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“Sudden Deaths”: Regicide, Theatricality, and Anti-Absolutism in Beaumont and Fletcher’s  
*The Maid’s Tragedy*.

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The staging of regicide in the early modern English theaters was commonplace by 1611, when Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher’s *The Maid’s Tragedy* was first performed. Subsequently, *The Maid’s Tragedy* has been read both as anti-Jacobean and as deeply royalist, a critical problem exemplified in the play’s concluding warning to both would-be regicides and the “lustful kings” against whom they might act (*MT* 5.3.293).<sup>1</sup> Its performance history reflects this paradox, as it was both played and banned on the Restoration stage before being given a revised final act that turned its tragedy into tragicomedy. The play’s performative elements emphasize the dangers of both tyranny and absolutism through a trajectory of escalating violence that can only culminate in the King’s death. In the scenes that follow the King’s demise, the play reinforces his culpability through the use of his blood as a literal trace of his corruptive influence as it is passed from his killer to the remaining members of the court until each individual tainted by his misrule has died or promised death. By focusing the audience’s attention on disorder, violence, and the dissemination of violence, Beaumont and Fletcher underscore the necessity of the King’s death to the restoration of order. However, the play also reminds its audience that this order is regulated by the relationship of obligation and obedience between sovereign and subjects, and that blind adherence to absolutism can be as dangerous to the health of the nation as tyranny. The play’s conclusion encourages its audience to recognize both the possibility of regulatory regicide, and their responsibility as citizens to approve or censure their monarch.

When *The Maid’s Tragedy* begins, the King has ordered Amintor to marry Evadne so that the King’s affair with her may continue unobstructed and she will have “one / To father children

and to bear the name / Of husband" (MT 2.1.316-318). One consequence of the marriage is the jilting of Calianax's daughter, the "wronged Aspatia," previously betrothed to Amintor. Melantius, Evadne's brother and Amintor's "constant friend," returns to Rhodes from the battlefield to celebrate Amintor's marriage to Aspatia, only to discover Amintor has married his sister, instead (MT 5.3.40; 3.2.78). The surprise of this discovery and Amintor's apparent misery lead Melantius – arguably the conscience of the play – to investigate, uncovering the King's perfidy and convincing both Calianax and his brother Diphilus to assist him in rebelling against the King. After failing to convince Amintor to rebel, Melantius persuades Evadne, the King's lover and first "victim," to assume the role of regicide in order to compensate for the shame that her illicit affair brings to the family name. Evadne accepts this responsibility and murders the King in his bedchamber in a grisly parody of the sexual act that originally corrupted her.

Once the King's blood has been shed, the threat of violence present throughout the play explodes into visibility. Rejected by Amintor at the King's command, Aspatia disguises herself as her own brother, claiming she is a soldier returning from the wars to avenge his sister's jilting. In this persona, she challenges Amintor to a duel, but refuses to fight, instead allowing him to inflict a mortal wound. As she lies (dying and unconscious) on the stage, Evadne reenters the scene and begs for Amintor's forgiveness; he is unable to grant it to her, and she kills herself with the same knife she used to stab the King. As Aspatia dies, Amintor comes to the realization that the deaths of both women are in part his responsibility, and he, too, stabs himself.

This grim scene – the King dead offstage, Aspatia and Evadne dead onstage, and Amintor dying onstage – greets the entrance of the royal party of Lysippus (the new king and brother to the dead King), Calianax, Melantius, and the courtiers. Melantius attempts suicide but is stopped by Lysippus, although both Melantius and Calianax promise that they will not long survive. In the final lines of the play, Lysippus offers an ostensibly royalist moral that suggests the cursed fate of regicides, but which ultimately complicates itself by also presenting a caution to rulers, raising the question that has vexed critical receptions and theatrical performances since the play's composition.

*The Maid's Tragedy* displays awareness of its position as both theatrical and political, and reminds its audience of this duality through metatheatricality; it opens with an explicitly theatrical moment as four courtiers enter to Cleon's line, "The rest are making ready, sir," a statement applicable to the masquers and courtiers within the play and to the players fulfilling their roles on the stage (MT 1.1.1). As Marie Axton has argued, the playhouses of late Elizabethan and Jacobean London were a "freer" place for political discussion than court or Parliament, and this drama actively participates in the ongoing Jacobean debates about the viability of tyrannicide.<sup>2</sup> Early modern political discourse aligned monarchs with the stage, as in James's pronouncement that "*Kings being publike persons, by reason of their office and authority, are as it were set (as it was said of old) vpon a publike stage.*"<sup>3</sup> This "publike

stage” was not simply a metaphor for the monarch’s position in state, but the scaffold upon which playwrights such as Beaumont and Fletcher influenced the public perception of monarchical responsibility and appropriate conduct.

Both on the early modern stage and within the court itself, the audience was asked to interpret the actions, behaviors, and language of the player-king in terms of existing conceptions of sovereignty. The importance of recognizing the monarchical role in performative terms relates not only to the drama’s participation in civic discourse but also translates from the stage to the state by communicating those expectations to both audience and monarch.<sup>4</sup> The plays represented both positive and negative exempla of rule, focusing not simply on monarchical performance and duty but also on the connected rights and obligations of subjects. The breach between the expectations created by doctrine and the disappointing reality of monarchical behavior ruptures the implicit sovereign-subject contract and forms the basis for many of the anti-tyrannical tracts of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The implicit contract was predicated on a monarchical obligation to preserve the rights and security of subjects that required their obedience and fealty in return.<sup>5</sup> This philosophy could tip the scale in favor of the people in the event of a conflict between sovereign and subjects, as pro-tyrannicide arguments, such as Hubert Languet’s *Vindiciae, Contra Tyrannos* (1577), explain: “So, as kings are constituted by the people, it seems definitely to follow that the whole people [*Populus universus*] is more powerful than the king.”<sup>6</sup> The argument that citizens are responsible not only for creating the nation, but also for granting monarchical authority might also give them the right to criticize, censure, and even remove a monarch who violates the safety, security, and health of the citizenry, a right Melantius exercises theatrically, and one the audience is encouraged to share with the players on stage. Drawing on traditional depictions of regicide, *The Maid’s Tragedy* would have been perceived by a Jacobean audience as largely canonical, and therefore, despite its politics, acceptable for the public and courtly stages. However, the events of the seventeenth century, especially the 1649 execution of Charles II, led to increased sensitivity to regicidal drama, a change reflected in *The Maid’s Tragedy’s* performance history.

