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‘[A]dore my topless villainy’: Metatheatrical Rivalry in John Marston’s *Antonio’s Revenge*

Marston’s Antonio’s Revenge is a self-reflexive tragedy with characters who speak and act like characters familiar with the conventions of Elizabethan revenge plays. This article argues that Marston’s use of metatheatricality allegorizes the competitive nature of commercial theatres. As Marston’s characters seek to emulate and surpass their theatrical models, revenge becomes a medium for aesthetic achievement, a showcase for acting and rhetorical skill. The play expands the theatrum mundi trope, imagining the world not as a single stage but as a marketplace of rival stages wherein playwrights vie for applause and seek recognition for their theatrical brilliance.

Despite *Antonio’s Revenge* declaring itself a serious tragedy, a ‘black-visaged [show]’ that seeks to ‘weigh massy in judicious scale’, the play’s metatheatricality has made the play difficult for scholars and critics to categorize (Prologue 20, 30).¹ Characters in *Antonio’s Revenge* do not speak so much as they extemporize, riffing knowingly on the conventions of early modern revenge plays. The dialogue in the play often exaggerates the stock rhetoric of revenge tragedy to the point that John Marston’s play may seem indecorously tongue-in-cheek. Samuel Schoenbaum calls Marston’s work ‘bizarre — more eccentric than the art of any of his contemporaries’ and claims that ‘the essential incongruity of Marston’s work’ is its most ‘striking feature’.² R.A. Foakes takes Marston’s ‘fustian’ lines, which he wrote for the Children of St Paul’s to perform, as intentionally and parodically melodramatic, especially when spouted from the lips of child actors:

The plays [*Antonio and Mellida* and *Antonio’s Revenge*] work from the beginning as vehicles for child-actors consciously ranting in oversize parts, and we are not allowed to take their passions or motives seriously. Their grand speeches are undermined by bathos or parody, and spring from no developed emotional situation, so that we are

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not moved by them, and do not take them seriously enough to demand justice at the end.³

As an effect of the play's theatrically self-referential rhetoric, Marston's characters' deployment of heightened language always seems strategic, since characters contextualize it as 'mimic action' which is 'apish' and 'player-like' rather than voicing authentic sentiment (1.5.78, 80). Marston's use of (often bombastic) rhetoric and his defiance of the conventional expectation that a revenge tragedy should end with the death of the titular revenger have left scholars debating whether Marston is writing serious tragedy or perhaps giving revenge tragedies a parodic send-up, turning Senecan speeches of grief and bloodlust into exaggerated farce.

The prevalence of histrionic and self-aware lines has proven difficult to reconcile with the play's stark, brutally visceral depictions of violence. Schoenbaum, for instance, argues that with *Antonio's Revenge*, 'Marston assumes the pose of the satirist lashing the follies of the age', while also claiming that 'the distinguishing characteristic of Marston's work is violence' and describing the play's ending as 'a succession of gratuitous horrors, excessive even by Elizabethan standards'.⁴ The play's historical proximity to a rival play amplifies the problem of generic categorization. *Antonio's Revenge* likely competed with William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, a play which has certainly weighed massier than Marston's in the annals of canonical literature. The plays feature similar plots, and scholars have assumed both to be adaptations of a preceding version of *Hamlet* (the *Ur-Hamlet*), which Thomas Kyd might have written and of which no known copy survives.⁵ Shakespeare's play has become an emblem of psychological realism and, over the last few centuries, scholars have fashioned it into a keystone text for understanding the emergence of modern interiority in Western culture.⁶ In contrast, early modern scholars have remained skeptical that Marston is even taking his material seriously as a tragedy. Phoebe Spinrad claims that the play's self-aggrandizing rhetoric leaves scholars wondering whether Marston wants us to sympathize with the urges that characters express for revenge or be revolted by the play's sensationalism, or perhaps we are supposed to throw our hands up and 'see his whole world as absurd and not really care'.⁷

When scholars do take *Antonio's Revenge* seriously as tragedy, they have trouble interpreting Marston's depiction of revenge without framing it in ethical or socio-political terms. Following the conventions that Kyd's immensely popular *Spanish Tragedy* established, Elizabethan revenge tragedies depict revenge as a last resort, reserved for some form of private justice when all other options have failed. Thomas McAlindon succinctly defines revenge in these tragedies as 'justice

without law'.⁸ The scholars that do read *Antonio's Revenge* as tragedy rather than parody assume that it, too, conventionally explores questions of justice. George Geckle, for example, argues that although a few scholars have begun describing Marston's work as radically unconventional, the 'proper' approach to Marston's play is 'within the context of the mainstream criticism about him — and that is Marston as a moralist first and theatrical experimenter second'.⁹ In *Radical Tragedy*, Jonathan Dollimore likewise reads revenge in Marston's play not as experimental metatheatre but as socio-political realism. According to Dollimore, revenge tragedies rehearse anxieties about 'social and political dislocation' and present worldviews that deny the teleological stability of providentialism.¹⁰ Playwrights use revenge to explore 'how individuals become alienated from their society', and Marston's characters in particular 'are shown to be precariously dependent upon the social reality which confronts them'.¹¹

While I agree with Dollimore that Elizabethan revenge tragedies tend to work by exploring the alienating effects of injustice, I argue that the 'social reality' of this particular play is not social realism.¹² Other revenge tragedies depict revenge's effects on characters *within the play*, but Marston links the visual and verbal extremes of revenge to metatheatrical concerns. This mimetic response to the genre is why Marston's characters speak and act as if familiar with other revenge tragedies. Recent emphases on analyzing disruptive, decentering approaches to literature in the wake of postmodern art and poststructural criticism have generated reevaluations of Marston's narrative inventiveness. Rick Bowers claims that 'to take Marston seriously is to understand that his thrust is basically sensational, not moral; a matter of contemporary theatrical and popular culture, not ethical consistency excavated from the classics'.¹³ Nathaniel Leonard argues that Marston's *Antonio* plays explore 'the theatrical potential of reflexive self-awareness' by frequently calling attention to the artifice of theatre.¹⁴ In *Antonio and Mellida*, for example, the induction scene introduces the characters to the audience by having the child actors, as if in backstage preparation, discussing their parts and giving one another advice about the best ways to successfully perform their characters. For Leonard, Marston's theatrical self-referentiality 'constructs an additional dramatic layer that serves to remind the audience of the out-of-character identity of the actor' and thus emphasizes the fictionality of the narrative the actor will perform and the world his characters will inhabit.¹⁵

I agree that Marston writes self-referential theatre, but where Leonard claims that the metatheatricality of Marston's work is "dramatizing" the "drama" in order to '[highlight] the limitations of genre and the hollowness of those tropes', I argue that Marston's theatrical self-reflexiveness calls attention to the artifice of

the theatre so audiences will appreciate his plays as aesthetic objects.¹⁶ *Antonio's Revenge*, in particular, invites audiences to assess the quality of his playwrighting and his actors' performances. Since the Elizabethan revenge tragedies that precede *Antonio's Revenge* use revenge to explore the ethical or political dimensions of violence, Marston's depiction of revenge as an aesthetic concern marks a radical departure from his contemporaries. Drawing upon recent scholarship on rivalry in the theatrical marketplace, I will argue that Marston's depiction of revenge logic, which alludes to prior acts of violence while attempting to surpass them, allegorizes the competitive nature of commercial theatres. Marston depicts revenge as a medium for aesthetic achievement and portrays violence as a showcase for rhetoric, acting, and intrigue. To demonstrate this emphasis on theatrical accomplishment, I will analyze four key elements of *Antonio's Revenge*: Marston's expansion of the *theatrum mundi* trope through the play's emphasis on theatrical rivalry; applause as validation of literary ambition; revenge as a form of *imitatio*; and Antonio's literary displacement of Piero in the play's conclusion.

