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**“Like to my soft sex”:
Female Revenge and Violence in *The Fatal Contract***

Samantha Dressel
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The Fatal Contract by William Heminge is not a good play. Its critical afterlife is essentially non-existent, with Fredson Thayer Bowers being one of the only critics to discuss it, criticizing its lack of “inspiration” and “ethical spirit.”¹ I argue however, that the play is both inventive and moral, despite its many derivative aspects and narrative foibles. I suggest a new reading of the play as deeply innovative in terms of gender and revenge. Bowers criticizes the play’s morality because of the ultimate exoneration of Chrotilda, the central revengeress. The play can be reinterpreted and partially redeemed by understanding Chrotilda’s extreme violence as a uniquely female revenge. In her quest to avenge her own rape, Chrotilda sets up her plot such to teach her rapist of his evil, rather than seeking maximum pain regardless of understanding. She constructs herself as asexual in her guise of Eunuch, removing the villainous link between female sex and violence, enabling her to act outside of the boundaries of female propriety. Because of her didactic revenge, her rapist fully understands his own evil, revealing a strong moral intentionality behind the admittedly chaotic *dénouement*, along with an opportunity for blameless female agency.

In the canon of Renaissance revenge drama, the central protagonist is almost exclusively male, and across the literary world of the English Renaissance, violent women are maligned. Linda Woodbridge notes that, “When women did commit violence, it called forth a rhetoric of exceptionality and unnaturalness and provoked a special horror that owed much to its being an infringement on male prerogative.”² This infringement on male prerogative also tied female violence to similarly gendered crimes such as outspokenness and voracious sexuality, all accepted or even lauded qualities in the male, but maligned in the female.

Into this milieu of gendered traits, I introduce a different type of heroine: that of William Heminge’s 1633-34 play, *The Fa-*

1 Bowers, *Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy*, 247.

2 Woodbridge, “Introduction,” xii.

tal Contract.³ It cannot be denied that *The Fatal Contract* is not a great play. Perhaps it is not even a good play. It is certainly a derivative play: Joseph Quincy Adams Jr. devotes the space of his article to a line-by-line comparison between it and *Hamlet*, as well as noting other major Shakespearean devices, metaphors, and turns of phrase throughout.⁴ Fredson Thayer Bowers, one of the play's only other critical respondents, decries it as decadent with empty convention and meaningless gore. He suggests that the ending presents a "total confounding of all ethical judgment," given Chrotilda's forgiveness by the state following her revenge.⁵ The play certainly has other flaws: the writing is inelegant as well as borrowing heavily from Shakespeare, and many revenge subplots pile on top of Chrotilda's central revenge to create a tangle of often-conflicting motives and plot points. However, modern scholars must look beyond these structural flaws and Bowers' invectives. This paper will contest Bowers' statement that the play reveals the degree to which, "the older ethical spirit is nonexistent," and instead suggest that *The Fatal Contract* presents revenge as a possible and even laudable female script in response to rape.⁶ *The Fatal Contract* tests the ethical limits of revenge rather than ignoring them by reimagining the revenge plot in a uniquely feminine form.

First, I will provide a brief synopsis, given that the play is so unknown as to be excluded from the modern critical discourse, saving for the two texts noted above and Carol Morley's edition of Heminge's work.⁷ The French Queen Fredigond⁸ murders her hus-

3 See Morely, *The Plays and Poems of William Heminge*, 265, for support of this dating

4 Given Adams's exhaustive treatment of play's indebtedness to *Hamlet*, *Othello*, and other more canonical texts, it falls outside the scope of this paper to locate the Shakespearean roots of *The Fatal Contract* in this way.

5 Bowers, *Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy*, 242.

6 Bowers, *Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy*, 247.

7 In order to remain brief, this synopsis will omit a number of the play's prolific revenge plots. Bowers takes nearly two pages to describe each of the separate machinations, dividing the action into seven distinct subplots (236-38).

