EMOTIONS AND GENDER
THE CASE OF ANGER IN EARLY MODERN ENGLISH REVENGE TRAGEDIES
Dr. Kristine Steenbergh, VU University Amsterdam

[This is an uncorrected pre-print version of my chapter in A History of Emotions 1200-1800, edited by Jonas Liliequist (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2012), 119-134. If you have access to the book, please quote the corrected print version.]

People [in the Middle Ages] are wild, cruel, prone to violent outbreaks and abandoned to the joy of the moment. ... Not only among the nobility were there family vendettas, private feuds, vendettas. The towns were no less rife with wars between families and cliques. The little people, too — the hatters, the tailors, the shepherds — were all quick to draw their knives.¹

These are the words of Norbert Elias, in the first volume of his Civilizing Process, published in 1939. In Elias’s widely influential view, anger in the medieval period was unconstrained. Only with the arrival of the absolutist court and the modern state in the early modern period did people learn to control their emotions and to adjust their conduct to that of others. Objections have been raised against Elias’s teleological representation of historical emotions.² Barbara Rosenwein has argued that this model, which views emotions as frothing fluids that need to be repressed and controlled, is no longer tenable in the context of modern cognitive theories in which the emotions play a key role in rational processes. Moreover, Elias’s model represents the Middle Ages as a period of child-like, uncontrolled anger – a representation vigorously contested by medieval historians.³ Besides the role of anger, Elias’s portrayal of the role of revenge in medieval society also invites scrutiny.

Although blood revenge is often represented as unchecked and virulent, historically revenge was an instrument to maintain social stability.⁴ It was first formulated as such in the ancient lex talionis or ‘talion law’, which later broadened into the blood-feud, a system based on binding obligations to revenge the death of a family member.⁵ As Keith Brown and Richard Fletcher have both argued, the blood-feud in medieval society functioned to maintain order, rather than to create disorder in society. It was governed by strong normative constraints, notions of balance and reciprocity,⁶ and was an essential instrument in minimizing violence after a crime had been committed.⁷ Medieval historian Karl Schoemaker suggests that there must have been a period in which this perception changed: ‘before the extirpation of revenge from modern criminal justice could occur’, he writes, ‘revenge had to be converted from a virtue to a vice; from a good into an evil.’⁸ In an English context one of the moments at which process can be seen to take
place, I will argue, is in the Tudor period.

The expansion of the legal system into a nation-wide network in the early modern period depended on the creation of an opposition between the order of the law and the disorder caused by traditions of revenge. The law presented itself as an agency of order and regulation, and defined itself against the disorder of aristocratic traditions of private revenge. In their endeavours to bring about a change in public perception of the feuds between the nobility, the state represented revenge as illegal and seditious, and contrasted it with the authority of the national legal system. In this struggle over the representation of revenge, family feuds and the fourteenth-century Wars of the Roses played a pivotal role. State discourse represented the English past as a time of uncontrolled, destructive anger. Norbert Elias’s characterization of the Middle Ages as a period of wild anger and destructive feuds, then, seems to reproduce an image propagated by the Tudor state.

I do not wish to replace Elias’s teleological model of increased control over the emotions with an analogical model in which revenge was first viewed as an instrument of order in the Middle Ages and then associated with uncontrolled anger in the early modern period. Historical periods are not as monolithic as such a model would suggest. In her contribution to this volume, Barbara Rosenwein writes that larger historical narratives that seek to account for moments of change in the history of emotions are as yet unsatisfactory or incomplete. Although she suggested in her book Emotional Communities that the group in power determines the dominant emotional norms, she acknowledges that this model might not apply to historical periods in which power is less monolithic than in her medieval sources. Instead, she offers the suggestion that a “new narrative of the emotions [could] be constructed on the appearance of new theories” of emotions: “consider there was no Oedipus complex before Freud.”

