

SAD STORIES: A LOOK AT REGICIDE AND
ASSASSINATION IN THEATRE

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis centers on the depiction of violence onstage, specifically the violent acts of regicide and assassination. The first chapter briefly reviews the depiction of violence in theatre from the Ancient Greeks through the Middle Ages. The second chapter focuses on Shakespeare's two tragedies, *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, and briefly discusses the sources for the theme of regicide within the plays and how that regicide is depicted. The third chapter examines the theme of assassination and its depiction within two modern plays, Keith Reddin's *Frame 312* and Stephen Sondheim and John Weidman's musical *Assassins*.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The slogan for the television channel TNT is “We Know Drama,” and their programming schedule includes hit television shows “Law & Order” and “NYPD Blue” and dramatic films “Gladiator” and “Blood Work.” These dramas feature violence and murder, heinous acts that terrify us in real life, yet we watch these events unfold on the screen day after day, week after week. Audiences watch these programs and films because of how the themes of violence and murder are depicted; however, television and films are not the only venues where violence intrigues the audience. Violence and murder have appeared throughout the history of the world, in our myths and stories, and of course, our theatre. These ways are portrayed to audiences through character traits and flaws, i.e., revenge power, jealousy, and pride.

In order to understand the themes of regicide and assassination, it might be helpful to clearly define these terms. *Webster’s New World Dictionary* defines regicide as “(1) one who kills a king;” and “(2) the act of killing a king or monarch” (503). Assassination is defined as “(1) to injure or destroy unexpectedly and treacherously;” and “(2) to murder by sudden or secret attack usually for impersonal reasons.” The major difference between these two words is their focus. Assassination does not specify the rank of the victim of the act, while regicide refers to the killing of a king. For the purpose of this thesis, the term regicide includes the killing of any royal family member, while assassination refers to those murder victims who are not of royal blood.

In this thesis, regicide and assassination will be explored in the following plays: William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*; Keith Reddin's *Frame 312*; and Stephen Sondheim and John Weidman's *Assassins*. These plays depict assassination and regicide in various ways; some with actual stage violence, some with humor and, in the case of *Frame 312*, the assassination of JFK is shown from its source, the Zapruder film of the fatal motorcade.

Though we may see ourselves living in a civilized world, it is a world full of violence. The Ancient Greek tragedies that we read and watch are full of violence, but the violence is left offstage. The absence of physical violence makes the audience imagine the cruelty of violent acts instead of having to witness it for ourselves. The Greeks focused on language and not the physical actions of violence. Through the uses of language, Greek playwrights like Aeschylus and Sophocles represented themes of revenge and power motivating their characters to regicide. The theme of revenge prompts regicide in Aeschylus's *Agamemnon*. Coming from an oral tradition society, Aeschylus uses his characters to tell about the violence rather than presenting the physical actions onstage.

In some cases the victim of violence cries out from backstage during the violent act. In Hugo Lloyd-Jones's translation of Aeschylus's *Agamemnon*, the character of Agamemnon calls from offstage:

AGAMEMNON (offstage). Oh, I am struck deep with a mortal blow.

CHORUS. Silence! Who tells of a blow, mortally wounded?

AGAMEMNON (offstage). Oh! Yet again, a second time I am struck!

CHORUS. I think the deed is done, from the king's cries

of pain. (lines 1343-1346)

After the chorus members discuss Agamemnon's cry, Clytemnestra enters and recounts to the chorus how she killed the king, her husband; she justifies the regicide by saying it was in retaliation for the king's sacrifice of her daughter, Iphigenia (lines 1551-1559).

Agamemnon, the first of Aeschylus's trilogy *The Oresteia*, concludes with Clytemnestra and her lover, Aegisthus, taking power. The cycle of violence that begins even before the start of *Agamemnon* continues throughout *The Oresteia* when Orestes, Agamemnon's son, avenges his father's murder by killing his mother and her lover (in *The Libation Bearers*) and leads to the trial of Orestes in *The Eumenides*.

The above lines from Aeschylus's play show one way of referring to violence. Like *Agamemnon*, Sophocles's *Oedipus the King* deals with regicide; however, the violence in *Oedipus the King* is self-inflicted (with the exception of the murder of Laius) and Jocasta's motives are based on guilt. In *Oedipus the King*, translated by Robert Bragg, the city of Thebes is cursed because of the murder of the king, Laius; the citizens of Thebes are in constant turmoil and Oedipus vows to bring Laius's murderer to justice. Unknown to Oedipus, he is himself the murderer he seeks. Jocasta's guilt concerning the truth of Laius's death and her incestuous relationship with her son/husband brought forth her brutal act of her suicide. Sophocles, like Aeschylus, uses language to portray the violence; we hear about the suicide of Jocasta and Oedipus's bloody reaction from the Servant:

She killed herself. You will be spared the worst—
since you weren't there to see it.
But you will hear, exactly as I can
recall it, what that wretched woman suffered

.....
He burst into the room. We saw her there:
the woman above us, hanging by the neck,
swaying there in a noose of tangled cords.
He saw. And bellowing in anguish
he reached up, loosening the noose that held her.
With the poor lifeless woman laid out on the ground
this, then, was the terror we saw: he pulled
the long pins of hammered gold clasping her gown,
held them up, and punched them into his eyes,
back through the sockets. He was screaming:
Eyes, now you will not, no, never
see the evil I suffered, the evil I caused. (lines 1402-1442)

The Greeks knew of these myths and stories from their pasts. They did not need to see the violence onstage; the descriptions of the violence were detailed, enough.

The Roman playwright Seneca wrote his own versions of Greek tragedies, and these descriptions of the violence were even more graphic. John G. Fitch's translation of Seneca's *Oedipus* shows how graphic this version of Oedipus stabbing his eyes is:

His eyes blazed threateningly with a ravening fire, and their
orbs scarcely held fast in their seats. Full of audacious violence
was his gaze, of ferocious anger, as he prepared to root it out . . .
For their part his eyes stood out wildly, and intently tracked
the hands they knew, meeting their wounds halfway.
With hooked hands he greedily probed his eyes, and from their
base, from their very roots he wrenched the eyeballs and let them
roll out together. His hands stayed embedded in the cavities,
their nails tearing deeply into the hollow recesses of his eyes,
those empty sockets, with fruitless aggression and excessive
rage: so great was the threat of light. (lines 958-971)

The graphic nature of the scene and other scenes in Seneca's version raise the question of whether Seneca's plays were meant to be produced. Fitch argues that [Seneca] intended the scene's impact to come from his powerfully descriptive verse, not from spectacle . . . the scene was designed for recitation, not performance (14).

The Greek and Roman playwrights did not start the violence, but they did give violence a venue, the stage. Though the violence was offstage, audiences still heard the reports of violence and could imagine what happened. For the Ancient Greeks and Romans, the focus rested on the language, not the staging.

During the Middle Ages, liturgical and secular dramas were presented and followed in the tradition of the Greeks and Romans when it came to violence. They described the events, but the violence was not shown. Secular dramas during the Middle Ages, however, pushed the limits of what an audience could take.

In her book, *The Medieval Theater of Cruelty: Rhetoric, Memory, Violence*, Jody Enders discusses how some of the secular plays were presented in the Middle Ages. She states that in some medieval dramas, “audiences experienced the dramatic aesthetics of death metonymically through a kind of vicarious participation in the fashioning of implements of torture” (189). Some towns made spectacles of torturing criminals and heretics. Witnesses of these acts sometimes paid for the privilege of viewing them (190). According to Enders, there is also a rumor of a production of a play where an actual execution took place. She quotes Frederic Faber, a historian of French theater, in regards to the rumor:

A criminal had been chosen [to fill the role of Holofernes] who had been condemned to have his flesh torn with red hot pincers. This poor fellow, guilty of several murders and ensconced in heresy, had preferred decapitation to the horrible torture to which he had been condemned, hoping perhaps, that a young girl would have neither the force nor the courage to cut off his head. But the organizers, having had the same concern, had substituted [for the role of Judith] a young man who had been condemned to banishment and to whom a pardon was promised if he played his role well. (193)

This switch is what Enders entitled “death by drama” (194). While the Greeks and Romans presented plays where the violence may have been imagined to be real (if staged at all), this occurrence depicted an actual execution “enhancing” the dramatic execution that the play required (194).

What would the reaction be to a “death by drama” today? Some critics may argue that our world has become so desensitized to violence with violent television shows and films that we accept violent acts, such as regicide and assassination as the norm. This raises the question of whether or not regicide and assassination should be presented on stage and how. Many audiences have also seen staged (fake) violence in films and on the stage and have been outraged.

