Voice and Obsession: A Rhetoric of Anonymity in *The Revenger's Tragedy*

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Anonymous writing, especially that which possesses "literary" qualities, awakens anxiety in nearly every society which uses writing. Apparently, from a social perspective, the desire to affix responsibility for a text precedes and supersedes the desire to use writing as a means for disclosing identity. In other words, the desire of readers to know who writes what they read is more intense than the desire of authors to treat their writings as "mirrors," reproductions, figments, or representations of themselves. Copyright legislation functions to satisfy the latter desire, but satisfaction of the former desire seems to resist accommodation by the Law and to motivate a large amount of text production dealing with the biographies of authors. Much writing encountered in literate society, such as advertising, instructions, official statements, lists and menus, is anonymous, but these writings tend to adopt signifying practices that identify, to the satisfaction of the reader, the *type* of person responsible for the inscriptions. Literary writing, however, involves such ambiguous signification and produces such complex emotional responses, that readers feel an acute sense of distrust toward them when they encounter a literary text having only a generic author or no identifiable author at all affixed to it--even though readers themselves generally seem unconcerned with discarding their own anonymity in relation to what they read. Indeed, it is primarily when they become authors that readers venture to disclose what they have read to other readers who are anonymous.

It is therefore especially strange to encounter a literary work whose author not only cultivates anonymity but intends the work to achieve its ideal manifestation through theatrical enactment, so that speech, live action itself, originates from an anonymous intelligence. Such a work is *The Revenger's Tragedy,* whose publication in London, in 1607, carried no author's name, though "His Majestie's Servants" had acted the play "sundry times."[1] Since 1656, Cyril Tourneur (?-1626) has been identified as the author of the play, but a great deal of subsequent scholarship has attempted to attribute the work to Thomas Middleton (1580-1627) or John Marston (1576-1634) or even John Webster (ca. 1578-ca. 1632).[2] By 1962, Allardyce Nicoll (1894-1976), who had himself contributed to the complicated authorship debate (on the side of Tourneur) had grown weary of the problem and stressed "the virtue of anonymity" in explaining the "position" of the play "in the larger contexts of dramatic and theatrical history." He quotes with approval a conversation with Sir Walter Greg (1875-1959), the famous Shakespearean scholar, who remarked that he was "trying to forget that these plays had authors at all."[3]

Yet a text is anonymous, not because it has no author, but because its authorship is not known. To "forget" that a text has an author is to repress a level of ambiguity in the text that the phenomenon of anonymity seeks to amplify--it is to forget what anonymity implies: that authorship is more than the disclosure of a personality. At any rate, anonymity is not a "virtue" merely because it allows the reader to concentrate on the "position" or significance of a text without being distracted by the spectacle of a personality, of a life lived outside of the text and outside of imagination. Anonymity is a "virtue" only insofar as it "reminds" the reader of *language* as a signifying power outside the control of either its users or authors. And yet the relation between the language of the play and the anonymity of its authorship has not attracted much scholarly attention. Either the language is the subject of debate about who wrote it, or the scholar treats the language as something in need of clarification regarding its referents.[4]

Thus, an innovative approach to the text would focus on exposing a relation between the language of the text and the representation of anonymity--or, to put it differently, we can approach the text from an emphatically semiotic perspective, wherein linguistic significations of power and salvation achieve idealized authority through anonymity of representation. The text then appears as a sign of a consciousness which seeks to prevent language from signifying any particularized, individual moral conscience, or from signifying "character," an identity that results from *differences* between language users. By constructing an "objective" perception of justice (revenge) and innocence (sexual purity) whereby moral authority, cosmic and abstract, operates through the systematic "de-subjectivization" of all human identities, the text assumes that moral conscience does not signify itself through any individuating use of speech defining the "character" of the speaker.

But my purpose here is not to show how specific rhetorical devices are exclusive to *The Revenger's Tragedy* and therefore constitute a unique rhetoric of anonymity. All the devices discussedhere appear in other texts of the time, including many which are not anonymous. Indeed, for any signification to achieve authority through anonymity, it is necessary for the signification to be repeatable and perhaps even pervasive, in the sense that the reader/spectator does not assign responsibility for the signification to an individual (an author) but to a codification system that exists "outside" any of its users. Anonymous codification foregrounds the mechanisms, rather than the objects, of communication. On the other hand, neither is it my aim to show how *The Revenger's Tragedy* is "representative" of dramatic "conventions" peculiar to the time in which it was written. The play is not an archetype for a rhetoric of anonymity that appears in the work of many authors and designates a general value ascribed to anonymous signification by the social context or "traditions" controlling literary intelligence. To establish such an archetypal identity for the text in relation to a socially determined value requires much more space than is available here. Moreover, it is a mistake to suppose that "conventions" or signifying practices common to many authors are synonymous with a rhetoric of anonymity. An anonymous text may well contain signifying practices that *are* unique to it and by no means "common" to literary practice in general. A rhetoric of anonymity refers to the signifying practices of a text that does not name its author. It does not refer to signifying practices which could come from "anybody." This rhetoric operates as if its significations and signifying practices came, not from anybody, but from "nobody," from pressures "outside" the users of the practices, regardless of the extent to which these practices

produce sameness or difference between authors or texts.

My purpose, then, is to identify relations between specific signifying practices in *The Revenger's Tragedy* and the significations produced by those practices. A sufficient (rather than exhaustive) account of these relations should clarify the *motive* for anonymity of inscription. Motive is not synonymous with intention, which refers to a conscious or stated objective; motives may issue from desires that are unconscious or unacknowledged by either authors or the social contexts in which they write. To accommodate this condition, it is necessary to explain why specific signifying practices produce particular significations. A conventional method for defining motive is to look "outside" the text, to look into the author, into the social "context." But an anonymous text alters the perception of what is "outside" of it; the text presents *itself* as being "outside" the "normal" repositories of motive in authors, "characters," or users of language. Language itself, rather than its referents or users, is the real context for the text and for the capacity of desire to determine or motivate choices of signifying practice. This perception of the relation between motive, context, and rhetorical choices is what prepares the theoretical ground for asserting eventually that it is the motive for anonymity which accounts for the *anxiety* projected by literate societies toward anonymous literary texts.[5]

In *The Revenger's Tragedy,* poetic language tends to construct sameness, rather than difference, between speakers. Many characters appear on the stage, but only one, monumental voice speaks from beginning to end. It is a voice obsessed with one thing: revenge, the only motive whose weight or intensity equals that of lust or sexual passion. The vindictive actions of nearly everyone in the play result from the pervasively morbid obsession of the characters with desiring, possessing, preserving, or destroying sexual purity. Chastity is the object of Obsession, to speak allegorically. The play dramatizes the efforts of the protagonist, Vindice, aided by his brother, Hippolito, to avenge the rape and death of his beloved, who was the victim of a lecherous duke. Vindice and Hippolito perpetrate ingenious ruses and disguises in order to penetrate the corrupt court of the Duke, destroy him, and stage the destruction of his heirs (Lussurioso, Ambitioso, Supervacuo). A subplot features the attempt of the Duchess to spur her illegitimate, disinherited stepson, Spurio, to revenge against the Duke, who says nothing in defense of her "youngest dearest son" (I, ii, 102), charged with raping the wife of a nobleman, Antonio, who in turn seeks revenge. Yet another subplot deals with Vindice's actions to punish his mother, Gratiana, for trying to prostitute his virginal sister, Castiza, to Lussurioso, who seeks to avenge Castiza's disdain for him. Punishment is the physicalization of revenge, but in *The Revenger's Tragedy,* justice unfolds exclusively in terms of

revenge, in terms of punishments inflicted so pervasively as to seem a natural human activity. The desire for revenge appears as "natural" as the desire for purity, for chaste femininity. The convoluted narrative suggests that while revenge does not always produce justice, justice inevitably entails revenge. In focusing on Vindice's obsession, the text might construct the perception that his revenge is more "just" than that pursued by the other characters. But Vindice and his brother suffer mortal punishment from the man (Antonio) who benefits most from their conspiracies. Even if it leads to justice, revenge does not cease to perpetuate itself. Death emerges as punishment for the impurity of life itself. It is clear, however, that strategies of revenge develop within an obsessed state of mind, which is not peculiar to any one character in the play: it is anonymous. Obsession discloses itself above all through speech; thus, the task before us is to identify those rhetorical devices which define the obsessed "voice" controlling the text as a whole and to demonstrate how this "voice" of obsession is synonymous with a rhetoric of anonymity, with the "objective" language for representing movement toward justice. Four general categories of rhetoric are peculiar to this obsessed voice: 1) restricted vocabulary and repetition; 2) abstraction; 3) compressed imagery; and 4) comic ambiguity. These categories and their sub-categories are not rigidly distinct. Dramatic effects often assume two or more categories simultaneously. But while these categories are not unique to *The Revenger's Tragedy*, few texts are as successful or sophisticated in mobilizing the categories to encode and monumentalize a motive for anonymity. It is rare to encounter a text in which the issue of anonymity is such a complex aspect of its signification and meaning. It is the complexity of its anonymity that sets this text apart from other anonymous texts and from anonymous categories (or "conventions") of signification themselves.

