

Scaffold Fiction:
Execution and Eighteenth-Century British Literature

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Before the age of sensibility, the literary scaffold was a device, albeit one with its own set of associations. Its purpose was to arrest plot, create tension, and render character. Fictional representations of execution typically did not question the place of capital punishment in society. They were heroic events in which protagonists were threatened with a judicial device that was presumed righteous in every other case but their own. But in the eighteenth century, the fictional scaffold acquired new significance: it deepened a Gothic or sublime tone, tested reader and character sensibility, and eventually challenged the judicial status quo. The reliance on the scaffold to generate atmosphere, to wring our compassion, or to examine the legal value of the individual resulted in a new type of literature that I call *scaffold fiction*, a genre that persists to this day. Representations of execution in eighteenth-century tragedy, in Gothic narratives, and in novels of sensibility centered more and more on a hero's scaffold anxiety as a means of enlarging pathos while subverting legal tradition. Lingering on a character's last hours became the norm as establishment tools like execution broadsheets and criminal biography gave way to scaffold fictions like Lee's *The Recess* and Smith's *The Banished Man*—fictions that privilege the body of the condemned rather than her soul and no longer reaffirm the law's prerogative. And because of this shift in the material worth of individuals, the revolutionary fictions of the Romantic era in particular induced questions about the scaffold's own legitimacy. For the first time in Western literary history, representations of execution usually had something to imply about execution itself, not merely the justness of a particular individual's fate.

The first two chapters of my study are devoted to close readings of Georgian tragedy and Gothic novels, which provide a representative sample of the kinds of tropes particular to scaffold fiction (if they exist before the eighteenth century, they are less vivid, less present). The negotiation of a sentence, the last farewell, the lamentation of intimates, the imagined scaffold death of a loved one, and the taboo attachment of a condemned Christian to his flesh became more sustained and elaborate, opening up new arguments about the era's obsession with sublimity, imagination, and sympathy, which in turn provide me with critical frameworks. The last two chapters pull back from the page in order to examine how literary representations of execution shifted as perspectives on the death penalty shifted. Anti-Jacobin fictions that feature the scaffold, for instance, were confounded by the device's now vexed status as a judicial solution. Challenging the supposed authoritarian thrust of texts like Mangin's *George the Third* and Craik's *Adelaide de Narbonne*, the anti-Jacobin scaffold was swept up in a general reimagining of the object and its moral implication, which by extension helps to dismantle the reductive Jacobin/anti-Jacobin binary which critics increasingly mistrust. My final chapter devotes space to William Godwin, whose novels underscore the moral horror of the scaffold not just as the ultimate reification of the law's power but, more interestingly, as the terminus of the "poor deserted individual, with the whole force of the community conspiring his ruin" (*Political Justice*). Godwin, a Romantic writer who anticipates Victorian and twentieth-century capital reforms, brings the scaffold fiction of writers like Defoe and Fielding into fruition as he wrote and agitated at the height of the Bloody Code, creating a template for Dickens, Camus and a host of modern authors and filmmakers.

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“The inquisitor only tortures those who are at least reputed criminals; whereas the writer generally chooses the most excellent character in his piece for the subject of his persecution.”

John and Anna Laetitia Aikin
*An Enquiry into Those Kinds of Distresses
Which Excite Agreeable Sensations* (1773)

Introduction

Inquiries into the phenomenon of execution in eighteenth-century Europe tend to open with a report of the scaffold death of a particular individual, then segue into a broader cultural commentary delivered in a progressive tone. These introductions are so common that “writing execution” has almost become a genre in and of itself in the last few decades. The template is appropriate: most of these inquiries constitute historical or sociological scholarship rightfully undertaken by historians, sociologists, and sometimes criminologists. As a result, the English-language documents referenced in these studies tend to be what J.A. Sharpe¹ calls the “ephemeral literature” of the scaffold: broadsheets, dying speeches, sermons, criminal biographies and ordinaries’ accounts—that is, texts made available on the occasion of their subject’s execution relaying “true” events in order to improve the morals of their readers. Also discussed at length, in these studies, are essays by Mandeville, Fielding, Boswell, and Burke; letters by Walpole; journal entries by Evelyn and Pepys; contributions by Blackstone and Eden; and reformist writings by Romilly and Godwin. When modern scholars of the history of execution consider the novels, poems, and plays of the long eighteenth century—what we loosely consider to be fiction, however problematic the term—they usually approach them in a sidebar fashion, and they tend to refer to the same handful of canonic texts, such as *The Beggar’s Opera* or *Moll Flanders*.

¹ See Sharpe’s “‘Last Dying Speeches’: Religion, Ideology and Public Execution in Seventeenth-Century England,” p. 148

Though some literature scholars, such as Lincoln Faller and Miriam Jones,² have taken a look at criminal biography and execution broadsheets, and while Regina Janes and Monika Fludernik³ have written about representations of execution in more “fictional” texts (e.g. *The Prelude* and *Caleb Williams*), a comprehensive study of such representations in eighteenth-century British fiction has not been undertaken until now. Considering the presence of the scaffold in the lives and literature of eighteenth-century Britons, it is a curious oversight, though a handful of scholars have certainly prepared the way for me. Yet unlike Janes, I am not solely concerned with beheadings; unlike Fludernik, I am interested in how the trope of sublime execution functions in the works of more than one author. Nor do I confine myself to discussions of sublimity, but also consider the place of imagination, sensibility, and revolutionary politics in the era’s scaffold fiction, and give Gothic expressions of execution their proper due. In short, my study aspires to fill the gaps left in the socio-historical work produced by J. M. Beattie, V.A.C. Gatrell, Peter Linebaugh, Andrea McKenzie and others in the field, who in most cases have collapsed different narrative forms of the eighteenth century into one body of evidence, ignoring the “literariness” of the scaffold represented in novels, plays or poetry—its tropic forms, imagery, symbolism, or atmospheric power. Nor have they had the space to consider the

² See Faller’s *Crime and Defoe* and Jones’ “Fractured Narratives of Infanticide in the Crime and Execution Broadside in Britain, 1780-1850” (in *Writing British Infanticide: Child-Murder, Gender, and Print, 1722-1859*, ed. Jennifer Thorn). Broadsheet execution narratives have also been examined by F.W. Chandler (*The Literature of Roguery*, Vol. 1).

³ See Janes’ *Losing our Heads: Beheadings in Literature and Culture* and Fludernik’s “*Caleb Williams*: The Tarnishing of the Sublime.”

emergence of scaffold fiction itself as a product of the very historical period with which they are concerned.

Though J.A. Sharpe prefers the term “ephemeral literature” to describe the documentation produced on the occasion of a scaffold death, that documentation is usually referred to as “execution literature,” and it has been pored over by Faller and other critics fascinated by its role in the development of the novel. I wish to distinguish myself from that group because I focus not on criminal biography and broadsheets but on tragedy and novels—those more self-consciously artistic products not attached to the execution of a particular individual (though historical figures do make appearances in these narratives). I have chosen to use the term “scaffold fiction” to describe the body of work that falls outside the scope of execution literature, for what I write about is uncontroversially considered to be fiction, full stop. Scaffold fiction has much in common with execution literature but it is also discrete from it in notable ways. The main difference I detect between these two forms of literature is not so much that one is more “fictional” than the other (a matter of degree rather than kind, especially with regard to the typically inventive broadsheet and biography),⁴ but rather that they appear to have different aspirations, which become more and more distinct as the eighteenth century wears on. Whereas execution literature was generally composed to serve and reinforce the moral, political, legal, and even religious status quo, scaffold fiction often sought to undermine them or even

⁴ Again, see Faller’s *Crime and Defoe* (Chapters 1 and 2 in particular) for a discussion of the creative liberties taken by authors of execution supplements like broadsheets and criminal biography.

dismantle them completely. It is therefore appropriate that this body of fiction have its own name and be reflected upon as a corpus.

Scaffold fictions are partly characterized by the atmosphere produced by images, metaphors, and threats of execution, and by the scaffold anxiety of its characters—a self-explanatory term that needs no definition. They become even more generically pronounced (as I will show in Chapter Four) when they pair scaffold anxiety with a critique of the scaffold itself, at least late in the century. My investigation charts the many ways execution makes its appearance in these works. What tropes does scaffold fiction borrow from the criminal biography and broadsheet, but more importantly, what tropes has scaffold fiction made its own? How has tragedy shaped scaffold fiction in ways that mark not just the eighteenth-century novel of sensibility or the nineteenth-century “social problem” novel, but even the death-row movies of our own century? How do pathos and the dreadful anticipated death of the condemned intersect? Why has the recurring image of the scaffold in Gothic fiction not been properly acknowledged? The dearth of treatments of fictional execution is all the more surprising because eighteenth-century scaffold scenes are events wherein so many literary and dramatic conventions—martyrology, lamentation, Christian consolation, tragedy, horror, pathos, sensibility, and sublimity—collide in interesting ways.

Scaffold fiction could not easily have existed before the ages of sensibility and democratic reform, or indeed before the era of the psychological novel. As Ralph Cohen argues in “History and Genre” (1986), generic “groupings arise, change, and decline for historical reasons” (204) and “at particular moments”

(210)—changes often arising from ideological concerns. I wish to situate my investigation within Cohen’s framework: to examine, that is to say, the rise of scaffold fiction “as a process, not a determinate category” (204). “Genres,” Cohen insists, “are open categories. Each member alters the genre by adding, contradicting, or altering constituents” (204) so that no genre is altogether static; it invites new iterations, and its criteria and features are prone to change. This idea of genre, moreover, helps answer the question *Why scaffold fiction now?*—that is, why the eighteenth century and not before? Cohen is clear: the measurable increase in any type of fiction and the transformation a narrative undergoes as it is adapted to different types of genres⁵ reveal the changing values of a culture. “Generic transformation can be a social act” (215), Cohen asserts—and I will show how this happens when William Godwin, for instance, tries his hand at scaffold fiction towards the end of the century. “An author in making generic choices involves himself in an ideological choice” (214) because genre has “social and cultural implications” (217) and is often formally shaped by the messages it wishes to emphasize.

The following study attempts to define a distinct genre, previously unidentified, or to argue at least for the existence of a sub-genre or narrative kernel. Jacobin and anti-Jacobin novels, Gothic novels, and novels of sensibility make liberal use of the literary scaffold. Many tragedies, too, can be considered scaffold fictions and—though I look mostly at drama and prose in my study—so

⁵ Interestingly, Cohen uses the narrative of George Barnwell—a scaffold figure—to illustrate how one story moves through ballad, prose, and tragic forms over the course of a century. “Why should a popular form be rewritten in another popular form?” (215) Cohen asks when the Barnwell story shifts from ballad to prose to play. It does so because each author “selects certain features ... to concentrate on” for ideological and didactic reasons (215).

too can many poems.⁶ Taking a page from Cohen, I devote space to the ideological message of scaffold fiction, as well as its formal elements. The works I discuss were selected because they are representative of this narrative kernel; given the ubiquity of the literary scaffold in eighteenth-century British fiction, it is only possible to provide a sampling, and many of the assertions I make in the context of tragedy or novels can be applied equally to poetry (or even to modern-day films and graphic novels, for that matter). My chapter divisions are not intended to suggest that scaffold tropes in tragedy, Gothic fiction, or revolutionary novels are unique to these respective forms—in fact, the case is very much the opposite. But the point I most wish to make in the following pages is that scaffold fiction is a product of the eighteenth century, however much it remains with us today. Before 1700 (to use an embarrassingly rough number), executions in fictions—even in fictions full of executions—tended to be plot devices rather than a function of genre.

In other words, my study invites readers to perceive the literary scaffold and condemned characters within a generic framework that began to make itself apparent in a specific period, a framework characterized by its own tropes, images, and anxieties—what I broadly call “scaffold referents,” which include gallows, chopping blocks, capital trials, hallucinations and nightmares, incarcerations, the psychology of condemned characters, and the lamentation of their kin. Together these referents create a unique atmosphere, one that admittedly suits the ends of Gothic or anti-Jacobin writers, perhaps, but which

⁶ See, for example, Susanna Pearson’s “Lines Found on the Stairs of the Tour de la Chapelle of the Bastille” (1790), or Elizabeth Singer Rowe’s epistolary poems featuring Lady Jane Grey and Lord Guildford Dudley (1728).

also transcends those genres and declares its own presence. Come the eighteenth century and the advent of certain literary and political movements, a scaffold event in the third act of a play or at novel's end—or that litany of scaffold referents described in a novel's opening pages—can tinge an entire work.

And what exactly do I mean by “scaffold event”? In fiction, at least, it encompasses not just an execution but the associated arrest, trial, sentencing, and wait for death, out of which spring horrifying images and the psychological ordeal of a condemned character and (sometimes) his or her loved ones. The scaffold event in its entirety might include preparations for death, prayers for fortitude, fits of anxiety, final farewells, escape attempts, and a host of other moments in which the anguish of a death sentence and its attendant pathos can be drawn out for dramatic purposes. In some scaffold fictions, the hero may never come to face an actual gallows, but the threat of execution is enough to colour a text, as is the ordeal of a trial and a stint in a prison cell. In execution literature, the scene of death—a condemned figure articulating last words on a scaffold followed by confirmation that he or she has been “launched into eternity”—is invariably and climactically depicted. In scaffold fiction, conversely, the scene of death is sometimes avoided or displaced, occurring not at all or well off-stage. Authors of scaffold fictions exercise choice, in other words, and they do so in the service of much more varied ends. They make the literary scaffold event a vivid thing, and this vividness is inversely proportional to the decline of the execution broadsheet; as the production of execution literature decreased after

the middle of the eighteenth century,⁷ scaffold fictions multiplied, as if to take its place. The second half of the eighteenth century was an era of Gothic horror, bloody historical romances, and even bloodier anti-Jacobin fictions, all of which provided readers with increasingly prurient narratives. John Lofland has criticized eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British society for “retreating from the dramaturgic openness” of public execution.⁸ This may be the case, but meanwhile the violence and dramaturgy of the scaffold intensified on the literary page, giving us unprecedented access to the minds and emotions of at least the fictional condemned.

One last word about terminology, this one regarding the word “scaffold” itself. As every student of theatre knows, a stage is not necessarily a stage. “I can take any empty space and call it a bare stage,” Peter Brook famously wrote in *The Empty Space*. “A man walks across this empty space whilst someone else is watching him, and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged” (11). Taking a page from Brook, I have come to depend on the simplest meaning of the word “scaffold” after reading about execution sites—real and fictional—these last years: a delineated space devoted to condemned, executioner, and killing device. Because not every execution takes place on a raised platform (death by firing squad, for instance), the platform itself is, in the end, unnecessary and therefore outside of my consideration. The “spectacle” of execution is not determined by a physical framework so much as a political one,

⁷ See Andrea McKenzie’s *Tyburn’s Martyrs*, pp. 33, 123-26, and 152ff.

⁸ See Lofland’s *State Executions Viewed Historically and Sociologically*, p. 283.

and the literary scaffold event—like the real-life scaffold event—does not always occur before a crowd. Because not every scaffold event is “spectacular,” I wish to sidestep discussions of execution-as-theatre in my study; as I point out in Chapter One, such studies already exist. My interest lies elsewhere, and I believe that by now we can take the theatricality and spectacle inherent in public execution for granted. What we should also take for granted (as I hope to convince the reader), is that scaffold fiction is a recognizable type of literature identified by its own peculiar hallmarks.

Wakefield, Quebec
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CHAPTER ONE

Tragedy, Materiality, and the Sublime Scaffold

1: The Scaffold Death Differentiated

Critical discussions about eighteenth-century tragedy⁹ tend to consider the drama of death in broad terms, whether that death results from illness, assassination, suicide, or execution. For most readers, the dagger, the poisoned cup, the black-creped scaffold, the sudden death from shock, and the lingering death from despair are perceived as different mechanisms of the same structural device: a relationship is severed (or nearly severed) by the death (actual or supposed) of a character (or two, or three) after a five-act struggle between love and duty. We might all agree that the threat of death injects a heroic dimension into the drama, but we too often treat the deaths themselves monolithically, locating uniform meaning among disparate manifestations.

Onstage, however, the scaffold death is characteristically different from the rest. Unlike the stabbing death (the form of death most common to the tragic genre), execution is foreseen by the victim and observable by others; it is dwelled upon, prepared for, negotiable, and it is sometimes prevented by the intervention

⁹ I address formal tragedy in this chapter, but my considerations tend to be just as apt for any poem or novel—or comedy—that borrows figures and conventions from the Aristotelian model.

of another character. The stabbing death is often self-inflicted, but the scaffold death is always performed upon the victim by another person who usually operates on behalf of the state rather than a political rival or jealous lover (although these too have at times been the case). The scaffold death in tragedy shares some elements with the offstage battlefield death or the onstage martial skirmish—the evocation of glory; the sanction of authority—but within the tragic frame, the soldier's death is not the same as the scaffold death. The scaffold death evokes questions of grace and is sometimes depicted as shameful rather than glorious (and, intriguingly, is sometimes called “shameful” and “glorious” within the same play, even by the same character). The scaffold death is one of those rare types of death one is guaranteed to see coming, so the playwright must depend on a separate set of devices to wring tension from the audience—devices that both exploit and enlarge the anxiety exhibited by the characters and experienced by the audience. By selecting the scaffold death, the writer has sacrificed the stage effect of sudden violence, which is supplanted by pathos, since few other forms of death can be drawn out with such anticipation and considered at such length by both the condemned and his or her intimates.

Because it has its own separate form of consciousness, both for the condemned hero and for the audience, the scaffold death in tragedy cannot then simply be classified under the larger heading of *Structural Device: Death*. The psychology that surrounds a public, state-sanctioned death is unique, and it triggers unique anxieties for the condemned hero and for those forced to mourn his passing within the context of a questionable justice. Providence becomes an

idea that must be forced a little further, in these cases. And as the perspective on public execution in Europe shifted over the course of the eighteenth century,¹⁰ authors could not rest their scaffold tragedies upon a single conceptual model—a complication I will investigate in Chapter Three. The scaffold death has always been "an inherently unstable event," as Peter Lake and Michael Questier have shown in "Agency, Appropriation and Rhetoric Under the Gallows" (1996),¹¹ a site of contesting ideologies and fluid terminologies:

The rites of state violence . . . were contained and embodied in a number of discursive structures—the last dying speech, the good death, the scripted dialogue between martyrdom and persecution—all of which could be glossed and appropriated for a variety of polemical purposes. In short, the very ideological means by which the state sought to encode its own purposes in these proceedings opened up spaces in which those purposes could be challenged and subverted. (69)

It was no different in the eighteenth century, which nurtured the concept of sensibility and the primacy of the (at times harrowing) imagination in nearly every area of thought—developments that led in turn to debates about the humaneness

¹⁰ See Peter Linebaugh's *The London Hanged: Crime and Civil Society in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1992), V.A.C. Gatrell's *The Hanging Tree*, and T.W. Laqueur's "Bodies, Details, and the Humanitarian Narrative," all of which analyze public execution within the context of a changing culture.

¹¹ Lake and Questier argue that public execution is not simply a Foucauldean site of absolute power reaffirmed by the destruction of the condemned's body, nor a Laquerian site of state power undermined by a carnivalesque crowd. Terms like *Catholic*, *Protestant*, *religion*, *treason*, and *state* were "continually being constituted and reconstituted in terms of the other in ways that preclude any simple unidirectional account of the flow of power between state, felon and religious ideology" (66), resulting in categories of meaning that "were never fixed or static, but rather always in flux, open for contest, negotiation and renegotiation" (105).

of the pillory and the effect of the scaffold on public morals.¹² Nor is it hard to name English tragedies of the period that reflect the growing association of the scaffold with unseemly horror and unnecessary cruelty. Dorothea Celesia's *Almida* (1771) and John Logan's *Runnamede* (1783), for instance, both re-imagine Voltaire's *Tancrède* (1760)¹³ and its views against the death penalty, and the anti-Jacobin plays of the 1790s present the guillotine and its employers as emblems not just of the Terror but of human nature in its most brutal form.

We are already aware that the fictionalized public execution borrows from conventions that surround the real-life scaffold ritual or that recur in the historical and journalistic narratives that fall under the rubric of execution literature. Lincoln B. Faller has investigated how “true” accounts such as criminal biography assisted the development of the novel and its modes of depicting the criminal in fiction.¹⁴ These borrowed conventions shape the tone of the final scenes in scaffold fiction, which are compressed into a coil of pathos out of which certain situations naturally spring—situations most audience members would recognize from newsprint, legend, or community lore. Eighteenth-century playwrights, in Britain at least, were diligent about including the dying speech convention so fundamental to broadsheets and criminal biography, and they were equally loyal

¹² The Parliamentary speeches of Edmund Burke capture these questions; see “Speech on Pillory” (April 11, 1780), “Speech on Mutiny” (May 1, 1780), “Some Thoughts on the Approaching Executions” (July 10, 1780), and “Additional Reflexions on the Executions” (July 18, 1780), in *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke, Vol III* (ed. Langford, Clarendon Press, 1996).

¹³ While James Thomson's 1745 *Tancred and Sigismunda* is a heroic drama in every sense, it has nothing in common with Voltaire's plot and is not a scaffold tragedy.

¹⁴ See Faller's *Crime & Defoe and Turned to Account* (Cambridge, 1987). Gatrell also discusses the interplay between event and narrative representation in *The Hanging Tree*.

to the last farewell scene popularized in histories and other “true” representations of scaffold events. That scene features the condemned signaling last wishes to intimates, such as the committing of offspring to guardians, or the payment of debts, or the making of amends for old feuds. Tokens are sometimes distributed and tears are shed. In the hands of Nicholas Rowe or William Havard (both of whom wrote tragedies based on historical executions),¹⁵ last farewell scenes are reconstituted into pathetic tableaux of weeping relatives unable to detach themselves from condemned loved ones.

Scaffold tragedies borrow much more than the dying speech and last farewell tropes from documented executions. In his autobiography, executioner Albert Pierrepont writes that it is often “the dying man who has to comfort his mourners” (114) and not the other way around, a real-world dynamic that perfectly suits the heroic tradition and its portrayal of the strong and resolute condemned man. It also suits martyrology, a convention that overlaps the heroic. The rhetoric of martyrdom found in hagiography and *Foxe's Book of Martyrs* was often reproduced in eighteenth-century tragedies, as was the scaffold posture of historical figures like Charles I (who was himself rendered in some histories as a typological Christ). We see these martyrological narratives restyled in Rowe's she-tragedies,¹⁶ or in George Adams' self-evident *The Heathen Martyr* (1746), which turns Socrates' death-row composure into a sublime manifestation of

¹⁵ See Rowe's *The Royal Convert* (1708), *The Tragedy of Jane Shore* (1713), and *The Tragedy of the Lady Jane Gray* (1715), and Havard's *King Charles I* (1737) and *Regulus* (1744).

¹⁶ In an introduction to his edition of Rowe's *The Tragedy of the Lady Jane Gray* (1980), Richard James Sherry argues that Rowe's version of the history contains more religious elements than John Banks' tragedy, and that it gives Jane more agency to choose her fate, which aligns her with John Fox's martyred Protestants.

defiance. The sister trope of the martyrology, that of Christian consolation, is also ubiquitous in the eighteenth-century scaffold tragedy; the more didactic the play, the more extended this feature becomes. Christian consolation was, of course, part of the formula of the execution broadsheet, in which the condemned was cast as a mortal poised on the edge of the afterlife, facing his or her greatest moment of judgment but who could, through penitence, look past the noose into the joyful infinite. As Andrea McKenzie explains in *Tyburn's Martyrs* (2007), some of these figures showed no concern for their souls—they were more interested in “dying game”¹⁷ than dying well—while others demonstrated remorse for their sins and forgiveness for their accusers (22-23). But unlike some condemned figures in “true” accounts published in broadsheets, the *Ordinary's Account*, or the *Newgate Calendar*,¹⁸ the condemned hero in eighteenth-century tragedy is always the most pious character onstage; he needs no spiritual prompting by the prison chaplain or the Newgate bellman, who sang out at midnight to urge the condemned to “examine well yourselves” and pray for their souls before dawn (McKenzie 1).

Martyrological and religious elements are nearly universal in representations of execution (at least until the twentieth century, when some

¹⁷ “The term *game* itself derives from *game-cock*; thus, to *die game* meant simply to die with the spirit and the pluck of the cockfight rooster” (McKenzie 196).

¹⁸ As McKenzie explains, the *Ordinary's Account*, published several times a year, detailed the Newgate Prison Ordinary's (or chaplain's) interactions with condemned prisoners and included prurient details about their crimes, states of penitence, and executions (123-126). A popular Grub Street paper that sold cheaply and earned scorn for its poor authorship and scandalous content, the *Account* (which emerged in the 1670s and was issued for almost a century) was a major source for the *Newgate Calendars* of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, which contained much the same.

authors inclined to more secular or even anti-religious scripts),¹⁹ as are the dying speech and last farewell tropes. But the authors of eighteenth-century tragedy depended on additional tropes or stock tableaux in order to magnify a scaffold event's pathetic tone or distinguish it from those found in so-called "true" accounts. Hagiography lacks sentiment; saintly martyrs are more invested in their relationship with God than with a star-crossed lover, and they proceed to their deaths with too little dramatic dimension—with scant internal conflict—to generate the kind of tension sentimental tragedians loved to invent. And the criminal biography often lacks the propriety tragedy demands. In *Crime & Defoe* (1993), Faller distinguishes between two types of criminal biography, "the morally serious" kind that approaches spiritual biography, and the "generally frivolous, overtly romantic and often fantastic" roguish kind with the picaresque bite of a *Roderick Random* (6):

Criminal biography sought to make its subjects "fit" for execution—or, rather, to render their executions fitting and proper—by representing them as saints or rogues, now beyond or beneath ordinary human concern. Before saying how they were severed forever from the human community, it either brought them back into it as shining examples of what humans might, after all, conceivably become, or else, reducing them to caricatures of one kind or another, it banished them to the farthest margins of imaginable human action. (111)

¹⁹ See n.48, p. 51.

The rogue biography was, as Faller points out, known in its day to be almost entirely fictitious even as it announced itself as “true” (22-23), and its formula was embraced by early novelists. Tragedians, on the other hand, exploited the first type of hero-criminal, the “shining example” who intersects with the idealized condemned in other literary forms. Like Rowe’s Jane Shore or Adams’ Socrates, this lawbreaker is a model of principle, piety, and self-sacrifice who is set onstage to teach us moral conduct by example.

As a consequence of this, the tragic hero who faces the scaffold rejects the dying game trope contained in broadsheets and biography or must at least reconstitute it as a nobler form to preserve his dignity and serve his genre. Even the most impetuous of tragedy’s condemned heroes, such as Gabriel Nisbet’s William Wallace²⁰ (whose chief characteristic is hatred for his oppressors), is not the same kind of rogue as the broadsheet braggart. The “game” criminal, reified in Jonathan Swift’s “Clever Tom Clinch Going To Be Hanged” (1727), is described by McKenzie as “the bold and dashing highwayman or street robber who dressed like a beau, drank like a lord, and went without tears or trembling to the gallows” (192). Moreover, he was sometimes portrayed by observers like Mandeville and Fielding as “vainglorious, drunken and impious” (192). McKenzie points out that such criminals were in reality a rare sight; few “died advertising his courage, his cheerful indifference to death and his refusal to implicate comrades” (195). However uncommon in real life, the figure of the callous beau hardly fits the pathetic tone of neoclassical or sentimental tragedy and is more suited to comedy—we see shades of him in *The Beggar’s Opera*’s MacHeath.

²⁰ In *Caledon’s Tears: or, Wallace, a Tragedy* (1733).

In order to honour his genre, then, the eighteenth-century scaffold tragedian cherry-picked from the traditions of Christian consolation, martyrology, and other “true” accounts, exploiting their last farewell and dying speech tropes to their fullest potentials, adjusting the trope of dying game so that his or her hero was neither saucy like the common criminal nor entirely disinterested like the martyred saint, and rejecting other conventions outright. He or she also relied on a repertoire of conventions that may have existed in other traditions in scattered fashion or in less developed form, but that were exaggerated and lingered over in most scaffold tragedies of the eighteenth-century (and frequently appeared in novels and poems when authors wished to sound a tragic note). These devices substitute for the stage effect of sudden violence. They render violence not as a shock²¹ but as a sensation massaged by the playwright into a sustained pathos. Such conventions include tropes I call *negotiation*, *tender fallacy*, and *lamentation of intimates*, all of which are triggered by the scaffold anxiety of the characters onstage and elevate that anxiety in turn, all of which are principal drivers of action, and all of which are regularly deployed by writers to animate one of the great features of eighteenth-century scaffold tragedies, the trope I call *taboo substance*.

There is a moment in Andrzej Wajda's 1981 film *Danton* that draws our attention to a particular circumstance of the scaffold death. The hours or days

²¹ As it is, most certainly, in tragedies of the Restoration, such as Nathaniel Lee's *Lucius Junius Brutus* (1680) or Thomas Otway's *Venice Preserv'd* (1682). While the features I discuss exist in these and other plays of the seventeenth-century, they appear less regularly and in relatively brief form. Rather, affective focus usually lies in shocking the audience with gore and violence (as it does in Lee's play); if the tropes appear, they are vexed by the more bitter sentiments popularly dramatized in the period, such as cowardice or jealousy (as they are in Otway's).

between sentencing and execution offer their own possibility for deliverance—beyond escape or armed rescue, the space between sentencing and execution allows for political maneuvering, an allowance that death by murder or wasting disease cannot provide. On learning, in the film, that the Convention has approved capital charges of treason against Danton's circle, one of the detainees exclaims "We're finished!" and blanches at the idea of execution. Danton objects: "Why? We still have our heads, our fists, teeth, claws to fight with. A political trial is a duel," he insists, planning to fight his way past the guillotine with rhetoric. This point of view was understood somewhat differently by writers of eighteenth-century scaffold tragedies. For them, a political trial was not a duel but a negotiation and one which did not end with sentencing. Moreover, most condemned heroes in these scaffold tragedies do not try to negotiate their way out of their own sentence through bribery, testimony, or supplication.²² Rather, negotiation is usually performed by friends or political allies attempting to save the life of a leader or intimate. These episodes create opportunities for grand shows of sensibility on the part of good characters and hard-heartedness on the part of bad ones. In portraying the pursuit of every last option, the scaffold dramatist keeps tension buoyant and complicates tragic despair, and by having these negotiations chiefly undertaken by peripheral characters, the playwright preserves intact the condemned hero's fortitude and trust in grace.

²² Contrast this attitude with that of Claudio in Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*. No neoclassical archetype of fortitude, he begs his sister to trade her chastity for his freedom when he is faced with execution.

Scaffold negotiations can be found as far back as Euripides' *Iphigenia in Aulis*, perhaps, and they were certainly toyed with from time to time by Jacobean and Restoration dramatists.²³ But the device became *de rigueur* in the eighteenth-century as neoclassical writers re-familiarized themselves with the *agon*, the verbal disputes between characters in old Greek comedies engineered to display their wit (or lack of it). In eighteenth-century England, that device is used to prove either a surfeit or lack of sensibility and—more especially—to stretch an elastic pathos around the scaffold event. The trope of negotiation is exploited more than once, for instance, in Colley Cibber's *Perolla and Izadora* (1705), which is set in Rome as Hannibal's army presses in. Cibber's heroic Roman hold-out, Blacius, is arrested for treason by a political rival who wants the Romans to surrender for his own personal gain. This rival, Pacuvius, plots to post Blacius' head on Salapia's gate in order to welcome Hannibal's army to the city (42). This prompts Perolla, lover of Blacius' daughter, Izadora, to sue Hannibal for her father's life, a request that takes on the form of a political negotiation: a prisoner exchange. "Thrice fifty Libyan captives, free, restor'd" (47) are promised to Hannibal in exchange for Blacius' life, but Hannibal is unmoved and orders the scaffold to be erected after a protracted debate. This debate demonstrates Perolla's compassion, but it also allows Cibber to exploit the audience's anticipation of death by making that death uncertain for a time.

²³ Bargaining for the life of the condemned is a trope at least as old as the Book of Genesis, in which Abraham asks God to spare Sodom and Gomorrah on behalf of the innocent living in the city walls. "And the Lord said, If I find in Sodom fifty righteous within the city, then I will spare all the place for their sake" (18:26), a number that Abraham negotiates down to ten.

Blacius is sprung from his cell by supporters, only to be re-arrested when he returns to fight his rival. The negotiation begins anew in Act V, which "discovers a scaffold for the execution, and at some distance, a seat rais'd for Hannibal; guards and people crowding" (60). Hannibal offers Blacius a pardon if he swears allegiance to Carthage, but this second negotiation is stalled by the condemned, who has already assumed the posture of a martyr; again the audience is teased with a possible release from the horror of a scaffold death, and it continues to be teased when Izadora demands a word with Hannibal, who must delay the execution to hear her (63). Hannibal, pausing out of honour rather than empathy, is reminded that he promised "that whosoever truly shou'd reveal / The first contriver, causer or accomplice / Audaciously concern'd in [Blacius'] redemption / Should strait receive whatever gift / Reward, or boon, their utmost wish cou'd ask" (64). Izadora exploits this promise to negotiate for her father's life: she names herself as the person responsible for Blacius' temporary escape and demands a pardon for her father in exchange for her information. As she—rather than Blacius, now—is led to the scaffold, Perolla bargains for Izadora's life with the same tactic. The lovers then negotiate with each other to decide which one of them ought to die, concluding (as tragic lovers usually do) that they are better off together in the next world, and that they will trade both their lives for that of Blacius. These are the terms they ultimately deliver to Hannibal (68). Altruism and skill at negotiation earn all three Salapians a pardon, and what has resulted rather than an execution is a stop-start-stop-start tension throughout the

play, in which the scaffold constantly pulls at characters, and the characters constantly pull each other back from it.

An offstage execution before the action begins—that of Blacius' brother, martyred for Rome's sake—inaugurates both the heroic conflict and the scaffold threat in *Perolla and Izadora*. The execution of his brother inspires Blacius' hatred for Pacuvius, the man responsible, and by extension his holding out against Hannibal, creating the scenario in which lovers are hindered by duty and three characters are threatened with execution. This is also the case in John Gay's *The Captives* (1724), the action of which is driven by executions that take place before the play begins. These offstage executions steer characters towards their own scaffolds as the story develops. In *The Captives*, a Persian named Hydarnes wants to avenge the executions of his father and brother at the hands of Phroartes, the King of Medea. The play opens with Hydarnes and his co-conspirators plotting a regicide, which results in the mistaken arrest of a Persian prince named Sophernes, a ransom captive on Phroartes' estate, along with Hydarnes and his men. The conspirators are tortured but they never name Sophernes, until Phroartes makes the same pact Hannibal does in Cibber's play, promising a favour in return for the name of his would-be assassin (33). Hydarnes, wishing to purchase time to kill the Medean king, offers up the innocent Sophernes and bargains back his life.

News of Sophernes' imprisonment reaches his wife, Cylene, who was separated from him by the Medean invasion, and here Gay manipulates one of the standard features of the negotiation trope, that of the wife pleading with her

husband's accusers. Rather than ask for his pardon, though, a disguised Cylene approaches the Medean King with a request to kill Sophernes. "I sue for his tortures," she tells Phroartes. "With rapture I could gaze upon his sufferings, / Enjoy his agonies and dying groans, / And then this hand could stab him to the heart" (39). Gay's use of the wife-as-negotiator, here, inverts the traditional figure of the spouse who supplicates with officials in order to avoid "gazing on her husband's sufferings." Cylene secretly wishes the same, but not trusting in the king's compassion, she lies about Sophernes' character and begs to see him so she can take revenge, all of which is a ruse to be reunited with him and engineer his escape. "Grant me to see him in his latest gasp; / Let my appearance strike him with confusion," (41) she says, threatening to discompose Sophernes and shake his resolution for a good death. Such a creative revenge appeals to Phroartes, and Cylene is led to her husband, where they proceed, in the privacy of his cell, to negotiate with each another over their own lives. Only one of them can leave under the guise of Cylene's dress and veil, and the one who remains will face the scaffold. Cylene wins the *agon* after she and Sophernes tantalize the audience for long minutes with a show of distressed affection.

The trope of negotiation creates a pattern of seesawing emotions that is made even less stable by another, intersecting convention that appears in these plays just as regularly. In William Preston's *Democratic Rage, or, Louis the Unfortunate* (1793), Louis XVI is visited in his cell by a loyalist named Lamoignon, who tells him not to despair, for "Our voice may yet awake, within th' assembly, / The dormant sparks of loyalty and reason, / Now stifled by their

fears; th' exhorted doom / Has past their lips; but, 'tis not, sure, enroll'd / Within their hearts" (37). The loyalists, in other words, may be able to negotiate for the king's life. Louis immediately recognizes this well-intentioned suggestion as an *ignis fatuus*, a false hope he must strive to ignore for the sake of his fortitude and readiness. "No, no, 'tis all in vain. / I can look thro' the tender fallacy" (37) of fleeting hope, Louis tells his friend. "I do expect the worst," he admits, "to that I hold me" (38). To indulge in hope creates too much disturbance in his composure and threatens to break his heart anew. Louis is a typical hero-condemned, planning to squeeze as much reflection and penitence out of his last hours as possible. He knows he must distance himself from the world in order to prepare for the next one and gather the courage needed to mount the scaffold without trembling. Lamoignon's misguided attempt to soothe his friend's despair is a demonstration of sensibility that is linked with the negotiation trope, while the condemned hero's refusal to pursue options (via negotiation, bribery, or escape) is linked to martyrology, which depends, of course, on the idea of a chosen death, one from which the condemned hero is not supposed to shrink.

The "tender fallacy" has a remarkably bright presence in scaffold tragedies. It eases the paradox of a hero invested with both fortitude and sensibility, and it enriches the pathos that the trope of negotiation has already generated. The device of tender fallacy is usually triggered (with the best of intentions) by those who love the condemned hero, but enemies are sometimes able to grasp the destructive potential of a hopeful state of mind. This is the case in Thomas Stratford's *Lord Russell*, performed by royal request in 1784 and

risibly melodramatic even for the era (the actress who played Lady Russell noted in the Epilogue that her role "required prodigious strength of lungs"). Stratford deploys the tender fallacy device not to demonstrate the devotion of the condemned man's circle, or the fortitude of Russell himself, or the more general imperative of preparing well for death, but to underscore the villainy of his one-dimensional persecutors. When Sir George Jeffries learns that Russell is unfazed by physical torture, he is inspired to greater levels of cruelty:

Thou only melt'st his marrow with slow
Consuming fire! But I shall tutor
Horror to tear him deep; for I shall raise him
To the false heaven of joy! The higher hope,
Deeper the fall of phantasy! (18)

His lieutenant is horrified by the idea, remarking "but lower still this hell of vengeance—lower / Than yet hath opened for the damn'd!" Regardless, they lead Russell to believe that King Charles II has issued a pardon, and they allow him a day's relief, surrounded by family in contemplation of a long life. The city celebrates and Sir George is smug. "'Twas I alone, / Who lent this momentary gleam of gladness," he triumphs. His ruse has a twofold purpose: not only will Russell doubly suffer when he is yanked back to the scaffold, but London's joyful reaction over the rumour of his pardon has proved to the king Russell's dangerous popularity. The reunion scene is interrupted by an arresting officer who escorts Russell back to the Tower, stunned by this inhuman form of "torture" (61).

Lord Russell and nearly every other scaffold tragedy of the period deploy the tropes of tender fallacy and negotiation in tandem, a pair of devices that engage with sensibility cleverly enough to propel it through scene after scene. That sensibility is expressed most plainly through a third device, the lamentation of intimates, which creates episodes of indulgent pathos as protracted and wrenching as the playwright desires. This scene is not particular to tragedy or to the eighteenth century, though some representations of executions omit it, such as hagiographic narratives and broadsheets (both of which are narrative forms usually much sparer than tragedy). Wherever there is a literary investment in character, however, there is an investment in the bonds between the person about to die and those who will survive him. Scaffold tragedians in a sentimental age could not resist the opportunity to transform the last farewell into a lusty plaint on the part of the condemned hero's intimates. Stratford's *Lady Russell* typifies the lamentation figure as it was rendered by his contemporaries: a teary, ashen, and half-mad spectre who embodies not just grief but the extraordinary trauma of one unable to accept that her own country is about to inflict the ultimate atrocity upon a loyal subject and, by extension, insult his relatives. The lamentation of intimates in scaffold fiction is unique; elsewhere the lament traditionally follows the death of a beloved, but in representations of execution it almost always precedes that death, which adds a dimension of anticipation²⁴ and deludes characters with hope. The traditional lament is a form of release, but the pre-event lamentation involves emotions that are seized up and, as yet, have no

²⁴ The grief and trepidation that precede an expected death, usually by illness, has in fact recently come to be referred to as "anticipatory grief" by mental health professionals.

outlet. This strained form of grief must have been attractive to eighteenth-century scaffold dramatists, who were obsessed with executed historical figures and revivals of Rowe's and John Banks' she-tragedies.²⁵

The lamentation figure is frequently the wife or lover of a condemned man. When male, he is feminized into the man of feeling who is just as prone to tears and fainting as his female counterpart. The Russell tragedies of both Stratford and William Hayley,²⁶ for example, exaggerate the state of mind of Bedford, the hero's sentimental father, who openly demonstrates his affection and grief. And the afflicted father in Logan's *Runnamede*, who has unknowingly bound his daughter to the scaffold with an oath, is one of the most intense incarnations of this figure (especially in comparison to the father in Celesia's alternate version, who is somewhat more composed). In *Runnamede*, the scaffold is used as a device to demonstrate the ultimate heroic dilemma: the welfare of one's own child versus the welfare of a nation. But Albermarle is no Lucius Junius Brutus.²⁷ He lacks Brutus' single-mindedness, and though determined to see his daughter Elvira executed for a supposed treason, he loses his sanity the instant he makes his choice. He begins to hallucinate, thinking he sees the figure of his dead wife:

Where am I? Ha! The shades of death surround me,
And graves, and monuments, and ghastly forms—

²⁵ See Banks' *Vertue Betray'd, or, Anna Bullen* (1682); *The Innocent Usurper* (1694), a tragedy about Lady Jane Gray; and *The Albion Queens* (originally *The Island Queens*), about Elizabeth's decision to execute Mary Queen of Scots (1704).

²⁶ See Hayley's *Lord Russell, A Tragedy in Three Acts* (1785?).

²⁷ I am referring especially to Nathaniel Lee's tragic version of the story, *Lucius Junius Brutus* (1680), which preserves Brutus as legend has painted him in English minds: a patriot who calmly executes his sons to unify a nation.

That path leads down to blood—Thou sainted shade,
Who gav'st a blooming cherub to my arms,
O turn thy tender eyes from this sad scene,
Nor look upon the deed! (31-32)

Albermarle must deal with "powerful Nature" (31), that part of him which yearns for the comfort of grandchildren or a daughter's tenderness in his dotage (37). Despite his position as a Norman lord, his lament is a typically helpless one that goes unheard. At one point, Albermarle decides to champion Elvira in the lists to earn her a pardon. When his age disqualifies him from competition, he roams the floodplain picturing her death and wishing for his own (48), until Elvira's lover appears and frees her with a tournament victory.

These lamentation scenes (and there is normally more than one in scaffold tragedies) indicate a convergence of the pathetic and the sublime that is, in some ways, unique to tragedy. These scenes are far more emotive even than the scenes of negotiation and tender fallacy that attend them, and their heightened pathos enriches the overall sublimity of the execution event on the tragic stage. Lamentation, after all, has a posture and rhetoric that evoke sublimity through the ineffability or inexpressibility of the character's grief. In her essay "The Lament and the Rhetoric of the Sublime" (1998), Linda M. Austin argues that the cries of an intimate are more sublime than those of professional mourners or an outraged public (281). The personal lament—a unique rhetoric of pathos—is "artless" (281) and depends more on gesture than words, which are often elusive or simply not enough. The pacing, fainting, clasping manner of the

lamenting intimate before an execution in tragedy and the staccato ejaculations of broken speech are similar to the biblical and literary examples listed by Austin, which "suggest that in a moment of utmost shock—whether of awe or of grief—language is less expressive than the body. Indeed, the words and phrases of lamentation often wind round in endless repetition or break off" (281), becoming "a rush of incoherence" (288), like the expressions of Stratford's Lady Russell in Act V ("Murder! —I behold him!— / Let not these fiends! —drag! —drag! —me down to / Darkness!"), or like those of the soon-to-be widowed queen in William Hey's *The Captive Monarch* (1794):

Fliest thou my voice? Wait, Francis. Hear me. Hear

Me. —

But, how it tears! —One instant. Leave me not.

There! My head too. They've got it. On, on, on!

We shall escape them. 'Tis enough. —Enough. (104)

The fainting, the pulling of hair and clothes, and the aiming of daggers at one's own breast are "spectacle rather than sound," which "point to some unreachable sorrow" (281) similar to the effect of watching a mourner rend garments. The intimate becomes "a mere personification of sorrow" (285-6), like Lady Russell or Albermarle (or, more familiarly, like the Pietà). Austin perceives these forms of lamentation in nineteenth-century melodrama (imported via classical models), but eighteenth-century scaffold dramas are rife with these inarticulate vocal spasms and mimed spectacles of grief. Because mourners in scaffold tragedies have cause to lament a death before it occurs, the aspect of futurity and the possibility

of a Providential reversal make these laments even more wrenching and possibly even existential. Austin reminds us that "death epitomizes Kant's idea of the sublime, that 'absolutely great' thing that stretches the imagination of the survivor to its limits" (286). She rightly perceives the sublime tones in a mourner's lamentation over a death (or scheduled death), for "the death of another forces the mourner to foresee his own inevitable death, a terrifying idea that plunges him into self-obliterating shock, mixed with the grief of actual loss" (286).

2: The Sublime Scaffold (So Far)

How does one use the word "sublime" without reverting to definition? Neither "sublimity" nor "tragedy" are univocal terms, and read together they evoke an overwhelming set of ideas elegantly surveyed by Eric Rothstein, Samuel H. Monk, W.J. Hipple, Clarence C. Green, and Marjorie Nicolson,²⁸ among others. There is no need to reproduce those surveys here. Nor do we need to review neoclassical philosophies of the paradox of tragedy, or what William Price Albrecht calls "the disagreeables that sublimity can render pleasant" (26). Albrecht's *The Sublime Pleasures of Tragedy* (1975) summarizes that strain of critical theory, from the Romans to the Romantics, which attempts

²⁸ See Eric Rothstein's *Restoration Tragedy* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1967) and "English Tragic Theory in the Late Seventeenth Century" (ELH, 1962); Monk's *The Sublime* (University of Michigan Press, 1960); Hipple's *The Beautiful, the Sublime, and the Picturesque in Eighteenth-Century Aesthetic Theory* (Southern Illinois, 1957); Green's *The Neo-Classic Theory of Tragedy in England During the Eighteenth Century* (Benjamin Bloom, 1966); and Nicolson's *Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory* (Cornell, 1959).

to explain why representations of human suffering appeal to us.²⁹ While this familiar ground requires no retreading, a summary of these ideas will be useful, for eighteenth-century aesthetic philosophers were haunted, of course, by questions of the sublime, the tragic, and the “pleasant disagreeable,” all of which problematize the nature of audience response to scaffold representations.

Most neoclassical theories of the “pleasant disagreeable” were either elaborations of, or reactions against, a single notion: the much-discussed “Lucretian return,” which was posited by Lucretius in the second book of *De Rerum Natura* and popularized in England by Thomas Hobbes in the ninth book of *Human Nature*.³⁰ “What joy it is,” wrote Lucretius, “when out at sea the stormwinds are lashing the waters, to gaze from the shore at the heavy stress some other man is enduring! Not that anyone’s afflictions are in themselves a source of delight; but to realize from what troubles you yourself are free is a joy indeed” (60). It is the realization of one’s own security, that “return upon ourselves” safe on solid ground after projecting our imaginations sympathetically towards the sufferer in the waves or on the battlefield that brings pleasure to terrible sights. The pain of others excites a thrilling relief in ourselves that affixes

²⁹ Albrecht builds on two influential essays: Baxter Hathaway’s “The Lucretian ‘Return upon Ourselves’ in Eighteenth-Century Theories of Tragedy” (*PMLA*, 1947) and Earl R. Wasserman’s “The Pleasures of Tragedy” (*ELH*, 1947).

³⁰ Lucretius’ words were reworked into an aesthetic theory after Hobbes wrote, “From what passion proceedeth it, that men take pleasure to behold from the shore the danger of them that are at sea in a tempest, or in fight, or from a safe castle to behold two armies charge one another in the field? ... There is in it both joy and grief: for as there is novelty and remembrance of our own security present, which is delight; so there is also pity, which is grief; but the delight is so far predominant, that men are content in such cases to be spectators to the misery of their friends” (51-52). In the eighteenth century, the Lucretian/Hobbesian referents of shipwreck and battlefield are regularly evoked by authors for instant sublime affect.

us to horrible scenes like shipwrecks and battles.³¹ The Lucretian return was not always discussed in relation to tragedy or sublimity in the eighteenth century, yet over time it grew inseparable from the idea of the sublime and theories of the tragic stage for many thinkers of the era.³² Consequently, it has become wedged in our own discourses of the eighteenth-century tragic genre, and it remains an appropriate background on which to paint finer points about anguish on the Georgian stage, especially fictional representations of the scaffold event—a protracted disagreeable rendered pleasant enough by dozens of minor tragedians whose names may be absent from our anthologies but whose plays filled the Theatre-Royal for impressive seven- or nine-night runs.

The links between tragedy, spectacle, and public execution have been extensively investigated. Sparked by René Girard's *Violence and the Sacred* (1972) and fanned by Michel Foucault's ubiquitous *Discipline and Punish* (1975), explorations of the stage violence of tragedy and the staged violence of justice have lit up the last few decades thanks particularly to scholars of English Restoration theatre,³³ and understandings of tragedy-as-spectacular-politics or

³¹ Lucretius' description of shipwreck and battlefield sets up a defense of Epicureanism, not theories of the sublime or the paradox of tragedy. He outlines the "return upon ourselves" in order to make a point about "the greatest joy of all: to stand aloof in a quiet citadel, stoutly fortified by the teaching of the wise, and to gaze down from that elevation on others wandering aimlessly in a vain search for the way of life ... O joyless hearts of men! ... Do you not see that nature is clamouring for two things only, a body free from pain, a mind released from worry and fear for the enjoyment of pleasurable sensations?" (60).

³² Henry Fielding makes a direct association between execution and the Lucretian return in *Jonathan Wild* (1743) when the ordinary attending Wild's execution is said to experience it (175).

³³ For a sample of this strain of scholarship, see Michael Lieb's *Milton and the Culture of Violence* (Cornell, 1994), Paula R. Backscheider's *Spectacular Politics* (Johns Hopkins, 1993), and Jean I. Marsden's "Spectacle, Horror, and Pathos" (in *The Cambridge Companion to English Restoration Theatre*, 2000). Marie-Helene Huet has applied similar theories to revolutionary

execution-as-theatre have become commonplace, almost axiomatic.³⁴ These studies have trained us to perceive (wherever else a reader's focus may lie) metaphorical links between the theatrical and punitive scaffolds, as Edmund Burke so memorably does in *A Philosophical Enquiry*.³⁵ Let us take as givens, then, that there are aesthetic and epistemological connections between the scaffold in the Theatre-Royal and the scaffold in the Tower of London, and that the sublime operates reliably on the eighteenth-century tragic stage. I would like to focus, instead, on the scaffold representation as an image that reifies the idea of the tragic sublime in a unique fashion—a representation that has only been hinted at by Austin and not yet been given its due in discussions of sublimity in eighteenth-century literature.

Neither Albrecht, Green, Hathaway, Hipple, Monk, Nicolson nor Rothstein examines the scaffold as an image of the tragic sublime (or of the sublime in a more general sense); neither do similar studies that investigate the literary sublime in the eighteenth century.³⁶ To be fair, these scholars' investigations lie

France in "Performing Arts: Theatricality and the Terror" (in *Representing the Revolution*, ed. James A. Heffernan).

³⁴ As I will show below, such insights were hardly unknown in the eighteenth century (or, surely, in any community that stages the ritual of execution for a group of spectators).

³⁵ "Chuse a day on which to represent the most sublime and affecting tragedy we have, [yet] just at the moment when [the audience's] minds are erect with expectation, let it be reported that a state criminal of high rank is on the point of being executed in the adjoining square; in a moment the emptiness of the theatre would demonstrate the comparative weakness of the imitative arts, and proclaim the triumph of the real sympathy" (Section XIV). So notable is this passage that I am hard-pressed to name an English-language study of execution that does not feature the quotation.

³⁶ I am thinking of Steven Knapp's *Personification and the Sublime* (Harvard, 1985), David Marshall's *The Surprising Effects of Sympathy* (Chicago, 1988), and David B. Morris' *The Religious Sublime* (University of Kentucky Press, 1972). Public execution as a sublime event has also been overlooked in Victorian studies such as Carol L. Bernstein's *The Celebration of*

elsewhere. Yet those who have explored an explicit link between public execution and sublimity are surprisingly few in number, and their arguments have little to do with the eighteenth-century stage. Of note is Luke Gibbons' *Edmund Burke and Ireland* (2003), which examines how political terror (and scaffold anxiety) contributed to Burke's conception of the sublime. As Michael Lieb does for Milton in *Milton and the Culture of Violence* (1994), Gibbons considers the influence such anxiety may have had on Burke's creative output:

Raised in the shadow of the Penal Laws, Burke's immediate family had direct links with some of the most traumatic state executions in . . . Ireland, and with the outbreak of the first major wave of agrarian terror in the Whiteboy campaign of the 1760s [and its ensuing hangings], the aesthetics of the sublime acquired an intense personal urgency. (xii)

This sense of urgency existed in Burke even in his youth, when a prominent relative was executed in 1720 (23).³⁷ The scaffold, Gibbons suggests, supplied frequent family conversations among the Burkes, who counted several Jacobite and/or Catholic sympathizers in the extended family. In a chapter entitled "This

Scandal (Pennsylvania State, 1991), which establishes the presence of sublimity in the nineteenth-century urban environment and addresses concepts of mass spectatorship in public places without fixing attention upon one of the most prominent engines of public sublime performance, the scaffold itself. The link is also neglected in Ellen L. O'Brien's *Crime in Verse* (Ohio State, 2008), which locates what O'Brien calls the "criminal sublime" in criminality rather than in the scaffold event. It is found in dramatic monologues like Robert Browning's "My Last Duchess" rather than in the nineteenth-century execution broadsheets and ballads O'Brien discusses in her first chapter, "Murder, Execution, and the Criminal Classes."

³⁷ Gibbons reminds us that the execution of Jacobite sympathizer James Cotter has been called "the most traumatic political event in the first half-century in Ireland" by L.M. Cullen, and lingered in recollection into the 1760s, when it aggravated sectarian tensions in Munster (see Cullen's *The Emergence of Modern Ireland, 1600-1900*).

king of terrors': Edmund Burke and the Aesthetics of Execution," Gibbons argues that such political unease engendered in Burke "an emotional intensity bordering on frenzy" (22) and inspired "an aesthetic of extreme situations" (23). Gibbons finds traces of Burke's own personal sublime anxiety throughout *The Enquiry*, which may have been conceived in the wake of Lord Lovat's execution in 1747 (25) and which appears to have formed, in good part, Burke's ideas of horror, inexpressibility, and the body in pain.³⁸ Gibbons also recognizes, as Burke did, that "the ultimate expression of the politics of the sublime" was "the staging of public executions" (28), a view rarely acknowledged in scholarship, yet commonplace in the period's literature.

Monika Fludernik's article "Suttee Revisited: From the Iconography of Martyrdom to the Burkean Sublime" (1999) locates sublime tropes in eighteenth-century European narratives of suttee or *sati*—that is, in the writings of foreigners who witnessed the public burning deaths of Hindu widows on their husbands' funeral pyres. Fludernik detects Western literary traditions in these representations, such as the Burkean sublime, Christian martyrology, sentimental fiction, Gothicism, and the trope of the maiden in distress (412). Fludernik also spots intimations of the tragic, but while she admits that the witnesses' "fascination with the prospective horrors of the spectacle remains the prime motive for their presence at the scene" (429), she concludes that the sublime, in

³⁸ *The Enquiry's* concern for "the body in pain" (xii) suggests to Gibbons that Burke broke the Enlightenment code of stoic suffering, which held that personal pain clouds the mind and distorts judgment—rendering sufferers unfit for civil life. Burke sought "to reinstate the wounds of history into the public sphere" (xii) and argued that the sympathetic sublime's "acknowledgement of oppression need not lead to self-absorption, but may actually enhance the capacity to identify with the plight of others" (xii-xiii).

these writings, ultimately allies itself more with the sentimental tradition than the Aristotelian:

Western observers come away with feelings of revulsion and do not pretend to have been purged of their feelings of terror and pity. Although their emotions are strongly harrowed by the spectacle, especially because of their empathetic involvement with the imagined agonies of the woman, they do not experience dramatic catharsis. References to tragedy abound; but their cathartic effect is even denied explicitly—not for the Western spectator but for the Indian multitude whose callousness at the gruesome proceedings thus negates the Aristotelian affects of terror and pity. (429)

Fludernik's article hints at connections among spectacle, tragedy, and the awful Burkean aspects of English representations of suttee in the eighteenth century, but in these cases "the supposedly exalted feelings induced in the viewing of classical tragedy become diluted into a more sentimental 'sympathy'" (430). She is forced to stop short of avowing a complete intersection between tragedy, sublimity and public execution as it was viewed by these particular eighteenth-century writers.

