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ملخص

دور المرأة الانتقامي
في مسرحيات مختارة من العصر الإليزابيثي

د. ندا أبو السعود(*)

يعني هذا البحث بتناول أحد أشكال دراما العصر الإليزابيثي ، وهو "مأساة الانتقام وعلاقتها بقضية مهمة في هذا العصر، وهي دور المرأة وخاصة الأم.

وقد تم اختيار مجموعة كتاب من هذا العصر، وهم: شكسبير، وكيد، وبومونت، وفليتشر، حيث تعتبر مسرحياتهم من كلاسيكيات هذا الشكل الدرامي مثل: "المأساة الأسبانية" (١٥٨٧) لكيد، و"تيتوس أندرونيكوس" (١٥٩١) لشكسبير، و"مأساة الفتاة" (١٦١٠) لفليتشر.

وقد استعان البحث بنصوص لكاتبات لتكون بمثابة نافذة نرى من خلالها كيفية تعبير المرأة عن جنسها في ذلك الوقت، وبذلك يمكن إعادة النظر إلى المسرحيات المنتقاة من منظور النساء.

ويؤكد البحث على أن " مأساة الانتقام " شكل درامي نسائي، على الرغم من أن البطل الرئيسي في هذه المسرحيات رجل، وأن دور المرأة غالبا ما يكون ثانويا. ويمثل البحث في هذه الحالة اتجاها معاكسا لكثير من الكتابات التي تتجاهل دور المرأة من حيث كونها مجرد ضحية .. إن المرأة هنا تملك إرادة قوية على الفعل والتنفيذ مما يؤكد إزالة الفوارق التي يفرضها المجتمع الذكوري، وإذابة العادات والقيم السائدة في ذلك العصر.

(*) مدرس الأدب الإنجليزي بالمعهد العالي للدراسات النوعية بالجيزة.

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To conclude, the world of revenge tragedy is primarily a human world, and the bloody rule is to do unto others as you have been done to. Robert Watson notes that the Senecan model of revenge tragedy "could hardly have proliferated so rapidly unless there were tensions in Elizabethan society to which it answered" (318). Time after time, revenge tragedies invite us to reassess the links between justice and revenge, violence and the social order. In so doing, they continue to challenge audiences and readers to engage directly with the politics of the past and the present, and the ways in which they interrelate. In the many plays considered here, male authority proves very brittle in the face of revenge. Drawn from the primitive energy of the Furies, revenge has the power to consume and dissolve gendered identities, to elevate women to new heights of self-determination. It is the only course of action left open for women is that of personal revenge on the homosocial system.

The very inconstancy in what it meant to be a woman in Renaissance England is what allowed women to reformulate identities in a time of both patriarchal oppression and ideological change. The struggle to reinvent the gendered self lies at the heart of feminist politics. Writing was one way in which a new self could be created. The Renaissance women's writing used to read the plays offer women's own construction of their sex, although it is vital to remember that these too are produced from within the dominant patriarchal discourse. Therefore, the dialogue between women's writing and male-authored drama thus allows for the creation of a "rush of women onto the historical stage" and to explore the emergence of feminist perspectives in Renaissance England. They offered angles on the construction of woman. Yet, there are whole worlds left to recover.

her black and red, calls out to be recognized, and finally drives him off stage:

> Thou dost awake something that trouble me
> And says I lov'd thee once. I dare not stay;
> There is no end of woman's reasoning.
> (5.3.137)

Only when Evadne is dead can Amintor return to commit suicide to be with Aspatia, the victim whose passive self-sacrifice he obviously prefers.

The problem of masculnization which destroys Evadne in *The Maid's Tragedy* becomes even more acute in plays where the revenger directs her energies against members other own sex rather than against men who have injured her. As we have seen, by becoming "incorporate" with Rome, Tamora has actually taken on the worst extremes of dominant masculine behaviour, its values as well as its violence. In the rape scene, Tamora first proclaims: "Your mother's hand shall right your mother's wrong' (2.3.121) by stabbing Lavinia in return for her insults. Tamora's decision to hand Lavinia over to Chiron and Demetrius instead reduces Lavinia to no more than an object, a possession other father, whose ruin will injure Titus. Lavinia appeals in vain to Tamora, woman to woman, encouraging the audience to agree that Tamora has betrayed her gendered identity:

> No grace, no womanhood — ah, beastly creature,
> The blot and enemy to our general name ...
> **(2.3.182)**

Her behaviour is deeply disturbing, her vengeance against Titus allying her more closely with the male rapists rather than with the female victim.

in the absence of a proper magistrate (5.2.50). The masculinized Evadne is also a projection of Aminior's outlawed desires for vengeance. In a moment of insight, he recognizes

> What a wild beast is uncollected man.
> The thing which we call honor bears
> all Headlong into sin, and yet itself is
> nothing. (4.2.317)

He knows that only a thin line parts him from brutally violent responses to the wrongs he has endured, yet he chooses to "suffer and wait' (2.1.307), rather like Aspatia. Evadne's actions, ironically, make her more manly than him. Amintor's horror when she appears before him, drenched in blood, is excited by a recognition of something deep in himself, and a combination of shock and shame at her usurpation of his masculinity. The fantasy of masculine power emphasizes his loss of control. She asks him "Am I not fair? / Looks not Evadne beauteous with these rites now?" (5.3.118). He sees in her actions a complete lack of respect for her paternal governors, and interprets them as a prophecy of more transgressive behaviour, namely the murder of himself and the destructive perversion of all loving bonds.

Evadne's two questions are simultaneously challenging and resigned, self-assertive and self-effacing, showing the spurious nature of female dominance in revenge. The futility of her action is clear when Amintor rejects her as a wife, saying "all thy life is a continued ill / Black is thy color now, disease thy nature" (5.3.135). He cannot completely deny a basic likeness between himself and the bloody Evadne. The ancient impulse to pay back wrong with wrong, which she embodies so vividly in

so she now ties him to the bed; his response, "what pretty new device is this?", suggests the erotic frisson her actions hold (5.1.47). Marina Warner notes that "male repression seeks an outlet in fantasies of phallic power that women are made to bear, reassuring the voyeur of his own potency, and confirming the rationale of his antagonism" (126). Whatever Evadne's intentions to deliver "weak catching women" from the plague of tyranny (5.1.93), her actions are a form of rape. The violent delight she experiences in avenging herself is a specifically male form of pleasure. She denies her femininity and tells the King "I am as foul as thou are' (5.1.74). By reproducing his power for the entertainment, Evadne's triumph is an empty one. Revenge patterns like this, for all their dramatic excitement and the illusion of control they grant, "render women complicit and even instrumental in the violence with which they are seen" (175). The murder scene in ***The Maid's Tragedy*** displays this bitter truth to women in the audience.

Evadne's masculinization is made explicit in the reactions of the servants who cannot believe "a woman could do this" (5.1.127). As Strato remarks, "she, alas, was but the instrument" (5.1.138). Finally, she is no more than a puppet of Melantius. He longs to acquit the wrongs offered to his family, friend and the court, but quickly recognizes "to take revenge and lose myself withal / Were idle" (3.2.289). He is committed more to pragmatic self-preservation than passionate schemes of reprisal.

