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Bastardy, Counterfeiting, and Misogyny in *The Revenger's Tragedy*

MICHAEL NEILL

> We must coin. / Women are apt you know to take false money.
> —*The Revenger's Tragedy,* I.i.102–3

> We are all bastards . . . Some coiner with his tools made me a counterfeit.
> —*Cymbeline,* II.v.2–6

> As the sign and currency of exchange, the invaded woman's body bears the full burden of pollution . . . If marriage uses the woman's body as good money and unequivocal speech, rape transforms her into counterfeit coin, a contradictory word that threatens the whole system.
> —Patricia Joplin

The Revenger's Tragedy is a play under false colors.[1] By a weird irony, given its preoccupations, circumstances have conspired to visit a kind of disinheritance upon it: not only has it been robbed of its true paternity, it appears even to have been cheated of its proper name. For more than three hundred years it has been credited to an author who almost certainly did not write it, Cyril Tourneur; and it has gone under a title that was in all likelihood not chosen by the man who probably did, Thomas Middleton[2] —for there are good indications that this is the same play that Middleton submitted to Robert Keysar of The Queen's Revels company in May 1606 under the name of *The*

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Viper and Her Brood.[3] In some ways the uncertainty regarding the play's nomenclature is just as significant as that regarding its authorship. The existing title makes revenge the nominal subject of the play; and it is of course true that the comic extravagance of this play's intricate revenge plotting accounts for much of the pleasure of its action. But, revenge is scarcely dramatized as a *problem* here in the way that it is in *The Spanish Tragedy*, say, or even *Hamlet*. In fact Vindice's description of vengeance as "murder's quit rent . . . tenant to tragedy" (I.i.39–40) nicely suggests its purely conventional role in Middleton's scheme. By contrast *The Viper and Her Brood* foregrounds the importance of the gender-coded issues of inheritance and usurpation that are given exceptional prominence in the play's satiric design. The serpent carelessly nourished in the bosom of Middleton's state is the duchess, and her brood are a hatch of apparently fatherless sons, together with the duke's bastard whose vindictive desires she stimulates, and who shares their usurping ambitions.

As their place among the "four excellent characters" of Vindice's opening chorus suggests, the two most important figures in this group are the illegitimate son and the transgressive mother. In a previous essay dealing with representations of bastardy in the early modern period, I argued that Spurio is given a symbolically central role in the social economy of his play. In this paper I want to attempt a fuller exploration of that role. Looking at the bastard as a kind of living emblem for the usurping appetite which dominates Middleton's world of courtly counterfeits, I shall examine ways in which the taint of his condition is metaphorically extended to other characters—notably to the villain-hero, Vindice, who is at once the scourge of courtly counterfeiting and yet himself the play's principal "coiner." In the process I hope to correct the earlier essay's overstressing of the extent to which "bastardy (like cuckoldry) involved an affair *between men*, in which the mother's role . . . was confined to that of witness and mediator—a vehicle of pollution in the male line of descent."[4] For clearly the very definition of a bastard as "whore's son" implies that the anxieties surrounding bastardy had a great deal to do with its disruption of the proper line of paternity through the creation of a child that could only be defined as its mother's son.[5] Such an offspring by his very existence constituted a challenge to the patriarchal order and its fictions of legitimate descent. Any full understanding of Spurio's role must consider how the trope of illegitimacy helps to shape both the misogynistic social vision of Middleton's tragic hybrid,

and its bitterly satiric response to the dynastic politics of early-seventeenth-century England.

When Spurio proclaims that "Adultery is my nature" (I.ii.177), he does more than simply justify incest with his stepmother as a wittily symmetrical revenge against his adulterous father. His self-description concentrates, in its bitter oxymoron, a whole history of cultural stigmatization; and in the process it foregrounds the symbolic significance of the bastard in Middleton's tragical satire. I have discussed elsewhere the construction of illegitimate children as "a special class of transgressive male," whose subversive energy and vicious disposition were seen as resulting from the special circumstances of their birth.[6] The bastard was credited with an unusually passionate and vigorous nature—the "composition, and fierce quality" claimed for his kind by Edmund in *King Lear*—which derived, according to contemporary humoral doctrine, from the "lusty stealth" of his adulterous conception (*King Lear,* I.ii.11–2).[7] But a bastard also carried the inevitable moral taint of this illegitimate origin: drawing "a certeyn corruption and stayne from the sinne of his parentes" (in the words of the jurist Sir John Fortescue), he was identified not merely as "the chylde of synners" but as the "chylde of synne" itself; and Nature accordingly "mark[ed] the naturall or bastard chyldren as it were with a certein prive mark in their soules."[8] Thus, "to live a bastard," in the words of Middleton's duchess, was to be branded as

> 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.
>
> *Revenger's Tragedy,* I.ii.158–62

Intensifying the moral opprobrium that attached to illegitimacy were deep-lying social anxieties, warranted by scriptural laws of separation.[9] Bastardy constituted a form of adulteration because it was the fruit of forbidden mixture, polluting the "pure" blood of legitimate descent; and it was interpreted as a form of genealogical counterfeiting because it threatened to displace the "true" heir with a "false" and debased substitute. Moreover, as Spurio's oxymoron suggests, to have one's very nature stamped with adultery was to be entangled in vicious paradox, since as the offspring of improper mingling a bastard was unnatural by nature, a corrupt hybrid, or species of monster.

