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# DRAMA

C R I T I C I S M

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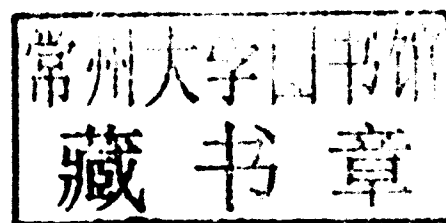
# DRAMA

## C R I T I C I S M

Criticism of the Most Significant and Widely Studied  
Dramatic Works from All the World's Literatures

**VOLUME 40**

Marie Toft  
Project Editor



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27500 Drake Rd.  
Farmington Hills, MI, 48331-3535

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOG CARD NUMBER 76-46132

ISBN-13: 978-1-4144-5882-3

ISBN-10: 1-4144-5882-7

ISSN 1056-4349

# Preface

**D***rama Criticism (DC)* is principally intended for beginning students of literature and theater as well as the average playgoer. The series is therefore designed to introduce readers to the most frequently studied playwrights of all time periods and nationalities and to present discerning commentary on dramatic works of enduring interest. Furthermore, *DC* seeks to acquaint the reader with the uses and functions of criticism itself. Selected from a diverse body of commentary, the essays in *DC* offer insights into the authors and their works but do not require that the reader possess a wide background in literary studies. Where appropriate, reviews of important productions of the plays discussed are also included to give students a heightened awareness of drama as a dynamic art form, one that many claim is fully realized only in performance.

*DC* was created in response to suggestions by the staffs of high school, college, and public libraries. These librarians observed a need for a series that assembles critical commentary on the world's most renowned dramatists in the same manner as Gale's *Short Story Criticism (SSC)* and *Poetry Criticism (PC)*, which present material on writers of short fiction and poetry. Although playwrights are covered in such Gale literary criticism series as *Contemporary Literary Criticism (CLC)*, *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism (TCLC)*, *Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism (NCLC)*, *Literature Criticism from 1400 to 1800 (LC)*, and *Classical and Medieval Literature Criticism (CMLC)*, *DC* directs more concentrated attention on individual dramatists than is possible in the broader, survey-oriented entries in these Gale series. Commentary on the works of William Shakespeare may be found in *Shakespearean Criticism (SC)*.

## Scope of the Series

By collecting and organizing commentary on dramatists, *DC* assists students in their efforts to gain insight into literature, achieve better understanding of the texts, and formulate ideas for papers and assignments. A variety of interpretations and assessments is offered, allowing students to pursue their own interests and promoting awareness that literature is dynamic and responsive to many different opinions.

Approximately five to ten authors are included in each volume, and each entry presents a historical survey of the critical response to that playwright's work. The length of an entry is intended to reflect the amount of critical attention the author has received from critics writing in English and from foreign critics in translation. Every attempt has been made to identify and include the most significant essays on each author's work. In order to provide these important critical pieces, the editors sometimes reprint essays that have appeared elsewhere in Gale's literary criticism series. Such duplication, however, never exceeds twenty percent of a *DC* volume.

## Organization of the Book

A *DC* entry consists of the following elements:

- The **Author Heading** consists of the playwright's most commonly used name, followed by birth and death dates. If an author consistently wrote under a pseudonym, the pseudonym is listed in the author heading and the real name given in parentheses on the first line of the introduction. Also located at the beginning of the introduction are any name variations under which the dramatist wrote, including transliterated forms of the names of authors whose languages use nonroman alphabets.
- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author and the critical debates surrounding his or her work.

- The list of **Principal Works** is divided into two sections. The first section contains the author's dramatic pieces and is organized chronologically by date of first performance. If this has not been conclusively determined, the composition or publication date is used. The second section provides information on the author's major works in other genres.
- Essays offering **overviews of the dramatist's entire literary career** give the student broad perspectives on the writer's artistic development, themes, and concerns that recur in several of his or her works, the author's place in literary history, and other wide-ranging topics.
- **Criticism** of individual plays offers the reader in-depth discussions of a select number of the author's most important works. In some cases, the criticism is divided into two sections, each arranged chronologically. When a significant performance of a play can be identified (typically, the premier of a twentieth-century work), the first section of criticism will feature **production reviews** of this staging. Most entries include sections devoted to **critical commentary** that assesses the literary merit of the selected plays. When necessary, essays are carefully excerpted to focus on the work under consideration; often, however, essays and reviews are reprinted in their entirety. Footnotes are reprinted at the end of each essay or excerpt. In the case of excerpted criticism, only those footnotes that pertain to the excerpted texts are included.
- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** explicating each piece.
- A complete **Bibliographic Citation**, designed to help the interested reader locate the original essay or book, precedes each piece of criticism. Source citations in the Literary Criticism Series follow University of Chicago Press style, as outlined in *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 14th ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993).
- An annotated bibliography of **Further Reading** appears at the end of each entry and suggests resources for additional study. In some cases, significant essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights are included here. Boxed material following the further reading list provides references to other biographical and critical sources on the author in series published by Gale.

