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Objects and Gender: *The Revenger's Tragedy* in Performance and on Film

Katherine M. Graham

Thomas Middleton's *The Revenger's Tragedy* is littered with objects; skulls, heads, daggers, scabbards, money and jewels all play an active role in the development of Middleton's narrative and in the symbolic lexicon of the play. In performance, these objects take on a new material life and, as Andrew Sofer has suggested, 'props seduce our attention ... they become drawn into the stage action and absorb complex and sometimes conflicting meanings.'¹ Thus, when considering performances of *The Revenger's Tragedy* we must consider the work that objects are doing to act as a conduit for the meanings of the text, but we must also consider the extra-textual meanings that they might generate. In this chapter, I argue that objects in two twenty-first-century performances of *The Revenger's Tragedy* function as material loci through, and around, which questions about gender are foregrounded. In order to support this assertion, I'm going to look at Melly Still's 2008 National Theatre production and Alex Cox's 2002 film version of the play, considering in particular how they stage the money used to corrupt Gratiana and the skull of Gloriana.²

In considering the money and the skull, I wish to utilize an understanding of objects that emphasizes their motion. Sofer underscores the importance of a prop's motion when he posits that '[b]y definition, a prop is an object that goes on a journey; hence props trace spatial trajectories and create temporal narratives as they track through a given performance'.³ In this, Sofer is drawing on Arjun Appadurai's influential notion of 'things-in-motion'.⁴ In his collection *The Social Life of Things*, Appadurai argues that

[e]ven if our own approach to things is conditioned necessarily by the view that things have no meanings apart from those that human transactions, attributions, and motivations endow them with, the anthropological problem is that this formal truth does not illuminate the concrete, historical circulation of things. For that we have to follow the things themselves, for their meanings are inscribed in their forms, their uses, their trajectories. It is only through the analysis of these trajectories that we can interpret the human transactions and calculations that enliven things. Thus, even though from a *theoretical* point of view human actors encode things with significance, from a *methodological* point of view it is the things-in-motion that illuminate their human and social context.⁵

Both the National Theatre production and the Cox film make specific interpretive choices about how to stage the objects under consideration, choices regarding what those physical props are, what they look like, and how they are used. Those choices, in turn, affect the trajectories that those objects undertake. As Appadurai suggests, we must follow the things themselves as a way of considering the human transactions, transactions which make up the gendered social contexts of the play, and I shall argue that these transactions are framed and focused by the objects in question.

‘[T]hese are they ... that enchant our sex’ (2.1.120)

Central to the treatment of women in Thomas Middleton’s *The Revenger’s Tragedy* is the moment at which Vindice, disguised as Piato, tests the chastity of his sister Castiza and the integrity of his mother, Gratiana.⁶ Sent to corrupt Castiza by the Duke’s son, Lussurioso, Vindice finds his sister firm in her resolve to remain a virgin and so he works on Gratiana, telling her that Lussurioso has ‘long desired your daughter’ (2.1.73) and that she should ‘chide away that foolish

country girl / Keeps company with your daughter, Chastity' (2.1.81-2). Vindice begins his approach with words, and those words seek to emphasize the financial gain associated with sleeping with the future Duke – '[I]ive wealthy' (2.1.80) Vindice (disguised as Piato) bluntly advises. At first, Gratiana resists, claiming 'O fie, fie, the riches of the world cannot hire / A mother to such a most unnatural task' (2.1.83-4). But her weakness is soon evident and she declares '[t]his overcomes me' (2.1.103) a mere twenty lines later. As effective as Vindice's verbose persuasion is, he doesn't seal the deal until he declares 'I keep the best for last. Can these persuade you / To forget heaven' (2.1.118-9). The non-specific nature of the determiner 'these' advises the audience that we've moved from a linguistic register to a visual one. This new register is powerful:

MOTHER Ay, these are they –

VINDICE O!

MOTHER – that enchant our sex.

(2.1.120)

This fragmented dialogue moves away from the longer speeches that mark Vindice's initial attempts at persuasion and underscore for the audience the power of the object Gratiana is engaged with. Her speech shows her as so rapt and enchanted by the material object that she addresses it in apostrophe:

That woman

Will not be troubled with the mother long

That sees the comfort shine of you.

I blush to think what for your sakes I'll do.

(2.1.121-125)

As Sofer reminds us, '[p]rops have many lives – practical, referential, rhetorical, phenomenological, psychological, ideological.'⁷ But I want to emphasize the material qualities of the object. This is especially important given that the moment at which Gratiana blushes to think what she'll do is also the moment at which she is holding the object and is confronted with its 'shine'.⁸

Whilst Middleton's text states that '*money*' is the object that ultimately persuades Gratiana,⁹ both Still and Cox's productions depart from Middleton's text in how they present that object. Still multiplies the number of objects Rory Kinnear's *Vindice* employs, utilizing the money indicated in the text, but also offering jewellery; the objects used to corrupt multiply as Gratiana succumbs. Cox also multiplies the objects, with Christopher Eccleston's *Vindice* offering a jewel in addition to the money—a jewel that plays a prominent role in the scene. Both directors emphasize the material qualities of the object that convinces Gratiana to give in to Lussurioso's demands. In both productions then, the emphasis on materiality, coupled with the use of a second object, intersects with questions of gender, because our understanding of Gratiana's greed changes when it isn't simply, singularly, the money that persuades her.

