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## 'For Fear to Be Infect': Reading the Female Body in Early Modern Revenge Drama

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# 'For Fear to Be Infect' Reading the Female Body in Early Modern Revenge Drama

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## *Abstract*

The article examines representations of female revenge within early modern drama. While much scholarship frames revenge as a primarily masculine form of expression, the article argues that revenge is not solely a male-specific endeavour. Rather, there is an interconnectedness between female revengers' modes of vengeance and their identities as women. This is present across multiple comedic and tragic works, with the bodies of female characters becoming the instruments of their revenge. Accordingly, these characters' quests for vengeance signify not a departure from, but an embracing of female agency and nature. However, while this may suggest that revenge helps empower and showcase female characters, the language used to define their actions is often filled with imagery of disease and suffering. Thus characterised as agents of infection, female revengers are often more vilified than they are empowered. And, as female bodies are integral to the expression of female revenge, so too are feminine identities deemed transgressive. The article develops this argument over three sections: a discussion of early modern discourses on bodies, gender and infection; an analysis of how female bodies are implicated in dramatic depictions of female revenge; and a discussion of how such representations conflate female bodies with infection, subversion and violence.

**Keywords:** *Early Modern Drama, Gender, Infection, Revenge*

## 1. Introduction

Despite attempts to limit revenge violence in real life – as seen through James I's command for his subjects to 'presume not vpon their owne Imagination and construction of wronge ... to reuenge (as the Lawe findes it) their owne quarrels' – such highly impassioned, honour-driven acts seem only to multiply within the worlds of Elizabethan and Jacobean plays (quoted in Bowers 1959, 10-11). From Hamlet's desire to avenge his father's

‘foul and most unnatural murder’ (*Hamlet* 1.5.25)<sup>1</sup> to Maria’s plot to punish Malvolio’s pride ‘on that vice in him will my revenge find notable cause to work’ (*Twelfth Night* 2.3.128-129), representations of revenge are anything but limited.<sup>2</sup> However, although these narratives are indeed diverse, modern scholarship tends to marginalise the role of female revengers, framing instead revenge as a specifically masculine endeavour. Alison Findlay, for example, argues that ‘female characters often assume a masculine persona in the execution of their tasks’ (1999, 72). This has certainly been said of one of William Shakespeare’s most infamous female revengers, Tamora in *Titus Andronicus*. Derek Cohen claims that as Tamora’s quest for vengeance sees her provoking the rape of Lavinia, her revenge signifies a ‘renounc[ing of] her own sexual identity’ in favour of a ‘male lust’ (1993, 88). What is more, women were also seen to be incapable of exacting or imagining an effective revenge. According to seventeenth-century author Thomas Hill, ‘females haue a more dead minde, and are lesse patient’ than their male counterparts (1613, 11). Gail Kern Paster elaborates on this differentiation between male and female bodies, stating that within early modern culture, female bodies were considered too unstable and erratic to channel their passions towards a specific goal. They are (supposedly) ‘leaky vessels’ and lack ‘bodily self-control’ (1993, 25). As such, the female revenger must presumably fight against her female nature in order to exact a focused, reasoned vengeance; she must adopt ‘a language and manner that is inevitably masculinist’ (Cohen 1993, 85). Marguerite Tassi remarks on this supposed rejection of female nature in her study of Shakespearean female revengers: ‘If the avenger is a woman, she steps over the bounds of culturally prescribed gender norms to pursue an action that may be deemed unwomanly’ (2011, 28).<sup>3</sup>

While such characterisations of female revengers are certainly tempting, this article offers an alternative view of female-inflicted revenge. Rather than being an act devoid of features of female nature, I argue that representations of female revengers emphasise a link between their bodies and their vengeance. For example, in John Marston’s *The Dutch Courtesan* (1605), Franceschina’s body is central to her plot, as she is decried to wield her alleged ‘loose blood’ to make Malheureux sick with ‘lust’ (1997, 5.3.66-67). Additionally, in Thomas Kyd’s *The Spanish Tragedy* (1587), the violence Isabella inflicts upon her body – ‘So shall my womb be cursèd for his sake; / And with this weapon will I wound the breast, / The hapless breast, that gave Horatio suck’ – signifies the inseparability between her desire for revenge and her role as a woman and mother (1995, 4.2.36-38). The relationship between revenge and the female body is examined at length by Liberty Star Stanavage, as she argues that ‘it is not despite their “leaky” and unstable female bodies but precisely because of them that these female characters can employ revenge as a rhetoric to empower their actions’ (2011, 64). However, though the revengers’ bodies are certainly implicated in their acts of vengeance, the portrayal of these revengers is perhaps less empowering than Stanavage claims. Namely, these representations are often infused with languages of disease and suffering, characterising the revengers as infectious and catalysts of sickness. For instance, Tamora in *Titus Andronicus* speaks of feeding Titus’s supposed ‘brain-sick humours’ (11.71), and Sir Toby in Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night* describes

<sup>1</sup> All Shakespeare quotes are taken from Taylor *et al.* 2016.

<sup>2</sup> For Marguerite Tassi, ‘revenge comes in many guises, ... not simply through unpalatable acts of violence, but also through purposeful scenes of comic plotting and shaming’ (2011, 23). This article acknowledges the diversity of revenge narratives present within early modern drama. Useful examples of plays featuring revenge plots include: Thomas Middleton’s *The Revenger’s Tragedy* (1606), George Chapman’s *The Revenge of Bussy D’Ambois* (1613), John Marston’s *Antonio’s Revenge* (1600-1601) and Cyril Tourneur’s *The Atheist’s Tragedy* (1611-1612).

<sup>3</sup> Useful scholarship that engages with the representation of female revengers includes Green 1989; Cohen 1993; Willis 2002; Bach and Kennedy 2010; Tassi 2011.

Maria's scheme against Malvolio as an 'infection' (3.4.109). As such, while there is indeed a correlation between revenge and female bodies, the portrayal of these bodies as dangerous and potentially sickening undermines the possibility of a wholly 'empowered' female revenger.

The following sections of this article will examine the role early modern discourses on medicine and physiology play in dramatic representations of female-inflicted revenge. This discussion occurs over three sections: 1) an analysis of how bodies were conceptualised within the period's medical discourses and how these bodies (particularly women's bodies) were thought capable of infecting others; 2) a discussion of how female bodies are implicated in representations of female revenge; and, 3) an examination of what these representations imply about how early moderns were invited to read female bodies, infection and violence. Discussing these issues, this article will explore how female revengers' bodies are implicated in (rather than removed from) their acts of revenge, and how such representations contribute to a cultural vilification of female bodies and female agency.

## 2. *Bodies, Health and Gender in Early Modern England*

Much of the knowledge about human bodies during the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods can be traced to classical scholarship. In particular, ancient Greek philosophies (such as those of Aristotle, Hippocrates and especially Galen) wielded significant influence over medical discourses. This is evident in the large number of ancient writings revived during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Such notable publications include Latin translations of Galen's *Opera Omnia* (from 1490 through 1625).<sup>4</sup> Galen's philosophy argues for a link between the human body and material world. To his mind, the body is born from and composed of the earth's elements:

The seed having been cast into the womb or into the earth (for there is no difference), then, after a certain definite period, a great number of parts become constituted in the substance which is being generated; these differ as regards moisture, dryness, coldness and warmth, and in all the other qualities which naturally derive therefrom. (1916, 19 and 21)

Such a description creates an ecological image of the female body, as the coupling of nature and anatomy implies an equivalency between earth and woman. This is largely indicated through Galen's initial claim that 'there is no difference' between earth and womb. Galen thus suggests that all human life is endowed with earthly and womanly properties. For, as all men 'naturally derive' from the womb, they are likewise born from and composed of female and natural elements ('for there is no difference').

