

# To what extent is the true of middleton's the revenger's tragedy?

[Literature](#)



'Sternly moral and strangely perverse' (Schoenbaum 1955: 6), The Revenger's Tragedy explores the ethical complexities of the revenger figure, Vindice, through his determination to take vengeance upon the lecherous Duke. The very nature of revenge tragedy shows an inversion of the morality play, in which the protagonist would face a series of temptations and ultimately choose a virtuous life over one of evil. Revenge plays on the other hand invariably include; secret murders and plots, disguises, violence and catastrophe, all of which are presented in The Revenger's Tragedy, but also within the character of Vindice.

He is not, however, the soul revenger in the play. Irving Ribner lists nine different situations which involve revenge (1962: 80) and therefore it is not surprising that some critics argue that Middleton's<sup>1</sup> work should be more accurately named 'The Revengers' Tragedy' (Adams 1965: 61). In order for Vindice, and the other malicious characters, to exact revenge, they must enter the world of their enemy, to achieve maximum devastation from the inside out; 'embracing evil in a vain attempt to destroy evil' (Ribner 1962: 80).

Is this, therefore, the real tragedy of the revenger, insofar as the revenger must debase himself to the level of his adversary, in order to punish him? In the opening scene of the play, Vindice holds his dead fiancée's skull in his hand and vows to get his revenge on the Duke who attempted to seduce her and subsequently poisoned her. In terms of a revenge plot, this appears very straightforward - an 'eye for eye' (Exodus 21: 24) vengeance, but this becomes more complex with the sacrifices that Vindice has to make.

Initially, he must find an entrance into court which is achieved by becoming pander to the Duke's son, Lussurioso. Having previously left the court after his father's death, merely becoming involved in this society again is a compromise, exposing him to the corruption he so readily criticises. Perhaps the audience is supposed to be impressed at Vindice's restraint, being so close to an enemy and not striking immediately, though it is this determination which ultimately turns him villain from hero.

As Bowers states, 'only rather villainous revengers are presented as waiting such a period. ... ] No normal, sympathetic person by Elizabethan standards would harbour his wrath for such a time and withstand the promptings of religion for forgiveness' (1959: 136n. ) Being under Lussurioso's command, Vindice's escape from the planned revenge is not so easy and it could be maintained that his fate is sealed from the start; not only must he kill the Duke, but his son as well. Under his guise as Piato, meaning "plated" (Neill 1996: 404), Vindice sinks further into tyranny by accepting money from Lussurioso, and presumably also from the Duke, for his work.

Perhaps he had no choice in this acceptance, and therefore again, Vindice's fate is marked. Neill notes the suitability of the name Piato and its associations with the repeated 'coin' image throughout the play. As a man in disguise, Vindice is the embodiment of the 'deceptive glitter of the whole court'; he has become the "blanched" coin, a 'base metal plated over with silver to improve its appearance' (Neill 1996: 404). In adopting this costume, Vindice becomes consumed by the traits he puts upon himself, and poisoning the Duke completes this conversion.

Piato and Vindice become, characteristically as well as physically, the same person. Murray warns that 'the name and the disguise are intended to fool Lussurioso, but we should not be fooled into seeing a contradiction of character where none in fact exists' (1964: 214 original emphasis). 'The crucial transformations in the play are effected by poisoning, figurative or literal' and the literal poisoning of the Duke is reflected in the figurative poisoning of Vindice's mind and character (Murray 1964: 196).

Although he has now completed his revenge plan, Vindice forgets his original purpose and not content with 'the death of ... his logical victim, must scourge from court all his vicious progeny' (Bowers 1959: 133). In losing focus of his initial goal, 'Puh, 'tis but early yet... ' (III. V. 171), Vindice aligns himself with the Duke, whose own aim had been to seduce Gloriana, but resulted in poisoning and ultimately murdering her.

Murray argues that Vindice's 'degeneration' can be followed through 'subtle changes' in his attitude toward Gloriana and her skull (1965: 124). After this episode, Gloriana is hardly mentioned and Vindice has reduced her to a similar level to himself; dressing up her skull, creating falseness, an ironic comparison with Vindice himself, as well the courtiers, having heavily painted or masked faces. This mask image is repeated with the masque at the close of the play, in which Vindice carries out his last gruesome acts in yet another disguise.

The movement from simple costume to the masque brutality is a perfect example of the shift in Vindice's character. From this moment he is 'never shown hesitating at the thought of violence' and as is noted by many critics,

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'no-one else in the major tragedies of the period goes to such extremes of takes such delight in the doing on violence on an enemy' - Vindice embodies the 'spirit of violence' (McAlindon 1986: 140). Through the enjoyment and pleasure of violence, Vindice loses all focus, control and rationality.

