

## **The Tyrant's Vein: Misrule and Popularity in the Elizabethan Playhouse**

### ABSTRACT

The fashion for tyrants on the Elizabethan stage reflected a sort of affinity between tyranny and theatre. How did the two things fit together? A tyrant is not a true king, but only seems to be one, and so is like an actor playing a king. Because he has no right to the throne, he must assert his rule by personal and rhetorical force – the actor's resources. Moreover, a tyrant is understood to be a figure in whom appetite conquers reason, self-control gives way to desire – as happens (according to hostile accounts) in the theatre. This logic applies particularly to popular theatre, where the tyrant is sustained by his dynamic relationship with the audience. In comparison with the tyrants of academic or humanist drama, who are uneasy and isolated, the tyrant on the common stage is energetic and happy amid the crowd. He is the imagined monarch of the theatre's populace – their representative, their creature, affiliated to them not by political forms but by the symbolic repertoire of festivity: misrule, inversion, masquerade. In this way, people without rights recognise themselves in the unrighteous ruler: arguably, that is how tyranny works in reality.

## 1 Tyrannical Humours

When *Pyramus and Thisbe* is being cast, Bottom asks whether he is to play a lover or a tyrant, and is a little disappointed to discover that the answer is a lover. ‘My chief humor,’ he says, ‘is for a tyrant.’<sup>1</sup> It is a taste that was richly indulged by the theatre in which Bottom himself is a character. Philip Sidney famously took it that the business of tragedy was to make ‘Tyrants manifest their tyrannical humours’.<sup>2</sup> The 1560s stage tyrant Cambises exemplifies this somewhat tautologous programme: at one point in the play his brother denounces him as ‘a tirant tirannious’.<sup>3</sup> Tamburlaine the Great was advertised as ‘a most puissant and mightye Monarque’ who ‘(for his tyranny, and terrour in Warre) was tearmed The Scourge of God’.<sup>4</sup> Among the imitations of Marlowe’s play that followed its first performances in 1587 was *The First Part of the most tyrannicall Tragedie and raigne of Selimus, Emperor of the Turks*; the placing of the epithet in the title suggests that for the tragedy to be tyrannical is a selling point.<sup>5</sup> In the 1590s Tamburlaine was joined by the no less insistently tyrannical image of Richard III: in *The True Tragedie of Richard the Third*, the heroic Richmond declares that he has come ‘to defende [his] countrey from the tyrannie of an usurping tyrant’, and on the earliest title page of Shakespeare’s *Richard III* the list of featured incidents includes his ‘tyrannical usurpation’.<sup>6</sup> A year or two later, in the allegorical prologue to *A Warning for Fair Women*, the figure of Comedy mocks Tragedy as ‘Murthers Beadle,/ The common hangman unto Tyrannie.’<sup>7</sup> Clearly Bottom was not alone in his humour: tyrants were one of the things that people went to plays to see.

It is less clear, though, what in this context the word ‘tyrant’ means. Bottom offers a sample of what he calls, with a casual air of connoisseurship, ‘Ercles’ vein, a tyrant’s vein’:

The raging rocks  
And shivering shocks  
Shall break the locks  
Of prison gates  
And Phibbus’ car  
Shall shine from far  
And make and mar  
The foolish Fates. (1.2.24-31)

As is well known, this is Bottom’s memory, or Shakespeare’s parody, of John Studley’s translation of the pseudo-Senecan tragedy *Hercules Oetaeus*. Phoebus’ car comes from Hercules’ opening monologue, and the rocks and gates from a hubristic speech of Deianira’s nurse.<sup>8</sup> But these speakers are not tyrants in the political sense; they do not oppress anyone; in fact they are not rulers at all. For Bottom, it seems, a tyrant is not so much a type of monarch as a style of performance.

Of course Bottom is a fool. Tyranny is a serious concept in the thought of the Renaissance, connoting usurpation, injustice and atheism, and implying difficult questions about sovereignty and resistance.<sup>9</sup> Only a fool would treat this politically

important topic as if it were nothing more than a pretext for overacting. But with Shakespeare in general, and particularly with Bottom, it is always possible that the fool sees something wisdom overlooks. What comes into view if, rather than studying the topic in depth, we follow Bottom's lead and treat it superficially?

This means diverging a little from the ways in which the tyrants of Elizabethan theatre have generally been discussed. Their parent and paradigm is the implacable Tamburlaine, who first appeared almost a decade before *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and held the stage over the intervening years, inspiring a number of attempts to reproduce his charisma. The resulting miniature genre includes Robert Greene's *Alphonsus King of Aragon* (1587), Thomas Lodge's *The Wounds of Civil War* (1588), Thomas Hughes's *The Misfortunes of Arthur* (1588), George Peele's *The Battle of Alcazar* (1588), Greene and Lodge's collaboration *A Looking Glass for London and England* (1589), and the anonymous plays *The Wars of Cyrus* (1588) and *Selimus* (1591), besides Marlowe's own *Massacre at Paris* (1593) and Shakespeare's *Richard III* (1593).<sup>10</sup> Critical attention to the more or less deplorable protagonists of these plays has tended to focus on questions of ethical and political judgment. Are they being presented on the stage for admiration or for abhorrence?<sup>11</sup> How does the stage representation of tyranny reflect classical and Renaissance theories of its nature?<sup>12</sup> Could condemnation of a wicked king serve as the vehicle for a criticism of monarchy itself?<sup>13</sup> Or, more broadly and topically, can Shakespeare help us to understand and resist the tyrants and demagogues of our own era?<sup>14</sup>

What these diverse thematisations have in common is that they treat tyranny as a political evil to be diagnosed, resisted, and if possible abolished, and they assume, by and large, that the dramatists approached the subject in the same analytic and responsible spirit. The opening of Stephen Greenblatt's recent book, for example, has Shakespeare *grappling* with a deeply unsettling question, *probing* psychological mechanisms, *asking* how catastrophe can be prevented, *thinking clearly* about the issues, and *lifting off* time-honoured beliefs to *look unwaveringly* at what lies beneath.<sup>15</sup> These verbs have the effect of framing the plays as discussions of the problem of tyranny; unconsciously, or at any rate inexplicitly, the book fashions its subject in its own image, making the dramatist into a liberal critic.

Bottom's empty-headed relish is a corrective to such academic ventriloquism. For him, the figure of the tyrant is not a moral and political problem, but an opportunity for an actor. Of course, there is no reason why it shouldn't be both, but on this occasion at least, I would like to put the main weight on the actor's side of the question. For one thing, it is the weaker side as far as critics are concerned: as a guild, we are more likely to write about the ideological positions a play adopts than the enjoyment it affords. And for another, the actor really does come first. Shakespeare and his contemporaries may or may not have been developing a critique of Tudor absolutism. But what they were certainly doing was producing scripts for what they hoped would be successful public performance. It makes sense, therefore, to bracket the question of what the theatre had to say about tyrants, and ask instead what tyrants had to offer the theatre.

## 2 Tyrant and Actor

It does seem that there is an affinity between the two. Rebecca Bushnell proposes, at the outset of her book-length study, that ‘The tyrant is identified with the tragic actor ... because his nature is fundamentally histrionic.’ (7) She bases this identification on the argument, found repeatedly in early modern political writings, that a tyrant is a false king. This is not quite a straightforward idea, and it is worth pausing over.

As Bushnell notes, early modern political writing typically constructs the figure of the tyrant through a binary opposition with that of the king. A king is ‘the best and most soveraine thing uppon earth’, and a tyrant is ‘the worst and most hurtful creature under heaven.’ (49)<sup>16</sup> This rhetoric of contrast is in part self-protective. Because ‘a tyrant (saith Seneca) differeth from a king in effect, not in name’,<sup>17</sup> there is a danger that a description of the one will be read as a slander against the other: hence the repeated insistence on the difference between them. The Huguenot author of the *Vindiciae, Contra Tyrannos* (1579), for example, trusts that ‘good Princes’ will welcome his arguments, because

Tyrants and kings, unjust and just princes, are diametrically opposed. Thus it is so far from being the case that what is said against tyrants should detract in any way from kings, that on the contrary, the more it does detract from the former, the more glory accrues to the latter; nor can the former be denounced without the latter being praised.<sup>18</sup>

This makes the case unusually explicit because the actual position taken by the *Vindiciae* is so risky. But the more prudent Thomas Elyot makes edgy comedy out of the same danger in his dialogue *Of the Knowledge which maketh a wise man* (1533). Plato, who is one of the speakers in the dialogue, gives an account of his notorious visit to the court of Dionysus of Sicily. It ends badly, in Elyot's version of events, because Dionysus invites Plato to speak about the majesty of kings, and he does so by contrasting the excellence of a true king with the baseness of a tyrant. He expects Dionysus to appreciate this instructive contextualisation of the topic, but somehow it fails to delight him.<sup>19</sup>

