

THE LURE OF THE ARENA
Social Psychology and the Crowd at the Roman Games

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There are thus very good reasons for supposing that psychological processes and the behavioral patterns that partly stem from them transcend time and space. In most cases this supposition is implicit in historical studies, but here it stands as a primary investigative tool. As noted in the introduction, social psychology is the essential instrument for what follows, since it demands integration of cultural considerations into its analysis. Three areas of social psychology are particularly pertinent to the arena crowd: the psychology of groups and crowds in general, and of sports spectators in particular; the psychology of prejudice; and the psychology of attraction to violence as spectacle and entertainment. That the Romans were not immune to these processes is demonstrated even by a cursory glance at the facts. The Roman hierarchical conception of social organization is practically a paean to group processes. The Romans assigned individuals into any number of group categories and treated them accordingly. As we shall see (chapter 3), this group-based social hierarchy was made manifest in the arena's stands. Ancient descriptions of crowd behavior evoke the thrill of participation in watching sport and competition. Prejudice is not only identifiable in the Roman world, it was sanctioned in all sorts of ways, both legally and socially. Finally, the scale and ubiquity of amphitheaters and other venues for gladiatorial shows can hardly leave in doubt the attractiveness of violent spectacle in the Roman world. Even more importantly, as we shall see in the next chapter, the Romans were not alone in succumbing to this attraction.¹³¹

¹³¹ Charles Dickens (Letter to the *Daily News*, 28 Feb. 1846) averred that it was people's "secret nature" to harbor "a dark and dreadful interest in the punishment at issue." A universal brutal streak, if you will.

CHAPTER 2

A catalog of cruelty

No animal could ever be so cruel as a man, so artfully, so artistically cruel.

F. Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880)¹

Vast was the number of Spectators (as always is both there and everywhere else at such unpleasant Sights)

W. Montague, *The Delights of Holland* (1696), on the crowds at Amsterdam executions²

Many people in different times and places have been eager to watch people and animals degraded, hurt, and killed as a public spectacle.³ In this chapter I present just a sample of the vast corpus of comparative evidence, drawn from divergent times and places, for violence staged before spectators. The sheer volume of pertinent data is telling in itself; indeed, there is much that cannot be included without extending the length of this treatment by needless replication of examples. The draw of violent spectacle emerges as not so much the exception but the rule.

PUNISHMENT

The brutal methods of execution employed in the Roman arena are well known. People were burned to death, crucified, exposed to wild beasts, cut down unarmed, or subjected to elaborate execution rituals inspired

¹ F. Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. L. Pevear and L. Volokhonsky (New York, 1990; originally published 1880), 238.

² W. Montague, *The Delights of Holland* (London, 1696), 179.

³ As recognized long ago by Friedländer, *Sittengeschichte Roms*, vol. II, 98. See also Kyle, *Spectacles of Death*, 133–40, for a brief collection of ancient comparanda. At the other end of the chronological spectrum, see the astute musings on the modern fascination with horror and violence in S. King, *Danse Macabre* (New York, 1981), and H. Schechter, *Savage Pastimes: A Cultural History of Violent Entertainment* (New York, 2009).

by motifs drawn from classical mythology.⁴ Four features stand out. First, spectacular executions in the arena were intentionally degrading and humiliating to the victim. As such, Roman law reserved them for true outsiders (bandits, war captives, slaves, murderers of low social status, etc.). Second, the amphitheater was not the original, or even the primary, place of execution in the Roman world. Public executions had long been held outside the arena, and continued to be so after the emergence and widespread diffusion of arena spectacles (see above, introduction, p. 7). Third, connected to the second, execution methods in the arena were either adapted from earlier modes or invented anew so as to offer the most interesting sight possible for the audience. This is best viewed as a secondary development, the consequence of moving some executions into the context of gladiatorial spectacles or beast hunts. Fourth, arena executions communicated symbolic messages to the crowd about the value of conformity, the power of the emperor, and society's solidarity in the face of threats to the established order. The arena context amplified these messages, insofar as the emperor (or members of the local elite) was personally present and the sociopolitical order was made manifest by the hierarchical seating arrangements.

Historical comparanda are legion for the popularity of rituals of public punishment, sometimes of shocking violence and terrible duration. While surviving documentation necessarily tilts the record in a European direction,⁵ large crowds turning out to watch public torture and murder are not restricted to the West or to places colonized by Westerners. In what follows, instances where spectators' attitudes or reactions have been recorded are given special attention, as are occasions when particularly vile punishments were staged in front of large crowds.

In Early Dynastic Mesopotamia (c. 3,000–2,350 BC) the execution of prisoners of war appears to have been normative, since the economic infrastructure was insufficiently developed to accommodate and exploit large numbers of slaves efficiently.⁶ Evidence is lacking to determine in what circumstances such executions took place, although a relief fragment from the Mesopotamian site of Girsu (modern Tello), now in the Louvre

⁴ See Barton, "Emotional Economy"; E. Cantarella, *I supplizi capitali in Grecia e a Roma* (Milan, 1991), 153–337 (who adopts an anthropological approach and has little to say about arena executions); Coleman, "Fatal Charades"; Kyle, *Spectacles of Death*, esp. 91–102; C. Vismara, *Il supplizio come spettacolo* (Rome, 1990); Wiedemann, *Emperors and Gladiators*, 68–97.

⁵ And is further limited by chronology, as descriptions of execution procedures and spectator reactions only become available in the sixteenth century and after.

⁶ F. Gelb, "Prisoners of War in Early Mesopotamia," *JNES* 32 (1973), 70–98.

and dated to c. 2,600 BC, shows a bound captive being hit over the head with a mace in the presence of a divinity, suggesting perhaps some sort of ritual involving human sacrifice. (If this conjecture is right, the relief offers an early example of how punitive and religious violence could be combined.) The location – whether on the battlefield or in town – is not clear. Mesopotamian lawcodes stipulate capital punishment or mutilation, particularly partial or total blinding, for many offenses. Given the need to broadcast the effectiveness of the law, we may assume a public context such as the marketplace for most such procedures.⁷ The vicious executions and mutilations of the Assyrians are graphically recorded in royal inscriptions and on palace reliefs, but they appear mostly in the context of warfare against recalcitrant cities under siege, and as such are examples of politically motivated terror campaigns aimed at opponents rather than ritual punishments carried out in front of voluntary spectators.⁸ There are exceptions. For instance, King Assurnasirpal II (883–859 BC) reports transporting a rebel leader to Nineveh (one of the Assyrian royal cities), flaying him, and draping his skin over the city walls. These circumstances surely imply that the procedure was staged as a spectacle for the edification of Nineveh's populace.⁹

The records of ancient Egypt reveal punitive violence, including blinding, beating with sticks, cutting, amputation, impaling, and, more rarely, burning and frying on a brazier. The places where such rituals were staged are usually not specified, but public spaces appear to have been the norm; we read of executions at the site of a crime, or at the palace gates. The dramatic means of killing alone imply a public dimension: modes of sequestered execution tend to be more mundane and seek less to impress (poisoning, hanging, garroting, suffocating, electrocution, lethal injection, etc.). How frequent public punishments were in Egypt, how many crimes earned them, and the degree, if any, to which the spectacles attracted large crowds are not details recoverable from the laconic tone of the (predominantly)

⁷ Most lawcodes laconically prescribe death, but sometimes they specify the method as burning, drowning, or impaling; see J. B. Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, 3rd edn. (Princeton, 1969), 159–98 (lawcodes of Eshnunna and Hammurabi). In at least one instance, the stipulated penalty was to be "beaten sixty times with an oxtail whip in the assembly"; *ibid.*, 175 (no. 202).

⁸ H. W. F. Saggs, "Assyrian Warfare in the Sargonid Period," *Iraq* 25 (1963), 145–54. For examples, see A. K. Grayson, *Assyrian Rulers of the Early First Millennium BC*, 2 vols. (Toronto, 1991–6); E. Bleibtreu, "Grisly Assyrian Record of Torture and Death," *BAR* (Jan./Feb. 1991), 52–61.

⁹ Grayson, *Assyrian Rulers*, vol. 1, 199. What is unusual here is the location of the punishment. In most instances, Assyrian atrocities were carried out directly outside the rebel communities, as part of the campaign itself (innumerable examples of which can be gleaned from *ibid.*).

official evidence for public punishment in Egypt. Presumably, at least some people came to watch.¹⁰

In a passage in Plato's *Gorgias* Socrates argues that malefactors who make amends by enduring punishment are metaphysically better off than those who escape punishment entirely. His interlocutor, Polus, replies:

If a man be caught criminally plotting to make himself a despot, and he be straightaway put on the rack and castrated and have his eyes burnt out, and after suffering himself and seeing inflicted on his wife and children a number of grievous torments of every kind, he be finally crucified or burnt in a coat of pitch, will he be happier than if he escapes and makes himself despot, and pass his life as the ruler in his city?¹¹

No direct evidence suggests that such vicious measures were regularly applied to real people, and the passage may throw light only on a dark corner of one educated Athenian's imagination. That said, we read that in 514 BC the tyrannicide Aristogeiton was captured alive (his accomplice Harmodios having been killed on the spot) and tortured for a long time ([Aristot.] *Ath. Pol.* 18.4). Herodotus (9.5) reports that Lycidas, who suggested making peace with Xerxes during the Persian Wars, was stoned to death by an angry mob. A mob of Athenian women then moved on to Lycidas' house and, just for good measure, stoned his wife and children to death too. Herodotus also reports (9.120) that the Greeks crucified Artayactes, Persian satrap of the region around Sestus, and forced him to watch his son being stoned to death before his eyes. According to Plutarch (*Per.* 28.1–3), some rebellious Samians were harshly treated by Pericles: they were dragged to the agora, fastened to boards, and exhibited for ten days, then clubbed to death and left unburied. Demosthenes (18.133) refers to an ex-citizen Antiphon being

¹⁰ A. Leahy, "Death by Fire in Ancient Egypt," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 27 (1984), 199–206; D. Lorton, "The Treatment of Criminals in Ancient Egypt through the New Kingdom," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 20 (1977), 2–64; J. A. Tyldesley, *Judgment of the Pharaoh: Crime and Punishment in Ancient Egypt* (London, 2000), 60–76 (esp. 65–8 for public locations). Tyldesley (14) doubts that public executions "became the popular spectator events that they were in many societies," but official evidence, which is silent about spectators, does not reflect the totality of the social reality. See the comments of A. G. McDowell in D. B. Redford (ed.), *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt*, 3 vols. (Oxford, 2001), vol. 1, 315–20, s.v. "Crime and Punishment."

