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"Revenge should have no bounds":

Poison and Revenge in Seventeenth Century English Drama

A dissertation presented

by

Catherine L. Reedy Woodring

to

The Department of English

in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in the subject of

English

Harvard University
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Professor Stephen Greenblatt Catherine L. Reedy Woodring

"Revenge should have no bounds":

Poison and Revenge in Seventeenth Century English Drama

Abstract

The revenge- and poison- filled tragedies of seventeenth century England astound audiences with their language of contagion and disease. Understanding poison as the force behind epidemic disease, this dissertation considers the often-overlooked connections between stage revenge and poison. Poison was not only a material substance bought from a foreign market. It was the subject of countless revisions and debates in early modern England. Above all, writers argued about poison's role in the most harrowing epidemic disease of the period, the pestilence, as both the cause and possible cure of this seemingly contagious disease. As such a transformative and ambivalent power, poison was called upon precisely as stage revengers turned to vengeance, as revenge was, at its core, concerned with the breaking and making of boundaries. As such, playwrights turned to both literal and metaphorical poisons in their plays of vengeance to stage the excesses of contagion. I contend that all of the plays under consideration in my dissertation uniquely represent the bounded alongside the boundless. In the process, they dramatize the surprising paradoxes of revenge. By staging, often uneasily, the potential for revenge to "have no bounds," dramatists more radically explored the perverse appeal and power of their own art.

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My parents and step-parent have all individually taught me the importance of creativity and passion throughout the years. Carter Page is always a source of thought-provoking conversation, whether on Shakespeare, *Breaking Bad*, or modern music. My parents, Lynn and Mark, showed me the value in making your world what you want it to be. Throughout my childhood, I witnessed first hand the joys of artistic expression, in our obsessively recorded Christmas albums, in the hours spent painting birds and faux-marble down the basement steps, and in the innumerable songs, stories, and drawings that made up my past.

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during frenzy of the past few months. My love for my mom, like my love for my daughter, knows no bounds.

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Introduction
Contagion, Poison, and Revenge in Early Modern English Drama

Deciding once and for all to take revenge on Hamlet, Laertes chooses a poison from his own personal stash, one that is so deadly he calls it a "contagion" (4.7.118).[1] An "unction" bought from "a mountebank," Laertes' poison is irrevocably lethal. No "simples" will be able to save Hamlet once Laertes "gall[s]" or pricks Hamlet with his greased sword: "I'll touch my point / With this contagion, that if I gall him slightly, / It may be death" (117-119). "This contagion" only surreptitiously enters the body, grazing the exterior ever so "slightly" as Laertes barely touches Hamlet's body with the very "point" of his sword. Like contagious diseases, Laertes' most deadly poison starts out imperceptibly small before growing large, overtaking the entire body in the process.

Laertes' use of "this contagion" rather than "this poison" sounds peculiar to us, as the words today are not used interchangeably. These lines are, in fact, the only recorded instance of "a contagion" denoting a poison.[2] Shakespeare thus revitalizes a commonly-known word by using it in an uncommon way. "Contagion," a noun often describing qualities, influences, or principles[3] thus turns into a specific material substance, a poison bought at some point during Laertes' travels.

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[1] All citations from "Hamlet" taken from William Shakespeare, "Hamlet," in *The Norton Shakespeare: Based on the Oxford Edition*, Eds. Stephen Greenblatt, Walter Cohen, Jean E. Howard, and Katharine Eisaman Maus (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1997) 1659-1759.

[2] See definition 3b in "contagion, n." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, March 2015. Web. 27 April 2015.

[3] Definitions 1a, 1b, and 2c of "contagion," *OED Online.*

While Shakespeare's substitution of "this contagion" for a particular poison was novel, the implied connection between contagious disease and poison was not. In the early modern period, the two concepts were deeply entangled. In fact, "contagion" was a concept that grew out of "poison." Diseases were said to be contagious by virtue of their poisonous qualities.[4] The pestilence, the epidemic disease that ravaged England and Europe, was described as being both contagious and poisonous.[5]

Writers energetically explored poison and poisonous properties from the first outbreaks of the pestilence in the fourteenth century to those of seventeenth century. Through these academic and practical examinations, poison infiltrated the very language of disease, which had been more traditionally associated with the balancing of humors.[6] Poison was now called upon to describe both the degradations of these internal humors and the spread of external, atmospheric poisons into the body during outbreaks of epidemics. However, the mechanisms behind poison's contagiousness remained subjects of fierce debate. In fact, the very concept of poison itself was in question. Medical

[4] For more on the history of the concepts of "contagion" and "infection" in Germany, see Annemarie Kinzelbach, "Infection, Contagion, and Public Health in Late Medieval and Early Modern German Imperial Towns," *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences* 61.3 (2006): 369-389.

[5] For more on poison as the source of the first outbreaks of the plague in Europe, see Frederick Gibbs, "Chapter 3: Plague, Poison, and Putrefaction" in *Medical Understandings of Poison circa 1250-1600,* Dissertation, University of Wisconsin-Madison (Ann Arbor: ProQuest/UMI, 2009). For a good outline of the connection between poison, putrefaction, and disease, see Andrew Wear, *Knowledge and Practice in English Medicine*, *1550-1680* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) 136-143, and Chapter 2, pp. 82-84.

[6] Gibbs, "Chapter 3: Plague, Poison, and Putrefaction," *Medical.*

writers before the sixteenth century did not even find poison to be a distinct substance.[7] In question was the nature of poison, its effects, its mechanisms of action, and its usefulness in treating disease.[8] The answers were often contradictory. Yet, wherever any particular writer landed, it was clear poison triggered the conversions and transformations of the most dangerous contagious diseases.

The contagious nature of poison made it a serviceable figure for countless cultural productions in England. Poison became a favorite substance for religious polemicists and allegories as it evoked the treacherous spread of dangerous ideas.[9] We need only look at Edmund Spenser's figure of "Error" in Book One of his *Faerie Queene* to see the explosive connection between poison and heresy. As his venomous, serpentine woman dies, slain by the Knight of Holiness, she spews out chunks of pamphlets and papers along with other poisonous creatures: "Therewith she spewd out of her filthy maw / A floud of poyson horrible and blacke, / …./ Her vomit full of books and papers was, / With loathly frogs and toades" (1.1, 20.1-2; 6-7).[10] Her poisonous children – "Deformed

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[7] Ibid., 58.

[8] Gibbs, *Medical* covers the medical debates of the thirteenth through sixteenth centuries. For more on the fifteenth century questions of "poisonous" qualities, see Frederick Gibbs, "Poisonous Properties, Bodies, and Forms in the Fifteenth Century," *Preternature*, 2.1 (2013): 19-46.

[9] In fact, in the OED entry for "poison," one finds the connection between poison and religious doctrines in the extended uses of the word. See 3a in "poison, n." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, March 2015. Web. 28 April 2015. Similarly, when I searched the database EEBO for documents with "poison" as a keyword, the vast majority related to the poison of religious heresies.

monsters, fowle, and blacked as inke" (22.7) – swarm out of her dying body, "flock[]" about her poisonous blood, "suck[]" it up, and explode, in this fantasy of self-cancelling poisonousness.[11]

Yet, the early modern English revenge play was the most poison- and decay-filled cultural production of its time. Later scholars described poisons that were "poured out like rain" in these violent spectacles of revenge.[12] The variety of modalities used in the onstage poisonings of revenge is astounding. Stage revengers lace dead bodies with poisonous paint.[13] They gleefully swing censors full of poisonous fumes to unsuspecting audiences, and thrust poisoned rapiers, chalices, portraits, flowers, ointments, porridge, and suits of armor at their victims. Both virtuous and depraved revengers relied on a startling array of poisons in their executions of justice and power.[14] It was not the only way a character could take revenge, but it was common enough that Othello could turn to

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[10] Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, 2nd Ed., Eds. A.C. Hamilton, Hiroshi Yamashita, and Toshiyuki Suzuki (Harlow: Pearson Education Limited, 2001). For more on Spenser's poisoned maws, see Chapter 1, pp. 37-39.

[11] See Chapter 3, pp. 160-161 for Cyril Tourneur's poisonous monster of heresy.

[12] John Addington Symonds, *Shakspere's predecessors in the English drama* (New York: Cooper Square Publishers, 1883) 388.

[13] Kyd's *Soliman and Perseda* (c1588) was the first of many plays to stage a woman's lips laced with poison to kill a Tyrant: in this case, Perseda poisons herself in the process. See Tanya Pollard, "Poisoned Kisses: Theater of Seduction" in *Drugs and Theatre in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) for more on the motif of poisoned lips/corpses.

[14] For more on the distinction between "villain" and "Kydian" revengers, à la Fredson Bowers, see Chapter 1, pp. 59.

poison as an option precisely at the moment he decided to take revenge on Desdemona for her alleged affair.[15]

In fact, in the scene of *Hamlet* referenced above, Claudius and Laertes discuss the boundlessness of revenge immediately before they turn to their arsenal of unctions and contagions. Claudius asks Laertes, almost tauntingly, what he would do to show himself as a proper son to his dead father. When Laertes responds, with no lack of impulsivity, that he would "cut his throat i'th'church" (98), Claudius applauds his lack of consideration for both "place" and "bounds": "No place indeed should murder sanctuarize. / Revenge should have no bounds" (99-100). Like Laertes' "contagion," destroying all the infinite reaches of the soul with its singular drop, revenge razes boundaries, penetrating into sacred spaces and desecrating them remorselessly. Not coincidentally, Hamlet also references contagion just as he prepares to take revenge on Claudius: "'Tis now the very witching time of night, / When churchyards yawn, and hell itself breathes out / Contagion to this world" (3.2.358-360). This is a play known for its contagions, with its language of overwhelming disease; a play more full of poison references and onstage uses than any of his others; and a play of a staggering number of both theatrical and meta-theatrical revengers.[16] Yet, for all the many subtle (and not-so-subtle) analyses of the revenge motive in this most-discussed play of all time, scholars

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[15] Iago rejects poison because he has a more "fitting" punishment for Desdemona: "Do it not with poison. Strangle her in her bed, even the / bed she hath contaminated" (4.1.197-198). All citations from *Othello* taken from *Norton Shakespeare*, 2091-2174.

[16] For more on the disease images in play, see Caroline Spurgeon, *Shakespeare's Imagery and What It Tells Us* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965).

have done little to analyze the entangled concepts of revenge, poison, and contagion in *Hamlet*.

More generally, scholarship has been virtually silent on the obvious connections between stage revenge and contagious poison. Part of this has to do with the invention of the revenge genre itself. As we will see in the next chapter, critics looked to distinguish their very-English "tragedies of revenge" from the "melodrama" of Italianate "tragedies of blood," and poison, along with the seemingly contagious nature of violent spectacles, only threatened these generic boundaries. Yet, rather than shy away from the seemingly more depraved components of these tragedies – the putrefactions, poisons, and staged tortures – I turn towards them in my dissertation. The putrefying corpses and rank corruptions that lie behind the revenge command in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (c.1600); the marriage of "patient," un-revenging revengers that is celebrated over the bloodied, brained body of the villain in Cyril Tourneur's *The Atheist's Tragedy* (c.1601-1611); the feast-like consumptions of rotten things and sadistic tortures in John Webster's *The White Devil* (1612); the defiled blood and ugly procreations in Thomas Middleton's mean-spirited *The Changeling* (1622): all of the violence and rotten things in these plays of revenge have made them seem "excessive" to critics in one way or another. *Hamlet* is said to be excessive for its digressions, language, and focus on female sexuality; *The Atheist's Tragedy* for its religious dogma and rock-solid structures; *The White Devil* for its "grotesque" murders and spectacles of violence; and *The Changeling* for its depraved female, Beatrice-Joanna.

In fact, this critical sense of "excess" reflects something foundational about these revenge plays. It is not that these playwrights are "debased" or that they write for

decadent coterie audiences. Rather, these plays seem excessive because dramatic revenge stages excess. That is, playwrights dramatize revenge as a contagious poison that impacted boundaries.

At a most basic level, dramatic revengers seek to break and make social boundaries. As such, their revenge was inherently tied to the transformative, and often-ambivalent, power of poison. Revengers were not simply being violent for its own sake: their violence, in fact, was a deadly form of communication. Revenge was contagious, of course, in other respects as well. It spread at a temporal distance, as violence from the past repeated in the violence of the present/future; and in some cases it often grew harsher and more violent over time, as revengers "paid back" villains with interest. These elements of contagion, moreover, speak to the profound anxiety that inevitably issue from these plays of charged violence. Many worried – and continue to worry – if these spectacles of poison threaten a meta-theatrical poisoning, where audiences are infected by the gory and depraved representations of violence.[17]

Yet, for all of the nervous discussions of revenge play's infection and poison on the meta-theatrical level, critics have been largely silent about the cultural and theatrical meanings of poison in early modern narratives of revenge. Revenge plays have been defined, and redefined;[18] the cultural and historical influences and narratives explored; the so-called "stock conventions" rigorously catalogued and ordered;[19] madness, ghosts,

[17] The bulk of my discussion on meta-theatrical "contagion" occurs in Chapter 4, pp. 221-227, yet I also consider the history of reading revenge plays as "poisoned" in Chapter 1, pp. 58-60.

[18] See Chapter 1, pp. 46-51 for a history of the categories of the revenge genre.

and delay connected to lost rituals of mourning,[20] psychic imbalances,[21] and the Catholic threat abroad;[22] the genre itself put aside to consider revenge more broadly in comedies, histories, tragicomedies, and so on[23]; but poison has been largely ignored.

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[19] Thorndike's and Bowers's lists of conventions and Senecan inheritances have been elaborated by scholars, though remain largely intact. See A.H. Thorndike, "The Relations of Hamlet to Contemporary Revenge Plays," *PMLA* 17.2 (1902): 125-220 and Fredson Bowers, *Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy, 1587-1642* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1940). See Katharine Eisaman Maus' "Introduction" in *Four Revenge Tragedies,* Eds. Katharine Eisaman Maus et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995) ix-xxxi for one of the most effective explorations of the basic structures and similarities in play in English revenge plays.

[20] The loss of Catholic ritual in the English reformation and the morality play tradition factored into the 1980s and 1990s criticism of revenge tragedies. Stephen Greenblatt's *Hamlet in Purgatory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001) and Michael Neill's *Issues of Death: Mortality and Identity in English Renaissance Tragedy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999) remain the most important works that detail the Protestant "wholesale displacement of the dead from their familiar place in the order of things," in Neill's account. See Peter Mercer, *Hamlet and the Acting of Revenge* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1987) for more on the "void left by ritual" and the lack of "system of rites" in the Elizabethan world; Thomas Rist's *Revenge Tragedy and the Drama of Commemoration in Reforming England* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2008) for Catholic rites of mourning to be the heart of revenge drama; Huston Diehl's "Observing the Lord's Supper and the Lord Chamberlain's Men: The Visual Rhetoric of Ritual and Play in Early Modern England," *Renaissance Drama* 22 (1991): 147-174, for the revenge masque as reflecting the lost Catholic rituals of the Eucharist; Dena Goldberg's "Sacrifice in Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta*," *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, 32.2 (1992): 233-245, for the ritual origins of revenge; and Phoebe S. Spinrad's "The Sacralization of Revenge in "Antonio's Revenge,"" *Comparative Drama*, 39.2 (2005): 169-185, for an account of Marston's play as ritualistic rather than parodic in its representations of revenge.

[21] The pre-eminent work on the psychological turmoil that occurs as a result of revenge is Charles and Elaine Hallett's *The Revenger's Madness: A Study of Revenge Tragedy Motifs* (Lincoln-London: University of Nebraska Press, 1980).

[22] These critics part ways with those above (fn 20), finding revenge to be a conspicuously anti-Catholic form that, if anything, celebrates the loss of Catholic ritual. According to Steven Justice, Kyd creates his seminal play out of "slogans of popular propaganda" (287) of the Protestant Reformation ("Spain, Tragedy, and *The Spanish Tragedy*," *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, 25.2 (1985): 271-288). Ronald Broude was one of the

The tide is, however, starting to turn. Literary scholars have started to appreciate the cultural history of "poisons" and its broader use in England as a powerful – and startlingly ambivalent – drug. In the first sustained examination of poison on the early modern English stage, Tanya Pollard considers this unique ambivalence of poisons and drugs more generally to reflect the power and danger of the theater itself.[24] Like Jonathan Gil Harris, Pollard brings to light the use of poison for both harm and healing in the new chemical therapies of Paracelsus.[25] Neither scholar, however, make much of the

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first scholars to call attention to the timing of Kyd's first revenge play, which emerged at the moment of the great Catholic threat to England in his article "Time, Truth, and Right in "The Spanish Tragedy,"" *Studies in Philology*, 68.2 (1971): 130-145. He was followed by Wendy Griswold's account of the genre emerging in response to the Catholic threat in *Renaissance Revivals: City Comedy and Revenge Tragedy in the London Theatre, 1576-1980* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986). Thomas Rist specifically rejects Broude's anti-Catholic interpretation in *Revenge Tragedy.*

[23] John Kerrigan's remarkably far-reaching account of revenge considers the revenge narrative throughout time (*Revenge Tragedy: Aeschylus to Armageddon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996)). He is part of a growing tradition of critics who read revenge not as a genre, but as a kind of universal narrative. According to these critics, revenge narratives are not merely a Senecan or Elizabethan form that follows specific conventions: they are indeed are oldest stories we have on record, and speak to something of the human condition itself. Anne Pippin Burnett's article on Euripides' *Medea* tracks the evolution of revenge stories in ancient Greece following this naturalistic, universal conception of revenge stories (where history and culture differently impact the manifestation of the revenge story) ("Medea and the Tragedy of Revenge," *Classical Philology*, 68.1 (1973): 1-24). More recently, Linda Woodbridge explicitly rejects genre as a concern in her exploration of systems of economic justice and revenge tragedies in early modern England, insisting instead on "the cultural work literary revenge performs" (5) in her *English Revenge Drama: Money, Resistance, Equality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

[24] Pollard, *Drugs*.

[25] Pollard mostly finds what she calls Paracelsus' *pharmakon* in early modern accounts of poison, taking the bulk of her argument about the ambivalence of poison from its doubled meaning of "cure" and "poison" in *pharmakon*. Harris likewise sees the doubleness implicit in "poison" as relating to Paracelsian iatrochemistry; rather than place it

intimate connection between revenge and poison, outside of the way poison may relate to the image of the poisoner as foreigner, like the Spanish and Italian settings of stories of revenge.

Miranda Wilson's account of poison in English Renaissance texts departs from Harris' and Pollard's books in its interest in poison not just as a physical substance, but as what she calls a "way of thinking about how the world works."[26] Moreover, she specifically explores the use of poison in revenge in her chapter on broadside pamphlets of poisoning women. She is largely concerned with the way poison becomes the substance of God's providential plan. It may be recruited by evil-doers, yet it is also used by God to signal either the invisible treachery of the victim or the inherent corruption of a post-lapsarian world. Central to her book is the sense of poison's disguise, in the way it fractures what is from what seems.

Unlike Harris and Pollard, Wilson is not constrained by a narrative of progress, where the Paracelsian *pharmakon* advances the history of science from Galen's internal humors to one more "modern" in its relative categorization of poison based on dose (a rather simplifying and at times misguided historiography[27]). Instead, Wilson considers

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alongside other drugs, he tends to thinks of poison as it relates to the health of the body politic, and tends to draw upon the period's negative connotations of poison. Poisonous outsiders – Jews, foreigners – are similar to the poisonous marketplace. See Harris, *Foreign Bodies and the Body Politic: Discourses of Social Pathology in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) 50-57.

[26] Miranda Wilson, *Poison's Dark Works in Renaissance England* (Lanham: Bucknell University Press, 2014) xxii.

[27] See for instance my discussion of way "contagion" encompasses both atmospheric infections *and* infections that spread by touch in pp. 12-13 and 81-82. The historical narrative offered by Harris, of an externally-based, proto-germ theory expounded by

the ontological ambiguity of poison. As something hidden, poison becomes the best metaphor for "the complications of epistemology" – and, moreover, the secretive plots of revenge, both human and divine.

Yet, poison was not the only substance that worked through unseen means in the period. If it acted according to its "occult" (or hidden) properties, or spread through the multiplication of *species*, or images of itself, it was not the only substance that acted in this way. Astrological influences, magnets, and sensation itself were all understood to act at a distance, and all substances were believed to have both occult and visible properties.[28]

All this is to say that poison's hidden operations probably *did* offer a good metaphor for the breakdown between the visible and the invisible, even though it was only one of many substances that did so. Wilson is surely right in finding in its disguise an interesting vehicle for the disguises and secretive murders in stories of revenge. Moreover, her connection between poison and the corruption of original sin does much to explain the theologies of justice underpinning the retributions of these plays.

Yet Wilson, while claiming to move beyond Harris' and Pollard's material understanding of poison, ultimately reads poison as a substance used for murder. She relies most of all on cultural accounts of famous poisonings, like the Overbury trial, and the changing legal definitions and punishments related to murder by poison. Historians

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Paracelsus and Fracastoro replacing an internally-based, Galenic system of humors, simplifies and ultimately distorts the matter. See Jonathan Gil Harris, *Sick Economies: Drama, Mercantilsm, and Disease in Shakespeare's England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004) 15-16.

[28] See pp. 13-15 in this chapter.

have considered poison in a remarkably similar fashion. Frederick Gibbs finds the history of poison to be dominated by accounts of murder and mystery. Remarkably few histories of the conceptual development of poison in medicine and philosophy exist.[29]

In light of this tendency, we first turn to what I consider to be the two most critical conversations on poison of the period: its connection to contagion and to transformation. In exploring poison as the force of contagion and transformation, we uncover just how intimately it was connected with dramatic revenge during the period.

Poison and Contagion

Contagion was taken seriously in early modern England. The monarchical orders that regulated the governmental response to outbreaks of the plague English plague practices forbade religious and secular authorities from preaching or printing opinions that went against contagion.[30] As it turns out, out of the three identified types of "plague" – bubonic, septicemic, and pneumonic – only one, pneumonic, is spread from person to person.[31] The very swollen glands of buboes and corrosive carbuncles, burning skin to

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[29] Gibbs, *Medical* 9-10. Gibbs joins with Lloyd G. Stevenson's earlier *The Meaning of Poison* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1959) in exploring poison's connection to disease and contagion in the early modern period. Franck Collard, *Le crime de poison au Moyen Age* (Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 2003) and C.J.S. Thompson, *Poison romances and poison mysteries,* New and Rev. Ed. (London: The Scientific Press, 1901) are both good examples of the typical histories of poison as histories of famous poisonings.

[30] For more on the Orders, see Chapter 3, pp. 136-139.

[31] For a good overview of the "types" and their mortality rates, see Ernest B. Gilman, *Plague Writing in Early Modern England* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009).

the bone, that so powerfully represented contagion to the period, were not, in fact, "contagious" in the modern sense.

However, early modern concepts of contagion were not exactly a proto-type of the "germ" theory. Nor indeed was "contagion" fully separated out from the atmospheric contaminations of "miasma."[32] Disease might be understood to be contagious both from the toxic fumes and vapors of the environment and through the direct (and indirect) contact of persons and objects.[33] Contagion and miasma were not mutually exclusive concepts for the early modern period. In fact, practitioners often seemed to think that both of them worked in tandem during outbreaks of disease. Corrupted vapors and poisoned air might infect through touch, or through some other exchange. "Infection" and "contagion" blurred together, as the exchanges and influences of one substance on another did not rely yet on touch-focused, mechanistic accounts of motion.[34]

Understood according to this broader conception, "contagion" thus spreads across a variety of modalities and through nearly every sense. Physicians turned to poison

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[32] Kinzelbach, "Infection."

[33] Gibbs, *Medical*, 150-151 gives a good summary of the differences at play here. The question of how the air spread disease was not understood as a question of "touch," that is, whether or not the corrupted air was said to touch a body. Instead, physicians and others considered the "spread" and motion of corruption differently. The air might be a "medium" across which *species* of disease propagate, or it might carry poison. Gibbs, following Jon Arrizabalaga, sees "miasma" and "contagion" not as opposing, but as *successive* stages of epidemics. In this account, the air is first corrupted or poisoned; next, poison spreads into the body via one of the senses in the period's broader definition of poison.

[34] To clarify, Kinzelbach outlines the two terms as follows: "infection," from "infectio" relates to a diseased condition that might also spread contamination, and "contagion," from "contagio" suggests a corrupting influence or infecting contact.

connect these varied sources of external rot to the internal rot of the humors and vital spirits.[35] How exactly the air became poisoned was a matter of conjecture. Some followed Avicenna's eleventh century account and found the air to be primed by poisoning astrological influences, from constellations in dangerous conjunctions, or from major events, like the release of noxious fumes from earthquakes or the atmospheric poisonings of comets. Once "primed," the everyday bad smells and vapors of rotten things on the ground amplified the overall corruption of the air.[36]

Additionally, the heightened attention of fourteenth and fifteenth scholars to the "specific form," "total substance," and "occult properties" of poison, along with the growing body of writings on "poisonous properties," made poison a particularly powerful explanatory tool to describe the invisible and leveling transformations of the plague.[37] Occult virtues, total substance, and specific form were all used increasingly during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries to explain how poison acted on the body. As described

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[35] Following from Gibbs, *Medical*, 154-155 we might not approach this turn to poison as an overhaul of Galenism or as a revolutionary paradigm shift, but instead read it as another way to approach the theoretical problems of disease *within* the traditional system of humors.

[36] Physicians at the University of Paris identified the cause of the 1348 pestilence outbreak as the conjunction of Saturn, Jupiter, and Mars. This followed from Avicenna's understanding of the putrefaction spread into the air from vapors on the earth resulting from specific astral influences. Cf. Gibbs, *Medical*, 123-125. For more on local sources of the pestilence, and the relationship between putrefaction and poison in disease, see Chapter 2, pp. 82-84.

[37] For a good history of the development of "total substance" cf. Gibbs, Chapters 1 and 2, *Medical* and Gibbs, "Poisonous Properties"; for a brief overview of the relationship between "total substance" and "occult properties" see Andrew Wear's "Medicine in Early Modern Europe, 1500-1700" in *The Western Medical Tradition: 800 BC to AD 1800,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) 261-264.

earlier, the "occult virtues" of a substance referred to the hidden qualities any substance might have, as opposed to their manifest and elemental properties. Hidden properties explained not simply the miraculous and supernatural, but served to describe everyday unseen properties of substances, like those behind the magnet and electric eel.

Sometimes argued to be occult, but not always, were the "specific form (*forma specifica*) or "total substance" (*tota substantia*) of a drug.[38] They were used interchangeably to describe the properties of a substance that arose from its form as a whole rather than from its particular mixture of elements. The concept came from Galen, who gave two explanations for the actions of remedies and poisons.[39] One the one hand, substances act according to their manifest qualities – hot, cold, dry, or wet – and the intensity of these qualities (where the "fourth degree" was seen as the most intense) most often explains a drug's severity or impact on health. Yet, Galen briefly referred to a poison's action by their "total substance" (dubbed "specific form" by the scholastics) to explain how small amounts of dangerous drugs had such powerful effects in his *On the Powers of Simple Medicines*. This property of a substance's whole form was largely ignored until Avicenna used it to describe the action of a few specific poisons (though, as Gibbs relates, Avicenna's explanations for "total substance" were often contradictory).

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[38] For instance, Jean Fernel speaks of diseases of total substance that are both "manifest" and "occult," either arising from putrefaction inside the body or from external sources, including the demonic or supernatural, respectively. For more on Fernel's account of "total substance," see Linda Deer Richardson, "The Generation of Disease: Occult Causes and Diseases of the Total Substance" in *The Medical Renaissance of the Sixteenth Century,* Eds. A. Wear, R.K. Rench, and I.M. Lonie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985) 175-194

[39] For a good overview of "total substance" in Galenism, see Vivian Nutton, "Galenic Medicine," in *Ancient Medicine,* 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2013) 236-253.

In fact, writers began turning to "specific form" or "total substance" to describe poison's actions as being inherently opposed to life. After the experience of plague, poison was less thought of as a drug with elements in the "fourth degree." By 1500, it would most often refer to a general substance that was inimical to the human body.[40] In line with this more broadly defined category, sixteenth century medical writers increasingly explored universal remedies for poison, and wrote in more general terms about its categorical effects on the body.[41]

"Poison" was thus not immediately understood as being a distinct substance that was inherently destructive, although it gradually assumed those characteristics. The Latin *potio*, through which the medicinal and poisonous draughts of the French *poison* and *poyson* became the English "poison," is the active form of *potare*, to drink. Likewise, the Latin *venenum*, from which "venom" derives, is related to potions and drugs more generally, perhaps more specifically to aphrodisiacs (as from the proto-indo-european root *wen*).[42] Moreover, as many have noted, the Greek *pharmakon* remains remarkably difficult to translate properly, as it refers simultaneously to medicine and poison. In some cases, the *pharmakon* even toed the line between food and poison.[43]

Eventually, however, the English "venom" and "poison" along with *venenum* became more focused on the destructive nature of substances that (may or may not) harm

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[40] Gibbs, *Medical*, 58.

[41] See Chapter 5, Gibbs, *Medical*, 209-249.

[42] "venom, n. and adj." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, March 2015. Web. 29 April 2015.

[43] As in Hippocratic treatise *On Nutriment*, Gibbs, *Medical* 22-23.

the vital spirits of the heart.[44] By the early modern period, poison was understood as a distinct kind of substance with a scary power. Yet, it was this *power* of change, rather than the direction of that change, that remained embedded within these words during the period, linking it all the way back to the Greek *pharmakon.* All of these words are predominantly concerned with the startlingly powerful change that occurs after the use of a drug, whether for good or for bad. As mentioned before, the secondary and figurative meanings of the English "poison" focused primarily on the threatening spread of pernicious ideas.[45] Less dangerously, "venom" also broadly referred to a dye. A small amount of dye, spreading and coloring an entire fabric, provided a good analogy for the strikingly vast physical transformations initiated by only the smallest bit of a substance.[46] ("Infect," incidentally, also comes from *inficere*, to stain or dye.[47]) These English words, while used to convey the sense of dangerous destruction, ultimately draw from concepts of transformation and infiltration. Change lies at the heart of our concepts of poison, even as the particular direction of that change was becoming increasingly negative.[48]

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[44] Gibbs, *Medical*, 58. Venoms came to mean naturally occurring animal poisons, while poison remained connected to the chalice as a human-crafted product.

[45] We might also read "toxic" as resulting from an etymological "spread," where the term used for vehicle of the substance (the arrow, or Greek *toxon*) became the word for the substance (the poison, *pharmakon*).

[46] Likewise, the Greek *pharmakon* and Latin *venenum* also contained this meaning.

[47] "infect, adj.1 and n." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, March 2015. Web. 29 April 2015. Gibbs, *Medical,* 19-20. I am reminded of the "tinct" of Gertrude's lines to Hamlet in the closet scene: "and there I see such black and grainèd spots / As will not leave their tinct" (3.4.80-81)

Poison, Revenge, and Transformation

As an agent of transformation, poison was a good candidate to explain the spread of illness. Since it capitalized on the fracturing of boundaries in its conversions of self to other, poison exemplified the boundary-breaking danger of the pestilence, this "leveling" infection of the air. Yet, its associations with transformation and conversion also aligned it with revenge. In the early modern period, revenge was also understood most crucially in relation to its transformative properties. Today, we are more likely to recognize in "revenge" the sense of extra-legality. Yet, Ronald Broude crucially reminds us that "revenge" was not inherently seen as "extra-legal" in Elizabethan and Jacobean England. Neither was the term laced with the many negative charges of the modern era. Its meaning was the blander "retribution," or "response to a wrong," and it was used synonymously with "vengeance" and "punishment." English "revenge," deriving from Old French *revenger* and Latin *vindicare*, meant personal, state-administered, and divine punishments.[49]

Countering Broude's etymologies, it seems possible to read the "re" of "revenge" as conveying an inherent sense of excess. "Revenge" might thus be understood as more excessive than "vengeance" or the now archaic "venge," as it necessarily offers repetition.[50] Broude, however, challenges this etymological difference. "Vengeance" was just as likely as "revenge" to refer to private, public, or divine retribution in the

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[48] See Gibbs' Introduction. The Greek *pharmakon* contains even more overlap than Latin *venenum*

[49] Ronald Broude, "Revenge and Revenge Tragedy in Renaissance England," *Renaissance Quarterly* 28.1 (1975): 38-58.

[50] For instance, see Kerrigan, *Revenge,* 21.

period.[51] Samuel Johnson's separation of the two terms in his 1773 dictionary may have established a boundary between legal and extralegal retribution ("Revenge is an act of passion; vengeance is justice"): but the matter was murky before and remained ambiguous at best after.[52]

At its most basic level, "revenge" owes its origins to concepts of forceful speech, as *vindicare* combines force (*vis)* with to say (*dicere*).[53] As powerful communication, revenge relates to curses, where speech is turned into a weapon. Revenge is also pre-eminently about representation. Victims of revenge must know why they have become victims. Most of the energies of the narrative draw towards a forced *anaganorisis,* as former crimes and transgressions in the past turn into the perpetrator's current suffering ("This is for my mother!"). In fact, Michel de Montaigne finds the entire enterprise of revenge to be about spectatorship rather than death. A revenger loses pleasure once his adversary is killed because death ends their capacity to communicate past woes and current retributions:

> … the thirst for vengeance is better slaked and satisfied by doing so [not killing the man], since *the only intentions is to make it felt.* That is why we do not attack a stone or an animal if its hurts us, since they are incapable of feeling our revenge…[thus] vengeance is at its most wretched when it is wreaked upon someone who has lost the means of feeling it; for, as the one who seeks revenge wishes to see it if he is to enjoy it*, the one who receives it must see it too if he is to suffer the pain and be taught a lesson*. [italics mine].[54]

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[51] Broude, "Revenge," 41-42.

[52] Ibid.

[53] Kerrigan finds this etymology to show the inherent theatricality of revenge, as revengers wanted to "display" rather than conceal their violence.

[54] Michel de Montaigne, "Cowardice, the mother of cruelty," in *Michel de Montaigne: The Complete Essays*, Trans. and Ed. M.A. Screech (New York: Penguin Books, 1991) 787.

One must be able to understand why they are suffering – what they are being punished for – in order for revenge to give any pleasure to the revenger. Revengers above all look to convert villains, to make "suffer" the hard hearts of the cruel and train them moral "lesson[s]." Montaigne continues in this essay on cruelty to contrast these instructive, "just revenges" with the brutal murders of tyrants. Unlike these just revengers, a cowardly tyrant kills subjects because he fears the revenges that might arise from his cruelty. Violence begets more violence, much as his tortures become longer and more inventive. His murders speak, though not to instruct. Tyrants only look to "kill and to make their anger felt" – tortures are prolonged and bodies are torn apart into pieces so that tyrants might continue to feel their own power *being felt* by their suffering subjects.

This kind of sadistic pleasure of feeling power being felt sits perilously close to the representational urge of the so-called just revenges that look to "make it felt." In fact, Montaigne connects the prolonged tortures of vicious tyrants to the total annihilation often witnessed in revenge. His *Essais* even begin with this image of the uncontrolled and irrational anger behind vengeance. He poses the following narrative. A man finds himself at the height of power, with his enemy lying before him, pleading for mercy. Does he exact revenge and kill his former enemy without pity, or is his heart "soften[ed]" with mercy? Montaigne, parting with convention, dramatizes the challenges in predicting the revenger's decision. People believed to be "soft" are, in fact, sometimes crueler than those described as being "hard." Vicious tyrants might be moved to pity by the valor of their enemy, or irritated by it; they might be merciful in one instance and murderous at the next. Their emotional response to the spectacle of suffering is the key to their decision here: and emotions for Montaigne are unbridled and irrational. When revenge

occurs rather than pity, it is the result of a boundless anger that seeks to "wreak revenge" on all, not finished until "his latest breath."[55] The English term "wreak vengeance" (translated from "à assouvir sa vengeance") was a favorite of the early modern period, and itself speaks to the total destruction of revenge. "Wreak," coming from Germanic origins and Old English *wrecan*, originates from the verb "to drive," and means both exacting revenge and causing damage, disaster, and total devastation.[56] Like ship "wrecks" or "wracks," revenge leaves behind only ruins, destroying structures of human bodies and their social relationships.

For Montaigne, the unbridled power of emotions makes them liable to create havoc.[57] Moreover, boundary-breaking emotions become analogues for human beings more generally. One cannot predict how any given spectacle will influence its viewer, just as one cannot state any simple truths on the behavior of man: "Man is indeed an object miraculously vain, various and wavering. It is difficult to found a judgment on him which is steady and uniform."[58] This is of course the very skepticism that underlies Montaigne's search for truth, where the digressive process of seeking meaning reveals more than any collection of completed, finalized aphorisms. Given his philosophy, it is not surprising that Montaigne does not understand revenge to be a uniform response. Revenge might be the destructive irrationality that seeks to turn all into bloody carcasses;

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[55] Ibid., 6.

[56] "wreak, v." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, March 2015. Web. 29 April 2015.

[57] Seneca's *De Ira* also offers an important account of the destruction of bounds in anger (and the vengeance that results). See Chapter 4, pp. 222-224.

[58] Montaigne, *Essays*, 5.

or, it might be a tool of conversion and communication, depending on the particular circumstances.

Both of these features of revenge might, however, be seen to stand in opposition. On the one hand, revenge thoughtlessly destroys everything in its path. Francis Bacon's essay on revenge partially speaks to this totally destructive side of revenge. It begins with the oft-cited line "Revenge is a kind of wild justice; which the more man's nature runs to, the more ought law to weed it out."[59] In this conception, revenge is a "wild" practice, according to the horticultural metaphor in use, when un-pruned by the gardener of the state. Indeed, many scholars call upon the vast changes emerging in the "religious, political, legal, and social institutions which accompanied England's emergence from the Middle Ages" to suggest the period's rejection of private, extra-legal vengeance.[60] Accordingly, dramatists might be said to stage revenge to show its overwhelming excess, where one corpse leads to another *ad infinitum*, as opposed to the controlled vengeance of the legal system. That is, as private blood-feuds and duels morphed into the English legal system of state-administered justice, stage revenges moved from the family to the state.

On the other hand, revenge might be interpreted as re-establishing the boundaries perniciously destroyed by tyrants and ruthless, power-hungry men who pervert the boundaries of social institutions and hierarchies. The breaking of the often sacred fault

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[59] Francis Bacon, *The Essays* (New York: Penguin, 1985).

[60] Ronald Broude, "George Chapman's Stoic-Christian Revenger," *Studies in Philology* 70.1 (1973) 56. Ronald Broude reminds us that, while these changes were ongoing during the period in question, the cultural changes were not fully appreciated by everyone living within their historical moment. We might sense some of the legal shifts in the texts, as state authorities condemned private revenge increasingly in the later productions of the period, as in Massinger's revenge play, for instance.

lines on the family level, too, might be restored by vengeance, where the private rapes and murders of family members throws off-balance the smallest unit of order within the Tudor-Stuart hierarchical structure. In this case, revenge, whether public or private, communicates meaning and order through its violence. In other words, its violence establishes bounds rather than destroys all, recklessly, in its path. Like the broken-apart bodies of Book V in Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, where the iron-man of justice chops off heads, feet, and hands to display bodily messages of authority, the dead bodies of revenges represent something greater than themselves. The manner of their deaths, often occurring through some kind of artistic medium, whether play, masque, or portrait-gazing, re-presents: the past crimes of the dead; the power of the revenger; the providence of God to requite injustice; and/or the reformation of the state, that will now better reflect God's will on earth. Katharine Eisaman Maus perfectly expresses the peculiar position of the revenger as "simultaneously an avatar and enemy of social order." Revengers are "caught in a double bind," falling outside convention in their struggles to assert convention. [61] Playwrights staged revengers as falling somewhere on this spectrum, between necessary reformers and villainous destroyers of civic bounds.

Revenge was thus the site of many paradoxes. As a form of communication and conversion, it only fully wreaks its wrath on its victims when they can no longer transform or listen to its message. It is reactionary, yearning for the good old days, and subversive, forgoing rules of social hierarchy to reform its breaking. It is a motive of fiendish villains and God himself; the stuff of tragedy and of comedy, depending on the outcome. From all of this, we see that at the heart of this early modern concept of

[61] Maus, "Introduction," xiii.

"revenge" is *transformation*, one that can go in a variety of directions. At its most pared-down, fundamental level, revenge involves change. Revengers force into being either treacherous schemes or sober reformations.

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For early modern Englanders, then, poison and revenge went hand-in-hand conceptually. Both were concerned above all with the transformation of social boundaries that followed models of contagious disease.

In placing emphasis on broken – and re-forged—boundaries, however, I am not suggesting that this was the only relationship between poison, revenge, and the theater, nor a necessary consideration of playwrights. In fact, each of the plays I examine – Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Tourneur's *The Atheist's Tragedy*, Webster's *The White Devil*, and Middleton's and Rowley's *The Changeling* – distinctively represent the contagion of poison and revenge. In each chapter, I consider the dramatic alongside the unique "medical" concepts at play: that is, putrefaction and the flight cure in *Hamlet*, astrological and divine causes of the plague in *The Atheist's Tragedy*, poisonous treatments and theatrical infections in *The White Devil*, and the relationship between the poison of the pox and the poison of the plague in *The Changeling.* I do not use the medical texts to contextualize or historicize the "literary"; indeed, I do not find the medical and the dramatic to belong to completely separated arenas of life. In insisting that there is nothing "literary" about plague tractates, for instance, or that *Hamlet* has little to do with the changing attitudes and practices about disease, we only limit our understanding of both medicine and the theater. The strong distinction between the medical and the theatrical, or the medical and the religious, may exist today, but it did not belong to

sixteenth and seventeenth century England.[62] Communal representations – whether on the stage or at church – were felt to have a real power over communal health and disease, not because the period was "superstitious," but because medicine was understood more holistically than it is today, involving not just cellular and chemical interactions, but the entire universe of stars and planets, with God's providential script to boot. People believed in the efficacy of their private and public performances of healing.

As a form of art, the theater uniquely requires communities of people to witness and produce representations that unfold across time and space. Thus, the spread of poison, or the spread of disease, is experienced and understood differently when represented in a play than when seen in a painting or read in a story. Both poison and revenge take time as they 'take their course' to infect other people. What better way to analyze these concepts than by looking through the medium that likewise requires time, space, and other people present to tell its story, a medium itself disparaged then and now as being "contagious," as inuring its spectators to violence and cruelty? The overt theatricality of many of these plays is not a tool to distance the audience from the grotesque murders and poisonings of fiendish revengers, nor does it reflect the desires of a high-brow, "coterie" audience now accustomed to artifice and reflexive-ness. Instead, it showcases the possibly dangerous power of the stage, de-familiarizing "ordinary" life as being itself a spectacle, a disguise over the reality of the death and disease of the human condition. Like both revenge and poison, the theater breaks boundaries, creating new ones in their wake. Since theatrical power partly belongs to this ability to influence and move other people, it is not surprising that playwrights staged narratives of ruptured boundaries. The

[62] For more on spiritual remedies, see Chapter 3, especially pp. 139-142.

poisoned performances within a play invariably relate the offstage and onstage spectators to one another, such that the onstage performances of poison and revenge call into question the nature of theatricality itself.

Throughout, I explore the many ways revenge writers turn to poison when juxtaposing the bounded with the boundless. I consider more fully the often paradoxical combinations of boundary -making and -breaking in revenge and poison in Chapter 1, reading the twentieth century creation of the genre alongside the anxiety about the poisonous, or infectious nature of these spectacles of violence. In Chapter 2, I consider the sense of the boundless alongside the play's narrative digressions and meta-theatrical representations. The profound confinement and isolation in *Hamlet* – likened to the confining disease of poisonous putrefactions – feels all the more tragic because Shakespeare shows the possibility of escape, whether in the freeing motion of budding sexuality, the theater, or the escape from Elsinore. Revenge and poison, both born of stagnation and rotting substances, spread, strangely enough, by preventing other motion. The infamously noted "delay" and sense of "excessive" digression of the play relates to Shakespeare's fascination with the transforming stillness of narratives of revenge.

In Chapter 3, Tourneur's ghost, the murdered father of Charlemont, rejects the boundlessness of revenge and poison by forbidding his son to seek revenge in *The Atheist's Revenge*. In staging the strict narrative of God's vengeance as the basis for earthly justice, Tourneur seems to protect his narrative from the "excesses" of revenge: that is, the blurring of boundaries between villain and revenger; the contagious spread of violence; and the undermining of state and religious authority. I consider Tourneur's containment of revenge in heavenly structures of meaning – God's providential plan –

alongside the religious ordinances of special services used during times of pestilence. Control over the threat of contagion – whether the hidden poison of revenge or of disease – is gained paradoxically, when earthly authorities make pretense of giving their power up to divine authority.

Webster's tragedies starkly contrast with these narratives of contained poison; in *The White Devil*, he creates a multitude of revengers unconcerned with the supernatural. Each revel in revenge and other poisons because they are "sweet." In Chapter 4, I consider the supposed "excess" of Webster as emerging from his characters' boundless drive for revenge, gore, and sex. How the poisonous violence of the stage threatens to spread to the audience – and what it might mean for representations of gore more generally – is a central occupation of this chapter.

Finally, I turn to the hidden poisons and infections of Middleton's and Rowley's *The Changeling*, where the secret threat of feminized disease is likened to the secret workings of hidden vengeance. Throughout Chapter 5, I explore Beatrice-Joanna's infections alongside the other "private" disease of poison, the pox. How the poisons of the pox were believed to influence the poisons of the plague is another major interest of the chapter. Middleton, fascinated by the mutability and treachery of women, understood boundaries as being forever dissolvable. One might try to "test" the purity of one's lover, wife, husband, friend, or child: but all humanity seems destined to fall into poison and disease, given the right amount of time and space.

Excluding Tourneur's *Atheist's Revenge*, all of these plays are considered by Bowers to represent the pinnacle of a particular "stage" of the "revenge tragedy." *Hamlet* reaches the zenith of the Kydian, golden-age revenge play; *The White Devil* embodies the

best of the villain revenge plays; *The Changeling* stands as the most sophisticated of the disapproval of revenge plays.[63] The fact that I chose the very plays that epitomize Bowers' historical periods of the genre, however, was coincidental. I selected each of the four plays under discussion because I found them to offer something original and surprising in their representations of poison and revenge, not because Bowers categorized them as the greatest of each sub-genre type (though I don't rule out the possibility that my perception of the play's originality has something to do with Bowers' similar admiration of them). I wanted to limit my analysis to the first two decades of the seventeenth century, the period roughly considered "Jacobean,"[64] for a variety of reasons. This was the so-called height of the vogue for staged revenge that struck the playhouses at the turn of the century. Moreover the great tragic voices of the Jacobean period – Shakespeare, Webster, Ford, Chapman, Tourneur, and Middleton – have been called darker and more grotesque than those of the 1580s-1590s. Since I wanted to explore how plays create the *sense* of the sensational and contagious in their representations of violence, it seemed wise to explore the plays that earned such reputations for centuries

[63] For Bowers, *The Atheist's Tragedy* belongs to one of the experimental counter-strains of the disapproval of revenge that was staged during the Kydian golden years. The best example of the "decadence" of the revenge genre was Shirley's *The Maid's Tragedy*. See Chapter 1, pp for more on these categories.

[64] Hamlet of course is a late Elizabethan play. Many consider the darkness of this play to be more reflective of the "pessimistic" strain of Jacobean literature, as opposed to Elizabethan "optimism." For this view, see especially Robert Ornstein, *The Moral Vision of Jacobean Tragedy* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985) and Larry S. Champion "Ford's *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* and the Jacobean Tragic Perspective," *PMLA*, 90.1 (1975): 78-87. I do not agree with this line of thought – plenty of Elizabethan productions were dark and gory, just as many Jacobean productions end comically (think of the "romances" and winter's tales of Shakespeare's later plays, or the vogue for tragicomedies).

after their productions. Finally, the greatest debates over the use of poison in the plague emerged in the first decade of the century, after the horrific 1603 epidemic struck London. James I had just assumed power, and the epidemic that followed was interpreted as reflecting that political change. The next pestilence of epidemic proportions, incidentally, would also occur during the next monarchical overhaul, as Charles I took the throne after his father's death in 1625.

Roughly book-ended by these conjoined events of poisonous outbreaks and deaths of monarchs, the plays under consideration in my dissertation had much to say about poison and revenge, and much at stake in doing so. However they chose to stage revenge, English playwrights saw its potential to "have no bounds" as revengers tore apart and conscientiously constructed new structures through their transformative, and poisonous, violence.

Chapter 1
"Inwardly he chawed his own maw":
Internal Poisons in Tragedies of Revenge

Something of vengeance I had tasted for the first time; as aromatic wine it seemed, on swallowing, warm and racy: its after-flavour, metallic and corroding, gave me a sensation as if I had been poisoned.[1]

Revenge is well-known for destroying not only the targeted victim of vengeance, but also the revenger ("Before you embark on a journey of revenge, dig two graves"). William Blake describes this doubled killing of the self- and other- as springing from a reservoir of poison, hidden deep within his revenger. In this poem of poison and revenge, the landscapes of his "Songs of Innocence" – his echoing greens, laughing babies, and "divine images" of Mercy, Pity, Peace and Love – have aged into the hellish terrains of revenge, found within his corruptible world of his "Songs of Experience." A corpse lies prone underneath the black, leafless trunk in his illustrated "A Poison Tree," the body's arms spread like a horizontal Christ (Figure 1). The dead body is that of the speaker's "foe," who has eaten an apple grown from the soil of hidden wrath, fed with the "fears," "tears," and "deceitful wiles" of the scorned speaker. Blake dramatizes revenge as perversely creative in its destructions. Rather than grow something nutritive, the angry soul creates something poisonous, cultivating venom from his internalized pain and resentment. Revenge is a gift forged out of the grossest parts of the self, where internal disease spreads into the "real world" through a carefully shaped physical object.[2] In

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[1] Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre: An Authoritative Text, Contexts, Criticism,* Ed. Richard J. Dunn (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001) 31.

[2] I use the term "gift" purposely, as the German "Gift" means "poison." One is reminded of Marcel Mauss' anthropological exploration of the gift-giving and its burdens in his highly influential *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, Trans. WD Halls (New York: W.W. Norton, 2000).

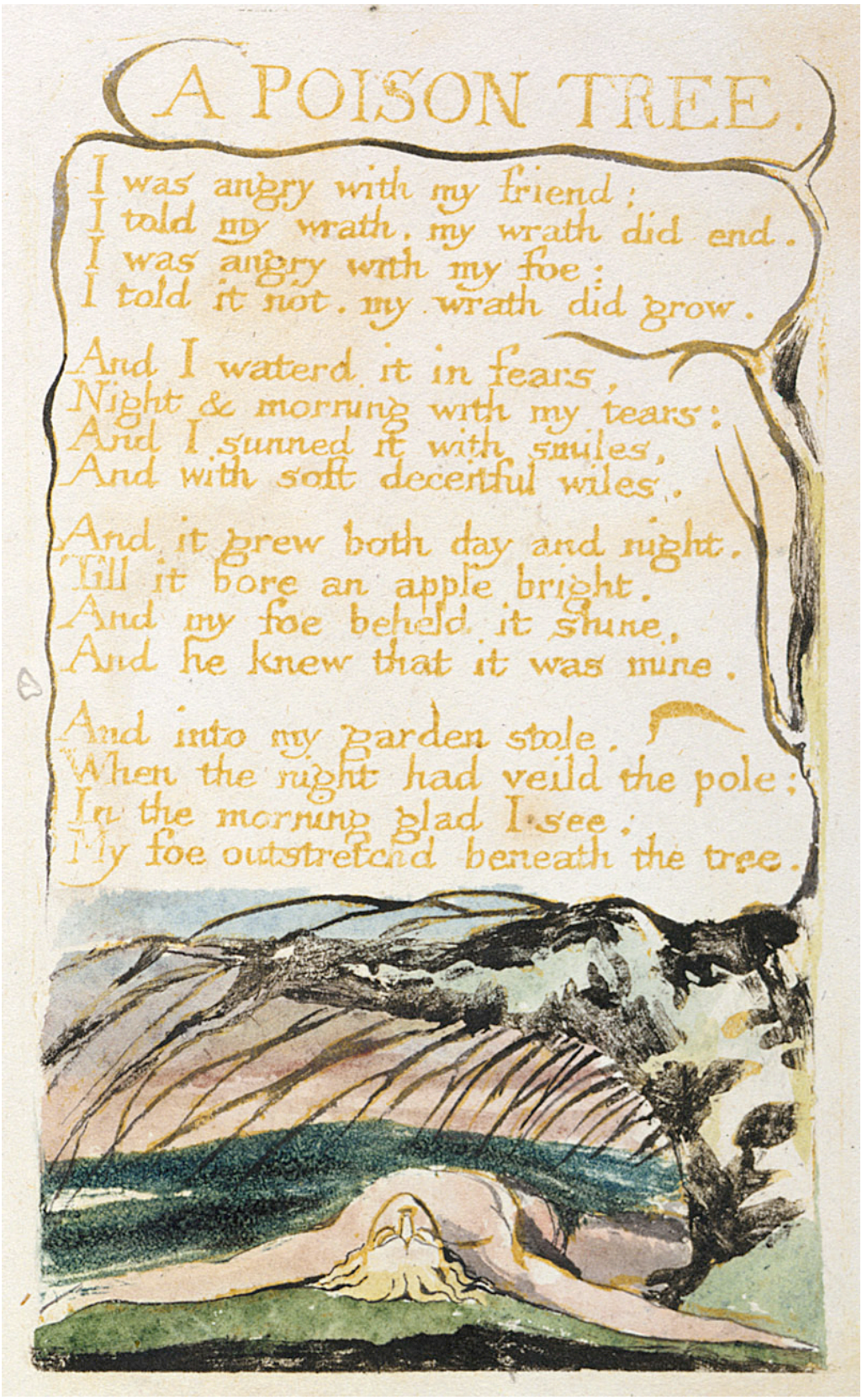

Figure 1. "A Poison Tree," William Blake, *Songs of Experience* (1794).

Blake's conception, revenge is not just enacted through poison: it is born from the internal poison of repressed bitterness.

While Blake's poison transforms his speaker into the very poison that will kill his "foe," others imagine the threat to the self in the pursuit of revenge according to a different figure of poison. In *Jane Eyre*, for instance, Charlotte Brontë juxtaposes the pleasure of revenge with its bitter after-taste: "Something of vengeance I had tasted for the first time; as aromatic wine it seemed, on swallowing, warm and racy: its after-flavour, metallic and corroding, gave me a sensation as if I had been poisoned."[3] Jane accidentally consumes poison, in this metaphor. Metallic corrosions eclipse any momentary pleasure she might feel. We find in these two, very different accounts that revenge might be like an infection of an external body, or the spreading corruption of an internally-directed revenge plot. Whether understood as more foreign or innate, we find in both accounts the intense fascination with the warping of character in revenge, a transformation into a poison that can only be read as harmful. Commonplace sayings litter our culture with reference to the internal poisons and perverse makeovers of revenge ("Revenge is like a poison. It can take you over, and before you know it, it can turn you into something ugly."[4]) Like any good makeover story, revenge stories dramatize the loss of a unique, individual self.[5] After all, in the broadest sense revenge *is*

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[3] Brontë, *Jane Eyre,* 31.

[4] *Spider-Man 3,* Dir. Sam Raimi, Perf. Tobey Maguire and Kirsten Dunst, Columbia Pictures, 2007.

[5] Makeover stories abound with this theme, where an oblivious ingénue, charmed by the aid of a knowing, socially-savvy helper, loses her identity and virtue by becoming like the social-climbing people who have rejected her in the first place.

a narrative of the past imposing its will on the present and future, as ghostly remembrances, tokens, and former injuries push their way back into the realm of the living present.[6]

Critics have relentlessly explored the burdens of the past onto the "infinite" soul of the present, living personality in the most famous stage revenge of all time. Hamlet's psychological disturbances have been diagnosed for so long that his character stands in for internal conflict. Mentally torn, depressed, and imbalanced, Hamlet "might be named 'Melancholia.'"[7] This interpretation follows from the so-called Schlegel-Coleridge theory of Hamlet's delay. According to this reading, a procrastinating hero, internally repulsed by the violence he must perform, retreats into his remarkably imaginative and perceptive mind. Hamlet is lost "in labyrinths of thought."[8] He is "a soul unfit for the performance" of revenge.[9] In this narrative, revenge traps Hamlet's "infinite"

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[6] For more on the function of the ghost in revenge stories, see Chapter 1 in John Kerrigan, *Revenge Tragedy: Aeschylus to Armageddon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996). Many have spoken eloquently of the way the past replaces present and future in the pursuit of vengeance. Plato differentiates punishment from retribution in his *Protagoras* based solely on time: punishment is for "the sake of the future," while the vengeance of "savage brute[s]" is for the sake of the past, Trans. Benjamin Jowett (Rockville: Serenity Publishers, 2009) 324a-b. Nietzsche finds revenge to be "the will's ill will against time and its 'it was'" in *Thus Spake Zarathustra,* Trans. Thomas Common, Intro. Nicholas Davey (London: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 1997).

[7] Victor Hugo, *William Shakespeare*, Trans. Melville B. Anderson (Chicago: A.C. McClurg and Company, 1887) 237. Of course A.C. Bradley famously "solved" the dilemma of the play – that is, Hamlet's delay – by arguing for his clinical melancholy. Andrew Cecil Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy: Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, Macbeth* (New York: Macmillan, 1964) 105.

[8] August Wilhelm von Schlegel, *Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature* (1809), cited in Harold Bloom (ed.), *Hamlet,* Major Literary Characters (New York: Chelsea House, 1990).

soul within the confines of its script: "It is the tragedy of a soul buzzing in the glass prison of a world,"[10] where the world's prison forces a complicated individual into the diseased logic of revenge.

This interpretation has influenced many theatrical and cinematic productions of the play, even bleeding into the realm of visual art. John Austen's stunning ink and pen illustrations in his 1922 edition of *Hamlet* visually represent Hamlet's "tragedy of mind" through sharp lines of black and white (Figures 2 and 3). He creates Hamlet's tortured,

Figure 2. A Ghostly Visitation. John Austin**,** *William Shakespeare: Hamlet* (Selwyn & Bloun, 1922).

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[9] Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship and Travels*, Vol. 1, Trans. Thomas Carlyle, Intro. Edward Dowden (Chicago: A.C. McClurg & Co., 1890) 240.

[10] George Santayana, "Hamlet" (1908), cited in Bloom, *Hamlet*.

inner life through the twisted extortions of his body. The imposing ghost towers over his points sharp fingers above Hamlet's head. Draped in the same ornate cloth as the feminine figures of Fate that litter the play, like that in Figure 3, the ghost is another puppet-master who leads Hamlet to his doom. In Figure 3, threads and bands of cloth attach characters to Fate and to the masks of horror and tragedy, the tension taut between Hamlet's folding body and the stern pole of Fate's command. Fate's arm, stretched out horizontally from shoulder to the tips of pointed fingers, recalls that of the Ghost and of his unrelenting command to revenge. Austen's drawings capture the motion of stillness, like a rope in a ghostly tug-of-war, dramatizing the motions of internal harm – the "wild and whirling words" and forms – born from the stillness and severity of revenge.

Figure 3. A Melancholic Hamlet. John Austin**,** *William Shakespeare: Hamlet* (Selwyn & Blount, 1922).