Fludernik does, however, ascribe sublime and tragic characteristics to execution (along with oppression, torture, confinement, and persecution in general) in her essays "Spectacle, Theatre, and Sympathy in *Caleb Williams*" and "William Godwin's *Caleb Williams*: The Tarnishing of the Sublime," both published in 2001. In these articles, Fludernik follows the course set out by Adam

Smith and Edmund Burke and argues that sublimity effloresces out of the observer's sympathy for the tragic condemned, rather than the terror of the condemned himself or the dread of the spectator. For Fludernik, the tragic spectacle of a persecuted figure inching towards or even straddling the scaffold requires the operation of specular sympathy to generate the sublime. However much I agree with Fludernik's several analyses, I wish to focus on the terror associated with the scaffold event rather than the pity (and the dynamic of sympathetic response), and investigate the way the tragic sublime manifests itself as capital violence and expressions of anxiety on the part of both the condemned hero and the tragic audience.³⁹

Elsewhere, in "'The Art of Killing by Electricity': The Sublime and the Electric Chair" (2002), Jürgen Martschukat argues that the innovation of the electric chair in 1891 "caused a sublime experience among late-nineteenth-century Americans" (900). Martschukat highlights the history of the electric chair's reception as a technological marvel in order to make the larger point that, in the industrial age,

the concept of the sublime shifted; man-made creations and achievements became the major triggers of the sublime.

Technological devices, machines, and buildings increasingly incorporated the qualities necessary to create a sublime

³⁹ In "Spectacle, Theatre, and Sympathy," Fludernik underscores the sublime intensity of fear for oneself over sympathy for another when she remarks how Caleb's pity for the condemned Mrs. Marney is displaced by concern for his own welfare when he learns that he is equally threatened with the scaffold (26-27).

experience. They were so large, so complex, and so dynamic that they seemed to be embodiments of supernatural power. (903)

Equally to the point, execution by electricity was thought to be a faster and cleaner mode of death than hanging (which was not, in most cases, quick at all)⁴⁰ or the guillotine (which showcased the carnality of a decapitated body). That victims of the electric chair sometimes popped and sizzled did little to erase the public's impression of the machine as a civilizing improvement over alternative modes of execution. "Technological progress promised to transform an execution from a representation of an archaic desire and longing for violence and cruelty into a performance signifying advancement, perfection, and sublimity," writes Martschukat (911-912). It was the electric chair itself, however, and not the execution, that was the site of sublimity for its early observers; it encased the power of nature in a human-made engine and, in turn, brought about feelings of sublime awe as people were "captivated by the 'silent and infinite force' of the dynamo" (913) designed to kill rather than animate, as it does in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (904).

By exploring sublimity in the context of execution, Gibbons, Fludernik, and Martschukat echo eighteenth-century thinkers who made a similar connection in essays on the sublime—yet those who did so are fewer than expected. Perhaps the scaffold as an engine of the sublime was too commonplace a notion to bother mentioning, but whatever the reason most contemporary treatises on sublime writing or imagery omit it. Longinus himself and his follower, John Dennis, make

⁴⁰ See Gatrell's *The Hanging Tree*, and in particular his section entitled "The Scaffold and the Crowd," for details on the protracted suffering involved in most hanging deaths.

no mention of the scaffold as a sublime image or idea.⁴¹ Nor is there any discussion of the scaffold's power to awe in Nathan Drake's "On Objects of Terror" (1798) or in Hugh Blair's complementary lectures, "The Sublime in Writing" and "The Sublimity of Objects" (1783). That same year, Anna Laetitia Barbauld published two essays with her brother, John Aikin, that open a space for such a discussion, but neither "An Enquiry into Those Kinds of Distresses which Excite Agreeable Sensations" nor "On the Pleasure Derived from Objects of Terror" offers the scaffold scene as an example of the sublime disagreeable.

We are left with Burke's famous comparison of the tragic stage and the scaffold in *A Philosophical Enquiry*—a passage, however, that is more invested in establishing agents of sympathy than the sublime. Joanna Baillie is one of the few writers who lingers on the figure of the condemned man. In her "Introductory Discourse" to *A Series of Plays in Which it Is Attempted to Delineate the Stronger Passions of the Mind* (1798), she deploys the image of the condemned man, whether in fiction or life, to defend humanity's native curiosity about itself and the universe, particularly towards what could be considered the sublime:

It is to this sympathetick curiosity of our nature, exercised upon mankind in great and trying occasions, and under the influence of the stronger passions, when the grand, the generous, the terrible attract our attention far more than the base and depraved, that the high and powerfully tragick, is addressed. . . . In examining others,

⁴¹ As Albrecht and others have shown, Longinus' *Peri Hupsous* [On the Sublime] and John Dennis' *The Advancement and Reformation of Modern Poetry* (1701) and *The Grounds of Criticism in Poetry* (1704) inspired many neoclassical essays on the sublime. Longinus, of course, considered rhetorical style to be the sublime determinant in epic and poetry, so that no one image, object, or action could in itself take credit for the production of sublime affect.

we know ourselves. With limbs untorn, with head unsmitten, with senses unimpaired by despair, we know that we ourselves might have been on the rack, on the scaffold, and in the most afflicting circumstances of distress. (12)

Her thoughts on the sublime aspects of the scaffold qualify as aesthetic in part, since her "ideas regarding human nature" do "in some degree affect almost every species of moral writings, but particularly the Dramatic" (2). Baillie's take on the question of the sublime disagreeable is not original; she concludes that our curiosity about humankind drives us to find analogues in romance and epic, which are ultimately (as Burke would agree) less compelling instructors than real life. "Neither the descriptions of war, the sound of the trumpet, the clanging of arms, the combat of heroes, nor the death of the mighty, will interest our minds like the fall of the feeble stranger" (22), she insists, thereby allowing the lowly criminal on the scaffold a degree of sublime appeal and didactic force both in life and tragedy.

This is not the case in non-aesthetic discourses about the sublime scaffold. John Baillie's "An Essay on the Sublime" (1747) contains a straightforward reference to sublimity under the real-life gallows, but his version denies the "intoxicated wretch" (28) on the scaffold any sublime affect, no matter how gamely he dies. Sublimity, he argues, is located in the noble and the uncommon—in the "Roman soul" (29) of a Cato who prefers death to submission. It was a Greek who embodied such nobility in George Adams' *The Heathen Martyr*, published a year earlier, in which the sublime Socrates is

unruffled by the bluster of his trial. "You have seen Mount Atlas," a character marvels, "When storms and tempests thunder on its brows, / And oceans break their billows at its feet, / It stands unmov'd, and glories in its height; / Such was the mighty soul of this great man" who "aw'd the whole assembly" (4-5).

David Hume follows this latter prescription when he describes the executions of Mary Queen of Scots and Charles I in his *History of England* (1754-56). As Donald T. Siebert has shown in "The Sentimental Sublime in Hume's *History of England*" (1989),⁴² Hume characterized Mary, Charles and other condemned royals by what he calls a "sublime tranquility and indifference."⁴³ This "hero of feeling" (Siebert 352) is cast by Hume as a figure of Roman fortitude whose courage is mitigated by the eighteenth-century values of propriety and sensibility in order to inject a novel brand of pathos into the scaffold events. Siebert notes how Hume suppresses the grisly details of Mary's death that appear in most histories (such as the apocryphal dropping of her head, or the need for two or three strokes to sever it from her neck) in order to heighten the moment's sublime solemnity. "Mary deserves a dramatic clean stroke of the axe, not a clumsy, horrible butchery" (360), Siebert writes, a point that echoes Martschukat's observations about the sublime effect of the quick and clean

⁴² In *Society and Sentiment* (Princeton, 2000), Mark Salber Phillips forwards Siebert's argument that Hume sentimentalized the condemned figures of history so that readers pitied them and vilified their executioners (65ff). Phillips draws our attention to Hume's autobiographical remark in *My Own Life* (1776) about how he was assailed as "the man, who had presumed to shed a generous tear for the fate of Charles I and the Earl of Strafford" (Phillips 35).

⁴³ See Hume's *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* (1751) in *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals* (third edition), Clarendon Press, 1975 (p. 256).

death. Siebert also underscores the condemned victim's sublime fortitude so key to Hume's depictions of royals on the scaffold:

One other aspect of Mary's final hours is prominent in Hume's narrative. She comports herself with that dignity, self-possession, and courage that Hume refers to as "greatness of mind," and to which he attributes the sublime power of heroic sensibility. Hume did not of course invent this characteristic of Mary; all sources portray her as resigned, courageous, and even cheerful. But Hume's version magnifies it. (360)

Like a Roman politician facing death, Hume's executed historical figures are, as Siebert describes them, "superior to adversity" (361) and collectively bold, but they also express a sensibility towards the grief of others (rather than grieve for their own fates) that would prove popular in Hume's era and find life on the eighteenth-century stage. Their final interactions with intimates are full of moving moments that prove the condemned figure's benevolence without undermining his courage.⁴⁴

Almost as famous as Burke's observation about the scaffold's power to upstage "the most sublime tragedy" is Henry Fielding's prescription for magnifying the impact of public executions, a suggestion that recognizes the sublime aura that surrounds the real-life scaffold event. In *An Inquiry into the Causes of the Late Increase of Robbers* (1751), a judicial document, Fielding

⁴⁴ So popular and "touching" was Hume's idealization of condemned royals, Siebert remarks, that "Louis XVI, upon learning of his death sentence, requested a copy of Hume's *Charles I.* ... As some indication of the dramatic power of Hume's shaped history, Louis would appear willing to use Hume's narrative as a script for his own imminent tragic performance" (363).

adopts a classical view of staged violence to remind readers about the scaffold's sublime potential, writing that "a murder behind the scenes, if the poet knows how to manage it, will affect the audience with greater terror than if it was acted before their eyes" (123-124). In "Theater and Countertheater in Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*" (1992), Frans De Bruyn has noted the way this passage "anticipates Burke's doctrine of sublime obscurity in his *Philosophical Enquiry*" (34). Like Burke, Fielding detects the affinities between theatre and execution which have so fascinated recent scholars of Restoration tragedy. Fielding is not, as De Bruyn points out, calling for executions to be removed from the public eye; rather, he is criticizing the way the scaffold event has been usurped by the crowd's countertheatrics which "often transformed malefactors into antiheroes or even martyrs" while simultaneously destroying the "dramatic solemnity" (34) of the event with the energies of commerce and audience participation. Fielding, a dramatist, understood the need for justice to use "dress and apparatus" (124) to ensure that its performances were, as De Bruyn writes, "a supremely dramatic enactment" (34) that would have the desired effect of maintaining order.

This solemn-sublime prescription for the spectacle of authority is echoed in Burke's 1780 speech, "Some Thoughts on the Approaching Executions," which proposed executing only "six . . . of the fittest examples" of the Gordon rioters, and these "in the most solemn manner that can be devised" (613). Concerned with effectiveness as well as fairness, Burke writes that "the sense of justice in men is overloaded and fatigued with a long series of executions, or with such a

carnage at once as rather resembles a massacre than a sober execution of the laws." He believed that "the execution of one man fixes the attention and excites awe" while "the execution of multitudes dissipates and weakens the effect" (614). Here, too, Burke taps into the sublime potential of the sight of a man dying on the scaffold, a potential that finds its fullest literary incarnation on the tragic stage.

3: The Sublime Scaffold (On Closer Examination)

It is Burke's notion of "sublime obscurity" that best describes the effect a scaffold-within-a-play had on eighteenth-century audiences. It is also a conceptual point on which to ground this discussion, owing to the polysemic nature of the term "sublime." Even the word itself is mutable; the sublime has been called "enthusiasm" by John Dennis and "greatness" by Joseph Addison,⁴⁵ and when Burke wrangled with the term in *A Philosophical Enquiry*, it received a painstaking separation from the "beautiful," a distinction accepted by most readers in the second half of the eighteenth century. Contemporaries as well as recent critics have classified sublimity as both a rhetorical and natural feature, located it only in style or chiefly in subject matter, or limited it to certain genres. For some thinkers the sublime is a product of imagination or religion; for others, strictly of reason.⁴⁶ But while the sublime was a much-debated aesthetic category

⁴⁵ See Dennis' *The Grounds of Criticism in Poetry* and Addison's "Pleasures of the Imagination" essays (*Spectator* 411-21).

⁴⁶ See Albrecht's introduction to *The Sublime Pleasures of Tragedy* for an overview of the history of the term in all its permutations.

during the eighteenth century, certain characteristics were shared from one definition to the next.

"To make anything very terrible," Burke wrote in his *Enquiry*, "obscurity seems in general to be necessary. When we know the full extent of any danger, when we can accustom our eyes to it, a great deal of the apprehension vanishes" (54). He determines that what is "dark, uncertain, confused, terrible" is "sublime to the last degree." Whether one experiences the "terrible joy" of John Dennis' enthusiasm on a mountain ledge,⁴⁷ or Addison's "highest pitch of astonishment" on consideration of the divine,⁴⁸ the sublime rests universally on what Albrecht boils down to "big objects, craggy shapes, and vast spaces" (7), which have both a material and emotional dimension. Those "big objects" and "vast spaces" impart a sense of obscurity when we observe them; objects too large and spaces too vast to absorb visually or intellectually suggest corners imperceptible to us where secrets, knowledge, terrors, or even truth can hide. Neither the Alps nor the afterlife can present their full faces to those of us who contemplate them, and in tragedy, death itself—both the physical process and the transformation that is thought to follow—is configured (after Kant) as the ultimate "sublime obscurity," which enriches the existing sublimity of a hero who displays a "courage, fortitude, and magnanimity that duplicate the awe-inspiring effects of great size" (Albrecht 5).

⁴⁷ In a letter dated October 25, 1688, Dennis founded his sublime paradox when he wrote, in relation to his journey through the Alps, "We walk'd upon the very brink, in a literal [sic] sense, of destruction; one stumble, and both life and carcass had been at once destroy'd. The sense of all this produc'd different motions in me, viz a delightful horror, a terrible joy, and at the same time, that I was infinitely pleas'd, I trembled."

⁴⁸ See *Spectator* 413.

These characteristics, conveniently, manifest themselves in the execution scenes of neoclassical tragedy, which present us with the “big object” of the spectacular scaffold, the “craggy shape” of weapons and wounds, and the “vast space” of infinity or the afterlife. The scaffold as a sublime “big object” has been noted by Regina Janes in an essay called “Beheadings” (1991), which argues that the guillotine is a figure of “gigantism” (44) in many revolutionary representations, looming over us and symbolizing not just the powerlessness of the condemned but also the incalculable breadth of eternity:

Through that shape in tension we glimpse the infinite while the frame marks our limits and reminds us of our finitude. As an impersonal, man-made instrument of death, the guillotine collaborates with the oblivious infinite, whose indifferent, unconscious, annihilating action the blade mimics. (45)

Janes is referring, in this passage, to modern-day film and novel representations of the guillotine,⁴⁹ but the sublime and infinite aspects of the machine were also perceptible to John Bartholomew in 1794. In his anti-Jacobin tragedy *The Fall of the French Monarchy*, Bartholomew repeatedly euphemizes the guillotine with the word “mountain,” already by this time a classic image of the sublime. The mention of mountains evokes Dennis’ “terrible joy” of simultaneous pleasure and trembling as he traveled through the Alps. Bartholomew’s “infernal mountain” (59) thrills the bloodthirsty Jacobins, who will use it to send Louis XVI “headless

⁴⁹ Specifically, to Andrzej Wajda’s 1981 film *Danton* and Alejo Carpentier’s 1962 novel *Century of Lights*.

to his fancied heaven" (67). The horrible event will bring joy both to the Jacobins and to the victim himself, who anticipates the afterlife with a degree of pleasure.

The more rudimentary scaffold of the gallows is an equal site of paradox, evoking both joy and terror, or anticipation and dread, in the tragedy of the long eighteenth century. That paradox depends, of course, on the condemned figure's religious belief and the conviction that she or he is deserving of grace. The sublimely obscure "vast space" of the afterlife can both comfort and terrify the hero. While Dennis does not refer to public execution in *The Grounds of Criticism in Poetry*, he may as well have been writing about the prospect of a scaffold death to a Christian imagination when he catalogues "the several ideas which are capable of producing . . . enthusiastick terrour" and topped the list with "God, Daemons, Hell, Spirits and the Souls of Men" (87). His catalogue includes such natural terrors as "torrents" and "tygres," but Dennis anticipates Burke when he stresses that "of all these ideas none are so terrible as those which shew the wrath and vengeance of an angry God," since "not being able to fathom the greatness and extent of their power, we know not how far and how soon they may hurt us" (88). Dennis "attributes enthusiastic terror to the fear of God" (Albrecht 20), a terror that is key to the eighteenth-century scaffold scene and that meets Burke's criteria for sublime obscurity. In other words, according to Albrecht, Dennis' sublime pleasure "does not reside in security from objects which in actual life would cause pain and suffering, but in the perception of an idea—of God and his attributes—arrived at by a rather complex process which was initiated by the noxious object and in which the noxious object now appears

as part of God's plan" (21). For the tragic hero staring at the scaffold about to launch him into eternity, and for audiences contemplating such an awful method of reaching it, it is hard to imagine an object better suited to render a sublime affect of those attributes highlighted by Burke and Dennis, which depend equally on terror and a complicated pathos. Each of Dennis' six enthusiastic passions—"admiration, terror, horror, joy, sadness, desire" (16)—co-exists in the scaffold event as it is understood by a Christian heroine and by a Christian audience admiring the heroine's fortitude, envying her proximity to the joys of Heaven, and shuddering at the sight of the block and the unavoidable possibility of damnation.

As it is in theory, the sublime is a conflicted idea in eighteenth-century English tragedies. It is used inconsistently, sometimes describing within the same play the (positive) sublime quality of a good character and the (negative) sublime quality of a villain. Given its currency in the eighteenth century, it is not surprising to see the adjective used to describe anything that possesses a degree of intensity: a hero's fortitude, a politician's ambition, a mob's momentum, a villain's fury. Well before Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry* was published, eighteenth-century tragedians exploited the natural connections between pathos and sublimity to animate images and stir the passions of audiences. Canny writers dispensed the term "sublime" wisely, while more indulgent ones affixed it to as many people, ideas, or events as possible.⁵⁰ But nearly every playwright who depicted an execution (or near-execution) exploited the inherently sublime

⁵⁰ See Edmund Eyre's *The Maid of Normandy, or, The Death of the Queen of France* (1794) for an example of sublimity associated variously with, among other things, Charlotte Corday's sorrow, her revenge, and her murdering hand; the stoic Marie-Antoinette; Marat's anger; and Theodore's pity for the queen awaiting execution in her cell.

features of the ritual, using language and images to produce a scaffold event that could not fail to move and terrify the audience with intimations of the sublime obscurity surrounding death. Stratford makes this clear in his *Lord Russell* when Sidney is warned about the possibility of a scaffold death, a fate described suggestively as "the sullen roar of winds, that hither roll from yonder / Clouds, — and swell into a storm, to sweep thee / Screaming from the shores of time" (52). Russell himself draws a similar analogy when he chides his weeping father, reminding him to "drown me not with thy sorrows, nor unman me," before execution, which will send him "plunging from time's bleak barrier into ocean!— / Shoreless eternity, thine awful ocean!" (86).

As Russell's words suggest, it is not just the idea of execution that is terrifying and unknown, but the "vast space" of the afterlife itself from the point of view of a condemned person whose righteousness has been questioned by his peers.⁵¹ In Bartholomew's *The Fall of the French Monarchy*, Louis XVI kneels in his cell before his execution and evokes the unknowable infinite with his choice of words:

Great God, Omnipotent! thy perfect ken
Surveys creation—all the rising thoughts
Of man—my fate I bear in resignation;
It is thy will. —Consolatory hope
Unfolded, in my last night's dream, profuse

⁵¹ The fear of the unknown afterlife is not, of course, new to the eighteenth century. See my discussion of the universality of such dread in Chapter Three, Section 1. However much the condemned Claudio of *Measure for Measure* fears the afterlife, however, his brand of panic is seen more frequently, and in a more protracted form, in eighteenth-century tragedy, and as a result becomes more marked as a tragic characteristic of scaffold fiction.

Of glory so resplendent, and of bliss
Amidst thy saints, gives me to bear my woe
In prospect of thy presence—prospect far
Above what language can unfold to man. (83)

This is the language of Christian consolation, of course, and in the scaffold tragedies of the period, such language is indeed consoling to the hero, who feels assured of his place in heaven, a certainty reflected in the martyrological tone of these plays. This tone is especially productive in tragic representations of religious martyrs like Lady Jane Grey. Thanks to associations with the executed figure of Christ and the still-popular *Foxe's Book of Martyrs*, contemporary audiences easily grasped the link between saints and scaffolds. Sublime affect, in other words, is generated primarily within the audience members' own breasts; the “big object” and the “vast space” presented onstage are cues (as Dennis has suggested, via Lucretius) for the viewers to imagine themselves in the condemned hero's place. The hero may be assured of grace, but the Christian viewer must realize that he or she is not, and the question opens a crack for sublime obscurity to seep in.

Moreover, imagining the scaffold as a sublime site makes the event more complex in eighteenth-century tragedies than executions in traditional martyrologies, where joy takes dramatic precedence over dread. In tragedies, the heroine's faith in heaven's welcome can be compromised by her not knowing the exact hour of her execution—keeping her suspended in a state of uncertainty—or indeed by the deployment of the tender fallacy and negotiation tropes, which

often cause the execution to be postponed and force the condemned to rally herself anew. That she may be able to overcome her terror of the block's torments and death's mysteries does not mean that the process of re-establishing her composure is not fraught with panic and doubt. "Of all things which are most terrible," Dennis concluded in *Grounds of Criticism*, "those are most terrible which are the most wonderful; because that seeing them both threatening and powerful, and not being able to fathom the greatness and extent of their power, we know not how far and how soon they may hurt us" (88).

The uncertainty of death as an event that will occur at an unknown time, or as an event which may or may not have actually taken place, is used to sublime effect in such scaffold tragedies as the anonymous *Wallace* (1799).⁵² Eleanor, who has been separated from her soldier lover in the uprising against Edward I, begs an ally of Wallace for details about De Graham's fate on the battlefield. She senses that her friend is withholding bad news and reminds him about the anguishing effect of sublime obscurity:

Why give me but a portion of the truth,
Like to some half-veiled picture
Of some dread, nameless deed, which fancy paints
More horrid than the truth? —Tell me the whole:
I am prepared. —I have so oft beheld,
In all my dreams, De Graham lie bleeding . . .
Or, sinking, struggling 'mid the stormy billows;

⁵² The never-performed play has been attributed to James Grahame, a Scottish lawyer; see Nancy Moore Goslee's "Public Spirit: Civic Rights and National Visions in *The Shade of Wallace*" in *Scotland, Ireland, and the Romantic Aesthetic* (Rosemont Publishing, 2007).

Or led to die beneath the murderous axe. (40-41)

"Half-veiled pictures" and death itself were certainly understood at the time as sublime unknowns, aggravated by imagination. What is notable here is the way the author has added execution to the Lucretian cues of shipwreck and battlefield (where we assume De Graham "lies bleeding" in Eleanor's dreams, given the context of her lament). In *The Tragedy of Sir Walter Raleigh* (1719), George Sewall makes the same addendum to Lucretius' famous twin images of the sublime when Raleigh demands of Death why he "spar'd him in seas, in battles, and in storms" (38) only to have him killed instead on the scaffold. Not to be outdone, Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Robert Southey give the scaffold its sublime due in *The Fall of Robespierre* (1794), which casts the guillotine as a "thunder-bolt of vengeance" (37) surrounded by torrents of blood.

Here is evidence that while the sublime scaffold may have gone largely unmentioned in aesthetic treatises of the century, the period's playwrights, at least, understood execution and its apparatuses to be natural and effective totems of the tragic sublime. When we consider the infinite and pathetic attributes of the sublime as seen through the eyes of tragic heroes, it becomes clear that the eighteenth-century idea of sublimity, especially as understood by Dennis and Burke, is reified absolutely in the image of the scaffold and that execution is by far the most sublime form of death to be met with on a tragic stage. Execution and its attendant delays, uncertainties, and anxieties bring a degree of sublimity to the event that other forms of death cannot. The anguished days or hours that precede a scheduled death open a space in which the condemned can

contemplate sublime obscurity in unprecedented ways. The scaffold death is emblematic of the grandeur and power not just of God but of justice, too, and the “big object” on which the condemned stretches his neck is a monument that embodies the hero's own sublime posture of stoicism and superiority—the awful majesty of his fortitude that makes him capable of facing such a strange, deliberate death.

4: Taboo Substance, or, The World of Flesh and Oranges

In a 1783 *London Magazine* piece called “On Executions,” James Boswell describes the scaffold death of one Mr. Gibson, which Boswell witnessed first-hand. Gibson, a lawyer sentenced for forgery, faced his death with more stoicism than most, and Boswell was an apt judge to make this assessment, having been a frequent observer of executions. Boswell's choice of words like “easy” and “placid” (346) to describe Gibson's state brings to mind characterizations of the Christian martyr or broadsheet gallant, but its context also reminds us of the tragic hero. In defending his interest in public executions, Boswell argues that (like tragedy) the “aweful object” (345) of the scaffold event has a didactic function that is delivered (like tragedy) through the “affecting scenes” (347) on display. Boswell claims he was “convulsed with pity and terror” (345) upon viewing his first-ever execution, a description that recalls Aristotle's affective formula for good tragedy.⁵³ “I . . . behold the various effects of the near approach of death, according to the various tempers of the unhappy sufferers,” Boswell

⁵³ See *Poetics*, sections 9, 13, and 14, which argue for the importance of pity and fear in tragedy.

insists, "and by studying them I learn to quiet and fortify my own mind" (347). The scaffold event, he concludes, prepares spectators for their own inevitable end. It is no wonder that Boswell focuses on Gibson's heroic performance, which displays a temperament very much like the scaffold death of a Russell or Louis XVI.

While Mr. Gibson may have behaved with textbook fortitude, a brief sentence in Boswell's description of his death links him even more closely with the tragic condemned. Boswell notes a curious motion on Gibson's part only seconds before he swung: as he stood in the cart beneath the gallows, "he refreshed his mouth by sucking a sweet orange" (346). The act is not analyzed by Boswell, who is more interested in praising Gibson's composure. That physical act, however, is striking in the context of a lesson about the power of Christian fortitude moments before the hanging of one perceived to be "truly devout" (346). Gibson, who may have been given the orange along the execution route or who may have pocketed the fruit before leaving Newgate, found a moment in which to enjoy his last taste of material pleasure, and Boswell, for his part, describes the act in terms more sensual than they need to be. Gibson may just as easily have "chewed" or "eaten" the orange, after all, and the sucked fruit is made more sensual still by the adjective "sweet" and by its "refreshing" quality. There appears to be a desire on Boswell's part to communicate the sheer materiality of Gibson's final, deliberate pleasure, which appears at odds with his Christian resignation. That parting taste of life is a pre-execution custom, of course, exemplified in the Last Supper and the modern death-row inmate's

carefully selected final meal. But Gibson brings that last-meal impulse all the way to the scaffold, and Boswell's qualifiers make a great deal of the man's sensual interaction with his food. His quick grasp back towards earth is an indulgent flash that interrupts what must have been, for Gibson, many days of internal distancing from the material world.

Gibson's pleasure-seeking with an orange recalls the last and perhaps most complex emotion catalogued in Dennis' list of the six enthusiastic passions: desire. In the context of the sublime scaffold, the desire in both the audience and the condemned does not simply refer to a common yearning for Heaven's joys. It also, arguably, refers to the desire the condemned has for the comforts of a material existence that he or she is being forced to relinquish, from friends and family to sex and food—in short, all the pleasing sensory and emotional stimuli of life. Mr. Gibson's final act suggests that he privileged the pleasure of taste, or was able at least to distill his concept of pleasure into the wet tartness of a particular fruit. His focus on the orange also indicates that no degree of devotion to God or faith in the afterlife can erase a person's longing for life as he contemplates proximate death. That God's world beckons does not discredit the powerful appeal of our own, and however sublime the scaffold event may be cast in eighteenth-century British tragedy, material affections regularly interfere with the hero's stoicism and “greatness of mind” and vex the sublimity and pathos that the tropes of negotiation, tender fallacy and lamentation have been deployed to enlarge. What I wish to emphasize is not just that the sublime invariably accompanies the scaffold event in sentimental tragedy, but that those

mechanisms which so carefully construct sublime affect are married to a trope that constantly undermines it.

Herbert Blau's *To all Appearances: Ideology and Performance* (1992) sheds light on this paradox. Blau, one of the first to direct the plays of Beckett and other Moderns, writes about twentieth-century drama with a theoretical pen that drips with Althusseran/Girardian ink. He focuses on the ideological parameters of performance rather than on dramatic device, but his writing becomes helpful when he speaks of the troubled consciousness of tragic figures, such as Hamlet, whose famous "ideological moment" is described—somewhat cryptically—as "a gathering of thought at its limit, where the thought which empowers thought is always escaping itself. What is sometimes forgotten, it seems, is that there is no guarantee in the autonomous movement of thought that it will escape in the right ideological direction" (15). Blau suggests that Hamlet's momentum as a physical entity with a "mortal coil" interferes with whatever thought-prescription he and other tragic heroes understand they ought to possess (a prescription further complicated by the actor's own ideological baggage).⁵⁴ In the eighteenth century, that thought-prescription is invariably the primacy of the soul over the body; the condemned hero is only stoic because of an "ideological direction" that promises relief from looming death and, just as crucially, from an imperfect or even difficult earthly life.

⁵⁴ Blau's central argument is that, in assessing the choices an actor makes onstage, "what we recognize as credible in performance is more often than not what we have come to accept as credible in that closed circle of the ideological which . . . produces . . . the confirmation of what we already know and believe" (78).

If these tragedies present their audiences with idealized figures in rarefied environments, contemporary reality challenged the sterile representation of existence onstage. In *Flesh in the Age of Reason* (2003), Roy Porter has summarized how "the flesh proved deeply problematic" well into the eighteenth-century:

To a degree that is hard to imagine nowadays, visible, tangible flesh was all too often experienced as ugly, nasty and decaying, bitten by bugs and beset by sores; it was rank, foul and dysfunctional; for all of medicine's best efforts, it was frequently racked with pain, disability and disease; and death might well be nigh. Letters and diaries—to say nothing of Swift's satire or the cartoons of Hogarth and Gillray—document at length and with passion the intense repugnance people so frequently felt towards their own noisome flesh and that of others. (25)⁵⁵

Porter also reminds us that the century saw a rise in trends designed to "hide, deodorize, cleanse [and] purge" (25) such frailties, as well as new interests in diet and exercise—not to mention a sea-change in medical opinions about care in life and the process of death. These trends to help preserve life and improve its quality were concomitant, of course, with the humanitarian creep that argued for the value of the fleshly self, especially in the latter part of the century. If, as Porter writes, "the elite drive for the reformation of popular culture equated the flesh and the plebs, and hence made the body connote all that was vulgar,

⁵⁵ After Swift's poems, there is no better example of this bodily distaste than Tobias Smollett's grotesque novel *The Expedition of Humphry Clinker* (1771), which chronicles the filth of cities, the persistence of disease, and the pollution of the shared waters at Bath.

disorderly, contagious and threatening" (26), the rise of Romantic individualism disinfected the putrid body, and the visionary rebel pregnant with self-esteem began to replace the Christian martyr as the outlying figure with a bead on Truth (a competition frequently embodied in the scaffold tragedy's wavering hero).

Blau grasps the eighteenth-century mindset when he considers the body as a historical entity. "Existence cannot be without the body and its detestable organs" (105), he points out, calling our substance an "invasion of anatomy" (107) that disrupts thought-prescriptions supposed to privilege everything beyond the physical self (God, country, justice, art, principle). For Blau, the flesh-bound individual cannot help to reinscribe the dominant ideological order into one "in which the body insists (or is made to insist) on its substance as the most sacred of taboos, that was not meant to be validated, yet is nevertheless manipulated, mutilated, castrated, consumed by all ideology" (124).

This phenomenon is dramatized in eighteenth-century scaffold narratives, in which the personal body is warred over by its owner and the owner's government, as if this taboo substance—a body that must be abjured in favour of a soul—has value of some kind. While corporeal theories may have saturated literary studies since the 1970s, Blau reminds us that the art of theatre is unavoidably localized in the bodies of performers—that we cannot underestimate those bodies' contribution to an audience's moral or ideological understanding of what occurs onstage (106-108). This must be particularly true in scenes that depict the authorized destruction of a body as they simultaneously communicate, through the piety of the condemned, that body's irrelevance in the Christian

scheme of things. The physical demands of performance reinforce the truth of the body's presence in the scaffold drama; the condemned heroine may disavow her substance, but her character depends on that body (and bodily attachment) to provide her with heroic circumstance in the first place, and with a contrast against which to make her edifying pronouncements on faith and principle. Eighteenth-century scaffold tragedies have a primary sociological purpose, after all, which underlies the prurience and pathos they strive to generate: the Christian consolation lesson demands that the audience consider the soul's preeminence over its physical shell and all the material associations we attach to it.

What place in the lesson, then, does the condemned Gibson's orange-eating have? We might agree that a hero's regard for private pleasure over public duty creates heroic conflict, and that his farewell to life generates excessive pathos; but how does that grief reconcile with these tragedies' ultimate message of consolation and their appeal for a model death? The point is, it does not; the veneration of taboo substance is a trope that undermines every pious narrative in our tragedies, which foreground the joy of bodily pleasure even as they try to communicate the proper thought-prescription of Christian consolation.⁵⁶ As Blau points out, "there is in Shylock's notorious question [*if you prick us, do we not*

⁵⁶ As Western culture and art secularized, so did many of our scaffold fictions. In contrast to eighteenth-century ideals of piety and the veneration of the soul stand works like Humphrey Cobb's *Paths of Glory* (1935), in which condemned men reject a priest's consolations and write letters to their wives free of guilt about worldly joys. They are outraged by the theft of their lives and anticipate no Heaven. One man symbolically kicks the priest in his stomach while another is unable to hold down his last taste of pleasure, a sip of cognac, because of his unheroic distress (compare a similar scene in Part V of Albert Camus' *The Stranger*). Substance in scaffold fictions like Cobb's is decidedly *not* taboo but instead inherently valuable; it is of the individual rather than of a creator. Taboo substance as a trope, therefore, can naturally only exist in narratives of devotion that privilege the soul over the self.

bleed?]) a reassertion of a universalism of the body, the essential body, which has become in theory something of a historical taboo" (118). What scaffold tragedies in the eighteenth century deliver, over and over, is Blau's image of an "autonomous thought" that fails to "escape in the right ideological direction," or at least in a direct, unfaltering line. The condemned's attachment to his or her materiality is acknowledged in formulaic scenes that privilege—one last time before the axe falls—materiality in its idealized form: domestic pleasures, spousal intimacy, the warmth of friendship, the joys of parenthood, and a comfortable death-bed.

Richard James Sherry has sensed, if not articulated, an emergent focus on taboo substance in his introduction to Rowe's *The Tragedy of the Lady Jane Gray* (1715). He compares the Rowe version of Grey's history with that found in John Banks' *The Innocent Usurper* (1694), upon which Rowe based his own play. As Sherry has remarked, after the last farewell between Jane and her husband shortly before their executions, "Banks' hero exits calmly, nearly as composed as Jane herself" whereas "Rowe treats Guilford as considerably weaker . . . [since he] nearly has to be torn from Jane's side" (xxii). In contrast with Banks, Rowe emphasizes the magnetism of flesh as early as Act I, when Guilford professes his envy of another man nursed by Jane's hands. "Were I like dying Edward, sure a touch, / Of this dear hand, would kindle life anew" (15-16). This statement is not merely a romantic expression or a moment of heady dramatic irony (given that Jane's marital "touch" leads to Guilford's execution); it communicates the overwhelming effect one body has on another, a theme that

develops into the trope of taboo substance by the play's end. Pressed by the tender fallacy of false hope and the rigors of negotiation, Jane must also endure a final farewell with Guilford, in which material joys feature large.

In other words, Rowe deploys the trope of taboo substance even in a tragedy that privileges (as Sherry proves) the religious element of Jane's martyrdom over the political. Her character is resigned to death, and she plays the role of the model condemned, until the sight of Guilford reanimates her personhood:

My heart had ended ev'ry earthly care,
Had offer'd up its prayers for thee and England,
And fix'd its hope upon a rock unfailing;
While all the little bus'ness that remain'd,
Was but to pass the forms of death with constancy,
And leave a life become indifferent to me.
But thou hast waken'd other thoughts within me:
Thy sight, my dearest husband and my lord,
Strikes on the tender strings of love and nature;
My vanquish'd passions rise again, and tell me
'Tis more, far more than death to part from thee. (55)

Rowe did not invent this tragi-romantic pattern, of course, but he should be credited with its reinvigoration just as Georgian sensibility was in its embryonic phase. He emphasizes taboo substance in a play ostensibly devoted to the glory of Protestant martyrdom. Gone forever is the single-minded sufferer eager for the

stake. Rowe's tragedy might be regarded, in other words, as having illuminated a trope that gains popularity over the course of the century and reliably manifests itself in later decades whenever a scaffold figures near. "Life and the world were hardly worth my care, but you have reconciled me to 'em both," Jane tells her husband (56), shaken by his nearness and, by extension, by recollections of marriage in its most material form. The trope of taboo substance lends tension to the ensuing conversion crisis, in which life is promised to the couple in exchange for their abjuration of their native faith; Rowe's Jane tells us how much she values what she chooses to forsake and how its appeal drives her to the very edge of heresy. He stresses the consolation message of a marital reunion in Heaven, but he forces Guilford and Jane to work through the trauma of recognizing their taboo substance as he steers them toward the block.

The appeal of that substance finds its way into other early-century scaffold tragedies, becoming a remarkably *de rigueur* feature in some form or another by the 1720s. Sewall illustrates the trope with tentative strokes in his 1719 version of *The Tragedy of Sir Walter Raleigh*, whose hero—in traditional martyrological guise—is more concerned about his own legacy than material joys. "My soul is light and easie now," Raleigh announces after his wife has been removed from his cell, and it "pants for the race, and fain would live at large" again among us (58). His ties to Lady Raleigh are stitched deep enough for the sake of appearances, and her tears "distract my scheme" (57), but there is no excessive focus on Raleigh's struggle to abandon his loved ones and his domestic routine. The lament for the loss of his taboo substance, rather, is delivered by an

observer, Olympia, who seems aghast at Raleigh's resignation: "What savage hand has cut the subtle line, / That runs from parent to their children's hearts?" (58) she wonders on perceiving Raleigh's calm leave-taking of his son. His request to see the younger Raleigh is not motivated by a desire to hold him in the flesh one last time but to offer his child clinical advice. The "chain of nature" (61) Raleigh refers to between fathers and sons is here not emotional but patrilineal, and the pragmatic elder who wishes to discuss the affairs of inheritance chides the other's teary weakness. "Come to my arms, thou best-belov'd," he urges the younger man (62), but his final embrace is merely dutifully final, accompanied by no regret about the loss of future joys that his execution preempts.

Tentative, too, is George Lillo's rendering of taboo substance in *The London Merchant* (1731), where the trope is localized in the last farewell between the condemned Barnwell and the loyal Trueman. Barnwell's initial refusal to accept his friend's embrace is only partly out of fear of the lure of taboo substance; though he balks at one last taste of "joys on earth" (333), he is more anxious about sullyng Trueman's pure breast with his own corruption. But sensing the power of taboo substance to remind the condemned of what he leaves behind, Barnwell also fears the embrace will be "an intercourse of woe" (334). Instead, he finds that Trueman's hug consoles him: "Where's now the anguish that you promised?" he asks the other (334). "You've taken mine and made me no return. Sure, peace and comfort dwell within these arms," he concludes. Lillo's use of the trope is deliberate but restrained—almost

undermining. Its purest expression arrives after mid-century, in the anti-Jacobin dramas of the 1790s, and in scaffold tragedies like Logan's 1783 *Runnamede*.

So insistent, by this time, is the call of earthly ties, that Logan's Anglo-Norman council knows to smother it with an oath. As they search for an unknown traitor, Albermarle and his council vow to put him to death without knowing his identity, a vow made so that "no favour of affection will seduce / The steady patriot from the public good" (25). If the execution is irrevocable, in other words, tenderness will not interfere with larger concerns. In and of itself, this idea might well be found in any heroic tragedy going back to Dryden, in any history play of the Renaissance, or in any Greek drama concerned with civic duty (it can be found as early as *The Book of Esther*). But Logan's insertion of this vow sets up a sustained examination of the power of taboo substance, one we are hard-pressed to locate in scaffold tragedies before the eighteenth century. By the time Logan wrote his version of the Tancredi legend, sensibility had fattened the trope and given it the robust glow of heightened emotion. Plays like *Runnamede* reconstitute what was once, perhaps, an expression of private wish over public obligation into a garish tableau of sentimentality. Logan devotes more than one act to Albermarle's anguish over having unwittingly promised his daughter to the scaffold; the father's taboo-substance trauma is dramatized to excess. Albermarle stands firm at first, a pillar beneath his tears—"Nature must cry, but justice shall be heard! / Dear, dear as she is to me—she shall die!" (29)—as fellow council-members praise the father's "high heroic path" (29). But he weakens over the course of the play, and the trope of taboo substance is fleshed

out by his emotional crisis, which articulates the sensory comfort of a loved one's proximity:

O foolish father! I delighted, thought . . .
To see a race of thine around me rise,
The young Elvinas of the age to come;
Trace my own features in their opening looks,
Hear the first accents of their lisping tongues,
Woo their embraces, fold them in my arms . . .
Then looking heaven-ward, to depart in peace,
In his good hour: Within their arms and thine,
Th' embrace of nature! look my last adieus. (37)

Albermarle is so overcome that he decides to fight for his daughter's life with the blunt force of chivalry; Elvina's substance outweighs intangible duty. Nor is Elvina herself immune to its sway. Though she appears to be resigned about her own earthly losses as her scaffold is erected nearby, she worries her father will not tolerate the physical gap her death will create: "Support my father's age when I am gone," she begs of God as she looks towards the scaffold. "Whatever years, / Whatever joys, thou takest from my life, / Repay to him with manifold increase" (52).

The idea of taboo substance was so woven into scaffold tragedies by 1775 that Hannah More wrote one of her own in seeming protest of the trope. In *The Inflexible Captive*, her Regulus is designed in opposition to the trend. The legend of Regulus, like the Tancred story, was fertile ground for eighteenth-

century tragedians who wanted to play with pathos (or promote a *dulce et decorum est* principle). Her Roman statesman is enslaved by Carthage and charged with convincing Rome to end the war between their nations; if he fails, he must return to Carthage and face a harrowing execution. Rather than sue for peace, however, Regulus urges the Senate to rout its enemy, then keeps his vow and departs for certain death after declaiming his love of Rome. In William Havard's 1744 version, Regulus is a condemned man who embraces his materiality, kissing Roman earth and clasping family to his breast. A figure whose heroic principle is famously manifested in oration becomes tongue-tied by personal concerns: "My words are lost in more substantial bliss," he admits as he enjoys the closeness of wife and children (27), and he acknowledges the larger worth of that substance when he confesses that "the objects dearest to me" have taught him "thro' them, to love my country" (27). Havard's Regulus struggles, in typical form, with taboo substance throughout the play, losing sight of his principle from time to time and celebrating domestic joys. He suffers paroxysms as he struggles to overcome the lure of materiality: "My wife! – My children!" he laments in a paeon to taboo substance near play's end, "let me not falter in my noble purpose: / Lend me your aid, assist me to sustain / The weight that presses on my feeble part; / Let me not feel what Nature is about, / Who, soft'ning every heart-string to her purpose, / Would melt me to the weakness of a child" (55).

If Havard's measure of virtue is sensibility, More's is clinical nationalism; in each play, the best characters eventually embrace that measure (and if Havard's Regulus still chooses a Carthaginian execution, he does so only after convincing

us how much it breaks his heart to contemplate leaving his loved ones and beloved city walls). More's Regulus, in contrast, is an unfaltering dispenser of heroic words who is himself the teacher of values to others, not—as in the case of Havard's play—a student of others' virtue who learns public duty from the lessons of private attachments. More's Regulus is the least sentimental character in the play (perhaps of any play of the period), persuading others to be less attached to taboo substance and natural feelings. The great triumph of More's Regulus, in fact, is the successful conversion of his grieving son into a stoic Roman unfazed by the departure of his father. The youth who earlier complained "And will my father then no more enjoy / The smiling blessings of his cheerful home?" as he negotiates to persuade Regulus to break his oath and stay in Rome (13), acquires his father's unflappable stance after a lengthy *agon* in which Regulus avoids his son's caresses. More's deployment of the trope of taboo substance is crafty; it exists in Regulus' assurances that "the present exigence / Demands for other thoughts, than the soft cares, / The fond effusions, the delightful weakness, / The dear affections 'twixt child and parent" (14), and it exists mainly to be rejected by the hero. More—bowing as much to convention as to audience expectation—allows her Regulus the briefest moment of paternal crisis, but the call of taboo substance is negated by his statement (in the midst of that crisis) that country yet comes before family: the latter must understand and accept his principles (32). His daughter Attila's grief "offend[s his] honour" (45), and he marches out of Rome as composedly as Brutus marched his sons to their racks.

While the sublime aesthetic found its most comfortable home in the scaffold tragedies of the eighteenth century, it is equally true that the trope of taboo substance challenges that sublimity and adds a fresh dimension to the heroic dilemma—a dilemma that finds its most protracted shape between a dramatic sentencing and dramatic scaffold death. These representations of execution become sites where sensibility collides hectically with traditional notions of fortitude and duty, and where the power of the sublime, as Burke defined it, is challenged by manifestations of the longed-for beautiful celebrated by the model characters onstage. The wild infinite may beckon and ultimately consume the condemned hero, but the softer values of domesticity, society, pleasure, and personal duty are not as emasculated as Burke suggests; charm proves a dramatic adversary for grandeur. If the sublime prevails by the time the axe falls—invigorated by the tropes of negotiation, tender fallacy, and lamentation of intimates—what is most pleasing to the senses in this world, or what Burke considers "those qualities in bodies by which they cause love" (*Enquiry* 83), has tintured this brand of sublimity with a unique aesthetic. It has also flushed this brand of tragedy with a brighter degree of dramatic irony, since pronouncements about a hero's fortitude are undercut by his attraction to and defence of the beautiful material. Lake and Questier's characterization of execution as "an inherently unstable event" proves to be true in these tragedies, where taboo substance interferes with any coherent image of the sublime.

But the trope also creates a binary that could not exist if the worth of one's physical substance were not considered to be nearly equal to the worth of one's

soul. If, as David B. Morris has argued in *The Culture of Pain*, pain and the threat of pain "possess redemptive and visionary powers" (125) that "disrupt the daily routines that arrest our attention and bind us to things of this world (125-126), then taboo substance highlights that "bridge between two worlds" and makes the material one far more tactile. If, as Morris reminds us, Saint Sebastian and other executed figures are traditionally seen as prophetic because of the political nature of their agonies, then the conflict between taboo substance and the sublime universe sharpens the "tension between two radically opposed worlds brought together (but not fused) at the moment of martyrdom" (127). The condemned hero's "otherworldly vision" or sense of the larger sublime order of things is, as Morris insists, inseparable from the psychological and physical pain of a scaffold event—the one cannot be had without the other. The hero's suspension between two distinct worlds is visible in the clash between taboo substance and the sublime dimension of the message of consolation in these tragedies, where towers and scaffolds are raised spaces that position the condemned hero uniquely between earth and Heaven.

CHAPTER TWO

Imagining the Scene: The Fancied Scaffold, Unwilled

1: Imagined Death as Intrusive Fancy

"Whenever death can be designated as 'soon,' the dying has already begun," Elaine Scarry has theorized about the extraordinary circumstances of those interned by violent captors (31). Scarry's insight into the psychology of anticipated prison death rests on an implied imaginative function. For how can a healthy inmate begin to die unless she is capable of projecting her mind forward to the moment when her incarceration transmutes into obliteration at the hands of her gaolers? Imagined death—or, more precisely, imagined dying—naturally overwhelms the condemned person's emotional space in the period between internment and execution. This "imagined death" is a consistent feature of scaffold fictions, and one especially germane to those produced in eighteenth-century Europe, when theories of the imagination proliferated in a culture obsessed with the operations of the mind. However vivid such imaginings may be in the minds of the condemned, eighteenth-century scaffold fictions also depict the lurid visions of imagined executions from the perspective of intimates. If the

interns of Kafka, Nabokov, and Camus⁵⁷ report on their anticipated fate with navel-gazing anomie, many of their eighteenth-century counterparts, in fact, tend to leave such anticipations to sympathetic bystanders, who “imagine the scene” of their loved one's execution with such frequency that these acts of imagining have become a literary trope.

This trope occurs reliably in the scaffold tragedies I highlighted in Chapter One. Again and again, in nearly every such play, the lamentation of an intimate is preceded or followed by a described vision of the scaffold at the moment of the loved one's death. That vision renders its recipient sublimely inarticulate, sometimes, or temporarily mad. *Runnamede*'s Albemarle describes a typical imagined death that overtakes his mind in mid-conversation with his condemned daughter's lover and champion:

Thou art the only comforter I've found;
Thy voice alone relieves a father's heart.
Let me embrace thee in my aged arms:
I'll call thee son!—But Oh! A dreadful scene
Begins to draw; the scaffold is prepared
Soon to be dyed with blood; the ax is laid:
The prison opens: The grim soldiers seize her;
They drag my daughter forth . . . to execution.
And I—must I behold it? —Let me die! (48)

⁵⁷ See Franz Kafka's "In the Penal Colony" (1914), Vladimir Nabokov's *Invitation to a Beheading* (1936) and Albert Camus' *The Stranger* (1942).

Albemarle's view of the scaffold is imagined, for the stage has yet to discover "a scaffold, engines of torture, executioners" and "Elvina dressed in white, surrounded by guards" (50). Expository imperatives inspire such visions, of course, since a character's description of events is a natural substitute for the cogs and pulleys of an enacted scaffold representation. That description is often ghastly, a prurient supplement to the condemned hero's execution offstage or near-execution onstage—concessions to decorum that eighteenth-century playwrights re-established with Aristotelian rule and Georgian delicacy once the bloody Restoration stage fell out of fashion.⁵⁸

But Albemarle's imagined scene is physically realized moments later by set and blocking, and is therefore dramaturgically redundant. Logan was not concerned with warning his audience about an event he was about to represent on his stage (e.g. the near-execution of Elvina). Rather, he was exploiting a convention of scaffold fiction that was, by 1783, well-established in the tragic genre: the imagined death of Albemarle's daughter in *Runnamede* is a pathetic device few playwrights could resist deploying, though Logan's representation is less ghoulish than some. Conversely, in Mark Anthony Meilan's *Northumberland, A Tragedy* (1771), Lady Jane Grey hallucinates her husband's approaching execution at length. Guildford's imagined death is vivid, protracted, and powerful enough to disable Jane intellectually for some time:

Pity!—Oh no. – I see him doom'd already. –

They bear him to the block. –Oh murder! murder!

⁵⁸ Jean I. Marsden provides an excellent overview of violent representations on the Restoration stage, which included tortures and executions. See "Spectacle, Horror, and Pathos" in *The Cambridge Companion to Restoration Drama*.

Villain stand off, —nor dare to kill my husband. . . .

Oh! —From his eyes, what horrible displeasure

Flashes like light . . .

Now, now he kneels; and see the axe above him;

Mercy!—It falls—turn, turn away my eyes;

Nor let me view that manly face, besmear'd

With blood; a spectacle of pity

And comely, though in death. . . .

But see they come!

An eye-less train of spectres rises before me,

Reeking with livid blood—My injur'd Lord,

Poor ghost!—is with them too. (60-62)

Descriptions of the scaffold, the axe, the severed head, and washes of blood characterize this convention, and the more guilt or remorse that is felt by the imaginer, the more lurid these visions tend to be. Some intimates, such as the Queen in William Hey's *The Captive Monarch*, imagine themselves catching their loved one's head as it bounces off the block (101). Others insist that their imaginations "bring the blackest scenes of death" to their mind's eye and leave them more shaken than would a witnessed execution, as the Queen suggests to her husband in William Havard's *King Charles I* (10). All are victims of an invasive fancy that overwhelms their faculties and provides opportunities for chronicling the terrors of the scaffold even when no scaffold is in sight. As Arnolphe tells a distraught Almida in Dorothea Celesias' version of the *Tancredè*

legend, "Fear's trembling pencil, ever dipt in black, / Paints to the mind strange images of woe" (*Almida* 58).

These images deserve closer inspection, for they become endemic to scaffold fiction in the eighteenth century. They acknowledge the power of sublime obscurity, a mental effect by which ideas both familiar and removed merge thanks to the imagination's associative powers, sometimes birthing terrifying chimeras. These chimeras are literary tropes, and their intrusive and uncontrollable nature form the subject of this chapter. Yet grappling with eighteenth-century concepts of the imagination in any comprehensive way is as challenging as doing justice to the period's notions of sublimity. In addition to fluid definitions and the sheer number of studies on the question of eighteenth-century imagination, I am challenged by the fact that the discourse tends to focus on theories of the imagination that have little to do with my purpose. Studies of eighteenth-century imagination have been taxonomized into two distinct spheres: the associative imagination of Locke's "presence room" and the creative imagination of (mostly Romantic) poetic genius.⁵⁹ And while both concepts merit the interest of philosophers, the one (creative imagination) is anachronistic and irrelevant to my study while the other (associative imagination) has little to say about what I wish to examine in the context of scaffold fiction: the trauma of unwilling visions or intrusive fancy.

⁵⁹ Most recent commentaries on eighteenth-century imagination have focused on the Romantic imagination, with an emphasis on its impact on genius and inspiration, such as Frederick Burwick's "Poetic Madness and the Romantic Imagination" (*Modern Philology*, 96: 1, pp. 112-115), and James Engell's *The Creative Imagination*.

Locating substantial explorations of intrusive or unwilled fancy in eighteenth-century essays on imagination has proved difficult. This is surprising, because the problem of intrusive fancy—in its most negative form—recurs in most of the century's scaffold fictions, and it often features in novels of sensibility and Gothic terror. Few contemporary examinations depart from Locke's notion of ideas combined together "either voluntarily or by chance," as he interprets willed and unwilled imagination in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (II.xxxiii.6). Locke's consideration of unwilled "wanton fancies" is brief and sententious; unless ideas combine in a willed or voluntary mode, the mind's associative power is a negative phenomenon, a process Locke characterizes with terms like "unreasonableness," "madness," "disease," and "weakness"—as something that is "in opposition to reason" (II.xxxiii.1-4). Too many of us, Locke warns, too frequently allow ourselves to be led by false associations:

The ideas of goblins and sprights have really no more to do with darkness than light; yet let but a foolish maid inculcate these often on the mind of a child, and raise them there together, possibly he shall never be able to separate them again so long as he lives; but darkness shall ever afterwards bring with it those frightful ideas, and they shall be so joined that he can no more bear the one than the other. (II.xxxiii.10)

Locke argues that false and frivolous associations generate unnecessary "aversions" between individuals and groups and are therefore antithetical not just to reason but to social justice as well (II.xxxiii.11).

When Kant wrote about an unwilled component of the “productive imagination” in his *Menschenkunde oder philosophische Anthropologie* more than a century on, he was not laying claim to an unrecognized phenomenon, but he was certainly updating the formal record, which had lain more or less dormant since Locke’s pronouncements in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Kant’s overview (written as it was at the start of the Romantic age) excises some of the negativity from Locke’s theory of unwilled imagination, but not all:

This productive power is divided into the willed and the unwilled imagination. The willed imagination consists in the fact that one can exercise the activity of imagination with discretion, let images well up and disappear, and shape them according to one’s desire. The unwilled imagination is called “fancy” (*Phantasie*), and although many writers have indeed confused the two, common usage already gives occasion to differentiate them.⁶⁰

Though Kant focuses on sources of creative imagination in this passage, and though he writes at the end of the century (long after the first literary descriptions of intrusive fancy appeared), his consideration of an “unwilled imagination” is noteworthy, if only because he is able to take a long view and distill an era’s mottled impressions of the topic into a few paragraphs. He is also reinforcing an established binary, that of imagination versus fancy, which needs here to be addressed. This binary, as we understand it via Kant, Coleridge, Shaftesbury and

⁶⁰ I cite from Engell p. 135; there seems to be some confusion in the footnotes as to the source of this passage, which I have so far been unable to verify. I cannot name the edition or translator.

others,⁶¹ bedeviled studies of the imagination in the eighteenth century, and I will not pause to review it here. Rather (like David Hartley, Joseph Addison, or Ann Radcliffe),⁶² I will use the terms “imagination” and “fancy” interchangeably, since I am concerned only with an operation of the mind, not with making judgments about the value of *phantasie* versus other forms of imaginative production.⁶³

In scaffold fictions, these uninvited intrusions are neither the whimsical and frivolous delights nor the indulgent escapes that Kant's contemporaries associated with so-called flights of fancy. Nor are they the engines of greater understanding or poetic inspiration that were, by the second half of the century, usually credited to the realm of imagination.⁶⁴ In *The Creative Imagination* (1981), James Engell reminds us that the far more inventive realm of imagination was understood holistically as a faculty “governing the interrelated activities of perception, experience, aesthetic appreciation, and the crown of it all, artistic creativity” (viii). The imagined deaths in scaffold fictions are visions, but they depend on the imaginer's associative knack for linking the known with the

⁶¹ See “Distinctions Between Fancy and Imagination” in Engell's *The Creative Imagination* for a thorough overview of the era's debates.

⁶² See Joseph Priestley's *Hartley's Theory of the Human Mind*, “Section V: Of Imagination, Reverie, and Dreams” (1775), Addison's “The Pleasures of the Imagination” essays (*Spectator* 411-21), and any of Radcliffe's novels, where the terms are used interchangeably.

⁶³ The functions of eighteenth-century fancy and imagination, when distinguished, are so varied among philosophers that I risk creating more confusion than clarity if I take on that distinction myself. I will not deny that, to this day, the term “imagination” implies a systematic or even cognitive operation while the term “fancy” suggests a relatively more spontaneous variety of idea. This distinction, however, is tenuous, so I prefer to use the terms “willed” or “unwilled” imagination or fancy.

