Master Recherche Études Anglophones
Université Toulouse II Jean Jaurès

Mémoire de Master 2 présenté par Natacha Guillaumin
sous la direction d'Aurélie Guillain et d'Emeline Jouve

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BASH (1999): America and the Politics of Violence

UNIVERSITÉ TOULOUSE
Jean Jaurès

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DÉPARTEMENT D'ÉTUDES DU MONDE ANGLOPHONE

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Cover design by Michael Ian Kaye and Joshua Whitlock, used as the front cover of *bash: three plays*.

. . . what Sorel remarked sixty years ago, “The problems of violence still remain very obscure,” is as true today as it was then.

- Hannah Arendt, *On Violence*, p. 35.

La mission éducative de la culture n’est pas l’enjeu central de l’art. Selon moi, l’enjeu politique de l’art se situe surtout dans la subversion du regard, dans le fait de « remplacer les évidences par des questions brûlantes ». Parce que ça me semble être ça, l’ordre. L’ordre du silence.

- Adèle Haenel, “*L’Étang*. Conversation avec Gisèle Vienne, Adèle Haenel et Ruth Vega Fernandez.”

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements ... 4
Introduction ... 6
1. The Origins of Violence: Sacred or Profane Contexts of Apparition ... 12
a) Violence Originates From the Re-Enactment of Myths ... 12
b) Violence Stems from Family ... 29
i. The Atreides' Curse and Oedipus ... 29
ii. The Father Figure(s) and the Relation to the Father ... 35
iii. Family Crime in the United States ... 37
c) Violence Also Comes from the American Society Which Produces Mimetic Desire ... 40
i. An Increasing Number of Hate Crimes in the US in the 90s ... 40
ii. Criminal Violence Calls for More Institutional Violence ... 42
iii. Dormant Violence in the Society of Spectacle Erupts Through Mimetic Desire ... 49
2. Structural Violence: Questioning Identity and Community in *bash* ... 54
a) Casual Violence and Casualties: Who Are the Typical Victims? ... 54
b) Violence and Identity: The Case of the Persecutors ... 69
i. Portraits of Ordinary Criminals ... 69
ii. A Violent Crisis of Identity ... 77
iii. Culpability and Guilt: A Fact but Not a Feeling ... 81
c) Duplicity and Paradox of Violence: Communication and Destruction ... 86
i. Violence as a Form of Communication ... 86
ii. Violence as an Unstable Foundation for Society ... 92
3. Cycle of Violence, Embodying the Tragic Aporia ... 96
a) The Attachment to the Past, and Going in Reverse ... 97
b) Paradoxical Connections, Failed Regenerations ... 105
c) The Gradation of Violence Leads to its Trivialisation ... 116
Conclusion ... 123
Works Cited ... 125
Appendices ... 136
Biographical Note on Neil LaBute ... 136
Summary of the Plays ... 137

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Introduction

Neil LaBute leaves no one indifferent. Praised or booed by the critics and the audience, his plays and films are triggering strong reactions. For instance, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints disfellowshipped him after the publication of *bash* in 1999. This tryptic of plays, inspired by ancient Greek subjects, explores the depth of cruelty and violence in four individuals: a young man who kills his daughter to secure his job; a fashionable couple, john and sue, who go on a week-end in Manhattan during which john and his male friends give a homophobic beating to a man; and a woman who kills her son to avenge herself against her former lover and father of her son.[1]

When violence is exploited in plays, it is usually with a political aim. Political comes from Latin *politicus*, *a*, *um*, "linked to the government of men," itself from ancient Greek *politikos* (πολιτικός), "of citizen, that affects citizens, popular, that affects the State, public" ("politique"). The OED definitions of politics that are of interest in this subject are "actions concerned with the acquisition or exercise of power, status, or authority," "management or control of private affairs and interests, especially as regards status or position," and "the assumptions or principles relating to or underlying any activity, theory, or attitude, especially when concerned with questions of power and status in a society" ("politics, n."). To summarise, what is political has to do with the relation of the citizens with the state and the organisation of public affairs. Just from the different acceptations of the noun, it can be seen that politics implies power, and that there are questions of acquisition, management, and attitude towards power that have to be considered when talking about politics. The relation to authority, power, and the question of status also depend on individual ideas and beliefs. Ideally then, by "politics," what is meant is the idea of creating a form of coherent group, a community of people sharing the same values, as well as the logics and workings of this organisation. The ideal *poleis* described in Aristotle's *Politics* share a common goal of betterment of the citizens through education and the ethos of association—sharing goods, talents, skills. Unsurprisingly then, politics and violence are often seen as antithetic entities.

Historically, theatre and politics have always been closely bound. In the ancient world, the objective of Greek tragedies was not to denounce the official body but to strengthen the social contract. On the contrary, in the 1990s, playwrights questioned political institutions with their plays. When considering the notion of "political theatre," it is important to mention Bertolt Brecht. Brecht's

[1] Most of the words, in *bash*, are spelled in lowercase. I chose to keep that spelling in this study when mentioning the characters and the titles of the plays.

epic theatre was developed in reaction against the Aristotelian principles; "his intention was to appeal to his audience's intellect in presenting moral problems and reflecting contemporary social realities on the stage. He wished to block their emotional responses and to hinder their tendency to empathize with the characters and become caught up in the action" ("Epic theatre."). LaBute's theatre gets its alienation or distancing effect from Brecht.

In Greek and Latin tragedies, violence acted on stage or reported by the chorus becomes a catalyst for togetherness through the process of the *catharsis* theorised by Aristotle in his *Poetics*. This cleansing of destructive passions thus supposedly allows the reinvigoration of the social contract. The US stage is heavily influenced by the UK theatre. In Great Britain at the end of the 1980s, the theatre of Edward Bond and Sarah Kane showed how men perpetrate auto-destructive violent acts on themselves to highlight the force of life and renew human bonds and relationships. In American theatre, there is a deeply rooted tradition of violence. Playwrights such as Adrienne Kennedy, Paula Vogel, Naomi Wallace, John Pielmeier, Marsha Norman, etc. nourish this tradition by openly showing violence on stage, but it is the controversial plays of Edward Albee and David Mamet which expose human hatred and horrific behaviours that come closest to what Neil LaBute does in his plays. Albee, Mamet and LaBute do not tend to openly show violent physical actions on stage (contrarily to Kane or Bond), but rather confine violence to the situations in which the characters are or were, and to the characters' language.

The word "bash," in American English, is polysemous: it alternatively means a hard hit ("bash" as a beating), or a party gathering people. These two meanings merge in LaBute's plays, implying that violence might be precisely what draws people together. In order to understand how that might be, it is necessary to make a first approach of the two notions of violence and politics.

The notion of violence is always already dual, it is both at the same time a physical force used against someone, and the violation of a norm. The singularities of each situation in the three plays considered follow different philosophical traditions regarding violence and what it means. However, they are all conform to Yves Michaud's definition of violence:

> We can speak of violence when, in an interactive situation, one or more actors act, either directly or indirectly, either once or on more than one occasion, in such a way as to attack,

> to some degree, either the physical or moral integrity of an individual or group, their property, or their involvement in symbolic and cultural activities. (20)[2]

Violence in *bash* exists in different forms. There is the direct behavioural violence of the characters when they committed murder or other acts of violence, but there is an indirect form of violence that is crushing all characters like the clogs of fate were crushing the characters of Attic tragedies. Indeed, violence in *bash* is systemic because it is generalised, but also and more especially because it is part of interdependent systems. Structural violence was first theorised in 1969 by Norwegian sociologist Johan Galtung thus: "We shall refer to the type of violence where there is an actor that commits the violence as *personal* or *direct*, and to violence where there is no such actor as *structural* or *indirect*" ("Violence, Peace, and Peace Research" 170). Structural violence is more difficult to pin down precisely because it is indirect and because it has no identifiable cause, source or actor. It is anonymous, latent and part of a macrosystem. James Gilligan goes further in 1997 by showing the links between the concept of structural violence and that of behavioural violence that the three protagonists of *bash* display. He explains in *Violence: Reflections on a National Epidemic*:

> Structural violence is . . . the main cause of behavioral violence on a socially and epidemiologically significant scale (from homicide and suicide to war and genocide). The question as to which of the two forms of violence—structural or behavioral—is more important, dangerous, or lethal is moot, for they are inextricably related to each other, as cause to effect. (196)

Structural violence endangers the community of characters in *bash*, who are left without a frame of reference, crushed by a silent and rampant system, that of patriarchy.

Violence thus appears as a real threat to community, a violation of the social contract between the perpetrator of violence and the one suffering it, the endangering of politics. The social contract is, at the base of any political organisation, "an actual or hypothetical compact, or agreement, between the ruled or between the ruled and their rulers, defining the rights and duties of each" ("social contract").

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[2] Originally: "Il y a violence quand, dans une situation d'interaction, un ou plusieurs acteurs agissent de manière directe ou indirecte, en une fois ou progressivement, en portant atteinte à un ou plusieurs autres à des degrés variables soit dans leur intégrité physique, soit dans leur intégrité morale, soit dans leurs possessions, soit dans leurs participations symboliques et culturelles." Unless specified otherwise, all translations are mine.

Yet, however paradoxical the connection between socialisation and violence may seem, it has been theorised by many thinkers—notably by Bourdieu, Freud, Hegel, etc. In *Politics*, Aristotle famously defined man as a political animal, a statement which can be interpreted as an oxymoron that actually reconciles politics with the violent instincts of man, not necessarily by taming those instincts, but by using them to create an organised form of gathering—the *polis* (Book 1, section 1253a). In this perspective then, violence implies a contact between different groups, it is even a form of socialisation according to Georg Simmel: it functions as a tool for integration in a group, to elaborate new values, resolve tensions and create new systems of equilibrium. In an interview, Paula Vogel also analyses hate as a congregating factor, calling it a "communal bond" which is "internalised" by absolutely everyone.[3] Of course, when violence could seem a very positive process for the group, it is most often at the expense of an individual who is set as a scapegoat—a theory developed notably by René Girard.[4]

Furthermore, violence is not just a way of socialising, but in many accounts, especially mythological ones, violence marks the *initiating* event for the creation of the social contract. For example, the myth of the Urvater as used by Freud in *Totem and Taboo* delineates the beginning of civilisation, suppressing human primitive drives and replacing them with totems representing the proscribed crimes and taboos. In Roman history, the creation of Rome, the heart of civilisation, happened at the moment when Romulus murdered his brother Remus. In the Roman civil religion, this violent crime is commemorated through rituals such as animal sacrifices; similarly, in the Christian religion, Easter is the ritualistic commemoration of Christ's sacrifice. Violence as initiation thus alternatively refers to the origins of civilisation from a violent act, and to the rite of passage or "initiation" to be accepted into a group. It is both an action to create a group, and the perpetuation and re-enactment of this fundamental action to reassert the fact of belonging to said group. Actually, although the origins of tragedy remain relatively obscure, it is thought to be in relation to ancient sacrificial rites, notably in honour of Dionysos.[5]

Finally, in literature and theatre, violence also plays a part in reinforcing the links between the members of a community, a concept linked to "cultural violence" as theorised by Johan Galtung. Cultural violence justifies and legitimises structural violence through different media such as, for

[3] In an interview with Arthur Holmberg, Paula Vogel says: "What we are taught to hate unifies us as a society."
[4] See notably *The Scapegoat* and *Violence and the Sacred*.
[5] On the origins of tragedy, see Degaine, *Histoire du théâtre dessinée de la préhistoire à nos jours, tous les temps et tous les pays* (12-15); Festugière and Lévêque, "GRÈCE ANTIQUE (Civilisation) - La religion grecque."

instance, art, literature, or religion. For example, punitive violence is inflicted on criminals to somehow reintegrate them into society, like in Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* with Raskolnikov's redemption only made possible thanks to his time spent in prison; and in the Aristotelian Greek tragedies, violence is unleashed by the tragic protagonist to allow the catharsis to work on the audience through the comments of the chorus symbolising the community and serving as a moral compass, thus restoring the order previously disturbed by the immoral action.

LaBute's use of violence in his trilogy of one-act plays questions the relation of violence and politics by inscribing it in a mythical and religious frame: the plays are affiliated to Greek tragedies in many ways (the characters refer to it directly and there are intertextual echoes both in the titles and in the plots), especially Euripidean tragedies—namely *Iphigenia in Aulis*, *The Bacchae*, *Medea—,* and to Mormonism—all of the characters are Mormons, and the subtitle of the trilogy *latterday plays* is a direct allusion to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, i.e. the Mormon Church. The violence inherent to myths is re-appropriated by LaBute and demystified to become trivial, so that the banality of violence becomes more shocking than violence itself.

This banal violence is carried out by the three protagonists who are, *prima facie*, ordinary white middle-class Americans, all smiles, very relaxed, casual, and seemingly inoffensive. However, they proceed to unleash in an undisturbed and unabashed tone the gruesome testimony of the ultra-violent crimes they committed. Violence is shown as if it were trivial and even enjoyable: the young man is thinking out loud "it's funny how things end up, isn't it?" (*bash* 30) in *iphigenia in orem*, john and sue experience erotic exhilaration at the sight of violence and blood in *a gaggle of saints* ("SUE. but see, in a weird way, though, it excited me. the blood, is that stupid to say?..." *bash* 44), and the woman is feeling blissful when imagining the pain of her former teacher (*bash* 93-4) in *medea redux*.

These matter-of-fact voices, through the process of remembrance, point at the absent characters, the victims of their violent crimes, and make them resurface. There is a shift from Pierre Bourdieu's "symbolic violence"—a systemic and invisible form of coercion that works with the involuntary ascent of the dominated subjects—to invisibility as a form of violence in LaBute. Indeed, the simple absence of the victims on stage recalls the violence in which they were assassinated; the victims' invisibility is a metonymy for the violent crimes that annihilated them. In ancient tragedies, death also usually took place offstage (with the notable exception of Sophocles' *Ajax*) and it was then narrated on stage by a messenger, usually the coryphaeus.[6] In LaBute's plays, the crimes that

[6] See Hénin, "Faut-il ensanglanter la scène ? Les enjeux d'une controverse classique."

happened are not performed onstage or offstage, they are instead told through the characters' biased monologues. This allows them to deliver their own version of the facts. The plays, dedicated to the fictional victims "emma, chet, and billie," are inscribed in a process of remembrance, but not of redemption of their murderers. The characters and the plots are infused with religion and myth, but these are perverted and deviated from their capacity to redeem and expurgate society, thus impeding the work of the Aristotelian catharsis and highlighting a monstrosity unredeemable by the Mormon Church. Thus, although LaBute's theatre is indebted to the ancient tragic tradition and to the Christian tradition, it also works against tradition. In the end, the plays reflect a contemporary American society that is immoral, not amoral, and it is one of the most disturbing aspects: the characters appear rational, they have a sense of what is good and bad, but their moral compass is not set to the same values as those of the social contract. Following a hyperrealist trend, LaBute's plays plunge the audience into the heart of a tragic experience that is crude and that shows a truth that is very difficult to explain.[7]

In sum, this dissertation will explore the ways in which *bash* questions the politics of violence in the American society. In *bash*, violence is a cohesive factor as well as a destructive one. It becomes symptomatic of the profound dysfunctionality of contemporary American society and its competitive capitalist morals which generate what René Girard calls mimetic desire—that is, the desire for an object is the imitation of someone else's desire for the same object—, and like the typically tragic motif of entrapment in a closed-circuit reality, it is doomed to repeat itself.

*

Unless specified otherwise, all translations in the footnotes are mine.

[7] In literature, much like in visual arts, hyperrealism emphasises vivid and detailed descriptions that are so realistic that they can create uncanny feelings.

1. The Origins of Violence: Sacred or Profane Contexts of Apparition

The violence present in *bash* grows from different roots. The myths exploited in the plays are violent and part of this violence is recuperated and exalted to be adjusted to the contemporary setting in which Neil LaBute's characters live. The way the characters talk is an integral part and a reflection of the ruthlessness of society, and the transgression of the Mormon codes coupled with the origins of tragedy as part of a religious ritual also create a favourable nest for the eruption of violence.[8] LaBute's plays astutely show that violence comes from many places. Violence is thus found not only in sacred ceremonies and mythical context, but also in more profane (i.e. non-sacred) environments and communities such as family or secular society. LaBute's typographic choice to remove capital letters could arguably be a way to signal a debasement from the sacred to the profane.

a) Violence Originates From the Re-Enactment of Myths

The violence of *bash* is, in part, rooted in the myths that the plays exploit. On the one hand, the simple reconstitution of myths and LaBute's focus on their darkest and most horrific characteristics to be recounted on stage highlight some motives and aspects of the myth already marked with a certain violence, whether it be in the plot and the actions of the characters (e.g. the central murders of emma, chet and billie orchestrated by the protagonists), or in the relentless and infernal machine of fate casting a shadow on the characters' future. It creates an effect of vividness and gives flesh to the story by acting it out, thus revealing some unconscious forces. In that matter, the specific genre of tragedy helps in bringing out fatefulness. On the other hand, violence comes from the speech of the characters, and from the words they use. Violence is very common in the reinterpretation of myths in the twentieth century European theatre, with for instance the works of Jean Cocteau, Bernard-Marie Koltès and Jean Anouilh in France, and of Sarah Kane in England.[9]

The word "myth" has a complex etymology which fits into the sphere of language. Harry Levin made a semantic enquiry on the ancient Greek word "myth" in his article "Some Meanings of

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[8] In the Doctrine and Covenants, family-oriented conduct is encouraged, and murder is forbidden: "Therefore, renounce war and proclaim peace, and seek diligently to turn the hearts of the children to their fathers, and the hearts of the fathers to the children" (Doctrine and Covenants 98:16).

[9] Jean Cocteau revisited the myth of Oedipus and Sophocles' Theban plays with *Antigone* (1922), *La Machine Infernale* (1932), and *Œdipe Roi* (1937); Bernard-Marie Koltès used myths such as the biblical myth of Samson and Delilah, the myth of the Minotaur and the myth of Psyche (to name but a few) as intertextual references in his play *Roberto Zucco* (1989), or the many myths of enemy brothers and the biblical motif of the evil serpent in *Le Retour au désert* (1988); Jean Anouilh revived tragic women from ancient myths such as *Eurydice* (1942), *Antigone* (1944), or *Médée* (1953); and Sarah Kane's adapted Seneca's *Phaedra* with *Phaedra's Love* (1996).

Myth"; he explains that *mythos* means "word" or "speech" in Homer and Greek poets, and then quotes Paul Valéry's definition of myth: "Myth is the name for everything that exists, or subsists, only to the extent that speech is its cause," whereas *logos* means "tale," "story" (Murray 103-114). That is the reason why Aristotle used the word *mythos* to signify "plot," and said that it was the most important feature of tragedy. In adaptations, especially in novelistic versions of ancient myths, the dimension of orality may have been lost. Thanks to the theatrical format of the text, the substantial link between *mythos* and *logos* is renewed and orality regains its central space.

To summarise so far, LaBute's original way of using myth emphasises three mythical forms: that of language itself, that of narrative, and a dramatised form when it is actualised on stage. As it happens, LaBute is using these three forms of myth to bring out the complex network of violence that underlies his plays. From the outset, Neil LaBute announces that his plays are relating to mythical material.

The titles of the first and the last plays of *bash* are directly alluding to ancient Greek plays by Euripides: *iphigenia in orem* echoes *Iphigenia in Aulis*, and *medea redux* descends from *Medea*. Neil LaBute, like many of his predecessors, repeats the well-known plots, but in different and successive versions steeped in other imageries (e.g. American myths). To put *bash* into perspective regarding its influences and transtextuality, it is important to state its status as an *adaptation*—a useful umbrella term "applied to a wide variety of theatrical operations, uses, and contexts, in which a transformation of sorts takes place" (Laera 2).[10] Not only does it maintain the imprint of the process of transformation from one object to the other, but it also evokes the dialogue between the hypotexts and the hypertexts, thus stressing the dialogical nature of literature. Subsequent dialogues are also made possible thanks to *intertextualité* as Gérard Genette defines it, which is omnipresent, from the plays' titles which serve as paratextual pointers, to the tragic trajectory of the plots.[11]

In relation to *hypertextualité* (the relation between the hypotexts and the hypertexts), different processes are at play. First, there is a temporal transposition ("translation temporelle")—that is, a transposition of the action into another historical time, from antiquity to the 1990s. Coupled with spatial transposition ("translation spatiale"), first from Aulis to a lobby in an American motel, then from Thebes to New York, and finally from Corinth to Utah and Arizona, it actualises the plays and helps the audience feel closer to the world and the characters in the plays (it is similar to the process

[10] See Genette 7, where he defines a text's transtextuality as: "tout ce qui le met en relation, manifeste ou secrète, avec d'autres textes."

[11] See Genette 8: "relation de coprésence entre deux ou plusieurs textes ; c'est-à-dire, eidétiquement et le plus souvent, par la présence effective d'un texte dans un autre."

of "domestication" theorized by Lawrence Venuti). It thus allows "a refocusing and repositioning of the adapted work, and consequently of its emphasis on specific issues" (Laera 8)—here, they are American. For instance, LaBute "has transformed the Greek convention of 'messenger speeches' . . . into intimate conversation between the actors and the audience," thus "capitalizing on the American obsession with talk show confessions" (English 24). These processes allow a reinterpretation of the myths from an American perspective, and shed a light on the religious, political and economic logics that govern the American society—namely, Mormonism and capitalism, including capitalism's social implications. For instance, Medea's fate is reinterpreted in a Bourdieusian logic of social (pre)determination in *medea redux*. Neil LaBute's theatre not only resonates with biblical and ancient myths, but the haunting recurrence of a whole array of mythemes—"each of a set of fundamental generic units of narrative structure . . . from which myths are thought to be constructed" ("mytheme, n.")—also generates "Figures"—in Deleuze's definition of the term—that are truly mythical in the sense that they appear as universal singulars, as symptoms of the forces which run through our contemporary world.

In this regard, the use of Euripidean material for LaBute's plays, instead of another ancient Greek playwright who tackled the same myths, Aeschylus in particular, is especially interesting because of Euripides' angle of approach, which is more psychological than Aeschylus's or Sophocles' (Szeliski 122)—a trait that Nietzsche saw as an encroachment of reason responsible for the death of the Attic tragedy symbolised by the trio of Aeschylus-Sophocles-Euripides (Nietzsche 61-2). LaBute's angle of approach is also very psychological: he is only presenting the protagonists' account of the events, without a chorus to balance, contradict or verify the facts. There is a certain affiliation with Seneca—who introduced "a climate of majestic violence" (Steiner, *La Mort de la Tragédie* 30)—and with Seneca's *Medea* more specifically in medea redux, for both Seneca and LaBute introduced Medea at the start of the play, and neither Medea-character blamed Jason/the woman's former teacher for the death of their son. Indeed, just like LaBute, Seneca showed "complacency for the horrible and the monstrous" (the corpses of Medea's deceased sons are on stage), a taste for "awful murders and dreadful crimes" and the "recurrence of the theme of infanticide" (Martin 303-304).[12] The endings of Seneca's *Medea* and LaBute's *medea redux* also share many similarities: Medea is some way or another removed from society—she flies away in Seneca, she will go to prison in LaBute—, and both endings convey the idea that gods do not exist. LaBute's borrowing from the ancient myths is a way to explore the psyche of violent characters and to revive violent themes that resonate with contemporary issues, such as the social and economic exclusion of women in the United States. At

[12] Originally: "complaisance à l'horrible et au monstrueux", "meurtres affreux et épouvantables", "récurrence du thème de l'infanticide."

the end of *medea redux*, which is incidentally the end of the trilogy, the woman embodying Medea depicts a piece of her fantasy, thus revealing at the very last moment the profound reasons for her crime:

> i can almost see 'em, you know, i can, down there in phoenix, probably wandering around on some playground at school, a saturday, and he's just stumbling there by himself near the monkey bars. can't be consoled, right, the truth all spilled out now like it is, and all these tears running down, yelling up at the sky, these torrents of tears and screaming, the top of his lungs, calling up into the universe, "why?! why?!" over and over. (BEAT) but you know what? in my fantasy, there's never an answer, uh-uh, there never is... (*bash* 94)

The reference to "phoenix" both has a literal and a metaphorical sense. It literally refers to the capital of Arizona, Phoenix, where the woman's former teacher lives, but it also recalls the mythical creature of the phoenix, the bird that can rise from its ashes. The bird represents the ascent in the air and on the contrary, fire and ashes, represent a descent into the ground. This trajectory is made in reverse: instead of a catabasis, a descent into the underworld, the phoenix represents an anabasis, the possibility to be born again, to start anew. As Phoenix is associated with the teacher, he is the one being granted another chance—a fact that highlights the irony of an American-born myth, the myth of the second chance, according to which all citizens are offered equal access to education to improve their chances. However, it can also be associated with the young woman herself because of the intertextual references with Seneca's Medea who flies away in the epilogue, and because of the contrasting motions that abound here. With reference to the ascending movement of the phoenix, "down there in phoenix" is built like an antithesis, "running down, yelling up" is a parallelism, so that in both cases, the motions answer and balance their contrary, thus creating a form of harmony of the cosmos. The movements of the teacher "wandering around on some playground at school, a saturday" highlights his being lost and alone, going in circles. He is the one being stuck "there," on the ground, and although unlike her, who is going to spend time behind real bars, he is only near and not behind the monkey bars—a cage structure designed for children to play in—, the redundancy of "these tears" and "these torrents of tears" (with the prefix "th-" already being anaphoric), concatenated in a double chiasma structure with "yelling" and "screaming," entraps him in his own misery. The young woman's use of the deictic "now" is performative, her testimony is the cause of his sorrow. His agony in a world devoid of meaning is concentrated in his repeated question, in a single word, "why," thrown up at the sky—the young woman's testimony becomes a whydunit (a type of detective story in which the motives of the crime are mysterious), and by not giving him the answer, she puts herself in the place of god, and in the case of a play, of the stage director. The

asyndeton of “at school, a saturday” looks like a stage direction that she gives for the final scene of the play. The whole play can be reinterpreted as if the woman had reorganised the chaos of her world with her violent crime—violence was a means for her to finally gain agency over her life, but in the end, she did not look beyond billie’s murder. Violence is yet again backfiring as she knows that she is going to be punished.

There are other internal references within the plays that revive that intertextuality, especially in *medea redux* where Euripides is mentioned along the Greek myths, and the main character incorrectly identifies a specific word in ancient Greek: she says *adakia* instead of *ataxia* (ἀταξία), referring to a chaotic state of the world, but it is interestingly close to *adikia* (ἀδικία), which means injustice. Most importantly, the Medea-like figure embodied by the main character, alone on stage, is a reminder of Euripides and Seneca’s versions of Medea. Belgian anthropologist Marcel Detienne explains that “[t]ragedy is inseparable from mythology”; the mythological landmarks anchor theatre to its tragic genre and reaffirm its ancient heritage (34-5).[13] However, “re-enacted and assumed in the tragic representation, the mythical story is at the same time . . . kept at a distance. Henceforth the myth is looked at with a political eye” (Detienne 35).[14] In other words, when myth is adapted for the tragic scene, the tragedy is both acknowledging of its mythic background and taking distance from it. Thereby the contexts of creation and representation of the tragedy, in connection with the underlying myths, create a palimpsest whose layers shed light on each other and help analyse the relations of power and authority between individuals and within a given political system. In this respect, Mary English astutely analyses *bash* in relation with their hypoplays in her article “A Modern Euripides” and she states that “Neil LaBute embodies the dramatic spirit of Euripides in that he seeks at once to provoke his audience and to challenge their values and ethical judgements” (24). On violence, she explains that “*a gaggle of saints* reads as an inverted Dionysiac tale where the ‘repressed’ and ‘narrow-minded’ characters do not fall victim to Dionysus but rather embrace his precepts to inflict a violent end on an unsuspecting individual” (28).

LaBute’s adaptation of violence from ancient material is not only a re-writing, it is deeply transformed. On the one hand, the main characters from myths and Attic tragedies have a superior status in society: according to traditional Aristotelian conventions, the tragic hero is not only supposed to be virtuous and admirable, but also usually belongs to the aristocracy, to a royal family, and sometimes also descends from a god. It is in part their fall from a higher sphere that allows the

[13] Originally: “L’œuvre tragique n’est pas séparable de la mythologie.”

[14] Originally: “reprise et assumée dans la représentation tragique, l’histoire mythique est en même temps . . . mise à distance. Désormais, le mythe tombe sous le regard politique.”

cathartic process; that is to say that the plays are supposed to show situations that quintessentially arouse *eleos* (pity) and *phobos* (fear) for the characters, so that the audience would recognise these feelings thanks to *mimèsis* and in turn experience them as an aesthetic emotion.[15] On the other hand, in LaBute's tragedies, the protagonists do not benefit from a high rank in society, and in consequence the catharsis is slightly impeded. Indeed, it is not as strong because not only the characters are middle-class, so their fall would not be as spectacular or catastrophic as if they had belonged to a higher class, but they generally do not even fall. The effect that LaBute is seeking is to show that his tragedy anti-heroes can be anyone. Modern adaptations of tragedies do not always keep heroes of aristocratic rank, but they usually preserve the principle of reversal of fortune and its dark epiphanies while applying it to middle-class or lower-class characters. What is essentially lacking in LaBute's tragedies is the kind of plotting in which there are enlightening reversals of fortune, following the pattern of peripeteia, anagnorisis and, potentially, catharsis. George Steiner wrote that "the tragic hero is responsible. His fall is linked to the presence in himself of a moral infirmity or of a positive vice. The sufferings of an innocent or virtuous man are, as Aristotle notes, pathetic, but not tragic" (219).[16] Neil LaBute's tragic characters are responsible but they are unable to fully realise it. Neil LaBute is focusing on the protagonists' lack of awareness of the seriousness of their actions, which impedes the audience's ability to keep on identifying with them. The characters look more like the audience, and thus the identification with them is made easier, but only up until the characters explain what crimes they have committed. In a sense, the subsequent rejection from the audience is so strong that a different form of fall occurs, but only for the audience, especially in *iphigenia in orem*. Indeed, in this first part of the triptych, the young man's first account of his situation at his workplace and the tragedy of his daughter's death at home make him look like a victim with whom the spectators sympathise. However, this feeling of pity towards the young man radically shifts after his second, more honest account of what really happened, and even the final tragic irony of this whole situation being due to a bad joke from an old friend does not change the fact that the audience can no longer identify with the young man. Furthermore, the characters who have committed horrible crimes are often not violently punished for them (or at least not yet, not in the play): the young man in *iphigenia in orem* lives on with a slightly better salary, john and sue from *a gaggle of saints* are about to get married, and only the woman testifying to the police in *medea redux* is sure to be incarcerated, or condemned to death penalty, as it is still legal in the state of Nevada where she has been arrested. The violence indispensable to the catharsis process has moved and diffused itself to become omnipresent, and as it

[15] See notably note 3 p. 190 in the edition of Aristotle's *Poetics* commented by Dupont-Roc and Lallot.

[16] Originally: "Le héros tragique est responsable. Sa chute est liée à la présence en lui d'une infirmité morale ou d'un vice positif. Les souffrances d'un homme innocent ou vertueux sont, comme le remarque Aristote, pathétiques, mais non pas tragiques."

never truly stops because it is repeated orally in the testimonies that the plays represent, any perspective of retribution for violent crime is cancelled out and the characters are doomed to remain stuck in their own violent ways—more often than not, it is hinted that there is no genuine reversal of fortune: the young man is still working in the same company and has had another son, and john is going to marry sue. Only the woman is going to be punished, but she was expecting it and she is accepting it. As Ilka Saal explains, "violence is tied to a larger project of collective cleansing and rehabilitation" (328). However, as long as the characters do not realise the need for "cleansing and rehabilitation" at least for themselves, as long as they are not aware of the horrible nature of their actions and thus self-aware, the anagnorisis (recognition, realisation) and its effect on the character is missing from the plays. For instance, in *iphigenia in orem*, the young man and his wife deb conceived another child on the deathbed of emma, and as joe was born around nine months after emma died, it probably happened on the exact same night after emma died; in *a gaggle of saints*, john proposed to sue with chet's ring; and in *medea redux*, the woman is savouring the effect of her killing billie on her former lover, and does not realise the full consequence of her action on herself. The characters seem undisturbed and continue to act normally, as if nothing had happened. There is no change in their behaviour, no soul-searching, they stay stuck in their old ways.

In Attic plays, whether it be *Iphigenia in Aulis* or *The Bacchae*, the anagnorisis is the key moment when tragic irony comes to an end. The audience and the character who had so far been the target of tragic irony come to the same level of realisation. It is the moment when the characters realise their mistakes and confusions, and when they are supposed to receive the full impact of the punishment they inflict upon themselves: they should be torn by terrible torments. Neither in *a gaggle of saints* nor in *medea redu*x is there an anagnorisis. The anagnorisis (from ancient Greek, meaning "recognition") is "the startling discovery that produces a change from ignorance to knowledge [that] usually involves revelation of the true identity of persons previously unknown" or one's own identity, for instance in the case of Oedipus discovering his birth ("Anagnorisis"). In the *Poetics*, Aristotle discusses the different types of *anagnorises* and explains that it is a major element of tragedy—nowadays, it is no longer restricted to tragedy or theatre but can be found in other genres. From recognizing the other or oneself, the characters experiencing an anagnorisis then suddenly grasps the consequences of previous actions. In *iphigenia in orem*, there could have been an anagnorisis, but it does not fully happen for the protagonist. The young man recalls his anagnorisis between two pauses in his monologue. It took place after emma has died, at a work seminar in Boston, during a conversation with the friend/colleague that had called him to let him know that his head was on the block:

> i was at a seminar, big yearly thing the company put on. this one was in boston, six months back. my friend from chicago flew in for it. okay, so… after the morning session, just passing as we were both in the restroom at one point, he said something to me, my friend, i guess trying to lighten things up a little, he mentioned work. and about the layoffs, and how glad i must've finally been to have gotten rid of you know who. and then he said, "boy, i really had you going that friday, didn't i?" i turned to him, standing there at the urinal, my fly still open and i turned to him and the whole picture was clear to me. right then, it was as clear as a look into the future...what he'd done. what we always used to do to each other, see, he'd heard the real truth about what was coming and just couldn't let it go without a little razzing and so he'd given me the call, let me stew about it over that weekend...he was going to buzz me back monday morning with the truth, but by then… (BEAT) yeah, he'd gotten me, alright, he got me good, just like the old days. (*bash* 28-9)

The event is recalled by the young man in a very laid-back manner: there are contractions ("i must've," "what he'd done"), slang (to razz means to tease), discourse markers ("okay, so...," "see," "alright") and repetitions which are all characteristic of oral speech. The whole event is told as if it were merely anecdotal, like an exciting plot twist in his personal story. Just like the woman in *medea redux* imagining the scene of her former lover finding out that she had murdered his son, the young man, through his speech, is staging the moment of the anecdote. The repetitions that fill his discourse are not just oral marks, they also have other effects: the accumulation of anaphoric terms to talk about the setting ("a seminar" is then "big yearly thing," "this one," and "it"); or the emphasis put on the complicity that he shares with his colleague ("my friend," "we were both," and the repetition of "my friend" following "me" and juxtaposed between two commas) dramatise the moment. Moreover, when the young man reports his colleague's speech, the switch from indirect to direct mode, and thus to present tense, gives the scene a theatrical aspect because it is re-enacted. Different times are telescoped: the scene is set in the past, there is the present of the direct speech, the mention of the future ("as clear as a look into the future"), a leap further back into the past (with the pluperfect "what he'd done"), and the gradual return, after a beat, to the preterit of narration. Despite remembering all the details of what happened, there is no anagnorisis for the young man who does not realise the gravity of his action. He is only presenting it as an interesting story with a funny turnaround.