Scholars radically overturned this image of Hamlet as an action-less thinker in the latter half of the twentieth century, drawing attention to his character's explosive violence, his unquestioned commitment to revenge, and his relationship to other stage revengers. Yet even in these accounts, Hamlet is still said to delay, though various reasons are offered to explain away this most famous procrastination outside of character flaw.[11] Perhaps the strongest current in contemporary criticism relates Hamlet's slow-going and anti-climactic revenge to genre, where the delay is read meta-theatricality as Shakespeare's own delay in taking on the old-fashioned "revenge genre."[12] Many assumptions, including the simplicity of the "revenge genre," *Hamlet's* comparative sophistication, and Shakespeare's distaste for revenge, underlie this interpretation. Moreover, it is hard to separate out from these analyses the strong sense that revenge internally poisons, or infects, character. Yet, what is the provenance of this idea of self-poisoning revenge? One wonders whether it relates to the advent of individualism in the centuries after *Hamlet*, or if it was present when *Hamlet* was performed at the Globe at the turn of the seventeenth century.

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[11] Some explain the delay as simply a convention of the genre, following from A.H. Thorndike's foundational account of the "tragedy of revenge" in "The Relations of Hamlet to Contemporary Revenge Plays," *PMLA* 17.2 (1902): 125-220; others argue the delay is the necessary impetus for the play itself (that is, there would not be a play if he simply killed Claudius); still others find it as reflecting Shakespeare's aversion to the "revenge genre," or his experimentation with the genre, like René Girard in *A Theatre of Envy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991. For a good summary of the theories of Hamlet's delay see David Bevington, *Murder Most Foul:* Hamlet *through the Ages.* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011) 3-4, 115-117, and 127-128.

[12] Girard, *A Theatre*, argues that *Hamlet* is a play about revenge plays, and is predominantly "inverted theater."

In fact, throughout this chapter, I argue that this figure of the internally-tortured revenger arose from the profound associations made in the early modern period between internal poisons and revenge. However, by exploring the period's representations of internally poisoning sins, on the one hand, and animals that were literally poisonous, on the other, we find major differences in the way the early modern period approached both revenge and poison. Revenge was simultaneously internal and external, both poisonous and bloody. Later centuries in contrast would split apart these Aristotle-like "spectrums" understand revenge as belonging either to "internal poisons" or "external blood." In fact, I argue that the genre of the "tragedy of revenge" was born next to the "tragedy of blood" precisely critics wanted to free the former from elements of the latter. Facing an astounding number of poisons, shocking gore, and "grotesque" images of disease, and revenge, scholars divided late Elizabethan and Jacobean plays into two broad types of infections, one that was internal and the other external. Our contemporary view of revenge as a very-contained disease of poison thus relates the generic borders of tragedies of revenge, that were drawn in part to differentiate "excess" from "art."

Envy and Wrath, Bees and Toads: The Early Modern Spectrums of Revenge and Poison

Images of self-poisoners were common in early modern iconography and emblems. Many linked specific sins to venomous consumptions. For instance, "envy" appeared in emblems and allegories as the chewing of a poisonous snake or of one's own heart. Jacob de Backer, a Flemish sixteenth century painter, offers a good example of this vice, as a hag bloodied with the pulp of her own heart (Figure 4). Medusa-like, poisonous snakes coil from her head in place of hair, as she is encountered secretly spying on other

people, hiding behind a massive stone. The torments of others seem to fill her with glee; yet, while watching other's miseries, she bites on her heart, the organ pulled from her chest as if part of the green robe covering the rest of her aged body.

The self-inflicted torment of Envy appears early on in Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*. In Book One, the self-poisoning Envy rides in next to the bloodied figure of Wrath in a procession of deadly sins performed before the Knight Redcrosse and the false Duessa at Lucifera's House of Pride. The two ride side by side, on wolf and on lion, as the last pair of sins to appear in solemn march before Satan's arrival. Envy and Wrath belong together, grouped like Idlenesse and Gluttony, Avarice and Lechery before them. Despite their proximity, the two sins act in seemingly opposite directions.

Figure 4. Envy. Jacob de Backer, *The Seven Deadly Sins,* Museo di Capodimonte, Naples (1570-1575).

Envy's poison is acidic and internal. In a fabulous string of repeated "aw's," Spenser describes Envy's poisonous consumptions, as he "Still did chaw / Between his cankred Teeth a venenmous Tode, / That all the Poison ran about his Jaw" (1.4, 30.3-4); yet, Envy also chews apart his guts (his "maw"), as "inwardly he chawed his own Maw / At Neighbour's Wealth" (30.5).[13] Envy reminds us of Shakespeare's Iago, who similarly "diet[s] my revenge" by imaging sins that "like a poisonous mineral, gnaw my inwards" (2.3.281; 284).[14] Spenser's figure threatens to spew out this poison, too, much as Iago externalizes his interior poison in his cruel manipulations of Othello ("I'll pour this pestilence into his ear" (2.3.330)). Like Iago, Envy is in the business of slander, as he viciously attacks "famous poets" through the "spightfull poison [that he] spues / From leprous mouth" (32.7-8), like the poisoned bite of the Blatant Beast found in the second half of the epic. Envy's poison thus primarily destroys character, whether by chawing apart his own internal organs or spewing out defamations. The focal point of the allegory, however, is the *internally* corrosive damage of Envy.

Wrath, on the other hand, externalizes his hot and "revenging" energy (33.1). Riding astride a lion, he "brandisheth" a "burning brond" and hurls out fiery sparks of violence at others (33.4;3). He kills without "government" or mercy, bloodied from head to toe and emitting murderous glances that kill at a distance, like the cockatrice: "His eies did hurle forth sparcles fiery red" (33.5). Importantly, these two figures go together for Spenser, here and elsewhere. The anti-social hatred of Envy befriends the murderous

[13] Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, 2nd Ed., Eds. A.C. Hamilton, Hiroshi Yamashita, and Toshiyuki Suzuki (Harlow: Pearson Education Limited, 2001).

[14] All citations from *Othello* taken from *Norton Shakespeare*, 2091-2174.

Wrath of revenge. While they are two separate allegorical figures, who might represent two different character types, their relationship seems symbiotic, where poisoned chawing of jaw and maw might explode into the "Sparcles fiery red" of revenge. That is, the self-contained bitterness of Envy might be behind – or at least next to – the unadorned ruthlessness of Wrath. In any event, poison means most of all internal corrosion for Spenser. As a disguised substance, poison matches the hidden cruelty of the secretly envious, would-be revengers. The *schadenfreude* of envy occurs at the expense of one's own health.

The emblematic tradition also figures into Edward Topsell's encyclopedic account of venomous creatures, *The Historie of Serpents* (1608).[15] Poison's many associations with revenge factor into his lively accounts of "serpents," defined broadly as any creature primarily composed of poison. Insects, lizards, snakes, and mythical creatures share virtues and vices that relate to their uniquely poisonous constitutions. Serpents are wily, smooth-talkers, and highly deceptive, all qualities of course perfectly encapsulated in the tempting serpent of Eden. Poisonous creatures also share a strong desire for revenge. As a group, they have such a great "desire of reuenge" that "for euen to losse of theyr lives and when they are more then halfe dead, they kill other."[16] Moreover, these animals fall onto a spectrum of vengeance and poison. The bee is on

[15] This history of serpent followed his *Historie of Four-Footed Beasts* (1607). Topsell translated much of Konrad Gesner's *Historiae Animalium* (published in the 1550s) and Edward Wotton's *De differentiis animalium libri decem* (Paris, 1552) and *Insectorum, sive, Minimorum animalium theatrum* (1634) in his histories. See Charles E. Raven, *English Naturalists*, *English Naturalists from Neckan to Ray* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1947) 223-226.

[16] Edward Topsell, *The historie of serpents* … (London : Printed by William Jaggard, 1608) 4.

one end. A little monarch in his orderliness, the bee contains a limited though powerful weapon of poison to be used only when necessary: "For he hath a sting, but maketh it not an instrument of reuenge."[17] Proper governance requires some use of force, some promise of retribution, but not too much. On the other end, toads lie in swamps of poison, putrefaction, and vengeance. With more "wrath and venome" than the frog, the toad "sendeth forth poyson out of her buttocks or backer parts, where-withall she infecteth the ayre for reuenge of them that doe annoy her."[18] Many of these creatures are born from the poison of putrefaction – from the bodies of men, horse-dung, putrefied semen inside animals, and so on – and their resulting poisonous nature makes them more likely to revenge through deceptive, hidden means.

Unlike other writers of his day, Topsell did not find poison to be a potential therapeutic agent. Its transformations were uniformly destructive. In Topsell's account, poisonous creatures only remain healthy because their poison is confined in various organs, often stored in a bladder of their mouth.[19] Poisons are so far removed from health that they belong to a totally separate category of medicines than their antidotes, which were specifically crafted by God to treat poisons.[20] Despite his uniform understanding of

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[17] Ibid., 66.

[18] Ibid., 190. Interestingly, the "cockatrice," the most poisonous of all creatures, is more stately and dignified than the others (as such, he wears a "crownet"). Topsell explains the creature's massive capacity for poisoning via all the senses as relating to the particularly abject putrefaction behind the birth of the creature (through the decay of internalized male semen in a cock hardened into the shell of an egg).

[19] Ibid., 11. Or, their poison is the concentration of gall that moves into their mouths through veins of their backbone.

poison as an inherently destructive substance – which, as we explored in the Introduction was the general trend in the period – Topsell does find some use for poison and revenge. As we saw above, creatures like the bee deploy controlled doses of both revenge and poison. In this way, he follows Aristotle's spectrum of anger in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, where one can be either too revengeful or not revengeful enough.[21] One must use just the right amount of revenge and poison to best govern a state, or the little state of the family.

Yet, much of our current understanding of revenge as a poison relates a very different medical model than that found in the early modern period. We no longer place vengeance on a spectrum. Instead, there is a choice between two oppositional terms. One chooses the health of mercy or the poisonous disease of revenge. Michael McCullough calls this the "disease model of revenge" that has become orthodox in our culture.[22] He describes the model as follows:

> Revenge is an infection that invades a vulnerable host …, releases a toxin that poisons the host morally, physically, and psychologically, and then wreaks destructive effects on the avenger and the objects of his or her vengeance – sometimes spreading from one host to another until the outbreak reaches epidemic proportions. [23]

For McCullough, the language of poison and contagion turns revenge into a foreign impulse, always belonging to the realm of vicious others. An understanding of revenge as a contagious virus – as an external poison made internal – thus ignores the universality of revenge – and of forgiveness. McCullough is responding mostly to modern social

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[20] Ibid., 58.

[21] See Chapter 1 in Kerrigan, *Revenge* for a good overview of Aristotle's account of revenge.

[22] Michael McCullough, "Chapter One," *Beyond Revenge: The Evolution of the Forgiveness Instinct* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2008) 1-20.

[23] Ibid., 5.

scientists, who have continued to align revenge with disease. Indeed, scientists propose that psychological or neurological trauma might lead to "posttraumatic embitterment disorder," a newly proposed companion disease to PTSD, in which patients are said to excessively ruminate on vengeance.[24] The neurological damage of these contained, repetitive thoughts of revenge and violence might require pharmacological care in addition to cognitive-behavioral strategies that will transform these thoughts into something different, and more healthy. Mercy and forgiveness are offered as not only philosophies that combat revenge, but also as material antidotes that combat the disease of revenge.

Others accept the disease model in revenge, but reverse the usual order. In these accounts, it is not execution of revenge that creates disease. Instead, the impossibility of taking revenge sparks a host of psychological issues. That is, frustrated vengeance rather than vengeance profoundly infects personality. In his attempt to rehabilitate revenge, Peter French describes the injurious effects of containing revenge inside oneself as being born out of the poison of rot. In his words, frustrated vengeance is "a state of not acting on legitimate resentment, holding it inside, letting it fester, until it poisons the victim."[25] French's model of poisonous containment inherited many of its tenets from the long-standing association of putrefaction, poison, and disease.[26] It also draws from the related

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[24] M. Linden, K. Baumann, M. Rotter, and B. Schippan, "The psychopathology of posttraumatic embitterment disorders," *Psychopathology* 40.3 (2007): 159-165.

[25] Peter A. French, *The Virtues of Vengeance* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2001) 60.

[26] See Chapter 2, pp. 82-84 for more on putrefaction and disease.

Freudian metaphors of health and release, where a cathexis of libidinal energies promotes psychical health. Like earlier models of putrefying, standing ponds, Freudian pathology emerges from the blocking of normal libidinal flow. Being stuck, or "fixated" creates disease.

Additionally, we find within French's disease of frustrated revenge echoes of Friedrich Nietzsche's figures of *ressentiment* whom he attacks in his scathing critique of moral philosophy. His whole project is preeminently about disease, poison, and revenge, as he seeks to identify the hidden sources of poison and revenge in Judeo-Christian thought, juxtaposed with the figures of "health" from antiquity. His figures of revenge and poison churn with frustrated desires for violence. They are the "preacher[s] of *equality*" who hide their desires for power and violence under the pretense of mercy.[27] These men are weak and cowardly, "cellar rodents full of vengefulness and hatred."[28] They internalize their wrath, make secret their desire for revenge, and become poisonous tarantulas, infecting others with their doctrines: "Revenge sits in your soul: wherever you bite, black scabs grow; your poison makes the soul whirl with revenge."[29] They pretend to reject vengeance. Instead, they create a system of morals out of this repressed desire for revenge. The entire moral structure that follows is diseased by virtue of its containment and duplicity: "black scabs grow" without the prophylactic release of these

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[27] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, Trans. Thomas Common, Intro. Nicholas Davey (London: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 1997) 97.

[28] Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo,* Ed. Walter Kaufmann, Trans. Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1989) 48.

[29] Nietzsche, *Thus Spake,* 97.

emotions and energies in their unadulterated reality. Nietzsche casts health and disease alongside physical strength and action. Healthy people do not seek vengeance over time, but respond immediately to the insult at hand; weak people become ever more diseased as they internalize their insults and bitterness, so much that their insides transform into a hidden well of poison, one that creates a miasma of "bad air!" throughout Europe and abroad.

Max Scheler further expands upon the social dimension of Nietzschian *ressentiment,* finding people on the edges of the social ladder – especially women and the young – to be most susceptible to this "mental attitude," as they are uniquely positioned to feel thwarted and impotent, yet have no recourse to alleviate that mental anguish. The resulting *ressentiment* is a "self-poisoning of the mind" that primarily issues from the "thirst for revenge": it is an emotion that belongs to "those who *serve* and are *dominated* at the moment."[30] Accordingly, revenge and all of its destructive poisons belong to treacherous, cowardly "others," who, like Spenser's Envy, can only chaw apart their own body in all their impotence. Nietzsche's figures of "health," in contrast, remind us of the killing machine of Spenser's Wrath. They do not need to internalize anything, or disguise their motives. They can simply act.

Thus, the notion that revenge and poison fell on a spectrum of health and disease gradually shifted into one where disease and health were oppositional categories. There is no middle ground to choose from in these more contemporary disease models of disease – revenge either happens, or it does not. We see, too, a separation of the internal

[30] Max Scheler, *Ressentiment*, Ed. and Intro. Lewis A. Coser, Trans. William W. Holdheim (New York: Free Press of Glencoe, 1961) 48.

corrosions of Envy and the contagious fire of Wrath that once appeared side-by-side to represent revenge. Picking up on the intimate connection between poison and putrefaction, writers recasted revenge as necessarily internal. Since revengers cannot – or will not – act openly, they act more like Envy than Wrath, chawing apart their very soul in the process. Yet, the values we assign to these figures depend upon the ideologies of the particular writer. Nietzsche abhorred the self-poisoning envy of frustrated revengers.

"Its garlands of poisoned flowers" : Melodrama, the Tragedy of Blood, and The Revenge Tragedy

Yet many were drawn to the figure of the self-poisoning revenger. The very isolated, tormented figure of Hamlet explored earlier influenced, and was influenced by, this gradual recasting of revenge as an internal disease and burden. Given *Hamlet's* monumental importance to literary scholarship, it is not very surprising, then, that his associations with the internal disease of revenge profoundly impacted the very genre of revenge. After all, *Hamlet* was central to the motivations to describe "tragedies of revenge" in the first place. As we will see, many scholars began to favor plays they identified as dramatizing the internal burden of vengeance, as opposed to the external pleasure of violence. Before the quite detailed structure of conventions and generic types was invented, however, the excesses of violence and rhetoric found in sixteenth and seventeenth century English tragedies startled scholars. Gore, poison, and revenge overwhelmed these dark representations. In fact, the violence of these plays was even extended to the English "Renaissance" itself. Violet Paget, one of the early scholars of both the Italian and English "Renaissances," uncovered in these English plays the pernicious influence of Italy. In her opinion, English dramatists had not invented the

horrors and gore that littered their pages: they had been attracted by the corruption of Italian courts, glittering with wealth, exotic poisons, and incredible violence.[31] Under the pen name Vernon Lee, she examines the exchanges between Renaissance Italy and England in *Euphorion: Being Studies of the Antique and the Mediaeval in the Renaissance* (1884), her first attempt at an aesthetic criticism that followed the style of her close correspondent, Walter Pater. She writes of the dramatists' "fascinat[ion] with horror" as they picked up the precious metals and dross of Italy – the "gold" and "tinsel," "refuse and ordure" in her elaborate analogy. These artists then forged from these bits and pieces of matter new products: England's own dark and terrible pictures of humanity that emerged in their plays, prose, and poetry. What the English saw in Italy was poison – heaps of poisons, used by tyrannical villains and hidden throughout the ever-concealed court. In lines characteristic of her soaring, emotional prose that over-brims with clauses, Paget connects the floral disguise of poison to the disguise of the Italian plots themselves:

> The world of these great poets is not the open world with its light and its air, its purifying storms and lightnings; *it is the darkened Italian palace*, *with its wrought iron bars preventing escape*; its embroidered carpets muffling the footsteps; it hidden, suddenly yawning trap-doors; its arras-hanging concealing masked ruffians; *its garlands of poisoned flowers*; its long suites of untenanted darkened rooms, through which the wretch is pursued by the half-crazed murderer; while below, in the cloistered court, the clanking armor and stamping horses, and above, in the carved and gilded hall, the viols and lutes and cornets make a cheery triumphant concert, and drown the cries of the victim [italics mine].[32]

She goes on to contend that English writers created such dismal, bloody tragedies because their moral sensibility was not inured to this vice, unlike their Italian

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[31] Given Paget's history, it isn't surprising that she identifies an English fascination with Italy as the source of the Renaissance: her writings from first to last, from aesthetic criticism to fiction, were inspired by the Italy of the past. For more on her background, see Vineta Colby's highly informative *Vernon Lee: A Literary Biography* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2003), especially Chapter 4.

[32] Vernon Lee, *Euphorion: Being Studies of the Antique and the Mediaeval in the Renaissance, Volume 1* (London: T Fisher Unwin, 1884), 78-79.

counterparts who could continue to "walk placidly through the evil which surrounded them; for them, artists and poets, the sky was always blue and the sun always bright." In contrast, the playwrights Webster and Tourneur responded to this "nightmare" and "incubus" of "Italian wickedness" with a corresponding darkness in their "grand and frightful plays."[33] Webster, Tourneur, and their contemporaries created tragedies out of their obsession with the ever-poisonous Italy.

Paget speaks generally about plays of the "Renaissance," though she focuses mostly on works that belong to the seventeenth century "side" of the term: that is, the age of Shakespeare's darkest, and most successful, tragedies, and the age of those playwrights allegedly drawn to the "skull beneath the skin."[34] Though her description of the gloomy Italian palace may owe as much to the Gothic novel as it does to the Renaissance theater, her intense focus on the violence of the stage unites it with the dramatic genre first invented around the time she was writing. J.A. Symonds was the first to label these dark plays. He described them as "tragedies of blood." This type would eventually include the "tragedy of revenge" as a "sub-species."[35] Before the

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[33] Ibid., 107-108.

[34] The phrase, from T.S. Eliot's "Whispers of Immortality," famously refers to John Webster.

[35] "Sub-species" is A.H. Thorndike's term from his highly influential essay "The Relations of Hamlet to Contemporary Revenge Plays," *PMLA*, 17(2), 1902, 125-220. The word is one of the many examples of the Darwinian influence afoot in both Thorndike's and Bowers' separate accounts of the revenge type. Both re-imagine genre almost as a biological entity, where "species" of plays adapt and evolve from other forms. Contemporary scholars cite A.H. Thorndike's article as the singular origin of the "revenge tragedy." Thorndike and Bowers were not, in fact, the first to speak of revenge plays as their own type, though they were the first to define this type at length. Frederick

elaboration of this different subset of revenge plays, however, Symonds described these plays as being filled with violence and poison. Poison was so prevalent that it "was poured out like rain."[36] Moreover, the "tragedy of blood narratives contained ghosts, revenges, corruption, and horrors. Most critics aligned it with the reception of Senecan tragedy in Elizabethan England, though Symonds himself found Seneca to be confined to the "academic" experimentations at Oxford and Cambridge.[37] However, more often than not, Seneca was seen as yet another pernicious and foreign source that explained the treachery behind the English "tragedies of blood." In the first extensive account of Seneca in Elizabethan England, John William Cunliffe asserted that Seneca's chosen themes, style of bombast and stately rhetoric, and heaping of horrors directly sparked the English "tragedy of blood." The result was exaggeration and excess, though Cunliffe finds this not to be without its power and pleasure:

> That Seneca misled English dramatists into violence and exaggeration cannot be denied; but these are faults which have their favorable side. If Elizabethan tragedy is sometimes too sensational, it is very seldom dull; and if its diction is sometimes extravagant, it is rarely inadequate to the needs of the situation, however tremendous the tragic crisis may be.[38]

Fleay speaks of "Revenge-plays, with ghosts in them, [that] were the rage for the next four years" (215) in his *A Chronicle History of the Life and Works of William Shakespeare* (New York: Scribner & Welford, 1886).

[36] John Addington Symonds, *Shakspere's Predecessors in the English Drama* (New York: Cooper Square Publishers, 1883) 388.

[37] Symonds argued that Senecan drama was limited to the closet plays of the university, and was confined only to the early *Gorbuduc* and *Misfortunes of Arthur*, while the "tragedy of blood," invented by Kyd in the 1580s, arose from the "romantic school" of drama rather than from these university exercises. Arthur Symons, in contrast, found the "tragedy of blood" to arise from the Senecan imitations of *Gorbuduc* and the *Misfortunes* via Kyd in his *Studies in Two Literatures* (London: Leonard Smithers Royal Arcade, 1897).

[38] Cunliffe, *The Influence of Seneca on Elizabethan Tragedy: An Essay* (New York: Macmillan & Co., 1893) 125

This term has now fallen out of favor so completely that scholars who write about "revenge tragedy," and even the history of the term "revenge tragedy," make no mention of it.[39] Critics instead explore the contours of the "revenge tragedy" as first defined at length by A.H. Thorndike in his 1902 article on *Hamlet*, and take as a matter of course a few stage conventions ostensibly inherited from the Senecan tradition. Though this list of conventions or genre requirements is varied, the ones most consistently found include: a ghost, urging vengeance for his or her untimely demise; the delay of the revenger; and the revenger's madness in the pursuit of vengeance. Thorndike considers these three attributes to be the hallmark of the genre. In contrast, he argues that intrigues and violence are more general facets of the plays that belong to the "tragedy of blood" type, but not the more specialized "sub-species" category of the "revenge tragedy."

We see here how the "tragedy of blood" became understood at some point in the first decades of the twentieth century as being a more vaguely-outlined genre. In "tragedies of blood," vengeance, gore, and violence mixed with poisons, stratagems, ghosts, and spectacles *messily*, as opposed to the rather clean narrative of the "tragedy of revenge." Moreover, we find in the these juxtaposed genres the very oppositional terms we explored earlier in this chapter: that is, the internal poisons of revenge versus the external blood of wrath. Unsurprisingly, "tragedies of blood" were associated with the

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[39] While there are insightful historical analyses of the development of the genre that followed from Thorndike, through Lily Campbell, to Fredson Bowers, and on through Ronald Broude in the 1970s (of note is Martha Rozett's "Aristotle, the Revenger, and the Elizabethan Audience," *Studies in Philology*, 26.3 (1979): 239-261), no one has analyzed the connections between the revenge genre and the tragedy of blood, nor the many other experimental genres created in the mid 19th and early 20th centuries.

external, focusing the play's energies on torture, spectacle, and even the pleasure of revenge. "Tragedies of revenge," in contrast, were remarkably internal, defined as they were by the revenger's madness, delay, and ghostly burden.

All did not embrace this distinction. The "tragedy of blood" was not immediately nor fully replaced by its sub-genre, at least not in the forty years between Thorndike's article and Bower's foundational book on the subject. Most scholars were not sure what to do with the types of plays created by Marlowe and Kyd. Many disagreed about the classification of these plays and others, including Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*. In fact, Elmer Edgar Stoll argued for two different types of "tragedies of blood" three years after Thorndike's article. His "Senecan-Kydian" genre of tragedy followed Kyd in centering its action on revenge, ghosts, delays of vengeance, and madness, as opposed to the "Marlowesque" type that followed Marlowe's *Tamburlaine* and the *Jew of Malta* in centering its action around the machinations of a Machiavellian villain.[40] The sense that there were two different types of gory plays – one featuring a more noble revenger and the other featuring a "poisoner by principle" in Stoll's terms (98) – persisted throughout the century, even after most scholars stopped talking about "tragedies of blood." Bowers argued passionately against a separate "Marlowe" type in his highly influential *Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy*, suggesting alternatively that the "tragedy of revenge" went through a number of different stages that might accommodate

[40] See Chapter 3 in his *John Webster: The Periods of his Work as Determined by his Relations to the Drama of his Day* (Cambridge: A. Mudge & Son, 1905). Also see D.L. Thomas' "Authorship of 'Revenge for Honour,'" *Modern Philology*, 5.4 (1908): 617-636 for another example of Senecan-Kydian and Marlowesque categories.

these different "types."[41] One stage, for instance, was the "villain" play, which might include the more broadly poisonous and revengeful plays of, say, John Webster. Yet, even Bowers struggled to fit Marlowe into the fold, as Marlowe's more "villain play" tragedies were written and produced, in fact, at the "birth" of the genre, and not during the appropriate moment in his proposed historical narrative. Bowers ultimately settled on labeling Marlowe's plays as a "counter-strain" during the Kydian "golden period" of revenge plays, though, as we will see, this hardly solved the issues at stake.

Even with Bowers' consolidation of the Marlowe and Kyd types into the "revenge tragedy," critics continued to argue for the existence of different genre types to better classify Marlowe's, Webster's, and Tourneur's plays in particular. W.A. Armstrong was the first to propose a separate genre for plays that had tyrants as their central revenger, and he suggested "tyrant tragedies" as another sub-category of the revenge play.[42] Albert H. Tricomi suggested that the term "Anticourt drama" better unpacks the energies in Middleton's *Women Beware Women* than does the label of the "Senecan" revenge tragedy.[43] Finally, Elaine and Charles Hallett demonstrate just how many plays sit uneasily within the boundaries of the tragedy of revenge. Their list of plays that do not properly fit into the "tragedy of revenge" includes Shakespeare's *Richard III*, *Titus*

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[41] Fredson Bowers, *Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy, 1587-1642* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1940). See pp. for more on Bower's historical narrative.

[42] W.A. Armstrong, "The Influence of Seneca and Machiavelli on the Elizabethan Tyrant," *The Review of English Studies*, 24.93 (1948): 19-35. William Blissett follows suit in "Lucan's Caesar and the Elizabethan Villain," *Studies in Philology*, 53.4 (1956): 553-575.

[43] "Middleton's "Women Beware Women" as Anticourt Drama," *Modern Language Studies*, 19.2 (1989): 65-77.

Andronicus, *Othello*, and *Macbeth,* Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta*, Chettle's *Tragedy of Hoffmann*, Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*, Tourneur's *The Atheist's Tragedy*, and Tourneur's/Middleton's *The Revenger's Tragedy*, Middleton's and Rowley's *The Changeling*, and Ford's *The Broken Heart,* among others.[44]

Today, there is no consensus about how we should categorize these more ambiguous identified plays. For instance, Bowers finds Webster and Tourneur (the playwrights Paget specifically mentions) to write "revenge tragedies" that virtually define the genre, as Webster's *The White Devil* is the epitome of the "villain play" stage of the genre and Tourneur's *Revenger's Tragedy* is the last of the Kydian "golden age" plays. Yet, some argue that Webster's and Tourneur's tragedies succeed because they push against the confines of the "revenge genre."[45]

It is through this concern over the proper labels that we find what is at stake in this generic classification of plays. As we have seen, one type represents the psychological struggles of contained poison, while another kind showcases the exuberant murders and greater gore seem of external violence. The latter spectacles of violence, with their vast array of onstage poisons, in fact, are often described as being too

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[44] See their ""Antonio's Revenge" and the Integrity of the Revenge Tragedy Motifs," *Studies in Philology*, 76.4 (1979): 366-386. Cf. Charles and Elaine Hallett, *The Revenger's Madness: A Study of Revenge Tragedy Motifs* (Lincoln-London: University of Nebraska Press, 1980. There, they understand the revenge to be focused primarily on the internal battle within the revenge hero, who faces a divine order that rejects vengeance yet is spurred on to do so by the "natural" order. As such, the plays of the era that feature villains relishing in vengeance do not belong to these plays of psychical turmoil.

[45] For a broader account of Early Modern English drama as combatting Senecan conventions of revenge see Anne Pippin Burnett's *Revenge in Attic and Later Tragedy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), especially Chapter 1.

influenced by the foreign sources: Italy and Seneca. Indeed, for the past two hundred years, scholars have understood these plays of "excessive" and "sensationalized" violence as being too much like the rhetorical "exaggerations" and bombast of Seneca.[46] This was above all a foreign influence. Critics speak casually about the conflation of Italian "decadence" with Senecan horrors, tracking the ways the English revenge plays drew from Italian *nouvelles* and Italian versions of Seneca (despite the English translations available).[47] Many find the worst aspects of either the "tragedy of blood" or "revenge tragedy" to belong to the foreign sources of the genre; the exaggerations and "melodrama" of the form occurs when the writer abandons his Englishness and regresses back into the mere sensationalism of its literary inheritor.[48]

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[46] There are too many examples to cite here. Cunliffe's seminal work on Seneca in Elizabethan England is the most extensive account outlining the perception of Seneca's bombast, rant, artificiality, and excess. Yet, critics continue to align Seneca with excess, both of violence and style. For instance, Tzachi Zamir's "Wooden Subjects," *New Literary History*, 39.2 (2008): 277-300 reads the excessive, aestheticized gore of *Titus* as coming from its Senecan origins. Sarah Dewar-Watson's "Jocasta: A Tragedie Written in Greeke, *International Journal of the Classical Tradition*, 17.1 (2010): 22-32 considers Gascoigne's play as reacting "against the excesses of Senecan rhetoric" (25).

[47] Fredson Bowers presents the most thorough and representative account of the proposed relationship between Seneca and early English writers, though writers examined the connection much earlier (of course, between the 'tragedy of blood' and Seneca, as the 'revenge tragedy' had not yet been fully born). The sense of Senecanism in the plays remains crucial to our definition of the genre: see, for instance, Maus's introduction to *Titus Andronicus* in the Norton. Not all critics have aligned Seneca and continental *nouvelles* with English tragedy. For instance, see Ernst de Chickera's "Palaces of Pleasure: The Theme of Revenge in Elizabethan Translations of Novelle," *The Review of English Studies*, 11.41 (1960): 1-7, for a less exaggerated account of the most popularly printed stories from the time.

[48] Indeed Thorndike presented the "revenge tragedy" as an English creation. Rather than show how *Hamlet* relates to European and classical sources, Thorndike is primarily concerned with exposing *Hamlet*'s relationship to other, English stage conventions.

Moreover, the plays' violence is more often than not explained as one of the more unfortunate aspects of the genre. Classicists have explained the gore of the English revenge plays as being related to the literariness and elaborate meta-theatricality of the plot. According to this interpretation, staged violence is used to repulse uniformly the audience, much as the meta-theatricality disconnects and distances the audience from the spectacle more generally.[49] Staged violence is often compared to the spectacles of real violence, like the infamous bear- and bull-baitings next door to the theaters. Spectators, then, moving back and forth between real and represented violence, are considered "bloodthirsty," while the dramatists who create these stories are said only to feed an ever-hungry, vicious group of spectators. Additionally, state violence is related to stage violence, such that the stage becomes another public scaffold of early modern England where savage violence recalls and reestablishes state authority over its subjects' bodies.[50]

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[49] Burnett, *Revenge,* Chapter 1. In general, it seems to have become trendy in the 1990s for scholars to consider the unique ways certain revenge plays push back against their "stock conventions" in dramatizing fracture and brokenness. In this account, the "anti-mimetic" playfulness of revenge plays bring into clear view the "fictive" nature of power, exposing through ruptured narratives and ruptured bodies the break-down of monarchical agency. See Karin S. Coddon, "'For Show or Useless Propery": Necrophilia and the *Revenger's Tragedy*," *ELH* 61.1 (1994): 71-88 and Katherine A. Rowe's "Dismembering and Forgetting in *Titus Andronicus*," *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 45.3 (1994): 279-303 for some representative examples.

[50] Molly Smith, "The Theater and the Scaffold: Death as Spectacle in *The Spanish Tragedy*," *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, 32.2 (1992): 217-232. Maus likewise connects public punishments to stage violence in her Introduction to *Four Revenge Tragedies*, Ed. Katharine Eisaman Maus (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), finding them both sources for instruction in "rousing horror and pity, emphasizing the affinity between sin and its castigation, heightening awareness of the mutability of fortune" (xvi-xvii). In contrast, Lorna Hudson argues against the traditional Foucauldian interpretation of staged violence in her article "Rethinking the "Spectacle of the Scaffold": Juridical Epistemologies and English Revenge Tragedy," *Representations*, 89.1 (2005): 30-58. She finds revenge plays to dramatize the searching of truth, that is

A few scholars have tried to find some kind of positive "cultural work" for "sensationalized violence" (the term itself, of course, already suggesting otherwise). Indeed, the very search for positive cultural work already places violence in service of some *other* aim, rather than doing anything in and of itself. Linda Woodbridge and Karin Coddon independently suggest that this other aim of revenge play violence is to disguise a subversive politics through its "excess," such that regicide is condoned and applauded under cover of sensationalized violence.[51] Yet, one might ask whether gore would be the best tool for disguise, or if it would in fact call even more attention to the controversial murders in question.

If poison is merely one of the elements of the "excess" of a revenge play – or, indeed, the very marker of "excess" – then it is not surprising it has been largely ignored within the context of these generic discussions. Indeed, English plays of revenge and blood have always seemed to toe the line between proper tragedy and "melodrama." Symonds himself uses the term interchangeably with "tragedy of blood" in his seminal work on the genre. Scholars today speak of the black and white categories of good vs. evil in the "old-fashioned" revenge tragedies to such an extent that one can casually use the phrase the "Jacobean melodrama of good and evil" as a straw man to other, more nuanced stories of revenge.[52] This unhappy proximity to melodrama has not left our

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more akin to a modern, more democratic judicial system based on trial by jury, than as a signal of monarchical power.

[51] See Woodbridge, *Revenge English Revenge Drama: Money, Resistance, Equality.* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010) and Coddon, "For Show."

[52] The phrase comes from Denis Donoghue's "Moby-Dick after September 11th," *Law and Literature*, 15.2 (2003): 161-168, though the tags "old fashioned" are found

radar. In the past, writers went great lengths to separate out the art of *Hamlet* from the "ungainly melodrama" of Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy* and Shakespeare's early experimentation of revenge, *Titus Andronicus*.[53] While this would be scoffed at today, critics still tend to use the "melodramatic exaggeration" of Senecan conventions to strike a contrast with the kinds of advanced experiments in dramatic revenge they prefer. Indeed, almost every single play and playwright from the era has been redefined as escaping from the melodramatic conventions of the revenge genre.[54]

But, what is "melodrama" anyway? We often use the term loosely to describe art that feels fake, exaggerated, and manipulative. Good guys and bad guys, who are too

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throughout scholarship. For instance, see Allison K. Deutermann's ""Caviare to the general"?: Taste, Hearing, and Genre in *Hamlet*," *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 62.2 (2011): 230-255.

[53] Take Symons, *Studies*, for one example. Many contended that the play could not possibly belong to Shakespeare based on its content.

[54] Accounts of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* breaking the mold of the revenge play are too numerous to even approximate here. René Girard's "Hamlet's Dull Revenge: Vengeance in *Hamlet*," in *A Theatre of Envy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991) perhaps most notably presents this thesis. He calls the play a revenge play about revenge plays that rejects in its "inverted theater" the "hackneyed" genre of revenge that, to Shakespeare's day, was as "the thriller in ours to a television writer." For Marston's plays as pushing against the conventions of the revenge genre see Barbara J. Baine's "*Antonio's Revenge:* Marston's Play on Revenge Plays," *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 23.2 (1983): 277-294; for his play as parody more generally, see R.A. Foakes, *Marston and Tourneur (Writers & Their Work)* (Harlow: Longman Group, 1978). For *Titus Andronicus* as being a tragedy about revenge tragedies see Zamir, "Wooden." For Webster as the playwright that ruptures cultural forms, see Scott Dudley's "Conferring with the Dead: Necrophilia and Nostalgia in the Seventeenth Century," *ELH* 66.2 (1999): 277-294. For Middleton's revenge plays as dramatizing their distance from convention see, for instance, MacDonald P. Jackson's introduction to "The Revenger's Tragedy"; for Middleton as father of all things subversive more generally, see Gary Taylor's "Unintroduction: Middletonian Dissensus" in *The Oxford Handbook of Thomas Middleton*, Ed. Gary Taylor and Trish Thomas Henley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012). On Tourneur's plays moving beyond the stability of revenge narratives, see Coddon, "For Show."

good or bad for "real life," follow plots designed only to exploit our feelings. The term itself has a curious history, one too complex to get into here at length;[55] its current pejorative meaning seems to have emerged in the nineteenth century, largely in response to the development of literary and dramatic realism. English critics used "melodrama" to target art that seemed too moralizing or emotional, too unlike the tempered verisimilitude of realistic drama and literature.[56] Yet, the term was not always negative. Italians, Germans, and French first used "melodrama" (*melodramma*, *melodrama, Melodram*) sometime in the early eighteenth century to refer generally to "opera," or to dialogue spoken over music (the term itself simply breaks down into the Greek *melos*, or melody, and drama). As the English began to use the word to describe Italian art, or English imitations of the Italian style, it picked up the many negative associations we have today: "mechanical stratagems" of plot, "exaggeration," "violent and morally conventional," and so on.[57] The sense of "mixing" seemed to emerge first in this list of negative conventions:[58] that is, that the Italians mixed music and language in the dialogues spoken

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[55] The English stage melodramas of 19th century were varied, including naval melodramas, Gothic melodramas, and so on. Our understanding of the term is even further complicated by a genre of twentieth century films that have earned the label "melodrama": films which themselves are various and disparate, depending upon the period.

[56] See Donald J. Mastronarde, "Euripidean Tragedy and Genre: The Terminology and its Problems," *Illinois Classical Studies* 24/25 (1999-2000): 23-39 for a good overview.

[57] "melodrama, n." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, December 2014. Web. They date the first recorded English use of the term to be 1789. The years of the selected citations above are listed in the OED definition as follows: 1814, 1902, and 1965, respectively.

[58] That is, in the 1802 entry in the OED.

over tremulous strings in order to exploit the audience's feelings, which should be stirred by the language alone, unaided by the orchestra. The word became a dumping ground for what the English perceived as excessive in Italian art: exaggerations and high feelings stirred by mechanical devices and stock figures.

If Italy is the source of all things "melodramatic," its associations with England's highest dramatic achievement – their great Renaissance in drama, with Shakespeare at the head of the charge – has undoubtedly disturbed critics. The fear that something foreign is the true source of early modern English plays seems behind much of the language of "melodrama" that litters old and new scholarship on English revenge plays, as the term itself is deeply ingrained with anti-Italian sentiments.[59] Poison signaled to many of these later readers the tales of great Italian poisoners and the Italian market of dangerous medicines rather than England's own poisoners and the English, homegrown medical marketplace. The more poisons in a play, the more critics aligned it with "melodrama" and Italy.[60] This is not to deny that these plays owe nothing to Italy, or to the famous

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[59] Violet Paget serves as an interesting contrast – her adoration of Italy seems behind much of her ecstatic account of the hidden Italian source of the English Renaissance.

[60] Indeed, early accounts of the "tragedy of blood" called their protagonists "the Elizabethan Machiavellian – poisoner and hypocrite" to distinguish them from those revengers of the "Kydian" tragedies of *The Spanish Tragedy* and *Hamlet*. Plays like Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta*, Webster's *The White Devil* and *The Duchess of Malfi*, Marston's *Antonio's Revenge*, and *The Revenger's Tragedy* all feature a high number of poisons and onstage poisonings, and are all typically grouped as either "tragedies of blood" or not belonging to the English "Revenge tragedy." Of course, Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* offers a notable exception – this play does not feature poison among its many acts of torture and mutilation, yet, unsurprisingly, its gore places it alongside these other plays as being "other."

tales of Italian poisoners.[61] Yet, we have been too quick to turn to Italy when considering poison and revenge, too ready to accept at face-value Thomas Nashe's satirical comments on Italy as both the source of poison and revenge: Italy as "the Academie of man-slaughter, the sporting place of murther, the Apothecary shop of poyson for all Nations," and Italians as "old dogs … [who] will carrie an iniurie a whole age in memorie: I haue heard of a boxe on the eare that hath been reuenged thirtie yeare after."[62] Satire almost always implicates the self while deriding the other: Nashe himself confronts English poisoners in his didactic satire *Christ's Tears over Jerusalem,* where he finds the current outbreak of the pestilence as God's punishment for England's poisonous sins.

Yet scholars have gone further than simply identifying Italy as the place of poison and revenger. The Italian influence itself is likened to a poison. Not only did Italy attract through its poisons, but the "excessive" reliance of the English on "Italianate" gore, revenge, and poison in certain was itself a "poison." Metaphors of the poisoning, decaying, and death of the genre of revenge draw upon concepts of excess and foreignness to create this sense of rotting narratives. Fredson Bowers speaks at length on the death of the "tragedy of revenge" in his historical overview of the genre. In his account, the "tragedy of revenge" was born with Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy* and died fifty or so years later. During the course of its metaphorical growth, the genre went through four

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[61] Indeed, Webster's *The White Devil* is based off of the well-known story of Italian scandal. The English consumed medicinal poisons were also often imported from the Italian market (along with other goods and medicines).

[62] Thomas Nashe, *Pierce Penniless, His Supplication to the Devil* … (London: printed by Abell Iesses, for I.B., 1592) and *The The Unfortunate Traveller; or, the Life of Jack Wilton* (London: C. Whittingham, 1892*)* 298.

different phases: the Kydian tragedy (1587-1607), the villain plays (1607-1620), the disapproval of revenge (1620-1630), and, finally, the "decadence" of revenge (1630-1642). Whereas we are inclined to view "decadence" today with excessive luxury, or perhaps the occasional chocolate binge, the term comes from Latin *de* and *cadere*, or to fall down.[63] Decadence is decay, an internal putrefaction. Historians started using it in the 1850s to describe Latin literature of the "Silver Age": that is, literature that had fallen from a prior state of perfection.[64]

In Bowers assessment, the revenge story was dying in the 1630s. As it grew older, conventions became increasingly stale: poisons more abundant, violence more staggering, and characters more black and white. William Heminge's *The Fatal Contract* (c.1638-9) hit a low point. For Bowers, the death of the genre went hand-in-hand with the death of the theater. In fact, he even expressed relief that the Puritans closed the theaters when they did in 1642 at the start of the Civil War:

> The closing of the theaters was really a blessing in disguise. In the breathing space afforded by the Commonwealth's inhibition, the tragic drama found a relief from its dependence on empty ingenuity and worn-out tragic conventions which had lost all touch with the problems of human life and ethics, and all interest in the human soul.[65]

One is not likely to defend avidly the artistry of Heminge's *The Fatal Contract*, or of the Viscount of Falkland's later *The Marriage Night.* Yet, it is curious that Bowers senses a greater "decadence" in these plays than in *The Bloody Banquet*, a play of the second, or "villain" period, where characters are tortured, body parts cut apart and hung around the room, and wine drunk from the skull of a murdered lover.

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[63] "decadence, n." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, March 2015. Web. 30 April 2015.

[64] I explore the connection between "decay" and "excessive" pleasure in Chapter 4.

[65] Bowers, *Elizabethan,* 284.

Bowers himself has some trouble maintaining his biological, stage-of-life historiography. While he is thorough enough to show the "counter strains" within each movement of the genre – villain plays written during the Kydian "golden age," disapproval plays written in the "villain" stage, and so on – his admission of variation itself muddles his whole thesis of development. If excessive violence and poison, stock characters, and exaggerated outlines of "good" versus "bad" reflect the death of the genre, then why are they present in plays of the 1590s? And what do we make of the re-staging and reprinting of the two very different plays of revenge throughout the entire period in question – Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta* and Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*, which were the third and fourth most performed plays of the era, respectively?[66] If later audiences were more debased than earlier ones, why would they be equally drawn to the very first plays of the "genre"? In any event, his historiography exposes a common approach to these plays when they are viewed as belonging to a specific category: that is, plays of poison themselves might become rotten – poisoned – by their own excessive use of poison.[67]

The label seemed partly designed to protect certain plays from the very disease and danger they represent. That is, the certain attributes of the "genre" that have gained the most critical attention – the ghost, madness, and delay – are the elements that are less threatening to the bounds of "propriety" in both vengeance and violence. All of the three fit into a narrative of reluctant revenge – violence imposed upon protagonists by other

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[66] With 20 and 15 runs, respectively. See Woodbridge, *English Revenge,* 4.

[67] Poison was after all believed to be the physical stuff of putrefaction and rot from the early modern period and onwards. See Andrew Wear, *Knowledge and Practice in English Medicine :1550-1680* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2000) and Lloyd G. Stevenson *The Meaning of Poison* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1959). Also, see Chapter 2, pp. 82-84.

forces, and the psychical break-downs that result from this imposition.[68] Escalating violence, "grotesque" language of putrefaction, and "Italianate" poisons threaten to push the plays outside the precarious boundary of the revenge genre and into "melodrama"; they threaten to corrupt their viewers through the contagious poison of their spectacles of violence; they threaten to destabilize the sense of an authentically original, English creation, as opposed to a Continentally-inspired imitation. Because "poison" has been unexamined for so long, it has taken on many of these pernicious associations. We have inherited so many assumptions about the "poison" of dangerous spectacles that we have approached these plays unfairly, ready to defend one only at the expense of almost all the others. We have continued to speak of Elizabethan and Jacobean plays as if they followed strict rules of construction; as if a select "coterie" audience of sadistic impulses required decadent spectacles of suffering and murder; as if representations of horror and violence *are* a societal poison, equivalent to the poisons used onstage.

Ultimately, these generic categories allowed critics distinguish between plays that are too "excessive" and dangerous, and those that fall within the properly defined limits. Above all, plays that dramatize internal struggles – the hidden struggles and self-destructions of revenge – earn cultural capital, while those of uncontrollable, seemingly exploitative violence – the external Wrath – are understood as being more contagious through their greater ethical corruptions.

If poison is the tool of vicious "others," than its exotic "otherness" offers the "self" better definitional clarity as something poison-free in its natural state. Our current narrative of historical progress gains a similar security when we look back into the abyss

[68] The Halletts, *Revenger's Madness*, is the best example of this interpretation.

of time and face the "otherness" of the past in the violent spectacles of seventeenth century drama. The events of Jacobean plays can be listed merely to shock the modern reader with the play's surprising – and distanced – brutality: boiling crowns, poisoned lips, painted corpses, and gouged out eyes. These "night pieces" of aestheticized violence, to borrow Webster's term, challenge our boundaries and our sense of decency. The invention of the revenge tragedy as a category of play at once emphasized the non-violent aspect of these plays (the "good" ones don't have as much violence). Yet, the genre simultaneously brought "grotesque" plays uncomfortably close to those of the greatest cultural significance. The proximity of *Hamlet* to *Antonio's Revenge* or to Shakespeare's own *Titus Andronicus* long disturbed scholars, who took great pains to examine the categorical differences between the plays. There are certainly major differences, aesthetic and otherwise, between *Hamlet* and *Titus*. Yet even now, strangely, scholars have continued to assert that certain revenge tragedies are valuable because they break away from the conventions of "revenge tragedies." In some instances, they celebrate the "anti-mimetic" experimentation of plays like *Antonio's Revenge* or *The Revenger's Tragedy*. Yet, in other instances, the opposite is argued. These same plays instead represent the "stock conventions" of the genre so definitively and statically, that some other play stands out against them as breaking from their "old fashioned" mold.[69]

This struggle to define "good" revenge tragedies from the "bad" ones emerges time and time again, not just because we want our "high art" to be categorically different from popular art (although some might very well believe that). Our interest in defining the boundaries of popular categories relates to the central ethical dilemma of tragedy

[69] See fn. 54.

itself. The dynamic power of the theater moves us, to pity and fear, to pleasure and titillation, or to fantasy and imitation; and if we are moved to some kind of tragic pleasure by watching the representation of torment and suffering, what does this say about the ethical foundation of drama? What does it say about our own morality, as we seek stories to feed our "love of suffering" in St. Augustine's words? The uncanny resemblance between our tragic pleasure at the death of Othello and the elaborate tortures of nameless characters on the cinematic screen puts into question the entire enterprise of tragedy itself. As such, there is much at stake, culturally, in differentiating *Hamlet*, say, from works that fit all too easily into genres of extreme violence. Those other plays seem exploitative, designed only to sell torments and death to a jaded audience. Many arbiters of culture turn to these moralizing categories of good and bad art to protect works like *Hamlet* or *The Revenger's Tragedy* from being read alongside works like *Saw*, the film franchise dubbed "torture-porn" by many reviewers. In these films, revenge is not as an internal burden, but a pleasurable feast of guts and genitalia for the external senses. Echoing within contemporary responses to these films are the initial accounts of shock at the "ungainly melodrama of Kyd" and the other depraved playwrights of the seventeenth century. Audiences of "torture porn" spectacles are defined just as sharply as early modern audiences once were, with their "hardy boisterousness of nature, a strength of nerve and roughness of taste, to which no exhibition of horror or cruelty could give anything but a pleasurable shock. A popular audience required strong food, and got it."[70]

But where do we set the boundary between *Saw* and *Hamlet,* if we indeed wish to maintain that one is morally corrupt and the other is morally instructive? At what point

[70] Symons, *Studies,* 52; 51.

does violence become unbearable, so "excessive" that it threatens the stability of boundaries between spectator and representation? Judging from the vast array of opinions, this threshold will never be definitively set. At the very least, its setting will always be a matter of subjective taste. Looking back at "revenge" and "poison" of the past, we are inevitably struck by some uncomfortable breaking of our own cultural *mores*, as, in this era, both revenge and poison only properly belong to the lethal injections of state executions. Yet, it is worth recalling Montaigne's essay on the cannibals of the New World before we approach the poisonings and dismemberments of the early modern stage. Montaigne speaks of the Europeans' horror and disgust at the practice of cannibalism in the "New World." After winning battle, natives took their adversaries captive before killing, roasting, and consuming their dead bodies. While this terrifying image of "extreme revenge" startled the European colonizers, Montaigne powerfully exposes their blindness to the cruelty of their own practices. Inured to the regular dose of state-led tortures and executions, Montaigne's contemporaries could not see its even greater barbarity than those distant, bloody feasts occurring across the ocean:

> I think there is more barbarity in eating a man alive than in eating him dead; more barbarity in lacerating by rack and torture a body still fully able to feel things, in roasting him little by little and having him bruised and bitten by pigs and pogs (as we have not only read about but seen in recent memory, not among enemies in antiquity but among our fellow-citizens an neighbours – and, what is worse, in the name of duty and religion) than in roasting him and eating him after his death.[71]

No moral or defense of the theater will likely ever 'solve' our possibly perverse fascination with the destructions, bodily and spiritual, of tragedy. Nor will the strange mixture of sorrow and pleasure in watching represented torment be fully teased apart; nor, indeed, will the larger cultural role of "gore" and the manifold effects of represented

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[71] Michel de. Montaigne, *Michel de Montaigne: The Complete Essays*, Trans. and Ed. M.A. Screech (New York: Penguin Books, 1991) 235-236.

violence on its viewers be made fully visible, despite the enthusiastic promises of experimental psychology. Yet, writing off certain performances as "poisonous" or excessive only blinds us to the dangerous power of our own accepted representations and narratives. We may hope to whitewash history and its violence, to contain the ever-contagious poison of revenge and its destructions. It is only in facing head on the possibly corrupting power of our representations that we can begin to understand the greater barbarity hiding behind our accepted practices: the displaced revenge worn "in the name of duty and religion."

Chapter 2
"A pestilent congregation of vapors": Sticky Air and Painted Tyrants in William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*

Malcolm: Be this the whetstone of your sword. Let grief
Convert to anger: blunt not the heart, enrage it. (4.3.230-234).[1]

The idea that revenge poisons a revenger's character has occupied much of the criticism on the revenge play most known for its representation of character. *Hamlet* is said to dramatize its protagonist's inner life to such an extent that the very "labyrinths of thought" we might expect from a novel appear onstage.[2] As we explored in Chapter 1, many interpretations of *Hamlet* tap into cultural narratives of the self-poisoning disease of revenge. The psychological turmoil dramatized by the soliloquies, antic dispositions, and notorious delays of action are often read as the breakdown of a personality weighted down by the burden of blood-revenge. Hamlet's own "peculiar character" is multidimensional, contradictory.[3] Above all, the play's delays and generally long form has seemed to suggest Hamlet's – or even Shakespeare's – ethical scruples over vengeance.[4] Hamlet refuses to murder Claudius kneeling silently at prayer; Shakespeare

[1] All citations taken from William Shakespeare, "Macbeth," *The Norton Shakespeare: Based on the Oxford Edition*, Eds. Stephen Greenblatt, Walter Cohen, Jean E. Howard, and Katharine Eisaman Maus (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1997) 2555-2618.

[2] The phrase is taken from August Wilhelm von Schlegel's *Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature*, Trans. John Black, 1809 (London: William Clowes and Sons, Limited, 1883). For more on the so-called Schlegel-Coleridge theory of *Hamlet*, see Chapter 1.

[3] A.C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1960) 70. Of course, the most infamous psychoanalytic account of Hamlet's oedipal complex is found in Ernest Jones' *Hamlet and Oedipus* (New York: Norton, 1976, c1949). The Halletts' more recent *The Revenger's Madness: A Study of Revenge Tragedy Motifs* (Lincoln-London: University of Nebraska Press, 1980) offers another psychological interpretation of Hamlet's delay.

refuses to give us a straight-forward revenge play. Accordingly, *Hamlet* is read as a play that rejects action for narration: one that interrupts its play of revenge to show its own characters watching various plays of revenges.

Of course, this follows from the rather outdated reading of *Hamlet* as a "tragedy of thought" rather than one that belongs to the so-called "tragedies of revenge."[5] Hamlet's incredibly impulsive violence, his clever plots, and his compunction-less decision to send his childhood friends to their slaughter: all have been found to support the exact opposite characterization about Hamlet's internal character. That is, he is a ready and willing revenger, and the play was enjoyed in its own day as "an action drama."[6] The delay itself is merely a common feature of the play, not representative of an existential crisis, according to this reading.[7] In fact, Hamlet never questions whether or not he ought to exact revenge if he thinks the Ghost is indeed telling the truth. Of all

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[4] René Girard's essay on *Hamlet* in his *Theater of Envy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991) is most emblematic of this kind of analysis. He calls Shakespeare's *Hamlet* a "half-hearted" revenge story, that is so meta-theatrical it is itself about writing revenge stories, as a kind of "inverted theater."

[5] For more on the development of the "tragedy of revenge," see Chapter 1, pp. 47-49. Also see Chapter 1, pp. 32-35, for more on *Hamlet* as a "tragedy of thought."

[6] David Bevington, *Murder Most Foul:* Hamlet *through the Ages* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011) 2.

[7] A.H. Thorndike's first definition of revenge tragedies focused its energies on explaining how *Hamlet* and all of its well-known mysteries related to the many other plays written by his contemporaries. The "delay" in his account is the third feature or convention of these types of plays. Cf. Thorndike, "The Relations of Hamlet to Contemporary Revenge Plays," *PMLA* 17.2 (1902): 125-220. Additionally, Paul Gottschalk argues that Hamlet's delay, in fact, showcases his character's very identification with the "revenge tragedy," as he delays precisely because he is more bloodthirsty: that is, because he wishes for Claudius to definitively go to hell. See his "Hamlet and the Scanning of Revenge," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 24.2 (1973): 155-170.

the questions of a play of questions – one that even begins with a question – the duty to avenge one's murdered relative does not appear to be one of them.

Still, one hardly needs a recap of all that makes the play less than direct, or the many examples of more current criticism that finds *Hamlet* as decidedly experimental or pushing against the boundaries of the genre. Hamlet does not murder Claudius, even after he has his "proof," until he directly witnesses Claudius' treachery. The notion of a delay here was not merely invented by critics. Nor does the conventional place of the delay as a trope within the narratives of revenge fully capture the strange contradictions of action and representation that drive the play. Not just Romantic scholars, but Hamlet himself cannot explain his delay: "What would he do / Had he the motive and the cue for passion / That I have?" (2.2.537-539).[8] As tired as we are of the ever-popular vision of Hamlet as a gentle, soul unfit for the "masculine" pursuits of murder, Hamlet both repudiates his delay and genders the conversation: he "like a whore, unpack[s] my heart with words" (2.2.562).[9] The play too, crammed as it is with soliloquies and meta-narratives, hardly offers a straightforward revenge thriller. "Words, words, words" of dizzying array call upon their own excess.[10]

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[8] All citations for *Hamlet* are taken from William Shakespeare, "Hamlet" in *The Norton Shakespeare,* 1659-1759.

[9] There is a remarkable history of reading Hamlet as a disguised female (secretly in love with Horatio) that relates to this Romantic interpretation of the gentleness of Hamlet. For instance, James Lowell describes Hamlet's "somewhat feminine nature" as "fill[ing] the place of a woman to Horatio" in his "Shakespeare Once More," *Literary Essays Vol. 3*, 1868 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1892) 80. Cf. Marjorie Garber, *Shakespeare and Modern Culture* (New York: Random House, 2008) for a good historical overview of stage and cinematic performances of the female Hamlet.

Almost everything about *Hamlet* has been described as excessive, its criticism most of all. The many interpretations of his "delay" already made the topic seem stale and over-covered by the late nineteenth century, and the sheer volume of conflicting opinions generated by scholar after scholar required a number of consolidated overviews of theories.[11] Moreover, in 1908, Horace Howard Furness, the first great American Shakespearean and editor of the *Hamlet* Variorum, cheekily implored Harvard's Phi Beta Kappa society to stay away from the play altogether: "Lastly, let me entreat, and beseech, and adjure, and implore you not to write an essay on *Hamlet*."[12] The abundance of literary criticism and multitude of utterly antithetical opinions on this most famous play – this "Mona Lisa" of literature, famous for being famous according to T.S. Eliot[13] – is one of the favorite topics of anthologies. 400 publications *every year*![14] The implication seems to be: "what more can one say?"

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[10] Even the sheer number of cultural citations derived from *Hamlet* has been deemed excessive. In Isaac Asimov's quip, "Miss Smith had read through *Hamlet* for the first time and was asked her opinion of it. 'Really,' she said, 'I don't know why people rave about it. It's nothing but a bunch of quotations strung together.'" Isaac Asimov, *Treasury of Humor: 640 Jokes, Anecdotes, and Limerics Complete with Notes on how to Tell Them, from America's Leading Renaissance Man* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1971) 117.

[11] See, for instance, Albert H. Tolman, "A View of the Views about *Hamlet*," *PMLA* 13.2 (1898): 155-184.

[12] Cited in William Shakespeare, *The Arden Shakespeare: Hamlet: Third Series, 3rd Ed.,* Eds. Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor (New York: Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, 2006).

