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‘[N]or bear I in this breast / So much cold spirit to be called a woman’: The Queerness of Female Revenge in *The Maid’s Tragedy*

In Beaumont and Fletcher’s The Maid’s Tragedy, we find Evadne, a female revenger who violently acts, avenging herself and the men around her. This article argues that the representational strategies of the play trouble our understanding of Evadne’s gender, showing it as constructed via a nexus of sometimes contradictory fixations, fixations which are articulated through a rhetoric of bodies. Throughout this consideration, I connect this nexus with Evadne’s proximity to, and enacting of, revenge.

Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher have been central subjects in the field of queer early modern studies, with both the nature of their collaborative relationship and their plays as key objects of inquiry. John Aubrey’s *Brief Lives* describes the two as having ‘lived together on the Banke side ... [having] lay together’ and having had a ‘dearresse of friendship between them’¹ and this description of their ‘social and erotic intimacy’² has fostered what Gordon McMullan identifies as an ‘interpretive unease’ around ‘[t]heir sexuality’.³ An interrogation of their collaborative relationship — the responses to it and the positioning of it — has allowed Jeffrey Masten to insist on ‘the inseparability of discourses we would now think of as distinct — sexuality and reproduction, on the one hand, and textual production and property on the other’.⁴ Their creative outputs (both collaborative and individual) have also been central to many of the ongoing debates in queer early modern scholarship, including debates focused on the figure of the boy player (or the boy more broadly), on cross-dressing, and on homoeroticism.⁵ *Philaster*, in particular, has been central to many of these conversations and Wendy Wall has intriguingly read *The Knight of the Burning Pestle* as doing queer work in its depiction of domestic medicine and household management.⁶ In what follows, I extend

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and develop this rich body of work through a focus on the relationship between revenge and queerness in *The Maid's Tragedy*, a topic and text fairly absent from published early modern queer criticism. Expanding and disturbing our critical responses to Evadne, I argue that within her revenge narrative the play's representational strategies trouble any stable monolithic signification of her gendered subjectivity, instead forcing the audience to see Evadne as a complex layering of, and interaction between, different bodies. The play brings this complex layering of bodies most clearly into focus at critical moments in Evadne's revenge plot. Thus, through Evadne, the always already queer partnership (following Masten) of Beaumont and Fletcher offers a powerful, and unusual, depiction of female revenge.

The Maid's Tragedy was first performed by the King's Men sometime after 1611,⁷ and its revenge narrative focuses on Evadne, who begins the play in an illicit relationship with the King. The King, mindful of any potential progeny from this liaison, marries Evadne off to a courtier, Amintor, breaking Amintor's engagement with Aspatia in doing so. Evadne refuses to sleep with Amintor on their wedding night, and reveals to him the true nature of their marriage: that it is a cover for her relationship with the King. Distraught, Amintor confides in his close friend Melantius, who is also Evadne's brother. Melantius is furious at the dishonour done to his friend Amintor and to his family name (dishonour made worse by his family's long army service) and insists that Evadne take revenge — avenging her own mistreatment, the mistreatment of their family, and the mistreatment of Amintor. A rich critical body of work that engages with the play draws attention to the challenges its female characters offer to normative gendered behaviours. In *Women and Revenge in Shakespeare*, Marguerite A. Tassi refers to Evadne's narrative as 'one of the most stunning enactments of feminine revenge', and highlights the unusual nature of Evadne's actions by underscoring that normally '[f]emale avengers rise up in the *absence* of men'.⁸ When Tassi states that Evadne's revenge 'undoes cultural norms associated with gender', she follows critics like Kathleen McLuskie who highlight's Evadne's ability to 'overcome the scruples of [Amintor and Melantius's] honour'; Adrienne L. Eastwood, who points out that Evadne 'disrupts established cultural norms ... [and] challenges gender norms'; and Peter Berek, who highlights Evadne's 'rebellion against ... female submissiveness'.⁹ This critical tradition importantly understands Evadne as a character whose behaviour belies an investment in undoing, disrupting, and rebelling against given gender hierarchies.

Tassi's insightful focus on Shakespeare's works and the relationship between female revenge and genre allows her only a short space within which to consider

Evadne. Nonetheless, she manages to highlight the complexity of Evadne's position vis-à-vis revenge — that is, that Evadne enacts revenge whilst 'fully owning the role', despite the fact that she is also merely the 'agent' of her brother Melantius; that the audience might feel both 'disbelief and horror, but also pity' for her; and that her 'refus[al] to suffer her shame quietly' is hugely powerful.¹⁰ Tassi highlights the complicated, gendered relationship between revenge and its female performers when she demonstrates that transgressing 'gender boundaries [by] taking on a masculine aggressiveness and will to violent retribution' makes female revengers 'appear less than human (bestial) and, at the same time, more than human (almost supernatural).'¹¹ More than previous critics, Tassi highlights the complexity of Evadne by demonstrating that her story presents not just a refusal of femininity but also a complex embracing of multiple gendered positions simultaneously. This productive demonstration of these multiple positions enables us to complicate readings like that offered by William Schullenberger, who reads Evadne's claim, 'sure, I am monstrous, / For I have done those follies, those mad mischiefs, / Would dare a woman' (4.1.182–4), as an indication that she 'accepts and conforms to the masculine terror of unbridled sexuality in women'.¹² In Schullenberger's reading, the utterance simply makes Evadne more female, whereas Tassi helps us to see that actually such an utterance highlights the construction of gendered subjectivity.