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Rocha, Mark William. "Black Madness in August Wilson's 'Down the Line' Cycle." In *Madness in Drama*, edited by James Redmond, 191-201. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993. Reprinted in *Drama Criticism*. Vol. 31, edited by Thomas J. Schoenberg and Lawrence J. Trudeau, 229-35. Detroit: Gale, 2008.

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# *The Revenger's Tragedy*

Thomas Middleton

The following entry presents criticism of Middleton's play *The Revenger's Tragedy* (c. 1606). For discussion of Middleton's complete career, see *DC*, Volume 5.

## INTRODUCTION

Violent, bloody, and comically grotesque, *The Revenger's Tragedy* is considered the preeminent example of the Jacobean revenge play, a genre of Renaissance drama that traces its roots to the works of the Roman dramatist Seneca the Younger. *The Revenger's Tragedy*, however, is set apart from other revenge plays by its self-conscious humor about its own cynicism, which many critics maintain is a deliberate parody of the genre. Once believed to be the work of Cyril Tourneur, the play is now generally attributed to Thomas Middleton, although authorship has not been definitively proven.

## PLOT AND MAJOR CHARACTERS

Like all revenge plays, *The Revenger's Tragedy* features a protagonist intent on avenging a murder. Typically the murderer is a corrupt leader or nobleman and the victim is a just and equitable political rival. In *The Revenger's Tragedy*, Vindice is a young man whose betrothed, Gloriana, has been poisoned by the villainous Duke because she spurned his advances. Vindice is able to gain access to the court via his brother Hippolito, who is in the service of the Duke's son Lussurioso. While in disguise as Piato, Vindice assists Lussurioso's attempts to seduce his sister, Castiza. Despite Vindice/Piato's admittedly distasteful persuasive techniques, and the active collaboration of Gratiana (their mother), Castiza steadfastly resists Lussurioso. In the meantime, the Duke's wife and her sons become involved in more sexual intrigues and violence, with her youngest son put on trial for raping the wife of the courtier Antonio. The Duke pardons his stepson at the Duchess's request, unaware that she is ensnaring his illegitimate son Spurio into a lurid affair. Vindice hopes to keep Lussurioso from Castiza by telling him about the affair between the Duchess and his stepbrother, but when Lussurioso enters the chamber expecting to catch and kill the couple, he instead attacks his own father, the Duke, who throws him in

prison. When the Duke commissions Vindice, still dressed as Piato, to bring him a country girl with whom he can have his way, Vindice recognizes his chance to avenge Gloriana's murder. He brings him a manikin, dressed as the girl and topped with the dead Gloriana's skull, painted with makeup and poisoned lipstick. Vindice arranges for the Duke's interlude to take place with a view of his wife's rendezvous with his son. While the Duke is slowly and excruciatingly poisoned, Vindice cuts out his tongue and forces him to watch the Duchess and Spurio having sex. Lussurioso is elevated to Duke following his father's death, but he is murdered by Vindice and Hippolito during a masque to celebrate his ascension. In the chaos that ensues, Spurio and two of his stepbrothers are also killed. When the wronged Antonio, whose wife has committed suicide rather than live with the memory of having been raped, inherits the dukedom, Vindice and Hippolito expect to be lauded for their role in bringing him to power and ridding the court of corruption, but instead Antonio has them executed for murder.

## MAJOR THEMES

Characterized by murder, intrigue, and depictions of gratuitous sex and violence, revenge plays were popular in the Elizabethan through Caroline periods in England. Notable examples include Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*, which is generally considered the first of its kind, and Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, which is credited with bringing psychological complexity to the genre. *The Revenger's Tragedy* is one of the later plays in the genre and is sometimes called a true Jacobean drama because its assumption of widespread social and political corruption and outright nihilistic view of the possibility of human redemption coincided with the death of the exceedingly popular Elizabeth I and the transition to her successor, James I. Ultimately, though, the play's misanthropy was attributed to the bitterness and cynicism of its supposed author, Cyril Tourneur, until a critic named L. G. Salingar published a seminal critical essay in 1937 likening *The Revenger's Tragedy* to a medieval morality play and contending that it was indeed intended to satirize the breakdown of the aristocratic social order under James I. Allegorical names and characters who represent various vices support the view of *The Revenger's Tragedy* as a morality

