

# The Traumatic Realism of Christopher Marlowe's *The Massacre at Paris*

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**T**HE MASSACRE AT PARIS (c. 1592) has the dubious distinction of being considered Christopher Marlowe's worst play, a poorly written and poorly structured piece of Protestant propaganda surviving only in what evidence suggests is a memorial reconstruction. As Kristen Poole documents, until recently the play has been almost unanimously condemned by critics and editors alike. John Bakeless's verdict is representative of the many others that Poole quotes: "The play 'is a blood-sodden piece of hack work'" (Poole 2). Among other more recent critics, Frank Ardolino asserts that "Marlowe's treatment of the Paris massacre is a sensationalistic depiction of murderous historical events" (245). Editors no less than critics judge the play negatively: "The major difficulty with a critical response to *Massacre*," comments Edward J. Esche, one of the play's latest editors, "is the corrupt state of the text, and one must preface any discussion with the proviso that, by any standard, the play as we have it is a very inferior piece of art because of the excessive corruption caused by memorial reconstruction" (309). The critical consensus is that the play is textually corrupt, poetically impoverished, and formally broken-backed, tacking together two temporally distant incidents in French history—the Paris massacre and the assassinations of the Duke of Guise and Henri III—with little concern for their

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integral unity. Recent criticism, however, including Poole's, has called for a re-evaluation of the play. The case being made is not so much one of facts as one of the values implicit in the aesthetic criteria by which the play has been measured. It may not, in fact, be the case that the play is an "inferior work of art" by "any standard." The play's "aesthetic" or "dramatic" flaws might be more intelligible within critical frameworks that do not privilege the conventionally valorized aesthetic qualities of wholeness and sense over brokenness, silence, and nonsense. Contemporary trauma theory provides just this sort of critical framework, one particularly apposite to the analysis of a play whose title event is the massacre of thousands of French Protestants in Paris and other French towns in the waning days of the summer of 1572, beginning on 24 August, St Bartholomew's Day, and concluding 27 August.

The massacre was the most notorious event in a period of early modern French history full of violence, the Wars of Religion that pitted Protestant against Catholic for roughly the last half of the sixteenth century. "Madam, it will be noted through the world / An action bloody and tyrannical" (4.5–6), the French king Charles declares before giving his consent to the massacre, and he is right. The event created an uproar throughout the European community and generated numerous pamphlet accounts, including Marlowe's major source for the dramatization of the massacre, François Hotman's *A True and Plain Report of the Furious Outrages of France* (1574). Hotman provides a detailed, supposedly eyewitness account of the massacre, which he sums up as "This butcherly slaughter of Paris" (271). If Hotman's pamphlet emphasizes the event's bloodiness, then one of the earliest collections of massacre accounts, Simon Goulart's *Mémoires de l'estat de France sous Charles IX* (1576), emphasizes its tyranny, suggesting, as Robert Kingdon puts it, that "these massacres had been caused by a government become so authoritarian that it had gone berserk and become a tyranny ruthlessly intent on extinguishing traditional rights of individuals" (5). The massacre was still fresh in English memories in 1586, when George Whetstone in *The English Myrror* (1586) asked

where was there a more sauage crueltie euer committed, then the massacre of Paris, where by the traine of amitie, and the celebration of a marriage, betweene the king of Navarre, and the Kinges sister: which in outward appearaunce, promised much peace and honour to the long afflicted realme: the peeres of blood, and nobilitie of the religion, to honour that wished accorde, repaired unto the Court, where the good Admirall was slaine, and by that stratageme or rather deuce of the

Deuill, many a thousand innocent and fearelesse Protestants in Paris and other cities of Fraunce, were cruelly murdered, which monstrous massacre (although many other trecherous murders, in Fraunce reproch the Papistes, with the extreamest name of crueltye) is remembred with the blame and exclamation of the cruelllest Pagans in the worlde. (96)

