

“*This Metamorphosde Tragoedie*”:
*Thomas Kyd, Cyril Tourneur, and the
Jacobean Theatre of Cruelty*

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“FROM THE TIME of *The Spanish Tragedy* onwards,” Alfred Harbage has observed, “the ingredients or Elizabethan tragedy were hard to synthesize.”¹ Harbage’s observation holds especially true for the popular tragedy of revenge, and perhaps truest of all for that fractious and refractory play *The Revenger’s Tragedy*. Not only has the authorship of what I shall call Cyril Tourneur’s play been long debated, *The Revenger’s Tragedy* has intermittently been interpreted as a melodrama, as a morality, as a social satire, and more recently, as a parody of its titular genre.² What this congeries of interpretation suggests, I shall argue, is that Tourneur’s play steadfastly resists the usual categories of Renaissance drama. Furthermore, I believe this resistance is deliberate. Written during a period of political instability and aesthetic confusion, *The Revenger’s Tragedy* has close affinities with what we have come to know in our own age as the Theatre of Revolt. Specifically, Tourneur’s play anticipates methods we now associate with the “Epic Theater” of Bertolt Brecht and with the “Theater of Cruelty” developed by Antonin Artaud.³

The reasons for this disturbing modernity are at once aesthetic and historical. As Fredson Bowers noted in his classic study of *Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy* (1940), *The Revenger’s Tragedy*, written about 1605 and printed in 1607, “stands practically at the crossroads of Elizabethan tragedy,” midway between Thomas Kyd’s *The Spanish Tragedy* (ca. 1590) and Thomas Middleton’s *Women Beware Women* (ca. 1623).⁴ Recent students of *The Revenger’s Tragedy*—Alvin Kernan, Peter Lisca, and Leslie Sanders foremost—have increasingly stressed the play’s self-consciousness, the author’s keen, ironic awareness of the tradition

in which he writes. Early a satirist, Cyril Tourneur began writing plays a generation after Kyd had introduced Senecan tragedy to the Elizabethan stage. By the time of Queen Elizabeth's death in 1603, the stock characters and formulaic plots of Kydian tragedy had grown shopworn — ripe for burlesque. In this sense, *The Revenger's Tragedy* does indeed mark a crossroads in English drama. "This metamorphosde Tragoedie," to borrow a phrase from Tourneur's earlier satirical allegory *The Transformed Metamorphosis* (1600), at once caps and demolishes its genre.⁵ What Thomas Rymer testily observed of Shakespeare's *Othello* applies far better to *The Revenger's Tragedy*: "There is in this Play, some burlesk, some humour, and ramble of Comical Wit, some shew, and some *Mimickry* to divert the spectators: but the tragical part is, plainly none other, than a Bloody Farce. . . ."⁶ As T. S. Eliot commented on Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta* (a play that anticipates Tourneur's burlesque of Kydian tragedy), the term "farce" need not be taken lightly. In the hands of Tourneur as of Marlowe and Jonson, farce implies a "terribly serious, even savage comic humour."⁷ It is just such black humour that Tourneur invokes against decadent theatrical conventions in *The Revenger's Tragedy*, humour several shades darker than that in his satirical pamphlet of 1605, *Laugh and Lie Downe: or, The Worlde's Folly*.

Before examining Tourneur's critique of Elizabethan revenge tragedy, however, we should first turn to *The Spanish Tragedy* itself, or, perhaps more aptly, to "Hieronimo and His Problems." As Harbage suggests, the warring elements of Kydian tragedy were indeed "hard to synthesize" — an aesthetic predicament that had grown first painfully, then comically obvious by Tourneur's day. First off, there was the audience's ethical ambivalence about blood revenge itself. "There would be few Elizabethans," Bowers writes, "who would condemn the son's blood-revenge on a treacherous murderer whom the law could not apprehend for lack of proper legal evidence" (p. 40). This sympathy for a son like Hamlet would surely extend to a bereaved father like Hieronimo as well, a man who can seek no redress from the corrupt court, which includes Lorenzo and Balthazar, Horatio's murderers. Nonetheless, blood revenge was legally clas-

sified as murder, and even in his rage Hieronimo's first thought is "Vindicta mihi" (III.xii.1) — "Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord" (Rom. 12:19).⁸ The problem facing Kyd and each of his followers throughout the reign of Elizabeth — including Marlowe, Shakespeare, and the unknown author of some 320 lines added to *The Spanish Tragedy* in 1602 — lay in how to handle so paradoxical and volatile a character as Hieronimo, Barabas, Hamlet or Vindice. Each author wrestled with this moral and aesthetic dilemma with varying skill — until Tourneur exposed its inherent absurdity.

