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**Dramatizing the fleshless body
in Cyril Tourneur's *The Revenger's Tragedy* (1607)**

Armelle Sabatier
Université Paris II

The Revenger's Tragedy is more often than not regarded as one of the darkest and most gruesome tragedies in Elizabethan and Jacobean drama. Daniel Jacobson has counted more than eighty five references to death: "over 85 references to death and dying, and the word death itself is the most frequently occurring noun in the play."¹ The dramatization of death and the dead body turns out to be a recurrent feature in early modern English drama, as critics such as Theodore Spencer have shown: "when [Queen Elizabeth I] died [the Renaissance] began to contemplate death. Elizabethan tragedy was the expression of this contemplation. It was far more concerned with death than any drama that had previously existed. Death, indeed, was tragedy; a tragedy was a play which ended in death."² This feeling of nostalgia for the dead sovereign seems to be embodied by the very choice of the name given to one of the main characters in this play – Gloriana who is reminiscent of the beauty and power of Queen Elizabeth I, happens to be the beloved of Vindice, the leading character of this revenge tragedy, who resorts to corpses or parts of them to achieve his revenge on the duke who abused and killed Gloriana a few years before. Even though Tourneur's aesthetic of death was undeniably steeped in the social, artistic and philosophical discourses of his time, the constant dramatization of death and of Gloriana's fleshless skull in this play hinges around a multiplicity of macabre plays within the play directed by Vindice.

In his study devoted to the “issues of death” in English Renaissance drama, Michael Neil has laid emphasis on the psychological aspect of such tragedies: “The psychological value of tragedy’s display of agony, despair and ferocious self-assertion was that they provided audiences with a way of vicariously confronting the implications of their own mortality by compelling them to rehearse and re-rehearse the encounter with death.”³ The encounter with death is rehearsed throughout this tragedy, starting with Vindice’s contemplation of Gloriana’s skull in Act I, reaching its apex with the erotic embrace of the Duke and the bony lady in Act III, and drawing to its close with the final masque of death in Act V. This series of morbid shows revolves around fleshless bodies or corpses which are metamorphosed into theatrical props to be used in Vindice’s personal revenge tragedy. The dramatization of death exposes the human body to the scrutiny of the revenger who also dissects the human soul. By covering and uncovering the main fleshless body – namely Gloriana’s skull – on stage, Vindice somehow turns into an anatomist who not only opens up and closely examines the human body but also delves into the depths of the corrupt human soul in order to reveal its darkest secrets. This play exemplifies one of the main functions of tragedy summed up by Philip Sidney in *An Apology for Poetry*: “[Tragedy] openeth the greatest wounds and showeth forth the ulcers that are covered with tissue.”⁴

The opening scene of *The Revenger’s Tragedy* where Vindice holds Gloriana’s skull is highly evocative of one of the best-known Elizabethan revenge tragedies, namely Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. Nonetheless, unlike the prince of Denmark who contemplates death through the skull, Vindice regards Gloriana’s skull as a mirror of human corruption – the rotting body is seen as a reflection of the disintegration of the human soul. Before uttering his first monologue, Vindice turns into a spectator gazing at a pageant – the Duke and Duchess, along with their son and bastard son, walk over the stage, holding torches. The presence of torch lights indicates that the whole scene takes place at night. This short “play within the play” foreshadows one of the recurrent themes of the play which hinges upon the multiple shows or

embedded plays directed by the revenger of this tragedy. Vindice's first words are addressed to the characters of the pageant :

Duke, royal lecher; go, grey-haired adultery
And thou his son, as impious steeped as he;
And thou his bastard, true-begot in evil;
And thou his duchess, that will do with devil;
Four excellent characters! (1, 1, 1-5)

The use of anaphoras and of the archaic form "thou" is akin to a legal sentence and announces the moralizing tone of the dissection of Gloriana's skull. Vindice moves from the corruption of the Duke and of his family to another show – his beloved's skull. His gaze is directed from the outward appearance of the Duke's court to the inwardness of the human body and soul.

O, that marrowless age
Would stuff the hollow bones with damned desires,
And 'stead of heat, kindle infernal fires
Within the spendthrift veins of a dry duke,
A parched and juiceless luxur. (1, 1, 5-9)

The fusion between the visual image of the Duke's pageant and the theatrical prop, namely Gloriana's skull, implies that the skull first becomes a mirror of the Duke's self, reverberating his inward evil nature as opposed to the glitter and pomp of the pageant. Vindice's bitter and scathing attack against the corruption of the Duke's court revolves around the imagery of the fleshless body, that is, the skeleton, not a living human body.

