VIOLENT PERFORMANCE: A CULTURAL ANALYSIS OF THE INTERSECTION OF VIOLENCE AND EMBEDDED PERFORMANCE IN ELIZABETHAN AND JACOBEAN TRAGEDY

by

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A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
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ABSTRACT

In many Elizabethan and Jacobean revenge tragedies, and in plays that are associated with this dramatic genre, we encounter formal performance occasions, or "embedded" performances, that erupt into violence. In keeping with the courtly milieus represented in these plays, the embedded performances are typically plays (or "playlets"), masques and revels, or forms of tournament combat. This thesis analyses the cultural significance of such "metaperformative" episodes in the following plays: Kyd's The Spanish Tragedy, Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet and Hamlet, Marston's Antonio's Revenge and The Malcontent, The Revenger's Tragedy (attributed to Tourneur), Middleton's Women Beware Women, Webster's The White Devil, and the anonymous The Second Maiden's Tragedy.

The effects of combining dramatic violence with formal, framed performances are various. In some episodes, violence destabilizes the performance by challenging its boundaries or "frame." As "played" violence becomes "real" for the onstage performers and spectators, the concept of "delimitation" is also cast in doubt for the theatre audience, who become aware of the potential for real danger to intrude into supposedly "aesthetic" experience. In other plays, the embedded performance destabilizes the meaning of the violence; it becomes impossible, for instance, to determine whether the violence is positive or negative, orderly or disorderly. In all of
the episodes that are discussed, basic conceptual oppositions become problematic. Considered collectively, the dramatic texts suggest that violence, as a cultural practice, is inherently paradoxical, that it always exists in the interstices of fixed meaning. In keeping with the argument that René Girard makes in *Violence and the Sacred*, this thesis is concerned with showing the power of literary or artistic texts (including theatre) to reveal the centrality of violence to culture and the paradoxical nature of its operations. The violent performances are all unstable sites in the theatrical texts, which offer perspectives on the organization of experience and on the construction of meaning in English Renaissance culture. The perspectives that the selected incidents of theatrical violence offer are neither clear nor coherent. Rather, the violent performances in Elizabethan and Jacobean tragedy confront audiences (historical and contemporary) with the play of difference that underlies the culture’s various assertions of order and coherence.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. Introduction: Elizabethan and Jacobean Theatrical Violence and the Performance of Culture /1

2. The Play of Violence: Violent Theatricals in *The Spanish Tragedy* and *Hamlet* /33

3. John Marston’s Revenge Masques: *Antonio’s Revenge* and *The Malcontent* /63

4. Later Jacobean Revenge Masques: *The Revenger’s Tragedy* and *Women Beware Women* /124

5. “Poisoned” Swordplay in some Elizabethan and Jacobean Tragedies /168

Conclusion /225

Works Cited /230

Works Consulted /243
CHAPTER 1

Introduction: Elizabethan and Jacobean Theatrical Violence

and the Performance of Culture

1. The Recent Critical Heritage of Elizabethan and Jacobean Theatrical Violence

Numerous critical studies of English Renaissance drama have taken violence as a subject for analysis. We will suspend temporarily the process of defining what the term “violence” means to the critics concerned and consider instead the range of different interests that are represented in these various analyses. Of course traditional thematic criticism of the plays has dealt with the topic of violence. However, in keeping with the increased interest over the last twenty or thirty years in Renaissance plays as performance texts (as opposed to poetic texts), a number of recent studies consider the visual impact of represented physical violence on the stage. Some of these studies consider the relationship between the aesthetic effect of the spectacles of bloodshed and the moral or ethical interpretation of the action.1 Many of these analyses implicitly assume or explicitly argue that in order for the tragic violence to have evoked its intended response, be it horror, pity, fear, or awe, the violence had to be staged

with grisly "realism." Other critics consider the range of symbolic or iconographic meanings which violent spectacles could have had. These studies focus on the embeddedness of the visual language of Renaissance drama in the emblematic traditions of the period.²

There are also many more recent studies, dating from the beginning of the 1980s, which are preoccupied with the politics of violence in the drama.³ These studies also treat the plays primarily as theatrical documents and consider them in terms of performance. Most of these studies consider the intersection of the theatre and the state; they theorize the relationship between theatrical representations and the dominant ideologies of the day. Several articles consider the way in which theatrical displays of violence interact with the state-sanctioned spectacles of corporal and capital punishment.⁴ Critics also commonly discuss theatrical violence in terms of the representations of injured, violated, and


⁴See Cunningham, Kendall, Shapiro, Smith.
mutilated bodies which it produced. In such analyses, the “body” is not considered as a discrete material entity but rather as a “discursive body,” a site of contested meaning, a sign inscribed with various competing discourses of gender, class, and statehood. The violence performed on the body is always informed by ideology. Two recent book-length studies deal with the relationship between theatrical violence in Shakespeare and what they call the “culture of violence.” It becomes clear when Francis Barker writes that “in the tragic text violence is, in addition to armed might or physical confrontation, something in the structure of representation itself,” he is no longer conceiving of “violence” in the same terms as Jonas Barish, who describes the subject of his analysis as “the inflicting of physical pain or injury by one person on another, often with the implication of excessive force.” The more recent studies either deliberately conflate or fail to distinguish between violence as a physical phenomenon and violence as a term for the ideology which informs representation. Through this conflation of categories, violence is reduced to an ambiguous and too-extensive term.

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5Coddon, Kendall, Stallybrass, Tennenhouse.

6Stallybrass 121.

7Francis Barker, The Culture of Violence: Essays on Tragedy and History (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1993); Derek Cohen, Shakespeare’s Culture of Violence (New York: St. Martin’s, 1993).

8Barker 87.

9Barish 101.
2. Representing Violence: Literal and Conceptual Dimensions

While the critics whose work is summarized above all purport to be examining dramatic violence, they are in fact talking about different concepts as well as different practices. In order to approach the topic of violence as a cultural phenomenon, it is necessary to define the term and to limit the range of practices to which it refers. To begin this process of definition, one might state that violence must be considered both as an empirically observable practice and as a conceptual category; at least, it is necessary to account for the distinction in various critical discourses between a physical violence that is widely observable and an abstract violence that is conceptualized as underlying a broad variety of cultural practices or relations. As we will see, the difficulty in distinguishing between categories of violence is exacerbated when we are considering violence within the context of representation. This preliminary attempt at definition also explores some of the epistemological problems that inhere in designating any practice or action as violent, especially when violence is represented.

The term "violence" is frequently used to describe conduct which involves great physical force, and/or force which is unlawful (according to a legal definition), excessive, or disproportionate. It is most commonly used to designate a range of practices which, in addition to demonstrating force, threaten to inflict or actually inflict pain or injury. Tobin Siebers defines violence in the following way: "Violence exists whenever human beings harm other human beings."¹⁰ The definitive element of violence, according to this definition, is not force but "harm" or injury. Indeed, force becomes a secondary or derivative

¹⁰Tobin Siebers, The Ethics of Criticism (Ithaca and London: Cornell UP, 1988) 7. By deliberately excluding the behaviour of animals and the forces of nature from consideration, Siebers posits violence as a primarily social phenomenon.
quality in this statement of meaning. The definition offered by Siebers also presupposes that the harmful action or behaviour is accompanied by an intention to injure or with an understanding of the injurious consequences of the action. This model of violence is most easily understood as physical action; at the physical level the designation of violence is verifiable insofar as the wielding of the instrument of violence is observable and insofar as the effect of that action, the “harm,” is manifested visibly on victims’ bodies. The element of physical violence that eludes empirical verification is the intention that accompanies the action. Intent, however, is often construed through actions and their immediate context.

When we define violence as a physical phenomenon, we can also say that we are invoking the “literal” sense of the term. In other words, “violence” most immediately signifies this range of physical actions whose intent and/or effect is to cause physical harm. Once any practice is identified as literally violent, once it is recognized as an intention or actualization of physical pain or injury, it is also implicitly understood that the grounds for the identification are self-evident. However, we also recognize that the term “violence” is not limited to identifying practices involving the wilful perpetration of bodily injury; it is used to designate a variety of conditions which are not reducible to this definition. As stated above, violence also has the sense of “great force”; it can be used in the same sense as intensity, passion, and power. It is also applied to situations which are perceived as causing harm in some sense, whether by creating victims, by

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11The concept of “literalness,” in terms of violence and its representations, is a paradoxical designation which will be subjected to rigorous analysis in the course of the thesis; initially, it can be said that implicit in the notion of a “literal” correspondence between the signifying term and its referent is the assumption that the relation is natural, immediate, uncomplicated by figurative uses of the language, in other words corresponding to an original meaning.
causing division or disruption, or by involving coercion, oppression, or marginalization, but which do not involve any physical force or aggression. Violence has been attributed to words, images and gestures, inasmuch as they wield force and also insofar as they show aggression, injure, create victims. The harm that Siebers claims is the essential component or defining element of violence can be understood to operate in practices—material and discursive—that involve no physical suffering or violation. At the same time, the absence of a specifically physical dimension to the violence leads us to say that the term is being invoked figuratively rather than literally.

The distinction between physical violence and conceptual violence is not so much empirical as discursive. That is, we are not distinguishing so much between distinct categories of violence as between different deployments of the term. The elaboration of violence as a term that refers to many contradictory practices renders problematic the idea of violence as a physical phenomenon that is objectively present and verifiable outside of any system of signification. If violence is a term that may be used to describe a whole range of divergent practices, then any so-called “literally” (i.e., physically) violent occasion is as much subject to interpretation as any practice that is “figuratively” violent. In other words, the security of any identification of a practice as essentially and self-evidently violent erodes with a heightened awareness of the rhetorical basis of that designation.

When the immediate context of violence is the domain of representation, that is, when the object of investigation and interpretation is represented violence, the specific formulation of the literal ceases to be possible. Literal violence, as the enactment of actual physical harm or injury, is impossible within the domain of representation. Physical violence can be represented to an audience through a variety of visual, plastic or poetic media, and the illusion of
injury and bloodshed can be created within performative art forms. Many critics of violence in literature, including those who analyse violence on the English Renaissance stage, devote themselves to the particular means of this representation—the stylistic conventions, the technical requirements—and the actual representability of violence is rarely cast in doubt by these critics. However, an essential distinction exists, which is that any given representation of physical violence only signifies violence without being violent in the literal sense of the term. Paradoxically, the ability to represent violence becomes a means of confirming the “truth” of the referent that lies beyond the specific representation (or “false” presentation). In a representational context, simulated violence finally establishes the difference between itself and that which it seeks to imitate. Some interpretive consensus must exist among spectators to say that what is enacted has the form of violence, at least up to a point, but is not essentially violent.

This distinction between represented violence and actual violence rests on the ongoing privileging of the physical dimension of violence. We can say that represented violence is not actually violent as long as we maintain that the essential element of violence is the physical wounding of victims. But represented violence, if not actually or literally violent, can still be violent in what we are calling a figurative sense. This is a theoretical issue that Nancy Armstrong and Leonard Tennenhouse write about, although their real objective is to collapse the distinction between literal and figurative designations of violence.

We have offered a crude distinction between two modalities of violence: that which is ‘out there’ in the world, as opposed to that which is exercised through words upon things in the world, often by attributing

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12See Barish’s, Charney’s, Tricomi’s arguments in the works cited above.
violence to them. But our ultimate goal is to demonstrate that the two cannot in fact be distinguished, at least not in writing.13

These critics oppose a violence that is "out there" (presumably literal violence) to a specific type of conceptual violence, that is the violence of words or of representation. The violence which words are said to exercise is, the critics maintain, demonstrated in the very process of identifying a practice as violent. To identify, name, or represent something as violent is to select an "appropriate object of violence"14 from among a field of possibilities, to impose meaning on that designated object and at the same time to exclude other objects from that same designation. In this way, the process of constituting objects as violent becomes a form of violence in itself. For these critics, the difficulty with maintaining a violence which is objective, or "out there," is one with the difficulty of establishing oneself as outside of this violence and still within culture.

Armstrong and Tennenhouse call attention in the above-quoted passage to the problem of speaking about specific representations of violent acts within a critical discourse that sees writing or representation as inherently violent. Their essay articulates the critical position that "writing is not so much about violence as a form of violence in its own right."15 A legacy of thought lies behind such a statement. Jacques Derrida is a key figure in the theoretical discourse that locates violence within the structures of signification. In an essay which has as its concern precisely this tradition and its development through key texts of


14Armstrong and Tennenhouse 4.

15Armstrong and Tennenhouse 2.
Western culture, Derrida says that writing\textsuperscript{16} is not only violent but the originary violence.

For writing, obliteration of the proper [i.e., the proper name, with its implications of self-presence] classed in the play of difference, is the originary violence itself. . . . Anterior to the possibility of violence in the current and derivative sense . . . there is, as the space of possibility, the violence of the arche-writing, the violence of difference, of classification, and of the system of appellations.\textsuperscript{17}

But according to Derrida, language also defers (and thus suppresses) at the moment of signification its arche-violence, its own basis in difference, and this process (the deferral of difference, which he calls différence) opens a space of possibility for the "metaphysical logocentrism" that posits the self-presence of the sign to its meaning. The naturalization of arbitrary differences into structured oppositions that occurs in all forms of language is a suppression of an originary condition of difference which is always unstable, always dangerously at play. To elaborate on Tennenhouse and Armstrong's statement that "the violence of representation is the suppression of difference," one might say that the violence of representation is the suppression of the real means by which difference is produced.

For Derrida, any violence which exists as an "empirical possibility," "what is commonly called evil, war, indiscretion, rape . . . the system of moral law and transgression,"\textsuperscript{18} is always inscribed by the arche-violence that underlies

\textsuperscript{16}"Writing" is a term Derrida uses for the process of signification which he opposes to "speech"; writing is invested with the idea of free play, of arbitrary correspondence, whereas speech implies "the absolute proximity of voice and being, of voice and the meaning of being, of voice and the ideality of meaning." See "The End of the Book and the Beginning of Writing," Of Grammatology, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins U P, 1976).

\textsuperscript{17}Jacques Derrida, "The Violence of the Letter: From Lévi-Strauss to Rousseau," Of Grammatology 110.

\textsuperscript{18}Derrida, "Violence" 112
language and is always derivative of it. This level of violence Derrida locates as “tertiary,” coming after designation and concealment. From the list of possibilities Derrida provides, we can see that this empirical violence encompasses the whole range of practices suggested in my initial classifications of literal and conceptual violence. Derrida’s system of thought evidently does not allow for the distinction between literal and figurative; in terms of violence, he does not privilege the materiality of physical violence over any other relation or practice that could be constituted as conceptually violent. Derrida’s theory of meaning does not admit the category of the literal at all, either for violence or any other concept; the literal meaning of any sign is always “under erasure.”

The violence that Derrida identifies as underlying language is not specifically ideological, but it might be considered as the precondition for ideology. The violent suppression of difference that Armstrong and Tennenhouse speak of as occurring in the process of representation is specifically ideological. Their formulation of the violence of representation reflects the influence of Michel Foucault. For Foucault, all representation operates within a given discourse or within competing discourses. He describes discourse as inherently violent in the sense that it proliferates types of institutionally or scientifically sanctioned “knowledge” in which “subjects” (human and otherwise) are necessarily constituted, formed and determined. We determine an object or practice to be violent in relation to the knowledge which discourse sanctions. In this way, violence is inherent in the process of interpretation. Interpretation, for Foucault, is violent inasmuch as it functions within and thus perpetuates the systems of knowledge and relations of power that compete for dominance within a culture and that determine subjectivity.

[If interpretation is the violent or surreptitious appropriation of a system of rules, which in itself has no essential meaning, in order to impose a direction, to bend it to a new will, to force its participation in a different
game, and to subject it to secondary rules, then the development of humanity is a series of interpretations. 19

What Foucault's theory (as well as its elaboration through Armstrong and Tennenhouse) suggests to the present study is that the application of the term "violence" to any individual action or relation can be understood to be both arbitrary and restrictive insofar as that interpretive gesture is the effect of a larger discursive violence.

Once we are made aware of the potential arbitrariness of the relation between "violence" and that which it designates, the notion of a literal application of the term is destabilized. In much current criticism of violence in literature and the arts, the concern with individual representations of physical violence is bracketed by a theoretical preoccupation with a much broader concept of violence, a concept sufficiently broad to encompass the whole endeavour of representation. In Armstrong and Tennenhouse's terminology, the representation of violence is subsumed by the violence of representation. This thesis moves against the current of criticism of cultural violence in that it focuses on "literal" violence as a specific critical concern. This is not to say that the representation of violence in the Elizabethan and Jacobean plays under consideration is approached with any security as to the grounds on which it may be known or understood. It is not to say that violence is now to be invoked unpromblematically as a category of experience. Rather, this analysis challenges the idea that violence, even as defined literally, was ever wholly coherent or stable in Renaissance England, either as a practice or as a concept. Nonetheless, there is, in the plays from the period, a broad range of practices that all correspond to our original, "literal" definition of violence in that they all

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represent, in some form, a threat or actualization of physical injury or harm. This study focuses on the ways in which various examples of represented physical violence in Renaissance drama call into question or undermine the possibility of secure knowledge and unproblematic interpretation in the context of performance.

3. The Meaning of Violence

The literal definition of violence comprises a broad variety of practices that belong to very different realms of experience. For example, a public execution and a tavern brawl both involve the infliction of pain and injury, and so they are both designated as violence. Yet they are generally thought of as different sorts of behaviour and different meanings are attributed to each. In order for these two situations to be constituted as similar, the specific circumstances surrounding the infliction of harm and the mode of inflicting it must be passed over in favour of the pain or injury itself. The example suggests that the application of violence as a blanket term for a number of discrete practices privileges a certain aspect of each practice as its essential signifier and obscures significant differences between them. While any incident involving pain, injury, or violation might be called violence, that particular designation does not invoke a stable or coherent category of experience. Rather, each designation of an act as violent is a specific and limited invocation of the term; continuity in meaning among discrete designations cannot be construed. Any attempt to generalize about violence occurs at the expense of the significant details of any given enactment. It is the endeavour of this thesis to demonstrate that it is in these details, in the specific conditions and conventions according to which violence is carried out, that its meaning inheres.
From the formal, philosophical problem of establishing a literal "reality" for violence, we have moved to an interpretive problem regarding the specific codes of a cultural context. We have moved from the question: "What constitutes violence (and how is it representable)?" to the question: "What does violence mean to the society that experiences it?"\(^{20}\) To begin discussing the meaning of violence, one could say that the interpretation of any act of violence invokes conceptual binaries; that is, its meaning is determined in relation to oppositions such as positive and negative, ordered and disordered (or concordant and discordant, harmonious and chaotic, etc.), pure and impure. In other words the meaning of violence is constituted in/as difference. As an empirical category (and like many other categories), violence can be said to reflect either of the opposed terms of any of these binaries. The paradoxical doubleness of violence can be easily illustrated in terms of its political manifestation. A violent act which occurs in the social arena may be interpreted as initiating or fomenting disorder, or it may be understood as participating in the maintenance of order. That is, violence can have as its ostensible purpose or effect the upsetting or overthrowing of a society's existing systems of order, and violence can also be used to impose or maintain those systems. The public insurrection of an unruly mob and the surreptitious violence of a single assassin both reflect the former category of violence, while sixteenth and seventeenth century corporal and capital punishment best illustrate the latter category. But the political meaning of violence is rarely as stable as these examples would suggest. From a purely functionalist perspective, this instability is not difficult to understand. Violence, as a category of actions or behaviour, can be practiced by diverse elements of a

\(^{20}\)Underlying this second query, of course, is the supposition that there is a range of practices that can be constituted under certain circumstances as empirically violent.
society to different ends. Given this fact, the key condition in determining the meaning of physical violence is the interest that it is understood to be serving. One can see, for example, that when violence is operating in the service of the state, when it is used to preserve the dominant power structure, it will be constituted through the discursive strategies of that power structure as simultaneously a tool and a reflection of the ordered power of the state.\(^{21}\) When the violence acts in opposition to the existing structures of authority, when it operates as the weapon of a subversive force, it will be constituted through the ideological machinery of that state as disorderly or chaotic. On the other hand, from the perspective of the insurrectionary or subversive forces, the violence of each side will signify inversely. The meaning of any act of violence is determined according to its effect on the perpetrators and on the victims, and that meaning is conveyed to larger audiences of interpreters by specific strategies of representation.

The above explanation for the meaning of social violence suggests the idea of a restricted, verifiable incident of violence which is then subjected to different interpretations and strategies of representation. It posits the empirical "fact" of violence and sets it against various vested interests and various duplicities of language and representation. But meaning is not only conferred on violence \textit{a posteriori} through discourse. The significance of an incident of violence is determined as it occurs both for those directly involved and for those who

\(^{21}\)Foucault discusses how public torture and execution were seen to reflect the order of the state: "[F]rom the point of view of the law that imposes it, public torture and execution must be spectacular, it must be seen by all almost as its triumph. The very excess of the violence employed is one of the elements of its glory: the fact that the guilty man should moan and cry out under the blows is not a shameful side-effect, it is the very ceremonial of justice being expressed in all its force." \textit{Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison}, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vantage Books, 1979) 34.
witness it: violence is enacted with the consciousness of an audience of interpreters. In this light, the sense of violence as empirically verifiable action recedes and the "textuality" of violence emerges. Whether we are speaking of a tavern brawl, a fencing match, a public execution, or representations of these occasions, violence is always present to its participants and spectators in the total text of its enactment or re-enactment.

4. Violence and the Texts of Culture

That the condition for knowledge of all cultural practices is textual, not only for literary and cultural historians but for the participants of any given culture, is one of the fundamental principles of current cultural studies, and it is an important paradigm in this study. Cultural semioticians Yury M. Lotman and B. A. Uspensky write, "The very existence of culture implies the construction of a system, of some rules for translating direct experience into text." According to these theorists, "Culture can be presented as an aggregate of texts; however, from the point of view of the researcher, it is more exact to consider culture as a mechanism creating an aggregate of texts and texts as the realization of culture." From the point of view of the participants within a given culture, it is the normative texts rather than the mechanisms that produce them that are significant, for it is the texts and not the mechanisms that they are engaged in interpreting. In these conditions of knowledge, all action or behaviour that occurs in the cultural domain can be understood to participate in complex


23Lotman and Uspensky 218.
signifying structures or texts.24 The total text of any action or enunciation includes the material conditions of its production, its framing mechanisms, as well as all the details of its enactment. These elements contribute to the meaning of an act of violence as they do to any other cultural text: as signs within a complex signifying structure, as intrinsic parts of an elaborate design.

The understanding of culture as textual raises an interesting theoretical question about the relationship between culture and representation. More specifically, it raises the issue of the relationship between aesthetic and non-aesthetic representation, between representation in theatrical texts and representation in other cultural texts.25 The term "culture" has been defined in many different ways to describe different aspects of social organization and production. In this study, "culture" includes all the ways in which a social group defines itself, orders itself, recognizes itself, and reproduces itself; it includes the various signifying practices in which the rules and systems of a society are

24 Within the encompassing framework of Renaissance English culture, we can identify specific contexts where this normative textuality was particularly evident. That the Stuart court represents a particularly "textual" cultural milieu is demonstrated in the great variety of symbolic activity through which the members organized experience and represented their culture to themselves. Beyond the circulation of written texts, such as lyric manuscripts, treatises on good government, courtesy literature, and essays on other humanistic themes, there were a whole host of performative texts: ceremonies, games, orchestrated spectacles of state power, and the formalized, decorous comportment prescribed by courtesy literature. All of these performances involved various languages of gesture and different forms of symbolic representation. The totality of texts which constituted the courtly culture at any given time represented a complex vision of a privileged society to that society and to the social groups that the culture excluded.

encoded. The broad definition of culture as a "whole way of life of a distinct people" encompasses theatre along with all the other practices in which the customs, conventions, and beliefs of the people are encoded. And yet within that broad definition of culture, a narrower group of practices can be delimited: these are the imaginative or artistic works of that people, which are said to belong to the "aesthetic" domain. Theatre may be said to belong to this category of aesthetic practices, and in this way it can be distinguished from many other cultural texts. More specifically, theatre is representational, imitative of, rather than coextensive with, reality. And yet this division within the cultural arena is itself subject to inquiry. For if we consider culture as the "signifying system" through which a social order is communicated, reproduced, experienced, and explored, then all of its accumulated texts somehow represent that culture to its participants. That is, each text, through its particular medium or mode of enactment, figures forth aspects of the social order to participants in the broader culture. For example, the basic function of any of the various "official" texts of Renaissance English culture, such as legal tracts, homiletic works, courtesy literature, religious rituals, and political ceremonies, is to encode and reinscribe the ordering practices of that society. This reinscription can only be achieved according to the same principles, techniques and strategies that are used in artistic or imaginative representation.


27 The category of the aesthetic may be considered as an invention of the late eighteenth century, but the idea of a distinct discipline of artistic creation--of creating objects or "works" which are distinctly imaginative and/or ornamental as well as functional or instructive--exists in Renaissance theories of the arts. Philip Sidney's Defence of Poesy, for example, is concerned with distinguishing writing which has a pronounced aesthetic dimension (i.e., which demonstrates imaginative invention) from other forms of writing (e.g., history, philosophy).

28Williams 13.
5. Violence and the Performance of Culture

The difference between imaginative or artistic creations and cultural practices which are conceived only as "social processes" is a particularly difficult problem in the study of early modern culture; the absence of a coherent theoretical discourse on this subject in the period suggests that the characteristics of the aesthetic domain were being worked out in practice. In the case of the theatre, we are dealing with a particular type of aesthetic text, namely a performance text, and so the more immediate issue is the relationship between Elizabethan and Jacobean public theatre and other types of contemporary cultural performance which we could call "non-aesthetic": religious rituals, political spectacles, social ceremonies and popular games or organized sports. We already know how theatre and related forms of performed entertainment (e.g., mumming, pageantry) differ from other types of aesthetic production: put reductively, performance texts occur in both space and time. The signifiers of performance are communicated simultaneously in temporal and spatial dimensions, and their communication coincides with their production, which is not the case with most other types of text. This accounts for the perception of

29 Williams 124.

30 Cf. Tadeusz Kowzan, Littérature et spectacle (The Hague: Mouton, 1975) 24. "This is what the circumscribed definition of performance implies: a work of art which must, by necessity, be communicated in time and space." De Marinis 50 (below).

31 For Marco De Marinis, the simultaneity of production and communication of the text, as well as the real physical co-presence of "sender" and collective "addressee," define the two basic requirements for theatrical performance. The Semiotics of Performance, trans. Aine O'Healy (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1993) 50.
the proximity of theatre to "reality" and suggests the possibility of blurring the boundaries that separate the two domains. But how is Renaissance theatre distinct from what we are provisionally calling non-aesthetic performance? A considerable number of critical studies of Renaissance culture have concluded that the distinction is difficult to maintain. It has been frequently observed, for example, that there are important continuities between Elizabethan-Jacobean theatre and Renaissance society Exponents of this argument typically assert that the conditions of knowledge and the conventions of behaviour inside and outside the playhouse were largely continuous. This position is articulated by cultural historian Molly Smith.

Theater in society, theater as society, society in theater and society as theater—all the variations seem to apply in seventeenth-century England. In the seventeenth century, society is theater, theater is society. Facetious though this equation might sound, this factor most clearly demarcates seventeenth-century attitudes toward the theater from our own and most clearly aligns the age with all ages and societies in which theater, spectacle, ritual and symbol have coalesced into a single spectrum of socially relevant meaning.32

It is partly within the drama itself that critics find evidence that this perception of the world was dominant in the period. Of course the most often quoted expression of the theatricality of everyday life is that of Jaques in As You Like It:

All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players.
They have their exits and their entrances,
And one man in his time plays many parts,
His acts being seven ages . . . . (II.vii.138-42)33


This speech implies a universality to the experience of being a player in the theatre of the world. According to this misanthropic satirist, all men (and women, implicitly), regardless of their social status, experience their own theatricality. Another contemporary expression of the theatre of the world repeats the claim for the universality of theatricality, and, like Jaques’ speech, it stresses the diversity of roles within the overall performance:

The world’s a Theater, the earth a Stage,
Which God, and nature doth with Actors fill,
Kings have their entrance in due equipage,
And some their parts play well and others ill . . . .
All men have parts, and each man acts his owne.34

The passage not only presents a model of a highly controlled and stratified theatrical society, but it asserts that theatricality is itself responsible for maintaining the divinely prescribed order. Franco Moretti sees this speech as exemplary of the Renaissance perception of the theatricality of the political world as well as the social world. “For us the concept of theatre refers directly to aesthetic activity, but for the Elizabethans it was before all else connected with a system of political relationships.”35 This thesis argues that the perceived theatricality of the world was the outcome not merely of the Renaissance “subject’s” consciousness of playing a role or roles in his/her daily existence, but also the result of a culture whose ordering mechanisms were so frequently conveyed in performance texts.

34Thomas Heywood, An Apology for Actors (1612; New York: Scholars’, 1941) a3r-v [13-14]. Heywood’s tract is a response to puritan anti-theatrical treatises, a defense of the stage as a vehicle for social order against charges of its immoral and subversive influences.

One means of distinguishing between theatre and other sorts of performance is in terms of its primary function. Richard Schechner has postulated that all performance, including many forms of ritual and theatrical activity, operates within the “dialectical-dyadic continuum” of efficacy and entertainment. Schechner sees organized theatre primarily as a form of entertainment, while cultural practices such as religious and judicial rituals are essentially efficacious; however, the categories are not mutually exclusive. In his words, “Whether one calls a specific entertainment ritual or theatre depends on the degree to which the performance tends towards efficacy or entertainment. No performance is pure efficacy or pure entertainment.”

Elizabethan plays were certainly efficacious insofar as they participated in topical and controversial religious, political, and social discourses and, in doing so, directly or indirectly reinforced existing belief systems and institutions or encouraged the development of new ones. And all other sorts of performance involve representation which we might call “entertaining,” insofar as they involved or engaged the aesthetic appreciation of their spectators. Schechner’s distinction is difficult to maintain when we consider individual performative practices according to what they staged and how they participated in the cultural discourses of the day.

One could maintain that the non-theatrical performative practices that have been mentioned are not theatrical based on the distinction that theatre

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36 An encompassing term for Schechner; ritual will be defined and discussed at some length in chapter 3.


38 Schechner 75
involves representation, while these other types of cultural performance involve presentation.\(^\text{39}\) However, we have already established that cultural texts that we would not identify as primarily aesthetic do not merely present but *represent* (more or less idealized images of) the culture to its members via techniques and strategies which differ little (if at all) from those of poetic, decorative, and dramatic texts. Representation is not, then, a means for arguing the distinctness of theatrical representation. One could, however, posit that while all performances involve representation, what theatre represents is these other performances. In holding a mirror up to the world, in re-staging the world, theatre reflects or re-stages versions of the performative practices that make up the cultural fabric of that world. Theatre performs the performance of culture. This means that theatre is more "layered" than most other forms of performance. Its representations are frequently at (at least) two degrees of remove from "reality."

The many plays, masques, religious ceremonies, armed combats, executions, and other performances which are staged within Elizabethan and Jacobean plays illustrate in a direct manner the way in which theatrical performance incorporates other types of performance. Critics have referred to the plays and entertainments within plays as metatheatrical episodes, insofar as they encourage the theatre audience to contemplate the performance conditions in which they themselves are engaged. However, layered performances, or performances within performances, can be understood not only as metatheatrical

\(^{39}\)This is a distinction that De Marinis posits, despite his acknowledgement that "while it is very difficult, if not impossible to find representational performances where there is a complete absence of some presentational and self-reflexive element . . . it is equally difficult to imagine performances of a presentational type that are completely lacking in representational and symbolic components" (49).
but as "metaperformative"; as well as being theatrically self-referential, they make reference to the continuities between theatre and the encompassing culture. At the same time, these episodes frequently suggest the distinctness or delimitation of theatrical performance from the world which surrounds it.

6. Thesis Statement and Outline

In the dramatic genre of revenge tragedy (and in the violent, "Italianate" tragedies associated with this genre) we frequently encounter formal performance occasions, that is, performances which acknowledge an "official" on-stage audience. These performances, which we will refer to alternately as inserted or embedded performances,\textsuperscript{40} typically reflect the dominant cultural milieu represented in the plays--the courtly milieu.\textsuperscript{41} They are entertainments imitative of those that were performed at the courts of Elizabeth and James and in other aristocratic venues. Stageplays, masques and revels dancing, tournament combat and fencing matches are all represented in these tragedies.

\textsuperscript{40}The term "embedded performance" is used by Lorraine Wynne, in "The Poetic Function of the Stage Audience and Embedded Performance," \textit{Semiotics} (1980): 571-76.

\textsuperscript{41} The courtly culture of late Elizabethan and early Jacobean England forms the specific context for the investigation of the plays. While the court constitutes a unique and definable culture within the broader culture of Renaissance England, the fluidity or permeability of the boundaries that define the courtly culture must be acknowledged. As Malcolm Smuts explains, in the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods, "the court was . . . an institution with a distinct nucleus but a vaguely defined periphery." The experiences and practices that constituted the courtly culture, even the physical environment, were to some extent shared with external or excluded groups. The public and private theatres of London are the most important case in point; they represent a common element in the culture of the court and in the emergent "bourgeois" culture of the merchants and citizens. See Malcolm Smuts, \textit{Court Culture and the Origins of the Royalist Tradition in early Stuart England} (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1987) 4.
These embedded performances also frequently involve violence, and it is such theatrical episodes that this thesis considers. The primary texts for analysis are dramatic episodes that combine violence and courtly performance, and it is the intersection and interaction of these two elements which is the persistent focus of the analysis. The effects of combining violence with formal and self-conscious performance vary from play to play, but there are several observable results.

One result of this combination is that the violence destabilizes the performance by challenging its boundaries. Such episodes challenge the boundaries or "frames" of performance by incorporating real violence into the performance. Earlier, it was stated that violence, understood literally, constitutes one of the limits of theatrical representation. Violence cannot occur in theatre or else the event ceases to be theatre. It functions as a point of definition, a textual site in which the distinctness of theatrical practice is revealed. In several of the scenes under consideration, the performed violence ceases to signify this distinction. The violence performed before the uncomprehending onstage spectators appears to them to be theatrical but is actually (for them) "real." The results of this misinterpretation are, for the on-stage audience as for the performers, devastating. Such violent performances, then, suggest to the audience observing the on-stage audience that the conditions of knowledge that obtain in a theatrical context are potentially unstable. Such performances also suggest to the theatre audience that the boundaries of their own theatrical practices are perhaps not as secure as they might think them to be, and that their own "entertaining" and "aesthetic" performances may also conceal undetectable, insidious forms of violence. The theatrical violence exceeds its immediate, literal significance in this way and acquires broader significance; it becomes a figurative representation of the potential dangers which reside in what may seem to be the most diverting and innocuous of cultural performances.
In these embedded performances, it is not only violence that destabilizes the conventional meaning of the performance. In some cases, the performance destabilizes the meaning of the violence. The significance of the violence as positive or negative, moral or immoral, ordered or disordered, etc., relies partially on the degree of moral sanction which the play creates for the revengers or perpetrators of violence; however, its significance is also determined in relation to the cultural significance of the embedded performance in which it occurs. While each of these embedded shows can be identified as a particular type of performance (e.g., play, masque, tournament combat), some of them can be interpreted as having several types of performance as referents; in some cases the spectacles are, in effect, hybrid performances, and this makes it difficult to apply a single interpretive code to the violence. We could generalize by saying that the violence is always antithetical to the objective(s) of the “official” performance: it interrupts a celebration of princely power or undermines an enactment of social order. At the same time, and as a result of certain theatrical strategies, the violence is consistent or continuous with an “unofficial” referent for the spectacle. In general, violence signifies not only as antithetical to the courtly performance but also as the realization of a potential that always underlies the performance.

In all of the episodes of literal violence which are considered in this study, fundamental oppositions, such as reality vs. imitation, abstraction vs. concreteness, truth vs. falsehood, order vs. disorder, good vs. evil, are blurred and become difficult to maintain. When considered collectively, the texts suggest that violence is inherently paradoxical, that it always exists in the interstices of fixed meaning. Violence may be implicated in all of these conceptual oppositions, and yet in its cultural life it is never finally reducible to either term of any binary. Rather, violence collapses the possibility of absolute distinctions.
According to a deconstructive method of analysis, the most profitable way to analyse a system (or text) is at its weakest point, where the conditions of its possibility seem most in jeopardy. Violence provides just this sort of moment in many texts of Renaissance culture. In several Elizabethan and Jacobean tragedies, violent performances form fissures in the theatrical texts, but at the same time they offer perspectives on the organization of experience and on the construction of meaning in other texts of the culture. The perspectives that the selected incidents of theatrical violence offer are neither clear nor coherent. Rather, they serve as points of entry into intertextual dialogues which involve interpreters in suggestive paradoxes, in productive contradictions.42 In short, the violent performances in Elizabethan and Jacobean tragedy confront audiences (historical and contemporary) with experiences of the play of difference that underlies the culture's various assertions of unity and coherence.

While performed violence has the general effect of collapsing differences, escaping boundaries, and/or effacing distinctions in all of the scenes that are examined in this study, the specific effects (summarized above) are not the same for each case. The various playwrights use embedded violent performances to achieve different effects in addition to the basic one of exacting revenge in a

42Intertextuality is a concept which has both "progressive" applications in the fields of post-structural and postmodern studies and "traditional" applications in the more conservative approaches to literary studies. A comprehensive definition of the term is beyond the scope of the present study, but the observations of one literary theorist give a sense of the way in which it is being used in this study. "An intertext [unlike the delimited, coherent, autonomous text], may be characterized by attributes that exceed it. It is not delimited, but de-limited, for its constituents refer to constituents of one or several other texts. Therefore it has a twofold coherence: an intratextual one which guarantees the immanent integrity of the text, and an intertextual one which creates structural relations between itself and other texts. The twofold coherence makes for the richness and complexity of the intertext, but also for its problematical status." Heinrich F. Plett, "Intertextualities," Intertextuality, ed. H. F. Plett (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1991) 5.
surreptitious manner. To a great extent, the significance of the violence depends on the particular embedded performance in which it occurs. The organization of this study reflects the importance of the specific performative context for the violence by grouping the scenes for analysis according to the type of performance that they stage.

In chapter two, the embedded performances analysed are theatrical performances—plays within plays. They include the performance of “Soliman and Perseda” in the last act of Thomas Kyd’s *The Spanish Tragedy* (c. 1587) and “The Murder of Gonzago” performance in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* (c. 1601). (The latter is one of two scenes included in this study in which no real violence occurs.) Kyd’s play within a play explores the instabilities of the boundaries of theatre in a way that is very influential for subsequent revenge performances. The play scene in *Hamlet* reveals the instability of meaning which is characteristic of violence, especially in an unstable and morally ambiguous climate of reciprocal violence.

Chapters three and four both consider the theatrical convention of the revenge masque. In chapter three, the revenge masques in two of John Marston’s plays, *Antonio’s Revenge* (c. 1601) and *The Malcontent* (c. 1604) (the other performance which does not involve any real violence), represent the process of establishing a unanimous interpretation of violence in a ritual context. While the performers and on-stage spectators of the masque in *Antonio’s Revenge* are engaged in fixing the status of the murder as a ritual of order, the violence continues to signify in a very unstable manner for the theatre audience. Chapter four considers the revenge masques in *The Revenger’s Tragedy* (c. 1606) and in Thomas Middleton’s *Women Beware Women* (c. 1621), both of which reflect the influence of Marston’s revenge masques as well as the revenge performance in *The Spanish Tragedy*. The masque in *The Revenger’s Tragedy* continues the business
of attempting to ritualize violence through the structure and the aesthetic of the court masque, while the entertainment in *Women Beware Women* reintroduces the epistemological problem of determining between reality and representation which is explored in *The Spanish Tragedy*. Middleton’s revenge tragedy also suggests, more than any of the other plays under examination, the decadence of the masque form, and it does so chiefly through the violence which the masque incorporates.

Chapter five groups together for analysis a number of dramatic scenes of swordplay. The combat at weapons, whether performed in play or in earnest, was another type of performative practice in the Renaissance that unfolded according to set “texts.” The social meaning of swordplay in the courtly circles of Europe was determined according to the performers’ adherence to certain “ideal texts.” Dramatic episodes in *Romeo and Juliet* (c. 1595) and *The White Devil* (c. 1612) self-consciously illustrate the importance of proper form in the interpretation of violence. Other scenes of swordplay suggest that the boundaries between real violence and played violence were unstable and always at risk of disappearing. This phenomenon is explored dramatically in the fencing scene in *Hamlet*, in the barriers scene in *The White Devil*, and in the revenge slaughter at the conclusion of *The Second Maiden’s Tragedy* (1611). Another issue which these last three embedded performances raise is the relationship between visible and invisible violence. This problem is represented in the plays through the use of poisoned swords. The combination of unexpected, spectacular violence with equally insidious, undetectable violence suggests an intensification of the anxiety that all of the plays suggest regarding the embeddedness of violence in the culture.
7. René Girard and the Violence of Culture

The only element of the theoretical apparatus of this study that remains to be discussed is the persistent influence of René Girard. His writings on the relationship between culture and violence inform much of the current argument: the conception of the always unstable significance of violence, the hypothesis of the "presence" of violence in all ordering cultural mechanisms, the recognition of the unique powers of literary or artistic texts (including theatre) among all other texts of culture to reveal the workings of violence; these premises, which are elaborated in the course of the discussion, owe their inspiration to the cultural theory of Girard.

Girard offers a means of moving beyond rigid conceptual oppositions (such as order vs. disorder), which inhere in most discussions of violence in revenge tragedy. Early in his seminal work, *Violence and the Sacred*, René Girard writes, "The secret of the dual nature of violence still eludes man."43 He refers to the essential paradox of violence, "the fact that evil and the violent measures taken to combat evil are essentially the same."44 The reason that we are not constantly confronted with the paradoxical duality of violence, Girard claims, is that our culture suppresses it. It is the job of a society's regulatory cultural mechanisms, its various rituals and myths, to suppress the essential resemblance between "good" and "bad" violence, between the violence that a society uses in order to eliminate disorder and restore social harmony and the violence that can so quickly destroy a community. Girard writes, "Beneficial violence must be carefully distinguished from harmful violence, and the former continually...

