



## 'The letter that killeth': the Desacralized and the Diabolic Body in Shakespeare

Ann Lecerle

---



### Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/shakespeare/1198>

DOI: 10.4000/shakespeare.1198

ISSN: 2271-6424

### Publisher

Société Française Shakespeare

### Printed version

Date of publication: 1 November 1991

Number of pages: 137-152

### Electronic reference

Ann Lecerle, « 'The letter that killeth': the Desacralized and the Diabolic Body in Shakespeare », *Actes des congrès de la Société française Shakespeare* [Online], 9 | 1991, Online since 01 January 2007, connection on 29 April 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/shakespeare/1198> ; DOI : 10.4000/shakespeare.1198

---

SHAKESPEARE  
ET LE CORPS A LA RENAISSANCE

Société Française Shakespeare

Actes du Congrès 1990

sous la direction

de

M.T. JONES-DAVIES

PARIS  
LES BELLES LETTRES  
1991

*Tous droits de traduction, de reproduction et d'adaptation réservés  
pour tous les pays.*

© 1991 Société d'édition Les Belles Lettres,  
95 bd Raspail 75006 Paris

ISBN 2.251 69117-X

## The letter that killeth : the desacralized and the diabolic body in Shakespeare

Rather than address myself to various organs, members or images of the body, I have chosen to invert the perspective and set the body in what, in Shakespeare and in society at that time, was probably the most momentous of contexts : the dialectic between the Letter of the Law that killeth the body and the Spirit that giveth it life, *Lettera enim occidit, Spiritus autem vivificat*<sup>1</sup>. Going back to Plato's *Phædrus*, through the Pauline Epistles to the Corinthians, the dialectic of the Spirit and the Letter, revived in Caxton's defence of printing and the Protestants' celebration of the Scriptures, thereafter gave rise to complex and contradictory arguments and positions such as the various expressions of antinomianism or the Ranters' gospel of 'perfect freedom and pure Libertinism'<sup>2</sup>. Of this dialectic, that between the name and the face, central to the debate between Renaissance iconophiles and iconoclasts, is a variant. In plays like *The Merchant of Venice*, with its pound of flesh but no blood, this dialectic is of course explicit. What I hope to show is that in plays where its incidence is seemingly modest, it nevertheless constitutes a conceptual keystone in the logic of representation.

In an article entitled *Des outils pour écrire le corps*<sup>3</sup>, Michel de Certeau defines in this domain two polarities : on the one hand, the inscription of the law on or in the body, what he calls the "intextuation of the body", on the other the incarnation, the making flesh, of the *Logos*. As his liminary model, he quotes Shakespeare's *Comedy of Errors*<sup>4</sup>, a passage centrally located at the beginning of Act III :

Say what you will, sir, but I know what I know;  
That you beat me at the mart I have your hand to show.  
If the skin were parchment and the blows you gave were ink,  
Your own hand-writing would tell you what I think.

I would add that in the nearly contemporary *Love's Labours Lost*, Shakespeare shows 'letters', booklearning, what Berowne anti-phrastically calls 'Angel knowledge', as the letter rather than the spirit of culture, dry dust instead of 'civil conversation'; the following lines crystallize this crux, for the paradigmatic incarnation of the Logos, the Eucharist, is literalized as the intextuation of the body, the irony being that the literalizing speaker, Constable Dull, is designated by the courtiers as "unlettered" :

Hee hath not fed of the dainties that are  
 Bred in a booke.  
 He hath not eate paper as it were :  
 He hath not drunke inke.  
 His intellect is not replenished.<sup>5</sup>

Such are the two complementary faces of the incorporation of the letter in lieu of the Spirit — of the intextuation of the body as opposed to the Incarnation of the *Logos* — that loom large in Shakespeare's earliest dramatic productions, and that remain with him to the end.

*The Comedy of Errors* as liminary paradigm is worth more however than de Certeau's passing mention of Dromio's skin as parchment for the inscription of his master's law. The dialogue throughout is fraught with "marks" which are signs written in the flesh in an oxymoronic conflation of the pneumatic and the pigmentary, as of Lacan's symbolic and imaginary :

Dromio : Ay, ay, he told his mind upon my ear,  
 Beshrew his hand, I scarce could understand it.  
 Lucius : Speake he so doubtfully, thou couldst not feel his  
 meaning?  
 [...]
 Adriana : Back, slave, or I will break thy pate across.  
 Dromio : And he will bless that cross with other beating;  
 Between you I shall have a holy head.

