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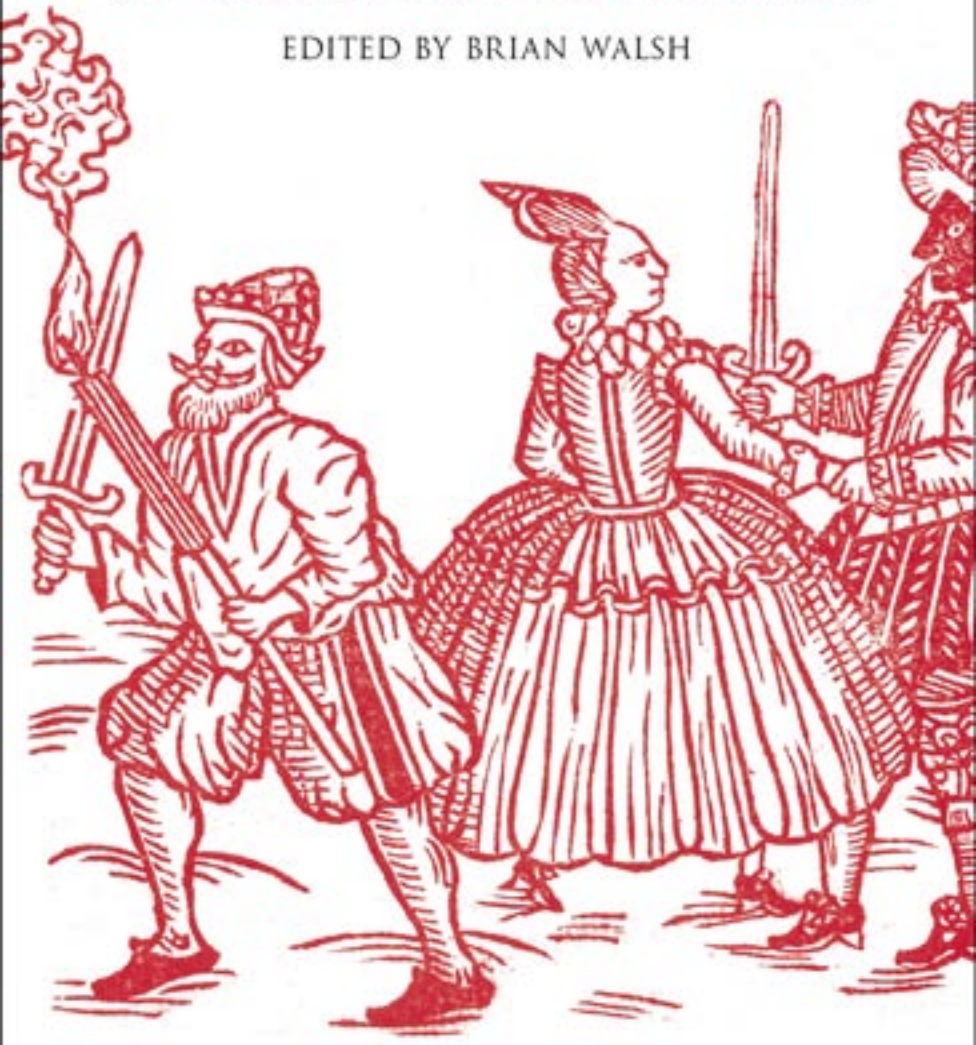
The Revenger's Tragedy

A CRITICAL READER

EDITED BY BRIAN WALSH



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The Revenger's Tragedy

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Cover: image taken from the 1615 title page of *The Spanish Tragedy*, by Thomas Kyd

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SERIES INTRODUCTION

The drama of Shakespeare and his contemporaries has remained at the very heart of English curricula internationally and the pedagogic needs surrounding this body of literature have grown increasingly complex as more sophisticated resources become available to scholars, tutors and students. This series aims to offer a clear picture of the critical and performative contexts of a range of chosen texts. In addition, each volume furnishes readers with invaluable insights into the landscape of current scholarly research as well as including new pieces of research by leading critics.

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Andrew Hiscock and Lisa Hopkins

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Brian Walsh has taught at Rutgers, the University of Illinois, and Yale University, USA. He is the author of *Shakespeare,*

the Queen's Men and the Elizabethan Performance of History (2009) and *Unsettled Toleration: Religious Difference on the Shakespearean Stage* (2016), as well as of several articles and book chapters on Shakespeare and other early modern dramatists.

TIMELINE

c. 1587: Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* written and first performed, initiating a vogue for revenge tragedy. It will be printed five times between 1592 and the likely premier of *The Revenger's Tragedy*.

c. 1601: Shakespeare's *Hamlet* written and first performed.

1603: First Quarto of *Hamlet* is printed.

c. 1605–6: *The Revenger's Tragedy* is most likely written and first performed by the King's Men, perhaps at the Globe, London, in this period.

