# The Revenger's Tragedy

## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF THOMAS MIDDLETON

Thomas Middleton's father was a bricklayer who found success and wealth with the booming London property market. He died when Middleton was just five, however, plunging the family into a prolonged battle over inheritance. Middleton went to Oxford University without graduating, and subsequently supported himself by writing pamphlets on the topical subjects of the day. He also became more involved in the theater world, writing for one of the same troupes as William Shakespeare. After James I succeeded Queen Elizabeth as the English monarch, Middleton entered his most productive period and wrote numerous plays across several genres, including *The Revenger's Tragedy*. In 1624, his satirical play on the subject of Anglo-Spanish relations, *A Game of Chess*, was performed for the King, before being banned from performance due to a complaint by the Spanish ambassador. It's thought that Middleton went into self-imposed exile to avoid punishment, or at the very least was discouraged from publishing any more dramatic work. He did, however, maintain a deep involvement in civic life, serving as chronologer to the city of London from 1620 until his death in 1627.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

*The Revenger's Tragedy* was written and first performed during the English Renaissance, a rich period for theater in England in which Queen Elizabeth I and then King James I encouraged the increasingly popular art form. Plays were often comments on the political climate of the times, but in general writers had to be careful not to cause offence to the authorities and risk punishment. Queen Elizabeth I presided over a relatively peaceful and prosperous time in England's history, which saw the rise in dominance of the English navy after the 1588 defeat of the Spanish Armada. With the ascension to the throne of James I came the unification of England and Scotland. He was generally devoted to peace, keeping his kingdoms out of the Thirty Years' War that that devastated much of Europe from 1618 onwards.

### RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Revenge represents one of the oldest and most compelling themes in drama, and vengeance-centered stories can be found within every major cultural period—from the early establishment of theatrical principles in Ancient Greece to the 20th century Western film canon (e.g. *Kill Bill* and other work from filmmaker Quentin Tarantino). Philosopher and dramatist Lucius Seneca, writing during Nero's Roman Empire, had a great influence on the way Middleton negotiates the plot in *The Revenger's Tragedy*, as did *Hamlet*, the work of his contemporary, William Shakespeare. The use of abstracted character names—in which the name clearly points to the character's dominant trait, e.g. "Ambitioso"—also points to the influence of medieval Morality plays. General tropes found in Jacobean revenge tragedy include gratuitous violence, the use of disguise and deception, and a grand finale in which many of the characters are killed, often including the avenger themselves. Other key revenge plays of the period are *The Spanish Tragedy* by Thomas Kyd, George Chapman's *Revenge of Bussy d'Ambois*, and Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*.

### KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Revenger's Tragedy
- **When Written:** c. 1606
- **Where Written:** Most likely London
- **When Published:** 1607 (anonymously)
- **Literary Period:** Jacobean / English Renaissance
- **Genre:** Revenge Tragedy (Jacobean)
- **Setting:** An unspecified Italian court
- **Climax:** The murders of Lussurioso, Spurio, Supervacuo, and Ambitioso
- **Antagonist:** The Duke/Lussurioso
- **Point of View:** Objective Third Person

### EXTRA CREDIT

**Mistaken authorship.** *The Revenger's Tragedy* was initially published anonymously, and later thought to be the work of Cyril Tourneur. More recent scholarship has established with reasonable certainty that Middleton is the play's author.

**Famous friendship.** Middleton is also thought to have collaborated with Shakespeare on *Timon of Athens*.

## PLOT SUMMARY

Vindice, the play's protagonist, appears on stage holding **skull** of his deceased fiancée, Gloriana, who was killed nearly ten years ago by the Duke as punishment for refusing his advances. As the Duke and his entourage pass by, Vindice vows from the shadows to take his revenge.

Vindice meets with his brother, Hippolito, who is committed to helping Vindice impose his vengeful justice. Hippolito informs

Vindice that Lussurioso, the Duke's lusty son, asked Hippolito to procure a "pander" (a contemporary word for pimp) to help win the affections of an especially chaste virgin. Sensing an opportunity, Vindice disguises himself as "Piato" the pander and takes on Lussurioso's mission—but to his horror the virgin in question is Castiza, his and Hippolito's own sister.

Meanwhile, Junior Brother, the Duchess's son (but not the Duke's), is tried for the rape of the nobleman Antonio's virtuous wife. The Duke refuses to pardon Junior Brother, leading the Duchess to plot revenge on her husband by having an affair with his bastard son, Spurio. Spurio agrees to the Duchess' scheme, but more out of resentment towards his father for his illegitimacy than any true feelings towards her. Ambitioso and Supervacuo, the Duchess's other two sons, vow to help their Junior Brother escape imprisonment; they hold their own ambitions to attain power too. Tragically, Antonio's wife commits suicide because of her shame at being raped.

Vindice, disguised as Piato the pander, visits Castiza and tries to use his powers of persuasion to make her give up her virginal purity for Lussurioso. All he receives in return is a smack on the face, which he is privately grateful for, impressed by his sister's commitment to her honor. But because he is playing the role of Piato, he turns his attentions to his and Castiza's mother, Gratiana. With a silver tongue and a bribe, Vindice implores her to change Castiza's mind; much to his horror, Gratiana agrees.

Vindice informs Lussurioso of the relative success of his visit, while privately doubling down on his commitment to kill both the Duke and the Duke's son. Hippolito tells Vindice a rumor he has heard—that the Duchess is "cuckolding" the Duke by having an affair with Spurio. Vindice passes on this information to Lussurioso in an attempt to distract him from visiting Castiza; Lussurioso bursts into the Duchess' chambers, but finds her with the Duke, not Spurio. Thinking his own son is attempting an act of treason, the Duke has Lussurioso imprisoned.

Supervacuo and Ambitioso pretend to plead with the Duke to be lenient with Lussurioso, while secretly aiming to speed up his execution. The Duke, sensing their ambitions, sends them to deliver a death warrant to the prison—which is mistakenly understood by the guards to be meant for Junior Brother. Meanwhile, the Duke has Lussurioso swiftly released.

The Duke, hearing of the pander's skills, asks Piato (Vindice) to find him a virgin too. Vindice and Hippolito hatch a cunning and macabre plan: to dress up Gloriana's skull as a living woman, place poison in her mouth, and then trick the Duke into kissing her. Their scheme works perfectly; as further vengeance, they orchestrate the Duke's dying moments to be spent witnessing the illicit behavior of the Duchess and Spurio. Vindice makes sure to point out his true identity—and the skull's—before the Duke passes away.

Soon after, Lussurioso comes to Hippolito to ask to meet his brother, Vindice. Upon their meeting, Lussurioso asks Vindice to assassinate Piato the pander, much to Vindice and Hippolito's hidden amusement. Vindice and Hippolito come up with another ingenious idea: to dress the Duke up in the Piato disguise and pretend to kill him. After Lussurioso realizes it's not the Duke, they reason, he will assume Piato himself killed the Duke and swapped their clothes in order to aid his getaway. Before bringing this plan to fruition, Hippolito and Vindice (now undisguised) visit Gratiana and force her to confess her immorality; satisfied with her repenting distress, they put their daggers away and praise her for changing her ways.

Vindice and Hippolito then bring Lussurioso to the Duke's body, which is dressed in Piato's clothes. Their plan works perfectly, with the Duke's son concluding exactly what they had hoped. Lussurioso realizes that he is now at the top of the court hierarchy and makes plans for festivities to mark his ascension to the Dukedom, while pretending to grieve for his father. Vindice and Hippolito work out the final stage of their revenge: to dress up in costume and masks as part of the celebratory "masque"—a performance to be put on for Lussurioso—and kill him when his guard is down.

With Lussurioso crowned, the "revels" begin with a feast. Lussurioso notices a **blazing star** in the sky, usually a harbinger of terrible events—but reasons it away as he has already been made Duke. Vindice, Hippolito, and two accomplices burst in and fatally stab Lussurioso and his three noblemen. Almost immediately after, Spurio, Supervacuo, and Ambitioso arrive with the same murderous intentions. Seeing Lussurioso already dead, they turn on each other, and all three are quickly killed in the ensuing fight. Vindice kneels down to Lussurioso, who is drawing his last breaths, and gleefully reveals his true identity.

Hearing the commotion, Antonio comes in with guards and is shocked to behold the bloodbath in front of him. It's quickly apparent that he is now the natural successor to the Dukedom. Antonio wonders what happened, and Vindice can't help but reveal his role in the bloody events. Much to Vindice's surprise, Antonio has him and Hippolito immediately sentenced to death, worried that they might plot against *him* too. Vindice accepts his fate, pleased to have brought about his revenge. As the brothers are led away, Antonio hopes that their deaths will bring an end to all the treason and tragedy.

## CHARACTERS

**Vindice** – Vindice is the play's protagonist and main avenger (though other characters have revenge motives too). He is brother to Hippolito and Castiza, and the son of Gratiana. His main target is the Duke, who nearly ten years earlier poisoned Vindice's fiancée, Gloriana, when she refused his sexual advances. Vindice doesn't merely want revenge, but what he sees as particularly poignant type of vengeance: he makes a special point of revealing his identity—disguised for most of the

play—to both the Duke and Lussurioso when he kills them. He carries the **skull** of Gloriana with him, talking to it in the play's opening scene and then later using it to trick the Duke into consuming poison. The fact that he has carried it so long, however, suggests that enacting the perfect revenge—rather than just revenge itself—has become an obsession for Vindice, his one true aim in life. Perhaps that's why, in the play's closing scene, he can't help bragging about his success to Antonio, unwittingly condemning himself and his brother to speedy execution. "Tis time to die," he says, suggesting his ultimate acceptance of his own fate as the doomed avenger. His name even translates to "avenger" in Italian, reinforcing the idea that he is defined by this single purpose.

**Hippolito** – Hippolito is Vindice and Castiza's brother, the son of Gratiana. His main function is to help facilitate Vindice's revenge on the Duke (and later Lussurioso). He and his brother are angry with the Duke for the maltreatment of their father (who is dead well before the start of the play) and with Lussurioso for his seedy pursuit of their chaste sister, Castiza. Hippolito is initially in good favor with those at the court, which he uses to his advantage—for example, by providing a disguised Vindice when Lussurioso asks for a pimp. Though Hippolito is successful in his attempts to help his brother seek vengeance, his brother is also the one to bring about Hippolito's own end: in the final scene of the play, Vindice can't help bragging to Antonio of their murderous success, and accordingly both brothers are instantly sentenced to death.

**The Duke** – The Duke is the ruler of the court when the play commences. He has two sons from a marriage prior to the Duchess: his heir Lussurioso, and his bastard son, Spurio. He's extremely corrupt and abuses his power to satisfy his overbearing lust. In fact, he even killed Vindice's fiancée, Gloriana, because she refused his advances. As the head of a court full of immorality and thirst for vengeance, the Duke is especially vulnerable to attack—the play is less a question of *if* he will die, but by whose hand and when. Ultimately, it's Vindice who has that honor, using the Duke's sexual obsession against him by tricking him into kissing the poison-laden **skull** of Gloriana. The only mildly redeeming feature of the Duke is that he is self-aware enough to see the extent of his own corruption, confessing to the audience that he is "like a monster" in his singular pursuit of sex.

**Lussurioso** – Lussurioso is the Duke's son and heir, the product of his father's marriage prior to the Duchess. He is consumed by lust, taking after his father, and spends much of his time trying to manipulate events and people in order to bring about the satisfaction of his sexual desires. Lussurioso describes himself as "past [his] depth in lust" and asks Hippolito to find him a pander—essentially a pimp—who can acquire a virgin for him. He is briefly imprisoned when he bursts on in his father and the Duchess in bed, thinking he will catch her instead with Spurio. When the Duke dies, Lussurioso is briefly crowned as the ruler, secretly relishing his increase in power. It doesn't last for long though, as Vindice and his accomplices soon appear, murdering Lussurioso and his entourage. Lussurioso's Italian name roughly translates to "lust" and "lewd."

**The Duchess** – The Duchess is the Duke's wife and the mother of Ambitioso, Supervacuo, and Junior Brother (who are not the Duke's children). When the Duke refuses to show leniency to her son, Junior Brother, who is imprisoned for the rape of Antonio's wife, the Dutchess decides to seek her own revenge by "cuckolding" her husband—that is, by having an affair. To make it that little bit more illicit she chooses Spurio as her partner, the Duke's own bastard son. When Lussurioso later ascends the throne, he has the Duchess exiled, angry at her treatment of his father, the Duke.

**Spurio** – Spurio is the Duke's bastard son, borne of an illicit affair. He despises his father for his illegitimate status, and this hatred infects the way he sees everyone else at court too. He has an affair with his stepmother, the Duchess, as part of an overall effort to get revenge on his father. He is killed by a lord in response to his own murder of Ambitioso. In Italian his name has derived implications of being a bastard and counterfeit.

**Ambitioso** – Ambitioso is the Duchess's eldest son, predating her relationship with the Duke. He is desperate to be Duke himself, plotting with his brother, Supervacuo, to attain power. Ambitioso kills Supervacuo when the latter proclaims himself Duke—and is then immediately killed himself by Spurio. His name gestures towards his hunger for power.

**Supervacuo** – Supervacuo is the Duchess's second oldest son, predating her relationship with the Duke. He is hot-headed and hungry for power, spending most of the time plotting a murderous route to the top of the court with his brother Ambitioso. It doesn't work out well—upon declaring himself leader after the Duke and Lussurioso's respective deaths, Supervacuo he is immediately killed by Ambitioso. His name implies that he is a superfluous and vacuous character devoid of worth.

**Junior Brother** – Junior Brother is the youngest son of the Duchess, predating her relationship with the Duke. He is imprisoned for the rape of Antonio's wife, but remains unrepentant; in fact, he feels no remorse at all, explaining his reason for committing the crime as "flesh and blood, my lord. What should move man unto a woman else?" Junior Brother spends most of the play hoping to be released from prison, but is killed when Supervacuo and Ambitioso bring the prison guards an order for execution. This is an error on Supervacuo and Ambitioso's part, as they had intended the order to be for Lussurioso.

