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OPEN AND CONCEALED DRAMATURGIC STRATEGIES:

The Case of the State Execution

JOHN LOFLAND

SOcial organizations vary in the degree to which their copings with basic aspects of life and death are dramaturgically open or concealed. A concealed dramaturgics of life and death events erects physical, social, and psychological barriers to perception, regulates the entrance and exit of participants and witnesses, controls publicity, and minimizes temporal duration, among other things. An open dramaturgics allows and even promotes the opposite.

One way usefully to conceive that enormous transformation in the western world typically captioned, "the industrial revolution," is as a shift from open to concealed dramaturgics in the management of many life and death matters. The primal scenes of fornicating, birthing, wedding, and dying (of humans and other animals) have shifted from relatively commonplace openness to delicate concealment. The historically open and ubiquitous acts of defecation and urination and their products have become shielded and contained. Disease, hunger, gross

AUTHOR'S NOTE: I am indebted to Katherine Buckles for library search assistance.

URBAN LIFE, Vol. 4 No. 3, October 1975
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impairment and deformity of the body have been metaphorically and literally swept out of the streets and held behind walls. Disputes historically managed with the directness of violence, duels, and other open contests have become mediated, elaborate, convoluted, and conspiratorial affairs.

Taking this asserted dramaturgical revolution as our context, I want here to analyze how one life and death event has been dramaturgically transformed from historic to modern times. That event is the *state execution*. Its *invariant* features are the space-time specific scene of a court sentencing a person to die; from there and then in court that person must—by some means, someplace, by someone—be killed. How is this to be accomplished? How open or concealed are people to be about the invariant fact that a human being is going to die, is dying, and is now dead?

This question needs to be addressed at two levels, the ideal-typical (or logical) and the historical-empirical. Irrespective of how any society has *actually* managed the matter of state executions, of what practices would each, *logically*, consist? What are features of an ideally concealed and ideally open state execution? The ideal-typical profiles to be presented provide guides, as it were, in terms of which actual, concrete state executions can be judged for the degree of their openness or concealment. At the historical-empirical level, the state executions of England and the United States (and to some extent all of Europe and the world) in the 1600s and 1700s, as contrasted with state executions in those countries in the 1900s, seem, at least in composite, remarkably to approximate the ideal-typical profiles. Within the confines of severe space limitations, I will try to provide sufficient empirical material to lend at least some credibility to this assertion of enormously opposed dramaturgic strategies.¹

By way of overview, eleven phases (or at least aspects) are employed in explicating the ideal types and in contrasting “historic” (circa 1700) and “modern” (circa 1950) state executions in England and America: the death wait, death confinement, execution time, death trip, death place, death

witnesses, executioners, features of the condemned him- or herself, technique of death, corpse disposal, and death announcement.

THE DEATH WAIT

In a concealed dramaturgics, the time between sentencing and execution is kept as short as possible. The longer the condemned is left alive, the more the act of execution can be thought about, and can be an embarrassment. Ideally, the condemned is executed immediately.

Ironically, this initial point of contrast is opposite to dramaturgic expectations. However open historic executions were in other regards, they missed the boat here, so to speak, by (especially in the 1600s and earlier) often taking the condemned directly from trial to execution. English law of 1752 required that murderers be hanged on the day after sentencing; by the 1820s many capital offenders were "tried on a Friday and executed in rows of from three to six the following Monday" (Laurence, 1960: 102). Such dispatch obviously limits the degree to which the reality of the death can be communicated, a deficiency for which, as we shall see however, historic executions more than compensated.

Modern executions have tended to enormously longer death waits, averaging a year or two at various periods in England and the United States (United Nations, 1968). In some cases, death waits have gone on for a decade. It is the stern reality that such waits display that seem, indeed, to generate so much strong feeling about state executions, as among those who argue that long waits (caused, proximately, by the availability and use of appellate and executive remedies) are "cruel and unusual punishment."

DEATH CONFINEMENT

If there is to be much time between sentencing and execution, the condemned must be kept someplace. If the presence of the now "living dead" is to be minimized, he needs to be kept sequestered in a concealed place, visitor access to which is either prohibited or minimized under stringent regulations. Obviously, the more people who interact with the condemned, the more that can be reported, thought, and perhaps even done about him.

