HiStories Re-told
ISSN 2283-8759
pp. 148-178 (2022)

The Revenger's Tragedy: Date, Title, Theatre, Text

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As well as fixing a precise date for the play, this study of *The Revenger's Tragedy* offers new evidence for identifying it as the supposedly lost *The Viper and Her Brood*. The reattribution implies that its traditional title is spurious, and the belief that it was written for the King's Men and performed at the Globe is mistaken. It was a Blackfriars play, and commissioned by Robert Keysar, manager of the Blackfriars Children. The essay also examines current editorial responses to the play's text, noting places where commentary is needed but absent, or offered but erroneous.

Keywords: Thomas Middleton, Authorship, Revenge tragedy, Private theatre, Lost plays

No other major English play has had as much bad luck as *The Revenger's Tragedy*. Its title is probably a printer's guess, and not the one its author gave it; the acting company advertised on its Quarto title-page almost certainly did not act it; and when, after remaining anonymous for fifty years, it finally acquired an author, the author it acquired was not the person who wrote it. These errors, certain or probable, went unchallenged for three hundred years, but in the last century the play's fortunes began to turn. Close, independent, carefully objective analyses of the Quarto text by Jackson, Lake, and

Price established beyond serious dispute that the true author of *The Revenger's Tragedy* was not Cyril Tourneur but Thomas Middleton (Price 1960; Lake 1971; Lake 1975; Jackson 1979; Jackson 1981), and the reassignment of its authorship has boosted interest in the play. Annotated editions have appeared under Middleton's name[1], as have critical discussions which are unapologetic about treating it as his[2]. The present essay seeks further to embed Middleton's play in the canon of his work by suggesting that questions which it continues to pose, concerning its date, title, theatrical provenance, and the accuracy of its text, can be resolved or at least clarified once his authorship is assumed.

Unless otherwise stated, Middleton references, including those for *The Revenger's Tragedy*, follow the Oxford *Collected Works* (Taylor and Lavagnino 2007a); those for Shakespeare the second edition of *The Norton Shakespeare* (Greenblatt 2008). The first edition of the play, a Quarto printed at the end of 1607 (some copies are dated 1608), is identified as Q.

Date

Middleton probably wrote *The Revenger's Tragedy* in April 1606. He cannot have done so later than 7 October 1607, for on that day its printer and publisher, George Eld, asserted his ownership of the copyright by entering the play, along with a Middleton comedy, *A Trick to Catch the Old One*, in the Stationers' Register. Since a dramatist sold all rights in his play when he sold it to the theatre (Wilson 1970, 19), and theatre managers tended not to release plays for publication while they were drawing audiences to see them performed, it is unlikely that composition occurred any later than the previous year.

Further evidence permits a more precise date. Hippolito's delighted anticipation of the destruction of the ducal regime, "There's gunpowder i'th' court, / Wildfire at midnight" (II.ii.168-69), can hardly pre-date the Gunpowder Plot of 5 November 1605,

[1] See e.g. Jackson 1983; Loughrey and Taylor 1988; Jackson 2007; Smith 2012; Minton 2019.

[2] See e.g. Holdsworth 1990b; Stachniewski 1990; Chakravorty 1996; Neill 1996; Gottlieb 2015; Guardamagna 2018.

foiled when guards found the gunpowder in a midnight search of the cellars beneath the House of Lords (Holdsworth 1990c, 119). Extensive borrowings from *King Lear*, which Shakespeare completed in December 1605 or January 1606 (Taylor 1982, 412-13), point to a date in the first half of 1606. *Lear* was not in print until 1608, so Middleton must be remembering the play in performance, and in 1606 there were no commercial performances of plays after 10 July, when plague closed the London theatres until the following January (Wilson 1927, 124). Two other Middleton plays written in this same six-month period, *A Yorkshire Tragedy* and *Timon of Athens* (the latter a collaboration with Shakespeare), narrow the date still further, for both also borrow from *Lear* but are themselves borrowed from in *The Revenger's Tragedy* (Holdsworth 2017, 379-81).

There is also the question of *The Puritan Widow*. This Middleton comedy, printed and published by Eld in 1607, has verbal links with *The Revenger's Tragedy* which identify it as the later, imitating play (382), and the two plays are further connected in that both respond, though in different ways, to the Act to Restrain Abuses of Players, a parliamentary bill banning profanity and "irreligious swearing" on the stage which became law on 27 May 1606. In *The Revenger's Tragedy* there are two occasions, at IV.ii.46 and IV.iv.14, where it seems that replacing "God" with a more acceptable alternative was not clearly indicated in the manuscript the printer worked from, with a consequent muddling of sense (see Minton 2019, 239, 255, 305). These attempts at revision indicate that the play was already in existence before the ban came into force, and the offending (or soon to be offending) word caught Middleton's or someone at the playhouse's notice as he looked through the completed text – unmethodically, as other uses of "God" were left untouched. The changes need not have been made after 27 May: the bill was passed in the Commons on 5 April and made steady progress through the Commons and the Lords before receiving the royal assent seven weeks later (Gazzard 2010, 518). The theatres would have been increasingly conscious of what was coming.

By contrast, in *The Puritan Widow* the ban is overtly alluded to and spoken of as already in effect. The arrival of Corporal Oath, whose name calls attention to the soldier's proverbial fondness for

scurrilous language, alarms the widow's servants, since he is "the man that we are forbidden to keep company withal". They "must not swear", and the corporal's very presence will get them "soundly whipped for swearing" (I.iii.1-9)[3]. The joke dates Middleton's last comedy for the Children of Paul's to the weeks following the May Act, and this is supported by Pieboard's consulting of an almanac for 15 July, which is said to be "today" and a Tuesday, as indeed it was in 1606 (III.v.241). In choosing this date, Middleton would have allowed time for the play to reach the theatre. He was not to know that when that date arrived the theatres would be closed.

Taken together, these indicators of its date assembled above position *The Revenger's Tragedy* in the following sequence:

Shakespeare, *King Lear*: November 1605-January 1606;
Middleton, *A Yorkshire Tragedy*: January 1606;
Middleton and Shakespeare, *Timon of Athens*: February-March 1606;
Middleton, *The Revenger's Tragedy*: April-May 1606;
Middleton, *The Puritan Widow*: June 1606;
Shakespeare, *Macbeth*: June-July 1606.

