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# Renaissance Revenge and the Age of Interiority

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Riley Meachem  
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## Renaissance Revenge and the Age of Interiority

### Introduction

Violence and humanism have a far more complex relationship than we might immediately credit them with. These concepts may seem unlikely bedfellows; if humanism is the valuing of human experience and agency, violence would seem its ultimate negation, as violence restricts freedom through pain and fear, and in the case of murder, ends all human experience and agency-- the murdered Roderigo and Desdemona, for example, begin as Roderigo and Desdemona, but end the play as Roderigo's corpse and Desdemona's corpse. While violence has been a key means of suppressing human rights and freedom, in the context of art it takes on a new significance; that of accessibility. Gertrude remarks in Hamlet that "all that lives must die," and this is the principle which makes violent fare entertaining to so many people. Death and violence are things which nearly every living thing has some, if unconscious, awareness of, and the consequences of a knife to the heart are the same, or nearly the same, to any viewer, be they educated or uneducated, young or old, rich and poor.

It hardly comes as a surprise that during the English Renaissance, particularly the late 16th and early 17th centuries, playwrights produced such quantities of stage plays which included or hinged on violence. The theater, which had provided entertainment throughout the early middle ages to versatile audiences, often for free, serves as an excellent place to witness this gradual change come about within the culture of England. Both members of the monarchy and common people of no social rank were able to attend these shows, which provided stories both simple and visceral in their appeal and complex in plot and noble in subject. Given their popularity and controversy, writers may well have seen the utility of these revenge narratives, with their inherent suspense and moral formula, to preach a populist, egalitarian ideology to multiple demographics. Theaters served as great equalizers; they brought whole

communities of varied background together, provided these people with the same story, gave them the same amount of control over it, and even allowed actors to become kings themselves.

While we can only assume that the operators of theaters and writers of drama were aware of what power they possessed, what is undebatable is the late 16th and early 17th century was an era of philosophical upheaval for England in particular. Paul Oskar Kristeller acknowledges this in his writings on the state of Italy during the 15th, 16th, and 17th centuries, as does Richard Helgerson, in his book *Forms of Nationhood: The Elizabethan Writing of England*, describes how not just Shakespeare, but writers of all sorts during this time began advocating for the rights of individual in relation to the state: “In chivalric romance, historical narrative, and topographical description, these poets sought to articulate a national community whose existence and eminence would then justify their desire to become its literary spokesman.” At this time, in other words, writers of multiple disciplines all began to expand their notion of the self and the value of the human being’s soul and freedom of choice. One of the figures mentioned is legal writer George Coke, whose treatise *Institutes of the Laws of England*, which established a means by which citizens might sue or lodge legal complaint with their government. These writings and others in Elizabethan England were an enormous influence on both the monarchical revenge tragedies and revered Historical tragedies of this epoch.

During the tumultuous political activities which marked both Elizabethan and Jacobean England—The Gunpowder Treason and the Essex rebellion both occurred while these plays were immensely popular— it is unsurprising revenge tragedies feature rich political subtexts, in which we begin to see precursors to our contemporary notion of humanism. Given their unique perspective, I will examine in this essay how the revenge tragedies of Middleton, Marlowe, and Shakespeare questioned notions of class and gender relations of their times and offered support for a new variety of humanism in opposition to Renaissance humanism through their characterization and often anti-monarchical plots. I will establish in my first chapter how Thomas Middleton’s plays *the Revenger’s Tragedy* and *the*

*Changeling* subvert and attack traditional notions of government, law, and gender by demonizing the nobility and re-appropriating from well-known generic touchstone *the Spanish Tragedy*. In my second Chapter, I will demonstrate how two earlier plays, the history play *Edward II* by Christopher Marlowe and *Hamlet* by William Shakespeare not only anticipate this re-appropriation of the revenge narrative but set up a new standard of moral interaction based on interiority and awareness of the minds of others.

### **Terminology: Humanism, Aims, and Pain**

To embark upon such a project as this however, we need several operational definitions of what it is we are discussing. Some initial confusion may arise from the fact that the Humanism of the Renaissance was not identical to what we now take the word to mean. Italian Humanism has a long and complicated history and has existed in some form or another since the Roman empire, when it was regarded primarily as someone devoted to classical learning and knowledge. With the re-adoption of Latin letters by many prominent poets and church figures, both the term itself developed in the early and mid-15th century, to describe those with a broad education and knowledge of past cultural touchstones— Petrarch, for example, had read the philosophy, plays and epics from ancient Rome, as well as the Homeric epics, and was well loved by the highest-ranking members of his society. To Quote Paul Oskar Kristeller, in an address he gave at Connecticut College in 1944, a renaissance humanist “referred to the teacher of a specific school of subjects,” which were crucial to “A characteristic phase in what may be called the rhetorical tradition in western culture,” (Monfasani, Kristeller 1156). The humanism Medici, Petrarch, and Ariosto were primarily concerned with was the cultivation of a classical, historical intellectual tradition. This Humanism presumed that the education and knowledge its practitioners had would necessarily lead to some greater knowledge of humanity and the human condition; however, it is hardly what we would consider humanism today. These scholars had no specific interest in the reformation of the church or the political situation during this period, and by their very

nature they only included the educated, wealthy, landed classes, who had access to good schooling, large quantities of free time, and enough wealth to support themselves.

When I am referring to the rise of humanism as expressed in these plays, I am not referring to this movement, but rather something nearly diametrically opposed. Jacob Burckhardt, whose landmark text *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* examines the multi-faceted ways in which the developments in Europe lead to a more widespread period of cultural growth, posits that rather than develop the notion of individualist interiority, the conception of humanism in the Italian Renaissance in fact hindered it by encouraging attitudes of tyranny: “The rapid progress of humanism after the year 1400 paralysed native impulses. Henceforth men looked to antiquity only for the solution of every problem, and consequently allowed literature to sink into mere quotation. Nay, the very fall of civil freedom is partly to be ascribed to all this, since the new learning rested on obedience to authority, sacrificed municipal rights to Roman law, and thereby both sought and found the favour of the despots,” (Burckhardt 206). Contemporary humanism is quite different, though it also has a long and turbulent history, with its roots in a great number of philosophical and historical traditions and schools of thinking. The materialism of Marx and existentialism of Sartre and Nietzsche, both of which center around the freedom of choice and actions of individuals, may be useful to our understanding of a humanist, but the idea that human life is of intrinsic value greater than any other arbitrary factor was first concocted by the Utilitarian philosophers of the enlightenment. Utilitarian philosophers believe that it may be reduced to a basic equation: that the pleasure and good of the most people be of paramount importance. Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill both identify beings as being worthy of consideration based on the principle of suffering: if something can suffer it can also be in a state free of suffering, which would be defined as pleasure or happiness. These concepts are some of the oldest and most effective when it comes to judging the morality of behavior. Bentham writes that “the greatest goal of Utilitarianism is to maximize pleasure for the greatest number.” This definition does not satisfy Singer,

who believes “Pain and suffering are in themselves bad and should be prevented or minimized, irrespective of the race, sex, or species of the being that suffers.” He also makes distinction between physical pain and the pain of having one’s aims dashed: “So self-interest teaches us not to be concerned only with ourselves, but to discover satisfaction through our engagement with goals that go beyond ourselves,” (Stamford Encyclopedia of philosophy). I have elected to use his definition for this study. Hedda Gabler for instance, lived a life in which she did not suffer physically, but which she was kept inactive and her goals and attempts at agency repeatedly thwarted, and she saw fit to end her own life. While pain may be a sufficient marker philosophically—it forces us to include animals, infants, and the impaired in our consideration—in these plays which focused on the violent nature of social organizations and the inescapable nature of death, it would not be a very useful guide.

In her essay “The Body in Pain: the Making and Unmaking of the World,” Elaine Scarry dissects the relationship to the suffering person as that of the torturers “producing a mime in which the one annihilated shift to being the agent of his own annihilation,” (Scarry 49). Because a body in pain cannot effectively communicate this pain linguistically, it resorts to an almost reflexive dehumanization of itself, becoming increasingly dependent on basic notions of survival, inducing flailing and screaming to alert others of the occurrence of pain. Due to the basic inability to truly share the pain of one body with another, however, and the intentional nature of violence, the tortured person then releases information as a matter of biology to end the suffering, despite being aware of the fact they are acting against their own goals and interests. In a sense, Scarry argues, we are not ourselves when we are hurt, or at the very least not our same selves. Everyone in these texts suffers varying degrees of physical pain, disfigurement, or flat-out demise, but all of them have goals, ideas of self, and traits which exist separate from their relation to pain and death. The dichotomy between the inherent objectification of pain and the interior mental lives of these characters helps to demonstrate both the importance of such

desires and the way structures of power, with their ability to induce violence, inhibit these desires and in so doing inhibit the creation of the self.

### **Vice and Social Critique in Middleton Introduction**

The violent and revenge-fueled texts which grew in popularity during the late 16<sup>th</sup> and early 17<sup>th</sup> centuries in England, now commonly referred to as revenge tragedies, were texts which arose from the Renaissance Humanism of the era, drawing on traditions of Roman and Medieval plays and myths and heavily rooted in the themes and traditions of the tragedies of ancient Roman playwright and thinker Seneca. Because of this, many of the earliest examples of these plays exhibit a marked distrust of the passions and feelings of individuals, and a deference to the power of the secular state. The archetypal example, *The Spanish Tragedy*, which remained relatively popular for decades after its premiere, serves as an embodiment of these ideas of the dangers of excess passion and rage, the supremacy of the government or monarchy, as well as an investment in the pre-Christian honor economy. The play follows the efforts of respected knight Hieronimo to find the murderer of his son Horatio, aided by Horatio's lover and watched from heaven by Horatio's slain best friend, Andrea. Though the dead can speak in Thomas Kyd's tragedy, they cannot affect change in the world of the living, as demonstrated by Andrea's outrage at being made to watch his good friend's suffering by the conclusion of the first half of the play. Revenge, the entity with whom Andrea holds discourse, may appear to be architect of what unfolds, but may also merely have foresight into the future, as we never see Revenge actually do anything other than speak. And though the vengeful father of slain Horatio, makes multiple pleas to the heavens for guidance and closure, it is bereaved lover Bel-Imperia who answers his prayers with a well-timed letter. With this absence of higher moral authority, the only real exchange of power and of order is between the state and its subjects. There is no other recourse for justice.

Thus, when the play's villains, Lorenzo and Balthazar, in a sense violate the state's power by manipulating the rules of the court system and the martial order of prisoners and ransom in order to

further their own aims, they must be done away with by Spain, if the play is to reach any sense of closure or is to discourage violence against the state. Hieronimo and Bel-Imperia have no other form of redress but to take on the role of the government, first by metaphorically donning royal rank in their very simplistic and gruesome play, and more broadly by actively taking on the role of the state in being arbiters of wrongs and of punishment. This is further enforced by Hieronimo's choice of words at the conclusion of the blood bath. He comes on stage, reveals the mangled corpse of his dead son, and explains to the three noblemen exactly what he has done: "See here my show; look on this spectacle!/ Here lay my hope, and here my hope hath end" (4.4.89). It is extremely important to him that he reveal dramatically, to these government officials, what he has just accomplished and why. Furthermore, we must examine the word "Spectacle" as something of supreme importance here. It brings to mind immediately the eponymous spectacle of the *Spectacle of the Scaffold* from Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*: "Many...non corporeal punishments were accompanied by a degree of torture: public exhibition, pillory, carcan, flogging, branding" (Foucault 32). It is not just the body that is tortured here, but also the other citizens and the mind of the subject of punishment. The bodies of criminals were exposed in a way that was not only often painful, but turned their physical forms into a canvas. Killing and displaying them allowed the state to perform the most fascinating and terrifying of magic tricks: It turned living people into things, things which the government compelled into obedience by showing them to other potential offenders as a warning, reducing a once defiant human into not even a body, but an object of pure obedience to the state. A competent and powerful body, should it wish to discourage behavior without accusations of barbarism, may use a combination of an audience and the recipient's awareness of themselves to force rectification.

Of course this violence stand when instigated by the single low-ranking Hieronimo and Bel-Imperia; the Viceroy and other nobles interrogate the surviving knight, who mutilates himself to keep from confessing before committing suicide, giving Spain and Portugal the ability to efface his narrative



and supplant it with their own. But it establishes two central themes in revenge drama from this period: the supremacy of the state government, which must be triumphant in the end, even if its cause is ultimately less righteous than that of the avenger; and the honor economy, or the code surrounding reputation and revenge, and which controlled both of standing and moral worth of an individual. It is only because his son is killed that Hieronimo takes action, and it is only because he was disgraced in battle that Andrea wishes to see Balthazar destroyed. This retaliation to family members being killed is a paramount theme in revenge narratives, both from the Renaissance and today.

### **Criticism and Influences**

The works of Thomas Middleton (1580-1627) may not at first appear to be the best example of a response to the somewhat propagandistic tone of *The Spanish Tragedy*. After all, *The Changeling* and *The Revenger's Tragedy* (a play that has been controversially but frequently attributed to Thomas Middleton), still conclude with those who take the law into their own hands being destroyed by the government. Despite these endings, however, there is a revolutionary line of thought which runs throughout the plays, each of which gives increasing credence to the interiority of their tragic figures, who invariably are tangled in rhetorical webs which they have helped to weave. Through these lurid and gripping popular plays, Middleton helped subtly espouse a form of governance in which the welfare of the governed individuals was held in greater value than the supremacy of government or that of traditional morality, which he accomplishes most effectively by placing the governing bodies or society in opposition to the honor of the family and the purity of love.