The way that the whole event is presented makes the anagnorisis happen for the audience, but not for the young man. The young man's realisation does not seem to be that he murdered his daughter because of a practical joke, but that his long-time friend has pulled a good prank on him and that it adds irony to his story. He completely omits emma's death, which is reduced to an elliptical turn of

phrase and an aposiopesis ("by then..."), and prefers to stage his story. That way, pain is shut out of the picture. The violent emotions that should have tormented the young man are instead re-located, so that it is their absence that becomes violent. The tragic irony of this plot twist relies on the fact that it does not seem to have affected the young man. In the end, without anagnorisis, the perception of the degree of cruelty existing in this world is left to the viewer only. The audience is made to realise that we live in a world without conscience because it is ultimately a world without consciousness, a ruthless world in which the absence of ethical behaviour has no consequences.

To explore more thoroughly the psychology of the characters, the form taken by LaBute's plays is such that there are only one or two characters on stage, and their testimony reveals the way these characters think. The way they narrate their crimes is a direct entry into their mind and psychology, and into the violence they represent themselves.[17] The two versions of emma's death given by the young man are particularly eloquent in that matter. In the first one, emma's death appears like an accident:

> she tucks her in, and out they went. and see, i was gonna lie down with her, i really was, but i just went back into the living room for a second, watch a little *wheel of fortune* or some thing, you know, five minutes a week to myself, and i fell. fell off to sleep right there, there on the loveseat by the window. (BEAT) deb's mom… emma's grandma… found her. maybe a half hour later, she'd smothered herself under the covers, i don't know, beneath the weight of the comforter or whatever it was. (*bash* 16)

At first it all seems like an accident, or even like deb is solely responsible for emma's death because she was the one who put her to bed and saw her last—the young man even goes further in that direction just after this extract, saying that if deb and her mother had come back earlier, this might not have happened. In this first version of the events, the young man just fell asleep, did not hear anything. There are more hesitations though: "or some thing," "maybe," "i don't know." Whereas after explaining his situation at the office, his troubles and dilemmas, the young man reluctantly admits:

[17] There might be a connection between LaBute's conception of crime and the studies carried out on the subject of psychopathic killers and their constitutional lack of empathy (see for instance Cleckley, *The Mask of Sanity: An Attempt to Clarify Some Issues About the So-Called Psychopathic Personality*), or rather than a lack of empathy, an ability, present to varying degrees in every human being, to switch it off and to live in denial (see Carver, Scheier, and Weintraub, "Assessing coping strategies: A theoretically based approach").

> and i hear it. (BEAT) i wasn't asleep…i couldn't of been, I mean, i've tried to believe it, make myself believe it, too, but i wasn't, or i never would've heard her. the baby, emma, in the other room. […] she was already under the blankets, she was, i swear, under them and fighting to get out […] i just kind of coaxed her down a bit. down a bit further with the edge of my foot, turned her a touch and down and then i dropped the covers back and walked out... (*bash* 25-7)

Just like in the first account, in which the young man insists on his good faith with the repetition of the phrase expressing his first intention ("i was gonna lie down with her") with the adverb "really" ("i really was") or with the use of the fixed phrase "you know" to kindle the adhesion of the listener, in the second, real version of emma's death, the young man goes one step further by making a promise to the audience: "i swear," as if to insist on the fact that emma was already probably going to die and that this could be an attenuating circumstance of his murder. The attempt at attenuating and minimising the part that his action played is also exemplified by the use of adverbial phrases "a bit," "a bit further," and "a touch" but paradoxically, it makes it look even more horrible. The fact that he used the edge of his foot to push his baby further down the covers shows that he reified emma, he reduced her to the state of an object that he does not want to touch with his hands. In Euripides' *Iphigenia in Aulis*, Agamemnon was torn between the two issues of his dilemma and the idea of killing his daughter made him suffer terrible pains. On the contrary, the young man is morally anaesthetised and completely apathetic. He is not saying or showing that his daughter's death is affecting him, it is more the police officers' investigation in their house that makes him feel uncomfortable.

In *medea redux*, Euripides is qualified as "the most humanistic," which is indeed what authors like Bernard Knox or Susan Monagan say when they compare him to his contemporary tragic playwrights, for the gods' intervention appears no longer "necessary" in the human sphere, thus desacralising fate and giving back agency to the characters—an emphasis on psychology which LaBute has inherited. This entry into the characters' psyche allows the audience to understand how any human being can be casually cruel, even under the guise of virtue or normality. Fate is thus not owing to gods anymore, but it depends solely on men. From then on, the characters have to rethink their relation to fate. This displacement of fate from gods to men was initiated by Aeschylus. Edmond Lévy, analysing the theatre of Aeschylus, notes that "[t]he idea of fate, to reconcile that of liberty, will take on a moral connotation: it will no longer be a real *fatum*, but a punishment mechanism: the hubris

calls the *até*, which triggers the punishment; misfortune appears as the punishment for an individual fault, even when the culprit belongs for the rest to a cursed race" (411-2).[18]

Sacrifice and all the symbolism it bears also comes from the ancient myths and civilisation, but it has been deviated from its original aims and the distinction between the profane and the sacred, as Mircea Eliade demonstrated it, is not as solid and clear as it once was. Eliade explains the aim of his book by saying that "by opposing the 'sacred' to the 'profane,' we especially wanted to underline the impoverishment brought by the secularisation of a religious behaviour" (11-2).[19] This is particularly striking with the treatment of the theme of sacrifice in *bash*. Indeed, sacrifice (from the Latin *sacer* and *facere*, to do something sacred) is framed within the civic religion, it corresponds to rites and it has a specific decorum so that it remains *sacred*. Initially, Agamemnon's sacrifice of his daughter Iphigenia does not respect the rules of sacrifice, but Iphigenia's sacrifice of herself does. In *iphigenia in orem*, emma, the young man's daughter, does not take the decision of dying. Euripides' Agamemnon and LaBute's young man are very similar on many points, but they differ in an essential one. Just like Agamemnon, who took his decision after receiving an oracle, the young man thought that his position at his firm was in the hot seat because of an unreliable source (a co-worker). The difference between them is threefold on the question of sacrifice: Agamemnon hesitated before deciding to offer his daughter as a sacrificial victim to the gods, and agreed to do it for the sake of his community, and Iphigenia decided that she accepted to be sacrificed. In *iphigenia in orem*, the young man saw an opportunity for himself in the death of his daughter and took his decision on the spot, and emma did not have a say in the matter. There is a shift from the group to the self which makes the crime even more "violent." The lack of consent of the victim goes hand in hand with the lack of awareness of the perpetrator, which both impede the process of anagnorisis. The sheer allusion to tragic characters' names (such as in the titles of the plays) creates expectations that are defeated by the treatment of the plots. For instance, Iphigenia's sacrifice prefigures emma's murder, but the slight differences in characters, in situations, and in the nature of the daughter's death take a step aside and generate an increase of the degree of violence first expected. As Mary English demonstrates, "LaBute doesn't just borrow characters and situations; he shares with the Greek playwright the suspension of easy, traditional answers so that his audiences are encouraged to consider their own responses and positions" (5).

[18] Originally: "L'idée de destin, pour se concilier avec celle de liberté, va prendre une coloration morale: il ne s'agira plus d'un véritable « fatum », mais du mécanisme de la punition: l'ὕϐρις appelle l'ἄτη, qui entraîne le châtiment ; le malheur apparaît comme le châtiment d'une faute individuelle, même lorsque le coupable appartient pour le reste à une race maudite."

[19] Originally: "en opposant le « sacré » au « profane », nous avons entendu souligner surtout l'appauvrissement apporté par la sécularisation d'un comportement religieux."

Violence also stems from American myths such as the Myth of the Frontier, illustrated by the leitmotiv of the road in *bash*. In the United States, roads delimit states, cities and boroughs—they are physically symbolising political, economic, and social delimitations. In *iphigenia in orem*, the young man is driving long distances for work, and he delivers his testimony to a stranger in a hotel where he stopped on a work trip; in *a gaggle of saints*, john, sue and their friends are going on a road trip to Manhattan; and the woman in *medea redux* also drives to different places (Chicago with her teacher, Phoenix with her son), first on the passenger seat and then on the driving seat. Regarding the last example, there is a probable allusion to Paula Vogel's *How I Learned to Drive* (1997), which received a Pulitzer Price. In this play, Li'l Bit, the protagonist, takes back control over her life after a difficult childhood and adolescence, during which she was sexually abused by her uncle. The metaphor of the car representing power and agency goes along that of the road, representing life and its obstacles which constitute as many ordeals. There are many coincidences between the woman in *medea redux* and Li'l Bit. In *medea redux*, the woman was fourteen when she was raped, and she kills her son billie on his fourteenth birthday. In *How I Learned to Drive*, Li'l Bit is forty when she is recalling the facts, and her uncle was forty when he abused her. On a side note that has its importance, LaBute's father was a long-haul truck driver whom Neil LaBute took as an example for some of his characters' behavioural traits. He says in an interview with John Lahr: "There's a great deal of my father in a lot of the characters that people find somewhat unseemly" ("A Touch of Bad" 17). The motif of the road helps bring out the Myth of the Frontier, which is reinvested and mixed together with other mythical hypotexts and religious ones—for example, in Mormonism, the Doctrine of the Manifest Destiny is paramount and it goes hand in hand with the Myth of the Frontier.[20] Richard Slotkin, in *Gunfighter Nation*, highlights the fact that with the end of colonisation, the Myth of the Frontier "was called on to account for . . . our distinctively American approach to the socially and culturally disruptive processes of modernization" (10), and he goes on by saying that "[v]iolence is central to both the historical development of the Frontier and its mythic representation" (11). LaBute's treatment and reinvestment of the Myth of the Frontier in *bash* replay the resurgence of this primal violence linked to the desire to conquer.

[20] Here, Mormonism encompasses the community of Mormons and their beliefs, values, and practices. This branch of Christianism was born in Utah and is anchored in the United States' history, following the idea of American exceptionalism by linking the United States to the Promised land in the Book of Mormon, and by believing that Mormons will save the US Constitution (see the Article of Faith 10 and the White Horse Prophecy). For more information on Mormon history and texts, see the website of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, or the article "Mormons." on *History.com*.

The physical frontiers announce and reinforce the symbolical crossing of a moral frontier, as in stepping over the line. A close analysis of different occurrences of the word "edge" in *iphigenia in orem* is particularly revealing in that matter. The young man explains the moment when he is about to kill his daughter (*bash* 26):

> i rushed in there, to the edge of the carpet at the bedroom door and then, i don't know, something stopped me. Just stopped me like some invisible force had reached out and took hold of the back of my shirt and yanked me to a halt…

There is a physical force, a sort of hesitation that is taking place here. This is what Mircea Eliade analyses as a rupture between spaces of a different nature. He explains: "For the religious man, space is not *homogeneous*; it presents ruptures, breaks: there are portions of spaces qualitatively different from others" (Eliade 25).[21] The pause that the young man takes before entering the bedroom where he is to "sacrifice" emma is the manifestation of this break in space. Eliade goes on characterising this space: "The threshold is at the same time the boundary marker, the frontier distinguishing and opposing these two worlds, and the paradoxical place where these worlds communicate, where the passage from the profane world to the sacred world can happen" (27), and more specifically, "it is above all the images of a *bridge* and of a *narrow door* which suggest the idea of a dangerous passage and which, for this reason, abound in rituals and mythologies" (Eliade 154).[22,23] The edge of the carpet represents this liminal space and the danger of crossing it. The frontier actually proposes an alternative to the young man, and the young man saw the two choices put in front of him as if fate had been responsible for that, and as if it were an opportunity, the Greek *kairos* (the right moment). This is an example of a physical manifestation of the remnants of the Myth of the Frontier, where the young man embodies the American settler. And then, on the next page, the young man says:

> i took the risk, this calculated risk for my family that this whole episode would play out in our favour, give me that little edge at work and maybe things'd be okay (*bash* 27)

[21] Originally: "Pour l'homme religieux, l'espace n'est pas *homogène*; il présente des ruptures, des cassures: il y a des portions d'espaces qualitativement différentes des autres."

[22] Originally: "Le seuil est à la fois la borne, la frontière qui distingue et oppose ces deux mondes, et le lieu paradoxal où ces mondes communiquent, où peut s'effectuer le passage du monde profane au monde sacré."

[23] Originally: "Mais ce sont surtout les images du *pont* et de la *porte étroite* qui suggèrent l'idée de passage dangereux et qui, pour cette raison, abondent dans les rituels et les mythologies initiatiques et funéraires."

Here, "edge" then takes another meaning, that of giving the young man an advantage that he can use at work. And afterwards, talking about his daughter's death, the young man explains, with an interesting repetition, that "it probably would have happened anyway, and it did happen, and so you go on. like i said before, you just go on..." (*bash* 28). And indeed, he goes on crossing limits without stopping or reflecting (etymologically, going back), never recognising the moral nature of the limits he crosses and therefore avoiding anagnorisis. Carelessness is a constitutive attribute of LaBute's morally dangerous characters, similarly to Francis Scott Fitzgerald's brutal novelistic characters (e.g. Tom Buchanan in *The Great Gatsby* (1925)).

Places, geography and topology are very significant for that matter in LaBute, because all the places evoked or talked about in the plays are fraught with a connotation, whether it be religious (Utah, Delphi university), or referring to a change of social spheres (Chicago, New York City)—and the crossing of a frontier between those places symbolically reflects the crossing of a moral line. For instance, the young woman in *medea redux* takes her son from Utah to Arizona and by changing states, she also crosses another symbolical line, she goes over the limit to kill her son. Arizona is the teacher's territory, the young woman driving there with her son is a form of violence in trespassing. She is taking back control over her relationship with her former teacher, and over her own life. Violence here is a means to regain agency and the myth of regenerating violence is successfully re-enacted. In this respect, LaBute's drama is directly linked with the tradition of Sam Shepard's theatre.[24] Drawing on Slotkin's and Assmann's theories, Ilka Saal argues that *a gaggle of saints* is a "provocative examination of the myth of the American frontier and its central trope of regeneration through violence as a key paradigm of American cultural memory" (327)—indeed, this can be illustrated by the reuse of chet's ring as an engagement ring for sue. Chet's ring, since the lynching of chet, is steeped in violence; when john uses it to ask for sue in marriage, it symbolizes the renewal of john and sue's relationship, the origin of which is already marked by violence. This initial violence, combined with the violence that was used to get the ring, is then reinvested in the rite of marriage. It is the union of Eros and Thanatos, forces of life and death, love and violence, that indeed regenerate through violence, that the ring and the couple represent.

The Doctrine of the Manifest Destiny dear to the Mormon doctrines is also there on the background, for all the characters are Mormon and there are some Biblical references explicitly

[24] See for instance Mirowska, "Negotiating Reality: Sam Shepard's *States of Shock*, or 'A Vaudeville Nightmare.'"

stated.[25] In *iphigenia in orem*, the young man's son is called joe, and the young man also mentions god:

> i don't know, but that may even be the night that joe was...that's our youngest, "joseph," yes, the bible, and i have a brother of the same name, so… but joe came almost exactly nine months later, he's a great boy, he really is. . . . you just go on. you do. you thank your heavenly father for giving you strength to stand up to his trials and figure there must be a plan behind it all, a reason for so much pain and you just… go on. (*bash* 21)

In the Bible, Joseph is Jacob's favourite son, and the young man is found of his son who "replaced" his late daughter emma. Incidentally, the founder of the Mormon church is also named Joseph (Joseph Smith). The way the young man mentions the Bible and god is particularly interesting in terms of characterisation, and it helps to better understand how religion is viewed by him and by all the protagonists of *bash*. Indeed, there is an expression of detachment and even a form of disdain when the young man justifies how his son's name was chosen: it is indeed from the Bible ("yes"), but the subsequent conjunction of coordination "and" has an adversative meaning here, and thus could be replaced by the conjunction of opposition "but." The young man tries to minimise the importance given to religion by further justifying that his brother is also called Joseph. It could even be that the young man was feeling spiteful, if his father had preferred his brother over him. In the second part of the extract, after the young man speaks about his period of grief and loss, he explains that the only cure is to "go on." This is when he uses an impersonal structure with the generic pronoun "you," suggesting that he does not completely include himself in that statement and rather wants to make a general statement about what people usually do in this type of situation.

The Bible is also mentioned in passing in *a gaggle of saints*, when john is talking about the two men kissing good night in the park: "i mean, come on, i know the scriptures, know'em pretty well, and this is wrong" (*bash* 60)—john develops neither his knowledge of the religious texts nor the reason why two men kissing would be wrong, but he still uses the excuse of religion to justify his prejudice against gay people. However, his other mention of the Bible is both subtler and more irreverent when he compares himself and sue to Adam and Eve:

[25] See note 20 regarding Mormon beliefs in an American exceptionalism. We can easily link this idea to the Doctrine of the Manifest Destiny, defined as "the doctrine or belief that the expansion of the United States throughout the American continents was both justified and inevitable; this (expected) expansion itself; also in extended use" ("manifest, adj. and adv."). Such links have been made in Tony Kushner's *Angels in America: Perestroika* (1993), notably with the reconstitution of an episode of Mormon history in the Diorama Room of the Mormon Visitors' Centre, in Act Three scene 3. It shows Mormon pioneers going to the Promised Land (in Utah).

> 's like we're thrown back to the garden, the two of us, watching one another across this great green meadow, my side still hurting from the missing rib and all, but she's revealed to me, golden hair and a face like fresh snow and i'm thinking...hey, screw the bone, you know, here's why he rested on the seventh day. (*bash* 53)

When sue appears into the living room of the hotel suite where john, her and their friends are staying in New York, john draws a nonchalant comparison (omitting the pronoun "it" in "'s like") with the sight of Eve from Adam's point of view in the Garden of Eden, just after the creation of Adam and Eve and just before the Fall. The nominal group "the two of us," apposed to the personal pronoun "we," is not only a paraphrastic reformulation, but it clarifies and decomposes "we": little by little, distance is being increased between john and sue/Adam and Eve: "we," "the two of us," "one another," then "she." Although this distance is necessary for john to admire the work of god, to properly relish the revelation of Eve/sue's beauty, it is also symptomatic of their relationship and of john's disengagement from sue. Eve/sue is represented like a flawless and generic Disney princess in an idyllic setting, part of a nostalgic dream ("thrown back"). She was also born from Adam/john's rib, and her beauty is indissociable with pain. The violence of her birth and john's lingering pain are thus associated with beauty and pleasure taken from the contemplation of beauty and violence. Furthermore, john's language is fraught with violence: the spontaneous use of slang ("screw the bone") between two commas and discourse markers also echoes the violence of Genesis. The interjection "hey" is a pragmatic marker calling the attention of the audience, whereas the second, the phrase "you know," asks the audience for a form of complicity, to confirm their understanding.[26] Perhaps for the same reason of making the audience an accomplice, the names of God, Adam and Eve, or the Garden of Eden are not explicitly uttered. Incidentally, John's Gospel starts with "In the beginning was the Word" (*Holy Bible*, John 1:1); and john's speech both puts an emphasis on the violence of the genesis and on the genesis of violence.

The Myth of the Frontier and the Doctrine of the Manifest Destiny are two American myths which tell a story in which legitimate violence is the main "character." At last, when myth is considered more broadly as a chimerical dream, the Pursuit of Happiness, or American Dream, typically American, is present in the three plays, for the characters more often than not favour their own purposes over the survival of a community: emma is smothered by her father so that he could keep his position at work, chet is beaten by john and his friends in order for john to reassert his veneer

[26] See Laserna et al. and Erman for their conclusions about functions of such gap-fillers. Cf. Laserna, et al. "Um . . . Who Like Says You Know: Filler Word Use as a Function of Age, Gender, and Personality."; and Erman. "Pragmatic Markers Revisited With A Focus On You Know In Adult And Adolescent Talk."

masculinity, and billie is drawn by his mother for vengeance purposes, so that the woman can regain power over her past lover. There again, the characters' pursuit of the American Dream is always a violent process, showing that this American myth has been pervaded by violence and has in turn pervaded the American society.

The ruthless, unbearable cruelty of the contemporary modern scene is then laid bare through the degradation of pre-existing constructs whose function may have been to justify, legitimise or even ennoble violence because of its final outcome, among which one may find anagnorisis and catharsis for the audience by the end. For example, killing is made acceptable and even desirable through ritualised sacrifice—like in *a gaggle of saints*, in which the myth of America's Manifest Destiny is commemorated through the implied reference to some original, regenerating violence. A sacrifice is a supervised ritual, circumscribed to political life, supposed to explain and reproduce the origin of the political organisation of men. However, the detached, unabashed air of the characters retelling their crimes on stage shows evidence of bare and useless cruelty, that is to say that they do not seem to be invoking of their own accords myths of origins, except as an excuse to conceal the real reason for their actions: the quest for exhilaration and personal gain or success. Finally, tragic violence may be useful in that it brings at least some enlightenment, which it is often lost.

b) Violence Stems from Family

i. The Atreides' Curse and Oedipus

From the ancient Greeks to contemporary playwrights, in most cases, tragedies happen within the family. Examples are legion, but some have been exploited more than others: whether with the curse of Oedipus which has been analysed many times in literature, especially from a Freudian perspective, or with the curse of the Atreides which was an inspiration for many playwrights. In both examples, the father figures as a triggering factor for violence, and both the curse of Oedipus and the curse of the Atreides are used in LaBute's work:

In *iphigenia in orem*, the young man (identifiable with Agamemnon) sacrifices his daughter emma (identifiable with Iphigenia) to save his job (compared to war). The curse of the Atreides is then looming over him as the reader/audience learns, by the end of the play, that deb and him conceived another child, joe. Hypothetically, if the identification with the Atreides family is continued, deb (who would be a Clytemnestra figure) is very likely to murder the young man to avenge their daughter emma, and then joe (Orestes) would carry on by assassinating his mother to avenge his father.

The curse of Oedipus and by Freudian extension the complex of Oedipus are useful to analyse *a gaggle of saints*. Indeed, john mentions his father on four different occasions (*bash* 45, 46, 51, 55). Oedipus kills his father and ends up marrying his mother before he realises what he has done and wanders around, blind, in the streets of Colonus. As far as the curse of Oedipus goes, john only symbolically kills his father. Psychoanalyst Didier Anzieu established an account of violent and taboo actions that are suffused with Oedipal symbolism in Greek mythology (Anzieu 31-71). It includes parricides (about ten), fratricides (three), infanticides (seven), and incest occurrences. Infanticides are a recurrent motif in Greek mythology. They are seen as even more monstrous than other crimes because killing innocent children unavoidably leads to a confrontation with the inhumane. Agamemnon sacrificing his daughter is already horrific, but Medea's crime punishing her unfaithful husband Jason by killing her own two sons (according to both Euripides' and Seneca's versions) appears to be worse because it contravenes the notion of "maternal instinct." In *bash*, it is difficult to assess if there is a gradation in horror throughout the trilogy. The first and last plays revolve around child-killing, in the first by the father and in the last by the mother, but the beating (and probably the murder) of chet in the middle play of *a gaggle of saints* is particularly violent and horrific, especially because it is described at length compared to the murders of emma and billie. A reason for that

difference of length in the descriptions of the murders could have been that the parents feel more ashamed of their crimes, but it is apparent that guilt is not necessarily a burden for them. The young man in *iphigenia in orem* experiences a sense of loss (*bash* 21) and waste (*bash* 26, 27), whereas the woman in *medea redux* rejoices at the sweet thought of revenge.

The family of the Atreides and its curse are the raw material for the Attic plays by Euripides, Aeschylus and Sophocles, and for the first play of LaBute's *bash*. The Atreides are from the beginning marked with the foulest crimes of murders, incest, and rapes. From Agamemnon, the family nucleus is composed of Agamemnon, the father (the young man in *iphigenia in orem*), Clytemnestra, his wife (deb), Iphigenia, their daughter (emma), two other daughters that are absent or secondary in LaBute and Euripides' plays, and Orestes, their younger son (joe). Agamemnon's downfall originates from a first crime, a filicide, the sacrifice of Iphigenia. Agamemnon needed the gods to be in his favour to be able to go to war and he interpreted an oracle that made him sacrifice his daughter. He lied to his wife about it. However, seconds before the sacrifice, Artemis replaced Iphigenia with a deer. Clytemnestra, who was absent during the ritual ceremony, believed neither the messenger's nor her husband's account of the miracle. Upon Agamemnon's return from the Trojan War, she assassinated him. Orestes later murdered his mother for killing his father. In *iphigenia in orem*, there are proleptic signs of what could happen after the end of the play. For instance, when the young man and deb are being interrogated by the police officers just after emma's death to understand the circumstances of the accident, the detective asks the young man if he checked on emma during her nap. While the young man is considering the fact that this is a "no-win" question, that if he had not, he would have been a bad father, but that if he had, his daughter would have been alive, he sees deb's looking at him:

> and just for a second, just the briefest of moments...i catch deb looking over at me. as if this is the first time the thought's come to her as well. this possibility, the whole incident thing hangs there—probably only two or three seconds all together—but it just lays there in the air over us all. this shadow of a doubt...there's another cliché for you...it hangs there until i say, very matter-of-factly, "umm, no, i didn't, i meant to, but..." (*bash* 18)

This is before the young man explains that he is the one who has killed emma. The young man refers to his daughter's death as "the whole incident thing" which is very vague, evasive and even deflective. "Incident" is used as an adjective to qualify "thing," a noun used to replace something that will not or cannot be named, so that the young man presents it like an event that happened by accident. At this point, the audience/reader comprehends that the young man does not want to say the word "death" because of the pain that the word could revive, but going back to this extract knowing that he

has killed emma, it is more likely that he is being coy about his responsibility. In any case, there is the image of the crime and the lie hanging in the air—it "hangs there," "lays there," "hangs there." This instant which was "only two or three seconds," "the briefest of moments," seems like a tipping point, a decisive moment, a break in time. Although it is supposed to be very short, the intensity of the moment is such that it seems much longer—as the repeated verb "hang" and "lay" suggest. The answer of the young man to the question will seal his fate: he must decide whether to tell the truth, or lie for the rest of his life. His answer will also determine the correct wording and precise denomination of "the whole incident thing," between accident and murder. The "whole incident thing" is also rephrased as "this shadow of a doubt," like an ominous sign: the shadow of a doubt is also called reasonable doubt; in legal terms it is the threshold that needs to be crossed to convict someone for a crime. *Shadow of a Doubt* is also the title of a 1943 acclaimed psychological film noir by Alfred Hitchcock in which Charlie Newton's uncle Charlie Oakley is suspected of having committed a crime, and his niece soon understands that he has. She keeps the secret although her uncle tries to kill her three times, before dying himself by accident the third time he tries to kill his niece.[27] The shadow of a doubt that lingers above them is a sword of Damocles ready to fall on the young man's neck, especially considering the hypotext of the Atreides and Agamemnon's fate after he comes back from the war. Fate and the imagery of the turning wheel of fortune are present as well (*bash* 16, 25, 27) and deb's shadow of a doubt might well lead her to kill her husband after the end of the play. The young man does not seem to realise it but he does have an instinct to drive away (*bash* 29): "and it keeps me going, deb and i are fine. joe's getting huge, he really is, i'd show you a picture but i don't have any on me...but i find i really like the driving these days, you know?", whereas at the beginning he had said that he did not really like to drive for work ("never cared much for driving all the time, meeting clients, that end of things…" *bash* 14). The young man might think that deb and him are on good terms, but deb could be hiding her own plan. The fact that he now enjoys driving could either be an instinct to escape to save himself, since his own Trojan war will be over when he comes back home from his trips, and home is where the danger lies; or on the contrary, it could be interpreted as a manifestation of his death drive, which is a "tendency towards self-destruction" coupled "with . . . the compulsion to repeat" (Buchanan). During his work trips, the young man likely repeats in his mind the whole chain of events that led him to kill his daughter.

Concerning the story of Oedipus, a prophecy said that Oedipus was going to kill his father and marry his mother. Despite his parents' efforts to avoid the realisation of this terrible prophecy, Oedipus accidentally and unknowingly complied with his fate. He was unaware of the identity of his

[27] Funnily enough, Charlie's uncle gives her a ring that belonged to a widow he had killed, just like john in *a gaggle of saints* does with sue.

parents when committing murder and incest, yet he remains guilty of a moral fault: indeed, all these events happened because of Oedipus' thirst for power and because of his hubris (Vernant 75-98). Although fate seems to be missing from the plot of *a gaggle of saints*, john can be compared to Oedipus because of his relationship with his father and through the Oedipus complex theorised by Freud. Without getting into too much detail, the positive Oedipus complex is a stage in children's development where the child is sexually attracted to the parent of the opposite sex and sees the parent of the same sex as a rival. Its counterpart, the negative Oedipus complex, happens when the child feels attracted to the same-sex parent and repelled by the opposite-sex parent. In this latter case, and considering a boy being attracted to his father, Freud's theory says that the boy either adopts a feminine stand, or is rejecting the feminine. In the second part of this dissertation, when dealing with the question of identity, we will go back to these theories and confront them with later criticisms (especially in relation to gender). In the case of john's relation with his father and with his own sexuality, different points can be observed.

As mentioned above, john's father is brought up four times in the play. The first three times, it is in relation with john's hair. In the following extracts, sue is talking about the first time she saw john on the running track. As she describes him and his hairstyle, john immediately remembers why he had such short hair and he makes an association with his father:

> SUE. he'd always kept his hair short, trimmed up…
> JOHN. my dad cut it. believe that?! sixteen years old and my father drags me into the kitchen, every other sunday. i could just count on the standard "sears portrait" cut. (BEAT) i was a little worried about my ears. stick out a bit…
> . . .
> JOHN. my dad was away on a sabbatical over in london or some type of thing… i didn't really know or care. i could let my hair grow, that's what i saw coming out of the whole deal. my mom didn't mind at all… (*bash* 45-6)

John's worry about his ears that "stick out a bit" could be interpreted in different ways. Most obviously, he is worried about aesthetics, and thus wants to let his hair grow to hide them. However, it could also be that he is afraid that his father will cut his ears when cutting his hair—a fear that could be interpreted as a symbol of castration. There is an obvious rivalry between him and his father. John's father is authoritative, he condemns his son's feminine appearance with long hair and tries to control it by cutting his john's hair very short and very often. A Sears portrait is a standard (and rather kitsch) type of portrait made by spending an hour in a photo studio—Sears is an American chain of

department stores in which people can get photographed. The portrait studio aesthetic was very popular in the eighties, but by the nineties, it had fallen out of fashion. John's mother is quite the opposite of her husband. She is more of an ally to john, she does not seem to care about her son's hair length, or about her husband's being away so often. John's father is often absent, and yet continues to act as the patriarchal figure in the house, taking decisions about john's haircuts even after john has left the household. John explains that on their way to New York City, they stopped at his parents':

> ends up we do go to my parent's house on sunday… dad makes me sit down, "you look like a bushman," first thing out of his mouth—what's he mean by that?—and he tries to give me a haircut! Halfway through my pre-med, he's still trying to cut my bangs! (*bash* 51)

The position of the possessive apostrophe in the nominal group "my parent's house" suggests that the house belongs to one parent only, probably the father. John obeys to his father, to whom he seems to be submitted. In the second sentence of this extract, his father is the subject and john is the direct object; and the verbal construction with "make" implies a notion of coercion from john's father on his son. Moreover, the action physically belittles john, it makes him smaller than his father and thus reasserts john's father's dominance over john. The direct speech that follows without any introduction goes in the same direction. It is a comment about john's hair and appearance; because it does not fit into his father's traditional view of what a man must look like, it thus makes john look "like a bushman": marginal, wild, untamed, degenerate and feminine. The word "bush" has indeed different meanings, including that of a shrub or thicket, or a large amount of hair, or very vulgarly that of pubic hair, especially a woman's. John's reaction to his father's comment and attempt at cutting his hair is one of indignation at still being treated like a boy when he is entering adulthood.

Later in the play, when john describes the gay couple he has seen kissing goodbye in Central Park, parallels can be drawn with the previous extract:

> coming out of the weeds, they were, off in the park alone, and these smiles, i don't know what to think about it. i mean, we're going to this party, all dressed up, what should we care, right? one dude looks like my father, a little, it's dark but he had that look, right, that settled, satisfied sort of...anyway, off they head, arms linked together and nothing we say ever going to change what they are…
> *pause.*
> dance all night, sue as stunning as she's ever looked and i'm telling you, i can't get that picture, the image of it, out of my head. those smiles, i can't do it… (BEAT) but the party is great, it really is... (*bash* 55-6)

The first parallel has to do with the two men "coming out of the weeds": they are not only spatially coming out of the vegetation, but they also cease to hide their sexuality. A parallel can already be drawn between the image of the weeds and that of the bush. John then makes an association with his father, because one man looks like him. This is where the negative complex of Oedipus could turn out to be useful: john's relationship with his father is complex, it is one of both rejection and attraction (which are not necessarily exclusive), and definitely of fascination (Bokanowski 35-45).[28] The syntactic order of john's speech (with a word order turned upside down, omissions and aposiopesis, jumps from one idea to another, and asyndeta) is probably chaotic because of these conflicting emotions that he is experiencing, but also because he is still processing the event and reliving the scene. The images of chet's and his date's smiles clearly keep haunting him. Moreover, as john is remembering and retelling the scene, LaBute's experience in directing films is discernible. The scene is very cinematographic: it opens with a point-of-view wide shot on the gay couple, is followed by an extreme close-up on their smiles, and then the camera zooms out to include john and his group of friends in the frame. The haunting image of their smiles could be flashes over the following party.

