

Editing and Staging *The Revenger's Tragedy*: Three Problems

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[*Early Modern Drama in Performance: Essays in Honor of Lois Potter*, ed. Darlene Farabee, Mark Netzloff, and Bradley D. Ryner (Newark: U, of Delaware Press, 2015), pp. 63-72.]

For centuries editors of the plays of Shakespeare and his contemporaries have been adjusting or expanding the stage directions that survive in the early printed texts and manuscripts. Admittedly, recent editors no longer side with Edmund Malone who in 1790 argued "that the very few stage-directions which the old copies exhibit, were not taken from our author's manuscripts, but [were] furnished by the players" and announced: "All the stage-directions therefore throughout this work I have considered as wholly in my power, and have regulated them in the best manner I could."¹ Rather, in the explosion of editions of all kinds in the last thirty years the tendency has been to retain the extant signals (although not necessarily their placement in a given scene) and to insert additional information, especially if the edition is targeted at students or other first-time readers.

Since such adjustments and insertions have been welcomed over the years by my undergraduates, my goal is not to defend as sacrosanct the often cryptic wording of the theatrical signals in the early texts. To help students to imagine the onstage action, particularly in a difficult-to-read play, is a strong plus, but the question remains: what is diminished or lost in such a process? What are the trade-offs? Especially when dealing with editorial transpositions or insertions (often but not always placed in square brackets so as to distinguish them from items in the original text) my concern is not "is this answer correct?" but rather "what is the function of such a signal?"; "who is the intended audience?"; and, most important, "are there alternative answers that have been diminished or screened out by such an intervention?" As to in-the-theatre

choices, to what extent have directors followed the editors' lead as opposed to forging their own path?

My focus in this essay is a cluster of three moments in *The Revenger's Tragedy*, each of which has generated questions for me as a reader and a playgoer. In treating these scenes I will be drawing upon six editions of this play² and three productions.³ Each of these scenes poses a challenge to an editor, director, or reader trying to reconstruct the original staging.

All three productions had distinctive features. As emphasized in his program note for his 1984 Oregon production ("somehow, beyond the edges of horror piled upon horror, there is a pinpoint of comedy that shakes us from the gloom"), director Jerry Turner chose to emphasize macabre humor ("no great depth here, but what a spirited bustle!"). The result was a production that was often very funny,⁴ but, by design, sidestepped providential or spiritual concerns. As Vindice, Allen Nause (through asides or tone of voice) conveyed a clear distinction between Vindice (his "self") and Piato (his disguise, played with a distinctive white make-up reminiscent of a death's-head or clown), but soon that distinction began to blur, an effect that reached a climax in 2.2 with his frenzied rendition of the passage that begins "Now 'tis full sea abed over the world" (2.2.136-45) with its depiction of universal sexual corruption. At this point Hippolito's "You flow well, brother" (146) was consoling, dampening, as he cradled Vindice, trying to soothe this figure whose diseased imagination (linked to the madness of Revenge) was consuming his reason.

Of the three directors, Turner made the most changes in the original script. Act 1 was rearranged, so that this show started with an abbreviated 1.4 (with Antonio mourning over his wife's coffin), then moved to the trial of 1.2, then 1.1, then 1.3. Gone therefore was the keynote position granted Vindice and the skull in the script; gained, for playgoers unfamiliar with the plot

(presumably most of the audience), was an increased emphasis upon the fate of Antonio's wife (acted out in dumb show) as a pivotal event. Elsewhere, Turner had Vindice share his last speech with Hippolito (a strong effect) and inserted a scene at the end of Act 3 in which Antonio, who had been observing events from above, told a lord that justice now had been done. The fourth lord in 5.3 was not sent off for execution but was killed on the spot by Vindice (so an eighth body accumulated onstage), a choice that helped explain Antonio's verdict on Vindice moments later (would you want a figure with such a quick trigger finger lurking around *your* dukedom?). For the curtain call the women stood on stage in shock as various fallen figures, one by one, began to rise like zombies from the dead