In contrast with Schullenberger, my reading of the above quotation follows the text's forceful split between the speaking 'I' and the 'woman' who 'would dare'. If Tassi makes visible the construction of female subjectivity vis-à-vis revenge, then such a split encourages the investigation of the various elements, or bodies, involved in such a construction and the interactions between those elements or bodies. The text's split between the speaking 'I' and the fictional 'woman' who 'would dare' encourages the audience to consider who the speaking 'I' might then be, and the other (speaking) body present is the boy player — a complicated figure who, as Stephen Orgel points out, is not yet fully male, valued for his femininity, feared for his perceived mutability.¹³ Through this utterance, this split, the play-text draws our attention to an apparently conflicting layering of bodies and performances. In order to account fully for the interactions between the bodies we are asked to imagine and the bodies present onstage, I return to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's definition of queer, which states that 'queer can refer to: the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or can't be made) to signify monolithically'.¹⁴ The representational strategies of *The Maid's Tragedy* ask the audience to consider

the 'constituent elements' of Evadne, as gendered subject. As indicated above, these 'constituent elements' include the body of character themselves (the body of Evadne which is so sexualized and desired within the play) and the body of the actor, which in turn evokes the socio-cultural understanding of the boy player (an historically specific part of the theatrical structure). In addition to these, the fleshy body, which evokes the physiological discourse of the humours, and the fictional body of an intertextual referent also function as constituent elements.¹⁵ Four key elements of the play, I will argue, help to create the 'gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning' between these 'constituent elements': the onstage act of undressing in act 2 scene 1; the rhetoric of body temperature as it is deployed throughout the play; the evocation of the humoral body, specifically as it connects to the rhetoric of body heat; and the intertextual references the play makes.

Crucially, the interplay of bodies fostered by the play's representational strategies is closely linked to Evadne's status as revenger and it is during moments central to her revenge narrative that the 'gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning' created amongst the imagined, the fleshy, and the fictional bodies outlined above trouble the ability of Evadne, as gendered subject, to 'signify monolithically'. Critics have often understood revenge as a deconstructive and dislocating force. For Harry Keyishian, in *The Shapes of Revenge*, revenge creates a sense of 'alienation' dislocating the revenger 'from the world and its processes, as they have known them'.¹⁶ According to Catherine Belsey, in *The Subject of Tragedy*, revenge is '[a]n act of injustice on behalf of justice, it deconstructs the antithesis which fixes the meanings of good and evil, right and wrong'.¹⁷ Hamlet makes it clear that revenge dislocates him in time, which is, for him, 'out of joint'.¹⁸ In *English Revenge Drama: Money, Resistance, Equality*, Linda Woodbridge argues that 'the fairness fixation and relish for vigilantism reveal widespread resentment of systemic unfairness — economic, political, and social — as the Renaissance witnessed severe disproportion between crime and punishment, between labor and its rewards'.¹⁹ A revenger then, is dislocated from moral, economic, judicial, and temporal codes. Here, I argue that the revenger is also dislocated from gendered and sexed codes — not in a simply exclusionary fashion, but in a fashion which troubles the ability of those codes to function monolithically.

In using queer theory to consider the construction of a female character I want to acknowledge two important precursors. While asking us to consider the ways our assumptions limit 'not only our reading practices, but also the literary and sexual histories that these practices permit us to see',²⁰ Melissa Sanchez considers

forms of non-normative female desire and asserts that ‘rather than pity or pathologize representations of female desires that appear undignified or disempowering, we [should] recognize these representations’ potential to generate new understandings of sexual variation’.²¹ Such work has allowed Sanchez to make visible the active and shaping nature of Stella’s desire in Sidney’s *Astrophil and Stella* and the masochistic, anal, and bestial desires of the female characters in Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and Edmund Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene*,²² thus recalibrating the value systems at play when we assess desire and practice. Sanchez’s work has an important precursor in Theodora A. Jankowski’s *Pure Resistance: Queer Virginity in Early Modern English Drama*, published in 2000.²³ Jankowski uses queer, a category she understands as being one which ‘disrupts the regime of heterosexuality’,²⁴ to interrogate early modern womanhood and to account for the position of virgins within a Protestant sex/gender system — a system which devalues virginity (as a refusal of its veneration under Catholicism) and which sees women as the property of first fathers and then husbands. Jankowski aims to ‘recover (specifically early modern) non-normative gender positions for women in order to disrupt the regime of heterosexuality’.²⁵ An interrogation of categories anchored in queer theory allows Jankowski to deepen and complicate her understanding of the figure of the virgin, highlighting that it is one which exists at the intersections of various discourses, and allowing her to consider the troubling indeterminacy of women who ‘choose to resist incorporation into the sex/gender system’, or ‘who confound the sex/gender system *not* by trying to be men, but by *not being* women’.²⁶ This line of analysis through Tassi, Jankowski, and Sanchez highlights vital critical imperatives for approaching *The Maid’s Tragedy*. Tassi asks us to see that the representational strategies of the play-text vis-à-vis Evadne’s revenge narrative emphasize the construction of her gendered subjectivity. If we focus on the elements at play within this construction, following Jankowski and Sanchez, we see non-normative interactions that disrupt any possible monolithic signification of Evadne’s gender. Such a critical line creates a challenge to the systems of gendered knowledge that an analysis like Schullenberger’s relies on.

Like Jankowski and Sanchez, I use queer to challenge what we see and acknowledge when we consider gender in the early modern period and I foreground the body, or bodies, in this analysis because the play foregrounds Evadne’s body. It does this strikingly in act 2 scene 1, in which Evadne is undressed by her ladies in preparation for her wedding night. This scene is only the second time we have seen Evadne, the first time she has spoken more than two lines, and the private setting makes it markedly different to her first appearance in act 1 scene 2.

