

University of Szeged Faculty of Arts  
Doctoral School for Literary Studies  
Anglophone Literature and Cultures in Europe and North America Programme

MIKE LAURA

**COLLECTIVE TRAUMA IN EARLY MODERN ENGLISH REVENGE TRAGEDY**

*Thesis booklet*

**Supervisors:**

Prof. Dr. Kiss Attila  
Dr. Sávai-Matuska Ágnes

Szeged, 2023.

## Contents

INTRODUCTION .....	3
PART I. THEORETICAL AND HISTORICAL CONTEXTS	
I/1. Theory, Methodology .....	15
I/2. The Contents of Collective Trauma .....	28
I/2/1. The Thanatological Crisis .....	28
I/2/2. A Sacrificial Crisis .....	35
I/3. Witnesses of Collective Trauma in post-Reformation England: the Reformed Calendar and the Reformed Landscape .....	46
I/3/1. Reformed Calendars .....	50
I/3/2. Rewriting the Catholic Landscape .....	54
PART II. REVENGE TRAGEDY AS A WITNESS TO COLLECTIVE TRAUMA	
II/1. Eucharistic Anxiety and Cannibalism in <i>Titus Andronicus</i> and <i>Antonio's Revenge</i>	58
II/2. The Reckless Dead – Corpses, Fetishes, and Relics in <i>The Spanish Tragedy</i> , <i>The Maiden's Tragedy</i> and <i>The Duchess of Malfi</i>	80
II/3. The Pyres of Smithfield – Martyrdom and Religious Persecution in <i>Titus Andronicus</i> and <i>The Duchess of Malfi</i> .....	109
CONCLUSION .....	127
REFERENCES .....	132

## Collective Trauma in Early Modern English Revenge Tragedy

### Topics

*The revision of the English reformation, collective trauma, revenge tragedy, thanatological crisis, the Eucharist Controversies, religious persecution, martyrdom, relics, fetishes*

### Methodology, frameworks

This dissertation investigates early modern English revenge tragedy against the backdrop of the complications of the English reformation. I put forward the argument that revenge tragedy, with its uncanny revenants, unburied dead, mad revengers, and maimed bodies stages every major socio-cultural controversy rising in the wake of the English reformation.

The discussion is built on two basic theoretical pillars: on cultural memory studies, and the theory of collective trauma. These two approaches are inseparably intertwined in the analysis, at the same time they are informed by a third, historical angle, which is the revision of the English reformation. Revisionist historiography of the English reformation lately reached two very important conclusions: firstly, further research is needed, as periodization itself has been an object of debate for a long time (When was the English reformation completed? Or did it happen at all? See Diarmaid MacCulloch “The Myth of the English reformation”<sup>1</sup>). Second, the concept of the “long Reformation” of England is increasingly gaining momentum in Reformation historiography. This implies a gradual, but thoroughgoing change, with occasional but severe setbacks, as opposed to the traditional, teleological accounts of a sweeping Protestant victory *or* the approach of the 80s, focusing on the activities of the Catholic rear-guard.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, the fundamental cultural turn – one could even write *cultural revolution* – that the incessantly fluctuating tides of the English reformation brought about, is described by an increasing number of scholars as traumatic. (Nigel Llewellyn, Peter Marshall, Brian Cummings, Christopher Highley, Margaret E. Owens, Huston Diehl, Steven Mullaney, Norman Jones, Michael Neill et al.). Therefore, it became clear that early modern literary works could be

---

<sup>1</sup> Diarmaid MacCulloch, “The Myth of the English Reformation” *Journal of British Studies* 30, no. 1 (Jan, 1991): 1-19.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Marshall, „(Re)-defining the English reformation” *Journal of British Studies* 48, no. 3 (July), 565.

