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Article abstract

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# “The Very Ragged Bone”: Dismantling Masculinity in Thomas Middleton’s *The Revenger’s Tragedy*

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*Les lecteurs de The Revenger’s Tragedy soulignent souvent comment Middleton imite Hamlet, surtout par son usage de la parodie. Toutefois, ces remarques oublient de noter que Middleton ne fait pas que l’imiter, mais qu’il le critique également. Cette critique consiste entre autre en un examen détaillé du modèle du mâle vengeur tel que présenté par Shakespeare. Simultanément, en se concentrant sur le modèle de chasteté féminine, Middleton développe plus avant la tragédie de la vengeance initiée dans la première pièce. Middleton démantèle en effet le fantôme masculin et son protagoniste, le mâle vengeur, et les remplace par le memento mori en lui donnant un caractère décidément féminin.*

In the opening scene of Thomas Middleton’s *The Revenger’s Tragedy*,<sup>1</sup> Vindice enters, according to the stage directions, “holding a skull.” Behind him we see “four ex’lent characters” who “pass over the stage with torchlight” (1.1.s.d., 5).<sup>2</sup> Skull in hand, Vindice excoriates the characters who pass behind him: the lecherous Duke, his Duchess, and his loathsome sons. Having dispensed with the characters in stage-director fashion,<sup>3</sup> Vindice turns to the skull itself, referring to it as the

Sallow picture of my poison’d love,  
My study’s ornament, thou shell of death,  
Once the bright face of my betrothed lady,  
When life and beauty naturally fill’d out  
These ragged imperfections. (1.1.14–18)

Finally, he calls upon Vengeance, asking “who e’er knew/Murder unpaid?” (1.1.39–43).

The answer to this question is, of course, no one—at least no one in the audience in 1607, all of whom would immediately recognize this play’s resemblance to *Hamlet*. As Stephen Mullaney has pointed out, “the play opens . . . in the graveyard scene of *Hamlet*: a long-delayed revenger stands on-stage, musing on mortality and his own grief, a skull in his hand.”<sup>4</sup> While the skull is the most obvious imitative device here, this scene also recalls *Hamlet* in its reference to “painted ladies” and in Vindice’s reminder that, in spite of “banquets, ease and laughter” (1.1.45), we each must, inevitably, die. Like Hamlet, Vindice has a murdered father, and Hamlet’s famous delay is here extravagantly echoed by Vindice’s nine-year wait for revenge. Clearly, Middleton was familiar with Shakespeare’s Danish prince. But to what end? Was Middleton merely reworking conventions that were quickly becoming shopworn, or are his reworkings and allusions indicative of a deeper conviction about the meaning of revenge tragedy as a genre? I believe the answer lies in the latter possibility, but we must move beyond the view of *The Revenger’s Tragedy* as mere parody in order to understand the true implications of his revisions.<sup>5</sup> My chief point is that the character of Hamlet was understood by Shakespeare’s contemporaries to be much less heroic and more problematic than we have so far imagined. That is to say, while we postmoderns assert that gender subtexts and metatheatrical elements reveal a Hamlet less straightforwardly heroic than as figured by the Romantics, we remain ignorant of the fact that Shakespeare’s own contemporaries seem to have shared our less romantic, or Romantic, view of the revenger. *The Revenger’s Tragedy* makes this clear.

While a number of critics have noted the prominence of irony and parody in Middleton’s play, less attention has been given to the question of why Middleton chose to invoke *Hamlet* in the first place, or why he chose to emphasize certain features of his inherited genre, or what, if anything, these particular changes and emphases might mean. In general, the play is read in light of *Hamlet*, and in the most prominent studies it is cited as an example of post-Shakespearean decadence.<sup>6</sup> It is, of course, true that by 1607 *Hamlet* had permanently and irrevocably changed the revenge tragedy genre. However, rather than aimlessly recycling plots and motifs, playwrights writing post-Shakespearean revenge tragedies seem to be remarkably canny about the changes Shakespeare made, recognizing not only significant generic shifts in Shakespeare’s revenge plays, but his creation of a different kind of revenger. Hamlet is of course the best known: a revenger who thinks more than he acts, and who ponders the

very nature of being, the relationship between mind and body, the futility of war. When we consider *Hamlet* as a revenge tragedy that is in conversation with both previous and subsequent revenge tragedies, it becomes quite clear that Middleton’s play is less parody or imitation than it is meditation on revenge, subjectivity, and, perhaps, the genre itself.

To make my argument, I need first to address the key changes Middleton makes to the template of revenge tragedy in general, and to the elements he borrows from Shakespeare in particular. Literary genres, particularly highly commercial ones like revenge tragedy, often demonstrate their meaning better when we attend to intertextuality, and when we entertain the notion that genres *think*. Critics of genre studies often object that such studies can lack depth,<sup>7</sup> and while this is sometimes true, it need not always be the case. Used well, genre can become, as Adena Rosmarin argues, “our most reasoned way of talking about and valuing a literary text.”<sup>8</sup> Given the popular nature of Elizabethan and Jacobean revenge tragedies, and the relatively short time span in which they were produced, they lend themselves particularly well to this type of analysis. Indeed, much of the meaning of these plays is lost or distorted if we fail to read them carefully in light of one another. In the case of *The Revenger’s Tragedy*, simply noting that Middleton appears to imitate or even parody *Hamlet* is not enough.