The action begins with Dula asking Evadne: ‘Madam, shall we undress you for this fight?’ (2.1.1). The language of the scene, accompanied by the actions of the actors, continues to draw attention to the act of undressing, with Dula asking the ladies ‘will you help?’ (7). Evadne’s response, ‘I am soon undone’ (8), draws attention to both the act of undressing and the assumed-to-be-imminent sex (the frisson here, then, is twofold).²⁷ When Amintor enters, one hundred lines into the scene, he also focuses attention onto Evadne’s (partially) undressed state through his line, ‘O my Evadne, spare / That tender body, let it not take cold’ (140–1). As Ann Rosalind Jones and Peter Stallybrass have asked, ‘[w]hat are we to make ... of those repeated bed scenes in Renaissance tragedy where we begin to witness an undressing or we are asked to see or to imagine an undressed (or partially undressed) body ... What is it we are being asked to see?’²⁸ Here, as in other moments of onstage undressing, *The Maid’s Tragedy* asks us to ‘speculate upon a boy player who undresses’.²⁹ The act of undressing highlights that the fictional female body cannot be revealed, or remain singular, and brings the boy player into view, thereby juxtaposing the fleshy body of the boy player and the fictional female body of Evadne.

The gendering of the boy player — as Orgel suggests, not yet fully male, valued for his femininity and, as Laura Levine also argues, feared for his perceived mutability — is complex and critical understandings have repeatedly understood the figure as one which does not signify in any stable or monolithic fashion.³⁰ As Michael Shapiro suggests, the boy player is a ‘figure of unfused, discretely layered gender identities’; Stallybrass similarly argues that the boy player is ‘less a matter of indeterminacy than of the production of contrary fixations: the imagined body of a woman, the staged body of a boy actor, the material presence of clothes’.³¹ Stallybrass’s use of ‘fixations’ helpfully evokes the fashion in which these points might be both material and immaterial — the fleshy body, the imagined body, etcetera. The complexity of this figure goes to suggest that when the body of the boy player is brought into tension with Evadne there is not a simple dissonance between a physical ‘male’ and fictional ‘female’ body, but rather a layering of bodies and fixations. Masten highlights the complexity of the figure of the boy when he interrogates *Twelfth Night*’s use of a ‘procession of conflicting, overlapping terms ... [used] to refer to [Cesario] in its male gender’;³² he also rejects a ‘developmental model of boyhood’,³³ arguing that ‘[i]nsofar as these multiple categorizations, recognitions, and hailings figure the response of a variety of represented persons to this performing figure, they may also figure what an early modern audience saw, in all its *multiplicity*, when it saw boy actors playing women, sometimes playing boys and men’ (emphasis added).³⁴ Central to Masten’s argument

is the understanding that some of the responses to 'represented persons' may be erotic and, using Beaumont and Fletcher's *Philaster*, he shows that 'the boy functions as a figure for the possibility of eroticism, a figure always on the verge of eroticism'.³⁵ Again, then, when the boy player comes into view we do not simply see a dissonance between a physical 'male' and fictional 'female', but rather a complicated and competing set of bodies which, in turn, produce a complicated and competing set of desires.

This multivocal physical body (of the boy player) does not overwhelm or erase the (fictional, female) character being undressed. Indeed, both this scene and the one preceding it (act 1 scene 2) are keen to encourage us to imagine (even as they are unable fully to show) the sexual, desiring female body. When Evadne first appears in act 1 scene 2, she and Amintor are newly married and, as McLuskie points out, 'the narrative and the social conventions which assume that marriages will achieve the happy and automatic conjunction of social form and sexual pleasure' create a kind of 'sexualised suspense' in the scene.³⁶ The wedding is celebrated through the staging of a masque, although as both Suzanne Gossett and Inga-Stina Ewbank have suggested, the content rather foreshadows the tragedy to come.³⁷ In the masque's songs, our attention is focused on the erotic, bodily action set to imminently follow, with the second song asking Night to 'hide / The *blushes* of the bride' and 'with thy darkness cover / The *kisses* of her lover' (233–4, 235–6, emphasis added). The third song continues to encourage us to imagine the nuptial sex: 'To bed, to bed! Come, Hymen, lead the bride, / And lay her by her husband's side' (247–8). Despite the passivity these songs ascribe to the bride, throughout the opening section of act 2 scene 1, in which Dula and the ladies undress Evadne, their language is erotically charged. When, as noted above, Evadne offers the multivocal line 'I am soon undone', Dula responds 'And as soon done' (8), reinforcing the sexual innuendo in Evadne's line. Dula continues to attempt to arouse Evadne with erotic language, claiming 'A dozen wanton words put in your head / will make you livelier in your husband's bed' (20–1), echoing Ambroise Paré's suggestion that erotic language might cause a woman to 'take fire and bee enflamed to venery'.³⁸ All of this by-play serves to encourage an audience to imagine the sexual, desirous female body, especially Evadne's.

This desiring female body is made present, and the erotic charge of act 2 scene 1 is felt, through the employment of the language of heat. According to medicinal and humoral tracts of the period, rhetorics of heat signal in various ways and while body temperature is indicative of sex difference (more on which below), it is also associated with lust, as Paré's above evocation of 'fire' and of being 'enflamed' indicates. This link understands heat as being necessary for sexual

arousal, especially for women, and generable through words or through friction. As Valerie Traub states, we must discern ‘the importance of understandings of heat, friction, and fluids to the psychophysiology of sex for men and women, from the mechanics of arousal to the spilling and reception of seed’.³⁹ Jennifer Evans qualifies this notion further when she states that ‘[t]he humoural model posited that sexual desire was driven by the heat of the body and the salinity of the seed. As men were considered to be innately hotter than women they were believed to be more prone to lust and more capable in sexual pursuits’.⁴⁰ Thus the importance of arousing a woman with words, as Paré suggests and Dula models.