Antonio's Revenge is insistently self-referential, functioning both as a sequel to another play (*Antonio and Mellida*) that was written within the conventions of another genre (comedy), and as a play that is in discourse with, and comments on, revenge tragedy as a popular theatrical form.¹⁷ Marston's characters demonstrate an awareness of the conventions of the genre itself throughout the play. When Pandulpho refrains from weeping after viewing his son's corpse, he describes the Senecan grief and madness an audience would expect from a character in a revenge tragedy:

Would'st have me cry, run raving up and down,
 For my son's loss? Would'st have me turn rank mad,
 Or wring my face with mimic action;
 Stamp, curse, weep, rage, and then my bosom strike?
 Away, 'tis apish action, player-like. (1.5.76–80)

Despite criticizing 'player-like' performances, Pandulpho frames his actions in theatrical terms, telling Alberto to 'Come, sit, kind nephew; come on; thou and I / Will talk as chorus to this tragedy' (1.5.62–3). In one notable scene, Piero rehearses the staged accusation he and Strotzo (his co-conspirator/lackey) will make against Antonio, wherein Strotzo will act as if he were overwhelmed by guilt and falsely confess that Antonio hired him to defame Mellida and murder Andrugio. This rehearsal scene is the part of the play most explicitly concerned with theatricality. Piero acts as playwright/director, providing Strotzo his lines, 'fall on thy face and cry, "Why suffer you / So lewd a slave as Strotzo is to

breathe?”), and giving detailed instructions on how to perform his role convincingly, telling him to ‘Rush’ with ‘Halter about thy neck, and with such sighs, / Laments and acclamations lifen it’ and to ‘Do it with rare passion’ and ‘Swear plainly’ (2.5.20–1, 14, 16–17, 6, 13).

In emphasizing the technical aspects of the players’ performances, the rehearsal scene constructs for its audience ‘additional layers of dramatic interaction’, drawing attention to actors that are playing characters that will themselves perform a fiction within the world of the play.¹⁸ We see this same emphasis of dramatic layers in Piero’s feigned anguish over his daughter’s supposed infidelity:

I ha’ no reason to be reasonable.
 Her wedding eve, linked to the noble blood
 Of my most firmly reconcilèd friend,
 And found even clinged in sensuality!
 O heaven! O heaven! Were she as near to my heart
 As is my liver, I would rend her off. (1.4.28–33)

The Senecan anguish of these lines is conventional to Elizabethan revenge plays, but Piero’s use of them is not. He pretends to be caught up in fury, but is actually staging the scene. Jonathan Lamb argues that when early modern plays produce this level of audience awareness, they generate what he calls a ‘bifold episteme’, a dramatic form ‘in which the audience ... obtains a categorical knowledge advantage over the other represented characters’.¹⁹ Part of the ‘fun’ of the bifold episteme is that these ‘levels of knowledge are themselves on display’ for the audience.²⁰ In *Antonio’s Revenge*, for instance, the audience knows what the characters onstage do not: that Piero’s feigned grief is all a ruse to frame Antonio. But the audience also knows, from the play’s title alone, what Piero does not: that Piero’s hubris will be short-lived.

The bifold episteme, of course, lends itself well to theatrical self-referentiality. According to Lamb, this bifold dramatic form ‘exploits ... the relationship between presentation (i.e. the play’s fictional world that is the function of the “author’s pen”) and presentation (the real, material world of the “actor’s voice”)’.²¹ Piero’s desire to put on a convincing performance calls attention to this relationship between presentation and representation, as the audience knows that Piero is both a character played by a boy actor and a character who acts. He performs with Senecan fury to shape the play’s narrative while also exhibiting to the audience his skill in theatrical performance. In creating ‘additional layers of dramatic interaction’, the play acknowledges separate layers of potential audiences.²² On the one hand, Piero’s acting conceals his villainous intent from the other characters

onstage. On the other hand, by presenting himself as an actor, Piero also performs for an imagined audience that watches from offstage and knows he is acting. With this knowledge, the play invites the audience to evaluate Piero's performance, to judge whether he is successful in acting 'with rare passion' (2.5.6). Thus, Marston's play not only foregrounds representation and presentation, it also calls attention to the fact that the audience's reception of the play is what establishes its reputation, determining its success or failure.

The self-reflexivity of the play is so pervasive that we notice whenever a character *does not* seem aware of the genre of the play he inhabits. When Antonio first appears onstage, he wakes with an optimism which befits the comic resolution of *Antonio and Mellida*, but which is here steeped in dramatic irony. We already know what Antonio does not: his father was murdered in the night. Antonio's first lines are tuned to display his unawareness that he is in a tragedy:

Darkness is fled; infant morn hath drawn
Bright silver curtains 'bout the couch of night,
And now Aurora's horse trots azure rings,
Breathing fair light about the firmament. (1.3.1–4)

Emphasizing an airy brightness more suitable for an aubade, Antonio's rhetoric produces a naive contrast to the setting and trappings of the stage itself. He describes a morning light which seems more spring than winter, contradicting the season of the play's performance, which the prologue describes as the 'rawish dank of clumsy winter' with 'drizzling sleet' and 'snarling gusts' that 'pills the skin' off trees (Prologue 1, 2, 4, 5). If the prologue truly does call attention to a nasty winter, the audience might very well feel their suspension of disbelief strained when Antonio describes a warm, bright dawn.²³ More ironic is Antonio's claim that the 'infant morn hath drawn / Bright silver curtains 'bout the couch of night' (1.3.1–2). While Antonio is speaking metaphorically, the stage's appearance contradicts his lines, the stage being literally draped in black, a detail emphasized by the prologue, which warns anyone unwilling to be disturbed by violent tragedy to 'Hurry amain from our *black-visaged shows*; / We shall affright their eyes' (Prologue 20–1, italics mine).²⁴ Not until Antonio speaks of the 'Two meager ghosts' that visited him in 'horrid dreams' do his lines fit this black-visaged stage (1.3.42, 39).

The play's pervasive metatheatricality seems, at first, simply to be an inclusion of the *theatrum mundi* trope common in early modern theatre. While the trope most often appears in philosophical musings on the social status a character is born into, Barbara Baines argues that Marston uses the *theatrum mundi* trope to draw attention to the artifice of the play itself, a reversal of the trope's

usual deployment: ‘Within the dramatic illusion, Marston’s characters live out the conventions of revenge tragedy because they literalize, or to use Rosalie Colie’s term, unmetaphor, the *theatrum mundi* trope: all the world’s a stage in a play of revenge. They perceive that life has provided them with roles they are destined to play.’²⁵ For Baines, this literalization of the *theatrum mundi* trope creates cognitive distance, divorcing the audience from emotive responses to the violence and grief depicted onstage:

By exaggerating the aesthetic sensibility of his characters in such a way that they perceive life in terms of art — that is, they live their lives by consciously creating dramas, poems, imaginative narratives, and emblems — Marston heightens his audience’s awareness of the play as a play and thus limits its participation in the dramatic illusion. The awareness that the audience is watching a play rather than life itself makes the audience acutely conscious of the dictates of the convention and invites an assessment of the generic form.²⁶

In Baines’s reading of Marston’s use of metatheatricality, the play’s distancing effect invites the audience to analyze the play instead of just experiencing it. Marston therefore does not deploy the *theatrum mundi* trope as a metaphor or a philosophical expression. Instead, the trope emphasizes the fictiveness of its fictional characters.

