Postgraduate English
www.dur.ac.uk/postgraduate.english
ISSN 1756-9761
Issue 33 Autumn 2016

Editors:
Arya Aryan and Douglass Virdee

‘That skull had a tongue in it’: Skulls, the Flesh, and the Individual in Early Modern Drama

Chloe Owen

King’s College London

'That skull had a tongue in it': Skulls, the Flesh, and the Individual in Early Modern Drama

Chloe Owen

King's College London

Postgraduate English, Issue 33, Autumn 2016

In early modern drama, skulls are not only a symbol of death, but a reminder of the living person. Even as playwrights employ common tropes that portray the skull's anonymity, they return the cranium to the flesh in a way that recreates the individual.[1] This essay examines the ways in which skulls are presented through the *memento mori* tradition, the *danse macabre*, attitudes towards charnel houses and finally the growing interest in anatomy. I focus particularly on the graveyard scene in William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1600), Gloriana's skull in Thomas Middleton's *The Revenger's Tragedy* (1606) and Tymethes's skull in Middleton and Thomas Dekker's *The Bloody Banquet* (1609). In each of these plays, there is a firm emphasis on the flesh and the soul that, together, recreate the once-living person even as the skull maintains its reputation as a blanket symbol of death.

In analysing the cranium, many critics argue for its 'anonymity', and its representation of 'death's undifferentiating blankness' due to our inability to see who the skull was in life.[2] Martin Esslin takes this idea of anonymity in drama further when he writes, '[t]he actor is the iconic symbol *par excellence*, a real human being who has become a sign for a human being'.[3] This raises the question of to what extent the skull can represent a person (i.e. someone who is real, rather than a fictional character); what we see on stage is a

[1] I use the term 'individual' to mean a person (fictional or real) who can be distinguished from other people.
[2] Pascale Aebischer. *Shakespeare's Violated Bodies: Stage and Screen Performance*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004. p. 85; Sophie Oosterwijk. 'Dance, Dialogue and Duality: Fatal Encounters in the Medieval *Dance Macabre*'. *Mixed Metaphors: The* Danse Macabre *in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*. Ed. Sophie Oosterwijk and Stefanie Knöll. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011. p. 32; Michael Neill. *Issues of Death: Mortality and Identity in English Renaissance Tragedy.* Oxford: Oxford UP, 1997. p. 14.
[3] Martin Esslin. *The Field of Drama: How the Signs of Drama Create Meaning on Stage and Screen*. London: Methuen, 1987. p. 56.

ISSN 1756-9761

‘*sign* for a human being’ holding the *sign* for a dead human being. Although the skull may represent ‘both a once living – and recognisable – human being and a portent of our own future condition’, it is firmly contained within the narrative of fiction; we do not see a *person* contemplating a skull, but a *character*.[4] The cranium, therefore, cannot be a person, but only a sign. In this way, it could be argued that the skull is made truly anonymous as it is never able to fully represent a human being.

However, while the skull itself is merely an anonymous sign, the audience is able to apply this elsewhere both inside and outside the fictional narrative. Within the world of the early modern playhouse, the audience is drawn into the fiction; the contemplation of fate, fortune and inevitable death is mirrored in the audience’s viewing a chain of predetermined events (i.e. the narrative) that allows the fiction to extend beyond the stage and into the surrounding viewers. An audience’s response to a contemplation of a skull in a play will undoubtedly be influenced by their experiences outside of the playhouse. These experiences are undoubtedly varied – those who have studied anatomy or seen an autopsy differ from those with a general awareness of the science or those who are aware of charnel houses – and so it should be remembered that audience reactions will not be uniform.

Seventeenth-century anatomy texts contain descriptions of the head as: ‘the chief mansion-house of the sensitive Soul’; ‘the mansion house of Reason, that is, the soule’; and ‘the Royal Palace of *Minerva* . . . where is the Seat of that most Noble Bowel, to which the Supream Architect subjected the Government of the whole Body’.[5] Margaret Owens briefly discusses cultures in which the soul is believed to be situated in the head (as these texts

[4] Oosterwijk, p. 40; Contemplating: the act of viewing a skull with attention. Specifically, ‘[t]o view mentally; to consider attentively, meditate upon, ponder, study’ (*OED* n. pag.). The character is not only seen to be viewing the skull physically, but is understood to be considering its symbolic and personal meanings; I use ‘character’ to mean a person who exists only within the fictional narrative.

[5] Thomas Bartholin. *Bartholinus anatomy*. London: Printed by John Streater, 1668. Defining gender, 1450-1910. Web. p. 127; Helkiah Crooke, *Microcosmographia.* 1615. EEBO. n. pag.; Ysbrand van Diemerbroe, *The anatomy of human bodies; comprehending the most modern discoveries and curiosities in that art.* London: Angel and Bible, 1694. Historical Texts. p. 373.

ISSN 1756-9761

suggest of seventeenth-century Europe) and writes that '[i]n these cultures, to possess the head is to possess the soul'.[6] The head is the container of the human being's essence, the immortal part of a person that transcends the physical body. A skull, stripped of its flesh after years of decay, is unlikely to still house the soul. However, it is still recognisably human. Thus, the audience is reminded of the essence of the now-dead individual that was once housed in the skull. Although we may no longer be able to see exactly who it was, we are aware that this cranium once housed a mind, a soul, and an entire personality, making the skull far from anonymous.