I remember a production of Tennessee Williams’s *A Streetcar Named Desire* I saw along with my parents at Central Missouri State University in Warrensburg, Missouri. I remember enjoying the production, yet I recall my mother saying that she was greatly offended by the rape scene in the second act. I had warned her about the scene prior to the start of the second act, hoping that she might avert her eyes, but there was something about the production that made her look. If there is violence depicted onstage, we must remember that it is not real (the exception to this is the aforementioned production in the Enders book). Though the violence onstage was merely part of a play, the act it represented was real.

When we are out driving or riding in a car and see an accident or the aftermath of an accident, there is something deep within us that cannot help but watch the events unfold. There are times during the evening news when an accident or a crime is being

reported and we keep watching the channel. When Clytemnestra kills Agamemnon, we lean in and await what comes next. What is it about these dark deeds of violence that appeal to us as an audience and as theatre artists?

Playwrights write about these acts in such a way that when we seem them enacted on stage, we enter their world and we cannot look away. Whether the act is a murder of a king or the assassination of a president, our eyes are fixed on the action, eager for what will follow. Are we attracted to the violence itself or the motivations for the violence? Is the manner in which the violence is depicted that determines are enjoyment or do audiences simply love the violence?

CHAPTER II
THE DEATH OF KINGS

“Let us sit upon the ground and tell sad stories of the death of kings”

--Richard II, Act III, scene ii, lines 1515-1516.

It is a cold winter's night on a college campus. All of the students are stuck in their rooms studying for exams. Two students are outside a building; one of them is smoking and holding a letter while the other one is packing up a duffel bag. The smoker reads from the letter. “Dearest son: I hope this letter finds you well, though here at home, the darkest of days have fallen upon us. Two days ago, I had lunch with your father in the orchard. It was quite peaceful at the time, nothing at all strange about the day. After we finished out meal, your father rested. I went back inside the castle for a while. When I returned, your father was still sleeping. I thought nothing of it at first, but then the bells chimed and he did not awake. My beloved son, your father died the day before last. Please hurry home.” Upon reading the letter, the smoker, putting the letter inside the duffel bag, hugs the other student, and they start walking away from campus. A week later, the two students stand over the grave of the smoker's father. The newly crowned king, the smoker's uncle, is not looking at the grave, but at the smoker's mother. Within a month, the new king has taken her for his bride.

This brief opening of a story imagines how Hamlet and Horatio heard about the death of Hamlet's father and what happened at the funeral. Shakespeare's spends much of his play drawing out the character's motivations and his inner emotions before allowing Hamlet to finally commit an act of regicide. *Hamlet* includes not one, but a

total of four regicides (only three are actually shown on stage). Upon hearing of how his father was murdered, Hamlet vows to avenge his father's death.

Shakespeare does not address when and where Hamlet was when his father's death occurred, but in the text, Shakespeare does tell us when Old Hamlet died. The Ghost of Hamlet's father asks Hamlet to "revenge his foul and most unnatural murder" (1.5.710). The act of regicide is defined here by the Ghost. The Ghost continues to tell Hamlet the details of the murder:

Now, Hamlet, hear
'Tis given out, that sleeping in mine orchard,
A serpent stung me: so the whole ear of Denmark,
Is by a forged process of my death
Rankly abus'd: but know thou noble youth,
The serpent that did sting thy father's life,
Now wears his crown. (1.5.722-727)

According to the Ghost, Claudius, the king's brother, murdered Old Hamlet and is now the king. Those are the facts of the regicide, but there is speculation about why Hamlet's father was killed. Was he killed out of jealousy for the crown, or did Claudius kill Old Hamlet because Claudius was in love with Gertrude? Either way, the focus is on Hamlet and his reaction to his father's death and not the actual reasons behind the regicide. Most critics are more concerned with the question "was Hamlet really mad?" after he receives this news from the ghost, or the other major question of why Hamlet waits so long to avenge his father's death.

Why does Hamlet wait and is he justified in committing regicide? Hamlet does not immediately enact revenge. He spends most of the play reflecting on the decision.

Revenge? Why Wait?

Hamlet is told of the regicide at the end of the first act. Hamlet does not kill Claudius until the second scene of the fifth act. Why does Hamlet wait? He had the opportunity to kill Claudius in the third act while Claudius is praying:

Now might I do it pat, now he is praying;
And now I'll do 't, and so he goes to heaven;
And so am I reveng'd: that would be scann'd:
A villain kills my father; and, for that,
I, his sole son, do this same villain send
To heaven. (3.3.2350-2355)

Hamlet's justification for not killing Claudius here is because he assumes that Claudius is praying and seeking forgiveness for the murder of Hamlet's father. If he were to kill Claudius after his sin was forgiven, then Claudius would go to heaven, while his father, who died "cut off even in the blossoms of [his] sins," remains in purgatory (1.5.761). Some critics argue that Hamlet shows weakness in this scene. A son avenging his father would not let anything stand in his way; a truly vengeful son would take his revenge.

However, Karl Werner, in his essay, "The Heart of Hamlet's Mystery," gives a different view of why Hamlet hesitates:

If Hamlet had misunderstood the Ghost's meaning and had assassinated the King before he had unmasked him, he would save rather than destroy him. He would make the King immortal, for the sympathy of the world would flow to him, and through all time the royal criminal would be regarded as the innocent victim of a wicked plot. (253)

Werner suggests that upon Claudius's death, all of Denmark would view him as a type of martyr. This is unacceptable for Hamlet; we know this because of Hamlet's reaction to Claudius in the first act. Hamlet is still mourning his father's death, months after the fact. Claudius tells Hamlet that though his mourning is a duty, it is "unmanly grief" and "'tis a fault to heaven/A fault against the dead, a fault to nature" (1.2.276, 283-284).

The argument can be made that Hamlet, realizing what grief has done to him, does not kill Claudius because he does not want the whole country of Denmark feeling the grief that he feels.

In his essay, "Hamlet's Neglect of Revenge," R.A. Foakes presents his own argument as to why Hamlet does not immediately kill Claudius. Foakes states that Hamlet did not promise revenge, but to "remember" his father, and that "Hamlet indeed dwells above all on remembering the Ghost and wiping away all other records he has kept in the notebook of his memory" (90).

As stated in the introduction, the topic of regicide includes the killing of any member of the royal family. The three remaining regicides (the murder of Hamlet's father is not shown, but referred by the Ghost) take place in a single scene, Act V, scene ii. This scene can be separated into two sections; the first concerns Hamlet's conversation with Horatio about Hamlet's sudden return. The section begins with the entrance of Osric, who relays to Hamlet the wager that Claudius offers him. Hamlet accepts the king's wager against Horatio's plea not to:

HORATIO. You will lose this wager, my Lord.

HAMLET. I do not think so, since he went to France,
I have been in continual practice; I shall win at the
Odds, but thou wouldst not think how all here about

My heart: but it is no matter.
HORATIO. Nay, good my lord.
HAMLET. It is but foolery, but it is such a kind of
Gain-giving as would perhaps trouble a woman.
HORATIO. If your mind dislike any thing, obey. I will fore-stall
their repair hither, and say you are not fit. (5.2.3658-3667)

Hamlet's line "It is but foolery" is reflected in the text as Laertes and Hamlet fight. The direction states after line 3725 that Hamlet "prepare[s] to play."

Though the directions state that Laertes and Hamlet are "at play," the violence that follows is not play. Hamlet's speech to Laertes prior to their duel does not suggest a playful attitude but that of a man asking for forgiveness.

HAMLET. Give me your pardon Sir, I've done you wrong.
But pardon't as you are a Gentleman.
This presence knows,
And you must needs have heard how I am punisht
With sore distraction? What I have done
That might your nature honor, and exception
Roughly awake, I here proclaim was madness:
Was't Hamlet wrong'd Laertes? Never Hamlet.

Let my disclaiming from a purpos'd evil,
Free me so far in your most generous thoughts,
That I have shot mine Arrow o're the house,
And hurt my brother.

LAERTES. I am satisfied in Nature,
Whose motive in this case should stir my most
To my Revenge. But in my terms of Honor
I stand aloof, and will no reconcilment,
Till by some elder Masters of known Honor,
I have a voice, and president of peace
To keep my name ungorg'd. But till that time,
I do receive your offer'd love like love,
And will not wrong it. (5.2. 3678-4705)

Hamlet's actions following these lines prompt Laertes's rage. Laertes accuses Hamlet of mocking him (line 3713), yet Hamlet denies it.

The depiction of violence within the scene begins shortly after Hamlet and Laertes begin to "play" (line 3742). Within the next three lines, Hamlet has already hit Laertes. It is after this first "hit, a very palpable hit" that the violence grows (line 3746). The first regicide victim is Gertrude.