Historic death confinements—prisons—were much more bustling, lively, and emotionally polymorphic places than their austere and solemn modern counterparts. Before middle-class prissiness and universalistic bureaucrats took over the management of prisons, the more colorful and wealthy of condemned persons, at least, could enjoy the companionship of virtually any visitors they desired. Popular criminals were visited by "men and women of the highest position." Perhaps the most famous, Jack Sheppard, executed in 1724, received "no fewer than three thousand persons" in his death cell in Newgate Prison (Bleackley, 1975: 79). In 1744, another had "seven girls to dine with him on the evening before he was hanged. . .," a party at which the condemned was reported "not less cheerful than those who hoped to live longer" (Atholl, 1954: 66). Alcohol and other amenities were available, prompting some contemporaries to complain that their effects detracted from an appropriate pale of death.

It was, indeed, against these kinds of easy and open death confinements that such champions of austerity as William Fielding and Charles Dickens railed. Dickens in 1849 plotted out the concealed strategy of state executions that was to become the reigning reality of virtually the entire world within a hundred years.

From the moment of a murderer's being sentenced to death, I would dismiss him to . . . dread obscurity. . . . I would allow no curious visitors to hold any communication with him; I would place every

obstacle in the way of his sayings and doings being served up in print on Sunday mornings for the perusal of families. . . .

We should not return to the days when ladies paid visits to highwaymen, drinking their punch in the condemned cells of Newgate [Dickens, 1892: 242, 243].

Modern dramaturgy is, nonetheless, a bit less strict, "the prevailing [world-wide] practice is to keep condemned prisoners in solitary confinement and under heavy surveillance, but to allow them special privileges" (United Nations, 1968: 99). Among these privileges is, in some jurisdictions, access to sedative drugs, the better to inhibit any disconcerting breakdowns.

To be open about death is, in part, to talk about it, to impress upon the condemned the imminence of his own demise. Historic executions had *death talk specialists*, people whose duty it was forcefully to impress the condemned with their state. By forcefully, I mean that the condemned was required to listen to them and that their actions were vigorously performed. The sexton of St. Sepulchre's church fulfilled such a role on the eve of executions in London. He came tolling a handbell under the windows of Newgate Prison, chanting verses recommending repentance. Given the high frequency of executions, he was a familiar sight and sound. Prison clergymen were even more ubiquitous and formidable figures. At Newgate, the condemned sat in the Condemned Pew of the prison's chapel and suffered admonitions during the compulsory and daily religious service attended by all prisoners. The condemned were also often subjected to a special religious service close to the time of execution. In one version, all condemned sat round a coffin listening to a sermon, perhaps hearing the ceremony for the burial of the dead. In another version, the last service and sermon on torments the condemned could expect to suffer after death were so harrowing and upsetting that they became a popular entertainment for the aristocratic ladies and gentlemen of London. Sheriffs sometimes had to control attendance by ticket. The clergy of Newgate, especially, seemed to enjoy their

work, for complaints of over-zealousness were sometimes lodged, and authorities on one occasion censured an Ordinary for "harrowing a prisoner's feelings unnecessarily" (Bleackley, 1975: 262). The contrast with the modern concealed strategy is striking: such specialists today are mild-mannered and their employment is optional.²

DEATH TIME

In a concealed dramaturgics, the execution is most auspiciously scheduled on a day of the week and at a time of the day that is socially inconspicuous. The day ought not meaningfully to coincide with the society's sacred days, be these religious or frivolous. An inconspicuous hour of the chosen day likewise deemphasizes the event.

Historic British executions occurred (in public) in the early afternoon, insuring the largest number of possible witnesses. But modern executions, despite the shield of a physically enclosed place, tend to concealed times: early morning (such as 7 or 8 o'clock) or late at night (such as 11 o'clock). The prison context has frequently prompted officials to choose times when prisoners are locked in their cells or fully at their work. A prison population at milling leisure is a population thought too easily preoccupied with the execution—hence, the marginal execution times (Atholl, 1954: 41).

THE DEATH TRIP

The condemned must in some manner be removed from the death cell and taken to the death place. A dramaturgics of openness—of bluntly proclaiming the condemned's imminent death—is a dramaturgics in which the trip itself is long, accomplished by elaborate transport devices, employs a complicated cortege, enjoys dramatic events along the way, traverses a complex and public route, and promotes long and complex talk

along the route and at the execution. Such were the dramatics of historic death trips.