I agree with Baines that Marston’s use of the *theatrum mundi* trope is unique, but want to take this analysis further. The crux of my argument is that Marston’s play radically expands the *theatrum mundi* trope by recognizing something implicit in revenge logic itself. In this expansion, Marston’s revenge play ‘plays’ to the audience. Not just commenting on the generic form of revenge plays, Marston explores the relation between a playwright and audiences who have seen many plays from many different playwrights and will see many more. In Marston’s revenge tragedy, the world is not a single stage where his characters are all players — instead, the play is a world of competing stages, a world in which success is measured by one’s ability to surpass other actors, performances, and narratives of ‘lesser plot’ to capture an audience’s attention and to remain foremost in their memory (5.6.59). Unlike their predecessors in other revenge plays, the characters in *Antonio’s Revenge* fixate on the theatricality of revenge as an occasion for displays of rhetorical flourish. Piero calls out to personified ‘Hell’ and ‘Night’, demanding his imagined audience to ‘Give me thy ears’ as he describes the ‘rare’ performance of his ‘pretense of love’ to bring about Andrugio’s ‘unsuspected death’ (1.1.30, 52, 74, 63, 67). For Piero in particular, revenge is not just retaliation for a disgrace; it

also becomes theatrical rivalry with other revengers in other revenge plays, a game of one-upmanship and a pleasure that he draws out through rhetoric, wanting to keep the triumphant moment alive and present as long as possible.

Early modern theatre and London's commercial market were mutually formative, with the rise of theatre as a commercial enterprise coinciding with the beginnings of 'institutionalized capitalism' in London.²⁷ This was a period when playhouses were 'frequently characterized, by detractors and supporters alike, as markets in miniature'.²⁸ Janet Clare argues persuasively that reading intertextually and with an eye toward the external pressures of theatrical rivalry and marketplace competition between playwrights allows for fresh insight into the textual variations of different printed versions of *Hamlet*.²⁹ This approach might also help us better understand Marston's style and tone. Marston notably wrote his revenge play while smack-dab in the middle of the Poets' War, a time of heightened theatrical rivalry between playwrights. While *Antonio's Revenge* was not embroiled in the satirical attacks and counterattacks of the Poets' War (Marston's volleys were the comical satires of *Histrionatrix*, *Jack Drum's Entertainment*, and *What You Will*), this period of intensified theatrical competition shaped Marston's revenge play. In this atmosphere of rivalry, 'playwrights began the project of assessing their own quality' and including evaluative principles within the plays themselves.³⁰ Consequently, Marston's revenge play is compulsively self-aware of its relation to other revenge narratives.

Linda Woodbridge argues that cultural anxieties about nascent capitalism help account for the popularity of revenge tragedies and their use of 'pervasive economic language', which reveals a frustration with 'economic unfairness and related legal unfairness'.³¹ The equal measure of violence Talionic law meted out — an eye for an eye — meant that 'Pain, like money, was a payment', and revenge, Woodbridge argues, functions within a 'culture of credit', so that the suffering of violence becomes a debt, to be repaid with interest.³² 'Payback', one of our modern synonyms for revenge, retains this sense of retaliation as settling a debt of pain. In *Antonio's Revenge*, however, Marston does not frame revenge as 'payback'. Though Piero describes his motives for murdering Antonio's father and Pandulpho's son, these stated motives are secondary to a desire to surpass all prior instances of theatrical revenge.³³ Instead of focusing on the initial cause for retribution, his rhetoric emphasizes the intricacy of his revenge as a praiseworthy accomplishment:

Lord, in two hours what a topless mount
Of unpeered mischief have these hands cast up!

I can scarce coop triumphing vengeance up,
From bursting forth in braggart passion. (1.1.9–12)

'Topless' and 'unpeered' are the key words here. Revenge becomes an ostentatious display of a character's unmatched ability to orchestrate murder and 'hale on mischief' (78). The conventional concern with 'legal unfairness' Woodbridge identifies is absent.³⁴ The rhetoric shifts revenge from payback to showboating.

When we ignore the self-referential and intertextual aspects of the play, the play's rhetoric looks like stylistic excess rather than an essential aspect of the play's interrogation of revenge logic and theatrical competition. Like Dollimore, Spinrad reads *Antonio's Revenge* as psychological realism and finds the play to be conventional, interpreting revenge in the play as a question of justice. If there is anything radical in Marston's treatment of revenge, Spinrad argues, it lies in the play's use of Judeo-Christian, rather than pagan, imagery, which asks early modern audiences 'to accept revenge as Christian'.³⁵ In her final assessment of the play, however, Spinrad does suggest the possibility of intertextual analysis: 'it may be that [Marston] was newly interrogating revenge or revenge drama ... or that he was simply trying to make a box-office killing (no pun intended) through outrageous one-upmanship'.³⁶ But Spinrad presents these as two separate possibilities without analyzing how they might be linked. Allen Bergson reads *Antonio's Revenge* as self-reflexive about the generic constraints determining its 'conventional representation of reality', but Bergson limits the scope of the play's metatheatrical implications to a generalized 'dramaturgical critique' of revenge tragedy, without recognizing the play's particular insistence on theatrical rivalry and aesthetic comparison.³⁷

As the financing of plays expanded beyond patronage, plays became products of an emerging entertainment industry, forcing playwrights to compete with each other for audience share. This 'mercantile nature of play-writing' is a 'simultaneously competitive and interactive process', characterized by the practice of adapting from shared sources or borrowing from other plays.³⁸ Commercial playwrights also 'came to mythologize elaborate realities of London's material base' by aestheticizing marketplace economics through the familiar topoi of poetry and drama.³⁹ In *The Gull's Horn-Book* (1609), Thomas Dekker offers an apt comparison between the theatre and the marketplace, linking playwriting and applause with capital and commodities: 'The theatre is your poets' Royal Exchange, upon which their Muses — that are now turned to merchants — meeting, barter away that light commodity of words for a lighter ware than words — plaudits and the breath of the great beast which, like the threatenings of two cowards, vanish all to

air'.⁴⁰ In Dekker's analogy, dramatists peddle words on the English stage in hopes of attaining applause, which functions as a kind of payment from the audience (ie the 'great beast').