The homophony *holy* in its conflation of the pneumatic and the pigmentary is a conceptual amphibology that walks the tightrope between the symbolic and the imaginary more than any other the English language is capable of affording. Which is why, in *All's Well*, for example, it constitutes, in the guise of the King's fistula, the very *génotexte* of the enire play.

But there is a more general and essential point to be made here. This subversion, de Certeau's "intextuation of the body" in lieu of the incarnation of the *Logos*, is no mere passing quirk of Shakespeare's imagination. It is in fact the embodiment of one of the conceptual keystones of Medieval and Renaissance thought. It gives Shakespeare his very title: the concept of Error. In Isidore of Seville, Error is a letter — the letter Y. In Spenser it is a monstrous body. In *Julius Caesar* it is the handmaiden of Melancholy that stalks the field of Philippi turning the fighters' swords into their own bowels for having tried to kill the Spirit of Caesar in the flesh of Caesar; for having bathed in the blood of their "father" Caesar's corpse, just as the children of Error live off the blood of their mother's corpse in the very first *tableau* in *The Faery Queen*.

The brilliant Medievalist, Charles Méla, in *La lettre tue: Cryptographie du Graal*, begins by commenting this Error as letter, then body,

il est humain d'errer. L'errance peut suivre la mauvaise voie, comme l'indique l'Y de Pythagore selon une scolie de Perse, reprise par Isidore de Séville. La fourche (*bivium*) que figure cette lettre doit nous ouvrir les yeux: la voie senestre mène à la chute, la dextre, dure à gravir (*ardua*) conduit à la vie bienheureuse. (*Etymologies*, I, 3, 7, ed. W.M. Lindsay, Oxford, Clarendon, 1911). Autre façon de le dire, dans le prologue du Conte du Graal d'après Matthieu 6,3, que ta main droite se cache de la gauche, si tu veux vivre en Dieu [...].<sup>6</sup>

He concludes with a third version, a landscape anamorphosis, already seen in Shakespeare, which brings us back to *The Faery Queen*: «la forêt aventureuse [des romans médiévaux] n'a d'autre géographie qu'une simple lettre bifide» — [ - ou corps à deux bras]. It is thus entirely logical that on entering Spenser's "forêt aventureuse", the Red Cross Knight of Holiness should at once be confronted by none other than the monstrous body of Error herself, a gross, prodigiously parturient female of which we learn — a case unique in the work I think — not only the outer features of deformation but the very contents of her bloated belly,

Therewith she spewed out of her filthy maw  
A floud of poyson horrible and blacke,  
Full of great lumps of flesh and gobbets raw,  
Which stunck so vildly, that it forst him slacke-

His grasping hold, and from her turne him backe:  
 Her vomit full of bookes and papers was,  
 With loathly frogs and toads, which eyes did lacke, [...]  
 Her filthy parbreake all the place defiled has.<sup>7</sup>

What is paradigmatic here is the equation of raw meat, on the one hand, and the materiality, not the sense, of the written word, the word literally as (maternal) flesh not as Spirit, on the other. Thus the demonic creatures spewed up with such literary vomit have no eyes to read it. Western literature does not afford a better example of the anomial eclipse of the symbolic by the imaginary. I shall return to the demonic later, but I want to make a final remark on *The Comedy of Errors*.

The point, missed by de Certeau, is that the intextuation of the servant's body by the letter of the master's law is in fact a mirror image, in the domestic microcosm, of a *first* such inscription, the one on which the play indeed opens: the body *politic's* inscription of the letter of the law on the body natural of the masters:

I am not partial to infringe our laws;  
 [...] our well-dezaling countrymen,  
 Who, wanting guilders to redeem their lives,  
 Have sealed his rigorous statues with their bloods,  
 Exclud[ing] all pity from our threat'ning looks; ...