For her 1987-88 RSC production Di Trevis made few cuts at the Swan but did additional streamlining in London (e.g., 1.4 was gone). Additional material was inserted to expand the Duchess-Spurio liaison. A few lines were added to flesh out the beginning of 4.3 where they are directed to enter arm in arm "*lasciviously*" so as to have her indicate an interest in more sex regardless of the consequences whereas he is interested solely in power; roughly thirty lines were added to her banishment in 5.1 so as to provide an indictment by Lussurioso ("Tis known she has an itch"), her defense, and comments from Antonio and the other sons (including Spurio). Antony Sher's Vindice appeared in 1.1 as a ragged homeless figure with a bag from which midway in the scene he pulled Gloriana's skull and later his Piato disguise, and both Gratiana and Castiza were also presented as very poor (as opposed to the luxurious costumes and rampant sexuality of the figures at court), with Hippolito bringing them money and leftover food. Here and later Trevis factored in a figure (designated "the Scavenger" in the program) who lurked in the background and occasionally joined in the action (e.g., at the end of 1.1 he thrust out a hand from under some boards to get the remainder of the food). In the final moments after Vindice

and Hippolito were taken off, Antonio (presented as a wishy-washy, even tainted figure) delivered his final lines while tripping over the seven onstage bodies and confronting the Scavenger, now a threatening figure.

At London's National Theatre I have seen numerous productions built around the Olivier's revolving stage, but Melly Still's adept use of that resource in 2008 was especially successful in telling the story and setting up potent images. The different locales (Vindice's room with Caravaggio's St. Jerome on the wall, various spaces at court) were an integral part of the narrative so as to set up the atmosphere and enhance meanings. The show started with a revolving display of courtly festivities (music, dancing, acrobatics, all with sexual overtones) during which Antonio's wife was isolated, raped, and left to stagger off clutching her torn clothes. In the final scene the blazing star that appears to Lussurioso on his throne was not displayed but was to be imagined as if over the heads of the playgoers.⁵ The scripted violence in the final scene calls for a body count of at least seven (Lussurioso and his three lords, three of the four in the second set of masquers), but here the count of onstage corpses was raised to ten because first the fourth lord (the only survivor from that second set) and then Vindice and Hippolito were executed on the spot. The final revolve of the stage after the last words were spoken revealed first the courtiers in a distinctive palace room, then Antonio bringing news to Castiza and Gratiana, and finally an empty throne in the light with a bloody pillow nearby.

The first of my three problematic moments is linked to a stage direction not found in the Quarto. Without question, the final scene includes both a blazing star (5.3.0.s.d.) and, after the first set of murders, a signal that "*It thunders,*" a sound that elicits Vindice's "Mark, thunder! Dost know thy cure, thou big-voic'd cryer? / Dukes' groans are thunder's watchwords" (41-43). However, the situation is murkier in Act 4 when Vindice, wondering why someone as wicked as

Lussurioso “Should not be cloven as he stood, or with / A secret wind burst open,” asks “Is there no thunder left, or is ‘t kept up / In stock for heavier vengeance? - at which point he comments “There it goes!” (4.2.196-99). At this point the Quarto (H1r) provides no stage direction, but five of the six editors insert a signal for *thunder*. The exception is MacD. P. Jackson who provides a gloss to “There it goes!” (p. 582) that reads: "That's it!, Eureka! Vindice has hit upon a plan, as he explains in his next speech."