In a similar vein, Marston explores the competitive nature of drama, using the convention of one-upmanship found in Elizabethan revenge tragedies as a complex symbolic expression of literary ambition. Conventional Elizabethan revenge tragedies depict violent retribution as a necessary last resort for procuring private justice, but do not treat it as a praiseworthy act. *Antonio's Revenge*, however, presents skillfully-crafted revenge as a means for attaining applause:

Andrugio sleeps in peace! This brain hath choked
 The organ of his breast. Feliche hangs
 But as a bait upon the line of death,
 To 'tice on mischief. I am great in blood,
 Unequalled in revenge. You horrid scouts
 That sentinel swart night, give loud applause
 From your large palms. (1.1.14–20)

Piero's desire for applause moves revenge from moral consideration to aesthetic appreciation. He demands not ethical vindication but validation for the unsurpassed *quality* of his revenge, an act he frames as a theatrical achievement worthy of audience share. Like grindhouse cinema, Piero capitalizes on repulsion as a source of fascination. For Piero, the only thing that matters is notoriety, and only the most shocking violence is memorable. There seems to be no difference between admiration and abhorrence, so long as the play is unforgettable. Piero's demand for lavish praise exaggerates the desire for audience approval commonly expressed in a play's prologue or epilogue. Marston's play is an expression of the poetics of the market that metonymically links theatrical rivalry and aesthetic appreciation with theatre traffic and economic viability. Even violence done in secret has an imagined audience from whom Marston's characters seek approval. Recognizing this imagined audience helps us make sense of the play's repeated references to applause: 'Give loud applause to my hypocrisy' (1.1.31); 'Sweet wrong, I clap thy thoughts' (2.1.9); 'From hearts, not from lips, applause desires' (2.2.64); 'Applaud my agonies and penitence' (2.5.29); 'Heaven sits clapping of our enterprise' (5.3.15). Marston's metatheatrical emphasis, in which world and stage mirror each other, distills competition into an abstract value, and only the 'Unequalled', 'topless', or 'unpeered' revenge is worthy of an audience (1.1.18, 84, 10).

Marston's metatheatrical competitiveness foregrounds the 'mercantile nature of play-writing', exploring revenge as a symbolic double for the playwright's desire for theatrical success, best attained through literary aggression.⁴¹ T.F. Wharton's discussion of Marston's early literary ambitions provides context for the play's emphasis on theatrical rivalry. Before turning to playwriting, Marston wrote aggressive satire and intentionally sought rivalry with other writers in order to secure an audience. According to Wharton, 'it is clear that Marston believes that a deliberately stimulated hostility is the best guarantee of his own renown'.⁴² For Marston, 'Aggression was ... not merely a matter of temperament', but was 'an effective tool of literary publicity' which soon became 'the chosen method by which [he] set out to gain literary recognition and force his way into the contemporary canon'.⁴³ Piero's revenge logic includes Marston's own tendencies as a writer to utilize aggression and rivalry for self-promotion. As Piero increasingly invests in his role as a stage villain unequalled in revenge, he must seek new targets for his animosity. This need arises from the fact that, even before the play begins, he has already murdered Andrugio, whom Piero viewed as his rival both in love and honour. Piero's solution to this narrative closure is to claim that his revenge has no conclusion and to extend his hatred to Andrugio's son. At Andrugio's funeral, Piero taunts Andrugio's corpse while plotting a sequel to his revenge, confiding that he will find a new rival in Antonio: 'Though thou art dead, think not my hate is dead'; 'Andrugio rots, / Antonio lives; umh; how long? ha, ha, how long?' (2.1.6, 11–12).

For Marston, literary recognition requires both a receptive public audience and a marketplace of literary competition. To succeed, rivals worth surpassing must be present, and Marston expects his audience to weigh his work against the competition. According to Wharton, Marston is 'an author propagating his own literary criticism and literary debate. He creates an imaginary audience and engages it in literary debate, or occasionally imagines it conducting the debate quite separately from himself, at the point of literary consumption, the book-stall and the marketplace'.⁴⁴ But this propagation also suggests that reputation and poetic authority are inherently unstable. As theatrical competition heated into a full-blown Poets' War, the question of what validates poetic authority became increasingly important. As James Bednarz states, rivalry between Jonson, on the one hand, and Marston, Dekker, and Shakespeare on the other, initiates a major theatrical conflict concerning 'the epistemological, literary, and ethical assumptions upon which [Jonson] based his assertion of poetic authority'.⁴⁵ While Jonson worked to establish neoclassical principles of drama as the standard to which English theatre should be held and which would 'establish for himself and for

his age a new paradigm of poetic authority', Marston, Dekker, and Shakespeare 'were willing to object to what Thomas Greene calls Jonson's "centered self" and Jonathan Dollimore terms the philosophy of "humanist essentialism"'.⁴⁶ Jonson's poetic authority derives from this humanist essentialism — pinned to a stable, self-determined identity that assumes it can view itself and name itself in a way that both precedes and shapes its social recognition. Jonson's opponents, including Marston, generate an opposing ontology to Jonson's theorization of poetic authority by writing self-reflexive plays that reject neoclassical principles and 'went beyond the formal limits of individual plays'.⁴⁷ Since the self-reflexivity and intertextuality of these plays 'had to be played off each other for their competing meanings to arise', they 'required modes of interpretation' from 'a sophisticated audience'.⁴⁸ This interplay between a play's production and its reception means that poetic authority is not absolute, but must be determined (perhaps repeatedly) by its success with an audience rather than by its displayed mastery of dramaturgical principles.

As characters in *Antonio's Revenge* seek to be unsurpassed in violence and woe, Marston's theatrum mundi trope suggests that literary competition includes the possibility of failure. Several moments in *Antonio's Revenge* voice concern about the fickle attention of audiences. Seeking praise for the quality of his revenge, Piero asks Strotzo, 'Is't not rare?' (1.1.81). 'Yes', Strotzo replies, but this monosyllabic response fails to properly validate the 'rare' heights of Piero's malicious accomplishment (81):

No! Yes!, Nothing but 'no' and 'yes', dull lump?
 Canst thou not honey me with fluent speech
 And even adore my topless villainy? (82–4)

Piero's numerous demands for comparison, recognition, and applause, while cocky in tone, also conceal an anxiety that he might not ever secure the approbation he craves: 'Say, faith, didst thou e'er hear, or read, or see / Such happy vengeance, unsuspected death?' (66–7); 'Nay, but weigh it' (75); 'Is't to be equalled think'st thou? ... / Is't not rare?' (79–81). If audiences find Piero less compelling than other characters in Elizabethan drama, his poetic authority will appear lacking in merit. Piero notably confesses that his murderous hatred of Andrugio results, in part, from Andrugio outshining Piero at the end of *Antonio and Mellida*:

When his bright valor even dazzled sense
 In off'ring his own head, public reproach
 Had blurred my name — (Antonio's Revenge 1.1.32–4)

Piero's anxiety about falling short of applause, and perhaps even facing ridicule, represents in microcosm the anxieties of failure within the larger scope of the theatrical marketplace.