Once Amintor has entered in act 2 scene 1, he (unsurprisingly for the audience) expects to have sex with Evadne, but she refuses, displaying remarkable sexual agency. He initially ascribes this to ‘the coyness of a bride’ (159) and thus a desire to ‘preserve / Your maidenhead a night’ (192–3), a concern Evadne bluntly rebuffs by asking, ‘A maidenhead, Amintor, / At my years?’ (194–5).⁴¹ This utterance fixes Evadne as sexually active and desiring, the physiological associations of the term ‘maidenhead’ fixing this sexual agency in the body. Evadne confirms this sexual version of herself, further refusing Amintor’s anxious virgin narrative, when she states:

Alas, Amintor, thinks thou I forbear
 To sleep with thee because I have put on
 A maiden’s strictness? Look upon these cheeks,
 And thou shall find the hot and rising blood
 Unapt for such a vow. No, in this heart
 There dwells as much desire, and as much will
 To put that wished act in practice as ever yet
 Was known woman. (285–92)

Evadne’s unequivocal statement, like the sources above, links heat with sexual desire and firmly marks her as a desiring subject. Again, this assertion uses bodily terms: ‘upon those *cheeks*’ and ‘in this *heart* / There *dwells*’ (emphasis mine). Amintor, too, imagines lust in terms of heat when he (falsely) describes how he feels after the wedding night:

I am light,
 And feel the courses of my blood more warm
 And stirring than they were. (3.2.79–81)

Later, the repentant (and revenging) Evadne laments the trouble ‘my hot will hath done’ (4.1.223) and finally, when Evadne enacts her revenge and kills the King, the rhetoric of heat reappears when Evadne counsels:

Stay, sir, stay,
 You are too hot, and I have brought you physic
 To temper your high veins. (5.1.52–4)

Evadne follows this exclamation with the assertion ‘[i]f thy hot soul had substance with thy blood / I would kill that too’ (89–90), further reinforcing the link between the King’s lust and heat. To feel lust, to be sexually desirous, is repeatedly linked with heat, according to the rhetoric of the play. And these references make present a fleshy body of sensations, drawing our attention to the details of the sensations numerous characters are experiencing or want us to believe that they are feeling.

When Evadne references the King’s bodily heat, however, she doesn’t just reference lust; she also brings another body into play. Her suggestion to the King that she brings him ‘physic’ to ‘temper your high veins’ is followed by her claim ‘I know you have a surfeited foul body, / And you must bleed’ (5.1.57–8). Here Evadne brings the humoral body into view by suggesting that the King has been made ill through excess (‘surfeited’) and thus must be bled. Humoral theory understood the body as being filled with four substances, or humours — black bile, yellow bile, phlegm, and blood.⁴² When these humours were in balance the body was healthy; however, an excess or deficit in any one of them would cause illness.⁴³ If the humors were thought to be excessive, balance could be restored through purging or bloodletting. Humoral balance was seen as being particularly sensitive to environmental conditions, especially temperature, and within the early modern understanding, to discuss temperature is to discuss gender and sex, since an important factor in the physiological ‘difference’ between the male and female body is body heat. As Gail Kern Paster argues, ‘[t]he early moderns regarded body heat as an attribute of sex difference’,⁴⁴ elsewhere stating, ‘[m]en’s bodies were thought to be hotter and drier, women’s bodies colder and more spongy’.⁴⁵ Given the way *The Maid’s Tragedy* brings together the culturally embedded gendered discourse of the humoral body with characters’ claims about heat, and following Tassi’s important insistence that Evadne is a character who occupies multiple gendered positions simultaneously, it is vital that we understand Evadne’s repeated claims to be hot as signifying multivocally. Given this understanding, evocations of lust couched in the rhetoric of heat concurrently suggest a male physiology resonant (in part) with the body of the boy player, to whom our attention has

been drawn in the act of undressing from act 2 scene 1, along with the desirous fictional female body. The play with the humoral body produces a further fixation, or constituent element, of Evadne's gendered presence and as gendered subject, then, Evadne reads queerly due to the lapses and excesses in gendered meaning produced by the interactions between her fictional female body, the body of the (complicatedly male) boy player, and also the fleshy humoral male body (abstracted from subjectivity). As these various bodies slip in and out of view, rendered more or less visible by the representational strategies of the text, any attempt at monolithic signification fails.

The use of temperature to unsettle monolithic gendered signification is further evident in the play's concurrent evocations of coldness. The first of these comes in act 2 scene 1 and it occurs in the context of Evadne's undressing, discussed above, just as the play has established a tension between the fictional female body being represented and the body doing the representing. Amintor enters the scene and waits onstage for Evadne, who has left, to finish undressing herself.⁴⁶ Following her re-entrance, Amintor addresses her: 'O my Evadne, spare / That tender body, let it not take cold' (140–1). We should note the phrasing here: 'spare / *That* tender body, let *it* not take cold'. Amintor's language establishes a split between Evadne and the body being referred to — 'that', 'it'. Indeed, his utterance figures as a precursor to Evadne's claim, again discussed above, that she has 'done those follies, those mad mischiefs, / Would dare a woman (4.1.183–4) and thus we must note a repeated pattern in which the representational strategies of the play (here, its language) reinforce the representation of Evadne as the product of multiple and complexly layered bodies across which there are dissonances and resonances. Once we acknowledge that split, we must note Amintor's use of 'take' (i.e. seize, grasp, take hold of); 'let it not *take* cold', he says, meaning let it not take femaleness, i.e. allow the body to signify as male. What is ostensibly a simple reference to body temperature plays on the body that the representational strategies of the play have been bringing into focus (i.e. the body of the boy player) and the physiological terms resonant with that body; and it does so as a means of troubling the ability of the fictional female body to signal univocally. But it is again worth noting that this complex evocation happens at a moment when the partially undressed Evadne, and Amintor's palpable sexual desire for her, conjures the sexually desirous female body.

