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EXTIMATE VIOLENCE: SHAKESPEARE'S NIGHT WORLD

BY

ELISABETH BRONFEN

In her book *Quoting Caravaggio*, Mieke Bal coins the term 'preposterous history' to present a critical approach "which puts what came chronologically first ('pre-') as an aftereffect behind ('post') its later recycling". As Bal insists, such a re-vision of early modern literature neither collapses past and present, nor objectifies the past in the sense of a positivist historicism, but rather demonstrates a possible way of dealing with the 'past today'. The particular after-effect I will be addressing in my discussion of Shakespeare's night world concerns a configuration of violence to be found in the Shakespearean text I want to call 'extimate', picking up on the word-play Jacques Lacan has proposed for his reformulation of the Freudian uncanny. By splicing together *exterior* with *intimacy*, Lacan highlights that a disturbing part of psychic life, which by virtue of repression has become unfamiliar (*unheimlich*), indeed seemingly exterior to the psychic apparatus, is in fact – as the pre-fix 'un' signals – utterly familiar (*heimlich* = intimate, secret).¹ If, in what follows, I speak of 'extimate violence', what is at stake is, then, an externalization – or more precisely a theatricalization – of an interior conflict, whose violent material requires the transference onto another scene. The analogy I am proposing regards the stage as equally heterotopic in relation to the public realm of ordinary quotidian life and its laws, as the unconscious is to the conscious self. One might, therefore, fruitfully think of the enactment of violence in and by a given play as an enactment of psychic violence transferred onto a stage and thus marking the murky interface between the private (intimate) and the public (exterior).

To illustrate what it might mean to read Shakespeare preposterously, which is to say presenting a later recycling of the externalized enactment of intimate violence as an after-effect of his theatrical imagination, I have chosen David Cronenberg's *History of Violence* (2005) as my point of departure; not least because the film's story precisely revolves around a philosophical discussion of the psychic gain of enactments of violence. Just as Tom Stall is about to close his diner in Millbrook, Indiana, two serial killers enter and threaten to murder everyone. Within seconds

¹ Mieke Bal, *Quoting Caravaggio: Contemporary Art, Preposterous History* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999), p. 7. For a discussion of Sigmund Freud's notion of the uncanny, see "Das Unheimliche", in *Gesammelte Werke* XII (1919; Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer, 1947), pp. 229–268; for Lacan's notion of extimacy see Dylan Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 58–59.

the ordinary world turns into a sinister stage. In self-defense, but with extraordinary alacrity, Tom kills both intruders, as though in a trance, only to find himself transformed into the hero of this small middle-American town. Within a few days a new set of killers, now Philadelphia Mafia, show up in his diner, claiming that twenty years ago he was one of them. While Tom initially denies the truth of this claim, the second half of the film has him accepting the identity of a mob hit man, first killing the men who sought him out and then his brother, only to return home meekly to his wife and children. The final scene offers a perfect visualization of extimacy. The re-united family, perturbed by the transformation of their father, cautiously watches him as he sits down to have dinner with them. What we have is a moment of extreme intimacy overflowed with strangeness about to turn private again. Poignantly, the film ends precisely as Eddy raises her eyes, looks at Tom and he, in turn, responds in silence with his own gaze. On its most manifest level, one could say, Cronenberg stages a timely concern, namely the eruption of violence in the midst of the ordinary, as if to reflect, as Caryn James puts it, that in a world fraught with large-scale political violence, it is no surprise to find ourselves at home also "surrounded by lethal neighbors and loved ones".²

Yet this blurring between the ordinary and the sinister assumes an even more uncanny twist, given that Cronenberg has always been interested in the manner in which fantasy breaks violently into the ordinary world of his protagonists, turning it into a stage for an enactment of desire. Because what this suggests is that any enactment of desire necessarily involves recourse to violence. The harmony at the beginning of the film is tantamount to boredom, but also – to be even more sinister – it is tantamount to not noticing the other. Eddy is forced to actually stop and look at her husband, as if she were waking up from the dream of ordinariness, precisely because he has transformed into a killer in front of her very eyes. To actually see the loved one, separate from oneself, entails an enactment of violence, psychoanalytically speaking, the violent severing of that narcissism we have recourse to every day so as not to be distracted from our routine. But this violence, and the recognition it entails, can only be experienced by virtue of enactment, to be more precise, as an intimate fantasy, which, given the medium film / theater, is rendered as an externalized theatricalization. For Cronenberg's *History of Violence* this means that we are never quite sure whether the violence we see is real or fantasy, diegetic actuality or a day-dream of any one of the characters. Indeed, there are several moments when Cronenberg signals to us that this could be a dream. The film, after all begins with Tom's daughter waking up from a nightmare (so she could well be the focalizer of everything that follows). The actual violent con-