For the early modern period, several excellent reconstructions exist of the then current theory of the emotions, the model of the humoral self. Interestingly, these studies disagree to a certain extent about the way in which this theoretical model shaped early modern understanding of the relation between the emotions and the self. It is precisely this disagreement which interests me in this paper. I will argue that theoretical models of the emotions should not be seen as agents of change in the history of the emotions as such. Rather, I would suggest it is the conflict between the ways in which different political groups employ contemporary knowledge and the resulting emotion scripts that they produce, which bring about changes in the history of emotions.

I will use as a guide a quotation from Foucault’s The History of Sexuality, in which he describes a model of thinking about change that avoids notions of sweeping transitions between periods, but envisages a multiplicity of discursive elements that can come into play in various strategies:
Are there no great radical ruptures, massive binary divisions, then? Occasionally, yes. But more often one is dealing with mobile and transitory points of resistance, producing cleavages in a society that shift about, fracturing unities and effecting regroupings, furrowing across individuals themselves, cutting them up and remolding them, marking off irreducible regions in them, in their bodies and minds.\textsuperscript{11}

In this model, there is not one dominant discourse of an emotion such as anger in a given period. Rather, in every historical period, different discourses co-exist, rub against each other, conflict or collapse in a dynamic process.

In my examination of conflicting discourses of revenge in early modern England, I will focus on the role of the stage. Accommodating large audiences from across the social stratum, the commercial theatres were a major cultural agent in discussions about revenge. Different stages and genres addressed specific audiences. In this way, the various London stages disseminated images and narratives that helped shape playgoers’ interpretations of conflicting ideas of justice and revenge. Moreover, the early modern theatre conditioned affective experience. Performances shaped the ways audience members came to name and interpret their emotions, as well as how they understood them as ‘social and political currency’.\textsuperscript{12}

**Emotions and the self**

My starting point, then, is a current debate in the study of the body and the emotions in early modern culture. This debate focuses on the perceived relation between the emotions and the self.\textsuperscript{13} Recent research examines the sense of self that is produced by the pre-Cartesian model of the relation between body and mind, in which the passions were seen as bodily processes produced by blood, phlegm, black and yellow bile, and regulated by heat, cold, moisture and dryness. Critics recently explored the extent to which this bodily model of the passions gave a person control over the self. Michael Schoenfeldt in *Bodies and Selves* has argued that it is precisely in the management of the passions that notions of selfhood and identity took shape in the early modern period. ‘The Renaissance seems to have imagined selves as differentiated not by their desires, which all more or less share, but by their capacity to control these desires.’\textsuperscript{14} In his view, self-control over one’s passions shaped a sense of inwardness, of selfhood.

On the other hand, Gail Kem Paster stressed that humoral discourse emphasizes change and penetrability of the body rather than identity and control. The body is not self-contained or self-controlled, but is in a constant state of flux with its environment, a condition that Paster calls ‘the humoral ecology’. A blazing fire, for example, could heat the
blood of a person standing next to it, causing that person to become angry. Subjectivity in Paster's view depended on the interactivity of bodily fluids, spirits and the surrounding environment, and the experience of inwardness is therefore prone to continual emotional transformation. Noting that the material body was predominantly understood to be constituted by its passions, she argues that issues of change and fluidity are central in early modern conceptions of selfhood:

It is not surprising, then, that the humoral body should be characterized not only by its physical openness but also by its emotional instability and volatility, by an internal microclimate knowable, like climates in the outer world, more for changeability than for stasis.\(^{15}\)

A second objection that Paster makes to Schoenfeldt’s model is that it is too all-encompassing. In her view, Schoenfeldt’s idea of Galenic discipline as a form of self-control does not take into account differences in gender and class, and thereby ignores social and gender hierarchies of the early modern period.\(^{16}\)

I will argue that in fact both Schoenfeldt’s notion of self-control and Paster’s notion of fluidity and change exist in early modern culture. Anger is sometimes represented as an emotion that contributes to masculine selfhood, but at other times represented as susceptible to influences from outside the body, capable of transforming a man to such an extent that he loses his masculine identity. These views of anger belong to different discourses: one is part of aristocratic traditions of blood revenge, the other circulates among a younger generation of middle-class administrators who sought to expand the legal system and eradicate practices of private revenge. In the conflict between these discourses, notions of gender and class do indeed, as Paster argues, play an important role. They do not, however, function as stable biological and hierarchical factors, but operate dynamically within these conflicting discourses. In fact, gendered representations of the emotions could well point researchers to the points at which different discourses collide.