A further evocation of coldness produces the most striking fracture between the represented fictional female body and the performer's body, and it occurs in the moment at which Evadne enacts her revenge and kills the King. Evadne has snuck into the King's bedroom and he believes that she is there to have sex,

entreating her to 'come to bed' (5.1.45) and asking, in response to finding himself tied up, 'what pretty new device is this?' (47). He maintains this impression until she insists that he has a 'surfeited foul body' and 'must bleed':

EVADNE Stay, sir, stay,

You are too hot, and I have brought you physic
To temper your high veins.

KING Prethee to bed then; let me take it warm,
There you shall know the state of my body better.

EVADNE I know you have a surfeited foul body,
And you must bleed.

KING Bleed!

EVADNE Ay, you shall bleed. Lie still, and if the devil,
Your lust will give you leave, repent. This steel
Comes to redeem the honour that you stole,
King, my fair name, which nothing but thy death
Can answer to the world.

KING How's this Evadne?

EVADNE I am not she, nor bear I in this breast
So much cold spirit to be called a woman. (52–66)

As we have seen before, the language reinforces a split between the speaking 'I' and 'Evadne' — 'I am not she' — and again this split is couched in bodily terms — 'nor *bear I in this breast*'. The evocation of body temperature here reinforces the queer friction between the speaking body, its 'cold spirit', and Evadne, or, between the fleshy humoral body and the fictional female body. It does so in this scene through Evadne's preceding references to 'physic', the King's 'surfeited body', and the need for him to 'bleed' as a way to be cured. I quote this section at length to underscore this structural juxtaposition — the rendering present of humoral discourse as a precursor to the use of humoral language to foreground the multiple layered bodies through which Evadne is produced. The term 'cold' again evokes humoral discourse and, in the speaker's disavowal of the 'cold spirit' she associates with women, offers a rejection of the female body. Again, this is another moment at which a male character believes he is going to have sex with Evadne only to have his expectations rebutted (here the King, previously Amintor). Again, performance of desire and sexual expectation encourages the audience to imagine the sexual, desiring female body. Thus the representational strategies of the play highlight a queer oscillation between bodies, gender, and performance.

As McLuskie has noted,⁴⁷ the act 5 scene 1 moment echoes act 2 scene 1, and I want to emphasize that these are important stages in Evadne's revenge narrative. Whilst her defiant admission of her sexual relationship with the King in act 2 scene 1 stands as marker for the audience of all her sexual sins (a motivating force for revenge), the killing of the King in act 5 scene 1 enacts her revenge. Thus, we can tie Evadne's revenge and her complicated sexed/gendered body together. Indeed, there is a further moment in Evadne's revenge narrative which might be understood to further the understanding of her as constructed through the interaction between layered bodies as linked with her revenge — act 4 scene 1, in which Melantius persuades Evadne to avenge her treatment at the hands of the King. In the opening section of the scene, Evadne withstands a barrage of insults from Melantius who calls her 'foolish', 'base', 'wretch', 'whore' (22, 23, 45, 51) and laments her 'long-lost honour', her 'contagious name', and her 'sickness' (36, 56, 57), before exclaiming:

Thou hast death about thee:
He's undone thine honour, poisoned thy virtue,
And, of a lovely rose, left thee a canker. (4.2.83–5)

These insults and comments designed to evoke a reaction of feminine shame are ineffectual, with Evadne responding, 'I'll ha' you whipped', 'I shall laugh at you', and 'The fellow's mad' (4.1.66, 68, 75). An interpretation that followed Schullenberg might be tempted to read these responses as showing Evadne's dangerous female 'unbridled sexuality',⁴⁸ but when these attempts fail Melantius shifts to constructing her as his revenger in a manner that parallels male revenger Hamlet as H. Neville Davis, Jason T. Denman and Peter Berek have all noted.⁴⁹ Indeed, McLuskie has argued that Evadne begins act 5 scene 1 with 'a self-searching speech reminiscent of Hamlet's over Claudius at prayer'.⁵⁰ Melantius brings into view this intertextual revenging body when he 'conjures' the ghost of their dead father 'Whose honour thou hast murdered' and who must 'raise his dry bones to revenge this scandal' (4.1.87, 90). Whilst for Hamlet the confrontation with his father's ghost provides the direct motivating force for his revenge, for Evadne the conjured dead father and the rhetoric of honour do not. Instead, she agrees to 'bend' only after Melantius has threatened 'This sword shall be thy lover' (97), adding:

When I have killed thee
(As I have vowed to do if thou confess not)
Nak'd as thou hast left thine honour will I leave thee,

That on thy branded flesh the world may read
 Thy black shame and my justice. (105–9)

It is to save herself from being left ‘naked’, from finishing the act of undressing started in act 2 scene 1, that Evadne confesses the relationship and agrees with Melantius’s suggestion that she must let the King’s ‘foul soul out’ (4.1.168). But it is not just Evadne who will be left ‘naked’ if the act of undressing is finished; the boy player would also be revealed. Thus the titillation stems from the erotic possibility of two naked bodies, from multiple erotic objects — the fictional female body and the fleshy boy player. By refusing the threat of nakedness, the text keeps the layered bodies through which Evadne is constructed present, it keeps the possible erotic desires for those bodies present, and it keeps her gendered subjectivity in queer flux — a state of flux that is maintained by Evadne’s revenge, because to agree to revenge is to refuse revelation.