Restricted Vocabulary and Repetition

The anonymous author does not strive to exploit the full resources of language. His vocabulary is highly concentrated and consciously avoids distinct or diverse modes of signification. He does not cultivate a vocabulary or style which is peculiar to any character; rather, he develops a universal vocabulary that is accessible to all characters and which has the effect, of course, of amplifying similarities rather than differences between speakers. Language differentiates characters only insofar as words describe the conditions defining the speakers in the play. In IV, i, 54, Hippolito, discussing Vindice with Lussurioso, remarks

> But he's a man in whom much melancholy dwells.

The text, however, declines to provide Vindice with a language or voice any more melancholy than the language of other figures in the play. Indeed, in IV, ii, 47-80, when Lussurioso asks the source of Vindice's melancholy, Vindice responds with a prosaic attack on the language of lawyers. The attack (discussed in greater detail later) is perhaps melancholy, but the melancholy arises from the abstraction within the language, which promotes the perception that the speaker is talking about something other than himself and his inner condition; indeed, he talks about what he presumes is a universal condition and not something in any way unique to himself. Vindice's use of prose echoes the deterioration of language and identities, not only in the mouths of lawyers (those who speak the law), but even in the mouths of those who speak about the law. If his speech projects a melancholy aura, it is not because invective prose is the character's melancholy, distinguishing mode of expression, but because, from the perspective of the text as a whole, *any* talk about the law is a source of melancholy and any source of melancholy has to do with the inadequacies or limitations of law. Prose is not the signifier of melancholy any more than it is a mode of speech peculiar to Vindice; rather, talk about the law (a prosaic debasement of language) is the signifier of melancholy: thus, Vindice is a signifier of melancholy to the extent that he talks about the law, but melancholy is not a distinct signifier of Vindice, of a unique character different from the others.

In short, the text does not use language to construct those qualities of the speaker which expose his or her will to create an identity distinct from any imposed or appointed identity; an utterance is not the projection of an inner condition identifying an individual identity within a generic identity (for example revengers, brothers, sons, mothers, dukes, bastards, etc.). Rather, language is the projection of a pervasive condition shared by all speakers, namely an obsession with conditions of innocence (allegorized as feminine Chastity and masculine Justice). Moreover, the universal vocabulary has the effect of intensifying the ambiguity of the action, of blurring distinctions between serious and comic moods, a matter for later consideration. The point here is that the characters speak a language which the text imposes upon them, and which does not function, "organically," as a source of "difference" between them. Language, utterance, becomes a kind of mask, which, so to speak, fits over the concept of character and constrains it.

Peculiar to the vocabulary of the obsessed voice is the obsessive recurrence of particular words:

> revenge, vengeance, lust, forehead, now, fruit, doom, mistress, knave, villain, silver, slave, pleasure, age, time, heaven, treason, tongue, virgin, banquet, brother, mask, lips, gold, impudent, poison, cold, women, palace, monster, mother, murder.

Though this list is not exhaustive, the obsessive use of these and other words indicates the

preoccupation of the text with fixing or codifying the identity of particular, indecisively perceived phenomena or actions. The repetition of words suggests doubt as to the identity of the phenomena they signify. To repeat a word is to suggest at least that it can be said differently; the variation in sound implies a subtle alteration in meaning, or at least a revision in the perception of the signified identity, which in turn weakens the authority of the utterance to fix the signified identity. Repetition thus generates Ambiguity and at least one of its agents, Irony (emphasis added):

> Duke: Oh Hippolito--call *treason!* (Falls)
> Hippolito: Yes my good lord. *Treason, treason, treason!*
> (Stamping him) (III, v, 154)

> 1 Officer: You must pardon us my lord,
> Our office must be sound, here is our warrant,
> The signet from the duke; you must straight *suffer.*
> Younger Son: *Suffer?* I'll *suffer* you to be gone, I'll *suffer* you to come no more--what would you have me *suffer?*
> (III, iv, 26-30)

> Hippolito: He *knows* not *you,* but I'll swear *you know* him.
> (I, 1, 91)

> Vindice: Oh think upon the pleasure of the palace,
> Nine coaches waiting--*hurry, hurry, hurry*--
> Castiza: *Ay, to the devil.*
> Vindice: (Aside) *Ay, to the devi*l,--*To the duke* by my faith!
> Gratiana: Ay, *to the duke*. Daughter, you'd scorn to think
> O' *the devil* an you were there once. (II, i, 195-205)

> Ambitioso: *Hold, hold* Brother! There's fitter time than *now*.
> Supervacuo: *Now,* when I *see* it!
> Ambitioso: 'Tis too much *seen* already.
> Supervacuo: *Seen* and *known*:
> The nobler *she is*, the baser *is she* grown. (IV, ii, 7-10)

A systematic cataloguing of repetition and echo effects (including alliteration) for these passages, let alone the entire play, would consume considerable space. What seems immediately clear is that the restricted vocabulary signifying the obsessed voice betrays a fascination with repetition. Obsession signifies itself through intricate, calculated devices of repetition. Throughout the play, words, even phrases, echo, mirror, and shadow each other to form an intricate, monumental, abstract pattern of sounds and meanings defining a constricted reality, a constricted consciousness, and a constricting obsession with constraining the potential identity of ambiguous objects and actions. An outstanding example of the strange beauty resulting from the obsessive

deployment of repetition occurs in II, ii, 158-171:

> Lussurioso: Come, only thou and I.
> Vindice: My lord, my lord.
> Lussurioso: Why dost thou start us?
> Vindice: I'd almost forgot--the bastard!
> Lussurioso: What of him?
> Vindice: This night, this hour--this minute, now--
> Lussurioso: What? What?
> Vindice: Shadows the duchess--
> Lussurioso: Horrible word.
> Vindice: And like strong poison eats
> Into the duke your father's forehead.
> Lussurioso: Oh!
> Vindice: He makes horn royal.
> Lussurioso: Most ignoble slave!
> Vindice: This is the fruit of two beds.
> Lussurioso: I am mad.
> Vindice: That passage he trod warily.
> Lussurioso: He did!
> Vindice: And hushed his villains every step he took.
> Lussurioso: His villains! I'll confound them.
> Vindice: Take 'em finely, finely now
> Lussurioso: The duchess' chamber door shall not control me.
> Exeunt (Lussurioso and Vindice)

Consider the frequency with which the speakers repeat words within this small interchange: *thou* (3 times); *I* (4); *and* (3); *my lord* (2); *the* (important as a definite article abstracting an identity: *the* bastard, *the* duchess, *the* duke, *the* fruit, *the* . . . door, 5); *what* (3); *this* (4); *now* (2); *the duchess* (2); *he* (3); *his villains* (2); *them-'em* (2); *finely* (2). The passage contains 98 words, of which 15 repeat at least once (more than 30%); 3 repeat twice (+3%); and 3 repeat thrice (+3%), meaning that over 37% of the passage restricts itself to only 16% of its vocabulary. But this restriction of vocabulary is not nearly as remarkable or subtle as the repetition derived from alliteration. In lines 165-166, we encounter a calculated use of M (*makes*, *most*, *mad*); and the F alliteration in line 164 ("father's forehead") recurs at 170 ("finely, finely"), to cite only two examples. The hissing sound employed by Vindice at line 162—"Shadows the duchess"--is certainly accessible to Lussurioso at line 159 ("Why dost thou start us?") and 165 ("Most ignoble slave"), both of which also embed an O alliteration. But the hissing sound dominates as an alliterative device throughout the passage, and Vindice relies on it more than his listener:

> I'd almost forgot the bastard! (160)

This night, this hour--this minute, now-- (161)

And like strong poison eats/. . . father's forehead (163-164)

This is the fruit of two beds (166) (Also embeds U alliteration)

And hushed his villains every step he took (168)

However, the serpentine hissing sound does little, if anything, to establish the unique character of the speaker. Rather, it serves to link the fulfillment of justice and the language used to achieve that fulfillment with vaguely primeval, reptilian impulses. Drives toward justice "originate" from the same primordial biology as speech, as the voice. Uncertainty as to the referent of the mysterious phrase "horrible word" allows Vindice, in the ensuing line, to treat the phrase "strong poison" as referring as much to the phrase "horrible word" as to the referent of the phrase--in other words, language is a "poison" which "eats" at the brain (the "forehead") of not only he whois the object of revenge (the duke) in what the speaker narrates, but he to whom the speaker narrates (Lussurioso). More interesting, perhaps, is the destabilization of masculine identity that occurs at lines 167-168, when "he," recurring as a kind of constant within the lines, nevertheless achieves *progressive* momentum, a dynamic condition, as speakers pair this identity with monosyllabic verbs in simple past: *he trod, He did!, he took*.