The images of the marrow ("marrowless age", l. 5), the bones ("hollow bones" l. 6) and the veins ("spendthrift veins", l. 8) are highly evocative of the science of anatomy which had grown more and more popular in the Renaissance, especially with Vesalius' *De Humanis Corporis Fabrica* (1543). Furthermore, the representation of the actor holding a skull was reminiscent at the time of the emblem of the surgeon in so far as this profession was always depicted with the symbol of the skull. The moralizing tone inherent in Vindice's dissection of his "age" echoes the tone used in Renaissance anatomy books, since the authors always interspersed their descriptive scientific discourses with moral judgements. Many Jacobean authors perceived the science of anatomy as an exploration of the self and of the human soul. Thomas

Brown equated dissection with a travel “in the cosmography of the self” and underlined that it confronted man with the very last encounter: “it was to undertake a journey into a corrupt world of mortality and decay [...] a voyage into the very heart of the principle of spiritual dissolution.”⁵ In *Microcosmographia* (1618), Helkiah Crooke is convinced that the dissection of the human body cannot be dissociated from the knowledge of the human soul: “by the dissection of the body, and by anatomy, we shall easily attain unto this knowledge. [...] whosoever will attain unto the knowledge of the soul, it is necessary that he know the frame and composition of the body.”⁶ However this journey into the human body described and dissected by Vindice merely displays a sterile, deathly corruption which spreads chaos in the Duke’s court, killing innocent and pure women such as Gloriana or Antonio’s wife who commits suicide after being raped by the Duke’s son.

The projection of the Duke’s corruption onto the skull not only highlights the dissection of the human soul, but it also brings to the fore Vindice’s surprisingly ambiguous attitude towards his beloved’s skeleton.

Thou sallow picture of my poisoned love,
 My study’s ornament, thou shell of death
 Once the bright face of my betrothèd lady,
 When life and beauty naturally filled 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. (1, 1, 14-25)

The detailed description of the beloved’s face whilst she was alive seems to be inspired from the Petrarchan blazons where each part of the woman’s body was compared to some precise elements. The reference to Gloriana’s complexion (“bright face”, l. 16) and the metaphor of the diamonds to refer to her eyes (“two heaven-pointed diamonds”, l. 19) echo the stereotypes of the literary device of the blazon. Nonetheless, each feature that could praise the ideal beauty of Gloriana as well as her purity is compared to a part of the skull suggesting the transience of beauty and the corruption of the dead fleshless body. The bright face is replaced by the ragged lines

of the skull while the sparkling eyes are dulled into two empty holes (“those unsightly rings”, 1. 20). Unlike Shakespeare who parodied the Petrarchan blazon in his sonnet 130, this counter blazon dramatizes a “vanitas”, these works of art which sometimes depicted fully fleshed living women catching a glimpse of a dead skull in the mirror where they admired their beauty. The juxtaposition of the living fleshed body and the fleshless skull was supposed to remind the onlooker that human flesh was doomed to putrefaction.

Furthermore, Vindice perceives the human flesh as a disguise hiding the true nature of man as he compares it to a garment (“Thee when thou wert apparel’d in thy flesh”, 1, 1, 31; “their costly three-pil’d flesh worn off / As bare as this”, 1, 1, 46-7). These images of layers of flesh all the more strengthen the underlying metaphor of the anatomy of the human body as they are evocative of engravings illustrating Renaissance anatomy books, such as the one drawn by Nicolas Beatrizet for Juan Valverde’s *Anatomia del corpe humano* (1560), where the skeleton disposed of its own flesh, layer by layer. The metaphor of the flesh as the body’s garment is extended by the more theatrical image of the mask when Gloriana’s skull is equated with “death’s vizard” (1, 1, 50). The confusion between the Duke’s corruption and his beloved’s skull implies that Vindice perceives the dead as well as the living as skeletons, fleshless bodies. This lack of distinction between human beings is also strikingly true for Vindice, who describes himself as already dead inside: “For since my worthy father’s funeral, / My life’s unnatural to me, e’en compelled / As if I lived now when I should be dead” (1, 1, 119-21). This altered perception of the world justifies all the murders he has planned to commit in order to revenge Gloriana. Indeed Vindice claims to be a “bone setter” (3, 1, 45), an erotic turn of phrase which literally foreshadows Vindice’s mission, namely to collect corpses that he intends to use as theatrical props.