² Caryn James, "When coldblooded murder hits close to home", *International Herald Tribune* (Saturday / Sunday, February 11–12, 2006), p. 10.

frontation between Tom and the man, who has come out of the past to bring him to his brother, sets in after we see our hero alone in his diner, as if caught in reverie (so for all we know he never physically leaves the diner). Tom's trip to Philadelphia, in the course of which he will kill his brother – in a fight scene so completely over the top to be almost Tarantinian black comedy – occurs after his wife Eddy is shown alone on her bed sobbing. Are they all dreaming a shared dream? Is the dream of violence, which suddenly erupted in their midst as an articulation of extimacy, what keeps this family unit together?

Not only does Cronenberg thus suggest that his protagonists have recourse to fantasies of violence so as to imbue their ordinary life with new energy. He leaves open whose dream this might be, and in so doing raises yet another crucial theoretical point. Given that the film's title equates its protagonist, of whom one might say that in the course of the story he proves to have a history of violence, with the medium cinema itself, Cronenberg gestures toward our own desire for mediated violence in the manner in which he stages it. Repeatedly we find ourselves cheering Tom Stall and his son Jack as they viciously fight to survive, only to stop in our tracks (as they do), when (with them) we wake up to the damage. Indeed, Cronenberg makes sure that his camera takes in the blood, gore and broken body parts in close-ups that are hyper-realistic. His moral point, I take it, given that he is looking at American mainstream cinema from the external perspective of a Canadian, is not only to make us realize that we enjoy representations of violence, but to stop and ask why. Apart from more standard answers such as René Girard's notion of scapegoats or Richard Slotkin's for the rejuvenatory power of violence, a more sinister response harks back to the medium itself.³ An enjoyment of cinema, Cronenberg seems to claim, is tantamount to an enjoyment of representations of violence. Like John Stall and his family, theatricalization also has a history of violence, and it is this latent kernel, which constantly erupts before our eyes, as Shakespeare's theater returns to us preposterously today.

Four theoretical concerns thus inflect my discussion of Shakespeare's nocturnal world: 1) An uncanny blurring between the ordinary and the sinister, reflecting 2) an omnipresent violence in a given culture at large, leading 3) to an investigation of how desire is violent and requires an enactment, which in turn 4) mirrors the violence at the heart of theatricalization. One might, of course, fruitfully begin by tracing the mutual implication of political violence and stagings of violence in Renaissance culture, primarily in the history plays. But the 'preposterous history' I

³ See René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. by Patrick Gregory (1972; London: The Athlone Press, 1988); and Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998).

want to present takes its cue from David Cronenberg's film so as to focus on the manner in which fantasy – private and collective – is encoded in terms of violence; indeed the manner in which violence marks the murky interface between intimacy and the political on the level of a cultural imaginary. As Marjorie Garber points out, the night in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* comes to function both as a stage and as a state of mind, and the nocturnal events presented as a performance of dreams.⁴ But three characters – Titania, Bottom and Hermia – explicitly give voice to the violence at the heart of an uncanny blurring between the ordinary and the sinister. While for the run-a-way girl the occurrences of the night transform romance into nightmare, for the weaver Nick Bottom, the onslaught of uncanniness entails his magical transformation into an ass, and concomitant with this, his spending the night with a fairy queen. While for him this transformation entails a dream of pure wish fulfillment, for Titania it encompasses a moment of deep humiliation, at least once she has woken up and Oberon points to her disfigured lover still lying asleep at her feet. In all cases desire emerges as violent; in Hermia's case giving voice to the fear of abandonment, and thus to a radical doubt about the constancy of her lover; as such she is the object of violence. In Titania's case the desire brought on by the magic juice gives voice to the sadistic power Oberon has re-gained over her, after having not only brought about her dotage on an ass and turned it to his favor, but also after posing as witness to this scene once she is awake and forced to recognize her folly. Only in Bottom's case does the dream turn him into an agent of violence, in so far as, albeit unwittingly, his erotic pleasure serves to both degrade and disempower a fairy queen, even while he emerges as a character transcended, with his dream linking the world of mortals to that of divine spirits. If the dream debases Titania, it makes Bottom privy to knowledge no other mortal has access to.