Clearly, then, the text manipulates repeated sounds and signifiers according to a complex, abstract musical or mathematical design whose significance or even principles may be obscure but whose effect is as calculated as an intricately structured piece of chamber music. The effect is a mirroring of sounds and signifiers: identity emerges as a mirrored or echoed phenomenon, something which reproduces itself, something which is "the same" in the Other. The revenger, Vindice, reproduces himself in Lussurioso by stimulating the object of his vengeful impulses (Lussurioso) to a similar vindictive fury directed against Spurio. The revenger completes (i.e., repeats) himself through the object of his vengeance. Vengeance breeds vengeance. Such are the interpretations that might explain the appropriateness of the echo effects in this passage. Yet the obsessive repetition resulting from the use of restricted vocabulary blurs rather than clarifies identities within the representation. The intermittent use of alliteration and rhymed couplets obviously amplifies the obsession in the text with mirrored or echoed identities. Echoing tones produce the illusion of identity as a complementary condition: speech fabricates identities shared by different bodies, different speakers. Speech produces similarity, sameness, wholeness of being, what nowadays functions as "understanding." However, this notion of identity as complementation of signifiers is merely an illusion. Repetition mirrors and refracts the identities of speakers in each

other, as in I, ii, 170f., where mother and stepson mirror and complement revenger identities by echoing (rhyming) incestuous impulses in each other (emphasis added):

> Duchess: Cold still: in vain then must a duchess *woo*?
> Spurio: Madam, I blush to say what I will *do*.
> Duchess: Thence flew sweet comfort, earnest and fare*well*.
> (She kisses him)
> Spurio: Oh one incestuous kiss picks open *hell*.

Yet we cannot say that speech really creates any *unity* of identity, because the play suggests that the most profound motive for speaking is the desire for justice, for punishment of a malignant Other. And this desire is the "absolute" source of conflict, of violence, of difference. Speech operates above all to satisfy this desire, not to disclose it, which means that in producing the effect of complementation or unity of perception, speech consistently disguises its motives: thus, for the spectator at least, effects of repetition, as well as other rhetorical devices, pervasively occur when the speaker is lying, deceiving, seducing, misleading, cultivating irony. And this power of speech to mask desire by producing, through modes of repetition, the illusion of "sameness in the Other" (understanding) weakens the authority of language in general to differentiate identities. Repetition is the key signifier of Obsession; the highest *object* of Obsession is Justice; but the chief consequence of Obsession is Anonymity. Repetition amplifies anonymity of signification and presents language as an autonomous energy imposed upon or *programmed into* speakers. As incarnated by the text, language signifies the presence of a cosmic mechanism that guarantees, indeed, constitutes, justice itself. The core component of that mechanism is repetition, the phenomenon of returning, the manifestation of inevitability, of doom, of an absolute desire, not within words or the references as such, but within sets and frequencies of signifiers that remain entirely abstract and arbitrary, insofar as the logic governing peculiar patterns of repetition seems intractably obscure. The literary value or significance of the text therefore diminishes if we confine ourselves to an examination of how images and metaphors in text "correct" or "purify" our perception of a corrupt world or reveal that world to the spectator or reader. The obsessed voice does not seek the rare, exotic, or luminous word that particularizes or "images" either the speaker or the referents of speech. This rhetoric of obsession is not the poetry of intensely immediate images; it is the poetry of abstraction.

Abstraction

Abstract utterances occur when someone speaks as if he or she were stating an "objective" truth that defines the condition of the world in general rather than the condition or experience of

the speaker only. The most frequent type of abstract utterance cultivated by the obsessed voice is the *aphorism*. Aphorisms issue from the mouths of nearly every speaker in the play. I note here only a few out of very many:

> "Age as in gold, in lust is covetous." (Vindice: I, i, 38)
>
> For to be honest is not to be i' the world. (Vindice: I, i, 94)
>
> For that which would seem treason in our lives
> Is laughter when we're dead. (Duke: I, ii, 7)
>
> . . . yet words are but great men's blanks;
> Gold though it be dumb does utter the best thanks. (Lussurioso: I, iii, 28)
>
> *Melius virtute mori, quam per dedecus vivere.* (Antonio: I, iv, 18)
>
> Maids and their honors are like poor beginners:
> Were not sin rich there would be few sinners. (Castiza: II, i, 5)
>
> A gentleman-usher scorns to use the phrase and fancy of a serving man. (Dondolo: II, i, 21)
>
> "'Tis no shame to be bad, because 'tis common." (Vindice: II, i, 117)
>
> Virginity is paradise, locked up. (Gratiana: II, i, 152)
>
> A duke's soft hand strokes the rough head of the law
> And makes it lie smooth. (Ambitioso: II, iii, 75)
>
> "Tis common to be common, through the world,
> And there's more private common shadowing vices
> Than those who are known both by their names and prices. (Hippolito: III, v, 38-40)
>
> Why there's no pleasure sweet but it is sinful. (Duchess: III, v, 201)
>
> Pleasure should meet in a perfumed mist. (Duke: III, v, 142)

In the last example, the alliteration and symmetrical balance of the line make the statement easy to remember, a rhetorical strategy founded upon the dubious assumption that the strongest truths are those most easily impressed upon consciousness. Abstraction (aphorism) and repetition (alliteration) operate in conjunction, as interdependent values. Repetition (rather than imagery) structures and preserves memory as the repository of truth (an abstract condition). This conjunctive operation constructing the memory (or memorization) of spoken words subtly reinforces the text's conservative, if not reactionary, obsession with contrasting the decadent, corrupt court milieu of the present with an idealized, agrarian, medieval past. If memory (the idealized past) is the repository of truth, then truth is external to its knowers, located in an abstract, eternal past, and thus not subject to significant modification by the *now*. Abstraction within the

text signifies a resistance to historical pressures, which have no truth-value in themselves, for the obsessive voice strives to assert that truth which exists prior to its revelation. The historical moment of revelation (through writing, reading, watching, critiquing the text) has truth value only when it assumes a form (drama, rhetorical devices) that exists prior to and independently of any particular reading, staging, or *image* signifying a highly individualized character, reader, or actor.

A more subtle effect of the aphorism is to make the speaker seem acutely conscious of the context in which he or she speaks. The speaker appears able to step outside of himself, observe, and define the world in which he acts. That this capacity to distance oneself from the identity appointed to the speaker by the world is a pleasurecultivated by the obsessed voice seems evident from Vindice's aphoristic remark in IV, iv, 85:

> . . . joy's a subtle elf,
> I think man's happiest when he forgets himself.

The aphoristic form of the utterance implies that to speak abstractly is to forget oneself, to assume an "objective" identity, to become anonymous.[6]

Yet because abstract utterances issue from any speaker, the "objective" identity achieves no greater distinction than the "character" (subjective) identities produced by the vindictive milieu. An obvious example of the failure of the abstract utterance to differentiate even authentic and false identities occurs in II, i, 178f., where Vindice, *in disguise,* employs an aphorism to justify the corruption of his sister:

> . . . what's honesty?
> 'Tis but heaven's beggar; and what woman is
> So foolish to keep honesty
> And not keep herself? [. . .]

In this complicated example, the spectator understands that, though the "objective truth" of the aphorism accords well with the disguise (that of a procurer) assumed by the speaker, the fact of being spoken in disguise implies that the speaker believes the exact opposite of what he says and hopes the addressee, his unknowing sister Castiza, will not believe what he says either. Yet, regardless of the intentions of the speaker, the aphorism *is* believable, insofar as the speaker, by being in disguise, is not honest with even his own idealized sister--in other words, the *language* (not the character) tells us you really cannot "keep" or be honest and "keep" yourself. In short, aphorisms in this text indicate that an acute consciousness of one's condition in the universe does nothing to differentiate one's identity or to disclose even a superior moral good. The aphorism differentiates objective and subjective identities, but is unable to bestow any unique attribute upon the speaker assuming an objective identity, for the aphorism is accessible to all speakers. In

effect, then, a speaker uses an aphorism, not to differentiate his identity, but to escape his identity altogether--to become in a sense, an inhuman, abstract, disembodied power. Through the aphorism, the "character" becomes a phantom, a shadow.

A rhetorical device similar to the aphorism is the *analytical commentary.* This device appears when the speaker wishes to explain or define an action which immediately precedes his utterance but does not wish his perception of the action to seem tainted by personal motives. At the beginning of I, i, the Duke, the Duchess, Lussurioso, and Spurio, "with a train, pass over the stage with a torchlight." After identifying each of the figures in single lines, Vindice shifts into an analytical commentary (on the "age" in which he lives) to explain the significance of both the dumb-show and the speaker's malicious response to it:

> --Oh that marrowless age
> Would stuff the hollow bones with damned desires,
> And 'stead of heat kindle infernal fires
> Within the spendthrift veins of a dry duke,
> A parched and juiceless luxor. [. . .]