The dissection of the human soul is fraught with erotic innuendos, bringing to the fore Vindice’s paradoxical attitude towards Gloriana’s skull: “For Vindice, the skull is both a ‘memento mori’ and a revenger’s token, material proof of a crime that authority has sought to erase from public memory. But for Vindice, it is also charged with a strange and destructive kind of eroticism.”⁷ The confusion between the

corruption of the human soul and of the fleshless body symbolised by Gloriana's skull leads Vindice to compare his beloved to a prostitute ("O, 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 consumed, and yet his suit been cold", 1, 1, 26-29). The discrepancy between Gloriana's pure innocence and her inherent corruption, which foreshadows the morbid eroticism of the encounter between the Duke and the bony lady, is bodied forth by Antonio's wife's dead body exposed to the public eye in Act 1 scene 4.

This scene opens onto the grieving Lord Antonio showing his wife's corpse to some characters. After being raped by the Duke's son during a masque, his wife killed herself ("She, her honour forced, / Deemed it a nobler dowry for her name / To die with poison than to live with shame", 1, 4, 45-7). The stage directions indicate that the dead body, probably lying on a bed, is hidden behind curtains as Antonio discovers his wife's lifeless body to the audience. This particular detail is evocative of English Renaissance tombs where curtains were part of the decoration and usually opened onto the funerary effigies or some scenes where the effigy was shown kneeling in prayer. The image of the tomb is further strengthened when Antonio compares his wife's dead body to a "comely building" (l. 2) and to "the ruins of so fair a monument" (l. 67). Other symbols were added to complete this funerary monument since Antonio's wife used a prayer book as "the pillow to cheek" (l. 13) and "another / Placed in her right hand, with a leaf tucked up, / Pointing to these words" (ll. 14-6). Thus the raped female body is metamorphosed into a funerary effigy testifying to her purity: "[her body] is displayed like a figure for some Renaissance tomb [...] whose posture draws attention to the Lucrece-like perfection of her inward chastity."⁸ Antonio's wife's corpse, whose flesh is not putrefied yet, reverberates Gloriana's fleshless skull not only as a token of mortality, but also as the symbol of conflicting perceptions of the female body:

the fully fleshed corpse of Antonio's wife remains erotically powerful in its showcased state. Far more perversely enticing is the 'fleshed out' figure of Gloriana, the corpse-in-disguise that arouses the Duke's lust and poisons him with a kiss. As dual emblems of purity and putrefaction, skull and corpse figure the oppositional extremes in the patriarchal symbolisation of woman.⁹

This duality reaches its apex in Act 3 when the Duke meets the seducing bony lady.

The critic Ellis Una Fermor uses the somewhat paradoxical turn of phrase “walking anatomies” to describe some of the characters in *The Revenger's Tragedy*: “The [horror] comes to us [...] from the aroma of evil with which Tourneur by the aid of diction and verbal music surrounds these walking anatomies.”¹⁰ The main walking anatomy in this play remains the bony lady who turns out to be Gloriana’s skull disguised as a living woman. The “corpse-in-disguise,” to resume the phrase used by Susan Zimmerman to depict the skull¹¹, happens to be one of the main actors of Vindice’s revenge play within the play (“I have not fashioned this only for show / And useless property ; no, it shall bear a part / E’en in its own revenge”, 3, 5, 100-02). Even though this metadramatic hint introduces the necessary distance to bear the horror of the revenger’s show, it reinforces the lack of humanity of Gloriana’s skull, which is merely used by Vindice as a puppet.

The dramatization of the encounter with the bony lady is highlighted by the varied references to disguise and the thematic line of deceit. To lure the Duke into his trap, Vindice disguised himself and lied about his identity: “The old Duke / Thinking my outward shape and inward heart / Are cut out of one piece” (3, 5, 8-10). Paradoxically enough, by resorting to lying and hypocrisy, Vindice adopted all the attitudes he eloquently criticized in the opening scene. This hypocrisy is further extended by Gloriana’s disguised skull: “a lady can, / At such, all hid, beguile a wiser man” (ll. 51-2).