¹¹ Pl. *Grg.* 473c (Loeb trans.): ἐὰν ἀδικῶν ἄνθρωπος ληφθῆ τυραννίδι ἐπιβουλεύων, καὶ ληφθεὶς στρεβλώται καὶ ἐκτέμνηται καὶ τοὺς ὀφθαλμοὺς ἐκκάρηται, καὶ ἄλλας πολλὰς καὶ μεγάλας καὶ παντοδαπὰς λώβας αὐτὸς τε λωβηθεὶς καὶ τοὺς αὐτοῦ ἐπιδὼν παῖδάς τε καὶ γυναῖκα τὸ ἔσχατον ἀναστραυρωθῆ ἢ καταπιττωθῆ, οὗτος εὐδαιμονέστερος ἔσται, ἢ ἐὰν διαφυγῶν τύραννος καταστή καὶ ἄρχων ἐν τῇ πόλει διαβίῃ; similar lists of dread punishments appear at *Ar. Ran.* 610–25; Pl. *Resp.* 361c; Aesch. *Eum.* 186–90; see also Pl. *Grg.* 525a–c for a theory of justice that emphasizes exemplary punishment. Plutarch (*Them.* 22.2) mentions a spot near the Agora in the Athens of his day where public officers threw out the bodies of the executed.

racked and executed, but he provides no details as to whether the procedure was carried out in public.

All of these examples pertain to times of war or political sedition. It is far less clear that harsh and humiliating punishments were routinely and publicly meted out to common criminals in peacetime. But it may well have been so.¹² Slaves appear to have been tortured under Athenian law, though the details of the practice – even its reality – have been seriously questioned.¹³ That public executions took place in ancient Athens, however, emerges from references to the *barathron*, a public execution pit which, in Plato's day, appears to have been located outside the northern wall. There the unburied bodies of the executed were to be seen by passers-by.¹⁴ Classical Athens had a board of public order, the Eleven, that presided over executions, which were carried out by a public slave in service to the board. Corporal punishment was also practiced, predominantly against slaves, as were some punishments of public humiliation, such as fastening in stocks.¹⁵

Passing beyond Antiquity, our sources for Dark Age punitive practices are not good,¹⁶ but throughout the Middle Ages in continental Europe it is clear that many forms of aggravated execution and public torture were employed, including burning, boiling alive in oil (feet first), decapitation, burial alive, drawing and quartering, branding, flogging, and miscellaneous forms of mutilation. For those guilty of multiple offenses, cumulative punishment could be applied, if stipulated by the court. In this way, lethal and non-lethal punishments were often combined, so that torture preceded execution, or mutilation of the body was carried out *post*

¹² Cantarella, *Supplizi*, 19–116, esp. 73–87.

¹³ See C. Carey, "A Note on Torture in Athenian Homicide Cases," *Historia* 37 (1988), 241–5; M. Gagarin, "The Torture of Slaves in Athenian Law," *CP* 91 (1996), 1–18; D. Mithady, "Torture and Rhetoric in Athens," *JHS* 106 (1996), 119–31. See also V. J. Hunter, *Policing Athens: Social Control in the Attic Lawsuits, 420–320 BC* (Princeton, 1994), 70–95 (on slaves and torture). Some of these scholars (notably Gagarin) insist that slave torture was not actually practiced, but was rather a rhetorical topos. Note also *Ant.* 1.20, 5.30, *Dem.* 48.16–19, *Lys.* 7.35 for instances of penal or judicial torture at Athens.

¹⁴ See *Hdt.* 7.133; *Xen. Hell.* 1.7.20; *Plut. Aristid.* 3, *Them.* 22; *Thuc.* 2.67. Cantarella, *Supplizi*, 96–105; *RE* 2.2 (1896), 2854, s.v. "barathron" (Thalheim). For the visibility of the bodies, see *Pl. Resp.* 439e–40a.

¹⁵ See D. S. Allen, *The World of Prometheus: The Politics of Punishing in Democratic Athens* (Princeton, 2000), 197–242, esp. 200–2 where the discovery of seventeen execution victims in a mass grave at Phalerum is noted; Hunter, *Policing Athens*, 154–84, who comments (184), "The venue chosen for penalties that afflicted the body was calculated to produce large gatherings eager for a spectacle." See also M. Gras, "Cité grecque et lapidation," in *Châtiment dans la cité*, 75–89; V. Hunter, "Crime and Criminals in Plato's Laws," *Museion* 9 (2009), 1–19.

¹⁶ See K. Royer, "The Body in Parts: Reading the Execution Ritual in Late Medieval England," *Historical Reflections/Reflexions Historiques* 29 (2003), 319–39, esp. 325–6 on Anglo-Saxon punishments.

mortem.¹⁷ The *Sachsenspiegel*, an illuminated German legal code of 1220–35, shows beheading, hanging, hacking, the birching and shearing of a woman tied to a stake, and mutilation. It is not evident from the *Sachsenspiegel*, however, that these punishments attracted crowds.¹⁸ But there is no reason to think that they did not. In Medieval France, for instance, punishments consistently attracted large crowds of spectators, and the grim human detritus produced by executions was hung from gibbets at the town gates, which extended and further publicized the spectacle.¹⁹ Later engravings suggest that the marketplace was the setting for many such punishments. If so, crowds of spectators would be a natural consequence. In 1488 the town of Mons paid a considerable sum of money to purchase a brigand from a neighboring community, so that he could be quartered in their town. Presumably, the good people of Mons would have spared themselves the expense unless there was considerable public interest in coming out to watch.²⁰

Particularly unpleasant was “wheeling,” also called “braiding” or “breaking on the wheel” (in France) or “breaking with the wheel” (in Germany). The procedure took many forms and was employed in numerous countries across the European continent and in foreign colonies. The usual method was for the victim to be tied to a scaffold or laid out on the ground with wooden struts to raise the limbs, and a wagon wheel (or a hammer, iron bar, or club) used to break them. Special execution wheels were manufactured, with projecting flanges for added smashing power. Alternatively, victims could be run over repeatedly by heavy wagons. The traditional *dénouement* was for the condemned to have their ruined limbs threaded through the spokes of another wagon wheel – the “braiding” part of the action – which was then hoisted on a pole for display. There the victim, if not dead already, could linger for days. A harrowing eyewitness account from 1607 reports how the victim was transformed “into a sort of huge screaming puppet writhing in rivulets of blood, a puppet with four tentacles, like a sea

monster of raw, slimy and shapeless flesh, mixed with splinters of smashed bones.” This mode of execution was employed in France until 1787, and in Germany into the 1840s (it was finally taken off the books in Prussia in 1851).²¹ The number of blows to be administered to each limb depended on the heinousness of the crime and could be specified in the sentence; the executioner could also be instructed to work “from the top down” (delivering the killing blow first) or “from the bottom up” (to maximize the suffering). Up to forty blows are stipulated in some instances.

A woodcut (Fig. 1) shows the execution by wheeling of convicted parricide Franz Seiboldt in Nuremberg on September 22, 1589. A sequence of events is enclosed in a single frame. Seiboldt shoots his father at top left and then, in the foreground, is shown being transported to the *Rabenstein* (the ravenstone, the traditional German place of execution) outside town. He sits in a carriage facing two clergymen while an executioner pinches the flesh of his arms with red-hot tongs, which have been heated in a brazier by an attendant wielding bellows. At center right, Seiboldt is shown being broken with the wheel, his limbs raised by wooden blocks to facilitate the smashing of his limbs. In the background can be seen hoisted wheels festooned with the tatters of previous victims, a severed head on a spike, and a gallows with dangling corpses. Around the *Rabenstein* is gathered a crowd of well-dressed gentlemen (two on horseback), as well as women and children, but it is important to recall that all the events portrayed in the woodcut (save the initial murder, of course) would have taken place in public view. Seiboldt’s sentence would have been read to him in the town center before large crowds; his transition to the place of execution followed by a crowd, perhaps with schoolboys singing hymns (as was common); and the execution itself carried out before spectators.²²

When the sources begin to pay attention to the spectators in the eighteenth century, the crowds emerge as substantial to enormous. The beheading of bandit Lips Tullian and four of his accomplices at Dresden in 1715 took place while “more than 20,000 people, 144 carriages, and some 300

¹⁷ Evans, *Rituals of Retribution*, 27–35; Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 47–51; A. McCall, *The Medieval Underworld* (London, 1979; reprint, Stroud, 2004), 41–81. See also W. Schild, “History of Crime and Punishment,” in C. Hinkeldey (ed.), *Criminal Justice through the Ages: From Divine Judgement to Modern German Legislation* (Rothenburg ob der Tauber, 1993), 99–173, esp. 131–64 (survey of methods of execution and mutilation, with many Early Modern woodcuts featuring watching crowds). Also note B. Innes, *The History of Torture* (New York, 1998).

¹⁸ See W. Schild, “History of Criminal Law and Procedure,” in Hinkeldey (ed.), *Criminal Justice through the Ages*, 46–98, esp. 65–80 on the *Sachsenspiegel*.

¹⁹ E. Cohen, “To Die a Criminal for the Public Good: The Execution Ritual in Late Medieval Paris,” in B. S. Bachrach and D. Nicholas (eds.), *Law, Custom and the Social Fabric in Medieval Europe: Essays in Honor of Bryce Lyon* (Kalamazoo, 1990), 285–304.

²⁰ McCall, *Medieval Underworld*, 72.

²¹ On the procedure of “wheeling,” see G. Abbott, *Execution: The Guillotine, the Pendulum, the Thousand Cuts, the Spanish Donkey, and 66 Other Ways of Putting Someone to Death* (New York, 2006), 39–50; Merback, *The Thief, the Cross and the Wheel*, 126–97 (quote from 1607 at 160–1); van Dülmen, *Theatre of Horror*, 92–6.

²² See van Dülmen, *Theatre of Horror*, 107–18, who stresses that the public nature of the different phases from sentence to death were key to their very purpose. See also Evans, *Rituals of Retribution*, 65–108 and 238. The latter includes (at 79) a depiction from 1726 of a mass execution by wheeling, hanging, and decapitation before a huge crowd, with the fashionable on horseback and in carriages; for many more such images, see Merback, *The Thief, the Cross and the Wheel, passim*.