While the opening scene does recall *Hamlet*’s graveyard scene, it is also immediately clear that Vindice is not a simple replication or imitation of Hamlet or any other tragic revenger. Instead, he is ironic and playful; indeed, Richard Brucher argues that the difference between *Hamlet* and *The Revenger’s Tragedy* lies in the latter play’s “comic violence.”<sup>9</sup> The main character in this play is named Revenge, and the very title invites a sense of play: does Middleton mean that this is a tragedy enacted by Revenge, or is tragedy Revenge’s fate? (By the end, both could be said to be true.) While Hamlet agonizes over his revenge plot, Vindice gleefully embraces the role of revenger, extending the Duke’s death and marking the torture with jokes about mouths and tongues. Like Hamlet, Vindice finds it crucial to “match the word to the action, the action to the word” in his theatre of revenge, taking devilish glee in aligning crime and punishment for his victims. Unlike Hamlet, Vindice is joyous about costume; unlike Kyd’s Heironimo, who chews out his tongue rather than speak, Vindice cannot keep still (his revenge plot is not unmasked, after all, by a crafty team of Jacobean detectives, but by his own prattling tongue). Vindice ends his final

speech by referring not to his Dukedom, or even to Gloriana, but to his mother and sister: “We’re well,” he says, a claim that would seem to be contradicted by his immediate circumstances, as he is about to be borne off to jail, but which he supports with the argument that “our mother [is] turn’d, our sister true” (5.3.125). Vindice’s emphasis on female chastity, here and throughout the play, both amplifies and alters Ophelia’s role in Hamlet’s drama. Vindice saves both mother and sister from the fate suffered by Gertrude and Ophelia.

The key to understanding these differences lies in the opening scene of *The Revenger’s Tragedy*, and in one important, but often overlooked, change from previous revenge tragedies: the shift from ghost to skull. For while Middleton’s play reenacts many of the same features as other revenge tragedies, including the cyclical, spiralling nature of revenge, it eschews many of the features Kyd’s *Spanish Tragedy* had made commonplace, including the ghost who desires revenge. This replacement of the ghost is the most important and telling change that Middleton makes to the genre. Indeed, the figure of the ghost disappears from revenge tragedy after this point. Instead, Vindice himself replaces the ghost, recalling and economizing not only the ghost of Hamlet’s father, but the role of the ghost set forth by Kyd in *The Spanish Tragedy*.

We know, of course, that Kyd’s play was enormously popular and performed well beyond its initial performance date of 1592. It is not surprising, then, that it continued to exercise its influence over both Shakespeare and Middleton. And yet, Kyd’s ghost, paired with the allegorical figure of revenge, is quite problematic. For while it is clear that Andrea *desires* revenge, it is never made clear why he is *entitled* to revenge. Opening with a frame narrative featuring the figures of the Ghost of Andrea and Revenge, the play treats us to a discourse about where Andrea ought to spend eternity. As a lover and a fighter, both the fields of love and the martial fields are open to him. Sent to Pluto’s court for a final decision, Andrea is waylaid by Proserpine, who calls, unexpectedly, upon Revenge. The opposition between two equally salutary afterlife options and a morbid concern with the life left behind is thus immediately drawn in Kyd’s play. The Ghost here allows himself to be drawn away from his destination by Revenge, whose motives are obscure. He promises that “the author” (1.1.87) of Andrea’s death will receive retribution, while he and Andrea “serve for a Chorus in this tragedy” (1.2.91). In Kyd’s original formulation, then, neither the ghost nor Revenge enter the world of the play. Instead, they provide a

point of identification for the audience and a context for the action. At the end of the play, Revenge will exhort Andrea’s ghost to hurry towards his reward:

Then haste we down to meet thy friends and foes:  
 To place thy friends at ease, the rest in woes,  
 For here, though death hath end their misery,  
 I’ll there begin their endless tragedy. (4.5.45–48)

Andrea’s ghost, coupled with Revenge, seems to exist as a malignant, but powerful force beyond the reach of the characters of the play, impinging on their lives in ways they cannot know. Kyd works to establish a separation between this world and the next, and yet Andrea acts as commentator and audience for the play at hand, asking in the final scene to take part in the tortures that await his enemies. Death itself becomes motive enough for revenge: the dead require death, Kyd suggests, and revenge, the driving force of the plot of the play, originates in the chaos and uncertainty of death. This uncertainty unleashes a drive to find a suitable revenger, and one is finally revealed in Hieronimo—for what is more worthy of revenge than the death of a child?

The replacement of Andrea with Hieronimo creates an interpretive dilemma. If Andrea is essentially passive, his death setting the revenge plot in motion but not, finally, the emotional centre of the play, what is the significance of the ghost? For Charles and Elaine Hallett the ghost is, in the Kydian formulation,

the spirit of revenge—nearly, at times, as its allegorical representation. As the embodiment of the impulse for revenge, its demands are unambiguous, immoderate, and recognize no obligations in the direction of mercy or forgiveness. Its voice is the voice of passion. The effect on the revenger is to bolster his perceptions and transform his relations with the other characters.<sup>10</sup>

The problem with this formulation, in my opinion, is that in *The Spanish Tragedy* Andrea is clearly not the allegorical representation of revenge—*Revenge* is the allegorical representation of revenge. And while it may be tempting to see Andrea and Revenge “essentially as a unit,”<sup>11</sup> too much of the separate nature of these characters is elided in this argument. This ghost offers no incitement to revenge, or obligation to remember, as Hamlet’s ghost will; instead, he seems

simply to symbolize the relationship between a dead (disembodied) male and the subsequent requirement for revenge.

I argue, therefore, that it is probably more useful to think of Andrea as the allegory of *Loss*, whose absence must be remedied by an act of remembrance. In *The Spanish Tragedy*, the clearest act of remembrance is, instead, taken over by Hieronimo, whose son's body, as John Kerrigan points out, becomes a kind of "surrogate ghost to whet his purpose should it ever blunt."<sup>12</sup> Andrea obliquely figures this loss: insatiable, unfillable, and implacable. Thus Andrea's presence establishes, first of all, a division between soul and body; indeed, the play opens with Andrea's remembrance of a time "when this eternal substance of my soul/ Did live imprisoned in my wanton flesh, /each in their function serving the other's need" (1.1.1–3). According to Andrea, and perhaps to Kyd, the need for the disembodied is to be remembered in the living world. This "remembering," oddly, takes the form of a kind of "dismembering": tearing another soul from another body as the means of placating the ghost. In its exploration of the question of who is a suitable revenger, *The Spanish Tragedy* creates a correlation between memorial and revenge.