This gives Middleton a very crowded schedule, even allowing for the fact that *A Yorkshire Tragedy* is unusually short and his share of *Timon* was less than half the whole play. It leaves no room for additional work, which means that Middleton's other comedies for Paul's Boys, often dated 1604-6 (*The Phoenix*, *A Mad World, My Masters*, *Michaelmas Term*, *A Trick to Catch the Old One*), can be no later than 1605.

The April-May date for *The Revenger's Tragedy* explains its many points of contact with *Volpone*, which was acted just before or just after Middleton's play at the end of March 1606 (Parker 1983, 8-9). Both plays are savage satires set in the luridly corrupt Italy of the English imagination, and both employ Italian type-names to present their characters as embodiments of particular virtues and vices; both feature a protagonist (Vindice, Volpone) who delights

[3] The reference is noted by Dutton 2005, 15-16.

in impersonation, and whose habit of congratulating himself on his own cunning propels him to disaster; both begin with a long soliloquy in which the protagonist holds up and addresses an object (a gold coin, a skull) which he offers as a governing symbol of the obsessions which drive both him and the world of his play; and both include a scene of failed seduction in which an allegorically named woman (Castiza: Italian *castità*, "chastity"; Celia, "the heavenly one") resists an assault on her virtue by the protagonist which is first verbal and then aided by a display of gold and finery. There are also what may be verbal echoes, such as Volpone's invocation of "Riches, the dumb god that givest all men tongues" (I.i.22), and Lussurioso's claim that "Gold, though it be dumb, does utter the best thanks" (*The Revenger's Tragedy*, I.iii.28).

Which play influenced which? Though he regularly cast himself as loftily independent of his theatrical contemporaries (once describing Middleton as "a base fellow"), Jonson was perfectly ready to plunder them for plot material and dialogue when it suited him. Even *Volpone*, wholly Jonsonian as it seems, is yet another play which freely echoes *King Lear* (Musgrove 1957, 22-37), while its plot devices of a fake bed-ridden invalid visited in his sickroom by characters feigning concern but actually hoping for profit, and a money-mad schemer who overreaches himself by announcing his own death, are lifted respectively from *A Mad World* and *Michaelmas Term*. That he knew *The Revenger's Tragedy* is attested by his borrowing from it in later plays (Holdsworth 1980).

Nevertheless, even if one discounts the other evidence, it is just as possible that *Volpone* is the imitated and therefore the earlier play. Middleton had taken material from Jonson before this date – in *The Phoenix* (c. 1604) from *Poetaster*, for example, and in *A Trick* (c. 1605) from *Cynthia's Revels* – and his debts to Jonson continued into the following decade, in *The Triumphs of Truth* (1613), *The Widow* (1615), *A Fair Quarrel* (1616), and *Hengist, King of Kent* (1620)[4]. As separate evidence favours it, the date of April-May 1606 for *The Revenger's Tragedy* remains the best choice.

[4] See Baskervill 1908, 116-19; George 1966, 154, 299; George 1971; Levine 1975, 217.

Title and Theatre

If this date is right, it becomes virtually certain that "The Revenger's Tragedy" was not the title Middleton gave his play. He called it "The Viper and Her Brood". Three years after writing it, in Trinity Term (that is, in June or July) 1609, Middleton was sued in the Court of King's Bench by Robert Keysar, manager of the Blackfriars Children, who complained that Middleton owed him £16, and that on 6 May 1606 he had given a signed undertaking to pay him £8 10 shillings (perhaps half of the larger debt, plus interest) by the 15th of the following month, but had not done so. Middleton countered that on the very next day, 7 May 1606, he had delivered a play to Keysar, and Keysar had accepted it as payment. The play was "quendam librum lusiorum tragicum vocatum the vyper & her broode": "a certain playbook, a tragedy called *The Viper and Her Brood*".

No other documents survive to tell us how the case was settled, but we can be sure that Middleton was referring to a play he had just written. Why else would a private-theatre manager have lent a dramatist writing mainly for the private theatres such a large sum, other than as an advance for new work? Besides, £16 was around the going rate for a newly commissioned play at this date (Albright notes payments of between £10 and £20 in 1612 [Albright 1927, 221-23]), and in mid-1606 Keysar was "using bonds to guarantee the delivery of plays" (Munro 2020, 271), as he sought to build up a new stable of playwrights following Jonson and Marston's withdrawal from the Blackfriars earlier in the year. Munro cites two bonds with Dekker for £10 and £14 on 4 June, just four weeks after Middleton claimed to have delivered *The Viper and Her Brood*. If Middleton's memory of the date was accurate, he would have accepted the advance from Keysar in March, completed the play in the first week of May, then turned immediately to writing *The Puritan Widow*, which he delivered to the Children of Paul's (assuming the attribution on Eld's title-page can be trusted) in mid- or late June, before plague closed the theatres on 10 July. There is no room in Middleton's 1606 schedule for an additional play. *The Revenger's Tragedy* and *The Viper and Her Brood* must be one and the same.

The text provides strong evidence that *The Viper and Her Brood* was the play's intended title. Vipers served to express a view of women as lustful, treacherous, and lethal, thanks to the belief that the female viper decapitated the male at the moment of orgasm; they were also bywords for filial ingratitude and malice, as the young were thought to kill their mother by eating their way out of her womb, in revenge, it was sometimes suggested, for their father's death. More generally, vipers could characterise any kind of murderous malevolence, especially if it involved poisoning, actual or figurative. In a sermon of 1620, for example, the crucifiers of Christ are "a broode of vipers […] full of venom and malice" (Denison 1620, 124).

The play has many references, both implied and overt, to what I take to be its real title. It has two mothers, Gratiana and the Duchess, who are vipers not only in that they commit acts of treachery against their families, but in being betrayed, threatened, and preyed on by their children. This link between them is asserted visually when at IV.iii.5 one of the Duchess's stepsons runs at his stepmother and stepbrother "*with a rapier*", and twelve lines later Vindice and Hippolito drag out their mother "*with daggers in their hands*". Both mothers are associated with poison. The Duchess twice considers a plan to poison her husband (I.ii.94-97; III.v.211), though for the moment she will betray him only sexually, and thus "kill him in his forehead" (I.ii.107). Gratiana (who in stage directions, speech prefixes and dialogue is always "Mother", apart from a single use of her name) is "that poisonous woman" (II.i.232) whose mother's milk has "turned to quarlèd poison" (IV.iv.7), and who finds that her own words poison her (236).