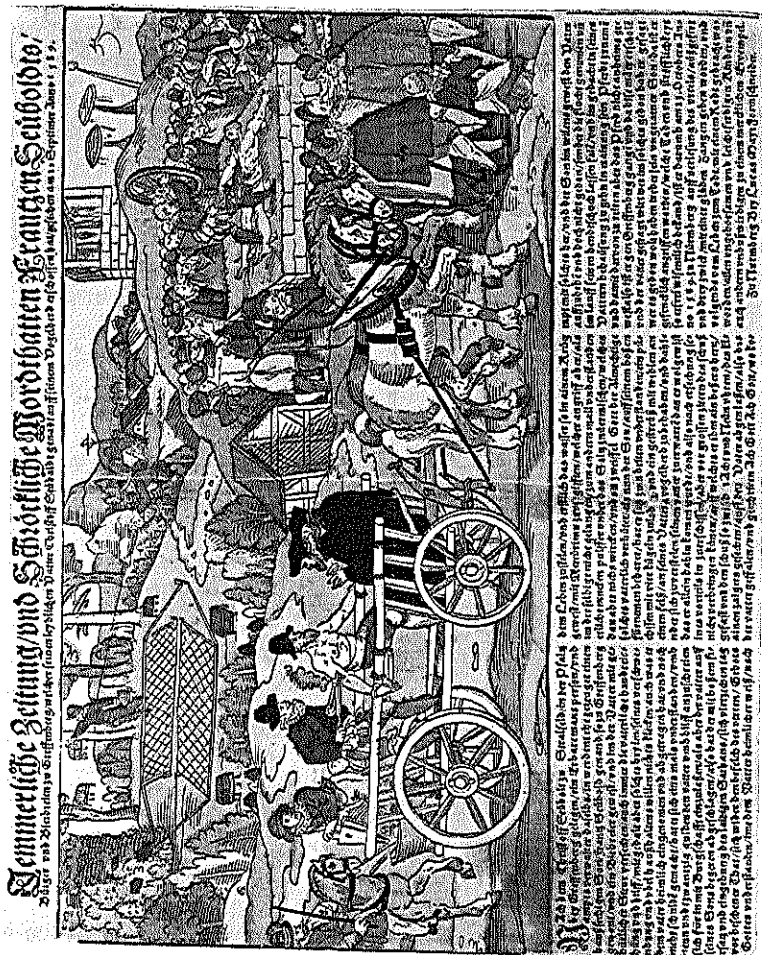


Figure 1 Woodcut of the execution of Franz Seuboldt in 1589

horses looked on.”²³ When the notorious poacher Matthias Klostermaier was broken with the wheel in Munich in 1771, the event drew so many visitors to town that all the guesthouses of the city were filled, and most of the private houses also. On the day itself, masses assembled at the town hall to watch the reading of the sentence, while others hurried to the place of execution to secure good vantage points. An etching of Klostermaier’s demise (Fig. 2) shows an enormous sea of people watching the proceedings. Noteworthy is the presence of carriages, men on horseback, women and children, and a viewing stand in the midst of the crowd, at center right. In the background, latecomers appear to sprint and gallop to the action. Crowds at *ancien régime* executions in France were also routinely vast: the wheeling of the bandit Cartouche in 1721 drew tens of thousands of spectators into the Place de Grève in Paris.²⁴

Alexis de Tocqueville quotes the letters of Mme. de Sévigné to her daughter describing the suppression of a peasant revolt in Brittany in 1675. This aristocratic lady, whom de Tocqueville deems no barbarian, describes breakings on the wheel, quarterings, and hangings which she had witnessed. The good lady comments “We are not so broken on the wheel now; one in a week, to keep justice going; it is true that hanging now seems quite a treat.”²⁵ Mme. de Sévigné’s habit of watching executions was not idiosyncratic. The opening of Jean Racine’s tragedy *Britannicus* in Paris on December 13, 1669 was less well attended than expected, since an execution in a neighboring square attracted away a large portion of the potential audience. They apparently preferred the real thing to a theatrical facsimile.²⁶ The situation echoes that facing Terence as he presented his new play *Hecyra* in 164 BC: the announcement

²³ Evans, *Rituals of Retribution*, 73–4 (quote at 73).
²⁴ P. Bastien, *L’exécution publique à Paris au XVIIIe siècle: une histoire des rituels judiciaires* (Seyssel, 2006), 136–7. Crowds of comparable size assembled in England to watch hangings; Gatrell, *Hanging Tree*, 56–8. It is claimed that the execution of St. Pol in Paris in 1475 drew some 200,000 spectators, but this is surely an exaggerated figure; see the *Chronicle of Jean de Troyes*, cited in M. Petitot, *Collection des mémoires relatifs à l’histoire de France*, 130 vols. (Paris, 1819–29), vol. xiv, 25. (My thanks to Professor Paul Friedland for this reference.)
²⁵ See A. de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. H. Reeve, 2 vols. (New York, 1899; originally published 1835), vol. II, 175. As de Tocqueville comments, what is key to de Sévigné’s attitude is the absence of any identification on her part with the victims, who were mere peasants: “Mme. de Sévigné had no clear notion of suffering in anyone who was not a person of quality.” It is possible she was being sarcastic, or adopting a fashionable insouciance; see P. Friedland, *Spectacular Justice: Theory and Practice of Executions from the Middle Ages to the French Revolution* (forthcoming; my thanks to Professor Friedland for sharing the relevant pages of his manuscript with me). Even if his reading is correct, the essential point, it seems to me, remains the same: Mme. de Sévigné watched executions as a matter of course.
²⁶ J. Racine, *Britannicus, Phaedra, Athaliah*, trans. C. H. Sisson (Oxford, 1987), xii.

of a gladiatorial show sparked an exodus from the play (Ter. *Hec. prol.* 39–42).

On March 28, 1757 the notorious rake Giacomo Casanova and his debonair companions, three of them women, were in the huge crowd that had assembled at the Place de Grève in Paris to witness the execution of Robert Francois Damiens, who had attempted to assassinate Louis XV only weeks earlier. The vast crowd was comprised of Parisians, countryfolk, and even people who had come from abroad.²⁷ Eyewitnesses describe people hanging out of chimneys and crowding the rooftops; one couple took a fall and were injured. The rooms around the square were rented to the well-to-do who watched in secluded comfort. Over a period of four hours Damiens' body was literally torn to shreds, piece by piece, until he was left a mere head and torso. Throughout his ordeal, he remained conscious and filled the square with appalling shrieks and wails. Casanova, who considered the spectacle "an offense against our common humanity," reports that he several times closed his eyes and blocked his ears to the atrocity but that his companions were riveted by the spectacle and never once diverted their gaze. They felt no compassion for Damiens, they said, due to the enormity of his crime. Casanova's friend Tiretta even had surreptitious sex with one of the women while the ghastly execution proceeded. Other eyewitnesses describe members of the crowd, especially the ladies, watching with detached disinterest or even chattering and laughing.²⁸

As humanizing Enlightenment attitudes took hold, death was prescribed for fewer and fewer crimes and execution rituals were elaborated into protracted and complex displays of state power. If wheeling was retained, it was only for the most serious offenses and all but the most despicable perpetrators were spared its agonies by being strangled before the procedure began. A Prussian regulation of 1749 stipulates that the strangulation is to be carried out "in such a way that the spectators round about will not

²⁷ The English gentleman and MP George Selwyn, whose 1791 obituary noted his "particular penchant for executions . . . that scarcely any great criminal was carried to the gallows, but George was a spectator," traveled to Paris specifically to see Damiens' grisly end. His friends in London wrote to him, lamenting his absence at a well-attended hanging there; see Gatrell, *Hanging Tree*, 253 (attendance), 262 (quote from obituary), and 276 (friends lamenting his absence).

²⁸ See G. Casanova, *The Memoirs of Jacques Casanova de Seignali 1725–1798*, trans. A. Machen, 8 vols. (Edinburgh, 1940; originally published 1894), vol. III, 310 and the comments of S.-L. Mercier (*The Picture of Paris*, trans. W. and E. Jackson [London, 1929; originally published 1781–8], 27) on ladies "carried in crowds" to the execution of Damiens: "they were the last to turn their eyes away from the hideous scene," he notes. See also Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 3–6; Bastien, *L'execution publique*, esp. 75–91 and 143–203; P. Friedland, "Beyond Deterrence: Cadavers, Effigies, Animals and the Logic of Executions in Premodern France," *Historical Reflections/Reflexions Historiques* 29 (2003), 295–317; Friedland, *Spectacular Justice*.

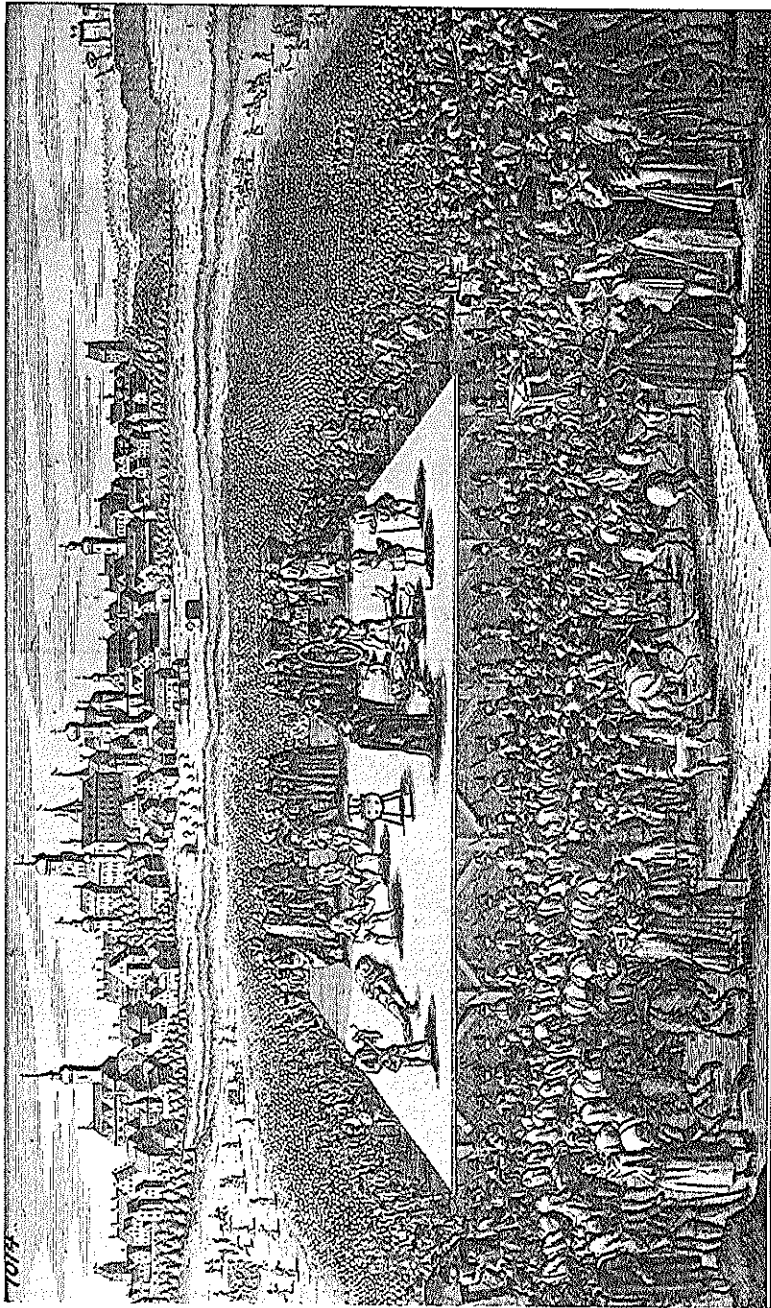


Figure 2 Execution of the poacher Matthias Klostermaier in 1771

notice it"; thereafter, the execution was to proceed as normal. The concern for the spectators' perceptions is noteworthy. The authorities' motive was presumably to maintain the deterrent value of the procedure, but there may also have been an element of fear at the crowd's likely reaction to a faked execution.²⁹ Strangulation was also employed in France throughout the eighteenth century, sometimes as the wheeling proceeded, i.e., the victim would endure a number of blows and then be strangled.³⁰

The cheering mobs who witnessed thousands of aristocrats, dissidents, and common criminals guillotined during the French Revolution are notorious. Although political partisanship doubtless played a role in drawing their attendance and shaping their attitudes toward the victims, contemporary testimony insists that many were there for the sport of it all. Despite the expectation on the part of its employers that *la machine* would inculcate the people with a sense of the law's majesty, the spectators' reaction to the process of guillotining – the procession from the prison, the exchanges on the scaffold, the rapid decapitation, the presentation of the severed head to the crowd – actually fell far short of these expectations. A vengeful and carnival atmosphere marked their attitudes more than did any expected solemnity. Platforms were erected to allow those equipped with opera glasses to get a better view. Contemporary engravings often include depictions of large gatherings of men, women, and children all clearly animated and cheering around the scaffold (with arms aloft, hats in the air, etc.).³¹ Convicted thief Nicolas Jacques Pelletier earned the dubious distinction of being the first person beheaded with the guillotine in Paris on April 24, 1792. The crowd were let down by the (non-)spectacle. They began shouting for a return to the more brutal methods of the *ancien régime*. Their dissatisfaction stemmed in part from the very novelty of the procedure, which departed from familiar rituals. But the guillotine, on its debut, was disappointing also because it was so efficient. The execution was over in a flash, death was dealt out impersonally and without much attention-arresting drama. As the Terror gathered pace, these shortcomings

²⁹ This is certainly documented in other contexts, where riots could be sparked by the cancellation of scheduled executions. See below, n. 34.

