

“There is nothing sure in mortality – but mortality”: Notes on Middleton’s Way with Death

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The statement in the title of this essay (*The Revenger’s Tragedy*, III.vi.85-86¹), commenting on the vanity of the human wish to come to terms with mortality, unequivocally summarises Middleton’s view of the issue. As usual in his work, however, the mode is unconventional, offering surprising and unusual elements – as this paper will try to prove.

The relation between Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* and Middleton’s most famous revenge tragedy has been tackled by a number of scholars². Both plays, like most exemplars of this formulaic genre (from Thomas Kyd to John Marston and beyond), find the source

¹ The edition used is the one by MacDonald P. Jackson, in *Thomas Middleton. The Collected Works*, eds Gary Taylor and John Lavagnino, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2007.

² About the relation between the two texts, see Daniela Guardamagna, *Thomas Middleton, drammaturgo giacomiano. Il canone ritrovato*, Roma, Carocci, 2018, pp. 143-45; about Shakespeare and Middleton, see the last chapter, pp. 220-40.

of their structural features in Seneca³, whose *Tenne Tragedies* were published in English in 1581⁴ after being translated and published separately in the previous years. But it is Seneca's philosophy which is most relevant here. His stoicism and his acceptance of death may have inspired Hamlet's lines in V.ii:

We defy augury. There is a special providence in the fall of a sparrow.
If it be, 'tis not to come. If it be not to come, it will be now. If it be not
now, yet it will come. The readiness is all. (V.ii.197-200)⁵

The *memento mori* and *danse macabre* elements characterise many of the protagonists' attitudes providing a focus on life and death. The pervasive imagery of rottenness is indeed an essential characteristic of *Hamlet*. From Marcellus' notorious sentence, "Something is rotten in the state of Denmark" (I.iv.90), to the "unweeded garden / That grows to seed" and the "things rank and gross in nature" in Hamlet's first soliloquy (I.ii.129ff), or, in I.v, "the fat weed / That [according to the Folio] rots itself [...] on Lethe wharf" (I.v.32-33)⁶ up to the "rank offence" (III.iii.36) smelling to Heaven which is mentioned by Claudius in his unsuccessful attempt at praying, rottenness is constitutive of the atmosphere of the play. However, all the elements which connect mortality with Hamlet's and Vindice's discourse need to be briefly isolated for a clearer vision of the theme.

Hamlet meditates on mortality from the very beginning, in particular from I.ii⁷: on his "sullied flesh" (if we accept this

³ See, above all, the still fundamental study on revenge tragedy by Bowers: Fredson Bowers, *Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy: 1587-1642*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1940.

⁴ The apocryphal *Octavia* is comprised in the Elizabethan publication, as it was thought at the time to be certainly Senecan; only more recent philological research has relegated it to the field of apocrypha.

⁵ William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, eds Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor, London, Arden Shakespeare (Third Series), 2006 (based on Q2).

⁶ See the Folio edition in William Shakespeare, *Hamlet: The Texts of 1603 and 1623*, eds Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor, London, Arden Shakespeare (Third Series), 2006. Q2's version "roots itself" is less pregnant as far as imagery is concerned; rottenness is sufficiently evoked, in any case, by the "fat weed" immersed in the stagnant waters of Lethe.

⁷ This is probably the reason why Peter Brook chose to stage his 2000-2002 versions of *Hamlet*, from the Bouffes du Nord in Paris to London Old Vic to the Venice Biennale,

convincing emendation for Q2's "sallied", which many editors suggest), on the frailty of the human condition (again in I.ii), and, later, on the corruption of the flesh in his exchange with Polonius:

For if the sun breed maggots in a dead dog, being a god kissing carrion
– have you a daughter?

[...]

Let her not walk i'th' sun; conception is a blessing but as your daughter
may conceive, friend – look to't. (II.ii.178-83)

or in his discussion about Polonius' body with Claudius, in IV.iii:

CLAUDIUS

Now, Hamlet, where's Polonius?

HAMLET

At supper.

CLAUDIUS

At supper! Where?

HAMLET

Not where he eats, *but where 'a is eaten*⁸. *A certain convocation of politic worms are e'en at him.* (IV.iii.16-20)

And again:

HAMLET

Your worm is your only emperor for diet. We fat all creatures else to fat us, and we fat ourselves for maggots. Your fat king and your lean beggar is but variable service, two dishes but to one table. That's the end. (IV.iii.21-24).