These things made the bastard, in his numerous theatrical manifestations, the natural tutelary of a drama that delightedly flaunted its own "mongrel" quality through open defiance of the prescriptions that were thought to shape "a good and legitimate poem." Plays such as *The Revenger's Tragedy, Troilus and Cressida,* and *King John,* in which elements of tragedy, satire, and history are violently and sometimes confusingly yoked together, constitute a kind of literary bastard-work whose generic deformity renders it "in everything illegitimate." Moreover, as the case of Thersites, the bastard chorus of *Troilus and Cressida,* abundantly illustrates, the homology between these violations of literary and biological "kind" stood for a connection that was felt as essential rather than metaphorical. The plague of undifferentiating mixture which Thersites discovers in the collapsing hierarchies of Shakespeare's Trojan War, and which he himself exemplifies, is mirrored in the self-canceling formal confusions of a play that Swinburne aptly described as a "hundred-faced and hydra-headed prodigy." Thersites is himself presented as a kind of satiric dramatist whose practice deliberately confounds the order of the Greek leadership; for as Ulysses complains, he "coins slanders like a mint, / To match us in comparisons with dirt" (*T&C,* I.iii.193–4); and there could be no more fitting satirist of Ulysses' discredited ladder of degree than one whose own birth constitutes an illegitimate insertion into what *King John* calls the due "sequence of posterity" (II.i.96). As an adulterator of the "true" patriarchal line of inheritance, the bastard was marked as inherently "false"—a kind of usurping substitute, or (in the telling metaphors that identified the womb as a mint in which was stamped the genealogical coinage of the patriarchal economy) a "counterfeit."

I. COUNTERFEIT COIN

The extensive interchangeability of the vocabulary of currency and (especially adulterous) procreation is a cultural phenomenon that deserves more attention than it has received. The origins of this association evidently lie deep in European culture: in Latin, *adulter* came to mean not just an adulterer (or, in Vulgate Latin, the offspring of adultery—a bastard), but (usually in the form *adulter solidorum*) "a counterfeiter or adulterator of coin"; while *adultero* similarly acquired the sense "to falsify, adulterate, or counterfeit"—an extended meaning which is also present in Medieval English "adulter" (="corrupt" or "debase"). By the same token, silver or gold coin was said to be

"debased" when its composition was adulterated with admixtures of so-called "base metals." Indeed for the late-seventeenth-century monetary theorist Rice Vaughan, the process of debasement, "wherein Silver is incorporated with other baser Metals, not only for Allay *but to the extinction of the denomination of Silver,*" even seems to threaten something like a genealogical eradication of precious metal.[10] If coin could be adulterated or bastardized, the adulterous getting of bastards could equally be figured as a species of counterfeiting or coining. Thus when the countess of Salisbury, in the anonymous *Edward III* (1592–95), wards off the king's advances by reminding him that the act of adultery would "stamp his image in forbidden metal" (II.i.258),[11] the wit of her defiance depends upon the idea that a bastard bears the improper "stamp" of his father precisely as counterfeit coin bears the unlicensed figure of the monarch. Illegitimate birth, in other words, amounted to the debasement of a sacred patriarchal image exactly comparable to "The Dishonour that accompanies *base Moneys*" as described by Vaughan: "what can be more dishonourable than to have the Image of the Prince impressed upon false and counterfeited stuff: according to the saying of an Emperour, *Quid enim erit tutum si in nostra peccetur Effigie?*"[12]

The notion that the counterfeiting or debasement of specie disgraced the monarch whose effigy it bore depended ultimately on ancient magical beliefs about the essential relatedness of persons and their images (reflected in the meanings of *imago* as both "representation" and "ghost" or "spirit"): to assault the image is to inflict damage upon the original, as the tribunes Murellus and Flavius discover to their cost in *Julius Caesar* when they are "put to silence" for "pulling scarves from Caesar's images" (I.ii.285–6). Impressed upon a coin, the image of a monarch authenticates and protects the integrity of the coinage while simultaneously expressing its intrinsic value: the coin is stamped with the king's authority as the son is stamped with the authenticating features of his father. Thus offenses such as clipping, gilding, restamping, and counterfeiting were capital matters not merely because they constituted a form of theft, but because they amounted to iconoclastic degradation of the royal image and a bastardizing usurpation of royal authority. The excessive anxiety that attaches to such activities in the early modern period, however, reflects the beginnings of a major shift from an intrinsic to a representational notion of money value which significantly destabilized what had been felt as a fixed and essential relationship between the royal

image and the value of the currency on which it was displayed.[13] There could be no more eloquent symbol of the paradoxes produced by this destabilization than Elizabeth's desperate alteration of her half-brother Edward's image in order to distinguish true from base and counterfeit coin.[14]