Kyd took special pains with the "Vindicta mihi" soliloquy in Act III to show Hieronimo's righteous indignation subtly transformed into Machiavellian intrigue:

Wise men will take their opportunity,
 Closely and safely fitting things to time:
 But in extremes advantage hath no time,
 And therefore all times fit not for revenge.
 Thus therefore will I rest me in unrest,
 Dissembling quiet in unquietness, . . . (III.xiii.25-30)

To make such blatant self-sophistry plausible, the 1602 additions offer earlier suggestions of Hieronimo's mental instability. For example, new lines in II.v. show him running mad after discovering Horatio's body in the garden. Still, neither of these tactics is wholly effective in transforming Hieronimo from a hero into a villain ripe for the catastrophe that must befall him as a murderer — however just his cause.

As the final scenes of *The Spanish Tragedy* unfold, Kyd's situation grows nearly as desperate as Hieronimo's. E. M. Forster has discussed the problem nicely apropos of the novelist, and the dramatist's quandary is much the same: "In the losing battle that the plot fights with the characters, it often takes a cowardly revenge."⁹ Hieronimo may be "mad againe" (significantly, this subtitle comes from the quarto of 1615, not from the authoritative octavo of 1592, whose subtitle stresses Hieronimo's "pitiful death"), but he still clutches the bloody handkerchief, the emblem of his righteous anger. The apocalyptic play-within-the-play, which Hieronimo aptly calls "the fall of Babylon" (IV.i.

195), culminates in a confused *dénouement* that has perplexed scholars ever since. As Bowers summarizes:

Then occurs a scene which is useless except as it leads to the final culmination of horrors and the eventual conception of Hieronimo as a dangerous, blood-thirsty maniac. Hieronimo from the stage has already rehearsed his reasons for the murders, but the king orders him captured and inexplicably tries to wring from him the causes (already explained) for the deed, and the names of the confederates (already revealed as Bel-Imperia alone). (pp. 70-71)

Critics have tried hard to justify this repetition. Bowers speculates that the instant replay may arise from Kyd's "passion for violence" (p. 81), while in his study of *Thomas Kyd* Peter Murray tries three possible explanations, only to conclude that he remains "not at all certain [his] explanation of the apparent inconsistencies is correct. . . ." ¹⁰

In a passing remark, Bowers offers what is probably the best rationale for the troubling encore: "Without this senseless action Hieronimo would have had no opportunity to tear out his tongue or to stab the duke, Lorenzo's father" (p. 81). However much we may lament such cruel treatment of the hero, Kyd finally does get the doughty revenger offstage so the plot may be wound up. Far from easing Hieronimo's exit, the additions of 1602 compound his raging with the vice of pride, a vice he has not heretofore possessed:

I tell thee Viceroy, this day I have seen revenge,
And in that sight am grown a prouder monarch
Than ever sat under the crown of Spain. . . .

(Fifth Addition, ll. 9-11)

This is indeed "cowardly revenge" on the humble Hieronimo, whose character suffers badly in the hands of Kyd's relentless plot.

