



Execution and the questioning of authority in three early modern English history plays

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The three plays selected for this paper are all history plays, as well as versions of *de casibus* tragedies. *Sir Thomas More*, written around 1593 by Anthony Munday, William Shakespeare and others, presents us with the life and career of Henry VIII's Lord Chancellor, executed in July 1535 for refusing to swear the Oath of Succession. George Chapman's *Tragedy of Byron*, published in 1608, is the second part of a diptych devoted to the failed conspiracy which the duke and marshal of France set up against King Henri IV. He was executed in July 1602. When John Fletcher and Philip Massinger wrote their *Tragedy of Sir John van Olden Barnavelt* in 1619, the Advocate of Holland had been executed only a few months before, in May 1619.¹

The word "execution" cannot be used to designate natural deaths, suicides or murders. It must be understood as a judicial killing ordered by the State. More, Byron and Barnavelt were officially condemned for "high treason", which means that the authority of the State was at stake, whether this State was a monarchy or a republic, such as the United Provinces. But the relevance of the three plays lies in the simultaneous presentation of opposite viewpoints: what is termed "high treason" by the political authorities covers a different reality once the voices of the three characters are heard. "High treason", in the case of Sir Thomas More, means being true to his conscience. In the case of Byron, it is his dream of heroic autonomy in an absolute monarchy and in the case of Barnavelt it is his conversion to Arminianism, perceived as a threat to the State.

The comparison of these three scenes of execution – in their theatricality as well as their text – will lead us to consider executions as judicial ceremonies of State, to examine

¹ The following editions will be used in this article: Anthony Munday, William Shakespeare, Thomas Dekker, Henry Chettle and Thomas Heywood, *Sir Thomas More*, ed. Gilles Bertheau and Jean-Pierre Villquin, transl. Jean-Pierre Villquin in *Histoires de William Shakespeare*, ed. Jean-Michel Déprats and Gisèle Venet, Paris, Gallimard, "Bibliothèque de la Pléiade", 2008, vol. II, p. 1229-1417 et 1684-1729; George Chapman, *The Conspiracy and Tragedy of Charles Duke of Byron*, 1608, ed. John Margeson, *The Revels Plays*, Manchester, Manchester UP, 1988; John Fletcher and Philip Massinger, *The Tragedy of Sir John Van Olden Barnavelt*, ed. Fredson Bowers, *The Dramatic Works in the Beaumont and Fletcher Canon*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1992, vol. VIII, p. 483-605.

how the three main characters stage their own deaths and how this comparison points to the question of obedience, and to analyse the expression of dissent both inside the play (through the voices of the prisoners or the spectators) and outside, when dramatists are confronted with censorship. What the playwrights chose to write about was indeed highly sensitive matter, under the reigns of Queen Elizabeth I or King James I, which accounts for their problems with the Master of the Revels and the fact that neither *Sir Thomas More* nor *The Tragedy of Barnavelt* were published before the nineteenth century (the former in 1844, the latter in 1883).

Questioning the authority of the State

The theatrical metaphor, a commonplace of the time and genre, runs through the three plays. It is particularly apt in scenes where the central stage property is a scaffold, a word that designates both the boards upon which actors work (*OED* 4 and 5) and the place where prisoners are executed (*OED* 6). When discussing this question, there always lurks, somewhere at the back of our minds, the retrospective paradigm, as it were, of all executions, that of King Charles I outside Banqueting Hall. Even for less prominent figures than a king, executions – the outcome of a judicial process – were staged (in plays and in actual life) as ceremonies of justice produced by the State to show the extent of its control of events and bodies.

If we take the word "authority" as "Power or right to enforce obedience; moral or legal supremacy; the right to command, or give an ultimate decision" (*OED*), we must acknowledge that executions lend themselves to an ambivalent interpretation. It is precisely because the political authority was unable to obtain obedience from a given subject (in a monarchy) or citizen (in a republic) that it resorts to its ultimate prerogative: depriving someone from his life. This supreme show of force necessarily transforms authority into power, as Hannah Arendt rightly explains: "Since authority always demands obedience, it is commonly mistaken for some form of power or violence. Yet authority precludes the use of external means of coercion; where force is used, authority itself has failed."² And it is what the playwrights demonstrate – more forcefully under the reign of James I – in their staging of these ceremonies of death.

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High treason is the name given to the three characters' behaviours towards the State; it is therefore a political crime, characterised by disobedience (Sir Thomas More) or disloyalty (Byron and Barnavelt). Sir Thomas More is condemned for refusing to subscribe to the "articles enclos'd" (IV.i.70). The playwrights rely on the spectators' knowledge of history so that they can avoid making explicit the political nature of these "articles". No reference is thus made to the Act of Supremacy and the Oath of Succession. Among the five charges listed during his trial (V.ii.47-66), Byron stands accused of intelligence with the enemy (Spain and Savoy) and of a murder attempt against the king, which amounts to "high treason" (V.iv.102). Barnavelt is also accused of five things: to destroy the "unitie of the State", to "alter the Religion", "To degrade the Prince of Orange", "To massacre the people" of enemy towns and to ask for foreign assistance (IV.v.29 *et passim*). This is also declared "treason" by the Prince of Orange (V.i.93).

