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The Negotiation of Urban Spaces  
in Shakespeare's Plays

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# SPACES OF DISCOVERY IN TWO EARLY MODERN TRAGEDIES OF REVENGE

BY

MARTIN MORAW

The first scene of Henry Chettle's unjustly forgotten *The Tragedy of Hoffman, or Revenge for a Father* – first performed by the Lord Admiral's Men, presumably at the Fortune playhouse around 1602 – offers a particularly striking example of the ways in which early modern playwrights exploited revenge, both in order instantly to generate dramatic conflict and as an occasion for spectacular theatrical display. The protagonist and revenger Clois Hoffman, who was driven into exile and has found shelter in a cave on the storm-swept Baltic coast, opens the play on a characteristic note of defiance. His first lines – “Hence, clouds of melancholy! / I'll be no longer subject to your fumes” (l.1–2) – are accompanied by the threatening sounds of thunder and flashes of lightning. While delivering his soliloquy, Hoffman strikes open a curtain at the back of the stage, thereby revealing to us the nature of the injustice he has suffered at the hands of his enemy, the Duke of Luningberg: hanging from the cave's wall, there appear the skeletal remains of his father, a former admiral condemned to death over dubious charges of piracy. “Be silent, thou effigies of fair virtue,” Hoffman pleads while his father's bare bones are rattling in the storm (l. 20). An iron crown still encircles the skull: at the execution of the disgraced Hans Hoffman, it had been made red-hot and placed on his head, melting his brains. Against the backdrop of more thunder and lightning, Hoffman, once again addressing the skeleton, utters the play's programmatic lines: “I will not leave thee, until like thy self / I've made thy enemies” (l. 23–24). A few moments later, Hoffman will use the crown to kill the first of his many victims, the shipwrecked son of the Duke, Prince Otho, and proceed to hang the corpse beside that of his father, while confidently assuring his sidekick Lorrique as well as the audience that this is “but the prologue to the 'nsuing play” (l. 237).

Modern historians of Elizabethan and Jacobean performance practice tell us that the grotesque miniature theatre in Hoffman's cave would have been set up in an area of the stage which, instead of forming a part of the main platform, was recessed into the rear wall and generally remained concealed from the audience's view by either a door or, as in this case, a curtain. This alcove, which was used frequently and to great dramatic effect by the playwrights and acting companies of the early modern theater, was known, quite fittingly, as the discovery space<sup>1</sup>. The significance of this space, I

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<sup>1</sup> Alan C. Dessen and Leslie Thomson count more than ninety instances in early modern drama in which the stage direction “discover” signals the sudden opening of a curtain or door, revealing a previously hidden scene. See the entry “discover” in Dessen and Thomson. For a comprehensive account of early modern playhouse architecture and staging practices see Gurr. For a detailed

will suggest in this essay, is not restricted to its immediate dramaturgical function but may in fact also be conceptualized in explicitly political terms. To demonstrate that such is indeed the case, I will advance two interrelated theses intended to shed light on the political structure of discovery, and of the uses of the discovery space, in Hoffman and a second revenge play, Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher's *The Maid's Tragedy*. First, I argue that moments of discovery in these revenge tragedies negotiate a particular feature of the political formation of early modernity, namely divine right sovereignty and its insistence that the king's political authority is at once sacred in nature and secret in form. Second, I suggest that theatrical disclosure and discovery in both Hoffman and *The Maid's Tragedy* also provide an indication that it is becoming increasingly difficult during the period to retain the secret and the sacred as axioms of political authorization without, however, pointing towards a clear alternative. My concern in this paper is thus to call attention to a number of ways in which the early modern stage, and specifically revenge tragedy as one of its most important genres, links dramatic and political form. It is perhaps worth recalling in this context that it has long become something of a critical commonplace to insist that the most famous of early modern avengers, Hamlet, represents the nascent claims of the modern subject partly through his prolonged resistance to the pressures of the archaic genre he inhabits: Hamlet, in this line of argument, is able to anticipate a modern form of consciousness despite being a revenger, rather than because of it.<sup>2</sup> The broader hypothesis that stands behind my argument about discovery and disclosure in Hoffman and *The Maid's Tragedy* seeks to challenge this view of the genre as a historically late expression of residual feudal codes of honour and, in this specific sense, a backward-looking dramatic form: revenge tragedy, I suggest instead, gained its extraordinary popularity and significance on the Elizabethan and Jacobean stage not least because it was uniquely capable of mediating the profound restructuration of the political field that characterized the early modern period.