(a) In early years, executions were often held on the spot of the condemned's crime, a feature making for long death trips from the prison. In London, as in other cities, particular spots came to be places of public execution. The use of Tyburn, a site more than two miles through crowded streets from Newgate prison—the place of the condemned—necessitated the ideal-type of open dramatic routing. While the route was less than three miles long, it sometimes required up to three hours to move the condemned this distance. The modern concealed strategy, in contrast, brings the condemned within a few steps of the death place beforehand (while not letting him perceive it). The British have even devoted considerable study to shortening the distance and timing the interval between calling upon the condemned in his cell and actually killing him. In some places, it was reduced to “eight steps” and in the range of nine to fifteen seconds (Scott, 1950: 209-210). Pinioning devices of lightning application and drills in cap and rope placement insure that the walk and the hanging happen so fast that one need watch closely in order to see it—to know that it in fact happened. (British gallows redesign of 1876 provided a scaffold-top lever for releasing the drop, thus eliminating the delay between adjusting the noose, descending the steps and going under the scaffold to draw the bolt.) Electrocution death trips are reported to be a bit slower, requiring somewhat more than a minute fully to accomplish (Elliott, 1940: 144).

(b) Eight steps and fifteen seconds contrast with the dramatic, historic flair of earlier times when the condemned were transported on hurdles or in horse-drawn carts along with their coffins. More wealthy or popular condemned were allowed to ride in mourning coaches. Thus elevated, condemned were visible to crowds of spectators who lined the route, or who merely happened to see them while conducting their routine pursuits in the action-filled streets of preindustrial cities (L. Lofland, 1973: ch. 2).

(c) Condemned were taken quite seriously in the sense that they were the stars of a cortege of several hundred people, which was typically "headed by the city marshal on horseback, followed by the undersheriff with a cavalcade of peace officers, and a body of constables armed with staves. Then came the cart or carts with the condemned, more constables, and finally a company of javelin men. Sometimes a party of javelin men headed the procession" (Laurence, 1960: 187). When the condemned were markedly popular or unpopular, there might be more armed strength, the better to protect against the mob's rescuing or killing them. Cutting the trip to a few steps and seconds drastically reduces the possibilities of forming a cortege which in modern times amounts to a mere four or five career officials, or even less when the trip is very short.

(d) Historic London corteges passed through narrow, people-glutted streets in which spectators pressed upon the procession. Popular condemned were cheered and kisses were blown at them; despised condemned were jeered, hissed, groaned at and pelted with garbage and mud. The scene was frequently one of confusion and borderline chaos, a scene in sharp contrast to the modern, de-peopled, streamlined death trip.

(e) As befits a social event, the cortege made stops; its course was punctuated by *events* which more clearly indicated the kind of procession afoot. These included a church stop, pub stops, and friend stops (Mencken, 1942). *Running conversations* took place between the condemned in the cart and his friends who walked or rode part of the distance with him (Bleackley, 1933: 50; Laurence, 1960: 66). Fifteen seconds and eight steps allow for none of this.

(f) The jiggling of the cart, its various stops and starts, mountings and dismountings, and flying objects made for an obstacle-ridden course. Upon arriving at the death place, the condemned perhaps had even to climb a ladder or mount steps, depending upon the technique of the time. The condemned, that is, very much *interacted with his situation*, thereby expressing himself in calmness, clumsiness, or whatever. Modern executions prevent such expression by abbreviating the death

walk, the ultimate abbreviation being the construction of the death cell and chamber on the identical level so that the condemned will not encounter grades.³

(g) Last, throughout the death trip there was a torrent of words: from the mob in the street; between the condemned and their friends and others; between officials and the crowd; from the clergy who orated at various points; and from the condemned in his death speech. Throughout, moreover, church bells tolled. Modern death trips are virtually wordless and no bells toll.

Thus, historic death trips were dramaturgically open: long in time and distance, complex in transport, large and heterogeneous in cortege and spectators, complex and diverse in events and routing, and long and complicated in verbal interaction.

DEATH PLACE

Social places vary in the degree to which they are dramaturgically open or concealed. Dramaturgically open places provide unobstructed views of contained activities, of "front" and "back" regions.⁴ Dramaturgically concealed places obstruct viewing by (1) erecting physical barriers, and (2) guiding and controlling what the viewer sees despite physical barriers.

Historic state executions were ideal-typically open. They took place outdoors, in early periods, in open fields and later in city streets. Even when made closed to the public, they remained outdoors for a time, in prison yards. Their "roof" was the sky, their "walls" the horizon or exteriors of buildings. Death was in this sense "integrated" with much else in social life. Modern executions, in contrast, are extremely concealed within doors, often even in windowless rooms.

Early historic executions were highly integrated in the additional sense that they took place at the scene of the condemned's crime—that is, in multiple and unspecialized places. Over time, certain places specialized in executions, as at the famous Tyburn, but there were many such local places.

