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## “FOR SHOW OR USELESS PROPERTY”: NECROPHILIA AND *THE REVENGER’S TRAGEDY*

BY KARIN S. CODDON

“Kiss me, kiss me, kiss me,  
Your tongue’s like poison”

—The Cure

The intersection of death and the erotic throughout Elizabethan and Jacobean tragedy is a virtual commonplace of the genre; from Hamlet’s leap into Ophelia’s grave to the perversities of Tourneur and Middleton, the body of death is at least symbolically conflated with the body of desire. Indeed, while granting that theatrical personae as yet do not “go so far as making love to the corpse,” Philippe Aries notes “an almost imperceptible shift [in early modern England and France] from familiarity with the dead to macabre eroticism.”<sup>1</sup> Yet in Cyril Tourneur’s *The Revenger’s Tragedy* (1607), the eroticized body of death is more than a symbolic presence or moody memento mori: Gloriana’s skull is a prop endowed with remarkable spectacular and material efficacy. Peter Stallybrass’s argument that death removes Gloriana from the corrupting realm of sexual desire is doubly belied by Vindice’s notably prurient obsession with the skull of his nine-years-dead betrothed and by his all but literal prostitution of the skull in pursuit of revenge against the lecherous Duke.<sup>2</sup> I suggest that this latter machination constitutes the play’s emblematic moment: a savage literalization of the conventional love/death conjunction as the Duke kisses—and “like a slobbering Dutchman,” at that—the skull’s poisoned maw.

Without denying the rather obvious connotations of patriarchal anxiety about female sexuality—or falling into the tempting though anachronistic trap of having Tourneur “have read” Freud or Bataille (to paraphrase Baudrillard), I would like to claim that necrophilia in *The Revenger’s Tragedy* serves at once to parody and to interrogate contemporary, increasingly scientific notions of the body. The constitution of the body as the object of scientific enquiry—perhaps most strikingly though not exclusively demonstrated in the relatively recent phenomenon of public dissection—is brutally travestied in Tourneur’s insistent displacement of an “objective” knowledge of the body by spectacular, defiantly perverse desire. Necrophilia yokes together science and seduc-

tion; discipline does not replace the unruly erotic but instead precariously displaces it in the elision of the body by the cold medium of the scientific gaze.<sup>3</sup> Tourneur's play does not simply eroticize "the idea of death"—it does not disembodied death by rendering it into a discourse as does that paradigm of proto-modern subjectivity, Hamlet; rather, the play theatricalizes death in the specific, material dead body. Gloriana's skull becomes perversely seductive, in Baudrillard's sense of the term, playing alternately at being pure referent and pure signifier, the revenger's "form and cause" at once conjoined and confounded: "*Every interpretative discourse . . . wants to get beyond appearances: this is its illusion and fraud. But getting beyond appearances is an impossible task: inevitably every discourse is revealed in its appearance, and is hence subject to the stakes imposed by seduction, and consequently to its own failure as discourse.*"<sup>4</sup> The Jacobean spectacle, situated as it is in a liminal position between the emblematic and mimetic—between theatricality and interpretation—undermines its own ostensible truth value by foregrounding the instability yet opacity of appearances. Confounded as well in the play's erotics of death is the distinction between an emergent scientism and the repressed, residual otherness of the transgressive corporeality identified with madness, witchcraft, and necromancy.

Even among the grotesqueries of Jacobean theatre, *The Revenger's Tragedy* is notably macabre; it is small wonder that Eliot singled it out for its "cynicism . . . loathing and disgust of humanity."<sup>5</sup> Yet the morbid interest in the corporeality of death and decomposition that so distinguishes Jacobean tragedy is at least as residual as emergent, given what Lynn White has called a pervasive "socially manifested necrophilia" of the fifteenth century.<sup>6</sup> As Foucault, Aries, and others have remarked upon, the Cimetiere des Innocents, Danse Macabre, and *artes moriendi* are cultural productions of late fourteenth and early fifteenth century Europe, phenomena that have been attributed, alternately though not exclusively, to a burgeoning humanism, the lingering psychic, social, and economic effects of the Black Death, and an ecclesiastical interest in promoting anxiety about death and hence the economic and political well-being of church bureaucrats.<sup>7</sup> Literary treatments of Eros/Thanatos tend to be more decorous in the Middle Ages than in Jacobean tragedy, if not terribly less frequent; the intertwining of love and death figures prominently in the *Tristan* tales, and Mallory's *Morte d'Arthur* features a number of implicit and explicit necrophiliac episodes.<sup>8</sup> In fact, in the fifteenth century occurred the most notorious documented case of necrophilia in early modern Europe, that of Gilles de Rais, a French nobleman who had fought alongside Jeanne d'Arc, and who was to

become the inspiration for the fictive Bluebeard. After Jeanne's capture and execution, Gilles evidently retired to his castle, where he proceeded to seduce, murder and mutilate scores of young boys, not only copulating with the corpses but preserving various body parts for posterity. Upon his arrest, Gilles confessed to his crimes, his pre-execution repentance likely of greater edification to the Church than to the soul of the necrophile himself, for "[Gilles's] confession, repentance, and resignation were acclaimed as an elaborate example of Christian penance."<sup>9</sup>

