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'You mean some strange revenge': The Jacobean Intersections of Revenge and the Strange

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Early Stuart plays with an interest in revenge contain many references to strangeness. Broadly speaking, these are plays with an interest in the excessive; in heightened emotional states; in unusual and extreme acts of violence; and in foreign settings. Nonetheless it is striking how often the word appears and how these usages might be seen to cluster. Exclamatory reactions and observations are the most common, so statements like 'tis strange' (*The Revenge of Bussy D'Ambois* 3.1.24), '[t]hat is strange' (*Bussy D'Ambois* 1.1.172), '[o] strange discovery!' (*The White Devil* 5.3.266), and '[f]rost I' th' dog-days! strange!' (*The White Devil* 3.2.202) abound. Plays such as *The Duchess of Malfi* find strangeness in dreams and the imagination; thus the Duchess refers to the 'strange geometrical hinges' (4.2.24) on which the doors of death pivot and reports to Antonio that 'I had a very strange dream tonight' (3.5.12), an experience she shares with the Page from *The Malcontent*, who also reports 'a strange dream' (3.4.12). Elsewhere in *The Malcontent* we find '[s]trong phantasy tricking up strange delights' (3.2.41) and there is a similar evocation of the imagination in *The Revenge of Bussy D'Ambois* where Clermont claims that 'th' imaginary power … Feigns many strange, miraculous images' (5.1.43-47). *Bussy D'Ambois* (which precedes *The Revenge of Bussy D'Ambois*) is particularly interested in people feeling or being strange, thus characters comment of Bussy 'here's some strange distemper' (1.2.115) or they claim 'I feare him strangely' (3.2.398). *Women Beware Women* demonstrates something similar, with Livia asking the Widow '[h]ow can you be so strange then?' (2.2.144) and the Widow observing of Bianca 'I'm sure she's strangely altered' (3.1.7). Further references to strangeness cluster around the language of plots and narrative. Thus, the action of *Cupid's Revenge* is referred to as 'this strange *story* of impeitie[sic?]' (4.2.17) and the plot is referred to as moving in 'strange *carriages'* (4.1.25). In *The Revenge of Bussy D'Ambois*, Guise 'is thought to entertain strange *aims*' (2.1.262), and Aumale urges Clermont to 'use your spirit / And knowledge for the cheerful patience / Of this so strange and sudden *consequence'* (4.1.128-30). In *The White Devil* the audience are told to '[m]ark this strange *encounter'* (3.3.55)[1] and

[1] All emphases added.

in *Titus Andronicus* Tamora claims, as she visits Titus, that she will 'Knock at his study, where, they say, he keeps, / To ruminate strange plots of dire revenge; / Tell him Revenge is come to join with him, / And work confusion on his enemies' (5.2.5-8).

As one might expect then, in Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher's *The Maid's Tragedy* and Thomas Middleton's *The Revenger's Tragedy* the word 'strange' is used repeatedly. But, unlike in the examples above, in these two plays there is a strategic deployment of strangeness, a deployment that seeks to control the focus of the audience on particular, and shifting, aspects of the play's revenge plot. Both plays, I argue, begin by describing the characters caught up in the revenge narrative (those wronged or those seeking vengeance) as strange but then shift to understand the act of revenge *in-and-of-itself* as strange. Put simply, we move from strange revengers to strange revenge. I posit that both plays do this as a way of reducing the moral culpability of the individuals caught up in revenge, and that they do this because these are tyrant plays. As Francis Bacon tells us '[p]ublique *Revenges*, are, for the most part, Fortunate; As that for the death of *Caesar*; For the death of *Pertinax*; for the death of *Henry* the Third of France; And many more' (17). I would argue that the shift in the rhetoric of the strange suggests that Beaumont and Fletcher's King and Middleton's Duke should be added to Bacon's list.