In a historical period full of bloody religious violence, then, the massacre at Paris stood out for its scope, its extreme brutality, and for its shocking political implications. Significantly, many accounts of the massacre present it as a tragedy. In *The Discoverie of a Gaping Gulf* (1579), for instance, John Stubbes elaborates upon the theatre metaphor in his depiction of Catherine de Medici's guiding role in the events: "In thys tragedy she played her part naturally, and shewed howe she gouernes all Fraunce ... the mother as setter forth of thys earnest game, stooode holding the booke (as it were) vppon the stage and told her children and euery other player what he should say; the last acte was very lamentable" (sig. B4<sup>v</sup>). In Marlowe's play, several characters employ the theatre metaphor: in scene two, for example, the Duke of Guise commands the soldier whom he has hired to assassinate the Admiral to "come thou forth and play thy tragic part" (25), and as he dies Henri III declaims that "Valois's line ends in my tragedy" (24.92). As lamentable as the events dramatized by Marlowe's play are, however, the conventional Aristotelian qualities of tragedy are precisely the aesthetic criteria that the play rejects in its dramatization of French history.

On the Catholic side of the events surrounding and including the massacre, the main actors were the Duke of Guise, who as scion of the house of Lorraine had claims to the French throne, and the French royal family: Charles IX, the Duke of Anjou, who on Charles's death became Henri III, and the Queen mother Catherine of Medici. On the Protestant side were Henri Bourbon, King of Navarre and next in line to the throne after the male members of the royal family, Gaspar Coligny the Admiral of France, and the Prince of Condé. The historical lead up to the 1572 St Bartholomew's Day massacre might be said to begin in 1562, when the Duke of Guise's father led the massacre of a group of Protestants worshipping in a farmhouse outside Vassy. This massacre sparked the first War of Religion, during which the elder Guise was assassinated during the siege of Orléans in 1563. The Admiral was rumoured to have ordered the assassination (Holt 50–55). The series of religious conflicts that followed involved armed conflict and popular violence on both sides, and dynastic interests cut across religious ones, creating in its later stages a scenario with which audiences who had seen Shakespeare's earlier history plays

would have been familiar: conflict between the weak monarch Henri III and his over-mighty subject the Duke of Guise. The marriage between Navarre and Catherine de Medici's daughter Margaret was an attempt to put an end to the civil warfare through traditional aristocratic means by subsuming religious difference in dynastic unity (Holt 81–82). The play, of course, dramatizes the explosive failure of this strategy. What exactly happened during those horrible four days in at the end of August in 1572 remains unclear. The Protestant pamphlets, whose main outline of the events Marlowe's play largely follows, adhere to the conspiracy theory articulated in the quotation from Whetstone above: the events, including the marriage between Navarre and Margaret, were part of a trap planned and executed by Catherine de Medici, Charles IX, and the Catholic nobility surrounding him. In the letters he circulated to the heads of various European countries in the massacre's aftermath, Charles attempts to defend himself by claiming that he had acted in self-defense: the massacre was a pre-emptive strike against a Protestant plot against his life, fully justifiable even if it was unfortunate that the event had spiraled out of control when the populace took over (Holt 82–91; Garrison 152–58). It is also unclear how many Huguenots were actually killed. Some pamphlets give the figure of ten thousand (Garrison 184); modern estimates place the number between two and three thousand (Holt 95). Despite the uncertainty, however, the traumatic effects of the event resonated throughout Europe.

Critics of Marlowe's play now generally recognize that however bad it might be it is on the whole historically accurate. Briggs writes that "although Marlowe did not have access to the wide variety of sources available to modern historians, his account comes much closer to historical fact than has been previously acknowledged; it is at least arguable that he represents the events much as they would have struck an impartial observer of the time" (259). The oddness of this verdict when juxtaposed with the general dismissal of the play on aesthetic grounds can be accounted for by the recognition that Marlowe's play aims at more than referential accuracy. The play is, I want to suggest, an instance of what Michael Rothberg calls "traumatic realism" (100). "Traumatic realism," he writes, "develops out of and in response to the demand for documentation that an extreme historical event poses to those who would seek to understand it ... Traumatic realist texts ... search for a form of documentation beyond direct reference and coherent narrative but do not fully abandon the possibility of some kind of reference and some kind of narrative" (100–01). The extreme historical events that are the play's focus, at least for its first half, demand representational strategies that go beyond the referentiality of simple fidel-

