

PHILOSOPHIES OF RETRIBUTION: KYD, SHAKESPEARE, WEBSTER AND THE
REVENGE TRAGEDY GENRE

by

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A Dissertation submitted to the
Graduate School-New Brunswick
Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Graduate Program in Literatures in English

written under the direction of

Emily C. Bartels

and approved by

New Brunswick, New Jersey

May 2007

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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Genre

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The first book-length attempt to set the generic parameters of early modern revenge tragedy was also the last. Since Fredson Bowers' *Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy* (1940), scholarship has interrogated literary and cultural issues *within* the genre. But it has left intact the prevailing assumption that such plays feature revenge as their principal focus, their very reason for existing as plays. Rather than privilege the retribution trajectory as the end point of critical inquiry, my dissertation argues that revenge proved a particularly apt *vehicle* for engaging with the highly contested philosophies of the period. For while critical discourse has read revenge as principally concerned with matters of justice and law, the retribution motif, unique among other early modern dramatic conventions, continually recalls to audience attention both the initiating forces behind current action and the fluid boundaries between the immaterial and material. By emphasizing the relationships between cause and effect, spirit and matter, and even idea and action, early modern revenge tragedies invite reconsideration, then, of a wider range

of philosophies than the legal and religious injunctions overtly invoked within such plays. Indeed, early modern revenge drama takes on, with surprising sophistication, such variegated matters as class, perceptions of moderation, the essential composition of the material world, and the generation of political power through fabulist narrative. While my individual chapters draw attention to strains of intellectual history not traditionally associated with each play – an Aristotelian faculty psychology in *The Spanish Tragedy*, the ethical mean in *Titus Andronicus*, the Lucretian atomism of *Hamlet*, and the Baconian fabulism of *The Duchess of Malfi* – my project seeks to reveal a larger point about the dynamics of revenge drama. This dissertation contends that early modern revenge tragedy emphasizes the complex interplay between the noetic, or conceptual, and the phenomenological in order to imagine, often in radical ways, the natural, ethical, and political philosophies that shape early modern culture.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My thanks go to the many people who have impacted – whether directly or indirectly – the development of this dissertation. In a very real sense, this project would never have materialized had I not met Russ McDonald during my earliest years in graduate school. His brilliant pedagogy and contagious delight in early modern drama shaped my thinking of the Renaissance stage and, as it turns out, set the trajectory for my career as a whole. Emily C. Bartels has provided countless hours of patient guidance, scrupulous and incisive editing, and enlightening conversation. For all these and for her direction of my graduate work at Rutgers University I am deeply grateful. I hope to repay her kindness, in part, by emulating her professionalism in my own work as scholar, teacher, and mentor. I have also benefited from Ron Levao, whose sharp analysis of intellectual history and its impact on early modern literature has continually caused me to rethink my own claims regarding the period. His humor, liveliness, and seemingly effortless mix of keen insight and unassuming demeanor have lightened many a conversation. Ann Baynes Coiro has provided invaluable advice at every stage of my dissertation and, indeed, throughout the whole of my graduate work. I greatly appreciate her attentiveness and generosity. The Mellon Dissertation seminars at Rutgers University, led by Meredith McGill and Michael McKeon respectively, provided space for invigorating collaboration and time to write. I gratefully thank the participants of the “Science and Religion in the Early Modern Period” seminar held during the Shakespeare Association of America Conference in 2006 for their contributions to my chapter on

Hamlet. My work on *The Spanish Tragedy* benefited from the close attention of the readers at *English Literary Renaissance*, and I happily acknowledge their contributions here. The readers at *Shakespeare Quarterly* – and especially Gail Kern Paster – have offered many incisive critiques of my article on *Titus Andronicus*. They deserve much credit for its final form, and I appreciate the care with which they are bringing it to press.

Many other scholars, teachers, and colleagues have added to this work, if not directly during the drafting process, then indirectly through their contributions to my intellectual and professional development. I consequently thank Christopher Hodgkins of The University of North Carolina-Greensboro, Jacqueline T. Miller of Rutgers University, Alastair Bellany also of Rutgers University, and Carlos Eire of Yale University for their engaging seminars on early modern literature and culture. I have also benefited from Paul Nisly and Clyde Ross, two of the finest professors from my undergraduate days at Messiah College. Brian Walsh, Christopher Warley, and Erin Murphy have graciously eased my transition into the professional world beyond our doctoral program, and I thank them for their kind generosity. Thanks also go to my family for their encouragement and support throughout the entire process, particularly Joan Graubit, whose advice to “just sit down and write” turned out, after all, to be exactly right. Finally, and most importantly, I thank Kelly Crosbie, who patiently read many drafts, endured rambling conversations, and kindly ignored book-littered tables, chairs, and floors. Her unfailing support, wit, and grace have made the periods of writing – and, more importantly, all the time in between – pleasant and worthwhile.

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Introduction

“When we speak of ‘revenge tragedy,’ we are often unaware of the extent to which our approach to these important Renaissance plays has been conditioned by the name we have given them. Elizabethans themselves recognized no distinct dramatic type called revenge play. The term is a modern one...”

~ Ronald Broude, “Revenge and Revenge Tragedy in Renaissance England”¹

“We should not adopt a term that answers the question before we ask it.”

~ Richard Helgerson, *Self-Crowned Laureates*²

“[T]he most cerebral and perplexed of revenge plays cannot escape from action as a principle... There is a sense in which theatrical ‘doing’ gravitates, quite naturally, towards revenge... As any director knows, it is easier for a performer to respond to something than to create events *ex nihilo*. Meanwhile, revenge is a building-block, the seed from which something larger can grow... Revenge tragedies practically construct themselves at this level, and the problem for an author is to prevent the material ramifying endlessly...”

~ John Kerrigan, *Revenge Tragedy: Aeschylus to Armageddon*³

“It is not, moreover, a question of bringing metaphysical ideas directly onto the stage, but of creating what you might call temptations, indraughts of air around these ideas... [I]t is through the skin that metaphysics must be made to re-enter our minds.”

~ Antonin Artaud, “The Theater of Cruelty,” in *The Theater and Its Double*⁴

In 1902, A.H. Thorndike published “The Relations of *Hamlet* to Contemporary Revenge Plays,” a remarkable article that created the “revenge tragedy” genre in order to more rigorously examine retribution on the early modern stage. Linking works as diverse as Thomas Kyd’s *The Spanish Tragedy*, Henry Chettle’s *The Tragedy of Hoffman*, Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, and other “revenge plays,” Thorndike’s essay constructed a list of conventions, a generic template, through which plays featuring retribution may be read, a project that in turn would shape over a century of literary criticism. In Thorndike’s own time, the article itself was, in many respects, rather bold. Situating *Hamlet* more directly within the context of its contemporaries, Thorndike asserts that Shakespeare created an “immortal work of art by transcendent genius” but also “in some considerable measure

by availing himself of the experience of others and by doing the same things which other men were doing at the same time.”⁵ To figure Shakespeare as, in some measure, akin to Kyd or Chettle, to make “transcendent genius” the beneficiary of what “other men were doing at the same time,” seems both remarkably prescient of later twentieth-century theories of authorship and notably liberated from (if still obviously influenced by) nineteenth-century inclinations towards hagiography. Indeed, in a seemingly democratizing manner, Thorndike states that he has “sought to point out the elements in these plays common to the revenge type” and that “all these authors were working with similar dramatic motives, similar material, and to some extent under similar artistic impulses.”⁶ *Hamlet*, within Thorndike’s reading, becomes then something of a piece within a larger set, part of a specialized yet distinctly wider group, a play belonging, in Thorndike’s terms, to “the revenge *type*.” Taken up, amplified, and further codified by Fredson Bowers’ *Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy* (1940), the first book-length study of the revenge play, Thorndike’s act of genre creation initiated the critical tendency towards reading revenge plays as a coherent genre, an identifiable form with its own recurrent tropes. In doing so, Thorndike drew attention to a remarkable network of plays as worthy of scholarly attention while also retaining Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* as the center of such critical inquiry.

In many regards, the genre created by Thorndike and Bowers remains compelling, connecting plays with undeniable stylistic and thematic affinities. Yet literary scholars have long signaled, even if only briefly and in passing, the limitations of the term “revenge tragedy” for accurately describing most of the plays associated with the genre. Thorndike defines “the revenge tragedy [as] a distinct species of the tragedy of blood”

and as a tragedy “whose leading motive is revenge and whose main action deals with the progress of this revenge.”⁷ Describing *The Spanish Tragedy* as paradigmatic of the genre, he identifies three particular characteristics that “distinguish more specifically the revenge tragedy.” First, Thorndike asserts, “the fundamental motive is revenge, and this revenge of a father for a son is superintended by a ghost;”⁸ second, there exists “hesitation on the part of the revenger who requires much inciting and superabundant proof;” and, third, “madness” functions as “an essential motive throughout.”⁹ Defining “revenge tragedy” through a similar set of concerns, Bowers likewise argues that:

revenge constitutes the main action of the play in the sense that the audience is chiefly interested in the events which lead to the necessary revenge for murder, and then in the revenger’s actions in accordance with his vow. The revenge must be the cause of the catastrophe, and its start must not be delayed beyond the crisis. ‘Revenge tragedy’ customarily (but by no means necessarily) portrays the ghosts of the murdered urging revenge, a hesitation on the part of the avenger, a delay in proceeding to his vengeance, and his feigned or actual madness.¹⁰

Thus, while revenge plays, not surprisingly, would become principally identified with the retributive act, they concomitantly take shape in the earliest criticism of the genre as centrally featuring ghosts, hesitations or delays (presumably caused by both interior and exterior sources), and madness – a series of traits that, in the aggregate, constitutes the revenge “type.”

Yet, as Bower’s parenthetical aside indicates, such traits nonetheless imperfectly describe the very genre they are brought together to define. Even while positioning *The Spanish Tragedy* as the progenitor of the revenge tradition, for instance, Bowers concedes that the play “is far from a perfect working-out of a revenge theme” and that while “the fundamental motive for the tragic action is revenge,” “the actual vengeance of Hieronimo is not conceived until midway in the play.” Moreover, acknowledges Bowers, “the ghost

has no real connection with the play.”¹¹ The fundamental characteristics of revenge tragedy, it would seem, imperfectly define even the first revenge tragedy itself.¹² When Bowers concludes his study by observing that “in spite of the prominence and well marked character of the tragedy of revenge as a literary type, the Elizabethans gave it no critical recognition,” he acknowledges the genre’s essential artificiality yet retains it as an indispensable, codified heuristic nonetheless.¹³

While other plays associated with the revenge tradition, not simply *The Spanish Tragedy*, also receive the curious disclaimer that they imprecisely fit the revenge tragedy mold,¹⁴ criticism on *Hamlet* remains conspicuously exempt from such genre anxiety, marking the play as singular in its conformity to this modern construct. But *why* does *Hamlet* fit seamlessly with the genre, even in its most minor characteristics, while other plays featuring revenge lack, in varying degrees, the genre’s fundamental conventions? The exact correlation of the one and the procrustean position of the others suggests that Thorndike’s model, remarkably enough, attempts to read revenge drama *through* the conventions common to *Hamlet*. Rather than simply situating *Hamlet* within the context of similar drama, that is, Thorndike *projects* Shakespeare’s most famous play onto other texts, creating in one motion a coherent genre but one imperfectly suited to other plays. If *Hamlet* sits comfortably within the generic type, it does so because Shakespeare’s play provides the very conventions for the genre itself: *Hamlet*, in short, *is* the type. Indeed, although Thorndike’s title, “The Relations of Hamlet to Contemporary Revenge Plays,” signals his attempt to place *Hamlet* within the context of other early modern drama, it also registers his privileging of Shakespeare’s work, his emphasis on *Hamlet* as the point of departure for his inquiry.¹⁵ For while Thorndike admirably seeks to situate

Shakespeare within the context of his contemporaries, even striving to appear “fair in this effort,” he nonetheless contrasts “the great man and the smaller men from the point of view of their contemporaries,”¹⁶ noting that “in the other revenge plays we have found attempts to deal with the same themes to which Shakespeare gave *final* expression. The other men were in some degree *struggling* to express similar artistic moods and a similar range of thought and feeling.”¹⁷ The predisposition to read *Hamlet* as superior, while in itself not surprising, clearly conditions the terms of the genre itself, as *Hamlet* becomes, first, the prototypical revenge tragedy and, finally, the exemplary one.

The notion that *Hamlet* emerges from a preexisting generic construct – and the correlative exultation of the play over its generic kin – recurs throughout twentieth-century literary criticism. F.S. Boas, for instance, reads Kyd’s play as simply an inferior precursor to *Hamlet*, a common reading conditioned in part by generic expectations, and his claim that “*The Spanish Tragedy*,...with revenge and madness as its main themes, anticipates in certain aspects Shakespeare’s mighty work”¹⁸ remains representative of criticism of the genre. Bowers likewise diminishes other revenge plays (including Shakespeare’s earliest tragedy) by asserting that “Shakespeare almost alone *unshackled* himself from the form, although in *Titus Andronicus* he experimented with it and in the final *Hamlet* achieved the *apotheosis* of the revenge play.”¹⁹ Bowers reiterates this sentiment numerous times, claiming, as Thorndike before him, that “*Hamlet* differs from the revenge tragedies by other Elizabethan dramatists only in the measure that Shakespeare was above his fellows in genius.”²⁰ More recently, Peter Mercer has asserted, in similar fashion, that:

Of this inherited complexity, which it so makes over, *Hamlet* is the astonishing consummation. It is not, of course, just *another* revenge play. In fact, it forces

the revenge structure to the point where it turns on its own forms and metaphors...Nevertheless, the structure it so radically transforms, the structure rediscovered by Elizabethan drama within the ancient myth of revenge, remains of the highest relevance to the play. *Hamlet* is born from that structure – however strange the labour.²¹

Mercer's depiction of *Hamlet* as an “astonishing consummation” of a genre, as a work “born from that structure” that “remains of the highest relevance to the play” positions *Hamlet* – as does the majority of twentieth-century criticism – as at once part of, yet necessarily distinct from, the generic form created to describe the play itself. While the revenge tragedy genre seems to situate *Hamlet* in relation to other plays, it does so in order to further set Shakespeare's play apart: it constructs a history of genre through *Hamlet* in order to portray the play as notably distinct. Revenge tragedy criticism, that is, reads retribution on the early modern stage *typologically*, looking before and after *Hamlet* for similarities to Shakespeare's work, rendering the play, in the process, the standard of comparison. In doing so, such criticism reinforces *Hamlet*'s distinctiveness within the genre by positioning other plays featuring revenge as inferior reflections of Shakespeare's famous play.²² Revenge drama outside of *Hamlet*, not surprisingly, tends to receive censure for its mere sensationalism and philosophical crudeness – in short, its distance from *Hamlet*.

Using revenge to connect – and philosophy to contrast – *Hamlet* with other plays, this act of genre creation, then, both privileges retribution as the central issue of inquiry and depicts most revenge plays as crudely sensational. Within this generic framework, plays such as *The Spanish Tragedy* and *Titus Andronicus* appear as brutal spectacle, as poorly rendered appeals to popular tastes for violence. Even *The Duchess of Malfi*, less histrionic and arguably more subtle than its predecessors, has seemed disjointed, lurid,

and lacking sophistication. If plays such as *The Spanish Tragedy*, *Titus Andronicus*, and *The Duchess of Malfi* achieved a degree of critical recognition on account of the revenge tragedy genre, this attention has centered less on the plays' philosophical depth, their engagement with variegated fields of inquiry crucial to the era, and more on matters central to retribution – on ones that coincidentally align the plays (even if by contrast) with Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Such plays notably retain in the critical discourse their status as revenge plays, therefore, but rarely receive credit for proving themselves philosophically sophisticated. At the same time, *Hamlet* while lauded for both its philosophical depth and its representation of revenge, rarely receives recognition for accomplishing both at the same time. For while the protagonist philosophizes, so the narrative goes, he does not revenge; when he revenges, he does so suddenly, on impulse, with comparatively little rumination.²³ Thus, *Hamlet* occupies a singular space in the critical tradition as both the only revenge tragedy proper and as the most sophisticated one at that. Yet even here, criticism has resolutely kept philosophy and revenge separate, as almost intrinsically incompatible with each other. Through the creation of the revenge tragedy genre, criticism has thus not only emphasized the putative simplicity of revenge plays but also the apparent conflict between thought and action in *Hamlet*, depicting, in the process, a latent tension between philosophy and retribution.

II.

The separation of philosophy from revenge in literary criticism may likewise be seen in the twentieth-century critical shift away from Augustus Schlegel's reading of *Hamlet* as a "tragedy of thought" towards the construction of "revenge tragedy." Writing in the early nineteenth-century, Schlegel argued that "Hamlet is singular in its kind: a

tragedy of thought inspired by continual and never-satisfied meditation on human destiny and the dark perplexity of the events of this world, and calculated to call forth the very same meditation in the minds of the spectators.”²⁴ Schlegel follows his emphasis on the ruminative components of *Hamlet* by explicitly contrasting this meditative, philosophical quality with the physical enactment of revenge and, by setting the two in opposition to each other, he helps construct a tradition of reading *Hamlet* that would, in turn, shape later revenge criticism. Schlegel concludes that “The whole [of the play] is intended to show that a calculating consideration, which exhausts all the relations and possible consequences of a deed, must cripple the power of acting” (218). In Schlegel’s reading, calculation – rather than facilitating, or even coexisting with, retribution – functions as a source of debilitation; philosophy and revenge stand here as irreconcilable opposites.

Building on Schlegel’s thesis, William Hazlitt argues that:

In this tragedy of thought we have delineated a highly sensitive, reflecting, self-introspective mind, weak and melancholic, sorrow-stricken and life-weary....Hamlet’s indecision to act, and his over-readiness to reflect, are placed beyond the reach of critical discovery by his own analytical motive-hunting, so eloquently expressed in the abstruse reasoning in which he indulges.²⁵

Where Schlegel contrasts calculation and “the power of acting,” Hazlitt likewise aligns introspection with an “indecision to act,” positing Hamlet’s “abstruse reasoning” as antithetical to his revenge. By “invert[ing] Aristotle’s stress on the primacy of action over character,”²⁶ both critics participate in the Romantic assumption that retribution and philosophy rest uneasily with each other.²⁷

Although seeking to counter the reading of *Hamlet* as a tragedy of thought (and written within the years that saw the birth of “revenge tragedy” criticism), A.C. Bradley’s widely-influential *Shakespearean Tragedy* further reinforces the ingrained assumption of

an inevitable incompatibility between philosophy and retribution. Bradley counters “the Schlegel-Coleridge theory” by arguing that “this theory fails to satisfy,” since it “describes, therefore, a man in certain respects like Coleridge himself, on one side a man of genius, on the other side, the side of will, deplorably weak, always procrastinating and avoiding unpleasant duties, and often reproaching himself in vain; a man, observe, who at any time and in any circumstances would be unequal to the task assigned to Hamlet” (89). Notably, Bradley takes issue with the notion that philosophy and revenge must *essentially* or *inevitably* remain at odds, continually pulling in different directions under all circumstances. Yet, even as he challenges Schlegel’s and Coleridge’s theory, Bradley implicitly reaffirms that action and reflection stand in tension in Shakespeare’s play. He asserts that, in *Hamlet*, “The energy of resolve is dissipated in an endless brooding on the deed required.”²⁸ Bradley continues, averring that:

Hamlet’s melancholy...would excite but little, if any, tragic interest if it were not the condition of a nature distinguished by that speculative genius on which the Schlegel-Coleridge type of theory lays stress. Such theories misinterpret the connection between that genius and Hamlet’s failure, but still it is this connection which gives to his story its peculiar fascination and makes it appear...as the symbol of a tragic mystery inherent in human nature...And this is the reason why, in the great ideal movement which began towards the close of the eighteenth century, this tragedy acquired a position unique among Shakespeare’s dramas.²⁹

Arguing that Hamlet’s failure to act derives not from his speculative nature itself, Bradley emphasizes that, under other circumstances, the ruminative Hamlet would readily perform any deed required of him. As Margreta De Grazia observes, “the prevailing view introduced by Schlegel and Coleridge that Hamlet is held back by excessive thought...[is] according to Bradley, partial and misleading. Excessive thought is a mere symptom: the cause lies deeper.”³⁰ “Bradley supersedes Schlegel/Coleridge with a psychological explanation that is both more deep-rooted and more modern,” asserts De

Grazia, for he seeks more fundamental sources for “‘Hamlet’s inaction” and his “‘useless activity.’”³¹ Even as Bradley attempts to rescue Hamlet’s contemplation from censure, however, he still explicitly links rumination to inactivity, keeping philosophy and revenge at odds. During the very period that saw *Hamlet* shift from “tragedy of thought” to “revenge tragedy” and the period that figured Shakespeare’s play as paradigmatic of other drama featuring retribution, the perception of an inherent conflict between retribution and philosophy still prevailed in critical discourse.

III.

While subsequent scholarship has interrogated literary and cultural issues *within* the genre constructed by Thorndike and Bowers, it has left intact the prevailing assumption that such plays feature revenge as their principal focus, their very reason for existing as plays, as well as retained a longstanding tradition of reading vengeance and philosophy as largely incompatible modes of human action. Rather than privilege the retribution trajectory as the end point of critical inquiry, my dissertation argues instead that revenge proved a particularly apt *vehicle* for engaging with the highly contested philosophies of the period. For while critical discourse has read revenge as principally concerned with matters of justice and law, the retribution motif, unique among other early modern dramatic conventions, continually recalls to audience attention both the initiating forces behind current action and the fluid boundaries between the immaterial and material. By emphasizing the relationships between cause and effect, spirit and matter, and even idea and action, early modern revenge plays invite reconsideration of a wider range of philosophies than the legal and religious injunctions overtly invoked

within such plays.³² Indeed, early modern revenge drama takes on, with surprising sophistication, such variegated matters as class, perceptions of moderation, the essential composition of the material world, and the generation of political power through fabulist narrative. By examining *The Spanish Tragedy*, *Titus Andronicus*, *Hamlet*, and *The Duchess of Malfi* – four texts central to revenge drama – my project contends that early modern revenge tragedy emphasizes the complex interplay between the noetic, or conceptual, and the phenomenological in order to imagine, often in radical ways, the natural, ethical, and political philosophies that shape early modern culture.³³

My first chapter examines Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*, the progenitor of the early modern revenge drama. Rather than simply irrational and brutish, or, conversely, highly calculative, revenge appears throughout Kyd's play as an *instinctively* reproductive mode as well. I contend that Kyd's play creates a subtle *apologia* for the "middling sort" by challenging the socially-constructed predicates of aristocratic privilege. A scrivener's son, Kyd understood *oeconomia*, or household management, as both the means for material advancement among the "middling sort" and a potential threat to aristocratic insularity. His translation of Torquato Tasso's *The Householder's Philosophy*, a work rarely studied by literary scholars, reveals an abiding interest in the political import of natural philosophy on class structure. In *The Spanish Tragedy*'s sophisticated revision of Aristotle, Kyd appropriates early modern understandings of the vegetative soul – the source of all reproduction, nutrition, and growth inherent in all living things – to fashion an egalitarian case against aristocratic privilege by revealing middling ambition as a natural phenomenon. By presenting the latent desire for growth and development as the consequence of an innate psychology, Kyd's play exposes the

artificiality of socially-constructed class hierarchy and transforms revenge into an understandable outgrowth of thwarted ambition, a type of reproduction by absence, when all lawful means of material advancement become foreclosed.

Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*, the focus of my second chapter, examines through its sensational horrors and multiple acts of vengeance how designations of moderation and excess may be constituted, unsettled, and reconstituted in a polity destabilized by shifting ethical referents. By examining Shakespeare's engagement with the Aristotelian ethical mean – the point of moral equilibrium between two diametrically-opposed, immoral extremes – I explain how the construal of ethical value in Elizabethan England invited contest. *Titus Andronicus* exhibits a preoccupation with fixing moderation – both in the sense of locating but also repairing it as well – for it imagines a world in which immoderation threatens to become the norm. By treating the contextual determination of moderation and the mean's ontological fixity as compatible, *Titus Andronicus* creates a flexible rigidity that positions Titus as both horrific and sympathetic in his revenge as he negotiates the shifting terms of Rome's civic contract. The play's apparent dislocation of victim and villain derives from the theatrical possibilities inherent in the mean's fluidity; yet the ethical mean also provides, paradoxically, a readable matrix of heroism and villainy. Resituated in a world grown uncontrollably immoderate, Titus acts in direct proportion to his surrounding context, his grotesque revenge functioning, remarkably, as a brutal but necessary type of moderation-in-extremity.

While *Hamlet*'s preoccupations with epistemological uncertainty and the interplay of motility and stasis have received considerable analysis separately, my third chapter proposes a new emphasis on the epistemics of perceiving motion central to the play's

process of revenge. By calling attention to the movement of faintly perceptible phenomena – whether the Old Mole shifting beneath the stage or the transformed bodies of Alexander and Caesar in the dust – *Hamlet* invites inquiry into the very nature of materiality. *Hamlet*'s interest in the particular – literally, the particles that compose the whole – attempts to get at the problem of ontological coherence by attending to the motion of the miniscule, fragmentary, and divided. *Hamlet* surprisingly takes up Lucretian atomism, a scandalous philosophy renowned for its atheist and Epicurean implications and long thought dormant until its reemergence in the late seventeenth-century. Contrary to readings that posit Hamlet as inveterately despising matter, then, I argue that both protagonist and play invoke atomist thought in order to subtly emphasize four reassuring qualities of the material. First, *Hamlet* depicts indestructible matter as yielding an ontological stability amid flux. Next, physical dissolution in *Hamlet* admits a type of continual, even comforting, existence. Third, the scrutiny of material motions – despite Hamlet's own protestations to the contrary – renders hidden motives discernible. And, finally, history, quite literally a material phenomenon, allows for its own reshaping. Moreover, *Hamlet* draws from atomism an interest in countering the epistemological void with a physical one. For the play's repeated iterations of the dialectic between "thing" and "nothing," like the atomist theory of matter and empty space, signals a marked investment in understanding the visible through its relation to the invisible. By recuperating *Hamlet*'s indebtedness to atomism, then, this chapter discovers how the play represents the epistemics of atomist philosophy as applicable to the courses of human action. Rather than simply treating external forms as deceptive, *Hamlet*, I contend,

depicts through the process of revenge the revelatory potential of, and the ontological coherence provided by, matter and the material act.

In my fourth and final chapter, I read *The Duchess of Malfi*'s cycle of crime and reprisal – and its curious use of animal lore in depicting a repressive politics – as using a Baconian critique of fabulism in order to challenge established constructs of authority and dominion. Here, I propose a new reading of Bacon's seemingly inconsistent claims regarding imaginative language and its capacity to accurately depict the natural world. Arguing that Bacon, in fact, differentiates between prescriptive and descriptive fabulism, I reveal how his works demystify authorizing rhetoric of entrenched power yet unexpectedly retain the fable as a useful vehicle for articulating heterodox ideas. *The Duchess of Malfi*, written immediately after Bacon's early treatises, depicts subjugated citizens as internalizing their treatment as mere creatures. In doing so, Webster's play signals the capacity of figurative rhetoric to enthrall the mind, dehumanize the citizen, and distort one's sense of value within social contracts. Notably, while Webster envisions political resistance to such repression, he also emphasizes the failure of an egalitarian alternative to emerge. Webster thus constructs neither a conservative nor a radical critique of hereditary privilege. For both the admirable application of aristocratic power and the violent deposition of tyrants fail to remedy the ubiquitous political corruption represented throughout the play. Instead, Webster uses the *failure* of both modes of critique in order to broach a still more revolutionary notion, namely, that solidarity across class lines, wrought by a sustaining philosophical framework of descriptive fabulism, might succeed – where revenge had failed – in displacing systemic inequity.

While my individual chapters draw attention to strains of intellectual history not traditionally associated with each play – an Aristotelian faculty psychology in *The Spanish Tragedy*, the ethical mean in *Titus Andronicus*, the Lucretian atomism of *Hamlet*, and the Baconian fabulism of *The Duchess of Malfi* – my project seeks to reveal a larger point about the dynamics of drama. For the stage affords the opportunity to make material and immediate the political and cultural possibilities latent, if unexplored overtly, in philosophy's more prosaic moments.³⁴ The twentieth-century creation of revenge tragedy as a genre drew critical attention, fortuitously, to a remarkable set of plays yet, unfortunately, away from some of their most intriguing aspects through its privileging of revenge as principal object of inquiry. By focusing on the natural, ethical, and political philosophies of these plays, I reveal each author's engagement with the translation of metaphysical theory into material reality. The vehicle of revenge provided Shakespeare and his contemporaries a means for engaging with the import of the age's protean philosophies as they examined the interplay between concept and phenomenon, between immaterial and material. Likewise, it provides us an avenue for studying the complex transformations and transmissions of intellectual history enacted on, and mediated through, the early modern stage.

¹ Ronald Broude, "Revenge and Revenge Tragedy in Renaissance England," *Renaissance Quarterly* 28.1 (1975): 38-58.

² Richard Helgerson, *Self-Crowned Laureates: Spenser, Jonson, Milton, and the Literary System*, (Berkeley: U of California P, 1983): 4.

³ John Kerrigan, *Revenge Tragedy: Aeschylus to Armageddon*, (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1996): 4-5.

⁴ Antonin Artaud, "The Theater of Cruelty," in *The Theater and Its Double*, trans. Mary Caroline Richards (New York: Grove Press, 1958): 90, 99.

⁵ A. H. Thorndike, "The Relations of *Hamlet* to Contemporary Revenge Plays," *PMLA* 17 (1902): 125-220, esp. 220.

⁶ 201.

⁷ Thorndike, 125.

⁸ On Thorndike's formulation as treating the ghosts as central to revenge plays, see also his comments on the "fashion for plays dealing with revenge and ghosts" (137).

⁹ 143-4.

¹⁰ Bowers, *Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy: 1587-1642*, (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1940): 63-4.

¹¹ 66, 71.

¹² Other revenge plays likewise deviate noticeably from the connections meant to define the genre. Peter Mercer, for instance, observes that "*The Revenger's Tragedy*, it is true, has no ghost and no madness, but it shares with *Hamlet* the richly problematic characteristic of combining the modes of revenge and satire" (*Hamlet and the Acting of Revenge*, [Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 1987]: 6).

¹³ 259. Cautioning against further subclassification of the revenge tragedy genre, Bowers observes that "We may be very chary of accepting any definite division" (271). The warning seems equally relevant to accepting too readily the genre itself.

¹⁴ On *The Revenger's Tragedy* as parodying the conventions of the revenge tragedy genre, see Karin S. Coddon, "'For Show or Useless Property': Necrophilia and the *Revenger's Tragedy*," *ELH*, 61.1 (1994): 71-88, esp. 81-2

¹⁵ Thorndike observes that "from 1599 to 1604 there occurred...a revival and development of this type which is of importance in any study of *Hamlet* from a historical point of view...*Hamlet* must be examined to determine what extent and in what ways it was influenced by this contemporary type" (126-8).

¹⁶ 220.

¹⁷ 220, emphasis added.

¹⁸ Frederick S. Boas, *Shakespeare and his Predecessors*, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1904): 63.

¹⁹ 101, emphasis added.

²⁰ Bowers, 110.

²¹ Peter Mercer, 7.

²² Harold Bloom provides a unique twist to this tendency by asserting, without further elaboration, that "*Hamlet* is part of Shakespeare's revenge upon revenge tragedy, and is of no genre" (*Hamlet: Poem Unlimited*, [New York: Riverhead Books, 2003]:3).

²³ See, for instance, Ruth Stevenson, who argues that "the revenge itself against Claudius takes place as an unplanned reflex" in "*Hamlet*'s Mice, Motes, Moles, and Minching Malecho," *New Literary History* 33 (2002): 435-459, esp. 443.

²⁴ Augustus Schlegel, *Course of Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature*, in *Hamlet: Critical Essays*, ed. Joseph G. Price, (New York: Garland Publishing: 1986): 217-9, esp. 217, emphasis added. On Schlegel's comment that *Hamlet* is a "tragedy of thought," see A.C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy: Lectures on Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, Macbeth*, Third Edition, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992): 66.

²⁵ William Hazlitt, *Characters of Shakespeare's Plays*, in *Hamlet: Critical Essays*, ed. Joseph G. Price, (New York: Garland Publishing: 1986): 207-215, esp. 214.

²⁶ Margreta De Grazia, "Teleology, Delay, and the 'Old Mole,'" *Shakespeare Quarterly* 50 (1999): 251-267, esp. 254. De Grazia notes that during this period "the activity foregrounded in the play took the form of thought rather than action or plot, occurring

within the interior recesses of the protagonist; and *Hamlet* was accordingly declared the ‘tragedy of thought,’ ‘the tragedy of reflection,’ or ‘the tragedy of consciousness’” (254).

²⁷ This critical emphasis on the tension between philosophy and revenge, according to Robert Watson, derived in part from “the Romantics who commented on Shakespeare in the early nineteenth century,” critics who “were often morbidly sensitive intellectuals (such as Coleridge and Hazlitt in England, Goethe and Schlegel in Germany) trapped in the world of brutal action: poet-philosophers with too much brain-power and emotional delicacy for their own good....” Such critics, Watson asserts, “perceived Hamlet as much the same...[as] Hamlet repeatedly condemns himself for getting caught up in analysing revenge instead of performing it.” (Robert N. Watson, “Tragedies of revenge and ambition,” *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespearean Tragedy*, ed. Claire McEachern, [Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002]: 160-181, esp. 171).

²⁸ 88.

²⁹ 106-7.

³⁰ 257.

³¹ 257.

³² After rightly calling into question the term “revenge tragedy,” Ronald Broude suggests such plays, indeed, take up a greater variety of philosophical concerns than simply retribution. However, his valuable study remains focused exclusively on questions of law and justice, leaving aside a broader array of philosophical concerns. Broude observes that “the central interest of revenge tragedy is not, after all, revenge – at least not revenge in the modern sense of the word...Revenge tragedy may in some sense be understood as a form of response to the basic questions of crime and punishment posed by these transformation in socio-legal thought and practice” (39-40).

³³ William Kerrigan and Gordon Braden assert that, “The general Renaissance quest for classical authority in the most dramatically unprecedented endeavors...now seems in many cases a clearly secondary effort, more strategy or camouflage than source. The nurture or instruction provided by the classics is often less impressive than the unclassical ends to which they and their cachet could be put” (*The Idea of the Renaissance*, [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1989]: 10). Although this dissertation extends beyond strictly classical sources, my project seeks to illuminate the stage’s role in appropriating philosophic authorities for unconventional ends.

³⁴ Antonin Artaud argues that “If the theater, like dreams, is bloody and inhuman, it is...in order to perpetuate in a concrete and immediate way the metaphysical ideas of certain Fables whose very atrocity and energy suffice to show their origin and continuity in essential principles...[I]t is through the skin that metaphysics must be made to re-enter our minds” (92-3, 99).

Oeconomia and the Vegetative Soul: Rethinking Revenge in *The Spanish Tragedy*

Literary scholars have long recognized the dramatic tensions of Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* as arising from the class antagonisms between its central players. Locating Hieronimo and Horatio as members of the "middling sort," a category roughly tantamount to the middle class, Kyd sets the Knight Marshal and his son in conflict with an entrenched aristocracy jealous to retain its own privileged insularity. But Kyd also imagines his protagonists collectively as an ambitious household, a fact only glanced at in existing criticism, and presents their success as informed by prudent *oeconomia*, or household management.¹ Shrewd *oeconomia* enables the middling sort to advance their station in life, but it also, when particularly successful, leads to the higher strata of the middling sort pressing against (and threatening to unsettle) aristocratic prerogative. Kyd's interest in the workings of *oeconomia* is evinced both here and in his translation of Torquato Tasso's *Padre di famiglia*, or *The Householder's Philosophy*. As suggested by his translation's title, Kyd attends to the philosophic predicates of *oeconomia*, and the class conflicts in *The Spanish Tragedy* have, as it were, deeper roots than we have previously understood.

Perhaps most astonishing is how the Aristotelian tripartite soul permeates Kyd's drama and shapes the *oeconomia* that gives rise to the play's central tensions. Cartesian dualism ostensibly simplified matters by subsuming the soul's lesser capacities within a mechanistic materialism, but Kyd's contemporaries imagined a more variegated psychology.² The Aristotelian tripartite soul, comprised not only of the rational and

animal faculties but also the vegetative as well, provided the prevailing psychological paradigm for late sixteenth century England. The vegetative faculty governed all reproduction, nutrition, and growth; it was the essential component, quite literally the *sine qua non*, of all life.³ As the source of all development and growth, the vegetative principle – or, as Kyd renders it in *The Householder's Philosophy*, the “faculty of getting” – represents for Kyd both metaphysical reality and social possibility. By presenting ambition, the latent desire for growth and advancement, as the natural product of a human psychology informed by Aristotle, Kyd reveals both the artificiality of socially-constructed class hierarchy and a legitimized rationale for middling aspiration. More significantly, however, he imaginatively depicts revenge as not simply irrationally brutish, or, conversely, highly calculative, but also as *instinctively* reproductive, a mode of production that functions as an outlet for thwarted material fecundity.

Kyd situates Hieronimo and Horatio as rising members of the “middling sort,”⁴ marking them as outside the aristocratic echelon their innate ambition prompts them to challenge. Keith Wrightson observes that “from the last third of the sixteenth century...a specific vocabulary of informal social description emerges into prominence, a set of terms called the language of ‘sorts’...[that] appears primarily to express an essentially dichotomous perception of society.”⁵ This method of articulating a “dichotomous perception of society” provides definition by contrast, identifying the middling sort not only by revealing who they are but more often indicating who they are *not*. “Though not a middle class, but like the middle class,” Leinwand argues, “they make it easier for us to determine with whom they did or did not identify than with what.”⁶ Writing before Wrightson and Leinwand, C.L. Barber identifies Hieronimo and Horatio as belonging to

what we might now recognize as this “middling sort.” Hieronimo, Barber argues, has “a very clearly-defined social position that makes him an appropriate figure for a middle-class London audience to identify with. He is not a member of the high nobility but a high civil servant.”⁷ He is, therefore, “the sort of man Kyd would look up to, himself the son of a scrivener, and a client of a noble family who respected learning.”⁸ Barber anticipates Wrightson and Leinwand here, arriving at this “clear” delineation by setting Hieronimo against “the high nobility,” a category into which he clearly does not fit.

Kyd imagines the play’s central conflicts as occurring not simply between the aristocracy and a middling individual, however, but as between the aristocracy and a middling *household*, figuring, therefore, the frustrations to social advancement wrought by Lorenzo as denying the very progress invited by the discourses of *oeconomia*. C.L. Barber adumbrates without further explication this subtext when he argues the king thinks of Hieronimo and Horatio “as a ‘house;’ the ransom [for Balthazar] is the kind of reward which could make a substantial difference to their fortunes.”⁹ Discussing the “social division and contention [that] pervades Kyd’s play,” James Siemon more thoroughly examines the limitations of father and son as indicative of their conjoined plight, rooted in their shared social stratum:

Hieronimo himself, of unmentioned antecedents and doubtful finances, occupies a house too small for the captured Portuguese train, and appears to be the only major character with a career and the accompanying daily professional responsibilities that must be followed whether he will or no. While his own success in rising from petty correigedor to Knight Marshall may suggest the openness of the Spanish court to the talented individual, the fate of his son Horatio reveals both of them to be caught in the structural inequities of court life.¹⁰

Despite their particular individual circumstances, Hieronimo and Horatio occupy together a frustrating middling space, existing together with Isabella as a household limited in

means yet possessing ambition for advancement. Rising and talented yet daily laboring and occupying “a house too small” for the captured Portuguese prince, the protagonists may be ambitious, but they have also become functionally static, lacking the promise of any additional advance beyond their present condition. This, it would seem, is the particular dilemma of middling success, but becomes especially acute for Hieronimo and Isabella once Horatio is killed, a scenario the third addition of the 1602 quarto further develops when Hieronimo describes Horatio as “the very arm that did hold up our house. / Our hopes were storèd up in him...” (32-3). Hieronimo, Isabella, and Horatio together dramatize the challenges of holding up one’s house, of seeking future advancement through prudent management in an uncongenial environment. With “the ethic of household management, or *oeconomia*, newly popular with the ‘middling sort’ of the population,”¹¹ *The Spanish Tragedy* draws on a discursive field familiar to its audience but, notably, depicts *oeconomia* as useful only to a point, as the promise of social advancement remains starkly delimited by existing social hierarchies.

Kyd’s *The Householder’s Philosophy*, his 1588 translation of Torquato Tasso’s minor treatise *Padre di famiglia*, reveals both his interest in *oeconomia* and his understanding of society as shaped by class antagonism, as fraught with the social stratification that is and the social mobility that could, in theory, be.¹² Prominent among domestic management manuals of the late sixteenth century, Tasso’s treatise is a “humanistic work outlining the universal principles of cosmic ordering underlying metaphysical and material worlds rather than detailing pragmatic tasks.”¹³ The emphasis on “universal principles of cosmic ordering” rather than “pragmatic tasks” situates the focus of the treatise *outward* rather than inward, on the world external to the home

despite the ostensible focus on the household itself. But the treatise is no mere recitation of abstract philosophy. Rather, Kyd's translation reveals a distinct concern with the concrete realities of social stratification, particularly the economic disparities that both impinge on and yet define one's household. While Kyd's subtitle may promise he will "perfectly and profitably" put forward "the true *oeconomia* and forme of housekeeping," it does not promise an exact rendering of Tasso's original. Kyd's deviations from the original text signal an authorial bias towards a more equitable system where merit, not privilege, governs. The railings against usury, for example, stem entirely from Kyd's own additions and seem to reflect his distaste for oppressive economies.¹⁴ The translation may be stylistically uneven, but Kyd consistently makes the case that lack of "clothing, purse, or birth need not preclude true nobility, which should be measured by richness of action, comeliness, utterance, judgment, and argument – as if such capacities might arise like Horatio's virtues independently of social and material conditions."¹⁵ The "universal principles of cosmic ordering" of Kyd's translation, then, pertain directly to the distinctly fiscal, or material, differentiations between society's strata. For while Kyd imagines these material differentiations separately from his definition of true "nobility," he nonetheless, by doing so, depicts the inherent capacities for self-improvement as continually set against the material advantages of the recognized "nobility" of the real, rather than theoretical, world. The society Kyd inhabits, the one he reflects in his translation of *The Householder's Philosophy*, and the one he creates in *The Spanish Tragedy* are all ordered by the dialectic implied in this contrast between privilege and merit, between entrenched power and laboring aspirants. Indeed, since Kyd thinks of the

capacities for self-improvement as arising “independently of social and material conditions,” it is worth asking from *where* such capacities derive.

