The Revenger's Tragedy: A Play on the Revenge Play

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What, brother? am I far enough from myself?
As if another man had been sent whole
Into the world, and none wist how he came.

I. iii. 1-3

Surely we are all mad people, and they
Whom we think are, are not; we mistake those:
'Tis we are mad in sense, they but in clothes.

III. v. 80-82

The principal issue of debate concerning *The Revenger's Tragedy*, aside from the question of authorship, appears to revolve around the problem of how seriously to take the play - and if one takes it seriously, how to ferret out its moral attitude. The confusion is caused in part by the plethora of elements the play draws from various dramatic traditions. *The Revenger's Tragedy* has what Bowers calls a "classic revenge plot in the Kydian tradition," but its characters assume the names and, at times, the roles of figures in a morality play. Blood abounds and the play ends in massacre, but its protagonist and many of his victims spend much of their time in farcical clowning. The language of the play evokes a sense of man as a creature led by his genitals to eternal damnation, yet at least one critic finds the play evokes sardonic mirth rather than pity or terror and several others see, in the same play, a stern sermon on final judgment.

One element of the play no critic has emphasized, though many have noted it in passing. *The Revenger's Tragedy* is self-consciously and insistently theatrical. From the opening lines which introduce, in procession, the "four excellent characters" to take part in the tragedy, to the final enactment of all the revenges, which occurs during what is in itself an entertainment, a masque, the play insists on itself as play. If we consider its theatrical dimension, the play emerges as both a black parody of that highly popular form of renaissance entertainment, the revenge play itself, and as a profound examination of the implications of the genre's immense popularity. *The Revenger's Tragedy* both burlesques the genre and examines its attraction.

The play's theatricality emerges in several forms. There are explicit references to the theatrical nature of the activity on stage through comments to the audience, through the use of plays within the play, through echoes from other revenge plays, especially Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. The drama is enacted in a circumscribed world, that of the court introduced to the audience by Vindice's opening soliloquy - a world which Schoenbaum describes as shining "with artificial brightness." The extreme complexity of the plot emphasizes the artificiality of this world. Everything that occurs in the play is possible, but barely possible. However, the overriding metaphor of the play, which is its chief dramatic device and the obsession of its protagonist, emphasizes the theatricality and intensifies its impact. As Murray notes, the notion of metamorphosis is everywhere in the play: it is apparent linguistically in the form of puns and metaphors concerning transformation and dramatically in the extended use of disguise. *The Revenger's Tragedy* is about a man who
both exploits and fears the notion of disguise, who adopts a role and then permits it to control him until he literally loses himself in it. Vindice, the character, puts on the role of revenger, of malcontent, of pander. The actor puts on the role of Vindice. The audience assumes the world projected by the play in coming to see and to applaud it.

In his opening speech, Vindice establishes the scenario, much as the stage manager does in Wilder's Our Town. The Revenger's Tragedy opens as Vindice's play.

From his cry "be merry" in his opening speech, he clowns, exercises his wit in tricks and quibbles, and guides our appreciation of what happens by his satiric remarks, or mocking comments. Of course, he is involved too in his devices, to the point of rejoicing in his skill and losing sight of their horror and evil.... But the fact that he sees the action as macabre, even funny at times, and the characters as mad, helps to control our view of the play's events, and ensure that we do not mistake what we see for an illusion of reality. 7

At several points, characters make explicit reference to the play's theatricality. After disclosing to Hippolito Spurio's liaison with the Duchess and Lussurioso's designs on Castiza, Vindice remarks that were all night-time activities revealed, few would escape without blushing. In the course of his revenge, Vindice exposes several "night-time activities" and Foakes suggests that the audience is implicated by the comment. 8

The second explicit reference to theatricality concludes what critics agree is the central speech in the play: the meditation on mortality in III. v. The speech ends:

Surely we are all mad people, and they
Whom we think are, are not; we mistake those:
'Tis we are mad in sense, they but in clothes.