Modern societies have moved decisively to concealment by having only one place of execution for large regions or for the entire society. These are called execution "chambers" or "sheds," terms tellingly revealing their concealed character. The movement is, in one sense, from a highly personalized to a highly impersonalized place; from an open definition of the condemned's personal identity at the place of his particular crime to an obscured and generalized treatment of him at a centralized place where everybody and anybody and hence "nobody" is executed.⁵ Even the exteriors of modern death places are highly inaccessible to view in that they are always inside prison walls.

DEATH WITNESSES

Historic executions attracted many by-standing witnesses, and were indeed held in the public outdoors partly for that reason. Hundreds and even thousands of persons appeared. The most famous or infamous condemned could draw enormous crowds (50-100,000 or more, according to some estimates). A hanging on New York's Bedloe's Island in 1860 had "steamboats, barges, oyster sloops, yachts and rowboats swarm[ing] everywhere in view of the gallows. Large steamers such as carry hundreds of people . . . on pleasure excursions were there, so laden with a living freight of curious people that it seemed almost a wonder that they did not sink. There were barges . . . with awnings spread, under which those who were thirsty imbibed lager beer" (eyewitness account reprinted in Mencken, 1942: 175). Sometimes people packed city streets so tightly that fear and panic ensued, killing a few and injuring dozens.⁶

These many witnesses were extremely *diverse* in social standing and types of social identity. First, most infamous and most numerous were what is variously called the rabble, the mob and the dregs. This was itself a heterogeneous assortment of pickpockets, harlots, unemployed, highwaymen, rogues, dandies, floaters, trollops, ruffians, thieves, vagabonds, and

criminals, to use a few terms of contemporary observers. Second, hawkers circulated selling broadsides detailing the life, crimes and words of the condemned, and foods such as sweetmeats, tarts, meatpies and oranges. Third, children were brought by schoolmasters and mothers to be morally instructed and edified. To warn a child he might come to a bad end had literal meaning in the rope he saw directly. Fourth, in favored places arranged by the sheriff and in discreetly rented windows, various aristocrats watched. Fifth, many businesses closed so their owners, craftsmen and tradesmen, and their families might enjoy the "hanging day." Sixth, soldiers, constables, and other agents of state force strove to prevent the crowd from pressing too close upon the gallows and to keep order generally. Larger executions employed several hundred agents of state force. Seventh and last, intellectuals and reporters were present, some to enjoy and some to deplore the execution horrors in their subsequent writings. Boswell is among the most famous of the enthusiastic regulars at hangings, while William Makepeace Thackeray (1968) and Charles Dickens were repulsed by them.

If these are some of the main classes of witnesses, what were they *doing* before, during and after the execution? First and most striking, many were engaged in a complex of acts best labeled holiday-making, consisting of sporadic group singing, food munching, joking, shouting, beverage sipping, and the like. The mood was as at a "sporting occasion" or fair. Rough play and fights punctuated time in encounters of pushing, tripping, "kicking dirt about," wrestling and straight fighting over imagined or real offenses. The press of the crowd and excitement caused faintings among the "gentler sex" who were often "indecently exposed" in the course of being taken away. Pickpocketing and pickups were rampant. Occasionally, large, packed-in crowds panicked, trampling and killing many of their number. Agents of state force—be they gaolers, constables, soldiers or police—worked at order-keeping, arresting thieves, striking spectators to keep them back from the procession or the gallows, fighting off attacks on the condemned, the executioner, or both, and so forth. However, a large proportion

of the witnesses simply engaged in quiet socializing while waiting, perhaps discussing other executions of their acquaintance or other matters of the day. When the scaffold or the condemned arrived at the appointed time, crowd acknowledgments went up. Witnesses continued to yell comments during the execution itself. If the condemned were faced away from the crowd, or people could not see, shouts of "turn him around," and "stand out of the way" were forthcoming. Despised criminals were likely to hang to the accompaniment of yelling and shouting. Witnesses were sometimes direct participants, as when they rescued the condemned, or carried him off for resuscitation after hanging. Friends of the condemned were sometimes allowed to pull his legs after he was suspended in order to shorten the agony of strangulation. Last, but far from least, businessmen and intellectuals of the bourgeoisie were deploring it all.

The dramaturgic openness of (a) large numbers of witnesses, (b) wearing diverse social identities, and (c) carrying on heterogeneous activities in the historic era contrasts sharply with the concealed character of (a) a small number of witnesses, (b) wearing a narrow range of social identities, and (c) engaging in a homogeneous set of activities in the modern era.

Virtually throughout the world, executions are, as reported in a United Nations survey, "not held in public view and attendance is carefully limited and controlled" (United Nations, 1968: 103). Execution "chambers" themselves limit the possible number—holding 50 to 75 people if they are packed in—and statutes often specify maximums, as in the United States in the nineteen sixties where the number varied from three to twenty (United Nations, 1968: 103).