The Elizabethan public theatre had no less reason to ensure that its imagined tyrants were not read as derogatory images of actual kings. Its main patrons were after all members of the Privy Council, its scripts were scrutinised by a court official, and its status was ratified by occasional court performances: although it was a business, it depended on royal support for regular access to its customers.<sup>20</sup> Political misunderstanding could be damaging to it, and on the whole, it protected itself against the fate of Elyot's Plato by exploiting the fact that the literature offers two separable definitions of tyranny: there is the tyrant by defective title (i.e. he is a usurper who obtained the throne illegally), and there is the tyrant by practice of rule (i.e. his title may be valid, but he governs in a wicked or unlawful manner).<sup>21</sup> Authorities differed on the relative importance of the two criteria, but what the playwrights tended to do was to arrange for their tyrants to combine both. Tamburlaine, Selimus, Richard III, Scilla in *The Wounds of Civil War* and Mordred in *The Misfortunes of Arthur* all rule with lawless cruelty and are usurpers as well. This insulates the spectacle from the suspicion of exposing legitimate monarchs to scorn and

abhorrence. But it also has another, paradoxical effect: it produces a stage figure who, in the most forceful way imaginable, both is and is not a king. He is a king, because he is shown crowned, enthroned, attended, and so on. This is not a trivial consideration. These things are the theatre's accepted signs of royalty; this is how the audience know they are watching a king, regardless of whether he is good or bad. But then the same character is not a king, because, as we have just seen, the whole point of identifying him as a tyrant is to insist that he has nothing in common with true kingship. So it is not simply that he is the king in appearance but not in reality. It is that his being the king and his not being the king are *equally apparent*. The audience are required to hold the contradictory aspects of him in unresolved equilibrium. This ostentatious doubleness is what makes him 'fundamentally histrionic': the tyrant embodies the paradox of the actor, the simultaneous actuality of the player and the character he is playing.

But although this structure is constitutive of the role, it does not quite account for its appeal. When Bottom performs his Herculean sample —

The raging rocks  
 And shivering shocks  
 Shall break the locks  
 Of prison gates —

he is not primarily engaged in assuming a character. It is not even clear who he is meant to be. What really excites his enthusiasm is not impersonation, but a particular way of



speaking, rhythmic, extravagant, outsized: the tyrant's vein. His chief humour is for a tyrant in the sense that *he wants to sound like that*. Nor is he the only Shakespearean character to respond in this way. Pistol has seen *Tamburlaine* —

These be good humors indeed! Shall packhorses,  
 And hollow pampered jades of Asia,  
 Which cannot go but thirty mile a day,  
 Compare with Caesars and with cannibals? (*2 Henry IV*, 2.4. 142-5).

Falstaff inaccurately recalls 'King Cambyses' vein':

Weep not, sweet Queen, for trickling tears are vain....  
 For God's sake, lords, convey my tristful queen,  
 For tears do stop the floodgates of her eyes. (*1 Henry IV*, 2.4. 356-9)<sup>22</sup>

And Hamlet famously remembers Pyrrhus as seen by the 'tyrannous' light of burning Troy, again mediated by a ferocious and superhuman rhetoric (*Hamlet*, 2.2.382). In all these instances, as in Bottom's Ercles, what prompts the memory of theatrical pleasure is not the adoption of a false identity but the immoderate vehemence, the absolute speaking out. These speakers are not so much pretending to be someone else as trying, themselves, to be supremely present.

This principle — the tyrant as unrestrained speaker — is articulated, if not quite exemplified, by the atheistic usurper Selimus. When he first appears on the stage to claim the Turkish Empire, he says:

Now Selimus consider who thou art,  
 Long hast thou marched in disguis'd attire,  
 But now unmaske thy selfe and play thy part,  
 And manifest the heate of thy desire:  
 Nourish the coales of thine ambitious fire. (B2r)

Strikingly, Selimus is ready to 'play his part' not when he adopts a disguise or wears a mask, but precisely when he throws aside these theatrical pretences and directly 'manifests' the heat of his desire. The tyrant is like an actor not in the sense that there is a gap between what he seems to be and what he is, but in the sense that he is uninhibitedly expressive. His passions are on display; he sees no reason to moderate or suppress them.

This analogy points towards a different way of understanding the 'histrionic' character of tyranny. Bushnell's comment was prompted by a remark of William Prynne, who observes of 'Dionysus, Nero, Caligula, and other bloody tyrants, that they delighted in Tragedies and Stage-playes: as being suitable to their tyrannical disposition'.<sup>23</sup> This was not an original thought on Prynne's part. The earlier *Refutation of the Apology for Actors* contends that 'whiles Playes were had in greatest honour, by the corruption of manners that proceeded from them, was the Romane Commonwealth changed into a Monarchie,

and the Monarchie afterwards into Tyrannical government.’<sup>24</sup> James I had the same impression: in *Basilicon Doron* he warns the Prince not to keep company with ‘Comœdians or Balladines: for the Tyrans delighted most in them’, adding that Nero was himself a tragedian.<sup>25</sup> This association of theatre with the more lurid Roman emperors was also encouraged by the players themselves, who represented Domitian as a stage-struck psychopath in Massinger’s *The Roman Actor* (1626). Tyrants typically *like* the theatre, because it suits ‘their tyrannical disposition’.

As that phrase reminds us, ‘tyrant’ in classical and consequently Renaissance usage is a psychological term as well as a political one. The two levels are brought together by the analogy at the heart of Plato’s *Republic* between the state and the soul. There the tyrant appears as a man who is enslaved:

love lives like a tyrant within him in all anarchy and lawlessness; and, being a monarch, will lead the man whom it controls, as though he were a city, to every kind of daring that will produce wherewithal for it and the noisy crowd around it — one part of which bad company caused to come in from outside; the other part was from within and was set loose and freed by his own bad character.<sup>26</sup>

Desire subverts law within the man, and so the man, with no power to resist his desire, subverts law in the state, which in turn loses the power to resist *him*. The correspondence between psychic and political tyrannies is detailed, complete, and widely understood.<sup>27</sup> It

appears epigrammatically, for example, in Sir William Alexander's closet drama *Julius Caesar*:

Of all the tyrants that the world affords,  
 Ones own affections are the fiercest lords.<sup>28</sup>

It is elaborated more systematically by Thomas Elyot in the Platonic dialogue we have already seen.<sup>29</sup> The true king bases his authority on virtue and knowledge, which rule over the inferior parts of himself in the same way that he rules over his subjects. A tyrant, by contrast, allows the worse to rule over the better in his soul, and so effects the same reversal in the realm. The passions — lust, rage, fear, greed — take over power in both spheres. In that sense, tyranny is not an oppressive order but, on the contrary, a subversion of order, a lawless state of things in which the low governs the high, and unrestrained impulses bully the social and spiritual forces that ought to be restraining them. Bottom was right, after all, to identify the tyrant with extreme oratorical violence. Tyranny is the comprehensive failure of government, at every level, including that of language.

The same Platonic logic informs one of the arguments advanced by Stephen Gosson in his tract *Plays Confuted in Five Actions*:

He that travelleth to advance the worst part of the minde, is like unto him, that in governement of Cities, gives all the authoritie to the worste men, which being well

weighed, is to betraye the Citie, and the best men, into the handes of the wicked. But the Poetes that write playes, and they that present them upon the Stage, studie to make our affections overflow, whereby they draw the bridle from that parte of the mind, that should ever be curbed, from runninge on heade: which is manifest treason to our soules, and delivereth them captive to the devill.<sup>30</sup>

Here the tyrant – the one who gives all the authority in the city to the worst men – becomes a model for the dramatist, who also encourages the worst parts of the mind to ‘run on head’. He does this by systematically feeding our appetite for sensations:

we gape after more, as hee that hearing one half of a sentence, and delighteth in that, is very desirous to have the rest. So in Comedies delight beeing moved with varietie of shewes, of eventes, of musicke, the longer we gaze, the more we crave, yea so forcible they are, that afterwards being but thought upon, they make us seeke for the like an other time. (F6r)

Shows are dangerous because they prevent us from controlling ourselves; the higher part of the mind is ‘robbed of Soverainetie if delight be greate’ (F5v); theatrical enjoyment is a usurpation. Moreover, the mechanism of this take-over is the unlimited character of the delight: ‘the longer we gaze, the more we crave’. Theatre respects no limits, but seeks always to excite more emotion, to offer yet more gratification. This intemperance is registered, with dismay, by the author of the *Refutation*:

The matter of Tragedies is haughtinesse, arrogancy, ambition, pride, iniury, anger, wrath, envy, hatred, contention, warre, murther, cruelty, rapine, incest, rovings, depredations, piracies, spoyles, roberies, rebellions, treasons, killing, hewing, stabbing, dagger-drawing, fighting, butchery, trechery, villany, &c. and all kind of heroyick evils whatsoever.<sup>31</sup>

The excessiveness of the list mimics the excessiveness of the spectacle: in the playhouse, as in the soul of Nero, violent passions encounter no curbs. It is in this sense, then, that the critics of the theatre expect tyrants to delight in it ‘as being suitable to their tyrannical disposition’. For the author of the *Vindiciae*, tyrants are harder to define than kings ‘because desire commands the former and reason the latter. Whereas reason prescribes limits for itself, desire, on the contrary, cannot be circumscribed by any bounds’<sup>32</sup> The tyrant is uncontained: he belongs in the playhouse because it too is a site of boundless desire.