*Hamlet* takes up this correlation, bringing the ghost on to the stage as, at various times, a figure of loss, of madness, of memorial, of agnostic doubt. Hamlet becomes the embodiment of Revenge the moment the ghost appears: it is the first meaning he ascribes to it, when he cries out, "O my prophetic soul! My uncle!" (1.5.46). Shakespeare initially updates Kyd's ghost, drawing out the possibilities latent in Kyd's plot. He eliminates the frame narrative, and, initially at least, dispenses with any exposition about the ghost's origins. Dressed in "the very armor he had on/when he the ambitious Norway combated" (1.1.60–61), the ghost initially resembles Andrea, the soldier. While not a mere invocation of genre, the ghost is, nonetheless, a reminder of the play's origins. Shakespeare, however, uses the ghost's command to "remember" in direct counterpoint to another kind of remembrance: the invocation of Yorick's skull, as *memento mori*, to "remember you will die." Within this textual space between the ghost and the skull, Shakespeare uses revenge tragedy to reconfigure revenge as, essentially, an act of mourning: Hieronimo's revenge of Horatio becomes Hamlet's revenge of Hamlet, witnessed, appropriately, by Horatio—another Kydian ghost. In the beginning, the ghost, and Horatio's observance and description of him, serve as a locus for Hamlet's loss, and a powerful impetus to amend that loss through revenge. By the end, however, though Hamlet is now dedicated

to act, the skull serves as a reminder of his own inevitable end. His revenge is “dull,” and Horatio will struggle at the end of the play to render it as compelling narrative.

Within the long delay, the space between the ghost and the skull, Hamlet famously reflects on the place of man in the cosmos, and on whether or not he really does have “that within that passeth show,” as he claims. This delay, of course, is what marks *Hamlet’s* difference from other revenge tragedies: the cycle is stilled so that he may ponder. James Calderwood has even gone so far as to propose the question, albeit somewhat facetiously, of whether “the middle of the play itself [is] irrelevant to the overall dramatic structure of the play.”<sup>13</sup> It is not, of course, but what emerges within the space Shakespeare creates is something unexpected: Ophelia and her own story of loss. Initially in *Hamlet*, the binary opposition between presence and absence centres on the ghost and Hamlet, the disembodied male asking for remembrance, through violence, by the still-embodied son. Eventually, though, this binary shifts onto the bodies of women. Like Hamlet, Ophelia “seems” to have an interior self that is inaccessible; unlike Hamlet, she seems unaware of, or unconcerned, by this fact. It is her descent into madness that allows her to speak the truth, the “nothing” that is “more than matter,” as Laertes says. Her suicide speaks volumes about her life, yet we are not allowed to witness her death. In a curious way, Ophelia comes to embody the play’s language: Hamlet’s desired suicide becomes her own, her own noble mind is overthrown. Eventually, it is she who becomes “nought.” As a mirror to Hamlet, Ophelia expresses the grief that he cannot. When Hamlet accuses Ophelia of whorishness, conflating nunneries and brothels, he creates, as Kay Stanton has pointed out, not “two choices: virgin or whore” for Ophelia, but one, as “the second position on women doubles back into the first,” so that a woman ultimately “cannot escape the ‘calumny’ that will brand her a whore: all women are thus whore, either by action or by slander.”<sup>14</sup> In doing so, he greatly complicates his ability to differentiate Ophelia’s body and her interior self. In fact, he demonstrates that her interior is inaccessible to him. She remains a cipher, for Hamlet *and* for the audience, until her death, which we learn of only through Gertrude’s narration. By the end, she is merely words, delivered through the voice of another: just another poisoning through the ear. She is totally, and irrevocably, absent. And out of her absence, Hamlet acts. Surprised into anger by her death, Hamlet finally initiates the inevitable revenge tragedy conclusion.



The importance of Ophelia to *Hamlet*, while not overlooked, has, perhaps, been insufficiently understood. And yet its impact is clearly evident in Middleton's play. That is, the play seems to investigate the kind of inward subjectivity offered by Hamlet in order to highlight a worldview presented obliquely in *Hamlet*: the worldview of women who have been commodified, objectified, and victimized. Shakespeare does not simply transcend the revenge genre with his version of revenge tragedy—he changes it, in fact, he *genders* it. Unlike his predecessors, Shakespeare includes a woman who is silenced, maddened, and then drowned before Gertrude's amazed but apparently unalarmed eyes. Her silence, and Gertrude's complicity and failure, speak volumes against the self-aggrandizement of revenge itself, and of a world where women are bought, sold, dismembered, buried, worshipped, and eulogized—but where they never really speak for themselves.

It is this world that Vindice evokes when he walks on stage holding Gloriana's skull. This initial tableau does more than merely recall *Hamlet's* graveyard scene, it discards, once and for all, the ghost as the impetus for revenge in revenge tragedy. In *Hamlet*, a disembodied male ghost cries out for remembrance through revenge—as the “old mole” reminds Hamlet from below the stage, he must “Remember.” In Middleton's play, on the other hand, the mandate to remember the dead is given material form through an object that, with brilliant economy, recalls all of Hamlet's soliloquies on death, dying, dissolving flesh, and women who paint an inch thick only to become skulls in their graves. Initially, Gloriana's skull is Yorick's skull; Vindice, who, as Hippolito says is “still sighing o'er death's Vizard” is a figure of Hamlet, a Hamlet frozen in time for nine years until this play can begin. But by placing the skull in Vindice's hands at the beginning of this drama, Middleton makes a crucial generic change: this is not just any skull, but the skull, so Vindice says, of a dead woman. And he is going to dress this skull up to perform revenge, using it as a tool to punish Gloriana's murderer. While Charles and Elaine Hallett have argued that “ghosts and skeletons are not so far apart”<sup>15</sup> and that “the skull can serve much the same purpose as did the earlier ghost,”<sup>16</sup> I would argue that the two are, in the logic of revenge, polar opposites, and that the presence of Gloriana's skull here marks the beginning of a drama that interrogates Hamlet's claim to have that within that passes show; indeed, to there being anything beyond the body in the world of revenge.

