

Forum

Shakespeare and bin Laden's Death

TO THE EDITOR:

Late on 1 May 2011, as I prepared the last lecture for my late-Shakespeare course, I was interrupted by President Obama's announcement that Osama bin Laden had been killed in Pakistan and that justice had been served. As the news gave way to euphoric celebrations, many of them involving American college students, I lamented how quickly "justice" became the authorized interpretation of this event and celebration the indicated response.

Throughout the semester I had urged my students to reject the notion of authorized interpretations and to examine the assumptions they brought to their reading. I reminded them that Shakespeare was a popular author who used popular traditions to compose works that, rather than perpetuate a cultural ideology, conduct searing ideological critiques. Above all, Shakespeare's works never give us conclusive answers to the questions they raise: What are the marks of virtue? To what extent are social roles inherent or acquired? What does it mean to be dutiful to one's parent, spouse, employer, country, or even to oneself? How can we tell the difference between revenge and justice?

In the aftermath of bin Laden's death, these last two questions seem especially apt. However one feels about this event, the celebrations of early May merit critical consideration. To be sure, bin Laden's death may provide some closure for those intimately affected by the al-Qaeda attacks that took place before and on 9/11. But as celebrations broke out across public, private, and social-media spaces, I was struck by the repetition of three pieties, common beliefs that can transform all too easily into memorial standards. In my final Shakespeare lecture, it seemed fitting to approach these pieties with the cautious skepticism that we had encountered in Shakespeare's plays through the semester.

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The first piety holds that bin Laden was purely evil and therefore deserved to die. Shakespeare gives us virtually no precedents for this conclusion. Few plays establish clear differences between heroes and villains. Even in the case of *King Lear*'s Edmund or *Othello*'s Iago, it's hard to say that the character we see is purely evil and not simply a flawed human being impelled by motivations to which we can easily relate: merits unrewarded, privileges accorded or denied by accident of birth. And while in Shakespearean tragedy no new villains arise to take up the mantle of an Edmund or an Iago after their death, in our world any number of people may eagerly seek to assume bin Laden's role.

The second piety is that bin Laden's death makes us safer. Here I think of the titular hero of *Coriolanus* and his short-lived victory over the Volscians. While his decisive military conquest and triumphant return to Rome earn him political advantage, his arrogance toward his fellow Romans ultimately precipitates his banishment and imperils the fledgling republic. Although *Coriolanus* may not be a straightforward allegory of the American war on terror, the National Security Agency, Central Intelligence Agency, and Department of Homeland Security project that we are, at least in the short term, more vulnerable to attack now than we were before 1 May.

The third piety is, to my mind, the most perverse: that justice has been served. In *Measure for Measure* Shakespeare effects a provisional split between the person and the office of the Duke to explore where justice resides. Is it in the letter of the law, in the spirit of the law, in those responsible for enforcing the law, or outside the law altogether? In a similar vein, we might ask whether the wartime justification of assassination overrides due process and international tribunals. Or is this the kind of revenge that Francis Bacon called "wild justice," a weed that will take over the garden if not properly kept in check? ("Of Revenge," *Essays* [New York: Cosimo, 2007; print], 15). In Renaissance drama, revenge never pays off; the cycle of re-

venge ends only after everyone of consequence has died.

When John Donne thought he was on his deathbed, he composed this timely and familiar meditation:

No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main; if a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy friend's or of thine own were; any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind, and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.

(Devotions upon Emergent Occasions:

Together with Death's Duel

[Teddington: Echo, 2008; print], 97)

For Donne, the involvement of every human in simply being alive connects us and makes us responsible for one another. The deaths of three thousand people in the 9/11 attacks, of over 900,000 in the war in Iraq, and of nearly 20,000 in the war in Afghanistan weigh heavily and certainly diminish us. But for Donne, at least, so does the death of any one man, whether that man is an enemy or a close friend. When the bell tolls for bin Laden, it does not ring to affirm our moral superiority, our national security, or the triumph of justice. It rings to remind us of our mortality and of our shared complicity in a world where expedient lethal force, not painstaking legal reckoning, is considered worthy of celebration.

There's no escaping our cultural, political, or other priorities when reading, writing about, or teaching Shakespeare. As this letter makes clear, I'm no exception to that rule. My first priority, however, is pedagogical: I aim to empower students to respond thoughtfully—critically, ethically—to all the cultural artifacts they encounter in and beyond the classroom. If nothing else, the events following bin Laden's death confirm that how we respond to cultural messages has a direct bearing on how we live in the world and how we make the world for ourselves and for others.

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