Just as *Julius Caesar* describes the transition between the old world of magically potent images, epitomized by the ancestral statue in which Brutus invests his sense of destiny, and a new world of synthetic image-making, represented by the "images" of Caesar which Antony manipulates to such effect; so plays such as *Troilus and Cressida, Volpone,* and *The Revenger's Tragedy* respond to a society where value, because it no longer seems inherent in its signifiers, is in danger of becoming a fluid and manipulable function of "particular will" (*T&C,* II.ii.53), a creature of appetite subject to infinite metamorphoses. Thus in *Volpone*—to choose an example where these matters are made unusually explicit—the protagonist's opening hymn to his gold pretends to define an intrinsic relation between treasure and its proprietor. Volpone's gold is described as being at once his "soul" (I.i.3) and his "substance" (line 74); hailed as "the son of Sol," it is the offspring of the royal Sun itself. Yet this last patriarchal hyperbole is revealed—through the complex word-play on son/sun and on "Sol" as both the alchemical name for gold and a denomination of gold coinage—to be merely an inflated tautology; and when Volpone goes on to identify gold with "virtue, fame, / Honor, and all things else" (lines 25–6), he unwittingly expresses the arbitrary, attributive nature of its value. Gold in this play is less the imagined *object* of desire than its *symbol,* less the repository of absolute unchanging value than a fungible agent of bizarre alchemical transformations. It is exactly this instrumental power that Volpone celebrates when he professes to "glory / More in the cunning purchase of [his] wealth / Than in the glad possession" (lines 30–2). Gold is the "elixir" which not only promises to "recover" the apparently moribund Volpone (lines 372–6), but also converts the decayed patriarch Corbaccio to an ambitious heir; and it is that which serves, in the most ruthless metamorphosis of all, to coin people (including ultimately Volpone himself) into profit. Gold is thus the instrument and epitome of unnatural relationship; it is what, in the corrupted patriarchy of Jonson's Venice, effectively replaces the bonds of natural kinship. Through its agency true children are bastardized—as in Corbaccio's disinheritance of Bonario (IV.ii); while the counterfeit patriarch Volpone is legitimated as "the true father of his family"—a doubly bastard brood

begotten (according to Mosca) upon outsiders and aliens, "beggars, / Gypsies . . . Jews, and black-moors" (I.i.505–10). *Volpone* imagines a society where the very terms of familial authority, succession, and inheritance—father, son, and heir—have become mere coinages, a freely manipulable (and counterfeitable) currency of relationship that defines no intrinsic bond whatsoever. So Volpone's pseudo-patriarchal role is demonstrated precisely by the arbitrary power to create heirs and disinherit them at will, a power he shares with the other true (i.e., false) fathers of the play, Corvino and the Fourth Avocatore.

What results is a radical instability to which even the principal coiner himself falls victim. When Volpone, as he invests Mosca with the treasury keys that are the badge of his heir-apparency, salutes the parasite as "my better angel" (II.ii.21), the high-sounding language of morality drama is inevitably adulterated by the sly pun on "angel," which identifies Mosca from Volpone's point-of-view as merely another of those whom he coins into profit; but the pun recoils on the punster through the careless irony of his following lines, anticipating the process by which the magnifico will be restamped as the issue of Mosca's own counterfeiting:

> Gold, plate, and jewels, all's at thy devotion.
> Employ them how thou wilt, nay, *coin* me too,
> So thou in this but *crown* my longings, Mosca.
> (II.ii.22–4, emphases added)

In the process, patron and knave change places, the presumptive heir usurping the role of the patriarch, while Volpone finds he has "lost [him]self" (V.vi.22) in the maze of his counterfeit impositions.

An even more extravagant irony of self-loss is thematized in *The Revenger's Tragedy*, which seems to have been written within a few months of *Volpone*. In this play Hippolito's nervous warning "Brother, we lose ourselves" (IV.iv.201),[15] achieves a bizarrely literal fulfillment when Vindice is hired to murder his counterfeit self, Piato, in the form of the old Duke's disguised corpse: "Brother that's I: that sits for me: do you mark it. And I must stand ready here to make away myself yonder; I must sit to be killed, and stand to kill myself" (V.i.5–7). There could of course be no wittier illustration of the governing principle of revenge drama, whereby the revenger is transformed into the simulacrum of the criminal he seeks to punish. But the episode has

also to be read as an illustration of the destabilization of identity characteristic of a world of bastard coining.

If Jonson characteristically imagines his own era as a base travesty of the classical Golden Age, "the money-gett, Mechanick Age" which he sardonically types the "age of gold,"[16] Middleton locates his court, where everything goes "in silk and silver" (I.i.52), in a degraded Silver Age, mockingly emblematized by the "silver years" of the duke (I.ii.11) and the silver hairs of his morally dubious successor, Antonio (V.iii.86). Just as the action of the play displays a progressive debasement of the currency of dukedom, climaxing in the farcical substitutions of act V where five dukes rise and fall in quick succession, so it serves to strip away the plated surface of the court exterior and expose the base metal beneath—precisely as Vindice's rhetoric strips way the "costly three-piled flesh" of courtly "fat folks" to expose the terror of "death's vizard."

Vindice satirizes the court as a place of monstrous sexual forgery where "cuckolds [together with the bastards foisted upon them] are a-coining, apace, apace, apace" (II.ii.142); yet in his theatrical self-multiplication he ironically proves himself to be the most prolific and successful of all the play's counterfeiters. From the moment that he agrees to become "the child o'the court" (I.iii.4) and to "put on" the role of "base-coined pandar" proposed to him by Hippolito (I.i.92, 80), Vindice acknowledges a surreptitious kinship with the base-coined Spurio. The very name he chooses for this "strange composed fellow" (line 95), "Piato" ("plated"), identifies him with that form of spurious currency known as "blanched" coin (base metal plated over with silver to improve its appearance),[17] thereby associating him with the deceptive glitter of the whole court; and in a last turn of the satiric whirligig, the completion of his revenge is punningly imagined as yet another spurious adulteration of currency: "And if we list *we could have nobles clipped* / And go for less than beggars" (V.iii.122–3).