**Playing Fury**

A striking example of the conflict between these discourses about emotions and the self can be found in the essays of Sir William Cornwallis, published in 1600. Inspired by the introspective style of Michel de Montaigne, Cornwallis wrote a searching analysis of his personal qualms about the practice of revenge. On the one hand, he lets his readers know that he has read Christian and philosophical works that have taught him to contain his passions, to manage his anger by forgiving the person who has hurt him. On the other hand, he worries that if he were not to defend himself in a quarrel, he will lose his
reputation. Yet, he is also anxious that he might lose his self-control if he engaged in a quarrel. Even if he merely pretends to be angry for honour’s sake, the performance of the passion might weaken his brain and cause him to abandon rational control over his deeds. These are Cornwallis’s considerations:

About nothing do I suffer greater conflict in my selfe then about induring wrongs; for other duties – though perhaps I seldom performe them, yet I am resolued they should be done; and it is not the fault of my meditation, but of my negligent flesh. But heere is set up Reputation as the Garland appointed, and he that reuengeth not is not capable of this glorie. ... I know what Diuinitie, what Philosophie perswades ... And yet for all this I dare not yeeld. ... [H]auing no present occasion wherein I may exercise valour, and manifest my worth, I dare not take day in any thing so nearly concerning me. ... I haue not yet any outward witnesse of my valour, but this is my determination, not to refuse the first good quarrell, and to per forme it as well as I can, after which I will serue Vertue ... If it were possible to play Furie to the life, and yet not haue her effects inwardly, I would be content vpon some great occasion not to hurt, but scare the iniurious: but it is dangerous, and that iesting often will discouer the intent, and it is to be feared will weaken the braine, as ill as drunkennesse.\(^{17}\)

Here, various discourses can indeed be seen to ‘furrow across’ an individual, as Foucault described it. Notions of aristocratic honour, stoic philosophy and Christian mercy overlap and conflict in Cornwallis’s mind. Moreover, Cornwallis’s words reveal an anxiety about the self-altering effects of acted passion. The operations of anger are here seen in the context of a permeable model of selfhood, in which the mere imitation of that passion is liable to infiltrate the mind and weaken it.\(^{18}\) The passion of anger is gendered feminine in Cornwallis words, and contrasted with the masculine reputation he needs to guard. The defence of his honour demands his anger, but ‘her effects’ paradoxically threaten to weaken him. The feminine pronoun may be due to the Latin gender of the word *furia*, but it could also refer to the Furies, the classical goddesses of revenge. Interestingly, the words ‘play Furie to the life’ evoke a theatrical context of performance. The Furies figured prominently in the tragedies of Lucius Annaeus Seneca (4 BC – AD 65), about which Cornwallis published his *Discourses upon Seneca the Tragedian* in 1601. Seneca’s tragedies are one of the roots of the hugely popular genre of revenge tragedy on the commercial stages in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The revenge plays in this tradition do not simply reflect historical developments, nor were they merely entertainment – a form of catharsis for the anxieties caused by the loss of traditions of revenge.\(^{19}\) Rather, these plays are themselves part of these historical developments, and play a role
in shaping conflicting discourses of anger and vindictiveness in the early modern period. As appears from Cornwallis’s essays, the images of anger performed on the stage shaped contemporary thinking on revenge. In what follows, I will analyse the gendered representation of anger and revenge in early modern English revenge tragedies, focusing on the Senecan tradition that seems to have influenced Cornwallis’s thinking, but also on plays that produce a counter-discourse to the Senecan view of anger and revenge.

Translations of Seneca
In the middle of the sixteenth century, the tragedies of the Roman statesman, philosopher and dramatist Seneca were rediscovered in England by translators and playwrights who were closely connected to the London Inns of Court, England’s schools of law. These translations of Seneca’s plays and the new tragedies written in Senecan style are usually studied for their literary influence on the later genre of revenge tragedy. An analysis of these texts’ interactions with the institutional and political context in which they were written and performed, shows that the Inns of Court’s interest in the themes of anger and revenge in Seneca’s tragedies and their representations of gender, emotions and the self, cannot be seen in isolation from the gradual expansion of the national legal system in the period.