Every English tragedian of the 1590's wrestled with the dilemma Kyd faced. Marlowe's solution to the problem in *The Jew of Malta* (ca. 1590-91) was to make the revenger into a sufficiently monstrous villain early in the play, although not early enough to prevent our sensing that Barabas has been wrest out of character by Act III, turned from an ambitious overreacher into

what Eliot called a "prodigious caricature" (p. 105), more farcical than tragic. Two anonymous plays, *Alphonsus, Emperor of Germany* (ca. 1595; once attributed to Chapman, but likely George Peele's work) and *Lust's Dominion; or, the Lascivious Queen* (ca. 1600; once attributed to Marlowe) develop the Marlovian pattern further, and by the time of Henry Chettle's *The Tragedy of Hoffman; or, A Revenge for a Father* (ca. 1602), the tragic "hero" could be — paradoxically — a villain from the start. It is greatly to Shakespeare's credit that after an early experiment with the Marlovian strategy in *Titus Andronicus* (1594), he returned to and perfected the Kydian formula of imposed delays and moral complications rather than spectacular atrocities. This psychologically "realistic" tradition culminates in *Hamlet* (ca. 1600; published 1603), a play in which Shakespeare may well have followed a lost Kydian source. Here, the revenger's virtues and vices are so deftly interfused as to be inseparable in thought, action, or criticism.¹¹

Thus, even as it set a pattern for playwrights, *The Spanish Tragedy* contained a fatal antinomy that was to become increasingly troublesome: blood revenge might be compellingly warranted, but the revenger must die for his crime. Given this ethical paradox, the farcical intrigues of hero-villains like Marlowe's Barabas, and the acute self-consciousness of a Hamlet, the stage was set for Tourneur's revolt against the revenge play genre. His tactic was simply to take both horns of Kyd's dilemma and twist them to the breaking point.

As Harbage suggests, comic intrigue — complots in which "the entertaining complication of the action becomes an end in itself" — had been a key structural device in *The Spanish Tragedy*:

Perhaps Kyd's greatest innovation was to employ comic methods with tragic materials, thus creating a species of comitragedy. Maneuvers traditionally associated with the petty ends of petty tricksters are given a sensationally lethal turn so as to win a new and oddly mixed response—of amusement and horror, revulsion and admiration. (p. 37)

Surely the most influential instance of this in *The Spanish Tragedy* was Lorenzo's intricate disposal of his accomplices, Serberine and Pedringano, in Act III. Having bribed Pedringano to murder

Serberine, Lorenzo then tricks Pedringano into going gladly to his own execution by assuring him of a pardon. The box supposedly containing this instrument is, of course, empty. As the Page who conveys the box rightly observes, “[W]ere it not sin against secrecy, I would say it were a piece of gentlemanlike knavery” (III.v.7-8).

In fact, the prototype for this “scurvy jest,” variations on which play out through *The Jew of Malta*, *Edward II*, *Hamlet*, and, of course, *The Revenger’s Tragedy*, lies not in tragedy at all, but in that first English “New Comedy,” *Ralph Roister Doister* by Nicholas Udall (ca. 1552). There, Mathew Merygreeke puts a crimp in Ralph’s wooing of Dame Custance by deliberately mispunctuating, hence misreading, the braggart lover’s letter to the wealthy widow (Act III). This is, of course, exactly the stratagem that young Mortimer uses to murder an anointed king in Marlowe’s *Edward II*:

This letter, written by a friend of ours,
 Contains his death, yet bids them save his life.
 “*Edwardum occidere nolite timere bonum est*;
 Fear not to kill the king, ’tis good he die.”
 But read it thus, and that’s another sense:
 “*Edwardum occidere nolite timere bonum est*;
 Kill not the king, ’tis good to fear the worst.”
 Unpointed as it is, thus shall it go, . . .¹² (V.iv.6-13)

Even Hamlet uses much the same trick to dispose of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern during his voyage to England — a piece of “gentlemanlike knavery” that gives even stoical Horatio pause.

The fatally mistaken message is but one of many Kydian conventions Tourneur reduces to absurdity in *The Revenger’s Tragedy*, a play that resounds with allusions to both *The Spanish Tragedy* and *Hamlet*.¹³ Self-consciousness and exaggeration are indeed Tourneur’s keynotes — and those of his protagonist, Vindice, who relishes playing the satirist and stage manager. In Vindice the Machiavellianism of Kyd’s Lorenzo and the self-consciousness of Shakespeare’s Hamlet combine to create a hybrid character who would not be out of place in what Antonin Artaud called the “Theater of Cruelty,” a theatre of revolt

against decadent stage conventions and numbed audience response:

The Theater of Cruelty has been created in order to restore to the theater a passionate and convulsive conception of life, and it is in this sense of violent rigor and extreme condensation of scenic elements that the cruelty on which it is based must be understood.

