

## **FEMALE FETISHISED DEATHS IN JACOBAN TRAGEDY**

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***Abstract:** I explore the violent deaths of Jacobean heroines on stage, looking at their fetishised dead bodies as a register of male repressed fear of women's physicality that is perceived essentially as the equation between womb and tomb. I argue that this fetishisation is a hegemonic effort to combat this fear through the consigning of the heroines' bodies to utter destruction. However, there is a residue left from the dialectic of death and desire that runs through Jacobean tragedy and sexualises the political issue of tyranny. The heroines' violent deaths, while not expressing heroic transcendence, mark the ultimate self-destructiveness of patriarchal politics.*

***Keywords:** cultural materialism, feminist theory, Jacobean tragedy, psychoanalysis.*

### **Introduction**

In Thomas Middleton's *The Maiden's Tragedy* (1611), the Tyrant commits necrophilia on the virtuous Lady's corpse, which has been snatched from her grave by his soldiers: the Lady returns as a ghost to complain that

even death is unable to protect her chastity from his lust. She says of the Tyrant that he:

Weeps when he sees the paleness of my cheek,  
And will send privately for a hand of art  
That may dissemble life upon my face  
To please his lustful eye. (Middleton, *The Maiden's Tragedy* 1998:217)

The corpse's face is painted with poison by her fiancé, the deposed King, Govianus, and upon kissing it the necrophiliac Tyrant dies. In Middleton's *Revenger's Tragedy* (1606), the gaping mouth hole in Gloriana's skull is painted with poison by her lover, Vindice, and (once again) upon kissing it the Duke dies, thus meeting with exactly the same kind of death that he had inflicted upon her for not submitting to his lust. In John Marston's *The Tragedy of Sophonisba* (1606) a Libyan king, Syphax, the rival of Sophonisba's husband Massinissa, another king in the same country, is threatening to have sex with her dead body should she commit suicide, something that she eventually does by drinking poisoned wine. The villain, in a further attempt to seduce the virtuous heroine, unwittingly commits the heinous sin of having intercourse with a devil in female form, the necrophiliac witch Erictho, whose terrifying sexuality signifies evil, sin and corruption. In John Fletcher's *The Tragedy of Valentinian* (1614), the tyrant Valentinian rapes the chaste Roman matron Lucina, whose suicide provokes tyrannicide in a tragedy that offers a rare instance of a second tyrannicide within the same play: on his enthronement as the new emperor, Lucina's widower Maximus is murdered - by a woman this time, Valentinian's widow Eudoxa. This is a weak reminder of an earlier female

tyrannicide, Evadne, in Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher's *The Maid's Tragedy* (1611), who carved her royal lover's body in bed as in sadomasochist foreplay. In John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* (1613) the Duchess' dead body lies horizontally at the mercy of the erect Ferdinand's imperious gaze in a tableau that genders power positions in a typical manner. However, her tyrannical brother's "eyes dazzle" (Webster 1995 [1972]:260) at the site of his own incestuous desire that eventually turns him into a werewolf roaming through the churchyard carrying dead people's legs on his shoulders. His lycanthropia symbolically re-inscribes him as a beast (he crawls on all fours), while, at the same time, his obsession with corpses prefigures necrophilia. In *The Insatiate Countess* (an unfinished play by John Marston, 1610), the nymphomaniac Isabella is executed for her promiscuity in the only scene of execution actually shown on the Jacobean stage, while her second husband kneels and embraces her body on the scaffold.

In all these tragedies written around 1610, and in several others, there are a number of recurring patterns that I see as signifiers of the psycho-political text about subjection which the dramatists construct on stage. This text clusters around a tyrant's sexual violation of a woman or the endangering of her chastity, in rape and necrophilia, female suicide and violent death, but also the thing after, which for lack of a better term I call the revenant. In this sense, although *The Insatiate Countess* is paradigmatic of the male fear that sexual desire ascribes agency to women, this being the crime for which Isabella must be executed in public, it does not strictly fall within my scope. What I want to examine is not so much the staging of the heroines' violent deaths as what happens afterwards in terms of the specific forms in which tyrannical politics is

both reproduced and challenged by the dead female body. I premise that in the absence of physical femininity on the stage cross-dressing de-naturalises femaleness by underscoring the constructed character of gender, thus appealing to male spectators' homoeroticism. At the same time it functions as a mere convention and as such becomes so familiar as to be "naturalised" in the context of the theatrical spectacle.