Also the splendid "quintessence of dust" passage (II.ii.261-74), in spite of the elated consideration of man as a paragon, akin to God and the angels, ends as an epitome of the medieval vision of man as dust, to which he will return.

and further, starting from this soliloquy, cutting all the previous paraphernalia on the castle ramparts and at Claudius' court. From his last version Brook derived the film *La tragédie d'Hamlet*, produced in 2002, with Adrian Lester in the title role.

⁸ Here and elsewhere, italics are mine. One of the many echoes of *Hamlet* in *The Revenger's Tragedy* has been identified in these lines: when poison gnaws at the Duke's mouth, Vindice serenely contemplates his teeth, and adds: "Then those that did eat are eaten" (III.v.162). See also note 2.

The obsession with rotting corpses permeates most of the play. It is the first Gravedigger who jokes about rotting corpses (V.i), but the theme is amplified and developed by the protagonist. The same scene hosts the famous exchange about Alexander the Great:

HAMLET

Dost thou think Alexander looked o' this fashion i' th' earth?

HORATIO

E'en so.

HAMLET

And smelt so? Pah! [...]

To what base uses we may return, Horatio! Why may not imagination trace the noble dust of Alexander⁹ till 'a find it stopping a bung-hole?

HORATIO

'Twere to consider too curiously to consider so.

HAMLET

No, faith, not a jot. But to follow him thither with modesty enough and likelihood to lead it: Alexander died, Alexander was buried, Alexander returneth to dust, the dust is earth, of earth we make loam, and why of that loam whereto he was converted might they not stop a beer-barrel? Imperious Caesar, dead and turned to clay,
Might stop a hole to keep the wind away.

Oh, that that earth which kept the world in awe,

Should patch a wall t' expel the water's flaw. (V.i.187-205)

A less grotesque, rather an affectionate meditation is the one about Yorick's skull:

Alas, poor Yorick. I knew him, Horatio. A fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy. He hath bore me on his back a thousand times, and now how abhorred in my imagination it is. My gorge rises at it. Here hung those lips that I have kissed I know not how oft. Where be your gibes now – your gambols, your songs, your flashes of merriment that were wont to set the table on a roar? [...] Now get you to my lady's table and tell her, let her paint an inch thick, to this favour she must come. Make her laugh at that. (V.i.174-84)

⁹ "Noble dust": everybody's fate is supposed to be levelled by the Great Equaliser, but an emperor's dust remains nobler than the one of a citizen, whatever its uses after death.

Here, Hamlet's reflections on the sinfulness of female making up, typical of the times, connect with the thoughts on mortality that Vindice offers on the subject. The very first is the contemplation of Gloriana's skull, which led most critics to postulate an obvious derivation of Vindice from Hamlet, attributing the presence of the skull on the Globe's stage to the influence of the older playwright on the younger¹⁰:

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 complexïon. (I.i.14-22)

Elements of mortality resurface here: the skull, the orbits ("unsightly rings") now empty of Gloriana's luminous eyes, once sparkling like diamonds and, at the same time, associating her to piety ("heaven-pointed") but failing to share the gems durability¹¹.

Later, when Vindice is gleefully anticipating the Duke's killing, meditations on Gloriana's beauty again assume the tone of *memento mori*:

HIPPOLITO
 Is this the form that living shone so bright?
 VINDICE
 The very same;
And now methinks I could e'en chide myself
For doting on her beauty [...]

¹⁰ Even though Henry Chettle's *The Tragedy of Hoffman*, where the father's skeleton is fondled by the protagonist, might also be responsible for the borrowing. On the relationship between *Hamlet* and *The Revenger's Tragedy*, see note 2.

¹¹ See Brian Gibbons' edition of the play: "The diamond ring's durability is ironically contrasted to the eyes of the spiritually bright but tragically short-lived beloved. Vindice is imaginatively preoccupied with eyes and eye sockets" (Brian Gibbons, ed., *The Revenger's Tragedy*, London-New York, New Mermaids, 1991, note to I.i.19-20).