³⁰ Prussian regulation: van Dülmen, *Theatre of Horror*, 95. France: Bastien, *L'exécution publique*, 103–6 (who points out examples where the strangulation was done visibly). For a penetrating analysis of the influence of rationality on modes of execution in the Enlightenment Germany, see Evans, *Rituals of Retribution*, 109–49 (with the 1749 regulation at 122–3).

³¹ See D. Arasse, *The Guillotine and the Terror* (London, 1989), esp. 87–132; Evans, *Rituals of Retribution*, 140–9; D. Gerould, *Guillotine: Its Legend and Lore* (New York, 1992). Arasse's and Gerould's books include a sample of engravings, but for a thorough survey, see R. Paulson, *Representations of the Revolution (1789–1820)* (New Haven, 1983).

were compensated for by prolonging the process, usually with an increase in the number of decapitations staged on a single occasion.³²

The beheading of Louis XVI on January 21, 1793 was an unusual case, in part because the relative silence of the crowd was exceptional – until the deed was done, that is. Then, as one eyewitness reports,

The blood flowed and cries of joy from 80,000 armed men struck my ears . . . I saw the schoolboys of the *Quatre-Nations* throw their hats in the air; his blood flowed and some dipped their fingers in it . . . An executioner on the boards of the scaffold sold and distributed little packets of hair and the ribbon that bound them . . . I saw people pass by, arm in arm, laughing, chatting familiarly as if they were at a *fête*.³³

People are reported dancing around the scaffold.³⁴ Such was the pull of the guillotine that fully functional miniature versions were manufactured as children's toys and used to decapitate mice and birds.³⁵

Things were no better in England, where executions drew enthusiastic and boisterous crowds from the Middle Ages down to 1868, when they were moved behind prison walls.³⁶ From the early Tudor period down to 1783, for instance, thousands of men, women, and children were hanged at Tyburn outside London at six-week intervals.³⁷ These hangings ought not to be sanitized as quick and easy. They were usually messy. Terrified victims typically kicked and bucked for five or more minutes on the end of the rope; the executioner often had to pull down on their legs to finish the job. There could be hemorrhaging, or the involuntary expulsion of excreta. The majority of victims were guilty of little more than theft. The crowds of spectators were so consistently large that the owner of a nearby farm

³² See Arasse, *Guillotine*, 27–8 (disappointing inauguration) and 87–132 (subsequent innovations in procedure). Simon Schama reports how hundreds could be decapitated in a single day, at staggering rates: thirty-two heads cut off in twenty-five minutes, or twelve heads in five minutes in Lyons in October 1793; see S. Schama, *Citizens: A Chronicle of the French Revolution* (New York, 1989), esp. 619–847 (growth of the Terror), esp. 782–3 (Lyons beheadings).

³³ Quote in Schama, *Citizens*, 670.

³⁴ On the reported dancing, see Arasse, *Guillotine*, 191–2. Some spectators danced and reveled as new gallows and scaffolds were erected (to mask their own fear at the sight?); see Spierenburg, *Spectacle of Suffering*, 87–9. In England, disappointed crowds grew troublesome or riotous when scheduled hangings were cancelled; see Abbott, *Execution*, 163–92, esp. 165–6; D. D. Cooper, *The Lesson of the Scaffold: The Public Execution Controversy in Victorian England* (Athens, OH, 1984), 3.

³⁵ See Gerould, *Guillotine*, 37–9.

³⁶ See Gatrell, *Hanging Tree*; T. W. Laqueur, "Crowds, Carnival and the State in English Executions, 1604–1868," in A. L. Beier et al. (eds.), *The First Modern Society: Essays in English History in Honour of Lawrence Stone* (Cambridge, 1989), 305–55; Royer, "The Body in Parts."

³⁷ For detailed studies, see Gatrell, *Hanging Tree*, and Linebaugh, *London Hanged*. The triangular gallows at Tyburn stood roughly where Marble Arch stands in modern London. Hangings were staged at Tyburn eight times a year, or every six and a half weeks; Gatrell, *Hanging Tree*, 56.

built a wooden viewing gallery to cash in, and entrepreneurs rented out carts and ladders to those seeking a better view.³⁸ As with executions on the continent, the two-mile cavalcade of the condemned from the city to the triangular gallows at Tyburn was attended by mobs of onlookers, sometimes in a merry frame of mind: "No solemn procession" wrote Henry Fielding, "it was just the contrary; it was a low-lived, black-guard merry-making."³⁹ Snacks were sold as the hangings progressed. Horrifically graphic accounts of the condemned's crimes (usually illustrated), combined with records of their last speeches from the scaffold, were printed and sold briskly on the streets of English towns, as did their counterparts in continental Europe and the colonies.⁴⁰

Samuel Pepys nonchalantly includes notices of witnessing executions at Tyburn and elsewhere among his diary entries. On one occasion, he comments that he sent his wife to book a good spot for him, and even records that the display of one victim's heart and severed head to the crowd occasioned a shout of joy.⁴¹ The novelist Samuel Richardson commented of the Tyburn crowds in 1741 that "the face of everyone spoke a kind of mirth, as if the spectacle they had beheld had afforded Pleasure instead of pain, which I am wholly unable to account for," and over a century later Charles Dickens noted with disgust that execution crowds in central London showed "no sorrow, no salutary terror, no abhorrence, no seriousness, nothing but ribaldry, debauchery, levity, drunkenness, and flaunting vice in fifty other shapes."⁴² William Makepeace Thackeray was also amazed

³⁸ Viewing stands were not restricted to Tyburn. In 1747 a viewing stand holding 9,000 spectators collapsed at a beheading at Tower Hill in London, killing twelve; see J. Laurence, *A History of Capital Punishment* (London, 1932; reprint, New York, 1960), 171; for other comparanda, see Cooper, *Lesson of the Scaffold*, 1–26. Note also the viewing stand at center right in Fig. 2.

³⁹ P. Linebaugh, "The Tyburn Riot against the Surgeons," in D. Hay et al., *Albion's Fatal Tree: Crime and Society in Eighteenth-Century England* (New York, 1975), 65–117 (quote at 68).

⁴⁰ Last speeches and moralizing sermons: J. A. Sharpe, "Last Dying Speeches: Religion, Ideology and Public Execution in Seventeenth-Century England," *Past and Present* 107 (1985), 144–67; R. Bosco, "Lectures at the Pillory: The Early American Execution Sermon," *American Quarterly* 30 (1978), 156–76. Popular songs and verses about executions and speeches of the condemned also circulated in early modern Germany; see Evans, *Rituals of Retribution*, 150–89. Indeed, the industry in murder- and execution-related broadsheets took on a life of its own in the seventeenth century and continued down to the twentieth in America and England; see, e.g., Gatrell, *Hanging Tree*, 109–96; K. Haltunen, *Murder Most Foul: The Killer and the American Gothic Imagination* (Cambridge, MA, 1998), esp. 7–59; Schechter, *Savage Pastimes*, 27–68.

⁴¹ See, e.g., R. Latham and W. Matthews (eds.), *The Diary of Samuel Pepys: A New and Complete Transcription*, 11 vols. (Berkeley, 1970–83), vol. I, 265 (shout of joy), vol. II, 26–7 and 72–3, vol. III, 67, vol. IV, 60, vol. V, 23, vol. VII, 131 and 205, vol. VIII, 196, vol. IX, 335. Attendance at executions is folded in to Pepys' daily routine, and his execution notices are as laconic as this: "[t]his day two soldiers were hanged in the Strand for their late mutiny at Somerset-house" (*ibid.*, vol. I, 59).

⁴² For the quotes, see Laqueur, "Crowds," 330 and n. 61. Public executions were moved from Tyburn to the square outside Newgate prison in central London in 1783.

by the English execution crowd's carnivalesque attitude and regretted his attendance at a hanging as a result.⁴³ Tyburn-like scenes were reproduced at hangings all around England. Following the hanging, drawing, and quartering of a Catholic priest in Dorchester in July 1642, for instance, the crowd played football with the severed head for six hours.⁴⁴ Even if English sensibilities and social norms changed over time, the presence of crowds of spectators at executions, often in cheery form, is strikingly persistent. On the continent, spectators were generally more subdued. People there tended to watch executions with solemnity and regard them as important communal events. Continental executions have been likened to funerals: publicly celebrated, to be sure, but nevertheless serious and weighty ceremonies that affirmed sacred and secular mores.⁴⁵ But solemnity did not always prevail. The last public hanging in Vienna in 1869 attracted huge crowds and the whole affair degenerated into a street party, with public drunkenness and fighting. There are records of German executions where tickets were sold and food peddled.⁴⁶ But whatever the mood, the main point is that for many centuries, stretching well into the Enlightenment and beyond, Europeans came out in large and sometimes huge numbers to watch people hurt and killed.

The spectacle continued after the death of the condemned. It was regular practice to let the bodies of execution victims hang in public sight until they decomposed (ostensibly as a continued deterrent). Remarkably, spectators could be found who wanted to watch this process too. Well into the nineteenth century, Hounslow Heath in London was the site of up to a hundred gibbeted corpses in various states of putrefaction, such that the stench downwind was often intolerable. These exposed corpses of the executed became destinations for Sunday outings. One gibbeting in England in 1812 drew 100,000 to watch. Children would be brought to gaze upon exposed cadavers as part of their moral education. Alternatively,

⁴³ W. M. Thackeray, "Going to See a Man Hanged," *Fraser's Magazine* 22 (August 1840), 150–8. The hanging was of Courvoisier, a French valet to Lord William Russell, whom Courvoisier had murdered.

⁴⁴ S. D. Amussen, "Punishment, Discipline, and Power: The Social Meaning of Violence in Early Modern England," *Journal of British Studies* 34 (1995), 1–34, esp. 12.

⁴⁵ Evans, *Rituals of Retribution*, 99–108. For similar interpretations of executions in other European countries, see E. Cohen, "Symbols of Culpability and the Universal Language of Justice: The Ritual of Public Executions in Late Medieval Europe," *History of European Ideas* 11 (1989), 407–16; Spierenburg, *Spectacle of Suffering*, 91–4. The difference in mood between English and continental executions is observed by Laqueur, "Crowds," 317 and Evans, *Rituals of Retribution*, 106–7. One Victorian commentator caustically dubbed English execution crowds "an avalanche of ordure"; Gatrell, *Hanging Tree*, 58–61 (quote at 60).