In Act IV, scene vii, Claudius and Laertes plot against Hamlet. Though Claudius approves of Laertes's idea, Claudius wants a guarantee; he takes the matter into his own hands. Claudius tells him that he'll poison Hamlet's drink "if he by chance escape your venom'd stuck" (4.7.3150-3152). During the sword play between Hamlet and Laertes, Claudius offers the cup of wine to Hamlet, which he refuses (lines 3748-3752). Hamlet immediately goes back to the sword play and hits Laertes again; this time Laertes agrees with the judgment. Gertrude takes the poisoned cup and offers a toast:

QUEEN. The queen carouses to thy fortune, Hamlet.

HAMLET. Good madam.

KING. Gertrude, do not drink.

QUEEN. I will my lord; I pray you, pardon me.

KING. It is the poison'd cup; it is too late.

HAMLET. I dare not drink yet, madam; by and by.

QUEEN. Come, let me wipe thy face.

(5.2.3758-3764)

Claudius does little to prevent Gertrude from drinking. In Line 3762, where Claudius says "it is the poison'd cup," many editors note the line as an aside; however, in the First Folio, there is no such designation. Claudius's line may have been overheard by Hamlet, which could signify the reason for his next line.

Though Gertrude does not die until line 3790, the poisoning of Gertrude sets off the chain reaction that leads to the other regicides. If Hamlet did hear Claudius talk

about the poison cup, it could be argued that his mind was distracted and he was not quite prepared for the third pass from Laertes. Laertes, having been hit twice, tells the Claudius "My lord, I'll hit him now" to which Claudius replies "I do not think it" (lines 3767-68). Audiences know that Laertes has a poisoned tip of his blade and is willing to win. With his next line, Laertes questions his own willingness to do it by saying "And yet 'tis almost 'gainst my conscience" (line 3769).

The next exchange between Hamlet and Laertes results in a non-blow. If Laertes questioned striking Hamlet, then why did he continue? As he did earlier in the scene, Hamlet's words appear to irritate Laertes. The following text may suggest why Laertes attacks Hamlet:

HAMLET. Come for the third.
Laertes, you but dally,
I pray you pass with your best violence.
I am afraid you make a wanton of me.
LAERTES. Say you so? Come one. [*Play*]
OSRIC. Nothing neither way.
LAERTES. Have at you now. (5.2.3770-3776)

Laertes strikes Hamlet with the poisoned blade, and in the struggle between them, they exchange foils (line 3777), Hamlet strikes Laertes. Hamlet's words "pass with your best violence" indicates that playtime is over; the real fight is about to begin.

This is when the violence hits full speed. With Osric's next line "Look to the Queen there ho," he suggests that something has happened to the Queen, yet there is no stage direction listed. Horatio then reports that both Hamlet and Laertes are bleeding (line 3781). Laertes, in line 3785, says "I am justly kill'd with mine own Treachery." Gertrude speaks of the drink "Oh my dear Hamlet, the drink, the drink, I am poison'd"

(3785). Hamlet cries out “Treachery!” upon the death of Gertrude, which prompts Laertes to unfold to Hamlet the plot against him. Hamlet immediately kills Claudius with the envenomed foil (lines 3792-3804). The following line “Treason. Treason,” is said by everyone.

This line can be interpreted in two ways. The charge of treason, as traditionally played, is directed to Claudius for orchestrating the plot against Hamlet and for causing the Queen’s death. The other interpretation makes the charge against Hamlet. The crowd shouts “treason” at Hamlet because he has committed treason in his act of regicide. This interpretation may prompt Hamlet's next lines:

HAMLET. Here thou incestuous, murderous,
Damned Dane.
Drink off this Potion: Is thy Union here?
Follow my Mother. [*King dies*]. (3807-3810)

Hamlet's action of forcing the rest of the poisoned cup excentuates the regicide. This is the last depiction of violence within the play and possibly, the most shocking for Hamlet says "follow my Mother." Does Hamlet intend that his mother is going to heaven or to hell? The line is up to interpretation; however, it may simply mean that Claudius is following Gertrude into death.

Though Hamlet's actions towards Claudius are the final act of regicide, Hamlet, at this point, still lives. Laertes asks Hamlet for forgiveness (lines 3811-3817).

Hamlet’s next line “Heaven make thee free of it, I follow thee” suggests that Hamlet asks Heaven to forgive Laertes for regicide. With this reciprocation of forgive, the violence of the play has ended. After Hamlet’s death, the action of the play dies down; only Horatio remains to tell Fortinbras of the events leading to the regicides.

Let us examine the gap between the first regicide and the remaining three.

Hamlet is told about the first regicide in the first act (lines 722-727). Over 3600 lines later, Hamlet dies. Hamlet could not have immediately avenged his father's murder. As stated earlier, his only opportunity to kill Claudius was when Claudius was in prayer (line 2350), and he knew it was wrong to do so. The prayer scene is more than halfway through the play. If Hamlet did kill Claudius at that moment, how would the play have ended? How much longer would it have continued? The critics that adhere to the idea that Hamlet should have killed Claudius in Act III, scene iii, do not seem to realize that Hamlet knew that regicide was a wrong and vile act. R.A. Foakes mentions in his essay that "whenever Hamlet reflects upon revenge, he cannot carry it out because the very idea clashes with his awareness of biblical injunctions against taking a life" (93). Throughout the play, Hamlet struggles with the idea of taking his own life, especially in his "To be or not to be" soliloquy (3.1.1709). It is not until after Laertes dies that he welcomes death. His words to Horatio can be interpreted as a call to live. He tells Horatio, in lines 3822-3835, to live on and "tell [his] story."

It is clear that both the murder of Old Hamlet and the killing of Claudius are acts of regicide; however, as stated in the introduction, the death of Hamlet is also classified as a regicide. In the introduction, regicide was defined as the killing of a king, yet I included the killing of any royal family member in that definition. Within the text, however, there is another explanation. Susanne L. Wofford, editor of *Case Studies in Contemporary Criticism* states in her notes of the text that Hamlet's line "This is I, Hamlet the Dane" (V.1. 243-244) "means Hamlet is calling himself 'King' (139).

We can speculate that sometime on his journey toward England, Hamlet realized his fate. When he sees Ophelia's burial, Hamlet acts. He does not ponder the consequences of his actions, but he reveals himself to the court and pronounces himself "Hamlet the Dane."

Many of Shakespeare's plays were written in response to previous plays and texts. It was not uncommon for playwrights to take well-known events or previous material and create a new text based on their interpretation of the original work.

According to Susanne L. Wofford, editor of *Case Studies in Contemporary Criticism*:

In the Renaissance intellectuals, poets, and writers admired the capacity to imitate and reproduce (with a difference, of course) the devices, concepts, plots, and even vision of an already existing work of art, especially if it was created by a Greek or Roman artist. (19)

Just like the Romans did with the Greeks, the writers and artists took existing material, reworked it, and made it their own. In regards to *Hamlet*, scholars have found that the play may have been based on several texts, including two previous plays featuring similar plot devices. In his introduction to *Hamlet: New Critical Essays*, Arthur Kinney mentions Thomas Kyd's play *The Spanish Tragedy* and Saxo Grammaticus's *Historiae Danicae*. Kinney states that it was Saxo Grammaticus writings that were the major basis for Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Kinney includes part of the plot of *Historiae Danicae*, which is similar to *Hamlet*:

Horwendil and Gerutha give birth to a son, Amleth. But Horwendil's brother Feng, presumably younger, is jealous of Horwendil and ultimately kills him and marries his sister-in-law, the widow Gerutha. Amleth is aware that his father was murdered, and in fear of his own life, feigns madness, concealing his own intelligence and integrity. (10)

With a few exceptions (the Ghost and “the play within a play), Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* follows a similar plot. Kinney goes on to say that the major difference between the two stories comes after the slaying of Polonius (at least in Shakespeare’s play). Saxo’s version has a scene much like it, but from that point on the two plays have little in common (11). If copyright laws existed back then, Thomas Kyd might have sued Shakespeare for not giving him credit for using the plot of *The Spanish Tragedy*, while Shakespeare would not need to worry about Saxo’s writing since it would be in the public domain.