In what follows, I chart this shift in deployment, demonstrating that the initial use of the term strange, when it is attached to a person, emphasises embodiment and is used to describe affect and behaviour. In this usage, individuals describe themselves as feeling 'strange' or are described as behaving 'strangely' and as such the language of strangeness signals what Harry Keyishian refers to as 'one of the most poignant aspects of the dramatic revengers' situation … their feeling of alienation from the world and its processes, as they have known them' (2). It is often that 'feeling' to which the rhetoric of strangeness speaks. I read the insistence on, and repetition of, that embodiment to be indicative of the magnitude of the shift to the second use of strange or strangeness – that which describes the events that have taken place as part of a revenge plot, the actions and crimes. The texture of the word strange is of particular importance here and its early modern associations with the unknown, the intriguing, the foreign, and also the visual, draw the audiences' attention, propelling this switch. Like Stephen Mullaney then, I would assert that 'the pleasures of the strange are consistently invoked to solicit our attention as spectators, auditors, or readers' (63). The misdirection set up through this strategic solicitation of our attention, the implicit shift away from the culpable

party to the act itself, is not without early modern parallel, and there is a corollary here with socio-cultural and juridical discourses around the figure of nobody.

'Strange'

The texture of the term 'strange', in the Jacobean context, is central to the efficacy of this pattern of usage, this shift from person to act, because it is an alluring, attention grabbing word, used to draw attention to something novel or noteworthy. In its Jacobean usage, the term is often associated with a kind of otherness or foreignness. For Emily C. Bartels, in *Spectacles of Strangeness: Imperialism, Alienation, and Marlowe*, 'to enter upon the Marlovian stage is to enter a landscape filled with strangers and strange lands' (3), but Marlowe's plays are notable for their attempts to 'combat his society's attempts to prove the alien inexorably alien and expose cultural stereotypes and discriminations as constructs, strategically deployed to authorize the self over and at the expense of some other' (4). Similarly, for Stephen Greenblatt, the term 'strange' is used to signal one's ability to engage with a foreign culture or object, discussing Christopher Columbus' reports to Ferdinand and Isabella show that 'the sign that Columbus cannot enfranchise, that is irreducibly strange or opaque, is *en route* to losing its status as a sign. For opacity here can only signal an obstacle standing in the way of the desired access to the known' (88). Strangeness thus evokes a process of understanding and interrogation.

In his discussion of *Wunderkammern*, in *The Place of the Stage: License, Play, and Power in Renaissance England*, Stephen Mullaney notes that W*underkammern* differ from museums in that they are *not* interested in 'regrouping the random and the strange into recognizable categories that are systematic, discrete, and exemplary' (62). Rather, for Mullaney, the strange is a 'category that in fact withholds categorization, that neither specifies nor defines but rather sets the objects to which it refers aside, grants them the freedom to remain as they are' (62). Expanding on this during a discussion of Walter Cope's collection of 'curiosities gathered from around the world' (60),[2] Mullaney remarks '[t]his is a room of wonder, not inquiry. It requires and to a certain extent produces an audience that is at once passive and attentive, willing to suspend its critical faculties in order to view "strange things" as precisely that: as known but in a certain sense unaccountable' (63). This sense of 'wonder, not

[2] Walter Cope (c.1553-1614), friend of Robert Cecil, Gentleman Usher and secretary to Baron Burghley.

inquiry', of things which might be 'unaccountable' is certainly an understanding present in the use of the term in pamphlets from the period, with numerous headlines using the term 'strange' to attract readers' attention. Thus we find '[a] most strange and true report of a monstrous fish' (A2r), '[s]trange newes' (A2r), '[m]ore strange nevves' (A2r), '[s]trange nevves out of Kent' (A2r), '[s]trange newes from Antvvarpe [Antwerp]' (A2r), '[a] strange horse-race' (A1r), '[s]trange newes of a prodigious monster' (A1r), '[a] straunge foot-post' (A1r), and '[s]trange nevves out of diuers countries' (A2r). Whilst there's a mix here between the foreign – 'diuers countries', Antwerp, Kent – and the attention-grabbing, but strange absolutely serves to 'solicit our attention'. In these pamphlets, the term, as Callan Davies suggests, 'fills a visual and moral gap, attempting description in the face of ineffability' (148), as Callan Davies suggests. Davies, importantly, deepens our understanding of the term strange by connecting it with the moral, stating that the term is 'a keenly moral concept in early modern England, and that it should be seen more fully within the context of the philosophical, visual, scientific, and technological developments of the period' (Davies 131-132). He goes on to suggest that 'strangeness eliciting a peculiar form of moral and visual *uncertainty*; it is … visually, intellectually, and philosophically *provocative'* (141 emphasis added), which evokes a broader understanding of revenge plays. As Chris McMahon argues, these plays (and tyrant plays in particular) do not show us 'revengers who are simply wicked or mistaken, these plays stage morally ambiguous contests where ideas of right or wrong are interrogated by means of sociopsychologically compelling stories. The plays thus deny pat answers but instead articulate crises of belief about domestic and civil practises' (2). Following McMahon and Davies then, both revenge plays (more broadly) and strangeness (specifically) ask the reader or viewer to interrogate uncertainties, thus this shift from strange revenger to strange revenge which forces the audience to question the morality, or efficacy, of killing these particular tyrants.

