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Corporeal Violence in Early Modern Revenge Tragedies

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CORPOREAL VIOLENCE IN EARLY MODERN REVENGE TRAGEDIES

by

MATTHEW MCINTYRE

Under the Direction of Dr. Stephen B. Dobranski

ABSTRACT

In the four early modern revenge tragedies I study, Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*, William Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*, Thomas Middleton's *The Revenger's Tragedy*, and John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*, the ubiquitous depictions of corporeal violence underscore the authors' skepticism of the human tendency to infuse bodies – physical manifestations of both agency and vulnerability – with symbolism. The revengers in these plays try to avenge the death of a loved one whose disfigured body remains unburied and often continues to occupy a place on stage, but their efforts to infuse corpses with meaning instead reveal the revengers' perverse obsession with mutilation as spectacle.

In Chapter one, I show how in *The Spanish Tragedy* Thomas Kyd portrays the characters' assertions of body-soul unity to be arbitrary attempts to justify self-serving motives. Although Hieronimo treats Horatio's dead body as a signifier of his own emotions, he displays it, alongside the bodies of his enemies, as just another rotting corpse. In Chapter two, I explore how in *Titus Andronicus*, William Shakespeare questions the efficacy of rituals for maintaining social

order by depicting how the play's characters manipulate rituals intended to celebrate peace as opportunities to exact vengeance; Titus demands human sacrifice as not just an accompanying element, but a central motive of rituals ostensibly intended to signify commemoration. In Chapter three, I read *The Revenger's Tragedy* as illustrating Thomas Middleton's characterization of the depiction of corporeal mutilation as an overused, generic convention; the play's revenger, Vindice, attributes multiple, constantly shifting, meanings to the rotting skull of his lover, which he uses as a murder weapon. In Chapter four I argue that in *The Duchess of Malfi*, John Webster destabilizes spectators' interpretive capacities; within this play's unconventional dramatic structure, the main characters use somatic imagery to associate bodily dismemberment with moral disintegration.

Corpses, the tangible remains of once vigorous, able-bodied relatives, serve as central components of respectful commemoration or as mementos of vengeance, yet these dead, often gruesomely mutilated bodies also invite repulsion or perverse curiosity. Thus, rather than honoring the deceased, revengers objectify corpses as frightening spectacles or even use them as weapons.

INDEX WORDS: Early Modern literature, Revenge tragedies, Early Modern dissection practices, Ritual theory, Early Modern relic studies and funereal practices, Body-soul unity, Authority, Identity

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MATTHEW MCINTYRE

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2012

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2012

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DEDICATION

In memory of my mother, Erminia McIntyre, and for my father, Thomas McIntyre, who taught me how to read and write and who demonstrated the importance of teaching and learning.

I also dedicate this work to my mentors, Dr. Stephen B. Dobranski, Dr. James Hirsh, Dr. Paul J. Voss, Dr. Calvin Thomas, and Dr. Thomas McHaney, who inspired me to write well.

Most of all, this is for Ruth, Jude, Anna Ruth, Liam, and Elizabeth, who encouraged me to keep writing well.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Vengeance and bloodshed, which pervaded the early modern English stage, were immensely popular throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. While most Renaissance plays had no more than one theatrical run, according to Linda Woodbridge, ten revenge plays enjoyed multiple runs, and, in an era when most plays were printed only once, 20 revenge plays went through two or more editions (4). Revenge tragedies remained in high demand for years after their initial staging, and they were familiar enough to be commemorated through parody or plagiarism: Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*, often considered the first English revenge play, "was quoted and burlesqued" throughout the seventeenth century, "more than any other play, even *Hamlet*" (Gurr 143-44). Well known as the most significant influence on Shakespeare's famous tragedy, Kyd's play proved popular enough to receive an anonymous series of "Additions" in 1602, eight years after Kyd's death. Writers and playgoers alike ridiculed the theatricalization of gore associated with the revenge tradition in general; as early as 1599, an anonymous Induction to *A Warning for Fair Women* described the genre's frequently imitated plot as telling how "some damnd tyrant, to obtaine a crowne, / Stabs, hangs, impoisons, smothers, [and] cutteth throats" (lines 50-51). Even an abridged list of atrocities demonstrates the gruesome, increasingly bizarre quality of the spectacles of violence early modern audiences paid to witness: in *The Spanish Tragedy*, Hieronimo keeps his son's corpse unburied only to present it as a decaying display after annihilating the Spanish court; in William Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*, the title character avenges his daughter's rape and mutilation by dismembering her abductors and baking their body parts in pies he serves to their mother; in Thomas Middleton's *The Revenger's Tragedy*, Vindice tricks the Duke into kissing a poisoned skull as punishment for

his rape and murder of Gloriana; and in John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*, the title character seeks reconciliation with her lycanthropic brother only to realize she kneels in deference to kiss a dismembered, rotting hand he has extended to her.

In the chapters that follow, I argue that the playwrights of early modern revenge tragedies depict violence and mutilation not merely to entertain and disturb audiences with sensational scenes and characters, but also to dramatize the human need to invest the physical self with signifying capability. The characters in these plays repeatedly grapple with the value of physical experience or corporeal identity, yet in this struggle to attribute symbolic meaning to bodies, the characters reveal a preoccupation with dismemberment and decomposition. Although these characters initially appear to fixate on corpses out of veneration for the dead, eventually the motives that lie behind this treatment appear manipulative or abusive. In the instances I examine, dismembered body parts are used as murder weapons, as gruesome spectacles, or as justification for revenge. By attaching significance to dead bodies in seemingly capricious and self-centered ways, the revengers in these plays might justify any use of corpses.

While in subsequent chapters I examine Elizabethan attitudes toward the relationships between body and soul and discuss specific cultural controversies involving bodily experience, in this introduction I want to focus on the revenge tragedy genre and its appeal to sixteenth- and seventeenth-century playgoers. The characters preoccupied with vengeance in these plays – the "revengers" – not only commit multiple murders but also thrill in the "aesthetic delight" of their execution of an elaborate revenge ("English Poetry" 341). Traditionally, definitions of the revenge genre have suggested that early modern spectators' "craving for morbid excitement" was satisfied by the prominent depictions of "murder, assassination, mutilation, and carnage" that was characteristic of these plays ("Tragedy" 480). Throughout this dissertation, I define revenge

plays more narrowly as tragedies depicting maligned characters who, robbed of officially sanctioned justice by a corrupt political or social structure, not only resort to deception but also participate in the same violence they seek to redress. In addition, these revengers typically attempt to treat dead bodies with respect, but they also recognize that the display of corpses or dismemberment might serve as a violent demonstration of power; they seek to avenge the death of a relative whose disfigured body remains unburied and often continues to occupy a place on stage. The revengers I study end up revealing a fascination with bloodlust; they initially focus on corpses as central to appropriate ritual practice or as motivation for their own acts of vengeance, but, as the authors of these four plays show, revengers use dead bodies for self-indulgent purposes and enact excessive violence against their enemies.

The diversity of the revenge plays I have chosen to examine in the following chapters testifies to the enduring appeal of the controversies surrounding vengeance, justice, and bodily corruption in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England. I have deliberately selected four disparate revenge tragedies, depicting a wide range of themes and spanning more than three decades: each one was initially staged between 1580-1615. Yet, these plays by four different authors share one consistent characteristic: all of them feature a revenger who displays or abuses an enemy's mauled corpse with a malice or self-indulgence in excess of the crime that initially inspires vengeance. That this striking similarity appears in such a wide range of Elizabethan and Jacobean plays implies that the depiction of violence may have addressed serious cultural concerns. As I intend to show, the portrayal of bodily mutilation and grotesque treatment of corpses dramatizes Renaissance anxieties about the relationship between body and soul, the regard for icons, the role of ceremonial practices, and the treatment of corpses.

The revengers in the plays I study in the following chapters try to invest their physical experience or corporeal selves with meaning – through rituals, through iconography, through metaphor – but the plays repeatedly show how these efforts fail; the revengers in these plays end up using dead bodies for their own self-centered attempts to exact especially gruesome violence against their enemies, and the dramatists' vivid and repeated portrayal of corpses and mutilation emphasizes the inefficacy of the characters' attempts to invest dead bodies with symbolism. As physical remains of the dead, corpses serve as reminders of a deceased relative, but as horrid demonstrations of human powerlessness and decay, they also can be reduced to mere objects. In the first chapter of this dissertation, I argue that in *The Spanish Tragedy*, Hieronimo struggles to alleviate his grief by attaching meaning to his son's dead body, but by fixating on this bloody, decomposing corpse, Hieronimo betrays an excessive interest in blood and gore. In chapter two, I argue that in *Titus Andronicus*, bodily disfigurement is paramount to the display of political power; in this play, Shakespeare invites audiences to question the role of violence in socially-sanctioned ritual expression by depicting Titus's brutality as overstepping the conventional obligations of vengeance. In chapter three, I study how Vindice, the main character in *The Revenger's Tragedy*, justifies his perverse obsession with his former lover's skull as a strategy of avenging her unjust death and of preserving her supposed virtue. Vindice's exhilaration for this plan exposes his bloodlust and his eagerness to inflict pain. And in the final chapter, I examine Webster's depiction of bodies and physical gesture as central to identity formation in *The Duchess of Malfi*. Pursuing her unsanctioned love of Antonio, the title character in this play resists her brothers' efforts to control her body. Her self-confidence contrasts with Ferdinand's struggle to deny his incestuous lust by refusing to see or touch his sister.

But whereas I focus on the prevalent depiction of bodily violence as an indication of these revengers' thirst for excessive violence, much traditional criticism has studied early modern playgoers' moral ambivalence toward revenge. Twentieth-century scholarship has explained the appeal of revenge tragedies by examining how the plays challenge Elizabethan responses to vengeance; critics have explored whether audiences left "Christian scruples behind as they entered the theater," or held "moral awareness and dramatic excitement" in suspenseful tension ("English Poetry" 341). While many spectators viewed revenge as no less illegal or sinful than the crimes initially instigating vengeance, other playgoers considered revenge a moral obligation. The revenger typically faces the dilemma of whether to exhibit patience and faith by reserving vengeance to God, or to demonstrate powerful individual agency by taking action himself. Among the earliest critics to study this predicament, Lily Bess Campbell argued in 1931 that most early modern spectators agreed that the revenger risked spiritual damnation: "God did not permit one who seized his prerogative of revenge to go himself unpunished" (294). According to proponents of Campbell's claim, belief in divine justice was not isolated to religious fanatics; Willard Farnham, for example, asserted that Elizabethan culture in general "staunchly maintain[ed]" that vengeance "belongs to God" (345).

Other critics, however, noticed a greater degree of ambivalence toward the dramatization of revenge in the period; they argued that audiences condemned revenge in principle, yet could still sympathize with revengers struggling for justice against political corruption. Fredson Bowers, writing less than a decade after Campbell, argued that spectators endorsed revenge when "recourse to the law was impossible" (40). Bowers portrays the revenger as victimized by injustice; an unwilling participant in the violence he finds despicable, the revenger in this analysis is depicted as compelled to avenge a relative's murder. This kind of reading suggests

that authors provoked audiences to assess the circumstances under which revenge might be justified; while playgoers might sympathize with a revenger robbed of justice, they were also challenged to judge a revenger's participation in violence. Implicit in this kind of criticism, furthermore, is the more controversial view that revenge tragedies discourage passivity and even seem to promote aggression. "Christian patience," according to Gordon Braden, is "only rarely given a strong voice" in revenge plays (203).

Many recent critics find support for Braden's reading and advance it in more forceful terms, asserting that revengers often not only appear to indulge in their position as rebels, but also relish the violence they inflict. The revenger's decision to take action himself, instead of awaiting legal or divine justice, probably contributed to his appeal as a figure who "risks his life in a battle against corruption" or "feels he must prove his manhood," in Eleanor Prosser's words (34). In contrast to earlier criticism, this kind of reading suggests that vengeance in early modern England was not merely acceptable in the face of corruption, but was considered a moral obligation, a "pious duty laid on the next of kin," (Harrison 90). Throughout the following chapters, I show how playwrights challenge audiences to consider when revenge might serve as a culturally accepted practice or as a hollow justification for excessive violence. The four revenge tragedies I study often blur distinctions between "authentic revenge" – retribution proportional to initial injuries – and personal vindictiveness motivated by cruelty (Keyishian 2).

One of the most significant ways that the playwrights I am studying question both a revenger's motives and his use of violence to achieve justice is by foregrounding corporeal mutilation. While early twentieth-century critics decried the revenge genre's obsession with gratuitous depictions of blood and gore, later critics sought to analyze scenes of dismemberment and rot beyond the sensationalism such depictions fueled. Scholars such as Willard Farnham and

Bernard Spivack, both writing in the late 1950s, denounced the plays' excessive violence as superfluous. Farnham attributed no significance to "the renewed horrors" (427) portrayed in revenge plays, and Spivack suggested that authors such as Kyd and Shakespeare popularized "a treatment that shocks" (379). Later in the century, by way of contrast, critics asserted that the portrayal of dismemberment and violence contributed to thematic development or shaped the audience's response to characters' motives. This subsequent scholarship accordingly linked onstage bodily mutilation with cultural spectacles such as public executions, or studied physical debilitation as indicative of political incapacity. Hillary M. Nunn, for example, argues that audience members' interest in onstage violence indicates a cultural tendency to examine "the inner reaches of a character to judge his true nature" (3). According to Nunn, the portrayal of bodily fragmentation was influenced by the relatively new practice of dissection and had the effect of arousing both horror and sympathy. In addition, physical disability, like mutilation, might be read as an embodiment of psychological powerlessness; the portrayal of dismemberment, for example, indicates a disruption between a character's "capacity for effective action" and the character's "interiority," in Katherine Rowe's words (54). Authors of revenge plays in particular, as these critics suggest, depicted bodies as invested with signifying capability and as provoking questions about personal agency and capability.

Recent criticism about the revenge genre describes bodies as fungible and susceptible, linking identity formation with not only incorporeal emotions or the psyche, but also the physical, nutritive acts of consumption and excretion. As one of the leading scholars in this expanding field, Michael C. Schoenfeldt argues that "the consuming subject" in early modern England understood bodily functions "as very literal acts of self-fashioning" (11). Schoenfeldt asserts that humoral theory empowered individuals with the agency to regulate their own states

of being; in this view, the balance of the four humors altered the body's processes of digestion, thus improving or upsetting not only one's physical health but also one's psychological disposition. While Schoenfeldt suggests that physical habits, such as dietary practices, might contribute to methods of self-discipline, critics such as Gail Kern Paster argue that Galenic physiology, on the contrary, characterized bodies as uncontrollable by attributing to the internal organs "an aspect of agency, purposiveness, and plenitude to which the subject's own will is often decidedly irrelevant" (10). Individuals in this depiction seem subject to their porous and unstable bodies. Both Paster and Schoenfeldt point to the intimate relationship between the physical workings of the inner body and the psychological and emotional development of an individual sense of self.

Although this most recent strand of scholarship illuminates a vital relationship between the physical and mental interior of the body and the outer world surrounding it in terms of identity formation, critics continue to overlook the centrality of portrayals of mutilation or dismemberment on the Renaissance stage. As I show in the chapters that follow, corpses and fragmented body parts, as tangible objects deprived of animation and agency, are essential to a character's motivation to revenge the unjust murder of a loved one. But instead of facilitating or undermining an individual's efforts to define herself, the bodies in the plays that I examine belong to others. The revengers in these four plays may try to use these bloody corpses for their own purposes or infuse them with symbolic significance, but the playwrights suggest that this kind of idol veneration or devotion to ritual, when stimulated by a desire for vengeance, results not in introspection but rather in self-centered moral righteousness and the manipulation of bodily remains. Bodily fragmentation, these authors suggest, complicates and threatens the

human proclivity to invest bodies with symbolism, by arousing not only fear or revulsion, but also deviant fascination.

Chapter Two: Body and Soul in *The Spanish Tragedy*: Vengeance as a Visceral Impulse

At the beginning of Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* (written between 1582-1592), the Ghost of Don Andrea expresses the contradiction that bodies and souls are simultaneously linked and separated. He asserts that when he was alive, his body and his soul worked together in reciprocity, "each in their function serving other's need" (1.1.3), yet he also claims that death has now liberated the "eternal substance of [his] soul" (1) from the prison of his "wanton flesh" (2). The Ghost here elevates his precious, "eternal" soul over his tainted, lustful body, but, as the subsequent lines of his opening speech indicate, he also boastfully remembers how "in prime and pride of all [his] years" (8) he "secret[ly] possessed" the attractive, aristocratic Bel-Imperia (10). Although the Ghost tries to depict the soul as more important and meaningful than the body, he also implies that he enjoyed the fleshly temptations so antithetical to the soul's ostensible purity.

By portraying the Ghost's attempt to describe the relationship between body and soul as both harmonious and antagonistic here at the outset of *The Spanish Tragedy*, Kyd introduces one of the play's central themes, the arbitrary, ambivalent nature of the characters' insistence on the union of body and soul. The characters struggle to articulate the relationship between body and soul in a variety of radically equivocal ways. In some instances, they describe the soul as more precious than the base, sinful body but simultaneously draw attention to the spectacle of the body's physical prowess. In other instances, the characters contend that body and soul are united,

but describe the links between the two entities inconsistently. Some characters, such as Don Andrea's Ghost, struggle to assert a mutual reciprocity between body and soul, claiming that the two entities coexist in service to each other, while other characters instead depict the body as an outward manifestation of the soul, an invisible force capable of having physical, observable impact on the body. In still other instances, characters argue for the disjunction, rather than the union, between body and soul, implying that each entity develops significance only in isolation from the other. By the play's end, Kyd's interrogation of the characters' ambivalence toward the relationship between body and soul culminates in Hieronimo's display of his son's corpse as both a manifestation of Hieronimo's own "hope, heart, treasure, joy, and bliss" (4.4.94) and a "spectacle," or stage prop, intended to shock his onstage audience (89). Although Hieronimo insists on the importance of Horatio's dead body as a signifier of his own emotions, he displays it, alongside the bodies of Bel-Imperia, Lorenzo, and Balthazar, as just another rotting corpse, to justify his violent retribution. Ultimately, as this final scene involving Hieronimo suggests, *The Spanish Tragedy* undermines the characters' assertions of body-soul unity: Kyd repeatedly reveals the equivocation regarding the relationship between the two entities to be arbitrary attempts to justify self-serving motives.

Using terms such as *flesh*, *corpse*, *soul*, and *spirit*, the characters in *The Spanish Tragedy* struggle to overcome the inadequacies of language – and especially of metaphor – to describe what they often experience as the simultaneous union and separation of the physical, visible body with the immaterial, invisible soul. Throughout the play, the characters define bodies in terms of unthinking matter, "the physical or material frame or structure" of human beings (*OED* "Body" def. 1a), in contrast to the soul, which they treat as "the principle of thought and action" as well as "the spiritual part in contrast to the purely physical" ("Soul" def. 2a). In some places,

the characters try to describe the relationship between soul and body in theological terms, contrasting the eternal soul's purity with the body's susceptibility to sinful, fleshly temptation and physical decomposition. When, for example, Andrea's Ghost describes his "wanton flesh" (1.1.2) as incarcerating the "eternal substance of [his] soul" (1), he depicts the flesh as "antagonistic to the nobler elements of human nature" ("Flesh" def. 11) and as "undisciplined, [and] ungoverned" ("Wanton" def. 1a).

Corpses in particular prompt characters to describe body and soul as categorically distinct. Generally, characters define corpses as soulless and vulnerable. At his realization that it is Horatio's body hanging in the garden, for example, Hieronimo asserts that Horatio lost his identity when he lost his animating soul: "Alas, it is Horatio, my sweet son! / Oh no, but he that whilom was my son" (2.5.14-15). In other instances, characters treat dead bodies with disgust, as when the General boasts about the Spanish military victory in explicit detail that also hints at his grotesque fascination with the mutilation of warfare; the General describes a confusion of dismembered flesh: "Here falls a body scindered from his head, / There legs and arms lie bleeding on the grass, / Mingled with weapons and unbowelled steeds" (1.2.59-61).

Yet, the play complicates even this contrast between body and soul; although characters denigrate the living flesh as a burden to the soul, they also stress the importance of caring for and respecting dead bodies. Bel-Imperia, for example, expresses anxiety over the fate of Andrea's corpse. Referring to her former lover's dead body as a "carcase" (1.4.31), she emphasizes its status as a "lifeless shell or husk" ("Carcass" def. 4), but she still suggests that Horatio's recovery of it is significant to her mourning Andrea's death. Other characters demonstrate similar inconsistencies in the treatment of dead bodies. For example, whereas Horatio performs the appropriate "rites of burial" (1.1.21) on Don Andrea's corpse so that his friend's ghost can

"pass the flowing stream of Acheron" (19), later in the play Hieronimo remains determined "not [to] entomb" Horatio's corpse until he can avenge Horatio's death (2.5.54). Ultimately, Kyd illustrates the potentially manipulative nature of the characters' efforts to represent dead bodies as signifying entities. By the end of the play, Hieronimo describes his display of Horatio's corpse in his rendition of *Soliman and Perseda* as a "spectacle" (4.4.89), a term connoting an "arranged display" and an "impressive . . . entertainment" presented to a public audience ("Spectacle" def. 1a).

But although dead bodies are central entities in commemorative practices throughout the play, the characters consistently differentiate the corpse, bereft of the animating, transcendent soul, from the living human being. The characters describe the soul as a weightless, winged substance simultaneously affected by and capable of influencing the passions. For example, while Hieronimo's emotions "torment" his soul and fail to breach the "walls of diamond" (16) surrounding heaven's "empyreal heights" (15), Isabella suggests that her soul can escape her body and join Horatio, "Backed with a troop of fiery cherubins" (3.8.17-18) that "Danc[e] about his newly-healed wounds, / Singing sweet hymns and chanting heavenly notes" (19-20).

Kyd and his contemporaries would have been familiar with ancient and medieval intellectual and theological debates regarding the soul's composition and impact on the physical body. Plato and Aristotle, two of the most important influences on early modern thinking about the relationship between body and soul, assert the soul's properties as a life-giving force. Plato defines the soul in terms of its powers of movement and animation. In the *Phaedrus*, he depicts Socrates reasoning that "all soul is immortal," both because it is "always in movement" (245c6) and because it is "also source and first principle of movement for the other things which move" (245c10-11). Plato cites as evidence of the connections between body and soul the capacity of

the tripartite soul to shape physiological functions, explaining how humans experience, for example, appetite in the stomach, emotion in the heart, and intellect in the brain. Like Plato, Aristotle in *De Anima* also argues for the inseparability of body and soul; although the soul "is not itself a kind of body," he reasons, it cannot exist outside of a body (414a19). According to Aristotle, the soul is the "form of a natural body which has life potentially," the source of the intellect, nutrition, growth, and internal sensation (412a16).

But the connections between body and soul are not always harmonious. In the *Timaeus*, Plato portrays the tangible, visible body corrupting the immaterial soul's balanced, rhythmic patterns of motion. Infused into the body, which is "subject to the flow of growth and decay" (43a6-7), the "orbits of the immortal soul . . . suffered and caused violent motions" (43a6-43b1), and "the whole creature moved, but its progression was disorderly, fortuitous and irrational" (43b1-2). Here Plato suggests that the soul tries to control the unruly body; he depicts the gods who created humankind as striving to retain the soul's purity by separating "the divine element" in the head (69d9) from "the mortal element" in "the breast" (69e4-5). Conveniently located between the head and the liver in Plato's account, the emotional part of the soul in the heart acts as both a communicator and an enforcer of the governing intellect's edicts to control the impulsive appetite.

Sixteenth- and seventeenth-century writers understood theories linking the body with the emotions as evidence that the four humors influenced both physiology and psychology, an idea promoted most notably by the first-century Roman physician and philosopher Aelius Galen of Pergamum. Galen, who described a direct correspondence between bodily and emotional health, asserted that "the body is the instrument of the soul" (*On the Usefulness* 1.2). Following Aristotle's notion of the soul as "the cause and first principle of the living body" (*De Anima*

415b8), Galen defined the substance of the soul as a "mixture of four qualities: heat, cold, dryness, and wetness," which are influenced by the four humors – blood, yellow bile, black bile, and phlegm – that respectively contribute to a sanguine, choleric, melancholic, or phlegmatic disposition ("The Soul's Dependence" 152). Galen described the soul as "the mixture of the body" (157), not just "a slave" to those mixtures (155). As evidence of this union between body and soul, Galen argued that bodily composition contributes to "differences in characters which make people spirited . . . or intelligent or otherwise," and he suggested that the humors could "cause all kinds of diseases of the soul, great and small, few and many" ("Quod Animi Mores" 176). By the Middle Ages, the relationship between the passions and the four bodily humors was more than analogical; during the early modern period, as Gail Kern Paster has shown, "the passions actually were liquid forces of nature" because the natural world was composed of the same elements as the interior human body (4). From the Galenic perspective, the emotions are "part of the fabric of the body" (5); as Paster puts it, "substance embodies significance," with the implication that the humors "are imbued with moral density and spiritual import" (6).

