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The Anatomy of Subversive Women in Early Modern English Tragedies

Women in early modern English tragedies are key participants in the networks of systematically foregrounded ambiguities. A liminal space in these plays stretches out between appearance and reality, life and death, containment and subversion, tragic and comic, symbolical and empirical, medieval and premodern, suggesting that the human condition often resists categorisation into these clear-cut binaries. The resulting ambivalence is representative of the all-pervasive uncertainty of the period. Revenge tragedy, the most popular and persistent genre of the English Renaissance, repeatedly posits female characters into situations where it is almost impossible to decide whether they have gained agency or, on the contrary, they have been even more firmly bound to the markers of their socially determined gendered subjectivity. Curiously, the agency they appear to assume often displays a specifically anatomical character: they indirectly influence the course of events through their severed, dissected, anatomized body parts. We find an early example of this already in the prototypical Renaissance revenge drama, Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*, where Bel-Imperia sets the chain of revenge in motion with a letter written in her own blood. By the time of the peak of the Stuart period, this thematisation of feminine agency and anatomy takes on extreme proportions. At a climactic point in Ford's '*Tis Pity She's a Whore*, a revenge tragedy that was one of the standard references for arguments about the decadence of English Renaissance drama after Shakespeare, the revenger Antonio enters the scene as an anatomist coming from an unfinished dissection, "with a heart upon his dagger." The heart is a real heart, but it is just a heart at this point. In response to the horrid sight, Vasques cries out: "What strange riddle is this?" The ambiguity of the question is representative of the complex epistemological crisis which framed the early modern age. Vasques aims his question, of course, at what might be the shocking result of some brutal butchery, but, at the same time, he is also interrogating an image that could be, and had always been, interpreted in the light of a multiplicity of iconographical, moral, religious traditions. One aspect of the riddle is the uncertainty of who the heart belonged to, but, on the other hand, the riddle immediately and conveniently offers itself to a number of solutions where the only difficulty is that of an exploding polysemy: it can be decoded as an emblem from the memento mori or the religio cordis tradition, it can be the symbol of affection and pleasure, but it can just as well stand for filial and spiritual bond, love and devotion, and we are still far from the end of the list. The hugely impactful stage effect of the scene, itself probably arranged as an emblematic stage tableau vivant, is ignited in the moment of the demetaphorisation of the heart: Antonio announces that the object is the heart of his beloved wife Annabella, he ploughed up "her fruitful womb" and, together with her heart, he also plucked out their unborn son. At this moment, the bleeding heart could still be interpreted as a symbolical representation of the triumph of love and the victory of Annabella in the

aftermath of a star-crossed love affair, except that, in the blink of an eye, the heart, which is loaded with an arsenal of meanings for an audience with a panmetaphoric semiotic disposition, is transformed from a polysemous emblem to crude materiality, a chunk of flesh, just a piece of offal, as Michel Neill would put it (Neill 36). What interpretive matrix, which critical orientation or theoretical paradigm could unravel the complexity of this scene which focalises the heart of a woman as a triumphant emblem in a blood-soaked revenge scenario? What are the chances of a feminist methodology in the understanding of early modern revenge tragedies?

The demetaphorisation of iconographic elements is a persistently recurring representational technique on the early modern emblematic stage, it problematises the contrariety or ambiguity of the age which is the result of two simultaneously present, competing epistemologies, and it connects two of the most popular contemporary arenas of public spectacle: the anatomical theatre and the public theatre. As Duke Pesta argues:

> In the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, the tensions between competing epistemologies, between the long-standing metaphysical tradition of the memento mori and the emerging empirical and scientific discoveries of the anatomy theatres were reflected not only in the architecture and iconography of the anatomy theatres, but also in the graveyard theatres of anatomy in plays like *Hoffman* and *Hamlet*. (37)

In order for us to really make sense of this anatomical investment in the early modern English revenge tragedies that, for a long time, were stuck on the margins of the canon, Renaissance scholarship had to cover an itinerary launched by the new historicist interest in material practices, leading up to the current forms of transdisciplinary research into the political, medical, religious and economic background of English Renaissance drama. All these interpretive orientations share a methodology which explores the dramatic canon in the light of the representational logic and the everyday material practices of the contemporary theatre. At the same time, they also see these practices embedded in the cultural semantics of the age, where the theatrical institution was functioning in the larger context of technological innovations and experiments, as well as the rites, procedures, and social customs that were being rewritten by the contemporary epistemological and thanatological crisis. Adrian Streete argues that this early modern theatre functioned as a laboratory where new ideas about identity and subjectivity could be experimented with. "As the space where discourses of nascent secularity jostle with those still powerful sacred narratives and ideas, the theatre is a veritable crucible where dominant and emergent forms of subjectivity are tested" (26, 29). Research has been ongoing into the technology that expanded the boundaries of cognition, the Protestant theology that reformulated the fundamentals of semiotics, the gender antagonisms that emerged during the formation of the early modern subjectivity, and the power antagonisms of the Anglican Church which balanced between conflicting religious currents. Feminist and gender

criticism made significant contributions to this line of interdisciplinary research, although initially this critical perspective was not devoid of limitations and blind spots.