⁶⁴ And they are certainly not the controlled mind-pictures born of a Romantic faculty that condenses and magnifies life's pleasures, or makes them retrievable in future moments. See, for example, Keats' “Fancy,” Coleridge's “This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison,” and Wordsworth's “Tintern Abbey” and “I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud.”

unknown—for mentally placing a loved one in a strait the imaginer knows from lore, if not from sense impressions culled from a witnessed past event. These imagined deaths result from the sophisticated combining powers of the imagination, which relies partly on memory and partly on invention to move from idea to idea, or to form a mental picture. "Locke's comparison between 'real' and 'fantastical' ideas," Engell points out, "tends to disparage the term 'fancy' itself as something unconnected to reality" (173). And yet, for the intimates of a condemned prisoner in scaffold fictions, what they fancy is absolutely real in the *will-be* sense—if not immediately, then in the very near future—nor can these images be dismissed by the imaginer on the basis of their phantastical nature.

"In certain situations, it is even more difficult *not* to imagine than to imagine in the first place," Edward S. Casey points out in *Imagining: A Phenomenological Study* (4), a 1976 examination of the intentionality and controllability of imagined ideas. Casey insists that "imagining is spontaneous when (and only when) it arises in an unexpected and unbidden manner" (58), and that imaginings are either controlled or spontaneous, but not both (64). He is adamant that spontaneous imaginings are self-generated rather than triggered by a specific event (71), and he generally avoids considerations of what he calls, in his preface, "extreme states of body and mind" (ix), preferring to rest his conclusions on the quotidian and therefore more universal operations of the mind. In other words, Casey does not apply his analysis to the imagination in times of crisis, such as the imminent possibility of violence to self or loved one, which batters the individual with intrusive images of tortured flesh and pained

faces. Though he does not mention scaffold situations, we can surmise by Casey's logic that what occurs in the imagination of the condemned hero or those of his intimates must be a more aggravated example of what occurs during "banal modes of activity" (ix). And Casey is almost surely correct about the impossibility of *not* imagining under some circumstances, or about the fact that "it is more difficult to fail than to succeed at imagining" (6) a thing, even if that thing is remote to our past experience. "Having a generic knowledge of something," such as a Pegasus or (for our purposes) a scaffold, "does not preclude unanticipated embodiments of this knowledge in specific imaginative form" (8), argues Casey. Whether or not the condemned hero's wife, therefore, has herself ever witnessed a scaffold blow followed by the spurt of blood, the body's mortal laxness, and the severed head held up before the crowd, her imagination was believed, even in the eighteenth century, to come equipped with a faculty for picture-making and—more significantly—to be predisposed to present those uninvited pictures to her mind's eye despite her conscious effort not to "see" them.

This understanding of imagination's authority and uncontrollability is rarely addressed in eighteenth-century theoretical studies of the mind's operations, and yet it appears insistently in the period's literature, which suggests in turn that such an understanding was commonly held. Samuel Johnson's *The History of Rasselas* makes it clear that imagination will "sometimes tyrannise" a person in a chapter appropriately entitled "The Dangerous Prevalence of Imagination" (702). It is Imlac who reminds us that "there is no man whose

imagination does not sometimes predominate over his reason, who can regulate his attention wholly by his will, and whose ideas will come and go at his command" (702). Imagination's uncontrollability left the intimates of scaffold heroes and heroines vulnerable to whatever a writer wished to insert into their minds for dramatic or pathetic effect. The idea of a person overwhelmed by fancy was one that was established beyond the realm of formal philosophy. It was celebrated in eighteenth-century poetry, for instance, and recognized as a sometimes fruitful and sometimes dreadful function of the human condition. Tyrannical Fancy harassing a passive speaker was a familiar dyad in an age that privileged receptivity not just to external stimuli but to spontaneous internal promptings. Odes to a ruling fancy abound, and most of these odes subscribe to the idea of a sovereign or godlike Fancy steering a sequence of images through the speaker's mind. In the anonymous "The Exhibition of Fancy, A Vision" (1776), a dreaming poet must accept what Fancy chooses to show him:

Behold, I come, to be myself thy guide.
Approach, and view the wonders of my reign.
Behold this wand—such is its magic powers,
That, as I wave it, at my will, new forms
Rise into sight, and new creations spring,
Obedient to its touch. (ll. 42-47)

In this instance, Fancy seems able to wrest control of the poet's imagination only when he sleeps, and her benevolent aim is to inspire his genius with "new

creations." Passivity on the part of the individual is a given, and the narrator's only effort occurs in the poem's final stanza, when he "struggles" to wake himself.

But many of these figures are not harbingers of poetic inspiration. There are intimations of a ruling and fearsome Fancy in William Collins' "Ode to Fear" (1746), but we have to look closely at the first stanza to spot them. In his apostrophe to Fear, Collins' narrator implies that, without our permission, Fancy's hand "lifts the Veil" between ourselves and the "unknown" horrors of the world usually visible only to Fear. Fancy seems to be the reason why the narrator is able to see Fear, all of a sudden, and respond with a tone of surprised horror ("Ah Fear! Ah frantic Fear! / I see, I see Thee near"). In "Fancy, An Irregular Ode" (1758, also anonymous), the speaker is terrorized by a train of images the goddess presents to him. "O Potent Queen, I own thy pow'r," the narrator cries (IV) and begs her to shield him from unpleasant sights of human suffering and conflict (VII). Fancy is the driver, and though the speaker may request where she steers him, the direction is out of his control and Reason is deaf to his calls for help. This crisis is also rendered in William Gill Wheatcroft's aptly titled "The Powers of Fancy" and in the anonymous "The Grove of Fancy"; in each of these 1789 odes, untamable imagination overwhelms a speaker forced to be a passive spectator to sights pleasant and noisome, inspiring or distressing.

Thus, poets, tragedians, and novelists of the eighteenth century, rather than philosophers, helped popularize the concept of intrusive fancy—none more so than those who dealt in scaffold representations. If Gothic-minded writers accepted as a given the debilitating mechanics of Locke's unwilling association of

ideas (exploiting the "unreasonableness" of such associations to terrify and even madden their characters), they seem to disagree with Hume's assertion in *Treatise on Human Nature* (1740) that images drawn from memory are more vivid than those drawn from the imagination,⁶⁵ fastening themselves instead to the rising current of Romantic imagination and its dazzling mental products. Lady Jane's vision of Guildford's beheading in the Meilan tragedy demonstrates the undeniable force of sights generated not from what was seen (Hume's all-important "impressions") but from what is foreseen or imagined. There is certainly no lack of colour in Jane's description of what her mind shows her; the audience can just about smell the blood on the air. Memory, in fact, plays only a minor role in these fictions while fancy has pride of place. Memory is a vague past contentment, often, but fancy grips these characters and blots out the world around them. The scaffold scenes they describe in anticipation of the actual event (or of an event that has taken place elsewhere, out of their sight) have a near-tangible quality because (of course) they are the pathetic centerpieces of their drama.

2: The Fancied Scaffold and the Gothic Imagination

As Hayley's Lord Russell awaits execution, he confesses that he dreads his wife's fate more than he does his own. His scaffold death will be quick but Lady Russell can expect a protracted torture at the hands of Fancy, which will "array the dreadful form / Of sudden death in visionary horrors" (213) before her mind's eye. The trope of imagined death is, as I have indicated, reliably present

⁶⁵ Book I, Part I, Section 3.

in eighteenth-century scaffold tragedies, but I should like to turn here to imagined executions in the era's Gothic novels, where they have a unique application. More so than in any other genre, anxieties about higher authorities—state, familial, patriarchal—are manifested in Gothic fiction and contribute to its dreadful affect. As Jerrold E. Hogle sums up in his introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*, Gothic writers exploit our disquiet about being subject to the whim and will of forces stronger than us:

The early Gothic sees its characters and readers as torn between the enticing call of aristocratic wealth and sensuous Catholic splendor, beckoning back toward the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, on the one hand, and a desire to overthrow these past orders of authority in favor of a quasi-equality associated with the rising middle-class ideology of the self as self-made, on the other. (4)

The Castle of Otranto's Theodore, *The Monk's* Antonia, and *The Mysteries of Udolpho's* Emily share a common distress: being helpless under the authority of lord, church, or tradition. The scaffold is a dependable symbol of this authority taken to terrifying extremes, since there is no greater power than the sanctioned prerogative to deprive an individual of life. When a Gothic writer features a scaffold in her story, she is reifying that authority in an object already accepted by most as a symbol of state power—an object that enters the imagination only to traumatize it and to remind an individual of his impotence.

Because of the fearsomeness of scaffold scenes in their own right, Gothic writers depended on the imagined death trope not merely to generate the pathos desired and expected by readers, but to increase the degree of terror or horror⁶⁶ in their stories. It is in Gothic fictions of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries that we find some of the most volatile representations of intrusive fancy. The popularity of such representations in Gothic literature suggests an understanding common among its purveyors: that our own imaginations are able to terrify us as effectively as any external wraith or villain. Characters assaulted by their own ungovernable minds demonstrate how the scaffold event can tyrannize our recollection or fancy, but they also act as examples of the overwhelming danger of imagination, a popular subject of eighteenth-century moral instruction inspired by Locke's admonition.⁶⁷ Most of these lessons suggest, however, that one's imagination can be controlled with some minor grooming or discipline. Few Gothic characters would agree, especially those about to lose a loved one to the axe or who face the scaffold themselves. For them, it truly is more difficult not to imagine than to imagine, and what they imagine overwhelms not just their faculties but the narrative as well.

⁶⁶ The terms "terror" and "horror," of course, possessed separate attributes for many writers and readers of the period, and still do for today's Gothic scholars. Because a scaffold fiction is capable of producing two kinds of fright (the terror of anticipated dread; the horror of a gruesome scene), I will adhere to the common distinction first made in Ann Radcliffe's posthumously published "On the Supernatural in Poetry" (1826): Terror is an anxiety, a sublime obscurity that "expands the soul and awakens the faculties to a high degree of life" (149) while horror is a shock accompanied by revulsion that "freezes and nearly annihilates" (149) the soul and senses.

⁶⁷ There is surely no need to reiterate (neo)classic eighteenth-century warnings about imagination's pitfalls. Samuel Johnson's "Rasselas" and Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* still serve as two of the best (and best-known) examples of such warnings.

Curiously, when scholars or instructors provide a list of Gothic elements for readers or students of the genre, execution is rarely if ever included alongside the ghosts and dungeons.⁶⁸ Entrapment, confinement, and persecution have long been considered regular Gothic devices, but not all entrapments concern the immured maiden who dreads a marital rather than a capital punishment. Many of these internments are accompanied not by the threat of suicide (the abducted virgin's recourse) but of execution. Such threats appear to have been subsumed by the larger "female Gothic" discourse that—appropriately—examines the genre's interest in patriarchal forces against women (and sometimes men).⁶⁹ But the threat of execution is ubiquitous in Gothic fiction, equally as common as the threat of rape. It features not accidentally in the first English Gothic novel, *The Castle of Otranto*. Horace Walpole's virtuous hero, Theodore, is sentenced to death for his role in Isabella's escape, but he is saved from decapitation by a standard *deus ex machina* device; when he removes his shirt for the swordsman in Chapter Two, his birthmark identifies him as Jerome's long-lost son. From Walpole to Radcliffe to Godwin, English Gothic literature is strewn with imprisonments accompanied by an oppressive scaffold threat, with near-

⁶⁸ Robert D. Hume's well-known catalogue of Gothic "trappings" in "Gothic Versus Romantic: A Revaluation of the Gothic Novel" (*PMLA*, 1969) names "haunted castles, supernatural occurrences, . . . secret panels and stairways, time-yellowed manuscripts, and poorly lighted midnight scenes" as standard elements. His essay, however, rightly argues that Gothic is more than a set of devices. Compare the equally valued Gothic catalogue of J.M.S. Tomkins in *The Popular Novel in England* (Constable, 1932). It also omits the scaffold, while her discussion of imprisonment (268ff) centers on castles and convents rather than juridical gaols.

⁶⁹ Donna Heiland provides an excellent overview of the female gothic school in *Gothic and Gender: An Introduction* (Blackwell Publishing, 2004).

executions such as Theodore's,⁷⁰ or with actual execution scenes rendered especially vivid thanks to Gothic licence and intrusive fancy in its most extreme fictional form.

The condemned man or woman, never mind the scaffold scene itself and its implications of overwhelming authority, is a natural Gothic subject. Lorna Clymer makes a sort of indirect argument about why this might be the case. In "Cromwell's Head and Milton's Hair: Corpse Theory in Spectacular Bodies of the Interregnum" (1999), Clymer argues that "corpse theory" (a term she coins) is, for the literary scholar, "a method of interpreting the nexus of meanings bestowed upon human remains" (92). Built upon the abjection theory of Julia Kristeva, Clymer's method examines the literary corpse as an ambivalent object that possesses Kristeva's "in-between" status as something not alive but not quite dead.⁷¹ A corpse, as Clymer describes it, "exists simultaneously and uncannily as both human and as gross matter, as both itself and as an unsettling image of the once living entity" (92). Moreover, a body's meaning depends upon some kind of surrounding narrative, be it the mourning and memorializing of the corpse by loved ones, the "veneration of a hero" through pomp and circumstance (92) or the turning of a corpse into an example of punishment. This "narration" of corpses (such as the corpse of an executed king) relies on tropes like

⁷⁰ In "Gothic Versus Romantic," Robert D. Hume mentions Theodore's near-execution in *Otranto* only incidentally. He does not consider the persistence of execution within the genre, writing only that "terror dependent on suspense or dread is the *modus operandi* of the novels of Walpole and Radcliffe. *The Castle of Otranto* holds the reader's attention through dread of a series of terrible possibilities—Theodore's execution, the (essentially) incestuous marriage of Manfred and Isabella, the casting-off of Hippolita, and so on" (285).

⁷¹ See Kristeva's *Powers of Horror*, Chapter One ("Approaching Abjection"), which itself owes a great deal to the uncanny theories of Ernst Jentsch and Sigmund Freud.

synecdoche, whereby fragments of human remains (a head, a lock of hair, a dab of blood on a piece of silk) "reference the corporeal whole and the former historical context that contained it" (93). To these telling fragments, Clymer adds what she calls secondary parts (e.g. chopping block, rope, dagger, shroud)—that is, relics of the death event itself or the ensuing ritual grief.

Clymer's theory helps explain why the condemned figure is so compelling for Gothic writers. Drawing on Kristeva, she reminds us of the fundamentally disturbing nature of something that is not quite one thing or another.⁷² The condemned figure serves not only to galvanize the Gothic reader's fear of death and gruesome bloodletting, but to act as a frightening entity in its own right. Not yet dead, but no longer part of life and destined shortly for the grave,⁷³ this figure is reminiscent of something undead, a more acceptable and less shocking embodiment of the vampire or the zombie. The person of the condemned becomes a site of prurience and fear, eliciting frissons from others whenever he or she appears on the page or stage. Moreover (as Clymer suggests), the physical space and objects that surround the figure become associated with his or her abject state. Engines of execution, as well as mementos, are touched with the disturbing in-between, thickening the Gothic mood. In short, the dread elicited by notions of a condemned figure is superadded to the dread associated with the scaffold event itself in order to contribute to a fiction's Gothic atmosphere.

⁷² Hogle attaches Kristeva's theory of abjection to the Gothic genre in his introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction* (pp. 5-8), but he does not mention the "in-between" figure of the condemned hero in his discussion.

⁷³ The idea of the condemned figure as one poised between life and death is not unique to my study. See, for example, "The Dramaturgy of State Executions" (1977), in which John Lofland points out that the condemned person has historically been "kept sequestered in a concealed place" so as to "minimize the presence of the now 'living dead'" (277).

In *Gothic Bodies: The Politics of Pain in Romantic Fiction* (1994), Steven Bruhm recognizes the role of execution in the genre, if (like Clymer) somewhat indirectly. His study argues that the Romantic poets shared with Gothic authors "a fascination with physical pain, and much Romantic production concerns itself with the implications of physical pain on the transcendent consciousness" (xvi). In his attempt to collapse traditional distinctions between Romanticism's "life of the mind" and Gothic literature's "immediacy of the body" (xvi), Bruhm highlights a generalized anxiety about the afflicted body throughout the latter half of the eighteenth century. Many examples of physical affliction in both Romantic and Gothic literature depend on wound or illness, but Bruhm also considers representations of torture which, at times, are followed by representations of execution (or are accompanied, at least, by dread of a scaffold death). As Bruhm explains, "the Gothic body is that which is put on excessive display, and whose violent, vulnerable immediacy gives . . . Gothic fiction [its] beautiful barbarity [and] troublesome power" (xvii). His locus, however, is the tortured body and not the mind afflicted by anticipations of execution.

But Bruhm senses the recurrence of the imagined death trope in Gothic (and Romantic) literature, for he notes how frequently Radcliffe and other late-century writers represented the imagining of an execution—though usually in a general or hypothetical sense rather than from the perspective of the condemned character or an intimate. He writes that "the imagination itself is a site of spectacle, where the pained body is evoked to register the hero/poet's engagement with the sad music of humanity" (xvii). Bruhm refers to Radcliffe's

The Mysteries of Udolpho, which contains a typical Gothic/Romantic moment when a character's imagination is flooded with ideas of execution through the associative process. Over the course of her travels, "Emily St. Aubert . . . comes upon a gibbet which has been the site of someone's intense physical pain, and Radcliffe records her [character's] terrifying reactions to that place" (30). Bruhm argues that Radcliffe's interest lies not in the representation of scaffold torture itself but in "the dynamics of the subject doing the imagining" (31), and that these dynamics are presented by the author as a means of instructing readers "on the proper use of imagination" (31). Radcliffe's gibbet, according to Bruhm, provides her with an opportunity to warn readers about the dangers of excessive imagination; the images it conjures up in Emily's mind are not to be trusted, for "the act of imagining pain opens up the possibility for self-delusion" (32). Bruhm is right to flag one of the ways in which Radcliffe and her contemporaries warned the public about imagination's excesses, but his explication is incomplete. He concludes that "the Gothic convention of imagining pain demonstrates the power of the imagination, but only by demonstrating its impotence and limitation" (32). This may be the case in the didactic fictions of Radcliffe—or at least in Bruhm's reading of *Udolpho*—but it fails to explain the motivations of her peers who describe similar scenes and the rather more complicated role that imagined executions play within the genre overall.

Radcliffe herself engages with this complexity in her earlier (and less elegant) *The Castles of Athlin and Dunbayne* (1789), which depends on imagined deaths for Gothic effect as much as it does for instruction about

imagination's snares. The mind's tyranny over the imaginer is precisely what creates conflict and produces memorable Gothic tableaux in the novel, and the images that overwhelm Radcliffe's characters are usually those of anticipated executions. The text is clearly concerned with the function of imagination, for it opens with a discussion of its dangers:

When first we enter on the theatre of the world . . . young imagination heightens every scene . . . and induces us with sensibility. As we advance in life, imagination is compelled to relinquish a part of her sweet delirium; we are led reluctantly to truth through the pattern of experience. . . . Here an altered scene appears . . . deep shades where late was sunshine. . . . We turn indignant from a prospect so miserable, and court again the sweet illusions of our early days; but ah! They are fled forever. (4-5)

Radcliffe uses the terms *fancy* and *imagination* interchangeably in her novel, applying them to the Kantian *Einbildungskraft*—the picture-making operation. All of her main characters struggle to bar uninvited mind-pictures triggered by a scaffold threat to the hero, Osbert. In fact, so much action and character development in *Castles* depends on these intrusive mental tableaux that the novel, for all of its faults, stands as a kind of *locus classicus* of the Gothic device of imagined execution.

Radcliffe shows us early in the text just how intrusive fancy can be, and she reiterates her concern throughout. If lovelorn Alleyn (a changeling nobleman raised as a rustic) believes he has the capacity to "exclude [the] idea" (19) of an

unattainable woman from his imagination, he barely has the wherewithal to exercise that capacity. "His mind . . . gave him only the image of the high-born Mary" (19) and forces him to feel emotional pain for the first time in his life. Alleyn's friend (and Mary's brother) Osbert is convinced by intrusive fancy to proceed against an enemy despite his mother's protests: "the figure of his dying father arose to his imagination, and stamped his purpose irrevocably" while "the anxiety of a fond mother, presented Matilda with the image of her son bleeding and ghastly" (21). It is intrusive fancy that sends Osbert into battle and motivates Alleyn to ally himself with him—actions which result in their imprisonment and near-execution at the hand of the Baron of Dunbayne. Before Radcliffe even begins to present her readers with the vivid imagined deaths of Osbert and Alleyn that torment Matilda and Mary, she normalizes the idea of minds haunted by ghosts that intrude willy-nilly and disturb both the imaginer and the reader.

The novel swings fully into Gothic mode in the third chapter, with the imprisonment of Osbert and Alleyn after their failed attempt to take Dunbayne Castle. The device of entrapment is deployed, and with it the device of imagined death. As her brother and friend wait in their cell for the axe, "the idea of [Osbert], surrounded with the horrors of imprisonment and death, would often obtrude itself on [Mary's] imagination, with an emphasis which almost overcame her reason" (33). Mary, intrigued by Alleyn, also endures "the picture . . . her fancy drew of his vile sufferings" (34). In fact, Radcliffe announces Mary's growing interest in Alleyn via the device of an imagined scaffold death, which reveals the true heart of her character. Osbert, too, is portrayed as a condemned figure who

struggles against his own imagination. Reflections on his fate, at first, "could not overcome his firmness" (35) and for a while he maintains his fortitude with a disciplined mind. He shows the Baron a brave face when threatened with torture. But the sight of the Baron wears down his will: "the cool fortitude in which he had so lately gloried, disappeared" (39), and he contemplates suicide to escape the "perfect misery" of the operations of his imagination. Like Sir George Jeffries in Stratford's *Lord Russell*, Radcliffe's Baron understands that thanks to intrusive fancy, "the sufferings of suspense are superior to those of the most terrible evils" (37). He forces Osbert to endure a mock execution which "quite unmanned him" (85) when his mother's image invades his mind as he steps towards the block (heroes of late eighteenth-century fiction are permitted, of course, to shed tears for the sufferings of others, if not for their own fates).

It is only after Osbert's scaffold anxiety and mental torture are protracted to fifty pages that he "acquire[s] the art of managing" his fancy (117), something his sister seeks to learn for herself when she relies on her mother for help in "expelling the destructive image [of unattainable Alleyn] from her mind" (90). But her mother has her own imagination to tame. When the Baron demands Mary's hand in marriage in return for Osbert's life, Matilda is forced to choose between the welfare of her two children:

To give to the murderer [of her husband] the child of the murdered was a thought too horrid to rest upon. The Countess rejected with force the Baron's offer of exchange, when the bleeding figure of her

beloved son, pale and convulsed in death, started on her

imagination, and stretched her brain almost to frenzy. (102)

If, by novel's end, the virtuous characters of *The Castles of Athlin and Dunbayne* are able to manage their imaginations (as they manage to resolve affairs of estate and marriage to their benefit), they do so only after Radcliffe has exploited the terrors of intrusive fancy to their Gothic limit.

Radcliffe, taking a page from Walpole, deploys the threat of execution and its attendant anticipations with as much consideration as she does the devices of entrapment and forced marriage. Far from being an exception, the scaffold threat that deepens the atmosphere of *The Castles of Athlin and Dunbayne* makes regular appearances in Gothic texts, many of which are designed primarily to frighten readers rather than admonish them about the dangers of imagination. Radcliffe herself later relied again on the threat of execution in *The Italian* (1797), which puts its hero in the hands of an Inquisition tribunal mainly, it seems, for the sake of suspense; the Inquisition's specific terrors overwhelm any didactic or anti-Catholic intentions that the author may have simultaneously borne in mind. Radcliffe's Gothic foil, Matthew Lewis, also took care to include a scaffold threat in *The Monk* (1796). If Radcliffe's version of the threat was treated with the lighter, more proper tones of terror Gothic, Lewis' scares were liberally horrific, and the reader can scarcely blame Ambrosio and Matilda for choosing Hell over an Inquisition scaffold at the end of the novel.

3: Intrusive Fancy and the Spectre of the Axe

For Radcliffe and Lewis, the dread created by scaffold threats helped to generate Gothic affect, but that threat was often one of many devices in play—one episode in a series of sensational events. Other Gothic writers, however, took the idea of anticipated or imagined execution much further, infusing entire narratives with what I call the “spectre of the axe”—a oppressive scaffold threat present from first page to last. Like many Gothic terrors, the spectre of the axe is nourished by the imaginations of both readers and characters, diffusing a particular atmosphere throughout a novel with an unsettling spread. One’s own execution or that of a loved one may be sketched in a character’s mind as a singular event, but spectre of the axe texts rely on a context that maroons its players in inescapable possibility brought on, typically, by political conditions. It is situation and history that inspire scaffold anxieties and images in these works—images that are often fancied despite a character’s attempt to avoid doing so.

Neither Sophia Lee’s *The Recess* (1785) nor Charlotte Smith’s *The Banished Man* (1794) is universally categorized as a Gothic text. The former is frequently referred to as a historical novel while the latter is widely considered a sentimental adventure story or (covert) Jacobin tale. And yet both novels possess a Gothic overlay, in large part because of the spectre of the axe, which has, until now, gone largely unacknowledged. Both texts are models of what I call “scaffold Gothic,” a type of narrative that relies on a ubiquitous execution threat not just to forward the plot but to terrorize its characters and thrill its readers. As I

will demonstrate below, that threat is made manifest in characters' minds through the operation of intrusive fancy, which takes regular control of their imaginations and which, by extension, suggests itself as an indispensable attribute of the genre. It also, reflexively, reveals the Gothic design inherent in both *The Recess* and *The Banished Man*, and perhaps settles the matter of these novels' degree of "Gothic-ness" once and for all.

However historical or sentimental, *The Recess* has also found a home in the Gothic canon, as April Alliston reminds us in her introduction to the University Press of Kentucky edition (2000). If Lee's work is considered one of the first English historical novels (a precursor to Walter Scott) and a novel of sensibility, it "was [also] extremely important in the evolution of that branch of literature of sensibility known as the 'Gothic.' . . . It was *The Recess* that ushered in the great vogue of Gothic fiction in England," Alliston argues, citing scholars like Montague Summers, J.M.S. Tompkins and D.P. Varma⁷⁴ (xii). If some have disputed the Gothic-ness of Lee's novel,⁷⁵ others have doggedly championed the idea and dubbed it the first English example of female Gothic fiction,⁷⁶ with its "grand innovation in the Gothic mode" that "was to combine characters and emotional appeal that were probable according to notions derived, like Walpole's, from

⁷⁴ Varma's thorough introduction to the 1972 Arno Press edition of *The Recess* explores the novel's influence on Radcliffe. If Walpole and Reeve established the Gothic genre, Varma argues, it was Lee who turned it into a literary craze with her themes of confinement and her use of Gothic machinery such as secret rooms and passages (xvi).

⁷⁵ In "Gothic Vs. Romantic," Robert D. Hume classifies *The Recess* as a sentimental domestic novel with "Gothic trimmings added for savor. If wearing a wool tie makes me a sheep," Hume quips, "then *The Recess* is a Gothic novel" (283).

⁷⁶ Alliston relies on the work of Ellen Moers in describing female Gothic as "featuring heroines who conform to morally prescriptive notions of probability for feminine behavior, but who are also portrayed as quite literally confined by them" (xiv).

Shakespearean and Aristotelian dramatic models, with the allowedly improbable plots of *both romance and history*" (xiv).

I wish to support the claims of Alliston and Varma by demonstrating how the spectre of the axe—through its many scaffold referents—charges *The Recess* with an undeniably Gothic atmosphere. The scaffold anxiety that afflicts its main characters is a common and quite deliberate terror in Gothic fiction, as we have seen, and it builds on the Gothic device of entrapment used so skillfully and relentlessly by Lee to constrain her characters in medieval piles and Tudor politics. *The Recess* is a historical novel with a “what-if?” construction: what if Mary Queen of Scots had borne twin daughters during a secret marriage with the Duke of Norfolk? Its sister heroines, Matilda and Ellinor, are raised in a recess under an old abbey, hidden from the eyes of Queen Elizabeth and her court for the sakes of both Mary's neck and their own. When the sisters leave the recess at eighteen, they are swept into love affairs and political perils, further entrapments in other cells and countries, the grief of widowhood, and finally illness and madness. If the twins ultimately escape the scaffold fate of their mother, their lives are harried and brief and their stories by and large unhappy.

The threat of execution cannot be overstated in discussions of *The Recess*. Its presence and its attendant anxieties can be spotted on nearly every page. From the day of their birth, Lee's heroines are trailed by the spectre of the axe, which hangs over Ellinor and Matilda and threatens their parents, lovers, and offspring. Alliston notes how “the characteristically Gothic terror” in Lee's novel “was a feeling more of suspense than fright, a dread of the unrevealed and

the unspeakable" (xii), but she neglects to underscore the particular and indisputable nature of that dread. The sisters are afflicted by spectres not supernatural but political—the Queen's axe hovers over their heads like a sword of Damocles and competes with the more direct Gothic devices of internment, banditti, and generic villains such as the rapist Mortimer and his calculating mother. When the twins are not imprisoned in a castle or a cell, they are confined by the political climate into which they were born, pinned to place by the ambitions of others. The offspring of two historical scaffold figures (Mary and Norfolk) whose executions are mentioned in the novel, Matilda and Ellinor are predestined to tremble at the thought of the chopping block. It is the spectre of the axe that confines them to the recess during their early years, that pursues the Earl of Leicester into the grove where he falls in love with Matilda (156), that prevents Leicester from publicly acknowledging his marriage (157), that tinctures Ellinor's love affair with Essex (157ff), and that finally separates Essex from Ellinor and triggers her madness.

The sisters are concerned that they will share their parents' fate (144), yet they increase their odds of doing so by attaching themselves romantically to figures whom readers automatically associate with the scaffold. Leicester, historically, was Robert Dudley, the brother of the executed husband of Lady Jane Grey. Robert himself lived for a time in the Tower under the threat of execution for his father's role in the Jane affair. His name, therefore—like those of Mary Queen of Scots and the fourth Duke of Norfolk—instantly conjures up scaffold associations, which are aggravated by Lee's associating him (creatively)

with the Babington Plot (108). Ellinor also falls in love with a figure who immediately brings to mind the Tudor chopping block. Robert Devereux, the second Earl of Essex, was the subject of several scaffold tragedies, such as John Banks' *The Unhappy Favourite* (1682) and Henry Jones' *The Earl of Essex* (1753). Lee indulgently connects him, too, to the Babington Plot—her Essex wants to supplant Elizabeth with her rival so he can win permission for Ellinor's hand (181). When he is discovered and detained, the spectre of the axe compels Ellinor to disavow her bloodline and marry another man in a bid to save the lives of Essex and Mary (181ff). Her mother is brought to the executioner but her lover is pardoned, only to be dogged by scaffold anxiety until he is eventually sentenced and beheaded (260ff).

This Essex is partly responsible for his own end, but he is also a victim of the Queen's passion and vanity. In Lee's Gothic zone, characters grapple not with the supernatural but with their own failings and with the failings of others, all of which drive them towards the axe. Much is made of the twins' inability to see their lovers' tragic flaws. Matilda notes Essex's credulity (257) while Ellinor complains about Leicester's ambition (156), but neither sister broaches the subject with the other. If love is blind, scaffold anxiety demands that the blindness carry on indefinitely; the sisters must maintain partial views of their lovers in order to assuage that anxiety and move forward in their affairs with men destined to err politically and lose their lives.⁷⁷ Elizabeth, for her part (as she is

⁷⁷ Lee's Leicester is accidentally stabbed to death by arresting officers and never makes it to the scaffold for which he is destined.

generally portrayed in the Queen Mary scaffold tragedies),⁷⁸ feeds the novel's spectre of the axe with her violent jealousy of court favourites and her envy of younger, prettier women. These jealousies manifest themselves, in *The Recess*, as subtle reminders of the invisible blade poised over the sisters' necks: in a temper fuelled by her own insecurities, the Queen throws a literal book at Ellinor's head, metaphorically "decapitating" the sisters and thickening the scaffold threat around them.⁷⁹

But the sisters are aware of their precarious situations. Lee's spectre consumes her heroines, and when they are not dreading the scaffold themselves (Ellinor after her sister's elopement, in particular, and Matilda when she is accused of poisoning a royal), they wrestle with images of their lovers' fates. Matilda envisions Leicester's potential arrest and execution before he is charged with treason (95-6), while Ellinor's madness is plagued by impressions of Essex "insulted, endangered, imprisoned" and worse (248). Half-crazed, and half-dazed by somnambulism, she ventures into the queen's chamber one night with her mind's eye fixated by the deaths of her lover and mother (266-67). Elsewhere, before losing her grip entirely, she admits to a "disordered imagination" (178) that fills her mind with images of potential executions:

Perhaps the danger [to Essex] is exaggerated, hinted prudence—
but oh, if not—if actuated by fear and rage Elizabeth should

⁷⁸ See, for example, John Banks' *The Island Queens, or The Death of Mary Queen of Scotland* (1684) and Mary Deverell's *Mary, Queen of Scots* (1792).

⁷⁹ After Matilda elopes with Leicester, Ellinor is left alone to face the queen's fury. She is threatened with torture and execution in the place of the fugitives just before the book is thrown at her head (171).

condemn him to the block, as she already had my father . . . —My wounded soul shrunk from the bare idea—long fainting and delirium followed—fancy realized every image fraud had presented; I seemed to behold every moment the chosen of my heart tried, sentenced, executed; I drenched the maimed, yet beauteous form my eyes for ever worshipped in my tears, and hardly could be persuaded, during my lucid intervals, that he yet lived, and that his fate still depended on my determination. (181-82)

Like the intimates in the scaffold tragedies examined above in Chapter One, Ellinor produces a lamentation fuddled by insanity. Her fractured speech is mirrored in the manuscript breaks that distort her letters as she grows increasingly incoherent while attempting to describe her grief over the executions of Mary and Essex, as well as her own terrifying anxieties. Too disordered to embrace Essex in a last farewell scene, Ellinor loses her ability to speak and write, and it is up to her friend, Lady Pembroke, to describe an imagined execution scene, then a real one, and finally Ellinor's total disintegration as a result of those deaths (264-65).

The title of *The Recess* invites us to consider the power and function of imagination. Sectioned off from the world, the secret quarters beneath the abbey call to mind Plato's cave⁸⁰ and, more significantly, Locke's presence-room, albeit

⁸⁰ "This recess could not be called a cave, because it was composed of various rooms," Matilda writes in a letter, and yet "our light proceeded from small casements of painted glass, so infinitely above our reach that we could never seek a world beyond; and so dim, that the beams of the sun were almost a new object to us when we quitted this retirement. . . . At first we were content, through habit and ignorance, nor once bestowed a thought on surrounding objects" (7-8). Given Lee's choice of words, it is nearly impossible not to be reminded of Plato's allegory in Book VII of *The Republic*.

one in which "young hearts with unformed ideas" (8) are allowed only those sense impressions authorized by their keepers. Not only is the recess closed off, its doors difficult to discover (9), but it is decorated, tellingly, with aristocratic portraits—portraits that play a large role in training the sisters' imaginations: "We mutually agreed to invent tales from the many whole-length pictures, which ornamented the best room," Matilda informs us, whenever she and Ellinor are separated from their store of books (9). Lockeans to the core, the twins privilege the didactic sense of sight and absorb what they can through their eyes. Yet Lee's sisters remain perilously naïve until the day they venture beyond the recess and find a hidden grove, where they meet Leicester in flight from the queen's men, and where they finally begin to absorb impressions that instruct them about the world as it really is and as it might really affect them. Over the course of the novel, Lee's heroines return more than once to their original "presence-room," where they are able to process information gained on the outside with greater competency. The hidden spot is at times a haven, at times a prison, populated by allies one day and by enemies the next. It is a place of comfort and terror, much like their own imaginations. It is the sisters' anchor and identity, a spot that promotes misperception. It characterizes them and influences their thoughts as they move through the narrative. More than a Gothic device or a metaphor for secrecy and entrapment, Lee's recess symbolizes an externalized brain and—by extension—invests the entire novel with a sense of imagination not just as fancy but as understanding, which helps the sisters assess the outer world even as fancy destabilizes their inner ones.

In "Desert Ruins and Troubled Waters: Female Dreams in Fictions and the Development of the Gothic Novel" (1977), Margaret Anne Doody describes *The Recess* as "the first English novel in which the dream-world expands to take on the contours of the whole world" (554). "The 'real world' for characters in a Gothic novel,"⁸¹ Doody argues, "is one of nightmare" (553), and it is safe to say that the twins' nightmare of an existence is largely composed of the spectre of the axe partly generated by intrusive fancy. The sisters "lead in a sense the life of phantoms" (555) as they are either hidden from view or presented in disguise or tucked away in a prison of some kind or another. Doody acknowledges the Damocles' sword over the twins' head and those of their intimates, but she dismisses the threat of Ellinor's execution as a chief cause of this character's insanity, blaming instead "guilty responsibility" (557) for a mother's scaffold death.⁸² And yet both anxieties, I think, together brand Lee's work as a Gothic text, and if Doody considers Mary's execution to be the final blow to Ellinor's reason, the distress generated by her own possible execution (not to mention that of her lover) is the unnamed co-conspirator that helps to destroy her. Doody appears to perceive as much, for she notes that "after [Essex's] death [Ellinor] is doomed to repeat the experience of his execution over and over again, going through the Tower and even the Queen's palace, looking for her lover" (558). Essex's imagined death is on a continuous loop in Ellinor's mind, in other words,

⁸¹ Doody calls *The Recess* "the first fully developed Gothic novel" (559) without hesitation, grounding her generic designation in its nightmare trope as I do in its spectre of the axe trope.

⁸² Doody brushes lightly at scaffold anxiety as Gothic affect without attaching much significance to it: "Guilt and fear are diffused throughout the whole historical dream and all of it—ruined monasteries, pomp and pageantry at Kenilworth, axe and Tower and palace—is at once both real and nightmarish, both inescapable and absurd" (560).

but Doody considers these mental "aberrations" to be "merciful in comparison to the reality" (588), a point with which I must disagree. Ellinor's imaginings are, in Lee's Gothic formula, the primary locus of terror and, for all intents and purpose, comprise her "reality": it is Essex's brutal end, and not her mother's, that plays over and over in her mind. If, as Doody argues, "there is no comfort in [Ellinor's] real world," which is "irrational and brutal," a place where "consciousness is punished rather than rewarded" and where characters must choose "between two dreams—lethargic reverie, or nightmare" (559), then the principal cause of this discomfort is the spectre of the axe, and intrusive fancy is an aggravating factor. In other words, though I agree with Doody's assertion that "institutions, power, [and] political activities are the nightmarish cruel realities from which no one can escape" and that "characters are trapped in their own historical situation" (560), I also wish to stress the role intrusive fancy plays in creating an inner world as frightening as the outer one. The spectre of the axe, in fact, bolsters Doody's reading of *The Recess* as a nightmarish haze of a novel, and a Gothic one at that.

Like *The Recess*, Charlotte Smith's *The Banished Man* may not be a Gothic novel in the purest sense, though its opening scene features a Gothic pile, a stormy night, and a mysterious groaning that frightens the castle's inhabitants.⁸³ And though its title and, indeed, its exiled hero might suggest at first glance the inverse of Gothic entrapment (i.e. an ejection into the

⁸³ The Gothic rears its head again in Volume III, when D'Alonville explores the Castle of Vaudrecour, which contains instruments of torture from the time of Louis XI (126) and an oubliette out of which he fishes a moldering prisoner (127ff). The Gothic also makes an appearance when D'Alonville is imprisoned by revolutionaries; his dungeon is typically Gothic in description.

overwhelming wider world), events conspire to imprison the aristocratic D'Alonville in the custody of revolutionaries for several chapters when he returns to Robespierre's France. These and other elements in *The Banished Man*, as well as in Smith's overall body of work, have compelled Katherine Ellis to consider the "Gothicisms" (51) of Smith, who peppers some of her sentimental adventure stories with the trappings of the genre, if not its complete wardrobe. Writing primarily about *Desmond* (1792) and *Celestina* (1791) in "Charlotte Smith's Subversive Gothic" (1976), Ellis reminds us that Smith relied upon "situations and settings that were becoming recognizable features of a developing pattern, initiated by Walpole and standardized by Ann Radcliffe" (51), Smith's professional rival. If *The Banished Man* (like Smith's other late novels) is more concerned with the politics and pitfalls of revolutionary ideals, critics such as Ellis, Hoeveler, and Jacqueline M. Labbe remind us of the author's contributions to the development of the Gothic genre, particularly in her earlier works.⁸⁴

Like *The Recess*, too, *The Banished Man* feels like a Gothic novel, thanks in part to the spectre of the axe that hangs over its hero and a handful of minor characters. *The Banished Man* is pure scaffold Gothic. The guillotine's horrors permeate the text and drive the plot, and—even more notably—they are the hub around which discussions of family, freedom, duty, and honour revolve, setting

⁸⁴ See Labbe's *Charlotte Smith: Romanticism, Poetry, and the Culture of Gender* (Manchester, 2003), and Hoeveler's *Gothic Feminism* (University of Philadelphia Press, 1998).

up a particular context for such explorations.⁸⁵ They fuel D'Alonville's greatest emotional and imaginative crises in Volume III, when he is detained by revolutionaries, forced to witness the beheadings of his peers, and harassed by visions of his own impending execution. They also provide Smith's readers with the most awful of thrills as they follow at D'Alonville's side. There can be no happier political climate for a Gothic writer, arguably, than Revolutionary France, so long as her hero is a French nobleman with an unshakeable sense of honour. Smith herself suggests as much in her *Avis au lecteur* at the start of Volume II, which points out that recent history leaves Gothic writers "at no loss for *real* horrors, if a novel must abound in horrors" (v), a comment that in turn reinforces the accepted view of the Gothic genre as one reflective of and ultimately rooted in contemporary society and political reality. The exiled D'Alonville's return to the arena of scaffold possibilities is, in a narrative sense, inevitable, and it is certainly anticipated by the reader, who understands that the spectre of the axe is a weak fiend so long as the hero it haunts stays on the safe side of France's borders.

Smith's hero makes noises about exile being worse than death—even a scaffold death—but his complaints seem born more out of duty than honest sentiment.⁸⁶ If D'Alonville perceives that his associates "seemed to repent that they had not submitted their necks to the stroke of the executioner, rather than

⁸⁵ See, for example, the dialogue between D'Alonville and his brother (V3, 211ff); the Revolution in general and the scaffold in particular create excuses for Smith's characters to comment on these ideas.

⁸⁶ D'Alonville also claims to prefer death over exile when he faces Melton in a duel (V3, 64ff), but death in this abstract sense is not the same, as we saw in Chapter One, as death by public execution, which is accompanied by additional terrors and unique anxieties about honour, privacy, property, and family.

have been driven forth to linger out, in foreign countries, their few and miserable days" (V1, 175), the reader cannot know whether this is in fact the case. Scaffold anxiety is, after all, what drove the émigrés into exile, and if they miss their homeland and "splendid palaces" (185), few are inclined to return without the protection of a royalist army. If D'Alonville's aristocratic pride gives him one impression of the figures on which he casts his eye, the larger narrative suggests that their distress is caused not solely by the loss of "elegancies of life" (176) but also by the grief over executed loved ones, the lack of news about other intimates back home (176), and the imagined deaths of self and other. We learn that D'Alonville's own brother has joined the revolutionary cause, which lashes the family to the guillotine in yet another fashion:

[His brother] had decidedly taken the republican party, quitted his name, abjured his rank, and adhered to the men who . . . had now imprisoned the monarch, and massacred the few nobles who remained around him. It was this conduct in his eldest son that had driven to despair [D'Alonville's father]; it was this conduct in his brother that had cruelly wounded the sensible heart of D'Alonville, and depressed his spirits more than the misfortune of his exile. (V1, 179-80)

The turmoil that surrounds the guillotine, it seems, trumps the distress of exile. Trying to escape the scaffold's pull or trying to push others onto it appears to create the greatest emotional charge in Smith's novel, which in turn delineates character in bold strokes. Both the brother (whose new citizen name is La

Fosse—French for pit or grave) and the novel's vilest character (Huertofen) scheme to put others under the guillotine's blade while betraying every value in order to escape it themselves.

Few eighteenth-century novels, outside of anti-Jacobin fiction,⁸⁷ feature the idea of public execution as intensely as *The Banished Man*. The spectre of the axe—imagined at every moment as either possibility or memory—overwhelms D'Alonville and directs his actions. The text is peppered with the executions of nobility and lesser aristocrats, either reported as news or described by eye-witnesses or the narrator herself. Updates about Louis' trial make D'Alonville nervous enough to hide from the view of Londoners (V2, 86-7 and 114), but they are not enough to prevent him and other noblemen from returning to France in search of kin or to respect an aristocratic code.⁸⁸ But the risk of execution is inevitably reflected upon whenever a character mentions a return; the opportunities for Smith to remind her readers about scaffold threats are inexhaustible. Despite almost certain death, D'Alonville re-enters France, only to find that his homeland has become one enormous Place de Grève. Perfectly on theme, Smith designs her narrative in such a way that D'Alonville's first impression of France, as he is rowed to shore by a seaman, is of a place of execution:

⁸⁷ See my discussion of the scaffold's presence in Jacobin and especially anti-Jacobin novels in Chapter Three.

⁸⁸ Haughty De Touranges returns to France in search of his wife, daughter and mother. While D'Alonville must overcome his fear of the scaffold in order to honour "the sacred shade of [his] father" (Vol. III, p. 29) and assist his countrymen, De Touranges is too blinded by class entitlement to understand the extent of the danger he faces.

"As for the noise," said [the seaman], "they are at the old business, I suppose, killing some of the people who happened to have said or done anything against the new government." This opinion seemed to be founded in truth; for the cries of the victims, and the shouts of the executioners, were distinctly heard after another volley of fire-arms. D'Alonville shuddered, yet felt half impelled to leap on shore, and throw himself among the demons who were busied in this work of death. (V3, 77)

The reader is introduced to France not via the typical imagery of Parisian sophistication or provincial bucolic charm. Rather, our first impression of the country, as Smith depicts it, is dominated by the idea of a busy scaffold, which afflicts the hero's senses even from a distance.⁸⁹ Though he disguises himself, D'Alonville is apprehended almost immediately and brought to Rennes for a trial and presupposed execution. He is kept with other counter-revolutionaries and aristocrats, whose lamentations about sacrificing "the future hope of our country" (V3, 156) to the scaffold suggest to both D'Alonville and the reader that the guillotine prevents nobles from performing their civic duty while also symbolizing their unrelenting fortitude and honour. The platform on which he and others will be killed becomes—if it cannot be avoided—a theater of identity declaration (158-59).

D'Alonville is imprisoned after a sham trial, during which La Fosse and Huertofen pass a vague sentence designed to inflame his imagination with

⁸⁹ This is a common feature in Jacobin and anti-Jacobin scaffold fiction, as I discuss more extensively in Chapter Three.

horrifying scenarios. As we have seen in other scaffold fictions, the condemned is forced to suffer the torture of uncertainty, unsure of the hour or day of his execution (V3, 166). He is made a victim of fancy, which "was busy in creating imaginary terrors, even more hideous than the realities which surrounded him" (167), and in tormenting him with "apprehension of immediate death" (222). At one point he is forced to watch the execution of eleven of his peers (169-70), which leaves him and—Smith might have hoped—the reader "shuddering with horror" (170). As information about his fate is withheld with what appears to be deliberate cruelty,⁹⁰ D'Alonville struggles with an anxiety he sometimes embraces and sometimes rejects—a process that carves his character into that of a model sentimental hero. Smith suggests that his anxiety was triggered by the start of the Revolution; as the novel opens, we find D'Alonville and his father lost in a storm on the German border, in flight from the revolutionaries. That anxiety is later aggravated by a "long, lingering imprisonment" that "would probably, he imagined, end in public execution" (207-08). And Smith makes it clear that the French aristocracy is not the only group controlled by scaffold anxiety; she also suggests throughout her text that La Fosse, the people, and the original revolutionaries themselves acted (or failed to act) primarily out of dread of the executioner.

⁹⁰ The reader eventually learns that D'Alonville's execution was stalled owing to his brother's intervention, which was instrumental in the hero's escape from the scaffold. Until that becomes evident, however, Lee takes full advantage of the device of the delayed execution (as it was used in *Lord Russell* and *The Castles of Athlin and Dunbayne*) and draws it out for several unnerving chapters.

Over and over in *The Banished Man* it all comes back to the scaffold and to the imagined deaths that take place in the minds of haunted characters. What argues for *The Banished Man's* status as a Gothic text is not just the spectre of the axe—established in the novel's epigraph⁹¹ and expanded in its very subject matter—but the relentless imagining of scaffold deaths, which by 1794 had grown inseparable from the Gothic genre. Before D'Alonville has his own brush with execution in Volume III, and before he is plagued with unwilling visions of his own beheading, he describes to his friend Ellesmere the "spectacles which continually haunt my imagination" (V2, 82), including "rivers of blood" and "fields of carnage,"⁹² metaphors commonly used to describe the Terror's scaffold violence. Later on, his nightmares depict the imagined execution of his father (all the more imaginary since his father died of natural causes in Germany) at the hands of his brother (V3, 167-68). But the Gothic centerpiece of Smith's novel, and the most lingering imagined death, takes place in D'Alonville's mind as he fights off visions of his own execution, which include images of his body bound in a cart (V3, 153), and the admission that "he felt all the horrors that obscurity adds to circumstances indistinctly imagined" (207).

D'Alonville's associates must wrestle with their own fancies, since the spectre of the axe also affects other characters in *The Banished Man*. Smith describes the mental straits of Gabrielle De Touranges and Mrs. Denzil, both of

⁹¹ The stanza "To me, nae after, day or nicht / Can e'ir be sweet or fair / But sune, beneath sum draping tree / Cauld death fall end my care" alludes to a noose rather than a guillotine, but the novel's thematic concern with scaffold anxiety—and its obliterating effects on the mind—is stamped into the text with this passage from Elizabeth Wardlaw's *Hardiknute* (1719).

⁹² My translation from the French. D'Alonville quotes a passage from Voltaire's *The Orphan of China*, Scene 3.

whom suffer images of loved ones led to the guillotine. The former is stricken by a vision of her husband "rushing on destruction by going back to France—already, perhaps, he was the victim of his own despair, the inhumanity of savages, who seemed to delight only in blood" (V2, 174), while the latter worries about the "injustice" that awaits her children in a ruined France (V4, 118). The injustice Smith hints at here is not only that of an heir deprived of birthright and property; the spectre of the axe insists that a more harrowing injustice awaits Mrs. Denzil's offspring (representatives of the next generation of French nobility) should they fall into bloodthirsty hands. The scaffold threat to De Touranges is more immediate than the one that may or may not destroy Mrs. Denzil's children, but each of these threats contributes equally to the Gothic pall that hangs over the story's events, disturbs the minds of characters with imagined deaths, and puts readers on the rack as well, so to speak, in ways we have not seen in the scaffold tragedies examined in Chapter One.

The novels of Smith and Lee demonstrate how the spectre of the axe trope and the imagined death trope are frequently linked in the subgenre of scaffold Gothic—that, in fact, it is difficult to present the one without also presenting the other. Perhaps it is more accurate to describe the spectre of the axe trope as one that depends equally on the imagination's spontaneous, often merciless associative powers and the dread of the scaffold generated by very real political situations—real enough, that is, for the characters in such texts who, if not "historical" in a technical sense, are certainly representative of an undeniable historical type. By placing characters in Tudor or revolutionary

politics, writers of scaffold Gothic in the late eighteenth century were able to knit together discrete devices (the dungeon, the villain, the Gothic castle) by presenting each of them in a context of unrelenting scaffold anxiety. If a sense of dread is indispensable to the Gothic genre as a whole, works like *The Recess* and *The Banished Man* produce a specific kind of dread—the dread of the scaffold, of rapacious state authority, of the not-quite-alive condemned hero—that darkens the atmosphere of these texts and puts the reader on edge. The significance of the scaffold is undeniable in these works, and it is only by ignoring this object and its attendant spectre that a reader could conceivably deny the Gothic tone of these novels. *The Recess* and *The Banished Man* are made incontestably Gothic, in other words, by the scaffold and its effects on the imagination.

4: The Intrusive Scaffold and Sympathetic Imagination

Smith indicates in *The Banished Man* that intrusive fancy is an almost universal affliction. D'Alonville, Ellesmere, the De Touranges women, and Mrs. Denzil are no more immune to scaffold imagery than Lee's Ellinor or Radcliffe's Matilda and Mary. The reader of certain types of Gothic texts would be right to assume that their authors believed intrusive fancy to be a natural function of the human mind. And yet Smith makes a point of introducing us—however briefly—to a character unsusceptible to darker fancy: Ellesmere's mother, who, not for lack of affection but of imagination, is free of the horrifying visions of a son's fateful

prospects on a battlefield. When D'Alonville remarks to Ellesmere that his mother must be distraught at the idea of her son enlisting as an officer, Ellesmere brushes it aside:

"Oh, yes! poor dear woman, she wept a little, and gave me a great many blessings, and some good advice; but as to ideas of danger, she has none. She has not a mind capable of figuring what she never saw. Imagination never oppresses her with its visionary terrors; or if it did, the most terrific drawing would soon be erased by the home scenes around her. . . . Such is the effect of living always in a narrow circle, without any changes of ideas." (V3, 46)

It is tempting to argue that Smith is suggesting, here, that the threat of execution triggers more vivid imagined deaths than other threats to loved ones (e.g. war, duels, or disease), but is it more likely that Mrs. Ellesmere is a model of quietism deployed to criticize those who avoid having "changes of ideas" by immuring themselves in their "narrow circles" while the Continent heaves. Mrs. Ellesmere is not unique in her insensibility, since her daughters are equally self-absorbed, or at least too willfully (and blissfully) ignorant of current political crises to bother much about their brother's going off to war. What Smith suggests, through such characters, is that we must look outward into the world; if one notes what is occurring in France, Britain, and elsewhere, one cannot help worrying and, by extension, caring enough to agitate in some way.

Still (and for whatever end) the exceptional characters of the Ellesmere women are the ones that prove the rule, as it were, in scaffold fictions. Most such

intimates must endure the visions that fancy assigns them—visions that unfold regardless of an individual's familiarity with actual executions. Eighteenth-century readers, of course, were more exposed to actual scaffold scenes than most modern peace-time readers. And yet it goes without saying that not every eighteenth-century reader witnessed an execution. However frequently crowds massed at Newgate, Tyburn or Edinburgh's Grassmarket to watch a hanging, and however proximate the event felt even to absentees (who may have heard the sound of the scaffold erected in the distance, or learned details about a convict's suffering from a broadsheet or a friend), familiarity with the event was never a guarantee. Class, age, and sex dictated the likelihood of one's attendance at an execution,⁹³ and it is probable that some of these authors' younger female readers had not yet "made a day" of watching a hanging from a lady's well-appointed window. James Boswell never missed an execution, but many of his fellow citizens heeded their stomachs and kept away. Eighteenth-century authors such as Charlotte Smith knew as much, but they could also assume that their readers, unlike Mrs. Ellesmere, "had a mind capable of figuring what they never saw," thanks to the associative process and the provisions of representation,⁹⁴ which allowed them to place not just the condemned hero but themselves on a figurative scaffold. In fact, it is our inherent ability to imagine our own death—in any form—that partly enables us to imagine the death of others,

⁹³ See V.A.C. Gatrell's overview of scaffold crowd demographics in Chapter Two ("Death and the Scaffold Crowd") of *The Hanging Tree*.

⁹⁴ Representations available to Smith's contemporaries might include the etchings of Hogarth, scaffold fictions, tragedy and pantomime, and the execution broadsheet. Though filmed representations were over a century in the future, there was certainly no dearth of scaffold representations to supplement live scenes of public execution in Smith's era.

the more so the more actual deaths we have witnessed or the more representations we have absorbed.

We might discuss the Lockean mechanisms of such a power, with all of its associative clockwork, at length. But for writers in the Gothic period, this natural and nearly universal function was understood to depend not entirely on the head. If the ability to imagine another's death—complete with attendant pain and emotional distress—originates in our minds, it is also inextricably linked to our hearts, according to Adam Smith's popular explication in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759). Smith's concept of sympathetic imagination cannot go unmentioned in a study of late eighteenth-century fictions that feature the imagined deaths of loved ones and commiserative horror—the more so because Smith relies on analogies of execution to lay out his argument. We may not be able to feel the suffering of the tortured man before us based on what we see and hear around us, but we can form an idea of that suffering if we look inward and imagine ourselves in his situation:

Though our brother is upon the rack, as long as we ourselves are at our ease, our senses will never inform us of what he suffers. They never did, and never can, carry us beyond our own person, and it is by the imagination only that we can form any conception of what are his sensations. . . . By the imagination, we place ourselves in his situation, we conceive ourselves enduring all the same torments, we enter as it were into his body, and become in some measure the same person with him, and thence form some idea of

his sensations, and even feel something which, though weaker in degree, is not altogether unlike them. (Part I, Section I, Chapter 1)

This passage has been cited so often by scholars of eighteenth-century imagination and moral philosophy that we may be in danger of forgetting that it is not the only scaffold reference in *Moral Sentiments*.⁹⁵ As Smith discusses our relentless need for the sympathy of others, he relies on other scaffold figures to bolster his point: the murderer who anticipates discovery and the condemned man under the noose. The former—the "violator of the more sacred laws of justice" (II.ii.2)—begins to internalize the "hatred and abhorrence" he can expect from his community when his deed is discovered. The shame and rejection that discovery promises must be worse than the scaffold itself, since "fellow-feeling" (according to Smith) is more necessary to human beings than air. "Of all the sentiments that can enter the human breast," he writes, remorse is "the most dreadful" and cannot be borne in the quiet of solitude; it drives the criminal "back into society" to face the distracting noise of justice (II.ii.2).