This cruelty, which will be bloody when necessary but not systematically so, can thus be identified with a kind of severe moral purity which is not afraid to pay life the price it must be paid. (p. 122)

These words from Artaud's second manifesto aptly describe Tourneur's methods in *The Revenger's Tragedy*, a play that fulfils Artaud's definition of "true theater" in "The Theater and the Plague": "[It] disturbs the senses' repose, frees the repressed unconscious, incites a kind of virtual revolt . . . , and imposes on the assembled collectivity an attitude that is both difficult and heroic" (p. 28).

The Revenger's Tragedy opens with Vindice self-consciously introducing the audience to the Duke, his son Lussurioso, his bastard Spurio, and his Duchess: "Four excellent characters."¹⁴ The Theophrastan "character" was, of course, a newly rediscovered literary genre, one which Tourneur later attempted in his "Character of the Late Earle of Salisbury" (1612). Thus, from the outset the playwright and his protagonist insist on the play's literary status rather than on its psychological reality. This constitutes what in *A Short Description of a New Technique of Acting* (1940; published 1951) Bertolt Brecht called the "alienation effect" (*Verfremdungseffekt*):

The A-effect consists in turning the object of which one is to be made aware, to which one's attention is to be drawn, from something ordinary, familiar, immediately accessible, into something peculiar, striking and unexpected. What is obvious is in a certain sense made incomprehensible, but this is only in order that it may then be made all the easier to comprehend. Before familiarity can turn into awareness the familiar must be stripped of its inconspicuousness, we must give up assuming that the object in question needs no explanation. However frequently recurrent, modest, vulgar it may be, it will now be labelled as something unusual. (pp. 143-44)

As Bamber Gascoigne observes, "The intention of this 'making strange' was to force the audience to respond intellectually to the action of the play and to question it, instead of responding emotionally and accepting it."¹⁵ Tourneur thus refuses to let the audience lapse into the melodramatic trance that Kydian tragedy conventionally sought to induce.

Furthermore, as Vindice speaks he fondles the skull of his "poison'd love," Gloriana. "Gloriana" was, of course, the literary sobriquet of the recently deceased Queen Elizabeth — and thus a blunt reminder of contemporary political instability. As L. G. Salinger suggested in his study of "'The Revenger's Tragedy' and the Morality Tradition," the object of Tourneur's long-recognized "disgust" is not so much the individuals he portrays as "the process they represent, the disintegration of a whole social order" (p. 402). Surely the skull of Gloriana is the cruelest possible reminder of this disintegration — for Vindice and for the audience. In his essay "The Theater and Cruelty" (1933), Artaud explains the historical necessity of such cruel stagecraft: "In the anguished, catastrophic period we live in, we feel an urgent need for a theater which events do not exceed, whose resonance is deep within us, dominating the instability of the times" (p. 84). Moreover, as he proposes in his essay "No More Masterpieces" (an apt subtitle for Tourneur's play), this historical necessity has its existential counterpart, since "theater of cruelty" means a theater difficult and cruel for myself first of all." Such a theatre demonstrates not merely the cruelty of individuals, "but the more terrible and necessary cruelty which things can exercise against us. We are not free. And the sky can still fall on our heads. And the theater has been created to teach us of that first of all" (p. 79). Finally, in addition to being a cruel reminder of political upheavals, the skull is also an exaggeration of a classic Kydian convention, the revenger's token. In *The Spanish Tragedy* Hieronimo had treasured Horatio's bloody handkerchief as a reminder of his purpose, and in *Hamlet* the hero meditates on Yorick's skull. In Henry Chettle's *Hoffman*, the protagonist actually squirrels away his father's entire skeleton. It is thus a logical development that in *The Revenger's Tragedy* the skull of Gloriana becomes the play's unifying symbol from the very outset.