Witnesses are sometimes excluded altogether, allowing only executional personnel *per se*. When permitted, they are defined as "symbolic representatives" of the public at large and typically include newspaper reporters, representatives of the prosecution, defense, or both, and perhaps members of the condemned's family. The presence of others may be left to the discretion of the prison wardens, who, it seems, have tended to

prefer politicians, other government officials, and professionals such as doctors from among the thousands who make application to be witnesses (e.g. Elliott, 1940: 230-233). Following the British, "the trend in most countries now is increasingly to exclude [journalists] from attendance," or to set strict limits and rules on what and how they report (United Nations, 1968: 103-104).

Witnesses and executioners alike hardly say or do anything, owing in part to the short period of time available to them. A large sign reading "SILENCE" hanging over the door into the Sing Sing death chamber epitomizes the modern stance and reduces witnesses to conversing in "low voices" while waiting, if they talk at all (Elliott, 1940: 142). Even photography is specifically forbidden.

Overall, then, the modern dramaturgy of concealment—of virtual denial—is impressive: there are, at most, a handful of silent, carefully selected, and constrained witnesses.

EXECUTIONERS

Like the witnesses before whom they performed, historic executioners were a colorful, robust, and rule-breaking lot—in their personal lives as well as in their roles as executioners. They comported themselves in ways that endowed them with distinctive public and personal identities; they performed their duties along lines of their personal choosing and they related to the condemned in a personal manner. Modern executioners, in contrast, are virtually anonymous, bland, and colorless men who carry out bureaucratically generated and well-practiced "drills" upon the condemned, who are treated in a severely impersonal manner. The historic executioner dealt honestly and directly with death; the modern one bounds flinchingly by it.

(a) Historic public executions rendered executioners public figures. As the ultimate and personally-known agents of state force, they attracted much interest, both supportive and threatening. They were ostracized or lionized depending upon

whom, and from what social group, they had most recently executed. Either way, they were "celebrities" about whom stories circulated and comment was made. As is inherent in being somebody, there was imputed to them stereotyped personal characters. Horace Bleackley (1975) has chronicled this nicely for historic London hangmen, as in brutal Price (1714-1715), grim Marvell (1715-1717), laughing Hooper (1728-1735), morose Botting (1817-1820), indifferent Calcraft (1829-1874), and gentleman Marwood (1874-1883). Each was endowed with a unique, distinctive, and public personality; each had a personal style. Flattered or insulted, each *existed*.

They existed, in part, because being an executioner was a full-time job. Business was heavy and social ostracism was strong; they were barred from other modes of employment even when they wanted to quit. Moreover, their "deviances" did not get them fired. When executions moved indoors and became private, executioners gradually ceased to be publicly known figures and, moreover, the volume of executions decreased. Executioner is a part-time job in the modern era. As a consequence, executioners have become virtual non-entities.⁷

(b) Historic executions, being less routinized and specified, facilitated the expression of personal character. At an execution in 1760 "the sheriffs fell to eating and drinking on the scaffold and helped up one of their friends to drink with them as [the condemned] was still hanging" (eyewitness account reprinted in Mencken, 1942: 240). London's hangman of 45 years, William Calcraft, joked and swore at executions, wearing, indeed, a rose in his buttonhole. Thomas Cheshire, who practiced between 1808 and 1840, openly relished his work, as described by one eyewitness (Bleackley, 1975: 196-197), pouncing upon the condemned with a "basilisk gleam" in his eye and a "stealthy cat-like clutch." Many liked their duties less and performed them drunk; one was so intoxicated he had to be restrained from hanging the clergyman by mistake (Atholl, 1954: 143).

Detailed, technical aspects of executions were left to the executioner, thus allowing for "mistakes." Some bought cheap rope that broke; others were "incompetent even in the tying of

knots." Occasionally, the executioner and other officials fell to arguing upon the scaffold over the adjustment of the rope, the length of the drop, or the division of the condemned's property (Atholl, 1954: 143; Bleackley, 1975: 128, 181).

The incredible quickness of the modern execution largely robs executioners of opportunities for self-expression. Like much modern work, individual variation and craftsmanship have been engineered out. Those involved in the modern British execution even called it "the drill" and practiced hangings with a dummy. The "engineering out" occurred historically among the British through a set of parliamentary commissions that studied the subject "scientifically" and produced a collective, binding set of procedures. Individual craft was thus transformed into bureaucratic procedure. While historic executioners supplied some equipment (for example, rope, pinioning harness), modern ones have everything carefully supplied and controlled by the state.