play, but some critics have argued that it fails to present an overarching sense of either earthly or heavenly justice because of Vindice's death and cannot, therefore, properly be considered a morality play. Nevertheless, the play contains numerous references to crime, corruption, and vice, as well as imagery and language that suggest that the author's intent was to portray humanity as fallen, brought down by its persistently vain, lecherous, and greedy nature. The central image of *The Revenger's Tragedy*, the skull of Gloriana, along with the deaths of almost all of the principal characters is interpreted as the playwright's commentary on the allegorical Danse Macabre, or Dance of Death, a common medieval European image of a personified Death leading a line of dancers to a grave—a reminder that no one is immune to death. In the case of *The Revenger's Tragedy*, some have argued, it is the carnivalesque atmosphere of the Danse Macabre that is foregrounded. Critic Arthur Lindley has catalogued the play's many examples of excess and grotesquerie—"rapes, skulls, poisonings, incestuous affairs, bisexual flirtations, filial seductions, abused corpses, plotters hired to murder themselves, accidental executions, murderous masques and chain-reaction assassinations"—and argues that, in addition to these, its feverish pace, focus on the unbridled appetite for food, sex, and power at the Duke's court, confusion of temporal and spatial reality, and overall tone of black comedy make it an early example of Mikhail Bakhtin's carnivalesque world, where all normal behavior and sense of decorum are transgressed.

### CRITICAL RECEPTION

Like other revenge plays produced during the English Renaissance, *The Revenger's Tragedy* did well in its time, but it is not known whether it was performed through the rest of the seventeenth and into the eighteenth centuries. Interest was revived in the nineteenth century by critics who speculated that the play was essentially a projection of the cynical world-view held by its then-supposed author, Tourneur, about whom little was known. In 1930 T. S. Eliot wrote that the horrors portrayed in the play were "immature" because they were so grossly exaggerated and concluded that the only way to explain the play's unrelentingly dark view of the human condition was to deduce that it was "a document on humanity chiefly because it is a document on one human being, Tourneur; its motive is truly the death motive, for it is the loathing and horror of life itself." This tendency to psychoanalyze the play's author without directly addressing the play itself remained a prevailing critical approach to *The Revenger's Tragedy* for many years. However, by the mid-twentieth century a critical battle was raging over the play's authorship, with a substantial number of scholars presenting textual evidence that Tourneur could not

have been the author and that, rather, it had been written by Middleton. This argument coincided with a revived interest in the play's satiric tone, and, by the 1980s, its gratuitous nature could be compared with that of modern horror movies. In the 1990s critics seized on the ambiguous moral purpose of Vindice and the apparent existential meaninglessness of the extreme violence, arguing that they reflected the increasing depravity of contemporary Western culture. Theater critic Charles Spencer, however, speculated in his review of two 2008 English productions of *The Revenger's Tragedy* that "both now and then the real reason for such excess is that writers get a kick out of ingenious unpleasantness and know that it will do great business at the box office."

NOTE: The authorship of *The Revenger's Tragedy* has been the subject of much scholarly debate. It is assumed in the following entry that Middleton is the author of the play, though individual critics may attribute it to Cyril Tourneur.

---

## PRINCIPAL WORKS

### Plays

- Caesar's Fall, or The Two Shapes* [with Anthony Munday, John Webster, and Michael Drayton] 1602
- Randall, Earl of Chester* 1602
- The Honest Whore, Part I* [with Thomas Dekker] 1604
- The Phoenix* c. 1604
- Timon of Athens* [with William Shakespeare] c. 1605
- A Trick to Catch the Old One* c. 1605
- Your Five Gallants* c. 1605
- A Mad World, My Masters* c. 1606
- Michaelmas Term* c. 1606
- The Puritan, or The Widow of Watling Street* c. 1606
- The Revenger's Tragedy* c. 1606
- The Viper and Her Brood* 1606
- A Yorkshire Tragedy* c. 1606
- No Wit, No Help Like a Woman's* c. 1611
- The Roaring Girl, or Moll Cutpurse* [with Dekker] 1611
- The Second Maiden's Tragedy* 1611
- A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* c. 1613
- The Triumphs of Truth* 1613
- The Masque of Cupid* 1614
- The Witch* c. 1614
- Wit at Several Weapons* [with William Rowley] c. 1613-15
- The Nice Valour, or The Passionate Madman* c. 1616
- The Widow* c. 1616
- A Fair Quarrel* [with Rowley] c. 1617
- The Triumphs of Honour and Industry* 1617