It is from *this* inscription, this signature in blood, this "seal", to use the term Shakespeare will be seen recurrently to choose, «apposed in the flesh of the body, that the entire action derives: Lettera enim occidit ...». In this context, the name, (the other face of the law), that presides over the whole proceeding is emblematic. For the Duke's name is Solinus, little Solon, dispensing the Law to a no less emblematic Greek, Egeon by name.

The point, however, does not stop at this. This *tableau* of intextuation occupying the first 30 lines, is only half of a liminary diptych of 60 odd lines. In fact, Shakespeare has his play open on not one but two complementary corporal punishments: a hellenized version of Kafka's *Strafanstalt* on the one hand, followed, on the other, by something more Spenserian. For the second thirty lines pass without transition to what the text calls bodily "punishment", but one that ends not in death but in the very creation of life: parturition, «The pleasing punishment that women bear» (!)

Error being Shakespeare's theme, the long past parturition of Egeon's wife is as aberrant as her husband's immanent death, but in symmetrically inverse mode. In this *tableau*, the letter of the law is not sealed into the flesh; on the contrary it is suspended, for Egeon momentarily becomes more concerned with a mode of fructification where women have no part («great care of goods at random left, / Drew me from the kind embracements of my wife»). The wife left to get on with childbearing alone, as the "pleasing punishment" itself, is duly anomial: she has twins, and, as if they were Weird Sisters, so too does Dromio's mother: «two goodly sons, / And, what was strange, the one so like the other, / As could not be distinguish'd but by name.»

In the Error-ridden land of Solinus and Egeon, Shakespeare's emblematic Greeks, *nomos*, the Law, but originally the dividing line between two properties, is also *name*, the dividing line between two bodies. The second *tableau* (of name) thus completes the first (of Law). However, hardly are they born, than the Law of God asserts itself where the father had been absent: they are sundered by 'a mighty rock', Petrus. Thereafter one twin looks for the other, but does something so aberrant that it upsets Shakespeare's syntax: «inquisitive after his brother, and importun'd me / That his attendant ... *Reft of his brother but retain'd his name*». Where baptism separated the two bodies, this 'transnomination' sutures them. When one twin takes the other's name, «Foul is fair and fair is foul».

There is thus, in the play's liminary diptych, two complementary and inverse errors, far greater in import than the vulgar errors of recognition to which the title is generally deemed to refer:

1. the intextuation of the body by *nomos* as law, and conversely,
2. the migration of *nomos* as name from one body to another.

Intextuation and transnomination, excess of inscription on the body in one case, lack of it on the other. In Spenser, Error is followed hard upon by Doubleness, Duessa. Beyond its specific Renaissance trappings, this logic of representation exemplifies one of Lacan's major points: that when the Name-of-the-Father, from symbolic, becomes imaginary, from castrated, becomes corporeal, then the imaginary runs riot, and the characteristic mode of such running riot is the proliferation of doubles presided over by a



*female imago* in lieu of a male, or, if you like, a Weirdie that is by definition a Sister. Intextuation and transnomination are both facets of the desacralisation of the Law.

The same logic is reproduced in the first 60 lines of *I Henry IV*. Here the desacralisation is that of the king body politic, Henry being regicide and usurper. In spite of this, his body has been marked with the symbol of the Law of God, for he has been anointed. Such an anointment, though, cannot but be in the letter, not the Spirit. And, as we know, "Lettera enim occidit ...". Literal kingship suspends transcendence, the mediation of grace conferred with the chrism on hands and head. If one follows Marc Bloch<sup>8</sup>, Henry was the first king to resuscitate, for his coronation in 1399, the legendary chrism given by the Virgin to Thomas à Becket in exile at Pontigny, and used by all English monarchs up to Elizabeth. In Henry's case, an excess of sacrality for the anointing of his body attempts to invest the Letter of the Law with the Spirit. In the *play*, this resacralisation is attempted by the proposed Crusade, imposing the Law of God on the Infidel, but, ironically, with the Sword, not the Word, for the Infidel to the Spirit of God is first and foremost Henry himself, like Othello. Conversely, at the *end* of *I Henry IV*, the multiplication of disguised doubles of the king, who pop up all over the field at Shrewsbury with a grotesque Jack-in-the-Box inevitability, represent in *literal*, necessarily parodic, guise the immortality of the king body politic conferred with anointment.