When Lisa Jardine published her highly influential and critical monograph on the feminist readings of English Renaissance drama, she argued that it was inevitable for this critical orientation to tackle, before any other author or historical period, "that most patriarchal body of texts, the works of William Shakespeare" (1). Her intention was to expand the scope of feminist Shakespeare criticism beyond the then dominant two lines of research: the critique of the "out-and-out sexist attitudes" of Shakespeare, and the idealisation and idolisation of his all-encompassing vision of the human experience. This was more than three decades ago, and since then, inspired (or provoked) by several new directionalities like the corporeal, the pictorial, the affective, and the intersectional turn, and emerging new paradigms like the new historicism, cultural materialism, critical race theory, ecofeminism and animal studies, Renaissance scholarship has certainly proliferated into diverse directions which all bear relevance for feminist practice. A sketchy list, very far from being comprehensive, will include the study of the material conditions of everyday life in the light of commercial, political, religious antagonisms (Greenblatt), the intersection of new forms of subjectivity and interiority with moral and political ideas (Maus), cultural representations of competing world models (Sawday, Engines), early medical and anatomical understandings of the human body (Sawday, The Body; Marshall; Nunn), the intersectionality of gender, race, and class (Novy; Hall; Parker; MacDonald), the circulation of desire and the formation of sexual practices (Traub), women's silence as a form of subversion or resistance (Luckyj), femininity and abjection (Zimmermann), and the relation of women to the environment, animals, and the household (Laroche and Munroe). If there is one lesson scholars of early modern English drama can draw from this development, it is that any study of the representation of gender or the constitution of female subjectivities in Renaissance texts must resist generalisations. Women characters are representations of the intersection of a multitude of cultural discourses in early modern England, and their assertion of female agency often testifies to an understanding of singular individuality which resists the conventional and ideologically determined cultural categorisation and containment. In what follows, I will scrutinise female characters who are represented as liminal, ambiguous, in-between agents in English Renaissance revenge tragedies.

If we survey the most well-known plays from the Stuart period of English literature, we encounter several dramas which literary history has repeatedly cited for epitomising the extreme tendencies that became the trademark of the 'decadence' of Jacobean and Caroline tragedy. The critical discourse about the decline and the later decadence of English Renaissance drama after Shakespeare was initiated already by Dryden, and, during the formation and solidification of the Shakespearean canon and the cult of the bard, was repeatedly reasserted by critics throughout the centuries (from Dryden and Thomas Rymer in 1668 and 1667–78 respectively, through Rupert Brooke in 1916 to William Archer in 1923). Fredson Bowers's monograph on the history of English revenge

tragedies allows for significant development in the plays of dramatists following Shakespeare, but he also posits authoritatively that the decades before the closing of the theatres in 1642 witness the gradual disintegration and final decadence of the genre (Bowers 218). Renaissance scholarship had to wait until the postsemiotically informed theories of the poststructuralist orientations to make sense of the seemingly bizarre and excessive representations in these plays. New interpretive trends after the postsemiotic and corporeal turn of the 1980s revealed that, when viewed in the context of contemporary intellectual, religious, scientific, and philosophical developments, these extremities appear to arise from the collision between the inherited emblematic representational traditions, coming down to the time of the Renaissance from the Middle Ages, and the new, early modern modes of interrogating a universe that started to display hitherto unknown or uncharted characteristics. These dramatic excesses become fully intelligible when interpreted as responses to the uncertainties surrounding the formation of early modern subjectivity and the period's epistemological crisis. Seen in its contemporary socio-political context, one of the most radical extremities of Stuart tragedy is the representation of subversive women in ambiguous, liminal positions. Female characters assert their individual identities, gender agency and sexual autonomy in ways that unsettle the logic of the patriarchal establishment and undermine cultural and political essentials that had been thought to be unquestionable and metaphysically motivated. The independence of the female subject is a threatening possibility which is suggested but always necessarily contained and suppressed, voiced but finally muted. Nevertheless, the foregrounding of this latent uncontrollable element in the social fabric in itself turns these plays into critical commentaries on the status quo, and the female body becomes the site upon which competing ideologies of control and freedom are inscribed.

As has been mentioned, one peculiar aspect of the ambiguity of the female body is that, in many of the revenge plays, women characters appear to gain agency through their body parts, although these corporeal constituents are subjected to extreme forms of violence. In what follows, I examine a representative selection of such instances to show how the persistent anatomical interest of early modern English revenge tragedy simultaneously shatters and elevates the body of independent, nonconformist, or subversive women. My first example comes from Shakespeare's earliest and long-debated tragedy, *Titus Andronicus* (1594), a play which provoked tens of authors to prove that it could not have been written by "the bard." Yet, after the corporeal turn and the new postmodern anatomical interest, this early tragedy has been in the focus of much critical and theatrical attention.[1]

As Michael Hattaway notes, in *Titus Andronicus* "Shakespeare was seeing what happens when a thing, a human hand, for example, is thrust repeatedly before the audience's consciousness. The word occurs forty-six times in the play, and as if that were not enough,

[1] The analyses that follow below are expanded versions of Kiss, "Kísérletek," and interpretive chapters in Kiss, *Kettős anatómia*.

a hand, Titus' severed hand, is carried off by the handless Lavinia who holds it between her teeth" (188). Let me briefly examine here this complex and climactic scene (3.1) where the hand is foregrounded within the systematically organised imagery of the play, because, even if it is the hand of the patriarch that replaces the tongue of the woman, the scene will grant Lavinia extraordinary agency. The composition of the stage at the end of the scene produces a tableau with Titus' daughter in the centre.