Does every proud and self-affecting dame
 Camphor her face *for this?* And grieve her maker
 In sinful baths of milk, when many an infant starves
 For her superfluous outside – *all for this?* (III.v.67-87)

As in the first passage, the memory of Gloriana's virtue is strangely soiled when Vindice's praise seems to imply that it will inevitably induce men to sin: "Who *now bids twenty pound a-night*, prepares / Music, perfumes, and sweetmeats?" (III.v.88-89). As above, "the uprightest man" sins "with looking after her" (I.i.23-25). For Vindice, human ways cannot be but sinful: the "uprightest man" is one "[t]hat sin[s] but seven times a day". Chastity is only possible in death, and the mortal mask, grotesquely imagined as appearing in banqueting halls and lavish dinners, is the frightening reminder of impending doom:

Thou mayst lie chaste now. It were fine, methinks,
 To have thee seen at revels, forgetful feasts,
 And unclean brothels. Sure 'twould fright the sinner
 And make him a good coward, put a reveller
 Out of his antic amble. (III.v.90-94)

Vindice's conclusion is a hard statement undeserved by the virtuous lady and, while insisting on the early modern condemnation of cosmetics, looks like an extempore quirk of the protagonist's somber mood: "[S]ee, ladies, with false forms / You deceive men, but cannot deceive worms" (III.v.97-98).

Echoes of the dance of death fill the speeches of the protagonists of both plays. The profound sentence which gives the title to this paper, instead, is pronounced in a very farcical moment by one of the most unreliable and ludicrous villains in the play. Ambizioso, the Duchess's oldest son, and his brother Supervacuo have just been thwarted in their attempt to have the heir to the Dukedom, the Duke's son Lussurioso, executed for his mistaken attack on the Duke; unwillingly they procure instead the death of their own brother Junior, who is in jail, subject to judgement for the rape of the virtuous wife of the noble Lord Antonio.

The two grotesque villains have just stopped gloating about the success of their plans; in fact they quarrel as to whose brilliant idea

it was to strenuously defend Lussurioso against the rage of the Duke ("O, how we pleaded!", III.vi.63). Cherishing the bundle which they think contains the head of their step-brother, they find that it holds their own youngest brother's severed head. One of the most frankly farcical and, at the same time, gruesome moments in the tragedy is the reaction they display when the officer who carried out Junior's execution tells them the truth. Supervacuo proceeds to threaten him, and Ambitioso pronounces the sentence which is being discussed:

OFFICER

The Duke's son,
My lord, had his release before you came.

AMBITIOSO

Whose head's that then?

OFFICER

His whom you left command for, your own brother's.

[...]

AMBITIOSO

Our brother's!

Oh, furies!

SUPERVACUO

Plagues!

AMBITIOSO

Confusions!

[...]

SUPERVACUO

Fell it out so accursedly?

AMBITIOSO

So damnedly?

SUPERVACUO

Villain, I'll brain thee with it.

OFFICER

Oh, my good lord! [*Exit Officer*]

SUPERVACUO

The devil overtake thee!

[...]

AMBITIOSO

A murrain meet 'em! There's none of these wiles that ever come to good: *I see now there is nothing sure in mortality but mortality.* (III.vi.70-77)

A severed head used as a weapon to hit an opponent is probably one of the most offensive elements in a gruesome play, and it is often cut in performance¹². The sentence about mortality, instead, generally survives.

The contrast of this basic statement with similar ones in the majority of early modern plays is worth being briefly dealt with. When Hamlet expresses his evangelical meditations on the mysterious ways of Powers above (“There is a special providence in the fall of a sparrow”, V.ii.197-98)¹³ or when Edgar convinces a healed Gloucester that suffering and death must be accepted and that “ripeness is all”, the audience or the reader cannot but associate some of these reflections, expressed by the protagonists of the plays, with the author’s thoughts: it is an understandable and probably justified attitude.

Even when Macbeth describes life as a story told by an idiot and acted by a poor player, it is difficult not to take his words as a statement of the playwright’s vision. But Shakespeare was of course very effective in expressing an idea of life he did *not* necessarily share, to produce multi-dimensional characters whose existential parable leads them to nothingness. In any case, the public is bound to partake in the protagonist’s nihilism.

It is, instead, very rare that a thought proposed to the audience’s awareness of the human condition should be entrusted to a character as shallow as Ambitioso: one which the audience is not expected to sympathise with or feel respect for. The depth of the sentence is certainly in contrast with whatever else Ambitioso utters in the play. This is a rare phenomenon, which finds its cause

¹² Even Declan Donnellan, in his recent production of *The Revenger’s Tragedy* at the Piccolo Teatro di Milano (which opened on October 9, 2018, and afterwards toured Northern Italy, stopping at the Teatro di Roma in February-March 2019), revels in the grotesque elements of the play but avoids ‘braining’ the Officer with Junior’s severed head, resorting instead to a fit where Ambitioso is only calmed by a cigarette that Supervacuo promptly lights for him, giving him the kind of solace a baby finds in his pacifier. In this production, Fausto Cabra played Vindice, Massimiliano Speziani the Duke, Ivan Alovio Lussurioso, Pia Lanciotti both the Duchess and Vindice’s mother Gratiana, David Meden Ambitioso, Christian Di Filippo Supervacuo, Errico Liguori Spurio, Raffaele Esposito Hippolito, Marta Malvestiti Castiza, Alessandro Bandini Junior.