By using Evadne to do his dirty work, he can group regicide and private vengeance with infidelity, as specifically feminine sins, and so escape the danger of alienating himself from the centre of power. He justifies his military rebellion against the King as the proper execution of "mine own justice"

desire, telling her new husband that her heart holds "as much desire, and as much will" as that of any other woman (2.1.287), thus implicitly broadening the scope other subversive behaviour.

As she vows to murder the King, she appeals to "all you spirits of abused ladies" to assist her in her "performance" (4.1.170-1), but in moving towards revenge, she paradoxically moves away from feminist resistance, to be associated more and more closely with her male oppressors. Her brother Melantius is instrumental in transforming Evadne into a masculine revenger, someone who will act for him. By making her confess her adultery as a sin and herself as "monstrous" (4.1.183), he forces her to internalize the values of the male court. She acknowledges that she can "do no good because a woman" (4.1.255), so her only chance to redeem herself is to play a man's part of "one brave anger' (4.1.144) in murdering the King. Obviously, revenge offers Evadne the opportunity to clear her name. If her words to Amintor about her desires are true, though, murdering the King does not so much repay an injury as cut off her pleasure in the interests of her brother, her husband and the spirit of her father, whose sense of honour and possession of her sexuality will be restored.

As a revenger, Evadne is merely a projection of male power. She plays a disturbingly pornographic game in the murder scene. She wants to wake the King and "shape his sins like furies" (5.1.35), as though alluding to her ancient foremothers, yet in stabbing him repeatedly with her knife, she repays and replays his penetrative behaviour all too exactly. In Leggatt's words: "Evadene's killing of the King is presented as in itself a perverted sexual act" (206). As he had bewhored her,

in Renaissance tragedies.

In ***The Maid's Tragedy*** (1610) Evadne becomes a monstrous parody of masculine power in the scene where she murders the King. In the characters of Evadne and Aspatia, Beaumont and FIetcher demonstrate the dangers masculine models hold. The King's decision to take Evadne as his mistress and then marry her to Amintor, beloved of Aspatia, subjects both women to his desires. Though they are very different, their responses ultimately confine each in a self-destructive, patriarchal prison. Aspatia dedicates herself to grief as a passive sacrifice to the apparent vagaries of male desire. The play teases the audience with the image of a more vindictive figure when she appears in Ace 5, cross-dressed and challenging Amintor to a fight. She Styles herself as a soldier, draws her sword and resorts to physical violence, kicking Amintor to goad him into action. In Hopkins's words, ***The Maid's Tragedy*** is one of the very few tragedies to feature a cross-dressed heroine, plots an image of masculinity uneasily positioned at the interistics of machismo, homoeroticism and the fear of effeminisation." (46).

She does not seek reparation but further injury, in the form of a death blow. She tells him "those threats I brought with me sought not revenge / But came to fetch this blessing from thy hand" (5.3.207). The manly costume has, ironically, reinforced her status as a victim of male cruelty. For all the illusion of self-determination it confers, the weapon she uses symbolizes her subjection and reinscribes her as a sacrifice to the dominant values of the court at Rhodes. Evadne seems to offer a more spirited resistance to prescribed feminine roles, especially in her famous exclamation "A maidenhead, Amintor, / At my years!" (2.1.190). She confidently advertises her own

Tamora's vengeful plots is illustrated as she consumes her own children. For Titus, too, the process is self-destructive. It is the masculine, martial Lucius who will lead the new Rome. The patriarchal state holds no place for those consumed by feminine revenge, be it Lavinia or Titus who embodies this complex relationship between self-annihilation, revenge and maternal power.

The use of violence by female revengers, even to redress the wrongs suffered by the sex, is deeply problematic from a feminist point of view since it often reproduces masculine modes of oppression and possibly even the dominant values of patriarchy. The gender-bending effects of vengeance are as extreme as they are by men. While men are emasculated, female characters often assume a masculine persona in the execution of their tasks. For example, in ***The Triumphs of Gods Revenge***, Reynolds recounts that Berinthia "wisheth her selfe metamorphosed from a Virgine to a man, that she might be revenged of her brother", and she stabs him 'though with a female hand yet with a masculine courage" (127,123). According to Simkin, in Renaissance drama, "women express similar desires to be either a man or to possess what Vittoria calls "masculine virtue" [*The White Devil* 3.2.135] (42)

As Angela Career remarks, the woman who models herself on her male counterparts "only subverts her own socially conditioned role", not the wider social structures that oppress her. As a "storm trooper of the individual consciousness" she is isolated from any wider feminist struggle, aspiring only to "that lonely pitch of phallic supremacy up above the world" (133,143-4). The same disturbing picture of the revenger transforming herself into her enemy rapist, and therefore condemning herself, is also found

claims to exact private retribution. Titus and Tamora are mirror images of each other, each trying to outwit the other with deception. Tamora's assurance that she has come to help Titus "and right his heinous wrongs" (5.2.4) will be true by the end of the scene since she has provided the means to his end. Her lines "I am not Tamora / She is thy enemy and thy friend" (5.2.29) point up the possibility of alliance between them a victims of the Roman state.

As Marion Wynne-Davies has pointed our, the image of the "swallowing womb" has considerable power in ***Titus Andronicus.*** It manifests itself not only in the pit in the forest, or the image of the mother who consumes her own children, but in the emasculating effect of revenge. (129-32) As Titus takes on Tamora's role, he also assumes her gender attributes. He warns Chiron and Demetrius "For worse than Philomel you used my daughter, / And worse than Procne I will be revenged" (5.2.193). Titus becomes more like a sister than a father in revenge, playing Procne to Lavinia's Philomel in a dramatization of the Ovidian myth. The sisters murder Tereus's son and cook his flesh. By-enacting a similar scene in his own-house, Titus allows Lavinia to become an avenging Philomel. In Baker's words, "for a deflowered and peculiarly mutilated woman to assist in contriving a peculiar, gruesome vengeance-this is what connects ***Andronicus*** with Ovid and probably with Ovid alone" (122).

After writing the names other persecutors in the dust, she can rake up the bowl to receive their blood, transforming herself from "a figure of dismemberment into a figure of agency" (Rowe 300). Titus prepares to "play the cook" (5.2.203) as Procne, and, like the good hostess or mistress of the house, welcomes his enemies. The self-destructive nature of

perhaps offstage. Her accomplices Chiron and Demetrius and Aaron are also endemically alien to Roman culture. They are all "others", united in revenge on the Andronicus family which has subjugated them, although since Chiron and Demetrius are stupid and Aaron has no official position of power, they cannot act without their mother. Tamora's methods are very different from Saturninus's public vows of retribution for the theft of Lavinia. While he retaliates openly, she works covertly. She tells Titus "I am incorporate in Rome" (1.1.459) and she carefully plots with "sacred wit" to pursue "villainy and vengeance" (2.1.121-2). As her plots unfold the overwhelming power of revenge becomes obvious, cautioning female spectators that to unleash it, even in a retrospective act of love for one's children, is violently unnatural.

