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Recovering Disability in Early Modern England

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Antic Dispositions

Mental and Intellectual Disabilities in Early Modern Revenge Tragedy

LINDSEY ROW-HEYVELD

In their 1980 study of revenge tragedy conventions, Charles A. Hallett and Elaine S. Hallett argue that madness is “the central symbol that binds all of the motifs [of revenge tragedy] together.”¹ At the same time, however, the Halletts identify madness as “perhaps the most misunderstood revenge tragedy convention.”² They take issue with many scholars’ literal approach to early modern madness, specifically the then-popular habit of drawing parallels between descriptions of distraction and contemporary phobias or psychoses. Attempting to diagnose fictional characters four hundred years after the fact, the Halletts insist, limits interpretative possibilities. While the Halletts’ specific assertion here is accurate, in the years since their study, scholarship investigating the complexities of early modern madness has broadened the scope of “literal” interpretation. Research by Michael MacDonald, Carol Thomas Neely, and Ken Jackson, among others, has proven that understanding madness as a real condition experienced by real people, with specific medical and cultural valences, can illuminate a wide variety of early modern texts.³

For all the great strides that have taken place in the study of madness in the past thirty years, few scholars have situated early modern mental impairment within the context of disability,⁴ and, especially strangely, in spite of the fact that it was emerging as a distinct legal and social category in the

unfolding English Reformation.⁵ Neither have scholars reconsidered the role of mental and intellectual disabilities within the tradition of revenge tragedy; three decades later, the Halletts' assertion that madness is the most important and least understood convention of revenge tragedy still holds true.⁶

Madness is often underexamined and undertheorized in studies of revenge tragedy because critics have frequently regarded it as a simplistic narrative necessity. As Fredson Bowers asserts, "For there to be any play at all, the revenger must delay," and madness, real or feigned, delivers that delay.⁷ Madness provides an exceptionally convenient dramatic deferral since it facilitates the bloody conclusion it simultaneously puts off. Avengers such as Hieronimo, Hamlet, and Antonio adopt disability as a disguise so they might safely observe the villains they hope eventually to punish. Nevertheless, because their feigned distraction blurs into real derangement, these avengers potentially jeopardize their concluding revenge by means of the madness they take on to complete it, turning what looks like an instrument of action into an instrument of deferral. It is a slick dramatic maneuver, and the seemingly self-explanatory justification for the inclusion of madness and foolishness in revenge tragedies has often precluded further investigation.

But madness and foolishness are more than just vehicles for dramatic delay. An analysis of plays such as *The Spanish Tragedy*, *Titus Andronicus*, *Hamlet*, and *Antonio's Revenge* makes clear that mental and intellectual disabilities played a critical role in making the morally ambiguous revenge tradition palatable for early modern audiences. These disabilities weave together a number of the central thematic occupations of revenge tragedy, and, in so doing, present a paradoxical version of revenge that allowed audiences simultaneously to indulge in and condemn the bloody actions of the drama. Mental and intellectual disabilities also serve a similar narrative function. Through the inclusion and eventual elimination of disability, mad avengers are protected from the guilt of the violence they enact, while mad villains' guilt is affirmed and the violent ends they meet justified. Disability provides revenge tragedy with something of a literary loophole, facilitating the consumption of its ethically compromised but emotionally cathartic plot for audiences trained to condemn but hungry for vigilante justice.

Disability as a Thematic Instrument

Examining the cultural construction of madness in early modern England reveals a number of attributes that made it a valuable thematic instrument in revenge tragedy. To begin with, medicine regularly granted mental and intel-

lectual disabilities performative qualities. Medical authorities, for instance, believed madness could be caused by simply pretending to be mad and could be cured by similarly theatrical means.⁸ Widely circulated case studies reported doctors operating more like stage managers than physicians, using elaborately theatrical machinations to cure their “brain-sick” patients by gulling them into simply believing they were cured.⁹ Revenge tragedies seize on the possibilities of this connection between madness and theatricality, featuring characters whose mental impairments entertain audiences and whose conditions blur the lines between real and feigned impairments. These plays also employ theatrical “cures” to end the avenger’s madness: the play-within-a-play that is a frequent feature of revenge tragedy either affirms the guilt of the villain or, more often, facilitates the violence that frees the avenger from his maddening pain of injustice.

