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Playing With Lives:
Theatricality, Self-Staging, and the Problem of Agency in Renaissance English Revenge Tragedy

A Dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

English

by

James Joseph Condon

December 2009

Dissertation Committee:

Dr. Deborah Willis, Chairperson

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For my mother, who first set me on this path and will want to read this.

For my father, who passed away before he got the chance.

And for Kelly. Always.

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Playing With Lives:
Theatricality, Self-staging, and the Problem of Agency in Renaissance English Revenge
Tragedy

by

James Joseph Condon

Doctor of Philosophy, Graduate Program in English
University of California, Riverside, December 2009
Dr. Deborah Willis, Chairperson

This project explores Renaissance revenge tragedy's conspicuous theatricality in light of the genre's primary concerns of personal transformation and the place of the self within an increasingly prescriptive society and cosmology. Specifically, its goal is to assert the essential dramaturgical role of theatricality in the early modern revenge play. Focusing primarily on the Kydian tradition of revenge begun with *The Spanish Tragedy* and continued in the work of William Shakespeare, John Marston, and Thomas Middleton, this study investigates the genre's treatment of subjectivity and how the characters' attempts at self-fashioning are mitigated—and at times, utterly thwarted—by the preexisting interpretive systems within which these characters move. This project

argues that the revenger's turn to theatricality affords him a means of destabilizing those associations by interfering with the court's ability to identify, interpret, and classify effectively. In so doing, the revenger facilitates a transformation of self that will combat his original state of impotence and vulnerability, and ultimately, creates a fleeting opportunity in which he might appropriate those tools of political domination that had previously victimized him. The liberatory potential of such theatricalized agency is compromised, however, by its conspicuous exclusion of female subjects, who are either appropriated as spectacles to motivate masculine reprisal, or cast as monstrous agents whose grasp at revenge effectively robs them of their femininity. More generally, *Playing With Lives* explores how the genre's theatricality undermines essentialist notions of subjectivity, and through its metadramatic conventions, essentially stages spectatorship to foreground issues of signification and voyeuristic reception to speak to the broader issues of how the individual semiotically constructs meaning and how those interpretations are situated within a political framework.

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Introduction: Setting the Stage for Revenge

Francis Bacon's famous description of revenge as "a kinde of Wilde Justice" suggests the ambivalence surrounding the very idea of personal retribution. The appeal of *lex talionis*, of taking eye for eye in response to an injury done to us or ours, is not only viscerally satisfying, but helps to combat those feelings of impotence that assault any victim; blood revenge lets us actively do something about our plight, and in that recovery of agency lies much of the prospect's allure. At the same time, however, the consequences of such retaliation stretch beyond those individuals involved, for as Bacon reminds, "the Revenge of that wrong, putteth the Law out of Office."¹ Taking matters into one's own hands as revenge requires directly challenges the state's privilege of being sole arbiter and executor of its laws, thereby inevitably contextualizing even the most personal of conflicts amidst a broader political framework and putting the revenger at risk for reprisal from the state itself. As a result, any study of revenge becomes not only an exploration of those conflicting impulses within the individual that simultaneously demand and eschew vengeance but also an investigation of the tension that exists between the subject and his or her place within the larger socio-political setting.

Even a cursory glance at those conventions most typical of early modern revenge tragedy similarly suggests that the genre's interests surpass the plight of its protagonists alone, despite how much their personas might dominate their plays. While such staples as the madness and delay speak to the turmoil within the revenger's mind, his consistently inferior social position to those who wrong him and the conspicuous misogyny within the genre itself both point to a broader concern with difference and the abuses that are routinely carried out through such social and gender systems that inherently hierarchize

their members based on that alterity. This theme is underscored by the very nature of revenge, one predicated upon a clear distinction between them and us, enemy and friend, which inherently leads to violence based upon that difference. My project is to explore this twofold focus of early modern revenge tragedy, namely the conflicted subjectivity of its avenging protagonist and those systems of categorization and difference through which these subjects move and against which, ultimately, they must contend if they wish to see their vengeance done.

At the heart of the English revenge play lies the contemplation of individual agency's place within social and theological strictures that appropriate the citizen's nascent agency and reallocate it to the state or God. Specifically, the revenge tragedy asks as what point—if at all—can man ignore the dictates of state and church and instead follow the demands of personal desire. These plays foreground a very specific tension between the individual's compulsion to see revenge done and an utter inability to satisfy this desire through any legitimate means. The revenger is blocked at every turn by an opponent more powerful and, at least at first, more cunning than he, and thus the avenger ultimately comes face to face with a stark realization that his current state is one fundamentally characterized by impotence and a vulnerability to both the hegemony at large and the specific individuals who preside over it. If his pursuit of revenge is to remain paramount, then, some other aspect of self must therefore change to compensate. The seemingly inevitable result of this existential dilemma, at least for the early modern revenger, is a gradual transformation from victim to victimizer; as John Kerrigan notes in *Revenge Tragedy: Aeschylus to Armageddon*, the inherent irony of the revenge play is that the revenger must ultimately become a murderer himself to see his quest fulfilled,

and in so doing, make his opponent into a victim, just as he himself once was.² In other words, at the heart of every revenge play is a deliberate transformation of self.

This concern with individual self-fashioning begins to explain the true presence of another generic convention besides those delays, bouts of madness, or social inequalities already discussed—its conspicuous and oft-noted theatricality. The powerlessness of the protagonist's original situation prompts him to seek alternate means of controlling events, and thus the revenger often becomes increasingly theatrical throughout the course of the play, masquerading as different persons, staging plays, and ultimately becoming a kind of rival director to the political figure of the play's chief antagonist. As the revenger develops into this increasingly theatrical individual, he becomes increasingly adept at a semiotic appreciation of the world and gains an awareness of the sign's potency, be it lingual, material, or performative. As such, he develops an ever greater skill at affecting others' perceptions, and the culmination, or at least the highlights, of this skill are the performative, metadramatic instances characteristic of these plays. Indeed, isn't identity performance, at its core, the iteration of specific, coded signifiers that, when compiled within a context of other signs and across time, creates an impression or persona that is then compartmentalized into classifications of gender, race, class, and even morality? Should it come as any surprise, then, that the figure who must consciously remake himself simultaneously develops an ultimately virtuoso ability for theatricality and the performative manipulation of signifiers, an ability showcased in each play through masques, roles-within-roles, and plays-within-plays? This is the fundamental connection, then, between the metadramatic instances within revenge tragedy and the identity re-fashioning of the revenger inherent in the genre.

In its most immediate and obvious sense, we can see this theme play out in the revenger's traditional need to disguise his true identity from the villain-noble who would thwart his quest for revenge. Yet the interplay between the revenge play's metadramatic convention and the central themes of the genre runs considerably deeper than this common plot device. Rather, I would argue that these performative varieties of the metatheatric refigure the more general sense of external forces and their power over the subject into concretized, visual signification, and thus something that can be more easily manipulated by the individual as a compensatory attempt at regaining agency. Myriad forces are at work amidst the corrupt setting of the revenge tragedy, forces at once victimizing many of the characters who inhabit that space and preventing them from seeing legitimate justice done. Despair and even madness are common responses throughout the genre to the powerlessness these intangible forces engender in the subject. As critics like Kerrigan have noted, however, the revenger in particular compensates for this powerlessness by turning toward a theatricality that gives him some control over the seemingly malevolent external world and, ironically, redirect that malevolence against his prey in an attempt to ultimately restore the play's corrupt society. In the end, this desperate grasp at control amounts to the temporary appropriation of those socio-political powers that have victimized him in the past to retaliate against the villain-noble who typically wields them, something accomplished through what I call the revenger's "theatricalized agency."

My central project, thus, is to contextualize this deliberate theatricality amidst the revenge play's primary concerns of personal transformation and the place of the self within an increasingly prescriptive society and cosmology. I argue that the persistent

deployment of metadramatic and performative instances within the revenge tradition is the genre's answer to contemporary notions of self-fashioning. Specifically, I will investigate the genre's treatment of subjectivity and how the characters' attempts at self-fashioning are mitigated—and at times, utterly thwarted—by the preexisting interpretive systems within which these characters move. Indeed, the identification, interpretation, and classification of subjects within the established patriarchal system is how those in control may deploy their power effectively against others, and in revenge tragedy, victimize them and deny them the justice they seek. The revenger at least in part turns to theatricality as a means of destabilizing those associations by interfering with the sovereign's ability to identify, interpret, and classify effectively, while the dramaturgical device itself foregrounds the issue by temporarily casting certain characters onstage as spectators to the revenger's productions; by essentially staging spectatorship, these metadramatic instances foreground issues of signification and voyeuristic reception for the theatrical audience, thereby speaking to the far broader and more substantial issue of how the individual semiotically constructs meaning and how those interpretations are situated within a political framework. Concurrent with this is the suggestion that those who cannot “stage” existence with sufficient skill, are prevented from doing so, or are simply reconciled to whatever contradictory or oppressive “stage directions” life happens to give them, are doomed to be shaped by external events with no significant agency of their own.

Such self-fashioning is far from an unmitigated success in these revenge plays, however. While the protagonist does deploy theatricality in such a way as to undermine those systems of identification and classification through which social forces may exert

their power upon the subject, he most typically utilizes this freedom to grasp at the tools of the political apparatus that wounded him to begin with, inevitably opting to return violence for violence, brutality for brutality in a move that targets the political figurehead even as it unwittingly endorses those doxic systems of subjugation. Indeed, the genre does gesture toward the liberatory potential of a theatricalized self-fashioning, but at least for those protagonists that inhabit these revenge tragedies, their potential is far more grim as their metamorphosis so often sets them down the path of villainy. Furthermore, that this problematic theatricalized agency does not typically extend to women—if anything, they are objectified further in many of the genre’s spectacles, thereby pushing interpretative agency almost entirely upon the men—suggests that any boons such theatricality may provide for the revenger are still strictly contained by gender, a caveat that in and of itself implies the preservation of larger doxic paradigms and thereby problematizes just how revolutionary said theatricality really can be.

In the conflicting discourse for and against personal vendetta during the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries in England, we can read the ambivalence that will characterize its theatrical revengers and see the societal pressures that the genre itself will explore. Not surprisingly, much of the argument against revenge was rooted in Scripture and the promise of divine retribution against both the original offender and any Christian that sought to take matters into his own hands. A central justification of this perspective was the passage from Paul’s Epistle to the Romans, portions of which were often repeated by the revengers themselves on stage as they weighed the divine prohibitions

against their desire: “avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord.”³ Clearly, vengeance was first and foremost the purview of God, and thus any individual who took the act upon themselves, according to Cleaver in *A Plaine and Familiar Exposition of the Ten Commandments* (1618), “strips himselfe of Gods protection, he neither can pray for a blessing, nor haue a blessing; because he is out of God’s defence: he promiseth no shelter, neither do his Angels watch ouer him that is out of his wayes.”⁴ Certainly, Scripture makes no promises that God’s retribution will be timely or satisfy the undoubtedly more immediate needs of those offended, but what the Christian might perceive as delay is no excuse: Thomas Beard in his *Theatre of Gods Judgements* (1632) cautions, “For though it may seeme for a time that God sleepeth, and regardeth not the wrongs and oppression of his servants, yet he never faileth to carry a watchfull eie upon them, and in his fittest time to revenge himself upon their enemies.”⁵ Finally, while the early modern state was generally understood to be God’s earthly representative, and thus its decisions regarding punishment of offenses were manifestations of that divine justice, the ultimate arbiter remained God, thereby obviating the theatrical revenger’s typical excuse for personal action in his complaint that no justice can be found while his enemy holds the reins of state. Rather than endorsing a view that this situation might allow a subject to take the burden of revenge themselves, Beard insists that this is all the more reason to patiently await God’s retribution:

by how much the more they cannot bee punished by man, and that humane lawes can lay no hold upon them, so much the rather God himselfe becommeth executioner of his owne justice upon their pates: and in such sort, that every man may perceive his hand to be upon them.⁶

Thus, despite whatever grounds the Old Testament *lex talionis* might grant the would-be revenger, the overwhelming sentiment of early modern religious commentary insisted that vengeance belonged solely to God and his earthly representative, the Renaissance state.⁷

This is not to say that secular forces were not at work against personal vendettas as well. The prickly personal honor of Elizabeth's courtiers—no doubt inflamed all the more by the culture of favoritism such early modern courts created—was a constant concern and needed regular attention from the monarch herself. Recognizing this issue of honor as a crucial sticking point, some works endeavored to utilize it in the case against vengeance. John Eliot, for instance, argued in 1591 that “the honour that is wonne by her [revenge], hath an ill ground...Honour is a thinge too noble of it selfe, to depend of a superfluous humour, so base and vilanous, as the desire of vengeance is.”⁸ However James I was not so adept or so willing as his predecessor to rein in his courtiers, and while the point was made that it was dishonorable to indulge in personal vendettas, many still held that personal honor demanded retaliation. Indeed, revenge was written into the very law of the land—at least, revenge against outside forces. The 1584 Bond of Association avowed that all who signed it would protect the monarch and, in the case of her assassination, pursue those responsible “as well by force of arms as by all other means of revenge.”⁹ Retribution was ingrained in the consciousness of the English, and as Fredson Bowers insists, “the right to punish their own wrongs was dear to many Elizabethans.”¹⁰

That such revenge was particularly prevalent amongst the English aristocracy, both because of the greater cultural emphasis upon the particularities of personal honor as

well as the established means of redress that was the duel, does not need considerable evidence. One example should demonstrate the early modern aristocratic mindset satisfactorily. Bowers describes how in 1607 a Lord Sanquire, a Scottish noble who had followed James I from the north, lost an eye during a fencing bout. The lord made no move toward retribution until later James remarked on the accident and wondered aloud how the man responsible had not yet been repaid. Sometime after Sanquire decided upon revenge and eventually, some five years later in 1612, murdered the fencing partner Turner through the work of two hirelings. When testifying on his own behalf at trial, Sanquire emphasized the compulsion of personal honor that drove him to the deed:

I must confess I never kept a grudge in my soul against him, but had no purpose to take so high a revenge: yet in the course of my revenge, I considered not my wrongs upon terms of Christianity...but being trained up in the courts of princes and in arms, I stood upon the terms of honour...Another aspersion is laid on me, that I was an ill-natured fellow, ever revengeful and delighted in blood. To the first I confess I was never willing to put up a wrong, where upon terms of honour I might right myself, nor never willing to pardon where I had the power of revenge.¹¹

Sanquire was ultimately convicted and sentenced to hang, denied the death of a nobleman. The reasoning behind this was less for the revenge itself as it was the manner in which it was carried out: the protracted time over which the grudge was nursed, the underhanded means of using others to carry out the deed rather than personally challenging the other party. This suggests not only a moderate acceptance—or at least, sympathizing—in the secular world for honor's compulsion to revenge, but also a sensitivity to the manner through which satisfaction is achieved.

Indeed, contemporary defenders of revenge routinely evince a concern with the particulars of the revenger's motivation that differs markedly from the starker theological prohibition—particulars that further enhance the ambivalence of the stage revenger's

traditional plight. For instance, there is evidence of a widespread, if incorrect, belief among the populace that “the ciuile law denies the fathers inheritance to that son which will not reuenge the death of his father,”¹² while the famous Renaissance fencing master Saviolo once insisted in writing “that among the few injuries it is impossible not to revenge are treacherous rape and murder,” where “Treacherous murder would imply a lack of evidence for a legal conviction.”¹³ Perhaps most particular to the stage revenger’s plight is the case made by William Perkins in his 1606 text, *The Whole Treatise of the Cases of Conscience*, in which he argues personal vengeance is excusable “when violence is offered, and the Magistrate absent; either for a time, and his stay be dangerous, or altogether, so as no helpe can be had of him, nor any hope of his comming. In this case, God puts the sword into the priuate mans hands.”¹⁴ It would appear that popular sentiment was particularly sympathetic to those revengers, like Hieronimo and his successors, without legal redress for the crimes committed against them. Nevertheless, these sympathies could not wholly drown out the condemnation of revenge that came from the pulpit, nor were even the most staunch defenders of revenge wholly comfortable with any means of redress besides direct and immediate confrontation. Such was the ambivalent cultural climate that produced these revenge tragedies, and set the stage for the hesitance and psychological duress that would characterize the Kydian protagonist for decades to come.

While there has been persistent, if not considerable, work done on the early modern revenge tragedy in general and significant work still underway regarding

Renaissance subjectivity and performance, there has been no substantial scholarship exploring the dramaturgical and thematic implications of performativity specifically within the revenge tradition. This is not to say, of course, that the genre's inherent theatricality has gone unnoticed. Katharine Eisaman Maus, in her introduction to the collection *Four Revenge Tragedies*, pointedly asks "What is the connection between revenge and theatrical display?"¹⁵ However she answers her question with a somewhat brief gesture towards contemporary punitive practice and its penchant for display, and later returns to the question only with *The Spanish Tragedy* to posit a kind of specular pedagogy in Hieronimo's final bloody spectacle. As discussed above, Kerrigan indeed notes "In pursuit of retribution, the avenger must manipulate a fluid and contingent world with a dramatist's inventiveness and authority. He must be, in the play, an image of its author, transmuting creative ambition into narrative and stage action,"¹⁶ yet this important point is, for Kerrigan, more an explanation of why contemporary dramatists might be drawn to the genre and the figure of the revenger.

Perhaps the work that comes closest to making a definitive connection between the revenge tragedy as genre and its implicit metadramatic convention is Charles and Elaine Hallett's *The Revenger's Madness: A Study of Revenge Tragedy Motifs*. In it, the Halletts recognize the play-within-a-play as a requisite component of the early modern revenge tragedy. However, as with so much else in their book, the Halletts' understanding of this metatheatrical trope's role is rigid and overly simplistic. Grouping it alongside "the delay" and "multiple murders" in a chapter broadly titled "The Other Motifs," Charles and Elaine Hallett delineate the play-within-the-play and the revenger's penchant for disguise from a largely practical, dramaturgical perspective: the disguise

provides a useful cover for the revenger, in which he may behave in ways other than he normally would, while the interior playlet is essentially a performance of the revenger's mindset, whereby he incorporates his victims into the production itself and thus achieves his bloody vengeance. The problem with *The Revenger's Madness*, as the above paraphrase no doubt suggests, is that it applies overly strict classifications and arguments upon a rather slippery genre. They argue that a fundamental aspect of the play-within-a-play is its closed-off location, although Hamlet's Mousetrap is performed before the entire court. They emphasize the importance of the revenger's delay in action, even though Vindice manages to kill the Duke as early as Act III and Hoffman kills his enemy's son in the opening scene of his play. Perhaps most obvious, the Halletts overstress the role of the revenger's death despite the conspicuous exception of Antonio's survival after murdering Duke Piero and his son. Thus, while useful in a fundamental sense, *The Revenger's Madness* fails to offer the sort of nuanced exploration of the revenge play's theatricality that the topic deserves.

Despite its publication some sixty years ago, the seminal work on the early modern revenge play remains Fredson Bowers's *Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy 1587–1642*. The thoroughness alone of this work—a revised and somewhat abridged version of his 1934 doctoral dissertation at Harvard—dwarfs any comparable historical study on the genre. Bowers contextualizes the thematic content of the English revenge play within the Tudor consolidation of political and legal authority throughout the sixteenth century in particular, though his examination of revenge and blood feud's place within the culture goes back as far as the Anglo-Saxon migration to England. He also establishes the dramatic history of the genre, exploring its predecessors and primary inspiration in the

classical theatre of Seneca and the Italian *novelle*,¹⁷ through England's nascent, neoclassical attempts at the revenge play with works like *Gorboduc*, *Horestes*, and *Gismond and Salerne*, and into the most familiar and popular manifestation of the English revenge play with Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* and onward until the closing of the theatres in 1642. Of course, written as it was over half a century ago, there are concerns which Bowers investigates that have largely faded from the criticism on revenge tragedy today. Perhaps the most notable of these is his treatment of the school of thought advocating two distinct but parallel revenge traditions in England: the hero revenger, represented by Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy*, and the villain revenger, represented by Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta*. Bowers himself is suspicious of the distinction in general and the latter strain of revenge plays in particular, and modern criticism has largely borne out his perspective; the Kydian school has essentially become the de facto revenge type, while villain-protagonist plays like *The Jew of Malta* are, in general, either no longer considered revenge tragedies or are included in the genre strictly on their Kydian influences. Appropriately, and as I will discuss in further detail subsequently, my project will principally follow the predominant Kydian revenge tradition.

Since Bowers's *Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy*, the revenge play has seen little in the way of scholarly works dedicated to a sustained and coherent analysis of the genre as a whole. While there is the occasional book like *The Revenger's Madness*, the majority of the subsequent scholarly attention has focused elsewhere. Kerrigan's *Revenge Tragedy: Aeschylus to Armageddon*, for instance, investigates topics as varied as Aristotle, *Hamlet*, *Dracula*, Mozart, and Nietzsche. Stevie Simkin's *Revenge Tragedy* is a relatively recent collection of essays on revenge plays from Kyd to Ford, but as each contributor's essay

focuses on one play alone and the book as a whole is held together only by the common subject matter, it fails to provide a unified exploration of the genre itself. Conversely, other studies fall short in their overly specific focus and neglect of the broader early modern revenge tradition. Both Peter Mercer (*Hamlet and the Acting of Revenge*) and Eleanor Prosser (*Hamlet and Revenge*), for instance, confine their examination of the revenge play to its specific iteration in Shakespeare's magisterial take on the genre. Harry Keyishian's *The Shapes of Revenge* takes a novel approach in exploring the recuperative and regenerative aspects of early modern revenge, but his work focuses exclusively upon Shakespeare's drama alone, and within that canon, disregards typical generic distinctions to discuss revenge in plays as disparate as *Titus Andronicus*, *King Lear*, the First Tetralogy, and *The Winter's Tale*. Even an otherwise perceptive and informative work like Eileen Allman's *Jacobean Revenge Tragedy and the Politics of Virtue* tends to limit its scope to a subsection of the revenge genre. Thus, endeavoring as I am to theorize a persistent facet of the Elizabethan revenge tradition, this project seeks to fill a conspicuous gap in the body of early modern scholarship on the subject of revenge.

While the English Renaissance revenge play will obviously be the central focus of my project, I must preface my chapter outline by explaining a significant caveat regarding which plays will be explored therein. The revenge tragedy is a somewhat difficult genre to categorize, for indeed, revenge alone does not a revenge play make; as Maus notes, "Political tyranny and retaliation for personal injury are ubiquitous tragic problems in the theater of the age."¹⁸ Some critics, for instance, include both *Titus Andronicus* and *Hamlet* under the same banner, while others insist that only the latter can be called Shakespeare's take on the revenge genre. Other scholars latch onto the

sensationalism characteristic of the revenge tragedy and thereby consider a play like *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* among the canon, while more often Ford's play receives no mention in similar studies. However, should a critic attempt to compensate by asserting too rigid a classification, the multiple permutations these diverse playwrights make upon the genre's conventions inevitably doom that scholarship to the same sort of repeated exception that undercuts the legitimacy of studies like *The Revenger's Madness*. Throughout this study I will operate under the same, broad classification of revenge tragedy from which Bowers takes his cue: Ashley H. Thorndike's 1902 *PMLA* article "The Relations of *Hamlet* to Contemporary Revenge Plays," the first to actually delineate the genre. In it, Thorndike begins, "The revenge tragedy, a distinct species of the tragedy of blood, may be defined as a tragedy whose leading motive is revenge and whose main action deals with the progress of this revenge, leading to the death of the murderers and often the death of the avenger himself."¹⁹ Thus plays like *Women Beware Women* and *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*, which certainly contain revenge elements in their final acts, will be excluded from primary consideration because they fail to meet the initial requirement of revenge as a central, leading motive. A play like *Titus Andronicus*, conversely, meets the requirements of this definition, for while the Andronici's revenge plot does not truly begin until after the rape and mutilation of Lavinia, revenge itself is a theme asserted from the outset through Titus's execution of Alarbus and Tamora's oaths of revenge.

Additionally, because the revenge tragedy as a genre is so prone to variance, even plays typically regarded as revenge tragedy contain permutations of its classic themes that work against the fundamental interests of my project, and as such will receive less scrutiny than those revenge plays of the strictest Kydian tradition. Thus a play like *The*

Tragedy of Hoffman (1602), while certainly a revenge play, characterizes its revenger as a villain from the outset, thereby eliminating the potential for the necessary self-fashioning in which my project is most interested. Thus, I plan to focus primarily upon what Fredson Bowers identifies as “the golden era of the true Kydian revenge tragedy.”²⁰ The key examples of this tradition, and thus the foundational plays of my study, are Kyd’s *The Spanish Tragedy* (1585-7), Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus* (1594) and *Hamlet* (1599-1601), Marston’s *Antonio’s Revenge* (1601), and Middleton’s *The Revenger’s Tragedy* (1606-7). Other revenge tragedies, including but not limited to Chettle’s *Hoffman* (1602), Webster’s *The White Devil* (1612, Fletcher’s *Valentinian* (1614), and Shirley’s *The Cardinal* (1642), will receive mention but not primary importance in the pages that follow.

My first chapter, “Exile, Imprisonment, and Courtly Entertainments: The Tyranny of Spatial Control,” explores the conspicuous foregrounding of spatial contest and control in the opening acts of Renaissance English revenge tragedy, revealing a fundamental system of hegemonic dominance through which the corrupt nobility of the plays assert power—a means through which they perform their crimes and simultaneously ensure that retribution for those crimes cannot take place. Against the frequent backdrops of war, exile, and imprisonment, the villain-nobles of the genre consistently commit their crimes through an intrusion into secure, private space, misappropriating the crown’s recognized right to spatial control evinced in these opening conflicts by asserting similar entitlement within the enclosed, protected spheres of the private and the domestic. In response, the revenger usurps the villain-noble’s power through the deployment of particular, non-lingual signs such as props, costume, or dance to establish a conspicuously performative

space. Failing to adequately recognize the simultaneity of such spatial classifications—that the imposition of the “theatrical” does not wholly eclipse the “real,” that rather they are both at once—the villain-noble instead sets aside the power he wields in court as he assumes the passive mantle of the stationary spectator and abdicates control to the “director” of that performative space: the revenger. Thus, while the avenger does ultimately appropriate the state’s right to mete out justice through torture and execution, the success of this act is predicated upon the establishment of a theatrical space in which the protagonist effectively immobilizes his prey and robs him of the socially sanctioned spatial control through which he has previously victimized the revenger and denied him justice.

My second chapter, “Revenge as Rite of Passage: Liminal Theatricality and the Elision of Difference,” focuses on the transformation engendered by the revenger’s plight and suggests it may usefully be understood in light of Victor Turner’s “rite of passage.” This metamorphosis begins with the protagonist’s alienation from his community, one characterized by his self-perception as uniquely wronged and the divorce between his public and private selves evinced in his growing use of soliloquy and aside. Having become detached from his former self but not yet become the murderer he must be, the revenger enters the liminal stage of his transformation. This second stage is replete with much of the theatricality for which the genre is famous, instances of disguise and madness that thwart easy categorization by those that witness them and therefore speak to the genre’s larger thematic project of problematizing both rigid social classification and notions of essentialist subjectivity. With the culmination of the revenger’s rite of passage and his reintegration into society, his prolonged mimicry of the court’s corruption

becomes genuine as he murders those he holds responsible for his victimization. In so doing, however, the revenger merely appropriates the tools of the villain-noble and thus actually reinforces those doxic systems of violent domination that subjugated him to begin with. Pessimistic as this “entrapment model” would appear, I contend it cannot wholly eclipse the libratory potential of the genre’s liminal theatricality.

My third chapter, “Pretty as a Picture: Women, Spectacle, and Misogynist Theatricality,” qualifies the potential of the revenger’s liminal performativity by reminding that its freedoms apply exclusively to male characters within the genre. Their female counterparts, on the other hand, are consistently made into dramatic spectacles of vulnerability upon which those men might project their own masculinist interpretations, and often, read further justification for their vengeful designs. Be it through Lavinia’s mute and mutilated form, Ophelia’s mad songs, the forced confessions of mothers like Gertrude or Gratiana, even the silent tableau of a female corpse, the women of these revenge tragedies ultimately evince little theatricalized agency, instead becoming spectacles through which patriarchal anxieties over female interiority may be alleviated in the men’s positioning of themselves as an authorizing audience to the ostensibly weak or vulnerable women they have staged. This is not to say that female characters evince no agency whatsoever throughout the Early Modern revenge tradition, but rather that its promise is continually overridden by the masculinist perspective that dominates the plays.

My fourth chapter, “But Words Will Never Hurt Me: Rhetorical Violence and the Sovereign Tongue,” turns to the violence for which the genre is famous but seeks to push beyond considerations of such bloodshed as mere theatrical spectacle alone to explore their relevance within the world of the plays. I argue that *Titus Andronicus* and *The*

Revenger's Tragedy are unique amongst the Kydian tradition in that their primary revenge action is initiated by the victimization of a woman, and that the tableau itself of these brutalized female forms is marked in each play by a blazon speech of grief in which the revenger's words unwittingly reenact the violence done to his beloved in their rhetorical partitioning of her. This moment of recognition—in which the woman as spectacle and man as spectator are linked through his verbal description of that sight—is ultimately combined in the singularly brutal assassinations those responsible experience, wherein the fragmentation of the blazon is physically enacted upon the villains as they are simultaneously made the centerpiece of the revenger's grisly show.

The chapter continues with an examination of speech's relation to violence in the genre overall, and argues that the revenger's recognition of the villain's ability to deploy political power through the spoken word leads him to attack the metonymic representative of human speech, the tongue. In so doing, however, the revenger's stratagem is as fleeting as the performative frame in which it takes place, for silencing the head of state does little to those systems of domination that empowered him in the first place, and thus ironically, the revenger's fate is inevitably pronounced by the next royal to occupy the position so recently vacated.

To conclude, I contextualize the demise of the Kydian revenge tradition amidst the backdrop of the changing Jacobean stage. Characterized principally by a growing focus upon tragedy as a product of social institutions, the Jacobean theater increasingly came to see revenge as an inevitability, taking it more as a dramaturgical means of forwarding the plot and less as an opportunity to study the moral and psychological strain such a desire for retribution places upon the protagonist. Looking beyond the five plays

that form the mainstay of my previous chapters, the conclusion follows the permutations made to the Kydian formula in such plays as *The Maid's Tragedy*, *The White Devil*, and *The Cardinal*. As the revenger's plight increasingly falls out of focus and the social constructs that victimize these subjects take the fore, the theatricality that once facilitated the protagonist's transformation and tacitly undermined notions of social categorization and essentialist subjectivity increasingly lost its dramaturgical potency, becoming instead a mere gesture toward the Elizabethan revenge format that preceded it. Thus, while the English revenge play would persist until the closing of the theaters in 1642, the Kydian revenge tradition met its demise once the aesthetic concerns of the Jacobean stage took hold decades earlier.

Before that decline, however, the particular variety of early modern revenge tragedy begun by Thomas Kyd thrived for nearly twenty years, offering a drama centered upon the subjectivity of its protagonists and rife with a theatricality that problematized essentialist notions of the self and undermined those systems of social differentiation upon which the corrupt political apparatus of their settings are built. These disguises, interior plays, and spectacles are not simply the trappings of a theater or era naturally inclined to recognize the similarities between life and the stage, nor merely the practical stratagems of victimized characters whose every legitimate means of redress is barred to them. This theatricality is rather a dramaturgical cornerstone of the genre, one that helps facilitate its chief thematic concerns and exposes the arbitrary workings of those seemingly innate and unassailable avenues of power that persecute these men and women and plant the seeds of revenge.

Endnotes

¹ Francis Bacon, "Of Revenge," in *The Essays or Councels, Civil and Moral* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985), 16.

² John Kerrigan, *Revenge Tragedy: Aeschylus to Armageddon* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 6-7.

³ Rom. 12:19.

⁴ Robert Cleaver, *A Plaine and Familiar Exposition of the Ten Commandments with a Methodicall Short Catechisme Containing briefly the principall grounds of Christian Religion* (London, 1618), quoted in Fredson Bowers, *Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1940), 13.

⁵ Thomas Beard, *The Theatre of Gods Judgements* (1632), quoted in Lily B. Campbell, "Theories of Revenge in Renaissance England," *Modern Philology* 28, no.3 (1931): 286.

⁶ Beard, quoted in Campbell, 291.

⁷ For a far more thorough justification of the claim that "there was a persistent condemnation of revenge in the ethical teaching of Shakespeare's England" (281), see Lily B. Campbell, "Theories of Revenge in Renaissance England."

⁸ John Eliot, *Discourses of Warre and Single Combat, by B. de Loque* (1591), quoted in Bowers, 14.

⁹ Harry Keyishian, *The Shapes of Revenge: Victimization, Vengeance, and Vindictiveness in Shakespeare* (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1995), 7.

¹⁰ Bowers, 10.

¹¹ Quoted in Bowers, 29. The entire account of Sanquire's crime, arrest, and execution can be found on pp. 29-30.

¹² Quoted in Bowers, 38.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 37-8.

¹⁴ William Perkins, *The Whole Treatise of the Cases of Conscience, Distinguished into Three Bookes* (London, 1606), 500.

¹⁵ Katharine Eisaman Maus, introduction to *Four Revenge Tragedies*, ed. Michael Cordner (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), xvi.

¹⁶ Kerrigan, 17.

¹⁷ Bowers is not alone in stressing the Senecan influences upon the English revenge play. More recently, however, some scholars have questioned to what degree Senecan drama directly influenced Kyd and his successors. See Gordon Braden, *Renaissance Tragedy and the Senecan Tradition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985) and Anne Pippin Burnett, "Huge Frenzy and Quaint Malice: Seneca and the English Renaissance," in *Revenge in Attic and Later Tragedy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 1-32.

¹⁸ Katharine Eisaman Maus, "Chronology," in *Four Revenge Tragedies*, ed. Michael Cordner (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), xxxvi.

¹⁹ Ashley H. Thorndike, "The Relations of *Hamlet* to Contemporary Revenge Plays," *PAMLA* 17, no.2 (1902): 125.

²⁰ Bowers, 109.

Chapter 1:
Exile, Imprisonment, and Courtly Entertainments: The Tyranny of Spatial Control

The villain-noble of English revenge tragedy, both in his person and the society he metonymically represents, stands as beginning and end to the revenger's quest. The corrupt aristocrat is the revenger's true *alpha* and *omega*—not God, whose tenets of vengeance are ultimately ignored. It is this noble's crime that victimizes the revenger, and it is the unjust society engendered by this noble that denies the revenger legitimate avenues of vindication and satisfaction. In a sense, the revenger is a creature of this man's deed, and in this trait he is distinct from the protagonists of early modern tragedy in general. As John Kerrigan explains,

A revenger's position is different. His predicament is imposed upon him, and to know this is part of his plight. Injured by another, or urged towards vengeance by a raped mistress or murdered father, he is forced to adopt a role....as long as he remains a revenger the proportions of the acts he engages in are determined by an injury he never gave or a request he did not make.¹

Consequently, the villain-noble is ever present in the revenger's thoughts, and as such, is never far from the audience's as well.

Yet these men are equally important to the genre for those systems of political and social control they represent. While the revenger does indeed bear a grudge against the villain-noble on an individual level, his recourse to criminality to ensure vengeance simultaneously challenges the entire legal system that has failed him. Fredson Bowers comments that, fundamentally, "The modern theory of crime presupposes the existence of a State whose laws or regulations are broken, and punishment inflicted by this State for the breach of its rules,"² while Katherine Eisaman Maus, more to the point, notes that "the revenger's outlaw legalism commandeers the monarch's exclusive prerogative over

the prosecution of felonies, which were defined as crimes to which the crown was always supposedly a party.”³ Of course, this point was certainly not lost to early modern political theorists. Indeed, James I himself stresses in *The Trew Law of Free Monarchies* (1598) that

if it be not lawful to a private man to revenge his private injury upon his private adversary (since God hath onely given the sword to the Magistrate), how much lesse is it lawful to the people, or any part of them (who all are but private men, the authority being alwayes with the Magistrate, as I have already proved), to take upon them the use of the sword, whom to it belongs not, against the publicke Magistrate, whom to onely it belongeth.⁴

The right to retribution stems from the divine but proceeds only so far as the earthly representative of God, the State, personified here in the figure of the magistrate. A citizen indulging in personal vendetta therefore usurps the sanctioned representative of divine and earthly justice; for that subject to turn his vengeance against a representative of the State simply compounds the infraction and thus the threat it poses to the body politic. Any crime, especially a violent one perpetrated against a member of the aristocracy, thereby undermines the very idea that the state alone possesses the right to mete out punishment, and reminds that such transgressions cannot be explored entirely apart from their social context. The Renaissance revenger’s quest is therefore an assault upon the ruler in his entirety, threatening him via both his corporeal self and the political system that greatly extends that body’s power and worth.