² Hannah Arendt, "What is Authority?", *Between Past and Future: Six Exercises in Political Thought*, New York, The Viking Press, 1961, p. 91-141 (92-93).

A trial always precedes an execution, otherwise the word cannot be used, as in the case of the Duke of Guise, whose assassination was represented by Chapman in *The Revenge of Bussy D'Ambois*. This judicial episode is nonetheless omitted in *Sir Thomas More*, most probably because it would have been too politically delicate to handle. The scene of execution is the last act of the judicial process and – especially for Byron – can take on the aspect of a ceremony, with its specific personnel and ritual.

The decorum is reduced to a minimum in the case of More: he is led to the scaffold by two sheriffs of London, and his death is attended by the Earls of Shrewsbury and Surrey. In Byron's case, the whole scene is made more solemn with the presence of the Lord Chancellor and the three judges who delivered the capital sentence. As for Barnavelt, only two lords are present at his side. Each time, the king or the prince is absent, but is represented by lords and officials whose function is to authorise the violence of State.

The full ceremony of the execution is nowhere more exactly performed than in *The Tragedy of Byron*, where, besides the judges, a bishop is present to assist the prisoner in his last moments.³ Byron himself calls the scene a "pageant" (v.iv.169) and shows further awareness of the theatricality of the scene by declaring: "I'll take my death with all the horrid rites / And representments of the dread it merits" (v.iv.193-94). It is the longest of the three scenes (262 lines). After asking Byron if he wants to speak to anyone, Harlay explains that "it is the manner once again / To read the sentence" (v.iv.75-76), which he does, in spite of the outbursts and interruptions of the prisoner. It is the occasion to remind everyone of the former identity and the quality of the man who is about to be destroyed.⁴ His titles are stated: "Knight of both the Orders, Duke of Byron, Peer and Marshal of France" (v.iv.98-99) and his function too: "Governor of Burgundy" (v.iv.100). His crimes are recalled as well as the sentence, which does not only consist in losing "his head upon a scaffold" (v.iv.112), but also in being deprived "of all his estates, honours and dignities" (v.iv.110-111). Hence, we can say that Byron's execution is a complete erasing of his whole being. The third symbolic rite that remains to be performed is to divest the prisoner of his "order", that is the collar of the Order of the Holy Ghost and that of the Order of St Michael.⁵ Only when these ceremonies are performed can the hangman enter (v.iv.163.1). As he traditionally has a claim to the prisoner's personal belongings, when Byron wants to give something to a boy, the hangman stops him (v.iv.167). Things are given much smaller proportions in the case of *Sir Thomas More*: his execution is more intimate, and points to the personal tragedy rather than the historical event. It is no longer than 122 lines, and the only judicial rite consists in Shrewsbury's asking More to "publish to the world / [His] great offence unto his majesty" (v.iv.68-69), to which More gives an evasive answer. In about the same way, Barnavelt is asked by the First Lord to confess his faults (v.iii.2951), which he does not.

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Executions are spectacles of justice – the prerogative of the sovereign – as well as demonstrations of the power of the State. As spectacles, they require an audience, whether

³ There is some uncertainty as to the rank of the prelate in John Margeson's edition: in the stage direction, he is referred to as "a Bishop" (v.iv.17.1) but as "Archbishop" in the speech-heading for lines 23-25 and 172-73. The historical Biron was actually attended by Garnier, the king's preacher, who later became bishop of Montpellier.

⁴ Byron asks: "Can the cruel king, / The kingdom, laws, and you, all saved by me, / Destroy their saver?" (*The Tragedy of Byron*, v.iii.260-62). See the warning of Modesbargen to Barnavelt: "I am sorry that / You give me cause to fear, that when you move next / You move to your destruction" (l.i.104-106).

⁵ As the sentence mentions "both the Orders", the Chancellor should say "I must now entreat you to deliver / Your order[s] up" instead of using a singular (v.iv.122-23).

it be a crowd or only a few chosen persons, and as shows of coercion, they imply the use of means which make these deaths both possible and exemplary.