Licensed in 1611 and performed several times at the Blackfriars’ Theatre and the Globe by the King’s Men, *The Maid’s Tragedy* made its courtly debut at the wedding of Princess Elizabeth to the Elector Palatine in 1613. It was entered into the Stationer’s Register with the publication of the first quarto in 1619, and by 1679 it had appeared in seven quarto editions.<sup>7</sup> Although no clear performance history for the years between 1613 and 1660 has been established, according to T.W. Craik’s introduction, a retitled *The Testy Lord* portion containing only Calianax, Melantius, and the King played at the Red Bull between 1642 and 1660.<sup>8</sup> Following the Restoration, the play appeared in the registers of both the Red Bull and the King’s Men and was performed frequently from 1660-1700.<sup>9</sup>

Evidence, however, indicates a temporary ban during the 1670s and 80s due to the play's similarity to the Popish Plot and Succession Crisis.<sup>10</sup> Gerard Langbaine's 1691 *Account of the English Dramatick Poets* records that

*Maids Tragedy*, a Play which has always been acted with great Applause at the King's Theatre; and which had still continu'd on the English Stage, had not King *Charles the Second*, for some particular Reasons forbid its further Appearance during his Reign. It has since been reviv'd by Mr. *Waller*, the last Act having been wholly alter'd to please the Court.<sup>11</sup>

Robert Hume notes that Langbaine's account is echoed by Charles Gildon in *The Lives and Characters of the English Dramatick Poets*, but was later contradicted by Elijah Fenton.<sup>12</sup> Although some critics regard the account of a ban as apocryphal, Hume concludes that a ban was likely, although he claims that Edmund Waller's final act "probably remained unperformed" even though Waller probably intended his revisions for performance.<sup>13</sup> The prologue expressly addresses a combined public and courtly audience in an explicitly theatrical context:

'Tis left to you: the Boxes and the Pit,  
Are sovereign Judges of this sort of Wit.  
In other things the knowing Artist may  
Judge better than the people: but a Play,  
Made for delight, and for no other use,  
If you approve it not, has no excuse. (*MTA Prologue.33-38*)<sup>14</sup>

The prologue addresses the "people," but the use of "sovereign Judges" and "approve" implies that his audience includes the displeased monarch who did not "delight" in the regicidal version. *The Maid's Tragedy* did reappear on the stage just prior to Charles II's death, but it is not clear whether it contained the original or altered fifth act.<sup>15</sup>

Waller's act is much more royalist than Beaumont and Fletcher's, beginning with Evadne's announcement that "Amintor lost, it were as vain a thing, / As 'tis prodigious, to destroy the King" (*MTA* 1.1-2). This contrasts with the original, in which she embraces Melantius's indictment to murder:

I must kill him,  
And I will do't bravely: the mere joy  
Tells me I merit in it. (*MT* 5.1.26-28)

While Beaumont and Fletcher's Evadne has no qualms about committing regicide, Waller's Evadne refuses to do so, instead highlighting her own culpability by leaving Rhodes to "act my part upon the Continent" (*MTA* 1.34). Blaming Evadne, as Waller does, shares guilt for

the affair between both the King and Evadne, allowing his sins to be forgiven. In Beaumont and Fletcher's text, the King alone is responsible for the corruption of the court and must atone with his life.

Melantius's lines in Waller's final act also suggest that *The Maid's Tragedy* (unaltered) had been banned for too close a resemblance to the Popish Plot and Succession Crisis:

I'll sound *Lucippus*, he has always paid  
Respect to my deserts: could he be made  
To joyn with us, we might perserve the State;  
And take revenge, without our Countrys fate.  
He loves his Brother; but a present Crown  
Cannot but tempt a Prince so near the Throne.  
He's full of Honour: tho he like it not,  
If once he swear, he'll not reveal the Plot. (MTA 1.53-60)

The contextual similarities between this speech and the Crisis seem to indicate that *The Maid's Tragedy Altered* attempts to render the original text more palatable. Lucippus's response to Melantius confirms this: "To stain my Conscience with my Brother's blood, / To be a King! No, not to be a God," an assertion that moves the King to repent (MTA 1.96-97). Melantius is then persuaded to surrender to the King, who pardons his rebellion (as Lysippus does in the original).

Following his reconciliation with Melantius, the King refers to Amintor as "that noble Youth, / So full of Patience, Loyalty, and Truth," confirming Waller's approval of Amintor's royalism, and decrees that Amintor and Aspatia may marry (MTA 2.162-163). The act concludes with a Messenger's proclamation that Melantius has publically proclaimed the King's justice and grace; therefore, "The Town's appeas'd, and all the air does ring / With repetitions of *Long live the King*" (MTA 2.180-183). The Messenger's announcement is not a complete departure from the original Melantius, who desires "again / To be a subject, so I may be free," but it does emphasize loyalty to the monarch over honor or even loyalty to the nation (MT 5.2.56-57).

Waller's epilogue, spoken by the King, also claims that the previous version of the play was too harsh on its monarch:

Too long indulgent to so rude a Time;  
When Love was held so capital a Crime,  
That a Crown'd Head could no compassion find.  
...  
Well sounding Verse, where Princes tread the Stage,  
Should speak their Vertue, or describe their rage. (MTA Epilogue.3-5, 9-10)

This conclusion confirms the likelihood of a Restoration-era ban and provides a reading from a seventeenth-century perspective that argues for Beaumont and Fletcher's anti-tyrannicist intent.<sup>16</sup>

Prior to the Restoration, when legal regicide was a hypothetical rather than a confirmed possibility in England, staged tyrannicide was less threatening to a royal patron accustomed to seeing plays of its nature. Lysippus's final caveat mitigates the play's anti-absolutism, but the contradiction between it and the rest of the play produced later critical debates about Beaumont and Fletcher's royalism:

May this a fair example be to me  
To rule with temper, for on lustful kings  
Unlooked-for sudden deaths from God are sent;  
But curs'd is he that is their instrument. (MT 5.3.292-295)

Lysippus reminds his audience that anyone who undertook such "tempering" would be "cursed," an irony since he has already pardoned Melantius, Diphilus, and Calianax for their roles in his royal brother's murder. The warning that "curs'd is he" who commits regicide mitigates *The Maid's Tragedy's* threatening politics, but it also condemns the King who called down his "sudden death[] from God," a point often overlooked in later critical receptions.

