Corporeal Violence in Early Modern Revenge Tragedies

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Abstract
In the four early modern revenge tragedies I study, Thomas Kyd’s The Spanish Tragedy, William Shakespeare’s Titus Andronicus, Thomas Middleton’s The Revenger’s Tragedy, and John Webster’s The Duchess of Malfi, the ubiquitous depictions of corporeal violence underscore the authors’ skepticism of the human tendency to infuse bodies – physical manifestations of both agency and vulnerability – with symbolism. The revengers in these plays try to avenge the death of a loved one whose disfigured body remains unburied and often continues to occupy a place on stage, but their efforts to infuse corpses with meaning instead reveal the revengers’ perverse obsession with mutilation as spectacle.

In Chapter one, I show how in The Spanish Tragedy Thomas Kyd portrays the characters’ assertions of body-soul unity to be arbitrary attempts to justify self-serving motives. Although Hieronimo treats Horatio’s dead body as a signifier of his own emotions, he displays it, alongside the bodies of his enemies, as just another rotting corpse. In Chapter two, I explore how in Titus Andronicus, William Shakespeare questions the efficacy of rituals for maintaining social order by depicting how the play’s characters manipulate rituals intended to celebrate peace as opportunities to exact vengeance; Titus demands human sacrifice as not just an accompanying element, but a central motive of rituals ostensibly intended to signify commemoration. In Chapter three, I read The Revenger’s Tragedy as illustrating Thomas Middleton’s characterization of the depiction of corporeal mutilation as an overused, generic convention; the play’s revenger, Vindice, attributes multiple, constantly shifting meanings to the rotting skull of his lover, which he uses as a murder weapon. In Chapter four I argue that in The Duchess of Malfi, John Webster destabilizes spectators’ interpretive capacities; within this play’s unconventional dramatic structure, the main characters use somatic imagery to associate bodily dismemberment with moral disintegration.

Corpses, the tangible remains of once vigorous, able-bodied relatives, serve as central components of respectful commemoration or as mementos of vengeance, yet these dead, often gruesomely mutilated bodies also invite repulsion or perverse curiosity. Thus, rather than honoring the deceased, revengers objectify corpses as frightening spectacles or even use them as weapons.

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This study considers parallel issues in revenge tragedies of the early seventeenth-century and violent cinema of the last thirty years. It offers a series of provocative explorations of death, revenge and justice, and gender and violence. What happens when we connect The White Devil with Basic Instinct? The Changeling or Titus Andronicus with Straw Dogs? Doctor Faustus with Se7en? Taxi Driver with The Spanish Tragedy? Discussions of violence in cinema and the ‘cinema of violence’ have tended to fixate on the limited definition of violence in its mimetic, graphic forms. Violence is traced to ‘screen violence’, horror movies and thrillers, a definition of ‘violent cinema’ linked Simkin calls ‘the representation of the damaged body’. Setting the Stage for Revenge: Space, Performance, and Power in Early Modern Revenge Tragedy. By Condon, James J. Read preview. Replete with the overwrought violence for which the genre is famous, Antonio’s Revenge reminds its audiences that no matter how brutal his enemy, the revenger will ultimately do worse. Striking as the dramaturgy may be in this instance, Marston is foregrounding here a convention typical of many early modern revenge plays: the protagonist’s gradual and increasingly problematic resemblance to the villain whom he stalks. John Kerrigan rightly identifies this reversal as an inherent irony of retribution itself, for as the revenger “makes himself resemble the opponent he has blamed. Indeed, early modern culture stages the ‘violent but calculated transgression of the outside into the vulnerable interior of the body’ to find out, as Norbert Elias would put it, what is the sheath upon the human being, and what is locked up in this container of the homo clausus. I would like to add, however, that this skin-penetration is also always a metaphor of the new habits of seeing and inwardness, closely connected to the early modern crisis of death (Neill, 1998:102-140). Demetaphorization, anatomy, and the semiotics of the reformation in early modern revenge tragedy. Reformation theology induced a profound thanatological crisis in the semiotics of the human being and the body.