Elsewhere the viper analogy is more explicit. Spurio is "like strong poison" who "eats" into his father the Duke (II.ii.159); Junior Brother is "a serpent" who wishes to "venom" the souls of his siblings (I.iv.62; III.iv.75); and Gloriana inflicts on the Duke a version of the male viper's erotic destiny when, thanks to her own poisoned face, she is able to "kiss his lips to death" (III.v.105). His revenge achieved, Vindice is happy to die after "a nest of dukes", glancing at the familiar "nest of snakes" (V.iii.125). Gratiana prompts the most sustained parallel. As well as being a "poisonous woman", she is a "black serpent" (IV.iv.131), a "dam" whose words

"will sting" (II.i.131-36), and who has hatched from "that shell of mother" which "breeds a bawd" (IV.iv.10). Middleton may be recalling Brutus's depiction of Caesar as an "adder" whose "sting" requires that the conspirators "kill him in the shell" (*Julius Caesar*, II.i.14-34). Certainly, in having Vindice label his mother "yon dam", he intends a reference to the standard term for the mature female viper, as in Richard Harvey's reminder that "the Vipers Broode […] kill their owne damme which bred and brought them vp to life" (Harvey 1590, 151-52). Gratiana's words will sting not because they will deliver a sharp rebuke to Castiza, but because they will inject her virtue with poison (as they seem briefly to have done at IV.iv.99-135).

Why and when did the play lose its title and become *The Revenger's Tragedy*? Perhaps Keysar disliked what Middleton had called it and insisted on the change; but would he have rejected something as suggestive and intriguing as "The Viper and Her Brood" in favour of this alternative – safe in its way, but bland and clichéd, and about as striking as "The Lover's Comedy" as the title of a play of the opposite genre? Focus should shift, I think, from Keysar to George Eld, and from May 1606 to October 1607, when Eld bought the play, together with *A Trick to Catch the Old One*, from the Blackfriars theatre, and set about entering them in the Stationers' Register and having them printed. There is a choice of explanations. Perhaps, the manuscripts of the two plays which arrived in Eld's shop were incomplete. As both were in Middleton's handwriting, they were some one and a half to two years old, and would have been used, then gathered dust, and perhaps deteriorated, in the theatre's archive. Perhaps, what came to be called *The Revenger's Tragedy* had no title, author, or acting company indicated but began with the first scene of the play proper. *A Trick* had its title, but nothing else. In order to register the plays, Eld did not need to give their author or acting company, but he did need to give their titles, so for the tragedy he had to create one. Not wanting to read the entire text (it was only a play, after all), he would have seen that a character named Vindice spoke the opening speech, and in it called on "vengeance", "tragedy", and "revenge". Had he read further, he would have noticed that Vindice translated his own name: "a revenger" (IV.ii.173). He

would have felt on safe ground choosing the title he did. On this view Eld was acting honestly, and exactly like Sir George Buc, the Master of the Revels, four years later, when, faced with the manuscript of another Middleton tragedy devoid of all information about the play, he invented a title for it: "this second Maydens tragedy (for it hath no name inscribed)". Unlike Buc's, however, Eld's choice was plausible enough to stick.

Having identified the two plays in the Register by means of titles only, Eld printed them one after the other, from the same stock of paper, beginning towards the end of 1607. He printed the tragedy first, adding "sundry times Acted, by the Kings Majesties Servants" to the still authorless title-page, and stopping the press to change the date from 1607 to 1608 as printing ran into the following year. Turning then to *A Trick*, he again added only an acting company ("lately Acted, by the Children of Paules"), but new information about the play reached him while it was at press, of a kind which would assist sales of the Quarto. He recast the title-page so that it now included the author ("T. M."), details of a court performance, and some theatrical history ("in Action, both at Paules, and the Black-Fryers"), this last piece of information establishing that Keysar and the Blackfriars had owned both *The Viper* and *A Trick*.

The other explanation of Eld's managing of *The Revenger's Tragedy*'s manuscript into print involves the likelihood of deliberate deception. Perhaps, the play's title was missing, compelling Eld to make one up, but the naming of the acting company as the King's Men is a different matter. How did Eld come into simultaneous possession of two plays from such widely different sources, allowing the stationers' clerk to bundle them into a single entry in the Register? We have to believe that he bought one from the capital's leading players, an adult company who acted at a public theatre, the Globe, just as he acquired the other from the Blackfriars private theatre, occupied by the child actors managed by Robert Keysar. Throughout the Register, that is from 1554 to 1640, this combination of such disparately sourced plays, in single joint entries or in consecutive entries by the same publisher, is highly anomalous, and quite possibly unique. The link, the common point of origin, is always the theatre company, and this applies whether a single author is involved, or two, or several. Take the following

handful of examples from different points in the Register, where the same publisher has brought two or more plays to be registered on the same day, where different authors are concerned but not named, and a single theatre company is concerned but is not named either:

14 May 1594: *The Famous Victories of Henry V* and *James IV* (Queen's Men);
13 August 1599: *The Spanish Tragedy* and *Longshanks* (Admiral's);
24 July 1600: *1* and *2 Sir John Oldcastle* and *Captain Thomas Stukeley* (Admiral's);
6 August 1607: *The Puritan Widow* and *Northward Ho* (Paul's Boys);
15 February 1612: *The Nobleman* and *The Twins' Tragedy* (King's);
2 April 1640: *The Swaggering Damsel* and *The Prisoner* (Queen Henrietta's Men).

In every case, it is clear that the publisher has obtained his plays from the same theatre company in a single transaction. On these grounds alone, it is more than likely that the Quarto's attribution of Middleton's tragedy to the King's Men is false. Like *A Trick*, and like the other two plays for which Eld acted as publisher, *The Revenger's Tragedy* was a private-theatre play, written for and acted at the Blackfriars by Keysar's company. If support for this conclusion were needed, it is provided by the Quarto of *The Puritan Widow*, published by Eld a few months earlier, where "Written by W. S." appears on the title-page: a yet more blatant attempt to boost sales of the play by associating it not directly with the King's Men, but with their leading dramatist.