Both *iphigenia in orem* and *medea redux* tackle the theme of infanticide and filicide. *a gaggle of saints* first appears different, for chet, the homosexual who is beaten to death, is not related to his attackers. However, because there is an identification between chet and john's father, there is a symbolical patricide at the heart of the play.

Taking the example of Oedipus, and many other myths, René Girard explains that "[t]he act of regicide is the exact equivalent, vis-à-vis the *polis*, of the act of patricide vis-à-vis the family. In both cases the criminal strikes at the most fundamental, essential, and inviolable distinction within the group. He becomes, literally, the slayer of distinctions" (*Violence and the Sacred* 78). That is to say that in the social order of the family, the father occupies the role of the king. He is supposed to be at the head of the organisation, in charge of taking decisions for the group and responsible for its cohesion. What Girard calls distinction or Degree (*Différence*) is the hierarchical gap between the father-king and the rest of the group. This gap, distinction, or difference is meant to keep the group in respect, there is even a sacred aura surrounding the position of the father-king who possesses, as

[28] See Bokanowski 35-45, especially concerning "the process at stake in the implementation of erotic and aggressive relations with the primary object, as well as the first identifications that emerge from them. This is called primary homosexuality, which relates to a double question, that of the trial of reality and that of the differentiation between the subject and the object"—originally: "processus . . . en jeu dans l'établissement des liens érotiques et agressifs avec l'objet primaire, ainsi que les premières identifications qui en émergent. C'est l'homosexualité dite primaire, qui concerne une double question, celle de l'épreuve de réalité et celle de la différenciation entre le sujet et l'objet."

Max Weber coined it, the "monopoly of legitimate violence." The patricide violates this most fundamental distinction and induces a violent reciprocity between the son and the father. In this regard, patricide is a *scelus nefas*; a crime beyond the horror of other crimes. When john first seduces then beats chet to a pulp, in a way, he is symbolically committing incest and patricide: like Oedipus, he is erasing all distinctions.

ii. The Father Figure(s) and the Relation to the Father

There are obvious relationships between authority and brutality, power and violence, and these are embodied in the problematic father figure. In patriarchal societies, it is evident to say that the father is the one detaining authority to maintain order. In the triangulation process as detailed in psychology, notably by Ernst Abelin in the 1970s rephrasing a characteristic tenet of Freudian theory, the father is the third party, he is the one luring the child away from the primitive maternal link and towards more complex relations to the world.[29] But this process is easily turned into a way of holding power from an intermediary position in a family relation. In the Oedipal complex theorised by Freud, the mother is a love object for the little boy and his relationship with his father is tainted with identification and therefore rivalry. All in all, the father-son relationship is always problematic, and the father tends to represent an undesirable obstacle that violence could help overcome or remove.

In *Totem and Taboo* (1913), Freud theorised two great types of father figures that are actually superimposed: the tyrannical and all-powerful *Urvater*, and the protective father who is the representative of the law, of the necessity to repress one's potentially transgressive drives. From German, *Urvater* translates into "forefather," "primal father" ("Urvater."). According to Freud, the *Urvater* is at the origin of religion, of morals, and of the organisation of society. More precisely, it is the crime of his sons, who killed and devoured him, that created an internalised notion of taboo and heralds the start of humanity's history. Although Girard disagrees with Freud on many points, he agrees with him on the idea that the *Urvater*, the "primal" father, who is representing taboo, king, and even god, is the one who organised the original chaos, undifferentiated, by creating difference (Freud, *Totem et Tabou* 117).[30]

By explaining the ambivalent relation to taboo—which is on the one hand "sacred, consecrated," and on the other hand "distressing, dangerous, forbidden, and impure" (Freud 37), and which also highlights "a common characteristic between the sacred and the impure: the fear of

[29] Freudian theory divides the psyche into three parts: the id, ego, and superego. Ernst Abelin used this tripartition to elaborate his concept of triangulation. See Abelin 229-252.
[30] See also in the French edition, p. 220: "le dieu n'est au fond qu'un père d'une dignité plus élevée."

contact" (47)—Freud at the same time defines the ambivalent relation to the father: "the hatred born from the rivalry with the father could not freely develop in the psychic life of the child, for it was neutralised by the tenderness and admiration that he had always felt for the same being; it resulted from it an equivocal, *ambivalent* attitude towards the father" (195).[31, 32, 33] The relation with the father is thus both at the same time one of anguish and anxiety and one of spirituality. Lina Balestrière summarises this well in her chapter on the *Urvater.* She explains that the representation of the father is always twofold and imbued with ambivalence; with love and hatred, but also with submission and revolt, with acceptation and transgression. It reflects the gap between the protective father and the persecuting father.[34]

The ambivalence of the father figure and of the relation to the father is represented in different ways in *bash*. In *iphigenia in orem*, the young man defends an image of himself as a protective father who cares about his position at his firm in order to provide for his family, but in the end, he harms his family for his own sake. In *a gaggle of saints*, the father is seen through john's eyes as tyrannical, but also as desirable. Finally, in *medea redux*, the woman experiences the absence of the father: first her own, then her son's.

There is also a strong autobiographic side to this question. Indeed, as LaBute said in different interviews, his father served as a model for a lot of his violent male characters. Lahr quotes him in his article: "His father's temper gave LaBute a sense of casual brutality and of 'how much damage could be done with language'" ("A Touch of Bad" 17). Writing theatre, the violence is concentrated in language, especially in the case of *bash* where all the actions and crimes are retold, but never staged. In an interview with Christopher Bigsby, LaBute acknowledges that his father's violence shaped his work, especially when working on the characterisation of his male characters. He says about his father: "He was unpredictable . . . He would occasionally be violent . . . but not consistently. There is something even more terrifying about that because you never know when it is going to happen and what is going to set it off" (Bigsby 236). In *bash*, the violence of the characters is even more unsettling as it happens unexpectedly—the characters remain phlegmatic despite the plot's reaching climax when murder is recalled, and even at the time of the events, it seems like none of the

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[31] Originally, p. 37: "le tabou présente deux significations opposées: d'un côté, celle de *sacré*, *consacré* ; de l'autre, celle d'*inquiétant*, de *dangereux*, d'*interdit*, d'*impur*."

[32] Originally, p. 47: "fait ressortir un caractère qui restera toujours commun au sacré et à l'impur: la crainte du contact."

[33] Originally, p. 195: "La haine née de la rivalité avec le père n'a pas pu se développer librement dans la vie psychique de l'enfant, parce qu'elle était neutralisée par la tendresse et l'admiration qu'il avait toujours éprouvées pour la même personne ; il en résulta pour l'enfant une attitude équivoque, *ambivalente*, à l'égard du père"

[34] See Balestrière, originally: "La représentation paternelle est toujours double, elle est par excellence le support de l'ambivalence, de l'amour et de la haine, mais aussi de la soumission et de la révolte, de l'acceptation et de la transgression. Elle est double car elle est mesure de l'écart entre Le père et un père, . . . entre le père protecteur et le père persécuteur, entre le père de l'angoisse et celui de la culpabilité."

three protagonists was in a state of fury, a bout of madness, or a burst of anger. LaBute's father also used to drive a lot for work, like the young man in *iphigenia in orem*, and was usually absent from the household, like john's father in *a gaggle of saints*. The young woman insists on her father's absence in one passage in *medea redux*—her teacher had to drive her home when her father was not there to pick her up at the end of a school day: "all the parents are there, this is a friday, and my dad doesn't show. he doesn't show up. we go into the office, call his work, nothing at home, and he doesn't come. half-hour goes by, nobody at school but us. sitting there on the curb, waiting for my dad." (*bash* 83). This particular incident has a direct repercussion on her life; it is the first time that she has heard Billie Holiday on the car radio, the singer after whom she is going to name her and her teacher's son. Whenever he was home, LaBute's memories of his father are ones of violence through speech and words. He is thus represented by the young man, by john and chet, by the absent father of the young woman, and by billie's absent father.

iii. Family Crime in the United States

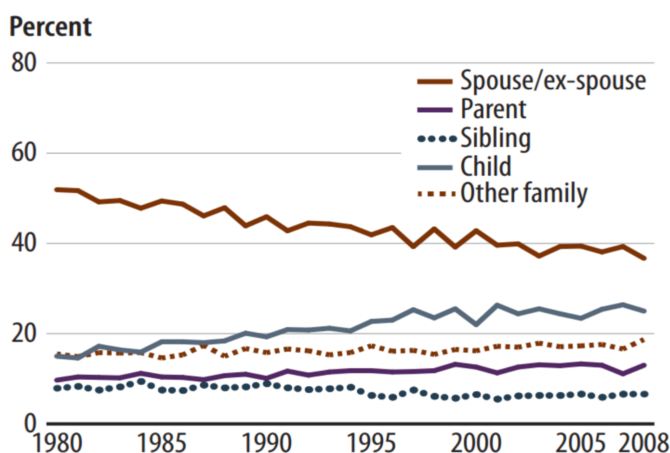
Homicide is already a crime punishable by death in many states of the United States, but homicide within the family appears as the most terrible crime imaginable. In the US law concerning first degree murder, if the victim was vulnerable—such as a child, who is unable to defend him/herself, it is considered as an aggravating circumstance. It appears thus paradoxical that violence emerges from the family even before the infanticides and patricide are committed, but it is actually what happens in *bash*. Violence is always present beforehand, and it grows and spreads, apparently without any limits. It seems that it is born in language, as in the comments of john's father to john when he was younger. Violence is then crystallised in the intricate relationships between family members—for instance with john and sue's relationship which relies on eroticised violence, and in the next generations—joe was conceived in emma's deathbed the very same day she died, and he is intertextually associated with Orestes, who is to kill his mother after she kills her husband. Finally, in the three plays, it appears that violence conglomerates around the father figure.

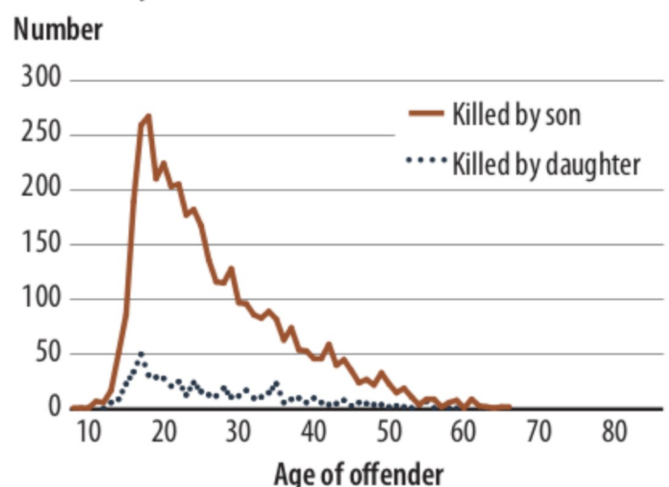
To better apprehend the socio-historical context in which *bash* was written, it is worth looking at some data about homicide trends in the United States between 1980 and 1999. On a graph by Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) statisticians Alexia Cooper and Erica L. Smith reproduced on the left below, the percentage of children murdered by their parents is represented by a grey line.[35] Between 1980 and 1999, and compared to other family homicides, it is the percentage that increased

[35] Bureau of Justice Statistics, US Department of Justice, "Homicide Trends in the United States, 1980-2008," Figure 30 on p. 21.

most—from 15% to 25% (+10%). Child killing was the second most frequent type of family homicide after spouse killing, the percentage of which decreased from 52% in 1980 to 41% in 1999 (-11%). The plays *iphigenia in orem* and *medea redux* reflect the trends of family homicides in the United States at the time when they were written.

Regarding Medea and her LaButian counterpart, the woman in *medea redux*, there is an interesting classification in the article "Child murder by mothers: patterns and prevention," written by Susan Hatters Friedman and Phillip J. Resnick. The authors explain that "maternal filicide perpetrators have five major motives" among which "the most rare, spouse revenge filicide occurs when a mother kills her child specifically to emotionally harm that child's father."





a gaggle of saints does not reflect an increase in patricides (the amount of which remains stable at 15%). However, the profile of the son killing his father, as shown on the second graph on the right above, does mirror a certain tendency.[36] Around 260 fathers were killed by their twenty-year old son between 1980 and 2008 in the United States. This profile corresponds to john: when he beat up chet, john was in pre-med, so in his late teens or early twenties. On figure 40 of the same BJS study, it is also notable that homicides involving gang violence rapidly increased in the early 1990s.[37]

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[36] Ibid., Figure 32a on p. 22.
[37] Ibid., Figure 40 "Number of homicides, by circumstance, 1980–2008" on p. 26.

Family in *bash* is thus represented as a microcosm that reflects the workings of the macrocosm of the patriarchal American society, thus also reflecting LaBute's awareness of changing situations which are given more publicity when he wrote his plays than in the past. Indeed, the relations between family members are ruled by similar logics and patterns as those of society itself—and violence plays the main role in these relations.

In the American society depicted in *bash*, capitalistic and individualistic values replace values related to moral responsibility and accountability, thus giving birth to a strong-rooted egoism. For instance, in order to keep his position at work, the young man sacrificed his daughter emma to an improper god, Mammon, thus prioritising his own financial security over his daughter's life and over his family's wholeness. John takes chet ring's off his finger to give it to sue as an engagement ring, at the expense of someone else's life. The egoism of the characters is pushed to its paroxysm as they commit crimes that serve their own purposes, whether to ensure themselves a safe financial situation, a safe social situation, or purely to take revenge.

c) Violence Also Comes from the American Society Which Produces Mimetic Desire

i. An Increasing Number of Hate Crimes in the US in the 90s

LaBute's work is set in a historical and cultural context that also shaped his plays. Some real-life family murders and hate crimes have served as a source of inspiration for LaBute's work, which in turn comments on the ever-blooming, ever-blowing violence that is spreading in the United States.

The plot of *a gaggle of saints* is probably inspired from an anti-gay hate crime that share many similarities with it: the murder of "Chet" Jackson.

"Chet" Jackson was shot by John Stephan Parisie on 12 April 1968 outside Springfield, Illinois, and died in the hospital the following day. On the same day, John S. Parisie, 19 years old, was found asleep in Jackson's car, in possession of some of Jackson's belongings, including his wedding ring. According to Parisie's testimony, Jackson had offered him a lift when he saw Parisie walking; Jackson then drove him out of town, parked the car and made a homosexual advance ("People v. Parisie, 287 N.E.2D 310, 5 Ill. App. 3D 1009"). According to Jackson's testimony delivered to a police officer before Jackson died, he did not know who had shot him, and they had gone for a ride around the lake without parking. Parisie was sentenced to imprisonment. During a 1972 appellate court, Parisie's defence strategy was insanity based upon "gay panic" defence—a panic reaction to an unwanted gay sexual advance—as Parisie testified he just "blew up, went crazy" after being propositioned ("John S Parisie trial starts"; "John Stephan Parisie, Petitioner-Appellant").[38] The report states: "Parisie's defense to the murder charge was that he did not have the requisite intent or mental capacity at the time of the incident because he was undergoing a 'homosexual panic,' a state of mind in which an individual acts instinctively or, in the words of the defense psychologist, becomes 'insane for a period of time.'" This defence strategy is still being used in US courts to this day to lighten sentences.

There is an obvious reference to this case in a gaggle of saints, because the names, age range and roles (perpetrator/victim) of the characters, john and chet, are identical to the case. There is also the detail of the wedding ring that was stolen from chet by john, and most obviously the homophobic dimension of the hate crime that was perpetrated.

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[38] For more information on the gay panic defence, see Holden, "The Gay/Trans Panic Defense: What It is, and How to End It."

Although *bash* was first produced onstage in 1999, LaBute had written a first version of *a gaggle of saints* as early as in 1992, when he was a PhD student at Brigham Young University. It was published in *Sunstone* (a BYU Mormon student magazine), presented at different universities and performed during the 1992 Salt Lake Sunstone Symposium.[39] LaBute explains in a note preceding his play, in the December 1995 issue of *Sunstone*:

> When I wrote *Bash* while a graduate student at Brigham Young University, its events were simply generated by a curiosity to explore "What if?" (as most playwrights do) in the context of horrific events precipitated by (and not "on") members of the Church visiting New York City. Nothing more. Since that time, however, a story of shocking similarity was brought to my attention by a young returned missionary; his companion, in a fit of guilt, had revealed that an event of this magnitude existed in his own past, never before spoken of. (LaBute, "Bash. A Remembrance" 63)

In this preliminary note, LaBute does not give any detailed account of the events that gave him impetus to write his play. He only evokes them very vaguely, but he makes two points clear: they were horrific, and they were perpetrated by Mormons. The first version of the play (1992) is very similar to the published 1999 version. Despite what has been suggested, LaBute confirmed in an interview with Rian Gilbey that he did not alter the text to please the Mormon Church by removing some references to Mormonism after being disfellowshipped, but he rather did so to engage a broader audience.[40] In this note, LaBute also mentions that some facts bearing extraordinary similarities with the events in the plot were later told to him. The playwright then insists on the idea that art mirrors reality, and vice versa.

The list of American anti-gay hate crimes that preceded or shortly followed the publication and productions of bash is long. In a 1998 New York Times articleabout Matthew Shepard's death, Brian Levin, a criminal justice professor, "said that his research indicated that homosexuals suffered higher rates of violent crime than the population at large. He said that roughly half of the people who attack homosexuals are male, age 22 or under" (Brooke). The profile of the attackers corresponds to john and his friends david and tim.

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[39] You can listen to the audio recording of that performance ("Play: Bash").

[40] "It might be assumed that subsequent changes LaBute made to the text of *Bash*, removing the references to the characters' religion, were intended to mollify the church, but this wasn't the case, he claims . . . In modifying *Bash*, LaBute was responding to a growing realisation that the play's religious context had let some audiences off the hook." qtd. from Ryan Gilbey, and Neil LaBute, "Neil Labute: 'Better for me not to be a Mormon than a bad Mormon.'"

In the same article, Brian Levin also makes a comment about such hate crimes: "With other crimes, violence is a means to an end; with hate crimes, the violence becomes an unstoppable goal." LaBute's plays both at the same time give reason to this observation and prove it wrong. *A gaggle of saints* concurs with violence becoming an unstoppable goal: the hate crime against chet was a demonstration of violence for violence creating a sacred bond between all the perpetrators. Moreover, violence is the fuel of john and sue's relationship, it is regularly used to rekindle the flame between them.

In the two other plays however, *iphigenia in orem* and *medea redux*, the crime perpetrators had an idea in mind when they committed their crime, and they had designed—with more or less premeditation—a plan. When he saw that emma was struggling for breath, the young man of *iphigenia in orem* saw an opportunity in her death to inspire pity in his workplace and therefore to guarantee his job in the company. As for the woman of *medea redux*, she spent fourteen years of her life designing her vengeance in which her son billie was the instrument. At first sight, it looks as if violence is only a means to an end in these two cases. However, because of the intertextual relations with myths and hypotexts, and because of the socio-political context in each of the plays, violence also becomes an unstoppable goal. In *iphigenia in orem*, it is not clear what could happen next: deb could murder the young man and in turn be assassinated by joe (thus complying to the Atreides' curse), or the recipient of the young man's testimony, who is an invisible character on stage, could decide to denounce him for his crime, from which point it would be the United States' turn to inflict violence upon the character. The woman of *medea redux*, before killing her son, had been treated according to her status of pregnant teen, then single mother her whole life. Society did not see her as a victim of paedophilia, but isolated her as a pariah instead. On stage, the woman is being recorded to the police as she is giving her testimony. She is facing life imprisonment, detention in a mental institution, or death penalty. Death penalty is indeed applicable to homicide cases, and according to the Death Penalty Information Center, "about half of all death penalty states include the murder of a child as an aggravating circumstance that can subject a defendant to the death penalty" (Dunham). Both the young man and the woman risk it.

ii. Criminal Violence Calls for More Institutional Violence

This idea of unstoppable violence coming from different origins echoes René Girard's research on violence, especially in his book *Violence and the Sacred*, in which he explains the

mechanism of violence and how the sacred used to give a frame to stop the vicious circle of violence.[41] Indeed, sacrifice has different functions, including that of "help[ing] men to keep vengeance at bay" (Girard, *La Violence et le Sacré* 35), because it stops the contagion of violence (ibid. 51).[42] Girard explains:

> The function of sacrifice is to appease internal violence, to prevent conflicts from erupting. But societies that do not have properly sacrificial rites, like our society, do very well without them; intestinal violence is, undoubtedly, not absent, but it never flares up to the point of compromising the existence of society. (30)[43]

Sacrifice is meant to control violence, to expurgate it in a sacred context—usually, by sacrificing of a scapegoat. Nevertheless, it is not always necessary, and more latent violence in contemporary occidental societies is usually not dealt with that way. As long as it does not compromise the system in which we live in, it is not even dealt with at all.

Moreover, if sacrifice is not carried out in a properly sacred context by an appointed sacrificer (or high priest), it does not expurgate violence—quite the contrary. For instance, the woman's sacrifice of her son billie in *medea redux* is improper: it relates more to a crime of hubris as the woman spontaneously takes the divine responsibility to recreate a form of cosmic justice by herself. According to Girard, there are two forms of violence. "Purifying violence" is employed in sacrificial rites rigorously controlled, whereas "impure violence" is not circumscribed to a sacrificial, coded rite, it is out of control. Sacrifice is supposed to purify the impure. But it does not work when there is a sacrificial crisis. As Girard explains, "the sacrificial crisis, that is to say the loss of the sacrifice, is the loss of difference between impure violence and purifying violence" (ibid. 76).[44] The sacrificial crisis sheds light on some aspects of tragedy. In tragedy, religious language becomes criminal language, and the sacrificer is not a vigilante (ibid. 69).

Manifestations of the sacrificial crisis appear in *a gaggle of saints*: through the whole weekend, which prepares the engagement of john and sue, and during chet's beating, which is staged as a religious ritual of initiation. Originally, the function of a party is "only a preparation for the

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[41] I used the French edition: René Girard, *La Violence et le Sacré*. All translations are mine, unless noted otherwise.

[42] Originally: "[Le sacrifice] aide les hommes à tenir la vengeance en respect."

[43] Originally: "Le sacrifice a pour fonction d'apaiser les violences intestines, d'empêcher les conflits d'éclater. Mais les sociétés qui n'ont pas de rites proprement sacrificiels, comme la nôtre, réussissent très bien à s'en passer ; la violence intestine n'est pas absente, sans doute, mais elle ne se déchaîne jamais au point de compromettre l'existence de la société."

[44] Originally: "La crise sacrificielle, c'est-à-dire la perte du sacrifice, est perte de la différence entre violence impure et violence purificatrice."

sacrifice which marks both its climax and its conclusion" (ibid. 171).[45] But as Girard explains, and it is also fitting for *a gaggle of saints*, "the tragedy of *The Bacchae* is first and foremost the party that *goes wrong*" (ibid. 181).[46] It is a tragedy which "brings the party back to its violent origins, to reciprocal violence" and "perpetuates an essential aspect of the sacrificial crisis, which is the erasure of differences" (ibid. 181).[47, 48] Chet's beating, which receives probably the most graphic description in *bash*, is followed by a form of ritual which channels the violence that was unleashed to create a bond and renew the community of tim, david and john:

> JOHN. wow. and then it's silence, not a sound, and for the first time, we look over at dave. tim and me. i mean, really look at him. us together, tim, myself, that's one thing, it's unspoken, our bond, but we don't know david. don't really know him...what's he thinking? and right then, as if to answer us through revelation...he grabs up the nearest trash can, big wire mesh thing, raises it above his head as he whispers, "fag." i'll never forget that…"fag." that's all. and brings that can down right on the spine of the guy, who just sort of shudders a bit, expelling some air. boom! right on his back, as i'm leaning down, pulling that ring off his pinkie. (BEAT) i told you i noticed it…
> *pause.*
> then, and i still can't even believe this, then tim does the most amazing thing, this'll go down, the record books, there, with the three of us over this guy's body, he starts offering up a short eulogy, i mean, i'm getting delirious, this is, like, almost surreal...and halfway through, tim's praying along, we all start giggling, like schoolboys, we're howling, tears running down, can't catch out breath we find it all so funny! and that's how we leave him… (BEAT) slip out, one by one, running back toward the plaza in the dark and whooping it up like indians, war cries, and running with just a trace of moonlight dancing off the pond as we go... (*bash* 63-4)

Just before this extract, chet was being beaten by the gang of youth and he lies unconscious on the restroom floor. The silence that follows this unleashing of extreme violence is the gang's realisation of what they did, but it also translates a sense of 'what now?". Indeed, john and tim turn towards david to silently ask him if he is part of the group ("it's unspoken, our bond, but we don't know david"), to know if he shares their bond. In her essay *On Violence*, Hannah Arendt notes that "in all illegal enterprises, criminal or political, the group, for the sake of its own safety, will require

[45] Originally: "La fête proprement dite n'est qu'une préparation au sacrifice qui marque à la fois son paroxysme et sa conclusion."
[46] Originally: "La tragédie des *Bacchantes*, c'est d'abord la fête qui *tourne mal*."
[47] Originally: "La bacchanale ramène la fête à ses origines violentes, à la violence réciproque."
[48] Originally: "perpétue un aspect essentiel de la crise sacrificielle qui est l'effacement des différences."

'that each individual perform an irrevocable action' in order to burn his bridges to respectable society before he is admitted into the community of violence" (Arendt, *On Violence* 67).[49] The repetition and reformulation show the "unspoken" bond that john is referring to ("we," "tim and me," "us together, tim, myself, that's one thing"). David's action is described by john as a "revelation," which is the first occurrence of a sacred or religious lexical term in that scene. But the revelation describes the final blow received by chet: both the gesture of the trash can going down on him and the homophobic insult, "fag." john sees how his group (him included) sees homosexuals, and all their hatred and contempt is contained in this three-letter word. The syntax is ambiguous here: "i'll never forget that… 'fag.'" John could mean that he will never forget that scene, david's hateful gesture and utterance—in which case the three dots could be replaced by a colon, giving to the substantive "fag" the function of attribute of the demonstrative pronoun "that." But he could also mean (and the two suggestions are not exclusive) that he will never forget chet, in which case "that" is a determiner, and the suspension marks represent the moment when john takes responsibility to repeat the word "fag" to talk about chet, not just citing david but saying it himself, thus endorsing it. John is rewinding the scene like a VHS ("right on the spine," "boom!," "right on his back"), before going back to chet's ring that he took as a token, an object to remember him by, but also an object of violence. Girard writes, "as the sacrificial crisis unfolds, violence becomes more and more manifest: it is no longer the intrinsic value of the object that provokes the conflict, by arousing rival desires, it is violence itself that increases the value of objects, that invents pretexts to better unleash itself" (*La Violence et le Sacré* 202).[50] In other words, violence is the essential parameter that gives its value to the object belonging to the violent subject, so that it is not really the object that is desired but the violence attached to it.

After a pause in his account of the events, which marks john's thinking about the ring and all that it represents, john continues and explains how tim started giving a eulogy of chet. Tim's falsely solemn eulogy is a final gesture of disrespect towards chet and chet's memory, and also towards religion. It is a perfect example of what Girard calls "tragic demystification":

> Tragic demystification is itself violent because it unavoidably weakens rituals or contributes to make them "go wrong." Far from working towards peace and universal reason, as it is thought in a world blind to the role of violence in human societies, antireligious

[49] Hannah Arendt quotes Gray, *The Warriors, Reflections on Men in Battle*.

[50] Originally: "À mesure qu'on avance dans la crise sacrificielle, la violence devient de plus en plus manifeste: ce n'est plus la valeur intrinsèque de l'objet qui provoque le conflit, en excitant des convoitises rivales, c'est la violence elle-même qui valorise les objets, qui invente des prétextes pour mieux se déchaîner."

> demystification is as ambiguous as religion itself; if it fights against a certain type of violence, it is always nourishing another one, undoubtedly more terrible. (ibid. 194)[51]

Tim takes the role of a priest and desacralises religion by mocking an important ceremonial ritual. In the middle of this "surreal," "delirious" scene, the three members of this "gaggle of saints" start laughing. To better understand how their behaviour jumps from ultraviolence (i.e. extreme and excessive violence), to feigned solemnity, until becoming more and more childish and animalistic, Girard's analysis of Shakespearean plays is helpful:[52]

> Each time that a new mimetic configuration takes the place of another, Shakespeare makes a character deliver an impersonal and solemn speech. These speeches, to tell the truth, do not tell us anything about the character that makes them, or even about the unravelling of the plot: their function is truly to mark the crossing of a mimetic boundary. (Girard, *Shakespeare* 244)[53]

Tim's speech indeed marks the crossing of a mimetic boundary; it seals the first hate crime of the gang and sets a bar for violence. Following that logic, the new mimetic configuration calls for greater violence next. Ilka Saal writes about this phenomenon of violence appearing and disappearing just as suddenly in the terms of a "persistent rehearsal of a sudden transition from mid-American innocence to all-out violence, and its conversion back into everyday etiquette", and makes the assumption that "[t]his duality of innocence and violence . . . entails a complex critique of American national identity and the ways in which it has been constructed in the nation's cultural memory" (325). Like in the *Bacchae*, the party has gone terribly wrong and moral values have gone topsy-turvy. The newly formed group bond relies on ultraviolence, which is not without recalls Stanley Kubrick's 1971 film adaptation of Anthony Burgess's 1962 novel, *A Clockwork Orange*. The film is set in a dystopian near-future where the government is complicit in the ultraviolence that rules the streets. The sound and visual scene of john and his friends "whooping it up like indians, war cries, and running with just a trace of moonlight dancing off the pond" recalls Kubrick's aesthetic: violence is like a game for Alex and his droogs, and it is choreographed and intrinsically linked with classical grandiose music.

[51] Originally: "La démystification tragique est elle-même violente puisqu'elle affaiblit forcément les rites ou contribue à les faire « mal tourner » ; loin d'oeuvrer dans le sens de la paix et de la raison universelle, comme se l'imagine un monde aveugle au rôle de la violence dans les sociétés humaines, la démystification antireligieuse est aussi ambiguë que la religion elle-même ; si elle combat un certain type de violence, c'est toujours pour en nourrir un autre, sans doute plus terrible."

[52] Cf. "Ultraviolence."

[53] Originally: "Chaque fois qu'une nouvelle configuration mimétique prend la suite d'une autre, Shakespeare fait prononcer à un personnage un discours de style impersonnel et solennel. Ces discours, à vrai dire, ne nous apprennent rien ni sur le personnage qui les fait, ni même sur le déroulement de l'intrigue: leur fonction est bien de marquer le franchissement d'un seuil mimétique."

Violence is also triggered by whistling, which is used as a signal to start chet's beating, and as a reminder of violence on the train back to Chicago.

By and by, Girard shows that when violence is carried out outside of the religious rites, it becomes uncontrollable and the thirst for violence cannot be quenched:

> Violence becomes the signifier of ultimate desire, of divine self-sufficiency, of the "beautiful totality" which would no longer appear as such if it ceased to be impenetrable and inaccessible. The subject both loves and hates this violence, he strives to control it by means of violence, he measures himself against it. If by chance he triumphs over it, the prestige of violence soon disappears, and the subject has to look elsewhere for an even greater violence, a truly insurmountable obstacle. (*La Violence et le Sacré* 208)[54]

In other words, the desire that was first supposedly directed towards an object or a person gradually deviates towards the means used to get that object: violence. Violence becomes the pith of desire, it becomes the object of desire itself, as opposed to the original object and even to the other subject with whom the subject is in a situation of mimetic competition. But as soon as an object of desire is possessed, the desire is satisfied and the object loses its desirable aspect. A new desire is to be born. Consequently, as soon as the subject accesses violence and is in power of it, the thrill seeking out and finally getting hold of violence is already gone. The subject who felt attracted to violence thus seeks out violence that is more difficult to access, that pushes the boundaries even more, that will draw out the pleasure they get from desiring, and give them a more intense satisfaction.

Class struggle somehow plays a part in the woman's action in *medea redux*. She is the victim of a negated, or at least unacknowledged suffering, which is partly resulting from her position in a lower social class: when she got pregnant at fourteen, she had to leave school and her parents' house, she had to go live with her aunt and was unable to pick up her education afterwards, although she seemed genuinely interested in her studies, as her taste for Euripides and the Greek myths demonstrates it. She does not explicitly complain about her own suffering, even though it is easy to admit that she did suffer when she was younger; but her former teacher and father of her child never suffered half as much as her of the consequences of her pregnancy. At the time when she tells her

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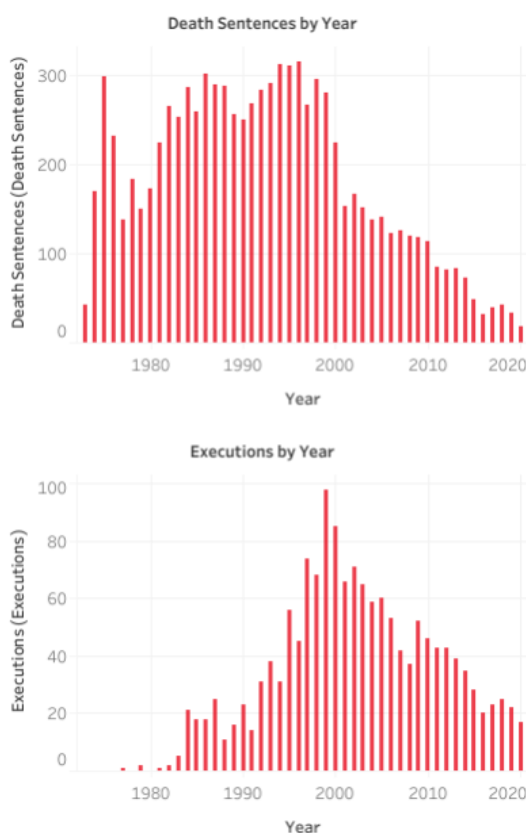
[54] Originally: "La violence devient le signifiant du désirable absolu, de l'auto-suffisance divine, de la « belle totalité » qui ne paraîtrait plus telle si elle cessait d'être impénétrable et inaccessible. Le sujet adore cette violence et il la hait ; il cherche à la maîtriser par la violence ; il se mesure avec elle ; si par hasard il triomphe d'elle, le prestige dont elle jouit va bientôt se dissiper ; il lui faudra chercher ailleurs, une violence plus violente encore, un obstacle vraiment infranchissable."

story, she is blinded by hatred and she does not seem able to suffer humane feelings. Her infanticide, as she justifies it, re-establishes a form of cosmic justice, she wants her former teacher/lover to suffer. As in revenge tragedy or Seneca's *Medea*, there is a form of retribution, but the young woman is the one deciding, instead of a higher instance, what form of punishment her former teacher deserves. She does not redeem him, she only revels in the thought of his suffering over a lost child.