As the first scene of Chettle's play already tells us, Hoffman betrays none of Hamlet's reluctance and hesitation. In fact, in what amounts to a rebuttal of Hamlet's famous couplet – "The time is out of joint. O cursed spite / That ever I was born to set it right!" (I.5.189–190) – he declares right at the outset: "In such a cause, / Where truth leadeth, what coward would not fight? / Ill acts move some, but mine's a cause that's right" (I.10–12). What sets the play in motion, then, is the revenger's self-authorization to take action in the name of a higher right, and his identification of a particular cause with that right. Hoffman's role, in other words, involves both placing himself above the rule of positive law, as well as realizing in action the conviction that it is indeed up to him – rather than the law, or, for that matter, anyone else – to set right the wrongs of this world and thus to mediate between the ideals of justice and truth on the one hand and the corrupt status quo on the other. This kind of extralegal position grounded in absolute right carried special political resonances during the early modern period.

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discussion of the discovery space and the ways in which it was used in the Globe theatre see Hosley, 35 - 46.

<sup>2</sup> This view of Hamlet can be traced back at least as far as Goethe's *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*. For the influential argument that revenge tragedy had already exhausted its vitality as a dramatic genre by the time Hamlet was first performed see Empson, 79 - 136.

Specifically, the avenging outlaw may be grasped as the mirror image of a certain notion of the absolute sovereign that played an important and controversial role in political thought during the same historical moment that saw revenge tragedy become increasingly popular as a dramatic genre. In the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century, absolutist thinkers throughout Europe resolutely broke with the medieval conception of political rule as the exercise of arbitration within a complex web of feudal and religious obligations, and instead assembled a new image of the sovereign as divinely ordained lawgiver whose authority far exceeded traditional legal limitations on royal power. In Scotland, King James VI – the future James I of England – insisted in his early, vigorously absolutist political treatise *The Trew Law of Free Monarchies* (1598) that monarchy follows “the trew paterne of Diuinitie:” kings, James declares in this widely read tract, “are called Gods by the prophetical King Dauid, because they sit vpon GOD his Throne on earth, and haue the count of their administration to giue vnto him,” and not to their subjects (64). Scottish kingship, James goes on to claim, historically preceded the institution of a stable legal order. If, therefore, “the kings were the authors and makers of the Lawes, and not the Lawes of the kings” (James VI and I, 73), it necessarily followed that, to this day, “the King is aboute the law, as both the author and giuer of strength thereto” (75). Although “a good king will not onely delight to rule his subiects by the lawe, but euen will conforme himselfe in his owne actions thervnto,” James continues, the sovereign nevertheless retains the right to suspend laws “vpon causes onely knowen to him” (75).

As King of England, James hardly softened his approach. In a speech before both houses of Parliament on March 21, 1610, James again referred to the parallel between God and kings to draw far-reaching conclusions concerning the nature and reach of his own power. “Kings,” James told the parliamentarians,

are iustly called Gods, for that they exercise a manner or resemblance of Diuine power vpon earth: For if you wil consider the Attributes to God, you shall see how they agree in the person of a King. God hath power to create, or destroy, make, or vnmake at his pleasure, to giue life, or send death, to iudge all, and to bee iudged nor accomptable to none: To raise low things, and to make high things low at his pleasure, and to God are both soule and body due. And the like power haue Kings: they make and vnmake their subiects: they haue power of raising, and casting downe: of life, and of death: Iudges ouer all their subiects and in all causes, and yet accomptable to none but God onely. They haue power to exalt low things, and abase high things, and make of their subiects like men at the Chesse. (181)

In the same speech, James repeatedly stressed that, in settled kingdoms, monarchs have an obligation to abide by the law. This limitation of the king’s power, however, always remains self-imposed and conditional: it applies only for as long as the king thinks that it should. In fact – again analogous to the sphere of theology – the question of the true extent of the sovereign’s power – or, in other words, the question of his ‘absolute’ prerogative that stands behind his ‘ordinary’ powers<sup>3</sup> – cannot rightfully be posed by his subjects at all:

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<sup>3</sup> The distinction between the king’s absolute and ordinary prerogative is analogous to the distinction between God’s absolute and ordained power (*potentia dei absoluta et ordinata*). For a detailed

I conclude then this point touching the power of Kings, with this Axiome of Diuinitie, That as to dispute what God may doe, is Blasphemie; but *quid vult Deus*, that Diuines may lawfully, and doe ordinarily dispute and discusse; for to dispute *A Posse as Esse* is both against Logicke and Diuinity: So is it sedition in Subiects, to dispute what a King may do in the height of his power. (King James VI and I, 184)

Six years later, James again returned to the “transcendent” matter of the king’s absolute prerogative in a speech he delivered before the Star Chamber (212):

That which concernes the mysterie of the Kings power, is not lawfull to be disputed; for that is to wade into the weaknesse of Princes, and to take away the mysticall reuerence, that belongs vnto them that sit in the Throne of God. [...] It is Atheisme and blasphemie to dispute what God can doe: good Christians content themselues with his will reuealed in his word. So, it is presumption and high contempt in a Subiect, to dispute what a King can doe, or say that a King cannot doe this, or that; but rest in that which is the Kings reuealed will in his Law. (212 - 213)

For James, passages such as these show, the king’s absolute sovereignty is and must remain an awful mystery. While subjects may rightfully concern themselves with the king’s will as it is “reuealed” in his laws, it is political blasphemy to ask, or even worse, to attempt to delimit, how far his sovereign willing may reach under exceptional circumstances.

The dramatic language of discovery in the first scene of Chettle’s *Hoffman*, I would argue, gathers some of its extraordinary force by seizing on, and radically disarticulating, the theologico-political grammar of sovereign authority. More precisely, the drama of the revenger’s self-authorization performs an inversion upon the monarch’s absolute sovereignty not only in form – mystery becomes spectacular disclosure and display – but also in content – the sacred core of the king’s power becomes the material for grotesque play. If, on the one hand and as I have already suggested, the revenger’s outlaw position is in certain ways akin to that of the sovereign – both are a law unto themselves; both act in the name of a higher right – then their respective modes of authorization, on the other hand, are diametrically opposed. The king’s extralegal power, as we have seen, is a secret; its inscrutability is not accidental, but, on the contrary, the necessary form of its sacred content. Hoffman’s prerogative as an avenger, by contrast, is theatrical through and through and arises through disclosure: as the stage master of his own miniature theatre, he discovers to the audience what he will do at the height of his power and why. At the same time, the crowned skeleton in the discovery space anticipates Hoffman’s murderous inversion of the sacred ritual of coronation, in which the ceremony whose purpose it is to confirm the monarch’s supreme authority in all its dignity is turned into a sign of the spectacular displacement of that authority by the outlaw.

When faced with the radical skepticism about the figure of the God-king that, I believe, lies at the heart of the moment of discovery that opens *Hoffman*, it seems important to recall that – James’ fiery rhetoric of divine right notwithstanding – English absolutism belongs, historically speaking, to the pantheon of unsuccessful ideas. Despite the previous advances in centralization of power made by the Tudors

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discussion of this theologico-political correspondence, which, while not new, became increasingly important in constitutional arguments and state trials during James’ reign see Oakley, 323 - 346.

and the aggressiveness with which the early Stuart monarchs subsequently pushed toward an expansion of the royal prerogative, England – relative to other European powers – in fact experienced what Perry Anderson has called a “peculiarly contracted variant” of absolutist rule (113). To be sure, as Anderson points out, absolutism everywhere in Europe “was [...] always doubly limited: by the persistence of traditional political bodies below it and the presence of an overarching moral law above it” (51). Yet the former limitation carried particular weight in England, where the comparatively early consolidation of royal power later proved a stumbling for its further expansion. “In effect,” as Anderson goes on to explain,

since centralized royal administration was from the start geographically and technically easier in England than elsewhere, there was proportionally less need for it to be equipped with any innovatory decretal authority, which could not be justified by inherent dangers of regional separatism or ducal anarchy. Thus while the real executive powers of English medieval kings were usually much greater than those of French monarchs, for that very reason, they never won the relative legislative autonomy enjoyed by the latter. (115)