Usually executions were public, precisely to teach a lesson to the onlookers and, more generally, to warn anyone against the dangers of committing a crime or a treason. Here, the lesson is more precisely directed to those military or administrative officials who partake of the authority of the State: they are warned against disputing or subverting this authority. The publicity of Byron and Barnavelt's deaths is evident. In Chapman's play, it can be deduced from the text itself, when Byron addresses a "boy" (v.iv.167) and when a soldier suddenly speaks out (from v.iv.217). The place of execution is the Place de Grève, although it is not entirely clear (see v.iv.112-17). The number of people on stage is nine, plus any number of guards and soldiers. In *The Tragedy of Barnavelt*, beside the "Captaines: and their Soldiers" (v.iii.o.1), the "gaping people" (v.iii.23) attend the show, among whom "Boys and Burgers" (v.iii.45.1). The Provost even says that they are "choakd with people" (v.iii.56). The number of people on stage is at most fourteen, plus any number of soldiers. So, Byron and Barnavelt have each a real audience to listen to their last words. More is executed inside the Tower of London,⁶ after being escorted from Durham House (v.i) and the public consists of the Lieutenant of the Tower, an officer, warders, the two sheriffs and the two earls, representing the king. But each of them seems to be personally affected by his death. The number of people on stage amounts to about eleven.

Carrying out these acts of justice requires a more or less impressive display of military force. Not much seems necessary to execute Sir Thomas More, as only "Warders with their halberds" are mentioned (v.iv.o.2-3). As the judges and the Chancellor are uncertain about Byron's reactions, he enters "with all the guards, soldiers with muskets" (v.iv.17.1-2). But it is in *Barnavelt* that the display of force is most spectacular and so the tension of the scene, which opens with the soldiers commenting on what is to happen: "Cock all your Muskets, Soldiers, / And gentlemen, be ready to use your pikes," a captain says (v.iii.1-2). That the authorities intend to make the execution possible is confirmed by his next remark: "theis Guards [are] / Commaunded to make good the Execution" (v.iii.5-6).

Each execution – especially of high-ranking figures – works in a double temporality. While it reveals the failure of the State's authority in the past, through the disobedience of the prisoner, it purposes to strengthen its authority in the future, through the recourse to power, in order to divert subjects and citizens from disobedience and urge them to obedience. In this sense, executions work as tales of fiction and share with poetry the same moral and didactic aim, as for example *A Myrrovre for Magistrates*. Therefore, executions have to be both impressive and efficient to work as warnings against the dangers of disobedience. While a new identity is imposed onto the prisoner – that of a traitor – his fate also becomes an example as well as matter for chronicles to come. It seems that the very executions of such figures as More, Byron or Barnavelt are demonstrations of the power of the State and a discourse of authority. Most of the time, words uttered by agents of the State make the discourse of authority explicit. In the case of Byron, the notion of example is invoked by the chancellor at the end of the trial: "we must quench the wild-fire with his blood / In which it was so traitorously inflamed, / Unless with it we seek to incense the land. [...] / And so all treasons in his death attend him" (*The Tragedy of Byron*, v.ii.296-98, 307). To prevent a fatal infection, the body of a subject must be suppressed to save the corporate body of the realm.

⁶ The Second Warder says: "Woman, stand back, you must avoid this place, / The lords must pass this way into the Tower" (v.i.29-30).

At the end of Barnavelt's trial, the Prince of Orange hopes that the capital punishment inflicted onto his enemy will serve a purpose: "Let them [...] / [...] all that plot against the generall good / Learne from this mans example" (v.i.214-16). And effectively, the playwrights show with what sense of drama and cruelty the authorities have staged this last scene. Onto the already crowded stage, the executioners bring "a Coffin and a Gibbett" (v.iii.22.1-2). The coffin is that of Leidenberch, "the fowle Traitor" (v.iii.72), one of Barnavelt's supporters, who committed suicide. The first captain remarks that "This prologue should portend a fatall Tragedie: / Theis examples will make'em shake", speaking of the people (v.iii.40-41), to what the second captain answers: "'Tis well they have'em, / Their stubbornenes, and pride requires'em greater" (v.iii.41-42). The reading of this show as a "Tragedie" is not surprising: it was also the word used by the authors of *A Myrrovre for Magistrates* to designate the stories told by the ghosts of the princes and other prominent figures in the book.⁷ The two lords attending Barnavelt's execution also deliver a conventional lesson to the audience: "vaine glory thou art gon: / And thus must all, build on Ambition" (v.iii.187-88), and "Farwell, great hart: full low thy strength now lyes, / He that would purge ambition this way dies" (v.iii.189-190). The voice of the two characters warning against the dangers of ambition is the voice of the humanist historiographical tradition that can be found in John Lydgate's *Fall of princes* and his followers. It is also, in the play, the official voice of political authority, not to be confused with that of the playwrights though. On the contrary, in Anthony Munday's play, the staging of More's death excludes all moral discourse about exemplarity. Only at the very end of the scene does Surrey deliver a brief conclusion to the play, saying: "A very learned worthy gentleman / Seals error with his blood" (v.iv.119-120), the meaning of which is very ambiguous, since the playwright avoids making clear whose error it is, More's or the King's.⁸

Executions and the question of identity

In the last scenes of their tragedies, the protagonists have also a part to play, in spite of the State's attempt to deny their very agency. In the three plays, the characters intend to perform what their true identity is: they try to resist the erasing of their previous identity by the State, which officially labelled them traitors.

