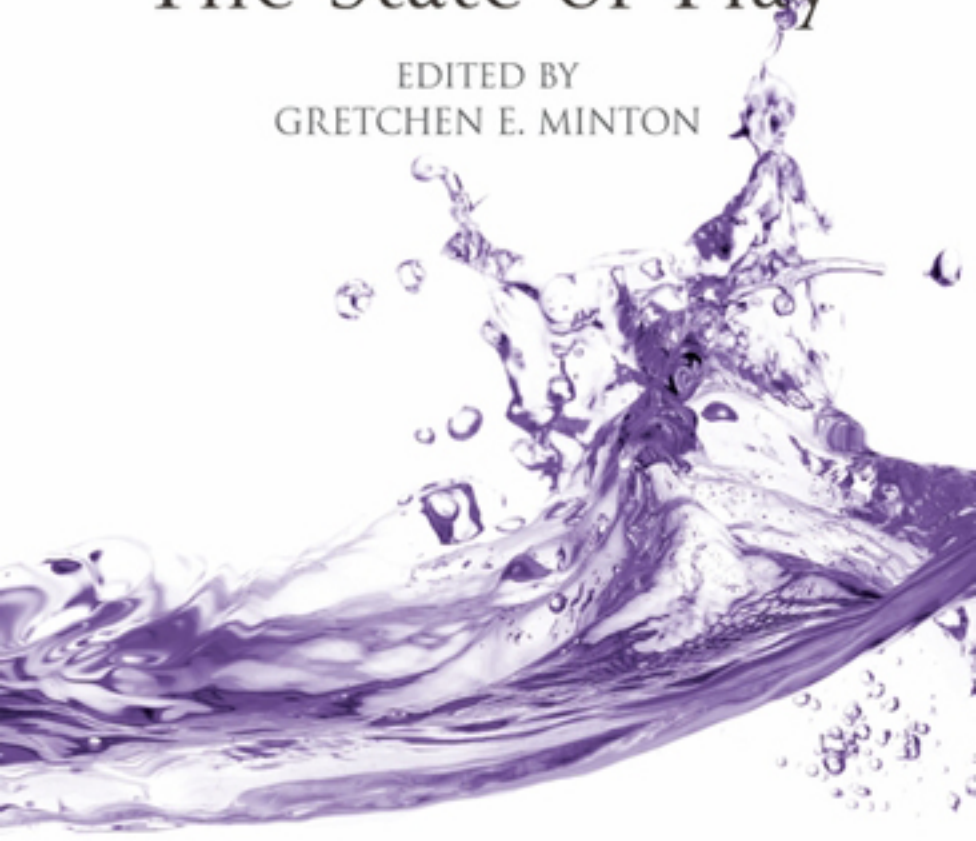
THE ARDEN SHAKESPEARE

THE REVENGER'S TRAGEDY

The State of Play

EDITED BY
GRETCHEN E. MINTON



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The Revenger's Tragedy

The State of Play

Edited by
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SERIES PREFACE

The Arden Shakespeare
State of Play
Series Editors: Lena Cowen Orlin and Ann Thompson

This series represents a collaboration between King's College London and Georgetown University. King's is the home of the London Shakespeare Centre and Georgetown is the home of the Shakespeare Association of America (SAA). Each volume in the series is an expedition to discover the 'state of play' with respect to specific works by Shakespeare. Our method is to convene a seminar at the annual convention of the SAA and see what it is that preoccupies scholars now. SAA seminars are enrolled through an open registration process that brings together academics from all stages of their careers. Participants prepare short papers that are circulated in advance and then discussed when the seminar convenes on conference weekend. From the papers submitted, the seminar leader selects a group for inclusion in a collection that aims to include fresh work by emerging voices and established scholars both. The general editors are grateful for the further collaboration of Bloomsbury Publishing, and especially our commissioning editor Margaret Bartley.

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Gretchen E. Minton, Bozeman, 2017

PART ONE

Religion and Genre

1

Vindice and the Vice of Revenge:

The Revenger's Tragedy and the Morality Play Tradition

Erin E. Kelly

There is a long critical tradition recognizing that *The Revenger's Tragedy* shares features with medieval morality plays such as *Mankind* and *The Castle of Perseverance*. Identifications of Middleton's play as like, if not necessarily an example of, morality drama date to L.G. Salingar's 1938 essay '*The Revenger's Tragedy* and the Morality Tradition'.[1] Others relied upon this categorization to argue that the play offers a clear moral message about the inherently sinful nature of human society.[2] These readings might now seem questionable since most critics who identified morality drama influences in *The Revenger's Tragedy* attributed the play to Cyril Tourneur, striving to square its ethical positioning with the more explicitly Christian rejection of revenge found in Tourneur's *The Atheist's*

Tragedy. Even so, *The Revenger's Tragedy* indubitably resembles medieval morality plays by putting onstage allegorically named characters who seem simultaneously to be individuals capable of specific actions and embodiments of abstract concepts.