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44Girard 37.
promoted at the expense of the latter. Ritual is nothing more than the regular exercise of "good" violence. In order to understand such a statement it is necessary to outline the basic propositions of Girard's theory of the origin of culture.

Girard believes that the origin of culture lies in an act of sacrificial violence. He hypothesizes that the originary moment of collective unity occurred when all the random violence in a community was polarized on a single victim. The violence that plagued the community until that point resulted from "acquisitive mimesis"--the desire to possess what the other desires. The widespread mimetic rivalry was quelled when acquisitive mimesis turned into "conflictual mimesis"--the imitation of the other's aggression toward a third party. Girard hypothesizes that the original scapegoat, the focus of the collective aggression of the community, was marked by difference. He became the object of violence because of his marginal or peripheral relationship to the group; he was *like* but not *of* the group. This condition of being outside as well as inside the community made the scapegoat safely expendable; his sacrifice directed the violence outside of the group, thereby interrupting the cycle of reciprocal violence which threatened the existence of the community. Because the death of the scapegoat resulted in a cessation of random, self-perpetuating, mimetic violence, this victim became in death "sacred," a venerated object as well as an object of revulsion.

According to Girard, the sacrificial elimination of the scapegoat persists in all societies, and it must be continually re-enacted in order for a society to sustain its sense of unity and to ward off further crises of mimetic violence. But in the course of history and with the development of complex societies, sacrificial

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45Girard 37.
violence is elided or concealed. Myth plays a part in any culture’s collective forgetting of the sacrificial crisis by reconstructing the violence as “salvific resolution,” while religious and secular rituals substitute for actual sacrifice other symbolic practices which preserve the essential function of establishing unity and also preserve the essential ambivalence of the sacred. Eventually, as a society develops a strong and effective judicial system which can punish its disruptive elements without initiating another cycle of retributive violence, the necessity of the surrogate victim declines, and the mechanism of sacrifice is further confined to aesthetic representation.

It is not necessary to subscribe to Girard’s theory of origins or to accept fully the universalizing and anti-historicizing tendencies of his thought in order to benefit from his conception of the relationship between violence and culture. Girard offers a means of moving beyond rigid polarities of order and disorder and a means of understanding the sense that we sometimes obtain of a violent disorder underlying symbolic enactments of order. Girard’s theory is particularly useful for the study of violence in literary or dramatic texts, for he believes that literature in general has the function of recovering for us a sense of our relative proximity to indeterminacy. He writes, “The poet brings the sacrificial crisis back to life,” which is one way of saying that artistic texts expose the instabilities and the crises in distinction that are inherent in the cultural systems by which a society orders itself. In the violent performances in

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48 Girard 64.
Elizabethan and Jacobean tragedy, we can witness the revelatory or "desymbolizing" function which Girard attributes to literature.

There is much in this study which Girard would disapprove of, including the intertextual method of interpreting the dramatic scenes, the identification of multiple referents within the culture for the violence, and the concern with the boundaries or frames of performance. Girard would consider these preoccupations as distractions from the more important consideration of the structures of reciprocity and sacrifice which, so he would claim, inform all of the selected episodes. But the concerns of this study are somewhat more diffuse than those which inform Girard's analyses of represented violence. We are not only interested in the sacrificial structure of the violence that we are analysing; we are focussing more generally on the ways in which the performed violence at once sets up and collapses distinctions and differences which are otherwise supported in the play text and in other texts of Renaissance culture.
The slaughter that occurs during the performance of “Soliman and Perseda” in Thomas Kyd’s The Spanish Tragedy is one of the earliest surviving examples of a performance within a play that erupts into violence. As such it is often treated by critics as initiating this convention which is so prevalent in Jacobean revenge tragedies. The play undoubtedly does provide an important model for later tragedies of the “layered” violent performance, but it will not do to overstate the resemblance between this revenge performance and subsequent ones. Many of the embedded violent performances in later tragedies are not theatrical in the same sense as “Soliman and Perseda.” This performance is generically a play, or “playlet” as many critics call it. The generic distinction is important to note. In Antonio’s Revenge, The Revenger’s Tragedy, and Women Beware Women, all of which are often considered to be successors of The Spanish Tragedy, the final slaughters are enacted within the very specific conventions and aesthetic principles of the masque, which are not identical to those of the surrounding play. In Hamlet and The White Devil, revenge violence takes the form of ritualized swordplay rather than theatre. “Soliman and Perseda” is generically closer than other revenge performances to the performance that contains it. As such it allows us to enter into an analysis of the combination of

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violence and theatre without having to consider the direct influence of other varieties of cultural performance.\(^2\)

The abbreviated play evokes (if it does not exactly imitate) the studiously classical tragedies that were written and performed at the universities and Inns of Court and, as Hieronimo expresses it, that were “determined to have been acted/ By gentlemen and scholars too,/ Such as could tell what to speak” (IV.i.101-03).\(^3\) As such it evokes a dramatic tradition and milieu distinct from those of the public playhouse where *The Spanish Tragedy* and Kyd’s dramatic career were launched.\(^4\) Hieronimo’s peculiar insistence that the dialogue be spoken in “unknown languages,/ That it may breed the more variety” (IV.i.173-74), has generated considerable scholarly discussion. There is no consensus as to whether the play was actually presented in foreign tongues or whether the English “translation” provided in the printed text was performed instead.\(^5\)


\(^4\)Unlike Hieronimo, who claims he studied “fruitless poetry” [at the university] in Toledo, there is no record of Kyd having studied at either an Inn of Court or a university. For biographical information, see Freeman or Peter Murray, *Thomas Kyd* (New York: Twayne, 1969).

\(^5\)Philip Edwards provides several hypotheses to explain the reference to performing in foreign languages and the supplied English translation, which, a textual note explains, “was thought good to be set down in English more largely, for the easier understanding to every public reader” (IV.iv.10.1). 1) The play was performed as it appears in the text, with the reference to “unknown languages” but with the English dialogue. 2) The playlet was originally written and performed in multiple languages and the translation was provided for publication. 3) The playlet dialogue was originally written in English, but Kyd revised (and shortened) for performance, at which point an abridged playlet with minimal foreign dialogue was provided and the lines which refer to the
However the play was performed, the reference to “unknown” and “sundry” languages was probably intended as a parody of the universities’ practice of performing plays in Latin or Greek. Inasmuch as the play within the play is a courtly performance as well as the work of a university tragedian, perhaps the “sundry languages” also offer a more general reference to the court’s fostering of foreign and classical cultural influences. Kyd’s drama itself derives partially from classical (especially Senecan) models, but those models have been translated and transposed for different audiences and playing conditions.

“unknown languages” were inserted. Edwards supports the third hypothesis and develops the further theory that the compositor of the 1592 edition printed by Edward Allde for Edward White, the earliest extant edition, was working from two texts. He postulates that the copy manuscript was defective or damaged at this point and that the compositor turned to an edition of the play already in print, Abell Jeffes’ edition, which was a “reported text” and thus contained the references to foreign languages which were added for the playhouse. The copy manuscript contained the playlet as originally written, in English, and it was retained for the printed edition, with the note about translation inserted before it. There are many problems with Edwards’ argument, the chief one being that there is no proof that the edition by Jeffes was a “reported” version of the play, or that it was substantially different from the edition published by White. See Edwards’ introduction to the Revels edition xxxvi-xl.

In his introduction to Stuart Academic Drama: An Edition of Three University Plays, Renaissance Imagination vol. 34 (New York and London: Garland, 1987) 7, David Russell remarks that “when the vernacular was used [in university playwriting], it was almost exclusively for comedy. Only Latin or Greek (the latter very infrequently, since Greek studies were in a notorious state of neglect in the English Renaissance universities) were considered suitable for the graver matter of tragedy.” The most complete scholarly work on the university drama remains that of F. R. Boas, University Drama in the Tudor Age (Oxford: Clarendon, 1914).

Moreover, despite its distinctiveness from the surrounding play, the inserted performance demonstrates many similarities to the work of Kyd and his Elizabethan contemporaries. The Oriental exoticism, the declamatory rhetoric, and the focus on conspiracy and love intrigue are all features of the public playhouse tragedies, and the specific narrative is the subject of a roughly contemporary play which may be by Kyd. Whether or not the playlet was actually performed in what Hieronimo calls “unknown languages” (which he then specifies to be Latin, Greek, French, and Italian), the performance succeeds in causing the “mere confusion” that Balthazar, one of the performers, fears. However, this confusion is not only a result of the play’s strangeness or difference from the surrounding drama, but also a consequence of its close correspondences to Kyd’s own theatrical practice. The locus of this confusion is the violence in which the play culminates. This discussion of *The Spanish Tragedy* explores the violent climax and its aftermath, where theatre collapses violently into its performative context, and considers the broader cultural significance of the crisis in audience understanding.

During the rather truncated performance of “Soliman and Perseda,” Lorenzo and Balthazar, murderers of Hieronimo’s son Horatio, are slaughtered by the revenging father and by Bel-imperia, Horatio’s heart-broken lover (who also takes her own life). In killing Balthazar, Bel-imperia also achieves revenge for her other lover, Don Andrea, killed by Balthazar in battle before the play’s

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8In the entry for the anonymous *Soliman and Perseda* in T. P. Logan and D. S. Smith, eds., *The Predecessors of Shakespeare* (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1973) 233, Jill Levenson writes that “The only serious candidate for the authorship of *S&P* is Thomas Kyd.” The play is usually considered to have been written after *The Spanish Tragedy*.

9Edwards believes that the unknown languages were introduced specifically for a revised text for production. See note 5 above.
action begins. Hieronimo’s plan, through which these retributive deaths are achieved, involves playing with and preying on both his actors’ and his audience’s expectations of the rules governing theatrical experience. This spectacle of violence is the occasion of a radical misunderstanding on the part of the audience of the on-stage audience, the theatre audience, the significance of which extends far beyond the boundaries of the particular performance. The theatre audience witnesses this epistemological crisis from a distance and with the privilege of greater knowledge than the spectators whom they observe, and yet at the same time the scene invites the theatre audience to question their own sense of security in the world which they perceive and interpret.

The confusion surrounding the violent performance is extended as a result of the complex self-referentiality that is operating throughout the scene. There are three groups of spectators involved at this point. Frank Ardolino identifies them as the “theatre audience” (the audience of The Spanish Tragedy), the framing audience or “chorus” of the ghost of Don Andrea and Revenge, and the “on-stage audience” of the Spanish court and its visiting dignitaries. Ardolino also describes the multiple audiences as “a series of frames within frames in what is known mathematically as a process of infinite regression, the box within a box effect.” This sense of mise en abîme in The Spanish Tragedy is frequently commented upon. Sarah P. Sutherland stresses the close relation between the framing characters, or “supernatural spectators,” and the theatre audience: “Kyd’s audience shares Revenge’s knowledge that vengeance will come, but shares Andrea’s uncertainty as to exactly how and when it will come.”


11Ardolino 18.

12Sarah P. Sutherland, Masques in Jacobean Tragedy (New York: AMS, 1983) 11.
However, it is the relationship between the theatre audience and the on-stage audience that concerns us at this point. The theatre audience (or its individual members) is encouraged to compare itself to the on-stage audience and, in terms of this collective stage other, to define its own position *vis à vis* the dramatic spectacle.

The immediate issue that arises is one of interpretive competence. As the "real" murders of Lorenzo and Balthazar are taken for theatrical effects, the on-stage audience demonstrates that it is incapable of distinguishing between reality and mimesis. After witnessing the death of his nephew Lorenzo, of Balthazar (the son of the viceroy of Portugal, who is present in the courtly audience), and of Bel-imperia (beloved of dead Horatio and betrothed to Balthazar), the King comments, "Well said, old Marshal, this was bravely done!" (IV.iv.68). In this moment of ironic confusion, the theatre audience perceives its own privileged perspective as it observes the on-stage audience making an interpretive error, taking for false that which is true, for played that which is real.\textsuperscript{13} This spectacle inverts the relationship between reality and mimesis that usually obtains in theatrical performance. As Peter Mercer expresses it, "A play is a pretense of reality; this play was the pretense of a play. Its deaths did not pretend to be real, as do those of other plays; rather they pretended to be fictional, unreal."\textsuperscript{14} The theatre audience is more skilled than the on-stage audience in its interpretation

\textsuperscript{13}Some critics analyse this self-referential moment differently, arguing that the perspectives of both audiences are identical in their misinterpretation. See, for example, James Shapiro, ""Tragedies Naturally Performed': Kyd's Representation of Violence: *The Spanish Tragedy* (ca. 1587)," "Staging the Renaissance: Interpretations of Elizabethan and Jacobean Drama," ed. D. S. Kastan and Peter Stallybrass (New York: Routledge, 1991) 99-113. The discussion which follows attempts to show how the theatre audience is prepared for the theatrical deception.

of the scene and can recognize this inversion because it is provided with more information. It has heard a series of intimations from Hieronimo, becoming gradually more obvious, that the entertainment that he has provided for the court and its visitors will end in violence that will fulfill his mission of revenge. During the assigning of parts, the writer/director/actor says, “I’ll play the murderer, I warrant you,/ For I already have conceived that” (IV.i.133-34). At the end of that scene, with the exit of his soon-to-be victims, he exclaims in soliloquy, “Now shall I see the fall of Babylon,/Wrought by the heavens in this confusion” (195-96). He closes the third scene of act four with a similar exhortation: “On then, Hieronimo, pursue revenge,/ For nothing wants but the acting of revenge” (29-30). While the precise method of realizing his vengeance is never elaborated with any specificity, Hieronimo states that it will be wrought in the “confusion” of the “acting of revenge.” As a result of this series of prior intimations, the play within the play functions to distinguish the playhouse audience from the audience within the play as competent interpreters. But the self-referentiality in this episode is such that at the same time it invites the theatre audience to confront the paradoxical conditions of its own knowledge and understanding as spectators of performance.

The play within the play involves the theatre audience in the perspective of the on-stage audience even as it permits the theatre audience to assert a privileged perspective against the manifestly limited perspective of its stage double. The on-stage audience demonstrates that it cannot distinguish between the real deaths of Lorenzo, Balthazar and Bel-imperia and imitations of those deaths without some source of confirmation external to the violent act itself. The Spanish court does not recognize that the slaughter is “real” until Hieronimo proclaims it. Ironically, despite the seemingly privileged perspective of the theatre audience, it is in fact operating under the same constraints. For when the
theatre audience compares the conditions of its knowledge to those of the stage audience, it realizes that it too only distinguishes between that which is represented as real and that which is represented as imitative based on information conveyed through means other than the immediate spectacle, in this case Hieronimo's words. The idea of accurate perception of visual spectacle is radically destabilized at the same time that the revelatory power of words is asserted. A number of visual signs frame the performance as theatre, but where violence is concerned these framing elements do not mark an actual distinction.

Implicit in this representation of misinterpretation is the premise that the violence which the on-stage audience observes does not differ markedly for them from the theatrical action that surrounds it; the violence does not seem more "real" to them than the rest of the performance. According to the theatrical logic operating within the scene, the failure of the on-stage audience to distinguish between real and played violence must reflect not only their lack of skill as interpreters but also, to some extent, the mode of enactment of the violence. In other words, the violence does not differ from other examples of staged violence. Based on the on-stage audience's response, one could mount an argument that Elizabethan audiences expected illusionism to the point of believability, especially for the representation of violence. Assumptions of an aesthetic of sensational realism, especially where violence is involved, underlie many discussions of Elizabethan stage practice, including Lee Simonson's early but influential study, *The Stage is Set* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1932). From the perspective of the theatre audience, however, one could construct an alternate argument—that a continuity of stylization characterized the Elizabethan theatrical aesthetic. Theatrical violence, whether represented as real or as represented, always looked stylized to the theatre audience, was never illusionistic or naturalistic. This is the position espoused by Huston Diehl, "The Iconology of Violence in Renaissance Drama," *Renaissance Drama* 11 (1980): 27-45, and by Alan C. Dessen, *Elizabethan Stage Conventions and Modern Interpreters* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1984).
The frame of performance is deceptive for all audiences, because it asserts a division that Hieronimo subsequently denies. Just as the theatrical illusion (and the illusion of theatre) collapses at the violent end of Hieronimo’s play, so does the difference between two categories of experience, the “real” and the mimetic or “played.”

The space of difference between the two audiences of “Soliman and Perseda” also collapses with this recognition of their common predicament as interpreters. This loss of difference opens up important questions about the process of interpretation in a situation where signs are operating within an unstable system of frames. The scene demonstrates a breakdown in the conceptual and practical frame that separates the aesthetic experience of art from the experience of “reality.” Real violence invades a type of delimited aesthetic experience which is normally confined to mimetic activity and effaces the distinctions between the aesthetic/mimetic (or theatrical) and the real. The source of danger is the audience’s complacency that the two domains, real and aesthetic, are always distinct and recognizable, that the limits or boundaries to aesthetic activity are fixed and impermeable, that the conventions which govern aesthetic experience are clear and self-evident. In the scene under discussion, all of these assumptions are undercut, and the collapse of this condition of secure knowledge is represented as being inherently threatening and dangerous.

The violent dénouement which follows this crisis of misinterpretation sustains a deceptive theatricality. Hieronimo, master of the revels and author of the entertainment, steps forward to clarify the meaning of the spectacle.

Haply you think, but bootless are your thoughts,  
That this is fabulously counterfeit,  
And that we do as all tragedians do:  
To die today, for fashioning our scene,  
The death of Ajax, or some Roman peer,  
And in a minute starting up again,
Revive to please tomorrow’s audience. (IV.iv.76-82)

Although Hieronimo’s speeches and actions subsequent to the deaths of Lorenzo and Balthazar are performed in the interest of clarifying the situation and establishing truth, they show the same tendency to doubleness and irresolution. He initially establishes the meaning of the violence in “Solimon and Perseda” by setting up an opposition between “fabulously counterfeit” violence (77) and its antithesis, presumably authentic or genuine violence. The binary, however, is not completed rhetorically any more than it has been (or will be) represented visually. Rather, the alternative to this condition of theatricality (which defines the larger occasion of The Spanish Tragedy) is rhetorically deferred. The antithesis of the “fabulously counterfeit” is represented by a negation, a simple “No,” followed by a redundant gesture of self-identification.

No, princes, know that I am Hieronimo,
The hopeless father of a hapless son,
Whose tongue is tun’d to tell his latest tale,
Not to excuse gross errors in the play. (83-86)

The self-presentation is as theatrically self-referential as the violence that precedes it, inasmuch as Hieronimo announces himself as a kind of anti-epilogue to the play that has concluded. Although he claims that his purpose in addressing the audience is “Not to excuse gross errors in the play,” he is in fact going to point out to the uncomprehending spectators the radical deviation from the regular course of play. He is also going to point out the “gross error” in their interpretation. Hieronimo’s persistence in a theatrical role ironically undercuts, here and in his succeeding speech of self-justification, his desire to expose the “truth” that underlies this world of deceptive “show,” the truth represented in the rhetorical negation of the spectacle.

Hieronimo’s final, explanatory words about the play he has staged and played in do not, however, enact closure on the violent spectacle. Nor does he
finally correct the “gross error” of misrecognition that has led to this crisis in knowledge. Although his “tongue is tun’d” to explain the staged murders, he resorts to another spectacle of violence to explain that which the audience has just witnessed but misinterpreted. As Hieronimo “Shows his dead son” (88 s.d.), he announces: “See here my show, look on this spectacle” (89). Presumably, in contemporary performances of The Spanish Tragedy, Hieronimo “discovers” Horatio or reveals him from behind the curtain which the stage directions at the top of the scene indicate he “knocks up,” and to which he refers in the previous scene when he recruits his players (IV.i.185-86). Through this self-consciously presentational gesture, Horatio’s violated corpse becomes as much “framed” as those of Lorenzo, Balthazar, and Bel-imperia. The similar semiotics of these two episodes of violence emphasizes a more fundamental resemblance. Like the violence of the play within the play, the image of Horatio’s corpse is necessarily mediated by the theatrical occasion. As such, its status as either real or mimetic is questionable. It cannot be determined through spectacle alone; rather, as with the previous bloody incident, its observers require that the status of the violence be confirmed verbally.

The status of Horatio’s corpse as “truth” or “illusion” is important at this moment because its theatrical “discovery” by Hieronimo functions symbolically to mark a transition in the revenger’s policy from deception to honesty. James R. Siemon has remarked that “the master trope of revenge tragedy—appearances are not reality—... is granted personalized embodiment as epistemological principle in Hieronimo and proclaimed as politic code both by him and by the villain he combats.” But at this point Hieronimo is seeking to refute this epistemological principle by presenting incontrovertible evidence of what really is. It is ironic

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then that he should do so in a way that highlights the mediated nature of his reality. Hieronimo seeks to make the basis of his grief and madness incontrovertibly material in the corpse of Horatio. Yet his audience is subjected to a metaphorical reading of this supposedly self-evident and coherent sign. Hieronimo reads Horatio’s corpse as an emblematic blazon of his own “hope, heart, treasure, joy and bliss” which, through the wounds, have all “fled, fail’d, died, yea, all decay’d with this” (94-95). Horatio’s wounds become, in the spectacle and in the supporting rhetoric, mere figures of Hieronimo’s own wounds: “They murder’d me that made these fatal marks” (97). Through the self-consciously presentational exhibition of the body and through the metaphorical elaboration of its features, Hieronimo causes his audience to call into question exactly that which he sets out to establish: the real, unequivocal nature of his son’s and his own victimization. The discovery of Horatio’s corpse, “Through-girt with wounds, and slaughter’d as you see” (112), serves not only as forensic evidence but as symbolic display.

The difference between the two successive spectacles of violence is not a function of enactment but of intent. The first violent spectacle has misrecognition as its stated purpose. In the collapse of the conditions that distinguish mimesis from reality, the violence becomes what it should only seem to be. The second show of violence aims at clarity and immediacy. It aims at being what it seems to be, without any mediation between the theatrical signifier and its referent. But because the first show of violence leaves us with an insurmountable awareness of the mediated nature of theatrical experience, the second spectacle’s claims to self-presence can only signify ironically. Hieronimo theatricalizes Horatio’s death in the process of restaging it, drawing attention to the body as signifying entity and opening up the spectacle and the narration to interpretation and misinterpretation.
Hieronimo sustains the sense of inescapable theatricality through to the end of the play. He asks of the Duke of Castile: “How can you brook our play’s catastrophe?” (121), leaving deliberately ambiguous the play to which he refers. His comment also underscores for the theatre audience the repercussions of the collapse of the mimetic principle and the accompanying loss of aesthetic distance at the point in the tragedy that demands it most. Similarly, when Hieronimo remarks of the play’s female revenger, “Poor Bel-imperia miss’d her part in this” (140), he is referring to the unfortunate literalism with which she has interpreted her stage directions. Hieronimo would have preferred that Bel-imperia’s death remain “fabulously counterfeit.” The fact that she eludes the limitations which Hieronimo would impose upon her “playing” (i.e., his insistence that she remain within the limits of theatrical representation where self-violence is concerned) further suggests the instability of the performance that he has staged. Then in the concluding lines of his long speech, which he seems to intend as his final moment on the stage of the Spanish court, he reiterates this ironic vision of the theatricality of his world.

And princes, now behold Hieronimo,
Author and actor in this tragedy,
Bearing his latest fortune in his fist:
And will as resolute conclude his part
As any of the actors gone before.
And gentle, thus I end my play:
Urge no more words, I have no more to say. (146-52)

He calls an end here to his rhetorical performance. He evidently intends to terminate his role in the drama off-stage with a few violent gestures. However, this scripted escape also fails, and Hieronimo is forced back into performance by his apprehenders. The relationship between the interrogation scene that follows Hieronimo’s failed attempt to hang himself and the long explanatory speech which precedes this escape is unclear. The King and the Viceroy of Portugal
demand that Hieronimo give reasons for the murders he has committed, despite the fact that he has just clearly explained the cause for his revenge and has indicted the slain youths. To these illogical entreaties to speak Hieronimo responds by vowing silence—"But never shalt thou force me to reveal/ The thing which I have vow'd inviolate" (187-88)—in spite of the fact that he has just revealed all. As many critics have noted, the dialogue and actions are puzzlingly incoherent and redundant, and editors of the text have hypothesized the text's corruption at this point.17 Despite the contradictions and repetitions that exist in the scene as it has survived, in its totality it sets up the violent renunciation of speech. The tongue-biting scene is an essential follow-up to the discursive theatricality that Hieronimo has been practicing. His compelling gesture of self-mutilation functions symbolically to express the relinquishing of the will to represent experience through language. In his final moments he limits himself to purely visual and violent means of expression. The violent self-silencing also absolves Hieronimo of the responsibility to determine the significance of his last violent performance. It is left to the survivors, the ghostly observers and, ultimately, the theatre audience to impose meaning on the slaughter.

The "reality" of the final deaths is not controverted in the same way as those which occur in the play within the play. Hieronimo's stabbing of Castile

17Edwards offers the following explanation for the contradictions and redundancies of the final scene. The action which includes the attempted escape of Hieronimo (i.e., the demands that he speak, the vow of silence and the tongue-biting) up until the final stabbing of the Duke of Castile and Hieronimo's suicide, was intended as a replacement for the long explanatory speech (IV.iv.99-152). This part of the text was not in the manuscript which was the copy text for the 1592 edition (printed by Edward Allde, see note 5 above) but was in the earlier, "bad" edition of the play by Jeffes (not extant) and was, because of some deficiency in the manuscript, included by the compositor. In other words, the 1592 edition (the basis of all subsequent editions) combines two alternate versions of the same scene, which explains the redundancies and incoherence. See Edwards' introduction in the Revels edition (xxxiv-xl).
and himself occurs outside the frame of "official performance," although it does occur in the context of another duplicitous performance. (Hieronimo acquires the weapon through another duplicitous bit of acting in which he feigns to sharpen a pen so that he can write his confession.) The murder and suicide could be interpreted as imitating Perseda's final actions in the play within the play—a case of nature imitating art; however, by this point it is clear that even the most (seemingly) spontaneous actions in the play have a self-consciously performative element. Through its insistent self-referentiality, the sustained violent dénouement of *The Spanish Tragedy* explores the limits not only of theatre but of perception and interpretation more generally. The scene highlights the fact that the real difficulty with theatrical violence lies not in its performance but in its reception. The problems that arise may seem to apply uniquely to spectatorship in the theatre, to conditions of interpretation unique to theatrical performance. It is, after all, the context of theatrical representation that makes the theatre audience uncertain as to what in "Solimon and Perseda" is being represented as represented and what is being represented as real. But this crisis in interpretation is not restricted to formally "theatrical" shows, as Hieronimo's failed revelations of "reality" and "truth" suggest. The spectacle that he stages after the end of the "official" performance represents the pervasiveness of performance in the culture.

In *The Spanish Tragedy* we are presented with theatre which turns out to have fatally real consequences and, beyond that, with a world inhabited by those who employ theatrical strategies in order to deceive and confuse. This observation of a persistent theatricality beyond the boundaries of the theatre proper has been made not only with reference to Kyd's play but also with reference to the culture which produced Kyd and his work. Many recent studies of Renaissance English culture highlight the instability of the boundaries which
separated the theatre from the world.\textsuperscript{18} Stephen Greenblatt provides one influential conceptualization of the interpenetration of the theatre and the world in Renaissance England.

Despite the wooden walls and the official regulations, the boundaries between the theater and the world were not fixed, nor did they constitute a logically coherent set; rather they were a sustained collective improvisation. At any given time, the distinction between the theater and the world might be reasonably clear and the boundaries might assume the quality of self-evidence, so that the very cataloguing of distinctions might seem absurd: for example, of course the theater audience could not intervene in the action on stage, of course the violence could only be mimed. But one can think of theaters that swept away every one of the supposedly self-evident distinctions, and more important for our purposes, Renaissance players and audiences could think of such counter-examples [emphasis Greenblatt’s].\textsuperscript{19}

Greenblatt suggests that the conditions of theatre could obtain outside of the physical sites and material signs which made up its institutional existence. At the same time he asserts that the culture in which the theatre was embedded also penetrated the actual and conceptual walls.

\[T]\text{he practical usefulness of the theater depends largely on the illusion of its distance from ordinary social practice. The triumphant cunning of the theater is to make its spectators forget that they are participating in a practical activity, to invent a sphere that seems far removed from the manipulations of the everyday.}\textsuperscript{20}

The “triumphant cunning” of theatre may indeed be something positive, depending on the nature of the “negotiations and exchanges” in which it engages with other “institutions, authorities, discourses and practices.”\textsuperscript{21} However,

\textsuperscript{18} See Smith \textit{Darker World} 28 and above, 18.


\textsuperscript{20}Greenblatt 18.

\textsuperscript{21}Greenblatt 19.
insofar as it “make[s] its spectators forget” the forces working behind and within it, this cunning must be acknowledged to be at least potentially menacing.

The literal violence that is staged in this particular play within a play signals an awareness within the culture that the blurred divisions between non-mimetic and mimetic experience, real and played behavior, efficacious and entertaining performance, could be brought to a crisis. In this scene, the permeability of theatre’s boundaries, the ability of performance to incorporate “practical activity” into its “pleasure” without the audience being conscious of it, is represented as a real, immediate danger. The fatal misinterpretation of violence literally represents the dangers inherent in the spectator’s reliance on or faith in coherent divisions of experience in order to recognize and interpret correctly. Indeed, this tragedy reifies (or creates an objective, material image of) the perils of interpretation (and misinterpretation) not only in theatre but within the performative culture that produced the theatre; the play enacts a chaotic interpenetration of supposedly discrete categories of experience, the aesthetic and the real, before a group of incompetent spectators with whom the theatre audience cannot help but identify. The embedded performance represents in violent extremity the radical instability of the key cultural mechanism of performance, and at the same time it enacts for all of its audiences the potential for victimization inherent in spectatorship.

Much of the tragedy that emerged in the last few years of Elizabeth’s reign and in the first years of James’ rule incorporates the convention of the courtly entertainment which erupts into violence. The influence of Hieronimo’s embedded play on the later violent performances within plays is significant, as is the general influence of Kyd’s revenge play on that dramatic genre. Indeed, The Spanish Tragedy provides a basic model for the peculiar self-referentiality of the
violent performance within a play which stages a spectacle of violence in order to comment on the relation of the performance to existing social and aesthetic systems. There is, in Elizabethan revenge tragedy, another violent embedded play that must be considered because of its generic similarities to the embedded performance discussed above but also because of its different emphasis. The violent play in *The Spanish Tragedy* focuses on the instability of the categories of "real" and "aesthetic," and presents this instability as a threat to participants in the performance. The "Murder of Gonzago," or "Mousetrap," in *Hamlet* points to the unstable meaning of violence. It represents the fragility of the signifying systems which distinguish positive or purifying violence from negative or corrupting violence. Through the violence the scene demonstrates the way in which relations of opposition can collapse into likeness when the interpreter’s perspective shifts. Finally, the play scene in *Hamlet* must be considered along with the one in *The Spanish Tragedy* because the two encapsulate the issues which remain important in the performances within plays that are discussed in subsequent chapters.

"The Mousetrap" acts as a "mirror" to the action of *Hamlet* in much the same way that "Soliman and Perseda" does to *The Spanish Tragedy*. Obviously it fulfills its primary function, as conceived by Hamlet, of presenting an image of the violent regicide that precedes and precipitates the action of the play. (In this way it differs from the purpose or mandate of Hieronimo’s drama, which is concerned with representing the present action of the play.) Hamlet clearly announces the mimetic and referential purpose of the drama he will have the players perform in soliloquy: "I’ll have these players / Play something like the murder of my father/ Before mine uncle" (II.ii.583-85), and later to Horatio: "There is a play tonight before the King./ One scene of it comes near the
circumstance/ Which I have told thee of my father's death" (III.ii.70-72). Like "Soliman and Perseda," "Gonzago" presents characters which are closely analogous to the primary characters of the larger play; in the case of "Gonzago," however, the parallels between the two play dimensions are multiplied. This occurs chiefly though Hamlet's crucial interjection upon the appearance of the murderer: "This is one Lucianus, nephew to the king" (III.ii.229). Hamlet's introduction of the character confers on Lucianus two referents within the on-stage audience: Lucianus is both Claudius the actual regicide and Hamlet (Claudius' nephew) the potential regicide. Hamlet's identification with the murderous character suggests to the theatre audience that the embedded performance functions dramaturgically as a flash-forward as well as a flash-back; in addition to representing the past murder of the old king (which has already been represented in the Ghost's narration), the play within the play stages the intended murder of the present king or the projected achievement of Hamlet's revenge.23

An obvious difference between Hamlet's embedded play and that of The Spanish Tragedy is that the scene in Hamlet functions as a depiction of revenge rather than as an achievement of revenge. "Gonzago" is not the courtly performance which brings the revenge tragedy to its bloody close. Hamlet does conclude in a performance that contains deceptive violence, the fencing match of the last act, and this staged spectacle assumes the plot function of Kyd's inserted


play and also raises similar epistemological issues regarding divisions of experience.24 The embedded theatrical performance which occurs in the third act of Hamlet is relieved of these responsibilities; in fact, it is possible to see "Gonzago" as operating in deliberate contrast to the deceptive shows of Hieronimo and Claudius/Laertes.

Hamlet's different use of the play within the play has been interpreted as demonstrating a civility or rational control which far exceeds that of Hieronimo or any other revenger.

In other revenge plays, the protagonist kills his enemies within the mock play--one murder, if not several, gives evidence of the horrors to which the madness of revenge can lead. Hamlet commits no murder in the Gonzago play. . . . The arrangement clearly distinguishes Hamlet from the other revengers. . . . The play-within-the-play motif has been civilized too by Shakespeare's pen.25

Although Hamlet's play is not intended to achieve any physical violence, it is nonetheless designed with a specific "victim" in mind. T. McAlindon has commented on the ways in which "The Mousetrap" departs from the model presented by "Soliman and Perseda," but in doing so he suggests some of the subtler continuities between the two embedded performances.

The two "plays" in Hamlet (that term is carefully applied to the game of foils) function according to the convention established by Kyd in that each is used by a revenger as a covert means to achieve his end; each is poison in jest, play in deadly earnest. There is, however, a distinction of great importance between them. Hamlet's device is not designed to kill; its purpose is to establish whether the King is guilty or not, and if he is, to make him "speak" his malefactions.26

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24The fencing scene is discussed in chapter 5.


Despite Hamlet's reassurance to Claudius' rather belated apprehension of the performance's "offence" (the play is already underway), the play does present "poison in jest"; unlike the later game of foils, the performance of "Gonzago" is figuratively rather than literally poisonous; it is Claudius' peace of mind or conscience rather than his body which is meant to be invaded and consumed by guilt and dread. The murder of the Player King is also unlike the deaths in "Soliman and Perseda" in that it is confined to the ontological frame of the embedded performance--it remains a representation in (and of) the court of Elsinore. The purely illusionary nature of the violence committed against this Player King is guaranteed by the fact that he is in "reality" (the reality of the court of Elsinore) an innocent and inconsequential actor and not an object of revenge. Thus while the play within Hamlet, like that within The Spanish Tragedy, imitates crucial elements of the larger play, mimesis proves to be the embedded play's essential purpose rather than its deceptive ploy. Art imitates reality in this violent performance, rather than reality imitating (or posing as) art. In fact, the status of "Gonzago" as a representation is crucial to the play; it is also crucial that the subject of the allegorical representation, the murder of King Hamlet, be recognized, at least by the performance's key royal spectator. The performance is Hamlet's way of ascertaining a truth, inasmuch as the manner of the play's reception confers reality on the event that has until now only existed for Hamlet through another less reliable representation, the Ghost's narration. The murder of King Hamlet by Claudius becomes real and true for Hamlet (and for the theatre audience) in the course of its representation on stage.

The violence which "Gonzago" enacts, first in dumbshow and then in full dramatic performance, does not invert the process of representation or collapse the distinctions between aesthetic and real experience, as in the play in The Spanish Tragedy. The barrier holds that separates the "fiction" of the embedded
performance from the "reality" of the on-stage audience, which suggests that the signs of the theatrical performance (e.g., the frame invoked by the on-stage audience, the formal occasion, and the stylistic elements of the performance which separate it from the surrounding action) signify this delimitation unproblematically. The violence is not other than it appears and thus it invokes no epistemological crisis for the on-stage audience. Nor does it constitute a crisis in knowledge for the theatre audience. In one sense, then, this embedded play works in opposition to the parallel scene in Kyd's revenge tragedy; "Gonzago" demonstrates confidence in the ability to signify through the languages of theatre the distinctions between representation and reality. This message operates in ironic contradiction to the deep doubt expressed elsewhere in the play concerning the ability to distinguish between what is "real" and what merely deceptive show.

The above discussion suggests that while the aim of the embedded performance in The Spanish Tragedy is misrecognition, the aim of the theatrical performance in Hamlet is proper recognition. This specific violent performance is not intended to demonstrate the difficulty of distinguishing between a representation and the reality which it imitates. The problem in the embedded play in Hamlet is, rather, which "reality" is being represented and, consequently, how to interpret the representation. Hamlet the would-be revenger sets out to establish truth (the truth about his father's death) through the reception of the performance, but the play he stages ends up suggesting multiple truths, the implications of which exceed his stated intention to "catch the conscience of the king" (II.ii.594). When Hamlet interjects in the course of the embedded play the vital information that Lucianus is nephew to the Player King, he interjects himself as a referent for the representation. He interrupts the line of allegorical
interpretation that he has to this point encouraged and offers an alternative meaning for a key figure in the text. Presumably Hamlet does this in order to suggest momentarily his violent intentions with regard to Claudius. But if the interpreter of the play keeps in mind this alternate referent for the figure of Lucianus, then the entire performance may be interpreted differently.

Hamlet’s expressed identification with Lucianus extends the allegory in directions that the character may not be supposed to intend, yet it must nonetheless be recognized that this substitution suggests the possibility of another “reality” in the court of Elsinore.

Because of Hamlet’s crucial interjection, the murderer in the embedded play signifies both Hamlet and Claudius and the victim signifies both King Hamlet and King Claudius. The doubling of referents for the embedded play’s characters results in paradox. The danger in Hamlet’s double allegory is that it effaces oppositions that he has carefully established elsewhere in the play. Molly Smith has observed that “Hamlet may also be read allegorically as a script on the dual aspects of the monarch. Through Hamlet the play repeatedly stresses the radical difference between the virtuous Hamlet senior and the corrupt Claudius.

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27“The Mousetrap” is essentially a political or historical allegory (rather than an allegory of ideas—on the distinction see M. H. Abrams’ Glossary of Literary Terms, 5th ed. [New York: Holt, Rhinehart and Winston, 1988] 4-5) insofar as the narrative has another level of meaning beyond its literal one. There are specific referents in Elsinore for all the characters presented in the play. This one-to-one correspondence of fictive character and real person is typical of political and historical allegories, such as Dryden’s “Absalon and Achitophel.” We also see this mode of allegory (alongside allegories of ideas) in Tudor and Stuart courtly entertainments.

28The play might also, for example, be interpreted as revealing Hamlet’s intentions with regard to the Queen, whom, in “Gonzago” as in Hamlet, the King’s murderer seduces.
And the play emphasizes the irrevocable gulf between these bodies.29 By making the murdered Player King signify at once King Hamlet and King Claudius, Hamlet collapses the difference or “gulf” between these two characters that he elsewhere expresses as that between “Hyperion” and a “satyr” (I.ii.140), or “this fair mountain” and “this moor” (III.iv.67-68).

The doubling of allegory in the embedded play also suggests that the dramatic violence is possessed of multiple meanings. As stated above, the poison which the Player Lucianus pours in the Player King’s ear is both a mimetic representation of King Hamlet’s death and a symbolic representation of the way in which the Hamlet is trying to poison Claudius’ conscience with fear and guilt. This staged poisoning also conveys Hamlet’s threat of real violent reprisal (if not in the dumbshow then at least in its second enactment following Hamlet’s public identification of himself with Lucianus). In other words, the simulated poisoning signifies Hamlet’s desire to inflict on Claudius both physical and psychological suffering. The interpretive problem raised by the multi-signifying violence concerns the continuities that are suggested between the violence of Claudius and the violence of Hamlet. While Hamlet cannot admit that his intended violence is similar to the past violence of Claudius, both actions signify at this moment in the dramatic text. The doubling of referents suggests a troubling similarity between actions which are supposed to remain distinct; ironically, it is this similarity between his own violence and that of Claudius which Hamlet must suppress in order to sustain the moral sanction that he is trying to obtain through the performance. In this light, the enacted murder of the Player King can be understood to reify a pervasive irresolution, an ongoing

29Smith, The Darker World Within 44.
paradoxical doubleness that is at once acknowledged and suppressed throughout
*Hamlet*.

Although Hamlet's play succeeds in its mission to "catch the conscience
of the King" (II.ii.594), the performance also represents a failure for Hamlet in
that it does not stabilize the meaning of its accusational and threatening violence.
Because Hamlet orchestrates the simultaneous performance of his own desires
and those of Claudius, he posits an essential similarity where he should be
demonstrating antithesis. He has conflated his "good" violence with Claudius' "bad"
violence by making them signify through the same theatrical sign. In
doing so, he has contaminated his own image with the image of Claudius' guilt,
just as he has involved Claudius in the image of his father's victimization. The
violence itself has become radically undifferentiated in meaning at the same time
that it is over-determined by multiple referents.