⁴⁶ Van Dülmen, *Theatre of Horror*, 108.

the body could be "anatomized," that is, dissected for science, often in public. There are descriptions of crowd-pleasing procedures only loosely connected to scientific inquiry, such as hooking the body up to a battery to make it twitch, tanning the hide, or pickling the scalp.⁴⁷

European habits naturally transferred to the colonies. In Spanish colonial America, for instance, executions and corporal punishment were conducted in public squares, the better to cater to the large crowds that were expected (and the crowds were not exclusively European in composition). People are known to have traveled considerable distances to attend. For instance, on November 13, 1630, an "infinite number of persons on foot, on horseback, and in coaches" gathered in Collao in Peru to witness the execution of one Thomas Buesso, who had been convicted of sodomy and bestiality. They also got to see Buesso's African male lover whipped and the offending dog burned.⁴⁸ Between 1640 and 1697 a Spanish diarist in Lima noted details of two dozen public executions held in the town's main plaza before huge crowds.⁴⁹ Treatment of Amerindian rebels was particularly harsh. Following the suppression of a major Maya revolt in the Yucatan in 1761, the rebel leader Canek underwent public execution in the provincial capital, Merida. The sentence required that Canek's bones be broken with an iron bar, his flesh torn away with pincers, and that he then be suspended in a cage "until he dies naturally." His body was to be burned and the ashes scattered. The entire process lasted five hours. Over the course of the following week, eight more rebels were hanged and over 600 flogged and mutilated, all in front of large crowds.⁵⁰ In 1781 Inca rebel Tupac Amaru II was executed in Cuzco's main square. He was forced first to witness the killing of his entire family, and then had his tongue cut out before being tied to horses and torn apart.⁵¹

⁴⁷ In 1752 the British Parliament decreed that the bodies of executed murderers be dissected for science — in public; see Cooper, *Lesson of the Scaffold*, 3. The deterrent effect of the execution was thus prolonged after the actual death of the criminal. See also Evans, *Rituals of Retribution*, 86–98 (exposure of corpses) and 416–17, 656–7, 897–8 (anatomization); Gatrell, *Hanging Tree*, 246–50 (children), 255–8 (anatomization), and 267–70 (gibbeting); Spierenburg, *Spectacle of Suffering*, 90–1. See also Linebaugh, "Tyburn Riot," 69–78.

⁴⁸ See M. A. Burkholder and L. L. Johnson, *Colonial Latin America*, 3rd edn. (Oxford, 1998), 228. The arrest, trial, and execution of animal malefactors was standard practice in premodern France; see Friedland, "Beyond Deterrence," 309–13.

⁴⁹ See R. R. Miller (ed.), *Chronicle of Colonial Lima: The Diary of Josephe and Francisco Mugaburru, 1640–1697* (Norman, 1975), 26, 83, 85, 109, 126, 131, 136, 210, 267.

⁵⁰ See D. E. Dumond, *The Machete and the Cross: Campesino Rebellion in Yucatan* (Lincoln, NB, 1997), 59; R. W. Patch, "Culture, Community, and 'Rebellion' in the Yucatec Maya Uprising of 1761," in S. Schroeder (ed.), *Native Resistance and the Pax Colonial in New Spain* (Lincoln, NE, 1998), 67–83. My thanks to Professor Matthew Restall for these references.

⁵¹ O. Starn et al. (eds.), *The Peru Reader* (Durham, NC, 1995), 157–61.

Public executions consistently attracted spectators in the United States until they were discontinued in the 1930s. On July 27, 1886, for instance, the public hanging of Andrew Green in Denver, Colorado, drew a crowd estimated at 15,000. Many hundreds took up position just to watch the gallows being built. So many people came out to watch that some were a mile distant from the action when Green met his end. The crowd represented a cross-section of Denver society and comprised men, women, and children. Some ladies dressed in their Sunday best, while others enjoyed a picnic. Hucksters sold lemonade and pictures of the condemned man. The *Daily Denver Times* noted that "one would have thought that they were assembled for the purpose of seeing a horse race instead of an execution," and Sam Howe, a local detective who was an eyewitness, commented later that "the hanging was divested of solemnity by the enormous crowd, who seemed to find pleasure in the gruesome spectacle about to be enacted. . . [it] took the situation lightly and was very boisterous." Green's hanging was botched. He writhed on the end of the rope for five minutes. Spectators pushed to secure a position as close as possible to the action; boys and girls surged forward; babies were held aloft for a better view.⁵²

The last legal public execution in the United States took place on August 14, 1936, when African-American Rainey Bethea was hanged in Owensboro, Kentucky, for a rape and murder committed a few weeks earlier. An estimated 20,000 people, many in festive humor, descended on the small town from five states by airplane, train, bus, car, horse, and foot. They seized every available vantage point, scaling buildings to occupy the roofs and even hanging off lampposts. Some slept on cots around the gallows throughout the preceding night, and hawkers sold popcorn and hotdogs.⁵³ Legal public executions aside, another spectacle of public murder attracted large crowds in America until quite recently. In the southern states especially,

⁵² See W. M. King, *Going to Meet a Man: Denver's Last Legal Public Execution, 27 July 1886* (Niwot, 1990), esp. 115–45 (quotes from the *Times* at 119; from Howe at 132). After the execution, a reformist local newspaper pointedly commented "[The sheriff] had made the people happy. He had given them a spectacle equal in brutality to the exhibitions with which the Roman Emperors were wont to pander to the lowest appetites of their subjects" (*ibid.*, 139).

⁵³ See P. T. Ryan, *The Last Public Execution in America* (Kentucky, 1992), esp. chs. 24–6. This book is available at www.geocities.com/lastpublichang/ (accessed Jan. 12, 2010). Laqueur ("Crowds," 306) offers a somewhat sensationalized account. The behavior of these American spectators is vividly echoed in descriptions of Old World execution crowds, such as this one from the execution of the bandit Cartouche, November 27, 1721: "All night long, on Thursday 26th, fiacres [four-wheeled cabs] carried passengers to the Place de Grève, until it was jammed with people all waiting for the event. Windows facing the square were lit all night. The cold was biting, but the crowd lit fires right in the square and local merchants sold food and drink. Everyone was laughing, drinking, singing. Most of the spectators had had their places reserved for over a month"; cited in Abbott, *Execution*, 43.

lynchings of African-Americans and white criminals continued into the 1960s.⁵⁴ Remarkably, a genre of photography emerged from these events that preserves gruesome images of beaten and often charred or half-charred corpses hanging from trees or lampposts, sometimes in groups. In such photographs, well-dressed crowds of smiling men and women are to be seen, occasionally with their children in tow. Some of the images were made into postcards.⁵⁵

The movement of executions out of the public eye did not diminish the hunger for images of the killings among significant sectors of the modern public.⁵⁶ Indeed, as executions became rarer in nineteenth-century Europe and rail transport became available, crowds at public executions in London and elsewhere in England actually *increased* in size.⁵⁷ This development was paralleled on the continent. Fearing disorder, the authorities tried to discourage heavy attendance by moving the scaffold further and further outside town. No matter. The spectators simply walked or rode to see the action.⁵⁸ Even the total sequestering of executions behind prison walls has not reduced at least a sector of the public's appetite for the details. In 1927, when a photographer from the *Daily News* captured the electrocution of Ruth Snyder with a hidden camera, the image sold an extra 500,000 copies of the tabloid. In the United States even today, crowds routinely gather outside prisons during executions. Some are there to protest the death penalty, but others to celebrate the execution and chant their mockery of the victim, even though there is nothing at all to be seen save bare prison walls and guarded gateways. Illicit photographs leaked from execution chambers, especially electrocutions, circulate widely on the internet, and

sites (such as "World of Death") with video of hostage beheadings from the Middle East and photographs of the aftermath of accidents attract visitors by the tens of thousands. Shaky video on youtube.com of Saddam Hussein's hanging in 2006 has drawn over a million hits, on an informal count.

Although documentation is much scarcer, it is evident that ritual violence conducted as public spectacle is not exclusively a European or Western phenomenon. Among the Iroquois of the north eastern United States, captured warriors and other enemies (such as Jesuit priests) were subjected to protracted rituals of torture, sometimes for days, tied to scaffolds before crowds drawn from the village and its environs. One Jesuit account from 1642 records captives being paraded through several villages and publicly tortured in each.⁵⁹ The urban center of the Aztec empire, Tenochtitlan, saw vast rituals of human sacrifice involving progressively larger numbers of victims staged for centuries atop the huge pyramids framing the city's main plaza. The bloody spectacles would therefore be seen from almost any part of the city below. Efforts were made over time to increase the scale of the sacrifices and to vary the methods of killing.⁶⁰ The process invites comparison with the quest for novelty notable in other violent spectacles and suggests that more than religious scruple was involved in staging Aztec sacrifices, and that there was a concern also to maintain public interest by avoiding monotony. In addition to sacrifices, Aztec criminals were subjected to vicious public executions (including stoning, clubbing, burning, and crucifixion).⁶¹ Human sacrifice in the New World was not limited to the Mesoamerican region. Until well into the nineteenth century, the

⁵⁴ See W. F. Brundage, *Lynching in the New South: Georgia and Virginia, 1880-1930* (Urbana, 1993); S. E. Tolnay and E. M. Beck, *A Festival of Violence: An Analysis of Southern Lynchings, 1882-1930* (Urbana, 1995).

⁵⁵ J. Allen et al., *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America* (Santa Fe, 2000). The message on one postcard depicting the horribly burned corpse of Jesse Washington (lynched in Texas on May 16, 1916) reads: "This is the barbecue we had last night. My picture is to the left, with a cross over it. Your son, Joe."

⁵⁶ See W. Lesser, *Pictures at an Execution: An Inquiry into the Subject of Murder* (Cambridge, MA, 1993). Lesser's book treats the wider phenomenon of America's obsession with deliberate killing, both legal and illegal.

⁵⁷ See also Laqueur, "Crowds"; Linebaugh, *London Hanged*; and Cooper, *Lessons of the Scaffold*, all of whom include striking prints of Victorian hangings with large (and sometimes festive) crowds roiling around the gallows. The woodcuts of William Hogarth (1697-1764) not infrequently depict executions. The quote from William Montague in the epigraph of this chapter refers to large execution crowds in seventeenth-century Amsterdam.

⁵⁸ Evans, *Rituals of Retribution*, 41-52 (general process of increase in crowd size), 257-8 (nineteenth-century figures and official measures). Crowds of 20,000 are recorded for hangings outside Newgate prison in England, and the hanging of two highwaymen in 1807 drew 45,000 spectators; see Schechter, *Savage Pastimes*, 99.

⁵⁹ See A. Greer (ed.), *The Jesuit Relations: Natives and Missionaries in Seventeenth-Century North America* (Boston, MA, 2000), esp. 155-85; N. Knowles, "The Torture of Captives by the Indians of Eastern North America," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 82 (1940), 151-225; D. K. Richter, *The Ordeal of the Longhouse: The Peoples of the Iroquois League in the Era of European Colonization* (Chapel Hill, 1992), esp. 65-70 on torture and adoption rituals among the tribes.