Murray's argument that '[Vindice's] moral perception is blinded at the moment when disillusion cuts through to his sexual obsession, and he is driven to sadistic revenges' (1964: 223) is another example of Vindice turning tyrant, by becoming the lecherous man he has despised for so many years. Vindice almost sexualises Gloriana's decorated skull, '... methinks I could e'en chide myself / For doting on her beauty' (III. V. 68-9) and he revels in the ingenuity of his revenge on the Duke, though he does not realise that 'it destroys the moral value of Gloriana's martyrdom, making a whore and a murderess of her' (Murray 1965: 218).

His lust even extends to his own sister and in trying to tempt her to court, Vindice has some of his most poetic and well-reasoned lines: 'Why are there so few honest women but because 'tis the / poorer profession?' (II. I. 225-6). McAlindon sees Vindice's plea to Castiza to prostitute herself, as the 'depth of [his] self-deception' and although of course he is happy when she rejects his offers, the 'image of a noble self we see in flashes is not restored in the end' (1986: 146).

The play's moral dilemma is of course that Gratiana and Castiza can enjoy the riches too, if they agree to become corrupted (Salinger 1982: 242). In his discussions with Lussurioso, Vindice again displays this side of his personality. The audience cannot help but draw comparisons between

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Vindice, the Duke and also his lecherous son, in the manner that he describes lust and sexual depravity: 'I have been witness / To the surrenders of a thousand virgins' (I. III. 49-50).

Vindice's arguments seem to flow all too easily, 'premeditated' (Ornstein 1954: 85) perhaps and convince his mother within seventy lines. Nicholas Brooke argues that his decision to carry out this 'project' has its 'own perversity', as his rage turns to 'excitement' and a 'delight in the paradox' (1979: 15) which leads him to a dangerous resolve, 'to try the faith of both' (I. III. 177). Although his asides show some regret for his actions, 'Not, I hope, already?' and 'I e'en quake to proceed' (II. I. 104, 109), Vindice appears to continue his persuasion with little further thought on the matter.

Later, when he decides to punish, and almost take revenge, on his own mother for agreeing to Castiza's prostitution, Vindice exhibits some of his most morally disturbing behaviour by Elizabethan standards. Gibbons notes that 'in a society where parental authority was so strong, a parent's submission to a child was a deep and disturbing breach of custom' (1992: 88n) and the image of Hippolito and Vindice either side of their mother, presumably with weapons, is almost a direct parallel of the way in which the brothers handle the Duke: 'Nail down his tongue, and mine shall keep possession / About his heart' (III.

V. 193-4). This can be viewed symbolically where Vindice must, for his own satisfaction, kill the 'heart' and perform psychological torment, by showing the Duke his wife and son together. It could be argued that it is this image that kills the Duke. As his next target, the murder of Lussurioso must, of

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course, out do the death of the Duke, despite his reasoning being less substantial. To get his change however, Vindice must now become himself and is hired to kill 'Piato'.

This symbolism releases Vindice of all mental guilt, as it allows him not only to re-enact his killing of the Duke, but also stabbing the image of himself pushes him further into the 'manic glee' (Brooke 1979: 25) of the revenger character. Neill sees this episode as if Vindice were 'facing the image of his death' (1997: 84), a form of premonition to his inevitable downfall and death at the end of the play. For the audience, this image of Vindice killing " himself" is ironic, and the idea of arranging the corpse in a lifelike way is a shocking mirror of the 'bony lady' (III.

V. 120) Gloriana. With this gesture intended to separate the characters of Piato and Vindice, this actually brings them together as one, though Vindice fails to see this, as does Hippolito who says 'In thine own shape now I'll prefer thee to him' (IV. I. 60) Vindice constantly makes the distinction between the characters; 'am I far enough from myself? ' (I. III. 1), he asks, when first dressing as Piato, and later he claims his alter ego to be 'a witch' (V. III. 121).

Although this is a popular argument, critics such as Heather Hirschfield disagree, stating that Vindice is enacting a quest for 'self-disclosure' and is 'less about obtaining an impossible justice and more about orchestrating scenes that allow him to proclaim his own sinfulness' (2005: 113). She argues that by putting himself in situations which allow him to give rise to

someone new and pure through self destruction, Vindice is actually not looking revenge at all, merely a passage to a better life.

With his final confession, Vindice hopes to attain this cleansing, however this moment of self-revelation 'shipwreck[s] him on the very sinful self that confession is meant to overcome', and perhaps this is a critique of 'hollow' Catholic penitence (Hirschfield 2005: 113). Irving Ribner agrees with this view, arguing that 'Heaven is responsible for Vindice's fall, but heaven's instrument is time, which changes all, and reduces life to death' (1962: 77-8).