Indeed, for all of the characters the night is the site where they can experience their dreams by virtue of an enactment, which is to say experience themselves as characters in a dream, even while – as in Cronenberg's *History of Violence* – we are not sure whether there is one dreamer, or whether they are taking part in a shared dream, in which psychic intimacy is theatricalized; the interiority of the psychic turned outward. The comic note at the end requires that the different dream enactments, whether individually determined or the result of one source, are resolved – and Hippolyta would be my suggestion for the agent behind the dream. She is, after all, the Amazon Queen who, having been wooed with a sword by Theseus, awaits her nuptial hour. As the one to whom most violence has been done before the play sets in, she not only frames all dreams of violence that will come to be en-

⁴ Marjorie Garber, *Shakespeare After All* (New York: Pantheon, 2004), pp. 213–237.

acted with her silence to Theseus' question "what cheer, my love?" (1.1.122).⁵ She is also the one who has most sympathy for the extimate violence the lovers recollect once they have awoken, arguing,

But all the story of the night told over,
 And all their minds transfigured so together,
 More witnesseth than fancy's images,
 And grows to something of great constancy;
 But howsoever, strange and admirable.

(5.1.23–27)

At the same time, a public issue is enacted as intimate drama. As Laura Levine argues, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* seeks to perform the transformation of sexual violence into marriage, even while enacting the impossibility of this transformation.⁶ If we take marriage as a trope for a successful bond between subject and sovereign, then we can read the violence that frames the nocturnal events – Theseus' martial courtship of the Amazon Queen, the stern law of Egeus against his daughter Hermia, Oberon's vicious desire to humble his queen – as the uncanny kernel to the restoration of social order after its subversive disruption. This symbolic violence fades from our view into a latency from which it could easily be retrieved, if public law comes once more to be questioned. At the same time the allegedly happy resolution of conflict, which lets the play move into a second night and with it a blessing of three marriages and one re-marriage, transfers this social restitution (based on an enunciation of violence and its curtailment) into personal happiness.

Yet, as in Cronenberg, something is left indeterminate, not perhaps the notion that all the characters involved somehow came to share a dream of violent desire, but rather the status of this nocturnal enactment for the day to follow. With Eddy's gaze at the end of *The History of Violence* in mind one might ask, how much nocturnal violence can you remember and how much must you forget? When we look at the manner in which Bottom seeks to resolve the blurring between the ordinary and the magical he has just been part of, Freud's discussion of dreaming and wak-

⁵ All citations from Shakespeare's works are taken from *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. by Stephen Greenblatt et al. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997).

⁶ Laura Levine, "Rape, Repetition, and the Politics of Closure in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*", in Valerie Traub et al. eds., *Feminist Readings of Early Modern Culture: Emerging Subjects* (Cambridge: CUP, 1996), pp. 210–228. For a discussion of Oberon's violation of Titania's power to interpret her own dream, see also Barbara Freedman, *Staging the Gaze: Postmodernism, Psychoanalysis, and Shakespearean Comedy* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1991), pp. 154–191.

ing emerges preposterously as an after-effect of Shakespeare's play. As Demetrius leads the other lovers away, declaring

Why then, we are awake. Let's follow him,
 And by the way let us recount our dreams
 (4.1.194–195)

Bottom wakes and his first utterance is "when my cue comes, call me" (4.1.196). He is suffering from the process of forgetting which Freud discovered to be a pre-condition of waking, or put another way, he is connecting two temporal moments, both of which entail enactments. The first is the stage performance his friends were rehearsing before his transformation, the second his attempt to piece together his dream vision. Like the characters in David Cronenberg's film he must ask himself what, having awoken, his relation is to the sexual prowess he found himself performing. The rhetorical turn Shakespeare introduces transfers enacted violence (the humiliation of the fairy queen) to the violence of belated articulation. Repeatedly Bottom comes back to the unfathomability of the scene he seeks to recall, and thus the violent loss of memory which waking up entails. The experience he has is marked by his inability to say what he has: "I have had a dream past the wit of man to say what dream it was" (4.1.200–201). As in the transcriptions Freud recounts in his *Traumdeutung*, a material piece of the dream remains with him, namely the signifier 'ass'. Twice it functions as the missing word in his truncated utterances – "Methought I was, and methought I had" (4.1.203), gesturing toward what is not in his grasp to say, only to attribute the word to himself as interpreter: "Man is but an ass if he go about t'expound this dream" (4.1.201–202).