Text and Commentary

The following notes supplement editorial commentary on the play and offer corrections to textual decisions where emendation, or failure to emend, is in my judgement mistaken. The three fullest editions currently available are those of Foakes 1966, Jackson 2007, and Minton 2019. Foakes's, a version of which is unfortunately still in print in a Revels Student edition (1996), contains errors and distortions of evidence which form the basis of his claim that

Tourneur wrote the play. (For a small sample, see Lake 1971.)[5] I pass over most of these false claims here, in the hope that this edition will soon be cited only to illustrate a discredited phase of authorship study which took hold in the previous century. Jackson's is the best edition of the three, even though its annotations are necessarily constrained by the limited space available to them in a 'Complete Works'. Minton's commentary is the fullest, but several of her emendations, some resurrected from eighteenth-century editions, others original to her, betray a lack of familiarity with Middleton's idiom.

I have divided the notes into those which defend or reject textual readings, and those which discuss references and usages which have received no or insufficient comment, or have been misinterpreted. Where textual questions are at issue, quotation is from the Quarto text of 1607/8, coupled with the act, scene, and line numbers of the Oxford edition; other notes cite the Oxford edition's modernised text.

Text

I.ii.145-46
Let it stand firme both in thought and minde,
That the Duke was thy Father.

The first line is a syllable short and is often emended to "Let it stand firme both in *thy* thought and minde", a correction readily supported by the possibility that the compositor was confused by the occurrence of "th" at the beginning of two consecutive words in his copy, or by the repetition of "thy" in the line following. However, the result is still a very weak line. Middleton does not share Shakespeare's fondness for doublets, and this one is particularly vacuous. What is the difference between "thought" and "mind" here? And how does such a coupling justify the use of "both", which seems to announce the pairing of two elements

[5] In a review of one of the reissues of Foakes's edition J. C. Maxwell observes that "a series of quite specific actual mis-statements about *The Revenger's Tragedy* […] are given a further lease of life" (Maxwell 1975, 243).

which might normally be thought of as distinct? The problems are solved, and the line properly integrated into the passage, if one reads "Let it stand firme both in *thy* thought and *mine*", i.e. "Let us both suppose that the Duke is your father, what then?". The database Early English Books Online (hereafter EEBO) reveals that Middleton uses this "thy/your […] and mine" formula more frequently than any other Jacobean dramatist. There are ten examples in his plays, including one in the previous scene in this play, at I.i.57 ("Thy wrongs and mine are for one scabberd fit"), and another in *Your Five Gallants* which employs "thought": "Your thoughts and mine were twins" (IV.vii.224)[6].

I.ii.186-88
When base male-Bawds kept Centinell at staire-head
Was I stolne softly; oh – damnation met
The sinne of feasts, drunken adultery.

Spurio is lamenting what he takes to be the ruinous spiritual consequences of his bastardising, and picturing the riotous orgy at which he was conceived. Minton emends "met" to "meet" and reads the word as an adjective, so Q's "oh – damnation met" is made to mean "O fitting damnation". This is certainly wrong. The change leaves "The sinne of feasts, drunken adultery" syntactically marooned, so to make any sense at all it has to be presented as an exclamation, whereas "met" marks the climax of a series of past-tense verbs, nine in all, as Spurio tells the story of his conception (beginning "I was begot" at line 178). More decisively, "meet" as a verb frequently appears in a retributive context, where it means both "encounter" and "requite". In Middleton, as well as Ambitioso's "A murrain meet 'em" at III.vi.84, cf. *A Game at Chess*, Q2 version, H3r, "Adultery, oh Ime met now […] / The sins gradation right payd"; also *Women Beware Women*, III.ii.96-97, "O equal justice, thou hast met my sin / With a full weight", and V.i.195-96, "Vengeance met vengeance / Like a set match". This use of "meet" remains common through the century, and is often

[6] The Oxford edition adopted this reading at my suggestion (and with due acknowledgement); see Taylor and Lavagnino 2007b, 552.

coupled with "damnation"; e.g. Lane 1681, 51, "your general Damnation met you"; Pordage 1673, 63, "Monster […] meet Damnation equal to thy Guilt"; and Anon. 1682, 12, "we meet Damnation here".

I.iii.184-85

So touch 'em – tho I durst almost for good,
Venture my lands in heaven upon their good.

Vindice, disguised as the pimp Piato, has been hired by Lussurioso to corrupt Vindice's sister and mother. Instead of challenging their would-be abuser, he ends the scene with an announcement that he will test the honesty of the two women, even though he is fully (or almost fully) confident that they are unseducible. Editors reject Q's second "good", assuming it to be an inadvertent repetition of the first, and replace it with "blood", the only other word which will both supply the necessary rhyme and make sense. "Blood" is then variously glossed as "strength of character" (Foakes 1966; Jackson 2007), "chaste disposition" (Gibson 1997), "virtue" (Maus 1995), "virtuous character" (Minton 2019), or "honesty" (Ross 1966). There are at least three strong reasons to reject this change and retain Q's "good". They are these:

1. The senses of "blood" editors are compelled to offer do not correspond with contemporary uses of the word, especially in moral contexts like the present one, and especially as used by Middleton. In Middleton and elsewhere, "blood" is a pernicious and compulsive force, closely synonymous with "flesh", "lust", and "will", with which it is regularly coupled. A product of the Fall, it is "[o]f that grosse and corrupt nature of man, which is throughout the Scriptures set as enemie to the Spirite" (note on John 1:13; Geneva Bible, 1587 version). "There is no God in blood", Marston's Malheureux tersely explains (Wine 1965, IV.ii.13). This ominous and negative sense of "blood" is everywhere in Middleton, as one would expect of an author deeply influenced by the Calvinist character of contemporary Protestant doctrine, and he charts its destructive operation in both sexes. In *A Fair Quarrel*, for example, he dramatises "the incensèd prison of man's blood" (III.i.69), and in *More Dissemblers Besides Women* "woman's frailty

and her blood" (III.i.226). In the present passage, Vindice is affirming his readiness to stake his spiritual future on his mother and sister's virtue. Q's "good" indicates what he expects to discover, "blood" replaces the Q reading with the opposite of the sense required[7].

