

“‘TIS MURDER’S BEST FACE, WHEN A VIZARD’S ON!”:

MORALITY AND METADRAMA IN RENAISSANCE

REVENGE TRAGEDY

By

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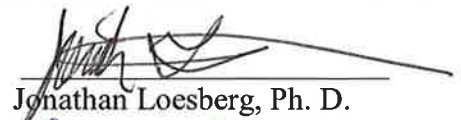
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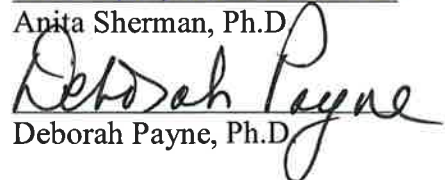
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ABSTRACT

This thesis analyzes the intersection of the genre of revenge tragedy with early modern English cultural and religious ambivalence regarding drama and the use of disguise. By juxtaposing two seminal revenge plays, Thomas Kyd’s *The Spanish Tragedy* and Thomas Middleton’s *The Revenger’s Tragedy*, with contemporary antitheatrical texts, this study argues that revenge plays support antitheatrical critiques at the level of plot, but celebrate drama and inventiveness in their excessive metatheatricality.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Vindice, the protagonist of Thomas Middleton's 1606 play *The Revenger's Tragedy*, exacts revenge on his foe the Duke in a particularly spectacular manner. Wearing the disguise of a pandar and dressing up the skull of his dead fiancée as a whore, Vindice paints his betrothed's bony lips with poison to seal his revenge on the Duke with a kiss from that "bony lady" (3.5.119). In describing the skull's role in his plot to kill the Duke, Vindice emphasizes his control through stagecraft:

Now to my tragic business. Look you, brother,
I have not fashioned this only for show
And useless property; no it shall bear a part
E'en in its own revenge. (3.5.94-100)

Vindice utilizes theatrical terms to emphasize his shaping of the tragedy and his acting of revenge. The use of the word "fashioned" further emphasizes Vindice's role as creator of what he refers to as distinctly *his* "tragic business." Vindice takes the stage with the skull and continues acting the part of pimp for the Duke, until the moment when the Duke presses his lips against the skull's. Then, the avenger steps out of his assumed role by condemning the Duke directly, rather than in an aside: "Royal villain, white devil!" (3.5.143). Although he has ostensibly shifted out of his role at this point, Vindice's performance is far from complete:

Vindice and his brother/accomplice Hippolito then hold the Duke's eyelids open so that he must watch the foul scene of incest and adultery that Vindice places before him. Vindice delivers stage directions to Hippolito throughout this maneuver, including the poetically grotesque injunction, "Let our two other hands tear up his lids / And make his eyes, like comets, shine through blood"

(3.5.197-98).¹ Though Vindice possesses only tangential knowledge of the rendezvous between the Duchess and the Duke's bastard son, Vindice makes it appear as if he has staged the whole spectacle. Vindice is not merely wearing a disguise in order to effect his revenge; he gleefully creates theatrical spectacles with the dexterity of a playwright, thereby shaping himself and manipulating those around him to fit different roles in the broader performance of his vengeance. This scene in which Vindice kills the Duke suggests a broader link between vengeance and stagecraft in the genre of revenge tragedy.

Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* (1587-1592) closes with a similarly spectacular staging created by the avenger, Hieronimo.² Hieronimo enlists the help of his accomplice, Bel-imperia, and his opponents, Lorenzo and Balthazar, to stage a tragedy for the enjoyment of the Spanish court. Hieronimo instructs his players that "each one of us must act his part / In unknown languages, / That it may breed the more variety" (4.1.166-68). This Babel-like staging makes the play-within-a-play even more excessive and spectacular for the characters participating in it, although it is actually performed in English for the paying audience viewing *The Spanish Tragedy*. Throughout the short tragedy Hieronimo stages, Hieronimo and Bel-imperia take advantage of their audience's trust by stabbing their opponents rather than merely mimicking stabbing motions where indicated by Hieronimo's script. By the end of the playlet, Hieronimo is the only actor still alive. The excessiveness of language and staging in Hieronimo's vengeful playlet simultaneously prove both the dangers and possibilities of theatricality.

¹ The gory, hyperbolic language Vindice uses to direct the action of this scene is reminiscent of that in Seneca's *Oedipus*. In Act 5, the Messenger's gory relation of Oedipus' eye-gouging sounds similar to Vindice's injunction to his brother to "tear up" the Duke's eyelids: "When sodenly all franticklyke hymself from ground he rears, / And rooteth out his wretched eyes /.... / The very holes in wayne he scrapes" (*The Lamentable Tragedie of Oedipus the Sonne of Laius King of Thebes out of Seneca*, 1563, translated by Alexander Neuyle, sig. C4r, sig. C5r).

² For a comprehensive discussion of possible date ranges for Kyd's writing of *The Spanish Tragedy*, see Lukas Erne's *Beyond The Spanish Tragedy* (New York: Palgrave, 2001).

In revenge tragedies, avengers become transformed before audiences' eyes into players and playwrights, assuming disguises and performing roles as well as crafting shows and spectacles for other characters to observe. Avengers such as Vindice and Hieronimo take on creative power to an extent almost unseen in other genres: characters in comedies may take on disguises and put on performances, but Vindice and Hieronimo do so in a way inextricably linked with their vengeful motives. The metadramatic mode is thus uniquely suited to the genre, as the use of disguises and plays-within-a-play frames the distinction between the outward show and inward thought of these avengers who often distance themselves from their bloody deeds. Of every dramatic genre in early modern England, revenge tragedy is that which most heavily utilizes metatheatricality as a dramatic mode.³ *The Revenger's Tragedy* is far from alone in its excessive use of metadrama within the genre, metadrama here being functionally defined as plays-within-a-play and self-conscious theatricality on the stage. Although this paper focuses on the bookends of the Kydian revenge tradition, *The Spanish Tragedy* (1587-1592) and *The Revenger's Tragedy* (1606), other notable examples of revenge plays that rely on metatheatricality include *Hamlet* (1599), *Antonio's Revenge* (1600), and *The Changeling* (1622).⁴

The genre of revenge tragedy is marked by a delay in seeking revenge, which is usually accompanied by madness (either real or feigned) and almost always by the use of a disguise, ostensibly used to hide motives while a) gaining easier access to an opponent or b) seeking more

³ Though the synthesis of revenge tragedy and metatheatricality is not the central point of their arguments, critics of metadrama including Joan Lord Hall (*The Dynamics of Role-playing in Jacobean Tragedy*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991), Dieter Mehl (*The Elizabethan Dumb Show; the History of a Dramatic Convention*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1966), and Hsiang-chun Chu (*Metatheater in Elizabethan and Jacobean Drama: Four Forms of Theatrical Self-reflexivity*) each highlight the particular consonance between the genre of revenge tragedy and the mode of metatheatricality.

⁴ See Fredson Bowers' *Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy, 1587-1642* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1966) for a fuller discussion of the Kydian model of revenge tragedy.

information about the opponent's guilt. Though *Hamlet* possesses the best known example of this revenge convention, Shakespeare was playing with a genre and type that Kyd created in *The Spanish Tragedy*. The process of assuming a disguise, whether it be one of feigned madness or a sane alter-ego, indicates that revenge is best undertaken under a different identity, or, as Supervacuo (one of the Duchess' sons) states in *The Revenger's Tragedy*, "Tis murder's best face, when a vizard's on!" (5.1.169-70).