However, beyond this macabre show, Gloriana’s hollow eyes see through the Duke’s hypocrisy and corruption: “Here’s an eye / Able to tempt a great man – to serve God” (l. 54). The godly look in the skull’s empty sockets brings to the fore the morality of the almost divine retribution Vindice is about to inflict upon the Duke. As a stage manager of Gloriana’s revenge, Vindice creates an erotic atmosphere for the encounter between the Duke and the bony lady in Act 3 scene 5. Apart from the mask covering Gloriana’s skull and the disguise to make the fleshless body look like a human body, Vindice has carefully prepared the stage for his plot. The theatrical space is supposed to be in semi darkness: “[the Duke] did wish his impudent grace / To meet in this unsunnèd lodge, / Wherein ‘tis night at noon” (ll. 17-19). The reversal

of day into night, and of light into darkness is an emblem of the reversal of roles – the victim turns into the executioner, while the former rapist and murderer becomes the victim of another murder. This reference to night also echoes Act 1 scene 3 when Vindice underlines that at night all the darkest desires are free while in daylight all the sinners put on their disguise to hide their true nature: “and in the morning, / When they are up and dressed, and their mask on, / Who can perceive this? – save that eternal eye / That sees through flesh and all” (1, 3, 63-6). Thus Vindice encourages the Duke to wear off his mask and indulge in his lust. The eroticism of the scene is heightened by the sweet presence of perfume which is also spread to cover the foul smell of the poison dubbed on the skull’s mouth: “Pleasure should meet in a perfumèd mist” (3, 5, 144). The Duke’s ecstasy is brief, for no sooner has he kissed the bony lady that Vindice demands Hippolito to bring light to the mysterious woman’s face: “Place the torch here, that these affrighted eyeballs / May stare into those hollows. Duke, dost thou know / Yon dreadful vizard? View it well; ‘tis the skull / Of Gloriana, whom thou poisonedst last” (ll. 148-51). While gazing into the two empty eyeballs of the fleshless skull, the Duke meets with his own death and can meditate on the death he inflicted upon the skull that is killing him.

The circularity of this scene is heightened by the ambiguous symbolism of the lips. Lynn White describes the association of eroticism and death as such:

Gloriana’s skull’s mutilated state certainly evokes contemporary depictions of anatomized female corpses, and while her sexual organs have presumably long turned to dust, the fact that the skull kills with its lips suggests the ‘vagina dentata’, even without an actual vagina.¹²

Michael Neill interprets this encounter as a reversal of the representation of Death and the Bride: “The grotesque sexualization of Death in that play’s Bony Lady scene mirrors the perverse raptures of the Dance, sardonically inverting the popular episode of Death and the Bride.”¹³ The Renaissance pictures showing the sexual and erotic encounter between Death and an innocent pure woman emphasized the paradoxical association of death and sexuality. In Hans Baldung Grien’s picture (1517), the young girl is forced to step down into her tomb just as the Duke is obliged to contemplate his fate into the two hollow eyes of the bony lady.

The kiss of death gradually turns the Duke into a fleshless body in progress as the poison slowly eats out his lips, and even his tongue ("My teeth are eaten out", l. 161, "oh my tongue", l. 163). As Susan Zimmerman puts it, "in the scene's climatic metamorphosis, the Duke's own head is transformed into a spontaneously putrefying piece of flesh, an incipient skull."¹⁴ The description of the progression of the poison through the Duke's body sheds light on the several stages of putrefaction, of the slow metamorphosis of the human body into a fleshless body. This morbid erotic intercourse is mirrored in another sensual encounter. The stage manager of this embedded play has prepared another show. The Duchess and the Duke's bastard son meet in a room next to the one where the Duke was supposed to meet the bony lady. The Duke is turned into a spectator of the adulterous and incestuous desire of his own wife for his son: "Here in this lodge they meet for damned clips / Those eyes shall see the incest of their lips" (ll. 184-5). The scene of the kissing between the Duchess and the Duke's son is all the more a reflection of the encounter between the Duke and the bony lady as it is stamped with the taste not only of sin ("Had not that kiss a taste of sin, 'twere sweet", l. 207), but also of poison, since the Duchess plots the Duke's death by poisoning ("Forget him, or I'll poison him", l. 214).