effectively investigated for traces of psychological trauma. Works like *Staging Pain, 1580-1800* or *Performing Early Modern Trauma from Shakespeare to Milton* or *Violence, Trauma, and Virtus in Shakespeare's Roman Poems and Plays* show a deep conviction that the post-Reformation era was indeed a traumatizing period in every respect, in the wake of historically specific traumas. I will engage with some of these works in the analytical part of my dissertation. But the main proposal of this present work is the application of the *social* theory of trauma in the discussion of early modern crises, that is the framework of collective trauma, as first proposed by Kai Erikson. Kai Erikson defined collective trauma as the following: "A blow to the basic tissues of social life that damages the bonds between people and impairs the sense of communality ... the community no longer exists as a support ... an important part of the Self disappeared."<sup>3</sup> This initial concept was later extended by Jeffrey C. Alexander et al. In their seminal book, Alexander, Jeffrey C., Ron Eyerman, Bernard Giesen, Neil J. Smelser, and Piotr Sztompka (*Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, 2004) laid down the theoretical foundations for a systemic study of collective trauma, with special attention to important socio-cultural factors such as the hegemonic power relations in the meaning-making processes of a society, the different agents of representation, or the competing trauma narratives.

Working within these preliminaries, my critical perspective differs from the psychoanalytically informed analysis of personal trauma, because this present study primarily focuses on social phenomena and representation. Nevertheless, psychological traumas of race, class and gender are just as equally relevant to revenge tragedy as are different socio-historical traumas. In fact, the different traumatic modalities are so closely intertwined in the plays that it is close to impossible to disentangle them. What is more, they reinforce the dramatic effect of each other, as in Lavinia's case who experiences profound trauma of gender, but her figure can also be associated with the Christian martyrs and the Holy Virgin. Because religious issues could not be addressed on the Elizabethan stage, so the gender-trauma in *Titus Andronicus*, paradoxically, not only enhances the dramatic effect, but also serves to conceal overt representations of religious trauma.

I also demonstrated how introducing the conceptual framework of collective trauma, interwoven with cultural memory studies, leads to new insights compared to the scholarly framework of *mourning*. Revenge tragedy as the cultural site of commemoration has been widely discussed before. (Michael Neill *Issues of Death*, Thomas Rist *Revenge Tragedy and*

---

<sup>3</sup> Kai Erikson, „Notes on Trauma and Community,” *Trauma, Explorations in Memory*, edited by Cathy Caruth (Baltimore–London: The Johns Hopkins University Press), 187.

*the Drama of Commemoration in Reforming England*, Stephen Greenblatt *Hamlet in Purgatory* etc.). Replacing the one-sided concept of *mourning*, which only deals with absence and loss, this complex, two-component approach allows one, as it will be shown, to account for the hegemonic power relations in the process of the creation of different, contesting trauma narratives, synchronically and diachronically as well. As Brian Cummings, Alexandra Walsham and Ceri Law write in their introduction to *Memory and the English Reformation*, “The manner in which the Reformation itself entered the record as a historical event remains comparatively understudied ...”<sup>4</sup>

Thus, within the theoretical framework of collective trauma, the major purpose is not to focus on *the unspeakable* and *loss*. Indeed, a basic advantage of the application of a socially informed theory of trauma is the emphasis on *representation* instead of repression, and on the *communal* as opposed to individual psychology in the context of cultural meaning production, and work-through. The concept of trauma–representation merits an additional explanation here. In the vein of old historicism and traditional, moral-philosophical or historical-biographical approaches to literature, one might argue that my approach posits a direct, imitative relationship between literature and the historical, social context, but this representation of trauma on the early modern stage is very far removed from a simple, direct *mirroring* of social phenomena. To begin with, there was a ban on representing religious issues during Elizabeth, thus direct representation of religious controversy was impossible. Second, as Mullaney puts it, “social mimesis of such a literal or thematic kind [...] was not dominant mode of representation in Elizabethan amphitheater drama.”<sup>5</sup>

Furthermore, the need for representation is a basic intersection of collective trauma and cultural memory studies. Thus, within these two research areas, the investigation is carried out by way of a New Historicist methodology, with its extension of textuality to basically every component of material culture: reading together literature and architecture, the fine arts, early modern law, or the annual calendar. At the same time, I had to consider the limitations of the New Historicist approach. As Richard Strier claims, there are “resistant structures” in early modern culture, that refuse to yield to theory.<sup>6</sup> He writes that in historical analysis a “...