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Apparently, More submits to his fate by accepting the idea of death without protesting, but this does not mean that he endorses the Tudor doctrine of obedience to "Rulers and Magistrates".⁹ When he refuses to subscribe to the famous "Articles" – and so to obey the king's will – he is perfectly aware of the consequences of his choice. We can even say that he subverts the very notion of obedience, at the end of act IV, by changing the meaning of

⁷ After Richard II has told his story, the commentary begins by: "Whan he had ended this so wofull a tragedy, and to all Princes a ryght wurthy instruction, we paused", William Baldwin, *A Myrrovre For Magistrates. Wherein may be seen by example of other, with howe greuous plages vices are punished: and howe frayle and vnstable worldly prosperitie is founde, even of those, whom Fortune seemeth most highly to fauour*, London, Thomas Marshe, 1559, Fol. xix.

⁸ The ambiguity of these words is lost in Jean-Pierre Villquin's translation: "Un homme très savant et de grande valeur / Scelle notre erreur de son sang", Anthony Munday *et al.*, *Sir Thomas More*, p. 1417.

⁹ As expressed in *An Homily against Disobedience and Wylful Rebellion* (1570), in David Wootton, ed., *Divine Right and Democracy: An Anthology of Political Writing in Stuart England*, London, Penguin Classics, 1986, p. 94-98; and *An Exhortation concerning Good Order and Obedience to Rulers and Magistrates* (1547), in *Sermons Or Homilies Appointed to Be Read in Churches In the time of Queen Elizabeth of Famous Memory: And now thought fit to be Reprinted by Authority from the Kings most Excellent Majesty*, Oxford, 1683.

the words of authority. When, for the last time, Shrewsbury asks him to "subscribe" (IV.iv.159), More shifts the object of his obedience by answering: "I'll now satisfy the king's good pleasure". He then explains:

O pardon me,
I will subscribe to go unto the Tower,
With all submissive willingness [...]
Now, my lord,
I'll satisfy the king, even with my blood [...]. (IV.iv.157 and 161-163, 165-66).

One can say that from this moment More has signed his own death warrant. Therefore, his execution is low-keyed, rather non-dramatic and the playwrights show him in a favourable light. He is in good spirits (V.iv.10-11) and displays a sense of humour, making puns on his own beheading (V.iv.25-26), which is consistent with his character throughout the play, as the Lieutenant of the Tower says: "In life and death still merry Sir Thomas More" (V.iii.20). The friendly conversation he has with the two sheriffs, who have very good memories of their past acquaintance (V.iv.37-39), is also a way to build the posthumous fame of the character. More is also very friendly to Surrey and Shrewsbury, and to the hangman. Similarly, he does not say a word against the king: "Ye see, though it pleaseth the king to raise me thus high, yet I am not proud" (V.iv.58-59). However, when Shrewsbury asks him to "publish to the world / [His] great offence unto his majesty" (V.iv.68-69), Sir Thomas More evades the question and says in jest: "I confess, his majesty hath been ever good to me, and my offence to his highness makes me of a state pleader a stage player [...] to act this last scene of my tragedy" (V.iv.71-75). This implicit assertion of the illusion of life liberates him from the burden of fear: he has already renounced the world and his body.¹⁰ That is why he mocks the display of force around him: "For all this troop of steel that tends my death, / I shall break from you, and fly up to heaven" (V.iv.106-107). More's death is not presented as a fall, but as an ascent. More's refusal of submission probably makes him the most subversive of the three characters: he dies for the sake of liberty of conscience. The erasure of More's catholicism enables the puritan and recusant hunter Anthony Munday to make his character a powerful voice of dissent. More's heroism is that of a martyr.

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The executions of Byron and Barnavelt are much more dramatic because, unlike More, they refuse the inevitability of their end. They claim their innocence, reject the idea of death, refuse to submit to their fates and take this last opportunity to desperately reclaim their heroic identities.

While the chancellor reads the sentence, the duke of Byron keeps interrupting him to protest his innocence (V.iv.88-96 and 104). Till the end, he remains true to his heroic anger, although he says he has lost his fury (V.iv.72). His reaction to the hangman's entrance is vehement: "Death, slave, down, or by the blood that moves me / I'll pluck thy throat out!" (V.iv.165-66)¹¹ and later, "I will not have him touch me till I will" (V.iv.198). His words show how much this character, who claimed to be "to himself" "a law rational",¹² and therefore refused unconditional obedience to the king, still wants to control his body (which "is no

¹⁰ See More's answer to Catesby ("Sir, we have seen far better days than these"): "I was the patron of those days, and know / Those were but painted days, only for show" (IV.iv.90-92).