The problem with the violence that Hamlet stages is that it obscures
where it should reveal and it reveals where it should conceal. The total text of
the performance (which includes Hamlet's ongoing verbal intrusions into the
dramatic spectacle) obscures the difference between the various perpetrators of
violence in Denmark, and it exposes the similarity between the different types of

30 Although one could argue that Claudius simply responds in alarm to what he
perceives to be a threat by Hamlet against him and that he does not perceive the
resemblance between the staged murder and his own (identical) murder of King
Hamlet, this interpretation is not convincing. There is no compelling reason to
suppose that Claudius is unable to apprehend parallels which are so obvious to
the theatre audience. In the next scene, during his soliloquy, Claudius
contemplates his offence, which, he says, is "rank, it smells to heaven" (III.iii.36);
he realizes that Hamlet has "smelled out," as it were, his crime and has
represented it to him. Claudius' lack of response to the first representation of
the murder in the dumbshow need not suggest non-recognition. It is not
necessary to impose that sort of psychological realism on the scene. It is equally
probable that Shakespeare delayed Claudius' response because he wanted the
effect of the multiple visual representation of the crime.
violence that are committed. René Girard asserts that it is the job of a society’s regulatory cultural mechanisms, its various rituals, ceremonies and myths, to suppress the essential resemblance between “good” and “bad” violence, between the sacrificial violence which a society uses in order to eliminate corruption and restore social harmony and the retributive violence which can so quickly destroy a community.31 To be fair to Hamlet, the performance which he stages for the court is not a ritual and it does not try to impose order as its primary objective. The purpose of the theatrical performance is rather to unsettle and disrupt the deceptive and dishonest stability of the society in order to restore a truth which the revenger perceives to have been suppressed. “The Murder of Gonzago” exposes the violent truth that lies concealed behind the marriage of Claudius and Gertrude. But Hamlet also stages a sacrificial elimination, the murder of Claudius by himself, by which Denmark is meant to be rid of corruption. Because the crime and the punishment are made identical in Hamlet’s simultaneous representation of them, neither signifies in the text without suggesting its resemblance to its opposite. The representational strategy, which relies on superimposition, makes it impossible for the violence to achieve its several purposes or to stabilize its meaning.

The “failure” of Hamlet’s performance, if it may be considered in these terms, lies in its inability to achieve clarity of meaning and assert moral distinctions (in the way of myth and propaganda). That failure signifies chiefly in terms of Hamlet himself. Hamlet’s interjection demonstrates his own unresolved feelings about the revenge which he has vowed to enact. It signifies his inability to banish from his conscience a sense of the resemblance of his proposed violence to the violence of Claudius. At the same time that the

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Booth 59

performance fails to create unambiguous moral distinctions (it rather collapses distinctions), it demonstrates the unique power of certain literary or artistic texts to bring paradoxical truths to the "surface," as it were. This embedded play reveals forcefully and with great economy the basic instability that underlies assertions of order.

In addition to the different status of the violence that is represented in these two plays within plays, "The Mousetrap" and "Soliman and Perseda" are also different with regard to the spectator-performer relationship that each encourages. The involvement of the court of Elsinore in the performance it observes is much more restricted than the involvement of the Spanish court in "Soliman and Perseda." Aside from Hamlet, who unofficially assumes the mediating role of presenter and commentator, the members of the court participate in the performance only as spectators; consequently, they do not expose themselves, as the courtiers in Kyd's play do, to the dangers which theatrical performance holds in revenge tragedy. Neither Claudius nor anyone else in the Danish court is at risk of being killed before the uncomprehending eyes of the court, because the court remains outside of the spectacle and within the "safe" role of collective spectatorship. Theatrical illusionism is not a source of actual danger in the performance of "The Mousetrap," because the boundary that separates the world of illusion and the world of reality is not challenged.

The performance in act three scene two of Hamlet demonstrates the separation of audience from performers which was conventional in Elizabethan theatre, particularly in theatrical performances at court. Despite Hamlet's familiarity with "the tragedians of the city" (which is demonstrated during the rehearsal of Aeneas' speech and in Hamlet's instruction prior to the performance of "The Mousetrap"), the players have no connection with the world of the court. There is a profound social division between players and audience. The lack of
interaction between this courtly audience and these players reflects the actual non-interaction of the two groups in the Elizabethan and Jacobean courtly milieus. The ephemeral nature of the players' existence for the court is manifested in their rapid disappearance following Polonius' instruction to "Give o'er the play" (III.ii.252). These performers are of no interest to the audience after the show has ceased, unlike the fallen performers in *The Spanish Tragedy*. The swift dissolution of the dramatic spectacle resembles another interrupted performance in a later play by Shakespeare, namely the betrothal masque performed by spirits in act three of *The Tempest*. Both scenes underscore the fact that the players and their courtly audiences do not share the same ontological space during the performance, despite occupying the same temporal space; in other words, like the spirits summoned by Prospero, the real identities of the performers of *The Mousetrap* are of no significance. Their fictive identities, on the other hand, are of paramount importance. The players signify insofar as they represent characters in the audience.

The other revenge tragedies with which this study is concerned contain embedded performances that imitate the general model of performer-spectator interaction that is set up in Kyd's play. The connection between those who perform and those who observe is intimate and of real consequence. They are all members of the same cultural group. Likewise, the actions of the performers

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32 Despite Stephen Orgel's statement that in the court world the actors, "traditionally considered itinerants, . . . became gentlemen," *The Illusion of Power* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1975) 1, when performing for the Elizabethan and Jacobean courts, the actors were not present as privileged members of the courtly society but as servants whose significance was restricted to the function they fulfilled of "playing." Despite the possible familiarity of members of the audience with the performers (like Hamlet's familiarity with the players from the city) and despite the fact that the distinctive traits or distinguishing characteristics of performers continue to signify during their performances, the real significance of the players at court consisted in the fictive roles which they played.
have “real” and not only symbolic significance for the spectators. Of course everything in these performances tends toward the achievement of revenge, and because the shows are staged in order to achieve actual violence, the aesthetic spectacle never remains purely aesthetic; the boundary between mimesis and reality never holds. However, subsequent revenge performances differ from the one in The Spanish Tragedy in that they are not theatrical performances. Instead, they tend to be types of performance which presuppose a greater amount of interaction between audience and “actors” than typically occurs in theatre. (The conditions which inform “Soliman and Perseda” are not typical of Elizabethan theatre.) Subsequent violent performances within plays are collective rituals or ceremonies which presuppose that spectators and performers are of the same “world” and share the same “space.” They are performances which emphasize the connection between all of their participants. Thus while these later revenge performances resemble the play within Kyd’s play, they raise different issues through their violence.

The other embedded, violent performances in the tragedies of the period demonstrate continuities with “The Mousetrap” as well. They reflect an interest in the means according to which meaning is attributed to violence, and they often render that meaning indeterminate or problematic. The conceptual separation between “positive” and “negative” violence, “pure” and “impure” violence, is threatened again and again in the courtly shows which revenge tragedies stage. Also as in Hamlet, the revenge plays of Marston, Middleton, and Webster are pervaded with the phenomena of rivalry and doubling, and these phenomena achieve their sharpest focus within the frame of violent performance. And so, while it is not the endeavour of this thesis to trace direct influence among the various plays which it analyses, it can be said that aspects of these two plays
within plays resonate in the violent performances discussed in the chapters which follow.
CHAPTER 3

John Marston's Revenge Masques:
Antonio's Revenge and The Malcontent

While there are basic similarities of function and of metaperformative structure between the play embedded in The Spanish Tragedy and performances embedded in subsequent revenge tragedies, the later examples of the convention often differ significantly both formally and in their reception. Embedded performances continue, in later tragedies, to play with deception and truth; that is, revengers after Hieronimo continue to use performance as a mode of deception or concealment, only to reveal the violent truth that lies beneath it. But in Kyd's play, it is the fact that "real" and "imitative" performance are indistinguishable, that the boundaries are permeable that separate mimetic activity from the reality that it imitates, which proves so fatal to the on-stage courtly audience. The specific performative context of theatre is responsible for the fatal misapprehension. The violent performances staged in revenge plays after The Spanish Tragedy are often not theatrical--they do not mirror the generic features and/or narratives of the dramas in which they are embedded. A number of tragedies, including Antonio's Revenge, The Revenger's Tragedy, and Women Beware Women, stage their culminating acts of retributive violence in masques. The issues raised through these revenge masques differ substantially from those that emerge in Kyd's final revenge sequence, in part because the masque is a different sort of performance from the stage play.

Because the masque and the stage play are different types of performance, a masque within a play cannot be theatrically self-referential in
the same way as a play within a play. The masque's continuities with
dramatic representation are not sufficient to provide the same degree of *mise
en abîme* as occurs during the inserted plays discussed above. It was noted of
the inserted plays in *The Spanish Tragedy* and *Hamlet* that through their
violence they present in extremity some of the instabilities that are already
inherent in theatrical performance. The violent masques in revenge
tragedies similarly reflect some of the unstable or paradoxical conditions that
inhere in real masques, but these embedded performances are more
concerned with signalling their difference from the plays that contain them
than they are with demonstrating continuities.

By choosing the masque within the play rather than the play within
the play as an occasion for violence, playwrights pass over some of the
problems of knowledge that are raised in *The Spanish Tragedy*. The problem
of distinguishing between reality and illusion remains prominent in
Marston's and Middleton's revenge plays, but this concern does not coincide
with their violent masques. The inserted masques of *Antonio's Revenge* and
*The Revenger's Tragedy* do represent victims who are fooled by a false show
of loyalty and homage and who do not recognize the masque to be a strategic
means of enacting revenge. Notwithstanding, the masque scenes do not
focus on the on-stage audience's misrecognition of violence, nor do they
prompt the theatre audience to interrogate the basis upon which it
distinguishes between reality and imitation, truth and falsehood. The
violence committed during the revenge masques under examination is not
taken for anything other than real violence.\(^1\)

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\(^1\)In the wedding masque in Middleton's *Women Beware Women*, the
ontological status of violence in performance becomes an issue again. This
has partially to do with the interesting problems of knowledge that arise with
the use of poison as a weapon. Also, by the time *Women Beware Women*
The masque undergoes considerable changes and produces numerous variations in the late Elizabethan and Jacobean periods, but it is always a genre of performance which is distinct from the stage play. For one thing, despite the inclusion of narrative elements, the basic structure of the masque is not narrative. The core of the masque performance is choreographed dances, which are introduced by speeches and dialogues and accompanied by songs. Consequently, the spectacle of the masque tends toward patterned movement and display rather than the representation of situation. Also, the stock figures within the performance who speak—frequently mythical beings, personified abstractions and forces of nature—do so in order to provide a rudimentary explanation for their appearance before the court and to present or explicate the allegorical and emblematic spectacles. Furthermore, from the perspective of stagecraft, there is in the Jacobean masque a reliance on scenic effects (produced by a variety of sophisticated technical means) which far exceeds anything produced for the Jacobean public and private theatres.

Of course it is difficult absolutely to draw the line between theatre and masque performances in the Renaissance. In many respects the plays of the public and private theatres and the court masques are interpenetrating genres. Plays obviously contain inserted masques, and they otherwise incorporate elements of masques, in comedy as well as in tragedy, in Elizabethan as well as written, the court masque had evolved as a genre, and some of the developments, such as the elaboration of dialogue and of dramatic situation, can be observed in Middleton's dramatic masque. The result is a masque that incorporates some of the epistemological and interpretive issues of theatrical representation. See discussion in chapter 4.
as in Stuart plays. We might say that the masque exemplifies much more fully than contemporary plays the "courtly aesthetic," whose concern, as Gary Schmidgall expresses it, is "to express the ritualized simplicity of the social structure and to display the richness and complexities of art itself." However, many plays, particularly those written for the children's companies but also some written for adult companies (e.g., Shakespeare's late romances), reflect the courtly aesthetic by highlighting poetic artifice, by incorporating self-consciously ornamental, emblematic, and stylized forms of expression, and by focusing on the dominant themes of courtly culture.

Similarly, the hybrid genre of the masque, particularly the Jonsonian masque, includes theatrical elements. One might say that the basis of drama is present in Elizabethan masques, in the dialogues that precede the dances and in the provision of a rudimentary narrative to explain the arrival of the masquers in court. Welsford writes that the "dramatic part of the masque (and also of earlier disguisings) came partly from an expansion of the prologue, partly from an absorption of qualities belonging to the plays, interludes, tourneys and debates, etc., with which it was so often associated." Later Elizabethan courtly entertainments, such as Philip Sidney's *Lady of May*

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2For a relatively complete list of plays which include masques or masque elements, see Inga-Stina Ewbank's dated but still informative article, "These Pretty Devices: A Study of Masques in Plays," *A Book of Masques in Honour of Allardyce Nicoll* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1967) 405-48.


4Schmidgall identifies themes such as civilization, the Golden Age, dynasty, and the perfect ruler as typical of the courtly aesthetic. See chapter three.

(1578)⁶ and Francis Davison’s *Masque of Proteus and the Adamantine Rock* (1594)⁷, supply fictional settings, multiple characters, well-developed dialogue and a narrative which includes conflict and resolution. With the innovation of Jonson’s antimasques, courtly entertainments include episodes which are scarcely different from dramatic performances. The comic antimasques of *The Irish Masque* (Christmas 1613-14), *Christmas His Masque* (Christmas 1616-17), and *News from the New World* (1620), to name only a few examples, include comic prose dialogue which differs little in style and tone from dialogue in contemporary plays by Jonson. In summary, while stage plays and masques constitute two distinct genres of performance, in specific examples of each we can observe the appropriation of aspects of the other type of performance.

Another means of differentiating between the masque and the stage play is according to how the former self-consciously announces itself as an occasional entertainment. Tudor and Stuart masques were devised, written, and performed to mark special occasions, such as marriages, investitures, important visits or embassies from abroad, as well as the holiday seasons of Christmas and Shrovetide. The masque “solemnized” or conferred importance on the event for which it was commissioned at the same time that it provided entertainment. Of course plays were also performed to mark

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⁶This title is a modern invention. When the entertainment was first published, in the 1598 folio which contains *Astrophel and Stella*, it was untitled. The entertainment is also identified by its opening line, which reads, “Her most excellent Majestie walking in Wanstead Garden . . . .”

⁷The text of the masque, which includes both description of the spectacle and speeches, occurs in the account of the festivities performed by Gray’s Inn during the Christmas season 1594-95, called *Gesta Grarorum: or the History of the High and Mighty Prince of Purpoole*. Reproduced in J. Nichols, ed., *The Progresses and Public Processions of Queen Elizabeth*, vol. 3 (London, 1823): 262-352.
or celebrate special occasions. Some plays even appear to have been commissioned for specific occasions. George Peele's *The Arraignment of Paris* (1581) was obviously written for a performance before the Queen, and it directly involves the sovereign in the final action of the drama. This play is informed throughout by the Elizabethan courtly aesthetic which also finds expression in the outdoor royal entertainments devised by Sidney and others. Some of Shakespeare's comedies too, such as *Love's Labour's Lost* (1595), *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1595), and *Twelfth Night* (1600), also show signs that they may have been written with specific performance occasions in mind. All of the above certainly were performed at court during special celebrations. But the fiction or the "illusion" that was created in the course of a masque performance was generally more transparent than that which obtained in stage plays, in the sense that the masque audience was never encouraged to lose sight of or to disregard the "present occasion" of the performance. Speaking characters in masques almost always make reference to their role in the performance, address privileged guests in the audience, and pay homage to the Royal or other dominant presence. Because the fictive or imaginary dimension of the masque is so consistently subordinated to its occasional function, the masque belongs to a different category of performance than Elizabethan theatre.

One could say that the difference between the Elizabethan/Jacobean

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8The idea of "theatrical illusion" in Shakespearean drama is problematic, to say the least, and it is necessary to qualify what one means by illusion. The point of the study is not to elaborate an Elizabethan theatrical aesthetic; theatrical illusion is being considered only in relation to the typical mode of the masque. "Illusion" must be understood to refer primarily to the way in which the play engages the spectators, encourages them to minimize their awareness of the interaction between performer and audience (the performative situation) and focus on the interaction between characters (the fictional situation).
stage play and the masque is equivalent to the more general difference between theatre and ritual. Indeed, many critics and historians of court culture have referred to the masque specifically as ritual. The distinction between theatre and ritual is discussed above (chapter one) in terms of the more general difference between performance which is primarily entertaining and performance which is primarily efficacious. There are certainly other means of distinguishing between ritual and theatre. William Morgan and Per Brask identify several features which set theatre apart. They include: the ability of theatre to interrogate as well as to reinforce the systems of belief which it symbolically presents; the fictional status of its properties and paraphernalia (unlike the symbolic properties of ritual, which, being “infused with the power of the referent,” have “factual” status); the reliance on representation rather than on presentation; the insistence on a separation between audience and actors and, related to this last point, the dissociation of audience from the staged action.

It is frequently argued that ritual requires an identification of spectators with performers while theatre maintains a conceptual distance between them. This point is central to Victor Turner’s theory of the relationship

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10Schechner acknowledges that no performance is either wholly efficacious or wholly entertaining. See discussion in chapter one 19-20 and in Schechner, Essays 75-76.

between ritual and theatre, and he espouses it very concisely: "Ritual, unlike theater, does not distinguish between audience and performers."12 Certain collective rituals, such as the mass, might seem to create divisions between spectators and performers; but such rituals can be understood as involving "leaders" (i.e., priests) who possess knowledge beyond that of the rest of the participants (i.e., congregation) and who guide the performance, which remains, nonetheless, a joint, communal experience. "[A]ll share formally and substantially the same set of beliefs and accept the same system of practices, the same set of rituals or liturgical actions."13 The difference between the performer-spectator relationship in ritual and in theatre has been posited as the essential difference between the two types of performance. Richard Schechner invokes a theory of the origins of theatre which posits that theatre developed historically when a given ritual ceased to provide for its participants a sense of intimate communion and became a performance from which they remained detached or to which they responded in solely aesthetic terms. "Theater comes into existence when a separation occurs between audience and performers" (emphasis added).14 Whether or not the audience-performer relationship is the key means of distinguishing between theatre and ritual, it provides critics with an important means of assessing the cultural significance of any given performance.15


13Turner 112.

14Schechner, "From Ritual to Theatre and Back" 79.

15In a very influential article, Louis A. Montrose challenges the idea that the Elizabethan theatre did maintain distinctions between theatre and ritual. While his position counters the argument being made in this thesis, i.e., that the theatre was interested in representing the difference between different
Stephen Orgel states quite explicitly in this often-quoted passage that the performer-spectator relationship that is typical of the masque is closer to ritual than to theatre.

[The masque] attempted from the beginning to breach the barrier between spectators and actors, so that in effect the viewer became a part of the spectacle. The end toward which the masque moved was to destroy any sense of theater and to include the whole court in the mimesis—in a sense, what the spectator watched he ultimately became.\textsuperscript{16}

Orgel describes the masque as merging the audience with the performance. This merging occurs through a variety of means, including repeated gestures to draw the audience into the world temporarily created by the masque. It seeks to fuse the “imaginary” world of grotesques, spirits and deities with the world of the court. As Jerzy Limon comments, “spectators are led to believe that their world is the ‘real’ world and appears in opposition to the superfluous world of the stage. But in fact they are incorporated into this fictitious reality, as is always the case in a ritual.”\textsuperscript{17} The chief means of realizing this connection is through the revels dances with which masques customarily end, where the masquers take out members of the audience to dance. This physical union of the various “realms” of the performance interrupts the dynamics of theatre, Orgel claims, and, arguably, creates a

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\textsuperscript{17}Limon 63.
performative situation which can best be described as ritual.

We have been attempting to distinguish ritual from theatrical practices in order to suggest that masquing belongs more to the former category than to the latter. However, the general category of ritual requires further classification. It is necessary to consider a related term, “ceremony”; in other analyses of masques and of masques in plays, both “ritual” and “ceremony” are used to describe the masque, sometimes interchangeably. The two terms certainly overlap but they are not synonymous; both ritual and ceremony are categories of performed behaviour which are repetitive; both rely on modes of expression which are formalized or stylized in order to separate them from “normal” experience; both are essentially organized or structured events, even when they incorporate spontaneous or disordered behaviour. Both ritual and ceremony also presuppose a greater involvement between spectators and performers than obtains in theatrical performance. But certain cultural theorists insist on a distinction between the two terms and the activities that they denote. The distinction can be detected in Victor Turner’s definition of ritual as “prescribed formal behaviour for occasions not given over to technological routine, having reference to beliefs in invisible beings or powers regarded as the first and final causes of all effects.”

The aspect of ritual which distinguishes it from other forms of collective ceremony is its sacred character, the way it involves or presupposes mystical powers in its ordering gestures. This distinction is supported by Morgan and Brask.

[I]n and out of anthropology, the term ritual refers to culturally

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19Turner 79.
patterned, repetitive activities having as their prime explicit aim the articulation of some or all of the members of that culture with those forces which are believed to structure and govern the universe. In terms of usual “Western world” thinking, then, ritual most often and most importantly is of a sacred character and is centrally and instrumentally involved in a culture’s “religious” sphere of action and thought.  

Turner has developed a theory of the “difference” of ritual from other types of formalized or ceremonial behaviour beyond the common observation that it presupposes the presence of the sacred. He posits that what distinguishes ritual is the way it incorporates periods of “liminality.” Liminality may be defined as a “threshold” condition, an interstitial or marginal state in which normative social structures or cultural codes are suspended, playfully altered or inverted. Liminality describes the condition of the initiand in various rites of passage.

In liminality, profane social relations may be discontinued, former rites and obligations are suspended, the social order may seem to have been turned upside down, but by the way of compensation cosmological systems . . . may become of central importance to the novices, who are confronted by the elders . . . with symbolic patterns and structures which amount to teachings about the structure of the cosmos and their culture as a part and product of it . . .

Turner believes that because it incorporates periods of liminality, ritual provides its participants with the possibility for transformations which are not available in ceremony: “Ceremony indicates, ritual transforms, . . .” Turner writes (his emphasis).  

Turner contrasts ceremony to ritual by saying that ceremony presents to its participants models of the systems or structures that give order to the social group, while ritual is “a transformative self-

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20Morgan and Brask 177.

21Turner 27.

22Turner 80.
immolation of order as presently constituted, even sometimes a voluntary *sparagmos* or self-dismemberment of order, in the subjective depths of liminality.”23 Ceremony constitutes “an impressive institutionalized performance of indicative, normatively structured social reality, and is also both a model of and a model for social states and statuses” (Turner’s emphasis).24. Clearly for Turner ritual is the more complex and more potent of the two cultural phenomena.

The distinction between ritual and ceremony, which is so crucial for Turner, is less important for other writers on the subject. Moore and Myerhoff minimize the difference between ritual and ceremony, suggesting that the sacred/secular or sacred/mundane distinction is a culture-bound dichotomy rather than a universal one. For these theorists, the idea of the “sacred” needs to be detached from religion.

An essential quality of the sacred is its unquestionability. Unquestionable tenets exist in secular political ideologies which are as sacred in that sense as the tenets of any religion. Secular ceremonies can present unquestionable doctrines and can dramatize social/moral imperatives without invoking the spirits at all. If the realm of the religious and the realm of the sacred are not treated as co-terminous, then it is possible to analyze the ways in which ceremony and ritual are used in the secular affairs of modern life to lend authority and legitimacy to the positions of particular persons, organizations, occasions, moral values, views of the world, and the like.25

These writers do not deal with the unique transformative dimension of ritual which Turner posits; rather, they emphasize the fact that both ritual and ceremony (or secular ritual) enact or re-enact the systems which determine or “order” experience. This study follows the example of these critics by

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23Turner 83

24Turner 83.

25Moore and Myerhoff 3-4.
bracketing or suspending the various distinctions between ritual and ceremony which have been posited and by using the two terms more or less interchangeably with reference to the court masque. In discussing the masque as ritual or ceremonial, the emphasis is on the performance as a mechanism for imposing on the participating community a specific paradigm of cultural order. Finally, it is this attempt to structure communally a symbolic experience of the social and cosmic order which distinguishes the masque from the more contestatory and interrogative mode of theatre.

Just as numerous cultural historians discuss the masque as a ritual practice, critics who examine masques in plays frequently comment on the ritualized or ceremonial nature of the masquing episodes. These critics most often make reference to an aesthetic of order which they see as pervading the performance. The elaborately choreographed dances of the masque are frequently invoked as the quintessential expression of courtly ceremonial, and they are presumed to reflect more pervasive structures or systems of order in the culture. Alan Brissenden writes, "From classical times onward the dance had been a symbol of harmony and concord, and in the elaborate entertainments of the Renaissance courts especially this symbolism was supported by the spectacle of costume and setting." Critics also comment on the significance of the "ceremonial mode" of the masque in relation to the rest of the play. We will survey some of the important criticism of masques in plays, and particularly of violent masques in revenge tragedy, in order to lay the groundwork for the present analysis. In general, the existing criticism demonstrates a need to incorporate into the study of these plays a more complete understanding of the ritual basis not only of the Elizabethan and

Jacobean masque but of the culture which produced it.

Recent criticism of the masques in Jacobean tragedy usually focuses on the relationship of the masque as a dramatic device to the play in which it occurs. This sort of analysis, in turn, either directly or indirectly responds to an earlier and opposed critical tradition that perceives the inserted entertainment as somehow gratuitous or superfluous, not part of the essential action of the drama. This perception of the purely sensational purpose of the inserted masque has been countered by critics intent on demonstrating how well the masque scenes are integrated into the larger dramatic structures and how they reinforce themes that are developed in the encompassing dramas. The relationship of the masque to the play's dramatic "whole" has for a long time been the central critical concern. Sarah Sutherland goes so far as to assert that this preoccupation is the most relevant to the study of inserted masques:

Kyd's play, James's masques, and London's theaters: these are the factors most often cited as contributing to the appearance of masques within plays. . . . There remains the final cause, that for the sake of which: the individual play. In the final analysis, nothing accounts for a masque in a play quite so well as the play in which it appears.

Sutherland redirects attention from the larger cultural context to the narrow context of the play as the most significant consideration for exploring the masques. Generally, the criticism to which Sutherland's study is indebted also demonstrates a critical bias for demonstrating the organic unity and total coherence of the plays as written and performed texts.

The influential work of Inga-Stina Ewbank participates in this

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integrative critical project in that her work is concerned with establishing the
dramatic function and the effectiveness of the inserted masque. She stresses
first of all that in Jacobean drama the inserted masque was a "functional
dramatic device--a way of starting, furthering and resolving plots and of
adding meaning to plots."29 The action and interaction that occur during the
masque, including its violence, are central to the total structure of the play.
Ewbank also notes the expressive capacity of this device, and the way it is
exploited by some of the Jacobean playwrights. Of Middleton's Women
Beware Women, she remarks: "The purpose of this masque is not just a coup
de théâtre, but a crystallization of the moral issues of the play . . . . The
masque functions, then, as a moralized metaphor of the action of the play as a
whole."30 Other critics have likewise focused on the ways in which
embedded masques articulate in miniature the thematic preoccupations of
the plays. In a book about the use of masques in Shakespeare's plays,
Catherine Shaw remarks on the mock banquet and masque in Timon of
Athens (1607-08): "Seen in its dramatic framework, the masque provides a
visual miniature of and a symbolic paradigm for the moral thrust of the
whole play."31 In a more general statement about Shakespeare's use of the
inserted masque, Shaw observes that "at the same time as the realistic mind is
accepting the masque as a part of the immediate social environment of the
action, the sensitivities of the "inward eye" touched by a symbolic vision.

29Inga-Stina Ewbank, "'These Pretty Devices': A Study of Masques in Plays,"
A Book of Masques in Honour of Allardyce Nicoll, ed. T. J. B. Spencer and

30Ewbank 446.

31Catherine Shaw, "The Visual and the Symbolic in Shakespeare's Masques,”
Shakespeare and the Arts, ed. Henry S. Limouze (Washington, DC: UP of
America, 1982) 2.
allegorical or otherwise, pick up those impulses which inform the whole play, masque and all."\textsuperscript{32} For all of the critics cited above, the masques acquire meaning chiefly in relation to the larger playtext. The focus of these analyses is intratextual rather than intertextual; that is, they do not address the extent to which the meaning of the fatal masque in a play is determined in relation to other cultural texts. This discussion of masques in plays is different from those cited above in that it takes as a primary concern the way that the embedded performances interact with other performances in the cultural context. The thematic continuities between the masques and the plays in which they occur, while significant, are not the focus of the current analysis. Rather, this chapter and the following one will consider how the representations of masquing in the drama cast light specifically on the function of the masque in courtly culture and more generally on the function of ritual in society.

It is also a critical commonplace to claim that the inserted masques in Jacobean tragedy encapsulate an ironic disparity between surface appearance or behaviour and underlying reality. This irony is also regarded as being pervasive throughout the drama. Marie Cornelia has written extensively about the inserted masque as "a means of obtaining an ironic double vision," or a vision of paradox.\textsuperscript{33} According to Cornelia, the "revelation" that accompanies the ritual action of the unmasking is, in the case of the violent masques of the tragedies, loaded with irony in that what is revealed is the opposite of the display of reverence and honour expected in the ritual. John

\textsuperscript{32}Shaw 32.

\textsuperscript{33}Marie Cornelia, \textit{The Function of the Masque in Jacobean Tragedy and Tragicomedy} (Salzburg: Institut für Englische Sprache und Literatur, 1978) 96-97.
Booth 79

Potter similarly remarks on the ironic effect of the inserted masque, and for this critic also it is primarily the order and the ceremonious decorum of the entertainment that signifies ironically. About Middleton's *Women Beware Women* he observes, "The surface of peace and civility becomes through [Middleton's] art a tragic ironic mask which expresses the characters' doubleness of mind, their self-deception laid upon self-deception, their inability to face fully the extent of their own evil." Potter psychologizes the characters' involvement in ceremonious or ritualized practices, but the ironic disparity still involves the violence that the characters perform and the ceremonious means of its enactment.

In analysing what the masques achieve within the drama in terms either of narrative or of thematic development, critics also necessarily analyse the effect of the masques' violence and the specific link between the violence and the masquing sequences. The combination of ceremony and physical violence is almost inevitably said to embody the conceptual opposition of order and disorder. The combination of these opposed principles in the revenge masque is interpreted in different ways. For Marie Cornelia, the ceremonious mode of the masque affects even the violence and, consequently, draws the violence into the larger structures of order that operate in the drama. She writes, "The masque world is seemingly one of ideal order, yet it erupts into violence, its patterns destroyed. But from this chaos which is recognized as a work of justice emerges a new order, a peace born from the very violence of the revenge revels." This is an important


35 Cornelia 96.
thesis in Cornelia's book, and in its frequent restatement she expresses her sense of the moral orthodoxy of these plays: "A champion of order, [the masque] could bring the chaos of murderous revenge, which it then resolved again into a more perfect order."\(^{36}\) For Cornelia, the plot function of the inserted masque of death is inextricable from its moral or political interpretation. Where the culminating masque serves to accomplish the play's main action of revenge and also eliminates (some of) the forces of evil and corruption in the play-world, its status as an instrument of Divine Will cannot be called into question. It is this sort of argument, where the end justifies the means, that resolves for Cornelia the potential disorderliness of the violence.

For other critics, the effect of the combination of ritual and violence is darker, more ominous. Rather than asserting that the overriding structure of the play and the ordered enactment of the masque resolve the violence into a larger pattern of order, various critics have suggested that the whole ritual mode is corrupted through the violent end that it serves. Ewbank's general interpretation of the revenge masque is similar to Cornelia's in that she asserts that the chaotic action of violence is transformed into controlled ritual in the masquing sequence. Of the masque slaughter in Antonio's Revenge, she writes, "while the torture is counterpointed by patterned speech, the killing is accompanied by a patterned dance-movement--the climactic taking-out dance of the masquers."\(^{37}\) The effect of this elaborate patterning, however, is not to contain the potential anarchy of the slaughter: "The whole world of Antonio's Revenge is one that has gone mad, and the effect of the

\(^{36}\)Cornelia 97.

\(^{37}\)Ewbank 448.
masque is to confront the audience with a grotesquely heightened picture of such a world."38 M. R. Golding concurs with Ewbank with regard to the sense of ceremony with which the violence is imbued and also with regard to the sense of perversion that is conveyed by the combination of ceremony and slaughter. Focusing, like Ewbank, on the final masque of Antonio's Revenge, he comments: "The formalization is sustained right through the whole act of the mutilation and murder, endowing it with something of the ritualistic and ceremonious. . . . [T]he effect of the masque murder confronts the audience with a grotesquely heightened picture of a world gone mad."39 In commenting again on "the disturbing conflict that results from integrating violent messy murder with the beauty, grace, and harmony inherent in the masque itself," Golding remarks, "It makes the murder more horrifying by contrast."40 The overall effect of the masque of death for Golding is to integrate the violence with the ceremony, but the combination is always perceived by him as paradoxical and perverse.

These critics express an interpretation of the violent masques as maintaining ceremonial form while inverting the usual meanings and effects of ceremony. The combination is perceived as paradoxical and ultimately expressive of the encompassing cultural environment. Sutherland sees in the six violent inserted masques she analyses a "juxtaposition between order and disorder, decorum and indecorum," which in turn reflects the

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38Ewbank 443.


40Golding 45.
relationship that exists generally between masque and tragedy.\textsuperscript{41} Sutherland goes on to ask, "Why in this first quarter of the seventeenth century, and not before or in quite the same way since, do the best dramatists present their audiences with spectacular scenes that throw violently together the orderly decorum inherent in celebratory court entertainment with the disordered indecorum of madness and murder?" She suggests by way of response that the fatal masque's combination of disorderly action and ordered enactment is a reflection of the Jacobean predilection for paradox.

The impulse that led to the masque in Jacobean tragedy is, I suggest, the same impulse that led the finest minds of the age to dwell almost obsessively on the simultaneously similar and dissimilar nature of things. This impulse is sometimes referred to as the Jacobean sensibility . . . . It is seen in the affection for certain kinds of ambiguity, a predilection that Rosalie Colie has called "paradoxia epidemica."\textsuperscript{42}

Having explained the paradox of the revenge masque as reflective of a "sensibility," Sutherland does not go on to speculate about what this specifically violent expression of the paradoxical sensibility indicates about the culture. The orderly/disorderly violence is, for her, expressive of generic difference (the masque inclines toward order, tragedy toward disorder) or of a difference that is primarily aesthetic. She limits the significance of the violence, making it an exemplum for the way that the drama sustains contradiction without finally resolving the terms of the opposition.

Cyrus Hoy also interprets the action of the revenge masque as an amalgamation of opposing concepts, order and disorder, only for him their simultaneous coexistence is reflective not merely of a sensibility, an

\textsuperscript{41}Sutherland 113.

intellectual or aesthetic predilection, but of opposing impulses that are both fundamental to "man": "Masques in Jacobean tragedy come to function almost too conveniently as emblems for ritual gone awry. . . , the tragedy of man's efforts to live by rational and graceful measure, blasted by the fury of the senses." For Hoy, the violent masque is expressive of paradoxical doubleness, only the basis of the paradox rests in the universal spirit that is capable of both ordered artifice and chaotic violence: "[Revenge masques] contribute a set of highly adaptable devices for projecting man's paradoxical capacity to idealize, to pervert, and to exploit the conditions of his humanity."  

Henry Jacobs also expresses an interpretation of the violent masques as a combination of the order of ceremony and the disorder of violence, but he goes much further in interpreting the social significances of this paradoxical combination. Jacobs sees the "masques of death" not as representations of the paradoxical "conditions of . . . humanity"; for him they refer to specific practices which are already invested with significance in that culture.

In the Renaissance, as in all other periods and cultures, social forms and rituals embody secondary discourses of social, religious, and political order. Formulaic events in art and in life thus re-present ideological discourses that are promulgated by and for the existing centers of power. In Renaissance English revenge tragedy, however, these social forms and rituals--symbolic reflections of ideology--are systematically perverted and inverted at the moment of crisis: the consummation of vengeance.  

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44Hoy 122.

The masque which descends into violence and results in the death of the royal audience signifies as a subversion of the orthodox ideology of the Royal court, with all its assumptions of sacred and inviolable hierarchy, position, and degree. The violence of the revenge masque is, according to Jacobs' argument, a radical disruption of order, and yet its meaning is finally yoked into the supposedly orthodox thought-structures of the drama itself, which (being orthodox) condemn the revenge action of the play. As Jacobs expresses it,

> the systematic and repeated perversion of social rituals at the moment of revenge and the resultant obliteration of traditional discourses of order and power serve a specific purpose in revenge tragedy. That purpose, most simply put, is to underscore the subversive and radical nature of revenge itself.46

So the violence must be maintained as a disorderly force opposed to the ordered forms of the ceremony. Jacobs' analysis shares with many cited above this assumption that the violence of the revenge masque represents a perversion and an inversion of the ceremonial mode. For Jacobs, the infection by violence of a specific social ritual has a specific political implication; it would be interpreted as a subversive representation, were it not contained by the larger moral structure of the play itself. Since, according to Jacobs, the revenge tragedy as a whole seeks to show how destructive to society the private revenge impulse is, the fatal masque is emblematic of the play's basic action, which is the interruption of the order of society by a disorderly ethos. The violation of the masque by violence functions as a metaphor for the violation of the social fabric by revenge.

Jacobs' essay is useful in that it focuses on the way in which dramatic representation incorporates and interacts with other contemporary cultural

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46Jacobs 49.
practices. His discussion of Jacobean tragedy's "masques of death" and other interrupted courtly rituals foregrounds the fact that the plays do not merely invoke a generalized notion of ceremony; they represent specific cultural practices which were invested with specific significances within the culture. Jacobs stresses that courtly ceremonies functioned as "symbolic reflections" of the ideology of the Jacobean court, as signifying structures through which the central power constructed and disseminated carefully controlled images of itself. In addition to highlighting the textuality of these courtly performances, Jacobs' analysis draws attention to the ways in which different cultural texts might have interacted; meaning in this culture (no less than in ours) was generated intertextually, as existing representations were reinterpreted in new representations, as performances were incorporated into other performances.

The limitation of all these analyses rests in their insistence on the essentially dialectical nature of violent ritual. In all these analyses, violence is essentially a negative and disorderly phenomenon which is opposed to the ceremonial mode. The violence is interpreted either as being incorporated into the larger ordering function of the ritual or as perverting the ritual and turning it into a parody of itself. Because of the critics' preoccupation with this binary opposition of subversive violence and ordering ritual, they fail to articulate the really troubling ambiguity of these scenes, the ways in which violence is constituted as both the essence and the antithesis of the ritual. In the subsequent discussion, I hope to demonstrate that the revenge masques in late Elizabethan and Jacobean tragedies are highly unstable representations which resist incorporation into either term of the order/disorder binary.

At roughly the same time that Hamlet was being performed by the Lord Chamberlain's Men, John Marston's revenge play, Antonio's Revenge,
was presented to the audience of the Paul’s Boys’ theatre. Marston’s play provides us with the earliest extant revenge masque. The dramatic occasion under examination in *Antonio’s Revenge* is a courtly celebration; however, the performance which forms the core of the revelry is different from the performances in *Hamlet* and *The Spanish Tragedy*. It is difficult to say exactly how the masque was presented in the early performances of *Antonio’s Revenge*. The printed text provides us with few clues. But the conciseness with which the masque dance is indicated in the printed text should not be taken as evidence of its lack of dramatic significance. The seeming brevity of the actual dance in relation to the larger scene is an effect of the printed text, which simply indicates in a stage direction that a “measure” is danced by the revengers. As Sutherland comments, “the masque seems too short. . . . But it is only too short on the printed page; it is not [necessarily] short in performance. . . . There is no reason to suspect that this dance was anything less than a full measure.”

Despite the paucity of information, we may suppose that this play invokes the masque in a very reduced form, as the masque had been performed in the earlier Tudor courts, and perhaps as it was still being performed in the Elizabethan courts.

This masque consists of the entry of courtiers in disguise, who dance

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47 Sutherland 42. Brissenden describes a measure as a “stately, grave dance; the word seems also to have come to be synonymous with pavan, especially when used in the plural [measures]. . . . The measures were a regular part of the revels after a masque and were danced on festive days at Inns of Court” (Shakespeare 115). Brissenden also acknowledges that a “measure” could also mean a section of a dance of several parts.

48 Chambers claims that in general the dramatized masques were presented in a reduced form: “To begin with, it is a simpler type of mask than is represented by the full Jacobean descriptions. . . . You get the mask as it was practised at Elizabeth’s court, rather than at that of James.” *Elizabethan Stage* vol I (Oxford: Clarendon, 1923): 189. See also Sutherland’s introduction.
before the Duke and his court. The scene does away with the presentation speeches which were customary by Elizabethan times, and it excludes the "taking-out" dance, which may be said to distinguish the masque from earlier Tudor forms of "disguisings." There is no mingling of masquers and audience members in dance during the masque performance, but then that sort of interaction would not achieve anything toward the goal of murdering the Duke, who must be singled out among the other audience members. The masquers are provided with the opportunity to mingle with the royal spectator during the banquet which follows the masque, and it is at this point that the violence occurs. Although the murder occurs after the actual masque is concluded, the masque performance is not incidental to the violence which follows. Masquing continues to exert an influence over the performance of the violence, and the violence is still "framed" as a performance. Cultural historians have noted that the post-masque revels and banqueting involved as much ceremony as the masque proper. In fact, the boundaries which separated the various performances of an evening of courtly entertainment and hospitality were not at all fixed. As one critic expresses it, "While the dances of the revels come after what we normally call the masque proper, they remain within the frame, as it were, of that evening's entertainment.

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49Welsford 151: "The presenter, or trucheman, who went before the maskers, and delivered an introductory speech, was a regular figure in the Elizabethan period, but it is not possible to say at what date he penetrated into the masque . . . ."

50Welsford 135: "the disguising was essentially a piece played before an audience, in which only disguisers danced together, whereas in the masque, the masquers chose ladies in the audience for their dancing partners."