Yet the objective perspective of the analytical commentary clearly does not imply the absence of a strong attitude toward the object of analysis: on the contrary, the magnitude of an attitude increases in relation to the degree that speech is "objective." Notice in the following example how Vindice, employing language devoid of any reference to either the speaker or the listener, constructs a set of "scenes" or situations which only an "eternal eye" can "perceive." But while this "eye" perceives, the voice judges; and judgement manifests itself through a language of abstraction, allegory, and anonymity. The world of "strange lust" contains no precise images, no proper names. This world contains only classes of identity (drunkards, uncles, brothers, etc.), and these classes are no more distinctly human than allegorical personifications ("Dutch lust, "honest salvation"):

> Lussurioso: . . . --Then thou know'st
> In the world of strange lust?
> Vindice: Oh Dutch lust! Fulsome lust!
> Drunken procreation, which begets so many drunkards;
> Some father dreads not, gone to bed in wine,
> To slide from the mother and cling the daughter-in-law;
> Some uncles are adulterous with their nieces,
> Brothers with brother's wives--Oh hour of incest!
> Any kin now next to the rim o' the sister

Is man's meat in these days, and in the morning,
When they are up and dressed and their mask on,
Who can perceive this, save that eternal eye
That see through flesh and all? Well--if anything be damned
It will be twelve o'clock at night: that twelve
Will never 'scape;
It is the honest Judas of the hours, wherein
Honest salvation is betrayed to sin.
Lussurioso: In troth it is too; but let this talk glide.
It is our blood to err though hell gaped loud:
Ladies know Lucifer fell, yet still are proud!

(I, iii, 56-74)[7]

As with the aphorism, the analytical commentary distances the speaker from himself, so that speech becomes the projection of an uninscribed law governing reality. A curious variation on this device occurs in I, ii, 120-126, where the Duchess offers an analytical commentary by referring to herself in the third person, a convention especially peculiar to dramatic speech built out of classical principles of rhetoric:

'Tis a wonder,
For ceremony has made many fools.
It is as easy way into a duchess
As to a hatted dame, if her love answer,
But that by timorous honours, pale respects,
Idle degrees of fear men make their ways
Hard of themselves. [. . .]

She repeats the effect at line 170 of the same scene:

Cold still: in vain then must a duchess woo?

Here, too, the effect is one of the third-person word creating two identities, objective and subjective in the same body. Because the speaker wishes to objectify herself by referring to herself in the third person, she momentarily stimulates doubt regarding the reality of her identity. The named identity (duchess) is an "other" identity, which the speaker "sees" rather than is. She then complicates the effect when she discusses her lover *to* him by referring to *him* in the third person:

Oh what a grief 'tis that a man should live
But once i' the world, and then to live a bastard,
The course of the womb, the thief of Nature,
Begot against the seventh commandment,
Hald damned in the conception of justice
Of that unbribed everlasting law. (I, ii, 157-162)

The passions (revenge and lust) dominating the speaker abstract not only her own identity but also the object of her lust. Indeed, an ironic insight of the play as a whole is that passion does not signify a

condition of intense subjectivity; it is, rather, an abstracting pressure that urges speakers toward absolute objectivity.

Like the aphorism, the analytical commentary reveals the effort of the speaker to escape himself, an action which in turn betrays the speaker's ambivalent attitude toward the identity he/she projects. This ambivalence in turn stimulates in the spectator a mood of uncertainty or skepticism regarding the represented identity (and identities in general). Such skepticism of course inhibits the spectator from "identifying" with the speaker, weakens the sense of a shared--or at least "familiar"--identity on the stage. Abstraction distances the spectator from the spectacle, so that it is not the familiarity or eternality of the action which interests the spectator, but its strangeness, its phantasmal remoteness. Yet paradoxically, this strangeness, this disturbance of perceptual continuity, is possible above all through mechanisms of repetition and universalization.

The estranging ambiguity generated through repetition and abstraction achieves an even more intricate level of paradox by the peculiar use the obsessed voice makes of *questions*. In *Hamlet* (1601), which is as much a revenge play as *The Revenger's Tragedy,* Shakespeare exploits the question as a device for creating a melancholy atmosphere of doubt as to the significance or meaning of actions performed within the representation. Not only Hamlet doubts the correctness or authority of his actions. (See, for example, III, ii, 87-130, in which four characters ask thirteen questions.) The rhetoric of doubt in *Hamlet* perhaps signifies the uncertain identity of the entire universe. However, neither the ambiguity of reality nor the doubt it provokes is such as to blur or efface emphatic distinctions between the characters Shakespeare constructs through language. Doubt in *Hamlet* amplifies the differentiating power of language.

Nobody in *The Revenger's Tragedy,* except possibly the mother, Gratiana, doubts the correctness or necessity of his or her actions. Nevertheless, the speakers occasionally do ask questions. Questions repeatedly arise out of the ambiguity projected by particular words:

> Vindice: The duke did much deject him.
> Gratiana: Much?
> Vindice: Too much. (I, i, 123)

> Lussurioso: Now sir, wert thou as secret as thou'rt subtle
> [. . .]
> Vindice: My lord?
> Secret? I ne'er had that disease o' the mother,
> I praise my father [. . .] (I, iii, 75-81)

Lussurioso: Swear to be true in all.

Vindice: True?
Lussurioso: Nay but swear!
Vindice: Swear? I hope your honour little doubts my faith. (I, iii, 161-162)

Vindice: That man that must be all this perhaps ere morning
--For his white father does but mould away—
Has long desired your daughter.
Gratiana: Desired? (II, i, 70-72)[8]

Clearly questions of this sort share affinities with the echo effects of re petition. The interrogator does not assume the questioning tone to cast doubt upon the power of language to contain the meaning of objects. Rather, he raises the question to cast doubt upon the listener's capacity to perceive a particular phenomenon correctly. Consequently, a very subtle but unmistakable effect of these questions is to diminish slightly the authority of the listener's words. Many questions, however, do not stimulate doubt as to the authenticity or inevitability of the context in which they are asked. On the contrary, the speaker tends to structure his question in such a way that it dissolves further questioning. Either he answers it himself:

May not we set as well as the duke's son?
Thou hast no conscience: are we not revenged?
Is there one enemy left alive amongst those?
'Tis time to die when we are ourselves our foes. (V, iii, 107-110)

Or he masses questions whose highly depersonalized vocabulary inhibits the development of a skeptical attitude toward the stability of the universe. More precisely, the questions signify an attitude of studied bafflement or ironic perplexity toward an immutable reality:

Vindice: [. . .] And is not he absurd
Whose fortunes are upon their faces set,
That fear no other God but wind and wet?
Hippolito: Brother, y'ave spoke that right.
Is this the form that, living, shone so bright?
Vindice: The very same.
Shall be revenged after no common action.
Does the silkworm expend her yellow labours
For thee? For thee does she undo herself?
Are lordships sold to maintain ladyships
For the poor benefit of a bewitching minute?
Why does yon fellow falsify highways
And put his life between judge's lips
To refine such a thing, keeps horse and men
To beat their valours for her?
Surely we're all mad people and they,

Whom we think we are, are not: we mistake those.
'Tis we are mad in sense, they but in clothes.
Hippolito: Faith and clothes too we, give us our due.
Vindice: Does every proud and self-affecting dame
Camphor her face for this, and grieve her maker
In sinful baths of milk, when many an infant starves
For her superfluous outside--all for this?
Who now bids twenty pound a night, prepares
Music, perfumes, sweetmeats? [. . .] (III, v, 58-88)

This amassing of questions allows the speaker to escape himself through the use of impersonal language, for in sharp contrast to the *statements* in the passage, the questions never refer, by use of first person singular or plural, to either the speaker or the listener. The purpose of the questions is not to create a mood of doubt as to the meaning of the speaker's perceptions, but to stimulate a mood of melancholy incredulity at an "objective," absolute condition. The speaker asks the questions to imply that no answer justifies the reality in which he finds himself. Any answer seems irrelevant because the questions insinuate that any serious answer is a justification for an unjust or corrupt reality.

Another strange use of rhetorical questions appears in I, ii, 152f., where the Duchess seduces her stepson by presenting him with a series of questions that suggest the speaker already knows the answers and uses the questions to cast doubt upon the capacity of the listener to answer "correctly" and thereby disclose a level of consciousness (or identity) competitive with that of the interrogator:

What wrong can equal this? Canst thou be tame
And think upon't? (151-152)

Who would be revenged of such a father,
E'en the worst way? [. . .] (154)

Would not this mad e'en Patience, make blood rough?
Who but an eunuch would not sin, his bed
By one false minute disinherited? (164-166)

Cold still: in vain then must a duchess woo? (170)

The pejorative resonance of certain words (*wrong, this, tame, such a father, e'en, rough, eunuch, false, cold, vain, must*) clearly restricts the number of "competent" responses open to the listener Anyone (especially, perhaps, a man) who answers "yes" to the second question (Spurio: "No, mad, and think upon't.") and "no" to the succeeding ones (Spurio: "Ay, there's the vengeance that my birth was wrapped in!") risks sinking into self-degradation or at least a

condition of impotent naivete. Yet anyone who answers "correctly" is "seduced," ruled, *commanded* (rather than really questioned) by the speaker. Not unnaturally, the listener responds with either an enigmatic silence or by shifting focus from the interrogator's interests to his own cryptic reaction (rather than answer) to her desires and inquiries:

> Duchess: Cold still: in vain then must a duchess woo?
> Spurio: Madam, I blush to say what I will do.