*The Mayor of Queenborough, or Hengist King of Kent* c. 1618  
*The Old Law, or A New Way to Please You* [with Rowley] c. 1618  
*The Inner Temple Masque, or Masque of Heroes* 1619  
*More Dissemblers Besides Women* c. 1619  
*The Triumphs of Love and Antiquity* 1619  
*A Courtly Masque; the Device Called the World Tossed at Tennis* [with Rowley] 1620  
*Anything for a Quiet Life* [with John Webster] c. 1621  
*Sun in Aries* [with Munday] 1621  
*Women Beware Women* c. 1621  
*The Changeling* [with Rowley] 1622  
*The Triumphs of Honour and Virtue* 1622  
*The Puritan Maid, Modest Wife, and Wanton Widow* c. 1623  
*The Triumphs of Integrity* 1623  
*A Game at Chess* 1624  
*The Conqueror's Custom* c. 1626  
*The Triumphs of Health and Prosperity* 1626

### Other Major Works

*The Wisdom of Solomon Paraphrased* (poem) 1597  
*Micro-Cynicon: Six Snarling Satires* (satires) 1599  
*The Ghost of Lucrece* (poem) 1600  
*The Ant, and the Nightingale: or Father Hubbard's Tales* (pamphlet) 1604  
*The Black Book* (pamphlet) 1604  
*The Meeting of Gallants at an Ordinary, or The Walks in Paul's* [with Dekker] (pamphlet) 1604  
*Plato's Cap. Cast at This Year 1604 Being Leap-Year* (pamphlet) 1604  
*The Two Gates of Salvation, or The Marriage of the Old and New Testament* (pamphlet) 1609

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## THE REVENGER'S TRAGEDY (C. 1606)

### PRODUCTION REVIEWS

#### Sam Marlowe (review date 4 June 2008)

SOURCE: Marlowe, Sam. "Tragedy as Farce." *Times* London (4 June 2008): Times2, 27.

[In the following review of a 2008 Royal Exchange production of *The Revenger's Tragedy* in Manchester, Marlowe finds director Jonathan Moore's attempts to appeal to a contemporary audience with gratuitous sex and violence distracting and clownish.]

Directing the first of two productions of this Jacobean gorefest [*The Revenger's Tragedy*] to open this week—the second follows at the National tonight—Jonathan Moore has gone to some lengths to make a splash. Designed by David Blight, Moore's version oozes lurid excess. It has neon and billowing smoke. It has nude sex in a shower. It has a pounding soundtrack that extends from Iggy Pop to Rodgers and Hammerstein, daft costumes and dafter wigs, a dance routine with a corpse, football with a severed head and, of course, lots of the red stuff. Yet it rarely feels genuinely connected with the throbbing, dark heart of a drama that features multiple murder, rape and near-incestuous adultery. Moore's contrivances aren't shocking, thrilling or even especially interesting as they attempt to make the play accessible to a modern audience.

It's not as if the author—formerly assumed to be Cyril Tourneur, now more commonly held to be Thomas Middleton—doesn't give us plenty to get our teeth into. Vindice (Stephen Tompkinson), whose beloved Gloriana has been poisoned because of her rejection of the lascivious Duke, is determined to avenge her death. The Duke's wife lusts after his bastard son Spurio while the youngest of her offspring is accused of rape and his two brothers have designs on the dukedom. With the virtue of Vindice's sister Castiza under attack by Lussurioso, another of the Duke's progeny, bloodlust and carnality are rife.

Moore doesn't need to lay on the grotesquerie any thicker by blasting out Julie Andrews singing 'My Favourite Things' during an execution scene. The disguise Vindice assumes to wreak his vengeance needn't consist of a ludicrous red-and-black pompadour wig, green sunglasses and a mincing campness. It's a pity that Tompkinson is lumbered for so much of the play with that interpretation, since he is fleetingly interesting as Vindice. Harrowed, sweating and trembling after Gloriana's murder, he looks as though he might climb into her coffin with her; and his relationship with Eileen O'Brien as his treacherous Irish Catholic mother is intriguingly fraught, a push-pull of filial devotion and disgust.

But Moore's decision to make the Duchess's vying sons stropky street-talking urban teenagers is unconvincing. If his intention was to draw a parallel the play and knife crime and acquisitiveness among Britain's youth, the point needed weightier treatment than these three clownish performances offer.

Moore's imposition of so much cluttered concept isn't illuminating, it's distracting. Striking reinterpretations can revivify a classic; but if this is bold, it's also a mess.