In addition to being theatrically resonant, early modern constructions of madness carried contradictory cultural associations shared by revenge tragedies; for example, madness reinforced the familial connections it also severed. Not only were family members usually the primary caregivers for persons with disabilities, especially those labeled “mad” or “foolish,” but an individual’s capacity to acknowledge and abide by familial ties was one of the primary factors in assessing his or her mental fitness. The failure to recognize a family member—or even the failure to recognize the authority of a family member—could lead to a label of “witlessness” or “insensibility.”¹⁰ This contradiction made the presence of mental impairment in revenge tragedy particularly apt, since the central conflict of the drama often hinges on an avenger’s clash of familial obligations: in order to earn bloody justice for one family member, Hamlet, for instance, has to kill another. Mental and intellectual disabilities throw into relief both the avenger’s shattering of familial bonds and his absolute commitment to those relationships.

The conflicts of duty highlighted by madness’s familial connections are further teased out in its contradictory religious associations. In early modern England, the image of the fool could not be easily divorced from its negative sacred connections: the opening words of Psalm 52—“The fool hath said in his heart, ‘There is no God’”—and the accompanying illustrations in psalters cemented the link between the person with mental impairments and the atheist.¹¹ Renaissance humanists, who associated reason with the divine, literalized this allegorical treatment of mental disability by characterizing the loss of reason as a break with God.¹² Paradoxically, mental impairments were also believed to facilitate an intimate connection with God; “holy fools,” who lacked a fixation on earthly things, were thought of as uniquely Christ-like. Erasmus plays up this contradiction of associations in *The Praise of Folly*

when he has his Folly, previously depicted as the source of vice, declare herself the only true wisdom, since salvation is itself a type of divine madness.¹³ These conflicting connections made persons with mental and intellectual impairments difficult to interpret in early modern England, and, therefore, especially rich parallels for avenging counterfeiters who walked that same difficult line between defying God and doing God's will. In John Marston's *Antonio's Revenge*, for example, Antonio's prolonged performance as a fool reinforces the play's fixation on divine censure versus divine consent since it mirrors the way Antonio repeatedly figures his act of personal retribution as an act of judgment ordained by God—in spite of his (and his audience's) awareness of the biblical injunctions against revenge.

The questions of guilt and innocence raised by the religious contradictions of madness find earthly counterparts in links between madness, revenge tragedy, and violence. One of the qualities frequently used to identify (or at least qualify) early modern mental disabilities, especially those categorized as “madness” or “lunacy,” was the threat an individual posed to the peace. As Peter Rushton points out, mental disabilities often went unlabeled during the English Renaissance until the danger of physical harm was evident.¹⁴ Claudius alludes to this potential for violence when discussing Hamlet's madness—“I like him not, nor stands it safe with us / To let his madness range” (3.3.1–2)—a potential that Hamlet fulfills in the murder of Polonius.¹⁵

Although madness and lunacy threatened physical danger, paradoxically, they also resisted the responsibility for that violence. One of the most popular euphemisms for mental and intellectual disabilities in early modern England was “innocent,” a term that implied both a purity that would not entertain the possibility of violence and a lack of responsibility for any potential harm that might occur.¹⁶ Revenge tragedies fixate on this duality, exploring the simultaneous guilt and innocence of the avenger, who must engage in unlawful violence in order to restore justice. In this way, having the avenger take on or be overtaken by madness increases the dramatic expectation of violence—and the ethical conundrum—inherent in revenge tragedies. Madness heightens the question of “Will he or won't he take revenge?” by transforming it into “Will he be too innocent to commit the required vengeance or will he be so guiltily enraged that he would be unable to stop himself from killing even if he wanted to?” Rather than serving simply as a somewhat unlikely diversion for the avenger, disability becomes a vital part of the anticipatory deferment of violence and its ethical complications.

The simultaneous visibility and invisibility of mental disabilities compounded the paradox of mad avengers' guilt and innocence. Unlike other

impairments whose representations on the stage were almost entirely contingent on costuming, mental disabilities were invisible. At the same time, mental disabilities were also granted visual cues, which developed over the centuries into nearly emblematic forms: madmen wore very few clothes or none at all; had either wild, unkempt hair or were entirely bald; and traditionally carried a weapon, usually a club.¹⁷ Fools wore striped or checked robes or cloaks, usually in green or yellow (the well-known “fool’s motley”), with a belled or tasseled cap and also brandished a weaponlike item, although fools’ accessories were distinctly nonthreatening.¹⁸ This contrast of eye-catching costume and invisible impairment not only made for effective theater through its playful, layered substitutions, but also lent itself particularly well to revenge tragedies that were obsessed with uncovering the unseen.