1607: *The Revenger's Tragedy* is entered into the Stationer's Register in a double entry along with *A Trick to Catch the Old One*. The first edition of the play is printed by George Eld, with no authorial attribution. Its title page reads 'THE REVENGERS TRAGÆDIE. *As it hath beene sundry times Acted, by the Kings Maiesties Seruants*.' (Some copies are dated 1608.)

1656: *The Revenger's Tragedy* is attributed to Cyril Tourneur in a play list belonging to Edward Archer.

1661: Francis Kirkman attributes *The Revenger's Tragedy* to Tourneur in a play list.

1671: In an expansion of his 1661 catalogue, Kirkman again attributes *The Revenger's Tragedy* to Tourneur.

1891: F. G. Fleay expresses doubt about Tourneur's authorship of *The Revenger's Tragedy* in his *Biographical Chronicle of the English Drama*.

1926: E. H. C. Oliphant publishes an article in *Studies in Philology*, arguing that Thomas Middleton wrote *The Revenger's Tragedy* (following up on an earlier suggestion that he had made in 1911). This helps to initiate a series of debates on the play's authorship in books and academic journals over the next decades, with scholarly consensus gradually swinging toward Middleton.

1937: The first recorded post-seventeenth century revival of *The Revenger's Tragedy* takes place as a student production in the UK, under the auspices of the Cambridge University A. D. C (Amateur Dramatic Club).

1951: A radio presentation of *The Revenger's Tragedy* is broadcast by the BBC.

1965: *The Revenger's Tragedy* is staged at the Pitlochry Festival in Scotland, its first known professional stage performance since the early seventeenth century.

1966: Trevor Nunn directs *The Revenger's Tragedy* for the Royal Shakespeare Company at Stratford, UK; Lawrence J. Ross edits a single edition of *The Revenger's Tragedy* for Regents Renaissance Drama series; R. A. Foakes edits an edition for the Revels series. Both editions tentatively credit Tourneur as the author.

1967: Brian Gibbons edits an edition of *The Revenger's Tragedy* for the New Mermaids Series, attributed to Tourneur.

1969: Nunn's RSC production is mounted in London.

1970: Robert Brustein directs *The Revenger's Tragedy* at Yale Repertory Theater, New Haven, Conneticut, in 1970.

1975: The state of the case for Middleton as author of *The Revenger's Tragedy* takes a decisive turn in his favour for many scholars as David Lake publishes *The Canon of Thomas*

Middleton's Plays in which he argues at length for Middleton's authorship.

1983: MacDonald P. Jackson publishes a facsimile version of the 1607/8 quarto *The Revenger's Tragedy*, with an introduction that purports to prove Middleton's authorship.

1980: Peter Lichtenfels directs *The Revenger's Tragedy* at the Liverpool Playhouse, UK.

1982: Toby Robertson directs *The Revenger's Tragedy* at the Bouwerie Lane Theater, New York.

1987: Di Trevis directs *The Revenger's Tragedy* for the Royal Shakespeare Company in Stratford, UK.

1989: Stuart Wood directs *The Revenger's Tragedy* at the Call Board Theatre, Los Angeles, CA.

1992: Jude Kelly directs *The Revenger's Tragedy* at West Yorkshire Playhouse, UK; Mike Alfreds directs a production for the Cambridge Touring Theatre, UK.

2002: A film version of *The Revenger's Tragedy*, adapted and directed by Alex Cox, with a futuristic setting that features most of the original script as well as some invented dialogue, is released.

2005: Jesse Berger directs *The Revenger's Tragedy* at the Red Bull Theatre, New York.

2008: Two high-profile productions of *The Revenger's Tragedy* open in the UK, one at the National Theatre, London, directed by Melly Still, the other at the Royal Exchange, Manchester, directed by Jonathan Moore.

2008: Brian Gibbons reissues his New Mermaids series edition of *The Revenger's Tragedy*, but now attributes the play to 'Anonymous'.

2010: *Thomas Middleton The Collected Works*, edited by Gary Taylor and John Lavagnino, which includes *The Revenger's Tragedy*, is published by Oxford University Press.