The *Memento Mori*

The *memento mori* tradition reminds the viewer that death comes to us all, encouraging them to think upon the afterlife. For example, in a sermon preached at a funeral in 1708, Daniel Featley stated that 'the beginning of Wisdom is the consideration of our End: and a forcible Means to bring us everlasting Life, is to meditate continually upon our Death'.[7] Although approximately a century later than the plays I discuss, the *memento mori* tradition remains the same; death is a reminder of the afterlife and therefore a way of improving life on Earth and ensuring entry into Heaven (thus bringing 'everlasting Life'). William Engel describes the skull as 'that which is brought low in the face of death, and which thus, iconographically, becomes the face of Death, and existentially, the faceless face of each of us after death'.[8] While this is the idea of the *memento mori,* playwrights do not always allow their crania to remain 'faceless', and instead recreate the flesh to give a sense of the individual through naming the deceased, giving them a biography and describing their physical features.

[6] Margaret E. Owens. *Stages of Dismemberment: The Fragmented Body in Late Medieval and Early Modern Drama*. Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2005. p. 170.
[7] Daniel Featley. *Philip's memento mori: or, the passing bell. A sermon preach'd in Mercers Chappel, at the funeral of Mr. Bennet, Merchant.* London: Printed by H. Hills, 1708. Historical Texts. p. 3.
[8] Willian E. Engel. *Death and Drama in Renaissance England: Shades of Memory*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002. p. 14.

ISSN 1756-9761

The end of Hamlet's contemplation of Yorick seems like a typical *memento mori* style approach to the levelling power of death. Richard Bruster describes an approach to stage properties that is 'influenced by the study of iconography'. This allows for a reading of the skull as a familiar and popular image: 'Thus the skulls of *Hamlet* and *The Revenger's Tragedy* are explained in relation to the memento mori tradition'.[9] Hamlet muses, 'Alexander died, Alexander was buried, / Alexander returneth to dust' and 'Imperial Caesar, dead and turned to clay, / Might stop a hole to keep the wind away'.[10] After contemplating the head of a jester, Hamlet moves on to consider the progression of time and the coming of new epochs through the fate of these emperors which also indicates the levelling power of death; we are not only equal once we are in the ground, but may be put to coarse uses.

However, Frances Teague describes the revelation of Yorick's identity as creating, 'no longer a conventional, safe symbol of mortality, but instead a stinking reminder that death has taken Ophelia and will soon take the rest of the court'.[11] The skull's transcendence of being a 'conventional, safe symbol' is one way in which the playwright creates a sense of individuality by creating a sign of a specific person. When discussing the same moment, Andrew Sofer makes a similar argument as he writes that '[n]aming the skull transforms the scene. It is a moment of "unmetaphoring" in which the conventionalized figure of speech has suddenly become humanized'.[12] According to these critics, once Yorick is named, he stops being seen as merely a skull. He is instead a personal reminder that death has come and is coming to the people closest to Hamlet as well as becoming his own person. Thus, he is no longer anonymous and instead becomes a character in his own right.

[9] Richard Bruster, 'The dramatic life of objects in the early modern theatre.' *Staged Properties in Early Modern English Drama*. Ed. Jonathan Gil Harris and Natasha Korda. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002. p. 68.
[10] William Shakespeare, 'The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark.' *William Shakespeare: Complete Works*. Ed. Jonathan Bate and Eric Rasmussen. London: Macmillan, 2007. 5.1.158-9; Ibid., 5.1.161-2.
[11] Frances Teague. *Shakespeare's Speaking Properties*. London: Associated UP, 1991. p. 24.
[12] Andrew Sofer. 'The Skull on the Renaissance Stage: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Props.' *English Literary Renaissance*.28.1 (1998). p. 53.

ISSN 1756-9761

When Teague writes that Yorick is a 'reminder that death has taken Ophelia', she hints at what is later stated by Carol Chillington Rutter: Yorick '[casts] imagination forward to Ophelia . . . in the grave, 'instant old', no longer even a body but rotten flesh and jumbled bones'.[13] Or, as Pascale Aebischer writes when working with Rutter's analysis, 'Yorick's skull is both his own and Ophelia's'.[14] While viewing Yorick encourages Hamlet to consider ancient emperors such as Alexander and Caesar, the audience is aware that this is Ophelia's grave. Thus, as Hamlet moves through the personal contemplation of his jester and back to the *memento mori* tradition, the audience is able to apply the skull (that we know is Ophelia's bed-mate in the grave) to a newly-deceased character. Rather than retaining the *memento mori* image, Shakespeare makes the skull specific to Yorick and Ophelia, two characters who are intimately connected to Hamlet.