Indeed, even the assassination of the villain-noble cannot entirely eradicate his presence, for in the successful completion of his quest, the revenger has assumed the murderous qualities that originally gave him birth. Kerrigan underscores this fundamental paradox of the revenge tradition, explaining,

when B, injured by A, does to A what A did to him, he makes himself resemble

the opponent he has blamed, while he transforms his enemy into the kind of victim he was once. Indeed, the more scrupulous he is in pursuit of retribution, the more exact in exacting vengeance, the more he effects this interchange.⁵

This is not a perfect transformation, of course, but the fact remains that aspects of that aristocratic criminal linger even after he has been violently eliminated. Thus, while Maus may be correct in claiming “Blood vengeance, in other words, almost automatically subverts the power of the crown,”⁶ revenge simultaneously thrusts the bearer of that crown to the fore. And if this royal should be such an object of scrutiny in the genre at large, he seems an ideal subject with which to begin a study of English revenge tragedy.

Kerrigan’s point regarding the revenger’s gradual appropriation of the villain-noble’s qualities is an important one, but one that should not be simplified to a facile matter of the non-violent becoming violent.⁷ Rather, the revenger learns to utilize various facets of political power through permutations of those modes considered exclusively the prerogative of royalty. The most conspicuous of these is the state’s right to punish criminals through torture and execution, but by no means is this the sole tool at the sovereign’s disposal, and thus we must look beyond the violent spectacles for which the genre is famous to recognize the subtler avenues of hegemonic power that the revenger appropriates and redeploys as his own.

Perhaps the most important political tactic to have been overlooked up to this point is the monarch’s socio-politically sanctioned control of space, a tactic apparently subtle enough to go virtually unrecognized in scholarly consideration of the English revenge tragedy. Despite this oversight, however, every single revenge play makes

conspicuous within its opening acts matters of spatial contest and control. Often this is established through a context of international strife. Horatio and Lorenzo return with Balthazar prisoner from Spain's martial conflict with Portugal in *The Spanish Tragedy*, Titus leads Tamora and her sons in chains after Rome's victorious war with the Goths in *Titus Andronicus*, and Claudius reaffirms Denmark's right to the land captured by the old King Hamlet from Norway: time and again, the stage is first set for revenge amidst the assertion of political power via control of territorial space. When this explicitly martial backdrop is absent, the genre instead supplies the localized alternatives of exile and imprisonment.⁸ Duke Piero imprisons his daughter Mellida and banishes the Stoic Pandulpho in *Antonio's Revenge*, while the Duke of Middleton's *The Revenger's Tragedy* grants his stepson Junior Brother a reprieve from execution by imprisoning him, and even goes so far as to mercurially order his heir Lussurioso's confinement and liberation within the course of a single scene. Nor is the foregrounded importance of space exclusively characteristic of the "golden era" of the Kydian tradition, but rather precedes and follows it as well: the central conflict of Norton and Sackville's *Gorboduc* stems from King Gorboduc's partitioning of his territory between his sons Ferrex and Porrex and the hostility this division engenders, while Shirley's *The Cardinal* is set against the backdrop of a war between Navarre and Arragon. Indeed, wholly apart from the more prominent elements of the genre that critics are fond of listing, matters of spatial conflict and control are a fundamental, if overlooked, aspect of the early modern revenge tradition.

This matter of territorial space was a concern for the English crown as well, though official discourse on the subject navigates the difficult waters of implementing

deliberate and strategic assertions of their right while simultaneously presenting the issue as so fundamental to rule as to be almost beneath mention. For instance, in Christopher Saxton's famous atlas of England and Wales (1579), the royal arms appear prominently on almost every page, while the frontispiece is a picture of Elizabeth elaborately enthroned, wearing the crown and holding the scepter and orb of state. Richard Helgerson clearly reads the political signification at work, arguing, "These maps proclaim royal sovereignty over the kingdom as a whole and over each of its provinces. As we turn the pages, we are invited to remember that Cornwall is the queen's, Hampshire the queen's, Dorset the queen's, and so on county by county," and thus, "Saxton's atlas provides a deliberate and insistent statement of royalist claims."⁹ While James I more explicitly discusses the matter in his own writing, he rarely offers justification beyond reminding the reader of the Crown's inherent right. Thus in *Basilikon Doron* (1599), he advises his son Henry,

But as for the Bordours, because I knowe, if yee enjoy not this whole Ile, according to Gods right and your lineall discent, yee will neuer get leaue to brooke this North and barrennest part thereof, no, not your owne head whereon the Crowne should stand: I neede not in that case trouble you with them: for then they will bee the middest of the Ile, and so as easily ruled as any part thereof.¹⁰

Here James reasserts the familiar association between the monarch's person and the State itself, where an inability to "brooke" the North is tantamount to losing sovereignty of his own person—significantly, the head upon which that loaded signifier, the crown, sits.

What this implicit and explicit control of space meant to the Renaissance ruler was an equally justified control of those subjects who occupied that space. James I suggests as much in the excerpt of *Basilikon Doron* above, but addresses the matter far more bluntly a year earlier in *The Trew Law of Free Monarchies*: "As ye see it manifest

that the king is overlord of the whole land, so is he master over every person that inhabiteth the same, having power over the life and death of every one of them.”¹¹

Surprisingly, this power of life or death is not the facet of control most germane to space’s role in English revenge tragedy; rather, it is the ruler’s ability to regulate movement within that space. A famous example of this, one often cited in histories of early modern drama, is the 1572 emendation to the extant Tudor Poor Law commonly known as the Vagabond Act, which states that ‘masterless men’ be labeled vagabonds and barred from traveling within the English countryside:

All and everye persone and persones whatsoever that being whole and mightye in Body and able to labour, havinge not Land or Maister, nor using any lawfull Marchaundize Crafte or Mysterye whereby hee or shee might get his or her Lyvinge, and can gyve no reckning how he or shee dothe lawfully get his or her Lyvinge; & all Fencers Bearewardes Comon Players in Enterludes & Minstrels, not belonging to any Baron of this Realme or towards any other honorable Personage of greater Degree [who] shall wander abroad and have not Lycense of two Justices of the Peace at the leaste, whereof one to be of the Quorum, when and in what Shier they shall happen to wander ... shalbee taken adjudged and deemed Roges Vacaboundes and Sturdy Beggars.¹²

The role of space here is twofold: these “Roges Vacaboundes and Sturdy Beggars” are designated in part through their lack of land ownership, and thus the lack of power that would accompany such property even in the post-feudal society of the English Renaissance; secondly, once designated as such, their movement through space is restricted so that they might not “wander abroad.” One’s relationship to space is thus a signifier of social rank and a means of asserting authority over others. Accordingly, we must recognize—as the Elizabethans and Jacobean clearly did—that the control of space is another avenue through which discourses of power take place.

This in and of itself is by no means a new insight, though such an understanding of space has only emerged relatively recently in current critical theory. The first hurdle to

overcome was the general misconception of space as static and without significance, a view contested and ultimately dismantled by such thinkers as Gaston Bachelard, Henri Lefebvre, and Michel Foucault.¹³ Lefebvre asks,

Is it conceivable that the exercise of hegemony might leave space untouched? Could space be nothing more than the passive locus of social relations, the milieu in which their combination takes on body, or the aggregate of the procedures employed in their removal? The answer must be no.¹⁴

A decade later, Foucault challenged what he saw as the nineteenth-century privileging of time over space, contending,

The use of spatial terms seems to have the air of anti-history. If one started to talk in terms of space that meant that one was hostile to time. It meant, as the fools say, that one 'denied history' ... They didn't understand that [these spatial terms] ... meant the throwing into relief of processes—historical ones, needless to say—of power.¹⁵

This is the fundamental significance of space within the politicized and volatile context of the English revenge tragedy, and thus, an essential facet of the villain-noble's domination that the revenger must undermine in order to succeed in his quest.

The conspicuous foregrounding of spatial control in the opening acts of these revenge tragedies thereby highlights a fundamental system of hegemonic rule through which the corrupt nobility of the English revenge play assert power, a means through which they perform their crimes and simultaneously ensure that retribution for those crimes cannot take place. Against the frequent backdrop of war and international strife—ostensibly legitimate avenues of exerting the State's right to control space—the villain-nobles of the genre consistently commit their crimes through an intrusion into secure, private space, misappropriating the crown's recognized right to spatial control evinced in these international conflicts by asserting similar entitlement within the enclosed, protected sphere of the domestic. Indeed, these private transgressions are meant to be

seen in the context of their public, martial counterparts. In *The Spanish Tragedy*, for instance, Kyd subtly plays with Lorenzo and Balthazar's impending spatial transgression by couching Bel-Imperia and Horatio's flirtatious courtship within the traditional conceit of love's war:

Bel-Imperia: Let dangers go. Thy war shall be with me,
But such a war as breaks no bond of peace.
Speak thou fair words, I'll cross them with fair words;
Send thou sweet looks, I'll meet them with sweet looks;
Write loving lines, I'll answer loving lines;
Give me a kiss, I'll countercheck thy kiss.
Be this our warring peace, or peaceful war.
Horatio: But, gracious madam, then appoint the field
Where trial of this war shall first be made. (II.ii.32-40)¹⁶

Despite the relative ubiquity of the trope, Kyd's specific deployment of it here—especially with Horatio, a character up to this point distinguished purely through his martial accomplishments—suggests a conceptual overlap of the public and private spheres, of war and love, thereby preparing the audience for Lorenzo and Balthazar's forthcoming crime, one predicated upon the very same lack of distinction between these two ostensibly separate spaces.

Those plays of Shakespeare's that adopt the Kydian tradition of revenge maintain a similar conflation of their opening scenes' martial context with the private intrusion of the villain-noble's crime. The Ghost of old King Hamlet, it must be remembered, unfolds his tale of woe "Armed at point exactly, cap-a-pe" (I.ii.200) in "the very armor he had on / When he the ambitious Norway combated. / So frown'd he once when in an angry parle / He smote the sledded [Polacks] on the ice"¹⁷ *Titus Andronicus*, alternately, sets Lavinia's rape and mutilation within the larger context of the hunt, a practice traditionally understood as a commendable leisure activity designed to perfect the skills

of war. Clearly, at least in those revenge tragedies containing prominent instances of military conflict in their opening acts, the microcosm of the villain-noble's personal crime is deliberately contextualized against a larger discourse of space that depicts the aristocrat's deed as a perversion of an otherwise established mode of socio-political dominance.

Yet even for those plays that do not open with an explicit foregrounding of space through martial conflict, the villain-noble's generative crime is consistently depicted as an unlawful penetration of an enclosed, ostensibly secure sanctuary. Refusing to acknowledge the conceptual boundaries of private space evoked by the gates and walls that bar their paths, these criminals breach the architectural confines of family estates, bedrooms, and gardens to perform their villainy and dispel the illusion of protection such confines afford. This convention begins with *The Spanish Tragedy*, where Horatio is murdered during Lorenzo and Balthazar's intrusion into Hieronimo's secluded bower. Tellingly, Horatio believes the locale utterly safe, but his lover Bel-Imperia harbors doubts: though she confesses "I know not what, myself; / And yet my heart foretells me some mischance," the knight marshal's son quickly responds, "Sweet, say not so; fair Fortune is our friend" (II.iv.14-6). While technically a gentleman, Horatio nevertheless exhibits the naïve belief that the private space of his father's bower is somehow distinct from the public space controlled by those nobles who would find his affair with Bel-Imperia scandalous. His socially superior lover, however, is more perceptive. As an aristocrat herself, she recognizes the vulnerability of any such public/private distinction against the noble's potential abuse of spatial control, something she herself has already tacitly exercised in designating the location of their rendezvous, casually volunteering

Hieronimo's private garden without asking permission of the father or the son (II.ii.42). Her brother Lorenzo is simply more cavalier about his transgression, boldly penetrating the lovers' secluded grotto and casually dispatching Horatio with a few quick orders. His final insult to Horatio, which mocks his victim for overreaching his social position, at the same time serves as a subtle boast that exhorts Lorenzo's recent spatial transgression by reminding the audience that this aristocrat's deeds seem to lack any such ceiling or constraint.¹⁸

Shakespeare's *Hamlet* presents another such breached garden, but more interestingly, the Ghost's harrowingly specific account of his murder metaphorically reinforces the significance of the corrupt aristocrat's trespass into private space. As Hamlet aptly listens on the battlements of Elsinore, the Ghost of his father famously recounts his end:

Sleeping within my orchard,
My custom always of the afternoon,
Upon my secure hour thy uncle stole,
With juice of cursed hebona in a vial,
And in the porches of my ears did pour
The leprous distilment, whose effect
Holds such an enmity with blood of man
That swift as quicksilver it courses through
The natural gates and alleys of the body,
And with a sudden vigor it doth [posset]
And curd, like eager droppings into milk,
The thin and wholesome blood. (I.v.59-70)

The Ghost's vivid description of the poisoning clearly presents his cause of death as the intrusion of a malignant, foreign substance into the closed passages of the body. In so doing, Shakespeare deftly situates Claudius's specific means of assassination as metonym for the larger spatial trespass that literally and symbolically facilitated that act. Indeed,

these vindictive nobles who facilitate their crimes through the penetration of space supposedly barred to them are tantamount to poison, inevitably corrupting and destroying whatever setting into which they are introduced.

In *Antonio's Revenge*, the vicious duke Piero first appears onstage as he is returning from committing a double homicide. After poisoning Antonio's father during a wedding feast, Piero "then Feliche stabbed / (Whose sinking thought frightened [the duke's] conscious heart) / And laid by Mellida, to stop the match / And hale on mischief" (I.i.75-8).¹⁹ Here Piero's literal transgression of stealing into the private space of his daughter's room and bed to plant Feliche's murdered corpse is compounded by the symbolic trespass it represents. Seemingly constrained by his daughter's companionate union to his enemy's son, Antonio,²⁰ Piero's breach of his daughter's chamber and deposit of Feliche's body effectively frames the woman as an adulteress, thereby giving him an excuse to intercede and annul her marriage. In other words, his breach of Mellida's chamber and bed ultimately allows him to usurp Antonio's right to her. In so doing, Piero intrudes as both father and duke upon a personal union to which he should no longer have access.

In this sense, Piero's particular transgression of space is emblematic of contemporary concerns surrounding the extent of the crown's control regarding the sovereignty of the father and husband within his own household. Eileen Allman perceptively links this anxiety to another fundamental transgression inherent in the English revenge tragedy, namely the lasciviousness of the villain-noble. "As self-proclaimed head of state and family," she reminds, "the revenge tyrant marries mothers, seduces sisters, and rapes wives, in the process infantilizing sons, undermining brothers,

and, most publicly shameful, cuckolding husbands,” and thus, “Through the agency of a woman theoretically subject to him, he [the revenger] is made subject to another man.”²¹ While this turn to the villain-noble’s characteristic lust would appear to be a retreat from our discussion of physical space, in actuality it complicates and compounds the matter by now including the aristocrat’s intrusion into various aspects of bodily space. The explicit sexual violation of Lavinia offers the most immediate evidence, but the threat of similar violation permeates other revenge plays, as well. Lussurioso sets his desire upon Vindice’s sister, hoping to “Enter upon the portion of her soul, / Her honor, which she calls her chastity, / And bring it into expense” (I.iii.113-5),²² and though the royal never even occupies the stage at the same time as Castiza, the intent alone is enough justification for Vindice to murder the man. Even the ostensibly legitimate union of Claudius and Gertrude is given undue significance in the mind of Hamlet, whose preoccupation with the royal bed of Denmark reenacts in his troubled mind the royal couple “In the rank sweat of an enseamed bed, / Stew’d in corruption, honeying and making love / Over the nasty sty!” (III.iv.92-4). Thus, the villain’s infiltration of the architectural confines of gardens and bed chambers often leads to a far more insidious breach of the female body, but even when those royals are unsuccessful in their designs, the mere threat of this transgression produces a palpable male anxiety that suggests even more is at stake than the chastity of their beloved sisters and daughters.

As Allman’s point reminds, the victimization of these female subjects is understood to wound the man as well, for they breach the symbolic but ostensibly secure limits of the family. Though an abstraction, such considerations are not wholly distinct from those spatial transgressions already discussed. In his *The Production of Space*,

Lefebvre delineates both the “real space” within which social practice takes place and the “ideal space” of the mind.²³ Andrew Hiscock helpfully glosses this second theoretical type, elaborating that such representational spaces are “a flexible and imaginative category which concentrates upon symbolic appropriations (e.g. racial, gendered, juridical, theological) of space in social existence.”²⁴ These different kinds of space are not mutually exclusive, however; rather, “Lefebvre asks his reader to attend to a concept of cultural space provided through relations between differing levels of signification (the perceived, the conceived and the lived), thus positing a dynamic and cross-fertilized form of space.”²⁵ For us to assume the villain-noble’s abuse of spatial control is limited strictly to the breach of physical boundaries, therefore, would be to misconstrue and underestimate the significance of space within these plays. As Lefebvre himself reminds, “In actuality each of these two kinds of space involves, underpins and presupposes the other.”²⁶ It should come as little surprise, then, that these princes’ intrusions into the real space of secluded gardens and private chambers should be accompanied by an equally dangerous penetration of characters’ symbolic space:

The stage tyrant’s flamboyant violations concretize in extreme form the contemporary fear that an absolute ruler could invade the family and seize his subject’s right to govern as absolute monarch there. Given the connection between a man’s commanding position in the family and his social validation as male, any usurpation of the position is a claim to absolute ownership of male gender.²⁷

With the villain’s trespass, the ostensibly separate realm of the public intrudes upon the private domain of the family, simultaneously belying the conceptual understanding of this rigid separation while still undermining the masculine sense of self predicated upon that abstraction. This villain’s penetration of the intimate circle that is the family, through that breach, inherently assaults the masculine subject who, at least in part, defines himself

through the policing of that conceptual boundary. This is why Vindice is so willing to murder over his sister's chastity, and why Hamlet, "too much in the sun" (I.ii.67), cannot reconcile the interloper Claudius with the position of "father" the man has assumed. In each instance, we have moved beyond the literal considerations of physical space to consider the more abstract but nevertheless significant implications of other transgressions. Be it the intimate realm of the family or their very conception of themselves as patriarchal protectors, instances of the victims' social space are always violated through the overreaching lasciviousness of the revenge tragedy tyrant.

Perhaps even more damaging, the villain-noble's trespass of physical and social space all too often marks an equally corrosive penetration of his victims' imaginations—quite literally their 'mental space.' The elderly lord Antonio's wife in *The Revenger's Tragedy*, raped by the Duke's stepson during a court masque, cannot stand the dishonor of her victimization, and rather than survive with that memory, instead "Deemed it a nobler dowry for her name / To die with poison than to live with shame" (I.iv.46-7). Even more pronounced is the revenger's preoccupation with his enemy, symptomatic of an imaginative intrusion by that villain equal to the physical breach of space that engendered it. Vindice, for instance, complains, "Oh, the thought of that [parched and juiceless luxur] Turns my abuséd heartstrings into fret" (I.i.9, 12-3). Titus is so enslaved by the memory of his family's victimization that he actually murders his daughter Lavinia so that "with thy shame thy father's sorrow die" (V.iii.47), and if Antonio's vow to "suck red vengeance / Out of Piero's wounds, Piero's wounds" (III.ii.78-9) in *Antonio's Revenge* were not suggestive enough in its manic repetition, Marston makes his revenger's obsession blatantly apparent in Antonio's rationalization of the young Julio's murder:

“He is all Piero, father, all; this blood, / This breast, this heart, Piero all, / Whom thus I mangle” (III.iii.56-8). So intense is Antonio’s preoccupation here that he cannot help but see his enemy in the man’s son, and thereby finds vindication in killing the child.

Yet the most famous imaginatively arrested revenger is Shakespeare’s Hamlet, who ironically obsesses over an enemy sexuality that, compared to the other lustful villain-nobles of the genre, is the least criminal. Like the shade of his father, who commands his son to “Let not the royal bed of Denmark be / A couch for luxury and damned incest” (I.v.82-3), Hamlet’s mind again and again returns to the “Bloody, bawdy villain,” the “Remorseless, treacherous, lecherous, kindles villain”(II.ii.580-1) with whom his mother “post[s] / With such dexterity to incestuous sheets” (I.ii.156-7). Claudius is a constant subject of Hamlet’s thoughts, one whose persistence only underscores the revenge yet to be accomplished, and consequently, turns Hamlet’s ire upon his own inactive self. Thus, though the degree and nature of their presence varies from play to play, every villain-noble comes to breach and dominate the mental space of their socially inferior victims, just as the performance of their actual crime was predicated upon a similar penetration of physical and domestic space.²⁸

But as that multifaceted incursion of space so clearly evokes the impulse to revenge in his victims, the corrupt tyrant of English revenge tragedy must continue to abuse this ostensibly legitimate avenue of hegemonic power in order to protect himself from reprisal, this time through restrictive measures of banishment and imprisonment. As Foucault reminds, “In the first instance, discipline proceeds from the distribution of individuals in space,” the most fundamental example of which being that “Discipline sometimes requires *enclosure*, the specification of a protected place of disciplinary

monotony.”²⁹ While it is ironic that these rulers would choose to deploy otherwise legitimate tactics of political control to hide their previous abuse of that very power, it is nevertheless entirely appropriate that after clearly evincing the potential for violent criminality via their own unlawful movement through space, these villain-nobles would therefore seek to limit others’ movement in the hopes of preventing a similar opportunity for bloodshed. Even as he is ordering his henchmen to hang Horatio, Lorenzo sets Balthazar to bear his sister Bel-Imperia away to confinement, and if his subsequent conversation with their father is any indication, actively works to deny Hieronimo access to the King: “It is suspected and reported too, / That thou, Lorenzo, wrong’st Hieronimo, / And in his suits towards His Majesty / Still keep’st him back, and seeks to cross his suit” (III.xiv.53-6). Other rulers seek to purge their domain of perceived threats through the expulsion of these dissidents. Having finally decided Hamlet is too dangerous to remain at court, for instance, Claudius “must send thee hence / [With fiery quickness]” abroad to England (IV.iii.42-3). Most telling, however, is Piero’s failed attempt to enlist the grieving Pandulpho as an ally:

Pie. Hence doting stoic! By my hope of bliss,
I’ll make thee wretched.
Pan. Defiance to thy power, thou rifted jawn! [...] Thou canst not coop me up. Hadst thou a jail With treble walls like antique Babylon, Pandulpho can get out. I tell thee, Duke, I have old Fortunatus’ wishing-cap, And can be where I list, even in a trice. I’ll skip from earth into the arms of heaven, And from triumphal arch of blessedness Spit on they frothy breast. Thou canst not slave Or banish me; I will be free at home, Maugre the beard of greatness. (II.ii.69-85)

In response to the ruler’s frustrated order to leave, Pandulpho aggressively asserts his

defiance of Piero's ducal power in terms of spatial liberation; he is not subject to Piero's sovereignty, he claims, because he is immune to those means through which the ruler would enforce it. In response, Piero deliberately affirms that very prerogative by exiling the old Stoic: "slave, I banish thee the town, / Thy native seat of birth [...] Hence, dotard wretch. / Tread not in court" (II.ii.89-90, 101-2). Clearly, the socio-politically sanctioned control of space—specifically the subject's movement through that space—remains an essential tool of the genre's villain-noble even after he has successfully performed his crime, strategically implemented to safeguard his guilt and protect his person. However, as this last example in particular illustrates, those victims subject to the tyrant's rule also recognize the significance of controlling space. The key to retribution, then, becomes a matter of appropriating and redeploying that power.

Despite the aristocracy's conception of their inherent right, the control of space is not a tactic exclusive to their caste. Lefebvre explains that

(Social) space is a (social) product [...] the space thus produced also serves as a tool of thought and of action; that in addition to being a means of production it is also a means of control, and hence of domination, of power; yet that, as such, it escapes in part from those who would make use of it.³⁰

If there is anything inherently aristocratic about the exploitation of space, it is merely the blunt openness with which the class utilizes this avenue of power. The tool itself remains available to others' use, so long as those who would do so can effectively refashion it to suit their disenfranchised position within the tyrant's regime. If, as Lefebvre argues, "new social relationships call for a new space,"³¹ the would-be revenger must therefore paradoxically create a new space first before he can effect a spatial control as potent as

the villain-noble's, for such self-empowerment is impossible in the extant setting of the ruler's corrupt court. Regarding *The Spanish Tragedy*'s knight marshal in particular,

Kevin Dunn notes,

But of equal if not greater importance to Kyd's understanding of Hieronimo's dilemma is the fact that this lack of a locus is also a lack of a topos [...] His words grant him no access to either heaven or the king because they are without adequate *place*—just as his bower has failed to provide a safe place, to represent successfully his secure place at court, so the topoi of the apothegm have failed to represent adequately his plight, and he must search for his own genre. To be constructed entirely as a public figure, a figure of speech, is also to be deprived of adequate discursive resources to render subjectivity.³²

Though made in regard to Hieronimo alone, Dunn's observation is pertinent to the early modern revenger in general: situated as he is within the corrupt space of the villain-noble's court, the means available to the revenger within that space are necessarily inadequate. To circumvent this, he must effect a change of setting; to use Dunn's words, he "must search for his own genre." The revenger's answer to this dilemma is the construction and implementation of an explicitly performative space, thereby furnishing himself with an alternative avenue to the power of spatial control and providing the genre its staple, metadramatic denouement.

This shift from the "real space" of the court and its legitimized avenues of hegemonic domination to the performative space of the genre's bloody masques and ceremonies represents a fundamental inversion of power between the villain-noble and the revenger, one ultimately effected through cultural assumptions regarding dramatic frame. "Frame" is the conceptual bracket—usually delineated, or at least reinforced, by spatial markers such as a stage or auditorium—in which the spectator designates what is performance and what not, what is to be interpreted and what to be ignored. As Kier Elam explains in *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama*, "The theatrical frame is in effect

the product of a set of transactional conventions governing the participants' expectations and their understanding of the kinds of reality involved in the performance."³³ This concept is so important to the revenger's success because an audience's belief that something is performance necessarily entails an abdication of control on their part. Because all phenomena onstage assume a signifying function "to the extent that their relation to what they signify is perceived as being deliberately intended,"³⁴ everything in such a controlled environment—supposedly natural or otherwise—is all believed to be a mere semiotic representation, but an intentional one. As such, the audience tacitly grants authority to that intentionality, resigning any say in what takes place within the theatrical frame.³⁵ So thorough is this abdication, in fact, that at times the audience even gives over its inherent interpretive agency. After the first metadramatic playlet in *The Spanish Tragedy*, for instance, the Spanish King asks Hieronimo, the play's creator, what it all means: "Hieronimo, this masque contents mine eye, / Although I sound not well the mystery" (I.iv.138-9). Assuming that everything performed has a predetermined meaning, the King foregoes the option of semiotically interpreting the masque himself and simply asks the play's creator what its message was. Therefore, as an audience's passive abdication of agency is so complete as to even allow others to give meaning to signs, it should come as little surprise that the incorporation of a theatrical frame allows the revenger to effectively usurp the villain-noble's socially sanctioned control of space by seeming to temporarily transform the court to a stage.

The irony, of course, is that no such transformation takes place—or to be more precise, the imposition of the performative does not replace the "real" space of the court. Rather, they overlap and coexist. Yet through the imposition of a theatrical frame, the

revenger succeeds in manipulating the perception of his audience, exploiting their expectations and understanding of courtly entertainments. In so doing, the protagonist may cover the very real business of assassinating a political figure beneath the guise of frivolous and harmless play by encouraging the belief that these instances of theater and dance are somehow distinct. To these corrupt nobles, the masques and other productions put on by the protagonist appear to be interludes apart from the real business of state, and in this temporary misrecognition of the situation, the revenger seizes his opportunity and utilizes his prey's assumptions to subvert his control over that courtly space.

This shift in control begins even before these metadramatic performances start, for the very designation of which space shall become his stage marks the revenger's initial exertion of power through space. While Foucault readily acknowledges the limitation of the subject's movement through space as a fundamental avenue of political control, as in exile or imprisonment, he also notes that the ability to "code a space that architecture generally left at the disposal of several different uses"³⁶ to be another effective tactic. This first technique actually provides a useful model for the revenger's appropriation of legitimate means of political control in general, for in this instance he first employs his rights within the performative frame and quickly progresses to utilizing more blatant and non-theatrical means of spatial control. Specifically, he first designates which space will be his stage and soon after, once he has been recognized as the director of that performative space, he assumes the right to close that space off and thereby restrict others' movement. For instance, Hieronimo first erects a clear designation of theatrical frame, a curtain,³⁷ and identifies himself in the third person as "the author" (IV.iii.3) before soon after asking Castile, "Let me entreat Your Grace / That when the

train are passed into the gallery, / You would vouchsafe to thrown me down the key” (IV.iii.11-3). An even more conspicuous appropriation of ducal power occurs in *Antonio’s Revenge*, where the revengers actually dictate what orders Piero should give, thereby making him a mouthpiece through which they may effect the spatial control that will mean his death. Having already entered “*in maskery*” (V.v.SD), Antonio and his co-conspirators dance a measure—thereby establishing the performative space—before whispering their orders in the duke’s ear:

Pie. The maskers pray you to forbear the room
Till they have banqueted. Let it be so;
No man presume to visit them, on death.
The maskers whisper again.
Only my self? O, why, with all my heart.
I’ll fill your consort; here Piero sits. (V.v.26-30)

By first clearly imposing a theatrical frame upon the space they share with the villain-noble, these revengers assume control of that space via the aristocrat’s understanding of dramatic performance and an audience’s passive role in it. Having done so, it is then an easy matter to appropriate more traditional modes of spatial control and thereby solidify their agency and their prey’s vulnerability at the moment of assassination.

Indeed, so complete is this reversal of fortune that the tyrant, who throughout the play has callously exerted his right to trespass in even the most private of spaces, is now not only robbed of that power but himself subject to a tacit stasis all his own. As a member of the audience, he is by convention meant to remain stationary and focus his attention upon the performance before him, but this stasis is compounded for the villain-noble in particular by his status as the most socially prominent individual in the room. In *The Illusion of Power*, Stephen Orgel describes the competing spectacles of any court production created by the presence of the royal spectator. Other members of court were

treated to “not a play but a queen at a play, and their response would have been not simply to the drama, but to the relationship between the drama and its primary audience, the royal spectator.”³⁸ So important was this individual that others’ spatial relation to her was a signifier of social prominence: ambassadors and nobles were known to be deliberately slighted by being placed far from the monarch, while others were shown favor through their proximity. This is just what Lussurioso does to reward the most officious of his courtiers in the final scene of *The Revenger’s Tragedy* immediately before the revengers’ masque, stating, “Give me thy hand. These others I rebuke. / He that hopes so is fittest for a duke. / Thou shalt sit next to me” (V.iii.36-8).

Furthermore, set design for these court spectacles came to be increasingly predicated upon the monarch’s position in the audience. These perspectivist sets, unlike the thrust stages of the public theatres, were built in such a way that only one position was afforded a perfect view of the performance; all other seats suffered views distorted or obscured proportional to their distance from that ideal spot.³⁹ At least for this type of court production, then, the performative space is so specifically constructed as to determine where the monarch will be even before she arrives, effectively locking her in place. And while it would be an overstatement to claim that each revenger’s masque is just such a perspectivist design, the plays do repeatedly call attention to the villain-noble’s status as sedentary and stationary immediately before his assassination. Antonio’s enemy declares, “Here Piero sits” (V.v.30) and Lussurioso orders his lords to take their seats as Vindice’s masque begins (V.iii.38). The parley Titus stages at the end of his eponymous tragedy is not explicitly situated within a theatrical frame, but the performative aspects of it are readily noted by his guests,⁴⁰ who observe his cook’s

costume and ask, “Why art thou thus attir’d, Andronicus?” (V.iii.30). Nevertheless, here too are the victims’ stationary positions underscored, as Marcus begins the feast by asking the newly arrived parties to “Please you, therefore, draw nigh and take your places” (V.iii.24). The palpable irony here is that these aristocrats, who have otherwise spent the entirety of the play moving freely through space and enjoying the power such control engenders, are finally and unwittingly robbed of that attribute, fixed in place by the revenger’s strategic deployment of a theatrical frame, and thereby transformed into a stationary target who is all too easy a mark for their avenging blades.

However, as is so often the case, *Hamlet* merits special discussion. In every other instance within the Kydian tradition of revenge, the play’s final metadramatic performance is orchestrated by the revenger himself; even the feast at the end of *Titus Andronicus*, while not the traditional masque or play, is nevertheless very much a performance. The duel that concludes *Hamlet*, however, is constructed largely by the play’s villain-noble, Claudius. How, then, do we situate this conspicuous exception against these other examples of revengers remaking a space for revenge? The answer lies in Claudius’s decision to make Hamlet an active participant within this frame but confine himself principally to spectatorship alone. Though he is the architect of the entire episode, Claudius nevertheless effects the very inversion of power for which these instances are typically employed, arranging a similar constraint upon his own ability to control the situation within the performative frame. More significantly, though, his clever stratagem also consigns the remainder of the court to the passive role of audience. While their subsequent inaction may indeed be due in some part to their shock at the chaotic events transpiring before them, the fact remains that the Danish courtiers make no move

in response to their prince's command, "Ho, let the door be lock'd! Treachery! Seek it out" (V.ii.311-2), or their king's, "O, yet defend me, friends, I am but hurt" (V.ii.324). This is not to say, of course, that the courtiers believe the chaos to be merely show, but rather that the nature of Claudius's trap is fundamentally designed to discourage interference by casting them as spectators, as passive, and while it eventually succeeds in granting Laertes an opening to wound Hamlet, it also gives the prince a similar advantage in the hasty, impromptu execution of his own revenge.

Thus, while it is certainly effected through the establishment of a performative context, the villain-noble's conspicuous loss of power during the final moments of these plays results from the unwitting loss of the spatial control he has exercised throughout the preceding scenes. The metadramatic set piece that comprises the finale of each play is less a space in which new kinds of power are deployed, then, as it is an opportunity for extant modes of domination to be temporarily appropriated by those typically denied their use. Failing to adequately recognize the simultaneity of multiple spatial categories—that the imposition of the "theatrical" does not wholly eclipse the "real," that rather they are both at once—the villain-noble instead sets aside the power he wields in court as he assumes the passive mantle of the stationary spectator and abdicates control to the "director" of that performative space: the revenger. Thus, while the avenger does ultimately and ironically come to resemble those he stalks, he does not simply come to mimic the violence of his enemy, but rather, through the deployment of particular, non-lingual signs such as props, costume, or dance, he establishes a theatrical space in which he might effectively immobilize his prey and rob him of the socially sanctioned spatial control through which he has previously victimized the protagonist and denied him

justice. Then and only then can the revenger proceed to the spectacular and bloody end for which the genre is so famous.

Endnotes

¹ John Kerrigan, *Revenge Tragedy: Aeschylus to Armageddon* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 12.

² Fredson Bowers, *Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1940), 3.

³ Katharine Eisaman Maus, *Inwardness and Theater in the English Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 55.

⁴ James I, *The Trew Law of Free Monarchies: or The Reciprocal and mutual duetie betwixt a free King, and his naturall Subjects*, in *King James VI and I, Selected Writings*, ed. Neil Rhodes, Jennifer Richards and Joseph Marshall (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2003), 274.

⁵ Kerrigan, 6.

⁶ Katharine Eisaman Maus, introduction to *Four Revenge Tragedies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), xiv.

⁷ Kerrigan himself warns against similar misunderstandings of the genre's fundamental irony, cautioning, "Clearly the picture of A vs. B antagonism needs qualifying with the thought that motives are often rationalizations, that desires can go in disguise" (9). His concern here, however, deals more with the uncertainties of characters' expressed motivations versus subconscious urges and compulsions; my concern focuses less upon psychoanalytic issues as it does the realities of political domination and doxic systems of control.

⁸ This is not to suggest, of course, that these two modes of spatial control are mutually exclusive and never appear together in the same play. Quite to the contrary, aspects of both are known to surface in a number of revenge plays. Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*, for instance, also contains Lorenzo's imprisonment of his sister Bel-Imperia, while *Hamlet* includes the prince's journey to England at the king's urgent behest.

⁹ Richard Helgerson, "The Land Speaks: Cartography, Chorography, and Subversion in Renaissance England," *Representations* 16 (1986): 54. Helgerson goes on to illustrate, however, that the very presence of these subtle assertions of spatial possession and dominance actually undermine royalist claims by foregrounding their decorative, and thus dispensable, nature.

¹⁰ James I, *Basilikon Doron Or His Majesties instructions to his dearest sonne, Henry the prince*, in *King James VI and I, Selected Writings*, ed. Neil Rhodes, Jennifer Richards and Joseph Marshall (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2003), 222.

¹¹ James I, *The Trew Law of Free Monarchies*, 271.

¹² “Act for the Punishing of Vagabonds,” quoted in Andrew Hiscock, *The Uses of this World* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2004), 3.

¹³ See Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1991); Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon, 1994); and Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces,” *Diacritics* 16, no.1 (1986), respectively.

¹⁴ Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 11.

¹⁵ Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge* (Brighton: Harvester, 1980), 149, quoted in Hiscock, 3. Of course, Lefebvre was acutely aware of the relationship between power and space as well. In *The Production of Space* he remarks, “We also forget that there is a total object, namely absolute political space—that strategic space which seeks to impose itself as reality despite the fact that it is an abstraction, albeit one endowed with enormous powers because it is the locus and medium of Power” (94).