**Gratiana** – Gratiana is the mother of Vindice, Hippolito, and Castiza. She deeply disappoints her children by accepting a bribe of jewels and money from Piato—Vindice in disguise—in exchange for pressuring Castiza to give up her chastity for

Lussurioso, the Duke's son. When Vindice reveals that he was Piato, Gratiana repents hysterically and is forgiven by her sons. Her name derives from the Italian *gracia*, meaning "grace"—perhaps intended by Middleton to be darkly ironic.

**Castiza** – Castiza is the beautiful virgin sister of Hippolito and Vindice, and daughter of Gratiana. She is arguably the only truly virtuous character in the play, refusing to sacrifice her chastity to Lussurioso despite considerable pressure from Vindice (disguised as Piato) and Gratiana. Her name derives from the Italian *casta*, meaning "chaste."

**Antonio** – Antonio is a nobleman at the Duke's court. He doesn't appear much in the play, but he has an important role. Firstly, like Vindice, he suffers considerable tragedy: Junior Brother, the Duchess's youngest son, rapes Antonio's wife, subsequently driving her to commit suicide because of the shame. After the bloodbath at the play's end, Antonio is surprised to find himself leader of the realm now that the Duke and the other contenders are all dead. His first act in charge is to send Vindice and Hippolito to their deaths, hoping this will put an end to the treason and tragedy that has so consumed the court.

## THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

### REVENGE AND JUSTICE

Many of the characters are out to right wrongs in *The Revenger's Tragedy*—not least the play's protagonist, Vindice, whose fiancée, Gloriana, was poisoned by the Duke ten years earlier. Revenge is Vindice's obsession, just as sex is both the Duke's and his son and heir Lussurioso's. The play works hard to reflect the moral complexity of revenge, however, leaving it up to the audience whether the acts of revenge depicted truly represent justice—or needlessly pile violence on top of violence.

Like other avengers in the revenge tragedy genre, Vindice takes matters into his own hands following his fiancée's poisoning. To understand why he does so, it's vital to look at the failures of the other potential moral authorities that might otherwise have been entrusted with the task of bringing about justice for Gloriana. From the very beginning of the play, the Duke is discounted as any kind of moral arbiter—in fact, he is the cause of Vindice's desire for revenge in the first place. The Duke, the audience quickly learns, poisoned Gloriana because she refused to have sex with him (which, it's worth pointing out, would have been adultery). For him, Gloriana's death *itself* represents a skewed form of revenge—but not moral justice.

Though there are also numerous judges and legal professionals in the play—both on stage and off—there isn't a single instance in which these men impose justice in accordance with a reliable moral framework. Instead, they prove to be as ethically corrupted by money (in the form of bribes) as characters like the Duke are by lust. Early in the play, Spurio, the Duke's bastard son, outlines the corruptibility of the judges: "if judgments have cold blood, flattery and bribes will kill it." Even if the judges did have a more virtuous moral worldview, they would be rendered useless by their deference to the Duke—who clearly has the ultimate power and final say in any given dispute. Given his brazen immorality, this completely undermines any pretensions of a fair legal system.

Whereas other plays lend more plausibility to the idea of divine providence—interventions by God or gods in the name of justice—*The Revenger's Tragedy* represents a world in which religion is ineffectual, unable to address any of the fiendish acts committed throughout the play. Characters often talk about religion—Christianity specifically—but, aside from Vindice's virginal sister, Castiza, they show no genuine allegiance to Christian morals. In fact, "sin" is present throughout, in the form of dishonesty, rape, incest, and murder. Characters often create their own justification for their actions, absolving themselves from any sense of religious or moral obligation. The idea of divine providence is even gently mocked. For instance, Vindice's call for **thunder and lightning**—which is promptly and impossibly answered, "on cue"—makes the possible intervention of a deity seem nothing more than a clichéd theatre trick.

There is a moral vacuum, then, which Vindice decides it is his duty to fill. Perhaps with more reliable moral authorities elsewhere, a different, less violent form of justice could have been served. Yet even as Vindice has no choice but to avenge the murder of Gloriana himself, the play makes it far from clear whether his revenge actually equates to *justice*.

Though he seems to have a simple aim, Vindice gets embroiled in all sorts of moral tangles throughout the play, suggesting violent revenge is not a clear-cut guarantee of justice. For example, while in disguise as the pimp Piato, Vindice agrees to do a favor for Lussurioso (something Vindice thinks will improve his chances of taking revenge): Vindice manages to convince his mother, Gratiana, that she should prostitute his virginal sister, Castiza, to Lussurioso. Though Vindice does this as part of his wider quest for vengeance, this has little to do with Gloriana. Later in the play, Vindice almost decides to kill his mother for her being willing to prostitute Castiza. But it was Vindice himself—albeit in disguise—who used his powers of persuasion to make Gratiana think that way. This is a moral paradox, then, because he wants to punish his mother for a "crime" in which he is arguably complicit. This quandary seems far removed from his simple desire to kill the Duke.

When Vindice's plan for revenge does eventually come to fruition, many people die in the closing scene's bloodbath, including some who have not displayed any immoral behavior at all. This suggests that personal vengeance can have unintended and deadly repercussions. And with his revenge complete, Vindice can't help but brag about his achievements to Antonio, the new ruler. Vindice is then instantly sentenced to death, a kind of cosmic joke on the part of the playwright. This both implies that Vindice's view of the revenge as personal achievement is fundamentally flawed (and perhaps even a sin itself deserving of instant "justice") and undermines any sense of fairly applied justice present in the play. Revenge, then, is not a simple case of dishing out like for like. The avenger is naïve to think that vengeance will be simple or clear-cut, and through his quest for supposed justice only becomes further entangled in the complicated moral world of humanity.

## LUST

There's hardly a moment that goes by in *The Revenger's Tragedy* that doesn't involve lust. Middleton shows lust to be a strong force, and to be especially volatile when mixed with power. In fact, lust is so powerful in this play that, for characters like Lussurioso and the Duke, sexual desire governs almost everything they do. Acting on lust becomes a kind of expression of power itself; sex is used both for gratification and as a weapon to exert dominance. Excessive lust can also become a weakness, however, which Vindice exploits in his quest for revenge. Middleton ultimately associates lust with depravity, positioning it as a consuming, blinding force that displaces morality.

The Duke presides over an empire of lust, with himself the all-powerful tyrant at its center. He poisoned Vindice's fiancée Gloriana, for instance, for not sleeping with him. His "bastard" son, Spurio, is further evidence of the Duke's lustiness: he was conceived out of wedlock and must live a life in which he is excluded from the advantages of being the ruler's son. Junior Brother, the Duchess's youngest son, is imprisoned for the rape of the wife of court nobleman Antonio—further underscoring that lust is everywhere in this world. Lust also begets lust: Spurio and the Duchess indulge in an illicit (arguably incestuous, given that she is his stepmother) relationship both as an attack on the Duke and as an expression of uncontrollable desire.

Lussurioso in particular takes after his father. At one point he says, "I am past my depth in lust, and I must swim or drown." Here, he explicitly states the way in which lust has consumed him—and his words could easily apply to the other characters too. Lust, then, is set up from the beginning as a potent force throughout the Duke's kingdom, arguably both causing and filling the moral vacuum left by the conspicuous lack of religious devotion.

The Duke and Lussurioso both abuse their positions to satisfy their lust and also use sex as a way of demonstrating and, ultimately, enjoying their authority. They behave with a perverse sense of entitlement, showing the way in which lust and power make a potentially dangerous combination. It never crosses the Duke's or Lussurioso's minds whether the women whom they lust after want to have sex with them or not—or if it does, they don't care either way. To these two characters, women are mere objects of desire, sexual conquests to be won by force if necessary. That's why rape and sexual coercion are a constant presence throughout the play.

Lussurioso, for example, orders Vindice (in disguise as a pimp) to make Castiza, Vindice's sister, sexually available to him. Though this luckily plays into Vindice's revenge plans anyway, Vindice is obligated to assist regardless because of Lussurioso's powerful position. When Gratiana, Castiza's mother, temporarily consents to effectively prostituting her daughter, it's because she is attracted by the power that might come with a closer association to the Duke's family. She is willing to exchange Castiza for a taste of power—in the process, only serving to confirm the *original* power embodied by the Duke and his son. Lust and power are thus twinned together. The play shows that one influences the other, potentially leading to an extreme breakdown of morality.

But just as lust—and acting on it—can be an expression of power, it can also become a point of weakness. Vindice is fully aware how much lust controls the actions of the Duke and Lussurioso and decides to use that to his advantage. In fact, rather than merely killing these men, Vindice wants to kill them in a way that makes them see both that he is the avenger *and*, crucially, the way in which he has exploited their own lust to bring about their deaths.

That Vindice sees lust as an exploitable flaw is clear in his disguise as a pimp, which he uses to get closer to Lussurioso and to manipulate events to bring about Lussurioso's death.

The danger of succumbing to lust, however, finds its ultimate—and grotesque—expression in the Duke's death. Vindice, now also acting as the Duke's pimp, orchestrates a scenario in which the Duke kisses the **skull** of Gloriana, thinking it's a living a woman. Vindice has planted poison on the skull's mouth, meaning the Duke is literally killed because of his own lust-inspired actions. This represents the ultimate revenge, weaponizing not just the Duke's present lust but also the object of his *original* lust, Gloriana. Vindice posthumously empowers Gloriana by letting her provide the kiss of death. Lust, then, is linked to weakness as well as power. Vindice's skill and success as the avenger depend upon his recognition that his enemies will follow their desires at any cost—even if that means endangering themselves and setting up the opportunity for Vindice's revenge to come to fruition.

## WOMEN AND MISOGYNY

Though in part a reflection of the time in which the play was written, women are treated terribly throughout *The Revenger's Tragedy*—both by those men wishing to sexually exploit them and those who believe themselves to be more morally forthright. Even Vindice, technically the "hero" of the play, has a shallow and disparaging view of the opposite sex. That said, when looked at as a whole, it is women who provide the only genuine example of something approaching morality. Middleton portrays a deeply skewed power structure between men and women, making it all the more remarkable that Castiza, and to a lesser extent her mother, Gratiana, can offer any sense of redemption from the play's relentless immorality and nihilism.

The play works hard to demonstrate the entrenched attitudes of men toward women throughout. It's not possible to say whether this is intended as a *criticism* by the author, but the relentless misogyny undoubtedly shows men in a bad light. The Duke and Lussurioso's relentless pursuit of women—and their numerous instances of rape and prostitution—reflect that women are seen primarily as objects of sexual desire. Vindice, despite being set up as the moral avenger of the play, also thinks little of women. Quoting his deceased father, he asserts, "Wives are but made to go to bed and feed"—that is, women are good for nothing except sex and reproduction. The fact that this is an attitude inherited from his father shows the extent to which misogyny is embedded in the deeply patriarchal culture of the court. Vindice goes on to double down on his own misogyny, by placing the responsibility of the world's ills at the feet of women: "Wer't not for gold and women, there would be no damnation; / Hell would look like a lord's great kitchen without fire in't. / But, 'twas decreed before the world began, / That they should be the hooks to catch at man."

Yet it's patently clear to the audience that all of the violence in the play is caused by men. It's the Duke who kills Gloriana; Junior Brother who rapes Antonio's wife; and Lussurioso who wants to force Castiza to have sex with him. Though two women in the play do engage in behavior that is arguably immoral—the Duchess's incest and Gloriana's attempts to prostitute her own daughter—the bloodbath at the play's end is entirely the men's making. This reinforces the fact that it's men, not women, who are responsible for the violence in the play, and, society more generally. Women are consistently derided throughout the play but attempts to blame them for everything that goes wrong are clearly laughable and misguided. Accordingly, the audience gets an overall impression of the male characters as being unable to see their own role in the play's action, perhaps gesturing at the disproportionately male nature of warfare and crime.

There's arguably only one true example of moral virtuousness in the play—if Vindice is set aside because of his misogyny. His sister, Castiza, behaves with dignity and a quiet but assured self-empowerment. Even she is almost defeated by male dominance, but she truly stands out against the backdrop of lusty men and vengeful acts of retribution.

Castiza is impoverished but determined to remain chaste and true. Early in the play Vindice, in disguise, visits Castiza to try and persuade her to give herself to Lussurioso. Castiza quickly demonstrates that she won't be convinced, and detests Lussurioso, who has tried to win her over before. She hits Vindice for proposing such an offer and tells him to send that "message" to the Duke. She also outlines her belief in the importance of her honor: "Tell [Lussurioso] my honor shall have a rich name, / When several harlots shall share his with shame. Farewell! Commend me to him in my hate." This is a brave and virtuous position to hold, risking the wrath of such a powerful man as the Duke's son. In this, then, Castiza is the only character to show any true sense of principle when it comes to women's place in society. She is the sole defender of womanhood, believing it to be too valuable to be sold to men, but her resistance seems futile in the male-dominated world of the play. Castiza does appear to briefly consider giving herself to Lussurioso, but only as a test for Gratiana, granting her mother an opportunity to repent for her earlier. In fact, Castiza ends up demonstrating another rare moral virtue—forgiveness—in eventually making amends with her mother.

Women are by and large presented as powerless figures and objects to be possessed by men in the play. Overall, though, the play emphasizes the absurdity of men's actions, particularly when it comes violence, (in)justice, and lust, while making the one character who displays a genuine sense of morality a woman—intended or not, this suggests that women possess a strength that some men cannot even begin to recognize.

## DEATH

The revenge tragedy genre was notoriously gruesome, full of gore and murder—and even by those standards, *The Revenger's Tragedy* is a bloody play. Whether this is Middleton poking fun at the genre or simply trying to outdo the revenge tragedies that came before is hard to say, but it certainly lends the play an anarchic streak of dark humor. When the play ends, there is the curious sense that perhaps none of the characters' actions have really been worth it. One possible reading of the play is that it is an examination of the futility of the passions and motivations of life, that eventually lead to the same void—death. Furthermore, the play suggests the hold that death exerts on the living.