The conundrum of madness’s in/visibility is just one iteration of the revenge tradition’s larger preoccupation with testing the scope of knowledge. Revenge has as much to do with revelation as it does with justice, and questions of epistemology, like those raised by the absence and presence of mental disabilities’ visual signals, recur throughout the plays. When Hieronimo discovers the body of his murdered son in *The Spanish Tragedy*, he fears that Horatio’s death shall pass both unrevenged and unrevealed. Yet the proof of guilt needed to reveal and revenge his son’s murder proves strangely difficult for Hieronimo to acquire. A letter written in blood from an eyewitness is not enough; Hieronimo needs the duration of the play to confirm the identities of Horatio’s murderers for himself. And he is not alone. The Ghost tells Hamlet of Claudius’s crime, but Hamlet still needs to stage *The Murder of Gonzago* to confirm his supernatural sources. Titus Andronicus cannot act upon his desire for revenge until his mutilated daughter can find a way to communicate the names of her attackers without the use of tongue or hands. The disguise of disability, then, is often how avengers finally establish the proof of guilt that frees them to become vigilantes, even as it resonates with the epistemological uncertainty central to revenge tragedies. It allows avengers the time and the freedom to confirm the guilt of the villain while avoiding suspicion themselves. Simultaneously, putting on disability further complicates the issue of discernment raised by revenge tragedies since the very presence of madness undermines avengers’ ability to serve as accurate and just judges. Because feigned madness so often perfectly resembles—and even bleeds into—the real thing, avengers compromise their claim to authority and blur the line between a righteous execution of justice and a maddened frenzy when they pretend disability. Mental impairment, then, undercuts the very certainty it is employed to secure.

Mental and intellectual disabilities assist these plays in negotiating the difficult ethical conundrum they stage. Critics have long debated how early modern audiences responded to the technically unlawful yet potentially satisfying actions of revenge tragedy. Did they see those raging avengers as agents of evil, as Lily B. Campbell and others have argued?¹⁹ Or did audiences look past their Christian context to read avengers as heroic exacters of a necessary blood payment, as Fredson Bowers and his adherents have contended?²⁰ The answer may be that madness allowed playwrights and audiences the best of both worlds: they could indulge in revenge while condemning it, too, since mental impairments paradoxically heralded a break with family and religion, a tendency toward violence, a sense of perpetual indistinction and invisibility, and a failure of judgment—even as they also affirmed strong relationships with God and family, resisted violence, were easily identifiable, and facilitated reasonable judgment. Thanks to the construction of madness during this period, avengers could be always guilty and innocent, punishable and praiseworthy.

Disability as a Narrative Instrument

Just as mental and intellectual disabilities aided avengers in their efforts to interpret the guilt of their enemies, so these disabilities are themselves evidence to be interpreted. As disability scholarship has proven, the nonstandard body in literature is never allowed to be simply a fact but always serves as a sign of some deeper meaning that requires interpretation. This was particularly true in the early modern era, where disability could be read theologically, as a sign of God's wrath or as a wonder that indicated the powers of nature; physiognomically, as a physical indicator of spiritual corruption, or, in reverse, as a nearly sacramental outward sign of inward graces; or humorally, as the corporeal result of "excess" or "lack," both physical and moral. Disability was also often linked to the social problems that plagued England during the Tudor-Stuart period, specifically the rapid urbanization and vagrancy that spiked in the late sixteenth century. Disability invited interpretation, and the madness and foolishness found in revenge tragedies were no exception. Not only do characters (and audience members) have to decipher if a character is genuinely disabled, but they also have to determine what that disability means.