¹⁶ Thomas Kyd, *The Spanish Tragedy*, in *English Renaissance Drama*, ed. David Bevington, Lars Engle, Katharine Eisaman Maus and Eric Rasmussen (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2002). All subsequent quotation of this play is from this edition.

¹⁷ William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, in *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans, 2nd ed. (New York: Houghton Mifflin). All subsequent quotation of Shakespearean drama is taken from this edition.

¹⁸ “Although his life were still ambitious proud, / Yet is he at the highest now he is dead” (II.iv.60-61).

¹⁹ John Marston, *Antonio’s Revenge*, ed. W. Reavley Gair, *The Revels Plays* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1999). All subsequent quotation of the play is taken from this edition.

²⁰ *Antonio’s Revenge* is billed as the second part of *Antonio and Mellida*, a traditional comedy in which Piero’s ill will toward his daughter’s match is circumvented by a clever stratagem at the play’s conclusion, thereby allowing the young lovers to marry and even receive the seemingly genuine blessing of her father. Thus, in a sense, Piero is also constrained by the continuity of the precedent play, one from which he effectively liberates himself in the sequel’s bloody opening.

²¹ Eileen Allman, *Jacobean Revenge Tragedy and the Politics of Virtue* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1999), 42. One might take issue with Allman’s choice of words in this quote: it may be misleading to speak of “agency” regarding women who are routinely blackmailed, terrorized, and raped by the kings and dukes of the genre. Quite to the contrary, these women are so frequently victimized precisely because they move within a misogynistic, corrupt court that denies them significant agency.

²² Thomas Middleton, *The Revenger's Tragedy*, in *English Renaissance Drama*, ed. David Bevington, Lars Engle, Katharine Eisaman Maus and Eric Rasmussen (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2002). All subsequent quotation of this play is from this edition.

²³ Lefebvre, 14.

²⁴ Hiscock, 5.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 6.

²⁶ Lefebvre, 14.

²⁷ Allman, 43.

²⁸ Though the proposed seduction of Castiza never actually succeeds, Lussurioso's words to Vindice as he offers him payment for the job are nevertheless telling in light of tyrants' penchant for dominating the revengers' imagination: "And thus I enter thee" (I.iii.85).

²⁹ Michel Foucault, *Discipline & Punish*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 141. Italics are preserved from the text.

³⁰ Lefebvre, 26.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 59.

³² Kevin Dunn, "Action, Passion, Motion: The Gestural Politics of Counsel in *The Spanish Tragedy*," *Renaissance Drama* 31 (2002): 48.

³³ Kier Elam, *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama* (New York: Methuen, 1980), 88. For more on the idea of "frame" in general and theatrical frame in particular, see Gregory Bateson, "A Theory of Play and Fantasy," in *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (London: Intertext, 1972), 177-93 and Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974).

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 20. This understanding of theatre's deliberate signficatory practice was Tadeusz Kowtzan's 1968 refinement of the Prague school's semiotization law. Taking the established distinction between natural and artificial signifiers, Kowtzan argued that even natural signs, when set within a theatrical frame, are necessarily interpreted as artificial. He explains, "The spectacle transforms natural signs into artificial ones (a flash of lightning), so it can 'artificialize' signs. Even if they are only reflexes in life, they become voluntary signs in the theatre. Even if they have no communicative function in life, they necessarily acquire it on stage." Quoted in Elam, 20.

³⁵ Indeed, this is the entire premise behind the satire of the Citizen and his Wife in *The Knight of the Burning Pestle* (1607): the actual Jacobean theatrical audience, with their sophisticated understanding of dramatic convention, are meant to see the pair's belief in the reality of events on stage and their determined efforts to dictate those events as the inept interpretive fumbblings of, essentially, a couple of theatrical rubes.

³⁶ Foucault, *Discipline & Punish*, 143.

³⁷ Specifically, the stage directions opening IV.iii read, "*Enter Hieronimo; he knocks up a curtain. Enter the Duke of Castile.*"

³⁸ Stephen Orgel, *The Illusion of Power* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), 9.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 10-14.

⁴⁰ Indeed, the very reason for Saturninus's question is the contradiction between their non-theatrical frame and the ostensibly performative signifier of costume. What the emperor does not realize is that this bloody banquet is indeed a performance orchestrated by Titus, one the former general directs under the guise of "host."

Chapter 2:
Revenge as Rite of Passage: Liminal Theatricality and the Elision of Difference

Understanding the revenger's fundamental trajectory as a journey or transformation is not a new insight by any means. Victimized by the villain-noble's crime and then blocked from legitimate avenues of justice by that corrupt aristocrat's machinations and the relative powerlessness of the protagonist's inferior social position, the revenger must effect some sort of change to see vengeance done. The vector of this metamorphosis varies widely from play to play, as does the degree of agency he has in his own transformation, but if one thing is clear after the bloody denouement of these plays, it is that the successful avenger is unmistakably a changed man: the controlled Knight Marshall of *The Spanish Tragedy*'s opening scenes stands in stark contrast to the wild revenger who bites out his own tongue; the maimed, mad chef who feeds Tamora her sons bears little resemblance to the triumphant Roman general at the opening of *Titus Andronicus*; and most famously, the acceptance of Hamlet's oft-cited "we defy augury" speech differs dramatically from the static indecision that plagues the Danish prince throughout the opening acts of his eponymous play. To be sure, ironic parallels persist throughout either extreme which remind us that these are still the same individuals—Titus readily murders one of his children at both the beginning and end of his play, while Hieronimo's final, bloody playlet echoes his earlier (if not quite so instructive) entertainment for the Portuguese ambassador—but at the same time, the permutations made upon these episodes serve primarily to underscore the nature and degree of the revenger's transformation.

Justifiably, this metamorphosis receives routine mention by critics of the genre, often becoming the very starting point upon which the particulars of their argument are built. Fredson Bowers, for instance, broadly characterizes revengers as “normal persons caught up by demands often too strong for their powers and forced into a course of action which warps and twists their characters and may lead even to the disintegration of insanity,”¹ while the authors of *The Revenger’s Madness* are more “concerned with the passion rather than the tragic situation, that is, with the attempts of the dramatists to analyze the changes wrought upon the psyche by the emotions of revenge.”² More recently, Harry Keyishian’s assertion in *The Shapes of Revenge*, that “Through revenge they attempt, with varying degrees of justification and success, to restore their integrity—their sense of psychic wholeness—and stabilize their identities, often by restructuring them around their new roles as revengers,”³ offers a novel approach, clearly speaking to the recuperative potential of revenge his work explores. Whatever their thesis, however, these critics make it a matter of course to begin their studies with a recognition of the revenger’s transformative journey.

This fundamental aspect of the genre has rarely been explored, however, in relation to the revenge play’s conspicuous theatricality. Of course, the fact that the English revenge tragedy is rife with such metadramatic theatricality has not gone unnoticed; quite to the contrary, critics make note of this characteristic with virtually the same regularity as they do the revenger’s transformation. What is curious is that they move beyond such superficial observation infrequently at best. Charles and Elaine Hallett note in the very first line of *The Revenger’s Madness* that “Revenge tragedy is noted (or notorious) for its theatricality,”⁴ though only seem to do so, essentially, to help justify

their overall neglect of it in their own work. In her introduction to *Four Revenge Tragedies*, Katharine Eisaman Maus asks, “What is the connection between revenge and theatrical display?” but answers her important query only cursorily with gestures toward the pedagogics of spectacle and the duplicity of disguise.⁵ On the other hand, those who do not believe theatricality already adequately explored instead seem to feel its role in the genre to be self-evident. These critics focus primarily upon the revenger’s penchant for disguise and his metadramatic plays-within-plays only to conclude his turn to the theatrical is wholly a practical necessity, that he has been left no other option. “In fact, the motive [to revenge a wrong] cuts two ways at once,” John Kerrigan explains, “subordinating the agent to a situation but, at the same time, prompting him to shape events towards that action’s end. This generates a theatricality which registers even in non-dramatic literature.”⁶

While I readily grant there are considerable practical benefits to the revenger’s theatrical turn—benefits he successfully capitalizes upon to realize his revenge—I question whether this theatricality is nothing more than a means to an end or, as others would have it, a pedagogical device. As pervasive as this metadramatic performance is within the genre, it must bear greater significance to the principal thematics at work within the English revenge play. As Jonathan Bate adroitly challenges,

Theatrical self-consciousness is so fundamental to Elizabethan revenge drama that it is insufficient to account for it on merely formal grounds by pointing out that play-acting serves to give Hieronimo, Titus, and Hamlet the opportunity to kill or expose their enemies which they would not otherwise have.⁷

Furthermore, is there no interpretation of the genre’s theatricality that can bridge the divide between those readings that ascribe its significance to the world of the play and

those that conversely argue its significance lies in its impact upon the theatrical audience?⁸

I would argue the genre's conspicuous deployment of theatricality is a fundamental and necessary component of the revenger's marked transformation, a metamorphosis best understood in light of Victor Turner's conceptualization of the rite of passage. Unlike our more general idea of the watershed moment marking one's coming of age,⁹ Turner's concept describes a specific, systematic sequence through which an individual transcends their previous place in the social, theological, or political order. Based largely upon Arnold van Gennep's anthropological work and theorization of the *limen*,¹⁰ Turner's *The Ritual Process* elaborates upon the three distinct phases of van Gennep's rite of passage:

The first phase (of separation) comprises symbolic behavior signifying the detachment of the individual or group either from an earlier fixed point in the social structure, from a set of cultural conditions (a "state"), or from both. During the intervening "liminal" period, the characteristics of the ritual subject (the "passenger") are ambiguous; he passes through a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state. In the third phase (reaggregation or reincorporation), the passage is consummated. The ritual subject, individual or corporate, is in a relatively stable state once more and, by virtue of this, has rights and obligation vis-à-vis others of a clearly defined and "structural" type; he is expected to behave in accordance with certain customary norms and ethical standards binding on incumbents of social position in a system of such positions.¹¹

Understanding the revenger's transformation as a kind of rite of passage, therefore, begins to explain the role of theatricality in this metamorphosis. Forcibly separated from his original sense of self through his victimization at the hands of the play's villain-noble, the revenger's theatricality not only provides him with practical opportunity to commence his quest but also effects and maintains a liminality that furthers his transformative rite of passage and challenges the audience's established notions of social

categorization, alterity, and self-fashioning. His eventual abandonment of disguise and return to society marks the full return of his vulnerability to its strictures, and while this means certain death for the revenger himself, this cannot completely eclipse the liberatory potential of strategically deployed theatricality nor cast aside the elision of difference such liminal performance reveals to its audiences. A sustained investigation of the revenger's oft-noted transformation as rite of passage, therefore, clearly promises an understanding of the genre's conspicuous theatricality far more complete than previous studies have achieved.

Appropriate to the revenger's unique position amidst tragic protagonists,¹² the initial separation that marks the beginning of this rite of passage is forced upon him by the crime of the play's villain-noble. While that generative offense becomes increasingly displaced as the genre develops,¹³ the often histrionic pathos which results from it remains a conspicuous benchmark of the English revenge tragedy. Typically this manifests as an intense feeling of alienation, as being subject to an undue amount of the world's corruption and impotent to remedy this victimization by earthly or divine measures. Hieronimo laments, "Where shall I run to breathe abroad my woes, / My woes whose weight hath wearied the earth? / Or mine exclaims that have surcharged the air / With ceaseless plaints for my deceased son?" for "still tormented is my tortured soul" (III.vii.1-4, 10) while Titus, in the pit of his despair, finds himself pleading not with Rome's tribunes but with the earth itself: "Therefore I tell my sorrows to the stones, / Who, though they cannot answer my distress, / Yet in some sort they are better than the

tribunes” (III.i.37-9). It is perhaps most telling that Titus, the once triumphant general who had Rome itself offered to him, now sees himself as merely a victim: “Why, foolish Lucius, dost thou not perceive / That Rome is but a wilderness of tigers? / Tigers must prey, and Rome affords no prey / But me and mine” (III.i.53-6).

Titus’s wilderness metaphor is especially characteristic of the revenger’s sorrowful lament, for implicit within it is the suggestion that the protagonist alone has experienced such hardship, that he is somehow set apart by the degree of his suffering. If, as Keyishian suggests, “The malicious assaults...that most strongly stimulate the desire for revenge, confound and disrupt the victim’s sense of possessing a stable and inviolable identity,” that “they feel disempowered and, in effect, erased,”¹⁴ many revengers desperately cling to their superlative misery as the one stable remnant of that otherwise shattered self. Should that singularity be challenged, they respond with an outrage otherwise reserved for their quarry alone. For instance in *Antonio’s Revenge*, when Pandulpho utters a self-pitying lament utterly typical of the genre, sighing, “I am the miserablest soul that breathes,” Antonio angrily and immediately responds:

‘Slid, sir, ye lie! By th’ heart of grief, thou liest!
I scorn’t that any wretched should survive
Outmounting me in that superlative,
Most miserable, most unmatched in woe.
Who dare assume that, but Antonio? (IV.v.53-8)

A more famous instance of this self-aggrandized suffering is Hamlet’s quarrel with Laertes over Ophelia’s grave. Each revengers in their own right, it comes as little surprise, then, that their implicit, competing desires to appear most wretched should come to a head. Equating their degree of loss with their measure of love for the dead, each insists Ophelia meant more to him, culminating in Hamlet’s vehement assertion that “I

lov'd Ophelia. Forty thousand brothers / Could not with all their quantity of love / Make up my sum" (V.i.269-71). Yet despite whatever benefit these men might receive from this superlative despair, it also underscores that their altered sense of self is predicated upon a self-perception of singularity, of conspicuous remove from their peers.

The revenger is further set apart through his preoccupation with the past, a quality which distinguishes him from the villain-noble that would conceal what has been done and the court that remains largely ignorant of what has transpired. In his examination of the English revenge play, Michael Neill recognizes "the crucial importance of memory in this form of drama" and for the revenger in particular: "The revenger, by contrast, is wedded to the past: his role is that of a 'rememberer' in both senses of that formerly potent word—one who exacts payment for past debts, and one whose task is to rescue the past from the grave of oblivion."¹⁵ Hamlet is not alone amongst revengers when he complains, "Heaven and earth, / Must I remember?" (I.ii.142-3). But even without the vengeful spectres characteristic of the genre, these avengers would remain aware of—even distracted by—what has come before. For instance, as his sons are being led to execution for a crime they did not commit, Titus attempts to utilize the past to save their lives, bartering past service done for clemency, unaware that Rome does not bestow the same significance upon days gone as he does:

For all my blood in Rome's great quarrel shed,
For all the frosty nights that I have watch'd,
And for these bitter tears which now you see
Filling the aged wrinkles in my cheeks,
Be pitiful to my condemned sons (III.i.4-8)

The impotence of this plea presents a harsh lesson for Titus, who until now still believed he had some place in the new Rome of Saturninus and Tamora. Only after this

unsuccessful invocation of the past does he fully recognize his alienation, a recognition marked by the “wilderness of tigers” conceit made shortly after the tribunes’ exit. Thus, though this acute memory is endemic of the revenger protagonist, it also necessarily separates him from a corrupt court that would sooner forget.

This disposition toward remembrance also marks an initial step toward the theatricality that will characterize the revenger throughout much of the play. In his deliberate, symbolic association between specific items and past events, he exhibits the conscious awareness of signification upon which his virtuoso theatricality will later be built. These *memento mori* simultaneously evoke multiple memories—of the loved ones themselves, of the revenger’s pain at their loss, and of the job still to be done—and thereby suggest the messy, overlapping nature of the semiotic process (one the revenger will learn to manipulate for his own ends) and gesture toward the ambiguous, liminal quality his roleplaying will ultimately engender. Vindice begins his play with perhaps the most conspicuous example of a revenger’s *memento mori*, the skull of his betrothed Gloriana—one he has had nearly a decade to brood upon. Even after all this time, though, this grisly sign remains potent for Vindice: descanting on the corruption of the royal family as they walk above him, his mind quickly turns to the skull, “Thou sallow picture of my poisoned love, / My study’s ornament” (I.i.14-5), which soon after turns his attention back to the Duke who poisoned her “Because thy purer part would not consent / Unto his palsy lust” (I.i.33-4), evincing the sort of self-perpetuating thought cycle that can only spurn the man toward vengeance as it ensures he remains trapped in memory’s painful thrall. This is precisely why Hieronimo effects two such reminders at the scene of his son’s murder: “See’st thou this handkercher besmeared with blood? / It shall not from

me till I take revenge. / See'st thou those wounds that yet are bleeding fresh? / I'll not entomb them till I have revenged" (II.v.51-4). Emphasizing the visual importance of these symbols through the choice of the verb "See'st," Hieronimo's juxtaposition of memory and semiotic signification is characteristic of the revenger's appropriation of *memento mori* as *memento vindictae*, and foreshadows his pending and essential turn to theatricality.

Less conspicuous than death's heads or bloody handkerchiefs but equally telling, the revenger's alienation also evinces rhetorical symptoms. Following the victimization that marks the break from his former sense of self and the beginning of his metamorphosis, the avenger increasingly relies upon soliloquy and aside to voice his true concerns, creating a schism between the face he presents the court and the ostensibly 'real' self, a divorce that both represents his symbolic separation and offers an initial component of the disguise and roleplaying that will develop soon after. Hieronimo, for instance, does not speak in soliloquy—does not even occupy the stage alone, his integration into the Spanish court is so complete—until the scene in which he discovers his son's murdered body hanging in the arbor; his next appearance in III.ii (another scene begun alone, in soliloquy) marks his first use of aside. Antonio is similarly incorporated amongst his peers until after his father's murder and his betrothed's imprisonment. Titus's first soliloquy—a scant three lines immediately after Saturninus has betrayed the general's trust and opted for Tamora over Lavinia—is particularly remarkable because Titus himself is shocked at these first signs of separation from Roman society: "Titus, when wert thou wont to walk alone, / Dishonour'd thus and challenged of wrongs?" (I.i.339-40). Of course, not all revengers evince such a turn to soliloquy and aside during

their time on stage, but then again, not every protagonist begins his play fully integrated into its society. Vindice begins *The Revenger's Tragedy* physically and rhetorically apart,¹⁶ but this is entirely appropriate for an unknown son of a disgraced family, one who adopts a second disguise late in the play by simply removing the first and exposing his true features. Hamlet is another notable exception, speaking his very first line in aside and punctuating the last third of the scene with his “too too sullied flesh” soliloquy. Yet Hamlet has just lost a father and seems unable to wrest his mind from his memories and unwilling to move forward with the rest of the court, and thus Shakespeare’s choice to first present the prince through aside merely underscores this distance that speech and action will soon make clear to the audience. The point is not that some of these revengers experience a break from their surroundings on stage during the course of the play and that some apparently begin apart, so much as the fact that each revenger experiences a distinct alienation that separates them from their peers and marks the opening step of their transformative rite of passage.

One might assume that such a separation puts the revenger at a distinct disadvantage, distracting him psychologically and distancing him from those familiar sources of consolation and strength to which he was accustomed. However, the revenger as he was is too powerless to change his lot; if transformation is therefore his only recourse, the former self must be discarded in order to effect that metamorphosis, and the alienation detailed above marks the first step of that change. Just as importantly, though, the conspicuous suffering characteristic of that initial break is equally necessary, for it makes apparent to the revenger just how impotent his former self really was. In fact,

Frank Whigham contends that this acknowledgement is a prerequisite to and conscious effort to seize control of one's environment and fashion the self:

I suggest that the recurrent dramatic engagement with the issue of control rests on this correlative foundation of insecurity. The embrace of a relationality capable of funding one's ontology seems for many characters in Renaissance plays to have meant a voicing or revealing or acknowledgement of need, experienced as intolerable self-subjecting disabling vulnerability... These struggles foreground mobile states of seizure—possession, imposition, loss—of control. All versions seem extremely threatening. Frequently the openness, the vulnerability, the trust, the “love” that I have proposed as the ground to Auden's figural lacuna, is itself originally felt as loss.¹⁷

If the revenger is to change his lot, he must begin by acknowledging the inadequacy of his former self, a realization ironically pushed upon him by the suffering engendered through the villain-noble's crime and the subsequent machinations designed to prevent retribution. That done, the separation that results—be it self-imposed or imposed upon the self—begins the transformative rite of passage that will create a man capable of seeing vengeance done. As Stephen Greenblatt explains, “one cannot achieve an identity without rejecting an identity” though he qualifies that “the principle of negation, though necessary, is not sufficient to the fashioning of self.”¹⁸

While this separation alone is indeed insufficient in remedying the revenger's plight, it does nevertheless mark a significant step, as this break with legitimate society and his former self allows the protagonist an increasingly Machiavellian *modus operandi*. Forcibly divorced from those means of legal redress sanctioned by society, the revenger must rely upon his own cunning and ingenuity to accomplish his goals, and in this regard resembles the prototypical English stage Machiavel. He may not evince the same self-serving ambition, nor does he operate under the same egocentric condescension, as the traditional Machiavel “is rarely prepared to repose much trust in others, whom he

commonly regards as fools or knaves, to admire anything but his own abilities, or to serve any cause but his own,”¹⁹ but they do share a single-mindedness, a distrust of others—and an isolation. Indeed, famous stage Machiavels commonly descant on this solitude themselves: Lorenzo muses, “I’ll trust myself; myself shall be my friend” (III.ii.122), Iago confides in his dupe Rodrigo “I follow but myself” (I.i.59), while Richard Duke of Gloucester evokes a more stark symbolic divorce from social ties near the end of *3 Henry VI*, claiming, “I have no brother, I am like no brother...I am myself alone” (V.vi.80, 83). Katharine Eisaman Maus characterizes this break as a move toward “inwardness,” a stark recognition of an autonomous self that, for the English stage Machiavel, undermines society’s claims to his allegiance or compliance. For the revenger in particular, “Social trauma, by forcing or allowing members to venture from the group, makes available a kind of inwardness that, in turn, powerfully outrages the social order,” demanding an “adaptation to a drastic crisis of authority, a crisis that seems to both necessitate and to enable circuitous illegalities.”²⁰ Thus, the revenger’s painful break with society and his former sense of self—engendered by the crime of the play’s villain-noble—facilitates the cultivation of a Machiavellian inwardness that will further his quest for vengeance and marks a first fundamental transformation within the protagonist. This separation constitutes the beginning of his rite of passage, one which soon after proceeds on to the liminality characteristic of its second stage, enacted in the duplicitous roleplaying and disguise made possible by this disempowered victim’s turn toward the Machiavellian.

The liminal stage of the revenger's rite of passage is engendered by his turn to theatricality, the practical benefits of which have at least received some critical attention, as I note above. The efficacy of such theatricality is not lost on the revengers themselves, either. The protagonist of *Antonio's Revenge*, for example, explains that "Thou that wants power, with dissemblance fight" (II.iv.27), delivered (appropriately enough) in aside immediately after wishing his hated enemy Piero a polite courtesy and respectfully making a leg, thereby proving his statement by pairing it with a disingenuous—and judging from Piero's lack of response, effective—performance of social respect. Even more explicit discussion of theatre's power is found in *Hamlet*, where the Prince marvels at the player's emotive response to his tearful Hecuba speech, where

I have heard
That guilty creatures sitting at a play
Have by the very cunning of the scene
Been strook so to the soul, that presently
They have proclaim'd their malefactions: (II.ii.588-92)

Thus, as the various facets of this theatrical efficacy are explicitly foregrounded by the revengers themselves, and later, underscored by the success of their schemes, it is no surprise that readers would latch onto this conspicuous facet of theatricality first. Yet effectiveness alone does not necessarily explain why each revenger should employ theatrical deceptions as a means of executing their revenge. Not all avengers share Hamlet's explicit predisposition for the theater, so why then do they each turn to it?

Despite what some critics would have us believe, such cunning stagecraft is not the only option for the genre's revengers. Some dispense with theatricality entirely. These characters, largely set in their ways and evincing little potential or opportunity for the prolonged metamorphosis of character typical of their dramatic peers, opt to attack their

foes immediately and without the dramatic stratagems for which the genre is known. Laertes, for example, returns at once from France and unceremoniously bursts into the court crying for vengeance; any craft on his part in the murder of Hamlet is largely due to his alliance with the Machiavellian Claudius. More often, however, the stoic alternative of forbearance is conspicuously proffered in the play. At times this alternative is raised by the revenger himself during the psychological indecision typical of his delay. Hieronimo muses, “Ay, heaven will be revenged of every ill, / Nor will they suffer murder unrepaid, / Then stay, Hieronimo, attend their will, / For mortal men may not appoint their time” (III.xiii.2-5), while the opening conundrum of Hamlet’s famous “To be, or not to be” speech ponders “Whether ‘tis nobler in the mind to suffer / The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune” (III.i.56-7). Other playwrights personify the stoic alternative in foils to their primary revenger, as Middleton does with the old aristocrat Antonio, who instead of vengeance chooses to focus on “this one happiness above the rest, / Which will be called a miracle at last: / That being an old man, I’d a wife so chaste” (I.iv.75-7). Marston’s aged stoic Pandulpho even goes so far as to disparage the characteristic antics of the stage revenger, dismissively asking,

Wouldst have me cry, run raving up and down
 For my son’s loss? Wouldst have me turn rank mad
 Or wring my face with mimic action,
 Stamp, curse, weep, rage, and then my bosom strike?
 Away, ‘tis apish action, player-like. (I.v.76-80)

Though their maxims of resignation and patience prove ultimately undesirable or untenable for the revenger protagonist (and, in the case of *Antonio’s Revenge*, even Pandulpho himself), the very existence of a stoic alternative to direct vengeance reveals the necessity of choice, suggesting a nascent agency that speaks to self-fashioning and the

protagonist's transformation. Inevitable though it may seem, this decision marks a departure from the victimization and passive histrionics that characterized the revenger's initial separation and ushers him into the second phase of his metamorphosis.

At first glance, this theatrical turn may seem even more inevitable because of the protagonist's newly-acquired Machiavellian inwardness, for as Maus reminds, "The Renaissance conception of machiavellian hypocrisy...closely associates power with spectatorial prowess."²¹ Yet as this association with the machiavel might suggest, conspicuous theatricality was not necessarily seen as a positive attribute. A pronounced anti-theatrical sentiment persisted throughout the height of the Elizabethan and Jacobean theater, and while these critics ostensibly approached the matter from disparate positions, the common sentiment was that performance encouraged individuals to play as something they were not, to live a lie that flew in the face of their 'true' self. Stephen Gosson in his *Plays Confuted in Five Actions* (1582), for instance, argues,

The proof is evident, the consequent is necessary, that in stage plays for a boy to put on the attire, the gesture, the passions of a woman; for a mean person to take upon him the title of a prince, with counterfeit port and train; is by outward signs to show themselves otherwise than they are, and so within the compass of a lie, which by Aristotle's judgment is naught of itself, and to be fled.²²

Though written over fifteen years later, John Rainolds's *The Overthrow of Stage-Plays* (1599) makes a similar case, contending, "Likewise in apparel, that which cometh upon the back dishonesteth not the man; yet, if men wear costlier garments than they ought, they are dishonested by their riotous and unmodest behavior."²³ Positing an essentialist understanding of identity, one that inherently supports the extant social structures of power predicated upon hierarchical categorization, writers like Gosson and Rainold implicitly argue that performance liberates the individual from the strictures of their

social role, and is therefore a threat to English society and, for some writers, God's design. It is, in a word, disruptive.

And while one might easily disregard such attacks as the biased diatribes of the anti-theatrical minority, one cannot so easily ignore similar sentiment from the revenge plays themselves. Though these characters do not necessarily link performance to the destabilization of social categories, they do voice a comparable distaste for its artificiality. Remember that Pandulpho ends his stoic dismissal of the revenger's typical antics with the almost contemptuous "Away, 'tis apish action, player-like" (I.v.80). Far more pronounced is Hamlet's famous response to his mother's question "Why seems it so particular with thee?"

Seems, madam? Nay, it is, I know not "seems."
'Tis not alone my inky cloak, [good] mother,
Nor customary suits of solemn black...
That can [denote] me truly. These indeed seem,
For they are actions that a man might play,
But I have that within which passes show,
These but the trappings and the suits of woe. (I.ii.75-8, 83-6)

In both instances, performance and external signification are disparaged because of their implicit divorce from the intangible truth of Pandulpho and Hamlet's grief, a perspective that tempers the recognition elsewhere in these plays of theatricality's worth. No outward show, they suggest, can represent it accurately—and as Pandulpho implies, any attempt to do so would be ridiculous. Therefore, if a pronounced segment of the culture contends that performance is the device of presumptuous and rebellious upstarts, if characters within the plays themselves betray a distrust of performance's efficacy in the face of its unavoidable artificiality, and if the alternative of stoic forbearance is routinely proffered

as a viable way out, why does the revenger inevitably turn to theatricality in the furtherance of his plot for vengeance?

In fact, the revenger's conscious turn to theatricality exposes the hypocrisy of these anti-theatrical attacks against performance, for what the revenge play recognizes is that self-conscious performance was already an essential aspect of public life, not a dissident minority. More so than even Elizabeth I, who was known for her theatrical self-presentation, the courtiers who surrounded the English monarch lived lives of constant—and often duplicitous—performance. Existing in an environment where favor might be bestowed just as much by the whims of the nobility as an individual's merit, inhabitants of the court felt compelled to adapt their outward show to better please the powerful. As Stephen Greenblatt explains,

Theatricality, in the sense of both disguise and histrionic self-presentation, arose from conditions common to almost all Renaissance courts: a group of men and women alienated from the customary roles and revolving uneasily around a center of power, a constant struggle for recognition and attention, and a virtually fetishistic emphasis upon manner. The manuals of court behavior which became popular in the sixteenth century are essentially handbooks for actors, practical guides for a society whose members were nearly always on stage. These books are closely related to the rhetorical handbooks that were also in vogue—both essentially compilations of verbal strategies and both based upon the principle of imitation. The former simply expand the scope of the latter, offering an integrated rhetoric of the self, a model for the formation of an artificial identity.²⁴

While the revenger's turn to theatricality can be traced back to his initial separation from his former sense of self and society at large, at the same time that theatricality provides the avenue through which he will overcome his symbolic exile: if theatricality is truly ingrained in the very fabric of courtly life, how better to infiltrate that court and stalk his prey than through self-conscious performance? Indeed, Maus's estimation of Hieronimo's plot serves equally well for the other principal revengers of the Kydian

tradition when she writes, “Hieronimo does not simply renounce court spectacle, but *infiltrates* it in order to turn it against itself.”²⁵

Furthermore, while the artificiality that the revenger disparages is unavoidable, it can still be deployed effectively if its pretense remains hidden from his courtly audience. Performance is denigrated by characters like Pandulpho and Hamlet because of its distinct remove from reality. Indeed, even to this day we treat performatives differently because of this belief: “Special rules exist, are formulated, and persist because these activities are something *apart from everyday life*.”²⁶ As performance “is a kind of emptiness, an evacuation of real presence and power,”²⁷ it is entirely appropriate that the similarly impotent protagonist should turn to it, but if it is to be of any use to him, he must elide the gap between reality and performance that Hamlet and Pandulpho believe to be so clear. Acting itself is not enough, for the very nature of performance betrays itself as such blatant role-playing effectively contaminates the ostensibly natural and innate qualities of the personated class or role. The performative presentation of the self as another threatens to pass along its artificiality to that which is portrayed, and thus the successful dissembler must act without the appearance of acting. This self-conscious but hidden artificiality was not only possible, but even advocated by many well-known Early Modern books of manners. Most famous of these was Baldesar Castiglione’s *The Book of the Courtier* (1528), translated into English by Sir Thomas Hoby in 1561. Indeed, not even a decade later, Roger Ascham exclaims in *The Schoolmaster* (1570) that Castiglione’s book “doth trimly teach” and if “read and diligently followed but one year at home in England would do a young gentleman more good, iwis, then three years’ travel abroad spent it Italy.”²⁸ In it, Count Lodovico explains the courtier’s chief virtue of

sprezzatura, or practiced nonchalance: ironically prefacing his advice with the admonition to “steer away from affectation at all costs, as if it were a rough and dangerous reef,” the Count suggests,

to practice in all things a certain nonchalance which conceals all artistry and makes whatever one says or does seem uncontrived and effortless. I am sure that grace springs especially from this, since everyone knows how difficult it is to accomplish some unusual feat perfectly, and so facility in such things excites the greatest wonder; whereas, in contrast, to labour at what one is doing and, as we say, to make bones over it, shows an extreme lack of grace and causes everything, whatever its worth, to be discounted. So we can truthfully say that true art is what does not seem to be art; and the most important thing is to conceal it, because if it is revealed this discredits a man completely and ruins his reputation.²⁹

In effect, the passage above advocates a form of routine, skillful deceit at court, one which obscures the distinction between truth and lie for the betterment of the socially inferior performer. Clearly then, the increased facility in manipulating one’s audience is the practical benefit of theatricality that critics have routinely noted, yet this practiced affectation also suggests a deliberate blurring of the line between genuine lived experience and artificial performance—one which evinces the liminality characteristic of the revenger’s transformative rite of passage.

The effectiveness of the genre’s disguise motif, present to varying degrees in every major revenge tragedy, is predicated upon this liminality, as “The attributes of liminality or of liminal *personae* (‘threshold people’) are necessarily ambiguous, since this condition and these persons elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space.”³⁰ Disguise unchains the revenger from the constrictive binds of his former lot, enacting through performance the symbolic separation already effected through his victimization and suffering. If Vindice has no influence at court, his creation Piato can always serve the Duke’s heir Lussurioso; while a

clearly vindictive Hieronimo could never approach Lorenzo openly, an officious personation of the Knight Marshall might associate with him easily. At the same time, however, we must recognize that the very nature of disguise would seem to suggest distinct partition rather than liminality. After all, the creation of a false persona only seems to underscore the authenticity of the real one. Antonio's performance as a fool reinforces the veracity of his true, vengeful self through its disparity from that original, as does the divide between the guise of the fawning courtier Piato and the bloodthirsty revenger Vindice underneath. Moreover, the protagonists' frequent use of aside during these instances of disguise emphasizes the artificiality of their performance by refusing to let the audience forget that another, anterior persona dwells beneath. While playing as Piato he may goad his mother toward becoming bawd for her own daughter, but Vindice is always underneath to pray, "Troops of celestial soldiers guard her heart!" (II.i.142), and in his time playing a bubble-blowing fool, Antonio actually speaks more lines in aside as himself than he does as his part. If anything, these conspicuous disguises only seem to underscore difference and suggest an essentialist notion of identity that merely emphasizes the artificiality of the trope.

And perhaps if these disguises were clearly distinct from the revenger's "true" self this would be the case. However, all too often the line between performance and self is blurred in the course of these characters' plots.³¹ Hieronimo, Titus, and Hamlet all display symptoms of madness during their more manic periods of excitement and discontent, and even if each man espouses a conscious desire to put on such a façade, further moments of distraction bleed into their ostensibly sane, 'true' selves. For instance, Tamora and her sons expect their flimsy masquerade as Revenge, Rape, and Murder to

fool Titus because of his madness, but there is little evidence of such in Titus's reaction to them. Immediately he identifies the queen as "our proud empress, mighty Tamora," and even after she has offered the lame retort that she is actually Revenge despite her appearance, Titus cannot help but ironically remark aloud "how like the Empress' sons they are, / And you the Empress!" (V.ii.64-5). Indeed, Titus sanely and shrewdly plays upon this perception of madness to further his own designs: confiding in the audience that "I know them all though they suppose me mad, / And will o'erreach them in their own devices" (V.ii.142-3), Titus feigns belief in their weak stratagem, a performance which the Empress so completely accepts that she leaves her sons in Titus's care, a mistake he quickly capitalizes upon to murder them both. Yet this ostensibly clear distinction is undercut by scenes before and after, as when Titus berates his brother for killing a fly, or when he abruptly murders his beloved daughter in the play's bloody denouement.

Hieronimo and Hamlet evince a similar erosion of the line between madness and sanity. Though Hieronimo realizes late in Act III "Nor aught avails it me to menace" his enemies openly in the court, but rather to "enjoin...thy tongue / To milder speeches than thy spirit affords" (III.xiii.36, 39-41), his audiences in court immediately preceding and following this statement share a conspicuous lack of restraint. In his first attempt at receiving justice from the king, the old Knight Marshall ultimately digs in the earth with his dagger and promises to fetch Horatio from the underworld, while later under the guise of friendship he draws his sword and histrionically promises to duel any who would dare slander Lorenzo. Even more ambiguous is Hamlet's psychological wellbeing; between his explicit plan to adopt an "antic disposition" and the many instances that suggest a mental disturbance "which passes show"—his abuse of Ophelia, the murder of Polonius, the

second appearance of the Ghost that only he can see—the question of Hamlet’s sanity has been an infamous crux of Shakespearean scholarship for centuries. Thus in each play, the supposedly distinct separation between performance and self is belied by the revenger’s unpredictable juxtaposition of behaviors, muddling the audience’s semiotic process and making it difficult to draw a definitive line between roles.