The excessive inventiveness and deceitfulness of avengers—as exemplified in the convention of metadrama—engages early modern English revenge tragedy in the broader cultural debate surrounding antitheatricalism more fully than any other dramatic genre. Protestant antitheatricalists claimed that, by creating the façade of a dramatic world and embodying masks and made-up characters, actors and playwrights were usurping God's right to create.⁵ Antitheatrical writers such as Phillip Stubbes condemn the theatre for the vanity and pride necessary for players to usurp God's role as creator. In his 1583 *Anatomie of Abuses*, Stubbes questions those who would wear disguises, saying, "Shall the clay say unto the potter, why has thou made me thus? Or can the clay make himselfe better favoured then [sic] the potter, who gave him his first stampe and proportion [?]" (sig. C6v). Through excessive plotting and use of disguises, avengers take on precisely the kind of overreaching that Stubbes is cautioning players and playwrights against. Avengers present a double affront to God's omnipotence: in taking justice into their own hands they disregard God's claim, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, saith the Lord" (Romans 12:19). Simultaneously and, evidenced by the intense metatheatricity of the genre, avengers also usurp God's power to create visual and aural realities. Many critics have questioned the prior form of usurpation—the extent to which stage avengers are acting

⁵ Stephen Gosson's *The Schoole of Abuse* (London, 1587), Phillip Stubbes' *The Anatomie of Abuses* (London, 1583).

immorally by taking justice into their hands—yet little attention has been paid to the morality/immorality of avengers wearing disguises and staging performances. As the genre of revenge tragedy developed over the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods, after Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*, the use of disguises and staging of plays-within-a-play become integral to the protagonists' plot for revenge. To write off this theatricality as mere ornamentation to the genre is to disregard the relationship of revenge tragedy to cultural concerns of the day. The debate over whether Christian audience members would condemn or condone private revenge is fraught with conflicting uses of the same evidence—critics have cited many of the same sermons, letters, and works of literature to make wildly different claims.⁶ Perhaps less polarizing but just as relevant to the plays' context is a consideration of the playwrights' rejection of the immorality of theatricality.

While most recent criticism of revenge tragedy has focused primarily on the sociopolitical and/or gendered significance of vengeance and private justice, the genre's relationship with early modern English society can be comprehended more fully by an examination of its confluence with contemporary rhetoric surrounding morality, creation, and display, as figured in sermons, antitheatrical screeds and pro-theatrical responses, and core documents of the Protestant tradition.⁷ One critical text which comes closest to addressing the resonance of revenge tragedy with antitheatricalism is Sara Munson Deats and Lisa S. Starks'

⁶ For contradictory uses of the same evidence regarding the morality of revenge plays, see Fredson Bowers' *Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy, 1587-1642* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1966), Lily Campbell's "Theories of Revenge in Renaissance England" (*Modern Philology* 28.3, 1931, pp 281–296), Eleanor Prosser's *Hamlet and Revenge* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford UP, 1971), and Reta Terry's "'Vows to the Blackest Devil': *Hamlet* and the Evolving Code of Honor in Early Modern England" (*Renaissance Quarterly* 52.4 1999, pp 1070–1086).

⁷ For sociopolitical analyses, see Linda Woodbridge's *English Revenge Drama: Money, Resistance, Equality*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), Chris McMahon's *Family and the State in Early Modern Revenge Drama: Economies of Vengeance* (New York: Routledge, 2012), Eileen Allman's *Jacobean Revenge Tragedy and the Politics of Virtue* (Cranbury, NJ: University of Delaware Press, 1999), Molly Easo Smith "The Theatre and the Scaffold: Death as Spectacle in *The Spanish Tragedy*" (*Revenge Tragedy*. Ed. Stevie Simkin. New York, N.Y: Palgrave, 2001, pp 71-87).

paper, “‘So neatly plotted, and so well perform’d’: Villain as Playwright in Marlowe’s *The Jew of Malta*.” In it, the authors tangentially address the relationship between revenge tragedies and antitheatricalism by examining metadramatic features of *The Jew of Malta*. Drawing a connective thread between various antitheatrical writings, Deats and Starks state that “plays and players were seen as evil [by antitheatricalists] because they substituted ‘notorious lying fables’ for actual events and artificial persons for the self created by God” (376). This analysis indicates that the perceived “evils” of staging spectacles and fabricating identities are directly linked to an anxiety about the usurpation of God’s power to create. Deats and Starks also indicate the interconnectedness of revenge and metatheatricality, stating, “Revenge without play-acting seems to hold little attraction for Barabas [avenger in *The Jew of Malta*]” (384).⁸ Indeed, for other famous stage-avengers like Hamlet, Vindice, Hieronimo, and Hieronimo’s accomplice Bel-imperia, “revenge without play-acting seems to hold little attraction.” Barabas’ excessiveness in plotting is inextricably linked to both his role as an avenger and the play’s genre of revenge tragedy.

Thomas Kyd’s *The Spanish Tragedy* (first written and performed sometime between 1587-1592) coincides with the beginnings of antitheatrical discourse in the period, and with the aftermath of England’s religious upheaval in the Reformation. According to E.K. Chambers, Puritan antitheatrical discourse begins to be uniform in its attack in “the critical period from

⁸ This interconnectedness is by no means the central thesis of Deats and Starks; they actually attempt to remove the motive of revenge from their analysis of Barabas’ inventiveness and theatricality. If we consider Barabas to be villain-as-revenger-as-playwright, the role of the genre becomes clear: it isn’t merely his villainy that causes these anxieties about dissembling to emerge, it is his motive of vengeance that does so. In addition, Deats and Starks’ analysis bookends an explication of metadrama in the play with brief sections on antitheatricality, rather than making the connection clear throughout their close reading of the text. This noticeable lack of structure causes their thesis to lose much of its impact.

1576 to 1583” (vol 1, 253).⁹ Attempting to follow the style of Seneca but succeeding in creating an entirely unique work, Kyd’s play set the stage for subsequent explorations of revenge themes and metatheatricality. By the time Middleton wrote *The Revenger’s Tragedy*, the antitheatrical movement had picked up full force, and was beginning to have some sway on censorship of theaters. Chambers cites the renewal of the antitheatrical writings in the early seventeenth century as being caused by “the sting of caricature [of Puritanism on the stage] which led directly to the old controversy,” noting that around this time, playwrights such as Thomas Heywood and the anonymous author of *The Puritan* (1606) began satirizing Puritanism (vol 1, 262). Margot Heinemann, in *Puritanism and Theatre: Thomas Middleton and Opposition Drama Under the Early Stuarts*, notes that Middleton’s early city comedies are often seen as “strongly anti-Puritan” based on his caricature of that sect (76). Middleton’s early plays coincide with an increased control of the stage; in 1603, James I took steps to appease the antitheatricalists by forbidding interludes and “Common Plays” on the Sabbath.¹⁰ Thus, based on the political and religious tone of James I’s reign, Middleton’s play has more at stake in the argument in support of theatre than does Kyd’s. When Kyd wrote *The Spanish Tragedy*, it had only been a decade since the antitheatricalists rallied together against the theatre. By the time Middleton wrote *The Revenger’s Tragedy*, antitheatricalists had been petitioning the theatre for over thirty years. While Kyd’s play is correspondingly more ambivalent regarding the antitheatricalists’ morality, both plays consistently embody cultural anxieties regarding dissembling and spectacles, while ultimately celebrating and valorizing theatricality.

⁹ The first public theatre in England opened in 1576, sparking more consistent backlash from Puritan opponents of the theatre.

¹⁰ Margot Heinemann’s *Puritanism and Theatre: Thomas Middleton and Opposition Drama Under the Early Stuarts* (New York: Past and Present Publications, 1980), p. 33.

