

Gloriana's Queer Skull: The Matter of Life and Death in *The Revenger's Tragedy*

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One moment in *Hamlet* that encapsulates the problematic ways in which Shakespeare's texts have been passed down to the 21st century comes in Hamlet's first soliloquy:

O that this too too sallied flesh would melt,
Thaw and resolve itself into a dew,
Or that the Everlasting had not fixed
His canon 'gainst self-slaughter. O God, God,
How weary, stale, flat and unprofitable
Seem to me all the uses of this world!¹

But is Hamlet's flesh, indeed, as both the First and Second Quartos have it, "sallied"? Or is it "too too solid", as in the Folio of 1623? Or, as some editors would have it, is it "sullied"?² The idea of the "melting" away of the flesh is a curiously effortless, non-agential one that ultimately results in a much-changed self. Even though, for Hamlet, it is a process that can occur only posthumously, he suggests that it is more desirable than what has become, to him; the literally unbearable facticity of a living fleshly selfhood to which he would, in a heartbeat, say "a dew" and "adieu". This "melting", with its almost unbearable suggestion of liquefaction is present metonymically from the start of *The Revenger's Tragedy* (1606), where Vindice has waited nine years before holding, and addressing, a skull.³ While the play offers no textual explanation for this unusually delayed revenge, Rowland Wymer, among others, has debated the very specific dating. "After nine years the flesh will unquestionably have rotted away from Gloriana's skull," writes Wymer, "enabling it to function not just as a traditional *memento mori* but as a stark emblem of ultimate moral purity."⁴ The skull Vindice holds belonged (or is it *belongs*?) to his beloved, Gloriana, who, sullied and sallied, is now a "sallow picture of my poisoned love."⁵ The love-struck revenger continues to muse, in a deliberate travesty of Petrarchan tropes, about Gloriana, his:

study's ornament, thou shell of Death,
Once the bright face of my betrothed lady,
When life and beauty naturally filled out
These ragged imperfections;
When two heaven-pointed diamonds were set
In those unsightly rings – then 'twas a face
So far beyond the artificial shine
Of any woman's bought complexion.⁶

Gloriana has made the transition from self to skull. Early modern dramatists had a morbid fascination with that alteration: the length of time it takes for self to become skeleton comes up in *Hamlet* too – as the gravedigger tells the Prince that it takes around eight or nine years for "a man" to "lie i'th' earth ere he rot," although "a tanner" (that is, one who has spent their working life curing leather and who is, presumably, also "tanned" as a result), "will last you nine year."⁷

It is a different sort of transmutation from that which reverberates throughout *The Tempest*, initiated by Ariel's exquisite song about a body not interred, but submerged. "Full fathom five thy father lies," the spirit tells Ferdinand:

Of his bones are coral made;
Those are pearls that were his eyes,
Nothing of him that doth fade
But doth suffer a sea-change

¹ William Shakespeare, *Hamlet* eds Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor (London: Thomson (Arden Shakespeare, third series), 2006), 1.2.129-34.
² See, for example, the early but still persuasive meditation on this debate in Fredson Bowers's 1956 article, "Hamlet's 'Sullied' or 'Solid' Flesh: a Bibliographical Case-History," as reprinted in Catherine M. S. Alexander (ed.). *Shakespeare's Times, Texts, and Stages*. The Cambridge Shakespeare Library, Volume 1. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. Pp. 123-27. See also Thompson and Taylor, *Hamlet*, pp. 175-76, n. 129.

³ On the long-disputed authorship of *The Revenger's Tragedy*, see Steven Mullaney, "Mourning and Misogyny: *Hamlet*, *The Revenger's Tragedy*, and the Final Progress of Elizabeth I, 1600-1607," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 45:2 (Summer, 1994), pp. 139-62 (145, n.22): "I am persuaded by recent arguments that Middleton is in fact the likely author. For a survey of the issue, see the introduction to Thomas Middleton, *The Revenger's Tragedy: A Facsimile of the 1607/8 Quarto*, ed. MacD. P. Jackson (Rutherford, NJ, 1983)." See also Martin White, "The *Revenger's Tragedy*: Middleton's or Tourneur's?" in Martin White, *English Dramatists: Middleton and Tourneur* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992), pp. 166-71.