Vindice’s parody of Hamlet in the first scene is developed as the play progresses, resulting in an extended meditation on the role of character and identity in dramatic performance. Scott McMillin argues that “*The Revenger’s Tragedy* does exactly what *Hamlet* does not do—it turns in upon the theater” (290),<sup>17</sup> and while it is possible that McMillin does not give enough credit to *Hamlet*’s metatheatricality, it is nonetheless true that *The Revenger’s Tragedy* amplifies what we see in *Hamlet* as the titular character’s self-consciousness about *being* a character, turning it into one of the central foci of *The Revenger’s Tragedy*. The oft-cited example of the play’s awareness of its own theatricality is Vindice’s ability to make thunder sound: when Vindice asks of heaven, “is there no thunder left, or is’t kept up/In stock for heavier vengeance?” (198–208) his words, which already refer to the “stock” sound of thunder, possibly reserved for “heavier,” or more important tragedies, are followed by the stage directions “thunder sounds.” As Jonathon Dollimore has rightly pointed out, “here the traditional invocation to heaven becomes a kind of public stage-prompt,” and Middleton “makes Vindice the agent of the parody, investing him with a theatrical sense resembling the dramatist’s own.”<sup>18</sup> However, it is also true that metatheatrical references suffuse this play. The theme of disguise, and particularly Vindice’s disguise as the bawd, Piato, is used throughout the play to signal an economy of surface identity. When Piato has outlived his usefulness, Vindice is called upon to kill “himself.” Here, Vindice obviously delights in doing away with his former self, and ridding the world of the vile Piato, remarking

That’s a good lay, for I must kill myself. Brother, that’s I, that sits for, do you mark it? And I must stand ready here to make away myself yonder—I must sit to be killed, and stand to kill myself. I could vary it not so little as thrice go over again... (5.1.3–6)

Vindice’s substitution of the Duke’s already dead body for Piato’s seems particularly apt, as it recalls his earlier lines, “my life’s unnatural to me, e’en compell’d/As if I lived now when I should be dead” (1.2.119–220), as well as the notion, evident elsewhere, that the body is a mere agent for disguise. It also makes sense, then, that at the end of the play Vindice recalls his alter-ego in a strange moment of seeming disassociation:

Now I remember too, here was Piato  
 Brought forth a knavish sentence once.  
 No doubt said he, but time  
 Will make the murderer bring forth himself.  
 'Tis well he died; he was a witch. (5.3.115–19)

While Vindice's reference to Piato in the third person conflicts with his earlier description of Piato as "myself," this fact merely underscores Vindice's own awareness that Piato was a role, discarded as dead matter when the role was no longer useful to him. The "character" of Piato thus paradoxically establishes Vindice's own apparent sense of having a core identity, one that differs from the disguise he dons.

In this way, Vindice's sense of character resembles Hamlet's; when Vindice unveils himself to the Duke, crying "'Tis I, 'tis Vindice, 'tis I" (3.5.166), he seems to be revealing a prior, truer identity to both the Duke and the audience, something that passes show. But the revelation itself is a deception, the core identity, at least in name, a stock figure from morality plays. Since L.G. Salinger first took note of the play's associations with the morality play tradition,<sup>19</sup> it has become a critical commonplace to note not only that Vindice's name means "revenge," but that "Vindice's individuated role as revenge hero is contradicted by the allegorical nature of his name" and that the play as a whole is "informed by the universality of ritual, the externality of farce and the symbolic thinking of the medieval Morality Play."<sup>20</sup> That Middleton is, in fact, toying with the notion of character is evident from the beginning. However, like the morality play characters he resembles, he is at once generic and individualized.<sup>21</sup> Vindice's quest for revenge, while highly stylized, is not without poignancy; his quest for purity in an impure world is at once ludicrous and moving.

Shakespeare's gendered revenge tragedy world is evoked in *The Revenger's Tragedy* with a distinctively Jacobean flavour: the world of marketplace economy, seen vividly in Middleton's comedies *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* and *Women Beware Women*, is here allied with the sexual economy that undergirds the courtly world of *The Revenger's Tragedy*. The world that Vindice lives in is characterized by lechery and violence, male aggression run amok. Because she would not sleep with the Duke, Gloriana is poisoned. Having endured this tragedy, Vindice is hired nine years later to act as the Duke's bawd, only to be charged with having a hand in the seduction of his own sister. Spurio, eager to

revenge his own bastardy, “a vengeance my birth was wrapp’d in,” is willing to sleep with the Duke’s wife, and “call foul incest but a venial sin” (1.2.167–169). Meanwhile, the Duchess’ idiotic son Junior Brother has raped a woman who subsequently committed suicide, and his brothers, Lussurio and Ambitoso, vie for power and ensure the execution of their remarkably stupid rapist brother.