Through an excess of disguises and plays-within-a-play, revenge tragedies simultaneously chide avengers for their overreaching by punishing them at the end of the action, and celebrate avengers' inventiveness in staging playlets and exploiting disguises. These warring impulses are indicative of revenge plays' broader ambivalence regarding the nature of theatre. The death of the avenger pays lip service to standard morality, yet the gleeful inventiveness of the act of revenge opens up a counternarrative in the plays that produces theatrical pleasure.¹¹ At the level of plot, these revenge plays enact and reinforce morality: by punishing transgressions. However, the level of excessive metatheatricity in the plays affirms and supports inventiveness and spectacle.¹² Avengers such as Hieronimo and Vindice are not merely puppets of the divine--they are autonomous individuals capable of shunning moral edicts, surpassing their own limitations as "characters" in a play, and enacting change in themselves and others. They represent the individual's potential to forge his own way in the world, and his ability to turn fate on its head. Rather than attempting to determine if Christian audiences would unanimously cheer on Hieronimo or Hamlet in their vengeance, I will consider the extent to which revenge plays themselves reflect and challenge religious tensions surrounding deceitfulness and inventiveness on the stage.

¹¹ This rhetorical tactic was common in the period in a variety of media. Sensational pamphlets detailing murders, witchcraft, and robbery often couched their lavish gore in half-hearted moralizing about how Christian readers should learn a lesson from the sins of others (thereby hedging against being criticized for sensationalism).

¹² Of course, the simple fact that these plays are written to be performed also tips the scales in favor of theatricality.

CHAPTER 2

ANTITHEATRICALITY

As mentioned previously, the distinctive feature of revenge tragedy—the affront to God’s omnipotence—emerges in response to a broader cultural discourse: that of religiously-fueled antitheatricalism. Lori Anne Ferrell, in her chapter in *A Companion to Renaissance Drama*, “Religious Persuasions, c.1580-c.1620,” states that “the years 1580 to 1620 stand as the most important formative years of England’s religious identity” (41). Around this time period, which coincides with the writing of both *The Spanish Tragedy* and *The Revenger’s Tragedy*, writers such as William Prynne, Stephen Gosson, and Phillip Stubbes wrote tracts discussing the evils of players and play-going (often in addition to the evils of dancing, dice-playing, and face-painting).

Stage avengers such as Hieronimo and Vindice assume the role of players and playwrights, and create spectacles (and even staging faux ceremonies) that in some ways resemble the supposed ‘excess’ of Catholic pageantry. By creating dramatic worlds in excess of the world God created, avengers implicate themselves in antitheatricalists’ arguments against players and playwrights’ usurpation of God’s omnipotence. Contemporary critiques of theatre have been traced to a distinctly Protestant iconophobia, a response to the iconophilia of the Catholic tradition.¹³ Protestantism focuses on the unmediated word of God, and mistrusts images and ‘show’ as idolatrous: stage representations of an artificial or manmade world challenge the idea that God’s word and God’s world should remain sacrosanct. Colin Rice, in *Ungodly Delights: Puritan Opposition to the Theatre: 1576-1633*, states that the antitheatrical “attack on

¹³ Most notably by Huston Diehl in her work *Staging Reform, Reforming the Stage: Protestantism and Popular Theater in Early Modern England*. (Ithaca, N.Y: Cornell University Press, 1997), and more broadly by Jonas Barish in *The Antitheatrical Prejudice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981).

the Elizabethan theatre clearly reflects and is regularly an overt expression of the new religious literalism... which opposed itself to the elaborate ritualism of the Church of Rome and which partly underlay the outbreak of post-Reformation iconoclasm” (18). The Church of England, like all Protestant sects, subscribed to a narrative of origins, whereby the purity of the early Christian church had become lost through medieval rituals and traditions. The 1559 Book of Common Prayer, liturgical governing document for the Church of England, includes a note at the beginning to explain why some ceremonies have been removed from the order of worship, which tries to address the divide between pageantry and simplicity:

OF suche Ceremonies as be used in the churche, and have hadde their beginning by the institution of man: Some at the firste were of Godlye entent and purpose devysed, and yet at length, turned to vanitie and supersticion: some entered into the Church, by indiscrete devocion and suche a zeale as was withoute knowledge: and for because they were winked at in the beginning, they grue daily to more and more abuses, which not only for their unprofitableness, but also because they have muche blynded the people, and obscured the glorye of God, are woorthy to be cut away, and cleane rejected. (sig. B1r)

Just as the Church of England disassociates itself with some man-made ceremonies because they have become “vanitie and supersticion,” and because such ceremonies obscure God’s power, the antitheatricalists bristled against the vanity and excess of the stage.

Just as the pomp and vanity of papist rites indicated a turning away from how God intended worship to occur, costumes or spectacles which visually altered the status of the players indicated a disrespect for the way in which God created humanity. Disrespect for the role allotted by God is clearly present through the disguises of avengers, who often hide their true selves and motives in order to exact revenge. Some antitheatrical writers, such as Phillip Stubbes and William Prynne, focus on the vanity and pride necessary for players to usurp God’s role as Creator. Phillip Stubbes, in his 1583 *Anatomie of Abuses*, condemns those who would assume a disguise above their station, or wear inappropriately costly attire: “Shall the clay say unto the

Potter, why hast thou made me thus? Or can the clay make himselfe better favoured then [sic]the Potter, who gave him his first stampe and proportion [?]" (sig. C6v). By choosing to wear a disguise, then, avengers are guilty of disregarding the "role" God has called them to play. At a more basic level, antitheatricalists condemned even playgoing as a direct breaking of the covenantal vow of baptism because of the vanity of the stage. In his 1631 *Histriomastix*, William Prynne states that "The Devills Pompe... which wee renounce in our Baptisme; are those Spectacles, or Playes in Theatres, and all other vanities of this kind: from which the holy Man of God desiring to be freed, *saith*: Turne away mine eyes from beholding vanitie" (49). Prynne here equates playgoing with Satan's pomp and vanity. Both of these figurations of the evils of theatre indicate an overweening pride—a sin which most stage avengers possess.

When viewed through the lens of antitheatrical writings, the primary sin of avengers is precisely that which antitheatricalists condemn theatre and Catholic pageantry for: an affront to God's omnipotence through falsification, dissembling, and lying—all of which also indicate that the player is attempting to change the shape of the world or people God has created. In addition to concepts like vanity and pride, antitheatricalists (including William Prynne, Phillip Stubbes, and Stephen Gosson) described the affront to God's omnipotence using terms of deception. William Prynne, in his *Histriomastix*, chides players for being as "variable in heart as they are in their parts" (138). Stubbes refers to players as "dissembling Hipocrites" and condemns playgoers to learning "to cogge, lye, and falsifie" (*Anatomie of Abuses* sig. L8v). This idea of dissembling is critical to Gosson's argument against the stage; he states that players who assume a disguise "falsifie, forge, and adulterate, contrarie to the expresse rule of the word of God" (*Playes Confuted in Five Actions* sig. C3v). Plays such as *The Spanish Tragedy* and *The Revenger's Tragedy* subvert and exploit these antitheatrical concerns about deceitfulness and

inventiveness by imbuing their excessive metatheatricality with a *joie de vivre* which betrays any tepid show of moral opposition to theatre.