It is not justice, however, but sympathy—even the sympathy that a crowd has for a condemned figure on the scaffold—which was thought to help people endure the moments leading up to public execution.⁹⁶ The word "scaffold"

⁹⁵ We can assume that Smith's rack refers to a public demonstration of punishment—like the French wheel—rather than a device hidden from the community's eye because of the implication of spectatorship in this passage and because of the importance of spectatorship to the function of sympathetic imagination, overall, as Smith envisions it.

⁹⁶ See James Boswell's entry for March 30, 1783 in *Life of Johnson*, in which both Johnson and Boswell complain about the doing away of the execution procession in part because the execution crowd was believed to provide emotional support for the condemned. If I feel this is too broad a generalization of individual events and personalities, it is a generalization that exists in modern times, as we see in Lofland's "The Dramaturgy of State Executions" when he opines that historic executions "provide[d] the condemned with the opportunity for dying with a display of

appears five times in *Moral Sentiments* and it is alluded to even more frequently. Smith uses scaffold images and metaphors to argue that a crowd's sympathy relieves and even emboldens the condemned man, and that a person cannot expect fellow-feeling from whomever he has wronged until he admits remorse and mitigates resentment. In his anatomizing of Smith's impartial spectator,⁹⁷ David Marshall has noted that, "although facing death," the condemned "is spared exposure to the most insupportable of sentiments, the awareness of facing spectators who watch without sympathy" (609-610). There is nothing more unbearable, according to Smith (via Marshall), than suffering before an unsympathetic community.⁹⁸ If this is true, then scaffold fiction—in which the condemned hero is accorded an excess of sympathy via the trope of imagined death—provides its readers with an assurance that the hero is guaranteed to have on his periphery one or more characters who can sympathize with his suffering to the point of shared pain, even in absentia. Perhaps these fictions even help our own internal "impartial spectators" to mature to a fuller capacity of conscience and sympathy, exercising our imaginations by proxy until we can "figure what we never saw," imagine a hero's anguish transposed onto ourselves or our loved ones, and relate to their straits with the moral sense Smith

courage and dignity" (321) without considering the popular association of a scaffold death with ignominy, which tended to increase relative to the condemned's social status.

⁹⁷ See Marshall's "Adam Smith and the Theatricality of Moral Sentiments" (1984).

⁹⁸ "If the spectators withhold sympathy," Marshall interprets, "they remain spectators. If they grant sympathy—if they enter into the sentiments of the person they are beholding, if they become in some measure the same person as he, identify themselves with him through a transfer of persons and characters—then they stop being spectators. . . . Our greatest fear is that they will remain spectators" (610).

advocated. If that moral sense depends on acts of (sympathetic) imagination rather than external directives, as Smith asserts, then scaffold fictions awaken that imagination even in one who has never attended an execution and groom her mind so that she can comport herself with good sympathetic citizenry when she is finally stationed as a spectator and assigned the task of assisting the condemned in his final moments.

In fact, scaffold fictions are ideal expressions of Smith's theory of sympathetic imagination because they vivify and explore, like *Moral Sentiments*, the image of the "brother on the rack," and their trope of imagined death (with its intrusive and intensely compassionate variety of fancy) insists that a sympathetic response ought to be inevitable, at least in moral breasts. Such a response, moreover, does not seem to rely on the external stimuli of eye-witnessing. Few, if any, intimates in scaffold fictions refer to attendance at past executions. Their familiarity with the details of such events is simply assumed, as if their sympathetic imagination is so powerful that they spontaneously generate the scene before them. The trope of imagined death supports Smith's theory of a compassion that is almost entirely inborn. What scaffold fictions suggest, therefore (Gothic or otherwise) is that caring individuals exercise a Lockean process of association, conflating moments of experience to reproduce in their imaginations what they do not actually see. Their imagination relies on sympathy, as much as sympathy relies on their imagination. Smith's analysis employs a spectator who is actually present at the scene of another person's suffering, while eighteenth-century scaffold fictions by and large draw pictures of imagined

executions about to happen or happening elsewhere. But rather than deny Smith's theory of the operation of sympathy and the manufacturing of a moral sense, scaffold fictions reinforce it by painting a picture of sympathetic imagination so innate and so automatic that we can "figure it" even out of view of its object. As Marshall points out, Smith himself "has less faith in the effect of sight and presence. Rather than insisting that a fiction of the imagination can convey the conviction an eyewitness would feel, he maintains that even an eyewitness must depend upon an imagined representation, at least in order to feel sympathy" (595).

Imagination conjures up a spectacle in scaffold fictions, a spectacle that may not be apparent to anyone besides the condemned or her intimates but that nevertheless reflects ideas developed in *Moral Sentiments*. And yet, despite Adam Smith's emphasis on spectatorship (and spectatorship's association with the stage in general and tragedy in particular), he departs from the tradition of Longinus, Hobbes, and Dennis by opting out of the expected shipwreck and battlefield imagery (the period's standard arenas of sympathetic response) and making the condemned criminal his model rather than the drowning sailor or dying infantryman. We may feel equal degrees of compassion for all three sufferers, but the condemned figure inspires a novel intimacy. By rejecting the structure of a sympathizer's removed view of distress at sea or on the plains, Smith closes the distance between ourselves and the sufferer. The scaffold scene is less epic, more quotidian (at least for his contemporaries) and as a

result more immediate.⁹⁹ Perhaps it is also, therefore, more imaginable and by extension more generative of sympathy and fellow-feeling. And it is precisely this immediacy that makes the imagined scaffold death so intrusive in the minds of both intimate and condemned. As Samuel Johnson indicated in 1750—a decade before *Moral Sentiments* was published—sympathy was generally understood in the eighteenth century to be something "produced by an act of imagination, that realizes the event however fictitious, or approximates it however remote, by placing us for a time in the condition of him whose fortunes we contemplate" (*The Rambler* No. 60).¹⁰⁰ The eighteenth-century scaffold event had such presence or *commonness* that both contemporary readers and fictional characters absorbed such scenes almost by osmosis, rendering them unable to resist the unfolding of mental imagery however much they attempted to avoid witnessing live demonstrations.

We must not forget that, however much he advocated the nurturing of fellow-feeling in our own hearts, Smith was opposed to excessive displays of emotion on the part of the condemned, which ran the risk of stifling another's sympathy and, in turn, humiliating the non-compassionated sufferer. The characters in Gothic novels and novels of sensibility are prone to exhibiting their feelings, but Smith advocated, as Marshall describes it, an "ethic of self-command" (604). If the sufferer wishes to attract the sympathy of spectators

⁹⁹ Smith also employs other more immediate examples of suffering in his study, such as the very sick, the very impoverished, or the very mad—all figures with which readers might know from life.

¹⁰⁰ The idea that sympathy relies on imagination is original neither to Johnson nor Smith. As James Engell notes in Chapter Eleven of *The Creative Imagination*, the link between sympathy and imagination was discussed early in the century by James Arbuckle, Archibald Campbell and John Gilbert Cooper, by David Hume in *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739), which asserts that "we enter [another person's] interest by the force of imagination" (II.ii.5), and of course by Burke.

(present or removed, for characters intruded on by the fancied death of a loved one behave as spectators, however imaginary their view), he must modify his demeanour so that it reflects the calmer aspects of his observers. He must, as Smith writes, lower "his passion to that pitch, in which the spectators are capable of going along with him" (I.i.4). We find this directive fulfilled in the figure of the eighteenth-century condemned hero, who—despite being intruded upon by visions of his own imagined death—tends to model himself after Socrates, to behave stoically, and to drop a tear only for his grieving and abandoned next of kin. As Marshall notes of Smith's stoic condemned, "he looks to his spectators for sympathy and in so doing imagines himself as a spectator to his own spectacle" (597), doubling back on himself and adopting the aspects of his observers in order to earn their sympathy. In Smith's interpretation, where like can only be attracted to like, the stoic condemned "does not merely affect the sentiments of the impartial spectator. He really adopts them. He almost identifies himself with, he almost becomes himself that impartial spectator, and scarce even feels but as that great arbiter of his conduct directs him to feel" (III.iii). Smith's analysis partially explains the historical and fictional compulsion of the heroic condemned to face the scaffold with brave resolve.

But complicating Smith's analysis, if only at the edges of the scaffold event, is the intimate's dread of the hero's execution. This dread, which is exaggerated and centralized in Gothic novels like *The Recess*, forms the typical state of the parent, spouse, child, or lover of the condemned figure in scaffold fictions. The distress of intimates reflects the operation of sympathetic

imagination on our moral sense, but when the hero of scaffold fiction is sentenced, his intimates are often as terrified for themselves as they are for him. If, after pronouncement, the hero knows he must face the executioner, his intimates must face an anticipated cataclysm of grief. They can expect to be choked by sorrow as the hero is choked by the noose, and they sometimes face the prospect of other forms of destruction. David Hume underestimated the potency of imagined death when he wrote that "pity depends, in a great measure, on the contiguity, and even the sight of the object" (*Treatise*, II.ii.7), unless by "contiguity" he means not just similarity between sufferer and sympathizer, but a degree of actual kinship. But Hume's more complex psychology of sympathy allows greater space for the dreadful fancies of intimates after their loved one has been sentenced. Unlike Smith, Hume perceives different, more ambivalent motives underlying our sympathetic responses—motives not just moral (in the benevolent sense) or civic, but often individualistic in ways that, at best, recall Lucretius' "return upon ourselves." At worst, Hume's sympathizers—like the sympathizers in many scaffold fictions—suggest conscious self-interest. "A great deal of what passes for 'sympathy'" in Hume, Engell notes, "is merely intensity of feeling" (147). In eighteenth-century scaffold fiction, we encounter the hero's imagined execution as fancied by an intimate more often than we read of a hero imagining his own execution, which suggests there might be something to Hume's view: perhaps the intimates' distress is not merely a fashionable sympathetic response, but also an indication of the selfish impetus behind intrusive fancy: a concern for our future selves who will suffer emotionally (and

perhaps financially, socially, or politically) when our kin meets the blade, which is a concern almost as overwhelming as that of our own death. In effect, the imagined death of loved ones can, at times, betray the ideal of sensibility—compassion for others—in certain scaffold fictions.

Whatever the philosophy of individual authors, scaffold fiction in general and scaffold Gothic in particular underscore the cultural significance of sympathetic imagination in the latter half of the eighteenth century. The profound effect that intrusive fancy and imagined deaths have on characters in such fictions (and in contemporary scaffold tragedies, as well) is undeniable, and the imagined death scenes we expect to find in these texts are not just a trope but a manifestation of the wider literary interest in sensibility. The uninvited imagined death in scaffold fictions is one of the strongest appeals to pity to emerge in an age that deliberately designed its literature to "rouse the reader's imaginative sympathies," as Robert D. Hume puts it (282). "The typical device employed towards this end by the Gothic writers is terror," he adds, and we can now understand how such writers combined the terror of execution with the impulse of sympathetic imagination in the trope of the fancied scaffold, unwilling. One Gothic novel in particular plays with intrusive fancy, imagined death, and sympathetic imagination in equal measure, fusing all three tropes and proving their contiguity. Peter Teuthold's *The Necromancer* (1794) may be more famous for inspiring sections of *The Monk* and *Frankenstein* than for its own literary merits,¹⁰¹ but it

¹⁰¹ See Syndy McMillen Conger's "A German Ancestor for Mary Shelley's Monster" (1984). Conger argues that the history and nature of Frankenstein's creature was influenced by Schiller's *The Dishonoured Irreclaimable* (1786) but most likely came to Shelley via *The Necromancer*, an

also provides us with a perfect blend of scaffold Gothic and sympathetic expression—an expression that takes the shape of an appeal to readers' compassion for the condemned figure. *The Necromancer* is as much humanitarian document as it is Gothic story, and it demonstrates how two such disparate literary modes are married by the trope of the imagined scaffold death.

Teuthold's novel warns readers about the dangers of credulity, which makes us vulnerable to frauds and confidence men. If we accept an apparently supernatural moment at face value, allow ourselves to be steered by superstition, or place too much trust in new acquaintances, we risk being deceived by our senses; we must work to make our reason even more persuasive than what we see with our own eyes. Scepticism is a moral value in *The Necromancer*, which reveals—as Radcliffe's novels do—that the mysteries we encounter have natural explanations, and that a cheat preys on the credulous because he enjoys proving "the superior power of his genius" (164). Here Teuthold catches us in a bind: he advocates the application of scepticism through reason while also admitting that one person's rational skill can be deployed against another. But he mitigates his paradox by directing us to rely just as equally on our compassion for others, a lesson teased out at the end of the novel in the context of not one but two scaffold events.

But Teuthold's lesson about credulity has a second didactic end. We are challenged to locate the author's ultimate perspective in the novel's complex structure, a series of nested tales that relate the encounters of several characters

English "translation" of a German work by Karl F. Kahlert that re-imagines Schiller. She also reminds us that Matthew Lewis was indebted to *The Necromancer* (see n.6).

with a conjurer whose name, we eventually learn, is Volkert. These encounters and the illusions Volkert generates for his victims may seem unconnected, but they are linked by a concern with justice and authority: a pickpocket's victim who wants to retrieve his goods, the investigation of a banditti-infested castle, the conflict between two would-be duelists, and the prosecution of a widow whose dealings with Volkert result in the death of her daughter. With "benumbing perfumes" (149) and laced drinks that "deprive the spectators of the proper use of their senses" (149-50) and cause them to hallucinate what they wish to see, Volkert performs what he calls "beneficial frauds" (151) to correct the behaviour of others. A phantom hand of moral authority hovers over nearly every scene in the novel, but that phantom eventually takes on the aspect of the spectre of the axe. In other words, the mysteries, adventures, and concern for our sceptical faculty in *The Necromancer* are tied together by the same themes of authority that inevitably frame any scaffold narrative, actual or fictional.

This phantom grows more distinct as the story progresses. While the scaffold has real immediacy only towards the novel's conclusion, Teuthold plays with the spectre of the axe by filling his story with scaffold referents (in the form of images and metaphors) that call the condemned figure and execution to mind even in situations where the scaffold has no place. One ritual suggests another, as, for instance, when Volkert's conjuring ceremonies include the dress or props or rhetoric of the ceremony of public execution. The sorcerer is described like a martyr ("clad in a white garment, barefoot, and with a pale and disordered

countenance"),¹⁰² his tricks save duelists from a "forced" and appointed death (72) or bandits from the hangman (83); and a character anticipates the spectacle of a conjuring rite in language that could be used to describe one's anticipation of a friend's execution, complete with the custom of the last meal (99-100).

Characters frequently compare their dread to that felt by a criminal on sentencing or on the day of execution,¹⁰³ and the Dane's ordeal with the robbers in Mr. Max's house is made analogous to a scaffold event when he realizes he may have walked into a trap:

I sat near an hour on my stool, like a poor culprit who awaits his doom, but was determined to defend myself to the last drop of blood. . . . My situation was exceedingly painful, and at the least noise which seemed to approach my chamber I started up. . . . Three fellows of gigantic size entered my room with naked swords. . . . Before I could recover my recollection I felt myself dragged out of my chamber, and beheld in an instant a man of the most terrible forbidding aspect. . . . "Tie the daring wretch," added he in a rage, "and throw him into the cellar, until sentence shall be pronounced against him." . . . After a long interval of the most desponding

¹⁰² See p. 58. During another conjuring rite involving other observers, Volkert is again likened to a condemned man: "His tall slender figure, clad in a white night gown, struck our senses with awe, as he stood motionless before us—his looks denoted a man in the agony of death" (65-66).

¹⁰³ See for instance the episode concerning the Dane's servant John, who, when press-ganged by robbers, compares himself to "a poor culprit who is dragged along to be delivered to the merciless fangs of the grim fiendly-looking executioner" (122) and who shakes "like a wretched culprit who hears his sentence pronounced" (123). John's dilemma—commit a crime or die—is compared to that of the novice criminal, who sometimes breaks the law in desperation and must opt "to be killed [by the noose], or to prey on his fellow creatures" (129). John's experience with the robbers is similar to that of his master's, a pairing that suggests that scaffold anxiety transcends class and that unfair pronouncement can be anyone's fate.

agony, I was at length dragged forth and brought before the tribunal of that terrible looking man. . . . Now the grim judge began to speak. (115-117)

The "tribunal" is made up of bandits who plot to kill the Dane before "arresting" and "trying" him for wounding a robber in his own defence. When the Dane spots Volkert in the room, he is overjoyed by the prospect of a return favour that may relieve him: "A poor culprit cannot feel greater joy, when, under the hangman's merciless fangs, his guardian-angel appears to save him from his impending doom" (117). The Dane is indeed "pardoned" and set free, but his experience, with its vivid descriptions of incarceration, trial, sentencing, and scaffold anxiety, assists the author's design to dot every page of *The Necromancer* with the totems of extreme justice and public execution.

Images and metaphors of "the poor culprit" are so ubiquitous (affecting nearly every character) that they seem intrusive. And that, perhaps, was Teuthold's intention. Characters in *The Necromancer* imagine their own deaths or the deaths of intimates, but they also carry in their heads the constant image of a hypothetical condemned figure, a pathetic being who is regularly compared to themselves or to their situations. In characteristic Gothic fashion, any "intensity of feeling" is attached to the dread of a condemned hero or to the tortures of the scaffold, such as the Baron's imagined sensations of being "pierced with a red hot iron" (69) when his pride is assailed by a rival officer. By reminding us how anguishing the situation of the condemned can be (emotionally as well as physically), Teuthold not only exploits a convention of scaffold Gothic, but also

makes it impossible for his readers to absorb the circumstances of scaffold victims, at novel's end, with anything less than active sympathy. The spectre of the axe and the constant intrusion of imagined "culprits" into the minds of characters in *The Necromancer* has guided us inevitably to a specific emotional place: we are not just sympathetically receptive but also more able to identify with the condemned men's states of mind, having been trained by nearly every scene leading up to the novel's conclusion.

In this context, it is impossible to see these concluding events as anything less than appeals for the reader's sympathy. Volkert's simmering scaffold anxiety may contribute to the Gothic tenor of *The Necromancer*, but its main function is that of a sympathetic beacon. We are drawn to his plight by the observations of the Dane, whose uneasy friendship with the conman places him on the sidelines of Volkert's trial and execution. The circumstances of the old man's most recent crime are complicated by his assertion that he and his fellow robbers stole church funds only to return money to townspeople bilked by dishonest clergy. Teuthold's condemned man is more Robin Hood than bandito, a nuanced figure whose motives are too complicated to be reduced to mere selfishness. This helps us, of course, to shift sympathetically towards Volkert's side in the courtroom, and it impels his judges to mitigate his punishment by calling for a swift beheading before the requisite burning at the stake. The novel's *de facto* villain becomes its hero as Volkert, going by the name of Peter in these scenes, convinces us he operated all along out of a complicated sort of benevolence. If Volkert is meant to embody the idea of the criminal tried and condemned, it

becomes increasingly difficult to hold our position as censors not just of Volkert but of all men and women brought before the bench who may be equally misunderstood:

Having heard his sentence pronounced with the greatest equanimity, he thanked his judges for their clemency, and left the court, supporting with his arm his companion, who exhibited a ghastly picture of dismay and despondency. Father Peter did not lose his courage during his confinement, and took all possible pains to sooth the grief of his fellow sufferer, and to inspire him with sentiments superior to black despair. (138)

Volkert the villain has assumed the posture of the traditional condemned hero, the more so as he is juxtaposed with a less stoic criminal, whose behaviour indicts cowardice while reinforcing Teuthold's villain-hero as a model of fortitude.

If Volkert is the locus of our sympathy, the Dane, who narrates these events, becomes our medium. Like any positive character of late eighteenth-century fiction, the Dane's actions are directed by his compassion for the suffering of others, and he serves as our eyes—however averted—on execution day. During a meeting in Volkert's cell, the condemned man confirms Teuthold's didactic aim when he tells the Dane to beware of "cheats like myself," and he appeals to his friend's pity when he requests that the Dane attend his execution as both a student of human nature and a provider of comfort. His imagined death intrudes on the Dane's mind and confirms the narrator's sympathetic function: "I left the prison lost in gloomy thought, and with a bleeding heart. The dismal idea

of the awful scene which was to be exhibited the next day, haunted me where ever I went, and I struggled in vain to chase it from my mind" (165). Furthermore, the actual scaffold scene highlights the problem of a *lack* of compassion in others, which—presented in negative contrast to the Dane's forgiving attitude—helps argue for the value of sensibility:

The streets were crowded with a noisy multitude. Haunted by a secret awe did I arrive at the place of execution, and horror made my blood run chill as I beheld the dreadful pile, which soon was to reduce to ashes the preserver of my life. A gaping multitude was standing around, awaiting with cruel insensibility, and with more than beastly satisfaction, the dreadful catastrophe which was to terminate the life of their fellow creatures. (165)

The sensitive Dane is unable to watch the executions of Volkert and his fellow sufferer, looking away when the strokes fall and retreating from the site before he can register Volkert's headless body. He is "at the city gate" (166) before he turns to see the smoke rising from the scaffold as the bodies burn. So humanitarian are the Dane's impulses that Teuthold can barely get a Gothic tableau in edgewise and must settle for a fleeting description of "smoking blood" that stains the block about to receive Volkert's neck, along with the image of a raised sword (166). Two years before *The Monk's* transgressive orgy of description and a hundred years after the excessive Restoration days of Oroonoko's evisceration, Teuthold presses at the limits of prurience but limits himself nevertheless, unwilling to undermine a sympathetic lesson for the sake of a shock.

As if Teuthold were dissatisfied with the efficacy of the moral embedded in Volkert's execution, he duplicates that moral in the subsequent story of Wolf, the robber chief in league with the conjurer. Like Volkert, Wolf "wants to provide a useful lesson" (167) as he stands trial for his crimes, but the gist of that lesson points even more strongly towards the humanitarian bias in Teuthold's work because it is linked to sympathetic imagination in the context of scaffold events. Echoing calls for capital reform that sounded in Teuthold's lifetime, Wolf details his history to the court hoping that "it will afford a useful lesson to judges, and teach the guardians of the people to be careful how they inflict punishments if they will not make a complete rogue of many a hapless wretch" (167).¹⁰⁴ He also hopes to earn their sympathy, as Syndy McMillen Conger points out in "A German Ancestor for Mary Shelley's *Monster*" (1984). Like Christian Wolf in the Schiller text that inspired *The Necromancer*, Teuthold's Wolf spins a confession that is "at once an apology and an appeal for understanding" designed "to win compassion" (Conger 225) and to earn "a tear of humanity" (Teuthold 167) from his listeners. Rigid society began the work of transforming a good man into a bad one, and the unnecessary cruelties of prison life completed it. If the poorer classes are all but destined for the noose, as Wolf argues, because society bestializes them, then men like him might as well live in such a way as to "deserve" the fate they are allotted by birth (172). Wolf admits to a lifelong

¹⁰⁴ Teuthold appears to share Rousseau's belief that people are born good and that villainy is learned or created by institutional error. His "hapless wretch," according to Wolf, "would have been recalled to his duty, and preserved to the human society, by gentle treatment: I never should have become a robber, had not the too great severity of the laws made me an enemy to the human race" (167).

scaffold anxiety as he relates his history, but fear of the hangman is not enough to correct behaviour when behaviour is influenced by outside forces. "I had a confused notion of halter and gibbet, and of the execution of a murderer I had witnessed as a boy," he assures his listeners (174). After he commits his first murder he disappears, like Shelley's monster, into a forest as "a thousand grisly phantoms tortured my fancy. . . . I had no other choice but either to put an end to my wretched existence, or to drag on a life embittered by a continual fear of dying under the hand of the executioner" (175). Already damned, he lives the only existence fate allows him and continues on his crime spree, "doomed to be a villain" (194).

As Conger suggests, readers familiar with *Frankenstein* are struck by how similar Wolf's history is to the history of the creature in Shelley's novel (a tender heart that goes unnoticed thanks to a disfigured face; a resentment fostered by the reprobation of others; an unavoidable and vengeful giving in to violence).¹⁰⁵ We are asked to consider that a criminal may not ultimately be responsible for his crime, that a sympathetic reaction is the only humane response and reformation the only conceivable communal imperative. By placing the Wolf episode directly after a scaffold scene, and by discussing recalcitrant justice in the aftermath of a horrifying double execution, Teuthold further influences our viewpoint through the novel's very structure. The authorial commentary is glaring, and Teuthold confirms his position by providing his readers with a model we are expected to

¹⁰⁵ Similarities with *Frankenstein's* persecuted creature can also be observed in Wolf's desire not to be seen by others once he recognizes his self-loathing ("I had covered part of my face with my hat, as if that could have hidden me from the eye of lifeless creation," p.175) and in his need for a companion at any cost ("I would not have hesitated to pledge the health of an infernal spirit, in order to have a confidant," p. 177).

follow: on the strength of his narrative, Wolf's sentence is commuted to life in prison in return for his cooperation. Justice has shown itself to be not only compassionate but productive. The scaffold and the condemned figure, after stimulating our sympathetic imagination, become objects that can be willed only by a community. When that community decides to look elsewhere for solutions, a quiet steals over the novel's conclusion and over the imaginations of its most afflicted surviving characters.

By juxtaposing the execution of one sympathetic villain with the gentler fate of another (that is, Volkert's graphic death with Wolf's commuted sentence), Teuthold demonstrates an understanding of Adam Smith's complex theory of sympathy as it relates to the scaffold—one that rejects the notion that a humanitarian response is always appropriate to the case at hand or desirable for social cohesion. In "The Violence of Sympathy: Adam Smith on Resentment and Executions" (2003), Robert Mitchell discusses the double-sided nature of sympathy in the context of punitive justice, arguing that compassion in the eighteenth century did not automatically generate condemnation of public execution, least of all for Smith. As Mitchell points out, Smith's sympathy can initiate violent or resentful feelings against a criminal as easily as it can inspire a call for mercy, but it is also able to control those feelings in order to reinforce the social bond between members of a community:

Standing as the symbol of this connection between violence and sympathy is the state-sponsored execution, which exemplifies the capacity of sympathy to resolve the very conflicts that it creates.

Through the action of sympathy, criminal actions generate contagious resentment, which threatens to undo the social bond. However, the execution of the condemned allows justice to prevail, while at the same time attending to the need for sympathy on the part of *both* the condemned and the execution spectators. (322)

Our sympathetic imaginations appoint us judge of a criminal's deeds. That is, we sympathize either with the criminal's victims or with the criminal himself, classifying him, as Mitchell writes, either as "deserving of reward" and "gratitude," or deserving of punishment or "resentment" (326). In *The Necromancer*, social order is maintained when characters acknowledge gratitude to both Volkert and Wolf, albeit in different increments. Neither man can be pardoned for his crimes, but neither meets the fate he should have met had he not stirred our sympathy with his history and complicated motives. Too much resentment for their acts lingers to bring them back into the social fold, and Teuthold's novel demonstrates what Mitchell calls "the consolation of executions" (329) when the conjurer is made to pay for the humiliation he caused, but at a reduced price: a quick decapitation rather than a live burning.

The resentment that Volkert generates with his tricks and outright crimes is mitigated by a degree of gratitude for his honesty and goodwill, but it still manifests primarily as a *judgment* of his lack of merit rather than as a *feeling* (as Mitchell distinguishes it) of grateful kinship. By making Volkert sympathetic and by complicating his death with nuances of reprobation and mercy—and by doing much the same with Wolf—Teuthold validates Smith's argument "that executions,

unlike other forms of punishment . . . allow for the mediation of both public and private interests, for they permit the condemned individual to receive the sympathy of spectators while at the same time serving the interests of the public" (Mitchell 332). He does so by harnessing fashionable sympathetic imagination to the scaffold, and by enlarging both objects through the trope of intrusive fancy which appears throughout his text.

Current debates about humanitarianism's influence on eighteenth-century politics remain heated among historians. I refer to the competing viewpoints of Thomas W. Laqueur ("Bodies, Details, and the Humanitarian Narrative"), Randall McGowan ("The Body and Punishment in Eighteenth-Century England"), and others. The so-called humanitarian shift is not easily graphed since, as Regina Janes has pointed out, "as the English abandoned mutilation of their criminals they killed them in increasing numbers" (*Losing Our Heads*, 42). These debates are especially vigorous in discussions of public execution, and *The Necromancer* features these contradictions dramatically. It is in late-century scaffold Gothic fictions like *The Banished Man*, *The Recess* and *The Necromancer*, at any rate—as well as in numerous scaffold tragedies—that contemporary readers could simultaneously locate discussions of punishment, thrill themselves with descriptions of executions, and work their sympathetic imaginations, for these sorts of fictions were on the rise as the popularity of criminal broadsheets waned. It is as if the scaffold narrative shifted from the broadsheet to tragedy and especially to the novel, and made itself more intense and descriptive through the trope of intrusive fancy.

CHAPTER THREE

Scaffold Anxiety, Humanitarianism, and the Revolutionary Debate

1: “Death is a fearful thing”: The Scaffold, Altered

The chopping block casts a long shadow in Shakespeare’s *Measure for Measure*, a play structured on nearly unavoidable capital crimes, such as pre-marital sex. Isabella may not be tempted to break Vienna’s moral laws, but Isabella is not like most citizens, whose natural desires expose them to the executioner. When her brother Claudio, who prematurely enjoyed his fiancée, is sentenced to death (and when, following Lord Angelo’s ultimatum, Isabella chooses her chastity over Claudio’s life), Shakespeare has the opportunity to investigate the mind of a condemned man. Claudio is unable to convince Isabella to trade her honour for his life with his descriptions of an almost unbearable dread: “The weariest and most loathed worldly life / That age, ache, penury, and imprisonment / Can lay on nature is a paradise / To what we fear of death,” he pleads (III.i.128-131). It is a “fearful thing” (115) that he is not prepared to accept on any terms. It is a mystery too cold, too dark, and too antithetical to what we know. “’Tis too horrible!” he exclaims (127) as he beseeches Isabella to weigh outcomes, but his sister is obdurate.

Claudio’s fear isn’t the scaffold proper—the ritual, the shame, the entire ghoulis procedure—but death itself. There is no mention, on his part, of the

headsman or the block, no imagined dying, no voiced concern about the process, in and of itself, that will shift him from one realm to the next. He takes a larger view of things, as do most condemned characters before the eighteenth century. Claudio's panic is general and spiritual; his imagination is harried by impressions of a hellish afterlife or a disappointing nothing, not his impending decapitation. If he mourns his taboo substance, he does so with a Renaissance or even Medieval frame of mind. More importantly, he never questions the role of execution in the civic sphere. The scaffold is a simple given, a fact of life to be avoided but not criticized; it would likely not even occur to Claudio—or to Shakespeare—to do so.

Our fear of death may be universal and trans-historical but our perspective on the death penalty is not. Any literary representation of the scaffold is a reflection of the culture—or, more precisely, of the author—that creates it. In Shakespeare's day, the literary scaffold was a device, and like any device its primary purpose was to arrest plot, create tension, and render character. At times it assisted in recreating a legend or a historical event. By the middle of the eighteenth century, as we have seen, the literary scaffold was frequently put to further use: it intensified a Gothic mood and tested reader and character sensibility. And by the 1790s, the literary scaffold had developed another dimension still, one that it continues to possess. As we have already seen it do in *The Necromancer* regarding questions of “just” punishments for Volkert and Wolf, the literary scaffold eventually became an emblem of philosophical conflict, a symbol that questioned the juridical status quo.

These mileposts are somewhat artificial, of course, in the sense that one may find the exceptional literary scaffold used in each of these ways previous to the Age of Sensibility, or the Gothic Era, or the 1790s. But the larger trends they point to support Ralph Cohen's assertion that "generic transformation reveals the social changes in audiences" (215), and that genre itself is a product of ideologies, one that swells and contracts as it takes on the social and even literary values of a given period. According to Randall McGowen and other historians of the death penalty, it was in the late eighteenth century that a critical mass of voices emerged to question the morality and validity of execution. Earlier criticism, McGowen reminds us,¹⁰⁶ was too sporadic to have much effect; the scaffold was still generally regarded as a fixed object in the world, one that served a social and even divine purpose, as well as a legal one. But after the publication of Cesar Beccaria's *On Crimes and Punishments* (1764), calls for reform emerged from conservative as well as progressive corners, from the medical and evangelical as well as legal communities, all of which generated, for the first time, a thicker and more lingering atmosphere of doubt.¹⁰⁷ In other words, the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries form a notable intellectual period in the West with regards to execution. Between the countless generations

¹⁰⁶ See McGowen's "The Problem of Punishment in Eighteenth-Century England" (2004), pp. 211ff, and "The Body and Punishment in Eighteenth-Century England" (1987), pp. 667ff.

¹⁰⁷ In "The Problem of Punishment," McGowen discusses developments in the English penal system previous to Beccaria's publication and reminds us that "the reformers did not discover the inhumanity of the gallows" (227). Like McGowen, I am not suggesting that doubts about the system's effectiveness or fairness did not exist before Beccaria, but rather that such doubts "would reemerge powerfully at the end of the [eighteenth] century" (214), and that "commentaries on the criminal law expanded rapidly" and "became more elaborate" (227) and accumulated enough adherents for more profound and lasting change. In addition to McGowen's work, see J.M. Beattie's *Crime and the Courts of England 1660-1800* (Princeton, 1986) and Peter King's *Crime, Justice, and Discretion in England 1740-1820* (Oxford, 2000).

of the past that (with scattered exceptions and “improvements”)¹⁰⁸ accepted execution as a fact of law and life, and the middle of the twentieth century (when the death penalty was abolished in every Western state but one), a period of roughly one hundred and eighty years produced a radical shift in penal ethics and legislation, as it did in other socio-political spheres.

Historians have illustrated this change in painstaking detail, but when they refer to bodies of contemporary writing, they usually call upon the same handful of treatises that includes the works of Beccaria, John Howard, William Eden, and William Blackstone, as well as Burke’s parliamentary critiques. But we must not overlook other forms of literature and how they, too, helped to transform—and were transformed by—the population’s perspective on capital punishment. In this period, fictional representations of execution arguably hold a special status as a literature of criticism or advocacy but always a literature vexed by competing viewpoints, and one in which any scene of anxiety before or on the scaffold could induce questions about the scaffold’s own legitimacy. In this period—for the first time—representations of execution often had something to imply *about execution itself*, not just the justness of a particular individual’s fate. Literary executions were no longer simply the means of a hero’s or villain’s end, or fodder for novels of terror or sensibility, but socio-political commentaries embedded within a satire or romance.

¹⁰⁸ I put this word in scare quotes because some pre-Enlightenment initiatives were either temporary or ultimately found to be harsher than initially described, such as solitary/silent confinement and transportation. They were also, in many cases, not inspired by humanitarian concerns; transportation, of course, had economic and social agendas that must not be confused with later reforms motivated more directly by compassion (although it certainly allowed judges and society to pretend to be merciful).

As Gothic fiction and novels of sensibility became more popular, so did protracted descriptions of the condemned person's horror and the scaffold itself, drawn with new psychological detail. Yet not even the fictions of terror or sensibility featured as many scaffolds as the Jacobin and, in particular, the anti-Jacobin literature of the 1790s and beyond. In a study of eighteenth-century scaffold representations, one cannot overlook the revolutionary and anti-revolutionary literature of Britain, where complicated and diverse articulations of the scaffold's (il)legitimacy crept into stylized disputes about custom versus social contract. If we look closely, we can spot a debate about capital punishment in the novels of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries that complements similar debates in pamphlets and Parliament; those who presented execution in the novels and plays of this period sometimes did so in order to challenge sham justice, human brutality, and even the death penalty itself—at least as it was then being deployed.

These challenges are rarely overt. Rather, we can observe an increasing mistrust of the capital code within the larger anxiety about violence and arbitrary justice that pervades the English anti-Jacobin novel, or within Jacobin fiction's demand for compassion and rational law—for it seems unlikely that an increase in death-penalty repudiations in Parliament and an increase in negative scaffold representations in fiction merely coincide. We can also find in such fictions the reason why we perceive this period as one of reform, unmatched by any previous era; despite the pre-Beccaria initiatives McGowen points to in his study, we see little concern for penal reform in the fictions of the seventeenth and early

eighteenth centuries, which suggests a dearth of consideration in the wider culture. But I must be careful with my terms, here, and not just in relation to the never-quite-accurate *Jacobin* and *anti-Jacobin* qualifiers that scholars have (sometimes inexplicably) affixed to Title A or Title B. I must also take this opportunity to elaborate on the phrase *scaffold anxiety*, which is no longer univocal by the 1790s.

In Gothic texts and novels of sensibility, in many Georgian tragedies, and in English fiction as a whole up to roughly the middle of the eighteenth century, the anxiety of the condemned hero—whether it is directed at the scaffold event itself or, Claudio-like, towards death in general—is usually just that: an individual character’s anxiety about the fate of her own body or soul, or the fate of her own family. I have shown how this anxiety takes the form of a character’s grief for the loss of her material future; of concern for her survivors; of imagined deaths that harass both the condemned as well as her intimates. But however numerous these tropes and however detailed these descriptions, we cannot say whether Ann Radcliffe herself possessed any personal anxieties about execution when we read about Osbert’s trauma in *The Castles of Athlin and Dunbayne*; whether Sophia Lee lost sleep over thoughts of the scaffold when we follow the Tudors of *The Recess* to the block; or whether Peter Teuthold worried about the fate of his own neck when we witness Volkert’s gruesome end in *The Necromancer*. We are only shown the mental states of these authors’ unfortunate creations and, because we rightly do not wish to confuse author and narrator, we avoid giving

much thought to Radcliffe's, Lee's, or Teuthold's own opinion on or experiences with the real-life scaffold, unless we have particular biographical concerns.

But it is difficult to limit ourselves to close readings when it comes to the scaffold fictions of the late eighteenth century and the first decade or so of the nineteenth. Scholars of the revolutionary debate have painted too clear a picture of the disquiet that characterized intellectual Britain in this period. Throughout English history, a few authors have marked their works with signs of their personal terror of the scaffold, as Michael Lieb has demonstrated in the case of Milton¹⁰⁹ who, like writers of the 1790s, published in a culture distressed and fractured by the beheading of a king. But by and large, we do not consider whether an author of scaffold fiction harbours his or her own anxiety about execution. Until the 1790s we do not often glimpse—or think to look for—an author's *personal* scaffold anxiety in his or her fiction; but suddenly, after the death of Louis XVI and reports of an insatiable guillotine, after what Ian R. Christie has called a “barely suppressed revolt in the sister kingdom of Ireland” (1),¹¹⁰ and in the midst of democratic agitation at home, British subjects could begin to imagine that anyone—not just kings or criminals, and certainly not just the French—might potentially be exposed to the scaffold for arbitrary errors of

¹⁰⁹ See Lieb's *Milton and the Culture of Violence* (Cornell, 1994). See also Luke Gibbons' *Edmund Burke and Ireland*, discussed in Chapter One, Section 2, which suggests that Burke endured similar anxieties that inspired his theory of the sublime.

¹¹⁰ In *Stress and Stability in Late Eighteenth-Century Britain*, Christie qualifies the Irish rebellion of 1798 as a near-revolution, a counterpart to the Continental upheavals but one which “sprang from factors which had little or no parallel in Britain” (14), America, or France, and which, unlike the French Revolution, had no taste for atheism (17). Yet, however different the socio-political circumstance of Britain and France, “the French Revolution was certainly the key event of that period in the history of the West” and “people in Britain were intensely interested in it” (18).

non-conformity: gentry, clergy, intellectuals, royalists, church-goers, even quarrelsome neighbours. The sanguinary tribunals of England's own history now appeared much less distant and abstract—they were made uncomfortably contemporary as Britain's neighbour began to indulge in what came to be known as “democratic rage.”

Much has been written about the British mindset during this period and the attendant anxieties that pervaded a public enervated by revolution and radicalism on the one hand, and stoked by anti-Jacobin propaganda on the other.¹¹¹ As H.T. Dickinson explains in his classic guide, *British Radicalism and the French Revolution* (1985), events in France threatened “the traditional political and social order throughout Europe” (26). British attitudes were exacerbated by “conservative publications exploiting such events as the September Massacres and the execution of Louis XVI and Marie-Antoinette in order to demonstrate in vivid and gory detail the horrors of revolution and social anarchy” (26-27). These assaults were linked to the guillotine; readers were bombarded with descriptions of summary executions and spectacular scaffold events as anti-Jacobin writers¹¹²

¹¹¹ The body of scholarship on the British revolutionary debates and literature is extensive and includes the following seminal texts: Steven Blakemore's *Crisis in Representation*, Marilyn Butler's *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas* and *Romantics, Rebels, and Reactionaries* (Clarendon Press, 1987), Kevin Gilmartin's *Writing Against the Revolution*, Claudia L. Johnson's *Equivocal Beings*, Ronald Paulson's *Representations of Revolution* (Yale, 1983), Paul Keen's *The Crisis of Literature in the 1790s* (Oxford, 2006), as well as the companion pieces of M.O. Grenby (*The Anti-Jacobin Novel*) and Gary Kelly (*The English Jacobin Novel*).

¹¹² I do not wish to contribute to the misperception that conservative or counterrevolutionary literature of the 1790s was univocal or unable to deal in nuance. Kevin Gilmartin's reconsideration of anti-Jacobin literature in *Writing Against Revolution* (2007) has helpfully “challenge[d] the tendency for a leading strand of Romantic studies to identify literary expression and the life of the imagination . . . with some primary sympathy for the French Revolution, and to privilege the progressive affiliations of literature and of print culture more broadly” (1). Rather, I wish only to draw attention to the generalizations in which the most panic-stricken conservatives engaged, and the effect such generalizations may have had on individual imaginations.

tried to convince them that the efficient new beheading device had become the great reposessor of noble estates and ecclesiastical wealth—that private property exchanged hands with the *swoosh* of a falling blade after a sham hearing before the Revolutionary Tribunal.

Though few British writers witnessed an actual guillotining,¹¹³ the dreadful ritual taking place with alarming frequency in the Place de la Révolution—just over the Channel—was too close for comfort. Anarchy and atheism, insisted the anti-Jacobins, would lead not just to the collapse of social, religious and political orders, but also to the divesting of one's own property, the slaughter of one's own family and, ultimately, the prospect of one's own execution, so that in a sense the scaffold was made in some minds and some fictions to reify the destabilizing and destructive violence of rebellion. If, as Grenby writes, "representations of the French Revolution, and insurrection elsewhere . . . were essentially a screen on which could be projected domestic anxieties" (56), these representations also formed a screen on which could be projected the scaffold anxiety of its literary citizens. That anxiety may have been slight, but if (as Grenby suggests) "fiction was perfectly adapted to reinforce anti-Jacobin nostrums" (9), then the ubiquitous portrayal of the scaffold in such fiction deserves special consideration. We might agree that these writers deployed the literary scaffold to affirm the moral and cultural superiority of the British, but were some of these writers not also, quite

¹¹³ Even Helen Maria Williams, author of the four-volume *Letters from France* (which details the trials and executions of her Girondin friends) and widely considered the premiere British reporter of the Terror's events, did not attend a guillotining. See Deborah Kennedy's "Spectacle of the Guillotine: Helen Maria Williams and the Reign of Terror" (*Philological Quarterly*, Vol. 73, No.1, pp. 104).

simply, haunted? Were they not exorcising unpleasant imaginings in the act of fiction-writing?

In *Revolution and the Form of the British Novel* (1994), Nicola J. Watson lists “female sexuality, national identity, and class mobility” as three key British anxieties of the 1790s and early nineteenth century (4), but given the impact of Burke’s imaginative descriptions of the French Revolution, the ubiquitous reports of French scaffold violence, and radical impulses at home, it might be fruitful to append “scaffold anxiety” to Watson’s catalogue, however difficult it is to attach, centuries after the fact, a particular mindset to a particular individual. I hesitate to psychologize authors because of the speculative and fallible nature of such an approach—but, at the same time, it is disingenuous to avoid the question altogether, even if it cannot be answered with certainty and in fact requires rigorous scholars not to draw objective conclusions. The question demands engagement to some extent, though it is a difficult enough to “prove” authorial intention in literary studies and even more difficult to “prove” obsession. Still, to address the depictions of scaffold anxiety and scaffold violence in the literature of a certain place and time, to acknowledge the oppressive cultural context in which it was written, as well as the reformatory currents that buoyed it, and to consider the dramatic thrust of scholarship that deals with the period—which recycles acute terms like “crisis,” “paranoia,” and “panic”—requires us to wonder whether, in such a climate, authors who detailed scaffold events in their fictions could entirely detach themselves from the anxiety of their characters.

Steven Bruhm considers such anxieties in *Gothic Bodies*, which addresses the “myriad discursive considerations of pain” centered around the French Revolution and its effects on British writers of the Romantic period (xviii). “If, as Blake said in *Jerusalem*, we become what we behold, then the effects of imagined violence . . . become much more difficult to control. The imagination itself,” Bruhm argues, “risks becoming the stage for the playing out of Gothic violence” (xviii), a stage where, in other words, anxieties about the safety and integrity of one’s own body sometimes arise, work themselves out, and are exorcised with pen and paper. Bruhm places the literary scaffold within a larger context of physical anguish and argues that the proliferation of torture tropes in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century literature—encapsulated in Shelley’s *Prometheus Unbound*—was partly born of an “epistemological crisis” (95) regarding juridical violence at home and on the Continent. Torture, he writes, might be a trope for “emotional affliction” of many kinds (xix), but its literary representation often sets out “to reconcile the political and social spectacles of [witnessed or reported] pain with one’s own experience or personal crisis” (xix). Bruhm’s framework is psychoanalytical, but his drawing together of politics, pain, imagination, and Romantic-era fiction nevertheless emits an almost axiomatic ring, in the sense that such a context seems naturally given to inducing personal terrors—however transient—that surface on the page.

2: The Anti-Jacobin Scaffold, Confused

The fictions of the 1790s and early 1800s are aesthetically contentious. They have been maligned by critics and, more recently, defended vigorously, if only on the strength of their cultural and historical value.¹¹⁴ Linda Lang-Peralta has even given scholars a mild scolding for their dismissive attitudes, writing that we “have tended to view the novels of the 1790s as a literary badlands, marked by strangely shaped formations, a desert area generally to be avoided for the sake of the manicured gardens of Enlightenment literature or the well-marked peaks of Romanticism” (ix-x). The anti-Jacobin and Jacobin fictions of the 1790s and beyond, whatever their literary faults, have proved to be invaluable to my assessment of representations of execution in the late eighteenth century and how they reflected (and perhaps even contributed to) a complicated mindset about reform in general and capital punishment in particular. Because of their focus on politics and justice, not to mention current events in revolutionary France, these novels are rife with representations of execution, and are therefore ideal subjects.¹¹⁵ Yet while many of the same tropes and perspectives appear in

¹¹⁴ In response to Marilyn Butler’s infamous rebuke of the anti-Jacobin novel in *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas*, defences of the era’s fiction underscore its socio-political import. In *The English Jacobin Novel*, Gary Kelly remarks that “there were no great novels published in England during the 1790s, but there were many interesting ones,” while J.M.S. Tompkins has pointed out that “dead books can provide little information when exposed on the gibbet of scorn” (*The Popular Novel in England*). Speaking for contemporary tragedy, Jeffrey Cox reminds us that “these plays are part of the broader reactionary literature and culture as relevant to the literary and political situation in England in the 1790s as the work of Wordsworth, Coleridge, or Blake” (“Ideology and Genre in the British Anti-Revolutionary Drama of the 1790s”).

¹¹⁵ Lang-Peralta has qualified, with reason, the novels of 1790s’ Britain as “excessive, bizarre, or extreme,” (ix) while Claudia L. Johnson has observed, in *Equivocal Beings*, that such fictions are also “distinctive first and foremost for their egregious affectivity . . . where emotions are saturated

both the novels and plays of the 1790s, I will focus on the former because they were, as Jeffrey Cox has pointed out,¹¹⁶ simply more visible and more frequently consumed. Many Jacobin and anti-Jacobin plays, in fact, never saw a public stage, their production apparently discouraged by the government (Cox 600-601). And however sanguinary the images even in successfully staged anti-revolutionary tragedies, such as William Preston's *Democratic Rage* (1793), they could not access as wide an audience as the anti-Jacobin novels of Jane West—or the novels of her literary counterpart, the reform-friendly Mary Robinson, for that matter.

Several studies have examined representations of revolutionary violence in British fiction of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, but none has concentrated exclusively on scaffold depictions per se. Even David Bindman's *The Shadow of the Guillotine* (1989), a provocatively entitled catalogue for a British Museum exhibit, treats the French Revolution's scaffolds, mobs, and massacres as equivalent forms of violence, and focuses on visual art, rather than on literature. Literary critics, for their part, have analyzed Jacobin and anti-Jacobin fictions as expressions of a "crisis of sentiment" (Claudia L. Johnson's *Equivocal Beings*) or an anxiety about radicalism (M.O. Grenby's *The Anti-Jacobin Novel* and Paul Keen's *The Crisis of Literature of the 1790s*); as

in turbulent and disfiguring excess" (1), so that any extended representations or considerations of death are lavishly produced scenes that invite investigation.

¹¹⁶ See Cox's "Ideology and Genre in the British Anti-Revolutionary Drama of the 1790s" (*EMH*, 1991), in which he argues that, because anti-Jacobin plays were often artistically inept, they were political liabilities that might be misread or "work upon the audience" in unexpected ways despite their bias. "The government did not wish to see revolutionary history put on stage no matter what the form or ideology of the play in question," Cox concludes (603ff). Many Jacobin plays suffered similar restrictions, and for even more obvious reasons.

evidence of a healthy proto-feminism (Adriana Craciun's triptych *British Women Writers and the French Revolution*, *Fatal Women of Romanticism*, and *Rebellious Hearts*);¹¹⁷ as advances in historical literature and new literary forms (Marilyn Butler's *Romantics, Rebels, and Reactionaries* and Kevin Gilmartin's *Writing Against Revolution*); or as reflections of a new political order (Steven Blakemore's *Burke and the Fall of Language* and *Crisis in Representation*, and Ron Paulson's *Representations of Revolution*). All of these studies have, in some way, inserted the Jacobin and anti-Jacobin novel into the dialogue about late eighteenth-century literature and humanitarian reform—whether as evidence of a new compassion, a new feminism, or a new political, economic, social, or narrative framework. I wish to contribute to this discussion by showing how representations of scaffold scenes and scaffold anxiety in these novels operated within a context of evolving, competing and somewhat incomplete notions of reform.

In "Nautical 'Docudrama' in the Age of Kembles," George D. Glenn explores the way in which current events and news stories inspired eighteenth-century theatrical productions. Borrowing the twentieth-century term "docudrama" to designate this trend, Glenn studies "that category of drama which is based almost entirely on either historic or contemporary documentary materials [which] are used to explore and comment on complex social and political issues, presenting them in theatrically exciting ways" (137). Glenn argues that these materials, such as news stories, were used primarily to create "exciting entertainment and political, social, and moral self-aggrandizement" (137), and his

¹¹⁷ The last of these three titles is a collection of essays co-edited by Kari E. Lokke.

theory can be applied equally to the novel. Both the Jacobin and anti-Jacobin novel in England drew on reports of real executions taking place in France in such a way as to underscore as well as sensationalize “true life” and political perspectives. Violence, in general, was the leitmotif of anti-Jacobin fiction, and scaffold violence, it seems to me, was elevated above mob violence, just as the actual scaffold is elevated above a crowd. The scaffold is, quite often, the novel’s graphic centerpiece and its premiere image of democratic brutality. Yet interestingly, critics tend to lump executions in with the other forms of bloodshed that stain the pages of anti-Jacobin novels, just as they tend to do in the case of Gothic fiction.

In “The Terrorist System of Novel Writing,” a letter that appeared in *Monthly Magazine* in August 1797, an anonymous Jacobin accused conservative writers of glorifying violence in their novels even as they purport to decry it:

It has long . . . been the fashion to advert to the horrid massacres which disgraced France during the tyranny of Robespierre; . . . Happy, sir, would it be, if we could contemplate barbarity without adopting it; if we could meditate upon cruelty without learning it; and if we could paint a man without a head, without supposing what would be the case if some of our friends were without their heads. But alas! So prone are we to imitation, that we have exactly and faithfully copied the SYSTEM OF TERROR, if not in our streets, and in our fields, at least in our circulating libraries and in our closets. (299-300)

Admonishing anti-Jacobin writers for being no better than sensationalist Gothic novelists, the essayist rhetorically links the terrorizing of readers with the terrorizing of French citizens, implying that contemporary authors are literary Robespierres who have advanced, to his disgust, “the wonderful revolution that has taken place in the *art* of novel-writing, in which the only exercise for the fancy is now the most frightful subjects” (300).

M.O. Grenby has noted this disproportion in *The Anti-Jacobin Novel* (2001). He argues that “representing revolution was the most straightforward means of infusing an ideological purpose into fiction” (28), and that “even if the representation of the French Revolution was not always used for a deliberately anti-Jacobin purpose, it was certainly not a weapon that British Jacobin novelists chose to take up to any significant extent” (30). Instead, readers must usually look to the works of loyalist writers to locate recurring images such as incandescent mobs, oppressive prisons, and “the guillotine cutting a swathe through the population of France” (40).¹¹⁸ Kevin Gilmartin concurs, arguing in *Writing Against Revolution* that “the anti-Jacobin novel staged the threat of revolution not as a single cataclysmic event but as an endless sequence of local episodes in which subversion found innumerable ways into the established order of things” (162), and that anti-Jacobin writers “imagined [the] revolutionary psychology” of radicals, democrats, and Jacobins as manifesting “an incomprehensible and apparently boundless appetite for violence” (170).

¹¹⁸ The so-called Jacobin novels of Charlotte Smith and Mary Robinson, many of which feature scenes in revolutionary France, are exceptions whose renown should not stand in for the entirety of Jacobin fiction.

It is not difficult to detect cynicism about capital punishment in Jacobin novels, where the scaffold often stands for the ultimate transgression of tyrannical domestic governance or, at the very least, mistaken justice. Hannah Primrose's hanging in Elizabeth Inchbald's *Nature and Art* (1796) is rendered unequivocally as the murder of the virtuous and helpless at the hands of the sinister and powerful. Inchbald's scaffold—like that of *The Necromancer*—demands that readers take a second look at penal customs and, more significantly, at suppositions about criminals themselves. Executions in Jacobin novels portray punishments that are out of all proportion offences, a point repeatedly made by reformers in the latter half of the eighteenth century. The Jacobin concern with over-harsh measures was fundamental to late-century anti-death penalty rhetoric—borrowed from Beccaria—which voiced the reformers' wish to see a reduction in the number of capital crimes, a concern for people over property, and the removal of the scaffold from the public eye.

The representation of execution in anti-Jacobin novels, on the other hand, is more vexed and by extension more interesting. Here, scaffold events often take place either in a less enlightened British past or overseas—in France, the Caribbean, or even Belgrade. Many feature the executions of offenders deserving of their fate, whether sympathetic or not—a Marat, for example, or a Wallace. While tragedies and novels of sensibility usually fasten scaffold anxieties and events to their dignified and righteous heroes in order to stir our sympathies and teach us fortitude, and while Jacobin fictions frequently attach such terrors to good characters in order to force questions about rights and

justice, anti-Jacobin novels tend to parcel out scaffold terrors to heroes and villains equally, taking particular delight in the gruesome execution of criminals. Anti-Jacobin fiction, as a corpus, has no trouble portraying scaffold deaths as glorious *and* terrible, as just *and* unjust—a duality that suggests an ambivalence towards the death-penalty process itself and an uneasy relationship with reform overall.

Like many scholars, Grenby acknowledges the slippage that occurs between the terms “Jacobin” and “anti-Jacobin” yet he still proceeds to rank texts under one column or the other. He provides a useful bibliography of anti-Jacobin fiction at the end of *The Anti-Jacobin Novel*, but his criteria are far too broad: any novel or tale that alludes to events in revolutionary France and/or features the excesses of the Terror is categorized as anti-Jacobin,¹¹⁹ which places reformist novels like Smith’s *The Banished Man* and Robinson’s *Hubert de Sevrac* (1796) and *The Natural Daughter* (1799) under his rubric.¹²⁰ His decision would seem curious if we were not already aware of the limitations of definition, particularly in the cases of the Jacobin and anti-Jacobin labels, which rarely identify works entirely representative of these binaries. But while it is relatively simple to determine both the ambiguities and ultimate ideological stances in the novels of

¹¹⁹ Grenby reduces anti-Jacobin fiction to any portrayal that delegitimizes revolution “no matter how grievous the oppression” of a government (51). “The main thrust,” he argues, “of the conservative fiction, perhaps all fiction, in presenting the mob, the revolutionary crowd, even the plantation slaves in Jamaica, was to show them unjustifiable in their insurgence, no matter how grievous the oppression under which they had been forced to exist” (50-51).

¹²⁰ In their introduction to *Rebellious Hearts: British Women Writers and the French Revolution*, Adriana Craciun and Kari E. Lokke point out that Smith was reading and admiring Godwin’s *Political Justice* as late as 1797 (6-7). See “Mary Robinson and Radical Politics: The French Connection” in Craciun’s *British Women Writers and the French Revolution* for evidence of Robinson’s reformist tendencies.

Smith and Robinson—who remained sympathetic to the ideals of reform, even as they condemned the French Jacobins for their methods—we must look closer to spot the scaffold concerns in purportedly anti-Jacobin works such as Helen Craik’s *Adelaide de Narbonne* (1800), Edward Mangin’s *George the Third* (1807), and Elizabeth Hamilton’s *Memoirs of Modern Philosophers* (1800).¹²¹ These novels, along with Robinson’s reformist *Hubert de Sevrac* and *The Natural Daughter*, have been selected for consideration, out of the many in Grenby’s list, because they contain scaffold scenes taking place specifically in contemporary, revolutionary France (or within the context of the French Revolution), and therefore most directly speak to my topic. If I am neglecting better known anti-Jacobin scaffold fictions, such as West’s *The Loyalists* (1812), Jane Porter’s *The Scottish Chiefs* (1810),¹²² and George Walker’s *The Vagabond* (1807), it is not to suggest that the scaffold representations in these novels depart in any significant way, in meaning and treatment, from those in the more “docudramatic” works I have selected for discussion. Rather, I prefer to focus on those novels whose place-and-time immediacy to the French Revolution makes their scaffold events less detachable from their authors’ own reality and hence potentially more anxiety-inducing.