In Turner’s Oregon production, where any supernatural element was played down, Vindice’s “There it goes” was preceded moments earlier by a flickering of lights in the theatre so as to suggest a "real" storm (my first reaction, shared by others, was that the theatre was undergoing a "real" power failure). In contrast, both Trevis and Still provided thunder at this point. I confess that, given the context provided by Vindice’s speech (“Is there no thunder left”), I do not find Jackson’s gloss convincing, so that I agree that Vindice does hear something. However, given the absence of a stage direction in the Quarto, what interests me is the possibility that the thunder is *not* heard by the playgoer. As in Act 5, Vindice hears something that he takes to be a heavenly endorsement of his actions, but are we as auditors to share that confidence? To what extent is Hippolito’s subsequent comment that “Brother, we lose ourselves” (200) a rebuke, especially if this figure sympathetic to the cause does not hear the thunder and is mystified by his brother’s reaction? The gloss in the Revels edition to the inserted “*Thunder sounds*” at line 199 explains the phenomenon “as God’s sign of heavenly judgment” (p. 99) and refers the reader to the moment in 5.3 where “thunder’s watchwords” is glossed as “This use of thunder as, so to speak, the voice of God, has its origin in the Bible; see *Job*, xxvi.14” (p. 123). Such a sense of heaven’s approval of Revenge would disappear, however, if a playgoer found the thunder in 4.2 to be limited to the revenger’s hearing alone and therefore a sign of his delusion.⁶

A second less problematic moment is linked to costuming. In the final scene (5.3.40), with Lussurioso and three nobles seated at the banquet table: "*Enter the masque of revengers*" (Vindice, Hippolito, and two other lords), so that these masked figures dance, pull out swords, and kill the four seated figures. With the departure of these four, "*Enter the other masque of intended murderers*" (Ambitioso, Supervacuo, Spurio, and a fourth lord) who "*coming in dancing*" discover the bodies of Lussurioso and his group (48.s.d.). Frustrated by their inability to carry out their intended violence, these new arrivals turn on each other, so that within moments only one (the anonymous fourth lord) is still alive.

In his rendition of this sequence, Turner made a significant change in the script. In the previous scene, aware of the revels and masque to be performed before Lussurioso, Vindice had set up his murderous plot with the observation that his group will "take pattern / Of all those suits, the colour, trimming, fashion, / E'en to an undistinguish'd hair almost" (5.2.15-17). According to his plan, these revengers will gain access to their victims by wearing costumes identical to the other set of masquers. These lines, however, were cut in the Oregon production; the two sets of masquers then wore different costumes, presumably to avoid confusing the audience (already puzzled by the plot complications of this unfamiliar play). In contrast, in the Trevis version both sets of masquers were veiled and holding skulls and the second group started the same dance until interrupted by Lussurioso's groans. The effect was more elaborate in Still's production where both sets of masquers appeared not only with identical costumes, masks, and swords but also making the same athletic leaps and throws (and handing off their swords when so doing).

With no textual anomalies to confront, none of the six editors comments on the identical costumes. Nonetheless, Turner's clear differentiation between the two groups of masquers

provokes the question: what strategy lies behind this confusing conflation in the script? Consider the effect upon a playgoer, then or now, when a second group of four, wearing costumes identical to the first group, appears with murderous intent. These are "the bad guys" (two of them inept villains verging on caricature, a third the cynical bastard, Spurio), as opposed to Vindice and his cohorts who supposedly are on the side of justice and morality. To an audience watching a production dictated by the Quarto, however, this second group is indistinguishable from the supposed "good guys" who have just committed four murders and left the bodies behind. Critics may argue at length about the size of the gap between Hamlet and Laertes as revengers, but here the dramatist has narrowed that gap to just about nothing, to the point that, in both costume and action, the two sets of murderers are indistinguishable. The director's desire for added clarity (or for a second set of visually exciting costumes) can therefore blur an equation for the viewer's eye that, if confusing, is confusing in a provocative way. For me, these paired entrances and actions act out something distinctive not only about this play but about revenge tragedy in general, a genre in which the "taint" of revenge often narrows the initial gap between the protagonist and those he opposes. The same sense of patterning that makes a modern interpreter uncomfortable can lead to revealing insights into the strategy implicit in the original script and may add to our understanding of Vindice's line in his final speech: "'Tis time to die, when we are ourselves our foes" (5.3.110).