One can fruitfully speak of rhetorical violence, because the truncated language breaks open any coherent and self-contained dream fantasy, and even though, in contrast to the four lovers, Bottom's was not a nightmare but a dream of erotic desire over-fulfilled, what he is left with are chards, distortions that can not be re-aligned. Indeed, he transforms *ass* into a trope emphasizing that what he has is lacking: "man is but a patched fool if he will offer to say what methought I had" (4.1.203–204). Yet even though his experience can not be grasped in words, it continues to move him; which is to say he knows his dream affectively, without being able to articulate it linguistically. With knowledge present to him, the impossibility of ascribing words to the dream is represented as a mapping of the interpreter's body, which violently patches body parts and sensory experience together to produce what I am prone to call disjunctive 'ass language': "the eye [...] hath not heard, the ear [...] hath not seen, man's hand is not able to taste, his tongue to conceive, nor his heart to report" (4.1.205–207). The man who could report what Bottom's dream was, is an impossible patchwork – the visceral counter-point to the unfathomability Bottom claims for his dream's material. Having recognized that he

does not have the body to adequately report what he has experienced, Bottom moves to the register of the aesthetic. He will ask Peter Quince to write a ballad of the dream, which is to be called “‘Bottom’s Dream’, because it hath no bottom” (4.1.208–209); no foundation, no substance. As in *History of Violence*, what is contested in Bottoms monolog is, thus, the status of the substance of the violence we saw represented on stage. It is in this sense that the mediality of violence at stake in David Cronenberg’s film can preposterously be found written into Shakespeare’s comedy. While the sinister experience – sexual aggression and its proximity to degradation – cannot find expression on the level of ordinary reporting, it can do so on the level of aesthetic language. There is, thus, an implicit alignment between violence, dreams and poetic writing; as Theseus argues

The lunatic, the lover, and the poet
Are of imagination all compact.

(5.1.7–8)

To speak of a dream without a bottom is, of course, exactly what Freud does by having recourse to a different trope for unfathomability, namely the navel of the dream. “Jeder Traum hat mindestens eine Stelle, an welcher er unergründlich ist,” he explains in a footnote to his first ‘Mustertraum’ of the injection of Irma, “gleichsam einen Nabel, durch den er mit dem Unerkannten zusammenhängt”.⁷ Reading Shakespeare preposterously allows us to see how, in trying to find a cure for the lunatic and the pathological lover, both the poet and the psychoanalyst have recourse to a lack of bottom, and in so doing legitimize their discursive medium (be it the play or the analytic case history) to boot. To say a dream of violence has no bottom implies that a special person must be called upon to do what the report of the witness can’t. The violence of forgetting authorizes a very specific mode of representation – be it poetic transformation or psychoanalytic interpretation. But Shakespeare builds in a false bottom as well. After all, his weaver has a very precise idea when, during the wedding feast, he intends to perform this ballad, which – let us not forget – would re-enact the part he played in the nocturnal events that conditioned the collective nuptials (as its violent ground and vanishing point). He intends to have it performed at the end of his grotesquely distorted production of *Pyramus and Thisbe*. Do we ever hear “Bottom’s Dream”? No, because by the time the players are done, even Theseus has become restless. Either the audience is thoroughly bored, or this enactment of the violent outcome of a comedy of errors, in structure not unlike what they experienced the night before, hits home (bad as the performance of it by the artisans may be) in a manner that the comedy’s ending

⁷ Sigmund Freud, *Die Traumdeutung*, in *Gesammelte Werke* II/III (1900; Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer, 1942), p. 116.

can't bear. The violence it gives voice to functions as a repetition of that pertaining to the strict paternal law in the play's frame, and like it must be returned to latency. Theseus saves not the day but the night by pointing to the time:

The iron tongue of midnight hath told twelve.
Lovers, to bed; 'tis almost fairy time.