If men are coiners, it is women, according to Vindice, who are most "apt . . . to take false money" (I.i.103). But women not only *take* money (and help to fake it), they *become* it: in the grotesque economy of the sexual mint, where cuckolds and bastards are coined together, pandar and whore too are struck from the same metal; so that if Piato is blanched coin, Gratiana and Castiza are liable to be "changed / Into white money" by his labors (II.ii.26–7). As Vindice/Piato urges Gratiana to put Castiza in "use" with Lussurioso (II.ii.98), his sister's flesh is metamorphosed into a form of material wealth:

I would count
My yearly maintenance upon her cheeks,
Take coach upon her lip, and all her parts
Should keep men after men.

(II.i.96–9)

"Common usury" thus becomes, in Castiza's bitter phrase, a synonym for prostitution (IV.iv.104)—the vice whose principal patron is the duke himself, in his role as "usuring father."[18] In traditional doctrine, usury, with its unnatural "breeding" of money, was denounced as a travesty of biological generation. The language of Middleton's play reverses this equation by turning fornication, with its prolific coining of bastards and cuckolds, into a monstrous form of usury.

II. "TREASON ON THE LAWFUL BED"

For Spurio to declare that "Adultery is my nature," then, is to identify himself as counterfeit coin; and in his scheme to displace Lussurioso in the line of ducal succession he wittily seeks to pay his father back in his own spurious currency. This act of "treason on the lawful bed," as well as ironically linking him with his legitimate rival (IV.i.22), points toward the significance of his name. In ways that I partially explored in my earlier essay, "Spurio" serves as an important index to the bastard's function.[19] In the brief cratyllic catalogue which supplies an allegoric key to the play's moral scheme, "Spurio" appears at first sight slightly anomalous. Most of the major characters—Vindice, Lussurioso, Ambitioso, Supervacuo, Gratiana, and Castiza—are typed, Morality-fashion, with names that identify them with particular vices and virtues. But "Spurio," glossed in John Florio's Italian dictionary as "a bastard, a baseborne,"[20] looks like a purely factual label, comparable with "duke," or with "junior" for the duchess's youngest son—indeed he is at one point actually referred to by Vindice as "*the* Spurio" (II.ii.114), as though Middleton were merely substituting the Italian word for "bastard." Even considered purely as a label, however, the name is not without allegoric force. As we have seen, in early modern thinking bastardy was as much a moral as a genealogical category,[21] so that Florio's further gloss on *spurio*—"Also adulterate or counterfeit"—does not really involve a significant metaphoric extension of the term. By virtue of the constant stress on his illegitimate state, moreover, the application of

Spurio's name is highlighted in a way that is otherwise true only of Vindice's. Apart from this general suggestiveness, "Spurio" has an even more particular referentiality that points toward the function of bastardy in the misogynist gender politics of the play; for the name derives from the Latin term *spurius* which denoted, according to Isidore of Seville, not just any illegitimate offspring, but one born from a noble but spouseless mother to an unknown or plebeian father. Such children, who could not take the paternal name, were called *spurius* because they sprang in effect from the mother alone—the word itself deriving, Isidore explained (following Plutarch), from *spurium,* an ancient term for the female genitalia. Thus, as Thomas Laqueur puts it, "while the legitimate child is from the froth of the father, the illegitimate child is from the seed of the mother's genitals, *as if the father did not exist.*"[22]

To be "the son of a cuckold-maker" (I.ii.202), then, is in effect to be one's mother's son; and the spurious child constitutes a living affront to the patriarchal order, seeming by his "stolen" existence (I.ii.187) to cancel the father out, implicitly denying the exclusive function of the womb as patriarchal mint. This is one of the things that makes Middleton's bastard "the thief of nature" (I.ii.159). Though he is reputedly the duke's child, Spurio remains "his son but falsely . . . an uncertain man / Of more uncertain woman" (I.ii.131–4); and his satiric conjectures as to his own paternity—"may be his groom / O'the stable begot me," "I'd a hot-backed devil to my father" (I.ii.134–5, 163)—conclude in a sardonic burlesque of the very notion of patrilineal descent: "Faith, if the truth were known I was begot / After some gluttonous dinner—some stirring dish / Was my first father" (I.ii.178–9). If the freak of the bastard's conception means that he is "By one false minute disinherited" (line 166), his status as *filius nullius*—as it were the son of nobody[23]—implicitly puts in question the whole charade of "legitimate" inheritance, serving as a reminder that, for all the dubious benefit of "report," his supposedly legitimate brother may very well be "as falsely sown" as himself, since "Women must not be trusted with their own" (I.ii.195–8).

Spurio's misogynist gibe foregrounds patriarchal anxieties concerning the problematic relation between property and women's bodies. These anxieties lie close to the heart of Middleton's play and help to explain the prominence of the bastard's role. The laws of primogenitive inheritance were designed to regulate the passage of property between generations, which is to say the handing down of wealth from father to son. Properly

speaking, women had no role in such transactions, except as vehicles of transmission; and if property was never truly their own, their bodies, as the vehicles of its transmission, necessarily themselves became another species of masculine property with whose disposition they were not to be trusted. "Virginity," as Gratiana is made to say, "is paradise, locked up . . . And 'twas decreed that man should keep the key" (II.i.153–5). Man has been granted this authority in order to secure the "true," unpolluted transmission of the line of inheritance; and female sexuality needs to be secured and contained by vigilant policing because women are, in the phrase that Gail Paster has made famous, "leaky vessels" whose incontinent "disease o'the mother" constantly threatens the "close" discipline of the patriarchal order.[24] "Tell but some woman a secret over night," Vindice declares, and "Your doctor may find it in the urinal i'the morning" (I.iii.83–4).