Introduction

Brian Walsh

The Revenger's Tragedy is one of the most vital and enduring tragedies of the Jacobean era and one of the few non-Shakespearean plays of that period that is still regularly revived on stage and taught in classrooms. Notable for its piercing insight into human depravity, its savage humour, and its florid theatricality, *The Revenger's Tragedy* investigates more starkly than any other play of its era the fundamental issue of how the act of retribution warps, irrevocably, the mind and soul of the revenger. Through its plot, action, and language, *The Revenger's Tragedy* is in explicit conversation with *Hamlet* and many other works by Shakespeare and his contemporaries, making it a fascinating lens through which to assess how Jacobean playwrights imitated, parodied, and revamped each other's work for audiences hungry for repetitions and revisions of tried formulas. On its own terms, it contains shocking humour, compelling and disturbing poetry, ingenious stagecraft and stratagems, and impressively vivid characterizations of some stock dramatic figures. Its plot twists and reversals, which continue until the last few lines, continually force those who encounter it to re-evaluate the appropriate response to injury and to question the earthly and cosmic possibilities for attaining justice. Its peculiar power, as the essays in this collection attest, resides in its ability to please, repulse, and challenge readers and audiences in overlapping ways that are difficult to disentangle and articulate, but impossible to forget or ignore. *The Revenger's Tragedy: A Critical*

Reader is the first volume of essays devoted solely to this important work. In the tradition of the Arden Early Modern Drama Guides series, it offers an array of fresh critical arguments about the play from a diverse group of scholars, alongside carefully compiled and authoritative overviews of *The Revenger's Tragedy*'s critical and performance history and an essay on resources for teaching and studying it. This introduction will outline the volume's contents in more detail, as well as call attention to a few of the play's most pressing questions and its means of articulating them.

The allure of revenge

Near the end of Dashiell Hammett's novel *The Maltese Falcon*, anti-hero Sam Spade attempts to define himself and his principles to his femme fatale Brigid O'Shaughnessy. Spade has learned that O'Shaughnessy murdered Miles Archer, the private eye with whom Spade ran his detective agency. He explains why, despite the fact that he intensely disliked Archer, and despite the fact that he is also not meticulous about truth and justice *per se*, he will nonetheless turn her over to the police:

> When a man's partner is killed, he's supposed to do something about it. It doesn't make any difference what you thought of him. He was your partner and you're supposed to do something about it.[1]

Spade's vague articulation of a principle behind his actions is quickly qualified when he makes clear that self-interested concern for his own safety, and for the preservation his male ego, are really the motivating factors in his decision to cashier Brigid, who lies to him throughout the book. With 'you're supposed to do something about it', Spade delivers a feint towards, and subsequent collapsing of, a coherent ethos of

retaliation, conveying how theories of a 'just' revenge are always bedevilled by ambiguity and uncertainty.

Hammett, thus, joins his detective novel to an evergreen component of the revenge genre, wherein revenge serves as compelling subject matter and as a gnomic ethical provocation, both to those within the story and to those consuming it. Writers since Homer, across the spectrum of high, middlebrow and, low culture, have drawn on this enduring epistemological and moral morass to structure, complicate and give urgency to their work. The Elizabethan and Jacobean eras in England were particularly fecund times for exploring the dimensions of revenge. The precise explanatory factors for this phenomenon are elusive. Tanya Pollard, Linda Woodbridge, and others have put forward strong hypotheses that the popularity of revenge stories at this time was the result of specific social and political conditions that stoked an unusually urgent desire to see wrongs addressed in radical fashion.[2] While it is difficult ever to pin down a precise cause for the periodic flourishing of such enduring conventions as stories about revenge, the fact is that the early modern theatre scene that emerged and thrived during these years developed a brand of tragedy that proved to be a dynamic conduit for such narratives. *The Revenger's Tragedy*, first published in 1607, and probably written and performed a year or so earlier, is one of the signal works of the period's 'revenge tragedy' subgenre.[3] The play was printed without authorial attribution, its title page indicating only that it was performed by Shakespeare's company, the King's Men; thus, presumably it was acted at the Globe Theatre in Southwark, London. For centuries, the author of the play had been posited as Cyril Tourneur, but, over the past century, this attribution has been rejected by many scholars. The consensus candidate for authorship of *The Revenger's Tragedy* at present is Thomas Middleton, although this is a knotty issue that is far from settled. I will say more about it below.

Regardless of who wrote this particular work, the revenge tragedies produced in the age of Shakespeare continue to stand out as landmarks in the long history of such narratives. Plays

like Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* and Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* demonstrate with blunt clarity how human beings react to hurt and loss with a visceral desire for revenge on their tormentors, while perhaps the most famous play in the Western canon, *Hamlet*, focuses on how such impulses run into practical and ethical impediments when they are experienced by an especially sensitive mind. Francis Bacon's famous comment that revenge is a 'kind of wild justice' gets to the heart of the revenge conundrum: the tense phrase 'wild justice' foregrounds the paradox of the revenger who seeks to restore balance and rightful dealing through usually disorderly and underhanded means.[4] As a genre, the revenge tragedy specializes in enacting and communicating this paradox. These works invite audiences to share imaginatively in their protagonists' need to redress grievances through retaliatory violence while they also demonstrate how severely warped the vengeful become, to the extent that the overriding feeling most of these plays convey is an uncanny mixture of delight and horror at whatever it is the revenger ends up doing.

