Take, eat; this is my body – a few remarks on the banquet scene in Marlowe's and Shakespeare's tragedies

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I. "Banquet scene" "trial scene", "temptation scene" – on the Elizabethan and Jacobean stage typical situations support the action of plays in some of their most characteristic patterns.

Strategic disposition of "trial scenes" in *King Lear* favour the sense of progress in self-knowledge and shape the conflict in productive operations of correlation and reversion; the "temptation scene" in *Othello* goes along with the ascent of the villain that plays his cards according to more and more risky challenges, and accelerating disintegration of social values and moral references, or painful alienation and vital exhaustion of the self are framed by the terrifying atmosphere of opacity inhabited by the elusive and tricky power of temptation in *Macbeth*. And these paradigms labelling scenes of distinctive configuration also come into view to generate conflict and rouse tension in the moment when the prince of Denmark meets the ghost of his father, confronts Ophelia, challenges his mother or responds to the devious contest of Laertes and Claudius. Sister categories could be added, and the "wooing scene", in some way a qualification of the "temptation scene", is an impressive device in *Antony and Cleopatra* and is to be found whenever the plot needs momentum and impulse, or bifurcates into new developments: Dido holds Aeneas in her arms and institutes dissention between love and duty, the Scythian lord of war captivates Zenocrate and joins his Muse of Love to the mysterious urge to expansion and conquest, Callapine, son of Bajazeth and prisoner of Tamburlaine, persuades his gaoler to set him free, Richard Gloucester seduces Lady Anne and rejoices over such an encouraging achievement, the Duchess of Malfi overwhelms Antonio, putting at bay his doubts and fears, in a gesture that ignores power relations and seals her appalling fate, … a never ending story of inscribed standard situations of structural value.

Elizabethan and Jacobean tragedy registers also the ubiquitous presence of the "banquet scene". This formulaic expression does not necessarily

concern gorgeous and crowded gatherings or receptions; contemporary range of meaning of "banquet" includes, among others:

– A slight repast between meals. Sometimes called running banquet.
– A feast, a sumptuous entertainment of food and drink; now usually a ceremonial of state feast, followed by speeches.
– Also applied to the to the Eucharist or Lord Supper. It occurs in Homilies ("O heavenly banquet, then so used"). See also Richard Hooker – "Christ assisting this heavenly banquet with his personal presence".
– A course of sweetmeats, fruit, and wine, … (Oxford English Dictionary).

Emphasis given to the symbolic dimension of these scenes, either in the context of a high mimetic mode or along the lines of the generally assumed theoretical and creative distance in relation to classic dramatic heritage, tends to stress ceremony and practices of social import. Moreover, the sense of community and participation involved does more than revisit and confirm gregarious ties and social allegiances: either both in ostensive and vague reassessment of celebration and the sacred or in both deliberate and unconscious subversion of cultural paradigms, hosts and guests in Marlowe and in Shakespeare activate ambiguous or ironic meanings in their re-presentation of the past in the present.

II. Origins of Western theatre and drama are still a matter for controversy. Aristotle suggests an organic evolution starting in a pristine dithyrambic situation – the chorus of members of the Attic tribes singing hymns to Dionysus, the thespian detachment of an element of the group creating the incipient frame of dialogue and conflict later ratified by a progressive individuation of actors interpreting a text on the stage. The god of the vine and fertility may keep a persistent rule over the great civic festivals of Athens; but the religious moment vibrating in the stories of gods and heroes goes hand in hand with the versatility and refashioning of those founding myths. Alternative and more recent views, however, claim that the explanation for the passage from the oral and formulaic culture of the bard of Homeric times to the more sophisticated attitude of rhapsodes and, later on, to the even more elaborate devices of written drama is to be found in a literary revolution that runs side by side with the long process affecting a community of warriors evolving towards a democratic

polis of merchants[1]. Be that as may be, rite and performance reciprocate in that common ground so vividly illustrated by the frantic congregation of women, devoted worshippers of Dionysus, that every two years in the cold winter mountains capture and devour a wild animal and in so doing incorporate the potency of the god. In *The Bacchae* lies the familiar testimony of one of the most startling and mysterious features of ancient Greek culture. Tragedy, perhaps *tragos* and *odia*, the scapegoat and the song celebrating the god and performing the propitious rituals of nature and fecundity. The consecrated animal and the consecrated wafer.