<sup>4</sup> Useful scholarship on the various Latin editions of Galen's *Opera Omnia* may be found in Fortuna 2012. Here, Fortuna emphasises the proliferation of such translations throughout the early modern period, noting how physicians 'promoted the study of Greek medicine in its original language, in order to improve medical knowledge in every field, from anatomy to therapy' (2012, 392). Accordingly, the numerous printings and editions of Galen's works highlight the authority of classical philosophy within early modern medical discourses. This authority, as evidenced in Giovanni Battista Montano's collection *Giuntine* (published between 1541 and 1542) – the largest assemblage of Galen's works printed as of 1542 – encompass a range of medical spheres, including biology, hygiene, pharmacology, therapy and surgery (to name a few) (Fortuna 2012, 402-403). Other useful sources on the relevance of Galen's works include Temkin 1973 and Nutton 2004.

These elements were believed to exist in humans' bodies through the four humours (blood, phlegm, yellow bile and black bile). Hippocrates argues that each of these humours corresponded to natural elements: blood synonymous with air and 'qualities of heat and moisture'; phlegm with water and 'coldness and moisture'; yellow bile with fire and 'heat and dryness'; and black bile with earth and 'cold and dryness' (Hoeniger 1992, 103). Further detail on this relationship appears in Hippocrates' description of the body's humoral composition:

The body of man has in itself blood, phlegm, yellow bile and black bile; these make up the nature of his body, and through these he feels pain or enjoys health. Now he enjoys most perfect health when these elements are duly proportioned to one another in respect of compounding, power and bulk, and when they are perfectly mingled. Pain is felt when one of these elements is in defect or excess, or is isolated in the body without being compounded with all the others. (1959, 11-13)

Appearing to anticipate Galen's views, Hippocrates likens man to nature as he describes the body's composition as 'the nature of his body'. Particularly critical to this makeup is a sense of balance. Only when the humours are 'duly proportioned' and 'perfectly mingled' does the body function appropriately and 'enjoy health'. Consequently, human health was seen to depend upon the stability of the body's nature. This reliance bears strong resemblance to that of nature on its elements. Just as humoral imbalance leads to changes in health, so too does a surplus of one natural element lead to environmental shifts (for example, rain, blizzard, drought). In thinking about human anatomy, it follows that the body was seen in ecological terms. More precisely, health and wellness were determined based on changes in the body's landscape (i.e. the behaviours of the body's earth, air, water and fire humours). This comparison, drawn by Galen and Hippocrates, is at the centre of early modern ideas on medicine, and provides an important rationale for the relationship between the environment, female bodies and physical health.

Conceptions of early modern bodies are further distinguished by the notion that they do not exist in isolation; just as bodies have an elemental connection to nature, so too are they connected to each other. Paster acknowledges the ease with which bodies may influence one another, describing the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as 'a moment in intellectual history when bodies were open and porous' (2003, 157). As such, human bodies were characterised as open to suggestion and persuasion from others' bodily humours. This notion of interaction surfaces in the period's medical tracts, as demonstrated in physician Robert Hooke's 1665 *Micrographia*. Dubbed 'the father of microscopy', Hooke describes a kind of active space between bodies wherein the humours may travel from person to person (Langley 2011, 103). According to Hooke: 'for the Offices of the five Senses being to detect either the *subtil* and *curious Motions* propagated through all *pellucid* or perfectly *homogenous Bodies*; Or the more *gross* and *vibrative Pulse* communicated through the Air and all other convenient *mediums*, whether fluid or solid' (1665, c2v). Here, Hooke describes the 'five Senses' as the portals through which the 'curious motions' of the body may travel. The 'Air' between bodies then becomes a communicative space (a 'convenient medium') for one person's humours to interact with and manipulate those of another. Though Hooke's work comes after the early modern period, his 'Notion of a Fluid body' echoes ideas found within early seventeenth century medical discourse (1665, 15). Thomas Walkington, for example, attests that 'Of all men wee count a melancholicke man the very sponge of all sad humours' (1607, 67). The reference to 'sponge' recalls Paster's conception of a 'porous body', with human bodies seeming to not only detect or sense another's humours, but actively soak them up. This invites a contagious reading of the humours, and, by extension, the dispositions and diseases associated with them. The humours are not presumed to exist trapped in individual bodies. Rather, they appear to float between and have a direct influence over others' wellbeing.

Such ‘infectious interaction’ is also deemed to occur between bodies and their environment. According to Paster, the ‘self is not a condition of disembodied inwardness independent of the material world that it inhabits. Self is rather inhabited reciprocally by that world, shaped by its elements’ (2003, 154). As the body is made up from the earth’s natural elements, it follows that its state of being is subject to the state of nature (and vice versa). An example of how the body is ‘shaped by the world’s elements’ appears in sixteenth-century physician Andrew Boorde’s remedy for ‘lunatic men & women’: ‘First be not solitary, nor muse not of studious or supernatural matters, use mery company, & use some mery & honest pastime, be not long fasting, use warme meates, and drinke wel to bedward, to make or to prouoke slepe’ (1587, 73r-73v). Boorde’s proposed remedy reinforces the relationship between bodies and the environment, as he argues that ‘lunatics’ must combat their dispositions with merriment, company and warmth (they must ‘use mery company’ and ‘warme meates’). Thus, just as bodies may infect one another, so too does a person’s environment possess contagious qualities.

The notion that bodies are inherently contagious is especially prominent in discourses on female bodies. While all bodies were seen as ‘open and porous’, female bodies were believed to be the epitome of openness (Paster 2003, 157). In Paster’s view, female bodies were ‘leaky vessels’ whose humours were prone to both shape and be shaped by their surroundings (1993, 25). Such characterisations likely stem from perceptions that female bodies had a significant influence over bodily health. Being at the core of man’s nature-based composition, female/earthly humours (‘for there is no difference’) dictated both the composition of human anatomy and its overall wellness (or illness) (Galen 1916, 19). A notable example of how female nature is portrayed as being influential over others’ health appears in early modern discourses around lovesickness. Also known as love melancholy, lovesickness was often aligned with dangerously heightened passions and disturbing behaviour. According to seventeenth century physician Jacques Ferrand, ‘The diverse and violent perturbations which afflict the mind of a Passionate Lover, are the causes of greater mischiefs, then any other passion of the mind whatsoever’ (1640, 7). In arguing that love was the cause of ‘greater mischiefs’ than any other passion, Ferrand distinguishes lovesickness as a particularly dangerous and destructive affliction. Robert Burton remarks on this in his 1621 *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, claiming that while love ‘first united provinces, built cities, and by a perpetual generation makes and preserves mankind’, should love ‘rage, it is no more love, but burning lust, a disease, frenzy, madness, hell’ (1857, 448). Here, love is characterised by a dual ability to bring elation and despair. Though in its best form love ‘makes and preserves mankind’, if allowed to grow (or ‘rage’), love becomes a danger to the individual’s health (a ‘burning lust, a disease’).