Having to face an audience's ridicule might be an anxiety inherent in literary competition, and Marston's depiction of Balurdo provides the play a comic outlet for this anxiety. If playwriting is a competitive practice of adaptation, appropriation, and iteration, Balurdo serves as an example of how such practices can fail. Balurdo recognizes that profitable writing involves borrowing from others, but he knows not what he borrows, nor how to activate these borrowed words in compelling ways. Throughout the play, Balurdo latches onto words that he might redeploy as fashionable vocabulary, presumably because he likes their sound and (for him, at least) their novelty. When Matzagente responds to teasing from Galeatzo, Matzagente's use of 'good words, very good words' tickles Balurdo, who jots them down in his writing tables (1.3.22). When Maria offers her 'respective' thanks after Balurdo serenades her with a bass viol, Balurdo comments on the pleasure of a word, "'Respective", truly a pretty word', and immediately co-opts it: 'Indeed, Madam, I have the most respective fiddle' (3.4.24–6). Balurdo also attempts to impress Maria with the new words — 'retort' and 'obtuse' — that he recorded earlier: 'Lady, with a most retort and obtuse leg, / I kiss the curled locks of your loose hair. [*Bows.*]' (19–20). After adding 'retort' and 'obtuse' to his vocabulary in act 1, Balurdo 'goes on to misuse [them] as an adjectival phrase eight times throughout the play'.⁴⁹

His failings only serve to highlight the superiority of the characters he imitates. To laugh at Balurdo's absurdity is to activate his normative function — which is to compel audiences to recognize the difference between superior and inferior writing. Through Balurdo, Marston injects a bit of bad writing to protect from criticism the high aspirations of Piero and Antonio, who seek to be unsurpassed and unequalled characters on the English stage. Drawing an audience's attention to notable language in a play, as Balurdo does, is not a strategy unique to Marston. Balurdo's fixation on good words highlights what Robert Watson describes as 'the competitive neologizing of the Elizabethan theater'.⁵⁰ Watson argues that the prevalence of coining new words in early modern English plays reveals the demand for fashionable neologisms in a culture that emphasized the social capital of language, a demand that emerges from the humanist 'notion that rhetorical mastery led to social mastery'.⁵¹ According to Watson, 'If the Elizabethan theater was a "knowledge marketplace," the lexicon itself was a featured product' that playwrights promoted as a 'rhetorical means of social advancement'.⁵² As merchants of language in this linguistic market, playwrights were thus competing not just in

terms of the quality of their plays' narratives, but also in their plays' coining and distribution of new and fashionable words and phrases. Along these lines, Gair reads 'this affectation of Balurdo to write down new words' as 'a means whereby Marston draws attention to his vividly contemporary and original vocabulary'.⁵³

Gair's gloss of Balurdo's attention to language, however, fails to recognize the clumsiness of Balurdo's attempts to capitalize on good words. Marston uses Balurdo to expose the tension between wanting to give audiences memorable language while also wanting to avoid being ridiculed for incorporating embarrassingly overblown or clumsy rhetoric. By demonstrating an awareness (and providing a satirical performance) of sycophantic, linguistic vapidness, Marston generates a distinction between Balurdo's cringe-worthy borrowings and the more praise-worthy appropriations of words, texts, and phrases on display in the play. Balurdo serves as a foil for the rhetorical pyrotechnics of Marston's other characters, who speak Senecan phrases in Latin or expound on their griefs in dramatic language that seeks to compete with the heightened language of rival playwrights.

Though other playwrights contribute to the poetics of the market by incorporating marketplace rhetoric into their work, Marston's play links the logic of revenge to the inherent rivalry of commercial theatres competing for applause and, thus, box-office success. Rick Bowers claims that 'Marston ... seems to be the only dramatist self-conscious enough to realize that his drama competes in a 'mart' of reflexive professional play'.⁵⁴ If we read *Antonio's Revenge* as a conventional revenge tragedy, we miss the crucial element of the play's aestheticizing of revenge as a response to marketplace economics. Rather than parodying revenge tragedies (as Foakes suggests) or rehearsing apprehensions about 'social and political dislocation' (as Dollimore claims), *Antonio's Revenge* investigates the apprehension of linking aesthetic and economic value. Even in moments that seem stock for a revenge play, the play calls attention to the anxieties of literary production. Taunting Andrugio's corpse, Piero marks obscurity as more devastating than death itself: 'Oblivion choke the passage of thy fame!' (2.1.3). While describing a nightmare encounter with the ghosts of Andrugio and Feliche, Antonio is interrupted by Balurdo, who describes his own 'monstrous strange dream' of 'the abominable ghost of a misshapen Simile' (1.3.61, 64). Antonio's nightmare of impending doom, so common in revenge tragedies, is displaced by Balurdo's nightmare of clichéd, unprofitable writing.

Antonio's Revenge challenges self-affirming, Jonsonian claims to poetic authority by showing them to be conditional on the affirmations applause provides, affirmations that, even if obtained, might fade over time or transfer to new

theatrical rivals. Although the play’s title is *Antonio’s Revenge*, much of the first half of the play is devoted to Piero. Not until Antonio commits to revenge does he begin monopolizing the stage. When Antonio usurps Piero’s project of retribution, the narrative structure of *Antonio’s Revenge* itself suggests the conditional status of any ‘unsurpassed’ revenge narrative. By imitating the theatricality of Piero’s rhetoric and amplifying the play’s spectacles of violence, Antonio becomes the central figure of revenge by the play’s conclusion and displaces Piero in the audience’s esteem. The play itself models this audience response through the senators, who express unending admiration for Antonio and his co-conspirators in revenge: ‘Blest be you all, and may your honours live / Religiously held sacred, even for ever and ever’ (5.6.10–11). Though the senators admire all who took revenge against Piero, they single out Antonio specifically, telling him, ‘Thou art another Hercules to us / In ridding huge pollution from our state’ (12–13).

In conferring the status of ‘another Hercules’ to Antonio, the senators affirm the success of Antonio’s own competitive streak in the play (12). As we have seen, Piero fixates on the rarity of his murders and intrigues, claiming he is ‘great in blood, / Unequaled in revenge’ (1.1.17–18). Antonio, also determined to display unequalled theatrical ability, will not be outdone in his displays of grief. With his father dead and his beloved Mellida defamed, Antonio exclaims:

Behold a prostrate wretch laid upon his tomb;
His epithet thus: *Ne plus ultra*. Ho!
Let none out-woe me, mine’s Herculean woe. (2.3.131–3)

Antonio’s claim to an unsurpassed, ‘Herculean woe’ provides him the passion necessary for a protagonist’s commitment to revenge. Consolation, however, threatens to dissolve willful vengeance:

Confusion to all comfort! I defy it.
Comfort’s a parasite, a flatt’ring Jack,
And melts resolved despair. (1.5.48–50)

The key to resolve, then, is to bolster it with desperation and anguish:

O boundless woe,
If there be any black yet unknown grief,
If there be any horror yet unfelt,
Unthought mischief in thy fiendlike power,
Dash it upon my miserable head,
Make me more wretch, more cursèd if thou canst. (50–5)

For Antonio, the revenger's herculean labour is to bear the weight of immense, unimaginable grief — a grief that is (at least rhetorically) beyond comparison. Through this immeasurability, Antonio configures himself to be the convergence point for all suffering. Overhearing Pandulpho, Maria, and Mellida vent their own sorrows, he assigns himself the role of grief's great receptacle:

PANDULPHO Woe for my dear, dear son!

MARIA Woe for my dear, dear husband!

MELLIDA Woe for my dear, dear love.

ANTONIO Woe for me all; close all your woes in me,

In me, Antonio. Ha! Where live these sounds?

I can see nothing; grief's invisible

And lurks in secret angles of the heart.

Come, sigh again, Antonio bears his part. (2.3.65–72)

Antonio's claim to a grief that both contains and surpasses all other experiences of grief is, like Piero's braggart villainy, self-congratulatory and intensely competitive. When Pandulpho, grieving over the corpse of his son Feliche, declares himself 'the miserablest soul that breathes', Antonio challenges Pandulpho's claim, saying no one is capable of 'Outmounting me in that superlative' and that he alone is 'Most miserable, most unmatched in woe' (4.5.53, 56, 57).

