

Three Jacobean Revenge Tragedies



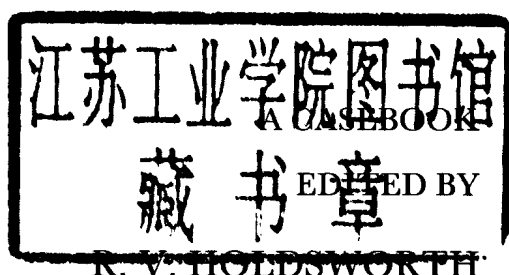
A SELECTION OF CRITICAL ESSAYS
EDITED BY R. V. HOLDSWORTH

Three Jacobean Revenge Tragedies

The Revenger's Tragedy

Women Beware Women

The Changeling



M
MACMILLAN

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GENERAL EDITOR'S PREFACE

The Casebook series, launched in 1968, has become a well-regarded library of critical studies. The central concern of the series remains the 'single-author' volume, but suggestions from the academic community have led to an extension of the original plan, to include occasional volumes on such general themes as literary 'schools' and genres.

Each volume in the central category deals either with one well-known and influential work by an individual author, or with closely related works by one writer. The main section consists of critical readings, mostly modern, collected from books and journals. A selection of reviews and comments by the author's contemporaries is also included, and sometimes comment from the author himself. The Editor's Introduction charts the reputation of the work or works from the first appearance to the present time.

Volumes in the 'general themes' category are variable in structure but follow the basic purpose of the series in presenting an integrated selection of readings, with an Introduction which explores the theme and discusses the literary and critical issues involved.

A single volume can represent no more than a small selection of critical opinions. Some critics are excluded for reasons of space, and it is hoped that readers will pursue the suggestions for further reading in the Select Bibliography. Other contributions are severed from their original context, to which some readers may wish to turn. Indeed, if they take a hint from the critics represented here, they certainly will.

A. E. DYSON

NOTE ON TEXTS

Throughout this volume quotations from and references to the three plays have been made to conform to the editions of them in the Revels Plays series (Manchester University Press). These are *The Revenger's Tragedy*, edited by R. A. Foakes (1966); *Women Beware Women*, edited by J. R. Mulryne (1975); and *The Changeling*, edited by N. W. Bawcutt (1958). The text used for other Middleton works is, where possible, that of the 'complete' edition of A. H. Bullen, 8 vols (1885–86); the texts used for works by Middleton which have joined the canon since Bullen's edition appeared are identified as the need arises. Shakespeare references and quotations follow *The Riverside Shakespeare*, edited by G. Blakemore Evans (Boston, 1974).

Editorial additions, in the footnotes of the essays and elsewhere, are placed between square brackets. As noted in the Contents page, essay titles printed within quotation marks have been supplied by the Editor.

INTRODUCTION

The Revenger's Tragedy

Thomas Middleton, and not Cyril Tourneur or anyone else, wrote *The Revenger's Tragedy*. After its composition in 1605–6, the play remained anonymous for fifty years. Its publisher, George Eld, entered the play in the Stationers' Register in 1607, along with a Middleton comedy, *A Trick to Catch the Old One*, but without saying who wrote them; and he at first gave no clue on their printed title-pages. In the case of *A Trick*, however, which he printed second, Eld stopped the press and added 'Composed by T.M.' to later copies in the run, some of which have survived. *The Revenger's Tragedy* stayed unclaimed until 1656, when the bookseller Edward Archer published 'An exact and perfect catalogue of all the plays that ever were printed, together with all the authors' names'. Included is a play called 'Revenger', which is classed as a tragedy and ascribed to 'Tournour'. Faced with scores of other anonymous plays in his list, Archer was wrong in his attributions twice as often as he was right: lacking 'T.M.' on his copy of *A Trick*, for example, he assigned it to Shakespeare. Nevertheless, most modern editors and critics of *The Revenger's Tragedy* have accepted Archer's ascription.