The Spanish Tragedy included a number of references to the theatre and to stagecraft, as when Hieronimo speaks of Lorenzo and Balthazar as "actors in th'accursed tragedy" (III.vii.41). "Tragedy" is indeed the last word in the play, spoken by Revenge itself. Kyd also introduced the conventional play-within-the-play motif by giving Hieronimo his revenge within the play of Soliman and Perseda which he mounts for the court. *Hamlet*, of course, includes the best known play-within-a-play of all, "The Murder of Gonzago," or, as Hamlet "tropically" calls it for Claudius, "The Mousetrap." Shakespeare's drama also contains a substantial discussion of contemporary plays and players, as well as the famous advice to actors in III.ii.

In *The Revenger's Tragedy* Tourneur and his protagonist transform these conventional motifs of Kydian tragedy into "alienation effects" that continually remind the audience that the play is merely that — a fiction. Vindice not only introduces the play's characters," he also speaks of Gloriana's skull as a "property," one that will "bear a part / E'en in its own revenge" (III.v.101-02). He calls attention to the stage itself by saying that his growing excitement may make him "spring up, and knock his forehead / Against yon silver ceiling" (III.v.3-4) — a reference to the painted "heavens" above the Globe's stage. In addition to the theatrically staged assassination of the Duke during Act III, *The Revenger's Tragedy* contains not one but two plays-within-the-play hard on each other's heels in Act V, the masque of the revengers and the rival masque staged by Ambitioso, Supervacuo, and Spurio. After Vindice, Hippolito, and their band slaughter Lussurioso and his company, thunder booms melodramatically — a fusty stage effect which Vindice treats as part of the show: "Mark, thunder! Dost know thy cue, thou big-voic'd cryer?" (V.iii.42). Again and again, Tourneur pointedly calls attention to his medium.

Vindice's asides to the audience during the play are legion. Throughout the testing of Gratiana in Act II and the murder of the old Duke in Act III, he keeps up a running commentary on the action. Furthermore, many of his comments recall stock responses to Kydian tragedy — responses which Tourneur evokes only to mock. Thus, as the revengers hack at the Duke, Vindice

melodramatically observes, "When the bad bleeds, then is the tragedy good" (III.v.205), a remark that at once sums up and demolishes a tacit premise of Kydian tragedy. Indeed, several of his ironic quips take the form of epigrammatic couplets, as when he presents Lussurioso with his father's corpse and observes in an aside, "Thus much by wit a deep revenger can, / When murder's known, to be the clearest man" (V.i.92-93). Likewise, after the fatal masque he boasts histrionically, "No power is angry when the lustful die; / When thunder claps, heaven likes the tragedy" (V.iii.46-47).

Indeed, the sheer number of incestuous complots suggests that Tourneur deliberately sought to push the Kydian mechanism beyond its limits. Vindice and Hippolito seek revenge against the Duke and later against his son Lussurioso; the Duchess and the bastard Spurio plot separately and together against the Duke as well; old Antonio seeks revenge against the Junior Brother, who has "play'd a rape on lord Antonio's wife" (I.i.110); Ambitioso and Supervacuo seek revenge against their step-brother Lussurioso; and Lussurioso ultimately seeks revenge against Vindice's alter-ego, Piato. Naturally, this endlessly tangled web makes for comic intrigue, the staple of Kydian tragedy. Nowhere is this clearer than in the crucial third act, during which the Duke's bumbling stepsons attempt to eliminate Lussurioso even as Vindice and Hippolito murder the Duke. Ambitioso and Supervacuo, classic braggart soldiers, concoct a scheme that will at once free their younger brother from prison and send Lussurioso to his death. Their tactic is, of course, the ambiguous message, the stratagem that Kyd learned not from Seneca but from Nicholas Udall. In Tourneur's play, however, the "trick" (III.iv.13) regains its original comic thrust by backfiring completely.