Vindice's contemplation of Gloriana's skull in *The Revenger's Tragedy* at first appears to be in the *memento mori* tradition much like Hamlet's contemplation of Yorick. He calls her 'My study's ornament, thou shell of death', implying that Gloriana reminds him of his own death.[15] However, Vindice goes beyond this: 'The skull is the traditional *contemptus mundi* symbol of human frailty and transitory life'.[16] Rather than *memento mori* – a reminder of death – *contemptus mundi* means contempt for the world. In the same way that naming Yorick 'is a moment of "unmetaphoring"', the naming of Gloriana humanises her skull, creating something more personal than the *memento mori*. Vindice's contempt for the world stems from the fact that his betrothed, Gloriana, has been poisoned by the Old Duke. This property, therefore, does not encourage him to think on death, but to think on revenge, for 'whoe'er knew / Murder unpaid?' As Jean Wilson states, the skull 'is not (for him) an

[13] Carol Chillington Rutter. 'Snatched Bodies: Ophelia in the grave.' *Enter the Body: Women and Representation on Shakespeare's Stage*. London: Routledge, 2001. p. 41.
[14] Aebischer, *Shakespeare's Violated Bodies,* p. 93.
[15] Thomas Middleton. 'The Revenger's Tragedy.' *English Renaissance Drama: A Norton Anthology*. Ed. David Bevington et al. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2002. 1.1.14-5.
[16] Richard T. Brucher. 'Fantasies of Violence: *Hamlet* and *The Revenger's Tragedy*.' *Studies in English Literature* 21.2 (1981): 257-270. JSTOR. p. 260.

ISSN 1756-9761

emblem of his own mortality but of love triumphing over death'.[17] Middleton takes the traditional *memento mori* symbol and subverts it, turning it into something deeply personal; because Vindice knew who the skull was in life, he is not contemplating death but thinking on Gloriana's person, thereby spurring himself on to revenge.

The Bloody Banquet also subverts the *memento mori* tradition though to a different effect when '*Sertorio brings in the flesh, with a skull all bloody.* [[*The young Queen*] *sits at the table, and begins to eat the flesh, and drink blood from the skull*.]'.[18] The image recalls artwork that features crania sitting on tables as a reminder of the inevitability of death (Figures 1-4).[19] In each of these images, a skull is placed on a table to remind the viewer of impending death. Middleton and Dekker recall this well-known symbol of the fleeting nature of life. However, their property is a murdered lover who must now be consumed by the adulterous young Queen. This is, once again, an image of revenge, but unlike in *The Revenger's Tragedy* the audience is made to feel disgusted by the revenger's actions and to pity the lovers. The *memento mori*, in *The Bloody Banquet*, becomes a gruesome display of tyranny rather than a reminder of the overarching power of death and is instead linked to the individual circumstances of the lovers. In this image, the skull is covered in blood, unlike the 'clean' skulls of the other two plays; this creates the figure of the newly-eviscerated human head that is found in the anatomy theatre. Instead of just the *memento mori*, Middleton and Dekker create evidence of dissection, which connects Tymethes's skull with the idea of a real human body. The strong visual link between this scene and the anatomy theatre suggests the connection between revenge – which is done for the good of society – and the science – that relies on the death of one man in the pursuit of knowledge to benefit future generations. This is, however, confused by the audience's sympathies as the Tyrant is figured as excessive and

[17] Middleton, 1.1.42-3; Jean Wilson. 'The Kiss of Death: Death as a Lover in Early Modern English Literature and Art.' *Mixed Metaphors*. p. 243.
[18] Thomas Middleton and Thomas Dekker. 'The Bloody Banquet: A Tragedy.' *Thomas Middleton: The Collected Works*. Ed. Gary Taylor and John Lavagnino. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2007. 5.1.
[19] See Appendix for all figures.

ISSN 1756-9761

brutal and his revenge a step too far, thereby supplying a negative image of anatomy and dissection.

The *Danse Macabre*

The *danse macabre*, an illustration in which skeletons in various states of decay are seen to be dancing their victims away to death, is related to the *memento mori*. Maike Christadler makes this connection when she writes, 'the young girls being taken by Death are brilliantly gruesome visualisations of the *memento mori* idea – as naked and shining youthful flesh is contrasted with the abject cadaver'.[20] The contrast between living and dead flesh acts as a reminder of the levelling power of death as it comes to young and old indiscriminately. The message of the *danse* is similar to that of the *memento mori*: death is 'the great social leveler. By witnessing life's end, readers may be moved to evaluate their prior behaviour, to repent, and, by changing their conduct, to attain salvation'.[21] However, even as the *danse* indicates at the levelling power of death, the cadavers are often given a sense of personality: 'Even if there is just one dead partner per living victim, artists often differentiated them through colour, … thereby lending them individuality'.[22] The dancing skeletons are often given costumes and props that indicate at a social status that mirrors that of their victim. While they may be copying the living as they mock them on their way to death, these signifiers perhaps indicate at who they were in life, reminding the viewer of the (previously) living person.

Both *Hamlet* and *The Revenger's Tragedy* employ *danse macabre* imagery. Shakespeare has Hamlet mention many possibilities for the identity of the crania exhumed by the Gravedigger. These include a politician, a courtier, a lawyer, and 'a great buyer of land',

[20] Christadler, 'From Allegory to Anatomy: Femininity and the *Danse Macabre*' in *Mixed Metaphors*. p. 106.
[21] Ann Tukey Harrison, *The Danse Macabre of Women*. Ohio: Kent State UP, 1994. p. 8.
[22] Oosterwijk, p. 20.