It is from this world that Vindice seeks to protect his sister and mother, and this world in which the theme of disguise, so joyously and lightheartedly treated by Vindice, gets mapped onto women with disastrous consequences. The subplot begins when Vindice is asked by Lussurio to convince Castiza to become Lussurio’s mistress. Vindice, though appalled at the thought, vows that he will “forget my nature, /As if no part of me were kin to ’em” (1.3.180–181) and act as “some slave, that would have wrought effectually” (1.3.176). To his horror, Vindice performs his role so well that his mother actually succumbs to his bribes, citing female weakness as her excuse:

It is too strong for me, men know that in us,  
 We are so weak their words can overthrow us,  
 He touch’d me nearly, made my virtues bate  
 When his tongue struck upon my poor estate. (2.1.105–108)

Taken in by promises of wealth, Gratiana too easily decides to pander her own daughter, a move that might initially seem more comic than serious. This scene, in fact, parodies the power of playing, as Vindice is such a good actor he achieves all that he desires. On a deeper level, however, the scene highlights the seriousness of Vindice’s divided self, presenting him with consequences that cause him to want “e’en at this instance turn the precious side of both mine eyeballs inward, not to see myself!”(2.1.105–108). It is also important to note that at this moment, Vindice resembles not Hamlet, but Gertrude, and that while the scene plays on jokes about feminine weakness it is actually Vindice, Revenge himself, who is rendered feminine through this reference to *Hamlet*. Vindice’s words, however, state the reverse case of Gertrude’s, as Vindice here desires *not* to see himself, while Gertrude, her eyes turned inward, does see herself and is appalled. Vindice’s divided self, then, is different from Hamlet, different, even, from Gertrude; in this statement he validates a self that is outward rather than inward, a self that depends on artifice and acting to exist. Because he has lost himself in his disguise, Vindice’s sister is now in the same

peril that Gloriana was, and by insisting on revenge Vindice increases her danger. This scene also presents a theme of infection, as Gratiana is “touch’d” by the disease inherent in Vindice’s disguise. Castiza highlights the notion that disguise itself can be a kind of disease when she begs for her “real” mother to return: “I cry you mercy lady, I mistook you. /Pray, did you see my mother? Which way went she?”(2.1.156–157). Castiza’s words echo those of Ophelia to Hamlet, again underscoring the connection between the two plays. Because of Vindice’s words, Gratiana has turned, literally, into another person. His own joyous “forgetting” of the self is figured here as the horror which he must undo.

But it is not until Vindice achieves his revenge against the Duke that his world begins to unravel. When he dresses the skull so that the Duke will mistake her for a woman, kissing her and then succumbing to the poison on her lips, Vindice resembles no one so much as an early modern playwright, dressing up a non-existent female body to take part in the action onstage. Vindice himself describes his action here by saying that the skull is not “fashion’d . . . only for show and useless property”(3.5.99–100), his very words—show, property, fashion—calling attention to the farce of female agency in early modern plays. The woman here is an androgynous skull, held like a puppet by a man, wearing a female costume to revenge its own death—speechless, mute, and indifferent to its fate. It is easy to read this scene, and indeed this play, as the epitome of early modern misogyny; after all, as Stephen Mullaney points out, here Gloriana is turned into the very thing she dies not to be; as he puts it, “the only good woman may be a dead woman in *Hamlet*, but *The Revenger’s Tragedy* does not even offer this posthumous recovery.”<sup>22</sup>

However, it is also true that this moment, which is the culmination of Vindice’s revenge plot, is also the beginning, quite literally, of Revenge’s own death. An awareness of Vindice’s slippery, self-conscious masculine persona helps account for the play’s final scene. Here we are presented with an unusual situation in the revenge tragedies: a living revenger, whose sudden and seemingly inexplicable confession displaces the conventional eulogy over a tableau of dead bodies the audience must have expected at this point. Most revengers are safely dead at play’s end; if they’re lucky, perhaps a Horatio still abides to provide a eulogy. Here, however, the living revenger supplants any narrated version of previous events. Having bid “adieu” to the audience, Vindice and his brother are escorted off stage, and since the story is told, Antonio need only clear up a few dead bodies. His three line summation is a mere shadow

of the much more elaborate speeches in other revenge tragedies: "How subtly was that murder clos'd! Bear up/Those tragic bodies; 'tis a heavy season. / Pray heaven their blood will wash away their treason" (5.3.127–129). Vindice's closing words, that "this murder might have slept in tongueless brass, /But for ourselves, and the world died an ass" (5.3.113–114) tells the true story, and provides a fitting end.

But why does Vindice speak at all? He succumbs, apparently, to the irresistible desire to publicize his crimes. He clearly speaks, not out of a sense of guilt or remorse, but out of a sense of pride in his plotting. When Antonio remarks that the Duke's murder "was the strangliest carried, I not heard of the like," Vindice seems compelled to take credit for an act he describes as both "wittily carried" and "well-managed" (5.3.93, 96, 98). Rather than biting out his tongue as Hieronimo does, Vindice gives it free reign, ensuring his own doom in the process. Vindice's confession epitomizes Middleton's version of dramatic self-consciousness. Though Vindice initially shows surprise about his arrest, he nonetheless becomes, quite quickly, resigned to his fate, arguing to Hippolito that their deaths are reasonable:

May we not set as well as the Duke's son?  
 Thou hast no conscience; are we not reveng'd?  
 Is there one enemy let alive amongst those?  
 'Tis time to die when we are ourselves our foes.  
 When murder'rs shut deeds close this curse does seal 'em:  
 If none disclose 'em they themselves reveal 'em. (5.3.107–112)

Vindice's remarks reveal his own awareness of how useless he now is, that to have outlived his revenge is ludicrous, even monstrous. He and his brother must die out of narrative necessity. Revengers, after all, cannot continue into the future of the playworld, as they are only necessary when that world is corrupt and in need of purification. Vindice's death is thus mandated not only by the ethical problems of revenge but, perhaps primarily, by his status as a character in a narrative that has now run its course.<sup>23</sup> Like Hamlet, Vindice is quite self-aware—he does not lack inwardness. But his consciousness is that of a character who acknowledges himself as a construct: when the play ends, so must Vindice, for revenge has no role outside the play.