But the apparent inadequacy of analogy to clarify the relationship among body, soul, the passions, and humors only contributed to a proliferation of descriptions about how these entities interacted. Since many Elizabethan writers agreed that the soul was intangible, they asserted that soul and body were connected by spirits, which Paster refers to as "bodily substance in its most rarified form" flowing through "the neural pathways along the sinews between the body's recalcitrant flesh and its immaterial soul" (12). Similarly, Angus Gowland explains this "spiritus" as "the immediate material cause of the body," capable of conveying "natural heat and radical moisture throughout the body" and of "communicating the activities of the soul" (48). The intimate connections between body and soul could nurture or harm the body. As the

seventeenth-century writer William Vaughan put it, physicians "affirm it for irrefragable doctrine, that such as the bloud is, such are the spirits (for they issue from the bloud its self) and such as the spirits are, such is the temper or distemper of the braine and heart" (qtd. in Schoenfeldt 23). Similarly, writers such as the English Jesuit Thomas Wright explained that the physical senses functioned with the help of invisible spirits, which explained how thoughts or visions stimulate emotions in the body: "The purer spirits flocke from the brayne, by certain secret channels to the heart, where they pitch at the dore, signifying what an object was presented" (45). But such connections between the emotions and physiology bred suspicion regarding the threat that the passions might disrupt physiological equilibrium. Wright cautioned that the "Passions cause many maladies, & welnigh all are increased by them" (63).

Debates regarding the relationship between body and soul also had religious implications throughout the medieval and early modern periods. Well into the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, theologians both elevated the soul's transcendent purity over the body's corrupting flesh and emphasized the importance of the body as necessary to human selfhood, "the expression of soul, its overflow, the gesture that manifests soul's intention," in the words of Carolyn Walker Bynum (319). St. Thomas Aquinas, for example, describes the body as not just a container for the soul, but the external embodiment of it. "Whatever appears in the parts of the body," he claims, "is all contained originally and . . . implicitly in the soul" (181). Thus, the human being cannot be perfect "unless the whole that is contained enfolded in the soul be outwardly unfolded in the body" (181). Aquinas acknowledges the conventional view that the body's corrupt flesh threatens to poison the pure soul, but his language also describes the body's status as not just a manifestation of soul, but, more substantially, as a component of it. "Since man is man not through his body but through his soul, and the body is essential to man insofar as

it is perfected by soul," Aquinas reasons, "beatitude . . . passes from the soul on to the body by a kind of overflow" (222). Perhaps even more striking, although thirteenth-century devotional and mystical writers affirm the conventional association of body with decay and sinfulness, these same writers also portray the soul as not only needing but desiring the body. For example, the author of the early thirteenth-century monastic work *Ancrene Wisse* (or *Ancrene Riwle*) marvels that "the thing which is highest under God, that is, man's soul, . . . should be so closely united to the flesh, which is mere mud and dirty earth" (qtd. in Bynum 331); and he acknowledges that "the soul loves the body greatly," for they part from each other like "dear friends [who] are sorry when they must separate" (qtd. in Bynum 332). Other examples of the simultaneous fear or denigration of fleshly decomposition and the depiction of the soul as yearning for that same flesh, abound in medieval devotional texts by writers as varied as Aquinas, Bonaventure, Richard Fishacre, Giles of Rome, and Henry of Ghent.

By the mid-sixteenth century, the advance of dissection during Kyd's lifetime probably contributed to a unique fascination with the human susceptibility to physical and psychic estrangement. In particular, Andreas Vesalius characterized dissection as a scientific, rather than an occult practice, and consequently depicted the body as a machine whose functionality could be explained through methodical observation rather than through spiritual speculation. In his exhaustive treatise on anatomy, *On the Fabric of the Human Body* (1543), Vesalius views the soul as an immaterial entity disconnected from the body, and he describes the role of the theologian as distinct from that of the anatomist. For example, Vesalius criticizes "magicians and followers of the occult" who assert that one of the bones of the right big toe "resists all decay" and "will reproduce the person at the last day of judgment" (299). He uses the opportunity to emphasize the difference between science and religion and to portray his meticulous

investigations into the body as physical and demonstrable (rather than mystical and ephemeral), differentiating himself from theologians, "who lay exclusive claim to freedom of opinion and argument on the subject of resurrection and the immortality of the soul" and who assert that "a whole person, whose wondrous fabric we are at present describing, will be propagated from such a bone" (299).

And yet, while Vesalius tried to separate body from soul, other sixteenth- and seventeenth-century writers approached the practice of dissection in terms of its potential to reveal the soul's contribution to the body's physiological condition. Writers like Timothy Bright and Robert Burton, for example, examine melancholy as a manifestation of the interactions between body and soul. Bright explains the body's connection to the soul by means of a spirit, the "chiefe instrument, and immediate, whereby the soul bestoweth the exercises of her facultie in her bodie" (35). According to Bright, the soul, composed of "a nature eternall and divine," is "not fettered with the bodie" (37), but it still maintains its connection to the body by managing the physiological functions performed by the brain, the heart, and the liver; the soul "employ[s]" what Bright calls the spirit (48), a "meane" between body and soul (38), to execute "the mechanicall workes of the grosse, and earthy partes of our bodies" (48). Bright repeatedly draws attention to distinctions between the body and the soul (which is "voyde of all passion of corporall things" [38]), but he also argues that "nourishments, whether they be of the vegetable, or animall kind . . . afford not only their corporall substance; but a spiritual matter also" (36).

Similarly, Robert Burton, in *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, asserts that the "Vegetall, Sensitive, and Rationall" faculties of the soul impact that body physiologically. Body and soul work in concert to perform the body's physical functions, but each also threatens to undermine the other's health. While the "bad humors" in the body "disturb the soul" by "troubling the

spirits, sending gross fumes into the brain," the soul, through its "passions and perturbations," causes "miraculous alterations, as melancholy, despair, cruel diseases, and sometimes death itself" (147). Burton ultimately fails to define the relationship between body and soul, despite his display of an encyclopedic knowledge of ancient and medieval references. He claims, for example, that most philosophers agree with Aristotle's definition of the soul as "the perfection or first Act of an Organicall body, having power of life" (147), but he also states that "many doubts arise" about the soul's "Essence, Subject, Seat, Distinction, and subordinate faculties" (147).

As scholarship on *The Spanish Tragedy* has shown, Kyd repeatedly depicts the relationship between body and soul not as fixed and stable, but rather as fluid and indistinct. For example, the contradictions that the characters demonstrate in depicting the relationship between body and soul highlight their struggle to use, in Michael Schoenfeldt's words, a "vocabulary of inwardness" that implies an intimate relationship between the physical and the psychological, rather than a categorical separation between the two entities (8). Early modern writers more generally describe the challenges of identity formation in what Schoenfeldt calls "a vibrantly inconsistent but brilliantly supple discourse of selfhood and agency" (11). In particular, while some of the play's characters engage in manipulation and deception, others, perhaps unintentionally, communicate information inaccurately. Still other characters express doubt and suspicion regarding the moral or political consequences of their actions.

Much criticism, for example, studies Kyd's depiction of language and representation as ineffective and arbitrary. Hieronimo's revelation of Horatio's corpse after his rendition of *Soliman and Perseda*, for example, serves as a culmination of what Jonas Barish calls the "progressive alienation of language" and the "breakdown of the links between rhetoric and reality" that Hieronimo has experienced throughout the play (81). According to Barish, Kyd

leaves the stage "littered with silent corpses" to depict how communication fails when "the healthy reciprocity between words and acts is fractured" (83). More recently, critics such as Carla Mazzio and Carol McGinnis Kay have developed further Barish's claim that language in this play, when disconnected from physical objects, becomes a "kind of disembodied incantation, a surrealistic dance of abstractions" (Barish 81). Mazzio, for example, argues that Hieronimo attempts to link representation and reality, or to transform "art into 'life,'" as if in pointed resistance to many of the other characters' deception. Hieronimo struggles to connect emotionally with Horatio's body, using simple words to emphasize physical presence and pointing directly to his son's corpse as a tangible reality. But, as Kay notes, Hieronimo's lengthy speech fails to convince the Spanish king and Portuguese viceroy that they might now share his grief, and Hieronimo disables himself from further communication by cutting out his tongue. Kyd's depiction of linguistic manipulation, according to Kay, culminates in the image of the tongueless Hieronimo, an embodiment of "the meaningless noise that has gradually engulfed the world of this play" (38).

This broad theme of linguistic confusion and deception in *The Spanish Tragedy* has also been explored in the context of early modern religious controversies. Critics have specifically examined the play's final scene as a condemnation of both relic worship and the doctrine of real presence. Huston Diehl, for example, has argued that Kyd uses Horatio's dead body in the play-within-the play to "disrupt the devotional gaze" and to stage a blatant violation of "the distinction between visible sign and the thing it signifies" (114). In other words, Hieronimo's presentation of Horatio's corpse suggests the violent and absurd implications of the Catholic belief that the Eucharist not only represents but literally transforms into Christ's flesh in the Mass, an understanding which early modern Protestant Reformers would have characterized as

"magic" (114). In addition, Diehl argues that Kyd ridicules the heresy of Catholic relic worship by depicting the idolatry of Hieronimo's promise to keep the handkerchief he takes from his son's corpse as a token of revenge. Protestant spectators, according to Diehl, probably would have scorned a character's claims that "a visible object like a handkerchief has magical properties" (114).

Other critics, however, have interpreted Horatio's corpse as indicative of Kyd's Catholic leanings. These critics suggest that Kyd was dissatisfied with current funerary practices and was objecting to, rather than supporting, Reformers' efforts to restrict these rites further. Thus Hieronimo's theatrical display of his son's dead body, according to Thomas Rist, testifies to "the persistent belief that symbolic exchange with the dead is inadequate" in a culture transitioning between the Catholic emphasis on real presence and the Protestant investment in Scripture (153). In contrast to Diehl, Rist argues that a majority of Kyd's audience probably would have understood his dramatization of Hieronimo's vengeance as suggesting that "diminished funerary memorial is incomplete" and "a cause of revenge" (40). This reading, as Thomas Anderson shows, might also explain Hieronimo's rejection of language as "unfruitful" (3.7.67) and his subsequent insistence that "naught but blood will satisfy [his] woes" (68). For Hieronimo, language is "inadequate as consolation," whereas "the visible, corporeal presence of blood" demonstrates "an exchange between the living and the dead" more tangible than "the figurative or metaphoric" (146).

But not all critics accept that early modern Catholicism strove to establish the body and soul in irreconcilable opposition, a revisionist perspective that complicates efforts to read Kyd's play as either Reformed or Catholic. Susan Zimmerman, for example, finds evidence to suggest that sixteenth-century Catholics simultaneously valued Christ's humanity and struggled to resist

the fleshly temptations that threatened to corrupt the transcendent spirit. She shows that medieval and early modern Catholicism foregrounded "ambiguity in the relationships between immaterial/material [and] soul/body" by emphasizing both Christ's humanity (including his physical suffering in crucifixion) and his spiritual purity and perfection (47). Catholic believers acknowledged that bodies experience physical transformation during life and in death, yet they simultaneously anticipated a state of unity and completion in heaven. Christian mystics described their ingestion of Christ's body and blood as ecstatic, but they also punished their bodies in an attempt to experience Christ's suffering on the cross. Zimmerman shows that while Catholic thinkers drew attention to the contradictions exposed by these debates about the roles of corporeal pleasure and pain, Protestant reformers minimized the importance of the body, going so far as to describe the Catholic investment in statues and paintings as lustful and narcissistic.

Other dualistic readings of *The Spanish Tragedy* analyze the tension between reason and passion, and between agency and subjugation. These critics argue that the play's characters express the human drive for justice and empowerment by resisting political oppression or some kind of divine fate, and engage in a struggle that carries personal significance, even if it proves politically or socially futile. According to Thomas McAlindon, for example, Hieronimo exemplifies Kyd's suggestion that "volcanic forces . . . slumber lightly in the souls of civilized men" (56). Hieronimo's eventual failure to maintain an objective, balanced rationality implies that reason without emotion can be, in McAlindon's words, a "self-deceptive form of driving will and desire" (56); by the play's end Hieronimo's justification of vengeance seems confusing and illogical, and Kyd provides very little evidence to suggest that Hieronimo gains peace of mind or even repayment for his son's death. While McAlindon's reading focuses on Hieronimo's inner turmoil, other scholars such as Frank Whigham and Katharine Eisaman Maus have studied

deception and oppression among various characters. Whigham, who characterizes Bel-Imperia's sexual freedom as treasonous, analyzes her struggle to "inhabit her body for her own gratifications and establishments" in resistance to the male authority figures who try to control her sexuality. Whigham argues that Kyd's play dramatizes the dualism of "restraint and fury, centered on the pressures and limits of the will" (30). Maus alternatively examines Hieronimo's assertion of class-leveling as a form of political insurrection. By grouping Horatio's dead body alongside those of Bel-Imperia, Lorenzo, and Balthazar, Hieronimo implies that, despite differences in social class, human beings "share an experience of embodiment, a 'common human lot' that can provide a basis both for social cohesion and for theatrical pedagogy" (69). But, she concludes, Hieronimo's on-stage audience, incapable of imagining similarities between themselves and this courtly servant, fail to comprehend this attempted social leveling.

Throughout *The Spanish Tragedy*, Kyd emphasizes the importance of the corporeal. As tangible entities of personhood, bodies and corpses in this play are simultaneously robust and fragile, at once tantalizing and gruesome; as visible manifestations of a deceased character's soul, flesh and blood in *The Spanish Tragedy* are spectacular bodily entities that invite characters to attach symbolic meaning to them. But, while Kyd suggests that characters' efforts to invest bodies with significance might enable those characters to alleviate suffering or enact commemoration, he cautions against the use of corpses for self-serving purposes. As we will see, Kyd repeatedly portrays his characters struggling to define how body and soul interact; while some characters describe the body as distinct from the soul, other characters assert connections between the two entities as a means of wielding power, and still other characters note the palpable impact of how abstract yet powerful passions, including sorrow or rage, contribute to bodily debilitation. In addition, Kyd questions connections between bodily violence and justice

as well as the convention of infusing corpses with symbolic meaning. The play is replete with death and mutilation; not only does Kyd feature a proliferation of corpses on stage, but he develops as a theme the characters' frequent use of imagery associated with death and fragmentation. While some of the play's characters turn to commemorative rites that appear positive and respectful, others betray a grotesque interest in violence or mutilation that seems to contradict their longing to dignify a deceased relative with a proper burial.

Again and again, Kyd portrays characters who, suffering from or supervising physical punishment, either downplay or emphasize the impact of bodily torture on the soul. For example, Alexandro, falsely accused of killing Balthazar, claims not to fear "the extremity of death" (3.1.40) because the earth is "too much infect / To yield [him] hope of any of her mould" (36-7). Alexandro insists that his "laboring soul" suffers "torments" not because he fears pain (43), but instead because he goes to his death "suspected of a sin" he did not commit (44). Alexandro associates his body with the corrupted earth, and his soul with heavenly transcendence. But whereas he places his "hope" in "Heaven" (35) because the earth is contaminated with deception and corruption, the Portuguese Viceroy asserts his desire and ability to harm Alexandro's soul through the physical pain of execution. The Viceroy claims that his plans to burn Alexandro at the stake foreshadow the punishment Alexandro's soul will suffer in the afterlife. Convinced that Alexandro killed his son in battle, the Viceroy describes temporary, corporeal torture as a precursor to the eternal, spiritual punishment that he contends awaits criminals after death: he warns Alexandro that the bodily torture of burning at the stake "shall prefigure those unquenched fires / Of Phlegethon prepared for [Alexandro's] soul" (49-50). Kyd portrays the Viceroy's efforts to link body and soul as a manipulative rhetorical ploy to justify his longing for vengeance and to intensify Alexandro's suffering. Eager to believe Villuppo's fabrication that

Alexandro murdered Balthazar in battle, the Viceroy takes advantage of his position to attach symbolic meaning to physical punishment.

Depicting characters in pain or threatened with torture is not Kyd's only strategy to portray the difficulty of describing the relationship between body and soul; Kyd also demonstrates the characters' longing to care for dead bodies properly. Corpses feature prominently throughout the play; physical, decaying reminders of a relative's death and a survivor's lingering grief, dead bodies are central to mourning rituals. For example, Bel-Imperia values Don Andrea's corpse as a physical object with which she might commemorate her former lover, and she implies that the proper treatment of his remains would indicate that he has not been "lost" entirely (1.4.31). Her focus on the fate of his "carcase" (31) indicates the importance of the corporeal in their relationship and hints at the illicit nature of their affair. Horatio, hoping to impress Bel-Imperia, similarly suggests a connection between this dead body and his own affection for Don Andrea: Horatio describes in detail his brave efforts to recover and care for his friend's body. He specifically recounts how he "strove" (32) to retrieve Andrea's corpse from the battlefield and "dewed him with . . . tears, / And sighed and sorrowed as became a friend" (36-7). These images of visceral, bodily contact heighten the respect he shows for Andrea's corpse. Horatio draws attention to his heroism in protecting Andrea's body from possible dismemberment on the battlefield, and he describes embracing the corpse and cleansing its wounds with his tears, as if such close physical contact might alleviate his sorrow. These ritualistic gestures do not revive Andrea, but they gain value as a means by which Horatio commemorates a fellow soldier.

Kyd, however, contrasts the comfort that Bel-Imperia and Horatio seem to gain by inquiring about or retrieving Andrea's corpse with Hieronimo's efforts to downplay the

significance of the mutilation marking Horatio's dead body. Upon realizing that the body hanging in the garden belongs to his murdered son, Hieronimo implies that in death Horatio has lost his identity. As if to elevate Horatio's soul over his lifeless, debased flesh, Hieronimo retracts his initial recognition, "Alas, it is Horatio, my sweet son" (2.5.14), and exclaims instead, "Oh no, but he that whilom was my son" (15). Hieronimo thus tries to mitigate his grief over the disfiguring of his son's body by creating a distinction here between Horatio as his son (with a name and unique personality), on the one hand, and Horatio's lifeless body hanging in the garden, on the other. Hieronimo not only suggests that the killers were capable of perpetrating merely physical mutilation, rather than spiritual corruption, but he also implies that Horatio's soul is safe and no longer vulnerable to pain. Yet, even as Hieronimo struggles to deny the importance of bodily maiming, his rage over Horatio's death and wounds underscores the significance he attaches to his son's mutilation. He characterizes the murderer as a "savage monster, not of human kind" (19) that "hath here been glutted with [Horatio's] harmless blood" (20) and "left [his] bloody corpse dishonoured here" (21). Hieronimo describes his son's dead body in purely physical terms, as if the shock and grief of Horatio's death instigates his focus on the body's disfigurement. Only an inhuman beast, according to Hieronimo, would engage in such mutilation, an insult to the civilized rites of commemoration. But, unlike Bel-Imperia and Horatio, Hieronimo gains no comfort by focusing on the physical condition of his son's corpse; instead, the wounds Horatio suffered intensify Hieronimo's grief.

Moreover, Kyd depicts how a character's determination to invest a dead body with signifying capabilities might prove self-serving rather than properly respectful. Hieronimo, for example, subsequently contradicts his own rage over the murderers' disfigurement of Horatio's body; he expresses his desire to keep Horatio's body unburied primarily as a reminder of his vow

of vengeance. Although Hieronimo kisses his son and Isabella tenderly "close[s] up the glasses of his sight" (2.5.49), Hieronimo's treatment of the body appears misguided: until he achieves revenge, Hieronimo promises, he will "not entomb" Horatio's gruesome corpse (54), disfigured by "wounds that yet are bleeding fresh" (53), and he will keep "this handkercher besmeared with blood" (51). Hieronimo's justification for keeping the body unburied appears selfish, and his interest in the body's lacerations and hemorrhaging seems excessive. As the play progresses, moreover, Horatio's dead body becomes a central component to Hieronimo and Isabella's struggle to express their grief. Later, for example, Hieronimo describes his own soul as tormented by his vivid memories of Horatio's wounds. He claims he cannot sleep at night because his soul is "vexed" with "direful visions" (3.2.13) of "the wounds of [his] distressful son" (14), which "solicit" Hieronimo to vengeance (15). Hieronimo thus implies that, despite his attempts to downplay the importance of his son's corporeal integrity, it is Horatio's bodily wounds that compel him to avenge this unrequited murder, and not, as he previously announced, his desire for revenge that prevents him from burying his son.

Kyd depicts Hieronimo not only as misguided but, by the play's end, also manipulative in his theatrical display of Horatio's corpse as a justification for his murders of Lorenzo and Balthazar. The shock that Hieronimo elicits from the onstage audience with his theatrical presentation of his son's dead body undermines, rather than bolsters, his assertion that the corpse symbolizes his own "hope, heart, treasure, joy, and bliss" (4.4.94). Hieronimo differentiates his version of *Soliman and Perseda* from conventional, "fabulously counterfeit" theater (77), in which the actors "die today" (79) and "in a minute starting up again, / Revive to please to-morrow's audience" (81-2). Instead, he collapses the expected distinction between representation and reality by killing Lorenzo and Balthazar, rather than merely portraying the deaths of the

characters they played. Hieronimo accordingly implies that conventional theater is inadequate for his vengeance, and he displays Horatio's corpse as "the reason urging" him to the actual (rather than the dramatized) murder of his enemies (88). Yet, his dramatic presentation of his son's body implies that he objectifies it as a mere stage prop intended to justify his own violent actions. Hieronimo urges the king and the viceroy to "see here [this] show" and to "look on this spectacle" (89), that is, to watch a highly theatrical "arranged display" and an "impressive . . . entertainment" presented to a public audience (*OED* "Spectacle" def. 1a). Furthermore, although Hieronimo attempts to emphasize the body's symbolic value, he instead continually focuses attention on it as an inert, disfigured corpse by repeating the word "here" while pointing to the body. In particular, he highlights Horatio's mutilation in an attempt to identify himself physically with the corpse, drawing attention to its "wounds" as capable of depriving Hieronimo himself of life; he claims that "these fatal marks" killed both Horatio and himself (97). By repeatedly focusing on the body's lacerations, Hieronimo neither elicits sympathy from, nor establishes an association with, the king and the viceroy. Instead, his concentration on Horatio's wounds seems to provide additional torment to the king and the viceroy; Hieronimo's fixation on the body's disfigurement reveals his bloodlust: again pointing to his son's mutilated corpse, he vividly relates how he found Horatio "hanging on a tree . . . / Through-girt with wounds, and slaughtered as you see" (111-12), and, even more gruesomely, he uses alliteration to depict how Lorenzo and Balthazar "butchered up [his] boy" in the garden (106). With this vivid language, Hieronimo portrays his enemies carving Horatio's corpse as if it were a slain animal carcass.

More generally, Hieronimo attaches meaning to material objects: claiming that his inner despair has visible, physical effects, he finds manifestations of his emotional turmoil not only in his son's corpse but also in the natural world. Instead of expressing his sorrow and desire for

revenge directly, he repeatedly infuses outward objects with symbolism reflecting his inner tribulation. For example, he asserts that his "woes, whose weight hath wearied the earth," seem to have the impact of natural disasters (3.7.2), and he describes the "blustering winds, conspiring with [Hieronimo's] words" (5), as having "disrobed the meadows of their flowered green" (7). But, although his passion seems to wreak havoc, his "tortured soul" (10) is unable to break through the "impregnable" windows (17) of "the brightest heavens" (13), which are "counter-mured with walls of diamond" (16) that resist Hieronimo's "woes, and give [his] words no way" (18). Kyd depicts Hieronimo turning to the material world, in his perspective gloomy and devastated, as a correlation to his body, battered by depression, but his soul seems ineffective in aiding his quest for revenge.

And yet, while Hieronimo finds evidence of his thwarted rage and sorrow in the desecrated natural landscape around him, other characters berate him for what they view as his complacency in the face of injustice. In particular, Bel-Imperia accuses him of neglecting his parental duty to avenge Horatio's murder and asserts that his soul's passion should reveal itself in visible, physical ways. Until Hieronimo takes action, she reasons, his outward cries – his "incessant tears" (4.1.3) and "protestations and . . . deep laments" (6) – are hypocritical "counterfeits" (2). Although Hieronimo insists on the sincerity of his sorrow, he expresses shame over his inability to gain justice or revenge. He recognizes, by comparison, the appropriate intensity of Don Bazulto's show of sorrow. Calling the old man "the lively image of my grief" (3.13.162), Hieronimo lists the physical manifestations of inner sorrow the old man displays: Don Bazulto's "eyes are gummed with tears," his "cheeks are wan" (164), and his "sad words [are] abruptly broken off / By force of windy sighs [his] spirit breathes" (166-7). Don Bazulto provides Hieronimo with an example of how the longing to gain vengeance might have physical,

noticeable effects; in Hieronimo's description, sorrow has worn down the old man, hindering his ability to speak and breathe.

But, even as Hieronimo recognizes the impact that Don Bazulto's grief has on his physical health, he seems unable to establish a meaningful connection with the old man. While Hieronimo tries to empathize with Don Bazulto by describing how the old man's grief toils his body, Hieronimo continually describes his own sorrow as represented by external objects. Hieronimo tries to commiserate with Don Bazulto, like himself a father seeking retribution for his own son's unrequited murder, by offering the old man a handkerchief for his tears, and urging him, "wipe thine eyes, / Whiles wretched I in thy mishaps may see / The lively portrait of my dying self" (3.13.83). But this consolation provides Hieronimo only momentary comfort; the gesture of compassion fails to alleviate his own suffering. He immediately recognizes the handkerchief as the same one he had taken, "dyed in [Horatio's] dearest blood" (87), as "a token" of his vow to avenge Horatio's murder (88). Hieronimo reasons that this memento should prompt him to behave like Don Bazulto, who "shame[s]" Hieronimo (95) by displaying "the sorrows and the sad laments" (97) that are expected of "a loving father to his son" (96). Hieronimo's response to the handkerchief – more than his empathy for Don Bazulto – shows his capacity to manifest such passion.