III. v. 80-82

Within the context of the speech, these lines suggest that we, lusting humanity, lust ultimately after death since death is the inevitable outcome of our lives and loves. Who are they who are mad in clothes? On the literal level, they are those wearing the garb of the madman. The lines also suggest the device and metaphor of disguise in the play and become a plaintive cry from the man who pursues his "legitimate" revenge against the Duke in disguise and then drops his costume as Piato in the course of cutting off the heads of the rest of the court.

'Twas our friend indeed.
'Tis state in music for a duke to bleed:
The dukedom wants a head, though yet unknown;
As fast as they peep up, let's cut 'em down.

III. v. 223-226

Moreover, on the theatrical level, those wearing disguise are the actors and it is they who merely appear mad, while it is the audience who is mad in sense – possibly revealing its madness in coming to the theatre to applaud the fantasy offered, i.e., the play. The sense of the last suggestion emerges from the realization that the entire scene (III. v.) assumes the shape of Vindice's play within the play.
Then I'll divide it to thee: the old duke,
Thinking my outward shape and inward heart
Are cut out of one piece (for he that prates
His secrets, his heart stands o' th' outside),
Hires me by price to greet him with a lady
In some fit place, veil'd from the eyes o' th' court,
Some darken'd, blushless angle, that is guilty
Of his forefathers' lusts, and great folks' riots;
To which I easily (to maintain my shape)
Consented, and did wish his impudent grace
To meet her here in this unsunned lodge,
Wherein 'tis night at noon; and here the rather,
Because unto the torturing of his soul,
The bastard and the duchess have appointed
Their meeting too in this luxurious circle,
Which most afflicting sight will kill his eyes
Before we kill the rest of him.

III. v. 8-24

The structure of the scene is that of a multi-level peep-show. Foakes suggests that the circle alludes to the canopy over the stage; i.e., that the magic circle within which revenge is to be enacted is the theatre itself. The language in this scene implies an orgy and to watch is to become a voyeur. Vindice employs the skull of Glorianna as prop in his drama – he makes explicit reference to its costume in lines 99-102. However, he is not content with merely the play (the revenge) within the play (his disguise as Piato) within the play (The Revenger’s Tragedy). Vindice arranges yet another play for the Duke. The audience, the revengers and the Duke will observe the Duchess commit incest and adultery with the Duke’s bastard son, Spurio.

The same voyeuristic implications occur in I. iv.; the scene concerns another group of revengers. When Antonio invites Hippolito and some other Lords to join in his mourning for his wife, he promises to “cut/Long grief into short words.” (I. iv. 25-6) He continues with a lengthy, graphic, emotional, titillating description of the rape of his wife that contrasts sharply with the stoicism of his earlier exchange with Hippolito. The speech is followed by the swearing on swords which, the editor notes, may have been suggested by Hamlet, I. v.9 Antonio’s recital is closely linked with Vindice’s later speech in III. v. Vindice’s begins with an explanation of how his disguise enabled him to entice the Duke into coming to the assignation; Antonio’s explains that the masque at which the rape occurred gave an opportunity to the courtiers to “[put] on better faces than their own,/Being full of fraud and flattery ...” (I. iv. 29-30) Vindice describes an “unsunned lodge/Wherein ’tis night at noon,” in which torchlight will act as spotlight on the liaison between Spurio and the Duchess; Antonio notes that the night of the masque, “torchlight made an artificial noon/About the court ...” (I. iv. 26-27). During Antonio’s speech, characters and audience view an actual rape through the speaker’s eyes. During Vindice’s, both the audience and the characters observe the fornication of Spurio and the Duchess and the symbolic rape of the dead Glorianna.