These two aspects of Vindice's character—the compulsion to speak and his self-awareness—help to explain the ending of the play. There is another layer to his confession, however, in one crucial, and often overlooked, line: "We're well, our mother turn'd, our sister true" (5.3.125). Here, Vindice ostensibly argues that he can leave because female chastity has been restored and protected; the dead Gloriana has been replaced by the living Castiza, and Vindice's family is intact. Gratiana, described at one point by Vindice as "that shell of a mother" in which "breed a bawd" (4.4.10), has been restored to her natural motherly role. Vindice's satisfaction, expressed in the phrase "we're well," reinforces the reading that Middleton is not merely poking fun at Hamlet, but levels a serious critique of the masculine revenge persona he exemplifies; Vindice "undoes himself" at the end of the play, ending up "as the leaky vessel he thought to distinguish himself from, dribbling away his secret, his carefully constructed maleness and life."<sup>24</sup> I would only differ from Mullaney in tone, as I am not at all certain that Middleton has Vindice "dribbling" here so much as joyfully imploding. It is true, though, that Vindice's constructed masculine persona deflates; it is also important to note the again often overlooked point that against his unravelling we are offered an image of female wholeness, albeit it one seen through Vindice's eyes. Mullaney offers a possible reading he himself is uncomfortable with, one in which "Middleton conceived this play with all its excesses not as yet another, and in many ways culminating, instance of stage misogyny, but as a critique and critical examination" of such misogyny.<sup>25</sup> The problem with such a reading, as Mullaney notes, is, of course, the overwhelming misogyny in the play. Vindice is consistently hateful towards women even as he seeks to protect them, muttering such asides as "*Wives are but made to go to bed and feed*" (1.2.132) and "Women are apt, you know, to take false money" (1.1.105). Numerous critics have echoed, in one way or another, Mullaney's quip that Vindice "can easily make Hamlet sound like a protofeminist."<sup>26</sup> The question here, however, is whether or not the play truly invites us to partake in Vindice's viewpoint as if it is our own; surely, even an early modern audience would have been attuned, by the end, to the ways Middleton deflates his central character. Furthermore, one need not paint Middleton himself as a proto-feminist to argue that, through his reworking of the genre, Middleton dismantles the male revenger—as such a charge is held up when we look at subsequent revenge tragedies. Moreover, there is a difference between making

a proto-feminist argument and making gender central to a genre’s argument, which is the argument I am making here.

To understand fully the play’s use of gender and dismantling of the male revenger, we must, finally, return to the play’s beginning. The initial tableau—Vindice holding Gloriana’s skull—marks a crucial turning point in the genre that often goes unnoticed. While critics have remarked upon the relationship between Yorick and Gloriana, the full import of the scene has not, in my opinion, been fully explored, and only can be fully explored in retrospect, once we’ve come to the end of the play. In recalling *Hamlet’s* graveyard scene, *The Revenger’s Tragedy* discards, once and for all, the disembodied male ghost seeking remembrance from a living male. Gloriana’s skull is, of course, reminiscent of Yorick’s, and Vindice’s address to the skull mimics “Hamlet’s rhetorical strategy, a string of unanswered and unanswerable question.”<sup>27</sup> Karin Coddon points out that “the skull is gendered only because we are told so; it obviously bears no visible mark of its own sex,”<sup>28</sup> highlighting its role as a prop for Vindice, who dresses up a non-existent female body for its role in the drama:

I have not fashion’d this only for show  
 And useless property, no it shall bear a part  
 E’en in its own revenge. This very skull  
 Whose mistress the Duke poison’d with this drug,  
 The mortal curse of the earth, shall be revenge’s  
 In the like strain and hiss his lips to death. (3.5.99–104)

It is important to notice here that Vindice’s words recall, first of all, Hamlet’s reference to his own mourning dress, which is also “not fashioned . . . only for show.” Moreover, in using the skull itself as the tool of revenge, Middleton, through Vindice, conflates the “remembering” that traditionally precipitates revenge with the “remembering” of the memento mori. In using Gloriana’s skull, both meanings are deployed at once. The ghost, so important in revenge tragedy up to this point, has been dispatched, never to return again.

Vindice, holding a dead woman’s skull that has no identity but the one he gives it, holds a mirror up to himself and the world around him; as Karen Coddon puts it, “if a corpse is a body without subjectivity, then Vindice is, on a certain level, ‘dead.’”<sup>29</sup> Like *Hamlet*, *The Revenger’s Tragedy* addresses the basic theatrical issue of imitation, the same issue that was so threatening to early



modern anti-theatrical polemicists Gosson and Stubbes. To a certain degree, Middleton's play subverts what we might call a specifically "Hamlettian" subjectivity, but it is important to recognize that the play does not refuse subjectivity altogether. Vindice is not a simple morality play protagonist; rather, like others of Middleton's characters who bear names derived from the morality play tradition, he is at once symbolic and generic, *and* individualized. Nor does the play abandon the notion of specific identity; instead, it attempts to explore the complexity of any identity that is created primarily through what Hamlet himself described as "outward shows." By speaking the "I" in "'Tis I, 'tis Vindice," Vindice dissolves before our eyes, leaving intact the small world of his mother and sister. If Vindice is a parody of Hamlet, he is a strange one. Like other critics of the genre, I agree that *The Revenger's Tragedy* is an ending of sorts—not of the genre itself, however, but of the masculine revenger. This generic change, which could strike us as merely another arbitrary change to a disintegrating genre, is in fact the harbinger of a different kind of revenge play. In the movement from ghost to skull, *The Revenger's Tragedy* establishes its own precedent, one in which increasingly deranged male revengers, like Webster's lycanthropic Ferdinand, roam the Jacobean stage. This should not surprise us: for while critics like Stephen Mullaney may argue that by dressing the skull, Vindice has committed a "travesty," turning Gloriana into what she most tried to avoid,<sup>30</sup> a point we do well to remember, it is nonetheless also true that Gloriana's disguise contains the seeds of Vindice's own eventual unravelling. I agree with Karin Coddon when she asserts that "Vindice's characteristic, quasi-prurient misogyny subverts itself throughout the play"<sup>31</sup>; indeed, I would go further and argue that it dissolves, and that this dissolution has a powerful impact on the revenge tragedy plays that follow, and should have a powerful impact on the way we read the genre as a whole.