Medieval drama and Christian worship are also inscribed in a complex frame of mutual response. The cradle of drama, after the long hiatus of the Dark Ages and the sustained hostility held against it by the new faith, may either be located in a liturgical moment of incipient possibilities or in a more autonomous impulse; and consolidation of performance and aesthetic feeling, running along a process of take and leave with religious devotion, reinstates, under the sign of paradox, a strange case of partnership interspersed with emulation and mutual exclusion. In the field of an oral and visual culture, pageants may be an efficient ancillary to celebration and a powerful means of indoctrination of illiterate congregations, but exuberance and expertise may also insinuate spirits of another sort. Different texts, formally more elaborate, austere, and ostensive in doctrinal intention would hand down to the Elizabethan drama a moral allegory to be refashioned into a wider range of artistic devices and insight; but cathartic violence and spectacular gratification was the domain of mystery plays, later to be exposed, along with the vivacity of folk festivals, by zealous divines and pious guardians of the temple in a reformed age. Garments, histrionic gestures and rhetoric apparatus declare similarities between preachers and actors and put insidiously pulpit and stage face to face: profanation and deviance, anyway, only make sense in the context of their alternative categories.

Dionysus in not far from the solemn elevation of the consecrated host. Doctrinal discriminations of spiritual or material presence, and subtle modulations imposed on sacramental reception illuminate a very different frame of reference, but the primitive experience stresses the archetypal inclusion of the representation of the past in the present.

III. Sitting at the table, partaking the food and passing goblets around, listening to stories or music: the banquet scene is a typical embodiment of the sense of unity and friendship. Celebration is specially conspicuous

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[1] WISE, Jennifer, *Dionysus Writes – The Invention of Theatre in Ancient Greece*, Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press, 1998, pp. 24-36.

when the members of the group, not assembled in a mere accidental or informal occasion, share values and interests in a common set of life principles. King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table join in a steadfast loyalty and a feeling of election that entitles them to a sacred mission. Last Supper revives, the Feast of Pentecost will be renewed in the parting of the members of the brotherhood in the pursuit of the Grail and in the fulfilling of their calling.

In *Tamburlaine the Great* the banquet scene is the apotheosis of triumph, and the sound and fury of the scourge of God is more terrifying and devastating in the siege of Damascus than Josuah and his trumpets before the walls of Jericho. Images of voracity and destruction had escorted the iterative progress of the Scythian conqueror, unstoppable like a turbulent force of nature crushing down its obstacles. Victories activate a principle of struggle and expansion put in words with conviction and eloquence in act II scene 7[2]:

> "What better precedent than mighty Jove?
> Nature, that fram"d us with four elements
> Warring within our breasts for regiment,
> Doth teach us all to have aspiring minds".

His amoral potency will sacrifice the virgins of Damascus – foolish victims of obstinate and futile resistance – to an absolute law heralded by the successive exhibition of the colours of banners and tents surrounding the unfortunate town. The banqueters are the barbarian host of Tamburlaine, enthusiastic revellers around the target of the most cruel jollity and scorn, the Turk Bajazeth, locked in a cage. Humiliated when forced to crawl before his unrelenting torturer, in one of those rhetorical devices that transform metaphor into the real thing –

> "Fall prostate on the low disdainful earth,
> And the footstool of great Tamburlaine,
> That I may rise into my royal throne "