### **Thanatos and Eros in Jacobean Drama**

Sophonisba, the Lady, Evadne, Antonio's wife in *The Revenger's Tragedy* and Lucina all commit suicide after lives in which they have been passed around among men for the establishment of homosocial bonding, masculine political dominance, and above all the preservation and inflation of male ego narcissistically transcribed as honour. In *Sophonisba* the senators of Carthage give the eponymous heroine as a gift to Syphax and then to Scipio for his Roman triumph. Sophonisba refuses to accept her objectification as booty to adorn a triumph and poisons herself. Both *The Maiden's Tragedy* and *The Revenger's Tragedy* centre on a woman's poisoned body (the Lady's corpse and Gloriana's skull respectively) as a terrain that offers the spectacle of male politics of revenge. Govianus and Vindice become tyrannicides, each of them asserting his political agency over and through the corpse of his betrothed. These acts of heroic assertion in the face of tyranny are considerably qualified by the Lady's and Gloriana's symbolic prostitution by their own lovers after death. In reality Govianus and Vindice function as the procurers of their adorned corpses by using painting to sexually lure the two royal rapists into suffering violent deaths by their own hands.

However, there is nothing heroic about female suicide, no assertion of individuality in the face of death, but rather simple annihilation. Because women's subjectivity is constructed on the basis of the principle of chastity, suicide emerges as a masochistic means of self-assertion that is essentially an act of self-annulment. Irrespective of whether these women have been raped or not, all of them must die. Their survival would signify the acceptance of whoredom as the only available position for unchaste femininity and at a deeper level the need for a painful restructuring of their "subjectivation". In Judith Butler's reading of this Foucauldian notion as a process that is "bound up with subjection" she argues that subjectivation nevertheless allows "resistance to regulation or to the form of subjection that regulation takes" (Butler 2000:151). Faced with the dominant practices of female subjection, which identify existence with chastity however self-destructive, these suicidal heroines opt for death both as submission to patriarchal regulation and as resistance to that very regulation. This is a "solution" that whoredom cannot afford; nor can it offer the same promise of eternal fame as does the exemplary womanhood pre-conceived by male gender ideology.

The tragedy of the Jacobean period emphatically inscribes this specific form of its heroines' entrapment in the male ideological hegemony that has persuaded the female subject that there is no existence outside it. Only by completely denying their bodies can these heroines acquire a place in a cultural hypertext that represents women's physicality as a dangerous materiality deeply threatening to men. This renunciation is celebrated by the male authors as that which returns from the grave, the dis-embodied woman is idealised precisely because she no longer poses a threat to masculine "wholeness": a

ghost, a skull, a voice or an echo, a “wife’s voice” (Webster 1995 [1972]:282), “a dead thing” (Webster 1995 [1972]:283). “Therefore she must not live” is Maximus’ callous appraisal of his raped wife’s life (Fletcher 1998:276). Good wives are dead wives, because the traits most appreciated in virtuous wifedom, that is, “silence, coldness, containment and passivity—bear a striking resemblance to the traits of the dead” (Watson 1999 [1994]:31). Hence we have another dramatic motif, that of women as sepulchers and marble, that is, as objects that are cold and solid, therefore eternally chaste and silent, whereas living women are ascribed fluidity. As Elisabeth Bronfen argues, “[i]f the living woman is unstable because ambivalent in her meaning, seemingly dissimulating (adulteress, saint, both, neither), her death affords somatic fixture, resolves the lies and intrigues with which her existence was inscribed” (293). The sepulcher reassures men of women’s constancy precisely because it marks the ideal cessation of their oscillation between the two extremes: those of the virgin and of the whore. As a paradigm of the masculine wish for an attainable ideal of female sexuality, Sophonisba dies a “virgin wife”, an oxymoron most emblematically staged by Marston in the use of the curtained bed-sepulcher ready for a marital consummation that is never completed.