The choice of the translation, adaptation and performance of a Senecan tragedy was political: the Inns of Court were one of the central institutions in the expanding national legal system in Elizabethan England. Known as England’s third university, Lincoln’s Inn, Gray’s Inn, Middle Temple and Inner Temple functioned as the main gateway to a career in common law, and also trained many of the country’s future governors and administrators. The Inns of Court occupied a key position in the expansion of the nation state, and had a vested interest in replacing traditions of revenge with the operations of the law. The Inns performed their plays before audiences of students, lawyers, politicians, and the royal court. Within this institutional context, scholars turned to Seneca’s tragedies to bring into circulation images of private revenge as uncontrollable and destructive, and as driven by the passion of anger.

Two surges of interest in Seneca occurred in the early modern period. In the 1560s, students and fellows at the universities and the Inns of Court circulated their English translations of Seneca’s tragedies in manuscript form, and published editions of individual translations. New tragedies inspired by Seneca’s plays were produced at the Inns of Court. Thomas Sackville and Thomas Norton co-authored the original, heavily Senecan tragedy Gorboduc, first performed in 1562. The second period of increased interest occurred in the 1580s, when Thomas Newton published the earlier translations of Seneca’s tragedies together with his own in 1581. The Inns of Court produced new Senecan
tragedies in this decade as well. In 1587, members of Gray’s Inn wrote The Misfortunes of Arthur.

The translators of Seneca’s tragedies took some interesting liberties with the works. Howard Norland, who studied the additions and changes that the Elizabethan translators made to their original material, found that all translators of Seneca’s tragedies expand the emotional dimensions of dramatic situations and language, and can be seen to elaborate on sensational elements in the tragedies. ‘Perhaps’, Norland suggests, ‘the young scholars can be faulted for dwelling too much on the passions and perversions of Senecan drama.’ Although Norland blames the translators’ bloodthirstiness on the literary tastes of the time, I think their emphasis on the passions in their changes to the material should be explained from a broader perspective than that of literary tastes. The translation of Seneca in the sixteenth century can be read in the context of the Inns of Court’s political interests. It is not coincidental that the translators added passages that stress the relation between a bodily, uncontrollable passion of anger, private revenge and civil war.

In comparison to the Latin original, the early modern translations of the tragedies emphasize the pain of anger, and represent that pain as a necessary step towards revenge. Medea, for example, feels that she cannot take revenge on her husband without first having been tormented by the Furies herself. She asks these goddesses of revenge to use their torches, whips and knives to inflict pain on herself. In a deviation from the Latin original, Medea solicits the furies: ‘in plunge of passing payne / Torment yee mee, that on my spouse do wishe this woe to raygne.’ To be able to enact the murder of her own children, Medea needs to be thrown into a state of fury that gives her the force to enact such a horrific deed. The experience of the pain inflicted by the Furies is all-absorbing. When they are thus tormented, angry characters cannot describe anything else than the very physical and painful emotion they are experiencing. In Seneca’s Agamemnon, translated by John Studley, Clytemnestra describes her anger as follows:

So grievous is my careful case which plungeth me so sore
That deale I cannot with delay, nor linger any more.
The flashing flames and furious force of fiery fervent heate,
Outraging in my boyling breast, my burning bones doth beate:
It suckes the sappy marrow - out the juice it doth convoy,
It frets, it teares, it rents, it gnaws, my guttes and gall away.

More elaborately than Seneca’s original text, the last four lines of the quotation emphasize the physical aspect of her anger, and describe how the heat of fury eats at her inner organs. The alliteration and the metre enact on a level of poetic form the painful throb-
bing sensation of Clytemnestra’s boiling breast and burning bones. Her physical pain seems to inhibit her from taking vengeful action at this point: even though she claims that she cannot ‘linger any more’, she is unable to do anything else than attempt to communicate the pain of the fury that rages within her.