Yet despite these fifteenth-century analogs, death, and dead bodies, seemed to retain a kind of quotidian respect due the inexplicable if not the magical; it was seldom the focus of derisive parody such as one finds in Tourneur, Webster, and Middleton. Compared to post-Reformation Europe, a relative tolerance for the magical seems at least partly responsible for the "familiarity" with death that Aries notes about the late Middle Ages. Unlike the lofty ritual of public anatomy, in which an audience of cowed, reverent observers watched an expert dissector anatomize, analyze, and label the dead body, popular practices well into the seventeenth century treated of the corpse in every-day, efficacious terms; various parts and fluids of the corpse were commonly assumed to have medicinal value—"the perspiration of corpses is good for hemorrhoids and tumors, and the hand of a cadaver applied to a diseased area can heal, as in the case of a woman suffering from dropsy who rubbed her abdomen with the still-warm hand of a corpse."<sup>10</sup> As late as the Restoration, so lofty a personage as the ailing Charles I of England "drank a potion . . . containing forty-two drops of extract of human skull."<sup>11</sup>

One is tempted, perhaps, to concur with Giovanna Ferrari's claim that the practice of anatomy descends from traditional, popular pharmaceuticals of the dead body.<sup>12</sup> Yet the relation between popular practice and science in the early modern period is less one of integration than of co-optation. By 1604 in England, it was a felony "to take up a dead body in whole or part for magical purposes."<sup>13</sup> Anatomy and dissection were the territory of the specialist; for the non-specialist, traffic with the dead body constituted necromancy, witchcraft. Although in France, desecration of the corpse could serve as an act, however unsanctioned, of religious sedition, for the most part in early modern Europe, licit contact with the dead body was expressly limited to men of science.<sup>14</sup>

I agree with Francis Barker that the rise of the "science" of anatomy in early modern Europe is very much bound up in an ideological re/formation of the subject that entailed an elision of the body.<sup>15</sup> For Foucault, these strategies focus "on the body as a machine: its disciplin-

ing, the optimization of its capabilities, the extortion of its foes, the parallel increase of its usefulness and its docility, its integration into systems of efficient and economic controls . . . ensured by the procedures of power that characterized the *disciplines*.”<sup>16</sup> Strikingly, these “anatomy-politics of the body” were applied to the dead as well as the living.<sup>17</sup> That artists like Leonardo, Rembrandt, and Vesalius partook in the discipline of anatomy along with physicians, humanists, and even noble amateurs suggests slippages between object and representation, ostensible referent and simulacrum.<sup>18</sup> It seems no cultural accident that the popularity of the *trompe l’oeil* in early modern Europe roughly coincides with the radical anti-mimesis of Jacobean tragedy.<sup>19</sup> For while the *trompe l’oeil* seems at first to be simulation at its most diabolical, it “does not attempt to confuse itself with the real. Fully aware of play and artifice, it produces a simulacrum by mimicking the third dimension, and by mimicking and surpassing the effect of the real, radically questioning the principle of reality.”<sup>20</sup> On a certain level, then, the *trompe l’oeil*, like Jacobean tragedy, parodies and even resists the emergent proto-empirical discourses that are predicated on the assumption of access to knowledge via the “objectivity” of bodies and equally stable subjectivity of the humanist subject. Spectacular representation becomes the site of radical contradiction, in which the unstable play of signifier and referent foregrounds its attempts—almost literally—to *deceive the eye*, the objectifying, diagnostic eye of discipline as well as the “I” that discipline homologously constitutes.

“The king is a thing—of nothing,” Hamlet utters paradoxically; as I have argued elsewhere, this intersection of madness with the paradox of the dead body disrupts the ideological conflation of the sovereign’s mystic corpus and the subject’s docile and obedient inwardness.<sup>21</sup> For the corpse is at once a *thing*, materially present yet marked by the absolute absence of subjectivity—and *no-thing*, a signifier severed from its referent, its “owner.” According to emergent scientism, to be a “thing” and a “thing of nothing” is redundant. Hence the hegemonic co-optation of the body is as mystified as the colonization of “savages” in the New World, both imperative and necessary for the primacy and sustenance of European rationality. And, as with the violence of imperialistic conquest, the more obnoxious aspects of conquest of the body were often viewed as the unpleasant but unavoidable “dirty work” justified by the rationality, even the nobility, of the end. Leonardo, though an experienced dissector, granted that “though you have a love of such things you will perhaps be hindered by your stomach; and if that does not impede you, you will perhaps be impeded by the fear of living through the night hours

in the company of quartered and flayed corpses fearful to behold.”<sup>22</sup> Alissandro Benedetti, a learned Italian Renaissance doctor and author of a 1502 treatise on anatomy, refers to dissection in a tellingly oxymoronic phrase as “a horrifying task, an object worthy of a special theatrical presentation.”<sup>23</sup> In his treatise on urn excavations, Sir Thomas Browne seems to justify his own scientific necromancy on grounds that cremated remains, unlike buried corpses, cannot be desecrated: “To be gnaw’d out of our graves, to have our souls made drinking bowls, and our bones turned into Pipes, to delight and sport our Enemies, are Tragically abominations, escaped in burning Burials.”<sup>24</sup>