2. Q is further supported by Middleton's re-use of the plot device of which the present passage is a part. Vindice decides to "try the faith" of his mother on the slenderest of pretexts – it "would not prove the meanest policy" to make use of his disguise for this purpose (I.iii.176-77) – and despite claiming to know in advance that her virtue is unassailable. He is well punished for his lack of trust when her "good" fails to withstand his skill as a tempter, and she proves corruptible after all. Middleton recycles this episode some nine years later in *A Fair Quarrel*, where Captain Ager, another son of a widowed mother, asks her to reaffirm her virtue before he fights a duel to vindicate it. Initially outraged to find her "good mistrusted" (II.i.113), she pretends to be sexually corrupt to save her son from risking his life. There is an obvious difference between the two episodes (Gratiana really does succumb to her son's interrogation, Lady Ager only pretends to), but both use the same ironic reversal of expectation to uncover the misogyny present in the son's motivation, in both the son stresses the "good(ness)" of his mother as a guarantee of his own spiritual prospects, and both sons veer between trust and mistrust in their view of the mother's virtue. "Certain she's good", Ager declares, but then immediately adds that he needs "assurance in't", since she is "but woman" (*A Fair Quarrel*, II.i.28-31). Later he laments that he has staked "th'assurance of his joys / Upon a woman's goodness" (IV.iii.8-9), which looks back to Vindice's "upon their good". The parallels of plot and language favour the Q reading.

3. Q's use of "good" as a noun meaning goodness in general might cause suspicion, as OED does not recognise this sense. Its closest approach is "A personal quality, a virtue" and "An act of goodness" ("good", B. *n*. III. 8c, d). But this is an oversight, as the more absolute or abstract use is common: it occurs in Shakespeare

[7] Middleton's use of "blood" is discussed perceptively and in detail by Stachniewski 1990, 234-43.

(*The Rape of Lucrece*, 656, "these petty ills shall change thy good"), and elsewhere in Middleton; e.g. *The Wisdom of Solomon Paraphrased*, II.251, "Tell them of good, they cannot understand", and *A Yorkshire Tragedy*, iii.13, "every thought of good".

The substitution of "blood" removes not only this sense but another, which Vindice is playing on: "good" meaning "property", "what one owns". Surviving now only as a plural ("goods"), the earlier, singular form was still current, as in Luke 15:30: "thy sonne […] hath devoured thy good with harlots" (Geneva version). Vindice means that he will stake his own salvation on his mother and sister's store of goodness. For the same pun elsewhere in Middleton, compare *The Wisdom of Solomon*, XII.81, "Too much of good doth turn unto good's want" (i.e. too much wealth leads to a lack of virtue); also *No Wit, No Help*, i.157 (see the Oxford editor's note), and *The Sun in Aries*, 295-96. Editors' failure to spot the word play is surprising, as "venture", "land(s)", and "good(s)" are constantly combined in commercial contexts (EEBO offers several examples around the date of the play), and the (always disastrous) exchange of land for goods is a theme of Middleton's city comedies, such as *Michaelmas Term*, where "goods and lands" are repeatedly coupled (III.iv.81, 229, 241).

II.i.78-79
There are too many poore Ladies already
Why should you vex the number?

Minton changes "vex" to "wax" meaning "increase", citing in support a Middle English spelling of "wax" as "vex". But there is no evidence that "wax" continued to be spelled in this way, or that "wax" could be used as a transitive verb to make possible the use that her reading requires. OED's only transitive sense of "wax" is "to cover or dress with wax"; otherwise its use is intransitive, with the sense of "become", which is how Middleton uses it elsewhere (e.g. *A Trick to Catch the Old One*, IV.v.41, "you are waxed proud"). Q's "vex" meaning "agitate, disturb" is supported by "vex the Tearmes" at IV.ii.47, and "vex the number" is paralleled in Warren 1690, 65: "*Calbalists* […] so vex (as I may say) and Wire-draw Numbers, as to force and wind them even to what they please".

II.iii.74
That as you please my Lord.

Jackson suggests that "That" may be an error for "That's" (Taylor and Lavagnino 2007b, 554), and Minton changes to this, but "That as you…" was a common locution, short for "Let that be as you…". In Fletcher, for example, cf. "That as you please, sir" in *The Little French Lawyer* (Beaumont and Fletcher 1647, 61), and "That as you thinke fit" in *The Custom of the Country* (15).

IV.ii.32
Ile turne myself

Minton emends Vindice's "turne" to "tune" on the grounds that this continues the musical metaphor he has used in his previous speech, where he promises to "bear me in some strain of melancholy" like "an instrument that speaks / Merry things sadly" (27-30). But the play is fascinated by the instability and malleability of the self, and images of transformation or "turning" are threaded through the text. Vindice vows "I'll quickly turn into another" (I.i.134) and to "turn my visage" (I.iii.9) as he dons his malcontent's disguise. Later he fears that Gratiana has "turned my sister into use" (II.ii.97), while Spurio wishes that "all the court were turned into a corpse" (I.ii.36). One of the main ironies of the play is that Vindice assumes that these turnings of himself into a melancholy assassin are temporary and simulated, but finds they more accurately represent his true self than he realised. As the reformed or "turned" (V.iii.124) Gratiana observes, her sons are "turned monsters" (IV.iv.4). Given that Q's "turne" makes perfect sense and contributes to a series of references which have thematic force, to remove it in order to create an extended metaphor from music is not defensible. If Q needed further support, one might cite other Middleton plays where his interest in the making and unmaking of the self is evident. In *1 The Honest Whore*, Fustigo is advised to "turn yourself into a brave man" (ii.115), and in *The Bloody Banquet* Roxano insists "I would turn myself into any shape" to win the Queen (I.iv.146). Middleton's interest is still present in *A Game at*

Chess, his last play, where the Fat Bishop vows to "turn myself into the Black House" (III.i.291).

IV.ii.142

with some fiue frownes kept him out.