Jonathan Dollimore notably threw out the possibility that *The Revenger's Tragedy* could be a '"late morality" where "the moral scheme is everything"' by pointing out all the ways in which it is parodic, subversive and outrageous, ultimately a 'radical tragedy' whose extreme violence and pervasive metatheatricality amount to 'black camp'.[3] Others have followed his lead, noting how *The Revenger's Tragedy* differs from early morality plays.[4] These arguments often imply that the morality is a 'simpler and cruder ancestor' of more realistic public theatre plays with psychologically developed characters. Morality plays might then be, at best, of historical importance, but even late examples have been described as lacking 'dramatic cohesion' and as showing a 'tendency to rambling diffuseness' that makes them bad plays.[5]

The debate about whether or not to label *The Revenger's Tragedy* a morality play hinges on how one defines that genre. Participants in this discussion who have disagreed about how to categorize Middleton's play too often share mistaken assumptions that morality drama is simple, pious and conservative. In fact, the morality play tradition comprises much more than a few medieval attempts to disseminate Christian teachings through performance. The following survey and analysis of the complex, constant evolution of morality drama across the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries demonstrates not only that *The Revenger's Tragedy* is a morality play, but also reveals how Middleton commented upon revenge tragedy conventions by reimagining them through the lens of an even older theatrical tradition.

Morality play foundations

One challenge for anyone attempting to attach the label 'morality' to Middleton's play is a lack of agreement about

how to define the term. As Robert Potter notes, 'The moralities are a tradition and not a rigid type'.[6] What's more, the term does not seem to have been commonly used for plays until well after the end of the Middle Ages, the period normally associated with such drama.[7] If *The Revenger's Tragedy* is a morality play, it will seem a shockingly late example to anyone who learned in school that morality plays died out when rejection of Catholic beliefs during the reigns of Henry VIII and Edward VI made older plays seem heretical. Even some theatre historians assume no one wrote a morality play after the 1560s, when Elizabethan statutes prohibited plays from engaging with religious controversy. Early morality plays do not typically forward polemical arguments, but many encourage devotional practices that would have seemed problematic to religious reformers.

Definitions of the morality usually look to the corpus of plays everyone seems to agree merit that label: *The Castle of Perseverance*, *Everyman*, *Mankind*, *Wisdom*, and the fragment *Pride of Life*. Pamela King admits that these texts are not like one another, are not necessarily medieval and may not even all be plays.[8] Given that so few early plays survive from what must have been a thriving fourteenth- and fifteenth-century performance culture, we might add that they could be unrepresentative examples.[9] But they are a reasonable place to start. As King puts it,

> What these plays have in common most obviously is that they offer their audiences moral instruction through dramatic action that is broadly allegorical. Hence they are set in no time, or outside historical time, though their lack of historical specificity is generally exploited by strategically collapsing the eternal with the contemporary.[10]

Additionally, these morality plays share a theatrical style Potter describes as involving 'acts of presentation rather than acts of illusion'; for example, the characters Mercy and Satan in *Mankind* have more lines in which they explain themselves

directly to the audience than in which they talk to other characters. Morality plays usually begin with such declamatory moments in a prologue or opening speech that 'Freely [acknowledges] the audience's presence [and] . . . makes clear the argument of the play or sets the scene'.[11]

The allegorical names of characters seem the most obvious characteristic Middleton adopted from the morality play tradition. The anonymous play *Wisdom* (1460–70) begins with both Wisdom and Soul offering speeches in which they name themselves.[12] The corruption of Soul involves vices perverting Mind, Understanding and Will. The character names in *The Revenger's Tragedy* are less Anglicized but equally suggestive of abstract qualities. As Florio's Italian dictionary for English speakers *A worlde of words* explains, Lussurioso means 'lusty, lecherous', Ambitioso 'ambitious', and Spurio 'a bastard, one base born' – and these characters manifest through their actions the qualities signalled by their names. Conversely, Castiza, whose name means chastity, and Gratiana, whose name is associated with grace, play out their parts as one would expect – Castiza is steadfast in protecting her virginity while Gratiana offers a problematic kind of social grace when she yields to Lussurioso's suit before receiving true grace in the form of her own repentance and her sons' forgiveness. Vindice's true name fittingly indicates that he is 'a reuenger of wrongs, a redresser of things, and abuses, a defender, one that restoreth and setteth a libertie or out of danger, a punisher of things done amisse', while his alias Piato signals humiliation and hypocrisy since the word means both 'a plea, a suite in law, a controuersie, a processe, a pleading' and 'flat, squat, cowred downe, hidden, close to the ground, euen, leuell, iust, razed with the ground'.[13]