That insatiable wanting is indeed heard in many Elizabethan tirades, including most of Tamburlaine’s solos. A less well known example is the speech with which Scilla, the murderous dictator in Thomas Lodge’s *The Wounds of Civil War*, addresses the troops who have

seated Scilla in the chiefest place,

The place beseeming Scilla and his mind.

For were the throne where matchless glory sits

Impal'd with furies, threat'ning blood and death,  
Begirt with famine and those fatal fears  
That dwell below amidst the dreadful vast,  
Tut, Scilla's sparkling eyes should dim with clear  
The burning brands of their consuming light,  
And master fancy with a forward mind,  
And mask repining fear with awful power.  
For men of baser metal and conceit  
Cannot conceive the beauty of my thought.  
I, crowned with a wreath of warlike state,  
Imagine thoughts more greater than a crown,  
And yet befitting well a Roman mind.<sup>33</sup>

This is the tyrant's vein as Bottom enjoys it, with its heavy alliteration and vaguely apocalyptic decor. But what is remarkable is its almost exclusive focus on the subjective. Scilla has just conquered Rome, but he says almost nothing of political or military significance. The speech does not project his ascendancy in that sense; rather, it asserts his capacity to master fancy, to mask fear, to imagine great thoughts. He controls the situation not by force of arms but through his 'sparkling eyes' and 'forward mind' – that is by his personal expressivity: the tyrant's power is essentially the same as the actor's.

Scilla's repeated references to his 'mind' are typical of tyrannical self-advertisement. Tamburlaine himself famously declares that nature 'doth teach us all to have aspiring

minds', and when he decrees the humiliation of Bajazeth, he concludes with the line, 'This is my mind, and I will have it so.'<sup>34</sup> Mordred, the usurper in *The Misfortunes of Arthur*, has a similarly absolutist sense of his mind. When a counsellor tries to moderate his actions – 'But will no reason rule that desperate minde?' – he retorts, 'A fickle minde that everie reason rules': for him, allowing oneself to be pushed around by reasons is a sign of mental weakness.<sup>35</sup> Comparably, Tamburlaine refuses to speak about things as they are – 'For "will" and "shall" best fitteth Tamburlaine' (I, 3.3.41) – and Greene's Selimus takes the same view of religious imperatives: the rewards and punishments of the afterlife are 'meere fictions, / And if they were not *Selim* thinks they were'.<sup>36</sup> His thinking so is performative: his 'mind' is absolutely self-determining.

This insistence on the greatness and autonomy of the mind has the effect of making the tyrant's illegitimacy appear as a sort of freedom. If the monarch's title to the throne depends on his inheriting it, or on his promise to uphold the law, or on his having been chosen by God, then he must acknowledge the authorising principle — heredity, legality, religion — as greater than himself, and his sovereignty is therefore not unconditional. Marlowe's Guise, for example, chafes at the need to represent his bid for supreme power as a service to the Catholic faith:

Religion! *O Diabole!*

Fie, I am asham'd, however that I seem,

To think a word of such a simple sound,

Of so great matter should be made the ground!<sup>37</sup>



To be absolute, power must be devoid of legitimation: in that sense the tyrant is the purest king, because he owes nothing to any authority outside himself.

Here then is a more consequential account of the affinity between theatre and the ‘tyrannical disposition’. It is not only that the tyrant is not a true king and is therefore in a sense pretending. It is also that the tyrant’s unconstrained will is perfectly expressed by the uninhibited vehemence of the tragedian’s rhetoric. His self-assertion is irresistible; he is what he declares himself to be. On the stage, therefore, the ‘tyrant’s vein’, the lift and rhythm of the conqueror’s oratory, works as a sort of theatrical manifesto. Possessing no genuine authority, he makes it all up, overriding the objections of reason, forcing the world around him to fit his mind. So it is not only that the actor is well placed to present an eloquent image of the tyrant. It is also that the tyrant is a poster boy for the power of acting.

### **3 Academic and Popular Theatres**

To conclude there, though, would be to treat theatre as if it were a universal human practice which is essentially the same in all times and contexts. Actually, as everyone knows, *this* theatre — the open-air London playhouse of the 1580s and 90s — was both historically specific and socially contentious: this is not theatre as such, but theatre of a particular kind. Its particularity is usefully identified, for my purposes, by one of its

moral critics, John Northbrooke. Denouncing ‘vain plays, and Enterludes’ in 1577, he nevertheless concedes that drama may have educational value if its use is suitably regulated. School pupils may act in plays, he thinks, given six conditions:

First that those Comedies which they shall play, be not mixt with any ribaudrie and filthie termes and wordes (which corrupt good manners.) Secondly, that it be for learning and utterance sake, in Latine, and very seldome in Englishe. Thirdly, that they use not to play commonly, and often, but verye rare and seldome. Fourthlye, that they be not pranked and decked up in gorgious and sumptuous apparell in their play. Fiftly, that it be not made a common exercise publikely for profit and gaine of mony, but for learning and exercise sake. And lastly, that their Comedies bee not mixte with vaine and wanton toyes of love. These being observed, I iudge it tollerable for schollers.<sup>38</sup>

Read backwards, as it were, these stipulations demonstrate Northbrooke’s grasp of what was taking shape in the newly built London playhouses at just this time. The decisive category is the fifth one: whereas the notional schoolboys act ‘for learning and exercise sake’, the performances of the common players are, precisely, ‘a common exercise publikely for profit and gaine of mony’. The other points follow naturally from that: in order to be accessible to a miscellaneous audience, the plays are written in the vernacular, and sometimes in base and ribald language; in order to make the business pay, performances are frequent and publicly advertised; in order to appeal to the eyes of the customers as well as their ears, the actors are ‘pranked and decked up’. In ruling these aspects out, Northbrooke distinguishes two contemporary and contrasting forms of

theatre, one amateur, educational and elite, and the other professional, licentious and popular.

Of course it is not that this value-laden antithesis is a simple reflection of early modern social reality. The idea that there was an institution that can accurately be called ‘Elizabethan popular theatre’ is something of an over-simplification.<sup>39</sup> Historically, it is clear that the Mayor of London’s famous characterization of the playhouse crowd – ‘vagrant persons & maisterles men ... theeves, horsestealers, whoremoongers, coozeners, connycatching persones’ – is a polemical caricature of a clientele that actually included courtiers, citizens, the professional classes and many respectable women.<sup>40</sup> Critically, the opposition between academic and popular stages is open to question both directions. On the one hand, the repertoire of the Elizabethan amphitheatres was often elaborately literary and erudite, and its early leading writers – Marlowe, Kyd, Shakespeare, Greene – were all concerned to address aristocratic and humanistic audiences as well as that of the theatre. And on the other, academics of our own time have shown, by their sympathetic interest in the academic drama of the sixteenth century, that it shared methods, preoccupations and audiences with the commercial stage.<sup>41</sup> My own working list of the period’s ‘tyrant plays’ includes items which cannot be straightforwardly assigned to one side or the other: the Senecan *Misfortunes of Arthur* at Gray’s Inn; Jonson’s *Sejanus*, combatively attempting to impose academic values on the public playhouse; Thomas Legge’s extraordinary *Richardus Tertius*, written in Latin for performance at St John’s College, Cambridge, but anticipating the dramaturgic rhythms and techniques of Shakespearean chronicle drama.<sup>42</sup> The schematic picture of early

modern drama in separate sealed containers, the learned and the popular, disintegrates on contact with the evidence.

But then it is precisely because the separation was imperfect that it was necessary to police it with the vigilance represented by Northbrooke's list. What is disturbing about the playhouse, as it appears in the antitheatrical accounts, is not that it is plebeian but that it is indiscriminate. As Jeffrey Doty emphasises in his recent celebration of early modern 'popularity', the theatre is definingly a public space; anyone can participate in it without giving an account of themselves; the 'many-headed' entity that therefore assembles has no authorisation, no institutional identity.<sup>43</sup> That openness can be traced, negatively, just under the moralising surface of the denunciations. In Henry Crosse's *Vertues Commonwealth*, for example, plays are

the very May-games of all sin and wickednesse ... For is not Vice set to sale on open Theaters? is there not a Sodome of filthinesse painted out and tales of carnall love, adulterie, ribaldrie, leacherie, murther, rape, interlarded with a thousand uncleane speches, even common schooles of bawdrie? is not this the way to make men ripe in all kinde of villanie, and corrupt the manners of the whole world?<sup>44</sup>

The miscellaneous accusations of sexual depravity are rendered specific to the theatre by the string of words connoting general participation: 'May-games', 'open', 'a thousand', 'common schooles', 'all kinde', 'the whole world'. The dismay is caused not by drama as such, but by the playhouse as a particular kind of place, where the lowest and grossest of

human elements are cheaply admitted, and virtue is exposed to them without defence.