8 As Morley notes, Heminge's text involves, "A contrived rewriting of history on a massive scale." Heminge draws from *A General History of France* for the premises of his plot, involving the historical Merovingian Queen Fredigund. However, he greatly exaggerates his characters and allows for an overthrow of the tyrannical line at the end, causing the play to fit more closely with the genre of the tragedy of blood than with the chronicle history. Morely, *The Plays and Poems of William Heminge*, 268-69.

band in order to marry her lover Landrey and elevate him to the throne. She also plots to murder her sons, Clotair and Clovis, so that their own claims will not stand in the way of Landrey's kingship and eventual heirs. Meanwhile, Clotair attempts to rape and then wed Aphelia, Clovis's secret betrothed. Clovis, thought dead, joins a rebellion against Fredigond's and Clotair's rule. All of these plots are enabled by the Eunuch, a shadowy figure at the heart of, and therefore also opposed to, everyone's plots. When the Eunuch helps Clotair discover Fredigond and Landrey *in flagrante delicto*, Clotair demands that they be imprisoned. The Eunuch carries out this sentence and starves them, so that when he provides them with a poisoned feast, they fall upon it. Behind a curtain, Fredigond and Landrey are forced to watch the unfolding events while under the influence of the slow-acting poison. Clotair then demands Aphelia's torture after the Eunuch had planted a letter asserting that she too had an affair with Landrey. After the Eunuch brands Aphelia's breast, he then reveals the now-dead bodies of Landrey and Fredigond, and informs Clotair that all of this was done in pursuit of revenge against Clotair's family. He also notes, as an additional psychological burden, that Aphelia was innocent after all. The Eunuch is in a position to kill Clotair, but when he begs for his life, the Eunuch begs for his own death instead. Finally, the Eunuch reveals that he is in fact a she, Chrotilda, returned to take revenge on Clotair who raped her, and against his family, who persecuted her family, the House of Duman, both of which events occurred before the play began. Clotair recognizes his wrongdoing, despite having already dealt Chrotilda's death-blow. Finally, Aphelia dies of her wounds, and Clotair of grief and regret; Clovis is left to inherit the throne.

This paper will examine the gender dynamics of Chrotilda's chosen disguise of the Eunuch, and the ways in which she asserts for herself a uniquely female form of revenge. In pursuit of this goal, I examine two major issues in the play. First of all, I will look at the ways in which Chrotilda divorces sexuality from violence in her guise as the Eunuch, consciously decoupling the two features by which Renaissance villainesses are traditionally condemned. Then,

I will suggest that Chrotilda's form of revenge follows a uniquely-female trajectory, marking itself as distinct from masculine revenge and therefore an acceptable portrayal of female agency for the Renaissance stage. Finally, I explore how these two female-coded types of action inflect other characters' judgment of Chrotilda's actions as a response to rape, and their representations of her narrative.

Throughout the play, Chrotilda is presented almost entirely in the persona of the Eunuch: an asexual disguise. Not only does this identity lack sexual features, but also acts without sensuality, defying other more erotic portrayals of castrates such as Viola in *Twelfth Night*.⁹ Chrotilda specifically constructs herself in opposition to such portrayals, with the Eunuch resisting all sexualization. This contrast is heightened by the construction of the lascivious queen Fredigond as Chrotilda's foil. Fredigond is cast in the mold of *Titus Andronicus*'s Tamora: a sexually-voracious queen who puts her love affairs ahead of the affairs of state, and will kill to keep her plots intact – the proverbially-evil woman who is outspoken, sexual, and violent. Early in the play Fredigond gloats about one of her machinations and kisses the Eunuch. However, she finds her would-be partner closed off: “Fie, what a January lip thou hast/A pair of Icicles, sure thou hast brought/A pair of cast lips of the chaste Diana's.”¹⁰ This incident sharply contrasts the two characters: the Eunuch is allied with frigidity and chastity in opposition to the too-hot and adulterous Fredigond. Chrotilda's coldness therefore transforms a man's pitiable impotence (or intersex appeal) into a woman's asexual armor.¹¹ Fredigond is involved in violent plots as

9 Stephen Orgel discusses the erotic potential of the castrate, noting that he was both a potentially erotic object in the celibate world of the Catholic church, and eroticized for men by existing in the same un-masculine category as women and boys. Orgel, *Impersonations*, 55, 103.

10 Heminge, *The Fatal Contract*, I.ii. 92-4.

11 Chrotilda's characterization is in the mode of Middleton and Dekker's Moll Cutpurse (*The Roaring Girl*), whose cross-dressing likewise serves to neuter her. As Coppélia Kahn suggests, the disguise Moll assumes is, “A male subject whom none can enter – a man who is psychologically and sexually an impregnable fortress.” Kahn, “Whores and Wives,” 257. While the Eunuch's identity as wholly-male is questionable, it is clear that the disguise gives Chrotilda the same impregnability, quite literally, as Moll.

well, and because of her blatant and aberrant sexuality, she is doubly condemned. Chrotilda's asexual façade insures that she is not similarly stained.