CHAPTER 3

THE SPANISH TRAGEDY

Forebearer of both metadrama and the genre of revenge tragedy, Thomas Kyd's 1587-1592 play *The Spanish Tragedy* mirrors growing cultural concern regarding play-acting and highlights cultural tensions surrounding dissembling, while overtly celebrating theatricality. *The Spanish Tragedy's* excessive use of metadrama that was integrally linked to the plot was unique for the time, as was the general structure of the plot, which became the foundation for the genre of revenge tragedy.¹⁴ The central action of the play, which occurs at the court of the Spanish king, takes place as part of a larger framing device of a spectacle that the figure of "Revenge" creates on behalf of the murdered Andrea. This conflation of the allegorical Revenge with stagecraft signals their interconnectedness, which will become a staple of the genre. Following the example of *The Spanish Tragedy*, subsequent revenge plays consistently highlight the connections between seeking revenge and creating dramatic worlds to confuse and entrap opponents. In *Hamlet and the Acting of Revenge*, Peter Mercer analyzes the metadramatic framing device as merely supporting the concept of *theatrum mundi*:

Such self-conscious theatricality... may seem innocent enough in this first act, but in fact it is exactly the device of a play within a play that figures the central irony of *The Spanish Tragedy*. Again and again we see men acting to enforce their will on others while all the time they are unwitting agents of someone else's plot. And in the final perspective all of them, King, prince, villain and revenger, are unsuspecting actors in the larger plot of Fate. They all dance to an unheard tune, play their parts in the tragedy promised to the watching Ghost. (37)

Mercer's analysis indicates that the play's metadrama limits Hieronimo, Balthazar, and Bel-imperia to be nothing more than actors in Revenge's tragedy, with Revenge serving as the

¹⁴ See Chapter 6, "Thomas Kyd," of Dieter Mehl's *Elizabethan Dumb Show: The History of a Dramatic Convention* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1966) for a discussion of Kyd's innovations with the use of dumb show in drama (particularly the way that Hieronimo as "presenter" of the dumb show helps to incorporate the playlet more fully into the play proper).

play's stand-in for God or the divine. Yet this analysis thoroughly overlooks the play's celebration of theatricality and authorship.

By embracing pride and excessive stagecraft (the two sins antitheatricalists such as Prynne and Stubbes warn against), Hieronimo is able to surpass the role the divine Revenge writes for him. Hieronimo is first introduced to the audience as the Spanish king's marshal and the court's unofficial master of revels. When confronted with his son's death, Hieronimo applies his expertise in stagecraft and acting by practicing dissembling, and coaching himself on his "lines" before addressing his foes (Castile, Lorenzo, and Balthazar): "What new device have they devised, trow? / *Pocas palabras*, mild as the lamb, / Is't I will be revenged? no, I am not the man" (3.14.117-19). Hieronimo reminds himself of the disparity between the role he is playing (that of humble courtier) and his true self (grieved father), and uses his acting skills to refrain from flying into a passionate fury when confronted by his enemies. When the time comes to enact the part he has rehearsed, Hieronimo responds to Castile's accusation of his anger towards Lorenzo by responding in perfect ignorance, "Should I suspect Lorenzo would prevent / Or cross my suit, that loved my son so well? / My lord, I am ashamed it should be said" (3.14.145-47). Hieronimo's status within the court as the unofficial playwright enables him to easily slip into the role of avenger, and successfully deceive his opponents.

While this scene is part of what will become the larger convention of revenge tragedy in which the avenger dissembles to gain more time/information, Hieronimo later takes on even more agency in his revenge, thereby usurping the divine Revenge's power in controlling the plot. In enacting his revenge on Lorenzo and the rest of the court for the death of his son, Hieronimo chooses to stage a literal drama to kill his foes: "It was my chance to write a tragedy / / I mean each one of you to play a part" (4.1.76, 81). At the end of the play, Revenge and Andrea reflect

on the consummation of their vindictiveness. Yet even Revenge, who has presumably been controlling the actions of the play, cedes his authority to Hieronimo when he states “[N]ow behold Hieronimo, / Author and actor in this tragedy” (4.4.146-47). Whereas in previous acts, Revenge spoke of his own agency in crafting the bloodshed taking place in the main plot, he here acknowledges Hieronimo’s control of the action. In Lukas Erne’s *Beyond the Spanish Tragedy*, he claims that as Hieronimo “becomes author and actor in his tragedy, he takes on a role that stresses his resemblance to the Creator rather than the distance from creature to Creator emphasized by both the frame [of Andrea and Revenge] and Calvinism” (103). Hieronimo effectively usurps Revenge’s role as creator and shaper of the dramatic world, and dies an author of his fate and the tragedy he has staged.

Committing both sins which antitheatricalists warn against, Hieronimo usurps divine control by practicing deception. His wife Isabella laments her son Horatio’s death, saying, “The heavens are just, murder cannot be hid; / Time is the author both of truth and right, / And time will bring this treachery to light” (2.4.120-22). In her grief, Isabella turns to the comfort of her faith. Yet immediately after Isabella invokes Providence, justice, and openness, Hieronimo indicates the necessity of hiding their true feelings:

Meanwhile, good Isabella, cease thy plaints,
Or at the least dissemble them awhile:
So shall we sooner find the practice out,
And learn by whom all this was brought about (2.4.123-26).

This injunction to dissemble complicates contemporary religious ideals regarding honesty. The 1559 *Book of Common Prayer*, a revision of Thomas Cranmer’s 1552 version, highlights the importance of inward purity and honesty in mainstream Protestantism: “But lo, thou requirest trueth in inwarde [parts], and shalt make me to understand wisdom secretlye” (From “The Collect for the 8th Sunday After Trinity”). Yet this inward honesty was also meant to correspond

to an outward display of purity—what this prayer indicates is that regardless of how outwardly pious someone is, God requires a pure heart and soul within. Hieronimo and Isabella are inwardly in turmoil, but Hieronimo cautions his wife to feign ignorance and innocence for the benefit of others.

In choosing to craft his own plot for revenge—to essentially play God—because of his mistrust of the divine, Hieronimo displays an overreaching comparable to that which the antitheatricalists warned against. By gently manipulating the concept of divine providence, the play subtly undercuts contemporary morality. Hieronimo cries out to “sacred heavens” to “See, search, shew, send, some man, some mean” to aid his vengeance (3.2.5, 23). The repeated emphasis on the first four syllables of this line, paired with a persistent sibilance, indicates both an urgency in Hieronimo’s tone, as well as a command to heaven rather than a plea. Immediately after he calls on heaven to send a sign, a letter from Bel-imperia, Horatio’s lover, falls from the sky. Yet Hieronimo immediately distrusts this timely, providential sign that he has called for: “[T]o entrap thy life this train is laid. / Advise thee, therefore, be not credulous: / This is devised to endanger thee” (3.2.38-40). Hieronimo exhibits some of this mistrust again later, when he contemplates God’s right to vengeance. He begins by quoting and reflecting on a biblical edict: “‘Vindicta mihi!’ / Ay, heaven will be revenged of every ill, / Nor will they suffer murder unrepaid” (3.13. 1-3). Yet Hieronimo quickly twists the word of God to indicate that he will craft a plot to seek vengeance, rather than waiting on heaven to do so. The divine claim of “vindicta mihi” has been subtly shifted so that Hieronimo is the one proclaiming his vengeance, rather than God. His decision to speed up heaven’s justice by taking revenge into his own hands is inextricably linked with his natural propensity for plotting, as he then states:

Thus therefore will I rest me in unrest,
Dissembling quiet in unquietness,

Not seeming that I know their villainies,
That my simplicity may make them think
That ignorantly I will let all slip. (3.13.29-33)

Hieronimo first substitutes himself for the divine, and then conflates revenge with dissembling.

This extended figuration of the avenger's role as player makes clear the relationship between metadrama, revenge tragedy as a genre, and a perceived usurpation of God's power.