–, the captive is reduced to the condition of an animal to be tamed, and his afflictions, the source of pleasure to the roaring sadistic throng, find a spicy ingredient in the tears and anxieties of Zabina, the unhappy emperess (*Part One,* act II scene 4). Food is not motive of any sacred ritual: Bajazeth is forced to eat the scraps from the sword of the conqueror,

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[2] Except when otherwise specified, quotations from Marlowe and Shakespeare should be referred to BURNETT, Mark Thornton, *ed.*, *Christopher Marlowe – The Complete Plays*, London, J. M. Dent, 1999, and GREENBLATT Stephen, *general editor*, *The Norton Shakespeare*, New York and London, W. W. Norton & Company, 1997.

suggestions of cannibalism (the speech of the victor, IV. 4. 79 ff., illustrates frankly the note) insinuate in parody and subversion the "Hic est corpus meum", and even in the crowns that the Scythian gives to his devotees the consecrated wafer of the sacrament of the Lord Supper, the Eucharist, can be easily recognized.

It is no wonder that the configuration of gesture and symbol turns up with its prime seditious intention in *Doctor Faustus*. The pervading motive of mutilation is more ostensibly depicted in the so-called *B-text* of 1616: in the expansion of the "middle scenes" the episode of the knight punished by the magician with the implantation of stag horns (a revival of the myth of Diana and Acteon) or the physical presence of the devilish trinity of Lucifer, Beelzebub and Mephostophilis in the upper stage, a sinister audience of the orgy of dismemberment of the sacrificial victim and its awful digestion by the gaping mouth of Hell, testify the doctrinal compromise absent in the more sober and Calvinistic *A – text* of 1604.

In *Doctor Faustus* obsessive images of inversion frame the substance and meaning of the banquet scenes. The magic spell that summons Mephostophilis recalls a black mass and the visitation of the accursed spirit derides the epiphanic experience, the tricks of the entertainer that responds to the capricious demands of the German emperor and provides his distinguished host and protector the vision of Helen and of Alexander and his paramour, or the stroke of magic that brings to the pregnant Duchess of Vanholt, in that "dread time of the winter", her most coveted dish of ripe grapes are debased reverberations of the miracles of the Gospel. Frustration had been the sequel of the mask of the Seven Deadly Sins, and Faustus replicates the demonic staging with unsubstantial shades and the figments of an intellectual chimera.

Along the same lines, Faustus Last Supper, rehearsed in its inchoative predicaments in the conclave with Valdes and Cornelius, vaguely recalled in the farce and slip-slap humour of the popish scenes (the banquet in the Vatican) or in his dealings among kings and courtesans, is tinged with unexpected premonition. There is always a Sganarelle, a Sancho Pança or a Wagner to comment on the strange case of their masters:

> "I think my master means to die shortly,
> For he hath given to me all his goods:
> And yet, methinks, if that death were near,
> He would not banquet, and carouse, and swill
> Amongst the students, as even now he doth,
> Who are at supper with such belly-cheer
> As Wagner ne"er behold in all his life".
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> *A-text,* act 5, scene 1, ll. 1-7.

There is however much more between heaven and earth than what the vane philosophy of the simple-minded Wagner can dream of. In his Indian Summer, Faustus exorcises the gloomy catastrophe providing his disciples with the enticing vision of Helen and entertainment with a frivolous and dull symposium. Immediate physical pain had been more intimidating than the distant prospect of the loss of his soul, nature and power more persuasive than the abstractions of a redemption beyond his grasp: the banquet scene in *Doctor Faustus* is no more than a distractive moment stressing evasion and forgetfulness.