> And, Lavinia, thou shalt be employed in this;
> Bear thou my hand, sweet wench, between thy teeth.
> (Titus, 3.1.280–81)[2]

Lavinia's "involvement" is presented to us by a puzzling stage image, for the interpretation of which we need the codes of the emblematic stage. The daughter takes the severed hand of the father, the centre of the patriarchal order, into her empty, tongueless mouth. In the upside-down universe of the drama, the symbol of power and patriarchal command, the paternal hand thus fills a specific gap: it takes the place of a woman's discourse, of feminine language. Recent performance-centred interpretations see the scene as a concentrated tableau vivant of confusion (Fawcett), a magnified emblem of chaos (Green), or Lavinia's second rape (Smith). The grotesque scene poses a great challenge to modern directors and actors and is often staged in a modified setting. As Erika T. Lin points out, even editors of modern editions sometimes try to tone down the gruesome, abject spectacle by omitting any reference to Lavinia's teeth or mouth, even though both the First Folio and all quarto editions make it clear that the mutilated Lavinia takes out her father's hand between her teeth (137). It is true that Lavinia would be able to take her father's hand away even if it was squeezed between the stumps of her mutilated hands, but Shakespeare chooses a much more powerful and radical solution. I intend to show that the apparently grotesque or extremely morbid scene is in fact the culmination of the emblematic meaning structure of the entire play.

The emblematic scene, with the mutilated Lavinia and the severed hand of her father inserted in her mouth, can be translated as a representation of how absence meets absence – Lavinia lacks her tongue, Titus lacks his hand, the two absences meet to produce a new discourse. When we apply a corporeally informed semiotic approach, we realise that it is not enough to establish an interpretation of the scene which argues that Lavinia is given a new language, since this reading would only focus on the patriarchal emblem of power, the hand asserting its position for a second time in the avalanche of violence. Shakespeare forms the semiotics of absence with a more complicated logic, and on this basis the scene can also gain a feminist interpretation. Lavinia becomes the source of the new language that is becoming necessary in the cosmic chaos of the play, her body serving as a map for Titus to navigate ("Thou map of woe, that thus dost talk in signs", 3.2.12), to find his "cave of revenge" (2.1.270), his motivational energies, and to succeed in his war plan. To

[2] References to the play are from William Shakespeare, *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. Blakemore Evans (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1972).

do this, he must change, he must learn a new alphabet, he must give up his previously proud paternal, military, political framework of thought, otherwise he cannot outdo Tamora's skills. So, the scene is not about paternal rape, it's more about Lavinia, the woman, starting to talk. The paternal power, through the emblem of military communication, speaks through a symbolic prosthesis, but it speaks a new language. A language that can compete with the invading Tamora, one that feeds on the body and that brings to the surface hidden, suppressed, ignored layers of writing, speaking, notation.

The difficulty of the scene is well demonstrated by the fact that, since the beginning of the "postmodern renaissance" of the tragedy, almost none of the productions ventured to explicitly show Lavinia with her father's hand in her mouth, since they did not make an attempt to deal with the complexity of this scene, a complexity which results from its textual, thematic embeddedness. The image of the hand as a central symbol had already been introduced earlier in the tragedy with Titus' "victorious hands" (I.1.163), followed by Lavinia's hands severed by Tamora's sons, and then Titus' hand cut off by Aaron, just to mention the most important instances of the human hand being in the centre of attention on the stage. The extreme mutilations performed on the human hand have always posed an almost unsurpassable challenge to directors who either used the strategy of stylisation to cope with the brutality of the scenes, or they mixed abjection with parody to foreground the grotesque heterogeneity of the tragedy. One of the most spectacular examples of stylisation was the performance at the 1988 Colorado Shakespeare Festival, directed by Joel G. Fink, in which Chiron and Demetrius pulled extremely long, blood-red silk ribbons from the sleeves of Lavinia's gown and spread them around her in such a way that Lavinia ended up looking like "a giant wounded butterfly, with wings of 'blood' covering the stage" (Fink 462). A good example of the mixture of the "reality effect" and its simultaneous parody was William Freimuth's 1986 staging with the Source Theater Company in Washington D.C., in which at the beginning of the performance a cleaning lady distributed plastic bags and baby feeding bibs to the audience sitting close to the stage, while the deafening noise of sawing heard from the background was intended to convey that the limbs of Alarbus were being cut off for the sacrificial fire.