This kind of hyperbole occurs again in IV. ii. where, through an inordinate number of
asides, principally spoken by Hippolito, the author seems to insist upon the play’s cleverness and theatricality. The scene is the encounter between Lussurioso and Vindice who has come to the court under his own name but “disguised” as malcontent. Vindice evokes for Lussurioso the picture of “[a] usurping father to be boiling in hell, and his son and heir with a whore dancing over him.” (IV. ii. 88-89) Lussurioso disregards that part of the image relating to himself and rejects the picture, arguing that rich men would find it offensive. He responds with another kind of picture, a lie. Lussurioso demands that Vindice kill Piato because the latter has pandered Vindice’s sister. He could easily have told the “truth” – that by giving him false information, Piato had almost cost him his life. He does not do so for the same reason that Antonio paints such a graphic picture of his wife’s downfall. In The Revenger’s Tragedy, Tourneur insists that to become an avenger, a murderer, a man must have a personal stake in the matter; he demonstrates that the nature of that stake is finally ambiguous. Antonio’s colleagues share his grief and horror. For Vindice, the situation is more complex and the ambiguity is explored in a dramatic conceit. Vindice must avenge a matter of family honour that he, himself (in disguise), has violated. The conceit explodes when Lussurioso demands that Vindice kill Piato, i.e., himself. The audience, in the position of co-plotters, become caught up in Vindice’s machinations in a manner frequent in Jonson’s plays. Vindice carries the audience with his wit, glee and energy until the audience, like the protagonist, wake to find they too have lost themselves.  

The artificiality of the plot emphasizes the play’s deliberateness. Four sets of revengers tangle in The Revenger’s Tragedy; each reflects upon the other’s activities. Vindice and Hippolito are doubly revengers: they pursue the Duke in their own cause and Piato for Lussurioso. Spurio avenges himself upon his father by cuckoldling him, and actually kills him by this act, for the Duke dies upon seeing Spurio and his wife together. The parallels between Spurio and Vindice are insisted upon, most obviously when Vindice exploits and complete’s Spurio’s vengeance in III. v. in the course of pursuing his own. An important link between the two occurs through the motif of the bastard. Spurio becomes an avenger because he is a bastard and thus has no clear title to the kingdom. A bastard is one of uncertain origin and it is suggested that the man in disguise is analogous:

What, brother? am I far enough from myself?  
As if another man had been sent whole  
Into the world, and none wist how he came.  
I. iii. 1-3  

By making his mother a bawd, Vindice also makes himself a bastard – and his sister and brother become the same.  

I cry you mercy, lady, I mistook you;  
Pray, did you see my mother? Which way went she?  
Pray God I have not lost her....  

Why, are you she?  
The world’s so chang’d, one shape into another,  
It is a wise child now that knows her mother!  
II. i. 161-3, 165-7  

Antonio heads the third set of avengers. He desires to avenge the rape of his wife, but
the matter is taken out of his hands by the machinations of the protagonist and the fourth set of avengers, who emerge as complete bunglers: Ambitioso and Supervacuo. The latter become avengers over a death they themselves caused by failing to specify which of the Duke's sons (Lussurioso or Junior Brother) was to be executed. Their thoughts of vengeance are directed at no one in particular (III. vi. 91-94). Ironically, they enact their "r-e-v-e-n-g-e" appropriately. During the indiscriminate sword play of the final masque, they murder each other in their scramble for power.

Finally, the Duchess is a kind of revenger: she plans to seduce Spurio in order to punish the Duke for his reluctance to pardon her youngest son.

The impact of this plethora of avengers with any and every motive for revenge is primarily comic. Revenge degenerates from the solemn summoning to justice, so graphically portrayed by Vindice in the opening scene of the play, to a ready excuse for murder. But the language of the play considerably darkens the comedy, as we will see. Moreover, the confusion among the characters dramatically reflects the essentially serious treatment of Vindice's own loss of purpose and of self.