There is one moment in the play at which Chrotilda does act like other staged eunuchs such as Shakespeare's Mardian in *Antony and Cleopatra*, frustrated with her supposed castration, and seeming to violate the framework I have suggested:

Oh were I but a man as others are,
As kind and open-handed nature made me,
With Organs apt and fit for woman's service...
Till I had met Chrotilda, whom by force
I'd make to mingle with these sooty limbs,
Till I had got on her one like to me.¹²

Her description borders on the pornographic, playing on the tropes of prior plays, as when Ferdinand imagines his sister, Duchess of Malfi, "Happily with some strong-thighed bargeman,"¹³ and the racialized fears evoked in *Titus Andronicus* when Tamora's adulterous baby is born black.¹⁴

Despite this graphic description, the moment becomes absurd as a sincere expression of sexual desire given the context of the Eunuch's character. Even though the audience does not realize that the Eunuch is threatening self-rape, the threat rings hollow: immediately following, Fredigond is able to "unclasp my soul to thee" (I.ii. 65). Chrotilda has modulated her speech to match the brutal and subversively sexual world of Fredigond and her court. By speaking to Fredigond in the only terms she understands, the Eunuch can gain

12 Heminge, *The Fatal Contract*, I.ii. 53-5, 58-60.

13 Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi*, II.v. 42.

14 Heminge pays very little attention to Eunuch's apparent blackness, outside of the mention of her "sooty limbs," and accordingly, this description has little importance for my analysis of her costume. However, there is certainly fruitful future work to be done, looking at the character's performative blackness rather than her performative gender. This analysis would certainly look at the ways in which the Eunuch's race plays into the generally malignant and stereotypical actions of her role as the Eunuch, making her like *Titus's* Aaron or Barabas from Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta*, an outsider figure whose alienation seems to be cause enough for hateful actions against all characters in the hegemonic group.

her trust. Even to an audience member ignorant to her disguise, it is quickly clear that the Eunuch is trying to become ingratiated with every major player at court, and shifts her identity accordingly so that they might communicate. Furthermore, Chrotilda's icy refusal of Fredigond's sexual advances, discussed above, follow quickly after this apparent display of sexual voracity.

Chrotilda's disguise as the Eunuch parallels her rape, by choice and by necessity. Female desire is erased through rape: the raped tragic heroine is traditionally removed from the world of sexual exchange, and her genitalia is elided, leaving death as her only option. Chrotilda's metaphorical neutering suggests that her disguise is the perfect symbol for her status; a eunuch is a man whose procreative power has been removed and whose desires are impotent, and a raped woman is one whose womb can never be chastely fruitful. Chrotilda further supports this figurative hysterectomy with her apparent lack of desire: her disinterest throughout the play towards both sex and romance suggests that a belief in her own nullified sexuality matches constraints imposed by the rape. This asexuality is vital for Chrotilda's revenge plot, because it severs the assumed link between female violence and voracious sexuality. Thus, Chrotilda's uncomfortable liminality of gender, created by her rape, perversely enables her to act outside her social limitations and regain her agency. From this desexualized position, Chrotilda is able to create an entirely new script with which to respond to her rape: she can be a violent revenger while retaining purity and validation for her actions, because she is constantly and carefully enacting her chastity.

Heminge further supports his vision of a chaste Chrotilda by eliding the rape scene itself. Often, a Renaissance woman's trauma serves as dramatic spectacle, either through a chase scene or a later display of her suffering body. For example, in *Titus Andronicus*, Lavinia's raped and maimed body is immediately displayed while Marcus describes it in long blazon. In *The Fatal Contract*, however, Chrotilda's suffering body is never an object of the male gaze in

this way, the rape having occurred before the play opens. This separates Chrotilda further from contemporary rape portrayals as well as any hint of sexualization. This is not to say that Heminge is above such sadistic titillation more generally: Aphelia is collateral damage in Chrotilda's revenge plot, and she instead serves as the suffering female tableau. Heminge is therefore not trying to avoid displaying the female body in pain, but he completely displaces the trope from Chrotilda. Thus, Chrotilda avoids the objectifying categories traditionally assigned to a rape victim, those of sex object or weak female. Chrotilda manages to skirt Scylla and Charybdis – she's neither a whore nor a suffering spectacle, neither blamable for her violence, nor a meek victim.