Within this comic subplot (III.i-iv and vi), Tourneur packs Vindice's successful revenge on the Duke, compressing every element of the Kydian formula into a "cruel" parody. "Now nine years' vengeance crowd into a minute!" Vindice exults (III.v.123). For Hieronimo's Edenic garden, Tourneur substitutes the hellish lodge, a room not unlike a Jacobean playhouse, "Wherein 'tis night at noon" (III.v.19). For the quick stab of a dagger he substitutes methodical, protracted torture worthy of Peter Weiss's

Marat/Sade. Furthermore, as Leslie Sanders has pointed out, Tourneur equates revenge with rape (p. 32). Thus, Vindice opens the scene by crowing, "O sweet, delectable, rare, happy, ravishing!" (III.v.1), and the delight he and Hippolito take in poisoning, stabbing, and trampling the Duke is blatantly orgiastic. The revengers ensure that the Duke's dying sight will be his Duchess and his bastard son locked in an incestuous embrace. Having created this horror show to expose the cruel psychopathic drives that taint the revenge motive, Tourneur closes the act by showing Ambitioso and Supervacuo farcically hoist on their own petard. Lussurioso crosses the stage and thanks his step-brothers for having *saved* his life — at Junior Brother's expense. The would-be murderers do a slow burn worthy of the Marx Brothers in *Monkey Business*, a slapstick comedy that Artaud called "a hymn to anarchy" (p. 144):

Ambitioso: Whose head's that, then?
Officer: His whom you left command for,
 your own brother's.
Ambitioso: Our brother's? O furies!
Supervacuo: Plagues!
Ambitioso: Confusions!
Supervacuo: Darkness!
Ambitioso: Devils!
Supervacuo: Fell it out so accursedly?
Ambitioso: So damnedly?
Supervacuo: Villain, I'll brain thee with it (III.vi.77-81)

Tourneur thus demolishes Kydian tragedy by first exposing its cruelties and then by laughing at its excesses.

No wonder those who have sought "positive values" within *The Revenger's Tragedy* have been frustrated. As L. G. Salingar lamented, "[T]here is nothing in the play, in its scheme of moral and social values, to compensate for Vendice's fall" (p. 417, sic). Indeed, every platitude spoken is shot through with irony, and even the murders hinge on comic motifs. The few characters who seem to offer the moralist some hope prove disappointing. Castiza is a dull prig, Gratiana a parody of the repentant bawd: "I wonder now what fury did transport me. / I feel good thoughts begin to settle in me" (IV.iv.93-94). Sententious Antonio proves to be more a Polonius than a Fortinbras by the play's end. His

comment on the catastrophe involves an alienation effect as well as considerable bathos: "A piteous tragedy, able to make / An old man's eyes bloodshot" (V.iii.60-61). Worse yet, his highest motive in apprehending Vindice and Hippolito is self-interest: "Away with 'em! Such an old man as he; / You that would murder him would murder me" (V.iii.104-05).

Nevertheless, despite the alienation and cruelty Tourneur cultivates, he need not be counted a cynic. True, he stands outside his work, writing with what Brecht would call "epic" detachment. In overall effect, however, *The Revenger's Tragedy* is not really a melodrama, morality, or even a satire. It is a Brechtian *Lehrstück* — a lesson for playgoers and playwrights alike. In this respect it clearly anticipates Tourneur's later play, *The Atheist's Tragedy*, which Clifford Leech has interpreted as a dramatic comment on Chapman's *Bussy* plays.¹⁶ By demolishing Kydian tragedy once and for all, Tourneur set the stage for a new kind of tragedy altogether. Hereafter, playwrights like Webster, Middleton, and Ford focus not on external intrigues but on internal conflicts. Significantly, Artaud considered John Ford's *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* (1632) the prototype of his "Theater of Cruelty": "If we desire an example of absolute freedom in revolt, Ford's Annabella provides this poetic example bound up with the image of absolute danger" ("The Theater and the Plague," p. 29). Protagonists like Tourneur's Vindice and Ford's Annabella express an attitude quite different from that of Hieronimo or even Hamlet, an attitude of existential revolt. As Artaud and Brecht alike argue, such theatre is actually the opposite of decadent. Artaud writes that "The Theater of Cruelty has been created in order to restore to the theater a passionate and convulsive conception of life, and it is in this sense of violent rigor and extreme condensation of scenic elements that the cruelty on which it is based must be understood" ("Second Manifesto," p. 122). Brecht argues that "The epic theatre's spectator says: I'd never have thought it — That's not the way — That's extraordinary, hardly believable — It's got to stop. . . . That's great art: nothing obvious about it. . . ." ("Theatre for Pleasure or Theatre for Instruction?" ca. 1936, p. 71). Far from expressing adolescent cynicism, as Eliot believed, *The Revenger's Tragedy* expresses a

vital and revolutionary attitude, a revolt "at once difficult and heroic."