⁴ Rowland Wymer, "Jacobean Tragedy," in Michael Hattaway (ed.). *A Companion to English Renaissance Literature and Culture*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2003. Pp. 545-55 (551).

⁵ Anon, *The Revenger's Tragedy*, ed. Brian Gibbons (London: A&C Black, 2008), 1.1.14.

⁶ Anon, *The Revenger's Tragedy*, 1.1.15-22.

⁷ William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, 5.1.154, 158.

Into something rich and strange.⁸

Ariel's production of an image of the potential for the ethereal, almost alchemical, metamorphosis of a corpse throws into sharp relief the earlier play's more elementally base textual variants: "sallied," "solid," and "sullied." Ferdinand's father has been spectacularly transformed "into something rich and strange." The "strangeness" of Hamlet's speculation about self-as-corpse is more grounded; the actuality of his flesh is too pronounced easily to "melt". For all of Ferdinand's father's beautiful changes, Hamlet's angst is uglier, and certainly far less ethereal. Each of the three lexical options suggests corporeal obstinacy and – as one of the possible words suggests – "solidity." If he is "sallied," then his psychological battering is being viscerally experienced; "sullied," and his human frame is corrupt, and decomposing even as he lives. According to Ariel, Ferdinand's father has been cleansed; made precious: is this the kind of tranquil "melting" for which Hamlet also yearns? The idea of transfiguration as opposed to annihilation is surely more appealing to the human imagination. That "solid" flesh, despite – or, indeed, precisely on account of – being "sallied," or "sullied," might become something beautiful or precious, is a corrective to the nihilistic tenor of so many early modern plays. Much human endeavour on the part of playwrights, philosophers, and artists is an implicit corrective to Lear's pessimistic proposition that "nothing will come of nothing."⁹

In this essay I ask whether *The Revenger's Tragedy* paradoxically – perversely, even – shows a woman, Gloriana, in a position of absent presence and impotent power. Is it always the role of the *memento mori* to serve a higher purpose? Or does Middleton's play merely show the desecration of a woman, both before and after death? Is there, in Middleton's play, a kind of immortality brought about by the tenacious stage presence accorded to Gloriana's skull? I read Gloriana's (non)presence as epitomising Judith Butler's work on gender as performance; even as preceding language. It is a reading that allows a way in to thinking about the apparently genderless skull's distinctive onstage agency. Further, it is Gloriana's skull or – more properly, here, Gloriana-as-skull – that vigorously challenges and changes plot, plotting, cultural expectations, and fixity, in a way that Gloriana's living body never could.

Many scholars have offered commentaries on the rise in Renaissance Europe of the anatomist as artist (or, indeed, vice versa). In the attempts of both da Vinci and Vesalius we might read an attempt at staving off the inevitability of mortality – the "nothing" that comes "of nothing" – by imbuing the skeleton with a kind of posterity, not only in their notebooks and detailed drawings, but also in the status of these artworks as records of something that endures.¹⁰ Gail Kern Paster has remarked on how "the skull is equally a reminder of the self-mocking that is the exclusive province of the living brain aware of its own mortality and capable of skillfully [*sic.*] portraying it."¹¹ While the Duke-as-friar in *Measure for Measure* draws for the prisoner Claudio a most terrifying glimpse into the unknown possibilities of the afterlife – "To lie in cold obstruction and to rot" – the early modern artists and anatomists were revivifying the human frame and granting it a kind of immortality, depicting it as animated even once the anima, or soul, had deserted it.¹² Thus we see skulls that, in Andreas Vesalius's woodcuts, for example, seem to look at us without eyes, and speak to us without tongues. But this goes deeper than the traditional early modern narrative of the *memento mori* – and much work has been done on that, too.¹³ These visual representations are essential in more ways than one – as signifiers of what one must have (or is it must *be?*), in order to live as a human being, and as resisting bodies that will not – cannot – be reduced to anything less, even to dust: to echo Hamlet's powerful oxymoron, there is a nobility or "quintessence" to humanness.¹⁴

While, with twenty-first-century technology, a skull may be visibly "male" or "female", its gender would not have been at all evident to the early modern theatre-goer. The skull has the potential, in early modern terms and contexts, then, to be thought of as free from signifiers of gender difference. In this way, it can be read as gender free. But it is a deeply problematic liberation that can happen only once the owner or inhabitant of that skull is dead. In my reading of *The Revenger's Tragedy* I grant Gloriana's skull more autonomy – in a radically paradoxical sense – than others have done. Laurie A. Finke, for example, wary, perhaps, of appearing to advocate what she describes as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's "strategy for 'killing' a woman into art," argues that

⁸ William Shakespeare, *The Tempest* eds Virginia Mason Vaughan and Alden T Vaughan (London: Thomson (Arden Shakespeare), 2011), 1.2.397-402.