The writings of other scholars and playwrights were not the only basis for Shakespeare’s text. The book *Royal Murders* by Dulcie M. Ashdown describes many regicides in which Shakespeare made connections with other plays within his own work. Ashdown specifically cites the story that Saxo used for his writings and also includes historical information about regicides. Ashdown states that “Scandinavia produced more medieval regicides than any other country” and that “in the Dark Ages, it was the rule rather than the exception for a king’s reign to end in his violent death” (3). Ashdown also illustrates that regicides were common in English history as well:

Almost every European royal dynasty can also offer an example of murder by a brother, a cousin or even a wife. Thus it is not surprising that the murder of England’s King William II in the year 1100 has been attributed to his brother, who became King Henry I. (5)

Most of the regicides concluded with the murderer assuming the throne (6).

According to Kinney, Shakespeare may also have used a historical document for the reason behind Hamlet’s act of regicide. Kinney states that there was a “verse epistle

written to James VI of Scotland urging him to revenge the murder of his father Lord Darnley; in this, the ghost of Darnley addresses the King in ways reminiscent of the Ghost of Hamlet Senior to his son” (17). The epistle explains that the murder happened because the killer wanted the throne and possibly the Queen, and that James should avenge his father’s death.

For Love or Ambition

Most theatre artists regard *Macbeth* as the darkest of Shakespeare’s tragedies; the fall of a Scottish soldier who commits regicide, becomes king, and eventually succumbs to the violence he created. One act of violence leads to another and another until Macbeth is consumed by it. Though the play shows various signs of violence, only two acts fall under the category of regicide.

Unlike *Hamlet*, the first regicide in *Macbeth* happens in the course of the play; however, like the former, the first act of regicide is not seen. The decision that Macbeth makes to commit regicide is much like Hamlet’s. Both characters struggle with the idea of taking a life Macbeth hesitates, but in a fraction of the time that Hamlet does. Why is this the case? The difference in the two characters lies within themselves. Hamlet is a student, more specifically, a student at a university where he learned about philosophy and reflection. Hamlet questions first and then takes action. Macbeth, however, is a soldier and is used to taking action without questioning (the exception to this is with Duncan's murder). Both men question the act of regicide before committing it.

Hamlet's act of regicide takes place in Act V while Macbeth's takes place in Act II. . In Hamlet's case, he spends the majority of the play in this debate. Macbeth expresses his doubts about killing Duncan in Act I, scene vii to Lady Macbeth:

MACBETH. We will proceed no further in this business.
He hath honored me of late, and I have bought
Golden opinions from all sorts of people,
Which would be worn now in their newest gloss,
Not cast aside so soon.

LADY MACBETH. Was the hope drunk
Wherein you dressed yourself? Hath it slept since?
And wakes it now to look so green and pale
At what it did so freely? From this time
Such I account thy love. Art thou afeard
To be the same in thine own act and valor
As thou art in desire? (lines 507-518)

Lady Macbeth accuses her husband of being weak and afraid. For the remainder of the scene, she plays to his emotions and questions his manhood; she refers to having breast-fed a baby and how she would have killed the innocent child if she were as cowardly as her husband (lines 533-538). His response to this is a simple question; "If we should fail?" (line 540). His doubt is clear in this statement; he fears that they will be caught. Her reply reassures Macbeth that together they can do the deed. (lines 541-554)). The scene ends with Macbeth saying "I am settled and bend up/Each corporal agent to this terrible feat" (lines 563-564).

The official act of regicide (the murder of Duncan) occurs shortly after the start of Act II. After encountering Banquo and Fleance and having dismissed them and his servant, Macbeth is beckoned to Duncan's chamber by an image of a dagger. He questions the "fatal vision" and then grasps the real dagger he is carrying (lines 616-621). Macbeth hears a bell ring and states: "I go, and it is done: the bell invites

me./Hear it not, Duncan, for it is the knell,/That summons thee to Heaven, or to Hell” (lines 643-645). In the following scene, Lady Macbeth awaits Macbeth’s return from Duncan’s chamber. From the moment he returns, Macbeth feels guilty about killing Duncan. In lines 675 through 700, he recounts what happened after he killed Duncan; how he witnessed Duncan’s guards praying yet he could not say “Amen.” Lady Macbeth tries to reassure him that they have succeeded and that to dwell on the guilt is unhealthy (lines 701-703).

As this point the play brings up three questions. First, when, if ever, did Lady Macbeth and Macbeth decide to kill Duncan? Second, what part did the witches play in this decision? Finally, why did Macbeth kill Duncan? On the surface these questions are answered, but, as with *Hamlet*, the thought of regicide is not easily explained. Textually, the following interaction between Lady Macbeth and answers the first question:

LADY MACBETH. Thy letters have transported me beyond
This ignorant present, and I feel now
The future in the instant.

MACBETH. My dearest love,
Duncan comes here tonight.

LADY MACBETH. And when goes hence?

MACBETH. Tomorrow, as he purposes.

LADY MACBETH. Oh, never
Shall sun that morrow see!
Your face, my thane, is as a book where men
May read strange matters. To beguile the time,
Look like the time; bear welcome in your eye,
Your hand, your tongue. Look like th’innocent flower,
But be the serpent under’t. And you shall put
This night’s great business into my dispatch,
Which shall to all our nights and days to come
Give solely sovereign sway and masterdom.
(1.5.408-425)

Lady Macbeth's thoughts immediately go to the killing of Duncan. When Macbeth tells Lady Macbeth of Duncan's arrival, she quickly inquires when he will be leaving and Macbeth's response prompts her to a decision. Duncan will never live to see that day.

This scene may be the first time that Macbeth and Lady Macbeth entertain the idea of regicide together, but it could be argued that Macbeth has thought of the act before discussing it with his wife. In the previous scene, Duncan announces to his soldiers that Malcolm is to be his successor upon his death. Macbeth's response to this is "the Prince of Cumberland: that is a step/On which I must fall down, or else o'releap,/For in my way it lies./Stars, hide your fires;/Let not light see my black and deep desires" (1.4. 335-339). Macbeth desires to be king, and his black deep desire is to murder the king and take his crown. According to Ashdown's book, regicides were quite common in Scotland during the 11th and 12th centuries mainly because "the principle of primogeniture was not yet established in Scotland. When a king died, the most suitable kinsmen mounted the throne, and his suitability was generally determined by the power he already wielded" (49). Ashdown's comments support the argument that Macbeth, having stopped the rebellion of Macdonwald, should have been named Duncan's successor.

The second question addresses the role of the witches in the regicide. When the witches greet Macbeth and Banquo in Act I, scene iii, they speak first to Macbeth:

WITCH 1. All hail Macbeth, hail thee Thane of Glamis.

WITCH 2. All hail Macbeth, hail thee Thane of Cawdor.

WITCH 3. All hail Macbeth, that shalt be King hereafter.

BANQUO. Good sir, why do you start, and seem to fear
Things that do sound so fair? i'th name of truth
Are ye fantastical, or that indeed

Which outwardly you show? (lines 148-154)

Banquo notices that Macbeth is puzzled almost to fear by the witches' decree. Macbeth knows that he is Thane of Glamis, yet does not understand how he could be Thane of Cawdor (lines 171-173). When Ross and Angus arrive to confirm on Macbeth the title of Thane of Cawdor, he is still shocked. It is only when he is alone that he reveals his true emotions:

This supernatural soliciting
Cannot be ill, cannot be good.
If ill, why hath it given me earnest of success
Commencing in the truth? I am Thane of Cawdor.
If good, why do I yield to that suggestion
Whose horrid image doth unfix my hair,
And make my seated heart knock at my ribs
Against the use of nature? Present fears
Are less than horrible imaginings.
My thought, whose murder yet is but fantastical,
Shakes so my single state of man
That function is smothered in surmise,
And nothing is but what is not. (lines 241-253)

For a moment, Macbeth is prompted to regicide, but he dismisses the thought as “fantastical.” In his next line, he wonders if he could still be king if he does not act on his thoughts (lines 255-257).

The witches do nothing more than address Macbeth by the titles he has and will have. They do not tell him how he will become Thane of Cawdor nor do they tell him how and when he will become king. For their part, the witches have given Macbeth a glance at what he is (Thane of Glamis), who he becomes (Thane of Cawdor), and who he is bound to be (King).

Macbeth does not think about the witches again until after Banquo mentions them. Macbeth replies back to Banquo that he does not think about them, yet will talk to him later about it (2.1.598-601). It is not likely that he has forgotten them. The witches are not mentioned until Act III, after Macbeth is crowned king. Banquo suspects that Macbeth murdered Duncan based on his reaction to the witches. Macbeth has Banquo killed later and then he himself refers to the witches again in Act II, scene ii and Act IV, scene i.

I previously stated that Macbeth should have been named Duncan's successor; however, Macbeth was overlooked and the crown was to pass to Malcolm. Macbeth sees this act as a sign of disrespect and this gives him a reason to commit regicide. Of course, the hope of being King is a strong reason to consider regicide, although it is not the only factor. During his interactions with Lady Macbeth, Macbeth is verbally teased and weakened by her. She demands that he start acting like a man.