I cannot here dwell at greater length on how various adaptation techniques can facilitate our imaginative reconstruction of what may have taken place on Shakespeare's stage. The important point to note is that the hand which replaces the tongue in Lavinia's mouth gives her new agency. If we follow the methodology of performance-oriented semiotic approaches and carefully imagine every detail of the scene on stage with a Lavinia who has gained agency rather than being even more repressed, the visual tableau will reveal that Lavinia at this point becomes eerily similar to a signpost. She has not only become a map, she has not just provided her father with a new alphabet, she is now also pointing out the direction in which Titus should proceed to bring his revenge plan to realisation. The signpost or fingerpost, a pointing device for the indication of directions, became widespread by the seventeenth century in England, when roads between settlements were

maintained by local parishes, and legislation introduced the requirement for markers to be erected at road junctions.

No solid evidence exists to prove the presence of fingerposts in Shakespeare's England, but even if we cannot link Lavinia's appearance to the shape and function of early modern signposts, we can certainly establish that connection between her and the sign in which the fingerpost has its historical origin: the manicule. The "pointing hand" was originally used as an eye-catching sign at the margins of codices and served to draw the reader's attention to particularly important passages. After the spread of printing, English printers called it a pointing fist: it is called the indicationum or index in the history of typography.[3]

Today, every computer user encounters this symbol countless times a day since it is the Windows icon for the Internet link: ☛ / 👆 / ☞. The stage tableau "Lavinia as manicule" must have carried a complex meaning on the emblematic stage, embedded as a climactic moment in the progress of the systematic imagery of hands in the play. Not only could it point out that we have reached a particularly important moment in the drama, but it also transformed Lavinia herself into a kind of signpost: a fingerpost which indicated the way for the protagonists out of the network of revenges in the tragedy. In this way, the mutilated daughter, the subordinated woman is positioned in a strangely ambiguous situation: in spite of having been brutally reduced to the zero point of existence and signification, Lavinia still emerges as the one who gives direction to the events and indirectly holds control of the action.

I will now move on to another representative example of the line of revenge tragedies where the seemingly passive and suppressed female character becomes curiously active and influential again. Thomas Middleton's *The Revenger's Tragedy* (1606), written shortly after the turn of the century, represents the culmination and synthesis of this tradition. In many ways, it bears the imprint of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, the other great revenge tragedy of the period. Middleton's play overflows with shocking scenes of violence, but it is far more than mere horror drama. He compresses into this single work all the essential features of the revenge tragedy, with the exception of the Senecan ghost – an obligatory feature in first-generation revenge plays that authors gradually abandoned during the Jacobean period. Middleton also experiments with parody and burlesque, adopting a cynical tone to push the genre's limits. Vindice, the protagonist, appears at the beginning of the play as a Prologue figure, adopting the persona of the Vice from medieval morality plays

[3] "The printer's symbol ☞. This type ornament has a long history, the printed outline of a hand being used as a paragraph mark by, among other early printers, Huss at Lyons in 1484 in the edition of Paulus Florentinus's 'Breviarum totius juris canonici' he printed with Johannes Schabeler. As with other typographic conventions this was taken from scribal practice, carefully drawn hands pointing to a new paragraph being found in early 12th century (Spanish) manuscripts. It is also known as a fist, hand, or index." (Glaister141) For the history of the manicule, see also Sherman 25–52.

and employing the Renaissance convention of direct audience address. In a distinctly metatheatrical moment, he introduces the characters of the drama – his drama, the tragedy he is about to "stage" himself. The setting is a thoroughly corrupt Italian court – then a common surrogate in early modern English drama for indirect criticism of domestic political and diplomatic conditions, which censorship otherwise forbade. The lascivious Duke, who poisoned Vindice's betrothed Gloriana nine years earlier after failing to seduce her, parades before us like a puppet. The entire court follows. Midway through the Prologue, we receive a shocking revelation: the skull Vindice holds in his hand is not merely the expected memento mori prop, the didactic emblem traditionally used to moralise death, but the actual skull of his murdered beloved, Gloriana. Vindice has returned to court to exact revenge. In becoming the perfect earthly embodiment of the allegorical figure of Revenge he earlier invoked, Vindice devises ever more elaborate plots. One of these involves dressing Gloriana's skull as a young bride, smearing poison on its mouth, and having the skull "enact" the revenge. In one pivotal scene, Vindice – in the role of a bawd – leads the lustful Duke to what he believes will be a secret sexual encounter. In complete darkness, the Duke embraces the disguised skull and, kissing it passionately, poisons himself. Thus, it is not Vindice, but Gloriana – through her skull which now takes on strange but gruesomely efficient agency – that takes vengeance.