Just as female porousness is always prone to release what should be contained, so it is liable to admit what should be excluded. Vindice's graphically imagined catalogue of the sins that crowd the sunset hour characteristically focuses on women exposed in acts of surreptitious opening:

> This woman in immodest thin apparel
> Lets in her friend by water, here a dame
> Cunning nails leather hinges to a door
> To avoid proclamation.
>
> (II.ii.139–42)

In this vision the very water on which the adulterous lover arrives operates as a powerful signifier of the leaky, fluid, and "uncertain" nature of womankind. The female body, once it surrenders the "close" condition of virginity (I.iii.137), constitutes a dangerous kind of opening in the otherwise impermeable edifice of patriarchal power and property-holding, a conduit of pollution, debasement, and usurpation that requires constant regulation.[25] For, as the fates of Gloriana and Antonio's wife reveal, ultimately only death can preserve the closeness of virginity against the voracious "moths" that "lust to eat / Into [the proprietor's] wearing" (I.iv.33–4). Where men are conceived as being "made close" (I.iii.81) by their very gender, rendering them, ideally at least, self-contained and impenetrable, for women such impenetrability would amount to a violation of their very nature: "That woman is all *male* whom none

can enter" as Vindice's contemptuous pun expresses it (II.i.112; emphasis added).

Understood as the product of improper penetration, a spurious and destabilizing insertion into the body of patriarchy, the bastard constitutes a living sign of the dangerously porous boundary produced by the incorporation of the female into the dominant order. This is the source of the bastard's peculiar bitterness, for it robs him of any possibility of becoming "a proper man," of standing for himself. In the patriarchal order where the "proper" self is, in the last analysis, defined by the possession of property, to be identified as a son is always to stand for someone else—as a potential substitute for the father; but even younger sons may hope one day to achieve that substitution, to inherit the paternal office, and at last to stand for themselves as full members of the body politic. The "unpossessing bastard," by contrast, is forever excluded from that possibility: legally defined as *filius nullius* (no man's son and heir) and in the vernacular as a "whoreson" (whore's son), he stands not for his father, but for his mother—or, more precisely, for her disgrace, her shameful openness. Thus, for example, the bastard "demi-devil" Caliban in *The Tempest,* though supposedly sired by the devil, is habitually defined by his relation to his "dam," Sycorax: he is his mother's child, as surely as his virtuous opposites, Ferdinand and Miranda, are their fathers' children; and it is for this reason that the island inheritance he claims "by Sycorax my mother" can be discounted and violently taken from him.

For most theatrical bastards the psychological effect of their radical displacement from the patrilineal order of inheritance is to force them to become defiant authors of themselves. The bastard contrives a desperately self-animated fiction of masculine identity, discovering in his own illegitimacy something of an outlaw's paradoxical freedom.[26] But for all his swaggering parade of masculinity, he is nevertheless consigned to a curiously anomalous position in the economy of gender relations—one from which he can never wholly escape, since it is part of his unnatural nature. For all his supposedly "unnatural" qualities, the bastard was traditionally described as a "natural child" because, conceived without benefit of matrimony, his origins lay outside the order of culture (typically imagined as masculine) in the (typically feminine) domain of nature.

Thus, since the bastard, whether fathered by "some stirring dish," or begotten by "[D]amnation [upon] the sin of feasts, drunken Adultery" (I.ii.179, 187–8), is anything but his father's

son, he embodies the subversive challenge posed by the "outlaw feminine" to patrilineal proprieties.[27] Accordingly, the prominence of Spurio in the play's opening procession points not merely toward the inversion of moral values implicit in Vindice's ironic oxymoron "thou his *bastard true-begot* in evil" (I.i.3; emphasis added), but to a disturbance of gender roles that makes the play's patterns of usurpation especially unsettling. The duchess's sexual alliance with her bastard stepson—which she imagines as constituting an impertinent legitimation of his dubious lineage ("His bastard son, but my love's true-begot" [I.ii.110])—has a double appropriateness in this context. Not only does her seduction tutor Spurio in the adultery that replicates the circumstances of his own begetting, teaching him how to realize "the vengeance that [his] birth was wrapped in" (I.ii.167), but in the act of cuckolding her husband the duchess mounts a symbolic assault on the patriarchal order of inheritance. To "arm [his] brow with *woman's heraldry*" (I.ii.175; emphasis added) is to substitute the badges of female fecundity and "uncertainty," for the immemorial signs of masculine "sequence and succession." Where men's heraldry constitutes an emblematic picturing of the closed boundaries of lineage, woman's heraldry blazons a reminder of the scandalous biological openness concealed by such devices; and in the duchess's case it highlights her role as a conduit for the illegitimate ambitions of her own conspicuously fatherless sons.