But even though the range of responses to the interrogator's speech is very narrow, she nevertheless constructs her questions out of universalizing abstractions that employ allegorical figures (Patience, blood) and general classes of identity ("a father," "an eunuch," "a duchess"). Here abstraction "objectifies" the question by objectifying both speaker and listener, as general rather than particular classes of identity. The "objective" question implies the existence of a single, absolute, "objective" response--that which the speaker already knows. However, the seductive appeal of these objectified questions is that their abstractness, their implication of a universal reality external to or detached from idiosyncrasies of human identity, also implies that neither the speaker nor the listener is really responsible for the consequences of the question and its appropriate answer. In this instance, the erotic interest and seductive authority of the speaker (an interrogator) bloom out of "objective" questions that provoke "objective" answers conforming to the speaker's desires. The "objective" rhetorical question thus becomes the instrument for obfuscating distinctions between innocence, seductivity, and seductibility.

That the rhetorical question and the aphorism function similarly (in allowing the speaker to escape or objectify himself/herself) is perhaps most evident in Vindice's speech, II, i, 225-226, 231-232, in which aphorism and question become single, undifferentiated identities:

> Why are there so few honest women but
> Because 'tis the poorer profession?
>
> "Lose but a pearl, we search and cannot brook it;
> But that once gone, who is so mad to look it?"[9]

The second aphorism is, like several other lines in the text, especially odd for being embedded in quotation marks: in other words, the thought is not original to either the character or the author of the text: its origin is even more anonymous, in the kind of collective mentality that spawns proverbs.

Innocence or purity is virtually the only quality of character that the text perceives as *unique* to an identity. Yet as it achieves greater "purity" of anonymity, speech itself compromises the purity of

its speakers as well as its referents.

Compressed Imagery

Through pervasive use of repetition and abstraction (repetition, strictly speaking, is a mode of abstraction), the text projects a skeptical, if not entirely iconoclastic, attitude toward imagery. "Objectivity" here implies a release from a reality defined through images. A character, a highly differentiated identity, entails a level of detail in the language of speakers that would require them to rely more heavily on metaphor and the descriptive resources of language. But imagery is not absent from the text. Rather, a quality peculiar to the obsessed voice is *compressed imagery.* This device occurs when the speaker resorts to allegorical language to achieve a compact and ambiguous syn thesis of idea and image, abstraction and materialization. Compressed imagery constitutes a *strain* on the spectator's perceptions because it does not produce clear pictures of anything. Rather, speakers use the device to compress and circumscribe the identity of objects within that of abstractions, so that the value of an image becomes constricted by its exchangeability with an abstract phenomenon hidden behind or within it. The resulting "image" produces tension rather than clarification within its receptor. Perhaps the most curious example of compressed imagery appears in Vindice's speech, I, iii, 47-54:

> (Aside) Fool to abundance sir; I have been witness
> To the surrenders of a thousand virgins
> And not so little;
> I have seen patrimonies washed apieces,
> Fruitfields turned into bastards,
> And in a world of acres
> Not so much dust due to the heir 'twas left to
> As would gravel a petition.

Here the strain on perception resulting from the speaker's hyperbolic effort to compress a sweeping vision of the corruption of great estates and agrarian paradise into a few allegorized nouns and metaphorized verbs almost signifies the power of his indignation to make him incomprehensible. But more accessible examples of compressed imagery appear with obsessive frequency. Again, there is space only to note the diversity rather than intensity of the effect:

> Duke: royal lecher: go, grey-haired Adultery. (Vindice: I, i, 1)

> [. . .] The law is a wise serpent
> And quickly can beguile thee of thy life. (Lussurioso: I, ii, 50)

> Her beauty was ordained to be my scaffold. (Younger Son: I, ii, 64)

Delayed, deferred, nay then if Judgement have
Cold blood, flattery and bribes will kill it. (Spurio: I, ii, 89)

Impudence
Thou goddess of the palace, mistress of mistresses
To whom. . . (Vindice: I, iii, 5f.)

. . . chide away that foolish country girl
Keeps company with your daughter, chastity. (Vindice: II, i, 81)

The maid being dull, having no mind to travel
Into unknown lands, what did me straight
But set spurs to the mother; golden spurs
Will put her to a false gallop in a trice. (Vindice: II, ii, 42f.)

My hairs are white and yet my sins are green. (Duke: III, i, 133)

Loudest music sound: pleasure is banquet's guest. (Duchess: III, v, 214)

The fruitful grounds and meadows of her soul
Has long been dry [. . .] (Vindice: IV, iv, 48)

A virgin honour is a crystal tower. (Castiza: IV, iv, 152)

This murder might have slept in tongueless brass
But for ourselves, and the world died an ass. (Vindice: V, iii, 112-113)

In all these examples, in which the distinction between allegory and metaphor is elusive, the effort to compress an abstraction into a sensuous form, an "image," does not have the effect of producing a clear image of anything--it magnifies the tension between the abstract and the material: compressed imagery calls attention to itself rather than (as with metaphor generally) to an insightful or "hidden" relation between supposedly unrelated categories of identity. A remarkable compilation of compressed images appears in Vindice's speech, II, i, 210-223, in which the speaker attempts to construct a panoramic vision of a world wherein "All thrives but Chastity." Yet the language creates only a shadowy set of impressions--numerous objects are named, modified, or qualified, but the speaker renders them all anonymous by his refusal to "see" anything other than general classes of identity in the world (Pictures, old men, meadows, women, farmer's sons, gentlemen, lands, tailors, etc.):

Who'd sit at home in a neglected room
Dealing her short-lived beauty to the pictures
That are as useless as old men, when those
Poorer in face and fortune than herself
Walk with a hundred acres on their backs- -
Fair meadows cut into green foreparts--oh,

It was the greatest blessing ever happened to women
When farmer's sons agreed, and met again,
To wash their hands and come up gentlemen; The
commonwealth has flourished ever since.
Lands that were meat by the rod--that labour's spared--
Tailors ride down and measure 'em by the yard.
Fair trees, those comely foretops of the field,
Are cut to maintain head-tires : much untold.
All thrives but Chastity, she lies a-cold.

The rhetorical choices imply that what "thrives" is everywhere something without distinctive identity, without precise image, swallowed up into plurals or generic forms ("a neglected room," "the commonwealth," "the field"); phrases such as "ever happened," "met again," "ever since," "by the rod," "by the yard," and "much untold," construct a perception of anonymous repetition and gross commonality of actions. Thus what does not thrive (Chastity) is nothing more or less than the great negator of identity, death itself, the end of procreation. Indeed, the massing of identities in this passage implicitly suggests that no "pure," significantly particularized identities exist except that which "lies a-cold," dead or never born.

Of course, the medieval resonance of the allegorical effects discloses the nostalgia of the obsessed voice for an older society. But one can go further: the language of the play as a whole, considered in its thematic context, signifies a consciousness embittered by the impermanence of the world and depressed by the perception that social and political change, new conditions of justice, entail threats to the "purity" and stability of sexual identity and feeling, doubts about the very circumstances of one'sorigins. The text allegorizes social change as sexual inconstancy.

Even when compressed imagery achieves its sharpest focus and abstraction seems restrained, such as Spurio's monologue, I, ii, 177- 188, the speaker still cultivates a rhetoric of anonymity:

Faith if the truth were known I was begot
After some gluttonous dinner--some stirring dish
Was my first father; when deep healths went round
And ladies cheeks were painted red with wine,
Their tongues as short and nimble as their heels
Uttering words sweet and thick; and when they rose
Were merrily disposed to fall again.
In such a whispering and withdrawing hour,
When base male bawds kept sentinel at stair-head,
Was I stol'n softly--oh damnation met
The sin of feasts, drunken adultery.

Though alone on the stage, the speaker sees himself and his origin in the pluralized context of

general classes of identity (healths, ladies, cheeks, tongues, heels, words, bawds, feasts) which are merely properties, not of particular persons, but of a larger, abstract identity, "drunken adultery." This mass of identity-fragments nevertheless undergoes systematic (consciously repetitive) modification through 1) symmetrical phrasing (for example, "short and nimble," "sweet and thick," "whispering and withdrawing"); 2) a complex array of alliterations (particularly of sounds); and 3) chains or strings of qualifiers and clauses, coupled by the word "and," which indicate the speaker's obsession with constructing an increasingly precise image of what in fact he is incapable of seeing--his own conception, his origin. The repetition of "when" to initiate three clauses universalizes the "scene" by implying that the precisely described actions are not only predictable and paradigmatic but indeed the manifestations of an irresistible, "mass" rhythm which pressures the speaker to drift into the passive voice. The speaker further focuses perception by allowing only one color--red--to tint his images. But this red is enigmatic, for although it is wine, it is also paint, and this paint, this heat, is what transforms women's flesh into a lurid mask, a deception, an illusion, an emblem of inconstancy. The speaker allegorizes lust and promiscuity as redness, which is in turn a compression of the emotional qualities attributed to the hues of wine, paint, flesh.