The heroines’ objectification is verbally registered in metaphors that suggest the immortality they achieve as monuments of chastity. For Govianus the Lady is a “treasure of mankind”, “a jewel” (Middleton, *The Maiden’s* 1998:202) and a “Temple of honour” (Middleton, *The Maiden’s* 1998:215). After her death the Duchess of Malfi is transformed into a “figure cut in alabaster” (Webster 1995 [1972]:193). As a monument of female martyrdom she is eternally fixed into that position of sexlessness that she fought against as

a young widow who asserted her claims to physical pleasure in her secret marriage to Antonio. For her cynical husband, Maximus, Lucina's suicide will secure her a place in eternity through her tomb: "all that is chaste, upon thy tomb shall flourish, / all living epitaphs be thine" (Fletcher 1988:276). As a raped wife she has no place in the social order because her loss of chastity reflects on his honour, the structural principle of early modern masculinity. In a typical instance of chastity as constitutive of a male ego that feeds on homosocial bonding Antonio exhibits his wife's dead body to the full view of other lords as "a fair comely building" that fell when it was undermined by "violent rape" (Middleton, *The Revenger's* 1988:91). His assessment of her suicide as a virtuous precedent for other wives makes sense in his final self-congratulatory statement that "being an old man, I'd a wife so chaste" (Middleton, *The Revenger's* 1988:93). This is the ironical close of a theatrical act that ignites revenge and at the same time reasserts an insecure masculinity and power for the sake of and over other men.

The heroines' total reification is significantly displayed in the fetishisation of their dead bodies at the hands of men who are often, ironically, their own victimisers: Sophonisba's dead body is adorned with the Roman triumphal regalia by a husband who stoically accepts the existing system of politics, however treacherous. The Tyrant kisses and embraces the Lady's corpse, dressed up in black velvet with a chain of pearls and a crucifix in a tableau of necrophiliac aesthetics, while her pale face at once intensifies and mitigates his desire. At the end of the play Govianus enthrones and crowns the Lady's decked-out dead body, something of which her ghost clearly

disapproves, in a scene in which “the distance between him and the necrophiliac Tyrant narrows to a hair’s breadth” (Wiggins 1998:xvii).

Philippe Ariès (1975:56-57) argues that “from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries, countless scenes or motifs in art and in literature associate death with love, Thanatos with Eros.” The important question is why Jacobean tragedy harps obsessively on women’s violent deaths while at the same time fetishising their dead bodies as weird artifacts. The answer has to do with the representation of intense and dramatic corporeality that dominates early seventeenth-century tragedy in its interrogation of relationships of power and resistance. These are inscribed in the body, the violence done to it, the pain and/or the pressure that it suffers. Sensational visual representation of extreme corporeality, far from being a token of the dramatists’ personal “depravity”, a Grand Guignol kind of exhibitionism, a gruesome sensationalism or a sheer virtuosity in artifice is, as Francis Barker (2000 [1997]:19) has brilliantly shown us, “systemic rather than personal: not the issue of an aberrant exhibitionism, but formed across the whole surface of the social as the locus of the desire, the revenge, the power and the misery of this world.” What Barker however left undiscussed in his classic *The Tremulous Private Body* is the *gendering* of the body whose materiality he nevertheless foregrounds. This is rather a peculiar omission in view of the classic association of woman with materiality. The omission is thrown into relief when he argues for the loss of corporeality as a representational practice by pinpointing the body’s disappearance from the visible as central to emergent bourgeois subjectivity. More specifically, in Barker’s narrative of the rise of the bourgeois subject the



body is always already masculine because neutral, and therefore the subject is “naturally” male:

That the body we see is so frequently presented in fragments, or in the process of its effective dismemberment, no doubt indicates that contradiction is already growing up within this system of presence, and that the deadly subjectivity of the modern is already beginning to emerge and to round vindictively on the most prevalent emblem of the discursive order it supersedes. (2000 [1997]:21)