Indeed, the positive, individualistic thrust of Tourneur's work is most apparent in the play's last scene, a scene that has perplexed critics nearly as much as Hieronimo's difficult exit. It is instructive to see how Tourneur manages the winding up of the plot. In *The Spanish Tragedy*, Hieronimo was destroyed by his own creator at the play's end. Tourneur closes his play with a Kydian confession-revelation speech, but with an ironic twist that preserves his hero's integrity — and his own.

During the play's last scene (V.iii) Vindice successfully completes his revenge on the Duke and Lussurioso. In effect, his work is done, and intellectually he stands head and shoulders above the few remaining courtiers. As he has earlier observed of the "catastrophe" he has engineered, "Thus much by wit a deep revenger can, / When murder's known, to be the clearest man" (V.i. 92-93). Indeed, "wit" has been the hallmark of all Vindice's plotting, and the concept suggests a value system antithetical to Kydian tragedy but familiar in Jonsonian prose comedy.¹⁷ In Brecht's terms, wit is an "epic" quality, a species of aesthetic detachment: "The essential point of the epic theatre is perhaps that it appeals less to the feelings than to the spectator's reason. Instead of sharing an experience the spectator comes to grips with things" ("The Epic Theatre and its Difficulties," p. 23).

Vindice's cool wit has conquered his hot-blooded enemies, the Duke and Lussurioso. His wit further allows him, unlike "pitiful" Hieronimo, to triumph over his greater enemy, the plot. In Forster's phrase, "the plot requires to be wound up" (p. 95). What more fitting "catastrophe" could Vindice perform than to wind it up himself? When doddering Antonio asks him "How the old duke came murder'd" (V.iii.93), Vindice answers directly:

All for your grace's good. We may be bold to speak it now; 'twas somewhat witty carried, though we say it. 'Twas we two murdered him. (V.iii.96-98)

The effect of this confession is far from tragic. Appropriately, Tourneur's play on the revenge play ends as a comedy, with all

disguises dropped, all intrigues brought to light. Ever the expositor, Vindice speaks a rousing epilogue:

Is there one enemy left alive amongst those?
 'Tis time to die, when we are ourselves our foes.
 When murd'ers shut deeds close, this curse does seal 'em:
 If none disclose 'em, they themselves reveal 'em.
 This murder might have slept in tongueless brass,
 But for ourselves, and the world died an ass. (V.iii.109-14)

Didactic and dialectical to the finish, *The Revenger's Tragedy* ultimately proves to be what Stanley Fish calls a "self-consuming artifact." "[A] dialectical presentation," Fish writes, "succeeds at its own expense; for by conveying those who experience it to a point where they are beyond the aid that discursive or rational forms can offer, it becomes the vehicle of its own abandonment."¹⁸ No wonder old Antonio, as good as a Kydian chorus, can only marvel, "How subtilly was that murder clos'd!" (V.iii.126).

NOTES

¹ Alfred Harbage, "Intrigue in Elizabethan Tragedy," in *Essays on Shakespeare and Elizabethan Drama in Honor of Hardin Craig*, ed. Richard Hosley (Columbia: Univ. of Missouri Press, 1962), p. 44.