In the translations of Seneca’s tragedies, then, anger is represented as a primarily bodily experience that is intensely painful. Aspiring avengers call upon the Furies to inflict this pain on them, in order to reach a state of fury that is so painful they can no longer delay their act of revenge. The risk inherent in this method, however — as Sir William Cornwallis was aware — is that the pain of fury turns against itself, and inflicts the most painful wounds on the avenger, who is no longer in control of his anger. Thus, the Inns of Court men introduce a discourse into early modern English culture in which anger is depicted as an uncontrollable bodily process that leads to destruction and even self-destruction.

As if to emphasize this, the translators also added long passages in which anger is depicted as excessive and self-destructive. An example are the seventy-two lines that John Studley added to the fifth and final act of his translation of Agamemnon, a passage that has no basis in Seneca’s original text. In that passage, anger is connected to civil war by a character who earlier attempted to assuage Clytemnestra’s vindictive rage:

Alas yee hateful hellish Hagges, yee furies foule and fell,
Why cause yee rusty rancours rage in noble heartes to dwell?
And cancred hate in boyling breastes to grow from age to age?
Coulde not the grundsires paynefull pangues the childrens wrath asswage?
...
But after breath from body fled, and Lyfe thy Lymmes hath left,
Can not remembraunce of revenge out of thy breast be ref?
...
So after all these bloudy broyle [sic], Greece never shall be free:
But bloud for bloud, and death by turnes, the after age shall see.

The added passage emphasizes the uncontrollable nature of vindictiveness. The passions of anger and hate lead to a vicious cycle of revenges within the House of Pelops, affecting the whole of Greece. Such additions to Seneca’s tragedies in the Elizabethan translations emphasize the large-scale destructive effects of a private desire for revenge. They stress the trans-generational operations of the body’s desire for vengeance: ‘re-membrance of revenge’ paradoxically rankles in the ‘breasts’ of these ghosts long after their bodies have decayed.
Apart from these translations, the Inns of Court also produced their own revenge tragedies, in which they fused the portrayal of anger and vindictiveness from Seneca’s tragedies with native English history. Thomas Norton and Thomas Sackville wrote what is often considered as the first English revenge tragedy: *Gorboduc, or Ferrex and Porrex*. The play was performed both in the Inner Temple and at court. In the play, Senecan elements are combined with the history of King Gorboduc. That king, like Shakespeare’s later King Lear, decided to split the English nation between his children. When his son Porrex subsequently murdered his other son Ferrex in a dispute over this division of the realm, Queen Videna took revenge on her one remaining son, and murdered him in a fit of rage. The play compares the murdering queen to the classical character Medea, since, as the play states, they both ‘moued by Furies vnnatulye had slaine their owne Chil- dren.’ The long monologue in which Videna decides to take revenge on her only remaining son echoes Medea’s tragic monologues.

The tragedy forges a structural association between Queen Videna’s anger and revenge on her own son, and the outbreak of civil war in England. In its final act, this association is emphasized:

> And thou, O Britain [...] shalt thus be torn,  
> Dismembered thus, and thus be rent in twain,  
> Thus wasted and defaced, spoiled and destroyed,  
> These be the fruits your civil wars will bring.  
> [...]  
> Thus wreak the Gods, when that the mother’s wrath  
> None but the blood of her own childe may ’suage;  
> These mischiefs spring when rebels will arise,  
> To work revenge and judge their princes fact. 

The association of Videna’s revenge with rebellion and civil war also operates in terms of a shared fury. Like the mother’s wrath, the rebellion of the people is moved by unbridled passion: they fight ‘as Furies did them move’. This mix of native British history with Senecan tragedy performed in the Inns of Court thus connects feminine vindictive anger with civil war.