Tourneur's parody of the revenge play becomes obvious also in specific twists of plot. Perhaps the best, most complex and darkly comic occurs in Act II. The time is night and several fornications are plotted. Almost all the revengers appear in pursuit of one another. Lussurioso informs Vindice/Piato that he is off to consummate his lust for Castiza. Vindice realizes that he must protect his sister, but does not wish to reveal his disguise and prefers to confront Lussurioso openly. He deflects Lussurioso by informing him that he has seen Spurio departing for an assignation with the Duchess. In fact, Spurio intended to take Lussurioso in Castiza's bed (thus enacting the revenge Vindice ought to have been planning but, of course, for reasons of his own.) Lussurioso surprises the Duchess with her bed partner only to discover he is the Duke and ends in jail for his effort to redeem the family honour. All the evening's plots misfire and the only resulting death is the inadvertent execution of Junior Brother. The confusion of characters and activities suggests not only parody of the complexities of the typical revenge plot, but also a confusion of revenge motives. Spurio assumes Vindice's revenge pursuit and Lussurioso chooses to act "righteously" towards the wrong victim.

The manner in which Tourneur burlesques the revenge play is not, however, primarily farcical. An examination of the language of the play reveals the darker side of the satire. There are very few lines in The Revenger's Tragedy that do not permit of sexual interpretation. This reduction of all matters to a sexual level creates the play's dominant atmosphere and meaning and suggests that the popularity of the tradition implies a prurience in its audience as well as an ambivalence in the motivation of the avenger. The levelling device is the notion of lust— for sex, for power, for gold, for blood— almost a commonplace in mediaeval and renaissance language, but carried to an extreme in The Revenger's Tragedy. An examination of I. i. will reveal how the language functions.

The opening tableau, Vindice, skull in hand, watching the Duke and his family parade below, has often been cited for its brilliance. While its visual impact is sparsely escatological, the luxuriant language of the opening speech undercuts the bare visual impact. The first thirteen lines indicate that the motivating energy of that "marrowless age" is lust itself and that the frustration of the avenger is of like fire.
O, that marrowless age
Would stuff the hollow bones with damn'd desires,
And 'stead of heat, kindle infernal fires
Within the spendthrift veins of a dry duke,
A parch'd and juiceless luxur.

I. i. 5-9

The similarity of the first part of this speech to the introduction of figures in a morality play has been used by several critics to argue that the play is basically a morality play. There are alternative interpretations. It is the specificity of the first part of this speech that is important: these four characters, this age, this avenger, this palace, the procession spotlighted with torches. Both visually and verbally, a constrained arena of action, a particular dramatic schema and situation are presented to the audience. The personification of the morality play opens out to suggest cosmic dimensions. The movement of the opening soliloquy of this play is one which defines the limits of a situation, a bounded world in which lust and revenge will tangle and maim each other.

When Vindice turns to the “sallow picture of my poison'd love,” he reveals that what he had admired in the dead Glorianna was her beauty, a visage whose main virtue seems to have been its power to tempt men to sin. Given the premises of the first part of the speech, it is not surprising that in “this marrowless age” beauty is defined by its ability to seduce, and the effect of Vindice’s paean to his dead mistress is to place him firmly in the world he has delineated.

The recurrent equation between sex and money begins also in this speech.

O, she was able to ha’ made a usurer’s son
Melt all his patrimony in a kiss,
And what his father fifty years told,
To have consum’d, and yet his suit been cold.

I. i. 26-29

The monetary equation is extended in the castigation of old men who “outbid like their limited performances,” and is made explicit in the sententia that ends the passage: “Age, as in gold, in lust is covetous.”

The last part of the speech introduces another major theme. The monetary metaphor first applied to sex and women is next applied to vengeance, “murder’s quit-rent,” and then the feminine metaphor is extended to Revenge: “Faith, give Revenge her due, / Sh’ has kept touch hitherto – be merry, merry ...” (I. i. 43-44) Thus the three major concerns of the play are linked: lust for women has been equated with lust for gold and lust for blood. Revenge is termed feminine in this clearly misogynist drama and even the opportunity for revenge constitutes a rape of that Bald Madam. (I. i. 54, 99-102) We learn that Hippolito’s place at court is in the Duke’s chamber, a place he maintains by holding on to the Duchess’ skirts (“Whom such a coat keeps up can never fall flat.” (I. i. 64)) and that he is on an errand to seek a pander for Lussurioso, who is so lecherous that he will stop at nothing short of a corpse. The scene ends with the decision to “coin” both mother and sister — meaning, on the literal level, to deceive, but in terms of the play having also specifically sexual connotations, since Vindice will attempt to seduce both of them.
The first scene also reduces law to a sexual level. "The law is a woman," Vindice tells his sister, "and would she were you." (I. i. 115) The feminizing of both law and vengeance in a play whose energies are primarily sexual seems to imply that the drive for justice bears analogy to baser impulses. The world might be a better place if Castiza held the scales, but in this play, it is clearly the Duchess who does so. (I. ii.) Moreover, the statement is ironic since in his pursuit of justice, Vindice will pursue his sister.