Procedural rationalization requires, of course, methodical and objective recruitment of personnel (including technical testing and character assessment) and formal training. Both procedures have been undertaken for modern British and other executioners.⁸ This is a far cry from the historic practice of haphazard recruiting and "training" among the condemned and the kinsmen and friends of executioners.

(c) Modern executions severely restrict and impersonalize the duration and amount of contact between executioner and condemned. No or few words need pass between them. There is virtually no bodily contact or other vehicle of personalism, such as the passing of goods or money. The executioner need never even see the condemned except during the few seconds of the execution. Accompanying prison officers may purposively be strangers to the condemned, the better to inhibit the emotional arousal of all parties (see Elliott, 1940: 130; Atholl, 1954: 133). All these narrowings of the relation serve the purpose of death concealment.

Historic executions had much more *talking and viewing* between executioner and condemned. Executioners might visit

the condemned in order to console or admonish (in addition to sizing up for the drop). Hangmen customarily requested and received the condemneds' pardon for executing them. In England, the condemned gave the executioner cash, presents and his clothes. Because execution techniques were uncertain in their effectiveness, the executioner was tipped in cash or expensive objects, such as a watch, in the hope of improved service. Such gifts might be openly awarded upon the gallows. Additional money was realized from the sale of the condemned's clothes which the executioner was likely to strip from the corpse at the scene, just before placing it in the coffin. The hanging rope was often cut up into short lengths and sold. The stripping of clothes involved, of course, the personalism and intimacy of physical contact, as did the standard practice of pulling the condemned's legs as he hung, the quicker to bring death.

In such ways as these, the historic executioner and his condemned experienced a direct and personal relation to each other. In all these ways, the executioners dealt openly with the fact that someone was dying.

CONDEMNED

We have seen that historic death cells and trips, especially, provided the condemned with a margin of freedom to express their personal uniqueness. They were visited and went visiting; they were talked to and talked. This leeway to behave in diverse and personal ways facilitated others' perceiving them as particular and unique humans. Death was thus personalized and, in this sense, dramaturgically open, as opposed to the dramaturgic concealment and impersonalization of masking and suppressing diverse personal expressions. Historic executions continued this leeway through the execution itself in permitted accouterments, actions and words.

(a) Condemned of substance and flair were allowed to express these qualities. Aristocrats and dandy highwaymen

decked themselves in formal finery, perhaps in the manner of the Earl of Essex who, in 1600, wore "a gown of wrought velvet, a satin suit, and a felt hat, all of black, and with a small ruff about his neck" (Laurence, 1960: 125). Peculiarities of taste, such as wearing a wedding suit or a shroud, were permitted. One wealthy condemned rode to Tyburn in his own mourning carriage drawn by six horses. More modest bits of executional equipment might be supplied by the condemned: cushions or handkerchiefs on which to kneel and pray upon the scaffold; a pliable silken rather than stiff hemp rope in order to hasten strangulation; black handkerchiefs with which to be blindfolded, bound at the wrists, or drop as a signal to execute; presents for the executioners.

(b) The final moments of the execution scene were not hurried through in wordless, rushed fashion as is the modern penchant. Their public character seemed, indeed, to have encouraged the condemned to give vent to an array of rather histrionic actions and words. Friends and acquaintances might be acknowledged and greeted. A condemned's infant child or others might be kissed or otherwise given farewell gestures. Deep formal bows might be directed to the crowd. An orange might be sucked upon, a pinch of snuff taken, or other minor comforts indulged in. Possessions and money might be presented as gifts to officials or nearby friends. Those who disliked the clergy's readings, prayers, and demands for repentance might counter with pithy putdowns as in shouting, "There is no God, or if there is, I hold him in defiance" (Atholl, 1954: 62). Contempt might be expressed by kicking one's shoes into the crowd (thus depriving the executioner of one of his perquisites) or by doing a dance. Ineffective pinioning methods made struggling defiance possible through wrestling, striking, or kicking the executioners. In one hanging, the condemned three times hauled himself up and straddled the trap door, finally necessitating three men to hold him at rope's end. More compliant condemned gave *help* to their executioners, perhaps by kissing the rope, positioning the noose, shaking hands and formally forgiving them, or dropping or waving a handkerchief

when ready. Most spectacularly, condemned might deliver long and elaborately prepared scaffold speeches. Last-minute reprieves were not uncommon in the historic era, a fact that encouraged "long discourses and prayers," perhaps "lamenting misdeeds," expounding "pious sentiments" and exhorting the crowd to avoid crime.