The Revenger's Tragedy

Thomas Middleton's *The Revenger's Tragedy*, first performed between 1604 and 1607, opens with Vindice detailing, in monologue, the murder of his fiancé and the death of his father. As he does so the offending members of the sexually corrupt court, most notably the Duke, '*pass over the stage*' (1.1.95). Enacting vengeance for these crimes requires Vindice to take on a number of disguises, and strangeness, as a material quality, is central to the Vindice's negotiation between these roles. Following the establishment of Vindice's motives for

vengeance, his brother, Hippolito, who works at the court, brings the news that the Duke's son, Lussurioso, is looking to bring a 'strange-digested fellow forth, / Of ill-contented nature' (1.1.76), '[a] man that were for evil only good – / To give you the true word, some base-coined pander' (1.1.80-1). Vindice seizes this chance to get access to the court, replying

> And therefore I'll put on that knave for once,
> And be a right man then, a man a' th' time,
> For to be honest is not to be i' th' world.
> Brother, I'll be that strange-composed fellow. (1.1.93-6)

The 'knave' that Vindice 'puts on', in response to this request from Lussurioso and established in the above lines, is 'Piato', a pander. Disguise is a trope often found in revenge plays of this period, and the above association between disguise and strangeness echoes *Hamlet*, in which the vengeful Hamlet puts on an 'antic disposition' (1.5.179) and tells Horatio that he shouldn't worry no matter '[h]ow strange or odd soe'er I bear myself' (1.5.177). As in *Hamlet*, strangeness is tied to performance, but in *The Revenger's Tragedy* that strangeness is firmly located in the material – Vindice will be 'strange-digested', a 'strange-composed fellow' (both utterances evoke the humoral body (Maus 352)), and 'base-coined'.

This link between vengeful role playing, the material body and strangeness continues. When Lussurioso presents Vindice (as Piato) with an abstract situation – the 'catching' of a virgin – Vindice claims 'my brain / Shall swell with strange invention' (1.3.119). Vindice's language renders inventive thought material. When Lussurioso reveals that the virgin in question is Castiza, Vindice's sister, he hides his shock and outrage in bluster until Lussurioso leaves and he exclaims:

> O!
> Now let me burst: I've eaten noble poison!
> We are made strange fellows, brother, innocent villains.
> Wilt not be angry when thou hear'st on't, think'st thou?
> I'faith, thou shalt; swear me to foul my sister!
> Sword, I durst make a promise of him to thee,
> Thou shalt dis-heir him, it shall be thine honour! (1.3.164-9)

Thus, having “pretended” to be a strange-digested and strange-composed fellow in order to enact revenge, that process of enacting revenge causes Vindice to be ‘made strange’, and being ‘made strange’ causes him to swear another revenge. If we understand the play as offering a complicated layering of revenges and revengers (both ‘real’ and disguised), then this rhetoric of strangeness ties them together. But, to underscore, the language emphasises the bodily nature of this – ‘digested’, ‘composed’, ‘made’, ‘let me burst’, ‘eaten’. When Piato falls out of favour, Lussurioso, again, asks Hippolito for help and Hippolito, again, goes to fetch Vindice muttering an aside: ‘[i]n thine own shape now I’ll prefer thee to him’ (4.1.60). When Vindice is then introduced, as Vindice, Lussurioso comments ‘[h]ow strangely such a coarse, homely salute / Show in the palace’ (4.2.43-4) – his bodily gestures marking him as strange. All of these utterances serve to mark Vindice as different, to mark him as strange, and to locate that strangeness in the material – the body and its gestures.