Although *The Maid's Tragedy* was permitted to play not only on the public and private stages of Jacobean London but also at James's Court (and at the wedding of his daughter, an admittedly unusual choice), its political tenor was radical enough that in a context of immanent rebellion, it could have been deemed too controversial. Indeed, Craik notes, Waller's revision is not the last: in 1831, James Sheridan Knowles wrote an adaptation entitled *The Bridal*, in which only Evadne dies, the others reconciling themselves to one another and the King.<sup>17</sup> The extent to which these revisions altered the play's conclusion to eliminate or mitigate regicide demonstrates that the play itself was frequently read as an authorization of tyrannicide.

Despite the Restoration attitude toward *The Maid's Tragedy*, nineteenth- and early twentieth-century responses situate Beaumont and Fletcher, in Samuel Taylor Coleridge's now infamous phrase, as "servile *jure divino* royalist[s]," a sentiment echoed in more recent criticism.<sup>18</sup> A.C. Kirsch reiterates "the old judgment, held by both Coleridge and [T.S.] Eliot," and suggests that Beaumont and Fletcher's plays "are parasitic and without inner meaning."<sup>19</sup> Irving Ribner similarly argues that "the ethical paradoxes it examines are related only to artificial – and ultimately unimportant – patterns of social conduct, and never to the larger problem of good and evil" or the question of justifiable regicide.<sup>20</sup> John F. Danby's argument, too, asserts that "There can be little doubt that Beaumont and Fletcher, broadly speaking, were 'royalist.'"<sup>21</sup> These claims are based on the play's supposed final moral as well as the

understanding that Amintor is its hero whose royalist beliefs reflect those of Beaumont and Fletcher.

Arguing that royalism is the impetus behind the decision to have Evadne (rather than Amintor or Melantius) murder the King, Craik asserts that Melantius “never ... considers regicide to be a terrible crime (or indeed, ... a crime at all, rather a duty and even a pleasure). For Amintor it is never anything but a terrible crime.”<sup>22</sup> He concludes that the final moral “serves its main purpose, to assure the departing spectators that the dramatists do not condone regicide.”<sup>23</sup> This interpretation is repeated by Ronald Broude and Walter Cohen, both of whom propose that *The Maid’s Tragedy*, rather than being explicitly royalist, is instead simply not anti-royalist. Cohen argues that the play “combines dramaturgical exploitation with ideological evasion,” and is “without...significance” to Jacobean political debates on tyrannicide.<sup>24</sup> Similarly, Broude claims that “the killing of the King in *The Maid’s Tragedy* was not viewed by Jacobean playgoers with undue alarm” as it was not carried out by its hero, Amintor.<sup>25</sup> While Amintor is indeed the voice of royalism within *The Maid’s Tragedy*, we should not ignore the fact that the tragic flaw that leads to his jilting of Aspatia, the rupture of his friendship with Melantius, and ultimately his death is the very royalism which has earned him label of hero.

Because Amintor’s royalism inhibits his ability to preserve his honor and his life, it seems unlikely that Beaumont and Fletcher shared in their character’s adherence to absolutism. Rather, they deliberately expose Amintor’s royalism as the flaw that permits the King’s abuse, contributing to the play’s tragic conclusion. For example, in the initial confrontation with Amintor and Evadne the morning after the wedding, the King forces Amintor to admit that he has not consummated his marriage to Evadne. Amintor “[Lays his hand on his sword],” but he is ultimately unable to fulfill his threat when the King invokes absolutist doctrine:

KING. Draw not thy sword. Thou knowst I cannot fear  
A subject’s hand, but thou shalt feel the weight  
Of this, if thou dost rage. [Lays his hand on his sword.]  
AMINTOR. The weight of that!  
If you have any worth, for heaven’s sake think  
I fear not swords, for, as you are mere man,  
I dare as easily kill you for this deed  
As you dare think to do it: but there is  
Divinity about you, that strikes dead  
My rising passions. As you are my king,  
I fall before you and present my sword  
To cut mine own flesh if it be your will. (MT 3.1.231.1; 3.1.232-242)

The King's lines recall Amintor's faith in monarchical invulnerability, diffusing his anger. When Amintor attempts to initiate violence – presumably, as noted in the stage directions, by laying his hand on the hilt of his sword – the King commands his passivity. It seems likely that while Amintor continues to reach for (and then draw back from) his blade throughout the subsequent speech, physically illustrating the debate surrounding justifiable tyrannicide, the King's refusal to "fear a subject's hand" denies the possibility of action. The King "cannot fear a subject's hand" (emphasis added) because both he and Amintor believe in the protection of divine right. This rejection of even the possibility of anti-monarchical behavior truncates Amintor's violent impulse and leaves him subject to the King's whim, despite his recognition that the King is "a tyrant" (MT 3.1.22). In his introduction to the play, Craik asks, "What is to prevent Amintor from sweeping to his revenge? The answer is found in his conviction of kingship's sacred character."<sup>26</sup> While Craik asserts that Amintor's behavior here demonstrates Beaumont and Fletcher's royalist leanings, I argue that Amintor's capitulation to his King's irrational insistence that he "cannot fear a subject's hand" even when facing a drawn sword indicates that Amintor is an irresponsible subject of Rhodes. In permitting the King's affair with Evadne, Amintor condones tyranny and endangers the other members of the Rhodian polity.

Amintor's royalism is so deeply engrained that it does not even require the King's presence. On their wedding night, after Evadne has refused his bed, Amintor's threats against her and her as-yet-unknown lover are crushed by her response: "You dare not strike him / ...'tis the King!" (MT 2.1.301, 304). When Evadne asks, "What will you do now," he is able only to reply that "thou has named a word that wipes away / All thoughts revengeful" (MT 2.1.305, 307-308). Torn between recognizing the King's misrule and sinfulness (what makes him a "mere man") and doctrinal assertions of divine right ("there is / Divinity about you"), Amintor is rendered literally and symbolically impotent, unable to consummate his wedding and unable to penetrate the King's flesh with his phallic sword.