I suggest that this thus-displayed corporeality, often seen in fragments upon the stage, is prevalently female insofar as it serves as the ideal paradigm for the vindictive “deadly subjectivity” of the emergent bourgeois order that Barker adumbrates. The growing contradiction is most graphically displayed in the transubstantiation of the Duchess of Malfi from sexual materiality to ethereal femininity in the trope of the revenant. However, the corporeality still lingers in the figure of the woman on stage that has cracked because of the terrible pressure exerted on her body. These pressures originate in the feminine body that is culturally constructed as representing deep anxieties concerning subjectivity in the specific manner of an internal division: female physicality expresses the inner split between the spiritual and the physical, purity and lust, the weak and the strong, beauty and decay. In short, the female body *par excellence* signifies the terrible divisions that bring to the fore the interplay of the archaic forces of desire and death. As Jonathan Dollimore (1996:371-372) argues, the

vision of desire as at once impossible and a kind of death is everywhere present in the literature of the Early Modern period, especially in the anarchic excess of Jacobean tragedy. In some of these plays the death/desire dialectic is present not just as a theme, but as a principle of dramatic structure and psycho-social identity, as the dynamic which simultaneously drives and disintegrates the world.

This dialectic is literally embodied in the living and/or the dead body of the desirable female, which serves as a conduit of death for man even when (or should I say especially when) it obstructs male sperm by remaining impenetrable to unlawful desire. Woman is closely umbilicated with life through motherhood and for this same reason also with the inevitability of death, as in the womb-tomb trope: “As the mother, ‘woman’ is the original prenatal dwelling place; as the beloved, she draws fantasies of desire and otherness; and as Mother Earth, she is the anticipated final resting place” (Goodwin and Bronfen 1993:13). In the sexual act man loses himself in the body of the woman where the limits of one’s self vanish because *le petit mort* of sexual pleasure is confused with actual dying. However, sex, as a form of violence done on the feminine body in the form of penetration, makes up for man’s loss into the Other and offers the fantasy of a transient victory over death. Seduced, raped or chaste, the dead heroine signifies something broader than perishable femininity. Via her death a site of resistance is opened up for the male protagonist and thus empowerment is offered to the defiant subject, empowerment which springs from the illusion that a man can after all not only resist death, the invincible enemy, but also contain it. This containment of and mastery over death, however transitory and illusory, is the psychological effect of the violent end of woman on the spectator during the performance.

Witnessing the death of another affords a sense of jubilation at one's own survival that is felt especially intensely because

*[d]eath is gendered.* Probably without exception, at least in Western culture, representations of death bring into play the binary tensions of gender constructs, as life/death engages permutations with masculinity/femininity and with fantasies of power. (Goodwin and Bronfen 1993:20)

The spectator to whom the spectacle of dead female bodies is predominantly addressed is male and the “surveyed” body confirms the power of the male gaze that objectifies it. That this is an act of re-appropriation essentially foregrounds what de Lauretis has pinpointed (1987:37), namely that although the woman's body appears as the locus of sexuality the latter is in fact a male attribute. In the Jacobean theatre man's striving to achieve mastery over physical decay takes the form of a “quaintly” staged spectacle which is predicated on “the central function of the fetish [which] is to make an object present to sight which stands in for the absent phallus” (Bronfen 1992:103), the signifier for wholeness. The heroine's dead body in its entirety but most significantly in its fragments serves precisely as the fetish which, severed from a materiality that is synonymous with decay, signifies the male refusal to acknowledge death. Its fetishisation on stage offers the spectator the narcissistic perception of his own self as “whole and immortal” (Bronfen 1992:97) in the face of the unwelcome awareness that he is neither. The ideal Renaissance beauty in the Petrarchan trope of breaking up the woman's body into objects such as, for example, lilies, cherries and pearls, is a strategy that precisely dispels the threat of death that woman embodies. She turns into “a collection of

