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Introduction

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Introduction

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- 1 Fear is present in one form or another in almost all of the dramatic works of Shakespeare and his contemporaries. From the ridiculous apprehension of cuckoldry to the horror felt by Macbeth faced by Banquo's ghost, from the mechanicals' worry that the "lion" might "fright the ladies" to the dread on which Richard III's tyranny relies, every degree of fear is to be found in Shakespeare, Marlowe, or Webster. Be it in tragedies still attempting to instil sacred terror or in comedies making fun of the staging of terrifying events, in historical plays critiquing the Machiavellian uses of political terror or in the new-fangled Jacobean taste for spectacular staging, fear goes through manifold variations on the Shakespearian stage, reflecting individual emotions such as "the dread of something after death" mentioned by Hamlet, as much as the ever-present social apprehension of the plague or foreign invasions.
- 2 As Joanna Bourke explains in her cultural history of fear,¹ one of the main difficulties facing researchers is to understand or reconstruct what it was that frightened Early Modern people, and exactly when fear was being displayed in iconographic depictions, since the physical symptoms or facial expressions often associated with the emotion are quite close to those of anger, amazement or even suspicion. Moreover, different types of fear lead to very diverse physical effects, ranging from paralysis and the impossibility of all action, to accelerated heartbeats, being short of breath or panting, irrepressible shaking or a complete loss of control over bodily functions. The researcher must therefore focus both on the physical manifestations of fear and on the cognitive response to it. The very extent of reactions and the varied modalities of fear open up verbalizing possibilities of which Shakespeare and his contemporaries made resourceful use, often grounding them in a physicality that determined their discourse as much the philosophical considerations on the nature and causes of terror or apprehension.
- 3 Shakespeare distinguishes *fear* (which occurs over 800 occurrences in the canon) from *dread* (50 occurrences) or *fright*, which is often to be found in ironic contexts, with an underlying suggestion that the events in question are not really worth the fretting they cause. The contributions presented here analyse the range of these lexical variations,

beginning with a comprehensive analysis by Robert Appelbaum, author of *Terrorism Before the Letter: Mythography and Political Violence in England, Scotland, and France 1559-1642*, while Christy Desmet turns her attention in particular to the varied significations and associations of the word *dread*.

- 4 The contributions gathered here attempt to shed light on the phenomenon of fear and its representations on the Shakespearean stage by referring to the authority of Jean Delumeau, whose seminal work on fear (*La Peur en Occident*, 1978) addresses the way the catholic church repeatedly emphasized the darker, more threatening aspects of Christian doctrine (Hell, the Last Judgment, sacrilege) in its overall strategy of conversion and domination. Though the fear of death may seem less dominant in the Early Modern period than the dread of the retribution that awaits sinners and bad Christians in the afterworld, Shakespearean drama does expose the social distinctions that condition individual anxieties. Thus while Anne-Marie Miller-Blaise discusses the dialectics of fear and retribution from a philosophical angle, Christine Sukič underlines the social contrast between the expected cowardice of the common people and the aristocratic elite's pretension to ignore and conquer fear. Relatedly, Jean-Louis Claret shows that the horror generated by the sea takes on an almost disproportionate dimension in the imagination of characters for whom the flames of Hell become less threatening than the perspective of death by drowning. In Webster's plays, on the contrary, audience-members are no longer tormented by their terror of the reckoning that faces them in the beyond: instead they are horrified by the relentless verbal cruelty displayed by the characters – a feature that inspired the French author Robert Merle in his study of the mental workings of professional killers in the Nazi era (*Death is my Trade*, 1952). In Webster's world, terror arises from humans' faculty to turn the sublunary world into a living hell.
- 5 Several contributors refer to Giorgio Agamben (*Homo Sacer*, 1995) and Carl Schmitt (*The Concept of the Political*, 1927), in order to address the political dimensions of terror, in particular the way in which a community can be constituted through fear of the other, or on the contrary fear *for* the other. Thus the apprehensions fed by the prospect of a potential return of catholic sovereigns or the massive arrival of foreigners on the British soil underpin the discussions to be found in this collection about Marlowe's *Massacre at Paris*, Shakespeare's *Sir Thomas More*, or Thomas Ravenscroft's adaptation of *Titus Andronicus*, in which the rape of Lavinia becomes a metaphor of the conquest of England by the catholic party.
- 6 Several authors examine the new faces of fear in the contemporary context, especially in films. The anxieties created by new media and their ability to poison the social fabric by generating and propagating mistrust and suspicion informs the representation of fear in Michael Almereyda's adaptation of *Cymbeline* as analyzed by Maurizio Calbi. Finally, it is impossible to escape the parallel between *Macbeth*, the Gunpowder Plot and the manifestations of present-day terrorism, even though both Robert Appelbaum and Graham Holderness are keen to warn against any over-simplifying analogies.

NOTES

1. Joanna Bourke, *Fear: A Cultural History*, London, Virago, 2005.

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