ISSN 1756-9761

figures that can be found in the *danse macabre*.[23] When we finally come to realise the identity of one of the skulls, it is discovered to be the jester, another key figure in the *danse macabre*. The Fool represents 'the social leveler who teaches that "all dead men are equal" before God'.[24] The jester is a recognisable image from the *danse*, and one that ushers other social classes along with him to death. When we see Yorick, 'the skull is loaded with meaning, since the combination of death's head and jester's cap connotatively invokes the tradition of the dance of death'.[25] Yorick therefore appears to be ushering the rest of the court towards their deaths as he acts as the 'social leveler'.

However, the trope has been subverted in this scene; in the traditional *danse macabre*, 'However many roles there may be, they are ordered in social hierarchy from the more powerful (Pope, Emperor) to the least powerful (Franciscan, Child)'.[26] Hamlet moves on to contemplate the fate of emperors *after* he has contemplated the jester. This subversion of the hierarchy strays from the usual *danse macabre* motif. Furthermore, while the Fool will usually usher all social classes to death, in *Hamlet*, there are specifically higher classes mentioned, further emphasised by a return to the emperors at the end. These are more akin to the people of Elsinore's court; thus, the audience associates Yorick's death specifically with the deaths of the characters of the play. He becomes, not an usher for the viewer as in the usual *danse macabre*, but an usher for Ophelia, Polonius, Laertes, Hamlet, and the other victims of the play. The *danse macabre* becomes individual and specific, rather than a commentary on society.

In *The Revenger's Tragedy*, Middleton employs the *danse macabre* at the moment of the old Duke's death as 'Vindice stages his revenge on the old Duke as if it were an episode

---

[23] Shakespeare, 5.1.58-78; see Anon, *La Danse Macabre: Reproduction en Fac-similé de L'édition de Guy Marchant Paris 1486*. Paris: Éditions des Quatre Chemins, 1925.
[24] Sandra L. Hindman, 'The Illustrations.' *The Danse Macabre of Women*. Ed. Ann Tukey Harrison. Ohio: Kent State UP, 1994. p. 16.
[25] Aebischer, *Shakespeare's Violated Bodies*, p. 90.
[26] Harrison, p. 8.

ISSN 1756-9761

from the Dance'.[27] As Vindice dresses up Gloriana's skull, the act recalls the skeletons that dance in costumes that signify social rank. Middleton evokes several images from *The Danse Macabre of Women*, which specifically shows women being ushered away to death, when he writes, 'This very skull / Whose mistress the Duke poisoned with this drug, / The mortal cause of curse of the earth, shall be revenged / In the like strain, and kiss his lips to death'.[28] Gloriana's name alone conjures images of Elizabeth I as '[a]mong the numerous figures which represent facets of Elizabeth is the presiding regal icon of Gloriana, whom [Edmund] Spenser invests with the sun-like brightness of both majesty and the Woman of Revelation [in *The Faerie Queene*]'.[29] Aebischer argues that Gloriana's skull can 'stand for the cultural nostalgia of the Jacobean subject for England's Gloriana and the lost glory of the Elizabethan age'.[30] On the one hand, Gloriana represents a brighter Elizabethan age that has been lost to death. On the other hand, she is being made by Vindice to 'kiss [the Duke's] lips to death', figuring her as a whore because of her lover. Middleton combines the familiar figures of the Virgin, the Queen, and the Prostitute from the *danse macabre*.[31] While Gloriana's identity is obscured by disguise in this moment, the combination of different characters works to create a new image; rather than following the tropes of the *danse*, Middleton works to create an individual that is simultaneously recognisable as an amalgam of types and one who can transcend these categories assigned by artists.

Charnel Houses

It is also possible to see early modern attitudes towards *real* crania, as well as these artistic traditions, in both the closure of charnel houses and in the increased interest in anatomy.

[27] Neill, p. 84.
[28] Middleton, 3.4.102-5.
[29] Helen Hackett. *Virgin Mother, Maiden Queen: Elizabeth I and the Cult of the Virgin Mary*. London: Macmillan Press, 1995. Palgrave Connect. p. 139.
[30] Pascale Aebischer. *Screening Early Modern Drama: Beyond Shakespeare*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2013. Cambridge Books Online. p. 128.
[31] see Harrison, *The Danse Macabre of Women*.

ISSN 1756-9761

Charnel chapels were in use from the 13th to the mid-16th century in England and were places where people could pray to and for the dead. They housed bones that were moved from the surrounding graveyards and were then left on display in an underground crypt for churchgoers. As they were located beneath the church, cathedral, or chapel, '[l]ooking into the charnel room may have been like looking into the grave; it was a place of the dead but one which was accessible to the living'.[32] However, with the Reformation came the closure of charnel chapels as the worship of bones and other relics was seen as 'Popish', and bones became associated with the devil.[33] Jenny Crangle states that '[i]t seems that once the chambers and charnels were closed and were deemed unacceptable as part of post-Reformation religion, they quickly fell out of memory'.[34] On the surface, it appears that these forgotten charnel houses would have little to do with these 17th century plays. However, in her study of the bone crypt underneath the Holy Trinity Church in Rothwell, Northamptonshire (Figures 5-7), Crangle states that some of the brownish coloured skulls were buried in coffins and 'exhumed shortly after burial, as the Hospital [Jesus Hospital that is now situated next to the south-east side of the graveyard] was constructed in 1585'.[35] Although the charnel house would have been closed at this time after the Reformation, bones were evidently being buried beneath the church as late as 1585. Therefore, there is still a culture in which bones may be seen as they are relocated to underneath the church.