Scholars have engaged similar questions about what mental and intellectual disabilities are and what they signify within the context of revenge tragedy. Charles and Elaine Hallett, for instance, posit that madness was

both the symptom and the symbol of emotional excess, implicitly condemning rage, grief, lust, despair, and other strong emotions while acknowledging the disruptive effects of psychological trauma and moral chaos. The Halletts also suggest that madmen and fools are used to provide a counterpoint to the “sanity” of normal conduct: “the extravagant behavior of the true lunatic was a natural symbol for that ordinary everyday madness to which all men are subject.”²¹ Other critics, such as Barbara J. Baines, suggest that madness serves as a foil, not to the behavior of sane characters and playgoers but to the image of Stoic acceptance so often presented as an ideal response to trauma in revenge tragedies.²² Because the body was such an important political metaphor in early modern England, scholars such as Alan Thier argue that madness is a symbol of governmental instability, particularly in revenge tragedies where the crux of the drama rests on the loss of a legitimate recourse to justice.²³ The “dislocation in consciousness” that Jonathan Dollimore asserts is frequently showcased in revenge tragedies can be the result of “a dislocation in the world,”²⁴ but, as Anne Duprat demonstrates, early modern mental disabilities were also granted the power to reorder the world, creating rich alternate versions of reality.²⁵

While these are insightful observations on the presence and purpose of madness and foolishness in revenge tragedy, these disabilities also served a very specific narrative function: which characters succumb to madness and which do not guide responses to vigilante justice enacted in these plays. When the revenger is mad, his madness facilitates a nominal approval of his actions; when the tyrant is mad, his madness verifies the necessity of vengeance enacted against him. Disability in such cases is indeed a sign to be interpreted, and deciphering its meanings provided audiences with helpful navigation through the complicated ethics of the revenge tragedy.

David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder have theorized the role of disability in Western literature, identifying a pattern they call “narrative prosthesis” by which the nonstandard body acts “as a crutch upon which literary narratives lean for their representational power, disruptive potentiality, and analytical insight.”²⁶ Mitchell and Snyder outline the fourfold structure of this narrative contrivance: (1) A marked physical difference is introduced to the reader. (2) The narrative accounts for the inclusion of this difference by recounting its origins. (3) This marked difference is brought from the periphery of the narrative to the central focus of its concerns. (4) There is an effort to rehabilitate or eliminate this difference, thus resolving the central narrative conflict in a purgation of the social body or a redefinition of essential states of being.²⁷ As Mitchell and Snyder have asserted, the nonstandard body functions in narrative art as the metaphorical embodiment of various

types of social and individual aberrance, a phenomenon they call “the materiality of metaphor.”²⁸ Just what metaphor the specific disability embodies often determines the fate of the character and the outcome of the story; that outcome, however, is usually limited to either eliminating the disability or eliminating the character with the disability (the so-called cure or kill principle). The deterministic metaphorical power of disability is decidedly evident in revenge tragedies, where the multiplicity of meanings assigned to early modern madness directs the narrative and, especially, the audience’s ethical interpretations of that narrative.

When the avenger experiences madness, the narrative prosthesis of disability provides audience members with an interpretive strategy that allows them to elide the ethical problems raised by the actions of revenge. Many avengers—Hieronimo, Titus Andronicus, Hamlet, and Antonio, specifically—initially engage in madness as a ruse. The fraud allows them to avoid the suspicions of the very men they are observing and plotting against. As Hieronimo explains in *The Spanish Tragedy*:

Thus therefore will I rest me in unrest,
Dissembling quiet in unquietness,
Not seeming that I know their villainies,
That my simplicity may make them think
That ignorantly I will let all slip.²⁹ (3.13.29–34)

Enacting his machinations in the “rest” provided by the disguise of mental “unrest,” Hieronimo and other avengers participate in the classical tradition of putting on madness to overthrow tyranny. Junius Brutus famously feigned madness in order to take down the evil Tarquin, and, as we are reminded in *Antonio’s Revenge*, even Machiavelli suggested that, when seeking out one’s enemies, “He is not wise that strives not to seem fool” (4.1.25).³⁰ Of course, their control over their costume quickly disintegrates, and it becomes difficult for the avengers and others to determine their genuine mental condition. Titus Andronicus, for instance, comes so close to genuine madness that he never officially sets out to feign it. His nemesis Tamora simply mistakes his behavior for derangement, and he takes deadly advantage of her error. In this way, these dramas swiftly move through the first three phases of narrative prosthesis, introducing the disability as an initially peripheral issue, giving it a justifying origin, and then centralizing it as the fraudulent disability bleeds into reality.