What is interesting, though, about this malady is how it was believed to arise in its sufferers. Burton argues that such an ailment required an external catalyst. In particular, he claims that, ‘sight, of all other, is the first step to this unruly love’ (457). The emphasis on eyes draws attention to how the ‘burning lust’ of lovesickness was sparked by a force outside of the body. Thus, though ‘ingendred within the body’, love was catalysed by something outside oneself (Ferrand 1640, 11). This follows with the view that the body was a ‘sponge’ to other humours (Walkington 1607, 67). Burton highlights this notion in describing how ‘spiritual vapours’ may travel from one person to another: ‘So the beams that come from the agent’s heart, by the eyes, infect the spirits about the patients, inwardly wound, and thence the spirits infect the blood’ (1857, 469). Here, the body is deemed to absorb another’s humours, or ‘beams’, through the eyes, and from there into the bloodstream. In doing so, the humours impose a physiological reaction on the body, as they come to ‘inwardly wound’ every part of the body with lovesickness. Women, by virtue of their appearance, were considered especially powerful catalysts for men’s lovesickness.

Burton explains this view in noting how, 'Kings sit still and command sea and land, &c, all pay tribute to the king: but women make kings pay tribute, and have dominion over them' (459). Accordingly, women were viewed as having a kind of power over men through their perceived ability to upset both men's physical wellness and social order. Though of a lowlier rank than men, women may have 'dominion' over even the most noble.<sup>5</sup> Such subversion of men's roles suggests that lovesickness was not only a symbol of mental and humoral imbalance; it was also a sign of women's capacity to destabilise a traditionally patriarchal society.

This invites an anxious reading of women's bodies within early modern culture: if women exercise 'dominion' over men, men may potentially lose control over both their bodily and societal wellbeing (Burton 1857, 459). For, in addition to infecting men's bodies, love's 'beams' were also presumed to threaten the very fabric of Elizabethan and Jacobean society. Burton describes the threat of lovesickness as follows: it 'subverts kingdoms, overthrows cities, towns, families, mars, corrupts, and makes a massacre of men' (1857, 448). The threat of love melancholy (and, by extension, female bodies) was then all the more severe, as it affected both individual bodies and the environment around them. Moreover, the notion that lovesickness made a 'massacre of men' implies a potential for women to usurp men's position of social authority ('women make kings pay tribute') (459). As such, women's sexuality represented a catalyst to not only bodily illness, but social unrest.

### 3. *Reading Female Revengers: Interpreting the Body in Female Revenge Narratives*

According to Paster's description of early modern gender discourses, women's bodies were considered 'leaky vessels'; they were prone to become overwhelmed by their emotions and likely to 'infect' others with their violent passions (1993, 25). Such characterisations suggest that women's bodies were too unstable to channel their passions into a calculated plot of revenge. Alexander Roberts describes the supposedly erratic female nature as follows: 'when it conceiueth wrath or hatred against any, is vnplacable, possessed with vnsatiabie desire of reuenge, and transported with appetite to right (as they thinke) the wrongs offered vnto them' (1616, 43). Though Roberts notes that women may be quick to revenge, it is their alleged 'vnsatiabie desire' that makes them unable to control these emotions. John Sterne further comments on this notion of uncontrollability, claiming that, 'where they [women] can command they are more fierce in their rule, and reuengefull in setting such on worke whom they can command' (1648, 12).<sup>6</sup> In being irrepressibly vengeful and 'more fierce in their rule', women are therefore painted as being perhaps too passionate to channel their revenge towards the appropriate target; they become 'revengefull' on whomever 'they can command' (*ibid.*).

However, despite the image of a tumultuous and 'porous' female body, early modern plays offer strong examples of female revengers whose bodies are instrumental in enacting their vengeance (Paster 2003, 157). As Stanavage argues, female revengers are not hindered by their 'lack of fixity' but enabled by 'the force of the passions' within their bodies (2011, 6). One example of such a revenger is Franceschina in Marston's *The Dutch Courtesan*. Scorned by Freevill in favour of the virtuous Beatrice, the titular courtesan Franceschina plans to seek her revenge: 'Ick sall be revenged! Do ten thousand hell damn me, ick sall / have the rogue troat cut; and his love, and his friend, and / all his affinity sall smart, sall die, sall hang!' (2.2.43-45).

<sup>5</sup> Cristina Malcolmson describes the period's patriarchal standards arguing that, 'for the Renaissance, a woman was considered to be analogous to other social inferiors in a hierarchical society' (1991, 30).

<sup>6</sup> Further discussion on Roberts and Sterne's descriptions of female nature may be found in Dolan 1994.

Though indeed enraged by being set aside, Franceschina is effectively able to channel her outrage into a calculated scheme of revenge. This involves her persuading the infatuated Malheureux into killing Freevill: 'So long as Freevill lives, I must not love' (2.2.167). Franceschina's chosen method may initially suggest that she herself is not actively, physically involved in the act of vengeance. Edward Muir remarks on women's participation in revenge during this period, arguing that, 'In the eyes of men, vendettas could only be a matter among men, a belief that created in their relationships with women an island of repose in which women lived safe from the world of masculine violence' (1993, 191).<sup>7</sup> Thus distinguished from 'masculine violence', women are presumed to be likewise physically detached from enacting revenge. Deborah Willis further claims that much scholarship suggests that female bodies tend to only be physically implicated in revenge plots when cast as 'victims' (2002, 22).

While such assumptions are tempting, Franceschina's revenge plot demonstrates how female revengers have, as Stanavage argues, a 'fundamentally different relationship to revenge itself' (2011, 3). Though perhaps not always the instruments of violence, female bodies are still very much implicated in their acts of vengeance. Franceschina, for example, is characterized by the men involved in her revenge plot as having an innate power over others' bodies. Malheureux announces this upon first meeting Franceschina, exclaiming, 'Now cold blood defend me! What a / proportion afflicts me!' (1.2.79-80). Figuring himself the opposite to Franceschina – he is cold, while Franceschina is 'heat' – Malheureux regards her as a potentially dangerous and 'othered' presence (she must be 'defended' against) (1.1.12). He further likens Franceschina's alleged danger to an infection, as seen through his attempts to draw Freevill away from her: 'But to grow wild in loose lasciviousness, / Given up to heat and sensual appetite, / Nay, to expose your health and strength and name' (1.1.90-92). Here, not only may Franceschina 'afflict' one's reputation; she may also introduce 'pain' to one's 'perfect health' (Hippocrates 1959, 11-13). Such attention to health is notably significant due to Franceschina's occupation as a courtesan, a profession repeatedly referred to as being a catalyst for disease. Freevill regards Franceschina as, 'an arrant strumpet; and a strumpet is a / serpigo, venomed gonorrhoea to man' (2.1.133-134). Likewise, the characters jest that her place of work, Mary Faugh's brothel, is so rife with illness that it must have its own doctor: Freevill: 'How far off dwells the house-surgeon, Mary Faugh?' (2.2.69).