The Spanish Tragedy's metatheatricality is not solely limited to Hieronimo. Balthazar, who later seeks revenge on Horatio for seducing Bel-imperia, interprets Horatio as usurping Bel-imperia's love through deliberate dissembling:

Now in his mouth he carries pleasing words,
Which sweet conceits are limed with sly deceits,
Which sly deceits smooth Bel-imperia's ears,
And through her ears dive down into her heart,
And in her heart set him where I should stand.
Thus hath he ta'en my body by his force,
And now by sleight would captivate my soul. (2.1.124-31)

This daisy-chain sequence by which Balthazar conceives of Horatio supplanting him in Bel-imperia's heart begins with Horatio deceiving her by false words that, step by step, eventually take root in her heart. Balthazar's suspicion that Horatio is self-consciously playing a role to seduce Bel-imperia is closely related to the antitheatrical argument that simply hearing or watching a play could poison a man's soul and supplant godly inclinations in his heart. In his *Playes Confuted in Five Actions*, Stephen Gosson sets up the relationship between the eyes and ears and the "spirit" by placing these orifices in opposition to the relative harmlessness of things taken into the body by the mouth: "we knowe that whatsoeuer goeth into the mouth defileth not but passeth away by course of nature; but that which entreth into vs by the eyes and eares, muste bee digested by the spirite, which is chiefly reserued to honor God" (sig. B8v). Gosson contends that the representation of something ungodly can take root in the spirit, effectively taking the place of God in a listener or viewer's heart. Similarly, Balthazar worries that Horatio has usurped

his rightful place in Bel-imperia's heart by deliberately dissembling his true nature and intentions.

The play's most pointed example of creating an alternative reality through representation occurs in a single scene with a minor character, the Page. Lorenzo, one of Horatio's killers, sends the Page to his accomplice, Pedringano, supposedly with a letter of pardon for the murder of Horatio. Although Lorenzo expressly forbade him to open the box, the Page must satisfy his curiosity:

My master hath forbidden me to look in this box.... By my bare honesty, here's nothing but the bare empty box: were it not a sin against secrecy, I would say it were a piece of gentlemanlike knavery. I must go to Pedringano, and tell him his pardon is in the box, nay, I would have sworn it, had I not seen the contrary. (1, 5-9)

This passage works as an extended metaphor for the process audience members go through when seeing a play: they are presented with an "empty box" which players pretend is not empty, and the audience must suspend their disbelief over the deception. Pedringano (and the players) momentarily create a world unlike that which God created and rules. This metaphor is not an innocent one; even though the Page knows that the box is empty, he willingly deceives Pedringano. Pedringano dies with false hope because of the performance Lorenzo has staged for him, and the Page—the performer in this scene—becomes implicated in Pedringano's deception and demise.

Lorenzo, Balthazar, and Hieronimo are all punished for their treachery and dissembling. By punishing these characters transgressions and excess, the plot of *The Spanish Tragedy* seems to support contemporary morality. Lorenzo, who killed Horatio and deceived Pedringano, is slain by Hieronimo. Bel-imperia stabs Balthazar for being complicit in Horatio's murder, then commits suicide. Hieronimo cuts out his own tongue and commits suicide rather than tell the story of the horrors that have passed. But although the play ends with the death of the avenger,

Hieronimo takes his life on his own terms, rather than bow to divine punishment or to the justice of his corrupt society. While Hieronimo and Bel-imperia's deaths pay lip service to contemporary morality, in that they transgressed and are subsequently 'punished,' the manner of their deaths complicates this morality. Hieronimo consistently performs his role as both "author and actor" in the tragedy, even at the moment of his death, effectively supplanting Revenge's (and God's) omnipotence (4.4.147). The play's excessive use of metadrama celebrates the individual's ability to shape reality in the face of fate or overwhelming odds to the contrary.

CHAPTER 4

THE REVENGER'S TRAGEDY

While *The Spanish Tragedy* created the genre of revenge tragedy, and heightened the use of metadrama on the stage, Thomas Middleton's 1606 play *The Revenger's Tragedy* presents the epitome of these techniques. Between the two, popular revenge plays such as *Hamlet*, *Antonio's Revenge*, and *Hoffman* further explore the structure Kyd creates with *The Spanish Tragedy*.¹⁵ Thus, by the time Middleton writes *The Revenger's Tragedy*, he has the advantage of both years of examples of the genre and of the growing cynicism in English society during James I's rule. In her book *Metatheater in Elizabethan and Jacobean Drama: Four Forms of Theatrical Self-Reflexivity*, Hsiang-chun Chu addresses this distinction between *The Revenger's Tragedy* and earlier instances of the genre: "*Revenger's* is different from [other revenge tragedies that revolve around plotting] in that it is deliberately self-conscious about its plotting to an excessive extent... In this sense, it indulges, and even delights, in its artificiality" (87).

In his excessive use of spectacle and role-playing, Vindice embodies antitheatricalists' central complaint about the theatre: he usurps God's role as creator and dramatist. Vindice accomplishes this particular affront to God's omnipotence by his management of the action of the play. When Vindice challenges heaven to respond to the injustice that has taken place, the thunderclap response makes it seem as if God is hurrying to enact the part Vindice has written for Him. While listening to Lussurioso condemn Piato, Vindice cries out in an aside: "Has not heaven an ear? / Is all the lightning wasted?" (4.2.150-51). Shortly after Lussurioso exits the stage in the same scene, Vindice delivers a second cue to heaven: "O, thou almighty patience.... / Is there no thunder left, or is't kept up / In stock for heavier vengeance? [*Thunder*] There it

¹⁵ For a full exploration of the Kydian model of revenge tragedy, see "The School of Kyd" from Fredson Bowers' *Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy, 1587-1642* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1966)

goes!” (4.2.183, 187-88). This concept of heaven’s vengeance being linked to thunder is affirmed by contemporary Protestant publications. An anonymous broadsheet prayer printed in 1603 offers a lengthy prayer to God to withhold his wrath, particularly as it takes shape in natural forces:

We acknowledge (O Lorde) that our sinnes haue greeuouslie prouoked thee not onelie to take vengeance of our bodies and goodes, but euen also to seperate both our bodies and Soules from thee to euerlasting destruction of both... [I]t were to be maruailed at... that thou shouldst not speake vnto vs by thy strange Iudgements... that thou shouldst not strike vs with thunder and lightning. (*A Praier... To Be Used of All Christians*)

Rather than being in awe of God’s ability to show displeasure through thunder and lightning, Vindice flippantly challenges heaven’s judgment, and even goes so far as to direct it. Hippolito nervously responds to Vindice’s provocation of thunder—perhaps unwittingly heightening the metadrama—“Brother, we lose ourselves” (4.2.189). Vindice has stepped out of his central plot of revenge into the role of director. He is losing whatever natural role he once possessed by attempting to craft a heaven and an earth based on artifice and his own “inventions” (4.2.191).

Heaven seems to have learned its lines and Vindice is entirely in control by the time his final scheme takes place: during the masques in which the royal family is killed, the stage directions note that after Lussurioso is killed, “*It thunders*” (5.3). Here, Vindice makes the metadrama explicit, taunting heaven by crying out, “Dost know thy cue, thou big-voiced crier?” (5.3.42). He continues by making the bold announcement, “No power is angry when the lustful die; / When thunder claps, heaven likes the tragedy” (5.3.46-47). Whereas in Act 4, Vindice attributed thunder to a condemnation from heaven, he here proclaims that it is approbation. The distinction does not concern Vindice, however; the self-conscious thunder indicates that Vindice really is directing celestial responses to the tragedy he has created. Though heaven is not a consistent character in this tragedy, when it does appear it seems to be at the will of Vindice.