The debate in I. ii. elaborates the justice theme. Junior Brother boasts of his rape of Antonio's wife. The Duchess begs for mercy which, Lussurioso suggests, has the seductive glitter of women, "good only for their beauties, which wash'd off, no sin is uglier." (30-31) Her plea is ineffectual until she takes a "woman's revenge": "O what it is to have an old-cool duke/To be as slack in tongue as in performance." (74-75) His virility attacked, the Duke immediately accedes and postpones judgment. The seductive power of law is again made explicit when Lussurioso counsels Junior Brother: "The law is a wise serpent,/And quickly can beguile thee of thy life." (50-51) The scene anticipates II. iii. in which Ambitioso and Supervacuo pretend to plead for Lussurioso's life with so little guile that the Duke remarks: "Here's no stepmother's wit;/I'll try them both upon their love and hate." (88-89) The wit of the law is the wit of a woman, her power of seduction.

O,
Were't not for gold and women, there would be no damnation; Hell would look like a lord's great kitchen without fire in 't:
But 'twas decreed before the world began,
That they should be the hooks to catch at man.
II. i. 256-261

Vindice's outrage against women, his response to his success at seducing his mother, resonates against all those ideas and activities feminized in The Revenger's Tragedy.

The drive for power is also sexually motivated. This becomes obvious, both visually and verbally, in the Duke's response to Lussurioso's mistaken attack in II. iii.

This boy, that should be myself after me,
Would be myself before me; and in heat
Of that ambition, bloodily rush'd in,
Intending to depose me in my bed.

(20-23)

Displacement in power as displacement in bed is further suggested by the activities of Spurio who avenges himself against his father in the Duchess's bed.

Principal relationships in the play are delineated by sexual metaphors. Vindice's first words to Lussurioso are:

With all my heart, i'faith; how dost, sweet musk-cat?
When shall we lie together?

I. iii. 33-34

Lussurioso's language to Vindice is explicitly that of the feminine partner in a sexual encounter: "sfoot, the slave's/Already as familiar as an ague,/And shakes me at his pleasure."
(38-39) He parallels the words of Gratiana in begging the results of Vindice’s mission, “Ravish me in thine answer; art thou rare?” (II. ii. 21) In the language used to describe Lussurioso’s hiring of Vindice, the sexual tables are turned, as Lussurioso gives him money with the words, “And thus I enter thee.” (I. iii. 84)

The interchangeability of roles delineates one of the modes of metamorphosis in the play. Not only roles, but also people are interchangeable. Hippolito notes this (II. ii. 14-16) and his brother concurs (IV. i. 35ff). The two brothers substitute for each other when the plot necessitates. In the final masque, when all are disguised, the notion of disguise and substitution becomes visually hyperbolic: everyone is killed and it hardly matters who is responsible – as Antonio’s execution of the “Fourth Noble” clearly indicates.

If passion for vengeance is a sexual urge, then sexuality underlies the relation of each revenger to his victim, each person seeking power to his competitors, as well as each seducer to the object of his seduction. Even the conversion of Gratiana has sexual overtones. She succumbs at sword-point and her contrition is met with the response from her sons, “then we’ll marry her” – the caveat, “albeit to our souls wherein there is no lust,” a highly problematical statement at this point in the play.