My third and trickiest moment is generated by the presentation on the page of the buildup to the murder of the old Duke where the Quarto provides only two signals: the scene-opening entrance of Vindice and Hippolito and then the re-entrance of Vindice with the skull of Gloriana who had been murdered by the Duke. Each of the six editions provides additional signals for this sequence. Four of these editors make slight adjustments to the Quarto's stage direction for

Vindice's re-entrance with the skull in order to spell out for a reader the presence of a mask; typical is R. A. Foakes in his Revels edition: "*Enter Vindice, with the skull of his love dressed up in tires [and masked]*" (3.5.42). Three editors then have the revenger's subsequent speech "*to the skull*" or "*Addressing the skull*"; at the end of this speech four clarify Vindice's "I'll unmask you" (3.5.48), as with George Parfitt's "*Reveals the skull*" (this inserted signal, like others in this edition, is not enclosed in square brackets). At the revenger's subsequent dialogue reference to "this drug" (103) only David Bevington (in his anthology targeted at students) provides "*He shows a vial of poison.*" Then five of the six editors (the exception is Brian Gibbons in the New Mermaid) clarify both Vindice's "So, 'tis laid on" (110 - Foakes inserts "*Putting poison on the lips of the skull*") and his "Hide thy face now, for shame, thou hadst needs have a mask now" (114) where Foakes inserts "*Puts a mask on the skull*" and the other four add "*To the skull.*"

Given both the importance of this pivotal scene and the difficulties it poses for the first-time reader, none of these insertions strikes me as controversial. What does surprise me, however, is what is *not* clarified by means of a note or inserted stage directions in Vindice's first speech when holding the skull. Bevington (in keeping with his targeted student readership) is the only one of the six to insert a signal just before the Duke's entrance, so that Vindice "*stands aside, and arranges Gloriana's skull and attires so that she resembles a beautiful lady*" (120.s.d.). This clarification sets up for the reader what the Duke will see moments later, but it also blurs what I take to be a major effect, an in-the-theatre trick that can easily be lost on the page.

Here one must return to Vindice's entrance as signaled in the Quarto "*with the skull of his love dressed up in tires.*" A key question is: what did the original playgoers see at this moment and during the speech that follows? First, how are we to define *tires* - i.e., what is the skull

"*dressed up in*"? The standard gloss is that the term is a shortened version of *head-tires* ("a covering for the head"), so that, in this reading, Vindice is holding a small object covered by some combination of veil, hood, and hat. However, an alternative interpretation is that *tires* refers to *attire*-clothing as in "tiring house" or in *Pericles* where Cerimon is described as wearing "rich tire" (3.2.22).⁷ Is Vindice bringing in a head-sized object that turns out to be a skull; or is he presenting to Hippolito and the playgoers the semblance of a lady, the same semblance that will be presented to the Duke?

As to the second option, no such trick is available to the *reader*, for what is concealed by the *tires* is spelled out in the Quarto's stage direction. No surprises here. Bevington's insertion some 80 lines later at line 120 rightly spells out how "*dressed up in tires*" and a mask will eventually be used to create the image of a beautiful lady in order to deceive the Duke, but my sense of the scene is that this is the effect that is created - for Hippolito *and* the playgoer - at Vindice's initial entrance with the skull at line 42. With or without any editorial additions, the Quarto stage direction gives away the trick to a reader, but what happens if we imagine the effect from the perspective of a playgoer or Hippolito? That playgoer would not initially see the skull (that *had* been displayed prominently in 1.1) but would see Vindice enter, apparently talking to and listening to the whispered responses of what *appears* to be a lady. For the six-line speech that follows this entrance, none of the six editors provides signals so as to clarify the give-and-take of dialogue, presumably because there is only one speaker and the figure being addressed is not in doubt.

Here is the moment as I imagine it:

Enter Vindice, with the skull of his love dressed up in tires [masked, and supported on his arm so as to seem to be a lady].

[*To the lady.*] Madam, his grace will not be absent long.

[*Listens.*] Secret? Ne'er doubt us, madam; 'twill be worth

Three velvet gowns to your ladyship. [*Listens.*] Known?