It could be said therefore, that the tragedy of the revenger, is not his debasement to the level of tyrant, but his impatience for exacting his revenge, and the 'failure of his faith in heaven' (Ribner 1962: 80). Vindice fails to recognise and embrace the 'inevitability of divine retribution' and the 'self-destructive quality of evil' and by believing that he fully understood and was in control of himself, ultimately lost grip on his moral identity (Ribner 1962: 75). At times Vindice seems somewhat irrelevant to the plotline in having no 'clear-cut opponent' and being out of control of the majority of the action.

In the masque scene, for example, the deaths of Ambitioso, Supervacuo and Spurio have 'no indication' that they were anything more than an 'unexpected accident' (Bowers 1959: 136, 7) in which Vindice was simply an innocent bystander. Vindice, however, is not the only revenger in the play and the most notable other is Lussurioso when trying to take revenge upon Piato. He mirrors, albeit unwittingly, the masking and lying that 'Piato' had

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displayed, in being untruthful about the reasons he wants revenge.

Lussurioso claims that Piato had disobeyed his commands and attempted to seduce Castiza for himself using jewels.

Ironically, this is just what Vindice had done, on Lussurioso's behalf, yet he fails to see this paradox, and is simply angered at the falsehood.

Supervacuo, Ambitioso and Spurio try to take revenge on each other, as well as their elder brother. Again, they lower themselves to each other's level, climbing over one another in an attempt to become the next Duke. It could also be argued that Antonio has the final revenge, on Vindice, by condemning him to death. Is, therefore, Antonio as guilty as Vindice?

Throughout the play he is described as 'discontented' (I. V. sd) at the death of his wife, rather than grieving, which is a term usually associated with the character of the malcontent; Lussurioso claims that 'discontent and want / Is the best clay to mould a villain' (IV. I. 48-9) Antonio, like Vindice, is deaf to the truth, condemning Gentleman1 for allowing the Duke to leave the court alone. It is ironic, perhaps, that Antonio's sufferings are so alike to Vindice's yet he condemns him still.

The nature of the relationship between Vindice and Antonio is described by Machiavelli: ... hat whoever is responsible for another's becoming powerful ruins himself, because this power is brought into being either by ingenuity or force, and both of these are suspect to the one who has become powerful (1532: 15) In punishing Vindice and Hippolito, Antonio protects himself.

Again, conceivably Vindice's fate was sealed from the very beginning, in that by allowing Antonio to become Duke as a consequence, he became in

danger. It is possible then, that the 'blazing star' (V. III. sd) looming over the banquet and masque, marks Vindice's fate, rather than Lussurioso's.

He knows it is useless to argue against Antonio, who is 'tainted because he shares [the brothers'] guilt' (Murray 1964: 228); 'Vindice loathes vice, but he has no faith in virtue' (Ornstein 1954: 86). Justice seems to be lacking at the end, just as at the beginning of the play and as a result, Vindice's work seems futile. In conclusion, it can strongly be argued that Vindice turns tyrant to punish tyranny and that from this guise he is not redeemable. However whether this is the tragedy of the revenger is still debateable.

Perhaps rather, the tragedy is that Vindice could not keep up his performance, his act, long enough to succeed or even take the Duke's seat for himself. In playing himself rather than Piato, and in his confession in the final scene, Vindice metaphorically admits to being taken in by the court that is 'so given up to evil' and despite an 'intense awareness of his own sin', he cannot save himself (Murray 1964: 192, 215). By the close of the play, the audience come to the realisation that 'those who seek justice are no less corrupted than those who seek sensual pleasure or power' (Murray 1964: 228).

It is impossible, however to align Vindice with the " tragic hero" character, as though despite his admittance, he fails to achieve 'self-knowledge' and 'he amuses himself and us so much ... he seems incapable of suffering and inner conflict' (Ribner 1986: 151). Through the enjoyment and gratification in the deaths and violence, Vindice's confession comes to nothing. He does not

argue for forgiveness or try and show his regret but merely accepts that 'tis time to die when we ourselves are foes' (V. III. 112).

Peter Murray argues that Vindice is one of the more 'believable portraits of neurotic perversion in all of Jacobean drama' and therefore the ways in which he evolves as a character is truly accurate to reality (1964: 247). Can therefore, turning tyrant really be Vindice's tragedy, if any other character would have come to the same fate? 'It is worth remembering that death is what we commonly expect at the end of a revenge tragedy' and Middleton simply alters the normal style of the close of a revenge play.

In showing Vindice's lack of self-recognition, the audience would leave the theatre with a 'particular sense of imperfection' (Ribner 1962: 86). The tragedy of the revenger then, is not that Vindice has turned tyrant, but that he represents everyman, and in allowing oneself to be consumed with rage, desire and lust, every one of us would come to the same fate. Vindice does not realise that he has become the butt of his own joke; Lussurioso sought to hire a villain, and he succeeded.