Having taken pains to establish Vindice as strange, at the point at which Vindice’s disguises and role-playing lead back to him to ‘playing’ himself, the play stops being interested in the link between strangeness and Vindice, and it moves instead towards an interest in representing the revenge *act* as strange. The first time this happens is following Vindice’s vengeful murder of the Duke. Here Vindice and Hippolito feign discovering the body with Lussurioso, who then alerts the court and assembled Lords by asking them to ‘[b]e witness of a strange spectacle’ (5.1.88). In drawing attention to the ‘strange spectacle’, Lussurioso transports the audience back to the moment of the crime, the enaction of Vindice’s revenge, by pointing to parts of the body that recall the murder: ‘O sight! / Look hither, see, his lips are gnawn with poison’ (5.1.100-1) In the play’s final moments when, just before Vindice and Hippolito admit their role in this murder, the new Duke Antonio wonders ‘[h]ow the old duke came murdered …It was the strangeliest carried; I not heard of the like’ (5.3.92-3). Vindice’s revenge involves multiple actions, the second is the murder of Lussurioso during the masque (in 5.3) celebrating his ascension to duke, which Vindice hijacks and uses to murder Lussurioso. In order to shore up his hold on the Dukedom, Lussurioso hatches a plan to get rid of the Bastard and his step-brothers stating in an aside ‘[a]fter these revels / I’ll begin strange ones’ (5.3.8-9), but the only murder tied to the revels is his own. We begin,

then, with a strangely fashioned revenger and we end with a strangely carried, spectacular murder.[3]

The Maid's Tragedy

In Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher's *The Maid's Tragedy* we see a similar move from strangeness assigned to someone tied up in the revenge plot to the actions of revenge as the strange thing in-and-of itself. As with *The Revenger's* Tragedy, the strangeness of individuals tied up in the revenge plot is figured in bodily terms. In Beaumont and Fletcher's play, probably written circa 1610-1611 and first performed on 20 May 1613 , Evadne is having an illicit relationship with the King. In order to cover any potential offspring, the King instructs the courtier Amintor to break his engagement to Aspatia and marry Evadne. When Amintor discovers the real reason for his marriage he swears vengeance until realising that he cannot kill the King. Distraught, Amintor confides in his close friend and Evadne's brother Melantius. Melantius, furious at the dishonour done to his friend Amintor and to his family name, forces Evadne to take revenge. Evadne then functions as a sort of revenger by proxy, working for others as much as for herself. Amintor is trapped by social rules, and when he discovers that it is the king who is cuckolding him, he reacts with 'O thou hast named a word that wipes away / All thoughts revengeful' (2.1.286-7). Melantius is highly committed to revenge, claiming 'I'll waken Death / And hurl him on this King' (3.2.187-8); '[I] will never cease / My vengeance till I find thy heart at peace' (3.2.97-8)', and 'I will to death pursue him with revenge' (3.2.209), all in just a few lines. Even so he constructs Evadne as vengeful actor, violently instructing her to 'direct thine arm / To kill this base king' (4.1.146-7). When Evadne enacts vengeance and kills the king, stabbing him in his bed, she states '[t]his for my lord Amintor, / This for my noble brother, and this stroke / For the most wronged of women' (5.1.107-9). We might understand this statement as reinscribing her role as proxy revenger, given that, whilst it is tempting to read 'the most wronged of women' as referring to Evadne herself, it is, in fact, Aspatia who is most often referred to as wronged. 'Wrong', or 'wronged' are used forty-five times in the play; three of those usages refer to the wrongs done to Evadne and ten to Aspatia, the phrase 'wronged Aspatia' repeats four times

[3] *The Revenger's Tragedy* use of performance as the means through which violent revenge is taken is not unique, nor is the understanding of that performance as strange, in *The Spanish Tragedy* Hieronimo introduces the performance of Soliman and Perseda (in which he and Bel-imperia will vengefully kill Balthazar and Lorenzo) as 'a strange and wondrous show' (4.1.179).

(3.2.44/5.3.42/43/46). Very literally then, Aspatia is the ‘most wronged’ woman in *The Maid’s Tragedy*, and Evadne’s revenge is always operating a distance.