Margreta de Grazia has written of the *Hamlet* of modernism; the play that has been cited by luminaries such as Coleridge, Marx, Freud, Hegel, and others as the defining moment of the English stage, the moment when theatre pulls itself away from primitive medievalism into something resembling a modern understanding of the world. As de Grazia points out, this understanding of Hamlet probably has more to do with modern Western thought than it does with the play itself.<sup>32</sup> We postmoderns, of course, are more skeptical. But what I am arguing here is that Middleton himself anticipated our postmodern response to Shakespeare's modifications of revenge tragedy, recognizing

a new type of revenger. Most importantly, and I think most evidently in *The Revenger's Tragedy*, Jacobean playwrights appear to have treated the figure of Hamlet with considerably less enthusiasm and respect than the modern world has. Thus, *The Revenger's Tragedy* is no mere burlesque; instead, it is an extended meditation on Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, and on the gendered nature of the subjectivity presented by Shakespeare. It is less a parody of the earlier play than of the masculine revenger, and there is a purpose to that parody. While Shakespeare questions masculine subjectivity, presenting it as a problem, Middleton seems ready to dispense with it altogether. By situating his own play in the graveyard scene, Middleton is not merely recalling a memorable moment; he is, instead, evoking the moment in Shakespeare's play where ghost and skull collide, and the skull, the *memento mori*, becomes the fitting emblem for a new, and gendered, revenge tragedy.

### Notes

1. My choice of Middleton, rather than Tourneur, as the author of *The Revenger's Tragedy* reflects the consensus of most recent scholars of the play. The question of authorship is not unimportant: Brian Jay Corrigan in “Middleton, *The Revenger's Tragedy*, and Crisis Literature,” *SEL: Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900* 38.2 (1998), pp. 281–89, convincingly argues that in spite of the frequent attribution of the play to Tourneur, which he ascribes to “timidity or lethargy or ignorance or some sort of aesthetic or other scruple,” ascribing the play to Middleton “strengthens the conjectures regarding Middleton's place as an early literary critic” (281). As my argument rests, at least in part, on an underlying assumption that in *The Revenger's Tragedy* Middleton is, indeed, engaged in an act of literary criticism, I find this point particularly pertinent. For elaboration of the authorship debate, see J.D. Lake, *The Canon of Thomas Middleton's Plays: Internal Evidence for the Major Problems of Authorship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975) as well as his earlier article, “*The Revenger's Tragedy*: Internal Evidence for Tourneur's Authorship Negated,” *Notes and Queries* 18 (1971), pp. 455–56. Lake's premises are questioned by M.W.A. Smith in “*The Revenger's Tragedy*: The Derivation and Interpretation of Statistical Results for Resolving Authorship,” *Computers and the Humanities* 21.1 (1987), pp. 21–55 and “The Authorship of the Revenger's Trag-

- edy,” *Notes and Queries* 38.4 (1991) p. 236. See also M.P. Jackson, *Studies in Attribution: Middleton and Shakespeare*, (Salzburg: Salzburg University Press, 1979).
2. *The Revenger’s Tragedy*, in *Five Plays*, eds. Bryan Loughrey and Neil Taylor (London: Penguin Books, 1988). All references to this version will appear in parentheses in the body of the article.
  3. For analysis of the importance of audience understanding of the staging in the play, see Michael Mooney, “‘The Luxurious Circle’: Figureposition in *The Revenger’s Tragedy*,” *ELR* 13.2 (1983), pp. 162–81, who argues that “Vindice performs three distinct roles of presenter, commentator and participant in the drama,” and that these roles would have been reinforced by his *figureposition*, which denotes the relationship between a character’s stage position and the speech, action and degree of stylization normally associated with that stage position, as defined by Mooney. Thus the audience, unlike modern commentators, would be aided visually in their interpretation of his role.
  4. Stephen Mullaney, “Mourning and Misogyny: *Hamlet*, *The Revenger’s Tragedy*, and the Final Progress of Elizabeth I, 1600–1607,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 45.2 (Summer 1994), p. 159.
  5. While somewhat dated, both Fredson Bowers’s *Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy 1587–1642* (Gloucester: Peter Smith, 1959) and Charles and Elaine Hallett’s *The Revenger’s Madness* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1980), which uses Bowers as a starting point, still exert heavy influence over the study of revenge tragedy. This influence is most apparent in the notion that in *Hamlet* we see the full flowering of revenge tragedy, while later plays are evidence of a decaying genre. This argument has been engaged recently by Jonathon Dollimore’s essay “*The Revenger’s Tragedy*: Providence, Parody and Black Camp,” in *Revenge Tragedy: Contemporary Critical Essays*, ed. Stevie Simkin (New York: Palgrave, 2001), pp. 107–20, in which he argues that attempts to render the play in terms of morality are mistaken.
  6. The first, and simplest, answer to the issue of these changes, of course, is that by 1607 Middleton was working with revenge tragedy conventions that were far past their prime; thus any novelty would do for a playwright determined to reap commercial gain from worn themes. Mark Gauntlett argues, for example, that the play is primarily addressed to audiences jaded by revenge tragedy conventions and is aimlessly parodic. William Stull has also noted that *The Revenger’s Tragedy* “steadfastly resists the usual categories of Renaissance drama,” in *Notes and Queries* 18 (1971), pp. 455–56, adding that “this resistance is deliberate” (39) and “would not be out place in what Antonin Artaud called the ‘Theater of Cruelty,’ a theater of re-