Criticism of both Middleton and of his capacity for social critique has been somewhat limited; due to continued debates regarding authorship, many pieces have been penned primarily concerned with who wrote *The Revenger's Tragedy*, and there is almost nothing written in the past thirty years on *The Changeling*. What criticism does exist on *The Revenger's Tragedy* however is fascinating. In her essay "The Very Ragged Bone; Dismantling Masculinity in Thomas Middleton's *The Revenger's Tragedy*,"

Aimee Ross-Kilroy argues that supplanting all the ghostliness of *The Spanish Tragedy* (and *Hamlet*) with a skull not only removes the spiritual and divine from the play at the onset, but that the choice of skull immediately sets up a hyper-masculine world which calls for blood violence through its very fabric:

“In *Hamlet*, a disembodied male ghost cries out for remembrance through revenge...But by placing the skull of Gloriana in Vindice’s hands at the beginning of this drama, Middleton makes a crucial generic change: This is not just any skull, but the skull, Vindice claims, of a dead woman. And he is going to dress this skull up to perform revenge, using it as a tool to punish Glorianna’s murderer. While Charles and Elaine Hallett have argued that ‘ghosts and skeletons are not so far apart’ and that ‘the skull can serve much the same purpose as did the earlier ghost,’ I would argue that the two are, in the logic of revenge, polar opposites, and that the presence of Glorianna’s skull here marks the beginning of a drama that interrogates Hamlet’s claim to have that within that passes show; indeed, to there being anything beyond the body in the world of revenge,” (Kilroy 58).

By beginning not with a supernatural occurrence recalling a living being to revenge, here a living being merely desires revenge and, with no prompting seeks and achieves it. We have no reason to suspect there is even a spiritual or ethical world in the universe of this play; no one really behaves with decency or empathy, and there are no ghosts or gods visible here. Thus the only recourse is murder, and dishonor avenged with death— the sort of justified-violence which is a staple in masculine-fantasy.

But Ross-Kilroy then vacates this topic, focusing more on the ways the play stifles female agency and the problematic views which the narrative seems to espouse<sup>1</sup>. I feel the abandonment of this line of thought to be an oversight. While the play, and most male Renaissance dramatists, are certainly guilty of expressing and propagating such misogyny, and these topics of conversation are of course critical in Renaissance studies and academia at large, the text is called *The Revenger’s Tragedy*, and deals foremost with a man named ‘Revenge’ in Italian seeking vengeance— the ideas of retaliation, wrongs,

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<sup>1</sup> For more criticism on this topic, see Karin Coddon’s “‘For Show or Useless Property’: Necrophilia and The Revenger’s Tragedy,” or Christine Gottlieb’s: “Middleton’s Traffic in Dead Women: Chaste Corpses as Property in *The Revenger’s Tragedy* and *The Lady’s Tragedy*.” Both critics dissect the relationship between Middleton’s characters controlling dead women’s bodies as a means of removing female agency, particularly when paired with the Duchess in the court scene or Gratiana being tempted by Vindice.

and vigilantism are paramount in this work, yet little has been said of such things. Ornstein touches upon this in his essay “the Ethical Design of The Revenger’s Tragedy” when examining the swiftness with which Vindice attributes lusts and sins to others: “[Vindice’s] erotic imagination transfigures even his mistresses’ skull... he is aroused and revolted, not by what is seen, but by what is imagined... He is the peeping Tom turned Moralist and moralizing with the fevered sexual images dwelt upon by the impotent or frustrate,” (Ornstein 84). Vindice wants to kill the Duke and company, but this is exactly why he finds the Dukedom so disgusting—it acts without thinking, following lusts and rages— and thus he fabricates a moral narrative to induce his revenge. And while this reading is also helpful to us, and paints a perfectly accurate picture of Vindice’s actions and motives, it still falls short of providing us with explaining some of the assumptions which it rests upon.

Chief amongst these are the very basic questions ‘What is revenge, when is it sought, and is it good or ill?’ Sir Francis Bacon, in an essay he wrote some years before the release of this play called “On Revenge” dissects the semantics separating this crime from the more straightforward murder. He begins the essay by naming revenge “a kind of wild justice,” and posits that “the more man’s nature runs to, the more ought law to weed it out. For as for the first wrong, it doth but offend the law; but the revenge of that wrong pulleth the law out of office,” (Bacon 183). By taking revenge, he claims, the citizens take from the state its radical power to both punish and pardon, which is also the means of establishing a state morality. He also makes no exceptions in the instance of dishonor or disgrace, listing them alongside other objects of vice when he comments “There is no man doth a wrong for the wrong’s sake; but thereby to purchase himself profit, or pleasure, or honour, or the like... [w]hy should I be angry with a man for loving himself better than me?” (185). Honor is just as trivial to him as pleasure or profit; it is concerned with the gain of the one over the needs of the society and state at large. However, he does concede that “The most tolerable sort of revenge is for those wrongs which there is no law or remedy; but then let a man take heed the revenge be such as there is no law to punish.” This could explain the

aforementioned decision on Vindice's part to expound for such length in his opening diatribe on how dreadful the Duke and his family is, as well as the decision of Middleton to display in great detail how corrupt the judges, prison guards, courtiers and even his family members are; if there is no reasonable recourse for justice, we are forced to side with Vindice, for the better or worse; even if he seeks merely to redress personal wrongs and affronts to his honor and station. Most importantly however, Bacon's definition of revenge as removing the law from office makes this a radical play— this is key for examining many of the scenes, both bizarre and straightforward, which comprise Middleton's most critically examined play.

The monarchy and government-controlled justice-systems are far from the only targets of Middleton's ire. He is also hyper-critical of the notions of honor which are applied, unevenly, to both men and women, nobles and commoners, in the texts he authored. To discuss this we must have some broader idea of what honor means to Middleton and his characters. Unsurprisingly, references to honor stretch into the annals of European history, with uses occurring in prayer and poetry as far back as 1225 (OED. Honor). While the oldest definition of the word identifies "Great respect, esteem, or reverence demonstrated or expressed," as well as a reference to the "honor" of Sir Thomas Becket, referring to honor in the context of "Quality of character entitling a person to great respect; nobility of mind or spirit; honourableness, uprightness; a fine sense of, and strict adherence to, what is considered to be morally right or just," (OED 2b) which is very similar to the meaning of honor as we know it, there are two other definitions of note: "Something conferred or done as a mark of respect, esteem, distinction, or privilege; a mark or observance of respect. Also: an official award or privilege; an office, rank, or title awarded to honour individual achievement or service," (OED 5a), "With reference to a woman: virtue as regards sexual morality; chastity; virginity; a reputation for this, one's good name," (7a). When applied to the text of *The Revenger's Tragedy*, these interpretations of honor create a new version of the text

centered on a panopticon society, while also presenting a grim take on the optimistic 'rags-to-riches' story, which implies that power may only be achieved through immoral means.

*The Revenger's Tragedy* makes a blatant attack against the unchallenged authority of the state. The very premise is centered on the disparity between the manner in which the government behaves towards its people, and the expectation of a ruled individual. Vindice makes this plain in his opening monologue where he addresses his intended targets, the Four Excellent Characters:

"Duke: Royal Lecher; go grey hair'd adultery;  
And thou his son, as impious steeped as he;  
And thou his bastard, true-begot in evil;  
And thou his Duchess, that will do with Devil," (1.1.1-4).

Vindice, through recounting their most prominent sins in relation to their titles, has placed the audience at odds with these figures within the first four lines of the text, without providing any context or reason to doubt this speaker. While we may soon come to question Vindice's motives and character, we are never at any point asked to change this initial assessment of the royal family; and immediately after further comparing them to the impious and unholy, Vindice, our De facto guide to the grotesque, declares "The duke poison'd [you, my betrothed] / Because thy purer part would not consent / unto his palsy lust," (Middleton 7). This makes the Duke, here the most powerful royal figure and stand-in for nobility, a murderer and a lecher. But it has a meaning which may have been even more devastating to viewers: the noble monarchs in charge of conducting affairs here are the enemies of love. The motive of revenge for a slain spouse is not so uncommon in literature from as far back as Sophocles to as recently as Sweeney Todd, and in writing it, Middleton could be fairly certain to have won the sympathies of both viewers and readers. What is so meaningful about it, perhaps, is that it is perpetrated by a Duke, someone with Royal blood, and that this Duke and his family are all profoundly foul and self-centered. These figures have no divine right to rule, for in fact, as is made plain repeatedly, they have much more in common with Satan than with anything divine. While it does help that the Duchess and her two

children are not of royal blood, and that Spurio is illegitimate, these people in positions of power are being dressed down, and worse, accurately dressed down, by a mere commoner.

On the surface of it, Vindice might seem to be the honorable wronged party and one justly entitled to revenge. His betrothed, Gloriana, has been poisoned for being faithful to him, after all, and his wealth taken. But closer inspection reveals that even from the beginning, Vindice has some ulterior motives in his quest for retribution against the Duke. For despite the nigh-on endless attacks against these royal figures, and the possible 'power to the people' interpretation of the ending, discussed in greater detail later in the essay, the play is difficult to see as a vindication of the individual for a multitude of reasons. Vindice might stand up to the state, but he doesn't do so for the express purpose of his own happiness or safety, but out of a bizarre moral logic rooted heavily in the idea of masculine honor economy. The honor economy is a pre-Christian and male-centered view of human dignity and morality, in which wrongs are exchanged for wrongs of equal or greater enormity. This means that Vindice is not doing this only for himself. He is not even doing it out of love—nor is his brother, as is made clear in the first scene where Vindice proclaims to Hippolito "Thy wrongs and mine are for one scabbard fit," (Middleton 1.1.57). He refers here to his now slain "worthy Father" and the patriarch of the family. It is the slight towards the honor of the family which finally induces action, causing the three children to march off towards their grim business.

Honor is further made the object of our suspicion by the language of commodification that Vindice uses. After spouting off the many sins and failings of the "four excellent characters" who are architects of all his wrongs, Vindice remarks of the Duke's lusting after Gloriana "O God! one, / That has scarce blood enough to live upon; / And he to riot it, like a son and heir! / O, the thought of that / Turns my abused heart-strings into fret."

Vindice speaks of the Duke and his lack of a right to behave in the way he does, because he is old and in possession of a family already—not taking into account the pain and suffering inflicted by murdering unjustly another human being. He goes on to address the Skull:

“Thou sallow picture of my poison'd love,  
My study's ornament, thou shell of death,  
Once the bright face of my betrothed lady,  
When life and beauty naturally fill'd out  
These ragged imperfections;  
When two heaven-pointed diamonds were set  
In those unsightly rings--then 'twas a face  
So far beyond the artificial shine  
Of any woman's bought complexion,  
That the uprightest man (if such there be,  
That sin but seven times a day) broke custom,  
And made up eight with looking after her.” (Middleton 1.1.13)

Here Vindice focuses on the decay inflicted on his once beautiful betrothed, who is now made into something which is ragged and imperfect. What is now but a shell, as he calls it, was once filled, and had about it “beauty” and “light.” He describes further her now decayed visage would be tempting to any man, even the most pious, despite calling the Duke lecherous for lusting after her at the beginning of his diatribe and claiming the leader’s old body had no right to feel these urges. He speaks about her physical form alone, which has now decayed, and he seems angry mostly that this prestigious beauty has been rendered into dust—something which would have happened anyway without the evil interventions of the Duke. The sole internal factor of Gloriana which Vindice praises is her chastity when he declaims

“ But, O accursed palace!  
Thee, when thou wert apparell'd in thy flesh,  
The old duke poison'd,  
Because thy purer part would not consent  
Unto his palsied lust”

It seems the only thing that Vindice loved about his betrothed was the fact she didn't do anything. But though our narrator is hardly the moral paradigm he might initially have made himself out to be, the reader can be in no doubt of Vindice's accuracy when it comes to describing the royalty. After this first scene, we immediately encounter what may be the most potent example of the moral decay of the upper class; the first scene in which the Duke and his family appear and are able to speak for themselves is at the trial of Junior for raping Antonio's wife. This judicial proceeding is gruesome and distasteful enough merely based on its surface meaning, as it depicts a guilty but wealthy sex criminal escaping unscathed. But the affair also serves as a farcical parable regarding the opposition between justice and the desires of those who control the courts.

The Duke begins the trial by speaking to the Justices and the Duchess, and at first glance his decree appears relatively benign:

"Duchess, it is your youngest son, we're sorry,  
His violent act has e'en drawn blood of honour,  
And stain'd our honours;  
Thrown ink upon the forehead of our state;  
Which envious spirits will dip their pens into  
After our death; and blot us in our tombs:  
For that which would seem treason in our lives  
Is laughter, when we're dead. Who dares now whisper,  
That dares not then speak out, and e'en proclaim  
With loud words and broad pens our closest shame?" (Middleton 1.2. 1-9).

The Duke is condemning the actions of his son, but for an odd reason; it casts shame upon the family. He speaks at length about the honor of the deed, the fact that "Blood of Honor" has been drawn by Junior, and that this in turn has stained the family's honor. Because of this, posterity shall defame the entire lineage, or so the Duke posits, and will turn the family into a mockery. The Duke's notion of doing the right thing is immediately shown to be tainted. He is not worried about the sin that has been committed; we do not even find out what Junior is accused of until some lines later. He is most concerned with his own reputation, both presently and posthumously.