Thus associated with a place of disease, Franceschina has ample opportunity to 'afflict' men's bodies (1.2.80). She is both a 'Woman corrupted' and a woman who corrupts (2.2.201). She then naturally becomes a focal point for the characters' concerns over physical wellness (*ibid.*). This anxiety is soon validated as Franceschina carries the theme of infection into her chosen method of revenge. She hints at this around the start of her plot, when she wishes the plague upon Freevill and 'all his affinity': 'Now legion of / divel seize him! De gran' pest, St. Anthony's fire, and de / hot Neapolitan poc rot him!' (2.2.45-47). Such 'gran' pest', or plague, signifies Franceschina's desire to wreak widespread havoc through her revenge. In particular, it represents a desire to inflict physical consequences, like those bred by disease, upon those who have wronged her. This is realised through Franceschina's interactions with Malheureux, wherein she is presumed to use her charms as a courtesan, a supposed purveyor of illness, to infect Malheureux with lovesickness: Malheureux: 'I do malign my creation that I am subject to passion. I / must enjoy her' (3.1.245-246). Referring to his 'creation', Malheureux draws attention to how his body is vulnerable (or 'subject') to Franceschina's, despite his awareness

<sup>7</sup> Though Muir deals specifically with Renaissance Italy, the assertions in this passage reflect views held more broadly across early modern Europe. This is touched upon in Willis 2002, 24.



of her purported threat: 'How easy 'tis to err / When passion will not give us leave to think!' (2.2.220-221). Franceschina is likewise reduced to anatomical terminology (i.e. a 'passion'). Only, in being the 'passion' that unsettles Malheureux's 'creation', Franceschina is not vulnerable; she is in full authority. She is soon seen to exercise her supposed powers, as she uses her 'impassioned' body to transform the 'cold-blooded' Malheureux into '[her] slave' (1.2.79; 2.2.12). Such a ploy signifies how she intends for her 'gran' pest' to grow contagious, since she hopes that by infecting Malheureux she can incite Freevill's murder (the success of this plan will be discussed in a later section). Franceschina's body may then rightfully be viewed as not distinct from, but wholly immersed in her plot for revenge. For, she is fully cognisant of how her 'leaky' body may influence others, and how it may lead to the harming of many more (Paster 1993, 25). This is affirmed in Franceschina's reaction to successfully wooing and manipulating Malheureux: 'Now does my heart swell high, for my revenge / Has birth and form' (2.2.196-197). The reference to 'birth' evokes a specifically feminine image; while the revenge has a growing 'form' outside of her, it is still very much dependent upon the female body. This awareness then indicates that, unlike Malheureux, Franceschina is not a 'slave' to passion. Rather, she is in perfect control of her 'porous' and infectious nature, and uses it as the vehicle for her revenge (Paster 2003, 157).

The notion that women could purposefully make men lovesick is not uncommon during the early modern period. Burton argues that women's influence – as it stems from their appearance – becomes 'much more when those artificial enticements and provocations of gestures, clothes, jewels, pigments, exornations, shall be annexed unto it' (1857, 470). This is certainly exemplified through Franceschina, as such 'enticements' and 'provocations' were indeed exaggerated to enable her profession. For, in being 'a money-creature', her 'Beauty's for use' (1.1.96; 1.2.136). Accordingly, women (according to Burton's view) were very much aware of and could purposefully enhance their infectious natures. It is fitting, then, that Franceschina's revenge is described through a language of infection. To Malheureux, it is her body that grants her power over others; she is the 'beast of man, loose blood' who is sent to 'distemper' him (5.3.66). Such control over men's humours is notably acknowledged by other female revengers. One example appears in Maria's plot against Malvolio in *Twelfth Night*. Angered by Malvolio's scolding, Maria conspires with Sir Toby and Sir Andrew to seek their revenge. Maria describes her scheme as follows:

I will drop in his way some obscure epistles of love, wherein by the colour of his beard, the shape of his leg, the manner of his gait, the expresse of his eye, forehead, and complexion, he shall find himself most feelingly personated. (2.3.131-134)

Through her speech, Maria reveals herself to be the instigator of Malvolio's alleged spiral intomadness.<sup>8</sup> She is the first to conspire against him and chooses to do so by means of deception and manipulation. Specifically, she enacts her plan by instilling a kind of lovesickness in Malvolio, wherein he believes that Olivia loves him and that he may rise above his station: Malvolio reading Maria's forged letter: 'some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon them' (2.5.120-121).<sup>9</sup> Malvolio consequently seems changed upon reading the

<sup>8</sup> It should be noted, however, that Maria's plot does not truly 'madden' Malvolio. Rather, her revenge comes in humiliating Malvolio by making others (namely Olivia) believe Malvolio is mad.

<sup>9</sup> Malvolio's desire for social mobility is evidenced in his subversion of his steward role. Barbara Correll describes the role of an early modern steward as follows: 'In addition to their specific administrative duties on estates and in households, stewards are factors of power, instrumental men tasked to concretize the desires of others, desires

letter, with his appearance transforming from that of a stern, pious steward into a ridiculously attired, 'smiling' fool (2.5.142). Olivia confirms this change in exclaiming, 'Why, this is very midsummer madness' (3.4.50). Malvolio's transformation then leads him to fall out of favour with Olivia, as confirmed by him later being removed and imprisoned: Sir Toby: 'Come, we'll have him in a dark room and bound' (3.4.113).

Once more, it may be argued that Maria is detached from her plot of vengeance. Rather than physically harming Malvolio, Maria merely writes a letter. However, such manipulation was likely only achievable by Maria due to her knowledge of Malvolio's character. He is, according to Maria's opinion:

... so crammed, as he thinks, with excellencies, that it is his grounds of faith that all that look on him love him; and on that vice in him will my revenge find notable cause to work. (2.3.126-129)

Such insight, though certainly biased, is not held by Sir Toby or Sir Andrew – Sir Toby: 'Possess us, possess us, tell us something of him' (2.3.117) – thus making Maria most fit to carry out the scheme. Maria goes on to designate herself as the most skilled for the task by claiming she can impersonate Olivia: 'I can write very like my lady your niece; on a forgotten matter we can hardly make distinction of our hands' (2.3.134-135). Malvolio soon confirms this ability when reading the forged letter: '[reads] "To the unknown beloved, this, and my good wishes." / Her very phrases!' (2.5.77-78). Maria, therefore, does not merely possess a skill for handwriting; she has an especial understanding of people's behaviours and emotions, and is well placed to manipulate them.

It is this knowledge, and how Maria wields it, that marks her revenge as female-specific. For, in being so aware of Malvolio's vices, Maria reinforces the idea that women were more attuned to the inner lusts and humours than men. Likewise, Maria's intention to use Malvolio's lusts against him ('on that vice in him will my revenge find notable cause to work') suggests she relies on this female intuition to perform her vengeance (2.3.128-129). This is evidenced through Maria's belief that making Malvolio expose his vices (i.e. his desires for Olivia and for social mobility) will bring about his downfall. Maria's use of love as the primary vehicle for her revenge further distinguishes the act as gender-specific, since, according to Burton, love is a tool that allows women special 'dominion' over men (1857, 459). Her vengeance may hence be viewed as an exercise of female agency. As Maria uses lovesickness to gain power over Malvolio, her revenge depends on the perceived 'dominion' women have over men's passions.

The attention to lovesickness in Maria's scheme also serves to couple female agency with infection. Like Franceschina, Maria is well aware of how to distemper those around her and incorporates this skill into her revenge. Maria's aim to distemper is first acknowledged through her describing her plot as a 'physic', or medicine (2.3.144). This language frames Maria's letter as an agent of infection, whose message will be consumed like a pill and have physical consequences for the reader's health. The letter highlights this intent through its reference to the body's humours: Malvolio reading the letter: 'Thy fates open their hands, let thy blood and spirit embrace them' (2.5.121-122). Through mentioning the 'blood and spirit', the letter not only implores Malvolio to heed its words; it also suggests these words may change his disposition, causing him to think, act and otherwise feel differently. Such change is evidenced by the physical

about which they may know very little' (2007, 67). Thus, stewards were largely in positions of service, asked to prioritise and cater to the 'desires of others'. Since Malvolio chooses to cater to his own desires – he is 'opposite with a kinsman' and 'surly with servants' (2.5.123-124) – he therefore undermines his purpose as the submissive steward.

alterations Malvolio undertakes. He has become ‘most feelingly personated’ (2.3.134), having abandoned his formerly austere attire to appear ‘strange, stout, in yellow stockings, and cross-gartered’ (2.5.138-139). These changes are further believed to be symptomatic of Malvolio’s supposed lovesickness, with Olivia diagnosing it as ‘midsummer madness’ (3.4.50), and Sir Toby claiming Malvolio ‘hath taken the infection’ (3.4.109). Thus, Maria’s letter is not merely a set of words; it is, per Fabian’s account, a ‘dish o’ poison’ that brings harm to its reader’s health (2.5.97).