In like manner, Hieronimo shreds the citizens' legal documents, anticipating the dismemberment he plans for Lorenzo and Balthazar as punishment for their crime: "Then will I rent and tear them thus and thus, / Shivering their limbs in pieces with my teeth" (122-3). As he will later try to invest his son's corpse with symbolic meaning, Hieronimo repeatedly turns to this type of material object to express his emotions – and he repeatedly finds no comfort. When the citizens complain to him, he denies tearing their documents, but his words also indicate a

frustration at his inability to harm his enemies. Ostensibly referring to the citizens' legal papers, Hieronimo exclaims, "I gave [them] never a wound; / Show me one drop of blood fall from the same: / How is it possible I should slay [them]?" (129-31). Here he asserts that he has not destroyed the citizens' complaints and hints at the inadequacy of such symbolic gestures to satisfy his thirst for vengeance. His images of wounding and bloodshed indicate his longing to "slay" his son's killers by inflicting visible, demonstrable violence, but his recognition that the papers fail to bleed when torn underscores his frustration over his inability to achieve revenge.

Hieronimo's fruitless attempts to invest objects with meaning – including his son's body – fit within the play's broader discussion of the relation between the spiritual and the material. In *The Spanish Tragedy*, as we have seen, Thomas Kyd repeatedly dramatizes the tendency to attach meaning to bodies, especially the often fragmented or grotesque remains of deceased relatives or friends, but he also cautions against the temptation to infuse bodies with symbolism out of self-serving motives. Throughout the play, Kyd portrays mutilation and dismemberment in particular as visceral and tangible indicators of bodily powerlessness. As Hieronimo and other characters suggest, fragmented bodies, perhaps more intrinsically than intact corpses, provide visible, terrifying evidence of both violence and vengeance, and they simultaneously disgust and fascinate. In Hieronimo's repeated attempts to link images of destruction with his inner turmoil or to infuse his son's disfigured corpse with symbolism, for example, Hieronimo both expresses his aversion to mutilation and exhibits an obsession with it. He evinces disgust with the disfigurement of Horatio's corpse, yet by repeatedly drawing attention to it, he seems preoccupied with his son's lifeless form. Kyd seems to suggest that mutilation challenges the human propensity to infuse bodies with the capacity to signify; whereas intact corpses usually

prompt piety or introspection, disfigurement not only stimulates fear or disgust, but also arouses perverse curiosity.

Kyd's dramatization of themes surrounding death, bodily violence, and justice apparently touched deep chords in the early modern world. The play's sensational depiction of corpses (often left on stage for extended scenes), coupled with the characters' persistent discussions about the proper care of dead bodies or the impact of mutilation, probably contributed to the extraordinary success of *The Spanish Tragedy* during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries; the play was so popular that in 1602, eight years after Kyd's death, an unknown author inserted a series of "Additions" into Kyd's original text.[1] A brief glance at these added scenes reveals the lasting resonance of Kyd's depiction of Hieronimo's failed attempt to displace his grief and rage onto material objects. Like Kyd, the author of the Additions emphasizes the importance of materiality or corporeality; both authors depict Hieronimo infusing an object with excessive symbolic meaning, as if he uses the physical to gain access to his soul and express his grief. While in Kyd's play, as we have seen, Hieronimo displays his son's dead body in a gruesome theatrical flourish and explains its symbolic meaning, Hieronimo in the Additions requests a painting of Horatio's death that might ease his sorrow. The Hieronimo of Kyd's play exploits Horatio's corpse as part of his dramatic presentation to justify his vengeance. Similarly, the Hieronimo of the Additions, frustrated by his attempt to express his rage through artistic representation, must resort to physical violence as an emotional release.

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[1] According to Lukas Erne, who claims that "the question of the authorship of the additions may well have to remain unanswered," the most plausible guess is that Ben Jonson wrote the new scenes, but alternatives include Shakespeare, John Webster, and Thomas Dekker (123). The scenes might also might have been added by actors; Thomas Hawkins, the first editor to print the additions, thought they had been "'foisted in by the players,' and [he] relegated them to the footnotes" (122).

The Hieronimo of the Additions asks the painter Bazardo to illustrate the story of Horatio's murder and to display Hieronimo's emotions, including grief, anger, and the desire for vengeance, as if artistic representation might help Hieronimo experience those emotions: "There you may show a passion, there you may show a passion" (151-52). But, insisting that the painting should have the capacity to record not only visual, but also aural expressions of mourning, Hieronimo demands more than artistic reproduction; Bazardo's rendition, according to Hieronimo, should cry not figuratively but literally. Bazardo, confused by Hieronimo's request, explains that his expertise instead lies in his ability to represent interior emotion visually and metaphorically. Thus, when Hieronimo demands, "Canst paint a doleful cry?" (126), the painter replies, "Seemingly, sir" (127) and points up the distinction between audible lamentation and silent portraits of sorrow. Hieronimo refuses to listen to Bazardo, however, and continues to insist that Bazardo's painting literally "should cry" (128). He urges the painter to "stretch [his] art" (133) and challenges Bazardo to depict audible or psychological elements, including frightening noises or strange phenomena from the natural world, that would challenge any painter's skill. Hieronimo describes intimidating nocturnal animals and gloomy natural settings that mirror his "distracted" state (143); he tells Bazardo to "let the clouds scowl, make the moon dark, the stars extinct, the winds blowing, the bells tolling, the owl shrieking, the toads croaking, the minutes jarring, and the clock striking twelve" (144-47). Hieronimo treats this painting as a physical manifestation of his inner turmoil and implies that it might even enable him to express himself. He develops the harrowing, dreary quality of these images to suggest how Bazardo might represent the onset of Hieronimo's madness. He claims, for example, that Bazardo "may show a passion" (151-52) both by depicting "a man hanging: and tottering, and tottering as . . .

the wind will weave a man" (148-49) and by representing Hieronimo's terrifying realization that the corpse belonged to his son.

Yet, Hieronimo in the Additions, as in Kyd's play, ultimately derives no comfort by telling the story of Horatio's murder and his own anger and madness. Instead, he only becomes more enraged while describing his pent-up emotions. By the end of the scene, imagining how he could "tear and drag" his son's murderers (164), he physically "*beats the Painter*" (s.d. 165) and exclaims, "The end is death and madness!" (159). The author of the Additions implies that only unmediated, physical contact can satiate Hieronimo's thirst for vengeance and that material objects – even art – often fail to bring comfort. The added scenes thus underscore Kyd's suggestion that artistic representation serves as a poor surrogate for literal, physical revenge; both authors contend, in fact, that another valuable function of art is to provoke or disturb. They acknowledge the powerful impact of the visual – whether that of mutilated, decomposing bodies or of violent artistic images – but they also suggest that proper respect for the dead and admiration of artistic achievement necessitates a balanced separation of body and soul. By illustrating this theme, Kyd initiates an examination of his culture's attitudes toward commemoration rituals, dead bodies, and relics, a theme which, as we shall see, echoes through early modern revenge tragedies of the subsequent generation of writers.

Chapter Three: The Corrosive Role of Bodily Violence in the Rituals of *Titus Andronicus*

In *Titus Andronicus* (written between 1588-1593), William Shakespeare questions the efficacy of rituals for maintaining social order by depicting how the play's characters manipulate rituals to enact bodily violence and to exact vengeance. Although Titus repeatedly turns to rituals to construct meaning, he ends up perpetuating the destructive behavior he seeks to redress and contributing to the fragmentation he longs to prevent. Titus intends the ceremonies he practices as overt signifiers of Rome's order and nobility, but instead he consistently exposes his preoccupation with corporeal violence. He insists that the burial of his slain sons demonstrates his respect for their military achievements and signifies the differences between civilized Romans and barbaric Goths, yet by allowing his sons to dismember and execute Alarbus, he characterizes himself not as a pious Roman soldier committed to a solemn funeral service, but as a bloodthirsty warrior seeking revenge for his sons' deaths.

Thus, Shakespeare underscores the potency of corporeal rituals while dramatizing their corrupt, self-serving potential. At various points in the first half of the play, characters enact rituals to maintain cultural values, celebrate social harmony, and demonstrate political power. Yet, these ceremonial gestures, intended to commemorate slain military heroes or to establish peace, involve brutal corporeal violence or human sacrifice and, rather than contributing to political stability, lead to deception and injustice, manifested in murder, rape, and cannibalism. Shakespeare ultimately confronts audiences with the paradox that humans seek to celebrate and establish social stability using rituals that result in corporeal dismemberment and other types of violation. Depicting a protagonist who initially trusts in the capacity of ceremony to bolster social harmony but who eventually manipulates rituals to serve his own vengeful desires,

Shakespeare blurs distinctions between legitimate and illegitimate violence and questions the efficacy of ceremony to build community.

Indeed, the bodily mutilation enacted throughout the play is emblematic of social fragmentation. When Chiron and Demetrius rape and dismember Lavinia, as I will show, they violate a ritual intended to commemorate the imperial wedding hunt; through rape, they pervert the matrimonial union and potential procreation it symbolizes, and, through mutilation, they subvert the traditional role of the hunt as a celebratory affirmation of stability and hierarchy. But, the Goths are not the only characters who manipulate rituals; in perhaps the play's most well-known scene, Titus deceives his enemies by staging a banquet under the pretence of peace and reconciliation. During the feast, as I will argue, Titus manipulates a ceremony frequently intended to celebrate peace and friendship as an opportunity to gain bloody vengeance; human sacrifice serves as not just an accompanying element to the ritual of the banquet but the central motive for it. Just as Hieronimo in *The Spanish Tragedy* claims to cherish Horatio's corpse as a means of commemoration but ends up manipulating his son's dead body as a bloody stage prop, Titus in Shakespeare's play initially trusts that the practice of traditional ceremony will contribute to social cohesion but later ritualizes the gruesome dismemberment and mutilation he engages in, as if to justify such bloodshed.

My reading of the rituals in *Titus Andronicus* is informed by anthropological and literary studies revealing how human participation in ceremonial practice reflects a need for social harmony, the establishment of cultural values, and the demonstration of military might. Rituals, which generally contribute to "the formal structuring or ordering of the life of any community that seeks to perpetuate itself," have played important roles throughout history in the human construction of meaning and community (Liebler 51). In particular, they are often thought of as

capable of "distinguishing local identities, ordering social differences, and controlling the contention and negotiation involved in the appropriation of symbols" (Bell 130).

Studying the significance of rituals in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century literature carries the potential of revealing divisive cultural anxieties and religious tensions during the time period, since, as Peter Burke has shown, early modern culture was "extremely important in the articulation and the development of the propensity to repudiate ritual" (225). In the wake of the social and religious upheavals stemming from the Reformation, intellectuals and playwrights repeatedly engaged in debates regarding the quantity, quality, and efficacy of ceremonial practice, and argued about the wide-ranging impact of investing in rituals as integral to spiritual belief or as merely symbolic gestures. While an older Catholic tradition tended to believe in the capacity of rituals to indicate God's real presence, the Reformation ushered in what Kenneth Muir calls a "theory of representation," according to which rituals might be understood "as an aspect of language that communicated meaning" (10). Shakespeare's early modern audiences probably would have recognized the tensions regarding ritual dramatized again and again in *Titus Andronicus*.

In my analysis of the play throughout this chapter, I define rituals as gestures and customs that reflect cultural values and that are practiced as a means of community-building and as a response to the threat of social disorder and human suffering. In ceremonial practice, no less than the existence of the community is at stake; in *Titus Andronicus*, Shakespeare dramatizes the social and political instability that results when characters manipulate rituals for self-serving purposes or disrupt them to enact violence. The crises repeatedly brought about by failed rituals in this play reveal fundamental links between ceremony and brutality that anthropologists such as Rene Girard have studied. The function of sacrifice, according to Girard, "is to quell violence

within the community and to prevent conflicts from erupting" (14); the sacrificial victim, whom the community "can strike down without fear of reprisal" (13), serves as a scapegoat, whose ritual execution obstructs the perpetuation of vengeful, unsanctioned cycles of violence within the community.

Traditionally, the apparently gratuitous portrayal of bloodshed in *Titus Andronicus* has been characterized as un-Shakespearean; many scholars even debated the play's authorship.[2] Early Shakespearean scholarship considered the play an "incorrect and undigested . . . heap of Rubbish" (Ravenscroft A2r), "one of the stupidest and most uninspired plays ever written" (Eliot 82), and a "broken-down cart, laden with bleeding corpses from an Elizabethan scaffold" (Wilson xii). But, these views have more recently been revised, as scholars increasingly have examined the play's excessive violence in terms of Shakespeare's explorations of relationships among ritual, revenge, and bodily mutilation, to name only a few of the themes that have been identified in the text.

Many scholars examine how the play's multiple instances of mutilation and dismemberment result from Titus's insistence on maintaining rituals in a culture experiencing radical social and political transition. Ralph Berry, for example, investigates how Titus's

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[2] In the early twentieth-century, J. M. Robertson (*Did Shakespeare Write* Titus Andronicus*?*, 1905) and T. W. Baldwin (*On the Literary Genetics of Shakespeare's Plays*, 1959) argued that the play had been written by George Peele and revised by Shakespeare. For scholarship examining the possibility that the play was written by Peele and Shakespeare, see: MacDonald P. Jackson, "Stage Directions and Speech Headings in Act I of *Titus Andronicus* Q (1594): Shakespeare or Peele?", *Studies in Bibliography* 49 (1996): 134-48; "Indefinite Articles in *Titus Andronicus*, Peele, and Shakespeare," *Notes and Queries*, 45 (1998): 308-10; Brian Boyd, "Common Words in *Titus Andronicus*: The Presence of Peele." *Notes and Queries* 42 (1995): 300-07; and Thomas Merriam, "Influence Alone? More on the Authorship of *Titus Andronicus*." *Notes and Queries* 45 1998: 304-08.

adherence to traditional conventions of behavior contributes to the breakdown of civilization: "Shakespeare sees a society given over to a rigid and unreflecting code of patriarchy, which must create such strains as to threaten the stability of the society nurturing the code" (41). The brutality enacted by the Romans has led many scholars to study how Shakespeare deconstructs binary distinctions characterizing Romans as civilized and their Goth enemies as barbaric. The Rome of *Titus Andronicus*, according to Ronald Broude, is an empire "in a period of crisis and transition, menaced by . . . the replacement of an ailing dynasty and the assimilation of a conquered people into the Roman commonweal" (30). Shakespeare dramatizes Titus's struggle "to adjust to changing conditions and the readiness to supplement the old virtues with new ones appropriate for a new Rome" (31).

Other scholars attribute the perpetuation of vengeance in the play to the failure of the play's rituals to contain the violence they require. Shakespeare dramatizes the problem, as Daryl W. Palmer describes, of what happens when "the performance of violence improperly directed breeds more violence," as when Alarbus's sacrifice leads to Tamora's vow of vengeance (101). The execution of Alarbus, according to Stephen X. Mead, is meant to display how "sacrificial blood maintains the distinction between the pure and the impure, much as sacrifice asserts the distinction between legitimate and illegitimate violence" (464). Reading *Titus* through the lens of Girard's studies on ritual, Mead argues that a human sacrifice like that of Alarbus separates "the dead . . . from the living" and helps "to stem the tide of violence . . . that would otherwise break out into a cycle of reciprocal vengeance" and threaten the community's well-being (466). But, rather than achieving peace and commemorating Titus's slain sons, Alarbus's execution sparks the bloody vengeance that leads to Titus's suffering. Begging Titus to spare Alarbus, Tamora undermines the cultural distinctions that Titus presumes exist between Roman and Goth by

asserting that her devotion to her children is similar to Titus's pride in his sons (Mead 468). By the end of the play, Titus wields power by taking advantage of rituals for his own desire for vengeance; he stages his murder of Chiron and Demetrius as "a performance with defined roles and a clear idea of triumph" (Palmer 110). Seeking an appropriate physical and linguistic response to the extreme injustice he has suffered, Titus ritualizes this killing.

Similarly, Shakespeare dramatizes the characters' struggle to display meaningful and socially appropriate gestures of expression and to enact what Tobias Döring calls "the body rhetoric of mourning" (2). Cynthia Marshall, who compares the portrayal of violence in the play to pornography, argues that the play makes use of "perversely literalized metaphors . . . through which Shakespeare calls attention to the collapse or reversion of language into violent action" (112). Furthermore, scholars have long acknowledged Shakespeare's depiction of the characters' investment in rituals as both a means of coping with injustice or loss and as an opportunity to exact bloody vengeance. Eugene M. Waith, for example, identifies the paradox that the play's violence serves as "an emblem of disorder" and the "agent . . . of a metamorphosis of character" (46). Similarly, psychoanalytical readings of the play examine how characters might gain satisfaction from vengeance; Deborah Willis, for example, demonstrates how the characters "turn to revenge in the aftermath of trauma to find relief from terrible pain" (31). Depicting the inadequacy of ritual to restore social order, Shakespeare questions the efficacy of typical human reactions to suffering and injustice. Asserting, for example, that *Titus* is an "early experiment" in challenging spectators' reactions to suffering and its theatrical portrayal, James Hirsh argues that in this play Shakespeare "dramatizes the impossibility of finding appropriate responses to certain situations" (60).

In the following pages, I intend to show how characters in *Titus Andronicus* rely on ritualized brutality as integral to social stability, on the one hand, or bloody vengeance, on the other. Shakespeare first depicts the potential dangers of violence in rituals by contrasting Titus's argument that Alarbus's sacrifice is necessary for the appeasement of his dead sons' souls with Tamora's request that Titus's burial rituals function without the execution of her oldest son. Rather than effecting peace or establishing the Andronici as Rome's political leaders, Titus's decision to sanction Alarbus's sacrifice fuels Tamora's vow of vengeance, which she pursues as Rome's new empress after Bassianus claims Lavinia as his lawful wife. Titus, who subsequently suffers one injustice after another, turns to ritual as a means of coping with inexpressible suffering and shame, but he no longer invests in rituals to establish social stability; Aaron's gleeful encouragement of Lavinia's rape results in a violence not dissimilar from that enacted by Titus when he dismembers Chiron and Demetrius and serves them in pastries to Tamora and Saturninus at a feast. Shakespeare ultimately confronts audiences with the paradox that the human investment in rituals as integral to the establishment of social and political stability is often implicated in the engagement of bodily violence and sacrifice.

As the play opens, Titus, who has just returned from vanquishing nomadic Goth tribes on the outskirts of Rome, enters and demands that his fellow countrymen show respect and gratitude for the sacrifices of their warriors through the proper observance of burial rituals: "Stand gracious to the rites that we intend!" (1.1.78). Titus insists that his sons suffered injury and death in significant and worthwhile military conflicts while achieving heroic deeds: "These that survive let Rome reward with love; / These that I bring unto their latest home, / With burial amongst their ancestors" (82-84). The proper observance of commemorative rituals adds meaning to the violence and chaos of war he and his sons have experienced, and Titus describes

the honorable interment of the dead, coupled with the Roman display of gratitude he demands, as a reflection of social stability. He expresses an urgent need for Rome to prove herself a civilized society, even rebuking himself for delaying his sons' burial: "Titus, unkind and careless of thine own, / Why suffer'st thou thy sons, unburied yet, / To hover on the dreadful shore of Styx?" (86-88). Not only are Titus's dead sons left "hovering" in a state of limbo between the worlds of the dead and the living, but the warriors' rotting corpses threaten the city of Rome with potential disease.

Furthermore, Titus finds consolation for his sons' deaths through the proper observance of ritual. He characterizes the tomb as a sanctuary protecting his sons' corpses from mutability and suffering: "In peace and honor rest you here, my sons, / Rome's readiest champions, repose you here in rest, / Secure from worldly chances and mishaps!" (1.1.150-52). Titus emphasizes the safety provided by the family tomb, implicitly linking peace and rest with honor and courage (he addresses the corpses as "champions") and contrasting the grave's tranquility (and the presumably structured rhythm of the burial ritual) with the fearful instability of "worldly chances and mishaps." Titus identifies the tomb, this "sacred receptacle of . . . joys, / Sweet cell of virtue and nobility" (92-93), with the honor displayed by the slain warriors he inters in it, and the grave becomes a monument that commemorates the heroism necessary to combat the human vices that threaten civil order: "Here lurks no treason, here no envy swells, / Here grow no damned drugs, here are no storms, / No noise but silence and eternal sleep" (153-55). The protective security of the tomb contrasts with the bloodshed and warfare associated with the wilderness outside Rome's walls, although Titus's language ironically also foreshadows the "treason" and "envy" that will contribute to his family's downfall.

The language with which Lucius and Titus focus on Alarbus's execution indicates that a perverse anticipation in corporeal dismemberment, rather than the symbolic comfort of the ceremony, is the focal point of this ritual sacrifice. Lucius initially justifies this sacrifice as essential to the burial ritual; he asks for permission to execute Alarbus "that so the shadows [of his slain brethren] be not unappeas'd, / Nor we disturb'd with prodigies on earth" (1.1.100-01). But he also uses vividly descriptive rhetoric that hints at vengeance: "Give us the proudest prisoner of the Goths, / That we may hew his limbs and on a pile / Ad manes fratrum sacrifice his flesh" (97-99). Lucius anticipates this ritual as a bloody spectacle; only thirty lines later, he reiterates his thirst for dismemberment (even using some of the same language as in his earlier appeal): "Away with him [Alarbus], and make a fire straight, / And with our swords, upon a pile of wood, / Let's hew his limbs till they be clean consum'd" (127-29). Lucius links his justification of the sacrifice in Titus's burial ritual – according to Lucius, Alarbus's execution is integral for the appeasement of the shadows of Titus's slain sons – with its impact as a demonstration of Roman power – Lucius implicitly intends this bloody display to shame and threaten Tamora and her sons: "See, lord and father, how we have perform'd / Our Roman rites. Alarbus' limbs are lopp'd, / And entrails feed the sacrificing fire" (142-44). Lucius judges the success of the funeral based on the spectacle of Alarbus's dismemberment and execution, and he ensures its display as an element of these "Roman rites" by announcing its effects in public.

Objecting to Alarbus's sacrifice, Tamora contrasts the symbolic power of Titus's ritualistic burial of his slain sons, a celebration of their heroic defense of Rome, with the public mutilation and sacrifice of her oldest son, a demonstration of Titus's thirst for blood and vengeance:

> Sufficeth not that we are brought to Rome

> To beautify thy triumphs, and return
>
> Captive to thee and to thy Roman yoke;
>
> But must my sons be slaughtered in the streets
>
> For valiant doings in their country's cause? (1.1.109-13)

Here Tamora demystifies Titus's ritualistic demonstration of Rome's military might. She argues that the symbolic objectification of herself and her sons as ornaments signifying Titus's victory should satisfy his desire to shame his Goth captives in public. Resisting her status as an enslaved prisoner of war, she attempts to assert her identity as a human similar to Titus in many respects; she and her sons fought as valiantly as Titus and his sons. Furthermore, she redefines the terms by which Titus and Lucius describe the ritual necessity of Alarbus's execution; instead of referring to it as a sacrifice, she denounces the cold-blooded "slaughter" of her son, and she empties Titus's burial ritual of its intended meaning by pointing out that her sons died defending their own culture's survival, just as Titus's sons died in Rome's defense. Tamora insists that she can relate to Titus's desire to commemorate his sons for their heroic deeds: "And if thy sons were ever dear to thee, / O, think my son to be as dear to me!" (107-08). Tamora further collapses the differences between Goth and Roman by describing the value of military heroism shared by both cultures: "O, if to fight for king and commonweal / Were piety in thine, it is in these [Tamora's sons]" (114-15). Urging Titus to display mercy, an integral component of true nobility, Tamora cleverly echoes but redefines the term Titus had used to address the Andronici tomb. Whereas Titus had earlier idealized the Andronici tomb as the "sacred receptacle of [his] joys, / Sweet cell of virtue and nobility" (92-93) to commemorate his sons and sanctify their final resting place, Tamora now suggests that true nobility involves the display of mercy on her family and vanquished people: "Wilt thou draw near the nature of the gods? / Draw near them then in

being merciful: / Sweet mercy is nobility's true badge" (117-19). Pointing out that Titus has already shamed his prisoners of war by parading them through Rome's streets, Tamora argues that murder constitutes an excessive and unnecessary element of this ritual. Even while she argues against a blind adherence to tradition, she identifies values shared by both Romans and Goths.

Thus, early in the play, Shakespeare establishes a conflict – one that he will develop throughout the rest of the play – between Titus, who adheres to prescriptive, conventional rituals at all costs, on the one hand, and Tamora, who asserts that "nobility's true badge" involves the willingness to break from tradition. In his response to Tamora, Titus reemphasizes the comfort that Lucius contends Alarbus's sacrifice brings both Rome's surviving warriors and the souls of those slain in Rome's defense: Titus argues that Alarbus must die "t'appease" the "groaning shadows" of his dead sons (126). Titus solemnizes this human sacrifice as a necessary element of the funeral rituals he oversees; the surviving Romans "religiously . . . ask a sacrifice" (124), a customary and spiritual request. But, he leaves many of Tamora's other objections to her son's execution unanswered. Unwilling to consider Tamora's pleas, Titus insists on following traditional conventions, as if shocked by Tamora's suspicion of this sacrificial rite. At this early point in the play, Shakespeare hints at the self-deceit that rituals can sanction; Titus tries to validate Alarbus's execution as customary and spiritual, but in his effort to justify this element of the burial rite, he appears to conflate human sacrifice with other traditional funeral rituals. Shakespeare demonstrates the potential for conflict caused by Titus's uncompromising adherence in tradition and ritual; rebuked by Titus, Tamora vows to revenge Alarbus's execution. And, Shakespeare further develops his depiction of Titus as unbendingly devoted to custom by dramatizing the horrible consequences of Titus's decision to decline the emperorship

and to support the advancement of Saturninus, the "eldest son" of Rome's deceased leader (), based on Rome's tradition of primogeniture.