¹³ The sentence derives from Matthew 10.29.

in a founding feature of Middleton's dramaturgy. It has relevant consequences.

First of all, its origin: alienation – both Swiftian and Brechtian *ante litteram* – is a typical strategy in Middleton's production¹⁴, one which most critics had already recognised in his work in the last century, speaking of his "clinical detachment", his "photographic realism", his dispassionate attitude to his characters. None of the pity John Webster reserves to his protagonists – even the sinners – is explicit in Middleton, not even for the few innocents. In the corpus of his work, the innocent and the guilty alike are simply 'shown' (as in Brecht's *Strassescene*) to the audience, which is left free to choose its own stance. They are exposed, manifested, in a sort of epiphany¹⁵.

There is no sentimental hierarchy between protagonists and minor characters. The choral voice resulting from the concourse of 'main' and 'secondary' characters is thus heightened, something which is often lost in the necessary economy of modern performance¹⁶. Middleton's original, multidimensional perspective

¹⁴ Cf. Guardamagna, especially p. 45; see p. 25 for the definitions of which no reference is given here.

¹⁵ Middleton reserves this dispassionate attitude to most characters in his plays: suffice it to quote the detached glance which in *Michaelmas Term* contemplates both evil Quomodo and innocent, though unpardonably gullible, Mr Easy alike. In *The Revenger's Tragedy*, where the protagonist Vindice is represented as slowly transforming himself from the wronged party into a villain in his own right, there is no explicit indication or comment about this descending curve. Bianca and Leantio in *Women, Beware Women*, Beatrice-Joanna and De Flores in *The Changeling* undergo the same kind of analysis. There are virtually no exceptions, from self-deceiving Vermandero, Alsemero and Alonso de Piracquo, to the latter's grim and willfully determined brother, up to sinful Livia, to the deceived and in turn deceiving Isabella and Hippolito. Even the virtue of Isabella in *The Changeling's* subplot is simply 'made visible', with no comments or participation.

¹⁶ A *topos* of criticism on Shakespearean plays is a cautionary warning on the risk of highly reducing their impact in production when cutting secondary characters. Of course, an early modern play needs a cast which, even resorting to doubling, is more numerous than most private companies can afford. British actor-managers of the late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century theatre, like the *mattatori* and *primedonne* in the Italian theatre, focused on protagonists and main plots to give pre-eminence to their role and to reduce the expenses. This aspect has survived in more recent performances. A number of reviews Agostino Lombardo wrote in his decade-long commitment to militant criticism dealt with this issue. Cutting minor characters like Cinna the Poet in *Julius Caesar*, torn to pieces by a senseless mob incensed by Antony's speech ("I am not Cinna the conspirator [...] It is no matter, his name's

has the effect of drastically reducing the functional distance between protagonists and minor characters, thus enhancing the polyphonic quality of early modern drama.

The ending of most revenge tragedies, including *Hamlet* and *The Revenger's Tragedy*, sees the corrupt rulers divested of power, and their nemesis – the revengers – losing their lives in the process, carrying to the grave with them innocent and guilty parties alike. The carnage on stage is a pregnant visual comment on the vanity of human wishes. The quest for power and the quest for justice are equally vain: King Claudius will have to relinquish the crown in death, while Lussurioso has no time to enjoy it before being stabbed to death by Vindice, after having lovingly anticipated it throughout the play. The revengers' progress is doomed to fail from the outset of the plot.

In these tragedies, the sequence of events unfolds like the voyage of a *Narrenschiff* ("Hieronymo's mad again") in a maze of vain anticipations, where the only realistic stance for the seamen is to be conscious of the expected wreck. Hamlet's lucid awareness of his fate is one with grotesque Ambitioso's glimpse of the human condition: hence the title of this paper.

Cinna; pluck but his name out of his heart, and turn him going"), risks lessening the radical representation of the irrationality of the mob, uncontrollable but at the same time easily orchestrated by the clever manipulator. To quote an example, Giorgio De Lullo's production of *Julius Caesar* in 1971 cut the episode, and Lombardo underlined how this 'emptied' and 'eroded' the impact of the play, limiting it to a more private, sentimental plane, thus neglecting the implicit fundamental reflections on the behaviour of the 'monster multitude'.