If violence in *bash* is analysed with the help of Girard's theories, the plays also make a comment on the death penalty at a time when executions were being carried out at an alarming pace. Indeed, the State's answer to a crime rate that was increasing at the beginning of the 1990s was to give more death sentences and to carry out more executions. It shows that the answer to violence is more violence, following the pattern of the vicious circle of violence described by René Girard. In the US, the number of executions rose until 1999 when it reached a peak of 98 executions in the year, making 1999 the year with most executions since death penalty was reinstated in 1976 (Death Penalty Info, "The Death Penalty in 1999"). The graphs below, produced by the Death Penalty Information Center, are quite eloquent (Death Penalty Info, "The Death Penalty in 2020"):



The states in which the crimes of *bash* were perpetrated all had the death penalty in 1999: New York abolished it in 2004, and Utah and Arizona still have it.

As the Death Penalty Information Center points out, "state and regional murder statistics show no correlation between use of the death penalty and reduced crime" (Death Penalty Info, "Murder Rates"). Institutional violence fails to stop or prevent criminal violence. On the contrary, LaBute's plays show that institutional violence even encourages the emergence of criminal violence. Without removing responsibility for their actions, nor trying to find excuses for them, LaBute questions the legitimacy of violence from criminals, from the State, but also the broader and more invisible violence of tacit social rules and internalised notions of what is desirable, important, and the criteria according to which someone is, or is not, valuable to the society.

For instance, in *iphigenia in orem*, when the young man describes his workplace, he explains between the lines that people have to play a role to fit in: "i like it. that office...i don't know… 'feel.'

the atmosphere. . . . it's like being a kid again, playing at war or that type of thing, . . . we may play it like a game sometimes, but believe me, a day doesn't go by in business that you're not out for somebody's blood…" (*bash* 14-5)—the fact that the young man actually likes that tension, revels in that game, proves that he willingly became the part that he was and is still playing. He bought into the game of masculinity, into the power competition, not for the sake of the trophy but for the thrill of seeing other people lose at the same game. LaBute's film, *In the Company of Men* (1997), similarly shows the absurdity of pursuing a virile competition to a fever pitch.[55] In the film, Howard and Chad, two co-workers who have previously been romantically disappointed by women, decide to seduce the same woman, Christine, to date her simultaneously and then to break up with her at the same time, as a means of revenge for all men. It does not work that way for Howard who first entered the competition because Chad suggested it, but then actually fell in love with Christine and lost on all fronts (this game, but also love, work, and friendship). The men described by LaBute are blinded of their own accords, because they play the power game whose winners are put on a pedestal by society.

Similarly, in *a gaggle of saints*, the shallowness of john and sue's couple is due to the fact that it is not fuelled by love, mutual consideration, not even by friendship or anything that would create a bond between them, but by the public image they project. They care more about it than they care about each other, and this already shows through their not listening to each other, sitting apart, and drawing close just for the final picture that represents what they want to show: a perfect couple about to get married, two promising young people already achieving social success.

iii. Dormant Violence in the Society of Spectacle Erupts Through Mimetic Desire

In *bash*, references to popular culture abound (TV shows, series, films), as well as more academic or classical ones (Shakespeare, the Bible, Euripides), as if to appeal to every audience and draw a cultural map that includes and mixes up different layers of references. They are all levelled, undifferentiated. But most interestingly, they all justify a form of violence. For instance, the *wheel of fortune* evoked in *iphigenia in orem* echoes the representation of the workings of fate (one of the meanings of *fortuna* in Latin actually is "fate") through the image of a wheel—it symbolises the changes of fortune, as the French phrase *la roue tourne*, the English image of the change of fortune can also be represented by a wheel. This is the TV show that is playing while emma is being killed, and it becomes the leitmotif of her death when it serves as a point of reference in the second account of her murder ("but i'm standing there, just taking in the vcr, and our big screen tv and one of the

[55] Neil LaBute first wrote *In the Company of Men* as a play in 1992 when he was studying at Brigham Young University.

kid's bikes, i can see through the front window, the pathfinder, *wheel of fortune's* blasting on the tv. in the family room...all these thoughts are swirling around in my head." *bash* 25). As if the wheel turned between these two accounts, the first one shows the event as if it were an accident or as if deb were the one responsible for involuntarily killing emma, while the second is murder in cold blood by the young man. The image of the wheel points at a form of equilibrium orchestrated by fate: his first account of the accident is a lie balanced by the true account of his murdering his daughter, emma's death is a low balanced by the high of the young man's victory in keeping his job. The wheel of fortune is also the image of all the objects of wealth surrounding the young man, and the movement of his thoughts before he makes the decision to cross the line.

René Girard showed that violence is the inevitable outcome of mimetic desire. Mimetic desire is a desire born from the imitation of someone else's or other people's desire, it is a form of second-hand desire. Girard explains that "desire is essentially mimetic, it copies a model's desire and elects the same object as this model." (*La Violence et le Sacré* 205).[56] Girard theorised it when analysing desire in literary works, and he distinguished three parameters in the triangular pattern of desire: the model or mediator of desire, the imitating subject, and the common object belonging to the first subject or first desired by them, and mimetically desired by the other.[57] This form of imitating desire creates rivalry between the subjects competing for the same object.

Mimetic desire intervenes in *bash* and in each play, it plays an essential role in triggering violence. In *iphigenia in orem*, the young man is competing with a work colleague—who is a woman, a trait that makes him despise her even more—to keep a work position in the same firm. Not only do they want the same thing, but the young man's macho behaviour is evidence of his feeling his masculinity threatened by a woman. He always sees his business company as an exclusive masculine arena ("all that 'dog eat dog,' 'jungle out there' stuff has become pretty cliché now, but it's true. i mean, you can see what guys love about it." *bash* 15). Yet mimetic desire must be taken into consideration at the moment when the young man's desire to keep his position is emphasised by the woman's desire to keep hers too, the two individuals thus fuel each other's desires by entering in competition. In the competition, the young man sees her as a real rival, their fight is childish, animalistic, like a jungle game. This is visible in two instances in the play. First, after having been called out by his female rival for his "chauvinist lexicon" (*bash* 23) in a meeting, the young man thought that he won the argument ("me and some of the guys laughed it off over lunch" *bash* 24).

[56] Originally: "le désir est essentiellement mimétique, il se calque sur un désir modèle ; il élit le même objet que ce modèle."

[57] To read some literary analyses of desire, see Girard, *Shakespeare, Les Feux de l'Envie*.

However, an image got stuck in his mind: "but i caught one or two of the women smiling to themselves as the meeting broke up. just this slight thing, but i caught it…anyway, i always felt one step behind her after that, like she made it her job to one up me from that moment on..." (*bash* 24). Actually, it is the young man who made it his job to "one up" her from that moment on. His motivation is no longer fuelled by his desire to keep his work position, it becomes mimetic desire, to get what the other wants simply to see the other fail and to win over her. This is when the second example comes in, right after the young man has finished telling the real circumstances of emma's death: "i kept my job. i did. and guess who was the one, i mean, after all that, guess who got it right between the eyes?" (*bash* 28). The metaphor of the bullet hitting his work colleague in the face reveals part of the violence that was boiling up during their competition. His infanticide is the obvious peak of violence in that rivalry.

Furthermore, mimetic desire works hand in hand with the mechanisms of the *Société du Spectacle* as theorised by Guy Debord in 1967. Indeed, in the society of the spectacle in which we live, capitalism and mass media have given full power to the market economy. Every aspect of life is commodified, and people have consequently become passive and alienated consumers, more interested in what they have and what they represent than what their deeper self. In thesis 20, Debord writes that "The spectacle is the material reconstruction of religious illusion."[58] People are given an impression of unity, of community, when they are being consumed by what they watch and aim to reproduce. The spectacle's end is only itself. In *iphigenia in orem*, the young man mentions a passage from *Kramer vs. Kramer*, a 1979 film Robert Benton, with Meryl Streep and Dustin Hoffman in the main roles. In the film, there is a moment when Ted has to find a job in one day in order to have a chance to win custody of his son Billie. The young man knows the reason why Ted had to find a job so quickly, but he dismisses it and thinks about his own material comfort, and about the effort he had to make to obtain it ("how could i possibly keep it all going, the lifestyle we'd made for ourselves . . . ?" *bash* 25). In fact, the young man resembles more Ted as he was at the very beginning of the film, when he said to his boss: "I'm not a loser Jim, you know that. And I've never let anything at home, you know, come into the office" (19:36).

In *a gaggle of saints*, mimetic desire pervades, from the very beginning, john and sue's relationship. John and sue tell the circumstances of their encounter in the present tense, painting a vivid picture to immerse the audience in that moment, as they were teenagers running on the track field: "we're not speaking at all, and we just keep going in circles..." (*bash* 47). They are both literally running in circles around the track, and also metaphorically going in circles by not initiating the

[58] Originally: "Le spectacle est la reconstruction matérielle de l'illusion religieuse" (*La Société du Spectacle*, thèse 20).

conversation. The element allowing communication arrives when her boyfriend comes to pick up sue but she does not stop running.

Sue was the first to notice john ("i see him running […] 's cute. nice body." *bash* 45) and she describes and comments his physical appearance, but john does not describe sue, nor does he say anything specific about her except that "she was dating a guy i knew..." (*bash* 46). John actually reacts to sue's lines by elaborating on his own appearance and his father's opinion about his hair style, or on the car of sue's boyfriend ("nice new scirroco, all black, that he got as a graduation gift from his dad" *bash* 47). John's dating sue is accidental and it only emerges thanks to the violent beating of her boyfriend by john. John and sue's relationship works solely on mimetic desire because their relation represents what all of their friends desire, it is like an advertisement with fancy clothes, fancy get-away weekends, fancy cars, and thrills and excitement from traces of blood and violence. Their own desire for each other is aroused thanks to the intervention of an element reminding the original violent act that initiated their relation. Eliminating the first "rival", sue's ex-boyfriend, and then chet, another possible rival because he reminds john of his father and thus of an undesirable source of authority that might over-shadow him, john reasserts his dominant masculinity and his power over sue. In their couple, john is holding the monopoly of violence, while sue is the admiring this violence. He also has more text than sue and he knows more about that night in New York, when he was out bonding with his friends while she was sleeping at the hotel. Once again, the symbol of the circle is reminded by the chet's ring that john offers to sue. It seals their love in a union based on violence. Through john, because he is sue's possession as much as she is his, she appropriates violence and feels part of the power that john experienced, and her admiration of violence is like another bash on chet's body. Their object of desire is a form of social recognition, their being on display to attract desire. Ultimately, they desire other people's desire. As john and sue's relationship is based on appearance, shallowness and consumerism, it seems like they are both marrying Mammon. The play ends in a picture of their artificial happiness, the two of them getting close for the first time after the telling of the workings of their relationship, and the getaway weekend that symbolises it best.

The hyper-intensity of the quest for money, a successful life, or a good reputation provokes a shift in the way American values are represented, and these exaggerations draw what we could identify as Americanism. In her analysis of LaBute's plays, Ilka Saal linked violence to American cultural memory: "LaBute uses violence to interrogate the country's cultural memory and to alert us to the general lethargy that has settled over the nation with regard to the historical violence is systematically exerted against its Others" (322). She explains through Assman and Slotkin's theories that LaBute shows the "central and 'ordinary' role that violence has played in the nation's history and

self-understanding" (Saal 322), as if violence resurged from the abyss of myths, where "normal" people keep it under control, silenced, tied up. People obsessed with an egoist fight or ideology, and ultimately with a competitive society in which they do not fit draw on mythical violence to try and ensure a steadier place for themselves.

All the different types of myths are mixed up, which is typical of the American logic of cultural melting-pot. In the end, violence originates from all places and participates in the ambient axiological blur. It is symptomatic of a dysfunctional political and cultural system that melts everything together and loses the principle of differentiation, or as Girard would say, there is a crisis of Degree (*La Violence et le Sacré* 78),[59] a crisis of the cultural order as a whole (*La Violence et le Sacré* 76).[60] But eventually, the great diversity of evoked mythical constructs is, above all, a tool to make the audience perceive the many different ways in which an ideal may be used to close one's eyes to the presence of violence; or to justify structures of domination.

[59] Girard defines the Degree: "Degree, *gradus*, is the principle of all natural and cultural order. It is the element that allows beings to be situated in relation to each other, that makes things have a meaning within an organised and hierarchical whole." In its original language: "*Degree*, *gradus*, est le principe de tout ordre naturel et culturel. C'est lui qui permet de situer les êtres les uns par rapport aux autres, qui fait que les choses ont un sens au sein d'un tout organisé et hiérarchisé."

[60] Originally: "La crise sacrificielle doit se définir comme une crise des différences, c'est-à-dire de l'ordre culturel dans son ensemble."

2. Structural Violence: Questioning Identity and Community in *bash*

Violence as a structure works according to different logics that tend to be discordant and contradictory. It is a tool questioning identity and creating community, and the plots and language lead little by little to a regenerative crisis for the characters and the audience.

In the world in which *bash* is set, the victims correspond to a typical profile of easy, weak preys, but the three "obvious" victims—emma, chet, and billie—are not the only existing victims in *bash*. Victimhood and power are a result of a global political system that benefits some and belittles, or rejects, others. The protagonists are depicted as ordinary people going through an identity crisis, and their nonchalant behaviours show that they dissociate culpability from guilt. As they are unable to realise the extent of their actions, violence is, for them, a means of communication and the basis of an unstable social structure.

a) Casual Violence and Casualties: Who Are the Typical Victims?

In *bash*, all the characters, victims, perpetrators, and secondary characters alike, originate from a same geographical area: vague and undetermined, apparently random places, save for the fact that it is always from the same type of suburban area of the United States. Ilka Saal notes it in her essay "Let's Hurt Someone":

> LaBute's stage directions with regard to place are sparse and vague, anonymous locations at the college campus, the office, the airport, the shopping mall, the car, or simply a bare stage as the backdrop for the cruel transactions of his characters. (324)

Every play starts and ends in silence and darkness, encapsulating snippets of the protagonists' lives in a definite but not precisely defined time and space. The only thing that we know or that we can guess about the characters is their approximate age, their type of social environment (their social class), and that they are American. Neil LaBute himself explains in his preface to his play *The Mercy Seat* (2002): "My work . . . has tended to exist in a geographic and moral vacuum." The locations used in LaBute's works are apparently random, but as Ilka Saal point it out in her essay "Let's Hurt Someone", there is always the "Midwestern stamp of . . . American heartland" (324). Such a choice of location is far from being insignificant. It characterises the characters too, gives a certain undertone and idea of the type of childhood and education they have had, and makes them look like "good middle-class suburbanites" (Saal 325). By reinvesting worn-out clichés, LaBute shows how they can be charged with a strong symbolic force, ironically showing how the bland or glossy surface of his

characters hides a rotten, corrupt, wounded core. In the case of the victims, it deprives them even more of a characteristic personality, of an internal force that could have stuck out or been more memorable otherwise. In other words, the ill-defined environment seems to predispose the characters, following XIXth century environmental determinism beliefs according to which the environment in which people live determines the way that they act.[61]

The victims (emma, chet, and billie), to whom the plays are dedicated, are determined by their Otherness and how they embody the Other. The children and the homosexual man who are killed are characterised by their non-violence and defencelessness, by their differences when compared to their persecutors, and by their apparent weakness and vulnerability.

Emma is the youngest victim, seemingly the most vulnerable. She was five-month-old when she was killed by her father. Although she did fight for her life, she was so young and powerless that she unwillingly contributed to abbreviating it. Although the first and second account of her death differ in *bash*, they both describe her in a similar way:

> she'd smothered herself under the covers, i don't know, beneath the weight of the comforter or whatever it was . . . the little thing…died in our bed, tangling herself in the blankets. (16)

Emma is only given agency grammatically to emphasise her father's fantasy in which he is not responsible for her death, but she is, as the repetition of the reflexive pronoun "herself" suggests. She is described as a "little thing", which could be construed as an endearing, hypocoristic expression; however, it also contributes to dehumanising her, to belittle her twice, first with the adjective "little" that makes her look small and insignificant, and then by the substantive "thing" that already deprives her of agency, turns her into an undetermined object getting closer to being inanimate. It creates a greater distance between her and her father. In the second account of her death, she is hardly more described:

> when i got to the doorway she was already under the blankets, she was, i swear, under them and fighting to get out. it's just reflexes, i guess, because she wasn't big enough to do anything about it, i mean, she'd just started to crawl a few weeks before that, and she was tiny for her age, the doctors said that…but she'd managed to get herself down under that comforter . . .i looked in at her again, this little yelp kind of coming up from her as she blundered around in there…it almost looked like when your puppy, as a kid, or the family cat, you know, would

[61] See the works of Carl Ritter and Friedrich Ratzel.

> get put under the blankets for a laugh, it was like that. almost, this little…mound…wandering around in there, it was nearly absurd, to walk in on something like this, i mean, you just could never be ready for a thing like that, and because of that, that specific part of it, the unreality… (26)
>
> . . .
>
> I stood there and pulled up the comforter by one corner and i saw her then. her little fine sandy hair and her…i just kind of coaxed her down a bit. . . . there was one last little sound emma made, you could barely hear it. (27)

There, emma is showing more resistance, "fighting to get out," and further down on the same page, "fight[ing] for her life." However, it is immediately counterbalanced by the young man's dismissive remark "it's just reflexes, i guess," showing that she is not in control. Once again, she is determined by her small size and age, by her physical condition that does not make her fit to survive this ordeal. The detail of the doctors' comment about her being "tiny for her age" underlines her puniness and her lack of physical force.

Emma is then compared to a pet ("your puppy," "the family cat"), then to something shapeless ("this little…mound…"), which makes her gradually alien, hidden, already invisible. The young man uses that distance and alienation as an excuse for his action: "i mean, you just could never be ready for a thing like that, and because of that, that specific part of it, the unreality…" He reformulates and struggles to find the right words to talk about his daughter and the feeling or idea he had when he saw her, but at the same time he confuses the situation and his daughter, merging them until making his daughter just a part of the situation instead of considering her as a human being: he consequently makes her absurd and unreal. It is by making emma less and less familiar that his father becomes able to kill her.

The only physical description apart from her size is as truncated as her life: "her little fine sandy hair and her…" The young man stops mid-sentence, as he stopped looking at her and pushed her away from him, further down under the heavy quilt. Then again, "to coax" removes responsibility from him, it is as if he had just convinced or persuaded her to die rather than pushed her himself, and the two preceding adverbs "just kind of" equally enforce this idea.

These two extracts are the only descriptions of emma that are in the text, so the audience does not have a precise idea of her. Instead, the focus is on her death which is told twice in different versions, and each time, she is made blurrier, more insignificant.

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Chet is probably the victim who is most described; it remains however quite generic. John, sue and their friends are strolling about in Central Park when they first see him with his lover. He is spotted a second time later that evening by john and his group of male friends, as chet is saying goodbye to his lover. The third and last time is when john and chet are flirting in one of Central Park's public restrooms, just before chet is attacked.

The first time chet is seen, it is from a distance, and few elements of description are given:

> JOHN. two guys, middle-aged guys, l.l. bean shirts on and the whole thing…come out of the dark. smiling, and i don't need a map to tell you what's been going on…
> *pause*
> …i don't.
> SUE. it was just two men. walking along…no big deal.
> JOHN. . . . one dude looks like my father, a little, it's dark but he had that look, right, that settled, satisfied sort of…anyway (55)

Chet's physical appearance could be compared to that of countless people: between the ages of forty and sixty, wearing an L. L. Bean shirt (a casual type of shirt, quite ordinary). It could have been almost anyone, something that sue's cue also suggests. Another important detail is the fact that he looks like john's father, with neither john knowing exactly why nor how to describe it: the substantive "look" is ambiguous, it could be chet's look meaning his physical appearance and what it gives off, or it could be chet's look as in his gaze, his way of looking at his lover. In either case, chet's look is interpreted by john to be a look of satisfaction, of confidence, which john does not have himself.

Later, on the same night, john and his group have come back to Central Park and they see chet again, as he is saying goodbye to his lover. In this scene, john and his friends are hiding behind trees, out of sight, and john has already started describing the two lovers saying good night. He then focuses a bit more on chet:

> oh man…man! you know, you read about it, or even see that film, what is it, with the "superman" guy? *deathtrap*, right, and you live with it. don't love it, don't condone it for the world for the world, still, you go on living, live and let live, whatever, but this, i figure is flaunting it. . . . men old enough to be our fathers—i mean, middle-aged, and clutching at one another like romeo and juliet! (BEAT) they whisper something, and chuckle for a second,

> hand on each others [sic] bottoms . . . then a last peck on the cheek and one disappears down a trail, headed for the west side. he's gone. the other glances around, taking in the night, i guess, big smile up at the moon . . . whistling while he goes…he was whistling (60-1)

Through john's eyes, chet is characterised firstly and mostly by his homosexuality, and john describes at length chet and his lover's attitudes as they draw out their goodbyes. John draws a comparison with the film *Deathtrap*, a 1982 adaptation directed by Sydney Lumet based on the eponymous 1978 play by Ira Levin. There are three possible reasons why *Deathtrap* first came to his mind: the romantic and homosexual relation between the two characters of Clifford Anderson and Sidney Bruhl; the good looks of Christopher Reeve, the actor playing Clifford Anderson, who also played Superman in the Superman franchise from 1978 to 1987; and the fatal ending for both characters who end up killing each other. The same comment could be made about the ending of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. Here chet is seen as being romantic, intimate and sharing a moment of complicity with his lover, unafraid to show affection; he is happy, carefree and whistling. What is interesting in this description of chet from john is that chet represents what john is longing for, despite his expressed homophobic disgust. He does not have the same relation with sue, it is more superficial.

The third and last time that chet is seen is just after that scene. John has followed chet into the public bathroom while his friends are waiting for his signal to come in and attack chet:

> and our friend's legs, i spot, patiently sitting in a stall, waiting, and not a care in this world, i sleep into the booth next to his, start fumbling with my belt, this, that, and like clock-work, this guy's hand comes up under my side of the partition, his signal, pink fingers, wiggling up at me. imploring, i notice this thin gold band on his little finger, catching the light. (BEAT) so, i lay my open palm in his and two minutes later we're standing near the mirrors—big pieces of stainless steel, really—standing, and sizing each other up. small talk. name's "chet," he says, and i don't even bat an eyelash as he moves in, his lips playing across my cheek, let his tongue run along my teeth and a hand, free hand, tracing down my fly…i just smile at him, smile and even lick his chin for a second, for a single second, i see his shoulders relax. then i whistle, i let out a whistle that sends him stumbling back, blinking, and kind of waving his hands in the air as tim and dave appear in the doorway, he looks at them, looks and comes back from his fantasies long enough to touch down on earth, a flicker in his eyes, realizing no good can come from this…and starts babbling, this guy, "chet," probably a vp some bank on park avenue and he's babbling and wetting himself like an infant, i don't remember exactly, but i think he even got on his knees, down on his knees and the pleading, begging. (62-3)

Chet is first called "our friend" by john, with a possessive that comprises john, his friends, and the audience reading or listening to the story; whereas the substantive "friend" is antiphrastic coming from john when we know what his friends and him are about to do to him. The description of body parts instead of chet as a person fragments chet's body and gradually dispossesses him of individuality: "our friend's legs" is followed shortly after by "this guy's hand," with a shift from the possessive "our" and the substantive "friend" to the determinant "this" and the substantive "guy," thus immediately creating an emotional distance between chet and john, and between chet and the audiences (john's group of friends and the theatre audience). The absence of determinant, possessive or article for chet's "pink fingers," although it is in apposition with "his signal," further renders chet invisible. Chet is still as carefree as ever ("not a care in this world," when john flirts back "his shoulders relax," he is in "his fantasies"), happy to play a seduction game with john. The seduction game, as described by john, has been instigated by chet and he is the one leading it. Nevertheless, there is a game of mirroring between john and chet, as chet moves towards john and john lets him play with him, accepting rather than participating, before also playing for a very brief moment—the emphasis being put on the brevity of this moment by the repetition: "lick his chin for a second, for a single second." The mirroring elements between chet and john are supported by john's use of visual verbs denoting his acute awareness of his surroundings and sense of observation ("i spot," "i notice," "i see," john and chet "sizing each other up"), by the attention given to chet's eyes (chet's "blinking," "he looks at them, looks and comes back from his fantasies long enough to touch down on earth, a flicker in his eyes"), by the mirrors of the bathroom ("standing near the mirrors—big pieces of stainless steel, really"), and by john and chet's physical resemblance as chet looks a little like john's father (*bash* 55). In the end, these elements hint at the idea that the victim, chet, is being eclipsed by john's narcissistic mirror-image, but at the same time, that john sees some of chet in himself as well. Chet's name is finally given but the content of the small talk between him and john remains unknown. John infers that he is "probably" the vice president of "some bank on park avenue," that is to say that john thinks that chet is upper-middle class, probably as well-off as john is about to be at the end of his studies. However, immediately after, john compares him to a baby: "he's babbling and wetting himself like an infant." John is trying to diminish him, to make him look ridiculous, immature, unmanly, through the description of his physical reaction after john whistled—chet is "stumbling back, blinking, and kind of waving his hands in the air as tim and dave appear in the doorway"—the ternary rhythm of *-ing* verbs of action stresses the fact that chet's reaction is spontaneous and instinctive; flinching back in recoil, his whole body is showing signs of stress and surrender. His waving his hands is a way to signify that he meant no harm and is not looking for trouble. But john is making fun of what he sees as chet's lack of courage: for him, chet is unable to defend himself, and

by not wanting to fight, he is displaying his unmanliness. His voice, compared to that of an infant, is therefore made silent by john, because in Latin, *infans* etymologically means "one who cannot speak." He is "babbling," "pleading," and "begging" as a last resort to try and save his life, answering to john's gratuitous violence with a thread of panicked, nonsensical sounds rather than articulated words—two modes of communication which are impossible to combine and cannot match. His pleading and begging, down on his knees, is also a physical subjection to john and his friends, he is physically lower than them and therefore raising them to the status of superiors. Chet's signal (a sign of the hand) was one of love, john's signal (a whistle) is one of death, making Eros and Thanatos meet in an unequal struggle at the end of which Thanatos takes the upper hand. Nevertheless, as chet's ring is taken by john and as his story is being told, Eros keeps on existing.

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Billie is almost invisible in the whole testimony delivered by his mother, the woman. Her account revolves more around her own story rather than on billie's. But her story is connected to his and to that of jazz and swing music singer Billie Holiday, after whom billie is named. Indeed, billie's father used to listen only to Billie Holiday's music and voice in his car, thus implicitly shutting out the woman's voice who in turns shuts out billie's voice by revenge (*bash* 84, 86).

Billie Holiday was born in Philadelphia to young parents—her father was 17 and her mother 19, John Szwed reports in *Billie Holiday, The Musician and the Myth* (12). When her grandparents learned that their daughter (Billie's mother) was pregnant, they evicted her. Billie was raised by her mother, her aunt, and her aunt's mother-in-law, while her father took care of his own career as a musician. At the age of 10, Billie was sexually assaulted by her neighbour. She became a victim of sexual trafficking at 13 and was consequently sent to prison with her mother at 14. Billie Holiday's life is similar to that of the woman in *medea redux*, more even than to billie's. But just like Billie Holiday's life was shared with her mother more than with her absent father, billie only knows his mother and their destinies are bound.

The woman on stage started seeing her teacher romantically when she was 13, and got pregnant when she turned 14. She very briefly explains what happened to her without getting into too much detail:

> like i said, there's a bunch 'a shit you don't need to hear twice, and i don't want your sympathy, okay, i don't, so we'll skip the hardship stuff about when i did tell my family, and being pulled

> out 'a school, the move to my aunt's house…sound familiar? i told you before, or if i didn't , i meant to…this story's nothing special, really, practically the only part that's of any interest is that it happened to me…you know? (BEAT) anyways, billie, that's my son, billie, "william," whatever…was born. a beautiful boy. just quite great, and although every mom goes off on that, he was. i mean it. he's great, and, umm, without getting all shitty about it, i give birth and a bunch 'a years pass. okay? (89)

The rhetorical question ("sound familiar?") and the answer she gives herself ("this story's nothing special, really") point out that the woman realises that her story is not original. It is further emphasised by her seeming indifference and minimisation of the facts: she is not looking for pity—"we'll skip the hardship stuff," while restricting the focalisation on herself as a passive subject—"the only part that's of any interest is that it happened to me," even casting away what she considers to be details—"whatever." Not only is the story of the pregnant teenager getting thrown out of her parents' house and seeking refuge at her aunt's commonplace, but it is also very close to the life of Billie Holiday's mother. The woman is confused and wonders if she has already told that story, but she has not. She probably thinks that she has because her personal story and her plan have been playing on a loop in her head all her life: she had premeditated her crime. She names her son william but he is always referred to as billie ("billie, that's my son, billie, 'william,' whatever"). Apart from his name and that he is "a beautiful boy" and "great," no information allows further characterisation of billie.

On his fourteenth birthday, billie's mother and him drove from Utah to Arizona for him to meet his father for the first (and last) time. When the woman is imagining their reunion, she has already cut billie out of the picture: "we'd all sit down and see each other. again, at least [*sic*], the two of us, again…" (*bash* 91). After billie's father has left the motel, billie takes a bath:

> billie was already in the bathroom, we'd driven straight through, and i could hear the water running. he was in his bath. god, he loved the tub! since he was tiny, he loved it. so, i knew he was in there, the water filling up around him, and "lady day"—'s what he liked to call billie holiday, 's her nickname, and he called her that—playing on his tape player. "stormy weather." i, ahh, went into the room, the bathroom, and i could see him there, through a little opening in the liner he had pulled shut, eyes closed and the steam coming up. he didn't really struggle, couldn't actually, the shock of it, i suppose, when the recorder first hit the water… . . . after, i just sat there, on the linoleum, and watched him, lying in that cloudy pool of bath water, his eyes open and so still, i thought i could almost make out…"adakia," that's the word. (92-3)

There is a water leitmotiv throughout the play and it is very present in this extract, with the water closing around billie, incorporating him ("the water filling up around him," "lying in that cloudy pool of bath water"), not without reminding the symbol of motherhood. The song playing on the recorder is Billie Holiday's "Stormy Weather," a song about a woman's longing for her lover after he has left her, and her disappointment as the days pass and he has not yet come back to her. There is a manifestation of pathetic fallacy with the metaphor of the weather reflecting the woman's feelings and her desolation in the lyrics: "Don't know why there's no sun up in the sky / Stormy weather / Since my man and I ain't together / Keeps rainin' all the time." The air in the motel bathroom is that of melancholy, the woman is reminded of her own life, of her former teacher's leaving her, but she could also be anticipating her separation from billie.

Billie is the subject of "loved" and "liked," the verbs are in the past tense as if announcing billie's death before it occurred in the narrative. The steam coming up from billie's body evokes the collective imagination's representation of the soul leaving the body at the moment of death. In the Mormon definition of physical death, as explained on their official website, "physical death is the separation of the spirit from the mortal body" (Nelson et al.). The parallel between his "eyes closed," as he is still alive, and his "eyes open," as he is lying dead, is suggesting that he found a form of completeness or an awakening in death. This idea is reinforced by the woman's observation of "adakia"—as explained in 1. a), she remembers incorrectly the word *ataxia* (ἀταξία), referring to a chaotic state of the world *ataxia* (ἀταξία), but it is also very close to *adikia* (ἀδικία), which means injustice. This scene of the mother looking at her dead son that she has just electrocuted indeed looks wrong and upside down.

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The only moments when the victims are described in *bash* are the moments when they are being killed, and even then, their description stays very vague and undetermined, unmemorable. In consequence, because the murderers give a superficial description of their victims, the dramatical focus is laid on the killers while symbolically, the reification of the victims is emphasised. The audience thus has to mentally build a fragmented image of the victims from the superficial description they have been given, hence a lessened memorability of the victims both for the killers and even more so for the audience. The plays ultimately question memory and memory work through the transmission of an already biased and transformed memory, that of the victims seen and retold by their killers, to the audience who has to imagine without having seen the victims.[62]

[62] See the works of Paul Ricoeur for reflexions on memory work, especially in relation to history, and Jacques Derrida for a philosophical reflexion on memory work in relation to deconstruction. For instance: Ricoeur, *History and Truth*;

The three direct victims represent vulnerable and innocent people who are all part of minorities: emma is a baby girl, chet a middle-aged homosexual man, and billie a teenage genderqueer—right from his name, he is closely associated with both his mother and with Billie Holiday ("Genderqueer"). Billie is already marginalised thus. The protagonists treat their victims as fundamentally different from them by emphasizing their apartness and making them Others. Ilka Saal notes that the "exercise of violence is directed against the Other, against an alterity that poses a threat to a hetero-normative white male identity, whether this manifests itself in gender, ethnic, or sexual difference" (327). Indeed, emma was primarily killed because of a war of the sexes that was going on at the young man's office—if the young man had lost his job to a woman, it would have harmed his virility, so eventually his female co-worker got fired and he killed his daughter emma. Similarly, but less collaterally, chet was posing a direct threat to john's heteronormative education that emphasised virility. As for billie, he was a central yet collateral victim in his mother's scheme: she wanted to hurt his father more. Paradoxically, the woman alienated him by making him more similar to her, so he could fit perfectly in her own narrative and make her plan work.

The victims do not embody an evil to exterminate, they are used as props or tools to attain another aim. The murder is never an end in itself, it is a step towards another goal. In each case, it could have been avoided, in each story, murder simply seems easier or more effective, it is almost natural and effortless for the murderer.[63] The young man and chet presented theirs as mistakes—not as something wrong but as an opportunity, something incidental that happened by chance.