The bastard's witty sarcasms concerning the culinary origins of his own paternity draw attention to his symbolic centrality in a work so preoccupied with patrimony and inheritance. Even more than *Hamlet,* the play to which it is so self-consciously indebted, *The Revenger's Tragedy,* with its gathering frenzy of illegitimate substitutions both sexual and political, is obsessed with issues of paternity and succession in which virtually all of its characters are entangled. The result is an elaborate structure of parallels and resemblances in which the protagonist is once again ironically implicated. As we have already seen, the opening scenes establish a curious symmetry between Spurio, the counterfeit diamond of the ducal house (I.ii.148–9), and Vindice in his role as Piato ("Plated"), the "base-coined pander" (I.i.80) of Lussurioso's household.[28] If Spurio has been rendered fatherless and "disinherited" by the "one false minute" of his disgraceful conception, Vindice too finds himself effectively stripped of his patrimony by his father's disgrace and impoverished death (I.i.118–26); and in the character of the "displaced" malcontent Piato, the bastardized "child o'the court" (I.iii.4), he

appears like an exemplum of his own satiric vision of universal disinheritance:

> I have seen patrimonies washed a-pieces,
> Fruit fields turned into bastards,
> And in a world of acres
> Not so much dust due to the heir 'twas left to
> As would well gravel a petition.
>
> (I.iii.50–4)

If Vindice's vengeful bitterness is fueled by the loss of his patrimony, Spurio too conceives his planned murder of Lussurioso as a symbolic reenactment and reversal of the sin that ensured his disinheritance:

> Well, have at the fairest mark—So said the Duke when he begot me—
> And if I miss his heart or near about
> Then have at any—a bastard scorns to be out.
>
> (V.i.167–70)

Moreover, just as the bastard's revenge against his father includes a plot to "disinherit [his legitimate brother] in as short a time / As I when I was begot in haste" (II.ii.125–6); so Vindice's revenge includes a scheme to "dis-heir" the duke through the murder of his son Lussurioso (I.iii.175).

Of course the disruption of inheritance and dissolution of patrimony are by no means confined to these two revenge plots. Middleton's court is merely the mirror of an entire commonwealth where, since "farmers' sons agreed, and met again, / To wash their hands and come up gentlemen" (II.i.217–8), place is governed by ambition rather than the proprieties of due succession; and Vindice's opening soliloquy introduces us to a world of perversely disrupted succession where just as "marrowless age" contrives to "riot it *like a son and heir*" (I.i.11; emphasis added), so inheritance is only the occasion for prodigal waste:

> Oh, she was able to ha' made a usurer's son
> Melt all his patrimony in a kiss,
> And what his father fifty years told
> To have consumed.
>
> (I.i.26–9)

The image of the usurer's prodigal heir will be given grotesque

life in the central murder scene (III.v), where the juxtaposition of the duke's self-consuming lechery with Spurio's incestuous embrace of the duchess forms the basis for Vindice's sardonic emblem of violated patrimony: "A usuring father to be boiling in hell, and his son and heir with a whore dancing over him" (IV.ii.87–8). If the duke himself riots it "like a son and heir," he finds his actual son guilty of trying to duke it like a father:

> This boy that should be myself after me
> Would be myself before me . . .
> Intending to depose me in my bed.
>
> (II.iii.19–22)

Similarly, Spurio's and Vindice's plots to dis-heir the duke are matched by the efforts of the duchess's sons to disinherit their half-brother ("He's the next heir; yet this true reason gathers; / None can possess that dispossess their fathers" [II.iii.87–8]), and the effort of each to proclaim himself "heir—duke in a minute" (III.i.13), climaxing in the knockabout farce of false succession and disinheritance that is triggered by the murder of Lussurioso:

> *Supervacuo.* Then I proclaim myself. Now I am duke.
> *Ambitioso.* Thou duke! brother thou liest.
> [*Stabs* SUPERVACUO.]
> *Spurio.* Slave! So dost thou.
> [*Stabs* AMBITIOSO.]
> *4 Noble.* Base villain, hast thou slain my lord and master?
> [*Stabs* SPURIO.]
>
> (V.iii.53–5)

As mother's sons, Ambitioso, Supervacuo, and Junior, although not formally typed as bastards, are allotted a structural position closely parallel to that of Spurio in the undermining of patriarchal inheritance and possession.[29] And just as Spurio's usurping designs upon the dukedom are symbolically enacted in the doubly adulterous usurpation of his father's bed when he makes "horn-royal" (II.ii.165) with the duchess, so Junior's "double adultery" (I.ii.44) with Antonio's wife not only "eats into [the husband's] wearing," but announces an implicit affront to the stepfather's potency: "Oh, what it is," complains the duchess, contrasting her son's sexual aggression with her husband's judicial passivity, "to have an old-cool duke / To be as slack in tongue as in performance" (I.ii.74–5).

Nor does the complicated chain of resemblances end there: it is an indication of the deeply ambiguous role played by Vindice and Hippolito that by the end of the play their own position has developed an uneasy similarity to that of Ambitioso and Supervacuo. The parallel is made most apparent at the end of act IV in a sequence of three scenes where the rival sets of brothers swear to punish their mothers for polluting their family honor. Vindice's vow to "conjure that *base* devil out of our mother" is immediately followed by the outrage of the duchess's sons at the shame to which they have been exposed: "The nobler she is, the *baser* she is grown" (IV.ii.229; IV.iii.10; emphases added). In the same way, Vindice's claim to have tried Gratiana on behalf of "the duke's son" and to have found her "base metal" echoes Supervacuo's disgust at a mother debased by "the duke's bastard" (IV.iv.31–2; IV.iii.15). Both pairs of brothers feel themselves to be, in effect, bastardized by the openness of a mother whose behavior implicitly calls in question their claims to be their fathers' sons. "It is a wise child now," reflects the sage Castiza, wittily extending an old proverb about the uncertainty of patrilineal descent, "that knows her mother" (II.i.163). "Most right," choruses Vindice, for whom the discovery of his mother's openness entails an unstitching of proper identity that will lead him to "doubt / Whether I'm myself or no" (IV.iv.24–5). There is a curious sense in which Vindice's gradual submergence in the roles of "Piato" seems to act out this sense of self-loss to the point where, in the character of "Vindice," the second false persona assumed for the benefit of Lussurioso, he becomes in effect his own counterfeit, a spurious version of himself.