¹²¹ I have left Jane West’s *A Tale of the Times* (1799) to one side, with some regret, as most of its action takes place in England. Its condemned Jacobin villain, Fitzosborne, is perhaps *too* strong a representation of scaffold anxiety, for he deprives us of a scaffold scene by taking his own life rather than facing the guillotine, and only moments before he is pardoned.

¹²² Curiously, Porter’s novel does not appear in Grenby’s list of anti-Jacobin titles. While it is one of the more politically ambiguous fictions of the revolutionary period, it is usually considered to be anti-Jacobin—much more so than anything penned by Smith or Robinson.

“In the tumultuous, electric atmosphere of the 1790s, the Revolution was being written even as it was unfolding,” Stephen Blakemore points out in *Crisis in Representation*; “thus to write the Revolution’s history was to participate concurrently in the creation of its meaning” (14). It also meant that writers had to soften the edges of their politics as they rendered them in fictional form, in order to find a publisher and audience while avoiding criticism and even prosecution. While Grenby is right to insist that patriotism was buoyant in post-1793 British society (4-5), his reduction, for instance, of Smith’s *The Banished Man* to a literary “recantation” (33) of *Desmond*’s pro-revolutionary sympathies overlooks the more complex reality faced by moderate and reformist authors in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, as he himself has pointed out elsewhere.¹²³

In *British Women Writers and the French Revolution*, Adriana Craciun shows how certain writers defied convention by “looking to the Continent (especially France), not to the British nation, for political and cultural inspiration”; by posing as “militantly pacifist when pacifism was unpatriotic at best”; by arguing “from a secular and philosophical, not religious and moralistic, perspective”; and by appearing “overtly feminist in attempting to carve out new ‘rights of women’ based on transformed Enlightenment ideals” (6). These elements indeed stand

¹²³ Grenby discusses the influence of audience expectation in Chapter Six of *The Anti-Jacobin Novel*, where he notes “a cyclical relationship between production and reception, a continuum in which authors refined their product according to what readership demanded,” however changeable and complicated (171). “The facts that novelists often came to anti-Jacobinism in the midst of their careers, that an attempt at an anti-Jacobin production was sometimes only a once-off foray into political fiction before a return to less contentious material and that their anti-Jacobin works sometimes even represented a repudiation of previously held sentiments, all suggest that authorial volition was being filtered through, or even contaminated by, something alien to the purest well-springs of literary creation” (172).

out in Smith's and Robinson's French Revolution novels and should not be effaced by their critiques of the new republic's brutality. Craciun also reminds us that, even as late as *The Banished Man*, Smith was critical of domestic nationalism and the British national character (154) and that she was drawing sympathetic portraits of model revolutionaries that were being shifted sideways into such characters as the Polish republican, Carlowitz. These portraits, however, were drawn against scenic anti-Revolutionary backgrounds that featured oppressed citizens and virtuous, persecuted royalists, who by the late 1790s were objects of compassion to most British observers, regardless of ideology. With the 1794 treason trials still fresh in memory—which resulted in the arrest of novelist Thomas Holcroft—such authors as Smith and Robinson, who in this stage of their lives relied on their pens for income, were left little option but to bury their ideals in the subtext of their novels. But most critics agree that they are only superficially compliant. However genuine their disgust towards the excessive violence in France, their principles remain fixed even in their later novels, which are far too ambiguous and complex to be called, as Grenby styles it, “repudiations” (172) of earlier fictions. Smith even admits as much in her preface to *The Banished Man* when she defends her earlier “rejoicing” over the “degree of freedom” that the French appeared to have achieved in 1789 (x). Her firm stance—and her drawing attention to it—is not the posture of an author who regrets past words.

Gary Kelly deconstructs British Jacobinism in his introduction to *The English Jacobin Novel*, in which he lists the means, causes, and manifestations

of the various strands of so-called Jacobinism, and Jacobinism's widely varying responses to anti-Jacobin accusations, legitimate or no. English Jacobinism "was neither a monolithic party nor a creation of the anti-Jacobin papers and pamphleteers," but rather—borrowing a term from Carl Cone¹²⁴—a "state of mind" that shared only a sense of righteousness, a privileging of reason, and a notion that political and social change was necessary. It is equally reductive to assume a uniform politics in so-called anti-Jacobin novels, or a uniform resistance to such change. Kevin Gilmartin, for one, has discerned a "qualified commitment to progress" (6) in counterrevolutionary works, even as these works criticize democratic ideals and often defend "monarchy, social hierarchy, and economic inequality as a providential dispensation" (7). Absent a "straightforward logic of reaction" (7) among British counterrevolutionary writers post-1789, we should consider the irreducible Edmund Burke as a model of anti-Jacobin attitudes—one who may appear, in a certain light, to be deeply conservative, but whose writing betrays "competing counterrevolutionary energies" (7). Few anti-Jacobin novelists shared Burke's intellectual endowment, his delight for nuance, and his sense of complexity for the political and social fabric of the 1790s, but their output as a body—as scholars like Gilmartin have demonstrated—resists comfortable stereotyping.

An inspection of scaffold fictions from the revolutionary period will further dismantle the Jacobin/anti-Jacobin binary. If, as Gilmartin asserts, British anti-Jacobins, as well as Jacobins, demonstrated a "qualified commitment to progress," then we should read between the lines in traditional conservative

¹²⁴ See Cone's *The English Jacobins* (New York, 1968), p.v.

pronouncements on class, property, and authority in order to spot more progressive views about the judicial treatment of individuals or suppressed groups, such as women, non-Britons, and criminals. The complicated (to us, perhaps) figure of William Wilberforce, a paternalistic authoritarian who nevertheless campaigned for the abolition of slavery, or his evangelical brethren who championed universal literacy and nominal equality while adhering to Biblical tenets of strictly codified behaviours, may not be as frequently discussed as Burke, but they are no less fascinating in their juggling of customary values with a broadening, decidedly post-Enlightenment concept of rights and responsibilities. The British anti-Jacobins have taught us that one can adhere to strict religious, patriarchal and authoritarian positions, yet still voice what we might consider to be classic appeals to progress, such as the education of women and the working class, or the abolition of slavery, or the reformation of harsh penal codes.¹²⁵

Indeed, the British anti-Jacobins as a group have, until fairly recently, been mischaracterized as stern traditionalists lacking in compassion for the individual, or lacking at least in compassion's outward face, sensibility. But Claudia L. Johnson has complicated previous understandings of conservative attitudes towards emotion and shown such writers to be eager to engage in "Burkean inflections of sentimentality" (7) in both fiction and polemic. Marilyn

¹²⁵ Even as Wilberforce, for example, championed his friend William Pitt's oppressive anti-democratic methods, supported strict vice and morality laws, and pushed for more aggressive religious conversion in India, he authored an amendment to commute the charge of treason to that of murder in the cases of women suspected of killing their husbands. See William Hague's *William Wilberforce* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2008).

Butler and Janet Todd¹²⁶ once argued that counterrevolutionary writers in Britain married sensibility and radicalism and “feared that sentimentality licensed unleashed subjectivism” (Johnson 6). But according to Johnson they overlooked the fact that “during the 1790s, men of feeling were decidedly conservative types, country gentlemen who resisted needed change, who had an aversion to the newfangled ideas” (8). Johnson agrees that “anti-Jacobin ideologues did sometimes portray reformers as perversely sensitive, but they just as often assailed them for being perversely cold” (8); we see this, for instance, in their countless iterations of Marat and Robespierre who look upon the guillotine’s operation with a sangfroid that is one part cruelty and one part indifference. Sensibility remained a mark of virtue even in anti-Jacobin literature, and it was frequently expressed in the distress of a nobleman or noblewoman over the spate of executions taking place in the next province or nation. As David Bindman remarks in *The Shadow of the Guillotine*, the very image of Louis XVI itself was rehabilitated—by anti-Jacobin artists and authors—from that of a despotic ruler or weak husband to that of the typical condemned hero, replete with sensitivity (48-50) and, we might add, invested with the tragic scaffold tropes of last farewell, imagined death, and tender fallacy.¹²⁷

Anti-Jacobin scaffold fiction supports Johnson’s impression. The authors of these fictions deployed virtue and vice just as most every other late

¹²⁶ See Butler’s *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas* (Oxford, 1987) and Todd’s *Sensibility: An Introduction* (New York, 1986).

¹²⁷ See Preston’s *Democratic Rage* (1793), Bartholomew’s *The Fall of the French Monarchy* (1794), Eyre’s *The Maid of Normandy* (1794), and Hey’s *The Captive Monarch* (1794).

eighteenth-century novelist tended to do, borrowing from Gothic fictions and novels of sensibility with little alteration. In *Adelaide de Narbonne, with Memoirs of Charlotte de Cordet*, an anti-Jacobin novel *cum* Gothic romance,¹²⁸ Helen Craik reduces most political motives to romantic ones, at least on the part of her noble (in both senses of the term) heroine. An exercise in overwrought emotion, Gothic patriarchy, and counterrevolutionary censure, Craik's scaffold fiction places its characters in the midst of the French Revolution (primarily in the ravaged Vendée region) and focuses on the personal and political world of a beloved countess, Adelaide, and her doomed companion, Charlotte De Cordet. But it is also an inherently vexed novel, as Adriana Craciun has noted in her essay "The New Cordays" (2001), in which "royalist and anti-Jacobin politics are thoroughly and constantly in conflict with a simultaneous reliance on a discourse of natural rights and liberties that echoes Rousseau, Wollstonecraft, Godwin, Williams, and Robinson" (196).

Over the course of the novel, Adelaide is made a wife three times over, forced into a marriage of convenience by an unfeeling father, then widowed, then secretly married to the man of her choice, then widowed and wedded once again, under duress, to a low-born republican. Adelaide's virtuous and aristocratic figure stands in, quite obviously, for a placid and monarchic France trampled by the Revolution and a brutal democracy of greedy social climbers. In Craik's vision of the Revolution, the mistakes of the *ancien régime* unleash the beast of rebellion,

¹²⁸ Compare Smith's *The Banished Man*, its Jacobin-Gothic counterpart. Kevin Gilmartin points out that anti-Jacobin fiction (no less than Jacobin novels) "tended to unfold within reasonably current [literary] conventions" (151).

which results in the “bad marriage” of noble France to grasping democrats.¹²⁹

This metaphor is reinforced when Adelaide’s father attempts to marry her off to the horrible Marquis de la Moreville, the associate of a baron who is under Marat’s thrall (V3, 112). Craik’s opinion on these matters is underscored in a feminist critique of arranged marriages among aristocrats for the sake of property and lineage (V1,57). When we learn in Volume IV of the mass compulsion of noblewomen to wed citizens and relinquish property to the New Regime (35), marriage becomes associated with persecution and the threat of death.

Adelaide’s aristocratic father, who is characterized by the same coldness and ambition that define the worst Jacobins, fails to understand that only independent (read *democratic*) choice, such as a woman’s choice of husband, results in a happy and peaceable future. Craik’s female Gothic bias criticizes a specific patriarchal/political tradition even as it assumes an anti-Jacobin posture with regard to inherited property, the natural superiority of (most) nobility, and the repugnance of an ambitious, destabilizing underclass.

The anti-Jacobinism of *Adelaide de Narbonne* is further vexed by the introduction of Hastings, a narrow-minded but heroic English gentleman; Montague, a compatriot who possesses a more balanced view of the French; and Charlotte de Cordet (aka Corday), especially—the historical republican whose murder of Marat is celebrated in conservative fiction. While Hastings and

¹²⁹ See Craciun’s *British Women Writers and the French Revolution*, which examines how Craik and her peers “consistently liken marriage to slavery” (124) and how “women in these revolutionary narratives return again and again to the same impossible choices—marriage or convent, Marat or the guillotine—a feminist acknowledgment of misogyny across regimes” (129), which Craik herself experienced (200, n.31; see also Craciun’s “The New Cordays”, which describes Craik’s own loss of lover and property at the hands of her authoritarian father, pp. 218ff).

Montague complicate “good British/bad French” and even “good conservative/bad radical” distinctions,¹³⁰ such complication is best embodied in the halfling figure of Cordet, who not only represents a conjunction of republican ideals with compassionate action but also—significantly—conjures up an instant impression of the scaffold in the reader’s mind. If Adelaide hesitates to leave Narbonne, where her beloved chosen husband is buried, and if Charlotte barely considers the guillotine as she assists her royalist friends and contemplates assassination, the fright of the nameless nobility in western France is nonetheless palpable in Craik’s novel. The tangible scaffold only appears, however, when Adelaide is seized by Marat’s agents in Paris and put on death row with fellow royalists, where they listen to the sound of the tocsin and contemplate their executions (V3, 245ff). It appears again, briefly, when Charlotte is arrested for murder and brought to the guillotine, though Charlotte herself—the sublime condemned with a “masculine fortitude of mind” (V1, 76) who “awes” the rabble into silence (V4, 282)—shows no fear. Adelaide’s own scaffold anxiety barely registers; leaving France is something she considers only in Volume IV when she learns she has a son to preserve, and it is the threat of rape and a ruined reputation rather than the threat of the guillotine that compels her to marry one of Marat’s toadies in Volume III.¹³¹ Her fear of the scaffold, like Charlotte’s, is

¹³⁰ Hastings, for instance, is mocked for his excessive monarchic sentiment and hypocritical tendencies (V2, 49ff), while Montague, given authorial voice, remarks on some positive aspects of the French system and some negative aspects of the British (V1, 188ff), which includes a lack of reformist thought in England (203).

¹³¹ Adelaide does not entirely escape scaffold anxiety, however. When imprisoned in Paris by Republicans, she admits to feeling personal terror (V3, 249); if she once wished for death as a grieving or beleaguered wife, now that death is close, and in scaffold form, she is afraid (253-54).

displaced by extreme sensibility. While Adelaide is fixed to France by a beloved ghost, Charlotte advises royalists and sympathizes with persecuted religious orders because, though a devout republican, she will not see compatriots harmed. Charlotte is aware that her sentiments, if publicized, will jeopardize her, but “the idea of my country’s situation and the suffering of those individuals with whom I am . . . connected, wring this heart” (70), and embolden her to conspire against the Jacobins. A Catholic, she is described as having an acceptably Protestant outlook which equates seclusion with a selfish quietism that threatens one’s salvation (95-96); compassionate action, therefore, is the only option available to the virtuous.

In the cases of Adelaide and the nervous royalists of Paris and Narbonne, the scaffold represents perverted justice and democratic violence. Charlotte’s encounter with the guillotine, however, is not as straightforward as Adelaide’s (or that of the novel’s villains, who are punished as required by the doctrine of poetic justice). As a republican and murderer, the executed Charlotte illuminates a complicated justice that both condones and vilifies the apparatus that kills her. Throughout *Adelaide de Narbonne*, Charlotte is portrayed as a perfect hybrid of reason and sensibility, an ideal character, and a difficult one to condemn regardless of her philosophical disposition; “Charlotte was a republican,” we are told, “but a rational one” (V1, 31). Craik’s Charlotte Corday adheres to the principles of a new brand of equality and the ethics of piecemeal reform rather than tidal, revolutionary change; she is a figure primly stationed between the

As with most tragic-virtuous heroines, however, her anxiety soon eases, replaced by innate nobility and Christian anticipation of the afterlife (260-61).

Jacobin and anti-Jacobin binaries, invested with the most productive elements of each perspective.¹³² Craik's readers are not supposed to be satisfied in any way by Charlotte's fate, but rather saddened; yet in no passage of the book does this Charlotte renounce her republican principles¹³³ and transform, as it were, into one of her British readers or a royalist Adelaide. Despite the facts of her crime and her destabilizing ideology, Charlotte's execution—a near-martyrdom—signals perverted Jacobin justice and excessive democratic violence. This in turn makes Craik's literary scaffold a complicated symbol that brutalizes the good (innocent royalists), punishes the bad (dissipated Jacobins), and corkscrews Charlotte's meaning as well as its own symbolism so that neither of these can be fixed at one end of the binary or another. It is telling, in fact, that Charlotte arrives at Marat's house just as he is passing sentence on a group of royalists: "She advanced forward; and while his unhallowed lips were yet uttering execrations against them, drew a dagger from her bosom . . . and instantly plunged it into his callous heart!" (V4, 279). Craik moves the death of Marat out of his legendary bathtub and into the judicial parlour of a home associated with unjust executions.

"Thus fell," Craik's narrator opines, "after a long and too prosperous reign over suffering mortality . . . that Marat, who ought to have become a victim to

¹³² In *Fatal Women of Romanticism*, Craciun has noted the way the literary Corday transcends pat categories: "Too often assumed to be misogynistic fantasies, such femmes fatales as Corday and [Marie-Antoinette] were actually charged with contradictory political significance in the 1790s, often serving pro-revolutionary or (proto)feminist ends" (17).

¹³³ Charlotte's character does not arc over the course of the novel. When we meet her, she still admires the 1791 Constitution but no longer admires Marat. She hates "the present system of terror" and wonders "was it for this [France] waded through so many streams of reeking gore?" (V1, 69ff). Her creed remains fixed, however, until her death: "founded on the pure basis of equality, it required not the fashionable auxiliaries of anarchy and bloodshed for its support" (53-54).

public justice, and died, not in his closet, but on a common scaffold” (280). This voice, however, does not appear overly disappointed, for it soon after insists, at Charlotte’s trial, that the murderer “asserted her right to put Marat to death, as a convict already condemned by the public opinion” (280), a fair indication of Craik’s general perspective on the righteousness of the death penalty. Most of Craik’s readers would be inclined to agree with Charlotte, who insists in a letter to her father that “c’est le crime qui fait la honte, et non pas l’échafaud” (282).¹³⁴ Her trial and execution are only briefly sketched; they are not designed to be lingered over, since Charlotte is neither wholly ideal, in an anti-Jacobin light, nor wholly culpable, and Craik’s readers may find their sentiments and philosophies at odds should they linger longer than a moment in contemplation of Charlotte’s fate.

The scaffold’s meaning, or rather its legitimacy, is queried more vigorously in Edward Mangin’s unsung *George the Third*,¹³⁵ a comic romp of a novel in the style of Fielding, Smollett, or Sterne that parses the arbitrary nature of fortune and, by extension, justice. If such a theme is common to the picaresque, it prompts new considerations—and generates contradictions—when located in the context of an unflinching scaffold fiction whose hero must repeatedly extricate himself from the terrible likelihood of execution. George Ardent is destined for a life unlike the insular, law-abiding existence of his clergyman father. He befriends

¹³⁴ From Thomas Corneille’s *Comte d’Essex* (1678), meaning “It is the crime that brings shame, not the scaffold.” The historical Corday cited this line in her actual final letter to her father.

¹³⁵ At the time of writing, there exists no scholarly edition or digital version of *George the Third*, and I had no opportunity to refer to the British Library original. As a result, I am forced to cite less-than-ideal “public domain” editions.

the village “blackguards” (V1, 5) as a child, vandalizes his father’s church and, quite by accident, earns a rich uncle’s patronage. Ardent and a childhood friend named Markham dub themselves Damon and Pythias¹³⁶—an allusion later ironized when they become rivals, and one that is especially appropriate given Ardent’s many run-ins with the scaffold over the course of the novel. He is wrongfully arrested when he helps a robbery victim and finds himself “in a fair way of being sent to Newgate and hanged . . . for performing the highest duty of a brave man and a good citizen” (43); he is afraid of being strung from the yardarm if he contradicts his captain on a voyage to Jamaica (V2, 31); he is mistaken for a French prince when he is captured by republican soldiers and taken before a Revolutionary tribunal¹³⁷ (74ff); a foreigner in the midst of the Terror, he is later re-arrested and condemned in a scene that makes much of Ardent’s scaffold anxiety and devotes realistic detail—such as a “singing in the ears” (115)—to the numbing ordeal of being carted to “the fatal place” with its “vista terminated by the guillotine dressed in all its terrors” (113). The fall of Robespierre springs Ardent from the blade with moments to spare, but he must still avoid (re)capture as a suspected English spy, posing as an American until he falls into the hands of royalist soldiers and helps their cause by impersonating the French prince he resembles, at tremendous personal risk.

¹³⁶ Damon and Pythias, like Lady Jane Grey and Mary Queen of Scots, are two of the eighteenth-century’s most popular scaffold figures. References to or adaptations of the Damon and Pythias legend appear in countless poems and tales and operate as symbols of the noble condemned as often as they do symbols of loyal friendship.

¹³⁷ Being arraigned before such a tribunal during the Terror was enough to invoke severe scaffold anxiety; though an Englishman, George is aware that “its members were rather in the habit of ordering prisoners to execution without the ceremony of a trial” (V2, 95).

By cataloguing Ardent's adventures, I wish to demonstrate how the scaffold pulls at him regardless of place or degree of culpability; with this ubiquitous device Mangin compels us to consider the problem of capital justice, however rough or formal. Ardent's father insists that a virtuous life brings fortune despite the fact that he himself has terrible luck and that his son's wickedest childhood impulse—the throwing of a rock through a church window—brings George unexpected opportunities such as a public school and Oxford education. If the younger Ardent benefits from his misdeed, however, he pays for it with his tumultuous relationship with the scaffold, always the result of a good or at worst a neutral act on the part of the hero. In Mangin's world justice is indeed blind, but not in a balanced or socially productive way. It is either lodged in a harsh tradition that corrupts decent human impulses, or it is founded on ideals and absences; in other words, Mangin accepts neither the rigid jurisprudence of a draconian past and compromised present, nor Rousseau's point of view as it was interpreted by Jacobins, taking instead a moderate position not uncommon among British anti-Jacobin writers.

Mangin's authorial voice emerges not from Ardent or his father but from the character of Gay, an usher at George's public school who preaches the middle way and becomes an advisor to the hero. Gay also discourses on the false value of corporal punishment—a highly relevant topic in a novel consumed by scaffold anxiety and the mistakes of capital justice. Through Gay's use of praise rather than punishment to mould student character, we glean Mangin's own possible suspicion of the rod, which was altogether spared by Ardent's

father but used rather too enthusiastically by Gay's superior, Dr. Flaybottom. It is an abuse George, as narrator, frames in almost Godwinian terms:

The consequence of corporal chastisement is always detrimental. It hardens the untoward and vitiates the generous disposition: if it should produce assiduity, which it hardly ever does, study ceases to be a pleasure, and the allotted task is performed under . . . terror: it inculcates falsehood, the basest of all worldly qualities, by which faults are concealed and changed into habits, instead of being corrected by exposure: and it teaches . . . the grand mystery of tyranny, the art of governing by force. (10)

Ardent claims that the use of corporal punishment in the nation's schools has contributed to "the corruption of public morals in general" (10), and that this world of "miniature men" is a microcosm of society and government. What is most notable in this passage, however, is the criticism of "governing by force" which—again in the context of Ardent's many random and unfair encounters with the authoritarian scaffold—undermines any conservative prescription of the death penalty.

Our narrator's opinion of such matters does not alter over the course of the novel, contrary to what we might expect in an anti-Jacobin text. Rather than position the younger George as a misguided idealist who evolves into a pragmatic moralist by story's end (like *The Vagabond's* Frederick Fenton), Mangin sustains his theme of disproportionate punishment and tinctures it with telling ironies. It is because Ardent's father spared the rod that the errant son

dares to toss that fateful rock, but had George been better disciplined, he would not have been launched on his travels nor would he have ended up with a charming wife and a fat inheritance. Mangin suggests, here and there, that vice is inborn and elsewhere that good boys are made vicious by ill-treatment: “Nature had not intended me . . . either as a thief or a prize-fighter, but wonderful is the force of example . . . and ridicule” (11). If not for Gay’s gentler form of discipline, Ardent would have been shaped into “a pusillanimous, mischievous, and ignorant idler” (10) under Flaybottom’s hand.¹³⁸ Mangin offers us a model, through the boarding-school episode and ensuing scaffold events, of productive governance that appears to criticize the capital code. Though he does not condemn the death penalty as a general social remedy, he repeatedly points out its pitfalls. It ensnares citizens not just in revolutionary France but also in Britain, where institutions corrupt character and where mistakes are made in a juridical process that is arbitrary, fraught, and blind to the facts—not to the same extent as in a Godwin novel, but certainly to a greater degree than was accepted by eighteenth-century proponents of fallible but generally competent British justice.¹³⁹ In *George the Third*, Ardent, the perpetually condemned, is shown to have little control over his legal destiny—nothing he does, or does not do, can veer him away from the path that leads to the scaffold, which is paved with

¹³⁸ Mangin’s use of the word “idler” would have triggered, in the minds of most contemporaries, associations with the era’s scaffold debates. In addition to Hogarth’s “Industry and Idleness,” moralists and broadsheet writers frequently named idleness as the first step on the slippery slope to criminality. See “Everyman and the Gallows” in Andrea McKenzie’s *Tyburn’s Martyrs* for an overview of popular opinion about the causes of criminality in eighteenth-century Britain.

¹³⁹ Again, see McKenzie, who notes that it was “occasionally acknowledged, however tacitly, that justice was not infallible” in the eighteenth century “and that the human beings who administered it were not all-seeing or all-knowing” (67).

accident and consequently inspires needless anxiety in the populations of revolutionary France and by extension Britain.

The presence of an inappropriate scaffold complicates the anti-Jacobin markers in *George the Third*. The sustained tone of injustice in the novel and its repeated discourses on ineffective or mistaken corporal and capital justice suggest that Mangin has a quarrel with the use of the scaffold in Britain as well as in France. He seems to recommend that Ardent (and presumably the rest of us) challenge the whims of law and Providence, and he shows the righteousness of his hero's scaffold evasions. He also coyly undermines a scaffold-story-within-a-scaffold-story by framing it in a novel obsessed with individuals mired in arbitrary justice. This inset tale, spun by an authoritarian sea captain, has a conservative enough moral: when a sympathetic mob surrounds a prison and blocks the road to the scaffold, a mayor must step in for the executioner and hang his own son in the name of the law. Determined to perform his duty and unwilling "to be compelled to prefer the advantage of an individual to the rights of his country" (V2, 70), the father guides his son to a window on the top floor of the prison, and "there presented himself and his victim, about whose neck he had fastened the rope." Tying the other end of the rope to an iron fixture, he "embraced the wretched Walter—and launched him into eternity" (70). The metaphors are ancient and somewhat mixed: the parent-as-state must privilege the body politic over the body of a son. The captain's tale is a classic scaffold story and, like its counterpart in Logan's *Runnamede*, it is designed to both instruct the reader, as well as touch her sensibility.

In other contexts, the captain's tale could be taken, superficially, as a conservative lesson about duty, order, and the appropriateness of the death penalty. The storyteller does not fail to mention how the determination of the father "awed" the unruly crowd and inspired "a sentiment of admiration and sorrow" that calmed observers and sent them "peaceably" on their way (71), restoring order in the community and faith in authority. But Captain Sowerby—with his punny surname and fearsome orthodoxy—makes George uneasy. Sowerby is fixed too firmly to the old order of rigid hierarchy, and his illustration of the traditional view of the death penalty—the pruning of the body politic at the cost of a limb, regardless of personal considerations—was by the time of Mangin's writing giving way to questions about the value of compassionate rule and the social significance of individual citizens. If Mangin had embedded Sowerby's anecdote in a novel more overtly critical of progress, more enamoured of tradition, and more reductively anti-Jacobin, it would have served to underpin the author's themes. In *George the Third*, however, it widens the schism between customary ideas of punishment and the modern value of the individual. If the sympathetic Walter, in Sowerby's traditional view, must perish, the sympathetic Ardent, with his series of unmerited close calls, poses a provocative counter-narrative. Order is not undermined but restored each time Mangin's hero eludes punishment; because they are disproportionate—the outcomes of mistaken identity or Jacobin fanaticism—those punishments are always unjust, no matter how just the punishment in Sowerby's tale of Walter. In a gesture that would please any anti-death penalty crusader, Mangin suggests his readers be more

invested in Ardent's problems of erratic justice than relieved by the hanging death of a confessed murderer.

George the Third, like its author, is a bit of a cipher, the result of an imperfect talent, perhaps, or—a more tangent prospect—the result of a personal obsession that has bled into an artistic composition. Mangin has written a novel about the intrusiveness of accident, where life and death are literally determined by lottery,¹⁴⁰ much like the lottery of inheritance that enriches George by story's end.¹⁴¹ He has also, if we are to believe his claims in "An Essay on Light Reading as It may Be Supposed To Influence Moral Conduct and Literary Taste" (1808), written a novel in order to mock the very sort of novel he produces. Taken on its own, *George the Third* is a charming, ironic tale that complicates its own anti-Jacobin disposition with philosophies of moderation, doubt, and individual helplessness vis-à-vis institutions. But when *George the Third* is considered alongside Mangin's non-fiction polemics, the few absolutes we might affix to the novel drop away entirely. We have a sense, even before turning to his aesthetic essays, that Mangin's only work of fiction satirizes the sources (*Tom Jones*, *Roderick Random*) that inform it, thanks to chapter headings suggestive of empty or meaningless content: *Which would not have appeared if it had not been*

¹⁴⁰ Ardent's closest brush with the scaffold is the result of an apparently random selection, when soldiers enter a crowded prison and name a dozen victims for the guillotine, among them the incredulous George (V2, 111): "There are some accidents of a nature so strange and horrible as to induce a man to believe that they *cannot* happen to him; and of these, the idea that I should ever have my head cut off in Paris was one" (113). Grenby has also noted how this scene depicts execution death as an event foisted on its victims "seemingly at random" (63), a modern view of death penalty (in)justice made literal in Part III of Humphrey Cobb's *Paths of Glory*, when lots are drawn to select scapegoats for the firing squad.

¹⁴¹ George uses the very word "lottery" to describe his financial gains, the result of a series of events involving the recovery of his beloved Arabella and the discovery of her long-lost and very wealthy brother (V3, 43).

written; In which diverse letters of the alphabet are made use of; Composed of more syllables than words, etc. If we can take it at face value, and not as a longwinded parody of extreme anxiety about the reading public,¹⁴² Mangin's "An Essay on Light Reading" confirms our suspicion. In it, Mangin challenges Samuel Johnson's assertion that no young man at a performance of *The Beggar's Opera* would, on the example of Macheath, be "tempted to go on the highway, and hope to escape with impunity" (40). Rather, he considers the heroes of Fielding and Smollett to be "a seducing poison" (41), one that convinces these same young men that "they can riot in security amidst illicit enjoyments, and ultimately reap a richer harvest than tame and timid prudence can hope for" (42), and one that teaches them that the effects of error "are not fatal; that though propriety may be outraged, the punishment is but temporary" (43).

Not only does "An Essay" inveigh against the very sort of novel Mangin publishes, but it opens with a focus on capital punishment and on improprieties that lead to the scaffold. Mangin's warning in "An Essay" presents the scaffold itself as the unpleasant fate to be avoided, rather than hell—the fate of the soul

¹⁴² It would not be out of character for a clergyman to participate in turn-of-the-century debates about the reading public, the circulating libraries, and the ill effects of novel-reading on less sophisticated Britons (see Paul Keen's *The Crisis of Literature in the 1790s* for a thorough examination of these debates). It would be especially appropriate for such a man to join the chorus that cautioned the public about unlimited access to print in both romantic and political form. That said, and all of Mangin's works considered, an indelible spot of doubt prevents me from wholeheartedly accepting "An Essay on Light Reading" on its pronounced terms; it most likely is but cannot certainly be a typical anti-Jacobin discourse against universal readership. In both *George the Third* (too joyously engaged in creating what its author claims he and society abhor) and in Ardent's mock conduct pamphlet of Volume 1 (which showcases Mangin's extraordinary imitative gifts), we glean too much delight in and esteem for Fielding, Sterne and Smollett, whom Mangin professes in "An Essay" to be undeserving models for authors. "An Essay" is perhaps *too* extreme in its condemnation, given its author's parodic suspicion of extremes in *George the Third* and his devoted imitation, which seems (perhaps due to its own failures) more emulative than satiric.

being a more natural concern for a voluble clergyman than the fate of the body. This ties the scaffold-focused “An Essay” in with the scaffold-focused *George the Third*, but Mangin’s charming novel published within a year of “An Essay” seems a mistaken endeavour given his purported mistrust of contemporary readers and the circulating libraries for which *George the Third* was inevitably destined.¹⁴³ That is, Mangin released onto the unsuspecting public a novel he himself did not believe most readers capable of distinguishing from wistful romance, and which in fact appears—when stripped of context—to be a friend of *Tom Jones* rather than a foe. *George the Third* is a *mock* romance seemingly designed for the amusement of a few knowing peers, but it was nevertheless put in the hands of an incompetent general public. As an Anglo-Irish man of the cloth with a satiric-moralistic bent,¹⁴⁴ Mangin likely styled himself a latter-day Swift, one who inexplicably put too much faith in the discretion of the very readership he scorns. Swift published in a period that was not as concerned with the growing literacy of women and the working class; when he attacked Grub Street products, he was more anxious about poor writers than poor readers.¹⁴⁵ These are two sides of the same concern of reader credulity, perhaps, but an important distinction when contrasted with the spirited reading-public debates of Mangin’s lifetime.

¹⁴³ Complicating the question even more is the tendency for authors to resent circulating libraries for economic as well as (or even more than) moral reasons, given their concern that such organizations would eat into their royalties and undermine newly established concepts of authorship. See Devendra P. Varma’s exhaustive study of the eighteenth-century publishing and library cultures in *The Evergreen Tree of Diabolical Knowledge* (Consortium Press, 1972).

¹⁴⁴ In addition to “An Essay on Light Reading,” see Mangin’s *Stories for Short Students, or, Light Lore for Little People*, an 1829 children’s book with all the usual didactic hallmarks.

¹⁴⁵ See, of course, *A Tale of a Tub* (1704).

What Mangin risked doing, in publishing *George the Third*, was further corrupt rather than instruct those average readers of novels for whom he shows so much consideration in “An Essay.” We might solve this strange paradox by declaring Mangin to be a failed satirist who loses control of his irony, and whose didactic markers are overwhelmed by the charm and boisterous momentum of the story itself, and by George’s accidental authority and appeal—all of which makes *George the Third*, at best, a compromised anti-Jacobin fiction. But something else may also have contributed to the overwhelming of style and story at the expense of an obliquely presented moral. The scaffold is simply too present. It is too ubiquitous a symbol of the anxiety of its hero and, possibly, its author. It is not just a delayed and finally overturned punishment that is shown to be unfit for George’s crime of ambition. It also hints that Mangin may himself have been swept up in concerns about the improper use of the scaffold against generally decent citizens by illegitimate authorities who compelled ideological adjustment through force. Just as Edmund Burke worried that the executions of rebellious relatives in Ireland might affect himself and his immediate family,¹⁴⁶ Mangin was a direct descendent, on both his maternal and paternal sides, from the Huguenots who endured censure, abuse, and forced conversion under Louis XIV’s Edict of Fontainebleau. The events in Jacobin and Napoleonic France—combined with the recent rebellion in his native Ireland—would not likely have been too distantly set apart, in Mangin’s mind, from the persecution of his forebears. Persecution, along with authoritarian or mob violence, that is, might have seemed to someone like Mangin a threat that tinted every consideration

¹⁴⁶ See my discussion of Luke Gibbons’ *Edmund Burke and Ireland* in Chapter One, Section 2.

of religious and political certainty—of state power and its court’s punitive arm. Absent intimate biographical details of Mangin’s perspective on the thing, we can only speculate, but it is nevertheless safe to point out that he had both the background and the social/religious standing to fear that events in France and Ireland might reach as far as Bath and push him up the scaffold steps. George himself may term his facing the guillotine an absurdly unlikely “accident of nature” (V2, 113), but the reader, even unaware of Mangin’s background, grasps authorial irony and understands that Mangin’s contemporaries were aware that “having their heads cut off” (113) was not out of the realm of possibility in such a climate.

Put succinctly, we cannot claim absolutely but nor can we dismiss the possibility that an author’s internal scaffold anxiety disrupted to some extent his artistic endeavour. The various scaffolds in *George the Third* have turned Mangin’s novel-against-the-novel into a novel against—or rather critical of—the noose and the guillotine. That Mangin’s own anxieties may have distorted his intended didacticism explains in part why that didacticism is noticeably effaced in *George the Third*. His mock novel reads like a novel—it would certainly have read like a novel, full stop, to most of its consumers. Moreover, its implicit anti-Jacobinism is undermined by the same scaffold that undermines its satire—a phenomenon recognizable in many anti-Jacobin fictions whose representations of the Republican guillotine sometimes accidentally cue progressive criticisms of the British scaffold. The focus on violence in Mangin’s novel and the novels of his peers illuminates the problems of juridical bloodshed in Britain nearly as much as

it does the savagery of Republican justice. In *George the Third* and similar anti-Jacobin scaffold fictions, we discern, thanks to the presence of a scaffold made terrible, Kevin Gilmartin's "qualified commitment to progress" (6) on the question of corporal punishment—that is, any punishment inflicted upon the offender's person by a sanctioned authority. In Mangin's body of work, taken as a whole, we also discern Gilmartin's "competing counterrevolutionary energies" (7), which esteem the educated and moral elite, even as they criticize their methods and suggest reforms that contradict centuries of tradition. Mangin, like Craik, appears to disdain the "perverse coldness" that Claudia L. Johnson reminds us characterizes some radicals in anti-Jacobin texts (8), and which attaches to representations of the scaffold—to any and all instances of unjust execution—in novels concerned with their hero or heroine's evasion of capital punishment.

3: The Confounding Guillotine

I have continued to rely on the broad term "scaffold" so far in this chapter, but at this point some further distinction is necessary. In discussions of representations of executions in revolutionary France, it is fair to say that the image such a backdrop conjures in our minds is almost exclusively that of the guillotine, with all of its particular associations—aesthetic and visceral. Death by guillotine was instantaneous¹⁴⁷ and, unlike the eighteenth-century noose, there

¹⁴⁷ I will not wade into the perennial debate about whether or not the condemned person's head "survives" for a significant measure of time post-decapitation; I use the term *instantaneous* relative to most hanging deaths, to botched decapitations by axe, to deaths by electrocution or lethal injection, never mind the French wheel.

was no infinitesimal chance of escape should the rope be cut too long or the knot poorly positioned under the jaw (malfunctions that, in some instances in British legal history, led to pardons for the hardy offender).¹⁴⁸ To be laid upon the bascule, swung into position, and locked into place by the yoke was a dispiriting guarantee. Those who observed these preparations or read about them in a scaffold fiction could be certain there was little chance of escaping death on the part of the condemned—no god-out-of-the-machine, for the god was the machine, its sublime presence anchoring the person and declaring him dead already.¹⁴⁹ No higher than many hanging trees, the guillotine’s “gigantism” made it seem taller and more formidable than it really was,¹⁵⁰ its movable blade suggestive of teeth. Victims were eaten rather than dangled, their heads not covered by a hood but visible and ultimately detached so that human insides were exposed to the audience. Because the slice was uniform and precise—unlike the series of gashes English traitors endured during a hanging, drawing, and quartering—it had the aspect of a surgical lesson, an impersonal cruelty somehow detached from the victim himself. Because of its processing power, which allowed for an extraordinary number of victims to be dispatched over the

¹⁴⁸ See McKenzie’s *Tyburn’s Martyrs*, which discusses pardons given on the grounds that Providence had willed the condemned person to live (19-20).

¹⁴⁹ Camus implies the same in his existential scaffold fiction, *The Stranger*, when Meursault muses that “what was wrong about the guillotine was that the condemned man had no chance at all, absolutely none” (Part V).

¹⁵⁰ See my discussion of Regina Janes’ observations on the guillotine’s sublime features in Chapter One, Section 3. Dickens reifies this impression in *A Tale of Two Cities*, when his narrator proclaims that “all the devouring and insatiate Monsters imagined since imagination could record itself, are fused in the one realization, Guillotine” (Book the Third, XV). However common the idea of the formidable guillotine, however, it is not universal; see *The Stranger*, in which the condemned Meursault notes that the modern Algerian guillotine, however inescapable it may be, has in appearance “nothing very impressive about it” (Part V).

course of a day,¹⁵¹ the guillotine represents not just *death* but *many deaths*, signifying in our minds the idea of a ravening scaffold or state. In these and countless other ways the revolutionary guillotine differed from the Georgian gallows, and it becomes more and more challenging to equate the two the closer we examine the apparatus itself, as both killer and symbol.

In describing a 1794 print entitled “Robespierre, Guillotining the Executioner After Having Guillotined all of France,” Steven Blakemore sees a Paris made up of “a wilderness of guillotines” that typifies 1790s France as “a republic of death—an egalitarian fraternity compelled to die for the nation, finally one and indivisible” (13). The irony is, of course, that the guillotine was a separating device by design, and while as a symbol it might evoke a strained sort of political uniformity, as an instrument it evokes exactly the opposite: “Divided heads and bodies,” Blakemore notes, “represent the corrupt body politic”—the first of many paradoxical effects of the machine that made it so compelling and distinct in contemporary imaginations. John Brewer, in his contribution to Bindman’s *The Shadow of the Guillotine*, implies such a paradox through his word choice:

At a stroke the French acquired a political culture which resembled that which the English had developed over a century or more. . . .

Revolutionary ideology was utterly committed to the idea that 1789

¹⁵¹ In *The Body and the French Revolution*, Dorinda Outram writes that “under the old regime...decapitation was a rare penalty, reserved for the nobility and administered by axe. Now, decapitation was democratized. . . . The old method with the axe would simply not have been adequate to the job. . . . The heroic self-control which might be expected from a Lally-Tollendal was not to be expected from those lower-class persons executed in batches. . . . Most obviously, it allowed the execution of greater numbers of people. It is difficult to see how the 14,080 death sentences passed between March 1793 and August 1794 . . . could have been carried out without the new machine” (109-110).

marked a sharp caesura with the past. . . . To prove that a total break had been made with the past [the Revolution] had to appear everywhere: its symbols to be ubiquitous; its rituals and ceremonies perspicuous and public. For the ardent revolutionary the Revolution must not only happen; it had to be seen to occur, its images and message inscribed again and again on revolutionary participants and observers alike. (12-13)

Brewer's use of phrases like "at a stroke," "a sharp caesura," and "a total break" is cleverly suggestive of the Revolution's enduring symbol; he speaks of the Revolution in general terms in this passage, but his vocabulary evokes the fall of the guillotine's blade, which as a larger object signals the swift political change Brewer denotes while pointing to the immediate shift between life and death that occurs on the bascule, a shift more precise and efficient than any produced by the British axe. If, as James A.W. Heffernan claims in *Representing the Revolution* (1992), "nothing has ever overpowered the storming of the Bastille as an image of the Revolution in its originating moment" (x), the guillotine quickly overtook the Bastille as the event's enduring signifier, leaving the former a distant second. The Bastille, as Heffernan writes, remains a symbol of liberty (xi), perhaps, but the guillotine is indisputably the premiere symbol of the wider Revolution, and it continues to be selected by writers, artists, and filmmakers¹⁵²

¹⁵² That it is the guillotine, and its connotative *absence* of liberty, that has most impressed us centuries on is evident in Wajda's *Danton*, which opens not with the storming of the Bastille but with sans-culottes demanding papers of 1794 travellers, quickly followed by a lingering shot of a shrouded guillotine in a downpour—an image doubly suggestive of oppression and death.

as the monolithic image of the 1790s partly because of its ability to intimidate with its design and bewilder with its paradoxical implications.

“Without symbolism, human heads would be safe from human hands,” Regina Janes observes in *Losing our Heads* (9), and without the human head (we might append), symbolism would be safe from subversion in an epoch of “body-based ideology” (ix) such as the late eighteenth century. Janes’ study examines both the social and aesthetic function of decapitation, and it treats the act (or images of the act, or a synecdoche of the act such as the guillotine) as one in which conflicting meanings often intersect. Decapitation, Janes points out, is disturbing partly because it “makes visible a violence that the west has been campaigning to make invisible since the seventeenth century” when we began to “have faith in the materiality of the body and believe in its rights” (ix). But like any symbol,¹⁵³ decapitation’s meaning is fluid: “that the head means is a constant; what it means and how it is used are contingent, temporal, historical, cultural, and contradictory” (x). Instruments of decapitation are themselves subject to similar fluctuations, and the French Revolution, which “saw two kinds of beheadings” (67), demonstrates this phenomenon:

One kind [that is, beheadings by guillotine] looked towards our own time and the technological perfection of impersonal violence. Aloft on pikes, the other looked back a much longer way. Heads speared

¹⁵³ Semiotician Umberto Eco illustrates the fluidity of symbols and their wonderful ability to confound meaning in his Postscript to *The Name of the Rose*: “The idea of calling my book *The Name of the Rose* came to me virtually by chance and I liked it because the rose is a symbolic figure so rich in meanings that by now it hardly has any meaning left: Dante’s mystic rose, and go lovely rose, the Wars of the Roses, rose thou art sick, too many rings around the Rosie, a rose by any other name, a rose is a rose is a rose, the Rosicrucians. The title rightly disoriented the reader, who was unable to choose just one interpretation . . .” (506).

on pikes, posted on bridges, gates, and walls, or heaped beside a tent, are far more ancient than the guillotine and far more widespread in their geographical dispersal. But the guillotine . . . has accrued meanings more complex. . . . Heads on pikes were the product of primitive, popular violence (or justice). The guillotine was the mechanism of revolutionary, institutional violence (or justice). Pike and guillotine shared . . . multiple, culturally determined meanings. . . . Both evoked contradictory responses—horror in some quarters, relish in others—and the continuum in between: fascinated horror, queasy relish, and the shrug of indifference. But the guillotine was new. . . . Almost at once it acquired a spectacular history that knotted it inextricably to the most controversial period of the Revolution. . . . Every observer had to accommodate it, and reality had to be reshaped to fit in, precisely because the guillotine was an instrument of order that generated (what seemed to many) disorder. (67)

Furthermore, as Janes points out, the guillotine claimed multiple and even conflicting benefits. Originally designed not just to improve the efficiency of mass executions and to reduce the suffering of the condemned, the guillotine promised to make executions “equal, humane, stable, legal, and boring” (78). Though uniquely “spectacular” and initially capable of drawing vast crowds, it was also found by audiences to be “too quick,” the head disappearing, “without bouncing or rolling, into the basket” (78). Intended to level the classes by allowing all

citizens to die like aristocrats with a dignified beheading, the guillotine was first an instrument of the people, then later of the state (79-80).¹⁵⁴

Brutal and humane, spectacular and dull, democratic and tyrannical, the guillotine as a symbol or plot device is fraught and brings with it a host of warring implications. To embed the guillotine in a literary text—a form already susceptible to the slippage of interpretation—is to accept its vexations and (sometimes, depending on the author) to take up the nearly impossible challenge of ascribing to it a stable frame of meaning. It becomes problematic in the hands of British anti-Jacobin authors, who mostly as a group declared their suspicion of “equality” and represented the guillotine as a symbol of democracy-gone-wrong when they were not deploying it as a symbol of (poetic) justice-gone-right. Remarkably, many such authors also anchored their narratives with a guillotine hoping both to immobilize the righteous moral position of the English while exposing the horrors that result when a people are infected with absolutist ideology. If the guillotine is the premiere signifier of the French Revolution, then the idea of execution must inevitably become attached to this signifier so that the Revolution was execution¹⁵⁵ even in the minds of its contemporaries. This violence naturally

¹⁵⁴ In *The Shadow of the Guillotine*, John Brewer also notes the paradoxical significance of the guillotine as seen through the lens of British observers: “In English prints the predominant symbol of the Revolution is the guillotine. It appears not only as subject-matter, as in depictions of the execution of the king, but as part of France’s new revolutionary iconography. The guillotine becomes the symbol of philosophy run mad. A scientific device originally designed to alleviate suffering, it is transformed by the madness of revolution into the instrument of judicial murder, providing the rational and technical means for mass execution” (21-22). In *Gothic Bodies*, Steven Bruhm remarks as well on the “paradoxical development” of the guillotine, which was touted as a “humane” surgical procedure (6-7).

¹⁵⁵ To understand how execution has become symbolically analogous with the Revolution itself, we need look no further than *A Tale of Two Cities*, in which Dickens makes them equivalent, literally and figuratively, again and again. This inextricable association is most clear when Sydney Carton and a Jacobin sawyer exchange the following words: “How goes the Republic?” “You

accords with the conditions for misguided moral certainty, for, as Elaine Scarry has noted, the body in pain—that is, the body tortured or destroyed by a higher or more powerful authority—has always accompanied deep social change. “At particular moments when there is within a society a crisis of belief,” Scarry writes, “that is, when some central idea or ideology or cultural construct has ceased to elicit a population’s belief, . . . the sheer material factualness of the human body will be borrowed to lend that cultural construct the aura of ‘realness’ and ‘certainty’” (14). Whether that central idea “has ceased” or, in the case of the French Revolution, requires nurturing and reinforcing because it is embryonic and by extension tenuous, the guillotine as a symbol of reinforcement of Jacobin certainty could not be passed up by anti-Jacobin writers dedicated to representing contemporary, revolutionary France in their fictions.

In *Gothic Bodies*, Steven Bruhm discusses the precariousness of representations of pain in the Romantic period, and what he writes about torture in general could also apply to the emotional torture and destructive physical effects of being sentenced to the guillotine, especially since he cues Jacobin violence in this passage:

Pain presents a confusion because . . . it invites us to sympathize physically and emotionally with someone whom we might abhor morally or politically—someone like the sodomite, or like Louis XVI or Marie Antoinette, the objects of Jacobin scorn. Similarly, pain presents problems because it is sometimes seen as a necessary

mean the Guillotine. Not ill. Sixty-three to-day. We shall mount a hundred soon. Samson and his men complain sometimes, of being exhausted.” (Book the Third, XI)

result of fighting injustice; the infliction of pain is essential to fighting the tyranny that inflicts pain on others. The necessity of inflicting pain, and the moral questions it raises, underlie much Romantic fiction, like Shelley's *The Cenci*¹⁵⁶ or Godwin's *Caleb Williams*, and also Jacobin tracts. . . . These writings demonstrate the problem of determining whose pain we should feel and whose pain we should remain insensible to. (24)

Such questions arise just as frequently in anti-Jacobin fictions centered around the guillotining of heroes and villains alike. Craik's representation of Charlotte Corday and her execution in *Adelaide de Narbonne* speaks to this complexity; the character embodies the problematic "moral certainty" of Charlotte's Jacobin ideals (read however negatively by Craik's audience) and her judgment of Marat's evil, which she corrects with righteous violence. Moreover, Craik's readers are meant to "remain insensible" to the bloodiness of Marat's assassination while empathizing with Charlotte in her final hours and abhorring the misguided justice that kills her. They must find themselves at odds with the instrument that threatens Adelaide, that makes a martyr of Charlotte, but that will also (eventually, beyond the terminus of the text itself) have its revenge on Robespierre and other real-life demagogues.

The guillotine naturally attaches to moral certainty in revolutionary scaffold fictions. In anti-Jacobin novels, especially, characters are no longer exemplary victims of juridical error or tyrannical oppression, but figures of brutal and

¹⁵⁶ Shelley's 1819 scaffold tragedy involves a daughter executed for the murder of her incestuous father (also a murderer who temporarily bribes his way out of a charge and is then assassinated before he can be arrested).

excessive executions triggered by French Jacobin ideals. In “Reflections on the Guillotine” (1957), Albert Camus reminds readers of the dangers of moral certainty in terms that evoke the debates of the 1790s: “One kills for a nation or a class that has been granted divine status,” he writes, then adds, “one kills for a future society that has likewise been given divine status. Whoever thinks he has omniscience imagines he has omnipotence” (228). Camus is directing his anti-death penalty rhetoric at the guillotine of 1950s France, but his words easily refer as well to the guillotine of the 1790s, when use of the machine was encouraged by both despotic and so-called Enlightened minds. By Camus’ day, the guillotine’s blade fell infrequently. It was removed from the public eye and enjoyed its last hurrah as European neighbours began to strike the death penalty from their books and look askance at France’s continued habit of beheading its citizens, particularly in colonial Algeria.

When Camus remarks on the danger of moral certainty, he is reiterating the tenets of classical skepticism which, after centuries of dormancy, regained currency during the Renaissance and undermined authoritative theology. It was temporarily overruled by René Descartes’ “dogmatic metaphysical theory” (Van Leeuwen ix), but constructive skepticism in science, religion, and moral philosophy was eventually championed by the Royal Society and effloresced in late seventeenth-century Britain, where it would subsequently influence Locke and Hume.¹⁵⁷ The 1790s scaffold came under scrutiny not just thanks to new

¹⁵⁷ See Richard H. Popkin’s preface to Henry G. Van Leeuwen’s *The Problem of Certainty in English Thought, 1630-1690*, which details how polemicists of both the Reformation and Restoration periods drew on “the arsenal of classical scepticism to show that the other side had no basis for the claims to religious knowledge and truth that they were making” (ix). The perils of

premiums on compassion, reason, and the life of the individual, but also because the dreadful moral certainty enshrined in revolutionary France appeared, to many Britons, to be far more extreme than anything produced by the most dogmatic anti-Jacobin values. In the wake of Hume's pronouncement that "to approve of one character, to condemn another, are only so many different [subjective] perceptions,"¹⁵⁸ moral objectivity lost even more ground, which in turn eroded the foundation on which stood the scaffold—no longer an automatically right, or righteous, cultural standard.

Moral certainty is muddled in *Adelaide de Narbonne* by the presence of the obfuscating guillotine, and it is undermined in *George the Third*, in which even in its final pages the arrogance of any philosophical declaration in the face of Providence seems suspect. It is also problematic in Elizabeth Hamilton's *Memoirs of Modern Philosophers*. Like many female anti-Jacobin authors, Hamilton was herself a figure of mixed ideals, avowedly against the Revolution and its perplexing impatience for class equality on the one hand, yet also (later in life) a believer in women's coequal intellectual abilities and a proponent of female education.¹⁵⁹ She was also for a time predictably suspicious of the "castle-

moral certainty is most famously encapsulated in Bertrand Russell's statement, "Most of the greatest evils that man has inflicted upon man have come through people feeling quite certain about something which, in fact, was false" ("Ideas that Have Harmed Mankind, p. 162).

¹⁵⁸ See *A Treatise on Human Nature*, Book III, Part I, Section 1.

¹⁵⁹ See Claire Grogan's introduction to the Broadview edition of *Memoirs of Modern Philosophers*, which discusses Hamilton's views on education and gender. "Hamilton was actually a liberal writer who sits midway between [the] two political extremes" of loyalist anti-Jacobinism and Wollstonecraft, and who believed, as many Britons did, that some moderate, limited reform was needed and should "occur within a framework of middle-class morality and Xian faith" (12). Grogan points out that Hamilton's proto-feminism developed after the publication of *Memoirs of Modern Philosophers*, which still emphasizes the "natural distinctions" between the sexes (102).

building” to which female imaginations were considered prone thanks in part to unsupervised romance-reading (85-87), and she goes so far as to equate the New Philosophers with the savage (in her mind) Hottentots who moved freely between domestic unions (141ff). The two problems collide disastrously in Hamilton’s novel, when the “castle-building” Julia Delmont absorbs one romance too many, becomes vulnerable to the Jacobin tenets of Vallaton, and is ultimately ruined by his modern approach to love and marriage.¹⁶⁰ A Christian moralist, Hamilton the author appears comfortably cemented in her own tenets, which are absolute when it comes to questions of alliances between the sexes or the duty of gentlemen towards female relatives and labourers, who in *Modern Philosophers* are at their happiest when they “admire the order of Providence” (106-107) and accept their allotted stations.

But once again the literary guillotine distorts whatever opinion the author herself may have held about justice, or rather it distorts the real-life scaffold as it attempts to represent moral certainty regarding legal questions. Hamilton’s guillotine and its British equivalent, the noose, are indisputably vexed when seen through the eyes of her villain, the conniving Vallaton. The son of an English con-artist, he is scarred by the hanging of his mother, which he witnessed as a youth and which infected him with enough scaffold anxiety to seek a more legitimate living for a time. “Many have trembled at phantoms less formidable than the gallows” (52), Hamilton’s narrator points out, but the gallows—along with its French counterpart after its 1792 introduction—appears to have no lasting

¹⁶⁰ As Craciun points out in *British Women Writers and the French Revolution*, Julia has also been philosophically weakened by her exposure to the shallow Godwinian Bridgetina.

detering effect on the vicious. As a social remedy, it can punish but never correct behaviour in *Modern Philosophers*; this undermines an important piece of the pro-death penalty rhetoric of Hamilton's contemporaries, while at the same time it harks back to traditional Augustan views of criminality as a static, inherent disposition.¹⁶¹ Despite Vallaton's best intentions and the assistance of two benefactors, he ultimately resorts to theft and fraud. Perfectibility is ironized by Hamilton, whose novel parodies Godwin's views through extremes and exaggerations; Vallaton only improves his deceit, not his morals (54). Upon entering into the political sphere, he finds himself confronted again with scaffold anxiety when "a threatened prosecution for sedition struck such terror in his heart, that he resolved to quit the kingdom" for Paris (58). In other words, the scaffold's pall leads to the further corruption of Vallaton by driving him to France and into the New Philosophy circle of Mr. Myope (60). Myope's training helps Vallaton philosophize himself into the appropriation of seven hundred guineas entrusted to his care—and so does the guillotine, which Vallaton convinces himself has already exterminated the money's rightful owner (60).