Given the play's penchant for metatheatrical allusions, we should also consider how the competitive nature of Antonio's 'Herculean woe' might extend beyond the boundaries of the stage at St Paul's, where Marston wrote for a troupe of child actors (2.3.133). Baines argues that Antonio's woeful exclamations allude to the rivalry between child and adult acting troupes:

The Renaissance audience would certainly have recognized Antonio's conscious creation of himself as an emblem, since his motto, *Ne plus ultra*, is a variation of a familiar heraldic device derived from the alleged inscription on the pillars of Hercules. Since the Globe theater was traditionally associated with Hercules through his labor of supporting the globe, 'Herculean woe' is a logical allusion to the tragedies of the Globe ... The likelihood that Marston's line refers to the rivalry of the theaters is reinforced by Shakespeare's allusion to the rivalry between the child and the adult troupes: to Hamlet's question, 'Do the boys carry it away,' Rosencrantz responds, 'Ay, that they do, my lord — Hercules and his load too' (2.2.360–61).⁵⁵

Like Piero's 'topless villainy', Antonio's 'Herculean woe' is invested in theatrical rivalry, marking him as a character not only in competition with the other

characters onstage, but also in competition with other stages, other kinds of acting troupes, and the characters of other playwrights (1.1.84, 2.3.133).

Scholars are quick to recognize the inherent theatrical rivalry of comical satires, but in discussions of revenge tragedies they have ignored the productive energy of competitive rivalry between playwrights, despite critics noting the many allusions and intertextual references between these plays. I would argue such references are signals that the context of literary competition shapes the content of these narratives. Not merely ornamental, the moments in revenge tragedies in which playwrights imitate, adapt, or allude to preceding revenge plays are rooted in the principles of aspiration initiated by the humanist educators whose classrooms provided the training ground for early modern playwrights. According to Clare:

The practice of imitation began in the schoolroom. Humanist pedagogy was based on the selection of a model, and the replication of its argument and rhetorical strategies. Erasmus had recommended the emulation of ‘a passage from some author where the spring of eloquence seems to bubble up particularly richly’, and advised the student ‘to equal or even surpass it.’⁵⁶

In revenge tragedy, imitating and surpassing are the *modus operandi* of the revenger, who takes a prior offense and returns it to the offender in an amplified form. Marston uses this revenge logic to explore the competitive, ambitious nature of humanism and art. From the opening scene, the play presents visual references to the genre. Fashioning himself into an imitation of Kyd’s mad Hieronimo, Piero arrives onstage with his clothing unfastened, his arms smeared in gore, and accessorized with poniard, torch, and cord.⁵⁷ Bragging about his murderous accomplishments, his unbraced and gore-smeared appearance is intentional. He adopts this appearance because revengers are supposed to look this way in revenge plays. By the end of act 2, Piero completes his imitation of Kyd’s revenger by recreating the conclusion of *The Spanish Tragedy*, where Hieronimo unveils his son’s corpse as a visceral form of accusation, displaying it as evidence against his enemies. Piero, too, hides a body behind a curtain, using its unveiling to make false accusations and strike up a vendetta between himself and Antonio. In reenacting what early modern audiences have already seen performed in other plays, Piero represents the dark possibility of *imitatio*, adaption, and poesis. He turns the project of humanist education — which encourages students to study, imitate, and surpass prior models — into a project of invective. He is a poet of the grudge.

To surpass a prior model is also to supplant it, to become the model that others must study and imitate. Baines notes that Piero approaches violence aesthetically

rather than politically: 'More important to him than the deed is the artistry with which it is accomplished and the recognition of his artistry. This self-conscious artistry sets the pattern for all of the characters of the play'.⁵⁸ Julio's murder scene suggests that Piero has indeed become the model that Antonio seeks to emulate. The scene dramatizes the practice of *imitatio*, with Antonio's language becoming indistinguishable from Piero's murderous rhetoric earlier in the play:

Ghost of my poisoned sire, suck this fume;
To sweet revenge, perfume thy circling air
With smoke of blood. I sprinkle round his gore
And dew thy hearse with these fresh-reeking drops.
Lo, thus I heave my blood-dyed hands to heaven,
Even like insatiate hell, still crying; 'More!
My heart hath thirsting dropsies after gore.'
Sound peace and rest to church, night-ghosts and graves;
Blood cries for blood, and murder murder craves. (3.3.63–71)

Here, Antonio's fascination with drinking blood or sucking its fumes echoes Piero's soliloquy at Andrugio's funeral, where Piero proclaims, 'I have been nursed in blood, and still have sucked / The steam of reeking gore' (2.1.19–20). Like Piero in the play's opening scene, Antonio raises his gore-smeared arms to the sky for recognition and approval of his violence from an imagined audience. When Piero's vituperative phrases begin falling from Antonio's own lips, the distinction between the two characters begins to blur.

Heather Anne Hirschfeld notes how rivalry and animosity function as symptoms of feared displacement in revenge tragedies.⁵⁹ How might this illuminate the threat and amplification of competition in *Antonio's Revenge*? Antonio not only adopts Piero's rhetoric and violence, he also takes revenge in the most metatheatrical way possible: first by exceeding Piero's imitation of other revenge plays and then by displacing the centrality of Piero's role in this play's narrative. Though the play begins with Piero imitating *The Spanish Tragedy* and claiming to be 'Unequaled in revenge', Antonio's practice of *imitatio* surpasses the play's theatrical models (1.1.18). After declaring himself 'unmatched in woe', Antonio directs his (less grieved) co-conspirators, Pandulpho and Alberto, to dig a grave for Feliche. As they dig into the earth with their daggers, Antonio creates a scene alluding to Hieronimo's mad stabbing of the earth in *The Spanish Tragedy*. The allusion also works to exceed Kyd's play in a literal sense, however, by tripling the number of revengers who ravage the earth with their blades. Where Kyd has a single character who grieves and digs the earth, Marston has three.⁶⁰ In the

conclusion of Kyd's tragedy, Hieronimo bites out his own tongue to refuse the king's demand for a confession. *Antonio's Revenge* also imitates this scene, but with a difference that amplifies its onstage violence. Rather than bite out their own tongues, Antonio and his entourage rip Piero's tongue from his mouth to 'spoil [his] oratory' (5.5.33). With Piero made speechless, the revengers then mock and torment him with the hacked limbs of his son, Julio, brought to him on a platter. Calling this a 'dish to feast thy father's gorge', Antonio, with culinary viciousness, alludes to the Thyestean banquets found in other revenge narratives (48).⁶¹

The destruction of Piero's tongue is key for understanding how Antonio enacts a unique form of revenge. Piero's speechlessness ends his claim to poetic authority and makes possible Piero's literary displacement in the play's conclusion. Initially, Piero's asides, soliloquies, and his conversations with (and often *at*) Strotzo provide much of the audience's understanding of the play's plot. Katharine Eisaman Maus argues that early modern convention establishes that a stage villain's use of soliloquies and asides creates a 'special intimacy with the audience'.⁶² In discussing 'Richard's blatant theatricality' in Shakespeare's *Richard III*, Maus argues that 'although the stage machiavel's intentions are "hidden" to other characters, they are wholly available to the theater spectators: we see Anna taken in by a false display of inward truth, but we are confident that Richard's self-disclosures to *us* are entirely reliable'.⁶³ For the first three acts of *Antonio's Revenge*, Maus's claim also rings true for Piero. The audience has access to Piero's inwardness through his self-disclosures onstage. Through these projected interactions with the audience, Piero generates the sense that he is the play's metatheatrical revenger, the central figure responsible for not only performing in the play's revenge narrative, but also writing and directing it. In his control of the play's theatricality, he presents himself as a figure capable of securing his own poetic authority. As Piero's theatrical rhetoric is closed off from the audience by Antonio and the other revengers, so too is the 'special intimacy with the audience' Piero fosters in his attempts to control the play's narrative while laying claim to its excellence. In place of Piero's self-congratulatory exaltation, the revengers orchestrate his tears, marking them as the material signifiers of their successful retribution: 'To thine anguish see / A fool triumphant in thy misery' (5.5.41–2); 'He weeps! ... / I have no vengeance if I had no tears' (44–5). They also translate Piero's tears into expressions of their own victimization, replacing his self-disclosures to the audience with their own:

ANTONIO Here lies a dish to feast thy father's gorge.
 Here's flesh and blood, which I am sure thou lovest.