The typical 'haunters' of plays, Crosse declares later, are 'the witlesse and braine-sicke multitude ... the very scum, rascallitie, and baggage of the people' (Q1r); his description conflates moral and social baseness.

'Common plays', then, are the defining opposite of educational plays.<sup>45</sup> Drama cannot be educative if it lives by appealing to the multitude. In *Playes Confuted*, Gosson considers the argument that when a play presents evil actions, it does not corrupt the audience but invites them to make a judgment. He says that in the playhouse this defence is ridiculous:

no indifferency of iudgement can be had, because the worste sorte of people have the hearing of it, which in respecte of there ignorance, of there ficklenes, and of there furie, are not to bee admitted in place of iudgement. A Iudge must be grave, sober, discrete, wise, well exercised in cases of gouvernement. Which qualities are never founde in the baser sort.<sup>46</sup>

If a theatre is to be a place of judgment, it can only be by excluding the 'baser sort'.

The application of this principle to the staging of tyrants can be seen quite specifically. In 1577, the year of Northbrooke's treatise, *Baptistes*, George Buchanan's tragedy about the death of John the Baptist at the hands of King Herod, appeared in print. It had been written in about 1542 to be performed by pupils at the Collège de Guyenne in Bordeaux,

and it conforms to Northbrooke's specifications: it is in Latin, it was done once, purely for learning and exercise sake, and although its cast includes the daughter of Herodias, it dispenses with the wanton toys of love that kept Oscar Wilde's version of the same story off the London stage 350 years later.<sup>47</sup> Its austere context of performance is reflected in its form. The scenes consist entirely of soliloquies and duologues; the physical events of the story (the daughter's dance, John's execution) are reported. The performance is devoid of spectacle, and even the interaction that does happen on the stage is more dialectic than drama. The actors are called upon to express ideas and arguments rather than passions or fictional intentions. The skills they need derive not from the playhouse, but from their rhetoric classes.

The effect of this restraint is abstraction: the play lives at one remove from the story, not enacting things but discussing them. The dramatic condition of this undramatic structure is the king's inability to decide whether or not to have the Baptist killed. The dialogue inhabits the space created by his hesitation: two Pharisees, the Queen, the daughter, and John himself all have scenes in which they tell him what he should do. Consequently, although Herod is described in conventionally anti-tyrannic terms as ferocious and cruel, he rather appears as anxious and indecisive. This impression is not inadvertent. It is part of Buchanan's didactic purpose to show that tyrants are miserable,<sup>48</sup> and Herod's vacillation makes sense as a symptom of his lawlessness: with no human or divine authority to guide him, he is the plaything of his emotions and his courtiers. All the same, there is a startling contrast between this worried egotist and the savage *joie de vivre* of

Scilla or Tamburlaine. It highlights the fact that the tyrants of the popular stage are, by and large, *happy*.

Importantly, the contrast is an ideological one. Unlike the public theatre plays, *Baptistes* makes no attempt to secure its own orthodoxy by branding its bad king as a usurper. It calls Herod a tyrant not because there is any doubt about his title to the throne, but because he persecutes the emissary of God. In other words, the play is informed by the resistance theory that was generated, in the years of the Reformation, by the situation of Protestants ruled by Catholic monarchs, and it develops, out of that, a religiously based critique of royal power.<sup>49</sup>

This is partly a matter of Buchanan's own convictions, but it also reflects the freedoms of amateurism. There are comparably uneasy tyrants, for example, in Fulke Greville's tragedy *Mustapha* and Elizabeth Cary's *Tragedy of Mariam*.<sup>50</sup> These are plays by aristocrats, written to be performed privately if at all, and their exclusiveness is the practical condition of their forthrightly anti-tyrannical programmes. It is not just that their heterodox sentiments will not enter public circulation, and so do not need to be policed so carefully. It is also that the whole business of distinguishing between legitimate and illegitimate forms of government is mainly of concern to the governing class. Many of Buchanan's pupils can expect to acquire real power when they grow up; it will be open to them to exercise it tyrannically, and appropriate, therefore, for warnings against tyranny to form part of their education. Moreover, it is part of the definition of a tyrant that he tramples on the law and ignores good counsel. Evidently this matters most to those who

have legal rights to lose, and who normally expect their advice to be heard. In other words, the unhappiness of Buchanan's Herod embodies a critique of autocracy which is fundamentally patrician.

But there is another way of reading it too. Because the tyrant of academic tragedy is not a usurper, the theatrical paradox of the king-who-is-not-a-king disappears. Herod's tyrannical conduct may condemn him morally, but it has no ontological force: he simply is the king. Consequently, the role neither requires nor generates the fierce self-invention whereby the illegitimate contender *makes himself* royal. At the level of the story, there is no seizure of the crown; and at the level of performance, there is no occasion for the rhetoric of the aspiring mind. Thus the tyrant is unhappy not just in a psychological sense, but formally and rhythmically: his dramatic situation denies him the uninhibited self-assertion that attracts Bottom. Confined by the disciplines of a humanist dramaturgy, the role loses its theatrical energy.

In other words, it loses its connection with the popular audience. As we have seen, social elitism is not an accidental circumstance; it is essential to the character of the performance. To block all commerce between the actors and the *vulgus* is almost the definition of its method. And the same exclusion is firmly written into the script. For example, Herod's first soliloquy begins:

*Fortuna regum quam misera sit et anxia,  
nec fando poterit explicare oratio*



*nec cogitando mentis acies adsequi.*  
*nos esse vulgus liberos solos putat,*  
*solos beatos, quos egestas obsidet,*  
*formido cruciat, misera servitus premit. (524-9)*

(Words cannot express by speech nor the eye of the mind grasp by thought how wretched and troubled is the destiny of kings. The common herd believes that we alone are free and we alone happy; but in fact poverty besieges us, fear tortures us, wretched slavery oppresses us.)

Finding himself alone on the stage is the king's opportunity to voice the misery which the public nature of his role usually forces him to conceal. Soliloquy suggests, not direct address to the audience, but solitude. The monarch as seen by the common herd is a false appearance; it is his private unhappiness that is real. The truth is as it were non-theatrical: to find it you turn away from the crowd.

Not only that, but also this closed-in discourse is repeatedly *about* those who are not to hear it: Herod is describing the common people's illusions, and his ensuing speech makes several further references to the *vulgus*, the *plebs*, the *populus*. The same preoccupation runs through the whole play. The Baptist is mistrusted because of his popular following (lines 98-9)<sup>51</sup>; when Herod hesitates to move against him, he is accused of deferring to the mob (1168);<sup>52</sup> the Queen's final line insists on the importance of making the multitude acknowledge the authority of the crown (1262-3).<sup>53</sup> The plebeians, excluded

from the drama as participants and as spectators, keep re-appearing as an external threat to its integrity. Like the figure of the unhappy tyrant, this intimation of the offstage *plebs* is echoed in other humanist plays. The tragic ending of *Mustapha* is marked by a popular uprising; the same is true of Sackville and Norton's court play *Gorboduc* (1561), and also, most suggestively, of Ben Jonson's tragedy *Sejanus* (1603), which was written for the Globe, but defiantly declares its affiliation to academic theatre by its dense texture of classical imitation and its explicit adoption of the political standpoint of patrician republicanism. The same trope — offstage popular disorder as tragic nemesis — appears in the pseudo-Senecan *Octavia*, which is presumably one source for the Renaissance humanist versions.<sup>54</sup> The pattern indicates that the plebeians do not merely happen to be missing from these plays; their absence is a structural imperative. The drama establishes its ideological and artistic coherence by suppressing the people, and their eventual return is apocalyptic.