Beset in this way by structural problems and ideological opposition, as well as lacking an adequate fiscal basis and military apparatus, English absolutism during the first half of the seventeenth century not only failed to reach the standards for the consolidation of power that it had set for itself, but was cut short by civil war and revolution within fifty years of King James’ ascension to the throne in 1603. Critics such as Jonathan Dollimore and Franco Moretti have made strong claims about the role of the public theatre, and specifically of its representations of political rule, in the ideological struggles during the decades leading up to the watershed moment of the execution of Charles I. Thus Moretti argues that there exists a direct link between what he calls the “deconsecration of sovereignty” in Elizabethan and Jacobean tragedy, and “the creation of a ‘public’ that for the first time in history assumed the right to bring a king to justice” a few decades later (42). And yet, as Moretti hastens to add, “[t]o acknowledge this profound historical significance [...] is not to say that English Renaissance tragedy is a ‘Puritan’ or ‘bourgeois’ or ‘revolutionary’ cultural form” (42). Moretti’s caveat is an important one, reminding us that forms and genres can fulfill a ‘negative’ historical task – in this case, the disarticulation of the claims of absolute sovereignty – without necessarily falling into ‘positive’ alignment with those forces, whatever we may call them, heralding the arrival of a new order. Hoffman’s death is a case in point. Like almost every other revenger on the early modern stage, he does not escape punishment for his actions, and the example of Hoffman is one in which the punishment is particularly fitting for the crime: the play ends with the spectacle, familiar by now, of the red-hot crown being lowered on his head, suggesting that the revenger’s prerogative remains entirely destructive, and thus within the limits of the ideology whose purchase it simultaneously helps to erode. The outlaw, it seems, can only wear the crown that rightfully belongs to the sovereign for so long, and only if it means his certain death.

I would like to illustrate further this last point about revenge tragedy as a genre in constant ideological tension with itself by turning to another, and very different, scene of discovery, taken from Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher’s *The Maid’s Tragedy*, which was first performed by the King’s Men at the Blackfriars Theatre (a smaller,

indoor theatre for the well-to-do) in 1611, discussed in Sarah Dustagheer's article in this issue. In this revenge play, Evadne, one of the few female avengers on the early modern stage, eventually kills the lustful King of Rhodes (known only by his title, not by name) for subjecting her to the humiliation of keeping her as a mistress even after having forced her to marry Amintor, a nobleman of his court. In the first half of the play especially, we could not be further removed from the grisly spectacles in Hoffman's sea shore cave: in an idealized island setting, we witness graceful conversation among courtiers and the performance of an elaborate masque, put on as part of the celebrations of Amintor and Evadne's wedding. Yet the King's abuse of power and sexual immoderation are soon revealed, and Amintor finds himself in a position in which the conflicting demands of loyalty to his wife and obedience to his sovereign have become impossible to reconcile. It is not surprising to find that in this Jacobean play, written and performed for a courtly audience, the latter demand should not only exert particular force, but also be articulated in language familiar to us by now. Thus, upon hearing that none other than the King is having an affair with his wife, Amintor is thrown into bewilderment, abandoning his plans for revenge:

O, thou hast named a word that wipes away  
 All thoughts revengeful. In that sacred name,  
 The King, there lies a terror. What frail man  
 Dares lift his hand against it? Let the gods  
 Speak to him when they please; till when, let us  
 Suffer and wait. (2.1.307–312)

Amintor's response would have pleased King James, who had pursued the very same line of argument in favour of unconditional obedience on the part of the subject in *The Trew Law of Free Monarchies*:

First, it is a sure Axiome in *Theologie*, that euill should not be done, that good may come of it: The wickednesse therefore of the King can neuer make them that are ordained to be iudged by him, to become his Iudges. And if it be not lawfull for a priuate man to reuenge his priuate injury vpon his priuate aduersary (since God hath onely giuen the sword to the Magistrate) how much lesse is it lawfull to the people, or any part of them ... to take vpon them the vse of the sword, whom to it belongs not, against the publicke Magistrate, whom to onely it belongeth. (78)

Revenge against the sovereign, both Amintor and James insist, is political blasphemy put into action. And yet, the one thing that the genre does not allow its protagonists to do, at least not for long, is to suffer and wait; and thus *The Maid's Tragedy* reverses its course.