⁶⁰ For an overview, see E. M. Brumfiel, "Aztec Hearts and Minds: Religion and the State in the Aztec Empire," in S. E. Alcock et al. (eds.), *Empires* (Cambridge, 2001), 283-310; G. W. Conrad and A. A. Demarest, *Religion and Empire: The Dynamics of Aztec and Inca Expansionism* (Cambridge, 1984), esp. 28-9 and 44-52. For changes in the scale and methods of ritual, see Fr. Diego Durán (died 1588?), *History of the Indies of New Spain*, trans. D. Heyden (Norman, 1994; originally published 1581), 140-3, 169-74, 191-2, 233, 288-90, 322-3, 407, 435-6; note especially 338-40 (80,400 prisoners supposedly sacrificed in one four-day ceremony) and 456-9 (variations in sacrificial techniques, including cardiac excision, partial burning, shooting with arrows, and flaying alive). Such sacrifices often took place before huge crowds; indeed, Durán (231) reports that king Moctezumah I (reigned 1440-69) said, "We shall invite the whole world [to witness a planned mass sacrifice], for an act of such great importance must be known to all, and it is better to make a big display than a little one." It is a sentiment the Roman *munerarius* would fully understand.

⁶¹ See D. Durán, *Book of the Gods and Rites and The Ancient Calendar*, trans. F. Horcasitas and D. Heyden (Norman, 1971; originally published 1574-6), 283-4.

Skidi Pawnee of Nebraska used to sacrifice captive men, women, children, and even infants to the Morning Star. This was done in full view of the village, as victims were tied to a scaffold and tortured before being killed and dismembered. Attempts by one of their leaders, Knife Chief, to stop the practice failed.⁶²

By the time of the T'ang Dynasty in ancient China (AD 618–907), five forms of punishment had become enshrined in the law: beating with a light stick, beating with a heavy stick, penal servitude, exile for life, and death. In earlier periods death was inflicted in a variety of ways, including boiling in a large pot, chopping, mashing, sawing in half (lengthwise), or pulling apart by horses. By the T'ang period the preferred methods were strangulation, decapitation, and the infamous “death by a thousand cuts” (*ling chi*). Like wheeling in Medieval Europe, this mode of execution was reserved for those guilty of the most heinous crimes.⁶³ Drawings from the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644) depict victims tied to stakes being sliced in front of onlookers. Indeed, execution in China was always very much a public affair, as suggested by its designation as *ch'i-shih*, “casting away in the marketplace” and its being staged between one and five in the afternoon, when the marketplace would be busy (public executions in premodern Europe usually also took place on market days, to maximize attendance). Many early modes of execution stipulated the public display of the malefactor's remains, also in the marketplace.⁶⁴

As part of his sojourn among the Zulus in the early nineteenth century, European trader Henry Francis Fynn reports summary public executions under the tyrannical rule of Shaka. Victims were hit on the head with a knobkerrie (a type of club), their bodies then beaten to a pulp and impaled on a stake through the anus, and left as carrion. Fynn became accustomed to this almost daily procedure, whereas a companion who joined him in Zululand could not bear to watch.⁶⁵ The native kingdom of Asante dominated the west African coast in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

⁶² Edgerton, *Sick Societies*, 142–3.

⁶³ G. MacCormack, *Traditional Chinese Penal Law* (Edinburgh, 1990), esp. 100–33 on T'ang punishments. See also M. R. Dutton, *Policing and Punishment in China: From Patriarchy to “the People”* (Cambridge, 1992), esp. 109–11 (for earlier punishments). On *ling chi*, see Abbott, *Execution*, 259–61; T. Brooks et al., *Death by a Thousand Cuts* (Cambridge, MA, 2008), esp. 1–4 for an execution carried out at the gate of the vegetable market in Beijing in 1904.

⁶⁴ See B. McKnight, *Law and Order in Sung China* (Cambridge, 1992), esp. 446–71 on the death penalty, and 448–51 for the Ming depictions of *ling chi*.

⁶⁵ J. Stuart and D. McK. Malcolm (eds.), *The Diary of Henry Francis Fynn* (Pietermaritzburg, 1950), 28–9; N. Isaacs, *Travels and Adventures in Eastern Africa Descriptive of the Zoolus, their Manners, their Customs* (Capetown, 1970; originally published 1836), 62. Note, however, the modern critique of the tradition about Shaka in, e.g., C. Hamilton, *Terrific Majesty: The Power of Shaka Zulu and the*

When European travelers entered its dazzling capital, Kumase, in 1817, they described the great wealth of the place and the warm welcome they received from the king and his court. They also met the royal executioner. He carried about with him an axe encrusted with human blood and fat, and the visitors saw a victim being led away for an appointment with him. The victim was tortured horribly en route, with knives shoved through his cheeks and under his shoulder blades, his ears severed, and the cord used to lead him piercing his nose.⁶⁶

In some parts of the world, public executions continue to be carried out to this day. In Saudi Arabia the condemned are beheaded, normally on Fridays, in one of the main squares in Riyadh, at the rate of about one a week. Women are usually shot, to spare them the indignity of bearing their necks in public. In Iran, China, North Korea, Thailand, and elsewhere executions can be staged before large crowds. In an echo of Medieval European practices, sentencing ceremonies are often staged in China as huge public rallies. In the North Korean city of Hamhung, the place of execution is located beside the town's main bridge, and schoolchildren are brought along in groups to watch (the preferred method is firing squad). Schoolchildren attending for the first time are seated at the very front. Eyewitnesses report crowds in the thousands. As recently as 1988, a public hanging in Pakistan attracted 10,000 spectators.⁶⁷

Each culture has had its own ideas about what public punishment achieves, and no doubt the motivations impelling people to attend have not been monolithic and unitary across so broad a cultural and chronological

Limis of Historical Invention (Cambridge, MA, 1998), and D. Wylie, *Savage Delight: White Myths of Shaka* (Pietermaritzburg, 2000).

⁶⁶ T. E. Bowdich, *Mission from Cape Coast Castle to Ashantee* (London, 1966; originally published 1819), 31–4.

⁶⁷ On the Pakistan hanging, see Linebaugh, *London Hanged*, xvi. The internet provides much information (as well as video and images) about contemporary public executions, although the sources must be vetted carefully. On Saudi Arabia, for instance, see Amnesty International website, s.v. “Saudi Arabia”; available at www.amnesty.org/en (accessed Jan. 12, 2010). On North Korea, see *ibid.*, s.v. “North Korea”; videos of executions have been posted at youtube.com (accessed Jan. 12, 2010). The presence of schoolchildren echoes English practices of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when taking children to the gallows or gibbet was considered an improving and educational experience (one town even declared a school holiday in 1824 to witness a hanging); see Gattrell, *Hanging Tree*, 246–50. On Thailand, see J. Head, “Eyewitness: Thailand's Public Executions,” available at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/1292812.stm> (accessed Jan. 12, 2010). For a particularly nasty public flogging and hanging in Iran in 2005, see “Iran Town Rejoices at Public Hanging,” available at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle-east/4355029.stm> (accessed Jan. 21, 2010). Indeed, public executions in Iran are often attended by large crowds and televised; see R. Fulford, “Iran's War on its Own,” *National Post* (Aug. 11, 2007), available at: www.canada.com/nationalpost/news/issuesideas/story.html?id=02679845-6f28-4db3-a222-2ae5d7043eda (accessed Jan. 12, 2010).

landscape as that reviewed here. Study of the cultural currents that flowed through such spectacles, and continue to do so, is thus a worthy and very instructive endeavor, and it is not to be doubted that the cultural meaning(s) of spectacles of punishment is closely tied to the facets of each one's historical context. This approach has its limits, however.

MEDIEVAL PUBLIC EXECUTIONS AND THE "GOOD DEATH"

By way of example, let us look a little more closely at the proposal that the ethos of the Christian "good death" infused European executions from the Middle Ages to the early nineteenth century, and that this is what motivated people to come and watch.⁶⁸ The "good death" was essentially a public, communal event. Even if people passed away at home, they did so in the presence of friends, neighbors, clergymen, and other onlookers, all of whom were there to witness and celebrate the departure of the deceased's soul to a better place. Death by execution paralleled the "good death," insofar as it was public and presided over by clerics. The latter ensured that the condemned died free from sin and, if they played their prescribed role properly, vocally repentant for past misdeeds. Execution victims could be admired and sanctified for dying under such blessed circumstances (that is, in a state of grace). The condemned also enjoyed the luxury of knowing the precise time of their deaths, so they could thoroughly prepare themselves for the transition to the hereafter. Malefactors habitually wore white on their final march to and on the scaffold, went to their deaths amidst hymns and praying, and interacted with the crowd before being killed. The whole event was thus communal, participatory, and ceremonial, analogous to other public religious rites. Death by public execution was an echo, even a mirror, of the Christian "good death." Therefore, it can be argued, spectators at European executions in this period were drawn to watch out of a solemn spirit of religious celebration.⁶⁹

One window onto popular perceptions of the execution ritual in this era is street ballads, so-called farewell songs, which were performed as street theater before an interested public. Examples from seventeenth- and

⁶⁸ For expositions of this thesis, see Merback, *The Thief, the Cross and the Wheel*, 126–97; van Dülmen, *Theatre of Horror*, 119–32; Evans, *Rituals of Retribution*, 108–238.

⁶⁹ See Friedland, "Beyond Deterrence." He argues (*Spectacular Justice*) that until the eighteenth century, *ancien régime* executions in France were participatory quasi-religious ceremonies that sought to redeem the community from the harm done by the criminal. Spectators are recorded praying and weeping and singing hymns, with the victim sometimes joining in (*ibid.*, 306–7).

eighteenth-century Germany emphasize the condemned's penitence and reconciliation with God. An example from 1683 reads in part:

This day I shall die, / Heaven shall be mine. / This day I'll see God. . . / Soul fly up to Heaven / From the body's cavern / For with Christ to rest. Rest, o soul, in Heav'n, / Rest awhile my limbs / Until the soul returns. / O troubled hearts / Why do you lament over my demise? I've gone to where I should / To where I long since would, / So wipe thy tearful eyes: For I've been sent before / To where you all must go / Every one of you.

The mutual identification of the condemned and the crowd, partly achieved by the use of the first person direct address but also inherent in the song's theological content, could hardly be clearer. Everyone dies, all good souls go to heaven – the executed just arrive there sooner. Another example, from 1735, ends:

O dearest Mother, O Mary, Thou must not leave me now, today,
Command me up to Thee above because I rush along death's way,
And Mary Magdalena too, stand by me with Thy tears of rue,
That I may be today with Thee, myself to call right blessed too.