Charles Spencer (review date 6 June 2008)

SOURCE: Spencer, Charles. "The Enduring Appeal of Nastiness and Perversity." *Daily Telegraph* London (6 June 2008): Arts, 29.

[In the following review, Spencer contrasts Moore's 2008 "gimmicky and dramatically underpowered" Manchester production of *The Revenger's Tragedy* with a National Theatre production of the same play, directed by Melly Still, that he considers far superior.]

When reviewers like me get steamed up about the latest parade of in-your-face horrors at the Royal Court, it's worth remembering that our age doesn't have a monopoly on gratuitous sex and violence.

The Elizabethan and Jacobean revenge tragedies had more nasty killings and a higher body count than almost anything written by today's young pretenders, as well as a similarly steamy interest in perverse sex, too.

The most memorable scene in *The Revenger's Tragedy* (1607), once ascribed to Cyril Tourneur but now generally attributed to Thomas Middleton, involves the lustful old Duke. Nine years earlier, he poisoned Vindice's girlfriend, Gloriana, because she wouldn't let him have his wicked way with her. So now, Vindice, our titular revenger, smears poison over his beloved's skull, disguises it as the face of a beautiful woman, puts it on top of a life-size doll, and urges the Duke, once again in the market for virgin flesh, to kiss the death's head in the gloaming. He laps up the fatal drug, and dies in prolonged agony, but not before he's had his tongue cut out and been forced to watch his wife having it away with his own bastard son.

The revenge tragedians would claim their work had a moral basis, showing that the wages of sin is death, just as today's schlock-horror merchants like to claim that their work is merely a reflection of a corrupt society. I suspect, however, that both now and then the real reason for such excess is that writers get a kick out of ingenious unpleasantness and know that it will do great business at the box office.

The NT and the Manchester Royal Exchange have opened productions of this infrequently performed play in the same week. At a time when knife crime is causing such concern, *The Revenger's Tragedy*, with its ferocious stabbings and a body count that makes *Hamlet* look like a tea party, is clearly a work whose time has come again.

Which is doubtless the reason why both Jonathan Moore in Manchester and Melly Still at the NT have set their productions in modern dress, though the designs at the

National are far more spectacular, with projections of late Renaissance paintings and revolving sets mixing with present-day street clothes and party scenes of orgiastic excess.

In Manchester, everything seems both gimmicky and dramatically underpowered. Moore has gone for a streetwise, punky approach, inserting an opening scene of his own devising that merely complicates an already tricky plot. The verse-speaking is dire, the performances mostly mediocre, with the charisma-free Stephen Tompkinson adopting the disguise of a camp second-rate conjuror as Vindice and almost entirely missing the character's perverse moral fervour and dark wit. The play feels like an unrewarding slog, the only real highlight being a clever danse macabre involving the dead duke performed to a lusty rendition of 'The Sun Has Got His Hat On'.

Matters are much improved at the NT and, in a play that owes a lot to *Hamlet*, Rory Kinnear as Vindice stakes his claim to play Shakespeare's sweet prince. He superbly captures the character's volatile mood-swings and the final sense of futility of the serial killer, who in murdering others, finally extinguishes his own divine fire.

The production is blessed with clarity, a hurtling pace, and an atmosphere of decadent loucheness, while the mixture of baroque and modern dance music works a treat. Best of all, Still's staging is as blackly comic as it is gory.

## CRITICAL COMMENTARY

Arthur L. Kistner and M. K. Kistner (essay date January 1972)

SOURCE: Kistner, Arthur L., and M. K. Kistner. "Morality and Inevitability in *The Revenger's Tragedy*." *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 71, no. 1 (January 1972): 36-46.

[In the following essay, Kistner and Kistner analyze the significance of Vindice's death in *The Revenger's Tragedy*.]

It is a commonplace of Elizabethan and Jacobean serious drama that the protagonist must die. The playwright's ability to convince his audience of the necessity of his hero's death is one determination of the success or failure of a serious play to attain to the stature of tragedy. The writer may infuse this feeling of inevitability through his characterizations and the interaction of his characters and incidents; he may use a

negative approach, that is, remove all good or sufficient reasons for the hero to remain alive; or he may construct the plot so that the protagonist must do away with himself in order to forestall another's justice or revenge.