This royalist response is problematic: not only has the King violated the social order by disrupting Amintor's original betrothal to Aspatia, he has disrupted Amintor's marriage to Evadne, and even orders Amintor to "wink at this, / And be a means that we may meet in secret" (MT 3.1.269-270). While Amintor acknowledges that the King's demands are a "curse," he nevertheless accedes to them because they come from the King:

But fall I first  
Amongst my sorrows, ere my treacherous hand  
Touch holy things! (MT 3.1.270, 248-250)

These invocations of absolutism are the crux of the play's argument against it; the fact that the simple name of "King" is enough to inhibit necessary violence – for, Lysippus reminds the audience, "lustful kings" suffer "sudden deaths" – leads to the later escalations and spread of violence to the other members of the Rhodian court.



A final example of Amintor's royalism comes in his last encounter with Evadne when she returns to the stage "stained with a king's blood / Violently shed" (MT 5.3.146-147). She enters with "her hands bloody, with a knife" (MT 5.3.105.2), and Amintor reacts with horror:

Thou hast touched a life  
The very name of which had the power to chain  
Up all my rage, and calm my wildest wrongs. (MT 5.3.134-136)

This reminder of his earlier impotence illustrates that royalist devotion can be a threat to the commonwealth, and that Amintor bears some guilt for permitting the King's abuse of power. Unwilling to relinquish his belief in absolutism, Amintor cannot reconcile with Evadne, Aspatia, or even Melantius and, thus, provokes the tragic scene that concludes the play.

Regicidal plays unlinked to English history, like *The Maid's Tragedy*, became more commonplace during the early seventeenth century, perhaps because of the increase in royal reliance on divine right discourse and iconography. Whereas Elizabethan Parliamentary addresses articulated mutual love and affection between the Queen and her people, James claimed to rule absolutely: "For Kings are not onely GODS Lieutenants vpon earth, and sit vpon GODS throne, but euen by GOD himselfe they are called Gods."<sup>27</sup> This adherence to divine right produced, as both Axton and Howard Nenner have argued, an attitudinal conflict between James and Parliament that extended into the populace as a whole.<sup>28</sup> Nevertheless, even the critics who recognize Beaumont and Fletcher's political agenda often maintain that *The Maid's Tragedy* examines the Jacobean political *status quo* without explicitly countermanning it. Sandra Clark, for example, suggests that Beaumont and Fletcher were "involved in a serious way with issues such as the subject's duty to the monarch and the ethics of tyrannicide," but she does not note their explicit criticism of absolutism.<sup>29</sup> However, the degree to which the King is at fault for the tragedy confirms an ideological shift in political thinking during the Jacobean period.

Likewise, while Philip J. Finkelpearl identifies the problem of *The Maid's Tragedy* with the King's "divine right pretensions," he holds the King responsible for his misapplication of those "pretensions" rather than, as I argue, recognizing the "pretensions" themselves as the focus of the play's critique.<sup>30</sup> Specifically, Finkelpearl's argument is concerned with inserting Beaumont and Fletcher into the debate on tyrannicide that pervaded Jacobean political discourse, suggesting that *The Maid's Tragedy* provides a problematization of the prohibition on regicide espoused by Jacobean doctrine. Similarly, William Shullenberger's primary argument suggests that Beaumont and Fletcher were not interested in explicitly condemning Jacobean political theory. He bases this claim on the fact that the murder of the King "does not throw the time out of joint," but, rather, rapidly moves on to the restoration of the kingdom under Lysippus's rule.<sup>31</sup> While Robert Turner argues that "The extravagance of James I's claims for his authority, combined with his unresponsive, if not disdainful, behavior in public ceremonies, ...provoked some disquieting fantasies of tyranny in his subjects,

fantasies to which Fletcher's plays gave a local habitation," he, like Finkelppearl and Shullenberger, moves away from making any explicit anti-absolutist claims by suggesting that *The Maid's Tragedy* is simply a fantasy away from which Beaumont and Fletcher ultimately turn by including Amintor, "whose dedication to honor even the most loyal Cavalier would find compelling."<sup>32</sup> This critical trend allows for the interrogation of Jacobean political theory by Beaumont and Fletcher, but shies away from claiming explicitly anti-absolutist politics for *The Maid's Tragedy*.

In contrast, Eugene Cunnar personalizes Beaumont and Fletcher's political position, suggesting that they know first-hand

the experience of suffering financially at the hands of James I. It is perhaps this shared experience of the Jacobean court's corruption that predisposes them to adopt a critical attitude toward courtly life and morality .... Furthermore, we know that Beaumont ... displayed a marked criticism of courtly rhetoric that perverted genuine moral values.<sup>33</sup>

Finkelppearl cautions against placing Beaumont and Fletcher in such direct conflict with James himself, for although accounts of James's reputation were not undeserved, "Not all of them are equally trustworthy."<sup>34</sup> While Finkelppearl's warning is well heeded, Cunnar's impulse to radicalize Beaumont and Fletcher's drama remains tenable, given the Jacobean historical context, early modern and Restoration performance history, and the acute political cognizance of the play itself. For instance, the King's assertions of inviolability in *The Maid's Tragedy* echo James I's claims in *The Trew Law of Free Monarchies* (1598), reissued in England with his accession in 1603: "I grant indeed, that a wicked king is sent by God for a curse to his people, and a plague for their sinnes: but that it is lawfull to them to shake off that curse at their owne hand, which God hath laid on them, that I deny."<sup>35</sup> Although Broude argues that "*The Maid's Tragedy* presupposes no more than superficial acquaintance with either James's views or the premises of sixteenth- or early seventeenth-century political thought," it seems rather unlikely that Beaumont and Fletcher were not well-acquainted with these views: *Trew Law* was readily available in London, and both the King and Amintor demonstrate the attitudes contained within it.<sup>36</sup> In fact, the play's language explicitly reflects that used in *Trew Law*: James's tract refers to the tyrant as a "curse" and a "plague," both terms that reappear in similar contexts in *The Maid's Tragedy*.