All editors alter Q's "fiue" (i.e. "five" in contemporary typography) to "fine". It is true that such "u"/"n" confusions are frequent, the result of misreading or an inverted letter. But what is a fine frown? How might it differ from an ordinary frown, and why should Lussurioso, whose power seems virtually absolute, have to rely on anything more than an ordinary frown to get his way? Q again has the stronger claim. EEBO offers no examples at all of a frown being called fine, while "some" followed by a number is common (as one would expect, given the word could – and can – mean "about"), and Middleton several times follows "some" with "five" to indicate an indefinite small number. EEBO gives "some five year" in *A Mad World* and *The Widow*, "some five days" in *The Phoenix*, and "some five or six houses" in *The Meeting of Gallants at an Ordinary*.

IV.iv.41

how far beyond nature 'tis
Tho many Mother's do't.

Q's "'tis" is a press correction; in its uncorrected state Q has "to't". Minton reads "to't" for the sake of the rhyme with "do't", but the resulting "far beyond nature to't" is both clumsy and obscure – intolerably so, the Q corrector must have felt – whereas "how far beyond nature 'tis" is a standard idiom. It is used by Middleton, e.g. *The Old Law*, I.i.411, "how far from judgement 'tis", and elsewhere; e.g. Carlell 1639, E2r, "how almost beyond hope it is".

IV.iv.149-50

no tongue has force
To alter me from honest.

Minton emends "honest" to "honesty" because she can find no example in the OED of "honest" as a noun, but she fails to recognise a stock contemporary idiom in which an adjective is put to quasi-nominal use; cf. "altered from vertuous" (Warner 1606, 351), and "hee was quite / Declin'd from good" (Davenant 1643, 40). The usage survives in "To go from bad to worse".

Commentary

I.i.94-95

a man […];
[…] to be honest is not to be i'th' world.

Another of the play's many echoes of *Hamlet*: "To be honest, as this world goes, is to be one man picked out of ten thousand" (II.ii.179-80). Middleton's version outdoes the pessimism of its source.

I.ii.41
'Tis the Duke's pleasure

Repeated word-for-word from IV.v.51 of Marston's *The Malcontent* (Hunter 1975), an important influence on the early Middleton. The phrase occurs nowhere else in EEBO in precisely this form. Cf. also III.ii.6, "prison is too mild a name", and Hunter 1975, I.vii.31, "Err? 'tis too mild a name". See also below III.v.58-60; IV.ii.138-40; and V.ii.30. This is not the only Middleton play to contain Marstonian phrasing; note, for example, *A Mad World*, I.i.3, where "lifeblood of society" is supplied by *The Malcontent* (Hunter 1975, I.v.38).

I.ii.133-34

I'm an uncertain man,
Of more uncertain woman.

The uncertainty of Spurio's "uncertain" – it means at once "unknown", "not identified"; "puzzling", "hard to define"; and "morally dubious or suspect" – endorses his conviction that his bastardy consigns him to a category outside the human, as well as dooming him to replicate the amorality and lustfulness which

brought him into being. Middleton's interest in outsiders, who might include, as well as bastards, actors and women seen as sexually disorderly, draws him to this play of senses; cf. "an uncertain creature, a quean" and "certain players […] uncertain in their lives" in *A Mad World, My Masters*, III.iii.34; V.i.29-34). The Courtesan of *A Trick to Catch the Old One* complains that her "state" is "uncertain" (IV.iv.10-11). For illuminating comment on "(un)certain", see Ricks 1993, 133-34.

I.ii.179-80

Some stirring dish
Was my first father.

The first father was Adam, "the first father of this earthly world, / First man, first father called for after time" (Middleton, *The Wisdom of Solomon Paraphrased*, X.7-8). Spurio is again asserting his sense of being spiritually alienated, of being "[h]alf-damned in the conception" (I.ii.161). "Our first father *Adam*" was "formed immediatly by the hand of God" (Cowper 1612, C3v), but Spurio regards his bastardy as cutting him off from this line of descent.

I.ii.192

I love thy mischief well, but I hate thee

Proverbial: see Tilley 1950, K64, "A King […] loves the treason but hates the traitor"; employed elsewhere by Middleton: e.g. *Women Beware Women*, II.ii.442, "He likes the treason well, but hates the traitor"; also *1 The Honest Whore*, xiii.51; *The Phoenix*, viii.233.

I.iii.53-55

in a world of acres,
Not so much dust due to the heir 'twas left to
As would well gravel a petitïon.

"Dust" puns on the slang sense "Money, cash" (OED "dust", *n*. 6), as in *The Wisdom of Solomon Paraphrased*, VII.ix.89-92, where it is also coupled with "gravel" ("what is gold? […] 'tis dust […] 'tis little gravel"), and *A Yorkshire Tragedy*, ii.96, where the Husband demands, "Shall I want dust[?]".

I.iii.84-85
Tell but some woman a secret overnight,
Your doctor may find it in the urinal i'th' morning.

Coarsely elaborating the proverb "Trust no secret with a woman" (Tilley 1950, S196); similarly coupled with physical voiding in *The Lady's Tragedy*, II.ii.176-77, "He's frayed a secret from me. […] / […] from a woman a thing's quickly slipped", and *The Witch*, III.ii.121-25, "She can keep it secret? / […] and a woman too? / […] / 'Twould never stay with me two days – I've cast it" (this last example is misunderstood by the Oxford editor).

I.iii.90-91
I am past my depth in lust
And I must swim or drown.

Ominously (for the speaker) invoking the proverb "Who swims in sin […] shall drown in it" (Tilley 1950, S474).

I.iii.184-85
I durst almost for good
Venture my lands in heaven

Referring to the belief that in God's kingdom a piece of land has been allocated to everyone, whether or not one proves worthy to receive it; cf. Davenant 1630, B4v: "he would accompt / Amongst his wealth, the land he has in Heaven"; Rollock 1603, 10: "thou shalt be shut out, thou shalt not have a furrow of land in heaven". Jonson glances at the idea in *Volpone*: "He would have sold his part of paradise / For ready money" (Parker 1983, III.vii.143-44).

II.i.5-6
Were not sin rich, there would be fewer sinners.
Why had not virtue a revènue?