This is similar to the treatment of Providence in *The Spanish Tragedy*: Hieronimo delivers an urgent command to the heavens and immediately receives a letter from the sky. Just prior to Lussurioso's inaugural banquet as Duke, Vindice rouses disgruntled lords to treason by crying out: "Let our hid flames break out as fire, as lightning, / To blast this villainous dukedom vexed with sin; / Wind up your souls to their full height again" (5.2.5-7). Though he is offstage when it first appears, Vindice here effectively presages the ominous "blazing star" that Lussurioso sees at his banquet (5.3.15). Thus, through seemingly controlling theatrical effects and spectacles traditionally associated with divine power, Vindice displays his power over the action of the tragedy.

Just as antitheatricalists responded negatively to the kind of dramatic power Vindice displays, Eileen Allman critiques Jacobean revenge tragedy for the metadrama of plays such as *The Revenger's Tragedy*, in her *Jacobean Revenge Tragedy and the Politics of Virtue*.¹⁶ Allman discusses what she perceives as the revenger's failed attempt to usurp God's power to create:

The revenger and the tyrant... and the players who are the point of convergence between the worlds inside and outside the theater—all are merely creatures posturing as creators, and the authority they erroneously took to be their natural right is rescinded in their exposure. (60)

Fueled by an attempt to question the internal hierarchy between female characters and the male avenger, Allman's analysis of revengers reads very similarly to the 16th century Puritan pamphlets decrying players for overstepping their bounds. Her criticism continues:

The revenger, onto whom the players can deflect criticism of their own dangerous theatricality, is an easy sacrifice. Created in their image, he can be punished in their stead, in part because the tragedies ultimately reveal that he has fashioned himself in the image of his rival. (60-61)

¹⁶ Allman's analysis is similar to Peter Mercer's *theatrum mundi* analysis of *The Spanish Tragedy*'s metatheatricality.

Allman views the revenger both as a failed creator and as a scapegoat for players. Though this analysis severely limits the creativity of the genre, as well as its potential for engaging broader cultural debates, Allman is responding to precisely the radical kind of metadramatic capabilities present in *The Revenger's Tragedy*. Contrary to Allman's assertion, in the world of this play, Vindice truly is the creature-turned-creator, rather than a failed embodiment of one. As Wharton indicates, the God of *The Revenger's Tragedy* is "at the beck and call of sardonic mortals" (55). By sublimating the divine to the level of a mere stage prop, *The Revenger's Tragedy* affirms the power of the individual to overcome the power of both society and the divine.

An extended analysis of Vindice's various disguises throughout the play sheds light on his prowess at shaping the outcomes of the play's action: though he begins as a somewhat reluctant dissembler, by the end of the play he gloats about his inventiveness, causing his downfall. Throughout the course of *The Revenger's Tragedy*, the protagonist Vindice takes on a variety of roles in order to infiltrate the Duke's court, seeking vengeance for his father's death and his fiancée's murder. Each of these roles allows Vindice enhanced access to the royal family, yet simultaneously costs him much in the process. He confronts the virtue of his own mother and sister, he forswears himself, and finally he surrenders his life because of an inability to separate himself from his acting of revenge. Vindice's experiences as an actor in his revenge closely resemble the types of immoral behaviors antitheatricalists warn against. In Phillip Stubbes' *Anatomie of Abuses*, he lists the types of 'lessons' audience members will learn in a playhouse:

If you will learn to become a bawde, vncleane, and to deuerginat Mayds, to deflour honest Wyues: if you will learne to murther... If you will learn to rebel against Princes, to commit treasons... If you will learn to play the whore-maister... if you will learn to become proude, hawtie & arrogant... if you will learn to contemne GOD and all his lawes, to care neither for heauen nor hel, and to commit al kinde of sinne and mischéef you néed to goe to no other schoole, for all these good Examples, may you sée painted before your eyes in enterludes and playes. (sig L8v)

Not only does the play *The Revenger's Tragedy* conceivably teach audience members these illicit lessons, but we see Vindice learning these immoralities as he performs the metadramatic roles within the play. The first disguise he assumes is that of Piato, a pandar to the Duke's son, Lussurioso. Vindice's first performance does, indeed, teach him to "play the whore-maister" and to attempt on Lussurioso's behalf to seduce his own sister Castiza (Stubbes sig. L8v). Next, he plays a melancholy version of himself, hired by Lussurioso to murder Piato (his first disguise). Finally, he takes part in the treasonous masque which causes the chain reaction of Lussurioso, Supervacuo, Ambitioso, and Spurio's deaths. Before the final masque, in which two of the duchess' sons (Supervacuo and Ambitioso) intend to kill their step-brother Lussurioso, Supervacuo echoes Stubbes' concern almost verbatim: "A mask is treason's licence: that build upon: / 'Tis murder's best face, when a vizard's on!" (5.1.169-70). In the course of each role he plays throughout the tragedy, Vindice commits nearly all of the sins Stubbes describes in the passage above. This confluence of antitheatrical concerns and Vindice's immorality as an actor indicates that Middleton is familiar with the antitheatrical argument.

Flouting Gosson's argument that "the outwarde conuersation of our life doe giue a testimony to the worlde of the inwarde holinesse of the minde," Vindice consistently couches his performances in terms of his capability in shaping his outward performance to fool others (sig. B8r). Yet the language he uses about crafting new roles is not purely objective—it betrays Vindice's anxiety (at least at first) over deviating from his inward self. He shows the most concern over the inward cost of role-playing in this first disguise. Before his initial attempt to broach his sister's chastity, Vindice invokes "Impudence" to help him "turn [his] visage" into that of the pandar Piato (1.3.9). In an Italian-to-English dictionary written by John Florio and originally published in 1598, *A Worlde of Wordes*, "piato" (or "piatto") possesses two possible

meanings: “a plea... a sute in law” or “husht, lurking, secret... hidden” (378).¹⁷ Though Piato’s role as a pandar necessitates a certain amount of secrecy and deception, Vindice’s adoption of this disguise forces him to hide who he truly is. Attempting to prepare himself for his first role, Vindice states “[I]f I must needs glow let me blush *inward* / That this immodest season may not spy / That scholar in my cheeks, fool-bashfulness” (emphasis mine, 1.3.10-12). By making clear the difficulty of distinguishing between his outward “visage” and his “inward” embarrassment or shame, Vindice suggests that the link between interior and exterior is a natural one that he must learn to break for the purpose of play-acting. This statement also belies Vindice’s concern or guilt about seducing his sister and mother.

If Vindice’s actions were merely separate from his internal identity, without causing any moral culpability, this assessment of inward and outward would be philosophically and thematically relevant, but not crucial to Vindice’s character development or the morality of the play. Yet his inclination to blush indicates a deeper anxiety over his outward display. In her analysis of blushing and shame presented in “Challenging the Literary Status Quo in *Hero and Leander*,” Georgia Brown states that “[s]hame is a form of anagnorisis, or recognition” that “marks a shift from ignorance to knowledge, from innocence to self-consciousness, often expressed through sudden blushing—a *physical sign of inner metamorphosis*” (emphasis mine, 68). Thus, Vindice’s inclination to blush indicates a self-awareness and shame, indicating some justification of antitheatricalists’ concerns about the disparity between players’ inward selves and outward displays.

