

MARTYRS IN AMERICAN CULTURE

Tristan Eloise, Elizabeth Williamson, Cai Logan

"I would like my books to be a kind of tool-box which others can rummage through to find a tool which they can use however they wish in their own area. . . . I don't write for an audience, I write for users, not readers."

-Michel Foucault

This summer, we focused on three identities that are often linked in Shakespeare's plays: the soldier, the martyr, and the traitor.

In these plays, soldiers who die exceptionally brutal deaths as a result of political unrest are transformed into either martyrs or traitors, but Shakespeare deliberately makes it difficult to determine which label best fits the character. The plays demonstrate that the terms "martyr" and "traitor" are highly relative and mutually constitutive; you cannot have one without the other. They also make it clear that soldiers are often transformed into martyrs or traitors by emphasizing their "otherness," usually around race and gender.



The traitor is one who turns against the state.

The martyr is a symbolic figure associated with a religious or political cause, whose death is described as an extraordinarily heroic response to brutal persecution.

In 21st-century America, the martyr is linked in similar ways to the figure of the terrorist.

In the first half of the summer, we used critical theory to study Shakespeare's works within their historical context, and found that soldier, the martyr, and the traitor all played a key role in 16th-century politics. The threat of Catholic treason justified increasing militarization, including the persecution of Irish rebels. At the same time, Elizabeth's supporters recalled the many Protestant martyrs executed by her predecessor, Queen Mary, and compared them to the Catholic heretics who, in the eyes of the state, were godless martyrs.



In the second half of the summer, we applied our research to several contemporary case studies in order to test our hypothesis that the connection between the soldier, the martyr, and the traitor/terrorist is still a factor in American politics. By studying mass media representations of Christopher Dorner, Michael Brown, and Bowe Bergdahl (see photos above) we concluded that the interplay between these three figures still exists, and is accentuated by even more entrenched discourses of race and gender. The demonization of all three figures reveals one of the most important goals of state violence: to separate those who are fit to live from those who are marked to die.