¹¹ See also what he tells Vitry, the captain of the guard: "If you will need rack me beyond my reason, / Hell take me, but I'll strangle half that's here / And force the rest to kill me" (V.iv.199-201).

¹² George Chapman, *The Conspiracy of Byron*, III.iii.145.

longer [his] own," as Vitry says (V.iv.192), since it now belongs to the State) and to stage his death himself.¹³ However much Byron is reluctant to die, Chapman shows him to be aware of the vanity of life when the prisoner speaks of the body as of "A quick corse, only sensible to grief, / A walking sepulchre, or household thief, / A glass of air, broken with less than a breath" (V.iv.35-37).¹⁴ Nevertheless, the former marshal of France, who is and sees himself as a soldier, wants to preserve his heroic integrity by dying "like the captain / That prayed on horseback, and with sword in hand, / Threatened the sun, commanding it to stand" (V.iv.52-54). Instead of obeying as a subject, he would like to command as a king, but through this ironic comparison with Joshua¹⁵ Chapman reminds us of his vanity, and signals his contempt for those aristocrats who accept being treated as lambs being led to slaughter, as it were: "Let tame nobility and numbèd fools / That apprehend not what they undergo, / Be such exemplary and formal sheep" (V.iv.193-197). The phrase "tame nobility", coined by the poet, enables us to understand how the tragic hero realises that he is the victim of a modern State whose king can now dispense with the service of his nobility.

The wishful perpetuation of the duke's heroic identity can also be detected in the exhibition of his wounded body to the crowd:

View, view this wounded bosom: how much bound
Should that man make me that would shoot it through!
Is it not pity I should lose my life
By such a bloody and infamous stroke? (V.iv.210-13)

Obviously, the phrase "such a bloody and infamous stroke" refers to what John Fletcher beautifully called "the long divorce of steel" in *King Henry VIII* (I.ii.76).¹⁶ Beheading is "infamous" insofar as it belittles both the character and its reputation ("*fama*"), but the word may also refer to the infamy of those who have ordered Byron's death.

When he eventually comes to terms with the idea that his being and heroic status are going to be annihilated ("So here's a most decretal end of me", V.iv.230), he asks his family not to avenge his death and to obey the king (V.iv.232-237), before delivering the expected lesson drawn from his own fate, which is a warning to the over-reaching "statists":

Fall on your knees then, statistes, ere ye fall,
That you may rise again: knees bent too late,
Stick you in earth like statues: see in me
How you are pour'd down from your clearest heavens [...]. (V.iv.254-257)

Aware of the "blots and scars of [his] opprobrious death" (V.iv.237), Byron nevertheless cares for his posthumous reputation, and asks the chancellor to "hold good censure of [his] life" (V.iv.133).

¹³ See Christine Sukić: "c'est en fait lui qui commande à la mort et donne des ordres au destin", *Le Héros inachevé : éthique et esthétique dans les tragédies de George Chapman (1559 ?-1634)*, Berne, Peter Lang, 2005, p. 258.

¹⁴ The image of the "quick corse" and the "walking sepulchre" comes from Erasmus's *Adagia*, II.iv.3, "*Vivum cadaver, vivum sepulchrum*", see Franck Louis Schoell, *Études sur l'humanisme continental en Angleterre à la fin de la Renaissance*, Paris, Honoré Champion, 1926, p. 53-54.

¹⁵ *Book of Joshua*, 10:12-13.

¹⁶ Since 1850, it has been accepted that the play, first published in the 1623 Folio, is the result of the collaboration between William Shakespeare and John Fletcher. The stylometric analyses of James Spedding, Samuel Hickson, Marco Mincoff and Cyrus Hoy have enabled critics to attribute scene ii of act I to John Fletcher, William Shakespeare, *The Famous History of the Life of King Henry the Eighth / La Célèbre Histoire de la vie du roi Henry VIII*, transl. Jean-Pierre Richard, ed. Henri Suhamy and Jean-Pierre Richard, in *Histoires*, ed. Jean-Michel Déprats and Gisèle Venet, in *Œuvres complètes IV*, Paris, Gallimard-Pléiade, 2008, vol. II, p. 1046 and "notice", p. 1654.

