

***THOMAS  
MIDDLETON***



***THE REVENGER'S  
TRAGEDY***

**Thomas Middleton**

# **The Revenger's Tragedy**

**Enriched edition.**

*Introduction, Studies and Commentaries by Jared Black*

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# Introduction

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In a world where private grief collides with public rot, *The Revenger's Tragedy* turns the itch for justice into a razor that cuts both tyrant and avenger, testing how far wit, disguise, and theatrical bravado can go before they become the very corruption they aim to punish, and asking whether a society marinated in lust, bribery, and spectacle can yield anything but further ruin when wronged people seize the stage, take up the script of vengeance, and try to write a better ending with the only ink available to them: cunning, courage, and a dangerous, intoxicating rage.

A quintessential Jacobean revenge tragedy, *The Revenger's Tragedy* is now widely attributed to Thomas Middleton and was first printed in 1607, amid the vibrant yet volatile theatrical culture of early seventeenth-century London. The play is set in a decadent Italian ducal court, a favored backdrop for English dramatists exploring power without restraint. Audiences encounter a milieu of courtiers, parasites, and rulers who operate by bribery and appetite. The piece stands alongside other dark satires of the era, sharpening its knives with speed, irony, and a relish for moral exposure that turns political intrigue into a nightmarish carnival of vice.

At its center is Vindice, a wronged gentleman whose life has been blasted by a crime that the ruling house has allowed to fester unpunished, and whose answer is a meticulously staged campaign of retribution. The opening movements follow his entry into the court's machinery, where he tests masks, loyalties, and opportunities with

sardonic panache. The language is muscular and quick, swinging from bitter wit to sudden menace, while the tone fuses grotesque comedy with moral outrage. Readers and audiences navigate a world of asides, sudden reversals, and perilous bargains, feeling the lure and the cost of stratagems.

One of the play's abiding concerns is the collapse of lawful redress in the face of entrenched power, and the way that collapse breeds private justice with public consequences. Middleton's court is a marketplace of bodies and favors, where desire becomes currency and family ties strain under ambition. The drama probes the ethics of revenge, not merely asking whether it works, but what it makes of the person who pursues it. It exposes performance as a civic habit: masks, titles, and ceremonies function as weapons, suggesting that political life is already theatrical long before the revenger steps onto the stage.

For contemporary readers, the play's anatomy of power feels disturbingly familiar: officials maneuver to protect their own, desire is leveraged to secure advantage, and public virtue masks private predation. The text confronts the temptations of vigilantism in a climate where institutions seem compromised, and it asks whether outrage can be channeled without reproducing the very harms it resists. Its satire of toxic masculinity and transactional intimacy resonates with debates about consent, coercion, and accountability. The brash humor, far from trivial, becomes a tool for surviving horror, illuminating how laughter and disgust can coexist when corruption has become everyday weather.

Formally, the play relishes swift scenes, razor-edged imagery, and a mosaic of characters whose names announce their tendencies without diminishing their

complexity. Vindice's bleak charisma is balanced by figures of power and their hangers-on, whose schemes create overlapping plots that collide in bursts of dark festivity. Disguise, eavesdropping, and sudden counsel propel the action, while moral reflection arrives in jagged, self-accusing flashes rather than tidy sermons. The result is both thriller and satire, a work that invites close reading of its rhetoric even as it delights in theatrical shocks, encouraging audiences to question what they applaud and why.

Approached with an eye for its gallows wit and its ethical unease, *The Revenger's Tragedy* remains a bracing encounter with the problem of justice in compromised systems. It rewards readers who listen for the music of its verse and the barbs of its satire, and it challenges them to weigh cunning against conscience. Without foreclosing judgment, the play insists that ends and means cannot be neatly separated when power corrupts the stage itself. That insistence keeps the drama alive: a fierce, unsettling mirror in which modern audiences can study how anger turns into action, and what action turns us into.



# Synopsis

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The Revenger's Tragedy, commonly attributed to Thomas Middleton and first printed in 1607, unfolds in an unnamed, Italianate court steeped in corruption. Vindice, a disenfranchised gentleman, mourns his betrothed, who died after resisting the Duke's lust. He fixates on vengeance while surveying a ruling house riven by lechery, favoritism, and rivalry. The court's official displays of justice mask a culture of bribery and opportunism, where status protects wrongdoing. As Vindice weighs method and timing, the play establishes its central tensions: whether virtue can survive in a polluted environment, whether private revenge can correct public evil, and how performance itself manipulates truth.