This socially forced inaction produces in both Amintor and Melantius a strong affective response they (and those around them) understand and articulate as strange. Amintor finds himself in what Lee Bliss describes as a ‘a nightmare reality in which the shattered self plays fragmentary and contradictory parts – happy bridegroom, loyal subject, irate revenger, repentant deserter of true love, murderer, suicide’ (150). Or, as Amintor himself suggests when told by Evadne that their marriage is merely a cover for her sexual relationship with the King, ‘What a strange thing am I!’ (2.1.298) ‘Thing’ here serves to further the fracturing, and even dehumanising, that Bliss notes. This dehumanising continues later, when Amintor discovers the nature of his marriage, he asks Evadne to ‘[k]ill me’ (2.1.302), to which she replies ‘I must have one / To fill thy room again if thou wert dead / Else by this night I would’ (2.1.306-8), reducing him to merely a placeholder. Amintor’s only way to understand his strange new position – or at least to articulate the affective impact of this positioning is to claim ‘[t]hese strange and sudden injuries have fall’n / So thick upon me that I lose all sense / Of what they are’ (2.1.309-311). This further shifts how he views the world, and his encounter with Melantius, on the morning after his wedding, is littered with evocations of the strange; the use of this rhetoric ties together the two men who are/will be unable to act. When Amintor sees Melantius he embraces him and ‘*looks intently at his face*’ (104) before declaring ‘’Tis wondorous strange’ (3.1.43) and goes on to insist ‘’Tis strange to me thou shouldst have worth and honour, / Or not be base and false and treacherous / And every ill.’ (3.1.49-51) Amintor’s situation, then, has changed how he sees, causing him to distrust – but this is something he physically performs, looking ‘intently’ at Melantius, physically examining him. As the scene develops, Amintor, distraught at having to perform his ‘post-marriage night’ happiness, shifts from directing his odd and intense behaviour towards Melantius to directing it outward, calling ‘Is there no music there? Let’s dance.’ (3.1.108) This conflicted and emotionally oscillating performance causes Melantius to respond ‘Why, this is strange, Amintor?’ (3.1.109) – this behaviour readsregisters? as strange before Melantius knows the crime against Amintor.

In *The Revengers Tragedy*, Vindice shifts between roles and disguises, beginning for the audience as himself, moving to play Piato, before moving back to an exaggerated version of himself. These disguises are associated with revenge and, as discussed above, the rhetoric of

strangeness is clearly deployed in moments when Vindice shifts between them. Paralleling this, in *The Maid's Tragedy* there is a shift from Aspatia as wronged party, to Amintor as wronged party, to Melantius as wronged party. In all of these moments, and in all of these shifts, the state of being wronged is always marked by a 'strange' affect and the rhetoric of strangeness passes between the characters. Thus in 2.1 when Aspatia attends Evadne on her wedding night, Aspatia's mournful song causes Evadne to comment 'the words are so strange' (2.1.80). Later in the same scene, when he enters to meet with his bride, Amintor comments 'I did that lady [Aspatia] wrong … Mine eyes run; this is strange at such a time' (2.1.127-9). This concurrence of tears and strangeness also facilitates the shift from Amintor to Melantius as, in 3.2, Amintor confesses the cause of his 'strange' behaviour and exclaims '[i]t is too big / To get out; let my tears make way awhile' (3.2.116-7), and Melantius replies 'Punish me strangely, heaven, if he scape / Of life or fame, that bought this youth to this' (3.2.118-19). This shift of rhetoric between the two is confirmed in 4.1 when the angry, blunt Melantius confronts Evadne, and she states '[y]ou are strangely disposed, Sir' (4.1.13). An awareness of the crimes against them causes Aspatia, Amintor and Melantius to behave 'strangely' and, as with Amintor above, in 4.1, Melantius has not yet openly spoken his injury but is performing his emotional response to it (pushing Evadne's ladies from the room and insulting her). Thus, an inability to speak the crime against them, or to act in the face of a crime against them forces the characters into an affective performance understood, and marked, as strange.[4]

As in *The Revenger's Tragedy*, while the revenge plot unfolds this rhetoric of strangeness again shifts. It is no longer associated with the individual subjects caught up in the revenge plot; instead, we begin to see that the acts and events associated with revenge begin to be described as strange. Neither Melantius or Amintor are again described as strange, and the rhetoric does not pass to Evadne, instead it shifts to the vengeful acts. Thus, Calianax, Aspatia's father, who is in charge of the fort Melantius is trying to get control of in order to facilitate his escape after Evadne has killed the King, is so baffled by Melantius' behaviour around the King that he exclaims 'things are so strangely carried' (4.2.269). The 'things' he refers to are the elements of the revenge plot which Melantius is undertaking the things which are not the killing of the King. Secondly, when Amintor sees Aspatia (disguised as her

[4] I want to acknowledge that the play also sets up an interesting tension between strangeness and knowing, which plays out in the sub-plot in which Melantius verbally spars with Calianax.

brother) he talks of 'so strange a wrong' (5.3.71), bringing back into view that understanding of the wrongs against Aspatia and their part in this revenge plot. Then finally, when the new King Lysippus enters and see the cross-dressed Aspatia, already dead, and the dying Amintor, he simply declares '[h]ow strange is this!' (5.3.249). As with *The Revenger's Tragedy*, the rhetoric shifts from the figure of the revenger to the vengeful acts.