Perhaps one cannot find in the savage farce of *The Jew of Malta* what really deserves the label of *banquet scene*. The voracious greed of Barabas, however, leads the action to a similar area of thematic references. The hero rejoices in his talents as a cook when he prepares the broth (III. 4) that will poison the nuns and, among them, his daughter, Abigail, the most recent convert in the nunnery. All the inhabitants of his former house, confiscated by Ferneze, the Christian governor of Malta, will die as rats. Ithamore, the Turk slave, follows avidly the movements of his master and bursts with enthusiasm in anticipation of the devastating effects of that peculiar Last Supper. Later the Jew, having betrayed Ferneze and his cronies to the invading Turks, will seek to overcome what he sees as a dangerous alienation and decide to make the former governor his confidant and ally. A deadly inflexion to his principles: after the deflection of Ithamore Barabas should know better, one cannot trust anybody. Feverishly busy around the cauldron and obsessed with his masterpiece of villainy, Barabas emulates the energy of other Marlovian heroes and, like Faustus, dies in the end protesting; he shouts and curses when trapped in the hell of his own cooking.

The Jew of Malta may be that "mere monster, brought in with a large painted nose, to please the rabble", in the known formula of Charles Lamb[3], and one could claim that the wild humour brought about by such extravagant devices is liable to excite amoral reactions and nurse base passions. Tamburlaine rejoices before the caged Bajazeth, explodes in triumph and delight and cracks the whip when drawn in his chariot by the captive kings of Trebizon and Soria – "Holla, ye pampered jades of Asia (*Part Two,* act 4, scene 3.). And now the boasting rascal comes and dives into the boiling soup. This is certainly revolting and infamous, but it is the language of farce, and one can easily be enticed by such a splendid and eminent scoundrel.

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[3] MacLURE, Miller, *ed., Christopher Marlowe: The Critical Heritage*, London and New York, Routledge, The Critical Heritage, 1979, p. 69.

IV. A brief survey of banquet scenes in Shakespearean tragedies would also stress their prime structural and functional importance.

In *Titus Andronicus* barbarism under the disguise of pious ritual dictates the sacrifice of Alarbus, son of Tamora, queen of the Goths. Revenge will be taken on Titus, a respected Roman general, and a sequence of conspiracies and bloody acts, that include the heinous rape and mutilation of Lavinia, the only daughter of Titus, by the sons of Tamora, Demetrius and Chiron, expose the Senecan heritage of the plot and the recent memory of the orgiastic violence of plays such as Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*. Aaron, the black lover of Tamora, meanwhile empowered by her marriage to Saturnine, the new emperor of Rome, is a villain that has nothing to do with the biblical character his name evokes, Lavinia is not the future of Aeneas and of the new Troy (5. 3. 72 ff.), quite the contrary, her disgrace makes her the emblem of destruction of Rome, and even the woods, the *locus amenus* of pastoral tradition and scenery of love and bliss, turns into the sinister location of treason and adultery, fierce hunting, dismemberment and murder. The denial of expectations attached to names or symbols, the atmosphere of deviousness and bestiality, mutilation and suffering call for a purgative outcome: the final stroke of revenge is the cannibalistic feast where the mother eats his sons, building up the parallel with the barren and voracious earth of Rome that pitilessly devours its children.

Excess and violence were a common stock of resources on medieval English pageants, not simply the fruit of Senecan influence, and the poetic configuration of speech or the symbolic dimension of scene and character clash against the idea of a stale imitation. E. P. Watling is, therefore, not very convincing when, in the introduction to his edition of the plays of Seneca, writes that

> "*Titus Andronicus* is the classic example of the distortion of the classical tragedy of revenge, drawing heavily by quotation, imitation, and reproduction, on ancient precedents, but creating only an extravaganza of atrocious deeds with no unifying shape or theme; it would have horrified Seneca"[4].

The banquet scene is not just a sensational dénouement replying to the successful recipe of *Thyestes* or *Medea*. Cathartic slaughter is kept in unison with the action and paves the way to the hope brought by Lucius, elected by the people, not the son of the last emperor. The tragedy of Titus is also the tragedy of Rome.