Rather than contradict him, the Judge obsequiously adds to what the Duke has said:

Your grace hath spoke like to your silver years,  
Full of confirmed gravity; for what is it to have  
A flattering false insculption on a tomb,  
And in men's hearts reproach? the bowell'd corpse  
May be sear'd in, but (with free tongue I speak)  
The faults of great men through their sear-cloths break. (Middleton 1.2.10-15)

We see that the Duke need not fear consequence and justice, as his judge seems to praise his wisdom and find his thought on his son's punishment, and shares some of his anxiety regarding what shall happen to the Duke's name—although this may be in service of ensuring the Duke remain uninvolved in the trial. The Duke does agree to this bargain, claiming

"They do; we're sorry for't: it is our fate  
To live in fear, and die to live in hate.  
I leave him to your sentence; doom him, lords—  
The fact is great--whilst I sit by and sigh," (1.2.16),

but we the reader have already seen enough: the Duke is in control of the judicial system, and will rule in whichever way causes him to appear the most honorable.

His step son, however, does not share this intrinsic value in honor, nor does he seem very intent on ensuring his longevity. When the Judge announces his crime with disgust, crying "A rape! why 'tis the very core of lust-- / Double adultery," Junior merely agrees "So, sir." (1.2.42-47). And as the series of Judges become more and more appalled at the nature and victim of the crime, "Lord Antonio's wife" (who never speaks and remains unnamed), and demand to know what "Mov'd [him] to't?" Junior carries on with more jests: "Why, flesh and blood, my lord; / What should move men unto a woman else?"

Junior, Son of the Duchess and stepson of the Duke, is clearly guilty and feels not even the smallest twinge of remorse. It would seem to be a damning blow to the honor of the family, reflecting poorly not only on the offender, but his mother, who may well have been perceived as "Base Born" and the Duke who married the creator of such a child. It would be a great step towards the direction of true

justice to have the Duke execute his stepson, despite any partiality, displaying to the citizenry that not even his own desires and loves can keep him from enacting justice on their behalf.

Of course he does not do this. Just as Junior is about to die, the Duke interjects: "Hold, hold, my lord!... We will defer the judgment till next sitting: / In the meantime, let him be kept close prisoner. / Guard, bear him hence." He immediately breaks his promise of not five pages earlier, merely because he is repeatedly harassed by his wife the Duchess. He displays that not only does actual retribution mean nothing, neither does his honor, just his own appetites and irritations. The desire not to be annoyed and to suffer the ire of his spouse is strong enough it over rules right, wrong, and the reputation of his family. It is also clear that the boy will never receive any form of reprimand; His brothers, whose names literally mean "Ambitious" and "Very empty," (or possibly "very stupid") assure Junior

"Brother, this makes for thee; / Fear not, we'll have a trick to set thee free," (Middleton 1.2. 99-100).

Spurio summarizes the whole affair by quipping "nay then, if judgment have cold blood,  
Flattery and bribes will kill it."

This performative kangaroo court notion of justice is a far cry from what we observed in the not much older text of *The Spanish Tragedy*. The institution of the state in *The Revenger's Tragedy*, unlike *Titus Andronicus* or *The Spanish Tragedy*, is antithetical to justice, and provides only the false promise of amends and integrity, while ultimately acting in its own interests. Whereas there, the state is the ultimate and final arbitrator of justice, here the aims of the nobles and the court are directly at odds with the execution of justice<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> This scene is also of great importance to Kathryn Finin, whose essay "Trying Rape in *The Revenger's Tragedy*: 'A Slack Performance'" examines the sexual and social implications of this scene, and the other scenes pertaining to Junior and his rape of Antonio's wife.

So while we do see some fairly radical political depictions, and the theme of the narrative, that of a wronged individual standing up for a new form of government, is clearly important and ideologically salient, this is also clearly not the freeing individualist text it easily could be. After all, several highly politicized forces still bear heavily on the actions of the 'crime family' who are at the forefront of the plot, and by the end of the text a new, extremely similar monarchy has already been set up, run by a man who also values his own safety over the people he leads.

"Hono[u]r" and its derivations appear 129 times throughout *The Revenger's Tragedy*. Many of these are meant to refer to the purely moral definition of the text, but there are also numerous instances where this definition cannot be logically applied. One of these is the very first use of the word in Act I scene II, in which the Duke says to the grieving Duchess, by way of consolation "Duchess, it is your youngest son, we're sorry,/ His violent act has e'en drawn blood of honour, / And stain'd our honours; / Thrown ink upon the forehead of our state" (1.2. 1-4). The Duke demands Junior be punished for two different honor-related offenses; spilling blood of honor, and staining the honors of the Duke and Duchess. The first use of honor is fairly simple—the blood of someone honorable has been spilled—and this could mean either someone of good character or of a good family. Given that Antonio's wife is described as pious, and the fact she is married to a noble of some degree, either meaning is perfectly valid. However, the second use of the word cannot refer to the high moral character of the Duke and his wife. For after asserting that Junior's dishonorable act has stained their honor, he waxes eloquent about the nature of gossip and of posterity: "Which envious spirits will dip their pens into / After our death; and blot us in our tombs: / For that which would seem treason in our lives / Is laughter, when we're dead," (Middleton 1.2. 5-7). The fact he shortly thereafter suspends his son's sentence, thus enabling his hypothetical escape, also serves as a good indicator that he is far from concerned with doing what is good. Thus we must infer that he is using the term in the sense of great esteem or respect which is bestowed upon one, given the allusions to posthumous mockery. The very first broaching of the concept

of honor then is something as follows: Because our child has killed someone good or important, we, and indeed the very institution of government, shall look exceedingly bad unless action is taken. Honor here is being used to mean “glory, renown, fame; reputation, good name.” (OED 1A), both a bragging token and a means by which public opinion and action can be controlled, and has nothing to do with the inner honesty of the supposedly honorable. And it is due to this perceived honor that Antonio is left without justice while the Duke may free his flagrantly guilty stepson.

But these characters are our chortling and decadent villains, and it makes a sort of sense they don't care overmuch about doing right by God and their fellow man. How do our protagonists, by contrast see the role of honor? Antonio, the man who eventually becomes Duke after the residing excellent character is deposed, also conflates definitions of honor to a bleakly comic effect. In act 1 scene 4, he remarks on his wife's suicide after the debacle in the Duke's kangaroo court: “Her honour first drank poison, and her life, / Being fellows in one house, did pledge her honour.” (1.4.6-7). As the dictionary and Lussurioso have helpfully pointed out “Honor, meaning her chastity” is a fairly common equivalence, and her husband may merely be saying that she did not wish to live if not a virgin. This would paint a blackly comic portrait of the man who will be Duke, showing him to be more concerned with the arbitrary distinction of ‘Virginity’ that Middleton would go on to mock in his play *The Changeling* than a good woman's life and self—thus subtly undermining the state further by making even the redeemer character seem morally bankrupt. Another possible reading though, is that he speaks not of her sex, but rather of his own good name. We have seen what avoiding ridicule and bad press, even after death, means to the Duke, and what it means to Hippolito. If he felt sufficiently shamed, or that the molestation of his wife would damage his prospects of promotion, it would make a sick variety of sense for him to be pleased she ended her own life, and may even have had a hand in her death. Either of these may be true, and both support an uncharitable view of Antonio, as well as the state and

society which will eventually vindicate him—which would be very much in keeping with a reading of Antonio as a self-centered monarchy as posited earlier.

This reading is further supported by the way in which Vindice extracts his judgment. Like all the best despotic regimes and heads of state, Vindice sees himself as the decider of what is good and what is evil. However, his judgment is not purely personal or arbitrary. He devises tests and snares for all of those whom he attacks or recruits, to see if they meet an ethical criterion. Each metaphorical trap is meant, by and large, to do one thing or another: force the enemies of his family to dishonor themselves, or force his family members to display how dishonored and corrupted they have become.

Perhaps the best example of this behavior comes in Act II scene I, when Vindice, dressed in a costume, attempts to gauge the honor of his family, in this instance both Castiza's sexual chastity and the ethical honor of his mother. Thus disguised, he entices his sister towards Lussurioso's offer of "the best of wishes to your sex," only to receive a slap on the ear in return. This pleases our gore-splattered moralist, who quips "It is the sweetest box, / That e'er my nose came nigh; / The finest drawn-work cuff that e'er was worn; I'll love this blow for ever, and this cheek / Shall still henceforward take the wall of this."

Immediately after this he soon meets up with his mother, who he then begins to tempt at great length. He first appeals to her deference to the state and nobility by asking "The crown gapes for him every tide, and then / Commander o'er us all; do but think on him. / How bless'd were they, now that could pleasure him-- / E'en with anything almost?" (Middleton 2.1. ) and when this fails, to her fear of poverty, "To you than him: madam, I know you're poor, / And, 'lack the day! / There are too many poor ladies already; / Why should you wax the number?"

Finally he twists her love of her daughter to his purposes when he argues for the existence of some form of moral relativism:

"[If] men have no power, angels must work you to't:

The world descends into such baseborn evils,  
That forty angels can make fourscore devils.  
There will be fools still, I perceive--still fools.  
Would I be poor, dejected, scorn'd of greatness,  
Swept from the palace, and see others' daughters  
Spring with the dew o' the court, having mine own  
So much desir'd and lov'd by the duke's son?  
No, I would raise my state upon her breast;  
And call her eyes my tenants; I would count  
My yearly maintenance upon her cheeks;  
Take coach upon her lip; and all her parts  
Should keep men after men, and I would ride  
In pleasure upon pleasure," (Middleton 32).

This rhetorical move does not perhaps seem initially so different from his first two arguments, Vindice makes a very telling mistake. By claiming that angels can work as devils, and that evil is on occasion the only method of doing good, Vindice conflates her ethical position with his own. He, after all, is doing something much to this effect in killing those he sees as evil. But given his obvious distress at Gratiana's ensuing doubts and entertaining this idea, it is clear that he finds the idea of her using Castiza's honor to advance their rank repugnant. Despite tempting her with increasingly large bait and taking note of the privation in which she and her children are forced to dwell, Vindice becomes extremely angry when his Gratiana finally concedes: "Yon Dam had Devils enough to take her part," he says of the woman who, not moments before, he was bribing with increased invisible glee using non-existent funds.

The scene of disguised Vindice may be the most crucial in decoding the true intent of this text; it appears to demonstrate just how far this once exalted family has fallen since the death of its Patriarch and Gloriana. But it doesn't; for while it does perhaps display the privation which they dwell in, it also sets them apart from the Duke, his family and their sycophants. Neither Junior, Lussurioso, Spurio, The Duke, or the Duchess are tempted to sin and vice the way that Castiza and Gratiana are; they take it upon themselves to sin, to seek extramarital sex, to rape and to kill. If anyone is tempting them it is the devil, who is missing from this play at least in his physical embodiment. The royals in this family are

wealthy and revered, and yet still choose to do evil deeds. Vindice's family is indigent and disgraced, and deeply desiring a return to the high standing they were once held in. Placing these two instances in opposition to one another highlights two distinct aspects of the situation—firstly, it manages to give Vindice an even stronger motive for revenge without making his family seem irredeemable. Secondly, it indirectly contrasts the honor that is esteem of the court and the system with what is right and just; or honor. In the world Middleton has created, it is profoundly dishonorable to seek and be concerned with honor, for doing so shall lead to sins, both of violence and of lust. And thirdly, it casts Vindice, who has henceforth been a reliable guide to the grisly universe of this play, in a more unreliable and unethical light, touching upon either his incestuous leanings, the fact he needs to hold a moral high ground which he does not truly have, or both.

So what differentiates Vindice selling his moral honor by committing the sin of murder with Castiza selling her 'honor' in the form of her chastity? Several options immediately present themselves; firstly Vindice might merely be possessive of his sister's sexuality. There are certainly plenty of examples of this in other works from this general period, most notably Ford's *Tis Pity She's a Whore*. But the alternative is that Vindice is perfectly convinced by his own argument for the necessity of breaking moral rules. He tempts his family members then only to get them to concede to sin, that he might have a cause for which to pursue the Duke and his brood with moral impunity: their sins have driven my noble blood to sin; therefore I avenge wrongs with noble wrongs, or something to that effect. This reading would be bolstered by the rhetorical contempt Vindice holds the word 'honor' in, particularly when referring to honor as chastity or inner decency. Vindice uses the word almost solely for the purpose of making dramatically ironic jokes about his enemies. In the third scene of the first Act, after Lussurioso tasks him with seducing Castiza on his behalf, he demands "Swear to be true in all!" to which Vindice coyly retorts "Swear?--I hope your honour little doubts my faith," (Middleton 1.3. 157-158).

On the one hand, he refers to Lussurioso's noble rank, which immediately grants him the honorific of "your honor." Thus Vindice says "I hope you, good noble, do not doubt my good Christian morals." But the other possible interpretation has a significantly higher amount of dread in it. As Lussurioso has just requested Vindici carry out a task no man of honor would agree to, Vindici may be saying "your honor, which you have just proved is non-existent, is in no position to be doubting my Christian faith and ethics, which also do not exist as I shortly intend to kill you." This is very much in keeping with the behavior of Vindice throughout the play, who seems to take fiendish delight in taunting others with their misdeeds and their undoings, while bestowing on himself a sense of power.

Let us visit for example, his inner monologue when considering stabbing Lussurioso, after the latter has expressed sexual interest in Vindice's sister: My loved Lord / Oh, shall I kill him o' the wrong side now? No, / Sword thou wast never a back biter yet. / I'll pierce him to his face, he will die looking upon me; / Thy veins are filled with lust, this shall unfill 'em: / great men are gods if beggars cannot kill 'em," (42). Vindice goes on to say he is fine with deceit, both in winning Lussurioso's confidences and in testing his mother. That said, he sees something very bad in killing this admittedly unsavory man merely by stabbing him in the back—he mentions the lustful appetites of the Duke's son, and the fact these sins will come pouring forth in death, but refuses to kill the man who desires to molest his sister simply for the crime of wishing to molest his sister.