[13] T.S. Eliot, "Hamlet and His Problems," *The Sacred Wood and Major Early Essays* (Mineola: Dover Publications, 1998) 55-59.

[14] As noted in the Arden's introduction.

Underneath this anxious accounting of the heterogeneity of opinions lies a thinly-veiled concern with the enterprise of literary criticism itself.[15] Yet, *Hamlet* has been dubbed excessive not simply for the variety of interpretations it inspires. T.S. Eliot famously lamented Hamlet's excessive disgust throughout the play that lacks an "objective correlative": that is, Hamlet's emotions are "in *excess* of the facts as they appear" and this overwhelming and "envelop[ing]" abhorrence "remains to poison life and obstruct action."[16] His excessive emotions, too, unravel across a play that, in Polonius' own words, might be accounted as being "too long" (2.2.478). In Frank Kermode's assessment, "Everything conspires to make the play long":[17] Shakespeare is so "unsparing" of words he uses "two for one" just as he uses "two characters and two themes for one."[18] This is a play over-brimming with multiplications and repetition. Soliloquies beget more soliloquies, and offer such jarringly discordant reflections of Hamlet's inner life they threaten to destabilize the sense of a united character. Revengers multiply, both in the play's 'reality' and in its representations.[19] Both the central character and the aesthetic form thus seem to dramatize the breaking of containment.

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[15] Indeed, *Hamlet* is such a touchstone for literary criticism that Bevington describes "the history of *Hamlet*" as "a history of cultural change," *Murder,* 4.

[16] Eliot, "Hamlet," 58.

[17] Frank Kermode, introduction to *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, in *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blackemore Evans, et al. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974) 1185.

[18] Ibid., 1183-4. In Northrop Frye's account, the play is long "partly because everyone, with the exception of the two women, talks too much" *On Shakespeare* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986) 83.

[19] In Frye's words, the tripled revenge plot of *Hamlet* has a "total effect" that "neutralize[s] the sense of the restoring of moral balance that a revenge is supposed to

Shakespeare's aesthetic of "excess" and disruption seems mostly related to these theatrical and meta-theatrical representations of revenge. One of the play's more curious stagings of revenge even repeats itself – with a difference – at the end of the long Act 2, Scene 2, which begins with the arrival of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to court and ends with Hamlet's "Hecuba" soliloquy. The language astounds in its dazzling variety: Hamlet's jocular quips with his friends, full of topical references and bawdy puns, suddenly turns into the celebrated lines on the "piece of work of man." Somewhat opaque classical and Biblical references litter the jesting puns and songs targeted against the pleasantly obtuse Polonius. Yet, as Hamlet performs his "antic disposition" to the court of an increasing number of spies, something unexpected happens. A troupe of traveling players arrives at Elsinore. Hamlet will use them later of course as part of his experimental and theatrical test on his uncle. At the player's arrival, however, Hamlet commands a recitation of different "speech," one on the fall of Troy. Incidentally, the epic-sounding lines that follow are on the subject of revenge. What unfolds is not simply one new story of revenge told within the play's larger story of revenge. Instead, Hamlet watches two stories of revenge told from two different perspectives. The First Player, picking up the lines where Hamlet leaves off, tells of the incredibly bloody and merciless revenge wreaked by Pyrrhus on the aged Priam. Pyrrhus is "total gules," red with the "blood of fathers, mothers, daughters, and sons" (2.2.437; 438) as he commits regicide. His murder of the helpless King adds even more color to the epic description: first

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give us as a rule. Revenge does not complete anything, it merely counters something, and a second vengeance pattern will grow up in opposition to it." Ibid., 90.

painted with his new "heraldry" of black and red, Pyrrhus then becomes "a painted tyrant" as he lifts his sword over Priam's "milky head" (460; 458).

After these lines and Polonius' interruption ("This is too long" (478)), the First Player turns to Hecuba, Priam's wife, running in pure agony and grief, clinging only "A blanket in th'alarm of fear caught up" (489). In contrast to the painterly scene set up before on Pyrrhus, the lines on Hecuba are explicitly theatrical. Running up and down, crownless, vulnerable, and barely covered, Hecuba moves unseen spectators surrounding her. The First Player asks his spectators in Elsinore to imagine the theatrical response, both human and divine, to her suffering:

> Who this had seen, with tongue in venom steeped,
> 'Gainst Fortune's state would treason have pronounced.
> But if the gods themselves did see her then,
> When she saw Pyrrhus make malicious sport
> In mincing with his sword her husband's limbs,
> The instant burst of clamour that she made –
> Unless things mortal move them not at all –
> Would have made milch the burning eyes of heaven,
> And passion in the gods (490-498).

The difference of accounts is astounding. Both, of course, offer a new kind of voice to the narrative, making the blank verse, prose, and songs of *Hamlet* sound all the more "naturalistic" in comparison.[20] It is Virgil's *Aeneid* inherited through Christopher Marlowe's *Dido, Queen of Carthage* (c1587-1593), and the "unfamiliar, high-sounding

[20] Coleridge speaks of this effect, saying that the "epic narrative" and "poetical" lines of the Player's speeches offer a "superb" contrast with the dramatic language used by Hamlet and others throughout the rest of the play: in other words, the speeches are "the language of lyric vehemence and epic pomp and not of drama" in order to create "contrast between *Hamlet* and the play in *Hamlet*," *Hamlet: The New Variorum Edition*, *Vol. 1,* Ed. Horace Howard Furness (Mineola: Dover Publications, 2000)183. For a good account of heteroglossia in *Hamlet* – especially seen in the approprtation of "Senecan models" – see Philip D. Collington, "'Sallets in the Lines to Makes the Matter Savoury': Bakhtinian Speech Genres and Inserted Genres in 'Hamlet,'" *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 53.3 (2011): 237-272.

words" create "in their strangeness… a forcefulness" that is "remarkably visual."[21] Yet, one narrative dramatizes revenge as totally destructive, the actions of a "painted tyrant" willing to ruin all bounds, familial and political, to exact his cruel punishment. The other dramatizes desired yet unanswered revenge; it asks whether or not visions of treason and injustice might trigger a divine retribution that could rain down onto the earth through a milky "milch" of tears.[22] "But if the gods…" neither affirms nor denies their celestial response or their actual presence at all.

Why the two accounts of classical revenge, the intrusion of so-called "purple passages" of epic language, in a scene already crammed full of words, in a play already taking too long to get to the series of intrigues and counter-intrigues expected in a revenge narrative? Within these lines on painterly and theatrical revenges, Shakespeare seems to be saying something about the intimate link between artistic production and revenge. Moreover, when we look closely at the lines, we find this connection is remarkably diseased. Indeed, throughout his play of notorious "excess," Shakespeare insistently uses the language of disease, speaking of the "pestilent congregations of vapours" (2.2.293) surrounding not only Elsinore, the scene of the play, but also London, the very "brave o'erhanging … majestical roof" (291) partly covering the stage. Shakespeare's dramatization of excess, disease, and poison, in fact, may be partly behind

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[21] Arthur Johnston, "The Player's Speech in *Hamlet*," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 13.1 (1962), 25-26. There are subtle distinctions even here, though, in the language of the two narrative passages, of which we will examine later in the chapter.

[22] Hecuba's "milch" repeats Priam's "milky head" (458). The milkiness of the pair – and the greater language of domesticity in the Hecuba passage more generally – only distinguishes them even more from Pyrrhus.

the critical language of these concepts as regards the play.[23] In other words, Shakespeare created an atmosphere that *feels* excessive, and such excess has infiltrated our very scholarly language. Through his virtual matryoshka doll of narratives-within-narratives, Shakespeare dramatizes the many ways pestilent congregations, revenge, and artistic productions influence one another. Above all, emotions like revenge and grief transform character, using the language of poison and putrefaction to dramatize the powerful conversions at hand. Painted tyrants and mobbled queens, actively inactive, help dramatically create the sense of "pestilent congregations" in the rotten world of Elsinore.

"As a painted tyrant, Pyrrhus stood … And … Did Nothing"

Returning to the First Player's recited speech, we find strange affiliations between these narrated, classical figures and the central characters of *Hamlet*. In an unhappy, and "uncanny," overlap, Pyrrhus oddly reflects both Claudius' unstaged regicide of Hamlet's father and Hamlet's as-of-yet unstaged murder of Claudius.[24] On the other hand, the bulk of Hamlet's energy immediately afterwards is directed at Hecuba's rather than Pyrrhus' story, most particularly the emotional impact Hecuba's account had on the First Player. Her effect on the "burning eyes of heaven" may only be hypothetical, but her imagined distress definitively moves the Player to tears. Thus, even as Hamlet beats himself up for not taking revenge ("Who…breaks my pate across" (549)), Shakespeare places the

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[23] Much like the sense of "excess" and "poison" within the "tragedies of revenge" likely relates to the comparison of the genre as being theatrically poisoning or excessive. See pp. 58-59 in Chapter 1.

[24] For more on the "uncanny" in *Hamlet*, see Marjorie Garber, *Shakespeare's Ghost Writers: Literature as Uncanny Causality* (New York: Methuen, 1987).

emotional and dramatic attention on Hecuba and her ability to inspire pity across the vast abyss of time. Much like Hamlet's replacing of the Ghost's injunction ("Revenge") with memory ("Remember thee?"), this vision of the (un-Gertrude-like) mourning wife reflects Hamlet's concealed grief, and the knotted pain of containment that explodes in his many soliloquies and asides.[25] This is a grief that seems to want to dynamically range, "runn[ing]" "up and down" (2.2.485) like the mourning Hecuba.

We might thus associate these two accounts of classical revenge – one yearned for and one cruelly exacted – as two options the play offers to Hamlet. Follow Pyrrhus or follow Hecuba: another of the either/or decisions Hamlet focuses on throughout the play ("To be or not to be"). On the one hand, Pyrrhus' revenge for his father Achilles' death sounds unethical and disturbing, more like one of Fredson Bower's "villain plays" than his "golden age" heroic revenge stories.[26] On the other hand, Hecuba is not free from the desire to revenge, and in many classical accounts she *does* in fact actively shape her grief into a revenge plot.[27] Yet, the story presented here at least represents the effect

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[25] For more on the relationship between memory and revenge, see John Kerrigan, Chapter *Revenge Tragedy: Aeschylus to Armageddon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996). For an excellent analysis of the lost rites of Catholic rituals of mourning, see Stephen Greenblatt, *Hamlet in Purgatory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001) and Michael Neill, *Issues of Death: Mortality and Identity in English Renaissance Tragedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999). Neill considers the revenge genre to be a "compensation for lost Catholic ritual," ultimately functioning "as a response to a particularly painful aspect for the early modern reimagining of death – the wholesale displacement of the dead from their familiar place in the order of things by the Protestant abolition of purgatory and ritual intercession" (46).

[26] Fredson Bowers, *Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy, 1587-1642* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1940). See Chapter 1, pp. 58-59.

[27] Hecuba was indeed more broadly associated in the period with extreme grief and weeping. Yet, Tanya Pollard presents the other, more vengeful side of Hecuba in her

sorrow has on others: how grief might actually moves celestial beings and future audience members, either to imagine or effect some kind of retributive justice.

Ultimately, all of these elements – Hamlet's identification with Hecuba and the scene's lengthiness and meta-theatricality – might be understood as showcasing push-back against revenge, where Hamlet might be said to reject the classical model of Pyrrhus as a narrative belonging to "painted tyrants" rather than mourning sons and wives.[28] Hecuba is remembrance and desire for divine justice to sort things out – Pyrrhus is violence and the destruction of earthly and heavenly forces to take personal retribution. Hecuba is dramatic and moving, "running" in her own narrative plane and influencing others in the distant future – Pyrrhus is "painted" and static.

Yet, when we look closer at the passages, we find that Pyrrhus is not exactly unchanging, despite his painted descriptions and relentless drive to revenge. Moreover, Shakespeare himself added Pyrrhus' transformation, moving outside his sources in order to do so.[29] In Shakespeare's version, Pyrrhus suddenly stops right at the moment he is

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article "What's Hecuba to Shakespeare?" *Renaissance Quarterly* 65.4 (2012): 1060-1093. Euripides' Hecuba transforms her overwhelming grief into violence and revenge: his heroine is more like Seneca's Medea than the weeping images of Hecuba seen in other texts. She suggests that Shakespeare's use of Hecuba throughout his plays reflects this mix of grief and revenge. Hamlet, in her account, rejects this female model of grief/revenge, instead fashioning his own model of revenge that is actively watchful.

[28] For more on criticism of the "inverted theater" of Hamlet or "anti-mimetic" in Jacobean revenge tragedies, see Chapter 1, pp. 35.

[29] There are many interesting details Shakespeare does not import from his sources of this scenes, the sources identified as being Marlowe's and Nashe's *Dido, Queen of Carthage,* which itself is based on Book II of Virgil's *Aeneid*, and his own poem, "The Rape of Lucrece" (see pp for more on "Lucrece"). One of the more interesting factors is that of Pyrrhus' violation of the sanctuary space. In Virgil, Pyrrhus rushes into the "altar [where] Hecuba and her daughters, like white doves / Blown before a black storm clung

about to take revenge. His pause captures a freeze-frame shot of the "painted tyrant" he has become: yet it also elongates his transformation into this "painted tyrant":

> For lo, his sword,
> Which was declining on the milky head
> Of reverend Priam, seemed i'th'air to stick.
> So as a painted tyrant, Pyrrhus stood,
> And, like a netural to his will and matter,
> Did nothing. (2.2.457-462).

The line breaks off after "nothing," bringing to life the very pause being described.[30] With a sword stuck in the air, like the image of tyranny, Pyrrhus waits to kill his prey. The epic simile of the next ten lines only prolong the pause: just as all the elements seem to pause before a storm – the "bold winds speechless, and the orb below / As hush as death" (465-467) exploding into "the dreadful thunder" (467) – so too does Pyrrhus pause before, finally, "vengeance sets him new a-work" (468) and he lets fall his sword. The transformation into "painted tyrant" unites inactivity with activity: he does nothing, yet is being roused by invisible forces all the while. The background activity of the metaphors – "the Cyclops hammers fall" the "forged" armor and so on – grants unseen motion to the still image. This pause is the heart of the passage – the bulk of Shakespeare's lines

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together" (Book 2, 669-671); Hecuba takes Priam into her arms, and they "rest on the consecrated stone" (683). Likewise, in Marlowe Pyrrhus finds Priam "at Jove's altar / About whose withered neck hung Hecuba" (2.1.224-225). Shakespeare, in contrast, does not mention the sanctuary violation at all (though see pp for more on Claudius' reference to sanctuary). Pyrrhus also murders Priam's son before his eyes in both of Shakespeare's sources. In Marlowe, he has "on his spear / The mangled head of Priam's youngest son" (2.1.213-214), whereas in Virgil, "to the altar step itself he [Pyrrhus] dragged him [Priam], trembling, / Slipping in the pooled blood of his son / of his son's blood" to slaughter him (Book 2, 717-718). Citations taken from Christopher Marlowe and Thomas Nash[e], *Dido, Queen of Carthage: A Tragedy* (London: Printed for Hurst, Robinson, and Co., 1825) and Virgil, *The Aeneid*, Trans. Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Vintage, 2013). For more on sanctuary in *Hamlet*, see pp. 103-104.

[30] As Richard Meek explains, this is a hemistich, or half-line, that not only "Describes a pause in the action of the narrative but also produces a metrical pause," in *Narrating the Visual in Shakespeare* (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2009) 101.

describe it. Remarkably, this play, infamous for its delaying revenger, even describes its classical revenger as delaying.

Shakespeare seems to be picking up on lines from Marlowe's and Nashe's play that occur after the description of Priam's murder. Aeneas, telling the story to Dido's court, ends his account of Priam's woeful murder by presenting Pyrrhus leaning up against his sword in stony, unfeeling silence. After his murder of Priam, Pyrrhus wanders away to watch the conflagration of fires enveloping Troy: "So, leaning on his sword he stood stone still, / Viewing the fire wherewith rich Ilion burned" (2.1.264-265). As we saw above, Shakespeare moves this "stone still" moment to the moment Pyrrhus lifts his sword above Priam's head, with a number of fascinating implications. Pyrrhus's sadistic spectatorship is no longer the focal point – instead he becomes notably painted during his pause ("as a painted tyrant, Pyrrhus stood"). Moreover, Shakespeare's Pyrrhus does not seem to be watching anything at all. He is instead being infused with the invisible forces of vengeance "new a-work" within him. Ultimately, Shakespeare transfers the "stone still" standing of Pyrrhus into the figure of the "painted tyrant" to dramatize the transformation that occurs not before, or after, but in the very *process* of revenge, where an already "hellish" figure, "Roasted in wrath and fire" (2.2.43; 491), becomes even more unfeeling. The pity evoked by the theatrical representation of grief – its tears, pulled hair, and moans – humanizes its spectator, while revenge seems to turn characters into stony images of terror ("Howl, howl, howl, howl! O you are men of stones!"[31]).

[31] Taken from William Shakespeare, "King Lear (Conflated Text)," in *The Norton Shakespeare*, 2479- 2553, 5.3.256.

In addition to its dramatization of revenge's painterly transformations, Pyrrhus' delay is also understood as remarkably elemental. His sword "seemed i'th'air to stick" as clouds, winds, and the earth "stand still." This is a play full of sticky, smoky air, foul smells, putrefaction, and disease. Not long before the First Player's speech, Hamlet tells Rosencrantz and Guildenstern of the "foul and pestilent congregation of vapours" that seems to surround him (2.2.293). In this exchange, Hamlet explains how something in him – "but wherefore I know not" (287) – is transforming all the beauty of the world into something ugly and sickening. In his words:

> …indeed it goes so
> heavily with my disposition that this goodly frame, the earth,
> seems to me a sterile promontory. This most excellent canopy
> the air, look you, this brave o'erhanging, this majestical roof
> fretted with golden fire – why, it appears no other thing to me
> than a foul and pestilent congregation of vapours. (288-293)

From his admittedly warped perspective, Hamlet finds the air to be full of a "pestilent congregation of vapors." Notably, he is not simply calling the air "pestilent," but is instead using "pestilent" to modify "congregation." The air is not simply sticky or smelly, but is crowding, crammed full of vapors ("I eat the air, promise-crammed" (3.2.85-86)). But how might masses of people or vapors be "pestilent"? What does it mean to be pestilent?

Pestilent Congregations: Putrefaction, Poison, and the Plague

At a very basic level, "pestilent" refers to the "pestilence," a term used for outbreaks of epidemic disease, more specifically that of the devastating "bubonic plague."[32] As the plague was understood to be a disease of poisoned or corrupted air, it is

[32] Pestilent also referred that which was troublesome, harmful to the social order, and fatal or poisonous ("pestilent, adj., n., and adv." OED Online. Oxford University Press, March 2015.) For more on the etymologies of "plague" and "pestilence" see fn 75, p.

not surprising that Hamlet's "pestilent congregation of vapours" occupy the "excellent canopy / [of] the air."[33] This "canopy" is one of the well-known meta-theatrical references in *Hamlet* to the Globe theater ("Remember thee? / Ay thou poor ghost, while memory holds a seat / In this distracted globe" (1.5.95-98)). The "heavens," the roof hanging over part of the open-air stage at the Globe, becomes a world in miniature, where the wooden roof above Hamlet's head, painted with starry constellations, represents the outermost limit of the firmament. The meta-theatricality of the moment, too, emerges in the "congregation" of vapors, as the word signals both the congregation of the metaphor – the invisible steams of the air – and of the audience members present at the Globe. With all of this, Shakespeare creates a sense of profound containment. Crowding vapors, like the pushing bodies in the pit, occupy a remarkably shrunken universe. "Denmark's a prison" (2.2.239) indeed.

Moreover, pestilence and crowds did go hand in hand in the era. Anti-theatricalists, in addition to medical and government authorities, commonly cited the jam-packed audiences at the theater as being more susceptible and contributing to the outbreak of the pestilence.[34] Moreover, the tight living spaces of the poor were targeted

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167 in Chapter 3. For a good account of the remarkable power of the word "peste," seen through its astounding flexibility as a signifier, cf. Colin Jones, "Plague and Its Metaphors in Early Modern France," *Representations* 53 (1996): 97-127.

[33] Authorities consistently argued over how exactly the air was poisoned – that is, whether or not the air's substance itself was corrupted, or whether it was mixed with "evil vapors" of poison. Cf. Frederick Gibbs, *Understandings of Poison circa 1250-1600,* Dissertation, University of Wisconsin-Madison (Ann Arbor: ProQuest/UMI, 2009) 125-127 for a good summary of these arguments.

[34] Jonas Barish offers a close reading of the antitheatrical, religious texts leveled against the theater during this period in, *The Antitheatrical Prejudice* (Berkeley: University of

as areas of particular danger during epidemics.[35] Accordingly, we might find this notion of "pestilent congregations" to relate to a more modern account of contagion *via* touch or direct contact. Perhaps these groups of people and other infected objects are contagious by virtue of their proximity. Shakespeare himself speaks of the "catch[ing]" nature of the plague in the play he wrote right after *Hamlet*. *Twelfth Night,* the last of his comedies that would not be labeled as a generic "problem," is itself an interesting transitional work of remarkable sharpness, filled with acerbic, biting humor and ending with Malvolio's threat of revenge "on the whole pack of you" (5.1.365).[36] Earlier, Olivia compares her sudden infatuation with the disguised Viola as being as quick as "one may catch the plague," an infection of "invisible and subtle stealth / To creep in at mine eyes" (1.5.265; 267-268).[37] This description of the plague as "catch[ing]" through the eyes, or "creep[ing] in" through vision, showcases the variety of modalities thought to be involved in "contagion" during the period. Indeed, as we explored in the Introduction, early modern concepts of

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California Press, 1981), finding in their arguments no real "impressive dialectical contribution[s]," but only "free-associative rambles" (88).

[35]Wear, *Knowledge* for more on the seventeenth century English plague tractate and the moral blame of the poor for the disease. The poor districts of London were disproportionately affected by the pestilence, which likely related to their location – close to the ships – and greater exposure to the fleas/rats carrying the disease. Paul Slack also explores the effects of the plague on social cohesion in England in his *The Impact of Plague in Tudor and Stuart England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985). Finally, for more on the draconian measures used during the 1576-8 plague of Milan used against the poor and others, see Samuel K. Cohn, Chapter 7: "Plague and Poverty," in *Cultures of Plague: Medical Thinking at the End of the Renaissance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

[36] All citations take from William Shakespeare, "Twelfth Night," *The Norton Shakespeare*, 1761-1821.

[37] Orsino also begins the play with a similar conceit of love and pestilence, though geared in an opposite direction. Olivia seems to rid the air of pestilence: "Methought she purged the air of pestilence" (1.1.19).

contagion were not a proto-type of the "germ" theory, nor were they fully separated out from the atmospheric contaminations of "miasma."[38] As the very phrase "pestilent congregations of vapours" suggests, contagion and miasma were not mutually exclusive categories. Corrupted vapors and poisoned air might infect through touch, or through some other exchange. All of this is to say that the people at the Globe might have spread disease partly due to their closer physical contact: but they also emitted more noxious vapors, smells, and atmospheric corruptions from their crowding-in-together. As such, the moralizing diatribes against the danger of the theater-house crowds were not equally applied, for instance, to the gathering of people at churches during the special, plague-time services.[39]

Above all, the plague's dangerous power to infect many people drew from the concepts of poison and putrefaction. We have already explored how poison became a powerful explanatory tool to explain the spread of disease from atmosphere to the

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[38] See pp. 12-13.

[39] For more on these services, see Chapter 3 pp. 139-142. Religious authorities stressed, however, that one should not attend the special services if one was infected or a member of an infected and "shut in" household. It is also worth noting that many of these plague-time prayers were printed just for that reason – to inspire religious ritual and prayer at home rather than in congregation. Indeed, English plague practices were remarkably more contained than those in Italy or France, for instance, whose religious rituals involved more processions of images and gatherings of crowds than did the English. For more on the continental processions of images, see Ernest Gilman, *Plague Writing in Early Modern England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009). In general, though, most seemed to follow the antitheatricalists in labeling a qualitative difference between crowds at ethically unsound locations (the stage) versus church. As an example, Roger Fenton's *A perfume against the noysome [H]pestilence prescribed by Moses vnto Aaron. Num. 16. 46. Written by Roger Fenton, preacher of Grayes Inne*, (Imprinted at London : By R. R[ead] for William Aspley, 1603), differentiates between the "perfumed…incense of sweet odours" from the church, as opposed to the "thick clouds" of "infection" rising from places of prostitution and the theater (11).

internal humors.[40] Yet, I have not yet outlined how putrefaction factored into this model of contagious poison. Indeed, putrefaction took center stage more generally in early modern medicine.[41] Decay – of food, body, and humors – spread within a given substance and, more perniciously, from one substance to another. Analogies of spreading decay provided a tight comparison between the gradual corruption of fruit, on the one hand, and the spread of disease within and without one's body, on the other.[42] Poisons were the source of this spreading rot in putrefaction. As such, poison was the conceptual lynchpin between contagion and putrefaction. Putrefying things became contagious by virtue of their spreading poisons.

Some combination of earthly and astrological forces were said to be behind the poisoning of the air during plague. Local putrefactions, alongside poisonous conjunctions and cosmic events, played some role in triggering the start of the outbreak.[43] Whatever working theory was in use for the cause of the air's poisonousness, authorities focused their plague-time regulations on cleaning up terrestrial sources of rot and

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[40] See Introduction, pp. 12-15.

[41] See Kinzelbach, "Infection" for more on this. For another good overview of putrefaction and health in early modern England, see Wear, *Knowledge*, 136-143. For the importance of putrefaction in Fracastoro's theory of contagion, see Gibbs, *Medical*, 213-217. In fact, Paul Slack explains the lack of differentiation between "contagion" and "miasma" as rising from both concepts relationship to putrefaction: "After all, both miasma and contagion were thought to arise from ill-defined processes of corruption and putrefaction, either in the heavens, in the air, or in terrestrial or human bodies, and they thus had the same root," *Impact*, 28.

[42] Fracastoro's theory of *seminaria* was founded upon putrefaction as the source of contagion. Again, see Gibbs, *Medical*, 213-217, and Nutton, "The Seeds of Disease: An Explanation of Contagion and Infection from the Greeks to the Renaissance." *Medical History* 17 (1983): 1-34.

[43] See Introduction, p. 13.

cleansing the air through a variety of purifying fires, even shooting cannons and guns, to physically move the stagnant and foul smells of putrefaction. Most of the plague orders developed during Elizabeth's reign were designed to combat the poisoned air locally, and did not focus much attention on the possible astrological causes in play.[44]

In fact, both plague practices and plague treatises became increasingly focused on earthly putrefactions rather than astrological sources of poison by the time *Hamlet* was written and produced.[45] Indeed, Thomas Lodge's 1603 plague tractate offers a good example of this cultural shift. He completely rejects the theory of poisonous astrological influences, arguing that the deadly vapors "that issue from the Earth" corrupt the air during plague. These include foul smells, vapors released in earthquakes or emerging from caves, unburied and corrupt bodies, or the very steam from standing pools and stagnant waters.[46] Even tractates interested in astrological causes considered the danger of filth and other putrefying substances that contributed to the poison of the pestilence. In fact, one of the period's most employed metaphors was the engendering of poisonous

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[44] The plague-time orders and regulations largely dealt with enforcing quarantine, establishing hierarchical chains of command in times of flight, setting up schedules for public bonfires, and orders regarding the cleaning of refuse and burial of bodies. The orders also offered traditional remedies to combat the poisoned air. See Wear, *Practice* for a good overview of the history of the English plague orders and regulations.

[45] Slack speaks to the growing skepticism towards astrology and divine causes found in medical tracts, yet argues that popular opinion was still drawn to both explanations, *Impact*, 26-28. George R. Keiser argues that astrological causes, once prominent in English plague tractates, were overtaken by explanations relating to divinity in "Two Medieval Plague Treatises and Their Afterlife in Early Modern England." *J Hist Med Allied Sci* 58.3 (2003): 292-324; however, see pp. 155-160 for more on the complicated relationship between divinity and astrology in the English plague tractate.

[46] Thomas Lodge, *A treatise of the plague: containing the nature, signes, and accidents of the same, with the certaine and absolute cure of feuers, botches and carbuncles ….* (London: Printed for Edward White and N L, 1603).

corruption from the still waters of a pond.[47] Importantly, the poison of putrefaction rose from motionless substances, or those buried deep underground.

So, Hamlet's sense of a "foul and pestilent congregation of vapours," like the air sticky enough to catch Pyrrhus' sword, both emerges from – and creates – an atmosphere of profound corruption and containment. It springs from the language of disease, poison, and decay that overwhelm the play. Indeed, ulcers, putrefying matter, harsh medical procedures, and surgical tools litter the text.[48] Poisons seep out from every crevice of Elsinore: laced on rapiers, dissolved in massy goblets of wine, and hiding in the corrupted black spots of Hamlet's imagination.[49] This is, in fact, the most poison-filled of

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[47] To take one example, Othello compares Desdemona to a "cistern," as opposed to the healthily moving "fountain" of life for him and his progeny: she is now "a cistern for foul toads / To knot and gender in!" (4.2.63-64). William Shakespeare, "Othello," *The Norton Shakespeare*, 2091-2174. Moreover, the connection between standing ponds and "poisonous" creatures was commonly made during the period, such that swamps, dead carcasses, and retained semen rotting within the body all bore from their putrefaction new life that was, perversely, poisonous. Creatures of poison – toads, bugs, basilisks, and snakes – sprung up out of this putrefaction. As such, one of the conventional "signs" of an oncoming pestilence was an increase in such poisonous creatures. See Chapter 1, pp. 39-40 for more on the link between putrefaction and poisonous animals in Topsell's *Historie of Serpents*. For an account of the gradual decrease of these tokens in French plague tractates during the seventeenth century, see Jones, "Plague."

[48] See Caroline Spurgeon's *Shakespeare's Imagery and What It Tells Us* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965).

[49] For more on the repetitive use of poison in the meta-theatrical spectacles of the play, see Alexander Nigel, *Poison, Play and Duel: A Study in* Hamlet (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971). G. Wilson Knight even finds Hamlet himself to be the poison of the court: "The solitary and inactive figure of Hamlet is contrasted with the bustle and glitter of the court, the cancer of cynicism in his mind, himself a discordant and destructive thing whose very presence is a poison and a menace to the happiness and health of Denmark," in *The Wheel of Fire,* 1930 (New York: Routledge, 2001) 33.

Shakespeare's plays and poems.[50] Some of the poisons are specific substances used by Claudius, bought from a mountebank in Italy in one case, and dissolved into a chalice in another.[51] Most of the language of poison, however, occurs in the images of disease and corruption: the "pestilent congregation of vapors," "mildewed ear / Blasting his wholesome brother" (3.4.63-64) and so on. In Marcellus' words, "Something is rotten in the state of Denmark" (1.5.67). Yet, what is the source of all this putrefaction and rottenness?

"Blasts from hell": The Startling Ghost

One obviously putrefying figure of the story is the Ghost of Hamlet's father. Shakespeare emphasizes the Ghost's explosive emergence from his grave into the atmosphere of Elsinore. Hamlet describes his father as being vomited from out of his tomb, rupturing all sorts of ceremonial covers in the process:

> Let me not burst in ignorance, but tell
> Why thy canonized bones, hearsèd in death,
> Have burst their cerements, why the sepulcher
> Wherein we saw thee quietly enured
> Hath oped his ponderous and marble jaws
> To cast thee up again. (1.4.27-32).

"Bursting" threatens to transfer from father to son – his father's bones have "burst" through their containers, and now Hamlet threatens to burst into pieces. The ghost comes from a notoriously ambiguous zone – hell, purgatory, or some other "undiscovered country" in the unknown landscape of death. Hamlet himself voices concern about the Ghost's status – "the spirit I have seen / May be the devil" (2.2.575-576) – and his

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[50] Poison, venom and their variants occur 25 times in *Hamlet*, as opposed to 14 in *Cymbeline* (the play with the second-most references to the substances).

[51] For more on the poisons, in particular, see pp. 107-111 of this chapter.

relationship to the dead King Hamlet is always made, cautiously, based on resemblance: "In the same figure like the King that's dead" (1.1.39); "Looks it not like the King?" (1.1.41); "Most like" (1.1.42); "A figure like your father, / Armed at all points exactly" (1.2.199-200); "If it assume my noble father's person…" (1.3.243). He is an "apparition," a "figure," a "spirit," a "dreaded sight," a "present object," an "it": he arrives "in such a questionable shape / That I will speak to thee. I'll call thee Hamlet, / King, father, royal Dane" (1.4.24-25). The skepticism at work in the text keeps the ghost and his awesome power at a distance from the central characters and the audience. Indeed, Horatio's first lines in Act 1 Scene 1 ("Say – what, is that Horatio there?" / "A piece of him" (1.1.16-17)) mirror his last lines in the scene, when he refuses to commit to Marcellus' theory of ghostly visitations without more proof than here-say ("So have I heard, and do in part believe it" (1.1.144)). Horatio and Hamlet will only believe in pieces and parts; likewise, one of the first things Hamlet does in the play is stress his disbelief in the dangerous deceptions of things that "seem": "These indeed 'seem,' / For they are actions that a man might play; / But I have that within which passeth show -- / These but the trappings and the suits of woe" (1.2.83-86). The nature of Hamlet Sr.'s ghost is remarkably ambiguous to Hamlet:

> Be thou a spirit of health or goblin damned,
> Bring with thee airs from heaven or blasts from hell,
> Be thy intents wicked or charitable … (1.4.21-23)

The ghost occupies strange territory between the either/or categories Hamlet presents: damned, from hell, and wicked or a figure of health, from heaven, and charitable.[52] More to the point, the Ghost crucially brings along with him "airs" that might be therapeutic or

[52] For more on the ghost as a demonic presence, see Eleanor Prosser, *Hamlet and Revenge*, 2nd Ed, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1971).

diseased. Whether he wills it or not, the Ghost carries the steams and scents of the afterlife, notably the "sulph'rous and tormenting flames" of his purgatorial "prison-house" (1.5.3; 14).

The link between ghosts and putrefying "blasts from hell" was prominent even in plays where the ghost's identity is not at all in question. Seneca's tragedies, translated into English, and read and performed in Latin in grammar schools and Universities, most often connected the figure of the ghost to the release of noxious fumes from inside the earth.[53] In Seneca's tragedies, there are only two ghosts: Tantalus in *Thyestes* and Thyestes in *Agammenon* (though the pseudo-Senecan *Octavia* features the ghost of Agrippina.) His ghosts partly functioned as exposition, emerging at the start of the narrative to explain the injustices that will be avenged in the course of the story. Yet, they also serve as a very material force of revenge in their release, opening up the earth and spilling out other murderous fumes and diseases with them.[54] Jasper Heywood's English translation of *Thyestes* (1560) opens with such an account of a diseased spirit, as Tantalus, newly-risen from the underworld, is forced to watch the ensuing bloody feasts

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[53] For a very good overview of Seneca's reception in the Elizabethan period, see James Ker and Jessica Winston, "Introduction," *Elizabethan Seneca: Three Tragedies, MHRA Tudor & Stuart Translations, Vol. 8,* Intro. and Eds. James Ker and Jessica Winston (London: Modern Humanities Research Association: 2012) 1-62.

[54] F.W. Moorman describes Seneca as combining the Euripidean prologue-ghost with the revenge-motive of the Aeschylean ghost in "The Pre-Shakespearean Ghost," *The Modern Language Review* 1.2 (1906), 86. His disregard for Seneca overwhelms the article: Seneca "gave new life to the themes of Attic tragedy" yet "imparted to them that rancid flavor of melodrama which clings to the Senecan tragedy in all its later developments," 86.

of the revenge play. "The bowels" of earth, ghosts, pestilence, and poison entangle in his galloping fourteeners:

> I am sent forth lyke vapoure dyre to ryse
> That breakes the ground or poison like the plague in wondrouse wyse
> That slaughter makes; shall I to such destested crymes, applye
> My nephewes hurtes?"[55].

Tantalus, until the Ghost of Hamlet, does not wish to rise and watch the play of revenge: he is sent by the Furies, and seems part of what Bowers calls the "malign influence" of the hovering, Senecan ghost, in contradistinction to the active agency of English ghosts, who shriek and demand revenge themselves.[56] Likewise, Seneca's Thyestes appears at the start of *Agammemnon* with equal confusion about motion on the ground. In John Studley's translation, he is "sent out agayne from Tartar Dungeon deepe," "fly[ing]" from "infernall fiendes," yet cannot decide which location is worse: that of his family's murderous and incestuous house or the pit of torture in the underworld ("My conscience lo abhors, that I should heather passage make."[57]). Like Tantalus, he is not exactly a willing or happy participant in the terrifying, bloody revenge plot that will follow.

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[55] Seneca, *Seneca his tenne tragedies*, *translated into Englysh*, Trans. Jasper Heywood (London: In Felltstreete neere vnto Saincte Dunstans church, 1581) 48. The full passage of Seneca as follows: *mittor ut dirus vapor tellure rupta vel gravem populis luem sparsura pestis, ducam in horrendum nefas avus nepotes*, taken from Seneca's *Tragedies II*, Trans. John G. Fitch (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002-4).

[56] Bowers tracks the spectral agency of ghosts in English and Italian popular plays, contrasting the demanding English ghost from the more inconsequential Italian ghost. Cf. Fredson Bowers, *Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy, 1587-1642* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1940) 83-84.

[57] Taken from Seneca, Lucius Annaeus, *Seneca his tenne tragedies, translated into Engylsh*, Trans. Jasper Heywood et al. (Imprinted at London : In Fleetstreete neere vnto Saincte Dunstans church by Thomas Marsh, 1581) 141.

In contrast, English ghosts played a more active role in seeking vengeance. Indeed, Jasper Heywood added an extra ghost to Seneca's tragedies, notably giving voice to the ghost of Achilles, who physically appears after Hecuba's lament in the otherwise-female centered *Troas*.[58] Achilles, unlike Thyestes and Tantalus, actively breaks through the pits of Hell because they cannot contain his rage:

> The deepe Averne my rage may not sustayne,
> Nor beare the angers of Achilles spright
> From Acheron I rent the spoyle in twayne,
> And though the ground I grate agayne to sight:
> Hell could not hide Achilles from the light,
> Vengeance and bloud doth Orcus [Hades] pit require,
> To quench the furies of Achilles yre.[59]

This ghost desires revenge, and revenge, connected with explosive anger, helps propel the ghost out of the ground and into the "light."[60] In Seneca's original text, the ghost of Achilles is only described by others as having, briefly, risen from the dead (a description also retained in Heywood's translation). Both Heywood's additional lines, and Seneca's description, again connect the release of the ghost to disturbances in nature. Like an earthquake, the ghost emerges from "the hollow caves" of "Plutoes deepe region." Pyrrhus' friend at the Greek camp describes the scene:

> The earth all shaken sodaynly and from the hollow grownde:
> My thought I hard with roaryng crye a deepe and dreadful sound:
> …Then shoke the tombe from whence anone in flame of fiery light,
> Appeareth from the hollow caves Achilles noble spright (104).

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[58] Seneca's *Troas* has a character speak of Achilles' ghost, though the ghost itself does not speak for himself. Interestingly, in both Seneca's and Heywood's texts, another ghost appears; the ghost of Hector appears in his wife's bedchamber; yet, with interesting reminders and divergences from the closet scene in *Hamlet*, no one else can perceive the ghost except for his wife.

[59] Ibid., 102-103.

[60] For more on Seneca's account of boundary-breaking anger, see pp. 222-223. Also see chapter 3, Kerrigan, *Revenge Tragedy.*

Heywood thus creates a more actively vengeful Ghost while, at the same time, retaining the convention of Ghosts as being a poisonous vapor of disease released from the hollow caves and tombs of the underworld.

Sixteenth and seventeenth century English plays often used such active and atmospheric ghosts in their narratives of revenge.[61] For instance, the ghost of the cotemporaneous *Antonio's Revenge* (c1599) much more directly engages in the narrative than does Hamlet's father. He appears before both his wife and his son and authoritatively directs the revenge plot that follows. Yet, whatever their activity in their respective plays, ghosts were often directly compared to diseased steams and vapors. In Ben Jonson's *Catiline His Conspiracy* (1611) for instance, the ghost of Sylla compares his emergence from the grave to "an earth-quake" (1.1.4), and describes his haunting form as another pestilent vapor:

> Behold, I come, sent from the *Stygian* sound,
> As a dire vapor, that had cleft the ground,
> T'ingender with the night and blast the day;
> Or like a pestilence, that should display
> Infection through the world: which, thus, I doe. (1.1.11-15)[62]

Jonson directly draws from Seneca's *Thyestes* here, repeating the idea that the ghostly hauntings of revenge involve a material balance to bring about retribution. The desire for justice manifests physically in these narratives.

Indeed, such a link between the putrefied smell and infecting potential of dead bodies to the poisoning of the air provides a simple and elegant frame for narratives of

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[61] There exist many examples of non-interactive, chorus-like ghosts and allegorical figures of revenge. For instance, Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* notably features both the ghost of Andreas and the Spirit of Revenge who serve as a classical chorus to watch the play, though they do not actively interact with characters.

[62] Ben Jonson, "Catiline His Conspiracy," in *The Complete Plays of Ben Jonson*, Vol. 3 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981-1982).

revenge. Murdered fathers, kings, and dukes ultimately smite the person and community that participated in their murder partly through the transformation of their body into vapors and spirits. Disease literally haunts the plays. In addition, many of these newly deceased wanderers were poisoned – and now, they get to poison in return. The plague thus gives the revenge story a structure of repayment that occurs according to nature. Ghosts of the past recruit revengers and destroy their murderers in their present release into the air.

Shakespeare's own earth-released Ghost does, after all, disappear into the "air invulnerable" (1.1.126) like a vapor. Yet is he, as an earth-released ghost, the cause behind the "something" that is "rotten in the state of Denmark"? Shakespeare indeed often connects unburied bodies and congregations of people to the putrefaction of air found in plague. This occurs most often in powerful curses issued by the vindictive women of his early plays and the angry men that crop up in his dark, later plays: Timon, Coriolanus, Lear, and the sarcastic Thersites.[63] We also find these carrion-plague curses issuing from the politic Prince himself, King Henry V, after he delivers the awe-inspiring and rallying St. Crispin's Day speech. After the French refuse him the rites of burial for any English soldiers that may die, he correlates their cruelty to their eventual punishment. In other words, they curse themselves. This putrefaction has much to do with heat and smells:

> A many of our bodies shall no doubt
> Find native graves, upon the which, I trust,

[63] A good example from Coriolanus connects the mob to putrefying corpses and corruption: "You common cry of curs, whose breath I hate / As reek o'th'rotten fens [vapors of swamps], whose loves I prize / As the dead carcasses of unburied men / That do corrupt my air: I banish you" (3.3.124-127), from William Shakespeare, "The Tragedy of Coriolanus," in *The Norton*, 2785-2872.

> Shall witness live in brass of this day's work.
> And those that leave their valiant bones in France,
> Dying like men, though buried in your dunghills,
> They shall be famed. *For there the sun shall greet them,*
> *And draw their honours reeking up to heaven,*
> *Leaving their earthly parts to choke your clime,*
> *The smell whereof shall breed a plague in France* (4.3.96-104, italics mine).[64]

Good smells and bad smells separate from the unburied through the magnet-like force of the sun, which in a kind of sympathetic magic attracts like to like and leaves the putrid stuff of the earth to "breed." A stench rotting off a dead body in the hot sun is one thing. A spirit, and one who visits in the cold of night is another in Shakespeare's imagination. The undead ghost, while related by Marcellus to an unwoundable kind of air ("it is as the air invulnerable / And our vain blows malicious mockery" (1.1.126-127)), seems about as un-airlike as possible and nearly evaporation-proof, with his heavy armor blocking and surrounding his body in the first two visitations (and his night-time attire in the third). Moreover, he doesn't seem to smell in the same way that Claudius' sins are imagined to do ("O, my offense is rank! It smells to heaven" (3.3.36)). Moreover, unlike the dead soldiers lying in France, the sun does not touch the Ghost's undead body and he cannot exactly "hang around" Denmark during the day. In contrast to the "breeding" putrefaction of heat and corpses seen in *Henry V* and the other plays, he brings a cold, freezing, and suspenseful energy to Elsinore, militarizing the battlements and setting each individual hair on edge.

Indeed, Hamlet's Ghost notably affects the boundaries of his watchers, appearing as he does in the "nipping and … eager air" (1.4.2) of the "dead waste and middle of the night" (1.2.198). Young Hamlet's withdrawing spirits confine themselves further inside his body upon seeing his father. Indeed, Hamlet has already appeared quite constrained,

[64] Taken from William Shakespeare, "Henry V," in *The Norton*, 1445-1523.

alone, and barely able to contain his bitterness and disgust whilst under the gaze of the formal and limiting "eye" of Claudius in court.[65] As is often mentioned, Hamlet already expresses the feeling of confinement within his flesh during his first painfully uttered soliloquy, a moment that comes before he has even seen the Ghost or heard about the murder. Already, he wishes for the boundaries of his body to burst apart.[66] The fact that he has to wait through a lengthy scene to be alone and at liberty to speak his mind only adds to the explosive sense of release in the lines:

> Oh, that this too, too solid flesh would melt,
> Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew,
> Or that the Everlasting had not fixed
> His canon 'gainst self-slaughter! O God, O God,
> How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable
> Seem to me all the uses of this world!
> Fie on't, ah, fie, fie! 'Tis an unweeded garden
> That grows to seed; things rank and gross in nature
> Possess it merely. That it should come to this –
> But two months dead – nay, not so much, not two –
> So excellent a king, that was to this
> Hyperion to a satyr, so loving to my mother,
> That he might not beteem the winds of heaven
> Visit her face too roughly! Heaven and earth,
> Must I remember? (1.2.129-143)

Hamlet wishes to lose solidity here, whether or not we read "solid," "sullied," or "sallied." Memory and religion, in addition to the structure of the court, constrain and oppress Hamlet into his very bodily shape. His yearning for his flesh to become heated to the point of liquidation matches the compressed bubbling energy we feel in the back and forth breaking of interjections and spilling over enjambments (five in thirteen and a half

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[65] Indeed, this outpouring of emotion led Charles Lamb to mark *Hamlet* as unstageable, as, it seems, "nine parts in ten" he wants to "retire to holes and corners and the most sequestered parts of the palace to pour forth" ("On the Tragedies of Shakespeare Considered with Reference to their Fitness for Stage Representation," 1812, *English Critical Essays,* Ed. Edmund Jones (New York: Oxford University Press, 1924)).

[66] This is famously pointed out by A.C. Bradley as providing evidence of Hamlet's melancholy.

lines). Ironically, the excess of weeds and seeds that overwhelm their boundaries and disgust him merge with his own overflow and constraint. Hamlet's disgust at his own flesh and its boundaries is palpable in the overflow and interjections of these lines.

The sense of confinement is pushed even further following the Ghost's appearance to Hamlet, as he closes off and makes even more definite the boundaries and limits of Hamlet's body, one that is "too, too" much there already. The ghost almost regretfully reports that he cannot make his son's hair "stand on end" (1.5.19), "freeze" his "young blood" (16), or, in his wonderfully monosyllabic line, "make thy two eyes like stars start from their spheres" (17) with his terrifying tales of the underworld. While we do not get a direct description of what Hamlet's hair is doing during his first encounter with the ghost, we do find such a description when the Ghost revisits Hamlet in the closet scene, as a third party witness, Gertrude, sees her son's overwhelming fear (and, incidentally, nothing of the Ghost). Though Hamlet will stress that his pulse temperately keeps time, Gertrude describes all the signals of terror:

> Alas, how is't with you,
> That you do bend your eye on vacancy,
> And with th'incorporal air do hold discourse?
> Forth at your eyes your spirits wildly peep,
> And, *as the sleeping soldiers in th'alarm,*
> *Your bedded hair, like life in excrements,*
> *Start up and stand an end*. (3.4.107-113)

The "sleeping soldiers" recall the watchmen on the battlements, linking this episode with the former. What the ghost begrudgingly promises will not happen does indeed happen, and perhaps has happened already in the past encounter: Hamlet's hairs start and stand; and, while his eyes are not blinded, his vital "spirits wildly peep," hiding behind his eyes. The motion of these dead pieces of Hamlet – his hair – creates the sense of "life in

excrements." As 'outgrowths' or dead parts of his living body,[67] they are moved through, we infer, the "freezing" of his blood forewarned in the earlier scene. Moreover, if we follow popular accounts of the physiology of fear (Burton and others), the lifeless parts that make up a body – hair, skin, and pores – stiffen and close their boundaries as the vital spirits that heat the body rush from the extremities into the interior, concentrating their warmth in the center of the body, thereby making their extremities cold.[68] So, the ghost also messes with the motions inside Hamlet's body. While the extreme jolting of this encounter threatens to tear to shreds his extremities as they violently whip away from his center, Hamlet is made even more solid and bounded through the fear and terror that the Ghost seems more than happy to create within him. In contrast, the inner change disturbs him in its swirling motion that sucks back into the center. Like the "whirling" words and manically repetitive "swearing" motions around the stage, the inner fluids of Hamlet are reeling. In fact, Hamlet's Ghost has this effect on the night watch, too: "Thrice he walked / By their oppressed and fear-surprisèd eyes / … whilst they distilled / Almost to jelly with the act of fear…" (1.2.202-205). The Ghost threatens internal dissolution just as he sharpens the exterior outlines of form.

We might ask whether or not there is a reason the Ghost would want to startle Hamlet so intensely, and what kind of "form" this sharpened outline would take. As a force actively seeking revenge, the Ghost looks to militarize Hamlet by shutting him inside his own body. Moreover, with the injunction to revenge, Hamlet seems confined

[67] See footnote 121 in William Shakespeare, *The Arden Hamlet*, 327.

[68] This explanation is found in the pseudo-Aristotelian *Problems* dating anywhere from 3 BCE to 6 CDE, in the section "On Face and Hairs." Robert Burton's comprehensive *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1638) follows this account.

all the way into his brain matter. Indeed, in his second soliloquy following the Ghost's horrible revelations and binding injunctions, Hamlet does not wish for his flesh to melt – he yearns for the very matter of his mind to be razed and purged:

> Remember thee?
> Yea, from the table of my memory
> I'll wipe away all trivial, fond records,
> All saws of books, all forms, all pressures past
> That youth and observation copied there,
> And thy commandment all alone shall live
> Within the book and volume of my brain
> Unmixed with baser matter. (1.5.97-104)

Hamlet wishes to sacrifice every personal record, memory, and connection to the world for "thy commandment" to live "all alone." Notice that he does not wish to become a receptacle bearing the memory of his father. Instead, he wishes to bear his father's *command* to remember. Here we see how the already circumscribed world of Hamlet is constricted even further, in a kind of suffocating push from the extremities of the flesh to brain matter; from Claudius' attempt to control his "forms and trappings of woe" of his black dress to the erasing of everything inside him, all those memories, images, books, and thoughts confined into two words: "remember me." Like Claudius, the Ghost tries to define and control Hamlet as a static, bounded unit. He wants to turn his son into the "proper" revenger – one who will transform into a frozen image of the past. His bodily definition relates to the narrowly circumscribed role he is to play as the revenger. The Ghost, then, in his bursting and freezing presence, terrifies his son into the structure of a specific type of narrative: that of revenge.

"Thing Rank and Gross in Nature" : **Courtly Putrefaction**

The language of solidifying power brings us back to Pyrrhus and Hecuba: the "painted tyrant" of revenge who delays action and sticks in the air, and the running queen who yearns for heavenly retribution. The too, too solid/sullied-ness of the Ghost's

commands might thus relate to the painterly image of classical vengeance, as both fundamentally warp motion through their stagnant pauses. As such, the "foul and pestilent congregation of vapours" in Hamlet's diseased imagination reflect the hauntings of revenge, ordered by the reanimated corpse that resembles the old King. In this account, revenge is obviously no cure for the corruptions enveloping Elsinore: indeed, revenge might be the very reason the entire atmosphere reeks of putrefaction.

Of course, this interpretation entirely ignores the other major source of pestilent congregations at court, and the more obvious explanation for the hidden disease running amuck in Denmark: that is, Claudius, the ultimate poisoner and deceptive usurper of the throne. Interestingly, Shakespeare almost completely opposes his elemental make-up with that of the Ghost. While the Ghost operates on Hamlet through cold, hardening, and nighttime forces, Claudius is part of other decidedly warm and breeding forces that enclose and surround Hamlet during the day. The indoors setting and layers-upon-layers of spying stifle Hamlet in a feverish heat. People indeed keep trying to shut Hamlet inside Elsinore, the worried Polonius asking him to "walk out of the air" (2.2.204) (that is, avoid the possibly unhealthy air and remain inside, out of danger). And, almost immediately following this exchange, Hamlet tells Rosencrantz and Guildenstern how the world seems to him to be a "pestilent congregation of vapours" (2.2.2293). Again, the lines are as follows:

> …indeed it goes so
> heavily with my disposition that this goodly frame, the earth,
> seems to me a sterile promontory. This most excellent canopy
> the air, look you, this brave o'erhanging, this majestical roof
> fretted with golden fire – why, it appears no other thing to me
> than a foul and pestilent congregation of vapours. (288-293)

These lines, in their crowding, putrefying forcefulness explored above, create the very sense of breeding pestilence described in *Henry V*; though in this case the sun, the "golden fire" of both the enclosing Ptolemaic system of Russian-doll like spheres and the overhang of the Globe theater itself, seems to push down the hovering vapors even closer to the "sterile" Earth. The air, in addition to hardening Hamlet into shape for his role as a revenger, also threatens to infect him in its stagnant warmth.

Hamlet's unique perception of putrefying vapors in Elsinore belongs not just to Shakespeare's play. In one of the more bizarre moments of Belleforest's *Histoires Tragiques*, a divinely inspired Hamlet (Amleth) refuses to eat the King of England's feast because he intuits that it is "already purified and corrupted, and that scenteth like the savor of a dead carryon."[69] He has left the court of his corrupt uncle (Fengon/Claudius) and now speaks to his accompanying companions in seeming secrecy, though the King of England is presently spying on him. To the King's astonishment, Hamlet's seemingly mad refusal of his food turns out to be for good reason. The corn of the meal is revealed to have grown from a "field ful of dead mens bones … as by the greate heapes of wounded sculles might well appeare"[70] and the hogs, delicately and pleasantly prepared for the feast, had in fact consumed the body of a hanging thief before their slaughter. One of Amleth's more heroic attributes, then, is his uncanny ability to smell the almost

[69] The French reads: "*et corruption des corps humains, ja tous pourris et corrompuz, et qui rapporte au goust d'une charonge*…" I am relying on the side by side printing of Belleforest's *Les Cinqviesme Tome des Histoires Tragiques* (1582) and its 1608 English translation of the text found in Sir Israel Gollancz's *The Sources of Hamlet with an Essay on the Legend* (London: Frank Cass & Co., 1967) 235-7.

[70] Likewise, I am using Oliver Stone's English translation of Saxo Grammaticus' account found in Gollancz's *Sources of Hamlet*.

completely obscured stench of putrefaction: that is, to recognize a poison hidden from everyone else in the court. In both the Belleforest and Saxo Grammaticus sources, Amleth recognizes a poison (*empoisonnez* and *venenis*, respectively) secreted from the very stench of corpses. These poisoning bodies paradoxically fertilize the soil. A sickening sense emerges in the way "the fatte and humours of the dead bodies" first feed the soil and then people, even royals in all their presumed divinity. While Hamlet's adventures in England do not appear directly in Shakespeare's play, this episode resonates with Hamlet's disgust over the combinations of breeding, consumption, and rotting, from his lines to Polonius on the "good kissing carrion" corpses that spur conception (2.2.183) to his manic bit on the "worm that hath eat of a king" in the aftermath of his murder of Polonius (4.3.27). Secret poisons proliferate and bombard Hamlet in their own vegetative and animal fertility.

Belleforest draws even more attention to this pestilent breeding arising from corpses than Saxo Grammaticus does – and, surely, Shakespeare outdoes both in his almost obsessive use of rotting, putrefying things in *Hamlet*. In an episode missing from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Amleth himself relies on the concept of contagious corpses to spur mass revenge against the now murdered body of his usurping uncle. In Belleforest's account, Amleth inspires the crowd of confused citizens to tear the dead King's body to bits, urging them to hack apart his usurping uncle's body to prevent the contagion that would spill from his polluting stench:

> But I have left Fengon whole, that you might punish his dead carkasse … Be joyfull, then (my good friends); make ready the nosegay for this usurping king … Let not one trace of a parricide be seene, nor your countrey defiled with the presence of the least member of this tyrant without pity, that your neighbors *may not smell the contagion*, *nor our land the polluted infection of a body condemned* for his wickedness (Ibid., 274-5; italics mine).

Belleforest relies on odors to an extent not seen in the Saxo Grammaticus chronicle, which entirely lacks this strange mix of anger and pleasure in smelling rotting bodies.[71] Additionally, Belleforest's Amleth reminds us here more than ever of the politic Henry V, or of Mark Antony in *Julius Caesar*, as this entire speech is consciously described as "work[ing] by policie."[72] Amleth's control of the masses has its direct function, generating unanimous support for his election following his own regicide. By targeting the Claudius figure as the 'source' of contagion, Amleth secures his position and cleanly eliminates any spill-over onto himself or others in the court. Unlike his prototypes, Shakespeare's Hamlet really feels and smells this rotting world all-too-well, even at the expense of his political strategizing. He does not use breeding contagion and pestilence to trigger the mob: in fact, he seems to abhor the 'mob' *as* the pestilence. That is, invisible "crowd[ing]" forces hover overhead and press against him in their congregating presence.

The growing sense of pressure from this congregating air seems related to Hamlet's perception of proliferating breeding that crops up in the garden imagery of

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[71] Saxo's corresponding account is remarkably absent of the olfactory dimension, though it notably relates the usurping corpse to *contagium* and *polluter* , what Oliver Elton tranlastes as "infection" and "defilement," respectively: "Therefore I .. left only the trunk of Feng [the 'Claudius' character] for your hands to burn … Now haste up speedily … Let no trace of his fratricide remain; let there be no spot in his own land for his tainted limbs; let no neighbourhood suck infection from him; let not sea nor soil be defiled by harbouring his accursed carcase" ("*...solum Fengonis truncum vestris minibus concredmandum reliqui … Nullum parricidii vestigium maneat: nullus contaminates artibus intra patriam locus existat: nulla contagium vicinia contrahat: non mare, non solum damnati cadaveris hospitio polluatur*." (134-7))

[72] Interestingly, Saxo Grammaticus' Amleth also uses congregations of bodies in particularly effective wartime policies against the British king, propping up dead bodies on horses during battle to stun and frighten the opposing forces. (159)

Shakespeare's play. We have already seen the "unweeded garden" of the first soliloquy, where raw sensuality seems – at least, to Hamlet – to be an unbridled procreation of base plants ("Tis an unweeded garden / That grows to seed; things rank and gross in nature / Possess it merely."). The Ghost and Hamlet both continue to use breeding weeds and even flowers as figures for the poisonous infection they feel lies hidden inside characters and the political structure of Denmark itself. The Ghost speaks of "thorns that in [Gertrude's] bosom lodge" (1.5.87); like the Ghost's mention of Gertrude preying on garbage, Hamlet warns Gertrude not to "spread the compost on the weeds / To make them ranker" (3.4.142-143) during the closet scene, connecting her sexuality to a waste product that promotes an already infected growth.