Death is present in the play from the very beginning to the very end. Almost all of Middleton's characters are connected to death one way or another. The overall effect is to make death a tangible presence in the play, showing the way in which it both obsesses the living and lurks underneath life as its one true certainty. Vindice's particular obsession with death mirrors the

prevalence of death in the play more generally. In the opening scene, Vindice appears on stage carrying the **skull** of his murdered fiancée, Gloriana. He's been carrying her skull for almost an entire decade, suggesting both his consuming desire for revenge and the grip that her death has understandably had on his life—he is literally unable to let her go. While one interpretation of Gloriana's skull is Vindice's determination to enact revenge, there's also a clear sense that it in part represents an obsession with death.

But while Vindice's words to his beloved might sound heartfelt and emotional on one level, his plans for the skull prove otherwise. Vindice uses Gloriana's skull as the instrument with which to administer poison to the lusty Duke—which seems an unnecessarily convoluted method for murder. If Vindice's priorities really were to do right by his deceased fiancée, it's worth considering whether parading her skull around and using it as a murder weapon is the most respectful and honorable mode of action. Accordingly, Vindice's use of the skull seems more a way of intensifying the death of the Duke. By killing him with this "memento mori"—a physical symbol of death—he literally kills the Duke with death itself. While it could be said that this ultimately lets Gloriana have the satisfaction of killing the Duke, the fact she is no more than a skull suggests otherwise. Vindice's wish for revenge, then, has turned into a wider obsession with death, in which he isn't happy to simply get his own back on the Duke—it has to be done in a particular way that most amplifies the death itself.

The play's conclusion, in turn, is relentless: numerous characters die, including Vindice and his brother, Hippolito, who has helped him plan revenge. On the one hand, this shows the consequences of the violent and destructive urges that most of the characters exhibit; on the other, it undermines the entire action of the play. With almost all of the characters dead, the audience is left to ask who it is that benefits, and how the action of the play reflects on the presence of death in real life itself. Most of the characters in the play have a motive to bring about someone else's death. There's Vindice of course, but even the Duchess's two sons, Supervacuo and Ambitioso, who are relatively minor characters, want to kill whomever they need to in order to attain power.

These multiple murderous desires accumulate throughout the play, making it teeter on the edge of absurdity. Middleton then contrasts the frantic behavior of the characters with the impending sense that all of them are going to die—which most of them do. This shines a light on the way the characters behave, asking whether their motives really worthy of their actions. When the inevitable bloodbath does come, numerous characters are killed off instantly, almost implausibly. There is the sense that this is partly Middleton mocking the seriousness of revenge tragedy—but it's a legitimate interpretation to say that he is mocking the seriousness of people in life more generally. Death, the play, seems to say, is coming to everyone and undermines the weighty wants, dreams and actions of the living.

This is best expressed by Vindice's final action. Having successfully brought about the murders he'd wanted, Vindice looks like he might escape the traditional fate of the revenge tragedy protagonists—that is, death. But Vindice can't help but brag about the way in which he's manipulated events, and Antonio—the most likely new ruler of the court now that all the other candidates are dead—instantly sentences Vindice and his brother to die. It's almost as if Vindice's desires towards death culminate in bringing about his own. Death, then, is everywhere in *The Revenger's Tragedy*. In the end, it's hard to escape the feeling that the play represents a kind of cosmic joke, building up tension only to release it one of the bloodiest, but darkly absurd, finales in Jacobean theatre.

## SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

### GLORIANA'S SKULL

Vindice carries the skull of his murdered beloved, Gloriana, who was killed by the Duke for refusing his sexual advances almost ten years before the action of the play. Vindice addresses the skull in the opening scene, an early appearance that suggests the strong presence of death throughout the play; it also gives the audience a sense of Vindice's obsession with revenge, given that he's held on to the skull for the best part of a decade. Later, Vindice employs the skull as the murder weapon when he tricks the Duke into kissing its poison-laden mouth. The use of the skull as the murder weapon accomplishes two significant things: first, it gruesomely allows Gloriana herself to have her revenge on the Duke (as much is possible); second, the skull's role as a "memento mori"—an object reminder of death—means that the Duke is killed by a symbol of death itself. With these two points in mind, then, the skull allows Vindice not just to kill the Duke, but to make sure he achieves the *perfect* revenge—the Duke is killed by the exact physical object that best represents his own earlier crime.

### NATURAL PHENOMENA

*The Revenger's Tragedy* contains instances and mentions of natural phenomena from the sky—e.g. comets, stars, thunder, and lightning—which are a typical feature of the revenge tragedy genre, often as markers of some sort higher power. Middleton, however, playfully disrupts their usual meaning so that such phenomena highlight the *lack* of any broader presence of justice in the world of his play.

Thunderstorms, for example, come from the sky and are therefore often associated with god/the gods and instances of divine intervention (this is true from the Ancient Greeks to Christianity). The sky, then, is usually some kind of external force that humanity can rely on to ensure that a degree of fairness is maintained among those on the earth. But Middleton subverts this typical understanding: Vindice frequently appeals to the heavens for intervention ("Has not heaven an ear? is all the lightning wasted?") but receives nothing. In fact, on the few occasions when thunder does arrive on cue, it comes across as darkly comic and more representative of the hopelessness of appealing to the heavens for justice than the arrival of divine help. This lack of a reliable religious framework is one of the reasons Vindice feels he has to take matters into his own hands and pursue revenge himself.

In the final scene, a "blazing star" appears; this is a comet, traditionally viewed around the time of the play's writing as a harbinger of doom. Lussurioso, who near the end of the play becomes the newly-crowned Duke, acknowledges this, and even has the arrogance to accuse the comet of committing "treason" (by suggesting his rule might not go well or, for that matter, last long). But because of Vindice's earlier futile appeals to the sky for divine justice, the comet feels like a hollow symbol rather than a true prediction of doom and terror. In fact, as the last scene's bloodbath plays out, the fault of the numerous deaths in the play comes across very much as the responsibility of the people within it—the star acts more as an innocent bystander, a light illuminating the tragic conclusion of the plays' events.

## QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Bloomsbury edition of *The Revenger's Tragedy* published in 2009.

### Act 1, Scene 1 Quotes

Duke—royal lecher! Go, grey-haired adultery;
And thou his son, as impious steeped as he;
And thou his bastard true-begot in evil;
And thou his duchess that will do with devil;
Four ex'lent characters.

**Related Characters:** Vindice (speaker), The Duchess, Spurio , Lussurioso, The Duke

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 1-5

**Explanation and Analysis**

These are the opening lines of the play, spoken by Vindice as he watches the Duke go by with his entourage. This moment immediately sets up how distant Vindice feels from the Duke's court, expressing his hatred for four key characters and giving an indication of why he hates them. The Duke is a "lecher," a man given to excessive sexual indulgence. His son, Lussurioso, is accused by Vindice of being just as bad. The audience then learns that Spurio was conceived out of wedlock, "true-begot in evil"—further evidence of the Duke's lifetime of lustiness. Vindice's accusation that the Duchess "will do with the devil" is also related to sex, implying her immorality by suggesting she would, given the chance, have sex with the devil, while also strongly linking back to the Duke's own devilishness. His final comment, that they are four excellent characters, is as sarcastic as they come. In just five lines, then, the audience gets a sense of Vindice's revenge motive, if not the specific circumstances, and the Duke's court is immediately shown to be "swimming" (as Lussurioso says later) in lust.

*[To the skull]* Thou sallow picture of my poisoned love,
My study's ornament, thou shell of death,
Once the bright face my betrothed lady,
When life and beauty naturally filled out these
These ragged imperfections,
When two heaven-pointed diamonds were set
In those unsightly rings [...]
Thee when thou wert appareled in thy flesh
The old duke poisoned,
Because thy purer part would not consent
Unto his palsy-lust

**Related Characters:** Vindice (speaker), The Duke

**Related Themes:**

**Related Symbols:**

**Page Number:** 14-34

**Explanation and Analysis**

Still in the opening scene of the play, here Vindice addresses the skull of his deceased beloved, Gloriana. The early appearance of the skull suggests the strong presence of death throughout the play; it also gives the audience a sense of Vindice's obsession with revenge, given that they later learn he's held on to the skull for the better part of a decade.

This quote establishes Vindice's love for Gloriana and his

grief at her death. To him, she has been reduced to an object—an "ornament" and a "shell"—which might explain the curious way he uses the skull later in the play. There are religious overtones in his description of her eyes, which serve to hint at the absence of divine authority elsewhere in this world. It's also worth noting that there is little description of Gloriana as a person—even in his memories of her Vindice treats her like an aesthetic object, painting a verbal picture of her appearance but not of her personality.

The audience also learns the horrible circumstances of Gloriana's death—she was poisoned by the Duke for refusing his sexual advances. This initially puts the audience on Vindice's side: the revenge motive is clear and reasonable. His actions later in the play will make his behavior less obviously justified.

## Act 1, Scene 2 Quotes

❝ Duchess, it is your youngest son, we're sorry,
His violent act has e'en drawn blood of honour
And stained our honours,
Thrown ink upon the forehead of our state
Which envious spirits will dip their pens into
After our death, and blot us in our tombs."

**Related Characters:** The Duke (speaker), Spurio , Antonio, The Duchess, Junior Brother

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 1-6

### Explanation and Analysis

Junior Brother, the Duchess' son from a relationship prior to the Duke, stands trial for raping the wife of Lord Antonio. This quote illustrates the Duke's attitude toward justice: it isn't a universal standard that humanity needs to uphold, but rather the mere expression of what's good for the court—or, more accurately, what's good for the Duke himself. He isn't concerned with the horror of Junior Brother's deed, but for how it will look to the public. In fact, it's more his posthumous reputation that he's worried about. It also shows the audience that it is the Duke who decides how justice is meted out, not the unseen judges, who are there just as an aesthetic accompaniment to the Duke's decision-making process. This adds validity to Vindice's decision to take vengeance into his own hands.

The forehead imagery runs throughout the play, usually referring to "cuckolding"—a man is made a cuckold when his wife has an affair, and horns are said to appear on his head to mark his embarrassing status. Here, then, the Duke unwittingly signals to his own cuckolding later in the play; in fact, it's after this scene that the Duchess decides to have an affair the Duke's bastard son, Spurio. Perhaps this is where she got the idea.

❝ SECOND JUDGE: Confess, my lord,
What moved you to't?

JUNIOR BROTHER: Why, flesh and blood, my lord.
What should move men unto a woman else?

LUSSURIOSO: O do not jest thy doom; trust not an axe
Or sword too far. The law is a wise serpent
And quickly can beguile thee of thy life.

**Related Characters:** Lussurioso, Junior Brother (speaker), Antonio

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 46-50

### Explanation and Analysis

The judges ask Junior Brother why he decided to rape Lord Antonio's wife, and his answer reveals a lot about the immorality rife in the Duke's court.

Essentially, Junior Brother's reply portrays the view that rape is a natural action—it isn't "wrong" or "evil" because it is simply the expression of the laws of nature. Not only is lust considered justification for rape, then, but it is also suggested that lust is the *only* force behind a man's attraction to a woman. Women are mere sites for the satisfaction of men's lust. Junior Brother's devaluation of "flesh and blood" mirrors the wider corruption at the Duke's court, where life holds little value other than as an arena in which lust and power can play.

Lussurioso's comment is also important. He cautions Junior Brother not to be so flippant in his answers to the Duke, but not because he takes moral objection to Junior Brother's flippant remarks. Actually, he's only trying to help Junior Brother get away with what he has done. He empathizes with Junior Brother, seeing a reflection of his own sexual obsessions. His statement that the "law is a wise serpent" is a darkly comic line that both highlights the lack of religious authority in the pay (by reference to biblical imagery) and underlines the irrelevance of the legal system in deciding

matters of justice.

DUCHESS: Who would not be revenged of such a father,
E'en in the worst way? I would thank that sin
That could most injury him, and be in league with it.
Oh what a grief 'tis that a man should live
But once i'th' world, and then to live a bastard,
The curse o' the womb, the thief of Nature,
Begot against the seventh commandment
Half damned in the conception by the justice
Of that unbribed everlasting law.

SPURIO: O, I'd a hot-backed devil to my father.

**Related Characters:** Spurio , The Duchess (speaker), Junior Brother, The Duke

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 154-163

**Explanation and Analysis**

The Duchess, angry with the Duke for not showing leniency to Junior Brother, decides to get her revenge by having an illicit affair with Spurio, the Duke's bastard son. Spurio is initially hesitant, thinking that any proposed affair would be immoral and incestuous. He doesn't take much persuasion, however, and the above quote illustrates the Duchess's reasoning, which quickly brings Spurio around.

Spurio harbors resentment for his father because of his own status as a bastard. His father conceived him in adulterous fit of passion, and thereby denied Spurio the rights he would have enjoyed as a legitimate son of a Duke (money, power, status, and so on). The Duchess's point is that the best way for Spurio to get his revenge is for him to engage in the exact same act that bore him to his half-baked existence: adultery. She appeals to Christianity as further proof, and Spurio continues the religious imagery with "hot-backed devil"—"hot-backed" because of sexual activity.

## Act 1, Scene 3 Quotes

LUSSURIOSO: Attend me, I am past my depth in lust,
And I must swim or drown. All my desires
Are levelled at a virgin not far from Court,
To whom I have conveyed by messenger
Many waxed lines, full of my neatest spirit,
And jewels that were able to ravish her
Without the help of man: all which and more
She, foolish-chaste, sent back, the messengers
Receiving frowns for answers.

VINDICE: Possible?
'Tis a rare phoenix whoe'er she be.
If your desires be such, she so repugnant.

**Related Characters:** Vindice, Lussurioso (speaker), Castiza

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 88-99

**Explanation and Analysis**

In this scene, Vindice is disguised as Piato the "pander"—an old word for pimp. Lussurioso has requested his services in procuring a virgin who is particularly reluctant to acquiesce to his advances; Vindice has agreed because it potentially aids his overall revenge project, getting him closer to the top of the court hierarchy.

Lussurioso lives up to his name, which roughly translates as "lewd" and "lust." He shows the extent to which lust has come to dominate his very being, and also outlines the dynamic between that lust and women's purity. That is, the more chaste a virgin the more he wants to spoil her. The "depth" imagery is an expression of his sexual obsessions, gesturing towards sexual fluids and ejaculation. He also outlines the usual way he gets his women: with false words and jewels.