Melly Still's 2008 National Theatre production worked to mark the importance of the material qualities of the two objects *Vindice* offered to Gratiana to tempt her to corruption. The first of these objects was simply a briefcase of cash and when Kinnear's *Vindice* first opened it in front of Barbara Flynn's Gratiana, the warm wash that had lit the scene changed and the two were encircled in a cold blue light, while a gentle hum further marked the moment. This lighting change and sound effect tightened the focus of the audience onto the money. Flynn's Gratiana, who was seemingly pulled towards the money, mirrored this focus, taking and caressing some notes, but quickly returned them, clenching her fists as she did so, as if to hold on to the feeling

of the cash. Her returning the money to the case prompted 'Piato'/Vindice to produce the second object, a necklace, asking 'can these persuade you' (2.1.118) as he did so. The appearance of this new material object was again accompanied by sound (here a tinkling fairy-like noise) and Flynn turned, grabbing the chain, running it through her hands – the feminine necklace much more affecting than the money. While the first sound effect seemed ominous, this second seemed markedly lighter, and indeed Flynn's Gratiana also seemed 'lighter', as if suddenly relieved of her moral quandary. Placing the chain round her neck, she stated 'that woman / Will not be troubled with the mother long' (2.1.122-3), and as she spoke she continued to touch and fondle the necklace, her speech lighter, her conflict gone – wearing the object was transformative. The audience were encouraged to read this enchantment as demonstrating her feminine weakness – 'these are they ... that enchant our sex' (2.1.120). Indeed, Still's production emphasized the particular gendered qualities of Gratiana's greed – cash weakened her, but it was jewellery that convinced her. The production went on to underscore this through Gratiana's next appearance. In 2.1, Flynn's Gratiana wore plain black clothes, her hair simple and greying, the only jewellery a silver cross. But 4.4 saw a marked change in her appearance: her hair was blonde and the cut sharper; she wore a tailored red jacket and kitten heels; and her simple cross necklace had been replaced with a large gold necklace and augmented with large gold earrings and a thick gold bracelet. Her corruption was marked by the multiplication of the corrupting objects, or as the reviewer for *The Evening Standard* commented, 'she transform[ed] from penniless frump to corrupt pander (all blow-dry hair and Versace baubles)'.¹⁰ Thus, if we might read Middleton's text as associating Gratiana's greed with her femininity, then Still's production underscores such a reading, and it does this through the escalation from the fairly neutral money, to the more directly gendered jewellery.

This multiplicity of objects, the multiplying jewellery, functions in Still's production as a visual mark of Gratiana's corruption – as the object multiples, our understanding of her corruption increases. Cox's film, however, asks the viewer to focus on a single object – a jewel. Middleton's text offers a comparison between Castiza and Gratiana, using Lussurioso's attempt to corrupt Castiza to juxtapose them as strong and corruptible, respectively. Frank Cottrell Boyce's script rewrites the scene to make Middleton's comparison between them even more direct, and Cox's visual language intensifies and focuses this comparison through the use of the jewel – an inherently tactile object. The use of a jewel as the corrupting object is first evident when Lussurioso (Eddie Izzard) gives Vindici the task of 'procuring' Castiza (Carla Henry); as he does so Izzard plunges his hands into a box full of jewels, letting them luxuriously slip through his fingers, emphasizing their tactility, before giving one to Vindici.¹¹ The importance of the object is further emphasized through the structuring function that the jewel performs in the film's interpretation of 2.1. The scene begins with Vindici offering the jewel to Castiza and ends with (the renamed) Hannah/Gratiana (Margi Clarke) demanding 'the jewel, sir. The jewel!'; the final shot of the scene shows Vindici placing the jewel in her outstretched hand.

Cox's film visually insists on the importance of the jewel to the scene when Vindici comes to the house and the viewer sees the jewel before seeing him. The episode begins with Castiza waking in the night, getting up and going to the fridge; as she does so a hand thrusts forward, holding a jewel. The darkness of the shot means that both the viewer and Castiza see only a hand thrusting forward (complete with tinkling sound effect), palm upwards, jewel sitting in the middle – we cannot see whose hand it is. Castiza's first response, however, is not to the jewel – rather, she exclaims 'who are you?' In doing so, she draws attention to the threatening presence of a stranger in her house and her possible vulnerability, but equally quickly any threat

is undone when Castiza asks '[i]s this my mother's jewel? ... Then give it back' while snatching at it, not waiting for Vindici to answer. The ensuing conversation wakes Hannah/Gratiana, who comes down the stairs frightened at what she might find, her fear augmented for the viewer by our realization that she is blind – the film again making the viewer see a vulnerable woman. Vindici reveals that he is sent from Lussurioso, referencing the Duke's son's passion for Castiza and broadly opening up notions of ingratiation. Immediately thereafter he places the jewel into Hannah/Gratiana's hand, and as he does so the power of the object is underscored through a shimmering sound effect and Hannah/Gratiana's audible gasp (the sound effect working as an auditory version of Middleton's 'shine'). Hannah/Gratiana's blindness functions here to draw our attention to the material power of the object; as Vindici places it in her right hand, she brings her left hand to also touch and caress it, her mouth parted slightly in excitement.