---

<sup>4</sup> Cummings, Brian, Alexandra Walsham, Bronwyn Wallace and Ceri Law eds. 2020. *Memory and the English Reformation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 14.

<sup>5</sup> Steven Mullaney, *The Reformation of Emotions in the Age of Shakespeare* (Chicago – London: The University of Chicago Press, 2015), 84.

<sup>6</sup> As Richard Strier writes in *Resistant Structures*, “In a deep sense, [ William ] Tyndale is unintelligible in Greenblatt’s account. Why would any sane person have wanted to be an early Protestant?” Richard Strier, *Resistant Structures* (Berkeley – London: University of California Press, 1995), 67.

sympathetic recreation of worldview, within a fully historicized context, is indispensable.”<sup>7</sup> One such topic is martyrdom, a fundamentally theological discourse that should not be interpreted by (cultural) materialist explanations. Every such attempt distorts the experience of those who lived and died through it.<sup>8</sup>

The main goal was to show how the collective trauma I propose in my dissertation penetrated all tenets of early modern culture, the calendar, the landscape and most of all, early modern tragedy. Nevertheless, the aim was not to foreclose a textual analysis for the sake of a sweeping sociological survey, but to provide a deeper understanding of previously ignored tenets of cultural phenomena. In my dissertation I have given a detailed account of the preliminaries of this proposition and elaborated on how my thesis differs from other, similar works. One example merits further mentioning here because probably this was one of the earliest of its kind. The interconnectedness of post-Reformation culture and baroque tragedy was first proposed by Walter Benjamin in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (1928) implicitly, which he later elaborated in his private correspondence as related by Samuel Weber.<sup>9</sup>

In my investigation I followed an interdisciplinary approach because this seemed to provide the widest scope for the discussion. Keeping with this, I have mapped out the proposed religious trauma not only on early modern tragedy, but on the reformed calendar, and landscape as well. A wide range of scholarly work facilitated this approach, for instance David Cressy’s invaluable insights on the Reformed calendar, and Alexandra Walsham’s study on the reformed landscape, but surprisingly relevant insights came from unexpected sources, such as Dylan Trigg’s *The Aesthetics of Decay* (2006).

### **Structure of the Dissertation**

In the first part of the dissertation, I laid down the theoretical foundations of my research. I elaborated on the theoretical foundations (memory studies, collective trauma, and the English reformation) and how they are relevant to my thesis. I have worked with three large disciplinary fields, thus I sometimes had to omit otherwise relevant information, such as detailed accounts of the revision of the English reformation, or the development of collective trauma theory from the Freudian concepts of trauma. These have been extensively researched and discussed

---

<sup>7</sup> Op.cit.77

<sup>8</sup> Alec Ryrie, *Being Protestant in Reformation England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 14.

<sup>9</sup> Samuel Weber, *Theatricality as Medium* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004), 168.

elsewhere. Other important side-issues or relating concepts found their place in the footnotes, which fact probably explains the amount and length of footnotes in the dissertation.

After conceptualising the post-Reformation collective trauma, I dedicated special attention to its contents and representations in early modern culture. The first main tenet of this collective trauma is mapped out in the first subchapter: “The Thanatological Crisis”. This topic has been widely addressed before; my proposition here is to classify it under the umbrella-concept of collective trauma, nevertheless, a historical overview of the phenomenon was necessary. In the second subchapter I discuss the basic constituents of “The Sacrificial Crisis”: an ambivalence around the scaffold of the martyrs, and the crisis brought about by the changing concepts of the eucharist. In the third subchapter of the First Part, “Witnesses of Collective Trauma in Post-Reformation England” I demonstrate a few of the different cultural representations of the assumed collective trauma: the reformed calendar and the reformed landscape. I explicate here how the entire material environment bore the marks of the enforced religious changes and upheavals of Tudor (and Stuart) England. My research was greatly helped in this chapter by the relatively recent developments in trauma studies, which examine the effects of cultural/historical traumas on the material environment.