These names would be more apparent to a reader of the play with a *dramatis personae* list on hand than to someone in the audience for a performance. In a production, we learn that the dead woman whose skull has been turned into a murder weapon was named Gloriana only when the Duke is in his final throes (3.5.150), thus implying that this figure represents a powerful achievement of 'glory' by poisoning the man who poisoned her.

Moments later, the play's main character reveals his name by shouting to the Duke, ''Tis I, 'tis Vindice, 'tis I' (5.3.167). Name, character and action intertwine as the figure on stage most clearly identifies himself as Vindice when he is in the midst of carrying out revenge. (Only retrospectively for an audience member, or retroactively for a reader flipping pages, does it become apparent that when Vindice in his opening monologue speaks of 'Vengeance' (1.1.39) and notes we must 'give Revenge her due' (1.1.43) he might be talking about himself.)

The play text deploys character names and descriptions in such a way that it is sometimes difficult to determine which is which. The first line, 'Duke, royal lecher, go, grey-haired adultery' (1.1.1), describes the character, but it also suggests his name might be Adultery, and his misdeeds both before and during the play merit that designation.[14] Hippolito and Vindice talk about the Duchess, who has helped Hippolito find a place at court, so shortly after they share quips about 'that bald madam, Opportunity' (1.1.55) that it seems fitting to think of her as such, especially when she takes the opportunity to revenge herself against the Duke by seducing Spurio. As does any morality play full of allegorically named characters, *The Revenger's Tragedy* blurs the agency underpinning action. Just as Avaritia in *The Castle of Perseverance* must greedily seek power over human souls and tempt mankind to covetousness, Vindice can be nothing other than a revenger, do nothing other than seek revenge.

The play's names slip so easily from being labels for stage figures to character descriptions to abstract qualities in part because of the play's abstracted setting. *The Revenger's Tragedy* takes place in Italy, so the play seems more rooted in the world than *Castle of Perseverance* (1382–1425), which stages its action around a castle set in the middle of scaffolds representing Flesh, World, Belial and Avarice. But Middleton's Italy is more symbolic and less specific than Hamlet's Elsinore or even Hieronimo's Spain. A judge's comment that the virtue of Lord Antonio's wife attracted admiration 'Over all Italy' (1.2.57) doesn't make explicit that the Duke governs a city-state in Italy,

much less which one. Time seems similarly indistinct – as the Duke dies, Vindice gloats, 'nine years' vengeance crowd into a minute' (3.5.122), but this phrasing does not necessarily mean Gloriana has been dead for exactly nine years. Nor does it clarify questions about how long Vindice's father has been deceased, how many weeks (or months?) Lussurioso has spent trying to seduce Castiza, or how much time passes between the suicide of Lord Antonio's wife and his ascension to the dukedom. The out-of-time and out-of-place quality of the play as much as the allegorical character names compel an audience to look for symbolic resonances and abstract ideas, if not necessarily clear morals, rather than a realistic representation of individualized people and specific events. *Everyman* (c. 1519) achieves similar effects by expanding the moment between an individual's encounter with death and his actual demise into a thousand-line exploration of how the soul might be saved, while *Castle of Perseverance* condenses human life and afterlife into about four thousand lines. As Middleton's play bends time and blurs place, it suggests the sins of the Duke and his family represent eternally problematic types of human corruption rather than the specific foibles of one court. *The Revenger's Tragedy* thus begs to be encountered as a morality play.[15]

Vindice's opening speech through its presentational style is very much in the tradition of morality play prologues, signalling to the audience that they are about to watch a play, suggesting what type of play it is and demanding an interpretive stance. As the immoral characters of the court make their way across the stage, Vindice calls them 'Four exc'llent characters' (1.1.5). His exposition of prior events that motivate his revenge, particularly the death of his fiancée, is framed as a condemnation of the vices of the present day. And the entire speech ends with a *memento mori* message:

> For banquets, ease, and laughter
> Can make great men, as greatness goes by clay,
> But wise men little are more great than they.
>
> (1.1.47–9)

This message plays out as those who think themselves at the height of their powers experience sudden downfalls – the Duke about to seduce a country maiden, Junior about to be pardoned for committing rape, Lussurioso at his coronation, and even Vindice assuming his acts of revenge will be celebrated all come to be 'As bare as this' (1.1.47) skull that appeared in the play's first moments. *The Revenger's Tragedy* might not offer a moral in the form of a lesson about Christian doctrine, but it seems a descendant of plays like *Everyman* or *Castle of Perseverance* when it reminds its audience that all human beings will die and exposes success in the earthly realm as vanity.

This invocation of the morality tradition is no accident; morality plays impacted Middleton's works throughout his career.[16] *The Black Book* (printed 1604) introduces itself as 'A Moral' and begins with a stage direction that would not be out of keeping in medieval drama, 'Lucifer, ascending as a Prologue to his own play'.[17] Similarly, one of Middleton's earliest works, *The Ghost of Lucrece* (c. 1597–1601), includes both a 'Prologue' and an 'Epilogue' surrounding a long monologue in which the title figure ponders whether her soul can ever be redeemed from hell, despite her lack of chastity and continuing desire for revenge against her rapist.[18] The final play of Middleton's career, *A Game at Chess* (1624), is a battle between good and evil represented through encounters between virtuous, white, English Protestant chess pieces and duplicitous, black, continental Catholic pieces. Their conflicts occur at the level of the social and political rather than within one individual's conscience; nonetheless, the rescue of the White Queen's Pawn from physical and spiritual debasement by lusty Catholics offers the play's audience an everywoman story.

Morality plays across the sixteenth century – and beyond

But how can we explain Middleton's late-sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century fascination with the conventions of

morality plays? Would his engagement with the morality play tradition have seemed academic (a form of proto-medievalism) or nostalgic (hearkening back to outdated theatrical tropes)? To understand Middleton's work, especially *The Revenger's Tragedy,* we need to examine drama across the entire early modern period. Although morality plays originated in the Middle Ages, the majority of English drama featuring allegorical characters in unspecified locations and relying upon a presentational style to offer an audience a moral message dates to the sixteenth century. By the first decades of Elizabeth's reign, many morality plays were not obviously Christian or even moral; to call *The Revenger's Tragedy* a morality play, therefore, puts it in like company.

King estimates 'seventy or so surviving interludes written between the period of the medieval saints' plays, scriptural plays, and morality plays and the construction of the first Elizabethan theatres' have much in common with medieval morality plays.[19] Plays ranging from John Skelton's *Magnificence,* usually dated between 1520 and 1522, to Nathaniel Woodes's *Conflict of Conscience,* likely composed shortly before 1581, rely on allegorical characters and feature conflicts between virtue and vice characters to represent the struggle for an individual's soul. Some later plays make only minor changes to the conventions found in medieval drama. For example, John Bale adapted the morality play to disseminate Protestant doctrine in plays like *Three Laws* (1538) by staging vices in the guise of hypocritical Catholic clerics. Some of these morality plays were performed at court, but a significant number appeared in school and university settings for educational as well as entertainment purposes, and quite a few have been associated with public performances by travelling companies.

As one would expect of any long-lived theatrical tradition, morality plays did not remain static across decades. Earlier morality plays often focus around a central *humanus genus* character who stands in for all people. (That said, even the plays with titles linked with this trope seem less universal when analysed carefully – Everyman is a particular type of man, a

merchant, and Mankind is a farmer.) More individualized central characters receive attention in later plays. For example, a subset of allegorical drama, including *Youth* (1513–14), *Wit and Science* (1539), *Lusty Juventus* (1547–53) and *The Disobedient Child* (1559–70), considers the spiritual and moral wellbeing of school-aged young men. A number of these plays move away from offering the explicitly Christian messages – instead, large-scale, court-associated plays like the Marian *Respublica* (1553) and the Scottish *Satire of the Three Estates* (first performed 1540 and revised 1552 and 1554) present lessons about good governance while small-cast plays for public presentation like *The Trial of Treasure* (1567) and *The Tide Tarrieth No Man* (1576) focus on how to manage worldly wealth.