Titus Andronicus adheres faithfully to Roman values for a remarkably long time. When his sons, Quintus and Martius, are wrongfully accused of murdering Bassianus, he believes that the Tribunes will give him justice, even to the extent of sacrificing his hand. He vows revenge when he realizes he has been tricked, yet even after he discovers the truth of Lavinia's rape, he does not immediately succumb. Marcus is amazed that he is "yet so just that he will not revenge" and appeals for divine intervention in Titus's cause (4.1.127). In Act 4, Scene 3, Titus's apparently mad project of shooting arrows to the gods again testifies to his faith in divine retribution. It is not until he meets Tamora in disguise that he loses himself to revenge. According to Palmer, Tamora represents the nightmare of male fantasy regarding women: unrestrained sexuality and unusual articulateness. (302-3)

The interview between Titus and Tamora, disguised as Revenge, dramatizes the competitive nature of male and female

appeals to Titus's familial feelings, to their already sufficient sufferings, and to their shared patriotic values. Finally she resorts to flattery and begs him to exercise "god-like mercy". But Titus, wedded to his inhuman rituals, is deaf to her prayers and not only has Alarbus killed but dismembered and burned. As Gibbons says, "this killing unlocks the brutality prevailing for the rest of the play" (99) and to a certain extent, justifies Tamora's obsessive desire for revenge.

An alien to Rome, which in this play we could say represents a "Symbolic Order" increasingly corrupted; Tamora questions its values, laws and customs. Although she can operate within this Order, she is more centrally placed in and draws her inner power from what Lacan calls the "Imaginary Order". This Order is coded "feminine and is the locus of the imago of the all-powerful phallic mother. In developmental terms, it represents a fantasy of need and instinct fulfillment, of narcissistic and aggressive drives that are unhindered by what Lacan calls "the Father's Law" (Willis 42).

The source of Tamora's power in the play, however, is deeper, more elementary than that conferred by Symbolic Order law; it resides in her playing the role of the all-powerful mother in relation to those real or metaphorical sons who enact her desires. (Wilburn 164) The driving force of her aggression is maternal revenge for Alarbus's death, a barbaric act justified in Titus's mind by a rigid insistence on "Symbolic Order" ritual.

In this early scene Tamora comes off looking very sympathetic to the audience while Titus is repellent. Who could not sympathize with a grieving mother pleading for her child's life? Tamora does not have any countrywomen to appeal to for support, but the spirit of maternal revenge she personifies speaks to other dispossessed and furious individuals on and

"Symbolic Order". Each represents powerful systems which define the play's essential conflicts and crises; each is "placed" within those conflicts by possession of or lack of rhetorical power (Marshall 191-93).

From the play's opening scene we see two forces come into opposition, neither of which is entirely admirable. On the one hand there is the excessive rigidity of Titus's adherence to ancient family customs, i.e., human sacrifice to the dead. Any religious ritual which demands the brutal human sacrifice of Alarbus is bound to be perceived as mindless adherence to an outmoded code. However, within the world of the play this code is sanctioned by Roman law and Titus has "right" on his side in demanding the strict enactment of the code. In ***Civilization and Its Discontents***, Freud comments on the sacrifices that the Symbolic Order (or to use his term, "civilization") demands: "What we call civilization is largely responsible for our misery". He goes on to comment on the strain that civilization imposes on the psyche "man [sic] cannot tolerate the amounts of frustration which society imposes on him in the service of its cultural ideals". As a result, man thinks up ways to insert instinctual behavior into the Symbolic Order so as to label it "good". One of these ways is to encode violence as sacred and pious within the parameters of that Order by calling it "sacrifice" and "defense of the country" (33-4).

Tamora, the conquered Gothic Queen and Alarbus's mother, speaks out eloquently and challenges the religious rite. Being a "barbarian," she has not learned the submissiveness that the Symbolic Order demands of its women. She names the deed "cruel, irreligious piety," brutality disguising itself as law. Impelled by maternal instinct, she attempts to break through this custom by a rhetorically impeccable speech in which she

to cement alliances and maintain a surface of order. When she enters she greets her father and the news of her brothers' deaths with formulaic phrases that seem to reach no lower than the surface of her feelings: "My noble lord and father, live in fame. / Lo at this tomb my tributary tears / I render for my brethrens' obsequies" (I.1.158-160). Totally at the mercy of the power structure, Lavinia is told she has been chosen to marry Saturninus to reward her father for his victories. When asked if she is displeased when Saturninus publically insults her by his provocative remarks to Tamora, Lavinia answers: "Not I, my lord sith true nobility / Warrants these words in princely courtesy" (I.1.271-72). She is speaking as the good woman does in the "Symbolic Order": divorced from passion, submissive to male authority, careful not to confront the representatives of the patriarchy. When Bassianus rushes in to carry her off, claiming a prior engagement, she says nothing. Visually she enacts the fate of woman in the Symbolic Order: she is a pawn in a power struggle between men, objectified as "Rome's rich ornament" to be seized by the strongest contestant. Of her own desires we hear nothing. "This opening scene is a precursor of Lavinia's role in the rest of the action; she is moved from square to square according to the plans of the players who control her" (Cunningham 144). The proper role for the woman in the Symbolic Order is to move from daughter, handed over by her father, to wife of a man chosen, or at least approved, by the father

On the other hand, Tamora, operating from within the "Imaginary Order" (in Lacanian theory) of maternal power, functions as a subject, i.e., as an agent, within the patriarchal order. Because agency is coded "masculine", she is seen as "usurping" power and creating disorder in the highly patriarchal

wife having an affair and obliges her to consume the flesh of her lover in a "Bloody Banquet".

Maternal revenge takes on a frightening power in ***Titus Andronicus*** (1591) through the parallel tragedies of Titus and Tamora. The play sets up a gendered opposition between patriarchal institutions and clandestine feminine revenge, the resort of the dispossessed. Saturninus opens by addressing the "noble patricians"(I.I.I), thus establishing Rome as a centre of male authority. Tamora, the conquered alien, pleads in vain against the sacrificial rites of this patrician state. The execution of her son arouses a maternal fury which may have tuned into the deep anger and frustrations of female spectators, and which eventually overwhelms Titus. "Tamora is identified with Hecuba, not as a symbol of grief, as was conventional, bur as a revenging mother" (Baker 132):

> The selfsame gods that armed the Queen of Troy With opportunity of sharp revenge ... May favour Tamora, the Queen of Goths — When Goths were Goths and Tamora was queen — To quit her bloody wrongs upon her foes. (I.1.136)

In her place within the "Symbolic Order" (in Lacanian theory) Lavinia functions as an object of patriarchal power plays. Instead of having power herself, Lavinia functions as an object to be used by powerful males within the Symbolic Order

vows to avenge Horatio's death" (3.13-89). As Ford points out in ***The Broken Heart***, "Revenge proves its own executioner" (4.1.139). Paradoxically, the self-assertive action of personal revenge can also devour the individual. For male revengers, the illusion of agency is always shadowed by the danger of self-annihilation, a dissolution of the masculine self into the feminine task.