The equation between the acts of rape and of revenge is also made specific in the structure of scenes and speeches that relate to midnight activities and to masques. The rape of Antonio’s wife occurred at a midnight masque. The scene closely parallels the murder of the Duke, which constitutes, as noted above, both rape and murder, and the last masque is the final masque, in which all the revengers come together, indistinguishable from one another in their disguises. In each scene there is a distinctive twist. Antonio’s wife is raped at midnight, the hour specifically devoted to sexual encounters (cf. I. iii. 66-70), though the night is lighted as though it were noon. The Duke is killed at noon in the atmosphere of midnight and the play closes at night and in a carnage of death, final night.

Furthermore, the pleasure Vindice enjoys both from his machinations and his malcontentish railings is explicitly orgiastic. In response to his area on the lechery of night, Hippolito commends, “You flow well, brother.” (II. ii. 146) The scene containing the destruction of the Duke opens with Vindice’s ravings: “O sweet, delectable, rare, happy, ravishing.” (III. v. 1)

The motif of appearance and reality, of disguise, also has sexual overtones – and these touch all Vindice’s forays into costume.

O, hour of overtones!
Any kin now, next to the rim o’ th’ sister,
Is man’s meat in these days; and in the morning,
When they are up and dress’d, and their mask on,
Who can perceive this? – save that eternal eye,
That sees through flesh and all. Well, if anything
Be damn’d, it will be twelve o’clock at night,
That twelve will never ‘scape;
It is the Judas of the hours, wherein
Honest salvation is betray’d to sin.

(I. iii. 61-70)

The speech is ironic in the mouth of Vindice, who does not stop at the rim of his sister –
he rationalizes his act as pander by saying, essentially, “better me than someone else.”
(I.iii. 178-185) He notes that the main impact of disguise is that it hides evil while he himself stands in disguise before Lussurioso. He introduces the notion that only the Lord can see truth to the bone – an interesting comment because it is his own obsession.

At this point we can begin to discuss the role of the overriding visual metaphor of the play – the skull of Glorianna.15 Most critics attribute to the presence of the skull much of the burden of the moral impact of the play. Essentially, they argue that the corrupt activities and language of The Revenger’s Tragedy occur within an escatological framework so that the impact of the play is that of the danse macabre or a mediaeval sermon with plentiful illustrations of the vices it condemns. But the skull appears always in the hands of Vindice, who is far too enmeshed and confounded by the webs he spins to be a fitting bearer of the sign of final judgment. What he does, in fact, is to employ the skull in his own drama. He dresses it, panders for it, allows the Duke to violate it, and then, its usefulness at an end, permits it to disappear (unless the careless treatment afforded the head of Junior Brother in the scene directly following Glorianna’s last appearance is intended as mindful of her presence and fate). The role of the Four Last Things, symbolized by the skull and the summoned thunder in the last act, are far too orchestrated to be taken with absolute seriousness.

Those characters who symbolize virtue in The Revenger’s Tragedy lack the stature of morality play personifications of goodness and the play treats them ironically. An examination of the scenes in which Castiza appears reveals that she is, indeed, dull, as Vindice comments. She says little; she displays her outrage most potently in the form of a slap, and that anger she herself describes as “passing the virgin limits of myself.” (II. i. 32)

There is little in the text to prevent an actress from interpreting her character as both vixen-like and “chaste.” Even her response to her mother’s betrayal has a precise, brittle quality:

It is a pretty saying of a wicked one,
But methinks now
It does not show so well out of your mouth,
Better in his.

(II. i. 175-8)

The cadence is in marked contrast to the speeches of Vindice and the response of Gratiana. The second time Castiza appears her actions have both a comic and a dangerous impact. No sooner has her mother undergone a melodramatic repentance than Castiza enters to say she will comply with her mother’s request. It is a macabre joke at this point in the play for disguise of any kind has acquired terrifying connotations.

The character of Antonio is also carefully undercut. We know little about him, but one bit of information, slyly included at the end of I. iv., is interesting in itself.

That is my comfort, gentlemen, and I joy
In this one happiness above the rest.
Which will be call’d a miracle at last!
That, being an old man, I’d a wife so chaste.