All this proliferation is imagined to come from a single source. That is, the poison of sin starts small, remains hidden, and grows. In his abstract – and notoriously abstruse – Q2-only musing on custom and nature, Hamlet describes how vices spread from "a vicious mole of nature," an "o'ergrowth of some complexion," or by "some habit" (1.4.18.8; 18.11; 18.18.13). In this case, the vicious mole refers to something inherited, the overgrowth to the imbalance of internal humors, and the habit to learned behaviors and customs. In any event, all of these sources of vice become likened to blacks spots of corruption that, from their humble beginnings, manage to convert an entire substance into themselves: a "dram" of either "eale" or "evil" (18.20)[73] that ultimately ruins an entire

[73] This dense passage only appears in Q2, and the cryptic "dram of eale" has been emended historically as "evil" (the first volume of the *Norton Shakespeare* chooses "evil"), though neither rendering gives a clear sense of the language in use. For a good summary of the possible meanings of "eale" in this context, cf. Shirley Carr Grubb, "The Scandalous Dram of Eale," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 36.2 (1985): 188-203.

"noble substance," or corruption born from *one* "particular fault" (18.21; 18.20). Likewise, Hamlet finds within Gertrude "the ulcerous place" that is filled with "corruption" and "infects unseen" (3.4.138; 140), which she herself describes as "black and grainèd" spots on her soul (3.4.80). All of these secret, hidden infections act like the poison of infectious disease, understood to spread almost by virtue of their concealment. Poison, the substance understood and defined by its remarkably exponential conversions of other into self, lurks behind these at times enigmatic metaphors of transformation and disease. Analogically, the "rotten" body of Denmark might follow suit, having as its poisonous center some single source of this procreative sinfulness. That is, all these weeds, seeds, and stained bed-sheets proliferate from one poisonous body.

Plot-wise, this source should be unambiguously identified as the play's actual poisoner, Claudius, whose crime, after all, is the great secret of the story. The off-stage poisoning of Hamlet relies on a network of Biblical allusions: the Edenic garden, poisonous serpentine/Satanic intruder, and the "primal eldest curse" of brother murdering brother (3.3.37). Shakespeare so emphatically connects Claudius with poison that he stages Claudius' repeated use of the substance when he manipulates Laertes in the secondary revenge plot of the Polonius family. Indeed, Claudius shapes Laertes' unbridled grief and rage to convert him into a poisoner: into a plotter of revenge who will use not one, but two kinds of poisons (plus a secretly un-blunted sword). Like other cruel plotters of Shakespearean tragedy, he deceptively manipulates Laertes' raw energy for over 120 lines before getting him right to the point he wants. And, he calls this very point, evocatively, "the quick o'th'ulcer –" (4.7.95.10). "The quick of the ulcer," another way of saying "the heart of the matter," unites pain with speed, as "quick" conjures both

the most sensitive part of corroded flesh and the urgency of the situation. Yet, Claudius also is prodding the sorest spot of Laertes' pain to quicken revenge inside of him. That is, Shakespeare relates Claudius' very manipulations to a kind of multiplying poison:

> Claudius: *But to the quick o'th'ulcer –*
> Hamlet comes back. What would you undertake
> To show yourself in deed your father's son
> More than in words?
> Laertes: To cut his throat in'th' church.
> Claudius: No place, indeed, should murder sanctuarize.
> Revenge should have no bounds (4.7.95.10-100; italics reflect Q2-only passage).

Claudius carefully and artfully molds Laertes' pain into a structure that gives him relief and control over the overwhelming forces within him. Laertes' grief, shaped into a form of murderous destruction, paradoxically knows "no bounds." Revenge is thus imagined to be a binding of emotions deployed to destroy bounds.

Curiously, Shakespeare references the breaking of religious sanctuary at the very moment Claudius pushes Laertes far enough to join his plot of revenge. Moreover, the pair then immediately turns to poison, the substance understood as destroying boundaries, to "show… in deed" rather than "words" one's familial bond: "for that purpose I'll anoint my sword. / I bought an unction of a mountebank…" (4.7.112-113).[74] No place is sacred enough to prevent Laertes' revenge, not even sanctuary spaces, the historically Catholic zones of asylum largely overhauled during Henry VIII's consolidation of power and religious authority.[75] Here, too, Shakespeare calls upon Marlowe's and Nashe's *Dido,* the source of the Player's speech. Only in this case, he relocates the breaking of

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[74] For more on poison's connection to boundaries and transformation, see Introduction, pp. 15-17.

[75] For more on the history of English sanctuary practices – and Shakespeare's representation of sacred space – see Benjamin Woodring, *"Oft Have I Heard of Sanctuary Men": Fictions of Refuge in Early Shakespeare,* Dissertation, Harvard University (Ann Arbor: ProQuest/UMI, 2014).

sanctuary found in that play (and in Virgil's epic). There, Pyrrhus murders Priam at the very altar of Apollo, as he hides with Hecuba and the other women of his court. Pyrrhus, irreverent of any boundaries whatsoever, murders all who get in his path. In Marlowe's and Nashe's rendering of the story, he essentially hacks Priam to pieces at the altar, first cutting off his hands, before finally slitting his throat like a sacrificial animal. The religious setting only underscores the complete cruelty of Pyrrhus in his quenchless drive for vengeance. Yet, Shakespeare removes this locational detail in his speeches on the Trojan War, only to remember it as Claudius directs Laertes towards vengeance. Technically, no one will break a sanctuary space during the play: Claudius and Laertes only show their willingness to do so, if need be. Then, why this transfer?

In some respects, the move reflects, however subtly, Shakespeare's implicit comparison between Claudius/Laertes and Pyrrhus. Of course, had he included a line or two on the sanctuary space in the Pyrrhus "speech," this would only make the comparison more obvious to the audience. It is impossible to determine exactly why Shakespeare ignored it in the First Player's recitation: perhaps it was seen to detract from the greater thematic concentration on the colors, elements, and pause of Pyrrhus; or perhaps its omission reflects Shakespeare's larger interest in the figures and characters of Priam and Pyrrhus.

In any event, the reference to murder in a church powerfully impacts the ongoing dynamic between Claudius and Laertes. The lines expose the radical destruction of anger that underlies revenge. Anger explosively emerges in Laertes quick-tempered response, "To cut his throat i'th'church" (4.7.98), and is set in distinction to the grief of loss. In fact, throughout this and other plays, Shakespeare often directly opposes this boundary-

destroying anger with the experience of mourning and pity. In *Macbeth* for instance, Malcolm pits the manliness of revenge against the womanish-ness of tears, as he tries to get Macduff to team up with him in a plot to overthrow Macbeth. Macduff has just learned that his entire family – wife and children – have been viciously slaughtered in his absence. Almost immediately, Macduff urges him to use his grief to fuel his revenge: only, grief continually interrupts the shaping energies of vengeance.

> Macduff: My wife killed too?
> Ross: I have said.
> Malcolm: Be comforted.
> Let's make us medicines of our great revenge
> To cure this deadly grief.
> Macduff: He [Macbeth] has no children. All my pretty ones?
> Did you say all? O hell-kite! All?
> What, all my pretty chickens and their dam
> At one fell swoop?
> Malcolm: Dispute it like a man.
> Macduff: I shall do so,
> But I must also feel it as a man.
> …
> Malcolm: Be this the whetstone of your sword. Let grief
> Convert to anger: blunt not the heart, enrage it.
> Macduff: O, I could play the woman with mine eyes
> And braggart with my tongue! But gentle heavens
> Cut short all intermission. (4.3.214-223;230-234).

"Play[ing] the woman" means actively expressing and experiencing grief, where tears and tongues stand opposed to the disputations and medicines of masculine plots. Anger, on the other hand, can be "the whetstone of your sword," and can "enrage" the heart into manly violence and revenge. Disease and treatment also infiltrate the language of vengeance in this dialogue, such that revenge becomes a "medicine" to "cure this deadly grief." Malcolm's comparison of violence to "medicine" strikingly resembles Claudius' regular references in *Hamlet* to "desperate appliance" (4.3.10) or harsh medical "cures" (4.3.68), as he equates Hamlet's mania to "diseases desperate grown" (4.3.9) and "the hectic [fever] in my blood" (4.4.67). Malcolm is not the only character to compare

manliness to the rejection of sorrow; at the end of the scene between Claudius and Hamlet described above, Laertes momentarily drops his church-murdering, poison-filled discussion of revenge and allows himself to grieve. Laertes – and the audience – has just learned of his sister's drowning. Like Macduff, he is overcome with tears, which he promises to forgo to seek revenge: "When these [tears] are gone, / The woman will be out." (4.7.160-161). Once more, the choice seems to be between Hecuba and Pyrrhus – between unshaped grief and carefully orchestrated anger.

Like Hecuba and Pyrrhus, these emotions are gendered. Words, tears, and sorrow are feminine and anger, violence, and political plots are masculine. Laertes disowns them as they drop from his eyes. Yet, in *Macbeth* we find an alternative view of mourning and the human condition. Again, after Malcolm questions Macduff's manliness ("Dispute it like a man"), Macduff quietly reproaches this remarkably uncaring and manipulative advice: "I shall do so, / But I must also feel it as a man." The play offers, however briefly, one instance where masculinity is not equated with callousness. Voices scattered throughout *Macbeth* continually identify manliness as cruelty, whether found in the epic descriptions of cruel warriors ripping open adversaries from "nave to th' chops" (1.2.22) or in Lady Macbeth's emasculating taunts of her husband's cowardice. The play suggests that both men and women must be careful to "feel" sorrow before "convert[ing]" it too quickly into some other directed force.

Claudius' perverse transformation of Laertes thus draws much of its dramatic power from the cult of manliness it espouses: one from which the audience is supremely distanced. Claudius' competent handling of Laertes and his language of revenge and cure ironically sets itself up as the opposite of disease, as mentioned above. The procreative,

unbridled disease described by Hamlet throughout the play is related to Hamlet; Claudius figures himself as antithetical to this uncontrolled, explosive grief and madness. Claudius' inner calculations, made visible after Hamlet's murder of Polonius, strike the audience with their cool detachment: "To bear [manage] all smooth and even / This sudden sending him away must seem / Deliberate pause. Diseases desperate grown / By desperate appliance are relieved, / Or not at all" (4.3.7-11). "Smooth," "even," and "deliberate," Claudius' policies are calm on their face despite the desperation that lurks underneath. Yes, Claudius' hidden crimes may be "rank" and "smell to heaven" (3.3.36), as he struggles to pray, stuck in the pitch of his own sins. Yet Claudius seems in control from start to finish. He is not part of the overgrowth: he handles and forms it in his hands. Moreover, in identifying himself with the sub-plot revenge, he becomes the more standard revenger of the play, relying on deception, plotting, and a secretly poisoned spectacle to kill Hamlet. In other words, he uses the very poison and strategies that Hamlet himself *should* be using, according to the commonly found conventions in narratives of revenge. The art of revenge transforms through its constraining boundaries of targeted anger and deceptive plot-making. Yet, all the same, it dissociates Claudius from the very poison he shapes.

"Endued unto that Element": Liquid Born Poisons

In fact, all the various poisonings of *Hamlet* differentiate the poisoner from his poison. Claudius' masculine "plotting" appears to be at odds with the feminine matter he shapes, like the form/matter dialectic so often found in this period and others. It is

Gertrude, so much at the center of the images of abounding and choking fertility, who seems to be the manipulated yet natural source poison herself.[76]

The specific poisons used in the play further suggest the infectious power of female sensuality. Of the four poisons mentioned, three take a liquid form while the one offered by Laertes is an unnamed "unction" he picked up from a mountebank in Italy; and, in a line that reveals the astounding overlap between the infectious disease and poison in the period, Laertes also calls this poison a "contagion" (4.7.118). The other three poisons are equally unspecific and magical, unlike the list of particular minerals and chemicals, for instance, in Webster's *The White Devil*.[77] Shakspeare's plays more often than not feature substances that double as poison and potion.[78] He is more inclined to understand poisons as powerful drugs of transformation that might lead to either health or harm, depending on the context. Each of the four poisons in *Hamlet* relate to Claudius: he directly administers two, one in the garden (off-stage) and one in a chalice (on-stage), manages Laertes' "unction" and plot to kill Hamlet, and, finally, is represented by the

[76] In fact, the play's seeming obsession with Gertrude's sexuality is one of the reasons why Fabricius finds *Hamlet* to be a play of "syphilis" or the "pox." In this account, the Ghost's reference to "sul'phrous and tormenting flames" recalls the harsh mercury treatment used to treat the pox. Fabricius follows the common biographical readings of Shakesepare that find the plays from 1600-1608 to reflect some kind of sexual disgust and mid-life crisis. Johannes Fabricius, *Syphilis in Shakespeare's England,* Bristol: Jesssica Kingsley Publishers, 1994.

[77] See pp. 207-208 for more on the specific poisons of Webster's tragedy.

[78] The most notable example of this mix of poison and potion occurs in *Romeo and Juliet*, where Friar Lawrence speaks at length of the physic and harm that might arise from the same substance. Juliet's potion resembles poison (and indeed, she fears it may actually be poison), but is not; while she drinks a potion, Romeo takes poison bought from a poor apothecary. The 'romances' also often explore the surprising effects of powerful drugs, as in *Cymbeline*, where substances believed to be poisons are actually harmless potions.

stage poisoner in the *Murder of Gonzago*. Each poison is remarkably liquid: poured into the ears of sleeping victims, dissolved in the wine of a chalice, or anointed in an oily unction onto an unbated sword. The first offstage poison is "Hebonon" in F, or "hebona" in Q2, an unidentified poison that may be a variant on hemlock or yew.[79] Whatever the derivation, we do not get a sense that Shakespeare is using something one could pick up from the apothecary. Christopher Marlowe mentions hebona in his revenging *The Jew of Malta* , when the poisoning Barabas curses his daughter with a fantastic list of female monsters from Greek mythology and other sources of water from the underworld:

> And with her let it work like Borgia's wine,
> Whereof his sire, the Pope, was poisoned.
> In few, the blood of Hydra, Lerna's bane:
> *The juice of hebon*, and Cocytus' breath,
> And all the poisons of the Stygian pool,
> *Break from the fiery kingdom: and in this*
> *Vomit your venom, and envenom her*… (3.4.5-11, italics mine).[80]

We are reminded of Seneca's Thystes, coming up from the ruptured earth as a pestilential vapor; only here, the poisonous earth-vomit is the effluvia – the blood, juice, breath, and pools – of female mythological monsters. In *Hamlet*, Shakespeare also links the poison to a juice in his rendering of the poison ("The juice of curséd hebonon" (1.5.62)). Though, unlike Barabas' mentioning of the drug in his list of female monsters

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[79] See for instance Rebecca Laroche's "Ophelia's Plants and the Death of Violets," in *Ecocritical Shakespeare,* Eds. Lynne Bruckner and Dan Brayton (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2011) 219. She argues, along with others, that Shakespeare's choice of "hebona," unlike his choice of flowers in Ophelia's scene of "madness," was merely related to the conventional list of poisons he found in Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta.* See Fabricius, *Syphilis*, for more on hebona's/hebenon's possible relationship to guaiac, the American wood used to treat the pox. Fabricius provides a good summary of the other suggested identifications of hebona (for instance, the yew tree, narcotic, hemlock, or deadly nightshade).

[80] Christopher Marlowe, *The Jew of Malta*, Intro. and Ed. J. Scott Clark (New York: Charles E. Merrill Co., 1892) 47.

and poisons, Hamlet's Ghost focuses the energy of the passage on the poison's physical effects: its scaly "leperous distilment" and "lazar-like" "tetter" and "crusts," (1.5.64; 72; 69) are vividly describe, as are the substance's pervese motion, while curdles internal fluids as it moves "swift as quicksilver" throughout his body (66).[81] Even more, the unexpected nature of Hamlet's death compounds the physical horrors, and the language of poisonous, floral disease applies to his spiritual condition as well: "Cut off even in the blossoms of my sin" (76).

In contrast, the play Hamlet stages to reenact his father's murder realigns the liquid poison with a cursing, female witch. In its highly stylized verse, this play-within-a-play replaces hebona/hebonon with something belonging even more to the realm of magic and witch's lore – we have "midnight weeds" "blasted" with the foul air from Hecate's "ban," or curse, not once, or twice, but three times. The poison, also liquid and poured into the ear, kills through the quality of its "natural magic" and "dire property." The King's nephew, Lucianus, speaks as the stock villain:

> Thoughts black, hands apt, drugs fit, and time agreeing;
> Confederate season, else no creature seeing;
> Thou mixture rank, of midnight weeds collected,
> *With Hecate's ban thrice blasted, thrice infected*,
> Thy natural magic and dire property
> On wholesome life usurp immediately (3.2.233-238, italics mine).

Even as the male Lucianus "pours the poison in [the Player King's] ears" (3.2.238 s.d.), the power of the poison relates primarily to the infectious curses of the female witch, Hecate. Moreover, a staggering number of lines (75) highlight what seems to be the greater disloyalty of Gertrude than of Claudius, as the Player Queen and King speak a

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[81] See Fabricius, *Syphilis*, for more on the pox-symptoms implied in the Ghost's language here.

tiresome dialogue on the evils of second marriage. The female-cursed juice of weeds here highlights the dangerous force of female sexuality: an anxiety only amplified by Hamlet's cruel jests to Ophelia that occur on the edges of the scene.

The final poison as well relies on liquid-born poisons, in this case the dissolution of a "union" (5.2.210), or pearl, into the wine that, along with the greasy "unction" used by Laertes, kills Gertrude, Hamlet, and the King. Why emphasize the liquidity of Claudius' poisons, again and again, when perhaps poisons acting through other modes, like smell, might fit in even better with the play's themes of pestilence and putrefaction? I suspect these three liquid-born poisons relate to the wild fear in the play over female sexuality and infection. To take one example, Laertes worries that Ophelia will be corrupted in the very beginnings of her blossoming. He tries to transfer his brotherly fear to her as, in between *sententae*, he claims that cankers and poisonous air run a greater danger for those young and 'liquid' people of the play: "The canker galls the infants of the spring / Too oft before their buttons be disclosed, / And in the morn and liquid dew of youth / Contagious blastments are most imminent" (1.3.39-42). Her young and fresh beauty not only stands at greater risk from contagious airs and corrosive infections. Laertes also causally links her innocence to disease itself: blastments seem to be "in the … dew" or at least spread more easily by virtue of the dew.

After all, it is water that eventually kills Ophelia, retold in Gertrude's poetic account of her singing, floral, and weed-crowned death. Ophelia weaves the very elements Hamlet finds too profuse in nature, and offers another perspective on the seeds of fertility and weeds.

> There on the pendent boughs her crownet weeds
> Clamb'ring to hang, an envious sliver broke,

> When down her weedy trophies and herself
> Fell in the weeping brook. Her clothes spread wide,
> And mermaid-like a while they bore her up;
> Which time she chanted snatches of old lauds,
> As one incapable of her own distress,
> Or like a creature native and endued
> Unto that element. (4.7.143-151)

She may be one "endued" to water: that is, naturally adapted to water, the dewy suggestiveness of the word itself echoing the line's meaning. This poetic and indeed pastoral shaping of her end in "muddy death" exposes the warped-agency so often in question in this scene. Is this a suicide or not? The text continually inscribes her floral and dew-like presence, seen in Laertes' first admonishments; in her herbal hand-outs in court during her madness; in her mermaid-like drowning; and, finally, in the strewing of flowers over her grave. The suggestion that she might be "endued" to not just the brook, but to the "weedy" crowns and flowers more generally marks her death as the final blow to the natural world in this very castle-contained play.

There are few traces of the open air of the woods and "nature" in *Hamlet*: only brief emergences of what Northrop Frye calls "green world" of the natural environment. They provide stark contrast with the feverous, smoky atmosphere of Elsinore. In the first instance, after all the frozen stillness of the dead night during the Ghost's first visitation, the guards finally get relief and life-giving motion as the sun rises. In verse reminiscent of his earlier tragedies like *Romeo and Juliet*, in what A.C. Bradley calls "honey-tongued" writing, Horatio tells his companions: "But look, the morn in russet mantle clad / Walks o'er the dew of yon high eastward hill. / Break we our watch up …" (1.1.147-149). The frantic watching and guarding can end, and natural motion can resume. The sense of free, unconstrained motion comes through the sun's walking over the dew, still and calm on the blades of grass. "Young Hamlet" himself proves likewise open and free to the

various visitors at Elsinore, and it is in this open and "beaten way of friendship" (2.2.262) that we see more of the connection between health and openness that is so missing in the rest of the play.[82] We are reminded that, in Elsinore, Gertrude and Ophelia only *seem* deceptive to Hamlet – their more minor deceptions are unrelated to the great murder of the King. In the end, the stifling sense of congregating vapors arises not from abundant fertility or unconstrained prodigality – there is almost none to be seen – but from the earthly and ghostly kings' control of Hamlet's movements, and, indeed, of those of the whole court.

Retrograde Motion and the Impossibility of Escape

Indeed, both the dead King Hamlet and the living King Claudius command the same narrative structure: that of revenge. Power continually curves the motion of the young people in the court and subordinates throughout the realm. Laertes must formally request both his father and his sovereign for permission to "bend again toward France" (1.2.55), and Polonius notably still plans to re-contain his travels and seeming freedom with Reynaldo's "drift[ing]" questions and "assays of bias" (2.1.10; 64); Claudius masterfully presents Hamlet's decision to stay in the court rather than go back to school as a "gentle and unforced accord of Hamlet" (1.2.123), though his acquiescence is more obviously the results of the incredibly public setting of the request and veiled threat of being "retrograde" to Claudius' desires (114). This astral term foreshadows the Ghost's shocking of Hamlet's eyes from their spheres, and the subsequent freezing and constraining we have already explored. Additionally, constraint not only impacts these

[82] In fact, we are first introduced to Hamlet as the "young Hamlet", pairing him with the "young Fortinbras," whose actions are likewise described as dangerously free and unconstrained, that is, "of unimprovèd mettle hot and full" (1.1.95).

more 'important' main characters, but also those on the margins: the watches, Bernardo and Francisco, awake at their unnatural hour; the "impressed shipwrights" forced to work in "sweaty haste" in preparation for Fortinbras' invading army (1.1.76); Cornelius and Voltemand, granted a very specified "scope" for their exchange with old Norway with "no further personal power" (1.2.36). Even the obsequious Osric, with his compliant flattery, must feel compelled in some way to obey the next-in-line for the throne. Within this system of containment, motion bends back into the center, as if gravitationally pulled into the weighty and inescapable court of Elsinore, the only place the audience sees other than the graveyard.

Escape was, after all, the first recommended treatment in most of the English plague tractates I have examined.[83] The plague-time motto, endlessly cited in plague tractates and other writings, was *cito, longe, tarde*: go quickly, go far, and return slowly. In part, of course, the recommendation to leave an infected area related to a sense of the atmospheric contagion that took a particular place. Flight, however, also literally puts bodies into motion to combat the stagnation of putrefaction. For instance, Stephen Bradwell understands the speed of flight to actually propel off of one's body the infection of the plague:

> Flight … which *Nature teacheth in giving Man two legs, as well as two armes*, that if his enemy be too fierce for resistance, *he may escape by running*…. I will be bold a little to Comment vpon these words, in this wise. *Fly with speed from the infected place, lest by a little lingering, that*

[83] The English plague texts under consideration include traditional tractates and religious sermons, as well as plague-oriented satires and more general medical books. They range in time from Joannes Jacobi's "Litil Book" (c1520s), which was, incidentally, the first medical work ever published in England, to Richard Mead's Short Discourse" (1720), though most of the publications occur between 1570—1620. The plague tractates I considered, for this and other chapters, is not exhaustive. I included texts using keywords through Early English Books Online and included any English texts mentioned in Wear, *Knowledge*.

> *infection (which you would leaue behinde you) goe along with you*. Therefore flie quickly, and in flying goe softly, till you be quite out of the contagious Aire. … And flie not a little way, but many miles of,. whither there is no probabilitie of common trading, or recourse of people from the place forsaken (italics mine).[84]

Bradwell emphasizes the bodily – man has "two legs, as well as two armes" – in his account of "lingering" versus "running" men. His later 1635 treatise, too, maintains this traditional advice, backed up by the authority of Hippocrates, Galen, and others.

Of course, conflicting interests were at stake in the advice to flee. What would become of those left within the city, if all those who could afford to leave went ahead and abandoned ship? Moreover, what about the threat of spreading the infection to other locations? The advice to leave, indeed, sat uneasily with the growing sense of the Christian – and medical – duty to stay and protect the vulnerable.[85] A multitude of biting, satirical pamphlets by the playwrights Nashe and Middleton, among others, skewered the abandoning fathers, mothers, priests, and physicians.[86] The radical priest Henoch Clapham even argued that the disease might not be contagious in order to insist upon the continued treatment and care of the sick during times of emergency.[87] Religiously oriented plague tracts often highlighted the folly of flight. Additionally, these texts, focused as they were on God's anger and sin as causing plague, transformed the

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[84] Stephen Bradwell, *A vvatch-man for the pest Teaching the true rules of preservation from the pestilent contagion, at this time fearefully over-flowing this famous cittie of London. Collected out of the best authors, mixed with auncient experience, and moulded into a new and most plaine method; by Steven Bradvvell of London, Physition. 1625.* (London : Printed by Iohn Dawson for George Vincent, and are to be sold at Pauls-gate at the signe of the Crosse-keyes, 1625) 6-7.

[85] See Jones, "Plague," for a good account of the change in flight advice in seventeenth century French tractates.

[86] For more on Nashe's and Middleton's pamphlets, see Chapter 5, pp. 262-265.

[87] Clapham was indeed arrested for disobeying the Orders. See Chapter 3, pp. 166-170.

traditional formula of flight-from-infected-city to flight-from-sin.[88] For instance, in John Godskall's 1604 anti-Catholic sermon on pestilence-practices and treatment, the "bodily" treatment of flight is used as a metaphor for the spiritual healing that is competitively "better" at treating the pestilence's ultimate cause:

> The *whole Colledge of the bodily Phy|sitians*, and the prince of them, that wise and learned Galen, prescribe for the time of Plague, that of all remedies, to pre|uent the contagion, the best is, to flie and shunne the infected and corrupted ayre, and to depart vnto a wholesome and purer ayre: and that with these three rules, Citò, longè, tradè. … *the whole Colledge of the spirituall Physition* of our soules haue pre|scribed for the time of Plague, *a better flight and departure, then that which is prescribed by Galen and the rest; namely (to the name of Iehouah) by the feete of prayer, mentioned and storied by that wise Salomon* (italics mine).[89]

We are reminded that the period saw three major plague "scripts," the medical, religious, and political, each of which had varying objectives, audiences, and styles.[90] Flight, at

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[88] For instance, John Hooper, [*An homelye to be read in the tyme of pestylence*] , [Imprinted at Worcester : By Ihon Oswen, prynter appointed by the Kinges Maiestie for the principalitie of Wales and marches of the same, [1553]] 11. Andreas Osiander argues further that the very abandonment of "our neghboure" during times of pestilence leads to more sin, and thus more plague, in *How and whither a Christen man ought to flye the horrible plage of the pestilence A sermon out of the Psalme. Qui habitat in adsutorio altissimi. By Andrewe Osiander. Translated out of hye Almayn in to Englishe*, ([Printed in Southwarke : By me James Nicolson. for Jan Gough], 1537) 6.

[89] James Godskall, *The arke of noah for the Londoners that remaine in the cittie to enter in, with their families, to be preserued from the deluge of the plague. Item, an exercise for the Londoners that are departed out of the cittie into the coutnrey, to spend their time till they returne. Whereunto is annexed an epistle sent out of the countrey, to the afflicted cittie of London. Made and written by Iames Godskall the yonger, preacher of the word* (London : Printed by Thomas Creede, [1604]) 11-12.

[90] Jones, "Plague" outlines these three scripts in early modern France, and explores how each of the three influenced one another. Moreover, he examines how the narrative of the self-sacrificing physician became the most popular textual trope by the end of the period. The brave physician or religious authority choosing to remain in a plague-ridden area fit in with the larger rejection of flight as a truly responsible option. While his text focuses on early modern France, the same trajectory can be found in England. Also see Kevin Killeen's "Powder for Padlocks: The Rhetoric of Thanksgiving and Politics of Flight in Caroline Plague," *Literature and Popular Culture in Early Modern England*, Ed. Matthew Dimmock and Andrew Hadfield (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company,

least in religiously-oriented texts, was increasingly associated with spiritual abandonment and lack of faith.

Yet, even medical tractates became increasingly geared towards remaining within the city.[91] Tractates unambiguously supportive of flight themselves sound defensive, showing just how divisive a response flight was considered to be at least as early as the mid-sixteenth century.[92] Moreover, flight is referenced proverbially, and at times with some extended discourse on the virtue in leaving, but without any real specifics about the travel in question. The most the plague tractates offer in way of locational guidance is found in the section on the "non-naturals," or the external elements long associated with health. There, places of health are described ideally rather than realistically. The healthy

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2009) 193-208 for a good example of the shared political and religious imperative in English plague texts of the 1620s.

[91] Jones, "Plague," 113-115.

[92] For instance, Thomas Cogan's popularly printed tractate (published in 1584, 1589, 1596, 1605, 1612, and 1636), goes off on a lengthy tirade against those who shame people from leaving a plague-infested area while they are still healthy. He explains the lengthiness of his "digression" to his anger at those who "thought Physicke of no force" during the last epidemic that ultimately "carried away" a great number of people. In *The hauen of health chiefly made for the comfort of students, and consequently for all those that haue a care of their health, amplified vppon fiue wordes of Hippocrates, written Epid. 6. Labour, meate, drinke, sleepe, Venus: by Thomas Coghan maister of Artes, & Bacheler of Phisicke: and now of late corrected and augmented. Hereunto is added a preseruation from the pestilence: with a short censure of the late sicknesse at Oxford* (Imprinted at London : By Thomas Orwin for William Norton, 1588) 264. As early as 1566, John Jones' *A dial for all agues conteininge the names in Greeke, Latten, and Englyshe, with the diuersities of them, symple and compounde, proper and accident, definitions, deuisions, causes, and signes, comenly hetherto knowen: very profitable for al men, compendiously compiled (and confirmed as may appeare out of the auctors following) by Iohn Iones phisitio[n]*. (Imprinted at Londo[n] : By VVilliam Seres, dwelling at the west end of Paules at the signe of the Hedge hogge, Anno. 1566) refers to the controversy. As someone who actually survived the plague, Jones compares remaining in an infected city to "receyu[ing] poyson" (55).

place is not battered by the putrefying south wind; its homes are open and cool, built in the proper direction to receive the North and East winds[93] and far away from swamps, standing pools, garbage, or offal. As such, a spacious, open country-home, like the stately "Penshurst" of Ben Jonson's imagination, is imagined to oppose the plague. Open spaces, rushing rivers, and cool breezes stood in stark contrast from the breeding motions of dead things. Londoners hoped to replace stagnant with moving air, and the city with the countryside.

Fictional narratives indeed often infused spaces of the country with these medical and spiritual metaphors of health and disease. In fact, Boccaccio frames his *Decameron* stories with as tale of escape from the terrifying pestilence of Florence. His stories are narrated during a "fair and delectable" retreat, where young people tell tales in the countryside only after escaping the terrifying transformations of the plague. Boccaccio weaves love, youth, and health into Pampinea's call for escape:

> I should deem it most wise in us, our case being what it is, … we were to quit this place, and, shunning like death the evil example of others, *betake ourselves to the country*, and there live as honourable women on one of the estates, of which none of us has any lack, with all cheer of festal gathering and other delights, so long as in no particular we overstep the bounds of reason. *There we shall hear the chant of birds, have sight of verdant hills and plains, of cornfields undulating like the sea, of trees of a thousand sort*s; there also we shall have a larger view of the heavens, which, however harsh to usward yet deny not their eternal beauty; things fairer far for eye to rest on than the desolate walls of our city. Moreover, we shall there breathe a fresher air, find ampler store of things meet for such as live in these times, have fewer causes of annoy (italics mine).[94]

The city, contained by walls, cannot differ more from the "festal gathering" only bounded by individual reason. The refuge of "verdant hills," "fresher air," and singing birds provides a magical, ritual space for the transformations of love and youth, like that of the

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[93] A pestilence measure dating back to Hippocrates' *Epidemics*

[94] Giovanni Boccaccio, *The Decameron of Giovanni Boccaccio,* Vol. 1, Trans. J.M. Rigg (London: A.H. Bull, 1903) 15.

story-telling, songs, and over-turned order of the much later forest of Arden. This plague practice, then, offers another escape for plague-time writers: that of a healing, comic restoration, where the freedom of youth replaces or reconstitutes the dead, corrupted order of the elders through story-telling and play in the 'green world' of liminality.

Based off of *Hamlet's* prose sources, an escape from Elsinore would be expected. In both Saxo Grammaticus' and Belleforest's accounts, Amleth gears up to transform from the hidden imbecile of court into the proper revenger precisely at the moment he is sent to England. As in Shakespeare's text, his plotting uncle organizes the trip to England and arranges for his murder. Yet, Shakespeare's Hamlet never makes it to England. The other Amleths do – and it is here they first use their policy to win over the King of England and gain their first of two brides. This is the first moment that young Amleth reveals his mad actions to be strategic and, in Belleforest's account, almost divinely inspired. The Rosencrantz and Guildenstern characters are summarily killed, and Amleth sails again towards Denmark, prepared now to 'purge' the court in a blazing fire and to enact revenge on his uncle. The revenge enters a larger, political trajectory, where Amleth assumes leadership from his competent handling of the English court and triumphantly returns home, unable to stay disguised any longer. Indeed, Belleforest's Amleth again appears strikingly similar to Shakespeare's Henry V in the politics of this scheme. Like Prince Hal in *1 Henry IV*, Belleforest's Amleth must hide his brightness under the veil of clouds: "The bright shining clearness therof I am forced to hide under this shadow of dissimulation, as the sun doth hir beams under some great cloud, when the

wether in sommer time overcasteth."[95] Hal senses this dissimulation itself to be 'contagious' in his account ("Yet herein will I imitate the sun, / Who doth permit the base contagious clouds / To smother up his beauty from the world…" (1.2.175-177)[96]), and, indeed, circumstances force Amleth into this disguise which apparently works against his deep desire for truthfulness. Intriguingly though, he continues to revel in using policy even after the very moment that his 'sunlight' emerges in England, as he takes on a more open identification as the revenger. Yet, he controls what is revealed or hidden. He gets in the ship himself, and sails to England.

Shakespeare's Hamlet does not. Battered from one center of control to another, he never reaches the shores of England, proves his valor and worth to a different court, or marries a worthy Princess. While he is on his ill-fated ship, it is Laertes who returns as the triumphant revenger for a father's murder; meantime, his worthy love goes mad, falls into a brook and drowns. With a dash of the romantic, pirates interrupt his journey to England, and he returns to the same enclosing prison of Denmark. Shakespeare so insistently kills each element of the pastoral world that the play feels overwhelming enclosed, more so than in any of his other tragedies. We feel, in Northrop Frye's account, that *Hamlet* "is the most stifling and claustrophobic of plays."[97] We get the sense in *Hamlet* that, even if he did make it to England, with his manipulated orders in hand, there would be no real 'escape.' Indeed, Amleth's reinvigoration in the court of England is far

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[95] (*Les clers, et saincts rayons de laquelle, j'absconse souz cest ombragement, tout ainsi que le soleil ses flames souz quelque grang nuage, Durant les ardeurs de l'este*) Gollancz, *The Sources,* 216-7.

[96] Taken from William Shakespeare, "The History of Henry the Fourth (1 Henry IV)" in *Norton Shakespeare*, 1147-1224.

[97] Frye, *On Shakespeare*, 84.

from a pastoral 'healing' or freeing motion in the source. As mentioned above, Amleth continues to dissemble, feigning anger at the appropriate moments, and, indeed, does not escape the court games of manipulations and control when he returns to England after the revenge. In any event, Shakespeare's Hamlet does not even have that luxury. Fortune herself seems to pull Hamlet back into the poisoned court of Elsinore, as both Claudius' controlling force and seeming accidents block any escape from the pestilent congregation of vapors.

More than this, Hamlet faces a profounder confinement than that of the plague or even of tyranny. He recognizes the larger and more overwhelming confinement of time itself in his return that is set, notably, in the graveyard, the first location outside of Elsinore's walls and battlements. His recognition of the inescapable march of time towards the grave emerges in his chilling, fatalistic mixing of the past, present, and future in the famous lines: "If it be now, 'tis not to come: if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come. The readiness is all" (5.2.158-160). Death and the degrading motions of its dissolutions are inescapable. No pastoral solution can be offered to this apocalyptic sense of unending disintegration and corruption, where time itself unravels into meaninglessness. Past, present, and future become one in this unwavering script that leads to the grave. Through this revelation, the disgusting lasciviousness of his unique situation seems less crowding or stifling. The consolation offered is about as sobering as it can be: Claudius may be an incestuous beast, but all the matter of the world is made of, and feeds off of, decay. Claudius envelops his subjects, but Death (through putrefaction) envelops all.

"Here feelingly she weeps Troy's painted woes"

Shakespeare thus dramatizes revenge in *Hamlet* as yet another of these containing transformations. Geared towards death, revenge literally creates putrefaction and material dissolution. This is not to say that Shakespeare was opposed to the "genre" of revenge, or that he found the motive repellent. Nor does Shakespeare's dramatization of the narrative as confining mean that the revenge stories *are* inherently confining. Rather, Shakespeare dramatizes the peculiar power of narratives in changing its participants and spectators. *Hamlet* pivots around such character transformations, as do so many of Shakespeare's plays. *Hamlet* was an old story, an old play – the audience knew that he *would* eventually get his vengeance after all was said and done. Shakespeare, always fascinated with the process of these changes, allows us to savor them, at times disrupting and at other times conforming to our expectations, as he dramatized Hamlet's process of becoming a revenger. Dramatic time elongates – like the remarkably lengthened interval that occupy Duncan's murder in *Macbeth* – as we watch Hamlet consume a variety of conflicting narratives on grief and revenge.

Yet, Shakespeare ultimately juxtaposes Hamlet's transformation with that of Pyrrhus, the "painted tyrant" stuck in the air. Both pause in exacting revenge, yet their stillness is categorically different. As we have explored throughout this chapter, Pyrrhus, waiting while the hidden energies of vengeance to complete his regicide, gains momentum *through* stagnation, like the other perverted motions of putrefaction and disease found throughout the play. Hamlet, concerned with the "scann[ing]" of his vengeance, waits – and still only acts in response to Claudius' controlling force. Claudius dictates the terms even of his own murder, as his planned killing of Hamlet

turns into the quick succession of violence that lacks most of the usual "anagnorisis" found in revenge stories.

Pyrrhus' pause, however, highlights the intersections of the "static" with the "dymanic" arts of representation. As we explored at the beginning of the chapter, he becomes an image of treachery as he takes revenge. Yet, he is not actually an image being viewed – the transformation into a "painted tyrant" is enacted through story-telling. In fact, revengers in many other plays are described as fashioning themselves according to the plastic arts of sculpture and paintings. For instance, in Beaumont and Fletcher's *The Maid's Tragedy* (1610), the female, would-be revenger, Aspatia, describes herself as becoming a static monument to the past, irrevocable wrong that has so destroyed her identity. She cries to her ladies, "Thus, thus, Antiphila: strive to make me look, / Like Sorrow's monument; and the trees about me, / Let them be dry and leafless; … / Make all a desolation. Look, look, wenches, / A miserable life of this poor picture!" (2.2.73-75;77-78).[98] The 1602 additions to Kyd's Spanish Tragedy make even more obvious the competitive tension between the static and the dynamic arts in revenge tragedies, as the writer (possibly Ben Jonson) adds a painter scene to underscore how woefully lacking paintings are in the critical experience of passing time. In his "madness," Hieronimo harangues a clueless painter to create what he essentially cannot create in his rendering of an image of his son's death: "Let the clouds scowl, make / the moon dark, the stars extinct, the winds blowing, the bells / tolling, the owl shrieking, the toads croaking, the

[98] Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher, *The Maid's Tragedy: The Revels Play*, Ed. T.W. Craik (New York: Palgrave, 1988).

minutes jarring, / and the clock striking twelve" (3.12-3.13, 144-147).[99] The present progressive showcases what drama can do, and how insufficient paintings are in expressing the very motions of grief – the "tolling," "shrieking," and "croaking" of passing time. Yet, all of these transformations also dramatize how profoundly images influence narratives of revenge.

Like Hieronimo, Hamlet wants to make paintings and images do more. His "counterfeit presentment" (3.4.33) of the miniature portraits of his father and Claudius to Gertrude expresses this desire forcefully: "Have you eyes?" (64), he asks, in disbelief over his mother's misreading of the image, of her attraction to the rotten corn, the "mildewed ear / Blasting his wholesome brother" (63-65). The dangerous power of the external to deceive senses – "Seems, madam? Nay, it is. I know not 'seems'" (1.2.76) – threatens to obscure the real stories that exist underneath their painted exteriors. In contrast, dramatization offers multiple dimensions for stories and characters to unfold, to become what they fatalistically are set out to be. Time is of the essence: Hamlet himself speaks of the power of the theater as emerging from its image of "time": "the purpose of playing," in his famous line, "both at first and now, was and is to hold as 'twere a mirror up to nature, to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure" (3.2.18-22). Both "was" and "is," "at first" and "now," dramatic narratives enable present audiences to encounter the voices of the past; their aesthetic is one of moving images, characters not fully formed, but forming before

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[99] All citations of Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* taken from *Four Revenge Tragedies*, Ed. and Intro. Katharine Eisaman Maus, Eds. Michael Cordner, Peter Holland, and Martin Wiggins (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

our eyes. Hecuba's story occurs at quite a distance. Told within the main "representational storyline" to Hamlet, the "speech" was written by some forgotten author, who himself could only have encountered Hecuba second-hand. For all this, Hecuba still inspires "passion" in her future "viewers," who only see her, of course, in their "mind's eye." Moreover, even as a "painted tyrant" who operates based on stagnant forces, Pyrrhus inspires "passion" in the spectator. It is Aristotle at its most basic: Pyrrhus inspires fear, while Hecuba inspires pity.

This is not the only time Shakespeare turns to Hecuba. In his poem written during the closing of the theaters during the plague epidemic of 1592-1594, "The Rape of Lucrece," Shakespeare dramatizes another wounded character who, seeking justice and revenge, looks to Hecuba for inspiration. Like Hamlet, the poem is notorious for being digressive in its narration, and for slowing down its action to represent two character transformations.[100] After her rape, Lucrece awaits the return of her husband and father and processes what has happened to her. Looking at a painted tapestry of the fall of Troy, Lucrece "feelingly weeps Troy's painted woes," bringing to life the soundless words and stories obscured by external presentations of painted figures. Like Pyrrhus' pause, Lucrece's ekphrastic reading of the image is Shakespeare's innovation.[101] The moment is

[100] In Katharine Eisaman Maus' words, which might equally apply to *Hamlet* or *Macbeth,* "Shakespeare's poem is essentially an account, punctuated by terrible violence, of two people making important decisions" in "Taking Tropes Seriously: Language and Violence in Shakespeare's *Rape of Lucrece*," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 37.1 (1986), 67.

[101] None of the Lucretia stories mention her looking at images of the Fall of Troy after her rape (see fn in Chapter 5 for more on Shakespeare's sources). Johnston cites Plutarch's *Life of Brutus* as one possible source for this ekphrastic moment, in the scene where Portia looks at a "painted table" of Andromache accompanying Hector as he went

one of mutual infusion: she brings narrative to the unmoving, frozen images, and they give her an image of grief and, ultimately, vengeance:

> Here feelingly she weeps Troy's painted woes:
> For sorrow, like a heavy-hanging bell,
> Once set on ringing, with his own weight goes;
> Then little strength rings out the doleful knell:
> *So Lucrece, set a-work, sad tales doth tell*
> To pencill'd pensiveness and colour'd sorrow.
> *She lends them words, and she their looks doth borrow* (1492-1498).[102]

In part, Shakespeare turns to paintings and stories of "painted tyrants" as a dramatist and narrative poet, in order to demonstrate competitively the superiority of his aesthetic. Narratives beat out images. Yet, ultimately, even these works offer more complex relationships between artistic media. Lucrece feels momentarily unburdened through her encounter with the painting – "By deep surmise of others' detriment, / [she] Los[es] her woes in shows of discontent" (1579-180) – and indeed offers a humanizing pity to their represented figures by giving them the very voices they lack. Yet, she also crafts her grief into a narrative form from these images of pain and destruction. Like the conversions in *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* of grief into the anger of revenge, she can convert some of the energies of her loss in looking at Hecuba's misery – "On this [Hecuba's] sad shadow Lucrece spends her eyes, / And shapes her sorrow to the beldame's woes" (1457-1458) – much like her husband and father will use the tokens of her suicide as spurs to vengeance, transforming their private grief into public justice. She will eventually become a static image of her woe – a "bleeding body" that will "publish Tarquin's foul offence" (1851; 1852) – that will move others to dramatic action.

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to battle. Portia was also departing from her husband, Brutus, and, seeing the image, "likening herself to be in the same case, she fell a-weeping" (cited in Jonston, 23).

[102] All citations from "Rape of Lucrece" taken from *Norton Shakespeare*, 635-682.

Hamlet, too, seems briefly freed from the horrible corruption of enseamèd beds and putrefying poisons when he encounters the painted tyrants and mobbled queens of the stately dramatic speeches at court. Like Lucrece, he can compare his miseries to Hecuba's – his story is worse – and lament his own story's lack of representation – no one gets to know just how miserably corrupt Denmark is. The stories ease – and shape – his burdens. The world is no less full of corruption; yet, Hamlet now has a model for vengeance and representation. Unlike Pyrrhus, transforming through the vile conversions of cruelty, Hamlet eventually sees himself as performing both for and along with the imagined – and possibly unreal –audiences. He returns from England understanding himself to play some role according to an unknown divine script: "There's a divinity that shapes our ends, / Rough-hew them how we will –" (5.2.10-11). Almost more importantly for Hamlet are the other audiences to his story of revenge: like Hecuba, he hopes others will hear his story, that the "silence" so forced on him throughout the play will lift, and "in this harsh world" his story will sound out.

Indeed, Horatio ends the play by gesturing towards a future, undisclosed space, where stories are retold and even "performed" again – "But let this same be presently performed, / Even whiles men's minds are wild, lest more mischance / On plot and errors happen" (337-339). The performance of Hamlet's story provides closure and political support for the new guard brought in with Fortinbras; yet it also promises something more healing. The overwhelming stagnation of the air in Elsinore only lifts and softly moves again through the breath of the actor and through the promise of future audiences who will witness this representation of the past. It is not a very optimistic account of our capacity to change an enveloping and crushing atmosphere. That is, there is no present

escape from pestilent congregations of vapors when facing the devastation of the plague or the total control of Hamlet. Without a pastoral zone of mythic transformation in sight, the dream of future congregations in the theater offers some small consolation to those stifled by plague, revenge, tyranny, and time.

Chapter 3
"To whom the justice of revenge belongs": The Order of Divine Revenge in Cyril Tourneur's *The Atheist's Tragedy*

A power above Nature?
Doubt you that, my Lord? (5.1.104-105)[1]

In what is arguably the strangest revenge play of the period, the ghost of a murdered father comes not as a Senecan vapor or a sulphurous blast from below, but as a booming voice from heaven, one that emphatically rejects rather than commands revenge. *The Atheist's Tragedy, or The Honest Man's Revenge* (published 1611) presents a different narrative of ghostly commands, and purifies the undead spirit from the smells and seeds of poisonous substances in the process. Penned by the largely obscure playwright Cyril Tourneur, the play has been read as a "propaganda" piece of Calvinist ideology and Jacobean politics.[2] Complete with "priggish" protagonists and exaggerated villains, Tourneur's tragedy comes from a supposedly "narrow mind, capable [of]... limited range."[3]

Tourneur's narrowness creates a world very different from that of *Hamlet*, which is described as aesthetically expansive and excessive. The differences between two play's ghostly commands – revenge my foul murder and leave revenge to the King of

[1] All citations taken from Cyril Tourneur, "The Atheist's Tragedy," *Four Revenge Tragedies*, Eds. Katharine Eisaman Maus, Michael Cordner, Peter Holland, and Martin Wiggins (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

[2] In Fredson Bowers assessment, Tourneur "was a reformer and moralists and …. was writing a propaganda tragedy with a religious hero and a higher moral to compete with the traditional amoral revenge play with its anomalous revenger," *Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy, 1587-1642* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1940) 143.

[3] T.S. Eliot, "Cyril Tourneur" in *Selected Essays: 1917-1932* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2014) 161.

Kings – partly creates the antithetical aesthetics of the plays. As we explored in the last chapter, Shakespeare dramatizes the process of transformation in revenge, which is why the play is seen – and sees itself – as taking too long, or as being too crammed with words and disruptions. Revenge in *Hamlet* warps and shapes the energies of grief into the "painted" structure of revenging tyrants. Its conversions connect it with the play's other pestilent forces, all of which are transformed by their putrefying corruptions. Yet, rather than present a completed image of the revenger, Shakespeare shows the process of Hamlet's conversion into a revenger. Like Lucrece, Hamlet reads – and interprets – narratives of vengeance.

In *The Atheist's Tragedy* revenge also follows a narrative. Only, this play does not feature meta-theatrical spectacles of revenge stories and a proliferation of revengers within the storyline. Instead, the narrative that guides revenge is secretive. Revenge follows the divine script of God rather than the plots and stratagems of human agents. The decision to make God a revenger seems related to the radical charge of revenge in plays like *Hamlet*. This charge arises from the central paradox of revenge, as explored in *Hamlet*: that is, revenge is incredibly confining and singular in the way its transplants grief into its "painted" images of violence; yet it also threatens to have "no bounds" in its destructions. The odd union of order and disorder, convention and subversion, relentlessly finds its way into revenge plays.[4] Revengers often face a dilemma: they must destroy a social boundary to cure it of corruption. In these cases, they find themselves "caught in a double bind," both "an avatar and enemy of social order."[5] Like

[4] See pp. 18-23 in Introduction.

the pestilence, revenge seemed unnervingly leveling in its executions. In its very reinstatement of the social systems in place, revenge threatened to raze all boundaries of social distinctions and hierarchy.

Different systems of order emerge spectacularly in *The Atheist's Tragedy* at the ghost's appearance, as a way to preserve the structures of each zone, natural and supernatural. That is, to prevent the inevitable destruction of human retribution, Tourneur replaces the stage revenger with God himself. In fact, Tourneur so insistently and uniquely stages the ghost's rejection of revenge that his play has been called an "anti-revenge revenge play."[6] During the scene, the ghost of Montferrers appears before his sleeping son, Charlemont, to reveal that the aptly named D'Amville, Montferrer's own brother, has murdered him and disinherited Charlemont. Yet, Montferrers insists upon Charlemont's "patience" and avoidance of revenge. Revenge can only follow a divine script:

> Return to France, for thy old father's dead,
> And thou by murder disinherited.
> Attend with patience the success of things,
> But leave revenge unto the King of kings (2.6.20-24).

Lest we forget this command, even with its memorable heroic couplets, the Ghost returns yet again during the play to remind Charlemont that revenge does not belong to man, but to God: "Let Him revenge my murder and thy wrongs / To whom the justice of revenge belongs" (3.2.32-34). At this point, Charlemont is about to kill D'Amville's tempestuous

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[5] Katharine Eisaman Maus, "Introduction," *Four Revenge Tragedies* Eds. Katharine Eisaman Maus, Michael Cordner, Peter Holland, and Martin Wiggins (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995) xiii.

[6] Bowers considers *The Atheist's Tragedy* to be one of a few notable experiments with the "Kydian"/Hamlet formula that predates the anti-revenge revenge plays of the so-called third period of revenge plays, best embodied in Middleton's play. For more on Bowers' historiography, see Chapter 1, pp. 58-60.

son, Sebastian, in the heat of his rage. Yet the ghost – described throughout as a quite bodiless spirit – prevents what would be the result of too much "passion" and "blood." Charlemont breaks away, exclaiming that he is tortured "between the passion of / My blood and the religion of my soul" (3.2.34-35). Blood and soul apparently follow different prerogatives in this play of heavenly revenge.

Montferrers reminds his audience of St. Paul's letter to the Romans, when Paul warns the readers of his epistle to "avenge not yourselves, but give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine: I will repay, saith the Lord" (Romans 12:19).[7] Throughout the play, disease and retribution are indeed understood as springing from heavenly forces rather than from earthly origins. D'Amville goes to a lot of trouble to disinherit his nephew, murder his brother, and marry his son to a wealthy baron's daughter, all to build the "foundation" of his house for eternity.[8] Since he does not believing in God or the afterlife, the succession of his family is of paramount importance for D'Amville. D'Amville's retribution thus does not come through the arm of Charlemont, but through some secret, heavenly design. His spirited son, Sebastian, is killed after cuckolding a Baron; his sickly son, Rousard, dies from a "gen'rall weakness" that Rousard himself understands to be part of some hidden "punishment":

> A gen'ral weakness did surprise my health
> The very day I married Castabella,
> As if my sickness were a punishment

[7] See John Kerrigan, *Revenge Tragedy: Aeschylus to Armageddon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), Chapter 1 for a rich analysis of retributive justice in the Judeo-Christian tradition and for a discussion of how this Christian verse, often cited as a rejoinder to the *lex talionis* of the Hebrew Scriptures (as seen in Numbers 35:19 and Deuteronomy 32:35), actually places retributive justice at the center of the religious order, rather than reject revenge.

[8] For more on the central metaphors of buildings, see pp. 164-165.

> That did arrest me for some injury
> I then committed (3.4.63-66).

Rousard's death seems particularly ruthless to a modern reader. Neither he nor Sebastian had anything to do with their father's treacherous murders and plots. Their deaths are more instrumental than anything else; that is, while Rousard's sickness might seem to him to be "a punishment" "for some injury / I then committed", it is more obviously a way for the universe to punish D'Amville.

D'Amville's death at least unites divine providence with poetic justice a bit more easily. Having leaped up to the scaffold to strike off the heads of Charlemont and Castabella – for crimes he knows they did not commit – D'Amville accidentally knocks out his own brains. The court celebrates. God's hand is apparent in the shocking plot twist – "Only to Heav'n I attribute the work" (5.2.273) – and the pair of star-crossed lovers prepare for their nuptials over the bleeding corpse of D'Amville and the caskets of his sons.

Critics relate the play's divine revenge to Tourneur's own moral code, one often deemed didactic, crude, and simplistic.[9] Additionally, the sense of totalizing order and orthodoxy in *The Atheist's Tragedy* is often called upon as a way to distance Tourneur from *The Revenger's Tragedy*, a play attributed first to Tourneur but now considered by many to be part of Thomas Middleton's collected works, based on the play's internal evidence.[10] *The Atheist's Tragedy* seems to be the perfect straw-man for *The Revenger's*

[9] For instance see Robert Ornstein, *The Moral Vision of Jacobean Tragedy* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1960) 117-120 for an overview of the "moralizing spirit" and "heavy-handed" morality of the play.

[10] *The Revenger's Tragedy* was first attributed to Cyril Tourneur in 1656, forty-nine years after its first anonymous publication. Tourneur was generally accepted as the author, yet

Tragedy: it is the conventional versus the subversive, "immature" verse versus the "fiery jet" of "molten verse,"[11] and the "absolute power" of a God-controlled universe versus the amoral vacuum of human performances and play.[12] *The Atheist's Tragedy,* defined as theodicy and a "dogmatic celebration" of order, is thus understood as primarily a play that upholds religious structures.[13] Revenge, rather than breaking boundaries, affirms them, since it is pawned off onto a heavenly force.

Yet as much as the play hammers home the message of man's patience and God's promise of revenge, the issues may not be so cut-and-dry. God does not use his traditional weapon to murder D'Amville, the bolt of lightning used in a variety of plays during the period.[14] Moreover, characters present wildly different interpretations

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a pro-Middleton campaign began in the mid-twentieth century based solely on internal evidence on Middleton-like contractions. See the introduction to *The Revenger's Tragedy*, Intro. and Ed. C.R.A. Foakes (New York: Palgrave, 1996). Gary Taylor, an avowed Middletonian, considers the play so definitively Middletonian that he includes it in his newly published collected works of Middleton; MacDonald P. Jackson's introduction in this volume rather disingenuously suggests that the matter is fully solved, claiming that "criticism has been bedeviled by the wholly unreliable Edward Archer's mistaken ascription, fifty years later, of Middleton's play to Cyril Tourneur," in *Thomas Middleton: The Collected Works* Ed. Gary Taylor and John Lavagnino, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007) 546.

[11] The line on "molten verse" belongs to Swinburne, and is cited by R.A. Foakes "On the Authorship of 'The Revenger's Tragedy,'" *The Modern Language Review* 48.2 (1953), 130.

[12] The "salvag[ing]" of "absolute power" in this play is described by Katherine Eisamann Maus in *Four*, xxix.

[13] The lines come from R.J. Kauffmann, "Tragedy and the Psalmist: Tourneur's 'Atheist's Tragedy,'" *Comparative Drama* 3.4 (1969-1970): 241-269, 250. As will become apparent later, Kauffmann does not argue that the play is a "water-tight … refutation of total atheism" (250) as he finds within the play discrepancies and covert sympathies with villainous characters.

throughout the play of the natural signals surrounding them, and, as scholars have begun to point out, no interpretation is ultimately given total assurance of being correct.[15] Of course, things do turn out quite well for Charlemont and Castabella in the end, and D'Amville – and his entire intermediate family – are wiped out in the process. Yet the subtleties of this supposedly straight-forward narrative of God's revenge remain difficult to answer. How directly is God interacting with the natural world? One wonders in what capacity he takes vengeance, and why some crimes stir his action, and others do not. Even the ever-chaste Castabella questions God's absence, as D'Amville threatens to rape her in a cemetery, "O patient Heav'n! Why dost thou not express / Thy wrath in thunderbolts to tear the frame / Of man in pieces?" (4.3.162-164).

In fact, God's peculiar method of influencing nature was a commonly discussed issue during the period, especially as his omnipotent power related to contagious disease. A variety of opinions emerged on the spiritual causes and cures for the pestilence, the disease described by many as being God's "revenge" on a sinful community. Outbreaks of the pestilence were in fact understood as emerging from both physical and moral poisons. Over the course of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, as we will see, the interactions of supernatural and natural causes would be debated with such an intensity that certain individuals, falling too much on one side of the equation, would be imprisoned for preaching the wrong message. Through his un-revenging revenge play, where heaven is granted the "justice of revenge," Tourneur radically explores the cultural

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[14] For instance, in Philip Massinger's *The Unnatural Combat*.

[15] See Huston Diehl, "'Reduce Thy Understanding to Thine Eye': Seeing and Interpreting in *The Atheist's Tragedy*," *Studies in Philology*, 78.1 (1981): 47-60. Also see pp. 145-151 of this Chapter for more on the indeterminacy of meaning in the play.

fault-lines under vigorous – and careful – consideration during the period. Above all, in defining disease and punishment as being part of God's "justice of revenge," Tourneur exposes how narratives of spiritual revenge might, surprisingly, bring terrestrial causes more into focus. That is, narratives that equate disease to God's vengeance often do so to uphold the very earthly and legal structures of order that are threatened by the disease-figures of disorder and social fracture.