Instead of being visible as relics to which people may pray, the bones are now hidden from sight as 'Reformers felt it necessary to eliminate all possibility of being amongst charnel, and even of seeing it'.[36] Bones are therefore viewed as something hidden and secret and certainly not something that should be made visible to the public. Thus, when we are

[32] Jenny Crangle. *A Study of Post-Depositional Funerary Practices in Medieval England*. University of Sheffield, 2015. Pre-publication version, provided by the author. p. 193.
[33] Crangle, personal correspondence; 2016.
[34] Crangle, p. 231.
[35] Ibid., p. 196.
[36] Ibid., p. 231.

ISSN 1756-9761

presented with skulls on stage, we are shown something that is at once a spectacle – something that is presented to an audience – and something that is deeply personal as bones are no longer easily accessible for viewing. With the first public dissections in Bologna in the 14th-century, the human body becomes a public spectacle; this is enhanced by the increasing popularity of dissections in the mid-16th century. There is a movement away from a display of bones and towards spectatorship of dissections in this time. Thus, when Hamlet is reconnected with Yorick, when Vindice talks to Gloriana or when the young queen consumes Tymethes, they hold in their hands something that has been hidden from society, but that is also connected with public spectacle. In the world of the play, this would be a sight only for them as the display of bones is a practice that has been suppressed in the Reformation, but their association with anatomy suggests a connection to the scientific field.

Although an early modern audience may not have had access to a charnel house, it is possible for us to gain some understanding of what it means to view a real skull by visiting these places. Figure 6 shows in detail two crania in Rothwell's bone crypt. Seen side by side, we can notice the differences between the individuals. The one on the right has a longer forehead than the one on the left; the one on the left has smaller eye sockets; and the one on the right has smaller cheekbones. Even without the skills and technology to perform facial reconstruction, it is evident that these skulls are from two different people. Similarly, in Figure 7, we can see differences in the size of eye sockets, noses and foreheads, the protrusion of cheekbones and the angle of the upper jaw. It becomes evident that these crania are from different people with different appearances, giving a sense of the individual.

It is not clear what would have been used as a skull on the early modern stage - whether it would have been a real skull or a replica. Assuming real skulls were used (as Andrew Sofer suggests when he asks '[w]as the temptation of throwing a real skull on stage too thrilling an opportunity to miss . . . ?'), the graveyard episode in *Hamlet* would create a

ISSN 1756-9761

similar scene to the one experienced in the charnel house.[37] Jonathan Bate and Eric Rasmussen in their edition of the play have a total of three skulls on stage (the potential courtier, the imagined lawyer and 'great buyer of land' and Yorick). In any other edition, there could be no fewer than two. For the groundlings who surround the stage, it would arguably be possible for them to see the differences between the properties and thereby gain a sense of individuality. If the audience is too far away to see the properties or if real crania were not used, Shakespeare still ensures that the audience is given a sense of the individuals as Hamlet names potential occupations for the inhabitants of this grave; they are not mere symbols of death but people who had identities in life. Similarly, Gloriana and Tymethes *remain* Gloriana and Tymethes even in their roles as the skull. In this way, they can be seen as characters in their own right; they are given a name, a biography and even a body (indeed, the characterisation of skulls is an interesting line of inquiry that would merit consideration in further research). Thus, the cranium may visually signal the individual, while the characters' lines acoustically maintain a sense of the person as they were in life.

Anatomy

Finally, the writers use ideas surrounding anatomy in their representations of skulls. Michael Neill, when discussing death in early modern culture, states that dissection is linked to the *memento mori* as studying the dead body is a reminder that death comes to us all.[38] He also points out that the structure of the anatomy hall and public dissections are particularly theatrical.[39] Therefore, when the audience is presented with a skull on stage, they are likely to make connections between the bones and the study of anatomy, particularly as it 'helped to produce an entirely new understanding of the human body and its processes of morbidity'.[40]

[37] Sofer, p. 48.
[38] Neill, p. 114.
[39] Ibid., p. 117-20.
[40] Ibid., p. 102.

ISSN 1756-9761

The skull could thus be seen as a sign of a decaying body and 'morbidity' as well as a symbol of undifferentiating death. It may also be seen as a way of preventing death as dissection is intended to provide knowledge of diseases; while the skull reminds us of approaching death, its connection to anatomy is a reminder that science aims to prevent that very process. Keir Waddington discusses the history of medicine, offering an overview from the medieval period to today. He states both that anatomy 'offered a means to explore the work of God and the nature of Creation' and that 'popular discomfort existed about the dangers of separating the body from the soul'.[41] When we see a skull on stage, it is at once a decaying body, a part of the inner workings of God's creation and a body separated from its soul.