In *I Henry IV*, when literal kingship suspends transcendence doubles therefore proliferate, this time as rivals. Hence the play opens on an oxymoronic spectacle of what Shakespeare calls 'civil butchery'; the body politic of which Henry is the head having been inscribed with the Letter not the Spirit of the Law, its flesh, the soil of England, is 'trenched' and harrowed no less than the victim of Kafka's penal colony, intextuated with the «ill-sheathed knife [that] cuts its master». Such are the first thirty lines of the play.

The second thirty, as in *The Comedy of Errors*, pass from the Law of God the Father in the body politic to the name given to the infant body as it comes into the world. For Henry imagines himself in Egeon's position : with two identical babies; only this time the second baby is not a twin but a changeling. What Henry dreams, actually happens in *The Comedy* : the migration of names from one to another, not from one Dromio to another but one Harry to another :

O that it could be prov'd  
 That some night-tripping fairy had exchang'd  
 In cradle-clothes our children where they lay,  
 And call'd mine Percy, his Plantagenet!

What is problematic in the first tableau of the liminary diptych is the *public* ritual of naming the body, anointment; in the second, the *private* ritual of baptism, the common element being the chrism that marks the skin, and supposedly the spirit. Thus, in both the comedy and the history, Shakespeare's drama stems from one source : intextuation and transnominatation.

Half way through *The Comedy of Errors* (III.ii), Shakespeare introduces a character who is reduced to a body and a name, for we never see her, or ever hear much more of her. She is Nell, the kitchen girl, (though she may or may not be the same as Luce). Nell is a centrally placed paradigm, much as the entire play is a Shakespearian paradigm writ particularly large and legible. Nell is a self-contained allegory of the relation of the body to *nomos*, name and Law, Letter and Spirit, as to the Error of the title. Nell's name is not imposed on her body with the sign and the Spirit of the Cross. Nell's name *is* her body :

Syr. Antonio : What's her name?

Syr Dromic : Nell, sir; but her name and three quarters, that's an ell and threequarters, will not measure her from hip to hip.

Her name is no name but an image, but this image in turn is that not of one but two bodies (apart from the fact that she may be Luce). The second body is that of a type of representation that reached its apogee between 1550 and 1650, the landscape anamorphosis. For Nell's second body is a *mappa mundi* : «No longer from head to foot than from hip to hip; she is spherical, like a globe; I could find out contries in her. / In what part of her body stands Ireland?» The deciphering of letters in this map is not the decoding of signifiers by the eye but the caress of the finger over the topology of the terrain : «Where Spain? / Faith, I saw it not; but I felt it hot in her breath.» «Where Scotland? / I found it by the barrenness, hard in the palm of the hand.» Elsewhere the decoding is not semantic but medical, as where the syphilitic eruptions of the skin and the receding hairline indicate France. Such a name is not symbolic, of the Spirit, separate from the

body in its semantic opacity and dependent on arbitrary differential parameters for meaning. It is the substance of the body as letter, and a substance *par excellence* rebellious to differential parameters being in the shape of a sphere, like Falstaff, who has not seen his feet for many a long year.

Nell is thus the paradigm, not of the incarnation of the *Logos* but of the flesh as letter. Yet Shakespeare takes this logic one step farther. Such an intextuated body is endowed with a literal version of the Spirit as divine Light of the Cosmos. In the case of Nell, this is not the spiritual correlative of immaculate corporeal purity; rather it is the very matter of corporeal maculation, converted into a source of undying energy producing light. It is the grease covering Nell's body, which, like Falstaff's fat, 'lards' the ground on which he walks. Exploited by a market economy, this grease becomes a raw material for candle-making! Nell as dry cell, not the face of Christ as light of the universe :

... [her complexion] swart like my shoe, but her face nothing like so clean kept; for why? she sweats, a man may go over-shoes in the grime of it [...]

Marry, sir, she's the kitschen wench, and all grease, and I know not what use to put her to but to make a lamp of her, and run from her by her own light. I warrant her rags and the tallow in them will burn a Poland winter; if she lives till doomsday she'll burn a week longer than the whole world.