Although the death of the protagonist is an accepted convention, Vindice's death and downfall, in *The Revenger's Tragedy*, is a source of considerable discussion. The variety of opinion evoked by Vindice's fall is due, to a great degree, first, to the relationship between his end and the ethical stance of the play and, second, to the doubt of the necessity for his death. Judgments on the moral significance of his death include both ends of the spectrum of possible opinions. On the one hand, some critics of the play feel that Vindice's death satisfies the claims of heavenly justice,<sup>1</sup> that it restores "moral balance,"<sup>2</sup> that it "must be seen primarily as the judgment of Heaven,"<sup>3</sup> and that it signifies God's punishment dealt after due measurement of the soul in the scales of justice.<sup>4</sup>

On the other side, a few commentators have made stringent arguments that Vindice's death is unjust, that no moral order is evidenced by his downfall. Robert Ornstein, for example, holds that Vindice dies "not because the moral order is restored or because the goddess Astraea returns to earth," but because of the selfish motivations of a crafty politician.<sup>5</sup> Peter Murray, in *A Study of Cyril Tourneur*, also contends that no human justice prevails in Vindice's downfall.<sup>6</sup> In addition, Murray maintains that, in the conventional sense, there is no heavenly justice either. The ironic justice of the play "is 'heavenly' only in that by disobeying God men put themselves in the power of demons" (p. 235).

As the question of the moral significance of Vindice's fall has answers at each extreme of opinion, so has the question of the necessity of his death. Some critics contend that the revenger's death is inevitable.<sup>7</sup> In contrast, one writer suggests that the death is so abrupt that it cannot be regarded seriously;<sup>8</sup> another, in somewhat the same vein, holds that it cannot be considered "as a rational solution of a story";<sup>9</sup> and yet another sees it as more ironic than inevitable.<sup>10</sup>

In order to measure the weight of these contending opinions, one must view the issues of moral stance and inevitability in their relationship to each other. The moral import of Vindice's fall and its inevitability are intimately interrelated questions. If the fall is to have moral significance, it must be inevitable; that is, it must fulfill the logical expectations of a moral system. In turn, the degree of inevitability that the writer can give to Vindice's death will strengthen the moral "message" that the play attempts to impart. An examination of *The Revenger's Tragedy* reveals that its author has built a mutually interdependent structure of inevitability and morality, but not the simple reward-for-the-good and

punishment-for-the-bad morality that has generally been imposed on the play.

In a reading of *The Revenger's Tragedy*, the first of the two questions to present itself is that of inevitability. The source of the necessity of Vindice's death lies in the playwright's representation of the two ages—the iron age<sup>11</sup> that prevails through the main portion of the play and the silver age that is initiated with the succession of Antonio (V.iii.84-85). The author carefully and elaborately depicts the corruption and cynicism of the iron age. In the first scene he presents a thoroughly sordid set of villains visually contrasted to the moral and bitter Vindice, who succinctly outlines the evil characters of his opposites, the Duke, Duchess, Lussurioso, and Spurio:

Duke! royal lecher! Go, gray-hair'd adultery,  
And thou his son, as impious steep'd as he,  
And thou his bastard true-begot in evil,  
And thou his duchess that will do with devil:  
Four exc'lent characters.

(I.i.1-5)

After this preliminary introduction to the evil of the iron age, the playwright continues his picture of degeneracy with direct pronouncements on its nature. Whether he is commenting on the condition of Italy as conceived by a Renaissance Englishman or on the state of English society itself, within the play's context decadence is attributed to the iron age. For example, Vindice says that his disguise as a pander makes him a "man o' th' time" (I.i.94), and Hippolito echoes that as a pander "This our age swims within him" and that he might be mistaken for Time, "He is so near kin to this present minute" (I.iii.24-26). In other instances, Vindice mentions the moral frailty of women "in these days" (II.ii.25-27) and contrasts "this immodest season" with "the old time" in which virtue was dominant (I.iii.10-14). Lussurioso may seem an unlikely character to be commenting on the corruption of the current decline, but nonetheless he refers to "this luxurious day" and asserts that the name bawd "Is so in league with age, that nowadays / It does eclipse three quarters of a mother" (I.iii.110, 154-55). Like Vindice, Lussurioso contrasts the era with other times which were less sinful (I.iii.137). Finally, Antonio and Castiza add their condemnation of the age. Antonio speaks of the perversion of justice "in this age" (I.iv.55), and Castiza laments that "The world's so chang'd, one shape into another, / It is a wise child now that knows her mother" (II.i.162-63). These overt pronouncements on the nature of the iron age complement the playwright's characterization of his villains. The sum effect is to present a period of time set off from other epochs by its overwhelming evil and degeneracy.