(5.1.346–347)

The nuptials they move into not only lie beyond the space of the stage. They will also undo the turmoil we have been witnesses to. Read backwards from the dramatic resolution of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the aesthetic medium is that which can give expression to the unfathomable as unfathomable; preserving the "no bottom" to Bottom's dream and all the violence it contains. It allows us to see – enacted on a different stage – what the sleeper upon waking must forget so as to move into the day. As the structural counter-point to Bottom's dream, Hermia's emerges in a more sinister light not only because she explicitly names the enjoyment of violence he has forgotten but also because she is unequivocally presented as its author. It seems important to me to remember that she is the one of the four lovers who moves into the woods mentally well equipped for any disaster she might be confronted with there. Before they embark on their journey she explains to Lysander:

If then true lovers have been ever crossed,
It stands as an edict in destiny.
Then let us teach our trial patience,
Because it is a customary cross,
As due to love as thoughts, and dreams, and sighs.

(1.1.150–154)

How then are we to understand the fact that she is the only one of the lovers who actually falls asleep on a stage we are meant to think of as a dream-like state, so that we see her waking up from one dream back into another? Titania, after all, only wakes up after it has begun to dawn. Furthermore, what are we to make of Hermia dreaming that a serpent is eating her heart away, while her lover smiles at her destruction? Rather than foregrounding the question of interpretation, I am more interested in addressing the function of her act of dreaming. Because if read as a *mise-en-abîme* – with Cronenberg's *History of Violence* as an after-effect in mind – Hermia's dream addresses the consequences of waking up; and, more precisely, waking up (as Eddy does) to the violence not just of her beloved but also her clandestine enjoyment of this. Regardless of whether one decodes the snake as a Christian symbol of temptation or a more secular one of masculinity, the image Hermia produces of herself is one of feminine endangerment. She imagines herself

in a precarious situation based on her own abandonment of her father's law, and with it his protection. But if, in this situation, she finds herself to be the object of her lover's sadistic enjoyment, we must not forget that this is not Lysander's dream but her own. So we must ask ourselves, if she finds enjoyment in imagining that Lysander enjoys her mortal endangerment, does the dream articulate her recognition that violence is what defines sexuality? This would be tantamount to saying that the sexual act always entails the incursion of another. Or is this a moment where her premonition that all lovers are star-crossed returns in her dream as a prophetic fulfillment? Or does her dream call upon her to recognize the sinister kernel that is part of the very boldness that got her to run off with a man she doesn't really know in the first place?

Regardless which decoding one privileges, the rhetorical gesture of her dreaming and waking is to signal that something in herself is telling her something. As such it re-iterates what the lovers do in the nocturnal woods, but also what the play does for us, namely play through variations of the violence of love. After waking up Hermia will run after Lysander and find that he is as cruel as she had foreseen in her dream. But in Shakespeare's comic night world this recognition doesn't deter the heroine. So my intuition is to take the dream one turn further. Hermia has learned that even in a situation as precarious as that of having a snake at her bosom, with no one to help her, she will wake up. She can endure the events of the rest of the night, knowing she will ultimately wake up from these as well, and having done so she will claim:

Methinks I see these things with parted eye,
When everything seems double.

(4.1.186)

Bifocality, which allows you to see your loved one as familiar and sinister in one and the same gesture, is what *A Midsummer Night's Dream* veers towards; containing – as a comic resolution – the very violence it also articulates.

For a tragic inversion of sexual violence, and more precisely the violence of imagination sustaining it, one might fruitfully turn to the night world of *Othello*. My claim is that while a comedy such as *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is dictated by, and follows through, the heroine's desire (even if this is curtailed to a degree in the end so as to fit the requirements of the social order which must be reconfirmed), a tragedy such as *Othello* plays through the fatal consequences of the hero's desire. I take from Stanley Cavell the notion that Othello's skepticism results in his being completely caught up in the force of his imagination, projecting this inner theater onto his world and forcing everyone to take part in a battle between absolute certainty (revolving around the purity of Desdemona), and doubt (revolving around