ity to what Marlowe might have considered the historical facts, and those representational strategies do not conform to conventional aesthetic or historiographical expectations. The play dramatizes history as, in Cathy Caruth's words, "a history of trauma" (17). As such, the play is concerned not only with the relationship between trauma and representation but also with the relationship between trauma and witnessing as a form of engagement. Kelly Oliver argues that witnessing is not just the objective recording of facts but also a mode of being toward another that she calls "response-ability" (5). Oliver locates "response-ability" at the heart of subjectivity: "subjectivity is founded on the ability to respond to, and address, others—what I am calling witnessing" (15), which has the double meaning of "eyewitness testimony based on first-hand knowledge, on the one hand, and *bearing witness* to something beyond recognition that can't be seen, on the other" (16). Marlowe's play suggests that "response-ability," moving from *eyewitness* to *bearing witness*, inevitably also involves the subject's recognition of complicity. If to write history as the history of trauma is to locate the silences and the forgettings necessary for the constitution of received, linear historical narratives, then the acts of remembering necessary for this task do not provide those who find themselves in the role of witness with ethically simple or comfortable positions from which they can bring closure to the trauma of history.

The most remarkable feature of *The Massacre at Paris* is the silence about the massacre that follows the massacre's dramatization. Scenes one through thirteen, roughly half of the play, are concerned with the massacre. The first four scenes provide the massacre's immediate context, while the first half of scene thirteen provides the only staging of its aftermath, in the form of the death of a guilt-stricken Charles IX. The scenes in which the massacre is staged, five through twelve, are striking for their swiftness, their brutality, and not least for the fact that a bell, the infamous tocsin of contemporary pamphlet accounts, rings for the massacre's duration. Scenes six, seven, eight, and twelve are all under fifteen lines. They are as formulaic as the battle scenes in *Tamburlaine*, but in stark contrast they are shorn of hyperbolic rhetoric and move straight to the point of the action: the Duke of Guise and/or his followers chase down a Huguenot or group of Huguenots, taunt them, and then kill them. A crude indicator of the insignificance of words in comparison to action is the fact that in scene six, for example, the opening stage direction, "The Guise enters again, with all the rest, with their swords drawn, chasing the Protestants," contains more words than the entire scene's dialogue, which consists of Guise shouting "*Tue, tue, tue!* / Let none escape, murder the Huguenots!"

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(1–2), followed by Anjou’s “Kill them, kill them!” (3). Throughout scenes five to twelve the scene shifts rapidly from one location to another—there is no unity of place in this play; it does not obey the aesthetic decorum of classical tragedy—to create a whirlwind of action.

The swiftness of the action is accompanied by an unremitting savagery. In her analysis of the fusion of religion and violence in the sixteenth century in France, Natalie Zemon Davis remarks that “so many of the acts of violence performed by Catholic and Protestant crowds have ... the character either of rites of purification or of a paradoxical desecration, intended to cut down on uncleanness by placing profane things, like chrism, back in the profane world where they belonged” (59). The massacre scenes forcefully stage this impulse to profane and degrade the sacred. Kristen Poole observes that

the murderers attempt to force even the most intimate and sacrosanct form of speech, prayer, into forms that deny Protestant theology. Avenues of prayer are dictated, as an effort is made to wrest the victim’s speech and turn it against his conscience. The sudden, violent death becomes a manifestation of stifled and aborted speech. The scenes of execution in *The Massacre at Paris*, then, are as much an annihilation of words—and of the Word—as they are of the body. (17)

The degradation of words is accompanied by the degradation of the bodies of the slaughtered Huguenots. After the Admiral’s body is thrown out of his bedroom window and into the street in scene five, for example, Guise jumps on the body, proclaiming “in despite of thy religion, / The Duke of Guise stamps on thy lifeless bulk” (40–41). Anjou then commands the body’s further desecration:

Away with him; cut off his head and hands—  
And send them for a present to the Pope;  
And, when this just revenge is finished,  
Unto Mount Faucon will we drag his corse,  
And he that living hated so the Cross  
Shall, being dead, be hang’d thereon in chains. (42–47)