volt against stage conventions and numbed audience response” (41). For both Stull and Gauntlett, the play marks an ending of sorts; as Gauntlett points out, rightly, it “is the last in that line of plays which has revenge as its sole motive” (37). For many, *The Revenger’s Tragedy* provides clear evidence that revenge as subject and genre was ending in a whimper of, to use Gauntlett’s word, burlesque. Furthermore, if we look to Charles and Elaine Hallett for our narrative of revenge tragedy, this conclusion is inevitable, as both argue that while *Hamlet* is a revenge tragedy, it transcends the genre, and that “to discuss *Hamlet* in terms of revenge tragedy is somewhat like attending to the trellis rather than the rosebush it supports” (181). Theirs and similar readings, while correct in their assertion that *Hamlet* changes revenge tragedy, usually neglect to examine the complex ways the “trellis” is often itself examining, and often critiquing, the “rosebush.”

7. See, for example, Douglas Bruster, who in *Drama and the Market in the Age of Shakespeare* (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992) argues that “generic analysis tends to place its emphasis on the manifest—rather than latent—content and thought of the drama” and that the highly tenuous practice of delineating a genre in the first place tends to make such studies “neither necessary nor ultimately persuasive” (26).
8. Adena Rosmarin, *The Power of Genre* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), p. 25.
9. Richard Brucher, “Fantasies of Violence: *Hamlet* and *The Revenger’s Tragedy*,” *SEL: Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900* 21.2 (1981), p. 257.
10. Hallett, p. 21.
11. Hallett, p. 23.
12. John Kerrigan, *Revenge Tragedies: Aeschylus to Armageddon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), p. 174.
13. James Calderwood, *To Be and Not To Be: Negation and Metadrama in Hamlet* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), p. 25.
14. Kay Stanton, “Hamlet’s Whores,” in *New Essays on Hamlet*, Mark Thornton Burnett, ed. and pref., John Manning, ed. (New York: AMS Press, 1994), p. 168.
15. Hallett, p. 228.
16. Hallett, p. 229.
17. Scott McMillan, “Acting and Violence: *The Revenger’s Tragedy* and its Departures From *Hamlet*,” *Studies in English Literature* 24.2 (1984), pp. 275–91.

18. Jonathon Dollimore, "Two Concepts of Mimesis: Renaissance Literary Theory and *The Revenger's Tragedy*," In *Drama and Mimesis*, ed. James Redmond (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), p. 39.
19. Salinger's essay is in many ways a response to the view advanced by T.S. Eliot that the play was anomalous in its violence and moral outlook in comparison to other plays of its time; Salinger argued that *The Revenger's Tragedy* has much in common with the morality tradition as well as other, more contemporary plays, including *Hamlet*. See "The Revenger's Tragedy: Some Possible Sources," *Modern Language Review* 60 (1965), pp. 3–12.
20. Brian Loughrey and Neil Taylor, "Introduction" to Middleton's *Five Plays* (London: Penguin Books, 1988), p. xv.
21. See Laura Severt King, "Violence and Masque: A Ritual Sabotaged in Middleton's *Women Beware Women*" *Pacific Coast Philology* 21.1–2 (1986), pp. 42–47 for further discussion of this point.
22. Mullaney, p. 161.
23. This point is sometimes missed by critics who read the play's ending primarily in terms of whether or not the play endorses revenge. For an example of such readings, see Jonas Barish, "The True and False Families of *The Revenger's Tragedy*," in *English Renaissance Drama: Essays in Honor of Madeleine Doran and Mark Eccles*, eds. Standish Henning, Robert Kimbrough and Richard Knowles (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1976); Allardyce Niccoll, "The Revenger's Tragedy and the Virtue of Anonymity," in *Essays on Shakespeare and the Elizabethan Drama in Honor of Hardin Craig*, ed. Richard Hosley (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1962); and Arthur and M.K. Kistner, "Morality and Inevitability in *The Revenger's Tragedy*," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 71 (1976), pp. 36–46.
24. Mullaney, p.161.
25. Mullaney, p. 162.
26. Mullaney, p. 159. Such critics include Stephen Wigler, "If Looks Could Kill: Fathers and Sons in *The Revenger's Tragedy*," *Comparative Drama* 9 (1975), pp. 206–25; and Karen Robertson, *Sexuality and Politics in Renaissance Drama*, eds. Carole Levin and Karen Robertson (Lewiston, NY: Mellen, 1991).
27. Marjorie Garber, "Remember Me: *Memento Mori* Figures in Shakespeare's Plays," *Renaissance Drama* 12 (1981), p. 12.
28. Karin Coddon, "For Show and Useless Property': Necrophilia and *The Revenger's Tragedy*," *English Literary History* 61.1 (1994), p. 76.
29. Coddon, p. 76.

30. Mullaney intriguingly connects the travesty of her skull to a travesty of Elizabeth I, arguing further that Elizabeth’s death precipitated “a significant transformation in the body politic, a reincorporation and regendering of monarchy” (139).
31. Coddon, p. 76.
32. Margreta de Grazia has explicated these aspects of *Hamlet* on multiple occasions. See in particular her articles: “When Did *Hamlet* Become Modern?” *Textual Practice* 17.3 (2003), pp. 485–503, 612, and “Hamlet Before Its Time,” *Modern Language Quarterly: A Journal of Literary History* 62.4 (2001), pp. 355–75.