For Hannah/Gratiana, the material qualities of the jewel, foregrounded in her touching and fondling, open the door to a negotiation of her daughter's sexual value. Thus, Vindici suggests '[a]s for honour, I'd let a bit of that go too and never be seen in't. I'd wink and let it go,' and Castiza responds '[b]ut we would not. 'Tis so, mama?' As Castiza looks to her mother to concur, the camera cuts to Hannah/Gratiana, who whispers '[n]o, we would not...'. But Margi Clarke directs her line at the jewel, drumming her fingers across its surface as she speaks, before throwing the jewel back at Vindici and concluding, 'not for ruby'. Thus Cottrell Boyce's script makes Clarke's Hannah/Gratiana as readily corruptible as she is in Middleton, but also implies that she is greedy and calculating. Different ideas about femininity come into play here and material objects are central to the differentiation between the chaste Castiza and the corruptible Hannah/Gratiana. Indeed, Castiza herself sees the fashion in which her mother is bewitched by the materiality of objects. After Hannah/Gratiana rejects the jewel for not being ruby, Vindici

ups his offer, asking ‘can these persuade you to forget heaven?’ Pausing, he holds paper money in front of Hannah/Gratiana, and as she cannot see it, he places the money in her hands. As Hannah/Gratiana holds it, again fondling and caressing, Castiza angrily gets up, smacking the money from her mother’s hands – to break the material connection with the object is to reduce its effectiveness. Castiza’s following angry words are drowned out by the (off camera) laughing of Hannah/Gratiana; despite Castiza’s physical action, the material qualities of the money produce a reaction that overwhelms any verbal argument. If Hannah/Gratiana is literally blinded here, then she is figuratively blinded by the material qualities of those objects. When Castiza and Vindice talk, Castiza refuses to engage with the jewel as material object, meaning that monetary gain remains an idea – not a material reality – and it is easily ‘beaten’ by Castiza’s vehement belief in female chastity. For Hannah/Gratiana, as soon as monetary gain becomes a material reality, the idea of female chastity and honour becomes less powerful. But the material object is the point at which their ideological conflict is focused and the work done by the singularity of the jewel, as object, focuses our attention on those competing ideologies around chastity and on the sexual threats faced by women in the world of the film. The structuring function of the jewel underscores this, with the scene moving from Castiza asking ‘is this my mother’s jewel?’ to her mother demanding the jewel – the trajectory of the jewel making Castiza’s opening remark seem like a horrible *fait accompli*.

‘[T]hou sallow picture of my poisoned love’ (1.1.14)

Cox’s employment of the jewel as structuring device encourages us to follow the path of the jewel through the scene – starting with Vindici, it is rejected by Castiza, before being demanded by Gratiana, and that demand bears a greater significance through the implicit comparison to

Castiza's rejection. As well as returning us to Appadurai's notion of 'trajectories', the need to follow the path of an object is central to any consideration of the skull of Gloriana. In the first instance, considering the trajectory and history of the skull as object forces us to recognize that, as Sofer suggests, 'no recognizable object arrives on stage innocent. Objects bring their own historical, cultural and ideological baggage on stage with them'.¹² The skull is loaded with baggage, especially in the way Middleton's text uses it. As such, the skull might gesture towards the *memento mori* tradition;¹³ towards the Catholic tradition of relics; towards Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (the opening scene is a clear parody of Hamlet's engagement with Yorick's skull);¹⁴ or towards Elizabeth I, given that Gloriana is the name used to refer to Elizabeth in symbolic representations.¹⁵ Both Still and Cox play, to different extents, with these histories. Still's production draws on the skull's function as *memento mori* by juxtaposing it with Caravaggio's *St Jerome Writing*,¹⁶ which hangs in Vindice's house and is spotlighted as the audience enter the auditorium. Cox's film draws on *Hamlet* through Eccleston's manipulation of the skull and occasionally during the film he strikes that 'typical' Hamlet pose.

Following 'the things themselves' on their 'trajectories' is also striking because productions or adaptations, like Still's and Cox's, which add extra textual material relating to Gloriana (or the skull itself) change the trajectory of the skull for the viewer. I turn now to consider the trajectories that Still and Cox construct for their skulls, and I will argue that in Still's production the skull moves *towards* becoming Gloriana, whereas in Cox's film the skull moves *away* from being associated with her. Further, I suggest that both of these productions use the movement of the skull to consider the sexual violence faced by women in the world of the play. But first, I want to briefly consider the relationship between the skull and Gloriana in Middleton's text.