Vindice's descriptive examples of moral deterioration are another skein which the playwright interweaves with cynical pronouncements and characterizations to

produce a picture of a dissolute age. To the examples of lechery, rape, incest, and prostitution depicted in the play's action, he adds Vindice's testimony that

I have been witness  
To the surrenders of a thousand virgins,  
And not so little;  
I have seen patrimonies wash'd a-pieces,  
Fruit fields turn'd into bastards,  
And in a world of acres,  
Not so much dust due to the heir 'twas left to  
As would well gravel a petition.

(I.iii.47-54)

Vindice's partial intent in this speech is to fool Lussurioso, but in his next speech he becomes so impassioned in his moral outbreak against unchastity that he discomfits Lussurioso, who brushes aside such unpleasant thoughts as sin and damnation (I.iii.57-74). The particular sins of concern to Vindice in the second speech are drunkenness, adultery, and incest. Other specific details that Vindice later adds to the picture of corruption are the misuse of land to support various vanities (III.v.73-74; II.i.214-21), diverse means to promote adultery (II.ii.138-41), avarice (IV.ii.68-75), and highway robbery for the sake of maintaining a woman (III.v.75-78). Vindice summarizes his view of the iron age in the picture he suggests to Lussurioso: "*A usuring father, to be boiling in hell, and his son and heir with a whore dancing over him*" (IV.ii.85-86). It is this bleak view of the present age that the playwright establishes by characterizations, direct pronouncements, and the descriptive details of Vindice.

The playwright's depiction of the role of virtue in the iron age is complementary to his picture of the domination of vice. The reward of virtue is demonstrated in the first scene: the skull of Gloriana, poisoned for her chastity, and, through neglect, the death of Vindice's father, worthy in mind but not in estate (I.i.122-27). In addition, Vindice presents the relationship, developed to some extent throughout the play, that vice is to advancement as virtue is to poverty (vice:advancement—virtue:poverty). He speaks of reserve as "fool bashfulness, / That maid in the old time, whose flush of grace / Would never suffer her to get good clothes" (I.iii.12-14). Castiza repeats the relationship between depravity and advancement; she refers to "her honor, / That keeps her low and empty in estate," and remarks that wealth, the reward of sin, creates sinners (II.i.3-8). In his disguise as Piató, Vindice again dwells on the advantages of sin, the wealth and promotion to be gained through it, and the disadvantages of virtue: "All thrives but Chastity, she lies a-cold" (II.i.222).<sup>12</sup> The iron age, then, is obviously one in which vice prospers and virtue suffers.

The evident source of the corruption of the times is the court. The chief members of the duchy—the Duke, Duchess, Spurio, Lussurioso, Ambitoso, Supervacuo,

and the Youngest Son—are notably vicious in one way or another. Virtue, in the forms of Castiza, Gratiana, and Antonio's wife, dwells away from the Duke's palace. Through its agent, the pander, the court extends outward to reach Castiza and Gratiana and partially succeeds in spreading its corruption; Gratiana is temporarily overcome by the temptation to seek advancement through vice. The life of Antonio's virtuous wife is ravaged by the court; she is raped by the Duchess' Youngest Son but maintains her honor through suicide.

Vindice's relationship to the court, the source of corruption, grows stronger throughout the play, and as it does, his virtue declines.<sup>13</sup> The process can be traced through successive stages from his isolation from the court to his complete unity with it. As the play opens, Vindice is contrasted to the court; watching the royal procession, he stands aloof, bitterly moralizing upon the court's vices. His only contact with the Duke's household is through his brother, Hippolito, who, like Vindice, disapproves of the court and desires revenge upon the Duke. Both Hippolito's and Vindice's wrongs "are for one scabbard fit" (I.i.57). On the other hand, Hippolito's integrity already seems to have suffered somewhat because of his proximity to the court:

Faith, I have been shov'd at, but 'twas still my hap  
To hold by th' duchess' skirt: you guess at that;  
Whom such a coat keeps up can ne'er fall flat.

(I.i.62-64)

Hippolito provides an opportunity for Vindice to go to court in order to perpetrate his revenge. To do so, however, Vindice must become a "man o' th' time," a pander; he must pretend to be evil even to gain access to the Duke. His acceptance of a guise of evil is his first step downward. He reaches another stage in his moral degradation when, upon arrival at the court, he swears to Lussurioso that he will attempt to seduce his sister and mother. Through his oath, he has thrust himself into the dilemma of being damned if he does not attempt the seduction or damned if he makes the vicious trial of his mother's and sister's virtues. Vindice rightly declares that Hippolito and he have been made "innocent villains" (I.iii.167)—innocent in intention, but villains in deed. Hippolito likewise exclaims that Lussurioso has made an "unnatural slave" and bawd of him (II.ii.10-11, 16).