The point of this becomes clear if we contrast Buchanan's soliloquising tyrant with Marlowe's. Tamburlaine has few soliloquies, but there is one in the scene where he uses the fallen Bajazeth as a footstool to ascend his throne. He climbs over the crouching emperor, seats himself and says:

Now clear the triple region of the air  
 And let the majesty of heaven behold  
 Their scourge and terror tread on emperors.  
 Smile, stars that reigned at my nativity,

And dim the brightness of their neighbour lamps —  
 Disdain to borrow light of Cynthia,  
 For I, the chiefest lamp of all the earth, ...  
 Will send up fire to your turning spheres,  
 And cause the sun to borrow light of you. (I, 4.2. 30-40)

For Herod, soliloquy represented a moment's remission from visibility. For Tamburlaine, on the contrary, it is an occasion of display. Deprived for once of human interlocutors, he calls on the heavens to witness his triumph, and urges the stars to desert the sun and moon and follow him instead. His essence is rhetorical: when he is not working an audience he is nothing. Whereas Herod found his true self by turning away from the public, Tamburlaine finds his true self through and with it. This is what it means to describe him as happy. He boasts of his mastery of fortune, but what really substantiates that self-congratulatory hyperbole is his position at the centre of a ring of spectators in the playhouse.<sup>55</sup> With the heavens over his head and the crowd at his feet, he is happy in the way that a well-timed remark or a lucky coincidence is said to be happy: he is in the right place.

Because the character became so famous, we can come close to documenting this immediate presence. Among the allusions that have survived, take the one in Joseph Hall's third satire:

One higher pitch'd doth set his soaring thought

On crowned kings that Fortune hath low brought:  
 Or some upreared, high-aspiring swaine  
 As it might be the Turkish *Tamberlaine*.  
 Then weeneth he his base drink-drowned spright,  
 Rapt to the threefold loft of heaven hight,  
 When he conceives upon his fained stage  
 The stalking steps of his great personage,  
 Graced with huf-cap termes, and thundring threats,  
 That his poore hearers hayre quite upright sets.<sup>56</sup>

Hall at this point is pillorying the poet rather than the actor, but the process of elaborating the description carries him irresistibly into the theatre: the stage, the moves, the thundering voice, the audience response. The whole thing seems like a sort of communicative erection: Tamburlaine is 'upreared' in the sense that he is a shepherd who becomes an emperor; the poet is the same because his 'base' fantasies turn into the high astounding terms of the play; this in turn raises up the actor on the stage as a 'great personage'; and the listeners' hair stands up in terror. If we ignore Hall's bad-tempered tone, the passage gives us Tamburlaine's greatness as a collaborative creation of the script, the actor, and the audience, all 'uprearing' one another. The 'stalking' is mentioned in several allusions, some of which read as if this feature of the role became proverbial: it seems that Alleyn imprinted himself on people's imaginations by an extravagant and quotable walk.<sup>57</sup> Nothing gives a better sense of the immediate connection between performer and audience. When Tamburlaine stalks across the stage,

the crowd recognise his trademark, and are partly frightened and partly reassured. *This* is what they have paid to see.

It is not enough, then, to say that the tyrant appeals to the popular audience. It would be better to say that the popular audience is the making of the tyrant: with them, he is magnificent; without them, he falls into hesitation and anxiety. He is their man, raised up by their applause and their money. Educated observers are contemptuous of exactly that interaction, which seems to them to prove that the character is vulgar and empty: ‘the Tamerlanes, and Tamarchams of the late age ... had nothing in them but the scenical strutting, and furious vociferation, to warrant them to the ignorant gapers.’<sup>58</sup> Equally, they are scandalised by the economic connection between the performer and the people:

Shame that the Muses should be bought and sold,  
For everie peasants brasse, on each scaffold.<sup>59</sup>

But even these hostile comments register the vitality of the transaction in the ‘common’ theatrical space. For good or ill, or both, the stage tyrant lives in his relationship with the crowd.

#### 4 King Games

Among the attempts to replicate the success of *Tamburlaine* was George Peele's *The Battle of Alcazar*, probably first performed in 1588-9. Unusually, it dramatises an almost current event: the battle was fought in North Africa in 1578, and one of its points of interest was the involvement of an English soldier of fortune named Thomas Stucley.<sup>60</sup> 'Captain Stukeley' is a supporting role in the play, including this soliloquy:

There shall no action pass my hand or sword  
 That cannot make a step to gain a crown,  
 No word shall pass the office of my tongue  
 That sounds not of affection to a crown,  
 No thoughts have being in my lordly breast  
 That works not every way to win a crown.  
 Deeds, words and thoughts shall all be as a king's,  
 My chiefest company shall be with kings,  
 And my deserts shall counterpoise a king's.  
 Why should not I then look to be a king?  
 I am the Marquess now of Ireland made,  
 And will be shortly King of Ireland.  
 King of a mole-hill had I rather be  
 Than the richest subject of a monarchy.  
 Huff it, brave mind, and never cease t'aspire,  
 Before thou reign sole king of thy desire. (2.2. 69-84)

It is a striking and ridiculous speech. Stukeley aspires to a throne, but doesn't mind which one. Kingship in his peculiar sense seems to involve no relationships with any realm or subjects: it is purely a personal state of being.

David Bradley dismisses the character as 'a wide boy who has been reading his *Tamburlaine*'.<sup>61</sup> The gibe is accurate: he is conscientiously obeying the imperative that 'doth teach us all to have aspiring minds' (I, 2.7.20). But the relationship between *Tamburlaine* and the wide boy is perhaps not all the one way round. Stucley was not a king and never became one. He was an Elizabethan gentleman of uncertain loyalties and even more uncertain finances — in other words, someone who might well be found in the audience at a London playhouse.<sup>62</sup> He therefore forms a bridge between worlds; he is the spectators' onstage representative; in him, they besiege cities and keep company with kings. As a way of reading *Tamburlaine* itself, this is by no means irrelevant. Take for example the famous moment when *Tamburlaine* has helped Cosroe to the throne of Persia; the battle is over, and as Cosroe sets off for his capital, one of his courtiers assures him that soon he will ride in triumph through Persepolis. *Tamburlaine* echoes the phrase:

And ride in triumph through Persepolis!

Is it not brave to be a king, Techelles?

Usumcasane and Theridamas,

Is it not passing brave to be a king,

And ride in triumph through Persepolis? (I, 2.5.50-54)

The shifting repetitions make the speech into something like a song: the aspiring mind attaches not to the reality of power, or even to the procession through the city, but rather to the ring of the words, the stately progress of the pentameter and the serene appropriation of the exotic place name. For the courtier who uttered it in the first place, the line was simply a description of an expected event, but Tamburlaine elicits its unconscious music. To ride in triumph through Persepolis is imaginary, shimmering, erotic. This is not really about governing Persia; as Stukeley bluntly puts it, it is about reigning ‘sole king of thy desire’.

That phrase is echoed in more politically volatile contexts. Wat Tyler, leading the insurrection in *The Life and Death of Jack Straw*, declares, ‘We will be Kings and Lords within our selves’.<sup>63</sup> In the scene Shakespeare contributed to the script of *Sir Thomas More*, the hero, addressing the riotous crowd that has gathered to demand the expulsion of foreign tradesmen, asks them to imagine that they have got what they want:

Grant them removed, and grant that this your noise  
 Hath chid down all the majesty of England ...  
 And that you sit as kings in your desires,  
 Authority quite silenced by your brawl...<sup>64</sup>

The successful rioters, like Stukeley, are not kings, but *as* kings in their desires. At this point we see how the stage tyrant can stand, not despite his violent wilfulness but because of it, as the radiant representative of the crowd. As is well known, the play about Sir



Thomas More was censored because the xenophobic violence it depicts was too close to the actual mood of the city. In 1593 a rhyme was pinned to the wall of the French Church in London, threatening to cut the throats of foreign merchants, and signed ‘Tamberlaine’.<sup>65</sup> The tyrant threatened to establish himself as a popular representative in an alarmingly literal sense.

In other words, it is not simply that the wide boy dresses up as Tamburlaine the Great. It is equally that Tamburlaine the Great is a projection of the wide boy.<sup>66</sup> Compare Heywood’s *The Four Prentices of London*, first performed in 1592 or 1594. The four heroes, apprenticed respectively to a mercer, a goldsmith, a haberdasher and a grocer, travel to the Holy Land, fight numerous battles, and eventually become kings. The untroubled daftness of this story gives the show the feel of a collective game — that is, the play is not claiming to represent historical events in the Middle East in any intelligible mimetic sense; rather, the battles are like an apprentices’ sporting contest in which the teams have adopted exotic names and emblems, and the crowns are fancifully designed medals for the winners. The eventual King of Jerusalem is really a Cheapside apprentice — that is not a failure of dramatic realisation, it is how the play works.

The interplay of symbolic levels is acutely identified by Francis Beaumont in his parody of *The Four Prentices*, *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*. Its apprentice-hero Rafe is at different times captain of the City trained bands, guest of the King of Moldavia, and May Lord in the celebration of Spring — that is, the institutions to which his stage pre-eminence is attached are sometimes actual, sometimes fictional, and sometimes a third

thing which is neither quite actual nor quite fictional, but festive. This flexibility (or inconsistency) is the trace of a theatrical space where the line between drama and game was not clearly drawn. As Thomas Pettit argues, ‘the conventional scholarly distinctions between theatre, pageantry, and folk-custom are largely anachronistic’.<sup>67</sup> Theatre existed not as a categorically defined art form, but as one aspect of a performance culture that shaded variously into ritual, sport, procession and masquing.