Reconciliation with God and repentance (symbolized by Mary Magdalena) are the core messages – and also core elements in the "good death."⁷⁰

From the perspective of the authorities, however, popular views of the condemned as blessed martyrs rather went against the moral and civic messages that the execution ritual was supposed to communicate to the masses. As eighteenth-century public policy was increasingly shaped by an emerging commitment to rationalism, attempts were made to secularize executions. Clergymen were removed from the public phases of the proceedings, and the nature of the events themselves was altered to emphasize the core lessons the state desired to teach the watching public: deterrence and moral education. Public participation was more and more restricted, public sentencing abandoned, the death march speeded up, white shrouds for the condemned replaced by normal clothes, detachments of soldiers dispatched to maintain order, and the execution ritual stripped down to its bare essentials. Pastors could attend the condemned in their cells, but they were increasingly barred from their side during the procession to the scaffold and at the execution itself. The motive behind these reforms was expressly to reduce the public perception of the execution victim as in any way fortunate or enviable, as one anonymous pamphleteer in Hamburg in

⁷⁰ Evans, *Rituals of Retribution*, 150–89 (on farewell songs; quotes from "farewell songs" at 153 and 156 respectively).

1784 put it bluntly "the ultimate purpose of public punishment is largely frustrated if the malefactor dies in circumstances that arouse a kind of admiration and respect. . . . Terror and repugnance, in accordance with the purposes of criminal justice, are the only emotions which the sight of a malefactor being led to the bloody scaffold should arouse in the spectator's heart." Under these reforms, moral education was furthered by replacing the intimate first-person "farewell songs" with officially sanctioned "moral speeches," composed in the more distant third person and largely devoid of religious imagery. The speeches cataloged the misdeeds and personal failings that had brought the condemned to so terrible an end. All of these measures sought to counter the popular view of the "good death" at executions, and the effort met with resistance: folk songs and other popular media retained elements of the religious view of the execution ritual, which continued to be seen as "almost an act of celebration, with the sanctified soul of the condemned rising up to heaven at the end."⁷¹

This interpretation of European public executions is sophisticated and nuanced, and carries considerable explanatory weight. Executions emerge as contested cultural space, where official policy butted against popular points of view. Yet there are good grounds for being wary of accepting the "good death" as an all-encompassing explanation of the spectators' *motives* for attendance. A cultural ethos of the "good death" does not require that the throngs at the execution scaffold were filled with admiration or envy for the condemned's fortunate circumstances, or were drawn there to celebrate a quasi-religious ritual. Motives no doubt varied from person to person, but on the collective plane the solemn, religious motive is difficult to reconcile with the boorishly festive mood sometimes noted by observers among execution crowds, which appears to have been the norm in England.⁷² Spectators' motives were complicated. The Hamburg pamphleteer of 1784, whose views we have already noted, comments: "The rabble is not motivated by the desire to hear something good and thus be moved and uplifted, but merely by the wish to see something new, and to satisfy its curiosity, even, on many occasions at the cost of human feeling." Similarly, a traveler to Munich in 1781 was appalled

⁷¹ Quotes in *ibid.* at 125 (from the Hamburg pamphleteer) and 188 ("sanctified soul").

⁷² Boisterousness is noted even at some German executions, the very paradigm of the "good-death" ritual. An execution in Stuttgart in 1738, for instance, was marked by a festive mood among the crowd, with viewing booths erected for ladies, broadsheets on sale, and street traders plying their wares; see van Dülmen, *Theatre of Horror*, 99. A change in attitude is also charted by Friedland (*Spectacular Justice*) in France where, after the sixteenth century, people's motives to attend became less overtly religious. The detached, callous, or even festive demeanor of delicate ladies particularly appalls the (male) observers.

at the public's interest in execution literature and imagery, much of it extremely graphic:

Instead of reflecting in a mature way on the origins of the horrible crimes that are the occasion for such terrible executions, people read reports on both the crime and its punishment, and even the wretched moral speeches attached to them, with interest. . . . The physiognomies of the hangmen and executioners are far more repulsive than those of the malefactors; these latter, which should surely arouse the real abhorrence, look like those of martyrs by comparison. The common people gawk at these pictures in a thoughtless way and with complete indifference; children even make jokes about them.⁷³

It is tempting to dismiss these views as symptomatic of a condescending elitism, but they carry no less weight as a guide to mass motivation than the equally condescending official sanctions against clergy on the scaffold. The final two sentences of the last quote are particularly telling. Despite noting the "good death" imagery of malefactor-as-martyr, the common people's reaction to it is hardly one of compassion and admiration, but rather titillation and disinterested curiosity. Cultural meaning need not be commensurate with conscious motivation.

More importantly, not every malefactor earned the crowd's sympathy. As reflected in folk songs, the crowd's attitude toward the victim depended in no small measure on the nature of the crime that had brought them to the scaffold in the first place – and only a handful of crimes appear to have generated outright empathy. When a young indigent girl was driven to infanticide by a duplicitous lover, or a cuckolded soldier-husband committed a crime of passion on returning from war, or a bandit was glossed with generous motives and populist virtues – in such instances the crowd might be well-disposed. But for most common murderers who killed in an act of larceny or out of adulterous motives or for other base reasons, as well as multiple murderers, gangs of bandits who terrorized farming communities, suspected witches, old women, "midwives," and loners, when such as these mounted the scaffold, the crowd's attitude was that they were getting what they deserved. A folk song about a robber-gang who carried out a "house invasion" and murdered a family in the process, along with a tenant and a maid, ends with the lines, "They are too wicked for this world! / A hangman's death these men have earned. / And for the ugly bloody deed / Each murderer pays upon the wheel."⁷⁴ Likewise in England. When murderers, child-killers, or sexual deviants mounted the gallows, crowd

⁷³ Evans, *Rituals of Retribution*, 124–5 (Hamburg pamphleteer) and 150 (Munich observer).

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 173–89 (quote at 184).

hostility could be intense. The hanging of the murderous body-snatcher William Burke in 1829 was greeted with loud cheers, and other reviled convicts were routinely yelled, hissed, or shouted at as they faced their final moments.⁷⁵ Thus the Christian "good death" only goes so far in explaining the European public's fascination with executions from the Middle Ages onwards. It is bounded by time (it ended by the nineteenth century, even as crowd size at executions increased), by place (it hardly applies to the unruliness that was habitual at Tyburn, and it is wholly inapplicable to spectators in non-Christian contexts), and by circumstance (not all malefactors earned admiration, and even some supposedly "good death" crowds were disorderly, drunken, or riotous).

A wider point emerges here that is applicable to any context-specific explanation for spectatorship at executions: they necessarily carry limited value in understanding the phenomenon across time and space. It would require sustained *ad hoc* reasoning to argue that people's consistent attendance at such rituals in widely divergent sociocultural contexts stems from motivations rooted only in those contexts.⁷⁶ Psychological factors must play their part. We shall return later in this book to the most probable psychological processes that help undergird spectator motivations at executions. For now, however, we turn our attention to the second main category of violent spectacle: games, pastimes, and competitions.

COMBAT SPORTS AND BLOODSPORTS

As with watching execution rituals, combats or confrontations staged as spectacle were not unique to Rome. Evidence from ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt makes it clear that combat sports (primarily boxing and wrestling, but also stick-fighting) were known in these societies, and their association with religious festivals suggests a spectacular context for their staging. Royal hunts could also be presented as spectator events. Other Mediterranean societies too, such as the Hittites or Minoans, appear to have featured some version of violent competition staged before spectators.⁷⁷

⁷⁵ Gattrell, *Hanging Tree*, 68–9 and 100–3. Gattrell suspects that class differences, titillation, and excitement played as much a part in this sort of behavior as did approval at seeing a vile crime punished. But the pitilessness of the spectators on such occasions – which could include toasting the eternal damnation of the executed man's soul with gin – rather points to retributive satisfaction.

⁷⁶ Gattrell, *Hanging Tree*, 67–105. He tips his hat in the direction of psychological considerations (*ibid.*, 72–3), but leaves the terrain largely unexplored.

⁷⁷ Kyle, *Sport and Spectacle*, 26–53. Note especially the famous "Grandstand Fresco" from Knossos (c. 1500 BC) or the "Ramp House Fresco" from Mycenae (c. 1450 BC), which show people spectating

The Greeks were enthusiastic for combat sports. Homer's epics contain descriptions of boxing (dubbed "grievous"), wrestling, and armed duels staged as spectacles.⁷⁸ Among the most unpleasant of these was the *pankration*, an all-out fight with only two rules: no biting, no gouging (Philostr. *Imag.* 2.6.3). For the Spartans, even these two restrictions were excessive, and many pankratiasts appear to have ignored them anyway. One anecdote tells how a pankratiast dislocated his opponent's ankle to secure victory before dying from his own injuries.⁷⁹ Greek boxing was even more punishing. From the fourth century BC onwards, boxers wore thongs of hardened leather over their knuckles that lacerated the opponent's face. (To this the Romans appear to have added pieces of metal and spikes to form the fearsome *caestus*, one of the most vicious sporting accoutrements ever devised.) As with the *pankration*, notices not only of cuts to the face, but eyes and ears lost in the fray make clear the hazards of Greek boxing.⁸⁰ Death and severe injury were very real possibilities during these bouts, so that jokes could be made about how the mothers or pets of boxers failed to recognize them.⁸¹ Violent events like these were part of the great panhellenic athletic competitions and were staged before large and enthusiastic crowds. These trends continued into the Hellenistic era, when empire infused the whole with a greater degree of staged excess.⁸² Furthermore, the Greeks were also

at staged events; or the Boxer Rhyton from Hagia Triada (c. 1550 BC) or the Boxing Boys fresco from Akrotiri on Thera (c. 1625 BC), the subject matter of which is self-evident from their modern titles.

⁷⁸ Boxing: *Il.* 23.651–700, *Od.* 18.1–107. Wrestling: *Il.* 23.700–39, *Od.* 8.100–3; Armed duel: *Il.* 23.748–825; Kyle, *Sport and Spectacle*, 54–71.

⁷⁹ See M. B. Poliakoff, *Combat Sports in the Ancient World: Competition, Violence, and Culture* (New Haven, 1987), esp. 54–63 on the *pankration*; Kyle, *Sport and Spectacle*, 124–6. Note also the remarks of Golden (*Greek Sport*, 72–4) on "violent Greeks." For the posthumous victory, see Philostr. *Imag.* 2.6; Paus. 8.40.1–2. Stephen Miller has remarked that in the *pankration*, "victory went to the survivor"; see S. G. Miller, "The Organization and Functioning of the Olympic Games," in D. J. Phillips and D. Pritchard (eds.), *Sport and Festival in the Ancient Greek World* (Swansea, 2003), 1–40 (quote at 27).

⁸⁰ Poliakoff, *Combat Sports*, 68–88 (75–9 on the *caestus*). On the boxing glove, see Kyle, *Sport and Spectacle*, 124–5. An attempt has been made to define the *caestus* down (the spikes reinterpreted as protection for the fingers, for instance); see H. M. Lee, "The Later Greek Boxing Glove and the Roman Caestus: A Centennial Re-evaluation of Jünther's 'Über Antike Turngeräthe,'" *Nikephoros* 10 (1997), 161–78, esp. 170–1. Greek boxing and wrestling were eventually staged as spectacle in Roman baths; see Z. Newby, "Greek Athletics as Roman Spectacle: The Mosaics from Ostia and Rome," *PBSR* 70 (2002), 177–203.

