"Revenge Should Have No Bounds": Poison and Revenge in Seventeenth Century English Drama

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Citation

Abstract
The revenge- and poison- filled tragedies of seventeenth century England astound audiences with their language of contagion and disease. Understanding poison as the force behind epidemic disease, this dissertation considers the often-overlooked connections between stage revenge and poison. Poison was not only a material substance bought from a foreign market. It was the subject of countless revisions and debates in early modern England. Above all, writers argued about poison’s role in the most harrowing epidemic disease of the period, the pestilence, as both the cause and possible cure of this seemingly contagious disease. As such a transformative and ambivalent power, poison was called upon precisely as stage revengers turned to vengeance, as revenge was, at its core, concerned with the breaking and making of boundaries. As such, playwrights turned to both literal and metaphorical poisons in their plays of vengeance to stage the excesses of contagion. I contend that all of the plays under consideration in my dissertation uniquely represent the bounded alongside the boundless. In the process, they dramatize the surprising paradoxes of revenge. By staging, often uneasily, the potential for revenge to “have no bounds,” dramatists more radically explored the perverse appeal and power of their own art.

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Course description

Broadly, this class is "an investigation of significant issues, themes, and ideologies in selections of seventeenth-century British literature studied in terms of their original cultural contexts" (Dept. of English). But, if we're honest about it, the seventeenth century has no one issue, theme o