These playwrights tend to reverse the process of dissection as they add flesh to the bone. In *Hamlet*, Shakespeare writes '[t]hat skull had a tongue in it and could sing once' when the first skull is thrown from the grave.[42] Even before we reach the familiar figure of Yorick, Hamlet is recreating the flesh of the skull, bringing it back to the body as it was in life. When we reach Yorick, Shakespeare becomes more specific as he writes, '[h]e hath borne me on his back a thousand times' and '[h]ere hung those lips that I have kissed I know not how oft'.[43] Yorick not only had *a* 'tongue, but he had a back that *Hamlet* has ridden on, and lips that *he* has kissed. As Shakespeare rebuilds the body, it becomes deeply personal; this is not just a skull, the result of the worms' dissection, but a human being who still exists in the memories of the living. Hamlet's reverse-dismemberment recreates for us an individual, thereby distancing Yorick from the anonymous *memento mori* or *danse macabre* figure. While his dissection is reversed, the body is connected back to the aims of anatomy as Shakespeare creates wholeness from fragmentation, mirroring the goal of anatomists to take complete forms back to their constituent parts.

---

[41] Keir Waddington. *An Introduction to the Social History of Medicine: Europe since 1500*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011. p. 99; Ibid., p. 101.
[42] Shakespeare, 5.1.57.
[43] Ibid., 5.1.142; Ibid., 5.1.143-4.

ISSN 1756-9761

Middleton gives a similar effect in *The Revenger's Tragedy* as Vindice recreates Gloriana. Neill argues that '[t]he hero's imagination progressively strips his dead mistress of her "costly three-plied flesh" to expose that "terror to fat folks," the skull which he then advances for the contemplation of his audience'.[44] However, I would argue that Middleton does exactly the opposite; Vindice *begins* with the skull, holding it up for the audience to see. This is the final stage of dissection as the bone has already been stripped of its flesh. Vindice moves from the bone to think of a time 'When life and beauty naturally filled out / These ragged imperfections, / When two heaven-pointed diamonds were set / In those unsightly rings' and to speak to Gloriana of when 'thou wert apparelled in thy flesh'.[45] The audience is encouraged to imagine a face to go with the skull that is presented in front of them. We see the bones, but Vindice gives us beautiful flesh and sparkling eyes to project onto the skull to recreate the woman as she was in life. However, while the audience may be able to reconstruct (to some extent) Gloriana in their minds, what they still *see* is the skull.[46] This, as Bruster states, presents 'a single rhetorical question concerning the lack of fit between the object at hand and a complex set of memories and truths separate from, if related to, the object'.[47] Gloriana the cranium and Gloriana the woman in Vindice's mind do not fit and so, instead of creating a unified identity, they exist simultaneously side by side. This illustrates Scott McMillin's statement about the imagery of the play: 'Behind the beauty that one would kiss rests the skull and this play foreshortens that message with a fine metonymy: the beauty the Duke kisses *is* the skull'.[48] While McMillin is specifically discussing the scene in which Gloriana is used to poison the Duke, the same idea can be applied here. Beauty and the skull exist simultaneously in this object. Middleton implies that they always coexist; each person is

---

[44] Neill, p. 138.
[45] Middleton, 1.1.17-20; Ibid., 1.1.31.
[46] For more on the figure of the lover in anatomy, see also: the poetry of John Donne, such as 'The Funeral' and 'The Relic', which imagine the decayed body of a lover.
[47] Bruster, p. 76.
[48] Scott McMillin. 'Acting and Violence: *The Revenger's Tragedy* and Its Departures from *Hamlet*.' *Studies in English Literature* 24.2 (1984): 275-291. JSTOR. p. 282.

ISSN 1756-9761

simultaneously their outward beauty and their internal anatomy. Even as Vindice rebuilds Gloriana, her identities in both life and death exist side by side.

In *The Bloody Banquet,* Tymethes begins the play alive (and very much intact), before being killed and stripped of his flesh, and then reconnected to the flesh through language in the final cannibalistic banquet scene. When Tymethes is first brought onto the stage as '*a skull all bloody*', he appears to be the subject of a dissection; a skull with his flesh freshly peeled off. However, as the Tyrant describes his young Queen's fate, Tymethes becomes reconnected to his flesh. The Tyrant states that she is 'To taste no other sustenance, no nor airs, / Till her love's body be consumed in hers'.[49] Tymethes is explicitly described as 'her love', and the idea that she consumes his body further ties him back with their adulterous relationship. As the skull watches on, the young Queen tastes his flesh and consumes him in an act that symbolically (and grotesquely) recreates their sexual affair. The Tyrant goes on to state that 'The lecher must be swallowed rib by rib. / His flesh is sweet; it melts, and goes down merrily'.[50] By describing in such detail the Queen's act of eating the flesh and by assuming such pleasure, the Tyrant forces the Queen to re-enact their affair. As the Queen takes Tymethes's body into her own, they create a union that is a gruesome parody of sexual intercourse. Unlike in the other plays, Middleton and Dekker do not recreate Tymethes's body in detail; they avoid giving him specific body parts as Shakespeare and Middleton do for Yorick and Gloriana. His flesh is, instead, forced into a cannibalistic union with the Queen that establishes him as her lover rather than as his own person. He is still, undoubtedly, an individual, for if we were to replace his skull with that of someone else's, the Tyrant's revenge would make no sense. However, his sense of individuality stems not from whom he was in life but from whom he encountered. As the flesh is consumed, the skull becomes – no longer Tymethes – but the Queen's lover.

[49] Middleton and Dekker, 5.1.182-2.
[50] Ibid., 5.1.204-5.