Interestingly, the category of gender was pointedly not elided in anatomy; rather, dissection of the female corpse offered the possibility of an ultimate, literal penetration, surveillance, and disciplining of female sexuality. Leonardo urged that “three [anatomies] need to be made of a woman, in whom there is great mystery on account of her uterus and its fetus” (in fact, he did dissect the body of a pregnant woman).<sup>25</sup> Contemporary illustrations of dissection are likewise, and tellingly, gendered. The frontispiece for Vesalius’s *Fabrica* (1543) and *Epitome* (1543) features a woodcut depicting the public anatomy of a female: surrounded by a crowd of avid observers, the anatomist has opened up the corpse’s abdominal cavity, toward which he gestures. But the woman’s body is, significantly, facing the viewer of the illustration, legs slightly spread, bare breasts evident above the huge gaping hole that is the rest of her torso.<sup>26</sup> Similarly, a woodcut from Jacob Rueff’s *De conceptu et generatione hominis* (1554) shows a (presumably) living, naked woman with her abdomen—from her vaginal lips to just beneath her breasts—completely opened up, her reproductive organs once again directly facing the reader’s eye.<sup>27</sup> Illustrations of the dissection of male corpses typically present the body laid in horizontal (that is, left to right) position; even Rembrandt’s *Anatomy of Dr. Joan Deyman*, in which the male body is facing the spectator of the painting, depicts the corpse with his groin area discreetly covered. The convergence of science with a means of absolute, violent control and containment of female sexuality is hardly arbitrary; for with the emergence of rationalist, empirical discourse comes an explicit irrationalization of the female body.<sup>28</sup> The scientific paradigm aspires to universalize the Other as object; hence the female corpse is doubly objectified, the disciplinary intervention serving to expose the biological, “natural” bases for gender.

While the skull of Gloriana in Tournour’s play literally lacks a body, it does not, as I have already suggested, lack a sexuality. Her mutilated state certainly evokes contemporary depictions of anatomized female

corpses, and while her sexual organs have presumably long turned to dust, the fact that the skull kills with its “lips” suggests the *vagina dentata*, even without an actual vagina. Yet Gloriana’s skull, and its function in the play, is not so easily reduced to simple imagings of misogyny. For the skull is gendered only because we are told so; it obviously bears no visible mark of its sex. Indeed, when Vindice, in act 3, scene 5 enters “*with the skull of his love dressed up in tires*,” the skull’s gendering is clearly a contrivance. The dead body, far from fixing gender categories (as it does in anatomy), here emblemizes the material contingency of gender. The play’s relentless confusion of identity with disguise and thus of the referent with radically unstable signifiers, in which not even the skull, a “thing of nothing,” can be identified outside of the duplicity of theatricality, overturns the very epistemological and ideological bases for power/knowledge.

In fact, Vindice’s characteristic, quasi-prurient misogyny subverts itself throughout the play by its association of vile female sexuality with artifice and disguise—de/vices that wholly construct (and deconstruct) this most decentered of Jacobean revengers. By his own admission, “My life’s unnatural to me, e’en compelled, As if I lived now when I should be dead.”<sup>29</sup> The conflation of the “unnatural” or artificial with life is striking; if a corpse is a body without subjectivity, then Vindice is on a certain level “dead.” Indeed, his assumption of the role of Revenger, of Piato the bawd, and even of his “actual self” after the Duke’s murder is not fundamentally different from Gloriana’s skull dressed up in tires. To an extent, then, the profound sexual nausea of the play may be seen to derive not only from the destabilized discourse of misogyny, but also from the fact that in this “unnatural” realm, all the players are vampires and necrophiles. In his opening speech, Vindice remarks of the Duke, “Oh that marrowless age / Would stuff the hollow bones with damned desires, / And ’stead of heat kindle infernal fires of a dry duke, / A parched and juicless luxor” (1.1.5–9). The Duke is characterized not only as impotent, but as having “hollow bones”—a figuring of death that prepares for the transition to Vindice’s address to Gloriana:

Thou shallow picture of my poisoned love,  
 My study’s ornament, thou shell of Death  
 Once the bright face of my betrothed lady,  
 When life and beauty naturally filled out  
 Those ragged imperfections;  
 When two heaven-pointed diamonds were set  
 In those unsightly rings—then ’twas a face

So far beyond the artificial shine  
Of any woman's bought complexion  
That the uprightest man—if such there be,  
That sin but seven times a day—broke custom  
And made up eight with looking after her.

(1.1.14–25)

The address to Gloriana, like the spectacle itself, is marked by semiotic instability. The skull is initially described as a “picture,” an “ornament,” a “shell” of the dead woman. Yet the living Gloriana can be characterized only in terms of the artifice and ornamentation employed by other ladies as a substitute for “natural” beauty: her eyes were like “two heaven-pointed diamonds,” and a few lines later, Vindice remarks “Thee when thou were *apparelled in thy flesh*, the old duke poisoned” (1.1.31–32; emphasis added). If living flesh is but the “apparel” for dead bones, then the skull must be the referent, not merely the relic; yet its referentiality is problematized by the visual absence of anything distinctively “Gloriana” about it. The body thus evades discipline by resisting a stable semiotic character: the will to knowledge can occupy the status only of a perverse and displaced voyeurism. It is interesting to consider Tourneur’s own “anatomy-politics” in light of Derrida’s commentary on Artaud’s “theatre of cruelty”:

Evil, pollution, resides in the *critical* or the *clinical*: it is to have one’s speech and body become works, objects which can be offered up to the furtive haste of the commentator because they are supine. For, by definition, the only thing that is not subject to commentary is the life of the body, the living flesh whose integrity, opposed to evil and death, is maintained by the theater.<sup>30</sup>

In the theatre of Tourneur if not that of Artaud, the matter is complicated further by a parodic confusion—both discursive and spectacular—of the semiotics of the dead body.