But though the speaker's language is highly precise and he carefully manipulates the senses of his listener, no distinct identity emerges. The language constructs a "scene" in which human identities are procreated or, as in the case of Antonio's rape speech (I, iv, 27- 47), destroyed by *unknown* persons. Yet in both speeches, the speaker describes events he has not witnessed. It is the rhetoric of speculation, the language of things not seen, only imagined. It is the language of a mentality obsessed with seeing what is unseeable. By contrast, Hippolito's speech in I, i, 65-80, in which the speaker recounts actions which he actually initiated in the world, is perhaps the dullest thing in the play.[10] There the obsessed voice seems unable to bestow poetic luster upon a description of actions which provide evidence, so to speak, of the facticity of the speaker's existence. The obsessed voice finds poetic only an abstract or "objective" reality--a reality "seen" or defined only when the speaker uses special rhetorical devices to escape himself: calculated repetition, abstraction, aphorism, analytical commentary, compressed imagery, or, as in the Duchess' monologue, I, ii, 101-107, and Lussurioso's speech, IV, i, 60-70, a shift into future tense which allows the speaker to contemplate *potential* identities. Obsession transforms language and the voice into abstractions, "frees" them from their subordination to the sensuous or material world of their referents. ("For to be honest is not to be i' the world," I, i, 95.) What the spectator sees on the stage

are figures representing the shadowy coordinates of a sex-obsessed consciousness (that of the anonymous author) which doubts (through a rhetoric of anonymity) the authenticity ("honesty") or "purity" of anything human--anything created out of sexual desire. But though one may escape oneself through language, no one can escape the anonymous, "objective" judgement of language itself, which manifests itself through the punishing, doom-laden motion of rhetorical "laws," any more than one can escape death. The play is important, not because these anonymous "laws" are peculiar to it, or because it applies them more rigorously or intensely than other texts. Indeed, the validity of the text's perception of how justice unfolds would be in doubt if the rhetorical devices did not operate, "anonymously," in multitudes of texts. Rather, the importance of the play lies in its monumental devaluation of the text, of writing, as a signifier of a unique being, the Author. Disclosure of authorship has no redemptive value; writing does not redeem the self (the name of the writer). The writing of the text, then its speech and acting, are processes by which one acknowledges the anonymity of language in bringing humanity to justice and salvation.[11]

Comic Ambiguity

Comic ambiguity occurs when the meaning of utterances differs between the speaker and listener, and the difference results, from the spectator's perspective, in making the act of interpretation produce consequences that are simultaneously ludicrous and just. An obvious example of comic ambiguity appears in III, iv, 5-78, wherein the dual interpretation by the prisoner and his captors of words in a letter to the imprisoned Younger Son discloses the foundation of interpretation in comic, ironic tensions between perceptions. The destruction of a human being results from the failure of language to disambiguate the meanings its constructs:

> Younger Son: Look, you officious whoresons, words of comfort: "Not long a prisoner."
> 1 Officer: It says true in that sir, for you must suffer presently. (59-61)

Because at III, iii, 3 Ambitioso's words "Unto our brother the duke's son" did not differentiate two identities, Lussurioso and the "Younger Son of the Duchess," the "wrong" person meets his doom (though the text makes clear that it is nevertheless right for the Younger Son to suffer death anyway for the rape of Antonio's wife). But of course, this "error" results from the earlier assumption (II, iii, 62-65) of the interchangeable brothers, Ambitioso and Supervacuo, that their words have the power to determine reality by ambiguating it:

> Now brother let our hate and our love be woven
> So subtly together that in speaking
> One word for his life, we make three for his death;

The craftiest pleader gets the most gold for breath.

The Duke, to whom they address their "pleading," perceives (106-114) the sinister motive behind the mask of language they have conspired to produce. What he can't perceive is that his own words ("He shall die ere many days," 102) ordain utterly unintended consequences. His words define well and economically an impending reality: the extinction of one of his sons. But the ambiguity of the language with which the Duke and the brothers conceal their intentions from each other permits their words to be misinterpreted by those charged with interpreting them: the "wrong" son dies, and the deliberate ambiguity of language cannot, apparently, produce a desired or intended interpretation. The humor stemming from this incident becomes even more convoluted in III, vi, 30-89, wherein the interchangeable brothers confront Lussurioso, whose doom they assumed their words had assured:

Lussurioso: Why do you shun me brothers? You may come nearer now,
The saviour of the prison has forsook me.
I thank such lords as yourself I'm free.
Ambitioso: Alive!
Supervacuo: In health!
Ambitioso: Released!
We were both e'en amazed with joy to see it.
Lussurioso: I am much to thank you.
Supervacuo: Faith we spared no tongue unto my lord the duke.
Ambitioso: I know your delivery, brother,
Had not been half so sudden but for us.
Supervacuo: Oh how we pleaded.
Lussurioso: Most deserving brothers; In my best studies I will think of it. *Exit* (55-65)

Accidentally, inadvertently, unknowingly, the interchangeable brothers (Ambitioso and Supervacuo) failed to differentiate, in words, another pair of brothers. And these undifferentiated, interchangeable, or "mirror" identities, these repetitions or "vacuous" reproductions of identity do not simply symbolize death, they define death, identify the aesthetic construction of its presence, in terms of pairs, doubles, shadows, replications, duplications, repetitions, parallels, masks, and siblings. All brothers die in the play; whenever the self becomes "objectified" by appearing to us in another, as in a mirror almost, death signifies itself as the extinction of *difference* (identity). But because it is language, a rhetoric of anonymity, which constructs the mirror identities, the speech of the play becomes the very sound of death, mistaking, abstracting, and effacing identities. Speech and writing may constitute "objectifications" of desire, but *language* embodies significations that operate

independently of desire, of authorship, and *these* "unconscious" or "anonymous" significations make reality and justice synonymous. At one point, the conspiring brothers, Ambitioso and Supervacuo, embody this insight with comic effect when their words, responses to the failure of their plots, become autonomous exclamations that are nothing more than nouns suspended in a void which language is supposed, by anyone who regards reality as the shaping of perception by desire or will, to fill or dissolve:

> Supervacuo: Plagues!
> Ambitioso: Confusions!
> Supervacuo: Darkness!
> Ambitioso: Devils! (III, vi, 75)

Obviously, the obsessed voice delights in puns, delights in isolating words through which contradictory desires intersect--that word whose effect is simultaneously comic and fatal, amusing and doom-laden. Puns appear regularly in the play, but surely an exceptionally ingenious use of them occurs in I, iii, 132-145, wherein Vindice, disguised as a procurer (with the name Piato) in order to draw his victim, Lussurioso, into his confidence, is able to speak of himself, as the brother whom Lussurioso "knows" only in undisguised form and would make his own victim, with an exquisitely simultaneous self-detachment and self-reappearance, which, besides himself, only the anonymous spectator can appreciate:

> Lussurioso: Shall't? Why content: dost know the daughter then?
> Vindice: Oh ex'lent well by sight.
> Lussurioso: That was her brother
> That did prefer thee to us.
> Vindice: My lord I think so,
> I knew I had seen him somewhere.
> Lussurioso: And therefore prithee let thy heart to him
> Be as a virgin, close.
> Vindice: Oh my good lord.
> Lussurioso: We may laugh at that simple age in him--
> Vindice: Ha! Ha! Ha!
> Lussurioso: Himself being made the subtle instrument
> To wind up a good fellow.
> Vindice: That's I my lord.
> Lussurioso: That's thou.
> To entice and work his sister.
> Vindice: A pure novice!
> Lussurioso: 'Twas finely managed.
> Vindice: Gallantly carried: a pretty-perfumed villain!

A similar, though more grotesque, effect occurs in III, v, 131-136, when the Duke fatally encounters Gloriana's poisoned skull, which he receives under the illusion that he is about to possess ·a country virgin procured by the disguised Vindice (Piato):

> Duke: Piato! well done. Hast brought her? What lady is't?
> Vindice: Faith my lord a country lady, a little
> Bashful at first as most of them are, but after
> The first kiss my lord the worst is past them:
> Your Grace knows now what you have to do. She's somewhat
> A grave look with her, but--
> Duke: I love that best, conduct her.[12]

In each case, the comic effect stems from the "innocent" power of language to disguise a punitive movement toward death within the illusion of movement toward virginal innocence, contact with "pure" flesh. Only Vindice and the detached, "objective" spectator can discern the disguised from the "actual" identities. Death is the punishment for those (Lussurioso, the Duke) who are not conscious of this differentiating power. Yet language itself is basically a mask, because the "objective," abstract intelligence which the text identifies with the manifestation of justice, with a cosmic craving for innocence, is something "hidden" within relations between signifiers rather than something talked about; this innocence is "invisible" insofar as it is the voice that constructs it. The disclosure of the abstract intelligence occurs, not when the speaker drifts into the rhetoric of anonymity, but when either the speaker or the spectator treats the rhetoric as the anonymous, cosmic enactment and enforcement of principles or *laws* determining relations between words and actions. To speak of rhetoric here is to refer to laws governing a ubiquitous desire for justice or innocence.

And yet the text embodies a severe lack of confidence in legal institutions themselves. Indeed, it is precisely the failure of Law to define any condition justly or accurately that stimulates an obsession with revenge in nearly every speaker of the play. The disgust of the obsessed voice with the deformation of identities through legal rhetoric possibly achieves its most satiric expression in IV, ii, 58-63, where Vindice slips into prose to expose the failure of the legal language to create either a poetic or just world:

> . . . There are old men at present that are so poisoned with the affectation of law words, having many suits canvasses, that their common talk is nothing but Barbary Latin; they cannot so much as pray, but in law, that their sins may be removed with a sasarara.