Taken together, the condemned had abundant opportunities to establish for themselves a *public character*, be that character heroic, villainous, courageous, cowardly, or whatever, and this possibility was founded upon the loose and uncoded conduct of executions and their public setting. Historic condemned were permitted, that is, to *personalize* the scene through showing the capacity for personal taste and preference and through speaking and acting. In this sense, the fact that a person was dying was openly communicated.

Modern executions, in contrast, prohibit this array of character-endowing possibilities—visiting, pub-stopping, speech-making, resistance, and the like. Not least of blandness-producing strategies is the engineering of swiftness: it is obviously hard to *be* anybody in but nine, fifteen, or sixty seconds. Even when a few "last words" are allowed (and not all modern executions allow any), the process moves in a manner so mechanized that it doubtless serves to inhibit speaking by many condemned. As hangman Berry would say to condemned upon entering the death hold: "If you have anything to say, now is the time, because once I get you on the scaffold you won't have time" (Atholl, 1954: 139). Referring to the 387 electrocutions he performed, Robert Elliott (1940: 66-67) describes the condemned as behaving virtually without exception as "meek as lambs." That is a way to go, of course, but it is only one of many historic ways. As one commentator has put it about England, "the old legends of courage on the scaffold . . . would not have sprung from executions as practiced . . . [there]" in modern times (Maddox, 1969: 87). Nor are other character styles very possible, such as the sniveling coward, the defiant sociopath, the eloquent revolutionary, the indifferent retardate or the dazed ordinary bloke. Such practices as state-controlled

or provided clothes and brisk, machine-like treatment from approach in the death cell through a short death march thus serve well to *impersonalize* and to conceal.

DEATH TECHNIQUE

The condemned must by some technique be killed. How, dramaturgically, is this to be accomplished? A strategy of dramaturgic openness makes inescapably clear the existential fact that a human being is being killed. How is this done? The technique should be highly unreliable and ineffective, take a long time to work, make a great deal of noise, mutilate the body and inflict terrible pain, causing the condemned to cry out in anguish and struggle strongly to resist—all of which actions are highly visible to witnesses and accompanied by noxious and abundant odors. Not all historic executions could claim to display all these features of openness, but, on the whole, they were rather well approximated. The modern concealed strategy of killing while looking the other way, so to speak, strives to achieve the opposite: unfailing, lightning fast, noiseless technique that is painless and nonmutilating, involves no struggle, dying sounds, or odors, and is carried out in a way that shields the condemned's body in case something "goes wrong" despite all precautions. Modern people call this "humane." Dramaturgically, it is concealed.

Space prohibits examination of various techniques in these nine terms. It must suffice to say that such ancient and historic ones as pressing to death by progressively heavy weights upon the chest, breaking upon the wheel, crucifixion, stoning, strangling, burning at the stake, cutting off strips of flesh, stabbing non-vital parts of the body, throat slitting, drawing and quartering, garroting, beheading, and premodern (short-drop) hanging are all enormously more open than concealed in these dramaturgic regards.

The five, major techniques of modern times—long-drop hanging, electrocution, lethal chamber, firing squad, and guillo-

tine—vie with one another in terms of how well each approximates the nine ideally concealed qualities. The firing squad and guillotine are markedly more noisy or mutilating than the others and appear to be losing ground for those reasons. Electrocutions apparently have some duration, noise, sound, and odor (flesh sizzling) problems, as does the lethal chamber with regard to contortions. Long-drop hanging as perfected and practiced by the British is most ideally concealed, but even it is not dramaturgically perfect. Indeed, the search for a technique that more fully operationalizes these nine principles still goes on among those moderns still executing or thinking about doing it. Before abolition of capital punishment in Britain, the lethal injection or tranquilizer was officially considered. At least one U.S. state governor has in recent times made the same suggestion.⁹

CORPSE DISPOSAL

An open dramaturgics of corpse disposal occurs in (1) a public manner that is (2) reasonably prolonged and that (3) brings the corpse to rest in some obvious and marked place. A concealed dramaturgics disposes of the corpse in (1) a private manner carried out in (2) a brief period of time that (3) brings the corpse to rest in an obscure and unmarked place.

Historic folk had some ingenious devices for actualizing these principles of openness. The common British and European practice of gibbeting expresses them best, by far. However killed, the corpse was somewhat preserved by boiling or tarring and hung up in a chain or wicker "suit" at the scene of the crime, along heavily travelled roads and rivers, or at a special gibbet place. The preservative retarded decay, and the chain or wicker "suit" prevented large parts of the corpse from detaching. By such means, the corpse's public display was prolonged. Carrion birds eventually picked the bones clean. Less public, prolonged and marked, but reasonably so, is the historic English practice of anatomization or dissection. In its most

extreme form, the corpse was conveyed through the crowded streets of London to the barber-surgeons for public display and dissection before an auditorium packed with spectators (who were sometimes charged admission).