⁹ William Shakespeare, *King Lear* ed. R. A. Foakes (London: Thomson (Arden Shakespeare, third series), 1997), 1.1.90.

¹⁰ See, for example, Rose Marie San Juan, "The Turn of the Skull: Andreas Vesalius and the Early Modern *Memento Mori*," *Art History* 35:5 (November 2012), pp. 958-75 (964): "[Vesalius's] figure is neither alive nor dead, and thus its insight into death can only be located in a space that cannot be defined in relation to the binary states of life and death."

¹¹ Gail Kern Paster, "The pith and marrow of our attribute: dialogue of skin and skull in *Hamlet* and Holbein's *The Ambassadors*," *Textual Practice* 23:2 (2009), pp. 247-65 (261).

¹² William Shakespeare, *Measure For Measure*, ed. J. W. Lever (London: Methuen (Arden Shakespeare), 1985), 3.1.118.

¹³ On skulls on the early modern stage, see Alan C. Dessen and Leslie Thomson. 1999. *A Dictionary of Stage Directions in English Drama, 1580-1642*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 202, where they discuss this key stage property in Thomas Dekker and Thomas Middleton, *I Honest Whore* (1604); John Webster, *The White Devil* (1612); Thomas Dekker and Thomas Middleton, *The Bloody Banquet* (c. 1608-09); and William Davenant, *The Tragedy of Albovine, King of the Lombards* (1629); in addition to Thomas Middleton's *Revenger's Tragedy* (1606), and Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1603), of course.

¹⁴ William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, 2.2.274.

Gloriana's skull is not about Gloriana.¹⁵ "Vindice's [*sic.*] descriptive strategy fragments his lover's body," Finke writes, "by making its parts, here the head, into signs - ciphers - of his own morbid imagination, his obsession with corruption and death."¹⁶

The biological phenomenon of the skull resists gendered interpellation while being the most crucial prop in another actor's identity formation. The skull "acts," or performs, a role, then, which creates a gendered identity. And this, for Gloriana, is a more potent identity than she ever had in life. Vindice's redeployment of her skull makes Gloriana-as-woman fluid; her performance repositions her into a posthumous identity, and ushers in the demise of the other main characters of the play. Central to Butler's identity politics, as many commentators have remarked since the first publication of *Gender Trouble* some 25 years ago, is the idea that the hegemony controls any discourse that we may deploy in order to create and control our identities. It's a philosophy that begs the question of whether or not we have an identity *prior to* cultural inscription. And, in the case of Gloriana, might identity actually accrue greater meaning after that inscription? What are we looking at when we're looking at Gloriana's skull? In other words, to quote Andrew Sofer, "by asserting its material presence on the stage, the Jacobean skull repeatedly refuses to settle for the role of passive emblem and insists on its active role in the stage event."¹⁷ On the surface of Gloriana's skull, first the playwright, then Vindice, and the Duke, and finally the audience, confer a gendered "significance" on a prop that would otherwise remain "a mere facticity devoid of value."¹⁸ Like the early modern body of the witch, so Gloriana's skull "is not simply a surface awaiting the inscription of meaning but rather the product of a series of historically located personal and social limits."¹⁹

But the powerful and inescapable irony, of course, is that so many early modern women were, in life, little more than props. Vindice's own sister Castiza is treated by him with no more reverence than he accords to Gloriana's skull: but Castiza's near-prostitution delimits the scope of her power while Gloriana's agency is, ironically, far more meaningful. As Sheetal Lodhia has argued, "*The Revenger's Tragedy, The Duchess of Malfi, and The Maiden's Tragedy* challenge conceptions of 'deadness' itself, featuring modified bodies that possess agency beyond life, agency absent of a soul."²⁰ But in what meaningful sense is agency-in-death remotely empowering?