"A cause not natural, but supernaturall" : England's Special Services

To start, religious and natural causes often went hand-in-hand in explaining the outbreak of plague in the era. "The justice of revenge" was not just a convenient stage device used to settle the score for would-be revengers. Divine vengeance was understood as issuing through the plagues that killed many of England's inhabitants, suddenly and dramatically. According to Henry Holland, a London clergyman and the vicar of St. Bridge, the pestilence that hit London in 1592-1594 was not just the result of earthly putrefaction, but was, most critically, God's speedy revenge against a sinful city:

> *The Plague then in these times is the sword of reuenge*, drawne foorth against all nations, when the Lorde sendeth it for the contempt of the Gospell of Iesus Christ, and to proclaime vnto men, that if the execution of this iudgement cannot preuaile against their securitie: *the Lord himselfe commeth speedily to the generall iudgement*, to sweepe away all sinners from the face of the earth, and to cast them into a place of torments…[16] [emphasis mine]

Of course, Holland was not the first to align epidemic disease with a heavenly vengeance executed by the "Lord himself": literature abounds with references of divine punishment

[16] Henry Holland, *Spirituall preseruatiues against the pestilence…* (London : Printed by T. C[reede] for Iohn Browne and Roger Iackson, 1603), 44-45. Throughout the text, he insists that the plague is God's revenge, not just his punishment. In his words: "He hath put vs in minde of our disobedience often by the pestilence, which is one speciall reuenger of his couenant," 3.

and communal disease.[17] Additionally, nearly every plague text of the era referred to the spiritual dimension of the disease.[18] The plague required both physical and spiritual remedies. Indeed, *all* health was understood to relate to both attributes. The idea that we ought to attend only to "medical" tracts, as if they separate easily from "religious" accounts, is a modern, not an early modern, approach to science and disease.[19] William Bullein, one of the major English medical writers of the period, voices the spiritual cause of disease in his *Dialogue* through Theologus, who speaks of God's wrath during "plague, pestilence, and famine" that comes "in time of vengeaunce…[to] destroy us."[20] Bullein grants both the physician and the preacher mutual roles in helping those sick with deadly diseases. Even he, writing largely from a "medical" perspective, ends his *Dialogue* with the final injunction against sin: "the cause of our plagues … is our abominable liuing, in sinning against God."[21]

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[17] For instance, the *Iliad* begins with an account of Apollo's punishing disease inflicted upon the Greek camps. The unknown incest of *Oedipus Turannis* likewise results in a communal plague that infects the whole community. For more on divinity and punishment in Greek concepts of "pollution," see Robert Parker, *Miasma: Pollution and Purification in Early Greek Religion* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983).

[18] See pp. 153-159 for more on the divine causes of the plague.

[19] For a good overview of the crucial place of religion in early modern English medicine, see Chapter 1 in Andrew Wear, *Knowledge and Practice in English Medicine, 1550-1680* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). Here, as elsewhere, the secular and religious are not as isolated as we might assume.

[20] William Bullein, *A dialogue bothe pleasaunte and pietifull …* (Imprinted at London: By Iohn Kingston, 1564) 102.

[21] Ibid. 97.

Political authorities regulated both aspects of life during plague outbreaks. Orders were established early in Elizabeth's reign to maintain community structures during pestilence epidemics, and at the same time to provide networks to support the clean-up of physical contaminants. Much critical attention has been directed at these rules and the first public works system, as governing authorities tried to contain the plague through the establishment of quarantine, the labeling of infected houses and people, the cleaning of refuse, the schedule of public bonfires, and so on, during times of pestilence.[22] These rules and recommended treatments were reused with few changes throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries whenever the number of plague deaths seemed to approach epidemic levels. In general, the "Orders," which were reprinted with virtually no changes for two hundred years, gave power to local magistrates to collect taxes and establish a system of governance during outbreaks of the disease.[23] One of the more controversial regulations was quarantine, the fifth item on the list, where a house is to be "closed vp" if any person in said household gets sick or dies of the plague for "viz. sixe weekes."[24] Blue or red crosses designated the homes of the infected, along with a

[22] For more on these regulations, which were first started in 1578 during Elizabeth's reign, see Wear, *Knowledge.*

[23] Magistrates put into place regulations on the burial of bodies in a designated plague pit, the weekly bills of mortality, and "searchers" to determine the cause of death, among other actions.

[24] Quarantine remained controversial into the eighteenth century, although it was generally accepted as being effective at controlling the spread of contagion. Daniel Defoe's fictional account of the 1665 plague sums up the tension succinctly. On the one hand, "It is doubtful to this day, whether in the whole it [shutting in] contributed anything to the stop of the Infection"; yet, on the other hand, quarantine prevents the "insensible" spread "by such Persons as were not visibly infected, who neither knew who they

sign that read, hauntingly, "Lord have mercy upon us." Keeping people inside houses of infection seemed cruel to some, and seems to have been challenging. Two or three guards watched over the infected households of disobeying individuals who threatened to break out of their confined boundaries. The fear of spreading contagion – and of the invisibility of infection – underlies much of the anxious "mark[s]" referred to in the orders. If people from an infected house go abroad, or if someone delivers goods to the infected, they must be designated by some kind of mark on their clothes, and "bear a white rod in their hand, to the end others may auoide their company."[25]

All of the painted crosses, signs, white rods, and closed-up homes reflected more than the fear of physical spread. After all, the very sign of quarantine was itself a prayer – Lord have mercy upon us – and the slathered-on crosses added a religious element to the rituals of healing in the infected community. The plaguy bills of mortalities, set up to give a weekly number of plague deaths by location, also spoke to the heavenly causes, adorned as they were with images of a smiting God and communal prayer for repentance (Figure 5). Both earthly and heavenly forces attack the walled London in Figure 5. A skeleton championing the arrow of death and the hourglass of time rises from the mound of dirt, as one of the rotting corpses on the grounds outside of the walled city. Meantime, an angel of death, surrounded by a blackened cloud of infection, brandishes a sword and whip overhead. The flurry of activity outside the infected city, carts hurrying to and fro,

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infected, or who they were infected by," *A Journal of the Plague Year*, Intro. and Ed. David Roberts (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990) 158.

[25] England and Wales. Sovereign (James I), *Orders thought meet by His Majesty and his Privy Council, to be executed ... in such ... places as are ... infected with the plague* (Imprinted at London : By Robert Barker ..., 1603).

corpses and filth carted away from the center, speaks to the physical measures in place. The bills were one of the items of the Orders listed above, designed largely to maintain a structure of governance amidst the flight of governing officials, perhaps represented by the commotion of people outside the walled city. The hygienic measures in play, on a physical level, of course spoke to the shared medical belief in the dangers of putrefaction and other corruptions: refuse-filled channels in the streets, slaughterhouses, and bad smells lingering in the air, to name a few of the major culprits.[26] Yet, these physical measures and corruptions do not exist outside of the moral forces at work, those visitors from below and above. The religious frame – the communal prayer for repentance – contains the physical orders in play. Without any intercessors, like those plague-saints conjured on the Catholic continent, English inhabitants faced the swords of God, angels, and Death alone, with only their petitions and prayers to stay the angry hand of God.[27]

Authorities also addressed spiritual corruptions specifically, issuing a system of religious services and practices to be used during times of plague. Once the pestilence death toll hit a high enough number, specific plague-time liturgies replaced the regular church schedule.[28] They were one of the special services used during times of upheaval that responded to on-going major event, like important births and deaths, dearths, disease

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[26] See Chapter 7 in Andrew Wear, *Knowledge.*

[27] For a good overview of the plague saints and continental practices, as compared with England's Protestant emphasis on the text during the plague, see Chapter 2 in Ernest B. Gilman, *Plague Writing in Early Modern England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

[28] For an excellent history of England's special services in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, see Natalie Mears, "Special nationwide worship and the Book of Common Prayer in England, Wales, and Ireland, 1533-1642," *Worship and the Parish Church in*

Figure 5. Lord Have Mercy Upon Us. Anonymous, London (1636).

outbreaks, and so on. These special services were commonly ordered across parishes to "provide a more extensive and more structured program of activities" that would either set up fasts and extra prayers during catastrophic events like famine, war, bad weather, and disease, or promote days of thanksgiving for events like the ending of epidemics, royal births, or military victories.[29] As early as 1563, William Cecil edited a form of plague-specific religious special services to be applied uniformly across the 9,000 parishes of England and Wales.[30] These special services usually set up a public fast on Wednesdays while altering the regular schedule of church services during the week. Despite the great fear of crowds during pestilence outbreaks, attendance at these services

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Early Modern Britain, Eds. Natalie Mears and Alec Ryrie (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013) 31-72. These services arose from what had been traditionally "occasional prayers."

[29] Ibid., 45.

[30] The first liturgy created for the plague appeared in 1563, and was reused virtually unchanged for many major epidemics. This liturgy was written between July 23-30, edited by Burghley, printed in a couple days, and brought to parish of St Mary Woolchurch on August 3. Ibid., 42.

was recommended for Sundays, Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays.[31] Moreover, priests urged people to attend both morning and evening services on these days of extra-ordinary worship.

The structure of the services was straight-forward: a call to service, two readings from the Old and New Testament, call-and-response pestilence prayers, a homily, communion on non-fast days, and a final prayer urging parishioners to follow the governmental orders. The readings and prayers drew from Biblical passages deemed relevant to the outbreak of disease, and were recited according to a set schedule.[32] Like the list of readings, priests followed a schedule of pre-packaged homilies, alternating between a new plague-specific exhortation and homilies of pestilence, repentance, fasting, and prayer. Rather than improvise, or speak from the heart, they were advised not to stray in particular from the pestilence sermon. Uniformity was urged.

The extra-services were clearly far from a minor or limited influence during times of plague. The average church-attending, un-infected Londoner would hear the same set of pestilence verses, prayers, and seven homilies over and over again until the plague had

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[31] For more on crowds and the pestilence, see Chapter 2, pp. 79-82.

[32] The Biblical texts most often read during times of plague told the following Biblical stories: God punishing the disobeying chosen through the pest (Leviticus 26, Numbers 14, Numbers 16, Deuteronomy 28, Psalm 38, Psalm 106) God punishing the damned through the pest (Exodus 5:2-7), God protecting faithful from the pest (Proverbs 22, Psalm 91, 1 Kings 8), and God punishing a society for its leader's wrongs or their communal wrongs (2 Samuel 24). The latter story from 2 Samuel 24 was the most popular, while Psalm 91 triggered the most controversy in its insistence on the total protectiveness of faith ("A thousand shall fall at thy side, and ten thousand at thy right hand; but it shall not come nigh thee"). Proverbs 22 was often cited by those who endorsed flight from the plague and 2 Kings 20 (also Isaiah 38) was used to promote the use of physical medicine.

finally abated, for as long as 78 weeks in some cases.[33] Like Holland's metaphor cited earlier, the homilies found the on-going disease to be the "sworde … of God" that might be stayed through these communal prayers and fasts. Similarly, these special service homilies emphasized that the most important cause of the plague was supernatural, not natural. Divine interpretation trumped those interpretations of the "Philosopher and Phisition":

> *But ouer & aboue these causes alledged*, the graue and weighty authoritie of the word of God must informe vs of an other cause, *a cause not natural, but supernaturall: namely, the wrath of God provoked and incensed* by the sinnes of any Nation or people, hath often brought in the pestilence… [emphasis mine][34]

What it might mean to be "ouer & aboue" natural causes was a matter of great debate. Did God respond in real time to sinfulness, or were his operations completely encapsulated in the mechanisms of nature? Additionally, one wonders how easily God's role of revenger was paired with his total perfection. When bombarded with such narratives of God as executing the victims of the pestilence – an angry god glowering over the legs and arms of the morally corrupt and innocent jumbled together in plague pits – one perhaps senses an unhappy overlap between God and his demonic other.

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[33] Mears outlines the following services: the 1563 plague services seemed in operation thrice a week for about 28 weeks; the 1593 plague weekly for an unknown duration; the 1596 plague twice a week services for an unknown duration; the 1603 plague three times a week for up to 78 weeks; the 1625 and 1626 plague once a week for unknown durations; the 1636 plague once a week for approximately 12 weeks; the 1640 plague one day of fasting. I haven't noted here the added liturgies of thanksgiving that came at the end of a pestilence outbreak, which typically only involved a one-time added prayer of gratitude for the end of the epidemic.

[34] Church of England, *Certaine prayers collected out of a forme of godly meditations, set forth by his Maiesties authoritie: and most necessary to be vsed at this time in the present visitation of Gods heauy hand for our manifold sinnes. Together with the order of a fast to be kept euery Wednesday during the said visitation*, ([London] : Imprinted at London by Robert Barker, printer to the Kings most excellent Maiestie., Anno 1603) 21.

Of course, this discomfort may be anachronistic. Religious tracts from Tourneur's period suggest at least the popularity of this collusion in popular literature. Many of these texts even go as far as to identify specific devils and "evil angels" that God uses in the pestilence. Holland gives the Hebrew names "Keteb" and "Deber" to the angels who "poyson the ayre with pesti|lent and venimous exhalations."[35] God uses "evil angels," "devils," "Sathans angels," and "Sathan" himself to take revenge on the blasphemous city.[36] The period might not have been uneasy about the collusion between God and evil forces, if said forces play into the larger, just plan.

We seem to have reached a crossroads, either interpreting the special services too much from our own cultural moment or, conversely, assuming too much of a passive acceptance of the ideologies found within the religious texts. It might help to consider another aspect of these services to move forward. The plague liturgies in question were necessarily interactive and theatrical. This was a script, shared between congregation and priest, that made visible the hidden script of God's interaction with the world. What these exchanges meant on a larger cultural level continues to elicit disagreement: whether they are "'strategies of persuasion' to shore up Tudor authority" that "anaesthetize subjects," or, more positively, structures that allow "active participation in assuaging

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[35] Holland, *Spiritual,* 74-5. The names are the Hebrew words for "pestilence" used in the Bible. Henoch Clapham makes much of the distinction between "pestilence" and "plague," the one being contagious the other not; he links the word histories to their differing disease categories, "pestilence" coming from the Greek "loimos" and the "plague" from Hebrew "Deber," or "blow." For an excellent summary of Clapham's etymologies, see Gilman, *Plague Writing*.

[36] Ibid., 61, 66, and 67.

God's wrath."[37] With both possibilities on the table, we find the special services to be remarkably ambivalent performances that were believed to have real medical power.

As such a dramatic form, the special services, with their narrative of divine retribution, repentance, and thanksgiving, related to the theater's narratives of revenge. The growing stage tradition of revenge – its ghosts, villains, and poisonous plots – did not simply speak to itself, but also informed – and was informed by – what people thought about off-stage revenges, both earthly and divine. As we have explored throughout this dissertation, stage revenge simultaneously suggested convention and subversion. The ambivalence of "revenge" on the early modern stage at least suggests that heavenly revenge might not be taken as easily as dogmatic authorities would have us believe.[38] As in the case of Tourneur's odd play, we wonder if church performances of God's wrath risked aligning God with some of the more ethically unsound stage revengers and villains.

Is Thy Omnipotence less free?

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[37] Natalie Mears' in depth account of these services eschews what she labels as the New Historicist account. She cites in particular John Cooper and Steve Hindle as offering New Historicist accounts of the politically propagandistic purposes behind the special services, in "'Oh Lorde save the kyng': Tudor royal propaganda and the power of prayer" in *Authority and Consent in Tudor England,* Eds. G.W. Bernard and S.J. Gunn (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2002) and "Dearth, fasting and alms: the campaign for general hospitality in late Elizabethan England" *Past and Present* 172 (2001): 44-86, respectively.

[38] See Ronald Broude, "Revenge and Revenge Tragedy in Renaissance England," *Renaissance Quarterly,* 28.1 (1975): 38-58 for a good overview of the different connotations of "revenge" in Early Modern England, which was not necessarily aligned with "extra-legal" retaliation as it is today.

Even Tourneur's seemingly "propagandistic" play of God's divine revenge voices uneasiness with the notion that God needs any "ill" at all to bring about justice. Castabella, the would-be wife of Charlemont, puts into question God's infinite goodness just as she asserts his necessary separation from "ill" things in the world. At this point in the play, she has much to worry about. Her father-in-law D'Amville tries to convince her to sleep with him, and she seems to have no means of escape, whether natural or supernatural. D'Amville argues that nature knows no restraints in sexuality, as other creatures commit incest freely. Castabella responds to D'Amville's notions of freedom and restraint, radically blurring their boundaries. Her definition of free action excludes certain actions that are morally corrupt. While D'Amville sees incest as "natural," she insists that it is so unnatural that its restraints are not actually restraining. How she conveys this sentiment, however, puts into question the obsessive theme of the play – "Leave Revenge unto the King of Kings." She counters D'Amville's claims of natural freedom by asking, rhetorically, whether God is less omnipotent because he cannot do any "ill":

> O God!
> Is Thy unlimited and infinite
> Omnipotence less free because Thou dost
> No ill? (4.2.131-134)

The answer, of course, is supposed to be "no": he is not less free, and his perfection comes from his consonance with all things purely good. Yet, these lines unsettle the simple formula endlessly presented throughout the play. God does "ill" both to free Charlemont from the burden of action and violence and to unfold his providential plan that is inherently retributive in nature. Charlemont sees God behind D'Amville's fatal accident, and Rousard understands his sickness to be some kind of divine "punishment."

Yet, in determining that God cannot do "ill," Castabella departs from these explanations of the accidents and illnesses throughout the play.[39] If God literally makes people ill in order to execute his revenge, would it not be hard to argue that he "does no ill"?

Yet, the play does not clearly answer whether or not God *does* directly do ill. Does he make Rousard sick? Is he the force behind D'Amville's self-destruction? Explanations are maddeningly opaque. In the scene cited above, Castabella wretchedly cries out for God's smiting thunder and lightning to save her. While this does not happen, Charlemont manages to jump out and scare away D'Amville at the right moment. He describes himself as being of "use" for Heaven's greater plan, much like Hamlet famously compares himself to the "minister and scourge" of God. Yet, even he never clearly aligns himself as an "instrument" of God: indeed, D'Amville and Borachio continually speak of themselves as instruments, and as using instruments, to succeed in their plots. Perhaps the strangest attribute of this play is that, for all its static insistence on the morals of Divine retribution ("Patience is the honest man's revenge"), it remains ambiguous about the meaning of all the action. Indeed, some have argued that the play dramatizes interpretation rather than dogma.[40] Characters voice a staggering variety of opinions on the play's natural signs, locations, and events.

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[39] Indeed, the word "ill" meant both morally unsound and unhealthy in the sixteenth century. While the first, moral sense is less common today, "ill" was derived as a shorthand for "evil" in the twelfth century. The word conflates unsoundness of body with wickedness, as "an ill" is both an evil act and a sickness. "ill, adj. and n." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, March 2014. Web. 16 March 2014.

[40] According to Huston Diehl, this is a play that dramatizes more than any other homiletic texts the multiple ways men can misinterpret "hieroglyphs of God's higher, moral universe," "'Reduce Thy,'" 48.

Of course, the "naturalist" and atheist, D'Amville, offers the most blatantly wrong accounts of events within the play.[41] Tourneur more obviously distances D'Amville's interpretations from his spectators. Tourneur's naturalists constantly offer dim-witted, physical explanations for events that have obvious supernatural meanings. This is done through parody, through the bathetic reduction of epic signals of God's anger and punishment into pseudo-Galenic physician speak. For instance, as D'Amville plots with his side-kick Borachio to murder his brother, thunder and lightning interrupt their discussion. The timing could not be more obvious to the audience. D'Amville has just spoken about the "Supreme of the stars," a divine force said to power all astral influences. He notably refuses to ascribe this ruling force to the Christian God, who would of course be identified as the "Supreme" ruler to the indoctrinated playgoer. Blasphemously, D'Amville compares himself to the ultimate astral power. His secret arrangements have led others to participate unknowingly in the murder of Montferrers; so D'Amville's "operations," not God's, are the mysterious energy that compels all who surround him to act according to his plan:

> That power of rule philosophers ascribe
> To him they call the supreme of the stars,
> Making their influences governors
> Of sublunary creatures, when their selves
> Are senseless of their operations –
> [*Thunder and lightning*]
> What!
> Dost start at thunder? Credit my belief;
> 'Tis a mere effect of Nature,
> An exhalation hot and dry, involved
> Within a wat'ry vapour i'the middle
> Region of the air, whose coldness
> Congealing that thick moisture to a cloud,

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[41] For more on the myriad connections made in this period between "naturalism" and "atheism" see Robert Ornstein, "'The Atheist's Tragedy' and Renaissance Naturalism," *Studies in Philology* 51.2 (1954): 194-207.

> The angry exhalation shut within
> A prison of contrary quality
> Strives to be free (2.4.138-151).

D'Amville tries to limit the terrible flashes and rumblings of thunder and lightning to a "mere effect of nature," to motions issuing only from un-sensing objects, like those people who became accidental accessories to his crimes. Yet, even as he rejects divine causes, D'Amville finds the replacing elements and qualities – "exhalation[s] hot and dry," "wat'ry vapour[s]," and "Congealing" cold – to be equally invisible, and equally vital. They too feel emotions – the cooled "exhalation" is "angry … shut within / A prison" of coldness and so "Strives to be free," explosively erupting into lightning. It may be a "mere effect" of nature, but air and vapors act and express more than simply deadened, reactive motion. The only difference between the two systems of interpretation seem to be that D'Amville explains away this event as relating to the agencies of natural rather than divine things.

Moreover, Tourneur understands the natural more generally in the play as being surprisingly confining, despite its offer of freedom. From the very first lines of the play, D'Amville, the self-proclaimed follower of Nature with a capital "N," characterizes his goddess as limiting in her effects, as "Nature and her large philosophy" (1.1.4) produces the "selfsame course / Of revolution both in man and beast" (5-6). Accordingly, man becomes "A fool" and a "beast" (12) since his own nature is "Not full and free" (11). People do not wander around freely according to the zodiac of their own wit. Instead, unseen and misunderstood beast-like impulses dictate feeling and action. Tourneur presents this conflated form of atheism and naturalism as more fatalistic and determined than those plots that fall completely under the divine's guiding hand. Unlike the

terrifying sense of freedom found in other tragedies from these subversive, alternative spaces, where often violent, Iago-like characters create new realities out of their empty performances,[42] Tourneur's nature-following characters are imprisoned, both mentally and physically. Their own bodies subject them to physical needs and impulses, so much so that they cannot offer any reliable explanation for their own actions. Castabella's step-mother, to take one example, feels she can "Neither restrain … nor give reason" for her sexual desires for Sebastian (D'Amville's son), and she is so overwhelmed by her lust she recognizes that her actions are not "the free effect of mine own / voluntary love" (4.5.17-18). Reduced to their affections, these "nature" worshippers cannot transcend the imprisoning whims of the flesh.

The play focuses much energy on stressing the comparative freedom of its religious, supernaturally-focused protagonists, who are apparently more free even with all of their ethical constraints. Their freedom of motion – of flight and, again, their actual physical leap up to the executioner's block – ostensibly represents the freedom of their spirit, even as they knowingly act as pawns in some unknown providential plot from above. Since Charlemont cannot act against D'Amville, we might expect that he would have no reason to try to flee from D'Amville's wicked plots: if he is completely assured that God will resolve all of this justly, there seems to be no need to actively fly from harm's way. Yet, Tourneur insists that Charlemont does not simply wait, patiently, for the promised outcome. That is, in order to be used properly in accordance with God's will, he must play along with the game. So, when he is imprisoned for attacking

[42] See pp. 176-178 at the end of this chapter for a more direct comparison between Shakespeare's Edmund and Tourneur's D'Amville.

Sebastian, he accepts his uncle's under-handed bail, refusing to "neglect the offer of one benefit" (). Similarly, after he mistakenly thinks he's killed Borachio in self-defense, he decides to flee rather than face the law's punishment, even though he thinks he deserves it:

> What shall I do? Accuse myself., submit
> Me to the law, and that will quickly end
> This violent increase of misery?
> But 'tis a murder to be accessory
> To mine own death. I will not. I will take
> This opportunity to 'scape. It may
> Be Heav'n reserves me to some better end (4.3.31-37).

Why his escape rather than his arrest is part of heaven's plan is a mystery; and of course this logic could technically support any random action Charlemont might like to take. In any event, the point here seems to be that Charlemont isn't confined by God's plot. He can move about however he likes, having faith that his decisions and literal motions fit into God's plan. In other words, Charlemont *ought* to flee, ought to take every means available to him to avoid his uncle, even if his uncle's nefarious plots themselves all fit into God's plan.

Yet, to us, Charlemont appears strangely active and inactive, as he flutters about within the confines of God's narrative. Moreover, his interpretations are no less problematic than those of the other characters. As we have seen, both Charlemont and Castabella present wildly different versions of God's capacity to take revenge. While Castabella speaks of God's inability to do wrong, Charlemont insists on God's necessary dramatic role in doing wrong (to do good). Moreover, Charlemont himself shockingly falls into the same conceptual traps as D'Amville. The paragon of virtue and faith interprets nature almost exactly like the damned atheist. When he first sees the ghost of his father, Charlemont rationalizes his appearance as a kind of hallucination, or "Some

bloody accident upon my mind, / Which mixed confusedly with other thoughts" (2.6.53-54). Montferrers has to come back a second time to spook Charlemont and his fellow officers into recognizing his reality. But the effect exposes, however subtly, a congruence between naturalist and faithful; and for all the hoopla about Charlemont's seeming "freedom," which is supposed to differentiate him from D'Amville and the other slaves to Nature, he remains boxed in by constraints too. On a cognitive level, Charlemont remains as much in the dark as the other nefarious plotters.

Even the genre of *The Atheist's Tragedy* showcases the ambiguous blending of good and bad forces together. The title, split into two parts – *The Atheist's Tragedy, or The Honest Man's Revenge* – exposes the paradoxes of at least these generic categories when all is mapped onto a larger-scale, providential narrative. That is to say, tragedy, the fall of the atheist, becomes comedy, the proper re-establishment of social order with the marriage of young people. In this case, Castabella and Charlemont begin their nuptial rites, in the courthouse no less, as D'Amville, a brainy mess, lies dead on the floor. Here, unlike Shakespeare's romances or other tragicomedies, it is not that the comic displaces the tragic, or occurs in spite of it, like the revitalizing rebirths and transformations that end *The Winter's Tale*. In this case, comedy is not just the marriage of the two young and faithful heroes, but is also the bleeding body of the atheist. His tragedy *is* the expression of a comic providence.

As such, one can see how the comic also becomes mixed with revenge, as this plot is itself identified as God's secret revenge plot. Yet another paradox is found in the title – *The Honest Man's Revenge* – as an honest man only gets revenge by refusing to take revenge. This is what vaguely creates the sense that Tourneur's play is an anti-

revenge revenge play, perhaps the dramatic version of John Reynolds's extremely popular prose series, *The Triumphs of God's Revenge against the crying and execrable Sinne of Murther* (1621), where God brutally suppresses human revenge, including even the mere desire to take revenge.[43] The play, shaped as a "dogmatic celebration" of the order of divine vengeance, awkwardly condemns revenge while enjoying its effects.

So, where is the divine in all of this? Tourneur's remote, obscure God hides behind the dazzling spectacle of natural signs and supernatural visitations, evading the gaze of his all-too-worldly followers. Despite his possibly polemic intentions, echoed through the "painfully obvious and labored moralism" of the play, Tourneur represents a damned atheist and faithful hero as being remarkably similar, all the while unsettling, ever so slightly, the dully-repeated moral of the story.[44]

"God rules the Starres": Divine and Astrological Causes of the Plague

The Atheist's Tragedy's muddled representation of God's status as a revenger reflects the bewildering array of opinions on the level of God's engagement with nature during the period. As we saw above, early modern English authorities developed a system of spiritual and physical plague measures that offered quite different interpretations of the plague's origins. Writers sometimes found the plague to be literally the hand of God. Bubo-speckled corpses were found with handprints blasting their now-deadened flesh, the print reflecting the very hand of an angry God, demon, or angel.[45] To

[43] For more on Reynolds, see Chapter 5, pp. 249-253.

[44] Ornstein, *Moral Vision*, 119.

[45] God's handprints are described in Holland, *Spiritual*; Andreas Osiander, *How and whither a Christen man ought to flye the horrible plage of the pestilence A sermon out of*

others, God only remotely caused the plague by virtue of his necessary engagement with all things physical. Historians have explored the many changes that occurred during this period on the supernatural causes of the plague. On the one hand, divine causes gradually replaced astrological causes in English plague tractates during the sixteenth century, indicating a possible increase in more direct accounts of God's wrath and vengeance as a cause of disease.[46] On the other hand, divine causes seemed to decline during the seventeenth century, supplanted by more mechanistic accounts of putrefaction.[47]

God's exact interaction with nature was thus certainly subject to disagreement and revision in the first decade of the seventeenth century, falling in between these two, broadly-defined cultural shifts. As evinced above, the site most often in contention involved astrological forces. The stars seemed to many writers to be a more obvious place where God might intervene. Physicians first turned to poisonous astral influences during the first outbreaks of the Bubonic Plague in the 14th century.[48] As the plague

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the Psalme. Qui habitat in adsutorio altissimi. By Andrewe Osiander. Translated out of hye Almayn in to Englishe, ([Printed in Southwarke : By me James Nicolson. for Jan Gough], 1537), reprinted anonymously in 1603; and Roger Fenton, *A perfume against the noysome [H]pestilence prescribed by Moses vnto Aaron. Num. 16. 46. Written by Roger Fenton, preacher of Grayes Inne* (Imprinted at London : By R. R[ead] for William Aspley, 1603).

[46] See George R. Keiser, "Two Medieval Plague Treatises and Their Afterlife in Early Modern England," *J Hist Med Allied Sci* (2003) 58.3: 292-324 for more on the infiltration of the divine into the plague tractate. He argues that we see the transition towards a more supernatural account of the plague in the increasing moralizing found in the section on the non-naturals.

[47] Wear, *Knowledge*.

[48] Especially the conjunction of Saturn, Jupiter and Mars before the 1348 outbreak.

tractate was developed and modified, a conventional list of causes emerged, including some combination of the following: communal sin, astrological events, local putrefactions and corruptions, and humoral constitutions. Additionally, the tractates note the contagious nature of the disease – that it might spread between people and objects – and that it might infect people with "open" pores and corrupted humoral dispositions.

Plague tractates, growing out of the medical *consilia* written for physicians, dispensed first- and second-hand information on the disease to a wider-group of individuals. [49] As a result, most were written in the vernacular. Writers followed Galen in dividing the texts into sections on the causes and signs, prevention, and remedies.[50] One might call the tractate a largely "medical" plague text. Generally speaking, early modern plague texts fell into one of three categories: medical, religious, or political. Each of the three texts followed different "scripts" in order to promote their various goals: health, spiritual welfare, and community order, respectively.[51] Yet, despite their various goals, there was considerable overlap between all three of the texts. The medically oriented plague tractates, in fact, most often began with religious lament, and writers moralized

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[49] See Lori Jones, *Exploring Concepts of Contagion and the Authority of Medical Treatises in 14th-16th Century England*, Dissertation, University of Ottawa (Ottawa: ProQuest/UMI, 2012) for a thorough analysis of four English plague tractates, and Wear *Knowledge* for a more exhaustive account of the various tractates in sixteenth and seventeenth century England.

[50] Ibid. 39-40.

[51] Colin Jones, "Plague and Its Metaphors in Early Modern France," *Representations,* 53 (1996): 97-127. Jones is writing about seventeenth century French texts, but we find the same general division in the English texts as well.

throughout the text about the plague's causes and treatments.[52] They drew upon the "religious" scripts of repentance and punishment, much as the religious scripts took the language of physical contamination and corruption. In Jones' assessment, "the representations of the disease [in the three scripts] are as contagious as the disease itself."[53] Writers not only looked to consolidate the three approaches to communal disease: they also looked to promote, competitively, their own approach. As such, some religious writers mocked the tractate structure to demonstrate the incredible narrowness of only-physically based interpretations.[54] And even within this competitive marketplace of ideas, some texts emerged that are impossible to classify perfectly, as they are written by medically trained religious figures and offer equal parts physical and spiritual advice.[55] Much like the plague orders described earlier in the Chapter, the plague texts offered approaches to disease that both spoke the language of the other "side" and contradicted it at a most basic level.

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[52] Moral causes often filtered into sections on the Galenic six non-naturals (included air, food and drink, sleeping and waking, motion and rest, excretions and retentions, and dreams and the passions of the soul) and on humoral corruptions. For instance, Stephen Hobbes argues that the "sediment" and "cruditie" of corrupted, putrefying humors of those who follow dissolute lifestyles provide a "fit subject" for the infected air, *A nevv treatise*… (London: Printed by Iohn Windet…, 1603), 3.

[53] Jones, "Plague," 112.

[54] For instance, John Hooper ends his *An Homelye* by mocking the typical language of Galenic contraries. See page 12 in his *An Homelye to be read in the tyme of pestylence],* (Imprinted at Worcester : By Ihon Oswen, prynter appointed by the Kinges Maiestie for the principalitie of Wales and marches of the same, [1553]).

[55] To take one example, Thomas Moulton's extremely popular *The mirrour* includes a plague treatise that is focused on the medical aspects of the disease. However, Moulton himself was a Dominican Friar, and his plague work was monumental in adding the religious dimension to plague tractates, according to Keiser, "Two Medical."

Not surprisingly, texts within each specific "script" were not uniform, especially as they approached the theoretical causes of the pestilence. While the historical narrative referenced above finds plague texts to, first, replace the stars with God during the sixteenth century, and, second, replace God with putrefying particles during the seventeenth century, all of these causes persisted throughout even the eighteenth century. Even with this variety and flexibility, though, it is worth comparing some of the earlier English tractates to some of the tractates that were published in response to the 1603 epidemic. The plague tractates of the first decade of the seventeenth century, when Tourneur's play was written and performed, were in fact a site of conflict and cultural change, especially in their unique accounts of the divine and astral origins of the disease. Here, we find that the broad-strokes historical narrative generally holds up, even granting the subtle variation offered by each particular plague text.[56] Starting with the early English tractates, we consider first the "litel book" on the pestilence, which was not only the first printed English plague tractate, but also the very first medical treatise published in England. Translated in 1485 in response to the outbreak of the sweating sickness in London, the tractate does not specifically mention astrological or divine causes.[57] Some

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[56] The English versions assign it to Bengt Knutsson or Knud Mikkelsen. For more on the English translation see Jones, *Exploring Concepts*. For more on Jacobi's original treatise, see John Aberth's *From the Brink of Apocalypse: Confronting Famine, War, Plague, and Death in the Late Middle Ages* (Psychology Press, 2001). John Jacobi, along with John of Tournamira, espoused a theory of the plague that highlighted its poisonous nature, though Jacobi focused on the "lower origins" of this "pestilential fever."

[57] See Wear, *Practice*, 299. The "Canutus" tractate, written first in Latin by Montpelier writer Johannes Jacobi in 1373.

combination of "the rot aboue and bynethe"[58] causes the air to become poisonous. There is still some space, here, for both divine and astral causes, as Jacobi both cites repentance as a treatment, and mentions astrological events as signs of impending plagues.

Plague tractates quickly became more specific about the sources of this "rot," and most mentioned the infamous conjunctions of the first Bubonic epidemic in the fourteenth century. One of the most popular, plague tractates of the early sixteenth century specifically addressed both divine and astrological causes, and was the first English text to emphasize the spiritual nature of the plague. The Dominican friar Thomas Moulton's 1475 translation of the Latin *De Epidemia*, originally written by John of Burgundy in 1365, was part of the extremely popular *The Mirrour or Glasse of Healthe,* a 'leechbook,' or collection of miscellaneous recipes, remedies, and charms first printed in 1531. The collection, reprinted 21 times by 1580, was one of the best selling English medical works of the entire period.[59] Moulton crucially reshaped Burgundy's tract, inserting into his work notes on God's wrath and England's sinfulness in the onset of the disease. According to Keiser, the popularity of this text, coupled with the growing use of spiritual causes and cures for the disease in later plague tractates, reflect a culture that looked to "balance the emphasis on [the plague's] astrological origins" with divine causes of disease.[60]

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[58]Joannes Jacobi, *Here begynneth a litil boke the whiche traytied and reherced many gode thinges necessaries for the ifirmite [and] graete sekeness called pestilence the whiche often times enfecteth vs made by the most expert Doctour in phisike Bisshop of Arusiens in the realme of Denemark [et]c*. , ([Antwerp : J. van Doesborch, ca. 1520), 2.

[59] Slack, *Impact*.

Turning to the plague tractates printed in response to the 1603 epidemic, we find some instances of an even greater emphasis on divinity than in Moulton's text. Thomas Lodge's tractate provides an example that best fits into this narrative of replacing the stars with God. In fact, Lodge explicitly denounces astrological causes for the plague at a greater length than any of the previous English language tractates. While he allows for the other standard natural causes, he directly replaces the astrological with the divine:

> Let vs therefore *cast off this vaine and sottish opini|on whereby we are induced to beléeue that the Plague pro|céedeth from the heauens*: that is to say, from the influence of the starres, (as by the vanitie of time we haue had induce|ments.) *But let vs confesse that it procéedeth from the secret iudgements of God, who intendeth by this scourge to whip vs for our sinnes*, as it appeareth in Leuiticus, and Deu|teronomy. (image 10) [emphasis mine][61]

Lodge has lifted from Francois Valleriola's 1566 plague tractate word-for-word.[62] We cannot, then, say for certain whether or not the text's insistence on the "sottish" explanations of the plague belong to both Lodge and Valleriola or to Vallieriola alone, if Lodge was ambivalent about these parts of Valleriola's text. Whatever the case, Lodge argues against any explanation that starts with the stars because contagion seems opposed

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[60] Keiser, "Two Medical," 322

[61] Thomas Lodge, *A treatise of the plague containing the nature, signes, and accidents of the same, with the certaine and absolute cure of the feuers, botches and carbuncles that raigne in these times: and aboue all things most singular experiments and preseruatiues in the same, gathered by the obseruation of diuers worthy trauailers, and selected out of the writing of the best learned phisitians in this age. By Thomas Lodge, Doctor in Phisicke* (London : Printed [by Thomas Creede and Valentine Simmes] for Edward White and N[icholas] L[ing], 1603) image 10.

[62] As such, it is striking that Kassell finds Lodge's tract to be "the most comprehensive English work on plague to that date" and, oddly, that it apparently "sidestepped the wrath of God" (104) and was a rare text in that it "had something to say about astrology" (105). For more on Lodge's appropriation of Valleriola's text, see Wear, *Practice*, 283. According to Wear, Lodge "apparently saw no barriers of cultural interchange in publishing a French medical treatise on plague as if it was an English production, proffered advice as if it was novel" (315).

to astrological purity and divinity. Following from Plato's *Timeus*, the tractate asks how the stars could be held accountable for putrefaction since it is in their very nature to be contrary to putrefaction.

Of course, we cannot take Lodge's work as standing in for all of the tractates at the turn of the century, and many proposed quite different relationships between the stars and God. Even just looking at Lodge, however, we fail to find a simple rejection of the physical for the supernatural. Lodge is not limiting the power of the stars. In fact, he ultimately argues for their near divinity in their total antithesis from the disease of rotting, earthly stuff. Furthermore, Lodge's/Valleriola's text, while denying the relevance of astrology in the plague, does not argue against the stars having any influence or effects of their own.

More extremely, others in the period fervently replaced astrological accounts of the pestilence with God for religiously charged reasons. Thomas Thayre's 1603 tractate allows for astrological causes only insofar as they are executed through God: "…but this euerie man is to vnderstand, Deus regit Astra, GOD rules the starres."[63] The eclipses and conjunctions that breed pestilence may come from the stars, but they fall under God's total power. Thomas Brasbridge, the Oxford educated student of divinity and medicine, goes even further in his 1578 medical tractate, where he derides the astrological account of the plague as belonging to "heathens":

> Of this cause I do not thinke it néedfull here to speake, especially in such maner as the Astronomers doe, who by their Ethnicall phrases, and kindes of speach in their Alminackes and Prognostications, d*o séeme to fauor or foster the Idolatrie of the Heathen: who worshipped those*

[63] Thomas Thayre, *A treatise of the pestilence*, (Imprinted at London : By E. Short, dwelling at the signe of the starre on bred-streete Hill, 1603) 5.

> *celestiall creatures as Gods.* For they speake of them, either as of Gods, or (at the least) as of liuing Princes, indued with reason, and béeyng in great power, and authoritie [italics mine].[64]

Idol worshiping, always a fraught topic in Reformation England, now applies to following the wrong plague tractate. What one labeled as the causes of disease had become theologically loaded. In line with the Reformation precedent of burning people and books, Brasbridge recommends not only rejecting the Heathen's advice and "art," but also burning their books as a sacrifice to the true God: "Therefore I doe not thinke their Arte necessarie, or profytable in a Christian common weale, further than is aforesayde. I thynke rather, that the burning of their bookes woulde be as acceptable a sacrifice to GOD."[65]

As we see from these competing accounts of God's ruling of the stars, the rejection of astrological forces could mean many different things. It could reflect a growing religiosity that equated the stars with heathens. Conversely, a rejection of the stars might in some cases represent a turn away from "higher" causes like God, and a renewed focus on the earthly putrefactions that might be controlled. Finally, it might speak to a different way of interpreting astrological forces altogether, without denying their potential to have physical effects on the natural world. The stars might be too "pure" to cause the plague, much as God is too good, in Castabella's words, to do any "ill."

Despite his reputation as a fervently Protestant writer, Tourneur reminds us more of Lodge, with his notion of astral perfection, than of Brasbridge. As it turns out, the

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[64] Thomas Brasbridge, *The poore mans ieuuel, that is to say, A treatise of the pestilence unto the which is annexed a declaration of the vertues of the hearbs Carduus Benedictus, and angelica, which are very medicinabl[e], both against the plague, and also against many other diseases / gathered out of the bookes of diuers learned physitians* (Imprinted at London : For George Byshop, 1578) 7.

[65] Ibid., 16.

stars fascinated Tourneur on both a literary and personal level. As we examined earlier, the moment of D'Amville's most egregious misreading of Nature involves the stars. God, the "supreme of the stars," invisibly controls their effects on the mortal, "sublunary creatures." Again, D'Amville uses this metaphor blasphemously, comparing himself to the "supreme of stars" who controls all his "instruments" through his secret plots. His greatest philosophical error, some argue, is found in this inability to see the divine in the stars: not *in* nature but *above* nature.[66] After his sons have died, he wonders whether there is, after all, "some power above" Nature. The Doctor – who has gone so far as to laugh at D'Amville's total distress at the sudden death of his children – can only answer, incredulously:

> A power above Nature?
> Doubt you that, my Lord? Consider but
> Whence Man receives his body and his form;
> Not from corruption like some worms and flies,
> But onelie from the generation of
> A man (5.1.104-109).

The theory of the first mover – called the "active mover" a few lines later – succinctly negates D'Amville's atheism. D'Amville quickly buys into the argument ("Now to my self I am ridiculous" (115)), yet immediately misreads another astrological sign. When he claims earthly justice can only be found in the "Star Chamber" (120), he is referring to the courts of earth, rather than God's heavenly domain.

Moreover, the reference here to putrefaction – the poisonous births of worms and flies from earthly rot – is set off against the form of man that exists, importantly, above nature. The stars are an obviously natural force; yet their location – hanging overhead in their "stellified" perfection – and their qualities –their perfectly circular motion and pure

[66] As J.M.S. Tompkins notes, this moment is "the crowning blasphem[y] of D'Amville," in "Tourneur and the Stars," *The Review of English Studies* 22.8 (1946), 316.

quintessence – made them also appear "above" the natural. For Tourneur, the stars represented the sacred forms of heaven. In his obscure poem "The Transformed Metamorphosis" (1600), Tourneur even presents the corruption of the stars to be the final blow to the now-totally diseased earth.[67] The source of all this rottenness is Catholicism, figured like Spenser's Error as a poisonous monster. She spews "poyson hellie blacke" in her attempts to "infect the vninfected Knight" (408). Like Error, her poisonous blood is generative through its contagiousness: "ev'ry drop of bloud … / Causde issue from hir noysome steeming breath, / Transformed were to monsters on the heath" (416-418). There is no answer to this riddling contagion, no special area the virtuous Knight might strike to stop the procreative putrefaction. The Knight Marvortio simply has to keep hacking away, until he reaches a "happy houre" (447) when the heap of bodies overtakes the monster and it dies. The carnage astounds the reader with images of "maimed wights low creeping traile / Their owne hew'd limbes, there gasping iawes that waile / To see their limbs lopt from their bodies lie, / On hugie heapes, like vnto mountaines high" (438-441).

This monster of contagion and poison partly sprung from the "infernall concord" (20) of the stars with the devil – all "the lights that should truth animate" now falter in their "th'vnstedfast" (24) motions that follow from the Moon. "Those stares, which for their sacred minds, / (They once terrestriall) were stellified" (15-16) now grow dark, with sky that is "pitchie" at noon (34). Marvortio, the figure of justice, who rights the wrongs in this hellish and diseased world, stands in for Christopher Heydon, the fervent

[67] All line references taken from Cyril Tourneur, *The Transformed Metamorphosis* (London: Printed by Valentine Sims [etc.], 1600).

Protestant to whom the poem is dedicated.[68] Heydon was also an active proponent of judicial astrology, and he published a number of tracts on the matter. In his own words, judicial astrology is the branch of knowledge that, analyzing astrological "motions and configurations," predicts events like "health, plagues, plentie, dearth, mutations of the ayre, warres, peace, and the other like general accidents of whole countries, prouinces, and cities."[69] Tourneur thus aligns his figure of religious reformation with God and the perfect stars, whose actions and elements best reflect God's own force. Heresy, inherently liable to spread, can be wiped out by brutal, ceaseless force. Individuals who can best read the stars also prevent infection by chopping into pieces the poisonous bodies of sin.

For Tourneur, the stars also dramatize the fundamental duality of human nature. Tourneur's dualism plays such a large role in *The Atheist's Tragedy* that he has been called a Baconian rationalist *avant la lettre*.[70] In his "Transformed Metamorphosis," he describes the spirit and soul (used interchangeably) as "the bodies prisner" (176), as a divine form "wholy…compact" of "heau'nly substance" (177) that is trapped, unhappily, within the "excrementall earth" (179) of flesh. Tourneur's characters debate the nature of the spirit throughout *The Atheist's Tragedy*, especially as it relates to the undead ghosts. Unlike the ghost of Hamlet, whose body is subjected to the painful putrefactions and sulphurous purgings of the underworld, the ghost of Montferrers appears quite un-

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[68] Tompkins, "Tourneur." The reference is explicitly made in Tourneur's prefatory material.

[69] Christopher Heydon, *A defence of iudiciall astrologie …,* ([London]: Printed by Iohn Legat, printed to the Vniversitie of Cambridge, 1603) 2 and 3.

[70] Ornstein, "'The Atheist's,'" 207.

bodily, and remarkably briefly. He appears first while Charlemont is sleeping, and then in reality only to convince his son that he is real. Bullets pass through him, and he disappears as quickly as he enters, delivering his message without any personality. However, the hypocritical Puritan, Languebeau Snuffe, takes this bodilessness to an extreme, which would negate the possibility of visiting ghosts. When Snuffe sees the returning Charlemont, whom all assume has been killed, he refuses to engage with him, claiming: "Spirits are invisible. 'Tis the fiend i'/ the likeness of Charlemont" (3.2.23-24). Snuffe will go on to use the motion of the "spirits" within the flesh as a sexual pun, in two different instances. As he plans to sleep with Soquette, he exclaims, first in exquisite delight that "the spirit of the flesh begin to / wriggle in my blood" (4.1.70-71), followed up with the scene's ending couplets, "The flesh is humble till the spirit move it, / But when 'tis raised it will command above it" (88-89). Snuffe perversely switches the normal hierarchy between body and soul. Flesh wriggles and raises above spirit, thus "command[ing]" its rightful master. Moreover, the spirit itself participates in this unholy reversal of hierarchy. Snuffe thus rejects the possibility of spirits being visible, yet connects them to the debasing motions of human sexuality.

Another, more ethically sound orientation finds invisible spirits to be utterly devoid of sensation. Castabella, thinking Charlemont is dead yet encountering him at the grave, cannot tell for sure whether she is interacting with his body or spirit.

> Castabella: I feel a substance warm and soft and moist,
> Subject to the capacity of sense.
> Charlemont: Which Spirits are not, for their essence is
> Above the nature and the order of
> Those elements whereof our senses are
> Created. (3.1.84-89)

Spirits, like God and the Stars, are of an "essence" that is "Above the nature" of earthy elements. Forms elevate the base matter of the beast-like, imprisoning nature worshipped by D'Amville. When Castabella begs for mercy, for instance, she calls it an attribute of "divine / Impression, form, and image" (3.4.6-7). The divine transcends. The natural declines, or moves around in base imitation. As such, the Ghost only slightly interacts with the physical realm. He is a mouthpiece for divinity, a form that cannot feel nor putrefy.

While the forms of mercy and soul may reunite sublunary creatures with the divine, it only occurs at a senseless level. We once again recall D'Amville's highly ironized language of the "supreme of stars." There, stars "make their influences governors" to people who "are senseless of their operations." This senselessness speaks to Charlemont's ignorance at his Father's first appearance, and to his own role in God's revenge plot. If all interpretation struggles to free itself from error, from the confines of the too-embodied streams of thought, than how can one act in the world? As explored above, Charlemont's actions are no freer than D'Amville's; his decisions no more obvious, either, since how he fits into God's plan is entirely unknown. As such, he falls onto the institutions of the everyday world: the religious and legal structures that uphold the status quo.

"Architecture of my lofty house": Structures of Order

Indeed, structure dominates the play. All of the play's language of forms – the impressions that exist in senseless spheres above nature – occurs along with a heap of

building images and metaphors. The play's central motif is architectural.[71] Tourneur draws the metaphors of buildings and structure from the presumed source of the play, Psalm 127, where buildings reflect the vanity of human ambitions: "Unless the Lord builds the house, / the builders labor in vain."[72] D'Amville speaks of "foundations" throughout the play, both in terms of his treacherous plot and in terms of the legacy he plans to leave his children. His children's sudden deaths, of course, completely destroy the imaginary structures of D'Amville's ambitions. Rousard's "gasping sighs are like the falling noise / Of some great building when the groundwork breaks" (5.1.75-76). Death razes D'Amville's entire design:

> On these two pillars stood the stately frame
> And architecture of my lofty house.
> An earthquake shakes 'em; the foundation shrinks (77-79).

The frequent language of structure, pillars, and buildings, mixed with the larger philosophical language of forms and impressions, contributes to an atmosphere of order and stability: one that persists, strangely, despite the ultimate ruin of D'Amville's "stately frames."

The critical sense of Tourneur's narrow-mindedness and dogmatic order probably comes – in part – from the play's own language of forms and structures. Other factors contribute to this sense, too, in addition to the theological messages and emblematic graveyard scenes. In part, the whole play is so devoid of images and metaphors, saving of course the architectural figures, that critics have argued it relies upon the "pattern of a gradually progressing argument" that "build[s] up to the all-concluding moral, so … the

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[71] Inga-Stina Ekeblad, "An Approach to Tourneur's Imagery." *The Modern Language Review* 54.4 (1959) 492.

[72] Kauffmann, "Tragedy."

imagery [is] constructed to conduct a kind of argument."[73] Structure has even seeped into the critical language here, where arguments "build" and are "constructed" according to Tourneur's strict ideological scaffolding.

Tourneur might be driven to structures, buildings, and forms in *The Atheist's Tragedy* because they offer some solution to the epistemological fractures and ambiguities. It is not for nothing that the final scene occurs within the court of law. All of the insistence on the divine as the force of justice, then, only works to make God more remote, meaning more unclear, and the individual spirit more restrained. The greater stress on the supernatural paradoxically places more power in the hands of the weak, and often corrupted, natural orders of authority.

In this way, Tourneur's narrative of divine revenge dramatically adapts what was happening on a broader, cultural level, in the plague-time narratives and structures of spiritual disease. The extra-services, emphasizing the supernatural causes of the plague, surprisingly seemed geared to prop up the accounts of physical contagion. The idea that God directly killed people in the pestilence was so controversial, in fact, that preacher Henoch Clapham, the notorious Anglican described by contemporary John Manningham for his "sower looke" and "bold" spirit, was imprisoned in the Clink for preaching and publishing documents during the particularly pernicious outbreak of 1603. He argued that the plague (or some cases of it) was not contagious, and that God's hand directly saves some of his faithful and punishes some of his unfaithful. All of this went against the monarchical orders, newly reprinted by James I, that followed Queen Elizabeth in

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[73] Ekeblad, "An Approach," 491; 492.

forbidding any from arguing that the plague was not infectious.[74] Clapham argued, at least in his printed texts, that the London epidemic was a "mixed" form of supernatural and natural disease (what he termed "plague" and "pestilence," respectively).[75]

None of this was particularly controversial or out of the ordinary, as we have seen from these other texts, and Clapham is careful to advocate the usefulness of physical remedies, albeit very briefly and with some cheekiness. Judging from the amount of space he dedicated to the issue in his second published work on the matter, published in 1604 during his imprisonment, his most controversial argument seems to be the one on the total protectiveness of faith. Rather than shy away from the disturbing logical conclusions of his premises, he assigns people without qualms into categories of "faithful" or "unfaithful" based on their survival (though all the while technically allowing for the possibility that some may have been infected by the "natural" disease). He responds to detractors that even the "wicked" will survive the plague if they have sufficient faith. As for the seemingly faithful departed? In his words: "the Lords promise being euer fast to

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[74] This is found in Item 16 of the Orders: "Item, if there bee any person Ecclesiasticall or laye, that shall holde and publishe any opinions (as in some places reporte is made) that it is a vaine thing to forbeare to resort to the infected, or that it is not charitable to forbid the same, pretending that no person shall dye but at their time prefixed, such persons shall be not onely reprehended, but by order of the Byshop, if they bee ecclesiasticall, shall be forbidden to preache, and being laye, shall bee also enioyned to forbeare to vtter such dangerous opinions vpon paine of imprisonment, which shall be executed, if they shall perseuer in that error," England and Wales, Sovereign (James I), *Orders thought meete …*, (Imprinted at London: By Robert Baker.., 1603).

[75] Even his division of plague into the supernatural and natural followed many other plague texts. Fracastoro speaks of astrologically caused plagues to be incurable in *De Contagione*. Stephen Bradwell likewise divided plagues into divine and earthly causes, what he calls "simple" and "putrid" plagues, in his 1625 and 1636 tractates. In his first text, he argues that "simple" plagues come directly from God through the stars, and thus cannot be helped. In his second tractate, he finds only God, and not the stars, to be the force behind the "simple" plagues.

Beleeuer (for he is faithfull that hath promised) there is in Beleeuers so dying*, a want of faith* for apprehending this particular deliuerance, this temporary mercy."[76] Surely, this claim of the importance of faith – the "want" of which kills even believers – counters any seeming efficacy of quarantine or other protective governmental measure.

Yet Clapham was still not alone even in this extreme claim. He wrote in a tradition of spiritual pestilence tracts that often cited to angelic handprints being found on victim's bodies. So, what made Clapham so controversial? Was it all a matter of bad timing, such that his printed text came too soon on the heels of James' 1603 Orders? Or was he a kind of scapegoat to dissuade others from continuing this logic, as his popular appeal and influence seems to have been particularly noteable? While medical authorities seemed irritated by Clapham,[77] it was not the College of Physicians or other medical practitioners who insisted on his imprisonment; nor, despite current histories on the matter, was Clapham only punished for disobeying the political public health orders. In his own words, he was, in fact, punished for disobeying the orders *for Wednesday's*

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[76] Henoch Clapham, *Henoch Clapham his demaundes and answeres touching the pestilence methodically handled, as his time and meanes could permit.* ([Middelburg : Printed by Richard Schilders], 1604), image 8.

[77] Francis Herring, one of the College Physicians, refuses to name him but mentions Clapham and his dangerous "murderous" teachings on the plague in a pamphlet on other plague-time abuses (notably, the use of poison to cure poison). In his words, we can still assume consistent and causal effects of nature even though God may be ultimately behind them: "Moses by lifting vp his rod, brought armies of flies and lice vpon Egypt, raised a terrible haile, smot the Egyptians with malignant vlcers. This was an extraordinary ministery of Moses, as well as of the angels. But shall we therefore thinke, that the lice and flies came not of putrefaction, the haile of vapors concret sodenly in the aire, the vlcers by the rotting of humors?" Herring, *A modest defence …,* (London : Printed by Arnold Hatfield for William Iones [3] dwelling in Red-crosse street at the signe of the Ship, 1604), 4.

fast: that is, he deliberately broke from the structure of special, religious services mentioned at the outset of this chapter.[78] His arguments, louder and more flamboyant than others like his, broke from what was meant to be a united religious front that carried a consistent message across all of England. The Lord Bishop Richard Bancroft and the Master Dean of St. Paul's and Westminster, Lancelot Andrewes, were the ones who kept Clapham in prison, at least in Clapham's accounts; and by 1605, Clapham was still imprisoned, still basically refusing to follow Andrewes's order to write a proper refutation of his former opinions. The 1604 and 1605 refutations provided Clapham instead with another chance to make his same arguments even more strongly.

Yet, why would religious authorities be so concerned with Clapham? After all, the very special services in question relied upon a homily that calls upon the "supernatural." I cite again the line at the start of the plague-time sermon:

> But ouer & aboue these causes alledged, the graue and weighty authoritie of the word of God must informe vs of an other cause*, a cause not natural, but supernaturall*: namely, the wrath of God provoked and incensed by the sinnes of any Nation or people, hath often brought in the pestilence… [emphasis mine][79]

Indeed, Clapham himself seems confused about this seemingly hypocritical response by the heads of England's church. The special services in particular would seem to support

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[78] What exactly prompted his punishment is slightly ambiguous. By arguing against the infectious nature of the plague, he was certainly disobeying the Orders; yet he insists that he has disobeyed orders *"for* Wednesdayes fast." In his words, "…he [the Lord Bishop] at the eleven weekes end convented me, the~ signifying that I had bene imprisoned for teaching, That the plague was not infectious; as also for publishing An Epistle concerning the Pestilence; and that in contempt of the booke of Orders for the Wednesdayes fast, authorized by the King," in *Henoch Clapham his demaundes and answeres*…, ([Middelburg : Printed by Richard Schilders], 1604) 2. Throughout, as will become clear, the major opposition to Clapham seems to come from religious rather than medical authorities.

[79] Church of England, *Certaine prayers,* 21.

the kind of preaching and publishing Clapham was actively engaged in. In discussing his own punishment, he asks:

> What is else that our Church and euery Church intendeth, when they appoint publique fasting & prayer for remouing of the pestilence? What else meaneth our Common seruice booke to vrge all to pray thus: From the Pestilence good Lord deliuer vs?[80]

Something is amiss, then, in Clapham's understanding of the whole purpose and design of these communal services.

In fact, the vast majority of the plague-time exhortation focuses on obeying political orders, especially calling on congregants to avoid crowds and follow quarantine. Relatively little space is accorded to the supernatural arguments of the case. Out of the eleven pages of the sermon, seven and a half are spent on advising parishioners to follow the Queen's/King's Orders. The fear that people might not treat the plague as if it was contagious seems to be the biggest anxiety expressed in the sermons. And, lest the faithful think attendance of these special services trumps infection, the liturgies repeatedly remind priests to insist that the sick should avoid going to the services. In fact, they will responsible for murdering others by spreading the disease in attending these services when infected.[81] Noted throughout each plague-time publication of these special services was the advice to print the liturgies so the sick may read in the safety of their shut-in room.[82] One of the exceptionally few changes made to the liturgy in the 1665

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[80] Henoch Clapham, *Doctor Andros his Prosopopeia answered*.... ([Middelburg : Printed by Richard Schilders], 1605), 19-20.

[81] See Gilman, *Plague Writing* for the marked difference between English plague time texts and continental plague-time services, which drew on images and communal processions to call upon the intercession of the popular plague saints, Sts. Roche and Sebastian in particular.

edition was the separation of the exhortation from the rest of the description of services, so that it might be more easily distributed to the sick, at home and not present at the church.[83]

The church thus became a place for both scriptural and political authority to share in a combined medical and religious narrative, one that balanced both the spiritual and the physical dimensions together, however precariously and anxiously. Yet, even in the church, where the supernatural dimension might take obvious precedence, the major message seemed to be "follow the political orders laid out by Queen Elizabeth/King James/King Charles/Parliament" (depending on the year of publication). The exhortation builds to just that point:

> …let vs not go forward to tempt GOD, to continue so cruell to our selues, and so harmefull to others: let vs be more humble in the day of our affliction, *submitting our selues to those good and wholesome orders, and decrees already published for preuenting the further infection of this our calamitie*, and making account of all good meanes, and medicinable helpe made knowne vnto vs for our better preseruation…[84]

In fact, the drive to prevent "further infection" takes up so much of the homily that the text has to briefly remind people not to forget to provide any succor to the sick and poor, so that "shut up" houses should not be "shut out from all succor."[85] This warning

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[82] From the 1603 liturgy: ""For the effectuall accomplishment whereof, it is thought meette that this order of prayer following should at this time be published, being such as may be vsed not only by the minister in the Church but by euery man in his private family," 6.