Shakespeare also contrasts the religious solemnity Titus exhibits during the funeral rituals of his slain sons with the deceit and manipulation with which Saturninus pretends to observe the rituals of political succession and marriage. Titus intends to ensure political stability in Rome by perpetuating the time-tested tradition of primogeniture, but Saturninus immediately expresses frustration over the limitations to his power caused by his participation in the conventional gift exchange expected of him. Saturninus offers to marry Lavinia in return for Titus's promotion of him to emperor, but by obeying the social conventions governing the prescriptive customs of gift-exchange, Saturninus is restricted from pursuing the true object of his desire, Tamora, whom he praises in an aside as "a goodly lady, trust me, of the hue / That I would choose were I to choose anew" (1.1.261-62). Saturninus reduces this ritual to a spectacle of political pandering and exposes the naivety of Titus's offer of the emperorship. Although Saturninus has surrendered the ability to "choose" his wife in a show of gratitude to Titus, he displays his power to obtain the object of his desire; suddenly pardoning Tamora and her sons in a triumphant flourish, Saturninus makes a mockery of the sacrifices that Titus and the Andronici made in battle to protect Rome from the enemy Goths. Shakespeare again characterizes Titus as anxiously trying to convince his fellow Romans – and himself – that political stability stems from an unflinchingly strict and sincere adherence to time-honored traditions and rituals. Moreover, he hints at the potential destruction that might result when other characters feign devotion to the rituals in which Titus so dearly invests. His daughter slighted, the ritual of the gift-exchange mocked, Titus turns his hopes to the hunt, an ancient and early modern ritual often enacted as a celebration of marriage.

The participants of an early modern hunt typically sought to confer honor on themselves by demonstrating their physical prowess and by confirming their respect for social hierarchy. While the hunt served as an opportunity to release violent human propensities for bloodshed, it also offered its participants the chance to demonstrate their respect for the formal rules governing appropriate, civilized behavior. According to William Harrison, whose *Description of England* (first published in 1577 as part of Holinshed's *Chronicles*), the hunt provided a forum for its participants to show off their courage; Harrison urges hunters to engage in this ritual as a "practice [of] their arms in tasting of their manhood and dealing with such beasts as eftsoons will turn again and offer them the hardest [danger]" (328). Hunters prove their bravery by chasing the fiercest wild animals; Harrison cites famous historical leaders such as Alexander the Great and England's King Henry I and King Henry V, who disdained hunting the hare and deer in favor of "the tiger, the pard, the boar, and the bear, but most willingly lions, because of the honorable estimation of that beast" (328). Furthermore, the physical challenges posed by hunting confer not only health but also honor on its participants; Thomas Cockaine, author of the 1591 *A Short Treatise of Hunting*, asserts that by enduring "continuall travaile, [and] painfull labour" from extreme hunger, heat, and cold, hunters develop the qualities of physical fitness needed to serve "their Prince and Countrey in the warres, having their bodies for the most part by reason of their continuall exercise in much better health, than other men have" ("To the Gentlemen Readers" A3). The links between the physical and mental benefits of the hunt elevate it above other forms of early modern entertainment; in contrast to the "common shows of interludes, of tumbler's tricks, of antics, mocks and mowes," the hunt contributed to both bodily health and "honest meditations" (Gascoigne, qtd. in Beaver 190). Of the various early modern cultural pastimes, hunting was considered the "most royall for the stateliness therof, [the] most artificial for the

wisedom & cunning therof and [the] most manly and warlike for the use and indurance therof" (Markham 3). As Shakespeare probably understood, the hunt "demanded specific forms of knowledge, comportment, and ritual action" and so constituted one of the most significant activities aristocrats could participate in to demonstrate "courtliness, sociability, or martial valor" (Beaver 192).

In *Titus Andronicus*, Shakespeare dramatizes the potential inefficacy of the hunt to contain the human propensity for violence; instead of a friendly competition demonstrating formal regulations of behavior and confirming the stability of the social order, the hunt turns into a chaotic massacre perpetrated to achieve vengeance. Shakespeare exposes the discomfiting paradox that rituals intended to secure social and political stability often involve gruesome bloodshed. Furthermore, he portrays the equivocal role played by language during the hunt; he demonstrates how language fails Titus and Marcus in their attempts to justify the necessity of this bloody ritual, while it serves Chiron and Demetrius as a means of exacerbating the bodily violence they inflict on Lavinia.

Even before the hunt takes place, Shakespeare hints at the potential for its failure to bolster social harmony. At Tamora's insistence, Saturninus pretends to offer the Andronici friendship by proclaiming this wedding day "a love day" (1.1.491), and Titus, hoping to regain Saturninus's favor, invites the Emperor "to hunt the panther and the hart" with him the next morning (493). Titus's optimistic anticipation of the hunt indicates his investment in it as a celebration of the double marriages he believes will bring stability to Rome, but it also appears a desperate attempt to smooth over some troubling contradictions Titus seems to underestimate. Saturninus has married Tamora, not Lavinia, and Tamora's promise that "This day all quarrels die" is only feigned (465), as the audience knows from her aside to Saturninus: "My lord, be

rul'd by me, be won at last, / Dissemble all your griefs and discontents" (442-43). Furthermore, on the morning of the hunt, Titus himself recalls that he was "troubled in [his] sleep" the night before (2.2.9), perhaps a premonition of the day's tragic events, which Titus refuses to acknowledge. He hastily dismisses this anxiety as a harmless nightmare by asserting that the "dawning day new comfort hath inspir'd" (10).

Shakespeare further undermines Titus's optimism in this ritual by demonstrating the different rhetorical strategies Titus and his enemies use to describe their anticipation of the hunt. While Titus, Marcus, and Saturninus revel in the male camaraderie and competitiveness that the hunt inspires, Aaron, Chiron, and Demetrius look forward to it as an opportunity to rape Lavinia and then brag about the gruesome crimes they have committed. Hoping to differentiate this ritual from a disordered, frenzied massacre, Titus, Marcus, and Saturninus obey regulated rules governing language use. Boasting to Tamora, "Madam, now shall ye see / Our Roman hunting" (2.2.19-20), Saturninus proclaims the start of the hunt: "Come on then, horse and chariots let us have, / And to our sport" (18-19). Although his language will prove terribly ironic – Tamora will not only "see" but participate in the hunting of Lavinia – his words here have the effect of initiating this "sport" as a competitive masculine ritual permitting the sanctioned release of violent impulses. Marcus and Titus also participate in the hunt as a contest. Marcus vaunts, "I have dogs, my lord, / Will rouse the proudest panther in the chase, / And climb the highest promontory top" (20-22), and Titus responds, "And I have horse will follow where the game / Makes way, and runs like swallows o'er the plain" (23-24). Engaging in this staged boasting contest, Saturninus, Marcus, and Titus assert the efficacy of the hunt to reflect the social harmony they hope it will solidify.

In contrast, Chiron and Demetrius excitedly describe their pursuit of Lavinia as an illicit perversion of the hunt. Demetrius brags that he and Chiron have no need for horses or dogs; instead, they resemble animals as they describe how they will track down their prey: "Chiron, we hunt not, we, with horse nor hound, / But hope to pluck a dainty doe to ground" (25-26). When Aaron warns Tamora's sons that they "do but plot [their] deaths" by competing for Lavinia within the confines of the court (2.1.78), Demetrius responds by comparing Titus's daughter to a doe and himself to a thief: "What, hast not thou full often strook a doe, / And borne her cleanly by the keeper's nose?" (93-94). Aaron later appropriates this imagery for the more violent purpose of urging Chiron and Demetrius to rape Lavinia in the secrecy of the forest: "Single you thither then this dainty doe [Lavinia], / And strike her home by force, if not by words" (117-18). Describing himself and his brother as animals, Demetrius collapses the assumed hierarchical distinctions between humans and beasts. Furthermore, Aaron, who reacts against courtly rituals as arbitrary, artificial conventions of aristocratic behavior, encourages Chiron and Demetrius to rape Lavinia in the hidden expanses of the forest. Aaron specifically advises Tamora's sons that "The forest walks are wide and spacious, / And many unfrequented plots there are, / Fitted by kind for villainy and rape" (2.1.114-16). Here he reasons that the vast natural landscape of the hunt provides both space and privacy; the sinister wilderness outside Rome's walls is free of the surveillance mechanisms governing behavior inside the city. Aaron accordingly warns Chiron and Demetrius, who are still unfamiliar with Roman etiquette, that "the Emperor's court is like the house of Fame, / The palace full of tongues, of eyes, and ears" (126-27); in contrast, the "ruthless, dreadful, deaf, and dull" woods (128) will allow the boys to "serve [their] lust, shadowed from heaven's eye, / And revel in Lavinia's treasury" (130-31). Through surveillance, Aaron implies, Rome's political and military leaders attempt to ensure that the court maintains

its status as a civilized, confined, and peaceful society, whereas the forest remains a primitive, vast, and untamed wilderness appropriate for the perpetration of unrestrained violence. But, by depicting the malicious language used by Aaron, Chiron, and Demetrius as a mockery of the conventional verbal competition engaged in by Titus, Marcus, and Saturninus, Shakespeare also hints at dangerous similarities between the violence enacted during a successful hunt and that perpetrated against humans in this play.

Thus, Shakespeare intensifies the brutality of his portrayal of physical mutilation by demonstrating the capacity of language to evoke scenes of violence. He refrains from portraying Lavinia's rape and dismemberment on stage, instead depicting the imagery of sexual assault used by Martius and Quintus to remind audiences of the brutality Lavinia suffers at the hands of Chiron and Demetrius. Unaware of their sister's fate, Martius and Quintus ironically describe the blood-stained pit in which they find Bassianus's corpse variously as a mouth, a tomb, and a womb. Quintus innocently asks, "What subtile hole is this, / Whose mouth is covered with rude-growing briers, / Upon whose leaves are drops of new shed blood?" (198-200), an exclamation later embodied by Lavinia, whose mouth becomes "a crimson river of warm blood" (2.4.22), in Marcus's words, when Chiron and Demetrius cut out her tongue. Martius pleads with Quintus to "comfort [him] and help [him] out / From this unhallow'd and blood-stained hole" (2.3.209-10), and Quintus later expresses fear of being "pluck'd into the swallowing womb / Of this deep pit, poor Bassianus's grave" (239-40). Phrases like "blood-stained hole" and "swallowing womb," used as descriptors of the pit into which Martius and Quintus fall, insistently remind audiences of the brutality of the rape Lavinia is suffering while her brothers helplessly fall victim to Aaron's deceit. The brothers express a bumbling helplessness in the face of Aaron's deceit as well as an unwillingness to participate in the hunt, and the violence of the brothers' vivid descriptions of the

bloody pit intensifies the failure of the hunt to achieve political stability and social harmony. Blind and bewildered, Martius and Quintus appear unaccustomed to the wilderness outside Rome's walls; they complain about their inability to see or to find their footing. Quintus claims, "My sight is very dull, what e'er it bodes" (195), and Martius admits, "Were it not for shame, / Well could I leave our sport to sleep a while" (196-97). Intensifying rather than alleviating the violence of Lavinia's rape and mutilation, Shakespeare underscores the total failure of the hunt; he characterizes Martius and Quintus as incompetent and uninterested in this potentially important ritual.

In addition, Shakespeare calls attention to the vivid brutality that language can perpetrate. He portrays not only the incapacity of language to contain the violence enacted during this ritual but also the potential for language to serve as a weapon. Whereas Titus and Saturninus boasted jokingly about their dogs and horses' prowess as a means of contextualizing the bloodshed they will enact within the hunt's socially sanctioned competition, Chiron and Demetrius after the hunt compete to outdo one another in mockery of Lavinia's disabled condition. Having violated and mutilated Lavinia, Tamora's sons now dismember her again, this time linguistically. They ridicule her disabilities and draw attention to the violence with which they have rendered her incapable of creating meaning through speech or physical action:

> Dem. So now go tell, and if they tongue can speak,
> Who 'twas that cut thy tongue and ravish'd thee.
> Chi. Write down thy mind, bewray thy meaning so,
> And if thy stumps will let thee play the scribe.
> Dem. See how with signs and tokens she can scrowl. (2.4.1-5)

As if to compare Lavinia to a mutilated beast, Chiron and Demetrius dwell on her inability to communicate using speech or hand signals; she can neither rebuke the brothers as they insult her, nor reveal the names of her assailants later in the play. Demetrius's mimicry of Lavinia's unsuccessful attempt to speak and gesture ("scrowl") echoes the word "howl" and hints at an incomprehensible scream or a kind of bestial insanity. Ironically, however, the word also foreshadows how, later in the play, Lavinia will use her handless arms and tongueless mouth to guide a stick in the sand to reveal the rape and its perpetrators; as Karen Cunningham points out, Shakespeare's "scrowl," which echoes both "scrawl" and "scroll," unites "allusions to bodies (gesticulating) and texts (writing) as modes of making meaning" (70).

Challenging our conventional modes of responding to brutality, Shakespeare refuses to provide relief from the play's violent depictions of suffering. The hunt does nothing to appease the characters' desire for mutilation, and the crime and disorder enacted in the forest persist after the characters reenter Rome; Saturninus refuses to investigate the details of his brother's murder, and the Roman tribunes ignore Titus's pleas for mercy. Furthermore, Lavinia's dismembered body, on stage for much of the play's remaining action, serves as a graphically mutilated reminder of the vengeance Chiron and Demetrius have achieved; she becomes a silenced and disabled manifestation of Titus's struggle to determine an appropriate response to the extreme brutality inflicted against his family. Motivated to take extreme measures to stem the violence, Titus falls victim to Aaron's villainy. When Aaron deceives the Andronici into hoping that Martius's and Quintus's lives might be saved if Lucius, Marcus, or Titus chops off a hand as ransom, he extends the hope that Rome still respects the proper social convention and ceremony Titus expects from civilized societies. The Andronici argue, in an absurd competition, over whose hand should be sacrificed, and, when Lucius and Marcus run offstage to procure an axe,

Titus chops off his own hand with Aaron's help. He desperately seeks to ritualize even this grotesque sacrifice; he commemorates the hand as if it were a relic that has served to keep Rome safe and civilized, ordering Aaron to "bid [the Emperor] bury it: / More hath it merited, that let it have" (195-96). Using language that recalls the solemnity with which he had buried his slain sons at the play's opening, Titus ceremoniously offers his hand as a sacrifice. Shakespeare depicts Titus's desperation to save his sons and stem the violence perpetrated against his family, but Aaron mocks Titus's optimism; rather than providing an alleviation of tension, Shakespeare portrays this onstage display of self-mutilation that is, in Hirsh's words, "not merely painful but incongruous and therefore ludicrous" (64).

Shakespeare's dramatization of Titus's search for appropriate ways to lament in the face of extreme hardship and suffering culminates in his vow to revenge the violence inflicted on his family, "even in their throats that hath committed" these brutal crimes (3.1.274). Offering his dismembered hand to Aaron in the hope that Saturninus might spare Martius and Quintus, Titus desperately seeks an end to his sorrow with supplications to the heavens, as if performing personal rituals for comfort. His need to express sincere, overwhelming grief exceeds the moderation Marcus advises him to seek. But, after the Messenger enters with the heads of Martius and Quintus, the dismayed Marcus regrets his earlier encouragement of Titus to "speak with possibility" (214) and instead expresses the same desperation he had berated Titus for displaying: "These miseries are more than may be borne" (243). The spectacle of carnage surrounding Titus and the surviving members of his family – the decapitated heads of Martius and Quintus, Titus's own dismembered "warlike hand," and his "mangled daughter" (255) – initially elicits from Titus stunned silence. But, when Marcus, who had earlier urged Titus to "let reason govern [his] lament" (218), now declares, "Now is a time to storm, why art thou still?"

(263), Titus, in one of the play's most memorable moments, shockingly reacts with haunting, absurd laughter. What seems initially an inappropriate expression of shock and grief baffles Marcus, who rebukes his brother, "Why dost thou laugh? It fits not with this hour" (265). But Titus, using imagery that recalls his identity as a warrior, explains that this outburst constitutes his last defense against "sorrow" (267). Determined not to let this "enemy . . . usurp upon [his] wat'ry eyes, / And make them blind with tributary tears" (267-69) before he can find "Revenge's cave" (270), Titus ritualistically demands that his remaining family members commit themselves to vengeance. In slowly cadenced imperative sentences, he gathers his family around him: "You heavy people, circle me about, / That I may turn me to each one of you, / And swear unto my soul to right your wrongs" (276-78). Like a religious official, Titus carefully and forcefully promises revenge, ceremoniously facing his remaining son, his daughter, and his brother. He formally ratifies the familial pact with powerfully monosyllabic words: "The vow is made" (279). Titus makes use of simple but precise language, as if in an attempt to regain control of communication and to confirm his promise to exact vengeance as an appropriate response to suffering.

Shakespeare thus dramatizes the dangerously equivocal roles rituals serve; Titus, who earlier executed Alarbus as a sacrifice commemorating his slain sons' military heroism, now kills Chiron and Demetrius in ritualized fashion. Recounting the murder of Bassianus, the rape and mutilation of Lavinia, and his dismemberment of his own hand, Titus focuses on the impact of bodily violence in both arbitrary crime and ritual observance, as if to justify his plan to feed the baked body parts of Chiron and Demetrius to Tamora and Saturninus. Titus has struggled to establish social harmony and political stability throughout the play, but, having been denied justice by Rome's tribunes and then having been deceived by Aaron, he now seeks personal

vengeance by engaging in the same deception Tamora has employed to upend Rome's political hierarchy.

By slaughtering Chiron and Demetrius in ritualized fashion, Titus simultaneously justifies his vengeance and intensifies the brutality of his actions. The Roman legal system has failed him, so he attempts to demonstrate the justice of these executions by recounting the charges against Chiron and Demetrius and by describing his suffering at their hands. As a result of Bassianus's murder, Titus explains, Lavinia's brothers "were condemn'd to death" (173) and Titus's own hand was "cut off and made a merry jest" (174). But, as Titus indicates, it is Lavinia's rape and mutilation that has the most destructive impact on Roman social and political harmony: "Both her sweet hands, her tongue, and that more dear / Than hands or tongue, her spotless chastity, / Inhuman traitors, you constrain'd and forc'd" (175-77). Titus has now "constrain'd" the bound and gagged Chiron and Demetrius – as if to draw attention to the power he wields over Tamora's sons, he repeatedly orders his servants to "stop their mouths, let them not speak to me, / But let them hear what fearful words I utter" (167-68) – while he vividly describes the gruesome dismemberment he plans to inflict.

Shakespeare suggests that, in a Rome whose legal system cannot provide state-sanctioned justice, vengeance may bring personal reparation, but it cannot restore social harmony. Asserting their right to lead Rome in the aftermath of Titus's bloodbath, Lucius and Marcus demand justice and accountability by appealing to the power of witnessing. They insist on their commitment to explaining the truth, and they support their claims with evidence. Lucius recounts his bravery in Rome's defense and argues that the Roman tribunes have no reason to doubt his report that Chiron and Demetrius murdered Bassianus and raped Lavinia: "Alas, you know I am no vaunter, I; / My scars can witness, dumb although they are, / That my report is just and full of truth"

(5.3.113-15). Similarly, Marcus testifies that Aaron, “chief architect and plotter of these woes” (122), will serve as “witness” to the truth of Marcus’s accusations (124). Implicitly acknowledging the lawlessness of Titus’s revenge, Marcus appeals to the Roman tribunes to “judge what cause had Titus to revenge / These wrongs unspeakable, past patience, / Or more than any living man could bear” (125-27). Having reported “the truth” (128), Marcus then urges the Roman tribunes to judge whether the Andronici have “done aught amiss” (129), promising his willful submission to their punishment.

But even as the play concludes, Shakespeare refuses to alleviate the tension created by corporeal violence. Lucius justifies his treatment of Tamora’s corpse by asserting that “her life was beastly and devoid of pity, / And being dead, let birds on her take pity” (5.3.199-200), yet he himself refuses to show mercy on Tamora; by denying Tamora the funeral rituals he provides for Titus, Lavinia, and even Saturninus, Lucius tries to characterize Romans as civilized and Goths as barbaric, but his punishment of Tamora’s corpse appears excessive and vindictive: he orders his followers to “throw her forth to beasts and birds to prey” (198). Lucius simultaneously oversees a public demonstration of the restoration of social order and exhibits a thirst for corporeal violence similar to that which he revealed when he demanded Alarbus’s dismemberment at the play’s opening. Drawing attention to the contrast between the peaceful, proper burial rituals awarded to Saturninus, Titus, and Lavinia, on the one hand, and the dismemberment and dispersal perpetrated against one of Rome’s enemies, Tamora, on the other, Lucius emphatically demonstrates his commitment to Roman cultural values such as honor and commemoration. Yet, at the same time, his gruesome mistreatment of Tamora’s body also serves to undermine this political demonstration; the brutality of both the fate Lucius declares for

Tamora's corpse and the punishment he doles out to Aaron foreshadows an endless cycle of the same corporeal violence as that exemplified throughout the play.

As the play concludes with this equivocation, it is Aaron, who consistently resists submitting to social conventions, who remains on stage, buried from the neck down but not entirely silenced. Aaron exposes the arbitrary nature of the violence Titus and Lucius justify through rituals. Marginalized and enslaved, he conspires to undermine the play's rituals and to disrupt Rome's political hierarchy. He impregnates Tamora, encourages Chiron and Demetrius to rape Lavinia, and sabotages the execution ritual Lucius stages. Aaron's cynicism in the meaningless, self-serving qualities of ritual observance contrasts with Titus's naive optimism in the capacity of rituals to restore social order. On the one hand, Titus's insistent devotion to ritual performance and adherence to social convention not only result in suffering and injustice but also lead to his political downfall. On the other hand, Aaron, who promotes social anarchy, obtains power as an autonomous character disdainful of what he considers the hollow, arbitrary nature of ritual performance.

From his first speech, Aaron characterizes himself as an outsider plotting political and social disruption in response to his servitude. Jealous of Tamora's elevation "above pale envy's threatening reach" (2.1.4), Aaron urges himself, "Then, Aaron, arm thy heart, and fit thy thoughts, / To mount aloft with thy imperial mistress / And mount her pitch" (12-14). Following the example of Tamora, Aaron longs to rise above his status as a servant, but with his sexual innuendo – he wants not only to "mount" above his servitude but to "mount" Tamora herself – he hints at his plan to use Tamora to upend Rome's political hierarchy. A dalliance with Tamora might produce an illegitimate heir to the emperorship. According to Aaron, Tamora has already proven sexually promiscuous; his boast that he has held her "fett'red in amorous chains, / And

faster bound to [his] charming eyes / Than is Prometheus tied to Caucasus" (15-17) proves true later in the play when Tamora gives birth to Aaron's child. Aaron has subversively enchanted Tamora with his charming eyes, and he has managed to undermine the political advancement Tamora gained through marriage to Saturninus. Unwilling to "wait upon this new-made empress" (20), Aaron is determined to "wanton with" Tamora (21), "this siren that will charm Rome's Saturnine, / And see his shipwreck and his commonweal's" (23-24). Taking advantage of Tamora's promiscuity, Aaron anticipates his opportunity to disrupt Saturninus's legacy.

Aaron not only admits his disregard for rituals, he also exploits other characters' investment in rituals for maintaining social order. Undermining Lucius's plan to stage a hanging, Aaron escapes death and procures the promise that Lucius will not murder his son; he ironically disturbs Lucius's efforts to stage this public execution as a formal ceremony by demonstrating how Lucius's devotion to religious beliefs and ritual practices enable him to sanction and justify various types of violent punishment in terms of ceremony. In this confrontation, Lucius seeks to gain power over Aaron by forcing him to confess publicly and by threatening to execute him, two significant early modern rituals that Aaron exposes as arbitrary attempts to impute meaning to violence. Threatened with imminent execution, Aaron again characterizes himself as unfettered by social conventions and demonstrates the potentially binding effects of devotion to religious beliefs. He disrupts the ritualistic public confession of bloody crimes that Lucius demands, and he associates his lack of religious faith with a powerful autonomy. Yet, even as he mocks Lucius's devotion, Aaron takes advantage of the solemnity with which Lucius practices his beliefs, compelling Lucius to "vow / By that same god, what god soe'er it be / That thou [Lucius] adorest and hast in reverence" (81-83). Despite the fact that he "believest no god" (71), Aaron can still procure Lucius's oath to spare his son from execution.

Acknowledging his power "to torment [Lucius] with [his] bitter tongue" (150), Aaron thus verbalizes the potential anarchy posed by anti-social behavior that constantly threatens the preservation of social harmony. Defiantly autonomous of social customs and traditions, Aaron proudly confesses to not only the brutality and injustice perpetrated against the Andronici but also "a thousand dreadful things, / As willingly as one would kill a fly" (5.1.141-42). Shocking Lucius and his band of Goth soldiers, Aaron revels in his power to disrupt the purpose of this public confession; flippant in regard to his impending death by hanging, he denies feeling remorse for his bloody deeds and refuses to impute meaning or motive to his actions. He claims to regret only his inability to perform "ten thousand more" acts of cruelty (144), and he recalls with glee how he "almost broke [his] heart with extreme laughter" after deceiving Titus into chopping off his own hand (113). Perverting the same rituals observed by Titus and Lucius, Aaron thrills at his performance of grotesque bodily violence and his subversion of social conventions; rather than burying the dead, Aaron has disinterred corpses, and, "set[ting] them upright at their dear friends' door, / Even when their sorrows almost was forgot" (136-37), he has carved despairing messages on their decomposing skins. Excitedly shocking his audience with descriptions of arbitrary, anti-social behavior, he exposes the restrictive bonds of social conventions and portrays himself as defiantly autonomous.