² For a survey of the widely varying interpretations of *The Revenger's Tragedy*, see Samuel Schoenbaum, *Middleton's Tragedies: A Critical Study* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1955), pp. 5-35. Christian readings of the play appear in L. G. Salingar's classic study, "The Revenger's Tragedy and the Morality Tradition," *Scrutiny*, 6 (1938), 402-24; Peter Lisca, "The Revenger's Tragedy: A Study in Irony," *Philological Quarterly*, 38 (1959), 242-51; and Irving Ribner, *Jacobean Tragedy: The Quest for Moral Order* (London: Methuen & Co., 1962), pp. 72-96. On the play as a social satire, see Alvin Kernan, *The Cankered Muse: Satire in the English Renaissance* (New Haven and London: Yale Univ. Press, 1959), pp. 221-32; as well as John D. Peter, *Complaint and Satire in Early English Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956), pp. 255-87. On the play as a parody of its own genre, see Leslie Saunders, "The Revenger's Tragedy: A Play on the Revenge Play," *Renaissance and Reformation*, 10 (1974), 25-36. On the question of authorship and on Tourneur's work at large, see Peter B. Murray, *A Study of Cyril Tourneur* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1964) and Samuel Schuman, *Cyril Tourneur* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1977).

³ A similar case has been made for John Marston's early plays *Antonio and Mellida* and *Antonio's Revenge* (both printed 1602). Cf. "Theatre of Cruelty in the Middle Temple," rev. of *John Marston of the Middle Temple*, by Philip J. Finkelpearl, *Times Literary Supplement*, 5 February 1971, pp. 155-57.

See also Robert Brustein, *The Theatre of Revolt: An Approach to Modern Drama* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1964). On the

"Epic Theater," see *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, ed. and tr. John Willett (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964); on the "Theater of Cruelty," see Antonin Artaud, *The Theater and Its Double*, tr. Mary Caroline Richards (New York: Grove Press, 1958). Subsequent references to essays by Brecht and Artaud follow these editions and appear in the text.

- 4 Fredson Bowers, *Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy 1587-1642* (1940; rpt. Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1959), p. 138.
- 5 Dedicatory sonnet "To the Right Worshipfull, Sir Christopher Heydon," l. 12, rpt. in *The Works of Cyril Tourneur*, ed. Allardyce Nicoll (New York: Russell & Russell, 1929), p. 53.
- 6 Thomas Rymer, *A Short View of Tragedy* (1693; rpt. New York: AMS Press, 1970), p. 146.
- 7 T. S. Eliot, "Christopher Marlowe," in *Selected Essays*, new ed. (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1950), p. 105.
- 8 Thomas Kyd, *The Spanish Tragedy*, ed. Philip Edwards, *The Revels Plays* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1959). Subsequent references to this edition appear in the text.
- 9 E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (1927; rpt. New York: Harcourt Brace and World, 1955), p. 95.
- 10 Peter B. Murray, *Thomas Kyd* (New York: Twayne, 1969), p. 148.
- 11 See Bowers, "The Spanish Tragedy and the *Ur-Hamlet*," in *Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy*, pp. 62-100; and Eliot, "Hamlet and His Problems," in *Selected Essays*, pp. 121-26.
- 12 Christopher Marlowe, *Edward II*, in *The Complete Plays of Christopher Marlowe*, ed. Irving Ribner (New York: Odyssey, 1963).
- 13 See Ashley H. Thorndike, "The Relations of *Hamlet* to Contemporary Revenge Plays," *PMLA*, 17 (1902) 125-220; and L. G. Salingar, "The *Revenger's Tragedy*: Some Possible Sources," *Modern Language Review*, 60 (1965), 3-12.
- 14 Cyril Tourneur, *The Revenger's Tragedy*, ed. R. A. Foakes, *The Revels Plays* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1966). Subsequent references to this edition appear in the text.
- 15 Bamber Gascoigne, *Twentieth Century Drama* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1966), p. 123.
- 16 See Clifford Leech, "The *Atheist's Tragedy* as a Dramatic Comment on Chapman's *Bussy Plays*," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 52 (1953), 525-30.
- 17 Cf. Ornstein's comparison: "The same dark, cynical, satiric spirit broods over *Volpone* and *The Revenger's Tragedy*. Both plays centre on the conflict between a pair of cunning, knavish minds. They have similar allegorical characters, ironic reversals, and uses of disguises and deceptions" (*The Moral Vision of Jacobean Tragedy*, p. 112).
- 18 Stanley Fish, *Self-Consuming Artifacts: The Experience of Seventeenth-Century Literature* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1972), p. 3.