Thus, too, the play’s immediate and persistent, morbid foregrounding of the skull—and of Vindice’s eroticized attachment to it—displaces the “disinterested,” disciplinary gaze of anatomy with a transgressive voyeurism—displaces the scientist with the necrophile, so to speak. The repulsiveness explained away in the name of science by Leonardo, Bennedetti, and even Browne becomes itself the object of desire. Moreover, the play’s subversive slippages between the body of death and the body of desire are perhaps better historicized than psychoanalyzed. The humanistic valorization of the body (a valorization that in many ways



enabled the co-optation of the corpse in the pursuit of higher knowledge), as well as the post-Reformation sanction of conjugal life, cannot be taken to suggest simply a cultural shift away from medieval *contemptus mundi* and toward an enlightened and affirmative embracing of the sexual body. In her discussion of Holbein's harrowingly realistic *The Body of Dead Christ in the Tomb*, Julia Kristeva provocatively poses the question: "Did the Reformation influence such a concept of death [as Holbein's], and more specifically, such an emphasis on Christ's death at the expense of any allusion to the Redemption and Resurrection?"<sup>31</sup> The Reformation's simultaneous privilege of inwardness and denial of individual agency *vis-a-vis* salvation may well have provoked greater anxiety about death; the prominence of the "food for worms" topos, emphasizing the decomposition and putrefaction of the corpse, is scarcely less morbid than the medieval Dance of Death.<sup>32</sup> As for the living, sexual body, Lawrence Stone suggests that for most early modern English women and men, intercourse likely exposed them to flesh that must have appeared well on the way to putrefaction:

Both sexes suffered long periods of crippling illness which incapacitated them for months or years. Even when relatively well, they often suffered from disorders which made sex painful to them or unpleasant to their partners. Women suffered from a whole series of gynaecological disorders, particularly leucorrhoea, but also vaginal ulcers, tumours, inflammations and haemorrhages which often made sexual intercourse disagreeable, painful, or impossible. Both sexes must very often have had bad breath from the rotting teeth and constant stomach disorders which can be documented from many sources, while superating ulcers, excema, scabs, running sores and other nauseating skin disorders were extremely common, and often lasted for years.<sup>33</sup>

Stone's catalogue of "nauseating" physical ailments comes dangerously close to absolutizing cultural norms, but it is equally misguided to assume that because of the commonness of such complaints, the average Elizabethan or Jacobean paid them no heed. Most important to attend to, I believe, is that for many sixteenth- and seventeenth-century women and men, sexual intercourse was accompanied by pointedly un-romanticized assumptions about the body of desire that would likely strike the twentieth century Western sensibility as revolting.

This is not to suggest, however, that Vindice's obsession with Gloriana's skull might have been taken by a Jacobean audience as naturalistic, much less normative. When Hippolito enters after the opening soliloquy, and

asks his brother rhetorically, "Still sighing o'er Death's vizard?" (1.1.49), the effect is to underscore Vindice's perversity. "Sighing," of course, has sexual connotations; and "Death's vizard" is yet another startlingly ambiguous phrase, seeming to contradict Vindice's prior characterization of Gloriana's flesh as the mask. For the skull marks not the limit or antithesis of corporeal desire but is rather its object. Hippolito has sought out Vindice to play the role of "base-coined pandar" (1.1.80), spurring Vindice's remark, "I wonder how ill-featured, vile proportioned / That one should be, if she were made for woman, / Whom at the insurrection of his lust / He would refuse for once: heart, I think none; / Next to a skull, though more unsound than one, / Each face he meets he strongly dotes upon" (1.1.86–89). The syntax is peculiar: does "Next to a skull" refer to the precedent "He" or following "Each face"? The ambiguity is intriguing, for the skull may be seen as simultaneously the boundary and the culmination of desire, the site where licit and illicit desires becomes mutually indistinguishable. Lust does not "disguise itself" as necrophilia so much as necrophilia disguises itself as lust, Vindice seems to imply, both in the aforementioned lines and in his contradictory expressions of derision of lechery and erotic attachment to Gloriana in "her" present state. But as I have already suggested, Vindice no less than the skull functions more as prop, as a "thing of nothing," than as an agent. He agrees to "put on that knave" (the role of bawd; 1.1.92) right away, the elision of "*the role of*," or "*the disguise of*" "that knave" justified by his ensuing remark, "For to be honest is not to be i' the world" (1.1.94). Charles and Elaine Hallett have observed that "Vindice's journey is a journey into madness in the sense that he creates an alter-ego and loses all grip on himself. Eventually, there is no longer a real Vindice; he has entered so far into deceit that he is the man he pretends to be. To put on the role of Vindice again is to put on a new disguise."<sup>34</sup> But I would question the Halletts' assumption that "a real Vindice," an originally centered subject, is available anywhere in the play.<sup>35</sup> By his own definition, "to be honest is not to be i' the world"—"the world" being the realm of Jacobean theatrical representation, which in its radical anti-mimesis anticipates Artaud (or, at least, Derrida's reading of Artaud) in "announc[ing] the limit of representation."<sup>36</sup> For no "real Vindice" is possible in the play, not only in the banal sense that theatrical personae are by definition roles and not "subjectivities," but also, and more provocatively, because the absence of *honesty* (a claim to authentic subjectivity) in the play's world parodically reduces the dramatis personae to the level of props, deconstructing the precarious distinction between the "dead" body as object and the animate one, with illusions of

its own autonomous subjectivity, as agent or even actor.<sup>37</sup> The opening scene closes with Vindice's aside, "I'll quickly turn into another" (1.1.134), but the collapse of boundaries between subject and object has already been put forth as a given of the play. The subsequent theatricalization of disguise is a savage self-parody that seems to acknowledge that the dismantling of the illusion of "honesty"—or *mimesis*—makes representation a metaphysical impossibility. And in the absence of metaphysics this theater can proffer only the arbitrary materiality of bodies stripped even of the ostensibly stable semiotic distinctions between living and dead.

