CHAPTER 5

Audience as Witness in Edward II

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Certain spectacular moments in plays recruit their audiences to transform: Lavinia, her hands cut off, her tongue cut out, and ravish’d; Hermione, “stone no more”; Richard II’s improvised self-deposition. These instances—largely visual but in cooperation with dialogue—encourage audiences to change from spectators into witnesses. The audience witnesses in a basic sense any time they see a play. They are “present” as a spectator or auditor, seeing and hearing with their own senses. What certain spectacles such as stage murders can do in such presence, however, is more profound. Onstage deaths, perhaps more than any other theatrical moment, contain the potential to engage or alienate an audience. To be a witness in these instances is to become “one who is called on, selected, or appointed to be present at a transaction, so as to be able to testify to its having taken place.” The members of the audience are enlisted by what they see and hear on stage in order that they might be made to interpret for themselves. To quote the prologue of Christopher Marlowe’s Tamburlaine the Great, Part I, such witnessing audiences are compelled to “view but his picture in this tragic glass, / And then applaud his fortunes as you please” (7–8). Applause signifies spectatorial judgment in Marlowe’s phrasing. With the imperative “view,” the prologue demands attention and then requests feedback. The audience has been appointed and is expected to testify.

While certainly inspired by assertions that early modern plays work to engage an audience’s role as theatergoers and even fashion their subjectivity, this argument avers that playwrights summon their audiences intellectually at important junctures. Rather than seeking to persuade (or subvert, to use the new historicist terminology), the playwrights call their audiences to attention and encourage them to judge for themselves. The summoning of a witnessing audience, I believe, may be imperative to the successful functioning of certain plays.
Onstage deaths can engage an audience in a number of ways, but the examples considered here will show how plays frequently undermine the pathetic appeal of certain deaths in favor of a distancing, grim humor. Alternatively, in the case of plays such as Marlowe’s *Edward II*, the onstage murder of a king demands an emotional response of pity and horror. The overflow of emotion is a tool of the play, however, because it goes on to sabotage the spectacular scene that follows. Activating a play’s audience results in competent witnesses who, in the case of Marlowe’s history play, detect the contrived theatricality of the play’s finale.

I employ the term “witness” in my discussion of the playhouse to assert the dynamic participatory role of the spectator in early modern drama. To term a spectator a witness is to draw attention to the moments in a play when the viewer engages not only with the play before them but with the contemporary discourses surrounding the judicial practices of the period and the lively debates surrounding the significance and credibility of vision and watching. The legal terminology intentionally reflects the comfort of early modern Londoners with lawyerly language and judicial discourse. Witnessing and testimony, whether used in an explicitly legal setting or not, are inextricably entwined with conceptions of judgment and an awareness of how watching matters. Playwrights were arguably using “drama to create an alternative framework of judgment”; the language of witnessing participates in the same discourse.

**Witnessing History**

In both its legal and evangelical valences, witnessing or being a witness carries considerable responsibility. Both fields support the witness’s importance; their participation and thoughtful testimony was a matter of life or death, whether their own or the accused’s. A medieval manual of customary law warns, for example, that the witness who wants to say “I know it for certain” cannot say this unless he also states “I was present and I saw it.” Knowledge and trustworthiness are linked to presence and spectatorial engagement and judicious watching. A nameless priest present at the execution of several Catholics, whose testimony is later printed, exemplifies this linkage between careful watching and trustworthiness. A witness to the events surrounding the execution of the Jesuit priest Edmund Campion, this “Catholike preist” is able to testify to the sights he has seen because the printer judged this churchman an excellent witness; he “apereth pressed to obserue & marke” the event clearly and the text’s title page assures the reader that the priest was “present” at the time of the proceedings. This text, attributed to Thomas Alfield, offers a Catholic reading of Campion’s martyrdom and testifies to the visibility of truth in Campion’s execution by providing illustrations of the process of martyrdom from rack to