Sofer suggests that ‘Jacobean playwrights conveyed the skull’s oscillation between live subject and dead object’,¹⁷ and both Cox and Still play with the skull’s ability to both be Gloriana and also to *not* be her, questions which are implicit in Middleton’s text. In Vindice’s opening monologue he speaks directly to the skull and refers to it as ‘thou’ (1.1.14/15) or ‘thee’ (1.1.31), the language drawing our attention to the split between Gloriana and the physical object. However, the ‘thou’ referred to is not simply Gloriana; the monologue sets up a complex interaction between the Gloriana that existed previously, the skull as it existed when Gloriana was alive, and the skull as it exists now. Vindice’s first line to the skull demonstrates this: ‘thou sallow picture of my poisoned love’ (1.1.14) – the skull exists now, but is a visual *representation* of the Gloriana that is now dead; the skull thus signifies doubly. This continues:

[...] thou shell of death,
Once the bright face of my betrothed lady,
When life and beauty filled out
These ragged imperfections.

(1.1.15-18)

Again the (grotesque) state the skull is in now conjures the image of how it was before. Its ugliness and its ‘imperfections’ actually show its beauty. References to ‘filling out’ and being ‘apparelled in thy flesh’ (1.1.31-33) also draw attention to the tension between the skull and the flesh of Gloriana. In doing so, the language points to an early modern conception of subjectivity, which, as Ann Rosalind Jones and Peter Stallybrass suggest, understands that ‘if the depths of the body [i.e. the skull] display only the workings of anonymous death, the surfaces of the body trace the insignia of identity’.¹⁸

This tension between the object and the woman it was continues in 3.5, in which the skull plays a vital role in the killing of the Duke. In this scene, the disguised Vindice and Hippolito provide a woman for the Duke to have sex with, but there is no woman, merely the skull. Here, Vindice suggests to Hippolito that

I have not fashioned this only for show
And useless property; no, it shall bear a part
E'en in it own revenge.

(3.5.101-102)

The term 'property' plays on the theatrical context in which the skull is being used (its 'performance' as the woman and the 'performance' that Vindice and the 'woman' are offering the Duke).¹⁹ Here, Vindice appears to problematize an opposition between those objects that are defined by their appearance, or by their inaction, and those that act, which in turn plays on the femaleness of the skull as Vindice has so far constructed it. In 1.1, Vindice was careful to establish Gloriana's beauty as 'natural,' describing it as 'far beyond the artificial shine / Of any woman's bought complexion' (1.1.21-2). Here it is the disguise, the 'false forms' (3.5.97), that allow the skull to 'act'. Vindice's assertion that the skull is also involved in 'it[s] own revenge' suggests that the skull in the present is an ungendered 'it' who can take part in avenging the woman it used to be, and to do that it must be disguised as a sexually available woman. The irony here is created by the tension between the impenetrable Gloriana that the skull was and the unchaste woman the Duke is coming to meet. In Middleton's text then, the skull is not referred to as Gloriana; it is *separate* from her and referred to as 'thee' or 'it'. Furthermore, it is also anonymous enough to 'become' someone else for the Duke. This notion of 'becoming' is, as I

have posited above, central to the ways in which the skull, as object, intersects with notions of gender in both Still and Cox's versions of Middleton's play.

In Still's National Theatre production, to 'bear a part / E'en in it own revenge' (3.5.101-103) is, quite literally, to become Gloriana; in the production's use of extra-textual material the skull *becomes* Gloriana after its revenge.²⁰ Still's production began by troubling any univocal equivalence between the skull and Gloriana, which it did through the fragmenting of the object via the use of set dressing and the production's video projections. Here, the skull maintained something of its *memento mori* qualities, evinced by the juxtaposition between the skull as object and skull as image in the Caravaggio painting *St Jerome Writing*. But, to further gesture towards the plurality of the skull, the image and the object were augmented by video projection. Making use of the Olivier Theatre's revolving stage, the production opened with an extended sequence designed to introduce us to the characters and the world of the play. The revolve was divided into three sections – Lussurioso's rooms, the palace, and Gratiana's house – and as the stage revolved the audience witnessed the rape of Lady Antonio and then '[a]s V[indice]'s room rev[olves] round, he's kneeling on chair watching film of Gloriana's skull'.²¹ The striking video was not simply 'of' Gloriana—rather, the computer-generated image began as a green tinged face (which was not clearly male or female), but as the audience watched the skin fell off the face, uncovering the skull. The mouth of the skull then opened to reveal a long pointed tongue, and both skull and tongue thrashed from side to side. The skull was then recovered in flesh. It was an uneasy image; as Paul Taylor, writing in *The Independent*, remarked, 'to reinforce the sense of morbid obsession, there's also a computer-generated image here of a female face that explodes to reveal the bony horror beneath'.²² Immediately then, the video skull is itself fragmented, moving between human face and skull – the tongue foreshadowing the Duke's later death by poisoning.²³