ISSN 1756-9761

In *Hamlet*, *The Revenger's Tragedy* and *The Bloody Banquet*, the playwrights move away from the idea of the skull as an anonymous symbol of the undiscriminating power of death and towards the idea of the individual. Although each employs *memento mori* imagery – a tradition that relies on the anonymity of the skull to remind the viewer that death comes to us all – the crania begin to take on their own identity. Yorick becomes a symbol specifically for the deaths of Ophelia, Hamlet and the rest of the court; Gloriana is a reminder for Vindice to exact revenge; and Tymethes is a sign of gruesome tyranny. In terms of the *danse macabre*, Shakespeare mentions only social classes that are present in the court of Elsinore. Thus, while the Fool would usually indiscriminately usher *everyone* off to death, Yorick signals only that *those in the play* will die. Similarly, Gloriana, used as a mode for revenge, signals only that the Duke is going to die. Furthermore, Middleton combines *danse macabre* images in such a way that he creates a new figure made up of the Virgin, the Queen and the Prostitute. She thereby gains a sense of individuality through transcending traditional *danse macabre* imagery. Regardless of whether the skull is real or not (and whether the audience would see any discernible differences between the properties), we are reminded of the once-living person by the playwright's recreation of the individual through providing their name, their life story and details of their body. Finally, as the writers use debates surrounding anatomy, Shakespeare and Middleton recreate the flesh in order to rebuild the individual character. The audience is thus encouraged to see simultaneously the bone and the person as they were in life. While *The Bloody Banquet* works differently in its connection between the flesh and the skull, the Queen's ingestion of the flesh as the skull looks on recreates Tymethes's identity as her lover and mirrors their affair.

The cranium is, undoubtedly, 'anonymous' in that we cannot tell who it once belonged to without the skills and technology to complete facial reconstruction. However, as this essay has shown, the cranium is not completely anonymous as the playwrights ensure

ISSN 1756-9761

that we are presented with a skull that is given an identity. By naming the skulls, making their messages specific to the characters in the plays, and by reconnecting them to the flesh, Shakespeare, Middleton and Dekker ensure that the audience is not just given an anonymous symbol of death but a sign of a once-living individual. Even as we see '[t]o what base uses we may return' as we look into the empty face of the skull, we are nevertheless reminded that '[t]hat skull had a tongue in it and could sing once'.[51] Through the characterisation of the dead, these properties are once again given a voice and an identity.

[51] Shakespeare, 5.1.154; Ibid, 5.1.57.

ISSN 1756-9761

Appendix: Illustrations

Figure 1: Michiel Coxcie, *A man with a skull*, 1560. From The National Gallery.

Figure 2: Barthe Beham, *Print*, 1528-30. From The British Museum.

ISSN 1756-9761

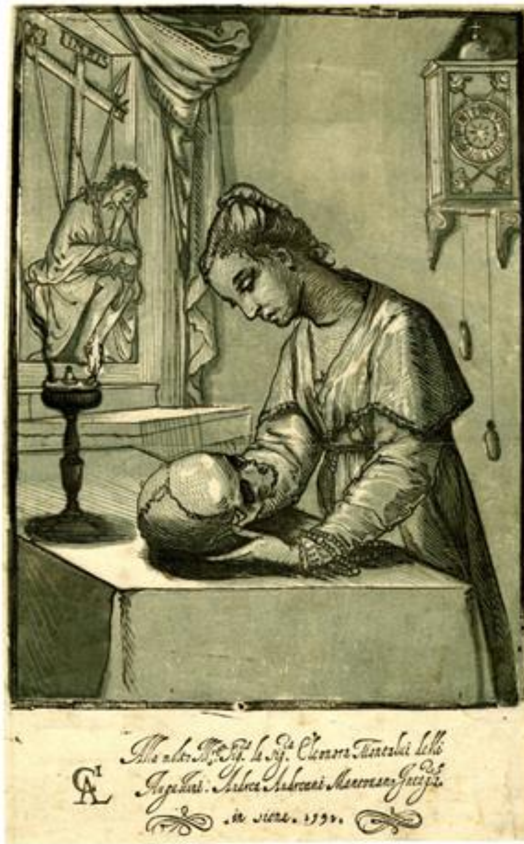

Figure 3: Andrea Andreani, *Print*, 1591. From The British Museum.

Figure 4: Harmen Steenwyck, *Still Life: An Allegory of the Vanities of Human Life*, 1640. From The National Gallery.

ISSN 1756-9761

Figure 5: Rothwell, Northamptonshire bone crypt © Chloe Owen 2016

Figure 6: Rothwell, Northamptonshire bone crypt © Chloe Owen 2016

ISSN 1756-9761

Figure 7: Rothwell, Northamptonshire bone crypt © Chloe Owen 2016

ISSN 1756-9761

List of Illustrations

Andreani, Andrea. *Print*. 1591. Print. *The British Museum Collection Online*. British Museum. Web. 5 Apr. 2016.

Beham, Barthe. *Print*. 1528-30. Print. *The British Museum Collection Online*. British Museum. Web. 5 Apr. 2016.

Coxcie, Michiel. *A man with a skull*. 1560 or later. Oil on oak. *The National Gallery Paintings*. The National Gallery. Web. 5 Apr. 2016.

Steenwyck, Harmen. *Still Life: An Allegory of the Vanities of Human Life*. 1640. Oil on oak. *The National Gallery Paintings*. The National Gallery. Web. 5 Apr. 2016.