A significant portion of Beaumont and Fletcher's objection to Jacobean doctrine falls under the theoretical umbrella of what Richard Hardin terms "civil idolatry": "The problem of civil idolatry arises when an impulse toward sacralizing the monarch goes awry, as it always must, since in any human sacredness is an unstable commodity."<sup>37</sup> In essence, Hardin suggests that the relationship between monarch and subjects breaks down in the face of a failure of the monarch to uphold the quasi-divine status he or she claims as a consequence of divine right. Such claims could also lead to the abuse of royal power and privilege. Franco Moretti argues

that when this occurs, the monarch ceases to be a sovereign and becomes a tyrant: "Appetite and will are now placed on the same level. The 'too sullied flesh' triumphs over 'godlike reason': the tyrant subjugates the sovereign."<sup>38</sup> *The Maid's Tragedy's* King is guilty of both abuse and tyranny: his lustful appetites subsume his reason and conflict with the image of monarchical divinity he espouses throughout the play.

While these doctrinal parallels would seem to indicate, as Cunnar argues, an explicitly anti-Jacobean tenor to Beaumont and Fletcher's play, the King's behavior is unequivocally tyrannical and uncomplicated by attempts at realistic, multidimensional characterization. Despite being accused of excess in his manner and dress, James acknowledges in *Basilikon Doron* (1599, republished in England 1603), that a monarch should "rule and dantone his owne proper affections and vnreasonable appetites," something Beaumont and Fletcher's King neither does nor acknowledges.<sup>39</sup> In fact, *The Maid's Tragedy* focuses specifically on the corruptive influence of the King's "appetites" as the primary factor in the deterioration of the Rhodian court. But the King's lust is only permitted to spread throughout the court due to absolutism, indicating that it is the doctrine itself that is under critical attack in the play.

Given the content and language of *The Maid's Tragedy*, coupled with its performance history, Beaumont and Fletcher clearly position themselves within the Jacobean debate as pro-tyrannicide and anti-absolutist. Although it seems likely that Cunnar is correct in labeling Beaumont and Fletcher as "anti-Jacobean," the extent of their stance seems limited to political theory. Although some of the patterns of behavior evinced in James's court seem to be echoed by the King, the degree to which the King is archetypal rather than realistic makes him a general embodiment of inappropriate monarchical behaviors, some of which may gesture toward the Jacobean throne without directly seeking to condemn James himself. What is most interesting about the way in which *The Maid's Tragedy* is constructed is not that the regicide is planned by Melantius and executed by Evadne, not that Amintor is forced to make a decision between his loyalty to his King and his own honor, and not even that Beaumont and Fletcher are disillusioned with the rule of James (although that may be a contributing factor), but, rather, that the play explicitly encourages its audience to examine and ultimately reject the ideological discourse of absolutism presented to them by the Stuart regime.

At the center of *The Maid's Tragedy's* conflict is the King's original disruption of Rhodian sociopolitical order, the repercussions of which resonate throughout the play. Amintor and Evadne's wedding and wedding night are corrupted by the King's affair with Evadne, and when Amintor suggests to his new bride that they go "To bed, then, let me wind thee in these arms" (*MT* 2.1.148), she refuses, causing Amintor to attempt to force her:

Come to bed,  
Or by those hairs which, if thou hadst a soul  
Like to thy locks, were threads for kings to wear  
About their arms –

I'll drag thee to my bed. (*MT* 2.1.273-277)

Such violence has no place in the bridal chamber and occurs only because of the King's interference. Similarly, Aspatia's melancholy is out of place at a wedding; she explains the contrast between the order that should have been and the disruption created by the King:

This should have been  
My night, and all your hands have been employed  
In giving me a spotless offering  
To young Amintor's bed.... (*MT* 2.1.44-47)

Because of the King's tyranny, Aspatia has forsaken her prescribed social role, and, in act five, since neither her father nor her betrothed has proven capable of challenging the King, she assumes the guise of a brother returned from war to avenge his sister, mimicking Melantius in the character she creates. By virtue of her own purity, she has been cast out of the corrupt social order by the King's original actions and orders. Part of the tragedy of the play lies in the death of this comparative innocent brought about by a combination of the King's tyranny and the court's (specifically, Amintor's) unwillingness to censure their monarch.

Once it is clear that the King bears the responsibility for the corruption and disorder pervading the Rhodian court, both in terms of immoral behavior and the doctrinal absolutism that has permitted his lustful abuse to continue unchecked, Beaumont and Fletcher present rebellion and regicide as the only plausible solution. Locking himself in Evadne's chambers, Melantius imprisons his sister physically, morally, and spiritually in order to force her to accept the necessity of the King's death; he "[Seizes her]," then "[Draws his sword, and forces her to the ground,]" crying,

When I have killed thee,  
(As I have vowed to do if thou confess not)  
Nak'd as thou hast left thine honour will I leave thee,  
That on thy branded flesh the world may read  
Thy black shame and my justice. (*MT* 4.1.45, 95.1, 105-109)

Melantius employs performance to convince his sister of his sincerity. While the threats of violence – "tell, or I'll kill thee" – seem "real" enough, Melantius does not intend to murder his sister, as he needs her to murder the King (*MT* 4.1.97). The stage directions place Evadne on her knees at her brother's feet, a physical position that echoes the prostration of a subject before a king or a penitent before God. Melantius – enraged and with his sword drawn – stands in the position of executioner, whether behind her or before her, demanding her repentance and justifying both violence and regicide. His threat prefigures the method by which Evadne will kill the "base King": the "sword" that may be her "lover" becomes the

knife that she takes to bed with the King (MT 4.1.144). However, Melantius must dismantle her assertions of absolutism before he can convince her to commit tyrannicide.

At first, Evadne mimics Amintor's royalism to counter Melantius's violence. He asks her,

Dost thou not feel, amongst all those, one brave anger  
That breaks out nobly and directs thine arm  
To kill this base King? (MT 4.1.142-144)

Her response, "All the gods forbid it," echoes Amintor's insistence on the King's inviolability, and she continues with the claim that regicide is "too fearful!" (MT 4.1.144; 1.4.146). However, Melantius transforms her objections into justifications by claiming that "all the gods require it" as compensation for allowing the King to corrupt her and dishonor their family name. He demands that she "Kneel and swear to help" him when the moment comes, asserting,

Come, 'tis a righteous oath. [*Evadne kneels.*] Give me thy hand,  
And, both to heaven held up, swear by that wealth  
This lustful thief stole from thee, when I say it,  
To let his foul soul out. (MT 4.1.145, 161-168)

The physical staging of this moment reflects a power-relationship absent from the King's interactions with his subjects: Melantius' position relative to Evadne here is that of father to daughter, of god to petitioner, of monarch to subject. The contrast provided by Evadne's subjection underscores the futility of her counter-threats, and, authorized by Melantius's moral, social, and political position of power, she accepts rather than rejects his injunction: "Here I swear it" (MT 4.1.168).