In *Titus Andronicus*, William Shakespeare dramatizes the impact of bodily violence and human sacrifice as visceral responses to suffering and injustice, and he interrogates the efficacy of rituals to contribute to social harmony and political stability. As we have seen, in the funeral rituals Titus stages upon his return to Rome, Shakespeare depicts how corporeal violence often intensifies the impact of public demonstrations of power. Although Tamora asserts that Titus has sufficiently displayed Rome's military might by parading his Goth prisoners of war, Titus

justifies Alarbus's execution as a sacrifice necessary for the completion of the funeral ritual; Lucius calls attention to the excessive bloodshed he perpetrates as if to highlight its role in both appeasing the souls of his dead brethren and punishing Tamora, Chiron, and Demetrius. Later, Shakespeare dramatizes how ritual violence can be used to exact vengeance. He portrays how the imperial hunt in this play fails to demonstrate the human ascendancy over the beasts and the stability of Rome's social hierarchy; the ritual of the hunt calls for the perpetration of brutality, but Titus's enemies shed human, not animal, blood, turning this ritual into a chaotic massacre. After raping and mutilating Lavinia, Chiron and Demetrius triumphantly mock her silenced, disabled condition. Similarly, later in the play, Titus justifies his gruesome plans for vengeance against Chiron and Demetrius by performing these murders as ritualistic sacrifices. Throughout the play, Shakespeare portrays how corporeal mutilation serves as a spectacular, visceral response to unbearable suffering and injustice, but he also warns against the criminal atrocities and social disorder that result when violence is misdirected or when rituals are disrupted. By dramatizing the role of excessive violence in both customary rituals and arbitrary criminal activity, his controversial play challenges the potentially cathartic effects of excessive bloodshed often depicted on the early modern stage.

Chapter Four: Staring through the Skull: Iconography and *The Revenger's Tragedy*

At the opening of Thomas Middleton's *The Revenger's Tragedy* (first recorded in the Stationers' Register in 1607), Vindice enters carrying the skull of Gloriana, his former lover, in a striking echo of Hamlet conversing with Yorick's skull in Shakespeare's famous play. Although

Vindice's soliloquy invites comparison with Hamlet's well-known lament that death threatens to erase human achievement, Vindice instead links bodily rot with moral corruption. Furthermore, Vindice's entrance with Gloriana's skull in hand demonstrates a perverse obsession with death and corpses; while Hamlet encounters Yorick's skull by coincidence in a cemetery, Vindice converses in a domestic setting with a skull he has coveted for nine years.

By foregrounding the corporeal over the existential, Middleton characterizes Vindice as unable to discern the distinction between his treatment of the skull as an object and his investment in the skull as a symbol. Obsessed with revenge and ostensibly outraged by the immorality of the play's unnamed Italian court, Vindice attributes to the skull the role of the traditional memento mori – a reminder of the inevitability of death and an inspiration to repentance – while simultaneously exhibiting a propensity toward violence. Middleton depicts Vindice as misguided and deceitful. Despite Vindice's efforts to establish the skull as symbolic of the purity and beauty he claims Gloriana exhibited while alive, he instead ironically objectifies the skull through his praise of it as well as through his use of it as a murder weapon in his revenge against the Duke. Vindice's moral righteousness obscures a suspicious obsession with the skull; although he justifies his plan to revenge Gloriana's death as rightful punishment in this corrupt court, he eagerly relishes this opportunity to inflict pain in an elaborate murder scheme. While in *Titus Andronicus* Shakespeare refuses to alleviate spectators' discomfort by continually intensifying that play's gruesome depictions of corporeal violence, in *The Revenger's Tragedy* Middleton suggests that the dramatic convention of a frenzied revenger perpetrating increasingly bizarre acts of brutality has become an overused, hackneyed feature of the early modern revenge tragedy.

Literary criticism about *The Revenger's* has traditionally focused on the contradictions that Vindice displays when struggling to commemorate his former lover. Some critics examine how Vindice tries to distance himself from his own complicity in corruption and murder and to deny the inevitability of his own death. For example, Phoebe S. Spinrad asserts that, by "dehumanizing the skulls of the dead and stripping the flesh off the living," Vindice ignores his own warnings against vice and attempts to position himself as "a puppeteer of death, untouched by any thought of his own mortality" (6). Similarly, Richard Brucher has argued that Vindice "met[es] out poetic justice without mercy or fear of censor" (260), thus demonstrating a disregard for the skull's power as a symbol of death.

Other scholars focus on Vindice's objectification of the skull as a result of his failed attempts to characterize it as a memento mori capable of inspiring repentance. Karin S. Coddon, for example, argues that "the whole of *The Revenger's Tragedy* is given over to 'show and useless property' – props, things of nothing, theatrically manipulable but inherently meaningless" (85). Coddon's conclusion, that "the absence of *honesty* . . . in the play's world parodically reduces the dramatic personae to the level of props" (79), anticipates Andrew Sofer's assertion that the skull debases Vindice by resisting his moralistic efforts to control its meanings. According to Sofer, Gloriana takes center stage in avenging her own death, "slyly using Vindice as both customer and stagehand before making her final exit" (114). As this brief review of scholarship reveals, Gloriana's skull serves as more than a mere decoration enhancing the play's sensational narrative; it contributes to the development of Vindice's character as a self-righteous moral arbiter struggling to distance himself from the inevitability of death. And, as Vindice's conflicted efforts to attribute meaning to the skull demonstrate, its role alternates from a passive, manipulated object to a seductive death's head capable of influencing Vindice's behavior. In

short, like a relic simultaneously suffering from decomposition and symbolizing beauty, Gloriana's skull takes on a central role in the contradictions Vindice exhibits in his commemorative practices.

Understanding the treatment of corporeal relics in early modern culture helps to explain Vindice's efforts to infuse Gloriana's skull with significance as a memento for vengeance, a stimulus to repentance, and eventually a tool in revenge. Vindice's conflicted relationship with the skull reflects a growing equivocation toward death developing in the wake of the Reformation. Although Renaissance courtiers probably did not, like Vindice, cherish corpses in their living spaces,[3] late medieval and early modern cultures nevertheless provide notable evidence of the fetishization of body parts and corpses, hinting at what anthropologist Clare Gittings calls "a growing secularization of death" and corpse imagery (147). For example, clothing and jewelry decorated with skulls and skeletons came into vogue during the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, contributing to "an interesting dissonance, with images of death and dissolution being used as objects to beautify the wearer and increase sexual allure" (168). The fifteenth-century priest Girolamo Savonarola recommended that Florentines carry a small death's head as a reminder of the transience of life, and the Elizabethan author Philip Massinger encouraged readers, "sell some of your clothing and buy yourself a death's-head and wear it on your middle finger" (qtd. in Aries 330). Skull-shaped watches, fashionable during the sixteenth century, measured one's march toward death with each passing hour (Frey 211).

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[3] Interestingly, when Margaret Roper, Thomas More's daughter, obtained her father's decapitated head from its pole on London Bridge in 1535, Cromwell and the Privy Council required that she "exonerate herself from the charge of attempting to propagate a cult" (Guy 266). After Margaret's death, both her bones and her father's skull were placed with the remains of Margaret's husband, William Roper, in Canterbury. William's son and heir, Thomas Roper, placed More's skull in the vault of Margaret's tomb "behind an iron grille as a holy relic" (274).

Leaders of the Reformation, however, sought to undermine the transcendent qualities attributed to such relics. John Calvin, perhaps the most vehement iconoclast, exposed many well-known relics as fakes, including the head of Mary Magdalen at Marseilles, which had been furnished with waxen eyes, and an arm purported to belong to St. Anthony that was found to be the bone of a stag. Calvin attacked such relics as "inventions for deceiving silly folk – or (as some monks and priests confessed) pious frauds or honest deceits to stimulate the devotion of the people" (qtd. in Bentley 172). Through relic veneration, condemned by reformers as idolatry, believers were deceived into investing in the physical over the spiritual; instead of "discerning Jesus in his Word, his Sacraments and his spiritual graces," asserted Calvin, relics divert believers' attention to "the preservation and admiration of [saints' and martyrs'] bones, shifts, caps and other similar trash" (qtd. in Bentley 174). Calvin and other reformers worried that relic worship led believers to elevate dead body parts ostensibly capable of working miracles over the Word of God, which clearly differentiated artifice from truth. Idolatry not only indicated "man's self-aggrandizing proclivity to demystify the deity by worshipping lifeless, anthropomorphic images of himself" but also signified an "overestimation of bodily forms . . . and was virtually certain to involve the sin of concupiscence" (Zimmerman 26).

Reformers accordingly encouraged moderation in funerary practices, often describing the more extravagant burial rituals of their Catholic forebears with suspicion. Grieving once expressed through relic veneration and intercessory prayer, both outlawed in Elizabethan England, were redirected toward "the management of bereavement," in the words of anthropologist Peter Marshall (312). Near the beginning of her reign, Queen Elizabeth I associated relic worship with "superstition and hypocrisy" (Hughes 118); she urged England's clergy to "teach that all goodness, health, and grace ought to be both asked and looked for only

of God as of the very author and giver of the same" (118). Reformers expressed openly their anxiety that believers might confuse objects for their symbols, hinting at the lustful and disorderly tendency to value superficiality over truth. They described moderation in funeral rituals as practical and orderly – or, as one English Bishop put it, demonstrative of "that comely order which Christian charity requireth" (qtd. in Marshall 266). True Christian charity toward the dead must be displayed "in their honest burial, in the preservation of their good names, in the help and reliefe of their posteritie" (qtd. in Marshall 266).

But while Reformers' hostility toward idolatry branded relic worship as fraudulent, outdated, and heretical, it also points up a broader, cultural reluctance to surrender the medieval, Catholic view of relics as capable of effecting miracles and of providing corporeal manifestations of God's power and presence. Saints' legends remained immensely popular between the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries; among the most influential compilations of saints' legends, the *Legenda Aurea* (compiled by Jacobus de Voraigne in about 1260) was published in hundreds of editions in early modern England. Furthermore, holy relics retained their medieval status of "wonder-working fetishes" capable of curing illness and protecting against danger (Thomas 26); many believers in sixteenth-century England still cherished stories of "sufferers cured by relics and images" (26). In addition, Protestant hostility to relic veneration reflected larger tensions surrounding the relationship between the living and the dead; according to Marshall, during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Reformers increasingly expressed secularized views regarding commemoration and equivocal attitudes about churchyard burial and the roles of memento mori. On the one hand, fifteenth-century Protestant writers objected to

churchyard burial in part because of theological hostility to corporeal proximity to relics.[4] On the other hand, Protestant writers acknowledged the significance of churchyard burial as a reminder of the inevitability of death.

Attempting to change contemporary attitudes regarding the impact of bodily processes on spiritual belief, Protestant reformers confronted many potential contradictions inherent in Catholic religious practices. According to Catholic doctrine, for example, bodies experience physical transformation during life and in death, but Catholic believers anticipate a state of unity and completion in heaven. And, while some Christian mystics described their ingestion of Christ's body and blood as ecstatic, they also punished their bodies in an attempt to experience Christ's suffering on the cross. In contrast to Catholic writers, who generally drew attention to the contradictions exposed by debates about the roles of corporeal pleasure and pain, Protestant reformers minimized the importance of the body by describing the Catholic investment in statues and paintings as lustful and narcissistic. Popular religious propaganda included the English homily on idolatry (1563), which argued that idol-worship would lead to the death of the soul, and the second edition of John Foxe's *Acts and Monuments* (1563), which emphasized how burning at the stake resulted in the immolation of the body. These popular texts, among others widely disseminated during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, "articulated a new and strongly felt Protestant anxiety about the body – put simply, a need to envisage its materiality, like that of the idol, as dead" (Zimmerman 46).

Read in this cultural context, Vindice's veneration of the skull as both a symbol of Gloriana's virtue and a murder weapon in revenge appears misguided and fraudulent. Vindice

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[4] As Peter Marshall shows, churchyard burial was also controversial for practical reasons, including illness caused by overcrowding and infectious disease (312).

tries to establish the skull as a symbol of the purity and beauty he claims Gloriana exhibited while alive. When "life and beauty naturally filled out" (1.1.17) the "ragged imperfections" (18) revealed by the fleshless skull, Gloriana's face glowed "far beyond the artificial shine / Of any woman's bought complexion" (21-22). Implying an association between Gloriana's natural beauty and her virtue, Vindice denigrates the other courtiers' preoccupations with superficial outer appearance as not only frivolous but even idolatrous: "Is not he absurd / Whose fortunes are upon their faces set, / That fear no other God but wind and rain?" (3.5.63-65). In contrast to the skull, which remains unaffected by "wind and rain," the courtiers fear the natural elements for their capacity to ruin expensive cosmetics. In these lines Vindice also implies his admiration of the living Gloriana, who purportedly modeled values like purity and virtue over vanity and reputation. The inevitability of death and rot symbolized by the skull demonstrates the ludicrous superfluity of the courtiers' expensive clothing.

While Vindice displays the skull as a warning of the physical and moral corruption resulting from death and licentiousness, his revulsion at the skull's corporeal disintegration underscores, rather than diminishes, his efforts to treat the skull as a symbol. As Vindice acknowledges, the skull fails to replicate Gloriana's beauty. He himself recoils from the "ragged imperfections" of the skull's hollowed-out eye sockets (1.1.18), as if to emphasize its role as a symbol and to downplay the importance of the skull as a remnant of the living Gloriana's beauty. Thus, Vindice treats the skull, his "study's ornament" (1.1.15), as a memento mori, a reminder of the inevitability of death and an inspiration to repentance. Excitedly anticipating his use of the skull in revenge, Vindice articulates his mission in terms of moral purification. He explains the didactic potential of the skull as a warning against the sins typically committed "at revels,

forgetful feasts / And unclean brothels" (90-91), and he imputes to the skull the power to "fright the sinner / And make him a good coward" (91-92).

Vindice's introduction of this death's head contributes to the diatribe he delivers against the courtiers' sinfulness, as if his anger at the Duke's lust, which he demonstrates in the play's opening lines, compels him to turn his attention to the skull in his hand. In this opening soliloquy, Vindice shifts his focus from the Duke, "a parched and juiceless luxur" (9) who has "scarce blood enough to live upon" (10), his "impious" son (2), his "bastard true-begot in evil" (3), and his "duchess that will do with devil" (4), to the skull, a "sallow picture of [Vindice's] poisoned love" (14) and a "shell of Death" (15). From Vindice's perspective, his cherishing of the decomposing skull empowers him to act as a self-righteous moral arbiter in this corrupt court; characterizing the courtiers' licentiousness as diseased, evil, and incestuous, Vindice tries to associate the physical degradation demonstrated by the skull with moral corruption.

And yet, for Vindice, the skull represents more than a conventional memento mori; it carries a personal, intimate meaning as a reminder of his betrothal to Gloriana. Conversing with the skull, he remembers fondly "the bright face of my betrothed lady," and, as we have already seen, he links her natural beauty with a virtue unusual in the play's corrupt court (1.1.16). Furthermore, the skull serves as a constant reminder of the personal vendetta for which Vindice has coveted it. He confirms Hippolito's shock that this rotting skull is Gloriana's – in Hippolito's words, "the form that, living, shone so bright" (3.5.66) – and he implies that the skull's decomposition enhances its relevance as a tool in his revenge; acceding the skull's putrefaction, Vindice acknowledges that he "could e'en chide [him]self / For doting on her beauty" (68-69), but he insists that "her death / Shall be revenged after no common action" (69-70). As the Duke approaches, Vindice expresses relief and satisfaction that the moment of his revenge has finally

arrived: “Now nine years vengeance crowd into a minute” (121). Vindice also characterizes his disguising of the skull as an appropriate component (rather than an ostentatious enhancement) of his murderous plan, insisting, “I have not fashioned this only for show / And useless property” (3.5.99-100). Rather than utilizing an anonymous skull from a random grave for his vengeful purposes, Vindice has disguised “this very skull, / Whose mistress the duke poisoned with this drug” (101-02), so that his former lover “shall be revenged / In the like strain and kiss [the Duke’s] lips to death” (103-04). The skull enacts physically its role as a memento mori; it seduces the Duke, who dies as a result of his sinful lust. Treating the skull like a relic, Vindice draws attention to the importance of identifying it precisely; “this very skull,” he announces, presumably unveiling it, belonged to his former lover, and it will now participate in killing the Duke “in the like strain” as that by which the Duke murdered Gloriana, through a poisoned kiss.

However, Vindice’s effort to assert the skull’s symbolic power in spite of its physical decomposition is fraught with tension. While he tries to justify his eccentric coveting of the skull in terms of the skull’s role as a reminder of his personal, intimate relationship with Gloriana, he betrays a fear that the skull’s physical disintegration implies the erosion of its power to commemorate the living Gloriana’s beauty and his love for her. For example, the name of Vindice’s former lover supports his praise of her beauty and purity; Gloriana, denoting the “glorious-one,” was “the namesake of [Queen] Elizabeth’s idealized royal persona” (Mullaney 160). The name was celebrated most famously by Edmund Spenser in *The Faerie Queene*, and Middleton’s appropriation of it during the Jacobean period probably invoked nostalgia for Queen Elizabeth I’s half-century-long reign, which was marked by colonial expansion, military conquest, and an artistic and literary renaissance. When, in contrast, Vindice addresses the skull as a “*sallow* picture of [his] poisoned love” (1.1.15, my emphasis), he suggests not only that

Gloriana's shining beauty has been reduced to a "sickly . . . or brownish yellow" but also that his love for her has faded (*OED*, def. a). Vindice's ambivalent rhetoric indicates that his feelings are a mere "picture" of their former intensity, yet he continues to insist on his longing to achieve vengeance and to commemorate Gloriana's supposed beauty and virtue. Vindice cannot deny the importance of the skull's physical appearance to his assertion of its symbolic power. Cherishing the skull for nine years has simultaneously fueled Vindice's thirst for vengeance and highlighted the reality of the skull's gruesome decay.

Thus, immediately after Vindice praises Gloriana's purity, he undermines his assertion of her beauty as natural; his comparison of the skull's bone-white sheen to expensive jewelry contributes to his objectification of the skull. His descriptions of Gloriana's allure ironically rely on imagery associated with the same glittering opulence he condemns the courtiers for worshipping. Describing the "unsightly rings" (20) of the skull's eye sockets as once set with "heaven-pointed diamonds" (19), Vindice apparently intends to emphasize Gloriana's spiritual devotion, but he instead compares her prayerful eyes to expensive jewelry coveted for its physical appearance and economic value. Gloriana's sparkling eyes have been reduced to her skull's hollowed-out holes, "unsightly" both because they are grotesque and because they lack the physical sense of sight. Yet, Vindice's diction – comparing the skull's empty eye sockets to "rings" – betrays his attraction to material wealth and undermines his attempts to link Gloriana's organic beauty with her moral purity.

Even in coveting the skull Vindice has dehumanized Gloriana; his mysterious procurement and safeguarding of the skull contradicts his insistence that it symbolizes purity and virtue. As Glenda Conway notes, Vindice presumably obtained Gloriana's head by decapitating it from her corpse and thus "defiled the body that died while trying to remain pure and intact"

(8). He further objectifies the skull by withholding the name of his former lover; it is only after the skull has been, in Stephen Mullaney's words, "fully reconstituted in the realm of bought complexions" as the Duke's courtesan that Vindice reveals her as Gloriana (160). Middleton depicts the beauty and purity of both Vindice's former lover and England's dead queen as debased and decomposing. The play seems thus on one level a critique of James I; just as Vindice's Virgin Queen has been reduced to a rotting skull and disguised as a prostitute and contaminated with poison as a murder weapon, the Elizabethan Golden Age has been replaced by the decadence of the Jacobean court.

Moreover, Vindice's address of the skull as his "study's ornament" (1.1.15) simultaneously emphasizes his desire for vengeance and testifies to a perverse, obsessive interest in death and decomposition. The phrase indicates Vindice's objectification of the skull, implying his treatment of it as a decoration for his study (both his contemplation and his living quarters). His description of the skull as an "ornament" recalls the decoration, disguises, or cosmetics he condemns the courtiers for using; according to the *OED*, an "ornament" implies "an accessory or adjunct, primarily functional, but often also fancy or decorative" ("Ornament" def. 1a), frequently "used to adorn, beautify, or embellish" (def. 2a). In addition, Vindice's reference to the skull as a focus of his "study" hints at both perverse affection and obsession; the term connotes not only "an employment, occupation, [or] pursuit" ("Study" def. 2a) but also both "pleasure or interest felt in something" (def. 1) and "a state of mental perplexity or anxious thought" (def. 3a). Gloriana's skull appears to have had deranging effects on Vindice; not only has he coveted the skull in his house, but he demonstrates his habit of carrying it around and talking to it. Even Hippolito has grown accustomed to his brother's odd treatment of the skull; he appears unsurprised to find Vindice conversing with it, but his greeting to Vindice, "Still sighing

o'er death's vizard?" (1.1.50), indicates that he considers nine years an excessive period of mourning.

Although Vindice intends to emphasize Gloriana's purity in order to underscore his assertion of her chastity, his language has the effect of characterizing her as sexually provocative. Instead of confirming her virtue – including, as Vindice implies, her ability to resist the Duke's "palsey-lust" (1.1.34) – Gloriana's natural beauty ironically tempted "the uprightest man – if such there be, / That sin but seven times a day" (23-24) to "[make] up eight with looking after her" (25). In this corrupt court, which lacks any genuinely virtuous men, Vindice characterizes the most blameless courtiers as those who commit only the seven deadly sins every day. He also implies that Gloriana, an unusual example of virtue and chastity in this court, risked contamination exactly because her exceptional purity acted as a seductive attraction to the licentious courtiers; her beauty and virtue would have "excite[d] an eighth erection in 'the uprightest man'" (Sofer 109). Bragging about his lover's beauty, Vindice both demonstrates the incapacity of her purity to protect her and implicates Gloriana in licentiousness, even raising the possibility that she actively sought the courtiers' attentions.

Vindice further undermines his assertion of Gloriana's purity by boasting about the irresistibility of her sexual allure and by associating the heat of his lover's kiss with disintegration and liquidation. According to Vindice, Gloriana's beauty could have compelled "a usurer's son [to] / Melt all his patrimony in a kiss" (1.1.27-28) and "to have consumed" the wealth his father had spent fifty years acquiring (28). Vindice's specific language here contradicts his apparent effort to depict Gloriana as chaste and virtuous. Rather than associating her kiss with purity or transcendence, he links her kiss with financial expense and sexual

exchange,[5] as if casting her as a bought woman or a prostitute. Moreover, Vindice cannot disregard the furtive anxiety he remembers feeling over Gloriana's ability to inspire lust in the courtiers; he almost seems to characterize her as deceitful and sexually promiscuous. While "consuming" subtly suggests a rapacious appetite, the melting power that Vindice attributes to Gloriana's kiss evokes the heat of sexual ardor, even implying the "rapture or delight" of "sexual orgasm" ("Melt" *OED* def. 3e). Moroever, by depicting Gloriana's seductive attraction, Vindice hints at the threat she poses to the passing down of inheritance and patriarchal lineage; Vindice's description of Gloriana's ability to entice the licentious courtiers to risk their birthright for a chance to kiss her indicates her power to confuse the legitimacy and integrity of aristocratic descent. Later, plotting his revenge against the Duke, Vindice attempts to characterize the kiss of Gloriana's skull as both seductive and fatal. Just as Vindice described Gloriana's kiss using the image of melting patrimony, he now draws attention to her skull's capacity to cause physical disintegration through its contaminating kiss. The Duke writhes in agony as his "teeth are eaten out" by the poison (3.5.159), and Vindice mocks the carelessness of his "slobbering" kiss (163).

Vindice's acknowledgement of Gloriana's seductive beauty also suggests his fear that he cannot control her – a fear that he then responds to by disguising the skull as the Duke's prostitute. Applying poison to the skull's lips, Vindice intends to demonstrate the moral and physical corrosion that results from the Duke's lust, but in the process, he literalizes the sexual promiscuity he associated with Gloriana in his opening soliloquy. Vindice justifies his vengeful plan as an appropriate repayment of Gloriana's murder – he explains that the skull "shall bear a part / E'en in its own revenge" (3.5.100-01) – but he also expresses a deviant amusement in his artifice. Playfully engaging in imaginary repartee with the disguised skull, he demonstrates an

[5] In economic contexts, the verb "melt" means "to spend or squander (money)" (*OED* def. 7a).

enthusiasm for his ability to control the skull, as well as a flippancy regarding his disguising of it as a prostitute. As if interacting with a courtesan concerned about her reputation, Vindice imagines the skull inquiring about her meeting with the Duke. He pretends that the disguised skull has expressed concern over the secrecy of this liaison, and he responds, "Secret? Ne'er doubt us madam" (44). He also mocks his simulation of the skull's anxiety over the "disgrace" associated with prostitution (46) by replying, "'Tis the best grace you have to do it well" (47). In performance, an actor might deliver these lines with a bitter, furious tone to demonstrate Vindice's anger at the sexual promiscuity Gloriana exhibited while alive and to suggest that Vindice's elaborate plan to murder the Duke accomplishes revenge against not only the Duke but also Gloriana.

Despite Vindice's assertion that his poisoning of the Duke achieves an appropriate repayment for Gloriana's death, his method of revenge involves the same cosmeticization he denigrates the courtiers for practicing. Announcing, "I have not fashioned this [Gloriana's skull] only for show / And useless property" (3.5.99-100), Vindice contrasts the courtiers' use of makeup as artifice – "show" and "useless property," in Vindice's perspective – with his intention to disguise the skull as a tool in his vengeance of Gloriana's unpunished murder.[6] However, Vindice's disguising of the skull as the Duke's prostitute, as well as his contamination of the skull's lips, exemplify his treatment of human bodies as hollow and manipulable.[7] Treating the

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[6] Vindice's insistence that he has not disguised the skull "only for show" or "useless property" belies his efforts to confirm its status as "the site of stable referentiality," as Coddon puts it (86); in contrast, Vindice's manipulation of the skull renders it "a fetishized prop on which not reason but madness inscribes itself, . . . neither a body of pain nor of pleasure, but one of infinite utility" (86).