Hippolito's incentives for following his brother play into the fixation on appearance and rank in esteem. As he stabs the Duke in the penultimate scene of the third act, he cries "And let this comfort thee: our lord and father / Fell sick upon the infection of thy frowns, / And died in sadness: be that thy hope of life," (3.5.166-168). Indeed, the failure of his father to advance in court is cited several times, by both Hippolito and Vindice, throughout this play. Here we see another instance of honor being at odds with itself, for while we must assume that Hippolito's father was an honorable man, he did not advance far in the court and was frowned upon by his masters (and given their demonstrable moral failings, this



may also go a long way in supporting the fact their father was ethical.) This uncanniness plays out in the sycophantic manner in which Hippolito must present himself, both as a low-ranking member of court and a mendacious player in the affairs of retribution—he refers to his victims and speaks of others who are not present with the word ‘his honor’ ‘your honor’ and ‘their honor’ more times than any other character in the text. Each day, he is reminded not only of his low social standing, but also of his father’s dishonor, and the consistent honor steeped upon his fellows.

Given the somewhat more direct sins committed by this family, the murder and attempted coercion of Castiza, it seems odd that the failure of a parent to receive a promotion or maintain rank would come into the picture. Certainly it’s difficult to prove the dukedom was even responsible for the doom. But this only seems to be a problem if the notion of honor as a synonym for justice in this work. Clearly it is not; if Vindice was concerned over much with morality and the doing of good, he would not have defaced the bones of Gloriana or have taken such a morbid delight in mocking the dying duke with flurries like the following:

“DUKE. My teeth are eaten out.

VEN. Hadst any left?

HIP. I think but few.

VEN. Then those that did eat are eaten.

DUKE. O my tongue!

VEN. Your tongue? 'twill teach yon to kiss closer,  
Not like a slobbering Dutchman. You have eyes still:  
Look, monster, what a lady hast thou made me!”

This is not a desire to do good and right the world, certainly. What delights Vindice here is the power he has over the Duke, whose own ability to control his body wanes. In this sense Vindice’s revenge speaks at least as much to the motive of avenging lost political power than avenging a dead lover; for though

lust and the skull of the murdered are employed, it is ultimately for his humiliating spectacle of being first dissolved with acid, then dressed in the clothes of a commoner, utterly without agency or royal dignity.

Vindice's motive is also undercut by the means with which he finally does away with her killer, as he uses Gloriana's body as a murder weapon. While she is supposedly the reason he is so set on revenge against the Duke, he turns her, the woman he hoped to marry, into a thing, and not just a thing, but a thing which helps him rise in rank. After this point, she is never seen, nor mentioned in the text again, except when he remarks:

"Villains all three! the very ragged bone

Has been sufficiently reveng'd."

Gloriana is just a bone, a weapon now, and it seems as though to Vindice she may never have been more than that. It is more likely that Vindice laments the loss of his prestigious place in society as lover to a beautiful woman and son of a courtier father.

This reticence to simply step up and stab all who dare oppose him or whom he feels like stabbing portrays a Hamlet-esque type of doubt, while also directly revealing an absence of Hamlet's self-awareness and interiority. Honor, or adherence to it, have utterly over-ridden Vindice's individual wants and needs. But this can be rectified, or at the very least concealed, if Vindice cobbles together a cause—he is not disgusting for wishing to watch the degradation and deaths of all those he abhors, if it is not just himself he is defending, but his betrothed. It is even better if he is avenging his betrothed and his father while seeking this gratification, and better still if he can manage to claim his once noble mother has been forced to sin, and that his sister's "honor" is directly under attack.

Really Vindice is not a free and radical individual—he is unbridled ambition and desire. And his enemies are not being killed because they are unjust enemies of God and Italy, or even because they are in defiance of Vindice’s wants, but because they are in violation of some masculine code of ethics which decrees it unlawful not to claim an eye in payment for an eye, so far as blood relations and their reputations are concerned.

One could argue that the same notion of family honor that motivates Vindice is what makes the state in this play so corrupt: After all, the first sin we witness committed by the Dukedom is the unjust delaying of a relative’s execution and a subsequent escape plan. This interpretation is furthered by Antonio’s imprisonment of the two brothers who put him on the throne at the play’s end. Vindice, either out of masculine bravado or out of repressed guilt over the deeds he has perpetrated, informs the new Duke of what has taken place in order to ensure his reign, and the new Duke has Vindice and Hippolito punished for working to empower him, declaring “You that would murder them would murder me!” (108).

The state must be an institution without honor, without a sense of blood relation, if there is to be justice. These two forms of exuding control not only counteract one another, but in a sense exclude one another: if Vendettas against the state can be carried out by families who feel dishonored, there could be no state power, for how could they control their subjects? And if families were subject to state power, how could they decisively strike someone dead without themselves fearing government retribution? But neither of these systems, though opposed, treat their participants ethically— they reduce individuals to agents of either violence, oppression, or sin, and swiftly do away with all resisting parties.

In Middleton we see a huge shift from the *Spanish Tragedy* and earlier works of revenge fiction. While the works he creates don’t quite qualify as humanistic (human life is extremely cheap in the world he creates, and the characters are typified either by their rank or a prominent trait) Much of the play is

spent attacking the ideas of the divine right of kings, the state judiciary system, and the honor economy, which were such important parts of the suppression of identity and individuality during most of Western History. Humanity is still an ultimately directionless and self-centered force in these plays, and even when they form coherent units, people desire only the basest and simplest of things; personal satisfaction, heightened rank, monetary wealth, sexual gratification, and to be viewed in high esteem. One could argue that it is pride which ultimately undoes Vindice after he successfully destroys the Duke's family line—his admission of guilt really has no logical explanation unless pinned on pride or the less-interesting liquor. In this play, Revengers are ultimately perverts more concerned with rank than with love, Dukes value their own safety and family honor more than justice, or in Antonio's case even more than his own wife.

### **Chastity, Virginity, and Ethics in the Changeling**

Middleton also displayed a significant amount of criticism towards the conception of women's honor being linked to their sexual purity. This sentiment is already on display to a degree in *The Revenger's Tragedy* and it gains traction in *The Changeling*. While the *Revenger's Tragedy* deals with the themes of state, justice and honor, its dissection of the family and of marriage is limited to the bribery scene in act two, and the comic quarrelling of the Duke and his brood. *The Changeling* serves as an important continuation of the *Revenger's Tragedy's* ideas and material, firstly by approaching the issue of gender from the perspective of a female character, and also by shifting focus from the state to its microcosm, the estate. The play, which focuses on Beatrice's attempts to free herself from a betrothal she does not desire and an obligation to her unsavory servant De Flores, takes a direct stand against several Jacobean marriage practices and laws which disadvantaged women. During this time, the families of women still offered a dowry in order to entice suitors, which the bride often could not inherit even in the event of her husband's death; though women were allowed by law to inherit in a variety of cases, this actually happened in fewer than 10% of cases. Even outside of property, laws often fell on the

side of husbands. The lengthy subplot regarding the mental asylum, for example—it depicts a controlling narcissist of a husband being cuckolded by his committed and socially-disgraced wife— is humorous as it is heavy-handed in depicting power disparities in Renaissance marriage.

The rhetoric surrounding “honor” or “chastity” and the way it is portrayed is also intentionally illogical and hypocritical. Take for instance, the “test” of virginity which Alsemero designs for the wedding night between himself and Beatrice—who is not a virgin after being extorted into sex with De Flores. Upon learning of this, Beatrice offers 1000 Ducats to her virgin servant girl Diaphanta to show her how the test works, and later uses these observations to pass the test to such effect that her husband remarks “She’s abused [been slandered], questionless,” (4.2.130).

The scene itself drives the plot forward and allows for the confrontations and misunderstandings of the final act to occur, but it is in and of itself somewhat groundbreaking, given its historical context.

Middleton separates honor from chastity and love. Beatrice was extorted into having sex with De Flores because of his conniving and threats of blackmail, and also because of the unethical plot she concocted when a virgin solely to escape her unpleasant marriage without losing her virginity. In most plays, sexual purity is a very key piece of the honor economy; take for example *The Revenger’s Tragedy*. In that play, Gloriana dies in order to preserve her chastity, and Vindice laments extensively his desire for revenge in reference to her chastity; the fact she remained pure means she warranted grief. But here, Beatrice is unethically coerced into sex because of her desire to remain chaste and to not dishonor her father or husband. To avoid this, she opts for the crime of murder instead, implying that she would be considered more honorable as a killer than as someone who broke marriage vows. A contrast such as this deliberately places the ethical values of the characters and societies it depicts, and makes the systems which viewers at the time would likely have taken for granted complicit in murder.

Secondly, Beatrice, a woman, works with Diaphanta, another woman, to fool a virginity test, by arranging a switch scenario and by observing the effects of the bizarre test on Diaphanta. The silly farce of the latter half of Act IV scene II goes through the esoteric motions of a virginity test, which Beatrice has already witnessed and emulates. This serves as a very subtle attack levelled against both the state and the notion of honor as chastity; for if a woman who is unchaste can go undetected and appear to be so, then how is the world to know she is dishonorable or sinful? They can't. They also cannot know for certain that she is true to her husband and the offspring is certainly his, casting an uneasy shade over inheritance laws. For a brief moment, two women manage to work together to completely baffle and undercut the panopticon of male authority, a move which would have been completely shocking to its contemporary audience were it not lent the benefit of mirth and mockery<sup>3</sup>.

The ribald scenario continues to escalate both in magnitude and in its mocking of sex and virginity. The plan of having her servant impersonate her causes a series of dilemmas for Beatrice; Diaphanta, the virgin, enjoys having sex with this man she isn't married to so much that she overstays her welcome, ostensibly to "devour the pleasure with a greedy appetite / and never mind my honor nor my peace" (Middleton 5.1. 3). Soon the sun threatens to rise, and her discovery is imminent, and so Beatrice engineers a series of farces which ultimately result in the estate burning to the ground. The scenario is another example of risqué wit on the part of Middleton, who brings the same irreverence he supplied in *The Revenger's Tragedy* and *Women Beware Women*. But whereas the crass jokes about incest and lust in those plays are meant largely to amuse rather than instruct, this scene demolishes any sense of respect for the authority of matrimony or the sanctity of chastity and sexual union.

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<sup>3</sup> See also Luttfiring's "Bodily Narratives and the Politics of Virginity in *The Changeling* and the *Essex Divorce*." This essay is concerned with women's bodies as the field on which an ideological battle is fought, and this scene takes on particular significance in her argument, see page 97, and extrapolates this led to many of the era's political movements.

Firstly there is the dysphoria surrounding the act itself. Consummation was an important aspect of marriage for much of European history, providing some form of finality or physical reality to the union. In Middleton's era it was thought that sex occurred only between married people who loved each other; it was pleasurable; and it was productive, in that it was meant to produce a child and carry on the family name. Of course, these assumptions are far from true and in opposition to reality in many cases, which Middleton highlights here. Beatrice does not want sex—she alludes to this throughout the play, especially in her choice of the supposedly virginal Alsemero in contrast to her virile husband. But even if she had desired to have intercourse with Alseremo, her fear of him and of the punishment he would inflict on her outweighs this, to the point that she is willing to make a farce of their union by replacing herself with a common servant. Her terror is also indicative of the fact that this is not a marriage based on mutual admiration or respect, but one rooted in patrilineal succession. Alsemero may divorce Beatrice if it is discovered she is not a virgin, and she is eventually betrayed by the husband she killed to be with, all because her lack of virginity threatens his honor, masculinity, and the property of his family.

Due to the attention given to her dilemma and her feelings regarding it, it is hard to believe viewers of the play would not feel any sympathy for Beatrice, despite her uncouth behavior. She is barred from redemption or confession by the opinions of her husband and the perversions of De Flores, and is driven to behave increasingly unethically simply to live with the man she loves.

Not only is marital sex depicted as not enjoyable and merely a perfunctory way of carrying on one's line, but sinful coupling is treated with much more charity. Diaphanta describes sex with Alsemero as making her "So well I ev'n forgot myself" (5.1.80), and is so taken with this man that she stays over long in the bedchamber and nearly ruins the entire, intricately plotted act of deception. Because this sex is based on an attempt to conceal the truth, takes place between a man of noble birth and a commoner, and a married nobleman and a supposedly pure virgin, the brief exchange carries with it a powerful counter-culture commentary. First, it continues its mockery of sex by stripping it of all holy pretenses

and turning it into a biological means of producing pleasure, but one which also is so strong it can overpower not only one's desire to be chaste, but one's obligations to duty. Virginitly is not only arbitrary and unimportant, it is unnatural and even inferior to an epicurean life of free sexual pleasure in this text.

Sex might be devoid of sacred implications and purely venal, but it still is the foundation of marriage and the transfer of property. Middleton takes a final swipe at this notion as well, in having Beatrice devise an escape which involves burning the servants quarters-- meaning that the fires not only cost them money and do damage to their new estate, the blaze also serves the nobles exclusively, and is not a positive to anyone outside of Beatrice and De Flores—Alsemero merely assures us that this fire “Is not so dangerous” (5.1.89) despite the fact it kills the unlucky Diaphanta. It's a bad omen to top all bad omens of course, implying the marriage shall soon go up in smoke, but it means that the estate and titled lands were damaged in order to preserve the marriage which is supposedly about this progression of property. Instead, their wealth has been annihilated so that their marriage might continue.