That entire entertainment, not merely the part taking place on stage, is the masque . . . , enclosing the spectators . . . within the whole invention or device." Thus when Duke Piero invites the masquers to a private banquet, he is extending a customary invitation to participate in a ceremony that is "performative" as well as formalized. Within courtly entertainments and revels there are built-in moments of convergence among spectators and performers. The taking-out dances provide such an instance; the post-masque banquet provides another. In this dramatic episode the convergence of audience and performers occurs in the latter sort of ceremonial activity, which is fraught with surprise, danger and violence.

The masque in Antonio's Revenge suggests dimensions of the masque performance that printed texts of masques, or "literary masques," might exclude, elide, or even suppress. The embedded performance in Antonio's Revenge points, in a way similar to the play in The Spanish Tragedy, to the inherent instability of a performance predicated on the intrusion of disguised figures. This scene plays on the fact that every use of disguise in play or performance, no matter how familiar or conventional, bears a fundamental resemblance to the duplicitous concealment of identity and purpose. The constant premise of the masque is that it occurs "as if" it were an unexpected intrusion into the court by unknown persons. The latent threat of this intrusion cannot be completely suppressed. Masques include many mechanisms which announce or signal that the intrusion of the disguised figures is a playful performance. Indeed, once the entrance of the masquers becomes a familiar convention, one could argue that the underlying sense of

52 Sutherland 22.

53 Limon (18) distinguishes between the literary masque, the text printed in commemoration of the event, and the masque-in-performance.
threat is quelled. But the fundamental resemblance between expected and unexpected disguised intrusions must still signify for the audience, however much the similarity might be suppressed in the representation. In *Antonio’s Revenge* the latent or potential threat of the masque is enacted literally, as the revengers unmask and, instead of demonstrating customary deference, reveal their undisguised hostility to the Duke. This dramatized unmasking represents not so much an inversion of the custom as a representation of the unacknowledged instability that underlies the moment of disclosure. Orgel asserts that the essential relation between the masquer’s assumed identity or disguise and that of the courtier is one of similitude, the disguise being but an embellishment or figurative representation of the courtier’s real position in relation to the prince. In the case of this revenge masque, the relation between disguise and identity is still one of similitude. The masquers’ vizards or disguises are literal representations of the dissimulation and contrivance that informs the courtier’s relationship to the prince.

As mentioned above, the masque in *Antonio’s Revenge* does not include the customary taking-out dance, nor is there a formal retreat of the masquers from the Hall (at least, no stage direction specifies that this takes place). Rather, the Duke calls for a banquet to be provided. “Bring hither suckets, candied delicates./ We’ll taste some sweetmeats, gallants, ere we sleep” (V.v.18-19). The masquers request (in pantomime) that they be allowed to banquet in privacy with the Duke. The call to new activity and the exit of the on-stage audience and attendants suggest that the masquing is over

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54 Orgel 117.

and that what follows will be an activity conducted without an audience. The insistence on privacy can be explained as a way of ensuring the powerlessness of the Duke, and yet this precautionary measure is not entirely logical.\textsuperscript{56} It has been established by this time that the whole court, even the rival power of Florence, represented in the embassy of Galeatzo, supports the execution, and so the presence of the on-stage audience should not be regarded as an impediment to the achievement of revenge. Nonetheless, the exit of the on-stage audience signals a transition of sorts, especially with regard to the meta-level of the performance. The departure of the on-stage audience isolates Piero with the masquers, and yet in performance the effect of this reduction of stage characters is paradoxically to enhance the sense of an audience.

In order to explain this intensification of the sense of performance it is necessary to review the development of the scene. The text indicates that as the measure is being danced, the Ghost of Andrugio takes his place “betwixt the music houses” (V.v.17), presumably in a raised playing area behind and above the masquers. Like the Ghost of Don Andrea and the spirit of Revenge in \textit{The Spanish Tragedy}, this ghost remains throughout the ensuing slaughter and cheers the murderers on: “Blest be thy hand. I taste the joys of heaven,/ Viewing my son triumph in his [Piero’s] black blood.” (36-37) The Ghost of Andrugio continues to frame the “private” murder as a metatheatrical performance in which the audience is provided with an image of itself and, perhaps, of the most obvious response to the performance.\textsuperscript{57}

\textsuperscript{56}The masquers’ private banquet is perhaps historically accurate. Barbara Baines writes that it was customary for masquers to banquet before the rest of the court. “\textit{Antonio’s Revenge: Marston’s Play on Revenge Plays},” \textit{SEL} 23 (1983): 292.

\textsuperscript{57}Barbara Baines writes, “The ghost’s highly developed emotional and aesthetic response—a response devoid of moral judgement—serves as commentary on the moral deficiency of the audience’s exclusive aesthetic and
Even without the Ghost, the "privacy" in which the murder is enacted paradoxically enhances for the theatre audience its own participation in the event. For one thing, everything in the revengers' formalized and stylized enactment of the violence suggests their awareness of the need to perform. The "ceremonial" enactment of the murder is almost universally commented on by critics of the play, and this quality of the action is generally interpreted as an instance of theatrical self-consciousness. The dramatic situation is a particularly "intense" rendering of the self-conscious scenes of private disclosure, of which the soliloquy is another variant. We know from such scenes that dramatic self-consciousness and stylistic embellishment do not disappear when moments of privacy are represented. However, we can go further than this general observation of a heightened sense of performance and identify another sort of performance as referent for the stage spectacle.

The violent death of the Duke at the hands of his torturers invokes a performance other than the banquet, the masque or the playhouse tragedy. The theatrical situation, which involves an audience witnessing ceremonial violence performed on a scaffold, roughly approximates the performance conditions of the contemporary public execution. Because public executions were both frequent and very accessible events in the Elizabethan era,\(^58\) the emotional response to revenge tragedy” (290).

\(^{58}\)Molly Smith provides evidence for the theatre audience's familiarity with spectacles of capital punishment, especially hangings: "During Elizabeth's reign, 6160 victims were hanged at Tyburn, and though this represents a somewhat smaller figure than those hanged during Henry VIII's reign, Elizabethans were certainly quite familiar with the spectacle of the hanged body and the disembowelled and quartered corpse. See "The Theater and the Scaffold: Death as Spectacle in The Spanish Tragedy," SEL 32 (1992): 217. See also Francis Barker's extensive presentation of the available statistics on capital punishment for the reigns of Elizabeth and James I (1559-1624) in The Culture of Violence 169-90.
theatre audience would have been familiar with them, and no doubt they would have recognized the resemblance to the execution ritual in the scene of Piero’s death. Several literary and cultural historians have noted similarities between theatrical spectacles and the spectacles of the execution scaffold. In an important article on the representation of executions in *The Spanish Tragedy*, Molly Smith stresses the basic similarities between the locale, the physical organization, the audience makeup, and the social occasion of public executions and public theatres in the late Elizabethan era, and argues that “the close alliance between theater and public punishment frames the great age of drama in England.” The continuities between the two types of public entertainment make it likely that a dramatic episode could invoke some aspect of a penal performance, especially when the scene involved physical violence. But the theatrical violence not only suggests a similarity between theatre and public executions; the episode represents masquing and banqueting as well as an execution-like murder; consequently, it suggests continuities between several types of violent and non-violent ritualized performance.

This is not the first time in *Antonio’s Revenge* that a deliberate convergence of the performance modes of theatre and capital punishment has occurred. For instance, the suspension of Feliche’s corpse over Mellida’s bed in the first act invokes the practice of gibbeting, which involved suspending the body of a criminal in chains, frequently near the scene of the crime for which he was executed. The logic behind the display of Feliche’s


60 Smith, “Theatre and the Scaffold” 220.

61 In a more gruesome variation on the practice, the criminal could be
corpse is clearly the same as that which underlies gibbetting, insofar as the intimate relationship of the local environment and the dead body is made abundantly clear. In this scene, the body also taints its immediate environment, involving Mellida and her bedroom in the corruption of the corpse. Despite the use of dramatic licence or artistic embellishment in the representation, the basic elements of the penal practice are evident in the stage spectacle. Antonio’s sacrifice of the child Julio is more difficult to reconcile to any sanctioned ritual of killing in the period. It is a scene which so thoroughly demonstrates the literary influence of Senecan drama that any reference to contemporary social practice must be oblique. The scene is especially remarkable for the way in which it insists upon the acquiescence of the victim. The child’s response, “So you will love me, do even what you will” (III.iii.42), is surely intended to mitigate the barbarity of the act and, thus, to distinguish the revenger’s violence from the violence of the child’s father. The bond of trust that is established between the sacrificer and the victim has mythical and literary analogues. And yet there is surely also a suggestion, however parodic, of the convention in the execution ceremony whereby the executioner begged forgiveness of the condemned man, who absolved the henchman of any guilt. As contemporary accounts of some important or notorious executions demonstrate, this moment in the ceremony contained inherent dramatic potential. Such moments have been described by their

suspended in chains while still alive and left to die in that manner. John Laurence cites a reference in Holinshed alluding to the commonplace nature of this practice. See his A History of Capital Punishment: With Special Reference to Capital Punishment in Great Britain (1932; Port Washington, NY: Kennicat, 1971) 57.

62 Cf. the Biblical episode of the sacrifice of Isaac (Genesis 22.1-18) and the sacrifice of Iphigenia in Euripides’ Iphigenia in Aulis (c.405 BC).
recorders as highly affective and compelling performances. The effects of this display of good will were several. One was to disassociate the executioner from his own violence or to highlight the fact that he acted on the will of a higher authority. It was also an attempt to create the illusion of a bond of trust and cooperation between the two figures whose wills might have been violently opposed at that moment. It was, furthermore, a demonstration of the ability of social decorum to exert its ordering influence even in extreme and potentially explosive situations. Finally, the condemned criminal's acquiescence was the ultimate demonstration of his total subjugation to the will of the state.

As in these earlier dramatic episodes, the murder of Piero suggests some of the conditions and practices of capital punishment. This analogy cannot be taken too far, for the murder of Piero also differs very deliberately from the standard ceremonies of the execution scaffold. The resemblance of the stage business to the business of the gallows or the block is at best partial; it mostly depends upon the performance conditions and on the fact of violence. The differences between the revengers' violence and the violence of public executions are as significant as their similarities. But if we read this scene against a reconstructed "standard text" of an execution, we must recognize the influence of the social ritual on the imagination that created the dramatic episode.

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63 See, for example, accounts of the executions of the Earl of Essex (1601) and of Raleigh (1618) in Laurence 189-93.

64 Brian Bailey writes that "It was a universally accepted ritual that the executioner should be forgiven by his victim in order that the executioner should not have any victim's death on his own conscience." Hangmen of England (London: W. H. Allan, 1989) 8.

65 Shapiro argues that playwrights deliberately avoided staging executions mimetically in revenge tragedy because it would have constituted an
In the most spectacular cases of capital punishment in early modern England, the punishment of political traitors and religious heretics, the condemned man was not simply hanged or beheaded but suffered through a highly codified ceremony of violence and mutilation. The procedure is summarized by John Laurence.

[The criminal] was to be cut down [from the gallows] alive and his entrails taken out and burned before his face. Then the head was cut off, “headed,” and the body quartered, the head and quarters remaining at the king’s disposal. The quarters were parboiled to preserve them and the various parts distributed in different places and hung up to the public gaze.66

This last mutilation of the corpse was obviously performed for the benefit of the execution’s larger audience rather than for the victim, although the victim’s foreknowledge of the fate of his body could be regarded as a form of psychological torture. The business of being cut down from the gallows before death and then eviscerated, on the other hand, was obviously performed as much for the sake of the victim as for his audience. The principle upon which this practice was based is obscure, but it seems that the condemned should be made not only to suffer before dying but also, effectively, to die several deaths. The elaborate procedures which were performed upon the traitor’s body cumulatively demonstrate an “aesthetic of excess,”67 and it is this same aesthetic that pervades Marston’s revenge play.

The violence that Piero suffers suggests the custom of scaffold torture encroachment on royal prerogative (100). It follows that when they wanted to make reference in their work to the violent practices through which the state enforced social order, they chose to do so indirectly or allusively.

66 Laurence 12.

67 Gillian Murray Kendall writes, “Renaissance executions, particularly those of regicides or parricides, were often affairs of excess.” In “Overkill in Shakespeare,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 43.1 (Spring 1992): 33.
and execution without representing it exactly or mimetically. He is not hung, disemboweled, or beheaded. He is, rather, bound, mutilated and stabbed. The severing of Piero's tongue more immediately invokes dramatic and literary traditions than the traditions of public execution. It is preceded in the revenge play tradition by the cases of Hieronimo and Lavinia. However, when Piero is presented with his tongue,

Ant: Behold, black dog! [Holding up Piero's tongue]
Pan; Grinn'st thou, thou snurling cur?
Alb: Eat thy black liver! (V.v.40-41),

the analogy with the custom of presenting the condemned man with his own severed parts would have been made by most experienced spectators of capital punishment.

The presentation of the limbs of Julio to his father is another moment which has a well-established literary precedent. The Thyestean banquet is one of Seneca's better known legacies to Renaissance drama, and is used to great effect in Shakespeare's Titus Andronicus (1594). But the episode in Antonio's Revenge also demonstrates a harnessing of the symbolic power of dismemberment, which is observable in the public display of mutilated corpses. In this scene, it is not the corpse of the "criminal" which is displayed. But the dismembered limbs signify the criminal's punished body. We recall that Julio's murder is rationalized by Antonio not only because it reciprocates the violence that Piero does to Antonio's family (a son for a father) but also because the child's flesh and blood is actually the flesh and blood of the father. The dismembered body of Julio bears a metonymic relationship to that of Piero, and that symbolic value is sustained in the scene of Piero's execution. The child's sundered limbs represent those of the father, for Piero as for Antonio. By presenting the victim with this gruesome banquet dish, the murderers not only inflict emotional anguish on their victim but also force
Piero to confront the fate of his own body.

At the same time that the scene invokes aspects of public executions, the violence is in many ways antithetical to such official performances of justice. If the murder of Piero resembles an execution in the conditions of its performance or in the relation that it establishes between victim and killer, it differs significantly in other ways; for the revengers’ ritual contains none of the customary “safeguards” of the execution which ensured that the penal violence would remain sharply distinguished from the violent crimes that it punished. Whereas state-sanctioned executions sought to minimize their resemblance to acts of private vengeance, in this dramatic scene the retributive aspect of the violence is stressed:

Ant. . . . This for my father’s blood! [He stabs Piero]
Pan. This for my son! [Stabs him.]
Alb. This for them all! [Stabs him.] (V.v.77-78)

Not only is each wound that Piero suffers a re-enactment of a violence that he has inflicted, but each wound is inflicted by the earlier victim’s next of kin. There is no mediation of the punishment through the executioner, the objective instrument of the law. In fact, there is no impassive representative of the law, no magistrate, to provide an enumeration of the criminal’s offences or to deliver the sentence of death. There are only the passionate accusations made by the revengers. There are no prayers said to aid the soul of the repentant criminal in its flight. There are only the bitter execrations of the masquers:

Ant. . . . Remember hell;
And let the howling murmurs of black spirits,
The horrid torments of the damned ghosts,
Affright thy soul as it descendeth down
Into the entrails of the ugly deep. (68-72)

Furthermore, there is no speech of contrition, no moralizing or sermonizing
on the part of the condemned, as was customary, even required, in the English execution. The cutting out of Piero's tongue deliberately subverts this custom by ensuring that the victim has no opportunity to express contrition. Neither is there any display of conscience on the part of the self-styled executioners. As was mentioned above, it was customary for the executioner to ask for the condemned man's forgiveness prior to "turning him off" or severing his head. One important effect of this display of decorum was that it distinguished legal violence from the illegal violence which it punished. Marston's revengers goad the dying man and revel in the pleasure of revenge. In summary, few of the practices that were incorporated into the execution ceremony to mark the violence as "good" are present in the masquers' revenge ritual.

Because the violence of this scene lacks these signs of moral and political sanction, the stylization and self-conscious orchestration lend aesthetic but not moral control over the event. Instead of distinguishing their violence from that which they are punishing, the revengers emphasize the similarity of their actions to those of the condemned man: "Murder for murder, blood for blood doth yell" (80). The scene highlights the fact that reciprocal violence repeats or duplicates prior violence. The chief danger of retributive violence is the possibility of its endless proliferation through

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68 John Spierenburg claims that English executions were especially noted for the prominence of these lengthy speeches of contrition. In The Spectacle of Suffering: Executions and the Evolution of Repression: From a Preindustrial Metropolis to the European Experience (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1984) 63. The significance of these speeches in terms of the overall regulatory function of the execution is also discussed in the articles by Kendall and by Cunningham, cited above.

69 Baines writes that "[Marston's] characters whose aesthetic sensibilities substitute for moral sensibilities reflect the artist's own problem in reconciling the aesthetic with the moral demands of the medium." 294.
reduplication. The violent spectacles of the power and authority of the state, which became increasingly codified or standardized throughout England in the late medieval period, were meant to interrupt cycles of reciprocal violence by stressing the absolute difference of legally sanctioned bloodletting from all other appropriations of violent retribution. The culminating violence of Antonio's Revenge fails to signify its difference from the violence which it punishes, instead stressing in self-consciously patterned and structured actions its essentially repetitive and mimetic nature.

The revenge action shifts from a conventional masque to an unconventional ritual of execution. But while the actual business of masquing seems to be completed early in the scene, not all of the signs of courtly entertainment are effaced with the exit of the on-stage audience and the commencement of the violence. The revengers wear their masquery throughout the slaughter, they make grisly use of the banqueting table and, as it has frequently been observed, there is in the formal repetition of their words and actions the suggestion of courtly song and dance. The revenge sequence is a bizarre hybrid which at once asserts its similarity to and difference from several distinct types of cultural performance.

There is one further aspect of the revenge ritual in Antonio's Revenge which must be considered, especially as it suggests continuities between the masquing and execution ceremonies that are referents for the scene. The whole fifth act is marked by the attempt to establish unanimity of opinion and of interpretation within the society that acts as audience for the revengers. The victim of violence, Duke Piero, is the object of collective

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71 Ewbank 448, Golding 45.
attention around whom a general consensus is developed. The courtiers’ united opinion of the Duke is first suggested in the dumb show that precedes the fifth act. The stage directions specify that as the whole court processes across the stage, "Alberto draws out his dagger, Maria her knife, aiming to menace the Duke. Then Galeatzo betwixt two Senators, reading a paper to them; at which they all make semblance of loathing Piero and knit their fists at him" (V.i.0.3-0.6). The dumbshow establishes the violent hatred of the court for the Duke, which is increased by the Ghost of Andrugio, who takes the stage at the exit of the court procession and describes the change in fortune experienced by the Duke.

The Florentine Prince
(Drawn by firm notice of the Duke’s black deeds)
Is made a partner in conspiracy.
The States of Venice are so swoll’n in hate
Against the Duke for his accursèd deeds . . .
That they can scarce retain from bursting forth
In plain revolt. (V.i.14-18, 22-23)

With the entry of the revengers, "their rapiers drawn, in their masking attire" (V.iii.0.1-0.2), we learn more about the complicity of the whole court in the plot and the support of the body politic at large. This wide network of support is laid out in the masquers’ dialogue, and especially in Pandolpho’s long set speech.

I have been labouring general favour firm,
And I do find the citizens grown sick
With swallowing the bloody crudities
Of black Piero’s acts; they fain would cast
And vomit him from off their government. . . .
The rumour’s got ‘mong troop of citizens
Making loud murmur with confused din:
One shakes his head and sighs, “O ill-used power!”
Another frets and sets his grinding teeth
Foaming with rage, and swears, “This must not be!":
Here one complots and on a sudden starts,
And cries, “O monstrous, O deep villainy!” (16-20, 28-35)
These images provide a sounding of the commoners who do not appear in
this courtly tragedy but whose consent or approval nonetheless confers
greater legitimacy on the murder. The images Pandolpho conjures of a
despairing and enraged populace provide a reduplication of the revengers’
position, a mirroring of the expressions and gestures through which their
violent rage is conveyed. The above speeches have the effect of transforming
the revengers from private subjects pursuing isolated and private vengeance
into representatives of the Venetian state as a whole. By means of the
sanction which they claim from the people, they become delegated
executioners rather than transgressors of moral and legal codes.

In the moments before the violence is carried out, the revenging
masquers receive confirmation of the general support that legitimizes their
violence. Galeatzo’s interjections, “[to Ant.] All blessed fortune crown your
brave attempt./ [to Pand.] I have a troop to second your attempt./ [to Alb.] The
Venice states join heart unto your hands” (V.v.4-6), together with the final
assurances from Maria, provide additional demonstrations of complicit
approval of the impending death of the Duke. The successive gestures of
unanimity provide the murderers with a sense of transcendent power and
authority, which in turn invests their mission with sacred significance:
“Methinks I am all soul, all heart, all spirit,/ Now murder shall receive his
ample merit” (16-17). In case the unanimous worldly sanction is not
sufficient to lend authority to the violence, the Ghost is present to provide
supernatural applause.

The summoning of support for the revengers throughout this act is
almost superfluous, which is perhaps consistent with the style of the play as a
whole. The obvious purpose of these repeated demonstrations of approval is
to establish the moral sanctity and political legitimacy of the violence. The
violence is clearly "good" because it is universally acknowledged as such. The actual enactment of the violence works in accordance with this strategy. The emphasis on repetition of words and actions makes each of the revengers the mirror image of another, so that no single motive is isolated and no violent deed can be separated from the others. In the subsequent discovery of the murder by the court, which is really only a confirmation of its completion, unanimous approval is again produced. The masquers' initial attempts here to claim the deed each for his own sound a brief note of ominous mimetic rivalry,72 as they are for a moment opposed in their competing desires for individuation. But the pacifying words of Alberto, who is of all the revengers least motivated by private vengeance, quells the momentary conflict: "Tush, to say truth, 'twas all" (V.i.9). To reinforce the stabilizing and sacralizing sense of collectivity that surrounds the violence, a senator chimes in: "Blest be you all, and may your honours live/ Religiously held sacred, even for ever and ever" (10-11) (emphasis added).

The unanimous approval for the murder of Piero presents what Elizabethan law enforcers would have recognized as the ideal-case scenario for a public execution. The violence is universally interpreted as "good," as morally unambiguous and socially beneficial. One can observe from accounts and descriptions of contemporary executions the various means through which the state sought to achieve this clarity of meaning, to control interpretations and responses to the event. The ritualized performance of the execution conferred on the event a sense of order, or a reflection of the moral order in the aesthetic order, and the "moralistic setting"—provided by the

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72 According to Girard, it is mimetic rivalry, the imitation of another's aggressive desire, that poses the basic threat to the order of a society and that is mitigated by the sacrificial ritual. See Violence and the Sacred 145-49.
prayers, the speeches of repentance, the moralizing ballads and broadsheet accounts—imposed a sense of moral sanctity on the violence. 73 Of course the response to any given spectacle of penal violence was probably quite diverse, and the probability that the audience always responded to the spectacle as it was supposed to is slight. Some contemporary reports of executions describe the atmosphere as one of carnival, with demonstrations of support for popular criminals and attacks on unpopular or inept executioners.74 Nonetheless, the response of the court to Antonio's revenge represents the response that the English civic and state authorities ideally sought to obtain for their spectacles of violence.

If the effect of the murder of Piero is represented as unambiguous, the actual "rites" of violence by which the elimination is achieved are still highly ambiguous. As has been demonstrated, the execution of the violence (rather than the violence of the execution) excludes many of the standard elements that were encoded as part of the liturgy of the execution, and it introduces practices which were never part of the ceremony. The way in which the violence is carried out is evidently not problematic for the Venetian court, which is in any case absent for the performance; but the theatre audience observes the whole affair. The contemporary audience for this play, which was familiar with executions, would have recognized the references to them, subversive or otherwise.75 There is, furthermore, the inescapable problem of

73 Spierenburg 54-66.


75 See note 54, above, on the frequency of executions in Elizabethan England.
the context of the execution. The masque, the ostensible raison-d’être of which was to celebrate the power of the ruler, is used here as a duplicitous front in order to entrap and eliminate the ruler. The combination of scaffold punishment and courtly celebration is undeniably antithetical, but the result of this contradiction is not merely the sort of dead-end paradox that some critics (e.g. Sutherland) envision. For as masque and execution overlap in the scene, we become aware of continuities between the two types of ceremonial performance.

The organizers and officials of public executions attempted to achieve unanimous consensus about the violence which they presented. Consensus was also a desired effect of courtly entertainments. It was to some extent achieved in the orchestrated interaction of the courtiers. A vision of collective unity was symbolically realized in the choreographed dances which the masquers performed for the court and in the revels in which the whole court could participate. But these entertainments were not only predicated on the harmonious interaction of courtiers in costume and dance. The Tudor entertainment included speeches, fighting at barriers, and ceremonial gift-giving as well as masquing and banqueting, and all of these activities would have been addressed to the Royal presence on whose behalf the entertainments were performed. Well before the Jacobean masques of Jonson and Jones, the masque was conceived chiefly as a celebration of royal power in which the whole court participated. In Orgel’s description of the typical masque of Henry VIII’s court we get a sense of the centrality of the King throughout the entertainment.

The carefully organized series of dances gradually involves more and more of the court and culminates in the final merging of symbol and

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76Brissenden, Shakespeare 3 (and passim).
reality, the removal of the masks so that "all were knowen" and the revelation that the chief masquer is also the king. The debate had been a didactic statement about the nature of kingship and the relation of the monarch to his court. To a contemporary audience, the dances must have seemed a realization of that abstract lesson. With the king's unmasking, the illusion was at last firmly established in the actual world of royal protocol, and the admiration of spectator for dancer turned necessarily to the homage of subject for sovereign.77

The monarch is also a dominant presence in the Elizabethan entertainments. As well as being an avid dancer and masquer, Elizabeth participated in elaborate outdoor entertainments. In both The Lady of the Lake, performed at Kenilworth in 1575, and in The Lady of May, performed at Wansted in 1578, the resolution of the fictive situation depends on the active participation of the queen. When the Greyans performed The Masque of Proteus and the Adamantine Rock for the queen in 1594-95, the Queen was again constituted as the force upon which the unfolding of the spectacle depended. This point is elaborated by Orgel:

The center of [the performance of Proteus] was Queen Elizabeth. Obviously her actual presence is a prerequisite of the production: on the most superficial level, because it is conceived as a compliment to her and would make no sense if applied to anyone else; on the fictive level, because her "attractive vertue" is necessary to effect the triumph of the prince over Proteus. . . . The queen makes this central event [the release of the dancers] possible, turning the dialogue to dance, the speeches to their traditional conclusion in the revels—in effect, making the masque a masque. In the deepest sense then, the physical presence of Elizabeth gives Proteus its meaning.78

The spectacular representations of magnificence, harmony and order were not only created for the monarch: they were presented as if they depended on the monarch for their existence. In other words, the monarch was meant to be constitutive of these ordered displays which were the quintessence of

77Orgel 32.

78Orgel 18.
courtly culture. While masques displayed the virtues of the courtly milieu as a whole, and no doubt the particular virtues of particularly notable performers, the ultimate point of the performances was to create consensus about the unique status of the monarch.

Both the execution and the masque achieved a ritual-like sense of communion by focusing attention on figures who were isolated or marked as "different." In the cases of the execution and the masque, the figures selected for special attention— the condemned criminal and the monarch—occupy diametrically opposed positions in the social spectrum. Foucault writes, "In the darkest region of the political field the condemned man represents the symmetrical, inverted figure of the king."\(^79\) This is especially true inasmuch as the condemned criminal signifies not only his own lack of power but also the surplus power of the state which is invested in the monarch. In the revenge masque in *Antonio's Revenge*, the opposed figures of the ruler and the convict merge in Duke Piero, and the great gap that separates them collapses. The difference between the two types of ceremony also collapses, and we are left with a sense of their commonalities. The violence which is enacted upon the condemned ruler, the criminal-king, is not incidental to the awareness that we obtain of the continuities between the two ceremonial performances. Indeed the violence is constitutive of that unity.

The revenge masque in *Antonio's Revenge* highlights the fact that both the masque and the public executions are informed by a sacrificial structure. Duke Piero becomes a sacrificial victim, according to Girard’s

\(^{79}\)Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 29.
definition. He is the focus of a generalized loathing which unites the community. His elimination brings about an end to the violence and restores social order. The elimination of the Duke is also constituted as a sacred act: the murder serves as a rite of initiation for the revengers into a new state of spiritual devotion and worldly renunciation. Following their exoneration by the community, Pandolpho solemnly vows, "we will live enclosed/ In holy verge of some religious order,/ Most constant votaries" (V.vi.34-36). Piero is unlike Girard's archetypal scapegoat in that he is not a substitute victim in the play. His death, like that of the convicted criminal, is a retribution for sins which are his own. The idea of guilt is as firmly fixed to this representation of violence as it is to enactments of violence by the judiciary. Girard has observed of Greek tragedy, however, that it typically suppresses the mechanism of arbitrary victimization, which is, after all, the most disturbing aspect of the sacrificial process, while allowing some sense of substitution to remain. Tragedy establishes a single figure as the source of a community's problems but at the same time suggests the symmetrical relationship between that figure and his accusers and opponents. Signs of the archetypal sacrificial situation remain present in this dramatized ritual murder, as they are present in the two cultural performances which are referents for the scene.

The conflation of the execution ceremony with the courtly entertainment suggests the resemblance of both the celebrated king and the condemned criminal to the victim of sacrifice. During the course of a masque, the sovereign is the focus of heightened, collective attention; consequently he not only appears as particularly powerful but as particularly

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80Girard's theory of the function of the scapegoat is summarized in chapter 1 (28-31). He elaborates this theory in Violence and the Sacred, passim, (see especially 6-15).
vulnerable. The object of veneration is always isolated from the rest of the group by his difference, and that isolation or individuation which distinguishes him is potentially dangerous. The king is always potentially a sacrificial victim because his unique status, both like and unlike his subjects, inside and outside the social structure, makes him expendable. If sacrificial victims can be eliminated because they are marginal, frequently occupying the bottom of the social hierarchy, as condemned criminals do, then the king’s position at both the centre and the top of the system makes him equally marginal. As Girard explains, “it is precisely his position at the center that serves to isolate [the king] from his fellow men, to render him casteless. He escapes from society, so to speak, via the roof, just as the pharmakos escapes through the cellar.”

The revenge masque in Antonio’s Revenge represents the ruler’s vulnerability in a literal manner, bringing to the surface the suppressed but latent threat of violence that operates even within rituals of royal celebration.

The condemned prisoner also resembles Girard’s sacrificial victim. He too is marked by extreme vulnerability, but this occurs literally through the violence to which his body is subjected. The threat is not potential in his case, as it is with the celebrated ruler. Also like the sacrificial victim, the criminal is invested with a potential power. As the focus of the crowd’s collective attention, he demonstrates the power of signification. The extremity of response that the victim of the execution typically encouraged from the audience of a Renaissance execution, which tended to oscillate dramatically between revulsion and strong identification, is proof of the ambiguous power that was invested in the figure.

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81 Girard, Violence 12.

82 Girard’s fullest articulation of the sacrificial nature of sacred kingship (and
The revenge masque in *Antonio's Revenge* demonstrates a complex intertextuality. Because it invokes the performance conditions and practices of the public execution as well as the courtly entertainment, and because the two referents seem to be superimposed one upon the other, the meaning of the violence that is enacted is very unclear. As an unorthodox execution ceremony, the revenge masque in *Antonio's Revenge* represents the difference between "good" or "pure" violence (that which is performed on the criminal) and "bad" or "impure" violence (that which is performed by the criminal) as being tenuous, in danger of disappearing, despite the existence of sophisticated aesthetic systems to sustain the distinction. At the same time, the resemblance of the most pacific of ceremonies (the court masque) and the most violent of ceremonies (the blood sacrifice) is in danger of reappearing, despite equally well-developed aesthetic systems to suppress that resemblance.

In *The Malcontent*, Marston again uses the masque in order to conclude the dramatic action and to satisfy the various revenge motives still operating in the play. The final scene resembles in some respects the end of *Antonio's Revenge*, and by concluding with a courtly performance which conceals the violent subterfuge of the revengers, the play also demonstrates continuities with earlier revenge tragedies. The obvious difference with this revenge masque is that it contains no physical violence. It achieves a dramatic effect comparable to the other revenge masques--the satisfaction of the revenge motives and the removal of a corrupt ruler--but in achieving

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these ends no blood is spilled. Because the final masque in *The Malcontent*
concludes without death as well as with the restitution of the protagonist to
his rightful position of power, with the happy reunion of several couples and
with the banishment of agents of evil, the play is generically closer to comedy
than to tragedy. Yet it must be acknowledged that the final masque invokes
the convention of revenge tragedy and that the play maintains until the very
end the potential to erupt into violence. This strategy of invoking or staging
a violent situation without involving any actual violence runs throughout
the play. The plot involves a series of near brushes with injury and death.
Ferneze is wounded by Mendoza’s sword upon being flushed out of Aurelia’s
bedchamber, but his apparent death proves to be illusory, and he recovers
under Malevole’s care. Later in the play, the report of Pietro’s suicide and the
succeeding account of his murder by Malevole invoke tragic situations, except
that they are undercut with dramatic irony through the audience’s awareness
of Pietro’s disguised presence. The “death” of Malevole is even more
remarkable for the way in which it imitates a conventionally tragic situation
without achieving a “real” tragic effect. The false poisoning of Malevole with
the box he brings to Mendoza resembles similar scenes of poisoning in the
tragedies of Marlowe, such as *The Jew of Malta* (1589) and *The Massacre of
Paris* (1593). In fact, nothing need distinguish the staging of the feigned
poisoning of Malevole from the staging of “real” poisonings; the means of
creating a distinction rests in the audience’s suspicion that Malevole’s “death”

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83In *The Jew of Malta*, Barabas murders his daughter Abigail and the sisters
of the “nunnery” with a pot of poisoned rice porridge. Abigail expires onstage
(IV.i). He also poisons Ithamore and Pilia-Borza with a poisoned “posy”
(IV.vi). In *The Massacre at Paris*, the Old Queen is killed by a pair of poisoned
gloves (iii).
is another of Malevole’s performances.\textsuperscript{84}

The nearly tragic conclusion of \textit{The Malcontent} is, then, consistent with the dramatic strategies of much of the rest of the play. The action is continually teetering toward violence without actually achieving violence. But the revenge masque \textit{manqué} is not only significant for the way in which it sustains this narrow path between tragic and comic situation. It also exposes certain contradictions which are inherent in the court masque, especially contradictions relating to violence. Obviously, the reunion of the lovers in the course of the dancing illustrates the masque’s potential for comic resolution. But the potential for violence that resides in the masquing occasion is also suggested in Marston’s later revenge play.

In \textit{Antonio’s Revenge} disguise is the element of the masque that is most obviously played upon. The disguises allow the revengers to slip into the court before the Duke’s unsuspecting eyes. The measures they dance are only a lead-in to the ritual killing that occurs during the post-masque banquet. In \textit{The Malcontent}, the role of dance is expanded as it becomes more immediately involved in the isolation and elimination of Mendoza. The printed text of \textit{Antonio’s Revenge} suggests that the taking-out dances which normally succeed the masquers’ choreographed dances are not performed. \textit{The Malcontent}, on the other hand, appears to forego the choreographed dance of the masquers and proceeds directly to the taking-out dance. Thus Marston’s second revenge masque is also a much-abbreviated

\textsuperscript{84}This scene of poisoning creates a theatrical situation similar to that which obtains in \textit{The Spanish Tragedy}, where the theatre audience is made aware of the fact that it cannot distinguish between real and feigned violence any more than the on-stage audience can. This recognition, in turn, reminds the spectators that they are, in a manner comparable to the unsuspecting on-stage audience, generally susceptible to deception and trickery.
representation of a conventional performance. Despite the integrative aspect of the revels dancing, it involves one deliberate act of exclusion. In addition to permitting the romantic reunions and sexual liaisons which are the dictates of comedy, the masquing isolates one spectator, the Duke, from the activity. His isolation leads directly to his elimination from the community. This occurs in the course of the masque dancing, rather than at a post-masque banquet, as in Antonio's Revenge. In other words, the "violence" (the hostile and punitive exclusion) in The Malcontent, while less overt and less bloody, is more closely integrated with masquing than it is in Antonio's Revenge.

The masque is ordered by Genoa's newest duke, Mendoza, who, like Piero in Antonio's Revenge, seeks to celebrate and solemnify his own rule. Like Piero, he sets himself up for a fall. Marston's plays seem preoccupied with representing the danger inherent in taking a central, focal part in these performances of power. Immediately following the "murder" of Malevole, Mendoza calls for "some pretty show, to solemnize/ Our high instalment; some music, masquery" (V.iii. 54-55). While the performance is, in Arnold van Gennep's terms, a rite of passage,86 corresponding to the post-liminal or reintegrative phase of the ritual process, the actual content of the ceremony seems to hold little significance for Mendoza. He calls for "any quick-done fiction," "[s]ome far-fet trick," "some stale toy," "'tis but for fashion's sake" (65-88). The event is set up as at once insignificant and essential for the consolidation of the Duke's power. This ambivalence is consistent with the

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rather precarious status of the masque at this time. Through the commissioning of the ceremony, we see represented the ambivalent status of the cultural practice--it is at once a trivial entertainment and a solemn ceremony.

The "device" for the masque, which the Duke himself conceives, calls for "some brave spirits of the Genoan dukes/ To come out of Elysium, forsooth, / Led in by Mercury, to gratulate/ Our happy fortune" (66-69). It is a symbolic display of political continuity with which the playhouse audience would have been familiar from Elizabethan civic and royal pageantry. It was standard to represent, in certain ceremonies of accession, the ruler's predecessors in power in order to illustrate the legitimacy of the line of rule. This sort of representation occurred in both Elizabeth's and James' coronation entries into London. During Elizabeth's procession through London to Westminster in January of 1559, she encountered a pageant representing the genealogical tree of succession, which included the enthroned figures of Henry VII and his queen (Elizabeth Tudor), Henry VIII and Ann Boleyn, and a figure representing Elizabeth herself. For James' coronation entry in March of 1604, a similar spectacle was staged. "King Henry the seventh was royally seated in his Imperiall robes, to whom King James (mounted on horseback) approaches, and receives a sceptor, over both of their heads these words being written HIC VIR, HIC EST."87 In his choice of device, then, Mendoza is working within a well-established tradition.

In addition to celebrating orderly political succession, the Duke also intends for the ceremony to mark and consecrate his projected union with Maria, Malevole/Altofronto’s wife. The occasion is set up as a betrothal celebration, which underscores another important social function of the court masque. In James’ court, masques were frequently presented in order to honour several occasions at once. The masques performed for the holiday season and for important feast days frequently celebrated marriages between important aristocratic families. Jonson’s *Hymenaei*, performed during the Christmas celebrations of 1606, celebrated the marriage of Robert, Earl of Essex to Frances Howard, daughter of the Earl of Suffolk. The same author’s *Hue and Cry after Cupid*, or *The Haddington Masque*, marked the marriage of Viscount Haddington to Elizabeth Ratcliffe, daughter of the Earl of Sussex, at Shrovetide 1608. Campion’s *Lord Hayes’ Masque*, performed on Twelfth Night of 1607, honoured the marriage of Hayes to Honora Denny, daughter of the Earl of Denny. Campion also wrote a masque for the 1613 Christmas season to celebrate the second marriage of Frances Howard to the Earl of Somerset. The anonymous *Masque of Flowers* was also commissioned for this occasion. In addition to serving the double function of celebrating the holiday season and aristocratic marriages, these masques paid homage to the magnificence of the Prince and represented to the court society visions of its harmonious order. The masque in *The Malcontent* demonstrates a similar plurality of concerns. It purports to celebrate the Duke’s installation in office, his upcoming marriage, and the order of the courtly society. Despite the fact that it addresses these multiple, conventional functions, the immediate effect of the masque is entirely unorthodox.

Just as Mendoza’s political ambitions are thwarted in the course of the masque, so are his marital ambitions. As a nuptial celebration, this scene is a
model of indecorum. The ceremonious meeting of the Duke and his intended consort, each of whom enters at the top of the scene in a stately procession, instantly goes wrong. Mendoza celebrates their impending marriage in the language of political diplomacy, which is not in itself a breach of decorum, since royal and aristocratic marriages were almost inevitably political alliances, and since courtly performances were frequently mounted in order to present the cases for these alliances. The masques that were performed for the wedding of Princess Elizabeth to Frederick, the Count Palatine, which include Campion’s *The Lord’s Masque*, Chapman’s *The Memorable Masque*, and Beaumont’s *The Masque of the Inner Temple and Grey’s Inn*, provide examples of the combination of the discourses of political diplomacy and marital celebration. In Campion’s *Lord’s Masque*, the Sibyl provides the following blessing of the union.

Additur Germaniae
Robur Britannicum: ecquid esse par potest?
Utramque iunget una mens gentem, fides,
Deique Cultus unus, et simplex amor.
Idem erit utrique hostis, sodalis idem, idem
Votum periclitantium, atque eadum manus.
Favebit illis Pax, favebit bellica
Fortuna, semper aderit Adiutor Deus.88

But while Mendoza may be working within this tradition, Maria clearly has another sort of performance in mind. She responds to Mendoza’s proposal in a manner that subverts the nuptial ceremony and initiates a polemical dialogue on the role of wives. The performance involves accusation and

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88 In *The Works of Thomas Campion*, ed. Walter R. Davis (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967) 260. Davis translates the passage thus: “Let the British strength be added to the German: can anything equal it? One mind, one faith, will join two people, and one religion, and simple love. Both will have the same enemy, the same ally, the same prayer for those in danger, and the same strength. Peace will favor them, and the fortune of war will favor them; always God the helper will be at their side.”
resistance; it is for Maria a trial of honour in the course of which she hopes to
defend herself against Mendoza. She turns the occasion into a formalized
competition, a demonstration of *agon* rather than *harmonia*. There is no
pretence of impartial justice in the trial, however, for Mendoza quickly
exercises his magisterial power. He threatens Maria with torture and death
and orders her to be remitted to "severest custody." The utter perversion of
the celebration of betrothals is obvious, and yet, ironically, following her
sentencing Maria resorts to the language and rites of marital celebration.
"[C]ome, girt my brows with flowers; / Revel and dance, soul, now thy wish
thou hast; / Die like a bride, poor heart, thou shalt die chaste" (V.vi.42-44).
Maria represents herself as a sacrificial bride of death rather than as the
"trophy" bride of Mendoza. By substituting a union with death for a
generative union, the masquing bride inverts the orthodox significance of the
ceremony.