Immediately after refusing nakedness and swearing to kill the King, Evadne asks ‘all you spirits of abusèd ladies, / Help me in this performance’ (4.1.169–70). Regardless of whether the ‘performance’ referred to is the performance of killing the King, the performance of having been abused, or the performance of femaleness, this metatheatrical reference draws attention to a performing body which needs shoring up with the help of ‘abusèd ladies’. Is the boy player asking for the ladies’ help in his portrayal or is Evadne (the character) asking for female solidarity? The tension between these bodies and performances is reinscribed when Evadne gives us her reasoning for vengeance, as she posits (as quoted above):

sure, I am monstrous,
 For I have done those follies, those mad mischiefs
 Would dare a woman. (182–4)

Again Evadne asks the audience to acknowledge that split between the ‘I’ which speaks and the ‘I’ constructed by that speech, a split which suggests a lapse in the signification of femaleness in the speaker. Importantly, this striking moment occurs as Evadne commits herself to vengeance — a sexual, desiring, fictional female body, split from the complicated male body performing, whose revenge narrative has just been compared to that of a famous male revenger.

Evadne’s self-description as ‘monstrous’ draws on this term’s evocation of that which is ‘unnatural in conduct or disposition’ and thus sets up a further set of potentially queer references and bodies, especially given the ways in which idea of the ‘monstrous’ is bound up with debates around sodomy and tribadism.⁵¹ In *Sexual Types: Embodiment, Agency, and Dramatic Character from Shakespeare*

to *Shirley*, Mario DiGangi explores the use of monstrosity to describe the relationship between James I, Charles I, and the 'monstrous favourite' who,⁵² it was feared, would lead the Kings astray — both sexually and politically.⁵³ DiGangi points to the repeated ways in which 'the favourite is depicted as a monstrous beast',⁵⁴ and there is a resonance here with the repeated ways in which *The Maid's Tragedy* links Evadne with animals. She describes herself as being like 'cozening crocodiles' (4.1.247) and as 'the foulest creature ... Lerna e'er bred or Nilus' (229–31); she also claims 'I am a tiger' (5.1.67); and Melantius likens her to a goat as he counsels her to find a 'kindred / 'Mongst sensual beasts' (4.1.62–3). Many of these descriptions serve to construct her as excessive in her (sexual) behaviours and an understanding of her as excessive further binds her to a discourse of monstrosity, through its association with the tribade. In *The Renaissance of Lesbianism*, Valerie Traub explores 'the monstrous figure of the tribade',⁵⁵ using a range of texts, including (amongst many others) medical tracts, Brantôme's *Recueil des dames* (*Lives of Fair and Gallant Ladies*), and Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*,⁵⁶ establishing that 'the tribade was associated with somatic and moral monstrosity; her excessive bodily morphology [her presumed to be enlarged clitoris] was mimetic of her excessive lust and she often was accused of using instruments of penetration.'⁵⁷ As in Traub's source material, 'monster', 'monstrous', and 'monstrosity' repeat throughout *The Maid's Tragedy* in relation to Evadne, who describes herself as 'a monster' in a scene which signals her (prior) sexual excessiveness and her threat to patriarchy and in which her stabbing (cast in erotic and sexual terms) of the King figures as a usurpation of the patriarchal right to penetration. While the play itself does not posit that Evadne is a sodomite or tribade, when Evadne uses, or is referred to by, the term 'monster', the play brings into view the bodies of the sodomite and the tribade, bodies which are resonant through their links to excessive sexual desire, patriarchy (and their threat to it), beasts, and, most importantly, their monstrosity.

The representational strategies of *The Maid's Tragedy* mean that Evadne troubles the bordered singularity of categorical boundaries and foreground that a nexus of sometimes contradictory fixations, fixations articulated through a rhetoric of bodies, construct Evadne as gendered character. I'd suggest, echoing Sanchez, that we recognize in Evadne that representations which might 'appear undignified or disempowering' actually have the 'potential to generate new understandings of sexual variation'.⁵⁸ As such, what I'm arguing for here is an acknowledgment of this complicated layering of bodies, performances, and possibilities in the gendered performance of Evadne and an acknowledgment of the queerness produced through it. The queerness I identify here is not simply located in, or

produced by, Evadne's refusal of a particular type of gendered behaviour. Rather, it is produced by the contradictions, oscillations, and interactions between the different bodies around which Evadne is constructed — fictional, imagined, fleshy, and performing bodies which make up her constituent elements. Further, it is not enough to simply acknowledge that these bodies are present; rather, we must acknowledge, first, that the representational strategies of *The Maid's Tragedy* serve to make us aware of all these constituent elements; second, that they stage moments at which various of these constituent elements produce lapses or excesses of gendered meaning and that those lapses or excesses of meaning repeatedly (and teasingly) trouble the monolithic signification of Evadne as female character; and third, that these representational strategies firmly tie these stage moments into Evadne's revenge narrative. It is at critical moments in her revenge that these lapses and excesses of gendered meaning occur — her marriage to Amintor (the cause of revenge); her acceptance of the role of revenger from Melantius; and her enacting of revenge (the killing of the King). If, as I suggest above, critical engagements with the revenger understand them as being dislocated from moral, economic, judicial, and temporal codes that govern others in their socio-cultural world, then surely it makes sense that revenge might also deconstruct a revenger's gendered subjectivity, might dislocate them from the given structures through which they construct their gendered subjectivity? And it seems to be through queer analysis that these details can be most productively unpacked.