The house is also an old one, as specified in the footnotes of the play which establish that De Flores' cover for the later murder-- firing a pistol up a chimney-- was a method used to alleviate smoke and fire damage in older houses-- implying it has been passed down for multiple generations and making it more noticeable as a physical manifestation of dynasty.

The fire, which De Flores sets in order to better “Force a rise” and allow Beatrice to switch places with Diaphanta also serves as the perfect excuse to kill the latter, which he promptly does. Of course there is a very puritanical reading of this-- Diaphanta had sex with a man who wasn't her husband and immediately died, implying this is a bad decision to make-- but I feel the play asks us to make a different connection. Diaphanta has hardly any lines of speech, and her self-reflection is limited to her feelings for Alsemero. We are rather asked to examine Beatrice, who has only a few scenes prior come to the grim conclusion that one sin shall ultimately beget another. It isn't De Flores who forces her



into being complicit in another murder-- she even comes back during the fire and asks him to ensure De Flores "Had [Diaphanta] a thousand lives, [you] should not leave her," (5.1.67). Rather, this eagerness to dispose of her own servant so quickly and carelessly, along with damaging the ancestral house, is in fact a jest meant to illuminate the ways in which female chastity had become more important socially than the things it was supposed to ensure, such as legitimacy of birth, inheritance of property down a royal line, and a sinless soul. In fact, a woman would be willing to sin, murder, destroy property, and have her husband be unfaithful with the serving maid, merely to ensure she is seen as chaste.

When Alsemero discovers the truth in the final scene, he is repulsed and declares "Neither tears or flattery shall flatter me from my belief: You are a whore," (5.3.32) and brandishes this sin above her, despite the fact he later reveals he believes she and De Flores had Diaphanta killed due to "the wages of her knowledge," (5.3.62). To these men, a virginal wife is paramount, even to the more gruesome sin of murder and arson. We shall never know if, faced only with the two bodies to her name and not unfaithfulness, they may have reconciled.

Because of the societal pressure placed on women to remain chaste, and because of the importance of sexual purity and patrilineal inheritance, not only do Beatrice and Alsemero not get to have sex, but they do not get to pass down a great deal of their property either. If we cannot blame blackmailed Beatrice, we can only accuse her father and the traditions he represents.

This might be meant as a valuation of the human being as superior to things like the state and morality. A sex crazed De Flores stabs her, then himself, and both of them blame their deaths on their sin. Not of killing two people but of sexual desire and being unchaste. De Flores notes in response to Alsemero preparing to kill him that "It could not be much more; 'Twas but one thing, and that she's a whore" (5.3.116), implying that he was damned from the beginning not for murder or rape, but rather for getting in business with an unchaste woman. Far more moving is Beatrice's abandonment by Alsemero, which leads her in her final moments to decry "Forgive me Alsemero, all forgive! / 'Tis time to

Die when 'tis a shame to live." The dishonor incurred by her unfaithfulness and murder makes her believe she should die rather than exist. While this does not undercut the points made earlier about the uselessness of paternity or rigid chastity, it does seem to crush the true individuation of Beatrice as a character; the situation she was put in through her betrothal and her lack of power have in a sense forced her to sin and this forced her to tragedy— her entire identity through the play in a sense, was predestined to serve as a warning.

Ultimately Middleton's plays are destructive political works; they take notions of state authority, the honor economy and female purity and turn them into untenable nonsense. However, he does not move forward from this point and supply an alternative method of morality or order—he takes, but does not give back. The characters in his worlds are invested entirely in the physical and direct consequences of these choices, not in the moral implications or eternal notions of life after death, nor even with the interiority of the characters they depict—what do we know about the thoughts of Vindice or Beatrice that do not directly pertain to their goals in the narrative—the construction of a murder plot, or the avoidance of an ill-fated marriage and a preservation of a good one? This work is left to other Renaissance playwrights who will leave the mocking and critiquing of old ways to Middleton and his fellows, instead crafting a new outlook which values the individual's capacity for thought or emotion.

## Emergence of identity in opposition with State

### Introduction

As *Hamlet* and *Edward II* were both published before Middleton's more nihilistic and satirical critiques, it would be easy to assume that they were weighed down with much of the same propagandistic tone that plagued *The Spanish Tragedy*. These texts may not hold concepts of honor, gender, morality and state in the same contempt as Middleton does, but we must not make the mistake of assuming they are less crucial to the artistic renaissance in English literature and art—if anything they are more so. If *The Revenger's Tragedy* made mirthful corrupt court systems and the notion of chastity and chivalry which governed human behavior, Marlowe and Shakespeare's works serve to highlight the increased importance of the individual as self, a unit wholly important to itself. Both deftly reconstruct the ideas of right, wrong, necessary and beautiful, all while also creating fully-formed characters with complex interior lives, plus a cohesive narrative. By depicting an increased awareness of interiority in their characters, as well as creating narrative wholly dependent on the decisions of their two central characters, both *Edward II* and *Hamlet* develop the at-that-time revolutionary notion that the will of the individual and the existential freedom that comes with self-awareness supersedes in importance both morality, the state, and class hierarchy.

To begin to address either of these texts, we must first address the monumental amount of criticism which surrounds them. Unlike Middleton's plays, which remain largely critically unexamined and which are seldom incorporated into the demonstration of theory, Marlowe and Shakespeare both

have been examined, re-interpreted, and revisited a great deal since they initially published their plays, which provides a greater body of work and a largess of opinions on these works. However, particularly in the case of *Edward II*, very little of this work is centered specifically on the notion of individualism and identity, and much more often on sexual identity and the ambiguous and fatal relationship he shares with Gaveston. This is not something which can exist in a vacuum for Edward's notion of himself—following one's sexual proclivities when society is staunchly opposed to them is absolutely a radical and individualist act. But this is only one part of Edward's development and totality of character. As Stymeist discusses in "Status, Sodomy, and the Theater in Marlowe's *Edward II*," homosexuality was particularly dangerous in reference to class and marriage, as it could completely destroy the system of marriage and property inheritance amongst other social ideals. We see this of course in the distaste the many nobles of the play nurture for Gaveston for his low social class, especially Gaveston's rival Lancaster "My lord, why do you thus incense your peers, / That naturally would love and honour you, But for that base and obscure Gaveston? / Four earldoms have I, besides Lancaster,-- / Derby, Salisbury, Lincoln, Leicester; / These will I sell, to give my soldiers pay, / Ere Gaveston shall stay within the realm: Therefore, if he be come, expel him straight. / For Mortimer will hang his armour up," (Marlowe 1.1. 101).

This implies that the lasciviousness of what they are doing stems from Gaveston's low rank is what makes the union surprising, not the actual union itself—later of course, Edward selects a new, royal favorite in the form of Spenser, and little enough is said about this for numerous reasons.

But this makes Edward merely an iconoclast striking back at a stratified society—he certainly is this, but he is also much more.

Some criticism has, of course found a means of blending this subject with those more closely related to individualism. Leonora Leet Brodwin, in her essay "Edward II: Marlowe's culminating treatment of love," sees the play not as being typified by its technically impressive story or the historical

morass Marlowe enters by portraying the king this way, but rather the notion of love which abounds through the play. "Problems of statecraft and love share equal honors... as Edward realizes that this tragedy of kingship has resulted primarily from his love," (140) she writes, and it is true. Had Edward not loved Gaveston, he would not have sent all the way to Ireland for him, or defied his father and Mortimer, in annulling the exile. Of course this is a distinctly individualist idea, that a romance can be as important to a king as his kingdom, and it nullifies the main duty of kings in favor of the main duty of husbands or lovers. But this reading rings somewhat false given the superficial nature of the interactions between the two men. Even in the height of their passion, Gaveston and Edwards minds are more likely to be focused on "Italian masks by night, Sweet speeches, comedies, and pleasing shows" or how desirable it would be to strip various figures of their power, than on each other's emotions and thoughts (1.1. 55.) Indeed, half if not more of the play affects only one of the two men.

The critical avenues which perhaps best plumb the depths of *Edward II's* notion of the value of the individual begin in avenues which are less connected with Edward's shifting mental states, but rather with his body, and the botched Contrapasso set up for him by Mortimer and Lightborn. As stated in the introduction, violence and humanism have an uneasy give-and-take relationship with one another, with violence often opening avenues for a more humanist school of thought and critique as it takes this humanity from individuals, real or imagined. Here however, we see violence as an inherent failure, which does nothing but provide more sympathy and interiority to Edward in his suffering. Patrick Ryan's essay on Edward's torture and imprisonment deliberately draws connections between Edward II and Jesus, and sees Edward as "emphasiz[ing] the individual will to power as the primary cause of historical process in a world without divine providence," (465) which is never invoked by either the various dukes, barons, and counts who mount the civil war, or by the king himself. In rebelling and dying as he does, "covered in excrement, forced to drink from a channel, shaved, enclosed in a cesspool, and trodden underfoot," which Ryan remarks is exactly what passion plays depicted happening to Jesus

during the middle ages, Edward opens up a path for future monarchs to defy the society they live in and their familial lines, which his progeny very quickly does.

Karen Cunningham is also interested in Edward's final moments, specifically for their value as execution scene, which she sees interlinked with the processes of the state. She notes that "Tudor monarchs tried to organize unambiguous "divinely sanctioned" public punishments by controlling the interpretive play of trials and executions," or in other words to use the machinery of the police and the scaffold to narrativize the lives and deaths of those being tortured and punished. She also argues that Marlowe, who had firsthand experience of torture by the state, was gifted with a unique perspective to describe and rebel against these vassals of state. "When Marlowe transfers violence from the executioner's to the theater's scaffold, he exaggerates what the ruling figures sought to minimize," she writes "the profound ambiguity of artifice." This can certainly be said of Edward's death, as despite the gruesome form of execution, all demonstrative power is sucked from Edward's death by the fact his oppressors are shortly thereafter done away with, and the fact his death was kept such a secret, historians such as Seymour Phillips still question whether or not Edward was in fact killed or if he escaped and remained at large until his death. But the overall inability of the state to define for the individual what their circumstances mean and the ambiguity of death and punishment is directly tied to the themes of this thesis, particularly the relation of violence and a violent death to the sovereignty of the individual.

### **Death is All: The Unique Existentialism of *Edward II***

*Edward II* is centered around this line of thinking. The action of the play only occurs because of Edward's decision to defy his father's request and bringing Gaveston out of exile, resulting in the outcry against him. This conflict is made both manifest and directly personal at the play's beginning in which Mortimer the elder first butts heads with the new king: "Will you not grant me this?--In spite of them / I'll have my will; and these two Mortimers, / That cross me thus, shall know I am displeased," he says to the

uncle and nephew, the latter of whom responds “Mine uncle here, this earl, and I myself, / Were sworn to your father at his death, / That he should ne'er return into the realm: / And now, my lord, ere I will break my oath, / This sword of mine, that should offend your foes, / Shall sleep within the scabbard at thy need, / And underneath thy banners march who will, / For Mortimer will hang his armour up,” (Marlowe 1.1. 78-90.) Because these Mortimers are appointed by the king and attempt to enforce the king's law, they are in a sense representative of the previous leader, exalted Edward I. Edward's very first action on stage then is to defy the kingship and create a rift between himself and these two visions of monarchy much closer to the platonic ideal of a king. He and his decision making, and his ability to defy societal expectations and historical tradition are the founding premises of the play, and they put him immediately at odds with nearly every other character we see in the text. It is not a Iago or a Richard III who fells Edward, but a sea of assorted bureaucrats and lesser nobles, courtiers, soldiers, and their families. Mortimer the Elder, Anne, York, Lancaster, Mortimer the Younger, and the others all create a façade without an archetypical face, the insecure, the ambitious, the overbearing and the jealous all playing roles in the drawn-out defeat of Edward. This move by Marlowe creates an immediate sense of conflict; the entire world is in a sense against him, represented here by his toadies, and History seems to be against him as well—Edward I, standing in for all dead kings, banished Gaveston and begged Edward not to take him back as a lover. Edward may threaten Mortimer with the consequences of disobeying a king, but he is no longer a king, but merely a human subject who has dared to make a radical choice, of valuing first his love of Gaveston more than the opinions of his subjects and advisers, the feelings of his wife, and the staggering financial cost.

Of course, this line or argument runs into a possible moral impediment in that it is not any mere blacksmith or barber who defies a nation, but in fact a trained king with the wealth of a nation and an army of thousands at his disposal. But despite the fact he is the king and therefore the embodiment of the state and state power, Marlowe does everything he can to keep Edward and King Edward separate;

in fact it becomes extremely difficult to tell what actions undertaken in this play are Edwards, and which are the decrees of "King Edward." One of the many reasons for engineering Gaveston's abduction given by the insecure lords is that Edward made enemies by destroying the system of monarchical hierarchy. When Lancaster lambasts Edward, who has just claimed Mortimer "contradicts a king," says that "you incense your peers / That naturally would love and honour you, / But for that base and obscure Gaveston?" Edward is therefore immediately made to be "against nature" by the lords, who see him not only as breaking a gender barrier but a class one, incurring their hatred and loving a commoner. Ostensibly believing that reuniting him with Anne and separating him from Gaveston will "mend the king and do our country good," they steal and kill the king's favorite. In a sense their plan works; for, after discovering his lover has been killed, Edward invokes his father:

"By earth, the common mother of us all,  
By heaven, and all the moving orbs thereof,  
By this right hand, and by my father's sword,  
And all the honours 'longing to my crown,  
I will have heads and lives for him as many  
As I have manors, castles, towns, and towers!--  
Treachorous Warwick! traitorous Mortimer!  
If I be England's king, in lakes of gore  
Your headless trunks, your bodies will I trail,  
That you may drink your fill, and quaff in blood,  
And stain my royal standard with the same,  
That so my bloody colours may suggest  
Remembrance of revenge immortally  
On your accursed traitorous progeny,  
You villains that have slain my Gaveston!" (2.4.89)

This speech is filled with the language of the monarchy: Edward's rhetoric, declaring that he shall be avenged by God, the world, his dead father, and his own right hand. This is in a sense a swearing in, the only such scene, as the play begins with Edward already king. After this moment he examines the great number of resources now at his disposal, the manors, lives, bodies, castles towns and towers, and connects them to his ensuing slaughter of traitors, which he swears to do by his kingly rank. Edward's "Royal standard" is not that of England, but of blood and violence executed to ensure his orders are



followed. Thus, having sentenced them to death, he begins a decade long battle against these same lords, a favorite pastime of Kings since time immemorial. Yet Edward's motive is not political; he does not wish to remove threats, consolidate power, win allies or gain tributaries. Instead, he disregards money, power, reputation and his own forces and safety in order to pursue his acquisition of revenge, all because his beloved was killed. These grand sweeping wars and moving speeches are the staples of kingly drama, but these actions are not undertaken by a king, but by Edward, whose motives are specific to himself. To quote British humorist Terry Pratchett, "Hate is just love with its back turned." Edward's love has died, and now he finally becomes the king Mortimer, Lancaster and Anne all want him to be; the unshakable bloodthirsty tyrant who will suffer no disobedience.