It, too, is wrong, however. In 1926 E. H. C. Oliphant published an article in which he noted detailed resemblances, of phrasing, vocabulary, and versification, between *The Revenger's Tragedy* and Middleton's plays.¹ Since the links were widely dispersed through the Middleton canon, occurring in work which was earlier than *The Revenger's Tragedy* as well as later, he rejected plagiarism as an explanation, and concluded that Middleton must have written this play too. Oliphant's methods were vulnerable to the charge that he accumulated his evidence haphazardly, and did not test its distinctiveness by checking it against a body of plays by other Jacobean playwrights. Recent research has, however, put his finding beyond reasonable doubt. In particular, we have to thank the painstaking labours of David J. Lake and MacDonald P. Jackson, who, working independently of one another, applying different tests,

and using a largely different sample of non-Middleton plays as a control, are united in their certainty that Middleton wrote *The Revenger's Tragedy*.²

Of the diverse kinds of evidence Lake and Jackson adduce, that of linguistic forms is the most powerful. Linguistically, Middleton was a highly colloquial and idiosyncratic writer, who cultivated a wide range of verbal and contractional forms, such as *I'm*, *I've*, *I'd*, *h'as*, *sh'as* 'las, 'em, on't, ne'er, and e'en, which other dramatists either never or rarely used, and who consistently avoided others, such as *hath*, *doth*, and *them*, which they employed frequently. From this point of view the quarto of *The Revenger's Tragedy* is a typical Middletonian text: its linguistic pattern agrees with that of every single one of Middleton's acknowledged plays much more closely than it does with those of some 150 plays by other Jacobean authors to which Lake and Jackson compare it. Supporters of Tournear object that scribes and printers' compositors, who sometimes tinkered with word-forms, may have accidentally created this exact linguistic match, but this is simply not credible. Many different copyists, widely separated in time and space, are involved, and the effect of their alterations would be quite random in direction. The odds against them shifting the linguistic details of these, and only these, texts so concertedly as to make them reduplicate one another, and reduplicate simultaneously Middleton's own practices as evidenced by his autograph manuscript of *A Game at Chess*, are many millions to one.

On top of this, *The Revenger's Tragedy* contains coinages, such as 'luxur' (i i 9) and 'sasarara' (iv ii 65), phrases, such as 'my study's ornament' (i i 15), and character-names, such as Lussurioso and Castiza, which appear nowhere else but in Middleton (who was, it should be added, a highly self-imitative writer). Its verse-style displays Middleton's peculiar habit of mingling blank verse, rhyme, and prose within single speeches; and it employs oaths and exclamations which are very rare outside his work. Take the case of 'push!'. There are six examples in *The Revenger's Tragedy*, six in *A Mad World*, six in *Your Five Gallants*, five in *No Wit, No Help*, five in *The Changeling*, and a further twenty-five elsewhere in Middleton. In 200 non-Middleton plays which Lake, Jackson, and I have checked between us, 'push' occurs just seven times, and never more than once per play. The evidence involved, of which the foregoing is merely a tiny sample, is different in kind, yet it all converges upon the same result.

Why, if Middleton is not the play's author, should this be so?

It is now clear that only tradition, abetted by an irrational distrust of 'internal' (that is, textually derived) evidence, has kept the Tourneur attribution alive. Its persistence has had remarkable consequences. For four centuries Middleton has been denied one of his best plays; Tourneur's name has become as familiar as those of Middleton and Webster; and Tourneur's one genuine play, *The Atheist's Tragedy*, instead of being as well known as *The Two Maids of Moreclack* or *The Duchess of Suffolk*, is widely studied and is currently in print in several paperback editions.

Criticism of the play has also been affected. Late Victorian critics, unhampered by the check on their imaginations that an awareness of Middleton's authorship would have imposed, were free to convert the obscure Tourneur into a late Victorian poet, a morbid and stricken visionary in the mould of Baudelaire's *poète maudit*. In this reading *The Revenger's Tragedy* becomes a neurotic and involuntary effusion, of mainly autobiographical interest; it provides, according to Churton Collins, a window into the author's 'diseased and perverted consciousness', and a revelation of his 'suffering, cynicism, and despair'. The subjectivity and tendentiousness of this response would have been more rapidly apparent had not T. S. Eliot re-endorsed it in his essay of 1930. But Eliot, too, was concocting an author who reflected his private preoccupations. Eliot's Tourneur, racked by life-hatred and 'some horror beyond words', is really Eliot – the poet who wrote *The Hollow Men* and who prefixed 'The horror! the horror!' to the first version of *The Waste Land*.