Thus, when Vindice appears in his disguise, his question to Hippolito—"What brother, am I far enough from myself?" (1.3.1)—underscores not only the infinite substitutability of "subjectivity," but on a practical, spectacular level, functions to inform the audience that this disguised figure is indeed the same "character" introduced in scene 1, act 1, given that the actor obviously has been physically "translated." Yet if Vindice's "life is unnatural to [him]," the "self" to which he refers is no less an artifice than this late guise of Piato the bawd. Similarly, Vindice's invocation of "Impudence, Thou goddess of the palace" (1.3.5–6), to "Strike thou mine forehead into dauntless marble, Mine eyes steady sapphires" (1.3.8–9), seems to echo his opening meditation on Gloriana's skull—"When two heaven-pointed diamonds were set in those unsightly rings—then 'twas a face So far beyond the artificial shine Of any woman's bought complexion" (1.1.19–22). The mask that Vindice has put on is strikingly similar to that which "apparelled [Gloriana] in [her] flesh." With no stable semiotic to mark off natural from unnatural, life from death, the ontological status of playing is itself thrown into question in a far more radical way than one finds in the typical "world-as-stage" topos. Again, the characters function as virtual props; thus the spectators, situated in the position of viewing the prurient machinations less of mimetic characters than of objects, are themselves inscribed as voyeuristic necrophiles.

When Vindice announces himself to Lussurioso as "A bone setter . . . A bawd, my lord, One that sets bones together" (1.3.42–44), he foreshadows the sexual assignation he will arrange between the Duke and Gloriana's skull: the "setting together" of "hollow bones" with the "the bony lady." Yet as go-between, the bawd is doubly implicated—indeed, is situated between the dead bones. Vindice's proclamation upon Lussurioso's exit—"Now let me burst, I've eaten noble poison!" (1.3.170)—aligns him (as has the sapphire-eyed figure) not only with the poisoned Gloriana, but also with the lecherous Duke, who will literally eat poison in the upshot of Vindice's revenge. The wholesale instability of Vindice's

identity accounts for the play's somewhat solipsistic quality; on a symbolic level, he is both Gloriana and her ravisher, for on a semiotic and hence epistemological level the play makes it impossible to distinguish him, whose "life's unnatural," from the "hollow bones" and "bony lady." If the construction of subjectivity functions to establish boundaries between identity and difference, Self and Other, then the refusal of subjectivity and parodic embrace of objectification and disguise produce an anarchy in which identity is radically interchangeable. Hence the following scene's perverse disclosure of the rape and suicide (by poison) of Antonio's wife not only mirrors the "main plot," but rehearses and duplicates it. Once again, the effect is that of the *trompe l'oeil*, wherein the seeming exactitude of mimesis actually serves to render imitation itself static and artificial: the parodic precision of the duplication of the Vindice-Gloriana-Duke triad is in fact the very antithesis of verisimilitude. To use Baudrillard's terminology, the scene is a simulacrum of the third order, in that it mimics a prior model that has no epistemological foundation itself—they are signs referring to and interacting only with other signs, all of them "variables."<sup>38</sup> Antonio displays the dead body of his raped wife: "Behold my lords / A sight that strikes man out of me" (1.4.4–5). In turn, the lords praise the object set forth for their perusal: Piero cries, "That virtuous lady!" while Hippolito extols "The blush of many women, whose chaste presence / Would e'en call shame up to their cheeks / And make pale wanton sinners have good colours" (6–9). The paens to the woman's corpse—"Precedent for wives" (1.4.6)—seem to imply that the emblematic desirable female body is a dead one, spectacularly displayed to appraising, evaluating male gazes.<sup>39</sup> Antonio's narration of the events leading to his wife's suicide significantly confuses the objectified but living female body with the object that is the eroticized body of death: "The duchess's younger son . . . Singled out that dear form, who ever lived as cold in lust as she is now in death" (1.4.32–36). That the woman's death makes her all the more "wondrous," an "empress," even (49–50), is not to say that she is removed from the realm of sexuality; for the spectacular display of her dead body rather undercuts the conventional and disembodying tributes to her chastity.<sup>40</sup> Antonio's claim that "this is my comfort gentlemen, and I joy / In this one happiness above the rest, / Which will be called a miracle at last, / That being an old man I'd a wife so chaste" (1.4.75–78) is one of the play's more incongruous speeches, for the conventional misogyny of the sentiment is ironized not only by the voyeurism incited by her corpse's display, but the erotic investment of Vindice's lust for revenge that frames the Antonio subplot.