This is the ambiguous zone where the stage tyrant flourishes. An eccentric but indicative instance is Shakespeare’s Jack Cade, during his brief ascendancy in *2 Henry VI*. Like Heywood’s heroes (who are otherwise completely unlike him), he lives on the stage in between history, fantasy and game. His invasion of London is presented as a historical event with real-life causes and consequences. But his claim to the throne is farcically unconvincing, and his temporary rule is not only murderous and unjust, but also comic and improvisatory: no-one quite believes that this is happening. In a way, then, he is just another brave mind, a king in his desire ‘huffing it’ by the force of imagination. But the desire is substantiated, beyond individual fantasy, by the sense that what *is* going on, both in the represented London streets and within the circle of the playhouse, is a collective observance, a ‘king game’.<sup>68</sup> For a limited time — the days of the crisis while government is in abeyance, or the two hours’ traffic of the stage — a Summer Lord exercises his playful sovereignty. Thus festivity gives institutional form to the affinity between the tyrant and the crowd.

The manner of the Cade scenes is adopted by Heywood himself in the first part of his *Edward IV*. An adventurer named Falconbridge leads an uprising against the Yorkist monarchy; in the hands of his comic henchmen it turns into a festive-utopian suspension of the law:

No sooner in *London* will wee be,  
But the bakers for you, the brewers for mee,  
*Birchin lane* shall suite us.  
The costermongers fruite us,  
The poulters send us in fowl,  
And butchers meate without controul:  
And ever when we suppe or dine,  
The vintners freely bring us in wine.  
If anybody aske who shall pay,  
Cut off his head and send him away.<sup>69</sup>

The scenes are no doubt directly influenced by Shakespeare's, but the ease and accuracy with which Heywood produces the same tone of ambiguous revelry indicates that it is part of a common theatrical vocabulary. The nursery-rhyme rhythms, and the mixture of fantastical plenty and jovial violence, turn the representation of insurrection into a game, and the tyrant-usurper into a folk hero.

This festive note can be heard more faintly in the tyrant plays proper, for instance through the villain-hero's jocularly. Richard III's asides, affiliating him to a medieval tradition of clowning, are a well known example.<sup>70</sup> Lodge's Scilla, too, slaughters his opponents with a sort of whimsical glee. A senator speaks against him, and he responds:

Let him that hath the keenest sword arrest  
 The graybeard and cut off his head in jest....  
 Beshrew me, lords, but in this jolly vein  
 'Twere pity but the prating fool were slain. (*Wounds of Civil War*, 2.1.116-128)

Another opponent is mockingly dedicated to the sacred birds of Rome:

For why this carcass must, in my behalf,  
 Go feast the ravens that serve our augurs' turn;  
 Methinks I see already how they wish  
 To bait their beaks in such a jolly dish. (5.1. 65-8)

Rather disturbingly, the imagery merges jesting, feasting, and murder. Both the victims are old men characterised by their gravity; Scilla's breezy and barbaric punishments celebrate vital energy against that static authority, the fighting and devouring body against moralising abstraction. He uses the word 'jolly' half a dozen times in the course of the play, often, as here, in a context of heartless violence. This is, you could say, festive atrocity. Other tyrants are aligned with the physical by cruder mechanisms. Rasni,

the depraved ruler of Nineveh in *A Looking Glass for London and England*, urges his followers to ‘frolicke and reuell it in *Ninivie*’, by which he implies unrestrained sex; and he announces, like a caricatured Lord of Misrule, that anyone who tries to leave his feast while still sober will be executed.<sup>71</sup>

The combination of tyranny and revelry seems paradoxical for a moment, but it is quite readily intelligible. Apart from anything else, the festive repertoire, as cultural historians have recovered it, is itself violent, or mock-violent, in many ways. Holiday sports included more or less stylised combat at every social level; Shrove Tuesdays in London were proverbially riotous. Mock rulers sometimes had a retinue of mock courtiers, who might carry staves and banners in imitation of an army, and knock on doors to levy ‘the Lord of Misrule’s rent’ in a travesty of taxation; this practice could be good-natured, or it could border on extortion.<sup>72</sup> Folk plays often involved sword dancing and ritual executions and resurrections, and, as Peter Burke points out, real state executions formed part of the culture of urban carnival.<sup>73</sup> Whatever ethnographic interpretations may be attached to these assorted practices, it seems clear that the battles, killings, sieges and depredations of tyrant plays in the theatre were drawing on a rich non-mimetic vocabulary of festive violence.

These iconographic borrowings are underpinned by a structural analogy. As we have seen in several contexts already, one of the basic definitions of tyranny is that the true king upholds the law, whereas the tyrant overthrows it. Consequently the performance has the nature of a *systematic* negation of legality, and so comes to imply a utopian

freedom. Scilla, Selimus, Rasni, Cade, Falconbridge, Marlowe's Guise and Shakespeare's Richard III are very various as 'characters', but they all alike deride the restraints of piety and morality in exuberant speeches, and all command executions with a light-hearted contempt for due process that renders them pantomimic. They are *anti-governors*: tyranny and carnival converge because the opposite of both of them is the law.

The festive traces are at their clearest in *Tamburlaine* itself. Especially in the early scenes, Tamburlaine's disrespectful treatment of his betters often has an element of debasing comedy.<sup>74</sup> The dying Cosroe says of him and his associates, 'The strangest men that ever Nature made! / I know not how to take their tyrannies' (I, 2.7. 40-1), as if, even now, he is not quite sure whether they are serious. The printer's prefatory address to the play suggests that there were clowning scenes in performance that are omitted from the published text.<sup>75</sup> In the many near-contemporary allusions to the play, three images recur the most often: Tamburlaine marking the successive days of a siege with white, red and black tents; Tamburlaine locking the Emperor Bajazet in a cage and feeding him through the bars; and Tamburlaine harnessing the kings of Asia to his chariot and driving them over the stage.<sup>76</sup> All three give the action a ritualistic, pageant-like character, and the last two are quasi-saturnalian inversions: the kings, who are conventionally more than human because they fill the place of God, are made less than human because they fill the place of animals. Tamburlaine has put down the mighty from their seats. This last example, the occasion of perhaps the play's most quoted line — 'Holla, ye pampered jades of Asia! / What, can ye draw but twenty miles a day...?' (II, 4.3.1-26) — has a particularly festive atmosphere because of its element of masquerade: Tamburlaine is *pretending* that his

captives are horses, and that gives his violent humiliation of them the character of a game. Like the satirical riding of a skimmington, it is a travestied procession, full of harsh laughter.<sup>77</sup> Moreover, the inversion of high and low affects Tamburlaine himself as well as the kings: in the game, he is the ‘coachman’ — that is, he is asserting his imperial dominance by playing at a low-status occupation.

The ironies of that are suggested by another allusion. A ‘Character’ of Bridewell mentions that prisoners, as part of their punishment, were made to pull the dung cart through the streets, and

as they passe the people scoffing say,

Holla, ye pampered Iades of Asia.<sup>78</sup>

The bystanders’ joke is high-to-low (instead of the kings of Asia, prostitutes and roaring boys; instead of the mighty Tamburlaine, a cartload of shit). But of course the debasing logic is already there in the original image, and the point of it is that the kings have been conquered by a vagabond who started as a shepherd. The euphoric confusion of high and low, of Tamburlaine’s soaring rhetoric and infantile savagery, is itself a carnival motif. The association of the conqueror and the dung cart is not just a piece of Swiftian mock-heroic: rather, it returns the imagined tyrant to his real origins among the ‘baser sort’ of the London streets.

## 5 The People

That the tyrant, high on the stage, should be the creation of the low people in the audience, is by no means an unthinkable idea. At one point in the *Vindiciae, contra Tyrannos*, the author allows himself a little mockery of the alleged capacities of kings:

Why, I ask, are kings said to have innumerable eyes and ears, farreaching hands and very swift feet? Is it because they are like Argos, Geryonus, Midas, and those others told of in legend? Not at all. Rather, it is clearly because the whole people, whose concern this is, lends its eyes, its ears, its strength and faculties to the king for the use of the commonwealth. If the people deserts the king, he who once seemed sharp-eyed and sharp-eared, mighty and active, will begin to go blind and deaf, and will suddenly fall down. He who once triumphed in splendour, will in an instant become vile to all.<sup>79</sup>

The intentional argument here is that ‘kings are made by the people’, and that the people are therefore logically and legally superior to the king. But the effect of putting it in this way is also to make the king a distinctly histrionic figure: he *seems* to ‘triumph in splendour’, but he is wearing borrowed robes; if you take them back, he is instantly exposed. The extraordinary qualities he seems to possess really belong to the people.