The opening conflict introduces Antonio, a nobleman whose wife has been assaulted by the Duchess's youngest son. The court stages a trial, and the offender is condemned, but power quickly presses against the verdict. The ruling family maneuvers to safeguard its own, testing whether law can prevail over favoritism. Meanwhile, the Duke's heir, Lussurioso, reveals his predatory desire and ambition, seeking gratification without consequence. Into this volatile arena steps Vindice, who adopts a servant's persona to gain proximity to power and information. His patient, theatrical calculation contrasts with the court's impulsive appetites, setting up a contest between cunning design and brazen entitlement.

Under his disguise, Vindice becomes useful to Lussurioso, who fixates on Castiza, Vindice's virtuous sister.

Commissioned to procure her, Vindice uses the opportunity to test his family's integrity. He tempts his mother, Gratiana, with gifts and promises, exposing the corrosive reach of courtly corruption into the household. Castiza resists, and Gratiana's wavering becomes a painful crucible for repentance and forgiveness. Parallel to this, the Duchess pursues an affair with the Duke's illegitimate son, Spurio, inflaming rivalries among potential heirs. Familial boundaries blur as private desires turn political, and every intimate decision becomes leverage in the larger contest for precedence.

As intrigues multiply, the play depicts a ruling caste that weaponizes scandal. Accusations are planted, bedrooms become traps, and rumors are engineered to unseat competitors. Lussurioso and his adversaries strive to compromise one another with evidence of lust or treachery, while the Duke's authority erodes under the weight of his own appetites. Within this turbulence, Vindice and his brother, Hippolito, refine their timetable, determined to balance patience with decisive action. The law appears malleable: sentences are negotiated, pardons courted, and public ceremonies overwrite private harms. The stage becomes a chessboard on which reputation, not truth, dictates survival.

A turning point arrives through a meticulously staged encounter, where entertainment masks intention and access to the highest power is won. The court's taste for spectacle becomes its weakness, and a private audience alters the political weather. In the aftermath, succession questions intensify, and opportunists race to occupy any sudden vacancy or expand influence under new arrangements. Vindice's double life grows more precarious as triumph courts exposure, and allies must be sorted from liabilities. The moment crystallizes the play's method:



public pageantry delivers private outcomes, and the same arts of disguise that enable justice can also unleash further chaos.

Approaching its crisis, the drama compresses rival schemes into a single night of festivity. Masques, music, and courtly dances furnish cover for competing strikes, and identities are hidden in plain sight. Gratiana's remorse restores trust at home, while Castiza's integrity stands as a counterpoint to the court's libertinism. Vindice and Hippolito must weigh the cost of completing their design against the risk of matching the cruelty they oppose. Political factions—Lussurioso's circle, Spurio with the Duchess's party, and nobles mindful of Antonio's grievance—move toward collision. The stage pictures both a purge and a performance, where revelation and retribution overlap.

The Revenger's Tragedy concludes with reckonings that test the boundary between justice and savagery, leaving order outwardly restored yet morally unsettled. Without resolving every ambiguity, the play poses enduring questions: whether private vengeance can purge public vice, what becomes of virtue in systems that reward predation, and how theatricality shapes power. Its enduring resonance lies in the acid clarity with which it exposes institutional rot, the seductions of spectacle, and the costs of making wrongs right by violent means. As a landmark Jacobean tragedy, it continues to provoke, inviting audiences to scrutinize authority and to mistrust righteousness performed for show.

# Historical Context

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The Revenger's Tragedy emerged in early Jacobean London, printed in 1607 by the printer George Eld. Now widely attributed to Thomas Middleton, the play was acted by the King's Men, the leading company under royal patronage; its quarto advertises that it had been 'sundry times' performed. Its action unfolds in an Italian ducal court, a conventional foreign setting that allowed English dramatists to depict elite corruption at a safe remove. The theatrical world around it included open-air amphitheaters such as the Globe and professional censorship by the Master of the Revels, whose licensing shaped what could be said about politics, religion, and the behavior of rulers.