In *Henry IV* Part I, exactly the same logic prevails, and again in an apparently gratuitous passage, situated right in the middle of the play, which evokes a character of very minor importance. The character is Bardolph anatomized by Falstaff, principally his face. Falstaff's eulogy of Bardolph's face is, from the dramatic point of view, as much a parenthesis as Nell's anamorphic physiognomy; and it is hardly ever commented on. The point of Falstaff's eulogy of Bardolph's face is that Falstaff is ready to take an oath, not by invoking the name of a transcendent authority but by invoking the face of Bardolph: «I would swear by thy face: my oath should be: by this fire, that's God's angel!» (III.iii.33-4). Swearing by the face reddened by sack, by the quintessential fluid of second childhood, Falstaff's maternal milk substitute, is tantamount to replacing the Name-of-the-Father by the anomial Name-of-the-Mother, the whole point of which is that it is not a name at all but a body — the primal image of the (M)Other's face.

As with Nell, moreover, the body/face in lieu of the name is at once redefined in economic terms more proper to the EDF : «Thou hast saved me a thousand marks in links and torches, walking with thee in the night betwixt tavern and tavern but the sack that thou hast drunk would have bought me lights as good as cheap et the dearest chandler's in Europe». This dialectic of name and face is in fact a grotesque repetition of the previous scene of reconciliation between Hal and Henry. Here Henry launches into a critique of Richard II central to which is the following couplet : «Had his great name profaned with their scorns, / And gave his *countenance* against his *name*» (III.iii.64-5). The Arden edition is inadequate here, glossing the last line as «a) contrary to his kingly title; b) to the detriment of his authority». The notion of «giving his face against his name» is part and parcel of the economics of exchange : the line means no more nor less than «he gave his countenance in exchange for his name», that is, in lieu of his name, as debased currency for his name. Then comes Hal's reply : it is expressed in terms of the same accountancy of faces as Falstaff's eulogy of Bardolph. Hal proceeds by totting up the reckoning of what he owes and pays it off ... with a red face! «I will redeem all this on Percy's head [...] When I will wear a garment all of blood, / And stain my favors in a bloody mask»; «Percy is but my factor good my lord. [...] he shall render [...] up/ Or I will tear the reckoning from his heart». The point is that there is a total symmetry between Hal's *bloody face* as Knight of the Bloody Mask, which will be the death of the enemy, and the *ruddy face* of Bardolph, Knight of the Burning Lamp, that makes him «a death's head». So, when Falstaff calls Bardolph «son of utter darkness», we think more of Hal.

Thus, if there is something rotten in the body politic of England, under a head only king in the letter not the spirit, it is this nominalization and monetization of the face, in pleasure or pain, ruddy or bloody, in lieu of the devalued Gold Standard of the name, reflecting the desacralization of the monarch. The best commentary on this crux may be the 2<sup>nd</sup> quatrain of the enigmatic Sonnet 94 :

They rightly do inherit heaven's graces,  
And husband nature's riches from expense;  
They are the lords and owners of their faces,  
Others but stewards of their excellence.<sup>9</sup>

I would point out that this dialectic of the name and the face is not simply a poetic construct on Shakespeare's part. What one might call the trinity of Face, Father and Finance was at the heart of a phenomenon particularly prevalent in the 16<sup>th</sup> century: iconomachy, iconoclasm and iconophily. At issue was the legitimacy of the iconic representation of the face of God's son, which, early on in the iconoclastic debate, had become known as the Father's Economy. This was through a conflation of economy, *oikonomia*, the 'regiment' of the house, *oikos*, and *ikonomia*, the 'regiment' of the image or icon. Writing of the face of the Son, in an introduction to the *Antirrhetics* of Nicephorus the Patriarch, Marie-Baudinet writes:

«To the Byzantine ear familiar with the iconoclastic debate, the law of the icon and the law concerning the administration of goods are one and the same thing. In either case, the supreme administrator, the great economist, is God the Father who gave his essence in order that it be distributed in the visible world through His own image — the natural image of His Son: the face of Christ.»<sup>10</sup>