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!
[*Unsheathes his sword*]
Sword I durst make a promise of him to thee,
Thou shalt dis-heir him, it shall be thine honour;
And yet, now angry froth is down in me,
It would not prove the meanest policy
In this disguise to try the faith of both.

**Related Characters:** Vindice (speaker), Hippolito, Lussurioso, Gratiana, Castiza

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 88-99

**Explanation and Analysis**

This quote comes just after Vindice, disguised as Piato, learns that the virgin he has to approach on behalf of Lussurioso is his own sister, Castiza. His phrase "innocent villains," which he uses to describe himself and Hippolito, demonstrates the complicated ethical position the brothers have found themselves in. As part of their overall revenge project, they now have to contrive to deceive their own family members, raising the question of how far they are willing to go in order to fully realize their plans for vengeance.

This is also one example of many in which the revenge act is deferred to a later occasion—Vindice doesn't want just any revenge, but the best possible form of revenge, which to him involves tricking his opponents and revealing his true identity at the last possible moment.

This quote is also telling of the overall attitude towards women in the play. Misogyny is rife (though it's important to be reminded that the play was written in the Jacobean era, when this was basically in keeping with broader societal attitudes), and Vindice feels that it is his place to test the faith of both his mother and sister. This seems a long way from his overall revenge project, and belies the general attitude that men are superior to women, acting as their judge and jury.

## Act 1, Scene 4 Quotes

I marked not this before:
A prayer book the pillow to her cheek;
This was her rich confection, and another
Placed in her right hand with a leaf tucked up,
Pointing to these words:
*Melius virtute mori, quam per dedecus viyere.*
True and effectual it is indeed.

**Related Characters:** Antonio (speaker), Junior Brother

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 13-18

**Explanation and Analysis**

This quote comes after Antonio reveals to his fellow noblemen that his wife committed suicide because of the shame she felt at being raped by Junior Brother. This is both because of the shame itself and the sense that her honor has been violated (honor is linked to chastity/sexual loyalty throughout the play). This is also the only expression of any genuine religious engagement in the play—Antonio's wife has been consulting her faith to try to help her recover from the rape. The Latin phrase translates to "it is better to die in virtue than live in disgrace," advice which Antonio's wife has clearly taken to heart.

## Act 2, Scene 1 Quotes

How hardly shall that maiden be beset
Whose only fortunes are her constant thoughts,
That has no other child's-part but her honour
That keeps her low and empty in estate.
Maids and their honours are like poor beginners:
Were not sin rich there would be fewer sinners:
Why had not virtue a revenue? Well,
I know the cause: 'twould have impoverished hell.

**Related Characters:** Castiza (speaker), Lussurioso, Vindice

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 1-8

**Explanation and Analysis**

This quote comes just before Piato (Vindice in disguise) arrives to try and persuade Castiza to give in to Lussurioso's advances. It neatly sets out her social position, which is demoted because her father is no longer alive. This makes her ineligible for marriage, meaning that the one true power that she holds is over her virginity and honor. She takes a principled stand in defending her position and is determined not to give herself away cheaply.

Her words also further illustrate the moral corruption of the world she finds herself in. She expresses frustration that sin seems to be rewarded, whereas virtue earns an individual nothing. In fact, she says, if virtue did have its reward, hell would have no purpose as everyone would behave with greater moral strength and thereby avoid damnation. Instead, as evidenced by the Duke and Lussurioso, people in power tend to be rewarded for their sins. This ultimately highlights the hollowness of religion in the play.

VINDICE: What think you now lady? Speak, are you wiser?
What said advancement to you? Thus it said:
The daughter's fall lifts up the mother's head.
Did it not madam? But I'll swear it does
In many places; tut, this age fears no man.
'Tis no shame to be bad, because 'tis common.'

GRATIANA: Aye, that's the comfort on't.

VINDICE: The comfort on't!
I keep the best for last; can these persuade you
To forget heaven—
[*Gives her money*]

GRATIANA: Ay, these are they—

VINDICE [*aside*]: O!

GRATIANA: —that enchant our sex; these are the means
That govern our affections. That woman
Will not be troubled with the mother long,
That sees the comfortable shine of you;
I blush to think what for your sakes I'll do.

VINDICE [*aside*]: Oh suffering heaven with thy invisible finger
E'en at this instant turn the precious side
Of both mine eyeballs inward, not to see myself.

**Related Characters:** Gratiana, Vindice (speaker), Lussurioso, Castiza

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 111-127

**Explanation and Analysis**

Having had his proposal roundly rejected by Castiza, Vindice—disguised as Piato the pander—tries to persuade his own mother to pressure Castiza into giving up her virginity for Lussurioso.

Vindice's true identity is firmly lost at this point, as he slips deeper into the role of Piato, testing the faith of his mother. He pressures her, suggesting that her complicity in changing Castiza's mind will ultimately bring about rewards for her too. His argument is that, in a world already morally corrupted, what harm does a little more corruption do? Between his silver tongue and the bribe, Gratiana is convinced by Piato and, rather nauseatingly, not a little attracted to this persistent pander. She adds to the generally disparaging view of women throughout the play, pointing out that all it takes is a little bit of money to make a woman behave in the way desired.

Vindice's aside his especially interesting, firstly in it's appeal to "heaven," one of many moments in which he helplessly longs for divine justice. Secondly, in wanting his eyeballs to turn inwards, he associates looking-in with an *absence* of self-reflection, suggesting that he usually takes his moral cues not from his inner sense of morality but from external observation of the world around him.

GRATIANA: O, if thou knew'st
What 'twere to lose it, thou would never keep it.
But there's a cold curse laid upon all maids,
Whilst others clip the sun they clasp the shades!
Virginity is paradise, locked up.
You cannot come by yourselves without fee,
And 'twas decreed that man should keep the key:
Deny advancement, treasure, the duke's son!

CASTIZA: I cry you mercy; lady I mistook you,
Pray did you see my mother? Which way went you?
Pray God I have not lost her.

**Related Characters:** Castiza, Gratiana (speaker), Vindice, Lussurioso

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 148-158

**Explanation and Analysis**

Under the spell of Piato's persuasion, Gratiana tries to convince Castiza to give up her chastity for Lussurioso. Castiza clearly does not recognize this attitude in her mother, accusing her of having "gone missing"—that is, no longer being herself. This is a line of accusation that Vindice and Hippolito carry on in a later scene—that Gratiana has lost her sense of self.

Gratiana's attempt to persuade Castiza should not be taken at face value; her words are primarily motivated by the chance of personal gain, not her genuine feelings. Gratiana seems to imply that Castiza doesn't realize the gratification that comes with having sex—if Castiza did, she wouldn't be so reluctant to give in to Lussurioso's demands. She also tries to scare Castiza with the thought that Castiza might become a spinster. The most shocking line of all, in which she calls virginity a locked-up paradise, continues the twisting of religious sentiment throughout the play, again highlighting the lack of any moral certainty that religion

might otherwise have provided. Finally, she portrays the attitude that women are objects for men to possess: "man should keep the key." All a woman can do is set her fee—that is, prostitute herself.

## Act 2, Scene 2 Quotes

LUSSURIOSO: Well this night I'll visit her, and 'tis till then
A year in my desires. Farewell, attend,
Trust me with thy preferment.
[*Exit Lussurioso. Vindice puts his hand to his sword*]

VINDICE: My loved lord.—
Oh shall I kill him o'the wrong-side now? No,
Sword thou wast never a back-biter yet.
I'll pierce him to his face, he shall die looking upon me;
Thy veins are swelled with lust, this shall unfill 'em.

**Related Characters:** Vindice, Lussurioso (speaker), Castiza, Gratiana

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 85-91

**Explanation and Analysis**

This moment represents a heightening of the dramatic tension in the play. Vindice, disguised as Piato, has just informed Lussurioso that Gratiana, Castiza's mother, is happy to receive him at the house and facilitate the satisfaction of his sexual desires with her daughter.

Vindice could kill Lussurioso at this instant, but, as with other points in the play, defers his actions. Because he wants a particular type of revenge, in which he gets to make clear his true identity, he decides to put it off until later. Contrast this with, say, Shakespeare's Hamlet, who delays vengeance because of its confusing ethics, and it's clear that *The Revenger's Tragedy* is a very different play (despite other similarities). Vindice's sole purpose, by this point, is revenge, and it's important to him that he carries it off in exactly the way he thinks best.

There is also a continuation of sexual imagery in Vindice's description of Lussurioso's "veins … swelled with lust." Vindice's intention to "pierce" the Duke's son carries with it the connotations of emasculation and castration, with the avenger physically putting an end to his target's sexual activity.

## Act 2, Scene 3 Quotes

O, take me not in sleep; I have great sins.
I must have days—
Nay, months, dear son, with penitential heaves,
To lift 'em out and not to die unclear;
O, thou wilt kill me both in heaven and here.

**Related Characters:** The Duke (speaker), Spurio , The Duchess, Lussurioso

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 8-13

**Explanation and Analysis**

Lussurioso bursts in on the Duke and the Duchess, thinking he will catch the latter engaging in incestuous behavior with Spurio. The Duke's reaction is telling of his attitude toward religion and the generally corrupted quality of religion throughout the play. He sees his relationship to "heaven" as essentially transactional—in order to secure his place in the preferred afterlife he needs to pay his moral debt with prayer. That is, all he needs to do in order to make up for his moral crimes is to make a superficial, vacuous tribute to his God. This emphasizes the extent of his immorality—because his sins will take days, or even months, to pray away—and the diminished role of religion in his court more generally.

It well becomes that judge to nod at crimes
That does commit greater himself, and lives.
I may forgive a disobedient error
That expect pardon for adultery,
And in my old days am a youth in lust.
Many a beauty have I turned to poison
In the denial, covetous of all.
Age hot, is like a monster to be seen:
My hairs are white, and yet my sins are green.

**Related Characters:** The Duke (speaker), Lussurioso

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 124-133

**Explanation and Analysis**

This quote is spoken by the Duke, with nobody else on stage. It is, then, a glimpse into his innermost thoughts, which portrays his rather skewed reasoning of morality and justice. Having just confronted his potential death at the hands of Lussurioso (accidentally, of course), his thoughts

take on a philosophical bent. Firstly, he thinks it is morally virtuous of him to forgive his son because Lussurioso's sin is less grave than the sins the Duke has committed in his life. Secondly, it shows his attitude towards his age and his lust: he believes that, in his relentless sexual obsession, he merely behaves like a young person tends to do. The closest he gets to feeling remorse for his actions, then, is that he perhaps doesn't act his age. The quote is also confirmation that Gloriana, Vindice's deceased fiancée, was not the only woman the Duke had poisoned for refusing to give in to his sexual advances.

## Act 3, Scene 5 Quotes

VINDICE: Look you brother,
I have not fashioned this only for show
And useless property, no — it shall bear a part
E'en in it own revenge. This very skull,
Whose mistress the duke poisoned with this drug,
The mortal curse of the earth, shall be revenged
In the like strain and kiss his lips to death.

**Related Characters:** Vindice (speaker), The Duke, Hippolito

**Related Themes:**

**Related Symbols:**

**Page Number:** 98-104

**Explanation and Analysis**

This quote comes as Vindice describes to Hippolito his plan for killing the Duke. Acting as Piato the pimp, he has lured the Duke away from the court (and thereby away from his usual protection) with the promise of a young woman for the Duke to have his way with. The woman, though, is the skull of Gloriana, dressed up and disguised, with poison planted on the mouth. The audience, here, has to ask whether Vindice's plans for revenge have become morally entangled with a certain kind of enjoyment he derives from being particularly ingenious in his methods. On the other hand, there is a sense in which allowing Gloriana's skull to administer the poison to the Duke—when he goes in for the kiss—restores power to her, in fact allowing her to posthumously avenge her own death. That said, it also shows Vindice's unflinching attitude to death. More generally, his willingness to use Gloriana's skull in such a grotesque mission suggests that he himself is prepared to die, once his aims have been achieved.

## Act 4, Scene 2 Quotes

Has not heaven an ear? Is all the lightning wasted?

**Related Characters:** Vindice (speaker), Gratiana, Castiza, Spurio , The Duchess, Lussurioso

**Related Themes:**

**Related Symbols:**

**Page Number:** 155

**Explanation and Analysis**

Lussurioso, now angry with Piato (Vindice in disguise) for giving him misinformation regarding the Duchess and Spurio's affair, hires Vindice to kill Piato. The only problem, of course, is that Piato and Vindice are the same person. In recounting what happened with Piato, Lussurioso completely absolves himself of any responsibility, craftily telling Vindice that it was Piato who tried corrupt Castiza and Gratiana, Vindice's sister and mother.

It's at this point that Vindice calls out (without Lussurioso hearing) for divine providence—that is, for the intervention of the heavens. Vindice is exasperated that God seems to have no interest in his quest for revenge, no investment in righting the wrongs that have been visited upon him. He feels as though heaven is not listening to him, which is a major factor in his decision to take matters into his own hands. It also means that he has no external way of judging his actions; in his world, Vindice himself is the only measure of justice and fairness.

## Act 4, Scene 4 Quotes

GRATIANA: Are you so barbarous, to set iron nipples
Upon the breast that gave you suck?

VINDICE: That breast
Is turned to quarled poison.

GRATIANA: Cut not your days for't: am not I your mother?

VINDICE: Thou dost usurp that title now by fraud,
For in that shell of mother breeds a bawd.

GRATIANA: A bawd! Oh name far loathsomer than hell!

HIPPOLITO: It should be so, knew'st thou thy office well.

**Related Characters:** Hippolito, Vindice, Gratiana (speaker), Lussurioso, Castiza

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 5-12

**Explanation and Analysis**

In this scene, Vindice and Hippolito confront their mother, Gratiana, for her corruptibility. Earlier in the play, Gratiana agreed with Piato the pander—actually Vindice in disguise—that she would prostitute their sister, Castiza, to Lussurioso. At this point she doesn't know the true identity of Piato and accordingly is confused why her sons are behaving so aggressively towards her. The grotesque imagery of "iron nipples" contributes to the overall sense of sexual depravity in the play. More generally, the trope of children killing one of their parents—in this case avoided—harks back to earlier Greek tragedies (e.g. the story of Oedipus). Vindice and Hippolito, like Castiza earlier in the play, accuse their mother of having lost her identity. A "bawd" is an older woman who oversees the activity of younger female prostitutes.