The two anonymous characters of scene eleven complete the desecration, turning the problem of what to do with the Admiral’s headless and handless corpse into carnivalesque comedy. “Now, sirrah, what shall we do with the Admiral?” (1), the first asks. “Why, let us burn him for an heretic” (2), the other responds, to which the first replies “O no, his body will infect

the fire, and the fire the air, and so we shall be poisoned with him" (3–4). The reduction of the Admiral's body to pollution continues until the two characters decide to "hang him here upon this tree" (10–11) in a parody of the crucifixion. The profanation of the Admiral's body stretches across the massacre scenes, but these scenes are full of much more swiftly executed instances of such violence. "Dearly beloved brother," the Guise intones as he prepares to murder the preacher Loreine, "thus 'tis written" (7.5), which is followed immediately by the stage direction "He stabs him" (7.5.s.d.). In the next scene Seroune pleads with Mountsorrell to "let me pray unto my God!" (8.13). "Then take this with you" (14) is Mountsorrell's reply, again immediately followed by the stage direction "Stab him" (8.14.s.d.). The massacre scenes stab at all their audience's senses, and senses of decorum. "The watchword being given," the Duke of Guise informs Catherine before setting the massacre in motion, "a bell shall ring, / Which when they hear, they shall begin to kill, / And never cease until that bell shall cease" (4.36–38). And the bell does ring: after the Admiral's murder and mutilation in scene five at "the entrance of this massacre" (5.12), the bell begins to toll, and it does not stop until the conclusion of scene nine, when the Guise commands "now stay that bell that to the devil's matins rings" (86). The octavo, "bad" because considered a memorial reconstruction by actors who performed the play, contains at the appropriate place in scene five the stage direction "The ordinance being shot off, the bell tolls" (5.60 s.d.), and the loud ringing of the bell must be counted as an integral part of the performance. Over this noise the actors were required to shout, and the cry the audience would have heard both at the commencement of the massacre and at its conclusion at the end of scene twelve, when the echoes of the bell's clapper were still ringing in their ears, would have been "*Tue, tue, tue!*" (6.1), "*Tue, tue, tue! Let none escape*" (12.7). The massacre scenes of the play's first half, then, force themselves upon the audience's senses visually and aurally.

The second half of the play's silence about the massacre is therefore almost as audible as the tocsin's clapper. Although with the exception of the defunct Charles IX the major characters in the second half are those of the first half, all of whom were involved in the massacre in some way, none of these characters mentions the massacre directly and specifically, even when presented with the occasion to do so. Indeed, in several instances characters veer so close to the massacre that their failure to refer to it is conspicuous. In scene fourteen, the scene of Anjou's coronation as Henri III in 1574, the Duke of Guise's brother the Cardinal of Lorraine informs Catherine that "My brother Guise hath gathered a power of men, / Which

are, he saith, to kill the Puritans; / But 'tis the house of Bourbon that he means" (54–56). The Cardinal's quick movement here from talk of killing Puritans to dynastic conflict raises the massacre's ghost only to dissipate it in the vapour of a deliberate deception. As he prepares for war against Henri III several scenes later, Navarre declaims against the "the Guise, the Pope, and the King of Spain" (16.4) who have instigated the conflict in order to "rent our true religion from this land" (6) and then declares that "The power of vengeance now encamps itself / Upon the haughty mountains of my breast, / Plays with her gory colours of revenge" (20–22). Here if anywhere is Navarre's opportunity to invoke the names of the victims of the massacre at Paris, to locate the massacre as the event for which he will now pursue his revenge as leader of the French Protestants. Instead, in lines whose strained decorum recalls the violent poetry of the *Tamburlaine* plays, Navarre anticipates his victory in the upcoming battle, comparing vengeance's gory colours to "leaves of boasting green / That change their colour when the winter comes, / When I shall vaunt as victor in revenge" (23–25). It is much later in the play, however, in the scene of the Duke of Guise's murder, that the avoidance of specific reference to the 1572 massacre is most noticeable. Having commanded the Duke's assassination, Henry III gloats over the body in a speech whose movement, like the movement of the Cardinal's earlier in the play, raises the memory of the massacre only to dissipate it. Henri begins by commanding the Duke's soul, "surcharged with the guilt of thousand massacres" (92), to "sink away to hell!" (93). These lines are followed by what seems to be a gesture of remembrance and a confession of guilt: "in remembrance of these bloody broils / To which thou didst allure me, being alive, / And here in the presence of you all, I swear" (94–96). But the line break disappoints. What Henri swears is "I ne'er was King of France until this hour. / This is the traitor that hath spent my gold / In making foreign wars and civil broils" (97–99). Line by line Henri's speech erases the seeming specificity of the word "massacre," at first subsuming it within thousands of other massacres then conflating it with "bloody" "civil" broils in general; his oath abruptly shifts attention from remembrance to the present moment of his own personal triumph.