Later critics, while retaining Tourneur as the play's author, have been less ready to view it as the outpouring of a disordered life-hater. Robert Ornstein argues that the playwright's 'ironic intellect is always in control',³ and Una Ellis-Fermor that 'his detachment from his characters is nearly as complete as Middleton's'.⁴ M. C. Bradbrook notes the calculation which has gone into the play's construction: she counts 'a list of twenty-two ironic reversals' connecting the action, which is 'an enlarged series of peripeteia'.⁵ These reversals, Peter Lisca shows, serve a coherent moral point: they dramatise 'the intestinal division of evil itself, a division which while seeming to lead to multiplication ironically ends in cross-cancellation'.⁶

Other studies demonstrate that the play achieves a deliberate and complex blending of diverse traditions, both dramatic and non-

dramatic. As a revenge tragedy it adapts the formula established in Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* and continued in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, displaying specific debts to both. Gloriana's skull, for example, aids Vindice's mortuary meditations as Yorick's skull does for Hamlet, but it is also the equivalent of the napkin dyed in his son's blood which Hieronimo vows to keep with him in Kyd's play, as an incitement to revenge. Jonson's and Marston's satiric comedies, in which a parade of grotesques is ridiculed and exposed by a wittily acerbic commentator, are also drawn upon, along with the perspectives and conventions of the earlier Morality plays. A major non-dramatic influence is the medieval homily, a formal exhortation on life's vanity and death's imminence. With Vindice's skull-assisted harangues, compare G. R. Owst's summary of the standard tactics of the medieval preacher, who would

point his audience to the skulls and bones of the departed, bidding them reflect how through the mouth once so delectable to kiss, so delicate in its eating and drinking, through eyes but a short while before so fair to see, worms now crawl in and out. The body or the head, once so richly attired, so proudly displayed, now boasts no covering but the soil, no bed of softness, no proud retinue save worms for the flesh, and, if its life was evil, demons for the soul.⁷

Finally, iconographical as well as literary traditions are utilised. Many critics note the pervasive suggestion of the Danse Macabre. In addition, Vindice pressing Gloriana's skull against the lips of the Duke recalls illustrations of the devil drawing together the heads of a man and a woman as they kiss,⁸ and when he and his brother stamp on their dying victim they resemble the demons of medieval woodcuts who tread down the damned into hell.⁹

Recognition of the author's sophisticated control of his material has encouraged critics to separate him from his protagonist, so that whatever morbidity and cynicism they find in the play are now seen as a product of Vindice's distorted psyche rather than his creator's. Interpretations of Vindice differ significantly, however. Some critics detect a latent corruption, a pre-existing moral affinity with his enemies which it is the business of the play to make plain; others view him as initially virtuous but gradually contaminated by the depravity of the court, and by the violence he has to espouse in order to purge it; and a few, while conceding that 'Vindice's vengeance does at last unsettle his moral balance',¹⁰ find him essentially noble and requiring our sympathy right to the end.

The first of these readings is surely the one which Middleton intends. Quite apart from Vindice's escalating sadism and his morally bankrupt celebration of the 'wit' of his deeds, his first speech gives evidence of perverted values. He prizes Gloriana's memory not for her virtue but for her beauty, and specifically for its power to lure 'the uprightest man' into the sin of lust (the pun on 'uprightest' smartly making moral excellence a matter of sexual prowess). He admires, too, her ability to provoke the very extravagance he elsewhere professes to deplore: 'she was able to ha' made a usurer's son / Melt all his patrimony in a kiss, / And what his father fifty years told, / To have consum'd' (I i 26-8). It is instructive that a later Middleton character, Horsus in *Hengist, King of Kent*, argues similarly when praising his love Roxena: 'A treasure 'tis, able to make more thieves / Than cabinets open to entice; / Which learn them theft that never knew the vice' (II iii 151-3). Horsus is an unambiguous villain, and his attempt at praise is meant as further proof of his baseness.