Consequently, when the rhetoric of law reaches such a base level of use that even he who is conscious of its sham "removals" of sin seems, in representing that consciousness through prosaic invective, as

corrupt as the poisonous "affectation of law words" itself, then clearly the achievement of justice depends not only on actions (revenge) that exceed the authority of legal institutions, but on the motives for action exerted by a higher, more "objective" order of signification than that which constructs the Law. This higher order of signification is the rhetoric of anonymity, which operates to abstract identities under the assumption that anyone born human is the consequence of sin, the consequence of an obsessive desire for more identity, possessed or procreated, than a condition of purity requires.[13]

That the speakers of the play seem conscious of the relation between the nature of justice and "laws" of speech communication. Speakers comment suspiciously and aphoristically on the treacherous ambiguities of words:

> For that which would seem treason in our lives
> Is laughter when we're dead. Who dares now whisper
> That dares not then speak out, an e'en proclaim
> With loud words and broad pens our closest shame. (Duke: I, ii, 7-10)
>
> We are so weak that words can overthrow us. (Gratiana: II, i, 106)
>
> . . . words spoke in tears
> Are like the murmurs of the waters, the sound
> Is loudly heard but cannot be distinguished. (Ambitioso: III, vi, 39-41)
>
> . . . for no tongue has force
> To alter me from honest.
> If maidens would, men's words could have no power; (Castiza: IV, iv, 149)
>
> See what confession doth.
> Who would not lie when men are hanged for truth? (Vindice: V, i, 126)[14]

Indeed, the destruction of the protagonist and his brother results suddenly, directly, and entirely from Vindice's compulsion to *speak* the true identity of the murderer:

> . . . We may be bold
> To speak it now: 'twas somewhat wittily carried
> Though we say it. 'Twas we two murdered him! (V, iii, 96-98)

The speaker's failure to remain silent discloses the abstract power of speech to dissolve itself as a mask and function as the designator of a "real" identity. The anonymous murderer cannot bear his anonymity; he insists, through speaking, upon establishing the uniqueness of his being, his worthiness to be known. But this insistence, this obsession with being known, is what justifies his guilt and doom, as he himself remarks aphoristically:

> When murderers shut deeds close this curse does seal 'em:
> If none disclose 'em, they themselves reveal 'em! (V, iii, 111)

Speech thus operates as a monumental apparatus of doom; the rhetoric of anonymity merely codifies the logic of the apparatus and objectifies the crypticity of its justice. In other words, the text constitutes a monumental dramatization of Roland Barthes' observation, regarding an insight of Roman Jakobson, that "a speech-system is defined less by what it permits us to say than by what it compels us to say."[15] Only an inviolable silence can create the purity of being, the innocence, craved by all who are born. Only death can "be" that silence.

Implications

The four rhetorical modes or "laws" described here dominate the construction of a speech-text that is simultaneously anonymous and "objective" in its representation of obsessive desires for revenge and purity. Power, the capacity to affect some condition of justice, signifies itself through these rhetorical configurations of anonymity and "objectivity." The most powerful character (Vindice) is the one who uses the most of these rhetorical configurations and is therefore the most anonymous, the most disguised, the most self-effacing of any character. Moreover, this compulsion to speak abstractly embeds vindictive impulses in sexual desires: the desire for revenge has its "origin" in the pressures of sexual desire, the desire to possess another person (and thus another identity). Revenge, then, is the corollary to lost purity, to the desecration of some extraordinary signifier of virginity. The obsessed voice equates conditions of purity with an idealized level of abstraction. Of course, this obsession with purity and anonymity can hardly escape a tragic perception of sexual desire, which the text designates as the greatest source of energy for destabilizing or mutating identity, and of procreation, which everyone tends to identify as the primal determinant of any human identity--or at least of the body as a signifier of identity, "humanness." Within the obsessed consciousness externalized through the text, to project a distinct identity, to assume the slightest particularizing detail of a "character," is to become involved in the perpetration of disguises, the adoption of masks, the implementation of a deception, the production of illusions. These illusions, which determine the limits (and, indeed, the "purity") of perceptions, turn identities into images of sin. Salvation, the triumph of justice, therefore depends on a higher mode of communication than that which signifies characters or the illusion of being. It depends on a rhetoric of anonymity, on a voice that transforms the speaker into a nearly inhuman abstraction, the vibration perhaps, of a cryptic, cosmic physics of

justice.

Abstraction and anonymity reach their most intense manifestations when language effaces or disguises altogether the speaker's or author's sexual identity; it is language "freed" from the body. Though abstraction and “objectivity” in language possibly signify a male (or patriarchal) ideological perspective (and no one seems to doubt that the author of the text was male), the obsession of the text with anonymous modes of signification nevertheless suggests a desire to desexualize the concept of authorship. However, the idea of transcending sexual difference through a rhetoric of anonymity seems constrained by the possibility of the rhetoric working instead to *confuse* sexual identity in the authorship of abstract communication. Consider a very strange aphorism uttered by Vindice in II, iii, 111: “’That woman is all male whom none can enter!’” The quotation marks around the line indicate that the speaker’s observation is not original with him but borrowed (or ventriloquized) from some anonymous source. More significantly, the statement, encased in the anonymous quotation marks, also encases “male” at its very center. Syntactically and thematically, the statement identifies maleness with conditions of central impenetrability, invulnerability, opacity, and unyielding virginity, even though none of the males within the play would seem to meet these qualifications.

Yet both the content and construction of the statement disclose a perversely enigmatic perception of sexual difference. The line asserts that perfect virginity transforms what is female into what is “all male.” Maleness, however, is not the assertion of phallic potency and projection, but the possession of something like a sealed womb, locked entrances into the body, openings or spaces that “none can enter.” The line signifies the power of the anonymous aphorism to bisexualize, rather than desexualize, abstraction and “objectivity” in language. From the “male” center of the statement emanates a sphinx- like ambiguity, rather than stabilization, of perception. Considered as a sexual identifier of the rhetoric of anonymity as a whole, this aphorism is apparently the product of an intelligence, not exclusive to the author, permeated with doubt and uncertainty regarding the conditions that separate male from female. Thus, even though Obsession nourishes the rhetoric of anonymity and magnifies itself through monumental “laws” of speech communication that compel people to speak, the power and “objectivity” of this rhetoric never produce a mood of dogmatic certainty. On the contrary, power and objectivity imply higher magnitudes of ambiguity: in seeking to desexualize its obsession with signifying an ideal state of abstraction, the text winds up bisexualizing the obsession. But the doom-laden action of the play suggests that the bisexualization

of anonymity and abstraction reaches its ultimate moment and signification through death and inviolable silence. Through this rhetoric of anonymity, speech operates, "objectively," to satisfy a cosmic desire for justice and purity at the same time that it embodies a movement toward death.

Notes

1 The edition of the text used here is Cyril Tourneur, *The Revenger's Tragedy*, Brian Gibbons, ed. (London and New York: Benn and Norton, 1971). This edition contains a facsimile reproduction of the 1607 title page.

2 A comprehensive summary of the half-century of research devoted to determining the authorship of the play appears in Samuel Schonbaum, *Middleton's Tragedies* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1955), 153-182, and David V. Erdman and Ephim G. Fogel, eds., *Evidence for Authorship* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1966), 431-432.

3 Allardyce Nicoll, *"The Revenger's Tragedy* and the Virtue of Anonymity," in Richard Hosley, ed., *Essays on Shakespeare and Elizabethan Drama in Honor of Hardin Craig* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1962), 315.

4 Critical commentary on *The Revenger's Tragedy* tends to focus attention on the narrative, rather than rhetorical, level of signification. Fredson Bowers, *Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy 1587-1642* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1940), 132-138, for example, interprets the significance of the text in terms of its generic status, as a "tragidrama," which fuses medieval and baroque moral perceptions. Jonathan Dollimore, "Two concepts of mimesis: Renaissance literary theory and *The Revenger's Tragedy,"* in James Redmond, ed., *Themes in Drama* 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 25-50, sees at work in the text principles of irony, parody, and satire, which are by no means unique to it, as Bowers believes "tragidrama" is unique to it, but formal strategies adopted by dramatists of the time and given powerful distillation by the anonymous author. From this Marxist perspective, the significance of the play has little to do with its formal innovations and much to do with its use of readily accessible generic principles to undermine the concept of divine or poetic justice: "Human suffering is never seen to vindicate human experience," 47. The "patterns" and "motifs" approach to textual interpretation, as exemplified by Larry S. Champion, *Tragic Patterns in Jacobean and Caroline Drama* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1977); and Charles A. Hallet and Elaine S. Hallet, *The Revenger's Madness. Study of Revenge Tragedy Motifs* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1980), discusses what the text is "about" from a moral-psychologistic perspective which treats "motifs" and "patterns" as components of narrative, rather than rhetorical, structures. Studies which focus on signifiers rather than referents concentrate heavily on imagery and metaphors. Daniel Jonathan Jacobson, *The Language of The Revenger's Tragedy* (Salzburg: Institut für Englische Sprache und Literatur, 1974), classifies images in the text, but not the rhetorical devices used to construct the images. Nicholas Brooke, *Horrid Laughter in Jacobean Tragedy* (London: Open Books, 1979), offers impressionistic images of the *reader's* response *to* the text, but no systematic discussion of the relation between rhetorical choices and