In the second part of my dissertation, I read some of the Tudor and Stuart revenge tragedies, these gory and melodramatic plays as witnesses or representations of this collective trauma. The analysis of plays does not follow the order of the contextual chapters, I discuss the ambivalence around the eucharist first, in “Eucharistic Anxiety and Cannibalism”. Although acknowledging the Ovidian heritage in depicting the bloody banquet, I propose that early modern playwrights consciously exploited this highly controversial religious topic on the stage. Furthermore, it became clear in the process of writing, that doctrinal and practical tenets of the eucharist, rites of death and martyrdom overlap so frequently, that any attempt for a neat separation would be futile. In this vein it did not seem problematic to present the analyses of plays in a different order, rendering the Eucharist Controversies prior to the thanatological crisis. I argue that the staging of the extremely violent, repellent scenes in these plays was not (merely) for the sake of sensationalism and blood bath, but for a double purpose. They served as commemoration *and* caricature of corporeal ritual at the same time, hence the difficulties of neat generic categorization. I have reached the conclusion that both the cannibalistic dinner and the Black Mass capitalize on eucharistic anxieties, even if they assume the form of caricature many times. The examination of the role of satire in revenge tragedy, which I termed as a traumatic genre, would merit further research. While John Marston’s *Antonio’s Revenge* (1602) is discussed in greater detail in this chapter than Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus* (c. 1594), thus

giving the impression of a lopsided analysis, the reason for this is because I later return to *Titus* in the third analytical chapter. I propose an underlying eucharistic anxiety in these plays, which entailed a crisis of belief, soteriological anxiety, and along these lines, a deep division of community, because the concept of sacrifice was refigured. At this point, the English reformation still seemed reversible, and the number of recusants only grew with the persecution of priesthood. Thus, most possibly a great number of people watched revenge plays not with cheerful irony, but resentment and anxiety. What if the ridiculed eucharistic altar is the way to eternity and salvation, nevertheless? The play forged a moment of remembrance, and while this *viewing* of the sacrifice was not redemptive any longer, rather horrifying, but it still transformed the audience into witnesses to a lost and maybe wished-for past, helping them in processing the change.

In “The Reckless Dead” I read the corpses and body parts on early modern stage within the discourse of relic veneration, a religious tradition that has strong bearings on early modern society, and which, as historiography has shown, was not relegated to the past completely. I had the most severe difficulties with the second subchapter, dealing with the thanatological crisis as a main element of this collective trauma, due to the abundant scholarly literature already existing on this topic. Finally, I could grasp the essence of the phenomenon of stage corpses along the lines of “fetishization” and the Catholic tradition of relic-veneration, which, as historiography has proved, although prohibited by Henry VIII early on, was not quite dead in Elizabethan times. What is more, it even gained momentum with the burning of the Jesuit priests. Alexandra Walsham addressed this intriguing topic in her volume *Past and Present Supplement – Relics and Remains* (2010). With this historical background in mind, it was not difficult to see how the discourse of relics could imbue with meaning the dead bodies lingering on-stage in most revenge tragedy. I have chosen *The Spanish Tragedy*, because Hieronimo verges on the sacred veneration of his dead son’s body, preserving the cadaver in a hidden seclusion of the stage up until the final scene. *The Maiden’s Tragedy* was opted for because of its open staging of necrophilia, a social taboo, which, nevertheless, vividly resonates the Catholic adoration of the saints’ bodies in medieval times. Finally, *The Duchess of Malfi* stages wax imitations of dead bodies, calling attention to the power of representation, and at the same time investigating the difference between real and fake relics.