The massacre staged in the play's first half, then, functions in the second as a traumatic black hole in the symbolic order, as the Lacanian Real whose gravitational pull bends the characters' discourse into circles of oblique attraction that leave the massacre unspoken while registering its dark density. In Abraham and Torok's metapsychological terminology, the play's main characters are "cryptophores" whose reality is structured

by complicity in a crime whose encryption renders it unspeakable. “How indeed could one put the unnameable into words?” (158), Abraham and Torok ask, “If cryptophores were to do so, they would die of it, thunderstruck; the whole world would be swallowed up in this cataclysm” (158). The massacre’s encryption is registered in the play’s dramatic structure as well as in the characters’ discourse. Many of the play’s earlier critics have held its dramatic structure to be one of its more egregious aesthetic flaws. The structure fails to shape its historical material into a unified whole, producing a broken-backed play in which the dramatization of the event announced in the title seems to have little if anything to do with the events that follow. H. S. Bennett, for example, asserts that the play “deals in a shambling pedestrian way with events spread over many years, and certainly does not escape a familiar weakness of the historical drama—considerable structural incoherence” (174). Recently, Richard Hillman has contested this evaluation by arguing that the play is structured as a pointed act of remembering that counters the forgetting implicit in Holy League pamphlets and literary works like Pierre Matthieu’s *La Guisade*, which troped the Duke of Guise’s assassination in 1588 as the massacre that originated the cycle of violence leading to Henri III’s assassination in 1589. By juxtaposing the two temporally distant events of the 1572 massacre and the events leading up to the Duke of Guise’s assassination in 1588, according to Hillman, the play recovers or decrypts the massacre as the source of the trauma of recent French history. “When Marlowe reaches back in time to attach to the Guise’s recent death the event qualifying, in Protestant eyes, as the true and original ‘massacre’—indeed, according to *le Tocsin contre les massacreurs*, as the primordial ‘tragoedie,’” Hillman writes, “he imposes upon Matthieu the supplement of providential history stretching backwards, as well as further forwards” (87). Yet if Marlowe’s play is an act of remembering, it is a strange one, for the juxtaposition central to Hillman’s claim is also a disjunction. In order to unearth and represent the massacre as trauma, the play must violate one of tragedy’s cardinal aesthetic criteria, structural unity or, in Aristotelian terminology, the unity of action. The play’s dramatic structure quite emphatically does not present the massacre as the visible cause or origin of the characters’ subsequent actions. Although one might speculate on the massacre’s effects on the play’s characters, on the political situation in which they find themselves or on French history in general, within the play’s dramatic structure the massacre is largely inconsequential. With the ascension of Anjou to the throne in scene fourteen the play seems to begin anew, establishing the origins for the conflict between Henri III and the Guise in the conflict

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between the Duke and Henri's minions and then developing that conflict as a revenge tragedy culminating in the double catastrophe of the two protagonists' deaths. In this dramatic scheme Navarre's arrival to the French throne is much like Fortinbras's arrival to the Danish throne in *Hamlet*. The play, then, is undeniably "broken-backed." Yet, I want to suggest, it is in precisely this breaking of the Aristotelian unity of tragedy that the play registers the massacre as historical trauma. Cathy Caruth comments that "For history to be a history of trauma means that it is referential precisely to the extent that it is not fully perceived as it occurs; or to put it somewhat differently, that a history can be grasped only in the very inaccessibility of its occurrence" (17–18). In *Massacre at Paris* that inaccessibility takes the form of resistance to historiographical and aesthetic perception, resistance to the rationalizing Epimethean gaze that would delimit the massacre as the cause of a definable series of effects leading to historical and aesthetic closure.