My reading postulates that Gloriana's skull marks a site of feminist resistance. Her lips – praised for their chaste silence in her lifetime – become the instruments of revenge. Gloriana is transformed, paradoxically, given her posthumous state, into an active site of refusal of the various insignia of the category "woman." At the same time, however, precisely because of Renaissance ideals of silence, chastity, and obedience, she can be read as conforming absolutely. Gloriana-as-skull is simultaneously a resisting *and* conforming subject. As Butler writes: "As a shifting and contextual phenomenon, gender does not denote a substantive being, but a relative point of convergence among culturally and historically specific sets of relations."²¹ Gloriana is the site of just such a "convergence;" her identity is produced discursively without her uttering a single word. But does Gloriana do this herself? Or is Vindice, puppet-master *extraordinaire* literally objectifying her, or, as Finke argues, "reducing her"?²²

Vindice's antics with the skull in act three are, again reflecting on Butler's work, pantomimic and, as such, like a drag performance in which *every* gendered engagement with the world is parody; is rehearsed and scripted by cultural norms. While poisoning someone by pretending to seduce them with a skeleton dragged up to resemble a former lover is not – of course – a quotidian experience, it remains that the key Renaissance ideals for a woman – chastity, silence, and obedience – are performed impeccably by Gloriana as skull. Read in this way, the skull is being used to reinforce the hegemony of gendered behaviour, less in a subversive act than in a logical continuum of Gloriana's life and culturally-scripted behaviour. If women are reified in early modern culture onstage it is merely the product, and logical extension, of their objectification off it.

Like the exaggerated presentation of the body in drag, Gloriana-as-skull fulfils agential expectations while simultaneously being a portable object – a prop to serve Vindice's machinations. To subvert or to surpass gender and the social expectations imbricated with it, she must be reduced to a skull in order to be enlarged in the realm of performance. She has agency only when agency – like her very flesh – is stripped from her on stage. In the performance, she is, in fact the *least* performative and least dishonest any of us can ever be since, in Butler's paradigm, even the subject/object dyad is an artificially constructed, hegemonic binary which is troubled, allowing

¹⁵ Laurie A. Finke. "Painting Women: Images of Femininity in Jacobean Tragedy." *Theatre Journal* 36:3 (1984), pp. 356-70 (361).

¹⁶ Finke. "Painting Women." p. 358.

¹⁷ Andrew Sofer. *The Stage Life of Props*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003, p. xi.

¹⁸ Judith Butler. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1990, p. 129.

¹⁹ Belinda Johnston. "Renaissance Body Matters: Judith Butler and the Sex That is One." *International Journal of Sexuality and Gender Studies* (April, 2001) 6:1, pp. 77-94 (85).

²⁰ Sheetal Lodhia. "'The house is hers, the soul is but a tenant': Material Self-Fashioning and Revenge Tragedy." *Early Theatre* 12:2 (2009), pp. 135-61 (139).

²¹ Butler. *Gender Trouble*, p. 10.

²² Finke. "Painting Women." p. 359; on Vindice's exploitation of Gloriana's skull, see Sarah E. Johnson. *Staging Women and the Soul-Body Dynamic in Early Modern England*. London: Routledge, 2016.

the evolution of the subject through repetition and “practices of *signification*.”²³ As drag parodies the artificiality of social constructs, so Gloriana-as-skull practises signification not through the addition of clothes, but by means of removal, even of her flesh. The skull performs in a way that simultaneously institutes and abolishes. It has an “undeniable ability to forge a connection between the dead and the living [...] charged as it is by its transitory status in which presence and absence, visibility and invisibility, can never be fully extricated from each other.”²⁴

The macabre death’s head of the third act of the play continues this project of incongruity and fluid identity. Alive, Gloriana, although loved by Vindice, was subsumed into a greater hegemonic project of control of women’s voices, behaviours, and identities. Her death at the hands of the Duke seems cruelly unavoidable in such a context. If identity is always a flawed enterprise, one in which we’re doomed to fail, Gloriana alive was destined never authentically to *become* herself. But is the alternative any better? It is a bleak picture when murder is the route to self-actualisation because of its annihilation of almost all that was. *Almost* all, for the skull endures. If sex is not natural or given, but is a form of social regulation and control, then in an environment where rebellion is impossible, death comes to the Renaissance woman, from Elizabeth I codified as the immortal Virgin Queen, to Gloriana herself, who is only ever known to us posthumously.