Rather than deter criminality or leave observers relatively unaffected (as it does earlier in the text), this incarnation of the scaffold—in Vallaton's imagination—actively encourages wrongdoing. "Who could call him into account?" (60) Vallaton concludes, able in this moment to stifle his anxiety just as he is about to commit the worst of his offenses so far. But he soon learns that the

¹⁶¹ According to Andrea McKenzie and other historical criminologists, in much of the eighteenth century the common perception of criminality was that it was individually (as opposed to supernaturally) produced, yet difficult to reform. Because sinning involved a progressive and willful withdrawal from God's grace, it was often "cured" only by execution. See McKenzie's chapter entitled "Everyman and the Gallows" in *Tyburn's Martyrs*.

money's owner survives and does what he can to avoid both the elderly gentleman he has wronged and the Republican authorities who, at this point in the Terror, are eager to arrest English visitors. Vallaton must rely on a cognitive dissonance that permits him, on the one hand, to commit a capital crime while, on the other, to observe the execution procession of aristocrats with philosophical satisfaction:

“What a charming contrivance is this guillotine!” said he to himself, as he went along. “How effectually does it stop the mouths of troublesome people. Would that this good-for-nothing old man had made such a desirable exit! And why should he not? Of what utility is his life to society? Why should he deprive me of these seven hundred guineas? Does not the philosophy, I now profess, teach that there is no such thing as right? From thence the inference is plain, that the gold ought in justice to be disposed of in the way that will be most conducive to the general interests of society.” (62)

The dissonance does not reside in the appropriation of a rich man's funds either by theft or communal inheritance—that much is consistent in the grasping Jacobin mind as Hamilton understands and presents it. Rather, it can be found in Vallaton's view of the guillotine as a device that threatens him even as it clears away royalist enemies for his benefit. His coming across the execution procession occurs, in the text, just as he learns that the money's owner is alive and seeking him in Paris, which causes him to quake anew. It also inspires him

to mitigate his own legal risks by framing the owner with a treasonous letter and guaranteeing the other's silence through execution (63ff).

The effect is immediate, and Vallaton struggles with his conscience, as his philosophical justifications do little to shore up his certainty (65). Unable to find solace among his friends, he ambles through the streets and finds himself at the foot of a freshly-used guillotine symbolic of his guilt: a machine that kills the innocent (as Hamilton shows it doing elsewhere) as well as men like Vallaton, whose crime is bound up in its blade not just as a potential punishment but as an abettor of his transgression:

Never were the energies of a philosopher put to a severer trial than those Vallaton underwent, on beholding himself at the foot of the instrument of death—the blood-stained guillotine! He started with horror, yet had he not the power of instantly turning from it; he seemed arrested to the spot; he gazed upon the scaffold; he fancied he there beheld the placid countenance of the meek old man smiling upon him. . . . Again he thought he saw his silver hairs grasped by the hand of the executioner, and the blood-streaming head held up to his distracted sight. His knees smote against each other, a chilly coldness crept along his whole frame, and his emotions became so apparent, as to attract the notice of the passengers. (66)

Vallaton is warned by a sans-culotte that his grief may put him under suspicion. He moves along, but we are told by the narrator that he never manages to

suppress the “haggard vision” (67) of his victim’s execution, a stand-in for his own, which finally arrives under similar circumstances when he is himself framed as a royalist and led to the scaffold, where he struggles against the executioner and dies a craven representation of Jacobin selfishness (386-87). In the space of a novel, Hamilton’s guillotine moves from an instrument of Republican tyranny—a tool of politicians and criminals both—to a comforting device of poetic justice that restores moral order to the proceedings as far as it can.

But what is the moral significance of the guillotine itself, when—regardless of an author’s position on the death penalty—it cues notions of unfair executions that serve no social benefit and that in fact, at times, inspire and even enable characters to sin? It is difficult to confine Hamilton’s scaffold and its moral references to the framework of her story when the novel’s own docudramatic events and particular execution device remind us too squarely of the period in which she was writing. The gallows, the axe, and even the firing squad also make appearances in British anti-Jacobin fictions, and they all tend to share such troublesome contradictions, but not to the degree of those engendered by the literary guillotine. Witness the scaffolds in *The Loyalists*, *The Scottish Chiefs*, and *The Vagabond*,¹⁶² which, however little execution is queried in these texts relative to others, are yet susceptible to the creep of humanitarian doubt. In these

¹⁶² In George Walker’s *The Vagabond*, for example, the scaffold Fenton escapes in V1, Ch. IV is just. Elsewhere, in “Meditations on a Gibbet,” Walker parodies the Jacobin view of the scaffold as an appropriator of property in order to deny it. But the same gibbet inspires Fenton to become a highwayman and is shown to be ineffective when Stupeo’s hanging does not kill him and leads to a brief career as a grave-robber. Though Walker deploys the novel’s climactic burnings at the stake to argue for the need for Hobbesian authority to mitigate human cruelty, *contra* Rousseau, his chosen example of cruelty—an ancient form of execution—in a way complicates his death-penalty apology, as does the narrator’s concluding ironic sentiment about the equalizing penal codes of England.

fictions, too, moral certainty is sometimes elusive and always tenuous because of what was occurring historically and politically around their authors, and because of the tendency of even these authors to pair their representations of just scaffolds with unjust ones. When these novels feature the executions or near-executions of the virtuous, these executions inevitably become events more ethically fraught than those found in traditional scaffold tragedies, like *Measure for Measure*, or in the gratuitous tableaux of Restoration drama, or in the poignant she-tragedies of Rowe and Banks. Even the scaffolds in the works of loyalist Jane West and George Walker, in other words, are no longer allowed simply to *be* anymore; they are no longer like the scaffolds of earlier fictions, in which heroes and heroines were threatened with a judicial device that was presumed righteous in every other case but their own. Their scaffolds have been tinged by the humanitarian discourse that had already, by 1789 and before the guillotine even appeared, altered the shade of such devices forever.

4: Humanitarianism Pruned and Forced

In “The Body and Punishment in Eighteenth-Century England,” Randall McGowen remarks how the punished body “was constructed in different ways by those who defended and those who attacked the gallows” (653). He reminds us of the traditional prescription for treating the diseased body politic with necessary “amputations,” a conception of state and justice presented by Hobbes but dating back at least as far as the classical era and having at its core sacrificial notions:

The problem with crime lay in its control and containment. The danger it represented lay not in the individual act but in its tendency to upset the fragile harmony of the community. Society was an unstable body in which the parts were prone to insurrection and the whole to dissolution. . . . Those who endangered the life of society had forfeited their place in the body politic. . . . The corrupt members of a community must be cut off by the sword of justice, lest by delay and impunity, the malignant disease spread further, and the whole be infected. (661-62)

Many considered the magistrate analogous to the physician: one who is able to see the whole entity and prescribe a course of treatment that privileges the larger corpus rather than the infected part (664). We see this traditional perspective in full play in *Measure for Measure*, when Escalus compares the execution of a citizen to occasional but necessary social pruning. “Let us be keen, and rather cut a little,” he suggests, rather “than fall, and bruise to death” the tree, or body, of Viennese society, which requires maintenance for healthy growth (II.i.5-6). In accepting this widespread and longstanding idea, communities had little reason to question the death penalty as an indispensable solution to the problems of crime and moral corruption (though they may have modified the particular methods used to put the offender to death or tested the rigour of their capital codes). McGowen attaches this view of punishment to conservative proponents of the death penalty in the age of reform—to those who sought not only to keep the scaffold in operation, but also to keep it in public view.

By the 1770s, however, more and more people—including conservatives like Blackstone and Eden (668)—began to turn inside out the notion that the individual body grew out of and was sustained by the body politic. “Increasingly,” McGowen notes, “the idea of the general good came to be connected with the fate of the body—not the body politic, but the individual body of the offender” (669). Successful rule began to be thought to originate in authority’s treatment of the individual bodies under its jurisdiction, for no model society could be built upon barbarity and no compassion taught without sustained demonstrations of mercy. With the new premium put on the individual, the role of the individual’s body in juridical punishment naturally altered:

We [now] have a body that was the site of pain and pleasure, of choice and consent. Society was composed of separate bodies, of individuals who might be connected by interest and feeling rather than by a shared ceremonial life. The life of the individual was uniquely important, and sacrifice of the physical body would injure rather than heal the social body. . . . The human body had once been sacrificed to save the body politic; now the human body was to be saved because respect for the body formed the basis of an ever more perfect union. (679)

Without respect for the individual body, argued reformers, “politeness and refinement” (668) would find no toehold in the community. Along with this *volte* came an onrush of humane and rational concerns articulated in louder voices and longer tracts and anatomized in the era’s scaffold fictions.

If the fictional axe and gallows had the potential to remain, in some cases, icons of customary ideas of justice—ones that might signify a traditionally pragmatic view of execution and perhaps argue for a final, conservative preference on the part of an author—the guillotine, as Regina Janes illustrates, was inevitably a symbol of reform and humanitarianism even in its most brutal literary representations. That is, the guillotine’s worst incarnations can never help casting a shadow of its best intentions, a phenomenon that maintains the machine as a moral complication rather than solution. The guillotine, which “spared neither friend nor enemy” as even Jane West understands (*A Tale of the Times* 373), had a mission distinct from its antecedents though it, too, ultimately sought to strengthen and unite a community by lopping its rotten boughs. That is, in the guillotine we find yet another contradiction that impedes straightforward textual interpretations wherever it appears: however technically advanced and however vaunted as a symbol of newfangled ideals of democracy and humanitarianism, it could not help communicating old ideas of trimming and pruning more perfectly than any other execution device, even the axe or sword. With a visible and audible snip as clean as that of gardening shears, the offending growth was separated from the rest of the body politic. Janes has noted the way the guillotine presumes to obscure or at least minimize the violence of execution by making it dull and clinical (though the very sublimity of scaffold death, of course, ultimately destabilizes this intent). “The ancient pleasures of violence recede from view as the machine erases the human hand,” she writes in “Beheadings” (46). “Unlike pikes,” she notes, “decapitating

machines are stationary. They do not perambulate palaces and streets,” like knives and spears, to “surge threateningly and randomly” (34). The guillotine “effaced the headsman,” in the minds of some of its proponents, and argued for the impersonality of both the condemned and the actors for the state. “Displaced from person to machine, the act of death became a product of justice itself” (34) rather than of frenzied human hands, and a truer approximation of the traditional impetus for capital punishment: not punishment so much as housekeeping.¹⁶³

Of course, as commentators like Simon Schama have argued (and as Janes herself implies), this clinical and humane posturing was disingenuous. By late 1792 and only months after its first use, Schama writes in *Citizens* (1989), the guillotine “return[ed] to the exemplary and spectacular purposes which both Joseph Guillotin’s ‘philanthropy’ and Antoine Louis’ surgical utilitarianism meant to preclude” (623).¹⁶⁴ Just as disingenuous, Schama argues, is the tendency of some scholars to sanitize the Revolution itself, despite its executions, its massacres, and its mobs, in order to endorse its socio-political motivations or celebrate its eventual gains. Schama warns historians not to indulge in the “normalization of evil” (632) by avoiding “tendentious moralizing” (631) in order to create illusions of impersonal social improvement, as some Jacobins were wont

¹⁶³ Dorinda Outram agrees that the guillotine sometimes mitigated the drama of the scaffold ritual. In *The Body and the French Revolution*, she writes that “many different sources agree that the guillotine was a disappointment in that it failed to provide a *tragedie* of any great drawing-power. The prolonged unfolding of retribution for crime in the lengthy death-throes of old-regime capital punishment had been replaced by a brief, virtually invisible passage into death, which, devoid of drama, was perilously close to losing significance altogether” (114).

¹⁶⁴ The well-intentioned Dr. Joseph Guillotin convinced the National Assembly that execution should be both “painless” as well as egalitarian; Dr. Antoine Louis looked to the Halifax maiden as a model for a new decapitating device in 1792 which was, for a time, called the Louisette.

to do and as Pierre Caron is said to have attempted in his historical writings about the September Massacres. “To those who insist that to prosecute is not the historian’s job, one may reply that neither is selective forgetfulness practiced in the interest of scholarly decorum,” Schama scolds (632), reminding us that to read Revolution must be to acknowledge the vicissitudes of moral certainty on the part of both subject and scholar and its violent outcomes (such as lynchings) are indeed the responsibility of those who profess them.¹⁶⁵ What Schama illuminates, over and above what the ambiguous scaffolds of anti-Jacobin literature already suggest, is that such moral positions enable contradictions—between scholar and subject, between text and symbol. With its function, design, and clinical purpose, the guillotine alone approaches the mild metaphor of past times by uniquely representing the pruning snip for the good of the body politic—even as such customary views were connected with the *ancien régime* the revolutionaries abhorred. The guillotine’s inevitable metaphor operated in violation of the Republic’s modern ethics just as, at the same time, it announced itself to be for the good of the community, if not for the soul of the condemned.

It is a fascinating paradox: that the newest and most democratic of killing devices should hark back, through representation, to the oldest of death-penalty justifications, in literature as well as life. Remarkably, McGowen never mentions the straightforward pruning imagery associated with the guillotine when he discusses the “amputation” function of execution and its gradual displacement by

¹⁶⁵ It is ironic, however, that Schama inveighs against the sanitization and “silent embarrassment” (631) of sympathetic historians like Caron (who wished to minimize the violence and accountability of the revolutionaries), yet proceeds a few pages later to euphemize a mass rape by calling the victims’ ordeal a “physical humiliation” (635).

individualistic considerations in “The Body and Punishment in Eighteenth-Century England.” Granted, he is concerned with British history and the British perspective on the value of capital punishment in the late eighteenth century, yet so many English minds were locked on events in France at that precise time, and the guillotine was so popular an icon of scaffold death, that it seems a necessary parallel to make. The imagination naturally strays over the Channel at the idea of neatly severed body parts. To write that “society was [in past eras] an unstable body in which the parts were prone to insurrection and the whole to dissolution” and that “the most frequent metaphor for sacrificing an infected part was amputation” (661) is not just to conjure the voice of an English Jacobean but also that of a French Jacobin. In one sense, then, by deploying the guillotine so frequently in their fictions, anti-Jacobin authors were perhaps attempting to reanimate (or were unconsciously reanimating) values even more conservative than those of their peers, while simultaneously generating contradictions and vexations that injected doubt into the entire practice.

In “Reflections on the Guillotine,” Camus lists what he thinks are flaws in the logic of capital punishment, one of which, in his opinion, undermines the civic allegory about pruning the cancer from society, as well as the retributive function of the process, which at times punishes the spectator, as well as the condemned, and as a result obliterates the event’s moral lesson. He opens his discussion with an anecdote¹⁶⁶ about his father, who in 1914 looked forward to the public

¹⁶⁶ This anecdote is reconstituted in *The Stranger*, when Meursault, on death row, recalls his mother telling him a similar story about his own father.

guillotining of a “monster” (175) who had murdered several people, including children. Camus Senior had never witnessed any such thing before:

He got up in the dark to go to the place of execution. . . . What he saw that morning he never told anyone. My mother relates merely that he came rushing home, his face distorted, refused to talk, lay down for a moment on the bed, and suddenly began to vomit. He had just discovered the hidden reality under the noble phrases with which it was masked. Instead of thinking of the slaughtered children, he could think of nothing but that quivering body that had just been dropped onto a board to have its head cut off. (175)

This view was not lost on eighteenth-century commentators such as William Eden and Samuel Romilly who, as McGowen points out in “The Body and Punishment,” held that spectators in the age of sensibility were more likely to recoil from the violence and sympathize with the condemned—a response that had the effect of cancelling or at least diluting the supposed lesson. By the time the anti-Jacobins were portraying scaffold events in their fictions, “what people saw and reacted to [at public executions] was the treatment of the body,” writes McGowen (671), rather than the message(s) such a treatment was supposed to convey. “The sensitive turned their eyes away, and the hardened gazed with indifference” (671). Rather than displace egotism and unite a people into one body politic, scaffold events were thought by some to reinforce the idea of the valued individual person, physically and emotionally (672). “The gallows no longer participated in a complex metaphorical discourse,” McGowen sums up. “It

only produced a powerful emotional response that one either felt or was indifferent to. The execution had become an inarticulate shock; it had been reduced to the single dimension of pain” (673).

It is, of course, the “inarticulate shock” of execution that scaffold authors fasten upon, for obvious dramatic reasons. But as we have seen, that shock also helps to efface or at least complicate whatever political or moral instruction these authors may have been attempting to convey. The guillotine, especially, appears to be read by Schama and Janes as something that might produce both an “inarticulate shock” of conspicuous violence *while at the same time* obscure that violence through the impersonal, dulling effects of neat machinery and clean severings.¹⁶⁷ Burke’s idea that the obscure can render a sublime impression finds life in this wonderful contraction,¹⁶⁸ one that seems to perturb the conclusions of scholars and fiction writers alike. Though we can assume some British novelists of the 1790s and early 1800s attended a hanging or two, hardly a one witnessed an actual guillotining in revolutionary France; they could compose their scenarios from the comfortable distance of imagined death, which was gleaned from reports and the creative capacity of their individual fancies.¹⁶⁹ This imagined guillotine, however intangible and removed, and however naïvely

¹⁶⁷ If both Janes and Schama imply that this “dulling” effect is suspiciously rhetorical, they also note that the first spectators of guillotine deaths indeed expressed disappointment at the speed and neatness of the event—in short, its lack of violent affect.

¹⁶⁸ See my discussion of Burke’s concept of sublime obscurity in Chapter One, Section 3.

¹⁶⁹ Mary Robinson has the distinction of being one of the few British writers of the French Revolution who, like Wordsworth and Helen Maria Williams, had a close brush with her own Revolutionary Tribunal. She narrowly escaped being arrested in France in September 1792 when orders were issued for the detention and likely persecution of British subjects, an event that tempts one to glean clues of personal scaffold anxiety in Robinson’s guillotine novels.

portrayed in the pages of British anti-Jacobin fiction, nevertheless has the power to wreak havoc on the didactic core of a tale or, as Herbert Blau might put it, to prevent an author's "autonomous thought" from "escaping in the right ideological direction," as the cherishing of materiality tends to do in scaffold scenes purportedly concerned with the sovereignty of the soul.¹⁷⁰

In contrast, the guillotine novels of Mary Robinson—*The Natural Daughter* and *Hubert de Sevrac*—and others that fall under the British Jacobin rubric tend to have fewer problems stabilizing philosophical positions built upon the image of the scaffold, if only because they more openly embrace humanitarian objectives associated with (though not necessarily supportive of) capital crime reform or abolition. If nearly all British novelists of the revolutionary era meet somewhere in the middle, in the end, on matters of compassion, justice, hypocrisy, and the need (however much or little) for non-violent domestic reform, we cannot presume the same level of concern for *everyone's* rights in *all* cases in Jacobin and anti-Jacobin fictions, when the former suspects economic-based merit and the latter frequently privileges it. We cannot even presume it within the scope of Jacobin fiction alone, when so few Britons were on the record, at the end of the century, as outright abolitionists.¹⁷¹ The problem of death penalty reform aside, the reasons for a greater collective sensitivity to the scaffold are still being worked out by such historians as McGowen, Thomas Laqueur, and J.M. Beattie. V.A.C. Gatrell offers the most satisfying theory: he insists there are no simple

¹⁷⁰ See my discussion of taboo substance in Chapter One, Section 4.

¹⁷¹ As Gatrell concludes in *The Hanging Tree*, "most middle-class elites were far less clear about the desirability of abolishing or mitigating the scaffold's penalties than their own and others' progressive narratives fondly imply" (228).

answers and likely no single identifiable cause of humanitarianism, least of all sensibility, as a cultural phenomenon. “Then as now,” Gatrell writes in *The Hanging Tree*, “most people occupied areas of confusion and contradiction where thoughts were mediated through murky feelings and feelings through murky thoughts” (228). But most experts agree a shift indeed took place, as least as it was represented in our literature. That shift is most visible and least “murky” in the works of Elizabeth Inchbald, William Godwin, Charlotte Smith and Mary Robinson, in so far as their literary scaffolds are concerned. Though Robinson’s guillotine, as a symbol, transmits the same negative/positive messages of the anti-Jacobin guillotine, it more often than not grounds rather than subverts the politics of her texts.

Just as Kevin Gilmartin unearths a “qualified commitment to progress” in anti-Jacobin fiction, we also detect the binary-breaking ambivalence many reformist writers felt about the New Philosophy once the Terror and the execution of a monarch and his queen took place. I do not wish to suggest that Jacobin writers held less complicated views than their anti-Jacobin peers. Robinson herself, as Craciun notes in *British Women Writers*, was hardly a straightforward figure: “The combination of her middle-class origins, aristocratic aspirations, intellectual ambition, and increasing political radicalism” (88) allowed Robinson to consider and express a gamut of social and political priorities in her work. To be sure, with regards to execution, individuals writing at the end of the eighteenth century could not have been situated in a more confusing context. As Janes points out in *Losing Our Heads*, the last English beheading (of a living person)

occurred in 1747, a date that “relegates decapitation to an earlier, antiquated era” (43) and is artificially associated with the start of the humanitarian shift, in Britain at least. In Britain, that is, the public was able to relegate decapitation safely in the past until the French drew their attention to the tradition once more by replacing the sword with the guillotine, thereby bringing beheadings back into quotidian reports and the mind’s eye. Though hangings continued apace throughout the last half of the century, “the visible signs of violence diminish[ed]” on the British scaffold, for “the whole body hanging is not as grisly as the mutilated members in pieces” (43).¹⁷²

Robinson’s *Hubert de Sevrac* opens, as many scaffold fictions do, with references to execution and scaffold anxiety which in turn inform the actions of several characters. When “the tumult of discontent perverted the cause of liberty” and brought members of the French nobility “to the slaughter” in 1792 (V1, 7), even the well-liked Marquis de Sevrac and his family are forced to flee in disguise “under the dreadful apprehension” (5) of the scaffold, which is not simply alluded to delicately in the novel’s second sentence but mentioned outright (5). Like Smith’s D’Alonville and Craik’s Adelaide, Robinson’s émigré also hears the sound of the tocsin and the shouts of a scaffold mob as he sneaks past a scene of execution, which has the effect not only of dramatizing guillotine events for Robinson’s readers but also of aggravating de Sevrac’s anxiety and spurring on his flight. The proud Marquis, far more than Adelaide and D’Alonville, is broken

¹⁷² Public beheadings were briefly revived in 1820 in the wake of the Cato Street Conspiracy, when five offenders were decollated by axe on a scaffold after they had been hanged to death. Contemporaries report that the crowd was so unsettled by the sight that some spectators fled in horror.

by his sudden loss of means and status which, along with his scaffold anxiety and fears for his family's welfare, launches him into a depression that is sustained throughout much of the novel.

But unlike Adelaide, de Sevrac is not allowed to stand as a reiteration of Burke's Marie-Antoinette, deserving of all our sympathy and none of our reproach. Robinson begins to set him up as such a figure, then undercuts it; the narrator's sympathy for de Sevrac's loss of prestige is mitigated by his own admission that his disproportionate privilege indirectly harmed others:

It was at that awful hour that de Sevrac examined the retrospect of his prosperous days. All the phantoms of delight purchased by the sufferings of the people, all the irritated tribes of wretchedness, whose wants had hitherto been unregarded, now conspired to taunt his imagination. He probed his lacerated bosom, and he found that, though no act of oppression, immediately proceeding from himself, had contaminated its feelings, he had been accessory to crimes and deserved to participate in their punishment. (8)

De Sevrac's daughter, Sabina, is even more certain of the fact, and she expresses as much several times over the course of the novel, creating a conspicuous political conceit. "If the nobles had relinquished their superfluous luxuries," she reminds her father, "would not the world be more at peace?" (12). "All our friends, all our associates were enemies of the people" (13), she admits,

and she only becomes more convinced of this as time goes by as a mouthpiece for Robinson's democratic perspective.¹⁷³

But the punishment in which the Marquis believes he “deserves to participate” is ultimately criticized by the novel's contextual humanitarianism that surfaces whenever he or his family are faced with Jacobin (in)justice. This same critique, of course, is present in anti-Jacobin novels, which also draw on such injustices, though primarily to undermine the tenets of the New Philosophy by portraying its believers as brutes. Robinson does so to undermine the rationale for brutality itself, not as a moral afterthought or a nod towards affect, but as a primary political consideration. In both *Hubert de Sevrac* and *The Natural Daughter* she deploys the word “humanity” with notable frequency, replacing the byword “sensibility” with what strikes us as a more modern and contestable one. By repeatedly using the terms “humanity” and “humane” in the context of punishment and execution—as she does in *Hubert de Sevrac*—Robinson is displacing its juridical precursor, mercy, with a concept aligned with and yet quite different from the former. Mercy is an ancient custom and one frequently called upon in even the oldest scaffold tragedies, going all the way back to classical Greece. But mercy is a one-off act rather than a philosophy. Mercy does not critique the scaffold as a general remedy. Mercy is an exception to the system, a

¹⁷³ Elsewhere, Sabina argues against “claims to birth”; “the prejudices of the ignorant and the subtlety of the proud, may propagate such an opinion [...] but the philanthropy of enlightened minds must shrink from such pernicious doctrines” (V2, 130). See Craciun's *British Women Writers and the French Revolution*, which agrees that Sabina “condemns her family's complicity with this *ancien régime* oppression” (152).

“prerogative of the sovereign power,” as Gatrell defines it in *The Hanging Tree*,¹⁷⁴ while humanitarianism seeks to override that prerogative democratically and change the system itself. Humanitarianism, in a sense, rejects the sovereign’s pruning shears in favour of forcing the growth of new ideas with the warmer and more fruitful light of universal compassion.

In Robinson’s text, even horses are distressed by the sight of a gibbet (V1, 166). The scaffold and those who would use it are portrayed as relics of a less enlightened age rather than harbingers of a new philosophy. When the Marquis and his family are finally apprehended, Madame discovers in her jailor a kindly figure who allows her to take the outside air for longer periods and who tends to her when she faints. Justin Latour is happy to “lessen the rigours of her confinement” (V1, 97), for “he had none of those characteristics which are generally visible in men who chose the dreadful trade of torturing their fellow creatures” (98) and he leaves Madame “not without hopes that he would prove a valuable friend as far as his humanity would be exerted” (98). When she begs him to allow her to see her daughter in the next cell, “the feelings of humanity struggled at his heart” (99), and he risks his own life to help her (106-7). In Latour’s case, humanitarianism overcomes his scaffold anxiety, but Robinson shows how the scaffold’s presence as a juridical prop can also undermine compassion between strangers. Unlike Mangin’s Ardent, who never imagines

¹⁷⁴ Gatrell’s discussion of mercy does not focus so much on the difference between it and humanitarianism, but rather on the increase in capital cases commuted by way of this sovereign prerogative amid growing resentment of often disproportionate physical punishment (p. 200ff). It is worth pointing out that, in Britain at least, mollifications of the capital code seemed generally to be preceded by an uptick in death penalty reprieves or shows of judicial mercy; they also increased just before the death penalty was abolished completely in 1964. This reminds us of the link between mercy and humanitarianism, or at the very least shows how the line between the two concepts blurs the closer a culture draws to abolition.

that he might be found culpable when he rescues a robbery victim, Robinson's everyman refuses to help an assault victim for fear he will be arrested and condemned for murder (V1, 113-14). Robinson's more thoughtful characters, however, understand that an improved society and reform itself are born of "love of humankind" (131), a value that underpins her novel and works in tension with the cruelty and indifference of revolutionary justice and the penal tradition itself.

Robinson's more-than-sentimental focus on the Marquis' series of close calls and their effects on nearby characters links her novel to what Thomas Laqueur defines as a "new humanitarian narrative." Gatrell argues that the era's progressive narratives were often nothing more than "finer words," or statements that had no automatic correlation to "registered acts" (228)—that a discourse of humanitarianism is not the same as a pragmatic politics of humanitarianism that effects actual change. That may be the case, but Laqueur at least shows us where to find those narratives and how they are different from those of earlier decades. In "Bodies, Details, and the Humanitarian Narrative," Laqueur argues that new narrative forms focusing explicitly on the trauma of the body emerged in the second half of the eighteenth century: autopsy reports, mining accident inquiries, case studies, and a host of bureaucratic accounts that partly inspired the formation of the realistic novel in the nineteenth century. These narratives "came to speak in extraordinarily detailed fashion about the pains and deaths of ordinary people in such a way as to make apparent the causal chains that might connect the actions of [their] readers with the suffering of [their] subjects" (177). They, in short, "make real the pain of others" (182). Unlike tragedy, which

compels us to sympathize with a hero who represents all of us, universally, “the humanitarian narrative describes particular suffering and offers a model for precise social action” (178), such as labour reforms or a more thorough on-the-scene observation of the wounded before writing them off as dead.¹⁷⁵ The humanitarian narrative strives to generate sentiment in order to generate reform, not just a momentary swelling in the reader’s breast or a cathartic tear.

The humanitarian narrative, in other words, has non-artistic goals, and Laqueur’s study relies on “non-aesthetic” texts like bureaucratic reports. The era’s concern about propriety prohibited explicit accounts of suffering bodies from appearing outside the almost entirely male purviews of law, medicine and industry. Novels that sought to appeal to a wide audience could not embrace (and nor were their authors, we might venture, inclined to) the gory extremes of *The Monk* when it came time to paint the inevitable scaffold scene. These scenes may contain a trace of blood but rarely the singular contortions of a body in physical distress—they do not aim to nauseate. Realistic detail in most fictions is, in short, pruned back so as not to obscure the moral lesson of the author. It is hard to disagree with Laqueur when he argues that “the social history of humanitarianism must include a history and sociology of narrative forms” (202), and scholars like James A.W. Heffernan take similar positions with axioms like “the study of history inevitably leads to the study of representation.”¹⁷⁶ Laqueur

¹⁷⁵ Laqueur is referring to the recently founded Humane Society, which in the 1780s aimed “to resurrect those who seemed dead—victims of drowning, lightening, trauma—but who could be saved if doctors and the public learned to distinguish real from apparent death and applied the appropriate first aid measures to victims in whom the spark of life still smoldered” (189).

¹⁷⁶ See Heffernan’s *Representing the Revolution*, p. viii.

may be correct when he argues that the effectiveness of generating revolutionary action in fiction readers is never guaranteed, as such a response can be defeated by the “cathartic expense of moral indignation on fictional suffering, while real suffering is left in peace” (202),¹⁷⁷ but that did not stop writers like Mary Robinson from trying.

Though *Hubert de Sevrac* deploys an aristocrat as its sympathetic locus (rather than the labourer or the anonymous citizen of Laqueur’s reports), Robinson, unlike most anti-Jacobin authors, underscores the Marquis’ connection to the crowd of humankind instead of highlighting his noble differences. Aristocratic instincts, in de Sevrac’s case, only madden him and increase his suffering. When, in Milan, de Sevrac is tried for a murder he did not commit (the first of three detentions for capital crimes he endures), only the negative figures in the courtroom are said to have “hearts hardened to the sensations of humanity” (V1, 116-17). De Sevrac (and sometimes his wife) does not face the guillotine per se when he is arrested and re-arrested in Italy—his place of exile—but his origins, the novel’s revolutionary context, and the guillotine that impedes his return to France collectively cast a pall over the narrative that, by design, remains in the reader’s thoughts as it remains in those of the Marquis, so that the French scaffold is folded quite naturally into Robinson’s humanitarian reflection of penal ethics. Condemned to die on the breaking wheel (a method

¹⁷⁷ Laqueur credits the views of Berthold Brecht who, in Laqueur’s words, argued that “far from inciting to action, the sorts of enthralling narratives I have discussed merely milk sentiment and defer revolutionary action” (202). This theory might partly explain why, as Gatrell stresses, a true softening of the capital code did not come into effect in Britain until the 1830s (*The Hanging Tree*, p. 238).

associated more with France than Italy), de Sevrac is pardoned just as he steps to the scaffold when a messenger delivers an eleventh-hour revelation. Robinson is not the first writer of scaffold fiction to portray the sympathetic distress of executioners as they prepare to kill the condemned—even the firing squad in *The Loyalists* is so overwhelmed by Eustace’s beauty and fortitude that they miss their target (V3, 119ff)—but she takes pains to connect the spectators’ paroxysms of sensibility to fallible everyday (that is, non-revolutionary) laws rather than to fallible movements or individuals.

Given the persistence of the imagined death trope in scaffold fictions, it is not surprising that Sabina is distressed by the sight of her parents’ scaffold being erected in the courtyard beneath her prison tower (V1, 125) or stung by a stranger’s whispering that “you will behold your father stretched on the wheel of torture, your mother a ghastly corpse” (129).¹⁷⁸ But Robinson does not miss an opportunity to demonstrate the compassion of strangers wrenched by the sight of a still-young husband and wife marched to the scaffold. Though (predictably) the novel’s hero is “resigned and composed,” those “who stood near the scaffold pitied him, and the executioner himself shed tears” (162). When Ravillon argues, in pursuit of his vendetta against the virtuous de Sevrac family, that “the laws are made for the punishment of criminals” (165), he and Robinson’s readers are immediately reminded by another character that “those laws would have put the innocent Marquis and his wife to death” (166). The law is not just fallible but also

¹⁷⁸ This “stranger,” an agent for the Gothic villain Ravillon, has a motive to unsettle Sabina; he is ordered to persuade her to escape with him, pointing out that she faces rape and ruin—rather than execution—if she stays near her parents (130).

susceptible to the manipulation of wrongdoers like Ravillon. The implication, in the context of Robinson's humanitarian narrative, is that such laws ought not to prescribe so final a punishment so blithely, and that they must be tempered by compassion.

Hubert de Sevrac only suggests a morality of penal restraint, but this suffices to help stabilize Robinson's literary scaffold more firmly relative to those deployed in analogous anti-Jacobin fictions. The scaffold that threatens the novel's characters is, by and large, a terrible mechanism consistently employed by terrible or at least misguided people. Any good it does by effacing evil from the world is muted; there is no celebratory depiction of a villain's scaffold end.¹⁷⁹

The Natural Daughter puts it more plainly still by adamantly separating humanitarianism from sensibility and showing the latter to be useless and non-productive of compassion or social change, and in a way that confirms the arguments of Gatrell and Laqueur. As Eleanor Ty has shown, this separation was emphasized in the service of female empowerment; sentiment traps women in traditionally subaltern roles vulnerable to artificial scandal, while genuine humane impulses compel them to question such roles and inspire constructive social acts.¹⁸⁰ But *The Natural Daughter*, being a scaffold fiction at least in part, also reads like a demand for reform beyond the domain of gender, calling into

¹⁷⁹ Robinson tantalizes us with but ultimately deprives us of the beheading of the vile Brancourt in Vol. 3 when the heroic Albert must flee to preserve his own head before he can arrest his nemesis (97-98). She does, however, allow us a quick glimpse of Robespierre's end in *The Natural Daughter*, when he is led "pale, ghastly, lacerated, trembling" to the scaffold (290), a description that reinforces Robinson's commentary about "the weakness of mere flesh" (Craciun 120) being no match for machines either literal or political.

¹⁸⁰ See Ty's *Empowering the Feminine: The Narratives of Mary Robinson, Jane West, and Amelia Opie, 1796-1812* (University of Toronto Press, 1998), p. 72.

question English justice (as so many Jacobin fictions do) as well as French. As Sharon M. Setzer points out in her introduction to the Broadview edition of *The Natural Daughter*, Robinson never abandoned the Revolution's "early commitment to the rights of women as well as to men" (31) and takes pains in her novel to separate good Jacobin ideals from bad ones by, for instance, "pitting the radical innocence of the infant Frances against the corruption of the 'sanguinary monster' Marat" (31):

Although the Revolution had already been identified with monstrosity by Edmund Burke and other conservatives, Robinson blatantly subverts their distinctions between French monstrosity and English morality. Indeed, as the climactic scene revealing the identity of Frances's "monstrous father" suggests, Jacobin terrorism was not the antithesis of English law and order but rather, in some instances, its own dark double. (31)

The Natural Daughter's privileging of humane feeling—which is practical rather than decorative—challenges the entire system, a system defined by Robinson as one in need of a general renovation in the legal sphere, as well as domestic and communal ones.

Robinson's thesis is famously embodied in two sisters, Martha and Julia. While Julia, the favourite, is a feminine ideal who performs sensibility with shrieks and fainting spells, pragmatic Martha actually helps people in distress rather than simply reacts in a socially approved but useless fashion. Her unconventional humanitarian behaviour earns the scorn of her family and creates social barriers

that force her to become heroically resourceful, but Julia's sensibility is a much heavier yoke that drags her into real ruin and destruction (rather than a supposed ruin that can eventually be overcome, as is the case with Martha, who is rewarded by novel's end). If the title of *The Natural Daughter* queries standards of legitimacy, which are shown to be arbitrary and harmful, it also underscores Martha's authentic, unadulterated compassion—an instinct that has been unnaturally suppressed in many of the novel's characters for the sake of appearances, especially as it pertains to women's reputations.¹⁸¹

The degeneration of Julia (who eventually becomes Robespierre's mistress) and Martha's humanitarian bent are the novel's primary focus, but the sisters' narratives frame an episode involving a third woman whose *récit* provides *The Natural Daughter's* main scaffold event. Mrs. Sedgley is the figure around whom Robinson intertwines her critique of social and legal traditions in order to force questions of humanitarian improvement in areas beyond the domestic. Sedgley's misadventures occur, in the opinions of Martha and her narrator, because humane feeling is lacking in both Sedgley's social sphere and in the sans-culottes who imprison her in Paris in September of 1792. The "tribunal of the public" (181) that relegates Sedgley to the social fringe for bearing a child out of wedlock is, in the context of a revolutionary novel, inevitably suggestive of the Republican tribunals that unfairly sent their victims to the guillotine. If Adelaide of

¹⁸¹ This argument is a typically Jacobin one; see Elizabeth Inchbald's *Nature and Art*, which represents a similar dichotomy that is equally critical of cold, self-interested, and socially constructed propriety. Adriana Craciun reads the significance of the two sisters as I do and notes Robinson's telling distinction between "sense and sensibility"; see *British Women Writers and the French Revolution* pp. 119ff.

Narbonne and Sabina de Sevrac prefer execution to a ruined reputation, Sedgley, with admitted anxiety, does not; she risks a sham marriage with a fellow prisoner to escape the guillotine,¹⁸² the sounds of which interrupt her agonizing dilemma until she ultimately agrees to accept the hand of a near-stranger:

Every hour during this tedious interval I heard of public executions. The tocsin sounded night and day. The cannon shook my dungeon with concussions that made me tremble. I heard the hooves of horses, as the troops passed to attend the restless process of the guillotine—I accepted the proposal made me by the English traveler;—life was the temptation offered; and I had not the fortitude to resist it. (166)

Deserted and pregnant after consummating what she hopes is a legitimate marriage, she admits that she “had been compelled to form a union for the preservation of [her] existence” (167). She is left destitute in the wake of intense scaffold anxiety and the threat of unjust execution. Months later, Marat himself enters her cell, waves an execution order at her and threatens to add her name to the list unless she submits to him sexually. Because Marat is killed the next day, the reader is left to imagine what course Sedgley may have taken, but given her avowed terror of the scaffold, we cannot be sure she would have chosen the socially acceptable option. In the light of Robinson’s critique of the unreasonable

¹⁸² In “Romancing the Reign of Terror: Sexual Politics in Mary Robinson’s *The Natural Daughter*,” Sharon M. Setzer also notes how “the shadow of the guillotine” influences Mrs. Sedgley’s decision to marry an English stranger (p.537). Setzer also links the experience of Sedgley to that of Mary Wollstonecraft who (according to William Godwin) posed as Imlay’s wife in order to avoid prosecution in Paris (538).

“tribunal of the public,” unsanctioned sexual activity for the preservation of life cannot match the evil of the Terror’s engineers and their killing device, nor match the pernicious limits of society’s disordered view of sexually active women.¹⁸³

Sedgley returns to Britain hoping to find, in her condition, “women who had feeling, and men, who to the character of the philosopher added that of the philanthropist” (168). But there she finds no support—only moral condescension which is indicted by Robinson again when Sedgley’s Duchess friend is shown to operate out of sensibility (168) rather than humanitarianism. This friend proves to be one of the “less enlightened beings” whose “mean fastidious scorn . . . acts as a watch-guard on the feelings, keeping aloof the noblest sentiments of friendship and humanity” (168). If, as Setzer and other critics have argued,¹⁸⁴ Martha represents Robinson herself semi-autobiographically (a morally maligned actress and writer who brushes too close to the guillotine on her French travels), it is in the character of Sedgley where (we might imagine) Robinson’s personal anxieties towards the morally certain scaffold and the morally certain salon intersect and demand a humane response to those caught in the snares of either. Neither Robinson’s proto-feminist position on gender equality nor her (mostly) negative depictions of the scaffold are complicated by the guillotine, which stands unwaveringly for the excesses of Marat and Robespierre, for British

¹⁸³ As Craciun notes in *British Women Writers and the French Revolution*, Robinson “places a sexualized Robespierre at the source of [Parisian] corruption” that is described as “carnal, materialistic, and luxurious” (120) in the novel; Robespierre’s licentiousness is of the murderous variety while whatever can be inferred of Sedgley’s is, by contrast, salvaging.

¹⁸⁴ See Setzer’s Introduction to the Broadview edition of *The Natural Daughter*.

society's erring treatment of women, and for the destructive properties of moral certainty in all spheres.

We read this relative stability into Jacobin novels today, perhaps, because of our own modern opinion of the guillotine, which tends to perceive it simply as brutal thanks in part to the filtering effect of 200 years' worth of scaffold fiction, including *A Tale of Two Cities*, *The Stranger*, and *Danton*. Though we may be aware of the supposed humanitarian purpose behind the machine's design, historical distance has shifted the device (more or less, and for the time being) into the camp of inhumanity. The Jacobin guillotine, at least as it is presented by Robinson, allows us to cease focusing on its declared positive purpose, which was never very convincing in the first place. This process contributes to our impression of a dichotomy between the "more stable" Jacobin guillotine versus the "less stable" anti-Jacobin one despite the latter's disgust towards its excessive use and reliance on the machine as a symbol of political viciousness—for, as we have seen, the anti-Jacobin guillotine is often shown to participate in the service of righteousness, too. And yet, by destabilizing anti-Jacobin representations of execution—by canting that scaffold towards the middle view that begins to doubt the death penalty's legitimacy overall—the guillotine also blurs the distinction we seem so dedicated to maintain between the progressive and conservative fictions of the 1790s and early 1800s. In short, the literary guillotine encourages us to think critically rather than reductively about these complex and inherently unstable political texts—or it at least assists us in

unconsciously perceiving such complications, which in the end are what keep these novels alive in the critical discourse of the twenty-first century.

If Gatrell is right when he insists that statements were more advanced than action when it comes to eighteenth-century pushes for humanitarian reform,¹⁸⁵ then the scaffold featured in revolutionary-era British novels—and not just in parliamentary polemics or postures of sensibility—indeed participated in this *forcing* of progressive growth, especially when anti-Jacobin authors deployed the confounding guillotine in a way that represented nearly all of the conflicting opinions and ideas associated with the death penalty. By appearing so frequently in the epoch between an age of general acceptance of capital punishment and one of growing ambivalence, and by being so much more “gigantic” than the traditional scaffold, the guillotine—real and literary—perhaps helped to hasten reform because it was so appalling. We might argue, in fact, that late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century humanitarianism was a response not just to events in France but to *impressions* of monstrosities exaggerated by scaffold fictions like Gothic, Jacobin, and anti-Jacobin novels.¹⁸⁶ By using the pruning/forcing metaphor, I am aligning my position with Gatrell’s, who suggests that eighteenth-century philosophers and novelists in a sense “taught” a culture “feelings like pity, compassion, sympathy, etc.” with their “new emotional repertoires” (236) which, I must underscore, included numerous literary scaffold events. Like Gatrell, I am

¹⁸⁵ See *The Hanging Tree* (225ff).

¹⁸⁶ If Dorinda Outram’s findings in *The Body and the French Revolution* point, historically, to a more apathetic crowd and a less spectacular guillotine in its originating moment, then we must ascribe to its fictional representations some of the mythmaking that has given us the impression of large, agitated crowds and frenzied drama, and which has perhaps made the apparatus more monstrous by far.

suggesting that the progress of sensibility in revolutionary-era scaffold fiction was not simply a result of a “new” humanitarianism but also part of its production—an emotional “statement” in and of itself that aggravated a growing rational unease regarding moral and by extension penal absolutes. We see in the guillotine novels of Mangin and Robinson hints of authorial scaffold anxiety, and we see in the guillotine novels of Craik and Hamilton a hint of scaffold suspicion—that is, an awareness of the arbitrary nature of the death penalty which, while arguably not new, now begins to appear in fictional representations more and more regularly.

CHAPTER FOUR

Godwin's Moral Horror and the Perfection of Scaffold Fiction

1: Scaffold Fiction's "Process": Defoe, Fielding, and Godwin

Throughout my study I have applied the term "scaffold fiction" to every work I have discussed at length, from the she-tragedies of Rowe to the works of Mary Robinson, however different the authors' aims. I do this because I understand genre as a process, rather than a fixed category that demands certain criteria of its applicants before it can be considered for membership. Scaffold fiction, like all genres, is a process of demarcation continually in flux; the eighteenth century saw it "arise," to use Ralph Cohen's term (204), and as it arose it became more pronounced. The tropes, the signalling of a hero's condemnation from the first pages of a text, the expressions of scaffold anxiety, and the presence of the scaffold itself as an aesthetic image or political totem certainly recur with greater frequency, overall, as we move through the decades. They collect themselves more and more often within the same work, gathering once casual or disparate elements together and framing them in such a way that forces readers to consider the scaffold as more than plot device. But until the end of the century, scaffold fictions did not (as we have seen) tend to question the legitimacy of the death penalty itself. Those who flirted with the idea, as Fielding did in *Amelia* (1751), were not abolitionist authors; Fielding was more critical of

the fallible purveyors of the law than of the legal system itself, and he believed in the social remedy of the scaffold (if not in how it was publicly and almost festively deployed). But even though *Amelia* criticized the law and indicted society for its role in the corruption of virtue and the production of criminals, it was not, as I will show below, the same kind of scaffold fiction as some of its successors. Nor was Defoe's *Moll Flanders* (1722), however steeped it is in roguery, prison-houses, and the wrenching anxiety of its heroine. Both *Amelia* and *Moll Flanders* feature vital elements of scaffold fiction but omit others; they are not as intensely marked by scaffold referents as many later works, and as a result we may not contemplate "scaffold fiction" as we read them, much less name them as important examples of that genre. It took the emergence of humanitarianism—however uncertain its origin, however arguable its development—and its deployment as a literary consideration by novelists operating within frameworks of sensibility, Jacobinism, and even anti-Jacobinism to make the genre truly visible. It took the particular mindset and obsessions of William Godwin, in fact, and his skill in describing an execrated character's psychological journey, before it became possible really to notice what had been happening to the literary scaffold for some time.

The grouping together of Defoe, Fielding, and Godwin and their respective scaffold fictions is hardly casual. Beyond their shared literary interest in legal affairs and the death penalty, they were all associated with the law in some capacity, which made them particularly well positioned to reflect and comment upon the justice system and render their concerns in fictional form. As biographer

Richard Holmes writes, “Defoe’s interest in Newgate, and the whole question of criminal lives, was longstanding” (xiii), having himself been imprisoned there for libel, a fate that also befell one of his editors, Nathaniel Mist, and his own son, Benjamin. Another Defoe editor, John Applebee, “had established special access to the Newgate Condemned Hold” and “had a virtual monopoly in publishing the ‘True Confessions’ of condemned prisoners” (xv), two of which can almost certainly be attributed to Defoe himself. Fielding, of course, practiced law after the waning of his dramatic career and was appointed Justice of the Peace of Westminster in 1748. His courtroom years provided him with material for several judicial essays, including *An Enquiry into the Causes of the Late Increase of Robbers*, which was published in the same year as *Amelia*. And Godwin, like Defoe, spent time as a Newgate visitor and court observer when, one after another, his friends were arrested for sedition in 1794. He threw himself into the legal sphere and took it upon himself to agitate on their behalf in the *Morning Chronicle*,¹⁸⁷ an activity that, as both William Hazlitt and biographer Peter H. Marshall suggest, “possibly saved the lives of twelve innocent individuals” who faced the death penalty (Marshall 139).

All three authors, additionally, made themselves unpopular with the authorities. Because of the words they chose to write, they risked running up against the capital charge of seditious libel (or some variation of this), which placed the scaffold squarely in their path. Defoe’s “Shortest Way with the

¹⁸⁷ “Cursory Strictures on the Charge Delivered by Lord Chief Justice Eyre to the Grand Jury, October 2, 1794” appeared anonymously in the *Morning Chronicle* on October 21 and was widely discussed, republished, and mentioned at length during John Horne Tooke’s trial (Marshall 136-139).

Dissenters" (1702), which tackles the controversial topic of religious nonconformity, drove him into hiding before he was eventually arrested, put in Newgate, fined, and pilloried three times. When he later thumbed his nose at Queen Anne with "Hymns to the Pillory" (1702), he once again found himself in jail. Fielding the dramatist irritated the Walpole administration so much with his satirical attacks on Parliament (and personal attacks against Walpole himself) that his work is credited with inspiring the Licensing Act of 1737, which in turn drove him to second and third careers as lawyer and novelist. And Godwin, for his part, published *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* in 1793 fully aware that it might mean prison or the scaffold; its original preface acknowledges the paranoid patriotism of the day, which threatens "every man . . . who shall appeal to the people by the publication of any unconstitutional pamphlet" (x) with "punish[ment] for any unguarded words that may be dropped in the warmth of conversation and debate" (xi). "Whatever conduct his countrymen may pursue," he avers, "they will not be able to shake his tranquility" even if he should "suffer in any respect" as a result of his opinion (xi). Biographers cite William Pitt's dismissal of *Political Justice* as an overpriced "three-guinea book" when attempting to explain how it was that Godwin avoided prosecution,¹⁸⁸ but the anecdote, as Jonathan H. Grossman observes "could not have been very comforting for Godwin. He would have realized the novel he was writing provided no such excuse; *Caleb Williams* was explicitly designed to reach" those who may not have been able to afford or absorb his three-volume philosophical tome (50). His activity during the treason trials, moreover, endeared him even less to Pitt's government; "although Godwin

¹⁸⁸ See Marshall's *William Godwin*, p. 121.

knew that he was a marked man,” Marshall notes, “he did all he could for the accused” (139) and kept himself in easy reach of the authorities. Nor did the government’s vigilance diminish with the close of the trials themselves, according to A.E. Rodway in *Godwin and the Age of Transition* (1952). “As late as 1813,” Rodway reminds us, “[Godwin] was charged in a State Paper with teaching pernicious ideas to the young through the sinister school primers that were then his sole means of support” (31). The “absurd charge” was never pressed (31), but it places Godwin in the same treacherous narrative of sedition as the executed Socrates—almost word for word.

It is worth noting, too, that all three authors composed their scaffold fictions just as the British capital code experienced periodic upticks in severity, and as a result the scaffold may have weighed more heavily than usual on the minds of the population. *Moll Flanders* was published shortly before the passing of the Waltham Black Act of 1723, during a perceived crime wave that resulted in a battery of new capital laws. “Both in its severity and in the loose and wholesale manner of its drafting,” E.P. Thompson writes in *Whigs and Hunters* (1975), “the Act was unprecedented. It provided a versatile armoury of death apt to the repression of many forms of social disturbance” (192). Citing Leon Radzinowicz, Thompson agrees that “there is hardly a criminal act which did not come within the provisions of the Black Act. . . . Thus the Act constituted in itself a complete and extremely severe criminal code” (22). In the year *Amelia* appeared, the Murder Act of 1751 was passed, which not only enforced the exposure and gibbeting of hanged felons—placing grisly scaffold reminders before the public

eye for longer periods—but also, according to Andrea McKenzie, “stipulat[ed] that convicted murderers be sentenced immediately after their trials and hanged within two days of sentencing” (256), which effectively shut down the possibility of appeal. “Thus,” McKenzie points out, “those very criminals who would . . . have been able to make a strong case for a respite (in the interest of preventing their eternal perdition) were now executed immediately,” just as Fielding recommends in *Late Increase of Robbers* (256). And Godwin published *Political Justice* and *Caleb Williams* during the revolutionary years when the image of the guillotine, and by extension the scaffold deaths of political dissenters, were foremost in many minds. His three other scaffold fictions—*St. Leon*, *Fleetwood*, and *Mandeville*—emerged between 1799 and 1817, at the height of Britain’s notorious Bloody Code. Not until the early 1800s did Samuel Romilly and other reformers begin to chip away at the Code, which bulged with 222 capital offences by 1815. Though fewer convicts than ever actually walked up the steps of the scaffold and faced the noose (thanks to judges’ and juries’ reluctance to sentence to death those who committed minor property crimes), the possibility was ever-present, a tangible, terrible reality for British citizens.¹⁸⁹ Many historians adopt a cavalier attitude about the disconnect between capital law as it was written in the late eighteenth century and capital law as it was actually enforced,

¹⁸⁹ Gatrell provides a table in Appendix 2 of *The Hanging Tree* that shows the pattern of actual convictions and executions in London/Middlesex from 1701 to 1813. The 1760s and 1780s were by far the bloodiest scaffold years, averaging between 208 and 298 executions per four-year period. There were only 98 executions between the years 1791 and 1795, when Godwin composed *Political Justice* and *Caleb Williams*, but the trend had crept upwards again to 140 as he composed *Mandeville*. The table also shows an unwavering increase in the number of pardons over the course of the century, which reached the eightieth and ninetieth percentiles when Godwin flourished.

but for those who, like Godwin, were particularly sensitive to the idea of state punishment and the loss of physical autonomy, this disconnect would have been cold comfort, and it certainly provided no guaranteed immunities (especially when even “humane” alternatives to the noose, such as transportation, could prove equally fatal).¹⁹⁰

In a sense, then, Defoe, Fielding, and Godwin—despite their varying positions on capital law—are literary brothers who wrote non-fiction works about crime and justice as they simultaneously wrote novels about criminals; who flourished in periods stressed by concerns about felonious behaviour and felons’ just deserts; and who faced the terrible possibility, however outside, of being put to death for their points of view. Laid end to end, their three most prominent scaffold fictions form an arc from the beginning of the century (*Moll Flanders*) through its middle point (*Amelia*) to its closing days (*Caleb Williams*), upon which we can trace the course of the genre as the scaffold itself evolved from a cultural given in Defoe’s era, to a social and legal problem in Fielding’s, and finally to a moral catalyst in Godwin’s, when Romantic humanitarianism replaced a mere aesthetic of sensibility and complicated the literary scaffold for all time.

Let us begin at the nominal beginning, then, now that we have worked out an idea of scaffold fiction in a general sense over the course of this study. We have identified its tropes and recognized its intersection with eighteenth-century preoccupations with sublimity, imagination, Gothicism, sensibility, revolutionary politics, and the politics of humanitarianism. From this perspective, we can better

¹⁹⁰ Godwin’s friend, the reformer Joseph Gerrald, was detained on a prison hulk, then transported to Australia, where he died of tuberculosis five months after his arrival.

detect changes as the genre of scaffold fiction “processed” or evolved through the century, however inconsistently. We can now anticipate the presence of what I consider to be scaffold fiction’s two most striking features: scaffold anxiety and socio-legal critique. Scaffold anxiety and socio-legal critique, that is, are the larger results of the scaffold narrative’s investment in sublimity, Gothicism, imagination, sensibility and humanitarianism. Because their development was so dependent upon each of these movements, it is only logical that the boldest form of scaffold fiction—one that contains equal measures of scaffold anxiety and socio-legal critique—could not emerge before the late eighteenth or early nineteenth centuries. As Cohen might agree, it took a particular ideological moment (210) before authors were wont to execute a certain type of literary “social act” (215). The portrayal of courtrooms, of death row, of condemned figures, and of the scaffold itself, as a generic collective, “reveals the social changes in audience” (216). However tangible the scaffold anxiety of Rowe’s *Lady Jane Grey*, for instance, and however evident Rowe’s interest in the emotional and political effects of a questionable death sentence, it is Defoe’s larger interest in crime itself and in the everyday justice system that gives the scaffold of *Moll Flanders* a breadth not shared by that of Rowe, Banks, or other early-century purveyors of fictional execution, both onstage and off.

In *Crime & Defoe: A New Kind of Writing*, Lincoln B. Faller discusses not just Defoe’s well-established contribution to the development of the novel but also how he used the lives and, to an extent, the minds of criminal characters to do so. According to Faller, Defoe used the genre of criminal biography as a

starting point to explore subjectivity and to comment on the individual in society. In its more traditional form, the English criminal biography, like the execution broadsheet, does not treat the anxiety of the condemned in anything more than passing fashion—if at all—and it does not tend to question the justness of his or her punishment. Most criminal biographies, as likewise broadsheets, sermons, and the *Newgate Calendar*, occupy the less ambiguous sphere of execution literature, a purportedly journalistic and/or moralistic body of narrative that generally sought to reassert the legal status quo. The degree to which criminal biography is “fiction” is, of course, contentious, and I prefer to side with Faller who emphasizes the creative liberties with which even the least imaginative author composed a *True and Genuine Account of John Doe, Highwayman*. Wherever they happen to fall on the fiction/non-fiction continuum, though, criminal biographies tend to portray attitudes other than anxiety: their heroes are figures of remorse or defiance. The emotional focus of the condemned is outward rather than inward—the executed man serves as a warning to spectators and readers, or struts gamely for his audience’s entertainment. When the narrative’s focus does turn back in their direction, they express concern for their eternal souls rather than their compromised bodies.

“During the second decade of the eighteenth century,” Faller tells us, “the first great collections of criminals’ lives began to appear” (5). If Faller cautions us more than once about taking the criminal biography “at its own word” (35), especially in the case of the “rogue” biography which sometimes could “be read as simultaneously satirizing and celebrating both bourgeois and aristocratic

values” (35), he ultimately concludes that its meaning was generally “congruent with official morality” (62). According to Faller, it is not surprising that Defoe, who showed such interest in the subjectivity of his characters, was drawn to the criminal biography as a narrative form; the English tradition held a great deal of potential:

On the Continent, the purpose of public execution was simply and totally to humiliate and erase the criminal [and] to subdue the watching crowd with an overpowering display of state authority. . . . Criminals in France were not of much interest in and of themselves; criminal biography there tended, correspondingly, to be brief, undeveloped, and infrequent. In England, however, where the body politic was far more active, divided, and complicated, the execution of criminals could be a far more richly nuanced affair. Nowhere else was it expected they would play so central a role in the social drama staged to exploit their dreadful ends; nowhere else were their voices given so much scope; nowhere else were their lives and fates potentially so dense with social, political, and religious implications. Serious criminal biography was particularly concerned with drawing out, developing, and broadcasting these implications.