There is much comment about the sexual failings of old men in The Revenger’s Tragedy.
and nothing to suggest that Antonio's wife was an old woman. Antonio acquires something of the stature of a January who has lost his May. The more obvious problem with Antonio as an ordering figure is that he too is an avenger, but one who practices conti-
nence, for when the objects of his revenge are done away with, he feels no compulsion to go on to others. Thus his reason for executing Vindice and his brother: "'You that would murder him would murder me.'" (V. iii. 105) - is both ironic and hypocritical.

The manner in which The Revenger's Tragedy both spoofs and satirizes the revenge play tradition is obvious. The play includes all the characteristics of the classic revenge plot except the presence of a ghost (for which the skull may serve as substitute); the author uses every twist of the revenge plot and then deliberately and gleefully adds another turn of the screw. The protagonist himself is conscious of the elegance of his machinations - and of the extent to which his language succeeds in dragging all actions and characters to the common denominator of that least dignified of human vices.

That the play is deliberately theatrical ought also be obvious. The effect of the play is to indicate clearly to the audience the nature of the experience in which they are engaged when they take pleasure in the kinds of activities that occur on the stage during a play of blood revenge. The principal indication occurs during the climax of the play, the murder of the duke, and the scene resonates throughout the drama.

But the play is entitled a tragedy. In what manner does it acquire the sense of tragedy prevalent in the form it burlesques? How seriously are we to read the play? If the play is a meditation upon the meaning of the genre, what meaning has the playwright discovered? Formally, there are two elements that place the play within a tragic structure. The plot concerns the fall of a man tormented by the corruption he sees around him, who risks himself in the attempt to "set it right." Since the murder Vindice avenges is the murder of his betrothed, and since the murderer is the Duke, there is some "justification" for his revenge; the law of the land lies in the hands of the murderer. Alvin Kernan argues that Vindice's knowledge that he must die at the end of the play constitutes an "attenuated tragic recognition."13 "'Tis time to die, when we are ourselves our foes." (V. iii. 1110) Vindice has accomplished his purpose and sacrificed himself in the process. This is the pattern of almost all revenge plays: the decision to bring justice into the world is always at the cost of one's own life. But the presence of this tragic structure does not account for the play's impact.

The serious impact of The Revenger's Tragedy emerges from a study of the protagonist. The fecundity of his imagination is awesome and when that imagination manages, in III. v., to translate its vigor into action, into tangible activity on stage, both the play and its protagonist touch on madness. Ornstein writes that Vindice is "aroused and revolted not by what is seen, but by what is imagined.... He is the Peeping Tom turned moralist."14 To query the serious aspects of Vindice's character is to ask the question, what does Tourneur say about the process of becoming a revenger?15

What the revenger does is to put on or assume the tragedy of another and to make it his own. The tragedy that Vindice assumes is the tragedy of Glorianna, who, nine years previous to the opening of the play, chose death over loss of innocence. A kind of equation is established between Glorianna's death and the process Vindice undergoes in avenging it.
O!
Now let me burst; I've eaten noble poison.
We are made strange fellows, brother, innocent villains;
Wilt not be angry when thou hear'st on 't, think'st thou?
I'faith, thou shalt.

I. iii. 168-172

That the journey towards becoming an avenger involves a journey away from self is the most insistent theme in the play. Vindice's use of disguise results finally in the need to kill first the disguise and then to allow or accept his own death. Although Vindice thoroughly enjoys the complications resulting from the path he has chosen, early in the play he experiences moments of terrible understanding of what it is he is doing. These are echoed later in Hippolito's cry, "Brother, we lose ourselves." (IV. ii. 199) Vindice's journey is a journey into madness in the sense that he creates an alter-ego to perform his revenge and then abandons himself to that alter-ego and loses all grasp on himself - until the end of the play in which he realizes that he has become his own enemy. The anguish underlying the process is carefully controlled and remains undercurrent to the satirical elements of the play. But it is this that gives the play its gruesome and terrifying dimensions.