Having embraced the necessity – and even the "righteousness" – of the King's death, Evadne is also unwilling to accept the King's assertions of divinity and instead takes them as further impetus to complete the murder she has begun. Evadne begins by tying the King to the bed, stating that "I dare not trust your strength; your grace and I / Must grapple on even terms no more" (MT 5.1.36-37). In binding the King to the bed, Evadne not only ties him to the physical location of his sins, but also lowers his status; once, they met on "even terms," the King's superior rank dissipated by his submission to lust, but Evadne reduces him further, enacting Melantius's label of "base King." She continues, saying, "You are too hot, and I have brought you physic / To temper your high veins" (MT 5.1.53-54). She presumably continues by climbing atop him in an inversion of his original sexual penetration of her body so that her subsequent penetration of his body (with her knife) is a physical as well as spiritual reversal of the original act of lust. Once she is physically in control of the King's body, she makes her threat explicit:



(property) means of linking the King with those he has corrupted: Evadne, Amintor, Aspatia, Melantius, and Calianax. By spreading blood from the King's body to each victim prior to his or her (promised) death, Beaumont and Fletcher use blood – the index of royalty in a society governed by primogeniture – to indicate their awareness of the doctrinal importance of that bodily fluid. It seems likely, too, that the irony of James's adherence to absolutism as a function of primogeniture was not lost on the authors, who would certainly have been aware that James's claims to the English throne were only loosely related to blood (via his great-grandmother, Margaret Tudor).<sup>41</sup> In addition to its political significance, the humor blood was associated in early modern medical belief with both rage and sexual profligacy, a fact that increases the significance of the King's blood as the agent of corruption in the final scenes of the play.<sup>42</sup>

The elimination of the King's corrupt influence exonerates Evadne, who, unlike Shakespeare's Lady Macbeth, feels no guilt about the blood on her hands:

Am I not fair?  
Looks not Evadne beauteous with these rites now?  
Were these hairs half so lovely in thine eyes  
When our hands met before the holy man?  
I was too foul within to look fair then;  
Since I knew ill I was not free till now. (MT 5.3.116-121)

Shullenberger observes that the commission of regicide "is less a crime to her than a violent and cleansing repudiation" that will allow her to resume a place in the social order.<sup>43</sup> She asks Amintor to "take me to thy bed," but Amintor is unable to reconcile the possibility of regicide, and "*Leaves her*" (MT 5.3.151, 166). The failure of Evadne's attempts to regain Amintor's affection leaves her with only one option for earning his love and forgiveness: to inflict upon herself, as she had on the King, an atoning death:

Amintor, thou shalt love me now again.  
Go, I am calm. Farewell, and peace for ever.  
Evadne, whom thou hat'st, will die for thee. *Kills herself.* (MT 5.3.167-169.1)<sup>44</sup>

Although the King's blood has absolved Evadne, Amintor is unable to accept what she has done because of his adherence to the same absolutist doctrine that permitted the King to abuse him.

Beaumont and Fletcher enact the King's guilt for the remaining deaths via the physical transfer of the King's blood from Evadne to Amintor, Amintor to Aspatia, and then to Melantius and Calianax. Evadne, "stained with a king's blood," passes that stain from herself to Amintor, literally rubbing the King's blood on his body when she "[*Holds him.*]" (MT 5.3.146, 151.1). Just as the original corruption spread from the King to Evadne through an

embrace, Evadne spreads the King's blood to Amintor, Amintor spreads it to Aspatia, and Amintor and Aspatia pass it on to Melantius and Calianax. During this final scene, Aspatia's revival from unconsciousness (the result of a mortal wound received during her disguised combat with Amintor) allows Amintor and Aspatia to be reconciled to one another in a grotesque inversion of a marriage. Aspatia asks him, "Have I thy hand, Amintor?" a question that is both literal and figurative: is she holding his hand, and is he willing to be her husband after all (*MT* 5.3.221)? Aspatia also receives the literal taint of the King's blood from Amintor as he holds her and takes her hand. The audience is shown the transfer of the King's corruption through blood and understands that Amintor, too, will have to die. Following both Evadne's and Aspatia's example, he takes a weapon (presumably the knife at hand, which was also the one that killed Evadne and the King), and "*Kills himself*" (*MT* 5.3.242.1).

The last moments of the play are perhaps its most problematic, containing both Melantius's failed suicide attempt and Lysippus's final admonition to his court and the audience that regicide is "curs'd." Finkelppearl argues that, "the authors shield Melantius from becoming, like Hieronimo and Vindice, a mirror image of the evil object of his vengeance. This they accomplish by making him the instrument of the act but not the actual agent."<sup>45</sup> Melantius has to survive, by this logic, to confirm his anti-monarchic sentiment; this is only possible, according to Finkelppearl and others, because his were not the actual bloody hands. Finkelppearl's choice of "instrument" to apply to Melantius seems incongruous, given Lysippus's assertion that "curs'd is he that is their instrument," since the "curse" seems to have fallen on Evadne, rather than Melantius (*MT* 5.3.295). Craik, in fact, argues that,

The last line cannot refer to Melantius, whom Lysippus has pardoned and whose suicide he wants to prevent. If it refers to Evadne, who 'was but the instrument' of her brother (V.i.139), it is making a morally inconsistent distinction between them. However, Evadne being by now conveniently dead, the generalisation has a sufficient specious plausibility, and it serves its main purpose, to assure the departing spectators that the dramatists do not condone regicide.<sup>46</sup>

While Craik may be right that the point of this last line is to provide some sort of assurance of Beaumont and Fletcher's royalism, it is too general and too obviously rote to be the play's ultimate claim. Melantius is responsible for the King's death, even though he did not actually commit the deed, and he not only survives the play's end, but is pardoned and protected by the new king. However, the final scene seems to oppose a clean solution because Beaumont and Fletcher do have Melantius attempt to join his friend in death:

I vow, Amintor, I will never eat,  
Or drink, or sleep, or have to do with that  
That may preserve life: this I swear to keep. (*MT* 5.3.288-290)



The guilt Melantius bears, however, is unrelated to the King. When confronted by Lysippus at the fort, he expresses no compunction, saying, "It was our honours drew us to this act," and Lysippus pardons him for the deed: "Melantius, write in that / Thy choice; my seal is at it" (MT 5.2.66, 64-65). Melantius's guilt lies in Amintor's death, as he was unable to prevent his royalist friend from becoming the King's victim. In essence, Melantius should die because of the dangers of royalism, not his role in regicide. Like Evadne, Amintor, and Aspatia, Melantius is a victim of the absolutism that precluded Amintor and other members of the Rhodian court from taking responsibility for the good of the nation as a whole by censuring the King.