It is important we make this distinction between Edward and King Edward, because a critique of the state is very much at play here. While the disorganized and unseemly apparatus of government we see here is perhaps most similar to the state of Kyd's *the Spanish Tragedy*, it is quite hard to find a similar vein of pro-state thought in Marlowe's work. The last acts of this play seem perfectly designed to make this distinction; for while even the most morally ambiguous and narratively sinuous contemporary plays tend to, if possible, skirt the depiction of torture, Marlowe, an actual survivor of torture by the English government, makes this the turning point of his story. Edward has long assailed Mortimer and his merry band of stooges and has proven himself an obstinate enemy until suffering a decisive defeat at Bannockburn. Fleeing to Abbey Neath, Edward is betrayed, first by a mower, and then later by Mortimer who despite promising clemency for all those who repent of Edward's cause, executes his brother, Duke of Kent. But if the state is made to be the agent the treachery, the individual the avenging angel of deferred true love who is superior in might and tactics, then the state is made to be extremely vulnerable—reliant either on nameless, faceless mowers, or else on the supernatural, if we are to read into the scythe that this peasant wields. If we are to believe this play, any king could, with enough brains and sufficient funds for war, rewrite any royal custom, tradition, law, or organization of power. It

is only by embodying treachery, and becoming an agent of sin does it become triumphant—in a sense defeating its purpose as a creator of moral order and a society of God's will on earth.

Of course Edward cannot defeat Mortimer or the other heads of state from whom he derives power. Historically Edward was defeated, apprehended, held captive, tortured, and privately executed. This places Marlowe in a tricky position as author; how can you write a play which encourages shirking social roles and classifications and following one's own heart, and is not condemning of Homosexuality, about a man who was horribly murdered for acting contrary to his position as monarch and for being suspected of homosexuality? This forces the author to make a series of interesting rhetorical moves and decisions, each of which will serve to highlight a crucial piece of his narrativization of Edward's life.

We have already examined the creation of a wall of animosity through many different nobles and officers who appear and disappear throughout the play, taking on differing roles and positions in the earlier scenes, but by the end of the play these characters have all merged into a few faces: Mortimer the Younger, an ambitious and semi-tragic figure, now vying for position of regent through cuckolding Edward, and his lover and partner Queen Anne. In this way, Marlowe reduces the vast political conflicts and social class rifts into the two characters with most reason to hate Edward: the one upon whom he turned his back and the one who personifies, with his ambition, cunning and courage, everything the classical world believed a king should be. Edward's situation within his society remains the same; he is still in a sense, on trial for his failure to be the ideal king and ideal noble, eschewing a marriage of practicality and waging a long disastrous civil war all over one commoner. Yet of course at their heart these issues are personal ones; it is the envy and ambition of Mortimer which causes him to hate the privileged king, while it is Anne's jealousy which provides her motivation. With this barrier between the personal and the political allegorically blurred, the audience is further asked to examine the see the narrative not as a history, but as a personal struggle between individual wills.

Mortimer the Younger and Anne hope that they will rule on through Edward III, the biological child of Edward who they both help ineffectually to raise. But though Mortimer rises above his fellow rebelling landowners, he is also, in title and narrative position, completely neutered. At first, he derives all his power from consenting and bellicose lords. Then he obtains more through his union with Anne. But he never holds a position of real true authority. Mortimer is only ever the regent to the throne as he holds it for Edward's son, Edward III. When in control of a nation he is still made to play the obsequious sycophant to a little boy, as in Act 4 Scene 6, where he is unable to express his wish to kill Edward openly for fear of reprisal by a 13-year-old, and thus concocts his latin code:

“\_Edwardum occidere nolite timere, bonum est,  
Fear not to kill the king, 'tis good he die:\_  
But read it thus, and that's another sense;  
\_Edwardum occidere nolite, timere bonum est,  
Kill not the king, 'tis good to fear the worst.\_  
Unpointed as it is, thus shall it go.  
That, being dead, if it chance to be found,  
Matrevis and the rest may bear the blame,  
And we be quit that caus'd it to be done.”

Even at the height of his power, Mortimer is still entirely reliant on the power of others—he generates now actual force of his own, but if given it either by Edward's father, Edward, Edward's wife, and Edward's son. Whereas Edward generated his own power by gathering an army and defying his father, Mortimer is merely a Medieval Blanche Dubois, rising to the top on the complacency and generosity of others.

This method of living, though not enviable, might be tolerable were it feasible long-term. But both in the narrative and actual history, it is not: upon coming of age, Edward III has Mortimer executed, along with all the other foeman of his father, and imprisons his own mother for her role in her husband's fall. And while Mortimer is led away, he makes the following remark of power-relations within the state:

“Base Fortune, now I see, that in thy wheel / There is a point, to which when men aspire, / They tumble headlong down: that point I touch'd, / And, seeing there was no place to mount up higher, / Why should I grieve at my declining fall?—,” (Marlowe 5.2. 134).

While hardly an inaccurate summation of most kingships, it makes two notable moves. Firstly, it allows for Edward to speak again, much in the same manner he speaks through his son's continued defiance of his lords. Edward was also entirely unafraid of death in his final moments, but was sleep deprived, starved, and fed nothing but bread and water—as well as not visible during the actual moment of his dying. Young Mortimer extols, on behalf of the play itself, the virtues of living a life dedicated to oneself and to being subject to no authority. We get the speech Edward was not able to give when alive from the lips of his enemy, and this at least allows young Mortimer to die unafraid, as well as Edward (though his reasons for peace with death may be more complicated as we will examine later.) But secondly, and less noticeably, this declaration makes a distinction between Mortimer the Younger. Mortimer seems still to love the queen, and to have outsourced his demise to the universe at large, or the cycle of the wheel of life. He does not, even in his final moments on stage, take responsibility for himself and for his actions. Young Mortimer was a pawn first of his father, then ambition and Anne, and in his final moments claims to be a pawn still of the universe—eternally without control or agency.

This creates an existential stalemate for Edward. He may die, and die in a good deal of pain and disgrace, but then again, Mortimer also meets with a similar end. Therefore, though barred by historical record from winning, Edward is prevented from being the loser. In fact, nearly every character we encounter dies by the play's end, or is left to rot in prison. This adds an existential lens to the events of the play; if living like Edward and Mortimer yield the same result, it is up to us to select the experience which we see as more noble and desirable, that of the eternal crone Mortimer, or of proud and passionate warrior-king Edward. As Gaveston puts it, “I perceive that heading is one, and hanging is the

other, and death is all," (Marlowe 2.2.38). A grim joke from his lips, but a perfectly valid argument against the idea of death and torture, or the state at large, from determining the identity of an individual.

Due to Mortimer's lust for power and paranoia, Edward, though still king (He mockingly remarks of his continued status that it entitles him to bread and water) is taken even further from his kingdom by being tossed in a sewer, and then the dissenting voices of his enemies are in a sense, permanently quieted. Next time we encounter these characters, they will be cowering. It might make Edward's victory less sweet, dying at his enemies' wish before he can see them toppled, but it makes this a tale of Edward's journey alone.

Edward, despite his glamorous bread and water ration, is now become the antithesis of kingliness and royalty, as his enemies doubtless hoped he would be, unable to make the decisions which made him dangerous, or enjoy the lavish luxuries of his previous life. Yet this too is unsuccessful in destroying and breaking Edward to their wishes; even separated from control of an army, the government, his own movement, diet, and quarters, Edward remains defiant even through his disgrace and exile to dark stone tunnel filled with rodents and feces. When Lightborn fishes him from the sewers, he still resists his murder and the violence of monarchical authority, here represented in a form both crudely sinful and almost supernaturally ominous. Torture and punishment of the body are also here insufficient deterrents of wrongdoing; even though Edward suffers cruel and humiliating mutilation by the hands of his torturers, we never see him die, beg for mercy, or repent. Much like Vindice, Edward has become entirely unafraid of death and pain inflicted by the state. But Vindice's lack of fear came from a place of both hedonism and nihilism. He desired only revenge and was willing to die in order to fulfill his role in the masculine honor economy. Edward however, does not have any meaningful revenge on Gaveston's killers; and he does not mention, in his dying oration, being reunited in the afterlife with his favorite or God—Marlowe may have done this in order to make a point about the salience of

Edward's identity, or may merely have been unable to make such implications about a murdered homosexual king, it is unclear. In any case, it makes it a narrative necessity that Edward has found something worth withstanding pain and humiliation for, which is not yet taken from him. It could perhaps be God, but Edward makes no mention of the afterlife, and it could be love, but Gaveston does not grace his dying oration either. This leaves us with only one thing; Edward himself. Marlowe does not show us a defeat or a death, but rather a radical act of self-acceptance, as the dethroned king accepts his life, the consequences of his choices, and a great amount of suffering merely for following his own feelings, then dies without regretting it.

Marlowe has invoked and created worlds and systems in his other works; as in *Faustus* where a binding system of moral economy between Earth, heaven and hell is revealed, and the rewards and reprisals of sin are made visible and manifest. Here much the same thing is done, but the world he creates is the one of the individual's will and belief. Triumph and longevity are not necessary in Marlowe's work, as it would be in a sense detrimental to the argument. If we follow Edward's example, Marlowe seems to indicate, if we follow our own desires, our passions, our loves, our hatreds, and do not fear the bully of the government, the disapproval of the dead, or the soon-to-fade impact of our actions, we shall die entirely without regret. The good life is not one lived for God, or for government, or even for power—something none of Ed's enemies truly attain. It is not even lived for love or for family; our lovers and spouses and children cannot really be with us when we die. Only the self is worth living for, because it is all we can have with us in dying.

However, though *Edward II* brings into stark contrast the individual and the social, military, and legal systems he or she operates under, it is far from an ideal literary argument for a current notion of individual value. For starters, though it undermines the permanence, historical and social importance, and desirableness of kingship, the play still functions in adherence to a monarchical framework of ethics and of inheritance. By allowing the play to end after Edward's refusal to bend to the wishes of his

society, Marlowe would have been tacitly stating that it is not the achieving of one's aims which is of consequence, but rather the having and valuing of aims and desires to begin with. Edward has no lover or vengeance in dying yet still faces his own oblivion unafraid. While he could not possibly know that Mortimer's undoing was imminent, and thus his courage in the face of suffering and death no less founded in this self-discovery, it almost cheapens his refusal to beg for mercy. Though the crypto-fascists in all of us is delighted to see the bad punished and Edward given the respect he never received ante-mortem, one can see something almost childish about it. After Edward II's tacit realization his subjective identity is worth more than the realization of his revenge or his kingship, his son immediately achieves this revenge and regains the kingship: one can almost imagine a poorly-written children's film ending in a similar manner, in which a fairy godmother or some other entity with preternatural powers and a proclivity towards socialism gives a young hero ten teddy bears in exchange for sacrificing one. For all of Mortimer's semi-tragic anguish over the wheel-like ephemerality of monarchical power, the monarchy still for all intents and purposes, cleanses itself—even if this cleansing is sometimes incredibly violent and cruel. The son of Edward has the same value of himself as his father, and thus deliberately disobeys his advisors in the carrying out of justice and in the processes of governance, but this means that it is because of Edward's progeny that he succeeds and is remembered. It is hard not to view this as detracting from Marlowe's argument for the merits of individuality, when this poetic doubling has someone else finishing his work and sorting the good from the bad in life. To a truly authentic individual, legacy is unimportant; not in monarchy.

### **The Melancholy Dane: The Performance of Revenge and Search for Selfhood in Hamlet**

It is Shakespeare's omnipresent tragedy *Hamlet* which provides the narrative vindication of interiority. *Hamlet* does not make the same choice that *Edward II* does, in that it both literally and figuratively destroys the monarchy. By the play's end, every royal Dane we've met is dead. Hamlet does not get to be re-instated, and after his demise, the country is instantly usurped by the prince of a

different country— essentially rendering the monarchy powerless to deal out karmic justice. The play is not as secular as any of the three works previously examined, as it does include a ghost, but this figure is profoundly impotent; not only can he not affect change in the material world, he cannot even provide truth or knowledge as Revenge does in *The Spanish Tragedy*. It cannot even compel its son to avenge it properly or promptly.