The idea that women could not only cause lovesickness but inflict other types of pain is likely a product of the period’s medical rationale. For example, Walkington argues that ‘the soule sympathizeth with the body and followeth *her* crasis and temperature’ (1607, 9v; my emphasis). The use of a female pronoun in describing the body gives the impression that female nature can (and will) influence the soul. If the soul ‘sympathizeth’ with the body, and the body is ‘her’, then the soul is at the mercy of ‘her’ nature. This idea is foregrounded in Galen’s view that the body receives its earthly qualities from the female body (specifically, the womb). As such, it is only fitting that women were thought to wield power over men’s bodies. Thus, rather than being hindered by their supposedly unstable bodies, female revengers could purportedly use their ‘temperature’ to create instability and devastation in others.

An example of this appears in Isabella’s effort to avenge her son Horatio’s murder in *The Spanish Tragedy*. Upon her first appearance in act 2, scene 4, Isabella is presented as an overly impassioned female character: ‘My husband’s absence makes my heart to throb’ (2.4.96). Isabella’s proclamation notably comes before she learns of her son’s death, thus suggesting her nature (her ‘temperature’) is already unstable. This is then exacerbated when she discovers Horatio’s body: ‘O gush out, tears, fountains and floods of tears; / Blow, sighs, and raise an everlasting storm’ (2.4.105-106). Unable to contain her passions, Isabella is revealed to have gone mad in her next appearance in act 3, scene 8, declaring that ‘there’s no medicine left for my disease, / Nor any physic to recure the dead’ (3.8.4-5).

Such a representation paints Isabella as not in control of herself, echoing Hill’s conclusion that women ‘may sooner be conuerted, and are sooner angred’ (1613, 11). However, though indeed ‘conuerted’ by her passions, Isabella uses these tumultuous passions as instruments in her revenge. This is first hinted at in act 3, scene 8, when the maid responds to Isabella’s fits by saying, ‘Madam, these humours do torment my soul’ (3.8.13). Accordingly, Isabella’s humours are seen to adversely affect those around her, as they ‘leak’ out of her body and inflict pain onto others (Paster 1993, 25). Such effect is later confirmed in act 4, scene 2, when Isabella vows to avenge her son’s death: ‘Since neither piety nor pity moves / The king to justice or compassion, / I will revenge myself upon this place / Where thus they murdered my beloved son’ (4.2.2-5). Such a pledge rejects an appeal to society in favour of an appeal to nature. This is demonstrated through Isabella’s treatment of the garden where her son was killed:

Accursèd complot of my misery!  
 Fruitless forever may this garden be,  
 Barren the earth, and blissless whosoever  
 Imagines not to keep it unmanured!  
 An eastern wind, commixed with noisome airs,  
 Shall blast the plants and the young saplings;  
 The earth with serpents shall be pesterèd,  
 And passengers, for fear to be infect,  
 Shall stand aloof, and, looking at it, tell:  
 ‘There, murdered, died the son of Isabel.’ (4.2.13-22)

Isabella not only destroys the garden – ‘*She cuts down the arbour*’ – but appears to cast a spell upon the site (4.2.5.1). She dooms the place to be forever ‘fruitless’ and a place of great infection for all ‘passengers’ who come too near. This fruitlessness is solidified at the end of the scene when Isabella stabs herself and dies: ‘And as I curse this tree from further fruit, / So shall my womb be cursèd for his sake’ (4.2.35–36). In so referencing the cursedness of both her ‘womb’ and ‘this tree’, Isabella’s speech directly reflects Hippocratic views on the interconnectedness of female bodies and nature. Such a notion is prefaced in act 1, scene 4, through Lorenzo’s statement to Horatio that, ‘women oft are humorous’ (1.4.105). In being so ‘humorous’, it is then fitting that Isabella wields significant influence over the play’s environments. This is soon confirmed as Isabella’s devastation of the garden (an act she vows symbolises her revenge by striking fear in the hearts of ‘passengers’) foreshadows the deaths of Balthazar and Lorenzo two scenes later. Thus, though Isabella is not physically present for Balthazar and Lorenzo’s deaths, the play ties Isabella’s destruction of the garden (and of herself) to the deaths of her son’s murderers. They are, in a sense, the very ‘plants’ and ‘young saplings’ Isabella has cursed.

Isabella’s revenge plot may then be read as evidence for how female bodies are implicated in, rather than divorced from, their modes of revenge. Just as Isabella’s humours ‘torment’ her maid, so too do they imbue the site of Horatio’s murder with a kind of plague. Likewise, Isabella’s suicide marks a physical commitment to her vengeance, as her body quite literally becomes the garden’s first ‘infect passenger’ (4.2.20). Accordingly, Isabella’s distempered body is both the symbol and instrument of her revenge, as the despair of the garden stems from and reflects her own maddened and tumultuous state. Such effect is further articulated through a language of infection, with Isabella claiming that the ‘curse’ she places on the garden travels through ‘noisome airs’ (4.2.17). This mention of wind recalls Hooke’s theory that the air is a ‘convenient medium’ through which humours travel between bodies (1665, c2v). As Isabella later alludes to passers-by ‘fearing to be infect’, it is implied this convenient medium breeds and spreads illness to those who come near (4.2.20). Not only, then, is the earth made ‘barren’ and ‘blissless’; so too are the ‘passengers’ made unwell by Isabella’s fury (4.2.15 and 20). The attention to barrenness is especially significant in Isabella’s plot, as her later references to her womb being ‘cursèd’ denote a self-awareness of how her body is implicated in her revenge (4.2.36). In particular, there is a recognition that her revenge is driven by her role as a mother. She becomes unhinged upon hearing of her son’s murder and is driven to avenge him shortly thereafter. Curiously, though, the notion that motherhood may be connected to revenge invites some confusion into discourses around female nature. Tassi, for example, argues that, ‘The very coupling of the concepts of *woman* and *revenge*, much less *mother* or *wife* and *revenge* activates – and upsets – long-standing gender norms of feminine nurturance, domesticity, and subordination that form the basis of Western constructions of femininity’ (2011, 20). As the term ‘mother’ is colloquially equated with ideas around caregiving, love, and nourishment, there is an uncertainty as to how to situate the roles of mother and revenger within the same body. Such confusion likely contributes to perspectives that revenge is a mainly ‘masculine picture’, in which women are portrayed as a ‘mere backdrop’ (Muir 1993, 191). Regardless, Isabella’s direct references to her body undermine such views by placing female nature at the centre of female revenge narratives. Moreover, her language suggests that her role as a mother fuels, rather than hinders, her desire for vengeance.