The Father's Economy, i.e. the divine face of the Son, is one of the main ideological cruxes in the figurative arts in Renaissance Protestant culture. The dialectic between the Father and the Face, the name and the image, *graphein* and *perigraphhein*, inscription and circumscription, is a major expression at the time of the problematic relation between what Lacan calls the symbolic and the imaginary. Even if Shakespeare's less than little Greek did not stretch that far, the debates between Cardinals Harding and Sanders and Bishops Jewel and Bilson, who hesitated not to liken the Tudors to the Greek iconoclast Emperors, made it all part of the *air du temps*. Thus, with their miraculous emission of light, Nell's face, and the face of Falstaff's 'son' Bardolph's 'Angel's' face, are Shakespeare's burlesque representation of the embattled confluence where economy and 'iconomy' meet.

This iconic transnomination is moreover accompanied by a particularly illuminating instance of intextuation of the body. Falstaff's wounding of Hotspurs's dead body, which has so shocked critics, can (and no doubt should) be read as the *literal* representation of what is implicit in the Renaissance notion of the *point of honour*, what anthropologists call "the pecking order theory of

honour", embodied in Hotspur, the honour condemned by the Anglican hymn «Conquering foes their titles take / From the foes they captive take». Falstaff's wounding of Hotspur's dead body is the very enactment *à la lettre* of honour as *point*, as *punctum*, as piercing — in a word, as mutilation : «I look to be an earl or duke, I can assure you». Of the historical quirk of Percy's name, Shakespeare makes an ethical paradigm : the sword inscribes the Name-of-the-Father, Percy, in the flesh of the son's body : «Well, if Percy be alive, I'll pierce him». The added pun on *piece* — «I would make him eat a *piece* of my sword» — redefines this intextuation, this *punctum* in alimentary terms : the Name-of-the-Father regresses explicitly to that of the pristine, predatory (M)Other immanent in the metaphor of oral sadism : «eat a piece» not of cake but sword. Even more than this, Falstaff's body wound demonstrates the point made by Barthes when he writes : «le texte *défait* la nomination et c'est cette défection qui l'approche de la *jouissance*». <sup>11</sup> Falstaff's wound is not any wound, it is a thigh wound, *locus classicus* of *jouissance*. At the point of death, Kafka's intextuating harrow writing the law in the flesh transforms the pain into unspeakable pleasure — *Jouissance*. In fact, Falstaff does what Hal threatened but forebore to do : to crop the crest of his enemy to deck his own head. The thigh wound is the nearest a Shakespearian character comes to taking a scalp, rather than giving one's own to the enemy, as does Hal with his favors, the plumes on his helmet, in the tradition of the Homeric heroes who let their hair grow long before battles to beautify their comrades' corpses with a shroud hair. If the Homeric mane, the Medieval crest or the Redskin scalp is a postiche phallus, then the thigh wound is an emasculation, indeed a defloration.

My concluding remark is the following : there comes in the 16<sup>th</sup> century a point where the «imaginarization» of the symbolic, the «facialization» of the name, the literalization of the Law at the expense of the Spirit, is tantamount to its demonization. This is implicit in Falstaff's phrase «the son of darkness». In *The Comedy of Errors*, the process is spelt out clearly. Nell turns the table on Dromio. He transformed her body into an *anamorphosis*; she transforms herself into a witch — albeit unwittingly — not by rigging herself out in the grotesque gear of a Weird Sister, but simply by using the same logic as Dromio. He inflates her body to a *mappa mundi*, she reduces his to *membra disjecta*, each time *via* the name : «she called me Dromio [...] told me what privy

marks I had about me, as the mark of my left shoulder, the mole in my neck, the great wart on my left arm, that I amazed, ran from her as a witch». And thence from the land as a land of witchcraft.

In Renaissance terms, the demonization of the dialectic between the Spirit and the letter of the Law, and the body, is to be reformulated : the name and the face become the seal and the spot. I use "spot" as generic denomination for the various *maculae* listed by Nell on Dromio's body.