In this discourse, the emotion of anger is represented as a feminine force. It is inspired by the goddesses of revenge and has a bodily agency quite of its own, thereby diminishing self-control. This representation of anger is in accordance with Gail Kern Patser’s emphasis on fluidity and change in the early modern experience of the body and the self. The cause of anger is represented as lying outside of the body, it is not a controlled emotion. The heat of the furies takes possession of the avenger’s body and starts
a material, somatic process that makes the blood boil and the breast burn. Avengers in
the plays describe the experience as something that happens to their bodies and of
which they do not know where it will lead. Gender does indeed play a role in this re-
presentation of anger and the self, as Paster argues, but I think we should view the role of
gender differences not in terms of the biological, hierarchical differences that she brings
to the fore.

The role of gender
What is the role of gender in these representations of anger and the self? This question
has been studied by feminist critics. Faced with an abundance of vindictive female char-
acters in early modern drama, they have sought to explain such commonplace represen-
tations with reference to ideas about ‘the nature of women’ in the period. Betty Trav-
itsky, for example, has compared contemporary representations of infanticide in pam-
phlets and broadsides to representations of the Medea-figure in the drama. Her conclu-
sion is that murdering mothers in the drama always send the same message: ‘women are
destructive ... the similarity of the language of the various accounts shows that all women
were obviously considered to be potentially damnable furies.’ She wonders whether
these classical murdering mothers perhaps embody an apparently transhistorical dis-
course of misogyny, a conflation of passion, tragic excess and evil. In her reading, the
reason why Videna is implicated in the outbreak of civil war should be looked for in con-
temporary ideas on motherhood: ‘It is to her, a passionate, terrible mother, that we must
point. Perverted female principle here leads to the fall.’

Linda Woodbridge in her Literature and the Nature of Womankind similarly con-
nects representations of women’s vengefulness to what she calls ‘the real world’, where
‘contemporary women were donning breeches and challenging people to duels.’ She
discusses an anonymous play Swetnam the Woman-Hater Arraigned by Women (1618),
which defends women against the accusations of the seventeenth-century woman-hater
Joseph Swetnam. The only stereotype about women that is allowed to stand at the close
of the play is their penchant for revenge. Woodbridge suggests that: ‘[p]erhaps the
playwright allowed himself this one stereotype because it wasn’t really a stereotype –
not adapted from stale literary models but drawn from the life. All the evidence suggests
that contemporary women were aggressive.’ These interpretations explain female an-
ger and vengefulness by referring to ideas about women, or even to the actual lives of
women, in the early modern period. If female characters are represented as vindictive,
then all women must have been considered potential furies, or perhaps they even were
furies.

I would argue that Queen Videna as a Medea-figure need not mimetically reflect
early modern ideas on women or womanhood. If we interpret the play in the context of
debates over revenge, and analyse the terms in which the play’s representations of fury and retribution intervene in discourses of justice and revenge, we can see that gendered representations do not necessarily refer to notions of womanhood, or the relations between the sexes. Instead, as Joan Scott has argued, gender is a primary way of signifying relations of power, and gender constructs in historical texts do therefore not always refer to sex itself. In Scott’s view, gender is part of the meaning of power itself, its structure in embedded in the discourse of politics. Although the meaning of gender might seem fixed, and although it appears to function as an objective set of references, it is in fact continually redefined in shifting relations of power. It is the task of the historian, she argues, to disrupt the seeming objectivity of gender structures, and to examine the nature of the debate that led to the appearance of timeless permanence in binary gender representation – such as the idea that women are vengeful or easily angered. In a special issue on the emotions of the journal *Early Medieval Europe*, Catherine Cubitt in 2001 called for more attention to the gendering of emotion. She wrote that: ‘The emotions and their expression have always served to delineate gender difference.’ We could also reverse this statement to make it say that likewise, gender difference has always served to delineate emotions and their expression. The tragedies of the Inns of Court seek to discredit private revenge as passionate and excessive, and mark it as feminine to counter aristocratic discourses in which revenge is regarded as a masculine duty. That does not necessarily mean that women in the sixteenth century were aggressive, nor that they were generally seen as aggressive. Instead, the binary construction of masculine and feminine is used as a key instrument in the shaping of relations of power.