Tilley 1950, R106: "Riches and sin are oft married together". Middleton frequently links virtue with poverty, e.g. *The Lady's Tragedy*, I.i.170, "As poor as virtue"; and note especially *No Wit, No Help*, ii.3, "Has virtue no revènue?".

II.i.122-25
That woman
Will not be troubled with the mother long
That sees the comfortable shine of you.
I blush to think what for your sakes I'll do.

Vindice, in disguise, offers Gratiana gold to corrupt her daughter, and she justifies her acceptance of it by citing a proverb: "[Women] may blush to hear what they were not ashamed to [do]" (Tilley 1950, M553). Her "the comfortable shine of you" is recalled in *No Wit, No Help*, iii.34, "the comfortable shine of joy". This is a unique parallel: "the comfortable shine of" occurs nowhere else in the entire EEBO database.

II.i.130
O, you're a kind Madam.

Editors miss the play on words. Ostensibly, Vindice is thanking Gratiana for the coins she has given him to reward his services, but underneath the compliment he is saying what he really thinks of her: "you're a natural bawd". See OED "kind", *adj*. 4c: "Having a specified character by nature or from birth". OED does not give "madam" meaning "bawd" before 1653, but this sense was common much earlier: see Williams 1994, 2:838-39, some of whose examples imply "procurer" or "brothel-keeper".

II.i.141-43
Good honorable foole,
That wouldst be honest 'cause thou wouldst be so,
Producing no one reason but thy will
Minton cites Tilley 1950, B179, "Because is woman's reason", but the passage is more immediately indebted to *Timon of Athens*,

I.i.131-33: "TIMON. The man is honest. / OLD ATHENIAN. Therefore he will be, Timon. / His honesty rewards him in itself".

II.i.147-48

by what rule should we square out our lives,
But by our betters' actions?

Jackson notes the play on "rule", i.e. "principle, criterion", as well as "instrument for measuring". "Square (out)" also contributes, with the senses "To mark out as a square" and "regulate", "adjust" (OED "square" *v.* I. 1c, II. 4d). Gratiana is again adapting a proverb to suit her argument: cf. Tilley 1950, R43, "Let reason rule all your actions", and Barry 1611, G4v, "the lawe, / It is the rule that squares out all our actions". Her version cynically replaces law or reason with "our betters".

II.iii.86

Here's no Step-mothers wit.

The Duke is commenting on Ambitioso's and Supervacuo's half-hearted pleas for him to spare Lussurioso, who they really hope will be executed. Editors take the Duke to mean "they lack the Duchess's shrewdness" (Jackson) or "they lack their stepmother's intelligence" (Foakes). But the Duchess is the mother of Ambitioso and Supervacuo, not their stepmother. She is, however, the stepmother of Lussurioso, and the Duke is actually saying "this is a prime case of the cunning way a stepmother will seek to turn her husband against any child of his by a previous marriage". The mistake arises from a failure to grasp the force of "Here's no…", which was an ironic way of asserting the opposite. The actual meaning is always "Here's a clear example of", or "Here's an abundance of". Middleton is fond of the expression; e.g. *The Puritan*, I.iv.159, "Here's no notable gullery"; *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside*, III.i.31, "Here's no inconscionable villainy" (misunderstood by the Oxford editor); and *Hengist, King of Kent*, III.iii.42, "Here's no sweet toil".

II.iii.126-27, 130

in my old daies am a youth in lust:
Many a beauty have I turnd to poison
[…]
My haires are white, and yet my sinnes are Greene.

Combining two proverbs: "His lust is as young as his limbs are old" (Tilley 1950, L589) and "Like a leek, he has a white head and a green tail" (L177). Middleton repeats the second in *The Roaring Girl*, xi.122, "Their sins are green even when their heads are grey". The Duke's victims are "turned to poison" by being both lured towards it and transformed into it, their "beauty" rendered poisonous in the process. Middleton is recalling his share of *Timon*, where Timon "is turned to poison" by his parasitic friends (III.i.53).

III.iv.9-10

Thou shalt not be long a prisoner.

The accidental execution of Junior Brother is modelled on the decidedly unaccidental execution of Clarence in *Richard III*. Richard has secretly plotted his brother's imprisonment in the Tower, at the same time assuring him (with a sardonic double-entendre which only Richard hears) that "your imprisonment shall not be long" (I.i.115). Once Clarence is in the Tower, Richard's agents arrive with a commission which compels the keeper to hand Clarence over to them. Pleading for his life, Clarence protests that his brother "swore with sobs / That he would labour my delivery". "Why, so he doth", is the reply, "when he delivers you / From this earth's thraldom to the joys of heaven" (I.iv.233-36). Junior's death results from a plot that misfires, but all other details match. Assured by his brothers that "I shall not be long a prisoner" (III.iv.18-19), he waits in the prison for "my delivery" (5), but officers arrive with a warrant which commands the keeper to relinquish his charge to them. Objecting that his brothers would not have ordered his death, he is informed that that they have indeed done so, though "grief swum in their eyes" (48). As for the promise that he will be "not long a prisoner", "It says true in that, sir, for you must suffer presently" (60-61). The extra element in Middleton's imitation of the

Shakespearean original – we know that the officers have got the wrong brother, but Junior does not – amplifies the mood of black farce which marks much of the play's action.

III.iv.77-78
Must I bleed, then, without respect of sign? […]
My fault was sweet sport

Jackson and Minton note the reference to medical bleeding, thought to be advisable only under certain astrological signs, but they miss the play on "sign"/"sin", a favourite Middleton pun, though seemingly undetected by all Middleton's editors; among many examples, cf. *The Wisdom of Solomon Paraphrased*, IV.124, "turn virtue into vice's sign"; *The Ghost of Lucrece*, 539-40, "umpire of right, / […] th' assigner of each sign"; and *The Lady's Tragedy*, I.i.24, "'Tis but the sin of joy".

III.v.58-60
Me thinkes this mouth should make a swearer tremble,
A drunckard claspe his teeth, and not undo 'em,
To suffer wet damnation to run through 'em.

