
“Torments will ope thy lips”: On “Racking,” “Torture,” and
“Torment” in Shakespeare

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The novelist Graham Greene, in his introduction to the autobiography of the persecuted Elizabethan Jesuit John Gerard, once complained that Shakespeare’s characters are “far removed...from the routine of the torture chamber” (Greene, xi). Greene suggests that, although the 1580s and 1590s were the years when state-sanctioned interrogatory torture was used more often than at any other time in English history (Langbein 82, 134; Heath 109-10), Shakespeare ignored this fact. In one sense, Greene is correct: with the notable exception of the torture of Gloucester in *King Lear* 3.5, actual depictions of torture are not present in Shakespeare’s plays, and this omission seems strange in light of the prevalence of torture at this time. Of all the cases recorded from 1540 to 1640, around sixty-one-percent occurred in Elizabeth’s reign (1558-1603). A further seventy-seven-percent of the Elizabethan total occurred in the 1580s and 1590s, just as Shakespeare was beginning his playwriting career (Langbein 80-1). However, *pace* Greene, a thorough examination of Shakespeare’s works demonstrates that the playwright in fact refers frequently to torture, in ways that suggest he was interested in it throughout his career.

“Racking”

The specter of state torture pervades the imagery of Shakespeare’s theater: for example, some variation of the word *rack*, the device most commonly associated with Elizabethan torture, is used in thirteen of his plays.^[1] These uses appear in a variety of contexts, including the comical, amorous, political, and tragic, and cover a wide range of the possible applications of “racking.” In many cases, these uses are linked to unflattering cultural, political, or legal assumptions about the practice. The most notable appears in *The Merchant of Venice*, in which the rack

becomes a metaphor for the anguish of unfulfilled amorous desires in the witty banter between Portia and Bassanio:

Bassanio: Let me choose,
 For as I am, I live upon the rack.
 Portia: Upon the rack, Bassanio! Then confess
 What treason there is mingled with your love.
 Bassanio: None but that ugly treason of mistrust,
 Which makes me fear th'enjoying of my love;
 [...]
 Portia: Ay, but I fear you speak upon the rack,
 Where men enforced do speak any thing.
 Bassanio: Promise me life, and I'll confess the truth.
 Portia: Well then, confess and live.
 Bassanio: Confess and love
 Had been the very sum of my confession.
 O happy torment, when my torturer
 Doth teach me answers for deliverance!
 (3.2.24-38)

Understanding this passage depends on the audience's presumed awareness of the link between torture and confession as well as a sense that torture inevitably produces false confessions. Crucially, Portia gives voice to a critique of torture—on the rack, “men enforced do speak anything,” she says—at least as old as Aristotle's *Rhetoric*.^[2] It is fascinating that the woman who eventually compels Shylock to admit he is “content” is also the person in the play who asserts that the objects of state-sanctioned coercion, or torture, can be made to “speak anything.”

At other times, “rack” may be deployed as a symbol for suffering caused by various non-literal means, including what we would refer to today as psychological torture. In *Twelfth Night*, absence between friends becomes a form of torture, as Sebastian proclaims: “Antonio, O my dear Antonio! / How have the hours rack'd and tortur'd me, / Since I have lost thee!” (5.1.218-20). In a more serious context, *Othello*, the rack is invoked by Othello to express the torturous feelings of uncertainty induced in him by Iago's insinuations about Desdemona: “Avaunt, be gone! Thou hast set me on the rack. / I swear 'tis better to be much abus'd / Than but to know't a little” (3.3.335-7). Likewise, in *The Tragedy of King Lear*, in one of the most compelling references to the rack in Shakespeare, Kent eloquently enjoins Edgar to let the soul of the

just-deceased King depart the world in peace: “Vex not his ghost. O, let him pass, he hates him / That would upon the rack of this tough world / Stretch him out longer” (5.3.314-316). Kent seems to rewrite the extensive suffering depicted in the play as a form of torture, a gesture which in itself is not necessarily exceptionally note-worthy (since the play is filled with awful things), but which takes on added significance given the practice of torture in the world outside the playhouse.^[3]

“Torture” and “Torment”

In addition to his use of the word “rack” and its variants, some variant of the word “torture” is used fifty times in Shakespeare’s complete works; some variant of the word “torment” is used in about equal measure, fifty-three times.^[4] Like variants of “rack,” variants of “torture” and “torment” appear in a variety of contexts in ways that seem unrelated to genre. Distributed as such, these variants of “torture” and “torment” appear in Shakespeare’s works in about equal numbers. There are sixteen variants of “torture” in comedy and romance; sixteen variants in history; sixteen variants in tragedy; and six variants in poetry. Likewise, there are eighteen variants of “torment” in comedy and romance; fifteen variants in history; fourteen variants in tragedy; and eight variants in poetry. As with “rack,” either term can be used in a literal or figurative context: that is, while sometimes each might refer to an episode of torture, just as often they are metaphors for the anguish of unrequited love, for example, or for the agony of uncertainty or ignorance.