The video and Caravaggio painting were the audience's first engagement with the skull, thus the complicated relationship between the skull and Gloriana, discussed above, is foreshadowed here visually – if the text itself does not allow the skull to simply *be* Gloriana, then these visuals disrupted any such simple association even further. However, the shifting between the strange demonic skull and the recognizably human face emphasizes that the viewer should not simply read any skull as Gloriana, but rather that we should see the multiplicity of skulls. Having been instructed on how to read the skull, the audience were then introduced to the 'real thing', which was packed away, wrapped in what looked like a wedding veil, in a box in a trunk. Vindice treated this carefully, often holding it cupped in two hands, cradling it and sometimes pressing it between the two inward facing palms of his hands at chest height (see Figure 1). Unlike Eccleston, Kinnear never quite held the skull in a typical *Hamlet* pose.²⁴ As Kinnear delivered parts of Vindice's opening monologue, he stood with his back to Caravaggio's *St Jerome Writing* and, in doing so, created a juxtaposition between skull as *memento mori*, as we find it in the painting, and skull as relic.²⁵ But what is clear, and this is evident in figure one, is that the presence of the Caravaggio painting in many ways undermined the idea of the skull as Gloriana and rendered the stage image a masculine one. This idea was extended when Vindice, hearing Hippolito (Jamie Parker) outside the room, puts the skull away and moves over to the painting, so when Hippolito asks 'still sighing o'er death's visor?' (1.1.49) he was referring to the painting, *not* to the skull of Gloriana. The action had two effects: firstly it encouraged us to read the skull as multiple, troubling any univocal understanding of the skull as simple 'being' Gloriana. Secondly, in the sequencing of these actions, and we must consider 'the *temporal* dimension (how props move in linear stage time)',²⁶ the material skull is superseded by the

image of the skull and the image of the skull in the Caravaggio painting might be understood as a masculine *memento mori*, given the similarity between the skull and the bald head of St Jerome.

In Still's production, the trajectory of the skull moves away from the masculine imagery towards feminine and it ultimately *becomes* Gloriana. But first it is disguised as a 'country lady' (3.5.133) to take part in the poisoning of the Duke by standing in for the prostitute that Vindice (as Piato) has promised. This disguise might be read as blurring the boundaries between Gloriana and Vindice because here Vindice's costume for the skull was elaborate (see Figure 2), and the construction of the puppet meant that when Vindice claimed that the skull shall 'bear a part / E'en in it[s] own revenge' (3.5.101-2), he meant 'part' literally. If the skull played one part, Still's puppet design meant Vindice played another. The puppet was formed of a body and one arm, the skull provided the face (it was covered with a lifelike mask) and Vindice provided the feet and other arm. As Figure 2 shows, Kinnear here wore high heels which complemented the outfit of the puppet and his right arm (invisible in figure two) was gloved in white satin, matching the puppet's left arm. The scene was darkly lit and Vindice dressed in dark clothes, so when he approached the Duke the puppet was convincing. As Ken Bones' Duke said 'I must be bold with you' (3.5.145), he wrestled the puppet to the ground, kissing her; as he did so Vindice let go of the puppet and ripped its mask off, allowing the Duke to kiss the poison. As the Duke writhed, poisoned on the floor, Vindice and Hippolito beat him and forced him to watch Spurio and the Duchess have sex. Throughout, Vindice was still wearing high heels and the glove, still bearing traces of Gloriana – even though those traces are also of the 'country lady' (3.5.133). Karin S. Coddon suggests that 'the skull is gendered only because we are told so ... Indeed, when Vindice, in act 3, scene 5 enters "*with the skull of his love dressed up in tires,*" the skull's

gendering is clearly a contrivance.²⁷ If the skull becomes more feminine as it is dressed up, in Still's production, that 'contrivance' works on Vindice too.

The most dramatic moment in the skull's trajectory comes after the murder of the Duke; here Still employed the revolving stage, again offsetting its movement with thumping dance music, in a parallel of the production's opening moments. Here however, we witnessed Vindice and Hippolito chasing the Duke and Spurio and the Duchess having sex. As the stage revolved, the skull graphic from the play's opening sequence repeated, but now when the skull had flesh on it, it looked more human than it did in its first appearance. As Vindice and Hippolito stabbed the Duke, the puppet got up and moved towards Vindice (the puppet had been flung aside on Vindice's line 'my once-betrothèd wife' (3.5.164), but as the stage revolved the puppet had been replaced by a living actress). Here Vindice broke down crying, holding a hand towards her, but she backed slowly offstage. Having been avenged, Gloriana in Still's production was reanimated, was re-covered in skin, and was free to leave. Still's production perhaps dramatizes Sofer's claim that:

[i]n effect, she [Gloriana] out-emblematizes the emblematizer, enduring Vindice's hollow mouthings simply as a means of taking centre stage. Vindice may think he has transformed the skull into a 'dreadful vizard' (3.5.149), a mask of its former self, but Gloriana herself arrogates the shape of bashful 'country lady' for a lethally effective performance (3.5.132), using Vindice as her costumer, valet, and means of transportation to keep her fateful tryst with duke, literally melting him with a kiss.²⁸

Here that arrogation leads to becoming. At the very least, in Still's production, having taken on the external appearance of a woman leads, via vengeance, to the skull very literally *becoming* a woman. Gloriana was murdered for refusing to sleep with the Duke; this murder robbed her of

her subjectivity, leaving her equivocal skull. Here, revenge gives subjectivity back, by making it material.

This trajectory of becoming is not reproduced in Cox's film – rather, Cox immediately and clearly aligns the skull with Gloriana, using visual cues in the present moments of the film's narrative as well as flashbacks to firmly insist on aligning character and object. This direct employment of the skull's past means that it functions much as Jonathan Gil Harris suggests objects function on the early modern stage, 'objects do not simply acquire meaning by virtue of their present social contexts. Rather, the value a particular object assumes derives from the differential relation of its present context to its assumed or known past usages and its potential future usages.'²⁹ Objects in Cox's film undoubtedly signal the past and move us between times, producing a complicated temporal trajectory as they do so. Vindici's first engagement with the skull produces the film's first flashback (to Vindici and Gloriana's wedding) and the film's second flashback is produced when Hannah/Gratiana and Castiza light a candle in front of Vindici and Gloriana's wedding cake topper. But while the flashbacks serve to reinforce the association between Gloriana and the skull, I argue here that in moving from past uses into future uses, the skull leaves behind that association with Gloriana and instead moves towards becoming associated with sexually wronged women more broadly (refusing the association between the skull and the masculine offered in Still's production). Thus, the trajectory of the object moves the audience from an engagement with the specific details of one woman's sexual murder to a broader engagement with the sexual abuse and violence directed towards women within the world of the film.

Cox introduces the viewer to the skull almost as soon as the film begins. Vindici arrives in Liverpool and goes straight to the catacombs to see the skull. The skull is recognizably

female; as Vindici takes it down from its position on a shelf its long, red hair strikes the viewer, as does the disjuncture between the hair and the skull – the skull is black bone,³⁰ whereas the hair is seemingly in good condition. Vindici sits with the skull in his lap, facing him, and in Frank Cottrell Boyce's screenplay the first line Vindici speaks, '[t]hou sallow remnant of my poisoned love', is directed at the skull, firmly casting it as Gloriana. Cottrell Boyce's script uses 'remnant', rather than the 'picture' we find in Middleton, further tying the skull to Gloriana by insisting on a material link rather than just an abstract representation. The importance of Vindici's reunion with the object, and the importance of the material, tactile qualities of that object, is increased when he presses his forehead to the skull. This action triggers a flashback and the film cuts to Vindici and Gloriana pressing their foreheads together on their wedding day – the red hair (unchanged by time) unequivocally links the skull and the woman in the flashback sequence.

The opening lines of Middleton's text are directed at the corrupt court and its denizens – 'Duke, royal lecher' (1.1.1) – beginning with corruption and moving to the skull fourteen lines later. Cox's film, however, starts with the skull (establishing its feminine role within a heterosexual relationship) and then moves to revenge and the corrupt court, but when the narrative of this scene in the film makes that move to revenge, the film troubles the understanding of the skull as dead wife and object associated with the past. In flashback, we see Vindici and Gloriana toasting their wedding guests with champagne, but at that moment the flashback breaks and Vindici cries 'No!', flinging us bluntly into the present. His cries draw the attention of other mourners in the crypt, and in response to the stares of two old women, Vindici turns the skull into a ventriloquist's puppet, performing a short 'routine' for the women. But this performance is not so simple. While ostensibly Vindici is speaking as a ventriloquist (Eccleston

holds his mouth taught, teeth showing) the slight movements of his lips do not always match the words we can hear. In addition to this, the tone of the voice speaking the skull's words is decidedly more feminine than the deep Liverpoolian brogue Eccleston employs. This effect is compounded as the ventriloquized dialogue progresses:

SKULL It's true, old bones don't lie.

VINDICI They do when they're in the grave.

SKULL When they're at peace they do. But these old bones will have no piece
 until they have revenge! Revenge! Revenge! Revenge! Revenge!
 Revenge! Revenge!