her infidelity).⁸ Once more we are faced with the question whether the characters share a mutual dream, or whether the deaths enacted might not be thought of as emerging from the violent clash of incompatible dreams. Initially at least we seem to have an inversion of the beginning of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. A daughter runs off with a man her father doesn't want her to marry, only in this case we get his perspective on the matter. The sinister darkness of the nocturnal world that supports Hermia's sense of vulnerability, which nevertheless also produces a revelation – an image of and thus an insight into Lysander's sadistic gaze – takes shape here in the form of a double. Although the suggestion may be preposterous, why not think of Iago as a symptom of the newly wed couple, which is to say the materialization of the extimacy inhabiting this romantic bond like a violent kernel of unknowability. Because love, while clearly the most intimate experience available to us, also brings into play radical doubt in so far as you never really know the beloved and, therefore, can never know with certainty whether you can trust her (or him). To overcome its internal strangeness love must include blind faith, without certainty.

As the figure giving body to this doubt, Iago sets the scene of violence he will orchestrate by explaining to Rodrigo:

Were I the Moor I would not be Iago.
In following him I follow but myself.
(1.1.57–58)

Walter Cohen glosses this passage to mean, "I serve out of self-interest rather than duty".⁹ But might one not also claim that Iago makes something tangibly clear, as though he were giving in code a message the conscious subject (individual or collective) can't bear to receive directly? If this night is the stage for a clandestine, though judicially sanctioned sexual act, namely the wedding night of Desdemona and Othello, it is also a state of mind, hinging *and* impinging on the violence of imagination. Desdemona betrayed her father by marrying Othello, leaving Brabantio in the dark about her actions, and thus invoking his most sinister conjectures about the married couple, namely that Othello bewitched her and that his daughter is a whore. At the same time, the bond of marriage the two have committed themselves to in secret gestures to something sinister inhabiting their mutual trust as well. Why else leave the father in the dark? By turning to Roderigo and compelling him to wake up Brabantio, Iago is indeed following Othello, forcing both him and his wife to interrogate what they have done this night, and in so doing bringing the

⁸ Stanley Cavell, "Othello and the Stake of the Other", in *Disowning Knowledge in Six Plays of Shakespeare* (Cambridge: CUP, 1987), pp. 125–142.

⁹ Walter Cohen in Greenblatt *et al.* eds. (1997), p. 2101, note 2.

way they imagine themselves in relation to each other to light. As Desdemona's corpse, at the end, in the only bed we actually see this couple share, suggests, bringing to light what lies at the heart of their shared clandestinity involves freezing violence into the embodied image of a tableau mort.

I am tempted to read *Othello* as a sequence of awakenings within a hallucinatory dreamscape directed by Iago and enacted by Othello, but emanating from the deceived father. Iago calls to Brabantio, "Look to your house, your daughter, and your bags" (1.1.80) in a manner no one warned Egeus. Yet the false invocation of fire linguistically invokes what is not seen on stage, namely the consummation of the marriage rite turned violent by figures of the imagination. In Iago's language the sexual act is transformed into the image of "an old black ram / Is tupping your white ewe" (1.1.88–89) and then again "your daughter and the Moor are now making the beast with two backs" (1.1.117–118). Because his tropes speak obliquely, they translate an unnamable presence, eluding language (the actual sexual act) into sinister images and in so doing open up the space for doubt, which will haunt not only the father but more poignantly the husband. Stanley Cavell has argued that the sexual act never actually takes place, so that what follows upon this first scene is a sequence of interrupted wedding-nights.¹⁰ If we follow this claim we might say, what Othello performs in the final act is a different mode of copulation, having loved "not wisely but too well" (5.2.353). Dying, we know, has the secondary sense of orgasm in Othello's final words:

I kissed thee ere I killed thee. No way but this:
Killing myself, to die upon a kiss.

(5.2.368–369)

By transforming sexuality into murder he enacts in actuality – over Desdemona's body and then his own – the kernel of violence Iago's imagination (and Brabantio's suspicion) attributed to their love from the very beginning.