The plays in which a variant of “torture” appears most often are *Cymbeline* and *2 Henry VI*, tied with six appearances each. Indeed, the *Henry VI* trilogy, taken as a group, is the most torture/torment-oriented body of texts in the whole corpus: there are fourteen uses of the words in these three plays. There is a possible explanation for this in the fact that Holinshed’s *Chronicles*, one of Shakespeare’s primary sources for the play, describes the reign of Henry VI as the period when the Duke of Exeter “first brought into the Tower the Rack or Brake allowed in many cases by the Civill Law: and thereupon the Rack is called the Duke of Exeter’s daughter, because he first brought it thither”

(Coke 35). For all this, however, there is no staged depiction of torture in the play.

On the other hand, in *King Lear*, the play that contains the most famous scene of torture in all of Shakespeare (indeed, probably in all Renaissance drama)—the blinding of Gloucester—“torture” does not appear in at all. The omission of the word itself is irrelevant, however; as has long been noted, the play is otherwise rife with the imagery of torture, torment, and suffering: “In the play we are conscious all through of the atmosphere of buffeting, strain, and strife...of a human body in anguished movement, tugged, wrenched, beaten, pierced, stung, scourged, dislocated, flayed, gashed, scalded, tortured, and finally broken on the rack” (Spurgeon 338-9).

In Shakespeare’s *Sonnets*, “torture” appears twice (*Sonnets* 28 and 133), and “torment” three times (*Sonnets* 39, 132, and 133). Taken as a whole, the *Sonnets* are saturated by a sense of the torment of the speaker, inflicted by his mistress, as well as, occasionally, the torment the speaker would like to inflict on his mistress.^[5] These feelings are most clearly on display in number 133, in which both words appear:

Beshrew that heart that makes my heart to groan
 For that deep wound it gives my friend and me;
 Is’t not enough to torture me alone,
 But slave to slavery my sweet’st friend must be?
 Me from myself thy cruel hand hath taken,
 And my next self thou harder hast engrossed:
 Of him, myself, and thee I am forsaken,
 A torment thrice threefold thus to be crossed.
 Prison my heart in thy steel bosom’s ward,
 But then my friend’s heart let my poor heart bail;
 Whoe’er keeps me, let my heart be his guard,
 Thou canst not then use rigor in my jail:
 And yet thou wilt, for I being pent in thee,
 Perforce am thine, and all that is in me. (Sonnet 33)

The anguish of the *Sonnets* is here collapsed into a single image, of the speaker as a prisoner of the unnamed addressee of the sonnet. The speaker’s “heart,” the part of the body most often posited as the object of torture, is made to “groan” by the torment it endures at the hand of the cruel mistress, here imagined as a jailer-cum-tormentor. Significantly, the next sonnet in the

sequence, number 134, opens with a confession: “So, now I have confess’d that he is thine, / And I myself am mortgag’d to thy will...” (Sonnet 134, 1-2). The torture and torment described in the preceding sonnet have produced, as torture is so often imagined to do, a confession from its victim: they have made him groan and speak—and then write poetry.

Finally, the word “torment” appears most often in *The Tempest* (eight times), all clustered, with one exception, first in an exchange between Prospero and Ariel and again in an exchange between Caliban, Stefano, and Trinculo. Coming as they do rather late in Shakespeare’s career, these appearances nicely encapsulate the potential thematic significance of the idea of torture and/or torment in all his plays. In the first cluster, Prospero uses the word three times to describe the conditions from which he freed Ariel, who had been trapped in the crushing prison of a tree (1.2.251, 287, 289). Freed, that is, to be Prospero’s servant; these reminders (part exposition) are given by Prospero to justify Ariel’s continuing servitude. One supposes they are there to inculcate gratitude in Ariel for Prospero’s benevolence, but one may also hear in them the threat of return: *remember that I knew how to free you; it follows that I know how to put you back again*. In the second cluster (2.2.15, 56, 64, 71), “torment” is used exclusively by Caliban in his first encounter with Stefano and Trinculo. Assuming that they are spirits sent by Prospero to goad him into working faster, Caliban repeatedly asks them not to torment him.

The only appearance of “rack” in *The Tempest*, albeit in a slightly different sense than those outlined above, also appears in the context of Caliban’s servile relationship to Prospero, in a threat spoken by Prospero to Caliban: “If thou neglect’st, or dost unwillingly / What I command, I’ll rack thee with old cramps, / Fill all thy bones with aches, make thee roar / That beasts shall tremble at thy din” (1.2.368-71). “Rack” is used here to mean simply “to cause extreme pain to (a person or a part of the body)” (*OED*, “rack, v.1,” especially sense 2.b) and often used to describe the effects of disease (as in *a racking cough*, for example). Note, however, that Prospero’s threat to “rack” Caliban is accompanied by an insistence that he will make the victim “roar.” In many places elsewhere in Shakespeare, torment is imagined to produce guttural sounds, inchoate expressions of pain and feeling—near-animal outcries. Likewise, at the end of *Othello*, Emilia declares to

Othello, “Nay, lay thee down and roar; / For thou hast kill’d the sweetest innocent / That e’er did lift up eye!” after he cries out “O! O! O!” and falls onto the bed (5.2.198-200). This reference to roaring might be compared with that from *The Tempest* and to Lear’s “Howl, howl, howl” as he enters with Cordelia’s body at the end of *King Lear* (5.3.258), as well, perhaps, to the “groan” of sonnet 133, line 1.