The notion of a maternal revenger is certainly not unheard of within early modern drama. Alongside Isabella in *The Spanish Tragedy*, a significant example of a maternal revenger may be found in *Titus Andronicus* through the character of Tamora. After losing the war with Rome and watching Titus kill her eldest son, Alarbus, Tamora is driven to avenge her family’s suffering. This revenge is first touched upon by Demetrius following Alarbus’ death:

Then, madam, stand resolved; but hope withal  
 The selfsame gods that armed the Queen of Troy  
 With opportunity of sharp revenge  
 Upon the Thracian tyrant in his tent  
 May favour Tamora, the Queen of Goths –  
 When Goths were Goths, and Tamora was Queen –  
 To quit the bloody wrongs upon her foes. (Scene 1.138-144)

Though equally enraged by the violence, Demetrius's speech identifies Tamora as the main revenger of their plot. She is, according to Demetrius, even likely to receive a godly blessing for seeking to 'quit the bloody wrongs'. Moreover, Demetrius implies that Tamora is most fit to exact revenge because of her status (she is 'the Queen of Goths'). Such a statement unsettles the idea that women existed on the peripheries of revenge narratives, as Tamora is immediately placed at the centre of the action. This is later confirmed in act 1, scene 1, when Tamora tells Saturninus of her plan to seek revenge on Titus:

I'll find a day to massacre them all,  
 And raze their faction and their family,  
 The cruel father and his traitorous sons,  
 To whom I suèd for my dear son's life,  
 And make them know what 'tis to let a queen  
 Kneel in the streets and beg for grace in vain. (Scene 1.453-458)

Here, Tamora describes her revenge as being personal and honour-driven, as she notes how her motivation stems from her status as a the former 'Queen of Goths'. Interestingly, such a drive is traditionally thought to be reserved for male revengers. Fredson Bowers attests to this view in his seminal text *Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy, 1587-1642*: the 'Elizabethan gentleman ... felt obliged by the more powerful code of honor to revenge personally any injury offered him' (1959, 37). In being similarly 'obliged' by the 'powerful code of honor', Tamora may initially be read as adopting masculine qualities in her vengeance. As Tassi notes, revenge narratives often align pursuits to avenge 'moral transgressions and perceived injustice' with masculinity (2011, 18). However, Tamora's language rejects such assumptions. In particular, her dialogue with Demetrius and Chiron in Scene 3, suggests that her revenge is driven by her status not only as a queen, but as a mother: 'Give me the poniard. You shall know, my boys, / Your mother's hand shall right your mother's wrong' (Scene 3.120-121). The reference to a 'mother's wrong' complicates the notion that Tamora's revenge fits into a 'masculine honour' trope, as her scheme is very much connected to her role as a woman and mother.

This idea is reinforced through repeated references to Tamora's body and her relationship with her sons. For example, Tamora, much like the other previously discussed revengers, is portrayed as having special power over men's humours. Tamora cites this alleged power when she claims she can manipulate Titus into delaying Lucius' army. Here, Tamora asserts she will 'enchant the old Andronicus / With words more sweet and yet more dangerous' (Scene 9.87-88) and 'fill his agèd ears / With golden promises' (Scene 9.94-95). Such language suggests that Tamora may have a supernatural influence (it will 'enchant'), and that such influence will have a physical effect on Titus' body (it will be consumed through his 'agèd ear'). Tamora further declares she will 'temper him with all the art I have' (Scene 9.107), thereby implying that she both has a particular skill (or 'art') for the task, and that such a task will sway Titus' humours (his 'temper'). As such, Tamora appears to align her 'art' of persuasion with the 'art' of infection;

her 'art', according to her own description, is a kind of poison she will pour into Titus' ear and use to distemper him. This infectious imagery is reinforced through Tamora's interaction with Titus in Scene 11, when she appears before Titus disguised as 'Revenge': 'I am Revenge, sent from th'infernal kingdom / To ease the gnawing vulture of thy mind' (30-31). Again, Tamora draws attention to how her plot will affect Titus's health. Tamora confirms this intention soon thereafter in her instructions to Demetrius and Chiron: 'Whate'er I forge to feed his brain-sick humours / Do you uphold and maintain in your speeches' (71-72). Tamora also implies her own body is an instrument for this effect. 'Sent from th'infernal kingdom' (30), Tamora represents a 'hot' humour that will disturb Titus's seemingly melancholic and cold temperament (i.e. his 'strange and sad habiliment', 1). Tamora's body is hence made integral to her revenge, as it is her own 'infernal' nature that she uses to infect Titus.<sup>10</sup>

The centrality of Tamora's body, and its purportedly infectious quality, is further realised through how her sons feature in her plot. As noted earlier, Demetrius first identifies Tamora as the rightful leader in their quest for revenge. This leadership is epitomised in Tamora instructing her sons to attack Bassianus and Lavinia: 'Revenge it as you love your mother's life, / Or be ye not henceforward called my children' (Scene 3.114-115). Thus employing her sons as instruments to her revenge, Tamora uses her authority as a mother to incite violence. She later echoes these sentiments when she disguises herself as 'Revenge' (Scene 11.30) and names her sons 'Rape and Murder' (the very assaults committed upon Lavinia and Bassianus) (45). This does not, however, suggest that Tamora is kept at a distance from the attacks. Rather, the characters' dialogue identifies Tamora's body as being the source and perpetrator of the assaults. Lavinia attests to Tamora's culpability when she begs for mercy from Demetrius and Chiron: 'O, do not learn her wrath! She taught it thee. / The milk thou suck'st from her did turn to marble; / Even at thy teat thou hadst thy tyranny' (Scene 3.143-145). Such language suggests that Tamora's sons act not only out of loyalty to their mother; they are compelled by the 'tyrannous milk' they consumed as infants. They have, in a sense, been infected by Tamora's temper and are henceforth driven by her wrathful humour. Demetrius and Chiron, therefore, do not act as independent agents in their revenge. As the 'lustful sons of Tamora' (according to Marcus' description), they are physical extensions of Tamora's own 'lusts' and passions (Scene 6.78). This connection is again acknowledged by Titus in Scene 12, when he gives Tamora the pie made from her dead sons: 'Why, there they are, both bakèd in this pie, / Whereof their mother daintily hath fed, / Eating the flesh that she herself hath bred' (59-61). By referring to Tamora's sons as the 'flesh that she herself hath bred', Titus ties Demetrius and Chiron's bodies to their mother's. Thus, Tamora is not distinct from her sons or their actions. Instead, the play frames the maternal body as the source of Demetrius and Chiron's violent passions, thereby drawing attention to how a woman (and, especially, how a mother) may infect others with her 'temperature' (Walkington 1607, A4r).

#### 4. *Weaponised Bodies: Implications for Female Revengers, Agency and Identities*

Whereas some critics, like Muir, claim that revenge is a 'masculine picture' with women existing as a 'backdrop', the consistent references to female bodies within dramatic revenge narratives suggest that these 'pictures' embrace, rather than relegate, female experiences (1993, 191). As discussed in the previous section, women's 'leaky' bodies do not inhibit their ability for revenge

<sup>10</sup>The success of this plan will be discussed in the following section.

(Paster 1993, 25). On the contrary, such characters are portrayed as channelling their emotions and experiences – whether these be as a scorned lover, an angered gentlewoman, a heartbroken mother or a disgraced queen – into their schemes. And, though these characters' motivations indeed may vary, the manner in which they all enact their revenge utilises and relies upon the supposed 'art' they possess as women (*Titus Andronicus*, Scene 9.107). These plots therefore reject the notion that revenge requires a woman to either adopt a 'masculine persona' or be marginalised (Findlay 1999, 72).<sup>11</sup> Recent feminist critiques have further claimed that, in seeking revenge, there are more opportunities for female characters to assert their agency. Tassi, for one, argues that 'feminine power and agency are awakened through the spirit of revenge' (2011, 20). Similarly, Stanavage attests to the 'potential of revenge to affirm and empower these transgressive identities' (2011, 64). These notions are perhaps best supported by the centralisation of female bodies and experiences in their revenge narratives. Just as Franceschina's body is instrumental in her revenge in *The Dutch Courtesan*, so too is Isabella driven by her maternal instinct *The Spanish Tragedy*. In so featuring female nature, such narratives then certainly allow for female identities to be 'awakened' and 'affirmed'. More than merely being awakened, though, representations of female-driven vengeance paint revenge as being reliant upon and inseparable from the characters' bodies. This gendered reading of revenge extends Stanavage's assertion that women have a 'fundamentally different relationship to revenge itself' (2011, 3). For, as the female revengers are portrayed as being driven by and using their bodies to exact vengeance, their revenge is distinguished as a female-specific act.