⁸¹ Eight deaths in boxing, wrestling, or *pankration* bouts are documented in the sources; see R. Brophy, "Deaths in the Pan-Hellenic Games: Arrachion and Creugas," *AJP* 99 (1978), 363–90; R. and M. Brophy, "Deaths in the Pan-Hellenic Games: All Combative Sports," *AJP* 106 (1985), 171–98; M. Poliakoff, "Deaths in the Pan-Hellenic Games: Addenda and Corrigenda," *AJP* 107 (1986), 400–2. Failure to recognize: Arist. *Lys.* 614–705; *Anth. Pal.* 11.77.

⁸² Coleman, "Ptolemy Philadelphus"; Kyle, *Sport and Spectacle*, 133–5 (Olympic spectators) and 229–50 (Hellenistic developments); A. Kuttner, "Hellenistic Images of Spectacle: From Alexander to Augustus," in Bergmann and Kondoleon (eds.), *Art of Ancient Spectacle*, 97–123.

fond of cock-, quail- and partridge-fighting, an enthusiasm not shared, interestingly, by the Romans.⁸³

Looking beyond the Roman era, in the warrior ethos of Medieval Europe training for war involved mock combats between armed men, which developed in the course of the twelfth century into the more structured tournament.⁸⁴ This spectacle involved teams of knights on horseback, sometimes numbering in the hundreds, attacking each other with sharp weaponry in a free-for-all termed *mêlée*; it only later incorporated more structured combats and jousts conducted with blunt weapons. Initially, infantry and even archers could be involved in the *mêlée*, which made the larger tournaments closely resemble actual battles.⁸⁵ Despite this, the contests were not intentionally lethal – combatants usually fought for honor and ransoms paid for captured opponents – but when the blood was up, matters could get out of hand. In 1241 at Neuss near Cologne, for instance, up to eighty combatants were killed when a tournament degenerated into a real battle. When the English king Edward I was manhandled at a tournament at Chalons in 1273, a struggle broke out that killed dozens of combatants and spectators and became known as the “little battle of Chalons.” Aside from these riotous occurrences, there are many notices of deaths and maimings among prominent participants in the course of tourneying that bear witness to the dangers of the pastime.⁸⁶ The Church reckoned that tournaments promoted sinful behavior and so officially opposed them, but the popularity of the events ensured that they continued to be staged. Eventually the Church reconsidered its position, not least due to the tournament’s usefulness in preparing Crusaders for the rigors of real combat.⁸⁷

The tournament appears to have been a spectator event from quite early in its history. Initially the *mêlée* ranged over an expanse of countryside bounded by palisades and ditches. It would have been possible for an audience to watch from outside the bounds, but only at some remove from the

⁸³ M. G. Morgan, “Three Non-Roman Blood Sports,” *CQ* 25 (1975), 117–22.

⁸⁴ See J. M. Carter, *Ludi Medi Aevi: Studies in the History of Medieval Sport* (Manhattan, 1981); J. Fleckenstein (ed.), *Das ritterliche Turnier im Mittelalter* (Göttingen, 1985); J. Fleuri, *Chevaliers et chevalerie au Moyen Âge* (Paris, 1998), 131–52; S. H. Hardy, “The Medieval Tournament: A Functional Sport of the Upper Class,” *Journal of Sport History* 1 (1974), 91–105.

⁸⁵ The popular image of the tournament, with tilting lists, heraldry, and ornate armor, derives from the events as they were staged in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Combats with sharp weapons were termed *à outrance*, with blunted *à plaisance*. But even the latter were hazardous and could result in injury or death. On the forms of combat featured in the tournament, see J. R. V. Barker, *The Tournament in England, 1100–1400* (Woodbridge, 1986), 137–61.

⁸⁶ For these and other details, see M. Keen, *Chivalry* (New Haven, 1984), 83–101.

⁸⁷ See Carter, *Ludi Medi Aevi*, 61–73; Keen, *Chivalry*, 94–7.

action. Gradually, however, tournament sites became more localized (outside castles, for instance), and eventually they became permanent arenas with roofed wooden stands. The attendance of women among the spectators at tournaments – attested as early as 1180 outside the castle at Joigny in France – played to chivalric ideals and helped mold the form of subsequent events.⁸⁸ The very presence of women, however, proves that the violence of the tournament (even if conducted *à plaisance*, with blunt weapons) had become a spectacle to be watched by an audience, while the gradual provision of permanent stands reflects the tournament’s growing popularity. Unfortunately there is little in the Medieval sources about spectator behavior, beyond notices of boisterous participation and the occasional riot.

Bear-, bull-, and badger-baiting, cock-, dog-, and rat-fighting, boxing, wrestling, cudgeling, singlestick, and fencing remained popular combat entertainments for spectators throughout the Middle Ages right down to modern times (and some of these diversions are still staged in various parts of the world). The object of cudgeling or singlestick bouts was to “break the head,” by which was meant the drawing of blood. Samuel Pepys, in his famous seventeenth-century diary, reports a sword-fight he watched in the New Theatre in London on June 1, 1663:

And I with Sir J. Minnes to the Strand May-pole; and there light out of his coach, and walked to the New Theatre, which, since the King’s players are gone to the Royal one, is this day begun to be employed by the fencers to play prizes at. And here I come and saw the first prize I ever saw in my life: and it was between one Mathews, who did beat at all weapons, and one Westwicke, who was soundly cut several times both in the head and legs, that he was all over blood: and other deadly blows they did give and take in very good earnest, till Westwicke was in a sad pickle. They fought at eight weapons, three bouts at each weapon. This being upon a private quarrel, they did it in good earnest; and I felt one of the swords, and found it to be very little, if at all blunter on the edge, than the common swords are. Strange to see what a deal of money is flung to them both upon the stage between every bout.⁸⁹

Even if this particular fight appears to have been a duel over some private dispute, it was nevertheless played out before a crowd, and Pepys is quite clear that the New Theatre had been given over to fencing spectacles that were public, bloody, and quasi-professional, insofar as prizes were awarded and money thrown on stage by the crowd. Later the same year, he attended a

⁸⁸ See Barker, *Tournament*, 100–11.

⁸⁹ Latham and Matthews (eds.), *Diary of Samuel Pepys*, vol. IV, 167–8.

cock-fight and noted the great social variety of the crowd, from Members of Parliament to “the poorest ’prentices, bakers, brewers, butchers, draymen, and what not.” On May 27, 1667, Pepys went to the “bear-garden,” an arena specifically built for bear-baiting, to see two men, a butcher and a waterman, fence for a prize in the pit. The place was so packed with spectators that Pepys had to find a way in through a nearby alehouse. When the waterman was disabled and could fight no longer, a riot broke out between partisans in the crowd, which Pepys stayed to watch, since “they all fell to it to knocking down and cutting many on each side. *It was pleasant to see*, but that I stood in the pit, and feared that in the tumult I might get some hurt. At last the battle broke up, and so I away” (emphasis added).⁹⁰

The popularity of bloody spectacle spurred James Figgs, a heavyweight boxer and expert pugilist in eighteenth-century England, to open the appropriately named “Figgs Amphitheatre” in London in 1719. The Amphitheatre was a huge hit with all classes, drawing rowdy crowds who came to watch the proprietor batter opponents with fists, sticks, and swords. Cock-and bull-fights and brawling Irishwomen were alternative attractions. One onlooker records that, during his visit, the loudest shout went up when Figgs sliced off part of his opponent’s calf.⁹¹ The appeal of combat sports continues down to the present, and not just in the familiar forms of boxing or wrestling. In recent years the spectacle of “Mixed Martial Arts” or “Ultimate Fighting” has emerged as immensely popular in North America, indeed so popular that it now has its own professional organization (the UFC, Ultimate Fighting Championship) and is the fastest-growing spectator sport among American males aged 18–34.⁹² Ultimate Fighting may be seen as a resurrection of the *pankraton*, although with more restrictions (the UFC website lists thirty-one possible fouls; the *pankraton* had two). Fighters are put into a boxing ring or an octagonal cage and kick, punch,

⁹⁰ Ibid., vol. iv, 427–8 (cock-fight) and vol. viii, 238–9 (bear-garden). Pepys liked his prize fighting, as he attended the bear-garden again on September 9, 1667 (ibid., vol. viii, 430) to see a prize fight in which the loser “was so cut in both his wrists that he could not fight any longer.” Pepys comments: “The sport very good, and various humours to be seen among the rabble that is there.” Note also his comment that a highlight of the play *Catiline’s Conspiracy* was the excellent fight sequences; ibid., vol. ix, 395. On stage violence, see ch. 7, p. 234.

⁹¹ See A. Guttmann, *Sports Spectators* (New York, 1986), 53–82, especially 70–1 on Figgs. For an excellent overview of English pastimes in this era – including blood and combat sports – see Malcolmson, *Popular Recreations*, esp. 5–14 and 34–51 (with blood and combat sports at 42–51).

⁹² The statistic is quoted by the UFC on its website (www.ufc.com/index.cfm?fa=news.detail&cgid=8111; accessed Jan. 12, 2010) and was confirmed in a *60 Minutes* report (aired Dec. 10, 2006). Sport and spectacle are becoming increasingly conflated: a LexisNexis search for “sports w/2 spectacle” yielded 964 results for the period 2005–10.

throw, or wrestle to win the bout. The bouts are very violent and frequently bloody. On television, the camera tends to linger on limbs being twisted or faces cut. Even bloodier is “Ultimate Wrestling” where performers fight it out in a ring of barbed wire, smack each other with hard objects, are flogged with barbed wire, or throw each other on to broken light bulbs. The bouts frequently end with the wrestlers bathed in very real blood from very real injuries. The audience, particularly in the southern United States, laps it all up.

This gruesome catalog has been necessary to underscore the point that the Roman public was not unique in turning out in large numbers to watch people tortured or killed, or both. Indeed what is really quite remarkable is the well-documented persistence of spectators at public rituals of punishment and competition, up to and including the present, in those places where they are still practiced. To be sure, punitive and ludic violent spectacles have varied in form, method, and intent. Some punishments, for instance, have been prolonged and hideous (*ancien régime* punishments in France, wheelings), others relatively quick and not particularly spectacular (hangings, guillotining); some have been overtly religious in intent (mass Aztec sacrifices), others wholly secular (nineteenth-century hangings). Similarly, depending on the competitive event, death and injury are made more or less likely by the rules of engagement, the accoutrements used, and the prevailing values of the historical context.

What unites all these violent spectacles, however, is the readiness of people to watch, which transcends the specifics of each cultural context. Violent spectacles undoubtedly carry cultural meanings particular to each time and place, and spectator motivations for attending are likely to be connected to those meanings. But even if so, such culturally embedded motivations are not likely to have been consciously experienced by the spectators and, in any case, they collapse as explanatory models outside the context to which they are linked. That is, culturally specific explanations for spectator attendance are partial at best. A wider framework of explanation is called for. This book is about the Roman games, so to chart the contours of such a broad explanatory model in detail lies beyond its scope. But we may embark on defining some of its main features by a detailed consideration of how psychological processes played out at the Roman arena. The investigation that follows can tell us much about what the experience of watching the Roman games was like, but its wider historical implications should also be evident from the dismal litany we have just reviewed.