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Barnavelt's state of mind is not entirely dissimilar to that of Byron.¹⁷ Till the last moment, he attempts to prove that his condemnation is unjust, that he is no traitor and desperately tries to reinstate himself as saviour of the nation. Here, as in *Sir Thomas More*, the theatrical metaphor is used by the character: "I shall not play my last Act worst" (v.i.204). But unlike Sir Thomas More, whose final "scene" is acted as an intimate drama of conscience, Barnavelt's "last Act" is performed as a pathetic political show. Whereas More's death was endowed with metaphysical verticality ("fly up to heaven"), Barnavelt, in order to deny his miserable and inglorious fall, pretends his death is a "promotion":

Thus high you raise me, a most glorious kindness:
For all my Cares, for my most faithfull service
To you, and for the State, thus ye promote me:
I thanck ye Cuntry men, most nobely thanck ye. (v.iii.60-63)

The bitterly ironic thanks he gives to the lords are repeated three more times. In the same way, he repeats the phrase they use when they remind him of the business at hand ("Will ye bethinck ye Sir, of what ye come for?", v.iii.90) and retorts with four "Bethinck you" and three "Thinck" to remind them, as well as the spectators inside and outside the play, of the "travells" (v.iii.93), "the dangers" (v.iii.95) and the "care" (v.iii.112) he went through to save the "Nation" (v.iii.112 and 113). He concludes: "then turne back, and blush, blush for my ruyne" (v.iii.115). Therefore, when the First Lord ritually asks him to confess his faults, he answers: "I dye for saving this unthanckfull Cuntry" (v.iii.149). Unlike Byron, the unrepentant Barnavelt does not respect the implicit rule that requires the prisoner to deliver a moralizing speech before dying. In his last moments, he thinks of his family and of the Prince. As in the beginning of the play,¹⁸ he compares himself with the sun:

Tell him the Sun he shot at, is now setting,
Setting this night, that he may rise to morrow,
For ever setting: now let him raigne alone,
And with his rayes, give life, and light to all men [...]. (V.iii.170-173)

The comparison extends to the prince (also implicitly compared with Hercules),¹⁹ whom Barnavelt openly accuses of changing the Dutch Republic into a monarchy. Although he acknowledges his defeat, he never expresses any regret, nor draws a lesson from his desperate quest for a glory which he thought Orange had defrauded him of (i.i.23-24), a quest that Modesbargen called "boyish folly" (i.i.59).²⁰ Unlike Byron, who cared for his chronicled fame, Barnavelt asks his "Cuntrymen" to forget him (v.iii.176). This may reflect a difference in their social status: Byron, fundamentally a soldier, draws his nobility from the military tradition (like his father) whereas Barnavelt belongs to the "noblesse de robe". Byron's heroism is the kind that fills volumes of chronicles, not Barnavelt's.²¹

¹⁷ On the question of Barnavelt's identity in the play, see Gilles Bertheau "Le 'prince puissant' et 'l'homme constant' dans *The Tragedy of Sir John van Olden Barnavelt* de John Fletcher & Philip Massinger (1619)", *Études Épistémè*, n°14, automne 2008, p. 47-66.

¹⁸ "Now in the sun-set of my daie of honour" (i.i.33).

¹⁹ Cf. the image of Hercules' arrow in Chapman's *The Conspiracy of Byron* (i.ii.40-44) and *The Tragedy of Chabot* (ii.ii.83-85).

²⁰ See also what Modesbargen said: "Shall Barnavelt / That now should studie how to die, propound / New waies to get a name [...]?" (i.i.61-63).

²¹ I thank Nicholas Myers for suggesting this distinction between the two sorts of nobility.

The expression of dissent

In the three plays under study, the execution scene coincides with the end and completes the meaning of the drama. Therefore, the differences noticed so far between *Sir Thomas More* and the two Jacobean plays come to a head when their uses of history are examined. In each play, the discourse of authority is counterbalanced by elements that do not fit in the official version of the story but rather expose the role played by reason of State in the condemnations of the characters. Yet, in doing so, the dramatists are sometimes confronted with censorship.

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Representing authority on stage under James I often amounts to exposing the workings of reason of State, especially in topical plays like *Byron* and *Barnavelt*.²² As Providence recedes in the background of Jacobean drama, politics takes pride of place. Jacobean playwrights grapple with the modern concept of State by focusing on those cases when a sovereign's or a prince's authority is disputed by a single man.

In *Sir Thomas More*, the absence of King Henry VIII does not entirely conceal the political motives that lead to the eponymous character's death. But unlike the other two plays, which begin when Byron and Barnavelt are at the top of their careers, *Sir Thomas More* follows the protagonist's rise to power before representing his fall. Interestingly, More is the voice of authority in the first three acts of the play, especially in II.iii – the first 159 lines of which were written by Shakespeare – where he manages to dissuade the rebellious citizens from assaulting the foreigners. This earns him the thanks of the Lord Mayor, to which he answers:

My lord and brethren, what I here have spoke,
My country's love, and next, the city's care
Enjoin'd me to, which since it thus prevails
Think God hath made weak More his instrument
To thwart sedition's violent intent. (II.iii.190-194)

Patriotism and providentialism are the hallmarks of this conventional Tudor vision of social and political order. Therefore, it is on behalf of this vision that the leader of the rebels, Lincoln, is hanged in II.iv, after delivering a very Christian and exemplary speech against sedition. We saw that More does not do that, but rather evokes "the king's good pleasure", a discrete allusion to reason of State (IV.iv.157), reminding us of the Roman maxim *Quod principi placuit legis habet vigorem* (*Digest*, I.IV.1).