exquisitely beautiful, dissociated objects” (Vickers in Finke 1984:362) that does not cohere into a complete whole. Gloriana’s disguised skull “dressed up in tires” is presented both as a *memento mori* and as a sarcastic reminder of the fetishised emblazoned body in poetry, jewels in place of women. Vittoria as a diamond in John Webster’s *The White Devil*, the chain of pearls across the Lady’s dead body, Sophonisba’s nightgown-petticoat and regalia, the use of an echo for the “actual” woman, i.e. the Duchess, all betoken man’s pleasurable illusion in possession. In particular, the fetishised *chaste dead body* paradigmatically reflects the male fantasy of a retrieved wholeness that is imperilled by the fear that it will be irrevocably lost in the actual penetration of the living woman; but the fear is essentially of his own body penetrated by the superior male, namely the tyrant. Thus the male subject’s transgressive pleasure in (sexual) possession and power via the woman’s sacrificed body fundamentally expresses the triumphant assertion of masculinity over the real object of desire, which is the tyrant.

This raises the question of the extreme political urgency of expressing relations of subjection in sexual terms. The answer inevitably raises the issue of tyranny in a period in which, interestingly with the exception of the political writings of James I, tyranny was generally the unspoken word everywhere but in the theatre (Bushnell 1990:72). Politically wronged men or those seeking for revenge displace onto the marble-like stage spectacle of dead woman their desire for an ideal purity and wholeness that cannot be satisfied by the corrupted and rotting body politic that the tyrant heads. This displacement is predicated on the death of women for the symbolic purification of the social body insofar as their physicality culturally inscribes internal violence as

manifested in the body's discharges, especially of blood (Bataille 1990 [1957]:54), a kind of decay that female beauty paradoxically intensifies by turning into a mask of death: "Beauty is desired in order that it may be befouled. [...] Human beauty, in the union of bodies, shows the contrast between the purest aspect of mankind and the hideous animal quality of the sexual organs" (Bataille 1990 [1957]:144). The stage violence focuses the truly explosive psychic burden of the subject's terror of death, a natural, integral part of mortality but grotesquely magnified in the figure of the tyrant, the Signifier of absolute power. After all, it is the male subjected to power who risks being penetrated and thus feminised by the tyrant.

Jacobean tragedy intensely sexualises power relations in the public sphere in order to speak of the male subject's place within the political. It acknowledges early seventeenth-century man's self-awareness as the submissive and hence feminised subject of monarchical absolutism, but simultaneously denies this by hinting at an alternative place as the defiant agent of resistance. Thus, the dominant anxiety concerning positionality vis-à-vis political power is transposed to the theatre as the space for the enactment of precisely this anxiety, and for its alleviation. In tragedy's sexualisation of hierarchical power and dependence in the political sphere, tyranny is intended to signify the excess of the appetitive, the narcissistic desire for pleasure and a sovereign will to absolute power. For dramatists such as Marston, Middleton, Webster, Beaumont and Fletcher and others, what the tyrant represents is not so much power in itself but desire as absolute power:

The overwhelming and unquenchable appetites that possess the tyrant motivate his actions; these appetites lead him in the end to seek the political power that enables him to satisfy his appetites without hindrance by the law. It is appetite, and not power, in the end, that topples the hierarchy of reason, converting man into beast. (Bushnell 1990:53)

From Valentinian's fantasy of relentless sexual potency there emerges the fearful possibility of a wholesale destruction of the social body itself when he gleefully threatens to implant "the royal seed of Caesar" (Fletcher 1998:290) into his subjects' wives. And it is *most emphatically* the Tyrant's necrophilia in *The Maiden's Tragedy* that serves as the dominant trope for desire as absolute power and its reverse, namely, unlimited power as infinite pleasure. At the same time, necrophilia as a scene of transgressive desire *par excellence* paradigmatically incorporates the macabre eroticism of graveyards, tombs and revenants, elements that pervade early seventeenth-century theatre. Necrophilia typically expresses the conflation between death and the extreme gratification of the senses in the act of sex, the prolongation *ad infinitum* of the state of *le petit mort*. The confusion is so great that the death of the beloved, far from cancelling pleasure, intensifies it, so that the corpse becomes in its turn the object of desire.