In setting herself up as a sacrificial victim Maria is working within the
conventions of nuptial celebration in this period. The language and
trappings of sacrifice are commonly associated with courtly celebrations of
marriage. This motif is central to a nuptial masque which Jonson and Jones
would create shortly after Marston's play was written. *Hymenaei* (1606) stages
a ceremony of marital sacrifice, the liturgy and symbolic accessories of which
Jonson culled from the Roman authors. The bride in this masque is
presented as a sacrificial virgin, her head bedecked with a garland of roses.
The speech of Hymen reinforces the sacrificial nature of the ritual:

... view two noble maids
Of different sex to Union sacrificed,
In honour of that blessed estate
Which all good minds should celebrate. (94-97)\(^89\)

Marston's masquing bride is a highly conventional figure, except that she fashions herself as a bride of death. Maria works within the conventional symbolic language associated with the genre, but she utterly subverts the orthodox function of the celebration, signifying chaste death where she ought to signify a fecund and generative life. By exploiting the darker significance of sacrifice this scene brings to the surface the "subtext" of violence which, so Girard claims, underlies the most celebratory of ritual occasions.

The integration of the language of classicized nuptial ceremony with the ritual of political succession is significant because it reflects a sustained double motive for the performance. The business of marital union is continued and resolved during the revels, while the ceremony for the accession to political power is also completed. The union of the masquers with the women spectators permits both the solemn reunion of the separated couples and the erotic play of more and less faithful lovers. As mentioned above, this celebration of erotic and spiritual love excludes one audience member--the new Duke. In its political dimension, the ceremony also excludes Mendoza. The dance represents the unifying of the purposes and interests of the court against its most powerful member. This formalized exclusion inverts the conventional objective of courtly entertainment, which is to establish the prince as the centre and source of the society's unity. We recall from Orgel that the masque performance in the hall auditorium placed James in the central and most prominent position; and this physical organization was intended to reflect the metaphysical hierarchy of the monarchy and the court.  

90 The dramatic masque inverts the relationship

UP, 1965) 97. All other quotations of Jonson's masques are from this edition.

90Orgel, Illusion 9-14.
between monarch and court that the royal celebration customarily represented, but the representation is not only inversive. Paradoxically, this performance also parallels the masque performance.

The expulsion of Mendoza from the court occurs through a well-orchestrated and well-timed threat of physical violence. It is important to note the moment in the performance at which this occurs. The taking-out dance is complete, all the "changes" have been performed. This is the moment in Tudor masque performances in which there would often occur a second révérence or formal show of homage to the monarch. This gesture makes explicit the status of the performance as a gift or offering. Patricia Fumerton writes that "masquing and gift-giving were by tradition homologous rituals . . . , generous manifestations of the principle of gift, often in the form of prayers or offerings to the king from his admiring courtiers."91

Masques typically communicated through a variety of means that while the royal spectator was metaphysically the "source" of all the spectacle, the performance also involved an enormous labour on the part of the noble participants who commissioned, organized, and performed them. Gift-giving rituals are ambiguous affairs. Fumerton writes, "Gift exchange . . . marks what is essentially a grand, imaginative leap from violence between enemies to an otherwise unimaginable peace. The threat of war is contained. Though never wholly vanquished or made invisible, its antagonisms are sublimated into the energies attendant upon the decorous handling of the gift."92 The underlying instability of the gift-giving ritual (as it occurs at the public, "official" level) is represented in a radical and literal manner in The

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92Fumerton 33.
Malcontent, as the masquers draw their hitherto concealed weapons on Mendoza. The dramatic scene represents, through its literal violence, the latent threat that underlies public displays of fealty, loyalty, and subjection.

As in the revenge masque in Antonio's Revenge, and indeed in most revenge masques of the period, The Malcontent represents the dark side not only of gift-giving but also of disguising. As well as involving a ludic appropriation of another role, behind which the performer's identity remains clear (ostensibly the masque scenario), disguise also makes deception and concealment possible. Disguise permits the outsider, the ostracized or undesirable element, to infiltrate a forbidden milieu without fear of detection. It is often used in this manner in the drama of the period; disguises in plays are usually completely effective in masking the characters' "real" identities. One effect of the inserted masque is to draw attention to the fact that, from a semiotic perspective, duplicity persists as an alternate significance to even the most playful and transparent forms of disguise.

The disguises in the inserted masque suggest something beyond the concealment of identity. They also create a spectacle of non-differentiation. We may suppose that, in contemporary productions of the play, the costumes for the masque of Genoan dukes were either very similar to one another or identical. The surviving documents pertaining to costuming for masques--i.e., the descriptions within the masques, the descriptions contained in other types of correspondence, the accounts of the Revels office--suggest that the costumes for a set of masquers were generally uniform. Welsford writes that "in England the usual custom was for each band of masquers to be dressed
alike, though there might be variations in the details of the costume." In what sense can this uniformity of appearance be constituted as non-differentiation? When confined to performance, identical costuming does not necessarily result in the loss of all differences between performers. This is because the effect of costuming is not necessarily to eliminate the identity of the performer, which may still signify for members of the audience. Identical costuming may only signify that the discrete identities of the performers are less important than the similarities which are being stressed in the performance. Identical costuming visually imposes a sense of unity and continuity on performers and performance. Mendoza’s choice of device seems to capitalize on this meaning. He seeks to represent the harmonious continuity of political rule in Genoa and the sanction with which he assumes the seat of power. However, the significance of the non-differentiation is more complex than Mendoza would have it, and it suggests a dynamic to the performance which exceeds his comprehension.

The visual non-differentiation of the masquers is deeply implicated in the threat of violence through which Mendoza is deposed and Altofronto is reinstated. The masquers mirror one another in actions and in appearance. They appear as reflections of each other, or as refracted images emanating from a single source. One might interpret this spectacle as a reinforcement of the message of unity that the dancers seek to convey in the dance, that is, the uniformity of appearance corresponds to a uniformity of purpose, which is collectively to make a show of honour to the king. But one can interpret the spectacle of visual uniformity in another way. The loss of difference that the disguising causes is also potentially a dangerous condition; it is the

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94Welsford 158.
precondition for a descent into chaos and violence. The masquers are all doubles of each other, and the effect of this doubling could be antagonistic as well as assimilative. To imitate someone implies not only the desire to follow the other but the desire to occupy the other’s place, to acquire the other’s possessions, to claim the other’s rights and privileges, to possess the other’s "being." According to Girard, mimesis is appropriative as well as emulative, which is why as a cultural phenomenon it must be viewed with trepidation. The "other" that one constitutes as one’s double is also potentially one’s rival, because that "other" already possesses or seems to possess what one most desires. "Violent opposition," writes Girard, "is the signifier of ultimate desire . . . ." The expansion of doubling which occurs in the masque implies the expansion of rivalries, which Girard identifies as the basis of social disintegration. The masque, then, with its proliferation of similar figures, figures forth the preconditions for violent conflict.

We might look at the inserted masque in The Malcontent as a symbolic enactment of the appropriative mimesis which has persisted throughout the play’s action: most of the masquers have, in the course of the play, been each other’s rivals, in either the sexual or the political sphere. The spectacle of doubling is, then, as much expressive of the dangerous rivalry that has operated throughout the play as it is of the unity of purpose that joins them at the end. But the masque does not develop into a violent display of aggression among the masquers. Rather, the violence that is potential in the spectacle of non-differentiation is averted by means of a strategy that has already been described as common in ritual. The aggression of the masquers is directed at a single figure, Mendoza, and through this focusing of aggression the non-
differentiation of the other characters becomes the basis of unity instead of rivalry. Mendoza is set up as a likely object of violence because of his dual position—both outside and inside the group. His exclusion from the taking-out dance is a means of suggesting within the performance semiotic isolation within the court. Having been identified as "other," and hence the ideal scapegoat, Mendoza is eliminated by means of a collective show of aggression. The masquers unmask and draw arms against him.

This display of aggression against the Duke clearly inverts the convention of honouring the ruler; however, the performance can also be understood to achieve an effect similar to this honouring. The collective gesture of honour constitutes an enactment of unanimous consensus. It is a demonstration of shared beliefs and allegiances, whatever the private tendencies of the individual courtiers might be. The violent encircling of Mendoza similarly serves as a demonstration of shared allegiance, and so it fulfills a function analogous to the honouring of the king. The violence is constituted as ordered and ordering violence which, far from being antithetical to the purpose of the ceremony, is essential to the achievement of unity.

The twin actions of this revenge masque manqué are elimination and installation. For with the exclusion of Mendoza from the court Altofronto is restored to his rightful position of authority. These opposed actions also demonstrate a continuity of effect, as both distract attention from the proliferation of rival doubles and both direct attention to a radically individuated figure around whom unanimous consensus can be formed. As in Antonio's Revenge, the concluding performance of The Malcontent provides the theatre audience with an image of the paradoxically doubled figures of criminal and king. In The Malcontent those figures are separated
and emphatically distinguished from one another. And yet despite their opposite movements at the end of the play—Altofronto to the centre of power and Mendoza to the outside of its furthest perimeter—the figures converge as the rest of the group defines its sense of community in relation to them.

In conclusion, we might return to the original objection that was raised (for rhetorical purpose) against the inclusion of the inserted masque in *The Malcontent* in an analysis of violent performances. The violence that is threatened in this scene differs little from the violence that is bloodily enacted in other revenge masques. Violence may have disappeared as a signifier from the surface of the performance, but a deep structure of violence informs the scene every bit as much as it does the overtly bloody revenge masque of *Antonio's Revenge*, and as much as it does similar scenes in the revenge tragedies which follow it. Like the violence in *Antonio's Revenge*, and like the violence in *The Spanish Tragedy* and *Hamlet*, the threatened violence in *The Malcontent* is informed by doubleness and paradox.
CHAPTER 4

Later Jacobean Revenge Masques:

The Revenger's Tragedy and Women Beware Women

The revenge masques in The Revenger's Tragedy\(^1\) and in Thomas Middleton's Women Beware Women demonstrate the influence of those staged in Antonio's Revenge and The Malcontent, but the two later revenge plays represent different elements of the masque and the violence takes on different shades of meaning. In both The Revenger's Tragedy and Women Beware Women, we also encounter a somewhat different attitude toward masquing and related celebratory practices of the court. Such occasions are represented not only as opportunities for carrying out acts of subterfuge (as in Antonio's Revenge and The Malcontent) but also as occasions given over to vice and misrule. The ritual seriousness of courtly celebration is undermined in The Revenger's Tragedy as it is in Women Beware Women, and in both plays' representations of masquing there is a strong element of satire. These two Jacobean revenge masques also differ substantially from one another. In The Revenger's Tragedy, the masque is essentially a ceremonial dance with weapons. In Women Beware Women, the masque is a quasi-theatrical performance which imitates the splendours of the Jacobean masque. The violence which occurs in The Revenger's Tragedy, is, like the violence in

\(^1\) Attributed to both Cyril Tourneur and Thomas Middleton. This discussion offers no opinion on the authorship debate surrounding The Revenger's Tragedy. Indeed, authorship is not much stressed at any point in the study. However, the continuities in the representation of courtly celebration in The Revenger's Tragedy and in Women Beware Women might be used to further an argument for common authorship by Middleton.
Marston's inserted masques, unforeseen by its victims. In *Women Beware Women*, the violence is not only unforeseen but also, like that which occurs in Hieronimo's play, unrecognized: the on-stage audience does not recognize that the violence is "real," and, consequently, it does not understand the meaning of the spectacle. Despite their differences, both plays suggest a deep association between masquing and violence.

More than Marston, the author of *The Revenger's Tragedy* exercises his satirical skills in his representation of masquing. In an old but still relevant article on *The Revenger's Tragedy*, S. Schoenbaum remarks that "the court of *The Revenger's Tragedy* . . . is a world of violent pleasures, of banquets, feasts, dances, and uncontrolled sensuality. The motif of revels appears continually and associated always with sin and damnation."² The solemn dimension of courtly feasting is subverted early in *The Revenger's Tragedy*, long before the celebrations which draw the play to a bloody close. While speculating on the sordid circumstances of his conception, the bastard Spurio exclaims:

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O damnation met
    The sin of feast, drunken adultery.
    I feel it swell me; my revenge is just;
    I was begot in impudent wine and lust. (I.ii.189-92)³
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Feasting becomes synonymous with intemperance in the course of this speech. The occasion which Spurio imagines and describes unites wine and lechery, and together these elements acquire a generative power. The offspring of these unwholesome parents is yet another vice, undisciplined wrath, represented by Spurio himself. He too is "swollen" with intemperate


anger, otherwise pregnant with violence, which he bears until he releases it in the final masque scene. In speeches such as this one, a procreative and cyclical relationship is established between courtly celebration and the violent spirit of revenge.

Just as feasting and banqueting are represented as occasions which foster seductions and lechery and provide the seeds of violence, so masques are described as productive of a sexualized violence. Antonio's account of the rape of his wife during an evening of revels represents this violent dimension of courtly celebration.

Last revelling night,
When torchlight made an artificial noon
About the court, some courtiers in the masque,
Putting on better faces than their own,
Being full of fraud and flattery--amongst whom,
The duchess' youngest son (that moth to honour)
Fill'd up a room . . . .
And therefore, in the height of all the revels,
When music was heard loudest, courtiers busiest,
And ladies great with laughter--O, vicious minute,
Unfit but for relation to be spoke of!--
Then, with a face more impudent than his vizard,
He harried her amidst a throng of panders
That live upon damnation of both kinds,
And fed the ravenous vulture of his lust . . . . (I.iv.26-31, 37-44)

The masque provides sexual predators with the cover and the licence to indulge their violent lust. The music, the hectic activity of dancing and socializing, and especially the vizards are all, like the throng of complicit panders, made accomplices to this violence. The masquing occasion breeds the violence which it also nurtures and conceals. This representation of masquing radically counters the sense of ritual seriousness which is so often articulated within the Jacobean court masques.

Late in the play, two more sets of masquers recognize in the masque the potential for violent subterfuge. First the devisors of the revenge masque,
Ambitioso and Supervacuo, observe that "In this time of revels, tricks may be set afoot . . . / A masque is treason's licence, that build upon; / 'Tis murder's best face when a vizard's on" (V.i.178, 181-82). They see the masquing occasion as an ideal opportunity to engage in political violence. Disguising is not, in this case, associated with sexual violation but with a violation of the existing power structure, which, it must be said, has already demonstrated itself to be corrupt. The other set of masquers, which includes Vindice and Hippolito, recognizes in the masquing occasion the same potential to do violence to the political order. Vindice expresses an awareness, nearly identical to that found in the above-quoted references to courtly celebration, of the intimate interconnection between lavish display, or a surfeit of sensory stimulation, and unseen, fatal danger. "And when they think their pleasure sweet and good, / In midst of all their joys, they shall sigh blood" (V.ii. 21-22). The repeated denigration of courtly celebration anticipates the violence that occurs in the final double masque. These references to masquing affect the audience's reception of the performances when they take place later in the play. When the violence finally occurs, it has already been constituted as a realization of a built-in potential for duplicity and vice.

No doubt the persistent cynicism in The Revenger's Tragedy about courtly celebration has much to do with the dramatic tradition from which the play derives. The corrupt Italianate court was well-established as a setting for the revenge play by the time that this play was written, and it was conventional to represent the notoriously decadent and immoral excesses of Italian culture in these plays. But this cynicism also reflects a contemporary social attitude toward the lavish celebrations held at England's own royal court, especially by those who were denied participation in them. Albert Tricomi observes that "In England latent reactions to the court--both positive
Booth 128

and negative--tended to center on the court masque." Tricomi provides evidence of disapproval for the masque within the citizen population of London, which focuses either on the costly extravagance of the celebrations or on the immoral behaviour which it encouraged. After citing several contemporary attacks on court masquing, he remarks:

[T]hese reports conform to a pattern of censure that attached itself to the Stuart masque as a symbol of excess and vanity, especially from citizen elements in London. The entry of such attitudes into the Jacobean drama provides one of the most accessible but least opened doors to popular antipathy to the courtly way of life.

That this Puritan and anti-aristocratic attitude toward court entertainment does pervade The Revenger's Tragedy is not to say that the dramatic masques provide us with no sense of ritual solemnity. The double revenge masque does not merely invite the theatre audience to regard the performance as a superficial cover for vice, though the characters might encourage them to do so. The violence is not only or always a representation of the corruption of the court. At the same time that the audience witnesses the revengers' devious corruption of the occasion with violence, it is also directed to make distinctions between the different incidents of violence that occur. At times, as when Vindice's group takes the floor, the ritual dimension of the performance seems to confer legitimacy upon the violence and at other times, as when Ambitioso and his entourage make their entrance, the violence destroys the legitimacy of the ritual. The following discussion of The Revenger's Tragedy considers some of the cultural codes that help to determine the way in which a contemporary audience would

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5 Tricomi 99.
have interpreted the violence in performance; this discussion also emphasizes that the differences set up between the various acts of violence in the course of the scene are simultaneously challenged. As was the case in the plays discussed in earlier chapters, these embedded performances of violence act as windows on the enigmatic role of violence in the ordering mechanisms of culture.

As with Marston's and Kyd's embedded spectacles, the dramatic irony of the revenge masque in The Revenger's Tragedy hinges on an inversion of the on-stage audience's expectations. On a very basic level, Lussurioso and his cronies expect that the performance will serve as another ceremonial confirmation of the power of the new régime. To their surprise (but probably not to the surprise of the theatre audience), the ceremony abruptly terminates their rule. The violence which the on-stage audience suffers is thus constituted as the opposite of the conventional objective of masquing, which is to reinforce the existing power structure. However, the self-consciously staged violence is not only the antithesis of what would be expected in a conventional masque performance. While the moment at which the revengers draw their swords is typically considered by critics as an intrusion of violent reality into the illusion of the masque, it is also possible to understand it as a shift in the type of performance being staged. Masquing may incorporate another type of performance for a time, as weapons are produced and violence is threatened.

The display and stylized wielding of swords is not necessarily a breach in the decorum of courtly entertainment, but only of specific courtly practices. We are well aware of the frequency with which displays of arms, mock-combats, and tournaments were staged at court. All of these involved the presentation of arms and, frequently, forceful demonstrations of their bearers'
skill in using them. Such events were frequently performed in conjunction with a larger sequence of entertainments which included processions, disguising, music, dance, etc.\(^6\) Mock battles and sword fights were not only presented in the context of courtly tournaments. They were customary as entertainment in other cultural milieus. Across Renaissance Europe, so-called “sword-dances” were performed in conjunction with other types of dramatic and non-dramatic entertainment, in carnival and festival contexts. The disguised, antic swordsman was a familiar figure in the social gatherings and entertainment of court, city and rural villages. Consequently, these dances and spectacles that were performed with weapons must be considered as potential referents when the disguised, dancing revengers produce their swords. The so-called sword-dance is actually a broad category which encompasses many different types of shows, ranging from the ceremonious to the quasi-dramatic. It was performed by and for different levels of society; it could be a rural folk custom, a performance for a guild, or a courtly entertainment. The medieval and Renaissance sword dance is described very generally by Welsford as “a mimic rhythmic combat, often accompanied by song or dialogue.”\(^7\) Many types of performance could be encompassed by this definition, and indeed the sword-dance has been said to encompass many kindred forms of folk entertainment. For example, the morris dance, or morisco, a familiar folk entertainment in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries which has elements in common with the sword-dance, is said to

\(^6\)Limon (chs. 4-6) examines several Jacobean “masque cycles” which include entries, fireworks displays, “sea battles,” tilts, and masques.

\(^7\)Welsford 20.
derive from the more ancient form. It has also been argued that these two forms of dance share a common origin in more ancient rituals, such as those associated with the transition from winter to spring. In his discussion of folk dances of England, Chambers goes so far as to say that the sword-dance, associated with the northern parts of the country, and the morris, mainly rooted in the south, are essentially identical. This merging of the two dance forms comes at the expense of the many incidental differences in their standard features. For one thing, the use of actual arms was not prevalent or common in the English morris. There are other differences as well, but since it is the wielding of weapons in the context of dance that specifically concerns us here, we will confine our discussion to the sword-dance.

Not surprisingly, a sword-dance necessarily involves the use of a cutting or thrusting weapon (or a closely analogous substitute, such as a stave or stick). However, the dancers' swords are not used only for cutting and

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8This is the opinion of Cecil J. Sharp, a pioneer in the study of English folk dances. See The Morris Book: With Descriptions of Dances as Performed by the Morris Men of England, Parts I, II & III (East Ardsley, Yorkshire: EP Publishing, 1974) 14. See also Nigel Allenby Jaffe, Folk Dance of Europe (Skipton, North Yorkshire: Folk Dance Enterprises, 1990) 101-03, for a discussion of how the continental morisco was superimposed upon the more ancient form of the sword-dance.

9Such scholarship reflects the influence of James Frazer's The Golden Bough (1890-1915) and the Cambridge School of Criticism, or the Classical Anthropologists. Chambers, Mediaeval Stage, cites Frazer extensively in his chapter on sword dances and Cecil Sharp, Sword Dance, subscribes to this interpretation of the origins of folk customs.

thrusting. The use of the sword during the dance varies significantly from culture to culture, but it is possible to make some generalizations. Julian Pilling makes a basic distinction between two types of sword-dance, the "linked" and the "clashed." The former activity involves the linking or interconnection of dancers by means of their swords, for the purpose of forming figures; the latter activity involves mimetic combat. The English sword-dances that survive to us combine the two uses of the sword, with an emphasis on linking. Nigel Allenby Jaffe succinctly describes the conventional features of the performance.

In the English sword dance (as also in many other countries), the participants are linked by holding each others' swords... They move quickly, turning under or stepping over the swords, making endless "cat's cradles" with their blades, turning again to reform their circle and, again, twisting in and out, to reach the climax of their performance as the swords are interlocked around the neck of the leader. The swords are suddenly withdrawn and the leader falls down "dead." In some cases, the decapitation is symbolized by the knocking-off of the leader's headgear.

The dance, as described, betrays a sacrificial structure whose violence is scarcely concealed. The "knot," or "rose," of swords which encircles the ambiguous leader/fool's neck symbolically eliminates him, at least until he is "resurrected"; the knot of swords also symbolizes the close connection between the other dancers as well as the containment of the potential for conflict between them. The linking of the dancers throughout the dance--hilt to blade tip--provides another containing mechanism; the total effect is of a ceremony which seems rather to suppress the representation of combat than to present it.


12Jaffe 54.
The northern English sword-dances which survive to us (whose forms are thought to be little changed since Tudor times) also include some sword clashing.\(^{13}\) This occurs both in the course of dancing the figures, or rounds, and in the sword fights that occur in the "dramatic" elements or dialogue sequences of these performances. However, some of the continental dances which were known and performed in England call for swordplay which more obviously imitates armed combat. In particular, a dance called the "matachin," which involves a combination of disguise, buffoonery, dance, and swordplay, seems to have included much in the way of actual combat. Chambers notes that the dance is found in Italy "where it is called the mattaccino, and in Spain (matachin), and under this name or that of the danse des bouffons it was known both in France and in England at the Renaissance."\(^{14}\) It seems that this type of the sword-dance could resemble the English version in staging a death-and-resurrection scene.\(^{15}\) But the matachin differs from the English variety in that it seems to have been intended for a primarily courtly milieu. Flavia Waters Champe writes that "The dance was introduced into plays and ballets as a divertissement. Molière made use of matassins in some of his comedies. It was a dance 'well known in France and Italy by the name of the dance of fools, or

\(^{13}\)Cecil Sharp's *The Sword Dances of Northern England* (East Ardsley, Yorkshire: EP Publishing, 1977) gathers together many of these dances, and forms the basis of the modern corpus.

\(^{14}\)Chambers, *Mediaeval Stage* 191.

\(^{15}\)Curt Sachs, *World History of the Dance*, trans. Bessie Shönberg (New York: Norton, 1963) 107, describes a broad category of dances which function as "resurrection charms" and claims that this motif is "at the base of the Italian death dances which spread among the people from Tuscany to Sicily under various names, such as the mattacino, baraban, or lucia." See also Jaffé 72.
Matachines.”

In his *Orchésographie* (1589), Thoinot Arbeau (pseudonym for Johan Tabouret) describes in detail a dance called the *bouffons* or matachins. This dance consists almost entirely of standard sword fighting movements (*feinte, estocade, taille haute et basse, revers haute et basse*) and simple processional dance steps. There is no linking of the swords, no final knot, no death and resurrection, and no dialogue. Following a pictorial description of the basic gestures of the “dance,” Capriol, the student persona in Tabouret’s dialogue, remarks, “Fencing has already acquainted me with all the gestures. Now tell me how to dance the buffens.” Obviously, the emphasis in this entertainment is on sword fighting. As described by Tabouret, the matachin was devised as an aristocratic entertainment which might be inserted into a larger performance of dance and ceremony. Accounts from the Office of the Revels from the reign of Elizabeth provide evidence of the performance of matachins at the English court.

The revenge masque in *The Revenger’s Tragedy* (as well as the one in *Antonio’s Revenge*) could be understood to evoke, at least briefly, the popular sword-dance of the period. However, the embedded violent performance may also refer to other contemporary incidents of staged swordplay; ironically, these incidents occur in actual court masques. It is rather ironic that swordplay, which many critics claim is antithetical to the ritual mode of

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18 Entries for 1582, 1584, quoted in Pilling 27.
masquing,¹⁹ formed an important part of several Jacobean masques. Indeed, the violent conclusion of The Revenger's Tragedy may well have been inspired by such masques. Swords were being displayed and wielded menacingly in masques by the date of composition of The Revenger's Tragedy. In Jonson's Hymenaei (1606), the nuptial rites are interrupted by the sudden appearance of eight men, all brandishing swords.

[T]hese represented the four humours and four affections, all gloriously attired, distinguished only by their several ensigns and colors, and dancing out of the stage, in their return at the end of their dance drew all their swords, offered to encompass the altar and disturb the ceremonies.²⁰

This masque constitutes an early Jonsonian experiment with representing disorder and violence within the masque performance, and it precedes those works of Jonson's which present fully developed anti-masques. The surface resemblance between the spectacle of the Four Humours in Hymenaei and the spectacle of the revengers in The Revenger's Tragedy is remarkable and, surely, significant. A similarly unruly intrusion in Jonson’s Haddington Masque, in which Cupid and twelve boys “discover” themselves and come forth “armed,”²¹ is described by Chamberlain as a “matachina.”²² Critics have noted that the dramatic masques of the early Jacobean period reveal the influence of the recent innovations in the court masque. Shakespeare’s The

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¹⁹Swordplay is the specific mode of the disorderly violence which is said to interrupt the harmony of the masque dance. Cf. Ewbank 443, Golding 45, Sutherland 113, Cornelia 97.


²¹Jonson, Complete Masques 112 (ll.134-35).

²²In a letter to D. Carleton, 11 February, 1608. See Nichols, Progresses . . . James I 2.189.
often cited as examples of this influence. And although it has been noted that *The Revenger’s Tragedy* stages a simplified version of a Tudor masque,\(^23\) it is possible that we actually have an inserted performance that imitates (and ironically subverts) an innovation of the contemporary masque, the embedded anti-masque violence.

The above discussion of possible referents for the violent masque demonstrates that the sudden display of arms need not be immediately interpreted as a gross violation of the conventions and decorum of the masque. Rather, for a suspended moment (depending on what the performers do with their swords before they turn them on the on-stage spectators) the spectacle may be interpreted as a conventional display of arms within an entertainment. That this interpretation of the spectacle is available is suggested in another revenge tragedy, Webster’s *The White Devil*: Lodovico, Gasparo, and others enter in disguise upon Vittoria, Zanche, and Flamineo. They announce, with meta-theatrical irony, “We have brought you a masque.” Flamineo, observing the weapons with which the intruders have overpowered him, responds, with equal irony, “A matachin it seems,/By your drawn swords” (V.vi.169-70).\(^24\) This scene in Webster places it beyond doubt that the sword-dance is a possible referent for the spectacle of disguised, armed performers in *The Revenger’s Tragedy*. The effect of this alternative referent is considerable, when one stops to consider the relationship of the violence to the larger spectacle. The violence need not signify only as an antithetical action which intrudes into the masque; it may

\(^{23}\)Sutherland 2.

also invoke the practice of staging mimetic or "played" violence within an entertainment. When the sword dance is admitted as a referent for the revenge masque, the violence constitutes a different sort of violation, which involves the bond of trust that the audience forms with performers under certain circumstances to adopt the gestures and trappings of violence while remaining within mutually prescribed limits for their use.

There is historical evidence that the sword dance produced a fair amount of cultural anxiety. Civic authorities throughout Europe periodically banned performances, fearing that they might incite social violence. Sachs notes that "In the year 1486 the city of Vittoria in Spain was forced to prohibit the sword dance because it involved too much bloodshed." 25 In 1487, in Cologne, the Blacksmiths' apprentices were allowed to perform their mummmings but were prohibited from performing the sword dance. 26 Such prohibitions and impositions of special conditions for performance continue throughout Europe into the seventeenth century. With the prohibitions on the carrying of arms imposed upon guildsmen and yeomen in this period, sword dances became increasingly involved in contemporary issues of social control. As a result of the restrictive measures that were exercised in cities and villages, many of the old dances were fundamentally altered, often by being performed with substitute equipment, such as hoops, sticks, axes, and other tools. Thus their potentially violent signifiers were obscured, and their ability to suggest or to incite disruptive activity was contained. 27

25Sachs 111.
26Jaffé 75.
27Jaffé 77.
English correspondence from Ireland from approximately 1600 articulates this awareness of the danger residing in the performance of weapons dances.

[T]hey dance . . . the matachine dance, with naked swords, which they make to meet in divers comely postures. And I have seen them often dance before the Lord Deputy in the houses of Irish lords; and it seemed to me dangerous sport to see so many naked swords so near the Lord Deputy and the chief commanders of the army in the hands of the Irish Kerne, who had lately been or were not unlike to prove rebels.28

The observation might easily have been made with regard to the spectacle of the masquers dancing before the court in The Revenger’s Tragedy. Along with the other historical evidence of contemporary unease with spectacular, mimetic violence, this document offers insight into the revenge masque as a cultural phenomenon; it urges us to consider the dramatic convention as a performance intended to intersect with contemporary social anxieties.

The above discussion suggests that the wielding of weapons in the course of this courtly performance is not immediately perceived as a breach of decorum and a sign of the subversion of the entertainment. The moment is ambiguous, fraught with tension, as a result of several different frames of reference that can be applied to the spectacle. The revelation of the weapons may or may not function as a sign that the entertainment has gone awry. In The Revenger’s Tragedy, it is only when the weapons are turned on the on-stage spectators that we have a literal, unequivocal breach of the principles of courtly ritual. Obviously, the murder of the spectators is antithetical to the ostensible function of the masque, which is to celebrate collectively the court and its ruler. The murder violates basic tenets of other sorts of performance as well, including those of the various forms of ordered combat. The audience observes this entertainment as they observe any other form of

28Quoted in Pilling 27.
mock-combat—with the expectation that the mimesis of aggression will remain just that: imitation—and that violence will not breach the boundaries of play and involve them. This is roughly the same expectation that exists for violent representations in the theatre, except that in theatre the barrier between the performance and the audience is also ontological. There is, in any case, a bond of trust between performers and spectators where mimetic violence is concerned that is, in this scene, radically violated. The result is an unsettling apprehension of the inadequacy of the mechanisms established to contain and limit both mimetic and real expressions of aggression.29

The significance of the revenge masque extends beyond the observation of the potential danger of mimetic violence. The inserted performance represents a collapse of boundaries, but the significance of this collapse requires some explication. We can begin “unpacking” the meaning of the violence by responding to a common (mis)reading of the revenge masque. Marie Cornelia interprets the violence of the revenge masque as raising the same issues as the violence in the play within the play in The Spanish Tragedy. Specifically, she believes that the revenge masque demonstrates the ambiguity of the boundaries separating illusion and reality: “[I]t is at the moment of death through the masque that the illusory, play-acting world of the revels is pitted against the real world of the play’s action. What the characters had complacently viewed as illusion suddenly leaps to life, dagger in hand.”30 While Cornelia stresses the similarity between the violent embedded masque and the violent embedded play, she also makes a specific comparison between the violence of the revenge masque and a

29This issue is taken up in considerable detail in chapter five, where swordplay is the specific cultural performance under examination.

30Cornelia 93.
conventional element of the court masque. She compares the assault on the masque audience to the point in the masque at which the masquers take out members of the audience to dance. She claims that both the revenge violence and the taking-out dance function as bridges between illusion and reality.\(^{31}\) The parallel that this critic observes between the murder and the dancing is particularly appropriate in the masque in *The Revenger's Tragedy*, because of the obvious pairing of masquers with victims that is set up in the scene. But Cornelia's emphasis on the collapse of "illusion" in both masque and revenge masque is imprecise. There is no illusion *per se* in masque dancing (nor, for that matter, in the ceremonious drawing of arms) as there is in theatrical performance.\(^{32}\) The dancing is formalized, aesthetic, but not illusory. One could argue that the masque produces illusions, insofar as it creates the fiction of alternate places and beings becoming apparent to the world of the court. But it is not illusion in the same sense as the contemporary theatre. As was mentioned earlier, the fiction of the masque is always more transparent than that which is produced in the stage play. In fact, Orgel has claimed that the end toward which the masque moves is "to destroy any sense of theater and include the whole court in its mimesis."\(^{33}\) Jerzy Limon agrees with Orgel's conception of the masque as a performance which actually discourages theatrical illusionism:

\(^{31}\)Cornelia 94.

\(^{32}\)As was acknowledged in chapter three (p. 64 n. 8), the notion of "illusion" in Elizabethan/Jacobean theatre is problematic. The term "illusion" is being used here in a specific way, and refers to the creation of a parallel, fictional world which the theatre audience observes and from which they remain essentially distinct.

I stress again that the separation between the fictitious world and the spectator's reality does not apply to the masque-in-performance. In other words, the masque spectacle is not autonomous after the fashion of a self-contained fiction performed before spectators who "belong" to a different reality, but is, rather, an institutionally autonomous performance of a ritual in which all present take part.\textsuperscript{34}

It is not the case, then, that the masquers "carry illusion into the sphere of reality"\textsuperscript{35} during the taking-out dance, because performers and spectators have occupied very much the same domain throughout the performance. Similarly, the violence which marks the union of performers and spectators in \textit{The Revenger's Tragedy} does not bring about a collapse in an autonomous theatrical illusion. The coming together of performers and spectators during a masque is a ritual convergence, a means of enacting social harmony, a means of collectively expressing consensus in the belief systems symbolically presented in the performance. The collapse, then, is more in the ability of the ritual occasion to exclude violence. The violence which marks the convergence of performers and spectators in \textit{The Revenger's Tragedy} is an acknowledgment (conscious or unconscious) of the instability of such ritual enactments of order, of the potential for violent reciprocity which persists in collective expressions of unity.

The violence of the first masque in \textit{The Revenger's Tragedy} is structurally very different from that which we see in Marston's revenge masques. The deep structure of sacrifice which informs Marston's creations is absent in this performance, as are the elements which cause us to associate the killings in Marston with rituals of criminalization and punishment. The violence which Vindice \textit{et al.} perpetrate does not converge on a single focus, in

\textsuperscript{34}Limon 62.

\textsuperscript{35}Cornelia 95.
the manner that the violence of the public execution converged upon the occupier (or occupiers) of the scaffold, or, for that matter, in the way that the sword-dancers converged upon the figure of the leader/fool. Rather, it is structured by pairings of figures, which, as just mentioned, cannot fail to evoke the taking-out of the audience for the revels. There are obvious differences between the revenge violence and the taking-out dance, aside from the bloodshed: in the play, the partnering occurs between male courtiers rather than between men and women, and the interaction is expressive of formalized aggression rather than formalized desire. Nonetheless, the similarity of structure cannot fail to suggest itself. Like Marston, the author of The Revenger's Tragedy is playing with moments of ritual importance in the masque, and he is exposing the instability in these moments. He focuses on different elements of the masque than Marston but, like Marston, reinforces a sense of the proximity of ritual to violence.

The revenge masque in The Revenger's Tragedy, like all of the other fatal performances discussed thus far, is informed by non-differentiation and doubling. As in the revenge masques of Marston, the performers become, through the concealment of their "real" identities in identical disguises, doubles of one another. Molly Smith observes, "This complete merging of personalities, where one character becomes indistinguishable from another, is metaphorically and powerfully presented in the final act of The Revenger's Tragedy in which 'the difference between one man and another dissolves into the similarities of choreographed movement.'" The visual non-differentiation of the revenge masque symbolically represents the doubling between characters that is evident throughout the play. One could argue that

the masque disguises reinforce the fact that each group of co-conspirators operates as a unified entity, a group acting “as one”; however, the behaviour of the second group of masquers ironically demonstrates the specious nature of this visual unity.\textsuperscript{37} The doubling of the actual performance, in turn, demonstrates the different possible effects of non-differentiation. Despite their outward resemblance, the two masques are obviously carried out differently and achieve different ends. In the double masque we see the playwright toying with paradox, with the concurrence of similarity and difference.

The pairing of masquers with spectators in the first masque presents a situation in which the tension between the perpetrators of the violence is entirely diffused. In the balance of masquers and spectators, each murderer is provided with his own victim. The situation excludes competitive aggression within the self-designated group because the opposition is clearly defined and the rivalry is quelled. This feature of the masque is overtly contrasted with the fatal rivalry that defines the second masque performed by Ambitioso, Supervacuo, Spurio, etc. The latter performance is an imitation (an unsuccessful one) of the first masque but does not recognize itself as such. The first masque, created as an imitation or double of the second masque, becomes the model which the second must follow. Paradoxically, it is the fact that the two performances are set up as mirror images of one other (Vindice says that he and his co-conspirators are to “take pattern/ Of all those suits, the colour, trimming, fashion,/ E’en to an undistinguish’d hair almost”), which emphasizes their differences. The most striking and important difference

\textsuperscript{37}Non-differentiation is also emphasized in the composition of both groups of masquers and of the onstage audience. In each of these groups there are unidentified “nobles,” anonymous figures who have no identity and no particular function other than to increase the number of the group to four. Their only role is to provide greater symmetry between the groups.
involves the nature of the violence. In the second masque, the violence is inward-directed as there is no external object for it. Once the revengers discover that their intended victims are already dead, the bond or sense of common purpose among them disintegrates. Their similarity becomes threatening again. The fatal rivalry which results is represented with remarkable dramatic economy.

Super. Then I proclaim myself; now I am duke.
Ambit. Thou duke? Brother, thou liest. [Stabs Supervacuo.]
Spurio. Slave, so dost thou.
[Stabs Ambitioso.]
4th Noble. Base villain, hast thou slain my lord and master?
[Stabs Spurio.] (V.iii.53-55)

The violence which they have plotted is the only thing that unites them, and once they discover the “labour” which they have been “saved,” their individual (and parallel) ambitions emerge. Ironically, their differences emerge in a spectacle of non-differentiation and are predicated on the simultaneous desire to occupy the same place and power. The mimetic nature of their desire is clear at this point, as is the mimetic nature of their violence. Each claim to power is a challenge to and an imitation of the claim that precedes it, and each claim is made through a violent elimination of the rival/model. The dramatic treatment is almost schematic, and yet it successfully represents the complex systems of rivalry that propel the plot as a whole. Girard writes that

Two desires converging on the same object are bound to clash. Thus, mimesis coupled with desire leads automatically to conflict. However, men always seem half blind to this conjunction, unable to perceive it as the cause of rivalry. In human relationships words like sameness and similarity evoke an image of harmony. If we have the same tastes and like the same things, surely we are bound to get along. But what will happen when we share the same desires? Only the major
dramatists and novelists have partly understood and explored this form of rivalry.38

This scene sets up the difference between two types of violence in the course of two ritual performances. The significance of the violence is determined according to the way in which each ritual is carried out. Specifically, the meaning of the violence is determined according to the success or failure of the ritual. In the first masque, the objectives are achieved. The ritual, as the revengers have formulated it, is successful and complete. The violence itself represents that completion. The second masque, on the other hand, is interrupted, incomplete. The stage directions specify that the dying Lussurioso utters a groan "At which, they all start out of their measure, and turning toward the table, they find the audience all to be murdered" (V.iii.48-49). If the first revenge masque is carried out according to Vindice’s design,

...ent’ring first, observing the true form,
Within a strain or two we shall find leisure
To steal our swords out handsomely,
And when they think their pleasure sweet and good,
In midst of all their joys, they shall sigh blood (V.ii.18-22),

then the violence is seamlessly integrated into the larger aesthetic of the performance. The second masque, on the other hand, breaks down, and the violence which ensues represents a collapse in the performance and the failure of the ritual to achieve its violent fusion with the spectators. The distinction between the two masques corresponds to a distinction between the two groups of revengers that has existed throughout the play. In this we have some evidence to corroborate the traditional critical concern with the relation of the inserted masque to the larger whole of the play. The group composed of Ambitioso and Supervacuo are unsuccessful in their earlier plot to kill

38Girard 146.
Lussurioso. The brothers' plan to have a sentence of death carried out on their stepbrother, Lussurioso, while he is in prison backfires, and their own brother, Junior, is sent to the block in his stead. This failed murder stands in direct contrast with Vindice and Hippolito's successful murder of the duke. Interestingly, the revengers are foiled in the earlier incident by another instance of doubling (Lussurioso and Junior double one another as murderer-sons) which they are unable to recognize or anticipate. They are also tripped up by language which, because of its ability to incorporate double meanings or dual referents, eludes their control. (The word "brother," with the various fraternal relationships it signifies, is at the centre of the misunderstanding which sends Junior to the block.) The result of the murderers' encounters with rival doubles is typically a redirection of the violence onto themselves.