In his various machinations (poisoning, sword fights, deception) Vindice rarely gives us any indications that he possesses a conscience. Yet Vindice does display concern over his acting

¹⁷ Page numbers taken from 1611 reprint of the original 1598 folio: *Queen Anna’s New World of Words* (London, 1611).

as he is trying out his first role in the tragedy he stages: when he swears an oath to Lussurioso, and when he tries his mother and sister's honor. Both instances of Vindice's guilt or shame hinge upon the separation between his true self and the role he has created. When Lussurioso makes him swear that he will procure Castiza (by persuading Gratiana if necessary), Vindice is hesitant to do so, which suggests that he is concerned somewhat with the confluence of his inner and outer selves. He falters twice in response to Lussurioso's command that he swear, the second time saying, "Swear? I hope your honor little doubts my faith" (1.3.162).¹⁸ Vindice's hesitation here over forswearing closely resembles one of the complaints in Phillip Stubbes' *Anatomie of Abuses*: "who can call him a iust man, that playeth the part of a dissembling hipocrite?" (sig. M1r). Vindice seems to be concerned about how the part he is playing when he outwardly swears to Lussurioso will affect his inner self.⁷ François André Camoin, in *The Reven[g]e Convention in Tourneur, Webster, and Middleton*, questions the "validity" of Vindice's oath, saying that Vindice's use of "'slud, I will' ... the Elizabethan contraction of 'by God's Blood' is blasphemy rather than solemn engagement, and is surely a very weak foundation on which to base an entire career of pandering" (45). Yet Vindice's anxiety over his oath indicates that even this monosyllabic promise is a binding agreement. Later, when Lussurioso calls upon Vindice to deliver news of his attempt to seduce Castiza (via Gratiana), Vindice says to himself, "Now must I blister my soul, be foresworn, / Or shame the woman that received me first" (2.2.35-36). This return to the vow he makes highlights further the connection Vindice feels between his soul and the 'lines' he speaks for his outward role as Piato.

¹⁸ In May of 1606, James I passed *An Acte to Restraine Abuses of Players*, which dictated that if "any person or persons doe or shall in any Stage play.... jestingly or prophanely speake or use the holy Name of God or of Christ Jesus, or of the Holy Ghoste or of the Trinitie" the offending party must pay 10 pounds for every offense (cited in Chambers' *The Elizabethan Stage*, Vol. IV, page 338). Vindice's oath in *The Revenger's Tragedy*, first staged in 1606, was apparently indirect enough to avoid punishment by that edict.

The Revenger's Tragedy forges an even stronger link between morality and dissembling through stagecraft and role-playing as Vindice seduces his mother. After Gratiana has accepted Piato's bribe to seduce Castiza, Vindice cries out in an aside:

O suffering heaven, with thy invisible finger
E'en at this instant turn the precious side
Of both mine eyeballs inward, not to see myself. (2.1.126-28)

In seeing the effect his role-playing has on his mother, Vindice simultaneously invokes Providence—God's omniscience in spite of Gratiana's blindness—and his own inwardness in an attempt to overcome what he has become outwardly. In *Moral Experiment in Jacobean Drama* T.F. Wharton claims that, based on his use of the word "myself" Vindice "seems to accept that his 'self' is his outside; in which case, he 'is' his disguise" (52). Throughout the play Middleton does use pronoun referents to increase the confusion (and delight) surrounding various disguises, but Wharton ascribes more weight to this particular instance than the text supports. However, Vindice at the very least acknowledges a type of schism in himself. Whether that external representation is his true "self," Vindice is clearly divided in this moment.

Although these early twinges of regret and concern over the disparity between himself and his role seem to be in line with antitheatricalists' complaints about theatre, by the end of the third act when he must again put on his Piato disguise, Vindice is entirely confident (and indeed prideful) in his ability to separate his inner self from his outer role. Telling his brother Hippolito of his plan to kill the Duke, Vindice states that the Duke "Think[s] my outward shape and inward heart / Are cut out of one piece (for he that prates / His secrets, his heart stands o' the outside)" (3.5.9-11). In Vindice's claim that he is able to entirely separate his interior and exterior, he betrays a marked shift from nervousness to overconfidence in his performance abilities. This impudence indicates that he has lost his initial (if momentary) moral concerns from earlier in the

action of the play, and that his disguises have indeed taught him to, as I.G. warned would happen in his *Refutation of the Apology for Actors*, “become proude, hawtie & arrogant” (sig. H2r).

Through Vindice’s casting off of his earlier guilt about role-playing, the play shifts from possible sympathy with antitheatrical sentiment to an approval of playacting.

Though Vindice remains complacent if not overtly gleeful in his role-playing and stagecraft, he berates women for the same sin, in a rhetorical move which links him to antitheatrical writers. In a twisted allusion to the graveyard scene in *Hamlet*, Vindice’s monologue contemplating the skull of his betrothed, Gloriana, expresses a decidedly misogynistic *contemptus mundi*. Rather than focusing solely on the futility of life (as all life ends in death), Vindice regrets that women paint their faces and attempt to hide their true selves from the world while they are living. In *Painted Faces on the Renaissance Stage*, Annette Drew-Bear discusses the Medieval and Renaissance concept of physiognomy in which a sinful soul was thought to be reflected by a naturally ugly visage.¹⁹ Drew-Bear states that “the origin of symbolic facial alteration is the devil’s attempt to disguise himself to deceive and seduce mankind” (35). Thus, face painting on the stage was often condemned for hiding the true nature of the wearer. Vindice subscribes to this rhetoric when he considers Gloriana’s skull, saying, “see, ladies, with false forms / You deceive men, but cannot deceive worms” (3.5.95-96). Vindice even laments the toll that make-up takes on a woman’s relationship with the Creator: “Does every proud and self-affecting dame / Camphor her face for this, and grieve her maker / ... all for this?” (3.5.82-85). For a man who only questioned his sins when he considered breaking a vow (not when he murdered a man), this concern about God’s judgment seems misplaced. In light of the deeds he has committed and plans to commit while wearing literal masks, ladies’

¹⁹ Drew-Bear also notes that Stubbes’ *Anatomie of Abuses* and William Prynne’s *Histriomastix* (London, 1583) address the sinfulness of face-painting.

face-painting seems chaste by comparison. On the surface of these complaints, he is concerned that women are weaker and more susceptible to deception and sin than men's are—"their sex is easy in belief" (1.1.107). Yet it is possible that this anxiety betrays his own guilt about the role he played in deceiving and seducing his mother. In the antitheatrical texts by Puritan writers such as Stubbes, Gosson, and Prynne, face-painting and acting are treated as the same type of depravity: both are a form of lying about one's true nature. Thus, Vindice displaces his guilt over role-playing onto the more abstract dissembling of female face-painting. By the third act of the play, Vindice relinquishes his earlier qualms about adopting a disguise to seduce his mother and sister. The scene in which Vindice and Hippolito kills the Duke is excessive in its theatricality, and Vindice rejoices in his inventiveness in this scene.²⁰ In leveling critiques against the female sex that could just as easily be directed towards his own actions, Vindice simultaneously ignores his own culpability while embodying a popular moralizing stance towards feminine face-painting. Vindice moves from holding himself culpable under the terms of contemporary morality, to displacing that blame onto others and wholeheartedly celebrating his own dissembling.

Contrary to Vindice's moralizing about the deceitfulness of women, the character most concerned about the cost of dissembling and shunning the self created by God is not Vindice, but his sister Castiza. In terms of honesty and morality, Castiza and Antonio are the two sympathetic moral characters in the play.²¹ Yet Antonio is less of a character and more of a figure of a virtuous man; Castiza is not only virtuous, but also loving, witty, and complex. She shares with her morally adrift brother a preoccupation with the separation reality and created roles. After

²⁰ See the pages 1-2 of the Introduction to this paper for an analysis of the scene.