The final tableau of death on the stage – ironically termed a "fair example" – is the strongest indicator of Beaumont and Fletcher's anti-absolutist politics. Lysippus's final warning to potential tyrannicides that they will be "cursed" rings decidedly hollow in the face of such carnage, and it is trumped by his own caution to himself to "rule with temper" lest he be visited with "sudden death." After all, the circumstances of the Rhodian court have led to the deaths not only of the regicide (Evadne) and the promise of death from the rebels (Melantius and Calianax), but it has also caused the deaths of at least two arguable innocents (Amintor and Aspatia) abused by the King's misuse of his power. The absence of the King's body from the stage in this final scene is especially poignant: if Lysippus uses the scene before him as a cautionary tale, the one body that is absent and therefore not a part of the caution is that of the King. Regicidal plays, including both *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, to which *The Maid's Tragedy* specifically alludes, tend to display the corpse of the king in their final moments, but Beaumont and Fletcher's play does not, focusing on the King's victims, rather than the King himself as victim, demonstrating what Moretti refers to as "the degradation of the cultural image of the sovereign" by refusing to acknowledge its sanctity.<sup>47</sup> While it could be argued that the King's absence is a sign of respect by not objectifying him as a corpse and displaying the living king Lysippus, the play did not shy away from the grisly scene of the King's murder, a visceral act that explicitly objectifies the body as the source of the King's sins. Instead, I argue that the caution contained within the play's final lines is meant to indicate the consequences of the King's misrule as they impact his subjects, who thereby become more important than the King himself.

In this final scene the significance of the audience returns, as well: if the King's death is less important than the harm done to his people, then the health of a nation relies upon the people (Languet's *populus universus*) rather than the monarch alone. If the nation is more important than the monarch, then it should be both possible and justifiable for the nation to remove that monarch when necessary. This being said, *The Maid's Tragedy* does not demand James's removal, nor does it bear an overt warning to England's king. Rather, Beaumont and Fletcher's tragedy seeks to remind both king and audience of the nature of their relationship to one another: it is within not only the ability, but the rights of the audience to praise and censure their monarch in state just as they do the monarchs on the stage.

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<sup>1</sup> Edition used: Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher, *The Maid's Tragedy*, edited by T.W. Craik (Manchester: Manchester University Press, The Revels Plays, 1988).

<sup>2</sup> Marie Axton, *The Queen's Two Bodies: Drama and the Elizabethan Succession* (London: Royal Historical Society, 1977), 89.

<sup>3</sup> James I, "Basilikon Doron, or his Maiesties Instrvctions to his Dearest Sonne, Henry the Prince," *The Political Works of James I*, edited by Charles Howard McIlwain (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1918), 5. James was likely echoing Elizabeth's 1586 claim that "for we princes, I tell you, are set on stages in the sight and view of all the world duly observed." *Collected Works*, edited by Leah S. Marcus, Janel Mueller, Mary Beth Rose (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 194.

<sup>4</sup> For more on the role of the audience in the playhouse, see Kristin Bezio, "Politics and Play: The National Stage and the Player King in Shakespeare's *Henry V* and *Macbeth*," *Quidditas* 31 (2010): 10-21.

<sup>5</sup> There was no literal contract between subjects and sovereign, although the monarch agreed at his or her coronation to "grant and keep and confirm to the people of England by your oath the laws and customs given them by the pervious just and God-fearing kings." Quoted in C. Warren Hollister, *The Making of England, 55 B.C. to 1399*, seventh edition (Lexington: D.C. Heath and Company, 1996), 275.

<sup>6</sup> Hubert Languet, *Vindiciae Contra Tyrannos*, edited and translated by George Garnett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 74.

<sup>7</sup> Sarah P. Sutherland, *Masques in Jacobean Tragedy* (New York: AMS Press, Inc., 1983), 62-63.

<sup>8</sup> T.W. Craik, "Introduction," *The Maid's Tragedy* (Manchester, 1988), 27.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 27; Robert Hume, "The Maid's Tragedy and Censorship in the Restoration Theatre," *Philological Quarterly* 61.4 (1982), 484-485. See also *The London Stage, 1600-1800*, Part I: 1660-1700, edited by William Van Lennep, Emmett L. Avery, and Arthur H. Scouten (Southern Illinois University Press, 1965).

<sup>10</sup> Hume, 485-486.

<sup>11</sup> Gerard Langbaine, *An Account of the English Dramatick Poets* (Oxford: L.L. for George West and Henry Clements, 1691), 212.

<sup>12</sup> Charles Gildon, *The Lives and Characters of the English Dramatick Poets* (London: Leigh and Turner, 1699), 59, in Hume, 484-485.

<sup>13</sup> Hume, 488. A.C. Sprague, *Beaumont and Fletcher on the Restoration Stage* (New York: Blom, 1965) is among those who claim that *The Maid's Tragedy* was never prohibited, although both Arthur F. White, in "The Office of Revels and Dramatic Censorship During the Restoration Period," *Western Reserve University Bulletin* 34 (1931): 5-45, and Andrew Gurr argue otherwise. See "Introduction," *The Maid's Tragedy* (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1969).

<sup>14</sup> Edition used: Edmund Waller, "The Maid's Tragedy Altered," *The Maid's Tragedy Altered. With some other Pieces* (London: for Jacob Tonson, 1690). *Early English Books Online*.