If not as cause, though, the play does frame the massacre as an effect of sorts. More precisely, the play frames the massacre (and violence and murder in general) as the byproduct of a means-ends approach to history, whether Machiavellian or providentialist. The most explicit instance of framing occurs at the end of the play's second scene, when the Duke of Guise takes the stage alone after arranging the assassinations of the Admiral and the Queen of Navarre. Guise's extended soliloquy clearly casts him in the role of Machiavellian, at least insofar as his declared goal is the "diadem of France" (44) and his declared means anything that will allow him to achieve this goal, from the deception of "attendance" (50) to the frontal assault of the "sword" (52) and the labyrinthine entanglements of "seditions" (60). Even religion for Guise is only a means: "My policy hath framed religion" (65), he tells us and then confesses that "I am ashamed, how ever that I seem, / To think a word of such a simple sound, / Of so great matter should be made the ground" (67–69). We next see Guise in scene four, plotting the massacre of the Protestants in Paris with Catherine of Medici and Anjou, the implication being of course that the massacre, like the assassinations of the Admiral and the Queen of Navarre, is undertaken as primarily if not exclusively a political move, one more step in Guise's ascent up the pyramid on which France's crown is set. Throughout the play the other main characters, Protestant and Catholic, voice a similarly political understanding of the play's central conflict and the violence it engenders. This political frame is oriented toward the future and leaves little time for remembering the past or mourning the victims of history's

forward motions. And as we have seen, when the past is remembered in this play it is lethal, merely a trigger for further violence.

One might expect providentialist understandings of history of the kind invoked by Navarre at several points in the play to be different, and one of the major critical debates surrounding this play has been whether it presents a Machiavellian or a providentialist narrative of French history. Andrew Kirk has recently attempted to solve this dilemma by arguing that “with the appearance of Marlowe’s inscrutable [English] agent at the end of the play ... past disorder now coalesces into a providential trajectory leading to the ascension of Elizabeth’s ally, the still-Protestant Henry of Navarre, and paralleling official Tudor history. Through the alliance of Elizabeth and Navarre, symbolized in the presence of the agent, French instability is resolved into English stability, and French history mirrors English history” (193). The Machiavellian and providentialist understandings of history differ little, however, in the position they afford history’s victims, at least in this play, and for the Huguenots massacred in 1572 the English agent arrives far too late. In the opening scene Navarre piously asserts that

He that sits and rules above the clouds  
Doth hear and see the prayers of the just,  
And will revenge the blood of innocents  
That Guise hath slain by treason of his heart,  
And brought by murder to their timeless ends. (41–45)

Navarre’s lines are proleptic only in their emphasis on blood and revenge. The providence Navarre posits here as the invisible controlling force of history is the Guise writ large, a divine revenger for whom violence is merely impetus to further violence. Marlowe’s first audiences would have been familiar with this notion of history from such martyrological and eschatological works as John Foxe’s *Acts and Monuments* and Anne Dowriche’s *The French Historie*. When placed in this context Navarre’s lines reveal a somber, apocalyptic subtext: before the coming of the New Jerusalem, when “God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes” (Rev. 21:4), there must be Armageddon. Henri III’s dying words in the play’s final scene bring the apocalyptic subtext of Navarre’s lines to the forefront. Fatally stabbed by a Jacobin friar, Henri rebukes the sorrow of his favourite, Epernoun:

Henry thy king wipes off these childish tears,  
And bids thee whet thy sword on Sixtus’ bones,  
That it may keenly slice the Catholics.

He loves me not that sheds most tears,  
But he that makes most lavish of his blood. (24.97–101)

In the rush to do battle with the Pope and his “antichristian kingdom” (59), the church militant has no time for tears. In Benjamin’s famous description of the “angel of history,” the angel’s

face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress. (257–58)

Marlowe’s play shows that one of its Elizabethan names is God. And although the storm may be blowing to Paradise as well as from Paradise, the play’s vision, like that of the angel of history, does not stretch that far.