The Aristotelianism still dominant in Kyd’s day and the Cartesian dualism that would eventually supplant it differ significantly on this point, and to understand *The Spanish Tragedy*, we must, therefore, look past Descartes’ rejection of the vegetative soul to the Aristotelian concept of a fundamental drive to self-perfection inherent to all living things. In his survey of late Aristotelianism and the rise of Cartesian dualism, Dennis Des Chene observes that “the divorce of the vegetative soul and its functions from the sensitive and rational souls...was effected by Descartes.”¹⁶ He continues:

the operations of the Cartesian soul have no intrinsic relation to nourishment, growth, or reproduction. Its sensations and passions are... ‘instituted’ by God so as to provide a guide to life... The Aristotelian soul, it would seem, requires no such institution... [T]he soul, by way of its vegetative part, is *in* the organs of generation, and through its powers immediately acts on and is acted on by them.¹⁷

Indeed, Des Chene treats the removal of the vegetative soul as one of the defining characteristics of Cartesian psychology. For Descartes “insists upon sensation and passion as evidence of the strongest sort for the ‘intimate union’ of soul and body... The result is that thought is severed *only* from the *vegetative* functions, not the sensitive.”¹⁸

In Kyd’s England, however, the vegetative capacity had yet to be severed from the soul’s functions. Fundamental to all life, the vegetative soul had “three powers: nutrition, growth (or augmentation), and generation.”¹⁹ The concept of growth as being a type of augmentation derives itself from Aristotle’s idea that “self-change” is the “one criterion for being alive” and that “spontaneous movement directed to self-perfection is characteristic of life.”²⁰ As Franciscus Suarez observes, non-living things do not act “so as to acquire what is needed to perfect themselves” whereas “living things are those that

have this power of moving and perfecting themselves by virtue of something intrinsic.”²¹ Thus, Aristotelian writers argue that even plants, which lack “sense and locomotion,” still “live and have souls,” since they move (even if imperceptibly) as they reproduce, attain nourishment, and grow.²² Though the function occurs more subtly in plants, the vegetative soul operates in all life, and its hallmark is this fundamental instinct towards self-perfection.²³

The concept of the soul’s latent drive towards growth (and advancement or self-improvement) found frequent expression in early modern literature. While some authors briefly glance at the vegetative function, others give it extended treatment. Marlowe’s *Tamburlaine* hints towards this psychology in his most famous lines: “Nature that fram’d us of foure Elements...Doth teach us all to have aspyring minds: / Our soules, whose faculties can comprehend / The wondrous Architecture of the world.../ Wils us to weare our selves and never rest, / Untill we reach the ripest fruit of all,/ That perfect blisse and sole felicitie, / The sweet fruition of an earthly crowne” (2.7.18-21,26-29).²⁴ The language of comprehending the world immediately places emphasis on the soul’s higher capacity for reason. But *Tamburlaine* points to the very elemental composition of our framing, figures his ambition as rooted in the multiple “faculties” of his soul, and imagines the apogee of his success as reaching “the ripest fruit of all...the sweet fruition of an earthy crowne.”²⁵ Theridamas echoes this ambition, invoking the language of “sorts,” when he compares the socially immobile, un-ambitious person to the non-living, dense materials of the earth: “he is gross and like the massy earth / That moves not upwards nor by princely deeds / Doth mean to soar above the highest sort” (31-33). A few decades later but obviously still within a pre-Cartesian context, Marvell will likewise

describe his own version of imperial ambition in “To His Coy Mistress,” by declaring “My vegetable love should grow / Vaster than empires, and more slow” (11-2).²⁶ But perhaps the most salient literary reflections on the vegetative soul and its role in growth and development may be found in John Davies’ “Of the Soule of Men, and the Immortalitie thereof.” Entered in the Stationer’s Register in 1599, Davies’ poem meditates on the “effects diversified” of the soul, beginning with what the marginal gloss terms its “vegetative or quickening power” (936).²⁷ What is more, Davies explicitly charts the relationship between the soul’s vegetative function and *oeconomia*:

Her quickning power in every living part
Doth as a Nurse, or as a Mother serve;
And doth employ her *Oeconomicke* Art,
And busie care, her household to preserve.
.....
This power to Martha may compared bee,
Which busie was the household things to do;
Or to a Dryas living in a Tree,
For even to Trees this power is proper too. (937-40, 945-48)

Significantly, in Davies’ poem, the vegetative soul functions as Nurse or Mother and employs her “*Oeconomicke* Art” entirely for the purpose of *preserving her household*. Davies makes explicit the common understanding that reproduction, nutrition, and growth are, logically, the essence of preservation; the vegetative soul gives rise to *oeconomia*, and it is through *oeconomia* that one preserves the household. Thus, Davies moves the reader from Martha, symbolic of busy activity, to a Dryas, the very animating essence of the tree. Davies invokes the Dryas to reveal that trees, too, have this vegetative faculty. But the image also simultaneously emphasizes *oeconomia* not simply as an *activity* but also as the latent *essence* of survival, of remaining alive and, ideally, thriving in an often inhospitable world.

The vegetative faculty likewise informs Tasso's original treatise on *oeconomia*, and Kyd's translation depicts this latent, instinctive drive towards advancement in his translation as "the faculty of getting," a rendering that further suggests his work as interested in social delineation and class antagonism. Kyd's translation notes that:

The facultie of getting may be *Natural* and not *Naturall*: *Natural* I call that which getteth the liuing out of those thinges that hath beene brought forth by Nature for mans vse and seruice: and forasmuch as nothing is more naturall then nourishment, which the Mother giueth to her Childe, most naturall aboute the rest must that gayne needes be that is had and raised of the fruits of the earth, considering that the Earth is the naturall and vniuersall Mother of vs all.²⁸

Similar to Davies describing the vegetative soul "as a Nurse or as a Mother," Kyd's explication of the "faculty of getting" depicts the earth as "the naturall and vniersall Mother of us all." Unlike Theridamas, who emphasized the nonliving, dense materials of the earth to symbolize the un-ambitious, Kyd's work stresses the earth's fecundity, connecting it to the "faculty of getting" designated for increase and growth (for "nothing is more natural than nourishment") and figuring it as vegetative ("for most naturall," therefore, are the gains derived "of the fruits of the earth"). What in Aristotle is simple nutrition and "nourishment" becomes glossed in *The Householder's Philosophy* as a process whereby one "getteth the living" via nature for "mans vse and seruice" in order to acquire "gayne."²⁹ *The Householder's Philosophy* is thus informed by both the Aristotelian vegetative soul and the material, economic concerns of the middling sort regarding self-preservation. When Jonathan Barry observes that "the middling sort defined themselves in relation to households, which often formed the heart of the trading unit...but also acted as the key unit for the reproduction and security of the family,"³⁰ he

is noting something that Kyd's contemporaries would have thought of as both a harsh social reality and a philosophical, metaphysical truth as well.

The Spanish Tragedy's opening – with its subtle yet distinct assumption of Aristotelian psychology and its ghost more preoccupied with locating his former class position and cataloguing his successes than seeking vengeance – suggests revenge not as the play's *raison d'être* but as a vehicle for its stymied middling protagonists to redirect their energies for advancement into a darker register. Don Andrea enters and immediately conflates his assessment of his soul's condition with his social status at court:

When this eternal substance of my soul
Did live imprisoned in my wanton flesh,
Each in their function serving other's need,
I was a courtier in the Spanish court. (1.1.1-4)³¹

Don Andrea's opening statement signals the play's underlying psychology, but the third line presents to the modern observer an apparent contradiction. If Kyd figures the relationship between soul and body as antagonistic, as one of prisoner to prison, then what need of the soul does the wanton flesh serve? What benefits the captive from the prison?³² The relationship described in line three, so often misunderstood by modern readers, is not between soul and flesh but between the soul's various components: the construction here is elliptical. Prepared by "this eternal substance," the opening clause's subject, and directed by the immediate invocation of "function," Kyd's contemporaries almost certainly would have assumed "each" as referencing the capacities intrinsic to the soul's substance that function cooperatively within the confines of the material body. Since the soul's capacities were often articulated as "functions" and, for the human, all three capacities must perform cooperatively,³³ the audience could be relied on to know

just *what* must serve each other's needs. What registers as dissonant to us would have followed logically to Kyd's audience because of their shared assumptions vis a vis the psyche. At the outset, then, Kyd signals not only that Don Andrea represents a disembodied soul entering the stage but a soul particularly conceived within an Aristotelian context. This, quite literally, introduces Don Andrea's announcement that he was as "a courtier in the Spanish court."

Don Andrea frames the subsequent play not solely (or even primarily) as an angry ghost seeking revenge but as the unsettled soul of a middling courtier who exhibited a sharp awareness of class taxonomy, an innate ambition for greater status, and a knack for working around societal obstructions – until death foreclosed his natural progress, "nipped," as it were, "the blossoms of [his] bliss," even during "the harvest of [his] summer joys" (1.1.12-3). Interestingly, Don Andrea's first seventeen lines employ the definition-by-opposition and the aspiration for advancement affiliated with the middling sort. Despite appearing with a personified Revenge, he articulates no initial desire for vengeance but rather obsesses over fixing in place his social rank for the audience. Setting himself against those beneath his station and then against those above him, Don Andrea describes his "descent, / though not ignoble, yet inferior far / To gracious fortunes of my tender youth" (1.1.5-7). The litotes "not ignoble" positions him above the lower class but "inferior far" to his promising start in life. Don Andrea likewise exhibits an active "faculty of getting" for he "by duteous service and deserving love, / In secret...possessed a worthy dame" (1.1.9-10). Rapidly undercutting any suggestion of humility implicit in acknowledging his service as "duteous," Don Andrea trumpets his love as "deserving," despite letting slip that his loving was done "in secret." What is

more, Don Andrea makes clear the causal connection between both his “duteous service” and “deserving love” and his “possess[ing]” Bel-Imperia, signaling at once his own sense of personal merit and his natural inclination towards acquisitiveness across class lines. Ambitious in life and unsettled in death, Don Andrea enters preoccupied with his status and his worldly successes, yet he will subsequently shift his thoughts towards revenge, eventually desiring it in ever-increasing measure, as his acquisitive impulses find articulation through the ensuing play’s promised catastrophe.

Don Andrea’s temporary release from Hades by Proserpine, the quasi-numinous, vegetative, and motivating figure behind the play, seems unsatisfactory as a solution to the underworld’s bureaucratic confusion over his status in the afterlife. It makes sense, however, as a reimagined movement of the aspiring soul into an alternative outlet for ambitious energies, a means to bypass the circumscription wrought by external forces. Don Andrea’s indeterminate status as lover-soldier prompts Aeacus to assign him “to walk with lovers in our fields of love” and Rhadamanth to counter “No, no...it were not well / With loving souls to place a martialist” (1.1.45-6). After Minos forwards him to Pluto’s court, Don Andrea himself articulates the social taxonomies of Hades in the language of dichotomous opposition and “sorts.” He passes “the foresaid fields, / Where lovers live, and bloody martialists, / But either sort contained within his bounds” (1.1.60-3). As in life where neither noble nor ignoble, Don Andrea is appropriate here for neither “sort.” Lovers and martialists may be contained within their respective bounds, but Don Andrea, as one who straddles the two categories, remains excluded from both. When he approaches “Pluto with his Proserpine” (1.1.76) and kneels, Proserpine becomes the prime mover of what will be the play. For at the sight of Don Andrea, “fair Proserpine

began to smile, / And begged that only she might give my doom” (1.1.78-9). As Don Andrea tells Revenge, “Forthwith...she rounded thee in th’ear,” and “No sooner had she spoke but we were here” (1.1.81,4). Proserpine, the daughter of Ceres who generates springtime fecundity and nourishment, provides the impetus behind the soul of Don Andrea returning to earth with Revenge by his side.³⁴ Her release of Don Andrea’s soul “though the gates of horn, / Where dreams have passage in the silent night” (1.1.82-3) frames the play as a dream vision reflective of Don Andrea’s dual concerns of class stratification and social (im)mobility. Don Andrea’s dream – that is, the body of *The Spanish Tragedy* – suggests his own insatiable desire for increase, for he begins with no discernible inclination towards revenge and concludes the play invoking eternal wrath upon his enemies. The play’s framing, so often perceived as only loosely connected to the drama’s central action, reveals revenge as the vehicle through which stifled energies of self-autonomy and advancement find darker expression.

After the Induction, the play’s opening dispute over the captured Balthazar pits middling against aristocratic, merit versus rank, but also establishes Hieronimo and Horatio’s fortunes as inextricably intertwined due to their shared middling household. The King tells Balthazar, “Young prince, although thy father’s hard misdeeds...Deserve but evil measure at our hands, / Yet shalt thou know that Spain is honourable” (1.2.134-37). A privilege extended to royalty, this severance of father and son’s worth allows the Spanish King to treat Balthazar individually, “for in our hearing thy deserts were great, / And in our sight thyself are gracious” (1.2.149-150). Thus we have the paradox of aristocratic privilege: on account of his birth Balthazar is afforded the right to be evaluated on his own terms, in this case as one separate from his royal father. Balthazar

gets to receive kingly munificence freely, and then exert himself afterwards (“I shall study to deserve this grace” (1.2.151)). This aristocratic privilege stands in marked contrast to the King’s conflation of Hieronimo and Horatio’s status and its continual dependence upon performance. Identifying Hieronimo by his civil function, the King addresses his first lines to him: “Knight Marshal, frolic with thy king, / For ’tis thy son that wins this battle’s prize” (1.2.96-7) and then claims, “Hieronimo, it greatly pleaseth us / That in our victory thou have a share, / By virtue of thy worthy son’s exploit” (1.2.124-6). To make the linkage between father and son’s fortunes wholly unmistakable, Kyd has the King reverse the trajectory of influence later when he promises, “Content thee, Marshal, thou shalt have no wrong, / And for thy sake thy son shall want no right” (1.2.173-5). When Hieronimo angles for Horatio’s advancement, he is “enforced of nature...to plead for young Horatio’s right” (1.2.168) by affection but also by the reality – articulated often by the King – that both their fortunes rise or fall together. Hieronimo is thus “enforced of nature” by the imperatives, to use Davies’ phraseology, of his “oeconomicke art...his household to preserve” (940). This accounts for why the King reassures the Knight Marshal that *he*, not Horatio, “shalt have no wrong” in the settlement of *Horatio*’s dispute with Lorenzo.

Although the King presents his adjudication as according with the claims of merit, the unequal, artificially constructed social positions – not the martial exploits of Horatio and Lorenzo – influence significantly the division of Balthazar’s ransom and goods. The King begins equitably enough by noting “You both deserve and both shall have reward” (1.2.179). He assigns horse and weapons to Lorenzo and ransom to Horatio, mediating competing claims in a manner that leads some to think him “generously mindful of his

obligations to his subjects, painstakingly judicious, and politically astute.”³⁵ However, while Kyd may indeed leave the King’s motives ambiguous, his actions remain unmistakably shaped by the pressures of class competition. As the king concludes his division of the goods, he turns to Lorenzo and explains:

But nephew, thou shalt have the prince in guard,
For thine estate best fitteth such a guest;
Horatio’s house were small for all his train.
Yet in regard thy substance passeth his,
And that just guerdon may befall desert,
To him we yield the armour of the prince. (1.2.185-190)

Confronted with Horatio’s undeniable merit publicly displayed twice in procession, the king must publicly assure that “just guerdon may befall desert.” In contrast, however, Lorenzo receives the king’s generosity freely, not by merit but because of his “estate.” Indeed, in awarding Balthazar’s armor to Horatio, the Spanish King seems to dilute his praise of the Knight Marshal’s son by linking the award, in part, to Lorenzo’s possession of more wealth, of greater “substance.” The conflicting ambitions of an established family and a rising one force the king to strike an uneasy balance between a middling household and a privileged aristocrat. Kyd gives us a court in which the success of civil servant and soldier encroaches on the honors distributed by rank – and vice versa. Spain, it would seem, rests uneasily on the faultline running between Hieronimo and Horatio’s house and Lorenzo’s estate. The king remains diligently aware of this faultline for he tellingly concludes his mediation by bypassing both Lorenzo and Horatio. Neither Lorenzo nor Horatio is given a voice here, despite the fact that the adjudication centers on their claims to honor. Instead, the king seeks affirmation for his decision (perhaps because neither soldier, from his perspective, could be pleased with it fully) from the subjected and powerless, yet nonetheless royal, Balthazar: “How likes Don Balthazar of

this device?" (1.2.191). Thus, the king publicly affects equanimity while still governing his decision by the pressures of an arbitrary aristocratic privilege.

By threatening the royal Balthazar with subjugation to Horatio, Kyd unsettles the justifications for class hierarchy by using the philosophical predicates of *oeconomia*. *The Householder's Philosophy*, for example, addresses the delineation between master and servant and then shifts to explain how the spoils of war should be divided. Tasso identifies a clear hierarchy rooted in Nature when he explains that "it also seemes that Nature hath engendred not onely brute Beasts for the seruice of Man, but hath framed men, that are apt to obey, to serue those whom also she hath framed to command" (276). It might seem that Tasso's division of men into two categories (namely, those "framed to commaund" and those "apt to obey") justifies class hierarchy, but he leaves indeterminate just how, exactly, these two categories might be implemented socially. Indeed, the very rootedness of this framing in Nature posits a distinct egalitarian strain, for it ignores as irrelevant any material factors such as wealth or status.³⁶ Moreover, immediately after this delineation, Tasso observes that "Whatsoeuer is gotten or obtained in the warres being iust, the same may also bee tearmed naturall gayne" (276). As we have already seen, *The Householder's Philosophy* approvingly mentions "naturall gayne," citing its relation to the fundamental impulse of the "faculty of getting." Thus, Tasso tells us there are men apt to obey, men framed to command, and the spoils of war may be deemed "naturall gayne," the acquisition wrought by the "faculty of getting." Balthazar notes the unsettling of social order made possible by just such a formulation later in *The Spanish Tragedy* when he admits, "by my yielding I became [Horatio's] slave" (2.1.123). When Balthazar, one socially framed to command, becomes the "naturall gayne" of Horatio,

one socially framed to serve, the aristocratic, royal system of privilege becomes threatened. In Horatio's defeat of Balthazar, natural merit quite literally unseats royal status. The king, therefore, must point to Horatio's inadequate household and use Lorenzo's estate to trump merit, returning things to their "proper" (but, to Kyd, not necessarily natural) order. The king's decision underscores the artificiality of aristocratic privilege, for it eschews Nature's framing of Balthazar and Horatio in favor of their socially predetermined class positions.

Subsequent to this opening dispute, Kyd suggests Hieronimo's house as contiguous to, but not incorporated within, the aristocracy by emphasizing it has a pleasure garden, transgressively marking it (beyond its actual status) with aristocratic trappings. Kyd takes pains to establish Hieronimo's garden as one designed for pleasure, not utility. Bel-Imperia arranges her rendezvous with Horatio to be in the "thy father's pleasant bower" (2.2.42). Horatio states that since "in darkness pleasures may be done, Come, Bel-Imperia, let us to the bower; And there in safety pass a pleasant hour" (2.4.3-4). And Hieronimo himself declares in the recognition scene, "This place was made for pleasure not for death" (2.5.12). Hieronimo's garden is paradoxically situated between labor and leisure, then, as it supplies the *otium* wrought by *negotium*, even as it operates as daily testimonial to the fruitfulness of Hieronimo's labor. Attached to Hieronimo's middling household it functions as a semi-private (but, therefore, semi-public) exhibition of his *oeconomic* facility and his exalted status within the middling strata. Kyd's notable emphasis on Hieronimo's garden as one for pleasure brings into sharper focus the central class conflict of the play by materially marking, via the vegetative trope, the Knight Marshall's aspirations to the coterie that actively excludes him.

By drawing on the pleasure garden *topos* for the most pronounced moments of class antagonism, Kyd employs a potent image of status differentiation. The garden took many forms in early modern English society, but the pleasure garden only made its appearance in England in the mid-sixteenth century and was a distinct marker of aristocratic leisure. Delineating the types of gardens and their roles throughout Europe, A.G. Morton notes that “the private garden...became the fashion and pride of Renaissance princes and wealthy families” and differed remarkably from the medieval garden which was “essentially utilitarian in lay-out, contents, and intention.”³⁷ While such a link between the aristocracy and the pleasure garden had a lengthy Continental history, the pleasure garden’s ascendancy among the upper class in England took place in the middle of the sixteenth century. Roy Strong painstakingly charts the development of the English pleasure garden, noting that the most significant development in Renaissance gardening after 1580 “was that the pleasure garden became an essential adjunct of the great house.”³⁸ Strong observes that “the earliest and longest description of an Elizabethan pleasure garden comes in a letter by Robert Laneham narrating the entertainments given by Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, for Queen Elizabeth I in July 1575 at his castle at Kenilworth in Warwickshire.”³⁹ At the time of *The Spanish Tragedy*, then, the pleasure garden figured as a relatively recent marker of aristocratic status in England, a recreational (and not simply functional) space for the well-to-do.⁴⁰

Kyd introduces the garden through Bel-Imperia, who seeks to use it, in part, for her own transgressive rejection of hierarchical strictures, a rejection prompted by her own restricted position and one that establishes her variance with the men of her social class. As sister to Lorenzo and daughter to the Duke of Castile, Bel-Imperia actively seeks to

marry downward a second time. Despite her previous union with Don Andrea, however, her attraction down the social hierarchy seems unthinkable among the aristocrats.

Balthazar imagines his failure in wooing Bel-Imperia as one of material worth, that his “presents are not of sufficient cost, / And, being worthless, all [his] labour’s lost” (2.1.17-8). Consequently, he envisions his noble status as possibly saving his cause, but only momentarily: “Yet might she love me to uprear her state; / Ay, but perhaps she hopes some nobler mate” (2.1.25-6). When Pedrigano finally reveals Horatio as her new love, Kyd adds stage direction to emphasize the shock, for “Balthazar starts back” (2.1.78-9). To be sure, Balthazar lacks imagination, but even Lorenzo seems surprised, exclaiming “What, Don Horatio, our Knight Marshal’s son?” (2.1.79). His incredulous response reflects his disdain for this upstart middling civil servant by shifting into the royal “our” and categorizing Horatio by his father’s civil profession. Bel-Imperia’s active pursuit of Don Andrea, then Horatio, confounds the aristocratic men who anticipate her looking equal to, or above, her own station.

One might expect “the faculty of getting,” the impulse to preserve and advance oneself via prudent management, would direct Bel-Imperia into quite a different trajectory, towards someone who *could* “uprear her state,” for example, or, at the very least, one who would maintain her current status. To be sure, if Bel-Imperia appears too easily attracted down the class hierarchy, it may well be the effect of Kyd’s own middling perspective, the authorial fantasy of an accessible aristocratic woman. But Bel-Imperia’s position within the play’s own milieu is itself unique and accords well with the drive for reproduction, growth, and nutrition. For as Bel-Imperia flouts the boundaries of such class divisions, she also defies expectations of female complaisance. She expresses

autonomous desire of a different sort, a self-determining ambition to resist a forced union. Situated in aristocratic privilege yet in subjection as a marriageable woman, Bel-Imperia repudiates the strictures imposed by both father and brother. Instead, her impulses for growth and nourishment shift towards autonomy rather than class escalation.⁴¹ Her downward selection of lovers remains an expression of ambitious growth precisely because it is a *selection*. Building on Frank Whigham's argument that Bel-Imperia's "sexual relations are certainly murderous, not literally of her superiors, but of their sustaining ideology," Ian McAdam notes that she challenges "gender (and class) restrictions by refusing to allow her father and uncle to use her as a valuable commodity in the royal marriage market of Europe."⁴² When we remember the play is framed by the conscripted and circumscribed Proserpine, powerless against her abduction and choiceless in her mate, the impulse of Bel-Imperia to woo according to her own determination appears liberating, a "faculty of getting" that acquires something beyond the scope of her established lot. Indeed, as a secure aristocrat but entrapped woman, Bel-Imperia has little else she needs to get other than freedom to act on her own terms.

Bel-Imperia courts Horatio as both a means to acquire her autonomy and a vehicle to advance her revenge, two types of "getting" that Kyd imbues with images of preservation and, finally, vegetative growth. Bel-Imperia easily conflates revenging Don Andrea and loving Horatio in a remarkable synthesis of what would ordinarily seem contradictory, conflicting impulses:

But how can love find harbour in my breast
 Till I revenge the death of my beloved?
 Yes, second love shall further my revenge.
 I'll love Horatio, my Andrea's friend,

The more to spite the prince that wrought his end. (1.4.64-68)

At this point in the play, we have only been promised Bel-Imperia's revenge on Balthazar (indeed, there is nothing else yet *to* revenge). Significantly, Kyd links Bel-Imperia's first articulation of revenge with her first affirmation to love Horatio. The relationship between the impulses to love and revenge in Bel-Imperia appears, therefore, symbiotic. Revenge keeps love viable, enables love to "find harbour in [her] breast." And love, likewise, propels and sustains vengeance, for it shall "further" revenge "the more to spite the prince that wrought [Andrea's] end." The circular interplay of preservation or nourishment (of autonomy in love) and acquisition or advancement (of her vengeful designs) creates in Bel-Imperia a nuanced expression of *oeconomic* principles. She seeks to bring both love and revenge to fruition at the same time, and Kyd immediately makes explicit the vegetative trope, the image of cultivation, for each. For Bel-Imperia vows to use Horatio to spite Balthazar to make the latter "reap long repentance for his murd'rous deed" (1.4.72). And when Bel-Imperia drops her glove in front of Horatio and Balthazar, the former retrieves it, observing, "I reaped more grace than I deserved or hoped," initiating the rivalry between the two men (1.4.103). At the precise moment when Horatio "reaps" grace from Bel-Imperia, Balthazar begins the process of "reap[ing] long repentance." In the language of harvesting, Kyd articulates Bel-Imperia's dual projects of preserving her autonomy and advancing her vengeful ambitions.

Shortly thereafter, as Horatio and Bel-Imperia approach the garden, Bel-Imperia alone intuits danger, articulating her unease as a function of her *soul*, a statement that will acquire additional resonance in the ensuing scene as the conflicting ambitions of the two lovers become more apparent.⁴³ Horatio invites her into the bower and she responds, "I

follow thee, my love, and will not back, / Although my fainting heart controls my soul” (2.4.6-7). Lisa Hopkins has noted that there exists a “strategy...habitual to the play, of representing states of mind and character in terms of physical location,”⁴⁴ and we see something of that here on the threshold of the bower. Earlier, Bel-Imperia had appointed the garden as meeting place but did so at court where she was closely constrained and where the transgressive blurring of hierarchical strictures figured in Hieronimo’s bower may well have appeared liberating. Now entering the garden, she has misgivings, not about Pedrigano (for “he is as trusty as my second self” (2.4.9)) but about something she leaves unnamed. Bel-Imperia’s heart is fainting – hardly an adjective of power or resolve – yet it controls her still more hesitant soul. Kyd leaves indeterminate the precise source of Bel-Imperia’s misgivings, for though she distrusts the court, she trusts Pedrigano, who holds watch. Moreover, Horatio anticipates “safety” in the bower (2.4.5). By muting direct allusion to an impending danger from the court, Kyd opens the possibility that Bel-Imperia hesitates for other reasons as well. The portrayal of this unarticulated worry as affecting her soul while she physically enters the arboreal space with her middling lover returns us to the possibility that Bel-Imperia’s hesitancy is rooted, in part, in the conflicting aspirations of the lovers inherent in this wooing process.

Bel-Imperia’s reactions to Horatio’s wooing – more specifically, to his metaphors of vegetative expansion, circumscription, and the leveling of distinction – reveal that her apprehensions lie in the incompatibility of her project for autonomy and Horatio’s project to acquire her. Tellingly, Bel-Imperia seems notably more comfortable figuring the courtship in martial terms and balks when Horatio shifts into the language of acquisition mediated by vegetative imagery. In a series of cantilevered syllogisms, Bel-Imperia

deftly moves Horatio away from birdsong to a counterfeiting Cupid, and then from Venus to the martial dominance of Mars. She notes, “And where Mars reigneth there must needs be wars” (2.4.35). Most at ease while acknowledging the power dynamics of wooing, Bel-Imperia operates comfortably within a discourse self-consciously allusive of tension and the pursuit of supremacy. She demurs, however, with Horatio’s transition to more pastoral rhetoric in which he envisions attaining mastery over her:

Horatio: Then thus begin our wars: put forth thy hand,
That it may combat with my ruder hand.

Bel-Imperia: Set forth thy foot to try the push of mine.

Horatio: But first my looks shall combat against thine.

Bel-Imperia: Then ward thyself. I dart this kiss at thee.

Horatio: Thus I retort the dart thou threw’st at me.

[*They kiss.*]

Bel-Imperia: Nay then, to gain the glory of the field,
My twining arms shall yoke and make thee yield.

Horatio: Nay then, my arms are large and strong withal;
Thus elms by vines are compassed till they fall.

Bel-Imperia: O, let me go, for in my troubled eyes
Now may’st thou read that life in passion dies. (2.4.42-49).

On one level, these may be playful lines spoken among lovers closing the physical space between them. Here, the pushing of middling on aristocratic takes on an amorous, erotic quality. Yet Kyd imbues the language with more than sexual tension by his highlighting the contest for power implicit in *this* courtship. Bel-Imperia imagines her “gain” as the product of her arms that “yoke” Horatio and “make [him] yield.” Horatio twice invokes “combat,” the means by which he forced the king’s favor (through his own “naturall gayne” of Balthazar) and won Bel-Imperia’s notice, and Bel-Imperia entreats Horatio to “try the push of” her foot as she both invites him closer and holds him at bay. Suggestive of her concomitant desire to have Horatio without him necessarily having her, this play frames the clearest articulation of the actual nature of Bel-Imperia’s misgivings. For at

the very moment Horatio leaves the martial for the arboreal, the character of his ambition (and the reason for her distrusting it) becomes clear. Horatio figures his attainment of Bel-Imperia with a threefold image of vegetative growth, circumscription, and the leveling of distinction, for he compares the embraced Bel-Imperia to “elms by vines...compassed till they fall.” Bel-Imperia, as we have seen, recoils at being “compassed” and erupts once again with her misgivings, this time noting that her own self-preservation is at stake. For she pulls away, telling Horatio that in her eyes he “may read that life in passion dies.” While Horatio will make this into a sexual pun, Bel-Imperia envisions the stifling of her own life under the passion of Horatio, an appropriation of Horatio’s own metaphor that drops an elm with choking vines. Where Horatio sees this felling of Bel-Imperia as the leveling of distinction (and analogous to the combat through which he unseats the socially superior), Bel-Imperia recognizes this as a very real kind of death.

In the *scelus*, or great crime, of *The Spanish Tragedy* immediately subsequent to this scene, the aristocratic villains violently suppress the lawful – indeed, as we have seen, natural – “getting” of Horatio, a deed conspicuously full of ironic allusions to the vegetative tropes used to describe middling ambition. By having Horatio woo Lorenzo’s sister, Kyd once again portrays a threat to an aristocratic order that requires a virtually hermetic structure to retain its identity. Consequently, Lorenzo penetrates the arbor by bribing Pedrigano, by wielding his greater “substance” to frustrate Horatio’s ambition. When the villains murder Horatio, Kyd juxtaposes the overwhelming force wrought by Lorenzo’s wealth with variant permutations of the metaphor linking the vegetative and the ambitious. Taken by surprise and outnumbered, Horatio poses little threat of

successful resistance. His hanging could seem entirely superfluous, especially since Kyd clearly establishes Horatio's death as caused by stabbing:

They hang him in the arbour.
Horatio: What, will you murder me?
Lorenzo: Ay, thus, and thus! These are the fruits of love.
They stab him.

While Hieronimo later notes that Horatio was slain by a cord (3.13.175), the scene itself presents evidence to the contrary, as Lorenzo kills Horatio by stabbing, not hanging, him. Able to talk, Horatio clearly hangs in such a way not intended as fatal in itself. Kyd graphically underscores this when Lorenzo, in response to Horatio's question ("What will you murder me?"), punctuates his answer ("Ay, thus, and thus!") with coincident thrusts of his blade. The hanging of Horatio in the arbor functions not simply as a means of murder, then, nor as a method of subduing resistance but also as a vehicle by which Kyd emphasizes the figurative connection between Hieronimo's child and garden. Both extensions, or outgrowths, of Hieronimo's own identity and household, Horatio and the garden symbolize the Knight Marshal's ambition. Moreover, the garden and Horatio's grotesque position within it in the *scelus* scene also become the means for Lorenzo's sarcastic sneering at the son's ambition as well. For in case we missed the emphasis on extending one's reach beyond his allotted station in life, Kyd concludes this scene with Lorenzo's quip, "Although his life were still ambitious proud, / Yet is he at the highest now he is dead" (2.4.60-1). Lorenzo equates Horatio's ambitious life to his corpse's physical elevation among the boughs of his father's arbor. The same Horatio who sought to fell Lorenzo's sister like an elm is ironically raised among the trees to his death, iconic of the violent suppression of his own ambition.

Hieronimo's dirge for the slain Horatio immediately signals a shift in his own ambitious energies and tacitly figures his revenge as a modified application of the vegetative faculty. Though operating rationally through his imaginative, Latinate rhetoric and emotionally through his effusions of grief, Hieronimo desires a scenario where rational and sensitive functions dissipate, leaving him just this side of complete death with only his impulse to revenge Horatio remaining. In the dirge, Hieronimo calls three times for herbs, the very first line reading "let someone mix for me herbs which the beautiful spring brings forth" (2.5.67-8).⁴⁵ He then promises that he will "gather whatever herbs the sun brings forth" and concludes he will "drink...whatever herbs" may ease his grief (2.5.71-4). Interestingly, Hieronimo turns to the vegetative to heal his pain by suppressing the soul's other, non-vegetative functions. He seeks a medicinal draught "which will bring oblivion to our minds" and will try any remedy "until all feeling dies at once in [his] dead heart" (2.5.69-70,74-5). Kyd's Latin here is telling. He has Hieronimo seek oblivion for his and Isabella's "animis," that is, their rational souls and then imagines the extinction of his "sensus," his power of perceiving or sensing.⁴⁶ In short, while three times imagining an herbal concoction (and twice a mysterious feminine force that supplies it), Hieronimo desires the comforting annihilation of two of the soul's three functions. As he begins to imagine joining Horatio wholly in death, he draws back "in case then no revenge should follow your death" (2.5.80). After imagining the absence of the rational and sensitive functions of the soul, Hieronimo eschews complete death in favor of a continuing impulse towards revenge. By concluding with "sequator," a word meaning not only "to follow" but also "to follow naturally," "succeed," or "ensue,"⁴⁷ Hieronimo's dirge again suggests revenge as a natural outgrowth or conclusion to a

matter. Ensuing naturally and deriving from something beyond the rational or sensitive capacities only, revenge, it would seem, emerges from Hieronimo's redirected energies towards creation and growth.⁴⁸ Indeed, right after the dirge, the personified Revenge underscores the underlying vegetative trope by responding to Don Andrea's impatience: "Thou talk'st of harvest when the corn is green," and, again, "the sickle comes not till the corn be ripe" (2.6.7,9). Here, Revenge echoes not only Bel-Imperia's intent to make Balthazar "reap long repentance" but also the Latin dirge's underlying psychology tacitly affiliating vengeance with vegetative fruition.⁴⁹

Between Hieronimo's dirge and his final vengeance, Kyd develops Hieronimo's natural impulse towards revenge as occurring against Lorenzo's artificially established and entrenched position of power which he retains by purchasing loyalty and circumscribing potential threats. Analogous to Villuppo, who confesses he did his foul deeds "for reward...and hope to be preferred" (3.1.94-5), Pedrigano aligns with Lorenzo because of his wealth. Lorenzo trusts that those who "for coin their souls endangered, / To save [his] life, for coin shall venture theirs" (3.2.113-4). Emphasizing his machinations as vehicles for retaining his already established position, Lorenzo relies on this policy of bribery and figures himself as one of the "hopeful men...that mean to hold their own" (3.4.43). Lorenzo manipulates effectively the immense material wealth at his disposal, indicating an awareness "that behind the facade of ceremony and eloquence by which the public life of Spain pretends to be organized, men are actually motivated and commanded by the properties of wealth and power."⁵⁰ Positioning himself as a sort of besieged aristocrat, jealous to retain the status afforded by his birth, Lorenzo hopes to

hold his own, explicitly figuring this project as fundamentally requiring his opposition to his enemies' aspirations.⁵¹

The corollary to Lorenzo holding his own, of course, is his controlling the movements and actions of others. The most salient instance of this may be found in his clever dispatching of Pedrigano, a move that literally circumscribes his enemy by means of the hangman's noose. But he also delimits the range of action among his remaining adversaries. Thus, he "enlarge[s]" Bel-Imperia after "clap[ping her] up where none may come at [her]" (3.10.7,12,31) and, likewise, "hinder[s]" Hieronimo from seeing the king (3.12.68). So overt does Lorenzo become in this project that the Duke remonstrates, "It is suspected, and reported too, / That thou, Lorenzo, wrong'st Hieronimo, / And in his suits towards his majesty / Still keep'st him back and seeks to cross his suit" (3.14.53-6). Lorenzo's hindrance of Hieronimo stands in direct opposition to Hieronimo's threatening success. The Duke reminds Lorenzo of the Knight Marshal's merit: "know'st thou not the common love / and kindness that Hieronimo hath won / By his deserts within the court of Spain?" (3.14.61-3) and warns him of the dangers of "thwart[ing] his passions" (3.14.66). Consequently, Lorenzo can do nothing but reframe the known with a more favorable interpretation, claiming, "I pitied him in his distress, / [And] held him thence with kind and courteous words" (3.14.81-2). It is against this established position that seeks to use its material substance and political access to maintain its privilege that Hieronimo plans to unleash his vengeful energies.

After figuring revenge as a function of the vegetative soul during Hieronimo's dirge and reemphasizing (through Lorenzo's machinations in the third act) the entrenched power structure Hieronimo opposes, Kyd uses the Don Bazulto subplot to further suggest

revenge as a type of gain acquired in the face of opposition and fed, in part, by the deepest undercurrents of the human psyche. Hieronimo witnesses Don Bazulto's grief and marvels that "love's effects so strives in lesser things," that "love enforce[s] such mood in meaner wits," and that it "express[es] such power in poor estates" (3.13.99-101). Observing the inverse relationship between the power afforded by social class and that by love, Hieronimo ruminates on the undercurrents of his own psyche that move him towards revenge. Contrasting the "lesser waters [that] labor in the deep" to the raging of the sea's "upper billows" (3.13.104-5), Hieronimo evokes an image of "an elemental power sought by the human revenger"⁵² right before aligning vengeance with acquisition and turning once more to Proserpine. Hieronimo sees revenge as acquisition or gain, for he imagines Don Bazulto and himself going to Hades and "in this passion...getting by force" the means of vengeance (3.13.109-11); consequently, he will endure, "Till we do gain that Proserpine may grant / Revenge on them that murderèd my son" (3.13.120-1). As Kyd moves Hieronimo's imagination from the earthly court he currently inhabits with Don Bazulto to that of Proserpine, he shifts the play's focus from the turbulent surface, the "upper billows," to the deeper recesses of the soul that generates revenge. For, here, Hieronimo's passion runs deeper than mere emotive excess and into the lesser waters of his psyche, the ones that govern "getting" and "gain" and find communion with the motivating, vegetative impulse figured in Proserpine.

What I'm suggesting is that the vegetative faculty that gives rise to the middling sort's lawful attainments of the play's first half, also promotes the revengers' ambitions in the second but does so in a different register, as Kyd figures revenge as an altered type of "getting" within (and against) an increasingly vicious milieu, one where aristocrats

such as Lorenzo violently seek to “hold their own.” Revenge, in *The Spanish Tragedy*’s denouement, becomes one of a number of expressions of household *oeconomia*, a form of propagation and extension of one’s self via alternate means when lawful attempts to advance become retarded. As such, revenge functions as a subset of the vegetative capacity, a method for the powerless or marginalized to reproduce their influence (and, ideally, something of their likeness) in the society that has robbed them of both identity and hope. The culminating affect of Kyd’s artistic manipulations of contemporary psychology reveals how the desire for advancement, intrinsic by nature to each individual, *will* find outlet – even if it must do so negatively.⁵³ In short, Kyd shifts the concept of continuing one’s existence through progeny and legacy into a darker register. Unleashing their creative energies on a courtly milieu inattentive to their unrest, Kyd’s revengers forever alter the landscape by puncturing the secure spaces surrounding the court with irremediable absences. What appears to many critics as cunning rationality, a studied waiting for opportunity,⁵⁴ mixed with irrational excess is also an altered form of natural outgrowth and a management of one’s condition. Kyd’s ironic inversion of the latent principle of reproduction and preservation helps explain why, as Scott McMillan astutely points out, Hieronimo draws from Seneca “passages [that] have nothing literally to do with revenge” but rather “share an unusual idea about ‘safety’ or ‘preservation’ which obviously concerns [him].”⁵⁵ Making their final desperate acts unalterable and irrevocable, Hieronimo, Bel-Imperia, and Isabella guarantee the perpetuation of their influence, and something of their likeness, indefinitely into the future.

Take for instance Isabella’s destruction of the arbor, the most salient instance of revenge as the creation of an eternal, immutable absence in the play. Distraught,

constrained, and unable to reach the murderers themselves, Isabella resolves to “revenge myself upon this place,” what she later terms the “accursèd complot of my misery”

(4.2.4,13). Kyd figures Isabella’s project as one of utter annihilation:⁵⁶

Down with these branches and these loathsome boughs
Of this unfortunate and fatal pine!
Down with them, Isabella, rend them up
And burn the roots from whence the rest is sprung!
I will not leave a root, a stalk, a tree,
A bough, a branch, a blossom, nor a leaf,
No, not an herb within this garden plot –
Accursèd complot of my misery.
Fruitless forever may this garden be,
Barren the earth, and blissless whosoever
Imagines not to keep it unmanured! (4.2.6-15)

Isabella’s whole project here is the creation of absence, the void without which her continuing impact on her environment, however limited in scope it may be, is impossible. Not only must the earth remain fruitless and barren but so, too, must the human mind preserve a sense of absence, for Isabella extends her curse even to those potentially interested in the future cultivation of this space. The negative formulation of her curse – “whosoever imagines not to keep it unmanured” – further suggests that she seeks to create an absence, a perpetual hole, continuing indefinitely into the future. Her concern is not simply that someone might imagine manuring this plot of land, but rather that someone might *not* imagine to keep it *unmanured*. In other words, she seeks the continual reinforcement of negation, the perpetual remembrance that this is a barren space that must remain incontrovertibly barren. Indeed, so total is Isabella’s proposed and enacted annihilation that she even imagines the complete absence of people inhabiting the space, since “passengers, for fear to be infect, / Shall stand aloof” (4.2.20-1).

By cursing and destroying both womb and garden, the two sites of Hieronimo's fruitful reproduction in which his seed(s) took root and expanded his household,⁵⁷ Isabella renders his revenge as necessary, the only means left of making his lasting mark in Spain. Isabella explicitly figures her destruction of the garden as part of her desire for Hieronimo to act. After tearing down the arbor, she doubly curses Hieronimo, apostrophizing: "Hieronimo, make haste to see thy son," and, again, "Make haste, Hieronimo, to hold excused / Thy negligence in pursuit of their deaths, / Whose hateful wrath bereaved him of his breath" (4.2.24-26, 29-31). After faulting Hieronimo's "negligence," Isabella concludes "and as I curse this tree from further fruit, / So shall my womb be cursèd for [Horatio's] sake" (4.2.35-6). That Isabella curses both womb and tree after bemoaning Hieronimo's torpor suggests she sees both as vehicles for his "faculty of getting" and his *oeconomic* energies, for she simultaneously shuts down their fruitfulness and links the destruction of each with her call for Hieronimo act anew.

Once Hieronimo's wife and garden no longer exist, Kyd has the Knight Marshal employ his "fruitless poetry though it profit the professor naught" (4.1.72-3) to enact his revenge, a destruction as absolute as Isabella's and one equally figured as a type of reproduction through the creation of absence. In this case, however, Hieronimo, in a manner analogous to his earlier advocacy for Horatio's advancement, seeks to reproduce his own likeness and implant it thoroughly in the court by creating in his adversaries the sense of negation and loss he himself experiences. After exposing the reason of his revenge, Hieronimo turns to his audience:

Speak, Portuguese, whose loss resembles mine:
 If thou canst weep upon thy Balthazar,
 'Tis like I wailed for my Horatio.
 And you, my lord, whose reconcilèd son

Marched in a net, and thought himself unseen,
 And rated me for brainsick lunacy,
 With 'God amend that mad Hieronimo!' –
 How can you brook our play's catastrophe? (4.4.114-121)

Hieronimo revels in the mimetic effects of his revenge by anticipating the Portuguese king's weeping, something he correlates to his own wailing for Horatio. Likewise, Hieronimo anticipates how the Duke of Castile will "brook our play's catastrophe," offsetting the Duke's impending reaction with a recitation of his own response to personal trauma, namely, his feigned madness and clever machinations. The deaths of Lorenzo and Balthazar may satisfy justice but they also transform Castile and the Portuguese king into fathers of slaughtered sons, transposing Hieronimo's likeness onto them. To the two kings and Castile, Hieronimo subsequently asserts that "As dear to me was my Horatio / As yours, or yours, or yours, my lord, to you" (4.4.169-170). On one level, this vengeance forces a type of parity between Horatio, Lorenzo, and Balthazar.⁵⁸ Yet Hieronimo's revenge is not only one of equalization but also one of mimesis, or reproduction, a fact that becomes even clearer in the play's final moments. For while the deaths of Lorenzo and Balthazar may seem to satisfy justice, the killing of Castile seems superfluous⁵⁹ – until one compares the effects of such an action. For Hieronimo explains his first two killings, by pointing to Horatio's body and saying "Here lay my hope, and here my hope hath end" (4.4.90). Then, immediately after Hieronimo – in one fluid motion – kills Castile and himself, the King of Spain mourns, "My brother, and the whole succeeding hope / That Spain expected after my decease!" (4.4.203-204). The Knight Marshal's slaying of Castile robs the Spanish king of the "whole succeeding hope" of himself and his nation, recreating in the king Hieronimo's hopeless image by making him bereft of his successor. By the end of this scene, the Knight Marshal has created in the

two kings two Hieronimos, establishing his perpetual presence at court by puncturing it with irremediable absences.

We see something of this insatiable desire to re-create loss with Don Andrea's final resumption of center stage when he depicts revenge as a concomitantly complete yet unfinished expression of ambition. His first words as he reclaims the audience's attention are, "Ay now my hopes have end in their effects, / When blood and sorrow finish my desires" (4.5.48). Don Andrea more narrowly locates his delight in his soul, as part of his fundamental psychology, and returns his thoughts to Proserpine and the division of sorts:

Ay, these were spectacles to please my soul.
Now will I beg at lovely Proserpine,
That by the virtue of her princely doom
I may consort my friends in pleasing sort,
And on my foes work just and sharp revenge. (4.5.12-6)

Despite having previously labeled his desires as finished (and, in the Induction, having displayed no inclination at all towards revenge), Don Andrea here exhibits insatiable desire, culminating in the play's final line envisioning "endless tragedy" (4.5.48).⁶⁰ As Kyd draws his play towards this endless conclusion, he reminds us that Don Andrea's revenge operates pleasurably on his soul, stems from the motivating acquiescence of Proserpine, and will ensure the eternal distinction between his friends and foes. While the latter consist entirely of the aristocracy, the former are entirely from the middling sort, with the exception of Bel-Imperia, who, as we have seen, encounters proscription and oppression in her own unique situation. As Don Andrea delights in his soul at the revenge initiated by Proserpine, he imagines a continuation of such delight, that he may "consort [his] friends in pleasing sort." Kyd conflates here the pleasure of Don Andrea's soul wrought by revenge and the pleasure the ghost imagines awaiting him in eternity, a

utopian vision where his aristocratic foes remain forever subordinate to his power and his own circle of equals (including, notably, Bel-Imperia) receive unending favor.