GRATIANA: Bethink again, thou know'st not what thou say'st.

CASTIZA: No—deny advancement, treasure, the duke's son?

GRATIANA: O see, I spoke those words, and now they poison me.
What will the deed do then?
Advancement? True, as high as shame can pitch.
For treasure? Who e'er knew a harlot rich
Or could build by the purchase of her sin
An hospital to keep their bastards in?
The duke's son! Oh when women are young courtiers,
They are sure to be old beggars;
To know the miseries most harlots taste
Thou'd'st wish thyself unborn, when thou'rt unchaste.

CASTIZA: Oh mother let me twine about your neck
And kiss you till my soul melt on your lips:
I did but this to try you.

GRATIANA: Oh speak truth!

CASTIZA: Indeed I did not;
For no tongue has force to alter me from honest.
If maidens would, men's words could have no power;
A virgin honour is a crystal tower,
Which, being weak, is guarded with good spirits:
Until she basely yields, no ill inherits.

**Related Characters:** Castiza, Hippolito, Gratiana (speaker), Lussurioso

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 134-154

**Explanation and Analysis**

By this point, Gratiana has realized the error of her ways. Her repentant tears have earned her the forgiveness of Hippolito and Vindice, and this exchange represents the final stage of her salvation. Castiza has just entered, stating that she wishes now to go back on her initial reluctance and give into Lussurioso's advances. She quotes the same potential advantages to such a decision as Gratiana had earlier described: advancement (as in a better a social position) and monetary reward. Yet Gratiana, fully restored to her sense of mother's morality, now argues against her previous words. Gratiana says that the only advancement such a decision would bring to Castiza is an increase in shame. She echoes Castiza's earlier point that a woman's true honor and virtue reside in her power of her own

body—chastity. To Gratiana's relief, this whole exchange is a test on Castiza's part to see if Gratiana has redeemed her character and restored herself to the mother she once was.

## Act 5, Scene 2 Quotes

My lords, be all of music;
Strike old griefs into other countries
That flow in too much milk and have faint livers,
Not daring to stab home their discontents.
Let our hid flames break out, as fire, as lightning
To blast this villainous dukedom vexed with sin:
Wind up your souls to their full height again [...]
And when they think their pleasures sweet and good,
In midst of all their joys, they shall sigh blood.

**Related Characters:** Vindice (speaker), The Duke, Lussurioso

**Related Themes:**

**Related Symbols:**

**Page Number:** 1-22

### Explanation and Analysis

Near the end of the play, the audience senses the imminent bloodbath. In this quote, Vindice convinces some of the other noblemen to join him in his vengeful actions and kill Lussurioso (who has just been crowned Duke after his father's death).

It's worth noting how Vindice's revenge project has extended from being centered on the Duke, to then incorporating Lussurioso, and now taking in the entire "villainous dukedom." In his words, this widening out of his revenge is justified because the court is "vexed with sin," but the audience might wonder if a small part of Vindice's psyche has simply developed a kind of pleasure in revenge and in his own cunning abilities. Given that his name means "revenge" in Italian, this is not so far-fetched.

There are two other important parts of the quote to consider. Firstly, Vindice's description of the planned murders as "lightning" relates to his earlier unheeded appeals to the heavens for divine justice. With none forthcoming, he has to create his own "lightning." Secondly, Vindice takes particular relish in killing his victims when they are in moments of "pleasure"—to him, this seems a particularly appropriate retribution against those whose sins are committed in the pursuit of their own desires.

## Act 5, Scene 3 Quotes

ANTONIO: Bear 'em to speedy execution. [...]

VINDICE: May not we set as well as the duke's son?
Thou hast no conscience: are we not revenged?
Is there one enemy left alive amongst those?
When murderers shut deeds close this curse does seal 'em:
If none disclose 'em, they themselves reveal 'em!
This murder might have slept in tongueless brass
But for ourselves, and the world died an ass.
Now I remember too; here was Piato
Brought forth a knavish sentence once:
No doubt, said he, but time
Will make the murderer bring forth himself.
'Tis well he died, he was a witch.—
And now my lord, since we are in for ever:
This work was ours, which else might have been slipped;
And if we list we could have nobles clipped
And go for less than beggars. But we hate
To bleed so cowardly: we have enough—
I'faith we're well: our mother turned, our sister true,
We die after a nest of dukes! Adieu.
*Exeunt [Vindice and Hippolito, guarded)*

ANTONIO: How subtly was that murder closed! Bear up
Those tragic bodies; 'tis a heavy season.
Pray heaven their blood may wash away all treason.

**Related Characters:** Vindice, Antonio (speaker), Gratiana, Castiza, Lussurioso, The Duke, Hippolito

**Related Themes:**

**Related Symbols:**

**Page Number:** 106-130

### Explanation and Analysis

These are the closing words of the play, coming after the bloodbath that has killed numerous characters. Antonio has arrived on the scene, and, because the Duke has no relatives left, is next in line to the throne. When he expresses his disbelief at what has happened, Vindice can't help but brag that the events that have transpired are largely down to his scheming. Instead of being grateful or impressed, however, Antonio immediately orders the executions of Vindice and Hippolito. This makes Antonio an ambiguous figure—it's not clear if he wishes to rid the court of the vengeful brothers in order to shore up his newfound position of power, or because he genuinely believes that their deaths represent fair and sensible justice. Either way, Vindice hardly cares: his

revenge project is complete and he expresses his preparedness for death. He finds some solace in the virtue of his sister and mother, and refuses to beg for his life, thinking that "cowardly." Antonio's lament towards "heaven" rings hollow, given the gratuitous violence that has just taken place and Vindice's earlier vain attempts to call for divine justice.

## SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

### ACT 1, SCENE 1

The play opens (and remains throughout) in a non-specified Italian court. Vindice appears on stage, holding the **skull** of his deceased fiancée, Gloriana. He watches from afar as the Duke, the Duchess, Lussurioso (the Duke's eldest son by an earlier marriage), and Spurio (the Duke's bastard son) go by. Vindice expresses fierce hatred for all of them.

*At the time of writing, Italy was seen as a hotbed of immorality and corruption. Setting plays there was also a way for English writers to critique society without getting into trouble with their own authorities. The skull quickly establishes death as a strong presence in the play, while Vindice's name means revenge in Italian.*

Vindice addresses the **skull** of Gloriana, which he has carried around with him since her death. He laments how beautiful she was when alive and states the reasons for her death, making clear that the Duke poisoned her because she refused to have sex with him; Vindice promises to get his revenge when the time is right.

*This makes clear who the main "revenger" of the play will be and fleshes out his motive. It also provides an early example of the Duke's insatiable lust and unrepentant corruption. Furthermore, this shows that women in the world of the play are frequently regarded as little more than sexual objects. Vindice doesn't just want revenge—he could theoretically have jumped out at the Duke just now and killed him—but a specific type of revenge, for which he'll have to wait for the right opportunity.*

Vindice's brother Hippolito enters. Vindice asks whether Hippolito has sensed any opportunity for Vindice to enact his revenge, given that Hippolito is closer to the court than Vindice—a side effect, Hippolito says, of the Duchess's attraction to him. Hippolito explains that there has indeed been an interesting development: Lussurioso has asked Hippolito to provide him with "some base-coined pander."

*Here Hippolito gives an early indication of the Duchess's willingness to be unfaithful to the Duke. Lussurioso, whose Italian name roughly translates as "lust," wants an immoral man to act as his pimp ("pander"). It's worth noting the way Middleton names most of his characters according to their dominant attribute; they are archetypes. This is a technique seen often in Morality plays, a popular medieval and early Tudor form of theater.*

Vindice says he isn't surprised to hear Lussurioso's request, because the Duke's eldest son is notoriously lusty. He doesn't think there's any woman that Lussurioso wouldn't want to have sex with. The brothers agree that Vindice should disguise himself as the "pander."

*Technically Vindice's main gripe is with the Duke; but Lussurioso, as the Duke's son and heir, represents a part of the overall revenge project. Vindice frequently appears in disguise in the play, both demonstrating the skill and guile he needs to enact his revenge and, perhaps, his diminishing sense of self in service of his one sole cause—vengeance.*

Gratiana and Castiza arrive, the brothers' mother and sister respectively. As they enter, Vindice notes to Hippolito that he would "stake" his "soul for these two creatures," despite the corruptible nature of women more generally.

*If anyone comes out of this play with a sense of moral virtue, it's Castiza, whose name roughly translates as "chastity." Though Vindice praises her and his mother, his general attitude belies little faith in women as a whole—something all the men in the play seem to share.*

Gratiana asks Hippolito for news from the court. Hippolito informs her that the Duchess's youngest son (and the Duke's stepson), Junior Brother, is rumored to have raped the wife of Lord Antonio, a court nobleman. Vindice says he must make "speedy travel." Vindice and Gratiana briefly discuss the worthiness of Vindice's deceased father, who was also mistreated by the Duke. They all exit the stage.

*The rumor about Junior Brother adds to the sense that lust is a rife, unstoppable force in the Duke's court. Vindice and Gratiana's conversation, meanwhile, adds further motive to Vindice's ambition to kill the Duke.*

## ACT 1, SCENE 2

The Duke, Lussurioso, the Duchess, Spurio, and Ambitioso and Supervacuo, the Duchess's other two sons, enter. Junior Brother is brought in to stand trial for the rape of Antonio's wife. Two judges are also present.

*These characters represent the core of immorality at the Duke's court. Spurio, Ambitioso, and Supervacuo's names hint at "bastard," "ambition" and "vacuous" respectively, giving the audience little hope of any redeeming features in their characters. The legal proceedings are a sham—the Duke who has final say over everything, which is another reason Vindice takes matters into his own hands.*

The Duke apologizes to the Duchess for the fact that Junior Brother, her youngest son, must be punished for his crime. He says it's important to do so to maintain their good reputation. One of the judges praises his wisdom; the Duke instructs the judge to "doom" Junior Brother.

*Morality has been hollowed out from this court: the Duke has committed crimes as bad as Junior Brother, but thinks the latter should be punished only to protect the Duke's own public image. His lack of leniency toward Junior Brother is also the start of the rift between the Duke and the Duchess, providing her with her own revenge motive.*

The Duchess pleads on her knees for Junior Brother to be shown mercy. Lussurioso says that mercy is superficial and false, but Ambitioso also asks the Duke to "be soft and mild." In an aside to audience, Spurio makes it clear that he hopes Junior Brother is sentenced to death.

*Spurio pretty much resents everyone, but especially hates the Duke because, as a bastard born out of wedlock (and thus, essential, out of lust), he is denied any of the usual power and prestige that belong to the son of a Duke. Here the Duke is also shown to have the power to decide who lives and who dies—a power Vindice hopes to wrestle control of.*

The judges quiz Junior Brother on why he committed the rape, to which he replies: "Why, flesh and blood, my lord. What should move man unto a woman else?" Lussurioso warns him not to be flippant with his answers.

*Junior Brother sees nothing wrong with raping a woman—in fact, it's a natural part of life. Lussurioso, notably, doesn't disagree with Junior Brother, and only thinks that the latter should adopt a different tone if he wishes to save himself.*

Much to the Duchess's dismay, the judge starts to pronounce the death sentence for Junior Brother. But before he can finish his statement, the Duke intervenes, instructing that the verdict will be deferred—and that Junior Brother should be merely imprisoned instead. Junior Brother is led away, and everybody else exits apart from the Duchess.

*The Duke is an authoritarian power, deciding life and death on a whim. He could easily free Junior Brother and appease the Duchess, but he cares little for what she feels or thinks, further alienating her from him and demonstrating her own powerlessness.*

The Duchess is furious with the Duke for not freeing Junior Brother. She vows to get her own back on him by "cuckolding" him—that is, having an affair. At this moment, Spurio re-enters the action. The Duchess expresses her attraction to Spurio, which so far has not been reciprocated.

*The one shred of power that the Duchess does have is sex. Like the other women in the play, sex is the only thing that she—sometimes—has a say in. To be cuckolded was considered embarrassing for a man, especially for one in a position of power. The Duchess wants to double down on that humiliation by choosing the Duke's own son—who himself exists only because of uncontrollable lust—as her partner.*

Spurio greets the Duchess, who makes it obvious that she wants a kiss on her "lip" and not her "hand." Spurio objects that this would be immoral as she is his father's wife. The Duchess tries to persuade Spurio to think otherwise, pointing out that the Duke paid little attention to morals in fathering a bastard child and denying Spurio the usual rewards of being the son of a monarch.

*Spurio shows a brief moment of moral concern, quickly eroded by the Duchess' reasonable argument that the Duke has hardly shown him the same courtesy.*

Spurio becomes increasingly angry toward the Duke for his bastardy, and assents to have an illicit affair with the Duchess in order get "the vengeance that my birth was wrapped in." They kiss, and the Duchess departs. Spurio says that despite his decision he hates the Duchess—as well as her sons, Lussurioso, and the Duke. He thinks his plan for revenge is logical: "For indeed a bastard by nature should make cuckolds, Because he is the son of a cuckold-maker." He exits.

*Already the audience sees three or four characters looking for revenge—the play lives up to his name. Like Vindice, Spurio is interested in the particular nature of his revenge. It seems especially appropriate to him that his revenge should involve acting on lust, because his very existence is due to similar behavior by the Duke. There are, then, parallels between Spurio's conception and his vengeance. Spurio's comment implies that he was conceived when the Duke had sex with a married woman, thus making the Duke a "cuckold-maker."*

## ACT 1, SCENE 3

Vindice and Hippolito enter, with Vindice disguised as "Piato" the pander. Both are impressed with the convincing quality of Vindice's disguise. Lussurioso enters, and Hippolito introduces him to Piato. He thanks Hippolito with some money before asking to be left alone with the pander.