In a text dating from the same year as *Macbeth*, the *Compendium Maleficarum* of Francesco Maria Guaccio (1606), exploited by Ludovico Maria Sinistrari in his treatise on *Demonialità*, one finds what is no doubt one of the most detailed accounts of the ritual of allegiance to the Devil. It has eleven steps. The sixth and central, the turning point between the Christian and the demonic body of the witch is the following :

Sesto : il padrino impartisce loro una sorte di battesimo sacrilegio : rinnegati i padrini e le madrine avute al battesimo cristiano e alla cresima, nonché il nome primitivo, il diavolo assegna loro un nuovo padrino e madrina, che li istruiscono nell'arte malefica, e impone loro un nuovo nome, di solito osceno.<sup>12</sup>

The obscene name, in England, seems to have taken a particular form. The spot by which the Devil was thought to inscribe his mark not in the Spirit but in the flesh of the satanist is, according to Keith Thomas<sup>13</sup>, particularly prominent in English witchcraft, being one of the prime objects of the body search effected by English officers of the law. The Devil's mark is indeed one of the distinguishing marks of the specifically English witch, as defined in the 1604 legal dispositions, the harshest in English history. Accordingly, in King James's *Demonology*, the spot as the mark of the Law of the Devil in lieu of the Name-of-the-Father becomes the very touchstone of witchcraft :

[the devil] makes them to renounce their God and Baptisme directly and gives them his marke upon some secret place of their bodie, which remains soare unhealed, while his next meeting with them, and thereafter, ever insensible, however it be nipped or pricked [...] (Bk. 2, ch. 2)

As none conveenes to the adoration and worshipping of God, except they be marked with his Seale, the Sacrament of Baptisme :

so none serves Satan, and conveenes to the adoring of him, that are not marked with that marke, whereof I alreadie spake. (Bk. 2, ch. 3)<sup>14</sup>

The dialectic of seal and spot is certainly borne out in the theatre contemporaneous with these texts. Paradigmatic is *The Witch of Edmonton*, the (1621) collective effort of Dekker, Rowley and Ford<sup>15</sup>. Here too we see the ritual of allegiance. Just as Nell's name *is* her body (an ell from hip to hip), so the seal *is* the spot: "DOG : Seal't with thy blood. (Sucks her arm. Thunder and lightning)". And as in *Henry IV*, where the inscription of the name Percy in the flesh is explicitly alimentary (*eat* a piece of sword), so in *The Witch*, and in English folklore generally, the spot was a teat.

Mother Sawyer : Comfort thee; thou shalt have the teat anon.  
 Dog : Bow wow! I'll have it now.  
 M. S. : I am dried up  
 With cursing and with madness, and have yet  
 No blood to moisten these sweet lips of thine.

Lacan and especially Leclaire could hardly have dreamt of such a perfect instance of the eclipse of the Name-of-the-Father by the quintessential partial object of the maternal body, the teat. For Jacobean England this logic was so obvious that when the local aristocrat evokes the local crone in terms of witch, he does not name her as such but says: «She's bruided for a woman that maintains a spirit that sucks her». The supposed hematogenesis of human milk by coction of the blood relates the two liquids closely. If the demonic principle of the Weird Sisters is their concoction, that of Lady Macbeth is non-coction.

It is thus, to my mind, hopeless to try to read the sleep-walking scene in *Macbeth* without taking account of the subliminal logic at work here. This logic is very simple but I have not seen it analyzed. The scene falls into two parts, the one narrated, the other acted, the one is for the ear in absence, the other for the eye in presence. In the first, narrated half, entrusted to the breath alone, Lady Macbeth writes a letter: »I have seen her rise from her bed, throw her nightgown upon her, unlock her closet, take forth paper, fold it, write upon it, read it, afterwards seal it, and again return to bed.» This is the restoration of the letter to its proper role and place, the seal as signature, as name, as Name-of-



the-Father : one should remember that in Medieval and Renaissance heraldry a woman bore first her father's emblems, then these were partitioned with her husband's. Above all, the entire tableau is subordinated to the Spirit in that, being narrated, it exists only by virtue of the breath, *pneuma*.