Indeed, Peter Hyland sees the name of the skull in *The Revenger’s Tragedy* as evoking the late Queen in a nostalgic Jacobean sleight of hand. Gloriana’s murder of the Duke, Hyland argues, “is a representation of the past that destroys the debased source of present power. It thereby takes on a potent political meaning in reviving the memory of Elizabeth as a weapon against James.”²⁵ In Hyland’s formulation, the signifier “Gloriana” carries a huge weight of representation, calling to mind a yearned-for golden age that is quite halcyon in the context of the comparative vice and debauchery of James’s court. Hyland’s account provides a motive both for the author’s/playwright’s desired anonymity, and for the nine years Vindice has waited. Similarly, Steven Mullaney argues that “Middleton achieves an overlaid meaning no less spectacular but of a different order, by making Vindice so fully possess the skull of Gloriana—the maidenhead, according to the implicit logic of his pun, of the Virgin Queen herself.”²⁶ The delay, then, to the minds of some Renaissance audience members, positions Gloriana very firmly back in the reign of Elizabeth. If gender is what Gloriana *does* (the nostalgic signification; the murder of the Duke), and not who she *is*, what, then, does “Gloriana-as-skull” (materially different, in the life of the play, to “Gloriana’s skull”) *express* that Gloriana-alive could not? The world of *The Revenger’s Tragedy* is, to return to Butler, one where “[t]here is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results.”²⁷

The queer potential of Gloriana’s skull is complicated still more when its status as prop is interrogated. As Andrew Sofer has argued in an examination of *Hamlet*: “Is ‘Yorick’s skull’ Yorick’s or Hamlet’s? Already the stage prop is arrogating conflicting ‘properties’.”²⁸ And there’s a key difference between Yorick’s skull and Gloriana-as-skull: she is crucial, absolutely instrumental, to the plot of her play while Yorick is merely a vehicle for one more in a series of Hamlet’s increasingly bleak solipsistic musings. What’s more, as Gail Kern Paster has argued, in *Hamlet*, “the skull is not only unverifiable but also unanswerable: the skull, being unable to speak its own name or history, can only be given an identity; and thus the skull identified as Yorick claims distinction only briefly.”²⁹ Conversely, in *The Revenger’s Tragedy*, and at the heart of the play’s queer enterprise, identity becomes journey, not destination; the result, and not the cause, of performance.³⁰ Elizabeth Williamson argues that “[i]f we see the skulls not as inherent bearers of meaning but as anchors for the stories theater practitioners tell about each other, it is less easy to dismiss Hamlet’s decision to address the skull by the name of ‘Yorick.’”³¹

Performance is a negotiation over symbols and representation. Semiotic conflicts are in evidence elsewhere in early modern drama, from Petruchio and Katherine’s verbal jousting over the sun and the moon (a battle Katherine must lose if she’s to win the bigger war), to Hamlet’s hawks and handsaws.³² The skull is a disruptive force. This disruption makes more sense when read through Butler’s lens once again, since “gender is not to culture as sex is to nature; gender is also the discursive/cultural means by which ‘sexed nature’ or ‘a natural sex’ is produced and established as ‘prediscursive,’ prior to culture, a politically neutral surface *on which* culture acts.”³³ In its queering of binary ontologies (the quick and the dead; the active and the passive; the masculine and

²³ Butler. *Gender Trouble*, p. 144.

²⁴ San Juan. “The Turn of the Skull.” p. 961.

²⁵ Peter Hyland. “Re-Membering Gloriana: *The Revenger’s Tragedy*,” in Elizabeth H. Hageman & Katherine Conway (eds). *Resurrecting Elizabeth I in Seventeenth-Century England*. Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2007, pp. 82-94 (84).

²⁶ Mullaney. “Mourning and Misogyny.” P. 15.

²⁷ Butler. *Gender Trouble*, p. 25.

²⁸ Sofer. *The Stage Life of Props*, p. 53.

²⁹ Kern Paster. “The pith and marrow.” P. 260.