<sup>15</sup> Hume, 486. Sandra Clark notes that Beaumont and Fletcher's plays were infrequently altered in the Restoration, but also remarks that they were enormously popular. See "Sex and Tyranny Revisited: Waller's *The Maid's Tragedy* and Rochester's *Valentinian*," *Theatre and Culture in Early Modern England, 1615-1737: From Leviathan to Licensing Act*, edited by Catie Gill (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), 76.

<sup>16</sup> Clark comments that the epilogue "redefines what in Beaumont and Fletcher's play is tyrannous intemperance as a minor failing" now permissible in a Restoration context that "understand[s] the heroic nature of royal love and the toleration properly to be extended to royal passion" (82), sentiments not a part of the Jacobean social attitude.

<sup>17</sup> Craik, 28-29; James Sheridan Knowles, *The bridal; a tragedy in five acts, adapted for representation (with three original scenes, written by James Sheridan Knowles, esq.) from the Maid's tragedy of Beaumont and Fletcher as performed by Mr. Macready*. (New York: Berford & Co., 1847). Clark also notes, without offering specifics, that "Restoration critics such as Flecknoe, Rymer, or Dryden do not seem to have regarded the plays as absolutist" (79).

<sup>18</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Notes and Lectures upon Shakespeare and Some of the Old Poets and Dramatists with Other Literary Remains* vol. 1, edited by H.N. Coleridge (London: William Pickering, 1849), 295.

<sup>19</sup> A.C. Kirsch, *Jacobean Dramatic Perspectives* (University Press of Virginia, 1972), 47.

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- <sup>20</sup> Irving Ribner, *Jacobean Tragedy: The Quest for Moral Order* (London: Methuen, 1962), 20.
- <sup>21</sup> John F. Danby, *Poets on Fortune's Hill: Studies in Sidney, Shakespeare, Beaumont and Fletcher* (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, Inc., 1966), 185.
- <sup>22</sup> Craik, 12.
- <sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.
- <sup>24</sup> Walter Cohen, *Drama of a Nation* (Cornell U. Press, 1985), 392, 371.
- <sup>25</sup> Ronald Broude, "Divine Right and Divine Retribution in Beaumont and Fletcher's *The Maid's Tragedy*," *Shakespeare and Dramatic Tradition* (Newark, 1989), 247; Philip J. Finkelpearl, *Court and Country Politics in the Plays of Beaumont and Fletcher* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 192.
- <sup>26</sup> Craik, 9.
- <sup>27</sup> James I, "A Speech to the Lords and Commons of the Parliament at White-hall," *The Political Works of James I*, edited by Charles Howard McIlwain (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1918), 307.
- <sup>28</sup> See Axton and Howard Nenner, *By Colour of Law: Legal Culture and Constitutional Politics in England, 1660-1689* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1977).
- <sup>29</sup> Clark, 79.
- <sup>30</sup> Finkelpearl, 184.
- <sup>31</sup> William Shullenberger, "'This For the Most Wrong'd of Women': A Reappraisal of *The Maid's Tragedy*," *Renaissance Drama* 13.1 (1982), 155.
- <sup>32</sup> Robert Y. Turner, "Responses to Tyranny in John Fletcher's Plays," *Medieval & Renaissance Drama in England: An Annual Gathering of Research, Criticism, and Reviews* IV, edited by J. Leeds Barroll (New York: AMS Press, 1989), 124, 127.
- <sup>33</sup> Eugene Cunnar, "The Wedding Masque's Moral Vision in *The Maid's Tragedy*," *Selected Papers from the West Virginia Shakespeare and Renaissance Association* 7.1 (1982), 38.
- <sup>34</sup> Finkelpearl, 51.
- <sup>35</sup> James I, "The Trew Law of Free Monarchies," *The Political Works of James I*, edited by Charles Howard McIlwain (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1918), 67.
- <sup>36</sup> Broude, 251.
- <sup>37</sup> Richard F. Hardin, *Civil Idolatry: Desacralizing and Monarchy in Spenser, Shakespeare, and Milton* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1992), 38.
- <sup>38</sup> Franco Moretti, "'A Huge Eclipse': Tragic Form and the Deconsecration of Sovereignty," translated by D.A. Miller, *Genre* 15 (1982), 12.
- <sup>39</sup> James I, "Basilikon Doron," 12.
- <sup>40</sup> Evadne's first line contains at least one but more likely three thrusts of her knife (each taking place on the word "thus"), followed by another four lines later, and probably three more before he dies – one each for "This for my lord Amintor," for "This for my noble brother," and "For the most wronged of women" – for a likely total of seven (MT 5.1.100-113). The King is stabbed at least four times, but line 110 implies at least one stab for each "This for..." just as the triple repetition of "thus" in line 100 and 101 indicates multiple wounds.
- <sup>41</sup> Pauline Croft, *King James* (Houndmills, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).
- <sup>42</sup> See also Jason R. Denman, "Anatomizing the Body Politic: Corporeal Rhetoric in *The Maid's Tragedy*," *Philological Quarterly* 84.3 (2005): 311-331.
- <sup>43</sup> Shullenberger, 150.
- <sup>44</sup> Amintor returns immediately after, in time to hear her final words as she dies, but too late to "stay thy hand" (MT 5.3.171). It seems that, perversely, this might be intended as a comic moment, given the rapidity of the timing between Evadne's death and Amintor's return to keep her from killing herself: he speaks his returning line just after the stage direction "kills herself," which implies that he may, in fact, have been just entering the stage as she commits the deed. Further compounding the bleak humor of the moment is the fact that Evadne's death is immediately followed by Aspatia's temporary revival: the direction "She dies" (MT 5.3.173.1) is followed by "O, O, O!" (MT 5.3.174) from Aspatia. Such a sequence is virtually impossible to play seriously, as the coincidences of timing are absurd. This comedy, however, is contrasted by Aspatia's more lengthy scene of

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death, in which the audience comes to realize that she and Amintor loved one another, and that the King's actions in separating them are the ultimate tragedy of the play.

<sup>45</sup> Finkelpearl, 201.

<sup>46</sup> Craik, 13.

<sup>47</sup> Moretti, 9. Claudius is among the dead at the end of *Hamlet*, and Macbeth's head is prominently displayed by Macduff throughout the final speech in *Macbeth*.