In a recent production of *Macbeth* at the Maedgen Theatre at Texas Tech University in Lubbock, Texas, the director and cast emphasized these scenes between the couple by showing Macbeth to be a religious man, who knew that murder was wrong. His wife being far younger than Macbeth in that production, did not care about the possible consequences of her actions. She wanted instant gratification. Somewhere within Act I, scene vii, the director had the couple embrace and kiss. In this production, one could argue that Macbeth killed Duncan to prove his love for his wife. In a later scene, Act III, scene i, it appeared that once Macbeth was king, he no longer needed the help or the love of his wife; he was consumed by getting rid of his enemies.

This production of the play also sheds some light on the reason for the murder of Macbeth. On the surface, the murder of Macbeth arises from Macduff seeking revenge for the murder of his family; however, in the Texas Tech production there is another voice that steals the focus: Hecate, the mistress of the witches. In the TTU production, Bill Gelber shows Hecate as a “puppet master” who controls the witches and in one scene, Macbeth, through subtle hand movements. In Act III, scene v, Hecate belittles the witches by saying :

how did you dare
To trade, and traffic with Macbeth,
In riddles, and affairs of death;
And I, the mistress of your charms,
The close contriver of all harms,
Was never call'd to bear my part. (lines 1433-1438)

Perhaps the director was showing how Hecate could use the witches, who supplied Macbeth with the idea of regicide, to bring about the downfall of Macbeth.

This interpretation of Hecate suggests that she controls the witches and makes them warn Macbeth about Macduff.

In the text, Hecate does not immediately appear at the start of Act IV. In the TTU production, Hecate is onstage and she “pulls” the witches onstage. From an elevated platform, Hecate moves her hands around, forcing the witches to move around the caldron. When Macbeth appears, Hecate moves her hands, and Macbeth appears to follow her actions. When the apparitions appear, Hecate conjures them, beckoning them to speak to Macbeth (4.1.1602-1680). After seeing the production, I wondered if the director wanted the audience to believe that Hecate gave Macbeth a false sense of

security by showing him the apparitions, and by having the witches say “for none of woman born/ Shall harm Macbeth” (lines 1621-1622).

Macbeth leaves his fear behind because he thinks he’s invincible. Even when Birnam Wood advances on Inverness, Macbeth still believes that he cannot be killed. It is not until Macduff reveals how he was born that Macbeth feels fear (5.2453-2456).

Macbeth was written much like *Hamlet* in that Shakespeare took an existing story and reworked it. According to Ashdown, Shakespeare was “commissioned to write a play to be performed at the palace of Hampton Court on 7 August 1606 in the presence of James I, King of England, who was also James VI, King of Scotland” (48). Shakespeare, wanting to please the king, took a page from Scottish history. There was an actual Macbeth who was king of Scotland from 1040 until 1057 and who did kill the previous king, Duncan, in order to get his crown (48). Ashdown goes on to say that Shakespeare more than likely read about Macbeth “in the chronicle of Raphael Holinshed” (48). Many Shakespeare historians agree that Shakespeare had read the chronicles to get background information on English history. Holinshed’s work also included some information on witches, a favorite subject of James I (48).

Prior to being James I, King James VI of Scotland was the victim of a kidnapping and attempted regicide. Yonjae Han, in his dissertation *Shakespeare’s Critique of Violence*, describes the Gowrie Conspiracy:

On August 5, 1600, Alexander Ruthven, a younger brother of the Earl of Gowrie, invited James, then King of Scotland, to examine a man whom he alleged he had seized with a large pot of gold pieces in his possession. After dinner the king was guided to the room where the man with the pot of gold was confined. But when the king entered the room,

he was shut in and found that Ruthven had deceived him. Ruthven threatened the king's life because he believed that the king was responsible for the death of his father. A struggle ensued but the king succeeded in calling for help from his attendants outside the room. Finally both Ruthven and the Earl were killed in the course of the fight, and they were found guilty of treason. (57)

Han goes on to say that the bizarre circumstance of the Gowrie Conspiracy is that "Gowrie's body did not bleed in spite of the wounds inflicted." While investigating the body, James discovered a bag "full of magical and enchanting words." A connection between regicide and evil was made (57).

Han's main focus in his dissertation is the topic of hospitality. He makes a clear association between the themes of hospitality and regicide in *Macbeth*. Han states that "Macbeth kills Duncan as the king's host" and that "regicide and hospitality cannot come together without calling for the evil spirits" (55, 64). The violation of hospitality derives from both Lady Macbeth and Macbeth "welcoming" the evil around them (65). Duncan is a guest of Macbeth's and, as a guest and as their king, should be protected from harm. He trusts Macbeth with his safety. Macbeth violates this trust in his act of regicide. Lady Macbeth also violates this trust when she falsely exclaims after the discovery of Duncan's body, "What! In our house?" (2.3.847).

Many scholars believe that the issue of trust was the focus of the regicide. Han bases his dissertation on the interaction between trust, hospitality, and violence. Several scholars believe that the Gunpowder Plot of 1605 contributed to the plot of *Macbeth*. Gary Wills's book *Witches and Jesuits* depicts the failed plot:

A cell of papist—the "enemy with" of that time, directed

by skulking Jesuits—had trundled keg after keg of gunpowder into a vault under Parliament. A munitions expert named Guy Fawkes was discovered with the detonating materials, ready to ignite the fuse (train) when the King was addressing his Parliament, in the presence of the Prince his heir and all leading members of his court. (14)

Wills goes on to discuss the investigations that ensued following the failed assassination. He states that James I, along with his advisors, reviewed the evidence carefully so that there was no doubt of what happened, what could have happened, and who was involved in the plot (15).

Wills admits that the majority of *Macbeth* does not follow the Gunpowder Plot; however, the play is full of references that are associated with Gunpowder plays including betraying the throne, conspiracy to commit regicide, and political unrest. Shakespeare includes witches and necromancy in the play, two topics that James I used to explain the evil within the world (27). Wills also argues that the inclusion of the Porter in Act II, scene iii, refers to the Gunpowder Plot.

He explains that the Jesuits and their co-conspirators, namely Henry Garnet, committed treason against the King and country. Wills states that in *Macbeth*, the “guests” that the Porter lets into Hell mirror those of the Jesuits and Garnet (101). He further tells how Garnet was finally hanged for his crime:

Garnet was given a chance to repent, as clergy and civil officers continued to question him on the way to the jammed square and onto the scaffold. Urged to endorse his own confession of complicity in the plot, he said he had confessed only to hearing about the Plot under the seal of confession. “You do but equivocate,” he was told—persisting in his sin at the last moment when he could save his soul . . . Garnet was represented as going off to hell defiant. (101)

The Porter's lines in Act II, scene iii (lines 751-754) "Faith, here's an equivocator, that could swear in both/The scales against either scale . . . /Yet could not equivocate to heaven," could resemble Garnet's fate in the afterlife (101). This scene may support Wills's and other scholars' theory that *Macbeth* is a Gunpowder play; however, Wills contradicts himself by admitting that most of the references to the Plot did not survive (202).

Parts of Arthur Melville Clark's *Murder Under Trust or The Topical Macbeth and Other Jacobean Matters* deals with the debate of whether or not the Gunpowder Plot played a significant role in the development of *Macbeth*. Clark argues that there "are only certain allusions that Shakespeare makes to [the Gunpowder Plot], and they amount to very little" (109). Clark stresses that the plot of *Macbeth* "parallels" the Gowrie Conspiracy more than anything else (109). He says:

The over-all parallel is that of the actual murder under trust of Duncan and of the attempted murder under trust of King James—the parallel between an accomplished and a frustrated [regicide] of a Scottish king. Both were cases of high treason in a supreme degree. (109)

Clark does not ignore the Gunpowder Plot, but emphasizes the Gowrie action more. If we look at the play as a whole, we will see more similarities with the Gowrie attempted regicide. Duncan, like James, was invited to the murderer's house under the guise of trust; though Duncan was killed, James escaped death.

Having explored the act of regicide in both *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, we can also look at how the violence is shown when performing the plays. Within the text of *Hamlet*, there are two places where regicides are shown onstage. The first instance is in

Act III, scene ii. The prologue to "The Mousetrap" and the play enact a regicide. This show of violence is fake violence, fake to us as an audience as well as the court within the text who are watching the "The Mousetrap." In Act V, scene ii, the acts of regicide are the climax of the play and are shown. This is in contrast to the acts of regicide within *Macbeth*. The murder of Duncan and the killing of Macbeth are done offstage. We witness the aftermath of both regicides; Macbeth returns with the bloody daggers after killing Duncan and Macduff carries in the head of Macbeth.