In Chapman's *Tragedy of Byron*, the idea that reason of State presides over Byron's death emerges from a conversation between D'Escures, a courtier, and Janin, a minister, evoking the prisoner's state of mind:

So furious is he that the politic law
Is much to seek how to enact her sentence:
Authority backed with arms, though he unarmed,
Abhors his fury, and with doubtful eyes
Views on what ground it should sustain his ruins [...]. (V.iii.224-28)

The image of "authority backed with arms" against an "unarmed" subject is telling enough, but Janin's words of advice to the king are even more significant. He purely and simply tells Henry to dispense with the course of law:

²² See Julius Walter Lever, *The Tragedy of State*, London, Methuen, 1971.

The unrest of the people seems to contradict the official version groomed by Orange, presenting his justice as the arm of Providence, when he says that everyone should "Learne [...] / That there is one above, that do's deride / The wisest counsailes, that are misaplide" (v.i.216, 219-220).²³ The fact that the authors – or rather John Fletcher, who wrote this scene²⁴ – stage only two lords to represent the authorities may also be taken as a sign of the unease of the State which did not want to be closely associated with the death of the former Advocate of Holland and Councillor of State.²⁵

In *The Tragedy of Byron*, the prisoner's opinion of his fate is briefly reinforced by the intervention of a soldier, who, without exculpating him, compares the merits of Byron with those of "the king's chief minion", meaning the duke of Sully, to conclude in favour of the former. This points to what Chapman made clear in his play: the role of reason of State in Byron's condemnation. This is why Vitry immediately orders: "Hence with that frantic!" (v.iv.225).

Even without any public, the staging of the character's death can have far-reaching implications, as we can see with Sir Thomas More. Thanks to his impeccable attitude, he subverts the very notion of example. He dies a humble Christian death: "There is a thing within me, that will raise / And elevate my better part 'bove sight / Of these same weaker eyes" (v.iv.103-105) and transforms his political fall into a spiritual elevation ("Well, let's ascend a God's name", v.iv.52). The playwright himself suggests it when the hangman says that the block is "To the east side" (v.iv.113): we do not attend the death of Sir Thomas More but his "birth to heaven, [...] void of fear" as he says himself (v.iv.118), in hope of the Resurrection. Even Surrey concludes the play by saying that More "tends progress to the state of states" (v.iv.122), confirming the mutation of the political event into a spiritual one. This is the reason why critics usually say that he dies the death of a martyr.²⁶ In these conditions, his death is an example, not of the consequence of disobedience though, but of the price to pay to obey one's conscience, the ultimate guide of More's conduct. The tears and kneeling of his family make him say that they are "rebels to [his] conscience" (iv.iv.137) and he sees his death as the way to end "the strife / Commenc'd 'twixt conscience and [his] frailer life" (iv.iv.172).

Chapman also – to a lesser degree of course – signals Byron's dignity in the last words he utters, inspired by a well-known passage from 1 Corinthians 15:54-55 ("Death is swallowed up in victory / O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?"): "Strike, strike, O strike! Fly, fly, commanding soul, / And on thy wings for this thy body's breath, / Bear the eternal victory of Death!" (v.iv.260-262).²⁷

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²³ He also declares: "The better part of the Christian world / Marks our proceedings" (v.i.89-90), to justify the capital sentence, and, at the end of the scene, he explains: "The World shall know, that what's just we dare doe" (v.i.208).

²⁴ See Fredson T. Bowers, ed. of John Fletcher & Philip Massinger, *The Tragedy of Sir John van Olden Barnavelt*, 1883, *The Dramatic Works in the Beaumont and Fletcher Canon*, vol. 8, Cambridge, CUP, 1992, p. 485.

²⁵ See John Fletcher & Philip Massinger, *The Tragedy of Sir John van Olden Barnavelt*, p. 604-605.

²⁶ Anthony Munday, in collaboration with Henry Chettle, wrote *Sir John Oldcastle, Part 1*, and *The Downfall and the Death of Robert, Earl of Huntingdon*, about which Jean-Pierre Villquin explains: "il plaide en faveur du libre choix, des droits de l'individu, et dénonce les excès de pouvoir de l'Église et de l'État", A. Munday *et al.*, *Sir Thomas More*, p. 1689.

²⁷ "Byron, malgré le supplice qui lui est imposé, est un héros guerrier triomphant dans cette dernière scène. Les mots qu'il emploie évoquent une victoire militaire", C. Sukič, *Le Héros inachevé...*, p. 257.