The Revenger's Tragedy enacts its particular exploration of these problems in the setting of a deeply corrupt, Italian court of an unnamed lecherous and murderous old Duke. The Duke's family members – a legitimate and a bastard son, a wife and three stepsons – are variant exemplars of sinful decadence. Lust – for power, sex, or both – is the chief crime by which each is defined. Against this monstrous family stands the enigmatic Vindice and his clan: his recently widowed and impoverished mother, Gratiana, his brother, Hippolito, who serves inconspicuously at the court but secretly loathes the Duke's family, and his sister, Castiza, a young innocent who is beleaguered by the sexual advances of the Duke's eldest son, Lussurioso. Outside of these two families is the old nobleman Antonio, whose wife, at the start of the play, has been raped recently by the Duke's youngest stepson. She will shortly take her own life as a consequence. Vindice himself stays away from court in mournful obscurity as he laments two absent figures whose memory serve to fuel his hatred

toward the Duke: his beloved Gloriana, a woman poisoned by the Duke because she refused his attempts to seduce her; and Vindice's father, who died in poverty and disgrace because of some unexplained persecution by the Duke. All of this is established with admirable economy in the first few scenes of *The Revenger's Tragedy* and Vindice, in a bravura opening soliloquy, is, from the outset, well-positioned as the play's conscience. Like a choric figure, he points out the worst of the Duke's family and anatomizes them to the audience as they pass over the stage. He stands at first outside the action as a commentator, perhaps even a radical truth teller, whose recoil from the fetid atmosphere of the Duke's court establishes him as a potential force of change and agent of renewal.

Beyond establishing himself as a figure of some moral authority in this opening speech, Vindice makes a compelling bid for audience sympathy. In moving terms, he expresses his deep and abiding emotional wounds from Gloriana's death, but it is through his expression of this that some playgoers may quickly begin to see something more to his grief than pitiable distress, and something more to his potential than that of serving as an avenging angel. There is, as well, morbid eccentricity, for Vindice in this first scene apostrophizes Gloriana's skull:

> Thou sallow picture of my poisoned love,
> My study's ornament, thou shell of Death,
> Once the bright face of my betrothed lady,
> When life and beauty naturally filled out
> These ragged imperfections;
>
> (1.1.14–18)[5]

When Vindice converses with a skull, he not only alludes to Hamlet, his famous predecessor on the Globe stage, but also to the tradition of fetishizing gruesome tokens that serve as symbols of revenge, such as Hieronimo's bloody napkin in Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*. His strange affectation of carrying and addressing the body part of a

deceased love begins to complicate Vindice's character, as he quickly transforms from the vessel of redemption he first seemed to be and begins to appear instead as something less distinct. Vindice announces himself here as a man unhinged by trauma and, as *The Revenger's Tragedy* proceeds, he emerges increasingly as an anti-hero and thus less as a reliable moral touchstone for the play.

Vindice will later speak of the 'violence of my joy' (3.5.27) as he prepares an elaborate ploy to ensnare the Duke. This expression reflects the peculiar charisma of revenge: 'violent joy' captures as much about typical audience response to *The Revenger's Tragedy* as it does about the protagonist's giddy prospects for defeating his nemesis. The entertainment value of this play, its capacity to please readers and audiences, has been well demonstrated by the rich critical and performance history it has enjoyed, as documented elsewhere in this volume in essays by Hirschfeld, Crosbie, Munro, and Brucher. The pleasure of revenge stories more generally is perhaps so basic that it sometimes escapes careful analysis. Their ubiquity throughout the history of narrative might simply be an example of the power of convention, but it is safe to say that these tales also satisfy deep-seated human fantasies of restoration. The most fundamental feeling such stories play upon is that of imbalance. As Hamlet puts it, 'the time is out of joint' (2.1.189).[6] Some sustaining aspect of a society or of an individual's life has been broken, destroyed, or removed. Since mutability and some version of the ancient 'wheel of fortune' dynamic are enduring conditions of human life, feelings of dislocation and longing for a lost Eden persist across time and cultures. The central fantasy explored in a revenge story is of locating a cause for the out of jointness, or the banished paradise, of defeating that cause and of re-achieving something like justice and, hence, equilibrium.[7] Yet, defining equilibrium in the aftermath of some disruption, or settling on a consensus of what justice looks like, are hardly easy things to do. The pleasures of revenge tragedy for its consumers must then involve the juxtaposition of some

superficial sense of closure, alongside nagging incertitude over whether the time has been restored or remains 'out of joint'; whether, indeed, restoration, justice, or equilibrium are even possible.