In his essay *King Lear or Endgame*, Jan Kott writes:

The world of tragedy and the world of grotesque have a similar structure. Grotesque takes over the themes of tragedy and poses the same fundamental questions. Only its answers are different. This dispute about the tragic and grotesque interpretations of human fate reflects the everlasting conflict of two philosophies and two ways of thinking... the irreconcilable antagonism between the priest and the clown. Between tragedy and grotesque there is the same conflict for or against such notions as eschatology, belief in the absolute, hope for the ultimate solution of the contradiction between moral order and every-day practice. Tragedy is the theatre of priests, grotesque is the theatre of clowns.16

Is Vindice a priest, for the task of the revenger is a priestly task: the calling of men to judgment? Or is he a clown, a Yippie, making "revolution for the hell of it"? Or does he begin as one and end as the other?

Tourneur certainly suggests that the genre purports to satisfy the audience's sense that justice can be accomplished in an unjust world, but that in fact it satisfies the craving for a vicarious outlet for baser emotions of lust and uncontrolled anger. He also suggests that man is not a competent instrument of judgment- not because vengeance is the Lord's - but rather because none of his motivations and actions are pure. The calling to justice is too apt to degenerate into a game of cat and mouse, played for lust of the hunt. There is also the darker suggestion that to set the world right, or to attempt to do so, is to risk madness. Revenge plays become an outlet for man's illusion that he can do so. In this play, the fantasy about setting the world right becomes a cruel trap for its audience. The play is both gruesome and hilarious; it seduces the audience into an awareness of its zest for the horrible, and into applauding what it cannot condone in itself.

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Notes

4 See Richard Barker, Thomas Middleton (New York, 1958), and Samuel Schoenbaum, Middleton's Tragedies.
5 Schoenbaum, p.13.
6 p.190.
8 Foakes, p.xxxviii, n.1.
9 There are several points in the play at which Hamlet is deliberately echoed. In I.i. when Lussurioso demands that Vindice swear secrecy, the deliberate repetition of the word, "swear" (160-167) recalls the echo of the ghost's voice as the conspirators swear secrecy in Shakespeare's play. Vindice's complaint that his "life's unnatural to me" (I.i. 120) since his father's funeral is another such echo. The notion of the revenger/malcontent applies to Hamlet, Vindice and Spurio and the latter two may be variants on the former. The conversion scene of Gratianella recalls that of Gertrude and Vindice's silkworm speech may be meant to suggest Hamlet's meditation upon the skull of Yorick.
10 Jonson often plays with his audience in this manner. The applause at the end of Epicoene forces the audience to partake in the torture of Morose. It is the figure of Volpone who requests the applause at the end of that play and the prologue of Bartholomew Fair spells out the nature of the audience's relation to the play in the form of a contract which the audience in effect signs by coming to the play; its signature becomes its assent to the activities on stage.
11 Especially L. G. Salingar.
12 The choice of name for the skull suggests a reference to Elizabeth I.
15 In his article, "Hamlet, Duellist" (University of Toronto Quarterly XXXIX, no. 1 (1969) pp.9-18) Sheldon Zitter examines Hamlet as an investigation into the adequacy of the duelling code (and ultimately any human code) for dealing with the ultimate questions of self and place in the world. He argues that the question was of some importance during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century not only because duelling activities had assumed alarming proportions in England but also because adherence to the code posed those questions that surround imminent death. Both Bowers and Lawrence Stone (The Crisis of the Aristocracy 1558-1641 (Oxford, 1965), pp.242-250) provide evidence of the social and political magnitude of the duelling problem. Zitter suggests that the acceptance of the duel as a manner of avenging one's honor, often for insignificant affronts, at the cost of one's life, made ultimate preoccupations immediate issues for those who accepted the code. The thesis is extremely suggestive in terms of The Revenger's Tragedy. The play could possibly involve a parody of the duelling code ritual imposed by Saviolo's manual as well as a satire of the dramatic tradition of which the play is a form. The article certainly suggests a social motivation for Tourneur's preoccupation.