*Vindice finds it easy to play the role of another man because there is little of his own identity left—his only aim in life is revenge. By pretending to be a pimp, he can exploit Lussurioso's lust as a weakness.*

Vindice (as Piato) boasts of his achievements as a pander, telling Lussurioso he has been "witness to the surrenders of a thousand virgins." Lussurioso is impressed by his knowledge of "strange lust." Lussurioso explains that he has a task for Vindice, which, if carried out well, will be handsomely rewarded.

*Lussurioso is whipped into a kind of climax, recognizing Piato's tales of lusty accomplishment as evidence of a kindred spirit. It's clear that Lussurioso wishes to use power and wealth to satisfy his sexual obsessions.*

Lussurioso tells Vindice he is "past my depth in lust, And I must swim or drown." He wants Vindice to procure for him a virgin "not far from court" who has so far rejected all of his advances (including offers of jewels). He hopes that Vindice can finally persuade her to agree to his sexual advances.

*Underneath Lussurioso's language is a subtle gesture towards sexual fluids. His specific request for a virgin implies that it's not just sex he wants—he wishes to be the one who corrupts women for the first time, both as a demonstration of his power and heightening of his sexual interest. Not once does he consider whether women reciprocate his lust for them.*

Vindice is eager to help Lussurioso and asks after the identity of the virgin. Much to his shock, it turns out to be his sister, Castiza. Lussurioso tells Vindice that if she continues to reject him Vindice should try to bribe her mother (Gratiana). Vindice vows to carry out the task well, and Lussurioso exits. Vindice rages about what he has to do. He restates his determination to kill Lussurioso, but also use his disguise to "try the faith" of his sister and mother. He exits.

*Vindice's efforts for revenge are already putting him in complicated ethical positions. If he refuses to persuade his sister to accept Lussurioso's advances, he gives the game away and undermines his disguise; on the other hand, he risks corrupting his sister and making her lose the one thing she has—her chastity. Lussurioso's task for Vindice now makes him a prime target for Vindice's quest for revenge.*

## ACT 1, SCENE 4

Antonio enters with another nobleman and Hippolito. Antonio's wife has committed suicide by poison after her rape at the hands of Junior Brother. Antonio, distraught, reasons that she must have killed herself because of shame—he found her with her hand in a book over the words *"Melius virtute mori, quam per dedecus vivere."*

*Junior Brother's actions reveal tragic consequences. The Latin translates to "it is better to die in virtue than live in disgrace." Antonio's wife felt she would never be able to move on from the rape and that death was the only option—and, in a way, her only expression of power. Her suicide makes his earlier defense of his actions as natural all the more incomprehensible.*

Hippolito gives Antonio his heartfelt condolences, which Antonio accepts gratefully. Antonio explains the circumstances of the rape. It was during recent "revels"; Junior Brother pushed Antonio's wife into "a throng of panders" and "fed the ravenous vulture of his lust."

*Here, lust is linked to hedonism. Antonio's description emphasizes the animalistic behavior of Junior Brother and the devaluation of his wife—amidst the "revels," she was nothing more than prey for predators.*

Antonio vows to avenge his wife's death, and asks the other men present to commit to this cause as well. They offer their support in his desire for revenge. Antonio praises the chastity of his wife, and all exit.

*Interestingly this is the last the audience hears about Antonio's desire to avenge his wife's death—Junior Brother meets his end in a different way. It does, however, highlight the lack of faith in the judicial system and heighten the dramatic pressure of the play more generally.*

## ACT 2, SCENE 1

Castiza enters, lamenting the way in which sin, rather than honor, seems to be rewarded by the world. Her servant announces that a man has arrived to speak with her. Vindice comes in, disguised as Piato the pander.

*In the world that Castiza occupies, chastity is the only source of value women possess. It's no wonder, then, that she wishes to preserve it.*

Vindice gives Castiza a letter from Lussurioso and is swiftly rewarded with a smack on the ear—Castiza says she had promised herself she would do so to the next person the Duke's son sent "to be his sins' attorney." She instructs Vindice to tell Lussurioso "my honour shall have a rich name, / When several harlots shall share his with shame."

*It's clear that this is far from the first advance that Lussurioso has made on Castiza. Her rejection of him gives her a small but tangible power over her world, as she resists being made into a mere target for his lust. Her law-related imagery harks back to corruption of legal authority witnessed in the Junior Brother trial scene earlier. Equating her honor with her name links her chastity specifically with her sense of identity—if she casually gives that up, she sacrifices who she is.*

Castiza exits, and Vindice praises her for her chastity and honor. Gratiana, Castiza and Vindice's mother, enters. Vindice, still in disguise, tries to persuade Gratiana to change Castiza's mind about Lussurioso, tempting her with the promise of increased wealth and status. Gratiana is initially hesitant, calling Vindice's request a "most unnatural task," but he eventually wins her over. In separate asides to the audience, Gratiana blames her womanhood as the reason why she is so influenceable, and Vindice expresses his disappointment in his mother's corruption.

*Following Lussurioso's suggestion, Vindice attempts to manipulate his own mother. At this point he seems far from achieving his revenge, instead deeply embroiled in the ethically troublesome act of deceiving his own family. Acting as Piato the pander (pimp), he shows the simple equation: women can trade their sex for money and power. The younger and purer they are, the more potential leverage they have in that transaction. That's why Gratiana wants a piece of the proverbial pie—she knows it's worth a lot, materially speaking. She also adds her voice to the general low opinion of women and their lack of moral strength throughout the play.*

Vindice gives Gratiana a bribe to pressure her further, which she says "enchant[s] our sex." She promises to convince Castiza to give up her chastity for Lussurioso. Just at this moment, Castiza re-enters. Gratiana tells her "virginity is paradise, locked up" and attempts to persuade Castiza to stop denying Lussurioso's advances. Castiza is disappointed, asking where her mother has gone.

*Gratiana implies that women are easily swayed by gifts. Her statement that virginity is an imprisoned paradise is a disorientating nod towards the book of Genesis—except that in the Bible, it is* sin *that prohibits further access to paradise; Gratiana's point is that* chastity *does. This, of course, is not what she truly believes—it's just her clumsy attempt to manipulate Castiza.*

Vindice tries to get Castiza imagine the lavish lifestyle she could have at court if only she'd change her mind. Gratiana agrees, but Castiza is infuriated. She exits, telling Vindice (still dressed as Piato) to "perish in thy office." In an aside, Vindice praises Castiza's "angelic" virtue. Gratiana promises that Lussurioso will be received well if he comes to their house. She exits; Vindice leaves too, wondering why "heaven" doesn't "**strike** the sins" of the earth, and blames all "damnation" on "gold and women."

*Vindice tries to appeal to the same materialistic instincts that won Gratiana over, but Castiza resists. Vindice appeals for divine intervention, but none is forthcoming. He blames all wrong in the world on gold and women—unfair firstly because it equates women to material possession, and secondly because it completely overlooks any male role in the world's problems.*

## ACT 2, SCENE 2

Lussurioso and Hippolito enter, with the former praising the latter's judgment in finding him a good pander. Vindice enters, and Hippolito leaves the two of them alone on Lussurioso's instruction.

*Lussurioso is lusty, but he is also dim-witted, falling for every part of Vindice and Hippolito's increasingly convoluted plan.*

Lussurioso desperately requests news about whether Vindice has broken Castiza's resolve: "Hast thou beguiled her of salvation, / And rubbed hell o'er with honey? Is she a woman?" Vindice explains that Castiza is still resistant, but that Gratiana may be able to persuade her otherwise—and that Gratiana has said she would be happy to receive Lussurioso at their house.

*Another unedifying image that mixes suggestively sexual imagery (honey) with biblical content (hell), contributing further to the sense of moral destabilization and the absence of religious authority. Lussurioso himself links the idea of salvation with chastity, backing up the idea that a woman's honor is the most significant virtue/power that she holds.*

Lussurioso goes to leave, and Vindice wonders whether he should kill him there and then. He decides he'd rather "pierce him to his face" when Lussurioso's "veins are swelled with lust." Vindice deplores his mother but vows to "guard" his sister's "honour."

*Vindice, alone with Lussurioso, has the perfect opportunity to kill him—but this wouldn't be the poetic and poignant revenge that he seeks (and also might disrupt his plans for his main target, the Duke). "Pierce" and "swollen" pile further sexual imagery on what has come before. Vindice sees his sister's honor as his to guard, reinforcing the sense of male dominance in the play's world.*

Hippolito comes back with news—he has heard about the affair between Spurio and the Duchess. Spurio enters with his servants; Vindice and Hippolito hide in order to eavesdrop. Spurio learns from his servant that Lussurioso is about to travel to have his way with Castiza, and vows to kill Lussurioso in the act.

*Word gets around quickly at the court, especially when there's an illicit affair involved. Spurio adds another revenge motive to the mix. Like Vindice, Spurio has a particular way he wants to kill Lussurioso: while the latter is having sex. This is one of numerous instances in which lust and death are closely linked together.*

Spurio and his servants exit. Vindice relishes the thought of the Duke being made a "cuckold." Lussurioso comes back, requesting Piato's (Vindice's fake identity) presence on his trip to Castiza. Vindice and Hippolito toy with the idea of killing Lussurioso immediately, but instead inform him of Spurio and the Duchess's sexual relationship.

*A cuckold is a man whose wife has had an affair, considered an especially embarrassing status in 16th/17th centuries. Here is also another example of the deferring of revenge. This time it's because Hippolito and Vindice hope that, in informing Lussurioso of the Duchess and Spurio's affair, they will further destabilize the power structure of the court. It also distracts Lussurioso from visiting Castiza. There is an anarchic streak in their actions, born of Vindice's sole purpose in life—revenge.*

## ACT 2, SCENE 3

Vindice (still in disguise) leads Lussurioso to the Duchess's chamber. Lussurioso draws his sword, hoping to kill Spurio, but discovers that the Duchess is in bed with the Duke instead. The Duke frantically begs for his life, saying he has days' worth of prayers to ensure he goes to heaven.

*The Duke reacts cowardly to the intruder, whom he doesn't initially realize is his own son. It's telling that, when confronted with the end of his life, the Duke feels he ought to pray. The fact that he has days' worth of prayers to make firstly suggests the sheer number of misdeeds he has committed through his life, and secondly that, like sex and justice, he sees the access to a good afterlife as essentially transactional—he believes he can exchange prayers for heaven.*

The Duke realizes that Lussurioso is his assailant; the Duke's guards seize Lussurioso. Some noblemen, Ambitioso, and Supervacuo enter. The Duke and the Duchess express their surprise that Lussurioso had come to assassinate his own father. Sensing it best that they get out of there, Vindice and Hippolito make a swift exit.

*Lussurioso, of course, hasn't come to kill his father, but rather to kill Spurio. The lack of bloodshed here heightens the audience's anticipation for its later arrival.*

Spurio enters with his servants. Lussurioso tries to tell the Duke about the Duchess's affair with Spurio but is silenced and taken to prison. On his way out, Lussurioso pleads with Ambitioso and Supervacuo to secure his freedom, which they pretend to commit to.

*The Duke demonstrates his power in administering justice. Ambitioso and Supervacuo live up to their names—they're only interested in trying to find a route to power.*

Ambitioso and Supervacuo speak to the Duke. Though their intention on the surface is to bring about Lussurioso's release, they deliberately try to subconsciously influence the Duke to punish Lussurioso as harshly as possible, telling him that that's what others would have done. The Duke instructs them to go and tell the judges, "He shall die." As they leave, the Duke makes clear that he sees through Ambitioso and Supervacuo's power-hungry scheming.

*The play's plot starts to complicate as vendettas between different characters become increasingly apparent. The Duke doesn't really want to kill Lussurioso because he is his only true son and heir (Spurio is a bastard and the others are the Duchess' children, not his). The Duke's directive to tell the judges only that a nonspecific "he" be punished to death will result in the misunderstanding that leads to Junior Brother's death.*

With Ambitioso and Supervacuo gone, the Duke tells his noblemen that he will pardon Lussurioso. Left alone on stage, the Duke reasons that he ought to forgive those sins that are less grave than those he has committed himself throughout his life. He talks of his lustiness, and his punishment for those who don't give in to his sexual demands: "Many a beauty have I turned to poison / In the denial, covetous of all."

*This is a rare insight into the psyche of the Duke, revealing a nihilistic admission of his evil acts. The exploitation of beauty—that is, acting on his lust—is more important to him than life itself. The mention of poison relates to Gloriana, Vindice's deceased wife, but also implies that she isn't the only one he has murdered for the same reasons. It also foreshadows his own death (and its method).*

## ACT 3, SCENE 1

Ambitioso and Supervacuo discuss taking the Duke's order for death directly to the prison guards (rather than the judges) to bring about Lussurioso's execution more quickly—and in doing so, increase their own power in the court. They also plan to "trick and wile" Junior Brother out of his imprisonment.

*The order is actually non-specific, equally applicable to Lussurioso or Junior Brother, who are both currently imprisoned. Whether this is a deliberate trick by the Duke or just the product of Ambitioso and Supervacuo's ignorance is unclear.*

## ACT 3, SCENE 2

On the Duke's orders, Lussurioso is freed from prison. He thanks the noblemen who have come to retrieve him, and calls "liberty" a "sweet and heavenly dame!"

*Lussurioso's image of liberty as a dame shows that he always women on his mind.*

## ACT 3, SCENE 3

Ambitioso and Supervacuo meet with the prison officers and present the order for the execution of "the Duke's son." The two brothers feign sadness and regret for Lussurioso's impending death and ask that he is killed in private rather than with a public audience.

*As the order doesn't specifically say Lussurioso—who has already been released by the Duke—the only person it could logically apply to from the prison officers' point of view is Junior Brother. Of course, this is exactly the opposite of what Ambitioso and Supervacuo intended. They are too hasty in their search for power to notice the mistake.*

## ACT 3, SCENE 4

Junior Brother sits in prison, frustrated at his situation. He asks the prison keeper whether there is any news from his brothers, Ambitioso and Supervacuo. The keeper hands him a letter, which Junior Brother dismisses as mere "paper comforts." The letter tells him to expect a "trick" that will soon get him out of there.