On the one hand, this elision of spectacle is useful, as it continues to divorce Chrotilda from sexualized stereotypes. However, it also hides the initial crime even further, making the act of convincing the audience of its severity even more difficult. As Jocelyn Catty notes, the effects of rape are “hidden within the recesses of [the victim's] body.”¹⁵ This means that “the rape situation, ... both necessitates and circumscribes female utterance: legitimizes and silences it.”¹⁶ Women are expected to create a counter-narrative to rape to save their honor from their abusers, but at the same time, this puts them in the maligned position of the outspoken unruly woman. Chrotilda finds revenge as a way out of this bind, as it will enable her to define herself apart from the tropes of both weak woman and sex symbol. Revenge gives her a means of self-definition.

Now, I examine Chrotilda's revenge as a uniquely female action before turning to the dénouement of the play to see how these gendered elements work together to create an ethic of revenge for Chrotilda. Revenge tragedy provides a particularly fruitful ground for exploring women's gendered transgressions because the genre itself already questions gendered identities. Eileen Allman insightfully argues that maleness is questioned in the revenge genre be-

¹⁵ Catty, *Writing Rape, Writing Women*, 22.

¹⁶ Catty, *Writing Rape, Writing Women*, 3.

cause the male revenger begins in a position of social submission. In her formulation, “When a man is defeated by another man, he is both unmanned and feminized; that is, he is stripped of cultural signs of dominance and forced to assume those of submission.”¹⁷ Essentially, men subject to a tyrant’s abuses are forced into a feminine position; a voiceless position. Allman’s allowance for female agency in revenge is through passive resistance, as is revealed in the suffering heroines such as the Duchess of Malfi. Women who deal more actively in revenge are left out of the critical conversation – as Shepherd notes, when they do exist, it is in a subordinated position from which they can, “Get away with” unaccustomed violence – generally as minor revengers who participate in a male-led plot.¹⁸ Responding to a dearth of active revengeresses in the canon, modern critics generally do not make allowances for them in theories of Renaissance revenge.¹⁹ These more passive models fall short when Chrotilda is considered; however, Chrotilda does not allow her persona to fit comfortably into a male model either.

In order to read Chrotilda’s revenge as uniquely female, I expand Jennifer Low’s conception of permissible female violence into the revenge genre. Low suggests that women in drama could threaten or enter into duels, but only in a didactic manner.²⁰ Rather

17 Allman, *Jacobean Revenge Tragedy*, 19-20.

18 Shepherd, *Amazons*, 112. Examples of this type include *Titus Andronicus*’s Lavinia, and Bel-Imperia from Thomas Kyd’s *The Spanish Tragedy*.

19 One notable exception to this trend is Alison Findlay, who suggests that female violence must only be read as reinforcing patriarchal power: “The use of violence by female revengers, even to redress the wrongs suffered by the sex, is deeply problematic from a feminist point of view since it often reproduces masculine models of oppression and possibly even the dominant values of patriarchy.” Findlay, *A Feminist Perspective*, 72. I find this view highly problematic, because it leaves no possibility for an active female engagement in revenge – to her, revenge is entirely the provenance of men (though, admittedly, a condemnable action). My suggestion that didactic revenge is a uniquely female form opens up a nuance which I find lacking in Findlay’s view, distinguishing a heroine’s revenge from a villainess’s vindictive violence, and allowing a heroine agency in spite of patriarchal control.

20 Simon Shepherd proposes a similar acceptable type of specifically-feminine violence that may be used by warrior women or folk heroines to reinforce traditional gender roles and “sort out for us the proper man from the braggart,” allowing the woman to resume her proper status when the man has learned a more positive form of masculinity. Shepherd, *Amazons*, 71.

than pursuing violence or revenge, their goal must be to teach a lesson about correct action.²¹ In particular, she suggests that the female duelist must view violence, “As a possibility for rehabilitation rather than as an opportunity for punishment.”²² Low excludes revengers from her assessment, assuming that revenge’s only goal is violence for its own sake.²³ I assert, however, that this is exactly where feminine revenge can differ from its masculine counterpart. Rather than rooting revenge in the complete debasement of her foe as men do, a woman must seek his admission of guilt. This type of revenge violence takes the comic tradition of rehabilitative gender violation and turns it into something darker, but still didactic.