PANDULPHO Was he thy flesh, thy son, thy dearest son?

ANTONIO So was Andrugio my dearest father.

PANDULPHO So was Feliche my dearest son.

MARIA So was Andrugio my dearest husband.

ANTONIO My father found no pity in thy blood.

PANDULPHO Remorse was banished, when thou slew'st my son.

MARIA When thou empoisonèd'st my loving lord,
 Exiled was piety. (48–57)

By directing Piero to weep and interpreting these tears for the audience, the revengers highlight the fact that, for him, self-disclosures are no longer possible.

Even if Piero's acts of malicious violence were of the rarest form, as he aspired, Antonio and his co-conspirators seem to surpass them here by not just politically silencing Piero's complaints, but removing his tongue; not just killing Piero's son, but bringing him pieces of the corpse to eat; not just taking pleasure in Piero's tears, but openly mocking them; not just plotting Piero's death, but fantasizing an eternal recurrence of his murder:

Sa, sa; no, let him die and die, and still be dying.
 And yet not die, till he hath died and died
 Ten thousand deaths in agony of heart. (73–5)

Above all, they interrupt his access to applause. Piero, in his metatheatrical addresses to an audience beyond the diegetic boundaries of the stage, casts the audience at times as his auditors. This audience (whether real or imagined) functions as a cognitive artifact, providing the possibility of reception, recognition, or social acknowledgment for his sense of self. As Christopher Tilmouth points out, applause in early modern culture is an act of 'labelling' and 'determining', a tangible assertion of appreciation for what has been observed in a person (or, in this case, a character).⁶⁴ When Piero wants applause, he wants others to take pleasure in his violent acts (just as he does) and he wants validation that he has successfully surpassed the models he emulates. Applause gives form and extension to his sense of malicious grandeur, solidifying the identity he believes himself to have by offering a perceivable sign of recognition and acknowledgment of his identity from others. In this sense, applause forms a necessary consensus for his construction of identity.

Antonio's greatest form of revenge against Piero is not in tormenting and killing him. In the end, Antonio's is not just a literal revenge, but also a *literary* revenge. The destruction of Piero's 'special intimacy with the audience' marks a devastatingly metatheatrical form of retribution. Where Piero seeks applause, Antonio emphasizes tears, suggesting another kind of audience response to the play: 'And when the closing Epilogue appears, / Instead of claps, may it obtain but tears' (5.6.67–8). Radically different emotional responses determine whether an act elicits applause or tears. Within the theatrical space of the tragic stage, tears are most often markers of grief (whether genuinely felt or feigned), but beyond the stage, in the realm of a 'choice audience', Antonio identifies tears as a form of aesthetic appreciation that exceeds applause (67). Not only does Antonio silence the applause Piero so stridently wished to hear, he also marks applause itself as inferior to the tears he might draw from the audience. Even after Piero is slain, Antonio extends his revenge by constructing a retroactive displacement of Piero's role in the play's narrative. In his closing lines, Antonio describes Mellida's death as a loss incapable of being equalled:

Never more woe in lesser plot was found.
 And, O, if ever time create a muse
 That to th' immortal fame of virgin faith [ie Mellida]
 Dares once engage his pen to write her death,
 Presenting it in some black tragedy,
 May it prove gracious, may his style be decked
 With freshest blooms of pure elegance;
 May it have gentle presence, and the scenes sucked up
 By calm attention of choice audience; (59–66)

To 'close the last act of [his] vengeance', Antonio suggests that if ever a tragedy is written capable of surpassing what the audience has just seen staged, it cannot be about some other character's tragic death (55). Only a more powerful adaptation of Mellida's death would suffice. Antonio reframes the play as Mellida's tragedy rather than Piero's revenge, inviting the audience to close the play in tearful remembrance of Mellida instead of applauding Piero's villainy. He reimagines the play with Mellida as its central figure rather than Piero, usurping the theatrical legacy that Piero so stridently desired. *This* is Antonio's revenge.

Notes

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- 1 John Marston, *Antonio's Revenge*, ed. W. Reavley Gair (Manchester, 1978). All further in-text citations are from this edition.
- 2 Samuel Schoenbaum, 'The Precarious Balance of John Marston', *PMLA* 67.7 (1952), 1070, <https://doi.org/10.2307/459959>.
- 3 R.A. Foakes, 'John Marston's Fantastical Plays: *Antonio and Mellida* and *Antonio's Revenge*', *Philological Quarterly* 41 (1962), 236.
- 4 Schoenbaum, 'The Precarious Balance', 1071–2.
- 5 W. Reavley Gair, introduction to *Antonio's Revenge* by John Marston, ed. W. Reavley Gair (Manchester, 1978), 16–19.
- 6 Margreta de Grazia, *Hamlet Without Hamlet* (Cambridge, 2008), 7.
- 7 Phoebe S. Spinrad, 'The Sacralization of Revenge in *Antonio's Revenge*', *Comparative Drama* 39.2 (2005), 169, <https://doi.org/10.1353/cdr.2005.0017>. See also George Geckle, '*Antonio's Revenge*: "Never more woe in lesser plot was found"', *Comparative Drama* 6.4 (1972), 323–6, <https://doi.org/10.1353/cdr.1972.0024>.
- 8 Thomas McAlindon, *English Renaissance Tragedy* (Vancouver, 1986), 52, <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-10180-1>. For further discussion of Elizabethan attitudes on revenge and its development on the English stage, see Fredson Bowers, *Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy, 1587–1642* (Princeton, 1940), <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400877300>, and also Linda Woodbridge, *English Revenge Drama: Money, Resistance, Equality* (Cambridge, 2010), <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511781469>.
- 9 George Geckle, *John Marston's Drama: Themes, Images, Sources* (Rutherford, 1980), 28.
- 10 Jonathan Dollimore, *Radical Tragedy: Religion, Ideology, and Power in the Drama of Shakespeare and His Contemporaries* (Chicago, 1984), 9.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 29.
- 12 *Ibid.*
- 13 Rick Bowers, 'John Marston at the "Mart of Woe": The Antonio Plays', in *The Drama of John Marston: Critical Re-Visions*, ed. T.F. Wharton (Cambridge, 2007), 14, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511519680.003>.