The Spanish Tragedy, of course, is informed by other aspects of early modern psychology beyond the Aristotelian vegetative soul. The rational calculus found in the play's stratagems is very real; so, too, are its emotive excesses for which Kyd was famous (and, subsequently, famously derided). But Kyd's appropriation of his culture's tripartite psychology reveals to our post-Cartesian minds how cleverly the author sought to use existing natural philosophy, conjoined with the pathos of his drama, to suggest the importance of a more egalitarian politics. Interested in the very real, material advancement among the middling sort, Kyd articulated not simply the sententious imperatives common to the discourses of *oeconomia* but also the potent psychological predicate informing those discourses. By emphasizing the most ubiquitous and universal yet most often overlooked and minor of the soul's faculties, Kyd found a useful vehicle for articulating the particular condition of the middling sort. The *oeconomics* of *The Spanish Tragedy* as well as its engagement with the vegetative soul's capacity for reproduction, growth, and nutrition suggest revenge as not merely sensationally brutish but also coherent, the natural outgrowth of a middling sort circumscribed by an artificial yet entrenched system of preferment and advancement.

¹ For a detailed inquiry into the classical etymology and usage of "*oeconomia*," see Kurt Singer, "*Oikonomia*: An Inquiry into Beginnings of Economic Thought and Language," in *Aristotle: (384-322 BC)*, ed. Mark Blaug (Brookfield, VT: Edward Elgar Publishing, 1991), 74-102.

² Here and throughout, I employ “psychology” to denote the pre- and early modern study not of the mind but more specifically the soul, or *psuchê*.

³ “There is no living object,” says Aristotle, “that can possess sensitive capacities without having this capacity for growth which plants display” (*Aristotle’s Psychology in Greek and English*, ed. Edwin Wallace [1882; reprint, New York: Arno Press, 1976], 1.5.411b27-30).

⁴ See Christopher Brooks, “Apprenticeship, Social Mobility, and the Middling Sort, 1550-1800,” *The Middling Sort of People: Culture, Society, and Politics in England, 1550-1800*, ed. Jonathan Barry and Christopher Brooks (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1994), 52-83, esp. 52-62, 78-81. For the middling sort’s relation to other social strata in Kyd’s era, see also Christopher Brooks, “Professions, Ideology and the Middling Sort in the Late Sixteenth and Early Seventeenth Centuries,” in *The Middling Sort of People*, 113-140; Ian Archer, *The Pursuit of Stability: Social Relations in Elizabethan London* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1991), esp. 49-57; and D.C. Coleman, *The Economy in England: 1450-1750* (Oxford, Oxford Univ. Press, 1977), esp. 1-11.

⁵ Keith Wrightson, “‘Sorts of People’ in Tudor and Stuart England,” *The Middling Sort of People*, 44-6.

⁶ Theodore B. Leinwand, “Shakespeare and the Middling Sort,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 44 (1993), 292.

⁷ C.L. Barber, *Creating Elizabethan Tragedy: The Theater of Marlowe and Kyd*, ed. Richard P. Wheeler (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1988), 135.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 136.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 139.

¹⁰ James R. Siemon, “Sporting Kyd,” *English Literary Renaissance* 24 (1994), 556.

¹¹ Wendy Wall, *Staging Domesticity: Household Work and English Identity in Early Modern Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2002), 5. For the prevalence of popular *oeconomic* discourses, see also Viviana Comensoli, ‘Household Business’: *Domestic Plays of Early Modern England* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1996), esp. 65-109. On the importance of *oeconomia* in pre-Elizabethan England, see Keith Wrightson, *Earthly Necessities: Economic Lives in Early Modern Britain* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2000), esp. 27-112; on the social changes and tensions wrought on the household in the years 1520-1580, see 132-158. See also Lena Cowen Orlin, *Private Matters and Public Culture in Post-Reformation England* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1994), esp. 86-91.

¹² For a concise introduction to *The Householder’s Philosophy*, including the possible pecuniary circumstances attending its creation, see Arthur Freeman, *Thomas Kyd: Facts and Problems* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), 170-4. See also F. S. Boas, *The Works of Thomas Kyd* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1901), xviii-xxii and lxii-lxiv. Boas includes a brief portrait of the class antagonisms provoked by Kyd’s literary endeavors, particularly from Thomas Nashe. Nashe complains of those who “leau[e] the trade of Nouerint, whereunto they were borne, and busie themselues with the indeuors of art,” finally categorizing such an author as Kyd as a “home-born mediocritie” (xix-xx).

¹³ Wall, 35.

¹⁴ Boas, lxiii-lxiv. See also, *Lukas Erne, Beyond The Spanish Tragedy: A Study of the Works of Thomas Kyd* (Manchester: Manchester Univ. Press, 2001), esp. 146-150, 217-220.

¹⁵ Siemon, 571.

¹⁶ Dennis Des Chene, *Life's Form: Late Aristotelian Conceptions of the Soul* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 2000), 5.

¹⁷ Des Chene, 5-6.

¹⁸ Des Chene, 169, emphasis mine.

¹⁹ Des Chene, 134. See also Philip J. van der Eijk, "Aristotle's Psycho-physiological Account of the Soul-Body Relationship," in *Psyche and Soma: Physicians and Metaphysicians on the mind-body problem from Antiquity to the Enlightenment*, ed. Paul J. Wright and Paul Potter (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2000), esp. 64-66.

²⁰ Des Chene, 55.

²¹ Quoted in Des Chene, 55. See also Edwin Wallace, "Introduction," *Aristotle's Psychology*, xxxix-lvi.

²² Des Chene, 57.

²³ Rosamond Kent Sprague explains the (perhaps startling) fact that for Aristotle, "plants as well as animals are interested in eternity," have in a sense "aspiration," and, "like other Aristotelian entities, are controlled by teleology" ("Plants as Aristotelian Substances," in *Aristotle: Critical Assessments*, vol. 2, ed. Lloyd P. Gerson [New York: Routledge, 1999]), 362.

²⁴ Christopher Marlowe, *Tamburlaine: Parts One and Two*, ed. Anthony Dawson (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997).

²⁵ Aristotle's critique of Empedocles is particularly relevant here. In assessing Empedocles' depiction of the elemental construction of plants, Aristotle counters, "Besides, the question rises, what is it that combines the elements such as fire and earth when carried in opposite directions. They will be pulled asunder, if there be not something to prevent it, and if there be, then this something is the soul and the cause of growth and nourishment" (*Aristotle's Psychology*, 2.4.416a6-8).

²⁶ Andrew Marvell, "To His Coy Mistress," *Andrew Marvell: The Complete Poems*, ed. Elizabeth Story Donno (New York: Penguin Books, 1987), 50-51. See also Patrick G. Hogan, "Marvell's Vegetable Love," *Studies in Philology* 60, 1 (1963), 1-11. See also Jules Brody, "The Resurrection of the Body: A New Reading of Marvell's *To His Coy Mistress*," *ELH* 56 (1989), 53-79. Brody takes issue with such "valuing privileged information" as Aristotelian psychology but nonetheless allows that "vegetable" here carries Aristotelian connotations. Indeed, Brody's emphasis on "incessant, unrestrained sprawl" (54) accords well with traditional readings of the lines; see esp. 53-61.

²⁷ Sir John Davies, "Of the Soule of Man, and the Immortalitie thereof," *The Poems of Sir John Davies*, ed. Robert Kruger (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1975). See also Elias Hershey Sneath, *Philosophy in Poetry: A Study of Sir John Davies's Poem "Nosce Teipsum"*, (Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1903).

²⁸ Thomas Kyd, *The Housholders Philosophie: Wherein is perfectly and profitably described, the true oeconomia and forme of housekeeping...First written in Italian by that excellent orator and poet Signior Torquato Tasso, and now translated by T.K. Whereunto is annexed a dairie booke for all good huswiues*, by Torquato Tasso (London,

1588; reprinted in *The Works of Thomas Kyd*, ed. F.S. Boas, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1901), 275.

²⁹ Even Kyd's reference to a possible "faculty of getting" that is "unnaturall" signals he has the vegetative faculty in mind – even though the vegetative faculty is, arguably, the most natural of substances. For he explains that such "unnaturall" getting (such as usury) is unnatural precisely because it has "not onely beene condemned by Aristotle, but [also] vtterly inhibited by the olde and new law" (282). "The Vsurer," Kyd's translation continues, "offendeth Nature, for it is not naturall that money should beget money or bring forth money without corruption, since Nature willeth that the corruption of one bee the generation of another" (287).

³⁰ "Introduction," *The Middling Sort of People*, 2.

³¹ All quotations from the play come from *Thomas Kyd, The Spanish Tragedy*, ed. David Bevington (Manchester, Manchester Univ. Press, 1996).

³² Steven Justice explains this line by arguing "A soul longs for its old prison only if it has gone on to something worse, and wants again the earthly goods that have failed it" ("Spain, Tragedy, and *The Spanish Tragedy*," *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 25 [1985]), 277. In contrast, Eugene Hill, rejects the idea of a tortured Andrea. Concurring with Howard Baker, Hill notes that "Andrea bears no such burden" as the "terrified Tantalus," and, indeed, "his tone of address in the Induction, unlike Senecan horror, sounds almost jaunty" ("Senecan and Virgilian Perspectives in *The Spanish Tragedy*," *English Literary Renaissance*, 15 [1985]), 145. Even Hill's superb article, however, still leaves unresolved the problem of line three, noting that "we must... imagine the moment when the actor faced the Elizabethan audience and spoke with pride mingled with perplexity" the play's opening lines (147). He concludes that these "pious hierarchical formulas [of "eternal substance" and "wanton flesh"] are undermined by the asserted reciprocity of l. 3" (148). See also Howard Baker, *Induction to Tragedy: A Study in a Development of Form in Gorboduc, The Spanish Tragedy, and Titus Andronicus* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1939), 117-8.

³³ For the cooperative interaction between the soul's three capacities, see James E. Phillips, "The *Tempest* and the Renaissance Idea of Man," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 15 (1964), 147-159.

³⁴ On Proserpine's role here and its relation to the "mythologizing literalisation of the seasonal cycle," see Lisa Hopkins, "What's Hercules to Hamlet? The Emblematic Garden in *The Spanish Tragedy* and *Hamlet*," *Hamlet Studies* 21 (1999), 118. See also Frank Ardolino, *Thomas Kyd's Mystery Play: Myth and Ritual in The Spanish Tragedy* (New York: Peter Lang, 1985), 75-87.

³⁵ James T. Henke, "Politics and Politicians in *The Spanish Tragedy*," *Studies in Philology* 78 (1981), 354; see also 355-9.

³⁶ Thus, we are earlier told that "hee that is borne to obey, were hee of Kings bloode, is neverthesse a servant, though he be not so reputed" (262).

³⁷ A.G. Morton, *History of Botanical Science: An Account of the Development of Botany from Ancient Times to the Present Day* (New York: Academic Press, 1981), 151. See also Alicia Amherst, *A History of Gardening in England* (London: Bernard Quaritch, 1896), 109-110.

³⁸ Roy C. Strong, *The Renaissance Garden in England*, (London: Thames and Hudson, 1979), 45.

³⁹ Strong, 50.

⁴⁰ Terry Comito observes that even “Elizabethan garden books...claim – simply as part of their practical intention – to extend such royalty [expressed via pleasure gardens] to ordinary men, and to make such places their everyday habitation.” (“Renaissance Gardens and the Discovery of Paradise,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 32 [1971], 501.)

⁴¹ Michael Henry Levin calls Bel-Imperia “a hot-headed individualist who *delights in flouting convention*...As Lorenzo’s sister, Bel-Imperia is under surveillance, and her actions are necessarily limited, but she does *everything in her power to gain redress*...and she does it immediately, *instinctively*, without hesitation, doubt or fear” (“‘Vindicta mihi!’: Meaning, Morality, and Motivation in *The Spanish Tragedy*,” *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 4 [1964], 318-9, emphasis mine). See also Donald R. Wineke, “Hieronimo’s Garden and ‘the fall of Babylon’: Culture and Anarchy in *The Spanish Tragedy*,” in *Aeolian Harps: Essays in Literature in Honor of Maurice Browning Cramer*, ed. Donna G. Fricke and Douglas C. Fricke (Bowling Green: Bowling Green Univ. Press, 1976), 68.

⁴² Ian McAdam, “*The Spanish Tragedy* and the Politico-Religious Unconscious,” *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 42 (2000), 45.

⁴³ On the lovers’ variant motives, see Carol McGinnis Kay, “Deception Through Words: A Reading of *The Spanish Tragedy*,” *Studies in Philology* 74 (1977), 25-7.

⁴⁴ Hopkins, 117.

⁴⁵ All translations are from David Bevington’s edition of the play, except where noted.

⁴⁶ C.T. Lewis, *An Elementary Latin Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1997), s.v. “anima,” s.v. “sensus.”

⁴⁷ *Latin Dictionary*, s.v. “sequator.”

⁴⁸ On the nexus here between “personal disintegration” and the creation of “a new role, answerable to this radical experience of loss and injustice,” see Scott McMillan, “The Figure of Silence in *The Spanish Tragedy*,” *ELH* 39 (1972), 40.

⁴⁹ Lisa Hopkins concludes that “it is precisely on this complex of images of husbandry and of the seasonal cycle that Revenge draws when he attempts to reassure Andrea...Even if events seem to outrage the customary logic of human growth and progression by killing the children before the eyes of their parents, Revenge seems still to see them as contained within an appropriate framework of cultivation and fruition” (123).

⁵⁰ McMillan, *Figure of Silence*, 33.

⁵¹ See also Levin, 312-315.

⁵² McMillan, *Figure of Silence*, 45.

⁵³ Eugene Hill intuits this but stops at a higher level of the psyche when he argues “This is what happens to Hieronimo repeatedly in the play: passage arrested yields passion. And when passion becomes excessive it turns to murderous rage” (159).

⁵⁴ See Ronald Broude, “Time, Truth, and Right in *The Spanish Tragedy*” *Studies in Philology* 68 (1971) 137-9.

⁵⁵ Scott McMillan, “The Book of Seneca in *The Spanish Tragedy*,” *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 14 (1974), 204.

⁵⁶ See Wineke, 65 and 70-1. For a concise discussion of Isabella's destruction of the bower as "a literal enactment of the elegiac verbal curse against nature" and the pastoral world, see Peter Sacks, "Where Words Prevail Not: Grief, Revenge, and Language in Kyd and Shakespeare," *ELH* 49 (1982), esp. 581-2.

⁵⁷ For another parallel between Isabella's womb and the earth, see Eleanor M. Tweedie, "'Action is Eloquence': The Staging of Thomas Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy*," *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 16 (1976), 230.

⁵⁸ See Kay Stockholder, "The Aristocratic Woman as Scapegoat: Romantic Love and Class Antagonism in *The Spanish Tragedy*, *The Duchess of Malfi*, and *The Changeling*," in *The Elizabethan Theatre XIV: Papers Given at the International Conference on Elizabethan Theatre held at the University of Waterloo, Ontario, in July 1991*, ed. A.L. Magnusson and C.E. McGee (Toronto: P.D. Meany, 1996), 131-2.

⁵⁹ On the injustice of Hieronimo's killing Castile, see Eleanor Prossner, *Hamlet and Revenge*, (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1971), 51.

⁶⁰ Steven Justice argues that "the general movement of the play's action is toward the satisfaction of an increasingly indiscriminate appetite" and that Don Andrea, in particular, "is not very satisfied in his satisfaction" (280, 286).

Fixing Moderation: Titus Andronicus and the Aristotelian Determination of Value

Declared “a tissue of horrors,” “a heap of rubbish,” and “one of the stupidest and most uninspired plays ever written”¹ *Titus Andronicus* has elicited critique for being, concomitantly, too much and not enough, excessive in its sensationalism yet lacking in its stylistic organization. The play’s protagonist, likewise, has appeared both immoderate and erratic, unhinged, as it were, by his own inclination toward extreme behavior, his conduct neither rationally nor consistently governed. But why has it seemed so obvious to read *Titus*’ excesses as indicative of its (ostensible) crudeness of form, a marker of its chaotic internal structure? Why has its eponymous hero, as if embodying the flaws of the play as a whole, so clearly seemed an intemperate figure, deficient in both rhetorical and moral moderation? Rather than merely the product of a muddled aesthetic, *Titus*’ excesses, I will argue, signal instead the play’s use of extremity to define the ethical, a representational strategy that exhibits sophistication and nuance amid, even through, sensational display. For “excess” and “moderation,” taken up throughout *Titus Andronicus*, themselves exist as finely-wrought conceptual categories in early modern England, shaped by continual explication and revision. As Shakespeare’s first Roman play, where allusions to a turbulent Roman history and culture abound,² *Titus Andronicus*, with all its horrors, seems far removed from the deliberative measures of Greek philosophy. Yet when situated within the prevailing Aristotelian ethical theory of the late 1590s, *Titus Andronicus* reveals a remarkably coherent underlying structure and –

perhaps even more surprising – a deeply *moderate* protagonist, more sinned against than sinning, who exhibits a strain of noble equanimity and a sense of reasoned temperance.

At stake in this essay, then, is a rereading of *Titus Andronicus* that intends to alter our understanding of the play's excesses by locating moderation in ways that may, at first, seem counterintuitive, even bizarre. For Aristotelian ethical epistemology – deeply ingrained in late sixteenth-century England and central to *Titus* – understands the ethical mean as the point of moral equilibrium between two diametrically-opposed extremes. Absolute yet also culturally-intuited, the ethical mean admits a theoretical *range* of action as “moderate” depending upon circumstance. Moreover, as a site of social stability yet hermeneutic uncertainty, the mean requires perpetual fixing – both in the sense of locating but also repairing as well. Contingent upon context, it requires, that is, continual identification and, when dislocated by rampant immoderation, restoration. In *Titus Andronicus*, Shakespeare treats the contextual determination of “moderation” and the mean's ontological fixity as compatible. This flexible rigidity helps position Titus as horrific yet just, noble while savage, as he negotiates the shifting terms of Rome's civic contract. As Rome becomes increasingly chaotic in its extreme flouting of gratitude (the social mean discarded by the feckless Saturninus), Titus must refashion moderation within his newly-altered context. His corrective revenge reintroduces two traits implicit in the city's initial contract based on gratitude (and absent in the crimes against his family), namely, proportionality and a calculated sense of equivalent exchange. Shakespeare creates a remarkable series of ethical relocations throughout the play, re-contextualizing Titus, surnamed Pius, in extreme circumstances, positioning him, that is, in a world grown uncontrollably immoderate. Within this context, Titus' horrific violence

functions not, as we might initially intuit, as merely excessive but rather quite the opposite, as a type of radically adaptive moderation-in-extremity.

I. Aristotelianism and the Early Modern Formulation of Value

As both Charles Schmitt and David Lines have shown, the narrative of the decline of Aristotelianism in early modern England has been significantly misunderstood. While not “considered an *auctoritas* in some infallible sense,” Aristotle was “the main authority in moral philosophy far into the sixteenth century,” his ethics permeating university systems and published materials throughout Europe.³ In particular, *The Nicomachean Ethics* “perhaps as much as any other work from antiquity, emerged from the Reformation struggles as a keystone of both Catholic and Protestant education”⁴ and was the standard text for ethics curricula.⁵ Aristotle’s influence extended beyond the university system, however, since “there was a general revival of interest in philosophy, particularly of the Aristotelian tradition, in England during the last quarter of the sixteenth century.”⁶ The philosopher’s works, especially *The Ethics*, enjoyed a high publication rate, a testament to Aristotle’s widespread appeal beyond the university.⁷ Printed more than any of Aristotle’s other texts, *The Ethics* went through numerous translations. The first English edition, rendered by John Wilkinson from an Italian version in 1549, was followed by several commentaries, including Samuel Heiland’s published in 1581 and John Case’s widely influential *Speculum quaestionum* “printed in Oxford in 1585 and reprinted in 1596.”⁸ At the time Shakespeare wrote *Titus*, Aristotelian philosophy, not yet in decline, informed literary engagements with myriad political and ethical issues, helping shape their representations of moderation and excess.⁹

The conflicted hermeneutics of fixing value in late Elizabethan England appeared across a wide array of discourses, including economic, racial, religious, and legal ones, some of which have received ample attention in *Titus* criticism. In its most immediately material expression, the question of value arose with the currency devaluation of the 1590s, a crisis that made ubiquitous the question whether value existed intrinsically or from a seemingly arbitrary cultural consensus (or, for that matter, royal fiat). According to Jesse Lander, “The crisis of value that roiled the world of late sixteenth-century England” derived partly from Elizabeth’s “‘calling down’ [of] the base coinage to its ‘true’ value,” an act that, in conjunction with rapid inflation, had “a corrosive effect on the coin’s ability to function as a standard of value”¹⁰ and “put enormous strain on the language of value in its various forms.”¹¹ As Jonathan Gil Harris has recently shown, “not only the debasement of England’s currency but also unprecedented volatility in international exchange rates” exacerbated this crisis and prompted attempts to fix the coin as a “common measure of value.”¹² While the “movement of bullion across national borders” called further attention to “the mutability of financial value in the course of foreign currency exchange,” multiple other discourses paralleled such “shifting economic theories of value” and provided avenues for “imagin[ing] rival models of value as inherent or extrinsic.”¹³ Indeed, as Gil Harris has convincingly argued, early modern inquiries into the relationship between “intrinsic telos” and “socially imposed nomos” extended beyond economic discourses to theories of language and even pathology as well.¹⁴ Likewise, articulations of racialized discourse shared with such material concerns an attempt to stabilize value by establishing fixed referents of meaning, even if such identifications might sometimes prove conveniently protean.¹⁵ Moreover, the discourses

of religious belief also participated in the crisis of fixing value in the late sixteenth century. The hermeneutics behind Protestant and Catholic disagreements pointed to a transcendent absolute at once knowable yet stubbornly elusive across differing cultural traditions and perspectives.¹⁶ And in legal matters, “by the late 1580s, the location of equity had become a political issue, as a result of the growing antagonism between common law and prerogative jurisdictions.”¹⁷ Consistent across varying perspectives and concerns, the contested discourses of value shared a governing presupposition, however, that true value not only existed but required deciphering. In the midst of social flux, fixing a median point of consensus, particularly regarding a sense of ethical value, proved essential for developing a just society: the variability of context necessitated, not obviated, fixing an ethical mean.

The contested semiotics of value figured in the myriad discourses only briefly surveyed here exemplifies the central quandary posed by the age’s prevailing Aristotelianism: determining if the ethical mean is absolute and transcendent, situational or contextual, or, as Aristotle intimates, some tenuously compatible fusion of the two.¹⁸ Academic yet pragmatic, the very question fundamentally shapes how one construes the “ethical.” Since the mean, by its very nature, exists in contradistinction to two divergent extremes, Aristotle often defines it relationally, by expressing it through opposition, articulating what it is *not*. One may find the mean of bravery, for example, by avoiding both cowardice and foolhardiness, two deviations from the mean that exhibit, respectively, too much or too little regard for one’s safety.¹⁹ Thus, ascertaining the mean relies in some measure on context – for the point of recklessness or cowardice may shift depending upon circumstance. This reliance on context at once creates moderation and

allows for extremity, for it prompts the ethical person to “save extreme reactions for extreme situations.”²⁰ Such a formulation promotes patient endurance, yet opens the possibility of justifiably extreme reactions, provided they are proportionate to extreme circumstances. When Aristotle speaks of the ethical mean, he points, therefore, not simply to an appropriate action but an appropriate range of action, adaptable as occasion warrants. Recognizing that locating the mean remains inherently fraught but nonetheless indispensable, Aristotle often advocates approximating virtue as closely as possible.

The influence of context on finding the mean likewise shapes Aristotle’s taxonomy of distributive and rectificatory justice, two formulations, as we will see, that figure centrally in *Titus’* election and Alarbus episodes. Here, as in personal ethics, just exchange exists on a potentially variable (and, therefore, disputable) point of equilibrium, and ethical behavior, consequently, admits a range of possibility. In Book V of *The Ethics*, Aristotle delineates between distributive justice, or the proper distribution of goods, and rectificatory justice, the legal justice rendered for physical injury.²¹ Governing the “distributions of honour or money or the other things that fall to be divided among those who have a share in the constitution,”²² distributive justice ultimately leaves imprecise just *how* such division should occur. Aristotle predicates distributive justice on merit, but, as he readily admits, merit proves a notoriously slippery concept to fix in place, “for all men agree that what is just in distribution must be according to merit in some sense, though they do not all specify the same sort of merit.”²³ While the indeterminate designation of “merit” precedes the enactment (or, perhaps, approximation) of distributive justice, rectificatory justice remains contextually shaped by its reactive

nature. Describing physical suffering (not just material dispossession) as a type of disequilibrium between a “gainer” and “loser,” Aristotle explains that:

this kind of injustice being an inequality, the judge tries to equalize it; for in the case also in which one has received and the other inflicted a wound, or one has slain and the other been slain, the suffering and the action have been unequally distributed; but the judge tries to equalize things by means of a penalty, taking away from the gain of the assailant.²⁴

Recognizing that “the term ‘gain’ is applied generally to such cases – even if it be not a term appropriate to certain cases, e.g. to the person who inflicts a wound – and ‘loss’ to the sufferer,” Aristotle argues that “at all events when the suffering has been estimated, the one is called loss and the other gain.”²⁵ Rectificatory justice, as “the intermediate between loss and gain,” must, therefore, attend to context, for the judge resets the fulcrum, as it were, in order to “equalize things by means of [a] penalty,” but does so only *after* “the suffering has been estimated.”²⁶ The impulse to establish the ethical mean remains, thus, not simply a matter of personal hermeneutics but the particular concern of a just society seeking to maintain civic order.

Within his taxonomy of justice, Aristotle articulates a third category known as “justice in exchange,” a formulation especially attuned to the importance of gratitude or grace for ensuring equitable transactions. While justice in exchange has often been read as a precursor to modern economic theory, recent scholarship has persuasively recuperated its broader purview – operant well into the seventeenth-century – as a category that encompasses the determination of value in *any* type of exchange.²⁷ Justice in exchange, according to Aristotle, is the “the sort of justice [that] hold[s] men together – reciprocity in accordance with a proportion and not on the basis of precisely equal return” since “it is by proportionate requital that the city holds together.”²⁸ Immediately

after observing that “it is by proportionate requital that the city holds together,” Aristotle states that “men seek to return either evil for evil – and if they cannot do so, think their position mere slavery – or good for good – and if they cannot do so there is no exchange, but it is by exchange that they hold together.”²⁹ As Aristotle discusses the exchange of “evil for evil...good for good,” he contemplates in the very next words graciousness: “This is why they give a prominent place to the temple of the Graces – to promote the requital of services; for this is characteristic of grace – we should serve in return one who has shown grace to us, and should another time take the initiative in showing it. Now proportionate return is secured by cross-conjunction.”³⁰ As Aristotle moves between referencing revenge (“men seek to return evil for evil”) and the start of his exposition on “cross-conjunction,” or the geometric proportion used to secure proportionate return, his emphasis on grace takes central place in his explication of justice in exchange. Grace, necessary “to promote the requital of services,” facilitates Aristotle’s ethical economy of justice in exchange: the absence of grace signals the breakdown of fair requital.³¹

While justice in exchange articulates social equilibrium as wrought by grace and proportionate return, Aristotle argues that equanimity of personal character becomes largely revealed through truthfulness and the nature of one’s “ready-wit.” Indeed, both truthfulness and the proper application of wit serve as indicators of the equability present in one’s broader transactions. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, at the close of Book IV, right before he attends to justice in Book V, Aristotle briefly treats truthfulness and ready-wit. “In the field of social life,” Aristotle states, it is important to “describe those who pursue truth or falsehood alike in words and deeds and in the claims they put forward.”³² Noting that “falsehood is *in itself* mean and culpable” and emphasizing that deception needs no

ulterior purpose to render itself blameworthy, Aristotle describes the truthful man as one who “would seem to be as a matter of fact equitable.”³³ This sense of equanimity is both a personal adherence to the mean and an indicator of whether one will operate selfishly or unselfishly, with grace or ingratitude. He continues, “For the man who loves truth, and is truthful *where nothing is at stake*, will still be more truthful where something is at stake; he will avoid falsehood as something base, seeing that he avoided it *even for its own sake*.”³⁴ Thus, when Aristotle subsequently turns to describe the “ready-witted,” he presents the application of wit as index of one’s interior equanimity. Since “ready wit” for Aristotle “implies a sort of readiness to turn this way or that,” he views it as no mere parlor game but rather a serious indicator of one’s ethical constitution: “For such sallies [i.e. turns of wit] are thought to be movements of the character, and as bodies are discriminated by their movements so too are characters.”³⁵ For Aristotle, then, one’s degree of truthfulness, of equitable behavior, is best marked by “the claims...put forward” “where nothing is at stake,” and the movements of one’s wit allows another to evaluate, to “discriminate,” the qualities and movements of that person’s character. Within Aristotelian ethics, truthfulness signals equanimity, falsehood a type of fractured exchange, and ready-wit a sense of one’s ethical character.

II. From Gratitude to Ingratitude: (Un)Settling the Mean in *Titus*’ Rome

Shakespeare frames *Titus*’ representation of civic piety – in language notably evocative of *The Ethics* – by raising the issue of the ethical life as shaped by consistent virtue yet also the vicissitudes of circumstance. In doing so, he suggests that context influences ethical value. Shakespeare introduces the plight of the Andronici family by picturing Titus as a type of Priam, having lost his sons in battle on behalf of the nation.

“Romans,” Titus intones, “of five and twenty valiant sons, / Half of the number that King Priam had, / Behold the poor remains, alive and dead” (1.1.82-4).³⁶ Contemplating those dead sons, Marcus assures his brother that they have “aspired to Solon’s happiness” (ll. 180), a reference to Solon’s dictum that no man may be called happy until dead, when he is finally beyond fortune’s caprice. In *The Ethics*, Aristotle himself invokes Priam and Solon to frame his inquiry into what constitutes the virtuous life.³⁷ Asking if happiness derives from virtuous action or circumstance, from being good or from good fortune, Aristotle emphasizes the former but admits the possibility of the latter. He argues that:

[T]here is required, as we said, not only complete virtue but also a complete life, since many changes occur in life, and all manner of chances, and the most prosperous may fall into great misfortunes in old age, as is told of Priam in the Trojan Cycle; and one who has experienced such chances and has ended wretchedly no one calls happy. Must no one at all, then, be called happy while he lives; must we, as Solon says, see the end?³⁸

As Aristotle ponders Solon’s happiness, he again alludes to Priam³⁹ and, in another passage, contemplates (as will *Titus*) whether the fortunes of the living affect the dead.⁴⁰

“Complete virtue” and a “complete life” are set in tension in both *The Ethics* and Shakespeare’s invocation of it in *Titus*, suggesting that context may indeed influence ethical value, that the measure of a person’s life may derive from not only action but also situation and circumstance.

Shakespeare most saliently establishes the disorder and unstable location of the ethical mean endemic to *Titus*’ Rome through the disputed election, an instance of distributive justice where political ideology defines merit and self-interest – except in the notable case of Titus himself – defines political ideology.⁴¹ Amid the clamorous contest for “rule and empery” (ll. 19), each rival assumes a discernible point of equilibrium, locating that point, however, in his own understanding of “merit.” Thus, when Marcus

entreats Bassianus and Saturninus to “Plead your deserts in peace and humbleness” (ll. 48), each rival accepts the proposition, perceiving the election as simply a matter of equitable valuation. Bassianus, for example, agrees to “Commit my cause in balance to be weighed” (ll. 58), while Saturninus, even in the syntax of his request, invites his auditors to aurally weigh his merit as on a balance: “Rome, be as just and gracious unto me / As I am confident and kind to thee” (ll. 63-4). The rivals employ rhetoric here that will be echoed in the play’s repeated iterations of the *suum cuique* principle, or the principle “to each his own.”⁴² This rhetoric invoking an equitable valuation of worth belies a fraught endeavor, however, for, as Aristotle had observed, each individual defines merit differently and according to one’s own political ideology. For “democrats identify it with the status of freeman, supporters of oligarchy with wealth (or with noble birth), and supporters of aristocracy with excellence.”⁴³ Such formulations for designating merit may remain tenable enough within each political philosophy, relatively homogenous in its conception. Across ideological divides, however, merit becomes even more contested, since the context of political consensus needed to establish it breaks down.

If distributive justice attempts to stabilize the criterion “merit” by establishing contextual parameters rooted in political consensus, Shakespeare’s play reveals the indeterminate nature of median value even further by receding yet another level, by blurring the political ideologies of the rival claimants. Saturninus, who will rule as absolute tyrant, employs language reminiscent of Aristotle’s description of the “supporters of oligarchy;” his is the argument of noble birth, more specifically, of primogeniture.⁴⁴ Predicating his right to the throne exclusively on birth, Saturninus also

emphasizes *whom* he addresses. He first entreats the “Noble patricians, patrons of my right” to “Defend the justice of my cause in arms” (ll. 1-2) and then calls his “followers” to “plead my successive title” because “I am his first-born son,” urging them to not “wrong mine age” (ll. 4-5, 8). Bassianus’ counterargument, at first glance, suggests the Aristotelian “supporters of aristocracy” who identify merit with “excellence” for he bases his appeal on “virtue” as well as “justice, continence, and nobility” (ll.15); he concludes his speech, however, by striking a distinctly democratic note. Bassianus, like the democrats who “identify [merit] with the status of freeman,” blends the rhetoric of virtue and excellence into a democratic appeal, for he does not even address the patricians specifically but rather tells the people “But let desert in pure election shine, / And, Romans, fight for freedom in your choice” (ll. 16-17). As Shakespeare’s rivals adopt mixed ideologies in order to arrogate power to themselves, the variability of merit becomes amplified by the instability of homogeneous political ideology and, more broadly, by the variability of context.

Titus stands notably apart from this display of mutable political ideology and unrestrained self-aggrandizement, adapting instead to a radically-altered political landscape – an open throne, immense popular support, weak rival candidates – by neither arrogating absolute power to himself nor shifting his political fealties for personal advantage. Bassianus had appealed to the Romans’ “freedom” and desire for “pure election,” invoking “justice, continence, and nobility” as desirable attributes. In contrast, Marcus enters to announce the people “have by common voice” already “in election for the Roman empery / Chosen Andronicus surnamèd Pius” (ll. 22-3) since “a nobler man, a

braver warrior, / Lives not this day within the city walls” (ll. 25-6). The reason for Titus’ popular appeal quickly becomes clear in Marcus’ first address to his brother:

Titus Andronicus, the people of Rome,
Whose friend in justice thou hast ever been,
Send thee by me, their tribune and their trust,
This palliament of white and spotless hue,
And name thee in election for the empire. (ll. 182-86)

Positioning Titus as not only a friend to the people of Rome but also a friend *in justice*, Marcus describes Titus’ popular support as deriving from two manifestations of the ethical mean in social action. Both justice and friendship, at their core, focus on equity and the mean; both require, by nature, equanimity, a balance wrought by fair and mutual exchange.⁴⁵ And here it is justice – the quest for the equitable mean – that itself becomes the medium for Titus’ intimate affiliation with the people. Indeed, Shakespeare underscores the sense of equivalency wrought here between soldier and populace by syntactically joining the two: “Titus Andronicus, the people of Rome” (ll. 182). Paradoxically, this fundamental sense of equanimity leads to Titus both receiving yet rejecting power. Having served for forty years as soldier (ll. 196), Titus perceives political duty as beyond his capacity, demurs, and, instead, projects loyalty to the emperor he has served by electing “our emperor’s eldest son” (ll. 227). Titus, in short, concludes decades of martial service (and the self-sacrifice it entails) by attempting to settle political unrest while rejecting supreme authority for himself.⁴⁶

Within the context of Aristotelian rectificatory justice, Titus likewise appears noble – though not entirely blameless – in the sacrifice of Alarbus on account of his relative degree of mercy and, more particularly, by his privileging self-denial over full equanimity when the latter concerns him personally.⁴⁷ For in rectificatory justice, it will

be recalled, “the judge tries to equalize” the disproportion wrought when “one has slain and the other been slain” and “the suffering and action have been unequally distributed.”⁴⁸ Since Aristotle figured rectificatory justice as an “intermediate between loss and gain,” one could argue that if Titus fails here, it is because he does not do *more*, that he kills only one son rather than all. That the play figures the wounds dealt to Titus in Aristotelian terms of loss may be seen most explicitly later when Titus tells Marcus “losers will have leave / To ease their stomachs with their bitter tongues” (3.1.232-3). Titus also suggests a similar sentiment regarding his sons as he faces his family tomb. “How many sons,” Titus tallies as if taking inventory, “has thou of mine in store / That thou wilt never render to me more!” (1.1.97-8). Titus has Alarbus killed for the Andronici “*brethren* slain,” noting that “religiously *they* ask a sacrifice,” and Alarbus must die “t’ appease *their* groaning shadows that are gone.” Upon the death of Tamora’s eldest son, Lucius remarks “Remaineth naught but to inter our *brethren*” and Titus makes his “latest farewell to *their* souls” (ll. 126-7, 129, 149, 152, emphasis added). If one pillar of Aristotelian rectificatory justice resides in the making of injuries equal, one might reasonably ask whether Titus’ sacrifice of Alarbus becomes questionable not because of its excess but rather its restraint, its refusal to demand even more given the conditions. With twenty one sons killed in battle and the whole array of captured enemies before him – not just Alarbus, but Tamora, Demetrius, Chiron, and Aaron – Titus calculates his loss in a context that might very well allow an intermediate space between gain and loss that admits the taking of multiple lives.⁴⁹ Yet, here, Titus denies his arguable right and eschews equanimity for a sacrifice of one. Such a reading of Titus’ act as restrained, as a variation of mercy, makes Lavinia’s unfortunate reference to her father while pleading

with Tamora more understandable and, indeed, reasonable: she assumes him merciful and the piety of gratitude ordering Rome's earlier interaction as still potentially redeemable.⁵⁰

While Titus' sense of equity and his gratitude to the state does not exonerate him of his moral failings, it does mitigate them, for he nobly – even if sometimes foolishly and myopically – seeks public order before self-gratification. Indeed, Titus is “Pius” precisely because his civic selflessness, paradoxically, constitutes his identity. In fact, in his killing Alarbus, as in his killing of Mutius and Lavinia, two of his other most questionable acts, Titus evinces a degree of selflessness often overlooked. For while he remains personally invested in the matter of Alarbus, Titus identifies his dead sons by their civic role – as “brethren” rather than “sons.” The distinction reminds us that Titus functions here not simply as a father but rather in a doubly official capacity – as returning general and potential emperor-elect.⁵¹ Indeed, this scene occurs between the people's selection of Titus and his final refusal of power, a stylistic arrangement that seems designed to highlight Titus' civic role. Titus' slaying of Mutius, likewise, occurs only after his son draws his sword in the streets of Rome and threatens his father publicly (1.1.291-93), an affront to civic order and the filial gratitude that supports it.⁵² Even when Titus kills Lavinia, he recognizes the deed as both an “outrage” that counters Lavinia's “stuprum” (the Latin means not simply “rape” but “outrage” as well) and as needing “A reason mighty, strong, and effectual; / A pattern, precedent, and lively warrant / For me, most wretched, to perform the like” (5.3.43-5). Whatever the degree of Titus' moral failings, he tends respond to disruption rather than cause it, errs on the side of keeping communal order, and remains noticeably less inclined towards the self-gratifying, community-fracturing excesses exhibited by his enemies.⁵³ Titus' piety, while rife with

limitations, nonetheless nobly privileges the ethos of gratitude over unrestrained self-interest.

If Rome's social cohesion derives from gratitude and its subsequent disorder from ingratitude, such a radical dislocation of the social marker (determined by cultural consensus) used to locate the mean reveals Saturninus' capricious fiats as initiating the play's chaos and necessitating Titus' recuperative deeds. The ancillary, seemingly minor, exchanges that accompany Titus' refusal of the empery and his transfer of power to Saturninus reveal that gratitude functions – though in a markedly variable, uncertain way – as a type of currency in *Titus Andronicus*.⁵⁴ Bassianus, for example, attempts to forestall Titus' selection of Saturninus by playing to gratitude, claiming that “thanks to men / Of noble minds is honorable meed” (1.1.218-19). Although Titus chooses to reject Bassianus' claim, the fundamental premise that gratitude functions as mediating currency appears again just a moment later. For the tribunes consent to Titus' impending choice “to gratify the good Andronicus / And gratulate his safe return to Rome” (ll. 223-24). The repetition of “gratify” and “gratulate” identifies Titus' political capital as originating in a mutually understood ethos of reciprocity. The converse, of course, to the play's opening exchange of power peaceably mediated and governed by gratitude occurs throughout Saturninus' rule, as equitable exchange dissolves into ingratitude. Hence, Titus will send his arrows into Rome, declaring himself “old Andronicus, / Shaken with sorrows in ungrateful Rome” (4.3.16-17), a sentiment Marcus echoes in “tak[ing] wreak on Rome for this ingratitude” (4.3.34). Likewise, when the First Goth bemoans Titus “Whose high exploits and honorable deeds / *Ingrateful* Rome requites with foul contempt” (5.1.11-12, emphasis added), he overtly conflates unjust exchange (the requital of contempt for

honor) with the abrogation of gratitude. If, as Aristotle had argued, “it is by proportionate requital that the city holds together” and that grace “promote[s] the requital of services,” Titus’ city here disregards both the proportionate return found in justice in exchange and the gratitude needed for maintaining *a priori* terms for fair trade.

The ensconcing of Saturninus on the throne brings the greatest test yet to Roman social cohesion, for he at once reveals an awareness of, yet disconnection from, the ethos of gratitude and a consequent repudiation of Rome’s social contract mediated by grace. By dissolving the “unit...fixed by agreement” (to use Aristotle’s rhetoric of material and social currency) in favor of the disproportion of dissimulation,⁵⁵ the new emperor single-handedly resets the definition of the normative in Rome. Saturninus had used the rhetoric of gratitude earlier when he requested that the people be “just and gracious” to his claim (1.1.63), but his later invocation of gratitude suggests his own limited, faulty understanding of its importance. After receiving the crown, Saturninus directs his first words as emperor to Titus:

Titus Andronicus, for thy favor done
To us in our election this day,
I give thee thanks in part of thy deserts,
And will with deeds requite thy gentleness. (ll. 237-40)

As Shakespeare pivots Saturninus’ line on the fulcrum of the two syllables “in part,” he has the emperor counterpoise “I give thee thanks” against “of thy deserts.” By doing so, Shakespeare sets “in part,” well, apart, and underscores the limitations inherent in *how* the emperor perceives the deed of requital. For in response to Titus’ “favor done,” Saturninus will offer thanks “in part” and then “deeds” that will “requite...gentleness.” Rather than the natural outgrowth of gratitude, Saturninus’ promised deeds become, therefore, an *addition* to his verbal display. In short, he seems to conceptualize thanks

and deeds as separate, distinct entities, a rhetorical move that suggests gratitude functions for Saturninus *only* on the level of language, a social nicety that possesses no greater depth of meaning. Although Saturninus acknowledges the social function and centrality of gratitude, the new emperor's words here reflect a disconnection from the economy of gratitude that will become brutally apparent in successive scenes.

This subtle display of Saturninus' disconnection from the ethos of gratitude occurs immediately before Titus transfers Tamora to the emperor, an important moment that simultaneously depicts Titus' participation in the just exchange governed by gratitude and Saturninus' dissolution of both that exchange and the social bonds it fosters. In rapid succession, Saturninus makes Lavinia the second half of his promised requital to Titus ("And, for an onset, Titus to advance / Thy name and honorable family, / Lavinia will I make my empress" [ll. 241-43]), even staking the people's fidelity to him upon this display of gratitude:

Thanks, noble Titus, father of my life.
How proud I am of thee and of thy gifts
Rome shall record, and when I do forget
The least of these unspeakable deserts,
Romans, forget your fealty to me. (ll. 256-60)

Yet when Titus relinquishes Tamora to the emperor's care, Saturninus concurrently relinquishes Lavinia in his thoughts (as well as his supposed fealty to Titus). As he appropriates Tamora unto himself, he lets unravel the bonds created by exchange among the Romans. For at the very moment Titus formally declares Tamora to be Saturninus' charge ("Now, madam, are you prisoner to an emperor" [ll. 261]), Saturninus voices interest in his new possession: "A goodly lady, trust me, of the hue / That I would choose, were I to choose anew" (ll. 264-65). This interior exchange of Lavinia for Tamora not

only breaks faith with Titus – if faith there ever was – but also leads to a very public, material eschewing of traditionally-ordered exchange itself when Saturninus declares “Ransomless here we set our prisoners free” (ll. 277). Here, Saturninus’ caprice (that eschews gratitude for disproportionate exchange) more than Titus’ slaying of Alarbus (that shows grace by disavowing full personal satisfaction) initiates the play’s ensuing chaos.