[7] As Annette Drew-Bear points out, poisons were used to make cosmetics during the early modern period: "The main ingredient of most face-whiteners, rouges, and lip salves was ceruse . . ., which was made by exposing plates of lead to the vapor of vinegar" (87). While the deterioration of the Duke's lips and teeth in *The Revenger's* may seem exaggerated, this decay

skull as "a plaything rather than a thing of honour," as Thomas Rist asserts (103), Vindice undermines the commemoration and vengeance of Gloriana he claims to enact with his poisoning of the Duke. Although Vindice rejoices in his "sweet, delectable, rare, happy, ravishing vengeance" (3.5.1), his excitement springs from his own devious ingenuity in disguising Gloriana's skull, rather than the ostensible resolution or justice he gains by avenging her death. With his dramatic presentation of this skull brought to life through cosmetics and disguise, he draws attention to the cleverness of his plan. As a result, Vindice's artistic manipulation of the skull arguably becomes more important than the significance of the skull's presence at this moment of revenge. Eager for an audience, he urges Hippolito, "You shall be witness brother, / Be ready, stand with your hat off" (33-34), and he displays his handiwork, boasting, "I have took care / For a delicious lip, a sparkling eye" (31-32). Vindice linguistically dismembers his creation. As Laurie Fink observes, his language demonstrates his tendency to partition Gloriana's separate body parts; through Vindice's objectification, his former lover is "dispersed into words, her body fragmented into a series of lifeless objects" (Fink 362).

In addition, by carelessly discarding the skull after using it as a murder weapon, Vindice further undermines his attempts to assert its symbolic value. Rather than meditating on the symbolism of the skull's role in the Duke's murder, Vindice ignores his earlier claims about its potential as a memento mori. On the contrary, Vindice's manipulation of the skull to trick and poison the Duke seems to spur him on to further bloodshed. Apparently abandoning the skull – this is its final appearance on stage – he plots against the inevitable succession of rivals to the

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recalls the corrosive effects of makeup decried by early modern moralists. In 1598, for example, Richard Haydocke asserted that women who wear makeup "doe quickly become withered and gray headed, because this doth so mightily drie up the naturall moisture of their flesh" (qtd. in Drew-Bear 87), and in 1616 Thomas Tuke observed that ceruse contributed to "the rotting of the teeth, and . . . unsauourie breath" (qtd. in Drew-Bear 87).

throne soon to arrive: “The dukedom wants a head, though yet unknown; / As fast as they peep up let’s cut ‘em down” (3.5.219-20). By describing the dukedom as decapitated, Vindice boasts about his clever ability to use Gloriana’s skull in avenging the Duke’s murder of her. In performance, an actor might display the skull while speaking these lines, as if to emphasize that the Duke’s lust caused him to lose his head literally; the Duke “want[ed]” to embrace a prostitute, but he kissed a skull instead. Although Vindice does not “cut” off the Duke’s head, his diction draws attention to the extraordinary mutilation he and his brother commit to the Duke’s face. The Duke’s corpse, his lips and teeth corroded away, remains on stage as a spectacle of violence (Vindice apparently carries it off stage with him to hide it in his living quarters, as he had done to Gloriana’s skull earlier). Moreover, by nailing down the Duke’s tongue and threatening to gouge out his eyes, Vindice and Hippolito render him (like Gloriana’s skull) susceptible to their violent, arbitrary whims.

Vindice is not the only character in *The Revenger’s Tragedy* who attributes significance to a dismembered body part. Just as he intends to treat Gloriana’s skull as a symbol of the meanings he attributes to it, which vary depending on his fluctuating motives, Ambitioso and Supervacuo interpret the “yet bleeding head” the officer carries on stage as a signifier of what they assume to be Lussurioso’s execution and as confirmation of their potential to succeed to the throne (3.6.35). Linking the two murder schemes, Middleton suggests that dismembered body parts are interchangeable. After Vindice congratulates himself for devising an elaborate scheme to murder the Duke, the new scene opens with Ambitioso asking Supervacuo, “Was not his execution rarely plotted?” in reference to what he assumes has been Lussurioso’s death at the hands of bribed jailers (1). Ambitioso’s opening line could be staged to maximize the potential for momentary confusion and dramatic irony; audience members must shift focus quickly from

one secret, meticulously planned murderous conspiracy to another. As it turns out, the brothers' piety is misguided not only because they are dissembling, but also because the head they are given belonged not to Lussurioso, but to the Younger Son. Furthermore, Gloriana's skull retains its thematic relevance even after Vindice discards it; Ambitioso and Supervacuo, unaware of the Duke's murder, make references to heads and brains that serve as reminders of Vindice's manipulation of Gloriana's skull. Ambitioso boasts that he had "thought on" the tricks of evading the judges and bribing the officers in order to effect Lussurioso's death (10), but Supervacuo mocks his brother for claiming responsibility for such plans, insisting that "like [Ambitioso's] brains," these plans probably would "ne'er . . . come out as long as [he] lived" (13-14). Middleton's implicit comparison between the two murder plots contributes to his characterization of this court as thoroughly depraved; more than one murder in this play could be described as "rarely plotted."[8] By associating Vindice's ambivalent and often abusive treatment of Gloriana's skull with Ambitioso and Supervacuo's self-centered assessment of the "yet bleeding head," Middleton characterizes Vindice's justification for murdering the Duke as hollow and selfish.

Middleton also takes advantage of the potential for dark comedy in this scene, a satirical denigration of idol worship. Ambitioso and Supervacuo treat the head as a type of relic; it induces them to feign sadness over the still unnamed courtier's death – in an aside, Ambitioso whispers to Supervacuo that a display of grief would "grace [their] flattery much" (3.6.37) – but they "dissemble" sorrow to mask their excitement at the prospect of succeeding to the throne

[8] Vindice and Ambitioso use similar diction to express their anticipation for their respective murder plots. Ambitioso's description of what he assumes has been Lussurioso's execution as "rarely plotted" recalls Vindice's excitement over his unusual and elaborate plot to gain vengeance; in the opening lines of the previous scene, Vindice exclaimed, "Oh sweet, delectable, rare, happy, ravishing!" (3.5.1), presumably in reference to his opportunity to avenge the Duke's murder of Gloriana.

(38). Ambitioso implies that the impulse to deceive stems from the severed head's status as a relic carrying the power to compel a demonstration of sorrow. Furthermore, the "yet bleeding head" in this scene becomes the gruesome focus of a dialogue replete with puns on the varying meanings of the words "pray" and "prayer." Ambitioso and Supervacuo, confident in their assumption that the severed head belonged to Lussurioso, mock his disposition in the face of execution. Feigning interest in the deceased courtier's frame of mind at death, Supervacuo asks, "How died he, pray?" (43), to which the Officer replies, "Oh full of rage and spleen" (43). And when the Officer reports that "In the stead of prayer / He [The executed courtier] drew forth oaths" (47), Ambitioso responds, "Then did he pray dear heart, / Although you understood him not" (48-49). As the Officer reveals, the Younger Son died screaming not prayers, but curses: "E'en at his last – with pardon be it spoke – / He cursed you both" (50-51). Ambitioso and Supervacuo regard the dismembered head not with the sincerity and genuine respect characteristically demonstrated by Catholic believers venerating relics; on the contrary, Ambitioso and Supervacuo ridicule the executed courtier's refusal to pray at the moment of death, and they mock what they assume to be Lussurioso's severed head, which remains on stage, a gruesome focal point during the brothers' sixty-line conversation.

Ambitioso and Supervacuo's regard for the decapitated head is thoroughly self-centered; each cherishes it as a signifier of his respective potential to succeed to the throne. Moreover, the brothers are misguided; confident in their assumption that the head belonged to Lussurioso, they fail to seek confirmation from the Officer, and they hypocritically shift the meanings they attribute to the head. On the one hand, they cherish the head as a signifier of their potential to take the throne and ridicule the deceased courtier's efforts to curse them at his death. Yet, on the other hand, at the revelation that the head fails to validate their ambitions, they renounce their

initial excitement at its decapitation and rebuke the officer presenting it to them. Lussurioso, "alive" (3.6.58) and "in health" (58), surprises Ambitioso and Supervacuo, interrupting their enthusiastic mockery of him and ironically praising them as "most deserving brothers" for effecting his release from prison (64). When the Officer reveals that the head he has been holding had belonged to the Younger Son, the brothers accuse him of deception and rebuke him using language carrying sacrilegious associations:

> Ambitioso: Our brother's [head]? Oh furies!
>
> Supervacuo: Plagues!
>
> Ambitioso: Confusions!
>
> Supervacuo: Darkness!
>
> Ambitioso: Devils! (73-74)

Cursing the officer's revelation of the head's true owner, these two conniving and malicious brothers ironically use diction typically reserved to condemn the same kind of irreverence and deceit they themselves demonstrated when mocking the deceased courtier's disposition at death. Ambitioso and Supervacuo hypocritically use the head as physical evidence testifying to their desires, until the revelation that it fails to signify the meaning they initially asserted. Middleton again recognizes the potential for macabre comedy; in an absurd echo of Vindice's use of Gloriana's skull as a murder weapon, Supervacuo, exclaiming, "Villain, I'll brain thee with it" (77), threatens to beat the officer with the Younger Son's severed head. The decapitated head at first derisively valued as evidence of Ambitioso and Supervacuo's unconfirmed assumptions becomes the source of potential violence and the object of a trite pun on brains and heads.

By comparison, Vindice's treatment of the Duke's corpse later in the play suggests his simultaneous objectification of it and his perverse identification with it. As if manipulating a

stage prop, Vindice uses the corpse to serve as the embodiment of a character that never existed, his alter ego, Piato. The corpse, which Vindice presumably retains in his apartment, proves useful, as he jokingly demonstrates. It provides Vindice a means to escape detection for the Duke's murder; he cleverly uses it to corroborate his story that it was Piato who killed the Duke, dressed his corpse to look like himself, and fled the court. Furthermore, the jocular attitude Vindice displays toward the corpse contributes to his objectification of it. Arranging the corpse to look like an intoxicated Piato, he mockingly warns Hippolito, "take heed you wake him not brother" (5.1.1), and he jokes that the corpse "leans well" (1). Yet, Vindice also seems ambivalent toward his manipulation of the dead body. Blurring distinctions between the corpse, Piato, and himself, he hints at the perverse bond he feels with the corpse: "I must stand ready here to make away myself yonder; I must sit to be killed, and stand to kill myself" (4-6). Here Vindice suggests that the Duke's disguised corpse might cause him to lose own identity. Specifically, Vindice's use of "make away" hints at the threat of self-erasure; the phrase denotes "to put a person out of the way" or "to put to death" ("to make away with" *OED* def. 1). As if parting with a fragment of his identity, Vindice allies himself with the Duke's corpse and subtly acknowledges the inevitability of his own death.

The Duke's dead body, a reminder of both his murder of Gloriana and of Vindice's subsequent revenge of that injustice, carries more personal significance for Vindice than a generic memento mori. Vindice simultaneously objectifies the Duke's corpse as a prop, thereby implying the fungibility of bodies and identities, and values it as physical evidence of his revenge. As if admiring his handiwork with a theatrical flourish, he displays the dead body as his alter-ego, saying to Hippolito, "Brother that's I: that sits for me: do you mark it" (5.1.4).

Although manipulating the corpse allows Vindice to avoid punishment for the Duke's murder, it also enables him to reveal his role in it.

As I have tried to show, Middleton implies that Vindice's adoration of his lover's skull smacks of the kind of relic worship that sixteenth-century Reformers condemned as idolatrous. Vindice's treatment of the skull amounts to a narcissistic manipulation of its symbolism, and his infatuation with its corporeality hints at a simultaneous attraction to and fear of perverse fleshly concupiscence. Although Vindice asserts that the skull serves as a reminder of Gloriana's natural beauty and purity, he fails to regard the skull as an inspiration to the prayerful contemplation of her purported virtue and chastity. In contrast, focusing on its physical appearance (both its current state of rot and its status as a memento of Gloriana's natural, non-cosmeticized beauty), Vindice exposes his fear and disgust of the seductive promiscuity he implies Gloriana displayed while alive.

Middleton suggests that Vindice neither enacts appropriate commemoration of his lover (as Reformed Protestant doctrine would promote), nor demonstrates his self-proclaimed moral purity. Vindice's admission of the Duke's murder at the play's end appears an arrogant attempt at self-commemoration. Vindice appears naïve not to expect punishment for killing the Duke, and his nonchalant acceptance of the death penalty seems to contradict the deception and cleverness he has used to avoid detection and to set traps for his victims throughout the play. He thinks of himself as a moral scourge; when Hippolito objects to Vindice's confession to killing the Duke, Vindice implies that he and his brother deserve execution, and he uses language tinged with religious overtones: "Thou hast no conscience: are we not revenged?" (5.3.110). Here, Vindice accepts the punishment of execution as providing appropriate order and justice. He implies that his admission of guilt points up the personal significance of his vengeance; the death

penalty he and his brother face, Vindice seems to boast, should be reserved only for such clever and meaningful crimes. He implies that by revealing his crimes, he achieves a self-commemoration based not on virtuous deeds, but on his role in the Duke's murder: "This murder might have slept in tongueless brass / But for ourselves, and the world died an ass" (115-16). He brags about his ability to eliminate the various successors to the throne, and he even agrees with the death sentence handed down, as if satisfied with his work as a revenger and a murderer: "Is there one enemy left alive amongst those? / 'Tis time to die when we are ourselves our foes" (111-12). Having put Gloriana to rest by avenging her unjust murder, and having ensured his sister's chastity, Vindice implies that his own death is justified by what Scott McMillin calls "the drive for compactness and finish," figured in "the moral issue of the self that has become its own enemy and is ready to die" (280).

Depicting Vindice's commemoration of Gloriana as rooted in a desire for vengeance, Middleton implies that idol veneration results in narcissistic moral righteousness and the omnipotent manipulation of bodily remains, rather than moral doubt or an existential fear of death. Vindice's abuse of Gloriana's skull as a manipulable object and a murder weapon provides a shocking response to Hamlet's complaint, "To what base uses we may return, Horatio!" (5.1.202). In contrast to Hamlet, who objects to the gravedigger's mishandling of the skulls and bones he unearths, Vindice covets his lover's skull for nine years and hides the Duke's corpse in his living quarters, putting both to "use" as props to serve his crimes. While Hamlet's melancholy is characteristic of excessive existential meditation – he broods over the absurdity that corporeal disintegration reduces even "imperious" (213) historical figures like Julius Caesar and Alexander the Great to "clay [that] / Might stop a hole to keep the wind away" (213-14) – Vindice's misguided, thoughtless abuse of bodily remains demonstrates a lack of meditative

reflection. Despite his insistence that he covets Gloriana's skull to avenge her unjust death and to commemorate her virtue, Vindice's treatment of it as a physical object is self-centered; he demonstrates neither moral anxiety over his torturous vengeance, nor existential fear of his own death. Unlike many other revengers, Vindice never expresses a moral dilemma regarding his murderous plan, and, after killing the Duke, he fails to reflect on Gloriana or on his satisfaction over his achievement of revenge. Through his depiction of Vindice's habit of attributing multiple, constantly shifting, meanings to the rotting skull of his lover, Middleton implies that the spectacular depiction of corpses and bodily dismemberment in early modern revenge tragedies has become an overused, generic convention.

Chapter Five: Corporeal Power and Authorship in *The Duchess of Malfi*

In *The Duchess of Malfi* (first performed at The Globe in 1612) John Webster is obsessed with bodies. Audiences cringe at images of bodies undergoing torture, suffering mutilation, and experiencing decomposition, and they are shocked by graphically bloody, violently dismembered body parts. The play's characters are both frightened by representations of dead bodies and attracted to decaying corpses dug up from graves. Elaborate and vivid descriptions of mutilation, burning, or dismemberment abound throughout this play. Bosola, for example, describes "a lady in France, that having had the smallpox, flayed the skin off her face, to make it more level" (2.1.28-29). Later in the play, Ferdinand imagines vengefully torturing the Duchess and her secret lover by "hav[ing] their bodies / Burnt in a coal-pit, with the ventage stopp'd" (2.5.68-69), or by "dip[ping] the sheets they lie in, in pitch or sulphur, / Wrap[ping] them in't, and then

light[ing] them like a match" (70-71). Ferdinand famously produces a dead hand he intends to use as an instrument of torture on the Duchess, and he creates wax statues of her husband and children in an attempt to scare her into submission. The play also uses grotesque terms to describe how bodies change. Bosola describes the "rotten and dead body" (2.1.60) humans try "to hide . . . in rich tissue" (61), and when he suspects that the Duchess has become pregnant, he imagines "the young springal cutting a caper in her belly" (2.1.155). Later in the play, Ferdinand apparently suffers from lycanthropy, a disease whose sufferers "imagine themselves to be transformed into wolves" (5.2.10), and he is reportedly seen "'bout midnight in a lane / Behind St. Mark's church, with the leg of a man / Upon his shoulder" (13-15).

While audiences may sympathize with the unfulfilled desire and the violent pain that the play's characters experience, the play's unique structure, often criticized for its inconsistencies, does nothing to ease audiences' sensibilities. The play's mysterious contradictions and the characters' confused motives contribute to a lack of overall structure, making audiences feel a desperate meaninglessness linked to action and intention. The play has long been faulted for its apparent disorganization, and the amount and variety of literary scholarship studying it testifies to how this play eludes artistic and critical stability. The play, which ends with a stage strewn with dead bodies, leaves audiences physically exhausted.

The Duchess of Malfi's early spectators generally considered it an artistically confused play made up of random acts of violence perpetrated by characters exhibiting inconsistent and unrealistic motives. In particular, early audiences accused Webster of disregarding the classical unities of time and place, especially charging him with mistakenly portraying the Duchess as having one child by the end of act two, and then, impossibly, as having two more by the

beginning of act three.[9] Often regarded as poetically inferior to his contemporaries, Webster traditionally has been considered eccentric in his use of violence. Most scholarship on this play, often highly varied and contradictory, questions the text's fundamental dramatic qualities, pointing to its jerky discontinuities, inconsistent character sketches, and superficial theatrical flourishes as evidence of Webster's dramatic incompetence. Such literary and stylistic weaknesses only contribute to confusion over questions concerning the intended reception of the themes and conflicts the play dramatizes.

In the early twentieth century, scholarship began to reinterpret such apparent organizational confusion in terms of Webster's intentional effort to develop themes and establish character. Many scholars now argue that Webster develops his characters as powerlessly ignorant inhabitants of a dark mist that threatens to swallow them. The fundamental questions that scholars have asked about individual responsibility and the repercussions of personal desire on the workings of social and political systems, for example, defy easy resolution, suggesting that Webster aims to complicate rather than to resolve such questions.[10] The play's disjointed structure and the outstanding lack of explanation for characters' motivations suggest that

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[9] As early as 1650, according to G. K. and S. K. Hunter, playgoers such as Abraham Wright objected to this anomaly as "against the laws of the scene" (35), and in 1735, Lewis Theobald, who based his play *The Fatal Secret* on *The Duchess*, claimed that Webster either was unaware of "rules," or "thought them too servile a restraint" (41). Later critics echo this sentiment; to mention only one outstanding example, William Archer describes the play as "a conspicuous example of the ramshackle looseness of structure and the barbarous violence of effect which characterized almost all the serious work of the period" (62).

[10] Charles Forker concludes that the play builds "an unresolved tension or philosophical dualism in which uncertainty and contradiction become the generative sources of tragic emotion" (365).

Webster portrays themes, such as the struggle between good and evil or between order and chaos, emblematically.[11]

Scholars such as Una Ellis-Fermor who defend the play's confused structure interpret its disjointed temporal movement and ambiguous character motives in terms of the conflicts between private desires and public responsibilities.[12] These critics relate the play's lack of structural coherence to the specific development of the Duchess's character and, more generally, to the responsibilities of political rules and the chaos that ensues when hierarchical social structures are overturned.[13] The play dramatizes the incompatibility of the longing to satisfy personal desires, usually illustrated as illicit and selfish, and the survival of political structures, typically characterized as upholding societal law and order. Scholars who read the Duchess as the play's main character debate her role as either heroine victimized at the hands of a patriarchal power structure or as a sexually promiscuous villain who, rebelling against social mores meant to preserve structure, brings about the chaos that the play thematically and aesthetically illustrates.[14]

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[11] Catherine Belsey describes *The Duchess* as "poised, formally as well as historically, between the emblematic tradition of the medieval stage and the increasing commitment to realism of the post-Reformation theater" (115).

[12] According to Ellis-Fermor, Webster pits "pseudo-Machiavellian protagonists" against "figures . . . who escape from this imprisonment of reasoned limitation into a wider, improved universe of the spirit" (170).

[13] Inga-Stina Ekeblad, defending the artistry of Webster's unique dramatic techniques in terms of his "ability to utilize the very impurity of his art" (263), analyzes the masque of madmen in 4.2 "as an ideograph of the dis-unity, the in-coherence, of the Duchess's world" (257). Similarly, T. B. Tomlinson suggests that "the 'prison' image of Act IV succeeds in presenting a new and particular attitude to living, a fresh statement of the familiar Elizabethan problem of clarity in chaos, vitality in destruction" (156).

[14] Clifford Leech, for example, criticizes the Duchess for her irresponsible "overturning of a social code," a specific example of the general "accumulation of structural flaws" the play exhibits aesthetically. Building on Leech's work, Joyce E. Peterson reads the play as a commonweal tragedy, concluding that the Duchess's "every action has been dictated by her

In contrast, scholars who read the play in terms of feminist theory sympathize with the Duchess as a heroine because she rebels against a patriarchal authority that tortures and objectifies her, while she merely asserts her right as a widow and her personal desire as a private individual.[15] The Duchess, who experiences life so fully as a heroic, though tragically doomed figure, insists on satisfying her own personal desires, despite her role as a public leader. This critical attention has sparked debates concerning the virtue of the Duchess's decision to rebel against her society's injunctions against remarriage, generating questions about the play's didactic nature.

Scholars often read the Duchess as an embodiment of a sensuality that reflects the intense fullness of life she exhibits, even if in an illicit affair.[16] Only recently, however, have scholars begun to examine links between this sensuality and the ubiquity of bodily imagery in *The Duchess*. For example, Katherine Rowe studies the relationship between the play's multiple references to witchcraft and the impact that the play's hand imagery has on willful agency. Her interest in how early modern revenge tragedies dramatize "fictional conversions of the self into property, turning hands and fingers into stage props" (109), closely parallels my analysis of the influence of mutilation on conceptions of autonomy. Unlike Rowe, however, I examine how

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desires and needs as a woman and a private person, not by her duties and responsibilities as a ruler" and that the play "bears out the dangers of unchecked individualism" (110).

[15] Theodora Jankowski points out that even though the Duchess fails to rule "as a woman sovereign," she challenges social views regarding "the representation of the female body and woman's sexuality" (81). Alternatively, Frank Whigham analyzes Ferdinand's incestuous desire for his sister as "a desperate expression of the desire to evade degrading contamination by inferiors" (191).

[16] Margaret Loftus Ranald describes the Duchess as "sensual in an affirmative sense as a representative of feminine procreative sexuality" (54), and Linda Woodbridge contrasts the Duchess's liberal sensuality with Ferdinand's "distaste for ordinary physicality" (170). As Woodbridge puts it, the Duchess defends desire as "wholesome" and as "something she believes in and is not ashamed of" (162): the Duchess "gives birth to four children, suffers from morning sickness, . . . sprawls all over the bed when she sleeps (3.2.13), . . . and enjoys sex" (170-71).

Webster's portrayal of bodily mutilation correlates with his intentionally dismembered dramatic structuring.

Even more significant to my analysis, scholars like Hillary M. Nunn and Sid Ray examine the play's depiction of corpses and dismemberment. Both Nunn and Ray point to the Duchess's strength in the face of grotesque brutality. Nunn, for example, characterizes the Duchess as heroic for quietly accepting her execution; the Duchess, according to Nunn, "glows with the aura of a chaste mother and sister, a woman untarnished by her socially transgressive marriage" (100). Ray echoes these sentiments, contrasting Ferdinand's mad lycanthropy with the Duchess's sanity and asserting that "Webster upsets gender stereotypes" by suggesting the Duchess "merits the position of rational 'head'" while her brother "aptly represents the chaotic 'body'" (136). Like Rowe, Nunn and Ray examine a sophisticated relationship between bodily violence in Webster's play and its effects on early modern views on agency. And yet it seems that few scholars have noticed the compelling links between Webster's purposeful development of a seemingly disorganized plot and his intentional depiction of bodily dismemberment, both of which contribute to audiences' discomfort watching and reacting to this unique play.

Those scholars who do argue for Webster's deliberate reinvention of dramatic techniques tend to gloss over the physical mutilation that would presumably trouble audiences just as much as the play's apparently disjunctive structure. For example, Susan McCloskey argues that *The Duchess* is "'about' the very problems of interpretation that so many readers seem to have with the text" (35). Webster's "alleged sloppiness," according to McCloskey, is in fact "a master playwright's experiment with the resources of his craft, with those sounds and images on which his play and all plays rely" (36). McCloskey examines how the Duchess's body and voice, which spectators see and hear, contribute to the play's challenges to literary interpretation, yet she

strangely does not address how the play's depictions of dismemberment may similarly affect an audience's response. Taking a different approach to the play, Huston Diehl suggests that spectators of this play "cannot help but attend to their own roles as watchers" (195). Diehl asserts that *The Duchess* stimulates "an anxiety about art and theater" (183) because the play is "deeply informed by English Calvinism" (182). But, focusing less on the impact of mutilation in the play and more on how Webster "invites [audiences] to consider the ways in which they are implicated in acts of looking, spying, and judging," Diehl's synthesis of audience response ignores vital links between bodily and structural dismemberment essential to a full understanding of this controversial play (200).