Repeatedly in Shakespeare, the practice of torture is linked to the coercion of speech. In *The Tempest*, such coercion is exemplified in Caliban’s most famous and eloquent lines in the play, spoken to Miranda: “You taught me language, and my profit on’t / Is, I know how to curse. The red plague rid you, / For learning me your language!” (*Tempest* 1.2.363-65). In *The Tempest*, as elsewhere in the plays and in the culture generally, torture is closely associated with two points: first, torment, or susceptibility to pain and punishment, is a mark of servile status. One early modern commentator, Sir Thomas Smith, explicitly connects susceptibility to torture with servility:

torment or question which is used by the order of the ciuill lawe and custome of other countreis to put a malefactor to excessiue paine, to make him confesse of him selfe, or his fellowes or complices, is not used in England, it is taken for servile. (Smith 85)

Furthermore, in this condition of servitude, one mark of the master’s superiority is his or her power over language -- a particularly important theme in *The Tempest* -- expressed, in these cases, as the power to produce speech in the slave by tormenting him or her.

Conclusion

As the preceding analysis has suggested, Shakespeare referred often to torture, sometimes in a derogatory and politically charged fashion. Thus while there is some truth to Greene’s claim that Shakespeare largely avoided contemporary torture as a subject, at the same time the repeated allusions to it in his plays suggest that the playwright encoded his response in less obvious ways. He may have had canny reasons for doing so: the early modern stage, situated on the politically ambiguous periphery of English culture, was all too familiar with the real application of

torture. Most notably, Thomas Kyd, a significant literary influence on Shakespeare, was tortured in mysterious circumstances not long before his death in August, 1594 (Freeman). Kyd's experience reflects a truth about the political climate in which dramatists and poets in the period worked. Not long after Elizabeth's ascension to the throne, an edict of May 16, 1559, had forbidden the performance of plays on the subject of politics or religion—these “being no meet matters to be written or treated upon but by men of authority, learning, and wisdom, nor to be handled before any audience but of grave and discreet persons” (Hughes and Larkin 115-16; Montrose 24). Nonetheless, the charged political climate in which the playwrights lived and wrote found its way into the drama. The looming image of the rack and the threat of torture were a part of the life of the period, political and otherwise, and Shakespeare's plays repeatedly call attention to this fact.

Notes

1. The plays are *1 Henry IV*, *1 Henry VI*, *2 Henry VI*, *King Lear*, *Love's Labor's Lost*, *Measure for Measure*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *Much Ado about Nothing*, *Othello*, *The Tempest*, *Troilus and Cressida*, *Twelfth Night*, and *The Winter's Tale*. Shakespeare also mentions other torture devices, including the *strappado* (*2 Henry IV* 2.4.237), the *wheel* (meaning “a large wheel, or contrivance resembling one, used in various ways as an instrument of torture or punishment,” [*wheel, n.* in *OED*; see also “*break, v.*,” 7.b., to *break on the wheel*]; cf. the “wheel of fire” in *The Tragedy of King Lear* 4.7.44-47), and even “cars” (i.e. carts; cf. *Twelfth Night* 2.5.63-4, “Though our silence be drawn from us with cars, yet peace”). All citations from Shakespeare are to *The Riverside Shakespeare* edited by G. Blakemore Evans.

2. He writes, “[W]e may say what is true of torture...that people under its compulsion tell lies quite as often as they tell the truth, sometimes recklessly making a false charge in order to be let off sooner” (1.15.8 [1376b-1377a]).

3. An actual rack is thought to have appeared on stage only rarely in the years immediately following Elizabeth's death. In George

Chapman's *Bussy D'Ambois* (1604), the Count of Montsurry puts his wife Tamyra on the rack to force her to confess the name of the person with whom she has committed adultery. Setting her on the rack, Montsurry says "now Torture use / This other engine on th' habituate powers / Of her thrice damn'd and whorish fortitude" (5.1.136-8). Later, in Fletcher and Massinger's *The Double Marriage* (1619-1622), another female character is tortured on stage, in a more political context (she is married to the tyrant Ferrand's chief political opponent; see act one, scene two). Regular depictions of racking in plays were not common until the Restoration period, however; on this point, see Ayanna Thompson's informative study *Performing Race and Torture on the Early Modern Stage*.

4. These figures are derived from Martin Spevack's *Complete and Systematic Concordance to the Works of Shakespeare*. Occasionally, the terms *torture* and *torment* are used interchangeably in Shakespeare (as at *Othello* 5.2.305, "Torments will ope thy lips," where interrogatory torture appears to be indicated).

5. The centrality of torture to Shakespeare's sonnet sequence, as well as other sonnet sequences from the period, is posited by Wilson in his admirable but brief discussion of these topics.

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