To miss the emphatic differentiation of the two enactments of violence in Act five is to miss the point of the scene. When Molly Smith claims that the last act constitutes a sort of anti-masque, and that "in appearance and action, the masquers are indistinguishable from each other," she ignores the significance of their differences; she fails to see that the dramatic emphasis is not only on repetition but also on the difference in repetition. The violence of the first set of revengers is characterized by a ritual closure whereas the violence of the second set of revengers marks the interruption of the ritual. This quality of completion and self-containment confers on the first revenge masque a perverse legitimacy that the second one lacks. Although the

Smith 129.

Smith makes an error in her discussion of this scene when, perhaps recalling the play from memory, she confuses the order of events: "[T]he second masque of the last scene simply repeats the action of the previous one; Vindice and his masquers come prepared to kill those already murdered by the first set of masquers" (129).
violence is, in a literal sense, antithetical to the practice and spirit of the court masque, the performance still achieves the objectives or requirements of ritual—a rapprochement of all the (surviving) participants and, eventually, a stronger sense of communion and consensus. The violence of the second performance marks it as wholly antithetical to ritual practices, especially those of the court masque.

It is possible to see both of these inserted masques as well as the ensuing action (Vindice’s and Hippolito’s downfall and the establishment of Antonio’s power) as participating in a larger ritual structure. The “blazing star” which appears at the beginning of act five, scene three represents the presence of the divine in the world of the play. The significance of the star is obvious, but the seriousness with which it is employed is much controverted in the critical history of the drama. Without entering this discussion directly, we can say that the presence of this theatrical signifier confers an alternate logic on all of the performances staged in the last scenes. Taken as a sign that the dramatic action represents the workings of Providence, the differences between the two violent masques disappear, and the audience is left with a sense of their common purpose in fulfilling God’s wrath upon the sinful court. As Antonio remarks of the elimination of so many evil, ambitious figures, “Just is the law above!” (V.iii.91). However, it is important to consider the other mechanisms which affect the meaning of the violence. The legitimacy that characterizes the revenge murders perpetrated by Vindice and Hippolito collapses in the final moments of the play, when they disclose their responsibility for the death of the duke. Through Antonio’s rapid passing of judgment (motivated by fears

41Lussurioso highlights the symbolic meaning of the star—its association with the workings of Divine Providence or Fortune and the downfall of princes: “But yet they say, whom art and learning weds,/ When stars wear locks, they threaten great men’s heads” (V.iii.22-23).
for his own safety) the revengers are criminalized. Vindice's last speech sustains the ambiguities that persistently mark his character: he demonstrates a resolve, in facing judgment, which is at once stoic and glib. His full confession of guilt for the other murders distinguishes him from the other revengers; he is unique in the play in preparing for a "good" death. But the confession also signifies a taking-on of the role of criminal, of enemy to society's order. The cultural force of the law collapses the difference between the ritually "pure" and well-ordered violence of Vindice and the disordered, uncontrollable violence of the other revengers. This ending imposes a sense of closure which is at once aesthetic and moral. But it is a resolution which is not wholly convincing or successful, as a plethora of critical debate has demonstrated. If one approaches the play as a text inscribed by many signifying practices, rather than as a closed and coherent artifact, then the gestures made within the text to resolve its contradictions recede in importance, and we can concentrate on the significance of paradox and irresolution. The violent double masque in The Revenger's Tragedy escapes determined significance, but it does suggest some strategies for imposing meaning upon inherently undetermined phenomena of human interaction.

In Women Beware Women we again find the association that is made in The Revenger's Tragedy between masquing and licence or misrule. Of all the revenge plays discussed, Women Beware Women offers the most cynical representation of masquing. Whereas the revenge masques in other plays sustain some sense of ritual solemnity, this play decisively undercuts the dignity of the masquing occasion. The representation of the masque is obviously satirical, just as the references to masquing are ironic and misanthropic. This cynicism with regard to the masque is not isolated; rather it
is one manifestation of a pervasive scepticism in the play about the purported
function of courtly ceremony and the purposes for which it is actually
employed. The play demonstrates an anti-court attitude similar to that in The
Revenger's Tragedy; however, the critique of the courtly milieu is not limited
to the moral failings of its members. Rather, it extends to the practices which
comprise and regulate the culture. In other words, the play not only suggests
that the masquers are corrupt, but also that the masque is itself a corrupt form
of ritual. Because the anti-court bias is so strong in this play, the violence in
the revenge masque is less ambiguous than in the revenge masques discussed
above. Violence is, in this play, less a site of contested meaning and more
obviously a sign of corruption.

The embedded masque in Women Beware Women includes some of the
most familiar and conventional elements of the Jacobean court masque, but it
represents them in an inverted manner. For example, the deities who
conventionally preside over the eventual triumph or epiphany of the masque
here embody malevolence and vice. Also, scenic effects which ought to inspire
awe and admiration absurdly and horribly fail. Furthermore, gestures of
tribute and propitiation, also highly conventional, conceal poison and
murderous violence. For all this obvious inversion, the revenge masque is not
only an inverted representation which reinforces by contrast the theatre
audience's sense of the dignity and harmony of actual masques. The revenge
masque also demonstrates subtle continuities with the Jacobean court masque.
The violence is not only opposed to the conventional action of the Stuart
masque but also signifies as the realization of a potential that exists in the
masquing occasion. The following discussion will demonstrate how the play
offers a critique of this theatricalized ritual of the courtly milieu.
This revenge masque includes indicators of what the proper function of ritual ought to be. It stages a sacrificial ceremony—the propitiation of Juno/Livia by the nymph/Isabella—which is supposedly performed in order to resolve the rivalry of two swains for the nymph’s love. The rites performed for Juno, Girard would argue, substitute for another, more violent, act of propitiation which serves to quell temporarily dangerous rivalries: “Religion in its broadest sense . . . must be another term for that obscurity that surrounds man’s efforts to defend himself by curative or preventative means against his own violence” [Girard’s emphasis].

Obviously, however, the sacrificial mechanism that is evident in the masque scenario is not intended to succeed. None of the participants desires to resolve the conflict through sacrifice. This ritual is performed in order that it may fail. Certainly no one intends for the masque to be “played out” according to the argument which is read prior to the performance: The mimesis of amorous rivalry will not be resolved in sacrifice—it will be supplanted by real violence and death. Each performer has his or her own violent scenario in mind; and while no single revenger foresees the total carnage which occurs, all are consciously involved in subverting the scripted ritual. That script itself, however, reminds the audience of the curative (order-imposing) function of ritual and highlights the distance of this revenge masque from that function.

This observation of the deliberate failure of the masque to achieve ritual effect can be countered by an argument for the efficacy of the masque as a vehicle of divine retribution. Like the double masque in The Revenger’s Tragedy, it succeeds in bringing about order in the end despite the disorderly objectives of its various participants, and the violence is wholly effective in
punishing and eliminating the wicked characters. Certainly the masque is informed by a logic that escapes both the performers and the on-stage audience. As numerous critics have observed, the masque enacts a "poetic justice" upon the revengers. The violence suffered by each victim is somehow appropriate—it reflects the sins he or she has committed. A. L. and M. K. Kirstner summarize the poetic correspondence between deed and punishment.

The masque itself provides ironic retribution for all participants: Guardiano, who liked to set traps for others, is caught in one of his own making. Hippolito is killed by Cupid's arrows and also by self-slaughter, running upon a sword, the means by which he murdered Leontio. Isabella dies from a lapful of burning treasure given by Juno/Livia from her brother. The Duke is killed by Brancha's poison, and Brancha kisses the poison from his lips before finishing the job by drinking from the same cup. Livia the bawd as marriage goddess is an appropriate symbol for a society that replaces love, honor, and cherish with buy and sell, and she dies aptly from the poisoned incense of a supplicant and follower.

Because the obvious patterning of the masque violence suggests that a cruel hand of justice operates through the embedded performance, critics have argued for the presence of the sacred in the ritual. Cornelia, for example, writes that "the 'purposes mistook' are a sign of the sure hand of God punishing sinners." According to this argument, the seeming descent into chaos is actually proof of the moral coherence of the universe. God does punish sinners through scourges and purges. While some critics contest the

43Tricomi 128, Cornelia 80, Potter 369.


argument about the morality of the play's resolution, most acknowledge the aesthetic coherence of the deaths.46

The limitation with this interpretation of the revenge masque as the fulfillment of divine retribution is that it precludes discussion of the cultural significance of the violent performance. The masque becomes a dramatic device which frames the neat resolution of providential design and, consequently, other elements of the representation pass unanalysed. The search for moral patterns obscures insights about the specific practices through which the courtly culture regulated itself. The following discussion will elucidate meanings other than those which are drawn out in the argument for the masque's moral coherence and will argue that, through its violence, the revenge masque offers a critique of the masque as a recreative and regulatory performance.

As in The Revenger's Tragedy, the theatre audience of Women Beware Women is prepared for the representation of masquing that it eventually observes. This occurs partly through a series of corrupted ceremonies which precede the masque. The corruption in these other ceremonies is more a result of the participants' corrupt and anti-social natures than it is a reflection of inherent weakness in the ceremonial forms themselves. The Duke's procession through the city, "a yearly custom and solemnity,/ Religiously observed by th' Duke and State" (I.iii.82-83),47 ought to display the magnificence and the apparent virtue of the prince to his


subjects. The Duke actually uses the occasion as an opportunity to find sexual partners among his subjects. Later in the play, a game of chess played by Livia and the Mother becomes a metaphor for the scheming games by which the courtly characters obtain their desires. As the women play out their game of strategy, the Duke plays out his game of seduction on Bianca. While the chess game is neither a collective ritual nor a performance in the same sense as the masque or other courtly ceremonies that are staged, it is a form of aristocratic "play" that is formalized, rule-bound—a private social ritual. In discussing this scene, one critic calls chess "a sublimated form of violence," making explicit the analogies between the game and the strategies of military combat.48 Because the game is staged as a parallel action to the rape, it is infected by a corrupted, negative violence. Still later in the play, the procession of Bianca and the Duke to their nuptials is interrupted by a blasting sermon by the Cardinal, which highlights the desecration of the ceremonial through which they seek to consecrate and legitimize their sinful and corrupt relationship.

Must marriage, that immaculate robe of honour,
That renders virtue glorious, fair, and fruitful
To her great master, be now made the garment
Of leprosy and foulness? Is this penitence
To sanctify hot lust? What is it otherways
Than worship done to devils? Is this the best
Amends that sin can make after her riots?
As if a drunkard, to appease Heaven's wrath,
Should offer up his surfeit for a sacrifice:
If that be comely, then lust's offerings are
On wedlock's sacred altar. (IV.iii.14-24)

Not only is the audience made aware of the ceremony as a corruption of a sacred ritual, but the murder that precedes and makes possible the marriage is

48Potter 371.
brought to the surface. The revenge masque occurs after this series of courtly games and ceremonies, by which time the theatre audience is aware of the irony which pervades the representation of courtly splendor and power.

The theatre audience is also prepared for the violence in the masque by what the characters say in anticipation of the performance. Guardiano, the deviser of the nuptial masque, describes the opportunity for violence that the ceremony provides in a way that deliberately invokes Supervacuo's speech in *The Revenger's Tragedy* about the masque as "treason's licence."

> Here's an occasion offered that gives anger  
> Both liberty and safety to perform  
> Things worth the fire it holds, without the fear  
> Of danger, or of law; for mischiefs acted  
> Under the privilege of a marriage triumph  
> At the Duke's hasty nuptials, will be thought  
> Things merely accidental--all's by chance,  
> Not got of their own natures. (IV.ii.159-66)

There are differences in emphasis between this invocation of masquing and that which is articulated in *The Revenger's Tragedy*. In the earlier tragedy, Supervacuo remarks, "'Tis murder's best face when a vizard's on" (V.i.182). In *Women Beware Women* the specific association between violence and disguise is not emphasized. The masque is not constituted so much as a cover or disguise for violence as it is an occasion in which violence may find an excuse. The distinction is subtle but important. The masque offers a "privilege" for violence, Guardiano says; this "privilege" results from the status of the occasion as one given over to special behaviour and rules. The speech is a tacit acknowledgment of what Turner calls the "liminality" of ritual and of the special licence that liminality provides. The liminal phase of ritual may involve anti-structure, inversion, temporary release from normative structures which are typical of "everyday" experience. The performed misrule of the antimasque and the frequently reported
disorderliness of masque revellers belong respectively to the classifications of scripted and unscripted liminal behaviour. Turner stresses that the licence which is sometimes granted during ritual occasions is generally not subversive, that "Liminal phenomena tend to be ultimately enfunctional even when seemingly 'inversive' for the working of the social structure."\textsuperscript{49} However, the masque sequence in \textit{Women Beware Women} suggests darker implications of the "privileges" of ritual performance; the slaughter constitutes a fatal loss of control of the society's escalating hostilities and rivalries. Furthermore, the violence is not contained or quelled by the frame of performance but only by the absolute thoroughness of its reciprocity.

Despite the fact that Guardiano's speech suggests an inherent potential for "mischief" (or violence) in the liminal space and time of ritual, it is not so much the ritual dimension of masquing as its theatricality that is implicated in the violence. The various aspects of the masque which can be called "theatrical" are discussed in the remainder of this chapter. To summarize briefly, such things as scenic effects which depend upon clever stagecraft, narrative structure based on conflict and resolution, and the representation of conventional, fictional characters all contribute to what we are calling the masque's theatricality. All of these aspects are present in this revenge masque and all are necessary to the violence which is carried out. As subsequent discussion will demonstrate, this particular representation of masquing suggests that the masque which was typically performed in the Jacobean aristocratic milieu was informed by a corrupt theatricality. The violence in the play is the visible sign of that corruption.

\textsuperscript{49}Turner 54-55.
"Women Beware Women" differs from other revenge tragedies in that it actually attempts to emulate some of the sophisticated theatrical effects that the masque had achieved. Advanced mechanization and elaborate pyrotechnics were conventional, even essential, features of the Jacobean court masques by the time this play was performed. Fantastic moveable sets, sudden revelations, brilliant lighting effects, were all expected and anticipated by the courtly audience. In that this scene seeks to evoke (if not exactly to imitate) some of the spectacular visual effects of real masques, it resembles more closely the masques in plays such as The Tempest or The Maid's Tragedy, or episodes inspired by masques such as the descent of Jupiter in Shakespeare's Cymbeline (1609), than it does other revenge masques which, textual evidence suggests, restrict their spectacles to costume, music and dance. This dramatic masque is only a "sketch" or "shorthand" representation of a hypothetical court performance. It lacks many of the standard features of Jacobean masques. For one thing, it would have been performed without the elaborate perspective set with changeable scenes, or scena ductilis, which was a standard element of the masques at Whitehall after 1611, the year that Oberon was performed. The show does not seem to call for any set pieces other than the altar of Juno. In fact, the special effects that Women Beware Women presents are determined by the physical resources and limitations of the public or private stage. Nonetheless, the concentration of many different special effects in this scene strongly suggests the typical mode of the court masque.

The descent of Juno, probably the most remarkable effect in the dramatic scene, evokes a standard convention in the masques designed by Inigo Jones. The revelation of deities or masquers in the upper part of the masque's "scene" and their descent from above by mechanical means were
effects that were common in Jacobean masques. *Hymenaei, The Haddington Masque, The Golden Age Restored,* and *The Vision of Delight* are some masques by Jonson and Jones which feature one or multiple revelations and descents (or ascents). In addition to Juno’s descent, some sort of effect is called for to achieve the “burning treasure” which the goddess drops on the nymph.  

Fire has hellish associations in the symbolic traditions of Christianity; but it is also associated in the classical iconography of the masque with deities and celestial bodies. Indeed, fire is associated with Juno herself in at least one Jacobean masque. In *Hymenaei,* when Juno is discovered in the upper part of the scene, she is accompanied by fire. According to Jonson’s description, “Above her the region of fire with a continual motion was seen to whirl circularly . . .” (ll. 202). The similarities between dramatic representation of Juno in *Women Beware Women* and in *Hymenaei* are striking.

The sophisticated scenic effects of the masque contribute to the magnificence which the performance was supposed to demonstrate. The ingenuity of the devices, the beauty of their realization, and the sophistication of the engineering that brought them about, were priorities for audiences, for

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50 The Yale copy of the 1657 octavo, which is the earliest extant edition of the play, includes a late seventeenth century annotation which says that Juno “Throws flaming gold upon Isabella, who falls dead.” Mulryne and other editors include this annotation as a stage direction. See J. R. Mulryne, “Annotations in Some Copies of Two New Playes by Thomas Middleton, 1657,” *The Library* 30 (1975): 217-21. That annotation, along with Livia’s allusion to burning treasure, strongly suggests some sort of pyrotechnic effects would be used in staging the scene.

51 Critics and editors have noted the resemblance of this stage effect to Zeus’s treatment of Danae.

52 Jonson, *Complete Masques* 83.
the devisors, and also for the persons who were represented in and honoured by the masque. The awe that these effects inspired served an immediate political end; the display was a tribute to the individual or individuals being particularly honoured by the performance (e.g., the monarch and royal family) and also, by extension, a tribute to the greater aristocratic community, for the splendour was interpreted as a reification of their magnificence. Graham Parry discusses the concept of magnificence and its circulation in courtly entertainment.

Magnificence was not simply sumptuousness of display on a scale that only princes could afford; it contained a moral element too, for as Spenser wrote in the Letter prefaced to The Faerie Queene, it is the perfection of all the virtues, and hence the Jacobean masque involved the celebration of ideal virtues which were identified dramatically with the King’s majesty which was present at the court.53

While the results of the masque makers’ efforts captured the interest and admiration of a larger public than the privileged courtly spectators, Jacobean theatre audiences by no means universally interpreted the masque’s lavish theatrical displays as straightforward manifestations of the King’s and the court’s virtue. We have already seen how in The Revenger’s Tragedy the masque is represented as an occasion predisposed to lasciviousness and sexual violence. This representation reflects an attitude that had some currency in Puritan circles and in portions of the population which were generally excluded from the courtly milieu.54 In Women Beware Women we see represented another negative perception of the masque, namely the sinful extravagance of its artificial splendour. Cornelia has written extensively about the use of the masque by playwrights who wished to castigate the evils

53Parry 41. See also Strong 21-22, Orgel, Illusion 37-38, on magnificence.

54See Tricomi 96-99.
of court life: "Extravagant, artificial, amorous, ephemeral, and vain, it was the antithesis of all the homely, natural virtues pastoralists so loved to extol." We are less interested in the moral lesson to be extracted from the masque than in the relationship that is formed between magnificent spectacle and concealed acts of violence. In Women Beware Women, the sensational theatricality of the masque is already associated with corruption and/or immorality before it becomes literally violent. The violence is constituted as a natural extension or a logical outcome of the extravagant shows. Insidious violence is not only the antithesis of magnificence, but magnificence in extremis.

In addition to its magnificent visual effects, Women Beware Women reflects another "theatrical" aspect of the court masque. The play emphasizes the tendency of the masque to develop a quasi-narrative or quasi-dramatic situation. In masques such as Mercury Vindicated from the Alchemists at Court (1616) and Pleasure Reconciled to Virtue (1618), the movement from raucous disorder to harmony and beauty occurs within a narrative framework. In both of these masques, the transition from disorder to order is protracted and is predicated on the struggle or competition between a figure representing virtue and some opposed figures of vice. In Women Beware Women, the scripted masque (as opposed to the one which is performed) has a similar dramatic structure. The "argument" which the Duke reads summarizes the intended action.

55Cornelia 13.
There is a nymph that haunts the woods and springs,
In love with two at once, and they with her.
Equal it runs; but to decide these things,
The cause to mighty Juno they refer,
She being the marriage goddess. The two lovers
They offer sighs, the nymph a sacrifice,
All to please Juno, who by signs discovers
How the event shall be; so that strife dies.
Then springs a second; for the man refused
Grows discontent, and out of love abused
He raises Slander up, like a black fiend,
To disgrace th’other, which pays him i’th’end. (V.ii.33-44)

This summary suggests that Middleton conceives of the masque as a series of conflicts and resolutions. This scenario is actually unlike those of the extant masques of the period in that it bases its eventual resolution upon retribution rather than reconciliation and transcendence. In this sense the “argument” (or plot summary) resembles the action of Women Beware Women more than it does any known court masque. However, with its nymph, its disagreeing swains, its presiding deity and allegorical anti-masque figure, the scenario bears a marked resemblance to many courtly entertainments of the period. Insofar as the violence in the masque is facilitated by the scripted, quasi-dramatic conflict, that theatrical element is constituted as both unstable and dangerous. Like the spectacular stage effects, then, the narrative structure of the masque is implicated in the overall corruption of the ceremonial.

The content of a masque, however entertaining and spectacular, was intended to be instructive. Masque representations were typically emblematic

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56Hymen, Juno and Cupid had long presided over betrothal and marriage celebrations and they had acquired a number of allegorical significances which are detailed in the Renaissance mythographies such as Cesare Ripa’s Iconologia (Padua, 1611). The rivalry of the swains for the hand of the nymph with the intervention of the deity to resolve the conflict is a conventional device that had long been used as a vehicle for expounding the competing claims of different virtues or for debating the relative merits of different philosophies. It is used by Sidney in The Lady of May (1578).
or allegorical and possessed moral and political significances. *Women Beware Women* draws attention to what Jonson calls in *Hymenaei* the "more removed mysteries" of the masque's content.57 Juno herself offers an interpretation of the emblematic "sign" by which she intends to confer favour on one of the suitors, and this moralized interpretation might have been taken from Cesar Ripa's *Iconologia* (1611).

He of those twain which we determine for you
Love's arrows shall wound twice; the later wound
Betokens love in age; for so are all
Whose love continues firmly all their life-time
Twice wounded at their marriage; else affection
Dies when youth ends. (109-14)

In its execution, the device proves fatally literal, which ironically undercuts its symbolic dimension. The other violent acts are similarly emblematic, but their didactic functions are also lost on the performance's victimized participants. The dramatic masque as a whole imitates the emphasis on moralized classical and hermetic learning which Jonson and others infused into the court masque, but violence undercuts the allegory and makes the moralizing ironically ineffective. The scene suggests the inaccessibility or irrelevance of the allusive content of the Jonsonian masque to the court audience.58

57Jonson, *Complete Masques* 76.

58David Lindley writes that "the hermetic allusiveness of the iconography of the masque, though in theory it should 'work its end upon the senses' of the beholders whether they comprehend it or not . . . was not necessarily received perceptively by its aristocratic audience . . . . It is indeed symptomatic that there is scarcely any contemporary comment on the iconology of masques, but abundant testimony to the splendour of the 'outward show.' "Introduction," *The Court Masque*, ed. Lindley (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1984): 6.
The highly elaborated representation of this masque is essential to the critique of contemporary courtly performance which the play effects. The inserted masque combines spectacular theatricality with a tone of high solemnity ultimately to suggest the incompatibility of these qualities. The play suggests that the masque is a corrupted form of ritual, and the violence is a literal representation of that inherent corruption. The violence is, then, not only an inversion of the normal outcome of the masque but also its persistent potential. The violence represents the failure of the masque to achieve the effects of either ritual or theatre. This judgment of the masque may seem harsh, particularly in the assertion that the form fails to achieve ritual status. In fact, there is some consensus among those who write about the Jacobean masque that it did fulfill at least some of the functions of collective ritual. The often repeated argument is that through its speeches, music, dance and stage effects, the masque achieved a vision of harmony and beauty which, supposedly, already inhered in the rarefied culture. The performance provided the courtiers with an idealized vision of themselves which they then might aspire to realize. Scholars mostly concur that the

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60 Roy Strong expresses the ritual dimension of court festivals unambiguously: “[I]n its fullness of artistic creation [this] was a ritual in which society affirmed its wisdom and asserted its control over the world and its destiny” (Art and Power 40-41). Similar positions on the masque are espoused by Parry 44, Sacks 470-71, Limon 62-67. See also the discussion of the masque as ritual in ch. 3 above.
model of ritual to which the masque conforms is not one which presupposes the presence of the sacred in the performance. It is not ritual in the sense that it involves "beliefs in invisible beings or powers regarded as the first and final causes of all effects."

The invocations of occult forces and supernatural powers in Stuart masques are generally mediated by their literary and allegorical dimensions. The masque is rather seen to resemble Moore and Myerhoff's category of secular ritual, which does not directly involve religious observance but which does affirm beliefs that are held to be unquestionable. The masque typically enacts a vision of social harmony and order, an idealization of the status quo, and it presents that vision as being sacred in its unquestionability. Middleton seems to challenge the claims for the masque's ritual "seriousness" by presenting a representative example where unquestionable tenets that ought to be reinforced, such as those concerning the moral basis of the society, are radically undercut. The reason critics have traditionally provided for the failure of the ritual is that none of the participants has any commitment to the principles that the masque ought to reinforce. None of the institutions that ought to be upheld in the ceremony--marriage, religion, the existing social hierarchy and power structure--are respected by the participants except as they permit selfish personal gain. However, it is not only the morality of the participants that is being critiqued in this representation. The violent collapse of the

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61 Parry does suggest the sacred aspect of the masque ceremony: "The religious analogy is not inappropriate, for both mass and masque solemnly and ceremonially reveal a mystery about the higher powers that operate in the world" (44).

62 Turner 79. See also Gluckman 231.

63 Moore and Myerhoff 3-4.
performance has as much to do with the corrupt form of the ritual as with its corrupt participants.

This episode parodies the Jacobean masque's dependence on spectacular effects, quasi-dramatic structure, and a highly conventional and esoteric repertoire of situations and figures, and suggests that these elements debase the attempt to enact collective consensus. While the symbolic material of ritual ought to constitute "representational compressed statements of principles or belief, infused with the power of the referent ("Fact")," these representations are for the participants fictions such as theatre presents, and deceptive fictions at that. The ritual resolution of social conflict is impossible because the performance has been corrupted by duplicitous theatricality. The violence which is represented is not only an ironic antithesis of the customary resolution of a masque; it is also an extreme (and literal) representation of the dangers involved in the court masque's theatrical destabilizing of the ritual mode.

The purpose of this revenge masque is not to suggest that theatre is a "corruption" of ritual, or that theatre is always and necessarily a more dangerous or unstable mode of performance than ritual. It is unlikely that Middleton would seek to privilege ritual performance at the expense of theatre. There are important differences between the two types of performance, which Middleton would have recognized, working as he did in both forms. Richard Schechner has postulated that all performance, including ritual and theatre, operates within the dyadic continuum of efficacy--entertainment. Ritual activity is associated more with efficacy and

64Morgan and Brask 191
theatre with entertainment.65 If it is true that ritual is more immediately “efficacious” than theatre in reinforcing social structures or systems of belief, this is not to say that theatrical performance may not itself engage in social/political/religious issues and, in doing so, either reinforce existing conditions or effect change. Morgan and Brask assert that theatre corresponds to the function of ritual in many ways, and that historically it arose as a cultural reinforcement of the social order at the level of complex “state societies.” For Turner too, theatre is always engaged with the social dramas that affect a community or a state:

The stage drama, when it is meant to do more than entertain—though entertainment is always one of its vital aims—is a metacommentary, explicit or implicit, witting or unwitting, on the major social dramas of its social context (wars, revolutions, scandals, institutional changes). Not only that, but its message and its rhetoric feed back into the latent processual structure of the social drama and partly account for its ready ritualization.66

Theatre is one of many types of performance which affect social order, social control, and communication between groups. But one important difference which may be postulated between ritual and theatre is that theatre permits interrogation or contestation of extant belief systems, of dominant discourses and the power structures they support, beyond what is possible in either religious or secular rituals. Theatre is still subject to the restrictions or constraints of the cultural environment, as in the mechanisms of censorship and repression which control expression, but the theatrical mode is such that its efficacy is less immediately tied to the function of reinforcing the social or cosmological order. If we return to the court masque, we can observe that while it definitely belongs more to the category of ritual than theatre, it still

65Schechner, Essays 75.

66Turner 107-08.
typically contains many elements that can be called theatrical. We also know that masques frequently engaged in the political and social issues of the day; the diplomatic, military, and trade policies of the monarch and the government and the *mores* and habits of the court were alluded to in order to question them as well as to celebrate them. The representation of the masque in *Women Beware Women*, however, does not emphasize the reflexive and reforming aspect of the masque's theatricality. Rather, it presents a performance which displays a spectacular theatricality whose ostensible function is to praise and affirm the existing power structure and whose actual function is destructive and chaotic. It is a performance which deliberately fails to establish a ritualized sense of unity and consensus amongst its participants, and yet it also fails to demonstrate a productive incorporation of dissension.

Duplicitous violence forms the essence of the satirical treatment of the masque, insofar as it is constituted as the natural outcome of a performance which is capable of neither the affirmative and unifying functions of ritual nor the reflexive and analytical functions of theatre. This performance celebrates neither marriage, nor kingship, nor a community's harmonious integration. It rather celebrates an amoral creative energy—a capacity to shape, structure and embellish experience independent of any moral or ethical constraints. Most of the characters in the play possess this amoral or immoral creativity, and the masque is their combined (but not collective) effort to achieve aesthetic as well as practical control over their environment. The violence is the consequence of this transformation of experience into

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aesthetic performance which has no productive effect beyond the immediate and private gratification of the performers themselves.

The representation of masquing in *Women Beware Women* is, on the whole, satirical and negative. It also strongly suggests a critical attitude toward the culture that produced the masque. *Women Beware Women* does demonstrate the anti-court bias that Tricomi and others detect in it, but it does so not only by representing some of the vices conventionally ascribed to the courtly milieu; the play also represents the inherent corruption of one of that culture's key ordering mechanisms. While the violence is the key signifier of that corruption, it retains some of the ambiguity or doubleness that characterizes revenge violence generally, including the violence which concludes *The Revenger's Tragedy*. Depending on one's perspective, the violence takes on different meanings. When considered simply as a theatrical device, the violence can be more readily moralized. It can be interpreted as proof of the presence of the sacred in the world of the play. The patterning of the violence identifies it as a sign of divine retribution or higher justice. But when considered in the context of the ritual of which it forms a part, the violence signifies as a dangerous collapse or failure in the performance, albeit an inevitable one. As with the earlier revenge plays, this performance offers a perspective on the instability of meaning which characterizes violence. More importantly, it functions as a window through which to observe the instability of one of the key ordering mechanisms of Jacobean courtly culture.
CHAPTER 5

"Poisoned" Swordplay
in some Elizabethan and Jacobean Tragedies

Swordplay has featured prominently in many of the revenge performances discussed to this point, but has been interpreted only in terms of the plays or masques in which it appears. Weapons are drawn and put to use in embedded performances other than court masques and plays, and these episodes remain to be discussed. The word "swordplay" is actually a blanket term for different types of combative practices, some of which might properly be categorized as "play" while others are never other than deadly "real." It is important to consider which cultural practice is being invoked in a scene of swordplay, in order to understand the significance of the violence. Swordplay very frequently took on the formal properties of a performance in Renaissance England and Europe. We should be aware of the varied cultural life of Renaissance swordplay--the different forms and contexts in which it appeared and the significances that were attached to it as a consequence. Like dance, disguise, and a number of other performative practices that have already been considered, swordplay acquired specific significances depending on how, when, where, and why it took place. Thus this chapter begins with a discussion of several types of swordplay which belonged to the courtly milieu--the milieu represented in the revenge plays--and considers some of their conventions and conditions. It will then consider several scenes of dramatic sword fighting which deliberately violate forms and rules, such as the famous duelling scene in Romeo and Juliet and a foiled duel in The White Devil, and will discuss the significance of those violations.
The second half of the chapter considers several revenge performances which combine swordplay with another form of violence: poisoning. These embedded performances occur in *Hamlet, The White Devil*, and *The Second Maiden's Tragedy*. Like the examples discussed in the first part of the chapter, these scenes stage swordplay performances in order to violate them. The added element of poison introduces another issue for consideration: the coexistence of multiple forms of violence, both overt and covert, in certain cultural practices. In these episodes we encounter many of the issues discussed in the context of revenge masques and plays within plays. The violence in the framed performances of swordplay causes audiences to confront the unstable conditions of knowledge which can obtain in performative contexts; the performed violence also causes audiences to confront the instability or fluidity of violence as a signifying category. The combination in these scenes of the visible violence of swordplay and the invisible violence of poison brings about crises of knowledge and of signification for all the audiences involved.

From the reign of Henry VIII, England had patented schools of defence which taught gentlemen the effective use of a variety of weapons of war and of personal defence. Fencing schools or fighting guilds existed in England long before the creation of the English Corporation of Defence Masters in 1540, but the antecedents of the royally patented fencing schools were apparently less reputable establishments which were primarily frequented by the lower classes and associated with the criminal underclass. The schools of defence began to obtain social respectability and legitimacy as they were patronized by gentlemen and noblemen who sought to defend themselves by means other than the traditional and increasingly obsolete body armour and heavy weapons of
mounted combat. The appropriation by the aristocracy of the institutions which instructed in the use of weaponry initiated a movement in England toward formalized and structured modes of hand-to-hand combat. The primary method of combat that was taught and practiced in the Tudor fencing schools was sword and buckler combat. This sword was typically a cutting rather than a thrusting instrument, and the buckler which parried away the opponent’s blows was a small, hand-held shield of wood and leather that was often fitted with a sharp pike. While swordplay was from the time of the early Masters known as the “noble science,” the mode of combat itself was not particularly scientific—neither theoretical nor technical. As Horace Craig explains, “Pupils merely learned to jump and vault aside to avoid slashes, and to ward off many of the blows by covering with the buckler. Each teacher had a few tricks which he had found useful in combat, as best suiting his own physical and mental capabilities.”

It was only with the introduction of the continental mode of rapier fencing in the latter part of the sixteenth century that swordplay in England became a practice that was governed by rules and by ideas about “proper” form. The rapier was a different weapon from the English sword—it had a longer, thinner and lighter blade that was designed for thrusting rather than for cutting. This thrusting action, in turn, rendered impractical the small shield or buckler with which sword fighters parried their opponents’ blows, and so it was replaced by other

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1 Horace Craig writes that “The men running the sword-and-buckler schools were a rough sort—often they were professional ruffians and bravos of the most evil character. Their establishments came to be looked upon as places of resort for bullies and thieves. Gentlemen, in the days of chivalry, had no occasion to visit them.” See “Duellng Scenes and Terms in Shakespeare’s Plays,” University of California Publications in English 9 (1940): 4-5. See also Craig Turner and Tony Soper, Methods and Practice of Elizabethan Swordplay (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois UP, 1990) 8-9.

2 Craig 4.
protective devices—a dagger or a cloak held in the left hand, or a gauntleted hand alone. This mode of fighting was practiced in Italy from early in the sixteenth century, and it fairly quickly spread to France and Spain, where it underwent various modifications. In 1576 an Italian fencing master named Rocco Bonetti arrived in London with his assistant Jieronimo and set up a fencing “college” in Warwick Lane; while Italian manuals on the “new” style of rapier fencing had been available for some time to interested English readers, and while Englishmen travelling in Europe had observed exhibitions of rapier fencing or duels, it was Bonetti’s arrival that firmly established the rapier in England. Rapier fencing quickly eclipsed the old sword and buckler combat in courtly circles, and the latter again became associated with the lower orders and with antiquated, unfashionable ways. Unlike the older schools of the English masters of arms, the Italians taught a method of fencing which was highly formalized and theorized. The “art” or “science” which Bonetti taught (both terms were used with reference to fencing; they were not as far apart in meaning in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries as they are today) was also expounded

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3The method of Spanish rapier fencing, which is best demonstrated by the manual of its most important practitioner, Jeronimo de Caranza, differed significantly from the Italian method. Robert E. Morsberger writes that “The intricate system of Caranza was based on geometric rules in which the body was diagrammed in detail and thrusts made at various degrees.” Swordplay and the Elizabethan and Jacobean Stage (Salzburg: Institut für Englische Sprache und Literatur, Universität Salzburg, 1974) 4. The Spanish style evidently also had followers in England. It is the object of Jonson’s satire through Captain Bobadill in Every Man in His Humour (1598). See also Forbes Stieveking, “Fencing and Duelling,” Shakespeare’s England: An Account of the Life and Manners of His Age, vol. 2 (Oxford: Clarendon, 1916) 397-99.

4Stieveking 396.

5Morsberger 14-16; Craig 8.
in treatises or manuals in Italian as well as French and Spanish. In the early
1590’s, by which time rapier fencing had become a sort of craze in courtly circles,
several manuals appeared in English. Sir William Segar published his Booke of
Honor and of Armes in 1590, which was followed in 1594 by a translation from the
Italian of Di Grassi’s True Arte of Defence, perhaps by the fencing master
Jieronimo. In 1590 another very influential Italian swordsman, Vincienzo
Saviolo, appeared in London to instruct in Bonetti’s college and at court. He too
published a manual on the art that he taught, Vincienzo Saviolo His Practice (1595).
These printed texts demonstrate the degree to which swordplay had become
elaborated and codified. The first part of Saviolo’s text, which takes the form of a
dialogue between Vincentio, the master of defence, and his student, takes the
audience through blow-by-blow accounts of exemplary exchanges at single
rapier, rapier and dagger, rapier and cloak, rapier and gauntlet, and other
combinations of arms. Saviolo stresses throughout his teaching the idea that
certain offensive moves require specific corresponding defensive counter-moves,
or “wards.” For example, Vincentio explains,

When I remove with my foote and lifte vp my hand, let the scholler passe
with his lefte foote where his right was, and withall let him turne his
hand, and not loose the opportunity of this blow, which must be a foyne
in the manner of a thrust vnder his Rapier . . . . At the selfesame time that
the scholler goes back, the maister shall play a little, and shifting his body
shall break the same imbroccata or foyne outward from the left side,
removing with his left foote, which must be carried behinde the right, and
withall shall give a mandritta at the head of the scholler, at which time the
scholler must remove with his right foot, following with his left . . . .

6Important continental treatises include: Camillo Agrippa, Tratato di scientia
d’Arme, con un dialogodi filosophia (Rome, 1553); Jieronimo de Carranza, De la
Filosofia de las armas (Lisbon 1569); Henri de Saint-Didier, Traicté contenant les
secrets du premier livre sur l’espée seule, mère de toutes armes (Paris 1573).

7Vincentio Saviolo, Vincentio Saviolo His Practise (1595), Three Elizabethan Fencing
There being a limited number of counter-moves for any move and a limited number of wards for any given combination of weapons, such descriptions become repetitive. This repetitiveness only emphasizes the importance of standard movements and patterns in Saviolo's art. These exchanges at weapons, as they are described by the master, assume a dance-like or choreographed quality, which is emphasized by the reiteration throughout the instructions of the importance of maintaining "distance," "time," and "proportion." Under the influence of Saviolo and the other practitioners of the Italian style of fencing, the whole business of hand-to-hand combat was transformed into a formalized and rule-bound practice.

The infiltration of the new style of fencing and the new breed of fencing instructor brought belligerent challenges from the champions of English sword and buckler fighting. However, the English masters of defence also attempted to compete against the popularity of the Italian teachers at court by appropriating some of their strategies of self-promotion. The institutionalization of the "foreign" practice in London prompted printed defences from English masters of the English methods. They retaliated by emphasizing the formal, learned, and scientific nature of their own mode of fighting. In the chief example of this sort of literature, George Silver's *Paradoxes of Defence* (1599), the author defends the English small sword against the thrusting rapier by adopting some of the rhetorical strategies of his competitors. Silver's book, like those of Di Grassi and Saviolo, uses a combination of written text and illustrations to outline systematically the advantages of his weapon of choice. Besides unfavorably comparing the rapier to the short sword, Silver formalizes his method of swordplay in the same way that Saviolo does, breaking it down into a limited number of wards and identifying specific principles and elements, which he calls "Governors" and "Actions." In the course of defending the "natural," English
mode of combat, Silver constitutes it as an art or science, a matter of theory and technique. Regardless of the school of defence to which one subscribed, then, swordplay was by late Elizabethan times considered, at least in courtly circles and at least in formal exercises, as a practice involving prescribed forms and rules rather than spontaneity and force.

As a weapon the rapier had a more limited function than the sword. George Silver points out in *Paradoxes* that the Italian weapon is useless in battle, where the English sword with its cutting edges is much to be preferred. He writes,

when the battels are ioyneyed, and come to the charge, there is no room for them to draw their Bird-spits, and when they have them, what can they do with them?... [N]o, these toyes are fit for children, not for men, for stragling boyes of the camp, to murder poultie, not for men of Honour to trie the battell with their foes.8

His argument actually demonstrates a rather weak sense of contemporary military practice, as Turner and Soper explain:

If made a hundred years before, Silver's charge that the rapier was useless in battle would have been a powerful argument. As it is, such a statement only points out how out of step his thinking was in this matter. Elizabethan military theorists and practitioners had already long left behind discussions regarding edged weapons. Of more concern to military theorists such as Smythe were the uses of the bow and the lance (which were also rapidly being supplanted by gunpowder).9

However flawed Silver's argument may be, it does suggest the limited application of the thrusting rapier. It was not designed for warfare, nor, for that matter, for the violent confusion of the street brawl. It was designed for a more controlled and limited type of combat, specifically for the duel as prescribed by the Italian code duello. Duels had long been fought in England and throughout


9Turner and Soper 80-81.
Europe, occasionally as events sanctioned by the judiciary (the trial by combat)\(^\text{10}\) and often as a means of privately settling disputes outside of the law. The Italian *code duello* established a formal protocol for resolving issues of personal honour. It was disseminated in sixteenth century England by such texts as the second part of Saviolo's book, entitled "Of Honor and Honorable Quarrels,"\(^\text{11}\) and in Segar's *The Book of Honor and Armes* (1590). Observing the rules or protocol of the duel was very important because that demonstrated awareness was itself proof of a gentleman's honour.\(^\text{12}\) The rules for conducting a duel pertained not only to the fighting but to all that preceded and followed it: the giving of the lie, the issuing of the written challenge or cartel, the acceptance of the challenge, the selection of the place and time of the duel, the choice of weapons, and all other interaction or correspondence which were necessary in order to bring about (or avert) the actual combat. Thus the formalized sword fighting corresponded with the equally formalized duelling occasion.