The opposite principles were likewise well actualized in the modern British practice of holding an inquest in the prison just after the execution and thereupon burying the body in an unmarked, quicklimed grave within the prison walls. Execution and complete disposal were thus accomplished in but a few hours and within a small, protected space. Only a minimum of officially required personnel were involved.

DEATH ANNOUNCEMENT

A state execution is "announced" to the degree that members of the society *not* present at it are aware of its occurrence and of its social and physical details. An open dramaturgics strives to maximize, and a concealed dramaturgics to minimize, the number of "absentees" who know and the amount of detail they possess.

Today the ideally open announcement would presumably involve something on the order of world-wide live television, repeated often on videotape, and embroidered by the observations of experts and other moralists (such as the Pope and Norman Mailer). Unrestrained print media would provide more permanent and weighty words and pictures. Announcements of historic executions were as open as technology then allowed. Newspaper, broadside and pamphlet accounts were produced in profusion. (Before the age of printing, the condemned's corpse was left to be its own announcement.) Historic folk employed, moreover, *symbolic acts* from which a modern dramaturgics of openness could well borrow: church bells were tolled, black flags were run up, public notices were posted. Many shops and schools were closed by their master's absence on a hanging day. In modern society the closing of government, educational and

other establishments would have a similar announcing effect upon the citizenry.

A dramaturgics of "concealed" announcements is obvious. All publicizing media are barred; witnesses, who might talk, are few and controlled; government notice is zero. This was virtually the modern British practice, among whom executions were classified as official state secrets.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

I have suggested two sharply different dramaturgic strategies of dealing with basic events of life and death and offered an idealized model of them for the specific event of the state execution. Materials on "historic" and "modern" state executions in England and America have been reviewed in terms of the degree to which they illustrate and approximate such open versus concealed dramaturgics.

If, as I asserted at the outset, the state execution is only one special front on which there has been a "dramaturgic revolution," then there is a need to specify carefully how and to what degree this has or has not occurred in other areas—most saliently, more routine dying, birth, and such on-going body functions as defecation, urination, and fornication. Among more "social" areas of life and death, open versus concealed stagings of hierarchical relations merit special attention.

As an application of the dramaturgical perspective, this analysis assumes that *how people do things, the style in which they do things, is virtually as important as what they do, the substance of their actions*. The world is ruled perhaps as much by the dramaturgic encasement of actions as by the actions encased. Public figures, especially, rise and fall as much on the manner they display as on the actions they perform. Of late, this realization has been elaborated into operating procedures of enormous efficiency, particularly in the creation and promotion of political figures. Relative to state executions, it may be suggested that they rise and fall as a function of how they are

done and not merely because they are done. To the degree they persist, they do so by means of the concealment strategy explicated.

NOTES

1. For topically and empirically expanded treatment, differently framed, see J. Lofland (1975).

2. See, further, J. Lofland (1975) on insulation of the death cell from noises of the death preparations.

3. Scott, 1950: 209. In one innovation, the rope is held daintily off the scaffold floor by a silk cord, the better to insure the condemned will not trip.

4. On this and other concepts of the dramaturgic perspective, see Goffman (1959).

5. The larger the number of places and the greater the number of people proximate to them, the greater, presumably, the likelihood of thinking about what happens in them.

6. See, e.g., Bleackley, 1975: 142-143; Mencken, 1942: 170ff.; Atholl, 1954: 79-80.

7. Cf. Hornum (1968). Sources of personal diversity of executioners in their deviances, misfortunes and "personalities" are discussed in J. Lofland (1975).

8. Laurence (1960: 137) sums up modern British executioners as "quiet men and well behaved." These formalizations are interestingly satirized in Duff (1955).

9. Sacramento Bee (1973). For extended discussion of the comparative dramaturgic characteristics of various death techniques, see J. Lofland (1975); see also Schmidt (1928) and Earle (1969).

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ERRATUM

In the review by Lyn H. Lofland of Blake McKelvy's book *American Urbanization: A Comparative History*, which appeared in the July 1975 (Vol. 4, No. 2) issue of *Urban Life*, the following erratum should be noted:

On page 232, the last sentence of this review ought to read: "This is a fair critique, although one that, until American sociologists as a group become better historians, is best left in abeyance."