²¹ C.f. Bowers' *Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy*. Although he entirely overlooks Castiza's morality, Bowers does acknowledge Antonio's contrast to the rest of the decadent court.

withstanding a shameless attempt at seduction by Vindice-as-Piato, Castiza is then affronted by her own mother's lack of integrity. Yet Castiza remains virtuous throughout, and condemns her mother's ill behavior as a performance. When Gratiana attempts to use an adage to convince Castiza that Lussurioso's money and stature are worth her virginity, Castiza tells her mother that the saying "does not show so well / Out of your own mouth. / Better in [Piato's]" (2.1.171-73). Simultaneously attempting to shame her mother and honor her previous esteem for Gratiana, Castiza suggests that Gratiana is repeating lines which better fit Piato's role. Castiza makes the disguise analogy even clearer later in the scene, when she despairs of her mother's disgrace:

CASTIZA: I have endured you with an ear of fire;
Your tongues have struck hot irons on my face.
Mother, come from that poisonous woman there!

GRATIANA: Where?

CASTIZA: Do you not see her? She's too inward, then (2.1.231-235)

Castiza's call for her mother to "come from" her alter-ego suggests that the "poisonous woman" has enveloped the true Gratiana. These strident remarks are simultaneously condescending jabs at Gratiana and evidence of the helplessness Castiza feels in learning that Gratiana has more regard for wealth than for her daughter's well-being.

In addition, Castiza's language regarding the assault on her virtues by way of her ears resonates with Gosson's perspective on the eyes and ears as entryways to the soul, which was also reflected by Balthazar's suspicion of Horatio in *The Spanish Tragedy*: "that which entreth into vs by the eyes and eares, muste bee digested by the spirite, which is chiefly reserued to honor God" (sig. B8v). By repelling the outward, aural assault she has received, Castiza is shoring up the defenses of her soul. Unlike Balthazar's configuration of Bel-Imperia's inability to repel verbal dissembling, Castiza remains wholly in control of her inner self by recognizing the dangers present in her mother's lies. Castiza's rational interpretation of the role-playing she

witnesses indicates that she is able to tell the difference between the real world and the world of the stage/actors. Although she seems to be aligned with the antitheatricalists in her morality and views on dissembling, her own role-playing precludes a straightforward reinforcement of antitheatricalism. Mirroring her brother's earlier attempt to "try the faith of both" Gratiana and Castiza, Castiza tests Gratiana's repentance by pretending that she will cede to Lussurioso's advances (1.3.176). Castiza uses the same language as Vindice in explaining her ploy to Gratiana: "I did this but to try you" (5.1.147). Castiza is not merely lying to her mother as she claims that she will succumb to Lussurioso, she is putting on a performance of immorality (echoing her earlier suspicion that Gratiana was performing an immoral version of herself that did not echo her inner self). That Gratiana and Castiza are the only two characters whose final moments on stage are unreservedly happy indicates that, in the world of the play, Castiza's dissembling is not cause for punishment. As Joan Lord Hall states, "[s]he remains truly Castiza, an icon of chastity" (32).

Castiza's valorization is just one indication that the play celebrates theatricality rather than condemning it. The manner of Vindice's downfall through his own excessiveness also supports this analysis. *The Revenger's Tragedy* doesn't fully vindicate Vindice's usurpation of God's power, as evidenced by his ultimate punishment. Yet neither does the play strongly condemn Vindice for that usurpation, or for his assumption of disguises. When a new ruler (Antonio) steps up at the end of the play and wonders who orchestrated the deaths of much of the royal family, Vindice responds "We may be bold / To speak it now: 'twas somewhat witty carried, / Though we say it. 'Twas we two murdered him!" (5.3.92-94). Rather than hold his tongue as he had so aptly done throughout the rest of the play, Vindice relishes an opportunity to share his wit and expertise in stagecraft and revenge. Antonio immediately commands his guards

to carry Vindice and his brother Hippolito “to speedy execution” (5.3.98). Vindice shows no remorse when Antonio condemns him to death; he merely accepts his sentence, content that he accomplished what he intended to do. His final words are “We’re well; our mother turned, our sister true, / We die after a nest of dukes! Adieu” (5.3.121-22). Vindice’s tongue-in-cheek acceptance of death indicate that while the plays nods at contemporary morality and religious beliefs, *The Revenger’s Tragedy* celebrates theatricality and the power of an individual to enact change.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

An analysis of revenge plays' relationship to contemporary morality is fraught with subtle evidence in both directions. On one hand, the evils of dissembling are presented as very real at the level of plot. The dangers of the inward/outward separation of theatre are presented as twofold for both avengers' 'audiences' within the plays, and the actual audience viewing these plays. On the one hand, if you let yourself believe the role you are seeing is reality rather than representation—that the outward show aligns with the inward being—you will find yourself misled and possibly begin acting outside of your vocation. This dangerous mixture of reality and representation is exemplified when Pedringano believes that an empty box contains his pardon, as well as when Vindice begins to experience slippage between his inward and outward selves.

If, on the other hand, you write off theatre as harmless spectacle—as outward performance with no effect on or relevance to internal nature—you remain open to real violence. The masques in each play represent that latter form of delusion. As Lillian Wilds states in *The Revenger as Dramatist*, “both masques [in *The Revenger's Tragedy*] are perversions of the dramatic form—the first masque being used for rape, the last for murder” (121). The first masque takes place offstage, and is described in detail by Antonio, whose wife was raped by the Duchess' youngest son. The youngest son and his accomplices are described as “[S]ome courtiers in the masque, / Putting on better faces than their own, / Being full of fraud and flattery” (1.4.28-30). Yet we get no evidence that Antonio's wife is beguiled by the “better faces”; she is forcibly raped in the midst of revelry, rather than taken in by an act. But Antonio makes a point of belaboring the youngest son's disguise, as if the anonymity and deceit that

attend to masques lead (un)naturally into his wife's rape. The King of Spain and Viceroy of Portugal are both similarly taken in by Hieronimo's masque in the final act of *The Spanish Tragedy*; they believe themselves to be viewing a harmless spectacle, without noticing the real, visceral murder taking place in front of them. Hieronimo is careful to disillusion them, however:

Haply you think—but bootless are your thoughts,—
That this is fabulously counterfeit,
And that we do as all tragedians do:
To die today, for fashioning our scene,
...
And in a minute starting up again,
Revive to please tomorrow's audience" (4.4.76-82)

Here, the author of the tragedy explicitly addresses the danger of being complacent in the divide between theatre and real life. At the level of plot, Hieronimo seems to be reinforcing the dangers of theatre. Yet the beauty of this scene is that audience members would recognize that, indeed, everything taking place on the stage before them *is* "fabulously counterfeit"; the play-within-the-play, no matter how seemingly bloody and murderous, will be staged again the next day.

In spite of the myriad examples of the genre reinforcing contemporary morality, the fact remains that these plays include some of the most excessive metadrama in the period. Kyd and Middleton both craft plays with excessive plotting, which consistently celebrate inventiveness. Why would a playwright stage such a metadramatic play if he were wholly opposed to theatricality? Kyd and Middleton both experimented with the theatrical possibilities of this new, bloody genre. *The Spanish Tragedy* includes early uses of the masque and dumb show in Elizabethan drama, and *The Revenger's Tragedy* includes more than 100 asides. Frequently, these asides celebrate Vindice's dexterity in acting: one of his earliest asides is "I'll quickly turn into another" (1.1.135). The overall treatment of the avengers also indicates a celebration of theatricality, players, and playwrights. Both Hieronimo and Vindice overcome the stigma and

guilt of their sins, with Hieronimo taking his fate into his own hands and Vindice shrugging his shoulders and winking at the audience as he heads to his death. The same issues that come up when considering the morality of avengers' vigilantism and shunning of God's right to avenge are present in the metadrama of the play as well: we see the individual working against the apparently stronger forces of heaven and the justice system to exact his revenge as he sees fit. By giving avengers autonomy in both the execution of their revenge and in their inventiveness throughout the process, Kyd and Middleton imbue these plays with a celebration of individualism and creativity.

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