In these plays, the avenger’s madness motivates the plot and leads to its inevitable conclusion, but, paradoxically, madness is a pointedly inadequate

justification for the actions of the plot and the machinations of the characters. Charles and Elaine Hallett assert that madness is crucial to revenge tragedy's bloody finale because it grants the avenger a potentially delusional but necessary sense of divine approval for his violent actions.³¹ This assessment of madness in revenge tragedy comports with Mitchell and Snyder's assessment of the role of disability in narrative art, wherein "the inherent vulnerability and variability of bodies serves literary narratives as a metonym for that which refuses to conform to the mind's desire for order and rationality."³² This statement is particularly true of mental disabilities, which, in revenge tragedies, become laden with symbolic meanings. Yet, at the same time, while madness is used to justify the actions of the avenger (to himself and to the audience of the play, as well) and to symbolize the social deviance the avenger has experienced and will cause, madness is also an insufficient explanation: revenge narratives destabilize early modern cultural assertions about the fixity of earthly and divine authority, but they do so by relying on the deterministic nature of disability. By depending on the fixity of disability to reveal the instability of order and lawfulness, revenge tragedies vividly illustrate Mitchell and Snyder's assertion that in prosthetic narratives "disability may provide an explanation for the origins of a character's identity, but its deployment usually proves either too programmatic or unerringly 'deep' and mysterious. . . . Their disabilities surface to explain everything or nothing."³³ Avengers who show up the artificiality of unchanging justice and authority through the predestined actions of their madness enact a similarly circular logic.

The conclusions of these dramas highlight their lack of explanation, since the resolutions of revenge tragedies rely on the motivation of madness; yet madness is often surprisingly absent from these scenes. By the time each avenger finally wreaks his revenge, he appears to have discarded the lunacy that he demonstrated earlier in the play. In the case of avengers such as Hieronimo and Hamlet, it is unclear whether they simply choose to abandon the pretense of madness—suggesting that they had control of it all along, however much their actions might belie that—or whether they were somehow cured of their condition, although no cure is ever identified. The obvious answer appears to be that they are cured by engaging in the final act of cathartic violence, which is contradictory, if, in fact, their madness facilitates their willingness to participate in that violence in the first place.

The ultimate fate of these avengers affirms the circular explanation of the prosthetic narrative, comporting with Mitchell and Snyder's assessment that disability explains "everything or nothing"—or, in the case of the revenge tragedy, everything *and* nothing. Instead of being cured or killed, protago-

nists of revenge dramas appear to be cured *and* killed: they enter into the final bloodbath free of their mental impairment and then they die in the attack that they instigate.³⁴ Both their curing and killing seem necessary to the narrative and ethical resolutions of these dramas. Avengers must be cured because, even if we agree that their madness motivates their violence, their lack of sanity would obliterate the scrim of justice that covers their brutality; similarly, they must be killed in order to punish them appropriately for their transgression of the law and return the narrative to a state of equilibrium. With these two conditions in place, the protagonists can be honored after their death in spite of their disability and unlawful actions—or, rather, because of their disability and unlawful actions. At the end of *The Spanish Tragedy*, the spectral Don Andrea promises to “lead Hieronimo where Orpheus play, / Adding sweet pleasures to eternal days” (4.5.23–24). Titus Andronicus is exonerated by his nation and honored by his remaining family members, who cover his mangled body with kisses. Hamlet, of course, is carried from the scene of his carnage by four captains, “like a soldier” (5.2.398); the “flights of angels” (5.2.362) Horatio invokes suggest that in his disability-free death he is not only “most royal” (400), as Fortinbras suggests, but also most Christian.³⁵ Valorizing the avengers after they have completed their revenge also guides the reactions of the audience members who have been presented with a complex moral task in deciphering these dramas. The application and elimination of madness allows spectators the transgressive pleasure of vigilante justice while exempting them from the moral quandary the violent and violating actions of the protagonist provoke.