meanings *of* the text: "Revulsion and fascination meet in a very nasty joking," which produces a "horrified laughter, the cackle of skulls," 24. T.B. Tomlinson, *A Study of Elizabethan and Jacobean Tragedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964), 18-119, also presents the rhetoric of reader response without dwelling on how the text constructs the response. Coburn Freer, *The Poetics of Jacobean Drama* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981), 62-102, does examine the language in great detail and avoids prolonged discussion of imagery and metaphor; Freer concentrates instead on determining the significance of metric structure, "the intrinsically poetic element of Renaissance poetic drama," 8. "The modern proliferation of imagery studies--even though there is little in Elizabethan dramatic poetics that alludes to this sort of reading--may indeed have its source in our inability to *hear* relationships between the characters. We tend, in short, to view these plays as masterpieces of figurative language in which structure and *vision* are the dominant components," 12. However, Freer considers metric structure significant only insofar as it creates the character of the speaker. But because he focuses almost entirely upon the language of one speaker, Vindice, he hesitates to reveal how properties he ascribes to Vindice's language are also properties of the language of other speakers. In other words, he discusses the metric peculiarities of Vindice's speeches in relation to a particular set of motives and attitudes. But Freer does not situate these peculiarities and motives within a general set of attitudes that control the language of the entire play and arise from a self-conscious attempt, through anonymity of authorship, to call attention to the conditions (to the *problem)* of how texts inscribe or produce identity as well as represent it. The result is that Vindice's language is misperceived as possessing a power to particularize its speaker when it is more accurate to say that it amplifies linguistic and characterological qualities of the speaker that the text multiplies or echoes in other speakers. Freer suggests that readers can be corrupted by treating Renaissance literary language as an instrument for generating images of greater clarity than refined perception permits. But an equally great deception awaits those who assume that this language is strange and fascinating because it demonstrates the differentiating power of speech to disambiguate the enigmatic manifestations of sight, image, and "vision." The voice is simply another zone of ambiguity.

5 By 1600, writers of texts had enough examples and models of literary authorship from the previous one hundred years as well as from the classical literature they had studied in school to realize that the public for literary (dramatic) works no longer expected anonymity of authorship, as was perhaps the case in the Middle Ages. By 1600, anonymity of authorship functioned as a conscious choice before the author of a text. But if anonymity of authorship still appealed to writers of literary texts, it was not necessarily because these writers wished to sustain older expectations. At a time when literacy was expanding prodigiously, but copyright legislation was non-existent, and so much literary work was the result of complicated collaborations, adaptations, forgeries, and plagiarisms, the concept of authorship probably lacked clear definition, and it was understood that the writers of texts were not always or entirely the authors of the texts they "wrote." However, the rhetorical devices in *The Revenger's Tragedy* operate so consistently as to suggest that the text has only one author with a "personal" attitude toward reality, even though scholarship has ascribed the singularity of the attitude to at least two individuals who assumed sole responsibility for the authorship of other texts, Tourneur and Middleton. But it is the sudden expansion of literacy in society, accompanied by innovations in printing technology that complicate distinctions between writing and publishing, that change an expectation of anonymity into an anxiety toward it, into an awareness of how emotions provoked by language are so mysterious and potentially fragmenting that they should not be detached from unique, named identities if language and literacy themselves, rather than their different users, are to amplify the

power of language to construct unity of identity for the entire society.

6 For other references indicating the desire of the characters to step outside of themselves, see I, 92-95; I, ii, 134; I, iii, 1; II, i, 235-241; III, iii, 4; III, v, 30; III, v, 113; IV, ii, 198; IV, iv, 25; v, iii, 110.

7 See also II, i, 249-257; III, v, 71-97; V, iii, 110-126. Lussurioso shifts into an analytical commentary at IV, ii, 42-46.

8 Other examples of this kind of question include the following:

Castiza: He lately brought
Immodest writing sent from the duke's son
To tempt me to dishonourable act.
Gratiana: Dishonourable act? . . . (II, i, 138-141)

Ambitioso: My gracious lord take pity.
Duke: Pity boys? (II, iii, 70)

Officer: My lords
E'en at his last--with pardon be it spoke--
He cursed you both.
Supervacuo: He cursed us? 'Las, good soul. (III, vi, 50-51)

Ambitioso: Slave!
Cam'st thou to delude us?
Officer: Delude you my lords? (III, vi, 67)

Hippolito: I chose him for the best my lord:
'Tis much my sorrow if neglect in him
Breed discontent in you.
Lussurioso: Neglect? 'Twas will: judge of it: (IV, i, 13-15)

1 Noble: You're now my lord's Grace.
Lussurioso: My lord's Grace? I perceive you'll have it so. (V, I, 146-147)

Vindice: Though we say it. 'Twas we two murdered him! Antonio: You two? (V, iii, 98-99)

See also II, 111, 51-52; III, iv, 28-30; III, iv, 51-54; III, vi, 3-4; III, vi, 28-29; III, vi, 74; IV, i, 28-29; IV, ii, 67-68; IV, ii, 104; IV, ii, 120-121; IV, iv, 101-102, 105; V, iii, 103-104.

9 See also II, i, 178f.; IV, iv, 26f.

10 Hippolito's speech, which almost seems perversely dull (for Hippolito's language is only dull here) runs as follows:

Last evening, predecessor unto this,
The duke's son warily inquired for me,
Whose pleasure I attended: he began
By policy to open and unhusk me
About the time and common rumour:
But I had so much wit to keep my thoughts
Up in their built houses; yet afforded him

An idle satisfaction without danger.
But the whole aim and scope of his intent
Ended in this: conjuring me in private
To seek some strange-digested fellow forth,
Of ill-contented nature; either disgraced
In former times, or by new grooms displaced,
Since his step-mother's nuptials; such a blood,
A man that were for evil only good--
To give you the true word, some base-coined pander.

Although some systematic repetition occurs toward the end of the speech in the form of rhymes and alliteration (for example, "seek some strange-digested fellow forth"), it is difficult to remember what the speaker has said, and the passage probably has to be read more than a couple of times before the reader, let alone the spectator, can determine its interest, if not its meaning. The reason the language is dull is that the speaker avoids using any combination of rhetorical. devices which would focus or intensify the perceptions of his listeners. His speech is empty of aphorisms, "objective" commentaries, complicated repetitions, striking comparisons. At line 78, there is a feeble attempt at an "either/or" construction, but one must return to the line repeatedly to be sure what choices are being considered. Here we find the "true word," devoid of rhetorical motive: the speaker describes an event that really happened because he was there to witness it. In this instance, the truth "speaks for itself," in the sense that Hippolito's words seem arbitrarily organized; the speaker doesn't construct the truth--he reports it. The passage is fascinatingly dull, not because Hippolito is dull for some unique reason, but because the author is unable to connect rhetorical prowess with the revelation or interpretation of experience that has "really happened." Rhetoric operates to disclose only that reality (or the reality) which otherwise remains hidden from the listeners of rhetoric. It is doubtful, however, that the author intended this passage to be dull, for it is not dull enough to be consciously dull, to be monotonously, excessively repetitious.

11 This attitude was apparently familiar to Christopher Marlowe, who, in *Doctor Faustus* (1592), has Faustus read lines from Jerome's Bible and translate them:

Stipendium peccati mors est--Ha! Stipendium, etc.
The reward of sin is death. That's hard.
Si pecasse negamus, fallimur, et nulla est in nobis veritas--
If we say that we have no sin
We deceive ourselves, and there's no truth in us. (i, 40-46)

12 Puns of one kind or another appear at I, i, 50-56; I, iii; 75-84; II, iii, 19-20; III, v, 215; IV, i, 60f.; IV, ii, 123-134; IV, ii, 202; v, i, 36-38, 40-46; v, iii, 66; v, iii, 115f.

13 Another famous anonymous play, *Everyman*, written over century earlier (1499), also dramatizes the perception that particular modes of speaking bring the speaker toward Death. But Everyman is utterly alone in a world of allegorical abstractions (Fellowship, Kindred, Goods, Five Wits, Good Deeds, Knowledge) which are aspects of himself. Every human being is alone in his or her relation to death and salvation; to be anonymous is to be profoundly alone. In *The Revenger's Tragedy,* however, anonymity has very little to do with the experience of loneliness, because the abstractions which construct the anonymity are precisely what free the speakers (and the author, too, perhaps) from the contaminating loneliness of subjectivity, of being profoundly different.

14 See also I, ii, 101f.; I, iii, 17; I, iii, 27; I, iii, 161f.; I, iv, 62; II, i, 48; II, ii, 115f.; III, v, 73f.; III, v, 169; IV, iv, 136; V, i, 142-143; V, ii, 30; V, iii, 6.

15 Roland Barthes, "Inaugural Lecture, College de France," trans. by Richard Howard, in *A Barthes Reader,* Susan Sontag, ed. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), 460. On the same page: "We do not see the power in speech because we forget that all speech is a classification, and that all classifications are oppressive."