This is the theatrical logic that accounts for the charisma of the stage tyrant. His monstrous vitality is that of the crowd; he outnumbered his enemies, so to speak, because he personifies the many-headed multitude. The popular theatre – as we have seen, it is



one reason for disapproving of it – addresses itself to spectators of no social standing, to the people who, in Sir Thomas Smith’s much quoted formulation, ‘have no voice or authoritie in our common wealth, and no account is made of them but onelie to be ruled, not to rule other.’<sup>80</sup> In the commonwealth at large they are of no account, but in the quasi-festive space of the playhouse they have a temporary collective presence.<sup>81</sup> Their voicelessness turns into the tyrant’s furious vociferation, their lack of authority into his unauthorised power of life and death. That they are responsible for nothing in the commonwealth appears as the tyrant’s irresponsibility; that no account is made of them appears in the form of his defiant refusal to be held accountable; their possessing nothing is expressed in his wanting everything. This paradoxical construction exemplifies the dynamic ambivalence of the Elizabethan popular stage, and it explains why its tyrants are so splendid, passionate and cruel: it is because their power is being imagined by the powerless.

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<sup>1</sup> *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 1.2.22. All Shakespearean quotations are from *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt et al, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn (New York, 2016).

<sup>2</sup> Sir Philip Sidney, *An Apology for Poetry*, ed. Geoffrey Shepherd and R.W. Maslen, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn (Manchester, 2002), 98.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Preston, *Cambises*, in T.W. Craik (ed.), *Minor Elizabethan Tragedies* (London, 1974), line 724.

<sup>4</sup> Christopher Marlowe, *Tamburlaine the Great* (London, 1590), title page.

<sup>5</sup> *The Tragedy of Selimus Emperour of the Turkes. Written T.G.* (London, 1638), A3r.

<sup>6</sup> *The True Tragedy* was played in 1591 and printed in 1594; Shakespeare's *Richard III* played in 1592 and printed in 1597. See *The True Tragedy of Richard the Third*, Malone Society Reprints (Oxford, 1929), line 1868; and the title page of *The Tragedie of King Richard III* (London, 1597).

<sup>7</sup> *A Warning for Fair Women* (London, 1599), A2v.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Newton, *Seneca His Tenne Tragedies* (1581), reprinted in 2 vols (London, 1927), 2. 193, 210.

<sup>9</sup> Quentin Skinner, *Origins of Modern Political Thought*, vol 2 (Cambridge, 1978), 189-348.

<sup>10</sup> The authorship, dates and texts of these plays are sometimes uncertain. *Selimus* is plausibly attributed to Robert Greene. The dates I have given, always for first performance rather than for publication, are the 'best guess' conclusions of Martin Wiggins, *British Drama, 1533-1642: a Catalogue*, 6 vols (Oxford, 2012-15).

<sup>11</sup> E.g. Peter Berek, 'Tamburlaine's Weak Sons', *Renaissance Drama*, 13 (1982), 55-82; Thomas Cartelli, *Marlowe, Shakespeare and the Economy of Theatrical Experience* (Philadelphia, 1991), 67-93; Tom Rutter, 'Allusions to Marlowe in Printed Plays, 1594', in Kirk Melnikoff and

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Rosalyn L. Knutson (eds), *Christopher Marlowe, Theatrical Commerce, and the Book Trade* (Cambridge, 2018), 199-213.

<sup>12</sup> Rebecca Bushnell, *Tragedies of Tyrants: Political Thought and Theater in the English Renaissance* (Ithaca, 1990); Silvia Bigliuzzi, 'Introduction: The Tyrant's Fear', *Comparative Drama* 51 (2017), 434-454.

<sup>13</sup> Andrew Hadfield, 'Thomas Lodge and Elizabethan Republicanism', in Charles C. Whitney (ed.), *Thomas Lodge* (Farnham, 2011), 443-62.

<sup>14</sup> Stephen Greenblatt, *Tyrant: Shakespeare on Power* (London, 2018).

<sup>15</sup> Greenblatt, *Tyrant*, 1-5.

<sup>16</sup> The quotation is from *A conference about the next succession to the crowne of England* (Antwerp, 1595), 78. The antithesis is also developed copiously in Pierre de la Primaudaye, *The French academie*, tr. T.B. (London, 1586), 637.

<sup>17</sup> Primaudaye, *French academie*, 628.

<sup>18</sup> *Vindiciae, Contra Tyrannos*, ed. and tr. George Garnett (Cambridge, 1994), 67. The author is 'Stephanus Junius Brutus', a pseudonym which has not been conclusively decoded; see Garnett's introduction, lv-lxxvi.

<sup>19</sup> Thomas Elyot, *Of the Knowledg whiche maketh a wise man* (London, 1533), 96-8.

<sup>20</sup> See Richard Dutton, *Shakespeare, Court Dramatist* (Oxford, 2016), 34.

<sup>21</sup> The terms of this distinction — *tyrannus ex defectu tituli*, *tyrannus ex parte exercitii* — appear routinely in early modern discussions of tyranny. One influential source is the *de tyranno* of Bartolus of Sassoferrato (1314-57), available in a modern English translation by Jonathan Robinson (pubd online 2012) [http://individual.utoronto.ca/jwrobinson/translations/bartolus\\_de-tyranno.pdf](http://individual.utoronto.ca/jwrobinson/translations/bartolus_de-tyranno.pdf), accessed 28 Apr 2018.

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<sup>22</sup> The Norton edition reads ‘trustful’, following both Q and F, but I have restored the usual emendation, as both likelier and funnier.

<sup>23</sup> William Prynne, *Histrionomastix* (London, 1633), 517, quoted in Bushnell, *Tragedies*, 7.

<sup>24</sup> I.G., *A Refutation of the Apology for Actors* (London, 1615), 13-14.

<sup>25</sup> James VI and I, *Selected Writings*, ed. Neil Rhodes, Jennifer Richards and Joseph Marshall (Aldershot, 2003), 255.

<sup>26</sup> *The Republic of Plato*, tr. Allan Bloom (New York, 1968), 255 (575a).

<sup>27</sup> Its sixteenth-century currency is traced in Francesco Dall’Olio, ‘Xenophon and Plato in Elizabethan Culture: The Tyrant’s Fear before *Macbeth*’, *Comparative Drama* 51 (2017), 476-505.

<sup>28</sup> William Alexander, Earl of Stirling, *Julius Caesar*, Act III Chorus, in *The Monarchick Tragedies* (London, 1607), Y1v.

<sup>29</sup> Elyot, *Of the Knowledg whiche maketh a wise man*, 96-8. There is another formulation of the same analogy in Thomas Starkey, *A Dialogue between Reginald Pole and Thomas Lupset*, ed. Kathleen M. Burton (London, 1948), 153.

<sup>30</sup> Stephen Gosson, *Playes Confuted in Five Actions* (London, 1582), F1r.

<sup>31</sup> I.G., *Refutation*, 56.

<sup>32</sup> *Vindiciae, Contra Tyrannos*, p. 143.

<sup>33</sup> Thomas Lodge, *The Wounds of Civil War*, ed. Joseph W. Houppert (London, 1970), 2.1. 4-18. ‘Scilla’ is the play’s version of the name of the general and dictator Cornelius Sulla (138 - 78 BCE).

<sup>34</sup> Christopher Marlowe, *Tamburlaine the Great*, ed. J.S. Cunningham (Manchester, 1981), Part I, 2.7.20 and 4.2. 91.

<sup>35</sup> Thomas Hughes, *The Misfortunes of Arthur*, ed. Harvey Carson Grumbine (Berlin, 1900), 2.3.143-4.

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<sup>36</sup> *The Tragedy of Selimus Emperour of the Turkes* (London, 1638), B4v.

<sup>37</sup> Christopher Marlowe, *The Massacre at Paris*, 1.2. 66-9. in *Dido Queen of Carthage and The Massacre at Paris*, ed. A.J. Oliver (London, 1968).

<sup>38</sup> John Northbrooke, *A treatise wherein dicing, dauncing, vaine playes or enterluds with other idle pastimes etc. commonly vsed on the Sabboth day, are reprod by the authoritie of the word of God and auntient writers* (London, 1577), 76.

<sup>39</sup> The phrase, though not the over-simplification, was given currency by Michael Hattaway, *Elizabethan Popular Theatre* (London, 1982).

<sup>40</sup> Lord Mayor to Lord Burghley, 1594, in E.K. Chambers, *The Elizabethan Stage*, 4 vols (Oxford, 1923), 4. 317. For corrective reflections, Andrew Gurr, *Playgoing in Shakespeare's London*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn (Cambridge, 2004), 58-85; Ian W. Archer, 'The City of London and the Theatre', in Richard Dutton (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Early Modern Theatre* (Oxford, 2009), 396-412.