Avengers, however, are not the only characters in revenge tragedy to experience mental disability. In a number of revenge tragedies, the object of revenge—the villain—succumbs to madness while the avenger remains sane. In Cyril Tourneur’s *The Atheist’s Tragedy*, the evil D’Amville loses his reason as he begins to lose his power and descends into madness by the end of the drama. The Tyrant in *The Second Maiden’s Tragedy* is driven to distraction by his grief over the Lady’s suicide. Lycanthropy plagues Ferdinand, the evil twin brother of the wronged Duchess in John Webster’s *The Duchess of Malfi*. The mental disabilities experienced by villains, like those experienced by avengers, are metaphorically loaded. However, villains’ madness signifies differently from avengers’ madness. For villains, their disability is a direct result of their crime; madness is a physical manifestation of their guilt. D’Amville goes mad because of the loss of his sons, whose deaths derive from his murderous power plays; the Tyrant loses his reason because the Lady, whom he ruthlessly pursued, killed herself rather than be possessed by him; and Ferdinand’s distraction sets in immediately upon seeing the bodies of his

sister and her children, whose murders he himself had ordered. The pointedly motivated madness of these villains demonstrates Mitchell and Snyder's theory of the materiality of metaphor, wherein deviance from a physical norm embodies social and/or individual deviance. As in the other revenge tragedies, madness provides a circular explanation for the actions of these tyrants: because villains are driven mad by guilt, their disability proves that they are guilty.

Plays where the villain becomes mad also follow the model of narrative prosthesis by first introducing the disability, then attributing it to a specific origin (namely, the evil perpetrated by these villains), before bringing it to the center of the narrative concerns and, finally, eliminating it. Again, disability helps elide the ethical difficulty of revenge. Villains' madness both facilitates and justifies the concluding violence, eliminating both the villain and his disability. This elimination neatly resolves the dramatic conflicts of the drama while protecting the hero (and, in turn, the spectators of the play) from responsibility for the otherwise ethically compromised ending. In his distraction, D'Amville kills himself, thus sparing the hero any possible taint of guilt associated with taking revenge himself in *The Atheist's Tragedy*. In *The Second Maiden's Tragedy*, the Tyrant's deranged obsession with the Lady's corpse leads the avenger to paint her dead body with poison; the Tyrant's necrophilia does the rest. Ferdinand in *The Duchess of Malfi* dies when he attacks his evil brother, the Cardinal, and the henchman-turned-avenger, Bosola, mortally wounding them both and allowing the play to reach its appropriate conclusion without tainting the purer heroes by forcing them into violence. The materializing of metaphor in these dramas means that villains' madness testifies to the rightness of revenge, since it proves their guilt by embodying their social and moral aberrations, while also providing for the elimination of those villains and their physical/social aberrance. Villains' madness makes revenge both appropriate and convenient. Uniquely, the madness experienced by villains also eliminates the guilt of revenge, since the tyrants in these plays bring about their own violent ends, either directly or indirectly. In these cases, madness serves as a prophylactic to protect the would-be avengers from the ethical mire of the bloody conclusion and to protect the audience members as well, since their presence authorizes the actions on stage.

Some revenge tragedies, it is important to recognize, do not feature madness at all. In plays such as Christopher Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta*, Thomas Middleton's *The Revenger's Tragedy*, and John Ford's *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* there is no apparent mental or intellectual disability, or at least none that is clearly articulated. Without the presence of madness in the drama, the eth-

ics of revenge become even more ambivalent and difficult for audiences to negotiate. In *The Revenger's Tragedy*, after finally completing his seemingly justified and hard-won vengeance, Vindice publicly confesses to revenge and is therefore immediately shipped off to a “speedy execution” (5.3.123). His justification for his bizarre actions demonstrates that Vindice has not lost his reason but is, in fact, so reasonable he recognizes the way his quest for revenge has eliminated any moral superiority he might have once claimed: “’Tis time to die,” he insists, “when we are ourselves our foes” (5.3.130). This unreasonable reason is also enacted by Giovanni in *’Tis Pity She’s a Whore*, who rationalizes incest. His vengeance on his sister/lover and her husband is, like Vindice’s, strangely self-defeating: he kills the one person whom he truly loved and then proceeds to take on a whole roomful of his enemies single-handedly, leaving little possibility for an outcome that does not include his death. Barabas, the titular *Jew of Malta*, meets a more straightforward end—he falls into a cauldron of boiling liquid after finally being apprehended by some of the many people he has harmed—but his position as a Machiavellian protagonist makes his death distinctly problematic. Like Giovanni, Barabas’s revenge is motivated as much by his own evil actions as those done to him, and his attempt to restore his version of justice makes things more unjust than ever. In the revenge tragedies that feature madness, disability mediates and/or clarifies the actions of the protagonist; in dramas without madness, the protagonists tend to acknowledge the evil of their own actions, complicating the dramatic pleasure and ethical equilibrium of their resolutions and making it difficult even to group these plays within the revenge tradition.