Few ladies respect that! [*Listens.*] Disgrace? a poor thin shell;

'Tis the best grace you have to do it well.

I'll save your hand that labour; I'll unmask you. [*Reveals the skull.*]

(3.5.43-48)

To Hippolito's "Why, brother, brother!" at the unmasking of "the lady" that reveals the skull, Vindice responds: "Art thou beguil'd now? Tut, a lady can, / At such, all hid, beguile a wiser man" (50-51) and proceeds to expound at length on deceptive (or beguiling) surfaces epitomized by the masked and *attired* skull.

For those readers already familiar with this moment, my three uses of "*Listens*" may seem too obvious to need noting, though my students rarely catch this effect, which to them is far less apparent than the action linked to "I'll unmask you," a phrase which *is* regularly expanded. My preference, moreover, would be for an explanatory note (not to be found in the six editions) rather than inserted stage directions.⁸ My main concern is for what I take to be a *huge* gap between "*to the skull*" and "*to the lady*." The former signal is technically accurate but can be misleading if, as I am suggesting, Hippolito and the playgoer (as opposed to the reader) watch Vindice apparently in dialogue with "a lady," so that the presence of the skull is only made apparent at the end of the six-line speech. Vindice's long meditation that follows (that concludes "see, ladies, with false forms / You deceive men, but cannot deceive worms" - 97-98) carries far more force if both Hippolito *and* the playgoer (as opposed to the reader) have been taken in by

the device that will soon be used to deceive the Duke. That trick, moreover, seems to me at the heart of the scene - and the play.

The Oregon production followed the editors in having Vindice at his re-entrance bring on a skull, not a lady. For the RSC Anthony Sher brought in what appeared to be a lady in a long dress that covered her feet and then dropped the dress on the stage floor to display the skull. More elaborate was Rory Kinnear's Vindice who re-entered escorting what appeared to be a lady in a golden mask; he held her erect, with her gown covering her feet and the mask covering the skull, and pretended to hear her whispers. At the climax of his speech, to the sound of a thunderclap that surprised both Hippolito and the audience, he pulled off the mask to reveal the skull beneath. His return with the "lady" requested by the Duke was even more elaborate, for here Kinnear used a dummy, again with the golden mask, with him standing in the darkness behind it, his shoes supplying the feet, and he also provided some adroit interweaving of the Duke's hands with "hers" (the left was from the dummy, the right from Vindice). As the Duke continued to kiss her, Vindice whipped off the mask so that the intended victim kissed the poisoned lips. What followed was a very bloody murder that involved frenetic stabbings and considerable blood supplied from a hole in the stage floor, all this with Spurio and the Duchess acting out their sexual encounter in the background. As the stage continued to revolve, Hippolito stamped on the duke's body and the dummy remained on the floor, until the final revolve (the last image before the interval) where what had been the dummy became an actress dressed in white who stood up, looked at Vindice, and moved away in what I took to be disapproval or disgust at the use of Gloriana's skull not just for revenge-justice but for this vicious, out-of-control murder.

Clearly, the original production had no revolving stage and may or may not have had access to a dummy. Nonetheless, Still's staging demonstrates that the surprise effect, with or without the accompanying thunderclap, *is* built into the scene. Indeed, given the rampant sexuality at the court on display in this production, several of my actor friends who did not know the script expected like Hippolito the appearance of a "real" lady and were taken in by Vindice's trick. Admittedly, such successful onstage choices in 2008 cannot prove what the original playgoers would have seen four hundred years earlier, but this director's presentation of Vindice and the apparent *lady* (as opposed to Vindice and Gloriana's *skull*), along with Kinnear's expert handling of both skull and dummy, calls attention again to the gap between what is presented on the editor's page and the potential telling effect on the stage, then or now.