Vindice's revenge on the Duke does not come to an end with the Duke's death - the soon-to-be fleshless body is metamorphosed into another theatrical prop that Vindice uses in the final act of his embedded revenge tragedy. Just as he did with Gloriana, he puts on the Duke's dead body the clothes of Piato, the character he used to play in the Duke's court. Dressed in Vindice's former disguise, the Duke's body is positioned on stage to create the illusion he is only asleep: "And being in drink, as you have published him, / To lean him on his elbow, as if sleep had caught him, / Which claims most interest in such sluggy men?" (4, 2, 215-7). While the confusion between sleep and death was a recurrent feature in Elizabethan and Jacobean drama, the position of the dead body leaning on its elbow is ironically reminiscent of English mid-sixteenth-century funerary effigies. By positioning the effigies on the elbow instead of carving them lying on their backs, the sculptors of the time attempted to create the illusion that these effigies were alive. Vindice masters the art of illusion in so far as he manages to convince Lussurioso, the Duke's legitimate son, that the

sleeping body is Piato. By thrusting his sword into the dead body, Lussurioso kills his own father but also metaphorically Vindice's character. Michael Neill draws a parallel between this scene and the Duke's encounter with Death in Act 3: "As he gazes down on the body he has dressed up in the clothes of his alter ego Piato, it is as if Vindice too were facing the image of his own Death ('I must stand ready here to make away myself yonde', 5, 1, 6)".¹⁵

Vindice's revenge reaches its apex with the masque organized in the Duke's court. Even though the morbid eroticism of the former scenes is absent in the last Act, the association of pleasure and death still pervades this final show:

Then, entering first, observing the true form
 Within a strain or two we shall find leisure
 To steal our swords out handsomely,
 And when they think their pleasure sweet and good,
 In midst of all their joys, they all sigh blood (5, 3, 18-22).

Vindice's last embedded tragedy is akin to the medieval dance of death where living bodies dance with soon-to-be fleshless bodies: "the ironic symmetry that assigns each victim with his own murderer, together with the chainlike sequence of ensuing deaths, clearly recalls the pairings of the 'Danse Macabre'."¹⁶

Pervaded with an atmosphere of death throughout the play, *The Revenger's Tragedy* turns out to be the theatre of fleshless bodies. The dramatization of death is further strengthened by the final image of the heap of lifeless bodies lying on stage. Antonio, who has had Vindice arrested for all the murders, eloquently ends the cycle of revenge by asking the soldiers to "bear up / Those tragic bodies" (l. 127). On the one hand, the polysemy of the word "tragic" stresses the chaotic deaths of most of the characters and, on the other hand, its metadramatic hint encourages the spectators to take their distances with these false fleshless bodies. Even though this fascination for corpses and skeletons was undoubtedly influenced by the science of anatomy, the dramatisation of the fleshless body in *The Revenger's Tragedy* could well question this science as Karin S. Coddon suggests:

Necrophilia serves at once to parody and interrogate contemporary, increasingly scientific notions of the body. The constitution of the body as the object of scientific inquiry is brutally travestied in Tourneur's

insistent displacement of an objective knowledge of the body by spectacular, defiantly perverse desire. Necrophilia yokes together science and education.¹⁷

NOTES

¹ Daniel J. Jacobson, *The Language of The Revenger's Tragedy*. Salzburg: University of Salzburg, 1974, p. 111.

² *Death and Elizabethan Tragedy*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1936, p. 232.

³ *Issues of Death. Mortality and Identity in English Renaissance Tragedy*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997, p. 31.

⁴ *The Prose Works of Philip Sidney*, ed. Albert Feuillerat, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969, p. 26.

⁵ Quoted by Jonathan Sawday, *Body Emblazoned, Dissection and The Human Body in Renaissance Culture*, London: Routledge, 1995, p.21.

⁶ *Mikroscomographia, A Description of the Body of Man*, London: W. Jaggard, 1618, p. 12.

⁷ Michael Neill, "Death and *The Revenger's Tragedy*", in *Early Modern English Drama*, eds. Garrett A. Sullivan, Patrick Cheney and Andrew Hadfield, New York: Oxford University Press, 2006, p. 169.

⁸ Michael Neill, "Death and *The Revenger's Tragedy*", p. 173.

⁹ Susan Zimmerman, *The Early Modern Corpse and Shakespeare's Theatre*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005, p. 136.

¹⁰ *The Jacobean Drama*, London: Methuen and Co, 1947, p. 154.

¹¹ *Op.cit.*, p. 136.

¹² "Death and the Devil." *The Darker Vision of the Renaissance*. Ed. Robert. S. Kinsman. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974, p.126.

¹³ *Issues of Death*, p. 54.

¹⁴ *The Early Modern Corpse*, p. 140.

¹⁵ *Issues of Death*, p. 85.

¹⁶ Michael Neill, "Death and *The Revenger's Tragedy*", p. 172.

¹⁷ "For show and Useless Property : Necrophilia and *The Revenger's Tragedy*." *Revenge Tragedy*, ed Stevie Simkin, Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001, p. 122.