The scene Lady Macbeth then acts out in front of our eyes reverses the sense of the first tableau. The second tableau centres on the "damned spot". This itself is a conflation of two representations : the indelibility of the blood is a diabolic travesty of the indelibility of the chrism conferring on the Lord's anointed deputy the immortality of the king body politic. It is the tragic equivalent of the comic Jack-in-the-Box immortality of Henry's doubles at the battle of Shrewsbury. However, the term "damned spot" is much more than this; to the Elizabethans it would no doubt have been the Devil's mark, the quintessential intextuation of the body by the Law reduced to a dead red letter. This is both a sign of the death of the Spirit, and of nurture of flesh, but demonic flesh, suckled by the teat welling blood in lieu of milk on Mother Sawyer's arm, Lady Macbeth's hand. You don't need to be a Weird Sister to be a Weird Mother.

Thus the logic that articulates the two halves of this paradigmatic diptych of the hand can be defined as *the separation of the seal from the spot*.

The trouble with Lady Macbeth's midnight toiling in the sleepwalking scene is precisely that, like the Weird Sisters', it is double : a double *scene*, voice, then vision; a double name, indeed a double letter : on the one hand, the Spirit of the Law that redeemeth, as the letter signed and sealed with the Name-of-the-Father, on the other the letter of the Law that killeth her own soul, and Duncan's body, intextuated, sealed, in the weirdly maternal flesh of the fiendish Queen. Double, double, toil and trouble. Such doubleness is less schizophrenia than a return to the topology of the heath — the *bivium* of Error. In German, madness is *Irrsinn* (*irre* and Error are Indo-European doublets). Lady Macbeth's madness is thus a paradigm of Renaissance Error, the sleepwalking scene an attempt, too late alas, to separate out, to castrate, to unseal, the letter from the flesh, to return to Isidore's *bivium* and leave the *Irreweg* on the left for the straight and narrow path on the right. No wonder the only words Ophelia ever speaks unprompted pose the choice between two paths.

*Epilogue*

So much for the intextuation of the body. What about the incarnation of the *Logos*? There one would have to look to the other end of the *arcana artis*, to the *theatrum chemicum* of alchemy, and more particularly to the Philosopher's Stone as *filius philosophorum*, conceived in the *magnum mysterium* that was deemed to take place in the *vas mirabile*, otherwise known as the now common-and-garden *Bain Marie*; as Dorn wrote in his *Physica Trismegisti*<sup>16</sup> of 1602: «The [alchemist's] vessel is like the work of God in the vessel of divine germination». But that is another story.

Ann LECERCLE

*Université de Paris-Nord*

## NOTES

1. For this formula, see B. Cohen, *Harvard Theological Review*, 47, p. 197-203; R.P. Hanson, *II Corinthians*, London, 1954, p. 39 ff.
2. Cf. Malcolm Evans, *Signifying Nothing*, London, Hervester, (1986) 1989, p. 41.
3. In *Traverses*, 14, avril 1979, Paris, Minuit, p. 3 ff.
4. All references to the Arden edition (ed. R.A. Foakes), London, Methuen, 1962.
5. Cited in Evans, *op. cit.*, p. 55.
6. In *Orricar*?, 25, 1982, p. 141.
7. In *Spenser, Selected Poetry* (ed. L. Kirschbaum), N.Y. Holt, Rinehart & Winston, (1956), 1964, I, i, 20.
8. *Les Rois Thaumaturgiques*, Paris, Gallimard (1924), 1983, p. 241.
9. *Shakespeare's Sonnets* (ed. Stephen Booth), Yale, U.P., (1977), 1980.
10. "The Face of Christ, the Form of the Church", in *Zone*, 3, 1989, N.Y., p. 149.
11. *Le Plaisir du Texte*, Paris, Seuil, 1973, p. 72.
12. Palermo, Sellerio, 1983, (Extracted from the *De delictis et poenis*, Venice, 1700), p. 38 (§ 18).
13. "The one common feature of English witch-trials which does indicate some sort of association in the popular mind between

maleficent magic and the Devil was the notion that the witch bore on her body the mark of her profession in the form of a spot or excrescence, which could be discovered by searching her for an 'unnatural' mark [...] As early as 1579 this was stated to be 'a common token to know all witches by'." *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, (1971), 1985, p. 530.

14. *Daemonologie* (1591), 1616, rep. 1971, Hildesheim, Olms Verlag.

15. All references to Methuen edition, London, 1983.

16. Quoted by Mircea Eliade in *Forgerons et Alchimistes*, Flammarion, 1977, p. 131.