Even the more distinct performances of Vindice and Antonio, two examples where the revenger masquerades as another person entirely and not as an ostensibly false version of himself, betray a similar ambiguity. When Alberto attempts to persuade Antonio to adopt a different disguise, he argues “’tis unsuiting to your elate spirit” and may “disgrace your high resolve” (IV.i.2, 10), as if the nature of this pretense would contaminate Antonio, conflating the two enough to suggest a link between man and disguise that belies a rigid separation of the pair. Moreover, though he chooses to play the fool in part because “He is not capable of passion” and thus “I should want sense to feel / The stings of anguish shoot through every vein” (IV.i.38, 50-1), Antonio’s performance is not nearly as aloof as he might hope. After Mellida swoons at false news of Antonio’s death and is taken away offstage, one character recounts, “my fool, that pressed unto the bed, / Screeched out so loud that he brought back her soul, / Called her again, that her bright eyes ‘gan ope” and “he, audacious fool, / Dared kiss her hand, wished her soft rest” (IV.iii.181-5). Unable to perform the remoteness he had hoped from this disguise, Antonio instead unwittingly creates a hybridized figure, one visually suggesting a fool but enacting his own personal grief, a performance remarkable enough for others to note and discuss but not so extreme as to negate the disguise entirely. This is the liminality of the revenger’s disguise—even if he doesn’t intend it. Vindice similarly fails to enact a

fully distinct persona over the course of his various masquerades, though not so spectacularly as Antonio. While he does indeed attempt to seduce his sister to the lust of Lussurioso under the guise of Piato, in no way does he “forget my nature” (I.iii.182) as he claims, for this pandering is symptomatic of Vindice’s very real misogyny, one that insists “That woman is all male whom none can enter” (II.i.115). His creation Piato is quick of wit and tongue like the revenger himself, and while later he must concoct a false version of himself to escape detection, both actor and role embody “Vindice, my discontented brother” (IV.ii.38). Clearly, even the most theatrical of disguises are not always so easily divorced from the protagonist’s ‘true’ self.

More fundamentally, though, the very nature of disingenuous performance reinforces this characteristic ambiguity, for in the question of where power resides, one can only answer that it lingers somewhere between performer and spectator, belonging simultaneously to both and to neither. At first glance, it would appear as if the revenger is the person in control, as he is aware of his disguise’s artificiality and utilizes it to manipulate his dupes at court; the courtiers’ ignorance would seem to be evidence enough of their powerlessness. We must remember, however, that any performance places the responsibility of interpretation in the hands of the spectator, and in this fact resides the court’s interpretive potency. Regarding performance and the Renaissance courtier, Whigham explains,

Any attempt to control the courtly audience’s interpretive legitimation of the status of the proffered self... was doomed conceptually to bow to that audience’s capacity to withhold such legitimation; the ambitious would-be courtier must forever, as it were, submit, subject, the self for approval.³²

If the peers of court are fooled by the revenger’s disguise, it is at least partly their own doing via their reading of that disguise; they are fooling themselves just as much as the

protagonist is fooling them. Even with their deception, though, these nobles are far from powerless. Until that final, bloody denouement, the revengers' disguise is a thin shield from the secret assassination or open execution they would enjoy should the duke or king recognize their scheming.³³ As Lloyd Davis argues,

Disguise becomes an ambitious trope that represents the naturalization of power *and* the reworking or possible undermining of dominance...the figure in disguise, is not entirely 'the ideological product of the relations of power.' Confronting these determining relations are acts of resistance, and in different texts and contexts disguise may be used to represent both processes.³⁴

Even apart from the eroding distinctions between various personas, then, the revenger's utilization of disguise introduces a liminal aspect to the very systems of power that operate at court.

Yet the liminality of these disguises is not intended for the revenger's courtly audience alone. While it does further the protagonist's transformation and provide access and opportunity for courtly infiltration, the slippages in each role largely remain invisible to the characters onstage. Piero cannot appreciate that Antonio lets his real grief seep into his fool's disguise, nor can Gratiana recognize her son Vindice's misogyny behind the honeyed words of Piato. These discoveries are for the theatrical audience to make, and suggest that the liminality inherent in the avenger's rite of passage permeates the dramaturgy of the English revenge tragedy in order to also influence its spectators. Indeed, the theatrical audience has a broader range of disguise conventions to appreciate, as it can also recognize the schism created in any character's use of aside. This common device reveals to the audience a discrepancy between characters' interior selves and the face they show the world, encouraging a larger recognition that subjectivity is not always as unified and coherent as they had once believed. As the anti-theatricalists feared, men

play as something other than they are—and none of their peers are the wiser. Thus, while the protagonist’s liminal theatricality allows the revenger to surmount the limitations placed upon his former self, it at the same time suggests to his audience that such categorical divisions as “true self” and “false performance” are not nearly as distinct as society might have us think.

Just as liminal, however, was the condition of “distraction” that we see in so many English revenge plays. Though Hamlet may be the most famous example of a revenger who flirts with madness over the course of his quest, early modern revenge tragedy is filled with disturbed avengers. Charles and Elaine Hallett go so far as to claim that madness is the central motif of the genre,³⁵ but generally critics hesitate to ascribe it so prominent a position. This is due, at least in part, to lingering uncertainties over when exactly these protagonists are experiencing genuine symptoms of distraction and when merely performing them. The difficulty scholars have in delineating these episodes—should they even attempt this feat at all—is due in no small part to the playwrights’ accurate reflection of contemporary notions of psychological distraction. So slippery were early modern definitions of madness, in fact, that many of the best known treatises on the subject approached their work by attempting to differentiate melancholy or distraction from other, similar conditions. Samuel Harsnett’s *Declaration of Egregious Popish Impostures* (1603), for instance, sought to distinguish genuine maladies from the elaborate but false performances of Catholic exorcism rituals, while Edward Jorden’s *A Briefe Discourse of a Disease Called the Suffocation of the Mother* (1603) attempts to separate medical symptoms of hysteria from demonic or supernatural attribution, insisting on its title page “that divers strange actions and passions of the body of man,

which in the common opinion, are imputed to the devil, have their true naturall causes, and do accompanie this Disease.”³⁶ Timothy Bright, on the other hand, focuses the entirety of his work, *A Treatise of Melancholy* (1586), on the different varieties of melancholic distraction, but even here such partition begins to erode, for “the careful distinctions between spiritual and psychological melancholy repeatedly collapse. Both states are characterized by the same symptoms.”³⁷ Accordingly, Carol Thomas Neely suspects that in the Renaissance “madness then was likely viewed as discrete, widely varied (and potentially transient) behaviors rather than as a permanent condition of an individual.”³⁸ With such uncertainty in the nature, symptoms, and duration of the condition, the designation of madness therefore becomes more a matter of subjective categorization, of “reconceptualizing the boundaries between natural and supernatural, masculinity and femininity, body and mind, feigned and actual distraction.”³⁹ Thus, while madness is obviously appropriate for the quandaries of psychological and moral distress placed upon the revenger, it also resonates perfectly with the genre’s emerging concern over categorization, difference, and the elision of those distinctions through the revenger’s liminal theatricality.

Though often dramatic and occasionally spectacular, the protagonist’s bouts with madness are not in and of themselves theatrical, save for those instances when the madness is explicitly performed. Nevertheless, these episodes erode established, accepted boundaries in similar ways, and thus serve as another dimension of the liminal stage in the revenger’s rite of passage. Indeed, this psychological distraction is produced in no small part by the initial separation that begins the protagonist’s metamorphosis, for dislocation from one’s place in the social order and a subsequent immersion in the

liminality that break engenders so unmoors the character that drifting into the equally ambiguous realm of psychological distraction becomes a genuine concern. However, as much as this condition may stem from the revenger's interior transformation, this label of madness is equally imposed from without. As I have already shown, the conflicting signals evinced over the course of each play make it difficult for spectators to definitively decide whether the revenger is genuinely mad or not. Rather, evidence of both conditions war with one another, even at the level of discourse, as when Polonius famously observes "Though this be madness, yet there is method in't" (II.ii.205-6). It is a symptom of liminality that the revenger is the one character his society cannot reliably categorize or quantify anymore, and as a response it often labels him "mad" in an attempt to compensate.⁴⁰

Nonetheless, the protagonist himself struggles at times to distinguish ostensibly separate things; specifically, he evinces difficulty in distinguishing past from present or accurately recognizing individuals, failings that ironically help audiences separate and label the revenger as disturbed even as his actions work to break down other distinctions, if only in his own mind. At times, the protagonist's mistakes are simply the stumblings of a distracted imagination, as when Titus mistakes the Clown for a messenger from Jupiter or Hieronimo believes the old man Bazulto to be his murdered son Horatio. More often, however, the revenger's fits of madness suggest a fumbling attempt at bridging the expanse of his original separation through the recognition of empathic connections. In that same audience with Bazulto, for example, Hieronimo tells the citizens "For all as one are our extremities" (III.xiii.92). Titus chastises his brother at the dinner table over the killing of a fly because "that fly had a father and mother" (III.ii.60) who, one might infer,

would suffer just as Titus has at the murder and mutilation of his own children. This is not to say, however, that all revengers suffer from such acute distraction, nor are as successful, even for that brief moment, in forgetting the alienation that began their journey in the first place. Like other avengers, Hamlet in his melancholy repeatedly draws connections between others' plights and his own, but for him any insight is inevitably used to criticize and chastise himself because of the discrepancies he sees between their actions and his lack thereof. After requesting a recitation of Pyrrhus's murder of Priam—a story bearing unmistakable parallels to his own vengeful desires—Hamlet rages at himself for doing nothing while “this player here, / But in a fiction, in a dream of passion, / Could force his soul so to his own conceit” (II.ii.551-3). Though the end result is a backlash of self-loathing fueled by his recognition of the differences between himself and others, any such contrast is only made possible by a preceding, tentative attempt at creating parallels. As these examples suggest, the liminal stage of the revenger's rite of passage begins to see movement away from the separation that marked the beginning of his transformation, though we must recognize these gestures are still too premature and inefficient to betoken any sort of significant change. Nevertheless, they do foreshadow the sentiment of ironic reciprocity, of *contrapasso*, inherent in the genre's bloody denouements—grisly scenes constructed theatrically to reveal to his victims and his audience the similarity between himself and those who made him what he is.

Like performance itself, no liminal stage can last indefinitely, and eventually the revenger must lower his disguise and accomplish his vengeance. The final acts of English

revenge tragedy are typically full of instances where the revenger steps forward to assert his identity, symbolically banishing the ambiguity that once surrounded him: Hieronimo tells a confused courtly audience “know I am Hieronimo, / The hopeless father of a hapless son” (IV.iv.83-4) and Hamlet brazenly interjects into Ophelia’s funereal ceremony by proclaiming, “This is I, / Hamlet the Dane!” (V.i.257-8). This does not mean, however, that the same person who originally adopted such theatricality will greet the audience when that masquerade ends. Davis overstates the case when he argues,

Tragedy discounts disguise by construing it as a restricted, temporary deviation that finally returns to and reinforces a schema of essentialist selfhood. In this way it seeks the revelation or stripping away of disguise as much as do the dominant codes of surveillance.⁴¹

The temporary nature of the trope is beside the point, for the damage has already been done: notions of essentialist selfhood have been significantly undercut by the liminality of the disguise convention and the questions it raises about the artificiality of performance and the unity of the subject. The revenger emerges from the other side of the liminal stage a changed man, now ready to enact the vengeance he was once too impotent or too passive to complete.

The problem, however, lies in the society to which the revenger returns. Though embodied in the person of the play’s villain-noble, the characteristic setting of the English revenge tragedy is always one of corruption that discourages honorable behavior and helps see any attempt at attaining legitimate justice thwarted. The revenger’s original victimization by this immoral society, through his subsequent alienation, underscored his remove from that depravity, but in his rejection of Stoic forbearance and insistence upon immediate and violent satisfaction, that revenger opens himself further to the imprint of the very society that once wounded him. Despite its initial stages of separation and

liminality, the rite of passage is fundamentally an occasion of reasserting one's ties to the culture, not severing them. Should that context be one as utterly corrupt as those typical of the early modern revenge play, the protagonist cannot help but be warped by it over the course of his rite of passage. As Turner explains,

The neophyte in liminality must be a *tabula rasa*, a blank slate, on which is inscribed the knowledge and wisdom of the group, in those respects that pertain to the new status. The ordeals and humiliations, often of a grossly physiological character, to which neophytes are submitted represent partly a destruction of the previous status and partly a tempering of their essence in order to prepare them to cope with their new responsibilities and restrain them in advance from abusing their new privileges. They have to be shown that in themselves they are clay or dust, mere matter, whose form is impressed upon them by society.⁴²

Thus, while the course of his rite of passage may evince promise regarding the subject's ability to fashion, even empower, the self, for the revenger in particular this transformation also means his gradual reflection of the evils he originally set out to combat.

His attention focused so completely upon the villain-noble who wronged him, the early modern revenger fails to fully recognize the doxic systems of power and domination that his enemy employs in the first place, and thus as the protagonist is increasingly changed by the setting in which he moves, he increasingly comes to reflect those aspects of the hegemony. Regarding the invisible social order that he calls *doxa*, Pierre Bourdieu explains that

The instruments of knowledge of the social world are in this case (objectively) political instruments which contribute to the reproduction of the social world by producing immediate adherence to the world, seen as self-evident and undisputed, of which they are the product and of which they reproduce the structures in a transformed form.⁴³

While as a genre the revenge play may undermine the naturalness or inevitability of this implicit social order by recognizing the stoic alternative of forbearance, the revengers

themselves ultimately believe their only option is to merely appropriate the same sort of violence and deceit that victimized them in the first place, embracing the *lex talionis* of the Old Testament while at the same time ignoring the equally Biblical injunctive “avenge not yourselves... Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord.”⁴⁴ The result is that the early modern revenger quickly becomes as bloody, if not more so, than the villain who perpetrated the original crime.

And if this violence were directed solely at the corrupt villain-noble of the play, perhaps the revenger’s internalization of his society’s ills would appear less reprehensible. However, despite the perseverance of this explicit and deserving target, the protagonist typically evinces an indiscriminate ruthlessness toward other members of the court that suggests just how thoroughly he has embraced his setting’s violent avenues of power and domination. Antonio murders his enemy Piero’s innocent son, Julio, while Hieronimo inexplicably kills Lorenzo’s father Castile with a pen knife, despite absolutely no evidence that the man was even remotely involved in his son’s crime. Hamlet infamously stabs Polonius through the arras when the old man cries for help, but perhaps more disturbingly, evinces a casual disregard that even Claudius does not share over his murder of the former king. Indeed, in this instance Hamlet demonstrates perhaps the most conspicuous example of an avenger reflecting his play’s corrupt social system, no doubt due to his singular status amongst revengers as a member of a royal family. While he is certainly aware of his wrongdoing and promises he “will answer well / The death I gave him,” he does so within the context of presenting himself as heaven’s “scourge and minister” (III.iv.175-7), a figure performing divine retribution on Earth not unlike how the Elizabethan state described its own legal prerogative.⁴⁵ It is only a small conceptual

jump from the divine sanctioning of a ruling family to the divine sanctioning of an individual revenger, and while there is little evidence of this philosophy from Hamlet later in the play, his choice of this defense here is nevertheless telling. No matter the play, though, the revenger inevitably kills more people than the character solely responsible for his victimization, performing a violent overcompensation for his own loss that ostensibly appears to upset social norms through the empowerment of the disenfranchised, but actually reinforces the status quo through the preservation of a doxic social system that maintains physical violence is the surest path to resolving conflict.

The great irony of the genre is that in this gradual internalization of his setting's corruption, the revenger comes to resemble the villain-noble whom he stalks. This monarch or aristocrat begins the play as the metonymic embodiment of the court's deterioration, and thus as the protagonist increasingly comes to reflect the immorality of his environment, he increasingly comes to mirror that villain who in many respects personifies it. One conspicuous example of this sinister resemblance is in *Antonio's Revenge*, where both the villainous duke and the revenger are described using nigh-identical stage directions. Piero begins the play fresh from murdering Feliche, "unbraced, his arms bare, smeared in blood, a poniard in one hand, bloody, and a torch in the other" (I.i.sd); later in the play, after murdering the boy Julio, Antonio returns on stage "his arms bloody, [bearing] a torch and a poniard" (III.v.sd). The unmistakable echo between these two stage directions provide visual cues for an audience to recognize the specific nature of this revenger's transformation, one which suggests that Antonio is becoming very much like the villain who victimized him. Even more telling, however, is the revenger's trajectory in *Valentinian*, a lesser-known play by John Fletcher probably first

performed around 1610-1614. In it, the lascivious Emperor Valentinian rapes the soldier Maximus's wife Lucina, who promptly kills herself from shame, prompting Maximus to enter into a conspiracy to kill the Emperor. Atypically, this revenger does not kill his quarry himself—that is done by a eunuch accomplice, who poisons the Emperor—but far more interesting, upon the successful completion of this plot Maximus becomes Emperor himself. The transformation typically delineated over the course of multiple acts in other, better revenge plays is here compartmentalized in one speech, where Maximus begins admitting “For though my justice were as white as truth, / My way was crooked to it, that condemns me” (V.iii.15-6), soon after stumbles upon the question “Why may not I be Caesar?” (V.iii.26), and thereafter concludes “If I rise, / My wife was ravish'd well” (V.iii.39-40). By the end of the play some five scenes later, Maximus is poisoned by the former Emperor's widow in vengeance for her murdered spouse. Abrupt though this might be, *Valentinian* merely offers an exaggerated example of a trope consistently present in the English revenge play, one that elides the distinction between the once diametrically opposed figures of villain and revenger in a move that further speaks to the genre's larger concern with destabilizing the explicit partitions between ostensibly distinct categories.

While this deconstruction is generally reserved for the theatrical audience, the revenger's final metadramatic show is designed to share this revelation with his enemy and the sycophants of his unjust court. Apart from granting the revenger the directorial prerogative to control the performative space for that short period of time, the explicitly theatrical nature of the assassination allows the protagonist to also craft a spectacle for a particular audience. In keeping with his demonstrated preoccupation with the past and his

repeated conflation of recent events and persons with anterior equivalents, the revenger designs his play-within-the-play to force its audience to connect their misfortune with his own. At the same time, the success of this display is also often predicated upon the protagonist's more recent internalization of his corrupt setting, for the additional murders committed become components of his final show. As Deborah Willis contends, "the violence of revenge swerves from its true target, requiring the sacrifice of innocents who function as props in the revenger's show, performed for an audience that includes the perpetrator along with the broader community."⁴⁶ This tradition begins with the genre itself in *The Spanish Tragedy*, where, after having murdered Lorenzo and Balthazar, Hieronimo breaks the dramatic fourth wall to proclaim the truth of events onstage and ask, "Speak, Portuguese, whose loss resembles mine; / If thou canst weep upon thy Balthazar, / 'Tis like I wailed for my Horatio" (IV.iv.114-5). Maus explains,

Ranging the corpse of his socially inferior son alongside the bodies of the heirs apparent, Hieronimo stages and voices a radically leveling sentiment: that one dead child is very like another, that paternal love feels essentially the same for noble and commoner, that his suffering is worth as much as the suffering of princes

and furthermore, his "strict talion—son for son, spectacle for spectacle, wail for wail—ignores disparities between one person and another, insisting upon equivalence and substitutability."⁴⁷ Titus's son Lucius suggests just this parity when he proclaims his father's murder tantamount to the death of the Emperor himself, crying "Can the son's eye behold his father bleed? / There's meed for meed, death for a deadly deed!" (V.iii.65-6). Though he clearly delights in it more than his dramatic peers, Vindice, like Hieronimo, evinces the same use of spectacle to produce similar emotional states, promising the Duke "I will make / Thy spirit grievous sore" just as "our lord and father"

who “died in sadness” (III.v.171-3, 177-8). Thus, though the liminality regarding the revenger’s identity may seemingly have been dispelled with his move into the final stage of his rite of passage, the play itself maintains its preoccupation with this theme through the protagonist’s deployment of dramatic spectacle to force a recognition of sameness upon his socially superior audience in spite of the social conventions that maintain their difference.⁴⁸

Yet if that society is to have any hope of redeeming itself after the assassination of the villain-noble, the revenger must also be eliminated. Transformed over the course of his rite of passage into a Machiavellian schemer and murderer, the protagonist’s continued presence would ensure the preservation of those disruptive and treacherous aspects of the court that made the revenger what he is in the first place. Obviously, he is a danger, a concern voiced most directly by Antonio at the end of *The Revenger’s Tragedy* when he explains that Vindice and Hippolito could just as easily continue to murder dukes, and therefore, “Pray heaven their blood may wash away all treason!” (V.iii.149). However, this threat is symptomatic of a larger problem, namely the revenger’s continued alienation from the community, for while his rite of passage was a success in the general sense that it facilitated a metamorphosis within his character, it is at the same time a failure because the protagonist never evinces a full reintegration into society to rectify his initial separation. Instead, he is trapped by the inwardness that marked that initial stage. The revenger broods only upon his own grievances, and while he does eventually make empathic connections between his plight and others’, he is never able to turn his gaze anywhere but inward. Rather, each connection is unilateral, seeing others’ problems only so much as the revenger believes they reflect his own. Hieronimo sees the elderly Bazulto

as “the lively image of my grief” (III.xiv.162) while Hamlet recognizes in the Norwegian march merely “How all occasions do inform against me” (IV.iv.32). They are, in a word, self-absorbed, trapped by their own interiority. This detachment facilitates their Machiavellianism and makes any justification of violence all the more easy by negating the interpersonal bonds that would help curtail such crime. Indeed, the revenger’s alienation from his peers reflects the institutionalized separation that the aristocratic villain-nobles enjoyed, further reinforcing the parallel between the two. Turner sees both forms of detachment to be equally problematic, arguing,

The pedagogics of liminality, therefore, represent a condemnation of two kinds of separation from the generic bond of *communitas*. The first kind is to act only in terms of the rights conferred on one by the incumbency of office in the social structure. The second is to follow one’s psychobiological urges at the expense of one’s fellows.⁴⁹

Though produced in each character through different means, the same separation from *communitas* the villain enjoyed also makes the revenger a potential threat to the court’s stability. Assassinating its corrupt head has only replaced one danger for another.

If there were some hope of reintegration into this *communitas*, then perhaps the revenger could be redeemed and allowed to survive, but by the end of their plays, these revengers seem unable or unwilling to overcome their consuming inwardness. At times, their disconnect is represented through the void of silence. Like the impenetrable Iago, who promises “From this time forth I never will speak word” (V.ii.304), Hieronimo declares, “never shalt thou force me to reveal / The thing which I have vowed inviolate” (IV.iv.188-9) and subsequently bites out his own tongue.⁵⁰ Titus, on the other hand, enacts his continued alienation through the whirling words and abrupt violence of his final scene, committing acts—such as cooking heads into pasties and killing his own

daughter—that are clearly beyond the understand of every other character onstage. Even Antonio and his accomplices, who hold the distinction of being the only early modern revengers to survive their play, nevertheless perform a symbolic death through their self-imposed exile. Their vow to “sad our thought with contemplation / Of past calamities” (V.vi.47-8) reveals their continued preoccupation with what has come before, an entrapment that would prevent their full participation in a recuperating society looking to its future. Thus, cut off by his own interiority from the reintegration into society that a rite of passage should promise, the revenger is left a twisted reflection of the court’s corruption, and as such, a persistent threat that must be removed if that setting is to enjoy any hope of redemption.⁵¹

Were we to leave the Renaissance revenge tragedy at this point, we would be left with what Alan Sinfield calls an “entrapment model,” where “maneuvers that seem designed to challenge the system help to maintain it.”⁵² Indeed, in spite of his victimization at the hands of a considerably more powerful individual, the revenger manages to begin a rite of passage marked by a liminal theatricality that undermines distinctions of class and essentialist subjectivity, and thus opens a world of possibility for self-fashioning—only to in the end become a reflection of the villain who helped create him, to have his corrupt setting irrevocably imprint itself upon him, and as such, become a threat that must ultimately be purged from the world of the play if any regeneration is to take place. This is not a rosy picture, and at least for the revenger, there is little we can do about this. That is not to say, however, that the outlook for the genre itself is necessarily

so bleak. Metadramatic theatricality creates a dual audience by its very nature, layering the spectatorship of those patrons in the theater atop the constricted perspective of the watching characters on stage, and what may be a grim portrait for those inhabiting the world of the play may in fact take on greater significance to those in the theatrical audience who enjoy a broader perspective of the dramatic action.

The answer lies within the genre's theme of liminality and the work that does to destabilize notions of static identity and fixed, distinct social position. While the ambiguity surrounding the revenger's penchant for disguise and proclivity toward madness obviously hold practical benefits for both protagonist and playwright, it at the same time begins to erode a superficial understanding of subjectivity for the theatrical audience who can recognize the schism suggested by *aside*, ponder their difficulty in reliably ascribing labels of madness and consider what that implies about categorization in general, and remark upon the court's inability to discern duplicitous performance from genuine behavior. The problem is not, as the anti-theatricalists maintained, that audiences were unable to distinguish between representation and reality; rather, what the revenge play foregrounds is that the distinction between the two is not nearly so clear as others would have us believe. Furthermore, what might be written off as an anomalous tangent in the middle of these plays is instead thrust to the fore again in the bloody denouements of the genre, where the liminality of the revenger's rite of passage is replaced by the conspicuous overlap between revenger and villain, between reality and mere "show." The English revenge tragedy refuses to let its audience easily disregard the uncertainty it evokes regarding essentialism, suggesting to its patrons that underneath their culture's explicit essentialist claims was the recognition that continued performance of one's

station was that mattered most. This notion of identity construction through repetition is the foundation upon which Judith Butler built her theories of performativity, a thesis that claims,

The subject is not *determined* by the rules through which it is generated because significance is *not a founding act, but rather a regulated process of repetition* that both conceals itself and enforces its rules precisely through the production of substantializing effects. In a sense, all signification takes place within the orbit of the compulsion to repeat; “agency,” then, is to be located within the possibility of a variation on that repetition.⁵³

Revenge tragedy focuses upon this very possibility, deconstructing hegemonic arguments for essentialism by the elision of difference between noble and commoner, reality and performance. It actually offers hope, for if identity is not necessarily static and instead maintained through continual performance, this suggests that a deliberate shift in that performance might afford the subject an opportunity to consciously fashion the self.

However, I do not mean to suggest that the English revenge play is hundreds of years ahead of its time, nor to facilely apply postmodern theory upon an early modern culture. Rather, I argue that the revenge tragedy problematizes prevalent notions of essentialism in order to reveal the implicit theories of performativity already extant within Renaissance culture. Whigham, for instance, notes the cultivated ambiguity surrounding definitions of nobility; by gradually detaching aristocratic rank from explicitly material signifiers, nobility then becomes a matter of regular performance, and as it is never rigidly delineated, the privileged may defend their social position through affectations of style and the nuance of a subject’s manner.⁵⁴ This is not to say, of course, that performativity was limited to the elite. In *The Overthrow of Stage-Plays*, Reynolds links the necessity of repeated performance to the human condition itself:

For the care of making a show to do such feats, and to do them as lively as the beasts themselves in whom the vices reign, worketh in the actors a marvelous impression of being like the persons whose qualities they express and imitate: chiefly when earnest and much meditation of sundry days and weeks, by often repetition and representation of the parts, shall as it were engrave the things in their mind with a pen of iron, or with the point of a diamond. In which consideration the Spirit of God instructeth us, that we ought to imitate, resemble, follow God, and godly men, and that which is good; not any evil thing, but good only; and meditate, exercise those things.⁵⁵

Admittedly, Reynolds's argument suggests something between strict essentialism and pure performativity, where repetition of action ultimately leads to a more fixed identity. Even English theology bore signs of this implicit tendency. Though the Calvinist doctrine of predestination, first put forth in *De Predestinatione* in 1552 and later legitimated by Article Seventeen of *The Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England* in 1571, was predicated upon an essentialist view of the soul itself, misgivings and even outright debate over this point of dogma refused to die down.⁵⁶ Such resistance suggests a belief that humanity's day to day choices—their routine performance of a good, Christian life—is a fitter measure of a subject's worth. Belief in predestination and the primary role of divine grace were never fully dispelled in the Renaissance, of course, but the fact nevertheless remains that implicit within contemporary notions of identity was a recognition that consistent, repeated performance ensured static identity. This is what legislation like sumptuary laws sought to guarantee, and what the revenge tragedy sought to reveal through its consideration of liminality.

Thus the English revenge play is not so grim as one would initially believe, as it suggests to its audience the possibility of self-fashioning through an elision of difference, an undermining of essentialist subjectivity, and a foregrounding of commonality across social divides. At the same time, it is not so idealistic as to promise unbounded agency in

this transformative process, for the revenger's ultimate demise serves as reminder that the subject is also beholden to the socio-political context in which he moves. Failure very much remains an option, but even this warning is not without a silver lining, as it reminds the audience that this failing was essentially due to the protagonist's rupture with *communitas*, that it is reintegration and social wholeness that are desirable, and that only those who cannot or will not attain that immersion in their common humanity are destined to suffer and fall.

Endnotes

¹ Fredson Bowers, *Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1940), 110.

² Charles A. Hallett and Elaine S. Hallett, *The Revenger's Madness* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1980), 6.

³ Harry Keyishian, *The Shapes of Revenge* (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1995), 2.

⁴ Hallett, 3.

⁵ Katharine Eisaman Maus, introduction to *Four Revenge Tragedies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), xvi-xvii, xxii. My concern with Maus's introduction is not the individual points she makes regarding theatricality's role in *The Spanish Tragedy* and *The Revenger's Tragedy*—which I feel are entirely accurate—so much as her unwillingness to attempt even a gesture toward theatricality's role in the genre at large, especially after stating the question itself so directly.

⁶ John Kerrigan. *Revenge Tragedy: Aeschylus to Armageddon* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 15-6.

⁷ Jonathan Bate, "The Performance of Revenge: *Titus Andronicus* and *The Spanish Tragedy*," in *The Show Within: Dramatic and Other Insets: English Renaissance Drama (1550 – 1642)*, ed. François Laroque (Montpellier: Publications de Université Paul-Valéry, 1990), 267. While I wholeheartedly agree with Bate's argument that theatricality must play a larger part in the Elizabethan revenge play, I feel his conclusion that it serves to undermine the credibility of English law (by exposing its own theatricality and its similarities to personal vendetta) still only touches on part of the answer and neglects theatricality's dramaturgical purpose within the world of the play itself.

⁸ A common sentiment among critics has been that Early Modern revenge tragedy is a product of tensions within evolving Tudor legal and punitive practice—often a comment or critique upon that system for its theatrical audience. Ronald Broude voiced this perspective concisely in 1975 when he wrote, "Revenge tragedy may in some sense be understood as a form of response to the basic questions of crime and punishment posed by these transformations in socio-legal thought and practice" (39). See Ronald Broude, "Revenge and Revenge Tragedy in Renaissance England," *Renaissance Quarterly* 28, no.1 (1975), 38-58.

⁹ For an example of this rather vague, conventional understanding of the rite of passage inexpertly applied to *Hamlet*, see Lee Thorn, "Kyd Caps Revenge: *Hamlet* as Rite of Passage," *Hamlet Studies* 10, no.1-2 (1988), 126-129.

¹⁰ For a more thorough elaboration of the *limen* and rites of passage from a predominantly anthropological perspective, see Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of*

Passage, 1908, trans. Monika B. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffé (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960).

¹¹ Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1969), 94.

¹² As discussed in Chapter 1, Kerrigan notes that the revenger is unique amongst tragic protagonists in that his situation is forced upon him by another's doing, rather than through his own. Kerrigan, 12.

¹³ In Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* (1587) we see Horatio murdered on stage near the end of the second act, as Lavinia is raped and mutilated offstage in the second act of *Titus Andronicus* (1593-4) (Titus's sacrificial murder of Alarbus, the act which prompts Tamora to her revenge, takes place in the opening scene of the play). Piero's murder of Feliche and Antonio's father in *Antonio's Revenge* (1599-1600) occurs offstage just before the opening of the play, as Piero enters on stage for the first time dripping with gore and bearing the murder weapon. Claudius's poisoning of old King Hamlet takes place months before *Hamlet* (1601) begins, while we first meet Vindice some ten years after the Duke's murder of his betrothed in *The Revenger's Tragedy* (1606).

¹⁴ Keyishian, 2-3.

¹⁵ Michael Neill, "English Revenge Tragedy," in *A Companion to Tragedy*, ed. Rebecca Bushnell (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2005), 344.

¹⁶ The opening scene of the play sees Vindice alone on stage as the royal family passes above, effecting a distinct spatial separation from these representatives of the court as he rants in monologue for nearly fifty lines.

¹⁷ Frank Whigham, *Seizures of the Will in Early Modern Drama* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 6-7.

¹⁸ Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 159.

¹⁹ Margaret Scott, "Machiavelli and Machiavel," *Renaissance Drama* 15 (1984): 161.

²⁰ Maus, 49, 60.

²¹ Maus, 66.

²² Stephen Gosson, *Plays Refuted in Five Actions* (London, 1582), E5r.

²³ John Rainolds, *The Overthrow of Stage-Plays* (London, 1599), 16.

²⁴ Greenblatt, 162. For more on the nature of performance in the life of the Renaissance courtier, see Frank Whigham, *Ambition and Privilege: the Social Tropes of Elizabethan Courtesy Theory* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

²⁵ Maus, 67.

²⁶ Richard Schechner, *Performance Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1988), 11. Italics are preserved from the text.

²⁷ Thomas Postlewait, “Theatricality and Antitheatricality in Renaissance London,” in *Theatricality*, ed. Tracy C. Davis and Thomas Postlewait (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 116.

²⁸ Roger Ascham, *The Schoolmaster in The Renaissance in England*, ed. Hyder E. Rollins and Herschel Baker (Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, 1992), 828-9.

²⁹ Baldesar Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier*, trans. George Bull (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 67.

³⁰ Turner, 95.

³¹ I do not mean to suggest too rigid a distinction here between deceptive performance and the ostensibly ‘true’ subject, as any outward manifestation of subjectivity—even the most honest—is at least partially created through performance. Such theories of performativity, most notably Judith Butler’s, are completely germane to this discussion, but a full consideration of their significance for the revenger and the English revenge tragedy will be reserved for the conclusion of this chapter.

³² Whigham, 3.

³³ Even after his multiple assassinations have succeeded flawlessly, Vindice nevertheless learns this painful lesson when he admits his culpability before the new duke Antonio, who orders his immediate arrest and execution as he fears “You that would murder him would murder me” (V.iii.125).

³⁴ Lloyd Davis, *Guise and Disguise: Rhetoric and Characterization in the English Renaissance* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), 11, 17.

³⁵ Hallet, 14, *passim*.

³⁶ Edward Jorden, *A Briefe Discourse of a Disease Called the Suffocation of the Mother* (London, 1603), 1.

³⁷ Carol Thomas Neely, “‘Documents in Madness’: Reading Madness and Gender in Shakespeare’s Tragedies and Early Modern Culture,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 42, no.3 (1991), 319.

³⁸ Carol Thomas Neely, “Recent Work in Renaissance Studies: Psychology: Did Madness Have a Renaissance?” *Renaissance Quarterly* 44, no.4 (1991), 778.

³⁹ Carol Thomas Neely, *Distracted Subjects: Madness and Gender in Shakespeare and Early Modern Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), 2.

⁴⁰ Of course, the label of madness this uncertainty prompts often appears to be correct; many of the genre’s most famous revengers seem, at least for certain periods of time, genuinely mad. My point is that this “diagnosis” stems in no small part from anxieties over unsuccessful categorization. As Mary Douglas has argued, “that which cannot be clearly classified in terms of traditional criteria of classification, or falls between classificatory boundaries, is almost everywhere regarded as ‘polluting’ and ‘dangerous’.” See Mary Douglass, *Purity and Danger* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966). Quoted in Turner, 109.

⁴¹ Davis, 169.

⁴² Turner, 103.

⁴³ Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 164.

⁴⁴ Rom. 12:19. The most frequently cited Biblical defense of *lex talionis*, the law of payment in kind, is found in Exodus 21:23-25: “And if any mischief follow, then thou shalt give life for life, Eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, Burning for burning, wound for wound, stripe for stripe.”

⁴⁵ While Renaissance England certainly wasn’t operating under some sort of legislative theocracy, that is not to say that there was no conceptual trickledown between notions of divinely sanctioned monarchy and the state’s right to punish criminals. Calvin, for instance, writes “we are to consider that the vengeance of the magistrate is the vengeance not of man, but of God” (quoted. in Davis, 168). For further discussion of the law’s relationship with divine retribution, in light of the English revenge tragedy, see Peter Sacks, “Where Words Prevail Not: Grief, Revenge, and Language in Kyd and Shakespeare,” *ELH* 49, no.3 (1982): 576-601.

⁴⁶ Deborah Willis, “‘The gnawing vulture’: Revenge, Trauma Theory, and *Titus Andronicus*,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 53, no.1 (2002), 33.

⁴⁷ Maus, 68-9.