The answer lies in the production of the plays. In regards to *Macbeth* in the production from Texas Tech, Dr. Gelber displayed most of the violence onstage (exceptions being Banquo's murder and the killing of Macduff's family). In the final act, Gelber decided to show the body of Macbeth instead of just his decapitated head. Macbeth was thrust onstage by Macduff, Macbeth fell flat, and his crown fell off. The crown falling off of Macbeth's head may have symbolized the death of the king. Macduff's action of thrusting (or pushing) the body onstage showed the final blow of the regicide.

In showing the violence onstage, Gelber makes, intentionally or not, a statement about the violence. We see the violence in order to understand it. Macduff's act of regicide serves two purposes. The first is to end Macbeth's reign and to ensure the peace. The second is similar to that of Hamlet. In killing Macbeth, Macduff avenges his family's murder. It is possible that the director wanted the audience to see the killing of Macbeth instead of just the result to show that Macduff had a specific purpose for the regicide.

In contrast, a production of *Macbeth* at Central Missouri State University's James L. Highlander Theatre pushed the element of witchcraft aside and focused on the violence. Though TTU's production included violence, the depiction of violence was minimal and not too graphic. Dr. Richard Herman's direction of the play emphasized the violence so much that a few scenes shocked the entire audience. The production, set in 2006 New York, began with a ten-minute fight between a gang of rebels versus Banquo and Macbeth. In the scenes that followed, every act of violence was fully illustrated to the audience: the beheading of Cawdor, the murder of Banquo, the slaying of Macduff's family, and the final bout between Macduff and Macbeth. In one scene, one of the murderers used Banquo's motorcycle helmet to smash in his skull. In another scene, the third murderer took a pillow and smothered a baby to death. At one point in the fight between Siward and Macbeth, Macbeth snapped Siward's neck. The only act of violence that was off-stage in the play was the murder of Duncan. With every act of violence, it appeared that the characters (not the actors) savored the moment.

Which style is more effective? Which play handled the violence appropriately? Both plays included the violence, but the TTU production limited the violence to a few scenes. The CMSU production seemed to actually glorify the violence. I witnessed several audience members leaving the production while others leaned in closer. In this Those who did may have been desensitized to the violence (or perhaps they wondered when it would stop.)

CHAPTER III
SOMEONE TELL THE STORY

“Someone tell the story. Someone sing the song.

Every now and then the country goes a little wrong”

--“The Ballad of Booth,” from *Assassins*

Outside the window of a small one-bedroom apartment, the clouds gather as if about to rain. A young girl looks out the window wishing she were outside. She turns on the radio, but all she can hear is static. She turns the dial back and forth. She finally finds a clear station, but there is only silence. After a few seconds, a somber, yet startled voice says, “The President’s been shot.” The young girl’s heart stops. For a moment she thinks about the last time her parents criticized the President’s agenda. She tries to think about something else but the voice repeats, “The President’s been shot.” Forty years from now, she will remember every detail: the color of the drapes hanging on the window, the smell of tar from the roof, the soda can falling from her hands to the ground. She will remember all of this and think back with a tear in her eye and a lump in her throat. On that day, she grieves for a man she never met and with whom her family did not agree. The whole country grieves with her.

If you asked people in their late forties and older where they were when President Kennedy was shot, sooner or later, you’ll get a response similar to the one above. Several people might actually be able to tell you specific details of that day. Some might not remember anything but the phrase, “The President’s been shot.” With

that in mind, this chapter examines the impact that an assassination, or attempted assassination, has on society as depicted in two plays.

Beginning with the assassination of Abraham Lincoln and through the assassination of John F. Kennedy, our nation has grieved and asked the same question. Why? We cannot seem to understand what would drive someone to kill a President, or at least we try not to think about it. At times, the assassination of a president has brought the country together through tragedy.

American Assassins: The Darker Side of Politics by James W. Clarke gives factual details of the assassinations and assassination attempts of several presidents and other notable figures. Clarke begins his section on Lee Harvey Oswald with the following: “There is little doubt that [Oswald] killed President Kennedy on that sunny, clear November afternoon [November 22, 1963] in Dallas” (107). Almost no one will dispute that fact; however, what is in dispute is why Oswald did it and if he acted alone. You can walk into any bookstore and find a book on the Kennedy assassination and the conspiracy theories surrounding it, but there are few plays that deal with the infamous event.

Back and to the Left

In Keith Reddin’s play *Frame 312*, Lynette, an assistant editor for *Time Magazine*, takes notes during a viewing of the Zapruder film of the Kennedy assassination. Through the course of the viewing, Lynette, seeing the hideous act, confides to her boss, Graham:

LYNETTE. Can I say something, Mr. Graham?
 GRAHAM. What is it?
 LYNETTE. You shouldn't publish it.
 GRAHAM. We shouldn't.
 LYNETTE. No . . .It's too upsetting for people.
 GRAHAM. It's history.
 LYNETTE. I know.
 GRAHAM. We have an obligation.

 GRAHAM. It's . . . you have to understand,
 sometimes facts can be unpleasant. Someone
 being killed, it's very unpleasant. But we have
 to report it. People want to know.
 LYNETTE. But it's the President. It's President Kennedy.
 And printing those pictures, you make it like staring
 at some dead animal. Some animal on the side
 of the . . .
 GRAHAM. It's what we do. (Act 1, scene 3, pages 12-13)

Lynette's reaction is similar to many after viewing a violent scene. The difference here is that Lynette is being asked to take detailed notes of the Zapruder film, to focus on the timing between each frame. Her boss, Graham, wants her to continue working, but notices that the film disturbs her. Graham believes that the people have a right to know how Kennedy was shot. He sees no wrong in publishing some stills from the film.

The remainder of the play shows Lynette switching between her past (1960s) and the present (1990s). In another scene from the 1960's, Graham confides in Lynette a secret he has kept since the assassination. In Reddin's play, Graham reveals to Lynette that he has the original Zapruder film. Earlier in the play, Graham asked Lynette to take the film to the FBI. Graham replies that the FBI has a copy of the film and he tells Lynette:

I was always afraid of what might happen. With the film.
 And I was right. The evidence in the commission report,
 it's not the same as . . . as what we saw that day. The notes

from Roy's analysis. They've altered it. Various frames. Lengths between shots. A few frames to increase time between shots. So it would match up with their findings. (2.5 page 66)

Reddin gives his own theory here of why the Warren Commission altered the film.

Later in the scene, Graham says that the commission wanted "it to go away. Everything that's unsettled or unknown needs to go away" (2.5 p. 66). The scene ends with Graham giving the original film to Lynette.

Reddin offers an alternate version of the factual evidence that the commission presented. He shows Lynette change from a concerned citizen into a paranoid observer, and in the scenes in the present, she appears alienated from her grown children. This suggests that it was Lynette's reaction to the assassination that caused her estrangement from her children. The play ends, however, much like it began. Lynette shows the film to her daughter, Stephanie, passing the story of the original film to her (2.6 p.72-75).

It should be noted that Reddin does not specify whether or not the film is shown to the audience. The representation of violence within Reddin's play, the Zapruder film, is not listed in the text; it could be argued that Reddin left the decision to show the film onstage up to the director. Reddin may assume that many of today's audiences have seen clips of the assassination, or he may not wish to offend his audience by having the stage directions mention the clip. More likely, Reddin chose not to have the assassination shown because the focus of the play is not the assassination, but Lynette's reaction to it.

Frame 312 only briefly touches on the theme of assassination. Reddin uses the character of Graham as the voice of the masses, the people who want to know. As

Graham views the Zapruder film, he accepts the violent act, but cannot fathom why it happened. Lynette's reaction to watching the film and her doubts of its release prompt her fears. According to Steven D. Stark's book *Glued to the Set*, most people were not home to watch the news on November 22, 1963; "most heard the news from friends or the radio" (112).

Most young people today cannot tell you what day Kennedy was shot, but if they can identify the shooter, Lee Harvey Oswald. For those of us who were too young to remember or were not even born, we only know about the assassination through what we are taught in class, what we watch on television, and in films, like Oliver Stone's *JFK*. There is, however, another way that today's audiences can view the Kennedy assassination.

Siding with the Enemy

In the musical *Assassins*, Stephen Sondheim and John Weidman show the stories behind nine individuals who attempted to assassinate presidents. (Four succeeded.) Through dark scenes and songs, we learn that "everybody's got the right to be happy" and "what a wonder is a gun." The musical explores the ideas surrounding the assassinations and shows the assassins' side of the story. What is unique about the musical is that somewhere between the start of the show and before the Oswald scene, we begin to understand the Assassins. We see their point of view enacted on the stage.