Extreme scenes like the opening of *The Revenger's Tragedy* can be read as attempts to escape the web of the inherited medieval symbolic tradition: until the midpoint of Vindice's Prologue, the skull functions as the conventional, almost boring memento mori emblem. Then, in a single shocking gesture, Middleton strips it of symbolic abstraction and presents it as raw material reality – Gloriana's actual skull. A similar effect of demetaphorisation occurs in Hamlet, when the prince comes to the shocking realisation that the skull he is contemplating in his hand is not just any skull but the remains of Yorick, the beloved jester of his childhood. A central concern in Stuart drama, then, is whether it is possible to break free from the weight of inherited traditions. This question also carries political and subversive potential. In a time when official church doctrine no longer allowed engagement with spirits, Purgatory, or the Eucharistic miracle of transubstantiation, the theatre became – at least in England – the refuge for such social anxieties and spiritual themes. From *The Spanish Tragedy* through Hamlet and *The Revenger's Tragedy* to *The Duchess of Malfi*, revenge tragedy provided a particularly potent form through which to stage these concerns. As Margaret Owens argues, "what is being mourned in revenge tragedy is mourning itself" (212): the genre is a dramatisation of the earlier Catholic rites of collective and individual grief that the Reformation discontinued, and it involves audiences into acts of cultural memory that helped process the increasingly suppressed and traumatised themes of death and loss in Reformation England. The heightened attention to the body and its internal structures was partly the result of a growing anatomical interest during the period – yet another response to the omnipresent epistemological uncertainty. Public dissections and anatomical theatres became widespread in Europe and soon reached England, where physicians and barber-surgeons competed for the corpses of executed criminals. Playwrights exploited the similarities between the public theatre

and the anatomical theatre (Nunn 2, 4), often staging scenes that reflected an intense desire to dissect reality, to penetrate beneath appearances in search of truth.

This quest for the truth of the human body and subjectivity characterises the next play I am to examine, John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* (1612–13), another famous and infamous Jacobean tragedy, which still draws from the tradition of the revenge tragedy while simultaneously diverging from it. Though most of its principal characters belong to a ducal family, the play marks a significant shift toward what is known as domestic tragedy – a genre that moves away from the grand historical, courtly, or political settings, instead offering insight into the internal microcosm of familial relationships. Moreover, it broadens its focus beyond the aristocracy to include ordinary people and the fates of those from lower social strata. Another crucial achievement of Webster's tragedies lies in the exceptional autonomy and psychological depth he grants to his female protagonists – far surpassing both his predecessors and most of his contemporaries. Like Vittoria in Webster's *The White Devil* (1611–12), the Duchess of Malfi appears as a sovereign individual, endowed with her own agency and will, thus anticipating the increasing independence afforded to female characters in Caroline drama.

However, *The Duchess of Malfi* also confronts us with a paradox from the outset, embedded in the protagonist's very name. The young widow, striving to escape the strictures of a patriarchal society and feudal traditions, seeks to assert her own will and take control of her destiny. She falls in love and freely chooses to remarry Antonio, her steward – a man of lower social standing. They have children together, and despite mounting threats, she resolutely defends her choices. Yet we never learn her actual name; she is referred to only as the Duchess of Malfi throughout the play. This paradox, gradually deepening, encapsulates the drama's central philosophical dilemma and reveals the Duchess's true tragedy: no matter how fiercely she strives for autonomy, she cannot fully disentangle herself from the social constraints symbolised by her title.

Regardless of her efforts to free herself from her two brothers – the power-obsessed Cardinal and the incestuous, increasingly deranged Ferdinand – her actions threaten the male-dominated political status quo and so must be suppressed. The dramatic paradox culminates in the realisation, at the moment of her death, that the title "Duchess of Malfi" ultimately holds no intrinsic meaning. It guarantees neither personal identity nor fulfilment, serving only as a metaphysical label derived from collective social consensus. Before she is strangled by the executioners hired by her brothers, she is visited by the arch-villain of the play, Bosola – disguised as an old man – who announces with grim irony that he has come to carve her tomb. The Duchess, bewildered, confronts him with questions in an attempt to assert her identity. But in this moment, the name has already lost its significance, a fact Bosola articulates in language drawn from the vanitas tradition:

> DUCHESS Who am I?
> BOSOLA Thou art a box of worm-seed, at best but a salvatory of green mummy. What's this flesh? A little cruded milk, fantastical puff-paste. Our bodies are weaker than those paper prisons boys use to keep flies in. [...]
> DUCHESS Am not I thy Duchess?
> BOSOLA Thou art some great woman, sure, for riot begins to sit on thy forehead (clad in gray hairs) twenty years sooner than on a merry milk-maid's. [...]
> DUCHESS I am Duchess of Malfi still.
> BOSOLA That makes thy sleep so broken. Glories, like glowworms afar off shine bright, But look'd to near, have neither heat nor light. (4.2.125–47)

Webster's tragedy aligns with other great early modern dramas that interrogate the philosophical, political, and artistic dimensions of emerging subjectivity: who is a person when stripped of socially imposed roles, titles, and traditions? How much truth is there in the assertion, made on the threshold of death, "I am Duchess of Malfi still"? The term "duchess" proves to be a social signifier whose validity persists only so long as the structures of power support it. Once the individual exits this metaphysical field, she is reduced to a vulnerable, bare human being – a mere mixture of flesh and blood. Yet, this scene also draws attention to another possibility: perhaps it is not in ceremony, authority, rank or title where we should seek the innermost core of our identity, but self-determination and integrity, virtues that only the Duchess excels in. Facing death with extraordinary calmness and self-assurance, the Duchess of Malfi is transformed by Webster into an emblem of sovereignty, which, at the same time, is a curiously subversive element in the social fabric, threating to undermine the feudal and patriarchal rule in a truly new, original way of inner, female, individual aspiration.