Strange tragedy?

In both *The Maid's Tragedy* and *The Revenger's Tragedy* there is a pattern in which those caught up in the revenge narrative become, through the shift in rhetoric, *less* strange. They begin as strange, but the shift fixes the play's strangeness on action not actor, on acts not material bodies (through the composition or emotion of those bodies). This is unusual and not a pattern easily visible in other revenge plays; as evidenced above, there is strangeness, but the language is not clustered so intensely around figure or act. With a broader view to tragedy, there is in fact a different pattern. As Paul Hammond has argued in *The Strangeness of Tragedy*, 'tragedy effects radical forms of estrangement by translating the protagonist into modes of time, space, and language which are alienated from those forms of time, space, and language which, in the different imaginations of different societies, constitute the human home' (11). In *Macbeth*, for example, strangeness comes to be located in Macbeth himself, but begins by being part of the general environment of the play. Thus *Macbeth* opens with repeated acknowledgements of 'things strange' (1.2.48 & 2.4.3), 'strange intelligence' (1.3.76), '[s]trange images of death' (1.3.97), 'strange screams of death' (2.3.55), and 'strange invention' (3.1.32). As *Macbeth* progresses, strangeness instead comes to be embodied in Macbeth himself, who states 'I have a strange infirmity' (3.4.85), 'you make me strange' (3.4.111), who references the '[s]trange things I have in head' (3.4.138) and his 'strange and self-abuse' (3.4.141).[5] This move serves to focus the strangeness into one person, to embody all that has come to pass within one, increasingly strange, figure. This shift from environmental to embodied strangeness is, however, the opposite of what happens in *The Maid's Tragedy* and in *The Revenger's Tragedy*, where subjects become less strange and acts become stranger.

John Card, Nobody and the disembodied criminal

[5] Whilst Hammond discusses the play in *The Strangeness of Tragedy* (123-142), I am indebted to my colleague Nigel Mapp for pointing out this pattern in *Macbeth*.

This shift of focus from subject, especially culpable subject, onto act is not without corollary. In the introductory volume to his *Calendar of Assize Records*, J. S. Cockburn points a practice undertaken by juries seemingly aware of the person responsible for a murder but wishing to let that person off:

> a verdict of “murder by persons unknown” was not acceptable at law, juries wishing to acquit in such cases had either to name a different killer or to advance an alternative non-prejudicial explanation for the death. Where neither was possible a jury was, in theory, obliged to find the accused guilty. By Elizabeth’s reign, however, jurors customarily escaped that quandary by attributing the death to an imaginary killer whom they identified by “some fictitious name, as John-a-Noake, which serves the turn”. (113)[6]

Looking through Cockburn’s *Calendar* we find the following fictitious killers: John-a-Noake, William Anoke, Willi[?]am Nemo, John in the Wind, John Astrawe, William Death, and John ultra Lunam. Amongst these we also find John Staff, Thomas Staff and John Card – fictional killers who take their surnames from the weapon used in the execution of the crime. In the *Surrey Indictments* we find the following: ‘Lucas, Catherine, of Arlington, spinster, indicted for felonious killing. By an inquisition held at Arlington, 20 Nov. 1592, before Thomas Woodgate, coroner, on the body of Alice Tuppen of Arlington, the jury … found that on 9 Nov. Lucas assaulted Tuppen with a “wool card”, inflicting injuries from which she died on 11 Nov.’ The verdict? ‘Not guilty: John Card killed her’ (265-6). Wilson points out, ‘[i]f you don’t want to blame one person you have to blame someone else, preferably someone who does not exist, a William Nemo or John in the Wind; and this object of blame seems to get mixed up with the deodand, a thing that does exist and which may figure in the casual chain out of which a death occurred for which no person seems responsible’ (176). Wilson is here interested in the material object, and he reads these names as substituting a guilty party for a thing. But, as much as these names signal objects, they signal acts – part of the shock of these crimes is that these objects were used in acts they were not designed for. So while each of these made-up criminals acts as a placeholder for the guilty party, the name of that placeholder evokes the act but absents the actor – much as the rhetoric of the strange does in

[6] Quoting W. Holdsworth, *A History of English Law*, vol. III (1966), 611.