But the act of recycling, which emerges in the conversation between *Othello* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* I am proposing, is perhaps even more sinister if we take note that the awakening invoked by Roderigo in the first scene of the play is structurally comparable to that of Hermia. What Brabantio and his peers wake up to is not the day, with its laws of rationality, but the night. Venice and Cyprus are presented as nocturnal stages, where violent states of mind – Iago's vindictiveness, Othello's jealousy, Desdemona's frivolity, Cassio's vanity – come to be externalized, only to end in a final catastrophe. In this nocturnal world the characters (much like the lovers in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*) are mutually tied together in a performance of each others' worst fantasies, rendering visible the estimate

¹⁰ Cavell (1987), p. 131.

kernel at the heart of their love and trust. As in *History of Violence*, they are forced to see each other beyond any sanitizing notion of friendship, neighborliness and marriage. Because in the midst of this psychic darkness – where the world is seen through the lens of false ambition, jealousy, intrigue, duplicity – there is also a revelation. Brabantio may have been in the dark about Desdemona's plans to be transported away to Othello, but he did have a premonition. What Desdemona enacts for him, although he will discover this only upon awakening, is what – like Hermia – he saw in his dream. Indeed he says:

This accident is not unlike my dream;
Belief of it oppresses me already.
(1.1.143–144)

It is interesting to note that at this point he calls for more light, as though the torches were meant either to confirm or to contest his dream. But bringing light into this nocturnal world, meant to clear up an accident, simply entails more violence, because it is this latency which must be forced into recognition in a shared consciousness sustained not by a willingness for the day, but rather for nocturnal self-delusion.

On the one hand, Iago cloaks his hatred for Othello in love, explaining to Roderigo

I must show out a flag and sign of Love,
which is indeed but sign.
(1.1.157–158)

Pretending to be something he is not, he performs extimacy, in so far as he reveals what the others simply cannot not know, namely the mutual implication of desire and violence. Even while he, like all gothic doubles, is a debunker of love, convincing Othello that Desdemona's love is "indeed but sign", his hatred is itself a form of desire. On the other hand, if Iago wants to cloud everything in darkness, Brabantio wants ever more light. Even after he recognizes that his daughter is gone, he calls for more tapers. Why? Initially he asks how she got out, but in the very next moment he gives voice to the question actually at stake:

Fathers, from hence trust not your daughters' minds
By what you see them act.
(1.1.170–171)

In so doing he raises a different specter, namely that of the charms by which a young woman's trust, as well as her virginity, may be abused. What he is really asking isn't only, why did she fall in love with the Moor, but more importantly, why did she deceive her father? Concomitant with this, he is asking about the

meaning of filial love if it is based on deception, as well as the meaning of paternal trust if it can be deceived. If Iago's imagination produces the violence Othello's murder will materially perform, Brabantio's imagination produces the doubt upon which this enactment is based.

To discover Othello, which is what Rodrigo claims he came to do, means to bring him to light. But finding Othello won't explain the nocturnal accident that is actually at stake. At the onset of the complex network of violent fantasies about to unfold, pitting generations, genders and ranks against each other, Brabantio, with all his tapers, gets one thing right. When, to his outrage, the court of Venice declares the marriage to be legal, he warns Othello,

Look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see.
She has deceived her father, and may thee.
(1.3.291–292)

The "eyes to see" he is speaking about are nocturnal eyes, but what renders his statement even more uncanny is the fact that we can't quite tell whether his premonition is the result of paranoia or real insight. To call it paranoia would mean claiming that Brabantio is seeing everything through a glass tinged with violent imaginations of deception. Once he gets caught in the radical doubt his father-in-law raises, Othello will only be able to believe that his wife has indeed betrayed him in the manner evoked by Brabantio. But let us remember, the father's warning of deceptions to come is, after all, only the result of what he saw in the dream Roderigo woke him from. To call his warning a justified insight, in turn, would mean recognizing that there is, indeed, something about Desdemona that is unfathomable to her father and will remain so to her husband. Indeed, she did allow herself to be wooed by Othello's tales, she did betray her father, using the cloak of night to run off. But if the status of deception, negotiated in relation to a daughter, is indeed the lynchpin of the play, then perhaps because it brings to light that the otherness of the other is violent in its very separateness. As Stanley Cavell would claim, it can be known only as something acknowledged, and that does violence to the omnipotence of our fantasies. The moment of recognition, when at the end of *History of Violence* Eddy finally raises her open eyes to acknowledge her husband's gaze, is one Shakespeare can not imagine for this couple. That he can, in *The Winter's Tale* for example, do so for others suggests that in *Othello* he doesn't want to. That indeed entails a nocturnal revelation.