As the focus of Saturninus’ whim, Tamora becomes emblematic of a new social order where dissimulation mediates social commerce. Notably, the new empress immediately recognizes the importance of masking disproportionate exchange with a façade of equivalency. For while Tamora affects a disinterested disposition that would have equanimity for all, maintain the social mean, and continue the commerce of gratitude, she employs the rhetoric of Rome’s civic piety – specifically, the language of gracious equanimity – simply to ensure her own tenuous hold on power. Claiming she must “speak indifferently for all” (ll. 433), Tamora thus postures neutrality but also signals her very method for navigating the court, for it is by “speak[ing] indifferently” that Tamora survives: her apparent indifference conceals and enacts the substitution of proportionate exchange for the disproportionate. Indeed, she explicitly articulates her strategy in these very terms, advising Saturninus to “dissemble all your griefs and discontents,” lest the people “upon a just survey take Titus’ part, / And so supplant you for ingratitude” (ll. 446, 449-50). Behind Tamora’s rhetoric of moderation and speaking indifferently exists a systematic attempt to forestall and subvert a just appraisal via dissimulation. Eclipsed by the play’s myriad, more graphic crimes, the emphasis here on

dissembling in conjunction with ingratitude signals a fundamental shift to inequality and disproportionate return within Rome.

If, as Aristotle noted, ready-wit signals the constitution of one's fundamental ethos and dishonesty marks one as inequitable by nature, Shakespeare heightens the villainy of "high-witted Tamora" (4.4.35)⁵⁶ beyond her complicity in murder, rape, and mutilation by emphasizing – of all things – lying. Tamora's ready-wit reveals her character as fundamentally – not simply strategically – dishonest, a trait indicative of her inequitable ethos and one that severely challenges her complicity in Lavinia's rape and mutilation as a type of revenge, or form of enacting proportion in her own right. Notably, Tamora begins the scene of Lavinia's assault not with thoughts of revenge for Alarbus but desire for Aaron – until he informs her of the impending crimes (2.3.42-45). Tamora's role in the prearranged plot consequently seems less revenge and more a pretense to employ her ready-wit.⁵⁷ With all conspirators alert to the plot, Tamora's elaborate fiction that Bassianus and Lavinia "have ticed me hither to this place" in order to leave her to a "miserable death" (2.3.92, 108) proves superfluous, a fabrication that aligns Tamora, in part, with Aristotle's blameworthy liar who deceives even "where nothing is at stake."⁵⁸ For neither expediency nor strategic calculation renders a fictitious reason necessary: Tamora simply imposes a false narrative on the crimes. Indeed, the idea that Lavinia's rape and Bassianus' murder occur as revenge for Alarbus seems likewise spurious. At the very least, it begs the question of causality. Concocted by Aaron and enacted by Demetrius and Chiron, the assault on Lavinia and Bassianus serves not the purposes of Tamora's revenge but the Moor's aesthetic delight and the sons' sheer carnality. Reading revenge here requires one to believe Aaron, who delights in villainy

for its own sake, and Demetrius and Chiron, who lust for “a thousand Roman dames” to rape and mutilate (4.2.41), would have acted differently had Alarbus lived.⁵⁹ Moreover, Tamora not only complies with Lavinia’s rape but also Bassianus’ murder, despite his unmistakable remove from Alarbus’ slaying. Tamora’s temporary purchase with audience sympathy in the Alarbus scene derives from her (convincing) adoption of the language of equanimity, yet becomes undercut not simply by her subsequent villainies but also her dubious connection to any consistent ethos of equity. Tamora’s unbounded reign in Rome, it seems, frees her not to revenge a son she hardly mentions but to unrestrainedly practice her deceptive, self-gratifying ways.

III. Redefining Moderation in Extremity: Titus, Marcus, and Consuming Sorrow

The resituated polarities of moderation and extremity wrought by Titus’ enemies recontextualize Titus in a “wilderness of tigers” (3.1.54), a new culture of extremes at once disorienting and devouring. Accordingly, Titus acclimates to his overwhelming sorrow and threatening environment by imagining himself as both consumer and consumed. While Titus employs continually shifting referents – at times grief threatens to swallow him, at others he absorbs sorrow to the point of overflowing – his apparently conflicting metaphors always center on consumption. Titus understands his surrounding context of extreme immoderation as inevitably consuming the innocent and recognizes his radical recontextualization as creating a dissolution of distinct boundaries – between him and his grief and between him and the culture of extremes that caused it. Affected by his new context, Titus operates on the assumption that the world *must* consume something. He describes the earth as having a “dry appetite” (ll. 14), pleads that his tears may “staunch” it (ll. 14), and begs the earth “refuse to drink my dear sons’ blood” (ll.

22). A direct result of his enemies' villainies, Titus' view of the world as consumptive mirrors his view of Saturninus, Aaron, and the Goths: "How happy art you then," he wryly declares to Lucius, "From these devourers to be banishèd!" (ll. 56-57). Fearlessly confronting his family's horror, Titus responds to Marcus' warning "I bring consuming sorrow to thine age" (ll. 61) with "Will it consume me? let me see it then" (ll. 62). Unlike Hieronimo's dirge in *The Spanish Tragedy* that seeks oblivion in tragedy, Titus, alert to his newly-altered context, adapts by both immersion in and absorption of his grief.

By presenting the disintegration of distinctive boundaries in such rapid succession, Titus' metaphors of consumption metonymically enact – through their shifting use of vehicle and tenor – the tumbling inversion of fixed point and context characteristic of Saturninus' Rome. For Shakespeare counterbalances Titus' express desire to be (further) consumed by Marcus' news with imagery of being filled to capacity. Thus, Titus flips the metaphor of consumption when he asks upon seeing his daughter:

What fool hath added water to the sea
Or brought a faggot to bright-burning Troy?
My grief was at the height before thou cam'st
And now like Nilus it disdaineth bounds. (ll. 68-71).

While here Titus' grief "like Nilus...disdaineth bounds," a moment later, he will be "as one upon a rock" and will act as one "Environed with a wilderness of sea, / Who marks the waxing tide grow wave by wave, / Expecting ever when some envious surge / Will in his brinish bowels swallow him" (ll. 93-97). Titus' grief, like Nilus, absorbs to overflowing, yet Titus, ensconced and isolated on a rock, confronts the raging sea *external* to him, the sea that threatens to take *him* into *it*. Throughout the third act, the rhetoric of flooding excess continually shifts so that, when comforting Lavinia, Titus

imagines their cheeks as, likewise, both flooded and flooding: with “miry slime left on them by the flood” yet also making “a brine pit” of the fountain below “with our bitter tears” (ll. 126-29). Titus, engulfed by his family’s grief, perceives his experience as a type of personal dissolution into his sorrow and the surrounding context that caused it, a context, not coincidentally, where meaningful ethical referents have themselves likewise dissolved.

As Titus merges imperceptibly with his grief, he acclimates wholly to his environment, and from the outset his reaction to the crimes against his family – for all its intensity – presents an almost organic sense of proportionality and adherence to the Aristotelian temperance of anger, prefiguring his revenge, as surprising as it may seem, as a redefined moderation within extreme circumstances. Aristotle delineates two failings in respect to temper, two deviations from the mean: on one side, a rash disposition to seek revenge and, on the other, an excessive passivity that never prompts anger. Aristotle dismisses the latter as a culpable “unirascibility” and later likens the former to “hasty servants who run out before they have heard the whole of what one says and then muddle the order,” concluding that a rash disposition “by reason of the warmth and hastiness of its nature...springs to take revenge.”⁶⁰ The mean falls somewhere in between, however, and “the man who is angry at the right things and with the right people, and further, as he ought, when he ought, and as long as he ought, is praised.”⁶¹ While a “good tempered man” is “thought to err rather in the direction of deficiency,” and is, thus, “not revengeful, but rather tends to make allowances,” too much allowance is also morally culpable. For “the deficiency, whether it is a sort of ‘unirascibility’ or whatever it is, is blamed.”⁶² Such people “are thought to be fools” or “thought not to feel things nor to be

pained by them.”⁶³ Moreover, since such a man “does not get angry, he is thought unlikely to defend himself” and is inclined to being “slavish.”⁶⁴ Thus, good temper neither hastens to revenge nor unthinkingly forbears. Indeed, Aristotle qualifies his earlier repudiation of revenge by appealing to circumstance and perception:

the man who strays a little from the path, either towards the more or towards the less, is not blamed; since sometimes we praise those who exhibit the deficiency, and call them good-tempered, and sometimes we call angry people manly, as capable of ruling. How far, therefore, and how a man must stray before he becomes blameworthy, it is not easy to state in words; for the decision depends on the particular facts and on perception.⁶⁵

Since “it is not easy to define” this ethical mean nor “at what point right action ceases and wrong begins,”⁶⁶ Aristotle opens a space for expressing anger under particular circumstances, tantalizingly speculating “how far...and how a man must stray” before he should be deemed immoderate.

Given Titus’ emphasis on flooding excess and his view of himself as a container that cannot contain, the deep sense of moderation and proportion here is both remarkable and easy to overlook. Yet Titus notably exhibits neither unirascibility nor a rush to revenge. Given his circumstances, Titus falls within the Aristotelian mean, for he eschews a “slavish passivity” but also stands in stark contrast to the hasty servants who rashly run off. Instead, Titus deliberately and unflinchingly confronts his family’s pain, slowing the dramatic pace and signaling his temperance of anger.⁶⁷ In fact, no movement towards revenge occurs until after Titus’ lengthy ruminations. Conversely, Titus clearly remains affected by his family’s woes, proves himself (if proof was needed) as capable of defending himself, and avoids thereby Aristotle’s “unirascibility.” Titus appears in this context of “particular facts and...perception” as “manly [and] capable of ruling.” Markedly slowing the dramatic action in the third act as Titus anguishes over his family’s

trauma, Shakespeare uses Titus' effusions of flooding and consumptive imagery, paradoxically, to signal the Roman's continence of temper, preparing us to encounter his subsequent revenge as a type of moderation fashioned to meet extreme circumstances.⁶⁸

Within the context of an Aristotelian temperance of anger, Titus and Marcus contrast rather sharply, with Marcus appearing – contrary to most critical valuations of him⁶⁹ – as actually further from the mean than the intensely distraught Titus. At first glance this may seem counterintuitive. Marcus, after all, fashions himself as moderator to Titus' emotional extremes. When, for example, Titus tells Lavinia that “with our sighs we'll breathe the welkin dim / And stain the sun with fog” (3.1.211-12), Marcus checks what he perceives as excessive imagination, remonstrating “O brother, speak with possibility, / And do not break into these deep extremes” (ll. 214-15). Portraying Titus' speech as doubly excessive (as “deep extremes”) and unnatural (one that Titus must “break into”), Marcus invites his brother to infuse his speech with realism rather than fancy, to be conversant with the possible. He entreats Titus instead to “let reason govern thy lament” (ll. 218). After Titus receives the heads of his two sons, Marcus yet again poses as moderating force, promising “now no more will I control thy griefs: / Rend off thy silver hair, thy other hand / Gnawing with thy teeth; and be this dismal sight / The closing up of our most wretched eyes” (ll. 259-62). Marcus remains a consistent foil to Titus, for even at this point when he invites rage, Titus falls silent: “Now is a time to storm; why art thou still?” (ll. 263). When Marcus thought outbursts inappropriate, Titus raged; when he deemed it “time to storm,” Titus subsides. Perplexed at his brother's subsequent laughter, Marcus understands it as impropriety, asking “Why dost thou laugh?” since “it fits not with this hour” (ll. 265). The brothers' consistent variance with

each other functions as the one constant throughout the scene's many reversals, with Marcus always supposing himself the moderating influence.

But, if as I have suggested, Titus acts in a manner accordant with the mean in respect to anger (even in his apparent extremes), then Marcus, often thought of as a moderating force, becomes something altogether different. And the moderation offered by Marcus is no moderation at all but rather the "unirascibility" noted by Aristotle. For we may think of Titus and Marcus – undeniable foils to each other, to be sure – as polarities framing an indistinct mean. Marcus does not simply try to dissuade Titus from emotional extremes, but Titus also explicitly challenges Marcus and his supposedly moderate responses to the aggressions against them. Titus depicts his "extremes" as the compassionate, reasonable response to his suffering child. He reasons as he rages:

When heaven doth weep, doth not the earth o'erflow?
 If the winds rage, doth not the sea wax mad,
 Threatening the welkin with his big-swollen face?
 And wilt thou have a reason for this coil?
 I am the sea; hark how her sighs doth blow!
 She is the weeping welkin, I the earth:
 Then must my sea be movèd with her sighs,
 Then must my earth with her continual tears
 Become a deluge, overflowed and drowned,
 For why my bowels cannot hide her woes,
 But like a drunkard must I vomit them.
 Then give me leave; for losers will have leave
 To ease their stomachs with their bitter tongues. (ll. 221-33)⁷⁰

Pivoting Marcus' appeal to "reason" back onto itself, Titus points to Lavinia as "reason for this coil," as she "becomes an icon that justifies and excuses vengeance, a reminder of the Andronici's just title to their acts of retribution."⁷¹ Moreover, Titus claims Lavinia makes his "extremes" not only reasonable but, what is more, necessary: "Then *must* my sea be movèd with her sighs, / Then *must* my earth...become a deluge, overflowed and

drowned.” In merging with his grief, Titus has compassionately merged with his daughter’s. As Titus both consumes and is consumed by Lavinia’s pain – her sighs, her tears, her woes – he calls attention to his suffering daughter and turns Marcus’ appeal to reason back onto itself, suggesting it a tepid response to the suffering present. Marcus’ initial response to Lavinia was to desire the identities of her attacker so that he – note the verb and reason given – might “rail at him to ease my mind” (2.4.35). Titus, in contrast, renders a more appropriately intense response and moves towards something more definitively reciprocal than a mere verbal thrashing conjoined with personal relief. Under the circumstances, Titus’ response, in short, seems both proportionate and reasonable, moreso it would seem than that of Marcus. Shakespeare, I suggest, does not offset a reasoning brother with a frenzied one. Rather, he gives us a father both reasoning and frenzied, an uncle rational yet soft-tempered.

Shakespeare has Marcus, the supposedly moderating force on Titus, step aside to let his brother “storm” only to have a clear-eyed, calm Titus adopt the language of equilibrium, proportion, and moderation even in his resolve to revenge. Immediately after Titus receives the heads of his two sons, Titus depicts revenge as a reinstitution of equilibrium, a direct response to the complete dissolution of proportionate exchange in Rome.⁷² His language distinctly invokes proportionality:

For these two heads do seem to speak to me,
And threat me I shall never come to bliss
Till all these mischiefs be returned again
Even in their throats that hath committed them. (3.1.271-75)

While the heads “seem to speak” figuratively, the move to “even in their throats” represents, as Gillian Murray Kendall has shown, a shift “back into the literal [for] we find later that it is literally in their throats that Titus finds his revenge – by slitting

them.”⁷³ This shift into literalness occurs precisely because the proportionate exchange requires a material, equivalent return. Visually enacting the emphasis on proportionality inherent in this language of reciprocity, Titus invites his family to adopt a physical stance mirroring his vow to revenge each injustice. “You heavy people,” Titus requests, “circle me about, / That I may turn me to each one of you / And swear unto my soul to right your wrongs” (ll. 276-78). Titus’ rhetoric of righting the wrongs of his family channels his vengeful energies – as he had directed his previous martial exploits – not simply into the service of his own interests but also of others as well.⁷⁴

Marcus’ uniraucibility within the context of such extreme brutality reveals a misguided understanding of balance that necessitates Titus keeping his brother at a remove from his corrective machinations, leading to his comment “’Tis sure enough, an you knew how.... You are a young huntsman, Marcus; let alone” (4.1.95, 101). Marcus misreads this statement as acquiescence to fate, forgetting that Titus earlier vowed vengeance, and thinks Titus “so just that he will not revenge” (ll. 128). Yet Titus quite possibly remains alert to Marcus’ limitations as a revenger. For although Marcus vows to “prosecute by good advice / Mortal revenge upon these traitorous Goths, / And see their blood or die with this reproach” (ll. 92-94), Shakespeare has subtly challenged Marcus’ ability to muster what it takes to do so. Upon finding Lavinia wandering in the woods, Marcus had imagined only producing a verbal assault (“O that I knew thy heart, and knew the beast, / That I might rail at him to ease my mind!” [2.4.34-35]). Even here in this late scene, Marcus’ first response to knowing “the beast[s]” is to exclaim that this knowledge is enough “To stir a mutiny in the mildest thoughts / And arm the minds of infants to exclains” (4.1.85-86). The chasm is wide and deep, however, between a

mutiny of thoughts and exclams and grinding a mother's sons into her dessert. When Titus tells Marcus, the "young huntsman" to "let alone," he repudiates his brother's direct help but not, however, the hunt itself.⁷⁵

IV. Reestablishing Proportionate Return in Rome: Titus' Revenge as Moderation-in-Excess

Although Titus speaks of his hunt as righting others' wrongs, his revenge takes shape within this altered ethical economy as a type of justice in exchange rather than rectificatory justice, takes shape, that is, not as the equalization of injuries mediated through law but as the extra-legal enactment of equivalent return. Rendering like for gruesome like since the law has failed him, Titus not only now acts outside any official capacity, but he also seeks (indeed, can *only* seek) equivalent return. Aristotle notes that justice in exchange, or reciprocity, "fits neither distributive nor rectificatory justice – yet people *want* even the justice of Rhadamanthus to mean this."⁷⁶ "In many cases," he continues, "reciprocity and rectificatory justice are not in accord" such as (to use the first example Aristotle proffers) when "an official has inflicted a wound, he should not be wounded in return."⁷⁷ Rectificatory justice, implemented by someone in a formal judicial capacity, may apply when Titus is returning conqueror but clearly does not when he seeks to wound the royal family in return for his family's suffering. Moreover, while rectificatory justice functions on a mathematical proportion of *equal* return, justice in exchange relies on *equivalent* return. Since precisely equal return is quite impossible here,⁷⁸ Titus seeks equivalency, his revenge consequently adopting an aesthetic parallelism with the crimes against his family.

It may, indeed, seem radical to think of Titus' revenge, rather than functioning as the mere lunacy wrought by extreme duress, as structured instead by the rational principles of Aristotelian exchange theory. But the correlation between justice in exchange and retribution in both ancient and early modern discourse – as well as Titus' own obvious investment in social contracts – prompts such a reading. Aristotle himself, as John Kerrigan notes, recognized the semiotic affinities between justice in exchange and vengeance. “The author of the *Metaphysics*, Kerrigan observes, “was impressed by the teleology of revenge plots, by their eye-for-eye attentiveness to lucid causal relations, while the social analyst of the *Nicomachean Ethics* found in their mutual violence an instructive obverse to that principle of benign reciprocity which he recommends in his writings about friendship.”⁷⁹ Not merely a classical preoccupation, the notion that “commutative justice also comprises and transcends the principle of revenge or simple reciprocity”⁸⁰ appears in early modern representations of vengeance as well. Since early modern revenge narratives “transmitted *structurally* notions of justice that are to be found in the ‘theoretical’ material of the time” – even in instances lacking “conscious collusion between the literary and the moral”⁸¹ – we have good cause, indeed, for thinking of justice in exchange as shaping the various forms of equivalent trade throughout the play. Moreover, since “revenge tragedy...deals in a conventionalized way with basic issues which everyday experience, socio-legal practice, and ethical speculation have made relevant,”⁸² it makes sense that *Titus Andronicus*, as a play that “repeatedly integrates contractual language with brutalized bodies,”⁸³ would transfer the prevailing constructs of Aristotelian exchange theory to its most violent acts. If Titus' brutal revenge – structured by a rational principle of social contract and functioning, thereby, as an altered

form of justice in exchange – strikes us as intensely dissonant, the strangeness of the notion, I would argue, derives from the very distance between ourselves and a culture deeply-rooted in Aristotelian ethical epistemology. The rather surprising substructure of moderation beneath the grotesque appearance of Titus’ revenge, however, emerges throughout each stage of the play’s denouement as Titus systematically repays, in kind, the pain inflicted upon the Andronici.

Notably, Titus exhibits his sense of equitability by creating proportionate exchange, an equivalent return, even in his method of vengeance, for since the crimes against his family take shape as, and during, a hunt, he likewise figures his revenge as a type of hunting. This is a remarkably clever turn, for, as A.C. Hamilton has noted, the hunting of Lavinia itself occurs as an inversion. “In the second act,” Hamilton explains, “the formal hunt of the panther and the deer which celebrates the marriages is inverted: the black panther is Aaron who hunts the deer, Lavinia, and the marriage celebration ends with the death of the bridegroom and the rape and savage mutilation of the bride.”⁸⁴ When Titus tells Marcus to “let alone,” he further employs the hunting trope to emphasize the importance of isolating Demetrius and Chiron – not unlike their singling of Lavinia from the Roman ladies:

But if you hunt these bear whelps, then beware:
The dam will wake, an if she wind ye once.
She’s with the lion deeply still in league,
And lulls him whilst she playeth on her back,
And when he sleeps will she do what she list. (4.1.96-100)

As Titus plans to isolate “these bear whelps” from their “dam,” he inverts the mechanics of the play’s most heinous crimes in order to create equivalency where he cannot obtain precise equality. Aaron had advised Tamora’s sons to separate Lavinia from the other

women in the woods, to “Single you there this dainty doe” (2.1.117), something Demetrius echoes to Chiron later: “we hunt not, we, with horse nor hound, / But hope to pluck a dainty doe to ground” (2.2.25-26). Tamora, unaware yet of the plot, also foreshadows a “double hunt” (2.3.19), and Marcus, relates his tragic discovery by explaining that he “found her straying in the park, / Seeking to hide herself, as doth the deer / That hath received some unrecuring wound” (3.1.88-90).⁸⁵ Creating an aesthetic proportion between *scelus* (or great crime) and retribution by transposing the roles of hunter and hunted in his revenge, Titus reveals again his characteristic sense of equitability while also seeking to return his city to a space ordered by fair exchange.⁸⁶

If Aristotle’s city “holds together” by “proportionate requital” and Saturninus’ Rome fractures from its habit of disproportionate return, Titus’ hunting the hunters and his family’s multivalent uses of consumption in their vengeance against Tamora, her sons, and Aaron reinstitutes an equivalency in exchange that returns order to the state. Not only does Titus’ revenge invert the strategic mechanism of dividing and conquering figured in the *scelus* but it also reacts to the play’s crimes through eternally (re)joining Tamora’s sons to her stomach. Whereas Demetrius and Chiron single Lavinia from the Roman women and divide her (in multiple ways), Titus divides the two sons from their mother and, in a single paste, returns them. Moreover, Titus, who received the heads of his two sons, grinds the heads of Tamora’s sons for her food. Titus confronts Demetrius and Chiron:

Hark, villains, I will grind your bones to dust,
And with your blood and it I’ll make a paste,
And of the paste a coffin I will rear,
And make two pasties of your shameful heads,
And bid that strumpet, your unhallowed dam,
Like to the earth, swallow her own increase.

This is the feast that I have bid her to,
And this the banquet she shall surfeit on... (5.2.187-93)

By “rear[ing]” a “coffin” with the bones of Tamora’s sons, entombing them in their “unhallowed dam,” Titus creates a sharp counterpoint to his interment of his own sons in the “sacred receptacle” (1.1.95) of his “father’s reverend tomb” (2.4.296). Imagining his revenge as a pious rite of sorts, Titus inters Demetrius and Chiron in a manner symbolic of their worldly lives, something Lucius likewise does to Tamora’s and Aaron’s bodies at the play’s end. Moreover, whereas Titus understands that the tomb will close his sons off to him forever (“thou wilt never render to me more” [1.1.98]), Tamora will forever have too much of her sons with her.⁸⁷ Titus had planned to return “these mischiefs...even in their throats that hath committed them,” and he both cuts the throats of Tamora’s sons and ensures she swallows their remains. In this grotesque reshaping of Titus’ piety, Shakespeare creates a type of proportion, an enactment of equivalent exchange,⁸⁸ that retains the sense of equilibrium figured in the earlier civic contract of Rome. In an ungrateful city, Titus reinstitutes proportionate return through revenge.

As Titus fittingly inverts the crimes against his family, the punishment of Aaron (who himself functions throughout the play as inverse of the normative) likewise takes on a sense of equivalent exchange, revealing the thoroughness of the Andronici’s translated ethic of moderation and proportionate return. Aaron represents the most extreme inversion of traditional piety, but he also functions structurally to foreshadow (fittingly, in reverse) the justice about to be enacted by Titus. Before Titus’ revenge, Publius commands of Tamora’s sons, “Stop close their mouths, let them not speak a word” (5.2.164), a sentiment which Titus reiterates not once but twice (“Sirs, stop their mouths, let them not speak to me” [ll. 167] and “What would you say if I should let you speak? /

Villains, for shame you could not beg for grace” [ll. 178-79]). This silencing of one’s victim mimics Tamora’s “I will not hear her speak, away with her!” (2.3.137) and also forces the sons into the mute pleaders they themselves had made Lavinia. But it also recalls by contrast the scene immediately prior where Lucius *invites* exposition of Aaron. “Say on, and if it please me which thou speak’st, / Thy child shall live,” says Lucius, who again urges Aaron to “Tell on thy mind” (5.1.59-60, 69). Even in defeat Aaron functions as antithesis to the normative. Indeed, just as he foreshadows by inversion Demetrius and Chiron’s fate, he likewise anticipates, again in relief, Tamora’s demise. Whereas Tamora eats to the point of surfeit and Demetrius and Chiron speak no further words, Aaron, in his punishment, will consume nothing and yet speak fully. While Shakespeare describes Aaron, like Tamora, as a “ravenous tiger” (5.3.5), he also depicts the Moor as a *producer* of evil, in addition to being a consumer of good. Thus, “this execrable wretch” (ll. 177) and “breeder of these dire events” (ll. 178) who loosed misery on the Andronici must himself waste in an earthy pit: “Set him breast-deep in earth, and famish him. / There let him stand and rave and cry for food” (ll. 179-80). Aaron, who operates largely uninhibited after Tamora’s incorporation, must be “fastened in the earth” (ll. 183), a phrase that simultaneously evokes the idea of fixing in place and, playing off its root word “fast,” depriving of food. In contrast to Tamora, who must, like the earth, swallow her own increase, Aaron must consume nothing and instead be swallowed himself. At once ravenous and execrable, Aaron starves even as he feeds the earth.⁸⁹

As the social order of Rome disintegrates with the dissolution of the equivalent exchange found in gratitude, the proportionate return figured in Titus’ revenge, while gruesomely enacted, serves as a type of moderation in extreme circumstances and

restores graciousness and equality to Rome.⁹⁰ The restoration of order, imbued with the language of proportionality and the mean, concludes with the contrast between Aaron's extreme anti-piety and Lucius' moderate – if to some problematic – valuation of events. The ensconcing of Lucius in power replaces the ingratitude that marred the play with a new antithesis, namely, "Rome's gracious governor" (ll. 146).⁹¹ With the restoration of graciousness – a condition where, to recall Aristotle, people repay "good for good...evil for evil" – Marcus invokes the rhetoric of proportion rendering "tear for tear, and loving kiss for kiss" and even shapes the excessive image of infinite grief into something mathematically reasonable, a ratio meet and proper to his debt: "O, were the sum of these that I should pay / Countless and infinite, yet would I pay them" (ll. 158-59). The return of an equitable society makes Marcus' speech appropriate to the circumstance. Lucius, proving himself the "gracious governor," honors the dead emperor's status, orders him interred "in his father's grave" by "loving friends," but commands Tamora's body to be thrown "forth to beasts and birds to prey" (ll. 191-92, 198). Recreating a type of consumption of like by like, the new emperor enacts a just exchange by returning the brute-like to the brutes, since "her life was beastly and devoid of pity, / And being dead, let birds on her take pity!" (ll. 199-200). Interestingly, Lucius leaves this "ravenous tiger" to the beasts and birds of prey but only figures the birds – not the beasts – as taking pity, underscoring on the play's final note that even the beastly consume their own in a type of fitting justice. With the return of a state characterized by gratitude, the traditional piety that dispatches Romans to family tombs and foreign barbarians to the wilds and the disinterested earth also returns.⁹²

Titus Andronicus prompts us to contemplate the moral ambiguities and the sense of shared culpabilities distributed between Roman and Goth that permeate its central narrative. But the Aristotelian framework to the play also invites us to consider ethical value as not only variable but also discernible, if only faintly so, in part through its persistent appeal to equity. Shakespeare's play creates an enduring sense that equity does, in fact, exist – even if its precise location may be contested. For even during the cataclysmic shifts that unsettle Rome, gratitude consistently functions, whether positively in its application or negatively in its neglect, as the final standard for action, something which Romans and Goths alike acknowledge. The unethical extremes of Saturninus' and Tamora's Rome radically re-contextualize Titus and create a milieu that requires a corrective response proportionate to the surrounding immoderation. Within its context and given its preoccupation with equity, Titus' revenge appears grotesque yet justifiably within the range of measured behavior. Indeed, Titus' just response to Rome's excesses reveals that the ethical person must simultaneously identify and resist extremes in order to find the mean – even if following such median behavior might resonate as extreme under ordinary circumstances. As a site at once absolute and intuited, concomitantly threatened yet defined by extremity, the mean, as *Titus* reminds us, continually requires identification and revision, requires, in short, a perpetual process of fixing moderation.

¹ Frederick S. Boas, *Shakspeare and His Predecessors*, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1896), 138; Edward Ravenscroft, *Titus Andronicus, or the Rape of Lavinia*, (1687), sig. A2; T.S. Eliot, "Seneca in Elizabethan Translation," *Selected Essays, 1917-1932*, (London, 1932), 82. Dover Wilson, likewise, describes the play "some broken-down cart, laden with bleeding corpses" (*Titus Andronicus*, ed. J. Dover Wilson, [Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1948], xii). Arguing against such critiques of the play, A.C. Hamilton cites both Wilson and Eliot and notes that "One word may sum up the reasons for

rejecting this play: *excess*” (“*Titus Andronicus*: The Form of Shakespearian Tragedy,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 14 [1963]: 201).

² On the uses of Roman history and culture in *Titus*, see Coppélia Kahn, *Roman Shakespeare: Warriors, Wounds, and Women*, (New York: Routledge, 1997), Naomi Conn Liebler, “Getting It All Right: *Titus Andronicus* and Roman History,” *SQ* 45 (1994): 263-78, Vivian Thomas, *Shakespeare’s Roman Worlds*, (New York: Routledge, 1989), Robert S. Miola, *Shakespeare’s Rome*, (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1983) and “*Titus Andronicus* and the Mythos of Shakespeare’s Rome,” *Shakespeare Studies* 14 (1981): 85-98, and T.J.B. Spencer, “Shakespeare and the Elizabethan Romans,” *Shakespeare Survey* 10 (1957): 27-38.

³ David Lines, *Aristotle’s Ethics in the Italian Renaissance (ca. 1300-1650): The Universities and the Problem of Moral Education*, (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2002), 79.

⁴ Charles B. Schmitt, “Aristotle’s Ethics in the Sixteenth Century: Some Preliminary Considerations,” in *The Aristotelian Tradition and Renaissance Universities*, (London: Variorum Reprints, 1984), 87-112, esp. 94 (nonsequential pagination).

⁵ Lines, 78.

⁶ Charles B. Schmitt, *John Case and Aristotelianism in Renaissance England*, (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s UP, 1983), 26-7.

⁷ Schmitt, “Aristotle’s Ethics,” 89-90.

⁸ Schmitt, *John Case*, 24.

⁹ For a brief but suggestive study on the influence of the *Nicomachean Ethics* on Shakespeare, see W.R. Elton’s “Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* and Shakespeare’s *Troilus and Cressida*,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 58 (1997): 331-37. See also John Wasson’s “‘Measure for Measure’: A Play of Incontinence,” *ELH* 27 (1960): 262-75.

¹⁰ Jesse M. Lander, “‘Crack’d Crowns’ and Counterfeit Sovereigns: The Crisis of Value in *1 Henry IV*,” *Shakespeare Studies* 30 (2002): 137-61, esp. 138, 143.

¹¹ Lander, 138, 143, 146.

¹² Jonathan Gil Harris, *Sick Economies: Drama, Mercantilism, and Disease in Shakespeare’s England*, (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 2004), 93. On the crisis of economic value and its relation to the stage, see also Gil Harris, 82-107.

¹³ Gil Harris, 84-5.

¹⁴ Gil Harris, 85.

¹⁵ On early modern semiotics of race and the “the stereotype as the one reliable measure of difference, the one stable and unambiguous sign of Otherness within a ‘wilderness’ of meanings” in *Titus*, see Emily Bartels, “Making More of the Moor: Aaron, Othello, and Renaissance Refashionings of Race,” *SQ* 41 (1990): 433-54, esp. 442. Bartels notes that even though “the play creates a chaos in which distinctions between right and wrong, insider and outsider, self and other are problematically obscured” Aaron’s body remains a consistent marker of value.

¹⁶ For a discussion on early modern religious difference and *Titus*, see Nicholas R. Moschovakis, “‘Irreligious Piety’ and Christian History: Persecution as Pagan Anachronism in *Titus Andronicus*,” *SQ* 53 (2002): 460-86, esp. 473.

¹⁷ A.N. McLaren, *Political Culture in the Reign of Elizabeth I: Queen and Commonwealth 1558-1585*, (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999), 230.

¹⁸ On the mean's indeterminate nature, see Joshua Scodel, *Excess and the Mean in Early Modern English Literature*, (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2002), esp. 1-11; see also J.O. Urmsen, "Aristotle's Doctrine of the Mean," *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics*, ed. Amélie Oksenberg Rorty, (Berkeley: U of California P, 1980), 157-170. On Aristotle's rejection of ethical relativism, or subjectivism, see Richard Kraut, *Aristotle: Political Philosophy*, (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002), esp. 20-49.

¹⁹ See Aristotle, 37-43, esp. 40. All quotes come from *The Nicomachean Ethics of Aristotle*, trans. Sir David Ross, (London: Oxford UP, 1972).

²⁰ Sarah Broadie, *Ethics with Aristotle*, (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1991), 99.

²¹ On Aristotle's taxonomy of justice, see D. D. Raphael, *Concepts of Justice*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), 43-55.

²² 111.

²³ 112.

²⁴ 115.

²⁵ 115.

²⁶ 115.

²⁷ For perhaps the most cogent discussion of justice in exchange as "a distinct, third form of justice," see Lindsay Judson, "Aristotle on Fair Exchange," *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, ed. C.C.W. Taylor, vol. 15, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 147-75, esp. 147-49. On justice in exchange (also called "commutative justice" and "reciprocity") as a subset of rectificatory (or "corrective"), justice, but still one that seeks "'correction' of a social imbalance" that need not be economic in nature, see also Gabriel Danzig, "The Political Character of Aristotelian Reciprocity," *Classical Philology*, 95 (2000): 399-424, esp. 401. On justice in exchange as central to early modern theories of social contract, see Lynn Johnson, "Friendship, Coercion, and Interest: Debating the Foundations of Justice in Early Modern England," *Journal of Early Modern History* 8 (2004): 46-64. For the relevance of justice in exchange to early modern narratives of revenge, see Ullrich Langer, "The Renaissance Novella as Justice," *Renaissance Quarterly* 52 (1999): 311-41, esp. 315-7.

²⁸ 117-18.

²⁹ 118.

³⁰ 118.

³¹ Early modern political theorists, sometimes explicitly citing Aristotelian theories of commutative justice, commented on the function of grace, or gratitude, in mediating social contracts. See, for example, Niccolò Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield and Nathan Tarcov, (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1996): 63-68 and Thomas Hobbes, "Chap. XV. Of other Lawes of Nature," *Leviathan*, ed. Richard Tuck, (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997): 100-111.

³² 100.

³³ 101.

³⁴ 101, emphasis added.

³⁵ 103.

³⁶ All quotes come from *Titus Andronicus*, ed. Russ McDonald, (New York: Penguin, 2000).

³⁷ On Aristotle's critique of Solon, see T.H. Irwin, "Permanent Happiness: Aristotle and Solon," *Aristotle's Ethics: Critical Essays*, ed. Nancy Sherman, (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 1999), 1-33.

³⁸ 19.

³⁹ Aristotle argues that "the happy man can never become miserable – though he will not reach *blessedness*, if he meet with fortunes like those of Priam" (21).

⁴⁰ Aristotle concludes somewhat imprecisely that "The good or bad fortunes of friends, then, seem to have some effects on the dead, but effects of such a kind and degree as neither to make the happy unhappy nor to produce any other change of the kind" (23).

⁴¹ On the mixed ideologies and self-interest of the claimants compared to Titus' role as "ethical icon," see Gail Kern Paster, *The Idea of the City in the Age of Shakespeare*, (Athens: U of Georgia P, 1985), 58-60.

⁴² "*Suum cuique* is our Roman justice," notes Marcus (1.1.283); even Aaron invokes the thought when he declares, "I am of age / To keep mine own" (4.2.104-5). On "Marcus [as] citing the standard formula for distributive justice developed in classical writings on ethics, jurisprudence, and the law from Aristotle onwards," see also, Andrew Hadfield, "'Suum Cuique': Natural Law in *Titus Andronicus*, I.i.284," *Notes and Queries* 52 (2005): 195.

⁴³ 113.

⁴⁴ See also Andrew Hadfield, "Shakespeare and republicanism: history and cultural materialism," *Textual Practice* 17 (2003): 461-483, esp. 470-77.

⁴⁵ On the close relationship between friendship and justice, see Stephen G. Salkever, *Finding the Mean: Theory and Practice in Aristotelian Political Philosophy*, (Princeton, Princeton UP, 1990), 242-4; see also Johnson, 46-64, esp. 50-61.

⁴⁶ On the tensions inherent in this *unilateral* decision to *decline* power, see also Sid Ray, "'Rape, I fear, was root of thy annoy': The Politics of Consent in *Titus Andronicus*," *SQ* 49 (1998): 31-33.

⁴⁷ My reading of Titus as sympathetic and noble even in the sacrifice of Alarbus runs counter to most critiques of the play that agree, if with qualifications, with Tamora's valuation that the deed is simply "cruel irreligious piety." On the speciousness of Tamora's overall argument, however, see Jane Hiles, "A Margin for Error: Rhetorical Context in *Titus Andronicus*," *Titus Andronicus: Critical Essays*, ed. Philip C. Kolin, (New York: Garland Publishing, 1995), 233-47, esp. 233-38.

⁴⁸ 115.

⁴⁹ See also Deborah Willis, "'The gnawing vulture': Revenge, Trauma Theory, and *Titus Andronicus*," *SQ*, 53 (2002): 21-52, esp. 35. The play does not specify precisely how many Andronici were killed by the Goths. However, no one countermands Titus' assumption of a correlation between the current war and his sons' deaths – not even Tamora, who builds her plea for Alarbus on the same predicate, namely, that her sons were merely "fight[ing] for king and commonweal" (1.1.117). A broadside ballad (ca. 1655-65) entitled "The Lamentable and Tragical History of *Titus Andronicus*" likewise picks up the same implication in its subtitle "With the fall of his five and twenty Sons in the Wars of Goths" (reprinted in John Kerrigan, *Revenge Tragedy: Aeschylus to Armageddon*, [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996], following page 112).

⁵⁰ Lavinia pleads, “O, let me teach thee for my father’s sake, / That gave thee life when well he might have slain thee” (2.3.158-59).

⁵¹ Rectificatory justice “can be manifested only by someone who is acting in a judicial or quasi-judicial capacity” J. O. Urmson, *Aristotle’s Ethics*, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), 76.

⁵² Here I share a predicate yet opposing conclusion with Robert Miola’s reading that “Because the Roman family appears as the basic unit of the city, Titus’s attack on Mutius is an attack on Rome itself” (*Shakespeare’s Rome*, 50). Mutius’ standing in Titus’ way, sword drawn and threat given, *before* Titus does anything towards him, I suggest, threatens the city itself.

⁵³ Aristotelianism argues that dedication to the common good is fundamentally more aligned with justice than self-gratification. Aristotle “maintain[s] that if something is conducive to the common interest, it is also just, and vice versa” Thomas I. White, “Aristotle and *Utopia*,” *RQ* 29 (1976): 635-75, esp. 657.

⁵⁴ On gratitude as a “value which remains strong in all the Roman plays,” see Vivian Thomas, 32. On the breakdown of gratitude as “integrating force” in *Titus*, see also Eugene Waith, “The Metamorphosis of Violence in *Titus Andronicus*” in Kolin, ed., 99-113, esp. 106.

⁵⁵ Aristotle, 121.

⁵⁶ Aaron also observes that “Upon her wit doth earthly honor wait” (2.1.10).

⁵⁷ See also Willis, 39-40.

⁵⁸ Moreover, since “the forest walks” have “many unfrequented plots...fitted by kind for rape and villainy” and “the woods are ruthless, dreadful, deaf, and dull” (2.1.114-16, 128), the conspirators with their victims remain secure from intrusion.

⁵⁹ On Aaron’s insatiable villainy, see his “confession” at (5.1.124-44).

⁶⁰ 173.

⁶¹ 96.

⁶² 97.

⁶³ 97.

⁶⁴ 97.

⁶⁵ 98.

⁶⁶ 98.

⁶⁷ The degree of selfishness or selflessness exhibited by Titus here has been a point of contention among critics. On Titus as exhibiting, for example, “a fantasy of perfect visual understanding, a Lear-like scene of mutual narcissism,” see Katherine A. Rowe, “Dismembering and Forgetting in *Titus Andronicus*,” *SQ* 45(1994): 295. On Titus’ interpretation of Lavinia as “both the occasion and the expression of his madness, *his* inner state,” even while he “acknowledges the integrity and otherness of Lavinia’s experience and intentions,” see also Douglass Green, “Interpreting ‘her martyr’d signs’: Gender and Tragedy in *Titus Andronicus*,” *SQ* 40 (1989): 317-26, esp. 322-24. Despite his notable capacity for both solipsism and misinterpretation, however, Titus nonetheless responds (given his circumstances) in a *manner* neither hurried nor laborious, neither excessively emotive nor dispassionate, exhibiting thereby a temperance of anger often overlooked. For Titus as attentive, deliberative, and even “fixated on [Lavinia’s] grief and physical suffering,” see Willis, 42-3.

⁶⁸ J.O. Urmson observes that “the doctrine of the mean does not require the doctrine of moderation” (“Doctrine of the Mean,” 162).

⁶⁹ Francesca T. Royster’s concise articulation of Marcus as moderating force may be considered representative: “Moderation and restraint were to Elizabethans the quintessential Roman virtues...[N]obility was assumed to express itself in ‘continence’ or self-restraint. When Titus is running to rhetorical extremes...his brother gives him good Roman advice...Significantly, Titus refuses to restrain himself or observe moderation...In a culture that values moderation, it is appropriately lack of moderation which provokes disasters” (“White-limed Walls: Whiteness and Gothic Extremism in Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus*,” *SQ* 51:4 [2000]: 440). See also, Maurice Charney, *Titus Andronicus*, (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990), 46-61.

⁷⁰ On these lines as “elaborate and laboured comparisons... confused, ineffective, inconsistent, and end[ing] in...really unpardonable lines,” see H. Bellyse Baildon, “How *Titus Andronicus* Looks Forward to Shakespeare’s Later Plays” in Kolin, ed., 65-73, esp. 65.

⁷¹ Rowe, 296.

⁷² Katherine Rowe observes that “Though Saturninus had not welcomed his gifts in the opening scene, Titus imagines his dismemberment as a second gift-exchange. But, as becomes clear from its literal deconstruction, the language of lending and giving lacks political force in Rome...[T]he tableau [of the severed heads] dramatizes not only the actual severance of political contract but the fact that Titus’s ‘victorious hand’ had never effected political contract in the first place” (293).

⁷³ Gillian Murray Kendall, “‘Lend Me Thy Hand’: Metaphor and Mayhem in *Titus Andronicus*,” *SQ* 40 (1989): 302.

⁷⁴ My reading of a more equitable, communally-aware Titus is not meant to suggest he operates entirely altruistically, wholly devoid of self-interest. But, as with his earlier reactions to his family’s trauma, however solipsistic Titus may occasionally appear, he consistently exhibits a discernible ethos of equanimity, or proportion, as well as an awareness of (and a degree of attention to) the suffering of others. Indeed, Titus’ personal investment in retribution makes both his repeated claims to proportionate return and his invocations of the wrongs done to others all the more notable, I think, for their measured equanimity.