In the final scene, after realising the irremediable corruption of the court and world and killing both the Cardinal and Ferdinand, Bosola himself receives a fatal wound and bids the world farewell:

> BOSOLA O, I am gone! –We are only like dead walls, or vaulted graves,
> That ruin'd, yields no echo. (5.5.96–98)

His words cast the entire tragedy in a veil of bitter irony. Not long before, he had offered to carve the Duchess's tomb; now he identifies both himself and humanity with cold, silent grave-markers – an image central to the visual and symbolic world of the play. This association supports the critical view that *The Duchess of Malfi* in fact has two protagonists. One is the Duchess, who, implicitly aware of her impending doom, gradually transforms herself into her own tomb, echoing the ars moriendi tradition and facing her death with stoic pride and unique dignity – even as the noose tightens around her neck. The other is Bosola, a coarse, often brutal man forged in violence, yet ultimately capable of moral awakening. Too late, he realises the corruption of the ruling class, both secular and

ecclesiastical. Thus, the play carries a strong anti-authoritarian and socially critical undertone. However, for a long time, critics struggled to make sense of its bizarre and extreme stage tableaux. In one scene, Ferdinand punishes his sister's defiance by leading her into a pitch-black room, placing a severed, icy hand in hers, and then revealing what seems to be the mutilated corpses of Antonio and their children. Though the audience later learns these are wax figures, the shock of the scene casts a long shadow over the remainder of the drama.

Criticism long viewed such tableaux and extended death scenes – like the Duchess's drawn-out demise at Bosola's hands – as excessive. Yet protracted deaths were a staple of early modern tragedy. Not only do Shakespeare's Hamlet, Othello, and Desdemona die slowly and with many lines, but numerous other characters in the period do as well. The liminal moment between life and death was a central theme of the era, particularly as the Reformation transformed conceptions of dying. In *The White Devil*, the poisoned Duke Brachiano suffers an agonising, extended death; in *The Revenger's Tragedy*, the Duke meets a gruesome end; and in Marston's *Antonio's Revenge*, the Duke of Venice, Piero, has his tongue torn out, prompting the revenger Pandulpho to cry: "Let him die, die, and still be dying!" (5.5.76).

Scenes that might strike modern audiences as grotesque or melodramatic can only be understood within the broader thanatological context of the period – a cultural crisis surrounding death, dying, and mourning. Webster's wax figures, for instance, can be interpreted as resembling effigies on tombs, linking the scene with the Duchess's death and Bosola's final words. These elements form part of a coherent visual and thematic network centred on commemoration, a motif that pervades the entire tragedy and reflects the English Renaissance's evolving death culture in the wake of the Reformation – a phenomenon Michel Neill has termed the "early modern crisis of death" (Neill 15, 102).

Of course, it was not only attitudes toward death, the status of tombs, and patterns of social memory that were transformed during the Renaissance – society, politics, and science were all in motion. Early steps toward empirical, experimental science still coexisted with the spiritually charged analogical worldview of the past: sympathetic magic, alchemy, folk beliefs, and superstition. Scientific experimentation in these transitional dramas can thus be read both as harbingers of modern science and as remnants of a vanishing cosmology, and they must not be dismissed as mere superstition or "pseudo-science."

What might appear to today's readers as pseudoscientific manipulation likely represented, for early modern audiences, the repository of a mysterious and novel form of knowledge – the promise of this new epistemology is embodied in the book discovered by Beatrice in her husband Alsemero's chamber in *The Changeling* (1622), a tragedy co-authored by Thomas Middleton and William Rowley.

> BEATRICE Bless me! A right physician's closet 'tis,
> Set round with vials, every one her mark too.

> Sure he does practice physic for his own use,
> Which may be safely call'd your great man's wisdom.
> What manuscript lies here? The Book of Experiment, Call'd Secrets in Nature.
> (4.1.20–25)

This drama is not strictly speaking a revenge tragedy, but it perfectly fits in the line of tragedies that problematise the potential subversive agency of women. The heroine of the play I am going to address next is the daughter of the governor of Alicante. Beatrice is characterised as capricious, impassioned, and impulsively reckless. Though she is courted by the nobleman Alonso de Piraquo, her affections lie with Alsemero. Determined to remove her unwanted suitor, she overcomes her intense aversion to her disfigured servant, Deflores – whose face is marred by boils – and solicits him to commit murder on her behalf. Deflores, hopelessly infatuated with his mistress – or, more accurately, consumed by desire for her – accepts the commission without hesitation, asserting that he will name his price in due time. Beatrice, heedless of the implications, agrees to the arrangement.

Following Alonso's murder, Deflores presents Beatrice with the victim's severed finger and the ring as proof of the deed. In exchange, he demands Beatrice herself – the object of his obsessive desire – as compensation. Although she pleads for reprieve, Beatrice finds herself entrapped: Deflores blackmails her with threats of exposure should she refuse. He claims his "reward," and Beatrice is reduced to his concubine. From this point onward, the narrative traces their mutual descent into deception as they attempt to evade discovery. Beatrice weds Alsemero, but on their wedding night, she must resort to subterfuge, persuading her still-virginal maid to consummate the marriage in her stead, unbeknownst to her husband.