Scene 4 in Act 3 of *Macbeth* is one of the most famous banquet scenes in Shakespeare's drama. The opening stresses leadership and ceremony

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[4] WATLING, E. F., *ed., Seneca – Four Tragedies and Octavia,*, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1966, p. 37.

orquestrated by the ruling voice of the king – "You know your own degrees, sit down. And first/ And last, the hearty welcome." – and performed by the ordered movements of the guests. Some eminence would certainly be given to the hosts. Macbeth does the honours of the house ("*walking around the tables*, as stated in the S. D.), urging his knights to take place in the solemn festivity that ratifies harmony in state and country. Ironic associations reverberate at this juncture in the calm assembly – "But let the frame of things disjoint, both the worlds suffer/ Ere we will eat our meal in fear", had said the disturbed usurper two scenes earlier, and shadows of the ambush that killed Banquo but let Fleance escape would certainly tinge with some suspense the banquet scene. The private conference Macbeth has with the Murder keeps the company in waiting, and his return may disclose a powerful tension he tries to suffocate. The first appearance of Fleance's ghost – only visible to the king (and perhaps to the audience) – shakes the ceremony, and the ready intervention of Lady Macbeth, confining her husband to a private area on the stage and urging him to pull himself together, cannot repair damages; but decorum and concord are definitely shattered when the appalling ghost turns up a second time, seeming to respond to Macbeth's toast. The fellowship disperses in embarrassment and disorder, and celebration of health and life crumbles down. The hero wants to know more about his fate – "I will tomorrow –/And betimes I will – to the Weird Sisters./More shall they speak; for now I am bent to know/ By the worst means the worst. /…/". Soon will he challenge those spooky beings of the foggy heath. In the cauldron of the "secret, black, and midnight hags" boil and bake fragments of a shattered nature, not the restorative food that unites people in ceremony. Chaos, a suggestion with terrible connotations at the time of Shakespeare, has really come again. Beyond oxymoron, paradox and opaque spells, Macbeth will be offered the dismaying succession of faces in the mirror: fertility and lineage demolish his great expectations; from then on he will keep a fierce obstinacy in the attempt to crush the seeds of time. Guilt and remorse are gone for ever. Irony operates devastatingly from afar: speaking about the valiant warrior moved once the confidant king Duncan: "And in commendations I am fed./It is a banquet to me"(1. 4. 55-56)

It would not be very reasonable to spread on the table the wide stock of occurrences of the banquet scene in Shakespeare's drama. They are always attached to a specific function in the plot – carrying the purgative impact that disentangles the Gordian knot of excruciating conflicts, as the cannibalistic example of *Titus Andronicus*, marking deliberately the isolation of the hero in an environment of rotten duplicity and corruption, as in the second scene of *Hamlet*, exposing the collapse of order through subversion of an archetypical situation, as in the above mentioned instance of *Macbeth*, exposing the happy path of disintegration and resentment

in the masque of the dancing Amazons and, later on, in the anti-masque of the meal of stones and warm water, the Last Supper of the enraged hero, in *Timon of Athens*. And the vigilant presence of Dionysus is felt too, either in the corrosive action upon the naïve Cassio, in *Othello*, or in the subtle and insidious power of discrimination and revelation of human frailties, in the banquet scene that seals a precarious alliance, in *Antony and Cleopatra* (Act 2, scene.7*)*.

V. The baroque is certainly an elusive concept, the site of vivid debate and controversy. The expression of intense emotions, of tension and movement, the bent for drama and conflict, the voluptuousness exerted by illusion and histrionic gesture, the distortion of structure and the stress on detail and elliptic form under the supervision, one should always emphasize it, of a conscious technique of composition, describe in a very wide set of features and a very reductive version some topics of a style. The firm outlines of the classical canon are slowly relinquished: the world becomes more complex, the artist seeks experiment and adopts a more individual creative stance. The crisis of European thought goes hand in hand with the search for new forms liable to give expression to new meanings. The historical context suggests strongly an allegiance of the baroque with the rhetorical strategies of the Counter-Reformation; the Catholic world is, in fact, the elected abode of that novel popular art that became a strong instrument of persuasion.