- 14 Nathaniel Leonard, ‘Embracing the “Mongrel”’: John Marston’s *The Malcontent*, *Antonio and Mellida*, and the Development of Early Modern Tragicomedy’, *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* 2.3 (2012), 65, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jem.2012.0019>.
- 15 Ibid, 67.
- 16 Ibid, 74–5.
- 17 For further discussion of Marston’s disruption of generic conventions and the radical implications of writing a revenge tragedy as a sequel to a tragicomedy, see Leonard, ‘Embracing the “Mongrel”’. Leonard argues that Marston’s tragicomedies are exceptions that defy conventional understanding of the genre’s development. Unlike Marston’s contemporaries, who were influenced by the Italianate tradition, Marston’s tragicomedies experiment with ‘generic instability’ and ‘incompleteness’ by gesturing ‘to future, potential events beyond the actions of the plays themselves — events that would be necessary for those plots to create closure’ (65, 74).
- 18 Leonard, ‘Embracing the “Mongrel”’, 74.
- 19 Jonathan Lamb, ‘William Shakespeare’s *Mucedorus* and the Market of Forms’, *Renaissance Drama* 46.1 (2018), 64, <https://doi.org/10.1086/697174>.
- 20 Ibid, 65. For Lamb’s discussion of the bifold episteme as a form of pleasure or ‘fun’, see 85–6.
- 21 Ibid, 63.
- 22 Nathaniel Leonard, ‘Embracing the “Mongrel”’, 74.
- 23 The play was likely written to be performed in the winter of 1599. See W. Reavley Gair, ‘Introduction’, 12–15.
- 24 Gair notes that ‘the stage was draped in black’ (55n20) and states that this was ‘a standard Elizabethan device to indicate a tragedy’ (53), citing a line from *The Insatiate Countess* as evidence: ‘The stage of heav’n, is hung with solemn black, / A time best fitting to Act Tragedies’ (55n20). See also Howard Staunton’s commentary on this practice in William Shakespeare, *The Works of Shakespeare, Vol. II.*, ed. Howard Staunton (London 1859): ‘In our early theaters, before the introduction of movable scenery, it appears that the back and sides of the stage were usually adorned with tapestry or arras ... When the performance was of a tragic nature, however, the furniture of the stage partook in some degree of the sombre character of the piece, and the walls and interior covering were always hung with black’ (332).
- 25 Barbara J. Baines, ‘*Antonio’s Revenge*: Marston’s Play on Revenge Plays’, *Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900* 23.2 (1983), 280, <https://doi.org/10.2307/450093>.
- 26 Ibid.
- 27 Douglas Bruster, *Drama and the Market in the Age of Shakespeare* (New York, 1992), 4, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511553080>.

- 28 Ibid, 7. For additional discussion of the theatre as a marketplace of dramatic forms, see also Douglas Bruster, 'The Representation Market of Early Modern England', *Renaissance Drama* 41.1–2 (2013), 1–23, <https://doi.org/10.1086/673903>; Lamb, 'William Shakespeare's *Mucedorus*', 59–61.
- 29 Janet Clare, *Shakespeare's Stage Traffic: Imitation, Borrowing and Competition in Renaissance Theatre* (New York, 2014), 181–5, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139626934>.
- 30 James P. Bednarz, *Shakespeare & the Poets' War* (New York, 2001), 11.
- 31 Woodbridge, *English Revenge Drama*, 10.
- 32 Ibid, 11.
- 33 Concerning Andrugio's murder, Piero states: 'We both were rivals in our May of blood / Unto Maria' but 'He won the fair Lady, to my honour's death, / And from her sweets cropped this Antonio' (1.1.23–6). Piero claims he murdered Feliche as 'bait' to 'tice on mischief', initiating a plot to interrupt Mellida's engagement to Antonio (1.1.16–17).
- 34 Woodbridge, *English Revenge Drama*, 10.
- 35 Spinrad, 'The Sacralization of Revenge', 182.
- 36 Ibid, 183.
- 37 Allen Bergson, 'Dramatic Style as Parody in *Antonio and Mellida*', *Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900* 11.2 (1971), 308–9, <https://doi.org/10.2307/450067>. Bergson states: 'In complicating the tone, narrative, and characterization of his tragic sequel through the introduction of comic-satiric elements, Marston once more undercuts and qualifies his presentation of a literary, conventional depiction of experience. This treatment of *Antonio's Revenge* not only balances that of *Antonio and Mellida*, it also completes a kind of dramaturgical critique of the comic and tragic world-views' (309).
- 38 Clare, *Shakespeare's Stage Traffic*, 2.
- 39 Bruster, *Drama and the Market in the Age of Shakespeare*, xi.
- 40 Quoted in Bruster, *Drama and the Market in the Age of Shakespeare*, 7.
- 41 Clare, *Shakespeare's Stage Traffic*, 2.
- 42 T.F. Wharton, *The Critical Fall and Rise of John Marston* (Columbia, 1994), 4. This strategy of aggressive rivalry as a publicity tool is, of course, still with us today. One need only consider rivalries between sports teams or 'beefs' in rap music to see the efficacy of aggressive rivalry for publicizing and securing lasting reputations.
- 43 Wharton, *The Critical Fall and Rise*, 1, 15.
- 44 Ibid, 2.
- 45 James P. Bednarz, *Shakespeare & the Poets' War*, 3.
- 46 Ibid.

- 47 Ibid, 8.
- 48 Ibid.
- 49 Robert Watson, ‘Coining Words on the Elizabethan Stage’, *Philological Quarterly* 88.1–2 (2009), 56.
- 50 Ibid, 57.
- 51 Ibid, 51.
- 52 Ibid, 50.
- 53 Marston, *Antonio’s Revenge*, 68n22.
- 54 Bowers, ‘John Marston at the “Mart of Woe”’, 14.
- 55 Baines, ‘*Antonio’s Revenge*’, 285.
- 56 Clare, *Shakespeare’s Stage Traffic*, 4.
- 57 See also Kyd’s *The Spanish Tragedy* 3.12. Hieronimo enters with a poniard in one hand and a rope in another. Piero’s ‘unbraced’ clothing, too, is a stock image for revenge tragedies. In *Hamlet*, Ophelia famously describes the Danish prince approaching her with ‘his doublet all unbraced’, looking ‘As if he had been loosed out of hell / To speak of horrors’ (2.1.75, 80–1).
- 58 Baines, ‘*Antonio’s Revenge*’, 281.
- 59 Heather Anne Hirschfeld, ‘Hamlet’s “first corse”: Repetition, Trauma, and the Displacement of Redemptive Typology’, *Shakespeare Quarterly* 54.4 (2003), 443, <https://doi.org/10.1353/shq.2004.0032>.
- 60 See Thomas Kyd, *The Spanish Tragedy*, 3.12.70–7.
- 61 The link between cannibalism and revenge is found in Seneca’s *Thyestes* and in the story of Philomela and Procne’s revenge against Tereus in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. See act 5 of Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus* for a powerful example of the Thyestean banquet in Elizabethan revenge tragedies.
- 62 Katharine Eisaman Maus, *Inwardness and Theater in the English Renaissance* (Chicago, 1995), 54.
- 63 Ibid, 53–4.
- 64 Christopher Tilmouth, ‘Passion and Intersubjectivity in Early Modern Theater’, in *Passion and Subjectivity in Early Modern Theater*, ed. Brian Cummings and Freya Sierhuis (Farnham, 2013), 19.