The disturbing connection between revenge and maternity is summed up by Pointon: "The ghosts of the Furies and Procne, Philomel and Medea hover in the wings of Renaissance tragedies; silent-mothers of the action whose presence can overwhelm the protagonist dissolve his independent identity as a powerful member of the dominant sex" (352). Revenge pushes male protagonists back towards a female point of origin, creating an illusion of omnipotence, yet at the same time destroying them by absorption. "Revenge dramas play out, in nightmarish form, the dangers and pleasures of self-loss in the return to an all-powerful maternal body where horror and desire combine" (Neill156).

Revenge plays such as, ***Antonio's Revenge, The Bloody Banquet*** and ***Titus Andronicus*** build on these prototypes, where gender differences between male revengers and their female equivalents are blurred by revenge action. In ***Antonio's Revenge*** Antonio is implicitly identified as a mother figure when the child Julio tells him "since my mother died I loved you best" (3.3.9), and Antonio, like Medea or Procne, displays affection towards the child before murdering him to serve to his father. This is elaborated even more grotesquely in ***The Bloody Banquet*** (1639), in which the usurper Armatrites discovers his

spectacles before the eyes of our wit, to make it see nothing but greene, that is serving for the consideration of the Passion. (Qt. Hallet 67)

Identifying the revenger's viewpoint with a state of child-like dependency draws attention to the obsessive nature of vengeance, which isolates the individual from the normal social structures governing behaviour. In psychoanalytic terms, "the male revenger threatens to regress into a pre-socialized state, a retrospectively re-created identification with a mother figure who feeds his pleasures. He retreats from the Symbolic Order (the social network structured around the Law of the Father) to the illusion of plenitude and of being in absolute control" (Asp 335). This imaginary collapse into the maternal womb creates an urge to pay back like for like. It is a return to Mother Nature. In ***Leviathan*** (1651), Hobbes sets up an opposition between a paternal "Civill Law" and "the condition of meer Nature", where "the Dominion is in the Mother" (Qt. in Wilson 165). Trying to return to a maternal space of vengeful passion is inherently dangerous, in spite of the pleasures it holds.

Revenge threatens to isolate the individual in a world so detached from conventional structures of communication that he or she appears mad. By not identifying with the Symbolic Order, the *subject* is confined to a discourse of madness. Most revengers' extreme passions raise doubts about their mental states. Revenge and madness are closely associated in many of the revenge tragedies. Hieronimo is described, with some Justification, as "Distract and in a manner lunatic" when he abandons his marshalship, digs his dagger in "' the earth and

depends upon one's perspective. "It would be a mistake therefore, to see Hieronimo's play as a purely personal statement, for its larger aim is arguably to encourage its audiences, both on stage and off, to recognize those general patterns which exist beyond individualized perception" (Mousley 70).

While vengeance could promote female agency and insubordination, its associations with maternal origins gave it an equally disturbing power over men. For men, a danger of taking personal revenge was that, rather than being a means of asserting independent subjectivity, it could be a way of losing one's self. To set out on such a course was an implicit acknowledgement of one's alienation from patriarchal institutions

and structures of power. As Elaine Scarry notes, a killer "consents to "unmake" himself, deconstruct himself, empty himself of civil content". The revenger constituted himself as "other" (122).

Once in this typically feminine position, he was in danger of losing touch with the dominant discourses of "reason" and being overtaken by a passionate fixation on the injury suffered and the need to avenge it. According to Thomas Wright, author of ***The Passions of the Mind in Generall*** (1604), the imagination locked the subject into dependency on such passion, to the exclusion of anything else. He defined this emotive realm in maternal terms:

> The understanding looking into the imagination, findeth nothing almost but the mother & nurse of his passion for consideration, where you may well see how the imagination putteth greene

feminine passion, all the more dangerous since there is no immediate outlet for it.

Bel-imperia is more than a catalyst to Hieronimo's punitive vendetta. As the personification of feminine vengeance she is instrumental to it. He jokingly tells Lorenzo "what's a play without a woman in it?" (4.1.97), to which she replies, with no little sarcasm, "Little entreaty shall serve *me* Hieronimo, / For I must needs be employed in your play" (4.1.97-9) [emphasis mine]. She reminds Hieronimo how much she has had to persuade him to take revenge, and how willing she is to enact it herself.

"Soliman and Perseda", the play-within-a-play, is a fine example of what Kate Saunders defines as feminine revenge: "an art form; fine, delicate precision engineering, largely beyond male capabilities . ." (vii). It might have been written for Bel-imperia, since its scenes replay her courtship with Balthazar and she is able to exact payment for the murders of both her lovers. Her lines give concise expression to the subversive undercurrent threatening to erupt through the surface of feminine submission:

Yet by thy power thou thinkest to command,
And to thy power Perseda doth obey:
But were she able, thus she would revenge
Thy treacheries on thee, ignoble prince: *Stab him*
And on herself, she would be thus revenged. *Stab herself(4.4.64)*

What Hieronimo's epilogue reminds the audiences on and off stage, though, is that the boundary between fiction and reality is easily crossed. Whether the story is "fabulously counterfeit" (4.4.77), performed by actors, or acted out for real

which will bring together victims and revengers in the final catastrophe.

When Horatio is dead, Bel-imperia cannot use romance as a form of retaliation. Imprisoned by Lorenzo in her father's house, all she can do is to write a letter with her blood to Hieronimo. She has been confined to a role like Andrea's, urging others to act on her behalf. Her physical passivity does not alter her goal. She acknowledges "I must constrain myself and "apply me to the time" (3.9.12). She hopes that heaven "shall set me free" (3.9.14) to pursue her quest, and rushes to Hieronimo with the passion of a Fury (4.1) once she is released.

The meeting between Bel-imperia and Hieronimo is a critical turning point. Her vow to murder the villains herself if he will not forces him to translate resolution into action. Her uncompromising energy allows him to believe that even the saints are now soliciting vengeance. The two are bound in a fatal compact that will lead to the destruction of all the protagonists, once she swears "to join with thee to I revenge Horatio's death" (4.1.48).

Tragically isolated from this conspiracy, and yet still passionately dedicated to revenge, is Isabella. Her mad attack on the arbour where her son was hung makes a striking parallel to Bel-imperia's actions (4.2). In this pathetic scene, the audience are forced "to confront the hangers of a culture that excludes women from discourses of knowledge and power" (Stockholder 105). Since she cannot touch the homicides and has no access to justice via the court, Isabella can only attack the place itself and then herself. While her madness is pitiful, her fury is also alarming, warning spectators of an implacable

... how can love find harbour in my breast,
Till I revenge the death of my beloved?
Yes, second love shall further my revenge.
I'll love Horatio, my Andrea's friend,
The more to spite the prince that wrought his end.(1.4.64)

Bel-imperia's courtship of a social inferior, Horatio, is deliberately transgressive. Romance itself can be a form of revenge, as Modleski has noticed. Part of the appeal of romantic fiction is the element of "revenge fantasy ... our conviction that the woman is bringing the man to his knees and that all the while he is being so difficult, he is internally grovelling, grovelling, grovelling" (45). For Renaissance spectators, Bel-imperia's calculated behaviour constitutes a double revenge on Balthazar and on patriarchal kinship structures in which women are treated as objects of exchange.