The failure of temporal justice in the context of some local jurisdiction, because of the ignorance, ineptitude or, most often, complicity in crime of those in power is a hallmark of the revenge tragedy genre. In modern iterations, such as potboiler cop novels, television shows, and movies, there are routinely legal loop-holes or minor technical violations of procedural protocol that allow criminals to escape punishment, making it necessary for individuals to seek satisfaction outside the law. Thus, a line such as 'my revenge is just' (1.2.189) reverberates powerfully as the vindication all avengers claim when they seek to establish equity in corrupt societies. Yet it is spoken in *The Revenger's Tragedy* by Spurio, the Duke's bastard son, who, while he may have some cause for resentment at his devalued social position, is hardly an exemplar of righteous indignation or restorative action. His revenge takes the form of sexually humiliating his father by cuckolding him with his present wife and his greatest ambition is to attain power for himself. His audacious appropriation of the language of the justified avenger, acting on behalf of the truth and the sincerely downtrodden or victimized, indicates a great deal about the atmosphere and the aesthetics of *The Revenger's Tragedy*. This is a play in which nearly everyone feels aggrieved in some way, and they articulate their resentment in passionate, compelling terms that can, at least momentarily, belie the plausibility of their claims: from the pernicious Duchess to her vicious sons, from the Duke's slimy heir, Lussurioso, to the family unit of Vindice, Hippolito, Castiza and Gratiana – among whom only Castiza can escape any censure for bad actions – the play teems with individuals who assert that they have been wronged, snubbed, or deprived in a way that requires bold action to amend their unfair lot. By convention we call the play *The Revenger's Tragedy*, as though it were about a single person's (presumably Vindice's) quest for

vengeance. However, as Jeremy Lopez asserts in his essay in this collection, as he notes the ambiguity of the play's title as it appears in the 1607/8 quarto ('The Revengers Tragaedie'), 'the unpunctuated 'Revengers' oscillates rapidly and continuously between suggesting a single tragic actor and a crowd of them' (p. 101).

The 'crowd' that Lopez references might as easily mean the audience, as well as those on stage. Sympathetic identification, on an instinctual level, with the position of the revenger is surely a central element to the genre's appeal. Who, no matter how privileged or powerful, at some point in time doesn't feel – legitimately or not – slighted, unfairly hurt, cruelly overlooked or egregiously wounded by someone who escapes punishment? It is the thrill of vicarious action in response to such universal feelings that plays like *The Revenger's Tragedy* skilfully exploit in order to please consumers. And *The Revenger's Tragedy*, more than any other early modern example of the genre, explores and seeks to unveil for scrutiny this very issue of the entertainment value of revenge. The 'vicarious' thrills on display here are not the stuff of ordinary repayment in kind. The ethos of *The Revenger's Tragedy* is not symmetry, as in the *lex talionis* dogma of an 'eye for an eye'. It is, rather, an ethos of excess, so that the punishment does *not*, as Gilbert and Sullivan might put it, fit the crime: it surpasses it in the ancient Senecan tradition.[8] The play's appeal is not merely that it understands the impulse to revenge as a common one. It connects that appeal to the most ingenious fantasies of settling scores imaginable. The quotidian revenge instinct is given intense frisson through the elaborate schemes and perverse actions of the play's avengers. From Spurio and the Duchess seeking to wound the Duke through their taboo sexual relationship, to the masquers' deadly dances late in the play, to Vindice's advice to Lussurioso that, to avenge his father's honour in response to his cuckolding, he should kill the offenders *in flagrante delicto*, great care is given to imagining the best, even the most enjoyable, ways to return injury. As Vindice instructs Lussurioso, 'Oh 'twill be glorious, To kill

'em doubled' (2.3.4). Indeed, Vindice celebrates the singularity of his own schemes by praising them as 'no common action', a phrase that echoes Ben Jonson's charismatic over-reacher Volpone, from a play put on by the same playing company in, perhaps, the same year as *The Revenger's Tragedy*. He boasts that he grows rich through 'no common way'.[9] Vindice's damning admission at the play's end is prompted by his desire for credit. The killing of the Duke, he says, 'twas somewhat wittily carried' (5.3.100).

When Vindice speaks of the 'violence of my joy', he is acting as prologue to the scene of that 'witty' crime, one of the most infamous scenes in an infamous genre. Here, the lecherous old Duke is killed, in part, by kissing the poisoned skull of Gloriana. According to the stage directions in the scene where he will wreak his vengeance, Vindice enters '*with the skull of his love dressed up in tires*' (3.5.42.sd). Vindice has made a simulacrum of a woman out of his deceased lady's skull to present to the Duke as a potential lover. This comically outrageous plan is centred on the travesty of the skull that had been an object of loving veneration and the subject of Vindice's impassioned, awed address to it earlier. The ingenious creativity at work in Vindice's action, the unnecessarily elaborate, theatricalized, even grotesquely eroticized means of his revenge, are a distillation of the complex dynamics of the allure of revenge drama. What Vindice and Hippolito do to the Duke in Act 3, Scene 5 so far exceeds what most ordinary acts of revenge constitute it also becomes a point at which would-be-revengers attending or reading the play can stand aloof and feel safe from implication. Audiences can thrill at seeing the scoundrel Duke snuffed out in such shocking fashion, can perhaps identify with the spirit of indignation and revenge that possesses Vindice here, but are simultaneously able to judge his actions as over the top, corrupt, and ghastly from the safe distance of the reader/spectator.