[83] "Then shall follow the Sermon, or Exhortation Printed at the end of this Book: which is also recommended to all good Christians to be frequently read, and thought upon by them in private," Church of England, *A form of common prayer, together with an order of fasting, for the averting of Gods heavy visitation…* (London : Printed by John Bill and Christopher Barker ..., 1665) 21.

[84] Church of England, *Certaine prayers*, 1603, 15.

expresses the major tension of these communal prayers of repentance. While partly arranged to unify the Biblical story of pestilence as God's punishment with contemporary experiences of disease, there was a fundamentally more crucial purpose for the services themselves. That is, they served also to give a religious precedent to the often controversial public health orders like quarantine. Contemporary political policies on disease containment now had religious justification, as Englanders heard repeated in printed Orders and in the church the admonishment of those who disobeyed the authorities and "mingl[ed] disorderly the sound, & the sicke together."[86]

The fear of mingling the sick with the healthy, or over improper "labeling" more generally, reflects a particularly scary aspect of contagious disease: the "hiddenness" of its transmission. This anxiety also exposes greater concerns about the status of religious and political hierarchies and organizations during times that seem "out of time." The political fear seems clear enough when one considers how often the governing bodies quickly took the medical advice to flee from the infected city or town. Monarchs would often leave London during pestilences, and so too would many of the magistrates (and religious leaders, and physicians…). Many sharply critiqued what felt like the abandonment of governing officials and other wealthy citizens in popularly printed satires and pamphlets.[87] In fact, one finds a major disconnect between monarch and populace during epidemic diseases in the archives of state papers. For instance, John

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[85] Ibid.

[86] Ibid., 13.

[87] See Chapter 5 for more on satires and social critique.

Murray's note to the Earl of Salisbury, dated September 1, 1609, presents a dramatically distanced James I:

> King has desired him to come no nearer to London than Kensington, in his way to Hampton Court, for fear of the plague. The King has been hunting all day and has killed a stag with his own hand.[88]

Clearly, James feared infection, enough to remove to Hampton Court.[89] And while obviously anxious, his daily activities strike a remarkably callous tone when we consider the plight of his quarantined and infected citizens. Known for his relish for hunting, James certainly had not been forced to alter many of his comforts while making sure to keep clear of all the sick Londoners who might bring with them infection.

James was not the only monarch to limit visitors from pestilence-ridden areas during epidemics. Elizabeth and Charles were so afraid of catching the disease, they both set up gibbets to warn people of consequences of visiting.[90] In John Stowe's account, Elizabeth went as far as to promise immediate execution for any London travelers coming to Windsor, where she was waiting out the worst of the plague:

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[88] *Calendar of the state papers held by The National Archives relating to the first years of the reign of James I.,* Ed. Mary Anne Everett Green (Originally published by Her Majesty's Stationery Office, London, 1857): 524-540, 540.

[89] This was indeed the norm, as monarchs frequently left London when the plague grew 'too hot,' retiring to Windsor, Hampton Court, or Woodstock. Law terms were also regularly suspended during times of plague to prevent the spread of infection often in tandem with the general removal of the court from London.

[90] Charles also notably gave up his powers of the "King's Cure" for scrofula during the plague epidemic of the start of his reign. His use of the gibbet to dissuade travellers is found in the British Calendar of State Papers; he and the Queen had already left for Woodstock on July 28th: "August 14 1625 Thos. Locke to Dudely Carleton: "The sickness is so violent in London, that there is no intercourse of boats from Kingston. Those that go to London must not return into the country. At Woodstock, where the Court is, none may go from thence to return, nor any come thither, and for contraveners a gibbet is setup at the Court gate. The Parliament holds at Oxford."

> This year 1563, in September, the Queen's Majesty lying in her castle of Windsor, *there was set up in the market place of Windsor a new pair of gallows to hang up all such as should come there from London*, so that no person or any kind of wares might come or be brought from London to or through, neither by Windsor, not so much as through the river by Windsor to carry wood or other stuff to or from *London upon pain of hanging without any judgment,* and such people as reserved any wares out of London in to Windsor were turned out of their houses and their houses shut up. [italics mine][91]

The threat of immediate, trial-less hanging came along with the threat of quarantine, such that houses without even a trace of infection were to be "shut up" for forty days if they had received any goods from London. Controlling infection meant controlling both goods and the masses of people, whose decision to follow the medical advice to flee might lead to a rejection of the monarchical orders to remain in quarantine if part of an infected household. Indeed, during the period, plague tractates began to replace the traditional flight treatment with a command to stay put.[92]

It appears that Elizabeth and Charles did not have to follow through on their threats. Ultimately, though, their proposed executions speak to the widespread belief in the efficacy of quarantine as a measure to prevent the spread of the disease. Elizabeth went so far as to blame the growing infection numbers entirely on the magistrates for failing to set up quarantine during the 1592-3 outbreak. She assumed that the increase in numbers could only mean the magistrates had not done their job in applying the orders.[93]

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[91] John Stowe, *A summarye of the chronicles of Englande, from the first comminge of Brute into this lande, vnto this present yeare of Christ. 1570. Diligentlye collected, and nowe newly corrected and enlarged, by Iohn Stowe, citizen of London. Seene and allowed accordinge to the Queenes Maiestyes iniunctions* (Imprinted at London : In Fleetestreate by Thomas Marshe, [1570], 127.

[92] See Jones, "Plague," 113-115.

[93] At Hampton Court, the 21st of January, 1592 [ie 1593]. A letter to the Lord Maiour and Aldermen of the cittie of London. The Queen's Majestie finding by the certificate of the last weeke that (contrary to her expectacion and the hope her Majestie and we had of

This is quite an expression of faith in the effectiveness of quarantine and street cleaning. Moreover, quarantine particularly relevant to a disease that was known for its social fragmentation: a disease whose utter decimation was often linked to the leveling of social classes and hierarchies.[94] The fears of social unrest and mass disruption evident in all these measures were not entirely unfounded. In fact, we find extremely anxious notes during September of the 1625 outbreak in Newcastle, where the few remaining magistrates worried about both foreign invasions and riots that might "ransack" the city;[95] the 1626 anonymous pamphlet *Lachrymae Londinenses* cites riots in Holborne that nearly spiraled out of control during the start of the last "Visitation."[96]

These extra services, then, seem to aim for more than creating a representation of a united, English plea for forgiveness from a revenging God. The joined prayers from

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your care in a case of that importance) the infection within the cittie of London, which for certaine weekes together beganne to diminishe, growth nowe to increase, *which cannot but procede either of your negligence in not regarding the observance of good orders for the preventing of the same, or of some defecte or insufficiencie in the prescriptions and directions given in that behalf*, hathe willed us to let you understand howe offensively she takethe the carelesse consideracion" [emphasis mine] from *Acts of the Privy Council 1592-3*, Ed. John Roche Dasent (London: Printed for His Majesty's Stationery Office, by Mackie & Co. Ld., 1901) 21.

[94] For more on the relationship between English plague orders and social control, see Paul Slack *Impact.*

[95] Sept. 10 1625. 46. Henry Lord Clifford to Sec. Conway. "…Newcastle is so infected with plague, so ill-fortified, and so ill-neighboured, that 500 men would ransack it…his lady took the infection from a new gown she had from London, so as she died the same day she took it. They are all dispersed most miserably with the greatest terror in the world," 102.

[96] "And may we not well remember euen since the beginning of this Visitation, and no longer agone but the last Trinitie Terme, what a horrible Ryot was begun in Holborne?" *Lachrymae Londinenses: or, Londons lamentations* (London : Printed [by B. Alsop and T. Fawcet] for H. Holland and G. Gibbs, at the Golden Flower-deluce in Popes-head Alley, 1626) 7.

fasted parishioners were also designed to unify the orders regulating the physical and the spiritual dimensions of the plague. Accordingly, social unity during moments of crises that seemed particularly pernicious to the basic structures of order, from the political to the religious, issued from an ostensibly united front, where both the natural and supernatural operated according to, if not the same, at least mutually reinforcing narratives.

It seems obvious that days of fasting and communal prayers were issued to increase the sense of unity, and that authorities carefully regulated religious and medical narratives to keep everyone on the same page. But, less obvious was the way the special services and the "God cause" in the tractates actually took pressure off the supernatural in the management of epidemic disease. Since authorities clearly feared unregulated, chaotic masses of people spreading infection and even threatening their own structures, attention needed to be placed on the measures designed to keep everything regulated and in a specified place. Now that the supernatural fit into the backdrop of the disease and the orders, people could be certain they were acting in accordance with God's will by following their Queen or King. So much for the radically subversive implications of a truly supernatural disease, where faith and active expression of religious ideology guaranteed that "A thousand shall fall at thy side, and ten thousand at thy right hand; but it shall not come nigh thee."

Tourneur's play of forms, structures, and shocking mental imprisonment likewise focuses its energies on earthly order, bypassing the dangerous freedom of D'Amville, on the one hand, and the radical breakdowns of social order and meaning from a totally interactive God, on the other hand. The play notably lacks almost all the terrifying

combinations of beauty and poison and all the language of rotting, infected things that so characterize other revenge plays of the time, just as it cuts off its central villain's power. By the end of the play, Tourneur reassembles Shakespeare's lines from *King Lear* in what appears to be the moment of D'Amville's triumph over Charlemont, as D'Amville viciously awaits his execution. Once again, D'Amville's naturalism fails him spectacularly. He thinks he will figure out what causes Charlemont's total faith in God through an anatomical dissection of Charlemont's body after his execution:

> I would find out by his anatomy
> What thing there is in Nature more exact
> Then in the constitution of myself.
> *Methinks my parts and my dimensions are*
> *As many, as large, as well composed as his;*
> And yet in me the resolution wants
> To die with that assurance as he does.
> The cause of that in his anatomy
> I would find out (5.2.144-151, emphasis mine).

The lines recall Edmund's first soliloquy in Shakespeare's *King Lear*. Only here, Tourneur has edited out the disruptive power and force of Edmund's rejection of the artificial conventions that govern property and inheritance. Nature, in Edmund's account, is his goddess, while custom brands and limits those with "dimensions … as well compact" (1.2.7), "mind[s] as generous, and … shape[s] as true" (8) as their betters.[97] While D'Amville recognizes, despite his and Charlemont's seeming equivalence, that he is missing some fundamental quality, one he stupidly thinks to find in an anatomical dissection, Edmund realizes not only a shocking arbitrariness to all seemingly 'natural'

[97] William Shakespeare, "King Lear (Conflated Text)" in *The Norton Shakespeare: Based on the Oxford Edition*, Eds. Stephen Greenblatt, Walter Cohen, Jean E. Howard, and Katharine Eisaman Maus (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1997) 2479- 2553. We also find the influence of Shakespeare's Shylock here, with both his insistence on anatomy the –'letter of the law' – and his compelling lines on the equivalence of Jewish and Christian bodies and desires in his "hath not a Jew hands, organs, / dimensions, senses, affections, passions?" speech.

distinctions (however much the play will condemn or accept this leveling); he also completely rejects the physical world as a guide to human behavior. As the scene continues, and the players in Edmund's perverse game enter and exit as if on cue, Edmund rejects his father's nervous reading of the almanac, calling it "the excellent foppery of the world" (109). His nature does not secretly compel him forward through some unseen "supreme of stars": indeed, he scornfully mocks the reliance on any nativity which would use astrology to explain away his "rough and / lecherous" nature (120). We face startling emptiness in the chaos of *Lear*, where language itself dissolves into hallucinatory riddles, nonsense syllables, and howls: where customs can no longer hide the abyss of "nothing" they are designed to cover.

Tourneur's villains, heroes, ghost, and remote God have much less disturbing, boundary-breaking freedom. While something of the void in both nature and divinity permeates the apocalyptic landscape of *King Lear*, in Tourneur's tragicomedy the laws of the divine and of nature categorize and organize all in their omnipresence. Illnesses, accidents, ghosts – the stuff that should be startling and riveting in performance – express a plot-line that is ultimately totalizing, even if the human mind cannot make sense of this plan's unsettling contradictions. Rather than threaten boundaries, sickness and vengeance reinstate the structures of the world. All the ambiguities of meaning and action displace these concerns onto a higher authority, who instills revenge just as he condemns it. Revenge is no longer the act of wounded, earthly creatures seeking to fix a broken legal system through their own illegal reformations. Instead, it is the hidden and sacred law that hides behind iron-clad structures of governance.

Chapter 4
"Sweetmeats which rot the eater":
Pleasure and Revenge in John Webster's *The White Devil*

I discern poison
Under your gilded pills (3.2.190-191).[1]

John Webster's revenge plays feature so much violence and cruelty that they have been dubbed "wild, grotesque, fantastical, and extravagant" in their "painful and sometimes unwarranted excess."[2] The supposed excess of his two extant plays of revenge – *The White Devil* (1612) and *The Duchess of Malfi* (1612-3) – is said to be strikingly different from the excess of *Hamlet*. In *Hamlet*, digression, narrative fracture, and psychological torment create the critical sense of surplus in dramatic form and language. As we have explored, these delays dramatize the process of transformation, slowing things down in the revenge narrative to focus on its unfolding. In contrast, critics often find Webster's plays to be excessive because of his onstage gore. Webster's plays approach "the grotesque" in their "spectacles" of violence, and all the while break the aesthetic boundaries of "propriety" in their morbid representations.[3] Unlike Tourneur's orderly revenge, one relocated into the very divine structure that props up earthly rule, Webster's revenge is all-too-earthly and remarkably destructive of bounds.

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[1] All citations taken from John Webster, *The White Devil*, in *The Duchess of Malfi and Other Plays: The White Devil, The Duchess of Malfi, The Devil's Law-Case, and A Cure for a Cuckold*, Ed. René Weis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) 2-101.

[2] The lines belong to John Wilson, from his review of Webster in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* (1818), cited within Don D. Moore's *Webster: The Critical Heritage* (New York: Routledge, 1981). My analysis of Webster's critical history owes much to the citations I found in Moore's text.

[3] The language of "propriety" is found in William Watson, *Excursions in Criticism: Being Some Prose Recreations of a Rhymer* (New York: Macmillan & Co, 1893) 19.

Revenge is one of the forces behind the explosion of blood and guts in Webster's so-called "chamber of horrors" that attracts audiences through its "melodrama."[4]

Webster's reputation as a depraved playwright of sensationalized spectacles was earned over the eighteenth century and still persists today, whether or not his corpses and "anti-mimetic" representations are understood positively or negatively. More than any other playwright, he embodies the ostensible disillusionment and "pessimism" of Jacobean England, as opposed to the apparently optimistic Elizabethan period.[5] Even outside of the academy, Webster represents theatrical sadism and the cheap thrill of gore. In the film *Shakespeare in Love* (1999), for instance, Webster makes a cameo appearance as a young, filthy boy who hangs around the Globe. In his first appearance, he even tortures animals (Figure 6). Dangling a mouse by its tail over the jaws of a meowing cat, Webster tells Will Shakespeare about his favorite kind of aesthetic. "I like it when they cut heads off," he says, to Will's dismay. The "only writing" for him includes "Plenty of blood."[6] Tom Stoppard and Marc Norman use Webster as a foil to set off Shakespeare's aesthetic, contrasting it with one that is more primitive and exploitative. While the film understands Shakespeare's art to emerge from his transformative love, as his best verse pours out, naturalistically, through his adoration of Viola, it finds Webster's art to emerge

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[4] George Henry Lewes, "Review of *The White Devil,"* in *Leader*, 30 Nov. 1850, reprinted in John Forster and George Henry Lewes *Dramatic Essays*, Ed. William Archer and Robert Lowe (London: Walter Scott Ltd., 1896).

[5] For a good account of Jacobean "disillusionment," see Robert Ornstein, *The Moral Vision of Jacobean Tragedy* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1960). See pp .

[6] *Shakespeare in Love,* Dir. John Madden, Perf. Gwyneth Paltrow and Joseph Fiennes, (Miramax Films, 1999) *Netflix,* Web, 16 April 2015.

from his childish attraction to cut-up bodies. Taking too much pleasure in stage mutilations, Webster – and, we are to imply, the average, unaware consumer more generally – misses the whole point of dramatic spectacle.

Figure 6. Webster tortures a mouse. *Shakespeare in Love*, 1999. Author's screenshot.

For the writers of *Shakespeare in Love*, Webster represents the worst relationship between playgoer and spectacle. The imagined reciprocal dynamic between consumer and consumed representation unsettles in the face of plays that are frighteningly dehumanizing in their representations of bodily destruction. How are all of these images of violence and torture impacting the playgoer? What does it mean, culturally, for us to participate in these spectacles of destruction? The film at least suspects that there is a connection between real-life cruelty and violent drama. Webster treats mice as viciously as he treats fictional characters. Moreover, he treats "real life" people as if they are only pawns in a play. Spying on the central characters, Will and Viola, he exposes their secret

affair (in this case, by dropping one of his tortured mice onto Viola while she is under disguise as a boy). His narrative cruelty both reflects and possibly enhances his personal, real-life cruelty.

The unhappy relationship between represented and real-life violence has characterized much of the history of Webster's criticism. Indeed, nearly every critical work on Webster, from the seventeenth century to today, is just as much an exploration of theatrical "excess," bounds of "propriety," "extravagance," and the "grotesque." In fact, the history of Webster's criticism is virtually a history of the critical definition of the "excessive." This breaking of aesthetic "propriety" is often understood as a kind of meta-theatrical contagion, where a depraved, or at least unwitting, audience faces infection from the sickened and diseased atmosphere of Webster's plays. For instance, the traditionalist William Watson, writing against fin de siècle, Webster enthusiasts, contrasted the "airy amplitudes of Shakespeare with the shut-in sick room of Webster": Webster's world was lit by "a picturesque torchlight rather than … candid sunlight."[7] Within this darkened atmosphere, contagious illness spreads rapidly. Certain characters in Webster's plays are called a kind "of human gangrene infecting the whole body of the play [that] … leaves a trace of slime upon all objects which [he] traverses."[8] Similarly, Northrop Frye finds disease and shut-in spaces to dominate the atmosphere of Webster's tragedies. This time, the contrast is with Marlowe. Frye argues that Marlowe "presents

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[7] Watson, *Excursions in Criticism,* 19. Watson's contrast between airy amplitudes and sick rooms reminds me of Samuel Coleridge's comparison of Henry Fielding and Samuel Richardson: "To take him [Fielding] up after Richardson, is like emerging from a sick room heated by stoves, into an open lawn," *Specimens of the Table Talk of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, Ed. Carl Woodring (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990) 295.

[8] Ibid. 15.

his heroes more or less as demigods moving in a kind of social ether," while Webster's enclosed tragedies "are almost clinical analyses of a sick society."[9] All of these critical works address the sense of contagion created by these plays: an infection both within the narratives and without, threatening to spread meta-theatrically to the consumer.

Reviewers of contemporary performances of Webster's *The White Devil* also consider the impact of the play's violence on the audience. Theater-goers to the 1996 Stratford RSC production were said to laugh at the dramatic blood shed: "the charnel-house endings are more likely to make you giggle than to horrify you… You doubt that this is what Webster meant; but … there's probably no way round it."[10] Yet, a different reviewer mentions not the audience's laughter, but their extreme disgust and terror that was so extreme, a schoolgirl was said to pass out during the performance:

> So effective was the accumulation of poisonings, stabbings, shootings, and garrotings at Thursday's matinee that a schoolgirl on the front banquette of the warm, wooden quasi-Elizabethan interior, fainted during the last act, banged her head on the front of the apron stage, and revived a few minutes later only to see that the carnage was still in full flow.[11]

Whether the reviewer was right in assuming that this fainting spell related to the "full flow" of carnage of Webster's play is likely beyond the scope of this chapter. Whatever the case, the proper response to these plays seems to be in question. Should we laugh at the absurdly horrific tortures and murders, or should we be overwhelmed with disgust?

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[9] Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006). Frye also calls Webster's plays "traged[ies] of the sick society" in his *Fools of Time: Studies in Shakespearean Tragedy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1967).

[10] Robert Hanks, "Theatre: The White Devil, the Swan, Stratford 29," *The Independent*, 29 April 1996.

[11] Micheal Covenay, "It's in the Blood: Review of the *White Devil*," *The Observer,* 28 April 1996.

This intense interest in Webster's spectators speaks to our categorization of Webster's aesthetic as excessive. In asking how or why people respond in their own peculiar manner to Webster's plays, one implies that we ought to be worrying about these responses: that there is something within the play that is too transgressive for people of proper taste to even know how to identify imaginatively with the fictional world in question. Yet, I find this *sense* of dramatic surplus is just that: a *sense* of surplus, a *sense* of contagion. Despite the many instances of violence, Webster's two extant tragedies are far from the most gory or violent of the period; and I would argue that, for all their depravity, Webster's characters don't reach the same lows as characters in Middleton's plays, nor do they become purely stock villains of depravity found in other plays of the era. So, why are we so concerned with the "contagious violence" of Webster in particular?

Moreover, Webster himself reversed the relationship of this meta-theatrical contagion. That is, rather than understand contagion as emerging from the spectacle of violence to infect audience members, Webster argues that poisonous spectators infected his dramatic production. Despite the critical history that finds Webster's plays as pleasing a vicious multitude, *The White Devil* was supremely unsuccessful, so incapable of pleasing the masses that Webster specifically addressed its failures in the prologue attached to the first printing of his play. The conditions were less than ideal. The day was dark and cold, and the open-air playhouse in the dead of winter was not particularly pleasant. Yet the biggest problem for the play lay in the ignorance of its audience:

> …*O dura messorum ilia* [O strong stomachs of harvesters], the breath that comes from the uncapable multitude is able to poison it, and ere it be acted, let the author resolve to fix to every scene this of Horace: *Haec hodie porcis comedenda relinques* [What you leave today will become food for pigs] ("To the Reader," 20-23).

Webster identifies the audience as the source of an infectious poison that harms dramatic productions. Like the "pestilent congregation of vapours" in Hamlet, the poisonous multitude draws on the danger of crowds, smells, and putrefaction. In referring to the danger of the theater crowds, he is not alone. Most Puritan anti-theatricalists spoke to the poisonous, stinking breath of people at the theater-house, though they of course found both impudent actors and corrupt audiences to be equally infectious.[12] In calling upon theatrical infection, Webster may only be picking up on one element of Puritan's attack against the theater; yet in doing so, he invokes ideas of the radical danger of language and representation itself. One wonders how much disease and contagion factored into Webster's bloody plays: if he saw them as related at all to the infections of the audience members, or if this figure of the poisoning multitude was merely serviceable, a way to malign his critics and group them as contagious others.

In fact, poison and infection run rampant in both of Webster's revenge tragedies, and even in his more obscure tragicomedies and collaborations.[13] In *The White Devil*, poison overwhelmingly takes the language of deception and disguise, the "white devil" of

[12] Webster's condemnation of the poisoning audience reminds me of I.H.'s *This World's Folly* (1615), who decries both the "infectious breaths" of impudent actors and the bad smelling masses of the "Oyster-crying Audience."

[13] Discussions on poison as physic feature more in *The White Devil* than any other play. In *Westward Ho* and *Northward Ho,* he speaks of poisonous "paintings" or cosmetics and considers the poison of jealousy. In the *Duchess of Malfi,* he discusses poison and its "spreading," especially from public to private areas. In *The Devil's Law-Case* and *A Cure for Cuckold,* Webster moves into tragicomic territory, and relates the unexpected outcomes of disease and cure, poison and physic, to the strange plots of his plays. Finally, Webster thinks of poison as a smoky infection related to slaughter and pollution, in his *Appius and Virginia*.

the title itself referring broadly to hypocrisy.[14] References to poisoned pills abound, both signifying poisons provided by physicians as physic, and physic that is secretly a poison. One type of ambiguous medicine, to which Webster draws much attention, is the "sweetmeat." Most of the energy of the play centers on that odd union of forces embodied in these sugar-covered treats, which were at once delectable and medicinal products. Webster uses the sweetmeat throughout to conjure the weird overlap of rot and pleasure. The word, with its notoriously sexual undertones, applies most of all to the central female character of the play: Vittoria, whose love affair with the Duke of Bracciano commands the attention of the powerful, and treacherous families across Italy. After Bracciano arranges to kill both of their spouses, she is brought to trial, and called not just a whore, but a sweetmeat by the bitter Cardinal Monticelso. Moreover, she is a sweetmeat that does not heal the body, but which "rot[s] the eater" (3.2.80).

In fact, I argue in this chapter that the "sweetmeat," with its combination of poisonous rot and pleasure, ultimately means much to Webster. "Sweetmeats" get to the heart of the warped pleasure of revenge found within Webster's plays, where *schadenfreude* and sadism characterize revenge's consumption of dead bodies. It is not for nothing that revenge, and sin more generally, is described as "Thrice candied o'er" (5.6.60) or sugar-coated. If revenge is a "sweetmeat that rots the eater," then what becomes of the consumers of tragedies of revenge? That is, do the sweet pleasures of violence rot their audience consumers?

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[14] For instance, Thomas Adams' sermon, "The white devil, or The hypocrite vncased," published in the same year as Webster's *The White Devil*, discusses the contemporary "white devils" in London, or the consummate hypocrites, as tricking and exploiting others, among other things.

"I'll find in thee a pothecary's shop": Medical Poisons

In trying to determine how Webster imagined his spectacles to interact with its potentially poisonous consumers, it would be useful to begin with his many references to poison as treatment found within the play itself. Does he represent his own play as being a kind of poison, one that might spread off the stage, or does this relationship exist only in criticism of the play? Throughout *The White Devil,* Webster refers to poisoned physic so often that it is the play's central motif. The play's first figure is of the imported physic, mummia, made from the very dust of decayed bodies from the ever-exotic mummies. The Count Lodovico – who will become one of the most flamboyant and sadistic revengers in the play – has been banished for his many crimes, including the "murders" he kindly refers to as "flea-bitings" (1.1.32). His friend Gasparo compares his banishment to a "vomit[ing]" from the "unnatural and horrid physic" of mummia: "Your followers / Have swallowed you up like mummia, and being sick / With such unnatural and horrid physic / Vomit you up i'th'kennel [gutter]" (1.1.15-8).[15] The strange doubling of poison and physic occurs in a variety of ways throughout the play. On the one hand, medical healers prescribe poisons to get rid of poisons. Flamineo, the "tool" character who serves as the go-between for his sister, Vittoria, and Bracciano, speaks of the utility of poisons when he decides to assume one of his many disguises during the play: "Physicians that cure poisons still do work / With counterpoisons" (3.3.59-60). He is following the "two wrongs make a right" line of thought so often parodied in revenge narratives during the time, the "harsher-the-disease the harsher-the-cure" logic Claudius

[15] Though purging was seen as one of the effective treatments of English medicine, Webster often aligns purgatives and vomit-inducing drugs with the sham operations of quack druggists. For more on "mummia" in the play, see pp. 192-193 and 217-218.

uses throughout *Hamlet.*[16] Yet, drugs are also described as being secretively poisonous. Vittoria describes the hidden treachery of Monticelso as being such a harmful product: "I discern poison / Under your gilded pills" (3.2.190-191). The play thus imagines the variety of ways poison is used medically, focusing mostly on it as a specific mineral substance, sold on a corrupt market.

The scene most chock-full of poisonous physic references occurs during Vittoria's trial. There, these "gilded pills" are related both to more general diseases and to the mineral wares sold by "physicians" and "apothecaries." In fact, the remarkable array of poisonous substances applied to Vittoria culminates with the image of the apothecary's store-house of poisons. In a fantastically rich and lengthy passage, Cardinal Monticelso pulls no stops, ransacking every poisonous figure he can think of in thirty line list of corruptions embodied in the "whore," Vittoria. Throughout the scene, Monticelso and other lawyers, in their garble of English and Latin, compare Vittoria to the plague ("*pestem mulierum corruptissimam*" (3.2.9-10)), sweetmeats, poisonous physic, and "unsavoury fruit" grown from the "warm blood manure" (187; 186). All of her individual "poisons" culminate in the figure of the "pothecary's shop" in Monticelso's lengthy tirade:

> Monticelso: Shall I expound whore to you? Sure I shall,
> I'll give their perfect character. *They are first,*
> *Sweet-meats which rot the eater*; in man's nostril
> Poisoned perfumes. They are cozening alchemy,
> Shipwrecks in calmest weather! What are whores?
> Cold Russian winters, that appear so barren,
> As if that nature had forgot the spring.
> They are the true material fire of hell,
> *Worse than those tributes i'th'Low Countries paid,*
> *Exactions upon meat, drink, garments, sleep*;

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[16] See Chapter 2, p. 105.

Ay, even on man's perdition, his sin.
They are those brittle evidences of law
Which forfeit all a wretched man's estate
For leaving out one syllable. What are whores?
They are those flattering bells have all one tune,
At weddings, and at funerals; your rich whores
Are only treasuries by extortion filled,
And emptied by cursed riot. *They are worse,*
Worse than dead bodies, which are begged at gallows
And wrought upon by surgeons to teach man
Wherein he is imperfect. What's a whore?
She's like the guilty counterfeited coin
Which, whosoe'er first stamps it, brings in trouble
All that receive it.
Vittoria: This character scapes me.
Monticelso: *You, gentlewoman?*
Take from all beasts, and from all minerals,
Their deadly poison.
Vittoria: Well, what then?
Monticelso: I'll tell thee;
I'll find in thee a pothecary's shop
To sample them all (78-105, italics mine).

Dramatically punctuated with the angrily repeated, "What's a whore?," Monticelso furthers the idea that Vittoria's corruption threatens the entire community in this remarkable character description.[17] Yet, the "whore" takes on more surprising characteristics than what we would expect of the normal attacks on "disease-bearing females," like Hamlet's attacks on Gertrude in the closet scene in his play. Webster places medical scams and petty extortions front and center. Moreover, extorters and extortions unite in the twisted agency of these listed items. The whore is at once the sweetmeat that rots the eater *and* the storehouse that becomes rotten by taking sweetmeats.

[17] Webster was notably skilled at these "Character" sketches. In fact, the character sketches of the hypocrite and actor published in Sir Thomas Overbury's books of Characters are identified as Webster's. Overbury, incidentally, was infamously poisoned with sulfuric acid and copper vitriol by his angry ex, Frances Howard, and an apothecary, possibly in response to this poem. For more, see Sir Thomas Overbury, *A wife now the widow of Sir Thomas Ouerburie …* (London: Printed by T. C[reede] for Lawrence Lisle, and are to be sold at his shop in Paules Church-yard, at the Tygres-head, 1614).

The abuses figured in Vittoria belong to the realm of medicine. "Sweet-meats," the first item on the list, were in fact not only a form of dessert, but were ambiguously charged drugs sold by apothecaries, who were at once confectioners and makers of drugs.[18] The term sweetmeat included sugared pastries and cakes, and some combination of either honey or the highly fashionable commodity, sugar, with seeds, herbs, nuts, or fruits.[19] Sugar and honey were both preservatives,[20] and sugar, taken by itself in all its sticky sweetness, had been used medicinally for at least as early as Theocratus' mentioning of it 371 BCE.[21] The idea that the sweetmeat combined something rotten or poisonous with something medicinal goes against our contemporary ideas of sugar and fruit, as we typically identify sugar as unhealthy and fruit as healthy. In the early modern period, however, sugar was known for its preservative qualities: for being a substance that artificially prolonged the life of the out-of-season fruit, rotting within its sugary case.

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[18] Much of my background of apothecaries comes from Penelope Hunting, *A History of the Society of Apothecaries* (London: Society of the Apothecaries, 1998).

[19] The first recorded use of "sweetmeat" was in the sixteenth century (circa 1600). Interestingly, the first figurative use of "sweetmeats" mentioned in the OED only dates to Ness' 1690 use, though the figurative uses, as we will see in this play alone, were already rampant. "sweetmeat, *n*." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press. March 2015. Web. 20 April 2015.

[20] Domestically produced honey was seen as far inferior to the new market for sugar; apothecaries in France only sold sugar to people of a certain rank, reserving honey for the lower classes. See Maguelonne Toussaint-Samat's *A History of Food: A New Expanded Edition,* Trans. Anthea Bell (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2009) 491-514 for a helpful overview on the differences between honey and sugar; P.W. Hammond's *Food and Feast in Medieval England* (Gloucestershire: Sutton Publishing, 2005) thoroughly analyzes the various kinds of sugars imported from the fourteenth through sixteenth century.

[21] Toussaint-Samat, *A History*, 497; the species name of sugar also derives from the drug dispensaries where it was sold (*officinarum*).

Fruit – ripening and rotting before consumption – was likewise understood as putrifying parts of the human body, especially the humors, so it was avoided during illnesses and epidemics. Not just the composition, but the effect of the sweetmeat was understood be a combination rottenness and health. It was medicinal, yet also was notorious for rotting teeth.[22] Vittoria, as such a sweetmeat, could be understood as mixing corruption with beauty, sickness with health, on multiple levels: in her internal composition, and in her relationship to the outside world.

"Sweetmeat" also carried with it obvious sexual connotations. Its phallic proverbial use "With sweetmeats comes the sour sauce" pits the immediacy of pleasure against the long-term, negative effects of living luxuriously.[23] Yet, oddly, Monticelso does not exactly draw on the figure's relationship to rotten, corrupted sexuality, and instead places it within a very medical context. Whores are "cozening alchemy," dead bodies stolen "by surgeons" for dissection in their anatomical theaters, the "deadly poison[s]," of apothecaries. These corrupt marketplaces of "health and wealth" may not be obvious choices for emblems of the licentiousness, and perhaps are more identifiable

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[22] The connection between the consumption of sugar and sweetmeats and rotting teeth was well-known in the period. Thomas Dekker speaks of the "poore rotten-tooth'd Comfit-maker in *A strange horse-race at the end of which, comes in the catch-poles masque* (London: ,Printed by Nicholas Okes for Ioseph Hunt, 1613). Shakespeare uses sweetmeats twice in his oeuvre; and in one of the cases he refers to the tooth-decay of the female consumers of sweetmeats, in Mercutio's fantastic Queen Mab speech: "O'er ladies lips, who straight on kisses dream / Which oft the angry Mab with blisters plagues, / Because their breaths with sweetmeats tainted are" (*Romeo and Juliet*, 1.4.551-3). (His other use of sweetmeats occurs in *Midsummer Night's Dream*, as Egeus mentions scornfully the lover's trading of "knacks, trifles, nosegays," and other knick-knacks, (1.1.26)).

[23] We find the maxim all over the texts of the period. The phrase also related to "one's man's meat is another man's poison."

as figures of hypocrisy.[24] Monticelso's list seems to run across a demonic trade route, notably reaching Russia before taking on the broader landscapes of hell and currency in general, moving associatively from one figure to the next as if enacting the very kind of contagious spreading he describes in the text. Yet, there is also something remarkably petty and small in these minor extortions of base merchants. These poisonous pleasures may threaten boundaries in a larger than life fashion from one world to the next ("They are the true material fire of hell"). But they also exact payment piecemeal on regular bodily functions ("meat, drink, garments, sleep"), cruel by being insistently minor and exact ("Which forfeit all a wretched man's estate / For leaving out one syllable"). These corruptions of varying scale are united in their monetary exploitations. This is above all an economic breakdown, where the hidden consequences of sex ("it rots the eater"), weighed alongside its more immediate allures and pleasures ("sweet," "perfuming," "cozening," and "flattering"), always leads to a net loss for the purchaser. As an unregulated vendor of poison, Vittoria is thus easily aligned to the commonplace vendors of poison, the apothecaries. In fact, the most damning evidence brought against Vittoria refers once again to the apothecary. Monticelso brings before the court a letter detailing Vittoria's and Bracciano's lusty escape to "an apothecary's summer-house / Down by the river Tiber" (194-5).

The apothecary's shop represents more than Vittoria's body or the specific site of her dalliances. It is shorthand for mercantile duplicity. In this scene alone, nearly every

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[24] And, as R.W. Dent points out in *John Webster's Borrowings* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1960) "only a few of the twelve figures involve any likeness to the whore beyond the threat to health and wealth," 104.

character accuses their opponents as being apothecary-like or poison-dealing, with Vittoria herself hurling the same insult back at Monticelso and Francisco, claiming that they corruptly use "envenom'd pothecary[s]" (67-8) to do their bidding. She accuses Francisco of giving her poison disguised as medicine when he feigns pity at her distress (the already cited, "I discern poison / Under your gilded pills" (190-1)). She likewise critiques the Lawyer's insistent use of Latin as being particularly apothecary-like.[25] To Vittoria, the Lawyer spews verbal vomit of his own "undigestible" words, as if he "hath swallowed / Some pothecary's bills, or proclamations" (35-8). Regurgitation once again calls to mind the play's first medical metaphor of the "horrid physic" of mummia. Lawyers, like apothecaries, are comically ineffective at their best, poisonous and pernicious at their worst.

This scene in fact splits the play into two halves, that roughly divide based on which "team" actively uses poison to further their ends. Vittoria's trial is the structural mid-point in Webster's "mosaic"-like, meandering plot, which itself originated from the well-known, real-life story of the Duke of Bracciano and Vittora Accoramboni.[26] The first part of the play focuses on the start and consummation of Bracciano and Vittoria's

[25] This association of Latin with deceptive (and poisonous) language certainly calls to mind the Latinate Catholic mass. Catholic sacraments and rituals become the vehicles for poisoning in this play, as in Isabella's poisoned idolatry (pp.) and the fake anointing of the sick in Bracciano's poisoning (pp).

[26] See Charles Forker, *The Skull beneath the Skin: The Achievement of John Webster* (Carbondale: SIU Press, 1986) for a good overview of the historical narrative, and Robert William Dent, *Webster's Borrowing* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1960) for a thorough analysis of Webster's sources. For Webster as a mosaic and "blurred" playwright, see J.A. Symond's introduction in *Webster and Tourneur: Volume 12 of The Mermaid Series: The Best Plays of the Old Dramatists* (London, T.F. Unwin, 1888). As Moore points out in *Critical Heritage,* T.S. Eliot picks up on Symond's observation in finding Webster to be directed towards chaos.

love affair, arranged by her brother, Flamineo, while the second shows the subsequent revenges on the pair by the relatives of their murdered spouses, Francisco and Lodovico largely at the head of the charge. During the trial, Vittoria's character and medical poisons are brought into focus, and the overlap is not entirely coincidental. Vittoria, like the poisons listed by Monticelso, powerfully contains many opposing attributes at once, though of course Monticelso only understands these metaphors of poisons to be uniformly bad. At least for the audience, however, this overlap prevents us from too quickly assuming that poisonous pills, sweetmeats, and the like are *only* rotten, just as Vittoria is not some flat villain, but the center of the play.

Moreover, this concentrated focus on poison and identity at the mid-point reflects a major shift in characterization and plot. While the first half of the play aligned Vittoria, Bracciano, Flamineo, and their gang with poison, the second half showcases the huge arsenal of specifically-named poisons used by Francisco, Lodovico, and their followers. The poisonous power of Vittoria transfers to her adversaries in the frenzied murders of the finale. Ultimately, Flamineo's statement cited earlier on the usefulness of counterpoisons to treat poisons can be applied to the play on many levels. Vittoria's character, the play's revenges and murders, and the play's effect on the audience: all might be read as "sweet-meats which rot the eater." All may combine very different things together, and may be understood as simultaneously spreading pleasure and disease in their transformative power.

"One in the habit of a Conjurer": Mixed Medical Identities in Court

Webster's persistent identification of poisons with apothecaries was not coincidental. The selling of medicinal poisons was increasingly associated during the

period with the apothecaries, the so-called "Physician's Cook[s]" and "ointment-makers" who regulated the purification, dispensing, compounding, and selling of drugs.[27] As a professional group, however, the outlines between physician and apothecaries were only beginning to become sharpened. "The Worshipful Society of Apothecaries of London" did not become its own guild until 1617, when it formally separated from the prosperous Grocer's guild. Both groups originally came from the fourteenth century "Pepperers" of London's Soper's Lane, which formed in response to the rapidly expanding spice and sugar trade. The group organized spicers, pharmacists, and apothecaries into what would become one of the major guilds of England, the Grocer's Company.[28] What goods the apothecaries had jurisdiction over was the perennial question. The term "apothecary," from Latin *apotheca,* or store house, and the Greek *ἀποτιθέ-ναι*, to lay aside, simply refers to the keeper of a store of goods.[29] These warehouses originally stored imported wines, spices, and herbs, though this collection was nearly always varied and changing.[30]

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[27] "Physician's Cook" comes from William Bullein's *Bulleins bulwarke of defe[n]se* (London: Ihon Kyngston, 1562). John Cotta defines the apothecary as one who "command[s] and direct[s] their [the drug's] prudent vse" in his *A short discouerie of the vnobserued dangers* (London: Imprinted [by R. Field] for William Iones, and Richard Boyle dwelling in the Blacke-Friers, 1612).

[28] After forming first a religious fraternity for St. Anthony (1345), the Pepperers exchanged their name-sake, the much-hoarded, medicinal spice popularly imported from India, for that of the "grocer," from the weighing of heavy goods "in gross" (by a weight of 112 pounds), organizing themselves as the Grocer's Company (1373). Hunting, *A History of the Society* and John Benjamin Heath *Some account of the Worshipful Company of Grocers of the City of London* (London: Privately Printed, 1869).

[29] "apothecary, n." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, March 2015. Web. 20 April 2015.

[30] Hunting, *A History of the Society*.

For seventeenth century apothecaries, the challenge in shaping an identity separate from the grocers lay in proving that certain products required expert regulation, dispensing, and preparation that uniquely belonged to them. That is, they needed to demonstrate that the cosmetics, perfumes, and spices sold in the apothecary shops on the famous Bucklersbury Lane could become potentially dangerous if put in the wrong hands. How could one designate the proper "authority" over this hodgepodge of items, from confections to arsenic? Both prominent grocers and the new, would-be differentiated apothecaries competed over items that fell on the boundary between basic foodstuff and medicine, each trying to levy monopolies over the other.[31] Both used the threat of accidental poison to leverage their side against the other. Ultimately, for the apothecaries, poison was a substance that best demonstrated their unique contribution to the medical groups of England. As a remarkably dangerous substance, poisons needed expert handling. One might speak negatively of the "venomed pothecary," but it was this venom that brought the group part of their reason for being.

As we have seen, the use of poison in treating poisonous diseases was far from uncontroversial. The riskiness of the cure, the debated mechanisms of action, and the potential amplification of the poisonous disease were called upon by skeptics. Webster skewers the "venomed pothecaries" as a group with base motivations as we saw above.

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[31] After the company's organization, the grocers demanded a monopoly in 1619 over a huge list of wares now part of the newly chartered apothecaries' territory, including perfumes, rose-water, distilled-waters, arsenic, treacle, liquorice, and the newly popular tobacco. King James continued to support the apothecaries against the City authorities, the grocers, and even the complaining distillers, druggists, and confectioners of the City who were not ready to pay financial dues to the new organization. The battle continued, and the apothecary's position was not truly secure until they were able to afford their own Hall in 1632. Hunting, *A History of the Society.*

Characters use them to represent medical dishonesty and exploitation. Yet, Webster goes even further than refer to apothecaries metaphorically. He represents a huge variety of healers onstage. As a result, a community of grotesque, healthcare professionals emerges, with caricature-level details.

Before the trial scene, when both sides accuse the other of being apothecary-like, many of these swindling competitors have appeared on the stage, operating primarily for profit. Bracciano hires Doctor Julio to murder his wife, Isabella, through poison. Already well-known for his peculiar and creative poisonings, we might expect Webster to call him an apothecary, like the many other drug-making, deceptive, and poisonous apothecaries mentioned in the trial scene.[32] Yet, Webster seems to go out of his way to insist that, while a drug-maker, Julio plays many other medical roles. Flamineo playfully addresses Julio's loathsome nature as they plot to kill Isabella:

> Doctor Julio: Your secretary is merry, my lord.
> Flamineo: O thou cursed antipathy to nature! Look, his eye's bloodshed like a needle a chirurgeon stitcheth a wound with. Let me embrace thee, toad, and love thee. O thou abominable loathsome gargarism, that will fetch up lungs, lights, heart, and liver, by scruples (2.1.301-306).

Webster allows Flamineo to continue his anti-medical rant by using the "chirurgeon" metaphor. He also adds to the multiple roles of the Doctor – he is not a surgeon, but his eyes contain traces of the surgeon. Toadish, one of the many creatures of "poison," the Doctor basely plays whatever medical roles he can. Like Monticelso's whore, Flamineo's Doctor profits through a perverse usury, where, "by scruples" he consumes a body piecemeal, from organ to organ, "lungs, lights, heart, and liver": scruples referring both to small bits and to an apothecary's measure of weight. In addition to this kind of

[32] See pp. 201-202 for an account of Julio's poisoned fart.

swindling, the doctor is an infection, that onomatopoeic gargling, throat disease of pigs: an "abominable loathsome gargarism." Doctor Julio thus encompasses many of the unique harms of the medical community: the surgeon's needles, the apothecaries' poisons and perfumes, and the physician's diagnoses of the various diseases.

One might find all of these creatures of greed and poison to represent perversion and corruption, where poison reads in the fully negative sense. Medical poisoners are "othered" in this reading, a foreign source of poison. Since the story is so overtly set in a Catholic Italy, the whole play itself might be read as representing to English audiences the decadence and danger of its religious competitor. In fact, Webster focuses so much on the infectious, exotic others of the play that he digresses from the main plotline to do so. In fact, Webster stages the murders of Vittoria's and Bracciano's spouses at a remarkable distance, drawing more dramatic attention to the medical poisoners and their various identity anxieties than to the represented murders of the innocent spouses.

Camillo and Isabella, the two murdered spouses, are killed onstage, though in an overtly meta-theatrical manner. That is, rather than dramatize their murders the same plane of mimetic verisimilitude, Webster shows it as a kind of play-within-a-play. Another medical figure – an unnamed "Conjurer" – appears before Bracciano to re-present the murders as two dumb shows, complete with instrumental music. Bracciano and the Conjurer also serve as spectators, particularly vicious ones at that (on his wife's death, Bracciano gleefully exclaims, "Excellent, then she's dead" (2.2.24)). Before presenting the dumb shows of murder, the Conjurer warms himself up like any good performer. Yet, he launches into a bizarre account of the various kinds of magicians and medical authorities, comparing the "art" of each one to his own "art." Professional

identity and its perversions are crucial to this seemingly digressive satire of the magician-physicians and their "juggling" practices:

> Bracciano: Now, sir, I claim your promise. 'Tis dead midnight,
> The time prefixed to show me by your art
> How the intended murder of Camillo
> And our loathèd Duchess grow to action.
> Conjurer: *You have won me by your bounty to a deed*
> *I do not often practice*; *some there are,*
> *Which by sophistic tricks aspire that name*
> *Which I would gladly lose, of nigromancer;*
> As some that use to juggle upon cards,
> Seeming to conjure, when indeed they cheat;
> Others that raise up their confederate spirits
> 'Bout wind-mills, and endanger their own necks
> For making of a squib; and some there are
> Will keep a curtal to show juggling tricks
> And give out tis a spirit; besides these,
> Such a whole ream of almanac-makers, figure-flingers,
> Fellows indeed that only live by stealth,
> Since they do merely lie about stol'n goods (2.2.1-18, italics mine).

The "conjurer" importantly defines himself against his given "name": he makes sure to let Bracciano, and the audience, know that he only conjures because of Bracciano's "bounty." What seems to be a throw-away detail in the entrance notes – *Enter Bracciano with one in the habit of a Conjurer* – turns out to be a note of crucial importance for the character. He both wears the external "habit" of a conjurer and acts by "habit." He will be yet another in the list of "necromancer[s]", "conjurers", "almanac-makers," and "figure-flingers." His hybridity – a conjurer by habit and some vague, magical/medical healer more generally – allies him with the other scammer's deceptive breaks between spectacle and substance. Yet, he insists that his "art" will differentiate him from these "fustian," Latinate tricksters.

After so many bumbling lines on the abuses of astrologers – after emptying out their performances to expose them as hollow cheats – he quickly moves to his own "art" and the subsequent dumb show that will dramatize Isabella's death:

> …Pray sit down,

> Put on this night cap, sir, 'tis charmed; and now
> I'll show you by my strong-commanding art
> The circumstance that breaks your Duchess' heart (20-3).

This anxious prelude undermines their authority of the dumb shows, filled with instrumental music and elaborate "special effects." Rather than gear up the audience (and Bracciano) for the magic of the conjurings, like Shakespeare's dramatic appeal to the imagination in the Chorus of *Henry V*, the man in the habit of a conjurer promotes weary skepticism, only barely cutting himself off and granting three unenthusiastic lines on his "strong commanding art" before he'll show it. His anxiety that his own "art" might be written off as yet another "sophistic trick" diminishes the gravity of Camillo's and Isabella's staged murders – the whole show is just another of the many "shows" without substance.[33]

So, by drawing attention to the seemingly minor distinctions of one kind of astrologer to another, Webster demystifies and satirizes the base performances of poison while voicing anxieties about identity and deception so crucial to his play of ceaseless deception. The crucial distinction of all these poisoners seems to be their outsider or foreign status – that they are allured to the court and to their unique positions for wealth alone.

Indeed, Webster's persistent use of "Doctor" in the character of Doctor Julio suggests another foreign invader. In Julio's poisonings, the greatest, continental deceiver of them all – the opulent Whore of Babylon herself, the Catholic Church – joins in with

[33] Moreover, he notably gives Bracciano a charmed "night cap" to witness the spectacle that directly recalls Flamineo's lines to the cuckolded Camillo in an earlier scene, where Flamineo tricks Camillo into granting his wife more freedom: "Camillo: Come, you know not where my nightcap wrings me. / Flamineo: Wear it i'th'old fashion, let your large ears come / through" (1.2.83-5).

the other medical contaminants of the play.[34] "Doctor," while already in use as a general term for a medical practitioner, more often referred to a teacher, coming from *docēre,* to teach, or one who has obtained a University doctorate. More to the point, theologians, especially the early Catholic Church fathers Ambrose, Augustine, Jerome, and Gregory, were the well-known "Doctors of the Church."[35] If Doctor Julio's title and the Italian setting were not enough to tip off the audience to the religious undertones, the use of Catholic rituals and sacraments to murder characters in the play surely made explicit the religious anxieties.[36] Beautiful oil paints and sacramental incense cover the sight and smell of poison in Isabella's dumb-show mediated death. These perfumes reverse the union of foul smells and poisons that is Doctor Julio's usual trade. He is known for poisoning a fart to infect Ireland, according to Flamineo ("a deadly vapour in a Spaniard's / fart that should have poisoned all Dublin" (2.1.298-299)). This treacherous Catholic influence in Ireland, savage and rank in its bestial infections, strikingly contrasts

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[34] Webster's plays struck a notably anti-Catholic chord in his own time, as made evident by the Venetian ambassador Orazio Busino's 1618 description of what was likely a revival of *The Duchess of Malfi*: "The English scoff at our religion as disgusting and merely superstitious; they never put on any public show whatever, be it tragedy or satire or comedy, into which they do not insert some Catholic churchman's vices and wickednesses, making mock and scorn of him …. And all this was acted in condemnation of the grandeur of the Church, which they despise and which in this kingdom they hate to the death," taken from Moore, *Critical Heritage*.

[35] "doctor, n." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, March 2015. Web. 20 April 2015.

[36] Webster suggestively links the Catholic jubilee selling of indulgences to the markets of sex and corruption in the same scene that features the nightcap exchange between Flamineo and Camillo (fn 38). In his quick-fire way, Flamineo shoots out "mutton," "flesh," "electuaries," "doctors," and "jubilee" in fast succession, connecting them in a blur of sex, greed, contagion, and poison: "These politic enclosures for paltry mutton / makes more rebellion in the flesh than all the provocative electuaries / doctors have uttered since last Jubilee" (1.2.90-3).

with Isabella's courtly poisoning. She enters into idolatrous territory in her portrait kissing.

> *Enter suspiciously Julio and [Christophero]. They draw a curtain where Bracciano's picture is. They put on spectacles of glass, which cover their eyes and noses, and then they burn perfumes afore the picture, and wash the lips of the picture. That done, quenching the fire, and putting off their spectacles, they depart laughing.*
> *Enter Isabella in her night-gown, as to bed-ward, with lights; … She kneels down as to prayers, then draws the curtain of the picture, does three reverences to it, and kisses it thrice. She faints, and will not suffer them to come near it; dies … She's conveyed out solemnly.* (2.2.s.d.)

Poison here is all the more deceptive, completely suffusing the scene through its perfumes and washes and threatening infection through sight, smell, and touch, the poisoners themselves needing to put on the strange gear of complicated "spectacles" protecting their eyes and noses. Yet, even though the poisoners are not using their customary "farts" to murder in a slapstick way, they still "depart laughing." This savage laughter contrasts with the Isabella's performance of selfless grace, as she protects others from her contamination. These medical parasites, foreign and poisonous, are thus not only ready to recalibrate their identities for court money: they also revel in base poisonings, and threaten to infect the court with their own pernicious poisons.

"The famine of our vengeance": Bingeing and Revenge

The medical poisons we have explored so far in the play identify poison as the "gilded pill" that disguises poison. None of the doctors, physicians, apothecaries, or conjurers give poison to cure the individual in question. Yet, the play offers a more complex appreciation of poison, as mentioned above. It may be a counterpoison designed to treat poison. Yet, poison also both rots *and* delights its consumer. For Webster, the radical power of poison lies in this disturbing entanglement of pain and

pleasure. In fact, it becomes apparent that Webster finds it impossible to separate out poison from physic in any part of the physical realm. After the conjuring scene mentioned above, the Conjurer gives a couplet that could serve as the "motto" for the whole play: "Both flowers and weeds spring, when the sun is warm, / And great men do great good, or else great harm" (2.2.56-57). Putrefaction seems underneath both the growth of beautiful flowers and the destructive weeds. In Vittoria's words after her sentencing, her brightness will shines all the more through her darkness of her imprisoning in the house of convertites: "Know this, and let it somewhat raise your spite: / Through darkness diamonds spread their richest light" (3.2.293-294). On a larger level, of course, it speaks to the play's obsessive mixture of opposite qualities. She herself is richer through her darkness.

Revenge, likened to a poisonous consumption, belongs much more to the realm of pleasure than sorrow in *The White Devil*. A delight in torture extends to all the collection of deceptive "others" we have already explored in the play, yet it also belongs to the richest, most powerful men. What is surprising is that these revengers don't see revenge in the way we might expect them too. Revenge for them is a far cry from Hamlet's imprisoning sense of duty and remembrance that so painfully erupts in his many bottled-up soliloquies and asides. In fact, revenge itself becomes likened to one of the many court luxuries that, like those pastimes, is both sweetly seductive and disgustingly destructive. Revenge is sweet enough to be its own luxury consumption, related to comedy, boredom, and art-making. Yet, none of the self-identified revengers seem to know why they yearn to kill. That a "primitive" pleasure in gore drives the sadism seems apparent in Lodovico's many references to the bloodiest kind of art-making, though he

ironically finds it to be the epitome of artistic cultivation. After he has stabbed to death Vittoria, Flamineo, and Zanche, he says that he "glories" in his "night piece."

> Lodovico: I do glory yet,
> That I can call this act mine own. For my part,
> The rack, the gallows, and the torturing wheel
> Shall be but sound sleeps to me. Here's my rest:
> I limned this night-piece, and it was my best (5.6.293-7).

Lodovico "limns" limbs and body-parts in his "night piece," the doubly suggestive "limned" evoking these body-parts of his victims and the always-deceptive paint and gild of artistic production. Earlier in the play, he likewise equates the slashing of internal organs with embroidery or lace, promising to "make Italian cut-works in their guts" (1.1.51). He continues throughout the play to worry about his aesthetic in killing, refusing to let his revenge fall into trite, predictable patterns.[37] Yet, while he kills we are exposed to an artless frenzy, as he consumes the carcasses of his "sweet" revenge:

> O could I kill you [Flamineo] forty times a day,
> And use't four year together, 'twere too little.
> Nought grieves but that you are too few to feed
> The famine of our vengeance (5.6.197-200).

That Lodovico finds murdering Flamineo a mere 57,600 times to be "too little to feed" his desire for revenge shows just how excessive and extreme this play has gotten. For Lodovico, there is no limit-point. His only calculations suggest an exponential curve zipping off into the infinite, where no amount of torture could ever satisfy this hidden need for torture. No single addition will ever fully nourish the vast "famine of our

[37] As he tells Francisco, after he and the other team of "revengers" have arrived at Bracciano's court in their disguise, he wishes for his plots to have him "recorded" in history for their ingenuity: "T'have poisoned his prayer book, or a pair of beads, / The pommel of his saddle, his looking-glass, / Or th'handle of his racket. O that, that! / That while he had been bandying at tennis, / He might have sworn himself to hell, and struck / His soul into the hazard! O my lord! / I would have our plot be ingenious, / And have it hereafter recorded for example / Rather than borrow example" (5.1.67-75).

vengeance." Revenge is a feverishly pleasurable consumption for Lodovico, ceaselessly provoking hunger like sugar.

While Lodovico kills, in part, for the pleasures of bingeing, Francisco seems generally more confused about his motivations. He, too, finds aesthetic motivations. And sure, as with Lodovico, there are technical "motives" that might make sense for the plot: he is Isabella's brother, after all. Yet, as is equally the case with Lodovico, these reasons fall flat, even to him.[38] He decides to conjure Isabella's "ghost" to help organize his revenge, fashioning it according to aesthetics:

> To fashion my revenge more seriously,
> Let me remember my dead sister's face.
> Call for her picture? No, I'll close mine eyes,
> And in a melancholic thought I'll frame
> Her figure 'fore me (4.1.95-9).

And her figure does, shockingly, enter. Yet, Isabella only stands onstage for eleven lines before Francisco commands her exit: "remove this object." While onstage, her brother only comments coolly on the skill that would be required to draw or paint this likeness of Isabella. He rejects the supernatural for a cause, finding the real cause to be "Common as sickness. 'Tis my melancholy" (105). Yet, how melancholic does Francisco seem here? If anything, he comes off as unemotional to his core: his revenge is a response to his lack of emotionality. In fact, his revenge plot opposes the solemn emotions spurred by "tombs, or death-beds, funerals, or tears":

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[38] Lodovico seems to be most inspired to revenge Flamineo after Flamineo slaps him for breaking their melancholic covenant (by laughing), rather than out of his love for Isabella. And these "revengers" do not even have full 'proof' that Bracciano arranged for Isabella's death until after his murder. When they find this fact out, and when Lodovico notes that they are now justified for their "revenge," Francisco reveals how little he cares for ethical justification. They kill for the laurel "crown" of poetry: "Tush, for justice! / What harms it justice? We now, like the partridge, / Purge the disease with laurel: for the fame / Shall crown the enterprise, and quit the shame" (5.3.266-9).

> Remove this object,
> Out of my brain with't. What have I to do
> With tombs, or death-beds, funerals, or tears,
> That have to meditate upon revenge?
> [*Exit Ghost*]
> …Come, to this weighty business.
> My tragedy must have some idle mirth in't …(4.2.109-112; 115-6).

In effect, Francisco's boredom gives birth to his revenge "play" that is equal parts tragic and mirthful. Violence helps pass the time, alleviating the *ennui* of a bored, wealthy courtier. It is an "idle" pleasure: empty, vain, and frivolous.[39] Unlike the sweetmeats of Lodovico's revenge, ceaselessly inciting a binge-like desire, Francisco's dramatic productions deceive and kill through their dispassionate calculations of equal parts pleasure and pain. While Lodovico cannot stop laughing throughout the play, Francisco places the laughter of "idle mirth" into his script for revenge.