To allay his curiosity and "for the salvation of his oath" (II.i.49), Vindice attempts the seduction and then returns to report to Lussurioso. He now finds himself between the Scylla and Charybdis of damning himself by a lie, or by failing to honor his mother (II.ii.36-39). He opts for honesty but later accuses himself, "I was a villain not to be forsworn" (II.ii.98). His self-condemnation marks another stage of degradation; his villainy is no

longer innocent. Each contact with the court further depraves Vindice and narrows the gap between the two.

In Vindice's next appearance on the stage, his association with the court has plunged him further into viciousness. He has agreed to be a pander to the Duke and is ecstatic over the opportunity for revenge presented to him (III.v.11-30). Here is not the reluctant, tortured decision for revenge and justice that characterizes Othello and Hamlet or even Hieronimo, but an eager lust for the enemy's blood. Not content to become pander and murderer himself, Vindice has brought Gloriana to court as prostitute and murderess. Furthermore, his desire to revenge her death is no longer motivated by love for her; lust for revenge alone has become his dominant emotion:

And now methinks I could e'en chide myself  
For doting on her beauty, though her death  
Shall be reveng'd after no common action.

(III.v.68-70)

Vindice's marked change in feeling toward Gloriana and the change within himself are evident in the contrast between his address to her in the first scene of the play and his words to her as they await the arrival of the Duke. In the first scene, his tone is one of adoration, and his emotion almost a deep despair over her loss:

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

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

(I.i.14-25, 30-34)

In the later scene, before he kills the Duke, Vindice's tone has degenerated to flippant mockery, his emotion to scorn and contempt:

Madame, his grace will not be absent long.—  
Secret? ne'er doubt us, madame. 'Twill be worth  
Three velvet gowns to your ladyship.—Known?  
Few ladies respect that disgrace: a poor thin shell!  
'Tis the best grace you have to do it well.  
. . . Here's an eye,  
Able to tempt a great man—to serve God;  
A pretty hanging lip, that has forgot now to dissemble;

Methinks this mouth should make a swearer tremble,  
A drunkard clasp his teeth and not undo 'em  
To suffer wet damnation to run through 'em.  
Here's a cheek keeps her color, let the wind go  
whistle;  
Spout rain, we fear thee not; be hot or cold,  
All's one with us.

(III.v.43-47, 54-62)

When, as they cruelly murder the Duke, Vindice calls Hippolito, Gloriana, and himself knaves and "villains, all three!" (III.v.151, 156), there is little reason to disagree with him.

By now Vindice is sufficiently degraded to cast away the role of Piato and come to court without a disguise. He hires out as a murderer under his own name and identity. As Vindice, he kills his disguise, Piato, his alter ego, the pretended villain. The genuine villain destroys the mock one. Vindice again rightfully castigates himself as rascal; he ironically condemns the acts of his other self, Piato (V.i.65), and deprecates Piato, Lussurioso, and himself with "O villain! O rogue! O slave! O rascal!" (V.i.95).

Vindice's final step downward makes him a full member of the court. He and Hippolito appear disguised in a revel, taking advantage of their masks to perform murder. They have now equated themselves with the brothers Supervacuo and Ambitoso, who wear the same disguises for the same reason, to murder Lussurioso. Vindice's desire to murder Lussurioso has not the firm connection with revenge that his lust to kill the Duke had. Peter Murray ingeniously suggests that Vindice must kill Lussurioso "to prevent him from destroying her [Castiza] as the old Duke did Gloriana" (p. 223). Vindice, however, mentions only that he wishes to "blast this villainous dukedom vex'd with sin" and to destroy "those few nobles that have long suppress'd" him and his cohorts (V.ii.6, 11). Moreover, Lussurioso is actually guilty of less sin against Castiza than Vindice is. Lussurioso may have wished to seduce her, but Vindice attempted it, just as he carried out the murder of Piato which Lussurioso wanted done. Vindice's murder of Lussurioso has more the look of armed rebellion than revenge.<sup>14</sup> Vindice, who once called upon Heaven to protest Lussurioso's villainy and to proclaim vengeance in thunder and lightning (IV.ii.154, 193), now ironically interprets thunder as applause for his actions rather than as protestation and proclamation (V.iii.42, 48). Surely, if there is any moral structure to the play, it is inevitable that Vindice must be punished for his villainy as were the Duke and his sons and stepsons.

A further indication of Vindice's oneness with the villainy that characterizes the court and the iron age is the contrast between his attitude toward the age in the early