Beatrice, though physically beautiful, is contrasted with the grotesque Deflores; the primary characters of the main plot appear rational, whereas those in the subplot – set in a madhouse – are ostensibly insane. However, this dichotomy is ultimately destabilised. The narrative gradually reveals that Beatrice's internal moral corruption rivals, if not exceeds, Deflores's external deformity. Furthermore, the supposedly "sane" world of Alicante's court is shown to harbour greater madness and moral dissolution than the asylum. Rather than functioning as a distorted mirror, the madhouse serves as an accurate reflection of the psychological and ethical disarray that dominates the ruling elite. As Duffy (194) notes, the play's governing aesthetic operates through the "optics of madness."

The play thus engages in a sustained epistemological inquiry, interrogating the deceptiveness of surfaces and the inherent difficulty of apprehending the underlying truth. In this respect, *The Changeling* shares thematic affinities with other early modern tragedies. Yet it is distinguished by its intense preoccupation with the senses – particularly the sense of sight – and the unreliability of visual perception. From its opening lines, the play

foregrounds questions of sensorial mediation, returning repeatedly to the instability of vision and the interpretive challenges posed by appearances. Deception, role-playing, and strategic misrepresentation pervade the characters' interactions, embedding *The Changeling* firmly within the metatheatrical tradition of early modern drama.

The afflictions of the mind exhibited within the madhouse are ultimately eclipsed by the more insidious maladies of the soul: the degradation of conscience, the collapse of moral integrity, and the figurative disease that metastasises within individuals and manifests as a contagion in the social body. These pathologies culminate in potent images of infection, poison, and contamination. "Oh, come not near me, sir; I shall defile you" (5.3.181), Beatrice exclaims to her father upon her exposure. In the play's final scene, Deflores murders Beatrice and then takes his own life, declaring: "...now we are left in hell" (5.3.196). Further intensifying the apocalyptic imagery, Beatrice's father offers a summative reflection that encapsulates the play's moral universe: "We are all there; it circumscribes [us] here" (5.3.197). The text deliberately resists closure, leaving open multiple interpretive possibilities. Its refusal to articulate a definitive moral judgment likely rendered it provocatively transgressive for contemporary audiences. Does Beatrice act out of autonomous will, or is she the inescapable victim of structural and circumstantial determinism? Does she come to accept the monstrous yet loyal Deflores, or is her every physical encounter with him an act of revulsion? As a review of the 2017 production under the title *Maskarák* (Masquerade) at the Budaörsi Latinovits Theatre aptly summarises: "We cannot determine whether we are witnessing a pitiable, desperate victim destroyed by shame, or a deeply corrupted villain who discovers her true self in transgression" (Szemerédi).

Upon closer scrutiny, this question of the innermost, true self of the covetous and self-assured woman and her capacity to drive the members of the court closer to clear-sighted self-knowledge and self-examination becomes a complex problematic in the "madhouse optics" of the play. As has been mentioned, the entire drama is loaded with images of the senses and acts of sensation, but these image clusters converge around one peculiar thing, as if everything was spiralling down to the mysterious kernel of the play's cosmos, on several levels. Acts of seeing, touching, smelling, hearing are all aimed at finding out the secret of the castle of Alicante, the great Citadel. However, the secret of this great circular construction is nothing else but another "circular structure," Beatrice's much-desired secret: her genitals. A great number of wordplays in the quick reposts exchanged by Beatrice and Deflores are indirectly not only about sexual desire, passion or lust, but also intercourse itself. In early modern English bawdy, the word "hell" could also connote the female sexual organ, and in the light of this, the concluding sentences cast an ironical, almost cynical light upon the tragedy. When Deflores finally posits that they are now in "hell," and Beatrice's father intensifies this with yet another image of circularity, the contemporary audience must have received the meaning of the intended pun and realised that the all-devouring place that has consumed their world is not the underworld but Beatrice's uncontrollable sexuality, the innermost circle in the circular fortification of

Alicante. The imagery of the devouring female genital, much like the persistent vagina dentata imagery in Titus Andronicus, finally endows Beatrice with a threatening power which is tragic and ironic at the same time, since, in this reading of the events, she has become victorious over the entire company of men trying to protect, possess or harass her. However, her victory has commenced at the cost of her life and with the ultimate disintegration of her attempted sovereignty.