Notes

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- 1 John Aubrey, *Brief Lives*, ed. Andrew Clark, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1898), 1.95–6.
- 2 Christine Varnado, 'Getting Used, and Liking It: Erotic Instrumentality in *Philaster*', *Renaissance Drama* 44.1 (2016), 26, <https://doi.org/10.1086/685785>.
- 3 Gordon McMullan, *The Politics of Unease in the Plays of John Fletcher* (Amherst, MA, 1994), 139.
- 4 Jeffrey Masten, 'My Two Dads: Collaboration and the Reproduction of Beaumont and Fletcher', Jonathan Goldberg (ed.), *Queering the Renaissance* (Durham, NC, 1994), 301, <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822382607-014>.
- 5 See, for example, Nicholas F. Radel, 'Fletcherian Tragicomedy, Crossdressing, and the Constriction of Homoerotic Desire in Early Modern England', *Renaissance Drama* 26 (1995), 53–82, <https://doi.org/10.1086/rd.26.41917318>, Nicholas F. Radel, 'Homoeroticism, Discursive Change, and Politics: Reading "Revolution" in Seventeenth Century English Tragicomedy', *Medieval and Renaissance Drama in England* 9 (1997), 162–78, Mario DiGangi, *The Homoerotics of Early Modern Drama* (Cambridge, 1997), <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511585319>, Varnado, 'Getting Used, and Liking It'.
- 6 On *Philaster* see Jeffrey Masten, *Queer Philologies: Sex, Language, and Affect in Shakespeare's Time* (Philadelphia, 2016), esp. 115–30, Suzanne Gossett, 'Introduction', in Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher, *Philaster, Or, Love Lies A-Bleeding*, ed. Suzanne Gossett (London, 2009), 1–102. Wendy Wall, *Staging Domesticity: Household Work and English Identity in Early Modern Drama* (Cambridge, 2002), 161–88.
- 7 For the date I am following Martin Wiggins, in association with Catherine Richardson, *British Drama 1533–1642: A Catalogue*, 10 vols (Oxford, 2012–), 6.183.
- 8 Marguerite A. Tassi, *Women and Revenge in Shakespeare: Gender, Genre, and Ethics* (Selinsgrove, 2011), 44–5.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 44; Kathleen McLuskie, *Renaissance Dramatists* (London, 1989), 195; Adrienne L. Eastwood, 'Controversy and the Single Woman in *The Maid's Tragedy* and *The Roaring Girl*', *Rocky Mountain Review of Language and Literature* 58.2 (2004), 14, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1566550>; Peter Berek, 'Cross-Dressing, Gender, Absolutism

- in the Beaumont and Fletcher Plays', *Studies in English Literature 1500–1900* 44.2 (2004), 370, <https://doi.org/10.1353/sel.2004.0013>.
- 10 Tassi, *Women and Revenge*, 44–46.
- 11 Ibid, 46.
- 12 William Shullenberger, “This for the Most Wrong’d of Women”: A Reappraisal of *The Maid’s Tragedy*’, *Renaissance Drama* 13 (1982), 149, <https://doi.org/10.1086/rd.13.43264632>; Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher, *The Maid’s Tragedy*, ed. T.W. Craik (Manchester, 1988). All further in-text citations are from this edition.
- 13 Orgel establishes that boys are different from adult men and associated with women because ‘both are treated as a medium of exchange within the patriarchal structure, and both are (perhaps in consequence) constructed as objects of erotic attraction for adult men. *Boys and women are not in competition in this system: they are antithetical not to each other, but to men*’. Stephen Orgel, *Impersonations: The Performance of Gender in Shakespeare’s England* (Cambridge, 1996), 103, emphasis added. For an exploration of the mutability of the figure of the boy player see Laura Levine, *Men in Women’s Clothing: Anti-Theatricality and Effeminization, 1579–1642* (Cambridge, 1994).
- 14 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (London, 1994), 8, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203202210>.
- 15 These distinctions draw on David Graver’s work in ‘The Actor’s Bodies’, *Text and Performance Quarterly* 17.3 (1997), 221–35, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10462939709366187>.
- 16 Harry Keyishian, *The Shapes of Revenge: Victimization, Vengeance, and Vindictiveness in Shakespeare* (New Jersey, 1995), 2. Like Keyishian, Charles and Elaine Hallett are also interested in the psychological experience (and deconstruction) of the revenger; see Charles Hallett and Elaine Hallett, *The Revenger’s Madness: A Study of Revenge Tragedy Motifs* (Lincoln, NE and London, 1980).
- 17 Catherine Belsey, *The Subject of Tragedy* (London, 1985), 115. See also Derek Dunne, *Shakespeare, Revenge Tragedy, and Early Modern Law: Vindictive Justice* (London, 2016), <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-137-57287-5>.
- 18 William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, ed. Robert S. Miola (New York, NY and London, 2011), 1.5.195.
- 19 Linda Woodbridge, *English Revenge Drama: Money, Resistance, Equality* (Cambridge, 2010), 6–7, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511781469>.
- 20 Melissa Sanchez, “In My Selfe the Smart I Try”: Female Promiscuity in *Astrophil and Stella*’, *English Literary History* 80.1 (2013), 21, <https://doi.org/10.1353/elh.2013.0010>.