(8-9)

Defoe was not the first to write protracted accounts of criminal lives (6), but the narratives he published about the deeds of Jack Sheppard and Jonathan Wild strike Faller as “enlarged versions of criminal biography” that “aim at greater

adequacy to the actual" (7) and skirt closer to the novel form than those of his predecessors.

And yet, although *A Narrative of all the Robberies, Escapes, &c. of John Sheppard* (1724) and *The True and Genuine Account of the Life and Actions of the Late Jonathan Wild* (1725) appeared a couple of years after *Moll Flanders*,¹⁹¹ they adhere more closely to the traditional criminal biography than the emerging novel form, at least in terms of their focus upon the condemned's state of mind. The Sheppard narrative, despite being written in the first person, does not project the hero's dread. Typical of criminal biographies and execution broadsheets, Sheppard expresses regret, remorse, shame, piety, and some satisfaction in serving as a warning to others, but his story contains no overt psychologizing of fear. In short, and true to form, the Sheppard biography makes no effort to arouse humanitarian sentiment for the condemned man nor devotes any space to his scaffold anxiety. There is certainly no concern for the operation of the justice system, unless it is to shine a light on its failure to restrain escape artists.

The scaffold's pall is somewhat more present in the Wild biography. Defoe notes the dismay of Wild's mistress when she learns of his death sentence; having already lost two husbands to the noose, she tries to kill herself rather than face the shame of her particular form of widowhood a third time, or the economic

¹⁹¹ In *Defoe on Sheppard and Wild*, Richard Holmes pools the combined opinions of other scholars and concludes that, of the five criminal biographies that have traditionally been ascribed to Defoe, only one is "definitely by Defoe" (*The True and Genuine Account of the Life and Actions of the Late Jonathan Wild*). *A Narrative of all the Robberies, Escapes, &c. of John Sheppard* is "highly likely to be by Defoe" while *The History of the Remarkable life of John Sheppard* (1724) is only "possibly by Defoe, in whole or maybe in part" (xxxix-xxxix). Both *Authentic Memoirs of the Life of John Sheppard* (1724) and *The Life of Jonathan Wild, from his Birth to his Death* (1725) "now seem unlikely to be by Defoe" (xxxix). Accordingly, I will only consider the two texts most likely to be Defoe's work in my own study.

difficulty, perhaps, of being left without a partner, or possibly even grief over the loss of Jonathan himself (*Jonathan Wild* 95). Defoe, in other words, toys with the trope of the lamentation of intimates, but he does so in barest footnote fashion. When the Black Act is passed and Wild's major source of income—the fencing of stolen goods—becomes a capital offence, the hero shows no concern for his safety, even after being warned by his associates:

He that was hardened above the baseness of all cautionary fear, scorned the advice, and went on in his wicked trade; not warily and wisely as he had formerly done, but, in short, with more impudence and shameless boldness than ever, as if he despised the laws, and the governors, and the provoked justice of a nation. (108)

There is no description of Wild's reaction upon sentencing (108), but we are given a glimpse into his state of mind when we learn that he attempts to kill himself with laudanum in the condemned hold. Before poisoning himself, however, he did not seem to be “in any suitable manner sensible of his condition, or concerned about it” (113). On the day of his execution, he is too addled by the drug for observers to interpret his mental condition one way or the other; he is described as sleepy and incapacitated, which makes his emotional state difficult to read and therefore inconclusive. The biography by and large focuses on the details of Wild's criminal operation and methodology rather than on his interiority, and its most intensely emotional moment is found in the narrator's expression of abhorrence for Wild's exploitation of children (109). Our pity, in other words, is directed only at his victims, and the narrator's gratitude for the scaffold deaths of

malefactors whom Wild, as informant, exposed to the gallows ratifies the text's reassertion of standard morality and unexamined law (90).

There is a great deal more room for the expression of scaffold anxiety in *Moll Flanders*, and Defoe exploits it. I have chosen not to dwell on *Captain Singleton* (1720), *Colonel Jack* (1722) or *Roxana* (1724) because, while they deal with rogues and outliers, they evince a lack of interest in the idea of scaffold anxiety by comparison with *Moll Flanders*. Colonel Jack is never brought to law despite his crimes, and scaffold anxiety enters into the equation only lightly (i.e. Jack sails to Virginia to avoid arrest as a Jacobite rebel). The travelogue *cum* pirate narrative of *Captain Singleton* is more concerned with mercantile details than legal ones, and Roxana's concerns are psychosexual, socio-economic, and moral. Concerns of class, economy, and morality are expressed by Moll, of course, but Defoe frames these, quite literally, between the walls of Newgate prison. It is in *Moll Flanders* where Defoe's innovations, as identified by Faller, assist in the fashioning of a palpable scaffold anxiety—the sort we will begin to see a great deal of in the late eighteenth century, when novels of sensibility and Gothic horror were ubiquitous. Faller does not break new ground when he lists the narrative elements that Defoe helped popularize with *Robinson Crusoe*, *Moll Flanders*, and *Roxana*, such as placing characters in a distinct and concrete environment, or creating an impression of the “disorderliness of life,” as Ian Watt styles it in *The Rise of the Novel* (106). As Faller writes, these techniques were unusual in Defoe's day but they do pre-date his oeuvre. Rather, it is the unique subjectivity of *Moll Flanders*, a subjectivity “rarely if ever found in criminal

biography” (59) that opens a space for scaffold anxiety in the text. With their “proliferation of points of view” (60) and “variety of voices” (61), Defoe’s novels “simply fail to conform to—or even be congruent with, the two main structures of criminal biography” (50) as Faller has catalogued them:

The lives they describe are never quite reducible to the aimless meanderings of criminal roguery, but neither can they quite be made to fit the strict fall and rise of serious criminal biography. . . . Moll’s life may seem to incorporate both the downward and upward movements of serious criminal biography, but its pivot point—her repentance in Newgate—is riddled with troubling ambiguities. . . . There is an inordinacy about Defoe’s novels, an incompleteness or overrepletion. They go too far or not far enough. They dilate or reflect or digress, and none comes to a proper ending. . . . Defoe leaves his readers hanging, not his protagonists. (50-51)

In traditional criminal biographies, even Defoe’s, the criminal is either the “chiefest of sinners” or “most shamed and penitent” (62), but Moll exhibits both of these archetypes, sometimes within the same chapter or paragraph, and displaces these discreet and rigid extremes with very human, very complex expressions of fear.

It goes without saying that a legitimate portrayal of scaffold anxiety requires the kind of subjectivity that Defoe elaborates in *Moll Flanders*. It requires at least a suggestion of opposition between the voice of its condemned heroine and “the official voice of society” (68), if not the sort of anti-establishment and

philosophical humanitarianism of a Godwin novel, with its unrelenting critique of the system. In other words, the presence of scaffold anxiety requires that our sympathy be manipulated or confounded until we find ourselves indifferent to the greater good, and firmly committed in the heroine's favour, however just the law that brought her to the condemned hold, however serious her crimes. It requires that we accept Moll's resentment of the idea of a premature death. In criminal biography, Faller writes, "author, narrator and reader are presumably at one," but Moll Flanders "put[s] readers peculiarly on the spot" (69). Moll's outrageous scaffold anxiety and attachment to the material world form a significant moment in the process of scaffold fiction, for she is a common criminal who breaks the common law even when she does not have to. Moll is not a Lady Jane Grey or a Lord Essex swept up in larger political forces and brought to the scaffold by enemies—she is not a virtuous and heroic figure whom our conscience whispers ought to have been allowed to live. Defoe's revolutionary focus on ordinary lives, which rise-of-the-novel scholars like Ian Watt have pointed out, allows for more than the individualizing and elevating of the psychology of oneself and one's neighbours. It also enables Defoe to make the literary scaffold not just more everyday but more *personal* than it typically was before the 1720s.

Moll Flanders strives to be a scaffold fiction in many ways. It features several expected tropes: negotiation, lamentation, and imagined death. Mother Midnight's attempts to negotiate with the jury and with Moll's victims are described only briefly (*Moll Flanders* 265), as is her lamentation of Moll's fate,

which merits half a paragraph (269). Moll's imagining of her own death is more vivid, with all the attendant anxiety:

I lived many days [in Newgate] under the utmost horror of soul; I had death, as it were, in view, and thought of nothing night and day, but of gibbets and halters, evil spirits and devils; it is not to be expressed by words how I was harassed, between the dreadful apprehensions of death and the terror of my conscience reproaching me with my past horrible life. (261)

Defoe is more willing to flesh out the trope of imagined death, perhaps, because it is a natural expression of scaffold anxiety, something he embeds in his story from its opening page. By way of introduction to his main character, we are told that many of Moll's associates have "gone out of the world by the steps and the string" as she herself expects to go (33). The fact of Moll's unlucky birth in Newgate also signals what sort of place the scaffold will have in the narrative. Her own mother was condemned to death but "pleaded her belly" (34) and was transported instead, leaving Moll a prison orphan. "I cannot recollect another criminal of the period, actual or fictitious," Faller observes, "who was born in Newgate of a thief and who came (as Moll nearly does) to end at her beginning" (Faller 53). Defoe's structure is telling; the reader is invited to contemplate the image of the scaffold from page one.

Moll herself does not express any notable measure of scaffold anxiety until late in the text. She does not become a criminal until she reaches her forties, and when she changes her name and plants herself in the sanctuary of

the Mint to evade a dead husband's creditors, she is more concerned about the state's appropriating what little money she has than about its appropriating her life. In fact, as Juliet Mitchell points out in her introduction to the Penguin edition of the novel, Moll does not consider herself a criminal for much of the book (10) and only feels the death penalty's menace after she steals that first bundle from the apothecary shop in Leadenhall Street. It is a colourful moment: "I was under such dreadful impressions of fear, and in such terror of mind. . . . I sat me down, and cried most vehemently. 'Lord,' said I, 'what am I now? a thief! Why, I shall be taken next time, and carried to Newgate and be tried for my life!'" (190). Moll is so exquisitely attuned to the idea of the scaffold that "I went in daily dread that some mischief would befall me, and that I should certainly come to be hanged at last" (193). But her "secret anxiety" (213) serves her and helps her avoid arrest for years: "The impression this made on me was too strong to be slight, and it kept me from making attempts that . . . might have been very safely performed" (193). She manages to keep her fears in check sometimes, but one after another her colleagues are executed, and each death reminds her that "it would be my turn next" (199). Each "frighted me heartily" (200) and gives her pause. The scaffold is such a bugbear to Moll that she claims to prefer the swift cruelty of mob justice to a methodical death by executioner (206). She rejects a job as a coiner because "the very thoughts of being burnt at a stake struck terror into my soul, chilled my blood, and gave me the vapours to such a degree, as I could not think of it without trembling" (242-43). When she is almost discovered one day, her chief emotion is indignation rather than fear (231ff) and after escaping

capture she brags that she “has the most courage” (255) when danger is greatest, up to a point. But the aggravating abstract becomes a brutally real ordeal when Moll is finally arrested in the commission of a theft and brought to Newgate.

“My very blood chills at the mention of its name,” (258) Moll confesses, since Newgate is the place “from whence [my friends] went to the fatal tree” (258). Critics have discussed the extraordinary length of time it takes Moll to repent in earnest after being brought to Newgate and charged with a capital crime, and they engage in ongoing discussions about the degree of Moll’s individualism and her complex characterization.¹⁹² But her vacillation also provides Defoe with an opportunity, in a dramatic sense, to milk the horror of Moll’s dreadful but mundane fate. Unlike the condemned in Defoe’s criminal biographies, she mourns her punishment rather than her crime; “I was a penitent,” she begins, before turning the convention on its head by adding, “not that I had sinned, but that I was to suffer” (259). She experiences the oscillations between fortitude and terror that we see in many late-century Gothic and revolutionary scaffold fictions, spending longer periods in the agony of anxiety than numbness. Newgate repulses her and deprives her of sleep; she becomes “brutish, then raving” (262) before she adapts to the place. Prison “degenerates” her rational and emotional faculties (263), sends her into swoons, and inspires

¹⁹² As Juliet Mitchell writes in the introduction to her edition, Defoe investigates a “juxtaposition of contradicting moral elements” (13), allowing Moll to be hero and villain, wife and whore, thief and entrepreneur, and to position her as a “relatively good woman caught up in bad acts” (15). Her nuanced response to justice and her delayed and muddled repentance serve to underscore her moral ambivalence.

her to keen, “I shall be hanged!” (266). When the death sentence is finally delivered, her anxiety becomes more generalized and in a way more traditional as she begins to consider the torments of an afterlife in Hell (270), just as her literary predecessors, like Claudio, had done for centuries. Before Moll’s repentance, her reprieve, and the commutation of her and Jemmy’s sentences to transportation, Defoe produces page after page after page of the psychological ordeal of an ordinary citizen on death row, and one that is unlike anything I have found in the English fiction that predates it, whether in terms of length, detail, or stubbornly prosaic subject matter. With the advent of the novel form and the privileging of interiority and individualism, literary scaffold anxiety naturally comes to the fore.

What has yet to appear is any real sense of socio-legal critique. Faller does remind us that people even in Defoe’s day “entertained at some level the notion that crime was not always a matter of individual responsibility but sometimes the product of larger social and economic factors” (Faller n.11, 207). Such causes or correlations, however, are given short shrift in *Moll Flanders* and undercut by Moll’s own biography. Like Faller, I question her attempts to settle responsibility for her thieving on the world around her, for Defoe makes it clear that she is in fact a rather *lucky* prison orphan (Faller n.42, 53), raised by well-to-do foster parents, educated above her station, and supported by charitable communities and benefactors. When she claims “I would not have had so scandalous a life” (33) had she been provided for by the state and trained for service, she is not indicting England’s lack of social support so much as she is

her own pride, which she implies was aggravated by the unexpected advantages she was given. She lives comfortably at Bath or on plantations until the age of forty-two. The death of a husband provides an opportunity for Moll and Defoe to discuss the disadvantages of a single, friendless, and no longer beautiful woman in a society compromised not by corrupt systems but corrupt individuals—con men tempted by a widow's nest egg or mendacious seducers. Poverty is characterized as "the bane of virtue" (186) and indeed contributes to her thieving (188-89) but, like the prideful Jemmy, Moll does not rob out of necessity every time, nor does she move into legitimate occupations, such as dressmaking, when given the opportunity. "The truth is," Faller emphasizes, "that Moll likes stealing," and "her claim that her first thefts were out of necessity is undercut by the temptation she feels to murder her second victim, a child whose necklace she steals in an alley" (Faller 209). Moll is regarded by most critics as one who steals mainly out of narcissism or even fetish; crime in *Moll Flanders* is personal rather than sociological, avoidable for the virtuous, a failure of character rather than a product of the system. That Moll blames the government, her seducer, and the Devil himself says more about her fallible pre-repentant character than the state of England. Defoe's focus is on individual error rather than institutional oppression; the law and things as they are escape his scope. If a stay in Newgate can be said to corrupt virtue (101), it does so because of the proximity of other criminals or crooked jailors. People, and not power, corrode our virtue, and yet people can also overcome their sins, as Jemmy, Moll, and Moll's mother demonstrate by novel's end.

A sustained socio-legal critique of the system in the context of scaffold fiction does not make a major appearance until Henry Fielding published his final novel, *Amelia*, thirty years later. Like *Moll Flanders*, *Amelia* depicts crime, law, and justice as they relate to ordinary men and women. But the novel is not Fielding's first foray into the world of crime and law. Like Defoe, Fielding published a criminal biography entitled *The Life of Mr. Jonathan Wild the Great* (1743) whose didactic focus lies less on the "slippery slope" that leads citizens into lives of crime than on the problems of ambition and its corrupting nature. Hugh Amory characterizes *Jonathan Wild* as a satire that "liken[s] criminal malefactors to national leaders" (xiv), an "anatomy of the relationship between crime and government, or gangsters, thieves, despots and conquerors" (xvii). Like *Moll Flanders*, *Jonathan Wild* does not blame class or legal systems for the existence of crime. It places the blame on Wild himself, a thief by nature who is born from a criminal bloodline and seems predestined for the gallows. Chapters II and III describe Wild's ancestry and suggest that, because he is descended from pickpockets, his behaviour is ingrained and unavoidable. Nature "gives some warnings of her intentions" (11) and foreshadows Wild's destiny by turning his pregnant mother into a kleptomaniac who "longed for everything she saw" but could only be "satisfied with her wish unless she enjoyed it clandestinely" (12). Wild's propensity is theft—it is reflexive, as he demonstrates on the scaffold when, about to hang, he pilfers a corkscrew out of the Ordinary's pocket (175-76). Because of an "awkward pride" (18), Wild would rather "stand on the summit of a dunghill, than at the bottom of a hill in Paradise" (18), a conscious allusion to

Milton's Satan and an admission of intention; too low-born to ascend the political ladder, and aware that a thief does less evil overall than a politician (21), Wild settles instead for ruling the Hell of London's underworld. Fielding's object lesson, in sum, is the "frailty of human nature" (8) rather than the frailty of the system, a lesson that could not be more different from that of *Caleb Williams*.

Or even that of *Amelia*, whose hero is in and out of custody throughout the novel and must face both capital and non-capital charges. While Joseph Andrews and Tom Jones are harassed by "chance or malice," according to David Blewett (*Amelia* ix), and while Jonathan Wild is genetically predisposed to sin, William and Amelia Booth must contend not just with Booth's fatalism and poor judgement but also with a full panoply of injustices:

It is in the analysis of outward forces that menace the domestic happiness of the Booths, and by extension all ordinary people like them, that Fielding moves beyond his previous depictions of English society. The Booths are the victims of a corrupt social system, "the institutionalized evils in eighteenth-century society," as one critic has put it,¹⁹³ of the law that throws Booth into prison for coming to the aid of an innocent man beaten by a pair of assailants.

(x)

Like Mangin's George Ardent, Booth's legal troubles extend beyond his own vanity or naivety—they are brought on by the system's easy propensity for mistake and the almost inescapable barriers of social rank and income. Neither

¹⁹³ Charles A. Knight, "The Narrative Structure of Fielding's *Amelia*" (*Ariel: A Review of International English Literature*, 11.1, January, 1980).

the jailing of Booth for debt (Fielding would argue), nor the disproportionate execution of a teenager for stealing linens serves society or the law itself.¹⁹⁴ Things as they were in 1751 needed improvement, for the law as it was recorded and practised made it difficult to punish harshly those who deserved it, or to assist or reform those who required nothing more than a paternal nudge. Many characters in *Amelia* break the law in some fashion, but only the hanging of Murphy—the crooked lawyer who helped bilk Amelia out of her inheritance—is depicted as a just and legally sound act, and one that unfolds without a hitch. The “exposure of public corruption” (x) is one of Fielding’s goals, Blewett argues (in keeping with the standard critical assessment of *Amelia*), and the second chapter of Book I is devoted to the problems and pitfalls of the English legal system, an acknowledged snare even for virtuous citizens. “Good laws,” the narrator maintains, “should execute themselves in a well-regulated state” (15) regardless of the bias and incompetence of their users. The system itself should be a bulwark against the bigotry and self-interest of a Justice Thrasher. With *Amelia*, Fielding “adjusts his tone to fit his more pessimistic vision of life” (xi), in particular his view that public evil has a negative effect on private virtue (xi).

If this sentiment exists in *Moll Flanders*, it is embryonic at best. Moll is ultimately responsible for her own virtue, which she rarely supports when she has the chance. But there is a “menacing atmosphere” (xi) in *Amelia*, which Blewett

¹⁹⁴ It is evident that Booth’s wish to see Betty hang for her theft is unfit when Amelia tells him “I shall submit to your superior judgment” (486) on the matter despite her desire to act compassionately, for we have seen just how superior her own judgment has been relative to her husband’s throughout the novel. This is underscored when Amelia later forgives Atkinson for stealing her locket (489-90) and when she allows her felonious sister to escape to France at novel’s end. See Section XI of *Late Increase of Robbers* for a more direct view of Fielding’s observations on punishment.

and other critics have highlighted. The “powerful theme of enclosure” and the “dominant image of the prison” (xi) are in and of themselves remarkable. Mitchell and Blewett point to matrimony as a linchpin fascination in both *Moll Flanders* and *Amelia*, but the texts are equally preoccupied with autonomy and the forces that constrain it. While Fielding’s critique of English culture is hardly on a par with that of Godwin, Booth’s bad decisions are only partly to blame for his numerous arrests and encounters with the death penalty. He is also “a victim of the law” and of “the social system that keeps him in poverty” (xii). In a sense, *Amelia* is a halfway point, as a scaffold fiction, between *Moll Flanders* and *Caleb Williams*, thanks to its interest in private as well as public failures. We must bear in mind that Justice Fielding believed in the state’s right to deprive criminals of their lives, however much he also felt the execution ritual itself was in need of reform.¹⁹⁵ He believed in firm laws and in the importance of personal responsibility. It makes sense, then, that in *Amelia* liberty is still tangentially tied to a person’s disposition and behaviour in ways not found in *Caleb Williams*. But, as Blewett remarks, Fielding also endued *Amelia* with a tragic tone not seen in his earlier novels and strove for “greater psychological accuracy” (xv), both of which are key ingredients in scaffold fiction. “The analysis of the moral and social problems that the novel provides,” Blewett believes, “gives to *Amelia* an urgency and pathos not to be found in English fiction until nineteenth-century novels such as *Bleak House*”

¹⁹⁵ *The Covent-Garden Journal*, No 49, Saturday, June 20 and *Late Increase of Robbers* offer us a clear view of Fielding’s opinion on capital punishment and on the role of the law itself. His outlook is conservative, paternalistic, and strict, and his critique of public execution is not born of an abhorrence for authoritarianism, but rather a mistrust of the mob’s interpretative faculties. If there are any shades of so-called humanitarianism to be found in *Late Increase of Robbers*, it is in Fielding’s assertion that the state cannot justify harsh penalties unless “we take every possible method of preventing the offence” (126), one of which is to make execution a ritual characterized by “celerity, privacy, and solemnity” (125) in order to better deter criminal acts.

(xx)—or rather *Caleb Williams*, I would argue, which likely goes unmentioned because it owes much to critical revisions more recent than Blewett's essay, and because Fielding showed little interest in Booth's scaffold anxiety relative to that endured by Godwin's greatest scaffold hero.

In other words, while *Amelia* delivers a socio-legal critique, it does not take a page from *Moll Flanders* and elaborate on the scaffold anxiety of its hero. Such psychologizing has never been Fielding's style. Even as far back as *Jonathan Wild*, where abstract "roguery" rather than fully dimensional rogues is Fielding's stated subject (219), cultural commentary enjoys more prominence than interiority. "No sympathy is wasted on [Wild] as an underdog unjustly discriminated against" (*Jonathan Wild* xvi), writes Amory, and Fielding shades him with such "classical" attributes as fortitude (xiv) which, given Wild's "sleazy grandeur" (xxvii), comes across as stubbornness, conceit, or mock-heroic bombast. Amory interprets Wild's scaffold attitude as a "plucky, low-level resilience" or a "low-grade effrontery supported by drink and drugs. It is not the courage of a great antihero, but an altogether lesser composure . . . partly akin to the resilient impassivity of a puppet or clown" (xxvii). In order for Fielding to delineate such a "shabby dignity" (xxviii), genuine scaffold anxiety—the sort that draws readers closer to the hero in sympathy—must give way, appearing only in passing in order to remind the reader that Greatness demands the sacrifice of a clear conscience:

[Wild] was under a continual alarm of frights, and fears, and jealousies. He thought every man he beheld wore a knife for his

throat, and a pair of scissors for his purse. As for his own gang particularly, he was thoroughly convinced there was not a single man amongst them, who would not, for the value of five shillings, bring him to the gallows. These apprehensions so constantly broke his rest, and kept him so assiduously on his guard . . . that his condition . . . might seem rather deplorable, than the object of envy or desire. (120)

Artful people are in the habit of judging others by their own example, so this small blip of scaffold anxiety serves more to underscore Wild's unscrupulous worldview than conjure up sympathy for his straits. It is not an investigation into the mindset of the condemned for the purpose of understanding that mindset in and of itself. It is a didactic moment rather than a pathetic digression, unsustained and only nominally resurrected at novel's end when Wild is scheduled to hang. Nor do we see such investigations in the Socratic figure of Heartfree, who reflects on the questions of the afterlife when he is not obsessing over his wife's perceived betrayal or the future of his children (90). Wild, for his part, compares criminals nervous about the noose to women and fools (92); the perfect crook, like Fireblood and Wild himself, has little or no fear of the authorities (93). For much of the narrative, Wild asserts that he is destined to hang and that hanging is honourable, a perspective that clarifies Fielding's mock-heroic outline.

Jonathan Wild plays with the tropes of imagined death and last farewell, but it does not do so in order to elaborate on the anxiety and despair of those facing the scaffold, as they are usually deployed. Scaffold anxiety must take a

back seat to Fielding's greater interest in the distraction of a guilty conscience and the isolation of the wicked. When Wild imagines Heartfree's execution "with fantoms too dreadful to be described" (136), we discern a conscience guilty over sending an innocent man to the gallows, not anxiety for the fate of an intimate or the hero's own body. Wild's torment, moreover, is brief; "Greatness instantly returning to his assistance," it "checked the base thought" (136) and reminds him that such cares are dishonourable and childish. During his interview with the prison ordinary, Wild briefly admits to being disturbed at night by dreams of hanging (166), but again this disturbance is glancing, unexamined, and about as momentary as those found in the odd criminal biography. And while Heartfree enjoys the final visits of his family and finds consolation in the sympathy of loved ones (a melodramatic scene designed, again, primarily to showcase Wild's guilty conscience as he observes these visits with a pang), the arrival of Laetitia, the hero's unfaithful wife, is a tableau of ulterior motives and crocodile tears. Laetitia, also sentenced to death, visits Wild not to comfort him but to harangue him, and his hurling her out of his cell is a wonderful reversal of the usual magnetism of bodies clinging to one another during last farewell scenes, loath to let go. Even Fireblood's visit to Wild is ironic in that he actually intended to see Laetitia, his adulterous lover. There is no one to see Wild off to eternity with honest blessings and fond farewells, apart from the prison ordinary, perhaps, whose account of their conversation is fragmentary—ironically incomplete. There is no one to help mitigate Wild's scaffold anxiety because that anxiety is subdued, at least in terms of spoken word. Fielding's hero dies, to all appearances, resentfully game,

cursing the crowd as the horses draw the cart away from the gallows, which hangs him to “universal applause” (176).

The sidelining of scaffold anxiety is typical of Fielding, whose Tom Jones is more obsessed with romantic trials than capital ones after he wounds Fitzgerald in a duel and finds himself arrested and detained. Jones is “indifferent” (775) to his fate and sleepless only because of his romantic woes; he is barely conscious of the scaffold that chance has placed in his way, and because he fears he has lost Sophia’s heart, death appeals to him anyway. His “most violent and frantic agonies of grief and despair” (815) are vented over the idea of having committed incest with Mrs. Waters, his supposed mother, not the horror of having erred his way into a condemned hold. Amelia’s husband is similarly distracted by concerns of heart and conscience after his arrest for a felony crime. Booth is melancholic but not terrified, and the felons around him—Robinson, Mrs. Matthews, and three merry robbers “certain of being hanged” (24)—quake even less. The death penalty is barely mentioned in these scenes, and the emotions Fielding describes are those of rage, shame, and sorrow, not fear. When Mrs. Matthews mentions her possible scaffold punishment, she expresses satisfaction at being “revenged” (34) of her seducer, sadness at having disgraced her father, and indifference to life—“let them take it from me when they will” (34). Her lawyer tries to use the terror of the scaffold in order to persuade her to buy a witness in her behalf, which only inspires her pique. Her jailors remind her to no avail that “one should always fear the worst” (56). But Mrs. Matthews, detained for murder, exhibits an almost comical lack of anxiety. Her only moment of “extreme horror”

(155) occurs when Amelia arrives and interrupts her tryst with Booth. Booth, meanwhile, experiences “terror” that “makes him the most wretched of human beings” (166), but his “deplorable state of anxiety” (181) is in relation to his affair with Mrs. Matthews and his horror of discovery.

Once Booth extricates himself from his first arrest, most of his subsequent detentions are debt-related and therefore involve non-capital charges. While Fielding’s themes of confinement and faulty justice are sustained, he does not take the opportunity to enrich his socio-legal critique with depictions of scaffold anxiety, even when Booth is charged, later in the novel, with assault and attempted escape after roughing up a bailiff (Chapter X, Book 8). There is no alignment of the death penalty, justly or unjustly imposed, with disabling anxiety. Fielding paints a sublime picture only during a shipwreck scene in Book III, Chapter 4, and the image that perennially haunts his anguished hero is that of a widowed Amelia or of an Amelia broken by news of his sexual betrayal. Booth is harried, no question, by anxiety over arrest for his financial blunders, and he fears a long, unpleasant, and unhealthy incarceration away from Amelia’s side. But his lack of scaffold anxiety—and the lack of scaffold anxiety in other characters, too—serves Fielding’s more urgent desire to comment on the justice system. In a clever and indirect fashion, the omission of scaffold anxiety helps Fielding demonstrate how little the capital code of 1751 deterred crime. The judicial concerns of *Late Increase of Robbers* are reflected in the characters that populate *Amelia*: Colonel Trent’s father-in-law, who forges a deed but “avoid[s] the gallows by the help of the law” (474); the larger nobility, which does not fear

punishment in general; a detailed conversation between Dr. Harrison and a young clergyman in Book IX which highlights, somewhat ironically, Fielding's dismay over the population's lack of reverence for law and punishment. Divine punishment, as Fielding himself would agree, is too remote a consequence for most humans; "corporal punishments," argues the young clergyman, "operate more forcibly on the human mind than all the fear of damnation" (405). But those punishments ought to be effectively meted out, for we have seen in *Amelia* just how ineffectively corporal punishments deter its characters from sin—an absence of scaffold anxiety communicates as much.

Gothicism and sensibility, as I have shown, prompted more thorough portrayals of scaffold anxiety in fictions concerned with crime, law, and punishment. Humanitarianism and calls for reform, meanwhile, made more relevant than ever fictions that depicted characters threatened with execution. Scaffold anxiety and socio-legal critique begin to work in tandem, the one bolstering the other: colourful descriptions of scaffold anxiety make condemned heroes and heroines more sympathetic and their straits more terrible, and therefore more politically noticeable, perhaps. They also, as Godwin's *Cursory Strictures* is said to have done,¹⁹⁶ shift our focus away from characters' crimes and place it on their punishments, which in turn forces us to question the validity of the law as much as a character's moral conduct, if not more so. One could even say that the differences among Defoe, Fielding, and Godwin can be defined

¹⁹⁶ See Marshall's *William Godwin*: "The pamphlet could not have been more timely. Its effect was immediate. Instead of the guilt of the accused, little was heard of but the flagrancy of the charge" (136).

as such: Defoe was concerned more than anything else with narrating crime; Fielding with narrating law; and Godwin with narrating punishment. Crime seems a lingering or eternal problem at the end of *Moll Flanders*, as it is at the end of criminal biographies; villains are either “brought to an unhappy end” or “brought to be penitent,” as Defoe himself announces in the novel’s preface (30). A virtuous life is achievable, in other words, so long as individuals avoid “bad company” (30). The people of *Moll Flanders* are not threatened to the same degree by the bad judgment of authorities as they are in *Amelia*, where the lingering problems at novel’s end, despite its comic conclusion, are bad law and bad neighbours, together with the possibility of a return of Booth’s own bad judgment. The returns of “unweary industry” (30) that Defoe evangelizes in his preface to *Moll Flanders* are hardly guaranteed in Fielding’s world. They are even less so in the worlds of *The Necromancer* and *The Banished Man*, and by the time we find ourselves in Godwin’s sphere, unwearied industry is a powerless value. If, as Juliet Mitchell writes, *Moll Flanders* is concerned with the “relationship of the individual to society” (5), that same relationship is queried from the opposite direction in Godwin, where society owes more to the individual than the individual does to society. Relative to *Caleb Williams* and even to *Amelia*, *Moll Flanders* absolves society of the problem of crime; it is when society is not absolved and when the effects of society’s destructive power over both the individual and the individual’s psychological state are portrayed, that scaffold fiction announces itself, finally, as a genre that has silently existed for some time.

2: A Bloody Different Code

In one of the earliest and most seminal critical defences of Godwin's novels, P.N. Furbank describes *Caleb Williams*, *St. Leon*, *Fleetwood*, and *Mandeville* as works that depict above all "the dramatized history of a state of mind" (214), a phrase that evokes a scaffold anxiety that is protracted and given its full due. In "Godwin's Novels" (1955), Furbank argues that the author's books have "an unjustifiably low" reputation thanks to problems of expectation:

Critics have as often as not been unwilling to accept the genre of his novels. It is one that we do not happen to have many examples of in English, though they are common in other languages: I mean the dramatized history of a state of mind on the lines of *Réné*, *Werter*, *Hero of our Own Times*, etc. It is a form of confessional literature, and in France takes some of its inspiration from Rousseau's *Confessions*. (In England, so far as it exists, it derives in part from religious confessions: there is a fine example in Hogg's *Confessions of a Justified Sinner*.) It is a form which comes into being with the Romantic revival, and is, perhaps, the Romantic substitute for tragedy. . . . It is important to point this out . . . because in the past Godwin has sometimes been linked with the *roman philosophique* of Holcroft and Bage, which is quite a different genre. (214)

I do not wish to argue to which genre, singular, Godwin's best-known novels ought to belong—indeed, as Ralph Cohen notes, “the same texts can belong to different groupings or genres and serve different generic purposes” (204). There is a consensus among readers that Godwin's works integrate several different types of fiction—Jacobin, Romantic, detective, historical, and Gothic, to name a few—and part of their fascination is their syncretic nature and their capacity to defy characterization. I would, however, like to add scaffold fiction to the list of genres Godwin's work embraces in terms of subject and style. Furbank's helpful description of these novels as “dramatized histor[ies] of a state of mind” and his consideration of Godwin as a Dostoyevsky-like “historian of the conscience” (215) assist in my rendering of these texts as fictions permeated with a scaffold anxiety more intense and pervasive than Moll Flander's emotional state or anything we might locate even in a Gothic novel of the 1790s. The anxiety of a Godwin hero is indeed a “state of mind” inextricable from and a direct result of his prideful self-agency before his expected execution. That is, while a sentimental or Gothic character may detail his torment on being arrested and sentenced, his awareness of such torments usually begins *in media vita* and ends with escape and/or reprieve, or perhaps only ignites with a shift in the political *status quo*, such as the onset of revolution. Godwin's persecuted heroes, however, seem to have been born and are certain to die with an anxiety about people and communities who claim any sort of authority over their person.¹⁹⁷ Their Romantic self-regard makes them combative; rather than submit heroically to sovereigns

¹⁹⁷ In this way, Defoe's prideful Moll has more in common with Fleetwood and St-Leon than Hubert de Sevrac or Adelaide of Narbonne.

and jailors, as do earlier condemned heroes for the most part, they ruminate, resent, and retreat at the first opportunity.

Godwin's novels are ideal texts with which to conclude my study, given his status as a transitional figure who straddled the eighteenth-century and Romantic eras and who anticipated, in *Political Justice*, capital reform—not just the age of Victorian reform but of twentieth-century reform as well. He is credited with helping to shape the Romantic novel, the detective story, and the historical novel. His scaffold fictions auger what was to come—that is, how novelists and filmmakers continue to render characters on death row—but they also hark back to older forms that came of age in the eighteenth century, such as Gothic fiction and the criminal biography. He turned the latter on its head by deploying its tropes to criticize hegemonic rather than individual sins, yet few readers doubt that the exploits of Jack Sheppard, in particular, inspired the escape sequences in *Caleb Williams*.¹⁹⁸ In effect, Godwin moved the criminal biography out of the sphere of execution literature into that of scaffold fiction, with its amplification of psychological detail and its aspirations for reform. He also makes the best use yet of the Gothic form's spectre of the axe; in *Caleb Williams*, that dependable symbol of authority is no longer merely affective, or critical of state power only in

¹⁹⁸ Kelly confirms that Godwin read Defoe's Sheppard account "just as he was writing vol. ii, Chs. xi, xiii-xiv" (n.1, pg. 192), and Grossman agrees that the story of *Caleb Williams* "does not just allude to Sheppard. Caleb's narrative . . . conforms at length to a recognizable criminal biography, as if Caleb were re-presenting a Jack Sheppard tale" (38). According to Grossman, Godwin "helped inaugurate a new form of crime novel, which would subsequently be reinvented in a subgenre called the Newgate novel" (61). "Godwin took up the genre of criminal biography in order to repudiate it. . . . After *Caleb Williams* the novel of crime subtly changed from referring itself to criminal biography to distancing itself from it" (48).

a limited, particular context—as it is in *Sophia Lee*, for example. In Godwin's hands the scaffold becomes a primary target of the author's censure.

In *The Hanging Tree*, Gatrell suggests that those of us interested in the so-called humanitarian literature of the late eighteenth century are “in quest of those hazy conjunctions where attitudes were subliminally as well as consciously shaped” (440) by a proliferation of forces:

The changes in perception and feeling of concern . . . had many roots: the growth of the reading public, cheaper print, more competitive newspapers; the energy of post-war radicalism . . . ; the linking of radical campaigning to exposures of injustice; the exposures of corrupt policing; the heightening of awareness achieved by Quakers and radical Whigs; the increasing assertiveness of lawyers. Admittedly until these legacies were carried into parliament by more confidently independent MPs after 1832, we are not dealing with the opening of floodgates. Still, these several kinds of campaigning contributed to that larger mobilization of feeling and indignation to which the Whig repeal of the capital statutes in the 1830s gave some satisfaction. (443-44)

Gatrell's study shows how the gradual shift in concern for the rights of criminals and the condemned was delayed by British anxiety about revolution and largely piecemeal. He points out that the outcry against the capital code was not widespread—that the Punishment Society at its height, for instance, had only 287 subscribers (405). “Public opinion is defined by the noisiest voices, not the most

numerous" (397), Gatrell reminds us, and yet the average Briton in the late eighteenth century "contemplated others' suffering in quite different ways from those of a century earlier" (226) because public opinion about the death penalty was, most certainly, being redefined. "Mental deposits were laid which abolitionists would build upon much later," however much "reformers exaggerated the clarity, ubiquity, and intensity of the public concern for which they spoke" (416).

Gatrell examines both the anxieties about the "death-dealing business" (440) among lawmakers, and the emerging constructs of humanitarianism that reformers "had in some degree invented" (325)—a dichotomy which in itself demonstrates the complexity of the question he wrestles with in *The Hanging Tree*. His study confirms my impression (as I wrote at the end of my previous chapter) that novels of sensibility and fictions of reform—not to mention Romantic poetry—helped "teach" Britons to become more compassionate and, in Godwin's day, contributed to the shaping of public opinion by harnessing citizens' emotion, as much as their reason:

We should nowadays insist that emotional repertoires are neither "natural" nor common to all people in all cultures and times. . . . Feelings like pity, compassion, sympathy, etc. are learnt. But, if so, this only endorses the importance of the moral philosophers and novelists of Hume's generation, for it was from them that the new emotional repertoires were disseminated. Through the novels of

sentiment and . . . essays on taste and manners, the project upon which they laboured entered polite drawing-rooms. (236)

Gatrell also discusses the various psychological inconstancies and cultural impediments that made this process anything but neat, and insists that “attitudes to punishment in the real world cannot be subsumed within a simple explanatory schema” (236). Indeed. But his recognition (however indirect) of the role that certain types of novels may have played in the reshaping of such attitudes—scaffold fictions, for instance—serves my own argument in this chapter: that Godwin’s novels participated in this reshaping of public opinion; that he was one of the “noisy” reformers whose message burrowed its way into the hearts of contemporaries; and that *Caleb Williams* and Godwin’s other scaffold fictions were “mental deposits” of some significance. “The people who petitioned for mercy on another’s behalf,” writes Gatrell, “were . . . of a kind obscure to history, who wrote no books, contributed to no newspapers, and signed no public petitions” (417). Godwin’s fictional output, like his more direct appeal for mercy in *Cursory Strictures*, was a type of petition that was not quite so obscure. His novels were minor atolls in a sea of apathy, perhaps, but still very much a part of the growing swell that eventually overwhelmed traditional perspectives on capital punishment.

The Bloody Code peaked, ironically, at a time when its association with the *ancien régime* had never been more apparent to Britons, one of whom declared in Parliament in 1790 that it was appropriate only to “the days of Gothic

tyranny and ferocity of manners.”¹⁹⁹ No history of British law or execution that I have found has failed to detail its grisly development over the course of centuries, however disputed the timeline, and however inconsistent its application. Andrea McKenzie sums up the Bloody Code’s cultural effects:

The eighteenth-century English capital code was notoriously harsh, with approximately two hundred capital statutes, most of them property offences, on the books. . . . This “Bloody Code” privileged property over human life. . . . Victorian and Edwardian writers delighted in pathetic descriptions of young female shoplifters executed for stealing to put bread in the mouths of their starving babies. Yet one of the most striking features of the so-called “Bloody Code” was that relatively few of those who fell under its purview were actually executed: the majority of men and women accused of capital crimes . . . could expect to be pardoned and/or sentenced to a punishment less than death. This paradox was often cited by contemporary apologists for the English criminal law as evidence of its flexibility and lenity: only the most violent or hardened repeat offenders . . . would suffer, and by their example strike terror in the hearts of would-be criminals. However . . . eighteenth-century critics argued that far from deterring crime, the severity of the law made it unenforceable: the fact that prosecutors and juries were reluctant to send men and women to the gallows for

¹⁹⁹ W. Smith, *Observations on the Laws Relative to Debtors and Felons* (1777), cited by Gatrell in *The Hanging Tree* (n.20, p. 232).

property crimes meant . . . that criminals believed they could rob with impunity.²⁰⁰ But . . . the unreformed capital code had weapons other than terror: the very mercy and discretion that ameliorated the severity of the criminal law also performed an ideological function, cementing and legitimating the bonds of deference and patronage, obedience and authority between the poor and the propertied classes. (3-4)

The relative “lenity” of sentencing in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries counted, as I have already suggested, for very little in the minds of men like William Godwin; it certainly left no favourable impression on foreign observers who wrote descriptions of the shocking sight of multiple hangings high above prisons’ walls. This aura of lenity vanishes in most scaffold fictions of the era, in which virtuous or at worst misguided individuals—far from hardened criminals—are launched into eternity: Hannah Primrose, for instance, in *Nature and Art*, or the Hawkins men in *Caleb Williams*. Caleb himself, like Moll Flanders and William Booth, comes uncomfortably close to swinging as his creator taps into a simmering cultural anxiety about the capital code. Godwin was dismayed by the state’s egregious power to take a citizen’s life, but he was also troubled by the Bloody Code’s “ideological function,” as McKenzie describes it; we see relations of “deference and patronage, obedience and authority” struggling awkwardly in his scaffold fictions.

²⁰⁰ The problem of pickpocketing among eighteenth-century scaffold crowds suggests there might be something to this.

Authority, punishment and William Godwin were inseparable long before twentieth-century scholars produced a library shelf's worth of criticism on *Caleb Williams*. This conjunction makes Godwin's appearance in a study about eighteenth-century scaffold fiction all the more expected—perhaps even as inevitable as the revolutionary guillotine which dominated my last chapter. The meticulous work of such scholars as P.N. Furbank, Gary Kelly, A.E. Rodway, Peter H. Marshall, Monika Fludernik, Carl Fisher, John Bender, Steven Bruhm, and Mark Philp has made my own task easier, for the groundwork has been laid. That Godwin's characters were oppressed not just by their own erratic personal codes but also by erratic social and legal forces has been established. That the anxieties of these characters mirror Godwin's own experiences and worldview has recently become nearly as irrefutable—to the extent that biographical certainty is possible in such matters. To this ongoing discussion, I should like to contribute two points: I wish first to collect in one place several exhibits of Godwin's expressions of scaffold anxiety, which other scholars have sensed in the oeuvre of a writer who flourished at the height of the Bloody Code. Perhaps sheer volume of testimony can once and for all satisfy us on the vexed question of authorial state of mind as it relates to authorial output. I then wish to approach Godwin's scaffold fictions as expressions of a sort of moral horror that surrounds the linked ideas of execration and execution, a sensation more intense and far-reaching than the scaffold anxiety of a single character.

Furbank was one of the first critics to sense Godwin's anxiety. Decades before Peter H. Marshall's exhaustive study of Godwin's letters, journal entries, and unpublished and original manuscripts, Furbank concluded that

It is plain that Godwin was in a state of extreme excitement at the time of writing his famous political work. The cold-blooded rationalism of *Political Justice*, its apparently placid nihilism, was conceived in a passion. It looks at first sight a paradox that the sedate anarchist and pedantic advocate of universal benevolence should also be the painter of the wild scenes of passion and mania that fill *Caleb Williams*; but the explanation is simple, it is that the emotions that fill the novel are those which Godwin himself experienced in writing the celebrated treatise. (216)

If Furbank seems overconfident in characterizing Godwin's emotions and in portraying his muse as a sort of anxious passion about government/power, he has reasons other than the fact that "*Caleb Williams* was written under the shadow of the Terror" (216). So was every other novel produced in the 1790s, and many of these works focused on similar concerns, as we have seen. Rather, what convinces Furbank of Godwin's acute inquietude is the sense of guilt that pervades *Caleb Williams* and its successors; "one has the impression that Godwin even at the height of his fame was always ready and expecting to find himself an outlaw," Furbank suggests. "It is his most natural habit of mind, as we can see from his preoccupation with the outlaws and guilty-innocent pariahs of his novels" (228).

We might accuse Furbank of making the classic mistake of collapsing a fiction's narrator and author, but subsequent critical and biographical examinations have borne out his assumptions. In *The English Jacobin Novel*, which devotes a chapter apiece to *Caleb Williams*, *St. Leon*, and *Fleetwood*, Gary Kelly examines the impact of context. While "events in France would have supplied Godwin with frequent illustrations of persecution, flight, and pursuit" (193), persecution also threatened closer to home as nervous Jacobins suppressed their writing and waited to be rounded up. Godwin went so far as to discouraged Elizabeth Inchbald from publishing a Jacobin play called *The Massacre* late in 1792 (193), and he also softened or withheld his prefaces to both *Political Justice* and *Caleb Williams*. "Holcroft, Thelwall and Horne Tooke, three of Godwin's closest friends, were arrested" in May 1793 for their criticism of British law and government and only acquitted later that year in November (11). It was during this period, according to Kelly and other scholars, that Godwin wrote a large section of *Caleb Williams*, a work produced during an uneasy summer when Godwin half-expected to be arrested for sedition in the wake of the success of *Political Justice*:

The repression of liberal views and writings began in earnest . . . in the few months before Godwin began writing [*Caleb Williams*]. The situation which Godwin conceived for his novel early in 1793 then became a prophecy, as a series of trials were instituted aimed at silencing English Jacobin preachers, publishers, and pamphleteers. These trials continued throughout the period in which Godwin was

writing his novel, and he noted in his Journal or read accounts of most of them. (195-6)

According to Kelly, Godwin was nothing short of obsessed with the straits of Joseph Gerrald, visiting him frequently while the prisoner awaited trial and, later on, as he wasted away on the hulk that would take him to Australia and a premature death. Gerrald and other associates of Godwin who were charged with sedition weighed heavily on the latter's mind. "On 29 April [1794] he saw Gerald [sic] for the last time. . . . He finished *Things as They Are* on the following day. The ending of the novel as it then stood offered an astonishing parallel between the fates of Joseph Gerald and Caleb Williams" (196).²⁰¹ If Kelly notes in Godwin "an anxiety for natural peace and harmony" (204) rather than scaffold anxiety, as I style it, he does not miss the way *Caleb Williams* reflects Godwin's fascination with crime and punishment in *Political Justice*—as Godwin himself signals in various prefaces and journal entries. Both the persecution of Caleb by Falkland and Tyrrel's persecution of Emily and the Hawkins men "are clearly related to Book [S]even of *Political Justice*, entitled 'Of Crimes and Punishments'. Godwin was presenting a fictionalized case of that central aspect of the Enlightenment debate on political theory, the right of the state to punish" (181).

Jonathan H. Grossman supports the conclusions of Kelly and Furbank in his essay "*Caleb Williams* and the Novel's Forensic Form" (2002). Aware of the inescapable influence that real-life concerns have on literary production, Grossman suggests that scholars "might begin by examining the moment in

²⁰¹ Kelly is referring to the original unpublished ending of *Caleb Williams*, or *Things as They Are*, in which Caleb succumbs to madness and possibly to poison in a dreary prison cell, with Falkland relatively victorious.

which Godwin wrote *Caleb Williams*—a time when the law courts invaded his own life” (49). Relying on Godwin's own marginal productions for support, such as the preface to *Political Justice*, Grossman concludes that, “as he sets out to write *Caleb Williams*, Godwin finds himself haunted by the knowledge that he may be tried for treason as the author of *Political Justice*” (49-50). *Caleb Williams* “brims with trial scenes: every one of this novel’s three volumes depicts at least three tribunals of various types, with many more threatened or invoked” (37). When these are considered alongside the representations of persecution, incarceration, and execution in Godwin's other three scaffold fictions, it becomes more and more difficult to dismiss or even underestimate the seeming hold such situations had on Godwin the man, as well as Godwin the author. Focusing only on *Caleb Williams*, Grossman examines what he calls a “historic struggle between criminal biography and the novel,” out of which Godwin “intentionally shed[s] the novel’s gallows literature past” by relying instead on “tribunal scenes to shape the novel's story and form” (38) as well as the state of mind of his characters. In other words, Grossman suggests that Godwin has written a scaffold fiction without a tangible scaffold such as those found in broadsheets and criminal biographies. Instead, it is the mere anxiety of character that generates a scaffold threat, one that perhaps reflects the anxiety of an author “enmeshed in a legal world” (51) that was swallowing up his friends and fellow writers.²⁰² He withdrew his original preface to *Caleb Williams* under the twin

²⁰² Grossman is in agreement with Kelly on the impact Godwin's quotidian reality had on his work: “Trial after trial of English Jacobins would command his attention while he wrote [*Caleb Williams*]” (50), including those of (an absent) Thomas Paine, Daniel Chrichton, Joseph Gerrald, and John Horne Tooke.

pressures of the treason trials and the French Revolution, according to Grossman: "Terror was the order of the day; and it was feared that even the humble novelist might be shown to be constructively a traitor" (52), as it certainly was in the case of Thomas Holcroft, a friend of Godwin.

Grossman discusses the role of scaffold anxiety in *Caleb Williams* without going so far as to use the term:

For literary critics the focal point of all the novel's tribunals has consistently been the crowning trial scene, with its dramatic reversal. . . . A few chapters earlier, however, a little noticed but perhaps just as important "incredible reverse" occurs: Caleb's long-awaited, official state assize trial is nullified. It is a remarkable moment: this trial that does not take place has prompted Caleb's imprisonment, his desperate escapes, his flight to London, his disguises there, and his recapturing, all amounting to some fifteen chapters that make up the core of Caleb's story and roughly a third of the novel's length. "Was it for this that I had broken through so many locks, and bolts, and the adamantine walls of my prison; that I had passed so many anxious days, and sleepless, spectre-haunted nights; that I had racked my invention for expedients of evasion and concealment?" (52-53).

Just as he pinpoints Godwin's own concern with the reach of capital law, so Grossman connects Caleb's motivations and the spectre of the axe. "Why, in this novel wracked with tribunals," asks Grossman, "does Godwin forego the most

obvious and predetermined one of them all? The answer, I think, is that this trial is before the bar, and Godwin has set out . . . not to show the government in action but to show its pervasiveness" (53) in a manner similar to how it has pervaded his own life. Caleb's very life is a trial, Grossman discerns: "almost every encounter in this novel erupts into a trial, complete with accusation and defense. Dialogue consists less of conversation than forensic confrontation"(53), which "renders the realm of Caleb's trial-oriented mind" (56-57) just as it renders the realm of Godwin's understandably scaffold-oriented one.

The biographical connection is further suggested by John Bender in "Impersonal Violence: The Penetrating Gaze and the Field of Narration in *Caleb Williams*" (1994). Bender discusses the violence of surveillance in Godwin's novel, and though he does not say so directly, we cannot help but note how the surveillance of Caleb by Falkland's agents reflects the surveillance of Godwin by the government and general public. Both Caleb and Godwin had to be aware of the watchfulness and opinion of their respective communities. According to Bender, "Godwin persistently frames his narration as a progression of images or tableaux that reproduce the violence of the gaze as a demand that the individual submit to external authority" (120), something that, as we know from Godwin's own experiences and confessions, caused him a great deal of personal anxiety as well. Certainly Bender is correct when he points out that Caleb "feels himself under universal surveillance because his story has been widely circulated by folktale and criminal broadside" (118); he must rely on a series of disguises, à la Sheppard, to move about the country. The "violent gaze" of Godwin's own

community is acknowledged in his preface to *Political Justice*, already cited above, which mourns the fact that “men are to be punished for any unguarded words that may be dropped in the warmth of conversation and debate” (xi), a turn of phrase that conjures up bureaucratic eavesdroppers and malicious neighbours.

The work of Peter H. Marshall gives us a compelling look into Godwin’s state of mind, not just during the fraught 1790s but throughout his life. Marshall’s biography, *William Godwin* (1984), remains a favourite of critics thanks to its rigorous scholarship and exhaustive scope. It also, quite helpfully, places nearly every finding about Godwin’s life within the context of his fiction, essays, and journal entries, and it draws convincing parallels between the author’s background and his literary creations.²⁰³ Like many scholars, Marshall traces strands of Sandemanian Calvinism and the Dissenting tradition in Godwin’s political philosophy,²⁰⁴ but he also locates cataclysmic moments in the author’s youth that appear to have triggered Godwin’s concern for autonomy and his hatred of coercion, especially physical. If his elders were able, temporarily, to instil in Godwin a terror of the afterlife as Sandemanianism foretold it (Marshall 23), they also provoked his nascent pride and made him resent power, especially

²⁰³ This general view of the overlap between Godwin and Godwin’s literary creations is upheld by Maurice Hindle in the introduction to the Penguin edition of *Caleb Williams*: “In many ways it is impossible to separate the literary and the biographical” in the case of Godwin (xxviii).

²⁰⁴ See Chapters 1 and 2 of Marshall’s *William Godwin* for a summary of the much-discussed influence of religion on Godwin’s political anarchism. These influences include Sandemanianism’s mistrust of human authority (because it glorifies one individual over another), and its emphasis on the duty of individuals rather than courts to address and correct the faults of others. “Godwin’s anarchism,” Marshall points out, “with its rejection of all forms of established authority, is little more than a strict application of the Dissenters’ ‘sacred and indefeasible right of private judgment’” (43).

socio-legal power expressed upon the citizen physically. Marshall describes Godwin's fretful days under the rule of a childhood tutor, Samuel Newton, whom Godwin recalled in later writings as an unyielding and wholly negative figure of authority. While previous tutors had coddled the boy and only ever praised his abilities, Newton accused Godwin of being pridefully stubborn—a lad in need of humbling. It was under Newton that Godwin experienced his first brush with corporal punishment and the sting of the birch: "It had never occurred to Godwin that his person could suffer such 'ignominious violation'," Marshall notes. "The injustice of the assault, coupled with the invasion of his physical integrity, left Godwin with an indelible hatred of coercion and violence" (19).

Characterized by Godwin as a despot and tyrant, Newton would be reincarnated in part as Falkland in *Caleb Williams* and in whole as Hilkiah Bradford in *Mandeville*. The latter "demands submission, humility, and hard work" from his pupil and "reprimands [him] with great vigour" (21).²⁰⁵ "Like Godwin," Marshall notes, "the young Mandeville submits outwardly but retains 'the principle of rebellion entire, shut up in the chamber' of his thoughts" (21).²⁰⁶ Thanks to Newton's teachings, Godwin for a time "became convinced that if he died, he would go straight to the Devil" (23), and with this in mind Marshall, like other critics, reads an anxiety about forms of ultimate punishment in Godwin's books

²⁰⁵ The despotic teacher trope appears in *Fleetwood*, as well. Its hero, a corrupted version of Rousseau's Emile, prefers to teach himself from nature and scorns his tutor and Oxford professors. "The lessons [my tutor] gave me appeared as a sort of shackles" (66), Fleetwood complains, anticipating Godwin's collapsing of schoolroom discipline and judicial power over the body in *Mandeville*.

²⁰⁶ Marshall is citing C. Kegan Paul's *William Godwin: His Friends and Contemporaries* (1876), 1:5.

and goes so far as to conclude that the author appears to have “suffered . . . from a permanent sense of anxiety” (24). We need not speculate about this lifelong anxiety for the “physical integrity” of his person; Marshall uncovers numerous self-professed descriptions of such fears in the Abinger manuscripts,²⁰⁷ which, coupled with their appearance in nearly all of Godwin’s fictions, convince Marshall that Godwin suffered from a remarkable “fear of tumult” (133), a fear not just out of proportion with those of other writers of his time, but also one that is verifiable in the volumes of letters and diary notations he left behind.²⁰⁸ During the “tumult” of the Treason Trials and the heady reception of *Political Justice* and *Caleb Williams* especially, Godwin had “good reason to believe that his own contribution to the cause of freedom and equality could prove his undoing” (92). Marshall suggests that “Godwin identified strongly with Caleb because of his own position after writing *Political Justice*,” fearing “like Caleb that he would be ‘cut off from the whole human species’” for taking a personal and political stand (147)—an ostracization that eventually came to be.

Our best evidence for Godwin’s peculiar fixation on physical punishment was produced by the author himself. In *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*, Godwin’s assertions about punishment and authority are neither distorted by fiction nor distanced by a constructed narrator. He suggests that punishment, as

²⁰⁷ The Abinger collection, on microfilm at the Bodleian Library, Oxford, “includes Godwin’s diaries and memoirs, as well as the bulk of his manuscripts, notes, and correspondence” (Marshall 450).