With its bitterly satiric view of courtly vice and nauseating sense of fleshly corruptibility, *The Revenger's Tragedy* has long been typed as a classic expression of the so-called Jacobean disillusionment. While contemporary historicist criticism is rightly cautious about such impressionistic periodization, I believe that the patterns I have been tracing, which foreground the dramatist's preoccupation with spurious substitution and false inheritance, support the traditional view.

The processional tableau with which *The Revenger's Tragedy* begins is constructed, as all such courtly ceremonials are, as an image of "due sequence and succession": the incumbent royal couple is followed by a line of royal sons in order of heritability (the heir, his half-brothers,[30] the bastard) and a "train" of courtiers. This conventional picture of patrilineal legitimacy is ironized, however, by Vindice's characterization of the duke as

"gray-haired adultery" and his metaphoric promotion of the bastard son as the "royal lecher's" proper heir ("true-begot in evil"). Against the adulterous passion and unnatural vigor of the "parched and juiceless luxur" whose "hollow bones" are filled with a "marrow" of unnatural desire, Vindice sets an ironic emblem of purity and chastity, his mistress's skull. From one point of view, his obsession with the skull only highlights the confusedness of Vindice's motives: is he, as the bereaved and impoverished son of an unfairly disgraced father (I.i.118–26), primarily a Hamlet-like agent of true inheritance; or is he (as the diseased eroticism that characterizes his recollections of the dead mistress might suggest) merely the passion-driven agent of a treasonable private vendetta? If the action of the play tends to favor the latter reading, we should notice that the dead woman will later be given a name whose powerful resonance associates the skull itself with the motif of improper or debased inheritance. "'Tis the skull / Of Gloriana whom thou poisonedst last" announces Vindice as the duke recoils from the envenomed kiss of the counterfeit "country lady" (III.v.149, 132). As critics have observed, the dressing of a skull in Elizabeth's best-known sobriquet less that four years after the queen's death can hardly have been innocent gesture—especially in the light of Elizabeth's self-promotion as the type of unassailable, "close" virginity, and of James's controversial right of succession. When it is remembered, moreover, that this succession was secured through the maternal line, and most immediately through a female whose notorious openness called his own legitimacy in question,[31] one reason why *The Revenger's Tragedy* has often seemed such a quintessentially "Jacobean" play becomes strikingly apparent.

Of course this is not to say that the duke is in any simple way a figure for James—indeed it might be conjectured that the dynastic layout of his court was deliberately designed to confuse the possibility of any such dangerous "application." Rather the play draws on (and exploits) widely diffused anxieties about questions of legitimacy and succession which *Hamlet* had already begun to articulate at the end of Elizabeth's reign—questions that left the new Stuart dynasty in an uncomfortably exposed position. Nor should the identification of the idealized "Gloriana" with the dead queen encourage a reading of the play as a piece of straightforward Elizabethan nostalgia; for not only might the "bony lady" in her velvet tires all too easily be construed as an uncomfortably burlesque reminder of the cosmetic grotesqueries of the old queen's last years, but the disguised skull has, after all, become the very instrument of

Vindice's ambiguous involvement with courtly counterfeiting and corruption in his role as "base-coined pandar."

NOTES

[1]All citations from *The Revenger's Tragedy* and other non-Shakespearean plays are (except where otherwise indicated) to Russell A. Fraser and Norman Rabkin, eds., *Drama of the English Renaissance II: The Stuart Period* (New York: Macmillan, 1976). All Shakespeare references are to G. Blakemore Evans, ed., *The Riverside Shakespeare* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974). Patricia Kleindienst Joplin, "The Voice of the Shuttle is Ours," *SLRev* 1 (1984): 25–53, 42.

[2]For useful treatments of the authorship question, see Roger Holdsworth, *Three Jacobean Revenge Tragedies* (London: Macmillan, 1990), pp. 11–3, 79–105.

[3]See Holdsworth, p. 106.

[4]Michael Neill, "'In Everything Illegitimate': Imagining the Bastard in Renaissance Drama," *YES* 23 (1993): 270–92, 275.

[5]Phyllis Rackin's essay "Patriarchal History and Female Subversion" in her *Stages of History: Shakespeare's English Chronicles* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1990), pp. 146–200 analyzes bastardy as a motif that discloses "the repressed knowledge of women's subversive power" (p. 188) and its threat to patriarchal fictions of lineage. An abbreviated version of the same essay, concentrating on the Bastard Faulconbridge in *King John*, is printed in Deborah Curren-Aquino, ed., *King John: New Perspectives* (Newark: Univ. of Delaware Press, 1989), pp. 76–90.

[6]Neill, p. 275.

[7]For discussion of how the circumstances of conception were thought to affect the nature of the child see Gail Kern Paster, *The Body Embarrassed: Drama and the Disciplines of Shame in Early Modern England* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1993), chap. 4, "Complying with the Dug: Narratives of Birth and the Reproduction of Shame," pp. 162–214.