If the play’s characters implicitly frame the massacre within Machiavelian and providentialist historical narratives, however, the play’s representation of the massacre refuses those narratives. As I have already suggested, the series of scenes in which the massacre is dramatized places a sensory pressure on the audience that exceeds any attempt to confine it within the term “byproduct.” Moreover, as Kristen Poole has argued, the scenes strip away the martyrological veneer found in Protestant accounts of the event in order to present the victims as utterly helpless, almost entirely speechless, and murdered without resistance. In an ironic rebuttal of the naïve piety Navarre displays in the play’s opening scene, the innocents in the massacre are given no time to pray before they are slain. And if God will consequently hear no prayers, nor will anyone else, for as the play represents it no eyewitnesses to the massacre who were not perpetrators escape. The massacre scenes are dramatically very similar to the murder scene in *Edward II*: they turn their audience into witnesses of the unwitnessable, the silenced, that which exceeds the sense-making processes of historiography. The scenes are what Lacan calls the stain in the play’s field of representation. For Lacan, “the function of the stain and of the gaze is both that which governs the gaze most secretly and that which always escapes from the grasp of that form of vision that is satisfied with itself in imagining itself as consciousness” (74). Žižek glosses Lacan’s stain as the “‘detail that does not belong,’ that sticks out, is ‘out of place,’ does not

make any sense within the frame” (88). As *The Massacre at Paris*’s stain, the massacre scenes are the obtrusion of all that does not belong and must remain beyond sense in order for reality to make sense, to cohere.

The role of witness into which the play casts its audience is not a comfortable one, however. It is not the role of a surrogate god. The play’s first performance in January 1593 garnered Philip Henslowe more than twice the usual amount for a new play, and the play continued to be popular for several years (Poole 4). Its popularity, over twenty years after the event featured in its title, suggests that the wound created by the massacre in collective Elizabethan memory had yet to heal. The play, however, provides no consoling, suturing narrative. The play presents on stage, in the now of the dramatic moment and before their very eyes, an event known to the audience only through the reported action of pamphlet prose. But the audience is jettisoned into the repetition of the traumatic past only to be as helpless to stop the unfolding events as the massacre’s victims. And the silence following the outrage, the massacre’s strange inconsequentiality, must have resonated deeply if not consciously with its Elizabethan audience. Although it provoked protest from Elizabeth when it happened, the massacre was as inconsequential in Elizabeth’s French foreign policy as it is in the play. In its several allusions to her and in the presence of the English agent in the play’s final scene, the play positions Elizabeth as a concerned, friendly but distant observer of France’s civil broils (the antithesis of the Pope and Philip II). To accept this historically simplified and ethically complacent rendering of England’s relationship to French affairs in this period, however, Marlowe’s audience would need strenuously to forget such culturally significant matters as the 1562 Hampton Court treaty in which Elizabeth exploited Huguenot needs to redress the loss of Calais, the much decried absence of effective English military intervention in support of the Huguenots, and Elizabeth’s notorious marriage negotiations with Anjou as well as Alençon, negotiations the massacre did nothing to impede (Guy 267–68; Neale 224–34). Historian John Guy remarks that

The Massacre of St Bartholomew caused an estrangement in Anglo-French relations ... But moral outrage was tempered by *realpolitik*. Elizabeth authorized the sending of munitions to assist the Huguenots and allowed the count of Montgomery to muster ships in England for the relief of La Rochelle. Yet simultaneously she agreed to stand as godmother to Charles IX’s daughter, and entertained a fresh round of dynastic marriage negotiations—this time the candidate was Francis, duke

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of Alençon, brother of Charles IX and of the duke of Anjou,  
and the youngest of Catherine de Medici's brood. (282)

It is precisely the amnesia of *realpolitik* that the play invites its audience to interrogate. The play does not give its Elizabethan audience the moral luxury of complete identification with the massacre's victims but, rather, presses the audience to recognize its own complicity in the historical trauma it dramatizes. *The Massacre at Paris* is not only an act of remembering; by breaking the criteria of tragic aesthetics and historiography, by obtruding incoherence, it also directs attention to the amnesia necessary to constitute history and the ethically simple subject positions from which individuals might attempt to perform the role of outraged witnesses of history's atrocities.

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