The subject matter of Hamlet was not as controversial as Marlowe's play—no one has any problems with straight royals murdering other nobles and agents of the monarchy, particularly long-dead ones in foreign countries. If they did they would hardly find any place in the world in 1600 where they could have fled to avoid such occurrences. Yet in a less ostentatious way than Edward, *Hamlet* begins to draw increased focus, value and attention to the world which exists solely inside each of us. Hamlet defies more than just the King and the state—he defies narrative convention itself.

However, orienting oneself when attempting critical analysis of *Hamlet* is an ordeal; the play and the figure of Hamlet have occupied such a permanent and prominent place in the eye of both literature and drama, the work has yielded a staggering amount of analysis, counter analysis, and re-interpretation, not to mention an inexorable stream of new thoughts on the text. To understand what is meant by this, we must examine T.S. Eliot's essay on Hamlet, "Hamlet and his Problems," as this first introduces us to the complicated meta-narrative machinery we will be using to parse the text. Eliot observes that given the circumstances of the play, in any other tragic drama by Shakespeare or anyone else, Claudius would be dead by act II scene ii, and the rest of the drama would deal with whatever fallout came from the reign of the new king Hamlet. Hamlet's deliberation and delay then, to Eliot, indicate the play to be "an artistic failure."

"Hamlet (the man) is dominated by an emotion which is inexpressible, because it is in excess of the facts as they appear. And the supposed identity of Hamlet with his author is genuine to this point: that Hamlet's bafflement at the absence of objective equivalent to his feelings is a prolongation of the bafflement of his creator in the face of his artistic problem. Hamlet is up against the difficulty that his



disgust is occasioned by his mother, but that his mother is not an adequate equivalent for it; his disgust envelops and exceeds her. It is thus a feeling which he cannot understand; he cannot objectify it, and it therefore remains to poison life and obstruct action. None of the possible actions can satisfy it; and nothing that Shakespeare can do with the plot can express Hamlet for him," (Eliot 91).

The essay has, for discernable reasons, become a foundation of many deconstructionist arguments and critical essays, as it highlights the infinite ambiguity of interpretation and expansion which can occur within any literary work. It highlights the fact that within the text there exists endless opportunities for re-interpretation and re-imagining of set definition, and the ability of a text to produce infinite meanings. But Eliot's critique of Hamlet's procrastination also makes apparent a narrative procrastination perpetrated by Hamlet on the audience or reader. That is, we know fairly quickly what Hamlet must and will do to Claudius, due to what Eliot dubs "artistic inevitability," or emotion in art being expressed through certain understandable behaviors. Yet Hamlet does not strike until act five, a period of such length it has caused many critics of the play from Olivier to George Detmold to name the tragic flaw of Hamlet to be his "All but blunted purpose." If, as Eliot theorizes, Hamlet is a retelling of Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*, there is no reason that, when made aware of the wrong done to his father, Hamlet could not have similarly weaponized the play and killed Claudius by act 2 scene 4. Had he forgone madness altogether and merely stormed up to Gertrude's chamber as he does in act 3, the play might have ended even before then. What this misses entirely however, is what Hamlet is doing as he is dilly-dallying—he is, when not engaged in observing Claudius or berating Ophelia or his mother, engaged in deep introspection, pondering the nature of his soul, his life after death, the power of art, and the effect of guilt. This is what Hamlet does even after his exile, upon observing Fortinbras' regiment, Yorrick's tomb, Ophelia's funeral procession, and nearly every other time he takes the stage, right up until his fateful duel with Laertes. Hamlet's knowledge of himself, then, is more consequential to Shakespeare than Hamlet's fate, the honor economy, justice or his roles as prince and avenger.

Of course, this is hardly the only way of seeing Hamlet, though it has been the most popular one over the past 200 years. This is the problem brought to a head in the collection of essays *Hamlet without Hamlet* by Margreta De Grazia which calls into the question the cyclical and myopic ways that the immensity of Hamlet, both as a cultural touchstone and a character, affects our ability as critics to think openly about Hamlet, or the way Shakespeare has situated him within the play. "*Hamme*, as the earliest dictionaries establish, derives from the Germanic word for home. A hamlet is a cluster of homes, a kingdom in miniature," De Grazia argues, and thus Claudius has in a sense "uprooted" Hamlet and pushed him off the thirty-year cycle of generational inheritance which defined male lives in this era. If Hamlet is meant to be the kingdom, his primary goal in the story is them to retake this kingdom. The same lack of purpose which has given critics, at least critics from the late neoclassical period onward so much reason to look at Hamlet the prince has convinced De Grazia there is little to see: Hamlet just wants his rank and role back. Because Hamlet is such a strikingly written figure, critics, at least since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, have become seduced by him, his multi-level reasoning and problem solving, his external behavior as either a veil or expression of his interior self (or both) and his nearly endless doubles, but have eschewed the one truly concrete aspect of the play, one which would have been more concrete to renaissance readers: Hamlet is the rightful heir to the throne, and now that is in danger. In this light, Hamlet's speeches change from contemplative and artfully humorous takes on the human dilemma and become instead narcissistic and diabolical plots, akin to Mortimer the Younger's asides in *Edward II*. In both of these cases the characters graft together cases for power based on their own needs and hidden under the desires of others: Hamlet wants to be king and not to get assassinated in the process, not to know what happens when we die or to save his mother from hell. Should we take this to be true, even the enigmatic ghost becomes a key part of the fabric, literally becoming the kingship forcing Hamlet towards his fate from the position of historical authority.

This is a perfectly valid point, and it makes a perhaps more important point, metatextually, about how simple it is to become swamped in pre-existing schools of criticism or social perceptions of a work. That said, it is important to know which pieces of the critical debate around Hamlet are salient to the ultimate point of his interior and value as a human. De Grazia's writing, for example, helps to prove how intangibly *Hamlet* is bound up with the emotional conditions and thoughts of its eponymous character. For, even if Hamlet were a political, financial, or narcissistically driven figure, the play would still be the play of Hamlet—Hamlet's greed, manipulation, indignance, plotting scheming, or whatever motive was read into him. While the much ado about madness may have created an endless pit in which meaning could be dumped, we cannot escape the fact that there are ten dead at the end of the play, and nearly any one of them could have been the protagonist of their own tragedy, and yet the story focuses on Hamlet. In dominating the focus so his narrative experience eats those of Claudius, Gertrude, Laertes, Ophelia, and Hamlet Senior. Even when Hamlet has been gutted of his Hamletness, if his asides were removed and his madness replaced with a more feasible disguise, it would still then be about Hamlet the prince of Denmark, a human agent being used to fulfill the functions of monarchy by taking back his father's throne. Hamlet in a sense cannot be taken out of Hamlet—even when we do not follow him the scenes of the play he is absent from are by necessity truncated and selectively depicted to be about whoever Hamlet is. Of course one cannot deny the cultural distortion and overzealous consumption of Hamlet the character, but this fact alone does not preclude him from our interests. As *Hamlet without Hamlet* points out in its third chapter, figures of the enlightenment and contemporary era as diverse as Hegel, Marx, Freud and Goethe were all influenced to some extent by Hamlet, and his character's potential wealth of emotions and motivations may well go on to support or engender more potentially helpful or fascinating schools of thought, particularly ones which vindicate the individual.

But if the play is then inherently about a human subject's interior, we must better understand the notions of interiority, particularly how these notions coincide with the art produced during the

renaissance. In the essay “Renaissance clothing and the materials of memory” by Ann Rosalind Jones and Peter Stallybrass, we do not get a precise definition of what is meant by “interiority,” but we do get detailed discussion of the way the exterior appearance and behavior of these characters is presented in reference to their motives and interiority. “Clothing is a worn world,” the introduction to *Fashion, Fetishism and Memory* argues, and the habit of Shakespearean characters like Hal to view kingship or sorrow in the language of dress is not a misappropriation, but rather because “What can be worn can be worn deeply,” ( Jones, Stallybrass 3). This theory can of course find an endless number of plays which support its central themes—Vindice, for example, become another person when donning courtiers clothes, and Henry V, the main figure of the critical piece, demonstrably exhibits different behaviors as he changes his rank and robe—even when he merely changes his outside appearance for jest, as he does with Falstaff in act II scene v of Henry IV pt. I. But in drama, the boundary between interior and exterior is much more difficult to locate than it would be with real living humans, in a novel, or even in film where camera tricks allow for interactions and moments which the characters themselves are unaware of. In Drama, however, characters perform for an audience who is unable to see the minutiae of the world these figures dwell in and has no avenue to their thoughts, save through their observed behavior and the asides which many tragic figures make to include the audience in their dilemma. Therefore, in drama what is exterior must by its nature be interior. The characters, in fashioning a persona for themselves, fashion themselves.

However, while Jones and Stallybrass do highlight some of the ambiguity of dramatic performance, their central focus is the minute ways in which the depths of humanity are depicted on stage—livery, for example, immediately identifies someone as subservient to an institution of government and occupying a valued place in it—and the progression of these vestments throughout the play. But robes, a crown, or even some unique self-crafted piece of jewelry are not the most meaningful things which a person may affect; there is also their personality. And given the admittedly through

avenues by which a viewer of drama may see the personality of a character, the already blurred line of what is solely external and inside truly fades away. This brings us directly to the heart of critical discussion of *Hamlet*, and some critics like John DeCarlo and Abigail Heiniger would even argue, the heart of Hamlet; that is Hamlet's madness and Hamlet's procrastination.

Hamlet's fatal flaw is often presumed to be cowardice, doubt, procrastination, or some attribute of that ilk. The 1948 film of the play starring Laurence Olivier actually begins with an added quote: "This is the tragedy of a man who could not make up his mind." Much has been made of the fact that Hamlet is told of his father's murder in the first act, and yet it takes another four for him to exact vengeance. But this reading, though workable, excludes some of the heady reasoning which occurs in the textured speeches of the play. Take act 2 scene 2, after Hamlet has met with the players and begins to set up his own tragic drama to unmask his step-father. Here he says the following of his decision not merely to massacre the man: "The spirit that I have seen / May be a devil; and the devil hath power / T' assume a pleasing shape; yea, and perhaps / Out of my weakness and my melancholy, / As he is very potent with such spirits, / Abuses me to damn me. I'll have grounds / More relative than this. The play's the thing Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King..." (1673-1680).

The ghost of Hamlet's father is often taken for granted as a Grecian God or seer, who brings truth into an otherwise muddled play, but in a sense he does quite the opposite. Before his appearance, decency, moral order, the succession of kings, and heaven and hell were all concepts that could be accepted without question. But Hamlet the younger does not know any longer; his father claims to be from purgatory, but could as easily be a deceitful demon. His father is dead yet appears alive. Hamlet may be sane or may be mad. The king is no longer the king and yet also the king. We the audience also do not possess this certainty either, much to the dismay of many critics, discussed later in the essay. All Hamlet can use to guide him is emotion-- in this case, Claudius's inner guilt which the prince attempts to make external. In appearing thus in the play, the spirit world has in a sense rendered itself unknowable

and irrelevant. Hamlet must now make his decision about what happened based solely on his interpretation of Claudius and his interpretation of his own feelings. But even in this Hamlet is not certain, for in outlining his plan, he states

“I have heard it said / That guilty creatures, sitting at a play, / Have by the very cunning of the scene / Been struck so to the soul that presently / They have proclaim'd their malefactions; / For murder, though it have no tongue, will speak / With most miraculous organ, I'll have these Players / Play something like the murder of my father / Before mine uncle. I'll observe his looks; / I'll tent him to the quick. If he but blench, I know my course,” (1662-1672).

Hamlet is right to curse “Fie upon't! foh! About, my brain!” He is not slowed by an inability to make up his mind, but by the inability of the mind to truly know. He cannot trust his reasoning for the constant accusations of madness and melancholy which barrage him, nor what he sees, or what he feels. All he has to orient himself is the interior lives of the humans around him, and the parts of this self which move by osmosis through the barrier that separates the emotional from the physical. He is, in a sense, reading a text and interpreting it, only the texts are human beings.

This is not a line of reasoning engaged in by most other avengers—even today. From Zeus killing Cronos to any spy or action film, the masculine bereaved tend to shoot, stab, or otherwise slaughter first, and ask questions later, if at all. Hamlet, however, sees himself as being trapped in a quandary which concerns him, Hamlet, not the world or his revenge. The dissonance of his revenge and behavior has caused many to see *Hamlet* directly as a response to the revenge tragedy genre; by making his character more visible to the audience through his frequent asides and by diverting so much from the revenge tragedy archetype, Shakespeare deliberately critiques the notion of revenge and these sorts of plays in that they obscure humanity through opaque and assumed imperative for revenge.

This less familiar discussion of Hamlet as an entity and as a reader and audience member of the theater lends a meta-textual potential of many of Hamlet's monologues and actions in the play. The most notable example of such instance is when Hamlet engages with the players in the second scene of

the second act. The still brooding and ranting prince has yet to take any action on his encounter with his Father's ghost, but perks when he is alerted of the arrival of a group of actors. He soon sets up a meeting with the actors, and instigates the awakening, so he hopes, of murder's hidden tongue. This line of reasoning, which Hamlet and Shakespeare may or may not have been aware of, originated in Kyd's archetypal *The Spanish Tragedy*, where vengeful Hieronimo and Bel-Imperia dress themselves in the garb of characters in a play to execute the real murders of Balthazar and Lorenzo, also in costume. However, in Hamlet's use of the play or acting as revelation, he is not concerned with the physical and direct consequences of the play, but rather the inter-personal ones. In other words, whereas the protagonists of *The Spanish Tragedy* created a play that mirrored reality in order to instigate a direct assault, Hamlet wants to create a courtroom to indict Claudius by forcing him to reveal his guilt. This distinction reveals Hamlet not only to be aware of himself as an entity, but of the interiority of others. He seeks to exploit what he knows of Claudius as Uncle and brother to instigate his demise, not his knowledge of his body or location. Hamlet reads Claudius and his reaction as Claudius reads and reacts to the play.