Obligation, audience and gender

'You're supposed to do something about it.'

Sam Spade's remark from *The Maltese Falcon* is both a fumbling attempt to give revenge a coherent rationale, as well as a reminder about an especially poignant issue in the revenge drama tradition: the question of obligation. Given that most revenge stories involve vengeance taken on behalf of another, the ethical component and psychological toll of obligatory revenge are routinely foregrounded across the genre. Hamlet's agonizing interview with the ghost of his father is perhaps the most intense example of the external pressure to take revenge: how so often vengeance is not just an outgrowth of personal grief or resentment, but that it has a powerful social component as well, for injured parties are faced both with their private pain, as well as with cultural expectations on how they are supposed to deal with it. Laertes, one of *Hamlet*'s other revenger figures, bluntly characterizes his agitation over his father's murder: 'That drop of blood that's calm proclaims me bastard' (4.5.114). Intense networks of obligation, most tied in one way or another to anxieties of self-definition, structure conventions of revenge. As Vindice muses early in *The Revenger's Tragedy*, 'Hum, who e'er knew / Murder unpaid?' (1.1.42–3). The normative force of the obligation to avenge and the momentum of the revenge narrative trajectory are usually so overpowering that there is little time or space to reflect on the putative duty to retaliate. There is no such moment anywhere in *The Revenger's Tragedy*; the characters care only about how – never whether – to seek and achieve revenge. Even *Hamlet*, often styled as the most contemplative version of the genre from the era of *The Revenger's Tragedy*, upon close examination includes relatively little probing of whether or not vengeance is justifiable. Any musings in that direction are short circuited and ultimately foreclosed by the play's interest in the epistemology of revenge, as well as in

machinations and subterfuge. The intellectual work of the play ends up being the search for verification of the crime to be avenged, more so than inquiry into the question of revenge itself. The pressure to proceed with deadly vengeance tends to make alternative responses to injury unthinkable in these plays.

The Revenger's Tragedy is keenly aware of itself as a play built along certain prefabricated specifications and contains several moments of metatheatrical commentary on the pleasure it affords audiences by hitting its marks. As Vindice puts it while torturing the Duke: 'When the bad bleeds, then is the tragedy good' (3.5.199). The play balances this awareness of itself as a spectacle to be beheld by audiences with another repeated articulation of being watched, in this case by an omniscient God who might be carefully tallying the crimes. Early on, Vindice lists the sins of humanity he has known, including the father who will 'slide from the mother and cling the daughter-in-law; / Some uncles are adulterous with their nieces, / Brothers with brothers' wives – Oh hour of incest!' (1.3.62–4). He revels in reporting this panoply of perversity (in part the subject of Carol Thomas Neely's chapter in this book), but is careful to note also that while this may be cleverly hidden from sight here on earth, it does not escape the purview of 'that eternal eye / That sees through flesh and all' (1.3.68–9). Other references to the divine and its uncompromising awareness of human folly abound, sometimes spoken by brazenly shameful characters, such as the Duchess who speaks of 'the justice / Of that unbribed everlasting law' (1.2.161–2). That the Duchess or even Vindice can speak so confidently of divine knowledge is, on the one hand, the play's presentation of how canny malefactors can invoke sacred principles strategically and, on the other, affirmation that if the Duchess and Vindice can say such words and consciously sin themselves, they imbue the play's atmosphere with the hopelessness of a hell on earth, in which characters always know they are beyond redemption. The sense of being locked into an irreversible course of

badness is heard in the words of the odious rapist Younger Brother, who, upon being admonished by Lussurioso for not taking his trial seriously, speaks like a true reprobate, noting that these are 'good admonitions […] / If I'd the grace now to make use of them' (1.2.54–5), an invocation of a term and a concept – grace – that is subtly explored in the play. Beatrice Groves discusses this in this book.

Vindice's name, which means 'a revenger of wrongs' in Italian, is, like nearly all of the major character names in the play, a morality play like marker of predetermination.[10] Whenever a character on the early modern stage is saddled with such a moniker, audiences are given some insight as to the playwright's intention, but are also challenged by the possibility that the characters will bump against the boundaries of being embodied concepts. Antonio is given the most neutral name of any major character (apart from Hippolito) and this helps the play refuse closure at its end, when he condemns Vindice to death for killing the Duke and stands now to reign over the decimated court. These actions cry out for interpretation. But the name 'Antonio' in itself does not instruct audiences how they should respond to this figure or to his decree: is Antonio only doing what must be done in ridding the world of the unhinged and dangerous Vindice? Or is he calculatingly eliminating a possible political rival and entering the circle of corruption just vacated by the Duke and his family? If Vindice is only a righter of wrongs, must we take the latter view of Antonio, or should we suspect that no character's name here is all defining?