Reformed nations of the North would never accept without conditions those dangerous influences. Exuberance and virtuosity, or startling and ingenious associations could well be given a local habitation and a name in the discursive configurations of art and literature. Strategic and ideological intentions arise more delicate questions, as the example of Inigo Jones, already subject to examination in a previous lecture, clearly illustrate. What about Marlovian and Shakespearian drama? John M. Steadman is very sceptical in what firm distinctions are concerned, and stresses the tricky attraction for categories that assimilate literature to art[5]. But scholars such as Didier Souiller and, to a lesser extent, in part due to the more abstract approach of his essay, Pierre Brunel, are generous in their references to the Elizabethan and Jacobean drama[6]. Still in the field of French criticism (things seen from abroad are sometimes more judicative),

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[5] STEADMAN, John, *Redefining a Period Style – «Renaissance», «Mannerist» and «Baroque» in Literature,* Pittsburg, Pennsylvania, Duquesne University Press, 1990.

[6] SOUILLER, Didier, *La littérature baroque en Europe,* Paris, Presses Universitaures de France, Littératures Modernes, 1998; BRUNEL, Pierre, *Formes baroques au theatre*, Paris, bibliothèque d"histoire du theatre, Klincksieck, 1996.

Christine Buci-Glucksmann[7] has a different view, unfortunately provided by a somewhat opaque argument. Excess and violence do not supply the conceptual justification of the baroque. The point is that English dramatic tradition is peculiar, and crude violence and rude sensation were not only the product of an aesthetic magnetism from abroad. This is not the place or moment to expand on the issue. And when the happy few celebrated in gorgeous and expensive spectacles the power of the king, and on the stage of the popular and commercial theatre of London the performance of violence and perversion exposed social insanity and injustice, paved was the way to the cultural and political division of court and city and, in its aftermath, the suppression of an art more and more subjected either to the interests of vane courtesans of discreet Catholic affiliation or to the impious turbulence and the vicious morality of the urban masses. Puritanism lurked also there in wait.

The last phase of Shakespeare's career – corresponding to the creation of the *romantic plays* – links the dramatist to the court of James Stuart. The hybridism of tragicomedy is itself baroque, and in *The Tempest,* a case in point, elaborate machinery and visual effects, classic allusions and mythological references, dissolution of relations of cause and effect in the plot construction, recurrent use of the design of wonder and miracle, serve the thematic intention of representing the process of succeeding generations (herald and pledge of social and moral renewal, confirmation in spectacle and performance of patriarchal values), and feed the aesthetic options of the king and his entourage. The *masque* becomes a central structural device: the *anti-masque* in the banquet scene, *the masque* of Ceres, the *anti-masque* of the miscarried scheme of Trinculo, Stephano and Caliban, the final restorative gesture of Prospero, supreme director.

The King's Men serve the father-king, which certainly doesn"t clash against the attitude that the Scottish monarch has always required from his subjects, their absolute obedience to the divine right of kings. In the Banqueting Hal a kind of secular congregation rejoice in the ritualistic confirmation of authority: performers invite the audience to join them, and drama becomes celebration. In the ceiling, the magnificent painting by Rubens shows the sacred crowning of the sovereign; somewhere, and in due time, the talent of Van Dick will expose to the view of the elected, also in a famous picture, the dignified and serene image of Charles II driving his horse. Shakespeare will be not around there any more. Tradition has it that a falstaffian Last Supper killed him in a sad evening of 1616. Marlowe had had not to wait that long: in a tavern in Deptford he had been killed, allegedly in a fierce dispute about the paying of the bill; actually he was

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[7] BUCI-GLUCKSMAN, *Tragique de l"ombre – Shakespeare et le maniérisme,* Paris, Galilée, 1990.

most probably, in that year of 1593, the victim of a sordid conspiracy. In 1642 the opening of the Civil War closed theatres and suppressed performances. "Take, eat; this is my body": when Puritanism finally prevailed the banquet scene left the stage; it was time for the revival of the Last Supper in more austere and intimate places.

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