³⁰ As Julie Sanders observes: “The resonance of the stage picture accumulates potency when we consider that both *Hamlet* and *The Revenger’s Tragedy* were King’s Men plays and that *Hamlet* was probably in the repertory at the same time as Middleton’s play in 1606 and that the lead role in each was probably played by the same star actor, Richard Burbage.” See Julie Sanders. *Cambridge Introduction to Early Modern Drama, 1576-1642*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014, p. 81.

³¹ Elizabeth Williamson. “Yorick’s Afterlives: Skull Properties in Performance.” <http://www.borrowers.uga.edu/782717/show>. No page nos.

³² “When the wind is southerly I know a hawk from a handsaw.” William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, 2.2.315-16.

³³ Butler. *Gender Trouble*, p. 7.

the feminine), the skull's inaction becomes action. As William E. Engel has observed, disruption of established binaries, such as a "disjunction of stillness and movement marks almost all representations of Death in the Renaissance – as does the double standard that Death accompanies or is within each individual at all times and yet is characterized as the alien, as the other."³⁴

The Revenger's Tragedy is a play where skulls *do*, because the body is represented as purely socially and linguistically constructed through Vindice's language; the skull's gender identity is both performed and produced by his actions and words. In this formulation, Gloriana's first authentic act must be posthumous because it must be performed by Gloriana-as-skull, a material, yet, significantly, non-corporeal, entity existing metaphysically and acting to cause the Duke's death. The taboo around the death's head's ontology and actions as a prop demarcates a body that "is itself a consequence of taboos that render that body discrete by virtue of its stable boundaries."³⁵

Gloriana, then, is a queer skull, resisting norms, and proving central to the darker moments and absurdist humour of *The Revenger's Tragedy*. And we'd do well to recall Butler's claim that "laughter in the face of serious categories is indispensable for feminists."³⁶ However, in this reading we must also be alert to the absurdity of the conceptual possibility that we may frame Renaissance women as literally better off dead. It is a conundrum that highlights the absolute precarity of their lives, subverting Joan Kelly Gadol's now-famous question to ask: "Did living women have a Renaissance?"³⁷ It is also a question asked by Diane Purkiss, in a tone of darkly playful understatement: "The fact that witchcraft was a role did not always make it an interesting subversion of gender boundaries. Once convicted and hanged, the witch's opportunities for exciting unfixings of the assumptions of others were rather limited."³⁸

The unreasonably contradictory demands annexed to the category of "woman" in the Renaissance highlighted the contingency of gender. In a Foucauldian manoeuvre, Butler unbolts gender and desire from the sexed body, making cultural productions/constructions instead appear "natural." This is how Vindice presents his version of Gloriana to the Duke in act three: she has been constructed in death – as in life – as a sexually available object, and the focus of his sexual desire. The murder of the Duke is not, however, the first time that Gloriana has been semiotically assembled: before producing her for the Duke and for his own revenge, Vindice produces her in his conversation with his brother. "Have I not fitted the old surfeiter/With a quaint piece of beauty?" asks Vindice: "Age and bare bone/Are e'er allied in action."³⁹ Gloriana-as-skull is a site of dis-ease and a contagion that "infects the body's semiotic function. In the revenge drama, the body eludes all efforts to direct and contain its proliferating semiosis."⁴⁰

Following Nietzsche, Butler's claim that "there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" complicates Gloriana's ontology still more.⁴¹ Ultimately, the audience is not even secure in the knowledge (and Vindice may be no more certain than that, either) whether the specific skull that Vindice uses is, or was, Gloriana's. But in one sense, that is almost irrelevant: the identity of "Gloriana" both imbues with meaning, but also exceeds, the skull's smooth white bounds. The skull is a receptacle of meaning; an empty-replete space.

In this reading, Gloriana is no more the "doer behind the deed", than Vindice is – they are co-conspirators.⁴² This interpretation is to move away from thinking of Gloriana-as-prop (as so many critics have done) to Gloriana-as-revenger, forging an identity in the very act of taking down the Duke's corruption. Gloriana-as-skull offers a robustly visual and semantic riposte to Butler's question: "if there is no recourse to a 'person,' or a 'sex,' or a 'sexuality' that escapes the matrix of power and discursive relations that effectively produce and regulate the intelligibility of those concepts for us, what constitutes the possibility of effective inversion, subversion, or displacement within the terms of a constructed identity?"⁴³ The possibility emerges that Gloriana has far greater agency and impact dead than she had alive; a claim which on one level entirely justifiably angers commentators who resist entirely the idea that Gloriana has any agency in the central revenge plot.⁴⁴

³⁴ William E. Engel. *Mapping Mortality: The Persistence of Memory and Melancholy in Early Modern England*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995, p. 75.