⁷⁵ Although Marcus joins Titus in shooting arrows into the city, he evidently sees it as part of Titus’ madness (“O Publius, is not this a heavy case, / To see thy noble uncle thus distract?” [4.3.25-26]). Also, Shakespeare emphasizes Marcus’s detachment from Titus’ revenge by having Titus dispatch him to Lucius *immediately* before Titus abducts Tamora’s sons (5.2.134-36).

⁷⁶ 117.

⁷⁷ 117.

⁷⁸ In addition to the other immutable crimes against the Andronici, Lavinia’s wound is “unrecuring” (3.1.90): that is, both incurable and unique.

⁷⁹ Kerrigan, 5. Aristotelian reciprocity, or justice in exchange, we should recall, however, is not *merely* benign in itself. As noted earlier, Aristotle argues that “For it is by proportionate requital that the city holds together. Men seek to return either evil for evil – and if they cannot do so, think their position mere slavery – or good for good – and if

they cannot do so there is no exchange, but it is by exchange that they hold together” (118). Built into the original Aristotelian formulation, retribution can (and does) function itself *as* a type of justice in exchange.

⁸⁰ Langer, 317.

⁸¹ Langer, 339-40.

⁸² Ronald Broude, “Revenge and Revenge Tragedy in Renaissance England,” *RQ* 28 (1975): 47.

⁸³ Thomas P. Anderson, “‘What is Written Shall Be Executed’: ‘Nude Contracts’ and ‘Lively Warrants’ in *Titus Andronicus*,” *Criticism* 45 (2003): 310.

⁸⁴ 207.

⁸⁵ Lavinia herself, with an unknowingly dark irony, describes Tamora and Aaron in similar language, for they are “singled forth to try experiments. / Jove shield your husband from his hounds today!” (2.3.69-70).

⁸⁶ See also Willis, 48-9.

⁸⁷ Coppélia Kahn adumbrates this affiliation by equating Lavinia’s womb with the tomb and Tamora’s stomach with Lavinia’s womb. On the first parallel, Kahn argues, “Like the daughter’s virginal womb, [the tomb] is a receptacle, an enclosed cell, that stores up the joy and sweetness of successive generations... The daughter’s womb is intended to produce sons for the state; the father’s tomb keeps them ‘in store’...” (52). Regarding the second parallel, Kahn argues that Tamora “attacked his progeny by supervising the murder of his sons and, more cruelly, the rape of his daughter; she raided his treasury and mocked the sign of his power, his chaste daughter. Now he insults her womb (the word also means stomach), the site of her power, by making her ‘swallow her own increase’ (5.2.191)” (70).

⁸⁸ Titus further emphasizes the use of like against like in his words to the three Goths. To Demetrius, he says “when thou finds’t a man that’s like thyself, / Good Murder, stab him; he’s a murderer;” to Chiron, he urges, “...find another like to thee, / Good Rapine, stab him; he’s a ravisher;” and to Tamora, he says “well shalt thou know her by thine own proportion” (5.2.99-106).

⁸⁹ See also Bartels, 447.

⁹⁰ Harry Keyishian observes that “When Rome’s system of mutually beneficial, reciprocal relations was disrupted, Titus restored it by imposing a symmetry of harm for harm.” (*The Shapes of Revenge: Victimization, Vengeance, and Vindictiveness in Shakespeare*, [Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1995], 48).

⁹¹ Despite skepticism about the Andronici’s claim to piety, Robert Miola views Lucius as “a man capable of wise leadership” (*Shakespeare’s Rome*, 69).

⁹² See also Paster, 84.

“A fine pate full of fine dirt:” *Hamlet* and the Atomists

If, as T.S. Eliot famously observed, John Webster shows us “the skull beneath the skin,”¹ in *Hamlet*, Shakespeare reveals the dirt beneath the skull. Invoked rhetorically in the “quintessence of dust” (2.2.278) and materialized as stage property in the graveyard scene as a “fine pate full of fine dirt” (5.1.101), *Hamlet*’s preoccupation with the particular – literally, the particles that compose the whole – attempts to get at the problem of ontological coherence by attending to the miniscule, fragmentary, and divided.² Moreover, the play’s interest in conceptual division remains consistently bound to its fascination with how the material – however constituted – *moves*. Thus, while Gertrude cautions her son against seeking “for thy noble father in the dust,” (1.2.71), Hamlet nonetheless will follow the “old mole” and “worthy pioner” that can “work i’ th’ earth so fast” (1.5.165-6) and will, also in the graveyard scene, use “imagination [to] trace the noble dust of Alexander,” a process he repeats for Caesar and one he describes as a type of “follow[ing]” (5.1.193,197).³ In *Hamlet*, material motion becomes the focus of both empirical and imaginative inquiry, and Hamlet’s epistemology emerges, in ways that might well surprise us, from a certain embracing of, even delight in, matter, its variability, and the physical void through which the material moves.

Hamlet’s delight in matter, motion, and vacuity seems on one level counterintuitive, for a substantial critical tradition has represented the protagonist as invariably repulsed by the material (particularly the corporeal), as predominantly static himself, and as deeply disturbed by the uncertainties wrought by gaps in knowledge, by “things standing thus unknown” (5.2.329).⁴ Contrary to most readings of *Hamlet* that claim the protagonist inveterately despises matter, I contend that Hamlet draws a type of

comfort from, even occasionally revels in, the material and repudiates instead the particular uses to which matter may be put. *Hamlet*, I will argue, takes up late sixteenth-century atomist thought, infuses it with a theistic teleology (anticipating in this way seventeenth-century religious atomists such as John Donne and Robert Boyle), and retains, thereby, atomism's materialist underpinnings while rejecting its atheism and Epicureanism.⁵ *Hamlet*, I argue, depicts (a) the universe as composed of particles, (b) knowledge of the imperceptible as attainable through the imaginative parsing of observable experience, (c) matter as dissolvable and capable of reconstitution, (d) motion as revelatory of hidden motive, and (e) time as a *physical* phenomenon capable of being both "out of joint" and "set...right" (1.5.191-2). In each of these points, the atomist philosophy informing Shakespeare's most famous play emphasizes the reassuring qualities of the material. Thus, indestructible matter yields an ontological stability underlying all apparent flux; physical dissolution still admits a type of continual existence; the close scrutiny of material motions – despite protestations to the contrary – renders hidden motives knowable; and history, rather than merely immutable, allows for its own reshaping. In all these respects, moreover, *Hamlet* draws from atomism an interest in countering the epistemological void with a physical one. For the existence of particles, the parsing of nature, the dissolution and reconstitution of matter, the tracing of motive, and the creation of a material history are all made conceptually possible by the theory of empty space, a theory that enables matter not only to move but also to be separated, interpreted, and altered. This chapter recuperates *Hamlet*'s indebtedness to atomism, then, in order to show how matter's motion functions throughout the play as a means to render knowable both hidden motive and obfuscated history. Rather than

simply treating external forms as deceptive, *Hamlet*, by translating the epistemics of materialist philosophy to the courses of human interaction, depicts the traceable phenomenon of matter's motion as revelatory, as yielding knowledge regarding the (otherwise) imperceptible and inaccessible .

I. Atomist Philosophy in Early Seventeenth-Century England

While atomism's philosophy of matter accords well with *Hamlet*'s representation of the body as dust and of the close inspection of motion as revelatory, atomism's affiliation with Epicureanism and atheism makes it seem an unlikely influence on a character who rails against Claudius' drunken revels and trusts a "divinity that shapes our ends" (5.2.10). Yet the philosophy's multivalence invites such uneasy engagements. First postulated by Democritus and Leucippus and most fully articulated in Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura*, atomism posits that indivisible, microscopic particles compose everything in existence, a theory of prime matter that argues all form and motion emerge from the rearrangement of imperceptible motes.⁶ Though indivisible, imperceptible, and immutable in itself, the atom so conceived invites the imaginative parsing of matter, the tracing of seemingly unaccountable transformations of form, and the study of material dissolution and reconstitution. Indeed, Lucretius's argument originates with such an epistemology as he works backwards from observable phenomena to the true nature of the miniscule. Corollary to this materialist philosophy – at least in the Lucretian model – is the repudiation of divine influence. Lucretius predicates his theory on the absence of the supernatural, declaring that "our starting point will be this principle: Nothing can ever be created by divine power out of nothing" (31).⁷ The atomist maxim that "out of nothing came nothing" not only obviates theistic belief, then, but also, in its materialist

emphasis, articulates a doctrine incompatible with the creation of the world *ex nihilo*. Moreover, atomism's privileging of the material further aligns the philosophy with an Epicurean emphasis on sensory perception and pleasure, an affiliation that would effectively ensure its scandalous reputation in early modern English thought. A philosophy of matter intriguing in its account of form and motion yet disturbing in its metaphysical and ethical implications, atomism would become a contested quantity for early modern authors.

Prominent in ancient philosophy, hidden "beneath a veil of almost total obscurity" in medieval thought,⁸ and revived in late seventeenth-century scientific circles, atomism elicited both vigorous opposition and circumspect interest in late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century England.⁹ Thomas Harriot, for example, "adopted the atomic philosophy in mathematics and physics" yet remained "loath to give full expression to views which would mark him as politically or theologically unorthodox" since "his atomism, deriving as it did from the ancient pagan materialists, was naturally considered unacceptable."¹⁰ Walter Warner, Harriot's collaborator, wrote copiously in private yet published little while seeking to systematize atomism's methodologies. Other proponents of atomism such as Daniel Sennert and Nicholas Hill remained largely unscathed by their affiliation with the philosophy, in part by attempting to synthesize its central tenets with Aristotelianism.¹¹ While the discreetly interested downplayed their engagement with atomism for fear of being charged with unorthodoxy, critics of the philosophy such as Robert Greville, Edward Herbert, and Sir Kenelm Digby expressed, even in their refutations, interest in some of the school's underlying theories.¹² Ben Jonson, likewise, mocked "all those atomi ridiculous / Whereof old Democrite and Hill Nicholas / One

said, the other swore, the world consists,”¹³ yet owned and “heavily marked up a Dutch edition of *De Rerum Natura*.”¹⁴ While Jonson exhibited a notably conflicted response to atomism, Shakespeare, who “had access to Lucretius through Montaigne,”¹⁵ twice alluded to atomist philosophy in *As You Like It*. Spenser likewise appropriated Lucretius for use in *The Faerie Queene*, suggesting that the theory evoked genuine, if still cautious, curiosity. While atomist thought would gradually attain a level of respectability in the late seventeenth-century, such acceptance emerged from a prolonged process of synthesizing materialist thought with more orthodox philosophies.¹⁶

Despite its contested reception in England, atomism would be conflated with theistic philosophy in the works of Robert Boyle and Pierre Gassendi later in the seventeenth-century,¹⁷ and we see movement towards this synthesis in the works of such earlier authors as Giordano Bruno, Francis Bacon, and John Donne. Approaching atomist philosophy through the tradition of Democritus, “Bruno...[and]...almost all subsequent atomists were in one way or another to criticize the implausibility, explanatory poverty, and impiety of Greek atomism”¹⁸ even as they were pursuing its theory of matter. Such criticism emerged not simply as the reactionary attempt to quell atheism, however, but rather as a natural corollary to adopting atomist material principles within a culture shaped by Christian theology. Indeed, “in the last decade of the sixteenth-century...we find Democritean atomism all of a sudden held up as a powerful scientific model,” as part of the “development of atomic modeling” and “of corpuscularian matter theory” prominent among writers who professed theistic beliefs.¹⁹ Francis Bacon, whose early writings reveal an interest in atomist thought, “became one of the earliest in England to attempt to ‘purify’ the atomic doctrine and make it acceptable

as a natural philosophy.”²⁰ Arguing that atomism remains more compatible with theism than the reigning elemental theory, Bacon asserts in his essay “Of Atheism” that:

[E]ven that Schoole, which is most accused of Atheisme, doth most demonstrate Religion; That is, the Schoole of Leucippus, and Democritus, and Epicurus. For it is a thousand times more Credible, that foure Mutable Elements, and one Immutable Fift [sic] Essence, duly and Eternally placed, need no God; then that an Army, of Infinite small Portions or Seedes unplaced, should have produced this Order, and Beauty without a Divine Marshall.²¹

The impulse to reject the impious implications while preserving the theoretical postulates of atomism likewise finds expression through John Donne, who held personal contacts with the Northumberland group, owned atomist texts, and wrote of the world as “crumbled out again to his atomies.”²² Donne’s simultaneous interest in atomist philosophy and adherence to theistic belief anticipates Boyle by decades but further suggests (in addition to Bruno and Bacon) that such conflation was thinkable earlier in the century. Perhaps more importantly for our purposes here, Donne indicates that a synthesis between Christian teleology and atomist materiality proved fruitful within a literary context.

Atomism’s purchase with Donne – and, I will argue, with *Hamlet* as well – derives, in part, from its reassuring theory of matter’s indestructibility and capacity for recomposition after dissolution, its promising permanence amid impermanence.²³ Figuring a world where solid mass resolves itself into other forms, Lucretius states that he “will reveal those *atoms* from which nature creates all things and increases and feeds them and into which, when they perish, nature again resolves them” (28). Claiming humanity “know[s] nothing of the nature of the spirit” (30), Lucretius eschews offering an account of the soul but avers that “nature resolves everything into its component atoms and never reduces anything to nothing” (33). “Visible objects,” he argues, “therefore do

not perish utterly, since nature repairs one thing from another and allows nothing to be born without the aid of another's death" (35). While disavowing the supernatural in favor of a wholly materialist philosophy, Lucretius retains a type of eternal existence through matter that will never "perish utterly."²⁴ Recognizing that his reader might become "mistrustful of my words because these atoms of mine are not visible to the eye," Lucretius adduces wind and erosion as phenomena that signal the movement of imperceptible particles (35). Wind flows like water, suggesting that "winds have invisible bodies, since in their actions and behavior they are found to rival great rivers, whose bodies are plain to see" (36). Even erosion, a process so gradual that it "eludes the most attentive scrutiny of our eyes," suggests that "nature works through the agency of invisible bodies" (37). Just as the observable world suggests the existence of atoms, for Lucretius, the *continuation* of this world points to their indivisibility. He reasons that "the particles of matter in the course of ages would have been ground so small that nothing could be generated from them so as to attain in the fullness of time to the summit of its growth" (43). This prime matter, intuited by deductive parsing of the observable yet nonetheless ultimately indivisible in itself, consistently remains. Theorizing a solid and resolvable materiality capable of reconstitution, Lucretian atomism asserts the perpetual presence of undying matter as a source of ontological stability, a grounding as it were, amid fluctuations in form.

In order to account for the various permutations of form, Lucretius radically posits the existence of empty space, or vacuity, a theory that admits the motion of matter, renders material movement traceable, and counters, thereby, the epistemological void by establishing a physical one. Lucretius' theory that empty space does, in fact, exist stands

in stark contrast to those of his predecessors, for it retains the notion of prime matter while providing a more consistent account of motion. Non-Lucretian monists had argued against a theory of the void by claiming that prime matter must exist everywhere, including apparently empty space (for, surely, space must be *something*). Movement, according to this theory, must only happen, therefore, with the prior shifting of other matter.²⁵ The motion of one object, for example, requires all the ethereal prime matter (appearing as empty space) to move out of its way first, an arrangement that begs the question of limits, since for *that* matter to move, other matter must move first as well – *ad infinitum*. Lucretius argues, however, that space can, indeed, be nothing: the void exists as the mere absence of matter and not a secondary substance in its own right. He retains, thereby, both the integrity of prime matter as a concept and the theoretical space prerequisite for true movement. Asserting “there is vacuity in things” and clarifying that “by vacuity I mean intangible and empty space,” Lucretius argues that if such space:

did not exist, things could not move at all. For the distinctive action of matter, which is counter action and obstruction would be in force always and everywhere. Nothing could proceed, because nothing would give it a starting point by receding...If there were no empty space, these things would be denied the power of restless movement...embedded, as they would have been in motionless matter. (37)

He concludes, “There are thus only two alternatives: either all bodies are devoid of movement, or you must admit that things contain an admixture of vacuity whereby each is enabled to make the first move” (38). Central to ancient atomism and compelling to early modern thinkers, the theory of the void permits matter’s motion, constructs a material world capable of dissection, and promises knowledge beyond the limits of immediate perception by allowing the reconstruction of antecedent movements based on observable trajectories.

The movement of atoms enabled by such theorizing of empty space, moreover, gives rise to a very real type of material history in Lucretius, for what we think of as “having happened” is actually an accident of the motion of atoms, a residual impression made by changes occurring in a particular locale or space. Lucretius argues that “Time by itself does not exist; but from things themselves there results a sense of what has already taken place, what is going on, and what is to ensue. It must not be claimed that anyone can sense time by itself apart from the movement of things or their restful immobility” (41). A function of atomic movement, time emerges quite literally from place, “for we could put it that whatever has taken place is an accident of a particular tract of earth or of the space it occupied” (41). For Lucretius, “accidents” denote “things whose advent or departure leaves the essence of a thing intact,” a concept that stands in opposition to “properties,” or characteristics that “cannot be detached or separated from a thing without destroying it,” such as weight to rocks or heat to fire (40). If history and time exist as accidents of matter’s motion, then such conceptual categories emerge as by-products of the microscopic. Vacuity allows motion and motion gives form to history: the physical void enables the sense of history that fills the gaps of knowledge created by the inaccessibility of prior happenings.

While matter’s motion constructs the sense that history or time exists, atomist philosophy contends that discernible motion can elucidate other phenomena beyond our immediate capabilities of perception, including such elusive concepts as motive. Having argued in Book I of *De Rerum Natura* that observable phenomena lead inevitably to the logical conclusion of the existence of atoms, Lucretius describes their motion more fully,

arguing backwards from the microscopic to explain volition. “If atoms never swerve,”

Lucretius argues:

...what is the source of the free will possessed by living things throughout the earth? What, I repeat, is the source of that will-power snatched from the fates, whereby we...[swerve] from our course at no set time or place but at the bidding of our own hearts? There is no doubt that on these occasions the will of the individual originates the movements that trickle through his limbs...For the whole supply of matter must first be mobilized throughout every member of the body: only then, when it is mustered in a continuous array, can it respond to the prompting of the heart. So you may see that the beginning of movement is generated by the heart; starting from the voluntary action of the mind, it is then transmitted throughout the body and the limbs. (68)

If the existence of atoms may be deduced from observable phenomena and, conversely, if the imperceptible motion of atoms serves as impetus for the outward motions we observe, then it follows to reason that close attention to external forms – by the work of both deduction and imagination – can yield an understanding of hidden motives. That is to say, the movements that exist forever beyond the reach of immediate perception may nonetheless be ascertained through their effects; motive exists residually within movement. The trace elements of such imperceptible movements require, therefore, an epistemology attuned to the significance of motion as a phenomenon in itself.²⁶ While atomism grounds history – one conceptual category of origins – by making it a function of place and the matter of place, it also makes material – and, thus, theoretically readable – the concept of motive, or the hidden impetus behind all action. Thus, we have something of a chain: matter exists and moves through empty space, creating accidents of place that we call “history,” “events,” or “time.” And matter’s movement, likewise, signals the motions that occur beyond our immediate perception, rendering origins, or motives, as observable behavior, traceable through close scrutiny.

In accounting for motive by charting the movement of atoms, Lucretius argues that insentience gives rise to sentience, a position that enables him to claim that all nature – though composed of unfeeling motes – seeks the absence of pain, the presence of pleasure, while also locating the mind and soul wholly in the body, as features that do not survive the process of physical decay. As prelude to his theory of the “Movements and Shapes of Atoms,” Lucretius argues that “Nature is clamoring for two things only, a body free from pain, a mind released from worry and fear for the enjoyment of pleasurable sensations” (60). Lucretius sees no contradiction in asserting an innate quest “for freedom from pain, worry, and fear” – what the Greeks call *ataraxia*²⁷ – and the insentience of matter, since the “the animate is born...of the insentient” much in the same way that “living worms...[emerge] from foul dung when the earth is soaked and rotted by intemperate showers” (85). Allowing the emergence of sentience from the inanimate provides Lucretius the latitude to assert that “the mind and spirit are both composed of matter” (101). Indeed, the body itself functions as prerequisite for this material sentience by creating a contained space that reigns in the component particles that create mind and spirit, for “it is only because their atoms are held in by the whole body, intermingled through veins and flesh, sinews and bones, and are not free to bounce far apart, that they are kept together so as to perform the motions that generate sentience. After death, when they are expelled out of the body into the gusty air, they cannot perform the sensory motions because they are no longer held together in the same way” (113). “Mind,” as Lucretius, explains immediately before this, “cannot exist apart from the body and from the man himself who is, as it were, a vessel for it” (112). Thus, the insentient atom gives rise through its own motion to a sentience that in turn can scrutinize the motion of its

constituent parts, all while seeking comfort until its final release from the body. Moreover, as an insentient thing itself, impervious to suffering and guaranteed reconstitution, the atom becomes tantalizingly emblematic of a durable center that can encounter uncertainty, can swirl in a void, buffeted, yet still remain “as one in suff”ring all that suffers nothing” (3.2.65).

II. Rethinking Matter and Motion in *Hamlet*

Where atomist writing tends to emphasize matter’s valuable hermeneutic function, its usefulness for discerning causation and revealing invisible movements, prevailing criticism on *Hamlet* has emphasized quite the opposite, stressing instead the play’s pessimistic valences towards matter as a mechanism for epistemology. Hamlet’s ostensible disgust with matter and his distrust of external forms have become, in fact, somewhat axiomatic, taken up throughout the critical literature, including some of the finest readings of the play. Janet Adelman, for instance, argues that Hamlet’s first “soliloquy establishes the initial *premise of the play*” by depicting Hamlet as finding “his own flesh as sullied and wish[ing] to free himself from its contamination by death.”²⁸ Hamlet, Adelman argues, perceives (most particularly through Claudius) that “in its grossness flesh was *always* rank, its solidness *always* sullied.”²⁹ While the notion of Hamlet as preoccupied with a fundamentally contaminated matter frequently appears in the criticism, so too does a concomitant emphasis on the role of such matter in generating epistemological confusion. Patricia Parker, for example, cites Hamlet’s disgust with his mother’s sexuality, noting that “the matter of woman” functions “as *lapsus*, error, detour, frailty,”³⁰ while Margaret Ferguson likewise avers that “matter [operates] as an obstacle to unity of opinion.”³¹ In a similar fashion, Don Parry Norford asserts the play stages “a

breakdown between inner and outer worlds” and that “the *very point of the play* seems to be that the phenomenal world lacks that stability that would make it ‘real.’”³² Matter in *Hamlet* has often appeared, therefore, as *inevitably* and *invariably* debased, a corrupted substance both repulsive and deceptive by its very nature.

Yet while Shakespeare’s most famous play indeed evokes strains of pessimism towards the material world, such negative valences of Hamlet’s relation to matter coincide with – in fact, remain counterbalanced by – repeated reminders of matter’s hermeneutic value, revelatory potential, and, surprisingly, metaphysical reassurance. To be sure, *Hamlet* does articulate the *corruptibility* of matter, the capacity for misleading action, and the theoretical delineation between exterior form and interior reality. But the *capacity* for corruption, deception, and obfuscation and the inherent *inevitability* of these characteristics are two very different things, and the pessimism towards matter in *Hamlet*, consequently, need not eclipse the play’s remarkable reiterations of *confidence* in the material. Since a venerable critical tradition has rendered commonplace the idea that *Hamlet* exhibits a profound disgust with matter, particularly the corporeal, and an equally intense distrust of forms, seeming, action, and motion for depicting hidden truths, I will briefly survey these issues prior to investigating the play’s epistemological investment in materiality. By recuperating the atomist philosophy of the play, I intend to show that *Hamlet* assumes an ontological link between matter and hidden knowledges and that the play, moreover, posits the occluded as capable of discovery through both the scrutiny of motion and the inferences drawn from such observations. In fact, by counterpoising the material with the immaterial, positing the void as a conceptual category useful for understanding matter, and depicting the observable world as parseable (and its motions as

traceable), the atomist philosophy informing *Hamlet* afford the play a materialist epistemology generous in its reliance on external, physical forms as reliable signifiers of interior, or hidden, motions. Atomism's materialist epistemology, then, helpfully reminds us that Shakespeare's play resists simply treating matter as corrupt, action as deceptive, and exteriority's reflection of interiority as, consequently, dubious.

The protagonist's disgust with Epicurean excess – with, that is, the potential uses and abuses of the physical world – has led to our thinking of *Hamlet* as depicting an inherently corrupted materiality – despite the fact that Hamlet, the protagonist, studiously avoids making this claim and that *Hamlet*, the play, fails to reinforce it. While Hamlet inveighs against the “unweeded garden / That grows to seed” (1.2.135-6), for example, he depicts not matter but its *employment* as corrupted, complaining “How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable / Seem to me all the *uses* of this world” (1.2.133-4, emphasis added). Hamlet's discontent with “the uses of this world” suggests his disgust derives, then, not from the garden itself but from how it is managed, from, that is, its very “unweededness.” Moreover, he notably does not call nature, or the world, “rank and gross” but rather observes that “Things rank and gross in nature / Possess it merely” (1.2.136-7), a figure that expresses dissatisfaction with *those that are themselves* rank and gross in nature (that is, corrupt in their own right) that take over the world. Even if we take Q1 and Q2's famous line where Hamlet laments his “too too sallied flesh” (1.2.129) to mean “sullied” (instead of “gone forth”), the prince's desire for his flesh to remain a type of definable materiality (to “resolve itself into a dew”) and his subsequent emphasis on the uses of the world suggests that he may think of “sullied” – if, indeed, he means “sullied” – less as a property of flesh and more as a type of accretion, something obtained by one's commerce

within an already-debased milieu. Indeed, as we will see, the play's emphasis on material motion may well suggest we take the image of a "too too sallied flesh" in its most literal sense: as a flesh that is too *traveled*, one that, like the uses of this world, is "weary" and needs reconstitution. In similar fashion, when Hamlet later claims that Claudius' "heavy-headed revel" allows others to "soil our addition," he figures corruption as created by Danish excess, imagining the honorable quantity, or "our achievements," in the most corporeal of terms, depicting them as "the pith and marrow of our attribute" (1.4.17-22). And if the "vicious mole of nature" (1.4.24) indeed indicates a corrupted materiality, a besetting original sin, Hamlet notably frames this image with marked qualification, by stating that this "chances in particular men" and even crafting the simile "As in their birth, wherein they are not guilty, / Since nature cannot choose his origin" (1.4.23-6). "The dram of evil" may well "all the noble substance dout / To his own scandal," but this significantly depicts the "dram of evil" simply as more *potent*, the "substance" as "noble," and this phenomenon – when it occurs – as occurring only in "these men" (1.4.36-8). To the extent that *Hamlet* portrays a debased materiality, then, the emphasis remains that matter *can* be corrupted, not that it inherently is so.³³

If the fine but critical distinction between Hamlet's disgust with the uses of matter and his view of matter itself needs recuperation in our hermeneutic, the same, I think, could be said of the protagonist's view of movement and spectacle as reliable means for revealing interiority and motive. Hamlet, of course, declares that he "know[s] not 'seems'" and that "'Tis not alone my inky cloak" nor other "forms, moods, shapes of grief, / That can denote me truly" (1.2.76-83). And he famously notes the capability of outward signifiers to be separated from interiority by observing:

These indeed seem,
 For they are actions that a man might play,
 But I have that within which passes show –
 These but the trappings and the suits of woe. (1.2.83-86)

But while Hamlet notes the capability, the possibility, of a disjunction between “seeming” and “is,” his concomitant claim emphasizes that, as it pertains to himself, these two categories happen to coincide: it is not *alone* his inky cloak that denotes him truly. Hamlet, that is, frames this observation on a possible separation between exterior and interior by noting its conditionality – for these are “actions that a man *might* play” – while also indicating that his inky cloak, as it turns out, does in fact correlate with “that within which passes show.” As with matter’s corruptibility, Hamlet presents to us not the inevitability but the capability of a disconnect between exterior “forms, moods, and shapes” and interiority. While the possibility exists, then, for outward form, particularly acting, to function deceptively, it does not necessarily do so here, and, as we will see, for all the play’s allusions to a potentially deceptive theatricality, outward appearance rarely succeeds in misleading elsewhere as well.³⁴

Even the player’s fabrication of emotion over the death of Priam, for instance – arguably the fullest, most salient, and seemingly irrefutable realization of the disjunction between exteriority and interiority – reinforces the notion that material motions are more likely than not to reveal hidden motives. Most notably, Hamlet’s fascination with the player’s simulated emotion (that is, motion without an apparent, corresponding motive) occurs as part of a definable theatrical dynamic where Hamlet *knows* the player’s motive differs from his external actions.³⁵ Hamlet undeniably understands the theatricality of the moment, its essence as fiction, and has no illusions that these motions signify a particular,

hidden causal explanation. In fact, that is the very essence of his larger point, and he uses the moment to reflect on his own motives:

Is it not monstrous that this player here,
 But in a fiction, in a dream of passion,
 Could force his soul so to his own conceit
 That from her working all his visage wanned,
 Tears in his eyes, distraction in his aspect,
 A broken voice, and his whole function suiting
 With forms to his conceit? And all for nothing,
 For Hecuba!
 What's Hecuba to him, or he to her,
 That he should weep for her? What would he do
 Had he the motive and the cue for passion
 That I have? (2.2.489-500).

In accurately revealing Hamlet's own condition to himself (just as it will when catching Claudius' conscience), the theater here exhibits the traits that Hamlet will later ascribe to it, namely, the ability to reflect one's own motions and motives back to oneself. "The purpose of playing," Hamlet informs us, "...both at the first and now, was and is, to hold, as 'twere the mirror up to nature, to show virtue her feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure" (3.2.20-24). Fully aware of what the theater is about and what the player is up to, Hamlet expressly recognizes the space of the stage as revealing not the motives of the players but rather, through reflection, those of the audience itself. Hardly deceived regarding the true relation between the player's actions and his motives, then, Hamlet speaks hypothetically here, alert to both the player's lack of motive and his own legitimate claim to one: "what *would* he do / *Had* he the motive...That I *have*?" Hamlet, therefore, uses the occasion to marvel at the capacity for disjunction between interior and exterior. Moreover, he considers the playacting as a type of commentary on his own motions and motives, a process that, as it turns out, proves remarkably accurate and revelatory.³⁶ While motion has the capacity to deceive,

it does not *necessarily* do so, and, in fact, often accomplishes quite the opposite through its capacity for revelation.³⁷ Indeed, Hamlet notably concludes this speech with a pronounced reliance on the theatrical as a worthwhile predicate, using it to obtain “grounds more relative than this” in order to catch Claudius’ conscience.³⁸ *Hamlet* represents motion, then, as a potentially reliable index of interiority and motive and, what is more, suggests it can become a means, especially through the dynamics of theater, for revealing a person’s motion and interior motive to that person (or, as *The Mousetrap* later depicts to even a close observer). The theoretical divisibility between external forms and interior truths becomes, therefore, not simply a source of epistemological frustration but rather of empirical and imaginative inquiry, a conduit for obtaining information and relieving, not simply provoking, uncertainty.

III. Voids, Divisibility, and Motion: *Hamlet* and the Epistemologies of Deduction

While the potential for disjunction between exterior and interior may suggest divisibility as an impediment to knowledge, Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* depicts the process of division as a fundamental to a reliable epistemology, and he repeatedly invokes a dialectic between “thing” and “nothing” (or the material and immaterial) in order to show that the observable world, in large measure, becomes defined through its contrast to vacuity, or the void. Calling attention to the reciprocal ways in which “thing” and “nothing” define each other, virtually everything in *Hamlet* offers itself as an admixture of what is and what is not – as a mixture, that is, not only of the observable and occluded but also the material and the empty. From the play’s outset, most notably through the arrival of the ghost, we are prompted to think in such terms. For when Horatio asks “has this thing appeared again tonight,” Barnardo responds, “I have seen nothing” (1.1.21-22),

and the two foreground, thereby, the prevailing condition of the play: accounting for a “thing” that is also, on some level, “nothing.” Concomitantly immaterial and material, the ghost most saliently embodies (ironically enough) the sense of admixture between matter and void, or empty space, characteristic of the play, for it is “as the air invulnerable,” appears as a type of “illusion,” and can disappear and reappear with great rapidity (“Tis here./Tis here./Tis gone.” (1.1.142-4)). Yet the ghost also exhibits, nonetheless, a marked materiality, for it is at once visible and audible, claims for itself (in addition to its obvious auditory capabilities) an olfactory sense quite uncommon for the walking dead (1.5.58), and, as “something more than fantasy,” is confirmed by what Horatio deems the “sensible and true avouch / Of mine own eyes” (1.1.54-58). What is more, Shakespeare counterpoises the material with its absence not only through the appearance of the ghost but also through repeated allusions to the thing-nothing dialectic throughout *Hamlet*. Hamlet’s coarse jest with Ophelia, for example, turns explicitly on the difference between thing and nothing when the prince concludes his crude pun on lying between Ophelia’s legs with the word “Nothing.”³⁹ And Hamlet’s later quip to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern figures Claudius – and, by extension, the monarchy – as simultaneously corporeal yet disembodied:

Hamlet: The body is with the king but the king is not
with the body. The king is a thing –
Guildenstern: A thing, my lord?
Hamlet: Of Nothing. (4.2.24-27)

Hamlet images the world – from the wondrous vision of a returning soul to the mechanics of sexual interaction to the construction of the monarch’s body – as admixtures of things and nothings. In doing so, the play privileges the function of absence, or the void, as a theoretical concept integral for defining and shaping the material world, a move akin to

the atomist figuration of the material world as counterpoised with empty space and one that transforms “nothing” and divisibility into avenues for obtaining knowledge.

Shakespeare’s representation of the void as a worthwhile conceptual category for understanding material reality remains embedded – and, as far as I can tell, undetected by literary critics – within Hamlet’s claim in the Folio text that “there is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so,” (2.2.249-50). For this comment, itself subtly shaped by the thing-nothing dialectic, implicitly posits the theory of empty space, rather than inherently scandalous in itself, as a concept capable of positive application. Hamlet’s assertion seems to suggest in its original order that “no thing” is good or bad except for how we frame it, a claim often perceived as advocating a type of vaguely-conceived relativism. But the syntax of the line also subtly signals the underlying thing-nothing construction that shapes both Hamlet’s thinking and, indeed, the prevailing ontology and epistemology of the play as a whole. For the antecedent of “it” here is “nothing,” rendering the line, literally, “thinking makes *nothing* either good or bad.” Thus, while we are apt to read Hamlet’s famous comment as “no thing,” the text allows, even invites, us to think also of “nothing” (as a conceptual category) having the capacity for either “good or bad,” depending upon how one evaluates it. Immediately and notably followed by Hamlet’s meditation on materiality and vacuity – “I could be bounded in a nutshell and count myself a king of infinite space” (2.2.254-5) – this rumination of the multivalence of “nothing” suggests not simply a sense of relativity but also a notion that absence (and even the physical void) is a malleable concept intimately bound with its antithesis (namely, “thing”) and capable, therefore, of shaping one’s interpretation of the material.⁴⁰

By representing the material world as so intimately intertwined with, even shaped by, the concept of nothing, or the void, Shakespeare's play suggests that divisibility – the capacity for being separated out, or made distinct – functions, on one level, as an impediment to knowledge (by creating epistemological distance) yet also as a constructor of it (by admitting conceptual contrasts that create definition through opposition). Indeed, Hamlet's much-critiqued interiority rests on this very paradox of divisibility's value. For while Hamlet avers that exterior and interior need not correlate, that inky cloak and true denotation are separated by a gap that may confound accurate assessment, his identity also relies on a type of divisibility. Hamlet defines himself through differentiation, as “*a little more than kin and less than kind*” (1.2.65). Simultaneously marking himself as an unknown quantity but one nonetheless defined in contrast to opposing alternatives, Hamlet fashions himself as both mysterious and yet identifiable, as one who confounds but seems to invite understanding in his separation from both kin and kind. In a similar moment that foregrounds fragmentation as a potential constructor of knowledge in the play, Horatio announces that not he but “a piece of him” arrives, a claim that both obscures and defines him by raising the question of what part of him we see (and what remains) even as he seems to openly define himself (in opposition to Barnardo and Marcellus) as halfhearted in his presence on the Elsinore ramparts. Denied full access to Hamlet (for something exists “within which passes show” (1.2.850)) and Horatio (for we only get “a piece of him”), we still receive knowledge through these formulations of divisibility through implicit contrast. The images of unknowableness and fragmentation at the beginning of *Hamlet*, therefore, belie an epistemology operant throughout the play that assumes knowledge may be generated through contemplation of

the negative. The divisible object as resistant to comprehension yet promising decipherability permeates *Hamlet*, structuring the human interactions of the play in such a way as to emphasize their traceability, a figuration, as we will see, that suggests a materialist frame for understanding the courses of social exchange.

Shakespeare signals the play's investment in conceptual division and the scrutiny of motion as a marker of antecedent causes through Horatio's reaction to the metaphysical conundrum posed by the ghost's appearance. For the scholar – summoned by the night watchmen both to categorize the unknown and to discover motive from motion – articulates the central question of the play in terms both materialist and theoretical, declaring “a mote it is to trouble the mind's eye” (1.1.112). The watchmen want Horatio to interpret “this dreaded sight twice seen of us” that he “may approve our eyes” (1.1.25,29), and their emphasis on visual interpretation proves well-warranted, for the ghost remains in perpetual motion as “it stalks away” (1.1.51) with “martial stalk” (1.1.66) and refuses, twice, to “stay and speak” (1.1.52,139). Neither static nor containable, the ghost “will not stand” (1.1.141) and affords instead only silent movement, forcing its observers to interpret its motions as it shifts unaccountably. Horatio readily admits his confusion about how to categorize this wonder, about how to classify it within the divisions of his existing taxonomies, confessing “in what particular thought to work on I know not” (1.1.67). Presented with limited evidence, Horatio interprets this nightly movement as harbinger to a “strange eruption” to Denmark (1.1.69), prompting the watchmen to enquire about other unaccountable nocturnal motions, namely, why the nation “nightly toils,” and “does not divide Sunday from the week” but makes “the night joint laborer with day” (1.1.72,76-8). Perplexing to the

watchmen, this perpetual motion that defies the division wrought by temporal markers necessitates the interpretative parsing by Horatio. Horatio traces such restless movement to its material cause, pointing to a “moiety,” a portion of land, disputed between Old Fortinbras and Old Hamlet, desired now by Young Fortinbras, and functioning as “the main motive of our preparations” (1.1.105). Tracing the material motions of his countrymen, then, to their “main motive,” Horatio identifies a single cause, a definable particular materialized in a symbolic patch of ground. The tracing of the nation’s motion to, as it were, its primary matter uncovers the motive, the impetus, behind observable action. Juxtaposed and explicitly connected with the restless wanderings of the ghost, this epistemology of interpreting motion prompts Horatio, Marcellus, and Barnardo to interpret the visible cues of the inscrutable phenomenon of the ghost: “it was about to speak,” “And then it started, like a guilty thing,” and “it faded” (1.1.147-8,157). Seeking for a “particular thought” for interpreting this “mote,” Horatio attempts to parse the observable and discern motive from motion, an interpretative act of tracing largely resisted by the ghost until Hamlet “follow[s]” it (a description repeated four times (1.4.63,68,79,86)), declaring finally “Whither wilt thou lead me? Speak. I’ll go no further” (1.5.1). While the ghost represents one of the play’s principal sites of epistemological crisis, it also promises revelation in part through close attention to its very motion.

In translating the epistemics of materialist philosophy to myriad human interactions, *Hamlet* suggests that close attention to motion can reveal both motive and the true essence of a person through the charting of trajectories to their antecedent causes, but it also indicates that such processes require methodical division and the elimination of

alternative accounts for behavior. After his encounter with the ghost, for instance, Hamlet worries that the watchmen and Horatio will attempt to indicate by indirect signs their knowledge of the origin, or cause, of his frantic motions (1.5.172-183). Polonius, in a similar fashion, attempts to ascertain the truth of his son's actions through an epistemology that conflates division, the processes of elimination, and the tracing of motion. By having Reynaldo impugn Laertes, Polonius attempts to prove a positive by negating negatives, attempts, that is, to reveal Laertes' true character by ruling out what he is not. Polonius imagines his epistemology in kinetic terms, for he has Reynaldo employ "this encompassment and drift of question" and these "windlasses and...assays of bias" in order to "by indirections find directions out" (2.1.64-5). Conflating the study and use of motion with gathering hidden knowledge, Polonius poses the "drift[s] of question" as corollary to "encompassment," and the proposed "windlasses" and "assays of bias" as functioning to chart "directions." In the very next scene, Claudius will, in similar fashion, order Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to follow Hamlet's movements "Sith nor th' exterior nor the inward man / Resembles that it was" (2.2.5-7) in the hopes that they might "gather so much as from occasion [they] may glean" (2.2.156). Indeed, Hamlet himself will later identify their attempt to "pluck out the heart of [his] mystery" by likening it to redirecting the flow of air through a pipe: "Govern these ventages with your fingers and thumb," Hamlet orders, "and it will discourse most eloquent music" (3.2.351-3).⁴¹ Knowledge throughout the play, it would seem, becomes obtainable through the observation of physical movement, and the characters depict such acquisition of knowledge as a type of direction of hidden motions, an epistemology that finds particularly developed treatment throughout Hamlet's staging of *The Mousetrap*.⁴²

The emphasis on motion as a useful avenue for attaining knowledge in *Hamlet* also posits theatrical artifice as remarkably revelatory – despite the protagonist’s avowed distrust of “seeming” – for it exhibits a peculiar capacity for arresting interior movements, redirecting exterior ones, and uncovering, thereby, hidden motives. Throughout the play, the theater functions (like Polonius’ and Claudius’ indirections) as a site of artificial movement designed to reveal and chart the occluded. Indeed, Hamlet understands the theater itself as a type of motion. Not only do the players circulate as itinerant performers – “how chances it they travel?” asks Hamlet (2.2.299) – but the scripts themselves also prove kinetic, for the players must receive welcome, Hamlet observes, or “the blank verse shall halt for’t” (2.2.295), a comment that depicts theatrical language as not simply falling silent but as ceasing to move. The theater’s kinesis, as it turns out, becomes the vehicle for ascertaining knowledge, particularly of unaccountable movements. Hamlet imagines Claudius “*sitting* at a play” (2.2.528), moved to confession by the artificial actions before him, “*struck* so to the soul” (2.2.530) that he admits guilt. The kinetic power of the theater becomes so reliable, in fact, that Hamlet will have the performers “play something like the murder of [his] father” in order to “observe [Claudius’] looks,” a process that will, in turn, lead Hamlet to an awareness of his own future motions, for he will, then, “know [his] course” (2.2.535-7). Anticipating Claudius’ “occulted guilt” will “unkennel” itself, Hamlet promises that his “eyes will rivet to his face” and he will join Horatio “in censure of his seeming” (3.2.79-86). The players’ artificial motions may strike Claudius at his deepest interior as he sits, but they will also generate, therefore, external, observable looks that will consequently alter the direction of Hamlet’s own action. As Claudius sits and Hamlet “must be idle” (3.2.89), the

reenactment of Claudius' crimes will at once arrest Claudius' conscience (*The Mousetrap* will “*catch* the conscience of the king” (2.2.544)), stir him into an interpretable motion, and direct Hamlet's future movements.

Although Hamlet confronts Gertrude after *The Mousetrap* with images of both Claudius and Old Hamlet that are themselves static – “the counterfeit presentment of two brothers” (3.4.54) – he purposefully seeks to reconstruct the Queen's own motion before her eyes as well, a charting of her past movements designed to reflect her “inmost part” (3.4.20) and one that continues the play's insistence that the tracing of motion can uncover otherwise inaccessible truth.⁴³ Notably, Hamlet's conference with Gertrude begins with, and remains governed by, allusions to matter, motion, and the processes of division. Hamlet's opening query (“Now, mother, what's the matter?”) quickly leads to the rhetorical invocation of contradictory motions (“Come, come” and “Go, go,”), shifts once more to Hamlet's original question (“What's the matter now?”), and concludes (prior to Polonius' death and the resumption of their discourse) with Hamlet attempting to bring the sparring – and, indeed, Gertrude's own motion – to a halt:

Come, come, and sit you down. You shall not budge.
 You go not till I set you up a glass
 Where you may see the inmost part of you. (3.4.8-20)

While the trope of setting up “a glass” most immediately suggests a mirror, Hamlet desires to establish stasis (to “sit [Gertrude] down,” to have her “not budge,” to ensure she “go not”) in order to set up a kinetic process at once dividing and revealing, a process that will uncover that which is both “inmost” and “part.” In controlling Gertrude's movement here, Hamlet's concern lies neither with simply displaying the two pictures of his father and uncle nor with revealing to Gertrude her own static image. Rather, he uses

the static image of the two men to reflect Gertrude's own *motion* back to herself.