- 21 Melissa E. Sanchez, “Use Me But as Your Spaniel”: Feminism, Queer Theory, and Early Modern Sexualities’, *PMLA* 127.3 (2012), 494–5, <https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2012.127.3.493>.
- 22 Melissa Sanchez, “In My Selfe the Smart I Try”, “Use Me But as Your Spaniel”.
- 23 Theodora A. Jankowski, *Pure Resistance: Queer Virginity in Early Modern English Drama* (Philadelphia, 2000).
- 24 Ibid, 8.
- 25 Ibid, 10.
- 26 Ibid, 10, 12.
- 27 Craik (ed.), *The Maid’s Tragedy*, glosses ‘undone’ as ‘helped out of my clothes,’ 80. See also McLuskie, *Renaissance Dramatists*, 193–8.
- 28 Ann Rosalind Jones and Peter Stallybrass, *Renaissance Clothing and the Materials of Memory* (Cambridge, 2000), 208.
- 29 Peter Stallybrass, ‘Transvestism and the “Body Beneath”: Speculating on the Boy Actor’, Susan Zimmerman (ed.), *Erotic Politics: Desire on the Renaissance Stage* (London, 1992), 64.
- 30 Levine, *Men in Women’s Clothing*, Orgel, *Impersonations*, and Masten, *Queer Philologies*.
- 31 Michael Shapiro, *Gender in Play on the Shakespearean Stage: Boy Heroines and Female Pages* (Ann Arbor, 1994), 3, <https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.13834>. Stallybrass, ‘Transvestism’, 79.
- 32 Masten, *Queer Philologies*, 111.
- 33 Ibid.
- 34 Ibid, 113.
- 35 Ibid, 115.
- 36 McLuskie, *Renaissance Dramatists*, 193, 196.
- 37 Inga-Stina Ewbank, ““These Pretty Devices”: A Study of Masques in Plays’, T.J.B. Spencer and Stanley Wells (eds), *A Book of Masques: in Honour of Allardyce Nicoll* (Cambridge, 1967), 405–48. Suzanne Gossett, ‘Masque Influence on the Dramaturgy of Beaumont and Fletcher’, *Modern Philology* 69.3 (1972), 199–208, <https://doi.org/10.1086/390331>.
- 38 It seems worth noting that the rhyming and meter of Dula’s lines give the utterance the sound of a proverb.
- 39 Valerie Traub, *Thinking Sex With the Early Moderns* (Philadelphia, 2016), 140, <https://doi.org/10.9783/9780812291582>. See also Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge, 1992 [1990]), 46–7.
- 40 Jennifer Evans, ““They are called Imperfect men”: Male Infertility and Sexual Health in Early Modern England’, *Social History of Medicine* 29.2 (2016), 319, <https://doi.org/10.1093/SHM/29.2.319>.

- [org/10.1093/shm/hku073](https://doi.org/10.1093/shm/hku073). As the reference to ‘seed’ in both of the above quotations suggests, such an understanding also insists on the necessity of heat and arousal for conception; see (amongst others), Laqueur, *Making Sex*, 50, and Traub, *Thinking Sex*, 93. The link between heat and lust is also substantiated in early modern attitudes to aphrodisiacs — foods understood to heat, and thus increase the lust of, an individual; see, for example, Laqueur, *Making Sex*, 101. Finally, the link between heat and desire is also evident in the link between those from hot climates and sexual excessiveness, what Sarah Toulalan refers to as ‘the perception of colonial peoples as [sexually] promiscuous and depraved’. Sarah Toulalan, ‘Introduction’, Kate Fisher and Sarah Toulalan (eds), *Bodies, Sex and Desire from the Renaissance to the Present* (London, 2011), 19, <https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230354128>.
- 41 A line McLuskie brilliantly describes as ‘show stopping’ (*Renaissance Dramatists*, 193).
- 42 Gail Kern Paster, *The Body Embarrassed: Drama and the Disciplines of Shame in Early Modern England* (Ithaca, NY, 1993), 7–8.
- 43 Kate Aughterson, ‘Physiology: Introduction’, in *Renaissance Women*, ed. Kate Aughterson (London, 1995), 41–43, 42.
- 44 Gail Kern Paster, ‘The Unbearable Coldness of Female Being: Women’s Imperfection and the Humoural Economy’, *English Literary Renaissance* 28.3 (1998), 416, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-6757.1998.tb00760.x>. See also Patricia Parker, ‘Gender Ideology, Gender Change: The Case of Marie Germain’, *Critical Inquiry* 19.2 (Winter 1993), 337–64, <https://doi.org/10.1086/448677>.
- 45 Gail Kern Paster, *Humoring the Body: Emotions and the Shakespearean Stage* (Chicago, 2004), 77, <https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226648484.001.0001>. See also Aughterson, ‘Physiology: Introduction’, 42, Laqueur, *Making Sex*, 108, 112, Paster, *The Body Embarrassed*, 7–9.
- 46 Surely this exit must also highlight the limits of revelation produced by the body of the boy player.
- 47 McLuskie, *Renaissance Dramatists*, 196.
- 48 Shullenberger, “‘This for the Most Wrong’d of Women’”, 149.
- 49 Other critics who have previously noted the relationship between *The Maid’s Tragedy* and *Hamlet* include H. Neville Davis, ‘Beaumont and Fletcher’s *Hamlet*’; Kenneth Muir, Jay Halio, D.J. Palmer and Samuel Schoenbaum (eds), *Shakespeare: Man of the Theater* (Newark, NJ, 1983), 173–81; Jason T. Denman, ‘Anatomizing the Body Politic: Corporeal Rhetoric in *The Maid’s Tragedy*’, *Philological Quarterly* 84.3 (2005), 324; Berek, ‘Cross-Dressing’, 370.
- 50 McLuskie, *Renaissance Dramatists*, 196.
- 51 *OED Online*, s.v. ‘monstrous’.

- 52 Mario DiGangi, *Sexual Types: Embodiment, Agency, and Dramatic Character from Shakespeare to Shirley* (Philadelphia, 2011), 193, <https://doi.org/10.9783/9780812205152>.
- 53 Ibid, 192–220.
- 54 Ibid, 194.
- 55 Valerie Traub, *The Renaissance of Lesbianism* (Cambridge, 2002), 16.
- 56 Ibid, 55–6.
- 57 Ibid, 231.
- 58 Sanchez, “Use Me But as Your Spaniel”, 494–5.