Nevertheless, there is a scapegoat logic at play in dehumanising and reifying the victims. By finding a scapegoat, the community concentrates and expurgates their hate and channel violence on a pariah whose role becomes, despite itself and through its own exclusion and destruction, one of cohesive factor for the group. The vision of scapegoating which is being proposed here is extremely original, because the intensity of hatred is so played down that the representative of the "norm" is made to appear psychopathic (i.e. lack of empathy, lack of any affect rather than excessive affect). The scapegoat is distant enough from the group so that his sacrifice will not make every other member of the group feel targeted by this brutality, and at the same time close enough for a cathartic bond to be established. René Girard, in *The Scapegoat*, explains that "there are violent crimes which choose as object those people whom it is most criminal to attack, either in the absolute sense or in reference

Ricoeur, *La Mémoire, l'Histoire, l'Oubli: l'ordre philosophique*; Derrida, *Memoires: for Paul de Man*.

[63] Billie being queer and an embodiment of the Other does not matter that much then: the murderer appears all the more inhuman as the victim is not even turned into a dehumanised, monstrous other in order to be killed. The murder victim seems to be objectified to the point of not even being the object of disgust or hatred. The irony and complexity thus lay in the fact that the victims fit, as if by chance, the ideal profile of victim—marginalised, discriminated against, vulnerable.

to the individual committing the act: a king, a father, the symbol of supreme authority, and in biblical and modern societies the weakest and most defenceless, especially young children" (15). In this regard, chet is both representing a symbol of authority because of his physical resemblance to john's father, and a weak and defenceless person, because of john's stereotypical representation of homosexual men and because chet did not fight back. The group needs to ignore (more or less wilfully) that the victim is innocent, otherwise it would neutralise the effects of the sacrifice. This is also part of the description given by René Girard: "Ultimately, the persecutors always convince themselves that a small number of people, or even a single individual, despite his relative weakness, is extremely harmful to the whole of society" (*The Scapegoat* 15). Indeed, the young man and john seem to be trying to convince themselves of the "legitimacy" or rather of the merits of their actions—the young man thought that his life and especially his material comfort and conformity to a normalised pattern (owning a suburban house, having a wife and children, making rapid career advancements, etc.) were threatened, thus he decided to sacrifice emma, and john saw homosexuality as a sin that could endanger his own sexuality and other people. As for billie, he had received the love that was denied to his mother.[64] Finally, the victim must be in part consenting in order to transform the delirium of persecution into consensual truth. As emma, chet and billie were victims that could not or would not fight back, it was easier to fake their consent. However, finding a scapegoat is a way to insure the survival of the group, not its longevity. Indeed, once the scapegoat is excluded from the group, "the violence that the scape-goat takes away with him is not the one that he had brought into the group, but on the contrary, it is that of the group itself" (Vinolo 65).[65]

Through these logics of props and scapegoats, the victims are dehumanised and "commodified" through violence: people's lives are dealt with as if they were substitutes for money, revenge, and personal gain. The common points of all murdered victims are that they are minimised physically, through their murderers' speech, and through the fact that their own voice is not heard. They are absent from the stage and rendered invisible. In her article about Susan Glaspell's play *Trifles* and the unveiling of the invisible, Emeline Jouve explains:

[64] It is necessary to stress that despite these simplified interpretations, a big part of the originality of *bash* lies in the fact that the motives and the underlying explanations for the murders are not obvious, even to the interpreter.

[65] Originally, the quotation reads: "la violence qu'emporte avec lui le bouc émissaire n'est pas celle qu'il avait amenée dans le groupe, mais au contraire celle du groupe lui-même."

> the figure of the Other is an entity that we judge guilty of a crime and that we try to name, to assign an identity to, in order to make him visible and only then be able to contain him at the margins of society by way of punishment.[66]

The punishment is slightly more radical in LaBute's plays because it equals elimination, which is the ultimate form of invisibility. The minimal characterisation of the characters in LaBute's plays already condemns them to invisibility as well as to a form of universalism of their experience—the identification is both made easier and harder by this lack of details. By accusing the victims of an unnamed crime, the murderers had taken a first step towards making the Others invisible. Their murders render them completely invisible, but paradoxically allows their invisible presence to haunt the stage.

Women are also casualties in this process: they are either unseen (absent from the stage as well), or unheard (sue merely comments on what john says, but she stays in the part assigned to her by her sex). Women, whether they be emma's sisters, the young man's female co-workers, sue and the other girls, the woman and her mother, her aunt, or her grandparents are all invisible victims. The exception here could be the woman in *medea redux*, but she was invisible her whole life: as a child, as a pregnant teenager, as a single mother. Her crime is what brought her to the stage. Many critics have accused Neil LaBute of misogyny because of his depiction of female characters and because of his misogynist male characters.[67] But as Becky Becker argues in her article "No Simple Misogyny: The Shape of Gender in the Works of Neil LaBute," it is rather the opposite. LaBute's "approach to gender is part of a more pervasive concern for identity and desire in a society fraught with mindless performance and predetermined behaviour" (Wood, *Neil LaBute* 6). Misogyny is part of the male characters' show of hypermasculinity in their quest of identity.

LaBute brings to the forefront the invisibility of women, their silencing and their oppression. He shows the structure of patriarchy with seemingly ordinary characters. When the young man explains what has been happening at his office that "started all this" (*bash* 22), he unleashes ordinary misogyny:

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[66] Originally: "la figure de l'Autre, cette entité que l'on juge coupable d'un crime et que l'on cherche à nommer, à qui l'on veut assigner une identité pour la rendre visible afin de la circonscrire ensuite aux marges de la société en guise de châtiment."

[67] See for instance: DeRogatis, "To Produce or Not to Produce: Neil LaBute."; or Svalwinska "Neil LaBute's sexist Pig."

> somebody else takes over, you lose a few of the stragglers, guys who couldn't keep up…and i do mean "guys" as in everybody, all people here, because it was usually women at that point, not always, but a lot of the time…takeovers were an excellent way to get things back in order, and that's not just me talking, you know, there's definitely an order to things in business and the old boys at the top, the guys you never even see, just their pictures in the hallway…they like things the way they've always been. so that's when a bunch of these women with their m.b.a.s and affirmative action nonsense would get the boot. nothing personal about it, at least i never felt there was…just getting everything spinning back the way it was supposed to be. (*bash* 22)

When the young man says "guys" and explains himself, we could think that he is trying to be more inclusive in a more politically correct way, but he is doing it for the opposite purpose. He is using the word "guys" instead of women to degrade women even more and to point out that they were the ones lagging behind, unable to adapt to the busy and manly environment of the office. He compares this situation of a conservative order ("get things back in order," "an order to things in business," "the way it was supposed to be") to nature and wilderness as if it was due to a natural order that women were the weak animals in the jungle of business. The repetitions of the idea of natural order reveals his insecurity and a fear of change; he perceives women as a threat to the white male dominion over business. He supports the old system in which the people in power, "the old boys at the top, the guys you never even see," are invisible too. For the young man, women would not (and should not) have been there in the first place if it had not been for "affirmative action," i.e. positive discrimination used to increase the representation of minorities such as women in fields where they are usually excluded. He thus implies that it is wrong for women to study and work in this field. It is even more ironic considering that the trigger element of his war with one of his colleagues (*bash* 23) was his saying the word "guys" to talk about a group of women at the office.

LaBute's strategy of showing the oppression of women and their invisibility follows the path of the theatre of the invisible with regards to its aims. In "Du presque-rien au presque-tout," Emeline Jouve distinguishes the strategies of Boal and Glaspell:

> The invisible theatre is a precise dramatic form of the theatre of the oppressed theorised by Augusto Boal in the 1970s. . . .even if the underlying strategies in Boal's theatre are very different from those of Glaspell, the two artists' objectives seem similar: both instrumentalise theatre in order to make social oppressions visible.[68]

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[68] Originally: "Le théâtre de l'invisible est une forme dramatique précise du théâtre de l'opprimé théorisé par Augusto Boal dans les années 1970. . . . même si les stratégies sous-jacentes au théâtre de Boal sont très différentes de celles de

Women's invisibility is paradoxically shown through their absence on the stage—in *iphigenia in orem*, the young man is speaking to a woman who is not on the stage and who never says anything—but also through their silence or rather their being silenced. In *a gaggle of saints*, sue is not being listened to, but she does not intently listen to john either; she seems unaware of what happened when she was sleeping at the hotel. In *medea redux*, the woman gives the testimony about her life in which she had never spoken of her liaison, in which she had kept silent.

LaBute reinvests Artaud's theory of the theatre being like a plague. In his plays, silence is like a plague that infects minorities. Season 2 episode 6 of the podcast *Injustices*, entitled "Ou Peut-être une Nuit: Le Monde que Construit l'Inceste," created and presented by Charlotte Pudlowski, is devoted to the silence that gags victims of sexual violence. But in the end, it reveals deeper and wider mechanisms. The question of the pervasiveness, contamination and contagion of silence is tackled:

> From this seed of silence sown in us around the age of nine, will flourish gags and muzzles; and the young women who will be raped by their piano teacher, by their coach, by the director of the film in which they are playing, will have learnt that they need to keep silent. And the men will have learnt that they have the right to crush, and that it is the way to take one's place as a man. And the silence will give them reason. All the ways to keep silent will always give them reason. And the silences will fit into each other, small families within big families, villages, trades, institutions. . . . It is not for nothing that feminist fights are being waged around language today: feminise names, change grammar, change vocabulary, transform the narrative, be listened to, be heard, be able to speak, have the right to inhabit the speech, no longer make it tell lies, half-truths, masquerades; tell the world as it is, with all its violence, to look it in the face, and be able to clean it, build other roads, start another world, with other generations, who will say other evils / words, who will say, who will speak. (34:20-49:33)[69, 70]

Glaspell, les objectifs de ces deux artistes semblent similaires: tous deux instrumentalisent le théâtre afin de rendre les oppressions sociales visibles."

[69] In French, *mots* (words) and *maux* (evils, aches) are homophones, and both could fit in this context.

[70] Originally: "De ce pépin de silence semé en nous vers l'âge de neuf ans, fleuriront des bâillons et des muselières ; et les jeunes femmes qui se feront violer par leur professeur de piano, par leur entraîneur, par le réalisateur du film dans lequel elles tournent, auront appris qu'il faut se taire. Et les hommes auront appris qu'ils ont le droit d'écraser, et que c'est ça, prendre sa place d'homme. Et le silence leur donnera raison. Toutes les manières de se taire leur donneront toujours raison. Et les silences s'emboîteront les uns dans les autres, les petites familles dans les grandes familles, les villages, les corps de métiers, les institutions. . . . Ce n'est pas pour rien que des combats féministes se mènent autour du langage aujourd'hui: féminiser les noms, changer la grammaire, changer le vocabulaire, transformer le récit, être écoutées, être entendues, pouvoir parler, avoir le droit d'habiter la parole, ne plus lui faire dire des mensonges, des demi-vérités, des mascarades ; dire le monde tel qu'il est, avec toute sa violence, pour la regarder en face, et pouvoir la nettoyer, construire d'autres routes, recommencer un autre monde, avec d'autres générations, qui diront d'autres maux/mots, qui diront, qui parleront."

Silence is disseminated from the oppressors on women who are victims of violence, but also on their family circle, relatives, etc. until institutions. In *iphigenia in orem* for instance, women who speak up at the young man's office are eventually let go, and deb stays silent too, even though she perhaps suspected something. In *medea redux*, the school could also have suspected something, and the woman, then a thirteen-year-old girl, did not speak of her statutory rape either. Speech is a weapon used by the perpetrators to silence and annihilate their victims.

In the end, the victims of *bash* are more numerous than the three to which the plays are dedicated, and the distribution between set categories of victims and perpetrators is not Manichean.

b) Violence and Identity: The Case of the Persecutors

"'Who are these people?' we cry out in utter distress at the end of a LaBute performance. What is the point of this excessive and mostly gratuitous psychological and physical abuse? Why is the author so preoccupied with confronting us with the dark side of modern civilization?"—Ilka Saal, "Let's Hurt Someone" (324)

Neil LaBute's protagonists in *bash* first appear as normal, ordinary people, until they admit matter-of-factly that they have committed murder without ever naming it thus. The characters are devoid of a conscience of others, they are broken or corrupt by a capitalist, homophobic, or vengeful obsession. Thereby the plot mechanism does not rely on conflict, on tragic conscience or anagnorisis like in Attic tragedies; instead, the characters' words are ones of senseless contagion and it is that escalation and propagation of violence that makes the plot unfold. The burden of realizing the full horror of the situation falls entirely on the audience—as if there were no such thing as tragic anagnorisis for the murderer here.

i. Portraits of Ordinary Criminals

bash is minimalistic. The dryness of LaBute's style mimics the coldness of the crimes. There are no character lists and there are not many stage directions or clues to picture the characters' physical traits and behaviour. The stage is not thoroughly described either. At the beginning of each play, there is a very short paragraph with the strict minimum of information to set the scene. See the openings of the plays of *bash*—in order of appearance, *iphigenia in orem*, *a gaggle of saints*, and *medea redux*:

> silence, darkness. lights up slowly to reveal a young man, early 30s, dressed in a plain suit. he is seated on the edge of a hotel chair and nurses a water glass in one hand. (13)
>
> . . .
>
> silence, darkness. a young attractive couple sitting apart from one another, they are dressed in the popular fashion of the day. (35)
>
> . . .
>
> silence, darkness. woman seats alone in a chair at an institutional-style table, a harsh light hangs down directly overhead. a tape player, water carafe and cup, cigarettes, and an ashtray are close at hand. woman finishes a cigarette, stubs it out, and slowly begins to speak. (77)

It is common at the theatre to find the curtains open and the lights on before the start of the play, the setting ready or being set up, and the actors already in character, talking to the audience as they are taking their seats or moving furniture to prepare the scene. It can be a way to ease the

transition between "real life" and theatre, to incorporate some realism into the play but also to give the appearance of life being directed, with the actors expecting and waiting for the audience to arrive. On the contrary, in *bash*, the indication "silence, darkness" at the beginning and end of each play encapsulates them in a set time and space, starkly divorcing the audience's and the play's levels of reality. The absence of introduction and the scarcity of details about the characters' appearance give the impression of arriving *in medias res*—it is not clear from the start exactly where the characters are and what they are going to talk about. The audience has to collect clues to get a clearer sense of the setting.

The young man is in his early thirties, we learn during the play that john and sue in their early twenties ("we're juniors up at b.c." *bash* 36) and the woman is in her early thirties as well (she has just killed her fourteen-year-old son with whom she got pregnant when she was fourteen herself, *bash* 85-7). Given the tone of the plays, it can be expected that children were not the target audience. The audience thus is or used to be the same age as the characters, making them more relatable in terms of preoccupations, mindsets, or behaviours.

In *iphigenia in orem*, the young man is wearing a plain suit—he is a business man on the road for a business trip, and he is just staying at a hotel (*bash* 29). The fact that he is sitting on the edge of his seat can indicate that he is not completely in his element, which would explain why he is not sitting more comfortably, but it can also show how eager he is to finally tell his story to someone. He is drinking water because as a Mormon, he cannot drink alcohol, but he encourages the person to whom he is talking to drink ("your drink okay? there's plenty over the counter there, so feel free…the looser the better on this one, i figure, so bottoms up" *bash* 13). That person is neither on stage nor in the play—they are invisible and do not have lines.

In *a gaggle of saints*, john and sue are ironically described as an "attractive couple" but "sitting apart from one another." Even before the play has started, there are contradictory forces exercising their power in the duo. Their attention to looks is also already displayed as they are both wearing fashionable clothes.

In *medea redux*, the woman is in a vulnerable position. The setting with a harsh light over her head would create shadows on her face. The water carafe, cup, cigarettes and ashtray next to a tape player give away that she must be in a police station, about to give a deposition and taking her time before starting.

Because the descriptions lack in details, the identification with the characters is made easier. The way the characters speak also makes them more relatable: the language they use is very natural, there are some hesitations, gap-fillers, some slang and some cultural or popular references that the audience shares. The young man is being nice to his listener ("you're okay, comfortable? good." *bash*

14), john and sue are paying a lot of attention to their looks ("JOHN. i ended up buying a perry ellis, finally. a size big, but i got one…looks okay, doesn't it? SUE. it looked good on him" and "i had a dress i'd been saving…all taffeta, i'd been saving it for something like this… JOHN. she looked great, proud to be with her…" *bash* 40-3), and the woman has endured so much injustice without complaining that the audience feels compelled to pity her or to be angry at her former teacher/lover.

In her essay "Let's Hurt Someone," Ilka Saal describes LaBute's characters from his films and plays as "good middle-class suburbanites," "white and predominantly male middle-class citizens" (324), and in an interview with Rosalynde Welch, LaBute says that "we think of them as good people." LaBute re-created a mythology of white suburban America, comprising middle-class, Mid-American middle-men who are etymologically mediocre, i.e. from Latin *mediocris* "of medium size, moderate, middling, commonplace" ("Mediocre"). Saal shows that LaBute's "taking up one of the most popular *topoi* of American literature (the dissection of small Midwestern communities) allows him to rehearse these beloved stereotypes of Ur-American innocence in an ironic manner" (324). By transforming archetypes, he charges them with strong symbolic force, excavating dirt from behind an ordinary façade, "uncovering the feral snarl beneath the bland American smile" (Brantley, "Neil LaBute's Beasts").[71] Going even further, John Istel explains that LaBute "transfers the worn-out clichés of the Midwest to a 'nameless mid-America', thereby also metonymically suggesting that the casual cruelties of his Midwestern characters might be emblematic of the 'muddled minds of middle-class Americans'" (Istel 39).

What is most striking then is how easy and natural it is for *bash*'s characters to confess their crimes. They explain how they happened as if they were rational, and as if they were not to be held accountable for them—as if everything they said could not indeed be held against them. It could be said that the theatrical apparatus is not a judicial apparatus, that the protagonists give a different kind of confession than the one you would get in a police station or in the docks, thus maybe implying that it is a theatrical fantasy of a naked, guilt-free confession. For the young man, it was an opportunity, for john, it just happened in an effusion of violence, for sue, it is easier to turn a blind eye and remain silent, and for the woman, it was the only option she had in her power to make her son's father pay and suffer in silence, just like she did all her life. When analysing another of LaBute's characters, Ilka Saal writes that he shows "a genuine, albeit detached, interest in the extent of the suffering he has

[71] Ilka Saal also writes: "LaBute supplements our stereotypical perception of the common Midwesterner as fair-minded, tolerant, and friendly to a fault with his portraits of the soft white underbelly of this ordinary (and in many regards normative) mid-America" (324).

caused" (323).[72] In *bash*, the characters do not care about the suffering they have caused. The only thing the young man deplores is the waste (talking about the wine for his listener to encourage her drinking: "myself, i hate to waste things" *bash* 14, and talking about seeing emma struggling for breath: "i realized that's what this was. an opportunity, and i wasn't going to waste it" *bash* 26-7). They only care about their own pain and their own power, they see themselves as more important than anyone else. John and his friends in *a gaggle of saints* are, as Christopher Bigsby remarks about Chad and Edward in *In the Company of Men*, "like children pulling the wings off flies because they can" (Bigsby, *Neil LaBute*, 39).[73] Their action reflects their will to go further in the folly that is usually excused for youth, in the (problematic on many aspects) mentality of "boys will be boys" pushed to its paroxysm. The game played between the young man and his colleague from another branch follows the same logic, "[b]ut in the end not even their celebrated 'male camaraderie' remains unscathed as they sell each other out to corporate America" (Saal 323).[74] The characters care more about their own skin, success and image (which are seen as equivalent), and they also consider that corporate America, i.e. the faceless US economy and bureaucracy, is more important than human values (except their own). In her essay *On Violence*, Hannah Arendt cites C. Wright Mills to better explain Max Weber's famous quote:

> "All politics is a struggle for power; the ultimate kind of power is violence," said C. Wright Mills, echoing, as it were, Max Weber's definition of the state as "the rule of men over men based on the means of legitimate, that is allegedly legitimate, violence." (35)[75]

Because the young man's work in business participates in the flourishing of the US economy, he feels legitimate in exercising violence for the purpose of saving his position at work, disguising it as a disinterested action to save his position from being taken by a woman, who would not be as competent as him because of her sex. Saal argues that LaBute's characters are "intensely suspicious of any kind of alterity—whether female (*In the Company of Men*), homosexual (*a gaggle of saints*), black (*This Is How It Goes*), or simply overweight (*Fat Pig*)" (Saal 324). As it is, the young man is being suspicious of the female alterity, and he actually feels threatened by the changes in society

[72] Chad in *In the Company of Men* (1997).

[73] What is essentially shown is a lack of empathy. From the 1970s onward, this has emerged as a specific feature in psychopathic killers—but LaBute seems to generalize it to all his murderers, making it the norm in a way. For studies related to empathy, reception and cognitive sciences, see the works of Dr. Bruce McConachie investigating the evolutionary and cognitive basis of theatre and performance studies, e.g. *Performance and Cognition: Theatre Studies and the Cognitive Turn*; *Engaging Audiences: A Cognitive Approach to Spectating in the Theatre*; *Theatre & Mind*; and *Evolution, Cognition, and Performance*.

[74] Ilka Saal is referring to the male characters in *In the Company of Men* (1997), but it also applies to the male characters of *iphigenia in orem*.

[75] See C. Wright Mills 171.

which aim to deprive him of some of his power. Hannah Arendt explains that "every decrease in power is an open invitation to violence—if only because those who hold power and feel it slipping from their hands, be they government or be they the governed, have always found it difficult to resist the temptation to substitute violence for it" (Arendt, *On Violence* 87). The young man's reaction to her female colleague's correcting him when he used the word "guys" ("a board meeting where i'd grouped her with a 'you guys oughta…' meaning that side of the table and she called me out on it…" *bash* 23) and the subsequent office war of the sexes is already a form of violence—and of course his killing his daughter is the apotheosis of his violence.

In his casebook on Neil LaBute, Bigsby compares the writings of Mamet and LaBute and says that while they both share a dark vision of human nature, LaBute goes deeper in the cruelties he chooses to explore. LaBute often cites Mamet as a source of inspiration for his own writing, and their characters "betray, deceive, manipulate, serve their own interests, oblivious to or disregarding of the needs of others" (Bigsby, *Neil LaBute* 39).[76] Indeed, they are so involved in their own pain ("everybody at my level; that mid-management level of things…was pretty vulnerable" *bash* 22) that they are deeply convinced themselves that they could not be blamed and had nothing to be ashamed of when they accomplished their crimes. There is no anagnorisis, they reckon that what they did is something that happened, and that it was not the worst that could have happened. They even try to convince the audience that they are victims who did not have any other choice but to "fight back" or retaliate against the injustices that they suffered.

In the end, the protagonists are none other than ordinary criminals. They embody, in a way, the "Banality of Evil" as defined by Hannah Arendt in *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (1963). Hannah Arendt used that phrase to describe Eichmann's ethics of work: during his trial in 1961, he repeated that he had only been doing his job, that he had only obeyed orders coming from above. By reading more of Arendt's works, it is easy to see that she often questions the mechanical aspect of the work of civil servants.[77] She shows in her essay *On Violence* that bureaucracy is the reign of nobody and that it relieves individuals from any responsibility:

> In a fully developed bureaucracy there is nobody left with whom one can argue, to whom one can present grievances, on whom the pressures of power can be exerted. Bureaucracy is the form of government in which everybody is deprived of political freedom, of the power to act; for the rule by Nobody is not no-rule, and where all are equally powerless we have a tyranny without a tyrant. (81)

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[76] For LaBute citing Mamet as a source of inspiration, see for instance: Morrison, "Neil LaBute part two."

[77] E.g. Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*; her thinking journals—*Denktagebuch*; *On Violence*.

The young man admits that in his company's corridors, there are portraits of "the old boys at the top, the guys you never even see, just their pictures in the hallway" (*bash* 22). As he leads his life according the principles of his work, it is easier for him not to feel responsible for his reprehensible actions. In the same essay *On Violence*, Hannah Arendt explains how bureaucracy as become a new form of government and why according to her it is the most tyrannical one so far:

> . . . the forms of government as the rule of man over man—of one or the few in monarchy and oligarchy, of the best or the many in aristocracy and democracy. Today we ought to add the latest and perhaps most formidable form of such domination: **bureaucracy or the rule of an intricate system of bureaus in which no men, neither one nor the best, neither the few nor the many, can be held responsible, and which could be properly called rule by Nobody**. (If, in accord with traditional political thought, we identify tyranny as government that is not held to give account of itself, rule by Nobody is clearly the most tyrannical of all, since there is no one left who could even be asked to answer for what is being done. It is this state of affairs, making it impossible to localize responsibility and to identify the enemy, that is among the most potent causes of the current world-wide rebellious unrest, its chaotic nature, and its dangerous tendency to get out of control and to run amuck.) (38-39)[78]

Arendt explains that the traditional forms of government implying a hierarchy of power (with rulers and ruled) are now counting another new form: bureaucracy. This particular form of domination is different from the others because the ruler cannot be held responsible; indeed, in an impersonal system such as this, it is impossible to determine who that ruler is. The intricate system of bureaus described by Arendt is best exemplified with administrations counting many offices, departments with branches, sub-branches, line managers, etc., and best illustrated in *Les Douze Travaux d'Astérix* (1976), an animated feature film by Goscinny, Uderzo *et alii*, in which the two heroes Astérix and Obélix have to accomplish a task that consists in getting a permit document in a multi-storey administrative building. Although this episode is very funny, it offers an acute critic of the administrative bureaucracy by showing its unnecessary complexity and its failings. Hannah Arendt also underlines the dangers of unrest that can result from the impossibility in localising responsibility in a bureaucratic order. In short, bureaucracy builds up violence.

[78] The emphasis in bold is mine.

The difference of LaBute's characters compared to Nazis rests on their ego. While Nazis were actors who obliviated their egos, who were not "someones" but were on the contrary invested in the disinvestment of their selves, the characters in *bash* are excessively invested in their own egos. Saal writes that the characters' behaviours show a "startling lack of self-doubt (replaced by extreme self-righteousness)" and a "belief that all values can be measured in terms of money" (324). In both cases, this relation of individuals to their egos is directly linked to desolation, to an uprooting of individuals in totalitarianism and bureaucracy. To go back to explaining the concept of the Banality of Evil, in a sense, "banality" is related to a form of superficiality linked to the absence of thought—for Nazis, because of their absence of ego, for the characters of *bash*, because of their egos overshadowing any thought concerning anyone other than themselves. The absence of thought is what allowed the banality of evil in the Second World War, thought being what makes humans go into depths of meaning, when the lack thereof is linked to superficiality. Indeed, as Ilka Saal remarked, LaBute's characters "tend to avoid probing the surface of reality" (324). The best example is john and sue's couple in *a gaggle of saints*: they rely a lot on their appearance, on how they look, how they are looked at, in other terms they are superficial.

New forms of hubris emerge in LaBute's plays; for instance, the woman pretends to re-instate the order lacking from the world by acting in accordance with her own vision of justice, her revenge scheme. It is a new form of hubris in the sense that she is not thirsty for divine power, nor is she opposed to God, but she temporarily takes God's place nevertheless, perhaps precisely because it remains empty. It is the same for the young man, or john, who do not turn their backs on religion. These forms of hubris resulting in the murder of innocents reveal a tendency towards the hegemony of the self, a self-centred vision, a loss of ethical bearings. LaBute's characters are guilty of hubris because of their excessive egocentrism. In Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, hubris is defined as:

> doing and saying things at which the victim incurs shame, not in order that one may achieve anything other than what is done, but simply to get pleasure from it. For those who act in return for something do not commit *hubris*, they avenge themselves. The cause of the pleasure for those committing *hubris* is that by harming people, they think themselves superior; that is why the young and the rich are hubristic, as they think they are superior when they commit *hubris* (1378^{b}23–30)

Broadly speaking, hubris is a crime or outrageous act, often involving violence, which results in soiling someone's honour, or the honour of an institution, a city, or a country, for the sheer pleasure

of the perpetrator. Revenge is not considered as hubristic because it should not inspire pleasure—the pleasure in committing hubris comes from the impression of power over the victim.[79]

The characters of *bash*'s hubris are not the same as the hubris that were shown and condemned in Attic plays. Indeed, the editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica explain that "[t]he word's connotation changed over time, and hubris came to be defined as overweening presumption that leads a person to disregard the divinely fixed limits on human action in an ordered cosmos" ("Hubris"). Fisher brings precious precisions on the definition and history of hubris:

> *Hubris* is not essentially a religious term; yet the gods naturally were often supposed to punish instances of it, either because they might feel themselves directly dishonoured, or, more frequently, because they were held to uphold general Greek moral and social values such as justice or respect for others. Nor is it helpful to see Greek tragedy centrally concerned to display the divine punishment of hubristic heroes; tragedy focuses rather on unjust or problematic suffering, whereas full-scale acts of *hubris* by the powerful tend to deprive them of the human sympathy necessary for tragic victims.

This distinction is especially interesting with regard to the characters of *bash* compared to tragic heroes who are seen as victims of hubris in Attic plays. For that reason, in Attic plays, the tragic heroes inspire sympathy. In *bash*, the only protagonist that could be seen as a victim of "unjust or problematic suffering" is the woman in *medea redux*: she is the only character who is not upper-middle class but had to struggle since she got pregnant in her teenage years, and that is why there is a form of sympathy towards her—a sympathy which diminishes or disappears when she explains how she cold-bloodedly killed her son just to turn the tables on the one who was at the origin of her life-long suffering. What is horrible for her is her impossibility to stop loving her former teacher, even after all the abuse he made her suffer. It is this love that prevents her to free herself, and killing her son will not help it either; it is more likely to make it worse.

Furthermore, she is the only one who is facing consequences and knows it. Whatever the choice of the woman for her course of action after her crime, she would always have been losing. By killing her son and not trying to escape the police, and by explaining the whole story without trying to actively justify herself for what she did, she will be incarcerated or executed. If she had fled after killing her son, she would have had to live as a recluse, somehow like she used to do her whole adult life. She is used to having to face the consequences of her actions, unlike the two male protagonists

[79] See Aristotle's definition of hubris, *Rh.* 1378^{b}23–30.

of *iphigenia in orem* and *a gaggle of saints*. This one of the reasons why, when it comes to the young man and john, it is more difficult to sympathise with them as they are not victims of "unjust or problematic suffering"—the young man is clearly prejudiced against women and was only concerned about the possibility of his comfort's disappearing, and john is the instigator of a gay hate crime while he was enjoying an expensive getaway weekend with his friends and his situation is seemingly about to get more comfortable in the near future. Indeed, he is pursuing higher studies, is engaged to sue, and his life's trajectory is likely to resemble that of the young man's. It thus seems more natural to call the two male protagonists of *bash* hubristic. On the other hand, contrarily to the woman's, the young man and john's crimes were not meant to be made public or aimed at someone to make them suffer, nor were they as meticulously planned either.

ii. A Violent Crisis of Identity

The characters' crimes correspond to an identity crisis. The persecutors are at a loss to find their place in the community, whether it be the one of family or society. They are questioning their identity in relation to an authoritative figure (the father/the teacher/the author/God), to their sexuality (the relationship between men/women and men/men), and the tension of this crisis, which is intrinsically linked to a crisis of Degree, leads to violence. In the crisis of Degree defined by René Girard, the characters' mimetic desires and all the dangers that they suppose are determined by society. Indeed, the violence of gender roles and their identification with them are appropriated by the subjects who are gradually losing their sense of self, of individuality, and of common sense. It is one of the consequences of the Society of the Spectacle; people imitate the representations they see everywhere and their dominant models. Their loss of individual identity induces an increase of their egocentricity—they feel that they are losing control and power and consequently put an emphasis on their shallow and stereotypical self, in order to regain a sense of self.

Trouble in gender identification, or rather gender roles, is felt like a struggle by the young man and by john.

In her book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990), Judith Butler questions the relationship between sex, gender, and sexuality, and demonstrates that sex and gender are social and cultural constructs. Butler deconstructs every concept down to that of "women" and "the woman" and shows that they are problematic not only because they are seen as universal categories (thus negating the particularities and singularities of individuals), but also because they were constructed by and are shaped in a patriarchal, phallocentric and heteronormative society. By extension, the traditional binary genders (male and female) in society determine the roles that one

should play according to their sex. Any behaviour that contravenes social expectations is seen as deviant and abnormal. Going even further, Butler critiques some psychoanalytic fundamentals such as the oedipal complex. She argues that the taboo about homosexuality also participates in creating heterosexual normativity, hence enabling the oedipal complex.

To cover up their uneasiness regarding their own role in society, the responses adopted by the individuals are a form of exaggeration of what is expected from them: hyper-virility for men, and passivity or absence for women, children, and homosexuals. John and sue's couple best exemplify this: john is citing many car brand-names (e.g. "i've got this old v.w., i said that, right? it's great, '73, with the metal bumpers and all that . . . [david]'s got one of those isuzu troopers. 's roomy, big" *bash* 39), and sue is talking about fancy clothes and shoes ("i thought it sounded wonderful, you know, getting out of some amoco, middle of connecticut, in this wave of taffeta . . . i was carrying my shoes—i did find a pair, even had time to dye them to match" *bash* 42). This is a violent process on the individuals imposing it on themselves or others. The young man's and john's demonstrations of violence are a demonstration of power, of what is expected from men. The woman was already seen as deviant because she got pregnant very young and had to raise her child on her own, but she complied to the social expectations of the feminine role by raising that child, not pursuing studies nor working, and staying quiet—up to her killing billie and her deposition.

The young man's vision of working women as a threat to his conservative values reflects the problems raised by Butler. Him and john embody toxic masculinity, which psychiatrist Terry Kupers, an expert on mental health in prisons, defines as "the constellation of socially regressive male traits that serve to foster domination, the devaluation of women, homophobia, and wanton violence" (Kupers 714).

Toxic masculinity manifests in their language: the comments that the young man made to his female co-workers are meant to be banter, but they soon started a war of the sexes in the office: "first meeting, or maybe the second, she'd been to and she nails me out loud about my attitude, my limited 'chauvinist lexicon' and all this other, just, crap that she fired off" (*bash* 23-4). Moreover, the young man does not give the names of the female characters, thereby de-personalising them and putting them back to the place that he thinks is theirs. He is also belittling women to appear superior, better. In the jungle metaphor of the office environment, women are the preys being hunted by men. By anchoring his plays in reference to ancient Greek plays, LaBute also reactivates a vision of the world as seen through the eyes of the ancients. That was a world in which the law stated that women, just like slaves, were not citizens, and they were always under the tutela of a male figure (a father or father-like figure, or their husband).