When Chrotilda reveals her identity at the close of the play, she seeks this type of instructive vengeance. Before this point, she has murdered the evil queen Fredigond and Fredigond’s lover, and displayed their bodies to her rapist Clotair. She has also mutilated Clotair’s object of affection, Aphelia. She ultimately finds, problematically for a modern audience, that she cannot kill her rapist because of his kingly status. Instead, she taunts him with her prior evil deeds until he deals her death blow. At this point, with nothing left to lose, she finally answers Clotair’s questioning as to her motives. When she names herself to him and her brother Dumain as, “Chrotilda and a woman,” she brings Clotair to a position of introspection as he recognizes his guilt.²⁴ Suddenly, Clotair is faced with an existential crisis, with Chrotilda’s revelation of her identity leading him to doubt his own: “What am I?/What strange and uncouth thing?”²⁵ Clotair becomes alien to himself, not even a person anymore, but an inanimate “what,” a “thing.” At this moment, Clotair appears to recognize the enormity of his crimes; this recognition scene happens publicly and directly because of Chrotilda, demonstrating the effi-

21 Low, “Women are Wordes,” 271.

22 Low, “Women are Wordes,” 278.

23 Low, “Women are Wordes,” 277.

24 Heminge, *The Fatal Contract*, V.ii. 430.

25 Heminge, *The Fatal Contract*, V.ii. 434-35.

cacy of her didactic form of revenge. She tells him that he is “a ravisher,” but Clotair’s understanding of his crimes seems to go deeper than her explanation.²⁶ He has heard the charges, understood them well enough to rearticulate his crimes, and judges himself guilty:

Shall Clotair live...
O ravisher and murderer of his friend,
There’s no way left to rid me but my sword,
Of all these ills at once. Oh wronged Chrotilda.²⁷

This statement is remarkable, because the revenge victim himself recognizes the rightness of revenge, and says that he must finish the job that the dying revengeress was unable to do. In his self-recrimination, he also helps to rearticulate Chrotilda’s story.

In contrast to his earlier cruelty, Clotair can suddenly read Chrotilda’s body correctly, unlike her own brother Dumain who still does not understand the connection between the evil Eunuch and his sister. Once Chrotilda has died of her wounds, Clotair is able to clarify events. He explains to Dumain that, “Here lies thy ravish’t sister slain/By me the ravisher.”²⁸ When Clotair admits this, he rewrites the scripts for them both: Chrotilda becomes the spectacle who has suffered, while he is the persecutor. In Clotair’s formulation, Chrotilda becomes counterpoint to herself, existing as both violent revenger and suffering victim. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of this scene, however, is that Clotair’s rewriting of Chrotilda’s identity does not efface her status as a revenger, but instead reaffirms it. He re-authors her as victim, but in doing so, validates the logic of her revenge, allowing Chrotilda to inhabit the roles of victim and rightful revenger simultaneously. When he does so, Clotair demonstrates that he has learned his lesson: he sees the wronged woman in both her agony and her strength, and he understands that he himself put her there through his distinctly un-kingly behavior. Apparently, Chrotilda’s didactic approach has worked, as Clotair both confirms and productively expands upon Chrotilda’s narrative of abuse.

26 Heminge, *The Fatal Contract*, V.ii. 435.

27 Heminge, *The Fatal Contract*, V.ii. 439, 442-44.

28 Heminge, *The Fatal Contract*, V.ii. 448-49.

Chrotilda had to die over the course of the play because of her actions as both a woman and a revenger, yet her actions are validated by others who hail her as a heroine after her death.²⁹ Perhaps the best praise she could hope for arises from her brother, who lauds her actions as manly in the way he was not:

My sister's in mine eies, this brave revenge
Should have been mine, and not thy act Chrotilda
Away salt rhume, Chrotilda laughs at thee,
Her spirit is more manly.³⁰

Despite it being his own prerogative that was usurped, Dumain sees Chrotilda's masculine actions as valiant. Rather than reading Chrotilda as an unwontedly violent woman, he sees her as the man he should have been. This accords with Low's model, in which feminine violence is a vehicle for correcting male action.³¹ Dumain even chastises himself for having the emotional female response of tears. It seems as though Dumain does feel his masculinity challenged by Chrotilda, seeing himself feminized in comparison. However, he recognizes that chastisement as necessary. He reads her death as the feminist pamphleteers, such as the author of *Haec-Vir*, hoped their messages would be read: "What could we poore weake women do lesse... then to gather up those garments you have proudly cast away, and therewith to cloath both our bodies and our mindes."³² If men acted out their proper roles as men, women would not have to act manly to compensate for their failings. Dumain recognizes that Chrotilda was fulfilling a void in masculinity which he had enabled through his inaction in the realm of revenge.