ISSN 1756-9761

Works Cited

Aebischer, Pascale. *Screening Early Modern Drama: Beyond Shakespeare*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2013. Cambridge Books Online. Web. 19 Jan. 2016.

-- *Shakespeare's Violated Bodies: Stage and Screen Performance*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004. Print.

Anon. *La Danse Macabre: Reproduction en Fac-similé de L'édition de Guy Marchant Paris 1486*. Paris: Éditions des Quatre Chemins, 1925. Print.

Bartholin, Thomas. *Bartholinus anatomy*. London: Printed by John Streater, 1668. Defining gender, 1450-1910. Web. 16 Mar. 2016.

Brucher, Richard T. 'Fantasies of Violence: *Hamlet* and *The Revenger's Tragedy*.' *Studies in English Literature* 21.2 (1981): 257-270. JSTOR. Web. 11 Feb. 2016.

Bruster, Richard. 'The Dramatic Life of Objects in the Early Modern Theatre.' *Staged Properties in Early Modern English Drama*. Ed. Jonathan Gil Harris and Natasha Korda. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002. 67-98. Print.

Christadler, Maike. 'From Allegory to Anatomy: Femininity and the *Danse Macabre*.' *Mixed Metaphors: The* Danse Macabre *in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*. Ed. Sophie Oosterwijk and Stefanie Knöll. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011. 101-129. Print.

'contemplate, v.' *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, September 2016. Web. 5 November 2016.

Crangle, Jenny. *A Study of Post-Depositional Funerary Practices in Medieval England*. University of Sheffield, 2015. Pre-publication version, provided by the author.

Crooke, Helkiah. *Microcosmographia.* 1615. EEBO. Web. 7 Apr. 2016.

ISSN 1756-9761

Diemerbroek, Ysbrand van. *The Anatomy of Human Bodies; Comprehending the Most Modern Discoveries and Curiosities in that Art.* London: Angel and Bible, 1694. Historical Texts. Web. 16 Mar. 2016.

Engel, William E. *Death and Drama in Renaissance England: Shades of Memory*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002. Print.

Esslin, Martin. *The Field of Drama: How the Signs of Drama Create Meaning on Stage and Screen*. London: Methuen, 1987. Print.

Featley, Daniel. *Philip's memento mori: or, the passing bell. A sermon preach'd in Mercers Chappel, at the funeral of Mr. Bennet, Merchant.* London: Printed by H. Hills, 1708. Historical Texts. Web. 16 Mar. 2016.

Hackett, Helen. *Virgin Mother, Maiden Queen: Elizabeth I and the Cult of the Virgin Mary*. London: Macmillan Press, 1995. Palgrave Connect. Web. 26 Nov. 2015.

Harrison, Ann Tukey. *The Danse Macabre of Women*. Ohio: Kent State UP, 1994. Print.

Hindman, Sandra L. 'The Illustrations.' *The Danse Macabre of Women*. Ed. Ann Tukey Harrison. Ohio: Kent State UP, 1994. 15-32. Print.

McMillin, Scott. 'Acting and Violence: *The Revenger's Tragedy* and Its Departures from Hamlet.' *Studies in English Literature* 24.2 (1984): 275-291. JSTOR. Web. 11 Feb. 2016.

Middleton, Thomas. *The Revenger's Tragedy*. *English Renaissance Drama: A Norton Anthology*. Ed. David Bevington et al. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2002. 1297-1370. Print.

Middleton, Thomas and Thomas Dekker. *The Bloody Banquet: A Tragedy*. *Thomas Middleton: The Collected Works*. Ed. Gary Taylor and John Lavagnino. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2007. 637-669. Print.

ISSN 1756-9761

Neill, Michael. *Issues of Death: Mortality and Identity in English Renaissance Tragedy.* Oxford: Oxford UP, 1997. Print.

Oosterwijk, Sophie. 'Dance, Dialogue and Duality: Fatal Encounters in the Medieval *Danse Macabre*.' *Mixed Metaphors: The* Danse Macabre *in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*. Ed. Sophie Oosterwijk and Stefanie Knöll. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011. 9-42. Print.

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

Rutter, Carol Chillington. 'Snatched Bodies: Ophelia in the grave.' *Enter the Body: Women and Representation on Shakespeare's Stage*. London: Routledge, 2001. 27-56. Print.

Shakespeare, William. *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*. *William Shakespeare: Complete Works*. Ed. Jonathan Bate and Eric Rasmussen. London: Macmillan, 2007. 1918-2003. Print.

Sofer, Andrew. 'The Skull on the Renaissance Stage: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Props.' *English Literary Renaissance.* 28.1 (1998): 47-74. JSTOR. Web. 9 Feb. 2016.

Teague, Frances. *Shakespeare's Speaking Properties*. London: Associated UP, 1991. Print.

Waddington, Keir. *An Introduction to the Social History of Medicine: Europe since 1500*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011. Print.

Wilson, Jean. 'The Kiss of Death: Death as a Lover in Early Modern English Literature and Art.' *Mixed Metaphors: The* Danse Macabre *in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*. Ed. Sophie Oosterwijk and Stefanie Knöll. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011. 237-268. Print.

ISSN 1756-9761