The King orders his brother to "win fair Bel-imperia from her will" (2.3.6), but she remains willful in her choice of lover. Her feelings for Horatio are not necessarily insincere, but revenge is, consciously or unconsciously, still in her thoughts when she appoints their meeting in the orchard. She imagines the nightingale "singing with the prickle at her breast" to express their "delight" (2.3.50). The mixture of pleasure and pain experienced by the nightingale, who sings pierced by a thorn, suggests Bel-imperia will take a destructive "delight" in meeting with Horatio. Her plot strikes with deadly accuracy and inaugurates another revenge, the murder of Horatio by Prince Balthazar and Lorenzo. Bel-imperia thus sets off the action

and another, insisting upon equivalence and substitutability. Balthazar and Lorenzo are higher in rank than Horatio, but just as dead by the end of Hieronimo's play.

The mother behind all these actions is Proserpine. Andrea tells how she listened to his story:

> Forthwith, Revenge, she rounded thee in th' ear,
> And bade thee lead me through the gates of horn,
> Where dreams have passage in the silent night. No
> sooner had she spake but we were here ... (1.1.79)

Hieronimo is bent on personal retaliation as an act of masculine self-assertion, yet it will be Bel-imperia who kills Don Balthazar. Moreover, Proserpine remains a silent, unseen presence determining the pattern of vengeance. In another significant reminder of this dark feminine world, we are told that Nemesis has struck down Andrea in battle, as though angry at his male presumption (1.4.16-22).

The possibility that stories of revenge could tap into female fantasies of paying back like for like was recognized by Kyd. The play dramatizes the gendered shift from masculine justice to feminine revenge through the actions of Hieronimo and Bel-imperia. Bel-imperia is instrumental in transforming Hieronimo into an active revenger. From the beginning of the play, she is committed to taking personal revenge for Andrea's murder. Her strength of will directs all her emotions towards this goal. She recognizes the limits other political power because of her sex, but intelligently foresees that she will be matched with, Balthazar in a political marriage and uses her position to further her own plans:

In the last act, in a fable that turns out to be true, Hieronimo attempts to enforce upon the rulers of Spain and Portugal the acknowledgement of likeness that had overcome him spontaneously in his encounter with Bazulto - as if sharing his affliction will make them comprehend his plight.

As dear to me was my Horatio,

As yours, or yours, or yours, my lord, to you.(4.4. 168-9)

Ranging the corpse of his socially inferior son alongside the bodies of the heirs apparent, Hieronimo stages and voices a radically leveling sentiment: that one dead child is very like another, that paternal love feels essentially the same for noble and commoner, that his suffering is worth as much as the suffering of princes.

With soonest speed I hasted to the noise,

Where hanging on a tree I found my son,

Through-girt with wounds, and slaughtered as you see.

And grieved I, think you, at this spectacle?

Speak, Portuguese, whose loss resembles mine:
If thou canst weep upon thy Balthazar,
'Tis like I wailed for my Horatio.
And you, my lord, whose reconciled son
Marched in a net, and thought himself unseen ...
How can you brook our play's catastrophe? (4.4.1 10-16)

Hieronimo's strict talion - son for son, spectacle for spectacle, wail for wail- ignores disparities between one person

In ***The Spanish Tragedy***, the protagonist is alienated from regimes_whose courts are corrupt, the revenge he enacts is destructive since it culminates in multiple murders, but it simultaneously and paradoxically constitutes a creative response to situations of dispossession. Hieronimo manipulate revenge as an art form to give him to construct a performance that gives him the illusion of control. In Mosley's words, the story of Hieronimo is the story of "a man vainly attempting to overcome his enforced exile into a world of his own" (67). As a result of the murder of his son, Horatio, who is stabbed to death and left hanging in the arbour where he and Bel-Imperia were making love, Hieronimo is shocked into contemplation of an act whose special enormity defeats comparison. He becomes "connoisseur of violence" (Leggatt 102). He is outraged at the state's failure to redress the injustice of the murder of his son- a failing he feels all the more acutely on account of his own position as knight marshal, a civil servant "charged in the English court with maintaining the peace within twelve miles of the royal presence" (Barber 135).

Hieronimo identifies himself with the common people, yet the very sensitivity that makes him a "gentle" man in the moral sense of the word alienates him from the barbarous values of the ruling order, where wealth and "violence prevails" (2.1.108). Hieronimo realizes chat Horatio's murder will not be answered in the Spanish court, and dedicates himself instead to Proserpine, patroness of a revenge in which he will be a major actor: "Then will I rent and tear them thus and thus, / Shivering their limbs in pieces with my teeth" (3.13.122)

between women can actually be a means to self-advancement. Cary's play thus presents a bleak vision of female self-determination within the confines of Renaissance society. Salome's success recreates her in the image of her brother as a dictator over the rest of her sex.

The Spanish Tragedy (1587) offers two contrasting models, dramatizes, in effect, two antithetical worlds, one authoritarian, divinely ordered and controlled, and the other disordered, unjust, incipiently secular and humanist. Hieronimo is an instrument of law with access to legal retribution, but the judicial system in the play is deeply suspect. In Portugal, the Viceroy is ready to burn the innocent Alexandro at the stake until news that Balthazar is still alive arrives at the last minute (3.1). This may provide evidence of divine intervention but hardly restores faith in God's deputy on earth.

The parallel scene in Spain, where no letter arrives to prevent Pedringano's execution, again shows an uneven kind of justice in action. Pedringano is an unscrupulous murderer, yet after rightly condemning him, Hieronimo discovers that the real villains remain untouched. His decision to 'cry aloud for justice through the court' (3.7.70) will be futile. The ears of the King and his brother remain deaf since their belief in the essential superiority of aristocratic birth makes them privilege the criminals, Lorenzo and Balthazar, above the voice of their socially inferior accuser. But when Hieronimo appeals to heaven for justice a letter "falleth" (3. 2. 23). Its auspices are uncertain: it is addressed to the subject and not to the sovereign: it reveals the identity of the murderers, and thus inaugurates Hieronimo's quest for justice, which becomes an act of revenge.

I scorn that she should live my birth t'upbraid,
To call me base and hungry Edomite.
With patient show her choler I betrayed
And watched the time to be revenged by slight.
Now tongue of mine with scandal load her name,
Turn hers to fountains, Herod's eyes to flame. (3.2.61)

Bribing the Butler to betray Mariam with lies about her intent to poison Herod, Salome carefully promotes Herod's belief that Mariam is the vengeful and unchaste one. These sins are, of course, her own. By projecting them onto Mariam she disguises her own motives. Salome assumes a powerful matriarchal role as Herod's protector, which allows her, like the ancient maternal spirits, to manipulate him, into enacting her revenge. At the same rime, she is masculinized. Herod finally recognizes Salome's vindictive nature, calling her a "foul mouthed Ate' who has "made my heart / As heavy with revenge" (4.7.155-63). "To the Greeks, Ate symbolized moral blindness, though in Shakespeare's plays she is associated, more with the passion of a Fury, as in ***Julius Caesar***" (Orgel 109).

