2
Pathologies of Mourning
Elizabethan Revenge Tragedies

2.1 Well-made partings and the problem of revenge

Since the Homeric scene of Hector’s farewell to Andromache, Western literature has often been concerned with moments of departure. Such acts of valediction and farewell form part of the intense moments of mourning which structure human life and which are often framed or formed in literary shape in an attempt to give them cultural validation, thereby managing the role of grief. One of the most helpful ways in which the experience of leave-taking has thus been rendered in a familiar and, possibly, comforting poetic figure is to place it in a pattern of some larger repetition, so that the parting moment is not final but superseded by a moment of return. As an example, we can take the parting between Cassius and Brutus before the battle of Philippi in Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*. Here we witness how the literal repetition of last words reiterates the fact of separation even as it articulates new hope:

\begin{quote}
*Brutus:* For ever and for ever farewell, Cassius.
If we do meet again, why, we shall smile.
If not, why then, this parting was well made.

*Cassius:* For ever and for ever farewell, Brutus.
If we do meet again, we’ll smile indeed.
If not, ’tis true, this parting was well made.
\end{quote}

(5.1.117–22)

Despite their clear awareness of the desperate situation and the anticipation of their deaths, their verbal echoes suggest a poetic reunion with – hence a symbolic restitution of – the friend they now must leave behind. Their parting is ‘well made’ because it achieves a pattern of
linguistic consonance and moves in the structures of fictional consummation.

In the context of his philosophical study of this problem entitled *Der Abschied*, Karl Heinz Bohrer (1996, p. 14) has cited this Shakespearean scene as a paradigmatic case to illustrate how poetic mourning may transcend historical mourning. Pressures of departure are generally accompanied, he argues, by expectations of return, that is hopes for compensation or symbolic consolation which suggest some second coming and thus a recovery of what has been lost. Beyond historical and real-life experience, this is what literary phantasms of farewell can provide. According to Bohrer, they have their own temporality and semantics and thereby produce imaginative textures that redress the finality of loss. In a related argument, we can account for this in terms provided by Frank Kermode. In *The Sense of an Ending* he once showed that our efforts to make sense of life and to arrange a ‘reunion with reality’ (1966, p. 41) always work with the provision of an ending, a point of meaningful conclusion that confers organization on the here and now in relating it to the expectation of closure and eventual rounding. This is how poetic form and ‘well-made’ fictions become functional: ‘Men, like poets, rush “into the middest,” in medias res, when they are born; they also die in mediis rebus, and to make sense of their span they need fictive concords with origins and ends, such as give meaning to lives and to poems.’ In this sense, the End is not only a ‘figure for their own deaths’ (Kermode, 1966, p. 7), but also a figuration of fulfilment.

Such reflections are important because they concern the conjunctions of poetic with political performances of mourning which I set out to explore. The previous chapter argued that the Shakespearean history plays pursue a project in which historical and poetic modes of mourning interrelate in crucial ways. With their popular dramatization of historiographical material the Elizabethan plays of the 1590s provided dramatic figures for historical referents and so presented live acts and voices for the benefit of later generations. In the view of theatre apologists like Thomas Nash (cf. section 1.4), it is the historical that authorized the poetic, providing a defence for the new medium and institution of the playhouse. But in the view developed in Chapter 1, we can also see how the poetic at the same time authorizes the work of memory and public mourning which is contested, if not actually suppressed, in the political arena. Theatrical acts like Henry’s Crispin’s Day speech are productive because with them the incipient moment of collective memories is grafted onto the traditional calendar of saints (cf. Assmann, 1994, p. 61) and staged with reference to their perpetual renewal: ‘And Crispin