29 Many critics have noted that violent women, rape victims in tragedies, and revengers all must die by convention. For example, David Nicol's paper "'My little what shall I call thee'" notes of rape victims that death is a traditional articulation of innocence, 178. Nicol likewise notes the necessity for violent women to be contained by death, 190. Harry Keyishian in *The Shapes of Revenge (7-8)* highlights the commonplace of the revenger's death.

30 Heminge, *The Fatal Contract*, V.ii. 465-69.

31 Low, "Women are Wordes," 271.

32 *Haec-Vir*, C2v.

Aphelia also responds positively to Chrotilda's revenge, though it was Chrotilda's machinations that cast suspicion upon Aphelia's virtue, and it was Chrotilda herself who executed Clotair's order to brand Aphelia. Despite these circumstances, Aphelia sees them as two equal sufferers: "Mine injuries and hers are so near kin."³³ Aphelia reads both of their stories as narratives of male tyranny. Chrotilda was raped, and Aphelia was taken from her fiancé and then branded because of male lust and jealousy. Both suffered injuries at the hands of the patriarchy, though Aphelia conforms to the fully-feminine register of suffering lament, rather than carrying out vengeance. Aphelia's judgment gives audience members another chance to sympathize with Chrotilda; she represents a traditional chaste victim, yet still affirms Chrotilda's actions, thereby licensing the audience to do the same. Aphelia then dies of her burns in true martyr fashion, which brings Clotair to a point of even greater despair, teaching Clotair of his wrongs in a more traditionally-acceptable way.³⁴

When Aphelia dies, Clotair also does not blame Chrotilda, despite her part in causing that death. Instead, he says, "My love is fatall, and too well thou know'st/The deadly proof in fair Chrotilda's death."³⁵ This statement suggests that Clotair has correctly interpreted Chrotilda's revenge and death in two key ways. First of all, he once again shows that he has learned about and accepted his own tyranny and poisonous nature. He is fully aware that he deserves the revenge, and that his own terrible actions, rather than Chrotilda's machinations, killed both women. Secondly, he sees Chrotilda as fully-woman in her death, labeling her both as "fair," and more importantly, as joined with Aphelia in the larger set of women he has murdered. Because her revenge is framed with feminine gestures,

33 Heminge, *The Fatal Contract* V.ii. 470.

34 Like Aspatia in Beaumont and Fletcher's *The Maid's Tragedy*, Aphelia's death serves as a didactic reminder. Neither of these women actually enacts violence of their own, though Aspatia threatens it, in a way that Low's model recognizes as legitimized.

35 Heminge, *The Fatal Contract*, V.ii. 477-78.

Chrotilda can be seen as an innocent rape victim, rather than a too-subversive revenger at the conclusion of the play.

Clotair's final comment on Chrotilda's revenge is upon his own death. He calls upon his own heart to break, and apparently, it follows its prince's command.³⁶ Clotair speaks a final eulogy for himself on his deathbed:

Touch sparingly this story, do not read
Too harsh a comment on this loathed deed,
Lest you inforce posterity to blast
My name and Memory with endlesse curses;
Call me an honorable murtherer,
And finish there as I do.³⁷

Besides revealing Heminge's indebtedness to (plagiarism of) *Othello*,³⁸ this speech finalizes the degree to which Clotair realizes his tyranny. Chrotilda's teaching has hit true: Clotair has realized that death is the only option left to him, and he recognizes that history has no reason to paint him as anything but evil. Clotair attempts to save his reputation at this last point: perhaps his repentance allows him to be labeled an honorable murderer, though his honor only followed after his murderousness found correction. His ability to call himself a murderer at all reveals the extent of his understanding.