Salome's behaviour is moral blindness, utterly condemnable in Christian terms. Interestingly, though, the Chorus does not single her out as a villain, and the play quietly shows that while Mariam fails, Salome's reprisal invisibly succeeds. Instead of defying male authority, Salome relies on it. Her revenge is based on a belief that the competitive rivalry which patriarchy sees up

Herod's fear of Mariam increases when he discovers that his servant has revealed his plan to have Mariam executed if he should die. He accuses her of adultery and of wanting to poison him: "And you in black revenge attended now / To add a murder to your breach of vow" (4.4.25). Mariam's moment of greatest power over Herod is also the moment other downfall since Herod decides to imprison and execute her here. Her plan of non-aggressive and non-violent revenge is therefore also unsuccessful.

The most successful revenger in ***The Tragedy of Mariam*** is simultaneously the most active and the most villainous. Salome's grudge against Mariam is established early in the play when Mariam and Alexandra insult her in racist and unsisterly terms. Mariam calls her "base woman" (1.3.17) and "mongrel issued from rejected race" (1.3.30), the insult "base" reflecting back on Mariam's own behaviour here. The comparison between Mariam's royal descent from King David and Herod and Salome's inferior ones, hints at the power struggle which lies beneath these remarks. In Herod's absence, Salome fears for her place at the centre of government, since in the event of his death, the original royal family could reclaim the throne and utterly dispossess her.

Salome's obsession with material power is what drives her revenge forward. She picks up on Mariam's insults and turns them back on her. When Mariam glances at Salome's "shameful life" (1.3.40), or lack of chastity, Salome slanders Mariam to destroy her. News of Herod's return allows Salome to begin her revenge:

Catherine Belsey argues that revenge "deconstructs the antithesis which fixes the meanings of good and evil, right and wrong", (115) and this is certainly true of the three female characters in ***The Tragedy of Mariam*** who seek reparation in very different ways. Doris who has been unfairly deserted by Herod in favour of Mariam, rejects private vengeance in favour of appeals to divine authority. When her son suggests they should poison or stab Mariam's children, she admits that "revenge's foulest spotted face / By our detested wrongs might be approved" (2.3.66), but fears that Mariam's family are too powerful. Reliance on heavenly retribution thus appears to be a last resort rather than a virtuous choice. Doris asks God to "stretch thy revenging arm, thrust forth thy hand" (4.8.91), and her curse on Mariam is effective in that Herod kills her.

Since it is Herod rather than Mariam who has caused Doris's misery the Justice of this resolution seems rather questionable. There is no sense that Doris or her children will be restored to their former positions in Herod's family, so in terms of reparation it is ineffective as well. The Chorus's purported message that vengeance belongs to God is undercut then, since Doris's experience does not promote faith in this idea.

Mariam takes a limited form of active revenge for the murders of her brother and grandfather by Herod. When Herod returns after rumours of his death, she responds by refusing to greet him joyfully. She reminds him that, had he wished to please her, "my brother nor my grandsire had not died" (4.3.30). Herod is particularly annoyed by her choice of costume, since her "dusky habits' (4.3.4) proclaim her allegiance to mourning and vengeance rather than to him.

Elizabeth Caldwell, a woman who tried to poison her husband, Thomas, in 1604. Gilbert Dugdale who obviously sympathized with her, printed her ***Letter to Her Husband*** in a series of documents relating to her case, giving her a voice to defend herself. Elizabeth reminds Thomas of "the dissoluteness of your life and the wrongs he has inflicted on her, thus implicitly defining her own crime as a form of retribution. Since the poisoning failed, she cleverly rewrites herself and her revenge in religious terms, cautioning Thomas to "make haste ... that you may truly understand the wretched estate and condition of those who, following the lusts of their eyes, wallow in sensuality and so heap up vengeance against the day of wrath" (144-5).

With increasing confidence, she goes on to assure him "the Lord hath long since taken his sword in his hand to execute his vengeance against all disobedient wretches" and triumphantly ends "You see the judgments of God are already begun in your house" (146-7). Elizabeth presents herself as a charitable Christian offering her best advice without rancour, "for I do love you more dearly than I do myself" (144). Yet from this Christian stance of forgiveness, she is able to take a public form of revenge on Thomas, exposing his crimes which, unfairly, cannot be prosecuted by law, and implicitly justifying her former actions.

can be defined by these simplistic terms since most are a complex mixture of "base" and "worthy" behaviour, so guideline is unhelpful. To make revenge seem less attractive, the chorus goes on to point out that brooding on injuries and their reparation is a form of enslavement, to be scorned by the truly "noble heart" (II. 19-24). Afterwards, though, it recognizes that the desire for revenge is impossible to eliminate, and is obliged quickly to reconfigure its doctrine forgiveness as a type of personal reprisal:

> But if for wrongs we needs revenge must have
> Then be our vengeance of the noblest kind.
> Do we his body from our fury save,
> And let our hare prevail against his mind?
> What can 'gainst him a greater vengeance be,
> Than make his foe more worthy far than he?
>
> (I.25)

Thus, the Chorus reiterates the divine proscription on revenge. It paradoxically and radically rewrites turning the other cheek as a form of vengeance. Cary acknowledges the ineradicable presence of subversive, vindictive energies and daringly suggests to those in her audience that even virtuous behaviour could include mental resistance.

This artful appropriation of divine authority and forgiveness is a particularly feminine technique since it is also used by

> pronounced it would willingly retract. And since this human law is so directly contrary to that of Jesus, alas! how we shall have co answer it one day ... having had, moreover, such strict charge on the subject from the great celestial shepherd. God knows that I, for my part, have been a great sinner in this respect. (Travitsky, ***The Paradise*** 203)

Elizabeth Cary's ***The Tragedy of Mariam*** (1604/6), the first original tragedy written in England by a woman, explores the attractions and dangers of female revenge on a larger tragic scale. Competitive relationships between women are the basis of revenge. John Marston dedicated the 1633 edition of his plays, including ***Antonio's Revenge***, to Cary "because your Honour is well acquainted with the Muses" (159). Cary meticulously distances herself from any unorthodox attitude to revenge by including an explicit condemnation of it in the fourth Chorus of the play. The Chorus moralizes: "The fairest action of our human life / Is scorning to revenge an injury" (I. 1), yet, as with many of the Choruses in the play, this prescriptive voice shifts ground from verse to verse, thus implying that the issue is more open to debate than would first appear.

The Chorus argues that gracious forgiveness actually empowers one over an enemy. Then, as if doubting that this point will have persuaded the audience, it goes on to remind spectators that there is "no honour won" in avenging oneself on someone "base". If the enemy is "worthy", one should naturally yield rather than fighting them (II. 7-12). None of the characters

"Revenge to me is sweeter far than life" (5.1.7). It seems, according to Hopkins, "that we are being specifically invited to see witchcraft as exposing some uncomfortable truths about society's so-called verities and in particular as something which works to prise apart ideas about 'women's nature' rather than to confirm its existence" (97).