²⁰⁸ Though Godwin suspected that his unshakeable anxiety about physical punishment was a symptom of cowardice, both Marshall and I think otherwise. During the Treason Trials, “Godwin knew the odds, but the unassuming scholar was also a man of great courage” (92) who never shunned the authorities, who published *Political Justice*, *Caleb Williams* and *Cursory Strictures* in a dangerous period, and who generally (and tirelessly) made his dissenting opinion known to government through his writings, activities, and associations.

a subject, “is perhaps the most fundamental in the science of politics,” (V2, 321), so great was its hold on his own conscience. It is also fraught with moral and legal fallacies, according to Godwin, who describes it as the last resort of the unwise:

Punishment is . . . in reality nothing more than force put upon one being, by another who happens to be stronger. But strength apparently does not constitute justice. The case of punishment . . . is the case of you and me differing in opinion, and your telling me that you must be right, since you have a more brawny arm, or have applied your mind more to the acquiring skill in your weapons than I have. . . . Do you wish in the weight of your blows to make up for the deficiency of your logic? . . . An appeal to force must appear to both parties . . . to be a confession of imbecility. He that has resource to it, would have no occasion for this expedient, if he were sufficiently acquainted with the powers of that truth it is in his office to communicate. If there be any man who, in suffering punishment, is not conscious of injury, he must had his mind previously debased by slavery, and his sense of moral right and wrong blunted by a series of oppressions. (V1, 179-80)

Godwin believed that the practice of punishment—capital, corporal, and even mere detention—prevents society from evolving into a collective of peaceful and rational beings because it is self-perpetuating: state violence encourages individual violence. With the help of Beccaria—upon whose *On Crimes and*

Punishments Godwin's argumentation is partially based—he works through a series of objections to the traditional apologies for capital punishment and cites a list of reasons why the rational and compassionate citizen cannot accept them. These objections include the fallibility of witnesses and the larger justice system, the inconsistent application of punishment, and the failure of punishment by example to deter future crimes. Anticipating Coleridge's Law of Diminishing Returns, Godwin argues that the death penalty "constantly fails of its purpose. Further refinements in barbarity," he notes, "produce a certain impression, so long as they are new; but this impression soon vanishes, and the whole scope of a gloomy invention is exhausted in vain" (344).²⁰⁹ Part of the problem, in his view, is that "barbarity possesses none of the attributes of persuasion. It may terrify; but it cannot produce in us candour and docility" (345). Punishment creates only resentment or unthinking obedience and therefore has no social utility, which puts it in conflict with his Doctrine of Necessity.²¹⁰

²⁰⁹ James Boswell discusses this phenomenon in "On Executions," writing that he was sickened the first time he witnessed a hanging and haunted by its memory for days, but that over time "my sensibility abated" (345) and he participated in scaffold audiences with ease. Byron has also reflected on the diminishing emotional return of executions in a letter cited at length by Gatrell. Byron describes in grisly detail the guillotining of three robbers in Rome: "The first [execution] turned me quite hot and thirsty—& made me shake so that I could hardly hold the opera-glass. . . . The second and third (which shows how dreadfully soon things grow indifferent) I am ashamed to say had no effect on me" (250).

²¹⁰ "The doctrine of necessity, would teach us to class punishment in the list of the means we possess of influencing the human mind, and may require us to enquire into its utility, as an instrument of reforming error. . . . [It] will teach us to look upon punishment with no complacence, and at all times to prefer the most direct means of encountering error, the development of truth" through, for example, conversation and reformation (393).

But Godwin's real quarrel with the scaffold lies in the barbarity of capital punishment itself²¹¹ and in its very finality—in the fact that a dead citizen is unable to make restitution for her crime and can no longer contribute to society. Depriving someone of her life may prevent a future crime, but it also “puts a perpetual close upon the prospects of the sufferer, as to all the enjoyments, virtues, and the excellence of a human being” (380). Quite apart from the uselessness of punishment in general and of the death penalty in particular, Godwin wishes to emphasize the outrageousness of the claim that an accuser, a jury, or a government can know the intention of another person in the moment he commits a transgression or writes a paragraph of political philosophy. Just as Elaine Scarry theorizes about pain having the capacity to obliterate the world and its meaning,²¹² Godwin argues that using punishment in an attempt to instruct or correct only results in “violently alienating the mind from the truth with which we wish it to be impressed” (337). He insists that “coercion cannot convince, cannot conciliate, but on the contrary alienate the mind of him against whom it is

²¹¹ Godwin makes his revulsion clear: “There are few subjects upon which human ingenuity has been more fully displayed than in inventing instruments of torture. The lash of the whip a thousand times repeated and flagrant on the back of the defenceless victim, the bastinado on the soles of the feet, the dislocation of limbs, the fracture of bones, the faggots and the stake, the cross, impaling, and the mode of drifting pirates on the Volga, make but a small part of the catalogue. When Damiens, the maniac, was arraigned for his abortive attempt on the life of Louis XV of France, a council of anatomists was summoned, to deliberate how a human being might be destroyed with the longest protracted and most diversified agony. Hundreds of victims are annually sacrificed at the shrine of positive law and political institution” (V1, 12-13).

²¹² In *The Body in Pain*, Scarry argues that “physical pain . . . is language-destroying” (19) and that “the claims of the [suffering] body utterly nullify the claims of the world” (33). “As the body breaks down, it becomes increasingly the object of attention, usurping the place of all other objects” (32), a process that provides the foundation of Scarry's thesis that torture serves to “unmake” meaning.

employed. Coercion has nothing in common with reason, and therefore can have no proper tendency to cultivate virtue” (340-341).

Godwin anticipates any future accusers by intimating that harsh expressions of authority cannot change a philosopher’s mind, possibly hoping to deflect a charge of sedition (which carries with it threats to his sacred “personal integrity”).

To hold a transgressor in a prison cell is to lay claim to an impossible omniscience, for “all punishment for the sake of restraint, is punishment upon suspicion, a species of punishment, the most abhorrent to reason, and arbitrary in its application, that can be devised” (340). Godwin’s argument against intention is, in part, an appeal to the British government; the idea of seditious intention is an unreliable basis upon which to prosecute a citizen. It is certainly not legal evidence of wrongdoing. Citing Beccaria, Godwin reminds his readers that “to ascertain the intention of a man, it is necessary to be precisely informed, of the actual impression of the objects upon his senses, and of the previous disposition of his mind, both of which vary in different persons, and even in the same person at different times, with a rapidity commensurate to the succession of ideas, passions and circumstances” (352-353). He criticizes the government’s expanding list of crimes against property and political expression: “edict is heaped upon edict, volume upon volume” (V2, 399) until there exists “an infinitude of law” (400) that make more and more Britons vulnerable to execution, which Godwin calls “murders . . . committed under the sanction of legal form” (361). This surely had a chilling effect on a public living under the Bloody Code and Pitt’s intolerant government. Regardless of how many felons evaded the

scaffold thanks to lighter sentences, Godwin points to a general air of scaffold anxiety with one evocative sentence: “Who does not know, that there is not a man in England, however blameless a life he may lead, who is secure that he shall not end it at the gallows?” (V2, 357).

3: A Poor Deserted Individual

“Of Crimes and Punishments” itemizes Godwin’s logical and moral objections to the death penalty, and remains, alongside Beccaria’s *On Crimes and Punishments*, Camus’ “Reflections on the Guillotine,” and Scarry’s *The Body in Pain*, one of the most comprehensive philosophical arguments against torture and/or capital punishment ever written. Book VII of *Political Justice* undermines the idea of the scaffold’s social utility while making a separate emotional appeal to simple, infrangible compassion. Some of these arguments and appeals surface in *Caleb Williams* and Godwin’s other scaffold fictions, but these novels seem to me to be suggesting a further objection to the death penalty that is not well-articulated in *Political Justice*, in part because it depends on the emotional and dramatic frameworks of fiction and Godwin’s recurring theme of the execrated individual. Romanticism’s wandering outcast, epitomized in Victor Frankenstein, appears in all four of Godwin’s scaffold fictions precisely because the idea of social condemnation and legal condemnation are natural complements. In *Caleb Williams*, *St. Leon*, *Fleetwood* and *Mandeville*, Godwin’s recurring twin concerns—judicial punishment and reputation—are reified in

figures not just execrated by their fellows but threatened with the ultimate expression of that execration: the decision of an entire community (literal or symbolic) to put one of its own to death via legal processes.

Though categorized as Romantic, Godwin's work should be of particular interest to scholars of the broader eighteenth century, an era obsessed with the subject of sympathy. How can a body of writers and thinkers so invested in sympathy, after all, not come eventually to be just as fascinated with its counterpart, antipathy? Andrea McKenzie has observed that the image of hanging day "has become a byword for the brutality and 'grossness' of the eighteenth century" and that "virtually any novel or movie set in this period is bound to feature a raucous execution scene" (21). It is no wonder that the subject of execution seems to be so representative of the century, and possibly therefore no accident that scaffold fiction—the most extreme expression of mass antipathy—came into its own at this time, not just because of contemporaries' privileging of sensibility but also because certain of their numbers contemplated manifestations of its opposite, and by doing so exposed both extremes of one individual's valuation of another. Wolf in *The Necromancer* mentions the pain of isolation brought on by his haughtiness, his disfigured face, and his criminality, and he describes the warm joy of "brotherly concord" (182) among a gang of thieves. He is a precursor of Caleb (and Frankenstein's monster), but Godwin's scaffold fictions reinforce with much bolder strokes Adam Smith's value of "fellow-feeling."²¹³

²¹³ See Chapter Two, Section 4, above, as well as Smith's *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (II.ii.2), in which fellow-feeling is described as being necessary to all humans.

Like many abolitionists, Godwin evinces a moral horror that the state can deprive a citizen of life, but he renders that moral horror in a fashion peculiar to his fiction, one that leaves us with little doubt that the true horror of execution, for this author, lies in a character being so abominated that he (nearly) suffers the axe or the noose, however deserving by legal standards. “A man tried for a crime, is a poor deserted individual, with the whole force of the community conspiring his ruin,” Godwin notes in *Political Justice* (V2, 358). His glancing observation about “such mighty odds against” a person (359) becomes a major motif in his fictions, one that helps to generate Gothic atmosphere even in the absence of prison cells, tribunal benches, and gallows.²¹⁴ The Romantic emphasis on the social alienation of a man from his fellows is ineluctably tied to execution by Godwin, which gives his heroes a particularly grim forsaken status. The abject blending of bureaucracy and brutality—the complete rejection of an individual to the point of administrative erasure—only seems to aggravate abolitionist moral horror at the idea of capital punishment. Monika Fludernik has picked up on Godwin’s use of the scaffold as an image of sublime oppression in her two essays about *Caleb Williams*,²¹⁵ but it appears in his other works, too, and I believe his scaffold serves as more than an emblem of excessive state power and its awful aspect. Certainly it hits all the proper Gothic notes. “Writers

²¹⁴ Gothic scholars such as Fred Botting, Jerrold E. Hogle, Maggie Kilgour, and Peter K. Garrett have observed that, as the genre evolved in the nineteenth century, supernatural trappings and traditionally “Gothic” objects such as dungeons fell out of favour as authors recognized that reality was horrifying enough in itself. “The source of gothic terror in *Caleb* is therefore not a supernatural agent,” Kilgour notes in *The Rise of the Gothic Novel*, “but ‘things as they are’, the British social system which, through a variety of insidious means, destroys the naturally good individual” (57).

²¹⁵ See Chapter One of my study.

from Godwin to James developed a mode especially suited for representing the isolated individual and extreme experiences” (3), Peter K. Garrett writes in *Gothic Reflections*, and I would argue that Godwin’s mode is a new form of scaffold Gothic that suits an audience caught up in complicated ways with humanitarianism and democratic reform in the 1790s and early 1800s. Godwin’s subject matter “reflects the central nineteenth-century preoccupation with the relation of the self and society, which it shares with more realistic fiction,” Garrett notes, “but reflects it in crisis and antagonism, where the self is estranged or abandoned, victimized or victimizing, absorbed in the self-enclosure of madness, the excess of passion, or the transgression of crime” (3). If, as Maggie Kilgour argues in *The Rise of the Gothic Novel*, Godwin looked upon Burke’s defence of “the old system of gothic tyranny” and exultation of the sublime as “superstitious awe” that acted as a “cloak for oppression” (47),²¹⁶ then Godwin’s scaffold Gothic evokes a sense of moral horror with regard to the state’s power over the individual. Since the arid rationality of *Political Justice* could not “arous[e] in his readers the same passions which had animated himself,” Gary Kelly writes, the reimagining of Godwin’s argument in *Caleb Williams* and its successors was designed to stimulate readers’ emotions (183-84). This emotional component is key to helping readers grasp the horror of the scaffold; moral horror is arguably a feeling rather than a philosophical position, a sensation designed to add intensity to more rational preoccupations.

²¹⁶ Like many other critics, Maurice Hindle, editor of the Penguin edition of *Caleb Williams*, agrees with Kilgour’s assessment. He writes that Godwin “sought to ‘expose’ the Burkean sublime” as a coercive, oppressive engine (xxxviii).

In “Moral Horror and the Sacred” (1995), philosopher Robert Merrihew Adams addresses such a feeling in the context of ethics and religion, and in so doing provides us with a definition of moral horror. What Merrihew describes is the sort of reflexive emotional aversion Godwin may have felt towards execution—a reaction that stands apart from his rational philosophical arguments. Moral horror, by Merrihew’s definition, is a *feeling* about certain acts that are generally²¹⁷ deemed to “be horrible to do even if there were no authoritative rule or social pressure against them” (202). He distinguishes between moral horror and outrage, the latter of which has more to do with anger at injustices than revulsion (202), and more importantly he distinguishes between the violation of a person’s possessions and rights, and the violation of the person herself:

An act that violates the person must *attack* the person. Its foreseeable effects must be so damaging to the person, or so contrary to her (actual or presumed) will, that fully intending them . . . would constitute *hostility* towards the person. A person is not violated by every act that harms her interests or crosses her will. A violation is an act that attacks the person *seriously* and *directly*. Most (but not all) violations of a person will assault her body. Acts that mainly damage a person’s possessions, what she *has* as distinct from what she *is*, will typically not violate her, even if they are quite hostile to her interests. . . . I think we must sometimes rely

²¹⁷ Merrihew acknowledges the problem of personal and cultural subjectivity with regard to moral disgust.

on our sense of moral horror to determine which acts attack a person seriously and directly enough to violate her. (205)

Merrihew's most prominent example of a morally horrible act is rape, but he also includes torture and murder under his rubric. Some horrible acts "may be justified . . . and their horror mitigated . . . if they are seen as necessary for the good of the person to whom they are done, such as a surgical amputation" (205). But overall, Merrihew detects an ingrained "prohibition" against unwanted sexual touching or violence—the sort of overwhelming infringement that violates Godwin's sense of "physical integrity," which Peter H. Marshall observed was so meaningful to the author as a principle.

The moral horror that Merrihew describes—universal or no—characterizes the sense of abhorrence toward capital law that pervades Godwin's scaffold fictions. Merrihew agrees with Godwin about the outrageous power and trespass of judicial punishment; he notes that "most punishments that human beings have devised are violative" (n.5, p. 209). Merrihew writes as a "divine command theorist" (202) who believes that the violation of the self is a violation of the image of God (204). But he acknowledges the experience of non-theists, as well, who may "have reason to seek a non-theological interpretation" (214) for the same emotional reaction experienced by the more devout. Merrihew's argument therefore in no way contradicts the position of the Godwin of *Caleb Williams* (who had by the 1790s shed his inherited faith), or that of today's abolitionists who articulate the moral horror of torture and capital punishment in similar, if secular ways. If believers are morally horrified by the violation of the "image of God,"

humanists and humanitarians—by their very label—are morally horrified by the violation of images of themselves reflected in the faces and bodies of their fellows, a phenomenon defined as “sympathetic imagination” by Adam Smith and expressed in the Lucretian doctrine of the “return upon ourselves.” But Merrihew devotes little thought to the particulars of execution and its unique form of moral horror; he focuses mainly on rape and (from an anti-choice vantage) abortion, but scaffold deaths are distinct from these other events, for—again—only execution tends to have “the whole force of the community conspiring [a particular individual’s] ruin.”²¹⁸ This important detail is not lost on Godwin and should not be overlooked when reading his scaffold fictions with an interest in representations of punishment, for Godwin distils his moral horror at the idea of ultimate punishment into an all-consuming motif.

Before we examine this motif, it may be helpful to cast an eye on another scaffold fiction by Godwin’s friend, Thomas Holcroft, in order to see how singular Godwin’s handling of moral horror was at the turn of their century. Holcroft’s *Memoirs of Bryan Perdue* (1805) is a more straightforward abolitionist text than *Caleb Williams*. Its preface unambiguously claims that the “moral purpose” of the novel is “to induce all humane and thinking men, such as legislators ought to be and often are, to consider the general and adventitious value of human life, and the moral tendency of our penal laws” (iii). Though Holcroft’s hero “offend[s] the

²¹⁸ Merrihew’s idea of rape and abortion falls outside this communal purview. It is, however, worth noting that community-imposed rapes and abortions, when they do occur, share a morally horrible particular with executions in the sense that the victim of both of these acts experiences the abject blending of bureaucracy and brutality mentioned above, as well as the “mighty odds” of community enacting sanctioned violence against one of their own. As with execution, a moral posture is assumed by the majority (or at least by those in power) in order to carry out an immoral violation of the one (for rape, murder and forced abortion are normally seen as such in the absence of, or outside of, community or state endorsement).

laws,” we should be appalled that “such a man might have been legally put to death” (iv)—as Godwin’s utilitarian argument against the death penalty suggests—for Bryan Perdue is, by and large, a good man when he is not the victim of evil circumstance. “How serious an act it is to take away the life of a man! And how possible it is for one, who may have been highly criminal, to become still more useful” (V3, 176-77). The novel calls for a more benevolent and more socially useful system of punishment, one that removes the death penalty entirely (189-90). “The precise intention with which I have written this book,” Holcroft repeats midway through the tale, “is to recommend kind and lenient conduct towards those who offend in early life; and mercy even to the most obdurate (V2, 188). He provides us with the example of Bryan Perdue, a man raised by a rogue and taught to be a thief and con artist. But (as Godwin believes of most people) he is hardly evil, just a very human admixture of vice and virtue; Bryan’s roguish acts are balanced by acts of tenderness and bravery, such as the rescuing of a trampled child and of a young woman trapped in a house fire. When he falls into debt, Bryan embezzles money from his employer’s client in order to post his own bail. Though he plans to repay the sum and goes so far as to send the client in question an IOU, he is arrested almost at once, this time for a capital crime. His scaffold anxiety is instantaneous and precedes his arrest: “The uncertainty of what I had done was terrible,” he confesses, “for I now began to recollect instances . . . that were adjudged to be forgery, and for which the persons . . . were brought to public execution. The horror of these doubts was almost insupportable” (V3, 98). His being brought to Newgate, “not a debtor” this

time “but a criminal, destined for death” (99), induces the worst emotional torment Bryan has ever known, and Holcroft mines the situation for psychological detail, producing a scaffold fiction with equal measures of dread²¹⁹ and socio-legal critique.

Holcroft, channelling Godwin, insists that crime is relative and its symptoms are the collective responsibility of society rather than the individual.²²⁰ The narrator—Bryan as a much older man—confesses that he writes his memoirs as a warning to youth about the various pitfalls that lead to the scaffold (V1, 4) but, unlike traditional criminal biographies, this didactic narrative is anti-death penalty. When the older Bryan inveighs against solitary confinement—“the most dreadful” form of imprisonment (V1, 226)—he is recalling the pain of social alienation his younger self experienced as a felon. “Finding myself,” he believes after his arrest, “without a friend to consult, without one human being to console me, rendered contemptible to all, censured by all, rejected and cut off from human intercourse, I sunk, like a dejected wretch” (V3, 107). But Bryan’s alienation is exaggerated and passing brief—it lasts just long enough to

²¹⁹ Bryan’s scaffold anxiety is so intense that even his trial brings on symptoms normally reserved for characters on the night before or day of their execution. On “the fearful morning of the day, that was to decide on life, or death” (V3, 147), Bryan has no appetite. “Violent spasms of the loins seized me” (148) and he is so traumatized that memory of his dread lingers well into old age: “While I am writing these memoirs I cannot forget that I have been subjected to hanging, by the neck, till I was dead! dead! dead! Dreadful and impolitic sentence! . . . The whole tenor of my life shows that it was a life worth preserving!” (128). Imagined death also torments him, such as “apprehensions from a scene that was strange and full of terrors, conjectures on the sufferings of death,” and “suppositions of persons under all its agonies” (110).

²²⁰ “As society is constructed,” Bryan-as-narrator argues, “there are many actions which can scarcely be called either good or bad; but which become either one or the other in a great degree, by the relation of things, the opinions of the world, and the consequences to the actors.” Furthermore, “there are actions that in themselves are highly virtuous, which, by the said relation of things, become highly vicious; and vice versa” (V2, 204-05).

communicate the agony of the state but it does not constitute, in itself, the oppressive motif that consumes Godwin's scaffold fictions. The trope of the last farewell—that staple of scaffold tragedies in which the condemned's family is faithful to the end—relieves Bryan's isolation soon enough. He is descended upon by friends who work to free him from the gallows. Bryan experiences a Frankenstein-like moment of self-loathing when he reacts to the news that Henry Fairman (a Godwin stand-in) wishes to visit him in his cell: "If die I must, I wished rather as it were to die and never be seen, of any human being by whom I was once known" and to "have concealed myself, and my guilt, even in the caves of nonentity" (111). But hugs and other gestures of inviolate friendship quickly return him to the world. Unlike Godwin's anti-heroes, Bryan is saved "by the ardent zeal, the unremitting exertion of friendship" (165) that demonstrates how little he has in common with the former. Though his reputation has been tarnished, he has a circle of intimates who ease his status as "an object of contempt" (195). For a while after his trial, Bryan senses that "the world to me, alas, was no longer what it had been. . . . Every human being, that seemed to eye me, looked reproaches and uttered language killing to the heart" (166). The loss of respect, and of self-respect, is hard on him, but it is not crippling; Bryan becomes a success in another land, building a second life as a plantation manager and living in mutual virtue with a loving wife—an echo of Moll Flanders' reformation.

If the last farewell is a hallmark of older scaffold fictions that never question the juridical status quo, and one that stands in contrast with Godwin's

motif of the outcast at odds with fallible law and society, the portrait of Bryan—semi-abandoned but semi-loved, as well—illustrates a midpoint between two types of scaffold heroes. Though Holcroft's depiction of scaffold anxiety is extravagant and his socio-legal critique daring, he does not take Bryan to the outer limits of execration. His view of the condemned figure is still rather prosaic and as a result not as interesting as Godwin's rendering of the socio-legal outcast. There is an absence, it seems to me, of the moral horror Godwin conjures up in his own scaffold fictions; *Memoirs of Bryan Perdue* is mired in a didactic "tell me" narrative, while *Caleb Williams* and its fellows communicate a *feeling* about execution, which gives Godwin's novels an exceptional texture.

Godwin's dramatic anxiety about state authority over civilian bodies is morally horrible in part because entities that are not capable of moral feeling or philosophy—that is, institutions—stand in for and act on behalf of individuals. *Political Justice* makes it clear that "coercion, exercised in the name of the state upon its respective members, cannot be the duty of the community" (V2, 363). Rather, guidance and correction can be delivered only by rational and moral individuals. Coercion, meted out only in the most extreme cases, loses its morally horrible aspect when it is imparted by another citizen—when the ratio is 1:1 rather than 1:∞. Godwin's aversion to "such mighty odds" has been detected by Carl Fisher, whose "The Crowd and the Public in Godwin's *Caleb Williams*" (1999) focuses on "the essential interaction of the individual and the collective in the polarized political world of the 1790s" (48). Fisher examines Godwin's seeming anxiety about crowds rather than the scaffold proper, but the latter (as I

see it) is a symbol of the former. Fisher notes that *Caleb Williams* “incorporates and involves the general populace, a public which responds to the actions of prominent individuals and reacts to the violation of social norms” (47), and he argues that Godwin is critical of “the collusion of the population with power as it operates not merely through political institutions and the law but prejudice, prepossession and habits” (48). Referring to the problem of surveillance that plagues Caleb, Fisher points out that “the public become accomplices and agents for the status quo” (48) and that “popular opinion is a form of social control (53), which drives Godwin’s story far more than any concern he may have had about the passionate mob. In fact, the passionate mob and the disinterested crowd are collapsed in *Political Justice* when Godwin speaks of the horror that occurs “when seven millions of men have got one poor, unassisted individual in their power” and “they are then at leisure to torture or to kill him, and to make his agonies a spectacle to glut their ferocity (V2, 336). When critics like Fisher write about the oppressive surveillance of individuals that leads to punishment, they unintentionally bring to light the etymology of the word “execution,” with its implication of an official fiat against the body of an individual duly carried out. That etymology is illuminated in Godwin’s works with its horrifying representation of community-willed ostracization and death.

Those scholars who have looked at themes of punishment, spectacle, imprisonment, and torture in Godwin’s novels (e.g. Fisher, Fludernik, and Bruhm) have implied to some degree that a loss of reputation—made explicit in the characters of Falkland, Tyrrel, St. Leon, and Mandeville—is a fate worse than

death. Marshall's biographical work has uncovered a similar disposition in Godwin, whose records do more than hint at an author's desperate need to "win the stamp of social approval" (Marshall 24). But while the link between execration and execution may be evident—especially within the framework of this study—the moral horror that links the two forms of condemnation has yet to be recognized. That is, it seems to me that the moral horror that Godwin's four main narrators express towards execution is as fundamental an ingredient in his fiction—is as Godwinian—as the concern for reputation, hatred of oppression, and critique of law and "things as they are" that most readers think of when they hear the author's name. In fact, problems of reputation, oppression, and law can all be gathered under the canopy of moral horror. To give an idea of just how viscerally Godwin presents the execrated status of the outcast, I would remind readers of the multiple descriptions of that status we find in his scaffold fictions; so numerous are these descriptions and so sputtering the voices that articulate them, that they have become, in my mind at least, the signature rhetoric of Godwin's novels.

In *Caleb Williams*, it is not just the hero who suffers execration, but Tyrrel and (eventually) Falkland as well. Descriptions of execration are so frequently applied to the three most prominent characters that they bleed together, erase boundaries, and in so doing seem to define general human ontology. Falkland's public condemnation of Tyrrel is couched in words and images that will echo and re-echo through Godwin's novels:

“Society casts you out; man abominates you. No wealth, no rank, can buy out your stain. You will live deserted in the midst of your species; you will go into crowded societies, and no one will deign so much as to salute you. They will fly from your glance as they would from the gaze of a basilisk. Where do you expect to find the hearts of flint that shall sympathise with yours?” (81)

Spoken in a tribunal-like setting so that it evokes the ultimate condemnation of a death sentence, Falkland’s expression is the very opposite of the sympathetic impulse that guides many eighteenth-century fictional characters and communities. Cold alienation becomes a natural state for the characters in *Caleb Williams*. Its first manifestation occurs when the public realizes that Tyrrel’s cruelty contributed to Emily’s death, unleashing a litany of public contempt. “All the world will abhor and curse you”; “the meanest beggar will spurn and spit at you”; “you will be obliged to fly the very face of a human creature!”; “contempt, abhorrence and insult”; “an universal cry of abhorrence and execration”; “sullen detestation in every face”; the detestation of mankind”; undisguised condemnation”; “censure”; and “universal disgust” (95-96)—these curses suggest more than a threat of physical violation, for Tyrrel. They also recollect the function of execution when the narrator remarks how a “sense of public resentment had long been gathering strength unperceived, and now burst forth into insuppressible violence” (96)—the sort of “indignation of mankind that, like death, . . . level[s] all distinctions, and reduce[s] their perpetrator to an equality with the most indigent and squalid of his species” (95-96). Godwin’s “seven

millions of men” who “have got one poor, unassisted individual in their power” is reified in Tyrrel, whose “looks were full of wildness and horror; his limbs trembled; and his tongue refused its office. He felt no power of resisting the impetuous torrent of reproach that was poured upon him” (99). Adding to his horror and perhaps our own, “the general voice was eager to abash him. As his confusion became more visible, the outcry increased. It swelled gradually to hootings, tumult, and a deafening noise of indignation” (99).

Not many pages later, Caleb considers “how many men have been aspersed, and even at some time or other almost torn to pieces, by their fellow creatures” (122), linking the idea of execration and execution (or at least mob justice) more concretely. He, too, knows his share of public condemnation when he realizes that “every heart was steeled against me” (190), and he grasps its scaffold affect: “Thus was I cut off forever from all that existence has to bestow. . . . I regarded the whole human species as so many hangmen and torturers; I considered them as confederated to tear me to pieces; and this wide scene of inexorable persecution inflicted upon me inexpressible agony” (190). It is notable that this passage is followed by a consideration of suicide on Caleb’s part, which would seem to contradict his scaffold anxiety until we recollect the problem of moral horror; it is not death but social rejection that distresses Caleb. I have pointed out in earlier chapters that accidental or self-inflicted death is not the same thing as scaffold death—tragic heroes have themselves weighed the difference on the eve of their executions, distinguishing the degree of dishonour between a beheading and a suicide. It is Godwin’s moral horror that finally

elaborates the difference between the two fates and collapses a seeming contradiction that has been present in earlier scaffold fiction. Caleb may sometimes cling “with desperate fondness to the shadow of existence” (191) and sometimes envy “the condemned wretch upon the scaffold” (151) about to shed his problems when the isolation and uncertainty grow too intense, but he is never cavalier about the condemnation that keeps him on the run. Ruminations about suicide and scaffolds are just that, of course, because Caleb stubbornly survives: since “the whole world was in arms to exterminate me, . . . I determined that I would not voluntarily resign the field, that is, literally speaking, my neck to the cord of the executioner” (247).

It is not death that hounds Caleb but the overwhelming crush of the many against the one—the real horror of his situation which, like Tyrrel’s, is triggered by a curse from Falkland in the context of a mock tribunal or informal trial. When his master accuses him of theft, Caleb’s friends reject him. Mr. Forester now considers him to be “the abhorrence of nature, the opprobrium of the human species,” and, calling into play the function of execution, he determines that “the earth can only be freed from an insupportable burthen by your being exterminated” (181). Gentle Thomas is even more direct:

“I would go ten miles with all the pleasure in life to see you hanged.
. . . I would not lie under the same roof with you for all the world! I
should expect the house to fall and crush such wickedness! I
admire that the earth does not open and swallow you alive! It is
poison so much as to look at you! . . . I believe from my soul that

the people you talk to will tear you to pieces, and you will never live to come to the gallows.” (183)

Godwin could not make it more clear that what most afflicts Caleb as he receives this curse is Thomas’ rejection of him—a morally horrible state that seems, in this novel, to lead inexorably to the gallows. Nor could Thomas’ choice of words be more significant in a fiction that establishes a scaffold atmosphere with its famous opening lines: “My life for several years had been a theatre of calamity. I have been a mark for the vigilance of tyranny, and I could not escape” (5). This combination of ideas—persecution, surveillance, and theatre—inserts *Caleb Williams* at once into the scaffold genre. Generic expectations are maintained: the Black Act devours the Hawkins men; “things as they are” are critiqued; Caleb runs for his life; the dread of imminent execution is sustained. But the execration/execution link is pivotal, communicated in the expressions of characters about the horrors of social alienation, or made explicit (for instance) in the criminal biography that Falkland’s agent plants in Caleb’s Welsh neighbourhood to renew his ostracization (311). Exposed once again, “it seemed as if I had some contagious disease, from which every man shrank with alarm, and left me to perish unassisted and alone”(306). He does not overstate his situation; “You are a monster,” Laura tells him (310), and every new bond he forms is severed.

Godwin further emphasizes the moral horror of the execrated man’s metaphoric or near execution by contrasting the situations of Tyrrel and Caleb with those of luckier characters. Mr. Clare, for example, enjoys a good death: he

has time to prepare his will, give advice, and visit loved ones. He dies in dignity because he dies a respected man whose utility is recognized and whose demise results in an “irreparable loss” to his community (38). He is in control of his last hours in ways a condemned man is not. Witness Falkland’s “fear of disturbing the last moments of his friend” (38)—his dislike of imposing—when he visits Mr. Clare’s deathbed, a show of deference not reserved for a condemned man, upon whom an entire community imposes to fatal extremes. Witness the anecdote of the peasant arraigned for murder after unintentionally killing his challenger with a boxing blow. A good man driven to manslaughter by the appalling behaviour of another, the peasant remains popular, and it is significant that his own community refuses to commit him to trial despite his afflicted conscience. He is too well-liked to hang, and it is only through much lobbying that a vindictive family member can persuade a second magistrate to charge the defendant and bring him to trial (132-35). We never know the outcome of this trial because, in Godwin’s scheme, it does not matter; what matters—what we are to take away from this anecdote—is that this criminal remains a member of a sympathetic community and therefore never experiences the acute moral horror of execration/execution. Witness even Falkland who, for most of the novel, deals with self-loathing rather than the loathing of his fellows; “though I be the blackest of villains,” he believes, “I will leave behind me a spotless and illustrious name” (142), and he can expect to do so until the final scene (and only then in the revised conclusion of the book). “To Mr. Falkland, disgrace was worse than death” (100), Caleb observes, but preserving a good name is only one feature of,

and not tantamount to, the complete social desertion experienced by Godwin's real sufferers, those who linger in an execrated state for more than the three shameful days Falkland endures before perishing. It is the idea of utter aloneness that is at the core of Godwin's moral horror—explicated through the trope of the condemned figure—and not merely loss of honour.

Caleb, Falkland, Gines, Tyrrel, the peasant, the robbers, and the Hawkins men are forced at one or more points in the novel to confront the idea of a scaffold death—a significant proportion of the story's characters. Caleb is constrained by the idea of the scaffold after he is warned by Gines that he will hang if he attempts to leave Britain for foreign parts (324). Earlier, he contemplates a scaffold fate “with horror” (218) while he sits in a prison cell, but unlike his predecessors, this condemned hero does not limit himself to imagined death. He is preoccupied even more by the idea of alienation from a public that desires his death with a collective will. As Caleb styles it, he is “destined to suffer an early and inexorable death from the hands of others” (210) rather than the hands of an executioner, though that is what he means. Not only does Caleb grasp the collective represented by the hangman, but he is also consumed by this idea throughout much of the novel. He finds it “strange that men . . . should consent to hold their lives at the breath of another, merely that each in his turn may have a power of acting the tyrant according to law” (218). Caleb feels the press of “a million men in arms against me” (279) and wonders “what could exceed the horrors of this situation?”(280):

Pursued by a train of misfortune, I could no longer consider myself as a member of society. I was a solitary being, cut off from the experience of sympathy, kindness, and the good-will of mankind. . . . I was a monster with whom the very earth groaned. . . . Here I am, an outcast, destined to perish with hunger and cold. All men desert me. All men hate me. I am driven with mortal threats from the sources of comfort and existence. (256-58)

So morally horrible the idea is of execration/execution that Caleb has reservations about exposing Falkland to a circumstance like his own (330), despite their mutual enmity and his need to reclaim his own reputation and safety. When Falkland confesses, he senses the “infamy” that will attach itself to his name (335) and understands that “death and infamy must seize me together” (336).

Like Caleb, the hero of Godwin’s next novel, *St. Leon* (1799), is more than just a pariah. Godwin could have presented us with social outcasts that were not also legal ones—men chased by the executioner—but he prefers to double-bind his heroes with social and judicial peril in order to make a point about oppressive laws, as well as to underscore the morally horrible condition of execration/execution. *St. Leon* has greater advantages than Caleb, and not just by dint of birth; he is taught the secrets of alchemy and as a result possesses unlimited wealth, but it fails to protect him from the coercion of communities that smother him in collective antipathy. In fact, his boon soon enough becomes his bane, but *St. Leon* is alienated even before learning the Stranger’s secrets.

Destitute, he settles his family in a Swiss valley and experiences a milder form of ostracization when he is denied disaster aid after a storm lays waste to his neighbourhood. As foreigners, “we were considered interlopers upon the portion of the natives” who “treated us with murmurs and reviling” (V1, 258). They are evicted by “order of senate” (258) and banished from the region. St. Leon resettles his family and scrapes by as a gardener, always on the verge of starvation, until he avails himself of the Stranger’s knowledge, despite the latter’s warning. “Five times I have been led to the scaffold and with difficulty escaped public execution,” the alchemist tells him (V2, 9), suggesting that the Philosopher’s Stone makes a man vulnerable to community antipathy. “Hated by mankind, hunted from the face of the earth . . . without a country, without a roof, without a friend” (9), the alchemist’s knowledge is a curse that physically endangers him. But St. Leon is too hungry—for food, for a restored reputation.

The moment he learns alchemy’s secrets, however, he loses his social footing: “I felt a degree of uneasiness at the immeasurable distance that was now between me and the rest of my species,” he admits. “I found myself alone in the world. Must I for ever live without a companion, a friend, anyone with whom I can associate upon equal terms, with whom I can have a commonality of sensation, and feeling, and hopes, and desires, and fears?” (V2, 110). Suspected of theft or fraud because of his inexplicable return to splendour, St. Leon is disgraced, detained, and interrogated, and, because he privileges reputation as much as Falkland does, he “writhed under this dishonour” (V2, 250). While the local laws are “the mildest in the universe” and the community cannot put a man to death

without a confession (263-64), they also do not require an accuser; this community, as a body, can arrest someone on suspicion, without a witness or a trace of evidence (259). St. Leon manages to bribe his jailor and escape, but he understands that “no matter how far the man . . . shall remove from the detested spot . . . the voices that repulsed and humbled him, will ring in his ear” (288).

Forced to remake himself in new communities in order to be a part of one (like Caleb), St. Leon moves to Pisa, where he is soon suspected of necromancy. There, too, he senses the “universal antipathy” (V3, 80) of his fellows, who jeer and mutter their contempt in the street and break “forth in gestures of abhorrence and derision” (95). His servant and dog are killed, but St. Leon’s primary trial is execration:

There is no pleasure more congenial to the human heart than the approbation and affection of other fellows. I call heaven to witness that I could mount the scaffold, surrounded with an innumerable multitude to applause my fortitude—and count it a festival. But I cannot bear to be surrounded with tokens of abhorrence and scorn. . . . Man was not born to live alone. He is linked to his brethren by a thousand ties; and, when those ties are broken, he ceases from all genuine existence. Their complacency is a food more invigorating than ambrosias; their aversion is a torment worse than that of the damned. . . . I wished myself buried deep in the centre of the earth. (V3, 96)

The scaffold proper is not yet in the foreground, but the idea of death at the hands of the many surfaces when St. Leon is pelted by a mob that cries “down with him! Exterminate him! Do not suffer him to live!” (V3, 103). He shifts again, this time to Madrid, where execution finally does become a possibility. Arrested by the Inquisition, he is unable to bribe these jailors, who are too scared of the scaffold to betray authority. He is kept in prison for twelve years until the arrival of a new ruler plunges him into a fit of scaffold anxiety when he is chosen to burn in one of two celebratory autos-da-fé (242). One of these events is described in detail, and so is the attitude of St. Leon’s fellow condemned. His reflections are “pungent and distressing” (240) and he can scarcely believe people “subject each other to so horrible a treatment” over differences of theology (246). “Dejected, despairing, I entered the streets of the city, no object present to the eye of my mind but that of my approaching execution” (251). St. Leon’s imagined death is an outrageously public event attended by king and dignitaries, but his actual death is forestalled when a bolting horse creates an opportunity for escape. Aging, ailing, and in need of a disguise, he drinks the elixir of youth. If the scaffold he just evaded did not separate him completely from humanity, the elixir finishes the job: “There was a greater distance between me and the best constructed and most consummate of the human species than there is between him and an ant or a muskito” (V4, 8), he muses. And it is significant, I think, that he muses this against the background of the horrifying autos-da-fé, explicitly described, so that execration and execution continue to be meshed in Godwin’s structure.

St. Leon's alienation continues in Ottoman Hungary, where there are more malevolent glances, more threats of lynching, and a charge of high treason. Like *Caleb Williams*, the novel is a sweeping scaffold fiction from beginning to end, filled with scaffold referents; dedicated to undermining the socio-legal status quo while portraying the fraught psychology of an execrated man on the brink of execution; and concerned with expressing a moral horror towards that execration/execution dyad. So is Godwin's third novel, *Fleetwood* (1805), though to a far lesser degree. By now, it appears, Godwin has worked through his moral horror about capital punishment and its attendant mode of antipathy enough to moderate his tone. His scaffold referents are less frequent, and they are displaced from the body of the novel's hero. As Steven Bruhm notes in *Gothic Bodies*, *Fleetwood* exposes "the problem of sentimentalism in legal inquiry" (100), particular with regard to torture and punishment. If, as Bruhm writes, "Romantic fiction is replete with painful bodies . . . most often viewed by a poised, distanced spectator" (xvi), then scaffold fiction differentiates itself the more so because it often narrows that distance, so that the condemned himself is the painful body in question, or at least finds himself in the throes of emotional agony as he anticipates bodily torture. Not so for Casimir Fleetwood, who inflicts punishment (real or symbolic) on others. When Fleetwood, in a fit of jealousy, "tortures" a doll that stands in for his wife, Bruhm perceives a "spectacle of suffering markedly different from . . . the juridical infliction of torture" (112), and yet, within the context of scaffold fiction, the usual motifs nevertheless appear.²²¹

²²¹ Bruhm's point stands, however: "In *Fleetwood*, the stage of the scaffold is the theatre in which we meet someone else's pain, realize that it is not ours, appropriate it all the same, and use that

Fleetwood's symbolic violation of Mary's body feeds the spectre of the axe that hovers over the novel, one of several references to harsh physical punishment that in every other case expresses itself in the form of the collective against the one.

While only Gifford is put to death by the state in *Fleetwood* (423), the novel reminds us of the scaffold in multiple places and in numerous devious ways. Over the course of his *récit*, a minor character named Ruffigny describes how, as a child, he was suspected of theft and brought before a magistrate after "being driven out from my country and friends" (165) who seemed to him to be determined to make a hanged man of him. He is released after a period in jail, but the "inexpressible horror" of the experience stays with him (166). Elsewhere, Fleetwood reads a scaffold tale to Mary called "Wife for a Month," in which a man agrees to be put to death if it means he can live with his sweetheart as husband and wife for thirty days (298ff). A valet of Gifford is interrogated in the Bastille (395), which inspires Fleetwood to rail against the uselessness of torture.²²² Long before Gifford preyed on Fleetwood, he is revealed to have once contemplated poisoning a half-brother but for "the chances that this action might conduct him to the gallows" (333). And the unusual mock torture scene highlighted by Bruhm in *Gothic Bodies* is also steeped in scaffold referents, when a frenzied Fleetwood attacks Mary's semblance and wishes her "torn with red-hot pincers" for her

appropriation to sacralize our own power and sense of identity" (119), which arguably enforces Godwin's evaluation of public punishment as a universal and morally horrible violation of the self.

²²² "Can you, a Briton, believe, that torture makes a man speak the truth? that, when he writhes with agony, and feels himself debased below a brute, his words are to be regarded as oracles? Would not a man then say any thing, to put an end to what he suffers? I would not hang a dog on such evidence!" (395). Ironically, the valet's information is in fact "the truth," and Gifford's attempted assassination of Fleetwood comes to light.

betrayal (378)—a French traitor's death. Even the rumour that the baby in Mary's womb might be another man's inspires a scaffold image when Fleetwood reveals that an "offender who is just going to expatiate his crime at the gallows" is a luckier man than him, so long as he is certain his offspring are his own (372).

In *Fleetwood*, Godwin focuses on the problem of self-education and excessive emotion in order to criticize Rousseau's natural man, or the man of *too much* feeling. To do so, he turns his attention away from the moral horror of execration/execution, yet its imprint remains. It is assisted by the scaffold referents that pepper the text, and it is embodied in the unforgettable figure of Withers, who (like the novel itself) is more evocative of execution than a concrete representation of the event. Withers is a classmate of Fleetwood "who was judged by the gayer Oxonians singularly well formed to be the butt of their ridicule" (74) because of his unstylish appearance and dreadful poetry. His tormenters stage a reading of his "Labours of Hercules" one night. His classmates' ridicule is labelled as "torture" (84) and followed by a mock tribunal held before a puppet headmaster, in which Withers is accused of instigating a campus "riot" (86). The scene is absurd, disturbing, and microcosmic, and when Withers realizes that "the applauses he had received were all ironical, that he had been invited to the reading of his play only for contempt, and that he had been treated as . . . the most despicable of mankind" (89), he stands in for Godwin's more widely execrated heroes in *Caleb Williams* and *St. Leon*. Like them, Withers finds himself before figures of authority, condemned by his fellows, and more suited to death than life; he faces no literal scaffold, but the

ostracization he experiences in his Oxford world stamps him with the same unbearable rejection. He commits suicide and the students involved in the prank are expelled “with a disgrace which pursues them for the rest of their lives” (89). Godwin writes moral horror into the affair, and Fleetwood’s distaste “for such adventures” (90) recognizes the unfairness of “such mighty odds” against an individual and the torment of alienation. The moral horror of total censure is, here again, shown to be the real problem of scaffold deaths when Fleetwood confesses his need for a true friend as he travels alone across Europe. Though he enjoys companions from time to time, “I saw that I was alone” (230). No one meets his criteria for real intimacy—the sort that compels lasting grief in one breast when the heart of another stops beating (231). Inclusiveness is always and forever in Godwin tied to the idea of a good or bad death, and his argument that the scaffold is made truly terrible by the absence of a sympathetic collective is reiterated when Fleetwood asserts that “the martyr, or the champion of popular pretensions, cheerfully encounters the terrors of a public execution, provided the theatre on which he is to die is filled with his approvers” (232).

Like Casimir Fleetwood, the hero of *Mandeville* (1817) enjoys a greater distance from the scaffold than Caleb and St. Leon, but he suffers its attendant anxiety nevertheless as a nobleman alive during the English Civil War and involved in partisan politics.²²³ More so than Caleb, St. Leon, or Fleetwood, Charles Mandeville is bred on scaffold referents that generate a heady atmosphere; even in boyhood the images he describes involve the platform on

²²³ Godwin ensures that his readers glean the horror of execution in this novel, as well: “There is something in the sight of a human creature, upon whom you are yourself called on to pronounce a sentence of death, that produces the most terrible recoil in every human bosom” (2/28).

which Charles I lost his life or the stakes at which martyrs (political and religious) were burned. An Anglo-Irish nobleman, his hero is raised on stories of the Portadown Massacre which he characterizes as “executions” of British colonists at the hands of Catholics (V1, 27). He is told his uncle Audley lost the hand of the woman he loved because she feared he would be executed if they married (Ch. III-IV). He is fed *Foxe's Acts and Monuments of the Church* (135) by his tutor, Hilkiah Bradford, a raving anti-Catholic who stuffs his pupil's head with images of Protestant martyrs consumed in flames, which Mandeville the narrator recalls in vivid detail (135-36): “The representation of all imaginable cruelties, racks, pincers, and the red-hot irons, cruel mockings and scourgings, flayings alive, with every other tormenting method of destruction” (136) leave him in a state of “tingling and horror” and form the backdrop of his childhood. Bradford teaches Charles that a martyr's death is a Protestant's greatest achievement and wishes that glory for both himself and his pupil. His message is such a drumbeat that young Mandeville admits, “I had barely a notion of any more than two species of creatures on earth—the persecutor and his victim, the Papist and the Protestant. . . . The one, the law of whose being it was to devour, while it was the unfortunate destiny of the other to be mangled and torn to pieces by him” (115). Later, Mandeville's entrance at Winchester School coincides with the trial and execution of King Charles I, which consumes his classmates; “the melancholy catastrophe . . . caused the whole to make an indelible impression on their memory” (190) and on his own. “That [a king] should be imprisoned and put to

death, is a thought to which the vulgar imagination can never reconcile itself. . . . Men feel as if a violation was perpetuated on our general nature" (222-23).

Like Fleetwood, Mandeville describes the persecution of boys in the microcosmic society of school, only this time from the perspective of the alienated one. It is the execution of a king that creates a climate of opinion that, in turn, has much to do with the hero's ostracization. "These political discussions influenced my fate at Winchester School" (230), Mandeville notes, and he becomes the butt of jokes. But he is no Withers. He returns the jeers with blows:

I had no respect for the limbs and members of my body. . . . My arm was but an implement and a tool, of the same nature as a hooked stick. . . . My creed was akin to that of Anaxarchus, of whom it is related that one of the Grecian tyrants having ordered him to be pounded in a mortar, he cried out under the execution, "Beat on, tyrant! Thou has no power but on the case of Anaxarchos; himself thou cannot hurt." . . . Thinking thus, I detested the necessity I lay under, of being the captive of my body, and that by this means the soul of Mandeville, that free spirit that could wander unfettered from pole to pole, should be liable to the dominion of others. (267-68)

Already Mandeville expresses a sort of moral horror at the idea that his own body might be a tool of subjection used by the collective around him. There is no mistaking Godwin's analogy; when an anti-royalist satire is discovered in Mandeville's room, he is brought before a mock jury of his peers, an "awful body"

(282) that imposes a physical punishment on the defendant, and one from which he learns “to expect no justice from the world” (289).

The scaffold continues to shadow Mandeville under Cromwell’s reign. He narrowly avoids becoming swept up in Penruddock’s restoration plot, and he collects the last dying speeches of condemned royalists, which “furnished me with a theme of endless rumination” (V2, 81) much as criminal biographies obsess Caleb. When rumours circulate that Mandeville is a Cromwellian spy who betrayed Penruddock to authorities and/or a coward who flees the fold because of scaffold anxiety, his reputation is ruined among his community of aristocrats, which stretches well beyond England. Here the horror of execration sets in, and encomiums on friendship and social approval begin to appear as Mandeville nurses a demolished pride. He has a breakdown, followed by a stay in an asylum, where he suffers from graphic visions of Penruddock’s scaffold death and rages over the confinement he experiences at the hands of others. “But mine was the punishment without the crime” (V3, 20) he notes later in the story, after enduring years as a man shunned for transgressions he did not commit. He is a “banished and blasted man” (265) whose only ally is his sister, Henrietta (whom he in turn mistreats). He is troubled by depression and anxiety and outraged by the injustice: “My life had been blameless; at the same time . . . my name was rendered a byword, an astonishment, a curse” (20), and he finds himself “a human creature cut off from his fellows” (36). But though Mandeville may not have broken any law, he is far from blameless; as an outrageously vain and

arrogant man whose life is consumed with destroying the name and body of another, he has much in common with Falkland.

Against this background of scaffold referents and the alienation of a troubled man (whose reciprocal aversion to community is evident in his incestuous lust for Henrietta and suggestive devotion to horses) Godwin affixes the novel's most interesting model of execration/execution. This time, he turns his motif inside-out in order to examine and present it from another angle. That model is Clifford, or rather Mandeville's perspective of Clifford, a charismatic youth who moves in the same circles and earns all the favours and acclaim Mandeville yearns to have for himself. The execration/execution motif is projected onto the character of Clifford; that is, the hero is so aware of the horrible status that awaits the execrated condemned that he wishes it on his worst enemy, which in turn signals Mandeville's own villainy. As Falkland does with regard to Caleb, Mandeville vows to erase Clifford's reputation and teach him the sting of alienation—preferably an alienation strong enough to push him up the scaffold steps. But Clifford's likeability thwarts Mandeville again and again. No matter how deeply Clifford involves himself in royalist plots, and no matter how many customs he offends (e.g. converting to Catholicism in order to inherit an estate), Mandeville remains the execrated figure while Clifford evades execution. When Clifford converts, it gives Mandeville leave to hate him with reason, now, and to imagine him covered in blood on the wheel (51). "A judgement had fallen upon him, that unthreaded all his joints, and pulverized his sinews" (52), at least in Mandeville's mind. He takes pleasure in describing what

he sees as a new deficit in Clifford's reputation, casting him with wishful thinking as a martyr burned at the stake. Clifford becomes an apostate, in other words, and "an apostate was to my ideas the being most worthy of inextinguishable abhorrence" (46). "Who would be his ally?" Mandeville asks. "All men would fly from him with horror" (53), he expects. "He walks blasted among his fellow creatures; he bears on him the mark of reprobation" and "his very touch is contamination" (129). But what Mandeville describes is his own state, while Clifford continues to thrive in comparison. His enemy is "an honoured apostate" (318-19) while he himself is (in his mind) an honourable man execrated.

Mandeville, Fleetwood, St. Leon, and Falkland are consumed by their neurotic concern for reputation. It is no wonder that this character trait recurs and that it is so bound to Godwin's fictional scaffold: what is an obsession with reputation, after all, but an anxiety about the sympathetic or derogatory judgment of oneself by one's community? And what is the ultimate expression of its counterpart if not the formal communal murder of an individual (as Godwin sees it) called execution? When Monika Fludernik notes how much Godwin relies on Burkean and Gothic aesthetics in *Caleb Williams*²²⁴ (and, I would add, in his other three scaffold fictions), she argues that Godwin "uses the . . . problematic notion of sympathy to deconstruct the religious and ideological tenets underpinning Burke's fundamentally conservative beliefs" in order "to preserve the ideal of the sublime" (888). But these sublime images, coupled with scaffold referents, also allow us to sense the moral horror that pervades Godwin's novels thanks to his harnessing of sublime images and referents; rather than inspire us

²²⁴ See Fludernik's "William Godwin's *Caleb Williams*: The Tarnishing of the Sublime."

with awe towards legal or sovereign power, in Godwin's hands they augment our revulsion about the horrifying ratio involved in capital justice. What links Gothicism, sublimity, punishment, and reputation is moral horror, a finishing touch Godwin adds to the Romantic scaffold fiction, which, as he writes it, is not just concerned with posing provocative socio-legal questions and painting the affect of scaffold terror. He also makes a larger pronouncement about execution as a morally horrible human act, the first English novelist to do so in such a definitive fashion.

4: Conclusion

Scaffold fictions have more or less remained the same ever since. Some fictions depict fleeting scaffold scenes in service to other themes, but these were never my consideration. When it comes to stories *about* execution, or about an executed or nearly executed character and the emotional process she endures, the tropes of eighteenth-century scaffold fiction persist, and the death-penalty perspective engendered in the 1790s seems to be what is most commonly transmitted to this day. Death penalty films, for instance—and by this I mean films set within the justice system that include depictions of death row—are almost uniformly anti-capital punishment or ambivalent about the practice, presenting “both sides” of the debate and leaving things open to interpretation.²²⁵

²²⁵ One must look to vigilante films such as *Death Wish* (1972, first a novel), *The Crow* (1994, first a graphic novel), and *Faster* (2010) for cinematic “pro-death penalty” narratives, but (like certain Westerns) these are not scaffold fictions. They take place outside of the legal sphere—this is in fact the entire point of such films, where individuals must perform a task neglected by a failed

This is to be expected within the framework of fiction, where our sympathy is naturally and traditionally made to align with the figure of the condemned hero; it is fiction's very structure that makes it difficult to write a pro-death penalty story centered around a condemned man. If that hero is not a tragic figure criminalized by the day's politics but otherwise blameless (e.g. Regulus, Mary Queen of Scots, Lady Jane Grey, or Lord Essex), he is a convict made too multidimensional and too fully human, and the fallibility and even severity of the justice system is too clearly depicted.²²⁶ In such English-language death-row movies as *The Life of David Gale* (2003), *The Green Mile* (1999, first a novel), and *Dead Man Walking* (1995, based on real events), Godwin's "mighty odds" are tangible, and scaffold fiction as it came to be in the late eighteenth-century remains a recognizable genre.

The controls I have mentioned throughout my study—*A Tale of Two Cities*, *Paths of Glory* (Cobb's novel more so than Kubrick's adaptation), *The Stranger*, and *Danton*—have, I hope, helped to demonstrate how many of the characteristics of eighteenth-century scaffold fiction persist. Certainly by the time Dickens wrote about the trials of Charles Darnay, scaffold fiction seems to have been a genre understood in terms of form if not name; in *A Tale of Two Cities*,

system—and, more importantly, characters do not experience the range of psychological states triggered by fictional scaffold events, such as anticipatory grief or imagined death. Godwin's "mighty odds" and the moral horror of a "whole force of a community conspiring [someone's] ruin" are also displaced by the vigilante structure.

²²⁶ The only exceptions to this rule that I have managed to find are films like *Judgment at Nuremberg* (1961), *Helter Skelter* (1976) and others that depict the real trials of almost universally loathed historical figures such as Rudolph Hess and "Squeaky" Fromme, which are told from the perspective of the prosecutors, and in which the death penalty is portrayed as the most desirable end.

the French Revolution provides the terrain on which to erect a guillotine that criticizes everything implicit (in Dickens' mind) in a scaffold event, such as ideology, judicial error, and public prurience. The story bursts with scaffold referents even when it strays from the narrative of Darnay's misfortunes, always building a sense of the anxious state of a people ruled by a guillotine, and always censorious. No less than Godwin, perhaps, we must credit Dickens for helping make recognizable a narrative form that has become primarily humanitarian—or one that, at the very least, depicts the scaffold as a brutal and destructive zone (as in Showtime's sanguinary television series *The Tudors*) when it attempts to recreate a historically correct view of execution. Despite the best efforts of anti-Jacobin writers, scaffold fiction remains by and large (and so far) the province of artists critical of authority, institution, and even war. Godwin, Dickens, Cobb, Camus, and Wajda (three of whose films conclude with execution scenes)²²⁷ are all on record as such, but we need look no further, in the end, than their scaffold fictions. In and among other concerns, these authors keep one of literature's most visceral symbols animated before our eyes long after the scaffold itself has been withdrawn from view and abandoned from use.

²²⁷ In addition to *Danton*, *Kanal* (1957) and *Katyn* (2007) also end with a scene of mass execution, a motif particularly suitable for a filmmaker whose work often speaks to the oppression of his own people.

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