Many scholars agree that *The Duchess* challenges our interpretive abilities by compelling us to make sense of a play that lacks logical structural coherence, clear character motivations, and consistent thematic development. But, many plays complicate notions of audience response, and arguments focusing solely on audience reactions often fail to analyze the specific dramatic techniques that characterize complex plays. As I argue in this chapter, Webster distances audiences through the play's notorious dramatizations of dismemberment, both physically portrayed on stage and verbally described by angry or melancholic characters. Webster's portrayal of mutilation in a play with such an unconventional structure compels us to question our physical capacities as well as our interpretive abilities, two faculties by which we measure the control we wield. Exploring intersections between somatic imagery and character development, I wish to examine how three of the play's main characters associate bodily dismemberment with moral disintegration. First, I argue that Ferdinand, prohibited from acting upon his incestuous desires for his sister, betrays a fragmented identity by absenting himself from Malfi and by manipulating Bosola's willingness to act as his agent. Second, I contrast

Ferdinand's distant trepidation with the Duchess's self-confident determination to pursue her own carnal desire, a sexual longing perhaps less taboo than Ferdinand's but nonetheless unsanctioned by her brothers. Next, I study how Bosola, who simultaneously seeks political advancement and protests against the cruelty of Ferdinand's orders, describes his powerlessness in images of corporeal disintegration. Bodies, according to Bosola, undergo physical decomposition, just as honor disintegrates through ethical corruption. Finally, I suggest that John Webster portrays moral disintegration in terms of bodily mutilation in both The Duchess and the play's dedication to George Harding, Baron Berkeley. Comparing the sheets of his manuscript to the winding sheets that enwrap corpses in their graves, Webster envisions his art as a memorial to both himself and his patron. As Webster implies in both his play and his dedicatory epistle, bodily integrity signifies nothing less than personal honor and nobility.

Ferdinand

Ferdinand knows intimately the human capacity to make bodies wield power in various ways. His obsessive contemplation of grotesque forms of torture and execution exemplifies not only his longing to gain power over his sister and her secret lover but also his ability to wield that power. Ferdinand also recognizes that bodies can be made to perform; courtiers, for example, depend on their bodies to define their sense of identity based on the actions and modes of behavior generally expected of them. In this regard, even the sycophancy exhibited by the servants in the court at Malfi qualifies as a powerful activity, for although it demands a flattery that indicates a surrender of autonomy, it highlights the artificiality of rank and hierarchy, and it points to the power inherent in passivity. As Ferdinand knows perhaps better than the play's other characters,

the powerful ability to perform enables humans to exploit their bodies as disguises that hide identities and secrets.

Ferdinand's grotesque references to bodies and body parts reveal his angrily passionate and power-hungry character. But, expressing these corporeal images in vague, figurative terms, Ferdinand often hides his meaning in ambiguity. Early in the play, for example, he warns the Duchess against remarriage by threatening her with their "father's poniard" (1.2.250) and by implying its phallic resemblance: "women like that part, which, like the lamprey, / Hath nev'r a bone in't" (255-56). Ferdinand compels the Duchess to interpret his intentional double entendre out loud; she exclaims, "Fie sir!" (256), and Ferdinand is able to make himself seem innocently concerned for her physical safety and the preservation of her reputation: "I mean the tongue: variety of courtship; / What cannot a neat knave with a smooth tale / Make a woman believer?" (257-59). This exchange exemplifies how Ferdinand, using corporeal language, simultaneously feels control slipping away from him and asserts power over his sister. That he and the Cardinal threaten the Duchess here at the beginning of the play – long before Webster has hinted at a secret marriage between Antonio and the Duchess – demonstrates the brothers' fears of losing power. At the same time, however, by cleverly suggesting that he cannot control oral meaning or the ways in which other characters respond to him. Ferdinand self-conscioulsy exercises a diabolic authority over language. Apparently leaving his meaning ambiguous, Ferdinand can blame the Duchess for interpreting his misogynistic claims in sexual terms, and conflating the sexual with the oral, he can reinforce the visual power of his initial phallic imagery. In performance, an actor playing Ferdinand might even feign an innocent surprise at the Duchess's reaction to his vividly sexual language, eliciting from the Duchess the exact response that testifies to his depiction of her as a "lusty widow" (259).

Throughout the play, Ferdinand himself proves to be “a neat knave with a smooth tale” who knows how to disguise language. Manipulating language and forcing the Duchess to draw the sexual implication he leaves unstated, he gains power over his sister by simultaneously accusing her of promiscuity and passively hinting at the variability of interpretation. Ferdinand gains power through deception, in particular using his body to disguise his inner intentions and emotions. But, longing to wield power through direct action, he finds that his position at the court, a duke with servants who act in his place, disables him. For the most part, his actions are limited to threatening other characters and imagining vengeful action in which he longs to engage. Having constructed an identity based on deceit, he feels thwarted by his inability to take action for and by himself. For instance, expressing frustration over what he views as meaningless court games that entertain lower-class servants, he reveals his struggle to feign interest in insignificant activity even from the beginning of the play: “when shall we leave this sportive action, and fall to action indeed?” (1.2.9-10). Sarcastically ridiculing Castruchio, Ferdinand responds to the servant’s suggestion that the duke “should not desire to go to war, in person” (11-12) with a mocking aside: “Now for some gravity” (13). Ferdinand finds that his capacity as a political leader makes him no more than a mere figurehead; his courtiers expect him to follow certain conventional rules governing political hierarchy. When Castruchio claims that “it is fitting a soldier arise to be a prince, but not necessary a prince descend to be a captain” (14-15), Ferdinand takes this point of view to an extreme, asking why a prince “should . . . not as well sleep, or eat, by a deputy” (19-20) in order to “take idle, offensive, and base office from him” (20-21).

Suggesting that having servants act in his place undermines his capacity for individual agency, Ferdinand articulates a paradox underscoring the political hierarchy through which

courtiers develop a sense of identity: while he maintains authority by commanding them, he longs to wield unmediated power through personal action. Significantly, in his sarcasm Ferdinand recognizes an important difference between his private and his public personae, a difference that he acknowledges as necessary to a functional court. As he exemplifies during the play, only in private can he express his true identity in all its violent passion. In public he must adhere to the strict social codes that govern his role as a duke, suppressing his true self and appearing stoically official. Although the deceptive construction of this public persona frustrates Ferdinand, he acknowledges its power; as his exchange with Castruchio indicates, his courtiers thrive off of the formal appearance of appropriate order and proper behavior. Ferdinand expresses the construction of this false persona, which he recognizes as an exercise in deception, in corporeal terms. By virtue of the strict hierarchy his courtiers depende on for the construction of their identities, Ferdinand controls their actions, but in order to preserve that hierarchy, he must control his own body. However, Ferdinand feels threatened by the Duchess, whom he later reveals to be his sister, because he is suspicious of her passionate sensuality and because he longs to own her body.

Ferdinand is not the only character who notices the power of the Duchess's sensuality and doubts her capability to maintain the artificially formal appearance necessary of public leaders in Malfi. Antonio tells Delio that "She throws upon a man so sweet a look, / That it were able to raise one to a galliard / That lay in a dead palsy" (1.2.117-19). Already smitten, Antonio claims that "in that look / There speaketh so divine a continence, / As cuts off all lascivious, and vain hope" (120-22). Whether Antonio means to portray the Duchess of the "sweet . . . look" she "throws upon a man" as indicators of intentional promiscuity, Ferdinand clearly suspects her of transgressing the social code that widows disdain remarriage. Regarding the Duchess's body as

an extension of his own, Ferdinand warns her against the dangers of transgressing the strict social codes governing the appropriate behavior of court leaders.

Threatening the Duchess against remarriage and even comparing her to a whore, Ferdinand and the Cardinal reveal the importance of appearance to a political leader's ability to wield power. They urge their sister to "let not youth: high promotion, eloquence, . . . nor any thing without the addition, Honour, / Sway [her] high blood" (1.2.216-18). Articulating their characterization of the Duchess in terms of her body parts, the brothers play on the different definitions of "high blood." Even while they point to the respectable place the Duchess holds at court, they suggest that her feverishly willful nature makes her particularly susceptible to transgression. The brothers also link behavior with social class. When the Duchess protests that "Diamonds are of most value / They say, that have pass'd through most jewellers' hands" (220-21), Ferdinand responds, "Whores, by that rule, are precious" (222). While the Duchess thinks of her "value" in terms of wealth, Ferdinand describes her body ini terms of the physical qualities of debased flesh, sold in exchange for money and pleasure. Ferdinand's many sexual and corporeal references characterize his disdain of promiscuity and his longing to control his sister's body.

But, despite Ferdinand's passionate diatribes against his sister's secret affair, remarriage, and pregnancy, the actions that Ferdinand authorizes depende upon Bososla's agency. Ordering Bosola to "observe the Duchess, / To note all the particulars of her haviour" (1.2.173-74), Ferdinand himself, strangely inactive and distracted for most of the play, remains aloof and distant. Removing himself from the court at Malfi, Ferdinand maintains a shadowy, elusive presence, again and again refusing to articulate his motives for having the Duchess observed and later tortured. Practically invisible and resistant to honest self-expression, he plays the role

expected of the unseen, omnipotent ruler whose public appearance belies his inner intentions. As he tells Bosola, “He that can compass me, and know my drifts, / May say he hath put a girdle ‘bout the world, / And sounded all her quick-sands” (3.1.84-86). Acting through Bosola’s agency, Ferdinand’s secrecy contributes to the appearance of power he longs to maintain: physically absent himself, he remains omnipresent by delegating authority. Through deceit he ensures that the danger of detection constantly looms, even as he creates an atmosphere of false security. The specific command he gives Bosola to spy on the Duchess gains significance as the play develops. Ferdinand never demands ocular proof of the Duchess’s secret tryst, but his attitude toward the sense of sight proves complex. He strangely avoids the physical act of seeing, and although he never expresses it directly, he thinks of seeing as contagious, most often refusing to see the Duchess and Bosola when he plans to accuse of punish them. Indeed, after Bosola has fulfilled Ferdinand’s orders, the reality of the Duchess’s execution, proven by the sight of her corpse, a “true substantial body” (4.1.114), brings him to insanity.

After Ferdinand learns about the Duchess’s first pregnancy, he vows never to forget that “cursed day” (2.5.13) until he has physically gained revenge by “mak[ing] a sponge” of the Duchess’s “bleeding heart” (15) in order “to wipe . . . out” (16) his “memory” (14). He must rely upon his vivid imagination to describe his assumptions about the Duchess’s promiscuity and his violent desire for vengeance. Absent from the court at Malfi and unable to see the Duchess and her lover, Ferdinand uses language to fuel his anger and helplessness. Ferdinand vividly describes his longing to have his sister “hewed . . . to pieces” (2.5.31), but his frightening imagination reveals both the power and the futility of language. Even though he has not seen the Duchess with his eyes and despite the harmlessness of mere words, Ferdinand gains control over the Duchess by exaggerating her promiscuity and describing a vengeance of extreme violence.

Speaking to the Cardinal, he torments himself with what he formulates as the Duchess's satisfaction at her successful rebellion against him:

Ferdinand: Methinks I see her laughing,
Excellent hyena! Talk to me somewhat, quickly,
Or my imagination will carry me
To see her in the shameful act of sin.
Cardinal: With whom?
Ferdinand: Happily, with some strong thigh'd bargeman;
Or one o'th' wood-yard, that can quoit the sledge
Or toss the bar, or else some lovely squire
That carries coals up to her privy lodgings.
Cardinal: You fly beyond your reason.
Ferdinand: Go to, mistress!
'Tis not your whore's milk, that shall quench my wild-fire
But your whore's blood. (2.5.38-49)

Ferdinand's imagination dwells on his elaborate conceptions of the Duchess's sexuality, but his language betrays his real concern, which involves power and bodies. At first describing how the Duchess's promiscuity ridicules him as a cuckold and mocks his noble rank, Ferdinand urges the Cardinal to distract him before his imagination "car[ries him] / To see her in the shameful act of sin." Ferdinand himself realizes the power of language and knowledge; treating Bosola's letter as definite evidence of the Duchess's challenge to his warnings against remarriage, he anxiously struggles against the overwhelming power of his imagination, which threatens to rob him of the power of expression. In performance, an actor might even reach out for the Cardinal while

pleading, “Talk to me somewhat, quickly,” as if in a visible gesture of the inner turmoil hinting at a powerlessness that is physical as much as it is psychological.

In fact, Ferdinand’s consequent formulation of detailed images of the Duchess having sex with lower-class working men constitutes his attempt to regain control over his language and the Duchess’s body. Fundamentally corporeal images such as the “strong thigh’d bargeman” or “one o’th’ wood-yard” serve as strikingly tangible and precise descriptions of a powerfully artistic imagination that Ferdinand strains to control. At the same time, the pun on “quoit” (44) and the playful double entendre of “some lovely squire / That carries coals up to [the Duchess’s] privy lodgings” (45-6) show an intricate attention to detail. Ferdinand struggles to construct knowledge in bodily terms, but his inability to describe his emotions precisely betrays an ambiguous relationship with language. His imagination reveals a mind artistic enough to use consciously suggestive word play to describe the Duchess’s betrayal of her rank, but it is exactly this colorful, precise language that torments him, implying as it does the lack of physical power he wields over his sister. Anticipating the satisfaction of revenge, Ferdinand proclaims that his “wild-fire” will be “quench[ed]” not by the Duchess’s “whore’s milk” but by her “whore’s blood.” While breast milk conventionally signifies nourishment, blood often indicates injury or death. In this context, Ferdinand hints at the sexual nature of his “wild-fire,” suggesting the quenching of lust as well as vengeance. The promiscuity he attributes to his sister implies a tainting of his blood as well as hers, since they are twins and presumably shared blood in the womb and milk when children.

Ferdinand concludes with the decision that he “will only study to seem / The thing [he is] not” (2.5.63-4). He plans to gain control over the Duchess by feigning ignorance of her affair, refusing to listen to her anxious plea for “private conference with” (3.1.46) him about “a

scandalous report . . . spread / Touching [her] honour" (47-8). Ferdinand insists, "Let me be ever deaf to't" (48), reassuring the Duchess that he regards rumor as nothing more than "paper bullets, court calumny, / A pestilent air, which princes' palaces / Are seldom purg'd of" (49-51). Convincing the Duchess that even if such rumors "were true" (51), Ferdinand claims that his "fix'd love / Would strongly excuse, extenuate, nay deny / Faults were they apparent in" her (52-4). By playing roles, Ferdinand hides knowledge and controls others' actions, but role-playing also compels him to efface his own identity, empowering Bosola and other servants as agents of his will. As has been noted, his frequent absence from the court and his evasive conniving indicate a denial of not only his sister's affair but indeed of his sister herself. As if unable to bear the sight of the Duchess, he cuts her short with a false reassurance of forgiveness and a longing not to see her.

When Ferdinand finally does visit the Duchess in her bedchamber, he surprises her. After Antonio and Cariola trick the Duchess by "steal[ing] forth the room" (3.2.54), Ferdinand appears "*unseen*" (according to the stage direction) and overhears the Duchess speaking of his "presence [. . .] in court" (64). After offering the Duchess a "*poniard*" with which to kill herself, Ferdinand refuses to listen to the Duchess, ordering her, "Do not speak" (75). Suggesting that the physical senses contribute to knowledge, he threatens the hidden Antonio, "Whate'er thou art, that hast enjoy'd my sister, / (For I am sure thou hear'st me), for thine own sake / Let me not know thee" (91-3). Ferdinand gains control by resisting the visible, damning impact of corporeal presence; he announces his anger and threatens punishment precisely by refusing to see. He warns, "I would not for ten millions / I had beheld thee" (96-7) because "it would beget such violent effects / As would damn" them both (95-6), and he orders the Duchess to keep the unknown man hidden from sight: "I would have thee build / Such a room for him, as our anchorites / To holier

use inhabit" (102-04). He concludes by telling the Duchess, "You have shook hands with Reputation, / And made him invisible. So fare you well" (135-6), promising not once but twice, "I will never see you more" (137, 141).

In fact, Ferdinand does not see the Duchess until he views her corpse. Even when he offers her the dead hand in act four, he orders that "neither torch nor taper / Shine in [the Duchess's] chamber" (25-6), since "once he rashly made a solemn vow / Never to see [her] more; he comes i'th' night" and darkness (23-4). The dead hand serves as an agent of Ferdinand's actions; just as Bosola has acted for Ferdinand during the play, this rotting and dismembered body part acts as a barrier to the horrifying, tangible nature of truly unmediated physical touch. As if the inability to see or feel protects him from contagion, Ferdinand disables himself out of a longing to deny the grotesque reality of the torture he administers. After the Duchess's execution, Bosola commands Ferdinand, "Fix your eye here" (4.2.255), to which he responds, "Constantly" (255). Bosola urges "pity" (252), asking Ferdinand, "Do you not weep?" (255) and characterizing "murther" (256) as a crime that not "only speak[s]" (256) but that "shrieks out" (256). As if transfixed by the sight, Ferdinand orders Bosola, "Cover her face. Mine eyes dazzle: she di'd young" (259). Unlike his refusal to see the Duchess more during her life, he cannot deny his sister's corpse by refusing to look at it; only eight lines later, he asks to "see her face again" (257). Until now, Ferdinand has relied upon his powers of imagination and description, both horrible yet abstract, to satisfy his desire for vengeance. Now, however, he longs for an excuse to deny that which his sight confirms, the tangible, undeniable corpse in front of him. Even at this sight, Ferdinand can convince himself of his innocence, and turning to the agent of his orders, he accuses Bosola of "not pity[ing]" the Duchess (267), pleading insanity: "I

bad thee, when I was distracted of my wits, / Go kill my dearest friend, and thou hast done't" (273-4).

Despite Ferdinand's attempts to refuse seeing and being seen, the effects of the violence he authorizes are complex. Although he continually refuses to see, Ferdinand's ability to deny or ignore the power of sight can have the effect of intensifying the violence he imagines or commands, as William Hamlin suggests: "Ferdinand's 'spectacle' reveals his sadistic obsessiveness, his desire to multiply images of horror exponentially, so that not only the theme but its elaborate and voyeuristic variations may reverberate through his own and his sister's imaginings" (215). Webster complicates audiences' reactions to the visual sensationalism Ferdinand orchestrates by portraying that violence as simultaneously powerless in its artificiality and grotesque in its dramatic suggestiveness. Furthermore, Ferdinand's consequent insanity only undermines his confidence that he shocks and controls the Duchess; Ferdinand's dead hand, like his employment of Bosola and his refusal to see, distances him from unmediated physical touch and effective action. Yet, at the same time, willful detachment offers no sanctuary for Ferdinand (or for audiences). His denial of any responsibility for his sister's execution makes no sense, despite his attempts to look away from Bosola, the agent of his orders. Ferdinand's refusal to see contributes to the threateningly distant nature that contributes to the appearance that he wields omnipotence, but his determination not to see points to a desire to ignore reality, characterizing him as disengaged from action.

The Duchess

The Duchess's spontaneity indicates a fullness of life as much as a restless dissatisfaction with it, and her body, constantly changing and expanding, physically represents these characteristics.

Her body is the object of voyeuristic observation throughout the play, not only because Bosola, Ferdinand, and the Cardinal are suspicious of her sexuality but also because she herself understands gesture and action in terms of power. From the beginning of the play, her identity is described in terms of her attractive body. In Antonio's introduction of her, he highlights how "she throws upon a man so sweet a look, / That it were able to raise one to a galliard / That lay in a dead palsy" (1.2.117-19). Attributing to that "sweet . . . look" a virtue unmatched by any of the other characters he introduces, Antonio claims that it "speaketh so divine a continence, / As cuts off all lascivious, and vain hope" (121-2). Ferdinand and the Cardinal, who early in the play expose the Duchess's sensuality, warn her against remarriage even before audiences have seen any evidence of her rebellion; describing those who "will wed twice" (1.2.219) as "most luxurious" (218) and depicting the "joys" (244) of the "marriage night" (243) in terms of "lustful pleasures" (245), the two brothers disdain the temporary pleasures of the flesh, and in their elaborate warnings to the Duchess, they depict her nature in deeply sensual terms.

During the course of the play, the Duchess expresses her desires through bodily movement and observation more than through speech. Her marriage proposal to Antonio, for example, depends on a formal ceremony that she shapes through gesture more than through verbal expression. Pointing out that "one of [Antonio's] eyes is bloodshot" (1.2.323), she encourages him to "use [her] ring" (323) to "help [his] eyesight" (327). When Antonio protests that the Duchess has "made [him] stark blind" (328), he explains that he sees "a saucy and ambitious devil / . . . dancing in this circle" (329-30), and she responds by putting the ring on his finger. When he kneels at this gesture, she forces him to stand, insisting, "This goodly roof of yours, is too low built, / I cannot stand upright in't, nor discourse, / Without I raise it higher" (333-35). Literally raising Antonio to her own level, the Duchess physically illustrates the

manner by which her marriage proposal raises Antonio to her social status, representing a breach of conventional custom. The ritualistic aspect of the ceremony engineered by the Duchess imitates that of the theater itself, a formal representation of action. As if an audience member, Antonio uses language that describes the viewing of an elaborate performance; he relies on the Duchess, the most active character in this scene, to aid his sight, as if seeking an interpretation of her proposal to him.

Like Ferdinand, the Duchess understands the power of an artificial public persona as a means of maintaining the appearance of power. Explaining her unconventional breach of custom as "the misery of" those who "are born great" (1.2.357), she argues that only through deception can she gain her deepest desires and satisfy her "violent passions" (361). Yet, she also seeks an honest method of expressing her truest desires through a mode of action that does not deceive. The Duchess describes her compulsion to "leave the path / Of simple virtue" (362-63) in terms of a loss of autonomy; according to the Duchess, she is

> . . . forc'd to express [her] violent passions
>
> In riddles, and in dreams, and leave the path
>
> Of simple virtue, which was never made
>
> To seem the thing it is not. (361-64)

Her concept of "simple virtue" certainly seems naively foolish in a court full of power-hungry deceivers, but it also colorfully illustrates an uncompromising demand for total sincerity, even in a physical sense; the Duchess wants to experience desire at its "simplest," most fundamentally corporeal level. She rebels against the suppression of her passion with a self-confidence she wishes to bestow on Antonio, encouraging him to accept her love as sincere and worthy of the

risk it carries: “Make not your heart so dead a piece of flesh / To fear, more than to love me” (367-68). She insists on the intensity of her sincere passion: “This is flesh and blood, sir, / ‘Tis not the figure cut in alabaster / Kneels at my husband’s tomb” (369-71). Valuing material, fleshly existence over artificially constructed social customs, the Duchess revels in the intensity of her passionate sensuality and makes use of vivid corporeal imagery to urge Antonio to action.

While Ferdinand manipulates language and uses deception to gain control over others, the Duchess locates meaning and power in her ability to construct a sincere selfhood in bodily gesture. And while Ferdinand attempts to establish a sense of identity based on his use of language as a tool to control others, the Duchess, who consistently ignores the artificiality of formal ceremony and court life, aims to achieve her personal desires through physical expression. Although the Duchess is not the only character who is spied on, she is observed not only for punitive purposes but also because she insists that physical activity provides an unmediated, sincere expression of her selfhood, exactly the powerful expression of identity Ferdinand longs to achieve. Ferdinand, who recognizes the significance the Duchess places on bodily sensations, takes advantage of her identification of herself as “flesh and blood” when he plans to torture her by handing her a dead hand. Exploiting the contrast between the Duchess, the most vital character in the play, and a dismembered, dead body part, Ferdinand hopes to characterize the Duchess as an ineffectual, powerless victim. Although Ferdinand tricks her in darkness, in this scene the Duchess herself, reaching out for and even kissing the dead hand, refuses to accept Ferdinand’s attempt to reduce her to a mere passive victim.

The dead hand serves as a powerful weapon of torture. As a dismembered body part and a dead piece of flesh, it foreshadows the Duchess’s death, and, as a dead hand in particular, it signifies to the Duchess her own impotence in the face of Ferdinand’s torture. However, as we

have already observed, Ferdinand's refusal to touch the Duchess with his own hands, suggesting a certain distance between agent and subject, implies his lack of power; Ferdinand chooses a dead hand, as opposed to any other grotesque tool of torture, as a parody of the Duchess's marriage ceremony, but his choice, adumbrating the lycanthropy to which he later succumbs, also reflects his inability to control his sister and his own body.

Just as the dismembered, decaying hand indicates separation and disability, the scene in general dramatizes deceit and misunderstanding. Both Ferdinand and Bosola elaborately establish a setting fraught with the expectation that Ferdinand sincerely wants to "reconcile himself" to the Duchess (4.1.27), but the action of the scene parodically overturns that expectation. Acting as Ferdinand's spokesman, Bosola orders the Duchess to allow "neither torch nor taper [to] / Shine in [her] chamber" (25-26) because Ferdinand "once made a solemn vow / Never to see [the Duchess] more" (23-24). Bosola compels the Duchess to expect a ritualistic ceremony in which Ferdinand "will kiss [the Duchess's] hand" (26), but ironically, it is the Duchess who will kiss the dead hand that Ferdinand will hold out to her. Asking Ferdinand's "pardon" as soon as he enters, the Duchess attempts to control the conversation in a sincere attempt at reconciliation (4.1.30). When Ferdinand refers to the Duchess's children as "cubs" (33) and "bastards" (36), she boldly warns him not to "violate a sacrament o'th' Church" (38). And when Ferdinand, speaking cryptically, offers "a hand, / To which you [the Duchess] have vow'd much love" (43-4), she reaches for it. In the darkness of her chamber, the Duchess believes that the hand is her brother's warm, active hand still connected to his body. She reaches for him in the hopes of connecting with a piece of his body, attributing to the gesture of a kiss and the flesh she grabs the power of communication. But this hand is not attached to his body, as she imagines it to be, and the play once again unsettles the hope for the stability of meaning.