Similarly, the disguised Vindice's attempt to procure his sister for Lussurioso, and seduction of his mother to consent to the pandering, is on the level of signification no less perverse and even incestuous than Spurio's liaison with his stepmother. For despite Vindice's declared intention merely to test the ladies' virtue, disguise and dissimulation so subsume any essential referentiality that there is only signification; the play precludes any stable spectacular or semiotic criteria by which to distinguish unnaturally-disguised (and -minded) "Piato" from Vindice, whose "life is unnatural." "Piato's" mastery of the very discourses of sensuality that Vindice ostensibly loathes, and the persistence with which he employs it to Gratiana and Castiza, indicts language itself as but a habit that aptly is put on. The boundaries by which kinship bonds are constructed (*and* incest forbidden) are disclosed as contingent, dependent on a stable semiosis that exists nowhere in the world of the play—just as distinctions between necromancy (with its evocations of necrophilia) and science, madness and sanity, are debunked as binarisms themselves violently imposed in the process of constructing early modern subjectivity. For, as Foucault has compellingly shown, the incitements of distinct categories of sexuality were bound up in the development of the disciplines (not the least of which is *self*-discipline).<sup>41</sup> The play's semiotic anarchy effects and virtually promotes the proliferation of illicit sexualities in excess of any subject's "intentions."

So, too, Vindice's exhortation to Lussurioso to murder the Duke and Duchess in bed "doubled, when they're heaped" (2.3.4) conflates the spectacle of voyeurism with evocations of incestuous oedipal desire and necrophilia. For Vindice has urged Lussurioso (who expects to find Spurio with the Duchess) to "take 'em twisted" (2.3.2), in a bitterly literal pun on the conventional Elizabethan/Jacobean "orgasm as death" metaphor, literal not the least because such a murder would provide a grotesque spectacle of sex and death intertwined. That Vindice is not particularly concerned that the Duke and not Spurio was discovered "heaped" with the Duchess (2.3.32–34) underscores the mad semiosis of necrophilic desire in excess of the object or referent (ostensibly, revenge against the Duke). Vindice shrugs off the missed opportunity: "Would he [Lussurioso] had killed him, 'twould have eased our swords" (2.3.34). What is constantly being provoked and incited in the play is not justice or even spectacle *per se*: it is the desire to present spectacularly the coupling of the quick and the dead, a desire that implicates not only Vindice but the audience as well.<sup>42</sup>

Thus the play's pivotal scene, act 3, scene 5, is remarkable both for its relative prematurity, given revenge tragedy conventions, and for the

vehemence with which it parodies the genre's, and the culture's, own governing symbolics of death. Romeo and Juliet's final moments in Capulet's tomb, Hamlet and Laertes' fight in Ophelia's grave, these staged conjunctions of Eros and Thanatos are decorous because desire remains in the realm of the symbolic and metaphorical. That is, it was for the audiences to accept the premise that these scenes take place in tombs and graveyards, given the relative austerity of Elizabethan and Jacobean scenic design. Vindice bounds onstage with the exclamation "Oh sweet, delectable, rare, happy, ravishing!" (3.5.1), directly following the prurient remarks of the Duke's Younger Son condemned to die for the rape of Antonio's wife: "My fault was sweet sport which the world approves; I die for that which every woman loves" (3.4.78). The slippage between lust and the ecstasy of violence is parodically foregrounded; when Hippolito asks his brother the cause of his ecstatic mood, Vindice replies, "Oh 'tis able / To make a man spring up and knock his forehead / Against yon silver ceiling" (3.5.2-4), an idiom with overt erotic connotations. Indeed, Vindice is almost too overcome to share with Hippolito the cause for "the violence of my joy" (3.5.27)—a phrase that mockingly recalls the throes of Petrarchan love such as one finds in *Romeo and Juliet*. When Hippolito persists in asking about the identity of the lady Vindice has procured for the Duke, Vindice responds, "Oh at that word I'm lost again, you cannot find me yet, I'm in a throng of happy apprehensions" (3.5.28-30), as though it is Vindice and not the Duke who anticipates a tryst. He runs off-stage to fetch the "lady," returning shortly with "*the skull of his love dressed up in tires.*" Even the generally amenable Hippolito seems shocked: "Why brother, brother" (3.5.49). But Vindice persists in his lascivious panderer's discourse: "Art thou beguiled now? Tut a lady can / At such, all hid, beguile a wiser man. / Have I not fitted the old surfeiter / With a quaint piece of beauty?" (3.5.50-54). The bawdy pun on "quaint," like Vindice's simultaneous sexual revulsion and sexual fascination with Gloriana's remains, once again yokes together the ostensibly disembodied skull with the sexual body of desire. Even the play's most celebrated set speech, which seems to begin as a somewhat conventional, if eloquent, meditation on mortality and corporeality, concludes with an acknowledgment of semiotic confusion in place of any concrete point of reference.

And now methinks I could e'en chide myself  
 For doting on her beauty, though her death  
 Shall be revenged after no common action.  
 Does the silkworm expend her yellow labours

For thee? For thee does she undo herself?  
 Are lordships sold to maintain ladyships  
 For the poor benefit of a bewitching minute?  
 Why does yon fellow falsify highways  
 And put his life between the judge's lips  
 To refine such a thing, keeps horses and men  
 To beat their valours for her?  
 Surely we're all mad people and they,  
 Whom we think are, are not; we mistake those.  
 'Tis we are mad in sense, they but in clothes.

(3.5.68–81)

Alas, poor Gloriana; yet Vindice's reflections on the decomposition of his lost love and the treacherous, because transitory, nature of female desirability are problematized by the conclusion that semiosis is irrational, and the "sane" man madder than the lunatic, a distinction that Hippolito reminds him is moot anyway, given that they "in clothes too" (their disguises) are mad, their identities effaced. Moreover, the temporal ambiguity of the speech's opening lines—for it is most unclear how long Vindice has ceased to "dote . . . on her beauty" or if he has ceased to dote at all—further compounds the confusion.