In her book *Not All Dead White Men* (2019), Donna Zuckerberg analyses the (mis)use of classics by members of the Red Pill, a very prolific online group of misogynist men. What she writes about them also applies to the young man:

> Instead of seeing themselves as part of the nation's most affluent and powerful demographic, the predominantly white heterosexual men of the Red Pill believe they need solidarity with each other because the idea of white male supremacy is an illusion maintained to ensure they remain oppressed. Although they concede that many of the most powerful people in the world are men—and are happy to use that as evidence that men are intellectually superior and more naturally suited to dominance and leadership than women are—they believe that "the myth of male privilege" is a manifestation of "the apex fallacy": the tendency to judge the status of an entire group based on a few outstanding members. . . . [T]hese men argue that the fact that every commander-in-chief of the United States has been male does not signify that men are not in a relatively disadvantaged position in our society. (12)

Zuckerberg's description of the members of the Red Pill community fits the definition of toxic masculinity and the type of remarks and behaviour that the young man shows. The solidarity that is erected as a principle of male comradery is only a façade. Each individual member is more concerned about themselves, they refuse to acknowledge their privilege in society and they victimise themselves (they talk about the "myth of the male privilege" or the "[illusion] of white male supremacy") to justify their misogynist actions.

The young man's idea of justice is completely biased by his own vision of the world, because of his egocentrism and hypermasculinity. Zuckerberg is particularly enlightening on this matter:

> Since the men of the Red Pill are convinced of their own superiority, . . . they have absolute conviction that white male supremacy is justice. They are more rational, and more Stoic, and therefore the world would be a better place if they were in charge. . . . [S]ince women and people of color are irrational and need guidance, society would be better off if rational white men were placed in charge. (86)

The young man and john are full of contradictions. They are convinced that they are in the right, but they are also behaving in an irrational manner, like animals (e.g. the gratuitous violence of chet's bashing in *a gaggle of saints* and the young man's excitement about his jungle office). They also see women as irrational beings—john does not listen to sue, "it didn't have to be like that. if deb had just hurried a bit, if she hadn't stop [*sic*] to look through *people* magazine or her mother hadn't gone next door to fill a prescription, then who knows?" (*bash* 27). As Simone de Beauvoir wrote in

The Second Sex (1949): “No one is more arrogant toward women, more aggressive or scornful, than the man who is anxious about his virility” (introduction). It is their anxiety about their masculinity that creates a misogynist response.

The woman is also paradoxical. In an interview with Adèle van Reeth, Pierre Judet de La Combe talks about Euripides' *Medea*. He explains that when Medea is killing her children, she is killing herself at the same time. She is the master of her destiny in her absolute lack of power. She is prisoner of the violence of others, i.e. of political and masculine violence. She is both a feminist because she is aware of the injustice of which she is a victim (especially in a soliloquy at the beginning of Euripides' play), and a monster because she kills her children. On this matter, the woman of *medea redux* is slightly different: she does not have as feminist a speech as Euripides' Medea. Nevertheless, the title of LaBute's play announces the return of Medea, the woman is determined in her action and eventually she rejects one form of oppression—silence. Medea is both culprit and victim, she commits her crime despite of herself and figuratively takes her own life, thus performing a contradiction—she is not dead, she is going to start a new life. She knows that what she is doing is wrong, but she does it all the same: it makes the tragic emotion even more powerful. She thwarts masculine norms by speaking like men: she speaks and she is listened to. Tragedy shows that men do not know what they are talking about when they talk about love or children, whereas Medea is omniscient, she totally knows what she is saying, but she is impotent. In this respect, the woman is slightly different from Euripides' Medea: she does not linger on her impotence about her fate, her suffering, nor even on her cruelty, but she knows what she is talking about when speaking fondly of her former lover (*bash* 84), or when she recognises the signs of love (*bash* 91). The young man says to the stranger, after having spent an evening explaining them how he killed his daughter because he cared more about his comfort and success at work than the unity of his family: “you have any kids? no? well, when you do, you be good to them, okay? there's nothing like 'em in the world…believe me” (*bash* 30)—implying that the person to whom he is talking will have kids by using the conjunction “when” rather than “if,” and implying that his past experience gave him enough knowledge to be able to give advice about children and education. At the end of the play, Medea is both triumphant and resigned: triumphant because she has avenged herself, resigned because she accepts that she is not all-powerful and that she must face the consequences of her action. She is very ambivalent and the Chorus (or in LaBute's case, the contemporary audience) is also ambivalent about her, at times on her side, at times horrified by her actions—a feeling which also applies to LaBute's woman and to the audience about her.

For all the characters, violence is then used as a regeneration tool to feel alive, as a stepping stone to build something new or sturdier, without realising that the foundations of this new life or identity are forever bound with the act of violence that permitted its birth. Arendt writes in her essay *On Violence*:

> It is as though life itself, the immortal life of the species, nourished, as it were, by the sempiternal dying of its individual members, is "surging upward," is actualized in the practice of violence. . . . But faced collectively and in action, death changes its countenance; now nothing seems more likely to intensify our vitality than its proximity. (68)

The danger of this course of action is that death and violence change the face of life. Violence accentuates the contrast between opposites of life and death, so that life suddenly appears more intense because of violence and death, and the illusion created makes violence an essential tool to reach the peak of vitality. The woman's vision of the great order of things when she killed billie, the young man taking his daughter's life as if it were an opportunity for his career, john's feeling of power over chet and sue after chet's bashing: all the characters feel like they have accessed another level of awareness which is divine, both in the sense of God-like and of absolute bliss and satisfaction.

In the end, has violence become a form of regeneration for the individual, to feel alive: for instance, the laughter of the young man at the end of the play ("yeah, he'd gotten me, alright, he got me good, just like the old days" *bash* 29), or the exhilaration of sue when she sees blood after john pricked himself with a pin ("but see, in a weird way, though, it excited me" *bash* 44), or just after violence or crime.

iii. Culpability and Guilt: A Fact but Not a Feeling

The characters' monologues on stage take the form of a confession to a third party, the unseen character who by extension becomes the audience. A relationship is thus created between the protagonists who are in control of the story and the audience/readers who receive it. It could appear as if these confessions were a way to unload guilt, to share pain and remorse, to expiate faults; but the characters of *bash* do not show any of sign that they are seeking redemption. Their confessions are not driven by a feeling of guilt. Christopher Bigsby writes:

> None of these characters believes that he or she is at fault. In a blame culture, all inadequacies are to be shifted onto others. . . . The word "me", however, is the operative one. Their religion is solipsism. Theirs is a world wholly lacking in mutuality and transcendence. (*Neil LaBute*, 65)

The young man tried to shift his fault onto deb and her mother (*bash* 27), john is using religion to justify chet's beating, and the woman used billie's death as a means towards an end in her plan and

her son is just a casualty—none of them feel guilty. Violence allows some aggressors, most commonly men, to walk more freely on their road. The point of violence is to be able to dominate without feeling remorse, it is a way to make progress in the hierarchy of that system and to perform better. What is appalling is that the characters do not realise the gravity of their crimes, they are living in their bubbles as if the world was revolving around them: the young man feels responsible for his family's holding together ("i took the risk, this calculated risk for my family that this whole episode would pay out in our favour, give me that little edge at work and maybe things'd be okay" *bash* 27), john feels pressured to make his father see him as a man ("halfway through my pre-med, he's still trying to cut my bangs!" *bash* 51), and the woman feels like she can see the whole universe as if she were above it (after killing billie and watching him lying motionless in the bathtub: "i thought i could almost see, i mean, if i squinted, i could almost make out…"adakia," the word i was trying, you know, that's it. 'the world out of balance'" *bash* 93; and imagining her former lover's reaction: "I can almost see 'em, you know, I can, down there in phoenix" *bash* 94).

In *The Warriors, Reflections on Men in Battle*, Jesse Glenn Gray explains how the meaning of guilt has evolved and its perception has shifted to become negative:

> Our age seems peculiarly confused about the meaning of guilt, as well as its value. With the rise of modern psychology and the predominance of naturalistic philosophers, guilt has come to be understood exclusively in a moral sense. Its older religious and metaphysical dimensions have tended to view guilt feelings as a hindrance to the free development of personality and the achievement of a life-affirming outlook. They like to trace guilt to the darker, subconscious levels of the soul and emphasize its backward-looking character as opposed to the future-directed impulses of the natural man. Hence guilt, when reduced to moral terms, has more and more been branded as immoral. To some, it is associated with a species of illness, which must be cured by psychiatric treatment. . . . The individual is released as far as possible from regret for past deeds and from the hard duty to improve his character. (174)

Guilt is a feeling that has been conceptualised in moral, religious and metaphysical terms. However, with the fall of popularity of religion and philosophy and the rise of psychoanalysis, guilt has gradually taken a negative moral connotation. The characters' refusal to acknowledge their guilt is enhanced by the American ideology of individual freedom. If guilt is backward-looking, the exercise of confession is a way to wash it away, to cut bridges with the past.

Ilka Saal argues in her essay "Let's Hurt Someone" that the references to "Greek tragedy" indicate among other things that "violence is tied to a larger project of collective cleansing and rehabilitation" (328). In other words, the intertextuality of *bash* with Attic tragedies suggests that the characters' use of violence is a way to perform a ritual sacrifice that could allow them and their community to start anew, in a way that would be cleaned of violence. The only problem with that interpretation is that it would need the characters to be aware of a fault, especially theirs. But the protagonists do not feel guilt, even less remorse. They do not express a need for redemption, instead it is as if they were pressing a reset button: they only perpetuate the same setting, in which they have added crime, violence, and hate.

In her article "No Simple Misogyny: The Shape of Gender in the Works of Neil LaBute," Becky Becker shows how the realistic depiction of characters, who twist the narratives to their advantage in order not to feel guilt, is a way to demonstrate to the audience that it is a human trait to desperately want to be seen as blameless.[80] She writes:

> Neil LaBute unmasks what Jill Dolan in *The Feminist Spectator as Critic* calls realism's traditional need to reify "the dominant culture's inscription of traditional power relations between genders and classes" by hiding "the ideology of the author, whose position is mystified by the seemingly transparent text" (84). For LaBute, realism must reveal our general inclination toward re-shaping the "truth". By exposing the traditional power relations between genders and classes (and races) through a constant re-writing of "truth" within the play, LaBute shows that nothing is stable except our extreme commitment to portraying ourselves as blameless. (Wood, *Neil LaBute* 118-119)

The character who best illustrates Becker's argument is the young man who delivers different accounts of his daughter's death, each of them exonerating him in some way, seducing the audience (*bash* 15-21 and 25-28). However valid Becker's observation is, it is not exclusive of a more specific comment on the exaggeration of this human behaviour trait in the US. Ilka Saal thinks that the way violence is depicted in *bash* is not only a critique of universal human frailty, but a more specific comment on America. She writes:

[80] The best example—the most obvious—is the young man's retelling emma's death, first as an accident, then as an intentional murder. It implies that the actor is playing the young man who is also playing a character, thus creating an embedded structure in the play.

> it is a pointed critique of a national ideology in which the infliction of violence and its mythological celebration in cultural memory go hand in hand with the ritualistic assertion of an innate innocence. After all, with Mormonism LaBute incidentally also references a quintessential American religion. (330)

In other words, violence is legitimised both by American history and its celebration of violence—after all, one of the defining characteristics of the US is the individual right to bear arms—and the "ritualistic assertion of an innate innocence"—indeed, the myth of American innocence and white saviourism in which the ideals of justice, decency, and purity are advertised as being intrinsically American values have had various applications and revivals (e.g. the American hymn, the propaganda during the Cold War, the interventionalist politics exemplified by the Peace Corps in the sixties…) and Mormonism is a religion that insists on decency, purity, good behaviour.[81, 82]

The way the characters see themselves as blameless is assorted with a form of detachment and equanimity that renders the characters even more despicable, less human. Hannah Arendt paraphrases Noam Chomsky in *On Violence* and dissects how detachment creates that reaction of distrust:

> Absence of emotions neither causes nor promotes rationality. "Detachment and equanimity" in view of "unbearable tragedy" can indeed be "terrifying," namely, when they are not the result of control but an evident manifestation of incomprehension. (64)[83]

This process is double: first, the protagonists show no emotion when retelling events of a traumatic nature. The characters, because of their crimes, could be experiencing a terrible trauma causing a phenomenon of dissociation that would explain their lack of empathy. Secondly, the audience listen to horrible stories told in an emotionally detached way, thus recreating the setting but this time with the audience in front of a traumatic story. It thus also invites a complete dissociation of the audience from the characters, but this time calling the audience to question that dissociation, to understand how it happens, that paradoxically, backing away from these characters is a way to reconnect to human feelings of empathy. LaBute's theatre reconnects with Brecht's theory according

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[81] The Second Amendment, one of the ten amendments to the Constitution comprising the Bill of Rights, states: "A well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed" ("Second Amendment").

[82] For a researched history on Mormonism and the Mormons' sense of moral innocence, see Joanna Brooks. *Mormonism and White Supremacy: American Religion and The Problem of Racial Innocence*. Oxford University Press, 21 May 2020. Oxford Scholarship Online. https://oxford.universitypressscholarship.com/view/10.1093/oso/9780190081768.001.0001/oso-9780190081768.

[83] See Chomsky, *American Power and the New Mandarins*, p. 371.

to which “the audience identification with the characters is a Romantic absurdity” (Steiner 339).[84] George Steiner wrote that “tragedy can only happen if reality has not been disciplined by reason and social conscience” (*La Mort de la Tragédie* 333).[85] The characters’ unawareness of their guilt is what allows tragedy to happen, while it is also a way for the audience to reflect on the workings of their actions. LaBute’s realistic reconstruction of social behaviours and, more accurately, misbehaviours, is a way to underline the mechanisms that society is built upon. This reflexion of reality is a way to make the audience reflect on society.

[84] Originally: “toute identification du spectateur aux personnages est une absurdité romantique.”

[85] Originally: “La tragédie ne peut se produire que lorsque la réalité n’a pas été disciplinée par la raison et la conscience sociale.”

c) Duplicity and Paradox of Violence: Communication and Destruction

i. Violence as a Form of Communication

In LaBute's plays, violence is used by the characters as a means of communication, as a change of encounter, as a way to connect with others. The lexical field of connection in relation to violent contexts is abundant in *bash*, the most blatant example being when chet is being beaten by john and his friends, and john says that he "connect[s] a few more times" (*bash* 63). It is also at the occasion of chet's beating that religion is most explicitly evoked, when tim is giving a fake eulogy and the group of friends realise they share a bond.

Religion is a way to bring people together and to make them connect with their spirituality. Etymologically, religion comes from the Latin *religere*, "to link," it is supposed to create a link with the sacred as well as a link between the different members of the religious community. In *bash*, religion is mixed together with violence. As violence is used as a conglomerating, unifying factor (e.g. in *a gaggle of saints*, the bonds connecting the members of the group together are made official at the end of chet's beating), we could talk of a religion of violence, or of a cult of violence. In Latin, *colere* means to cultivate, to practice and to honour. John's group devote a cult to violence and they are a cult of violence differentiated from their Mormon affiliation.

Although it was not LaBute's intention to display the Mormons as evil, *bash* is the trilogy that precipitated the playwright's disfellowship from the Church of Latter-day Saints after its first production in 1999 (Welch). Indeed, the characters are all Mormon, but Neil LaBute explains in an interview with Christopher Bigsby: "I only used the Church in that particular play because I felt I knew the religion and I could use it" (Bigsby, *Neil LaBute* 249). What interested him most was the self-perception of a church member as inherently good. Neil LaBute maintains in interviews that the reason why he wrote about Mormon characters was not to bring any discredit to the Church, but to show that evil can lurk in places where no one would expect it. He repeats that what he likes to explore in his work is the relationships between characters and the simple questions of good and bad.[86]

In her essay, Ilka Saal writes that the function of Mormonism in the plays is to "underline the extent to which the founding myths of cultural memory in the US have informed the ways in which

[86] In a 2011 interview by Geffen Playhouse, Neil LaBute says: "I think the idea of faith has always been interesting to me; I think sin, faith, those kind of big simple questions about what else is there or lies beyond, but in the daily routine, are things that I've always tried to tackle in some way" (0.42-0.58).

the nation views its past and imagines its future" (330).[87] Mormonism is a religion that was born in the US at the end of the nineteenth century, coinciding with the emergence of the doctrine of Manifest Destiny. Both the Church of Latter-day Saints and the Manifest Destiny emphasise predestination, and the US nourish this idea by having a "theological and moral self-conception of the nation as a whole" (ibid.).

This view implies that the individuals sharing Mormon beliefs share a connection, otherwise they could not be perceived as a whole. In his plays, LaBute's protagonists are alone on stage, even john and sue are not communicating between each other and exist separately on the scenic space. Still, their sense of longing for communication is implicitly expressed through their only action: speaking to the audience, sharing their story, even though this process is truncated since the protagonists do not listen to their interlocutor in return. Their deeper desire of connection, to feel part of a community, however, is hidden until it is expressed through violence. For example, john and sue went to a congregating event with other members of the Church, which could be interpreted as a desire to meet new people of the same religious community, but they stayed with the people they already knew, and even then, their group separated. As john went out with a group of male friends, sue stayed with the women to sleep at the hotel, and she complained about tim's girlfriend's snoring ("SUE. i'd known patrice since kindergarten…" *bash* 58; "SUE. did you know patrice snores?" *bash* 61). Sue fails to bond with the women while john bonds with the men of his group thanks to an explosion of violence.

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A parallel can be drawn with Edward Albee and Harold Pinter's plays of the Absurd. In the Theatre of the Absurd, characters are desperate to establish contact with their peers but their repeated attempts only scratch the surface of communication. *Bash* is not absurd, but it shares some characteristics with the movement, especially in the use of language.

In *a gaggle of saints*, sue is commenting john's violence and seems to be selective in what she hears and what she shuts out. When the violent acts that chet describes are ones that happened in her presence, she is pleased by them. For instance, when john recalls the first time he pursued sue on the running track and he beat her boyfriend, she is almost daydreaming about it: "JOHN. i'm hitting him pretty good and sue's just standing there…waiting. SUE. i'd never seen this happen before…" (*bash* 49). However, despite john's retelling of the evening in Central Park, sue remains unaware of

[87] For more on founding myths and cultural memory in nations, see Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*.

chet's beating in a public bathroom by john, unaware that the engagement ring that he gave her belonged to chet. She only reacts to some of john's cues, she completely shuts out others. Instead, she lingers on details of lesser significance: "did you know patrice snores? she does… a little" (*bash* 61). In Pinter's play, *The Birthday Party*, Meg repeats four times that she "was the belle of the ball"—this cue, especially because it is uttered at times when the topic of the conversation was neither her beauty nor the ball, is not significant *per se*. Rather, it is its repetition that becomes the signifier of Meg's refusal to let go of her illusion of a glorious past. Martin Esslin explains in *Pinter, a Study of his Plays*:

> The fourfold *repetition* of the statement does not derive from any desire to say the same thing four times; her pitiful determination not to let the realization of the disaster dawn on her. Hence the repetition of the statement is more relevant than the statement and the explicit, "discursive" content of the statement, itself. . . . Here the language has almost totally lost its rhetorical, its informative element and has fully merged into dramatic action. (203)

Similarly, sue's comments are not significant *per se*; they are a sign of her delusional vision of her life and of her refusal to see that her relationship with john is dysfunctional. There is "a certain defectiveness of communication between characters—who talk past each other rather than to each other" (Esslin 201); even though they are talking about the same subject, the characters are almost never on the same wavelength. LaBute draws our attention to the fact that spoken language is neither chronologically linear, i.e. the characters' stories go back and forth, nor always used for logical interaction. Language—including silence—conveys more emotions than hard factual content. LaBute's characters use gap-fillers, beats (short silences) and pauses (longer silences) respectively to support the emotions they want to show or convince the audience that they are feeling (like compassion or pain), or to calculate the way they are going to phrase what they want to say so that it is sugar-coated. The longer silences at the start and at the end of the plays are like the bold double bar lines on a music staff. The tone of the characters' voices, although there are no scene directions, can easily be guessed thanks to the use of gap-fillers that make the characters seem friendly and relaxed, and thanks to the absence of capital letters throughout the plays: every word is on the same level. "What matters in most oral verbal contact therefore is more what people are *doing* to each other rather than the conceptual content of what they are saying" (Esslin 204).

Bill Naismith analyses language in Pinter's *The Caretaker*: "The importance of language in the plays, as it defines the identities of the characters and their inability to relate, is underlined by the final stage direction—*Long silence. Curtain*.—which shows that there is nothing left to be said between them." (Naismith 116). Likewise, LaBute's three plays all end exactly the same way:

“silence, darkness.” (*bash* 30, 70, 94). The young man has dismissed his guest; john and sue, who were sitting apart from each other during the whole play, have finished speaking and they artificially embrace each other to have their picture taken; and the woman has simply finished her statement to the police.

Repetition can also serve a different purpose: when the woman is trying to find the Greek word that her former teacher taught her, she is struggling to find the correct word, the *mot juste*. Martin Esslin explains that:

> Traditional stage dialogue always tended to err on the side of assuming that people have the right expression always ready to suit the occasion. In Pinter’s dialogue we can always watch the desperate struggles of his characters to find the correct expression; we are thus enabled to see them in the—very dramatic—act of struggling for communication, sometimes succeeding, often failing. (206)

Likewise, the woman was looking for the word *adakia* from page 78 (when she is saying: “we been doing things wrong for so long now that it all starts to feel okay after a while, you know, like this is how it oughta be. (BEAT) there’s a greek word for that…”) and she thinks she has found it at the very end of the play, when her story has arrived to the murder of billie (*bash* 93). Even then, the word she remembers is wrong, suggesting that even when she feels like she has accessed a superior level of knowledge, she is still human and fallible.

Lastly, the repetition of the action through is retelling is a way to show the protagonists’ struggle to gradually accept some facts which they had difficulty in taking in at first. For instance, the young man is slowly accepting his colleague’s joke and the irony of his situation. All the plays are re-enacting the crimes through speech rather than through action, which has been criticised by LaBute’s teacher at UBY: “for me the play is an experimental exercise, I would not do the play as it’s written. It’s one long monologue” (at 46 minutes).[88] But LaBute’s use of language is highly theatrical because it is not simply a retelling, it is a retelling in the first person to an invisible character, using rhetorical devices such as hesitations and colloquial speech to make it less artificial and more natural, more immersive.

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[88] You can listen to the audio recording of the first version of *bash* (the first title given to *a gaggle of saints*, the two other plays had not been written yet in 1992), followed by a Q&A (“Play: Bash”).

Violence is not only an encounter between criminals, but also between criminals and their victims ("with so many of us hitting, tearing at him, it's hard to get off a clean punch but i know i connect a few more times" *bash* 63), criminals and their loved ones, and also between criminals and those listening to their confession. Violence is pictured as a means of communication, as a virus that spreads, as contagious; it makes the frontiers between the different spheres of society porous.

In this sense, the motif of the road (present in the three plays) and its symbolism work as a code for creating a link between different places, spheres, as much as it is a means of transgression, or of fleeing. Violence communicates through these roads, and the motif of the road bears the same duplicity as violence, both creating and breaking links. For instance, the road that connects Utah to Phoenix, the woman and billie to billie's father, is one of reunion, of connection, but it is also one of transgression, of anticipation of the crime. Another example could be the flow of speech coming from the criminals on stage to their listener, which can be seen as a one-way communication motorway. But the invisible limit between the characters and their listener impedes a real exchange, a return or a response (e.g. the distance separating john and sue, the invisibility and muteness of the young man's interlocutor, the absence of response from the audience)—violence is spreading from the protagonists to their listener, who takes it without being able to give back an answer or a response. The protagonist is impervious to any response, but even more than that, it is impossible to give any response.

In *bash*, violence is communicated *via* contamination. This phenomenon can be explained in two ways: with psychology, and with theatre.

In the case of very violent events, memory can be affected, deformed and reconstructed. It is usually studied in the case of the victim suffering from traumatic memory. In the first episode of "Ou Peut-être une nuit," it is explained that during a traumatic event, violence contaminates the victims (Pudlowski). In other words, violence is the way the persecutor and the victim communicate, although their communication is forced and noxious. Violence gets stuck in the victims' memory and a curious phenomenon takes place as the memories of the persecutor (their violence, their words) and of the victim blend, as the memory of the persecutor "colonises"—in the words of Muriel Salmona—the memory of the victim to become part of the victim. But Muriel Salmona argues that the mechanisms described for the victims also operate for some aggressors: the persecutor also experiences trauma inducing symptoms such as, for instance, sideration, dissociation, or traumatic memory.[89] The aggressor has the memory of the violence they inflicted, but that does not cause them any problem.

[89] On traumatic memory, see https://www.memoiretraumatique.org/; and Salmona. "Dissociation traumatique et troubles de la personnalité post-traumatiques."

They wanted to be violent. But they have the traumatic memory of the victim's terror, and they cannot stand it because it makes them feel like the victim, it puts them in the position of victim. Therefore, both the aggressor and the victim try to avoid dealing with traumatic memory and to anaesthetise it. The victim does it to escape their suffering, the aggressor does it to escape discomfort linked to the victim's traumatic memory inside them. The huge stress created by violence, even for the person who inflicts it, disjuncts the brain to disconnect emotions (Pudlowski, "Ou Peut-être une Nuit: Le Monde Que Construit l'Inceste"). It can involve the total rejection and denial of responsibility and guilt by the persecutors, or on the contrary it can trigger the need to talk about it in order to process it.

In *bash*, the traumatic memories of the younger victims are lessened because emma and billie were not manifesting terror—emma's cries and yelps were muffled, and billie did not have time to realise what was happening to him. On the other hand, the description of chet's beating is longer and more detailed, it is more vivid. Nevertheless, all three criminals feel the need to tell their crimes, to minimise the victims in their stories in order to minimise the risk of feeling hurt or sorry; in order not to take the risk of feeling like the victim.

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The contagion of violence developed in *bash* is not without reminding Antonin Artaud's theories. In *The Theatre and its Double*, Antonin Artaud develops a reflexion on theatre, more precisely on the powers of theatre, on its necessity and on its own existence. A whole chapter is devoted to comparing theatre and the plague. In this analogy, the plague is first described at length: its effects or symptoms, its appearance in dreams or the subconscious through prejudices, and how it affected society. Antonin Artaud then explains how it is linked to theatre, how both theatre and the plague have been seen on the same level, that of an epidemy. In *bash*, Artaud's theory is confirmed as violence spreads like an epidemy on the stage.

In theatre, fury is a moving force that gets transferred. The fury of the assassin is only a passing stage, but that of the tragic actor stays in a pure and closed circle. The reason for that difference is that the assassin's fury is discharged in the accomplishment of the action, the fury then loses touch with the initial force that was leading his action and stops nourishing it. Instead, it takes the shape of the actor, who negates themselves as the force is relished and becomes one with universality. In other words, the fury is like an animated force that can move from character to action, and parallelly from actor to universality. In *bash*, this force was depicted in *a gaggle of saints* during chet's beating as everyone punches and kicks him, and after, when tim is offering a eulogy and everyone starts giggling and leaves "whooping it up like indians" (*bash* 64).

Artaud cites Augustine of Hippo in *The City of God*, in which the author explains that theatre is even more pernicious and dangerous than natural diseases because it does not attack the body but the mores. Artaud partly agrees, notably in the idea that both the plague and theatre are a communicative delirium.[90] Once again, the most evident example of this communicative delirium, in *bash*, occurs at chet's beating in *a gaggle of saints*. But it is also illustrated, to a lesser extent, in *iphigenia in orem*, where the joke of the young man's co-worker took great proportions. The initial joke already carried a form of violence: from trying to instil a hint of uncertainty, doubt, and anxiety in the young man, it spread to the young man's harassing his female co-worker, and ultimately killing his daughter emma.

Artaud insists on the fact that theatre has an intrinsic quality, like the plague, that is both victorious and vengeful. Both theatre and the plague take the mind back to the source of its conflicts. If theatre is like the plague, it is not because it is contagious, but because it is a form of revelation, of bringing forward and outward a deep layer of latent cruelty through which all the perverse possibilities of the mind locate themselves on an individual or on a people. On this matter, LaBute's use of violence also invites the contagious aspect of plague into theatre. Theatre is the image of a carnage, of an essential separation. It unties conflicts, liberates forces, triggers possibilities, and if those possibilities and those forces are black, it is not because of the plague or because of theatre, but because of life. The contemporary world depicted in *bash* through the protagonists' cruel words is particularly bleak, and the characters' choices are definitely black—egoistic, individualistic, capitalist, hateful. In other words, theatre and the plague reveal the dark nature of life. Theatre is an evil because it is the supreme equilibrium that cannot happen without destruction. In the end, both the plague and theatre have a positive impact on society, for their action forces people to take a step back and see themselves as they are, it unmasks hypocrisy, shakes off the lethargy of the body and invites to reconnect with senses, and it reveals to collectives their dark power, inviting everyone to adopt a nobler and more heroic attitude.

ii. Violence as an Unstable Foundation for Society

As seen above, violence is at the base of almost all social and political relationships in *bash*. In *iphigenia in orem*, the friendship between the young man and his colleague is maintained although it is because of this colleague's joke that the young man thought that his position at the firm was in danger ("yeah, he'd gotten me, alright, he got me good, just like in the old days" *bash* 28)—this "joke" may even have revived their friendship. The office environment, instead of building

[90] Originally: "Il importe avant tout d'admettre que comme la peste, le jeu théâtral soit un délire et qu'il soit communicatif."

relationships of comradery and kindness between colleagues, was resting on individual competition and on a fixed patriarchal hierarchy. This competitive logic nourishes different forms of violence and oppression that ultimately lead to the implosion of violence between the men and the women in the workplace, exemplified with the fight between the young man and his female co-worker who finally lost her job. In *a gaggle of saints*, the friendship between the different members of the group is born from their complicity in chet's murder—chet is unconscious on the bathroom floor after being lynched by the group:

> and it's silence, not a sound, and for the first time, we look over at dave. us together, tim, myself, that's one thing, it's unspoken, our bond, but we don't know david. don't really know him… what's he thinking? and right then, as if to answer us through revelation...he grabs up the nearest trash can, big wire mesh thing, raises it above his head as he whispers, "fag." (*bash* 63)

In *a gaggle of saints*, the function of looks as "appearance" and as "gaze" is crucial. In this extract, it is the incredulous look of expectancy given by the group that is already constituted and so solid that it does not need conjunctions "us together, tim, myself," it is that look that substitutes for words. Actions replace speech and violence becomes communication. Dave's action is also given a form of sacredness, it becomes a "revelation," and the trash can lifted up suddenly takes a religious connotation. The combination of dave's gesture with his utterance of the monosyllabic insult, justifying violence just after a solemn silence and before a mock-eulogy, marks dave's entry into the cult of violence. Their micro-society is born from and based on violence, and it reflects the way that john, tim, and david see society in general: as a union of similar men relying on hatred towards a category of individuals that they consider like a menace towards their vision of the world, a scapegoat.

Violence is also at the heart of love relationships—between john and sue, for instance, it is overt. Their romantic relationship is entirely based on violence and desire fuelled by violence, and on john's social domination as an alpha male, a position asserted by violence when john beats sue's ex-boyfriend in front of her (*bash* 49) or when john beats chet in front of his group of male friends (*bash* 63). There again, it puts violence at the heart of politics—as George Steiner wrote, "Marriage is a dynastic form of expansion or political alliance" (Steiner, *La Mort de la Tragédie* 70).[91] *A gaggle of*

[91] Originally: "Le mariage est une forme d'expansion dynastique ou d'alliance politique," and also a bit further: "Le mot 'civilité' contient tout ce que sa racine implique de social et de politique. Quand il devient civil, l'amour, qui est strictement une circonstance de la vie privée, devient public et faux. La civilité est une vertu de l'esprit et non du cœur." (75).

saints starts on the story of a big gathering with friends, a "big bash" (*bash* 35), and ends on the promise of a future marriage between john and sue (*bash* 69), supposedly sealing a political union of two individuals sharing the same vision of the world. John and sue already share the same religion, Mormonism, and they are both attracted to violence—sue is aroused by it, john feels compelled to use it to reassert his virility. Their union, despite their being apart on the stage during the play, is often reminded by sue: she is the one explaining that the Church gathering in New York coincided with their four-year anniversary with john (*bash* 44), and she is also the one who announces, almost in passing: "anyway, we are getting engaged this summer, for sure. did i tell you that?" (*bash* 69). Her dream relationship with john is always in the back of her mind, so much that she does not remember if she already mentioned their engagement or not. Throughout the play, john never remembers precisely the milestones marking out their relationship, or it is more anecdotical and then sue comments to add precisions (e.g. "JOHN. . . . wouldn't want to ruin her anniversary dress. SUE. four years… JOHN. huh? believe that? four…" *bash* 44-5). Their toxic game of being attracted by each other because of exterior elements such as social status, look, and a need for the recognition and approval of other people, coupled with their distance materialised on stage as they are sitting apart and as they are not listening to one another, reveals how unbalanced and unstable their relationship is.

In *medea redux*, the violence of the macrosystem in which the woman has lived her whole life led to her ostracization when she was a teenager. Her father was often absent or forgot her ("and my dad doesn't show. he doesn't show up. we go into the office, call his work, nothing at home, and he doesn't come." *bash* 83), she did not seem to have friends because she did not share the same interests with children of her age when she was thirteen (*bash* 82-3), and she was denied assistance and help when she got pregnant with billie (*bash* 89). The series of misfortunes that she suffered built her resentment towards society, and her desire for violence and revenge against her former teacher who is the main cause of her exclusion from society. In the end, society's violence thus turned against itself as the woman killed billie, depriving both society of a citizen and billie's parents of their child. Instead of building a stable community, violence actively participates in its destruction.

Finally, the union of the young man and deborah in *iphigenia in orem* is also maintained and endangered by violence. Indeed, the conception of joe apparently happened on the same day as emma's death, but the intertextual associations between joe and Orestes, deborah and Clytemnestra, and the young man and Agamemnon augur violence in the near future.