The Revenger's Tragedy and *The Maid's Tragedy*, producing what Wilson refers to as the 'relocation of agency and animation' (175).

Concurrent to these legal cases, and to *The Maid's Tragedy* and *The Revenger's Tragedy*, we find visual and literary representations of the figure of 'Nobody'. In 'The Picture of Nobody: An Iconographical Study', Gerta Calmann charts the development of this figure and demonstrates its use to interrogate questions around criminal culpability, thus offering a parallel to the disembodiment explored above. Discussing a broadsheet published by Strassburg barber Joerg Schan in 1507, Calmann typifies Nobody as someone 'eternally innocent yet eternally guilty, [who] patiently bears the blame for the misdeeds of the whole household' (60). Or as Schan's figure claims 'Nobody is my name; what everybody does, for that I am blamed' (quoted in Calmann 100). Representations of the figure of Nobody 'persisted through more than a century' (Calmann 60) and include the anonymous play *Nobody and Somebody*, first printed in 1606 and performed in London before being performed in Graz at the archducal court in 1608.[7] The play's main plot focuses on Elidure, who is crowned King of Britain three times, each time replacing a highly unsuitable or tyrannical alternative. As Peter Womack points out, '[r]oyal authority in the play is almost farcically unstable' (196). This main plot is juxtaposed with the comedic story of Nobody and Somebody, in which Nobody attempts to help the poor, charitable work which Somebody (at the behest of Archigallo, the tyrant from the main plot) attempts to stop. This sub-plot culminates in a trial in which Nobody is absolved of blame. The humour of the sub-plot derives from the irony of claims like '[c]ome twenty poor men to his gate at once; / Nobody gives them money, meat and drink, / If they be naked, clothes' (316-8) and 'Nobody racks no rents, doth not oppress / His tenants with extortions' (344-5). The play's prologue informs the audience '[a] moral meaning you must then expect, / grounded on lesser than a shadow's shadow' (Prologue 6-7), and, in part, the moral claims of that sub-plot lie in the suggestion that Nobody does good things and Somebody does bad ones.

The Maid's Tragedy and *The Revenger's Tragedy* do not overtly utilise the language of 'nobody' but, as my above argument suggests, they do share what Womack refers to as *Nobody and Somebody*'s 'unsettling interest in negation' (195). As the anonymous play

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[7] I am following Martin Wiggins and Catherine Richardson in their emphasis on the Jacobean, rather than Elizabethan, characteristics of the play (see Wiggins and Richardson 190).

suggests, '[i]f Nobody should do it, / Then should it be undone' (1888-9), a tantalising possibility present in the disembodying shift from strange revenger to strange act. But I do not wish to conclude by suggesting that either *The Maid's Tragedy* or *The Revenger's Tragedy* are ultimately 'successful' in shifting all moral blame away from their vengeful actors. Indeed, as *Nobody and Somebody* also tells us, '[i]f things were done, they must be done by Somebody, / Else could they have no being' (1884-5). In both *The Maid's Tragedy* and *The Revenger's Tragedy* there is a forceful assertion of 'somebody', with Evadne repeatedly referring to herself in the third person as she confesses to Amintor that she has killed the King (5.3.112/119) and Vindice ending *The Revenger's Tragedy* by unnecessarily admitting the killing of the Duke, claiming ''Twas we two murdered him' (5.3.97). Rather, I posit that it is intriguing that both these plays create the possibility of escaping culpability for the vengeful killing of a tyrant. Both plays tell their audience, through the shift in the rhetoric of the strange, to look away from the person and to look at the act. The texture and alluringness of the word strange direct the audiences' attention from subject to crime. In exactly the same way that certain juries drew the attention of the law away from the guilty party onto the act, presumably to allow the guilty party to go free. In this, the rhetoric of strangeness does exactly what Callan Davies says it is going to do when he suggests that 'strangeness elicits a peculiar form of moral … uncertainty' (141). The shift in rhetoric creates a moral uncertainty about the revenger's actions, particularly because the rhetoric of strangeness *does not* return to the culpable parties when they assert themselves as culpable. That uncertainty, coupled with both plays' ambiguous new leadership, returns us then to Francis Bacon's claim that '[p]ublique *Revenges*, are, for the most part, Fortunate'.

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