Finally, Clotair's brother Clovis is left on stage, inheriting the kingship, passing judgment on what has gone before, and ultimately erasing Chrotilda's violent agency. His reading of the situation is benevolent, but problematic. He determines that Chrotilda should be buried in honor, but he also compares her situation to that of Aphelia, tortured to death as collateral damage during Chrotilda's plot. Aphelia plays the traditional role of the suffering female tableau, a model of female heroism which directly opposes Chrotilda's agential violence. However, Clovis demands that, "These/that for [Clotair's] love on either hand lie slain,/They shall lie bur-

36 Heminge, *The Fatal Contract*, V.ii. 500.

37 Heminge, *The Fatal Contract*, V.ii. 524-29.

38 Shakespeare, *Othello*, V.ii. 291-92: "An honourable murderer, if you will,/For nought I did in hate, but all in honour."

ied in one Monument,” (V.ii. 536-38).³⁹ In one sense, this justice is kind to Chrotilda, suggesting that she is so little at fault as to be Aphelia’s mirror. She appears to be fully forgiven for her part in the revenge. However, Clovis also suggests that Chrotilda was slain “for [Clotair’s] love” – an odd statement describing someone who performed multiple murders in order to gain revenge on her rapist. While she ultimately seems to have forgiven Clotair, Chrotilda also continued to teach him of his wrongs even after her death to the point of driving him to his own. In saying that she died for Clotair’s love, Clovis essentially erases the narrative of rape and revenge that Chrotilda went to such great lengths to publicize.

Catty suggests that, “Rape is both a sexual (and usually social) destruction of the woman and a figurative silencing. . . . It figures the denial of autonomy which disables and disempowers female authorship.”⁴⁰ She further notes that the ambiguities surrounding the crime of rape can invalidate the woman’s traumatic experience in it.⁴¹ In the final moments of the play, this sort of double-silencing has been performed on Chrotilda. Rape originally silenced her, and I propose that her revenge plot be read as an elaborate plan to regain a sense of agency.⁴² By judging her as a complete innocent, a silent sufferer who can be Aphelia’s mirror, however, Clovis causes the second silencing, as he overwrites Chrotilda’s autobiographical narrative and denies her original trauma by suggesting that she loved Clotair, as well as overwriting her later violence by refusing to judge her revenge as such. Chrotilda’s revengeress identity is elided in a way it was not by Clotair: while Clotair did cast her as his victim, his acceptance of the villain’s role reinforces the sense that he understood and respected her actions as revenger. Clovis overlooks this possibility entirely; while he is politically generous to Chrotilda in labeling her innocent, he also seems to lack any understanding of her trauma.

39 Heminge, *The Fatal Contract*, V.ii. 536-38.

40 Catty, *Writing Rape, Writing Women*, 4.

41 Catty, *Writing Rape, Writing Women*, 115.

42 Such a return of agency through revenge is frequent trope of the genre, as Keyishian argues.

In seeming complicity with Clovis, Bowers thus suggests that, “Finally, Chrotilda, as evil and villainous a revenger as ever trod the stage, is considered a noble heroine.”⁴³ But, is she truly meant to be seen as a villainous revenger? I argue that Chrotilda’s adherence to a female mode of revenge, didactic rather than vindictive, allows for the moral clarity that Bowers denies, as does her care to avoid the oversexualization and outspokenness that define villainesses such as her enemy Fredigond. While Chrotilda’s revenge does very much participate in the gore tradition which surrounds revenge tragedy, she performs her gory and horrific actions with the specific goal of instructing her rapist in his crimes. She writes herself as neither villainous nor villainess. In this effort, she is highly successful, and through that success, the play presents revenge as a potential script for women to cope with the trauma of rape.

When Chrotilda cannot kill Clotair, she blames it on “A woman’s weakness.”⁴⁴ “Like to my soft sex,” all she can do is die.⁴⁵ *The Fatal Contract* describes a much stronger woman than this, however. Chrotilda is not a passive victim – it is revenge which she takes, “Like to my soft sex,” teaching her oppressor of his wrongs so coherently that he can carry forth her story.⁴⁶ Other forces may silence that narrative, but Chrotilda manages to convey her pain and perform deeds generally outside of a woman’s abilities without taking blame for them. She finds strength in her revenge, along with a unique means of self-expression. A woman’s weakness does not prevent her revenge, but instead constrains it such that it might be performed on the Renaissance stage. Through Chrotilda’s strength, a modern scholarly audience can find new relevance in this play and the way in which it explores female agency, particularly in the way that revenge enables a woman’s voice to scream out her trauma without blame.

43 Bowers, *Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy*, 241.

44 Heminge, *The Fatal Contract*, V.ii. 455.

45 Heminge, *The Fatal Contract*, V.ii. 63.

46 Heminge, *The Fatal Contract*, V.ii. 63.

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