Given the many gaps in the evidence, a final word is needed about editing, theatre history, and silence. The work of scholars continues to fill in various blanks, but, as I have learned from thirty years of struggle, any attempt to reconstruct what happened onstage in those first performances is a crapshoot. We just do not know what we need to know to draw firm conclusions. The norm is silence. Philip McGuire has singled out and analyzed a series of pregnant silences in Shakespeare's plays,⁹ and further discussion of these and other problematic moments is a fruitful topic for students, teachers, scholars, actors, and directors. However, to fill in such gaps on the pages of the editions used as the basis for subsequent interpretation by scholars and theatrical professionals (many of whom do not read textual notes or textual introductions) is to run the risk of foreclosing legitimate options by positing one solution at the expense of a valid alternative (perhaps one waiting to be born). I offer no commandments etched in stone on Mount Sinai, but when judging when to insert or not to insert a stage direction, I side

with Paulina who comments on the group reaction to the "statue" of Hermione: "I like your silence" (*The Winter's Tale*, 5.3.21).

¹ "Preface," *The Plays and Poems of William Shakespeare*, 10 vols. (London, 1790), 1:lviii.

² A facsimile of the Quarto is available in *The Revenger's Tragedy: Attributed to Thomas Middleton*, ed. MacD. P. Jackson (London and Toronto: Associated University Press, 1983). The six modern editions cited are *Revels Plays*, ed. R. A. Foakes (London: Methuen, 1966); *Regents Renaissance Drama*, ed. Lawrence J. Ross (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1966); *New Mermaid*, ed. Brian Gibbons (London: Benn, 1967); *The Plays of Cyril Tourneur: The Revenger's Tragedy and The Atheist's Tragedy*, ed. George Parfitt (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978); *English Renaissance Drama: A Norton Anthology*, ed. David Bevington, Lars Engle, Katharine Eisaman Maus, and Eric Rasmussen (New York: Norton, 2002), pp. 1297-1369; and the Oxford Middleton, ed. MacD. P. Jackson in *Thomas Middleton: The Collected Works*, ed. Gary Taylor and John Lavagnino (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 543-93. Unless otherwise noted, citations are from the Revels edition.

³ The three productions I have seen are from the Oregon Shakespeare Festival (1984) directed by Jerry Turner; the Royal Shakespeare Company (1987-88) directed by Di Trevis; and London's National Theatre (2008) directed by Melly Still.

⁴ Memorable moments included Gratiana's show-stopping justification to Vindice of her actions ("No tongue but yours could have bewitch'd me so" - 4.4.33), equivalent, as performed here, to Falstaff's wonderful "coward on instinct," and Spurio's delicious delivery of "Old dad dead?" (5.1.115).

⁵ In her RSC show Trevis used the same device for the blazing star, whereas Turner in Oregon omitted it entirely.

⁶ Readers familiar with the situation in *Pericles*, 5.1 will recognize a comparable problem wherein a reader cannot be certain whether the playgoers should hear the music of the spheres heard by Pericles. For an excellent summary of that situation see the longer note to 5.1.212 in Suzanne Gossett's Arden 3 edition (London: Thomson Learning, 2004), pp. 411-12.

⁷ See the entries for *tire*, *tires*, *headtire* and *attire*, *attired* in Alan C. Dessen and Leslie Thomson, *A Dictionary of Stage Directions in English Drama, 1580-1642* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). Citations from Shakespeare are from the revised Riverside edition, ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1997).

⁸ I have in mind here the standard practice in the on-the-page presentation of an analogous situation in *Twelfth Night*, 4.2.94-101 where, to deceive Malvolio, Feste alternates between his own voice and that of Sir Topas. The Riverside editor uses punctuation rather than inserted directions to distinguish between the two voices (e.g., "Maintain no words with him, good fellow,---Who, I sir? Not I, sir. God buy you, good Sir Topas.---Marry, amen.---I will, sir, I will" - 99-101), though no such distinctions are to be found

in the Folio, and provides a note to lines 95-97: "Feste here impersonates Sir Topas again, and in his next speech takes both parts in a dialogue between Sir Topas and himself."

⁹ Philip C. McGuire, *Speechless dialect: Shakespeare's open silences* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).