The type names of so many characters suggest that the people of this play's world are knowable, but this is ultimately a fantasy, even for audiences, as the names give us a starting point for assessing these figures, but never quite cover everything, even in the case of the Duchess's three ridiculous sons. Within the play, several characters express a fantasy of attaining the capacity of the 'eternal eye,' to 'see through flesh and all' and thus attain power over each other. Hippolito says that Lussurioso had sought through cunning questioning

to 'open and unhusk me' (1.1.68) in order to assess his true allegiances. Characters throughout the play are obsessed with acts of inquisitive peeling as they constantly seek to gain knowledge of other hearts and minds, while withholding their own feelings and desires, in some cases even their true identities. 'Open and unhusk me': the expression is reminiscent of theories of allegory advanced by Augustine and others, whereby the goal of interpretation is to strip off the outer layers of stories in search of the spiritually nutritious kernels of truth within.[11] In keeping with the play's corrosive atmosphere, Hippolito's line takes on the air of travesty, as the search for true meaning is only ever in the service of crude self-advancement in material or erotic terms or in pursuit of information to aid bloody deeds, rather than for purposes of divine enlightenment.

Applied to a person, 'unhusk' attains also a menacing physical connotation, reinforcing the violent atmosphere of the Duke's court, where physical assaults and acts of forceful 'opening' in the form of sexual violence are a past reality and remain a constant threat. *The Revenger's Tragedy* presents in particular a brutally misogynistic milieu in which women are reduced to lame tropes: 'Your hope's as fruitless as a barren woman,' (3.4.38) says an officer, while elsewhere rape jokes are made casually. When the judges ask the Duchess's youngest son what 'moved' him to commit his crime, he blithely responds 'why flesh and blood my lord: / What should move men unto a woman else?' (1.2.45–7). Vindice idealizes his dead love Gloriana, whom he had longed to marry, but maintains that 'wives are but made to go to bed and feed' (1.1.131). Like Hamlet, Vindice's mission of revenge is nearly derailed by his obsession with testing and reforming a corrupted mother. Similarly, he incorporates the concerns of Laertes and Polonius to police a female relative's sexuality when he seeks also to test his sister Castiza's chastity. Castiza's incorruptibility in the face of immense pressure to become Lussurioso's concubine is admirable to be sure, but in the play this devotion to chastity it is held up as a limiting exemplar

for female behaviour, as is, more disturbingly, the Lucretia-inspired suicide of Antonio's wife. Attacks on women are articulated by male characters throughout the play, chiefly Vindice, but they are internalized by female characters as well, namely Gratiana, who is quick to blame her own moral failings on her gender (e.g. 2.1.121–5). As much as the sensational violence, the dark humour and the transgressive energy of *The Revenger's Tragedy* continue to delight readers and audiences, its relentless and axiomatic anti-feminism marks one limit of its trans-historical pleasure. As Lucy Munro discusses in her performance review chapter, modern film versions and stage productions have sometimes tried to inject greater female agency and awareness of misogyny into the play. However, as Munro points out, this leads often to awkward and confusing results, as the play's discourse on women remains an unsettling window into historical foundations for gender roles and assumptions that continue to govern so called 'honour culture', as well as more mainstream repressive norms today.

Authorship

Many plays from Shakespeare's era have come down to us without authorial attribution and, in most cases, this is settled by simply acknowledging that the author is unknown or, by convention, 'Anonymous'. The excellent Elizabethan tragedy *Arden of Faversham* is one such example. Despite a lack of hard evidence to identify the author of *The Revenger's Tragedy*, though, scholars have long felt compelled to debate various candidates and to attempt to pin down a particular author, perhaps because, as some commentators have suggested, the play's liveliness seems to point to a charismatic author figure we are eager to discover. The candidate with the oldest pedigree is Cyril Tourneur, otherwise known mainly for his compelling, and yet, today, largely neglected work *The Atheist's Tragedy* (published 1611). A playlist from 1656