This creation of a play within a play begs from us a comparison between Hamlet's relation to the play and our connection to Hamlet. Thus, as the scene continues, and Hamlet asks one of the players he is familiar with to recite a section of a monologue regarding "Priam's slaughter," we cannot help but be intrigued by the duality of meaning which by nature arises. When Hamlet envies aloud the deep feeling of the lead actor, for example, this is drawn into direct focus:

"O what a rogue and peasant slave am I! / Is it not monstrous that this player here, / But in a fiction, in a dream of passion, / Could force his soul so to his own conceit / That, from her working, all his visage wann'd, / Tears in his eyes, distraction in's aspect, / A broken voice, and his whole function suiting / With forms to his conceit? And all for nothing! / For Hecuba! / What's Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba, That he should weep for her? What would he do, / Had he the motive and the cue for passion That I have? He would drown the stage with tears / And cleave the general ear with horrid speech; / Make mad the guilty and appal the free, / Confound the ignorant, and amaze indeed / The very faculties of eyes and ears. / Yet I, A dull and muddy-mettled rascal, peak / Like John-a-dreams, unpregnant of my

cause, / And can say nothing! No, not for a king, / Upon whose property and most dear life / A damn'd defeat was made. Am I a coward? / Who calls me villain? breaks my pate across? / Plucks off my beard and blows it in my face? / Tweaks me by th' nose? gives me the lie i' th' throat / As deep as to the lungs? Who does me this, ha? / 'Swounds, I should take it! for it cannot be / But I am pigeon-liver'd and lack gall / To make oppression bitter, or ere this I should have fatted all the region kites / With this slave's offal. Bloody bawdy villain! / Remorseless, treacherous, lecherous, kindless villain! / O, vengeance! Why, what an ass am I! This is most brave, / That I, the son of a dear father murder'd, / Prompted to my revenge by heaven and hell / Must (like a whore) unpack my heart with words / And fall a-cursing like a very drab, / A stallion!" (2.2. 577-616).

The scene has been widely seen merely as a self-conscious yet envious rant on the part of Hamlet. He has yet to exact vengeance for some reason unknown to himself, while this stranger may fly into a rage over someone he has never met. Yet it must be significant that Hamlet refers to his role, "the son of a dear father murdered, prompted to revenge by Heaven and Hell," (1658), and the addition of a mirror-play into the plot evokes a direct connection to the popular revenge tragedies, particularly the still-popular *the Spanish Tragedy*. Not only did Kyd's play contain a play meant to mirror the past and the future, it also contained the influence, if tertiarily, of heaven and hell. In several scenes throughout the play, including the first and last of the entire narrative, the ghost of a slain Spanish warrior Andrea regards the events on earth from heaven along with an angel who is called Revenge. Revenge ostensibly has some role in the architecture of the events on earth and engineers it so that nearly all the named characters die, before informing the audience that the villains are suffering ironic torments in hell, while the innocent are vindicated in heaven. Here, a ghost, that of Hamlet's father, presents itself to him, and not any soul but one entrapped in purgatory. Thus he is embodying both heaven and hell, the order of the living world and the unknown realms of death. Hamlet finds himself in nearly the same position as Hieronimo, though inverted, as Hieronimo was the father of a murdered son compelled by heaven and hell. Hamlet makes this allusion while observing the classical monologue, a play which for all intents and purposes, exists outside the realm of the Christian theology. Thus in remarking as he does on the fervor and delivery by the actor Hamlet references not merely his literal position as the son of a murdered father, but the son of a murdered father in a play who is thus prompted like the players to act, to avenge



and become a figure who is fated for murder and subsequent death. Hamlet is very open: he does not want to inhabit his role; he can't, for he lacks the passion to perform it, both within the context of the play and the context of the narrative. And as Shakespeare famously remarks in *As You Like it*, "All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players; They have their exits and their entrances, And one man in his time plays many parts, His acts being seven ages." Hamlet resists his role in life and as his fate as damned avenger for nearly the entire play, one could argue. It is even plausible that Hamlet never avenges his father, as his last words before slaying Claudius are "Follow my mother," implying her death by his deceit is his motive for regicide. This would be a move long ahead of its time, in our current conception of western literary history, as it demonstrates a distinctly postmodern awareness by the protagonist and an overtly existential coloring. Hamlet refuses to revenge his father, but when forced by the narrative he actively resists, to murder his uncle, he does so for reasons which are his own. It also puts Hamlet's identity in direct conflict with the identity of the revenger, and the genre of the revenge tragedy; fate, convention and outside forces place Hamlet in his unfortunate scenario. He actually generates very little narrative action himself, unlike Macbeth, Brutus, or Lear. Hamlet merely finds himself placed in a situation at the text's end he has only a tertiary and limited understanding of, with no reliable indicators whatsoever of metaphysical consequence or what truly occurred between his uncle and father, yet strikes and kills him anyway. Hamlet has still come to fulfill his role as avenger, but in a very roundabout way, and largely by rejecting it. Rather than merely just kill his usurping uncle, he first comes to know Claudius's internal processes, and then his own. Hamlet resists text and tradition to become his own person, which allows for his act of vengeful spontaneity.

By creating this narrative dissonance and forcing Hamlet to interact with the players in reference to his own dilemma, Shakespeare creates a metatextual and existential dilemma for Denmark's prince, and in the process, vindicates Hamlet's role as Hamlet above that of avenger or hero, displaying a humanism and revolutionary insight.

Hamlet's knowledge of other's interiority also grows and expands as the play progresses.

Though he begins the play with little but contempt for his mother, uncle, friends, fellow nobles, and for Ophelia, by the last act he has been bestowed with a new insight into the value of shared experience with humanity. The best passage to prove this knowledge is possible on our part takes place when only four figures are on stage: a Dane, a traveler, a gravedigger and a cadaver, and all are watched by the reader.

"Alas, poor Yorick! I knew him, Horatio, a fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy. He hath borne me on his back a thousand times. And now how abhorred in my imagination it is! My gorge rises at it. Here hung those lips that I have kissed I know not how oft. Where be your gibes now? Your gambols, your songs, your flashes of merriment that were wont to set the table on a roar? Not one now to mock your own grinning? Quite chapfall'n? Now get you to my lady's chamber, and tell her, let her paint an inch thick, to this favor she must come. Make her laugh at that. Prithee, Horatio, tell me one thing..." (5.1. 190).

Though Horatio is present for the entire speech, he is only consulted at its end; for the rest of the diatribe, he is like us, in the audience to Hamlet's antics. Once he has been summoned again, Hamlet makes a Yorick-esque statement which is nonetheless true:

Horatio. What's that, my lord?

Hamlet. Dost thou think Alexander looked o' this fashion i' th' earth?

Horatio. E'en so.

Hamlet. And smelt so? Pah! [Puts down skull.]

Horatio. E'en so, my lord.

Hamlet. To what base uses we may return, Horatio! Why may not imagination trace the noble dust of Alexander till 'a find it stopping a bung-hole?" (Shakespeare 5.1. 204- 211).

Of course this bears the same hallmarks of Hamlet's earlier comments about Polonius the fishmonger and his riddles with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, but this, both literally and metaphorically, foolish rhetoric of comparing the great and venerated to the crass and simple, while making an existentialist point, is far removed from what we saw but a few lines earlier. Hamlet begins not with discussion of Yorick's pre-established rank and title, but with the person of Yorick: "Alas, poor

Yorick! I knew him, Horatio, a fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy.” In death, though we are made hollow, it is not our rank which persists, at least not in the eye of Hamlet. He describes the personality of this jester, that he was a man of unending laughter and jests, and that he interacted and played with him, and now this man he knew has decayed to nigh on nothing. In fact, while all the duties of a jester and fool are enumerated, from “gibes...gambols, your songs, your flashes of merriment that were wont to set the table on a roar?... your own grinning?” his rank is alluded to through mention of his social role as jester to the king, but Hamlet’s eulogy does not even directly mention his status as clown but rather the moments which he shared with Hamlet. When Hamlet speaks to people, he mocks them, covertly or overtly. When he speaks of people, he speaks only of their deeds, and of their humanity, something which he seems to value.

If this is our interpretation, and we do not believe Hamlet to merely want what he cannot have, we have a profoundly anti-monarchical and anti-state play. In death, Hamlet both explicitly and implicitly makes plain, even the great Alexander is reduced to smelly dust. All processes of state are meaningless affectations—even if Hamlet aims throughout the play to take the throne, by the time of his return to Denmark he seems uninterested even in avenging his father or killing his uncle, and by the end of the play he is dead and the royal line completely expunged. Hamlet may feel it important to declare himself “the Dane,” as he leaps into Ophelia’s grave, but this rank is not what he values most in others; not their positions, which he regards as little more lofty than selling salmon; or familial rank, which he sees as insufficient when stacked against his own feelings of love. Monarchy and rank are perishable, and subject to the whims of individuals. When people die, their rank dies with them; Hamlet Senior does not remain king after his demise, nor in the language of the play does he remain Hamlet’s father. All that remains is who he was, and the impact left behind on the world, and upon the living’s memory. That is why the audience is included in the form of Horatio—Hamlet, though dead and never king, will endure forever because of the impression left on our counterpart, and on ourselves, who carry

the true nature of Hamlet with us without meaning to centuries after his story was made stageplay, perhaps even millennia after Hamlet died.

### Conclusion

In summation, the two-part deconstructive and constructive action that the dramatic works of this era pulled off has left an indelible impact on western thought, and by understanding in their entirety the means by which the dramatists in turn personified their times and helped push fate's wheel down upon monarchical authority, we may gain insight into how to interpret our own contemporary landscape and how long-term societal change may be achieved

With its critiques of state and unflattering depictions of those who value 'Honor' and 'purity,' *The Revenger's Tragedy* exemplifies much of the anti-monarchical satire which would carry over into the work of enlightenment writers such as Voltaire and Swift, while at the same time drawing upon the violence and narrative of both Medieval and classical playwrights. His play *The Changeling*, written with William Rowley, builds a critique not only of honor but of chastity and the social traditions which attacked and disadvantaged women, and of morality in general. By creating a situation in which Beatrice must choose between sin and suffering, the play achieves a level of Brechtian alienation, as the absence of any real ethical character and the focus on their planning and moral decision making questions the utility of the moral structures, which exist and cause a great deal more sadness than they do good and inhibit the pleasure of all. *Edward II* by Marlowe is significantly more radical than either of these, firstly because it depicts the monarchy of the nation he lived in (albeit a few centuries after the events of the text) as being populated by morons, bullies, traitors, homosexuals and liars, and secondly because it draws the state into direct contrast with the individual freedoms and choices of its main character, who was widely thought of as a 'weak-king' during this period and after. However he does not further attack

the system of governance, and even vindicates it by having the young Edward III follow in his father's footsteps and convict his enemies—creating the illusion that on a long enough timeline, a government with pure lines of inheritance will sort itself out. *Hamlet* proves the synthesis of all of these attributes, not only centering its narrative on a character's interior thoughts and opinions as *Edward II* does, but also by combining this with his critiques of royalty, *the Changeling's* attentive depiction of his ethical reasoning and his thought processes, while not excluding the scathing attacks on nobility and the institutions of power, or the devastating violence which helped make the genre of revenge tragedy so popular. If not the unacknowledged legislators of the world, then the Dramatists of Elizabethan and Jacobean England were an excellent campaign staff, serving the purpose of the fool in *King Lear*: if the proud king does not listen to his muddled wisdom, at least there was a large audience who could listen and take it in. The prominence of these plays in England not only coincided with the surge of political activity, which would culminate in the execution of Charles I, but with the emergence of a wider northern renaissance which would see the increasing rise of romantic and humanist art, drama, poetry, policy, and philosophy in France and Germany, which would continue into the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

If we are to fully understand our own conception of human rights and the self, we must fully comprehend how these notions developed, particularly if we wish to alter these notions in the future. Further dialogue on the historical conditions, philosophical influences, poetry and drama of this period interacted to help shape and enable the current understanding of humanism as an ethic, and brought on the beginning of the English Renaissance. The notions of Interiority as they existed in the middle ages as well, are not covered here extensively, nor is the mystery play and its often violent subject matter compared to depictions of the interiority in renaissance drama which may allow for further expanded study into how these cultural ideologies are formed and spread. It is also worthy of note that though the release of these works amongst others preceded the overthrow of King Charles by Parliament, these same Parliamentarians despised the theater and wished to have it banned, while lords and other

members of the monarchy were often in attendance at these shows which attacked and defamed them. It may produce a more textured image of English society, theater as a medium, and the politics of the 17<sup>th</sup> century to write an essay on this dichotomy, and examine if the plays may still be said to have radical power if the changes they could be credited with engendering, if one of the groups they helped to inspire shut down theaters across the nation. While we are all familiar now with Shakespeare's monumental legacy, Marlowe, Kyd and Middleton were all also popular in their own circles, and their impact on the zeitgeist of the era impressive, and the ways the operations their plays begin influenced other dramatists, poets, philosophers or novelists later in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and into the 18<sup>th</sup> would also be a worthy avenue of inquiry, as the ideas which were radical under Elizabeth and Jacob might have become something which allowed for the conservation of power in a different political climate, or may have become more relevant and applicable when re-appropriated. It is my hope the work in this thesis may further encourage such investigation.

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