By the play's final act, Evadne, now part of a whole ensemble of conspirators, has become desperate enough to act. Armed with a dagger, she steals into the King's bedchamber at night and – drawing back the curtain concealing the discovery space – reveals the monarch asleep. Like Hamlet in the prayer scene, Evadne is worried that her victim will get off too lightly - “Yet I must not / Thus tamely do it as he sleeps; that were / To rock him to another world” (5.1.28-30) – and restrains him on the bed before waking him. The King commands her to stop, then pleads for mercy, but Evadne – “I am a tiger; I am anything / That knows not pity” (5.1.67-68) – is determined finally to

get her revenge and kills him. Few would thus dispute, then, that *The Maid's Tragedy*, and specifically the murder of the licentious King in the discovery space, offer a striking dramatization of one of the enduring internal contradictions of any absolutist theory, and of James's radicalized version of the divine right of monarchs in particular: the doctrine endows its merely human protagonists with a sovereign power modelled after divinity, yet they inevitably fall short of the image of the God-king they originally brought into play. Walter Benjamin, although primarily concerned with the plays of the German Baroque, identifies this antithesis as one of the defining concerns of all European tragic drama of the period, or, in his terminology, of *Trauerspiel*:

Die Ebene des Schöpfungsstands, der Boden, auf dem das Trauerspiel sich abrollt, bestimmt ganz unverkennbar auch den Souverän. So hoch er über Untertan und Staat auch thront, sein Rang ist in der Schöpfungswelt beschlossen, er ist der Herr der Kreaturen, aber er bleibt Kreatur. (65-66)

Even the sovereign cannot escape his own creatureliness. For Benjamin, *Trauerspiele* turn the persistence of the resulting “Missverhältnis” (52) between divinely ordained hierarchical dignity and inescapable human corruption into plot, by dramatizing the dialectical conviction “dass im Herrscher, der hocherhabenen Kreatur, das Tier mit ungeahnten Kräften aufstehen kann” (67). And indeed, one could do worse than describe the progression from Amintor's initial response to the King's transgression – “In that sacred name, / The King, there lies a terror” (2.1.308-309) – to Evadne's cursing of the king as a “monster” (5.1.106) in these terms. This disclosure, then, unfolds on the level of dramatic action, and not in the shape of a usurpation of the symbolic language of divine right sovereignty which, as I have suggested, is what occurs in the discovery scene in *Hoffman*. Both, we could say, in their own way “wade into the weakness of Princes” and “take away the mysticall reuerence, that belongs vnto them that sit in the Throne of God” (King James VI and I, 213). And yet *The Maid's Tragedy* does not end here. In the aftermath of the murder in the King's bedchamber, when the curtain has fallen again and the discovery space has once more disappeared from view, the play changes its trajectory once more. The deed has thrown the avengers into “an unknown wilderness” (5.3.148) and, one after another, they take their own lives. Monarchical rule is restored in the person of Lysippus, the King's brother, whose concluding speech attempts to turn the play's action into a confirmation of the very forms of political legitimation it had seemed to discredit. “May this a fair example be to me / To rule with temper!” Lysippus declares, adding that “on lustful kings / Unlooked-for sudden deaths from God are sent; / But curst is he that is their instrument” (5.3.292-295). Like *Hoffman*, it appears, *The Maid's Tragedy* has come full circle. Yet as I have tried to show, the return to a divinely ordained hierarchical order only arrives after that order has been tested to its limits.

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## Zusammenfassung

Dieser Artikel untersucht die Funktion des sogenannten *discovery space* in zwei englischen Rachetragödien der frühen Neuzeit, Henry Chettes *The Tragedy of Hoffman* und Francis Beaumont und John Fletchers *The Maid's Tragedy*. Ausgangspunkt ist dabei die These, dass diese politisch bestimmt werden kann. Enthüllungsszenen in beiden Dramen, so die Argumentation, stehen in einem Zusammenhang mit einem zeitgenössischen Souveränitätsbegriff, der die absolute Autorität des Königs als ein Geheimnis und als gottgegeben betrachtet.