³⁵ Butler. *Gender Trouble*, p. 133.

³⁶ Butler. *Gender Trouble*, p. viii.

³⁷ Joan Kelly-Gadol. "Did Women Have a Renaissance?" in Renate Bridenthal & Claudia Koonz (eds). *Becoming Visible: Women in European History*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1977, pp. 137-64.

³⁸ Diane Purkiss 1996, p. 208, as quoted in Johnston, "Renaissance Body Matters," p. 91.

³⁹ Anon, *The Revenger's Tragedy*, ed. Brian Gibbons. London: A&C Black, 2008, 3.5.52-4.

⁴⁰ Margaret E. Owens. *Stages of Dismemberment: The Fragmented Body in Late Medieval and Early Modern Drama*. Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2005, p. 103.

⁴¹ Butler. *Gender Trouble*, p. 25.

⁴² Butler. *Gender Trouble*, p. 25.

⁴³ Butler. *Gender Trouble*, p. 32.

⁴⁴ See, for example, Kathryn R. Finin, who argues that "to call this [Gloriana's] revenge further elides the violence enacted upon her mutilated corpse." Kathryn R. Finin. "Re-membering Gloriana: 'Wild Justice' and the Female Body in *The Revenger's Tragedy*," in *Renaissance Forum: An Electronic Journal of Early Modern Literary and Historical Studies* 6.2 (2003), online, n.p., par. 25.

It is Butler's emphasis on process and becoming, without beginning or end, that makes Gloriana-as-skull viably powerful: "the reconceptualization of identity as an effect, that is, as produced or generated, opens up possibilities of 'agency' that are insidiously foreclosed by positions that take identity categories as foundational and fixed. For an identity to be an effect means that it is neither fatally determined nor fully artificial and arbitrary."⁴⁵ At every turn in the world of the play Gloriana has more power than the Duke; patriarchal will and entitlement have been taken down by a skull: "Duke, dost know/You dreadful vizard? View it well; 'tis the skull/Of Gloriana [...]The very ragged bone/Has been sufficiently revenged."⁴⁶ Further, "The fascination of the skull for the Renaissance playwright lies less in its emblematic than in its anamorphic properties, its willingness to steal the show from under the noses of the *brotoi*, the 'dying ones,' and to put the spectator literally on edge," writes Andrew Sofer, "And if we wish to understand the function of skulls on the Renaissance stage, we must see them not merely as symbols, but as characters in their own right who may be less self-effacing than they seem."⁴⁷

Gloriana's skull is, of course, literally silent. But it is a posthumous silence that equates to an (albeit involuntary) rejection of a semiosis of being; her stage presence connotes a refusal to trade in the conventional signs that, on the Renaissance stage, created gender. Karin S. Coddin, for example, links the skull's simultaneous material "thingness" and semiotic "no-thingness" to the Renaissance *trompe l'oeil*, "wherein the seeming exactitude of mimesis actually serves to render imitation itself static and artificial."⁴⁸

Gloriana-as-skull is a subaltern, opening up new opportunities for female activity and participation. But it's a strategy shot through with the brutal irony of her literal death and not-being. For how much use is agency to the dead? Ultimately, and deeply poignantly, in Middleton's convoluted ragbag of a play, Gloriana is the only authentic "actor" in this sham world of disguise and inauthenticity. The skull possesses a unique ontology that is radically at odds with the materiality of other actors who are, by contrast, perpetually caught up in a restless and indeterminate state.

⁴⁵ Butler. *Gender Trouble*, p. 147.

⁴⁶ Anon, *The Revenger's Tragedy*, 3.5.148-49; 152-53.

⁴⁷ Sofer. *The Stage Life of Props*, p. 74.

⁴⁸ Karin S. Coddin, "'For Show or Useless Property': Necrophilia and *The Revenger's Tragedy*." *English Literary History* 6. 1994, pp. 71-88 (81).

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