On the surface, such a distinction supports beliefs that revenge helps 'empower' and embolden female identities. This may certainly be the case for the female revengers discussed earlier, as each character's vengeance is in some way connected to their identity as a woman. Furthermore, such representations help broaden and contradict the stereotypical notion of a servile, pleasant female character. Franceschina, Maria, Isabella and Tamora are not 'nice'; they are very much aware of their female nature and express it through their revenge. However, though indeed an opportunity for female identities to be more fully explored, the suggestion that female revenge truly 'empowers' them is problematic. Namely, the idea that revenge may 'awaken' their identities contributes to an alignment of female agency with violence. If their revenge is linked to female agency, then their identities are likewise conflated with danger and destruction. This sense of destruction surfaces in the female revengers' plots, with the characters' actions leading to social turmoil. Maria's manipulation of Malvolio in *Twelfth Night*, for example, leads to a kind of social unrest, with Malvolio being humiliated and temporarily imprisoned. Similarly, Tamora's scheme in *Titus Andronicus* contributes to political turmoil amongst the play's noble characters (namely through the perpetuated violence and deaths of major characters).

Accordingly, the representation of female agency in these revenge narratives is not wholly 'empowering' for female identities. Rather, it is painted as a weapon. This weaponisation is reinforced by the language of infection that appears alongside these revengers. As demonstrated by Isabella's speech in *The Spanish Tragedy* and Franceschina's revenge in *The Dutch Courtesan*, female revengers are characterised as using their bodies to manipulate the wellbeing of others. Thus, female agency is portrayed as not only disruptive to social order, but to physical health. This note on health is especially significant given cultural concerns over preserving one's physical

<sup>11</sup> Carolyn Asp, for example, argues that Tamora does not operate as an independent female character, but rather as a 'subject, i.e. as an agent, within the patriarchal order' (1995, 335). The suggestion that Tamora has become 'unwomanly' is indeed remarked upon in the play, as demonstrated when Lavinia begs for mercy from her attackers: 'No grace, no womanhood – ah, beastly creature, / The blot and enemy to our general name' (Scene 3.182-183).

wellness. For example, in his treatise *De habitu et constitutione corporis* (1561), translated into English by Thomas Newton in 1576, Levinus Lemnius argues that knowing that the ‘health of bodye and health of minde’ should be a person’s ‘chiefest care and whole diligence’ (1576, 2v). This view of health as ‘chiefest’ priority is reflected across a number of the period’s publications, including William Vaughan’s *Directions for Health, both Naturall and Artificiall* (1617), which states on the title page: ‘Teaching how euery Man should keepe his body and minde in health: and sicke, how hee may safely restore it himselfe’.<sup>12</sup> Such a preoccupation with health is largely a product of contemporary anxieties over the plague, which threatened not only an individual’s personal health, but also the order and wellbeing of Elizabethan and Jacobean culture. Thomas Lodge – a proclaimed ‘Doctor of Physicke’ – stresses the prevalence of plague as he regards the significance of the ‘Feuers, Botches and Carbuncles that raigne in these times’ (1603, title page).<sup>13</sup> In then being aligned with infection, female agency and bodies become an even greater source of anxiety. Just as revenge ‘awakens’ female identities, so too do these identities help ‘awaken’ pre-existing concerns over physical and societal stability.

What this ultimately means for representations of female revengers is that, instead of being empowered, these characters tend to be further solidified as ‘transgressive’ (Stanavage 2011, 64). This is made evident in how these characters feature within the dramaturgy of their respective plays. For one, such revengers are more often than not left injured by their actions. Burton remarks on how revenge often hurts the revenger, arguing that revenge will ‘precipitate ourselves into that gulf of woes and cares, aggravate our misery and melancholy, heap upon us hell and eternal damnation’ (1857, 168). Tassi likewise claims that ‘revenge brings satisfaction and pleasure, yet it may ultimately pain and destroy the avenger’ (2011, 28). This is certainly the case in the tragedies, wherein the female revengers are more or less destroyed by the ends of their plays. For example, Isabella in *The Spanish Tragedy* and Tamora in *Titus Andronicus* suffer gruesome deaths. They also become socially disgraced. Isabella is made to appear unstable and overwhelmed by her passions. Such passions fail to bring justice for her son, and are also claimed to be the cause of her demise, as seen through the Ghost’s claim that ‘Fair Isabella by herself misdone’ (*Spanish Tragedy*, 4.5.6). In addition, Tamora (who is notably unsuccessful in either maddening Titus or avenging her family) is dismissed as a ‘ravenous tiger’ in Lucius’ closing speech: ‘throw her forth to beasts and birds to prey. / Her life was beastly and devoid of pity’ (*Titus Andronicus*, Scene 12.194 and 197-198). Tamora’s branding is particularly significant in this instance. By juxtaposing Tamora’s ‘memoriam’ against Titus’ (*Lucius*: ‘My father and Lavinia shall forthwith / Be closed in our household’s monument’, Scene 12.192-193), the play invites audiences to perceive female-driven revenge as a most troublesome and offensive form of vengeance. It is important, though, to acknowledge that male revengers are certainly not unharmed by their quests for revenge; Titus and Hieronimo both suffer ill fates in *Titus Andronicus* and *The Spanish Tragedy*, respectively. Nonetheless, the ‘woe’ that is heaped upon female revengers is not merely related to their actions. Since female revenge is portrayed as manifesting from female bodies, the punishment of female revenge is also a punishment of female nature.

<sup>12</sup>Other contemporary publications regarding the significance of bodily and mental health include Sir Thomas Elyot’s *The Castel of Helth* (1541) and William Bullein’s treatise *The Gouernment of Health* (1595). Bullein’s work in particular draws attention to concerns over preserving health via the following inscription on the title page: a treatise ‘for the especiall good and healthfull preseruacion of mans bodie from all noysome diseases, proceeding by the excesse of euill diet, and other infirmities of Nature: full of excellent medicines, and wise counsels, for conseruacion of health, in men, women, and children’.

<sup>13</sup>Useful scholarship on plague anxiety during the early modern period may be found in Healy 2001; MacKay 2011; Gilman and Totaro 2011.