Ferdinand intends to frighten and torture the Duchess with the dead hand, but despite her dark confinement, she is not a helpless victim; in fact, the Duchess, unaware that the hand that Ferdinand extends is dismembered and decaying, reaches out to kiss it "affectionately" in an act of kindness or penance (45).

The Duchess's reaching for the dead hand affects audiences on a visceral level. Sympathetic toward the Duchess and held in suspense in this frightening scene, we are almost lulled into believing that she will gain reconciliation with Ferdinand, and theater-goers and readers alike, who know before the Duchess does that Ferdinand is extending not his own hand but a bloody, dismembered hand, brace themselves as she not only touches it but kisses it. The Duchess expresses concern over the possibility that Ferdinand may be ill, pointing out how "cold" the hand feels (4.1.51), and her understatement only contributes to the audience's suspense, since they see on stage a hand not only "cold" but also grotesquely decayed and toxic. The Duchess's ironic understatement also intensifies the power of her surprise at the realization of the true nature of the hand she has touched and kissed: "Ha! Lights: Oh horrible!" (53). As Ferdinand sarcastically gloats over what he views as a triumphant punishment of his sister, the pace of the play immediately revives in almost absurd fashion; he orders that the Duchess be given "lights enough," and the room is illuminated to reveal the spectacle of the wax statues representing the corpses of Antonio and the children (53).

Webster in *The Duchess of Malfi* depicts bodies as simultaneously vulnerable and powerful, as horrific as they are attractive, and both capable signifiers and ineffective tools. Trying to control her fears and gain power over her enemies, the Duchess, who associates her identity with physical sensation, uses her sense of touch to comprehend the darkness that surrounds her and the hand that Ferdinand thrusts in front of her. Thus defusing Ferdinand's

cruelty, the Duchess challenges his assumption that he has trapped and disabled her, but, horrified at the exposure of the gruesomely dead and dismembered hand she has been tricked into kissing, she recoils from the deception with which Ferdinand mocks her gesture toward reconciliation. The Duchess appears tragically heroic in her uncompromising demand for the authority to define her own identity, based in terms of bodily touch, visual observation, and sexual procreation, but her attempt to interpret, or to construct meaning on her own, fails miserably.

Whether viewed as courageous, naïve, or egotistical, the Duchess relentlessly takes action based on her desires in a play in which other characters, mired in a world of sycophancy and hypocrisy, seemingly accomplish nothing but crime. The Duchess longs to establish human relationships, but the hand that Ferdinand offers her, dismembered and displaced from its proper place of burial, communicates only disease and disability. As a result, this dead piece of decaying flesh resists even the Duchess's kiss, intended as an attempt to interpret or connect with her brother. As we shall see, she herself is consumed both by a pregnancy that fatally gives away her secrets and by voyeuristic characters who attempt to rob her of individual agency.

Bosola

The paradoxes of Bosola's nature reveal important parallels between human and political bodies essential to the play's themes. Bosola depends upon the same hierarchical structure that he cynically disdains. While he recognizes that in order to advance at court he "must do / All the ill man can invent" (1.2.195-96), he relies upon his status as a servant to develop his sense of identity. He dwells on physically grotesque aspects of human existence, describing how "we bear about us / A rotten and dead body" and characterizing the Duchess's pregnant body in terms of

an illness (2.1.59-60). Yet, after the Duchess dies, he paradoxically considers her corpse a "fair soul" (4.2.336) capable of bringing him "out of this sensible hell" (337). He recognizes similarities between his role as a servant and the parasites that contribute to the decomposition of human bodies, but he continues to work as Ferdinand's paid henchman, until Ferdinand refuses to reward him. He acknowledges that by taking Ferdinand's "bounty" (1.2.192) he becomes a "villain" (194), yet he acts as if he has no choice but to enslave himself to Ferdinand, and his disappointment at Ferdinand's denial of payment indicates how the disintegration of the hierarchy on which he relies for a living leads to a crisis of identity.

Even from the beginning of the play Bosola dwells on themes concerning political hierarchy and fleshly decomposition. Describing Ferdinand and the Cardinal as "plum trees, that grow crooked over standing pools" (49-50) that "none but crows, pies, and caterpillars feed on" (51-52), he admits that, given the chance, he also would live off of them: "Could I be one of their flatt'ring panders, I would hang on their ears like a horse-leech, till I were full, and then drop off" (52-54). He describes the structure of courtly hierarchy in terms of sicknesses or injuries, claiming that "places in the court are but like beds in the hospital, where this man's head lies at that man's foot, and so lower and lower" (66-68). Although Bosola knows that the "flatt'ring panders" he mocks profit from their parasitic behavior, he also describes them as disabled and hospitalized. They have no choice but to thrive as flatterers, and as servants they cannot author their own actions.

Bosola describes the physically decomposing human body in similarly disabled and sick terms. He aims his cynicism specifically at the hypocrisy at the court of Malfi, but he also recognizes a general corruption in the value humans place on the false appearance of hierarchical

superiority. Expressing disdain for the human attempt to conceal corruption with a false veneer of virtue, he imagines grotesque bodily rot and dismemberment taking place even during life:

> Man stands amaz'd to see his deformity,
> In any other creature but himself.
> But in our own flesh, though we bear diseases
> Which have their true names only tane from beasts,
> As the most ulcerous wolf, and swinish measle;
> Though we are eaten up of lice, and worms,
> And though continually we bear about us
> A rotten and dead body, we delight
> To hide it in rich tissue (2.1.53-61)

Bosola contends that, deluded by the illusion of our superiority over "beasts," we trust insistently in our perception of autonomy that belies our physical chemistry. Bosola's imagery recalls his earlier descriptions of the parasitic relationship between courtiers and leaders. The court cynic and melancholy malcontent, he ridicules other servants at Malfi for what he views as their deluded and ineffectual sycophancy. He thinks of himself as better than them because he willingly enslaves himself to Ferdinand, as if he can avoid responsibility for doing no more than following orders. Just as the "lice, and worms" he imagines "eat" away at human bodies, he depends upon Ferdinand, claiming to follow the duke's orders in the hopes of political advancement. He implies that he rises above the hypocrisy at court precisely by acknowledging his role in this corruption.

Dwelling on the fleshly, physical aspects of human existence, he almost never mentions concepts such as soul or spirit, until he is faced with the Duchess' corpse and realizes that

Ferdinand has gone insane. The hypocrisy Bosola betrays with his sudden attribution of spirituality to the Duchess's corpse reveals his inconsistency and untrustworthiness, but it also emphasizes his desire to draw meaning from that which is visible. When alive, the Duchess harbored secrets, deceiving Ferdinand and Bosola by hiding her pregnancy, and Bosola, linking deception with sickness, describes the Duchess's pregnant body as diseased: "I observe our Duchess / Is sick a-days, she pukes, her stomach seethes, / She wanes i'th' cheek, and waxes fat i'th' flank" (2.1.66-69). The Duchess's body, here imagined as ill, becomes a fitting object of Bosola's voyeurism; while the Duchess attempts to hide her secret, she cannot stop her body from betraying her. Bosola, throughout the play demanding sincerity and condemning hypocrisy, sees nothing fruitful about the Duchess's body. His description of her as "sick" immediately follows his diatribe against the Old Lady and Castruchio, and in both speeches he focuses his anger on false appearances. Bosola seems to believe that his bold acknowledgment of his complicity in the court's corruption can at least save him from participating in the same hypocrisy of which he accuses the other courtiers, so audiences might be surprised when he expresses shock at Ferdinand's betrayal of him.

Bosola recognizes that Ferdinand's "curs'd gifts would make / [Ferdinand] a corrupter, [and himself] an impudent traitor" (1.2.185-86), and he longs for a specific, honest definition of his role in the court: "what's my place? / The provisorship o'th' horse? say then my corruption / Grew out of horse dung. I am your creature" (206-08). Longing to please Ferdinand, Bosola describes the contradictions that come along with playing the role of the "true servant" (4.2.327), claiming that he "served [Ferdinand's] tyranny: and rather strove / To satisfy [him] than all the world" (323-24). Although he consciously decides to follow Ferdinand's orders, he also implies that servants have no choice about their positions or the actions they must take in order to thrive

at court. Calling himself Ferdinand's "creature," Bosola participates in the same corruption he condemns, yet he also longs to justify his actions by claiming that he does no more than execute Ferdinand orders. He treats powerlessness as a necessary excuse for his participation in actions that he acknowledges as cruel later in the play. The imagery of bodily decomposition that he consistently refers to as illustrative of inner corruption reflects this general human powerlessness. Bosola exemplifies this attitude again when, much to Ferdinand's dismay, he expresses his belief that "there hath been some sorcery / Us'd on the Duchess" (3.1.63-64), suggesting that "there's power in potions, or in charms" (67). He describes human action as futile, lamenting at his accidental murder of Antonio, "We are merely the stars' tennis-balls, struck and banded / Which way please them" (5.4.53-54) and exclaiming at his own death, "Oh this gloomy world, / In what a shadow, or deep pit of darkness / Doth, womanish, and fearful, mankind live?" (5.5.99-101). Despite his attempts to right his wrongs, Bosola dies believing that individual autonomy is no more than a tempting illusion. His description of humans living in "a shadow" recalls Plato's cave, implying that we can only ever grasp at power and knowledge. His depiction of the "gloomy world" as a "deep pit of darkness" describes life in terms of the graves in which we are buried at death.

Bosola follows Ferdinand's orders, regarding them as a guide by which he might develop a sense of identity, even though he recognizes the corruption in which he necessarily participates. Realizing he has been cheated, Bosola articulates the contradictions of servitude: "though I loath'd the evil, yet I lov'd / You [Ferdinand] that did counsel it" (4.2.325-26). Thus denied reward and accused of murder, Bosola rejects Ferdinand as "much distracted" and invests now in the Duchess's corpse, which revives after Ferdinand leaves the stage. Instead of clinging to Ferdinand as an authoritative figure, Bosola now attributes redemptive powers to the Duchess's

dead body; referring to the corpse before him as a "fair soul" (336), he urges the Duchess to "Return . . . from darkness, and lead mine [Bosola's soul] / Out of this sensible hell" (336-37).

Bosola expresses the disintegration of his sense of identity in terms of the physical disintegration of bodies. Fully realizing Ferdinand's betrayal, he sarcastically exclaims, "Your brother and yourself are worthy men; / You have a pair of hearts are hollow graves, / Rotten, and rotting others" (4.2.312-14). Shocked at the Duchess's momentary revival, he imagines a grotesque self-sacrifice in his longing to resuscitate her fully, claiming, "Upon thy pale lips I will melt my heart / To store them with fresh colour" (338-39). He laments "that we cannot be suffer'd / To do good when we have a mind to it" (353-54), claiming that his "tears" (356) signify a "manly sorrow" (355) that "never grew / In [his] mother's milk" (356). Openly expressing guilt over the Duchess's murder and shame over his tearful show of weakness, Bosola attributes to the Duchess's corpse those qualities often associated with mothers, such as caring, inspiration, and nurturing. His reference to "mother's milk," which directly contrasts with Ferdinand's earlier exclamation that the Duchess's "whore's milk" will not "quench [his] wild-fire" (48), reveals Bosola's desire for a mother figure. Surprised and ashamed by his tears, Bosola regrets following Ferdinand's orders and wonders "where . . . / These penitent fountains [were] while she [the Duchess] was living" (4.2.358-59). He determines to "somewhat . . . speedily enact / Worth [his] dejection" (368-9). For Bosola the Duchess's body, a unified whole even in death, "is a sight / As direful to [his] soul as is the sword / Unto a wretch hath slain his father" (360-62). Making the corpse a symbol of his longing for vengeance, he promises to "deliver" (364) it "to the reverend dispose / Of some good women" (365-66).

As we shall see, in Bosola's final lines, lamenting over the "shadow, or deep pit of darkness" (5.5.100) in which, "womanish, and fearful, mankind live[s]" (101), he implies "the

widespread uncertainty evoked by the play's closing scenes: there may be forms of goodness and justice, but they appear to be inapprehensible – and all the more so when desperately sought" (Hamlin 213-14). According to Hamlin, Bosola's experiences only confirm his initial suspicions about the meaninglessness he expresses when he describes courtly competition for advancement in terms of bodies being eaten alive by parasites. He decides "he will imitate neither 'things glorious' nor 'base,' but simply stand as his own example," a "solipsism" that "reflects his sense that terrestrial virtue is a chimera, a dream" (214). As has been noted, Bosola intentionally renounces the quest for virtue: "Let good men, for good deeds, covet good fame, / Since place and riches oft are bribes of shame" (1.2.210-11). His conclusion that "sometimes the devil doth preach" (212) indicates his resignation to "do[ing] / All the ill man can invent" (195-96). When he follows Ferdinand's orders, he acknowledges that "these curs'd gifts would make" (185) him "an impudent traitor" (186) and "take [him] to hell" (187). Elaborately calling attention to his self-pity, he rejects his own capacity for virtue, and, carrying around corpses, he ends up acting out the baseness he sees in himself.

Conclusion: the play, authorial intention, and audience response

As its long critical history shows, *The Duchess of Malfi* resists stable interpretation. The play's disjointed structure parallels its depiction of mutilated human bodies, demanding sophisticated responses from audiences who view or read it. Participating in publication, Webster makes his play available to diverse audiences and draws attention to the interpretive difficulties involved in reading or watching this complex play.

Webster's surviving remarks on the theatrical reception of his plays, *The White Devil* in particular, reveals his discomfort with the unstable relationships between authors and audiences.

Much like Ferdinand's inconsistent orders and vividly illustrative imagination, Webster's works often produce varied and even contradicting interpretations, but Webster himself acknowledges the complexity of authorial intention. In his preface to *The White Devil*, which was first performed a year or two before he wrote *Malfi*, Webster criticizes his play's audience as "ignorant asses (who visiting stationers' shops their use is not to inquire for good books, but new books)" (8-10, "To the Reader"). Implying that the subtlety of his art demands attention, Webster compares the spectators who frequent the Red Bull with readers who buy books only because they want to appear fashionable.

Webster allies himself with writers like William Shakespeare, Ben Jonson, and others of his contemporaries, whose works also had been printed: "In publishing this tragedy, I do but challenge to myself that liberty which other men have ta'en before me" (1-2, "To the Reader"). Webster hints at the significance of publication by comparing himself with those "other men" and by implying that printing his work is both a privilege and a risk. Publication allows Webster to control certain textual aspects of his work, such as language and syntax, but it also enables him to expose his art to a diverse and distant public. Unlike the Cardinal in *The Duchess*, Webster refuses to "be laid by, and never thought of" (5.5.89), for publication enables Webster to memorialize himself for all time. Furthermore, attentive readers may have better opportunities to appreciate his work than spectators; as Webster suggests, since *The White Devil* "was acted, in so dull a time of winter, [and] presented in so open and black a theatre, . . . it wanted . . . a full and understanding auditory" (3-7, "To the Reader"). At an outdoor playhouse, Webster's audiences presumably had to pay attention to a complex play while darkness fell on a cold winter's day. While he acknowledges the impact of harsh weather conditions, Webster struggles to conceal his disdain for viewers who may not have appreciated fully his sophisticated art.

Aware of the differences among indoor and outdoor playhouses, Webster and his contemporaries enjoyed testing their spectators' listening and viewing abilities, especially given their awareness of the heterogeneous compositions of those audiences.[17] Differences in wealth probably reflected differences in education, and some audience members might have understood sophisticated allusions, language, or even character depictions better than other spectators. As Andrew Gurr shows, for example, it was "possibly not just the poor conditions of [*The White Devil*'s] staging but" Webster's "intellectual pretensions [that] brought his next play, *The Duchess of Malfi*, to the Blackfriars in 1614." Since the Blackfriars was an indoor "hall playhouse," it presumably would have been easier for spectators to hear and understand plays there than at an outside courtyard, such as the Globe or the Red Bull. As Gurr shows, Webster, whose plays are generally "full of verbal echoes," makes the most of the chance "to cater specifically for learned hearers at Blackfriars" (83).[18]

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[17] Reina Green suggests that Webster both acknowledges that he is compelled "to accept the repercussions of his audience's inattention," and "attack[s]" his "auditors" because of "their apparent deafness" (471). Similarly, Lukas Erne studies the importance of "stage abridgement," pointing to the fact that *The Duchess of Malfi* "is among the longest [plays] written by Shakespeare and Jonson's contemporaries, but much shorter than some of Shakespeare's plays" (144).

[18] As Gurr argues, the play's final couplet implies that on the one hand, "the Duchess . . . will live on in human memory because her life had integrity," but on the other, it echoes "Horace's ode, Book 1, no. 22," which "says that a pure life will keep a man immune from mortal harm," since not even a wolf will attack a man living with integrity (84). According to Gurr, "the more educated" spectators probably recognized Webster's allusion and realized that it reverses the ostensible point of the couplet," complicating an understanding of the Duchess as a virtuous and innocent victim (84). That Webster and his contemporaries acknowledged the sociological differences impacting audience attentiveness and interpretation demonstrates that they composed for wide ranges of audience members, even as they understood their work as sophisticated art.

Webster himself hints at the significance he affords to publication in his dedication for the print edition of *The Duchess of Malfi* to George Harding, Baron of Berkeley. While he acknowledges that patronage draws attention not only to his patron but also to himself as author, he also hints at the artistic nature of his work, referring to it as a "poem" and implying its potential to make his patron famous ("To the Reader" line 6). Publishing a dedicatory letter to a noble patron can "confer honour" on Webster and his work, but, as Bosola suggests in the play itself, the differences between nobility inherited through ancestry and nobility earned through labor are significant (16). Self-consciously highlighting this distinction, Webster emphasizes the power of art and publication: "I do not altogether look up at your title: The ancientest nobility, being but a relic of time past, and the truest honour indeed being for a man to confer honour on himself" (13-16). Especially with his depiction of Ferdinand and his brother, Webster interrogates "the ancientest nobility, being but a relic of time past," and he prides his own artistic creation as his attempt "to confer honour on himself."

Yet, even in this bold questioning of the nature of "truest honour," Webster develops a sophisticated relationship between author and patron that demonstrates the creation and power of art. While the working-class Webster can gain fame through patronage, he also wields control over Lord Harding:

> I am confident this work is not unworthy your Honour's perusal for by such poems as this, poets have kissed the hands of great princes, and drawn their gentle eyes to look down upon their sheets of paper, when the poets themselves were bound up in their winding sheets. (18-22)

Proclaiming his hopes that *The Duchess* will memorialize him for all time, Webster imagines "poets themselves," not just "their sheets of paper," being "bound up," and he puns on the

different ways in which dead poets and their published works are preserved. More subtly, he refers to themes and events from the play itself. Ostensibly highlighting social class differences between poets and princes, Webster suggests that worthy poetry elevates its authors. Webster's confidence that "by such poems as this, poets have kissed the hands of great princes" recalls polite gestures of deference toward royal figures, but anticipating the dead hand that the Duchess kisses in act four, the image also implies the power that poets wield. Concluding with a compliment to his patron, Webster alludes to the Duchess's surviving echo after her death; Lord Harding's approval of *The Duchess* "shall make [him] live in [his] grave, and laurel spring out of it" (23-4). Webster differentiates his patron from "the ignorant scorners of the Muses (that like worms in libraries, seem to live only, to destroy language)" who "shall wither, neglected and forgotten" (24-6). Although couched in a compliment to his patron, the mere mention of such "ignorant scorners" warns Lord Harding not to take this work or this dedication lightly.

Conclusion

How might we begin to explain the lasting appeal of Renaissance revenge tragedies? Why do audiences continue to return to depictions of such gruesome suffering? A glance at performance reviews of twentieth- and twenty-first-century productions of early modern revenge tragedies suggests that audiences are simultaneously thrilled and repulsed by the bloodshed in these plays. Phillip Hope-Wallace, reviewing Peter Brook's "magnificent" 1955 production of *Titus Andronicus*, reported that spectators "seemed half to be expecting a 'horror comic,'"; playgoers apparently anticipated the grotesque, macabre terror associated with the horror genre that

provokes reactions such as excitement, fear, or disgust. As the London *Express* reported, during the production's run "at least three people" fainted each night (qtd. in Ellis). Still, according to Hope-Wallace, Brook managed to give the play "its true size" and avoided presenting its violence with frivolity. Cecil Wilson, the critic or London's *Daily Mail*, agreed, praising Brook for "resist[ing] the temptation" of turning this disturbing tragedy into "a gory gala night" (qtd. in Ellis).

Shakespeare's notoriously grisly play is not the only early modern revenge tragedy to evoke the simultaneous ascination and revulsion that audiences apparently experienced at Brook's mid-twentieth-century production; reviews of more recent performances of other Renaissance revenge plays record similar audience reactions. In July 2008 Susannah Clapp applauded Melly Still for capturing the "weird brilliance" of the rarely revived *The Revenger's Tragedy* in a London staging powerful enough to "strangle your breath so that you don't know whether to let it in or out, whether to gasp or giggle" (Clapp). While this production emphasized the gruesome corruption that Middleton portrays, it also underscored the drama's improbable wit and humor, veering wildly between the two modes and repeatedly putting audience members on edge. More recently, Kate Bassett, reviewing Mitchell Moreno's October 2009 production of *The Spanish Tragedy* at London's Arcola Theater, approvingly recorded the alternating reactions of "yelps of nervous laughter and horrified gasps" at this "screech-inducing" production (Bassett). These reviewers indicate how modern productions of Renaissance revenge tragedies generate anxiety, rather than providing equilibrium, and both provoke and subvert the appeal of staged corporeal violence.

The early modern revenge tragedy, once dismissed by scholars as decadent and even comically horrific, has in the past two decades experienced a critical revival as a genre that

responded to serious economic, judicial, and religious grievances during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century. In this dissertation, I have tried to contribute to that growing body of scholarship, but I also acknowledge that revenge plays often were absurdly grotesque. The four authors I study in these pages question presumed distinctions between a desire for justice and a destructive preoccupation with carnage, and they depict the disproportionate cruelty their revengers exhibit as bizarre and frenzied. These playwrights fall short of suggesting that the human thirst for vengeance is unjustified – the crimes the revengers seek to redress certainly are heinous and requently perpetrated by corrupt political authorities who avoid legally sanctioned punishment – but the authors also suggest that their revengers' retaliatory atrocities exceed the bloodshed initially instigating vengeance. Rather than honoring the deceased with commemoration or equitable vengeance, revengers objectify corpses as frightening spectacles or even use them as weapons and thus undermine the idea that corporeal violence is justified by revenge.

By investigating further how the four tragedies I've discussed here depict both injustice and vengeance as threats to social harmony, we can gain a new, more critical perspective on early modern revenge plays and their lasting theatrical appeal. In a more comprehensive study, I would address how sixteenth-century playwrights simultaneously generated affinity for the revenger and underscored the social and political disorder that usually results from revenge. For example, a chapter-length analysis of *Hamlet* (1599?), arguably the most well-known revenge tragedy, might address how the play's ubiquitous descriptions of corporeal disfigurement stand in for the court's depravity. Shakespeare portrays the body as a collection of fragmented parts that, linked with the play's images of decomposition and the characters' efforts to deceive, contribute to the play's pervading themes of fragmentation and skepticism. In addition, I would

include a comparison between Shakespeare's famous play and John Marston's roughly contemporaneous *Antonio's Revenge* (entered in the Stationer's Register on 24 October 1601). Marston tests audience reactions to extreme suffering and injustice by augmenting the macabre or melodramatic conventions of the revenge genre. Emphasizing the cruelty o the play's villains, Marston encourages spectators to empathize with Antonio, yet the play also distances audiences by depicting Antonio as indifferent towards the morality of revenge. Marston thus hints at his dissatisfaction with the gruesome sensationalism associated with revenge tragedies and invites us to see the genre evolving over time.

Certainly the revenge tragedy as a literary classification during the early modern period seems to have run its course by 1629, when John Ford shocked audiences with *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*, in which Giovanni excitedly displays his sister's heart, skewered on a dagger. By portraying Giovanni's attempt to appropriate traditionally iconographic signs and symbols as justification of his ritual murder of his sister, Ford critiques the interpretation of religious symbols as subjective and arbitrary. Although revenge seems atavistic in the twenty-first century, it has remained a central theme in modern film Westerns and detective thrillers. These movies and novels are characterized by a revenger who hunts down the killer of his family, usually taking on some of the villain's most sinister traits in the process. That the dramatic depiction of early modern revenge tragedy has survived for over four hundred years indicates that the desire for personal, unlawful revenge is an inherently and viscerally human impulse, prevalent even in societies in which civic justice has been established to bolster social order. Revenge tragedies, in other words, continue to provide a means of experiencing the catharsis of personal vengeance; in the theater, authors and filmmakers can safely evoke the anger and frustration we suppress in order to live in social harmony.

And yet, the four early modern playwrights I have studied in these pages disturb that expectation of catharsis by compelling us to question the human propensity to wring meaning from bodies or to assert the signifying capacity of rituals. Rather than characterizing the mutilation and dismemberment in early modern revenge tragedies as providing emotional purgation, my analysis in these pages suggests that audiences often leave the theater disgusted by the sinister human fascination with bloodshed characteristic of the revengers in these plays. I read staged violence not as a peripheral spectacle designed to shock, but as a central part of the drama that enhances character development. Thus, I suggest that this sophisticated treatment o the depiction of brutality serves to heighten audience members' levels of discomfort more than the conventional sensationalizing of staged violence, which often might contribute to comic or absurd theatrical effects.

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