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Antonio's Revenge

A play brimming with linguistic superfluity and spectacular gore, John Marston's *Antonio's Revenge* (1599) has been portrayed by critics as everything from a brilliant burlesque of revenge tragedies to a grotesquely overwrought literary disaster. While the play is, as the title might suggest, a revenge tragedy, the degree to which its author intended it to be seriously received as one is a matter of persistent critical contention. Part of this confusion lies in the play's notorious excesses in language, characterization, and violence. The play's bizarre ending is especially problematic: in the final act, Antonio and his friends not only torture and kill the villainous Piero, they also murder and cook an innocent child. Instead of being punished, however, these revengers are heaped with praise and offered rewards before announcing their plans to become religious hermits.



While some critics argue that this ending reveals Marston's own personal sadistic bent, others simply see it as evidence of his lack of skills as a dramatist. T.S. Eliot, for example, has noted that this play, along with its predecessor *Antonio and Mellida*, "give the effect of work done by a man who was so exasperated by having to write in a form he despised that he deliberately wrote worse than he could have written, in order to relieve his feelings." Eliot's notion of Marston writing "to relieve his feelings" is not without merit; Antonio spends the entirety of *Antonio's Revenge* either describing his feelings in melodramatic ecstasy or "relieving" them through murder. Because Antonio is one of the most overtly emotional characters in Renaissance drama, *Antonio's Revenge* is, at least in part, a play about the physical dangers of excess emotion.

Antonio's Revenge presents emotion as a corruptive force by continually linking it with the human body. According to Renaissance philosophy, the human body was the seat of sin and decay—a sordid counterpart to the virtuous soul. In *Antonio's Revenge*, the connection between corrupt emotion and the corrupt body is present in both language and action. References to the body in this play are almost always negative: corpses rot, bloody wounds cry out, and ribcages burst with anguish. Because the human body is both the cause and conduit of this pain, emotions that arise from the body, such as rage or lust—both of which were thought to come from the liver—are also necessarily negative. This link between the emotional and the physical is reinforced throughout the play. In promising to avenge his father's death, for example, Antonio vows that his heart will "beat on" vengeance—that is, it will be both fixated on and be powered by the thought of revenge.

Encouraged by the ghost of his murdered father, Antonio further swears: "May I be numbed with horror and my veins / Pucker with singeing torture, if my brain / Digest a thought but of dire vengeance! / May I be fettered slave to coward chance, / If blood, heart, brain, plot aught save vengeance!" (III.ii.85-92). In these lines, Antonio urges his blood, heart, and brain to be wholly consumed with revenge. He imagines that his brain will "digest" his thoughts, creating a doubly corporeal image. Furthermore, the consequences he imagines for himself—being "numbed with horror" and having his veins "pucker with singeing torture" emphasize the physicality of his promise to revenge his father's murder.

Avenging his father's death thus becomes not only an act of justice, but also an act of bodily necessity. By committing all of his major organs to the cause of revenge, Antonio makes revenge part of his physiology. In binding vengeance to the human body, Antonio builds on traditional early modern concepts of the dichotomy between the body and the soul, using the theory of the corrupt body to justify all of the ghastly violence that follows.