In 1991, John Weidman defended his views about the play in the preface of the text:

These murderers and would-be murderers are generally dismissed as maniacs and misfits who live in common with each other, and [have?] nothing in common with the rest of us. *Assassins* suggests otherwise. *Assassins* suggests that while these individuals are, to say the least, peculiar—taken as a group they are peculiarly *American*. And that behind the variety of motives which they articulated for their murderous outbursts, they share a common purpose: a desperate desire to reconcile intolerable feelings of impotence with an inflamed and malignant sense of entitlement. (x)

Weidman states that *Assassins* attempts to show the human side of these “maniacs” and to portray them as who they really are: Americans who thought they were justified in their actions. The musical shows audiences how “a little finger can change the world.”

This opening to the musical suggests a carnival-like atmosphere where the Assassins try to “win a prize.” Each of the would-be-assassins enters and hears the song sung by the Proprietor:

Hey, pal—feelin’ blue?
Don’t know what to do?
Hey, pal—
 (*Czolgosz looks up*)
I mean you—
Yeah.
C’mere and kill a President. (Scene 1 p. 5-6)

This opening scene continues until all of the Assassins, except Lee Harvey Oswald, have entered. John Wilkes Booth, called “our pioneer” by the Proprietor, is the last to enter. His addition to the song includes lyrics like “everybody’s got the right to be happy” and “don’t be scared/you won’t prevail/everybody’s free to fail” (12). At the end of the song, the assassins load their guns and turn upstage to fire, but a Voice calls out “Ladies and Gentleman, the President of the United States, Abraham Lincoln.” Booth excuses himself and we hear a gunshot (13-14).

Booth's exit signifies that he is going to assassinate Lincoln. The next scene, a mixture of a ballad and dialogue, details what Booth did after leaving Ford's Theatre.

It should be pointed out that Sondheim and Weidman have taken some liberties with the facts surrounding Booth and his assassination of President Lincoln. In the song, "The Ballad of Booth," the Balladeer sings about why "Johnny Booth" killed Lincoln:

Some say it was your voice had gone,
Some say it was booze.
They say you killed a country, John,
Because of bad reviews. (Scene 2 p. 16)

Bad reviews may be one reason why Booth killed Lincoln; however, it is not accurate. Though he did not get as much praise as his brother Edwin, Booth was a talented actor and did receive praise from "established professionals" (Clarke 23). This scene of the play also shows Booth demanding that his voice be heard. He begs the Balladeer to tell his story, and then the Balladeer fills in for Booth. The scene ends with the Balladeer making one last comment on Booth and his act:

Damn you, Johnny,
You paved the way
For other madmen
To make us pay.
.....
Listen to the stories.
Hear it in the songs.
Angry men don't write the rules.
And guns don't right the wrongs.
Hurts a while,
But soon the country's
Back where it belongs
And that's the truth.
Still and all . . .
Damn you, Booth. (Scene 2 p. 22-23)

These lyrics express Sondheim and Weidman's view that every presidential assassin since Booth owes him their thanks.

The next two scenes of the musical involve Giuseppe Zangara, the Italian immigrant who attempted to assassinate President-elect Franklin D. Roosevelt. In the song "How I Saved Roosevelt," several bystanders sing about how they intercepted Zangara and how "lucky they were there or we'd been left bereft of FDR" (Scene 4 p. 31). With this song, Sondheim shows how a tragic event makes celebrities out of anyone. Each of the bystanders says that he or she saved Roosevelt and his/her lines overlap the other, as if each is trying to outshine the others. The scene climaxes with several Bystanders singing in harmony as Zangara is electrocuted (Scene 4 p. 35). This is the first violent act listed in the script as being shown onstage.

Following the Zangara scene is a small interaction between Leon Czolgosz, a former factory worker, and Emma Goldman, the famous anarchist. In this scene, Weidman shows the desperation of Czolgosz, a man who feels that the worker is being abused, and yet, he also has a softer side to him when he picks up Goldman's suitcase. Goldman takes the suitcase from him and replies, "They make us servants, Leon. We do not make servants of each other." Czolgosz takes the suitcase back from her and they walk off (Scene 5 p. 39). For a brief moment, we feel for the would-be-assassin and the anarchist. We want to continue walking with them.

Not all of the songs and scenes within *Assassins* have specific meanings behind them. Scene Six shows Moore and "Squeaky" Fromme sitting on a park bench. They are both inquisitive, but Moore, being older, does not always get the references that

Fromme makes. The two ladies find a connection between them through Charles Manson. Fromme says that she is “[Charlie’s] lover and his slave,” and Moore seems to remember knowing a Charlie Manson back in high school (Scene 6 p. 41). This scene gives a bit of the background of Fromme and Moore and its comedic nature emphasizes how small our world can be. One reason for this scene is to show the human side of these characters, these notorious people we have read about or seen on television. Another reason for the scene might be to separate the sweet, somber Scene Five and the dark, yet entertaining “Gun Song.”

The “Gun Song” is one of the most bizarre numbers in *Assassins*. Czolgosz, Booth, Charles Guiteau, and Sarah Jane Moore sing the song in a barber shop quartet style. The assassins sing about “the wonders of a gun” and how:

All you have to do is
Squeeze your little finger
Ease your little finger back—
(They click the triggers)
You can change the world.
Whatever else is true,
You trust your little finger,
Just a simple little finger
Can change the world. (Scene 7 p. 47)

This scene conveys the idea that anyone can change the world; that it only takes one small action. Each assassin has some connection to his or her gun. Czolgosz hates his gun. Booth embraces it. Guiteau is in awe of his, and Moore, at first, cannot remember where she put her gun (46-47). The quartet style of this song appears to illustrate that the Assassins see nothing wrong with violence but that violence must be justified. Their attachments to their guns parallel how they may see themselves in society.

Czolgosz hates what society has done to the working class, Booth embraces his Southern roots and fights for the cause, Guiteau is in awe of the world, wanting to explore every opportunity, and Moore cannot seem to remember what she is doing with her life and for whom.

Following the “Gun Song” is “The Ballad of Czolgosz” in which the Balladeer sings about the exploits of the young man who assassinated President William McKinley. According to the lyrics, Czolgosz went to the Pan-American Exposition in Buffalo so he could kill McKinley. One of the repeated lines in the song is “In the USA, you can work your way, to the head of the line” (Scene 8 p. 50). During the song, Czolgosz waits in line in order to get closer to the President. With each verse, he gets closer and closer to “the head of the line” until he finally assassinates the President (53). The song tries to reestablish the idea of “the American Way,” in that anyone can make it as long as they work hard. Czolgosz worked very hard, yet saw the suffering of those around him, and blamed the rotten treatment of the working class on the government, specifically McKinley (Clarke 59). The scene ends with Czolgosz firing his gun at McKinley (Scene 8 p.53).

Scenes Nine and Fourteen feature Samuel Byck, a high school dropout who attempted to assassinate President Nixon. In Scene Nine, Byck is recording a message to Leonard Bernstein, pleading for him to listen and to “write more love songs” (55). His speech is lively and upbeat; however, in Scene Fourteen, when Byck is recording a message to Nixon, his tone is darker, more cynical. Byck is furious with the situation of the government and the nation. He says:

The Democrat says he'll fix everything the Republicans fucked up. The Republican says he'll fix everything the Democrats fucked up. Who's telling us the truth? Who's lying? Someone's lying . . . Who can understand this crap? We need to believe, to trust like little kids, that someone wants what's best for us, that someone's looking out for us. That someone loves us. Do they? *No*. They lie to us! They lie about what's right, they lie about what's wrong. (77)

Byck's words are the voice of his generation, the generation that survived the tragedy of Kennedy's assassination and protested against the Vietnam War. In the minds of most of that generation, the government was at fault. In Byck's mind, the only way to get the government's attention, to have the government listen to him, was to assassinate the President (Clarke 142).

After Byck's rant to Nixon, the scene changes to a bare stage where the assassins talk about their reasons for their actions. A number, entitled "Another National Anthem," presents another side of the United States "for the ones who never win," who never get a break. While each of them share a line, Byck shouts "where's my prize," referring to the first scene at the carnival (Scene 15 p. 79). The Assassins cycle through various excuses until the Balladeer comes in, telling them about "the mailman [winning] the lottery" and "the usherette's a rock star," pleading with them to acknowledge the rest of the world (82). The assassins start to drown out the Balladeer until he is silenced.