Directing Gertrude's gaze to one image and then the other ("Look here upon this picture, and on this," (3.4.53)), Hamlet details his father's and then Claudius' appearance, emphasizing not only the contrast in image but also the movement from one to the other, commanding "Look you now what *follows*" (3.4.63). The double focus continues as he rages:

Have you eyes?
 Could you on this fair mountain leave to feed,
 And batten on this moor? Ha! have you eyes? (3.4.65-7)

To be sure, Hamlet's reiteration "have you eyes?" frames his characterization of his father as "this fair mountain" and Claudius as "this moor," starkly drawing a contrast between the two. But Hamlet's attempt to get Gertrude to see is also an attempt to have her recognize her own anterior movement, her own shift from mountain to moor, a rhetorical challenge he will repeat a moment later when he asks, in a manner also suggestive of motion between two points, "what judgment / Would step from this to this?" (3.4.70-1).⁴⁴ Indeed, as Hamlet tries to get Gertrude to see her own movements, he cleverly turns his imagery around, asserting that, certainly, she must see if she has capacity to move: "Sense sure you have, / Else could you not have motion" (3.4.71-2). Confirming that Gertrude has sight since she has such (easily verifiable) motion, Hamlet concludes that if she can (now) see her own motion, she can thus learn her own motive. While attempting to decipher Gertrude's motive, then, Hamlet recreates and charts her movement before her own eyes: he seeks, that is, to reveal her motion so she might see her "inmost part."⁴⁵

IV. “Looking before and after:” Reading Matter’s Motion Teleologically

In reading this shift from “mountain” to “moor,” Patricia Parker observes that the concept of “ground” in *Hamlet* signifies both “soil and cause.”⁴⁶ the play, that is, articulates through the language of matter the epistemological imperative to understand antecedent events. This duality – derived in part from atomism’s conflation of matter and motive – finds its most salient articulation in the graveyard scene a moment later, the space where Hamlet parses and traces matter in order to construct theoretical histories and, in a clever revision, futures as well.⁴⁷ Here, Hamlet attempts to read material history, to chart the trajectory of matter’s motion in order to imagine both past and future. Lucretius, it will be recalled, asserts that the rearrangement of motes in a particular place creates the sense something has occurred, that time emerges literally from material movement. History, in this mode of thought, becomes the tracing of antecedent physical motions, a process that requires the parsing of matter for the construction of narrative. As Hamlet confronts the jumbled mixture of skulls and dirt turned up by the gravedigger, he parses and traces matter in order to imaginatively reconstruct individual histories for each skull: “this might be the pate of a politician...might it not?” Hamlet inquires, adding “Or of a courtier.” When another skull arrives, Hamlet muses:

There’s another. Why may not that be the skull of a lawyer? Where be his quiddities now, his quillities, his cases, his tenures, and his tricks?...This fellow might be in’s time a great buyer of land, with his statutes, his recognizances, his fines, his double vouchers, his recoveries. [Is this the fine of his fines, and the recovery of his recoveries,] to have his fine pate full of fine dirt? (5.1.92-101)

While Hamlet represents the lawyer’s “quiddities” and “quillities” (or subtle distinctions) as ultimately futile, he nonetheless draws fine distinctions himself, extracting skull from dirt and history from matter. As Hamlet’s lawyer becomes a “buyer of land,” the prince

syntactically blurs his own temporal referents, stating not that this fellow “might *have been* in’s time a great buyer of land” but that he “might *be* in’s time a great buyer of land.” Hamlet’s formulation here simultaneously invokes past, present, and future, for while the context suggests we think of the past – of the time preceding this moment – “*might be* in’s time” also admits a reading of futurity and the present, allows us to think of the skull as presently or in the future acquiring more ground, depending on when (or where) we presume his time to be. Indeed, this seems to be Hamlet’s point. For Hamlet notes that the buyer/skull both acquired land and acquires it still – buying ground in life, accumulating it (within his own pate) in death. The past, present and future are, thus, defined by the movements of particulates; the transfer of land in its various forms becomes the marker of time. Lucretius had asserted that time does not exist “apart from the movement of things or their restful immobility” (41). Hamlet’s assertion likewise suggests that the skull remains “*in*’s time” by remaining within (to use Lucretius’ definition of time) its “particular tract of earth or...the space it occupied.”⁴⁸

If Hamlet seeks to reconstruct the material history of the skulls, he does so, in part, in order to imagine future transformations of the corporeal that – despite the ignominy of decomposition – nonetheless promise the retention of a type of identity and an imperviousness to suffering. He imagines, in short, a teleologically-inflected atomist materialism. As Hamlet observes the skulls disinterred by the gravedigger, he imagines the base ends to which humanity returns. Yet while Yorick’s decomposition may be “abhorred in [his] imagination” (5.1.177), it prompts a train of thought not wholly unwelcome to the prince. For Hamlet makes another turn to the historical, asking “Dost thou think Alexander look o’ this fashion in the earth?” (5.1.187-8). The turn to the past,

however, implicitly invokes both present and future, for if Alexander “looked” this way, he no longer does and the implied contrast sets up the following exchange:

Hamlet: To what bases uses we may return, Horatio! Why may not imagination trace the noble dust of Alexander till a find it stopping a bung-hole?

Horatio: 'Twere to consider too curiously, to consider so.

Hamlet: No, faith, no 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.

O, that that earth which kept the world in awe

Should patch a wall t' expel the winter's flaw! (5.1.192-206)

Although Hamlet's commentary on the “base uses we may return” and on the degradation suggested by “stopping a bung-hole,” stop[ping] a beer barrel,” or “patch[ing] a wall” indeed signal a strain of giddy morbidity within the prince, Hamlet's rumination notably carries with it a type of comfort as well. For he imagines – in the midst of utter decomposition – a reconstitution, a continued existence, and, what is more, a retention of identity.⁴⁹ Wholly disintegrated to their constituent parts and rearranged into other forms, Alexander and Caesar remain, nonetheless, Alexander and Caesar still. In addition to retaining a type of identity in decomposition and remaining theoretically traceable for those “with modesty enough” to follow it, Alexander and Caesar exhibit an imperviousness to flux, empty space, and suffering (since, depicted by the threefold repetition of the word “stop,” they block holes and, Caesar, at least, “keep[s] the wind away” and “expel[s] the winter's flaw”). Not unlike the motes of atomist philosophy – traceable, identifiable, and free of suffering – Alexander and Caesar retain in Hamlet's imagination an indivisible, unalterable core, a capacity, that is, for being separated out from surrounding matter while remaining themselves as well as an unassailable essence.

And while Horatio, akin to polemicists uneasy with atomist thought, warns against the “curious” nature of Hamlet’s epistemology, Hamlet argues that such thinking may, indeed, be appropriate if practiced the proper way, if “follow[ed]...with modesty enough, and likelihood to lead it” (5.1.197-8). Both Hamlet in the graveyard and *Hamlet* as a whole affect a revision of atomist philosophy by taking its materialist epistemology while rejecting its atheist assumptions, positing as an alternative a world both atomist and providentially-ordered. For *Hamlet*’s universe allows for both the reconstitution of circulated matter and “a divinity that shapes our ends” (5.2.10), one that promises a “special providence in the fall of a sparrow” (5.2.197-8). *Hamlet*, consequently, imagines a world where matter reveals motive through motion, time emerges from material movement, histories (and, by extension futures) are theoretically traceable, identities become retainable, bodies reconstitutable, and *ataraxia*, in some measure, possible.

We see Hamlet’s desire to turn the traceable histories of matter towards the future – to employ, that is, the plotted trajectories of the past in order to anticipate, or suggest, what is to come – not only in the graveyard scene but also at his own death, a moment that emphasizes imagination’s role in reconstructing (but not creating) history. For history, in atomism and *Hamlet* as well, principally emerges from the physical properties of a given space and resists mere fabrication. Yearning for more time, Hamlet imagines death as stopping his motion, precluding his recitation of his own history: “Had I but time – as this fell sergeant, Death, / Is strict in his arrest – O, I could tell you - / But let it be. Horatio, I am dead” (5.2.319-321). Hamlet’s “time” ends with his “arrest,” and his stasis forestalls his historical narrative. With the arresting of Hamlet’s matter, he worries that

his motives will be lost, that others will not accurately trace the signification of his corporeal remains to their original motive: “Report me and my cause aright,” he tells Horatio, linking body and motive in a plea for a true history. Yet even in this moment Hamlet imagines himself as continuing on; he traces, as it were, the progress of his own materiality through time. For Hamlet’s lament that “Things standing thus unknown, shall I leave behind me” subtly posits himself as continually moving – even in the arrest wrought by death – for the “unknown” future remains both “standing” and “behind” as he “leave[s].” Hamlet figures himself as mobile still, his material matter as “go[ing] a progress” (4.3.29-30) in death nonetheless. Indeed, Shakespeare emphasizes Hamlet’s obsession with faintly perceptible movements as shaping history even in the prince’s penultimate sentence, for he references “th’ occurrents, more and less, / Which have solicited” (5.2.340), an image that suggests, through its evocation of both “occlusion” and “currents,” the flow of unseen things as shaping history. Hamlet’s reference here prepares us to see the double meaning of his final words, for while the “rest” (of his incomplete speech) is “silence,” “rest” itself – the cessation of motion, or state of “arrest” – becomes a type of “silence” as well.⁵⁰ The matter of history remains for others to trace. While Horatio and Fortinbras may ultimately seem to misread Hamlet’s history, the play notably concludes by emphasizing how material evidence countermands mere imaginative fabrication. Fortinbras may fancy Hamlet as being “like a soldier,” but he immediately and conclusively recognizes the falsity of that reading: “Take up the bodies. Such a sight as this / Becomes the field but here shows much amiss” (5.2.384-5). The material history piled in front of him necessitates Fortinbras’ rejecting (his own) mere fabricated account of events. Such repudiation of the fabrication of history reaffirms

Hamlet's earlier gloss that "Foul deeds will rise / Though all earth overwhelm them to men's eyes" (1.2.257-8) when confronted with Claudius' attempts to retell material events. Just as the "strange eruption" (1.1.69) both figured in and promised by the Ghost's appearance unsettled the matter of Old Hamlet's death, so too does the pile of dead bodies at the end resist Fortinbras' tale.

Atomism's theory that matter gives rise to time, is traceable, reveals causation through its motion, and enables the imaginative tracing of history *forward* shapes, therefore, Hamlet's clever attempts to fill an epistemological void posed by an unknown future. For the prince exhibits a habit of thought – even at his death – that traces material history in order to construct his own teleology. Arguing for the importance of memory in the play, James P. Hammersmith has observed that:

[W]ithout memory, the sum of any individual's experience is no more than his present sensations at any given moment; past and future have no meaning in such a present. Without the act of remembrance, all actions become futile and insignificant, for they perish in the very doing...The continuity of past and present does not exist in the dead earth, it is carried forth in the living mind which remembers...If time erodes not only the brute matter of world, but with it all human aspirations and achievements, then the only response is a bitter despair. (599-603)⁵¹

Hammersmith concludes, then, that "Without the historian" time itself "fragments into discrete particles of present moments with no connection to past or to future" (603).

Hammersmith's clever reading privileges cognition in a way we might expect as appropriate in an essay on Shakespeare's most brooding play. But his assumption that "time erodes...the brute matter of the world" remains belied by the play itself, a play that depicts the material world, as we have seen, as continually resolvable and reconstitutable and that, consequently, opens a space beyond "bitter despair." Indeed, *Hamlet* offers a type of material temporality rather the opposite of Hammersmith's claim, depicting the

“present moments” – as well as the past and future – quite literally as “discrete particles.” The matter of history does not, then, need the historian, for the historian himself or herself is a product of material motion: the “continuity of past and present,” as it turns out, resides *precisely* “in the dead earth.” Fusing this material epistemics with both a dynamic view of temporality and a theistic teleology, *Hamlet* recognizes both past and present as indices of the future, a fact intuited in varying degrees in existing criticism on the play.⁵² Thus, when Hamlet imagines a divinity as one that “made us with such large discourse, / Looking before and after, gave us not / That capability and godlike reason / To fust in us unused,” he contemplates both the divine and the human that can look “before and after” as part of the same process of knowing. Occasioned by his observation of Fortinbras’ movements (who himself “makes mouths at the invisible event” (1.4.50)), Hamlet’s rumination indicates the study of history’s sweep as mitigating fear of an unknown and uncertain future.

Within the context of late sixteenth-century atomist philosophy, *Hamlet*’s representation of matter and resolvable particles, of the symbiosis between materiality and nothingness, and of the process of division as a constructor of (not merely an obstruction to) knowledge suggests that the voids of the play (both epistemological and metaphysical) do not, inevitably, generate a disgust with matter, a distrust in exterior forms, or an inertia in the protagonist rendering him passive. In fact, it is something of a quirk of literary criticism that we tend to think of Hamlet as disgusted with matter, wholly paralyzed by his epistemological and metaphysical angst, and as, therefore, immobile. As Margreta de Grazia has recently observed, our sense of Hamlet’s inertia runs directly counter to the earliest productions of the play that emphasized his capacity

for frenzied, whirling action.⁵³ The motility of Shakespeare's prince recuperated so astutely by de Grazia, I contend, exists as part of the play's larger emphasis on motion, an emphasis that values the *reliability* of matter for signaling otherwise inaccessible truths. For while the play undeniably depicts external forms as potentially deceptive, *Hamlet* also presents a world in which the close scrutiny of physical motion promises to reveal hidden motives and antecedent causes – in a word, histories, both personal and national. The close connection between material motion and its role in revealing hidden, interior motives may well contribute to the very shift de Grazia observes between the earliest understandings of the play and post-Romantic studies of inwardness:

For two centuries, Shakespeare's dramas had been deemed *unruly* and *wild* by the biases of the ancients. While *romantic* allowed for an alternative genealogy, it is the *psychological* which lifted Shakespeare out of the dramatic contest with the ancients, and primarily through the character of Hamlet. The focus of the play moved inward, and expressed itself not by the action primary to ancient drama, but by the withdrawal from action.⁵⁴

Hamlet's representation of both wild motion and contemplative inwardness suggests that the frenzied motility and interior motives of the play – not so disparate after all – concomitantly emerge from a coherent philosophical substructure. The materialist philosophy figured in the play's resolvable particles, myriad voids, and valorization of deductive reasoning indicates that matter, through the tracing and interpretation of its motions, can itself yield knowledge beyond one's immediate perception. By representing the epistemics of atomist philosophy as applicable to the courses of human action while abjuring the theory's affiliation with atheism and Epicureanism, *Hamlet* posits the material as a source of comforting knowledge, the void as a space of revelatory movement, and motion itself a traceable phenomenon promising an interpretable past and, by extension, future as well.

¹ T.S. Eliot, "Whispers of Immortality," *Collected Poems: 1909-1962* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1970), 45-6.

² Hamlet likewise claims he has "compounded" Polonius' body "with dust, whereto 'tis kin" (4.2.4). On the composition of humanity from dust and its broader ontological significance, see Ronald Knowles, "Hamlet and Counter-Humanism," *Renaissance Quarterly* 52 (1999): 1046-69, esp. 1046-1052. While the body-as-dust trope most directly derives from Christian theology, it also carries resonances, as I will argue, from atomist discourses as well. All quotations from the play are taken from William Shakespeare, *The Tragical History of Hamlet Prince of Denmark*, ed. A.R. Braunmuller (New York: Penguin, 2001).

³ On the materiality of the ghost, see Bruce Danner, "Speaking Daggers," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 51 (2003):29-62, esp. 43-7. On Hamlet's perceiving Alexander as a "radically transformed monistic substance," see Paul A. Cefalu, "'Damnèd Custom...Habits Devil': Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Anti-Dualism, and the Early Modern Philosophy of Mind," *ELH* 67 (2000):399-431, esp. 426-8.

⁴ On *Hamlet* and matter, see, for example, Margaret W. Ferguson, "*Hamlet*: letters and spirits," *Shakespeare and the Question of Theory*, ed. Patricia Parker and Geoffrey Hartman (New York: Methuen, 1985), 292-309. On *Hamlet* and epistemological voids, see Eric P. Levy, "'Things standing thus unknown': The Epistemology of Ignorance in *Hamlet*," *Studies in Philology* 97 (2002):192-209 and "The Mind of Man in *Hamlet*," *Renascence* 54 (2002): 219-233. Margreta de Grazia offers a helpful corrective to the Hamlet-as-static trope in "When did *Hamlet* become modern?" *Textual Practice* 17 (2003):485-503, esp. 485-87 and 495-99.

⁵ On *Hamlet* as engaging with "conceptual frameworks" while also "assur[ing] that personal purposes are subsumed in the immutably subsistent whole which is the divine plan," see Eric P. Levy, "The Mind of Man in *Hamlet*," *Renascence* 54 (2002):219-233, esp. 223-4.

⁶ See C.C.W. Taylor, *The Atomists Leucippus and Democritus: Fragments, A Text and Translation with a Commentary* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 157-188.

⁷ All quotations come from Lucretius, *The Nature of the Universe*, trans. R.E. Latham (Baltimore: Penguin, 1961).

⁸ Jonathan Gil Harris, "Atomic Shakespeare," *Shakespeare Studies* 30 (2002):47.

⁹ Robert Hugh Kargon observes that, "The Cavendish or Newcastle Circle, including Thomas Hobbes, marked a turning point in the fortunes of the atomic philosophy. Harriot and his disciples, who were the first important revivers of the atomic doctrine in England, were for various reasons *covert* atomists" *Atomism in England from Harriot to Newton* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966), 42, emphasis in the original.

¹⁰ Robert Hugh Kargon, "Thomas Harriot [sic], The Northumberland Circle, and Early Atomism in England," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 27 (1966): 128-136, esp. 129,133.

¹¹ See Kargon, *Atomism*, 14-5 and Charles Trawick Harrison, "The Ancient Atomists and English Literature of the Seventeenth-Century," *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology*, 45 (1934):1-79, esp. 5-8.

¹² Harrison, 5-8.

¹³ Ben Jonson, "CXXXIII. On the Famous Voyage," *Ben Jonson: The Complete Poems*, ed. George Parfitt (New York: Penguin, 1996), 86-92.

¹⁴ Harris, 48.

¹⁵ Harris, 48. See also, W.G. Moore, "Lucretius and Montaigne," *Yale French Studies* 38 (1967): 109-114.

¹⁶ On the late seventeenth-century engagement and residual discomfiture with atomism, see Matthew R. Goodrum, "Atomism, Atheism, and the Spontaneous Generation of Human Beings: The Debate over a Natural Origin of the First Humans in Seventeenth-Century Britain," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 63 (2002): 207-224, esp. 210; Paul Hammond, "Dryden, Milton, and Lucretius," *The Seventeenth Century* 16 (2001): 158-76; Regina Schwartz, "Milton's Hostile Chaos:... 'And the sea was no more'" *ELH* 52 (1985): 337-374, esp. 354-8; and Kargon, *Atomism*, 42. See also John Evelyn's *Essay on the First Book of T. Lucretius Carus De Rerum Natura* (London: 1656) where he addresses in equal measure "the Learned, the Ignorant, and the Scrupulous," indicating that there are those who "declaim against our Author, as altogether Irreligious and Profane" (1,10).

¹⁷ In *Some Considerations Touching the Usefulness of Experimental Natural Philosophy*, "Boyle first gave thought to vexing problems associated with [the] religious implications of atomism and quickly dissociated himself from Epicurean[s]...who banished God from the universe by declaring the possibility of universal creation by the casual dance of atoms" (Kargon, *Atomism*, 96).

¹⁸ Christoph Lüthy, "The Fourfold Democritus on the Stage of Early Modern Science," *Isis* 91 (2000): 443-479, 453.

¹⁹ Lüthy, 451.

²⁰ Kargon, *Atomism*, 45. See also Harrison, 4.

²¹ Francis Bacon, "Of Atheisme," *The Essayes or counsels, civill and morall*, ed. Michael Kiernan (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), 51.

²² "The First Anniversarie: An Anatomy of the World" (211-2). In "The Extasie," Donne also writes "Wee then, who are this new soule, know, / Of what we are compos'd, and made, / For, th' Atomies of which we grow, / Are soules, whom no change can invade" (45-8), *John Donne: The Complete English Poems*, ed. C.A. Patrides (London: Everyman, 1998). On Donne's library and use of atomism in his poetry, see David A. Hedrich Hirsch, "Donne's Atomies and Anatomies: Deconstructed Bodies and the Resurrection of Atomic Theory," *SEL* 31 (1991): 69-94.

²³ Hirsch, 69-94.

²⁴ Lucretius also argues that "We must still admit that material objects consist of particles which throughout eternity have resisted the force of destruction" (44). See also Amy Olberding, "'The Feel of Not to Feel it': Lucretius' Remedy for Death Anxiety," *Philosophy and Literature* 29 (2005): 114-129.

²⁵ Cyril Bailey, *The Greek Atomists and Epicurus* (New York: Russell&Russell, 1964), 10-27.

²⁶ On the relation between atomic motion and the psyche, see David J. Furley, *Two Studies in the Greek Atomists* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), 227-237. See also Jeffrey S. Purinton, "Epicurus on 'Free Volition' and the Atomic Swerve," *Phronesis* XLIV (1999): 253-299.

²⁷ See James Warren, *Epicurus and Democritean Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 1-10.

²⁸ *Suffocating Mothers: Fantasies of Maternal Origin in Shakespeare's Plays, Hamlet to the Tempest* (New York: Routledge, 1992): 16-7, emphasis added.

²⁹ 17, emphasis added.

³⁰ *Shakespeare from the Margins: Language, Culture, Context* Chicago (U of Chicago P, 1996): 263.

³¹ 295.

³² "'Very Like a Whale': The Problem of Knowledge in *Hamlet*," *ELH* 46 (1979): 559-576: 563, emphasis added.

³³ Thus, the prince recognizes matter as noble, its misuse as ignoble, and even qualifies his complaints by emphasizing the role of his own perception. Therefore, he later states that "this goodly frame the earth seems to me a sterile promontory," the "excellent canopy" and "brave o'erhanging firmament" "appeareth nothing to me," and "the paragon of animals" "to me" is insignificant, since "man delights not me" (2.2.268-278). Here, we see in application what Hamlet mentioned earlier: the noble substance tainted in perception by the dram of evil, an image he evoked when contemplating not the material world itself but Claudius' Epicurean excess in particular.

³⁴ On Hamlet's assumption that motion and theatricality function as means for revealing "fresh, if inevitably partial, insight into the hidden workings of his being" and on his "belief in a transcendent inner being...and in the possibility of an ideal mimesis capable of representing this truthfully," see Alison Thorne's "*Hamlet and the Art of Looking Diversely on the Self*" in *Vision and Rhetoric in Shakespeare: Looking through Language* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000): 104-133, esp. 108-110. While Thorne argues that the play unsettles the predicates of both these projects, she argues persuasively that Hamlet himself nonetheless believes motion can reveal interiority. As such, her argument is both helpful corrective, I think, to the overstatement of Hamlet's skepticism towards seeming and a useful supplement to my claim that the play draws from materialist epistemology an interest in tracing movement to discover antecedent causes.

³⁵ To put it another way, the *player's* motive is to entertain, to act, and this motive corresponds with his exterior deeds; his *character*, as part of a prearranged fiction, acts as though he has anterior motives for his simulated emotion, and it is this seeming disconnect that prompts Hamlet's meditations on acting.

³⁶ My reading thus runs counter to Don Parry Norford's argument that "Hamlet is fascinated by the stage because this disjunction between inner and outer, reality and appearance, is most perplexing there: the player forces his soul to his own conceit in a fiction...[and]...here the shapes of grief are genuine, yet correspond to no true inward reality," 562. The very property Norford rightly identifies, I argue, functions for Hamlet as a comforting, known quantity rather than a troubling unknown one. As we will see, it becomes the very vehicle he uses for obtaining knowledge.

³⁷ In fact, as Susan Crane has shown, Hamlet's speech here "marks a change, however slight, from [his] early theory about the falsification of the physiological signs of emotion. Whereas earlier Hamlet believed these symptoms to be always potentially false...he now believes that the play's show of feeling is a result of an inner alteration: he

has been able to ‘force his soul’ to experience feelings of sadness...Hamlet imagines the inner processes differently, so that he now envies what he previously held in contempt” (131). My reading, of course, differs from Crane’s first assertion about Hamlet originally viewing outward motion as “always potentially false,” but agrees that Hamlet, here, understands quite precisely the mechanics of interior and exterior motions.

³⁸ See Jean S. Calhoun, “‘Hamlet’ and the Circumference of Action,” *Renaissance News* 15 (1962):281-298, esp. 290-1.

³⁹ On this pun’s relation to Hamlet’s broader concern with revealing that which remains “beyond the reach of vision,” see Patricia Parker’s “*Othello* and *Hamlet*: Spying, Discovery, Secret Faults,” in *Shakespeare from the Margins: Language, Culture, Context* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1996), 261. On the “nothing” of Ophelia’s lap and its connection with the line the “king is a thing...of nothing,” see Parker, 264-6.

⁴⁰ Even the standard reading of this line as a form of relativism may well suggest an atomist influence. Well-known was the atomist adage speaking against standard orthodoxies of thought and taste: “by convention sweet, by convention sour, but in reality atoms and the void.”

⁴¹ Hamlet identifies such revealing of his interiority as directly related to the redirection of invisible motion when he notes, “Look you, these are the *stops*” and claims “You would play upon me, you would seem to know my *stops*, you would pluck out the heart of my mystery” (3.2.354-360, emphasis added).

⁴² Claudius will later ask Rosencrantz and Guildenstern if they can “by no drift of conference / Get from him why he puts on this confusion, / Grating so harshly all his days of quiet / With turbulent and dangerous lunacy?” (3.1.1-4). And he will also encourage them to “give him a further edge / And drive his purpose into these delights” (3.1.26-7).

⁴³ On *The Mousetrap* and counterfeit presentment as revelatory of Hamlet’s own interior disposition, see also Paul Gottschalk “Hamlet and the Scanning of Revenge,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 24 (1973):155-170, esp. 162-165.

⁴⁴ For an alternate reading that argues Hamlet “inadvertently collaps[es] the distance between the idealized and debased versions of Gertrude’s appetite and hence between the brothers she feeds on,” see Janet Adelman, 21-2.

⁴⁵ While Gertrude’s motive remains in doubt for the audience and, presumably, for Hamlet as well, Hamlet notably breaks off his inquiries here. The scene suggests a process with the *potential* to reveal motive, then, even if the process in its entirety does not become fully acted out. On Hamlet’s preoccupation with Gertrude’s internal processes and external motions, see also Susan Crane, 134-138.

⁴⁶ Patricia Parker, “Black *Hamlet*: Battening on the Moor,” *Shakespeare Studies* 31 (2003):127-64, esp. 135.

⁴⁷ T. McAlindon notes without further comment that “the graveyard scene...contributes to a Lucretian sense of the interdependence of life and death” *Shakespeare’s Tragic Cosmos* (Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 1991): 110.

⁴⁸ John Kerrigan notes that “the gravediggers turn up the past as it really is: earth indistinguishable from earth, skulls, loggatt bones...None of Hamlet’s speculations can give life to this bony refuse. The skulls remain, despite his efforts, terrifying, vacant emblems, mouthing the *momento mori* truism...I am not as I was, you will not be as you are,” *Revenge Tragedy: Aeschylus to Armageddon* (Clarendon: Oxford UP, 1997), 188.

That, I contend however, is precisely Hamlet's point: in imagining the materiality of the past to imagine his future, he expressly does *not* imagine terror in transformation but rather *ataraxia*.

⁴⁹ See also Kerrigan, 189.

⁵⁰ See Brent M. Cohen, "'What is it you would see?': *Hamlet* and the Conscience of the Theatre," *ELH* 44 (1977): 222-247, esp. 243.

⁵¹ James P. Hammersmith, "*Hamlet* and the Myth of Memory: *ELH* 45 (1978):597-605.

⁵² On the conflation of temporalities in *The Mousetrap*, see Heather Hirschfeld's "*Hamlet*'s 'first corse': Repetition, Trauma, and the Displacement of Redemptive Typology," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 424-448, esp. 440-441.

⁵³ De Grazia notes that "In two separate works, Dekker alludes to entrances by Hamlet in distracted motion," that "Shakespeare's play...explicitly calls for excited or violent motion from Hamlet," and that "Hamlet's signature action may have been not paralyzing thought but frenzied motion." "When did *Hamlet* become modern?" *Textual Practice* 17 (2003): 485-503, esp. 486.

⁵⁴ De Grazia, 495-6.

Baconian Fabulism and the Politics of John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*

Dividing the role of protagonist between remarrying widow and masterless man, John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* takes as its central concern the expression of human agency within the confines of a controlling court.¹ Despite the ostensible power enjoyed by the Duchess as an aristocrat and the seeming freedom afforded Bosola by his masterless status, both protagonists exist within a conscripted, limited world, hostile to individual autonomy. The Duchess, both lauded and faulted by critics for remarrying beneath her caste,² has seemed fundamentally circumscribed, even prior to her literal imprisonment.³ Bosola, likewise, has appeared to many as trapped by the inherent inequities of Ferdinand's court.⁴ Notably, Webster – preoccupied with human agency and the political and social contracts that hinder or enable it – repeatedly articulates the repressive, closed world of *The Duchess of Malfi* through tropes of subjugated or contained animals. Bosola, consequently, appears a mere “creature” (1.1.287), the Duchess a caged bird (4.2.12-3) or “English mastiff...fierce with tying” (4.1.13), and Julia a subdued falcon (2.2.28-30) or “tame elephant” (2.2.32). Even Ferdinand, the character with the most power, imagines himself a wolf, declaring he “account[s] this world but a dog-kennel” (5.5.67), while the Cardinal, too, perceives himself as dying “like a leveret / Without any resistance” (5.5.45-6). *The Duchess of Malfi*, in short, teems.⁵ But *why* does its court prove a veritable menagerie, a “rank pasture” (1.1.306) full of predators and parasites, a space where its inhabitants – masters and servants alike – remain dehumanized within the existing hierarchical structure?⁶ Why does Webster specifically turn to the enclosure of *animals* to examine the politics of human autonomy?

By depicting the effects of a repressive political system – as well as resistances to it – through the trope of the contained creature,⁷ *The Duchess of Malfi* draws on early modern discourses of fabulism in order to reexamine the capacity of figurative language to subjugate or liberate the individual citizen.⁸ More remarkably, Webster engages with Francis Bacon's early seventeenth-century critique of fabulism's role in shaping, even constituting, perception. Bacon has confounded his critics by dismissing figurative language as mere fiction, a force that enthralls the mind with error, yet also using the fable as a method for introducing his own heterodox ideas. Bacon, however, subtly yet consistently differentiates between (what we may call) prescriptive and descriptive fabulism. While the former imposes *a priori* meaning through fictitious narrative, distorting perception of the natural world by interpreting it through preexisting myth, the latter simply elucidates genuine, empirically-derived knowledge. By simultaneously challenging yet reaffirming fabulist discourse in its various modes, Baconian philosophy allows for both the demystification of authoritative narrative and yet the retention of fabulism as a useful vehicle for unconventional philosophy. Written within an intellectual milieu increasingly influenced by Baconian thought, *The Duchess of Malfi* likewise signals the capacity of figurative rhetoric to enthrall the mind or, conversely, challenge established authority. Bosola, for instance, internalizes the repressive, *prescriptive* narratives of Ferdinand's court, failing to transcend the metaphoric language that defines him as mere parasite and abject creature. The Duchess, by contrast, uses imaginative language *descriptively* as a means to recount her own forms of social experimentation and to level hierarchical distinctions, even radically broaching the notion – most saliently through her curious fable of the salmon and the dogfish – of a type of

solidarity across class lines. Through both characters, Webster envisions resistance to political repression. However, he notably emphasizes the failure of an egalitarian alternative to emerge. In doing so, Webster constructs neither a conservative nor a radical critique of hereditary privilege. For both the admirable application of aristocratic power and the violent deposition of tyrants fail to remedy the ubiquitous political corruption represented throughout the play. Instead, Webster uses the *failure* of both modes of critique in order to advance a still more revolutionary notion. Specifically, Webster's play suggests that solidarity across class lines, wrought by a sustaining philosophical framework of descriptive fabulism, might succeed – where secret subversion and open revenge had failed – in displacing systemic inequity.

I. Baconian Fabulism and the Shaping Power of Figurative Language

In his early writings central to his critique of fabulist discourse, Francis Bacon, seeking to restore human dominion over the natural world, depicts the containment of the animal as crucial to defining the status of the human, bringing to the center of early modern thought the trope of the enclosed creature as a vehicle for understanding human value. According to Bacon, knowledge of the physical world amounts to the control of nature,⁹ and such control manifests the true essence of humanity itself, indeed, registers the human as such by setting it apart from the non-human. Bacon adumbrates his theory that the containment of the creaturely gives definition to the human even in his earliest writings. In the unpublished treatise *The Masculine Birth of Time* (1603), for instance, Bacon declares that he “lead[s]...Nature with all her children to bind her to your service and make her your slave,” and he uses this stark image of containment as a vehicle for articulating his “only earthly wish, namely, to stretch the deplorably narrow limits of

man's dominion over the universe to their promised bounds.”¹⁰ Bacon reiterates this dialectic – of the enclosure of nature as constructing human identity – in *Valerius Terminus* (1603). Here, Bacon claims that “the true [end] of knowledge...is a restitution and reinvesting (in great part) to man of the sovereignty and power (for whensoever he shall be able to call the creatures by their true names he shall again command them) which he had in his first state of creation.”¹¹ In *The Advancement of Learning* (1609), Bacon likewise correlates the constraining of nature and the disclosing of one's truest interior, declaring, “For like as a man's disposition is never well known till he be crossed, nor Proteus ever changed shapes till he was straitened and held fast; so the passages and variations of nature cannot appear so fully in the liberty of nature, as in the trials and vexations of art.”¹² Imagining nature as yielding knowledge only when “straitened and held fast,” Bacon argues that one needs experiment, or “the trials and vexations of art,” in order to reveal truths normally hidden “in the liberty of nature,” connecting such circumscription with a coincident simile centered on the discovery of one's true disposition. Throughout Bacon's early writings, the containment of nature and the constitution of the human remain inextricably linked, therefore, part of one concerted project whereby controlling the creaturely gives definition to human identity and value.

Bacon depicts the containment of the creaturely and its corollary empowerment of the human as the product of properly-wielded language, as the function of a precise nomenclature that enables clear perception of – and thus mastery over – nature. In doing so, Bacon suggests that language not only controls or liberates depending upon its usage but, what is more, always concomitantly does *both*. As his repeated use of “restauration” imagery suggests, Bacon imagines control over nature as characteristic of a prelapsarian

humanity that used language precisely, a sharp contrast to his own fallen world that remains enslaved by obfuscating language and lacks, therefore, mastery over creation.¹³

In *Masculine Birth of Time*, consequently, Bacon prefaces his promise to restore dominion, to deliver nature bound and enslaved, by announcing he intends to disperse “shadows thrown by words” and “the most obscure idols” that cloud his readers’ minds.¹⁴

Examining this particularly Baconian approach to the role of language in shaping degrees of control and liberation, Erica Fudge observes that:

To call creatures by their real names...is to understand – to ‘know’ – them; to know creatures is to wield power over them; and to wield power over them is to remove humans from their ‘infantile’ place in post-lapsarian society and to return them to their original position of superiority on earth. Power in Bacon’s terms means exploitation, and exploitation is proof of humanity...The human reduces the animal to the status of an object while increasing his own status.¹⁵

In a prelapsarian context, defining the creaturely enables dominion and constructs, as a result, the fully-realized human.¹⁶ Within postlapsarian society, the failure to accurately label the natural world reduces dominion, lessening humanity’s distinctiveness, its very identity.¹⁷ In both cases, however, language simultaneously controls and liberates, and, within Baconian philosophy, words depicting the creaturely not only exert power over the subhuman but also reflexively construct human identity and value.

In attempting to counter the imprecise language of his contemporaries, Bacon seeks to intervene in a pernicious cycle of internally and externally derived error, a cycle whereby misleading language common to daily life skews perception and ingrains misguided habits of thought, or biases, that, in turn, generate more misleading language. Such a cycle of error, Bacon suggests, ultimately results in an uncritical acceptance of traditional authority, lessens reliance on direct observation, and distorts perception of true human value. While Bacon differentiates the errors in perception wrought by language,

or “the idols of the marketplace,” and those caused by one’s own biases, or “idols of the cave,” he nonetheless emphasizes their symbiotic relationship and their collective role in debilitating the human.¹⁸ For as humans internalize misleading rhetoric, transforming it into established patterns of thought, they likewise reproduce such language, perpetuating a continual process of mental, even political, enslavement and enervation. Indeed, Bacon explicitly figures such a cycle of misprision as a continual state of cognitive helplessness.¹⁹ With the collapse of prelapsarian clarity of language, the human becomes, in effect, enthralled by error as the very terminology used to describe the world becomes a self-perpetuating *internal* impediment. While differentiating the idols of the marketplace from those of the cave, Bacon thus leaves fluid the boundaries between exterior and interior sources of misperception, and he imagines such errors as mutually reinforcing each other within a larger process that functions to enslave the mind and induce a “*disabling* veneration of authority.”²⁰ Bacon illuminates not only the “particular mistakes” of individual hermeneutic errors but, more importantly, “the *entire warping and misdirection of the intelligence*,”²¹ a warping, as we will see, that fundamentally skews perception of human dignity through the powerful influence of language on the human mind.²²

Despite his criticisms of imprecise, misleading, or fantastic language, Bacon, however, frequently invoked, even praised, figurative rhetoric and the fable, a concession to the discursive potency of fabulism that suggests Bacon imagines himself as rightly appropriating, not merely displacing, fabulist discourse.²³ While it might appear at first glance that “the fable and myth represent for Bacon sham philosophy,”²⁴ both function centrally throughout his own thinking.²⁵ Indeed, Bacon’s engagement with fabulist

discourse conspicuously recurs through even his earliest writing. In the *The Masculine Birth of Time*, for instance, Bacon praises Peter Servinus for turning the “brayings” of Paracelsus into “sweet harmony,” “transforming [his] detestable falsehoods into delectable fables.”²⁶ Bacon’s *Essays* likewise frequently conflate “sententiae, allusion, and practical observation” in a process that utilizes figurative language, including the Aesopic fable, to explain natural phenomena.²⁷ Bacon’s *The Advancement of Learning* does criticize “Poesy Parabolical” that “retire[s] and obscures[s]” knowledge, but this most famous early work also praises such usages of “Allusive or Parabolical...narration” such as “the fables of Aesop” that “tendeth to demonstrate and illustrate that which is taught or delivered.”²⁸ Figurative language may thus prove helpful, even necessary, for articulating “any point of reason which was more sharp or subtile than the vulgar” could comprehend.²⁹ In *De Sapientia Veterum, or Of the Wisdom of the Ancients*, Bacon actively promotes fabulism as useful for illuminating the processes of nature by interpreting Greek myths as depictions of natural events. If the title of Bacon’s treatise “suggests a veneration for antiquity rather surprising in a man known for his attachment to novelty,”³⁰ the text itself further reveals Bacon as “firmly convinced that the veil or dense mist of fable *facilitates* the modern advancement of learning,” as he even “endorses the fables of Homer and Hesiod as models to be imitated.”³¹ As “the first of his books to gain him a European reputation” and “popular enough to be reprinted during...his lifetime” in both English and Italian,³² *De Sapientia* imagines a noble prehistory to the ancient writers Bacon will later chastise. According to Bacon’s imaginary history, the original, unadulterated fables of “the early ancients” held a revelatory potential subsequently obfuscated by later philosophies. Bacon specifically critiques

Aristotelianism for “obscuring...the remote ancients who represented the face of nature, the stamp of God, in hieroglyphics, gestures, and fables – all of which have some similitude to the thing signified and function like emblems, icons, or pictures.”³³ Thus, “Bacon’s restauration of learning does not completely disregard past practices,”³⁴ and his writings, instead, actively utilize figurative rhetoric as central to his project of reshaping early modern thought.

Bacon’s simultaneous disdain for yet valorization of fabulist rhetoric of all sorts – his “doubleness...toward poetic fictions and their genesis in the imagination” – has perplexed critics seeking to account for such mythic material in a largely rationalist corpus,³⁵ and “his inconsistency has been an issue ever since the early seventeenth century.”³⁶ “What shall we make of such willing contradictions,” asks Henry Reynolds, Bacon’s contemporary:

when a man to vent a few fancies of his owne shall tell vs first, they are the wisdom of the Auncients, and next, that those Aunceint fables were but meere fables, and without wisdom or meaning til their expositours gaue them a meaning; & then scornfully and contemptuously (as if all Poetry were but Play-vanity) shut vp that discourse of his of Poetry with It is not good to stay too long in the Theater.³⁷

Subsequent criticism has echoed Reynolds’ observation that Bacon both “vent[s] a few fancies of his owne” and describes fables as, alternately, “wisdom” and “without wisdom.” Indeed, “modern assessments of Bacon’s contradiction range from proposing a change of heart [towards fabulist discourse] to discerning the opportunism of a shrewd rhetorician” determined to make his rationalist agenda palatable to his readers by means of fanciful language.³⁸ Both critiques, however, seem inadequate. The former requires we read Bacon as changing opinion multiple times since such seemingly contradictory comments on the fable span his career.³⁹ The latter – as suggested by Reynold’s

complaint – remains vexed by the fact that Bacon’s use of the fable promises to distract his reader, to obscure rather than illuminate his principal argument. If Bacon invokes the fable as a method of persuasion, his rhetorical move would, in this light, appear rather clumsy instead of shrewd since it would strain even an early modern hermeneutic accustomed to paradox, if not outright contradiction, in polemical prose. What, then, accounts for Baconian fabulism? What, precisely, transpires in Bacon’s peculiar dismissal yet employment of figurative language?

While Bacon’s approach to fabulist discourse has appeared to many as inherently contradictory, Bacon draws a fine yet consistent hermeneutic distinction by inveighing against *prescriptive* uses of the fable while allowing, even championing, the fable’s *descriptive* capacity. Throughout his various writings, Bacon rejects fables that impose meaning prior to (or wholly independent of) empirical observation. Conversely, he applauds imaginative language that elucidates *previously*-established truths through memorable or persuasive narrative.⁴⁰ Bacon predicates his justification for writing *De Sapientia Veterum* on this very distinction. “I know very well what pliant stuff fable is made of,” Bacon avers:

how freely it will follow any way you please to draw it, and how easily with a little dexterity and discourse of wit meanings which it was never meant to bear may be plausibly put upon it...All this I have duly examined and weighed; as well as all the levity and looseness with which people indulge their fancy in the matter of allegories; yet for all this I cannot change my mind...[T]he truth is that in some of these fables, as well in the very frame and texture of the story...I find a conformity and connexion with the thing signified, so close and so evident, that one cannot help believing such a signification to have been designed and meditated from the first, and purposely shadowed out.⁴¹

Notably, then, while Bacon remains alert that the “pliant stuff [of] fable” can accrue “meaning...it was never meant to bear,” and while cautioning against both “levity and

looseness,” he nonetheless retains the fable as valuable – but only if it “purposely shadow[s] out” a “signification” accurately describing the observable world. Where the fable as *prescriptive* signals a misuse by “people [who] indulge their fancy,” the *descriptive* fable remains both compelling (“yet for all this I cannot change my mind”) and revelatory (even “in the very frame and texture of the story”). The distinction between prescriptive and descriptive fabulism remains so central to Bacon’s project that he singles out dissenting opinion as especially worthy of disapprobation. Bacon asserts that:

if any one be determined to believe that the allegorical meaning of the fable was in no case original and genuine, but that always the fable was first and the allegory put in after, I will not press the point; but allowing him to enjoy that gravity of judgment (of the dull and leaden order though it be) which he affects, I will attack him, if indeed he be worth the pains, in another manner upon a fresh ground.”⁴²

Thus, the prescriptive fable (where “the fable was first and the allegory put in after”) receives particular derision as accepted by those with “dull and leaden” judgment who fail to appreciate how the ancient thinkers, as Bacon imagines, first sketched out “allegorical meaning” and *then* constructed corresponding fables.⁴³ Bacon’s problem, in short, derives not from fabulism itself but rather from how that fabulism was constructed, as well as with the specific cultural work it does in a given instance.⁴⁴

Within the context of Bacon’s earlier writings and his consistent differentiation of prescriptive and descriptive fabulism, Bacon’s seemingly critical comments on the fable in *The Advancement of Learning* become markedly clearer. In an often-cited passage from *The Advancement*, Bacon claims that, in certain instances, “I do rather think that the fable was first, and the exposition devised, than that the moral was first, and thereupon the fable framed.”⁴⁵ While Bacon’s comment has often been read as a critique of all

fabulism, it occurs within a subsection of his treatise dedicated to critiquing a particular *mode* of fable that “retire[s] and obscure[s]” truth.⁴⁶ Moreover, Bacon again makes such a distinction explicit even later in *The Advancement* when he observes that:

it is generally to be found in the wisdom of the more ancient times, that as men found out any observation that they thought was good for life, they would gather it and express it in parable or aphorism or fable. But for fables, they were vicegerents and supplies where examples failed: now that the times abound with history, the aim is better when the mark is alive...For knowledge drawn freshly and in our view out of particulars, knoweth the way best to particulars again.⁴⁷

Since Bacon imagines that “in the wisdom of the more ancient times,” humanity, first, “found out any observation” and, *then*, “express[ed] it in parable or aphorism or fable,” the essayist emphasizes the importance of observation *preceding* figurative articulation. Bacon’s own day that “abound[s] with history,” by contrast, needs to recover “knowledge drawn freshly...out of particulars.” If the ancients imagined by Bacon valued descriptive fables over prescriptive ones, Bacon’s interest in particulars, then, leads not to banishing the fable altogether but rather to ensuring its proper use. Andrew M. Cooper notes that Bacon believed that the “fable, a collective repository of common sense, can supply a model of the new organon based on induction and shared enterprise. As a primitive inquiry into nature focusing not on the mind’s projected similitudes but the singularities of matter itself, fable is a prototype of inductive empiricism.”⁴⁸ Thus, although Bacon concludes his extended discussion of the fable in *The Advancement of Learning* with his often-cited comment that “it is not good to stay too long in the theater,” his assertion, within the context of his earlier writings, seems less an indictment of all fabulism and more a critique of a specific *kind* of figurative language.