Through a complex network of thematic and narrative connections, madness helped playwrights and audiences both indulge in and shield themselves from the dangerous pleasure of revenge tragedy. Capitalizing on the many contradictions of mental and intellectual disabilities in the early modern era, authors could stage avengers who were always both guilty and innocent. Taking this overdetermination of disability even further, madness could be employed to approve the violent actions of some characters and, simultaneously, to condemn the violent actions of others. Mental and intellectual disabilities could show the audience who to honor as a hero and who to castigate as a villain, however similar their behavior. Madness is, indeed, the central symbol that binds all the motifs of revenge tragedy together—but it is more than just a symbol. It is the empty center on which the project of the revenge tragedy turns: it can justify the avenger even as it signals his deviance; it can motivate, condemn, and eliminate tyrants; it can free audiences to revel in and revile the play’s bloody actions. Revenge may be a dish

best served cold, but it is madness that allows audiences of revenge tragedy to have that dish and eat it, too.

Notes

1. Charles A. Hallett and Elaine S. Hallett, *The Revenger's Madness: A Study of Revenge Tragedy Motifs* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1980), 9.

2. *Ibid.*, 41.

3. Michael MacDonald, *Mystical Bedlam: Madness, Anxiety, and Healing in Seventeenth Century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Ken Jackson, *Separate Theaters: Bethlem ("Bedlam") Hospital and the Shakespearean Stage* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2005); and Carol Thomas Neely, *Distracted Subjects: Madness and Gender in Shakespeare and Early Modern Culture* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004).

4. Because of their complicated definitions, madness and foolishness are often excluded from discussions of disability. I categorize them here as disabilities for a number of reasons: (1) to identify my allegiance with the project of disability studies, which does not segregate physical and mental disabilities; (2) to maintain historical accuracy, since early modern medicine, although it did treat madness differently than other impairments, did not impose a Cartesian separation of body and mind in its diagnosis and therapeutics; (3) to comport with emerging early modern legal definitions of disability, which grouped madness with impairments such as blindness, deafness, lameness, etc., in its categorization and distribution of financial compensation.

5. There is not a perfect correlation between "madness" and "foolishness" and what we today term mental or intellectual disability. As C. F. Goodey has demonstrated, words such as "fool" and "madman" were not limited to psychiatric impairments, but could also indicate social, economic, or religious status; see Goodey, "'Foolishness' in Early Modern Medicine and the Concept of Intellectual Disability," *Medical History* 48 (2004): 289–310. Yet because these terms primarily described mental disability, I use them as such. Importantly, the two terms were not identical in the Renaissance: "madness" tended to indicate a more volatile and often temporary loss of reason, while "foolishness" signaled a wide spectrum of longer-term mental incapacities; even so, given the imprecision of early modern medical terminology, they were often used interchangeably. I attempt to strategically differentiate between them where appropriate in order to retain their historical and cultural implications.

6. Throughout this article I use the conventional term "revenge tragedy" to refer to those early modern plays that engage issues of justice and retribution, follow a classically tragic model, and often repeat a set of Senecan tropes; early modern playwrights and audiences would not have used this term to designate these plays as a distinct category.

7. Fredson Bowers, *Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy, 1587–1642* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1940), 89.

8. Montaigne offers an entire essay on the dangers of pretending impairment, because "I have heard many examples of people falling ill after pretending to be so." See Michel de Montaigne, "On not pretending to be ill," in *The Complete Essays*, ed. M. A. Screech (New York: Penguin, 2003), 782.

9. For more on theatrical early modern medical case studies, see Winfried Schlein-er, “Justifying the Unjustifiable: The Dover Cliff Scene in *King Lear*,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 36, no. 3 (1985): 337–43; for musical performance in early modern medicine, see Peregrine Horden, *Music as Medicine: The History of Music Therapy since Antiquity* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2000).