In “The Pyres of Smithfield” I intended to show how Lavinia and the Duchess were very much alike the contemporary Christian martyrs. I argued that the meaning of religious executions and torture was increasingly ambivalent, and the community was torn along these dividing lines. René Girard’s seminal study, *Violence and the Sacred* still has great explanatory



power to this most unsettling corollary of the religious reform. After establishing the historical context, it could be safely posited, that with the kindling of the pyres of Smithfield anew, Elizabethans could witness the gruesome death of almost two hundred Catholic priests, which was not hailed with obvious cheer, as in the case of criminals. While it is very difficult to trace down contemporary responses, one thing seems sure: the crowds were volatile, and there were conversions happening all around the religious executions. For this part of my research, Brad S. Gregory's seminal book was the greatest resource.<sup>10</sup> The sacrificial crisis was manifest in the fact, that scapegoat's death could not unify the audience, but it birthed dissent and subversion. The result of religious coercion was not an enforced unity, but rather the opposite. These plays made the practice of sacred violence transparent and open for reflection and questioning, and thus, they always carried a subversive potentiality.

### **The results of the dissertation**

The purpose of the dissertation was to show how the "erratic" process (Walsham's term)<sup>11</sup> of the English reformation engendered a collective trauma in post-Reformation England. Having studied multiple histories of the English reformation, the historiography of which is constantly swelling, I had to acknowledge my limitations and understand that there is still a vast amount of material that I would not be able to peruse. My point of departure was the post-revisionist stance above all. The *systemic* application of the collective trauma framework to early modern culture has been an "uncharted land" so far, to my knowledge, although there is mentioning of collective trauma in other scholarly works as well. An outstanding example is Steven Mullaney's study, who departs from the concept of collective trauma, but ends up in mostly psychoanalytical explanations in his study. In none of the scholarly works have I come across the problematics of hegemonical power relations in the representation of trauma, nor with the different agents of trauma narratives, competing in the conflicted arena of cultural representations. With this work I wish to amend this lacuna and join the scholarly discussion on the traumas of the early modern period, especially from the communal angle, and predominantly as played out on the early modern stage.

By successfully applying the framework of collective trauma to early modern vicissitudes, I demonstrated that revenge tragedy, with its bloody spectacles and ambivalent

---

<sup>10</sup>Brad S. Gregory, *Salvation at Stake*. (Cambridge MA–London: Harvard University Press, 1999)

<sup>11</sup> Alexandra Walsham, *Charitable Hatred – Tolerance and Intolerance in England, 1500-1700* (Manchester–New York: Manchester University Press, 2006), 13.

characters plays the role of witness in representing this trauma, as it stages every major controversy entailed in the religious debates of the period. The almost unsurmountable popularity of the goriest plays such as *Titus Andronicus* proves that the plays most frowned at by modernist criticism were able to make deep impressions on early modern minds. This fact validates their importance in understanding early modern trauma in my view.

### **Possibilities for further research**

The main proposal of the dissertation is that every single cultural representation of the period witnessed the landslide changes in the wake of the English reformation. This includes the material environment as well. Although the discussion of trauma-imprints on material culture could be expanded, I do not wish to proceed into that direction. In fact, there are more textual witnesses of the proposed collective trauma left, the elaboration of which I could not undertake in this work. These are, for example, the popular ballads, pamphlets, last wills, diary entries and homilies even. Obviously, these are thoroughly (although not exclusively, see homilies) textual witnesses, and as such, they are lacking one crucial element of representing trauma: the human body. Nevertheless, this fact does not make them less important witnesses. The closer scrutiny of these textual witnesses could enrich this research. Furthermore, the investigation could be further expanded on a larger corpus of revenge tragedies, Webster's *The White Devil* or the Anonymous *Arden of Faversham* could be investigated within this framework.