By so thoroughly critiquing the structures of fabulist writing, Bacon shares with his contemporaries an interest in the fable as a philosophically productive discursive

mode,⁴⁹ a genre worthy of close attention and one capable of constructing the political world by imaginatively depicting the natural one. In fact, the fable proper became something of a pedagogical staple during the era, operating as both grammar textbook and moral guide.⁵⁰ While Richard Mulcaster's *Elementarie* (1582) adduces the figure of Aesop himself as evidence for the power of education, authors such as Spenser, Sidney, Shakespeare, and Jonson periodically drew on fabulist writing, particularly Aesopian traditions.⁵¹ Moreover, as a "newly ratiocinative and applied approach to the fable" emerged during the seventeenth century, fabulist discourse underwent a notable process of legitimization as a vehicle for complex philosophy, so much so that authors such as John Donne "took it for granted that a fabulist mode of reference was a necessary part of the thinking man's intellectual machinery."⁵² Even Edward Topsell, more renowned for Plinian copiousness than Aesopic brevity, conspicuously interpreted the human world through the animal one in his *Historie of Four-Footed Beastes* (1607) and, consciously connecting his natural history to fabulist discourse, signaled that "like the animals of fable, animals could now carry meaning in many different ways."⁵³ Amid such widespread popularity, the early modern nature fable, moreover, also held the reputation for challenging, not merely reaffirming, established authority, becoming a site of significant ideological contest. For while the fable appeared within the most orthodox curricula as well as the writings of authors from varying degrees of privilege, it also operated as a "*function* in Renaissance culture," one that provided "a medium of political analysis and communication, especially in the form of a communication from or on behalf of the politically powerless" (1-2).⁵⁴ In his appreciation of fabulist language as capable of shaping mental – and, by extension, social – constitutions, Bacon shares the

prevailing early modern perception of the fable as politically functional, as capable of inculcating the values of the ruling class or subtly working to destabilize hierarchical rule. Thus, when Bacon accords “‘*Allusive or Parabolical*’ poetry one-ninth of the world’s of learning, and [instances] ‘the fables of Aesop’ as his prime example” in the 1605 edition of *The Advancement of Learning*,⁵⁵ he participates in a larger cultural preoccupation over the form, function, and import of fabulist writings in early seventeenth-century England.

If the fable alternately reaffirmed or challenged aristocratic rule, how did Bacon’s early seventeenth-century attack on, yet employment of, figurative language affect political uses of fabulism, particularly in its heterodox, or subversive, forms? The broader political import of Bacon’s philosophy (beyond simply its influence on fabular discourse) has elicited much critical comment, and his writings have appeared, variably, as bolstering established power or supporting more egalitarian strains of thought.⁵⁶ Julie Solomon, for instance, argues that “Bacon’s program...served to maintain, as well as advance, the interests of the court aristocracy. For the Lord Chancellor, the pursuit of empirical science would ultimately enhance the power of the crown.”⁵⁷ More specifically, Solomon avers that Baconian philosophy employed ostensibly “objective” rhetoric and method to silently transfer the claim to specialized (and, hence, empowering) expertise from the artisan classes to the aristocratic elite.⁵⁸ If, within this reading, Baconian philosophy seems “a strategy for state empowerment,”⁵⁹ in others, it appears distinctly egalitarian in its suppositions and effects. Alvin Snider asserts, for instance, that Baconian skepticism posed no hegemonic threat itself but, quite the contrary, continually promoted critique of entrenched power, an epistemology that invited

interrogation even of its own claim to value.⁶⁰ Although a privileged figure writing about increasing dominion, Bacon thus became known for espousing a skeptical view of authority. Indeed, Elizabeth Hanson convincingly argues that “if Bacon himself was a staunch supporter of the King and defender of royal prerogative, his philosophical project is ideologically as well as epistemologically revolutionary, susceptible of appropriation by millenarian Puritans in the service of leveling.”⁶¹ In fact, Hanson asserts that:

Bacon’s project does not merely perpetuate the processes of subjugation that characterize the Renaissance state. While Bacon rhetorically gives the King his due, his discourse also resolutely shifts power from sovereign to nature, with the implication that from thence it can be appropriated for human use by all men...The forms of domination and subjection...have no place in Bacon’s philosophical writing save as metaphors for the discovery of nature.⁶²

Bacon’s disinterestedness towards dominion and subjection can be overstated – metaphors do, after all, carry political freight – but Baconian philosophy exhibits an unmistakable egalitarian strain, holding in tension the desire for increased dominion and an emphasis on observation, leveling in its ramifications. While Bacon’s more severe criticisms of fabulism itself, then, may seem, on one level, to undercut a mode of discourse particularly suited for political resistance, Baconian philosophy, in fact, challenges authority that merely relies on precedent rather than direct observation. Indeed, by “claim[ing] fables were...remnants of an Adamically direct encounter with the world when things were known through the activity of naming them,”⁶³ Bacon invests a popular genre of political resistance with a type of authority all its own. By demystifying prescriptive authorities while still utilizing descriptive fabulism as a means for articulating heterodox ideas, Baconian philosophy retains the fable as a method for interpreting the world anew while also broaching the idea that the natural world, unlike classical authority, affords no basis for hereditary privilege. More importantly, Baconian

philosophy lends the politically subversive fable the means for making a *structural* critique rather than a merely conditional one. The political fable, that is, not only could claim direct connection with the observable world in a new way, attaining a type of natural authority itself, but also could challenge systemic habits of thought (rather than mere forms or figureheads) maintaining a corrupt political system.

II. Rethinking Natural Authority: Aristocracy, the Subhuman, and the Functions of Fabulism

In the dedicatory epistle to *The Duchess of Malfi*, Webster immediately signals – in a manner remarkably reminiscent of early Baconian writing – his suspicion of authority predicated on ancient tradition, his admiration of individual learning, and his interest in the flexible meanings of figurative language, particularly their capacity for either supporting or challenging established authority.⁶⁴ Employing an elaborate metaphor of flowing water, one of the play’s many instances that read political arrangements through naturalist tropes, Webster subtly inverts the trajectory of homage in order to figure himself, rather than his patron, as the static center to which honor flows. He declares:

That I may present my excuse why, being a stranger to your Lordship, I offer this poem to your patronage, I plead this warrant: men who never saw the sea, yet desire to behold that regiment of waters, choose some eminent river to guide them thither, and make that, as it were, their conduct or postilion; by the like ingenious means has your fame arrived at my knowledge, receiving it from some of worth who both in contemplation and practices owe to your Honour their clearest service. (5-13)

While Webster ostensibly imagines “some of worth” as the conduit (as “some eminent river”) that brings his literary work to George Harding, Baron Berkeley, his syntax notably belies such homage as it sustains neither Harding as “the sea” nor himself as an

explorer.⁶⁵ For immediately after establishing that rivers do, in fact, guide men to the sea, Webster reverses the implied trajectory of the terms by claiming that *Harding's fame arrived at Webster's knowledge* ("by the like ingenious means has your fame arrived at my knowledge"). Webster, that is, subordinates Harding to the role of discoverer arriving at Webster's own knowledge, a rhetorical maneuver that subtly reverses the roles of fixed point and seeker, of patron and beneficiary, by fashioning Webster's own intellect as superior to traditional authority. Webster again boldly devalues ancient precedent and the aristocratic rank supported by it just a moment later when he argues that:

I do not altogether look up at your title, the ancientest nobility being but a relic of time past, and the truest honour indeed being for a man to confer honour on himself, which your learning strives to propagate and shall make you arrive at the dignity of a great example. I am confident this work is not unworthy your Honour's perusal; for by such poems as this, poets have kissed the hands of great princes and drawn their gentle eyes to look down upon their sheets of paper when the poets themselves were bound up in their winding sheets. The like courtesy from your Lordship shall make you live in your grave and laurel spring out of it. (13-23)

Webster's preface may extol his patron, praising Harding's "learning" rather than "title" to suggest he truly merits praise. Yet by declaring he does "not altogether look up at [his] title" since it remains "but a relic of time past," Webster exhibits a notable distrust of authority maintained solely by tradition.⁶⁶ Instead, he identifies as "the truest honour" the kind one "confer[s]...on himself," an assertion that prefaces a description of his own literary endeavors designed to appeal to his patron's "learning." By employing the conventional forms of homage to hereditary status while also subtly and overtly challenging the value of such status, Webster prefaces his play by calling established power into question through the flexible meanings of figurative language. Webster's

epistle thus immediately signals the author's distrust of tradition, praise of individual learning, and willingness to challenge established hierarchical roles.⁶⁷

Beginning *The Duchess of Malfi* proper with Antonio's homily on the well-governed state as pure, unpoisoned fountain, Webster contrasts the value of individual merit with aristocratic privilege by depicting autocratic rule as especially susceptible to corruption, prone to imposing identity from above, and easily distorted by misleading fabulism that undercuts an equitable society. The play opens with Antonio praising the French court and its "judicious king" who "quits first his royal palace / Of flatt'ring sycophants, of dissolute / And infamous persons" (1.1.6-9). Turning more generally to the nature of political organization, Antonio observes that:

A prince's court,
Is like a common fountain, whence should flow
Pure silver drops in general; but if 't chance
Some cursed example poison 't near the head,
Death and diseases through the whole land spread. (1.1.11-15)

While Antonio takes pains to differentiate between noble and ignoble government, he always imagines rule from above as totalizing in its effects, as invariably affecting the entire population by its example, and he suggests, thereby, the capacity of a rigidly stratified system for projecting its influence through *exempla*. Consequently, he imagines the "first" wise act of the "judicious king" as the banishment of "flatt'ring *sycophants*," a term suggestive in early modern culture not only of servile parasites but also of "tale-bearers," or people who distort perception through their misleading speech.⁶⁸ If strictly hierarchical rule threatens corruption of the entire polity and remains particularly susceptible to the shaping power of misleading fiction, "blessed government," Antonio notes by contrast, emerges when the citizenry may check the power of the prince with

clear speech, may “freely / Inform him the corruption of the times” (1.1.18). Thus, Antonio’s ideal polity admits the free flow of advice from below to above, from subject to prince:

Though some o’th’ court hold it presumption
To instruct princes what they ought to do,
It is a noble duty to inform them
What they ought to foresee. (1.1.19-22)

If Antonio bemoans the distorting power of language found in the diseased court, he here unambiguously values the clarifying rhetoric found in the healthy state, rhetoric that enables right perception. Webster frames his play, therefore, by contrasting the poisoned polity – where a “curs’d example” corrupts the entire populace and misleading tales distort perception – and the healthy one, where citizens contribute by describing their milieu accurately, informing princes “What they ought to foresee.”⁶⁹

Through the entrance of Bosola during Antonio’s homily, Webster reveals the fabulist language of Ferdinand’s court as not only dehumanizing the citizen but also pervasively distorting individual perception to the point of ingraining, particularly within Bosola, a predisposition towards abjection.⁷⁰ While Ferdinand and the Cardinal will reveal their propensity for using language to control their subjects in later scenes (where they figure more prominently), Webster foregrounds through Bosola how the solider has internalized a debased view of himself wrought, as we will see, by the rhetorical conventions of his rulers. A vagabond dependent upon, yet ignored by, Ferdinand and the Cardinal, Bosola instantly links the court’s neglect with his wasted condition, telling his would-be patron, “I do haunt you still” (1.1.29). Bosola’s opening line establishes his status as a mere shadow of his powerful rulers, perhaps even of his former self, and as emptied of intrinsic value. Indeed, Bosola complains that he has “done...better service

than to be *slighted* thus” (1.1.29-30), an image that equally describes the Cardinal’s treatment of him as well as his own physically wasted condition, a double resonance he explicitly evokes just a moment later: “Slighted thus? I will thrive some way: blackbirds fatten best in hard weather; why not I, in these dog-days?” (1.1.37-8). Figuring the court’s neglect as leading to Bosola’s identification with the animal world, Webster presents the servant as rapidly, almost intuitively, perceiving himself as subhuman, conditioned by the debased and dehumanizing environment in which he exists. In fact, when Antonio questions Bosola regarding the Cardinal’s behavior, the servant observes that

He and his brother are like plum trees that grow crooked over standing pools; they are rich and o’erladen with fruit, but none but crows, pies, and caterpillars feed on them. Could I be one of their flattering panders, I would hang on their ears like a horse-leech till I were full, and then drop off...Who would rely upon these miserable dependencies, in expectation to be advanced tomorrow? What creature ever fed worse than hoping Tantalus?...There are [even] rewards for hawks and dogs, and whores, when they have done us service; but for a soldier. (1.1.48-59)

Bosola’s description of the court stagnating like “standing pools” and its the leaders as “plum trees” fed upon by “crows, pies, and caterpillars” sharply contrasts Antonio’s notion of the court as a “common fountain” dispensing “drops of pure silver.” As if the sense of infestation were not pronounced enough already, Bosola yearns to “hang...like a horse-leech till...full, and then drop off,” a brutally debased image that figures the servant so low that he *aspires* to the role of mere parasite. For however insignificant a horse-leech may prove, at least it may become, as Bosola imagines, “full” rather abject, something more than a simple, starving “creature” akin to “hoping Tantalus.” Debased and dehumanized, Bosola even conjectures his position as lower than “hawks and dogs, and whores,” a claim that, with a characteristically misogynistic addition, figures the

soldier as a lowly creature indeed. Here, Bosola reveals his tendency towards reading political arrangements in fabulist terms, through tropes of the creaturely, simultaneously signaling that his subhuman condition emerges in large measure, if not derives entirely, from courtly neglect.⁷¹

Throughout the first scene, Webster locates the dehumanization of both servants and rulers alike, more specifically, in the aristocrats' obsessive efforts to prescribe the actions of their citizenry.⁷² If the world of Ferdinand's court appears brutal, Bosola animalistic, Webster quickly makes clear such a state exists precisely because those in power engender it, a reality repeatedly commented upon by the court's subjects and consistently, even obsessively, reinforced by its rulers. After Bosola's tirade against the parasitic court, for instance, Antonio claims "'Tis great pity / He should be thus neglected" since "This foul melancholy / Will poison all his goodness." He continues by noting that "want of action / Breeds all black contents, and their close rearing, / Like moths in cloth, do hurt for want of wearing" (1.1.73-81).⁷³ Charting a progression directly from Ferdinand's neglect to Bosola's melancholy, inactivity, and final transformation into a malcontent, Antonio fears a polity poisoned from above. And while the ruler as touchstone for the court remains a staple of early modern political discourse, Webster extends this image a moment later, explicitly depicting Ferdinand as obsessively attempting to construct the identity of others. When his courtiers momentarily jest among themselves, for example, Ferdinand lashes out with a disproportionately sharp rebuke: "Why do you laugh? Methinks you that are courtiers should be my touchwood, take fire when I give fire; that is, laugh when I laugh, were the subject never so witty" (1.1.122-124). The aristocratic rulers of Webster's play exhibit an intense desire to

maintain control over and dehumanize their subjects, a desire frequently noted upon by those subjected to such debasing manipulations.⁷⁴ Commenting on the Cardinal, for instance, Antonio observes that “the spring in his face is nothing but the engendering of toads; where he is jealous of any man, he lays worse plots for them than ever was imposed on Hercules” (1.1.158-61). And when Antonio likewise notes of Ferdinand that he seeks “only to entrap” his subjects, Delio concludes “Then the law to him / Is like a foul black cobweb to a spider: / He makes it his dwelling and a prison / To entangle those shall feed him” (1.1.177-180). In the predatory world ruled by Ferdinand and the Cardinal, the privileged few seek to prescribe behavior, enthrall the mind, and render their subjects subhuman as part of a concerted project of establishing and ensuring their own status as rulers of the existing order.

Webster portrays Ferdinand and the Cardinal, particularly through their manipulation of Bosola, as purposefully creating a type of subhuman, disposable underclass by wielding the combined power of prescriptive fabulism and the promise of patronage in order to ensure their own continued dominion. Although Ferdinand and the Cardinal repeatedly employ such artful rhetoric most saliently during ensuing scenes, Webster suggests from the play’s outset that virtually all of their subjects’ debased perceptions of themselves emerge as a direct result of the court’s manipulation and control. Throughout the first scene, Bosola appears as entirely degraded by his rulers and consistently links his apparent self-abnegation to his enforced status as mere servant. “I was lured to you” (1.1.231), Bosola tells the Cardinal, employing the language of angling to depict himself a hooked creature, and he later observes to Ferdinand, “It seems you would create me / One of your familiars” (1.1.258-9). By holding out the promise of

advancement, Ferdinand explicitly encourages this debased thinking. For the Duke readily reaffirms Bosola's perception, admitting "Such a kind of thriving thing / I would

wish thee; and ere long thou mayst arrive / At a higher place by 't." (1.1.261-3).

Significantly, the more the aristocracy figures Bosola as creature, the more he adopts such language himself. When Ferdinand likens him to "a politic dormouse," Bosola interjects, concluding the sentence for him: "As I have seen some feed in a lord's dish"

(1.1.282-3). Readily assenting to the dehumanized role prearranged for him, Bosola indeed seems incapable of imagining anything else.⁷⁵ In fact, on the verge of finally

receiving some preferment, he inquires "What's my place? / The provisorship o'th' horse?" and concludes that they should "Say then, my corruption / Grew out of horse dung: I am your creature" (1.1.285-87). Alert to the irony of overseeing a mere animal,

Bosola describes his condition as concomitantly corrupted and creaturely, a status directly emanating from the court's deft use of political favor and imaginative rhetoric.⁷⁶

III. Reimagining Fabulism: The Duchess and the Construction of Authoritative Narration

Against this backdrop of a corrupt court that obsessively controls and dehumanizes others, Webster introduces the Duchess as employing aristocratic power in order to delimit a more egalitarian space, as resolutely refusing to use the constraining fabulism (common to her brothers) that reduces the citizenry to the creaturely, and, what is more, as even employing her speech to elevate rather than debase those in her purview. Antonio's -first description of the Duchess prior to her arrival onstage, for instance, emphasizes the protagonist's continence, her ability to govern not only her own deeds but, more significantly, the intrusive forces external to her as well.⁷⁷ In contrast to the

other aristocrats who use language to control and debase others, distancing the citizenry from themselves in order to define their own dominion, the Duchess, Antonio observes, stands out for “her discourse...so full of rapture” that it promotes sympathy, an emotional affiliation, even across class lines and draws others towards her. If the Duchess’ voice seizes the listener (as the word rapture connotes), her speech does not constrain but rather ennobles, elevates, and even inspires. While no doubt the hyperbolic valuation of a lover, Antonio’s description nonetheless immediately distinguishes the Duchess as one who wields language nobly. At the same time, her “sweet look” – despite its power to incite and arouse, to “raise one to a galliard / That lay in a dead palsy” – checks the otherwise unbridled flow of corrupting influences in the court (1.1.195-97). For “in that look,” Antonio avers,

There speaketh so divine a continence
As cuts off all lascivious and vain hope.
Her days are practiced in such noble virtue
That sure her nights – nay more, her very sleeps –
Are more in heaven than other ladies’ shrifts. (1.1.198-203)

Where the Duchess’ continence of speech provokes desire to hear more and her look invites one “to dote / On that sweet countenance,” both speech and appearance ultimately foreclose further intrusion into her private life. From the outset, then, Antonio depicts the Duchess as defined by her self-enclosure from the corrupted court, a fact that will become ever more apparent through her own mode of discourse, remarkable for its departure from the divisive, dehumanizing rhetoric of her fellow aristocrats.

The Duchess first enters the play (in contrast to the subservient Bosola) successfully countering her brothers’ attempts to contain and dehumanize her through their overtly prescriptive language. More significantly, she articulates her decision to

remarry as leading to the creation of her *own* lore, a type of descriptive language that will “report” the experiences generated through her private, autonomous action. Harnessing tropes clearly designed to subjugate and debase the Duchess, Ferdinand immediately attempts to control his sister with his prescriptive, fabulist rhetoric, asserting that those who “will wed twice” have “livers...more spotted / Than Laban’s sheep” (1.1.298-9). In addition, he counsels, “You live in a rank pasture here i’t’h court: / There is a kind of honeydew that’s deadly; / ’Twill poison your fame. Look to ’t...” (1.1.305-8). As the Duchess dismisses both her brothers’ advice as “terrible good counsel” (1.1.312), they redouble their efforts, attempting to reshape her willful resistance into something more appropriately subhuman. Thus, when the Cardinal imagines “You may flatter yourself, / And take your own choice” (1.1.316-7), Ferdinand takes up the thread, describing the willful Duchess as “like the irregular crab, / Which, though ’t goes backward, think that it goes right / Because it goes its own way” (1.1.319-320)⁷⁸ As the brothers attempt to refashion the Duchess’ claim to “choice” into something akin to a misguided, unreasoning creature, they thus employ a type of fabulism meant to alter the behavior they encounter. When the Duchess again repudiates their claim to control (“I think this speech between you both was studied, / It came so roundly off” [1.1.329-30]), Ferdinand threatens her with his “father’s poniard,” crudely asserting that “women like that part, which like the lamprey, / Hath ne’er a bone in ’t” (1.1.324-5, 331-337). The phallic allusion in Ferdinand’s speech has elicited much critical comment, but, notably, Ferdinand follows this attempt to affiliate the Duchess with the creaturely with his overt avowal of the power of fabulist discourse: “Nay, / I mean the tongue.../ What cannot a neat knave with a smooth tale / Make a woman believe?” (1.1.337-40).⁷⁹ By figuring

women as undone by narrative, by “a smooth *tale*,” that can “*make* a woman believe,” Ferdinand expressly signals his belief in the power of imaginative language to control and even demean the listener against her will. Unlike Bosola, the Duchess responds to these attempts to constrain by language, first, by repudiating them (“Shall this move me? [1.1.341]) and, then, by fashioning *her own* authorizing narrative (“So I, through frights and threat’nings, will assay / This dangerous venture. Let old wives report / I winked and chose a husband” [1.1.347-9]). The Duchess, that is, rejects the prescriptive fabulism of her brothers and, instead, creates her own experiment (for she “will *assay* / This dangerous adventure”), an experiment that will then become a tale of “old wives” that describes (rather than *prescribes*) her deeds.⁸⁰ Although the Duchess may well express a degree of contempt for “old wives” tales, she also imaginatively positions herself nonetheless as a subject whose deeds will prove significantly suitable for recounting by those who follow her.

Articulating her socially transgressive behavior as worthy of generating subsequent lore, the Duchess holds forth the promise of enlightened aristocratic largesse, one that proves beneficent, even leveling, in its application.⁸¹ Yet by emphasizing such unconventional deeds must stay hidden from the distorting power of the court, the Duchess also suggests such an alternative remains impossible within the confines of the current hierarchical system. Thus, while the Duchess depicts her wooing of Antonio as a type of direct, experimental engagement with the natural world, as “going into a wilderness / Where I shall find nor path nor friendly clew / To be my guide” (1.1.359-61), such exploration must occur outside the court, and the Duchess quickly emphasizes the importance of holding her brothers’ pervasive influence at bay. When Antonio voices

concern over the Duke and the Cardinal, the Duchess reiterates the need for establishing a sphere for autonomous action, advising, “Do not think of them; / All discord, without this circumference, / Is only to be pitied, and not feared” (1.1.468-70). If the “discord” imagined by the Duchess occurs “without this circumference” and within the rigidly hierarchical court, she imagines Antonio and herself, by contrast, as inhabiting a more orderly, egalitarian world. The Duchess specifically uses the language of repairing and improving one’s private estate to characterize her transgressive contract with Antonio:

Sir,
This goodly roof of yours is too low built;
I cannot stand upright in ’t, nor discourse,
Without I raise it higher. Raise yourself,
Or, if you please, my hand to help you: so. [Raises him.] (1.1.415-419)

By explicitly envisioning her union with her steward as an instance of estate management, or the improving of one’s household, the Duchess seeks to level social distinctions, a fact Webster reinforces through the formal stylistics of the line.⁸² Thus, the caesura within the line “I cannot stand upright...Without I raise it higher. Raise yourself” juxtaposes the Duchess’ aristocratic largesse with an emphasis on the middling steward’s own agency, an implicit sense of *cooperation* physically enacted a moment later with the joining of hands: “Or, if you please, my hand to help you.” The Duchess may prove the mechanism that “raises him” but he – unlike, as we will see, Bosola – participates in this venture and accepts the Duchess’ proffered solidarity.

The Duchess likewise appears as an enduring model of aristocratic power rightly applied, a source of libratory rather than repressive discourse, when Ferdinand discovers her union with Antonio. When the Duchess informs Ferdinand of her marriage, she describes him as powerless to restrain Antonio:

Happily, not to your liking; but for that,
 Alas, your shears do come untimely now
 To clip the bird's wings that's already flown! (3.2.81, 83-85)

Despite Ferdinand's attempts to keep his subjects subhuman, then, the Duchess has (for the moment) successfully arranged for Antonio's liberation nonetheless, and her retort draws from her brother a torrent of images indicative of his desire to reduce his subjects to the status of contained creatures. Thus, when the Duchess asks "Will you see my husband?" (3.2.86), Ferdinand declares, "Yes, if I could change / eyes with a basilisk," forestalling future conversation by exclaiming "The howling of a wolf / Is music to thee, screech-owl. Prithee, peace!" (3.2.88-9). Ferdinand's desire to both contain and dehumanize through prescriptive rhetoric finds its most salient articulation as he concludes:

*I would have thee build
 Such a room for him as our anchorites
 To holier use inhabit. Let not the sun
 Shine on him till he's dead. Let dogs and monkeys
 Only converse with him, and such dumb things
 To whom nature denies use to sound his name.
 Do not keep a paraquito, lest she learn it. (3.2.101-107, emphasis added)*

As the dark enclosure envisioned by Ferdinand transforms from "such a room" inhabited by "anchorites" into a type of cage – full of "dogs and monkeys" and "such dumb things" – his rhetoric blurs the distinction between human and subhuman, imagining Antonio as occupying the same space as the creaturely. Confronted with such elaborate rhetorical flourishes designed to contain her, the Duchess refocuses Ferdinand's objections back on the central issue and challenges antique precedent by herself appealing to precedent: "Why might I not marry? / I have not gone about, in this, to create / Any new world, or custom." (3.2.109-111). By averring that she has not "in this" sought to fashion "any

new world, or custom,” the Duchess appeals to convention in order to justify her transgression of class boundaries, a line of reasoning that culminates in her final challenge to her brother: “Why should only I, / Of all the other princes of the world, / Be cased up, like a holy relic?” (3.2.137-9). Adept at turning Ferdinand’s speech upon itself, at using his own predicates and terms against him, the Duchess disavows the prescriptive language of the dead, enclosed spaces inhabited by the creaturely envisioned by her brother. Instead, she turns his rhetoric designed to distort perception and enthrall the citizen into justifications for her own radical social experiment that challenges established hierarchical boundaries.

As the Duchess gradually loses her freedom to act autonomously, to make her assay into her own an egalitarian contract, she articulates her subjugation as akin to the containment of the creaturely; yet, significantly, she persists in emphasizing that the natural world provides no inherent precedent for her brothers’ restrictions, resisting to the end their prescriptive narratives and invoking still a type of descriptive fabulism that instead reads nature observationally. Preparing to take her leave of Antonio, the Duchess sadly reflects on their state, observing that:

The birds that live i’t’h’ field
On the wild benefit of nature live
Happier than we; for they may choose their mates,
And carol their sweet pleasure to the spring. (3.5.18-21).

By figuring the uncontained animal as “happier” since “they may choose their mates,” the Duchess implicitly imagines herself as subjugated and contained and, what is more, artificially so, unable to enjoy “the wild benefit of nature.” The strictures enforced by her brothers appear, thus, as contrary to “nature,” imposed from an external and false authority onto an entity that otherwise would live freely.⁸³ Webster further emphasizes

the planned capture of the Duchess' family as both dehumanizing and contrary to a naturally-free existence by having Bosola, as the soldier himself describes it, act as one that "frights the silly birds / Out of the corn" and "allure[s] them / To the nets" (3.5.102-4). Later still, the Duchess will carry the metaphor even further by noting "With such pity men preserve alive / Pheasants and quails, when they are not fat enough / To be eaten" (3.5.111-13). Immediately preceding the Duchess' singular fable of the salmon and the dogfish, the Duchess' comments signal her awareness of her brothers' desire to render her subhuman through containment, and she describes, moreover, such desire as fundamentally *unnatural*.⁸⁴

Within this context of redoubled tropes of the contained animal, the Duchess uses the fable of the salmon and the dogfish not only to defend Antonio against Bosola's charge of natural inferiority but also to depict her own current plight. More ingeniously still, the Duchess employs her fable in order to encourage Bosola – through the very mechanism of reading humanity through the animal world that he has so thoroughly practiced himself – to reconsider his own abject condition and distorted perception. Complex, curious, and appearing at a critical juncture of the play – at the moment Bosola first imprisons the Duchess – the Duchess' fable invites the soldier-servant to reconsider the status of existing hierarchies:

I prithee, who is greatest can you tell?
 Sad tales befit my woe; I'll tell you one.
 A salmon, as she swam unto the sea,
 Met with a dogfish, who encounters her
 With this rough language: 'Why are thou so bold
 To mix thyself with our high state of floods,
 Being no eminent courtier, but one
 That for the calmest and fresh time o'th' year
 Dost live in shallow rivers, rank'st thyself
 With silly smelts and shrimps? And darest thou

Pass by our dog-ship, without reverence?
 'O', quoth the salmon, 'sister, be at peace:
 Thank Jupiter we both have passed the net!
 Our value never can be truly known
 Till in the fisher's basket we be shown;
 I'th' market then my price may be the higher,
 Even when I am nearest to the cook and fire.'
 So, to great men, the moral may be stretched:
Men oft are valued high when th'are most wretch'd. (3.5.123-141)

Notably, the Duchess presents the fable not only as a defense of Antonio against Ferdinand but also as illustrative of her own interaction with Bosola. For the variability of the fable's referents align the salmon, alternately, with either Antonio or the Duchess and the dogfish with either Ferdinand or, more surprisingly, Bosola. Despite setting out to prove Antonio's worth, the Duchess begins by claiming "sad tales befit *my* woe; I'll tell you one," affiliating the ensuing narrative with *her* own condition.⁸⁵ Likewise, the fable's moral focusing on ensnarement – of waiting "in the fisher's basket [to] be shown" – remains most evocative of the Duchess' own condition as the one presently ensnared and "nearest to the cook and fire." Thus, while the salmon may signify Antonio (as one of low rank who remains free nonetheless), the salmon's imagined demise seems apposite to the Duchess' situation, and the story that "befits [her] woe" concludes with resignation to her fate: "But come; whither you please. I am armed 'gainst misery" (3.5.142). If, therefore, the Duchess invites us to read the salmon as Antonio or herself, she likewise suggests the dogfish, despite its alignment with high rank, may signify Bosola. Immediately preceding the fable, for instance, Bosola launches into a strident attack on Antonio and urges the Duchess to "forget this base, low fellow...one of no birth." The dogfish, likewise, upbraids the salmon "with...rough language," disdaining her as one that "rank'st thyself / With silly smelts and shrimps." While the fable of the salmon and

dogfish, then, focuses largely on depicting Ferdinand's reaction to Antonio's low birth, the tale itself registers, only slightly less overtly, the interaction between the Duchess and Bosola as well. Since the parameters of fabulist language prove malleable indeed – the Duchess, after all, notes that “the moral may be *stretched*” – she uses the fable to defend Antonio, bemoan her own plight, and invite Bosola to be wary of his false confidence expressed through his unwarranted and rough language.

By using the human-as-animal trope to resist the dehumanizing effects of the court – by inverting, that is, the very fabulist mechanisms employed as methods of political repression – the Duchess seeks to have Bosola perceive his inherent kinship with both her and Antonio, and, in doing so, tries to invoke a sense of natural solidarity, a type of inherent kinship, with another repressed citizen. The Duchess depicts the fable, then, as potentially subversive, a means of generating solidarity between captive and captor, both subject as they are to containment (and exploitation) by figures more powerful than themselves.⁸⁶ By opening her fable with the dual questions “who is greatest, can you tell,” the Duchess simultaneously draws attention to the ascription of value to a human life and the capacity of Bosola to accurately perceive it. She invites Bosola, that is, to rethink eminence, and she invites the audience to rethink Bosola, to attend more closely to his process of ethical perception, to wait and see whether he will, in fact, be able to “tell.” On one level, then, the fable operates in defense of Antonio, who mingles “with our high state of floods” despite “being no eminent courtier” who “darest” to transgress class boundaries “without reverence.” But it also functions to challenge Bosola's perception of humanity as akin to the subhuman by turning to the animal fable, by reading, that is, the human through the animal in order to affirm the value of the former.

Appealing to a “value” that “never can be truly known” until a later time, the Duchess concludes that “Men oft are valued high when th’ are most wretched,” a move that, while failing to conclusively establish the value of the repressed, opens a theoretical alternative to the prescriptive narratives of the court. The fable, then, focuses its energies on prompting Bosola to rethink social relations, particularly the definition of eminence, the valuation of the human, and the servant’s own relation to power.⁸⁷

If the deafening silence that follows the Duchess’ fable underscores the gulf between the Duchess and Bosola, between their various capacities for appreciating the promise held forth by generating one’s own authorizing fables, Webster again emphasizes such distance as Bosola persists in imagining the human as *inevitably* subjugated – a view starkly at odds with the Duchess who retains autonomy even in her final moments. While Bosola imagines that Ferdinand’s “restraint” of the Duchess makes her “like English mastiffs that grow fierce with tying,” the Duchess remains, in fact, quietly resigned. For when Cariola calls for her “to shake this durance off,” the Duchess replies, “Thou art a fool. / The robin redbreast and the nightingale / Never live long in cages” (4.2.12-14). Both Bosola and the Duchess may perceive subjugation as akin to “tying” or caging an animal, but the Duchess resolutely points up the unnatural essence of such circumscription, defying it to the end.⁸⁸ The Duchess resists attempts to render her subhuman and famously retains her sense of value, declaring “I am Duchess of Malfi still” (4.2.141). Bosola, by contrast, perceives – even at the end of the Duchess’ life – the human condition as inherently and unalterably subhuman; for Bosola, the metaphors of degrading entrapment signify immutable reality. Thus, when the Duchess

inquires of Bosola, disguised as a madman, “who am I,” he dubs her “a box of worm-seed,” and claims:

Our bodies are weaker than those paper prisons boys use to keep flies in; more contemptible, since ours is to preserve earthworms. Dist thou ever see a lark in a cage? Such is the soul in the body; this world is like her little turf of grass, and the heaven o’er our heads, like her looking-glass, only give us a miserable knowledge of the small compass of our prison...Thou sleepest worse than if a mouse should be forced to take up her lodging in a cat’s ear. (4.2.213-138)

Notably, the sequence of images here depicts not only a debased humanity but an enclosed one, and Bosola expresses through each trope an inherently oppressive power relation. Thus, “our bodies” appear as “prisons,” operating as mere “cage[s]” to the soul; the “world” becomes a “little turf” and “the heaven” a mere “glass” reflecting “the small compass of our prison;” and the Duchess becomes emblematic, thereby, of the entire human condition since she remains “forced” to reside where she does. While Bosola’s rhetoric remains conventional enough, the sheer quantity and the condensed reduplication of such tropes signal their centrality to Bosola’s political hermeneutic. Whereas the Duchess rejects the prescriptive narratives of Ferdinand’s court, Bosola has so internalized them that his perception remains almost irrevocably distorted.

IV. Kinds of Nothing and Deep Pits of Darkness: Systemic Inequity and the Powers of Fabulism

By declaring that her death will permit her predatory brothers to “feed in quiet,” the Duchess retains a type of autonomy – granting permission to her captors and, undeterred by the court’s prescriptive narratives, lucidly calling attention to the court’s debased nature – yet she also acknowledges her attempt to wield aristocratic power for more egalitarian ends as ultimately failing to counter the court’s systemic inequity.⁸⁹ As the executioners remove her waiting woman, the Duchess takes her leave, declaring:

Farewell, Cariola.
 In my last will I have not much to give;
 A many hungry guests have fed upon me;
 Thine will be a poor reversion. (4.2.198-201)

Through the discussion of her “will” – a word with double resonance that invokes the materialization of personal desire, or agency, through legal transaction – the Duchess signals her beneficent regard for the servant class and suggests her desire to transfer her own alternative vision of aristocratic largesse into an empowering reality. The Duchess contrasts, therefore, her own more egalitarian vision with the current predatory court where many “hungry guests have fed” on her very person. Just before her execution, the Duchess implicitly sets her own application of aristocratic power against that of her brothers and signals the essence of the court system she now exits:

Go tell my brothers, when I am laid out,
 They then may feed in quiet. *They strangle her.* (4.2.235-6)

Here, the Duchess not only depicts her brothers as predatory – as “feed[ing]” on their helpless subjects – but also acknowledges her own central role in disrupting that process. More significantly, she imagines her removal as admitting “quiet,” a portrayal suggestive that her disruption of her brothers’ plans occurred, in part, because of the speech – the report of old wives, as it were – generated by her transgressive behavior. Notably, in the final moment of redoubled physical circumscription – imprisonment coupled with strangulation – the Duchess exhibits a commanding presence, a will that remains free and that refuses to internalize the dehumanizing narrative offered by her milieu. For she both orders the very men executing her (“Go tell,”) and (in declaring “they then may feed”) grants a type of ironic permission to the brothers who ordered the execution in the first place. Resisting the prescriptive attempts to control her thinking, the Duchess, even at

the end, opts instead to describe accurately the world abusing her. Undaunted by the prescriptive rhetoric of the court, her perception undistorted, the Duchess remains free to instead describe the court as she directly observes it.

After the Duchess' death, Webster juxtaposes the Cardinal's seizure of Antonio's lands – figured as a type of ravenous consumption – with Ferdinand's disintegration into his delusional lycanthropia in order to show how the predatory and dehumanizing nature of the aristocratic system debases even those most privileged by it. Although Ferdinand dismisses the death of the Duchess' children by declaring “the death / Of young wolves is never to be pitied” (4.2.258), the subhuman imagery quickly obtains to himself as well, and Ferdinand's condition almost literalizes the nexus between human and subhuman. After imagining that “The wolf shall find her grave, and scrape it up, / Not to devour the corpse, but to discover / The horrid murder,” Ferdinand exits, promising “I'll go hunt the badger by owl-light: 'Tis a deed of darkness” (4.2.308-310, 333-4). If Ferdinand's lycanthropia further blurs the distinction between human and animal, so too, then, does the seizure of the Duchess' and Antonio's lands. Delio and the Marquis of Pescara, for instance, tellingly depict this reclamation of land as an act of predation, a consumption of the powerless by the powerful. For where Delio imagines the Cardinal as arranging “nets to entrap” Antonio and as convincing the Marquis of Pescara “to seize those lands,” Pescara, when asked why he bestows Antonio's lands “to such a creature” as Julia, explains that “it was Antonio's land: not forfeited / By course of law, but ravished from his throat” (5.1.5-8, 39-42). The court, Webster suggests here, not only steals but, in doing so, consumes the very sustenance of others. The demise of the Duchess, indeed, allows for the feeding of her rapacious brothers. To underscore the point, moreover,

Webster frames such rapacious behavior with Ferdinand's return to the stage as he exhibits signs of "lycanthropy," joining those who "imagine / Themselves to be transformed into wolves" (5.2.5, 10).⁹⁰ If the Cardinal becomes more openly predatory, prompting Bosola to observe that "this fellow doth breed basilisk in 's eyes" and acts as a deceptive "old fox" (5.2.145, 150), Ferdinand's subhuman nature manifests itself in overt disorder and the disintegration of personality, as both men suffer the debilitating effects of the repressive world they have created.⁹¹

At the Duchess' death, Bosola evinces a burgeoning awareness that he has internalized the misleading prescriptive narratives of the court system, and yet, as he attempts to remedy his subjugation, he fails to conceive a mode resistance beyond the physical deposition of tyrants, a mode that would prove more lasting in its effects. As Bosola realizes his debased condition, he depicts himself as no longer held in thrall by the promise of wealth, rejects the repressive aristocratic system of patronage, resolves, instead, to rebel against tyranny, and opts for solidarity with the downtrodden, outcast Antonio. Asking himself, "What would I do, were this to do again," Bosola concludes "I would not change my peace of conscience / For all the wealth of Europe" (4.2.338-40), as his utter debasement leads to a type of moral epiphany. Depicting his reformation as deriving from his emancipation from anxiety, Bosola declares, "My estate is sunk / Below the degree of fear" and acknowledging unambiguously that Ferdinand functions as a "cruel tyrant" (4.2.362-364, 371). As Bosola dispenses with fear, he shows a nascent, yet still inchoate, awareness that while the ravenous aristocracy may seek to dehumanize and consume their citizens, the individual subject need neither accept such a characterization nor internalize its sustaining narratives. Consequently, when Bosola

observes that “these most cruel biters...have got / Some of [Antonio’s] blood already,” he nonetheless joins forces with Antonio even though such “cruel biters” still hold power (5.2.340-1). “It may be,” Bosola imagines, “I’ll join with thee in a most just revenge. / The weakest arm is strong enough that strikes / With the sword of justice” (5.2.341-344). Bosola, increasing alert that his subjugation need not be an inevitable one, perceives his world more clearly, yet – in his vision of a purely physical revenge – fails to appreciate that Ferdinand and the Cardinal operate, in fact, as the mere figureheads of a more corrupt system.