Violence thus initially has a structural logic, a function of gathering. Gathering through violence in myth/*polis*/family creates a community, but it is one of disorder, *ataxia*. Violence as a means of communication creates shallow grounds, shaky foundations on which to build community. Violence remains dangerous and problematic not just for the victims of violence, or for the community in which it is used, but also for the individuals perpetrating it: there are risks of becoming the scapegoat, of revealing weaknesses or reviving doubts about one's identity, and in the end, violence is detrimental for everyone in any political organisation. It is symptomatic of dysfunctionality and *adakia* (the woman's neologism from *ataxia*, disorder, and *adikia*, injustice).

3. Cycle of Violence, Embodying the Tragic Aporia

An aporia, from ancient Greek *aporia* (ἀπορία), is literally an impasse, that is to say a great difficulty or even an impossibility of passage. In tragedy, an aporia is a conundrum that presents itself as a problem that cannot be solved, and that always forebodes a tragic outcome. The paragon of tragic aporia could be Agamemnon's situation after hearing Calchas's prophecy. Agamemnon had offended the goddess Artemis, who in turn had released strong unfavourable winds. In order to appease her wrath so as to be able to sail to Troy with his army, Agamemnon was told by Calchas the seer that he had to sacrifice his daughter Iphigenia. When trying to find a compromise that would hurt neither his army, nor his family and the sacred laws attached to both, he could not. There was no good solution, nothing that could have avoided a tragedy, and Agamemnon sacrificed his daughter Iphigenia.

The paradoxes of the uses and consequences of violence in *bash* actually mirror and embody the tragic nature of violence. Thus doing, LaBute offers a reflection on violence but also, on a wider extent, on tragedy and on theatre. In the *bash* trilogy, the characters are strongly attached to the past. They look back on their past to explain their present situation on stage, but they also experience a need to testify, a pleasure in going into some details, an interest in manipulating narratives to accommodate them as they like. This perpetual backtracking can be interpreted as a form of nostalgia, a pain felt by the characters who manage neither to find a comfort that seems lost in a bygone past, nor to project themselves into a future that could give them the satisfaction they seek. There is also a mirroring process, from the characters to the audience, which is not exactly mimesis because of the distancing effect theorised by Brecht, but which affects the audience's experience of time as well. Indeed, the audience experiences a similar movement towards the past: they are retaining the events of the play, to then be able, later, to reinterpret some details in light of the knowledge acquired through the performance. In their stories, however, the protagonists try to conciliate their past, present, and future by creating paradoxical connections and associations between different elements which often turn out to be irreconcilable; so that regeneration cycles are initiated but often aborted prematurely. In fact, the violence which served as their driving force to remedy aporia situations is the cause of the tragic LaButian aporia. Indeed, the characters in *bash* only make aporetic situations worse by using violence, because violence subverts the initial configurations of aporias. In other words, although violence may be initially used as a means to solve a problem or an impasse, it escapes any control and becomes itself the principal object of the aporia in LaBute's plays. For instance, in *iphigenia in orem*, the young man's outlook on the problem that he is facing at work is biased—he does not know that his co-worker was playing a joke on him. By using violence (thus killing his daughter emma) to solve his work problem, the young man replaced an inexistent problem by creating a bigger problem:

the start of a cycle of violence. Violence escalates to reach an extreme point until all differences are levelled, annihilated—it is the crisis of Degree theorised by Girard. It ultimately leads to a trivialisation of violence in all aspects of the reality of *bash*.

a) The Attachment to the Past, and Going in Reverse

Nostalgia and theatre are intrinsically linked. Like Proust's madeleine, theatre has the power to make present what is absent, distant, and inaccessible. In LaBute's plays, for instance, the characters are remembering their victims on stage; without bringing them back to life, they are transmitting their memories to the audience, they are giving them a space on stage. In this regard, Marvin Carlson's book *The Haunted Stage, The Theatre as Memory Machine* shows how much intertextuality is present and important in theatre.[92] He refers to the idea of going to see a familiar play as "ghosting"—"ghosting presents the identical thing [the spectators] have encountered before, although now in a somewhat different context" (Carlson 7). According to him, it shows "the images of the dead continuing to work their power on the living, of the past reappearing unexpectedly and uncannily in the midst of the present" (Carlson 1). In LaBute's *bash*, this phenomenon is at the heart of the plays: the process of remembrance and of the irruption of the past into the present do not belong uniquely to the audience, but to the characters as well. This theory of "ghosting" is even more interesting in relation to the ideas of death, lingering, and traces of memories—which are, once again, paramount in *bash* as the characters do not feel guilt, and yet feel the irrepressible need to confess, as if the memories of their victims were, in a way, pushing them to do so. They are as stuck in a loop of violence, as they are in a temporal loop, doomed to repeat in their minds the events that they are unveiling on stage. As Carlson demonstrates later in his book, "[t]he simultaneous attraction and fear of the dead, the need continually to rehearse and renegotiate the relationship with memory and the past, is nowhere more specifically expressed in human culture than in theatrical performance" (Carlson 167). These three confessions are also a way for the characters to question their place in life and their relation to death.

But the audience is also inhabiting the experience of the performance (or of the reading), which is anchored in the present, so as to be able to remember it afterwards. In a sense, the audience is preparing a future backtracking, they are building a memory during the present time of the performance. It is even more the case with a play performed on stage as it is with a play which is read, because a theatre performance is never the same two nights in a row. Moreover, when the

[92] "Among all literary forms it is the drama pre-eminently that has always been centrally concerned not simply with the telling of stories but with the retelling of stories already known to its public" (Carlson 17).

audience goes to the theatre to attend a play, the memory of the play is not just the performance itself: it is the time before the performance starts, the mind-set the audience was in when they arrived, throughout the play and after it, the people with whom they came, the feeling of disconnection during the performance or on the contrary the enhanced awareness of being at the theatre. At the theatre, the performance cannot be paused, it is impossible to rewind or to read the same paragraph one more time, the performance is set in the present. The theatre is a shared art of the senses—impermanent, fleeting, but bringing people together in a shared experience of the present. Neil LaBute "loves the rehearsal process, the camaraderie, the give and take, the rewriting, the academic discussions about a word, a line, a reading" (Jordan). He said to Pat Jordan: "I'd build a set if I could. The theater is my way of communing with people" (ibid.). This repeated communion is made possible with the rehearsals, and with the performances of the plays. But today, *bash* is no longer played in theatres—or sporadically—and Neil LaBute is writing other projects; he cannot go back to the rehearsal process and the excitement of the first performances. Inevitably, nostalgia is the regret born from the impossibility to reach a familiar place, time, state; it is the impotence of those who seek an ideal. The audience, paying close attention to the whole performance and making the effort to remember it all, unknowingly prepares itself for the frustration of not being able to relive the events of first time they saw the play. Their memory is inevitably going to process the experience, to transform it slightly. Their judgement, especially, is going to change and alter their perception of the evening, the play, the characters.

In *bash*, there is a shift from the chorus to the audience through intertextuality and intermediality. In Greek tragedy, the Chorus commented, explained and summarised the action, took sides. LaBute's plays "are modern in the sense that they don't offer moral norms to their audiences, at least not within the texts themselves" (Wood 2). Thanks to LaBute's references to popular culture and classical literature, the audience's common cultural memory is solicited so that everyone is concerned and has to make their own reflection about the plays. The convocation of Greek mythology reinvested with contemporary cultural memory invokes once again the theme of nostalgia. Indeed, LaBute's "habits of belief" are not shared by his audience: his plays are notorious for never being unanimously well received by critics and audience. Pat Jordan writes that "LaBute's plays are, in fact, so provocative that some past audience members have walked out midplay or screamed out 'kill the playwright' or slapped an actor's face after a performance" (ibid.). But by tampering with Greek mythology and intentionally making it artificial, LaBute is making a comment on the death of shared habits of belief, of a common moral conscience, of human links between citizens: isn't showing it a way to bring it back?

Originally, Neil LaBute had written *a gaggle of saints* under the title *bash: a remembrance of hatred and longing* (1992) as a single play. He changed its title to *a gaggle of saints* when he wrote the two other short plays, rebranding the whole trilogy *bash: latterday plays* (1999). In 2001, after having been disfellowshipped by the Church of Latter-Day Saints, he made a few changes in the play to make the characters less Mormon, and the title became *bash: three plays* (2001). The original subtitle of *bash*, "remembrance of hatred and longing," underlines the protagonists' mind-sets for the whole plays. The prefix "re-" in "remembrance" is one of return, of going back over one's memory. It could also work in this case as the recreation of community, "re-member," trying to fit in as a member of the community by sharing the stories at the base of this community of hatred and longing. It recalls violence—"hatred"—and mimesis—"longing." It fits with the literal meaning of nostalgia, from the Ancient Greek *nostos* (νόστος), "a return home," and *algos* (ἄλγος), "pain, suffering"—a "remembrance of hatred and longing" is going back to violence and mimesis identified as a form of "home." The characters experience neither guilt nor redemption, but they still feel the need to go back on the details of their stories. The characters do not suffer from violence and hatred, they suffer from the lack of them and this is why they feel the urge to go back to them, to go back "home." The fact of returning to the crime scene, not literally but through the protagonists' narratives, can be associated with unresolved trauma, with an endless quest for validation, or even with an endless quest for a perfect community which is impossible to attain and which remains inexorably absent. This is illustrated by the last line of *a gaggle of saints*, which is delivered by sue describing john's whistling on their way back from New York: "this beautiful music as i was sleeping, like the sound of angels calling us home…" (*bash* 70). John and sue's relationship started when john beat sue's ex-boyfriend, and john's whistling is a reminder of chet's whistling just before he got assaulted. Hence the movement of homecoming finishes john and sue's story on a positive note, it brings them back to the place where it began: violence. This going back to the start reveals a lack of resolution and a lack of closure, an entrapment in the same cycle of endless violence.

All the testimonies that the plays constitute are re-collections, the characters remember their crimes and tell them to the audience; either through an absent character on stage, like in *iphigenia in orem*, or directly to the audience (or perhaps to a photographer) in *a gaggle of saints*, or to a recording device in *medea redux*. Remembrance calls in the question of truth; the criminals are the only ones able to recollect what happened because they are the only live witnesses left after they have assassinated or silenced their victims. The criminals are thus essential in the process of memory, because the victims, absent from the stage, are only present through language and through the voice of their killers. But nostalgia is also a way for the criminals to construct or re-construct their identities with regard to their pasts and their victims' pasts.

The audience is thus put in the position of trusting the account of a character who is not entirely reliable. The young man points it out himself: "another cliché, right? yeah, i'm full of 'em. or it, full of it, one of the two…can't be sure anymore" (*bash* 23)—he is transforming his story so much, telling different accounts of emma's death and twisting the truth, that he does no longer know what he is saying himself, or he is pretending not to know to confuse his audience even more. The omission of the subject in the sentence "can't be sure anymore" creates a confusion between the implied "I" and "you." In *a gaggle of saints*, john and sue keep repeating "did she mention that?" (*bash* 57) or "did i tell you that?" (*bash* 69), hinting that they are not sure of what they are saying, that they are not paying a lot of attention to each other and to themselves. Similarly, the woman of *medea redux* is forgetful on the one hand—she does not remember correctly the Greek word that describes a world "out of balance" (*bash* 93), but very attentive to her choice of words on the other hand. She pauses to philosophy about language:

> …it's interesting, you know, how things'll work out. well, not "out," i guess, not so much that as maybe just through, we probably don't have all that much to do with it. we like to think we do, though, right? god, like we're in on all the big planetary decisions and shit, you know? but, uh-uh…you wanna know what i feel, i think we're just spinning around out there, completely out 'a whack and no way of ever getting it right again, i mean, back on track or whatever.., just can't do it. see, we been doing things wrong for so long now that it all starts to feel okay after a while, you know, like this is how it oughta be. (*bash* 78)

It is interesting that the woman of *medea redux* is the character who pays the most attention to her phrasing, albeit her dropping out of school when she was young. She therefore did not receive the same education as the other characters of *bash*, and she still has a very colloquial way of speaking, with a much more informal and oral style: she makes elisions and contractions where the protagonists of the two preceding plays did not ("things'll work out," "wanna," "oughta," "out 'a"), she swears more ("shit," "god" used as an interjection), and in addition to gap-fillers used by all the protagonists of *bash* ("you know" is used three times just in this extract), she also uses the interjection "uh-uh" to indicate negation. However, she spends more time trying to find the correct phrasings and the correct words, showing that she pays attention to the way things are called, that she wants to access the most authentic level of reality. Here, for instance, she reflects on the verbal phrasing "work out" (in the sense of "how something ends"), comparing the connotations of the adverbs "out" and "through" in terms of level of implication of the people included in the process ("Work out"). According to her, in "things'll work out," it is implied that people play an active part in the outcome of the process

engaged, whereas with “through,” there is a higher plane which could be defined as the natural order of things, or course of events, that is not determined by humans but that determines human lives. It is the philosophical distinction between free will and determinism. For the woman, people have the illusion of free will but are in fact determined by higher, cosmic forces, “big planetary decisions” in which they play no part. According to her, men’s actions have altered the cosmic order and there is no way of fixing it—good and bad have no meaning in a world that is out of whack, unbalanced, and in which humans are just “spinning around.” The image of a circle is not gratuitous, it bears its importance in invoking the theme of nostalgia which is paramount in *bash*. At the end of *medea redux*, the woman finds the word that she was looking for at the very beginning of the play—it creates a form of analepsis, i.e. it makes the audience go back to the beginning of the play and encapsulates the whole play in a circular pattern. *Bash* thus engages a reflection on language, and it does so from the title of the trilogy and the titles of the plays.

Furthermore, as developed in the first part of this dissertation, the three plays of *bash* revive the intertextuality with ancient plays and myths from a contemporary American context. The characters go back on events that have already happened, but they also unknowingly go back on events that are anterior to their timelines. The title of the trilogy *bash* has a double connotation: a hit and a celebration. It suggests that violence is a form of joyful commemoration. The third play, *medea redux*, highlights this aspect even more: *redux* comes from the Latin *reducere* and means “brought back” (“Redux”). It suggests that the myth of Medea is envisioned as a closed loop that can be repeated with variations over time.

It also underlines the woman’s flawed quest for her flawed origins, for her young love story. As Mary English points it out, “the devotion of Young Woman [*sic*] in *medea redux* is rooted in her nostalgia for the type of love that possessed Medea” (Wood 32). In *medea redux*, the woman indeed speaks fondly of her young love for her former teacher, despite the facts that he was guilty of statutory rape with her, that he was guilty of adultery towards his wife, and that he abandoned her after he learned that she was pregnant with his child. The woman’s blind, relentless passion for her former teacher is due to the fact that, unlike the original Medea who was the niece of Circe and the granddaughter of Helios, she is not the progeny of gods, and therefore her passion cannot attain the same divine heights as Medea’s, but more importantly, it is due to the fact that the mythical passion that she so desperately tried to revive belongs to a time that is not hers. Here the woman is attached to a past that is a definitively closed chapter and it is her realisation of the impossibility to go back to it that pushed her to pursue her plan after seeing her former lover for the last time. What gave her an extra push is when she saw satisfaction in her former teacher’s eyes:

> it was in that second, as he leaned in to kiss my cheek, his head turned toward me and maybe it was just the light, the sun coming in the room, but i saw something there, there in his eyes…he loved this boy, all that shit he'd said to me years ago, it was true about kids. he loved'em. but also…he was satisfied, i could see that, satisfaction on his face…because he'd gotten away with it all. that's what i saw, shining in his eyes, as he moved forward to kiss me. he'd beaten fate…and gotten away with it. (BEAT) (*bash* 91-2)

The rhythm of the scene described and that of the woman's speech are parallel: the second that it took the woman to see what was in the teacher's eyes is echoed by the beat during which she remembers and analyses it at the police station. They are a dilated pause in time. The description of the scene is quite surprising. The setting is very romantic: the teacher was leaning in for a kiss on her cheek, the sunlight revealing a glimmer in his eyes, in which the woman saw a proof of sincerity, of genuine love for children. The woman is still charmed by her former teacher and lover, she feels nostalgic about their past attachment, but she is seeing something new that strengthens her will to come through with her plan. His look of satisfaction, of pleasure in having escaped consequences makes him the alter ego of the young man and john. The leitmotiv of fate, which is also present in *iphigenia in orem* under the guise of justification for the young man's own choice, is represented here as an opponent for the teacher. He had to fight and beat fate seen as the normal course of events that should have made him take responsibility; and he is proud of it. This discrepancy between the woman's longing for the past and her hatred of the present is what pushes the trigger to execute her plan.

In *a gaggle of saints*, nostalgia is visible through the binary and outdated images of masculinity and femininity embodied by john and sue. Sue's focus on the evening is very romanticised, she recalls the beauty of her dress and of john's tuxedo, their dance together, how she fell asleep with the other girls at the end of the evening. On the contrary, john's focus on the violence and brutality of his male friends and him are recalled as if their action had been heroic and masculine. In the same way, the reminiscence of how john and sue met when john beat sue's ex-boyfriend on the running track is valorised as a good memory, as a good time. The couple's obsession about their physical and social appearance is symptomatic of a form of consumerist mimesis which is fuelled by nostalgia. John and sue do not feel nostalgic about the past themselves, but they are buying into a capitalist system relying on positive connotations attached to nostalgia.[93] Nostalgia and violence are

[93] See Koenig, *Theater's Nostalgic Connection: Nostalgia's Impact on the Entertainment Industry and Strategies to Solve an Age-Old Problem*, in particular the section "Nostalgia and the Consumer" on page 15.

best represented in a mnemonic object: chet's ring offered to sue as an engagement ring. The ring plays a memento role for john, bridging the gap between violence and love, between past and future, in the symbolic shape of a closed circle.

In *iphigenia in orem*, the young man is more nostalgic for his former office position at the office than he is of his family life ("i took the risk, this calculated risk for my family that this whole episode would play out in our favor, give me that little edge at work and maybe things'd be okay, or they'd change their minds because of, you know…" *bash* 27). There is also, in this form of nostalgia that prevails in *bash*, the notion of a misguided quest for closure, for completeness. The young man, on the one hand, says that he took a "calculated risk," that is to say that he took that risk knowingly, with a precise objective in mind, without gambling with important aspects of the equation, with an estimation of the outcome that did not leave great space for doubt. But on the other hand, it is immediately contradicted by the introduction of the young man's expectations: "maybe things'd be okay, or maybe they'd change their minds because of, you know…" The adverb "maybe" first introduces doubt and uncertainty, which are then reinforced by the imprecision of the noun "things" and of the predicative adverb "okay." The alternative with "or" and the incomplete sentence suggest either the possibility of other outcomes, or the ellipsis of "emma's death" replaced with "you know." The incompleteness and lack of clarity of his sentence also reveal that his quest for closure is flawed. In any case, the young man took a great risk more than a calculated one, and he is playing down the facts.

However, the young man feels nostalgic about a time before him and deb had children. After the police officer asked the young man if he had checked on emma during her nap and he answered in the negative (*bash* 18), deb took her husband's hand in hers and did not let go throughout the whole afternoon and evening ("deb holding my hand under the table the whole time, all through the silence…" *bash* 19). The young man had to "pry deborah's fingers off of [his]" (ibid.) to answer the late police call telling him that they had ruled natural causes for emma's death, and after hanging up he held her hand again:

> putting my hand back in place and squeezing her fingers a bit. but it woke her. she woke up and we whispered to each other… talking under the sheets like two schoolchildren, about things we hadn't mentioned in years! . . . anyhow, the talking must've gone on for hours, a few at least and then the kisses and finally…well, you're not that drunk, you don't need to hear it all. we did what you'd imagine you might do on a night like that, a moment when your entire universe has been changed forever. (BEAT) (*bash* 20-1)

Nostalgia dominates this scene. There is a regressive quality in the happiness of a late-night pillow talk ("like two schoolchildren"). The young man and Deborah are not accustomed to this and the exclamation of the young man expresses the joy he felt during this intimate moment ("things we hadn't mentioned in years!"). It also reveals that the couple does not share a lot of intimate moments, that they do not talk regularly to each other about private matters. The young man feels pleasure and relief in that moment, something that he is recreating when revealing his crime to a stranger in a hotel. He does not give any detail about what exactly deb and him talked about before they had sex, but what is most surprising and quite disturbing is the fact that the young man expects his audience to have guessed that they made love on the same day and in the same bed on which his daughter died.

There is a metatheatrical reflection at play in revisiting a play and bringing it back to stage, bringing it back to life. George Steiner explains in *The Death of Tragedy*:

> The ancient is not a glove into which the modern can slip at will. The mythology of Greek drama was the expression of a complete and traditional image of life. The poet could achieve with his audience an immediate contact of terror or delight because both shared the same habits of belief. When these habits are no longer current, the corresponding mythology goes dead or spurious. (329)

Bash is a revival of tragedy because the myths used are still famous enough, they are still commonly known and the references through the titles are obvious enough for the audience to recognise them. The imagery that is convoked is still relevant to the audience even if it is very ancient. Furthermore, despite the differences between the characters and the audience (as explained in the second part of this dissertation), both the characters of *bash* and the audience share a common cultural reference frame which is made evident when the characters make references to TV shows (e.g. *Dragnet* in *iphigenia in orem*, *bash* 19), to the Bible or a famous Shakespearean play (*Romeo and Juliet* in *a gaggle of saints*, *bash* 60), to car brand names ("nice new scirroco" in *a gaggle of saints*, *bash* 47), etc. Consequently, LaBute's reuse of ancient myths is more than slipping into a glove, it is rebranding said glove to reignite it.

b) Paradoxical Connections, Failed Regenerations

The paradoxical connections, between different times, elements, or images, serve an attempt at initiating a regeneration, to break the cycle which the characters are stuck in and in which violence thrives. The nostalgic movement towards the past, while showing a connection to the present seen as the consequences of the past, also reveals a fear of the future.

For instance, there are implicit references to Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* (1991) especially in *a gaggle of saints*. *Angels in America* is an award-winning two-part play by Tony Kushner; the first part premiered at the Eureka (California) in 1991, and the entire play went to Broadway in 1993. It explores the epidemy of AIDS in 1980s New York in the gay Jewish, Mormon and WASP communities, and the association of HIV with homosexuality (especially male homosexuality) that worsened the general homophobic atmosphere. Associated with fears triggered by the approaching Millennium, it created a climate of terror and hate towards the gays. To reflect this fear of the Millennium, in *bash* (published in 1999, so only one year before 2000), the young woman admits her concern: "i worry about what's gonna happen, i mean, to me and all, i do—'s natural, though, right, to wonder about things" (*bash* 93) and all the characters share a form of nostalgia that denotes a fear of the future. It is made even more ominous in *iphigenia in orem* thanks to the intertextual associations between characters: the young man (Agamemnon) is probably going to be killed by his wife deb (Clytemnestra), who is in turn going to be assassinated by their son joe (Orestes). In *Angels in America*, an angel visits Prior, one of the main characters suffering from AIDS, in delirious and apocalyptic visions about the upcoming Millennium. Angels are very important in Mormon beliefs—the Angel Moroni is the one who appeared to Joseph Smith (the founder of the LDS Church) to tell him where were the golden plates which, once translated, would become the Book of Mormon ("Introduction - Book of Mormon").

At the end of *a gaggle of saints*, as john and sue remember their journey back to Boston, sue describes the tune that john was softly whistling as she was sleeping and compares it with a call from angels:

> JOHN. . . . and you know, i started whistling to myself, i did…
> SUE. i was sleeping, asleep there on john's arm, but i'd swear i could hear music…
> JOHN. not loud, i mean, don't even recall the tune. but i was whistling, i was. that much i remember…

SUE. this beautiful music as i was sleeping, like the sound of angels calling us home… (*bash* 69-70)

John was casually whistling, seemingly not paying much attention to it, and sue was half-asleep. John does not "recall the tune" but he remembers he was whistling and to stress that last fact, he uses an emphatic structure inverting the syntactical order of the sentence by putting the direct object "that much" before the subject and verb "i remember." Memory is a big part of *bash*, and the memory of john's whistling is also his memory of chet's whistling on his way to the public bathroom and to his bashing the night before. It is a tune that encapsulates the past violence, revives it and celebrates it. Sue finds this music "beautiful," "like the sound of angels calling us home." The simile implies that john and sue are called home by the angels as if john and sue were angels or saints themselves. Indeed, sue does not say "the sound of angels telling us to go home," but the call is made from home by angels for john and sue to join them there. Sue sees their couple as harmonious, holy, heavenly, and deserving to live amongst angels. But it is also sue who finds the sight of blood exciting: "in a weird way, though, it excited me. the blood" (when john pricks his finger with a pin, *bash* 44). Even though she remains unaware of the events of the previous night, it is implied that the reason why she enjoys john's whistling so much is because it is full of violence. This last sentence said by sue is incidentally the last sentence of the play, going back instead of going forward. Their home represents the violence of the past and it is reassuring for them.

The title of *a gaggle of saints* is first and foremost an allusion to the Church of Latter-day Saints—john and his friends are a group of unholy saints because they are affiliated to the Mormon Church but they do not follow Mormon ethics. But there are some implicit references to Tony Kushner's play. The scene of chet's bashing is set in Central Park, and *Angels in America* is also set in New York. The latter also tackles homosexuality and homophobia, especially with the character of Roy who is sexually attracted to men but has internalised homophobia so much that he refuses to acknowledge it, even to his doctor who diagnoses him with AIDS, and he feels the need to publicly slur homosexuals to establish his "clout"—Roy is a prominent lawyer.[94] John and Roy are similar in this regard, because as previously showed, john's homophobia is a way for him to fit in a masculine environment, to prove to his peers that he is virile as opposed to homosexuals. It is a way to achieve success.

[94] See *Angels in America*, Act One, Scene 9.

In *bash*, there are paradoxical connections made through symbols and leitmotivs. They sometimes denote the passage into another world or back into an anterior state, and they translate different stages of violence.

An easy example of paradox central to the three plays is the absent presences on stage of the characters central to the plot, the three obvious victims: emma, chet and billie. Unlike the young man or the woman, they are named, but they remain shut out.[95] It also reveals and symbolises the impossibility for women and queer people to fit in a heteronormative, patriarchal and capitalistic world. LaBute plays a lot on paradoxes and he explained in an interview with Rosalynde Welch, when talking about his choice of depicting Mormons:

> I wanted to juxtapose people who, ironically, the world would look at and say, "We think of them as good people, in a broad way, we think of them as good, church-going folk." The point was not that they were also blood-thirsty killers, but that going to church, and having a testimony—or being around those who do—is not insurance against having choices appear in your life that cause you to go the wrong way, to falter or even to fall.

The very strict Mormon rules were a great way for LaBute to create a sharp contrast with the completely unethical and inhumane morals of his characters. Neil LaBute, in the same interview, further explains that "great good can come from showing the bad"—by good, he means "awareness, principally":

> I do think that you have quite a forum on the stage or screen: you're concentrating people on looking at something, and you can influence them in a certain way. You are being instructive, hopefully. You're saying, "Don't look at just what they do, but look at what's behind it." Does the story focus this in such a way that bad behavior leads to something beneficial, a good way of life, happiness?
> As a viewer, I don't shy away from something tragic or challenging or questionable, because I continue to be curious. That curiosity has ultimately led me in positive directions.

Neil LaBute confirms that his drama is moralistic in the way that it can be "instructive, hopefully" and that it kindles curiosity. However, it has to be stressed that the morals of LaBute's plays are neither given to the audience as if they were a logic consequence of the plots, nor are they

[95] For an analysis of present absences in theatre and their relation to gender power, see Gruber, "Theatres of Absence."

set in stone—they have to be interpreted. Neil LaBute offers a reflexive space to the audience for them to interpret in their own ways the teachings that resonate with their lives.

*

Other elements in the plays highlight almost subliminal links between concepts that seem, at first glance, to be opposed. It is up to the audience to detect them. For instance, the symbol of water, especially (but not exclusively) in *medea redux*, is representative of paradoxical relations between life and death, love and violence, Eros and Thanatos, between Billie Holiday's Stormy Weather and the electricity in billie's bath when the record player hits the water. The treatment of the water imagery, in *bash*, is revealing in this regard: it is fundamentally ironic and ambivalent in the reunion of the cleansing or maternal water on the one hand, and deadly water on the other.

In *iphigenia in orem*, the smothering of emma under a blanket can metaphorically represent a return to the maternal womb. The passage to a symbolic realm is announced by the young man talking about the "edge of the carpet" when pausing as he entered the bedroom (*bash* 26). Emma's father killing her is like her drowning in amniotic fluid: it is the opposite of what is expected, supposed to happen, of what is natural. Her father should have nurtured her and helped her grow instead of killing her. The movement down the cover can also recall the katabasis, a descent to the underworld. Death itself can be linked to water, as in Greek and Roman mythology, the dead had to cross the river Styx on Charon's boat.

These connections to water can be read under the light of Bachelard's analysis of the symbolisms of water. Gaston Bachelard wrote a book of literary aesthetics offering a psychoanalysis of water—*L'Eau et les Rêves: Essai sur l'imagination de la matière*. Dreams are notoriously known to be a godsend for psychoanalysis thanks to the myriad of symbols that they contain. Dreams are made of memories; and the memories of murders are also full of symbols. Among the many symbols contained in *bash*, water is very present. Water is a mysterious element that underlines the unity and multiplicity of mythological symbols, the chaotic symbiosis between the sky and the earth, between the humans and the fish, it symbolises the world turned upside down.

In *medea redux*, the symbolism of water is omnipresent in an extended metaphor made of associations and comparisons. It anchors the plot in cosmos and chaos (*ataxia*); the leitmotiv of water works as a tether. As Bachelard explains, "water really is the transitory element. It is the essential

ontological metaphor between fire and earth" (Bachelard 8).[96] It calls for more intertextual links at the heart of the play, with the other plays of the trilogy, with Euripides' plays and with the mythical world they were set in, and it reactivates the links with other literary and cinematographic works as well as with "popular culture" with TV shows.

Within the play, water recurs many times. From the start, the props of the "water carafe and cup on the table" (*bash* 77) set the theme. They are used at crucial moments of the woman's testimony: after describing her first kiss with her former teacher (*bash* 84-85), she "takes a sip of water. she fiddles again with the edge of the water cup but doesn't drink" (*bash* 85) as she is remembering the feeling of his kiss. Later, she pauses once more to drink: "i just need a little water… [she pours a touch more into her cup and sips]" (*bash* 88) just before explaining the moment when she murdered billie. In other words, water is needed when talking about love (Eros) and death (Thanatos).

In her deposition, the woman recalls a school trip they took to Chicago when she was about thirteen. She explains how they took a break to admire a lake:

> we went there, maybe twenty-five or so of us, the school bus, and i remember we were going along that one road, runs past the lake up there… god, that was beautiful! he looked back, my teacher did, sitting up by the driver, and saw all of us kids smashed up against our windows and staring out, every one of us with our eyes glued to that water! so, he had the driver pull off at an exit and we got, maybe, fifteen minutes or so to run around the beach…this was november…chase each other, throw rocks, whatever, but all i did was stand there, stand down by the edge of the surf and watch the waves coming in. there in my little red windbreaker, and i dunno, i felt like an astronaut. or a kind a' time explorer, maybe, some scout or something, sent on ahead, down to earth to see just what the fuck all the fuss's about…and taking it all for the first time. you know? i still remember that.'s kind'a like that moment in that one movie, with all the monkeys and that one guy, he does those commercials for…*planet of the apes*, that's the one. it's like that, remember, when he rides down the beach and realizes that he's home after all, and there's no going back, and he's screaming and everything, pounding his fist up at the sky, but he's still sort'a caught up in it all, too, like, taken in by the awesomeness of what he's seen…i mean, it was better than that, i thought, maybe just because of my age at the time, it was better, but it reminded me of that a little, it did… (*bash* 79-80)

[96] Originally, "L'eau est vraiment l'élément transitoire. Il est la métaphore ontologique essentielle entre le feu et la terre."

The water exercises a form of fascination on the kids who are physically attracted towards it, "smashed up against [their] windows" and their "eyes glued to the water." It is as if it had magical powers. Paul Claudel, in *L'Oiseau noir dans le Soleil levant*, writes "water is thus the eye of the earth, its device to watch *time*…" (Bachelard 45).[97] The imagery of the eye associated with water is very eloquent in the extracts of *medea redux* analysed here. The roundness of the earth, its rotating movement and the evocation of memories on which time has taken its toll are essential in the cosmic reflections of the woman.

When the bus stops, the woman is feeling "like an astronaut," already estranged from the other kids, isolating herself from them while they play around the lake slightly above her and "chase each other, throw rocks, whatever." She is standing by the water on her own, more precisely "down by the edge of the surf," ready to tip into another dimension. This moment that she remembers vividly is proleptic of her relationship with water as an element that she uses to reflect on her life and on the universe, like an astronaut from space, a time explorer or scout from another planet or galaxy sent on an expedition to investigate the earth and contemplating both the waterscape and herself. The water reflects the infinity of the universe, with waves embodying its disorder and chaos, and she is both outside and at the centre of it. Bachelard explains that water is like a mirror, it is the element of narcissism. He develops a part on lakes: "The lake is a tranquil big eye. The lake absorbs all the light. Through it, already, the world is contemplated, the world is represented. It too can say: the world is my representation" (Bachelard 41).[98] As the children had their "eyes glued to the water", the eyes being aqueous organs themselves, there is a mirroring effect at play. Reciprocally, "the cosmos is thus somehow narcissistic" (Bachelard 42), because it reflects itself in the water.[99] This process is reciprocal and imbricated, "individual narcissism gradually frames itself in a true cosmic narcissism" (Bachelard 16).[100] The woman compares that moment of revelation when she was by the lake with the end of *Planet of the Apes* (1968), when Taylor realises to his great despair and rage that the planet of the apes is actually the earth after a nuclear war that annihilated the human race—the climactic end of the film is, in her opinion, not as full of emotions as what she experienced by the edge of the lake.[101] More than this, she claims that Taylor is also in awe when discovering the planet of the apes. "Awesomeness" is ambiguous, awe is "an emotion variously combining dread, veneration, and

[97] Originally, in *L'Oiseau noir dans le Soleil levant* by Paul Claudel, it says: "l'eau ainsi est le regard de la terre, son appareil à regarder le *temps*..." (Claudel 229), quoted in Bachelard on p. 45.

[98] Originally, "Le lac est un grand œil tranquille. Le lac prend toute la lumière. Par lui, déjà, le monde est contemplé, le monde est représenté. Lui aussi peut dire: le monde est ma représentation."