⁴⁸ The conspicuous exception to this trend is Hamlet, who unwittingly stumbles into a trap laid by Claudius in the play's final scene. Though the prince has already shown his efficacy with dramatic spectacle earlier with his Mousetrap, the fact remains that the duel concluding *Hamlet* does not share the genre's characteristic impetus to perform sameness. Of course, it has little reason to. As previously mentioned, Hamlet is distinct amongst revengers for being virtually the same social tier as his enemy; where most protagonists are low ranking members of court or are excluded from it entirely, Hamlet is prince and heir to Claudius's throne. Both are members of the royal family, and thus there is no need to make an unnecessary equivalence on top of the appropriately ironic end Claudius already makes, poisoned by the wine that killed Gertrude and by the envenomed blade that will kill Hamlet.

⁴⁹ Turner, 105. Admittedly, Turner conspicuously privileges *communitas* throughout *The Ritual Process* and much of his other work, and thus any rupture of it is particularly grave for him. Still, I find it very interesting that this quote should so perfectly illustrate how the distinct natures of the revenger's and villain-noble's crimes are actually two sides of the same coin.

⁵⁰ Of course, it remains unclear what secrets specifically Hieronimo means to keep, as he has already thoroughly explained his revenge in the preceding lines. Still, the self-mutilation remains a potent symbolic gesture of an alienated interiority that he refuses to allow others to breach.

⁵¹ Shakespeare does make a concerted effort to distinguish Hamlet from the trappings of villainy that characterize most revengers in their final scene. The duel that concludes the play, for instance, is orchestrated by the villain Claudius and the secondary revenger Laertes, thereby protecting Hamlet from the implications of premeditated and cunning assassination that early modern audiences found so dishonorable (though dramatically entertaining). At the same time, Hamlet is certainly not without blame, as the murder of Polonius attests, and he does consistently evince the kind of trapped interiority that ultimately impairs other revengers. For more discussion on the villainy of Hamlet, see G. Wilson Knight, "Hamlet Reconsidered," in *The Wheel of Fire: Interpretations of Shakespearean Tragedy, with Three New Essays* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1966), 298-325.

⁵² Alan Sinfield, *Faultlines: Cultural Materialism and the Politics of Dissident Reading* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 39. Sinfield associates this entrapment model with New Historicism in particular, but grants that it appears in other kinds of readings as well.

⁵³ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 185. All italics preserved from the text.

⁵⁴ Whigham, *Ambition and Privilege*, 117.

⁵⁵ Reynolds, 19.

⁵⁶ For instance, William Barrett and Peter Baro questioned predestination during the 1590s at Cambridge, an episode representative of a larger debate volatile enough to prompt Archbishop Whitgift to attempt settling matters with the Lambeth Articles of 1595. See Alan Sinfield, "Protestantism, Subjectivity, Control," in *Faultlines* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 154, *passim*.

Chapter 3:
Pretty as a Picture: Women, Spectacle, and Misogynist Theatricality

The Renaissance English revenge tragedy is, among other things, a genre rife with misogyny. The villains' consistent objectification of women as purely sexualized objects for the taking repeatedly produces the crimes that begin their plays' revenge plots, while the protagonists, stalwart defenders of women though they be, often betray the source of this protective impulse to be their belief in woman's fundamental inferiority as a sex. Simply put, the early modern revenge play "insistently, even obsessively, express[es] misogyny."¹ Yet in a number of respects, this fact is unremarkable. After all, these plays were conceived amidst an early modern culture where women were clearly second class citizens, despite the conspicuous exception of a female monarch like Elizabeth I. Furthermore, as tragedies they belong to a larger dramatic tradition that, unlike its comedic counterpart, consistently saw female characters as victims or villains when they weren't downgraded to minor roles or excised from the work entirely.² From this point of view, such misogyny is almost expected, practically mundane.

What does make this misogyny so remarkable, however, is that it is utterly incongruent with the principal themes of the revenge genre in their broadest sense. These plays are about the course and result of inferiors (even aristocratic revengers like Hamlet are subsidiary to the villain-nobles who have victimized them) expressing anger that otherwise they are counseled to ignore or suppress. These socially subordinate avengers inevitably are allowed to indulge in this anger, pursuing a path of vengeance that sees them deploy theatricality in such a way as to elide the socio-political distinctions that once separated them from their aristocratic prey and suggest that these disparate men are

not so unlike as they may seem. Meanwhile, the genre's women predominantly remain powerless—counseled by their men to silence their voices, to bury their anger and shame—suggesting that there are different kinds of inferiority at play in the Renaissance English revenge tragedy, and in a genre that indulges one disenfranchised group, another is vigorously policed. Furthermore, the liminality that works elsewhere in the genre to destabilize essentialist notions of identity and social stature does not appear to extend to gender. If, as Dymphna Callaghan claims, misogyny “is not, in any sense, an *anti*-language or a *sub*-discourse of tragedy. Rather it is the primary language of differentiation,”³ then the revenge tragedy's misogyny to some degree undermines the liminal theatricality its revengers enjoy by definitively parsing the *dramatis personae* by sex. Nowhere do we see the transvestite heroines of Renaissance comedy in the early modern revenge play; for all their unique circumstances, these female characters remain conspicuously women, and thus conspicuously different. Typical of its misogynistic setting, a double standard clearly persists within the genre, problematizing the broad claims made in my last chapter regarding the implications of the revenger's liminality. And so, having examined the ramifications of such performance for the genre's men, we must now consider the repercussions of this theatricality upon its women.

To begin, we must recognize that women are of central importance within the Renaissance English revenge tragedy—or, to be more precise, women are the principal subject over which the genre's larger concerns of patriarchal order and contest between men come forth. Time and again, the central crimes of each play can be traced to failed exogamy, to an interrupted or aborted transfer of women from one family to the next. Lorenzo's conspiracy to murder Horatio in *The Spanish Tragedy* stems from the

nobleman's recognition that the soldier's affair with Bel-Imperia will thwart the royal family's intention to wed her to the Portuguese prince Balthazar. The dispute over who can have Lavinia's hand initially turns Titus against his own son, and soon after, Saturninus against the Andronici, while the old Duke of *The Revenger's Tragedy* abruptly ends Vindice's union with his fiancé Gloriana by poisoning the girl for her chastity. Indeed, Marston's duke Piero manages a multi-generational challenge to established transfers of women, murdering his old rival Andrugio in part because "We both were rivals in our May of blood / Unto Maria, fair Ferrara's heir" and "He won the lady, to my honor's death" (I.i.23-5), while simultaneously framing his own daughter for adultery and thereby interrupting her pending nuptials to Andrugio's son, Antonio.⁴ In each instance, a central dispute between men grows out of their contention over a woman, transforming her into an object over which a territorial dispute of authority, control, and masculine power takes place. These women are the catalyst that inevitably begins the genre's revenge action, a subject that facilitates each play's turn toward its "real business" of examining the fissures in patriarchal concepts of hierarchy and dominion.

As the metaphor of movement from one family to another suggests, notions of distinct spaces and the vigorous policing or breaching of those boundaries are significant in this discussion. The father's insistence on the daughter's confinement at home simultaneously speaks to his power over her and his prerogative regarding which men, if any, might have access to this domestic space. Russell West-Pavlov reminds that

Masculinity, today as in the early modern period, is predicated upon the capacity to enter and occupy space and fix its boundaries through subjugating power. Masculinity defines itself by acts of spatial power, and thus the imagery of gendered work points towards a larger context of gendered geography and politicized topography.⁵

Beholden as they are to the power of their fathers, brothers, and sons, the women of the English revenge tragedy are therefore subject to the conspicuously spatial manifestations of that power continually directed at them. Inevitably, this means restriction and confinement. After Lorenzo murders Horatio, he has his sister imprisoned in a tower, just as Piero orders his daughter placed in a dungeon while his own schemes play out. In much the same way, Polonius advises his daughter Ophelia “Be somewhat scatter your maiden presence” (I.iii.121), while Hamlet later in the play presumes to tell his mother “go not to my uncle’s bed” (III.iv.159). As I have already shown elsewhere, contests over spatial control are a fundamental aspect of the English revenge play, and thus it should come as little surprise that the genre’s women are routinely imprisoned or constrained as collateral damage in the men’s frantic contest for socio-political ascendancy.

Of course, these fathers and sons are not simply restricting the movement of their women in a purposeless exhibition of power, but rather for the specific design of protecting them from the lascivious encroachments of the court, as well as the woman’s own sexual desires. It is not surprising, then, that many of the genre’s most misogynistic lines play upon the overlapping meanings of spatial and sexual penetration; Vindice, for one, promises, “I will lay / Hard siege unto my mother” (II.i.51-2) and later remarks, “That woman is all male whom none can enter” (II.i.115). The almost universal lasciviousness of the genre’s villains thus serves the dramaturgical function of giving these nobles and monarchs reason to breach the confines established by their social inferiors and thereby ignite the fundamental clash that will propel the play forward from that point onward; in this transgression we recognize the genesis of the revenge play’s thematic concern with disproportionate power struggle between men.⁶ Furthermore, the

villain-noble's intrusion into this confinement not only contests the father's right to govern that space and those that inhabit it, but also underscores the genre's misogynistic presentation of woman's thorough, often violent subordination to male agency—whoever that male might be. The repeated restriction, confinement, and victimization of women in the English revenge play therefore reveal the overlapping, entangled concerns of space, power, and sexuality that saturate their treatment in the genre.

At first glance, then, theatricality would seem to have little to do with their unfortunate plight. However, part of the reason these women are so successfully confined and with such regularity is their conspicuous lack of a theatricalized agency—specifically the device of disguise. Unlike the typical early modern comedy where women routinely masquerade as men—a move that grants them access to spaces and presences otherwise designated off-limits to them—there is little evidence of any such deception on the part of the revenge play's women.⁷ Instead they are but themselves, and as such remain beholden to the spatial limitations placed upon them by the genre's men.

More importantly, however, this issue of confinement speaks directly to male anxiety over the voyeur's gaze, and consequently, broader notions of performance and spectacle. While the most immediate concern of these fathers and brothers may be the suitor's penetration of the family's domestic confines and the potential sexual penetration that, they fear, would follow hard on its heels, this was only one part of a broader disquiet surrounding the dangers of women liberated from their protective enclosures. Evidence of this anxiety surfaces in the drama amidst both the protectors and suitors of these contested women. For instance, Laertes warns his sister “The chariest maid is prodigal enough / If she unmask her beauty to the moon” (I.iii.36-7), while in his mad ramblings

Hamlet warns Polonius “Let her not walk i’ th’ sun. Conception is a blessing, but as your daughter may conceive, friend, look to’t” (II.ii.184-5)—advice even the old councilor recognizes, conceding “Though this be madness, yet there is method in’t” (II.ii.205-6). Furthermore, these larger concerns increasingly come to the fore in contemporary discussions of female playgoers and the London theatrical scene. In his *School of Abuse* (1579), Stephen Gosson argues that women

which shew themselves openly, desire to bee seene. It is not ... your modestie at home, that couereth your lightnesse, if you present your selues in open Theaters. Thought is free: you can forbidd no man, that vieweth you, to noate you, and that noateth you, to iudge you, for entering to places of suspition.⁸

This final note would suggest that Gosson’s principal concern is for female reputation, but soon enough concupiscence enters the discussion:

Looking eyes, haue lyking hartes, liking harts may burne in lust ... though you go to theaters to se sport, *Cupid* may catche you ere you departe ... If you doe but ... ioyne lookes with an amorous Gazer, you haue already made your selues assaultable, & yelded your Cities to be sacked.⁹

In other words, the physical protection of female bodies is not enough, for if freely allowed into populated public spaces, these women might be ravished by the male gaze. “What safegarde of charitie can there be,” John Northbrooke asks, “where the woman is desired with so many eyes, where so many faces look vpon hir”?¹⁰ Citing many of the same passages from *The School of Abuse*, Jean Howard can only conclude

In Gosson’s account the female playgoer is symbolically whored by the gaze of many men, each woman a potential Cressida in the camp of the Greeks, vulnerable, alone, and open to whatever imputations men might cast upon her. She becomes what we might call the object of promiscuous gazing.¹¹

This fear of the “promiscuous gaze” underscores the significance of woman’s non-existent theatrical agency in English revenge tragedy, for without the avenger’s virtuoso talent for disguise, she is not only entrapped in the spatial confines set by the

men of her family, but denied a device by which she might mask herself from those around her and thereby overcome her vulnerability to the male gaze. More significantly, this anxiety comes into direct conflict with the consistent theatricalization of women in revenge tragedy, for amidst the tangled struggles between the plays' male characters, these women are pushed to the fore and compelled to make spectacles of themselves. The Goths' brutal silencing of Lavinia forces the girl to communicate her victimization and implicate those responsible through mute performance and sign. Ophelia becomes deranged and wanders the Danish court, drawing every eye to her even as the spectacle unsettles them all. Gratiana and Gertrude are both attacked by their sons and forced to make a show of their penitent hearts. Ultimately, most of these women commit suicide or are killed, thereby leaving a final tableau for their men to witness. In each instance, the female subject becomes a spectacle for her male audience to interpret, one they often read as some manifestation of the "good woman," in so far as they can elicit a properly patriarchal conclusion from their interpretation: the contrite whore or pander, the remorseful female suicide, and always, the undeniable justification for male vengeance. How ironic, then, that in order to accomplish this goal, these women must to some extent be liberated from their domestic confines and subjected to the very male gaze that elsewhere causes such concern.

In effect, by making the women of English revenge tragedy a spectacle, the genre's theatricality continues the misogynistic agenda of its corrupt courts' social structures, once again making objects of these female characters; in one instance they are objects of spatial confinement or sexual desire, in another a performative object beholden to the male interpretive gaze. Like these more typical examples of female subordination,

this theatrical objectification stems from male anxiety over their (in)ability to successfully control women. By essentially staging women—or, as is often the case, compelling them to stage themselves—woman’s notoriously ambiguous and unpredictable interiority is externalized, granting the men at court the opportunity to facilely confirm their misogynistic assumptions, and in so doing, allaying the anxieties upon which their misogyny is built. If, as Joseph Swetnam asserts in his *Araignment of Levvd, Idle, Froward, and Unconstant Women* (1616), women “beare two tongues in one mouth like *Iudas*” and “they can with the *satyre* out of one mouth blow both hot and cold,”¹² or if as Hamlet rages, “Frailty, thy name is woman!” (I.ii.146), then the installation of woman as performative object grants her male audience the interpretive agency to read her as he will and thereby reassure himself that the patriarchy’s misogynistic lessons have successfully been learned by these female subjects. For the male protagonist in particular, however, these instances of female spectacle serve an even greater function: they provide the scenes of vulnerability and victimization that he will appropriate as his own and use to construct his new, vengeful iteration of masculine subjectivity.

Shakespeare’s Lavinia, “Rome’s rich ornament” (I.i.52), is the revenge tragedy example *par excellence* of woman objectified both sexually and theatrically—even before the grisly rape and mutilation for which she is best known. Our very first glimpse of her sees the virtuous Roman daughter perform her filial respects to the victorious Titus in language that explicitly calls attention to a corresponding show, augmenting her speech

with appropriate action: “Lo at this tomb my tributary tears / I render for my brethren’s obsequies; / And at thy feet I kneel, with tears of joy / Shed on this earth for thy return to Rome” (I.i.159-62). Making a deliberate spectacle of her deference and grief in her opening speech, Lavinia inserts herself into the broader ceremony already underway, one in which men clearly play the active participants. Titus and his sons bring forth their prisoners, intern their noble dead, and make sacrifice to their spirits; they observe their solemn rites by acting upon other objects. Lavinia, conversely, performs her role by drawing attention to herself as an object to be studied, a passive model of proper affect. And in this regard, she is successful: her performance elicits the desired response of pleasing her father, who exclaims “the cordial of mine age” does “glad my heart” (I.i.166).

We must be careful, however, not to assume that such female performance significantly empowers the performer; it is not so simple a matter as Lavinia theatrically displaying sentiment and thereby convincing the peers of Rome. Her show of deference is successful not because such theatricality is inherently or automatically effective but rather because it serves the purposes of the established patriarchal order. Titus’s daughter makes no move to interfere with the ceremony at hand; instead, she simply shows the assembled patriarchs what they already expect to see. Actively seeking to manipulate events, on the other hand, is an entirely different matter. Shortly before Lavinia’s entrance, Tamora desperately pleads with her captors for her son’s life, utilizing the very same technique Lavinia will so successfully deploy moments later.

Stay, Roman brethren! Gracious conqueror,
Victorious Titus, rue the tears I shed,
A mother’s tears in passion for her son...
Sufficeth not that we are brought to Rome

To beautify thy triumphs, and return
Captive to thee and thy Roman yoke (I.i.104-6, 109-11)

Calling attention to the visual cues of her own spectacle—her woman's tears to evoke pity, her helplessness to inspire mercy—Tamora draws the eyes of Rome's patriarchs to sway their opinions and change their explicit designs. In this instance, however, she is conspicuously at odds with her masculine audience's intention, and consequently she is immediately overridden with cold courtesy. This stark disparity between the two otherwise similar examples reminds us that the efficacy of any theatricalized spectacle lies not in the performer alone but also in the agency of the audience, and thus if woman is limited to merely generating semiotic cues for the male gaze, then she will remain beholden to masculine interpretive agency. This is obviously a hard lesson for the Gothic queen, but one she learns nonetheless. Indeed, Tamora reminds her remaining sons of this very fact as, scenes later, Lavinia desperately begs for mercy: "Remember, boys, I poured forth tears in vain / To save your brother from the sacrifice, / But fierce Andronicus would not relent. / Therefore away with her, and use her as you will" (II.iii.163-6). Unfortunately for Lavinia, the standard has already been set: men need not respond to female spectacle that is at odds with their established intentions, and thus no cries for mercy or death—no matter how visible or sincere—will dissuade the Goths from their evil design.¹³

Lavinia's subsequent rape and mutilation, therefore, does far more than constrain her ability to implicate her attackers, for not only does it remove those traditional verbal and textual means of communication, but it also consigns her to the realm of the performative, one which we have already seen gives its female performers little significant agency. In effect, by permanently restricting Titus's daughter to the merely

semiotic, it forever traps her in a position of patriarchal subjugation, ensuring that even her merest attempt at communication be necessarily authorized by a male audience that may or may not interpret it as she intends. “Shall I speak for thee?” (II.iv.33) Marcus asks, while later Lucius tells his uncle to “say thou for her, who hath done this deed” (III.i.87). This recourse to forceful interpretive appropriation is most starkly suggested by Titus’s promise that “I, of these [signs], will wrest an alphabet” (III.ii.44). As Kim Solga argues, “rape becomes a script, an event constituted after the fact in carefully arranged word and gesture, to be performed for the edification of an authorizing public.”¹⁴ Lavinia’s gruesome plight, therefore, is the evolution, not the beginning, of a theatricalized, patriarchal objectification we see already underway at the very outset of the play.

Lavinia’s mutilation makes of her a permanent spectacle, but this is not necessarily symptomatic of her unique case. Rather, as a number of critics have shown, this association between rape and theater is indicative of contemporary tensions in English law. Sixteenth-century legislation came to increasingly “redefine rape as a violent crime against a woman rather than as a property crime against her guardians,” thereby tacitly acknowledging the intent of the victimized female subject over the permissions of her male relatives.¹⁵ At the same time, however, women’s testimony on the matter was not always granted sufficient gravity by the courts, for “women were frequently disbelieved, their willingness to speak of sexual matters becoming possible proof of complicity.”¹⁶ The result, consequently, was a legislative dependence upon visual cues to corroborate the victim’s words. As Lorraine Helms contends, “Since the new laws acknowledge a woman’s consent without validating her testimony, they

escalate the violence of sexual crime. Injuries become the only admissible evidence of denial.”¹⁷ Contemporary legal documents seem to support this conclusion. *The Lawes Resolutions of Womens Rights* (1632), known otherwise as “The Women’s Lawyer,” advises the female victim of rape “to goe straight way...and with Hue and Cry complaine to the good men of the next towne, shewing her wrong, her garments torne,”¹⁸ thereby offering semiotic corroboration to offset the intangibility of the female agency that extant law ostensibly recognized but cultural practice routinely undermined. As such, the particular demands of Lavinia’s gruesome plight create not a wholly unique case, but rather an exaggeration of the spectacle seemingly required by Renaissance English law, forcing the woman to present her private victimization to the public confirmation of male spectators.

What this does is to some degree disassociate the theatrical audience, despite our sympathy, from Lavinia and her plight, for by making her a permanent spectacle, our rapt scrutiny of her ineffective gestures places us in a position identical to the male audience onstage that is similarly trying to read her. Solga explains,

the most likely reason for rape’s inevitable stage absence is that its representation in the early modern theatre is designed not to reflect what we understand about the experience of rape—the victim’s heinous bodily and psychic violation—but to echo the experience of those to whom rape is reported, who can know it only as vicarious witnesses, and who wield the power to absolve the victim of any potential complicity and mobilize the force of the law. Rape is staged in early modern England as it is made known in the world beyond the stage: as a rehearsal for public confirmation.¹⁹

The dramatic emphasis is placed not upon the act itself or even its impact upon the victim, but upon the interpretation of that act by the broader male community and the consequences of their “reading.” Indeed, attention is primarily drawn to Lavinia’s mutilation in so far as it incites righteous indignation and a desire for bloody revenge:

“worse than Philomel you used my daughter,” Titus declares to his daughter’s rapists, “And worse than Progne I will be reveng’d” (V.ii.194-5). Titus’s promise that *he*, not his daughter, will be revenged is telling, as it reveals the rape “is torn from women’s bodies and identified with the men who govern and command those bodies,” and thus, “as rape becomes theatre, its consequences for her body, her psychic well-being, even her future prospects fall out of the frame.”²⁰

From the outset, the frame imposed upon Lavinia’s plight by her family is that of classical precedent, principally the story of Philomela. In his *Metamorphosis*, Ovid tells the tale of how Tereus, king of Thrace, rapes his sister-in-law Philomela during a sea voyage and, to prevent her revealing his crime, removes her tongue. Philomela, however, weaves her story into a tapestry that she gives her sister Procne, and so to achieve revenge on her husband, Procne butchers their son and feeds him to his father. This is by no means an exact parallel—particularly in the distinction that Ovid’s story centers on female solidarity and revenge—but this does not stop the male Andronici from appropriating the tale for their own ends. The moment he finds her in the forest, Marcus tells Lavinia, “But sure some Tereus hath deflow’red thee, / And, lest thou shouldst detect [him], cut thy tongue,” yet once he realizes the parallel is not nearly as precise as he originally believed, he refuses to abandon the comparison, amending, “A craftier Tereus, cousin, hast thou met, / And he hath cut those pretty fingers off / That could have better sewed than Philomel” (II.iv.26-7, 41-3). As a permanent spectacle that cannot help but present incomprehensible signs to her audience, Lavinia remains utterly at the mercy of her masculine spectator, one that responds to this inadequate sign system by interpreting her through an only partially accurate comparison. Nevertheless, this is how

the men continue to understand her plight, and thus in order to successfully communicate her thoughts to them, she must acquiesce to their imprecise gloss.

The breakthrough moment in which Lavinia finally reveals her attackers comes not when the men, as Titus promises, “by still practice learn to know thy meaning” (III.ii.45), but instead when she learns to utilize their modes of communication and interpretation. Groping through her nephew’s books, she comes upon Ovid’s *Metamorphosis* and manages to gesture toward the story of Philomela, and only then does her father finally seem to grasp the nature of her violation: “Lavinia, wert thou thus surpris’d, sweet girl, / Ravish’d and wrong’d as Philomela was, / Forc’d in the ruthless, vast, and gloomy woods?” (IV.i.51-3). Successful as this effort is, however, it cannot implicate the parties responsible, but Marcus solves that dilemma by giving his niece another way to communicate. Placing his staff in his mouth and guiding its point in the sand with his feet, he requests her to “guide, if thou canst, / This after me” (IV.i.69-70). Mimicking her uncle’s example, Lavinia finally employs signs her masculine audience can understand, and thereby succeeds in implicating Chiron and Demetrius, galvanizing the play’s otherwise stagnant revenge plot. As Robin L. Bott explains,

in this scene Lavinia is clearly at the mercy of the patriarchal system: because her own signs are indiscernible to the men, they must provide her with their own means of communication by teaching her how to write with the stick, and she is only comprehensible to them while using this medium. Her voice, entirely constructed through her menfolks’ agency, is not her own.²¹

More so than Bott’s statement gives her credit for, I would argue that Lavinia is an equal partner here in engineering her performative success, as it is her conspicuous attention to Ovid’s *Metamorphosis* that begins the discovery. Once again, however, we must recognize that she does so only by adapting to them; her semiotic message is only as

successful as the degree to which she caters to the masculine audience's static modes of comprehension.

Having finally delivered her message successfully, Lavinia's inability to speak or write becomes a non-issue as the responsibility of vengeance fully transfers to the Andronici men with their recognition of the parties responsible. For the remainder of the play, no more mention is made of their inability to understand her; from this point onward, Lavinia is completely and truly silenced. However, this does not interfere with her continuing role as theatrical object, and over the remaining two acts Titus employs his mutilated daughter as a prop in spectacles of his own design. As Demetrius and Chiron are bound and gagged in preparation for their murder, Titus calls their attention to Lavinia's silent presence, making of her an object lesson in his motivation for revenge: "Here stands the spring whom you have stain'd with mud, / This goodly summer with your winter mix'd" (V.ii.170-1). More starkly, his macabre staging of the scene is designed to underscore the irony of how that revenge is accomplished, noting, "This one hand yet is left to cut your throats / Whiles that Lavinia 'tween her stumps doth hold / The basin that receives your guilty blood" (V.ii.181-3). Forever silenced by the horrendous disfigurement she suffered at the hands of Demetrius and Chiron, Lavinia appears to be no less eloquent as a patriarchal signifier of justified revenge.

This does not mean, however, that her father will not continue to apply an interpretive gloss upon her mute spectacle. In the play's final scene Titus, dressed as a chef, asks the emperor Saturninus "Was it well done of rash Virginius / To slay his daughter with his own right hand, / Because she was enforc'd, stain'd, and deflow'r'd?" (V.iii.36-8). Abruptly abandoning the classical allusion his family has been utilizing since

Lavinia was first discovered in the forest,²² Titus's shift toward the story of Virginia, who was sought after by a powerful official and murdered by her father to protect her, provides a telling reminder of the revenger's ability to manipulate onstage theatrical audiences and suggests that women may often become hapless victims amidst these machinations. By essentially putting himself forth as a substitute for Virginius, Titus tacitly seeks authorization for his pending murder of Lavinia from the unwitting Saturninus, a feat impossible to achieve through the Philomela story, with its female revenger and conclusion in which all three major characters survive, transformed as birds. And while the aftermath of Lavinia's abrupt murder is frantic and confused, it appears that Titus's strategy largely succeeds. Despite the emperor's immediate shock at witnessing the old general murder his only daughter, Titus need only reiterate "I am as woeful as Virginius was, / And have a thousand times more cause than he" (V.iii.50-1) for Saturninus to ask "What, was she ravish'd? Tell who did the deed," and once that information is revealed, to demand "Go fetch them hither to us presently" (V.iii.53, 59). From the moment Titus reiterates his Virginia analogy, from the moment his audience Saturninus finally absorbs the interpretation he is intended, the emperor ceases asking why Titus would kill his daughter—it has already been explained through the revelation of her rape, a disclosure made through an ambiguous performative spectacle coupled with an explicit patristic gloss to nudge that spectacle's audience toward the desired conclusion.

Perhaps it is appropriate, then, that we are given no clear indication of Lavinia's complicity in this final show, for by all indication female agency is routinely eclipsed in their roles as theatricalized objects. Rather, they are beholden to the interpretations of

their masculine audience, one who willfully accepts or rejects those spectacles proffered only in so far as they correspond with extant patriarchal norms. Thus Lavinia, a woman raped and then mutilated to prevent her implicating the villains responsible, is less an exception as she is the starkest example of the misogynist theatricality that objectifies its female subjects in the English revenge tragedy and places them at the interpretive whim of the male spectators onstage who will ultimately decide their fates.

Like her predecessor Lavinia, Ophelia is ultimately made a theatricalized object by forces outside her control, though the stark symbolic correspondence between woman's severed performative agency and Lavinia's mutilated body in *Titus Andronicus* is refined in *Hamlet* through the subject of psychological distraction. As before, however, there are indications that this young lady was already enmeshed in a patriarchal system where women enjoy little performative agency to begin with. For example, once Hamlet has adopted his antic disposition in earnest and the court struggles to determine what has caused this malady, Polonius and Claudius opt to stage a chance meeting between the councilor's daughter and the prince, hoping that in their observation of Hamlet's behavior they might discover its origin. For her part, Ophelia is directed by her father as if she were an actor in a play, to the degree that he even gives her blocking directions and suggests props to use: "Ophelia, walk you here...Read on this book, / That show of such an exercise may color / Your [loneliness]" (III.i.42-5). These elder statesmen craft a scene by which they hope to elicit an intelligible response from a subject who has hitherto been indecipherable, and Ophelia is little more than the bait upon which the

pending spectacle is built. Whereas Lavinia at least opted of her own accord to perform her show of filial devotion in the opening scene of *Titus*, here Ophelia is robbed of even that much agency. Rather, she is told where to go and what to do by her father, and her subsequent performance is only worth as much to him as the response it generates from the prince. In a play where we have already seen Hamlet consciously adopt an antic disposition to distract those that may wish him harm, where a player's speech on Hecuba brings tears to his audience's eyes, and where the prince decides to use the power of theater to "catch the conscience of the King," such instances of effective masculine theatricality stand in stark contrast to Ophelia's performative debut as a theatricalized tool deployed by the scheming patriarchs of family and state.

Eventually, the strain placed upon Ophelia by her thorough subordination to masculine prerogative amidst the confusing and contradictory undercurrents of the Danish court's politics leads to her mental breakdown. As Carol Thomas Neely explains, "The context of her disease, like that which will (much later) be termed hysteria, is sexual frustration, social helplessness, and enforced control over women's bodies,"²³ but as we have already seen with Lavinia's rape and mutilation, Ophelia's conspicuous psychological break also transforms her into a perpetual spectacle dependent upon male authorization. While her previous experience as the dutiful daughter and sister did consign her to a subordinate position in the family, beholden to father and brother alike, that did not prevent her from occasionally asserting herself. For instance, after Laertes gives a lengthy speech counseling his sister on how best to respond to Hamlet, Ophelia acquiesces but retorts, "good my brother, / Do not... Show me the steep and thorny way to heaven, / Whiles, [like] a puff'd and reckless libertine, / Himself the primrose path of

dalliance treads” (I.iii.46-50), and though she ultimately bows to her father’s demands on the same issue, she clearly is not in agreement (I.iii.88-136). With the onset of madness, however, any such shreds of agency evaporate as the girl loses her grasp on reality, “Divided from herself and her fair judgement, / Without the which we are pictures” (IV.v.85-6). As this last quote suggests, she becomes a mere show, one which inevitably draws the anxious eyes of the court but remains powerless to determine how they will interpret her.

However, the repeated success with which these male onlookers read Ophelia’s madness suggests the implicit contradictions in such instances of objectified female spectacle, for to find meaning in an affliction believed to be utterly devoid of such sense intimates that this reading was arbitrarily assigned by its audience in the first place. Indeed, even before we see Ophelia enter on stage “distracted, with her hair down, playing on a lute” (IV.v.SD), she is first described by a messenger, thereby beginning her masculine interpretive gloss in advance of her own semiotic cues and suggesting the secondary importance these signs take to their masculine readings. This messenger briefs the court on Ophelia’s condition and attempts to describe what is so unsettling about her distracted spectacle—not just the misfortune of the girl itself, but that her watchers cannot help but find meaning in her mad speech:

...[she] speaks things in doubt
That carry but half sense. Her speech is nothing,
Yet the unshaped use of it doth move
The hearers to collection; they yawn at it,
And botch the words up fit to their own thoughts (IV.v.6-10)

This description is telling, for the absence of sense in her speech (“nothing”) and her own lack of agency (“the unshaped use”) stand in stark contrast to the active verbs of the

listeners who “yawn at it / And botch the words up,” not unlike Titus’s “wresting” of an alphabet from his daughter’s mute signs.²⁴ Implicitly taking advantage of her splintered subjectivity, the Danish court imposes its own signification upon Ophelia, making of her a mere imprint, an object, of their own designs. Consequently, Ophelia’s mad songs and proverbs that literally speak of grief over an absent father and regret over a stolen sexual innocence become instead to Laertes “A document in madness, thoughts and remembrance fitted” that “Hadst thou they wits and didst persuade revenge, / It could not move thus” (IV.v.178-9, 169-70). Thus in Ophelia’s famous mad scene we see the principal roles of the female subject in English revenge tragedy collide: as a theatricalized object, stripped of any agency, she becomes a *tabula rasa* upon which her masculine audience may impose their own readings, and through this particular theatricalization, she becomes the objectified catalyst of a revenge plot, the female spark that leads to a heated contest between men.

Ophelia’s conspicuous psychological distraction and the concerns it raises regarding woman objectified by the interpretive male gaze foregrounds a significant discrepancy in how madness is utilized in the English revenge play. As I have argued elsewhere, the paradigmatic madness of the revenger serves to destabilize static, essentialist notions of identity by making indeterminate the boundaries between sanity and insanity, between one persona and the next. Neither the onstage or theatrical audience can reliably decide whether Hieronimo, Titus, or Hamlet are in full control of their faculties, suffering from uncontrollable mad passions, or something in between. This indeterminacy, I have argued, comprises a significant part of the revenger’s liminal transformation and serves the larger thematic designs of the genre. For the madwomen of

the English revenge tragedy, however, their distraction is far from ambiguous. Both Ophelia and her generic precursor, Hieronimo's wife Isabella, are given neither asides nor calm moments of introspection, and therefore are denied the presumption of manipulative agency Hamlet or Spain's knight marshall enjoy during even their most frantic outbursts. Unlike the revenger, these women are clearly and undeniably mad, and consequently their psychological affliction works to separate them from the rest of the court, to conspicuously set them apart from their peers. Most significantly, their madness contrasts them from the protagonist himself. As Carolyn Neely argues of Ophelia,

Perhaps the most important aspect of her role is the contrast with Hamlet that it introduces...His madness is in every way contrasted with hers, in part, probably, to emphasize the difference between feigned and actual madness, melancholy, and distraction.²⁵

Thus the very subject of madness serves the misogynist theatricality of the genre, for not only does it make an object of the woman at least in part to add significance to a corresponding male character, but it accomplishes this through stark contrast, though the tacit assertion that these women are fundamentally different than their men.

I do not mean to completely disregard the potency of Ophelia's mad spectacle, but rather, as Harry Keyishian does, to call attention to the fact that if the maid "does dole out punishment it is indirect and oblique and achieved through her own suffering, a martyrdom that accuses effectively but cannot adequately redress her grievances."²⁶ As surely as she is victimized by the patriarchal forces at play in the Danish court, she is equally wronged by her consignment to mere dramatic spectacle, a passive object without agency of its own that must be granted meaning through the interpretive gloss placed upon it by an authorizing, and often masculine, onstage audience. Bereft of her senses, the Rose of May is in no position to improve her lot, and eventually, she famously

drowns in a brook. It would appear Keyishian is correct that “the victims of malicious injury may be destroyed by continued powerlessness,”²⁷ and thus in a genre where women are so clearly and routinely disenfranchised, it should be little surprise Ophelia meets her watery end before the final curtain.

Most of the women in Renaissance revenge tragedy meet their end sometime during the course of the play, their systemic victimization at the hands of patriarchal dogma finally culminating in their physical victimization at the hands of others and themselves. Sadly for these women, their untimely deaths do not always end the parts they must play in the genre’s misogynistic theatricality. This is due in no small degree to the complex relationship between death and spectacle. As Richard K. Sanderson explains, “Whenever we speak of death, we really mean the death of someone else; death is something we know only from the outside as surviving observers. It is natural, then, that our attempts to explain death and dying frequently use the vocabulary of spectatorship.”²⁸ In a sense, the dead female form is the apogee of the theatricalized objectification they have suffered throughout the early modern revenge tragedy.

A ready example is Antonio’s wife in *The Revenger’s Tragedy*. Never actually named in the play or even mentioned in the *dramatis personae*, this virtuous woman exists only as a dead body, a victim of suicide.²⁹ Her mortal remains are theatrically presented from the outset when her husband Antonio pulls aside a curtain to reveal the corpse, “discovering the body of her dead to certain lords” (I.iv.SD). Yet despite what this staging might suggest, the old lord Antonio is not the author of this spectacle, but

rather its facilitator. Sanderson reminds that “What makes killing oneself inherently ‘theatrical’ is precisely one’s awareness of one’s *audience*. In other words, the act is ‘dyadic.’ It is a communication from the suicide to some other person or persons, real or imaginary.”³⁰ The old man’s somewhat startled recognition of the particulars surrounding his wife’s body suggests that he has had no hand in displaying it thus:

I marked not this before:
A prayer book the pillow to her cheek—
This was her rich confection —and another
Placed in her right hand, with a leaf tucked up,
Pointing to these words:
“*Melius virtute mori quam per dedecus vivere.*”³¹ (I.iv.12-17)

The desire to communicate a message is palpable here, in part due to the rather heavy-handed use of not one but two prayer books, but chiefly to the earmarked Latinate passage—the equivalent of a suicide note. Every aspect of this spectacle is designed to speak to the victim’s devotion and innocence, and not surprisingly, the wife’s audience receives that message perfectly: upon Antonio’s presentation of the corpse, the courtiers immediately deem her “That virtuous lady!” and “Precedent for wives!” (I.iv.6-7). If “stage-suicide can express a wish for posthumous control over the lives and feelings of survivors,”³² then Antonio’s wife to some degree regains the agency stripped from her in Junior Brother’s rape by making of herself a meticulously arranged spectacle, one that successfully communicates her semiotic assertion of chastity and honor.