Just as confused is the ensuing apostrophe to Gloriana: Vindice no sooner bids "Thou may'st lie chaste now" (3.5.89) than he pictures the skull's presence "at revels, forgetful feasts and unclean brothels" (3.5.90–91), a peculiar imagined situation of the virtuous lady's skull in the very spaces of lechery. Readdressing Hippolito, Vindice turns to his "tragic business":

I have not fashioned this only for show  
 Or useless property, no—it shall bear a part  
 E'en in its own revenge. This very skull,  
 Whose mistress the duke poisoned with this drug,  
 The mortal curse of the earth, shall be revenged  
 In the like strain and kiss his lips to death.

(3.5.99–104)

The sexual puns continue, with Hippolito "applaud[ing] . . . The quaintness of the malice" (3.5.107–8), and Vindice replying, "So 'tis laid on" (3.5.109). But what is interesting as well is Vindice's justification of the ruse in the name of theatrical efficacy—"I have not fashioned this only for show / Or Useless property" (3.5.99–100)—a theatrical efficacy the play itself has resoundingly deconstructed, replacing it with a prurient spectacle that traffics chiefly in the titillation of its spectators via

representation of overtly decentered, semiotically unreadable objects of transgressive desire. Indeed, on a certain level, the whole of *The Revenger's Tragedy* is given over to "show and useless property"—props, things of nothing, theatrically manipulable but inherently meaningless. What if, the play seems to be brutally suggesting, the body itself were no more than a prop? Bodies of desire, bodies of death, the bodies of actual actors playing roles that have no ultimate reference to subjectivity—the enabling distinctions that divide mind from corporeality, licit from illicit desires, subjects from objects, are disintegrated.

Hence the brutality of the Duke's murder must be viewed from the perspective not of the "ethics of revenge," but rather of the excesses of spectacular desire that cannot but convert law into license, discipline into a violent affirmation of the transgressiveness of body-politics. The Duke's teeth and tongue are eaten away after his kiss with Gloriana—"Twill teach you to kiss closer, Not like a slobbering Dutchman," scoffs Vindice (3.5.161–62). Vindice's simplistic comment, "When the bad bleeds, then is the tragedy good" (3.5.198), is patently ironic, for both the sadistic spectacle and the Revenger's obvious lust in torturing the Duke belie any generic notion of Old Testament-style vengeful justice. Vindice's ostensible *raison d'être*—vengeance for Gloriana's death—has been served, and yet his conclusion of the scene by urging his brother, "As fast as they peep up let's cut 'em down" (3.5.210), marks not an ethical critique of revenge so much as the radical estrangement of signifier from referent. Gloriana has been avenged, Vindice has fulfilled his dramatic and ethical "purpose," and yet the play's own inexorable, even tyrannical, logic subsumes its supposed premises. Though two full acts follow the Duke's murder, their narrative purpose is radically superfluous. In act 4, scene 2, Vindice "becomes himself" again, only to be commissioned by Lussurioso to kill "Piato"; that he "accomplishes" this deed by disguising the Duke's corpse in "Piato's" garb is less ironic than brutally parodic, identity being as unstable and contingent for the dead as for the living. Likewise, Vindice's ostensible hubris in blurting out to Antonio his and Hippolito's murderous deeds signifies not tragic pride so much as the impossibility of subjectivity: "'Tis time to die when we are ourselves our foes," Vindice proclaims (5.3.110), adding shortly thereafter that the "dead" Piato "was a witch" (5.3.119). Any criteria—ethical, semiotic, or spectacular—by which subjects can be named, distinguished not only from one another but from the materiality of objects, of props, have been exploded.

*What's Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba?* The play profoundly travesties the illusion of actors embodying agents, or theater holding up



a (rational) mirror to nature, or spectacular experience as possible locus of knowledge. Against the body of death as the site of stable referentiality, the desexualized object of disciplinary inquiry and the Other of the disembodied proto-humanist subject, *The Revenger's Tragedy* subversively proffers the dead body as a fetishized prop on which not reason but madness inscribes itself, the transgressive limit of desire that cannot itself be limited, neither a body of pain nor of pleasure, but one of infinite utility. In its savage parody of the scientized body, the play spectacularly confounds the transgressive and the legitimized body, desire and discipline—the very boundaries that would construct and define subject and object for early modern European epistemology.

In postmodern America, when one hears 1992 Los Angeles likened to 1991 Kuwait or Iraq, when the *political* inscription of “anarchy,” “lawlessness,” and violence is questioned, when violence against bodies of color is justified in the name of “due process” and “law”—that is, “the biological existence of a [white] population,” small wonder that many of us, within and without the academy, prefer to speak abstractly about the “ethical anarchy” of Jacobean tragedy, conveniently invoking the trope of “historical difference” to sidestep an active engagement of readings of the past with lived experience in the present.<sup>43</sup> As historically situated readers, we dare not constitute *history*, either overtly or tacitly, as merely part of the body of knowledge—pun intended—that designates a discipline and a profession. Where was your body the night Rodney King’s was being beaten? Where was mine? What do either question have to do with Cyril Tourneur’s play? I would hope that these are questions those of us who grapple with history will continue to consider.<sup>44</sup>

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Philippe Aries, *The Hour of Our Death*, trans. Helen Weaver (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1981), 376

<sup>2</sup> Peter Stallybrass, “Reading the Body: *The Revenger's Tragedy* and the Jacobean Theater of Consumption,” *Renaissance Drama* 18 (1987): 129–32.