attributed *The Revenger's Tragedy* to Tourneur, as did another set of playlists from 1661 and 1671.[12] The gap between the play's first performance and printing and the initial attribution is some fifty years, but given the extreme scarcity of evidence from the Jacobean period about plays, any pieces of information that seem within historical striking distance are tempting to accept. However, as Heather Hirschfeld discusses in her 'Critical Backstory' essay in this volume, by the early twentieth century many scholars had begun to question the Tourneur attribution. A faction emerged that advanced Thomas Middleton as the more likely author, a case that has come to be based largely on stylistic tests and some suggestive, but ultimately circumstantial pieces of external evidence.[13] The conversation on the play's authorship proceeded as a 'one or the other' debate and a series of strong claims for Middleton, starting in the 1970s, began to swing critical consensus that way, a trend that has been most recently bolstered and given powerful disciplinary authority by *The Revenger's Tragedy*'s inclusion in Gary Taylor and John Lavagnino's *Thomas Middleton: The Collected Works* (2010). Christopher Crosbie captures the current effects of this trend on criticism in his 'State of the Art' essay in this volume, noting that, while critics writing about the play often tend to include 'brief asides about the ultimate inconclusiveness of the matter,' most nonetheless assert, if not necessarily depend on, Middleton's authorship as they advance their claims about the play (p. 77).

Some dams have been thrown up against the flow of this critical tide toward certainty, especially in three widely circulating editions of *The Revenger's Tragedy*, published in the last twenty years. Each confirms the dislodging of Tourneur, but also resists the definitive move to Middleton. R. A. Foakes's 1996 Revels edition revises his earlier edition's (already tentative) attribution to Tourneur without erasing him entirely: it lists the author of the play as 'Thomas Middleton/Cyril Tourneur', an inelegant, but clear way of showcasing the lingering controversy on the edition's cover. In the Norton *English Renaissance Drama* anthology from

2002, David Bevington and his team of editors offer their own quizzical method: they list the author of the play in the table of contents, on the title page within the volume and, as a running header over the length of the play, on its verso pages as 'Thomas Middleton (?)', a peculiar, but perhaps in its own way canny method of acknowledging, yet problematizing, the growing consensus. In his 2008 New Mermaids edition of the play, Brian Gibbons – swerving away from his previous two editions, published in 1967 and 1991, which list Tourneur as author – makes the choice that Foakes and Bevington seem to be toying with without actually committing to it: he ascribes *The Revenger's Tragedy* to 'Anonymous'.

Gibbons does not elaborate on his exact reasoning for this shift in his brief note on authorship in the introduction, but he does write that 'The mystery of [the author's] identity, if accidentally caused, seems consonant with the mood of his play', a view that is further complicated and ingeniously advanced by Jeremy Lopez in his essay for this volume.[14] As we will see, while Lopez draws attention to the authorship question in hopes of changing the nature of the conversation on the play and on early modern authorship more generally, other essays in this book treat the issue with differing degrees of emphasis. Ultimately, *The Revenger's Tragedy: A Critical Reader* does not take a corporate position on the matter or attempt to advance a claim, explicitly or implicitly, for who wrote this play. While each piece is clearly framed by what we might call a 'post-Tourneur' perspective, the chapters collected here reflect a range of current approaches in which the significance of authorship is put in the foreground or made to recede depending on the interests of the particular scholar or the function of the essay he or she is writing. Lopez calls attention to, in order to intervene in, the conversation about authorship. Meanwhile, Hirschfeld, Crosbie and Richard Brucher disinterestedly document the authorship debate's place in the play's critical history and thus alert interested readers to important milestones in the progress of the arguments and to available resources for further inspection.

Lucy Munro ascribes the play to Middleton with reference to the major scholarship on the issue, but without attaching too much importance to the particularity of his, rather than a different candidate's, authorship, as she describes the performance history of *The Revenger's Tragedy*. For Beatrice Groves, particular authorship becomes significant at moments in her argument, insofar as she identifies aspects of the play as characteristic of Middleton's style, as well as his religious sensibilities. Carol Thomas Neely, in remarks resonant with Lopez's, wonders whether the anonymity of the play was strategic and goes on to suggest that 'anonymity allows us to understand this play with fewer constraints and to see afresh its generic siblings' (p. 155). For Martin Moraw, it is not a pertinent issue and authorship, one way or another, does not impinge on his discussion of *The Revenger's Tragedy* as he reads its emotional and political resonances in light of the work of Walter Benjamin. For the most part, and this applies even and perhaps especially to Lopez's work here, these essays are concerned with examining the play's artistry, affect and afterlife, rather than with settling the authorship question or even with offering an exhaustive account of the various arguments about it, versions of which can be readily found elsewhere.[15] While the authorship of the play remains uncertain, the contributors here demonstrate that *The Revenger's Tragedy* is less interesting as a literary whodunit than it is as a powerfully disturbing, perversely satisfying, and thoroughly provocative art work.

The Revenger's Tragedy: *A Critical Reader*

This book begins with Heather Hirschfeld's comprehensive review of *The Revenger's Tragedy*'s critical history. As her chapter makes plain, the play has elicited very different responses in different eras: Romantic-era excitement at its