However, we must recognize that while this is clearly an effective assertion of theatrical agency by an otherwise powerless woman, it is once again accomplished through the martyrdom of that woman herself, and like Lavinia’s opening scene, is only as successful as it corresponds to extant patriarchal expectations. Certainly, her suicide coincides perfectly with Junior Brother’s reprieve from execution to incite her male

audience's extant inclination toward oaths of vengeance. Sanderson reminds, "One of the most common messages from the suicide to his or, more usually, her survivors is *the summons to revenge*,"³³ and while there is no clear indication that this was the wife's intention, it is apparent that her death prompts such a response in her masculine audience: "Twere pity," Hippolito remarks as the courtiers swear they will enact their revenge, "The ruins of so fair a monument / Should not be dipped in the defacer's blood" (I.iv.66-8). The woman's suicide simply gives the already discontent courtiers all the more reason to initiate plots against the royal family and provides conspicuous justification that their rebellion is righteous. More significantly, though, patriarchal values are being reinforced here because the courtier's lauding of her self-mutilation in the name of stolen chastity is just as misogynistic as if they had branded her a whore; they are praising her, at least in part, because she has so successfully internalized their masculinist agenda. As Eileen Allman explains, in such situations "The presentation of praiseworthy women then becomes no more than male tyranny exercising the 'benign' rather than the 'violent' option of patriarchy"—especially since Antonio's wife has already done such violence upon herself.³⁴

Nevertheless, the woman's final act allows her to theatrically exert some agency upon those courtiers who witness her remains. How powerless, then, are those victimized women whose bodies never even see the stage? Unlike Antonio's wife or even Lavinia, who is first glossed as a modern-day Virginia before her father kills her, Mellida and Ophelia both die offstage, and as a result, their final moments instead must be narrated to the court by a messenger. In banishing their deaths to that invisible realm outside of the staged theatrical action, the playwrights effectively erase the women themselves,

replacing what would have been the spectacle of their immobile forms with the detailed death scenes created by the messengers' stories. In other words, what before had been an imbalanced relationship between a theatrically objectified woman and her authorizing male audience now becomes the tension between a witness's interpretation of that woman and the audience's. Somehow, she has become beside the point.

In each instance, an older woman narrates the younger's final moments, but despite the varying degrees to which they try imposing their own interpretation upon events, these women's words remain secondary to their masculine audience's prerogative. Mellida's death in *Antonio's Revenge* is largely unremarkable and makes little impact upon the play. It is narrated by Antonio's mother Maria, who dutifully imparts the girl's final words and describes the manner of her quiet passing, but though Mellida's father Piero seems taken aback by the news, he nevertheless resolves "I will not stay my marriage for all this!" (IV.iii.190). The more interesting case is Ophelia's. Her death is famously reported by Gertrude, who clearly describes the death in such a way as to suggest the girl's lack of culpability. Despite Carolyn Neely's contention that "she narrates it without interpretation,"³⁵ the Danish queen repeatedly inserts details and qualifications that point both to the accidental nature of the death and the girl's inability to comprehend her own situation. Unlike the willful leap of the suicide, as Ophelia "There on the pendant boughs her crownet weeds / Clamb'ring to hang, an envious sliver broke" and so she "Fell in the weeping brook." (IV.vii.172-5). Once in the water, "she chaunted snatches of old lauds, / As one incapable of her own distress" (IV.vii.177-8), clearly rendered unaware of her plight by the very madness that previously caused her to sing similar songs amidst the court. Indeed, Gertrude even makes Ophelia a passive

victim at the moment of death, ascribing blame to “her garments, heavy with their drink,” which “Pull’d the poor wretch from her melodious lay / To muddy death” (IV.vii.181-3). At each step, Gertrude shades her narration in such a way as to subtly protect the drowned girl from the aspersions cast upon suicides, thereby imposing her own interpretative agency between the spectacle itself and the authorizing court. Unfortunately, she is not a complete success. While Ophelia is allowed a significantly expanded funeral service, the Doctor adamantly insists, “Her obsequies have been as far enlarg’d / As we have warranty. Her death was doubtful” (V.i.226-7). Clearly Gertrude’s presentation of Ophelia’s death, while certainly effective, could not wholly override the man’s reservations. In the end, the patriarchal powers that be reserve the ultimate right to judge—or perhaps in this case, withhold judgment—on their every female subject.

Such patriarchal condemnation of women is not restricted to the impersonal and distant perspective of learned doctors or judges, however. The matriarchs of the English revenge tragedy, those characters who most often survive the objectification and victimization that ultimately leads to the demise of other, younger women, are routinely condemned by the men closest to them and compelled to make some show of contrition in order to save their lives. For example, this trope provides us Hamlet’s famous closet scene with Gertrude, as well as Vindice’s confrontation with his would-be-bawd mother, Gratiana. Already in this dyad of the repentant woman and her expectant male audience we see a parallel to the female suicide, who makes of herself a spectacle designed to convince men that she is indeed a good woman. At the same time, these matriarchs need

not martyr themselves to accomplish their feat, and thus their case also brings us full circle, back to Lavinia's performance in the opening scene of *Titus* where she plays the dutiful woman to an authorizing male audience that expects nothing less. Perhaps more clearly than in these other instances, however, the persistent misogyny of the Renaissance revenge play sabotages itself with these mothers and sons, as its own sexist claims undermine the veracity of their female performances and the validity of the men's orthodox conclusions.

In each instance these older women are accused of sin, of betraying their families through the weaknesses characteristic of the feminine sex, and only by confessing their fault—be it verbally, performatively, or both—are they ultimately granted absolution from their male judges. In *Antonio's Revenge*, Antonio's mother Maria is accosted by the ghost of her murdered husband Andrugio the night before her marriage to the villainous Piero. Despite the fact that this union is largely forced upon her and that she has just reiterated her grief at her husband's absence, mourning "Alas, my dear Andrugio's dead!" (III.iv.64), the ghost nevertheless attacks her for lascivious infidelity: "Disloyal to our hym'neal rites, / What raging heat reigns in thy strumpet blood?" (III.v.1-2). Basing his accusation upon the misogynistic stereotype of the sexually insatiable woman, the ghost confronts his former wife, yet the moment she shows any visible sign of regret, he immediately pardons her. Noting her terror at this supernatural visitation, the ghost recants, "Go to, calm thy fears; / I pardon thee, poor soul," and when she then begins weeping, he continues, "O, shed no tears; / Thy sex is weak" (III.v.6-8). Like a benevolent parent absolving a mischievous child, the ghost of Andrugio forgives his supposedly wayward spouse because her sin was part of her nature: the weakness that

ostensibly led her astray now becomes the very reason for her absolution. The implication, of course, is that this essential weakness robs women of any moral agency, as they seemingly cannot combat their natures. As such, it falls to their men to judge them and dole out punishment or forgiveness. Once more, woman has become an object to be read by an authorizing male audience, and once again, she has little say in how she is to be interpreted. In this instance, Maria's fear and tears are read as conspicuous reminders of female weakness, and so when Antonio soon enters and asks the ghost why Maria still lives, Andrugio's shade can simply say "Pardon [her] ignorance" (III.v.24) and thereby evoke the judgment he has passed.

Similar confession scenes in *Hamlet* and *The Revenger's Tragedy* evince the same misogynistic underpinning, where woman's subordination is tacitly reinforced through the suggestion that female weakness is fundamental to their gender. Having resolved to confront his mother for her infidelity to the old king's memory, Hamlet's tirade receives the desired result as Gertrude admits her guilt, confessing "Thou turn'st my [eyes into my very] soul, / And there I see such black and [grained] spots / And will [not] leave their tinct" (III.iv.89-91). Already building to a frenzy, Hamlet makes no acknowledgement of Gertrude's turn, but the ghost of his father soon intervenes and imposes a familiar reading of female disquiet: "But look, amazement on thy mother sits, / O step between her and her fighting soul. / Conceit in weakest bodies strongest works" (III.iv.112-4). Once again, an assault on female virtue is abruptly cut off through a masculine recognition of her gender's fundamental inferiority, a weakness that Hamlet cannot help but recall as he later advises his mother to avoid her husband's bed, suggesting, "Assume a virtue, if you have it not" (III.iv.160). Vindice and his brother elicit a similar confession from their

own mother, and having done so, similarly attribute it to the failings of her sex.³⁶ More so than his predecessors, however, this revenger clearly attributes his forgiveness to the performative signs proffered by his mother: as Gratiana weeps and begs, “Forgive me! To myself I’ll prove more true. / You that should honor me, I kneel to you” (IV.iv.37-8), Vindice responds, “tis a sweet shower; it does much good,” and then orders her to “Rise, mother. Troth, this shower has made you higher” (IV.iv.46, 49). Having conspicuously subordinated herself to her sons, those sons then grant her absolution, for only in her kneeling and weeping has she demonstrated the signs that men might read as contrition. Thereby reaffirming their belief in their own superiority, these men can absolve their mother of the sins they have imposed upon her—though not without a subtle reiteration of her essential female weakness, accomplished through the reference to Gratiana as “O you of easy wax” (IV.iv.61). In each case, woman is yet again compelled to make a spectacle of herself, one which her male audience interprets in such a way as to corroborate their preexisting worldview—even if it is this skewed perception that led them to attack their wives and mothers in the first place.

As I have suggested, however, the essential weakness upon which their misogynistic argument rests, coupled with the largely performative nature of these female confessions, implies a fundamental contradiction within this patriarchal system of ostensibly benevolent absolution. Through their own deceptive utilization of theatricality, these revengers have already shown just how easily disguise and role-playing can mislead other characters onstage: Antonio has played a fool so successfully that his sworn enemy made baby talk to him before the entire court; Hamlet adopts an antic disposition to forestall those that would hinder his revenge and even manipulates a court production in

such a way that his uncle exposes his own guilt; and Vindice not only plays multiple roles over the course of his tragedy, but even stages a scene with such cunning that he entraps his enemy with the man's own lusty nature. Such sly performers must all realize, as Hamlet does, the efficacy of such a divorce between outward seeming and one's interiority, orchestrated by those "actions that a man might play" (I.ii.84). Why, then, does each man so facilely accept these women's tears and confessions as genuine, especially when misogyny holds that woman by her own nature is such a deceptive creature? If, as Joseph Swetnam claims, "they have *sirens* songs to allure thee, and *Xerxes* cunning to inchant thee; they beare two tongues in one mouth like *Iudas*" and "they can with the *satyre* out of one mouth blow both hot and cold," why are these penitent performances to be believed? That these mothers all seem to genuinely be contrite is beside the point—especially when we remember that female agency can be so easily overridden. After all, as Hamlet reminds us, "Frailty, thy name is woman!" (I.ii.146), and as Vindice explains, "That woman is all male whom none can enter" (II.i.115). Indeed, the confession scenes themselves implicitly remind us of this malleability: Hamlet promises Gertrude he will "wring your heart, for so I shall / If it be made of penetrable stuff" (III.iv.35-6), and while Vindice and Hippolito threaten a far more literal penetration with their bare bodkins, Gratiana herself also admits, "No tongue but yours could have bewitched me so" (IV.iv.33). If these sons realize the efficacy of deceptive performance, and if their own misogyny tells them that woman is both inherently duplicitous and easily susceptible to male persuasion, how can these men so readily accept these shows of female contrition?

They can because these histrionic confessions confirm the masculinist prejudice the revenger holds, endorsing in this tangential instance the broader sense of righteous superiority upon which he has built his vengeance and thereby granting him further momentum as he prepares to assassinate his enemy. Confronting the mother, whom the revenger sees as to some degree tainted by the sins of the villain-noble, provides a preliminary correction of a festering wrong that will ultimately culminate in the villain's death. The compulsion to make this matriarch a spectacle of confession is designed not for her benefit, then, but the revenger's. Hamlet's vow that "You go not till I set you up a glass / Where you may see the [inmost] part of you" (III.iv.19-20) is telling, for mirrors show us less who we really are as they do the image the outside world sees. In these instances, this performative "mirror" reflects patriarchal assumptions of female weakness, and thus, the necessity of an authorizing male. Luce Irigaray has named this dynamic "mimesis imposed," in which "the female...unable to symbolize her fantasies and desires in a male symbolic, is positioned as mirror to the male, reflecting back to him—*thereby demonstrating the truth of his centrality*—his own image, his Self-Same."³⁷ Indeed, this is what the men of these corrupt courts have done with female spectacle of any kind: they read their own importance and superiority in the show of filial honor Lavinia performs, they find the masculine prerogative to revenge wrongs in the suicide of Antonio's wife, and now, they see confirmation of their moral superiority and a reaffirmation of just how necessary their judgment is in the forced confessions of these matriarchs. The suspicion of performance's veracity voiced elsewhere in these plays, as well as their misogynistic doubts surrounding female honesty and force of will, need not be entertained in these instances, for to do so would undermine the easy and self-serving

conclusions these men have drawn from the spectacles they themselves have forced upon their women.

Fundamental to this reading of female spectacle, and implicit in the very notion of misogyny itself, is the rejection of any signs that undermine the ostensibly inherent difference between men and women. This distinction is certainly important to the spectacle of the penitent mother, as it allows the protagonist to situate himself as the morally superior subject passing benevolent judgment upon the wayward woman, yet even more significant, this dependence upon difference is essential to the progress of the revenger's deliberate self-fashioning. As I have already shown, these theatricalized women typically serve as a catalyst in the revenger's metamorphosis, for their spectacles of vulnerability and impotence demand the enactment of unfaltering retribution by the male subject. Yet at the same time, the similarity between the woman's plight and his own feelings of victimization and powerlessness prompts unwelcome implications of femininity for the revenger himself that help to drive him toward the adoption of a traditional, violent masculinity. In other words, the revenger must feel the plight of these women enough to act, but is unnerved by the implications of feeling it as a woman would. This tendency is most explicit in *Hamlet*. For instance, the sight of Ophelia's madness urges Laertes further toward vengeance, but news of her subsequent death produces a decidedly "feminine" response from which he struggles to distance himself: "I forbid my tears; but yet / It is our trick, Nature her custom holds, / Let shame say what it will; when these are gone, / The woman will be out" (IV.vii.186-9). Hamlet similarly understands a portion of his motivation to stem from "a mother stain'd" (IV.iv.57) even as he vehemently criticizes his ostensibly feminine propensity to "like a whore unpack

my heart with words” (II.ii.585). In each case, the male’s recognition of female weakness produces a call to action that not only seeks to avenge the woman’s victimization but also, tellingly, hopes to distance the revenger from what he perceives as an undesirable femininity in himself. As Allman explains, the revenger

heeds the first imperative [that of vengeance rather than submission] because to follow the second is to embrace the virtue of patient passivity rather than the virtù of heroic action, to choose the moral authority of Patient Griselda, which, in his terms, is to collaborate in his own feminization.³⁸

This alternative is unacceptable at least in part because the revenger himself participates in the misogyny characteristic of his corrupt court, yet ironically, in his movement away from this supposedly feminine weakness he chooses to instead embrace the violent masculinity of the villain who has wronged him.

Often, this entails the manipulation of female spectacle to reinforce his new identity as a revenger and justify the violence that is to come. The starkest example of this is Titus’s murder of Lavinia, in which the old man compares himself to the “rash Virginius” who killed “his daughter with his own right hand, / Because she was enforc’d, stain’d, and deflower’d” (V.iii.36-8) and then plays the part by murdering the girl before his audience, yet this trend is common throughout much of the Kydian tradition. Laertes, as we have seen, reads in Ophelia’s “document in madness” further justification for his revenge, while Vindice dresses the remains of his beloved Gloriana so as to restage the Duke’s initial attempt at seduction, thereby performatively replaying the original sin to essentially catch the man “red handed,” and consequently, further validate the brutal retribution at hand. Even Hieronimo’s subtle gloss of Bel-Imperia’s suicide reinforces his own role as revenger, for in depicting her as the good woman who so loved Horatio that she could not long survive him, claiming “love of him whom they did hate too much /

Did urge her resolution to be such” (IV.iv.140-5), the old Knight Marshall subtly reiterates how exemplary his son was, and therefore, how righteous his vengeance must be. This masculine appropriation of female spectacle is certainly in keeping with the broader pattern of patriarchal self-interest already discussed, yet it also speaks to men’s ambivalent but necessary relationship with femininity in the fashioning of their own masculine identities. While theatricality does indeed facilitate the revenger’s liminal transformation of self, his staging and reading of women in particular—however troubling it may often be—gestures toward the problematic necessity of the genre’s misogyny in driving the protagonist’s metamorphosis.

What then about those women who do not fit neatly in this package, those women who do exert conspicuous agency and are clearly at odds with, or at least indifferent to, the patriarchal project of their corrupt courts? In other words, how does the female revenger fit in all this? Despite widespread misogynist stereotypes regarding a woman’s inherently vengeful nature, the idea of a female revenger was not one endorsed by the patriarchal powers that be. Indeed, even in arenas where that wrath might be channeled in directions productive to the state, women were politely refused: for example, women were excluded from participation in the 1584 Bond of Association, an oath which required its adherents to avenge any attempt upon the monarch’s life.³⁹ Not surprisingly, this prejudice permeates the English revenge play as well. Though Eileen Allman claims that the rebellious woman is not uniformly slapped down in revenge tragedy, but rather held as a positive emblem for her struggle against the tyrannical ruler of the play’s

corrupt court,⁴⁰ the genre allows little latitude for these women to rebel so far as to become revengers themselves. Those few women who do never enjoy a position of dramaturgical prominence as do their masculine counterparts, but rather are marginalized in one of two ways: they are relegated to the role of mere accomplice, or they are demonized as an aberration of the true, good woman. Yet in each instance, the expression of female agency is reinterpreted by men so as to alleviate the anxiety and disruption these acts create and thereby protect the patriarchal status quo.

There are multiple examples throughout the Kydian tradition of women who participate in the drama's principal revenge action, but in each example these characters are clearly secondary to the play's male revenger. Antonio's mother Maria, for instance, participates in her sons's revenge against the duke Piero, but she is only one amongst five avengers. While she is allowed to chastise the tongueless, grieving villain in his final moments, she does not participate in the masque that precedes the assassination, and even then the stage directions remain unclear as to whether or not she actually wounds the duke; though the stage directions read "They run all at Piero with their rapiers" (V.v.SD), this may simply be referring to the three men who have just finished stabbing him individually, for when the senators subsequently ask who is responsible for the duke's mangled form, Maria does not speak up. Interestingly, despite this comparatively minor role in the play's bloody denouement, Maria is one of the few characters who opts for exile into religious monasticism at the end of the play. Despite her limited involvement in the assassination itself, the court's first steps toward rejuvenation must apparently include the removal of such an unruly female presence.

In other instances, the process of realizing the act of vengeance not only subordinates the women involved but also sees the genre's theatricalized objectification of women reiterated through these female confederates. For example, Lavinia's role in her father's revenge is scant indeed. Beginning as the mere assistant who holds the bowl in which he collects Demetrius and Chiron's blood, in the play's final scene she ends as a prop, a demonstration through which he attempts to performatively justify his pending revenge. Her predecessor Bel-Imperia plays a more significant role in *The Spanish Tragedy's* revenge action, but her end is also far more theatricalized. It is a letter written in Bel-Imperia's own blood that first implicates her brother Lorenzo for Horatio's murder, and only through her help does Hieronimo's final metadramatic playlet succeed. Yet though this assertive noblewoman promises, "Nor shall his death be unrevenged by me, / Although I bear it out for fashion's sake" (IV.i.23-4), she nevertheless agrees to follow Hieronimo's lead. And while one might rightly object that Bel-Imperia reasserts her own agency by ultimately diverging from Hieronimo's script and stabbing herself after she murders Balthazar, the result of this final flash of independence is all too familiar: a woman is silenced and consigned to being a mere theatrical spectacle, an object that must be interpreted by her male audience independent of her own intentions. Thus, when Hieronimo reveals, "Poor Bel-Imperia missed her part in this, / For, though the story saith she should have died, / Yet I of kindness and of care of her / Did otherwise determine of her end," his explanation of her motivation, that "love of him whom they did hate too much / Did urge her resolution to be such" (IV.iv.140-5), must be recognized as pure conjecture, as yet another imposition of male interpretative agency upon female spectacle. Hieronimo's explanation glosses Bel-Imperia as an example of the good

woman who so loves her man that she cannot long outlive him, downplaying her role as revenger and encouraging us to forget the willful character who earlier decides “second love shall further my revenge. / I’ll love Horatio, my Andrea’s friend, / The more to spite the Prince that wrought his end” (I.iv.66-8). Furthermore, this mention is a scant six lines amidst the frantic final moments of a scene that clearly sets Hieronimo at the center of the audience’s attention. Indeed, this familiar asymmetrical dynamic of the theatricalized woman and her male spectators informs her limited participation in the genre’s revenge plots: though the degree to which she stages herself or her revenge varies from character to character, female agency is nevertheless consistently overshadowed by that of her male peers—ensuring that even those women who actively participate in the righting of wrongs are still subordinate, and thus that the double standard of the genre’s misogyny remains intact.

The conspicuous exception to this trope is Tamora in *Titus Andronicus*, and in the play’s chronicle of her successful bid for vengeance, we recognize the full extent of this misogynistic genre’s anxiety over female agency. Unlike Bel-Imperia or Maria, Tamora is the chief agent in the realization of her revenge: it is she whom the other Goths “acquaint withal what we intend” as they plot their attack on Lavinia so that the Queen might “file our engines with advice” (II.i.122-3), and it is she who directs Demetrius and Chiron on how best to execute their despicable crime once Titus’s daughter has been caught. Furthermore, unlike virtually every other female character in the genre, Tamora is never objectified theatrically against her will, never made a passive spectacle in the service of the patriarchy’s self-perpetuation. Instead, the threat posed by Tamora’s conspicuous power and agency is averted through her equally conspicuous demonization;

as she is clearly aberrant and thus outside the norm, she cannot significantly threaten a patriarchal status quo that depends upon an understanding of woman as fundamentally subordinate to men, as ultimately harmless. The play suggests that the Gothic queen's power was gained at the cost of her womanhood. For instance, once it becomes clear that Tamora will pay no heed to Lavinia's cries for mercy, the girl responds by refiguring the Queen as monstrous: "No grace? no womanhood? Ah, beastly creature, / The blot and enemy to our general name!" (II.iii.182-3). This is the monstrousness that late in the play shines through her disguise to Titus, who recognizes the Goths as "A pair of cursed hell-hounds and their dame" (V.ii.144). In fact, Tamora's maternity—the very reason for which she became a revenger—is ironically perverted in the realization of Titus's revenge, for the Goth unwittingly eats her own dead children in the play's final moments. Even her sexuality, a secret infidelity in Tamora's case that only seems to reinforce misogynist stereotypes of the lascivious woman, is made aberrant through her choice of the Moor Aaron, and ultimately, their offspring: "A joyless, dismal, black and sorrowful issue! ...as loathsome as a toad / Amongst the fair-faced breeders of our clime" (IV.ii.66-8).

It is no coincidence that the most powerful woman in the Kydian revenge tradition is also the most monstrous, for at the moment she gains ascendancy through the realization of her revenge, she becomes a threat to the gendered hierarchy of her patriarchal setting, and thus only by refiguring her as something fundamentally deviant of "true" femininity can the status quo be preserved. Her death, therefore, not only provides the traditional righting of a wrong characteristic of the genre as a whole, but also alleviates misogynistic anxieties over self-empowered women by removing her

permanently—even from the boundaries of Rome itself, from which she will be thrown “forth to beasts and birds to prey” (V.iii.198). Such is the lot of the female revenger: any grasp at violent agency elicits a compensatory response from a patriarchy that depends upon their subordination. And be it by casting them as a secondary accomplice to a chief male avenger, or by refiguring them as unnatural and monstrous, these female revengers all ultimately share the same fate—their forceful removal from the misogynistic court that is unwilling to accommodate their bid for self-determination.

Ultimately, these scenes reveal that the male characters’ misogynist conclusions are not so simply because they are natural or fundamentally true, but rather because those individuals most invested in upholding patriarchal systems of dominance deliberately choose to read these conclusions in the female spectacles they have orchestrated around themselves. This in and of itself is not a surprising conclusion; people and systems in dominant positions of power inherently and necessarily strive to maintain that ascendancy. What is noteworthy, however, is that theatricality and spectacle seem to be utilized for cross purposes in the English revenge tragedy. On the one hand, the revenger successfully employs disguise and stages scenes to combat his initial position of alienation and weakness, to elide social distinctions of class and identity through a performative liminality that ultimately sees the successful completion of his quest. At the same time, the genre’s women are routinely situated as theatricalized objects both in scenes of their own making and in those of another’s design, where the efficacy of this staging is determined not by the participants themselves but by their predominantly male audience and the degree to which the scene’s intent does or does not correspond to the patriarchal agenda. While these women are not without agency, their concerted efforts

toward becoming an active subject are routinely eclipsed by the patriarchal interpretative gloss that always seems imposed upon them, for try as these women might, the men inevitably get the last word. In short, the genre's theatricality is as misogynistic as the courts in which it is set. While we may find some consolation in the fact that the truth of the sexist conclusions gleaned is inherently problematized by their performative means, the fact remains that while the English revenge play may focus on one instance of oppression's overthrow by the disenfranchised, it simultaneously leaves largely untouched other, more systemic modes of oppression that pervade every facet of the genre.

Endnotes

¹ Eilleen Allman, *Jacobean Revenge Tragedy and the Politics of Virtue* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1999), 56.

² To briefly glance at Shakespeare's canon alone, his tragedies give us the innocent (if largely impotent) Desdemona and Ophelia, the saintly Cordelia, the aberrant and murderous Goneril, Regan, and Lady Macbeth, and the conspicuously absent older female generation of *King Lear*, while the comedies offer the industrious and ultimately victorious Portia, Viola, and Rosalind. Admittedly, this is a mere fraction of his female characters and an oversimplification of even those names included, but the fact remains that tragedy was long seen as centered on a 'Great Man' while comedy could more fully explore their social "inferiors," whether that inferiority stemmed from class, gender, or both. This distinction undoubtedly contributed, as Dympna Callaghan suggests, to early feminist criticism's attempts to redeem the latter genre as a whole from its previous critical subordination, as "Reclaiming comedy as the privileged sphere of the feminine was a strategy of empowerment, a celebration of femininity." Dympna Callaghan, *Woman and Gender in Renaissance Tragedy* (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989), 37.

³ Callaghan, 125.

⁴ This is not to say, however, that the female character in question remains of central import throughout the remainder of the play. For instance, Piero's murder of Antonio's father is at least of equal, if not greater, concern to the revenger than the victimization of his beloved Mellida, while Vindice's outrage over his betrothed's murder and Lussurioso's lecherous encroachment upon his sister is mitigated by a concurrent grudge over the royal family's victimization of his father. Hamlet's ire for Claudius is perhaps the most ambivalent, as the Danish prince appears to conflate the "rank sweat of an enseamed [royal] bed" with Claudius's murder of the old king Hamlet.

⁵ Russell West-Pavlov, *Bodies and Their Spaces* (New York: Rodopi, 2006), 93.

⁶ Horatio's romance with Bel-Imperia provides a notable exception at a superficial level, as at least to Lorenzo and Balthazar's eyes, it is the socially inferior soldier Horatio who is intruding upon the realm of nobility. The broader theme of class intrusion remains intact, however, and the more typical transgression of aristocrat into the private space of his subordinate is nevertheless enacted in Hieronimo's garden during the murder of his son.

⁷ A notable exception is Tamora's masquerade as Revenge in *Titus Andronicus*, but her spectacular failure in this regard only reinforces the trope. Attempting to gain entrance to Titus's home, the queen falls short in deceiving the old revenger, who notes "'I know them all, though they suppose me mad; / And will o'erreach them in their own devices'" (V.ii.142-3), barring her entrance but allowing her sons in, only to immediately murder them.

⁸ Stephen Gosson, *The School of Abuse*, 1579, quoted in West-Pavlov, 5.

⁹ Gosson, quoted in West-Pavlov, 6. Note as well the now-familiar spatial metaphor closing Gosson's statement, likening a woman vulnerable to sexual advances to a city vulnerable to invasion.

¹⁰ John Northbrooke, *A Treatise Against Dicing, Dancing, Play and Interludes. With Other Idle Pastimes*, 1577, quoted in West-Pavlov, 5.

¹¹ Jean E. Howard, *The Stage and Social Struggle in Early Modern England* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 77.

¹² Jonathan Swetnam, *The Araignment of Levvd, Idle, Froward, and Unconstant Women* (London, 1616), 4-5.

¹³ I do not mean to suggest, however, that this sort of ineffective spectacle is wholly unique to female show, but rather that its dynamic between dependent performer and empowered spectator is characteristic of the broader discrepancy between females and males in these misogynistic, patriarchal settings. When Titus, for instance, is at his lowest point, the height of his impotence, he performs a similarly ineffective show of tearful supplication to the tribunes as his sons are led to execution, one dramaturgically situated to explicitly parallel Tamora's initial complaint (III.i.1-22). This sort of spectacle, therefore, is not inherently feminine, but rather inherently subject to external agency and authorization—characteristics typical of women in vigorously patriarchal settings.

¹⁴ Kim Solga, "Rape's Metatheatrical Return: Rehearsing Sexual Violence among the Early Moderns," *Theatre Journal* 58 (2006): 54.

¹⁵ Lorraine Helms, "'The High Roman Fashion': Sacrifice, Suicide, and the Shakespearean Stage," *PMLA* 107, no.3 (1992), 557.

¹⁶ Solga, 56. Solga attributes much of this disbelief surrounding female testimony to general misogynistic suspicion of female honesty and their facility with dissembling. However, this testimony did certainly have its place in the legal proceedings that would follow; indeed, Solga describes the care with which that testimony would be coached, often elaborating upon or outright fabricating details of domestic chores or wifely chastity to better emphasize the patriarchal ideal that was violated. Her point, however, is that contemporary legal writing underscored the importance of the visual component when reporting rape.

¹⁷ Helms, 557.

¹⁸ Thomas Edgar, *The Lawes Resolutions of Womens Rights* (London, 1632), 392-3.

¹⁹ Solga, 55

²⁰ Solga, 56.

²¹ As I suggest earlier in the paragraph, I believe Bott partially misses the point by not recognizing the companionate gestures of using the men's classical allusion with the more blatant and immediate sign of the staff, but her interpretive conclusion, I feel, is nevertheless sound. Robin L. Bott, "O, keep me from their worse than killing lust': Ideologies of Rape and Mutilation in Chaucer's *Physician's Tale* and Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*," in *Representing Rape in Medieval and Early Modern Literature*, ed. Elizabeth Robertson and Christine M. Rose (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 203.

²² Of course, this is not to say that the Philomela myth has been abandoned entirely—it is simply no longer being referred to as an interpretive gloss of Lavinia's plight. As Philomela's sister ultimately murdered her own child and fed him to her husband, the ongoing backdrop to the scene—Demetrius and Chiron's remains turned into pies served to their mother—leaves a lingering reminder of Procne's revenge even as Titus turns our attention to Virginius.

²³ Carol Thomas Neely, *Distracted Subjects: Madness and Gender in Shakespeare and Early Modern Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), 52.

²⁴ Also like Lavinia's case, Ophelia's necessarily aligns the theatrical audience more with the onstage spectators than with the traumatized girl herself. As Neely reminds, "Onstage characters mediate this pregnant, mad discourse, explicitly teaching audiences how to translate it into discourse of reason," or at least, how to make the attempt. After all, one of the most enduring challenges of Hamlet scholarship has been the explication of Ophelia's mad songs and words. Thus another dimension of this theatrical objectification of victimized women like Lavinia and Ophelia is that we, the theatrical audience, are made to some degree complicit. Neely, 50.

²⁵ Neely, 53-4.

²⁶ Harry Keyishian, *The Shapes of Revenge* (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1995), 28.

²⁷ Keyishian, 30.

²⁸ Richard K. Sanderson, "Suicide as Message and Metadrama in English Renaissance Tragedy" *Comparative Drama* 26, no.3 (1992): 200.

²⁹ The wife's lack of a name seems particularly conspicuous when we remember Gloriana, the deceased fiancé of Vindice who remains as nothing more than a skull, is named in the opening soliloquy.

³⁰ Sanderson, 201.

³¹ This line is translated in the Norton *English Renaissance Drama* anthology as "Better to die in virtue than to live in shame." (1317).

³² Sanderson, 199.

³³ Sanderson, 201.

³⁴ Allman, 17.

³⁵ Neely, 55.

³⁶ The similarity between the scenes is by no means unintentional. In fact, Middleton deliberately invokes Hamlet's famous confrontation with his mother at the beginning of the scene when Gratiana asks, "What, will you murder me?" (IV.iv.2).

³⁷ Elin Diamond, "Mimesis, Mimicry, and the 'True-Real'," *Modern Drama* 32.1 (1989), 59. Author's italics. For Irigaray's discussion of feminist theory in light of mimicry, mimesis, and phallogentrism, and specifically of 'mimesis imposed,' see Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985).

³⁸ Allman, 58.

³⁹ Karen Robertson, "Rape and Appropriation of Progne's Revenge in Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*, Or, 'Who Cooks the Thyestian Banquet?'" *Representing Rape in Medieval and Early Modern Literature*, ed. Elizabeth Robertson and Christine M. Rose (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 221.

⁴⁰ Allman, 18.

Chapter 4

“But Words Will Never Hurt Me”: Rhetorical Violence and the Sovereign Tongue

A principal facet of the early modern revenge play that distinguishes it from its Senecan predecessors is the deliberate incorporation of violent spectacle thrust onto the stage. This distinction is evident even when we compare Kyd’s seminal revenge tragedy to its dramatic forebearer mere decades earlier: Sackville and Norton’s neoclassical *Gorboduc* (1562), while not a true revenge tragedy itself, follows in rather didactic fashion the precepts of Greek closet drama and banishes all violent action, including the Queen’s revenge upon her fratricidal son, off stage to the limbo between scenes. Instead, it is merely recounted by the *nuntius* or the guilty parties themselves in conversation. Part of the key to *The Spanish Tragedy*’s vast popularity was Kyd’s deliberate break from classical tradition,¹ where instances of violence are not merely discussed between characters onstage but rather performed for all to see: while Andrea’s death is simply described in his opening monologue and subsequent scenes, this nod to classical precedent is soon eclipsed by such spectacles as Horatio’s body stabbed and hung in his father’s bower, of Pedrigano executed, Isabella’s suicide, and ultimately, Hieronimo’s bloody play-within-a-play.

This performative turn was by no means restricted to revenge tragedies alone, but the increased frequency and degree of staged violence in these dramas played a significant part in earning the critical disdain the genre labored under for so long: T.S. Eliot, to take just one example, famously dismissed *Titus Andronicus* as “one of the stupidest and most uninspired plays ever written.”² The accusation of sensationalism was often leveled at other works besides Shakespeare’s most violent tragedy, though, as “the

genre's taste for episodes of extreme (and endlessly inventive) violence...earned it the casual and dismissive labels 'decadent', 'exploitative' and 'gratuitous'" and thus, Stevie Simkin concludes, "For many years revenge tragedies were largely neglected, consigned to a dark corner of the map of Renaissance culture, despite their obvious prominence...revenge tragedies were embarrassing blemishes best ignored."³

More recently, however, postmodern theory's fascination with body politics and its implications for sexuality, gender, and hegemonic systems of political power has granted critics an obvious approach to Renaissance revenge tragedy and transformed the genre's violence, once the hallmark of its inferiority, into a principal object of scholarly scrutiny and interest. Yet as Margaret Owens has noted in her work on dismemberment in the English revenge play, violence in the genre is culturally "overdetermined,"⁴ and thus, not surprisingly, a wide variety of readings have glossed the spectacular brutality inherent in the genre. The victimization of women like Lavinia and Antonio's unnamed wife has been examined by feminist critics exploring patriarchal appropriations of violence against women for its own purposes, while other critics have scrutinized the post-Reformation disjunction with established means of cultural memory and suggested an English anxiety over commemorating the dead, ultimately seeing the fragmented human form as a *memento mori* that harkens back to the Catholic veneration of relics.⁵ Far more common, however, has been the Foucauldian linkage between the theatricalized violence of the revenge tradition and the early modern state's well-known penchant for spectacles of capital punishment.⁶ In their work, scholars such as Fredson Bowers and Ronald Broude have situated the genre at "a moment of historical change when an immemorial ethic of blood revenge was supplanted by state monopoly of the redress for private wrongs,"⁷ and

have argued the tension of this conflict is enacted through the distinct parallel between the revenger's theatricalized violence and that of the early modern state, one which gestures toward a "genuine anxiety about the shared theatrical modes of judicial punishment and dramatic entertainments."⁸ They contend that the crown's ongoing attempts at asserting its political power through spectacles of capital punishment, a tactic routinely taking place in the early modern polis, are interrogated through the microcosm of the revenger's individual utilization of a particularly theatricalized violence.