Later morality plays often turn their attention to practical problems resulting from sin, representing social problems as allegorical vices in satirical – and highly entertaining – ways. The militantly Protestant *New Custom* (1550–73) makes Ignorance an old and foolish Catholic priest. In *The Longer Thou Livest the More Fool Thou Art* (1559–68), Ignorance is a fun-loving friend who has a bad influence on Moros, while Discipline is a morally upright but unexciting schoolmaster. *The Play of Wit and Science* (1539) has Idleness dress the fallen Wit in the ridiculous clothing of her son Ignorance. While there were presumably recognizable conventions associated with the staging of some allegorical figures, the fact that a quality like ignorance could be manifested in so many different ways suggests later morality plays' interest in selectively skewering particular forms of corruption. *The Revenger's Tragedy* might be seen as an extension of this tradition as it shows Vindice engaging with and punishing characters who outrageously act out their lust and ambition.

Some later morality plays have something else in common with *The Revenger's Tragedy*: final scenes in which a central character does not achieve a happy ending (in the form of earthly happiness or spiritual salvation). *Enough is as Good as a Feast* (1559–70) concludes with Worldly Man struck down

by God's Plague before being carried off to hell by Satan. *The Disobedient Child* (1559–70) states in its prologue that the audience will learn the dangers of parents being too lenient with their children, but the play also shows the young man refusing to follow his father's wise guidance; the question of whether father or the son is more at fault seems no easier to answer after the Devil appears onstage to claim responsibility for the son's petulance, so the moral one should derive from this morality is unclear. *Like Will to Like* is dominated by the vice Newfangle, who receives orders from Lucifer to help corrupt mankind by helping people find companions who share their sinful inclinations. Thus, drunkards and criminals wind up being paired off, and they all come to a bad end.

Teleological narratives that describe the rise of Renaissance drama as a secularizing adaptation of medieval religious drama have been around as long as scholars have undertaken serious study of plays by Shakespeare and his contemporaries; a story of religious morality plays evolving into more socially concerned drama that eventually turns into more realistic public theatre tragedies and comedies fits well with this narrative.[20] As it attempts to explain key structural features of early modern plays, David Bevington's seminal *Mankind to Marlowe* implies that Renaissance drama became more sophisticated as it progressively evolved out of and moved away from morality plays.[21] Discussions of morality play conventions often rest on this hypothesis, assuming that playwrights stopped staging allegorical figures that represented virtues or vices, that only transitional plays presented a Vice figure, and that plays performed at the time of Middleton peopled the stage with a very different type of individualized, psychologically developed characters.[22]

References to morality plays in sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century plays appear to reinforce these suppositions. When Shakespeare's *Richard III* (c. 1592; first printed 1597) describes himself as being 'Like the formal Vice, Iniquity' (3.1.81),[23] he can be seen as both accurately evaluating his own character and linking himself to a medieval past

associated with plays of Richard's times rather than with those being performed at the Globe. *Sir Thomas More* (c. 1590–1600) establishes the historicity of the events it stages by having its title character stage for his household guests an old-fashioned morality play identified as *The Marriage of Wit and Wisdom* (Scene 9).[24] Jonson's *The Devil is an Ass* (c. 1616) opens with the minor demon, Pug, asking Satan for a 'brave' Vice like Iniquity before being chided for thinking he will be helped by such an old-fashioned type of character; in the seventeenth century, the devil explains, vices are 'stranger and newer: and changed every hour' (1.1.102)[25] to the point where human depravity outstrips anything found in hell. But this is very thin evidence on which to base our understanding of theatre history; rather than identifying morality plays *per se* as outmoded, all of these references could just as well imply that the morality play elements of these later works self-consciously differ from, but are also in conversation with, earlier drama.[26]

As Alan Dessen once proposed, 'one *could* argue that the period between 1558 and 1590 represents the golden age of the morality play';[27] however, a survey of plays performed from the 1590s to the closing of the theatres in 1642 reveals that while the morality play was no longer a dominant form, highly allegorical drama was hardly moribund. Robert Wilson's plays about the fall and redemption of Lady Conscience, Lady Love and Lady Lucre, *The Three Ladies of London* and *Three Lords and Three Ladies of London,* were both printed and probably performed in the 1590s. *The Contention Between Liberality and Prodigality* was printed in 1602 after being performed at court in the previous year; its many scenes of different types of characters appealing to Fortune for her son Money sent a clear message to the queen about the importance of rewarding virtuous service. Thomas Dekker's *The Whore of Babylon* responded to the 1605 Gunpowder Plot by pitting its title character against a perfectly virtuous and virginal fairy queen, Titania; just in case anyone failed to understand the allegory, the printed text of this play