Their revenge against Bracciano is the second, heavy-handed Catholic poisoning of the play. To start, the revengers, having entered Bracciano's court disguised as Moors, secretly poison his beaver. This poison is seeringly hot: Bracciano runs onstage, screaming that his "brain's on fire" (5.3.4). Once the physicians assure him that his infection is "mortal," Bracciano speaks in the heroic vein of Webster's most dazzling characters. He defiantly affirms himself and his love in the face of total destruction. He calls Vittoria to his side and, rather than regret his involvement with this "lower" class woman and her family, he affirms her once again above all else: "Had I infinite worlds / They were too little for thee. Must I leave thee?" (5.3.17-18). Bracciano's love for Vittoria becomes worthy of admiration precisely because it strives to break any containing bounds. Unlike the sham forms of the revengers, that secretly break

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[39] Indeed, "idle" is the key word here; he calls both Isabella's ghost and his questioning of it an "idleness": "How idle am I / to question mine own idleness!" (107-8).

boundaries in a foreign infiltration, Bracciano directly declares his boundary-breaking, dangerously infectious love. For all its pig-headedness and stupidity, Bracciano's love for Vittoria stands against the falsely pious systems of staged humility and performed purity.[40] He defies all; as he says to Francisco early on, even if Vittoria is a "whore," Bracciano will affirm her as his own. Bracciano now seems to be at his best; and, before the disguised Capuchins of the order of St. Francis enter, decked in their sharpest-pointed friar's hoods, we also think to have seen our last of Bracciano.

Instead, Bracciano dies a depraved death, not heading toward the infinite with a rough-bearded, flaming comet overhead,[41] but in a much more dismal fashion, becoming less coherent, laughing, and then simply screaming for help. We get a first glimpse of this in the changing valence of "infinite." Whereas Bracciano's defiantly boundary-smashing love for Vittoria offers "infinite worlds" in its infinite desires, he suddenly becomes frightened at the sight of the entering friars.

> BRACCIANO: What are those?
> FLAMINEO: Franciscans.
> They have brought the extreme unction.
> BRACCIANO: On pain of death, let no man name death to me.
> It is a word infinitely terrible (36-9).

In a phenomenal act of cowardice, Bracciano's fear of death has translated the infinite worlds of his imagination into infinite terrors, as he now uses his power over the physical bodies of his subjects to alleviate the lack of power he holds over his own.

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[40] The first time the two are seen together onstage, Bracciano promises to break all legal, political, religious, and social lines in his total admiration for Vittoria: "I'll seat you above law and above scandal, / Give to your thoughts the invention of delight / And the fruition; …/ you shall to me at once, / Be dukedom, health, wife, children, friends, and all" (1.2.252-4; 256-7).

[41] He speaks of the "rough-bearded comet" (30) that "Stares" on his departues, recalling Vittoria's identification as a "blazing star" during her trial.

The grotesque sham ritual that follows evokes humor in its flattened-out, stock characterizations of poisoning, revenging "Catholics." Once again, the scene is focused on the poisoner's identity rather than the victim. The suspense builds towards the final revelation of the poisoners' identities. When Lodovico and company finally uncover their identities, pulling back their pointed hoods, they gloat over the dying Bracciano. Their "devilsh pothecary stuff" (159) is at work, transforming Bracciano into the "stink" of a "dead fly-blown dog" (163). Their pleasure is unmistakable as they relish the long-awaited moment of recognition.

> *Here, the rest being departed, Lodovico and Gasparo discover themselves*
> Gasparo: Bracciano
> Lodovico: Devil Bracciano, thou art damn'd.
> …
> Gasparo: Now there's mercury –
> Lodovico: And copperas –
> Gasparo: And quicksilver –
> Lodovico: With other devilish pothecary stuff,
> A-melting in your politic brains. Dost hear?
> Gasparo: This is count Lodovico.
> Lodovico: This, Gasparo.
> And thou shalt die like a poor rogue.
> Gasparo: And stink
> Like a dead fly-blown dog.
> Lodovico: And be forgotten
> Before thy funeral sermon.
> Bracciano: Vittoria! Vittoria! (148-149;158-165)

The rapid exchange between the disguised Lodovico and Gasparo quickens the pace, the eagerness of their torture evident in the rising energy of interruption and addition. In a sadistic glee, they don't want to end the fun in constructing this building list of abuses and gross things – "And x", "And y" – as their revenge takes on the very binging gluttony of lechery and luxury they condemn in Bracciano.[42] Once again, the mythic collapses into

[42] Indeed, in the excised lines, they refer to Bracciano's former poisonous pleasures: his "art was poison," his "villainous sallets," and "perfumes / Equally mortal with a winter's plague." Note how Bracciano's luxurious and lecherous poisons are now replaced by the mineral poisons the revengers administer.

the quotidian in Bracciano's dehumanizing torture and murder as dramatic tension centers on poisonous murderers rather than pallid victims.

"To show his teeth": The Cruelty of Pleasure

Behind the joy of revenge is the sense that *all* pleasure might in fact come from a sadistic place. Lodovico recognizes a cruelty behind laughter itself: "What a strange creature is a laughing fool, / As if man were created to no use / But only to show his teeth" (3.3.80-83). Any emotion seems suspect in *The White Devil* to expose some secret kernel of sadism – and this almost anthropological account of the showing of teeth in laughter highlights the cruelty and animal competition found in comedy.

So too do the other "drives" of court pleasures rely on pain. Erotic desire is argued by some in the play to increase with limitation and, indeed, pain. Pleasure becomes a function of pain and difficulty, where the more effort required and the more pain experienced, the more desire overwhelms the seemingly masochistic, would-be lover. In Flamineo's words:

> O they [women] are politic; they know
> our desire is increased by the difficulty of enjoying, where a satiety
> is a blunt, weary and drowsy passion. If the buttery-hatch at court
> stood continually open there would be nothing so passionate
> crowding, nor hot suit after the beverage (1.2.20-4).

This crowding drive for sex, like that geared towards revenge, seems weariless in Webster's play. Pleasure arrives from difficulty, or the erotic "chafing" in Antonelli's perfuming account of pleasure ("Perfumes the more they are chafed the more they render / Their pleasing scents" (1.1.47-48)). If constraint spurs the hunger for revenge and sex, it incites a hunger that is impossibly huge.

These drives for sweetmeats, sex, and violence all play on the hidden bestial components of the supposedly "cultivated" courtiers. Throughout, men describe the secret desires of women as being ravenous: they can barely contain their animal-like lust. Women are constantly called wolves in their intense sexual desire, as the wolf, ravenously insatiable, was known for prolonging the torturous end of its prey in an attempt to elongate the pleasure of consumption.[43] Zanche, Flamineo's Moorish lover, has a sexuality that, stronger than Flamineo's, threatens to overwhelm and consume him in its poisonous excesses.[44] These women, "cursed dogs" are "let loose at midnight" to feed on their lovers in their night-time lust:

> Women are like cursed dogs: civility keeps them tied all daytime, but they are let loose at midnight; then they do most good or most mischief (1.2.187-189).

Female treachery, barely contained in this "black" devil, is equally wolf-like and all-consuming in the "white devil," whose alluring power either completely raises man to a god-like stature or debases him fully.

Webster connects these female and animal forces of revenge, sex, and beauty to even vaguer forces of the world. Fate is an equally bitchy female: a whore, finicky and unreliable, and another ravenous dog. At the play's end, as the revengers at last prepare to kill Vittoria, Flamineo, and Zanche, Flamineo delivers one of the most memorable, and original maxims of the play, on this (literally) bitchy consumer of man: "Fate's a spaniel,

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[43] According to Edward Topsell's *Historie of Four-footed Beasts…* (London: Printed by William Iaggard, 1607), wolves need to kill enough sheep to form a huge, heaping pile of their dead bodies out of this boundless desire to feed: "not because hee feareth the ouer-liuers wil tel tales, but for that his insatiable mind thinketh he can neuer bee satisfied."

[44] In his words, "I do love her, just as a man holds a wolf by the ears. But / for fear of her turning upon me, and pulling out my throat, I would let her go to the devil" (5.1.148-150).

/ We cannot beat it from us" (5.6.176-177). The feminine designation is not just a convention. Like his lover, Zanche, who won't be commanded (or beaten) away from him, Fate ceaselessly consumes her lover, one life-expending orgasm at a time. Violence and sexuality unify, in the attempted "beatings" of the clingy lover and the corrosive consumptions of the doubly charged "dying." Lodovico likewise compares fate to the ever-present ravenousness of a whore, who only gives "in small parcels" at random.[45] This whorish Fortune is wolf-like in her consumptions: "Your wolf no longer seems to be a wolf / Than when she's hungry" (1.1.8-9). Wolves of desire and fate are feminine in their destructions: at least, according to the men of the play.

"To be made sweet" : The decaying body as a sweetmeat

These female-like desires for sex and violence finally are revealed to be spreading infections within the body. A "wolf" also referred to an ulcer. Flamineo compares himself to a "wolf" within a woman's body that has been treated with externally applied "poultry": "… like a wolf in a woman's breast, I have been fed with poultry" (5.3.54-55). The line directly refers to Flamineo's relative powerlessness in the court, despite his helpfulness in arranging things for Bracciano and Vittoria. Much as the internal corrosions of the "wolf" are only "fed poultry" on the surface, Flamineo feels his benefits have been surface-level only. On a larger level, the wolfish ulcer and poultry treatment call attention to an animality that hides within the now-de-familiarized human body.

Animal disease also takes a central role in Webster's second tragedy, *The Duchess of Malfi.* In this case, Bosola, the play's Flamineo figure, meditates on the basic

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[45] This line recalls the small parcel extortions of Monticelso's whore, pp. 191-192, and Flamineo's Doctor Julio, p. 197.

materiality of the body that yokes together humans with the other dying things of the world.[46] The body is the greatest deceiver of all, more than all of the perfumes and paintings of the plays. As he teases an old "painted" hag, Bosola de-familiarizes himself, and his audience, to the body's secret economies of consumption: the slow subtractions of flesh from animal-like diseases, microscopic creatures, and the great Decayer, Time herself. The "ripeness" is all, as the very rot of external forms literally "sweeten" through putrefaction:

> I do wonder you do not
> loathe yourselves. Observe my meditation now:
> What thing is in this outward form of man
> To be beloved? …
> But in our own flesh, though we bear diseases
> Which have their true names only ta'en from beasts,
> As the most ulcerous wolf, and swinish measle;
> Though we are eaten up of lice and worms,
> And though continually we bear about us
> A rotten and dead body, we delight
> To hide it in rich tissue. All our fear,
> Nay, all our terror, is lest our physician
> Should put us in the ground, to be made sweet (2.1.39-40; 48-56).[47]

The sweetmeat is now not just the "whore" or the desire for revenge: it is literally the rotting meat of the decaying human body, "made sweet" through its underground ripening. We inhabit a form that is "rotten and dead," that "continually" is "eaten up of lice and worms." Like out-of-season fruit, our bodies inevitably march towards increasing "sweet[ness]" through putrefaction.[48] The body "sweetens" more as it dies.

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[46] In *The Duchess of Malfi*, this figure of the internal "wolf" within the human body becomes literalized, when Ferdinand thinks he has transformed into a wolf after he has had his sister killed, and is diagnosed with lycanthropy.

[47] All citations taken from John Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi* in *The Duchess of Malfi and Other Plays: The White Devil, The Duchess of Malfi, The Devil's Law-Case, and A Cure for a Cuckold*, Ed. René Weis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) 104-200.

Yet, as sugar preserves fruit in a syrupy artificiality, so too the "rich tissue[s]," and cosmetic paintings and perfumes momentarily obscure the dying, rotting thing underneath. The play's poisoners – female, foreign, Catholic, and medical – are just as animal as the noblest courtier. The only things that differentiates one "rotten and dead body" from another are the "outward form[s]", only falsely distinct. For all the specific attempts made by various healers and revengers to distinguish a unique identity, all is leveled in Bosola's "loath[ing]" account of humanity.[49]

In *White Devil*, Webster also dramatizes this springing of life out of death in the second of his play's quasi-ghosts. While Francisco commands and demystifies the first ghost as "common," the second ghost appears to Flamineo as if out of a book of emblems. Bracciano, recently murdered, suddenly appears before Flamineo, wearing a long, leather cassock robe and hooded cowl of some unidentified monastic order and holding a "pot of lily-flowers." As Flamineo questions his deceased master about his current whereabouts ("In what place art thou? in yon starry gallery?"), Bracciano suddenly scoops up the soil and dirt underneath the lily and throws it in Flamineo's face. Now covered in dirt, Flamineo sees an eyeless, grinning skull, once obscured by the rank manure now staining Flamineo's body.

> *Enter Bracciano's Ghost, in his leather cassock and breeches, boots; [and] a cowl; [in his hand] a pot of lily-flowers, with a skull in't.*
> …
> Flamineo: In what place art thou? In yon starry gallery,

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[48] Moreover, in *The Duchess of MAlfi*, Bosola figures out that the Duchess is pregnant by feeding her apricots grown in a putrefying garden. The ripe fruit, with all of its rotten vapors, seems to be the force that unsettles her stomach, and hurries her labor.

[49] In Flamineo's terms, "these perfumed gallants" are equally as diseased and rotting as the smelly lower-class servants, and "Their satin cannot save them" (5.1.160).

> Or the cursèd dungeon? No? Not speak?
> Pray, sir, resolve me, what religion's best
> For a man to die in? …
> Not answer? Are you still, like some great men
> That only walk like shadows up and down,
> And to no purpose? say.
> *The Ghost throws earth upon him and shows him the skull*
> What's that? O fatal! He throws earth upon me.
> A dead man's skull beneath the roots of flowers.
> …
> He's gone; and see, the skull and earth are vanished.
> This is beyond melancholy (5.4.199 s.d.;123-6;129-133;138-9).

The revelation of the skull beneath the dirt wordlessly answers Flamineo's imploring questions about the afterlife: like Bosola's "dead and rotting body" sweetening in the burial ground, the hidden, gleaming bones of the flower pot secretly corrupt the flesh. This is the hidden source of poison within every man and woman – the source of the disease that ceaselessly spreads and multiplies through the stuff of our body. Poisonous stenches – farts, bad breath, and sweaty bodies – release from a body that is already dead, the invisible forms of poison spreading out of the body's hidden caverns. No wonder bad smells fill the court air, never fully masked by perfumes and aromatic sweetmeats.[50] The human body itself becomes yet another poisonous and putrefying disease in a play already overwhelmed with rot.

"Pull out her rotten teeth": Disguised Sadism

So, what about those characters of "virtue" in the play: the long-forgotten Isabella; Vittoria's worrying mother, Cornelia; Vittoria's murdered brother, Marcello, eager to prove the "nobility" of his spirit. Are not these characters foils to the depraved poisoners and deceivers of the court?

[50] These bad smells even extend to unnamed courtiers. My favorite bad smell description is Flamineo's account of a random young Lord passing by who "smell[s] worse of sweat than an under-tennis-court-keeper" (5.1.143-144).

Indeed, critics, longing to find some solid territory in this swirling whirlpool of a play, often hold steady by grabbing onto Isabella. Like the innumerable maxims adorning the dialogue, offering their pat morals and succinct judgments, Webster might use Isabella as some yardstick by which we measure all other characters. In fact, the first adaptation of *The White Devil,* written by Nahum Tate at the turn of the eighteenth century, reorganizes the plot around Isabella. She is now the main heroine of the play, the title now *Injur'd Love: Or, The Cruel Husband. A Tragedy* (1707).[51] Tate shortens the play, simplifies its characterizations, and places Isabella's death at the text's midpoint, as the singular event that brings about the tragic fall of Bracciano. Webster's strange tragedy becomes a melodrama of Isabella's "injur'd love" – a phrase of Tate's own device. Fate's opinions in Tate's play are far from the contingent and random swoopings of Webster's bitch.[52] Indeed, after Isabella's death, the "Magician" (rather than the Conjurer in Webster's play) ends the scene with a very different vibe than his predecessor. The original couplet creates the sense of a proliferating cesspool of "weeds" and "flowers"

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[51] After its run in the seventeenth century, *The White Devil* would not be staged again until 1925. Lewis Theobald's happy-ending adaptation of *The Duchess of Malfi,* called *The Fatal Secret*, brought Webster back to the stage for the first time since the seventeenth century during its brief run in 1735. However, it wasn't until the 1850s that the *Duchess of Malfi*, revised again, became "the standard vehicle for the leading ladies of the nineteenth century," Forker, *The Skull*, 469.

[52] As such, the scene where Bracciano swears never to sleep with Isabella again is marked by "Thunder and Lightning," and the rumbling of an earthquake under the ground. Heaven makes its alliances known through these dramatic signals, and Isabella herself warns Bracciano for his own sake to avoid incitement of God's vengeance: "Nay then 'twas more than Fancy, Earth did groan / And answer'd now with Vengeance from above" (2.1, p. 18) in Nahum Tate, *Injur'd Love, or, The Cruel Husband: A Tragedy. Design'd to be Acted at the Theatre Royall* (London: Printed for Richard Wellington, 1707).

that best captures the essence of the play. Again, the lines are, "Both flowers and weeds spring, when the sun is warm, / And great men do great good, or else great harm" (2.2.56-57). In the revised form, the Magician moralizes on the fate of vice. The uninspired new title - "injur'd love – hammers home the tagline of this closet play:

> Magician: Dearly hast thou paid,
> And dearer yet shalt pay for injur'd Love,
> Wretched *Bracciano*! – Oh could'st thou foresee
> Thy own, as now, thy Dutchess Tragedy –
> But tis the Fate of Vice on shelves to run,
> And never see the Danger till done (3.1, p. 30).

Unlike Webster's dark convolutions of identity, plot, and genre, Tate enjoys his summary containing of any overwhelming energies at play. He translates the doubled "spring[ing]" of "Both flowers and weeds" from the same material stuff into clearly differentiated categories, where Vice separates from Virtue and runs headlong, and perilously, on the submerged rocks of the "shelves."[53] Vice and virtue are mutually exclusive, and vice runs itself off of the Providential map.

While Tate's crisp categories oppose Webster's almost obsessively mixed categories, we still might read Webster's Isabella as the central heroine. After all, she is one of the few characters who does not directly or indirectly kill anybody during the play. She claims to use policy only to further her wifely obedience rather than for its own pleasure.

Yet, in the scene of Isabella's greatest "self-sacrifice," her stank breath and consumption of sweetmeats suddenly appears front and center. Her medical use of sweetmeats mirrors the comparison of Vittoria to a sweetmeat by Monticelso. In fact, she

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[53] There is also the sense, in a double use of "shelves," that an all-watching Fate carefully "shelves" and organizes "Vice" in some kind of Providential plan.

and Vittoria surprisingly share this feature (at least, according to Monticelso and Bracciano). They are only two in this play of pleasure-driven consumers who are said to consume sweetmeats. In Isabella's case, her possible use is referenced just as she disowns all jealousy:

> Isabella: O my lovèd lord,
> I do not come to chide. My jealousy?
> I am to learn what that Italian means;
> You are as welcome to these longing arms
> As I to you a virgin.
> [*She tries to embrace him; he turns away.*]
> Bracciano: O, your breath!
> Out upon sweet meats and continued physic!
> The plague is in them (2.1.159-165)

Some may argue that the line reveals more about Bracciano than Isabella, and only adds to the cruelty of his unfounded rejection of his wife. But Isabella's characterization of herself suggests there may be something behind this notion that her breath reeks of plague and rotten candies. She goes on to compare herself to those unpolluted flowers of a "natural" garden. A "virgin" to other men, she offers to her husband the gentle welcome of longing arms and sweetly tasting, restorative medicines of physic and sweetmeats. That foreign, "Italian" jealousy does not even enter into her vocabulary.[54]

Yet, we are reminded at a basic level that Isabella, for all her pretensions and moralizing pronouncements, is inherently corrupted by virtue of her humanity. Like the other sweating and farting animals of Webster's play, her breath smells. As in the fashion of the whore as "Sweetmeats which rot the eater" bit, her breath reeks of tooth decay. This surprising stench also suggests, more perniciously, that plague-like poisons

[54] Even if we do take her as free from "Italian" sin and from the other base motivations of the play, something feels "off" in her expression. In Forker's words, from *The Skull*, her "unalloyed virtue in the jaundiced context of the play seems cloying and disconcertingly out of key" (268).

deceptively hide under her seemingly "sweet" advice. As such, Bracciano rejects her claims to spotless purity.

That she feeds on sweetmeats also suggests some darker, more savage hunger, like those irrepressible, wolf-like forces of all the other characters in the play. Her idolatrous devotion of Bracciano – which kills her – is said to be a feeding of Braccianos' "dead shadow," which Tate notably changes to his "loved shadow." And, during the great scene in which she "stages" a rejection of Bracciano, in front of her brother, Francisco, and Monticelso, supposedly to keep Bracciano in good terms with her family, one begins to suspect that the lady doth protest too much in her ceaseless avowals of jealousy, and in the increasing creativity of her desired revenge on that whore Vittoria.

> Isabella: O that I were a man, or that I had power
> To execute my apprehended wishes,
> I would whip some with scorpions.
> Francisco: What? Turned Fury?
> Isabella: To dig the strumpet's eyes out, let her lie
> Some twenty month's a-dying, to cut off
> Her nose and lips, pull out her rotten teeth,
> Preserve her flesh like mummia, for trophies
> Of my just anger; hell, to my affliction
> Is mere snow-water (2.1.242-250).

In her performance of jealousy, the very jealousy she disavowed earlier, that prompted Bracciano's skeptical "Out upon sweet-meats," explosively emerges in her imagined excesses of revenge. Her inventive violence dramatically disproves her earlier claim to total innocence. She not only comprehends that "Italian" word, "jealousy," but she comes up with her own tortures and exacting punishments that match only Lodovico in their relentless fury. Like Lodovico, her imagined piecemeal destruction of Vittoria knows no bounds and cannot be satisfied, moving from "eyes" to "nose," to "lips," to "teeth," and then to the very preserved dust of her flesh in the "mummia." Isabella, supposedly antithetical to poison, sadism, violence, and excess, suddenly resembles the

figure for all these things in the play. Her performance is more than a performance, commanded by no one and unnecessary in its extremity. It would be enough to swear never to sleep with Bracciano again. No surprise, then, that Tate completely excises these lines.

All of this opposes Isabella's self-fashioning. She likes to think of herself, in her self-pitying rituals of devotion, as the pure, neglected "unicorn's horn," standing at odds with her husband (that infected creature of poison, the "spider").[55] She will "charm" and contain his poison in her magical, encircling arms, and admonishes her brother's rougher terms. Before she sees Bracciano and delivers this performance of "false" jealousy, she plans to covert his sexual infections into chastity, his straying into imprisonment:

> I do beseech you [Francisco]
> Entreat him mildly; let not your rough tongue
> Set us at louder variance; all my wrongs
> Are freely pardoned, and I do not doubt,
> *As men to try the precious unicorn's horn*
> *Make of the powder a preservative circle*
> *And in it put a spider, so these arms*
> *Shall charm his poison*, force it to obeying
> And keep him chaste from an infected straying (2.1.9-17, italics mine).

Just as she imagines taking total control over Bracciano – notably "charm[ing]," "forc[ing]", and "keep[ing]" him in her grasp – she organizes and shapes the meter from a more conversational rhythm into lyrical verse with rhyming couplets: couplets that themselves dramatize her whole project of charming Bracciano back into his despised

[55] Unicorn's horn is often mentioned in Webster as a kind of "touchstone" for detecting poison, as in the *Devil's Law-Case*. He also uses as a magical detector of Chastity in the elaborate Lord Mayor's pageant he arranged in 1624. In his Monument of Gratitude, a float with a pyramids standing on top of artificial rock made of precious stones and mother of pearls, and lit with different gems, the unicorn stands next to an actor impersonating Chastity: "Next, Chastity, by her a Unicorn; showing it is guide to all other virtues, and clears the fountain-head from all poison." Taken from Charles Clode, *Memorials of the Guild of Merchant Taylors of the Fraternity of St. John the Baptist,* (London: Harrison and Sons, 1875) 607.

bird-cage. These artistic walls are meant to attract through their purity and beauty. Her aesthetic is "mild" and not entirely unsympathetic, especially in light of the real dangerous of "contagious poison" in the pox. Yet, Isabella cannot embrace the "infinite worlds" Bracciano offers Vittoria, the doubled mess of poison and cure, putrefaction and fertility that is the necessary part of their world. Her attitude, especially in light of her imagined murders, prefigures Nietzschean *ressentiment*, where her ascetic identity reflects only her inability do what she would like to do: and she rejects her own fantasies of violence and sexuality as belonging those other spider-like characters.[56] Like Max Scheler's later social analysis of *ressentiment*, Webster exposes how her unique social position makes these fantasies of violence and revenge still sharper.[57] Were she a man with resources, or were she a more powerful, alluring woman, like Vittoria, she would possibly act out many of these vicious fantasies.

Rather than revere these self-fashioned "virtuous" characters, Webster exposes them as being vicious in their twisted repressions. Indeed, we are shocked when such milquetoast characters as Cornelia and Marcello suddenly attack Zanche when they are upset about this Moor's tryst with Flamineo. The aged Cornelia herself actually runs onstage, completely at random, curses, beats Zanche, and then leaves as suddenly as she

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[56] See Chapter 1, pp. 42-45.

[57] Scheler explores *ressentiment* through gender, age, and social, class, and religious identity. As with Nietzsche, he reads *ressentiment* as a contagious poison. According to his read, the suppression of action, like Vittoria's "O that I were a man" helps expedite the rancorous conversion of poison inside the personality: "When it [*ressentiment*] occurs … it is either due to psychological contagion – and the spiritual venom of *ressentiment* is extremely contagious – or to the violent suppression of an impulse, which subsequently revolts by 'embittering' and 'poisoning' the personality" Max Scheler, *Ressentiment*, Trans. William Holdheim (New York: Schocken Books, 1972) 48.

has entered. Marcello, disgusted by his brother's lower-class, black lover, violently imagines her broken-apart body in as twisted and gory a revenge fantasy as the one imagined by Isabella:

> Marcello: She brags that you shall marry her.
> Flamineo: What then?
> Marcello: I had rather she were pitched upon a stake
> In some new-seeded garden, to affright
> Her fellow crows thence.
> …
> If I take her near you, I'll cut her throat (5.1.186-9; 191).

Death and fertility unify in the gross pleasures of Marcello's "new-seeded" garden, and he, like Isabella and Cornelia, takes pleasure most in the fantasy of creating clear signs of virtue and vice, white and black. He imagines transforming her tortured body into a signal of justice to other black "crows." While already black, he wants to make her blacker, both "pitched upon a stake" as a scarecrow, and "pitched" in the black tar of birdlime, entrapping other birds of her flock. Through their startling combinations of violence and purity, Webster's seemingly virtuous characters are revealed to be just as imaginatively vicious as those other deceptive, power-hungry characters.

"Through darkness diamonds spread their richest light" : Violence and the Stage

After exploring the sea of poisons and putrefactions in *The White Devil*, we can return to the meta-theatrical questions that started this Chapter. On one level, the critical experience of "excess" and breaking of boundaries can be better appreciated as arising from the impossibly mixed identities of seemingly oppositional categories. If Webster works to destroy the boundaries of every category within his play, it should not be terribly surprising that the play creates the illusion of spreading rot like a "moral gangrene." On another level, Webster's understanding of sadism as a universal component of humans might suggest more depraved reasons for watching a play like *The*

White Devil. If we are all like Isabella, are we simply letting the wolves of our uncultivated desires freely range during the two hours traffic of a particularly violent play? One might apply Freud and/or Bahktin, and find the play to function as a catharsis of repressed sexual and aggressive urges, or as a cultural release of subversive desires.[58] Following this twisted consumption, audiences, like Isabella, can more easily return to their daytime rituals and identifications with nobler ideals (the "unicorn's horn"). According to this reading, Webster keeps just enough of a moralizing frame and produces a veritable surfeit of moral maxims in order to let his audience feel justified in embracing the gory pleasures and dark comedies. In this account, Webster represents the moral corruptions of his poison-breathed audience to themselves, manufacturing "excess" to promote sharper containment.

Then as today, these violent "images" and spectacles threatened contagion, and dramatist apologists for the theater as equally concerned as their Puritanical brothers with the possibly contagious nature of violence.[59] Can these barely contained animals, stinking under their perfumes and sour under their sweet covers, return to those daytime

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[58] That is, we might take the Freud's use of Aristotelian "catharsis" and find this sweetness and "physic" in the audience's "release" of these pent-up, animal forces in watching some enacting of their basest desires. Along with this "free discharge" of emotions comes "sexual stimulation," according to Freud's *Psychopathic Character on the Stage* . Aside from this Freudian stimulation, the sweetness of revenge might also be the dramatic equivalent to the Bahktinian grotesque, where material, effluvia-filled bodies and a topsy-turvy blending of categories allows for a voicing of subversive ambiguities before renewing the "right-side-up" social order.

[59] See, for instance, Thomas Heywood's *An Apology for Actors in Three Books* (London: Nicholas Okes, 1612). Even in Heywood's defense, he notes the disarming power of theatrical performance to change its audience: "so bewitching a thing is lively and well-spirited action, that it hath power to new-mold the harts of the spectators, and fashion them to the shape of any noble or notable attempt."

posts, to their Isabella-like bindings and birdcages, after the enjoying the raw excesses of the stage? Did Webster capitalize on violence thoughtlessly, amplifying the "poison" of the poison-breathed multitude in the process?

In fact, Webster's misanthropic approach to audiences and masses of people, both in his diatribes against the spectators, and in Bosola's and Flamineo's "loath[ing]" accounts of humanity, suggests that his plays were not exactly designed for all the Lodovicos in the audience. In some respects, his use of gore in revenge might be said to relate to that of the supposed "father" of the revenge tragedy, Seneca. The bloodiness of Seneca's first century Roman stage and his Stoicism might seem at odds. Senceca's moral philosophy found contagion as the key not only the anger, the emotion behind revenge, but to every emotion, including mercy. His section on "Anger" in his *Moral Essays* showcases above all the spreading force of fury in its desecrations of boundaries. The anger of would-be revengers simply cannot be controlled or tamed by reason. It is a "raving impulse" that threatens total infection and conversion of the mind like poisons.[60] As a result, anger, and other passions, must be cut off. Anger threatens complete decimation of any bounds, both overwhelming the mind and the external world.[61] For all the claims to the tragic nobility of the impassioned mind, the passions only reveal

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[60] Seneca, *Moral and Political Essays,* Trans. and Ed. John Cooper and J.F. Procopé (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) 30.

[61] In his account, anger is a "plague" in its totalizing destructions: "No plague has cost the human race more dear: you will see slaughterings and poisonings, charge and sordid counter-charge in the law-courts, devastation of cities, ruin of whole nations, persons of princely rank for sale at public auction, buildings set alight and the fire spreading beyond the city-walls, huge tracts of territory glowing in flames that the enemy kindled" 18. Seneca, "On Anger," in *Moral and Political Essays,* Trans. and Ed. John Cooper and J.F. Procopé (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

humans at their basest: "But all these, no matter what lengths they go to or how wide they spread, are narrow, wretched, mean."[62]

Critics have suggested that Seneca wrote his plays of notable blood and excess precisely to show the depravity and corruption of these supposedly noble states of the mind. The proper spectator would learn through watching the disgraceful debasements of the stage just how much any emotion breaks mental stability. Rather than participate in the comic, gross energies, the audience is deeply disturbed and emotionally separated from the actions of the play.[63] As noted, Webster's first audience did not in fact enjoy these so-called "sweet revenges." According to this reading, they simply did not "get" that they were *supposed to* despise the violence: that the playhouse was a tool of instruction, a guidebook for the would-be dispassionate Stoic. So, Webster's sweet revenges thus would be taken to the extreme simply to push the pleasure of revenge too far, and to reveal its own aestheticized violence as disgusting and artless.[64] That is, Webster uses poison to "cure" the poison of the depraved multitudes.

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[62] Ibid., 41.

[63] Anne Pippin Burnett argues that Seneca instructs his audience to detach themselves from emotions by allowing to become partially caught up with the emotional experience of the play: Seneca "brings the spectator into a partial engagement with it [vengeance], stretching language and imagery to match the vicious passions of the Tantalids, so that his audience is forced to admire even what it loathes. Only after undergoing this form of 'temptation' are we allowed to use the muscles that will suppress our excitement" in *Revenge in Attic and Later Tragedy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998) 11. She contrasts her reading with that of Martha Nussbaum, who argues that Senecan spectatorship is meant to be a clinical, emotionless analysis.

[64] This kind of rejection of violence sounds similar to the amputation strategy Vittoria angrily offers to Bracciano, after he has accused her of sleeping with Francisco. In her

These readings do much to explain the bizarre anticlimaxes and evacuations (bodily and dramatic) in Webster. Yet, I think all of these interpretations fail to fully encompass what makes Webster's plays so powerfully compelling and concretely-felt. The fresh vitality of his aesthetic emerges through the powerful juxtaposition of lightness and darkness, just as his lyric flashes with sudden intrusions.[65] Webster's defiant insistence on beauty *through* poison, not in spite of it, forbids shrill moral condemnations of the entirely infected world; and, it partly makes his verse, in William Hazlitt's famous assessment, "come the nearest to Shakespear[e] of any things we have on record."[66]

Indeed, Webster's understanding of revenge, pleasure, and humanity as "sweetmeats" is not uniformly negative. Webster seems to find something beautiful in decay itself. The gory aesthetic of Webster's poem "Monumental Column" (1613) best conveys this sense. Written on Prince Henry's death, Webster describes Henry, the former warrior in France, as "fashioning death-beds" and making "Horror look lovely, when i'th'fields there lay / Arms and legs." In passages like these we find, according to Forker, "the paradoxical truth that certain 'good' traits may only be embodied or expressed through evil."[67] Here, and elsewhere, Webster allows for that strange sense of pleasure afforded from playing with our own wounds. These are the playhouse joys of

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words: "let me hear no more of you. / I had a limb corrupted to an ulcer, / But I have cut it off; and now I'll go / Weeping to heaven on crutches (4.2.117-120).

[65] In Clifford Leech's words, "Webster excels in the sudden flash, in the intuitive but often un-sustained perception" in *John Webster: A Critical Study* (London: Hogarth Press, 1952) 115.

[66] William Hazlitt, *The Collected Works of William Hazlitt: Lectures on the English poets and on the dramatic literature of the age of Elizabeth*, Volume V (London: J.M. Dent & Co, 1902) 240.

[67] Forker, *The Skull*, 190. The citation from Webster's poem was cited within Forker.

tragedy, the "love of suffering" condemned by Augustine in his *Confessions*: that pleasure in scratching raw the diseased sores of one's own heart.[68] Yet, rather than cut out this infected matter, Webster encourages us to see this infected matter as, indeed, the only place from which goodness, virtue, and beauty can arise.

In a play like the *White Devil*, the defiant vitality of Vittoria allures us, in Edmund Gosse's account, like those very deadly, disguising perfumes of the play: "The fascination of Vittoria, like an exquisite poisonous perfume, pervades the play."[69] In her trial scene, she appears both alarmingly guilty and defiantly innocent, with all her "innocence-seeming boldness," in Charles Lamb's account. We return to her final words of the trial, those words that embody that mix of dark and light, corruption and beauty so characteristic of the rest of the play: "Know this, and let it somewhat raise your spite / Through darkness diamonds spread their richest light" (3.2.293-294). Her sparkling brilliance issues from her very pettiness, jealousy, and even murderous nature. It is this heroic affirmation of the self, with all of its poisons and hypocrisies, that startles and energizes Webster's audiences. For A.J. Smith, this "refusal to capitulate in the face of death, when there's nothing to lose or gain" offers a response to the terrifying contingencies of that incomprehensible "whore," Fate, as characters "are all slashing around in the dark, to some little purpose or none."[70] It is the acidic dissolution of boundaries – the vacancies of meaning from the sea of hypocritically issued moral

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[68] See Book III in Saint Augustine's *Confessions,* Trans. William Watts (London: W. Heinemann, 1912).

[69] Edmund Gosse, *The Jacobean Poets* (London: John Murray, 1894) 170.
[70] A.J. Smith "The Power of the *White Devil*" in *John Webster: Mermaid Critical Commentaries*, Ed. Brian Morris (London: Ernest Benn, 1970) 86.

maxims – that creates the best backdrop for the creation of identity and meaning, however empty and performative both are.

Webster's characters are at their best as they face death. His plays most powerful lines are among their final ("I am Duchess of Malfi still."). With an infinite void overhead, these ambiguous characters only triumph as they affirm life, in all its terrible mixes of poison and physic, of sweetmeats and rot. Vitoria shines "through darkness" even as she, like Flamineo, dies in a "mist." Attempts to visualize the dead in Webster's play are futile: the visiting ghosts simply have no place in the living world of putrefying things. The afterlife is almost unimaginable. That we must translate the hidden world of the dead back into the language of life to make sense of its landscape is made apparent when Isabella's son, Giovanni, asks: "What do the dead do, uncle? Do they eat, / Hear music, go a-hunting, and be merry, / As we that live?" (3.2.322-4). Within this confused, ambiguous world, endings cannot be predicted from beginnings.. "Sweetmeats" both heal and poison their eaters. Whether self-proclaimed "virgins" or identified "whores," all of Webster's characters remind the audience of the mixed bag of identity. Through all the sweetness and rancor of their vital, dark energies, Webster's characters, violent and defiant, suddenly startle us with their transformations just as they face the terrible void overhead. If one feels a startling sense of contagious excess from their untimely demise, or a glimmer of recognition in their pleasurable feasts of revenge, than Webster's "flashing" aesthetic has been successful at stripping away the quotidian boundaries of the detached spectator, who now faces the image of a sweetly rotten, de-familiarized self.

Chapter 5
"I shall defile you":
Polluted Blood in Thomas Middleton's and William Rowley's *The Changeling*

Why, men of art make much of poison,
Keep one to expel another (2.2.46-47).[1]

Critics find Thomas Middleton's plays of poisonous women to operate very differently than John Webster's plays of infectious gore. While Webster earned his reputation for his excesses of violence that threatened external and meta-theatrical boundaries, Thomas Middleton was primarily found to dramatize the internal corruptions in his female-focused plays of revenge. In fact, out of his very large oeuvre, including city comedies, tragedies, masques, city pageants, poems, and prose satires, critics best remember Middleton for his dark "studies" of "depraved feminine character," found to be his "highest achievements" as a dramatist.[2] Middleton's most well-known *femmes fatales* of are the central anti-heroes of his most "sophisticated" revenge plays: Beatrice-Joanna of *The Changeling* (1622), co-authored with comic William Rowley,[3] and Bianca and

[1] All citations from *The Changeling* are taken from Thomas Middleton's and William Rowley's *The Changeling*, Ed. Michael Neill (Norton: New York, 2006). All other citations from Thomas Middleton's plays and prose are taken from *Thomas Middleton: The Collected Works*, Eds. Gary Taylor and John Lavagnino, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

[2] A.H. Bullen, "Introduction," in *The Works of Thomas Middleton*, Vol. 1., Ed. A.H. Bullen (London: John C. Nimmo, 1885) xx. I am indebted to Sara Jayne Steen, *Ambrosia in an Earthern Vessel: Three Centuries of Audience and Reader Response to the Works of Thomas Middleton* (New York: AMS Press, 1993) for leading me to this reference.

[3] Throughout this chapter I will speak of the playwrights together when speaking generally about the play as a whole. For the sake of simplicity, I will refer to the playwright thought responsible for the scene or passage when I examine specific lines and scenes. Rowley has been identified as the main hand behind the first and last scene (1.1 and 5.3) and all of the subplot (1.2, 3.3, and 4.3), while Middleton is thought to be behind the central scenes of the main plot (2.1, 2.2, 3.1, 3.2, 3.4, 4.1, 4.2, 5.1, and 5.2). In

Beatrice in his sole authored *Women Beware Women* (c.1621, published 1657).[4] These corrupted women seem to have so transfixed Middleton that their poisonous figures actually replaced the revenge motives and conventions normally guiding along the plot. Fredson Bowers even finds Middleton's *The Changeling* to embody the "disapproval" of revenge in the period more than any other playwright of the era.[5] Like Cyril Tourneur's *The Atheist's Tragedy*, *The Changeling* thus supposedly presents an "anti-revenge, revenge" narrative. Yet, while Tourneur places vengeance in the center of his heavenly and earthly structures, Middleton and Rowley move much farther inward, situating vengeance within the poisoned blood of their corrupted female.

In fact, the "defil[ing]" blood of Beatrice-Joanna spills out into the court in the finale of the play. In a perverse analogy of her adultery, Beatrice-Joanna's physically revolting servant, De Flores, stabs her to death in a wild frenzy. She has been blackmailed into sleeping with the appropriately-named De Flores after hiring him to murder her former fiancé, Alonzo de Piraquo. Desperate to keep her secret hidden from her new husband, Alsemero, she and De Flores grow closer, bloodier, and more isolated from the court, until they are finally uncovered. Her internal changes – summarized by Alsemero as being "beauty changed / To ugly whoredom" (5.3.197-198) – take a

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speaking of one playwright alone, however, I do not wish to suggest that any given passage works in isolation from the rest of the play.

[4] The style and sophistication of *Women Beware Women*, in fact, is what leads most critics to put it at a later date that falls more closely to *The Changeling*. See for instance William C. Carroll's introduction in Thomas Middleton, *Women Beware Women*, Ed. and Intro. William C. Carroll, New Mermaids (New York: Norton, 1994).

[5] Fredson Bowers, *Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy, 1587-1642* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1940). For more on Bower's account of the four movements in revenge, see Chapter 1, p. 59.

physical form. As she dies, she imagines herself to be full of contaminated – and contaminating – blood:

> O come not near me, sir, *I shall defile you:*
> *I am that of your blood was taken from you*
> *For your better health;* look no more upon't,
> But cast it to the ground regardlessly,
> Let the common sewer take it from distinction (5.3.149-153; italics mine).

Her poisoning is not literal, like the overwhelming issuing of poisons in the final play-within-a-play of Middleton's other major revenge tragedy, *Women Beware Women*. In that play's ending, deemed a "ridiculous holocaust" by J.D. Jump,[6] virtually every character onstage dies according to an elaborate choreography that featured poisoned wine, poisoned incense, real darts shot by onstage Cupids, trapdoor accidents, and a mace bludgeoning. Both plays feature powerful, violent women at their center. Bianca of *Women Beware Women* and Beatrice-Joanna in *The Changeling* are both raped, and both become exultant in their savagely-awakened sexuality.[7] Yet *The Changeling* ends on an extremely different note than *Women Beware Women*, by focusing the violence of the denouement and all the dramatic attention onto the pair of secret lovers, Beatrice-Joanna and De Flores.

More generally, the narrower concentration of *The Changeling* onto Beatrice's hidden world – her desires and physical blood – has helped create the sense that the play is a "character study" of self-destructive, feminine corruption. According to Bowers,

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[6] J.D. Jump, cited in Carroll, "Introduction."

[7] Roberta Barker and David Nicol wisely warn us against reading rape as a fulfillment of repressed desires on part of the female characters in "Does Beatrice Joanna Have a Subtext?: *The Changeling* on the London Stage," *Early Modern Literary Studies* 10.1 (2004): 1-43. In both plays, I only note that both heroines explicitly embrace the "poison" of their contamination after they are raped.

Middleton's and Rowley's wronged men need not look to God nor to the broken legal system to rid the castle of Beatrice-Joanna's sinfulness. "Vengeance [does not] fall from Heaven or result from the hidden workings of divine retribution" because:

> …life carries its own vengeance for crime. We need no bloody Tomaso to stab Beatrice or fiery thunderbolt to strike her to the earth: her punishment in the form of the inevitable consequences attendant on such a deed begins immediately after she has instigated the murder of Alonzo.[8]

According to this reading, *The Changeling* presents a morally-sound universe, where sin is its own undoing. Middleton and Rowley so successfully negate the need for vengeance that the revenge motif barely exists, and seems one of the "literary artifacts" left over from the "Kydian" tradition.[9]

Yet, this line of thinking almost applies more to *Women Beware Women* than to *The Changeling.* There, the incestuous uncle, Hippolito, summarizes the final bloodbath that kills him and others to be a "plague" that infects other sinful people. In his words, sins create their own disease as "vengeance met vengeance / Like a set match, as if the plagues of sin / Had been agreed to meet here all together" (5.1.195-7). Middleton stages the self-cancellations of vengeance – a dramatic apoptosis of vice – in the ravages of violence that sweep away each sinner in *Women Beware Women*.[10]

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[8] Bowers, *Elizabethan*, 204.

[9] Robert Ornstein finds the Tomazo storyline to amount to nothing in the plot, as Middleton uses De Flores as the "tool" to carry out the denouement. In his words, "Although he [Tomaso] is the revenger, or more correctly, the would-be revenger of the play, that role seems to Middleton no less a literary imposture than the Petrarchan dream. Wandering aimlessly through the play, muttering darkly of vengeance in the melancholy accents of Hamlet, Tomaso is not so much a character as a literary ghost," *The Moral Vision of Jacobean Tragedy* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1960) 188-189.

[10] Though, even in this case, the play's energies are not fully captured and explained away by the sudden explosion of punishing violence.

In *The Changeling*, many in the play do celebrate the deaths of Beatrice and De Flores according to Beatrice's own medicinal figure. Their deaths free the remaining characters from their various burdens. Beatrice's father and husband both decide to "joy again" as "justice hath so right / The guilty hit, that innocence is quit" (5.3.187; 185-186), and her husband turns to the audience to seek "smiles" (223) from the audience, since a "new brother" and "child" (225) have replaced the murdered characters in the play. The play's only traditional revenger, the minor character Tomazo, even proclaims satisfaction with the outcome, since the two murderers of his brother are now dead. "I can exact no more," he exclaims, forgoing a post-mortem pursuit of revenge because "there are wraths / Deeper then [*sic*] mine, 'tis to be feared, about 'em" (191; 194-195).

However, the "defile[d]" blood of Beatrice-Joanna differs in many respects from the "set match" of "plagues of sin" described above. When we look more closely at Beatrice's own imagined corruption, we find something other than full purgation of her poison from the court. Her contagion lingers, seeping back into the blood of her anxious family even as it spills out, disturbing in the process the algebraic symmetry of the "set match" of one sin for another seen in *Women Beware Women*. Beyond her metaphor of corrupted female blood, there is an unhappy sense that all female bodies might be deviously changeable, irretrievably fallen. In fact, in the very few lines that occur after Beatrice-Joanna's death, Rowley reminds the audience of the ceaseless threat of adultery. The comic, subplot characters, who have teamed up with the "main" plot, tragic characters, speak of future female infidelities. The keeper of the madhouse delivers the "comic" moral of their story – that adultery might ironically result from unfounded jealousy – just as his wife, Isabella, threatens to cuckold him in the future: "Your [her

husband's] change is still behind," or to come, though he "deserve[s] best your transformation" (209; 210). The resulting tone is so odd that the whole ensuing "winding up" after the fall of the two lovers has been called "an appalling anti-climax."[11] It sits so uneasily with the intensity of the preceding scene that many modern performances of this play edit out most of the lines after Beatrice's death, often removing the subplot characters completely from the scene.[12] Yet, when the comic lines are included, they create through their strange tonality the structure of satire, a debasing maneuver that sullies the "tragic grandeur" of Beatrice's death and darkens the humor and reconciliations of the remaining characters. The threat of adultery persists, whether "earned" or not by cuckolded husbands.

In fact, if we take seriously the play's refrain of anxiety over Beatrice's spreadable corruption, we find it relates to the play's obsessive exploration of the disconnect between what can be seen and what can be hidden, whether in the recesses of the literal heart or of the metaphorical castle of Alicant.[13] Middleton and Rowley explore the way characters communicate with each other, both verbally and sexually, and what risks attend these exchanges. Yet, they also examine how women's bodies hide meaning from men, ironizing the failure of sensory systems along the way. There is something

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[11] Taken from an anonymous review of Bullen's edition of Middleton, 1885, reprinted in Steen, *Ambrosia*, 154.

[12] See for instance the BBC's 1970 version of the play, starring Helen Mirren. In this version, all of the lines are excised that tie together the two plot-lines – for instance, the suspicion that Antonio and Franciscus have absconded the court because they murdered Piracquo.

[13] For more on the symbolic topography of the play, see Michael Neill's Chapter on "Hidden Malady" in his *Issues of Death: Mortality and Identity in English Renaissance Tragedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

feminine behind the play's epistemological fractures and contagions of hidden maladies. As it turns out, Middleton held a peculiar fascination with diseased females throughout his lengthy and prolific career. The diseased woman is so prevalent in his oeuvre that she was the central motif of Middleton's works. Middleton visited and revisited the danger of feminized diseases throughout his career, and perceived, with a startling intensity, ironic intersections between what he saw as private, female diseases and public, masculine epidemics.

"Make much of poison": Beatrice-Joanna's Defiling Blood

Returning to Beatrice-Joanna's polluted blood, we find that Rowley's metaphor of blood-letting and purgation is much more convoluted than at first glance:

> O come not near me, sir, *I shall defile you:*
> *I am that of your blood was taken from you*
> *For your better health;* look no more upon't,
> But cast it to the ground regardlessly,
> Let the common sewer take it from distinction (5.3.149-153; italics mine).

Beatrice's defiled blood pours out of her body, just as her body will be expelled from castle, debased and mingled with refuse in the "common sewer." These meanings suggestively emanate from the explicit metaphor that moves inside her father's and her husband's veins: she is "that of *your* blood was taken *from you*." That is, she is their own infected blood, a disease that once lived inside of their bodies. The figure unsettles the seeming isolation of Beatrice-Joanna from the unwitting familial network of Vermandero's castle. She might infect others – "Come not near me" – yet, more troublingly, they might have been exposed already to her contagious blood –"I am that of your blood."

Like Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, that language of disease overwhelms *The Changeling*. Both plays voice anxiety over hidden maladies that secretly rot within the body; they likewise share a morbid fascination with diseased females. Ulcers, probes, and poisons haunt Middleton's and Rowley's thwarted revenge play that, like *Hamlet* before it, worries about secrecy. Throughout the play, masculine authorities desperately seek to uncover hidden female secrets, with Alsemero going so far as to administer a virginity test on the shifty Beatrice before their wedding night. Even after Beatrice-Joanna reveals that she is "a stranger" to Alsemero's bed, however, all remain uneasy with her defiled body: a body that now physically represents her affair. Meanwhile, De Flores draws none of this concern from the court. His blood does not threaten to defile anyone. Strangely, the man who himself bullied Beatrice into sex and who murdered two people with his own hands is less reviled and deemed less contaminating in the end.

De Flores' lack of internal poison is startling, given his continuous association with poison throughout the text. His ugliness, one of the most striking alterations to the source text,[14] disgusts Tomazo so much he forgets, momentarily, about his brother's mysterious disappearance. Calling him a "pest-house" (5.2.12), Tomazo finds De Flores to be so infectious that a mere drop of his blood would kill anyone who touched it: he is "so most deadly venomous, / He would go near to poison any weapon / That should draw blood on him" (17-19). When De Flores walks by Tomazo again, he feels "choke[d] up," as if De Flores has "infect[ed] my blood" (23; 24), yet he does not know why. De Flores feels the burden of Tomazo's brother's blood on his hands, "I see his brother's wounds / Fresh bleeding in his eye" (32-33), and shrinks away from Tomazo, who has impetuously

[14] For more on the source differences, see pp. 249-253.

tried to start a fight with De Flores. Tomazo is unaware the De Flores has murdered his brother, but something imperceptible alarms both Tomazo and De Flores ("For murder, though it have no tongue, will speak / With most miraculous organ"[15]). The murdered Piracquo's blood, scrubbed clean from De Flores' hands, spurs a variety of secret effects on other men's blood. It "choke[s]" his brother's blood and hides as venom within a single drop of De Flores' blood.

Aside from Tomazo's almost magical perception of De Flores' poisonousness, Beatrice-Joanna is the only other character who calls De Flores a poison. From the start, she refers to him as a "deadly poison" (1.1.107) when she and Alsemero first meet and begin flirting. She acknowledges, however, that he appears poisonous to her in particular, for reasons she cannot fathom:

> Nor can I other reason render you
> Than his or hers of some particular thing
> They must abandon as a deadly poison,
> Which to a thousand other tastes were wholesome:
> Such to mine eyes is that same fellow there,
> The same that report speaks of the basilisk (105-110).

Alsemero cordially agrees: "There's scarce a thing but is both loved and loathed" (120). Understanding poison to be a relative substance – "What may be your poison, sir?" (122) – Beatrice-Joanna does not fear using her "poison" to do her bidding. She fearlessly "kissed poison" and "stroked a serpent" (5.3.67) to get what she wanted, dangerously undervaluing the contagious power of poison in the process.

Beatrice-Joanna thinks she can safely use De Flores to do her bidding much as "men of art" use poison to treat poison. In this case, venomous healing occurs through

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[15] William Shakespeare, "Hamlet," in *The Norton Shakespeare: Based on the Oxford Edition*, Eds. Stephen Greenblatt, Walter Cohen, Jean E. Howard, and Katharine Eisaman Maus (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1997) 2.2.570-571.

expulsion: "Why, men of art make much of poison, / Keep one to expel another" (2.2.47-48). The first "poison," De Flores, will expel the second "poison," her fiancé Piracquo. In speaking of poisons and counter-poisons, Beatrice-Joanna recalls characters in other revenge plays, like, as we have seen, Webster's Flamineo in *The White Devil*. Yet, Beatrice-Joanna is no revenger. Moreover, for all of their associations with poison, neither Beatrice nor De Flores actually use poison. Tomazo feels like his brother has been killed with poison – "All slaves that kill by poison are still cowards!" (5.2.31) – partly because of the secrecy of the murder, and partly because of the base treachery that he assumes was used in his brother's murder.

Beatrice-Joanna's use of De Flores as a type of "poison" suggests that he is the source of her infection. She has slept with an outwardly deformed, monstrous creature; she has debased herself morally and sexually, consuming transformative poison in the process. Yet, the play does not present such a clear-cut transference of infection. The changes that defile Beatrice-Joanna's blood occur before she has slept with De Flores; before she has even used him "to expel another," or murder Piracquo. From the first scene of the play, Rowley presents her love for Alsemero as improper devotion, opposed to the "holy purpose" (1.1.6) of Alsemero's love. In the play's third use of the word "change," Beatrice-Joanna exposes the idolatry already implied by the overtly Catholic setting[16] when she speaks of her new interest in Alsemero: "I shall change my saint, I

[16] John Reynolds's source makes the Catholic setting even more obviously charged: "It is both a griefe and a scandall to any true Christians heart, that the Church ordained for thankesgiuing and Prayer vnto God, should be made a Stewes, or at least, a place for men to meet and court Ladies: but in all parts of the Christian World, where the Romane religion reigneth, this sinfull custome is frequently practiced," *The Triumphs of Gods Revenge against the Crying and Execrable Sin of Wilful and Premeditated Murther …*7th

fear me: I find / A giddy turning in me" (148-149). In fact, for all of the actions committed by Beatrice and De Flores throughout the play – all the horrific murders, complete with chopped-off fingers and charred bodies – the play consistently voices the most anxiety over the least violent of Beatrice-Joanna's changes. That is, Beatrice-Joanna is at her worst, at least according to the play's male voices, when she is sexually inconstant. Even more surprising, her deformed sexuality arises in her earliest transformation, when she changes her mind and replaces Piracquo with Alsemero in her imagination. De Flores calls it "a kind / Of whoredom in thy heart" (3.3.143-144) that only paves the way to the subsequent whoredom of her body. Her hidden, internal changes spur the violence that follows.

Middleton imagines the "whoredom" of Beatrice's heart in physical terms. Tomazo warns his brother Alonzo de Piracquo against marrying Beatrice early on, when it becomes clear that she does not love him. He stresses the dangerous power of Beatrice's imagination: a faculty of the mind that might impress the image of another man onto her child during conception.[17] Thanks to this kind of maternal impression, Beatrice might give birth to a quasi-bastard without even committing adultery. By

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Ed., 1621 (London: Printed for C. Griffin and sold by the Booksellers of London and Westminster, 1704) 147. For more on Reynolds' source, see pp. 249-253.

[17] The idea that women might physically impress images onto their developing children was popular during the period. The imagination's power to imprint images within the body thus extended to the developing fetus. Thus, a woman could be said to have committed adultery imaginatively, if she thinks of another man while procreating with her husband. For more on the various agencies of men and women in generation in 14th and 15th Italy, see Katharine Park, *Secrets of Women: Gender, Generation, and the Origins of Human Dissection* (New York: Zone Books, 2006) 142-147. For a good summary of maternal impression in 17th century English thought, see Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, Ed. William H. Gass (New York: New York Review of Books, 2001) 254-255.

substituting her husband for another in her mind during sex, her body produces its own changeling child: "She lies but with another in thine arms, / He the half-father unto all thy children / In the conception; if he get [beget] 'em not, / She helps to get 'em for him in this passion" (2.1.134-137). The imagination works concretely and aggressively in the sinews and flesh of hearts, brains, and developing children – it "get[s] 'em," the children, for the "him" not literally in bed with Beatrice. Beatrice's internal "change," while seemingly flighty in its sudden transformation, permanently and palpably corrupts her from the inside out.

The mutability of her imagination relates to a spreadable disease that by degrees corrupts her entire mind. In this she recalls Middleton's other sexually-duplicitous female, Bianca of *Women Beware Women*. After Bianca has been raped, offstage, she embraces her now-corrupted honor: "Yet since mine honour's leprous, why should I / Preserve that fair that caus'd the leprosy? / Come, poison all at once" (2.2.423-425). Beatrice's "giddy turning," along with her dangerous use of poisons, puts into motion the "leprous" transformation of her honor.

"Thou laundress to the gods and goddesses": Female Anatomy and Disease

Yet, Beatrice is not the only one to change throughout *The Changeling*. Middleton and Rowley represent nearly all of the many meanings of the play's title. The three major meanings of the "changeling" included: the simpleton or fool, the inconstant person, and the substitute child exchanged for another.[18] While Beatrice-Joanna seems to be the

[18] "changeling, n. and adj." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, March 2015. Web. 26 April 2015. For a good summary of the different changelings in the play, see Peter Morrison, "A Cangoun in Zombieland: Middleton's Teratological Changeling," in

obvious "changeling" of the play, given her notoriously "inconstant" heart, it is the disguised courtier of the subplot, Antonio, who is explicitly called a "changeling" in the character list.[19] Moreover, the bed-trick offers another obvious structural "changeling" for the play: Beatrice-Joanna, no longer a virgin, has her maid, Diaphanta, switch places with her on her wedding night. Aside from the play's organization of changelings – the exchanges of disguise that move the plot forward – characters speak about mutability over and over again. The word "change" or "changed" occurs seventeen times, almost always to describe the perceived transformation of another character.[20] These changes relate almost entirely to the mutability of female sexuality and the obscure nature of female desire.

Many in the period understood feminine mutability to arise from the very material differences between men and women. The female reproductive system was understood as being internal, a hidden and inverted form of male genitalia.[21] Visible masculinity was pitted against the obscured organs of femininity, their hidden flesh part of the "secrets" of female anatomy, sexuality, and reproduction.[22] The uterus, standing in for "hiddenness,"

Kenneth Friedenreich (ed.), *'Accompanynge the Players': Essays Celebrating Thomas Middleton, 1580-1980* (New York: AMS Press, 1983) 219-241.

[19] Antonio is a "changeling" in two senses: he is pretending to be a "changeling," or a fool, and he is a "changeling" by virtue of his disguise. See Neill's "Introduction" for more on the earlier fame of Antonio, and his foolish "Changeling" as a theatrical type.