Yet these readings do not, I would argue, satisfactorily acknowledge the implications of violent spectacle within the world of the plays themselves. Many explorations of the genre's brutality speak to the seemingly one-way (as often seems to be the case with cultural studies) influence of broader cultural tensions upon the content of these dramas, and while the Foucauldian tradition certainly acknowledges the link between instances of violence and the genre's fundamental theatricality, it principally does so in regard to its effects upon and implications for the real-world audience. When we reexamine those metadramatic scenes typically scrutinized for this purpose, we find the particulars of their staging to be disparate, and thus our ability to apply a broad interpretation of their dramaturgical purpose for the characters onstage to be increasingly problematic. While Katharine Eisaman Maus's thesis about a specular pedagogy of reciprocity certainly holds true for Hieronimo's audience in the Spanish court,⁹ we cannot apply it equally to the Italianate courts of *Antonio's Revenge* or *The Revenger's Tragedy*; unlike *Soliman and Perseda*, the bloody masques concluding these later plays have no witnesses, nor are these revengers so willing to explain their motives as Spain's Knight Marshall. One could certainly argue that Hamlet means to instruct his audience

with “The Mousetrap,” but what of the final duel through which Claudius and Laertes hope to assassinate him? Indeed, these disparate conditions suggest that we must look beyond the mere spectacle of the genre’s violence to consider the additional facets of its sensational brutality if we hope to understand the significance of these instances within the world of the plays themselves.

Consequently, I shall turn to the implicit association between language and violent spectacle in these revenge plays, to the spoken word’s consistent anticipation of torture and death in its figurative enactment of the violence to come. In *Titus Andronicus* and *The Revenger’s Tragedy*, we find an intimate relationship between the two, one that begins with the rhetorical violence committed against the female subject by the revenger’s blazoning speeches of grief, acts that symbolically fragment the beloved’s victimized form even as it presages the uniquely piecemeal retribution the villain responsible will ultimately suffer. *Antonio’s Revenge* and *The Spanish Tragedy*, and to some degree *Hamlet*, instead share a particular anxiety over the potent speech acts of the royalty. To combat this, the protagonist gradually creates, through his theatrical acumen, the opportunity to appropriate the villain-noble’s speech or silence it entirely, an initially metaphorical attack against the organ of human speech that often culminates in the gruesome enactment of the tongue’s mutilation. In these final instances, the genre’s theatricalized violence becomes, within the world of the play, less a juxtaposition between contemporary practices of capital punishment and the execution of the revenger’s personal vendetta, than it is a clash between the efficacy of the protagonist’s theatricalized agency and the established power of the sovereign’s dread command.

Titus Andronicus and *The Revenger's Tragedy* are unique amongst the Kydian tradition in that their principal revengers are motivated by the victimization of a woman. While I have argued elsewhere that the central conflict of any revenge tragedy can be ultimately traced to disputes over failed or unlegitimated exogamy, and any reader will know that women often become collateral damage amidst the men's machinations during the dramas' final scenes, only these two plays begin their central revenge plots through the brutalized female form of a beloved daughter or fiancé. Hieronimo seeks to avenge his son Horatio, Hamlet his murdered father and king, as Antonio does his father and Pandolpho his son Feliche, but the Andronici are driven to vendetta by Lavinia's raped and mutilated body, while Vindice is ever reminded by the skull of Gloriana, who was poisoned for refusing the Duke's lustful advances. As such, these tragedies are built upon a unique disruption of the typical power dynamics at play in the English revenge tradition. Here, the hostility between opposing camps manifests in the deliberate brutalization of women, subjects who are understood to be under the authoritative auspices of their husbands and fathers, and thus by choosing to assault the revenger's family through its daughters, sisters, and wives, the villain-noble simultaneously presents an obvious external threat to the family and creates a subtler, more insidious anxiety regarding those spheres of control the revenger once unquestioningly considered his own—both of which are concerns he must ultimately address. Accordingly, I would argue these plays offer a particular variation upon the execution of the revenger's vendetta, a variance predicated upon its atypical origin in the violation of women.

Surprisingly, though, the key to this fundamental difference lies not in the actual wounds inflicted upon Lavinia and Gloriana but instead in the rhetoric through which their men register and mourn those wounds. In each instance, these uncles, fathers, and would-be husbands itemize the ravages done to the woman in question, drawing the audience's eyes to those injuries as they grieve over what they once had been. Holding the skull of his fiancé before him in the opening scene of *The Revenger's Tragedy*, Vindice first muses upon the "two heaven-pointed diamonds [which] were set / In those unsightly rings" (I.i.19-20), but only as his plan to snare the Duke approaches fruition does he fully and ironically catalogue her lost attributes:

Here's an eye
Able to tempt a great man—to serve God;
A pretty hanging lip, that has forgot how to dissemble...
Here's a cheek keeps her color, let the wind go whistle. (III.v.54-6, 60)

Infused with his typical ironic bitterness and macabre humor, Vindice's speech details the violence done to his beloved by itemizing those attributes typically lauded in woman to underscore just how far Gloriana's skeletal remains have come—or, more accurately, been forced—from that ideal. The Andronici address Lavinia's rape and mutilation in much the same way, focusing their attention (and in so doing, the audience's) upon those lacerations and stumps that so vividly conjure the feminine charms that have been stolen from her. Titus notes "Thou hast no hands to wipe away thy tears, / Nor tongue to tell me who hath mart' red thee" (III.i.106-7), and ever afterward continues to note her stumps, missing tongue, and tear stained cheeks. Far more evocative, however, is Marcus's speech upon first discovering Lavinia in the forest:

Speak, gentle niece: what stern ungentle hands
Hath lopp'd and hew'd, and made thy body bare
Of her two branches, those sweet ornaments

Whose circling shadows kings have sought to sleep in...
Alas, a crimson river of warm blood,
Like to a bubbling fountain stir'd with wind,
Doth rise and fall between thy rosed lips,
Coming and going with thy honey breath....
O, had the monster seen those lily hands
Tremble like aspen leaves upon a lute,
And make the silken strings delight to kiss them,
He would not then have touch'd them for his life!
Or had he heard the heavenly harmony
Which that sweet tongue hath made,
He would have dropp'd his knife, and fell asleep,
As Cerberus at the Thracian poet's feet. (II.iv.16-9, 22-5, 44-51)

Like Vindice, Marcus juxtaposes his niece's mutilated attributes with their former glory, emphasizing her current horror by reinforcing how drastically and forcibly she has been divorced from those feminine boons she once possessed. Yet these men do more than attempt to convey their own sense of loss by verbally highlighting the brutality committed against their loved one; in cataloguing the wounds left upon her body, these men unwittingly perform a rhetorical violence against her all their own.

To understand the nature of this rhetorical violence and its implications for the spectacles of brutality yet to come, we must first recognize these speeches as the permutations of poetic blazon that they are. This device, particularly common in the sonnet sequences of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, entailed "a richly ornate and mannered evocation of idealized female beauty rendered into its constituent parts."¹⁰ Characteristic of laudatory verse in Petrarch's *Canzoniere* (1368), this hyperbolic trope was imported with Petrarchan poetry into France and England, ultimately becoming an essential aspect of the English Cult of Elizabeth and virtually every courtier's poetic arsenal. Blazons of the distant yet irresistible beloved, cataloguing her abundance of perfect features, appear in some of the most famous sonnet sequences

of the Renaissance. In an early sonnet of Sir Philip Sydney's *Astrophil and Stella* (1591), the beloved's face is blazoned within the poetic conceit of architecture:

Queene Vertues Court, which some call *Stellas* face,
Prepar'd by Natures cheefest furniture:
Hath his front built of alabaster pure,
Gold is the couering of that stately place.
The doore, by which sometimes runnes forth her grace,
Red Porphire is, which locke of Pearle makes sure:
Whose Porches rich, with name of chekes indure,
Marble mixt red and white, doe enterlace.
The Windowes now, through which this heauenly guest
Lookes on the world, and can finde nothing such,
Which dare claime from those lights the name of best,
Of touch they are, that without touch doe touch,
Which *Cupids* self, from Beauties mine did drawe:
Of touch they are, and poore I am their strawe. (Sonnet IX)¹¹

Stella's seeming unattainability is underscored here through her features' associations with rich gold, pure alabaster, and white pearl, items of aesthetic perfection that epitomize the inherent beauty of these disparate features and implicitly suggest the cold, unflinching disdain for which the Petrarchan mistress was also known. Edmund Spenser utilizes a similar blazon in his *Amoretti and Epithalamion* (1595) a few years later:

For loe my loue doth in her selfe containe
all this worlds riches that may farre be found,
if Saphyres, loe her eies be Saphyres plaine,
if Rubies, loe hir lips be Rubies sound:
If Pearles, hir teeth be pearles both pure and round;
if Yuorie, her forehead yuory weene;
if Gold, her locks are finest gold on ground;
if siluer, her faire hands are siluer sheene,
But that which fairest is, but few behold,
her mind adordnd with vertues manifold. (Sonnet XV)¹²

Once more, the sonneteer itemizes the desirable attributes of the beloved's appearance through comparison to the most extravagant materials imaginable, and if Spenser presents his speaker in a less pitiful light than Sidney's, both remain in the unenviable position of

chasing a mistress who, if their conceits are to be believed, appears essentially inhuman in her hyperbolic majesty.

Of course, this is only one way the blazon dehumanizes its female subject, though it is also the characteristic that most readily explains the revenger's appropriation of the blazon tradition for describing loss. While the lauding of the Petrarchan mistress's seemingly perfect attributes worked quite well in the eroticized court of Elizabeth where the Queen was both to be desired and recognized as ultimately unattainable, the same trope was considerably less practical for those addressing other women. This fact was certainly not lost on the poets of the day, some of whom chose to parody the traditional blazon in an effort to make this very point. Indeed, one of Shakespeare's most famous sonnets foregrounds the discrepancy between poetic conceits and the practical reality of the beloved's features:

My mistress's eyes are nothing like the sun;
Coral is far more red than her lip's red;
If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun;
If hair be wires, black wires grow on her head.
I have seen roses damask'd, red and white,
But no such roses see I in her cheeks (Sonnet 130)¹³

However, the "false compare" that Shakespeare critiques here becomes the heart of the matter for Marcus, Titus, and Vindice as they mourn their victimized women. What was the impossible comparison between the beloved's eyes and sapphires or suns becomes instead the equally unbridgeable expanse between Lavinia's ruined form and her former self, between the chilling visage of Gloriana's skull and the bewitching beauty of her past. The seemingly unattainable perfection of the beloved so effectively evoked in traditional blazons is here deployed to emphasize loss, effecting a similar disjunction between the past and present through an equally unfair association. In these revenge plays, the poetic

blazon becomes a rhetorical signifier of what the villain-noble's crime has irreparably destroyed, where the former simplicity of a lady's hand or smiling lip becomes as impossibly distant as alabaster skin or teeth of pearl.

Yet this blazon of grief does more than mourn violence already done. As I have suggested, it performs a rhetorical violence all its own—something it has inherited from its poetic predecessor. While the association between a woman's features and precious materials in the traditional poetic blazon clearly reinscribes the traditional commodification of the female form, feminist critics in particular have instead emphasized how it is accomplished through a deliberate fragmentation of the female body into its constituent parts.¹⁴ Most influential in this critical turn has been Nancy J. Vickers, who explains, “the object of veneration is not a beloved woman but a beloved part...Here ‘the woman’ is absent; a fragment of her body, often reified and dehumanized, receives the devotion that had traditionally been her due.”¹⁵ The irony, therefore, of the revenger's blazons of grief is that the very speech through which he performs that loss reenacts the violence that caused it; he mourns the mutilation done to his daughter or fiancé even as his words metaphorically emulate that dismemberment. When we furthermore recognize that this is merely a part of the male subject constituting himself—be it through self-definition as a spurned lover or as a wronged man who must avenge his family—the woman, as means to this end, becomes “the instrument by which man attains unity, and she pays for it at the price of her own dispersion.”¹⁶

Nevertheless, the significance of these speeches is further reaching than the figurative implications of those moments themselves. Rather, they presage the uniquely grotesque execution the villain-noble will suffer, for as these blazons of grief reflect the

mutilation already done to the female form, so too do they look ahead to the reciprocal mutilation the revenger will enact upon those responsible for the initial crime.¹⁷ Whereas most villains in the revenge tradition are merely stabbed in their plays' final moments, those characters responsible for Lavinia's rape and Gloriana's death experience a far more gruesome end: Chiron and Demetrius are chopped up and cooked in a pastie, while the Duke has his tongue nailed to a window sill and is forced to watch his wife copulate with his bastard son. Appropriately, each assassination is accompanied by a speech that rhetorically enacts the villain's pending dismemberment, itemizing those parts the revenger will wound just as his earlier blazon of grief lamented those aspects of the beloved forever lost. As Titus reveals his ruse to the captured Goths, the boys' constituent parts become little more than ingredients for the revenger's grisly recipe:

This one hand yet is left to cut your throats,
Whiles that Lavinia 'tween her stumps doth hold
The basin that receives your guilty blood...
Hark, villains, I will grind your bones to dust,
And with your blood and it I'll make a paste,
And of the paste a coffin I will rear,
And make two pasties of your shameful heads (V.ii.181-3, 186-9)

In much the same way, Vindice and Hippolito's threats rhetorically fragment the Duke's body, focusing on those various parts they will wound at the seeming expense of the Duke's person as a whole, cutting him up with words before they do in actuality. Vindice tells his brother, "Now with thy dagger / Nail down his tongue, and mine shall keep possession / About his heart" (III.v.198-200), and threatens, "If he but wink, not brooking the foul object, / Let our two other hands tear up his lids / And make his eyes, like comets, shine through blood" (III.v.203-5). In each case, the rhetorical and actual violence of dismemberment, originally separated in the revengers' earlier blazons of grief, are here

collapsed together in these moments of bloody satisfaction as the sins of the past and the present contract in the realization of the protagonist's revenge.¹⁸

This thematic link between blazon and violent, piecemeal reciprocity also adds another dimension to the revenger's deliberate choice to make a spectacle of each assassination. We must remember that a principal dramaturgical purpose of these particular grieving speeches is to underscore the visual impact of the violence and mutilation onstage; the audience does not stare at Marcus as he speaks of Lavinia's wounds, but rather feels its gaze drawn to the horrible suffering etched over the girl's body. The villain-noble's crime has made a macabre spectacle of these women, one highlighted through a verbalized blazon of loss designed to ensure the theatrical audience experiences that scene much as these uncles, fathers, and fiancés do. Indeed, this is why these speeches always accompany the wounded beloved's first appearance onstage—to ensure the audience's reading of her victimization is as closely aligned with the revenger's as possible. In this capacity, the blazon of grief is a supplement to the spectacle onstage, a director of the inquiring and interpretive gaze.

As the revenger shifts his attention from the violence done to his family to the violence he will inflict upon those responsible—from the rhetorical dismemberment of his pseudo-blazon to the actual violence of his impromptu anatomy theater—the one constant remains the fundamental role of spectacle. As Vickers reminds, both the *blasonneur* and the anatomist “displayed the private, particularized body to the public gaze.”¹⁹ Despite whatever practical benefits a theatricalized assassination may grant him in accessing the villain-noble and setting the stage for revenge, the very nature of that theatrical scene reinforces the *contrapasso* reciprocity characteristic of the revenger's

assassination by ensuring what was done to the victim is reflected in the punishment done to the villain: if he made a spectacle of her, the revenger will make a spectacle of him. For instance, though Titus's attire in the play's final scene draws confused looks and questions from his guests, there is method to it: by foregrounding the parley's status as a banquet, most notably through his cook's attire, Titus prepares his audience to focus upon the centerpiece of any meal—the main dish. Thus, once the Emperor has asked for Chiron and Demetrius, Titus may triumphantly reveal, “Why, there they are, both baked in this pie; / Whereof their mother daintily hath fed, / Eating the flesh that she herself hath bred” (V.iii.60-2). At this moment of recognition, the gruesome dish before them all suddenly refigures the entire scene: Titus's costume clearly designates him the author of the grisly culinary tableau, but far more important to the revenge itself, the revelation draws Tamora—his final victim—into the spectacle as well, transforming her before their eyes into the monstrous mother, the cannibal woman who devours her own offspring. Ultimately, killing Chiron and Demetrius was never enough; the old general's revenge is not complete until they have become as much of a spectacle as his daughter, and not until that spectacle makes of their mother a sight as unnatural as the ravaged beauty of Lavina.

Vindice, on the other hand, crafts a scene that is at once more and less theatrical than Titus's Thyestean banquet. While the clever stratagem through which he dispatches the Duke is not situated within an obviously theatrical frame—Vindice and Hippolito poison him in a secluded estate outside the capital, rather than within a play, masque, or other court entertainment characteristic of the genre's denouements—Vindice repeatedly directs the assassination as if it were a dramatic production. Setting the stage for their revenge, he orders Hippolito, “Back with the torch! / Brother, raise the perfumes”

(III.v.139), only to soon after adjust the lighting to ensure his spectacle delivers the appropriate dramatic effect: “Place the torch here, that his affrighted eyeballs / May start into those hollows” (III.v.146-7). He even goes so far as to, Hamlet-like, gloss his production before it has finished: “When the bad bleeds, then is the tragedy good” (III.v.206).²⁰ By tacitly presenting his assassination as a theatrical production, Vindice thereby casts the central element of that spectacle, the Duke, as merely another component of the show. That there is no audience within the play to witness Vindice’s bloody scene is beside the point; his language has already framed the production as theater, and thus for him at least, similarly transformed the Duke into its principal spectacle. The transformation is only confirmed scenes later, when the slumped corpse of the Duke is found in the cast off vestments of Vindice’s former guise, Piato, and virtually the entire court is called on stage to “Be witness of a strange spectacle...the Duke my father gealed in blood” (V.i.89-91).

The final component of Vindice’s plan, however, assaults the Duke not with bodkins or poisons, but with the vicious barbs of a horrible tableau. Merely wounding the villain’s body will not suffice for this revenger; rather, he must “begin / To stick thy soul with ulcers. [He] will make / Thy spirit grievous sore; it shall not rest, / But, like some pestilent man, toss in thy breast” (III.v.176-9). Accordingly, Vindice and Hippolito force the Duke to watch his bastard Spurio lay with the Duchess, a sight which the villain “cannot brook” (III.v.223) and escapes only through his subsequent death. The revenger’s sadism aside, this additional component reveals an added dimension to the act that exceeds the one to one, villain-to-victim correspondence that other assassinations in the genre enact. Instead, that fundamental reciprocity is supplemented by a wounding

spectatorship that evokes the moment when the revenger first beheld the effects of the villain's treachery. It is not enough that the villain-noble be made a spectacle as the beloved was; he must also be made to witness a sight that wounds his heart as much as that which began the revenger's quest. As Titus orchestrates the moment when Tamora simultaneously recognizes her sons' remains and is recognized by others as the monstrous mother, so too does Vindice construct this scene where the Duke at once watches an act he "cannot brook" and is made the centerpiece of a spectacle all his own. In each instance, these villains are forced to experience both the victim's and the revenger's pain. Through his theatricalized stratagem, the revenger invokes that previous moment of discovery which elicited from him the blazon of grief, collapsing the spectacle of the wounded beloved with his own anguish at the sight of her into one torturous moment that revisits both torments upon the villain ultimately responsible for them.

As Sawday reminds, "The free-flow of language within the blazon form over the female body was not a celebration of 'beauty' (the ostensible subject), but of male competition,"²¹ and thus the revenger's triumph over the villain marks the end of that competition. We must not mistake it, however, for the contest in its entirety. Indeed, the rhetorical violence of the revenger's pseudo-blazons presages not only the horrors that will be done to those responsible, but also the violence he will inflict upon the beloved himself. Like the *contreblason*, in which another poet lauds the same female subject in an attempt to eclipse the skill and wit of the original *blasonneur*, Titus and Vindice precede their revenge by first victimizing the beloved in a perverse reassertion of their patriarchal right over her, responding in kind to the villain's crimes with a violence all their own. As Titus prepares to kill Lavinia, he glosses their plight through the story of Virginius, one

whose significance is predicated upon a father-daughter relationship. Consequently, once he has drawn the unwitting endorsement of Saturninus, Titus murders his daughter, crying, “Die, die, Lavinia, and thy shame with thee, / And with thy shame thy father’s sorrow die!” and “I am as woeful as Virginius was, / And have a thousand times more cause than he / To do this outrage” (V.iii.46-7, 50-2). In so doing, Titus reasserts his authority over his daughter’s body both through the affirmation that, as part of his family, her shame is one with his own, and thus his presentation of her murder as an obligation and right of his status as father.

Vindice’s assault against Gloriana is considerably less shocking, yet at the same time, serves as a far more direct retort to the Duke’s original crime. While it might seem that the deceased Gloriana is well beyond anyone’s ability to do her further harm, one must recall that the proper treatment of the dead is an issue that repeatedly crops up in Renaissance revenge tragedy,²² and thus Vindice’s use of her skeletal remains to further his own designs against the Duke presents merely a different kind of violence done to her. Furthermore, his specific choice to dress her in fine attire and put her forth as the object of the Duke’s lust completes the assignation she originally died to prevent; by essentially pandering her remains, Vindice accomplishes what the Duke could not, thereby reasserting his superior and “rightful” control over her body.

This shared compulsion to exceed the violence already done to their beloved in a perverse attempt at reestablishing their patriarchal right is a misguided response to the anxiety created by the villain’s original crime. It is a product of these plays’ particular deviation from the traditional Kydian formula, one that complicates the extant contest between men by making the object of that dispute the violated female body. At the same

time, the structural similarity to more traditional amorous and literary disputes between men over women allows the playwright to appropriate the poetic blazon and refashion it for his own purposes; without the gendered complication unique to *Titus Andronicus* and *The Revenger's Tragedy* this move could not work, for "the importance of the blazon lay in its partitioning not of any indiscriminate body, but of a specifically female corpse."²³ Of course, the revengers themselves show no evidence of consciously manipulating the convention. Rather, it is a dramaturgical device that typifies the dramas' interplay between language and violence, one uniquely situated to both hearken back to atrocities already committed and simultaneously look ahead to those still to come. These blazons of grief remind us that the undercurrents of gender and power at play in these revenge tragedies affect not only the spectacular violence for which the genre is known, but also the rhetoric employed by its chief players. As such, scrutiny of the language that precedes these violent acts may unlock the mutual forces that shaped them both.

Of course, should we move beyond the particularities of these two revenge tragedies and their appropriation of the poetic blazon, we find that language remains very much implicated in the systems of power at play in the genre. And while the villain nobles of other revenge plays do not suffer the dismemberments unique to *Titus* and *The Revenger's Tragedy*, their corrupt decrees do often lead the revenger to attack, even remove that organ of speech which physically makes utterance possible. As this grisly response suggests, the role of imposed silence in the discipline and subordination of subjects becomes increasingly pertinent amidst the genre's broader discourses of power.

For proof, one need look no further than the supernatural visitations that routinely begin these revenge plots and the curiously gendered silence of the grave.

Female ghosts in early modern drama are in short supply, but this is particularly conspicuous in English revenge tragedy, where men routinely return from the grave to impart knowledge to the living. Antonio's dead father Andrugio spurs both his son and widow forward to revenge, while old King Hamlet not only reveals the identity of his murderer to his son, but also utilizes his tortured voice from beneath the stage to compel Horatio and the guards to swear their silence. Don Andrea is even allowed to present his case to Porsepine herself in the underworld, and as a result, stands as chorus with Revenge throughout the entirety of Kyd's revenge play. That death is truly the end for the genre's women, then, is especially ruinous, for its silence bars them from further affecting events and seeing themselves avenged as these men do. Clearly, such silence diminishes these victimized women, and the disparities between their fate and that of the genre's fathers and brothers speaks not only to the gender inequities at play but also the conspicuous correlation between speech and power in the English revenge tragedy. How, then, does the spoken word relate to that other tool of political domination, violence, which bestows upon the genre its most spectacular scenes?

To begin to answer this question, we must first look to the revenge plays' villain-nobles and their dread command. A principal arena in which the royal decree is exercised is the dispensation of justice, particularly the ruler's condemning of criminals and, as is more often the case in Renaissance revenge tragedy, personal enemies to the gallows or the headsman's block. Traditional explorations of the genre's theatricalized and sensational violence, however, typically explore the brutal crimes that initiate the plot or

those final metadramatic scenes in which the revenger realizes his quest, and consequently tend to overlook or undervalue the intermediary examples of more traditional, state sanctioned violence meant to establish the extant systems of royal power and prerogative.²⁴ Quite to the contrary, I would argue these preceding scenes must be taken into account when analyzing the revenger's final triumph, for only through investigating the play's normative exhibitions of pardon and execution can we successfully recognize and juxtapose the tactics the conspirators deploy to subvert, appropriate, or eliminate those "legitimate" avenues of capital punishment. Specifically, only by exploring how politicized violence enacts and embodies the abstract authority of the sovereign's dread command can we begin to appreciate the revenger's conspicuous efforts to thwart that adversary's speech and impose silence.

The genre's earliest, and perhaps, most telling portrait of traditional, state-sanctioned justice is Pedrigano's execution in *The Spanish Tragedy*. Apprehended while murdering his accomplice, Serberine, at the behest of Lorenzo, Pedrigano is sent to the gallows, condemned by Hieronimo for the crime, and finally hung. What makes the scene so memorable and sets it apart from a routine execution, however, is the excellent "piece of gentlemanlike knavery" (III.v.8) that so skews Pedrigano's perception: Lorenzo promises the assassin a royal pardon for the crime but never keeps his word, instead sending a page to the gallows with merely an empty box so that thereby "the villain will flout the gallows, scorn the audience, and descant on the hangman, and all presuming of his pardon from hence" (III.v.11-3). Despite the fact that Lorenzo's stratagem is ultimately a ruse designed to eliminate yet another accomplice, the manner in which he does so speaks to the larger dynamic of royal decree and its fundamental association with

violence. For all the cultural conditioning that inculcates the Renaissance subject with belief in divine appointment of the nobility and consequently that their word is tantamount to law, these associations are, nevertheless, fundamentally abstract and cannot maintain traction on a populace without a substantive, concrete manifestation to prove its potency. For Pedrigano, this is literalized in the box, a physical (if false) sign of Lorenzo's royal pardon, proof positive of an aristocratic act that cannot otherwise be seen or felt. Traditionally, however, violent institutionalized reprisal may serve this turn. As Elaine Scarry argues, the sheer material factualness of the human body will be borrowed to lend that cultural construct the aura of 'realness' and 'certainty,' or in other words, "the incontestable reality of the physical body...become[s] an attribute of an issue that at that moment has no independent reality of its own."²⁵ Imprisonment, torture, and execution, in short, prove the power of the state—manifest it—and consequently, the power of the royal decree that initiates that act. This is the very reason behind contemporary capital punishment's inclination toward spectacle (the stocks, public hangings and maimings, etc.),²⁶ and permutations of this theme often become the traditional reading of the revenger's final, theatricalized assassinations.

The particulars of this scene, however, problematize a simplistic one to one association between the potency of royal speech and the execution of procedural state justice, a tension that lingers throughout much of the early modern revenge tradition. Both the threat of capital punishment and the promise of royal pardon share the scene, and the friction between these two forces, emblemized in the signifiers of gallows and wooden box, creates an unfortunate misunderstanding for the condemned, and consequently, the scene's humor. Yet Pedrigano's rebellious and irreverent speech

leading up to his hanging, despite what Hieronimo's surprised outrage at hearing it might suggest, was not an entirely uncommon occurrence in the early modern period. With nothing more to lose, the criminal would often curse and speak out of turn, and thus "In these executions, which ought to only show the terrorizing power of the prince, there was a whole aspect of the carnival, in which rules were inverted [and] authority mocked."²⁷

The full utilization of the state's right to control its subjects' bodies, ironically, highlights the limits of that power and affords those about to experience it the opportunity to undermine it. The reasoning behind the subject's rebellious behavior in Kyd's plays is the exact opposite, however. Pedrigano disrespects and challenges the authority of his executioners not because he realizes he has reached the limits of state power and cannot be further chastised beyond his impending demise, but rather because he firmly believes the limits of Lorenzo's royal pardon exceed those of the court before which he stands. Not only does he recognize the distinction between the agency of the state judiciary and that of its rulers, but also that the individual sovereign's agency trumps that of the state he embodies. The hangman himself shares this perspective, for soon after Pedrigano's execution he asks Hieronimo to "stand between the gallows and me" (III.vii.25) when he, too, comes to fear Lorenzo had pardoned the condemned. Clearly, these subjects both perceive the nobility to be greater than the state that empowers them. This is certainly not a dynamic unique to Renaissance revenge tragedy, but rather one symptomatic of early modern political systems in general. What it does mean for the genre, though, is that this perception of executive autonomy colors the performance of state-sanctioned violence as the individual will of the sovereign and not an operation of the judicial system at large. For those in positions of power, it encourages them to treat the state as merely an

extension of their will; for those subject to that terrible power, it encourages a belief that the solution to such institutionalized oppression lies in the assassination of the figure they believe to be its head.

The trial of Junior Brother in Middleton's *The Revenger's Tragedy*, set early in the play to help establish the corruption rotting its Italianate court, clearly evinces this tension between the exertion of state power and the sovereign's individual agency. The Duke's stepson stands accused of a rape to which he readily, even casually confesses, and as the Duchess and her sons plead for clemency, the contrasting targets of their ire underscore the fractured nature of the scene's power dynamic. The Duke and the First Judge, who should both be understood to represent the will of the state and thus a unified front, are instead seen as competing sources of authority: the Judge, who appears to be running the proceedings, is asked to withhold judgment, while the Duke, who presents himself as a passive spectator to those proceedings, is asked to intervene. The commonality between the two, however, is the means through which they might exert their ostensibly autonomous authorities—the spoken word. The Duchess begs the Judge, “Oh, keep't [his decree] upon your tongue! Let it not slip; / Death too soon steals out of a lawyer's lip,” while she chastises her husband, “Oh, what it is to have an old-cool duke / To be as slack in tongue as in performance!” (I.ii.68-9, 74-5). Indeed, this association between speech and power is confirmed when the Duke finally does intervene. Throughout the scene, the First Judge has been an active participant, responding to the royals' interruptions even as he attempts to move the proceedings forward, but the moment the Duke defers those proceedings, the Judge no longer speaks. Once the sovereign exerts his agency and overrides the state judicial apparatus, its representative

becomes essentially powerless, and consequently, speechless. Despite the initial lip service he pays to the constrained position of those in the public eye, the Duke clearly recognizes the superiority of his word over that of a mere official, and as such, casually exerts that agency over the judicial system he should be supporting. At the same time, this act to some degree divorces the Duke from the state he represents in the eyes of his subjects, and thereby encourages those displeased with the results of the system, like the Duchess, to turn their ire on the Duke himself.

Of course, many of these corrupt royals are already divorced from the legitimate exercises of the political and judicial systems over which they preside, dispensing with pretense and simply abusing the power of their dread command. Claudius sends his nephew Hamlet to England carrying a missive that orders the English king to kill the Danish prince, while in *Antonio's Revenge*, Piero alternately labels his daughter a whore and promises his manservant clemency if he confesses to a murder the duke himself committed, then abruptly murders that manservant before the court and declares his daughter innocent. Even Middleton's Duke, after having participated in the judicial farce that was Junior Brother's trial, later orders the boy's execution on a whim to spite his other stepsons' clumsy attempts at deceit. Time and again, the sovereign authority invested in these royal decrees is affirmed through physical violence done to their subjects, granting a corporeality to this political abstraction through the bloody proofs they muster. At the same time, their penchant for allowing their minions or the political system itself to perform this violence not only provides them at times with a sort of plausible deniability, but also greatly extends their reach. As Thomas Adams observes in *The Taming of the Tongue* (1619), "The hand spares to hurt the absent, the tongue hurts

all...The hand reacheth but a small compasse, the tongue goes through the world.”²⁸

Although Adams here writes of slander’s far-reaching effects, his remark is equally applicable to the political construct of loyalty and subservience that the villain-noble manipulates to extend and preserve his sphere of influence. At the center of this nexus is the royal pronouncement itself, an essentially empty box like Lorenzo’s, one that is ironically invested with authority by the very political system that these corrupt rulers later abuse to serve their own ends. Their power resides in their words rather than their arms, and consequently, those that would do them harm seek first to silence their enemy before they drive home their avenging blades.

As critics are fond of noting, the inherently theatrical nature of the revenger’s final ploy creates of his triumph a spectacle, one that might instruct his audience in mutual suffering, the commonalities between men regardless of class, or even subtly wink at the similar theatricality deployed by the state itself and the anxiety this awareness might generate for those in power. However, there are additional, more practical benefits that come with this strategic deployment of the theatrical. As I have argued previously, the establishment of a performative space allows the revenger to temporarily wrest the spatial control characteristic of the villain-noble’s royal position and instead utilize it for his own vengeful ends. Similarly, by designating his victim as a passive spectator and himself as the director of that pending spectacle, the revenger can manipulate and redirect, if not completely usurp the power of the villain’s speech. Antonio and his co-conspirators, for instance, trick Piero into clearing the court, essentially making him their mouthpiece as they whisper in his ear: “The maskers pray you to forbear the room,” the duke repeats, “Till they have banqueted. Let it be so; / No man presume to visit them, on death”

(V.v.26-8). Hieronimo, on the other hand, goes so far as to cast his victims in a play whose lines are incomprehensible to both its audience and its players, stipulating that each actor will speak in a different language. Even Balthazar recognizes that “this will be a mere confusion, / And hardly shall we all be understood” (IV.i.180-1), but as Hieronimo cryptically promises, “It must be so, for the conclusion / Shall prove the invention” (IV.i.182-3). In each instance, the performative frame imposed upon the situation allows the revenger to determine how the royal voice is to be used. The artificial and fleeting nature of such performative spaces necessarily constricts the efficacy of this ploy, but the gambit does momentarily enable the revenger to take further action. Indeed, that these measures grant the conspirators little to no real power is beside the point, for the revengers themselves realize the tenuous hold their theatrical trap affords them, and consequently take measures to impose a far more permanent silence upon their prey.

The temporary imposition of a performative space within the court is not enough in and of itself to effectively silence the villain-noble. Such frames are extremely delicate and will easily collapse when the real world intrudes, as it does during the assassination of Lussuriosso in *The Revenger's Tragedy*. Even after having been mortally wounded during the revengers' masque, the dying royal still manages to gasp, “Those in the masque did murder us” (V.iii.80). The inept timing of the stepsons' second masque allows the real assassins to temporarily escape arrest, but the young duke's lingering life—and with it, ability to further speak—greatly agitates Vindice, who complains, “Heart, does he breathe so long?” and “A vengeance throttle him!” (V.iii.68, 72). Whatever momentary control he might have gleaned by effecting a performative frame evaporates with the assassination, leaving Vindice anxious and at the mercy of how well

Lussuriosso can still articulate himself. Only once the dying duke confesses “My tongue is out of office” (V.iii.91) can the revenger safely gloat over his prey in aside, underscoring with his every taunt the new and final impotence that accompanies this silence. Thus, the theatrical frame of the conspirators’ assassination merely provides them an opportunity to do their bloody work; it cannot effectively silence the royal voice that has routinely thwarted them throughout the play. Rather, something else is needed to permanently address this threat, and while death does ultimately silence the villain-noble, many revengers prefer a more hands-on approach.

As Carla Mazzio observes, “the fantasy of muteness and mutilation works apotropaically to ward off the very dangers it represents” in “many texts of the period,”²⁹ such as Erasmus’s *Lingua* (1525), where he suggests the wounded tongue could be made into a balm for those it has harmed: “If only pills were made of the pounded tongues of slanderers, so that they might aid by this cure those whom they harmed by their poison.”³⁰ The ironic inversion of utilizing that which wounds to help remedy its hurt is entirely in keeping with the *contrapasso* nature of the revenger’s killings, and if Erasmus wrote merely in hyperbolic speculation, the protagonists of these revenge plays are all too happy to perform a more literal enactment. Vindice and Hippolito complain that their father “had his tongue, yet grief made him die speechless” (III.v.175) and exact their revenge upon the old Duke by afflicting him with a poison that eats away his lips, teeth, and tongue. When the Duke continues to speak, Vindice promises, “Then we’ll invent a silence...Now with thy dagger / Nail down his tongue” (III.v.196, 198-9). Similarly, Antonio and his co-conspirators’ first move is to rip out and display the conniving Piero’s tongue, vowing, “We’ll spoil your oratory. Out with his tongue!” (V.v.33). The organ of

speech, which in previous instances has been utilized by the villain to deploy his powers of state, here has violence done upon it in order to circumvent that political power and, ironically, to prevent the very sorts of violence that have earlier been deployed to confirm and corporealize his otherwise abstract, sovereign authority. The irony is only heightened by the fact that, in dismembering a specific part of the human body in an emblematic association between the act and the member that performed it, the revengers unwittingly mimic the state's institutionalized mechanisms of capital punishment. For instance, it was common for perpetrators of treasonous writings to publicly lose a hand, as John Stubbs did in 1579 when "Queen Elizabeth judged to be the seditious publication of [his] treatise, which opposed the Alençon marriage."³¹ Here, instead of a hand for treasonous writing, the revengers mutilate the villain's tongue for the corrupt speech it has performed, and through that, much of the violence it has authorized. In short, these protagonists essentially silence their sovereign by reproducing the deceit and violence for which they are punishing him, metonymically locating the far reaching, abstract, and notoriously unruly nature of human speech in that organ that physically helps to produce it.