The play belongs to the late Elizabethan and Jacobean revenge-tragedy tradition, indebted to Senecan drama and exemplified in England by Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* and Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. These works explore private vengeance, elaborate stratagems, moral outrage, and theatrical displays of suffering. By the first decade of James I's reign, the genre had become self-aware, mixing grim sensationalism with satire. The Revenger's Tragedy draws on that vocabulary—masks, disguises, courtroom rhetoric, and macabre spectacle—while scrutinizing why audiences take pleasure in punitive justice. Its Italianate court magnifies the stakes of succession, favoritism, and honor that English spectators recognized in their own political culture.

Early Stuart political discourse grappled with the image of the scheming "Machiavel," a stock figure on the English

stage since the 1590s. Italy—seat of popes, principalities, and intricate court etiquette—stood for sophisticated statecraft tinged with moral danger in Protestant eyes. English travel writers and chroniclers described ducal courts rife with patronage, bribery, and poisoned intrigues. James I's court, though different in structure, drew criticism for favoritism and expensive display, making foreign courts an expedient screen for commentary. The *Revenger's Tragedy* situates its intrigues within that Italian stereotype to probe how power circulates through flattery, sexual bargaining, and calculated cruelty.

In Reformation England, private revenge was condemned by church teaching and common law, which vested punishment in magistrates as guardians of the king's peace. James I's writings on kingship emphasized order and the prerogatives of sovereign justice, while courts such as Star Chamber targeted libel, riot, and corruption. Yet audiences were fascinated by plays that dramatized affronted honor and retaliatory plots, a controlled space to examine conscience and injury. The *Revenger's Tragedy* confronts that contradiction, staging the appeal and peril of self-authorized punishment, and testing whether rhetoric, wit, and theatrical display can substitute for lawful redress in a tainted court.

The immediate political climate included the 1605 Gunpowder Plot, a failed attempt by English Catholics to blow up king and Parliament, followed by tighter oaths and surveillance. In 1606 Parliament also passed the Act to Restrain Abuses of Players, fining the profane use of sacred names onstage. Such measures intensified attention to language, duplicity, loyalty, and the exposure of hidden threats. Contemporary drama responded with scenes of eavesdropping, informers, and ceremonious oaths whose sincerity was suspect. The *Revenger's Tragedy* shares this

preoccupation with dissembling speech and performative vows in a courtly environment where appearances are instruments of power.

London's commercial theaters catered to mixed audiences hungry for novelty, rhetoric, and violent catharsis. Companies like the King's Men developed repertoires balancing comedies, histories, and tragedies to retain crowds and satisfy patrons. The Revenger's Tragedy circulated both onstage and in print: its 1607 quarto, printed by George Eld for the bookseller John Helme, advertised repeated performance by the King's Majesty's Servants. Publication was supervised by the Stationers' Company, while plays themselves required licensing by the Master of the Revels. Foreign settings, allegory, and satire were practical strategies for dramatists to discuss elite misconduct without naming English officeholders.

Thomas Middleton was a prolific London dramatist whose career bridged city comedy, tragicomedy, and darker tragedy. He collaborated frequently (notably with Thomas Dekker and William Rowley), wrote civic pageants for the City of London, and later served as the City Chronologer. His satirical *A Game at Chess* (1624) provoked authorities with its topical attack on Spanish diplomacy. Earlier comedies anatomized greed, sexual bargaining, and social pretense in London life. Those habits of sharp observation and moral exposure inform *The Revenger's Tragedy*, whose brilliant set speeches and carefully engineered encounters dissect the traffic of desire, bribery, and reputation within a corrupt elite.

Composed amid anxieties about court patronage, outward conformity, and trustworthy justice, *The Revenger's Tragedy* turns a familiar genre into a stringent social critique. Its Italian court concentrates behaviors English

viewers debated at home: the buying of access, the fragility of female chastity as currency, the spectacle of authority, and the temptations of retaliatory violence. The play's relish for wit and sharp antithesis coexists with an insistence that corruption corrodes all bonds. By pressing theatrical ingenuity against the limits set by censors and decorum, it mirrors its age's fascination with power while exposing the spiritual and civic costs of vice.