The fact that these plays all underwent the rigour of censorship – not necessarily in relation with the execution scene – is proof that staging reason of State was subversive. Sometimes, as for the Byron plays, the very representation of the monarch was problematic. In *The Conspiracy of Byron*, the scene of the duke's embassy to Elizabeth was rewritten and the French ambassador's angry reaction to the way his queen was depicted is well documented. Nevertheless, the play was printed immediately after its performance.²⁸

As for *Sir Thomas More*, its editorial fate was quite different: it was probably never performed until the twentieth century, although it was meant to be (by Lord Strange's Men). The Master of the Revels, Edmund Tilney, vetoed any performance. We also know that he was responsible for the vagueness of the mention of the "articles" in the play: he did not want the playwrights to make it too precise so that Rochester and More's refusals should not appear as a support for the Roman Catholic Church. This is why he indicated that the lines about the arraignment of the two lords (in IV.i.81-106) should be deleted. The manuscript was not rediscovered by Thomas Hearne until 1728 and the play was printed in 1844 (in Alexander Dyce's edition). Still, the censor's interventions did not directly affect the last scene, which is not the case with *The Tragedy of Barnavelt*.²⁹

The manuscript of this play bears many markings (71) and comments from the Master of the Revels of the time, Sir George Buc and from the scribe, Ralph Crane, which is not surprising as the subject of the play was highly controversial.³⁰ It staged living characters, among whom the Prince of Orange, and dealt with religious questions, since Barnavelt was mainly condemned for converting to Arminianism, a soft version of Calvinism that his opponents took for just another form of catholicism. King James I himself kept an eye on these affairs, and Buc, who was very well-informed of these matters, saw to it that the play did not depict Barnavelt too favourably. This is why he asked for the addition of 31 lines (folio 27*, lines 2019-2950), spoken by the Lords in answer to Barnavelt's long speech in V.iii. The retort of the second Lord is particularly striking, as it identifies Arminians with the worst of dissenters and catholic conspirators: "Examine all men / Branded with such fowle syns as you now dye for, / and you shall find their first stepp still, Religion" (V.iii.134-136). He then quotes the names of "Gowrie", Lord Ruthven, who was executed for treason in 1584, and the Gunpowder Plot conspirators, who attempted to kill the royal family and members of Parliament in 1605. It shows that the two authors were not in full control of their depiction of the character, as also attested by the passages deleted in the trial scene, in which they voiced a more balanced opinion of him.

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The three plays examined in this article provide a significant example of the shift occurring in English theatre over a period of twenty-six years (1593-1619). Written around the time when Shakespeare worked on *Henry VI* and *Richard III*, *Sir Thomas More* is akin to the chronicle play, even if the focus is rather on the intimate nature of the drama than the telling of a historical episode. The political and religious import of the play is left in the background. While the dramatists contrasted the expected fate of a seditious rebel like Lincoln with the

²⁸ See John Margeson, ed., *The Conspiracy and Tragedy of Byron*, p. 9-12.

²⁹ See Jean-Pierre Villquin's introduction, A. Munday, W. Shakespeare, T. Dekker, H. Chettle and T. Heywood, *Sir Thomas More*, p. 1684-1688 and 1699-1700.

³⁰ For further details on this question, see Trevor Howard Howard-Hill, "Buc and the Censorship of *Sir John Van Olden Barnavelt* in 1619", *The Review of English Studies: A Quarterly Journal of English Literature and the English Language*, n.s., n°39.153, February 1988, p. 39-63.

sedate but firm decision of a state official like More, they did not – could not – expose the political implications of his condemnation. Moreover, the very vagueness of the reason for his arrest and subsequent death – dictated by the 1599 proclamation on theatrical performances³¹ – allowed for an extensive interpretation of the play: paradoxically, Elizabethan puritans could have shared the idea of the primacy of conscience over positive law with Sir Thomas More. On the other hand, *The Tragedy of Byron* and *The Tragedy of Barnavelt* have moved away from that model and if they can still be called history plays – even topical plays – they are much more concerned with the very mundane workings of politics in modern States, whose rulers are shown wielding the notion of Providence as a tool of government. Whereas Munday and his fellow playwrights did not dare to stage Henry VIII, who had died about half a century earlier, Chapman, Fletcher and Massinger incurred the wrath of the authorities for staging living potentates and exposing their Machiavellian methods of government. It is the meaning of the way they represent the judicial fates of Byron and Barnavelt, two disputable heroes confronted by two no less disputable heads of State.³²

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³¹ See Edmund Kerchever Chambers, *The Elizabethan Stage*, vol. IV, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1923, p. 263.

³² "We realize that we have been witnessing a play with not one but two Machiavels", Ivo Kamps, *Historiography and Ideology in Stuart Drama*, ch. v, "'No meetematters to be written or treated vpon': *The Tragedy of Sir John Van Olden Barnavelt*", Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 147.

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