As the word 'revenge' is repeated, there are two voices audible – Vindici's shrill 'ventriloquist's' voice and the softer whispering sound of the skull. The skull then is not simply an object under Vindici's control, rather it takes on a 'life' outside of him. As Gretchen Minton points out, 'Vindice's ventriloquist act with Gloriana's skull also underlines the linguistic disjunction – the words that he speaks are his as well as hers.'³¹

During Vindici's ventriloquist performance, Cox sets up an image that repeats in the film (Figure 3): Vindici and the skull, side by side, facing the camera with the two of them filling the screen. It is an image that implicitly compounds the insistence on them as couple and the skull as Gloriana. This image, and Vindici's ventriloquizing, is restaged as Vindici reveals to Carlo/Hippolito (Andrew Schofield) and Castiza his plan for killing the Duke. Here, it is the side-by-side image that causes Castiza to ask 'is this the form that living shone so bright?' Having been employed to get the Duke 'a lady', Cox's Vindici creates a woman out of the skull and the body of a teddy bear, taken from the pile of teddy bears left in a show of public mourning for Antonio's wife.³² This hybrid 'lady' is placed in a canopy bed and Castiza, who

wears a wig matching Gloriana's hair, further complicating the hybridity of the object, lures the Duke towards it. Here then, Cox creates a material link between the three women treated so poorly by the corrupt men of court: Gloriana, killed for refusing to sleep with the Duke; Antonio's wife, who has committed suicide after being raped by the Duke's son; and Castiza, whom Lussurioso attempts to corrupt and then threatens with rape, are all fused in this material object. As Pascale Aebischer notes, '[t]he single signifier of Gloriana's skull, at this point, becomes a surrogate for the living Gloriana, for Castiza and Antonio's Lady, who are all three united in avenging the sexual exploitation that has threatening and/or destroyed them'.³³ Thus, as the skull proceeds through the film's narrative, it becomes less associated with Gloriana and becomes more widely indicative of threat to female chastity within the dystopian world of the film. But it does this through the manipulation of the material object and through encouraging the audience to consider the relationship between the skull and Gloriana.

In both Still's National Theatre production and Cox's film, objects function as material loci through, and around, which gendered arguments – about chastity and about sexual violence – are debated. While, like all props on stage, both the money/jewel and the skull are working as visual symbols as well as objects, the tactility and materiality of these objects are central to the facilitation of these debates. In both productions, the actors' performances focus the attention of the audience on the objects through their emphasis on the tactility of said objects – the caressing of the jewel or jewellery, the gentle cradling of the skull. To emphasize tactility is to engage the audience with conversations about chastity and/or sexual violence in a fashion that anchors those debates in the material (and often violent) world, not the abstract world of ideas and ideology. But these are also tactile objects *in motion*; their tactility focuses the audience onto them and

then the motion of them leads the audience to conclusions about chastity or the sexual violence. Thus, in Still's production Gratiana is rapt not just by money but by a single necklace, and her desire for material things (rather than, say, financial need), and the depth (and thus danger) of that weakness, is signalled when the trajectory of one necklace is towards a multiplicity of 'Versace baubles'. For Cox, the jewel, and the path of the jewel through the scene, focus the comparison between the chaste Castiza and corruptible Gratiana, because the specific jewel Gratiana demands is always the same specific jewel that Castiza has rejected. Thus both productions use the trajectory of objects to heighten our awareness of the danger Gratiana's frivolous greed poses to chaste Castiza.

That sense of danger, the threat of the sexually violent world the play's women face, is present in both productions' staging of the journey undertaken by the skull. For Still, vengeance makes the journey of the skull one of 'recovery' from sexual violence – the skull *becomes* the woman whose humanity was stripped by sexual crime. Whereas for Cox, the skull's strong association with Gloriana unravels as revenge moves the skull into grotesque, violent hybridity, a hybridity that suggests there is no respite from the sexual threat faced by women in the dystopian world of Cox's film. But, to return to Appadurai, in both Still's production and Cox's film we see that tactile and material 'things-in-motion' are central to facilitating comment on the world the women of *The Revenger's Tragedy* occupy.

¹ Andrew Sofer, *The Stage Life of Props*, (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2003), p. 2.

² Thomas Middleton, (2008) *The Revenger's Tragedy*. Dir. Melly Still. National Theatre Company. National Theatre, London. From 27th May 2008. *Revenge Tragedy* (2002), Dir. Alex Cox. Screenplay by Frank Cottrell Boyce. DVD. Fantoma, 2004.

³ Sofer, *The Stage Life of Props*, p. 2.

⁴ Arjun Appadurai, 'Introduction: Commodities And The Politics of Value', in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, (ed) Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 3-63, p. 5.

⁵ Arjun Appadurai, 'Introduction', p. 5.

⁶ In-text references from Thomas Middleton, *The Revenger's Tragedy*, (ed) MacDonald P. Jackson, in *Thomas Middleton: The Collection Works*, (eds) Gary Taylor and John Lavagnino (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007), pp. 543-593.

⁷ Sofer, *The Stage Life of Props*, 29.

⁸ The effectiveness of an object's shine is marked later in the play when Vindice, pretending to be a disgruntled and impoverished law student, is given gold by Lussurioso and claims that he's '[a]lmost struck blind' by the 'bright unusual shine' of the gold (4.2.114/115).