Vindice's villainy is masked by his disguise as the malevolent Piato, but it is also embodied by it. As J. L. Simmons notes, comparing Jonson's identical strategy in *Volpone*, 'the hero's role-playing metaphorically projects his spiritual disease, and, in turn, exacerbates it'.¹¹ Vindice believes that his assumed identity is wholly distinct and false: he will merely 'put on that knave for once', 'turn into another', and be 'far enough from myself' (I i 93, 134; I iii 1). Later, when he puts off his disguise, his brother remarks with relief, 'So, so, all's as it should be, y'are yourself . . . now thou art thyself' (IV ii 1-4). But this asserts a truth which neither of them perceives. Vindice is now indeed fully himself, for Piato has brought his murderous nature to the surface; the disguise was all along the reality. Middleton repeats the irony in *Women Beware Women*, when Livia, allaying the suspicions of her intended victims after threatening them, pretends to have calmed down, and declares, 'I am now myself' (IV ii 172). This again carries a deeper truth, for Livia's real moral identity now stands fully revealed, in the fact that she is planning to murder her kinsfolk.

Accepting that Vindice is essentially corrupt, and even that the play is 'a nightmare of the Calvinist sense of sin',¹² does not, however, compel us to view the author's attitude as unrelievedly pessimistic. This will depend on our response to Antonio's succession, and the moralising finale he supplies. Some critics see Antonio as 'pious',

and his condemnation of Vindice as signalling a final 'reversal of Evil to Good'.¹³ A majority find him hypocritical and self-serving, and thus the play's ending as dark as its beginning.¹⁴ A case against Antonio, who appears only twice, can certainly be made. A stage-direction introduces him as '*the discontented Lord Antonio*' (i iv 1), a worrying description, since we learn elsewhere that 'discontent' is 'the nobleman's consumption' (i i 127), and that 'discontent and want / Is the best clay to mould a villain of' (iv iv 47-8). In the ensuing scene, he accepts the prospect of non-legal revenge for the rape of his wife, thanking the lords who swear to exact it (i iv 65). Assuming the dukedom, he orders the death of the 'Fourth Noble' for a crime he has not committed (v iii 71-3), and his sentence on Vindice and Hippolito, 'Bear 'em to speedy execution' (v iii 102), disconcertingly echoes Lussurioso's 'bear him straight / To execution' of two scenes before (v i 127-8), pronounced on an innocent man.

A stronger case can, however, be made for Antonio's integrity. He is kept apart from all the play's revenges, not joining in the lords' oath in i iv (which will, he is assured, only come into force if legal remedies fail), and not appearing among Vindice's followers in v ii who plan to attack the ducal family. The Fourth Noble whom he condemns may not have killed Lussurioso, but he has formed part of the '*masque of intended murderers*' (v iii 48), and he has killed Spurio. A more pressing question is what we make of Antonio's lines explaining his condemnation of Vindice for killing the old Duke: 'Such an old man as he; / You that would murder him would murder me' (v iii 104-5). T. W. Craik thinks this 'pointedly selfish',¹⁵ but it is readily defended. There is nothing in the text to show that Antonio is aware of the old Duke's villainy (or for that matter of Lussurioso's), so his death would really seem to him to be murder. Moreover, Vindice clearly has become an unguided missile, liable to launch himself at anyone, rulers included, in the future. As Lussurioso has pointed out (but failed to spot how it might apply to him), Vindice 'has wit enough / To murder any man' (iv ii 106-7).

Seeing Antonio as well-intentioned does not, however, remove all ambiguity from the play's conclusion. His verdict, which Vindice cheerfully endorses, that the killings Vindice has perpetrated are 'murder' rather than justifiable acts is merely asserted rather than argued for, and the repetition of the word 'murder' eight times in