10. MacDonald, *Mystical Bedlam*, 126.

11. David A. Sprunger, “Depicting the Insane: A Thirteenth-Century Case Study,” in *Marvels, Monsters, and Miracles: Studies in the Medieval and Early Modern Imaginations*, ed. Timothy S. Jones and David A. Sprunger (Kalamazoo: Western Michigan University Press, 2002), 231.

12. Allen Thiher, *Revels in Madness: Insanity in Medicine and Literature* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 74.

13. Desiderius Erasmus, *The Praise of Folly*, ed. and trans. Clarence H. Miller, 2nd ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press), 132–38.

14. Peter Rushton, “Lunatics and Idiots: Mental Disability, the Community, and the Poor Law in North-East England, 1600–1800,” *Medical History* 32 (1988): 40.

15. William Shakespeare, *Hamlet, The Complete Works of Shakespeare*, Ed. David Bevington, 5th ed. (New York: Pearson/Longman, 2003), 1091–1149. All play citations hereafter are quoted within the text via act, scene, and line.

16. Rushton notes poignantly that “innocent” as a euphemism for mental/intellectual disabilities was particularly popular among the relatives of people with those impairments (“Lunatics and Idiots,” 37).

17. Sprunger, “Depicting the Insane,” 231–33.

18. John Southworth, *Fools and Jesters at the English Court* (London: Sutton, 1998), 163–74.

19. See Lily B. Campbell, *Shakespeare’s Tragic Heroes, Slaves of Passion* (Cambridge [Eng.]: The University Press, 1930) and “Theories of Revenge in Renaissance England.” *Modern Philology* 38 (1931): 281–96.

20. See Bowers, *Revenge Tragedy*.

21. Hallett and Hallett, *The Revenger’s Madness*, 51.

22. Barbara J. Baines, “Antonio’s Revenge: Marston’s Play on Revenge Plays,” *Studies in English Literature* 23, no. 2 (1983): 277–94.

23. See Thiher, *Revels*.

24. Jonathan Dollimore, *Radical Tragedy: Religion, Ideology and Power in the Drama of Shakespeare and His Contemporaries*, 3rd ed. (New York: Palgrave, 2004), 34.

25. Anne Duprat, “Stultitia loquitur: Fiction and Folly in Early Modern Literature,” *Comparative Critical Studies* 5, nos. 2–3 (2008): 141–51.

26. Mitchell and Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis*, 49.

27. *Ibid.*, 53–54.

28. *Ibid.*, 48.

29. Thomas Kyd, *The Spanish Tragedy. English Renaissance Drama*, ed. David Bevington (London: Norton, 2002), 3–73.

30. John Marston, *Antonio’s Revenge*, ed. W. Reavley Gair (Manchester: University of Manchester Press, 1978).

31. Hallett and Hallett, *Revenger’s Madness*, 78.

32. Mitchell and Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis*, 48.

33. *Ibid.*, 50.

34. In his reading of Shakespeare's *Othello*, David Houston Wood identifies a similar "cure and/or kill" phenomenon at work in that play's use of the prosthetic narrative. Yet because of the humoral practice of characterizing "health" or "normalcy" as an essentially unattainable state of being, Wood notes that disability was "an implicitly ubiquitous feature of early modern English life." In this case, Wood argues that the version of disability we encounter in early modern prosthetic narratives tends to be more "inward and covert" than those identified by Mitchell and Snyder. The dual protective measures implied by the "cure *and* kill" practice of revenge tragedy seem to affirm Wood's suggestion that early modern disability was indeed more inward and covert, since the narrative strategies that incorporated disability also necessitated a more stringent elimination of that disability in order to provide narrative resolution; see "'Flustered with Flowing Cups': Alcoholism, Humoralism, and the Prosthetic Narrative in *Othello*," *Disability Studies Quarterly* 29, no. 4 (2009): n.p. <http://dsq-sds.org/article/view/998/1182>.

35. The exception here is Antonio in *Antonio's Revenge*, who is freed of his disability but does not die after exacting his vengeance. For explanations of this atypical ending, see Dollimore, *Radical Tragedy*, and Phoebe Spinrad, "The Sacralization of Revenge in *Antonio's Revenge*," *Comparative Drama* 39, no. 2 (2005): 169–85.