Bosola’s growing awareness of the court’s pervasive influence over perception becomes more acute after his revenge miscarries and he kills Antonio, and, as Bosola more clearly recognizes his “misprision,” he vows to ignore the prescriptive dictates of the aristocracy, to encounter, instead, the world directly, his thinking unmediated by preestablished authority. “O direful misprision,” Bosola exclaims, “I will not imitate things glorious, / No more than base; I’ll be mine own example” (5.3.80-82). Bosola’s incapacity to imagine himself as anything but creaturely has, indeed, proved a misprision – a function of the distorting language of Ferdinand’s court that taught him (by their own “glorious” example) to imitate the creaturely, or “things...base.” Moreover, as Bosola recognizes the folly of imitating “things glorious” as well as “base,” he realizes that such reliance on the great proves, ultimately, a type of debilitating subservience. Bosola begins, only at the play’s end, to recognize the metaphors and rhetoric of the court as prescriptive, and when he vows to “be mine own example,” he begins – in a manner not unlike the Duchess – to make his own assay away from custom and existing authority.⁹²

In his revenge, Bosola gestures towards a type of political leveling, a materialization of his new awareness of the aristocratic system as poisonous and hollow, a construct with no value intrinsic to itself and predicated simply on the exploitation of the underclass. As Bosola finally stabs the Cardinal, he realizes that the language of the court – language that subjugated him while also exalting the Cardinal and Ferdinand – created an otherwise non-essential distinction between the classes. “Now it seems thy greatness was only outward,” Bosola declares, and he marvels at how the Cardinal’s superior image deflates before his eyes: “thou fall’st faster of thyself than calamity / Can drive thee!” (5.5.43-45). Moreover, as Bosola exposes the fictions of the court, both the Cardinal and Duke acknowledge their own dehumanized, contained condition. For the Cardinal laments that he “shall...die like a leveret / Without any resistance,” and Ferdinand observes that he “account[s] this world but a dog-kennel” (5.5.45-6, 67). The prescriptive fictions of the court at once lose purchase with Bosola and overtly redound on Ferdinand and the Cardinal. Moreover, while striking the aristocratic figures who subjugated him throughout the play, Bosola inverts the power structure momentarily and proudly describes this instance of usurped authority as an object lesson of sorts, as revelatory of the true essence of courtly politics:

Yes, I hold my weary soul in my teeth;
 ’Tis ready to part from me. – I do glory
 That thou, which stood’st like a huge pyramid
 Begun upon a large and ample base,
 Shalt end in a little point, a kind of nothing. (5.5.75-9)

No longer merely consumed by the predatory aristocracy, nor his interior state solely shaped by the conditions imposed from without, Bosola “hold[s]” his “weary soul” in his “teeth,” as he both tenuously holds to life and forcibly retains his own identity, notably

turning the dehumanizing trope of consumption here into a type of self-protective gesture. Bosola's self-command precedes his declaration that the Cardinal, who once seemed "like a huge pyramid," "shalt end in a little point, a kind of nothing." The revenger's delight stems both from his awareness that a once-imposing figure now dissipates into nothing but also from his epiphany that such an impressive pyramid relies "upon a large and ample base." The privileged aristocrat, like the apex of the pyramid, only exists because of the indispensable "base," and Bosola realizes just prior to his own death that where the mighty prove "a little point, a kind of nothing," the base, or lowborn, remain both "large and ample."⁹³

Bosola's revenge, while theatrically satisfying, ultimately fails, however. For by killing Ferdinand and the Cardinal, the servant merely displaces the figureheads of the corrupt system he loathes, failing to undo the pervasive, underlying fabulism that perpetuates the court's systemic inequity. As Bosola dies, he locates the cause of his corrupted and debased nature in the court's system of patronage, noting that he acted "Much 'gainst mine own good nature, yet i'th' end / Neglected" (5.5.86-7). More significantly, Bosola identifies such degrading political arrangements as deriving from a fundamental epistemological error, namely, the human propensity towards accepting misleading fictions. Bosola observes:

O, this gloomy world!
 In what shadow, or deep pit of darkness,
 Doth womanish and fearful mankind live!
 Let worthy minds ne'er stagger in distrust
 To suffer death or shame for what is just –
 Mine is another voyage. [Dies.] (5.5.100-5)

Bosola's "gloomy world," lost within "shadow, or deep pit of darkness," evokes Plato's cave and Bacon's idols of the mind in order to show humanity's condition as "fearful," a

condition developed through a type of mental enslavement.⁹⁴ Significantly, Bosola begins to perceive nobility, therein, as a function of *thought*. Yet while Bosola exhibits here a depth of political awareness regarding the need to resist tyranny – the need to endure not only “death” but also “shame” or, as he describes it throughout the play, “neglect” – he fails to undo the underlying order of hereditary privilege that generated his debasement in first place. Despite Delio’s call for solidarity in the play’s final lines, the projected action of the play – envisioning the installation of the Duchess’ remaining son into power – ultimately perpetuates hereditary privilege.⁹⁵ Thus, “the noble Delio” promotes the “pretty gentleman, [Antonio’s] son and heir,” an effort Delio articulates as “mak[ing] noble use / Of this great ruin” and as “establish[ing] this young, hopeful gentleman / In ’s mother’s right” (5.5.106, 110-113). On the play’s final note, hereditary privilege persists, its validating narrative reinforced by distinguishing between noble and ignoble humanity, between the “wretched eminent things” now openly represented by Ferdinand and the Cardinal and the “great men” ready to take up their prescriptive function as “lords of truth,” a function putatively ascribed to them by “Nature” itself (5.5.113, 118-9).

Webster thus depicts both the Duchess’ secret resistance to her brothers and Bosola’s violent rebellion against tyranny as ultimately failing, as, respectively, avoiding or displacing mere figureheads of a corrupt system but not, however, undoing the system itself. Through both tragic narratives, Webster presents two failed counter discourses – revolt from above and revolt from below – to the aristocratic system of patronage. In doing so, however, Webster invites consideration of what *might* succeed in displacing an entrenched political system rather than its temporary leaders, and the compelling cases of

both the Duchess and Bosola suggest that where each failed individually, both, if operating together, could perhaps sustain an alternative social structure. Webster depicts Ferdinand's and the Cardinal's power as relying on prescriptive fabulism, as wielding the power of language to circumscribe and dehumanize in order to establish aristocratic dominion. If Webster exposes such political strategies as reflexive, as ultimately debasing the rulers who enact it, he also challenges the value of prescriptive fabulism through the Duchess' own assay into a more egalitarian contract. For the Duchess not only repudiates the strictures of the court enforced through the powers of rhetoric but also generates out of her own direct social experimentation a descriptive lore meant to last generations. As the Duchess imagines a community of "old wives" who will "report" that she "wink'd and chose a husband," she imagines her actions as generating narrative after the fact – a type of her own fabulism that describes rather than prescribes a role. Her venture into a wilderness with no direct "clue" how to proceed becomes, as she imagines, transcribed into lore for posterity. Yet the Duchess holds out an even greater transgressive possibility by inviting Bosola to appreciate his position as akin to her own through the fable of the salmon and the dogfish. The prospect of solidarity across class lines among the repressed remains the unrealized promise held out throughout *The Duchess of Malfi*. Webster's play becomes, in essence, its own fabular form, a narrative rife with social antagonisms that gestures towards unrealized – in some respects, only faintly adumbrated – alternative political possibilities.⁹⁶

¹ Although critics do not usually describe Bosola as "protagonist," he appears at the head of the play's *Dramatis Personae* (the first one in English to publish actors' names along

side their corresponding roles) and serves as principal focus after the Duchess' death for the play's entire fifth act.

² For a reading critical of the Duchess, see Clifford Leech, *John Webster: A Critical Study*, (New York: Haskell House, 1966): esp. 69-77. See also Joyce E. Peterson, *Curs'd Example: The Duchess of Malfi and Commonweal Tragedy*, (Columbia: U of Missouri P, 1978): 79-104, esp. 79-88. For a reading sympathetic to the Duchess, see Elizabeth Oakes, "The Duchess of Malfi as a Tragedy of Identity," *Studies in Philology* 96 (1999): 51-67. On the likely diversity of early modern opinion towards the Duchess, Lady Arbella Stuart, and remarrying widows, see Sara Jayne Steen, "The Crime of Marriage: Arbella Stuart and *The Duchess of Malfi*," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 22 (1991): 61-76.

³ Charles Forker observes that "Despite her technical hegemony, the Duchess is a virtual prisoner in her own realm long before she is physically incarcerated" *Skull the Beneath the Skin: The Achievement of John Webster*, [Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1986]: 301).

⁴ See, for example, Lee Bliss, *The World's Perspective: John Webster and the Jacobean Drama*, (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1983): 138.

⁵ *The Duchess of Malfi*, for instance, alludes to blackbirds; crows, pies and caterpillars; horseleeches; hawks and dogs; moths; Spanish jennets; toads; spiders; a dormouse; Laban's sheep; a crab; a lamprey; starlings; an abortive hedgehog; a dead pigeon; lice and worms; a tithe pig; a springal; hares, horses, and crickets; the owl; a mole; a snake; a hyena; a basilisk; a howling wolf; dogs, a monkey, and a paraquito; a bear in a ring; foxes; a salamander; birds; bloodhounds; a tiger; a salmon and a dogfish; a bee; ravens, bulls, and swans; porcupines; a woodcock; flies and earthworms; a lark in a cage; a mouse asleep in a cat's ear; glow worms; a badger; a turtledove; eagles; six snails; a cockatrix's egg; and fish ponds. By no means exhaustive, this list represents the play's investment in the animal world as a means for articulating human interaction. Ralph Berry notes that "...the animal images continuously underscore the action...[as] well over sixty different sorts of animals are alluded to in *The Duchess of Malfi*" (*The Art of John Webster*, [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972]: 111). On the play's "animalistic milieu," see also Richard Bodtke, *Tragedy and the Jacobean Temper: The Major Plays of John Webster*, *Jacobean Drama Studies*, ed. James Hogg (Salzburg: Universitat Salzburg, 1972): 27-35

⁶ On the repeated imagery of the court as "breed[ing] nothing but poisonous and preying forms of life," see Nigel Alexander, "Intelligence in *The Duchess of Malfi*," *John Webster*, ed. Brian Morris, 104-105.

⁷ On the political import of the term "creature," see Julia Reinhard Lupton, "Creature Caliban," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 51 (2000):1-23.

⁸ On Webster's interest in fabulism, see Rupert Brooke, *John Webster and the Elizabethan Drama*, (New York: John Lane, 1916). Brooke describes Webster's fables as "long-winded, irrelevant, and fantastically unrealistic tales. They are of a sententious, simple kind, such as might appear in Aesop. Generally they seem to be lugged in by their ears into the play" (135). Clifford Leech, even while calling attention to their value, concedes that "there is no doubt that these interposed fables in Webster's tragedies constitute an oddity for most modern readers. We can hardly guess how they sounded in 1612-14" ("Distancing in *The Duchess of Malfi*," in *Twentieth Century Interpretations of*

The Duchess of Malfi: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Norman Rabkin, [Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1968]: 87). “Fable,” M.C. Bradbrook notes, “is aggressively unpretentious, and Webster was later [in *The Duchess of Malfi*] to employ tactics of implicit comment for political ends” (*John Webster: Citizen and Dramatist*, [London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1980]: 136).

⁹ See, for instance, Perez Zagorin, “Francis Bacon’s Concept of Objectivity and the Idols of the Mind,” *British Journal for the History of Science* 34 (2001): 379-393, esp. 387, and Benjamin Farrington, *The Philosophy of Francis Bacon: An Essay on its Development from 1603 to 1609 with New Translations of Fundamental Texts*, (Chicago, U of Chicago P, 1964): 28, 93. Bacon’s desire to restore a self-defining dominion over creation will find its fullest articulation in the *Instauration of Learning* (1620), written, in the words of its preface, “so that the mind may exercise its right over nature” (Francis Bacon, *The New Organon*, ed. Lisa Jardine and Michael Silverthorne, [Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000]:6). On Bacon’s “vision...of a science leading to the sovereignty, dominion, and master of man over nature,” see Evelyn Fox Keller, “Baconian Science: The Arts of Mastery and Obedience,” *Reflections on Gender and Science*, (New Haven: Yale UP, 1985) 33-42, esp. 34-5. On Bacon and dominion, see also Erica Fudge, “Calling Creatures by Their True Names: Bacon, the New Science and the Beast in Man,” in *At the Borders of the Human: Beasts, Bodies and Natural Philosophy in the Early Modern Period*, ed. Erica Fudge, Ruth Gilbert, and Susan Wiseman, (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1999): 94; Charles Whitney, “Francis Bacon’s *Instauration*: Dominion of and over Humanity,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 50 (1989): 271-390, esp. 373; and Farrington, 28, 93.

¹⁰ Francis Bacon, *The Masculine Birth of Time*, in Farrington, 62. See also Rob Iliffe, “The Masculine Birth of Time: Temporal Frameworks of Early Modern Natural Philosophy,” *British Journal for the History of Science* 22 (2000): 427-453, esp. 442.

¹¹ Francis Bacon, *Valerius Terminus*, in *The Works of Francis Bacon*, ed. James Spedding, Robert Leslie Ellis, and Douglass Denton Heath, (1859), (Reprinted, Stuttgart: Freidrich Frommann, 1963), Vol. 6, p. 34.

¹² 178.

¹³ “For Bacon, the smooth mirror of the human mind had been distorted by Adam’s fall. In this way man lost his God-given ability to understand and control the natural world, substituting instead the dreams and hallucinations of imagination. The task Bacon set out for himself was to restore man to his original state of power and knowledge. To accomplish this, he had to ‘deliver and reduce’ the mind from the deceptions of imagination” (Katharine Park, “Bacon’s ‘Enchanted Glass,’” *Isis* 75 [1984], 290-302, esp. 290).

¹⁴ 62.

¹⁵ “Calling Creatures,” 92.

¹⁶ “In Bacon’s thought the application of reason, and, by extension, the control of the natural world is what makes a human” (Fudge, “Calling Creatures,” 92).

¹⁷ See also Stephen Gaukroger, *Francis Bacon and the Transformation of Early-Modern Philosophy*, (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001): 125-6 and Diana B. Altegoer *Reckoning Words: Baconian Science and the Construction of Truth in English Renaissance Culture*, (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 2000): 100.

¹⁸ On the interplay between the different idols of the mind, see Lisa Jardine, *Francis Bacon: Discovery and the Art of Discourse*, (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1974): 81 and Zagorin, 160-172.

¹⁹ Bacon identifies such cognitive helplessness as most thoroughly caused by the idols of the marketplace. As “the most pernicious of the four” idols of the mind, the idols of the marketplace reveal how “words take on a life of their own, resisting change, contaminating the understanding, and generating endless controversy and confusion.” Alvin Snider, *Origin and Authority in Seventeenth-Century England: Bacon, Milton, Butler*, (Toronto, U of Toronto P, 1994): 47-8. Consequently, when a person “accepts the received terminology and holds to the basic classifications” employed in public discourse, it becomes “extremely difficult to reorganise and reclassify against the grain of existing theory, since the common application of terms automatically upholds the prevailing set of opinions” (Jardine 81). On the idols of the marketplace as “the most troublesome of the idols,” see also Perez Zagorin, *Francis Bacon*, (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1998): 84.

²⁰ Snider 47, emphasis added. In fact, Bacon levels just such a charge against the mystifying ancients in *The Masculine Birth of Time*, arguing in effect that the potent rhetoric of Aristotle, Plato, Galen, and others transformed idols of the cave into idols of the marketplace. Bacon argues, for instance, that Aristotle “made us slaves of words” and that he was a “dictator” who “fetched up his darksome idols from some subterranean cave” and “spun as it were spiders’ webs which he would have us accept as causal bonds though they have no strength or worth” (in Farrington, 63).

²¹ Zagorin, “Francis Bacon’s Concept of Objectivity,” 387.

²² Moreover, “Bacon conceives language not only as a potential contaminant of intellectual rigor, but also as the paradigmatic example of the tendency for all social institutions to give way to degeneration and constant flux” (Snider, 48).

²³ On Bacon as both relying on imaginative language and earlier philosophy, see Katharine Park, 291 and Silvia Manzo, “Francis Bacon: Freedom, Authority, and Science,” *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 14.2 (2006): 245-273, esp. 249.

²⁴ Fudge, “Calling Creatures,” 99.

²⁵ On Bacon’s indebtedness to “Plato’s Myth of the Cave in *The Republic*, where shadows...are taken for reality,” for instance, see Charles Whitney, *Francis Bacon and Modernity*, (New Haven: Yale UP, 1986): 38. Moreover, as Paulo Rossi notes, “five of Bacon’s thirty-nine philosophical works are either directly concerned with the problem of a hidden wisdom in classical myths and fables, or at least refer to it explicitly” (*Francis Bacon: From Magic to Science*, trans. Sacha Rabinovitch, [Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1968]: 80). Peter Pesic also observes that “Searching for a mode of exposition adequate to the essential novelty he expected from true experimentation, Bacon turned to ancient myth to evoke the new qualities he discerned in the emergent science. Bacon found myth far more than mere rhetorical decoration...Bacon felt that these stories contained hidden clues to the new learning he sought...” (“Wrestling with Proteus: Francis Bacon and the ‘Torture’ of Nature,” *Isis* 90 [1999]: 81-94, esp. 83).

²⁶ 66.

²⁷ Whitney, 183.

²⁸ 187.

²⁹ 187. On Bacon's engagement with myth in *The Advancement*, see also Paolo Rossi, 84-5. On Bacon's praise of figurative language in *The Advancement of Learning* for its ability to "represent the possibility of devising a sign system that systematically connects *res* to *verba*," see Snider, 50. On Bacon's view of myths in *De Sapientia Veterum*, see Rossi, 85-7 and C.W. Lemmi's "Mythology and Alchemy in *The Wisdom of the Ancients*," in Vickers *Essential Articles*, (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1968): 51-92. On "Bacon's "fable of Daedalus," see Heidi D. Studer, "Francis Bacon on the Political Dangers of Scientific Progress," *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 31(1998): 219-234, esp. 220. On *The Masculine Birth of Time*, *De Sapientia Veterum*, and *The Advancement of Learning*, collectively, as forerunners to Bacon's *Novum Organon*, see Zagorin, 33.

³⁰ Howard B. White, *Antiquity Forgot: Essays on Shakespeare, Bacon, and Rembrandt* (Boston: Martinus Nijhoff, 1978): 109.

³¹ Altegoer, 80 and 88, emphasis added. See also 112 and Jardine, 179-80.

³² Zagorin, *Francis Bacon*, 68.

³³ Altegoer, 79.

³⁴ 79.

³⁵ For a concise overview of critical accounts of Bacon's approach to myth, see Diana Altegoer, 79-94.

³⁶ Ronald Levao, "Francis Bacon and the Mobility of Science," *Representations* 40 (1992): 1-32.

³⁷ qtd in Levao, 5.

³⁸ Levao, 5-7.

³⁹ See Fudge, *Perceiving Animals*, 99-100.

⁴⁰ This distinction, overlooked in Baconian criticism, not only resolves Bacon's putative inconsistencies but also helps account, as we will see, for the seemingly incompatible, coterminous popularity of Baconian philosophy and the political fable.

⁴¹ 695-6.

⁴² Bacon, *De Sapientia, The Works of Francis Bacon*, ed. James Spedding, Robert Leslie Ellis, and Douglass Denton Heath, (1859), (Reprinted, Stuttgart: Freidrich Frommann, 1963), Vol. 6, p.698.

⁴³ On the vexed question whether "allegorical interpretation...uncover[s] the truth within the fable or merely compound[s] the act of fabling," see Levao, 5. Andrew M. Cooper also inquires "whether Bacon's interpretations recover those authentic historical meanings or cleverly impose their own" ("The Collapse of the Religious Hieroglyph: Typology and Natural Language in Herbert and Bacon," *Renaissance Quarterly* 45 [1992]: 96-118, esp. 112).

⁴⁴ Bacon's early treatise *Of the Interpretation of Nature* (1603) also registers this subtle distinction between prescriptive and descriptive. Disdaining fabulism that emerges merely from theory rather from observation, Bacon asserts that too many people: have from particulars and history flown up to principles without the mean degrees, and so framed all the middle generalities or axioms, not by way of scale or ascension from particulars, but by way of derivation from principles; whence hath issued the infinite chaos of shadows and notions, wherewith both books and

minds have been hitherto, and may be yet hereafter much more pestered. (in Farrington, 67)

Humans, in short, induce error by beginning *prescriptively*, by fashioning “middle generalities or axioms” that obscure the true nature of particulars. Such prescriptive “shadows and notions” consequently become the target of Bacon’s censure, and he scorns not simply figurative language but, more specifically, a particularly imprecise process that too often precedes and informs it.

⁴⁵ 188.

⁴⁶ 187.

⁴⁷ 270-1.

⁴⁸ 112.

⁴⁹ Annabel Patterson identifies “the second half of the sixteenth century in England [as] the time (and place) where the Aesopian fable entered early modern culture decisively” (*Fables of Power: Aesopian Writing and Political History*, [Durham: Duke UP, 1991]: 52).

⁵⁰ On “the continuing use of Latin Aesops as second- or third-form grammar-school texts,” see Mark Loveridge, *A History of Augustan Fable*, (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998): 95. On the “history of the Aesopic fable” and the “revival of interest in Aesopic literature” during the fifteenth century, see David Marsh, “Aesop and the humanist apologue,” *Renaissance Studies* 17 (2003): 9-26.

⁵¹ See also Mark A. Kishlansky, “Turning Frogs into Princes: Aesop’s *Fables* and the Politics Culture of Early Modern England,” in *Political Culture and Cultural Politics in Early Modern England*, ed. Susan D. Amussen and Mark A. Kishlansky, (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1995): 338-60; Arnold Clayton Henderson, “Animal Fables as Vehicles for Social Protest and Satire; Twelfth Century to Henryson,” *Third International Beast Epic, Fable, and Fabliau Colloquium: Proceedings*, ed. Jan Goossens and Timothy Sodmann, (Munster: Bohlau Verlag, 1981). On the influence of fables and Aesopic literature on early modern drama, see Jayne Elizabeth Lewis, *The English Fable: Aesop and Literary Culture 1651-1740*, (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996): 95 and James Emmanuel Berg, “*Gorboduc* and ‘Feudalism,’” *Studies in English Literature* 40 (2000): 199-226, esp. 215.

⁵² Patterson, 51.

⁵³ Mark Loveridge, *A History of Augustan Fable*, (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998): 100.

⁵⁴ The fable’s trenchant political commentary could indeed prove vexing for authorities. See Loveridge, 98 and Annabel Paterson, esp. 52-80.

⁵⁵ Loveridge, 100.

⁵⁶ On Bacon as using “myths...to further his own political agenda” and on “why in his ‘restauration’ of knowledge certain tales proved more useful than others,” see Altegoer, 98ff.

⁵⁷ 518.

⁵⁸ 518. Solomon concludes that, consequently, “Bacon articulates a program that requires the breaking down of traditional categories in order to shore up the foundations of governmental authority,” Julie Robin Solomon, “To Know, To Fly, To Conjure: Situating

Baconian Science at the Juncture of Early Modern Modes of Reading, *Renaissance Quarterly* 44 [1991]: 513-558, esp. 520).

⁵⁹ 524.

⁶⁰ Indeed, Snider asserts that Bacon “demanded that authority submit itself to interrogation and constant revision. After dwelling on the susceptibility of human institutions to decay and exhaustion, he scrutinizes his own instauration for signs of conceptual rigidity and advocates a course of ongoing revolution, endless new beginnings” (26). On “‘Baconian’ principles and ‘Baconian’ doctrines” as “ideological catchwords in revolutionary England” and on “the genuine leveling effect of Baconianism and the emphasis placed on the gathering of data (which ‘any man’ could carry out),” see also Antonio Perez-Ramos, *Francis Bacon’s Idea of Science and the Maker’s Knowledge Tradition*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998): 12-3. For an alternate reading of Bacon’s philosophical program as only tangentially concerned with political and social reform, see Neal Wood, “Tabula Rasa, Social Environmentalism, and the ‘English Paradigm,’” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 53 (1992): 647-668, esp. 655.

⁶¹ 126. Hanson further asserts that Bacon’s “knowledge-making system...undermines the position of the sovereign, conferring power instead on those men who possess the secrets of nature’s workings” (126). Such transfer of power, Hanson argues, occurs precisely because “The freedom from the constraints of authority and tradition permits the discovering subject to encounter the unknown; the encounter with the ‘unknown’ grants him the right to begin discourse anew” Elizabeth Hanson, *Discovering the Subject in Renaissance England*, (Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 1998): 125.

⁶² 138.

⁶³ Cooper, 110.

⁶⁴ The influence of Francis Bacon on John Webster’s plays has received considerably scant attention, but good cause exists for situating the playwright within the Baconian philosophy developing conterminously with his plays. As a prominent statesmen and lawyer, Bacon appeared centrally in public events upon which Webster drew material for his plays, most notably in the case of Arbella Stuart, long recognized as a central source to Webster’s play. In fact, Bacon served as “prosecutor...in the trial of Mary Talbot, who was convicted for having aided Stuart’s escape,” and he leveled public “accusations which, in slightly modified form, have been made against the Duchess of Malfi” (Steen, 66-7). On the relevance of Bacon’s biography to issues central to Webster’s other plays, see Dena Goldberg, *Between Worlds: A Study of the Plays of John Webster*, (Wilfrid Laurier UP, 1987): 124. While R. W. Dent identifies Bacon as among the contemporaries who “prove of no direct Websterian interest” and counting as “equally unilluminating...the early English essays” of the statesmen, he nonetheless cites parallels between the two authors’ works, suggesting an intellectual sympathy between the two authors. (*John Webster’s Borrowing*, [Berkeley: U of California P, 1960]: 49, 196, 213, 248). Indeed, the temporal proximity of, and intellectual affinity between, Bacon and Webster have elicited notice, and literary criticism has tended to implicitly connect the two. M.C. Bradbrook, though not positing direct influence, notes that “Bacon’s first collection [of essays] appeared in the same year that John Webster appeared at the Middle Temple. Worldly wisdom constructed an idiom which lent itself to the theater” (45). On Webster’s aesthetic as akin to Baconian notions of entertainment and poetics,

see Charles Forker, 447-8. On similarities between Webster's and Bacon's approaches to figurative language, see also 92-5 and, on parallels in literary style, see Dent, 51. On Bacon's influence on early modern theater, see Rowland Wymer, *Webster and Ford*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995): 143.

⁶⁵ On George Harding as patron of various literary endeavors, including Robert Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*, see Charles Forker, 199.

⁶⁶ On Webster as "critical and skeptical of the integrity of those in great places and those with riches who hide corruption behind a title and a name" and on the emphasis on class in this epistle as a "revealing key to the moral design of a play which...[is] itself uniformly critical of men in power," see R. S. White, "The Moral Design of *The Duchess of Malfi*," in *The Duchess of Malfi*, ed. Dymphna Callaghan, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000): 210-11.

⁶⁷ Commenting on Webster's dedicatory epistle, Charles Forker notes that the playwright's "attitude is complacent, even bumptious" (119).

⁶⁸ "sycophants, n.2" *The Oxford English Dictionary*. 2nd ed. 1989.

⁶⁹ See also White, 212.

⁷⁰ On Bosola as "a living example of" "the poisonous effect of corruption in princes," see Peterson, 46. On Bosola as "the victim of...evil people who happen to be higher in the social scale than himself, and who are willing to use him ruthlessly to do their vicious deeds," see also White, 210. See also Nigel Alexander, "Intelligence in *The Duchess of Malfi*," in *John Webster* ed. Brian Morris, (London: Ernest Benn Limited, 1970), 104-05.

⁷¹ On Bosola's "parasitism" as the product of "the society that his betters have created for him," see Dena Goldberg, 96. See also Lee Bliss, 139.

⁷² On the confining nature of Ferdinand's and the Cardinal's court, see Paula S. Berggren, "Spatial Imagery in Webster's Tragedies," *Studies in English Literature* 20 (1980): 288, 296-7.

⁷³ Bacon observes that if "ambitious men...be checked in their desires, they become secretly discontent, and look upon men and matters with an evil eye" ("Of Ambition," *Francis Bacon*, ed. Brian Vickers, [Oxford: Oxford UP, 1996]: 414-5).

⁷⁴ Reading this scene as paradigmatic of the dehumanizing nature of Ferdinand's court, Frank Whigham observes that Ferdinand's "courtiers are to be his creatures, will-less, without spontaneity." Moreover, Whigham notes, while "it is common to describe this behavior as usual for flatterers and ambitious men," "for the prince to require it publicly involves a different emphasis altogether" ("Sexual and Social Mobility in *The Duchess of Malfi*," in *The Duchess of Malfi*, ed. Dymphna Callaghan, 171-2).

⁷⁵ Indeed, when Bosola later reflects on "this outward form of man," he asserts that, "Man stands amazed to see his deformity / In any creature but himself" (2.1.49-54). Notably, Bosola signals that man stands amazed not at seeing his *features* in the animal world but in seeing his *deformities* there, suggesting the he has so internalized a sense of abjection that he can only imagine deformity as an inevitable, preexisting human condition.

⁷⁶ On Bosola's claim to be Ferdinand's "creature" as "voic[ing] an attitude which will more and more become a sign of the hypocritical court itself," see R.S. White, 209.

⁷⁷ Emily C. Bartels convincingly argues that such autonomy and seeming submission to the existing demands of the court operate symbiotically. Noting that "gestures of

submission paradoxically enable the expression of desire" (420), Bartels reveals how the play "highlight[s] the remarkable, though invisible, license that comes with visible compliance. Secretly autonomous, [the Duchess] is overtly submissive to her brothers' constraints; overtly submissive, she seems at once untouched and untouchable. Under the cover of patriarchal authority, she can act on her will" (422). "Strategies of Submission: Desdemona, the Duchess, and the Assertion of Desire," *Studies in English Literature* 36 (1996): 417-433.

⁷⁸ James L. Calderwood notes that Ferdinand constructs here "essentially an argument from Degree: the reliance upon private choice, especially when that choice descends upon an inferior, constitute an infringement of the rigidly established social hierarchy..." "The Duchess of Malfi: Styles of Ceremony," in *Twentieth Century Interpretations of The Duchess of Malfi: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Norman Rabkin, (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1968): 73-84, esp. 75.

⁷⁹ See, for instance, Lisa Hopkins, "The Part with Ne'er a Bone it't: Webster's women and the politics of speech," *Journal of Gender Studies* 4 (1995): 181-187, esp. 184 and Reina Green, "'Ears Prejudicate' in *Mariam* and *Duchess of Malfi*," 43.2 (2003): 459-474, esp. 467.

⁸⁰ On the Duchess as utilizing "a strategy very popular amongst Webster's characters, of substituting communal forms of speech such as apophthegms, proverbs and truisms for any more immediate or personal form of expression," see Hopkins, 181-187, esp. 183. Hopkins views the Duchess as "openly contemptuous of female speech with her scathing remark, 'let old wives report / I wink'd and chose a husband'" (185), and Lee Bliss, likewise, reads the Duchess as "reject[ing]" the imagined "old wives" in this line (144). Theodora A. Jankowski, however, argues that "the Duchess can be seen as challenging that discourse either by creating a new one or by consciously harking back to a tradition which, at least philosophically, granted women a certain measure of autonomy," ("Defining/Confining the Duchess: Negotiating The Female Body in John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*," in *The Duchess of Malfi*, ed. Dymphna Callaghan, [New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000]: 232).

⁸¹ The Duchess, for instance, declares "So, now the ground's broke, / You may discover what a wealthy mine / I make you lord of (1.1.428-30) and even notes how aristocratic rank can prove a disadvantage since those "born great" are "forced to woo, because none dare woo us."

⁸² See, for instance, Charles Forker, 362.

⁸³ On the Duchess as "using her body natural and her body political," as "attempt[ing] to secure herself politically by divorcing her natural body from her political one by creating a private second marriage that exists simultaneously with – but hidden from – her public life as a ruler," see Jankowski, 221-245, esp. 222.

⁸⁴ See also Joyce Peterson, 83.

⁸⁵ Clifford Leech notes that "in the immediate context it is in defence [sic] of Antonio that the Duchess speaks, but her words have more powerful, if grotesque, relevance to her own position" ("Distancing," 87). On the Duchess' fable as one of her "metaphysical manoeuvres [that] are her psychic defence in the face of capture by Bosola" and as an attempt "to perceive, and thus absorb and process, her experience *sub specie aeternitatis*,

placing her action in a cosmos less inhospitable than her social world,” see Frank Whigham, 181.

⁸⁶ On the Duchess as “break[ing] from straightforward protest to tell the story of a salmon and a dog-fish” in order to pose “an allegorical challenge to the world’s great,” see Leech, “Distancing,” 87.

⁸⁷ Lee Bliss notes that “The Duchess does not simply defy Bosola. She challenges the assumptions on which he bases his taunts, forces on him the dilemma of knowledge confounding knowledge...Majestic in adversity, the Duchess demonstrates that disdain of the world which Bosola affects; by incarnating one side of his personality, she offers him a different model from Ferdinand and the greatness he represents” (152).

⁸⁸ Webster further underscores the sense of dehumanization implicit in the torments proposed by Ferdinand’s masque of the madmen: their “deadly dogged howl” sounds “as from the theat’ning throat / Of beasts and fatal fowl! / As ravens, screech-owls, bulls and bears....” Even when “sing[ing] like swans,” they do so only “to welcome death” (4.2.62-71).

⁸⁹ See Inga-Stina Ewbank, “Webster’s Realism, or, ‘A Cunning Piece Wrought Perspective,’” in *John Webster* ed. Brian Morris (London: Ernest Benn Limited, 1970), 171.

⁹⁰ The doctor explains that Ferdinand “howled fearfully; / Said he was a wolf, only the difference / Was a wolf’s skin was hairy on the outside, / His on the inside” (5.2.15-8) and, the Duke proceeds to imagine himself as a wolf, as “crawl[ing] after like a sheep-biter” (5.2.50-1).

⁹¹ Robert Ornstein that the brutality of the play’s villains, “emphasized continually by animal imagery, assumes a graphic reality in Ferdinand’s lycanthropy” “Moral Vision in *The Duchess of Malfi*,” in *Twentieth Century Interpretations of The Duchess of Malfi: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Norman Rabkin (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1968): 65-72, esp. 65. On Ferdinand’s lycanthropy, see also Ralph Berry, 112.

⁹² Frank Whigham argues that “Bosola seeks his ontological grounding anew in a succession of chosen actions that he sees as neither derived from another (as his service was) nor evasively contemplative...Personal vengeance will at least make him his own deed’s creature” (193).

⁹³ Notably, as Ralph Berry observes “the animal references die away in the closing scenes as Bosola’s ‘good nature’ asserts itself” (113).

⁹⁴ On the “deep pit of darkness” as recalling the “poisoned fountain or standing pool” that describes “the world ruled by [the Duchess’] brothers” and as describing the entire fifth act itself, see Nigel Alexander, 109.

⁹⁵ On the possibility of this ending as challenging the patriarchal order, however, see Jankowski, 244.

⁹⁶ On the fable in Webster’s play and on the inclination to read the play *as* a type of fabulism itself, see M.C. Bradbrook, 164-5.

Conclusion

Open a book on revenge tragedy and, invariably, Francis Bacon rises to the first page. Indeed, one is more likely to meet Bacon before Hieronimo, Titus, Hamlet, or Bosola. Bacon famously deemed revenge “a kind of wild justice,” providing thereafter a concise trope for framing commentary on early modern retribution. Yet the essayist’s line, in full, asserts that “Revenge is a kind of wild justice, that the more men’s nature runs to, the more ought the law to weed it out.”¹ By narrowing critical focus to the first seven words, scholarship has frequently, if unintentionally, alienated “wild” from its original (horticultural) associations in Bacon and has, instead, imbued it with a sense of savagery, barbarousness, and brutishness. Fredson Bowers, for instance, begins his seminal study on revenge tragedy by describing “blood revenge as a definite code...universal among primitive people” and as “the only possible action for the primitive individual.”² He concludes his opening paragraph by asserting, “Francis Bacon, with his usual acumen, recognized such a condition when he called revenge ‘a kind of wild justice.’”³ Most readings of early modern revenge similarly assume a distinction between the judicially-ordered civil society and an unrestrained, chaotic one, between the modern tort and primitive blood revenge, between the rational and the unsophisticated.⁴ In a manner reminiscent of Bowers’ binary, for example, Frederick Boas describes *The Spanish Tragedy*’s final scene as “sheer savagery,” concluding that “the wild justice of revenge turns to mere massacre, and a situation inspired by the true genius of tragedy collapses into a series of blood-curdling incidents.”⁵ No doubt such readings, alert to Senecan strains of influence, conceptualize “wild” as akin to Senecan

furor, “that consuming rage which could signify simultaneously both sinful passion and epic *θυμός*, both mad delusion and visionary heroism.”⁶ Seneca, however, is only one of many strands of influence on the revenge tradition,⁷ and the tendency towards conflating “wild” with mere emotive excess obscures other fruitful lines of inquiry. The selective appropriation – one might say, the wholesale reinscription – of Bacon may in fact be considered paradigmatic of criticism on early modern revenge tragedy, making visible as it does criticism’s investment in contrasting the civilized with the uncivilized. But to overemphasize early modern revenge tragedies’ more sensational features risks reducing the revenge dynamic to a strict duality – one pitting rational against irrational – instead of examining the broader, and fascinatingly more complex, representation of philosophy as articulated *through* the trajectory of retribution on the stage. The preceding project has been an attempt at recuperating the variegated intellectual histories informing early modern theater’s nuanced “wildness,” its subtlety in engaging philosophical matters within the visceral material of the revenge drama.

This dissertation began as an inquiry into the revenge tragedy genre and more specifically into a set of fundamental, governing questions: what if revenge is *not* the principal concern of plays that depict retribution? What if critical inquiry, by privileging revenge as primary object of study, has neglected other concerns taken up by these plays? If such oversight has indeed occurred, what issues (beyond the legal and religious injunctions against retribution) might early modern revenge tragedies engage? And how might such plays, rather than indulging in mere sensationalism, prove more philosophically sophisticated than previously thought? In reevaluating both the generic status and philosophic commitments of early modern revenge tragedies, this dissertation

has sought to counter literary scholarship's inclination towards treating revenge as a final endpoint of critical study. My work, likewise, has challenged the putative simplicity of plays featuring revenge as well as the notion of an inherent tension between philosophy and retribution. Whether assuming an apparent conflict between thought and action in *Hamlet* or depicting other instances of retribution on stage as crude spectacle, critical discourse has tended to distance the weighty matters of philosophy from the physical action found in revenge. I have instead argued that revenge on the early modern stage functioned not simply as a dramatic *raison d'être* but as a means to engage with the period's transformative strains of natural, ethical, and political philosophies. Early modern revenge tragedies – situated within, and responding to, a matrix of theoretical discourses – uniquely represented the process whereby metaphysics translated into material reality. While literary criticism has emphasized the sensational and legal components of such plays, my dissertation has contended that revenge drama operated, in fact, as an integral mechanism for examining the nexus between the conceptual and phenomenological in early modern culture.

The interrelation of noetic and phenomenological featured centrally throughout early modern discourses of all kinds, as poets, theologians, physicians, and philosophers increasingly investigated the mind's relation to the body, the motives underlying observable action, and the invisible's existence behind, even within, the visible. Early modern psychology (literally, "the study of the soul"), for instance, speculated regarding the soul's physical composition in an attempt to examine the precise interdependence between immortal and mortal. Theories of reproduction likewise asked when and how the ethereal and immaterial – a parent's soul and essence – contributed to the imprinting

of form on one's offspring. Indeed, the mind's influence on the processes of reproduction received considerable attention as early modern thinkers figured "conception [as], in a sense, the male having an *idea* in the woman's body."⁸ William Harvey, for example, argued that "the generation of things in Nature and the generation of things in Art take place in the same way...Both are first moved by some conceived form which is immaterial and is produced by conception."⁹ While Harvey's theories of reproduction found widespread appeal,¹⁰ his participation in the more singular "philosophy of vitalism, known also as animist materialism," reflected a more unorthodox – yet still deeply influential – investigation into the noetic and the phenomenological, positing as it did "the inseparability of body and soul and...the infusion of all material substance with the power of reason and self-motion."¹¹ In this philosophy "energy or spirit, no longer immaterial, is seen as imminent within bodily matter."¹² Hardly contained to speculative philosophy, questions regarding the relation between immaterial and material held interest, moreover, for rather practical reasons and extended into matters of daily interaction as well. In an era of scrupulous attention to interior disposition, the relation between action and motive, exterior deed and internal thought, became increasingly pertinent. "Social life" in early modern England, as Katharine Eisaman Maus observes, "demand[ed] the constant practice of induction...[the process of] reasoning from the superficial to the deep, from the effect to the cause, from seeming to being."¹³ "Given the ubiquity of such conceptual categories in the English Renaissance," Maus continues, "it is hardly surprising that the 'problem of other minds' present[ed] itself to thinkers and writers not so much as a question of whether those minds exist as a question of how to know what they are thinking."¹⁴ The relation of the

immaterial to the material, the invisible to the visible, therefore, permeated early modern life, influencing everything from religion, psychology, and natural philosophy to daily social interaction. Far from merely an abstract, theoretical, or academic field of inquiry, the transition between the unseen and seen, or the conceptual and the physical, appeared in early modern thought as a matter at once quotidian, essential, and, at times, even urgent.

If the noetic and the phenomenological remained of particular interest across a wide array of discourses in early modern England, the theater – and, more narrowly, the theater of revenge – likewise proved especially suited for examining the unique moments and methods of transfer between the immaterial and material worlds. At the most rudimentary level, the performative nature of the theater renders the connection between noesis and phenomenon, between poetic thought and material manifestation, immediately relevant. Drama, of course, literally embodies its producers' conceptualizations. But the theater, especially the theater of revenge, more particularly provides a space dedicated to, even dependent on, causality. For theater to work, to produce its dramatic *effects*, there must be a reasonably coherent sequence, a linking of first to second and so on, a linking that may not necessarily be found, for example, in the fragmentary landscape of *The Faerie Queene* or even in the age's frequently copious and digressive prose.¹⁵ The theater not only depends on the materialization of the conceptual and the progress of causal events, however, but also, by its very design, invites inquiry into the noetic. As Joel B. Altman has persuasively argued, early modern drama specifically focuses on “first principles,” the predicates that reside beneath exterior forms and within rhetorical claims. In fact, as Altman observes, plays in Renaissance England “literally were

questions,” designed in part to argue “*in utramque partem*,” or “on both sides of the question,” and “functioned as media of intellectual and emotional exploration for minds that were accustomed to examine the many sides of a given theme, to entertain opposing ideals, and by so exercising the understanding, to move toward some fuller apprehension of truth that could be discerned only through the total action of the drama.”¹⁶ If early modern theater developed in part from the impulse to seek out “first principles,” revenge tragedies seem not only an essential component of that project but, what is more, its most salient manifestation. Central to the genre, as Linda Charnes rightly observes, lies a fundamental question, namely, “where do we locate the *origin* of a problem that needs to be redressed?”¹⁷ In its constant focus on antecedent events and on the unseen world’s impact on the observable one, revenge tragedy specifically lends itself to the interrogation of the noetic and phenomenological.¹⁸

Representing worlds where souls have been separated from bodies, where those souls return symbolically through the physical presence of actors, where plans materialize gradually over a long period of time, and where the final moments of the action purposefully call attention – in a manner unique in early modern drama – to the initiating events of the play, revenge tragedies invite audiences to rethink the relation between cause and effect, plan and action, immateriality and materiality. In doing so, they encourage investigation, across a diverse array of intellectual traditions, of the correspondence between metaphysical theory and social application. By reexamining the representation of souls, ethical value, matter, and social contracts in these revenge tragedies, my project has explored the power of the early modern stage to examine the transformation of the metaphysical predicates underlying ethical, natural, and political

theory into their material manifestations in early modern culture. Revenge may indeed appear “wild,” but it also proves – as this project has sought to establish – deeply philosophical as well.

¹ “Of Revenge.” *The essayes or counsels, civill and morall*. Ed. by Michael Kiernan. (Cambridge: Harvard UP,) 1985: 384.

² *Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy: 1587-1642*, (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1940): 3.

³ 3.

⁴ See also Ronald Broude’s “Revenge and Revenge Tragedy in Renaissance England.” *Renaissance Quarterly*. 28.1 (1975): 38-58, esp. 40-41.

⁵ XXXIX. More recently, John Kerrigan has rightly muted (but notably does not fully eschew) the brutish implication found in most readings of Bacon’s phrase. Invoking Bacon, Kerrigan describes revenge as a “cultural practice which arouses intense emotions” and a “destructive impulse” motivated by a primal brutality comprised, in part, of “a volatile, emotive mixture of loss and agitated grievance” (John Kerrigan, *Revenge Tragedy: Aeschylus to Armageddon*, [Oxford: Oxford UP, 1996]: 3).

⁶ Robert Miola, *Shakespeare and Classical Tragedy: The Influence of Seneca*. [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992]: 122. While Miola specifically refers to Atreus here as part of his discussion of *Titus Andronicus* (an allusion demanded by the play’s heavy reliance on *Thyestes*), the reference retains broader resonance for a consideration of revenge tragedies as well. As Miola notes regarding Atreus a bit earlier in his superb study, “This colossal villain, variously incarnate in the works of Kyd, Shakespeare, Chapman, Marston, Jonson, and others, lived on through his many descendants” (23).

⁷ See especially Miola’s first chapter “Heavy Seneca” in which he rightly reasserts the importance of Seneca in revenge narratives while also arguing for a nuanced approach attentive to variegated strains of influence from multiple sources.

⁸ Thomas Lacquer, *Making Sex: Body and Gender From the Greeks to Freud*. (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1990): 59, emphasis added.

⁹ Qtd. in Lacquer, 147. On William Harvey as a “man who thought that conception was the having of an idea, sparked by sperm, in the womb,” see also Lacquer 142.

¹⁰ On “the alleged effect of the imagination (the ‘power to generate mental images’) on the uterus, especially during pregnancy, causing birthmarks and deformities,” see, for instance, Ian Maclean, *The Renaissance Notion of Woman: A Study in the Fortunes of Scholasticism and Medical Science in European Intellectual Life*. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1980): 41.

¹¹ John Rogers, *The Matter of Revolution: Science, Poetry, and Politics in the Age of Milton*. (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1996):1.

¹² 1-2.

¹³ Katharine Eisaman Maus. *Inwardness and Theater in the English Renaissance*. (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1995): 5.

¹⁴ 7.

¹⁵ On *The Faerie Queene* as “involv[ing] seemingly endless acts of undoing, denial, and frustration” and as “a text populated with faceless knights (as C.S. Lewis called them) and their ladies moving in flux, constantly resituated, momentarily lodged in relationships from which they are as quickly dislodged, inevitably undone,” see Jonathan Goldberg, *Endlesse worke: Spenser and the Structures of Discourse* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1981): 1-12, reprinted in *Edmund Spenser*, ed. Andrew Hadfield (New York: Longman, 1996): 149-160, esp. 156.

¹⁶ *The Tudor Play of Mind: Rhetorical Inquiry and the Development of Elizabethan Drama*. (Berkeley: U. of California P, 1978): 2-3, 6.

¹⁷ “Dismember Me: Shakespeare, Paranoia, and the Logic of Mass Culture” *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 48 (1997): 1-16, esp. 4.

¹⁸ “Shakespeare was manifestly drawn to the popular genre of revenge tragedy,” observes Ronald Knowles, precisely “because it gave him the opportunity to confront a condition of being and acting” (“*Hamlet* and Counter-Humanism,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 52 [1999]: 1046-69, esp. 1063).

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