This theme of punishment is likewise apparent in how female revengers are treated in the comedies. However, unlike in the tragedies, the 'woe' heaped upon female revengers in these plays is not compounded by a complete collapse of order. Instead, order is more or less preserved in the end. Duncan Salkeld acknowledges this distinction, stating that 'At close, either the contradictions are resolved, as in the comedies ... or they remain and madness leads to tragedy and death' (1993, 61). Female revengers may very well fall under the category of 'contradictions', since their schemes often represent a threat to social stability. As such, the comedies avoid falling into complete chaos by 'resolving' the challenges created by these contrary figures. In *The Dutch Courtesan*, this is achieved through Franceschina being removed from society. Sir Lionel: 'To severest prison with her!' (5.3.55). In so punishing Franceschina, the characters identify her and her revenge as the very contradiction in need of settling. And, as Franceschina's body plays a large role in her revenge (through 'infecting' Malheureux with lovesickness), there is a further conflation of this contradiction with the female body. Only through her physical removal may order be restored. This idea is reinforced with Franceschina's imprisonment giving way to a moment of realisation and resolution for the other characters. For example, Freevill discloses his plot to thwart Franceschina – 'I gave her line at will, till her own vain strivings / See here she's tired' – Malheureux is 'cured' of his infatuation and the other characters' turmoil is abated (5.3.47-48). This is evidenced through the following exchange. Sir Lionel: 'You 'maze us all; let us not be lost in darkness,' Freevill: 'All shall be lighted' (5.3.51-55). The imagery of dark and light reflects the characters' transition from confusion to clarity. As Malheureux soon exclaims 'I am myself', there is continued confirmation that the world has been put to right (5.3.61). Curiously, the play also suggests that Franceschina is aware of how her presence and actions have wreaked havoc. This comes towards the end of the play when Franceschina verbalises her surrender: 'me ha' lost my will' (5.3.58). Such resignation helps herald in a renewed sense of order. By losing her 'will', she has forsaken her supposed power of infection (i.e. her 'dominion' over men) and permitted the play's characters to return to health and stability (Burton 1857, 459).

Franceschina's acknowledgement of how her presence fits (or not) within the social balance of her play recalls the tenuous position of women within early modern hierarchies. Marianne L. Novy speaks of the dangers of rebelling against traditional gender roles, attesting that 'the obvious way for a woman to survive is to go along with social order' (1984, 152-153). As Franceschina does not go along with order (she is not, according to Freevill's account, a 'lawful love' like Beatrice), she is not able to survive socially within her play's world (1.2.94). The play then implies that, unlike male agency, female agency does not hold a firm place within early modern society. It is instead antithetical to societal health. Such interpretations, however, are slightly obscured by the treatment of female revenge in *Twelfth Night*. Though the 'contradictions' are indeed resolved at the end of this play, such resolution is not brought about through Maria's removal (Salkeld 1993, 61). Unlike Isabella, Tamora and Franceschina, Maria ultimately benefits from her scheme. The plot enables her marriage to Sir Toby and her subsequent rise in station.

*Fabian ... Maria writ*

The letter, at Sir Toby's great importance,

In recompense whereof he hath married her. (*Twelfth Night*, 5.1.342-344)

This benefit is hinted at earlier in the play when Sir Toby praises Maria for her plan: 'I could marry this wench for this device' (2.5.147). The idea that the marriage was a reward for her scheme adds an alternative reading to Maria's revenge plot. Namely, it may be argued that Malvolio was not the only target of Maria's ploy; she intends for her 'physic' to also be consumed by Sir Toby

(2.3.144). Only, instead of humiliating Sir Toby (like she does Malvolio), Maria hopes to use him to aid her own ambitions of social mobility. Tassi remarks on the similarity between Malvolio and Maria's lofty goals, claiming that 'If Malvolio's transgression lies, in part, in his wish to cross class lines through marriage – to become *Count* Malvolio – so, too, does Maria's... Revenge advances her suit, which is to become *Lady* Maria' (Tassi 2007-2008, 36-37). Accordingly, Maria aims to distract from her own agenda by finding a scapegoat in Malvolio.

Such a sequence of events suggests that, while other representations of female revenge may vilify female nature, it is possible for these characters to be truly empowered by and succeed in their vengeance. Despite their 'leaky' bodies, female revengers may be able to defend against the harm they spread (Paster 1993, 25). Moreover, Maria's success may imply that feminine agency actually has a place within early modern culture (despite other plays' efforts to admonish their female revengers' reputation and agency). The question then becomes how such success may be feasible for Maria when it is not for others (Franceschina, Isabella and Tamora are all unsuccessful in accomplishing their goals, and are all undone by their actions) (Paster 1993, 25). On the one hand, Maria's revenge is potentially more set up for success, as, according to Tassi's argument, 'comedy offers an hospitable environment for the exercise of feminine agency, creativity, and modes of justice' (2011, 23). Maria's creativity is certainly on display with her scheme's humour: it 'May rather pluck on laughter than revenge' (*Twelfth Night*, 5.1.346). Her actions are also deemed entertaining, as evidenced by John Manningham's 1601 account of seeing the play: 'A good practise in it to make the Steward beleve his lady widdowe was in love with him' (in Bruce 1868, 18). Female revenge, then, seems agreeable so long as its 'sportful malice' adds to the ultimate 'sport' of the comedy (*Twelfth Night*, 5.1.345). Maria's marriage to Sir Toby provides further confirmation that her revenge is acceptable; if 'comedy demands a marriage', then Maria's revenge helps fulfil these demands (Howard 1994, 127). Such fulfilment distinguishes Maria from female revengers in other comedies. For, while Franceschina's scheme in *The Dutch Courtesan* may be entertaining, its intention is to break up Freevill and Beatrice's union and is therefore not conducive to the 'comedy demands'.

Regardless of Maria's satisfaction of the 'comedic marriage', however, the play does not appear to glorify her behaviour; her success is revealed only in passing, and neither Maria nor Sir Toby are present. The lack of celebration is compounded by the revelation that Maria only gained her success through deceit. Such a presentation invites audiences to likewise 'pass over' their union, giving the impression that it is not the marriage the comedy wanted, but the marriage the comedy got. This becomes clear when comparing them to the protagonist couples, who are all present and who arguably invite more sympathy than either Maria or Sir Toby. Additionally, Sir Toby is not the romanticised lover typical of such a happy, comedic ending. He is instead portrayed to be a fool and a drunkard. Olivia remarks on his buffoonery, crying, 'Ungracious wretch, / Fit for the mountains and the barbarous caves, / Where manners ne'er were preached – out of my sight!–' (*Twelfth Night*, 4.1.42-44). Maria, similarly, dubs Sir Toby a nuisance, claiming that his 'quaffing and drinking will undo you' (1.3.11). Thus, while the marriage is socially advantageous, Maria's 'success' comes at the price of being tied to (and 'undone' by) Sir Toby's vices. The 'hospitality', then, of comedies to female agency is indeed conditional (Tassi 2011, 23). Even when female revengers manage success, there is a limit to how much freedom and empowerment their agency can have.

## 5. Conclusion

In then interpreting how female revengers are represented in early modern drama, there appears to be more than a mere worry for how vengeance harms individual persons. As revenge arguably

'awakens' female agency, female-driven vengeance also 'awakens' broader fears around masculine identities and social order (Tassi 2011, 20). The idea that vengeance emboldens female identities is well demonstrated through repeated references to female bodies. Specifically, the female body is portrayed as a 'weapon', with Franceschina, Maria, Isabella and Tamora all being portrayed as catalysts for disease and suffering. More than simply being 'weapons', though, these bodies are deemed inseparable from and integral to female revenge. This negates the assumption that women must assume a 'masculine persona' in their vengeance (Findlay 1999, 72). Instead, revenge is 'fundamentally different' for female revengers, as the language around their bodies distinguishes their revenge as a female-specific act (Stanavage 2011, 3). Ultimately, though, such a pronounced exhibition of female agency does not help promote female identities within the plays, since these characters are often confined, removed or otherwise disgraced from their plays' social worlds. The lesson then arising from these narratives serves to embolden a cultural vilification of female bodies. For, in so conflating female nature with infection and destruction, the plays appear more concerned with warning against than enabling female agency.

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