[99] Originally, "Le cosmos est donc bien en quelque manière touché de narcissisme."

[100] Originally, "le narcissisme individuel s'encadre peu à peu dans un véritable narcissisme cosmique"

[101] *Planet of the Apes* is a 1968 American science fiction film directed by Franklin J. Schaffner and loosely based on the 1963 French novel *La Planète des Singes* by Pierre Boulle. In the film, astronauts are time-travelling and they crash on a strange planet in the future. They discover a society ruled by apes with human-like intelligence and speech, and in which humans are mute and treated like vermin by the apes. It is only at the end of the film that the astronaut crew realises that the strange planet is in fact earth after a terrible war has devastated it.

wonder that is inspired by authority or by the sacred or sublime" ("Awe"), implying that both Taylor and her find that terror and horror have a fascinating aspect. The use of water to reflect her situation is a way to show its ambivalent and complex character—"there needs to be a *double participation*—participation of desire and fear, participation of good and bad, tranquil participation of white and black—for the *material element* to capture the soul entirely" (Bachelard 17).[102]

It is on another school trip two months later, to a maritime centre, that her teacher sexually approached—one could say abused—her for the first time:

> you know what's funny? he hit on me, my teacher did, on one of those trips, yeah. not on that one, this was at the maritime center a couple months later…scared the shit out'a me! i didn't even know what he was doing at first—i mean, okay, i did, but i was, like, thirteen—and that's just not what you're expecting at that age. well, maybe it never is…he came up behind me at the observation tank, right, where they've got the sharks and everything, see . . . and the shark tank has its dark room connected to it so that you can stand there and see without a glare through all over the windows, and some kids were sort'a scared—but i was always interested in sharks and all that, i was. you know, you have to pick a vocation in seventh grade, they make you do that in junior high, on this "career day," right? and i chose "marine biologist." i did. out'a all the other kinds of things they had there, i picked that one, 'cause i love the water, always have…so, my teacher said it'd be okay if i stayed and watched, we'd catch up later…(BEAT) well, i'm keeping my eye on this one big hammerhead, that's a species of shark—you probably knew that—and he's darting in real close to the glass, this hammerhead is…suddenly, i feel all this weight up against me. my teacher is pushing me forward with his body, up onto the observation windows, and i can't move. he never said anything while it was happening, i mean, to me—i could hear him whispering something about "the tragic nobility of sea creatures," some shit like that—and all i can see, i can't turn at all, the way he's got me held there, all i can see is this shark, the one i'd been watching, coming out of the murk and sweeping past me, again and again…and it's not 'till he's right on top of me, and turned each time, that i can see his eye. he turns past the glass at the last second and his eye sort's rolls back all white as he passes…fuck, that was scary, i've never forgotten it. that feeling, his weight on me, and watching as that hammerhead just kept circling around…(BEAT) well, what the hell, it's easy to scare a kid. right?" (*bash* 80-82)

[102] Originally: "Il faut donc qu'il y ait *double participation* – participation du désir et de la crainte, participation du bien et du mal, participation tranquille du blanc et du noir – pour que l'*élément matériel* attache l'âme entière."

This long extract is very rich in recurring symbols. Violence is associated with the image of water and the sea world. The woman brings the world of human social interactions down to aquatic animals (fish and sharks), using the logic of the food chain and the violence of nature. Before starting the story, she says: "you know what's funny? he hit on me, my teacher." "Funny" here does not mean amusing here, it means strange, odd, unexpected ("that's just not what you're expecting at that age"). The violence is present from the verbal phrase "hit on," showing that there was violence in the process of seduction. This is the only time when the woman does not describe her relationship with her teacher with fondness and adoration, and it is also the only time that she feels their age difference. The start of their relationship was not romantic but scary ("scared the shit out'a me!," "fuck, that was scary," "it's easy to scare a kid, right?"), and the woman makes an ambiguous comment after saying that what happened was not what she was expecting: "well, maybe it never is…"—it could either say that love appears when least expected, or that the violence and impulsivity of men towards vulnerable people always happens when least expected.

The teacher is abusing his position of power on the woman and establishing his authority in all respects: he is older, he is a figure of authority because he is her teacher, he is positioned behind her, the room is dark, he weighs more than her and is stronger ("all this weight," "i can't move," "i can't turn at all," "the way he's got me held there"), and he made sure not to say anything that could have been held against him. After this assault, he did not approach the woman for weeks. He was probably making sure that she would not say anything to anyone before getting closer to her. By not addressing her as he was "up against" her in the maritime centre, he made her feel even smaller ("he never said anything while it was happening, i mean, to me"). He was muttering something about "the tragic nobility of sea creatures," which does not mean anything in itself, but it introduces the theme of tragedy, and gives to their relationship its tragic colouring from the start, especially as the hammerhead and the teacher are both identified as predators darting in on the woman. Even though she is "interested in sharks and all that," the room remains an aquarium tank full of predators and she did not enjoy this experience at all. Once again, she was isolated from the other children who had gone to a side room with another teacher. The hammerhead, whose name reflects that its head looks like a weapon, embodies violence. This is probably why the woman was "keeping [her] eye" on it, and it was while she was watching it and devoting all her attention to it that the teacher took advantage to push her against the window. "He's darting in real close to the glass, this hammerhead it…"—there an ambiguity regarding the signified of the pronoun "he," because as it is postpositive, it could have been the teacher instead of the shark. The description of the shark "circling around" in the tank enforces the woman's feeling of entrapment and of danger all around her, making her the centre of

the target at which the darting shark and teacher are aiming. The importance of this motif and of that of gaze is highlighted here, with the shark's eye that the woman can only see when he is turning.

For her fourteenth birthday ("in march, i'm a pisces…'the fish.' how 'bout that?" *bash* 85), her teacher drove her to a lake in Chicago—probably Lake Michigan—where he had rented a boat for them (*bash* 86). The boat could be a reference to the Argo on which Jason and Medea fled after getting the Golden Fleece. Bachelard compares the romantic boat with a cradle (Bachelard 178).[103] Inviting the theme of maternity here foreshadows billie's conception. Indeed, there is "almost always a feminine character attributed to water" (Bachelard 20) and "water . . . is a superlative, a sort of substance of substance, a mother substance" (Bachelard 64), so that water is very often associated with femininity, the feminine natural cycle, and motherhood.[104, 105]

After learning that the woman is pregnant, the teacher makes her swear not to say anything about who the father is and he says to her that he has to go to Delphi university to finish one of his degrees (*bash* 88). The ancient Greeks considered the centre of the world to be in Delphi, marked by the stone monument known as the omphalos (which means navel). The teacher going to Delphi to flee his responsibility is a selfish, egocentric act highlighted by the topology of his destination.

Finally, water is of course present during the scene of billie's death:

> billie was already in the bathroom, we'd driven straight through, and i could hear the water running. he was in his bath. god, he loved the tub! since he was tiny, he loved it. so, i knew he was in there, the water filling up around him, and "lady day"—'s what he liked to call billie holiday, 's her nickname, and he called her that—playing on his tape player. "stormy weather." (*bash* 92)

Like his mother, billie loves water. "The water filling up around him" embraces him, comforts him like a mother. Water is associated with milk, a nourishing mother. There are positive connotations given to water and liquid elements that recall the motherly milk, the amniotic fluid, to which we subjectively associate tepidness and softness. The woman gave birth to billie and is about to take his life back. Water is supposed to be maternal and feminine, a cradling element.

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[103] Originally, "la barque romantique est, à certains égards, un berceau reconquis"

[104] The first quotation originally reads: "caractère presque toujours féminin attribué à l'eau"

[105] The second quotation originally reads: "L'*eau* . . . est un superlatif, une sorte de substance de substance, une substance mère."

Billie's death is both Heraclitan—water is still running from the tap—and immobile in the tub—standing water is the symbol of deep sleep. Bachelard writes that "each of the elements has its own dissolution; earth has its dirt, fire its smoke. Water dissolves more completely. It helps us die totally" (Bachelard 125).[106] So water is both representative of life as its indispensable substance, and of death as the means to dissolve life completely. The vision of water as regenerating is thus ironically presented as an appalling kind of delusion—a form of perversion even.

Water is also ambiguous with respect to its gender. As said earlier, water is an element perceived as essentially feminine. What changes its perception, according to Bachelard, is the irruption of violence:

> First, in its violence, water takes on a specific anger or, in other words, water easily receives all the psychological characters of a *type of anger*. This anger, men quite quickly boast about defeating it. Hence violent water soon is water that we assault. A duel of meanness starts between man and the waves. The water holds a grudge, changes sex. By becoming mean, it becomes masculine. Here is, on a new mode, the conquest of a duality inscribed in the element, new sign of the original value of an element from the material imagination! (Bachelard 21)[107]

Similar to the woman's violence, violent water is here placid, resolutely calm, and it is this static appearance that renders it even more terrible, implacable.

The woman killing her son in the water is also a way for her to get her head out of the water—she crosses the frontier from victim to perpetrator by tasting the pleasures of power and aggression. It is a form of reversed cathartic power, an attempt at liberating herself from the constraints of the heteropatriarchal world that she is living in (Bienaimé).

In all three plays, all means used to break away from the vicious circle of violence—speaking about it, blaming others, justifying the unjustifiable, or using more violence—have obviously failed, and the characters subsequently do not achieve the regeneration necessary to break away from their tragic fate. The function of violence in LaBute's plays has been described by Ilka Saal as a "restaging

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[106] Originally, "Chacun des éléments a sa propre dissolution, la terre a sa poussière, le feu a sa fumée. L'eau dissout plus complètement. Elle nous aide à mourir totalement."

[107] Originally: "D'abord, dans sa violence, l'eau prend une colère spécifique ou, autrement dit, l'eau reçoit facilement tous les caractères psychologiques d'un *type de colère*. Cette colère, l'homme se vante assez rapidement de la mater. Aussi l'eau violente est bientôt l'eau qu'on violente. Un duel de méchanceté commence entre l'homme et les flots. L'eau prend une rancune, elle change de sexe. En devenant méchante, elle devient masculine. Voilà, sur un mode nouveau, la conquête d'une dualité inscrite dans l'élément, nouveau signe de la valeur originelle d'un élément de l'imagination matérielle !"

of the historical and mythological violence . . . without redemption, either in an ideological or aesthetic sense" (Saal 331). It is the absence of redemption that prevents "the social/political regeneration that Slotkin speaks of," and the "ritualistic purging of mimetic desire à la Girard" (Saal 331).

It all results in a failed regeneration, a "prevalent sense of apathy in narrative and aesthetic form" (Saal 332). The ethical blur that pervades *bash* is exemplified in *a gaggle of saints* when john and sue describe the corsage that john offered her:

> JOHN. last minute, got her a corsage, not the wrist kind, hate those…but this was beautiful, white blossoms. don't know what kind, but they were white, i remember that…
> SUE. i loved it! the softest pink, it was…john thought it was white, but it was really just the lightest shade of pink. the last shade of pink it could be, before turning into something else… (BEAT) and you know? he pricked his finger, john did. as he pinned it on me, pricked his index finger… (*bash* 43)

John and sue's disagreement on the colour of the corsage happened just before john pricked his finger and stained his shirt with blood. It offers a colour palette ranging from white to red. Ilka Saal writes that "[p]ink and red are, then, really only shades of white, a white that, in its mythological brightness, is already insured against the incursion of (other) colour(s). Without the capacity for making such distinctions, however, the possibility of individual and collective regeneration has been lost" (Saal 332).

The impossibility of regeneration for the characters amounts to their being stuck in a repetitive loop. Bigsby has suggested that *medea redux* could be "a story which, myth-like, will be repeated" (Bigsby 34) and the characters seem to be repeating themselves—the young man by telling different versions of emma's death, john and sue by not listening to each other or to themselves. Steiner explains that "[i]rrepressible repetition and discontinuity not only belong to childish language but also to that of nightmares" (Steiner 277).[108] The protagonists of *bash* are all immature and their world is definitely nightmarish, "wholly lacking in mutuality and transcendence" (Bigsby 65). Regeneration is thus inexorably impossible and the characters live in the illusion of the possibility of rebirth.

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[108] Originally, "La répétition irrépressible et la discontinuité appartiennent non seulement au langage enfantin mais aussi à celui des cauchemars."

c) The Gradation of Violence Leads to its Trivialisation

LaBute's trilogy of plays are, without a doubt, tragedies. Although they are set in contemporary times, they still respect the convention of ancient Greek drama avoiding to represent deaths, murders and generally any form of violence on stage—save for violence contained in the description of violent acts and behaviours. This particular way of telling rather than showing violence is a convention that was broken as early as Roman theatre emerged, with Jocasta killing herself on stage by ripping open her womb at the end of Seneca's *Oedipus*, for instance. From ancient Greek tragedies to in-yer-face theatre, it seems that the evolution of tragedy followed a logic of escalation that went from off to on stage depiction of violence, from less to more sensationalism. Neil LaBute's *bash*, however, is not sensational but it is shocking in a different way.

Tragedy took many forms since its birth in ancient Greece to contemporary models from today, with violence always in its core but exploited in different ways in each tragic form. Aeschylus, Euripides, and Sophocles used the chorus or messengers to recount violent actions without ever showing physical violence on stage (the most famous exception being Sophocles' *Ajax*), or they used props such as swords to signal the play's peak of violence or to "foreshadow the cycle of violence which will be the driving force of action" (Wyles 41).[109] On the one hand, when violence is shown on stage, it is sensational, brutal, shocking—it gives the audience a thrill. On the other hand, if violence is told rather than shown, it increases the power of the action and demands an effort of imagination, even if some depictions, such as chet's beating in *a gaggle of saints*, are greatly precise and vivid—the visual distance makes the audience interrogate their relationship with violence.

The distancing effect, in *bash*, rests on the fact that the characters are not re-enacting the stories encapsulating violence, but they are narrating them. The distancing effect is achieved through several techniques: the young man on stage, since he is speaking to an interlocutor who is physically absent, seems in fact to be addressing the audience directly and to regard them as his interlocutor. It is as if the fourth wall is not there, so the narrative illusion cannot set in. In addition, the character on stage seems to think about his words, to struggle, to hesitate, which creates a discrepancy between the character and himself, that is to say that he is a character who is reflecting upon himself, building himself, at the same time as he is telling his story. Therefore, the audience cannot get caught up in a story that is traditional, seemingly seamless (even if the realism of the text is not due to improvisation, but it is written and prepared with such hesitations and rewordings), the audience is aware of its status

[109] In the play, Ajax commits suicide by falling on his sword—this action has nourished debates amongst classical scholars as to whether or not it happened on stage. See S. P. Mills, "The Death of Ajax."

as an audience, rather than forgetting itself in a story. The text and its performance on stage are thought out in such a way that the audience, rather than feeling empathy for the characters and becoming emotionally involved in the action, immediately takes a step back in order to be able to analyse and understand how the plot works, how the characters think. This distance, in the Brechtian social and political ideal, would become a force for changing mentalities and the world. By using distancing effects, Neil LaBute's theatre appears in line with Brecht's theories.

As they are the main actors in the violent stories that they are narrating, the protagonists also embody on stage the violence that they inflicted in the stories they are telling. The distancing effect allows the audience to take a step back not only from the characters but also on the violence that they embody, that surrounds them, that they exploit and transform. The young man, for example, is attracted to the atmosphere of violence that permeates his workplace. At the beginning of the play, he describes it, without being able to put the right words on it:

> i stuck to the desk as much as i could, i like it. that office… i don't know… "feel." the atmosphere. faxes coming in, people zipping around, emergency strategy sessions, all that. it's like being a kid again, playing at "war" or that type of thing, i don't mean exactly like that, but you know what i'm saying, it's a whole different thing out there, i have to tell you. (*bash* 14-5)

The young man revels in the hectic atmosphere of the office. The mere evocation of it makes him lose his words as he hesitates: between two ellipses, as he is looking for a word, he says "i don't know," and when he finally chooses a word, it is carrying the imprecision of the idea of an "office 'feel'" with "feel" accentuated by the inverted commas. The young man tries to make a comparison ("it's like being a kid again") that conveys the idea of childhood, of a time of joy and carefreeness, but it is contrasting with the idea of war—even though it is between inverted commas. There again he is looking for his words ("i don't mean exactly like that," "you know what i'm saying"), and using generic and vague words and phrases such as "it's a whole different thing out there"—the young man is flustered, he is lost in his mental image of the office atmosphere, absorbed by the memory of latent violence.

The office atmosphere is described with an enumeration of action verbs in the continuous form (their suffix is in "-ing") juxtaposed with commas, which adds a dynamic rhythm of haste and hurry that imitates the rhythm a stressful environment. The verb "to zip" is generally used with objects rather than people, so that "faxes coming in, people zipping around" becomes a chasm confusing people with faxes and vice versa, granting more importance to objects than to human beings—the

"faxes coming in" seem to have a definite purpose, whereas the "people zipping around" seem to be hurriedly going in circles to no good purpose. Such an environment would not seem very appealing to many people, but the young man clearly loves it.

Such an attraction to violence is all the more startling and disturbing as it contrasts with the Mormon education that the young man received, with the religious principles and laws he is obeying by not drinking alcohol for instance ("i'm not a drinker…you probably guessed that, though, right? nothing but water here" *bash* 14).

Encyclopedia Britannica explains the difference between the three Athenian playwrights (Aeschylus, Euripides, and Sophocles) thus: "it might be said that Aeschylus tended to resolve tragic tensions into higher truth, to look beyond, or above, tragedy; that Euripides' irony and bitterness led him the other way to fix on the disintegration of the individual; and that Sophocles . . . was truest to the actual state of human experience" (Conversi & Sewall). From this description, LaBute does not share Aeschylus' resolution of tragedies but he shares the irony and pessimism of Euripides, and he balances it with "some resonance . . . some truth, by filling it with language that was specific to the rituals of the church, the dynamics of the church" (Welch), a trait that still pertains to ancient Greece as tragedies are thought to have been originally performed at the occasion of civil and religious ceremonies. Aeschylus's drama "is traumatic and emulative, with roots in the primal crimes and mythic precedents of the past: it both disrupts and reestablishes basic foundations of social order, hereditary and political identity, and language" (Dodson-Robinson). On that aspect, LaBute's take on myths is also disruptive in the way he reinvents them and makes them contemporary, but more especially because they show that the foundations of social order that seem the fairest—Mormon codes, for instance—hide a very dark side of brutality, gratuitous violence, and the absence of redemption. *A gaggle of saints* borrows the symbolism of the Bacchanalia to denounce the false devotion of the Mormon youth through john, tim, david, and their friends and romantic partners who are more interested in bending the scriptures to satisfy their desire of violence than in constraining themselves to a less adventurous, more acceptable and thus more boring festive gathering.

LaBute's plays are still tragedies even if they differ largely from the Aristotelian definition of tragedy. The tragic hero who had to be of higher rank in ancient tragedies is a seemingly ordinary, young American in *bash*. In *iphigenia in orem* and *medea redux* respectively, the young man and the woman's names are not even known. American playwright Arthur Miller wrote the essay "Tragedy and the Common Man" (1949) arguing that tragedy may also depict ordinary people in domestic surroundings, thus defining Domestic tragedies. Even though Neil LaBute depicts ordinary

characters, their surroundings are not exactly domestic, simply ordinary—a hotel room, an undefined room, a police station. LaBute acknowledged in interviews that he was influenced by Pinter, Mamet, and Bond's plays (Bigsby 6), and by Barker's Theatre of Catastrophe according to which, in LaBute's words, "an author has no moral need to supply answers, only questions—he calls it honouring his audience, that no audience leaves nodding their head in agreement, they argue amongst each other and inside themselves on the way out, and no one goes home and sleeps well" (Barker; "Play: Bash" 1:18:45). LaBute plays on expectations and contrasts to better surprise and shake the audience's beliefs, to reveal the darkest side of his characters after having made them look relatively relatable and friendly. For instance, the young man is affable with his interlocutor, he wants to make them feel comfortable ("your drink okay?" *bash* 13, "you're okay, comfortable? good." *bash* 14) at the beginning and at the end of the play ("you have kids? no? well, when you do, you be good to 'em, okay? there's nothing like them in the world…believe me." *bash* 30). But if it was credible at the beginning of the play, it becomes ironic at the end with the reference to children and how precious they are, and with the young man setting himself up as a figure of authority in the matter of parenthood.

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In *bash*, violence is hyperbolic and goes crescendo, it follows an escalation logic: when the highest point of violence seems to have been reached, it gets worse, leading to think that even after the end of the play, it is going to get even worse. For instance, in *iphigenia in orem*, the first account of emma's death is tragic (in the contemporary sense of extremely sad and pitiful) because it is about the accidental death of a baby (*bash* 16); the second account is worse because the audience learns that the young man played a part in the death of his own daughter (*bash* 26-7); but then discovering that the motive for killing emma was void because the young man's fear of losing his job was due to a friend's joke eventually creates tragic irony (*bash* 29). Even after the play, the threat of his own death hangs above the young man like Damocles' sword as deborah, Clytemnestra-like, could well be planning his murder by way of revenge.

In her essay *On Violence*, Hannah Arendt analyses the evolution of power until it becomes violence: "Violence . . . is distinguished by its instrumental character. Phenomenologically, it is close to strength, since the implements of violence, like all other tools, are designed and used for the purpose of multiplying natural strength until, in the last stage of their development, they can substitute it" (Arendt 46). In other words, violence is used as a tool to increase power until it replaces it. The

young man, john, and the woman all tried to gain more power by using violence, but they have eventually lost power and replaced it entirely with violence. Arendt continues:

> Moreover, the danger of violence, even if it moves consciously within a nonextremist framework of short-term goals, will always be that the means overwhelm the end. If goals are not achieved rapidly, the result will be not merely defeat but the introduction of the practice of violence into the whole body politic . . . The practice of violence, like all action, changes the world, but the most probable change is to a more violent world. (*On Violence* 80)

Violence, first used as a means to gain power, finally took over the characters who lost control without realising it. Even more frightening, violence tends to take over and propagate itself outside of the violent individual, until it becomes normalised or even valorised. This particular aspect of violence is best exemplified through sue and the way she is immediately seduced by and attracted to violence, excited by blood (*bash* 44), ravished by the behaviour of john beating her boyfriend on the running track (*bash* 49).

Breaking away from a form of violence thus creates another form of violence—for example when the symbolical violence suffered by the woman of *medea redux* fuels her plans for murdering billie. Violence actually perpetuates itself, as symbolical and cultural violence will be reinforced if the woman goes to jail for having killed billie, or worse, if she is executed for it. All the while, the teacher is never going to be punished for the unlawful actions that he committed by engaging in a romantic relation with his teenage pupil and getting her pregnant.

While violence escalates in the stories told by the characters on stage, the characters themselves remain equanimous—"just like that. just happened" (*bash* 15). This discrepancy between the increasing degree of violence of the plot and the undisturbed nonchalance of the protagonists increases the shocking aspect of violence.

It looks impossible to escape from the aporia of Euripidean and LaButean tragedies, and from the tragedy of contemporary civilisation. Violence impedes the regeneration of community or identity. The image of the circle is present in the form of Euripidean tragedy, in the connections between the past and present, and in the projection in the future as well.

The failings of violence mirror tragic irony and recreate the workings of a tragic aporia. Indeed, violence increases as the characters try to break its mechanism, and by doing so, the characters

of *bash* get bogged down in a more and more inextricable aporia. It is even more complex than the curse of Oedipus whose parents, to cheat fate, made it easier to happen. In the LaButian aporia, violence replaces fate.

*

The escalation of violence reaches the point at which violence is so omnipresent and so intense that it paradoxically becomes casual. The fact that the whole plays are written in lower-case brings everything at the same level and highlights the casualty of language, even when it is extremely violent—"no big deal" (*bash* 55). With violence becoming casual, it is less easily identifiable, so it is more difficult to break away from it. The only laws that violence obeys and rules correspond to a logic of dissemination, differentiation, going in circles.

Sue's attraction to violence in *a gaggle of saints* underscores the crisis of Degree theorised by René Girard. Ilka Saal observes: "Murder remains on a par with their delight in John's Perry Ellis tuxedo and Sue's taffeta dress, and is in this manner reduced to yet another accoutrement of middle-class life—if not complete meaninglessness . . . it remains divorced from reflection on its violent underpinnings" (Saal 330). The levelling of the extreme of violence, murder, with the exuberance of fancy clothing showcases the fact that it is not the ordinary that somehow becomes extreme, but the contrary. LaBute's plays are all written in lowercase. When asked about it, LaBute justified himself by saying:

> beyond the inevitable e. e. cummings connection—whose work I admire and adore—it's a simple matter of being able to type faster, to write more and in a way that allows the work to flow out of myself more completely, without stopping for the 'shift' each time it's expected. I still punctuate—punctuation is the gift and weapon of the writer—but I skip the niceties of capitalization and try never to do what's been bred in me/or whatever's the standard requirement. (Bigsby 18-9)

Bigsby was not convinced. It could be interpreted differently; by writing in lowercase, all the words are levelled, not a single word is above the others—a physical levelling of every word on paper translating the levelling of violence with ordinary actions. Moral and ethical concerns hold no value—they are rendered completely non-existent as the characters share an "inability to imagine the suffering of others" (Lahr, "The Makeover Artist" 171). Their casual cruelties have become "a reflex, a habitual routine" (Saal 333).

This absence of moral concern in the characters are observable in larger communities. When talking about Neil LaBute, Bigsby notes that "[h]e is political in the sense that he looks in private lives for those radical imperfections equally observable in public life" (Bigsby 14).

George Steiner wrote that "[i]nstead of becoming masters of words, we are becoming their slaves. And that is the curse of politics" (Steiner 63).[110] The characters' way of talking, the façade that they show, it is all more imprisoning than it is protecting themselves. LaBute shows that violence, albeit used as a means to acquire or secure a more desirable status in society, to enforce a sense of belonging in a community, is only a manifestation of selfishness that backfires as it becomes bigger than the individuals who chose to use it initially. As it escalates until reaching extreme peaks of horror, it easily spreads in a society that encourages competition, rivalry, and individual success. At such point of the crisis of Degree, violence becomes indistinguishable with anything else; at such point, violence is the new normality. Consequently, there is an enduring tension between the euphemising of violence on stage and the shock experienced by the audience at the very fact of its euphemising.

[110] Originally and in length: "La conduite politique cesse d'être spontanée ou sensible à la réalité ; elle 'cristallise' autour d'un noyau de mots morts. Au lieu de rendre la politique dubitative et provisoire à la manière de Montaigne (qui savait que les principes ne sont supportables qu'à titre d'expérience), les mots enferment les hommes politiques dans l'aveuglement de la certitude ou l'illusion de la justice. La vie de l'esprit est rétrécie ou paralysée par le poids de l'éloquence. Au lieu de devenir maîtres des mots nous en devenons les esclaves. Et c'est là la malédiction de la politique."

Conclusion

> The nineteenth century spectator did not participate in a civil or religious ceremony, like the Athenians . . . Simply, he chose a hobby among the increasing number of rival hobbies. Theatre was becoming what it is today: a simple entertainment. And the bourgeois spectator of the Romantic period did not want more. He was not ready to face the risks of terror and revelation that the tragedy implies. All he desired was to shiver for a second or to dream at his leisure. By entering the theatre, coming from the street, he did not leave reality for hyper-reality (like every man does who wants to face the imaginary worlds of Aeschylus, Shakespeare or Racine); they went from harsh solicitations of present times and economic worries to the break given by illusion. (Steiner 114)[111]

According to George Steiner, tragedy died because theatre was no longer part of a civil or religious ceremony. Instead of offering an experience full of powerful emotions, soul-searching, and philosophical reflection, it became mere entertainment. It seems that playwrights such as Neil LaBute are reigniting the tragic flame. *Bash* is a trilogy that invariably triggers a reaction in its readers, it does not leave them indifferent. Neil LaBute's detractors denounce the gratuitous violence of the plays and the immorality and brutality of their characters. But as demonstrated in this study, the violence of *bash* is neither gratuitous nor here to serve entertainment.

Neil LaBute's style is singular. Beneath the appearance of nonchalant language, of a draft of a script rather than a polished work with capitalised nouns and fluid speeches, language is carefully crafted to better surprise and shock. The characters' language bears the pretence of normality, but it is used to show an American façade covering rotting morals. The topics tackled in the plays are difficult, sometimes unveiling taboos with such easiness and indifference that it is brutal, scandalous even.

Neil LaBute's trilogy of plays offers dark meditations on the origins of violence, which is used by the characters as a constructive and cohesive tool, but which ultimately escapes their control

[111] Originally, "le spectateur du XIXe siècle ne participait pas à une cérémonie civile ou religieuse, comme les Athéniens. . .Simplement, il choisissait un passe-temps parmi le nombre croissant de passe-temps rivaux. Le théâtre était en train de devenir ce qu'il est aujourd'hui: un simple divertissement. Et le spectateur bourgeois de la période romantique ne désirait pas plus. Il n'était pas prêt à affronter les risques de terreur et de révélation qu'implique la tragédie. Tout ce qu'il désirait, c'était frissonner un instant ou rêver à son aise. En entrant au théâtre, venant de la rue, il ne quittait pas le réel pour le plus réel (comme fait tout homme qui veut affronter les mondes imaginaires d'Eschyle, de Shakespeare ou de Racine) ; il passait des âpres sollicitations de l'histoire présente et des préoccupations économiques au repos de l'illusion."

and has devastating consequences. Violence indeed obeys its own rules in *bash* and takes the upper hand so that it permeates the plays to their core, to the lowercase letters which can be interpreted as the ultimate levelling of differences. The plays' structures and monologues stage the intrigue and the words of the crises—crisis of identity, but also crisis of society. Indeed, the crimes committed by the characters of *bash* were not the consequence of a pathology or an individual perversion, they resulted from a long history of domination. The characters are thus stuck in a tragic cycle of regression rather than regeneration, and the escalation of violence paradoxically leads to its trivialisation. In turn, because of the casualness with which the characters narrate their despicable actions, and because of the appearance of triviality given to violence, there is a discrepancy, a distance that is put between the characters on stage and the audience. The audience indeed experiences a shock not so much at the sight of violence—for violence is not re-enacted—but at its euphemising. This process achieves the distancing effect without impeding the audience from experiencing strong emotional and aesthetic emotions. It invites them to reflect on the workings of violence in the contemporary American society.

Bash questions the politics of violence in the American society by displaying its tortuous workings and by staging the contagion of violence to every sphere of society. Through his characters' psyche, he investigates social and moral constructs such as masculinity and femininity, the social construction of identity, the ongoing negotiations by male characters between work and family commitments, social injustice in relation to class and gender. By and by, as the characters follow a capitalist logic of individualistic competition, a general atmosphere of loss and anxiety emerges. Neil LaBute succeeds in creating a distorted mirror effect with a dialogue between his plays, the contemporary American society, and the reinvented notion of tragedy. The notion of tragedy is disfigured and reinvented through words of senseless contagion, as opposed to words of conflict and anagnorisis. The disfiguration of tragedy has to do with the impossibility of revelation, but also with the impossibility of awareness (notably the characters' awareness of being guilty), which thus questions the links between surprise, violence, reversals and anagnorisis. The anagnorisis then only happens for the audience.

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Appendices

Biographical Note on Neil LaBute

Neil LaBute was born in Detroit, Michigan, on 19 March 1963, to Richard and Marian LaBute. His father is a truck driver and his mother a hospital receptionist. Neil LaBute has a big brother, Richard, Jr., who is a linguist and digital-processing executive. The family moved to Liberty Lake, Washington (near Spokane), where Neil LaBute spent his childhood.

After attending high school in Central Valley High School in Spokane, he worked in a cinema for a year to save money for college. His mother showed more support in his interest in film and theatre than his truck-driving, working-class father. Neil LaBute then studied Theatre in Brigham Young University after receiving a "minority scholarship" reserved for non-Mormons of any race or ethnicity. While attending BYU, LaBute joined the Church of Latter-day Saints in 1981.[112] He also met his wife, Lisa Gore, a Mormon and later family therapist. During his studies, he wrote short pieces (sketches, monologues) and staged many plays, among which David Mamet's *Sexual Perversity in Chicago* (1974).

In the 1980s, he moved to New York with his wife and continued writing on the side of working for an educational software company. He then furthered his education at the University of Kansas, at NYU, at the Royal Court Theatre in London, and back to BYU as a PhD student in theatre theory and criticism, while working part-time jobs in mental hospitals and correctional institutions.

At the same time as being a professor of theatre at St. Francis College, in Fort Wayne, Indiana, he started directing critically acclaimed films—*In the Company of Men* (1997), *Your Friends and Neighbors* (1998). His career as a film director was then successfully launched: he continues to write, adapt, and produce films, plays, and mini-series up to this day.

[112] In 1999, Neil LaBute was disfellowshipped (one step away from excommunication) by the Church of Latter-day Saints because of the extremely violent attack on a gay man by Mormon characters in his one-act play, *a gaggle of saints*. Neil LaBute apologised to the Church, and a few years later, in 2004, he left the Church.

Summary of the Plays

iphigenia in orem

A young businessman, "early 30s, dressed in a plain suit," explains the circumstances in which he lost his five-month-old daughter emma. He confesses his murder to an unseen person in a hotel and argues that he had to kill emma to secure his job, for a co-worker had told him that his position in the firm was jeopardised. He got to keep his job, but also realised a few years later the tragic irony of his situation when his friend and co-worker told him it had been a joke, that the company had never wanted to fire him.

a gaggle of saints

John and sue, "a young attractive couple sitting apart from one another," remember how they met and then how they got engaged on the way back from a party in New York City. During this party, while the women had stayed at the hotel to sleep, john and his male friends went for a walk in Central Park. There, they followed a homosexual man, chet, to a bathroom, where they beat him unconscious, probably to death. On the next day, john proposed to sue with chet's ring. Throughout the play, violence is romanticised, eroticised, and brings john and sue together in their story and for the finale of the play, when they embrace to have their picture taken.

medea redux

A woman alone on stage confesses her story to a tape recorder. She relates her relationship with her junior high school teacher, which started when she was thirteen. At fourteen, she got pregnant and gave birth to a baby boy, billie. Meanwhile, her teacher had moved to Phoenix, but they kept up a correspondence. When billie turned fourteen, his mother and him went to Arizona so he could meet his father. When his father left their motel room, billie went to take a bath and put on a record of Billie Holiday playing "Stormy Weather." Then his mother came in the bathroom and pushed the recorder into the bathtub to electrocute her son.