Francis Bacon observed that "vindictive persons live the life of witches, who, as they are mischievous, so end they unfortunate". By problematizing the category of "witch", however, ***The Witch of Edmonton*** opens a space for revenge as "a kind of wild justice" which "putteth the law out of office" (Vickers 347). Elizabeth's searing critique of male behaviour in the trial scene serves to remind spectators of the cruelty of Old Banks, the murderous desires of Frank Thorney and Sir Arthur Clarington's abuse of Winnifrede. She makes the system of justice that condemns her look corrupt. In such exceptional cases, revenge could be a viable alternative.

While few women would have dared to publish a public defense of revenge, some did hint at its dangerous attraction. In her 'Essay on Adversity" (1580), Mary Queen of Scots noticed "we must endeavor, through all these afflictions, to guard against the sin of impatience". She criticizes those who take revenge but ends by acknowledging that she has shared their sins:

> They thrust the law of God on one side, not only to vaunt their own praises but to cast away their whole existence for so small a matter as a chance word which is but wind, and which, perhaps, he who

wrongs. Driven to excess in some form, the revenger often lashes out at the innocent as well as the guilty or in some other way overshoots the mark. Revenge is always in "excess of justice.... And yet the act of vengeance, in excess of justice, a repudiation of conscience, hellish in its mode of operation, seems to the revenger (and to the audience?) an overriding imperative" (Belsey 113). Not to act is to leave crime unpunished, murder triumphant or tyranny in unfettered control. Revenge plays tend to leave reader or audience in a state of tension. The plays' interrogative endings put pressure on audiences to think again about revenge as a reflex response.

In ***The Witch of Edmonton*** (1621), for example, Elizabeth Sawyer gives expression to its energizing force, which can transform her from a wretched old woman who has been "reviled, kicked, beaten" (4.1.77) into a commanding figure. The play overtly condemns Elizabeth's wish for "Vengeance, shame, ruin" (2.1.120) since it invokes the Dog, an agent of evil, as her familiar. Nevertheless, Elizabeth is presented more as a victim than a criminal; she effectively turns the accusation of witchcraft back onto those who have injured her, men who "are within far more crooked than 1 am, and if I be a witch, more witch-like" (4.1.88). When she exclaims "A witch! Who is not?" (4.1.103) she gives voice to a communal desire to, challenge and avenge the abuses inflicted by male oppressors.

scheme which divine vengeance conventionally presupposed" (29). In her comments on male lust, the pamphlet writer Jane Anger vows "Deceitful men with guile must be repaid / And blows for blows who renders not again? (31, 32, 34) Jane Anger's call for revenge speaks directly to the desires of women for self-vindication. Revenge offers an illusion of agency, the power to direct events from a position of apparent impotence. Indeed, Harry Keyishian has argued that in revenge drama it is often presented in positive terms as "a redemptive declaration of selfhood" with which audiences readily sympathize. Revenge allows characters to "restore their integrity — their sense of psychic wholeness" (2-3). The opportunities for rebuilding a damaged self make it very attractive to female characters.

Early modern dramatists- such as Tourneur, Ford, Marston, Chapman, Shirley, Dekker, and Rowley- considered revenge from multiple viewpoints and examined it in the context of changing notions of honor and shame. They wrestled in sophisticated ways with the unstable relation of revenge to justice and repeatedly asked what the "private man" should do in response to a wrong when the gods are silent and the state too weak or corrupt to bring about just solutions. Their answers were typically ambivalent: revenge is a nearly irresistible response, yet it is also a source of escalating violence and new

Revenge tragedies invariably stage a conflict between this orthodox Christian standpoint and a code of personal reprisal which draws on the Old Testament dictate "life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth" (Exodus 21.23-4) and the ancient tradition. Differences between the two ideologies are implicitly or explicitly gendered. To reject or appropriate God's prerogative on vengeance is to rebel against patriarchal authority and ally oneself with the more disturbing primitive maternal world of the Furies and some infamous female revenges: Juno, Medea, Leto and Artemis, Procne and Philomel, Hecuba, Althea.

In Renaissance England, the opposition between the divine "Law of the Father" and a feminized personal vengeance was a material reality since women were largely excluded from the legal system. Since all lawyers, magistrates, judges, clerks and jurors were male, women had little opportunity of enforcing or applying the law (Laurence 263-4). Most women did not have easy access to civil justice as the instrument of divine retribution as the legal handbook, ***The Law's resolution of women's rights*** pointed out: "women have no voice in the parliament. They make no laws, consent to none, they abrogate none…" (Aughterson 134).

The attraction of self-vindication for women is therefore unsurprising. As Jonathan Dollimore notes, revenge can be seen as "a strategy of survival resorted to by the alienated and dispossessed" which constitutes a rejection of the "providential

Derrida's sense), which guarantees it and simultaneously always threatens to usurp it, to return it to the rule of primordial feminine law (Girard 22). As Marina Warner remarks speaking of Justice, the woman who "tramples, beheads, pierces and otherwise despatches trespassers has lost her innocence. As a figure of virtue she has become saturated with perversity and contradiction" (154).

Vengeance which makes mothers, such as Medea, the archetypal murderous mother, kill their own children is "linked ultimately to the cycle of mortality and the mother-earth as both a womb and a grave" (Raber 304). Nemesis personifies the connection between revenge and mortality. Francis Bacon's ***Wisdom of the Ancients*** (1609/19) remarked that Nemesis "signifies revenge or retribution" and terrifies everyone "with a black and dismal sight" (311). Nemesis is the watchful mother who will ultimately destroy her children.

It is not surprising that revenge is feminized since it is diametrically opposed to the paternal Word, the Law of the Father. The New Testament teaching "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, saith the Lord" (Romans 12.19) was widely accepted as a divine proscription against individual forms of retribution. In a poem addressed to her sisters, for example, Isabella Whitney cautions them

> Refer you all to him that sits above the skies:
> Vengeance is his, he will revenge; you need it not devise.
> (Martin 285)

with an implacable desire for revenge; the King points out that "nature's force doth move us to revenge" in a pattern where "blood asketh blood, and death must death requite" (4.2.106, 365). The murdering mother is, as Travitsky argues, an "archetype"- one whose roots lie in early modern fascination with classical myths about mothers like Medea, Clytemnestra, and other Greek and Roman Furies. Murderous mothers, and Videna specifically, thus represent to Travitsky the effect of "gender ideologies aimed at delineating the mother's social and political role: they manifest the fear that women are by nature disordered, and when given power through motherhood are liable to lapses into extreme evil, uncontrollable passion, and monstrous acts" (*"Child Murder"* 65,7).

An equally unnatural behaviour is reflected by Medea. Deserted by Jason, she overturns patriarchal order and normative gender roles by killing her children on the altar. In Raber's words: "The interests of the state, in short, have for Jason supplanted the interests of blood. When Medea murders Jason's blood kin, she simply fulfills by action what his ideological stance regarding his first family has already accomplished" (302). Speaking also of Medea as a model for feminist revengers, Kerrigan claims that "Medea was the epitome of fanatic female vengeance, associated with pagan magic and willfulness" (318). Every act of personal vengeance, then, is shadowed by the presence of these ancient maternal spirits.