Another, quickly expanding field, that is of interest for me, is the study of religious violence, as Brad Gregory puts it, "the willingness to kill" for matters of conscience. A quite recent surge in publications show the level of attention this field has been gaining. Mark Juergensmeyer, *When God Stops Fighting: How Religious Violence Ends* (University of California Press, 2022); *Oxford Handbook of Religion and Violence* ed. Mark Juergensmeyer, Margo Kitts, Michael Jerryson (Oxford University Pressm 2015); Steve Clarke, *The Justification of Religious Violence* (Wiley Blackwell, 2014); Richard A. Burrige, Jonathan Sacks eds. *Confronting Religious Violence* (Baylor University Press, 2018).

### **Publications pertaining to the dissertation's topic:**

1. Mike, Laura. 2022. "Kollektív trauma és mártírok a kora modern angol bosszútragédiában." In *Fidele Signaculum: Írások Szőnyi György tiszteletére – Writings in Honour of György Endre Szőnyi*. Edited by Kiss Attila, Matuska Ágnes, Péter Róbert. Szeged: SZTE BTK Angol-Amerikai Intézet, pp. 649-659.
2. Mike, Laura. 2022. "Shakespeare's Literary Architecture in King Lear." *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies* no. 28 (2): 508-511.
3. Mike, Laura. 2022. "Collective Trauma as a Conceptual Framework in the Interpretation of Tragedy," in *Acta Philologica* no. 58 (2022): 81-91. DOI: 10.7311/ACTA.58.2022.8
4. Mike, Laura. 2022. "A kora modern bosszútragédiák határátlépései," In Daróczi Jakab, Hajdú Ildikó, Nyerges Csaba, Prótár Noémi szerk. *Határok és határátlépések*, Budapest: ELTE Eötvös József Collegium. pp. 69-83.
5. Mike, Laura. 2020. "Kyd's Traumatic Passage to the Underground – 'The Spanish Tragedy' and Early Modern Crises." In *Distinguished Szeged Student Papers 2020*. Kiss Attila szerk. Szeged: JATEPress. pp. 61-87.
6. Mike, Laura. 2019. "Hamlet a szanatóriumban vagy a purgatóriumban? Az újhistorista kutatások hatása a Hamlet adaptációkra." In *Apertúra Magazin*. Available at: <http://magazin.apertura.hu/film/hamlet-a-szanatoriumban-vagy-a-purgatoriumban-az-ujhistorista-kutatasok-hatasa-a-hamlet-adaptaciokra/10046/>

### **Other publications**

7. Mike, Laura. 2018. "Religion and Hospitality in the Television Series Homeland," in *Americana: E-Journal of American Studies in Hungary (1787-4637)*: 14 (2). Available at: <http://americanajournal.hu/vol14no2/mike.5p>.

### **List of conference papers given on the subject of the dissertation**

1. Mike, Laura. 2023. "Martyrdom and Iconoclasm in William Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*." *Eastern and Western Tradition of European Iconology – Conference on Theatrum Mundi*. July 2-5, 2023, University of Szeged, Hungary.
2. Mike, Laura. 2023. "Cultural Trauma on Early Modern English Stage: Eucharistic Anxiety in Marston's *Antonio's Revenge*." *16th Biennial Conference of the Hungarian Society for the Study of English (HUSSE)*, January 26-28, 2023, University of Miskolc, Hungary.

### **Membership in academic associations and other academic responsibilities**

2023. 2<sup>nd</sup> March –: Teaching within the framework of the *EUGLOH – Placebo* international online lecture-series, Presentation's title: "Hocus-Pocus: Placebo, the Eucharist and Early Modern Religious Debates." SZTE, Szeged, Hungary.

2023.– : Co-Instructor of *English Renaissance Drama and Cultures of Performance* with Sávai-Matuska Ágnes. Spring Semester. SZTE, IEAS Szeged, Hungary

2022. –: Co-Instructor of *English Renaissance Drama and Cultures of Performance* with Sávai-Matuska Ágnes. Spring Semester. SZTE, IEAS Szeged, Hungary

2017 –: HUSSE (Hungarian Society for the Study of English), member