[8]John Fortescue, *A Learned Commendation of the Politique Lawes of England* (London, 1567; facsimile edn., Amsterdam and New York: Theatrum Orbis Terrarum, 1969), fols. 95^{v}–97^{v}. Alison Finlay, "The World So Swarms with Bastards Now: The Bastard in Elizabethan, Jacobean, and Caroline Drama" (Ph.D., thesis, Univ. of Birmingham, 1988) cites the proverb "Bastards by chance are good, by nature bad" (p. 33).

[9]Neill, "'In Everything Illegitimate,'" pp. 276–7.

[10]Rice Vaughan, *A Discourse of Coin and Coinage* (London, 1675; New York: Johnson Reprint, 1975), p. 45.

[11]*The Reign of King Edward III*, ed. G. C. Moore Smith (London, 1897).

[12]Vaughan, p. 53. Vaughan went on to advise the king against the "dishonour" of importing foreign coin on the grounds that he would thereby "communicate a principal point of Soveraignty unto a Stranger, and . . . pay a Tribute to a forein Prince out of your own Country, and you shall never have any material Coin to be coined in your own mint" (pp. 83–4). For his sire, the bastard resembled such coin, dishonorably stamped in another's mint.

[13]See Stephen X. Mead, "'Thou art chang'd': Public Value and Personal Identity in *Troilus and Cressida*," *JMRS* 22 (1992): 237–59. Mead stresses the way in which the development of credit, the use of bills of exchange, and regular

manipulations of exchange rates undermined notions of the absolute value of money, threatening to make value seem as arbitrary and mutable a matter as reputation—"What's aught, but as 'tis valued?" as Troilus puts it. Ironically enough the repeated attempts of monarchs "to bring money back to some ancient, absolute value" only served to emphasize "the chimerical nature of intrinsic worth" (p. 240).

[14]Mead, pp. 243–4.

[15]Vindice's own gathering sense of self-alienation is registered in a series of asides—"All this is I!" (IV.ii.130); "Oh, I'm in doubt / Whether I'm myself or no" (IV.iv.24–5); "I think man's happiest when he forgets himself" (IV.iv.85)—climaxing in his wry confession to Antonio at the end: "'Tis time to die when we are ourselves our foes" (V.iii.110).

[16]Ben Jonson, *The Complete Poetry of Ben Jonson*, ed. William B. Hunter Jr., Stuart Editions (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1963), "An Expostulacion with Inigo Jones," line 52; Epigram LXIV, line 4.

[17]Mead, p. 242.

[18]At the same time Lussurioso's bribing of Piato is figured both as a diabolical sexual coupling, in which gold coin is transformed to seed, and as an especially corrupt form of usurious investment:

> *Lussurioso.* So, thou'rt confirmed in me
> And thus I enter thee.
> [*Gives him money*]
> *Vindice.* This Indian devil
> Will quickly enter any man: but a usurer,
> He prevents that by entering the devil first!
>
> (I.iii.85–8)

[19]Neill, "'In Everything Illegitimate,'" p. 283 n. 48.

[20]John Florio, *Queen Anna's new world of words* (1611), s.v. "*spurio*."

[21]In this sense the discourse of bastardy merely reflected larger habits of thought which, as Gail Paster has pointed out, did not yet properly "distinguish between the ethical and physical domains" (p. 78).

[22]Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1992), p. 56, quoting Isidore, *Etymologiarum,* 9.6.4 ("Semen") and 4.5.4 ("Blood")—emphasis added.

[23]For a discussion of the concept of *filius nullius*, see Neill, "'In Everything Illegitimate,'" pp. 283–4.

[24]Paster, pp. 23–63.

[25]See Peter Stallybrass, "Reading the Body: *The Revenger's Tragedy* and the Jacobean Theater of Consumption," *RenD* n.s. 18 (1987): 121–48, and "Patriarchal Territories: The Body Enclosed," in *Othello: Critical Essays*, ed. Susan Snyder (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1988), pp. 251–74; Frank Whigham, "Reading Social Conflict in the Alimentary Tract: More on the Body in Renaissance Drama," *ELH* 55 (1988): 333–5; and Michael Neill, "'Hidden Malady': Death, Discovery, and Indistinction in *The Changeling*," *RenD* n.s. 22 (1992): 95–121.

[26]Neill, "'In Everything Illegitimate,'" pp. 282–4.

[27]"Outlaw feminine" is the term coined by Marilyn French in *Shakespeare's Division of Experience* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1982).

[28]Note the curious chime between the duchess's "had he cut thee a right diamond, / Thou hadst been next set in the dukedom's ring" (I.ii.148–9) and

Vindice's evocation of Gloriana's eyes as "heaven-pointed diamonds . . . set / In those unsightly rings" (I.i.19–20).

[29]In this sense their role resembles that of Tamora's conspicuously fatherless sons in *Titus Andronicus.*

[30]I am assuming that the quarto stage direction "her son" is not a mistaken description of Lussurioso, but a misprint for "her sons," since, although their place in the procession is not highlighted by Vindice, their exclusion from this emblematic display of deformed patriarchal order seems unlikely.

[31]For the question of James's possible illegitimacy see Neill, "'In Everything Illegitimate,'" p. 275 n. 19, and Stephen Orgel's introduction to his edition of *The Tempest* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1987), pp. 37–40.