<sup>3</sup> See Francis Barker, *The Tremulous Private Body* (London: Methuen, 1984), 80.

<sup>4</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Selected Writings*, trans. Jacques Morrain and Charles Levin, ed. Mark Poster (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1989), 150.

<sup>5</sup> T. S. Eliot, *Essays on Elizabethan Drama* (New York: Harvest Books, 1932, 1960), 120.

<sup>6</sup> Lynn White, Jr., “Death and the Devil,” in *The Darker Vision of the Renaissance*, ed. Robert Kinsman (Univ. of California Press, 1974), 31.

<sup>7</sup> For discussion of humanism see Donald Howard, “Renaissance World-Alienation,” in

*Darker Vision* (note 6), 47–76; for black death see White (note 6), 30–32; and for church bureaucracy see Aries (note 1), 298.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, book 6, chapter 17 of *Morte d'Arthur*. I am grateful to Elizabeth Bryan for this reference, as well as for pointing out the frequent intersection of spectacles of torture and death with the erotic in Medieval “virgin martyrs” accounts.

<sup>9</sup> Vern L. Bullough, *Sexual Variance in Society and History* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1976), 401.

<sup>10</sup> Aries (note 1), 357.

<sup>11</sup> Aries, 358.

<sup>12</sup> Giovanna Ferrari, “Public Anatomy Lessons and the Carnival: The Anatomy Theatre of Bologna,” *Past & Present* 117 (November 1987): 100–101.

<sup>13</sup> Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1971), 443.

<sup>14</sup> Natalie Zemon Davis, *Society and Culture in Early Modern France* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1975), 179.

<sup>15</sup> Barker (note 3), 73–80.

<sup>16</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), 139.

<sup>17</sup> Foucault (note 16), 139.

<sup>18</sup> Aries (note 1), 368–70.

<sup>19</sup> See Baudrillard (note 4), 155–59.

<sup>20</sup> Baudrillard, 156.

<sup>21</sup> Karin S. Coddon, “‘Suche Strange Desygns’: Madness, Subjectivity and Treason in *Hamlet* and Elizabethan Culture,” *Renaissance Drama* 20 (1989): 67–68.

<sup>22</sup> Kenneth D. Keele, *Leonardo da Vinci's Elements of the Science of Man* (New York: Academic Press, 1983), 197.

<sup>23</sup> Quoted in Ferrari (note 12), 57.

<sup>24</sup> Sir Thomas Browne, *Hydriotaphia or Urne-Burial*, in *The Works of Sir Thomas Browne*, ed. Geoffrey Keynes (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1964), 155.

<sup>25</sup> Keele (note 22), 197.

<sup>26</sup> William S. Hecksher, *Rembrandt's Anatomy of Dr. Nicholas Tulp: An Iconological Study* (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1958), fig. 54.

<sup>27</sup> Marcie Frank, “The Camera and the Speculum: David Cronenberg's *Dead Ringers*,” *PMLA* 106 (1991): 459–70 (fig. 468).

<sup>28</sup> See Foucault (note 16), 104.

<sup>29</sup> Cyril Tourneur, *The Revenger's Tragedy* (1607), ed. Brian Gibbons (New York: W. W. Norton, 1989), 1.1.119–20. All further references will be cited in the text.

<sup>30</sup> Jacques Derrida, “The Theater of Cruelty and the Closure of Representation,” in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass, (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1978), 183.

<sup>31</sup> Julia Kristeva, “Holbein's Dead Christ,” trans. Leon S. Roudiez, in *Fragments for A History of the Human Body*, ed. Michel Feher with Ramona Naddaff and Nadia Tazi (New York: Zone, 1989), 252.

<sup>32</sup> Arnold Stein, *The House of Death* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1986), 13.

<sup>33</sup> Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage 1500–1800*, abridged edition (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1979), 306.

<sup>34</sup> Charles and Elaine Hallet, *The Revenger's Madness* (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1980), 239.

<sup>35</sup> See, for example, Catherine Belsey, *The Subject of Tragedy* (London: Methuen, 1985), 31.

<sup>36</sup> Derrida (note 30), 234.

<sup>37</sup> By “honesty,” I refer not only to the modern definition of “truthfulness,” but also, and perhaps chiefly, to the sense of *authenticity* invoked by Hamlet when he tells Horatio, “Touching this vision here [the spectre of King Hamlet] / It is an *honest* ghost” (*Hamlet*, ed. T. S. B. Spence [Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980], 1.5.143–44; emphasis added).

<sup>38</sup> Baudrillard (note 4), 135.

<sup>39</sup> See Barker (note 3) on Andrew Marvell’s “To His Coy Mistress”: “The text exhibits, and even in its brutal way—within the economy of violence and the *imago* of the fragmented body discloses within the conventional lyricism—celebrates the body of the beloved in public view. . . . It is still there to be seen, and is acknowledged openly as the object and site of desire” (89).

<sup>40</sup> Here I disagree with Stallybrass’s (note 2) claim that the raped body of Lady Antonio is not “sexualized. . . . In the silence of death, Lady Antonio is made to speak only of religion and virtue, to speak as a ‘precedent for wives’” (130). Rather, I believe that the spectacular display of her body invokes and invites desire, not unlike Marvell’s “Coy Mistress;” see Barker (note 39).

<sup>41</sup> Foucault (note 16), 17–35.

<sup>42</sup> See Aries (note 1), 377.

<sup>43</sup> Foucault (note 16), 137.

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