⁹ Middleton, *The Revenger's Tragedy*, (ed) Jackson, in *Thomas Middleton: The Collection Works*, p. 560. R. V. Holdsworth comments '[i]n II i editors fail to equip Vindice with the "gifts" with which Lussurioso promised to "furnish" him to assist Castiza's seduction (I iii 148-9). More than a purse of money is involved, as Vindice offers "a thousand angels", "treasure" and "jewels" (II i 86, 160, 192). As directors usually recognize, he should bring on a large chest' (R. V. Holdsworth, 'The Revenger's Tragedy on the Stage (1989)', in *Three Jacobean Revenger Tragedies: The Revenger's Tragedy, Woman Beware Women, The Changeling: A Casebook*, (ed) R. V. Holdsworth (Houndsmill, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1990), pp. 105- 120, 111.

¹⁰ Anon, 'Revenge is Still a Tasty Dish in Tragedy', *The Evening Standard*, 16 July 2008. Available Online: <<http://www.standard.co.uk/goingout/theatre/revenge-is-still-a-tasty-dish-in-tragedy-7408180.html>> ([Accessed 21 September 2015](#))

¹¹ Frank Cottrell Boyce's script changes the spelling of Vindice to Vindici, and I am following that here.

¹² Sofer, *The Stage Life of Props*, p. 17.

¹³ A reminder of the inevitability of death – a common representation in much early modern art (Hans Holbein's *The Ambassadors* (1533), for example) and emblem books, like Henry Peacham's *Minerva Britanna*.

¹⁴ For full discussion of the relationship between the use of the skull in *Hamlet* and *The Revenger's Tragedy* see, Scott McMillin, 'Acting and Violence: *The Revenger's Tragedy* and Its Departures from *Hamlet*', in *Studies in English Literature*, 24.2 (1984), 275-291.

¹⁵ See for example, Roy Strong, *Gloriana: The Portraits of Queen Elizabeth I* (London: Random House, 2003).

¹⁶ The production used the 1606 version of the painting (Borghese Gallery, Rome), not the 1607-8 version (St. John's Co-Cathedral, Valletta, Malta). We might note that Caravaggio was working on the painting as Middleton was working on the play.

¹⁷ Sofer, *The Stage Life of Props*, p. xi.

¹⁸ Ann Rosalind Jones and Peter Stallybrass, *Renaissance Clothing and the Materials of Memory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 250.

¹⁹ Karin S. Coddon offers a useful engagement with the skull's role in the theatricality of the play in "'For Show or Useful Property': Necrophilia and *The Revenger's Tragedy*", *ELH* 61.1 (1994), pp. 71-88.

²⁰ The concurrently running Manchester Royal Exchange production included an *opening* sequence in which Vindice danced with a masked Gloriana. (Thomas Middleton, (2008) *The Revenger's Tragedy*. Dir. Jonathan Moore. The Royal Exchange Theatre Company. The Royal Exchange Theatre, Manchester. From 17th June 2008.)

²¹ *The Revenger's Tragedy*, Olivier, 2008, RNT/SM/1/S71.

²² Paul Taylor, 'The Revenger's Tragedy, Olivier, National Theatre, London', *The Independent*, 5 June 2008. Available Online:

<<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/theatre-dance/reviews/the-revengers-tragedy-olivier-national-theatre-london-841251.html>. (Accessed 20 September 2015) [I would argue though that the image of the face was not so easily identifiable as female as Taylor suggests.](#)

²³ See J. L. Simmons, 'The Tongue and Its Office in *The Revenger's Tragedy*', *PMLA* 92.1 (1977), pp. 56-68.

²⁴ After playing Vindice, Kinnear then went on to play Hamlet. This temporal arrangement meant that Kinnear's Hamlet bore a trace of Vindice, rather than the other way around.

²⁵ While for the first half of the monologue he was stage right and lit only by a spotlight, on the line 'O keep the day, hour, minute' (1.1.41*) he got up and moved centre stage the light of the spotlight illuminating the painting.

²⁶ Sofer, *The Stage Life of Props*, p. 2.

²⁷ Coddon, "'For Show or Useful Property'", p. 76.

²⁸ Sofer, *The Stage Life of Props*, pp. 111-112.

²⁹ Jonathan Gil Harris, *Untimely Matter in the Time of Shakespeare* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), p. 8-9.

³⁰ See Pascale Aebischer for a fascinating discussion of meanings generated by the black bone in *Screening Early Modern Drama: Beyond Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 127-129.

³¹ Gretchen E. Minton, 'The Revenger's Tragedy in 2002: Alex Cox's Punk Apocalypse' in *Apocalyptic Shakespeare: Visions of Chaos and Revelation in Recent Film Adaptations*, (eds) Melissa Croteau and Carolyn Jess-Cooke (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2009), 132-147, 136.

³² Cox mirrors the outpouring of public emotion following the death of Princess Diana.

³³ Aebischer, *Screening Early Modern Drama*, p. 129.