Vindice's invective has biblical force: "he that eateth and drinketh unworthely, eateth and drinketh his owne damnation" (1 Corinthians 11:29; Geneva version). Cf. *2 The Honest Whore*, perhaps entirely by Dekker, but sometimes thought to be a Dekker-Middleton collaboration: "to tast that lickrish [= lecherous] Wine, is to drinke a mans owne damnation" (Dekker 1630, B3r). With "wet damnation" cf. "Lickerish damnation" (for lust) in *1 The Honest Whore*, vi.399, and "silver damnation" (for coin) in *The Black Book*, 217. A similar passage in *The Malcontent* might be Middleton's source, or might suggest that the expression was familiar: "O Heaven […] sufferest thou the world / Carouse damnation?" (Hunter 1975, III.iii.126-28).

III.v.76-77
Why does yon fellow falsify highways
And put his life between the judge's lips.

Vindice's "falsify highways" is unhelpfully cryptic. Loughrey and Taylor, reading "high ways" (i.e. upper-class conduct), gloss "impersonate the aristocracy", but this is unconvincing: even if "falsify" could be understood in this way, such impersonation would hardly have counted as a capital crime. It is more likely that the phrase is a compressed version of Middleton's reference to land-stealing in *The Black Book*: "those are your geometrical thieves, which may fitly be called so because they measure the highways with false gallops, and therefore are heirs of more acres than five-and-fifty elder brothers" (308-11). Here "geometrical" is fitting because it literally means measuring earth, and "measure the highways with false gallops" adapts the proverbial "go at a false gallop" meaning "to act dishonestly or wickedly", an expression Vindice himself has used in undertaking to corrupt Gratiana: he will "put her to a false gallop in a trice" (II.ii.44). Vindice's "falsify highways" might therefore be understood to mean "misrepresent the routes of main roads (in order to appropriate the vacant land that results)". If this, too, is unconvincing, it may be that Middleton intends a reference to a different criminal activity which had recently caught public attention and was certainly a capital crime: highway robbery. OED records "highwayman", "highway robber", and "highway thief" as all entering the language between 1577 and 1617. Presumably one of the robbers' *modus operandi* was to falsify road markings in order to lure their targets to a deserted spot.

III.v.88-89
Who now bids twenty pound a night […]
[…] All are hushed.

Editors do not comment on the sum Vindice proposes for an encounter with Gloriana, but it is surely worth making the reader aware that it is staggeringly high. Brothels (unattached prostitutes would have asked less) charged "sixpence to half a crown or so" (Shugg 1977, 301), so at 240 old pence to the pound Gloriana's price is between 160 and 800 times greater than the norm. Assuming a six-day working week, and given a day rate in London at this date of 12 pence for labourers and 18 pence for craftsmen (Boulton 1996,

279), she would cost between 45 and 66 times the average weekly wage. As in *1 The Honest Whore*, where the brothel-keeper also expects "[t]wenty pound a night" (viii.21) from her star performer (though accumulated, it seems, from more than one client), the implication is that membership of the court gives admission to a world of scarcely imaginable opulence and excess utterly remote from the life of the nation it governs.

Commentators fail to discuss not only the sum but the currency. Why does this Italian malcontent suddenly talk in English pounds? The reason is that the switch allows Vindice to step half outside his play and address his London audience as though they were buyers at an auction. "All are hushed" trades on the conventions of theatre to maintain the effect. "All" are indeed hushed – because they are spectators at a play attending to the performance; but the comment is a cue for Vindice to look surprised at their silence, as though he were expecting at least a few bids. Or perhaps he should look grimly unsurprised. Either way, Minton's strange decision to gloss "bids" as "spends" spoils the effect for her readers.

III.v.112-13

she makes almost as fair a sign
As some old gentlewoman in a periwig.

Another example of the "sign"/"sin" pun (see III.iv.77-78 above), indicated here by Q's spelling of "sine". The fair appearance of sin was proverbial; cf. Middleton's *Microcynicon*, III.21, "sin […] foul yet fair", and Byfield 1615, 2A1r, "our best actions are but faire sinnes".

IV.ii.14

Now the Duke is dead the realm is clad in clay.

Another reminiscence of *Hamlet*: "Imperial Caesar, dead and turned to clay, / Might stop a hole to keep the wind away" (V.i.196-97). The couplet evidently struck a chord with Middleton: cf. *A Mad World*, III.iii.128-29: "Dost call thy captain clay? Indeed, clay was made to stop holes".

IV.ii.138-40

knowing her to be as chaste
As that part which scarce suffers to be touched,
Th' eye

If this does not draw on a proverb, it may be another echo of *The Malcontent*: "as tender as his eye […] that could not endure to be touched" (Hunter 1975, I.i.18-20); but if this is Middleton's source he has changed the eye's owner from male to female in order to import a broad sexual joke, one which he had already used in *The Phoenix*, ix.309-10: "that jewel / More precious in a woman than her eye, her honour". For "eye" = vagina, see Williams 1994, 1:453-54.

IV.iii.15-16

Most women have small waist the world throughout,
But their desires are thousand miles about.

Punning on "waste", i.e. uncultivated land (OED *n*. 1a, 2), as in *The Phoenix*, vi.133-34: "how it moves a pleasure through our senses! / How small are women's waists to their expenses!". As "the waist" was a common euphemism for the genitals, a sexual pun may also be present; cf. "land, like a fine gentlewoman i'th' waist" (*Michaelmas Term*, II.iii.92), and *A Mad World*, IV.vi.106, "'bove the waste, wench" (meaning ostensibly "as well as the waste ground"). Middleton repeats his image of the limitlessness of female desire many years later in *Women Beware Women*, IV.i.39, where Bianca fears that her daughters will "fetch their falls a thousand mile about" (punning on "fall", an item of female clothing).

V.ii.30

PIERO
O, let us hug your bosoms!

A startlingly exact recollection of this character's namesake in Marston's *Antonio's Revenge*: "PIERO. O, let me hug my bosom" (Hunter 1966, II.i.10). Middleton demotes him from the Duke of Venice to a minor lord.

V.iii.126
How subtly was that murder closed!

All editors gloss "closed" as one of two opposite senses, "concealed" or "disclosed", but the OED does not recognise either of these uses. Cf. "close", *v*. II. 8a, "To conclude, bring to a close or end; to finish, complete", which is the sense here.

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