[20] Nearly all the references occur in Rowley's first and last scenes of the play, which helps set up and then drives home the central concerns of the play.

[21] This argument was found in Galen's *On the Use of Parts*. See Park, *Secrets*, 219.

[22] For more on women's "secretive" genitals and reproductions, see Park, *Secrets*, 91-120. "Women's secrets" also referred to women's secret knowledge. Ibid., 81-91.

was literally exposed in private and public dissections, in a powerful demonstration of human advancement into the most mysterious realms of knowledge.[23] In addition to the "hidden" nature of female anatomy, it was also known for being mutable – physically changing during women's cycles – and for its receptivity. Cold and wet, made of softer, wax-like material, female organs and menses were more easily impressed upon, stamped by the seed of men and images springing from the imagination.[24]

These cold, wet, enclosed "secrets" also threatened to breed poison and disease. Menstrual blood contained putrefying matter, as female humors and seed turned to a "venemous quality" as it grew more rotten.[25] When not released, these organs, full of poison, became obvious zones of infection and disease. Regularly menstruating women, however, also threatened to poison others at a distance. They might sour wine, dull steel and ivory, make crops barren, and infuse animals with incurable poisons.[26] Staining mirrors with blood, menstrual women emitted poisonous vapors through their eyes. Ficino describes this "red gaze" alongside the infections of love, where eyebeams entangle women and men in their contagious exchanges.[27][28]

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[23] Ibid., 27.

[24] Ibid., 181.

[25] The citation is from Gualtherus Bruele's *Physicians Practice* (London, 1639) taken from Andrew Wear, *Knowledge and Practice in English Medicine*, *1550-1680* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) 142. For more on putrefaction and menstrual blood, see 140-143.

[26] See Pliny, Chapter 15 "Of womens monthly sicknesse," in *The Seventh Booke of the Historie of Nature*.

[27] For female complexion, see Ibid., 103. For generation, see Ibid., 141-150.

Rowley draws on the dangerously contaminating menstrual blood of women in his final figure of Beatrice's "defil[ing]" blood.[29] Throughout, the playwrights draw great attention to Beatrice-Joanna's internality by juxtaposing it with De Flores' externality. Beatrice, beautiful and seemingly honorable on the outside, is a hidden source of poison, whereas De Flores' aggressive lust, like his cartoonishly ugly face, is understood as external, readily viewable and readable. There was no secret to be revealed with De Flores, and even Beatrice-Joanna bemoans the obviousness of his signaled treachery ("My loathing / Was prophet" (5.3.156-157)). As such, the playwrights liken Beatrice-Joanna's hidden corruption to the reservoirs of stagnant menstrual blood and poisons.

On a larger level, the play understands females as treacherous sources of secrets, morally and anatomically. The subplot features a number of puns on adultery and female genitalia. The jealous jail-keeper, Alibius, uses the word "secret" to reference his ill-founded anxieties about adultery, while his clownish servant, Lollio, turns this secret into the pleasures of the female sex:

> Alibius: Lollio, I must trust thee with a secret,
> But thou must keep it.
> Lollio: I was ever close to a secret, sir (1.2.1-3).
> …
> Alibius: But there is a knowledge which is nearer,
> Deeper, and sweeter, Lollio.
> Lollio: Well, sir, let us handle that between you and I (12-14).

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[28] Marsilio Ficino, *The Book of Life,* Trans. Charles Boer (Irving: Spring Publications, 1980) 139.

[29] Her bloodiness – she is a "woman dipped in blood" – relates her to the common "motif" of in revenge tragedies, where ineffectual female revengers wrote letters with their blood. See Kaara L. Peterson, "'The Ink of Lovers': Revenge Tragedy's Blood Letters," *Hysterical Disease and Social Controversy in Shakespeare's England.* (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2010) 71-106.

Moving "close to a secret," and "handl[ing]" the deep and sweet nature of femininity, Lollio teases out the sexual charge of "secrets." In the process, hidden knowledge is equated to the ever-mysterious nature of female desire. Like their bodies, women's desires and sexual past are maddeningly opaque. Early on in the play, the combination of hidden knowledge and "women's secrets" applies to the castle-as-body metaphor, when Vermandero, Beatrice's father, prepares to give Alsemero an uncustomary tour of his castle: "our citadels / Are placed conspicuous to outward view, / On promonts' tops, but within are secrets" (1.1.157-159). It is only when Beatrice-Joanna's blood finally becomes "conspicuous to outward view," by pouring out of her body in all of its corruption, that the men of the castle succeed in excavating the "secrets" festering within castle.

Her polluted blood recalls other figures of raped women, most notably the classical Lucretia. Rowley draws from Shakespeare's "The Rape of Lucrece" in particular. Shakespeare parted ways from his sources in describing in remarkable detail Lucrece's blood as she commits suicide.[30] Raped by Tarquin, Lucrece feels polluted at a

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[30] Shakespeare drew from Livy's *The History of Rome, Volume 1* (Chapters 57-59), which speaks of the body's corruption and the soul's virtue in the aftermath of the rape. Her family and friends insist that "it is the mind that sins not the body, and where there has been no consent there is no guilt," (New York: E.P. Dutton & Company, 1937) 67. Ovid's *Fasti* (Book 2, February 24), another of Shakespeare's sources, does not get into this body/soul dialectic, focusing instead on her family's immediate forgiveness for her rape: "Her husband and her father forgave her being forced"; Ovid likewise does not mention anything about her blood, but imagines that she takes care of her body in dying so that she leaves a beautiful, well-ordered corpse: "Even then she took care in dying so that she fell / With decency, that was her care even in falling." Chaucer follows Ovid's tale; he too remarks on the cleanliness of her death: "Lest that hir feet or suche thyng lay bare; / So wel she loved clennesse and eek trouthe," "The Legend of Good Women*,* V. The Legend of Lucretia," in *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd Edition, Ed. Larry D. Benson. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1987) ll. 1858-1860. John Gower writes more

bodily level, despite her spiritual purity. Shakespeare uniquely grants this feeling of infection a physical foundation, as Lucrece's blood where the Bard describes Tarquin's corrupting rape as "putref[ying]" Lucrece's blood. Lucrece's destroyed innocence and feelings of pollution take literal shape when she commits suicide, as her blood itself makes palpable her mixed innocence and corruption. The internal battle between her blushing "red" blood and Tarquin's invading "black" blood reflects and repeats the corrupting rape:

> And bubbling from her breast it [her blood] doth divide
> In two slow rivers, that the crimson blood
> Circles her body in on every side,
> … *Some of her blood still pure and red remained,*
> *And some looked black, and that false Tarquin-stained*.
>
> About the mourning and congealèd face
> Of that black blood a wat'ry rigol [circle; crown] goes,
> Which seems to weep upon the tainted place;
> And ever since, as pitying Lucrece' woes,
> Corrupted blood some watery token shows;
> *And blood untainted still doth red abide,*
> *Blushing at that which is so putrefied* (1737-1750).[31]

While Shakespeare imagines Tarquin's rape to have physical ramifications on Lucrece's body, the putrefied matter does not threaten to take over the pure blood. In fact, the "blood untainted" becomes even redder, even more pure, as it blushes at the invading impurity. This figure speaks of "corrupted blood" in general terms. Yet, her body does

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explicitly about what she covers as she falls in death, suggesting that Lucrece regains control over her forced body in the artful manner of her death: "Whan that sche fell, so as sche myhte, / Hire clothes with hire hand sche rihte [adjusted], / That no man dounward fro the kne / Schold eny thing of hire se," in "Book Seven," *Confessio Amantis*, *Volume 3*, Ed. Russell A. Peck, Trans. Andrew Galloway (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2004), 5071-5074. (Ovid's, Chaucer's, and Gower's interest in Lucrece's self-presentation in death reminds me of Polyxena from Euripides' *Hecuba,* who chastely arranges her skirts in death.) Thomas Heywood's 1607 play on Lucrece's rape does not comment on either the quality of her blood or the clean/artful way she dies, mentioning only that her body will be shown in the marketplace.

[31] All citations from "Rape of Lucrece" taken from *Norton Shakespeare*, 635-682.

not specifically threaten the other characters present who, rather than hide (from) her corrupted body, "show her bleeding body thorough Rome" (1851); her husband goes so far as to "bathe" in "Lucrece' bleeding stream" (1774), falling in sorrow into her black and red blood. Tarquin's corruption, while visible, does not seem contagious.

Of course, Middleton's and Rowley's Beatrice-Joanna embraces villainy and, eventually, sex in a way completely unlike the chaste, mentally-uncorrupted Lucrece. But Lucrece is not completely unrelated to Beatrice-Joanna. In fact, Middleton himself wrote his own poem on the subject more than twenty years before *The Changeling*, giving voice to the ghost of Lucrece, whom he conjures from the depths of Hell. In his version of the narrative, rape more perniciously infects Lucrece. Like Beatrice's virginity, "perfect in thee" according to De Flores (3.3.117), Lucrece's chastity was so divine it almost sanctified her in its perfection. Her apostrophe to chastity lasts for almost one hundred lines. Moral purity is inescapably physical in Middleton's understanding, so much so that Tarquin's rape manages to destroy the very physical property that kept Lucrece's blood pure. Virginity is not simply a trait of a pure or virtuous person, but an active agent that purifies through motion. It keeps the internal fluids moving rather than stagnant. Without this cleansing system, all the body rots. Lucrece asks, "Where is the spring of blood's virginity / That wont to serve thy veins like conduit heads / And cleanse thy cistern of iniquity / With maiden humours from chaste Flora's meads?" (388-391). Now missing its physical "conduit heads," Lucrece's body perilously falls into filth. Female bodies – almost always verging perilously close to poison and infection in their hidden anatomies of impressible stuff – become swamps of rottenness without the protection of virginity.

Middleton further muddles Lucrece's culpability in the matter by having her admit to being flattered by Tarquin, as if she secretly wanted her rape unlike the careful and watchful Philomela. Middleton isn't alone in doing this;[32] but his version is more extreme than any of his predecessors, and his Lucrece more seduced in the process. "I left sweet verdure for a flattering voice," she regrets; and as she loses her chastity, she likewise loses her spiritual connection to heaven. Chastity – like virginity – is for Middleton an almost magical physical property:

> Twas thou, O chastity, m'eternal eye,
> The want of thee made my ghost reel to hell.
> Twas thou, O chastity, that gild'st the sky
> With beams of virtue. It is thou doth dwell
> In that white milken crystal silver cell,
> *Thou laundress to the gods and goddesses,*
> *Washing their souls in fonts of holiness* (507-513, italics mine).

This "laundress" of the blood connects the dirty, debased human body with the "holiness" of the heavens above – the "milken crystal silver cell" and "beams of virtue" that protects those on earth like one of Ficino's forms, impressed with the heavenly bodies above to reconnect the high and the low. It is talismatic, like a hidden amulet within the body that draws its powers from its analogous connections to the constellations and virtues overheard. In this case, it doesn't seem to matter that Lucrece's chastity was stolen: she is punished for its loss – and for her suicide – in the "hall of hell" (597), along with her rapist, Tarquin.

Yet, irony is not missing even from this seemingly straight-forward account of the cleansing power of chastity. Middleton once before mentions a "laundress" in the poem

[32] Most of the narratives mentioned above in fn. draw attention to Lucrece's quasi-"consent": according to the story, she "agrees" to be raped when Tarquin threatens to tarnish forever her reputation as a chaste wife, by killing her and claiming to have caught her committing adultery after-the-fact.

when Lucrece asks if "Venus [is] made a laundress," or prostitute, "to the court" (50). G.B. Shand, the editor of this poem in the Oxford edition, notes that "laundress" only refers to a prostitute in its first usage; in the latter, it simply carries the usual connotations of linen-washing, bringing the chastity metaphor back down from the sky-gilding beams of virtue to a humbler, more domestic abode. Yet, if Middleton intended his reader to pick up the double-entendre a page before, surely it would still echo here, however uncomfortably within this paean to uncorrupted female sexuality. Indeed, he uses the term two other times to refer to promiscuity in his works: in Knavesbe's canny admission of adultery to his wife in *Anything for a Quiet Life* and in his early prose satire *The Nightingale and the Ant*.[33] Like the famously mixed word "nunnery," simultaneously evoking celibacy and prostitution in Hamlet's cruel invectives to Ophelia, "laundress" exposes something troubling in female sexuality. Even in its most divine and cleansing state, female chastity refers back to its eventual contamination and rot.

Middleton's adoration of female chastity contains within its idealizations the seeds of its own loss. The very power of virginity is its own undoing. Again and again, Middleton stages the perverse way female purity engenders impurity in others. In *Hengist, King of Kent, or the Mayor of Quinborough* (c. 1615-20) he compares Castiza's virginity to the substance that keeps the stars pure: "You've a substance / As excellent as theirs; holding your pureness, / They look upon corruption as you do / But are stars still. Be you a Virgin too" (1.3.175-178). Her rape would have made her corrupted and

[33] Knavesbe is trying to goad his wife into admitting that she has also committed adultery, when he says: "I sinned twice with my laundress." In the "Nightingale and the Ant," the ant, recounting his time as a soldier (since he has been reincarnated as many various "types" of Londoners), speaks of the way "harlots" disguise their promiscuity. Here, "the habit of a laundress / shadows the abomination of a strumpet" (885-886).

unworthy had it not been committed by her husband in disguise. In this play, rapes that end in marriage allow women to experience "glories unblemished" (5.2.209). Moreover, Middleton explores how marriage can nullify the corruption of rape in his and Fletcher's ethically disturbing tragicomedy *The Spanish Gypsy* (licensed 1623). The play begins with the rape of the virtuous Clara by the lead hero of the play, Rodrigo, a friend of Clara's fiancé. Instead of ending tragically, all is well once Rodrigo marries his former victim. But, before being married to her rapist, Clara recognizes her own corruption: she commands Rodrigo to "Let out that blood which is infected now" (1.3.11), and feels infected with a "leprosy that cleaves / To my just shame." For Middleton, it seems that contagious poisons infect rape victims only insofar as the rape breaks the boundaries of marriage. If the rapist is already married to his victim, or plans to marry her, she has not actually been poisoned. Social customs dictate whether or not they end up "corrupted" by sex.

This stress on custom, however, does not seem to suggest that female sexuality is not corrupted or corrupting. In fact, it suggests the reverse. If all even virginity triggers poison, then all women, chaste or unchaste, hold within their bodies something contagious. Middleton's women seem totally debased by virtue of their sex.

"A woman dipped in blood": A Narrative of Female Contamination

As mentioned above, Beatrice-Joanna mostly attracts De Flores through the perfection of her virginity: he only coerces her into having sex because he fervently believes that "thy virginity were perfect in thee" (3.3.116). Yet, paradoxically, this "perfection" means very little about Beatrice, morally speaking, in the moment De Flores blackmails her into sleeping with him. Her honor has been irrecoverably tainted, and the

entire hierarchy of values and order flips completely on its head. In De Flores' powerful and acerbic dismissal of Beatrice, she is no longer in charge. Now her own servant, secretly lusting and outwardly loathed, dares to tell Beatrice that she is utterly wrong in her vision of herself. All builds to the simple assertion: "You're no more now." The hidden deformity of her "conscience" makes her De Flores' "equal" in ugliness:

> Beatrice: *Why, 'tis impossible thou canst be so wicked,*
> *Or shelter such a cunning cruelty,*
> *To make his [Piracquo's] death the murderer of my honour.*
> Thy language is so bold and vicious,
> I cannot see which way I can forgive it
> With any modesty.
> De Flores Push! You forget yourself:
> A woman dipped in blood, and talk of modesty?
> …
> Look but into your conscience, read me there –
> 'Tis a true book, you'll find me there your equal.
> Push! *Fly not to your birth, but settle you*
> *In what the act has made you; you're no more now;*
> *You must forget your parentage to me –*
> *You're the deed's creature* (3.3.120-126; 132-137, italics mine).

De Flores powerfully evacuates Beatrice's obviously warped hierarchy, where the "honour" of her chastity and her social status make her better than De Flores. Now, De Flores insists, she belongs to a new and perverse familial structure. They are kin in the disturbing equality of their ugliness. She, his former master, is now his (and his murder's) daughter. Yet as her father, the master of her new "parentage," De Flores first commands incest. Like Death's incestuous rape of Sin in John Milton's later *Paradise Lost*, De Flores's transgression is at once an act of self-creation and self-destruction, as the two lovers now only belong to each other: to their secrets and to the hidden, orgasmic consumptions of self and other.

Middleton notably alters Reynolds's source in this "confrontation" scene, deemed for centuries to be the best scene of the play. In fact, in Reynolds's narrative, De Flores is gallant, attractive, and a knight. He actively pursues Beatrice-Joanna along

more traditional lines, as he "revives his old sute, and redoubleth his newe Kisses."[34] Beatrice succumbs not out of the loss of her honor, her whorish heart, or through De Flores' threats. In the source, Alsemero suddenly falls into the throes of jealousy, for no reason whatsoever. After three months of honeymoonshine and connubial satisfaction, Alsemero acts "like fond husbands" apparently do, and "becomes ielous of his wife; so as hee curbes and restraynes her of her libertie, and would hardly permit her to see, yea, farre lesse to conferre or conuerse with any man."[35] He watchfully moves her back from their new home to Valencia, keeping her under lock-and-key in her father's castle. Thus, the temptations of pleasure and gallantry in Reynolds's source transform into the coercion of deformity and aggressive lust in Middleton's and Rowley's play.

Moreover, Alsemero's rather than Beatrice's mutability is the source of most of the troubles in the original rendering. He the main, revenging plot-maker we follow throughout the whole of the story. Reynolds's Beatrice-Joana never changes her mind about Piracquo. She never loves him and is only pressured into marrying him by her father. Even more, her father, Vermandero, prefers Piracquo to Alsemero (whom she explicitly loves) only because he is better-off, "of better means."[36] The sole "change" explicitly noted in the first half of the story belongs to Alsemero. He originally sets off to Alicant to make his way to Malta, where, through "nauall & sea actions" he "make[s]

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[34] Reynolds, *Triumphs*, 41.

[35] Ibid.

[36] Ibid., 36. In contrast, Vermandero of Middleton's and Rowley's play almost prefers Alsemero at their first meeting, as Vermandero was close to Alsemero's now deceased father, and it is Vermandero who welcomes Alsemero to his home.

himselfe capeable to reuenge his fathers death,"[37] as his father died fighting at the battle of Gibraltar. Despite the ensuing political peace and explicit ban on fighting, Alsemero devotes himself to war. So, his chance meeting of Beatrice-Joanna in church, where he is "instantly ravished" through the "invisible lances of his eyes,"[38] provokes an instantaneous change: "And now hee leaues Bellona to adore Venus, and forsakes Mars, to follow Cupid."[39]

Middleton and Rowley directly reject this part of the narrative. Their Alsemero cannot seek vengeance for his father's death, thanks to the Treaty of Hague (the "late league"): "Whose [his father's] death I had revenged, / Or followed him in fate, had not the late league / Prevented me" (1.1.177-179). This alteration, while seemingly minor, creates a vastly different narrative than in Reynolds's narrative. In *The Triumph*, story after story repeats the same message on vengeance: mortal man must leave revenge to God, who will himself be sure to "repay." Like Tourneur in *The Atheist's Tragedy*, Reynolds completely and utterly rejects earthly revenge, so much so that even the desire for vengeance insures God's punishment. By this point in the text, the fourth of these stories, the reader would instantly recognize that Alsemero has probably damned himself – not exactly for his mutability, but for his ceaseless seeking of revenge. Even though the narrator speaks of his "brave resolution, worthy … affection of a sonne"[40] in choosing to

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[37] Ibid., 34.

[38] Ibid.

[39] Ibid.

[40] Ibid., 127.

"addict" himself in military business, Reynolds has already hit his reader over the head with example after example of the failure of revenge. Satan transforms even reasonable and seemingly noble desires for vengeance into sin, as "hee will blow the coals to our choler …. [and] thrust and hale vs on to despaire."[41]

One sees more clearly the stark contrast between the Reynolds's narrative and the play by looking at the illustrations of Reynolds's text (Figure 7). There, Alsemero takes the lead. He guides the action in these three last scenes of the story: first, he kills De Flores and Beatrice as he catches them in bed together (while, in the play, it is De Flores who kills them both); second, he kills Piracquo's brother, who has challenged him to a duel; and third, he is beheaded for his crimes. A decidedly masculine force thus organizes Reynolds's narrative around different forms of vengeance. Alsemero responds immediately and then uses a courtly form of revenge, the duel that was slowly being weeded out of Jacobean culture.

Figure 7. Alsemero in Reynolds's *Triumphs of God*. (London, 1704) 33.

[41] Ibid., 11. Part of the biggest issue Reynolds has with moral men seeking vengeance is the way it casts doubt on God's capacity to take revenge. In his introduction, he speaks early on of the "Necessity of heaven and hell for justice," equating earthly vengeance to "wretched and execrable Atheists" (7).

Unsurprisingly, Reynolds condemns Alsemero legally and morally for his revenge. Yet, his damnation does not spring from his apparently justified murder of the pair of secret lovers – nor for his later treachery in killing Tomasso in a duel – but for his decision to keep private Beatrice-Joanna's hired murder of Piracquo so that he might personally and "sharply be revenged of her, as he will make her an example to all posterity."[42] Like the many other revengers and murderers of Reynolds's text, Alsemero faces total decimation when all is revealed to the law. The law breaks apart the still-living Alsemero and the mangled corpses of Beatrice-Joana and De Flores so that their bodies match their crimes. Alsemero is decapitated, his body tossed into the restless sea to match his crime of "concealing"[43] Piracquo's death, while the two lovers are burnt, their ashes thrown into the air, "vnworthy to haue any resting place on earth."[44] For Reynolds, vengeance destroys societal bonds and public justice, as private parties conceal their plots and murders to exact their own justice. So, in this scattering, complete annihilation of the body's bounds, he creatively imagines a punishment that is equally destructive of limits. If the worst of revenge and murder is its dissolution of bounds and concealment of truth, then the best of punishment responds in kind.[45]

After reading Reynolds's story we see with even greater clarity just how little Middleton's and Rowley's play focuses on Alsemero and the other traditional revengers

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[42] Ibid., 42.

[43] Ibid., 44.

[44] Ibid.

[45] See Chapter 3, pp. 170-176, for more on the particular anxiety over the dissolution of social, political, and familial bonds during epidemics. Reynolds uses this punishment for vengeance or concealment so much that it becomes a motif of his collected stories.

of the source. While Reynolds's Alsemero "conceals," the play's Alsemero consistently looks to make public what is private. He wants to reveal the sins he has uncovered to the whole of the castle, which one of the reasons he calls everyone in to see Beatrice-Joanna and De Flores when he has uncovered their treachery. Thus, the playwrights place all the weight of the tragic plot squarely on the shoulders of Beatrice-Joanna and De Flores. This is not a story of revenge gone wrong or even of the incompatibility of revenge with justice. It is above all else a story of female corruption and the deformed violence of male lust.

"Guarded with French amulets": Transforming Diseases of Poison

Middleton and Rowley do more than shift their narrative away from masculine-driven revenge towards a "study" of "depraved females." Both debase their characters even further, and introduce into the play the elements of satire. Thomas Middleton, in fact, got his start by publishing prose satires, and he explicitly fashioned himself after the great satirist Thomas Nashe.[46] For Nashe and others, satire offered a variety of forms to express an ever-stylized anger.[47] Satire could destabilize or reinstate boundaries. It granted a space for either the ceaseless examinations of skepticism or for the oftentimes-

[46] See, for instance, his references to Nashe in "The Ant and the Nightingale."

[47] Nashe takes many different approaches when satirizing plague-time England. Scholars know Nashe mostly for his fabulously skeptical voice in *Pierce Pennilesse* and *The Unfortunate Traveller.* In these works, the authorial and narrative voices are not perfectly aligned. In his *Christ's Teares* (1593), however, we find a relatively straight-forward, didactic account of the sinfulness that has caused the plague raging in England. This text does not create the playful separation of moral polemic from source, as in the others. Nashe has both voices at his disposal: the earnest reformer and the skeptically distanced improviser.

shrill condemnations of dialectically-opposed social and moral boundaries.[48] Both the polemic and the sharply playful attracted Middleton in his early work. Above all, the satirist's use of irony became his forte.

Middleton's plays by definition are not prose satires. Yet, the irony he learned from writing in this genre carried through to nearly all of his stage plays, creating an almost univocal tone of the satirist's disgust and loathing, in the knowing, little "twist" his characters would reveal to the audience. Unlike many of his fellow playwrights, Middleton wrote plays only identifiable as "comic" or "tragic" given the final outcome. A biting, angry tone seethes underneath nearly all of his characters and plots. Yet, unlike Webster, who reveled in the mixing of virtue and vice in his cauldron of beauty and poison, Middleton's approach is not fully leveling in its ironic debasements and angry exposures. He instead took pleasure in juxtaposing figures of the good and the bad, like those floats of his many Lord Mayor's Pageants. In his all-or-nothing sensibility, characters suddenly and precipitously fall into evil. We feel for them – but we are not meant to question the tremendously huge gap between right and wrong as we are in plays like *The Duchess of Malfi* or *The White Devil,* where a sea of conflicting platitudes contradict each other and, in the process, expose the disturbing vacuum of meaning surrounding the characters.

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[48] Dermot Cavanagh helpfully illuminates the two kinds of satire in Early Modern England: the first being the skeptical and experimental satire that is wary of oppositional thinking; the second is the often-forgotten polemical satire, that draws instead on polarizing categories of opposition. See "Modes of Satire," in *Handbook of English Prose, 1500-1640*, Ed. Andrew Hadfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) 380-395.

Middleton's satirical voice, found not only in his tragedies, but also in his vaster number of city comedies and tragicomedies, has become associated with his "subversive qualities" and proto-realism. The "new" genre of literary realism in the nineteenth century had much to do with this interpretation of Middleton's city comedies and civic pageants.[49] Yet, the idea of Middleton's real and raw representations of "urban" life continued to attract many followers in the twentieth century and beyond. T.S. Eliot famously speaks of Middleton as having "no message; he is merely a great recorder."[50] Most scholars today take for granted the notion that Middleton is a proto-realist, and use the idea that his plays more vividly represent London as a starting-off point,[51] though there are exceptions.[52] The dominant tone in criticism at the moment often follows from an assumption of his subversive and boundary-shattering qualities, applied on a personal and dramatic level. Gary Taylor, himself the editor of the Oxford Middleton and a zealous fan of the playwright, has declared Middleton to be the first great "feminist" and the dramatic equivalent of the painter Caravaggio in his "new, optically acute mode of

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[49] Charles Lamb first notes the sense of realism in Middleton's tragic *Women Beware Women*, speaking of Beatrices' rape scene as being "one of those scenes which has the air of being an immediate transcript from life" (1808). In 1875, Aldophus William Ward writes of Middletons "comedies" as being "perhaps the truest dramatic representation of it [the English life of his own age]." Both citations found in Steen, *Ambrosia*, 139.

[50] T.S. Eliot, *Selected Essays* (London, 1932) 169.

[51] To take one of many examples, Jonathan Hope's essay "Middletonian Stylistics" in the *Oxford Handbook* cites Middleton's use of "hey ree" sounds as part of his attention to real details. "This close attention to quasi-linguistic noise is a marker of Middleton's realist concerns, and his skill as an observer," 252.

[52] Douglas Bruster wisely warns against reading Middleton's plays as "powerful pieces of sociology, reminding us that Middleton wrote from his imagination rather than from "real life," "Middleton's Imagination" in *Oxford Handbook,* 525

realism [that] rejected the hierarchy of genres."[53] In fact, Taylor finds Middleton to so utterly turn "expectation upside down" that he organized the chapters of his Oxford Handbook in reverse alphabetical order.

Middleton's supposed "feminism" and "subversion" overlap, and create the sense for these critics that he was not for all time like Shakespeare but ahead of his time, rebelliously progressive. Speaking with other performers, Terri Bourus goes so far as to assert that Middleton gave voice to females whose emotion "was best kept, according to early modern standards, under wraps."[54] Going outside his period's *mores*, Middleton, according to Bourus, creates characters that are "unconventional, and unabashedly sexy. They are the Marilyn Monroe, Shirley Maclain, and Gloria Swanson roles of the seventeenth century, *moving well outside of almost every guideline or expectation of their respective times*" (italics mine).[55]

In his own time, Middleton was more known for his success as a comic playwright than for his *femmes fatales*, and he was known throughout the period especially for the unprecedented success – and suppression – of his politically charged *Game of Chess*. Yet, by the nineteenth century, readers and audiences began to recognize something of Middleton's greatness in his later female parts. In fact Swinburne, who found such vitality in early modern dramatists that he wrote a series Petrarchan sonnets

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[53] Gary Taylor's "Unintroduction: Middletonian Dissensus" in *The Oxford Handbook of Thomas Middleton*, Ed. Gary Taylor and Trish Thomas Henley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).6.

[54] Terri Bourus, " 'It's a Whole Different Sex!': Women Performing Middleton on the Modern Stage," in *The Oxford Handbook*, 569.
[55] Ibid., 569.

on each of the writers mentioned in Charles Lamb's *Specimens*, finds Middleton's art to be characterized by his cruel heroines. He remembers Middleton's plays precisely for their uniquely imagined, violent females:

> A worse fair face than witchcraft's, passion-proud,
> With brows blood-flecked behind their bridal wreath
> And lips that bade the assassin's sword find sheath
> Deep in the heart whereto love's heart was vowed.[56]

The bloody bride – soaked in the blood of her own betrothed – did not only bewitch Swinburne and other nineteenth century scholars. We find this characterization as early as 1657, in the prologue to the first publication of *Women Beware Women*. The prologue summarizes the entire play of intrigues and bloody revenges as being the "murder of virtue with a venom kiss" – that is, the poisoned sexuality of the "Drabs [Whores] of state" who command the play.[57]

Indeed, we miss out on a lot of what Middleton is trying to do if we too quickly identify him as a proto-realist or proto-feminist. Middleton's satire was not realism: the two modes of writing are not equivalent. Moreover, while satire may take subjects and content from "real life," the stylized anger and railing of satirists take a shape inherited from literary models: models, of course, infused with new voices and revitalized into new shapes.

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[56] Algernon Charles Swinburne, "IX Thomas Middleton," in *The Collected Poetical Works of Algernon Charles Swinburne,* Vol V. (London: William Heinemann, 1917) 305.

[57] Strangely, this revenge play does not feature a poisoned kiss – a common trope used in playhouse revenges in Kyd's *Soliman and Perseda*, Webster's *White Devil*, Middleton's *Second Maiden's Tragedy*, and Massinger's *The Duke of Milan*. See Tanya Pollard's chapter on the topic in *Drugs and Theatre in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

Moreover, women featured heavily in Middleton's prose satires. Prostitutes were one of Middleton's favorite targets. His "whores" were almost always infected "pox," another contagious disease spread through poisons. Today, while many have identified the "pox" as "syphilis" – the latter name taken from Girolamo Fracastoro's mythic, Lucretian poem on the disease and its treatments – the former, early modern term is notably imprecise, often including under its umbrella venereal diseases like gonorrhea, among other ailments.[58] Moreover, at first the pox was not even definitively linked to sex. Fracastoro's famous poem on the disease conjures causes that are identical to those of the plague: corrupted stars, putrefactions on earth, and punishments from Gods and Goddesses.[59] In his less "literary" account of literary account of disease, *De Contagion*e, Fracastoro does mention – explicitly –the sexual nature of syphilis.[60] Yet even there, he continues to insist that it spreads across space through astrological conjunctions and poisonings like the plague. In his words "… there seems to be no other possible factor which could have contaminated the air over so many countries and over so great a space, except the constitutions of the sky and the heavenly bodies."[61]

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[58] For instance, see Johannes Fabricius, *Syphilis in Shakespeare's England* (Bristol: Jesssica Kingsley Publishers, 1994).

[59] Girolamo Fracastoro, S*yphilis or the French Disease: A Poem in Latin Hexameters*, Trans. Heneage Wynne-Finch, Intro. James Johnston (London: William Heinemann Medical Books, 1935 [original 1530]).

[60] For Fracastoro, syphilis spreads through copulation because of the heat involved. Even in this passage, he insists that the contagion does not have to have spread by another person.

[61] *De Contagione et Contagiosis Morbis et eorum Curatione, Libri III*, Trans. and Notes Wilmer Cave Wright (New York: GP Putnam's Sons, 1930) 149. Fracastoro describes

As the century progressed, the connection of the "pox" to plague-like, atmospheric corruptions faded in importance, and most pinpointed the "pox" to specific people – or group of people – who carried the disease. These pox-ridden sources aped foreign manners and brought into London this disease of foreigners.[62] Tracking the pox's movement from the Americas to France and Naples, writers assigned a nationality to the disease based on whatever foreigner appeared most "luxurious" to them. This was the "French," "Spanish," "Italian," or "Portuguese" disease, not Fracastoro's diffusely emanating poison. Additionally, in England at least, writers became more focused on sex alone as the vehicle for the pox's transmission, and were all the more moralizing and condemning in their accounts of the pox. English accounts of the pox, shrill in their condemnations of the "filthy wretches, that wallowe in this sinne",[63] characterized the disease in gendered terms. Men were victims and women were sources of the disease, with their "secret places"[64] corrupting and infecting men. Peter Lowe explains this according to the physicality of men's and women's privates: the "secret parts of men,

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three main routes by which infection may occur: direct contact, contact via fomites on mediatory objects, and contagion at a distance. For an excellent overview of the history of the concept of "seeds" of disease – and for more on Fracastoro's understanding of disease – see Vivian Nutton's "The Seeds of Disease: An Explanation of Contagion and Infection from the Greeks to the Renaissance," *Medical History 17* (1983): 1-34.

[62] For a good summary of the different nationalities called upon in labeling the pox, see Fabricius, *Syphilis.*

[63] William Clowes, *A short and profitable treatise touching the cure of the disease called (Morbus Gallicus) by unctions, set forth by William Clowes, of London, chirurgion* (At London : Printed by Iohn Daye, dwelling over Aldersgate and are to be sould at his shoppe at the west dore of Paules., An. 1579) Biii.

[64] Ulrich von Hutten, *De morbo Gallico*, Trans. Thomas Paynell (London: In aedibus Thomae Bertheleti, [1533]) 6. The greater empathy for "male" victims perhaps relates to the author's own infection with the disease.

because they bee laxe and soft, … therefore receiue infection" whereas the polluted "Matrix" of women "proceedeth the original of this disease."[65] Hence, by the turn of the seventeenth century, the outlines of the "pox" were sharper, clearer, and more damning than at the start of the century before. By the time Fracastoro's *Syphilis* was finally translated into English by Nathaniel Tate in 1686, Tate could place all of the blame at the start on women and remain well within the parameters of convention: "Blame not the Stars," he begins. Instead, blame "That wheedling, charming Sex, that draws us in / To ev'ry punishment and ev'ry sin."[66]

Middleton likewise spoke of female sources of disease and male victims, just as he aligned the pox with the "disease of lust."[67] Diatribes against prostitution, so common in his plays they become a motif, directly connect the "poisons" of the harlot with the "breed[ing] of rank diseases."[68] Prostitutes, along with usurers, are part of the ranks of "speckled vermin" that, plaguey and venomous, infect the civic values of London.[69] Yet,

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[65] Peter Lowe, *An easie, certaine, and perfect method, to cure and preuent the Spanish sicknes Wherby the learned and skilfull chirurgian may heale a great many other diseases. Compiled by Peter Lowe, Arellian*:... (London: Printed by Iames Roberts, 1596) Biii.

[66]Girolamo Fracastoro, *Syphilis, or, A poetical history of the French disease written in Latin by Fracastorius ; and now attempted in English by N. Tate*, Trans. N. Tate (London: Printed for Jacob Tonson, 1686) 9. This is the same Tate whose *Injured Love* so whitewashed Webster's *The White Devil*. See pp. 214-216.

[67] For instance, in the *Chaste Maid at Cheapside,* Walter Whorehound speaks of shunning something "like pestilence / Or the disease of lust" (3.1.51-52).

[68] *Honest Whore*, Scene 9, l. 59. Bellafront's attack on prostitutes is strikingly reminiscent of Webster's later diatribe against "whores" in *The White Devil*, though, in Middleton's case, the moral message is clear. See pp. 188-189.

while these disease-carrying women spread infection all over the place, Middleton posed again and again a bizarre effect of their private, sexualized poisons. That is, the poison of the pox actually wards off the poison of the plague. He presented the view in many of his works that the pox was a "French amulet" that expelled poison like a magnet, where like things repulse each other. Middleton, always on the lookout for ironies, was fascinated by this theory of poison blocking poison that drew on sympathetic magic. His characters even comically use the pox to prevent the plague in Middleton's earlier works (or, at least, they are said to do so). For example, Frippery, the canny and exacting merchant of *Your Five Gallants* (1608) who carefully reads the Bills of Mortality each week, also nervously takes whores during times of plague so that "the pox sits at meat and meal with him" (1.1.5). Hence, Beatrice's ill-fated desire to use De Flores as a "poison to expel another" does not come out of nowhere: and her language unwittingly betrays the hidden sexual corruption that will spring from her "use" of De Flores.

This poisonous amulet, however, first appeared in Middleton's co-written tract on the plague epidemic that hit London in 1603. In response to one of the worst outbreaks of plague in decades, Middleton teamed up with Thomas Dekker, a fellow dramatist and author of a number of pamphlets on the plague. The pair wrote the anonymously published *Newes from Gravesend* (1604). The text's argument is muddled. It attacks perceived social abuses in a scattershot fashion, targeting the abandoning wealthy, the irresponsible (and irresponsive) medical, political, and religious authorities, the insufficiency of the governmental orders, and, more subversively, the cruelty of

[69] Taken from his satirical "The Blacke Booke," ll. 105.

quarantine.[70] Mingled within this text is a long section on both the physical and spiritual causes of the recent pestilence, and the two offer many interpretations of the ostensible purpose to the plague. Signed by "*nobody*" – the running joke being that nobody was around to take care of the sick and govern the city during this outbreak –the two dramatists anonymously offer their take on the disease that seemed to pick up around Elizabeth's death, reaching its height during James' coronation.

Middleton's lines on the French amulet appear in his relatively brief section in the tract. In fact, most of the *Newes* belongs to Dekker.[71] The plague seems to be a subject quite important to him; this was not the first, nor the last, of his pamphlets satirizing the experience of the pestilence.[72] While in line with the sharp tone of the piece, Middleton's contributions to *Newes* strike a subtle shift in emphasis. Far into the text, after Dekker's medically informed and biting opening on all the events that have brought contagion through London's front door, Middleton zooms in on the characters he would return to again and again in his city comedies: usurers, gallants, and whores. While so far the London readers have seen the pestilence from a bird's eye view – the rank smells wafting

[70] In fact, Robert Maslen argues in his introduction to the text in the Oxford *Thomas Middleton* that this scathing attack on quarantine was remarkably subversive, especially given the governmental order that prohibited arguing against the effectiveness of quarantine. See Chapter 3, pp for more on quarantine and pubic orders.

[71] In fact, scholars only attribute 106 lines to Middleton.

[72] To my mind, the *Newes* is Dekker's most disturbing account of the pestilence. His text presents a proto-Keynesian theory on the needfulness of large-scale destruction: scarcity of resources in times of dearth and famine means that the loss of hoards of people – themselves "bankrupt" and inclined to "waste, deface, and spoil" anyway – allows for a healthy thinning of the herd. In Dekker's words: "Then famine's only physic, and / The med'cine for a riotous land / Is such a plague. (1151-1153).

through the air, the disapproval of God, the barges carrying the dead body of the Queen, and the invading army of the pestilence moving in through the city gates – Middleton lowers their gaze onto specific figures. These are the corrupted citizens who should be victims of the plague, but are not; indeed, Middleton begins by acknowledging that only "babes and poor" (974) are the victims of this "beggar's plague" (973), and yet quickly proceeds to imagine, perversely, what it would be like if the plague took better victims. He imagines an outbreak where the usurer would be forced to "behold / His pestilent flesh" (980-1), where the glutton would "see blue marks" of swollen buboes rather than grapes "hang in clusters on each vein" (1009-1010), and where the lecher would be wasted, lying "In dreadful trance" (1033) as he dies in front of his whore. Here is a vision of what the plague could be: a fantasy of a disease that might kill the very people thought to be responsible for all the corruption that is currently harming the city.

Yet, while Middleton busily fantasizes about this alternative plague, he suddenly loses focus on the initial irony of the poor being victims and the corrupt being survivors. As he thinks about the lecher, dying amongst bawds and whores, he comes to the central irony of his passage, the idea that seems to have given him the most steam to fuel the angry comedy of his section. Seeming to forget that he is arguing that the lecherous, whore-buying man should die, but doesn't, he suddenly notes that this man will die from the plague due to his extramarital activities. Now, it is the whore whose survival is ironized. *She* is the one who ought to die of the plague, but doesn't. In fact, Middleton's section never returns to the central construction (that all these lecherous characters haven't died, and that only the poor and innocent have been slain). The imagined portrait of the sickened adulterer surrounded by corrupted women now made real, the actual

ironic picture of London's pestilence he presents is that of the disease-infested woman protected by her very corruption.

For Middleton, the sexually charged poison of the pox acts as an "amulet," since its occult properties, or unseen qualities, blocks the plague's poison from entering into the already-corrupted female flesh:

> His [the dying gallant's] painted harlots …
> Now they dance in ruffian's hands,
> Lazy lieutenants without bands,
> With muffled half-faced panders laughing
> Whilst he lies gasping, they sit quaffing,
> Smile at this plague and black mischance
> Knowing that their deaths come o'er from France.
> Tis not their season now to die:
> *Two gnawing poisons cannot lie*
> *In one corrupted flesh together,*
> Nor can this poison then fly thither.
> There's not a strumpet mongst them all
> That lives and rises by her fall
> Dreads this contagion or his [lover's/pestilence's] threats,
> *Being guarded with French amulets*. (1038-1055).

Middleton's corrupted females gloat with their pimps over the dying man, protected by their own sexually charged "French" disease from the plague. Adding ironies to ironies, the plague here seems to have been spurred by their poisonous influence and dissolute sex industry. Yet, they are protected from the very poison they have conjured. Of course, the dancing whore only celebrates in the short term, as Middleton still promises her eventual death "come o'er from France" in the more prolonged and painful illness promised from her venereal infection. This is a limited victory.

Yet, this highly ironized, momentary triumph of whore over gallant relies on a number of odd assumptions on Middleton's part. For one thing, he insists that only prostitutes and pimps – not customers – are protected. Would not the men who frequent the whorehouse be likewise infected with her poison, and thereby protected from the

plague? Why would only the people who earn financial gain from the sex industry be susceptible to the pox? Moreover, Middleton seems to align the pox here even more with the "strumpets" than with their pimps. The presence of the pimps in the text is as brief and shadowy as their description as those "half-faced" men. In this construction, the pox is almost uncontagious, sticking to "painted harlots" and women in particular, but not really spreading to their youthful, boyish customers. Middleton treats epidemics as gendered phenomenon, where the sexual ravages of the pox, feminine and slowly corrosive, might protect prostitutes and other unkempt females from the swift annihilation of the plague

The idea that the pox might prevent the plague was not Middleton's alone. Yet, Middleton's presentation of it in the *Newes* is the earliest reference I have been able to track in English, though it was surely already well apart of the popular perception of the interaction between pox and plague. It ties in, of course, with the ever-controversial practice of using poison to treat poison. Yet, another competing idea was gaining traction during the period that connected the poisons of various diseases with one another. According to this concept, during plague outbreaks, the poisons of one disease could transform into the poison of the plague.[73] It is far from a given that Middleton would take the opposite, plague-protective position in his text.

[73] The idea that other diseases might transform into the poison of the plague fit in more generally with the effect of Galenic "non-naturals" on increasing disease, as those with greater putrefaction were understood as being more likely to be infected by the plague. In Jon, Arrizabalaga et al.'s account, "It was widely agreed that there were 'mixed' disease and that one disease could change into another," in *The Great Pox: The French Disease in Renaissance Europe* (Yale University Press: New Haven, 1997) 2.

His intense focus on the ironically-protective, female pox seemed to be something of his calling card. Indeed, in his second, much gentler collaboration with Dekker on the plague, "The Meeting of Gallants" (1604), he once again describes prostitutes, or "light-heeled wagtails," as carrying "against all weather of plague/ and pestilence … a French supersedeas" (372-373), or a writ that delays a defendant's payment while awaiting appeal. Reminiscent of the tricksters and thieves in his comedies, who rely upon legal technicalities and loopholes to take what they want, strumpets use the pox as a kind of legal trick to prevent the plague. Yet, while presenting the ironies of contagion (the most corrupt are the most free of the plague!), Middleton is really satirizing the notion of the "French amulet" and other medicinal poisons. Infecting oneself with the pox does not appear to Middleton to be a particularly wise strategy. In the *Newes*, then, the pox's sudden appearance disrupts the plague-narrative of swollen buboes and divine punishment, effectively substituting one scary disease with another scary, and perhaps more socially disruptive, ailment. Within the "secrets" of their internal, sexual organs, painted harlots shamelessly hide the pox, a disease "more common" than the plague. All of Middleton's fuss over the healing power of chastity relates to this biting image of diseased, female sexuality. Whether "virigns," "chaste," or "whores," women are undeniably corrupted in Middleton's utterly debased, satiric representations of humanity.

"Lady, you hear not me": Fractured Communication in *The Changeling*

Middleton's sharp, satirical edge, and his near-obsession with the ironized draw of corrupted female sexuality, keeps him from granting Beatrice-Joanna and De Flores much "tragic grandeur." The language of their "romance," if one can call it that, does not captivate audiences in the traditional sense. Middleton (as always) writes so colloquially

that his language reads more like prose than blank verse, barely scan-able. It completely lacks the soaring highs and lows of Webster and any of the *pathos* and lyricism of Shakespeare. Middleton's verse throughout, but especially in the aforementioned confrontation scene of 3.4, mirrors Beatrice's estimation of De Flores' language: it is "bold and vicious," shorn of imagery, and emptied of regular meter. At its heart is the almost entirely monosyllabic, central metaphor of the passage: again, "You're no more now … You're the deed's creature: by that name / You lost your first condition" (3.3.135; 137-138).

The hollowed-out aesthetic of De Flores' and Beatrice's forced love lames Alsemero's and Beatrice's earlier conceits on love; in each of their three flirtatious conversations on love (in 1.1, 2.1, and 3.1) Beatrice and Alsemero play on more elaborate metaphors of desire and visual clarity. Yet, Middleton and Rowley undermine their visibility even here through their peculiar, and sometimes awkward, experiment with asides. More than anything particular in the language, the asides of the play subtly dramatize the deeply problematic break-down of communication between nearly every character of the story. As in so many of Middleton's plays, characters and their motives are so disguised from each other than even spying proves to be uninformative at best and misleading at worst. Hence the incredibly strange virginity test scene, where Beatrice-Joanna escapes Alsemero's detection by faking her response to drinking the potion in Glass M.[74] Far before representing this failed experiment of masculine detection over

[74] See, for instance Margorie Garber's delightful and powerfully incisive "The Insincerity of Women" in *Deisre in the Renaissance,* Eds. Valeria Finucci and Regina Schwartz (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994) for more on the way Beatrice's performance of 'faking it' is a way to avoid Alsemero's controlling gaze.

tricky female sexuality, Middleton and Rowley manage to create an atmosphere of profound isolation on an even more basic level, where characters seem unable to communicate with one another even when they want to do so.

The remarkably frequent asides throughout the play only amplify this sense of the obscurity of human character, and the deceptiveness of outward signs. From the start of the play, in Act 1, Scene 1, the high number of asides creates an atmosphere that feels highly stylized and un-naturalistic. Unlike the soliloquy, asides thrown into a dialogue continuously start and stop the flow of imagined onstage communication, such that multiple asides create the effect of a dizzying "head-turn," where actors speak one line to a character, turn to the audience to speak another line, turn back to the character for the next, and so on. Rowley starts the play by dividing the stage into two groups of wooing lovers – Diaphanta and Jasperino, and Alsemero and Beatrice-Joanna. The juxtaposition of the raunchier conversation between servants, and the would-be Petrarchan laments of the others, parodies the "serious" love of Alsemero and Beatrice right from the beginning. Added to this is the quick succession of asides that reflect the "inner" reality of the characters. In placing desires and hidden motivations in the aside, Rowley effectively dislocates true thoughts and emotions from dialogue, and exposes the limitations of outward communication. Moreover, soliloquies book-end this scene, which starts on the note of Alsemero's "holy" love and ends, powerfully, on De Flores' lust, as he perversely fingers Beatrice's dropped glove, or "thrust[s] my fingers / Into her sockets" (226-227). Thus, in between these male fantasies of love and lust, Rowley captures the manners of courtship that smooth away the baser motivations lust and aggression.

Middleton picks up the device and uses it to a greater extent than Rowley. While Rowley's asides in the first scene stick to about a few lines each, onstage communication breaks down almost completely in Middleton's scenes. Mimetic verisimilitude – where a story unfolds between onstage characters – shatters in the face of these extended asides to the audience. Additionally, Middleton narrows the focus onto Beatrice and De Flores. We do not find the manic "head turn" effect of four or five different onstage characters as before, but extensive, soliloquy-like asides between the only two characters onstage. In 2.1, while Beatrice-Joanna and De Flores are alone onstage together for thirty-three lines, they only speak two lines directly to each other, both of which are Beatrice's short commands and insults to her reviled servant. In total, out of their shared sixty-two lines of the scene, a remarkable forty-five of the lines are asides, where both continue to perseverate on the same thoughts that have plagued them throughout the play: Beatrice obsesses over her disgust for De Flores (and worries about her predicament in the two soliloquies that comes before and after this encounter), and De Flores, as always, expresses his overwhelming desire for Beatrice.

Thus, in this scene, Middleton expands and elongates dramatic time such that De Flores stands in front of Beatrice for an extended period of time, speaking only to the audience, first in a soliloquy-like, ten-line aside on the possibility of his success despite his ugliness; and then in a series of short two line-asides, interjected between Beatrice's own two-lines asides. Finally, Beatrice cuts through the very un-silent "silence," by speaking directly to him, addressing their strange lack of onstage communication: "Thy business? What's thy business?" (56). This is a subtle shift from Rowley's use of the aside, that largely got at the dissociation between what is said and what is thought. Now,

the device is not unsensed by onstage characters. They may not hear the content of other character's asides, but they seem to feel the necessary pause that breaks apart onstage, mimetic time and language when another character starts speaking to the audience. As far as Beatrice-Joanna is concerned, De Flores enters the stage and stands silently before her while he speaks to the audience.[75] In her own aside on the matter, she says, "The villain's fixed": that is, stuck in his place, unnerved by his hidden desire for Beatrice.

This effect occurs even more explicitly and with much greater irony in the next scene, when Beatrice secretly meets with Alsemero. In this case, Beatrice breaks off in thought as she and Alsemero try to figure out how they might get Beatrice out of her former engagement to Piracquo. She rejects Alsemero's suggested duel, and begins to think of her own private plan. In the following passage, I have italicized the asides:

> Beatrice: Here was a course [the suggested duel]
> Found to bring sorrow on her way to death;
> The tears would ne'er ha'dried, till dust had chok'd 'em.
> Blood-guiltiness becomes a fouler-visage,
> *And now I think on one – I was to blame,*
> *I ha' marred so good a market with my scorn:* [that is, by shunning De Flores in her anger]
> *'T had been done questionless. The ugliest creature*
> *Creation framed for some use, yet to see*
> *I could not mark so much where it should be.*
> Alsemero: Lady!
> Beatrice: *Why, men of art make much of poison,*
> *Keep one to expel another. Where was my art?*
> Alsemero: Lady, you hear not me (2.2.37-48).

Why dramatize Beatrice's secret plot to use De Flores, "the ugliest creature / Creation framed for some use," in the aside rather than in a soliloquy after Alsemero leaves the stage? In explicitly calling attention Beatrice's aside, Middleton sharply drives a wedge between the two plotting lovers. Her internal world becomes inaccessible to Alsemero

[75] De Flores clues us in to the timing of all of this. Towards the end of his soliloquy-like aside, he mentions "She turns her blessed eye upon me now" (50). Thus, she probably only feels the pauses from his asides after this moment, as she is presumably unaware of his presence before this line.

and literally fractures their communication. Moreover, all of this heavily ironizes the optimistic lines that start this scene. At this moment, when the two would-be lovers finally arrange to meet in the private recesses of the castle, Beatrice claims to "have within mine eye all my desires" (2.2.8). In other words, she thinks she has achieved her dream earlier expressed in the play, of a love that is fully transparent, where the outward and inward eye perfectly align. Alsemero also celebrates their clarity and consonance, only he speaks of language and communication rather than vision: "We're so like / In our expressions, lady, that unless I borrow / The same words, I shall never find their equals" (12-14). The two never feel this sense profound likeness and connection again. Beatrice retreats more and more into her hidden world of secrets and Alsemero becomes increasingly scientific in his desperate attempts to observe the external signs of his impossibly obscure wife. It all starts, however, during Beatrice's interrupting aside on the use of "poison." "Lady, you hear not me" – and the two seem to occupy almost completely different worlds from here on out.

Though Middleton powerfully dramatizes Beatrice's mental separation from Alsemero, he focuses more energy on showcasing the fractured communication between Beatrice and De Flores in the lead-up to their great confrontation (in 3.3). Unlike Alsemero, De Flores uses the aside even more than Beatrice does. When Beatrice tries to manipulate De Flores into killing Piracquo, De Flores virtually only speaks in asides. In the following passage, all the italicized lines are his asides to the audience. The conversation begins after Beatrice tells De Flores his ugly face now "look[s] … amorously." She asks if he's seen a "physician":

De Flores: Not I.
Tis the same physnomy, to a hair and pimple

Which she called scurvy scarce an hour ago:
How is this?
Beatrice: Come hither – nearer, man.
De Flores: *I'm up to the chin in heaven.*
Beatrice: Turn, let me see –
Faugh! 'Tis but the heat of the liver, I perceiv't;
I thought it had been worse.
De Flores: *Her fingers touched me –*
She smells all amber!
Beatrice: I'll make a water for you shall cleanse this
Within a fortnight.
De Flores: With your own hands, lady?
Beatrice: Yes, mine own, sir: in a work of cure
I'll trust no other.
De Flores: '*Tis half an act of pleasure*
To hear her talk thus to me (2.2.75-87).

In over ten lines of dialogue, he only manages to stammer out to his lady "Not I" (75) and then "With your own hands, lady?" (84). All the power seems to be in Beatrice's court: De Flores appears to be totally manipulated, barely capable of speaking to her directly. Desire is scarcely contained – "She smells all amber," "Tis half an act of pleasure" – and, moreover, seems to be sensed by Beatrice. She thinks she knows what she is doing here, and by all accounts she seems to be succeeding in her seduction of De Flores.

Thus, returning to Act 3, Scene 3, we see just how startling De Flores' blackmail really is to the dynamic so far seen in the play. More to the point, the dialogue that ensues between De Flores and Beatrice is almost entirely devoid of asides. This is a first, not only for De Flores and Beatrice, but also for almost every other character seen so far. The only asides of their lengthy exchange – when De Flores throws Piracquo's finger at her and blackmails her into sex – belong to Beatrice, and they are brief exclamations ("I'm in a labyrinth" (71) and "He speaks home!" (87)). For the first time in the play, two characters are almost fully communicating with one another. The harsh reality of their shared crime comes across in their nearly rhythmless and transparent language:

Beatrice: Is it done then?
De Flores: Piracquo is no more.
Beatrice: My joys start at mine eyes; our sweet'st delights

Are evermore born weeping.
De Flores: I've a token for you.
Beatrice: For me?
De Flores: But it was sent somewhat unwillingly – [*Shows the finger*]
I could not get the ring without the finger.
Beatrice: Bless me! What hast thou done?
De Flores: Why, is that more
Than killing the whole man? (3.323-30)

The shorn line "Piracquo is no more" of course sets us up the later, major revelation of the scene, "You're no more now." Additionally, his evacuation here of Beatrice's naiveté with the horrific "token" of his work likewise mirrors the momentous loss of her "honour" later in the scene. The stupidity of her favorite kind of visual metaphor, used so often with Alsemero, – "My joys start at mine eyes" – becomes obvious when the visual token of what she's actually done breaks apart the language of visuality and meaning. The chopped of body-part of her former fiancé simply signals the gore she has tried to rewrite as "delights" and "joys."

Without the aside, Middleton forces the characters to engage directly with each other. At the same time, he allows his audience to identify with the onstage suspense. We know the full-extent of De Flores' obsessive lust for Beatrice, though she does not. Since we are accustomed to having full access to character's internal responses and hidden agendas in real-time, the lack of asides let us feel along with Beatrice's confusion.

Beatrice: 'Tis resolved then.
Look you, sir, here's three thousand golden florins;
I have not meanly thought upon thy merit.
De Flores: What, salary? Now you move me!
Beatrice: How, De Flores?
De Flores: Do you place me in the rank of verminous fellows
To destroy things for wages? (3.3.60-65)

By stripping this moment of the usual asides – where Beatrice might continue to speak of her confusion and De Flores of his ardor or the success of his plot – Middleton stages the

very transition from hidden, audience-directed language to revelatory, character-directed dialogue, savagely emptied of the fantasies of metaphor in its expressions. The dark triumph of the scene does not only have to do with De Flores' success in forcing Beatrice to sleep with him. It is the triumph of communication, where character-directed language finally expresses motives and feelings.

This deftly executed structure of audience- and character-directed language is what I find to be behind much of the sense of romanticism in this and subsequent scenes. Middleton has so successfully manipulated the asides that his audience feels an intense charge – feels the hollowness that surrounds his two anti-heroes – without adding much of anything to the language. Simply having two characters communicate directly, with little to no asides onstage, is enough.

Middleton will go on even further to dramatize even greater communication between De Flores and Beatrice. They first communicate without any asides at all in Act 5. Scene 1 – the first time such dialogue occurs in the play – as they plot to cover their tracks by killing Diaphanta. Once De Flores comes up with this strategy, Beatrice exclaims, "I'm forced to love thee now" (5.1.48), coming close to love, but still insisting on the "forced" nature of her affection. She comes even closer later in the scene, moving from "forced" love to "worthy" love once she is alone onstage, exclaiming "Here's a man worth loving" (5.1.76). Yet their contact becomes radically closer when most of the cast is onstage. All have been woken up by De Flores' set fire and the murder of Diaphanta. Now, the two communicate in an entirely unspoken manner while in the presence of others. She arranges for him to receive a reward for putting out the fire, and he can only rejoice in her plotting after the fact, when he is alone onstage ("Rewarded? Precious!

Here's a trick beyond me!" (5.1.126)). Their communication now moves beyond the spoken word. They are in cahoots, sharing and enjoying their dark secrets, once so frantically whispered in the play's many asides.

Unlike the Macbeths, De Flores and Beatrice-Joanna grow closer, mentally and physically, the more isolated from others they become. They share their poisonous desires and secrets without ideals, fully open to the dangers of infiltration in the harshly shorn, corrupted, and fallen nature of their post-lapsarian world. For Middleton and Rowley, however, the stakes are clear. Unlike Webster, who imagined virtue and vice springing from the same primordial soup, Middleton's love of categories and loathing of boundary-breakers overwhelms this play of "secrets," where hidden violence and adultery mirrors the hidden physiology of the female sex. Before her "fall," while still a virgin, Beatrice-Joanna still contains within her chaste body the disturbingly hidden privacy of an internal world where desire and lust, changed hearts and deceptive imaginations, run uncontrolled, unchecked by the policing male gaze. It is only through death – only through the literal evacuations of the internal blood from the external forms – that female sexuality, poisonous and contagious in its changes and exchanges, is put into its observable, static place.

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