The problem, of course, is that mutilation of the human tongue cannot thwart the broader political system of institutionalized violence that previous scenes have illustrated and, ultimately, this attack hopes to undermine. The protagonist's vulnerability to this social apparatus, to the punishment that might be inflicted upon him should his enemies triumph, is a source of constant anxiety, and one he inevitably hopes to alleviate by removing that organ of speech that allows the villain-noble to utilize the political apparatus that empowers him. Mazziio, however, reminds that this is little more than a comforting illusion:

The urge to locate the root of discursive instability in the tongue itself is a way of rendering vulnerable that which is threatening, of rendering concrete, singular, and detachable that which is elusive, abstract, and capable of endless manipulation. The localization of discourse in the organ of speech, in other words, enables the fantasy of location, excision, and—however paradoxically—the fantasy of control.³²

As Mazzio explains, localizing the intangibility and unpredictability of human speech in its physical embodiment is merely a comforting illusion, and consequently, the revenger's attempt at subverting the state's ability to enact violent reprisal through the voice of the sovereign who deploys that violence is no more effective. Like the performative space in which this attack takes place, wounding the ruler's tongue does little more than create a temporary reprieve and opportunity, and just as destroying the physical organ of speech in some ways mistakes the tongue for the political decree in general, so too does targeting the villain-noble mistake the figurehead for the broader system of hegemonic domination and violence that allowed that corrupt royal to victimize the revenger in the first place.

Yes, the revenger realizes his quest in the assassination of his enemies and achieves satisfaction to that end, but he succeeds in making no real impression upon the socio-political apparatus that empowered those enemies in the first place. As a result, he remains as vulnerable as he was before, and not surprisingly, his fate is inevitably decided in the final scene by the abiding voice of sovereign authority. Fortinbras, for instance, belatedly enters in the closing moments of *Hamlet* and immediately decrees how the prince's corpse is to be interned, his royal command conspicuously backed by the violence embodied in his surrounding military forces. Immediately after the assassination of Piero, senators enter the bloody stage of *Antonio's Revenge*, and if their approving reaction to the carnage is uncharacteristic of the genre overall, their presence

nevertheless reminds that a larger political apparatus remains intact to judge and voice its interpretation of events. Perhaps the most famous example of the persisting state after its ruler's demise—and the perpetual dangers of speech in that state—is Vindice's self-incrimination in the final moments of *The Revenger's Tragedy*. Having first successfully murdered the old Duke and now Lussurioso, Vindice cannot contain his pride and blurts out, "'Twas somewhat witty carried, though we say it. / 'Twas we two murdered him" (V.iii.117-8). Rather than the congratulations he undoubtedly expects, however, the revenger and his brother-accomplice are immediately sentenced to death by the new duke, Antonio. Fearing "You that would murder him would murder me" (V.iii.125), Antonio deploys his newfound authority, and in so doing, demonstrates that these revengers are just as vulnerable to the power of royal decree as they ever were. Characteristically, that potency is manifested through the state's utilization of violence upon the bodies of its subjects, so when Antonio wishes, "Pray heaven their blood may wash away all treason!" (V.iii.149), he is essentially praying that this violent reprisal may reiterate the power of the state, and consequently, deter any "treason" that would seek to question that power.

The inherent problem in the revenger's pursuit of a personal vendetta against a prominent political figure, one aggravated by the tensions evinced in such scenes as Pedrigano's execution and the trial of Junior Brother, is that he is encouraged to focus on the man himself at the expense of those systems of political domination that empowered the villain in the first place and, as these final scenes so clearly illustrate, remain to threaten the protagonist afterward. While an awareness of how that state apparatus is deployed very much informs the specific nature of his revenge—establishing a performative frame to temporarily wrest control from the villain, targeting his speech

before or as he kills the man—the protagonist nevertheless misses or ignores the “bigger picture,” for it is the preservation of that institutionalized system of violence that ultimately ensures the revenger’s ascendancy is so fleeting. Of course, there is little that can be done to challenge or undermine that system. Hieronimo perhaps comes closest, but he does so merely by preempting the physical mutilation the state threatens by first doing it to himself. As a former minister of state justice, the old Knight Marshall recognizes better than most that “Thou mayest torment me,” but vows “never shalt thou force me to reveal / The thing which I have vowed inviolate” (IV.iv.186, 188-9)³³ and bites out his own tongue. When they threaten further torture to compel a written confession, Hieronimo gestures for a pen knife and kills himself. Drastic though it may undoubtedly be, the Knight Marshall’s self-mutilation obviates the threat of violence upon which the state ultimately builds its power, and therefore, obviates the efficacy of the sovereign’s dread command. That such extremities are unlikely only underscores the power such hegemonic systems wield over their subjects, and by association the power resident in those voices that can deploy this violence.

For the sovereign to be without his voice, then, is to unmake the sovereign, and because of this no royal survives the revenger’s mutilation of his tongue. Unlike Lavinia, who remains alive long after her tongue is removed, even ultimately participating in her father’s revenge upon those responsible, none of the villains long survive the silences imposed upon them. These men are defined by the positions they hold and the power they wield, and consequently to cut them off from the expression of that authority is to essentially obliterate them. Interestingly and unlike the conspicuous lack of female ghosts, this is one arena where women seem to get the upper hand: as Mazzio observes, “while

the prototypical loss of women's tongues...is often linked with a birth of 'voice,' with a *resistance* to the notion that agency is located in a body part, the loss of male tongues is often linked with the death of self."³⁴ At least in these early modern revenge plays, Mazzio would appear to be correct. Revengers routinely kill their enemy's tongue before they kill him outright, striking at the royal's ability to deploy the powers of state that help make him what he is, and to undermine the institutionalized violence that routinely manifests that abstract sovereignty. In the end, though, this only kills the man who abused that authority. Though the revenger never makes any overt claim to challenge those broader hegemonic systems of domination and violence, their persistence after the villain's assassination ensures the revenger himself will not long remain. As his doom is ultimately voiced in the closing moments of the play, its decree grimly reminds us all, "the tongue can no man tame."³⁵

Endnotes

¹ Scholars have been fond of pointing out the significance of this decision on the contemporary popularity of Kyd's play and subsequent iterations of the revenge tradition. For instance, see Bowers, *Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy 1587-1642* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1940), 65-66. Of course, this ready association between Renaissance revenge plays and spectacular violence has also encouraged some critics to mistakenly see corroboration of certain plays' otherwise tenuous ascriptions to the genre in their over-the-top violence; a ready example of this is some readers' unsubstantiated categorization of *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* as revenge tragedy based merely on Giovanni's one reference to revenge in the play's final act, followed by his gruesome entrance into the wedding feast with his sister's heart impaled on a dagger.

² T.S. Eliot, *Selected Essays, 1917-1932* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1932), 82.

³ Stevie Simkin, introduction to *Revenge Tragedy* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 3, 5.

⁴ Margaret E. Owens, *Stages of Dismemberment: The Fragmented Body in Late Medieval and Early Modern Drama* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2005), 207.

⁵ See Kim Solga, "Rape's Metatheatrical Return: Rehearsing Sexual Violence among the Early Moderns," *Theatre Journal* 58 (2006), and Owens, *Stages of Dismemberment*, respectively.

⁶ Michel Foucault, *Discipline & Punish*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1995). Though the early modern period is rather ancillary to his primary focus on the eighteenth century onward, Foucault does discuss the significance of torture and spectacles of public execution in the Renaissance, especially in Part 1 of the book.

⁷ Jordi Coral Escolá, "Vengeance is Yours: Reclaiming the Social Bond in *The Spanish Tragedy* and *Titus Andronicus*," *Atlantis* 29, no.2 (2007), 61.

⁸ Owens, 121. See also Katharine Eisaman Maus, introduction to *Four Revenge Tragedies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), xvi-xvii.

⁹ Maus argues that Hieronimo's assassination of Lorenzo and Balthazar is staged as it is, at least in part, because "Hieronimo defiantly insists upon the similarities between king and subject, aristocrat and commoner. To prove that identical losses produce identical grief he uses theatre, the most powerful tool the Renaissance had to assert the resemblances among human beings, and to induce empathetic identification." Maus, p. xvii. Her point, of course, is specific to *The Spanish Tragedy*; my observation regarding the dissimilarities in the specific contexts of revenge tragedy assassinations is not meant to suggest that Maus was erroneously applying this reading beyond Kyd's play.

¹⁰ Jonathan Sawday, *The Body Emblazoned: Dissection and the Human Body in Renaissance Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 191.

¹¹ Sir Philip Sidney, *Astrophil and Stella*, 1591 (Menston, England: Scolar Press, 1970), 4.

¹² Edmund Spenser, *The Shorter Poems*, ed. Richard A. McCabe (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), 395.

¹³ William Shakespeare, *The Riverside Shakespeare*, 2nd ed. (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1997), 1867.

¹⁴ Nancy J. Vickers is undoubtedly most responsible for this development (see following note), but since her pioneering work on the blazon in French and Petrarchan poetry, numerous critics have been influenced by her scholarship and subsequently expanded the topic to explore its impact in a variety of early modern English genres and in regards to gender, the human body, and the broader political and ideological apparatus of the culture. For examples, see Moira P. Baker, "'The Uncanny Stranger on Display': The Female Body in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century Love Poetry," *South Atlantic Review* 56, no.2 (1991): 7 – 25; Coppelia Kahn, "Lucrece: The Sexual Politics of Subjectivity" in *Rape and Representation*, ed. Lynn A. Higgins and Brenda R. Silver, 141-59 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991); Louis Adrian Montrose, "The Elizabethan Subject and the Spenserian Text" in *Literary Theory/Renaissance Texts*, ed. Patricia Parker and David Quint, 303-340 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986); Sawday, *The Body Emblazoned* (1995); and Hannah Betts, "'The Image of This Queene So Quaynt': The Pornographic Blazon 1588-1603" in *Dissing Elizabeth: Negative Representations of Gloriana*, ed. Julia M. Walker, 153-84 (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998).

¹⁵ Nancy J. Vickers, "Members Only: Marot's Anatomical Blazons," in *The Body in Parts: Fantasies of Corporeality in Early Modern Europe*, ed. David Hillman and Carla Mazzio, 3-21 (New York: Routledge, 1997), 18. While this quote refers specifically to sixteenth-century French *blason*, Vickers has studied a wide variety of poetry lauding female appearance—including those of Petrarch's *Canzoniere* and early modern England—and made similar conclusions. See "Diana Described: Scattered Woman and Scattered Rhyme," *Critical Inquiry* 8, no.2 (1981), 265-79 and "'This Heraldry in Lucrece' Face'," *Poetics Today* 6, no.1-2 (1985), 171-184.

¹⁶ Vickers, "Diana Described," 273.

¹⁷ Both Vickers and Sawday draw explicit connections between the metaphorical fragmentation of the blazon tradition and of the growing Renaissance vogue of anatomy theaters, both in regards to the scopical implications of directing the gaze at an objectified body (part) and their deeper significance for power and subjectivity. For more, see Vickers, "Members Only" and Sawday, *The Body Emblazoned*.

¹⁸ It should be noted that the piecemeal murder of the villain-noble corresponds not necessarily with his original crime, but rather with the rhetorical fragmentation that crime prompts in the revenger's grief. While Lavinia's attack and her father's revenge on the Goths may resemble one another in degree, we must remember that *The Revenger's*

Tragedy offers no evidence that the Duke did anything to Gloriana besides poison her. Consequently, the necessarily reciprocity of revenge is complete once Vindice has poisoned the villain. The subsequent, torturous execution is a reflection of Vindice's musings upon his murdered fiancé, not what was actually done to her—of course, it is also very much in character for Vindice to go above and beyond in the execution of his murderous plans.

¹⁹ Vickers, "Members Only," 7.

²⁰ It is worth noting that Vindice's itemization of theatrical components throughout the scene (costume, prop, lighting, effects, and music) performs a metadramatic fragmentation of theatrical production itself that echoes the more stark physical and rhetorical dismemberments already performed onstage.

²¹ Sawday, 199.

²² Examples of improper burial and its subsequent animosities are numerous in the genre. Horatio receives special credit from Bel-Imperia and Don Andrea for recovering and burying the latter's body in *The Spanish Tragedy*, while the restoration of Feliche's murdered corpse is an ongoing concern through much of *Antonio's Revenge*. Disputes over the internment of the dead are equally significant in Shakespeare's revenge plays: Titus refuses to intern his son Mutius for much of the first act over a perceived betrayal, while Laertes objects to the treatment of both his father's and sister's remains in *Hamlet*.

²³ Sawday, 191.

²⁴ R.A. Foakes, for instance, is most concerned with "the primal scene of violence, the deed that seems spontaneous and to have no meaning" (8), while at the other extreme, Michael Neill's interest in the theatricalized denouements of the genre leads him to conclude the revenger's "play acquires a double function as both memorial and fatal *memento mori*" (259). See R.A. Foakes, *Shakespeare & Violence* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003) and Michael Neill, *Issues of Death: Mortality and Identity in English Renaissance Tragedy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

²⁵ Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 14, 124-5. Scarry calls this process, in which the corporeality of the wounded body is utilized to grant a similar corporeality to an abstract ideology or belief, "analogical verification" or "analogical substantiation" (14).

²⁶ The concept of power's intimate association with displays of state violence does not begin with Scarry, but rather achieved prominence in Michel Foucault's seminal work, *Discipline and Punish*.

²⁷ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 61.

²⁸ Thomas Adams, *The Taming of the Tongue* (London, 1619), 152.

²⁹ Carla Mazzio, "Sins of the Tongue," *The Body in Parts: Fantasies of Corporeality in Early Modern Europe*, David Hillman and Carla Mazzio, eds. (New York: Routledge, 1997), 62.

³⁰ Qtd. in Mazzio, 62.

³¹ Katherine A. Rowe, "Dismembering and Forgetting in *Titus Andronicus*," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 45, no.3 (1994), 284. The treatise in question was his *The Discovery of a Gaping Gulf Wherinto England is Like to Be Swallowed by Another French Marriage if the Lord Forbid Not the Banns by Letting Her Majesty See the Sin and Punishment Thereof* (1579).

³² Mazzio, 64.

³³ What Hieronimo is specifically referring to here remains one of the common interpretive mysteries of the scene: having already revealed everything from his motivation to how he enacted his plot, there seems little else to confess. Rather than weigh in on this classic question, however, I would instead simply observe that in stating his enemies cannot compel him to speak, and then ensuring that vow by biting out his own tongue, Hieronimo not only evinces a recognition of the nexus of speech and violence that composes the state's power, but more importantly, expands his revenge beyond the punishment of those royals who victimized his son to include a direct challenge to the political system that empowered those villains in the first place.

³⁴ Mazzio, 63.

³⁵ Adams, 149.

Conclusion: Jacobean Drama and the Demise of the Kydian Revenge Play

The distinctly parodic undertones of Middleton's *The Revenger's Tragedy*, beyond the playwright's own penchant for satire, suggests a dramatic form on the cusp of decline. Written nearly twenty years after Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*, Middleton's revenge play unfolds with a decided self-awareness that seems to wink at the genre's conventions as much as it hyperbolically enacts them. It is peopled with caricatures, and even its protagonist Vindice evinces a perspective more static than any of his principal antecedents.¹ The ethical concerns that formed the core of Kyd's great play are reduced here to stark binaries; if its protagonist must become a villain to see his revenge done, he does so gleefully and utterly without the ambivalence of a Hieronimo, let alone a Hamlet. Not surprisingly, Jonathan Dollimore can only conclude that "In *The Revenger's Tragedy* a vital irony and a deep pessimism exist in disjunction," held together by "a subversive black camp."² It is a revenge play about revenge plays, and as such, suggests that the fundamental precepts of the Kydian tradition were beginning to come under scrutiny themselves.

This attention led to growing experimentation with the fundamental components of the Kydian formula, and though the English revenge tragedy persisted up until the closing of the theaters in 1642, Jacobean iterations of the tradition increasingly came to deviate from the thematic concerns of their Elizabethan predecessors. Fredson Bowers holds responsible the audience's greater fixation on the sensational violence of the genre instead of the moral anxiety that precipitates it, and thus the playwrights' gradual shift toward giving the Machiavellian and treacherous villain who most produces these spectacles the central role of the play: "The older Elizabethan drama of revenge was

highly moral in that it raised (although infrequently attempted to solve) certain problems concerning man's life. The hero was set in a position which, as in *Hamlet*, wrenched his whole moral outlook," but as time passed, the Jacobean audiences

still wanted the highly colored and emotional declamation which had made the earlier plays so popular, but they preferred the more artificial, standardized, and hence less serious rhetoric of a villain to the essentially moral and real analysis of a tortured hero revenger.³

What Bowers calls "the reign of the villain" would not last until the closing of the theaters, but it does mark the end of the English revenge play's primary concern with the ethical quandary of its protagonist. Indeed, though the genre itself would persist in one form or another for decades to come, the Kydian revenge play died in the early years of the Jacobean theater.

The demise of this particular subgenre, as Bowers suggests, was due to more than an irreverent manipulation of dramaturgical conventions; rather, it grew from a fundamental shift in the Jacobean perspective. While it may be true that "Nothing could be more cavalier than their [Jacobean playwrights'] treatment of Kyd's revenge formula" and "in short space they discarded the ghost, the chorus, the madness and the hesitation of the revenger,"⁴ other elements endured enough to give these plays a familiar feel:

It must be noticed that many of the proved theatrical incidents of Kyd are retained in the new tragedy. Accomplices are still tricked and murdered, a revenger of blood may appear (in the opponent's role), and the lust of the murderer for his victim's wife or daughter is frequently important as a mainspring of action. But if separate incidents and themes are reminiscent of the older drama, the form had changed decidedly, and a multiplicity of plot formulas have replaced the simple thread of the Kydian central situation.⁵

Ultimately, however, evaluating the trajectory of the Kydian revenge play solely upon the presence or absence of particular generic conventions across time promises a superficial and unproductive study. That Jacobean playwrights increasingly began to omit the

madness and hesitation of the revenger is in and of itself far less important than the thematic implications of this omission, namely the absence of a prolonged and significant tension in the mind of the protagonist between his desire for blood revenge and the socio-religious precepts that prohibit the performance of that desire. In other words, these later plays evince less and less concern with the subjectivity of their revengers. In its place, they focus upon those social and political apparatuses that produce the need for revenge. Dollimore insists that “Jacobean tragedy anticipates, and is therefore usefully explored in relation to, a central tenet of materialist analysis, namely that the essentialist concept of ‘man’ mystifies and obscures the real historical conditions in which the actual identity of people is rooted,”⁶ or as J. W. Lever more succinctly explains, “What Bowers fails to allow for is that in Jacobean tragedy it is not primarily the conduct of the individual, but of the society which assails him, that stands condemned.”⁷

Of course, a growing emphasis upon the hegemonic powers of the state does not inherently mean the dissolution of the Elizabethan revenge play; indeed, the presence of such a political apparatus is fundamental to the success of the Kydian formula, for it is the tension between the will of the individual subject and his social environment that creates the genre’s drama and depth. However, the trajectory of the Jacobean stage increasingly saw revenge portrayed as the inevitable result of social injustice, and in this inevitability, the psychological struggles of the revenger that characterized the Kydian tradition receded in importance. An indicator of this shift can be seen in the amount of time devoted to the contemplation of revenge. While protagonists like Hieronimo and Antonio spend much of their time on stage brooding over or pursuing their vengeance, and others like Hamlet and Vindice utilize virtually the entirety of their plays, their

Jacobean successors come upon the decision to revenge late but enact it much more quickly: Evadne, the King's mistress of *The Maid's Tragedy* (1611), transforms from haughtily unrepentant to submissive and ashamed over the course of just a hundred lines and avenges herself the very next scene in which she occupies the stage; Hernando in Shriley's *The Cardinal* (1641) decides upon revenge in the third act, kills his primary target Colombo in the fourth act, and then kills Colombo's uncle the Cardinal in the fifth. Furthermore, the dramatists' shift away from the gradual transformation of their principal revenger often diffuses the retaliatory action amongst multiple characters, typically of competing and contradictory aims. This Jacobean variety is often less about revenge as it is about the social tensions and fissures that, once they victimize the subject, produce revenge. As such, the play's focus in these denouements are particularly diluted and fragmented, for as everyone has been victimized to one degree or another by this system, each feels their wrongs warrant retaliation. Perhaps the starkest example of this fragmentation is the conclusion of Middleton's *Women Beware Women* (1620-4), which while culminating in a traditional play-within-a-play, contains no less than four different assassination plots. This, along with the more immediate, knee-jerk revenge action of their protagonists, is the dissolution of "the simple thread of the Kydian central situation" Bowers describes, produced by the Jacobean emphasis upon the genre's corrupt society at the expense of the individual turmoil that society creates within the revenging subject.

Most germane to this study, though, the Jacobean turn saw a distinct reduction and redeployment of the pronounced theatricality characteristic of the Elizabethan revenge play. In light of the thematic shift occurring in the opening years of the seventeenth century, the Kydian saturation of disguise, interior plays, and spectacle

becomes an inevitable casualty. Theatricality had provided a means by which those social systems of violent domination that subordinate the protagonist may be destabilized and manipulated, if only for short periods of time. These roles and performative spaces were deployed by the revenger both to facilitate the actual assassination itself and, unwittingly, to further the personal transformation that simultaneously allows the revenger to accomplish his quest while tacitly reinforcing the extant systems of domination (hierarchy, violent reprisal, misogyny, etc.) that contributed to his victimization in the first place. However, as less scrutiny is paid to the interior tension within the protagonist, the dramaturgical mechanism that helps facilitate his subsequent metamorphosis becomes moot. Moreover, like the characters themselves, the backdrop of societal ills and injustice that spurs the dramatic action becomes increasingly static itself, and the Jacobean playwrights who still utilized the revenge motif showed little interest in theatricality's ability to subvert the rigid systems of classification and identification upon which that society is built, and instead fixated upon the tragic consequences of that system upon its subjects. In short, the demise of the Kydian tradition can be traced through the decline of theatricality within the Jacobean revenge play.

Webster's *The White Devil* (1612) provides a useful starting point, for it contains all the hallmarks of its Elizabethan predecessors yet still clearly stands outside their tradition. At first glance, the plot appears typical of revenge tragedy. The Duke Bracciano and his mistress Vittoria arrange to have their respective spouses murdered, and after fleeing together to be wed, a group of conspirators led by Bracciano's brother-in-law Francisco and the count Lodovico track them down and murder them. However, the focus of the play is clearly placed upon the companionate union of Bracciano and

Vittoria, not the revengers who pursue them; the pair, along with their Machiavellian pander Flamineo, all receive lengthy speeches as they die, contrary to the abrupt and silent ends of those villain-nobles typical of the Elizabethan revenge tragedy. Lever recognizes a similar contrast, explaining, “Yet in spite of the conventional organization, the current of sympathy flows in an *opposite* direction to that of the earlier revenge drama,” due not only to the attractive qualities of its female protagonist and the charming wit of her brother, but also the “Crafty and hypocritical” revengers who “are more repulsive than the wrongdoers they punish.”⁸

Furthermore, the play maintains much of the theatricality characteristic of the genre but deploys it in a decidedly Jacobean fashion. The trial of Vittoria in the third act bears all the misogynistic trappings one has come to expect in a revenge tragedy, but despite it all she refuses to be made a passive spectacle as her generic predecessors were and instead “leaves the papal courtroom having established herself as a courageous, beleaguered woman, strong-minded, eloquent, resourceful with language, and unfazed by male bluster.”⁹ Typical of the objectifying theatricality directed at female characters in the Kydian tradition, Vittoria is made the focus of a metadramatic trial scene, interrogated by her judges as ambassadors and other characters comment on the proceedings from their seats in the gallery. Situated by design as the focal point of the surrounding male gaze, Vittoria is interrogated by the cardinal Monticelso and duke Francisco as they attempt throughout the proceedings to “paint out / [her] follies in more natural red and white / Than that upon [her] cheek” (III.ii.52-4)¹⁰. In this instance, however, the male characters are unable to successfully impose their reading of her upon the court audience. She proudly insists “your names / Of whore and murd’ress, they

proceed from you / As if a man should spit against the wind; / The filth returns in 's face" (III.ii.150-3), and once the cardinal—ostensibly the judge of these proceedings—becomes overly vehement in his accusations, Vittoria shrewdly objects, "If you be my accuser, / Pray cease to be my judge; come from the bench, / Give in your evidence 'gainst me, and let these / Be moderators" (III.ii.227-30). That she may very well be culpable in the crimes for which she is on trial ultimately falls to the wayside during this exchange, for her steadfast refusal to be defined by her male adversaries eclipses all else. If this offers an encouraging break from the Kydian tradition's otherwise dismal pattern of enlisting theatricality to objectify women and impose a masculinist reading upon them, that triumph is mitigated by the reminder that it comes at the expense of the legal system, one that is perverted by the play's revengers through their bias and zeal to see her punished.

Generally, however, the play tends to rely only upon the most utilitarian example of the genre's theatricality—disguise. In a curious echo of Hamlet's antic disposition, the murderer and pander Flamineo opts to "feign a mad humor for the disgrace of my sister, and that will keep off idle questions" (III.ii.310-1), but he employs it for little more than a few scenes, and by the next act, his stratagem is completely forgotten. The more pronounced instances of disguise are those costumes employed by the revengers to gain access to Bracciano's estate in Padua during his wedding celebration: the duke Francisco masquerades as a moor, while Lodovico and his accomplices dress as Capuchin friars. This last façade is particularly problematic, for it allows the revengers to murder Bracciano—after he is already dying in agony from a poison they applied to his helmet—under the guise of giving him his last rites. Utilizing a crucifix and intoning

Latinate prayers, these assassins modify the traditional masque into a blasphemous parody of a religious sacrament designed to save the human soul.¹¹ Instead, once alone these false friars happily promise their victim “Thou art damned...for thou / Art given up to the devil” (V.iii.154-6). Though this ploy certainly gives the characters opportunity to isolate and eliminate their quarry as their Elizabethan precursors have done, the particulars of this theatricality also undermine the justice of the revenge through the problematic irony it evokes. Robert Ornstein can only conclude, therefore, “that Webster is not very interested in the motives or the moral natural of his revenger (Lodovico) in *The White Devil*,”¹² and in this trait, he distinguishes his revenge play from the Kydian tradition that anticipates it.

As this inversion suggests, Webster’s play provides much greater emphasis upon the tragic fall of the treacherous lovers and their accomplice, rather than the avengers who silence them, and in their dying speeches, Vittoria and Flamineo in particular contextualize their tragedies against the societal ills of female reputation and aristocratic service that lead them down their paths. Having throughout the play bitterly remembered “I visited the court, whence I returned, / More courteous, more lecherous by far, / But not a suit the richer” (I.ii.325-7), as he dies the pander warns, “Let all that belong to great men remember th’old wives’ tradition, to be like the lions i’th’Tower on Candlemas Day, to mourn if the sun shine, for fear of the pitiful remainder of winter to come” (V.vi.266-9). Ever more direct than her brother, Vittoria simply notes, “Oh, happy they that never saw the court, / Nor ever knew great man but by report!” (V.vi.262-3). By setting their personal fates against the backdrop of the courtly setting in which they moved, “Webster’s satirical tragedy looks beyond individuals to the society that has shaped

them.”¹³ In so doing, the play deflects attention away from the characters’ culpability to a certain degree, and creates an interesting inversion of the relationship suggested in most Elizabethan revenge tragedies. Hamlet may complain that Denmark is an unweeded garden and note the dram of evil that corrupts the human soul, but he does not link them causally. If anything, the villain-nobles are seen as the fonts from which the corruption of their court springs. Here, however, the play’s “villains” gesture toward the social apparatuses that compelled them toward their villainy, reversing the chain of causality much like Lever observes that Webster reverses the current of sympathy in his play. Thus, while David Bevington may be correct when he claims “today it [*The White Devil*] takes its place as one of the truly great revenge tragedies of the early modern theater,”¹⁴ we must also recognize it as a decidedly Jacobean iteration.

Beaumont and Fletcher’s *The Maid’s Tragedy* actually antedates *The White Devil* by a year or two, but it shares more in common with subsequent instances of the revenge tradition in its drastic reduction in theatricality and emphasis on broader woes beyond any one character. In some respects it actually begins as an anti-revenge play, for a consistent theme in the opening acts is not revenge itself, but rather the divine right of kings that would prevent such a regicide. The cuckolded husband Amintor does actually get to the point where he threatens his sovereign, insisting, “For I shall be apt to thrust this arm of mine / To acts unlawful” but soon admits, “there is / Divinity about you that strikes dead / My rising passions. As you are my king, / I fall before you and present my sword / To cut mine own flesh, if it be your will” (3.1.165-6, 251-5)¹⁵. As it turns out, though, Amintor is not the play’s revenger, and once his friend Melantius convinces his sister Evadne that her affair with the king is wrong, Evadne agrees to assassinate the

monarch. Typical of the Jacobean revenge play, however, the dramatic focus does not remain on Evadne for long. Having killed the king, she is rejected by her husband as a regicide, but this conflict is soon overridden by a clash between Amintor and his former lover Aspathia in disguise, which is itself interrupted by Evadne's return and suicide. As all this transpires, the soldier Melantius hides within a fort and negotiates his surrender with the king's brother. Clearly the play's focus is particularly fragmented in these final scenes as various characters confront others in the name of revenge and prevent any easy delineation of right and wrong. Indeed, as Bevington suggests,

To ask who is the tragic hero or heroine of *The Maid's Tragedy* is to realize, despite the play's title and its seeming reference to Aspathia, that the play is no less concerned with the tragic dilemmas of Evadne, Amintor, Melantius, and perhaps also the King. The court itself is perhaps the most plausible tragic protagonist in that the outcome seems dictated...by the conflicts inherent in a society that idealizes its own neochivalric fantasies and attempts, however fitfully and unsuccessfully, to live by them.¹⁶

Once again, the plurality of claims to personal victimization suggest a broader dynamic that supercedes the personal grievances of the individual and implies a concern for the play's flawed social apparatus, what Bevington here identifies as the attempt to follow "neochivalric fantasies." Largely bereft of theatricality and clearly evincing the Jacobean focus upon the state, little remains in this revenge play that resembles the Kydian tradition.

Each play that follows in the English revenge tradition evinces some variety of those deviations seen in *The White Devil* and *The Maid's Tragedy*, their particulars determined by the individual projects of their playwrights but never again capturing the individual focus of the Elizabethan type, despite the decades that still remained to do so. Indeed, the early modern revenge play persisted right up until the Parliamentary closure

of the theaters in 1642, ending with James Shirley's *The Cardinal* (1641). In it, "Shirley turned to the past and contented himself with rearranging in an energetic and efficient fashion the best of the older drama's incidents and characters," but "was more concerned with brisk, sharply outlined plots than with ethical conceptions of character and justice."¹⁷ It is in this regard reminiscent of *The White Devil*, at least in so much that it bears conspicuous conventions of the Elizabethan revenge play but without that earlier type's emphasis upon the revenger's considerable plight. Certainly, the genre's traditional theatricality sees a resurgence here, though not with the same thematic import of its Kydian antecedents. The revenger Hernando, for instance, returns in disguise after one murder to see another done, but is quickly recognized by the Secretary regardless, suggesting a consistency of character that supercedes deception and belies the transformative uses such disguise sees in Elizabethan revenge plays. In another instance, the soldier Colombo inserts a masque into the wedding festivities of his rival Alvarez and former betrothed Rosaura, pulling the unfortunate bridegroom offstage before then depositing his corpse before the guests dressed as a fellow masquer. This revenger, however, hopes to live after his crime is committed, and thus unlike similar instances in *The Spanish Tragedy* or *The Revenger's Tragedy*, the performative nature of the murder—a facet principally intended to provide merely a fleeting opportunity for revenge—actually betrays the culprit: after Colombo's explanation of his cause's justice, the King retorts,

Has my
Indulgence to your merits, which are great,
Made me so cheap, your rage could meet no time
Nor place for your revenge, but where my eyes
Must be affrighted and affronted with
The bloody execution? This contempt

Of Majesty transcends my power to pardon,
And you shall feel my anger, sir.” (III.ii.208-15)¹⁸

The King eventually reneges on his vow and forgives Colombo, but the revenger's expectation to survive his quest persists throughout the play with other figures and other instances of theatricality. Rosaura, hoping to murder Colombo for his assassination of her love, opts for the familiar trope of an antic disposition. However, she does so not like a Hieronimo or Hamlet, who mean to deflect attention and bide time to consolidate their revenge, but rather because “The taking off examination / For great Colombo's death, it makes what act / I do, in that believed want of my reason, / Appear no crime, but my defence” (IV.iii.318-21). Once again, a would-be revenger hopes to survive their crime, and in so doing, evinces a stubborn refusal to recognize the full villainy of their actions and suggests a tacit belief that such depravity is acceptable amidst their social setting. This “business as usual” philosophy, combined with the fragmented, competing revenges, thematically situates this Carolinean play alongside the Jacobean tradition of revenge and reminds that even a deliberate effort to emulate the Kydian type could not overcome the pronounced dramaturgical shift engendered decades before in the London theaters.

This is not to suggest, of course, that Jacobean tragedy is without its rich characters or its theatrical and metadramatic complexities, nor that a greater scrutiny upon the social apparatus in which its characters move does not produce profound results. Yet the fact remains that the era's increasingly pessimistic acceptance of revenge as an inevitable human response ironically stripped the drama of the human experience that made the Kydian tradition what it was. More than its staples of madness, delay, even its theatricality, the Elizabethan revenge play was ultimately about the individual struggle of a subject to reconcile competing urges within himself and the resultant metamorphosis

that tension demanded. That subject's hostile relationship with the state was certainly a component, but when that part grew to become the focus after the Jacobean turn, the heart of the Kydian revenge tragedy was forever gone. Like so much else, it was a product of its time, and once the unique conditions that gave birth to the Renaissance English revenge play changed with the increasing skepticism and pessimism of the Jacobean stage, the original tradition that began with *The Spanish Tragedy* and reached its greatest heights in *Hamlet* ultimately had to end. Like the great avengers who inhabit these plays, the genre itself could not survive.

Endnotes

¹ This is not to say that Vindice's character lacks the transformative qualities endemic of his predecessors, but rather that it is of a decidedly different nature. Where the traditional Kydian revenger moves from innocence and impotence toward an empowered, if more villainous, agency, Vindice's trajectory evinces a curious movement from isolation toward a more collective membership in his unnamed court: assassinating the Duke with only his brother in the play's third Act, by the final scene of the play he is merely a chief coconspirator in a group that includes some "five hundred gentlemen" (V.ii.28). Thereby avoiding issues of shifting morality—a subject he broods upon for all but himself—Middleton's protagonist thus also resembles the villain revengers who will increasingly populate the Jacobean stage and serves as bridge between them and his great Elizabethan antecedents Hieronimo and Hamlet.

² Johnathan Dollimore, *Radical Tragedy* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 149.

³ Fredson Bowers, *Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1940), 154-5.

⁴ Robert Ornstein, *The Moral Vision of Jacobean Tragedy* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1960), 22.

⁵ Bowers, 157.

⁶ Dollimore, 153.

⁷ J. W. Lever, *The Tragedy of State* (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd, 1971), 12.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 81.

⁹ David Bevington, introduction to *The White Devil*, by John Webster, in *English Renaissance Drama* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2002), 1661.

¹⁰ John Webster, *The White Devil*, in *English Renaissance Drama: A Norton Anthology*, ed. David Bevington, 1664-1745 (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2002). All subsequent quotation of this play is from this edition.

¹¹ It must be noted that as this is a Catholic ritual, a London audience's aversion to the revenger's appropriation of it may have been mitigated somewhat. However, Webster (unlike some of his contemporaries) refuses to indulge in a facile vilification of all things Catholic; the highest ranking clergyman in the play, Monticelso, eventually turns from his vengeance and preaches against revenge. Thus, the assassins' "last rite" most likely had an ambivalent reception.

¹² Ornstein, 22.

¹³ Lever, 86.

¹⁴ Bevington, 1659.

¹⁵ Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher, *The Maid's Tragedy*, in *English Renaissance Drama: A Norton Anthology*, ed. David Bevington, 1147-1212 (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2002). All subsequent quotation of this play is from this edition.

¹⁶ David Bevington, introduction to *The Maid's Tragedy*, by Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher, in *English Renaissance Drama* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2002), 1146.

¹⁷ Bowers, 217.

¹⁸ James Shirley, *The Cardinal*, ed. E.M. Yearling (Dover, NH: Manchester University Press, 1987). All subsequent quotation of this play is from this edition.

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