Insatiable and uncontrollable passion is also the central theme of the drama I am going to examine last. It is not due to reckless whim or thoughtless folly that Annabella – much like Beatrice in *The Changeling* – finds herself ensnared in an emotional and social trap. She is the female protagonist of one of the most provocative and controversial tragedies of the Caroline era: John Ford's *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*. Most probably written in the latter half of the 1620s and first published in quarto format in 1633, the play again centres on the theme of desire, but this time desire is brought to the extreme: it is incestuous desire between siblings. Owing to its explicit portrayal of incest and its graphic staging of passion descending into violent sexual coercion, the play remained largely ignored by the literary canon in the centuries following its composition. It was omitted from the 1831 collected edition of Ford's plays, and editors often sought to mitigate the shock of the title by altering it. Only in the second half of the twentieth century did critics begin to re-evaluate the play as a powerful exploration of individual passion in conflict with social and religious injunctions, situated within the ideological contradictions of its time. As port.hu declared in promotion of the 2010 Magyar Színház production in Budapest, "The performance is as if Tarantino had rewritten *Romeo and Juliet*." The intersection of revenge tragedy and contemporary film has been the subject of much recent criticism (Matuska), but in this staging this intersection was anatomical and dissective. One critic described the central set piece–a large plexiglass table in the intimate space of the studio theatre–as a hybrid between an autopsy table and a Renaissance banqueting hall (Kovács).

The drama unfolds in the household of Florio, a Parman citizen, where Giovanni, newly returned from university in Bologna, falls in love with his sister, Annabella. Though Father Bonaventura attempts to dissuade him, Giovanni defies both religious doctrine and social mores, confessing his love to Annabella. With the assistance of her governess, Putana, the two young lovers arrange secret meetings and carry on their illicit relationship. Eventually, however, Annabella becomes betrothed to the nobleman Soranzo. When her pregnancy is revealed, the enraged Soranzo confines her to her room, and the narrative shifts into the mode of a revenge tragedy. Determined to uncover the identity of the man who has dishonoured him, Soranzo enlists the help of his loyal servant, Vasques, who extracts the truth from Putana and has her blinded for her complicity.

Annabella, now aware of the mortal danger facing her brother-lover, writes a warning to Giovanni in her own blood – a dramaturgical solution we already saw in Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*. But he, blinded by passion, disregards her message and attends Soranzo's birthday banquet. Recognising that fate has conspired against them and that they can never be

together in life, Giovanni sneaks into Annabella's room, stabs her during a kiss, and then dashes into the banqueting hall with her blood-dripping heart skewered on his dagger. Before the horrified guests, he declares his love for the now-deceased Annabella and brandishes her heart as a grotesque token. He then murders Soranzo before being slain himself by Vasques's hired thugs.

For a long time, literary historians regarded this blood-drenched final scene – with its image of a frenzied man parading the severed, steaming heart of his beloved – as a transgression of aesthetic and moral boundaries, an extreme outburst of Stuart drama's increasingly 'decadent' obsession with passion and violence. Yet upon closer examination of the play's imagery and recurring motifs, it becomes evident that *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* is structured by the same ambiguity and undecidability that characterise early modern revenge tragedy in general. Ford makes a bold theatrical attempt to render this ambivalence in its most dramatic form.

The final tableau may be interpreted as a moral allegory grounded in the Renaissance emblematic tradition – an image-laden declaration of moral themes such as the "grammar of the heart," sacrificial love, repentance, and spiritual renewal (Lara 171). It can also be decoded as an ironical celebration of love's victory – although it is the male avenger who stages the ostentation of the female lover's heart, similarly to how Vindice holds up Gloriana's skull in his prologue, we can still decipher the heart as an emblem of Annabella's triumph over the hostile and corrupt environment. But it also admits of more cynical or ironic readings (and stagings), in which the scene is stripped of transcendence: what remains is a lump of flesh, a butchered organ impaled on a dagger of vengeance, devoid of higher meaning (Neill 36). Passion, in this reading, is not to be located in the bodily humours of classical theory, nor would Annabella, in opening Giovanni's chest with the dagger he offers her (1.2.216), find the secret of love. The body, despite the era's burgeoning fascination with public dissections and the anatomical theatre, ultimately proves mute on such questions. Anatomy fails; insight must instead be sought in the mind, the soul, or reason itself – which, in the emerging Cartesian world model, is increasingly conceptualised as separate from the body.

Following the anatomical experiments of early modern drama, and the passionate, corporeal extremes of Stuart theatre – not so much decadent as radically invested in the mutual dissection of body and mind, matter and affect, the corporeal and the mental – the upcoming periods of the Restoration and eighteenth-century classicism largely abandoned this "theatre of dissection." In its place, they developed new dramatic models that sought to represent the political and spiritual conditions of bourgeois society and their influence on the modern, Cartesian subject.

In sum, the subversive women of Stuart tragedy embody the unresolved contradictions of their transitory historical moment: they are at once emblems of patriarchal violence and agents of destabilisation who resist containment even in death. Their fragmented

bodies and transgressive desires reflect the epistemological crisis of an age that witnesses the clash of medieval symbolism and emerging modern rationality, ritual meaning and empirical materiality. Revenge tragedy stages female characters in emblematic tableaux that defy interpretive closure, transforming the stage into a site of cultural negotiation where the limits of subjectivity, gender, and knowledge itself were put to the test. Even if these subversive female characters must ultimately be silenced, mutilated, or annihilated, their persistent capacity to redirect meaning and unsettle authority ensures that they remain an irreducibly disruptive presence. Stuart drama thus not only exposes the fault lines of its own patriarchal culture but also grants its women agency and a paradoxical sovereignty – one forged in ambiguity and enacted through the dissected, anatomised body.

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