What these tragedies display is the interplay of death and female sexuality as a twofold representation that persistently and eloquently inscribes the question of power. Because of woman's culturally ascribed "secondary" nature, her dead body is the ideal fetish for the tyrant's narcissistic self-perception as omnipotent. It fully serves his fantasy of complete control over his victim's life, death and significantly also hereafter and at the same time it

occludes his own death. Does not the tyrant own all his subjects? Is he not God, after all? In *The Maiden's Tragedy* the Tyrant's necrophilia is transcribed as "self-deification, an appropriation of God's power "to bring the dead back to life"" (Daileader 1998:97). In the eponymous tragedy, Valentinian, on hearing that Lucina is dead, blames his courtiers for having convinced him that he is omnipotent, an idea disproved by the fact that he cannot bring her back to life: "Why do ye make me God that can do nothing? / Is she not dead?" (Fletcher 1988:290).

In his need to maintain his illusory god-likeness he is ready to force himself on Lucina's now dead body but, ironically, he conquers "nothing", the bawdy word at the time for female genitalia (Bronfen 1992:74), a nothingness and/or "lack" that still inscribes male signification of difference. Poisoned by Aretus, one of his eunuchs, Valentinian painfully recognises that he is mere flesh and that he is "A man, a mortal man" (Fletcher 1988:312), but this offers no relief to the victims of his tyranny. To them Valentinian, like all tyrants, has always been, as Aretus says to him, "but man, a bad man too, a beast / and like a sensual bloody thing thou diest" (Fletcher 1988:313). In an eloquent gesture Fletcher invites the spectators to relish, in the spectacle of the tyrant's prolonged agony, the terrible suffering inflicted by the poison and his tortuous corporeal disintegration, something offered as a recompense for their suffering in the limited context of revenge. However, there is no jubilant restoration of order, since Maximus, the new emperor but no better a man than the dead tyrant, will be poisoned, significantly by a woman, Eudoxa, avenging her monstrous husband, an act that underscores the absolute lack of any alternative to this deadly system of power.

## Conclusion

Michael Neil argues that early modern tragedy “offered to contain the fear of death by staging fantasies of ending in which the moment of dying was transformed, by the arts of performance, to a supreme demonstration of distinction” (1997:32). However, this does not apply to the victims of tyrannous masculinity, the heroines, although their return from the grave as voices, echoes and/or ghosts might be represented as a harbinger of the eventual punishment of the tyrant. The only exception to this, the heroine as an actual avenger of the wronged subjects of absolute power, is Evadne in *The Maid’s Tragedy*. Julia Kristeva’s incisive analysis of the psychology of the violent political female subject shows at the same time the limitations of Evadne’s revolt:

But when a subject is too brutally excluded from [the] socio-symbolic stratum; when, for example, a woman feels her affective life as a woman or her condition as a social being too brutally ignored by existing discourse or power (from her family to social institutions); she may, by counter-investing the violence she has endured, make of herself a “possessed” agent of this violence in order to combat what was experienced as frustration. (1990 [1986]: 203)

As the only female tyrannicide Evadne is throughout already entrapped in the affective/personal. She is unable to turn her fury into a political cause and thus transcend it, despite her partial recognition that her sexual reification as a whore of the King is part of a wider system of exploitation. Significantly, when she stabs her royal lover in bed she invokes the family, precisely the institution that has victimised her: “This for my lord / Amintor, / This for my noble



brother, and this stroke / For the most wronged of women” (Beaumont and Fletcher 1998:144). As a “‘possessed’ agent” of violence Evadne cannot therefore be entitled to heroic distinction, a distinction that male tyrannicides historically enjoy. On the other hand, the heroines’ “resurrections” mark out the tyrants’ power as finite, but in no way can the revenant be seen as a transcendental confirmation of distinction. The violated heroines’ deaths simply consign them to utter annihilation, with the arguable exception of the Duchess of Malfi: the only instance of articulation of a female defiant subjectivity is offered by her. At the point of death she echoes Anthony’s heroic self-assertion in *Anthony and Cleopatra*, “I am / Anthony yet”, in her famous statement “I am Duchess of Malfi still”, but this will be immediately challenged by Bosola’s political cynicism (Neill 1997:349). Her tomb as a symbol of the new moral politics that the ending promises signifies that heroic closure for women’s lives cannot exist outside a new order of things, but that ironically this can only take place over their dead bodies.

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