The attention to proper form that could be observed in both the art of fencing and in the duel, in turn, reflected a central preoccupation of the courtly culture. In the realm of social interaction, form determined meaning, and what

\(^{10}\)The last trial by combat in England was to have taken place in London in June 1571, but it was called off by the presiding judge as one of the petitioners failed to show up. It is recorded in John Stow's *Annales and Chronicles* (1615) and in Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicles* (1587). Stow's account is reproduced in Herbert Berry, *The Noble Science* (Newark: U of Delaware P; London and Toronto: Associated UP, 1991) 9-11. The judicial duel was not formally repealed as a means of legally resolving disputes until 1819.


\(^{12}\)The code of honour of which the duelling code formed a part was strongly influenced by the courtly culture of sixteenth century Italy, and Elizabethans became familiar with its particularities through such works as Baldassare Castiglione's *Book of the Courtier* (Venice, 1528; English trans. London 1561).
was understood to be *proper* form signified a propriety of another sort, a moral propriety or an innate nobility properly belonging to the aristocrat. Thus the form according to which a sword fight was carried out determined its significance as either positive or negative, orderly or disorderly, honourable or dishonourable. Saviolo stresses throughout his book that the formal steps in the process of defending one's honour are necessary in order to determine whether the cause is just, worthy, and honourable; however, one could also interpret the ritualization of duelling as an attempt to impose a superficial sense of dignity and order, the outward signs of honour, upon a practice that was officially condemned by the state, the judiciary, and influential humanist moralists as being disorderly and immoral. While Saviolo (Muzio) ostensibly discusses the honourable quarrel only in terms of its legal incarnation, the judicial duel before prince or magistrate, there is a recurrent acknowledgement in his discussion of the private (and thus illegal) applications of the activity he is so rigorously codifying. But there is also an implicit appeal to the reader to judge his endeavour in terms of his absolute insistence upon proper form and rule, not in terms of the pronouncements against duelling that were being made by the state, church, and judiciary. It appears, then, that the relationship between the form of the duel and its social significance, while asserted by some interested parties to be transparent, was not uncontroversed.

Since duelling was both prevalent and controversial in the period, it is not surprising that the practice was frequently represented in the theatre. A number of dramatic representations of sword fighting deliberately violate the well known codes of personal honour and of duelling. The effects of these rupturings of form

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13James I issued a proclamation against private challenges and combats in 1613, the first by an English monarch. Francis Bacon, as attorney general, vowed to enforce the law against duelling in *The Charge of Sir Francis Bacon Touching Duells* (1614).
are various. In many cases they comment on the moral status of the character or characters involved: if adhering to prescribed form in a matter of honour identifies an individual as honourable, then breaking that form demonstrates dishonour. Sometimes the disruption of proper form in dramatic duelling also functions as a critique of the efficacy of the code of honour and the related duelling code as means of regulating social behaviour. In other words, sometimes the responsibility for the breakdown in public order is seen to rest not with the individual perpetrators but with the larger system of values and practices within which they operate. The interpretation of any breakdown of culturally ordered or ritualized violence will depend on the extent to which the ideology associated with it is being subjected to interrogation. The following discussion considers several dramatic episodes in which the form of duelling is violated and speculates on the significance within late Elizabethan-early Jacobean culture of those violations.

The most famous and the most discussed episodes of duelling in Elizabethan drama occur in *Romeo and Juliet.* The approximate date of composition of the play roughly coincides with the peak of Saviolo’s success in London’s courtly milieu. The play makes repeated references to the techniques and conventions of sword fighting, which suggests the topicality of the subject. Shakespeare has Mercutio viciously satirize the Italian mode of rapier fencing,

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especially as it is practiced by Tybalt, who supposedly embodies all of its worst affectations.

[H]e fights as you sing pricksong, keeps time, distance and proportion. He rests his minim rests, one, two, and the third in your bosom: the very butcher of a silk button--a duellist, a duellist . . . . Why, is not this a lamentable thing, grandsire, that we should be thus afflicted with these strange flies, these fashion-mongers, these 'pardon-me's', who stand so much on the new form that they cannot sit at ease on the old bench? (II.iv.22-24, 30-35)\textsuperscript{15}

Despite the satire which Mercutio unleashes, it seems that he too fights with a rapier (III.i.83), as the method distinguishing the gentlemen from the sword-and-buckler-wielding servants seen in the opening scene. Mercutio also satirizes, at Benvolio’s expense (III.i.16-30), the exaggerated propensity for quarrelling which was inseparable from the duelling phenomenon and which was an outcome of the aristocratic code of honour. The obvious irony of Mercutio’s verbal assault is that he too is fatally subject to this tendency, for it propels him into hasty combat with Tybalt. This aggressive mode of social behaviour is represented in the play as being governed by considerations of form, and yet that adherence to form results in the collapse of order as the aggression escalates between rivals.

The honour-driven violence in \textit{Romeo and Juliet} not only violates the law as prescribed by Escalus; it also violates the proper ritual form of duelling as this was laid out in the manuals and taught by the fencing masters. The most radical and obvious violation occurs when, as the 1597 Quarto stage direction has it, “Tybalt under Romeo’s arm thrusts Mercutio in” (III.i.90) while Romeo is attempting to separate them. The act unquestionably demonstrates Tybalt’s deficiency of honour. There are many other formal violations of the duelling code. Tybalt’s

initial challenge to Romeo, besides resting on insufficient cause, is not properly
carried out. His call for Romeo to draw on the street is a gross violation of
duelling protocol; a “properly” conducted duel required a lengthy delay for the
formal settling of the terms of the combat, and the duel itself occurred not in the
street but in some designated “field” or “lists.” Mercutio’s intervention in
Tybalt’s challenge is likewise a disorderly precipitation of violence. Together
Tybalt and Mercutio instigate a street brawl instead of a proper duel. Also,
Romeo’s intervention in the fight between Tybalt and Mercutio is expressly
warned against by Saviolo, and the consequences are felt in Tybalt’s
dishonourable dispatching of Mercutio. Romeo’s violent response to Mercutio’s
murder, which leads to the killing of Tybalt, may demonstrate a strong sense of
personal honour, but it is an equally flagrant violation of the duelling code. Such
deviations from the prescribed rules were commonly interpreted by
contemporary expositors of the code as signs of deficient honour. Admittedly,
most Englishmen would have been familiar with duelling as much in the form it
takes in Romeo and Juliet as in Segar or Saviolo. In other words, the audience of
the play would have held in balance two codes for interpreting the violence: one
formal and “official” and the other informal and “lived.” In terms of this “lived”
code the hot-headed young gentlemen of Verona might not appear to the
Elizabethan interpreter to be acting dishonourably. At the same time, the play
does repeatedly invoke the formal code of honourable quarrels, and, thus
framed, the violence reflects negatively on its perpetrators.

16Rossi (118) explains that he should have given the lie verbally before issuing a
cartel.

17“And to say something of parting, I will by the way declare thus much. That
hee that will parte two that are fighting, must doe so betwixt the(m) both, having
great regarde that he nether hindreth one more then the other, nor suffereth the
one more to endanger his enemie than the other . . .”(Saviolo 337).
At the same time, the disorderly duelling in the streets of Verona could be interpreted primarily as a representation of the failure of the code of personal honour and the associated duelling ritual to maintain social order. The tragedy enacts a strong condemnation of destructive social forces such as factional aggression by showing the incidental victimization which is an inevitable consequence. The cycle of reciprocal violence, with its intended and unintended victims, is shown to be exacerbated rather than mitigated by the rituals and formalities that come into play when mutually antagonistic groups interact. The code, the techniques, the protocol of the duel are productive of as well as antithetical to the outbreaks of disorderly violence. The specific violations of the duelling ritual in *Romeo and Juliet* exemplify the paradox of cultural practices that are self-consciously ordered but which incline toward social disorder.

Webster’s *The White Devil* offers a representation of duelling within a Jacobean revenge tragedy. The fatal quarrel between Flamineo and Marcello, like that between Montagues and Capulets, invokes the duelling code and its associated ritual practices in order to violate them. The significance of this dramatic episode is enhanced when that frame of reference is considered. The dramatic impact of the quarrel is somewhat obscured (especially in the printed playtext) by the more developed conflicts that involve the “white devil” Vittoria, her lover the Duke of Bracciano, and their opponents Francisco the Duke of Florence and Cardinal Monticelso; the violence between the two brothers, though fatal for Marcello, prefigures the familial violence that arises between Flamineo and his other sibling, Vittoria. The basis of the quarrel seems rather inconsequential. Marcello disapproves of Flamineo’s familiarity with Zanche, the Moor who is Vittoria’s waiting-woman, and he assaults her and banishes her from Flamineo’s presence when he discovers them together. The relations between the two lovers are perceived by Marcello to injure the family honour,
hence the violence of his threats. This treatment of Zanche angers Flamineo, but the audience is never led to believe that his response stems from any strong regard for the servant woman or from any sense of her injury. "I do love that Moor, that witch, very constrainedly," he explains to Hortensio earlier in the scene of the quarrel. "[S]he knows some of my villainy; I do love her, just as a man holds a wolf by the ears. But for fear of turning on me, and pulling out my throat, I would let her go to the devil" (V.i.152-56).18 It is rather the injury done to his sense of personal honour that raises his wrath. He reasserts his masculine honour by insulting Marcello, making light of his threats and ridiculing his demonstration of aggression as effeminate and diseased.

Mar: If I take her near you I'll cut her throat.
Flam: With a fan of feathers?
Mar: And for you;—I'll whip
This folly from you.
Flam: Are you choleric?
I'll purge' with rhubarb. (V.i.198-201)

Flamineo then insults both Marcello and their mother by calling him a bastard. Marcello responds predictably to this ultimate injury to his personal and family honour. He challenges his brother, "Those words I'll make thee answer/ With thy heart blood," and Flamineo accepts, "You know where you shall find me" (207-09). In this exchange and in the ensuing action of this quarrel, we see Marcello observing the spirit if not exactly the letter of the duelling code. The challenge itself does not conform to the rigid prescriptions set out by Saviolo. A contemporary audience might observe that Marcello does not follow the conventional practice of "giving the lie," though it would have been to his advantage to have done so in that it would place the responsibility on Flamineo

to prove his allegations and to take the role of challenger. Nonetheless, Marcello demonstrates a self-conscious adherence to the code of honour and to a mode of action which corresponds to that code. It is the convention-bound, “scripted” nature of Marcello’s behaviour which emphasizes by contrast the radically subversive nature of Flamineo’s violence.

Following Flamineo’s departure, Marcello makes a gesture which both establishes his adherence to formal and ritualized procedures and also sets up Flamineo’s violation of the code of honourable combat. He sends an attendant after Flamineo with his sword, saying “And thou beest a noble friend, bear him my sword,/ And bid him fit the length on’t” (210-11). This serves as a formal, symbolic confirmation of his intention to fight Flamineo. The significance of the gesture requires no special knowledge of duelling conventions in order to be understood. However, it does signal a commitment to a formal, ritual mode of behaviour. The gesture of sending the sword actually serves as a sort of dramatic “shorthand” in the sense that it represents with great economy several distinct practices that were conventionally performed by combatants in “honourable quarrels.” As was mentioned above, a verbal challenge had to be followed by some confirmation of that challenge, which, from the sixteenth century onward, usually occurred in the written form of a cartel. However, in earlier times it had been conventional to send a dagger or some other object. In this play, the rapier substitutes for the cartel as a symbolic confirmation which synecdochally expresses Marcello’s intention. In addition to fulfilling the function of the formal challenge, the sword which is sent indicates the choice of weapon for the combat. As well (and this is suggested by the line “bid him fit the length on’t”), Marcello

19See Saviolo, especially section titled “What the reason is, that the partie unto whom the lie is given, ought to become Challenger: and of the nature of lies” (342-46).
demonstrates himself to be aware of the practice whereby combatants committed themselves to "fair play" by submitting their rapiers for inspection in order to ensure that the weapons were of a length. In sum, then, the audience may read in the brief dramatic gesture Marcello's commitment to carrying out the ensuing violence in an "orderly" manner, according to custom and in adherence to the code of honour.

It is this adherence to form and protocol which Flamineo exploits and subverts. He returns with Marcello's sword and, without any forewarning and in the presence of their mother, runs him through with it. This violence is a disorderly, dishonourable subversion of the ordered course of the duel. Even without considering the cultural context of duelling, the violence can only be interpreted as radically anti-social. The fratricidal situation, besides being archetypal, is expressive of social disruption at a fundamental level. The scene represents a collapse of normative social structures and value systems even without taking into account its violation of the specific cultural code. Nonetheless, Flamineo's dispatching of his brother does occur within the code that Marcello has invoked, the cultural practice which he has initiated, and the evil, anti-social, "impure" nature of this violence is intimately tied up in the

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20René Girard cites Clyde Kluckhohn's assertion that "the most common of all mythical conflicts is the struggle between brothers, which generally ends in fratricide" (Violence 61). The motif of the enemy brothers was common enough in Renaissance literature, and it was understood to make reference to important antecedent Biblical episodes such as the Cain and Abel story, which supplies a myth of origins for human (social) violence, as well as classical legends. Marcello's challenge to Flamineo explicitly highlights the archetypal dimension of the quarrel through the allusion to the fatal fraternal division between Eteocles and Polyneces in the Oedipus myth.

21Girard claims that "The proliferation of enemy brothers in Greek myth and in dramatic adaptations of myth implies the continual presence of a sacrificial crisis, [ie. social violence arising from a loss of sufficient systems of differentiation] repeatedly alluded to in the same symbolic terms" (Violence 61).
violation. Paradoxically, Flamineo's actions tend to exonerate Marcello's own fratricidal designs; Flamineo's violence sets up Marcello, another would-be brother-killer, as the upholder of proper form, as the representative of honest and honourable violence.

At the same time (and in the same way as in the sword fighting in act three of *Romeo and Juliet*) it is possible to see the violence between Marcello and Flamineo as an outgrowth as well as an inversion of the duelling ritual and the aggressive concept of honour that ritual demonstrated. The scene suggests something that was no doubt recognized and felt in English Renaissance society, which is that rituals of violence are among the most tenuous and unstable of cultural practices. The other prevalent public ritual of violence in the period, the execution, was a more effective mechanism of social order because of the overwhelming spectacle of authority which its ceremonial provided and because of the clear imbalance of power that characterized the violence. Besides the fact that the private duel lacked the symbolic trappings of state power, its violence had an entirely different structure. The duel attempted to order the violence between rival doubles rather than quelling or displacing that violence (e.g., by sacrificial mechanisms or by the overwhelming force of the intervening judicial system). It stressed identity between participants rather than difference, symmetry rather than imbalance, reciprocity rather than a conclusive unidirectionality of violence. The effective disappearance of the trial by combat

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22As was mentioned in ch. 3 (96), above, public executions also provided opportunities for destabilizing the official significance of the performance. The condemned criminal was a potent symbolic figure with whom members of the audience might also identify. The violent spectacle of capital and corporal punishment was not necessarily always a stable representation of state power. However, it was recognized early on to be a more stable ordering mechanism than the trial by combat, hence the decline in use of the latter.
in the sixteenth century is proof of contemporary perception, at least among authorities, of the instability of ritualized reciprocal violence.

To this point it is the formal, structured or scripted nature of the duel that has been emphasized. The practice has been assigned a ritual status, but the public, performative dimension of the ritual has not been stressed. As well as being scripted by the code _duello_ and choreographed according to the art of fencing, the duel in the Renaissance was a sustained performance. It stands to reason that the duel was a public event, given that honour, while sometimes interpreted as an inner virtue, was something that exhibited itself principally in external actions. The scene in _The White Devil_ in which the violent resolution of the brothers' quarrel occurs begins with their mother, Cornelia, confronting Marcello about the rumours she has heard that he is to fight a duel. "I hear a whispering all about court,/ You are to fight,—who is your opposite?/ What is the quarrel?" (V.ii.1-3) The line suggests the interest and involvement of the courtly milieu in these supposedly private and surreptitious affairs. While duels in England as elsewhere had to be fought privately _alla macchia_ in order that they not be prevented by authorities and in order that the combatants and their seconds not be arrested for disturbing the peace, the actual quarrels which gave rise to duels were frequently very public affairs. The cause or causes for a challenge were generally published by the challenger and the defendant might likewise publish his version of the quarrel and the reason that he was justified in giving the lie. Intervention in these quarrels sometimes fell to the highest

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24Turner and Soper xxii.
officials in the country, depending on the rank of the combatants. The involvement of powerful public figures further fuelled the great public interest in duelling. Queen Elizabeth was frequently forced to intervene in quarrels between her courtiers, as in the one which arose between Sir Philip Sidney and the Earl of Oxford on a tennis court.25

A duel was, for the community it directly or indirectly involved, an ongoing performance; it was carried out with an awareness on the part of the combatants that their actions were being observed and evaluated by a critical and informed audience, an aristocratic and courtly community that was also eagerly studying the manuals of Segar and Saviolo. The objective of someone involved in an honourable quarrel was not only to obtain "satisfaction" or revenge but also to demonstrate his knowledge of proper form and his skill in operating within the limits of that form: for that competence was itself a sign of honour. Thus in the duel of honour as in the competitive and recreative swordplay of the fencing schools, theatres, innyards and court halls, there was a continuous sense of performance as well as an aristocratic emphasis on form. Whether the violence was performed as play or in earnest, it was supposed to be equally demonstrative of proper form and of the prescribed rules of personal conduct.

The continuous emphasis on form and on performance in both playful and serious exercises of the sword invites us to question how the "played" violence and the "real" violence which were occurring in the cultural arena were distinguished from one another. One means of distinguishing between real and

25The only account of this quarrel is in Fulke Greville, *The Life of the Renowned Sir Philip Sidney* (London, 1652) 65-69. Greville writes that the Queen eventually persuaded Sidney to back down from the quarrel by arguing that his inferiority in rank made it impossible for them to fight: "[T]he Gentlemans neglect of the Nobility taught the Peasant to insult upon both" (68).
played sword combat is according to their different purposes. Ostensibly, the duel was fought by its participants with the intention of causing incapacitating injury or death. It was a lethal way of settling a dispute between parties. The fencing match, on the other hand, was primarily a demonstration of skill and a source of both entertainment and instruction. But the purpose of the swordplay or the intentions of the participants was not readily displayed in the action. Rapier fencing was not supposed to differ markedly in form depending on whether it was occurring in play or in earnest, if one followed the example of Saviolo; rather, the practice combats and prize-fights performed in the salons of the Italians, in the English fencing guilds and in the theatres of London were ultimately intended to be “rehearsals” for future real combat. Fencing masters and actors might wield their swords for purely spectacular purposes, but their ability to inflict real violence would be evident in their skillful manipulation of their weapons. Sidney Anglo observes that the purpose of the masters’ instruction, as demonstrated by the surviving fencing manuals, is unambiguous:

From Talhoffer in the mid fifteenth century to Fabris and Capo Ferro in the early seventeenth century the fencer is seen transfixing his opponent through eye, neck, chest and belly. Blood spurts out in all directions; and few of the victims would have been likely to survive. The art of fencing, as conceived by the great Renaissance masters, was a skill devised solely for the efficient killing of a man in a private quarrel.26

The illustrations in the English manuals of the 1590’s are more restrained; they schematically depict defensive wards rather than realistically portraying offensive thrusts.27 Nonetheless, Saviolo’s choreographed fights always specify a deadly stoccata or other thrust to the face or breast, and he makes clear the


27See illustrations in Saviolo, Di Grassi, Silver, cited above.
pragmatic purpose of the instruction. It was these fatal moves which the competitive and recreative fencers practiced.

If the real or played status of swordplay could not necessarily be determined through its pure form, the distinction was certainly created through the ways that the swordplay was framed. Gregory Bateson asserts that any activity or behaviour which we designate as play is framed differently from the activity which serves as a model, pattern, or foundation for it.28 According to Bateson, the frame is primarily a psychological concept "which is neither physical nor logical."29 Nonetheless, in the cultural realm, concrete or literal framing is cognitively necessary in order that practices which are intended as "play" be recognized as such. Erving Goffman calls the signs (or "conventions" in his terminology) which designate an activity as play "keys." "I refer here to the set of conventions by which a given activity, one already meaningful in terms of some primary framework, is transformed into something patterned on this activity but seen by the participants to be something quite else."30 Keys may be incorporated into played activity, or they may be contextual, (i.e., features of the spatio-temporal context). Examples of keying which are incorporated into played activity or which form part of its modality include demonstrations of restraint (like "pulling a punch," or cutting short a thrust or blow), exaggeration, discontinuation (starting and stopping), exercising the power to refuse to play or to terminate play, demarcation of the beginning and ending of play. Goffman


29Bateson 187.

asserts that in most occasions of formal contest or sport, framing limits are well-marked.

Whereas in playfulness the playful reconstitution of some object or individual into a "plaything" is quite temporary, never fully established, in organized games and sports this reconstitution is institutionalized--stabilized as it were--just as the arena of action is fixed by the formal rules of the activity.  

In the case of the fencing match, the social and cultural contexts--the location of the fight in a theatre, inn yard or hall in the presence of an audience, the encompassing ceremonial of the event, the specific rules of play--provided important means of "keying" the activity as play and distinguishing it from "serious" forms of swordplay.  

The fencing match bound swordplay within its peculiar logic and distinguished it from any other manifestations of swordplay, such as the duel. Despite the demarcators of play, however, there are suggestions that the significance of this category of performed violence remained unstable. There is a question, in other words, as to whether the frame of play always contained the significance of the violence that occurred within it. According to some theorists, controlled performances of violent combat can be understood to serve a "steam-valve" function in a manner similar to the disorderly behaviour which arises during periods of carnival. Brian Sutton-Smith acknowledges this pressure-valve paradigm when he writes that "we may be disorderly in games either because we have an overdose of order, and want to let off steam, or because we have something to learn through being disorderly." Fencing competitions occurring in Renaissance England, when considered in this light, could be said to have

31 Goffman 57.

channelled the aggression that arose between social rivals and to have allowed it to “play out” in an orderly fashion and in an arena which was not disruptive of social peace. Victor Turner emphasizes the affective function of disorderly play which is acknowledged in the quotation by Sutton-Smith. He postulates that disruptive or disorderly behaviour (or “anti-structure”) that occurs during periods of ritual or play (“liminal” or “liminoid” periods) is indeed linked to the dangerous crises that occur in the ongoing “social drama,” but the disorder which is acted out belongs to the redressive phase of the social process, where resolutions of conflict and models of order are also introduced and rehearsed. Turner would probably say of the Elizabethan or Jacobean fencing match that it was less its spectacle of aggression than its display of structure and ceremonial form that signified for its audience, so that its violence was ultimately contained.

The anthropologist Clifford Geertz comes to essentially the same conclusion about the benignity of controlled “playing” at violence. Taking as his specific object of analysis the Balinese cockfight, Geertz observes,

> Men go on allegorically humiliating one another and being allegorically humiliated by one another, day after day, glorying quietly in the experience if they have triumphed, crushed only slightly more openly by it if they have not. But no one’s status really changes. . . . An image, fiction, a model, a metaphor, the cockfight is a means of expression; its function is neither to assuage social passions nor to heighten them . . . but, . . . to display them.

The collective performance of aggression and rivalry plays an important role in the process through which the participants and spectators form perspectives of themselves and their society, but the actual violence which is staged remains

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demarcated from the realm of real experience and thus from the real experience of aggressive rivalry.

This sense of security that the anthropologists articulate with regard to played violence seems to be called into question in certain episodes of violent play in Elizabethan and Jacobean tragedy. Several scenes, including the fencing match in *Hamlet*, the combat at barriers in *The White Devil*, and the metatheatrical episode at the end of *The Second Maiden's Tragedy*, contain embedded performances which involve the use of arms and simulated violence; in each case the played violence erupts into real violence, which leads to a collapse of the performance occasion and to an escalation of violence among the participants in the performance. The plays offer challenges to the position argued by Geertz *et al.* regarding the security of the boundaries which cultures build around their violent play. The dramatists appear to have been sceptical about the possibility of a complete delimitation of the domain of mimesis and play from the domain of reality, and in the revenge plays they appear to stage in a literal manner some of the darker implications of these blurred boundaries. In all of the scenes discussed below, an outbreak of real violence is compounded by another weapon that cannot even be discerned until it is too late: poison. In general, played experience is represented not only as unstable in terms of the way that it contains the aggression which it incorporates but also dangerously deceptive in terms of what it allows to take place "below the surface."

The fencing match in *Hamlet* plays on a recognition of the real aggression that operates within performances of violence. A latent antagonism is established between Hamlet and Laertes early in the play, which develops into an overt rivalry by the time of the violent dénouement. To be sure, at the

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35René Girard has written about the mimetic rivalry between Hamlet and Laertes, and describes Laertes as the unself-reflecting revenger that Hamlet would like to be. See "Hamlet's Dull Revenge," *Major Literary Characters: Hamlet,*
beginning of the play the rivalry between the men is overshadowed by the
greater conflict that exists between Hamlet and Claudius. However, the two men
are implicitly compared in the court scene in act one scene two, where the
antagonism between the King and Hamlet also develops. Laertes’ forthright suit
to Claudius that he be permitted to travel to France, which meets with success, is
followed by Hamlet’s demonstration of anti-social misanthropy. Laertes
represents the type of the decorous and socially well-integrated courtier to which
Hamlet is no longer able to conform in the new court of Elsinore. The
antagonism between the two men is first verbalized by Laertes in his warning to
Ophelia to avoid Hamlet’s company and his suits of love (I.iii.-1-45). The essence
of his argument is that Hamlet exceeds her in rank and that he will not be
permitted to honour any promises that he may make her in exchange for her
sacrifice of honour. The speech suggests, by association, a social difference
between Hamlet and Laertes rather than a proximity and resemblance; however,
the language through which the warning is made, which is full of imagery of
violated female chastity, conveys an intense interest in and jealousy over the
imagined seduction of Ophelia. Consequently, the antagonism assumes a quality
of rivalry as well as distrust.

Hamlet’s murder of Polonius, compounded with the madness and the
suicide of Ophelia, provides Laertes with a solid justification for his aggression
against Hamlet. With Laertes’ assumption of the role of his father’s revenger,
Hamlet is confronted with the threatening image of a rival-double. Hamlet’s
aggression toward Laertes manifests itself simultaneously with his recognition of
this doubling. The first display of violent aggression, the indecorous grappling

also David Scott Kastan, “‘His semblable is his mirror’: Hamlet and the Imitation
of the two men in Ophelia's grave, is seemingly predicated on Hamlet's recognition of Laertes as a rival lover/mourner rather than as a rival revenger. "I loved Ophelia. Forty thousand brothers/ Could not, with all their quality of love,/ Make up my sum--What wilt thou do for her?" (V.i. 259-61). Hamlet repeatedly expresses his desire to imitate Laertes and to exceed him in that imitation.

'Swounds, show me what thou'lt do.
Woo't weep? Woo't fight? Woo't fast? Woo't tear thyself?
Woo't drink up eisel, eat a crocodile?
I'll do it. Dost thou come here to whine,
To outface me with leaping in her grave?
Be buried quick with her, and so will I. (264-69)

Laertes provides Hamlet with a model of passion (desire and loss). The immediate object of that passion is the dead girl, not the dead father. Already, though, the audience has observed Laertes' convincing performance as the revenging son (the performance that the Ghost would doubtless wish Hamlet to emulate), and so this rivalry is superimposed upon the spectacle of their amorous rivalry. When Hamlet acknowledges that "by the image of my cause I see/ The portraiture of his" (V.ii. 78-79), it is in the way of regretting the violence that has occurred between them. He seems to be trying to effect conciliation through his recognition of resemblance. But immediately he recalls and reinforces his mimetic, violent aggression: "But sure the bravery of his grief did put me/ Into a tow'ring passion" (80-81).

It is impossible to dissociate the fencing match which concludes the play from the build-up of rivalry and the prior explosion of uncontrolled violence between the two men. Indeed, one might say that the embedded performance is a schematic representation of the dramatic conflict as well as its resolution. It is also a conventional scene of the dramatic genre. The fight is the embedded performance through which Laertes, the orthodox revenger, achieves his revenge
on his father's murderer. According to the logic which operates within the play, the competition never has a chance of being played out in an orderly manner, according to the customary rules of the sport. The fencing match is deliberately staged by Claudius and Laertes in order to murder Hamlet. The only "surprise" in the outbreak of "real" violence is that it is not contained to that which is plotted by Claudius and Laertes but also includes the incidental and inadvertent victimization of Gertrude and the deaths of Laertes and Claudius. In other words, the deviation within this performance is not the presence of real violence (for that was always scripted) but the escalation of the violence beyond that which was originally intended.

If we move beyond the interpretive strategy which regards the embedded performance only in terms of its internal dramatic logic, or in terms of its thematic relation to the rest of the play, and consider instead the way in which it interacts with systems of meaning outside the text, we can reconstruct an expanded significance for the violence. The disruption of the conventional "script" of the fencing match can also be understood to signify the inadequacy of the framing mechanisms of performance in the face of uncontainable mimetic aggression. The movement during the swordplay from simulated violence to real violence represents a danger that always underlies this sort of cultural performance. The Renaissance challenge at arms sought to contain the most unstable type of violence, the violence which occurs between rival doubles, by formalizing it. It was a sublimation of the spirit of mimetic rivalry through ceremony and choreography rather than a dispersal of that rivalry (such as occurs in the substitutive action of sacrifice). It has already been suggested that formalized rapier-play emphasized balance, symmetry, a mirroring of
opponents.\textsuperscript{36} It highlighted the rivalry between opponents, but it did so with the understanding that the violence was being played out within the safe parameters of play. To that end, the framing devices or “keys” of play were very much stressed.\textsuperscript{37}

The fencing match in \textit{Hamlet} not only reproduces the ceremonial trappings which were meant to solemnify aristocratic contests; it insists upon them. The king himself officiates over the ceremonial enactment of good will between the two combatants which precedes the combat: “Come, Hamlet, come, and take this hand from me. [\textit{He puts Laertes’ hand into Hamlet’s}]” (V.ii.171-71.1) Hamlet then offers a formal apology for his previous injury to Laertes, in which he effects a split between the madness that supposedly propelled him to the attack against Laertes and his rational and ordered self (172-85). The intent of the speech seems to be to efface all traces of the former rivalry from the current encounter. Hamlet asserts that just as “His madness is poor Hamlet’s enemy” (185), Laertes’ enemy is not the man standing before him but rather that man’s irrational “other.” Paradoxically, by invoking the previous violence in order to banish it (along with his madness), Hamlet reinforces it as a referent for the impending performance of controlled violence. In addition to the formal gesture of reconciliation, a framework of rules and adjudication is heavily emphasized throughout the combat. Osric has laid out the conditions of the wager in the previous scene. In this scene Claudius explains the accompanying ceremony of drinking from the (deadly) stoup of wine to mark Hamlet’s success. The fighting is strongly restricted and controlled; Osric presides over the fight and judges every hit. Trumpets and ordinance sound to punctuate the action. The style of swordplay

\textsuperscript{36}See discussion above, 173.

\textsuperscript{37}See examples of keys of athletic contest (from Goffman) above, 177.
would, in contemporary performance, also correspond to the formalized and
decorous nature of the occasion. The initial passes and hits would demonstrate
the precise and skillful technique of rapier fighting that is described in Saviolo or
Di Grassi. All of the ceremonial and formalized aspects of the performance are
insisted upon in order that the collapse into murderous violence be more
remarkable. Laertes violates the code of honour, which he claims to hold so dear
and which is supposed to be governing this occasion, with his duplicitous and
fatal wounding of Hamlet. The first sign for Hamlet that a fundamental rule of
the game has been violated occurs when he is wounded by Laertes’ unbated
weapon. The injury which Laertes inflicts does not occur in the course of a
conventional “pass”; rather, it occurs in a violation of proper form which is also a
violation of the rules of fair play. The cry “Have at you now!” (254) accompanies
a thrust by Laertes when Hamlet is resting and his ward is down. This break

38The staging of the swordfight has been thoroughly discussed and conjecturally
reconstructed by a number of critics. Most studies focus on the “exchange of
weapons” by which Hamlet gains possession of the poisoned rapier. For a recent
study see James L. Jackson, “’They Catch One Another’s Rapiers’: The Exchange
of Weapons in Hamlet,” Shakespeare Quarterly 41.3 (Fall 1990): 281-98; See also
Morsberger 97-107; Craig 18-22; J. Dover Wilson, “Introduction,” Paradoxes of
Defence, by George Silver (1599; London: Oxford UP, 1933) xi-xx; several
responses to Dover Wilson’s essay, as E. B. Goodacre, “The Duel in Hamlet,”
Times Literary Supplement (Jan. 11, 1934): 28; John Evan, “The Duel in Hamlet,”
Times Literary Supplement (Jan 25, 1934): 60; Dover Wilson’s revised discussion of
the duel in What Happens in Hamlet? (New York: MacMillan, 1935) 276-90; Lee
71-73.

39Generally, there is a consensus among the critics cited above, 196n38, that the
injury which Laertes inflicts on Hamlet must come unexpectedly and, in doing
so, must violate the proper form of the competition (Morsberger 104, Wilson,
What Happens 286, Jackson 293). Lee differs in opinion and reconstructs the fatal
thrust as part of the third bout (72). It is only the Quarto of 1601, which does not
contain the line “Have at you” and which has as stage direction “They catch one
another’s Rapiers, and both are wounded,” which does not indicate by any means
that Laertes initiates the fatal bout.
in form initiates the collapse of the frame of play; the violence quickly escalates beyond the two opponents, "poisons" the performance occasion and leads directly to the deaths of the King and Queen.

The scene demonstrates a situation in which mimetic rivalry is channelled into the "safe" arena of played competition only to show the inadequacy of the various controlling mechanisms to contain the violence in the realm of "as if." Playfulness slips into seriousness readily enough, imitation slips into reality. The effect of the scene, then, is to demonstrate the fragility of the mode of "as if" where violence is concerned. As was mentioned above, this interpretation of the action is available despite the audience's awareness that real violence (i.e., that which is directed at Hamlet) is not an inadvertent but a planned outcome of the fencing match and that the performance is never intended to be wholly "play."

The defence of this interpretation of the scene is the same as that which applies to the interpretation of the revenge masques. Audiences of plays, in Elizabethan London as now, do not interpret a performance only according to its linear narrative and its internal dramatic logic; their interpretations are not based only on the information that is provided within the fictive world of the play. Rather, the representations of the stage interact dynamically with practices and performances in other domains of culture, and their possible meanings are determined intertextually. Furthermore, theatre plays do not only passively reflect the real or "outside" world. They also contribute to the meanings which are ascribed to other practices, other performances; they affect interpretation outside the theatre. Thus it is possible to interpret the fatal swordplay in Hamlet as "proof" of a contemporary perception of the instability which informs performances of competitive violence.

The fencing match in Hamlet is similar to the "Solimon and Perseda" performance in The Spanish Tragedy in the way that imitated violence becomes
real and collapses the boundaries of play. In both embedded performances, the violence spills out from the domain of performance into the domain of reality and claims victims from the audience as well as from the performers. However, the real violence which intrudes into the performed combat in *Hamlet* is not only inflicted with swords, as it is in Kyd's play, but also with another, less visible, weapon: poison. Laertes anoints the "unbated" point of his rapier with an "unction . . ./ So mortal that but dip a knife in it,/ Where it draws blood no cataplasm so rare,/ . . . can save the thing from death/ That is but scratched withal" (IV.vii.117-22). The poisoning of Laertes' rapier must be considered as an act of violence distinct from though coterminous with the use of the sharpened point. To be sure, the "venomed stuck" (136) with which Laertes seals Hamlet's fate constitutes a single action; however, as subsequent discussion reveals, the use of poison in performance raises issues which are distinct from those that arise through the practice of swordplay. In addition to Laertes' poisoned blade, Claudius supplies a chalice of poisoned wine in the event that Laertes should fail in his endeavour to wound Hamlet with the envenomed point. These two deployments of poison during the fencing match constitute a second means of violating boundaries, conventions, and relationships of trust that ought to be established and observed in the course of the performance.

As well as invoking the fatal embedded play in *The Spanish Tragedy*, the fencing match in *Hamlet* resembles many other scenes in Elizabethan and Jacobean tragedy in which an object featured prominently in some sort of ritual or ceremony is poisoned. As a dramatic device, poison highlights the deceptiveness of appearances. It does so precisely because it is invisible.

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40 The poisoned chalice, in particular, is frequently used by duplicitous revengers and Machiavellian villains in Elizabethan and Jacobean tragedy. It features in *Antonio's Revenge*, *Women Beware Women*, and Chettle's *Hoffman* (1602), for example.
undetectable. The poison within the host object (whatever that object might be), like the revenger beneath the disguise, is a danger which cannot be perceived by the intended victim. Indeed, poisoned objects very often coincide with disguised revengers/villains in revenge tragedy; the analogous relationship is very much stressed. Poisoned objects, like disguised murderers, forcefully suggest the risks involved in interpreting visual signs in the absence of other (more reliable) indicators. When poison is employed in the course of a ceremonial practice, its invisibility becomes especially destabilizing. The properties and gestures of religious rituals and social ceremonies are visual signs which are invested with fixed and determined significances. As Morgan and Brask have commented, the “symbolic paraphernalia” of ritual are “representational compressed statements of principles of belief, infused with the power of the referent (‘Fact’).” In order for a ritual to be effective, its visual symbols must signify in a consistent and unambiguous manner. The poison that is concealed within a ceremonial object in a revenge play radically undercuts the

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The most extensive theorization of poison’s invisibility and the problems it poses in performance occurs in Julia Grace Houston, “The False Optic: Poisoned Fictional Objects in Renaissance Revenge Tragedies,” Diss. Tulane U, 1993. The current argument was elaborated without reference to Houston’s thesis, but it shares a number of conclusions with her study. Houston refers to poisoned stage objects as “iconographically incomplete” in that they depend upon some source of information other than the sign-object itself in order for the poison to signify. Crucial to Houston’s argument is an analogy that she makes between the poisoned object of revenge tragedy and the sacramental objects of the mass. As stated above, poisoned fictional objects are similar to objects with religious presence in that both may be termed iconographically incomplete. The poison of Renaissance revenge tragedies and the religious significance of the Protestant mass are both invisible, not only to the characters of the drama (or to the priest), but also to the spectator/participant or audience. As with religious objects, poisoned fictional objects require manipulation which indicates to the spectator the presence of the poison” (74).

Morgan and Brask 191.
fixity and stability of that object/sign’s prescribed significance. The poisoned objects in the last scene in *Hamlet*, the rapier and the chalice, are examples of ceremonial objects whose meanings are radically subverted, with fatal results.

The poisoning in *Hamlet*, like that which occurs in other Elizabethan and Jacobean tragedies, has been assigned a variety of connotative or metaphorical meanings by critics. It is often said, for example, that the poison in *Hamlet* is a metaphor for the moral and political corruption that exists in the state. The poisoning of King Hamlet (in its various manifestations) may be interpreted as an emblematic representation of Claudius’ poisoning of the body politic;\(^{43}\) likewise, the poisoning at the end of the play figuratively (and at the same time literally) signifies the spread of fratricidal/regicidal corruption and of the spirit of revenge. Another phenomenon that the poisoning connotes (and which is related to corruption) is contagion. Laertes remarks, in act four, “I’ll touch my point/ With this contagion, that, if I gall him slightly,/ It may be death” (IV.vii.122-24). In the final scene, the “contagion” or poison spreads from Hamlet to himself and thence to Claudius in the manner of a deadly infection or a virulent disease. As well, the poison from Claudius’ “union” (V.ii.219) contaminates Gertrude and then himself instead of the intended victim. Poisoning is represented as a form of violence which is not containable or controllable, which spreads in the manner of an epidemic. Girard observes that in certain tribal societies, individuals who kill are marked through ritual as impure, as contaminated, and that the sense of contamination often translates materially into a fear of having contact with those persons for fear that the

\(^{43}\)Nigel Alexander writes that “Claudius is a ‘king of shreds and patches’ who has stolen the crown by murder and is in the process of poisoning the whole body politic of Denmark as he had poisoned the body-natural of its true King.” *Poison, Play, and Duel: A Study in Hamlet* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971) 177. See also Houston 111, 174.
violence is contagious. He writes, "Concepts such as impurity and contagion, because they translate human relations into material terms, provide a sort of camouflage. The peril that overshadows all human relations and that stems from these relations [i.e., uncontrolled violence] is presented either in a purely material or in a wholly otherworldly guise."44 Insofar as poison also demonstrates a contagious aspect, it too can be understood to represent in material terms the contagious and self-perpetuating nature of reciprocal violence.

At the same time that the poisoning at the end of Hamlet demonstrates itself to be a multi-valent metaphor, it also reminds the audience of the deceptiveness of "outward shows." While poison can be employed to suggest the deceptiveness of appearances in general, it bears a special relationship to appearances in performance. The number of poisoning scenes in Elizabethan/Jacobean tragedy that involve some kind of performance--be it theatre, ritual, or play--suggests that an association was being made between performance and dangerous obscurity or concealment. The sceptical view of performance which poisoning scenes encourage contrasts sharply with the conceptualization of performance which underlies contemporary spectacles of state power, that is of performance as a display or enactment of certain truths. Poison subverts an essential dimension of performance--its visual dimension. Indeed, poison is antithetical to visual signification. In the theatre, poison has no visible signifier. It resides within a host--a sword, a cup of wine, a book, a bouquet, a pair of gloves, painted lips--which conceals the poison rather than revealing it. Poison signifies, in such cases, as an absence--as the absent sign of violence. The toxic substance is invoked through other signs which suggest its

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44Girard, Violence 28. See also Girard, Things Hidden 17: "Primitive societies repress mimetic conflict not only by prohibiting everything that might provoke it but also by dissimulating it beneath the major symbols of the sacred, such as contamination, pollution, etc."

presence, such as the speeches and gestures which refer to it, which point to its concealed presence, or which enact its horrible effects.\textsuperscript{45} But at the same time that poison is made manifest in the performance, its invisibility continues to signify for the audience.