Revenge transformed justice into a frightening independent force. It is law's necessary "supplement" (in

The feminine Latin noun "Vindicta" indicates the feminization of revenge and the female origin of the power of vengeance to deconstruct male authority, independence, and even identity. It also links back to the Furies, Nemesis, the life-giving and consuming earth, and other figures from the classical tradition. The powerful influence of the primitive avenging spirits of the Furies as part of natural impulse of revenge is shown in ***The Triumphs of Gods Revenge*** (1635) by John Reynolds. The female villains are condemned as reincarnations of these monstrous female spirits, in "like a Fury of hell" and "like a counterfeit Fury" (14, 26).

The opposition between paternal biblical law and crazy maternal revenge was clearly outlined in ***The Triumphs of Gods Revenge***, where the mental processes of Lauretia, a young woman bent on killing her lover's murderer, are explicitly condemned as irrational and demonic. By turning to 'Nature', the instinctive, primitive desire to pay back like for like, Lauretia cuts herself off from 'Reason' and 'God', in the "fumes and fury" of a revenge which is, according to Reynolds, characteristics of "her sexe and selfe" (138).

Moreover, in ***Gorboduc*** (1562) by Norton and Sackville, the Furies inspire Queen Videna to avenge the death of her son by killing his brother. These "daughters of the night" (4.2.358) and mothers who "unnaturally had slain their own children" (4.2.351) have the power to overwhelm both men and women

(1.1.39-42). He is confident that she will pay back Gloriana's murder by stripping the courtiers' flesh until they too look like the "shell of Death" (1.1. 44-9). Vendice, consumed by the desire for revenge, plots to attire and perfume Gloriana's skull to seduce and poison the Duke, just as he abused Gloriana. Now, the skull represents a disturbing feminine power. As Katherine Rowe has argued with reference to ***Titus Andronicus***, the female victim or object can acquire a mysterious sense of agency as an icon advocating revenge. Gloriana's skull, like Lavinia's dismembered body, is animated so as to "blur the boundaries between instrument and principal, actor and prop in disturbing yet compelling ways" (297).

Then, revenge is a feminine impulse: Gloriana's participation in the quest for retribution is echoed by the Duchess, who vows "my vengeance shall reach high" (1.2.174). Even Castiza's accepting prostitution takes a form of revenge on her brother, Vindice, by depriving him of his right as head of the family to arrange a match for her and use her in property negotiations. All these revenges remind us that female sexuality is much less easy to control than the men in the play would wish.

The Revenger's Tragedy is not the only play which taps into fundamental fears about women, relating to maternal power and to female agency. Even in plays where the revenger and his inspiration for revenge are male, the power of vengeance is embedded in fears of maternal origin. For example, in ***Antonio's Revenge*** (1600) by Marston, the ghost calls on the goddess of revenge:

> ...stern Vindicta towereth up aloft
> That she may fall with a more weighty peise
> And crush life's sap from out Piero's brains. (5.1.4)

religious condemnations of playing and performing. As I shall argue, revenge tragedy also is feminine genre in spite of the fact that the revenge protagonists are usually male and female characters appear to play more passive roles. Willis, in particular, speaks of the tendency in a good deal of feminist writing to ignore women's participation in revenge, and such writing may speak to a wish to construct the violence of revenge as a purely "male" problem or "an effect of patriarchy". Women are the "nonviolent sex," far more likely to be victims of violence than its "perpetrators". When they do fight back, it is argued, their violence is a justifiable act of self-defense. (22-3)

In ***The Revenger's Tragedy***, probably by Middleton, the living Gloriana was an object of the Duke's desire and her dead skull, at the opening scene of the play, was an object of male gaze as well. Perhaps this is the most striking example of female passivity. The other women were treated as objects too. Antonio's wife appears only as a dead body; her act of suicide is self- destructive since it redefines her as Antonio's possession, "a fair comely building" (1.4.2). Vindice's behaviour towards his mother and sister tests his ownership of her sexuality. Castiza describes herself using this imagery: "A virgin honour is a crystal tower" (4.4.152). We can conclude, then, that in the opening scene of ***The Revenger's Tragedy***, Gloriana's skull seems to typify women's role as objects in that drama.

Nevertheless, the spectre of Gloriana stands for the possibility of female agency, always ready to be awaken by the call for revenge. Vindice (whose name of course means Revenge) appeals to a female "Vengeance" to "keep thy day, hour, minute, I beseech, / For those thou hast determined"

society and politics: recurrent issues include sexuality, the complex relations of gender and power, and the relationship between the individual and the state" (Simkin 5-6). This article focuses on this dominant genre of Renaissance drama, revenge tragedy and a key issue in Renaissance culture, female agency and maternal power. To explore this area, my selection of dramatic texts has deliberately concentrated on mainstream writers like Shakespeare, Kyd, Beaumont and Fletcher, and classics of the revenge tragedy genre. The article, thus, gives a re-reading of Renaissance drama from a historical feminist perspective. That is, I use women's compositions to open up new readings of Kyd's ***The Spanish Tragedy*** (1587), Shakespeare's ***Titus Andronicus*** (1591), and Beaumont and Fletcher's ***The Maid's Tragedy*** (1610). These are the texts and major authors that we are most likely to encounter as students or teachers, and a re-reading of Renaissance drama from a historicized feminist perspective must claim the cultural superiority of these wonderful plays.

The Renaissance women's writings used to read the plays offer women's own constructions of their sex, although it is vital to remember that these are produced from within the dominant patriarchal discourse. Texts by Renaissance women give us indirect access to individual voices, although the relationship between the written word and the author's own voice can often be complex, as Betty Travitsky has pointed out. ("***Reconstructing***" 193-6)

Revenge tragedy is repulsive yet fascinating. As Muriel Bradbrook commented, it "allowed the projection of deep fears, the exorcism of guilt which the actors and audience shared" (130). For Bradbrook, such anxieties were caused by

Revenge Tragedy and "Female Agency" in Some Selected Elizabethan Plays

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"Feminism's impulse is often, not surprisingly, to make a celebratory identification with a rush of women onto the historical stage" (Riley 8). The desire to uncover "a rush of women onto the historical stage" is a pressing one despite of the dangers of eliminating cultural differences between women of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and women nowadays. "The neglect of women in the past has been so complete that their lives and works are virtually terra incognita, and even 'famous' women- those exceptional figures such as queens who could not be ignored- have been studied superficially" (Travitsky, *Attending* 16-7).

The England of the Renaissance was an arena of change- religious change, economic change, the growth of print culture and changes in gender relations. England was dominated by an oppressive patriarchal culture, yet pressure points created opportunities for resistance. This article uses texts by sixteenth and seventeenth century women to construct a critical perspective on Renaissance plays written by men. What I do here is to produce new readings of male-authored plays by appropriating extracts from women's text in order to place the analysis of gender politics centre stage.

"Contemporary critical theory of every cast has, in fact, found the revenge genre a rich source of ideas about Renaissance

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