Sondheim and Weidman make a very bold statement right after silencing the Balladeer. While the Assassins continue singing "Another National Anthem," the Balladeer changes into Lee Harvey Oswald (Scene 15 p. 88). It appears that the writers

want to suggest that if a supportive voice (the Balladeer) is silenced, then something must take its place. In this case, the Balladeer who, for most of the musical, sang about the assassins now becomes the object of his songs. The stage directions for Scene Sixteen set up the climactic event of the musical and modern American History:

A storeroom on the sixth floor of the Texas School Book Depository in Dallas, Texas. The room is cavernous, with grimy floor-to-floor ceiling windows. It is filled with textbooks, some in cartons, neatly stacked, others set out on metal shelves. There is a clock on the wall, and somewhere on a carton or a shelf, a radio, through which we hear country-and-western music. Lee Harvey Oswald, dressed in faded jeans and a tattered T-shirt, sits on a carton reading a handwritten note. On the floor beside him are a lunch pail and a long package wrapped in a blanket. (90)

The entire thesis of the musical is set out in this scene. Sondheim and Weidman push the audience into welcoming Oswald, sharing his space. When Booth enters and speaks to Oswald, something does not seem right. Booth appeals to Oswald, calling him Lee, telling him that he knows Oswald is missing in his life:

BOOTH. What do you want, Lee?
OSWALD. You know so much, why don't you tell me?
BOOTH. You want what everybody wants. To be appreciated. To be valued. To be in other people's thoughts. For them to think of you and smile . . . You want someone to love you, Lee. Right? . . . Isn't that it? . . . Lee?
OSWALD. Yes. (94)

Booth is right. Most of us do want those things; however, most of us do not kill people to achieve them. Booth continues to play to Oswald's emotion, mentioning his wife and children. Oswald, having enough of Booth's rant, says, "So tell me what I should do?" Booth's reply is short and to the point, "You should kill the President of

the United States” (94). Oswald is puzzled and does not know that to do. Booth tries to convince him, but he is not getting through. He introduces Oswald to the other assassins, including those that came after him. The following lines show Booth and Oswald as almost humane:

OSWALD. People will hate me.
BOOTH. They’ll hate you with a passion, Lee. Imagine
 people having passionate feelings about Lee
 Harvey Oswald.
*Oswald reaches for the gun. He hesitates, then
drops his hand.*
BOOTH. Somebody. Help me . . .
*The Assassins look at one another. A beat, then Zangara
steps forward. He speaks in Italian, not in anger, but with
passion. The Assassins translate. (100)*

It is in these lines that Oswald becomes convinced that his act will bring meaning to his life, to other people’s lives. The Assassins tell Oswald several incidents that occur after the assassination, “you can close the New York Stock Exchange; shut down the schools in Indonesia; in Florence, Italy, a woman will leap from the Duomo clutching a picture of your victim and cursing your name” (101). The scene ends with Oswald pointing the gun out of the window. As he pulls the trigger, “*the Book Depository disappears and a slide is projected upstage: the famous photo of Oswald being shot by Jack Ruby*” (103). The musical ends with the same song Booth sang at the beginning, “Everybody’s Got the Right to Be Happy” with Oswald joining the rest of the Assassins (Scene 17 p.104-107).

With the exception of Booth assassinating Lincoln, the "successful" assassinations are all shown onstage. In a previous scene with John Hinckley, he attempts to fire at a picture of Reagan while Squeaky Fromme mocks his shooting

abilities with lines like “Sorry, Nancy. Looks like I forgot to duck!” and “Where’d this kid learn to shoot? The Russian Army?” (Scene 10 p. 61). In scene 13, Fromme and Sara Jane Moore drop their bullets before they can attempt to assassinate President Ford. Ford shows up and helps the ladies pick up the bullets:

(Ford gets down on his knees and starts helping them collect the bullets)
FORD. Say, you should be more careful with these things.
They’re bullets.

MOORE. Thanks, Mr.—
FORD. Ford. Gerry Ford.
MOORE. *President* Gerry Ford?
FORD. *(a beat)* Yeah!
(For smiles and starts to exit. Fromme aims her gun at his back and pulls the trigger—CLICK)
FROMME. It didn’t go off.
(Moore looks frantically at the bullets she holds in one hand and the gun she holds in the other. Then she starts to throw the bullets, one by one, at the departing President). (75)

Once again, this comedic scene seems to signify that the violence is not to be taken seriously, even though the desperate act of assassination is serious.

Though we do not see JFK as a character onstage, we do see Oswald kneeling near the window and taking his shot. Like the other assassinations in the play, we see the aftermath through images on screens. The aftermath of the Kennedy assassination is described in the following directions:

Oswald fires. Music stops for a moment, then resumes, loud, triumphant. Silently, the Assassins exit. Oswald turns. Where did they go? He lurches to his feet and exits. . . . The Book Depository disappears and a slide is projected: The famous photo of Oswald being shot by Jack Ruby. (103)

Sondheim and Weidman take a big risk with *Assassins*. They take traditional villains from our history and reveal their weaknesses and humanity. We do not

exclusive see the darkness and violence of the characters. We see them as people with their own views and problems.

As with *Frame 312*, *Assassins* is not about assassination, but the people involved and the reactions to the violence. The major difference between the two plays is the portrayal of violence. *Frame 12* refers only to the assassination of JFK. As previously stated, it may be up to the director of a production of the play whether or not to show the Zapruder film onstage. Though *Assassins* features scenes of assassination and violence, the play puts a comedic spin on some of the violence, possibly in hopes of emphasizing it.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION

Richard Schechner wrote in *The Future of Ritual*,

Humans need to “make something out” of the violence of real life, if at first only by repetition. The rebroadcasting of events like the assassination of John F. Kennedy or the explosion of the Challenger space shuttle are kinds of low-level ritualizing, an attempt to absorb and transform the violence of the event itself into something redemptive. (232)

Schechner’s words answer the question posed in the introduction. What is it about these dark deeds of violence that appeal to us as an audience and theatre artists? We see the violence on stage or on television and we try to find something salvageable from it. We look for meaning within tragic events. We ask questions. We wonder why it happened. Playwrights have done this for centuries in their plays. We, as inquisitive creatures, want to understand. Plays that focus on tragic, dark events like regicide and assassination make us ask questions, force us to look at different viewpoints, and perhaps to change our own opinions.

The Greeks and the Romans bring out the violence in the language. They include long speeches of dialogue, describing everything we could not see. Our minds shape the violent images, and we know we are still safe, yet when we do see an actual physical act of violence, we can still appreciate it in some way. The Medieval plays pushed the limits of the day of what was real and not real. A “death by drama” may have taken the place of the text.

In Elizabethan drama, regicide and assassinations were part of the culture. Audience expected to see such tragic events on the stage. Today's audiences are bombarded with images of violence through films and television. Violent acts depicted onstage are common; however, we must look at the texts of these plays to see if the depiction of violence is necessary. After speaking with Dr. Herman, the director of the CMSU production of *Macbeth*, I felt that few of the acts of violence, graphic as they were, were unjustified; however, the production was his and his casts' vision of the text.

Today, we look at these texts in hopes of finding new questions. What if Hamlet had killed Claudius at the most convenient moment? Would Laertes go directly after Hamlet instead of accusing Claudius? What if Macbeth was caught? Would he be executed in the same matter as the Thane of Cawdor? What would have become of Lady Macbeth had she not killed herself? What if there was no violence at all? We can only speculate how these plays would unfold if the violent acts were interrupted.

Both *Frame 312* and *Assassins* take the Kennedy assassination and bring out a theory that we might not have thought of. Watching *Frame 312*, we might question the status quo of the Warren Commission's findings. After watching *Assassins*, we might better understand why events happen. The answers are there; we just need to ask the right questions.

We look at the works of Shakespeare and contemporary playwrights and find a way to understand the violence, justify it in some way. The violence in a play should be justified. Violence for the sake of violence is not effective. The violence within *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* is based on actual events. There are no gratuitous acts of violence.

In *Hamlet*, one regicide leads to another and another until the royal family is no more.

The character of Macbeth embraces the violence, turning away from the man he used to be.

We can research hundreds of books on the Kennedy assassination, but by reading or watching a play based on the event, we can see the violence played out before us. We can experience it. The bottom line is that audiences want to be entertained. They yearn for strong characters and absorbing issues. The themes of regicide and assassination are tools that playwrights can use to open their audiences to other ideas, different situations. The violence must have a purpose if the play is to be truly accepted. We should also learn to accept the violence and ideas of regicides and assassination as essential to the action. We must attempt to understand the violence and its social significance, question the motives for it, and determine if the violence is necessary or relevant. Then and only then can we start to create our own stories with or without the violence.

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