The poison radically subverts the frame which signals to the audience that what it observes is only mimetic and at the same time promises to contain the aggression between the combatants. The frame is both fragile and deceptive. The fencing match conveys a disturbing sense of “hollowness,” a sense that its ceremonial forms are only forms which offer neither substance nor stability. At the same time, there is a “substance” to the violence which the performative frame initially obscures but which is eventually exposed as the characters fall to the floor. Thus the performed violence is epistemologically unstable, and its hermeneutic is no more fixed. Interpretation of the violence is to some extent influenced by the way in which it fulfills Hamlet’s obligation to his father (as laid out by the Ghost). The significance of the concluding bloodbath is also influenced by Hamlet’s repeated invocations of providential design in the fifth act.\textsuperscript{46} Arguably, the slaughter can be reconciled in terms of both pagan and Christian value systems. At the same time, corruption and contagion signify strongly in the mode of the violence. In this revenge performance as much as in any previously discussed, violence is the site of interpretive as well as material conflict.

\textsuperscript{45}Houston refers to this verbal evidence as “non-defective verbal explanation” (76).

\textsuperscript{46}“There’s a divinity that shapes our ends,/ Rough-hew them how we will” (V.ii.10-11); “There’s a special providence in the fall of a sparrow” (V.ii.166-67).
Jacobean revenge tragedy can claim another episode of swordplay which is presented as a courtly entertainment and which concludes in poisoning. The embedded performance occurs in Webster’s *The White Devil*. In this case the performance occasion is not a bout of rapier fencing but a combat at barriers. The performance is ordered as part of “our duchess’ revels,” Brachiano explains to the Duke of Florence, who is disguised as the Moor Mulinassar:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>It hath pleased</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The great ambassadors of several princes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In their return from Rome to their own countries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To grace our marriage, and to honour me</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With such a kind of sport. (V.i.57-61)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Like rapier combat, the barriers was a courtly exercise which formalized aggression between competitive peers and which invoked various framing devices in order to distance the activity from real violence. Combatants fought on foot in full ceremonial armour, exchanging blows with lances or swords across a waist high wooden barrier. The fights were overseen by judges as well as by large audiences, and prizes were bestowed on champions. Fights at barriers were held in the Tudor and Stuart periods either as parts of tournaments that also featured mounted chivalric exercises such as tilts and tourneys, or as separate events performed in palace halls. By the sixteenth century, such events were conducted not for the purposes of practical martial training or exercise but rather principally for the entertainment of the court and the commoners who

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paid to attend the spectacles.\textsuperscript{48} Like other courtly entertainments, tournaments were instruments of royal propaganda which demonstrated the magnificence of the monarch to his subjects and to important visitors from abroad and, at the same time, enhanced the status (and possibly the influence) of the aristocratic participants.\textsuperscript{49} These events incorporated many of the elements of other courtly entertainments, such as progresses and masques, in conjunction with which they were very frequently staged. For example, the Elizabethan Accession Day tournaments, borrowing from the customs of the earlier Tudor tournaments, made use of both fixed and moveable scenery, pageants, elaborate costumes, poetic speeches and debates, music, songs, processions, and embellished forms of neo-chivalric ceremony such as the presentation of the \textit{imprese}.\textsuperscript{50} Jacobean chivalric contests were no less spectacular or theatrical. The barriers that were performed for the Jacobean court in the Banqueting Hall on Twelfth Night, 1610, with Prince Henry as chief challenger, featured speeches by Jonson and designs by Jones.\textsuperscript{51} In terms of its theatrical and spectacular elements, this particular

\textsuperscript{48}Young mentions that although the real function of the tournaments "was not solely or even principally that of preparation for war, the Tudors none the less liked to pretend that the tiltyard could be a nursery for real combat" (\textit{Tudor} 23).


\textsuperscript{50}Contemporary accounts of tournaments and speeches written for them are published in Nichols, ed., \textit{Progresses . . . of Queen Elizabeth}, and in Jean Wilson, ed., \textit{Entertainments for Elizabeth I} (Woodbridge and Totowa: D. S. Brewer, 1980).
performance differed little from contemporary masques. The performance which is represented in Webster's play, then, combines rule-bound, adjudicated, decorous, "symmetrical" combat with spectacular elements from the masque and other courtly celebrations.

There is little in the playtext of *The White Devil* which specifies how the barriers episode is to be performed; consequently, it is difficult to ascertain how elaborate the staging was in contemporary performance. The stage directions merely call for "Charges and shouts. They fight at barriers; first single pairs, then three at three" (V.iii.0.1-2). One can extrapolate from this abbreviated note little other than that the fighting must have occupied a fair amount of time in contemporary performance if all the combinations of opponents were actually played out. As with the masque, the swordplay obviously had its own sensational appeal for the theatre audience. The directions for the embedded performance in the playtext are, like those for the masques in Marston's plays and in *The Revenger's Tragedy*, uninformative; however, we may plausibly suppose that, like many other performances within plays, this combat at barriers was staged in a manner that preserved the essential features of the form but which dispensed with many of its peripheral embellishments. In other words, the staging of the embedded performance might have reflected the principles of economy and simplicity which Chambers and other have posited for masques in plays.52


52See above, 86n48.
The combat at barriers in Webster’s play does not pit two enemies against one another, as the rapier combat between Hamlet and Laertes does. Brachiano does not face off against a rival/double. Because the combat itself is not a schematic playing out of pre-existing aggression between two characters, but rather a diverting display of sport, the threat of violence does not signify in quite the same way that it does in the fencing match in Hamlet. The barriers episode differs from the other revenge performances which have been examined thus far in that the violence to which Brachiano falls prey originates entirely with figures who stand outside of the performance. The reciprocal violence of Francisco and his co-conspirator, Lodovico, is carried out without their direct participation within the performance. They are (seemingly) not even among the combatants at the barriers. Consequently, the swordplay does not directly contribute to the achievement of revenge. The spectacle serves only as a distraction from the real violence that is going on “beneath the surface” of the performance.

This dramatic episode does resemble the fencing match in Hamlet in that it contrasts a spectacle of played violence with an unseen, intrusive form of real violence. The poisoning of Brachiano does not occur in combat through an envenomed weapon, but it does occur within the frame of performance and by means of a property which is an integral part of the performance. Brachiano is poisoned by a piece of protective armour, the beaver of his helmet, and the irony of this development is quite obvious; the face-guard is supposed to function as a protection against injury, yet here it proves to be fatal. The ironic disparity between the conventional significance of the object which is poisoned and its significance within the murder plot is typical of revenge drama.

In The White Devil as in Hamlet, the presence of poison in the embedded performance emphasizes a difference between the theatre audience and the on-stage audience. The members of the on-stage audience who are not privy to the
murder plot are, like Brachiano, deceived by the performance. They are figuratively, if not literally, victimized by the performance. The theatre audience observes the victimization of the on-stage spectators with a sense of security and privilege. These privileged viewers have been reliably informed of the presence of poison through verbal and visual evidence, and so the poison is “visible” or perceptible to them when it enters into play. The on-stage audience, in contrast, is supplied with no means with which to detect the invisible violence until it has occurred and its effects have become visible or palpable. The privilege of the theatre audience, then, is the privilege of knowledge. The theatre audience observes the on-stage spectators and performers being deceived and victimized by an invisible weapon, certainly, but also by their limited perspective. As well as being deceived by duplicitous adversaries, the on-stage performers and spectators are victims of the conditions which allow the duplicity to operate. In other words, the performative context is implicated in the insidious violence. The performance offers reassurances to its audience that it will maintain the distinction between real and played behaviour, and, at the same time, it allows for violence which ought only to be feigned or imitated to become real. As well, the performance focuses audience attention on one sort of potentially violent practice, sword fighting, in order to allow another form of violence, poisoning, to go unnoticed. Spectators of the performed combat in *The White Devil* (like those in *Hamlet*) are exposed to a double threat—from a violence

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53 The theatre audience for this scene is thus in the same position as the theatre audience for the fencing scene in *Hamlet*. Houston explains that a theatre audience is not blind to the poison as a result of two dramatic conventions: non-defective verbal information and consistency of signification. These conventions ensure that responses such as horror and ironic awareness are properly felt (75-82).
which they mistakenly perceive to be played, and from a violence which they not only cannot detect but are actively discouraged from detecting.

The theatre audience witnesses this deception and violence from an objective distance and is able to recognize the dangers of the performance. But ultimately, the embedded performance should not only produce complacency and security in the theatre audience. Another effect of the theatre audience's aesthetic and critical distance is to cause them to recognize continuities as well as differences between the play they observe and their lived experience. This is not only to argue that Elizabethan and Jacobean theatre audiences interpreted the revenge poisonings as a warning of similar hazards which faced them in the same contexts. Contemporary audiences surely did apprehend the figurative significance of the poison, and, consequently, they would have been conscious of the warning of hidden danger. Poison is a literal representation of, a material metaphor for, the unseen danger that can underlie performance. That danger, that violence, is not only physical. The plays themselves make explicit that the mind and the soul can be poisoned as well as the body. Perhaps, then, poisoning scenes signal an awareness of the imperceptible violence that can be inflicted on a participant and/or a spectator in the course of any given performance, which

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Fredson Bowers believes that the Renaissance theatre audience did accept the hazards of poison, as presented in the Italianate tragedies, as real and immediate. After surveying the contemporary knowledge and technologies of poison, the literature of Italian poisoning, the recorded cases of murder by poison in England, and the well-known suspected cases of poisoning among the English aristocracy, Bowers concludes that the theatrical and ingenious poisonings in the drama would not have seemed either remote or unreal. "It is not too much to say that an intriguing courtier lived in daily dread of poison and believed implicitly that it was used in his own circle... The outlook of the man in the pit would differ very little from that of the courtier in the balcony. Poisonings among his own order were not strange, and by his distance from the upper stratum of society, gossip of poisonings in noble circles would be tremendously magnified."

will not be felt immediately and physically, but which will nonetheless oppress, violate, "injure" the victim in some way. The insidious poisoning of the revenge performance, like other forms of insidious violence, might be one way of representing the operations of "violent" ideologies in cultural performance.

The Second Maiden's Tragedy is another Italianate revenge tragedy which stages an embedded performance that includes swordplay and poison and that proves fatal to its participants and on stage spectators. The dramatic episode in question concludes the sub-plot and provides the conventional bloodbath ending of a revenge tragedy. The events which lead to the performance are as follows: Anselmus is a foolish, doubting husband who sacrifices the marital chastity of his wife by submitting her to an unreasonable test of fidelity. He asks Votarius, his friend and house guest, to attempt to seduce his wife in order to prove her falseness. Votarius is successful in his seduction, but he and the Wife acquire an immediate passion for one another and therefore decide to conceal Votarius' success and to maintain a surreptitious liaison behind Anselmus' back. However, when Votarius exposes the illicit affair of the Wife's chamber maid, Leonella, she responds in kind by betraying Votarius and the Wife to Anselmus. The action of the fifth act, which culminates in poisoning and violent sword fighting, involves the Wife's and Votarius' attempts to convince the jealous cuckold of their innocence through a deceptive performance, and the sabotaging of that performance by Leonella and Bellarius for the purposes of revenge.55 The

55 The episode offers a counterpart to the scene in act one in which Votarius first attempts to seduce the Wife while Anselmus observes them from a hiding place. This time, however, the Wife is aware that she is being watched; and this time, too, her display of chaste fidelity is merely played.
spectacular resolution of the sub-plot recapitulates many of the devices and effects in the other revenge performances discussed above.

The self-reflexive, meta-performative bloodbath owes much to the dramatic tradition which this study has traced through Kyd, Shakespeare, Marston, Middleton, and Webster. However, the embedded performance also differs from those previously discussed in one important way. The other revenge performances are all representations of entertainments which belong to the courtly culture. However much they stray from their prescribed or conventional courses, they begin as identifiable cultural practices. Be they stage-plays, royal entertainments, or martial contests, they all take place on formal performance occasions which presuppose “official” audiences or bodies of spectators. The violent swordplay performed in The Second Maiden’s Tragedy, on the other hand, does not represent a specific cultural performance, although it includes elements of several types of performance. It is not an entertainment, not a contest, not a consecration of social harmony or royal power. The occasion represented is rather a private one occurring in a domestic environment (the Wife’s chamber). What is absent, in other words, is an official cultural dimension for the performance. Nonetheless, the action of this scene is scripted, blocked, and staged for an on-stage audience. Because it is self-consciously a performance, and because it involves deception, violence, and murder, the episode can be discussed in terms of other revenge performances.

While the scene does not represent a formal, public performance, its theatricality is strongly stressed throughout. It is not just metaperformative but specifically metatheatrical. Metatheatricality is established at the beginning of the scene when the various audiences for the action are “planted” on-stage. There are numerous references to theatrical performance in their dialogue. As
Leonella escorts her co-conspirator, Bellarius, to his place of hiding, the following exchange occurs.

Leo: . . . Thou know'st this gallery well; 'tis at thy use now; 'T'as been at mine full often. Thou may'st sit
Like a most private gallant in yon corner,
See all the play and ne'er be seen thyself.

Bel: Therefore I chose it.

Leo: Thou shalt see my lady
Play her part naturally, more to the life
Than she's aware on.

Bel: There must I be pleased.
Thou'rt one of the actors; thou'lt be missed anon. (V.i.21-28)

References to play-acting are sustained through a number of asides which remind the theatre audience of the false and unreal nature of what is being said. Once he has seen his lover slain, Bellarius leaves his spectator's position in the gallery and, gaining the stage, says: "What make I here? I had forgot my heart/
I am an actor too, and never thought on't;/ The blackness of this season cannot miss me" (115-117). The character is self-reflexively acknowledging his part in the play, which has been suspended while he has framed the action as an on-stage audience. He is anticipating his direct involvement in the concluding violence, involvement which the tragic genre requires. Bellarius at once distances the theatre audience from the action by invoking the theatrical frame and dissolves the frame by merging with the performance. As the character who has for a time served as a mirror image of the theatre audience ceases to reflect their position, the theatre audience is prodded to consider the nature of its engagement in the action.

The terms according to which this domestic situation can be called metatheatrical must be discussed at more length. The play makes clear that the

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56All quotations from the play are from the Revels Plays edition, ed. Anne Lancashire (Manchester: Manchester UP; Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1978).
characters are deliberately and self-consciously play-acting. What they perform is fictive, not real, and neither is the action that they represent "true." Instead, the purpose of this performance is wholly deceptive: the Wife, Votarius and Leonella are all "dissembling," as they specifically state at several points (e.g., IV.i.125, 154). Deceptiveness of appearances certainly does not distinguish this episode from the play within The Spanish Tragedy, or from the various revenge masques, which are also staged in order to trick their audiences. However, the framing audience (actually audiences) in The Second Maiden's Tragedy is very different from those which we find in other revenge performances, in that it is hidden. Anselmus lurks in a "closet" (10) and Bellarius watches the action from above in the gallery. In no other revenge performance is the primary on-stage audience concealed from the performers. 57 In several tragedies, such as The Spanish Tragedy and Antonio's Revenge, an "invisible" ghostly audience oversees the final slaughter, in addition to the present, mortal spectators. These additional framing figures might be considered as concealed audiences. 58 However, these observing spirits are undetected by the actors and spectators on the stage and the performances are not intended for them. In The Second Maiden's Tragedy, the hidden audience is also the acknowledged audience. This feature makes the embedded performance unique among those which we have been analysing.

Because its on-stage audiences are hidden, this scene resembles many other dramatic episodes in comedy and tragedy which are not formal, embedded performances either but which involve a character or characters who conceal

57 In The White Devil, e.g., some of the onstage audience members are disguised, but the semiotics of this sort of concealment are very different from those of the hidden audience.

58 One could possibly compare the omniscience of Bellarius' perspective with that of the Ghost in The Spanish Tragedy. Interestingly, both spectators appear to have been situated above the stage in a gallery, in contemporary performances.
themselves in order to witness a deceptive scene. The Wife and Votarius are obviously aware of Anselmus' hidden presence; he is the raison d'être of their performance. However, Anselmus is meant to believe that his wife is unaware that she has an audience. He is meant to believe that her demonstration of chastity and loyalty is real, not theatrical. At the same time, he is meant to believe that Votarius' attempted seduction is merely a performance. While the actors are conscious of their audience, they are not all aware that they have multiple audiences and, consequently, that their actions may have multiple significances. As was mentioned above, Bellarius provides a second audience in the gallery. Bellarius is a more informed audience than Anselmus; he is aware of the multiple audiences and he is aware of the multiple deceptions that are in play. He is also more informed than the main actors, for he and Leonella have undermined and subverted the performance so that what the actors only seek to simulate they achieve in reality. Through the machinations of the second set of schemers, the actors are as deceived and as victimized as they intended their audience to be.

Despite the fact that this embedded performance is so different from those which we find in other revenge plays, the violence works very much as violence does in other revenge performances. First of all, it brings to a crisis the epistemological problem of distinguishing between simulation and reality, mimesis and actuality, in a theatrical context. The scene sets up issues that are also raised in the play within The Spanish Tragedy. There is a difference, however, in the way in which real violence and played violence are confounded in this play, in that the actor who commits murder in the embedded performance does so unwittingly. When the Wife wields the sword against her lover, she and her

59e.g., the scene in Hamlet in which Claudius hides to observe Polonius speak to Hamlet, who performs his "antic disposition."
victim are, ironically, the only ones who do not at once realize that the violence is real: "Prithee, peace; / I will not hurt thee" (104-05), she says as the blade point pierces Votarius' unprotected breast and the poison enters his bloodstream. Anselmus, on the other hand, never has reason to doubt that the violence is real and responds to it as such. Leonella and Bellarius know that the theatrical illusion in which the Wife believes herself to be involved is itself illusory, that what seems real is real. The scene provides yet another dramatic occasion where the categories of the mimetic and the real collapse in the course of performed violence. Again violence is the textual site of a crisis which involves the possibility of obtaining knowledge of the real. Both Votarius and the Wife are victimized by duplicitous subverters of theatrics, certainly, but also, it follows, by the unstable conditions of knowledge which prevent them from apprehending the reality behind the performance. The scene suggests, like other revenge performances, that the theatre audience also has reason to fear the unstable conditions of knowledge that can obtain in certain types of performance.

Like Hamlet, The Second Maiden's Tragedy stages swordplay with a poisoned weapon. Bellarius and Leonella poison the rapier that the Wife uses during her performance to defend her chastity, and they also ensure that Votarius does not wear the concealed armour that the Wife has stipulated in order to protect him from her violence. As in Hamlet, a rapier thrust which is formally keyed as play (this time theatrical play rather than competitive play) proves fatally real. An important difference between the two scenes rests in the fact that the Wife, unlike Laertes, does not know that her weapon is poisoned and she never intends her action to be violent in reality. She performs the fatal thrust in a manner which she believes to be purely theatrical; but the conditions surrounding that gesture have been radically altered. The Wife demonstrates herself to be the instrument of another's violence, despite her belief in the
autonomy of her performance. Her gestures are not self-authored and independently signifying, for their real significance is determined without reference to her intentions and through their manipulation by others. As well as exposing her passive instrumentality, the Wife shows that she is as much a victim of the poisoned weapon as is Votarius. Her victimization becomes material moments after Votarius’ death, when she herself intercepts the envenomed blade.

Like so many other revenge performances, this one is not what it at first appears to be. The sense of security which performers and spectators ought to feel with regard to the outcome of the performance is radically undercut. Like many other theatrical and ceremonial poisonings in the drama, this one suggests that deception and corruption may lurk undetected within the most controlled occasions. This poisonous performance shares with the fencing match in Hamlet the device of combining a visible weapon with an invisible one. As in Hamlet, the suggestion here is that undetectable violence is more to be feared than violence that can be sensed and anticipated. The scene enacts an anxiety that we have already detected in other revenge performances--an uneasy apprehension of threats that may exist in seemingly innocuous performances.

As in many other revenge plays, after the first victim succumbs to the violence, there is an escalation of violence. With the murder of Votarius, the performance that he and the Wife have scripted comes to an end. Anselmus, the intended audience, jumps into the action and becomes a participant. He slays Leonella, the object of his wrath, despite the fact that he is ignorant of her full role in the violence. With her murder, Bellarius also enters the fray, and the distinction between performers and on-stage spectators entirely disappears. A general slaughter ensues which shows the devastating effectiveness and efficiency of reciprocal violence. The poisoned sword features throughout the
violence, taking out first Leonella, then the Wife, and finally Bellarius, who is the original source of the poison in the play. As in *Hamlet*, the revengers are killed with their own weapons. In addition to embodying (albeit as an absent presence) the corruption of the revengers, the poison renders material the related concept of contagion. The toxin spreads through the group like a virulent infection, just as sin and corruption have been transmitted among them like communicable diseases. And as well as providing a literal analogy for the spread of evil, the poisoning acts as a metaphor for the spread of reciprocal violence. The scene manifests an awareness that rivalry which is not contained or diverted results in an expansion of both rivalry and violence, which will terminate only with the complete destruction of the community.

The slaughter which enacts closure in the sub-plot stands in strong contrast to the revenging violence that concludes the main plot. It has not been an objective of this study to discuss violent episodes in terms of either the larger thematics or the general representational practices of the plays; it is the intertextuality of the various violent episodes, their relationship to other cultural performances and to each other, that has been at issue. However, in the case of *The Second Maiden's Tragedy*, it is necessary to relate briefly the revenge slaughter of act five scene one to the other violent conclusion of the play. This play is unique among the revenge tragedies that we have discussed in that it offers two final revenge performances—one for each plot.\(^{60}\) The main plot and sub-plot are quite discrete and unentangled. It is only after the above-described slaughter that the main plot characters enter into the dramatic context of the sub-plot and offer commentary on the action. The concluding violence reflects the distance

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\(^{60}\)One could argue that *The White Devil* also offers two revenge performances—the barriers, which poisons Bracchiano, and the final slaughter of Flamineo, Vittoria, Zanche, and Lodovico, which itself involves several violent performances.
between the two stories. Both revenge performances are self-consciously performative, even theatrical, but otherwise the two episodes stand in marked contrast to one another. For one thing, the main plot revenge murder does not involve swordplay. The reason that the scene merits discussion in a chapter devoted to swordplay is that it contributes retrospectively to the way in which the preceding swordplay is interpreted. The second revenge performance does involve poisoning, but it is enacted in such a way as to encourage a very different interpretation from the episode just discussed. In the conclusion of the main plot we observe a strategic, contained deployment of violence rather than an explosion of reciprocal violence.

In the last scene, the usurping Tyrant appears with the disinterred corpse of the Lady, whose suicide he has caused. Although the body is brought in with great ceremony and display of reverence and is richly adorned, and although the Tyrant praises its beauty, it is evidently meant to be contemplated with horror. The song which is heard during the ceremonial entrance of the corpse makes clear the response which should be evoked by the display.

O, what is beauty, that's so much adorèd?
A flatt'ring glass that cozens her beholders.
One night of death makes it look pale and horrid;
The dainty preserved flesh, how soon it moulders. (V.ii.14-17)

The emphasis on the corruption of the body renders perverse the honour which it receives, and also renders acceptable the use which Govianus makes of it thereafter. He enters the court disguised as an artist and, at the Tyrant’s request, paints the corpse’s face to restore a semblance of life to it. But the cosmetic paint is actually poison, and when the Tyrant, driven by his perverse lust, kisses its lips, he seals his own death.61 This scene closely resembles act three scene five

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61Govianus uses the Lady’s corpse as a weapon with which to revenge her death, which might be understood as another desecration of the corpse along the same lines as those which the Tyrant has already committed. But Govianus’ poisoning
in *The Revenger’s Tragedy*, where Vindice paints with poison the bony lips of his
dead Gloriana’s skull and cozens the Duke, her violator and murderer, to kiss
them. In both plays the poison brings about an ironic reversal: the seducer’s
(attempted seducer, in the case of SMT) corruption or “poisoning” of the victim
is mirrored in the poisoning of the seducer by the victim. In *The Revenger’s
Tragedy* the analogy is taken further. The dead Gloriana had actually been
poisoned by the Duke following her rape. Vindice comments on that scene,
“This very skull,/ Whose mistress the duke poison’d with this drug/ The mortal
curse of the earth, shall be revenged/ In the like strain, and kiss his lips to death”
(III.v.102-105). And when the Duke has made the fatal kiss, the following
exchange occurs:

Vind. | Duke, dost know
Yon dreadful vizard? View it well; 'tis the skull
Of Gloriana, whom thou poisonedst last.
Duke. | O, 't has poisoned me.
Vind. Didst not know that till now? (III.v.149-53)

The victim’s body is a site of contamination in multiple senses. It is
contaminated by the seducer’s violent lust and by the revenger’s poison; the
body is also contagious, for it reinfects the seducer by poisoning his soul with

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of the corpse is done for the sake of recovering it and giving it proper Christian
burial. It is done to put the soul at rest. It also shows an appropriate devaluation
of the body in relation to the soul. Thus it is excused.

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Both scenes are discussed in Annette Drew-Bear, “Face-Painting in Renaissance
had a real association with poison in the period, given that most of the
substances with which they were made (white lead or “ceruse”, mercuric
sulphide or “vermillion”, mercury sublimate or “cantharides”) were toxic. There
was also a well-developed poetic convention which associated face-painting (for
the purpose of concealing blemishes or the ravages of disease) with the
concealment of sins or vices. Face-painting was used to represent sin (vanity,
lust, dishonesty), as well as the concealment of sin or the deceptiveness of
appearances.
lust at the same time that it literally poisons his body. Reinfection is retribution, and it is achieved in an action exactly parallel to the original offence. In *The Second Maiden’s Tragedy* the seducer is also twice poisoned, but the female victim’s contamination is not literally true. The Lady is not literally violated (before death). Rather, her corpse is a sign of her resistance to sexual (and moral) contamination.

The emblematic and figurative meanings of the two episodes are closely analogous, and yet the two violent episodes finally must be interpreted differently. Numerous elements of the poisoning in *The Second Maiden’s Tragedy* remove from it the moral ambiguity which surrounds the scene in *The Revenger’s Tragedy*. The chief difference between the poisoning of the Duke in *The Revenger’s Tragedy* and the poisoning of the Tyrant in *The Second Maiden’s Tragedy* is the spectacle of unanimous approval which is produced for the latter event. In *The Revenger’s Tragedy*, the episode remains a private, surreptitious act, however theatrical its presentation might be. The theatre audience may remark on the poetic justice of the punishment, but finally Vindice’s revenging violence is insufficiently differentiated from the Duke’s violence. His violence is infected with the meaning of his enemy/double’s violence. Poison retains connotations that it acquires when it is used by the villain, because there is no mechanism within the play which encourages the audience to distinguish between good and bad poisoning. In *The Second Maiden’s Tragedy* the case is different. While it is unlikely that poison was ever entirely free from association with corruption and insidious violence,\(^6\) there are definitely strategies at work in the play to

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\(^6\)Bowers writes that “of all the forms of murder, that by poisoning was considered the most detestable and carried the automatic penalty of first degree murder with premeditation” (497). Mariangela Tempera observes that poisoning was inseparably associated with a specifically Italian (i.e., “other”) evil in Renaissance England, “The Rhetoric of Poison in John Webster’s Italianate
minimize those associations. When the Tyrant realizes that he has been poisoned, and recognizes his assassin, he sounds the alarm. Upon re-entering the scene, the court, rather than providing the victim with assistance, provides Govianus with a full endorsement of the violence which he has just committed:

Tyr. Your king's poisoned!
Mem. The King of Heaven be praised for it!
Tyr. Lay hold on him,
Mem. E'en with the best loves
And truest hearts that ever subjects owed. (V.ii.167-70)

The spectacle of unanimity which the courtly audience provides is further developed with the appearance of the ghost of the Lady. She supplies a spiritual sanction for the violence. This additional endorsement from the spiritual realm derives from the revenge tradition, which provides, for example, applauding ghosts in The Spanish Tragedy and in Antonio's Revenge. In this play the moral authority of the ghostly audience is less problematic than it is in The Spanish Tragedy, Antonio's Revenge, or Hamlet. The ghost of the Lady is the spirit of a Christian martyr who only demands of her beloved: "My rest is lost; thou must restore it again" (IV.iv.79). This is no Senecan ghost, no Don Andrea, calling for bloody revenge.

The unanimous consensus for Govianus' murder of the Tyrant confers on the violence the sanctity of a godly act, much like the sanctity that was claimed for the violence of public executions. The universal approbation with which the court receives the violence also reflects the desired response for state-produced spectacles of capital punishment (however different their actual reception by the public may have been). The framework of unanimous approval renders unproblematic the quality which Govianus' violence demonstrates (and which it

shares with Vindice's violence) of reflecting or mirroring the crime in the punishment. This strategy is inherently unstable in that it can suggest an essential similarity between crime and punishment, which the punisher would desire to suppress. However, Foucault observes that this was precisely the strategy of many executions in the Renaissance: to make the victim's body a text wherein might be read the offence as well as the punishment. "There was the use of 'symbolic' torture in which the forms of the execution referred to the nature of the crime . . . . There were even some cases of an almost theatrical reproduction of the crime on the execution of the guilty man—with the same instruments, the same gestures." The state sought to eliminate the potential danger of the multiple significations of the criminal's body, through intimidation (by means of the overwhelming power that was enacted in the punishment) and through various didactic texts which accompanied the actual execution and which imposed a single moral interpretation on its violence. The final objective of the public execution, then, was a unanimous interpretation of the appropriateness and thoroughness of its administration of violent justice.

The unified audience that is produced for the murder of the Tyrant is absent in the revenge performance which precedes it. When the general slaughter of Anselmus' household (with all its satellites) is discovered by Govianus and his servants, it elicits shock and dismay. It is the secrecy and the privacy of the violence that signifies at this point. As a consequence of the surreptitious intrigue that lingers in the scene, no moral sanction is forthcoming. Certainly none is elicited by the commentator in the play. The interpretation of the spectacle which Govianus offers, after learning of the sordid circumstances

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64 Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 44-45.

65 See Spierenberg (63) on the "moralized context" of the Renaissance execution. See also above, 91.
that have led to the violence, does not mention justice or God's will. His commentary, which bears the weight of his moral authority, highlights only the pathos of early death. The absence of moral commentary here is striking in a play which otherwise is so explicit in its didacticism. This omission of a moral interpretation makes it extremely problematic to claim that the violence signifies as divine retribution.

The unanimous hatred of the Tyrant and the general approval of his execution assure that violence will cease with his death. His elimination restores peace and order to the society. Govianus' line, "Well, he's gone,/ And all the kingdom's evils perish with him" (V.ii.193-94), unambiguously reiterates what the performance makes clear: that the Tyrant is a sacrificial victim whose violent expulsion will eliminate all violence and evil from the society. He embodies the impurity in the society, and when he dies he takes with him the poison which is attributed to him but which has also been used against him. He is transformed via the violence from one who disseminates corruption to one who absorbs corruption (as a sponge, in absence of a better analogy) and leaves a purified kingdom behind him. While his death is sacrificial in these terms, the positive qualities of the sacred do not attach themselves to the Tyrant as Girard claims they do to sacrificial victims. Sacredness is instead signified by the other corpse on the stage, that of the Lady. She too is very much a sacrificial victim; through suicide, she eliminates herself as the object of desire and source of rivalry between the two dukes. The Lady's self-sacrifice does not immediately appear to be an act of communal sacrifice, in that Govianus resists killing her and in that it

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66"Sacrifice too can be defined solely in terms of the sacred, without reference to any particular divinity; that is, it can be defined in terms of maleficent violence polarized by the victim and metamorphosed by his death . . . into beneficent violence. Although the sacred is "bad" when it is inside the community, it is "good" when it returns to the exterior." Violence 258.
does not generate an immediate cessation of aggression. But she is, in death, invested with the sacred powers which the victim acquires and her elimination becomes inextricable from the eventual return of order. Loathing and desire, which are produced simultaneously in a community’s relation to the sacrificial victim, are separated and polarized here through the two victims of violence. The double sacrifice at once reveals and partially obscures the puzzling duality of the sacrificial victim, who is at once pure and impure, good and bad, sacred and reviled.

No sacrificial victim emerges from the revenge performance in the sub-plot. And, consequently, this violence is not resolved into a larger scheme of order. The violence does punish sin and eliminate evil, and for this reason it may be tempting to attribute to it a sacred dimension. But the framing and the mode of the violence undermine this providential interpretation and assure that the violence will be interpreted as disorderly and “impure.” First, the performance conditions are represented as being inherently unstable and duplicitous. This in itself is threatening. Then, the use of poison means that the violence is both visible and invisible, spectacular and undetectable, and, consequently, there is no

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One could argue that the sub-plot does suggest a sacrificial victim of sorts. The Wife’s death by the swords of two rivals is most likely intended to be emblematic: it metaphorically represents the sin of which she is guilty (adultery-taking two swords) and the consequence of that sin. The image also represents a displacement of rivalrous aggression on another body, which is the essence of sacrifice. Her death does not lead to an immediate cessation of violence. In this sense her sacrifice is not efficacious. However, she is also the focus of the final display of violence in the scene, the verbal violence which her husband heaps on her. The sins of all the characters are displaced as attention is focussed on the Wife. Anselmus, in his dying adage, offers *women*, as represented in his wife, as the source of the evil that has befallen them all. His statement is inadequate reduction of the issues which the play has been exploring, but it has the authority of being the last word on the subject. It is possible, then, to elaborate a gendered argument for woman as the real scapegoat of the play.
consistent means of apprehending danger. Finally, the structure of the violence is reciprocal rather than unidirectional. As weapons (poisoned and unpoisoned) are wielded, the theatre audience observes (particularly in the exchanges between Bellarius and Anselmus) the threatening reciprocity which typifies armed combat in all of its manifestations. The result is a violence which is self-perpetuating rather than final.

The basis of comparison for all of the dramatic episodes discussed in this chapter may appear to be insubstantial; swordplay is, after all, a relatively common occurrence in the drama. Indeed, there may seem to be little in common between the first scene discussed, the duelling scene in *Romeo and Juliet*, and the last, the metatheatrical violence in *The Second Maiden's Tragedy*. At least, their common ground, the fact that both scenes stage rapier combat, may seem inconsequential in comparison to their many differences of situation and effect. But the continuities among the scenes are actually more extensive than this: in all of the scenes the swordplay is structured as performance, and all of the performances are, in some sense, violated. The nature of the violation differs significantly from scene to scene. In some cases, it is a code of behavior and/or proper form which is broken. In other scenes, the basic principle of "play" is violated as the signs which indicate that the performance is operating in the mode of "as if" prove to be false (and the violence proves to be real). In all of the scenes, performed violence is an unstable entity, not only because it brings social relations to a crisis but also because it leads to a collapse of basic divisions of experience which are created in the cultural domain.
Conclusion

Given the many different paradigms of cultural analysis that this thesis employs, and given the selective way in which they are invoked to aid in interpreting the dramatic texts, it might be useful to reiterate the "through-line" of the study. Continuity in the discussion is provided first of all through the dramatic episodes that are analysed: all of the scenes represent formal performances that enact violence. In each case, the violence can be constituted as a violation of some principle of the performance, (e.g., its commitment to purely mimetic activity, its purpose of representing and enforcing social/aesthetic order), although the specific violation does not signify unproblematically. Arguably, the definition of "formal performance" is stretched a little in the last chapter, which includes analyses of the duelling in Romeo and Juliet and the metatheatrical revenge violence in The Second Maiden's Tragedy. Neither of these episodes involves an "official" on-stage audience, for example, although this feature is elsewhere identified as a prerequisite of formal performance occasions. However, the discussion of the violent confrontation between Capulet and Montague factions emphasizes the formal, scripted, and public nature of the "honourable quarrel," and the revenge sequence in The Second Maiden's Tragedy refers repeatedly to its own theatricality and also signals a self-conscious awareness of operating within the tradition of the "embedded" revenge performance. Some degree of continuity, then, is assured by the basic similarity of all the dramatic material, the ground upon which the cultural analysis stands.

1See above, 23.
The common focus for all of the play analyses is the nexus of violence and performance, but the emphasis of the criticism changes from play to play. At times, the critical issue is how the embedded performance influences the meaning of the violence that occurs within it, i.e., whether the performance "co-opts" the violence and makes it signify as an orderly/ordering practice, or whether the performance exaggerates the disorderly, disruptive nature of the violence. At other times, the relationship between the two terms is reversed, and the critical issue is the way in which the violence influences our sense of the performance--what it tells us about the "delimitedness," the stability of the mode of performance that is represented. At certain points in the discussion, it is "violence" which is problematized, at other points it is "performance," but always of issue is the interaction of the two terms.

Quite apart from the fact that the various chapters (and the various discussions of violent episodes within chapters) do not raise identical theoretical problems, there is another aspect of the discussion which may require some further commentary: the way the scenes are contextualized. Put reductively, the dramatic episodes tend to be treated in "isolation" from, or with very little reference to, the plays in which they occur. The represented violence is not contextualized in relation to the larger thematics of the play, or, to provide a specific example of this sort of critical approach, the revenge slaughter is not interpreted in terms of the overall treatment of revenge in the play. Since the influential study of Fredson Bowers, it has been customary to discuss the moral ambiguity of the revenge play's violence (or the fact that it resists easy incorporation into either term of such binaries as "good" and "evil," "ordered" and "disordered") in relation to the
ambiguous moral universe represented in that play. The current study
deliberately steers away from this sort of approach, not because it is invalid
but because it tends to obscure other means according to which theatrical
signs signify. The hermeneutic of the above-mentioned mode of analysis
tends to be "intratextual" and "organic"; it presupposes that the
interpretation of any given textual element ought to be determined
principally in terms of larger patterns which are present in the text. Of course
such patterns generally are significant and, with regard to theatrical violence,
we can safely assume that the playwrights did intend for the concluding
slaughters to reinforce themes that develop earlier in the plays. But this sort
of playtext-focused analysis obscures the fact that a play's representations are
also intertextual, that they also interact with representations in other
(frequently non-dramatic) cultural texts and with other cultural practices.
The significance of theatrical representations such as embedded plays,
masques, and swordplay episodes is created in the tension between the poetics
of the play text and the poetics of the encompassing culture. One important
influence on the meaning of the revenge violence, this thesis frequently

2Fredson Bowers, Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy, 1587-1642 (Princeton:
Princeton UP, 1940). Bowers is actually less inclined to admit the ambiguous
structure of the late Elizabethan and early Jacobean revenge tragedies
discussed above than are many of his successors. "In all the plays treated in
this period there is a very definite ethical background to the action, although
no attempt is usually made to align the dramas with contemporary life and its
moral and legal code. Only in this latter sense may these plays deserve the
frequently bestowed adjective 'amoral' . . . " (109). For Bowers, the ambiguity
of the revenge play's moral universe is largely a result of the competing
literary influences on the genre and of the different belief and value systems
associated with those influences.

3Plett 5.

4Stephen Greenblatt, Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to
argues, is the type of performance that is represented. The dramatic scene enters into "dialogue" with the known conventions of the performance type/genre. However, the thesis demonstrates that the violent episodes can have multiple intertextual referents. This factor, as much as the ambiguity of the play's "moral universe," complicates the audience's interpretation of the play and its violence.

Because this study practices a specific mode of interpretation, it follows that it also makes certain assumptions about audience reception of theatrical performances. Because it does not treat each episode of violence as part of (or the culmination of) a progressive, linear narrative, or as an element within a coherent "whole," this study also does not take for granted that interpretation in the Renaissance English theatre was dominated by such considerations. While the thesis does not elaborate either a theory of audience reception in the Elizabethan/Jacobean theatre or a discussion of the performance conditions which might have influenced reception, it does tend to minimize the importance for the audience of the "total" dramatic text (its unfolding plot structure, its progressive development of theme) and instead highlights certain spectacular moments within the performance text. The argument stresses the importance of the visual semiotic, and it suggests that moments of particularly vivid spectacle were interpreted by contemporary audiences within a larger network of cultural practices and images. The general implication of the mode of analysis of this thesis is that the dramatic context was not the last resort or final authority in determining the meaning of any theatrical representation.

In closing, we can connect the central argument of this dissertation to other studies that fall under the general rubric of "cultural studies" and that discuss dramatic violence. The most important of these essays and book-
length studies are outlined in the introduction (2-3). Many of them are preoccupied with exposing the violence that underlies certain representations of "literal" violence. In general, the violence which the critics identify tends to be both specific and politically determined; that is, it has specific victims, such as women, commoners (i.e., non-royal, non-aristocratic), criminals, other marginal, powerless, and disenfranchised members of society.\(^5\) The theatrical representations are interpreted as either reinforcing or subverting the "violent" ideology, depending on the argument of the critic. The "underlying" violence that this thesis exposes is more general than that which the above-mentioned critics identify, in that it threatens society as a whole, rather than certain elements of society; violence "figures forth" the collapse of important systems according to which Renaissance society was structured and ordered. In some of the plays considered, the violence is tied to a specific milieu, or it becomes characteristic of the cultural practices of that milieu (e.g., the violent masque in *Women Beware Women*, which represents the decadence of courtly performance). But for the most part, violence is less localized and less moralized. The pervasive argument of this study is that the theatrical violence signals to its audiences that the world that they have created, the cultural world, is not as stable, safe, or determined as they have elsewhere asserted it to be.

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\(^5\)Works which focus on the violence done to women include Stallybrass, "Reading"; Tennenhouse, "Violence"; Cohen. Works which focus on the violence that representation enacts of the contemporary "underclass" include Cohen, Barker, Cunningham.
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