If so far I have presented Hippolyta and Brabantio as dreamers, who frame either a comic or tragic resolution of enactments of violent desires, by way of closure I want to end with one last scene of intimate violence rendered extimate – Lady Macbeth's night-walking. My wager is that this scene self-consciously reflects

upon the tragic events leading up to and resolving the uncanny theatricalization of her confession as though they were her nightmare. Upon hearing of her husband's encounter with the witches, she had called upon nocturnal forces, "[c]ome, you spirits / [...] unsex me here / [...]. Make thick my blood" (1.5.39–41), and these "sightless substances" (1.5.47) will indeed guide her in the night of Duncan's murder. At the same time her killing also enacts the violence of her imagination, notably the fact that her ambition for power will stop at nothing. As the one who insists that they realize their violent dream, she is the sinister force behind Macbeth's hand, as though he were merely the instrument of her desire. But if she is the one to finish off the murderous deeds where he falters, she is also the one who will perform remorse. While Macbeth will give himself up completely to a pure enactment of violence beyond moral conscience and political reason, she, as the instigator behind the first death, is also the one willing to take responsibility for her murderous desires, albeit unconsciously by accepting the consequences of her fatal actions. What intrigues me is that this ethical gesture theatricalizes intimate violence; not, however, as an enactment (we never see her murdering her enemies) but as a re-enactment. She transforms her nocturnal castle into a stage, on which she can replay the traumatic scene of murder. What does she replay? Significantly not the killing, but rather the fact that the traces of blood, which indexically refer to her violent deed, and thus her violent desire, can't be washed away. Violence, which in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* can be blissfully forgotten and in *Othello* comes to be frozen into a tableau of corpses, emerges as an infectious stain. Not only can it not be removed, but it must also be exhibited. Even while Lady Macbeth recognizes "[w]hat's done cannot be undone" (5.1.57–58), her sleep-walking keeps re-enacting the inevitability of remorse as well as its necessity. It is as though she were repeatedly enjoying both her will to kill and her guilt, in a gesture of excess that brings the violence of personal imagination (the scene of murder and her constant nocturnal enactment of it) into proximity with the collective imagination theater entertains.

While the doctor explains

Unnatural deeds

Do breed unnatural troubles; infected minds

To their deaf pillows will discharge their secrets

(5.1.61–63)

what we are shown is something different. Lady Macbeth is precisely not discharging her secrets to deaf pillows, but to the open eyes and ears of her gentlewoman, her doctor, and implicitly to us. It is, furthermore, in this uncanny transference of

private desire and guilt onto a stage straddling the intimate with the public – the hall of her home at night – that she successfully passes on to others her insight into the violent kernel of desire and imagination, infecting them with her nocturnal knowledge. Explaining that she needs a priest more than a physician, the doctor also admits,

My mind she has mated and amazed my sight.
I think but dare not speak.

(5.1.68)

I am tempted to say we are back where we began, namely at Bottom's dream. The vision the doctor is presented with – a fragmented performance of a murder that occurred off stage in a moment of sinister ecstasy – will haunt him. He will not be able to name it, but by saying so, he declares it to be the navel of a dream we have seen called *Macbeth*. But we are also back to David Cronenberg's film, with which my entire preposterous discussion began; to a wife, opening not only her eyes to the violence contained in her imagination of home and family, but opening ours to any enjoyment of cinema. *Lady Macbeth*, with her eyes wide shut – to borrow a trope from Kubrick – leaves us awakened to something we simply cannot not see. We are inevitably complicitous because we are watching, not because we can't do otherwise, but because we must. The violence of the other is what compels us.

Zusammenfassung

David Cronenbergs Film *History of Violence* dient als Ausgangspunkt, um die Inszenierung von Gewalt in drei Stücken Shakespeares aufzuzeigen, und zwar *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Othello* und *Macbeth*, wobei sich die Nacht als privilegierter Schauplatz für diese Darbietung entpuppt. Der Artikel analysiert, wie eine Überlagerung von Privatem und Öffentlichem, die sich aus einer Theatralisierung persönlicher Gewaltphantasien ergibt, zugleich die Präsenz von Gewalt in der jeweiligen Kultur reflektiert. Dabei wird auch gezeigt, daß Gewalt nicht nur als dunkler Kern dem persönlichen Begehren innewohnt, sondern auch dem Gestus der Theatralisierung – sei es auf der Bühne oder der Leinwand.