*This makes clear where Ambitioso and Supervacuo's true loyalties lie—with Junior Brother. The use of "trick" is an ironic joke—the "trick" will be on the brothers when they accidentally have the wrong person executed.*

The keeper briefly exits before returning with "bad news," saying he has been "discharged" of Junior Brother. The prisoner thinks this means he's about to be released, but prison officers enter and make it clear that they have orders from the Duke to execute him there and then. Junior Brother tries to argue, but the officers tell him he is better of using his last words to say his prayers.

*Junior Brother is truly baffled, having only just read a letter that was meant to reassure him that he would soon be released. The keeper's use of the word "discharged" is a euphemism—he means that once Junior Brother is killed he will no longer be under the keeper's care. Again, there is the suggestion that a person's final moments in life are best spent petitioning God for leniency.*

The officers tell Junior Brother that his own brothers delivered the Duke's judgment to them, confusing Junior Brother, who says he is waiting for "trick" to get him released. The officers say they are just following orders, and that Ambitioso and Supervacuo had seemed genuinely sad to deliver the Duke's decision. Junior Brother's says his last words: "My fault was sweet sport, which the world approves; I die for that which every woman loves."

*Ambitioso and Supervacuo had been pretending to be sad—but at Lussurioso's, not Junior Brother's, impending execution. Junior Brother is unrepentant to the last, thinking nothing of his rape which resulted in Antonio's wife's suicide. He feels that his actions were nothing but "sweet sport," and that everyone—including women!—loves that sport (sex), not drawing any distinction between consensual sex and rape. Most audiences will probably feel that justice has been accidentally administered in Junior Brother's case.*

## ACT 3, SCENE 5

Vindice, still in disguise, enters with Hippolito, who is carrying a torch. Vindice is clearly excited about something, and Hippolito wants to know what. Vindice explains that the Duke has asked him—or "Piato" the pander—to find a woman for him. Vindice has arranged for the Duke to meet this woman tonight, away from the "eyes of the court," at which point Vindice will kill the Duke and make him bear witness to Spurio and the Duchess's affair.

*Vindice is excited because he can sense that he is close to achieving his aim—not just revenge, but his particular brand of revenge. Vindice exploits the Duke's lusty immorality, which allows him to orchestrate a situation in which the Duke is unguarded and vulnerable.*

Hippolito is impressed by Vindice's plan and asks where the woman is. Vindice tells him that this is the best part of the plan—the "lady" is **Gloriana's skull**, dressed up. Vindice gleefully explains he will place poison on her lips—or where her lips would be—that will kill the Duke when he kisses her. The dying Duke will then die witnessing Spurio and the Duchess together—Vindice has arranged the Duke's sexual liaison to take place at the same location as their illicit affair.

*Vindice's role as Piato, a dealer in lust, has allowed him to construct the type of revenge scenario that seems to him most appropriate for the Duke's crime. Vindice's plan shows that his obsession with revenge is more important to him than respecting the skull of Gloriana. On the other hand, his plan could be said to posthumously empower Gloriana, granting her the final, fatal act in the plan for vengeance.*

Vindice and Hippolito hear the Duke approaching, and Vindice instructs his brother to hide with the **skull**. The Duke arrives with an entourage that he duly dismisses, instructing its members not to tell anyone at court of his location.

*The Duke dismisses his entourage so that he can engage in his lustful behavior in private. But he also makes himself vulnerable by instructing the group to keep his location secret.*

Vindice, still disguised as Piato, explains to the Duke that the woman he has found for him is a "country lady, a little bashful at first" with something of a "grave look" about her. He implores the Duke to go in strong for the first kiss and that she will then quickly lose her shyness. The Duke says that's what he loves best anyway.

*Vindice seems to revel in seeing his plan come to fruition, even making jokes to himself ("grave look"). He describes the "woman" as from the country because this explains her silence—she is intimidated by the Duke's power and prestige. Of course, that's all a lie. The Duke's comment shows him to be similar to Lussurioso, in that, to them, the more virginal and pure a woman the more attractive she becomes.*

Vindice tells Hippolito to back away with the torch and give him the **skull**. Vindice moves the skull towards the Duke, who plants it with a kiss. The Duke instantly realizes that something is terribly wrong and falls to the floor. Hippolito moves the torch back towards them.

*The way in which Vindice poisons the Duke is darkly comic and also suggestive of the way lust is linked to death (by corrupting the "soul" or moral integrity of an individual). The Duke dies at the hands of his own lust—and in poisoned by the skull representative of death itself.*

Vindice gleefully reveals to the Duke the identity of the **skull** (that is, Gloriana). Hippolito stamps on the Duke as the poison kicks in. Vindice then reveals his true identity to the Duke, and Hippolito charges the Duke with causing their father's death too.

*This is the moment that Vindice has been waiting for—the big reveal. It's not enough for him to kill the Duke; he needs the Duke to know it's him, and that he's dying because of what the Duke did to Gloriana.*

The Duke's tongue starts to dissolve from the poison. Vindice isn't finished with the Duke yet, however, telling him that before he dies he will become a "renowned, high and mighty cuckold" by witnessing his bastard son, Spurio, and the Duchess together. The Duke pleads with them not to force him to see that. Vindice and Hippolito place their daggers on the Duke, telling him he will get stabbed if he makes any noises.

*What happens to the Duke tongue is symbolic of him having his sexual power taken away from him—tongues have sexual connotations, and in this case the Duke's tongue also carries the suggestion of the biblical serpent from the book of Genesis. Forcing the Duke to witness Spurio and the Duchess will make him confront the fact that he presides over a kingdom of lust and, most importantly, intensifies his sense of powerlessness.*

Spurio and the Duchess enter, kissing. The Duchess says, "there's no pleasure sweet but it is sinful." The Duke can't help but make a sound, so Vindice stabs him to death. Exiting the stage, Vindice says to Hippolito that "the dukedom wants a head" and that they should "cut down" everyone that tries to claim it.

*Lust, pleasure and immorality are linked together again. Vindice's comment shows that his original desire for a revenge has morphed into a general death-wish, primarily for the others at court but, deep down, for himself too.*

## ACT 3, SCENE 6

Ambitioso and Supervacuo enter, bragging of the way they orchestrated Lussurioso's execution. They plot to bring about Junior Brother's release, with Ambitioso saying he has a "trick" to help. At this moment, an officer enters with a head covered by a cloth.

*Pride comes before a fall here, as Ambitioso and Supervacuo have yet to realize that they unwittingly ordered Junior Brother's execution, not Lussurioso's. The head brought in is of the latter and is another stark reminder of death. In its initial anonymity, the head also symbolizes the way in which life is devalued throughout the play, displaced either by lust or the quest for revenge.*

The officer informs Ambitioso and Supervacuo that he has brought them the "bleeding head," which they assume to be Lussurioso's. They feign solemn sadness and ask questions about the execution.

*The audience, of course, knows the identity of the head, and can enjoy the suspense before the brothers' realization.*

Lussurioso suddenly appears on stage, much to Ambitioso and Supervacuo's surprise. They pretend to have aided his release by convincing the Duke to be gentle in his judgment. Lussurioso thanks them and exits.

*Lussurioso's appearance is highly comic—to the brothers it's as if he has just come back from the dead. This also further demonstrates Lussurioso's dim-witted obliviousness to what's actually happening.*

Ambitioso and Supervacuo ask the officer to let them see the head. It dawns on them that they had not been specific about which brother to kill, and that the officer had assumed they meant Junior Brother. They look at the head in horror, before vowing revenge on "all."

*Revenge reaches its ridiculous peak in the brothers' vow to get their own back on "all." This sets the play up for a gory finish.*

## ACT 4, SCENE 1

Lussurioso and Hippolito enter. Lussurioso is angry with Hippolito for providing him with Piato (Vindice) the pander, who has proved to be a "knave." Lussurioso recounts how Piato's misinformation led him to burst in on the Duke and the Duchess in bed, thinking he would find the "incestuous sweets" of Spurio and the Duchess instead.

*Lussurioso is also angry that Piato hasn't delivered on his promise to procure Castiza for him. "Sweets" contributes to the sense that women are something for men to enjoy at their leisure.*

Vindice (still as Piato) comes in but is sent away immediately by Lussurioso for his misinformation about Spurio and the Duchess. Lussurioso asks Hippolito if he has a brother, and, learning that he does, requests to meet him. Lussurioso implies that he has a task for Hippolito's brother, much to Hippolito's secret amusement.

*Lussurioso continues to play into the brother's hands, having not recognized Piato's true identity. This provides the brothers with further opportunity for revenge.*

Hippolito exits to fetch Vindice. In the meantime, Lussurioso reveals that the proposed task for Vindice is to kill Piato the pander (who is also Vindice). Some noblemen enter, asking whether Lussurioso has seen the Duke recently. Answering that he hasn't, Lussurioso and the noblemen wonder where the Duke has gone.

*The Duke, of course, is already dead. Nobody knows, though, because of the secrecy which the Duke himself imposed on his movements. Vindice can't kill Piato because that would mean killing himself—so the brothers will have to come up with further deception.*

## ACT 4, SCENE 2

Hippolito and Vindice enter, with the latter no longer in his Piato disguise. To Vindice's surprise, Hippolito informs him that Lussurioso wants to meet him and offer him some "employment." They agree Vindice should change his voice and demeanor so that the Duke's son won't suspect Vindice is one and the same as Piato. Vindice decides to adopt a "melancholy" persona.

*Vindice's identity has been so eroded that even when he plans to be himself it is under the veil of a different personality. This shows once more that revenge is the sole motive in his life, with everything else sacrificed to bring it about.*

Lussurioso enters and meets Vindice. Lussurioso asks Vindice what has "made thee so melancholy?" Vindice improvises, explaining that it is his work in the legal profession that has made him depressed. Vindice says he has painted a picture based on his experiences and presents it to Lussurioso. It's of "a usuring father, to be boiling in hell, and his son and heir with a whore dancing over him." Lussurioso says the rich men of the court would never like it.

*Vindice's improvisation about the picture is another example of his relish in dangling the truth in front of his targets. The picture itself is a comment on court society, one which Lussurioso disproves of because of its unflinching accuracy. The picture is also a prediction of Lussurioso's own death—he is the Duke's "son and heir." "Usuring" refers to usury, the practice of money lending at unreasonable rates for personal profit.*

Lussurioso asks Vindice if he is short of money and gives him some gold; Vindice feigns excited gratitude. Lussurioso explains that Vindice can earn more if he will carry out a task for him.

*Lussurioso attempts to manipulate Vindice using the only way he knows how—money. The general sense of corruption throughout the play is a big factor in why Vindice has to take revenge into his own hands.*

Lussurioso wants Vindice to kill Piato. He dishonestly recounts how Piato tried to set him up with Castiza, offering "jewels to corrupt your virgin sister." Lussurioso says he refused, knowing her to be "chaste" and that he's never wished "any virgin harm." Placing all the blame on Piato, Lussurioso continues that the pander then tried to bribe Gratiana too.

*Lussurioso is completely dishonest about Piato, unaware that the pander was actually Vindice. The audience knows that he's wished many virgins harm, contrary to his claim to be an honorable man. This adds further reason for Vindice to want to kill him.*

Vindice and Hippolito praise Lussurioso's honorability, as Lussurio explains how he beat Piato up in anger at his actions. Vindice, unable to believe the audacity of the Duke's son, asks in an aside: "Has not heaven an ear? Is all the **lightning** wasted?" Vindice and Hippolito agree they had better kill this "Piato", and Lussurioso says he is "about the palace." Hippolito goes off to find the pander.

*Vindice's comment emphasizes that the world of a play is devoid of divine intervention and has no sense of justice or fairness.*

Lussurioso asks Vindice his name, which he then praises on account of it meaning "revenger." Lussurioso says Vindice "shouldst be valiant / And kill thine enemies." Hippolito returns, saying he spotted the drunken Piato. Lussurioso leaves, telling Vindice on his way out that if Vindice kills Piato he will "never fall" again.

*Vindice's true identity is right there in front of Lussurioso, but he fails to see it. Lussurioso's advice is darkly ironic—he's essentially imploring Vindice to kill him.*

Vindice rails against Lussurioso, aghast at how anyone could be so "impudent and wicked." He again appeals to the heavens: "Is there no **thunder** left, or is't kept up / In stock for heavier vengeance?" At this point, thunder sounds.

*The sounding of thunder does not herald divine intervention, but in a blackly comic way highlights the vacuum of religion in the play. It does, however, suggest the impending "storm" of the final scene.*

Knowing Vindice would have to kill himself to kill Piato, Vindice and Hippolito hatch a plan: to dress up the Duke's body in the Piato disguise, making it look like the Pander has killed the Duke and stolen his clothes to aid his escape. They agree that this is a cunning plan. They then decide to visit Gratiana—in order to "conjure that base devil out of our mother."

*Here is further use of disguise in the play, and another transgression across the border of the living and the dead. Just as Gloriana's skull helped bring about the Duke's death, the Duke's body will aid the brothers in killing Lussurioso. But first they wish to restore their mother's sense of morality.*

## ACT 4, SCENE 3

The Duchess and Spurio enter, arm in arm and behaving "lasciviously." Supervacuo runs after them with his sword, but Ambitioso stops him. The Duchess and Spurio exit, confident their affair will not be discovered. Ambitioso tells his brother that there will come a better opportunity to put a stop to the Duchess and Spurio's behavior. Ambitioso says "most women have small waist the world throughout; / But their desires are thousand miles about."

*Another example of deferred revenge, which here sets up the play's bloody finale. Ambitioso mimics Junior Brother's earlier view that women are corrupted by their own desires, ignoring the fact that most of the desiring at court seems to be on the part of men.*

## ACT 4, SCENE 4

Vindice and Hippolito enter with daggers in their hands, dragging Gratiana. She is distraught, oblivious to why they are treating her this way. She asks them, "am not I your mother?" Vindice spits back that she has lost that title, because "in that shell of mother breeds a bawd."