<sup>41</sup> Jonathan Walker, 'Introduction', Jonathan Walker and Paul D. Streufert (eds.), *Early Modern Academic Drama* (Routledge, 2016), 1 - 18.

<sup>42</sup> *Richardus Tertius*, in Thomas Legge, *The Complete Plays*, ed. and tr. Dana F. Sutton, vol 1 (New York, 1993) .

<sup>43</sup> Jeffrey S. Doty, *Shakespeare, Popularity and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, 2017), 21-4.

<sup>44</sup> Henry Crosse, *Vertues common-wealth: or, The high-way to honour* (London, 1603), P2v.

<sup>45</sup> The phrase 'common plays' recurs in hostile descriptions, e.g. *A second and third blast of retrait from plaies and theaters* (London, 1580), 32-3.

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<sup>46</sup> Gosson, *Playes Confuted in Five Actions*, C8v.

<sup>47</sup> *The Baptist* (text and translation), in George Buchanan, *Tragedies*, ed. P. Sharratt and P.G. Walsh (Edinburgh, 1983), 95-164. The play's separation from the public domain was not automatic; at about this time, the *écoliers* of Guyenne were apparently engaged, as public performers, in the controversies of the Reformation in Bordeaux (Kevin Gould, *Catholic Activism in South-West France, 1540–1570* (Aldershot, 2006), 27-33). But the street theatre Gould describes was in the vernacular; it seems unlikely that a Latin text would be played in this way. If anything the context makes Buchanan's refusal of the *vulgus* all the more pointed.

<sup>48</sup> He announces that the play 'clearly sets forth the torments of tyrants, and their miseries when most they seem to flourish'. (Dedication, tr. Steven Berkowitz in *A critical edition of George Buchanan's Baptistes and of its anonymous seventeenth-century translation Tyrannicall-government anatomized* (New York, 1992), lines 11-13

<sup>49</sup> Skinner, *Origins of Modern Political Thought*, 189-238. The timing of the play's appearance certainly suggests such a reading. It was first published in London in 1577 — that is, as part of the European debate about tyranny that followed the St Bartholomew's Day massacre. And it appeared in English translation as *Tyrannicall-Government Anatomized: or, A Discourse Concerning Evil-Councillors*, printed by order of Parliament in January 1642. See also Dermot Cavanagh, 'Political Theology in George Buchanan's *Baptistes*', in Adrian Streete (ed.), *Early Modern Drama and the Bible: Contexts and Readings, 1570-1625* (London, 2012), 89-104.

<sup>50</sup> *Mustapha* was probably first written in 1594-6, though much revised subsequently: see Ronald

A. Rebholz, *The Life of Fulke Greville, First Lord Brooke* (Oxford, 1971), 101-3, 328-30.

*Mariam* was composed in 1602-4, according to S.P. Cerasano and Marion Wynne-Davies (eds.),

<sup>51</sup> *ille stolidae insania / plebis superbus* (he is become arrogant through the frenzy of the stupid crowd)

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<sup>52</sup> *vulgi loquacis dum timet rumusculos* (in his fear of the tawdry gossip of the chattering crowd)

<sup>53</sup> *et sive reges aequa iniquave imperent, / aequo ferenda populus animo omnia putet* (whether kings enjoin just or unjust commands, the people must believe they are all to be borne without resentment)

<sup>54</sup> Newton, *Seneca His Tenne Tragedies*, 2. 182-6.

<sup>55</sup> As Andrew Gurr points out, the London amphitheatres were historically unusual in placing the spectators who paid the least closest to the stage. 'Why the Globe is Famous', Richard Dutton (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Early Modern Theatre* (Oxford, 2009), 186-208 (192-3).

<sup>56</sup> Joseph Hall, *Virgidemiarum* (London, 1598), 6-7.

<sup>57</sup> See Richard Levin, 'The Contemporary Perception of Marlowe's Tamburlaine', *Medieval and Renaissance Drama in England* 1 (1984), 51-70 (62-3).

<sup>58</sup> from *Timber, or Discoveries*, in Ben Jonson, *The Complete Poems*, ed. George Parfitt (Harmondsworth, 1975), 398.

<sup>59</sup> Hall, *Virgidemiarum*, 9.

<sup>60</sup> The play is edited, and Stucley's reputation discussed, in Charles Edelman (ed.), *The Stukeley Plays* (Manchester, 2005).

<sup>61</sup> David Bradley, *From Text to Performance in the Elizabethan Theatre* (Cambridge, 1992), 152.

<sup>62</sup> He conforms for example to the social type invoked in Nashe's defence of the theatre: 'There is a certaine wast of the people for whom there is no use, but warre: and these men must have some employment still to cut them off: If they have no service abroad, they will make mutinies at home. Or if the affaires of the State be such, as cannot exhale all these corrupt excrements, it is verie expedient they have some lyght toyes to busie their heads withall, to cast before them as bones to gnaw uppon, which may keepe them from having leasure to intermeddle with higher matters.' Thomas Nashe, *Pierce Penilesse his supplication to the diuell* (London, 1592), 25v.



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<sup>63</sup> *The Life and Death of Iacke Straw* (London, 1594), D2v.

<sup>64</sup> Anthony Munday et al., *Sir Thomas More*, ed. Vittorio Gabrieli and Giorgio Melchiori (Manchester, 1990), 2.3.78-84.

<sup>65</sup> Arthur Freeman, 'Marlowe, Kyd, and the Dutch Church Libel', *English Literary Renaissance* 3 (1973), 44-52.

<sup>66</sup> Cp Mark Thornton Burnett, 'Tamburlaine: An Elizabethan Vagabond,' *Studies in Philology* 84 (1987), 308-23.

<sup>67</sup> Thomas Pettit, 'Local Drama and Custom', in Michael Hattaway (ed.), *A New Companion to English Renaissance Literature and Culture*, 2 vols (Oxford, 2010), 2. 184-203 (185).

<sup>68</sup> The phrase is from Sandra Billington, *Mock Kings in Medieval Society and Renaissance Drama* (Oxford, 1991): see especially pp. 55-63.

<sup>69</sup> *The First and Second Parts Of King Edward the Fourth*, in *The Dramatic Works of Thomas Heywood*, 6 vols (New York, 1964, reprinted from the edition of 1874), 1. 11.

<sup>70</sup> Robert Weimann, *Shakespeare and the popular tradition in the theater* (London, 1978), 148-50, 159-60.

<sup>71</sup> Thomas Lodge and Robert Greene, *A Looking Glasse for London and England* (London, 1594), B1r, H1r. The play is obscure now, but seems to have been a popular success in the 1590s: see Beatrice Groves, '“They repented at the preaching of Ionas: and beholde, a greater then Ionas is here”': *A Looking Glass for London and England*, Hosea and the Destruction of Jerusalem', in Adrian Streete (ed.), *Early Modern Drama and the Bible: Contexts and Readings, 1570-1625* (London, 2012), 139-55.

<sup>72</sup> François Laroque, *Shakespeare's Festive World* (Cambridge, 1993), 37, 97-101; Billington, *Mock Kings*, 36.

<sup>73</sup> Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (London, 1978), 196-99.

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<sup>74</sup> The comic elements in the play are discussed in David Pecan, 'Dramatic Prologue and the Early Modern Concept of Genre: Understanding Marlowe's *Tamburlaine the Great* in its Critical Context', *This Rough Magic*, 3 (2012) 28-66.

<sup>75</sup> 'To the Gentlemen Readers', *Tamburlaine the Great*, ed. J.S. Cunningham, p. 111.

<sup>76</sup> *Tamburlaine the Great*, I, 4.1.47-63; 4.2.83-97; II, 4.3.1-26. The allusions are surveyed in Levin, 'The Contemporary Perception of Marlowe's *Tamburlaine*', and in Charles Whitney, *Early Responses to Renaissance Drama* (Cambridge, 2006), 17-69.

<sup>77</sup> For skimmington riding, Laroque, *Shakespeare's Festive World*, 333, n42.

<sup>78</sup> R.M., *Micrologia* (London, 1629), D6v.

<sup>79</sup> *Vindiciae, contra Tyrannos*, 76.

<sup>80</sup> Thomas Smith, *De republica Anglorum: The maner of gouvernement or policie of the realme of England* (London, 1583), 33. The same formulation appears in the chapter 'Of degrees of people in the common-wealth of England' contributed to Holinshed's *Chronicles* by William Harrison in 1577. See Raphael Holinshed, *The first and second volumes of Chronicles* (London, 1587), 163.

<sup>81</sup> This collectivity, or something like it, is proposed in more politically ambitious terms than mine in Jean Howard and Paul Strohm, 'The Imaginary "Commons"', *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 37 (2007), 549-577.