*Gratiana doesn't seem like their mother anymore—because Piato (Vindice) corrupted her earlier in the play by persuading her to prostitute Castiza. That is, she isn't the virtuous mother the brothers once thought she was. But it was Vindice, playing the role of Piato the pimp, who enticed Gratiana with bribery. In a way, then, he is guilty of the same behavior as her. A "bawd" is a madam—an older woman who manages younger prostitutes.*

Vindice asks whether Gratiana had talked with a man sent by the Duke's son, and if that man had convinced her to "work our sister [Castiza] to his [Lussurioso's] lust?" Gratiana denies the charge, but Vindice reveals that he was that man—Piato. She kneels, weeping, saying it was Vindice's way with words that "bewitched" her.

*The play here presents a troublesome moral puzzle: is Gratiana guilty for accepting money and jewels from Piato in exchange for pressuring Castiza, or is Vindice guilty for disguising himself as Piato and doing his best to manipulate his own mother? Either way, Gratiana is portrayed as weak. It's worth noting that Gratiana's pose—kneeling—has religious connotations as a position for prayer. This ties in with the idea presented earlier that people need to pray before they die in order to give themselves the best chance at salvation in the afterlife.*


Vindice and Hippolito put away their daggers, satisfied that Gratiana has shown herself to be truly repentant. Gratiana appeals to the heavens to cleanse her through her tears: "To weep is to our sex naturally given; / But to weep truly, that's a gift from heaven." Vindice and Hippolito kiss their mother, with Vindice saying "honest women are so […] rare."

*Here Vindice and Hippolito once again act as the custodians of justice, forcing their own mother to confront her wrongdoings and reducing her to a gibbering wreck. Their behavior does seem excessive, highlighting the way in which their overall project has affected their own psyches. Gratiana's words make a further contribution to the idea of women's weakness running throughout the play, but her notion that to "weep truly" is a "gift from heaven" makes a subtle case for a world with more empathy than has been present thus far. Vindice reminds the audience that he thinks little of women.*

Vindice and Hippolito leave; Gratiana wonders how she was ever able to entertain the idea of prostituting her own daughter. Castiza then comes in. She appears to have changed her mind, now willing to do as Gratiana had wished—"to prostitute my breast to the duke's son."

*Gratiana's change of heart seems sincere—otherwise she'd probably admit it wasn't in an aside to the audience.*

Gratiana pleads with Castiza not to sacrifice her chastity and honor. She explains that she has "recovered" from her previous errors and is distraught that Castiza has taken her earlier words to heart. Castiza kisses her mother, explaining that she is still honest and chaste—she was only testing her. Castiza describes "virgin honour" as a "crystal tower." Gratiana thanks Castiza for saving her.

*Like her brothers, Castiza gives Gratiana a chance to repent—but her method is far less aggressive. Gratiana proves that her redemption is genuine, restoring the previous mother-daughter relationship to its full worth. The "tower" imagery links the idea of chastity to power and has connotations of firmness and "standing tall."*

## ACT 5, SCENE 1

Hippolito and Vindice enter, carrying the Duke's body dressed in Vindice's "Piato" disguise. They set the body to look like a man in a drunken stupor. Hippolito tells Vindice that Lussurioso will not come alone, and that therefore the best chance for revenge will come later; this annoys Vindice as he'd like to kill Lussurioso as soon as he discovers that the body of Piato is that of the Duke's.

*Vindice's hurriedness is not so much a product of wanting to kill Lussurioso immediately as it is of him thinking that this particular opportunity represents the kind of poetic, poignant revenge that Vindice desires.*

Lussurioso enters, greeting Vindice and Hippolito. He instructs them to kill Piato. They ask for his assurance that he will protect them for prosecution or retaliation, which he gives. They stab the corpse of the Duke.

*This is another example of black humor in the play, surely making audiences then and now feel uncomfortable. Thanks to their clever scheming, Vindice and Hippolito can stab the Duke in front of his son without any repercussions. They're not only succeeding in terms of their revenge, then, but also in demonstrating their intellectual superiority to the other characters (for now at least).*

Lussurioso approaches the corpse, and suddenly realizes that it's his father, the Duke. Lussurioso buys into Vindice and Hippolito's plan, thinking that Piato must have killed the Duke and swapped outfits to aid his getaway. Lussurioso notices that the body is cold, before asking the brothers not to tell anyone about his murderous plans with them.

*Lussurioso should be suspicious that the body is cold, which indicates the Duke has been dead for a while. That doesn't align with Hippolito and Vindice's claim that the man was in a drunken stupor. Vindice and Hippolito's plan is still working however: Lussurioso is more concerned with covering his own back than the fact that his father has been murdered, and so doesn't think too deeply about what must have happened.*

Lussurioso calls in his servants and asks them to "be witnesses of a strange spectacle." In an aside to the audience, Vindice notes how "wit" can help a revenger to be the least culpable man around when a murder is discovered. Lussurioso notices that the Duke's lips are "gnawn with poison."

*Vindice makes an interesting point, which is that his scheming has been so successful that he can hide in plain sight even though he is the Duke's murderer.*

As word of the Duke's death gets around, more nobles, guards, and court attendees enter, along with Ambitioso, Supervacuo, Spurio, and the Duchess. Ambitioso wonders "over what roof hangs this prodigious **comet** / In deadly fire?" Supervacuo, Ambitioso and (separately from those two) Spurio privately express their gladness at the Duke's death.

*The play builds towards its climax, with all of the characters grouping together prior to making their revenge motives public. The stage directions don't indicate a comet in the sky (whereas they do in the last scene), implying that Amibitioso is probably talking metaphorically, linking the symbol of comet as prophecy of doom with the turmoil going on at the court.*

Lussurioso summons the nobleman who had earlier said that the Duke was away from court, and sends him off for execution, falsely blaming him for the Duke's death. He instructs some of the other noblemen to search for Piato.

*Lussurioso does everything he can to stop anyone suspecting him of any involvement in the Duke's death, or of any generally unusual behavior. He uses the nobleman as a scapegoat, and to make it seem like he is taking charge of the situation—which he has to do, given he is the next in line to the dukedom.*

One of the nobles points out that, with the Duke's death, Lussurioso is now ruler. Lussurioso pretends to be anguished by "griefs," but in an aside remarks "Welcome, sweet titles!" He and the noblemen agree that now is the time "prepare for revels" to welcome Lussurioso to his new supremacy. In another aside, he vows to exile the Duchess. Lussurioso, the Duchess, and the nobles exit.

*Reflecting the lack of morality or empathy among most of the characters in the play, Lussurioso is secretly delighted that his father has died. His use of the word "sweet" links his newfound power to sex (having earlier referred to the Duchess and Spurio's affair as "incestuous sweets"). Instead of grieving for his father, his first thought is to organize a party. For the audience, Lussurioso's behavior heightens the darkly comic sense that his bloody fate is just around the corner.*

Vindice and Hippolito excitedly anticipate the final stage of their revenge, before leaving. Spurio, too, exits expressing his secret desire to kill Lussurioso. Supervacuo and Ambitioso briefly discuss a plan to kill Spurio, intending to use the costumes worn during the "revels" for cover. Supervacuo leaves; Ambitioso lets slip that he wants to kill Supervacuo too, ensuring the dukedom for himself.

*Almost every character in the play wants to kill one or more of the others by this point. Again, Vindice and Hippolito's plan depends on the use of disguise and deception.*

## ACT 5, SCENE 2

Vindice and Hippolito enter with other lords. Vindice incites them to "blast this villainous dukedom vexed with sin." The lords agree—"our wrongs are such, / We cannot justly be revenged too much." Vindice instructs the others of his plan, which is that they all attend the "revels" dressed in masks and costumes before setting upon Lussurioso and his cohorts with their swords. He wants to strike them "in midst of all their joys." The others wholeheartedly agree with his plan.

*There are a few instances in the play when violence takes place, or threatens to take place, at moments in which the target characters are in the "midst of joys." For example, Antonio's wife was killed at a party, and Lussurioso wanted to kill Spurio whilst the latter was having sex with the Duchess. This, then, further links desire, pleasure, death, and sin, underlining the lack of moral certainty in the world of the play. It's also worth noting that, with the Duke dead, Vindice and Hippolito are able to speak more freely and publically about their intense hatred for the court.*

## ACT 5, SCENE 3

Lussurioso is crowned Duke, and celebratory music plays. He and three noblemen sit down to a banquet as a "**blazing star**" appears in the sky. They exchange niceties.

*The blazing star is a comet, a traditional harbinger of doom often feared during the Elizabethen and Jacobean eras. Little has been done in the play to create a tangible sense of a connection between the heavens and the earth, but as the action is now drawing to a close—and the venomous revenge plots are not yet resolved—the comet increases the sense of impending violence.*

In an aside, Lussurioso states that he has banished the Duchess, and plans to kill Spurio, Supervacuo, and Ambitioso. Lussurioso looks to the **star**, thinking it to be a bad omen—though at least he has already been crowned, he reasons. The nobles tell him not to worry and that they foresee a long reign of sixty, eighty, or a even a hundred years or more.

*Lussurioso is engaging in wishful thinking, firstly in his plan to kill his stepbrothers, and secondly in thinking that the fact he has been crowned means that he has escaped any horrible fate that might have come his way. The nobles implicitly agree, praising him disingenuously by stating they expect his reign to last up to a hundred years (extremely unlikely even with today's average life expectancies).*

Vindice, Hippolito, and their accomplices enter, disguised in costumes for the masque. Suddenly they draw their swords and stab Lussurioso and the noblemen. **Thunder** sounds, leading Vindice to comment: "Dost know thy cue, thou big-voiced crier? / Dukes' groans are thunder's watchwords." The revengers exit.

*A masque is a form of courtly entertainment consisting of costume, pantomime, and dance, offering Vindice and his accomplices the perfect opportunity to disguise themselves and get close to Lussurioso. Vindice has been in disguise more often than he has been himself during the play, reinforcing the idea that his identity is destabilized by his all-consuming quest for revenge. Here, the play begins its logical conclusion: a bloodbath. Vindice's rhetorical question aimed at the heavens is again darkly comic: his previous appeals for divine intervention were unanswered.*

As Lussurioso lies groaning on the floor, Ambitioso, Supervacuo, Spurio, and a "Fourth Man" enter, also dressed in masque costumes. They notice that all of the men have been fatally wounded. Supervacuo proclaims himself Duke, for which his brother, Ambitioso, stabs him. Spurio in turn stabs Ambitioso, before being knifed himself by the Fourth Man.

*The fact that almost all characters at this point are in disguise demonstrates the way in which each has been governed by an ulterior motive—they have all been dishonest and harboring private ambitions. Though this scene is gory, it's also darkly funny: Supervacuo is Duke for all of five seconds. On a more serious note, the sheer amount of deaths in this scene emphasizes the way that life has been devalued at the court.*

Vindice and Hippolito re-enter, cunningly calling for help: "Pistols! Treason! Murder! Help! Guard my lord / The Duke!" Antonio and guards enter. Vindice and Hippolito seize the Fourth Man, alleging him to be the murderer. Lussurioso says it was the men in the masque that murdered them; Vindice and Hippolito have guards take the Fourth Man away.

*Vindice and Hippolito's plan is so far coming off perfectly. Lussurioso's attempt to inform Antonio of the identity of his killers is unsuccessful because there are too many people disguised for the masque to make it clear who he means.*

Vindice leans into Lussurioso, who is nearly dead. He whispers to him that it was he, Vindice, who murdered Lussurioso and the Duke. At this, Lussurioso draws his last breath.

*Vindice achieves the perfect revenge. As with the Duke's dying moments, Vindice revels in confessing his true identity to his revenge target.*

Hippolito addresses Antonio, telling that the "hope / Of Italy" now rests in his hands. Antonio vows to be a just and reasonable leader. Vindice says that the rape of Antonio's wife has now been revenged; Antonio wonders "how the old duke came murdered."

*This is only the second reference to Italy in the whole play, demonstrating that the setting is not especially important. Vindice and Hippolito could leave at this point, having successfully carried out their revenge. Antonio is a generally ambiguous character—the audience doesn't see much of him—but he stands out in his lack of murderous or lust-inspired activity.*

Vindice announces to Antonio that it was he and Hippolito who orchestrated the murder of the Duke, bragging that it was "witty carried." Antonio orders the guards to seize the two "villains" and take them off for "speedy execution."

*Vindice can't help but brag about his achievements. Perhaps this is because of hubris, or it could be that, having carried out his revenge, Vindice has no other reason to live and deliberately implicates himself to bring about his own death.*


Vindice appeals to Antonio, saying that the murders served him well—but Antonio counters that "you that would murder him would murder me." Vindice accepts his and Hippolito's fate, viewing it as their "time to die" now that their enemies are dead. At least, he says, their sister, Castiza, is "true" and their mother, Gratiana, morally redeemed.

*Antonio's character seems fairly virtuous, but only in comparison to the others. The truth is Middleton doesn't show enough of Antonio for the audience to get a deeper sense of his character. It's possible that he relishes the sudden opportunity for power and wishes to secure his place at the top of the court hierarchy by removing its murderous elements. Vindice compares his imminent death to his approach to revenge—he was always waiting for the right time to kill his targets, and now that "right time" has come for him. In this way his fate is linked first of all with his deceased wife, Gloriana: she is already dead, and so he must die too (once he has avenged her death). Secondly, as though a life force has left his body, the successful killings of those he has hunted means it is time for him to die too—all are linked in death, and the revenger has served his one true purpose.*


Vindice and Hippolito are dragged away by guards, leaving Antonio alone on stage. He expresses his disbelief at the recent bloody events and hopes Hippolito and Vindice's deaths will put an end to such activity: "Bear up / Those tragic bodies; 'tis a heavy **season**. / Pray heaven their blood may wash away all treason."

*Antonio's comment doesn't ring particularly true. The audience is still recovering from the bloodbath, and the bodies are still on the stage. "Heaven" has shown itself to be far removed from the goings on at the court. His call for the bodies to "bear up" is a reference to the ascension of the dead characters' souls to heaven—which the rest of the play has made seem very unlikely. The overall atmosphere at the end of the play, then, is one of emptiness and futility.*


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