In this use of gender in the shaping of emotion scripts in the theatre, feminine passion is not confined to female characters. In another Inns of Court play, *The Misfortunes of Arthur*, the excessive feminine anger and vindictiveness of King Arthur’s wife Guinevere is taken up by Arthur’s rebellious son Mordred and finally by the participants in a civil war. Like *Gorboduc*, this tragedy combines native English history and elements from Senecan tragedy. Guinevere is based on Seneca’s Clytemnestra. In the same way as her classical counterpart, Guinevere awaits her husband’s return from the wars, and plots with her lover to be revenged on Arthur. The play is interlarded with translated quotations and imitations of Seneca’s tragedies; the queen speaks lines from no less than seven of his plays. In a passage taken from *Thyestes*, she invokes the furies to possess her with anger:

```
Come spitefull fiends, come heapes of furies fell,
Not one, by one, but all at once: my breast
Raues not inough: it likes me to be filde
With greater monsters yet. My hart doth throbbe:
```
My liuer boyles: some what my minde portendes,  
Uncertayne what: but whatsoeuer, it's huge.  
So it exceede, be what it will: it's well.  
Omit no plague, and none will be inough.  
Wrong cannot be reueng'd, but by excesse.40

The passage rehearses by now familiar patterns: the bodily experience of vindictiveness is foregrounded and associated with the female Furies, Guinevere seems to have no control over her actions and does not know where her anger will lead her, only that it will result in a revenge that can only be excessive – not an eye for an eye, but a revenge that spirals out of control. Here, then, excessive female anger seems to be connected to the female body, but this connection between sex and gender is undermined by the play as a whole. When Guinevere decides not to follow the role model of Clytemnestra, but to turn to a more Christian interpretation of the concept of revenge: ‘dayly penance done for each offence I May render due revenge for every wrong’, feminine vengefulness is not purged from the play with the queen’s confinement to a convent.41 Instead, it continues to exert its influence on the plot of the tragedy. As Guenevora leaves the stage for the last time in the play, Clytemnestra’s lines from Seneca’s Agamemnon are transferred from her character to that of Arthur’s rebellious son Mordred. When a counsellor urges him to seek reconciliation with his father, Mordred objects that ‘[t]he safest passage is from bad to worse’, a translation of Clytemnestra’s well-known words ‘per sceleras semper sceleribus tutum est iter’.42 In the exchange that follows, Mordred continues to give voice to Clytemnestra’s thoughts from Agamemnon.43 In this manner, the feminine vindictiveness first embodied by the character of Guenevora is transferred onto Mordred, who is about to engage in a feud against his own father that is to inflict civil war on the country. This parallel between the Senecan fury displayed by Arthur’s wife and the ensuing civil war also comes to the fore when the epilogue juxtaposes the ‘franticke moodes [that] [d]istract a wife’ with the ‘sword and fire still fedde with mutual strife.’44

Both Gorboduc and The Misfortunes of Arthur shape a discourse in which Senecan representations of feminine fury are combined with native English histories of rebellion and civil war to create an image of revenge as passionate, furious, uncontrollable and destructive. The role of gender here is not prescribed by biological hierarchies: the humoral system does not present a very firm base for a gendered hierarchy of anger. In early modern medicine, women were considered colder and wetter than men in humoral ecology. This could mean, in some texts, that they were not susceptible to hot choler, but could brood on their revenges for months. In other texts, their cold and wet humour is seen as a recipe for short, uncontrollable bouts of anger. Rather than as a sign of biological differences between the sexes, gender is here used to delineate emotion scripts:
to counter the notion of revenge as a masculine duty, anger is represented as typically feminine. We might see the stereotype of the vindictive, angry woman as being created again and again, but each time under very specific historical circumstances. In sixteenth-century England, I would argue, the Inns of Court revived feminine vindictive fury to react to male traditions of blood revenge and not to aggressive women.

**Counterdiscourses in the drama**

When Sir William Cornwallis writes in his essays that he is afraid to play Fury to the life, then, his image of fury as a force that weakens the brain and threatens a loss of self-control may have been inspired by his reading of Seneca’s dramatic work, as well as by the early Elizabethan revenge tragedies that drew on Seneca’s representation of anger as a feminine, bodily and uncontrollable force. Not all revenge tragedies, however, presented the act of revenge as a danger to masculine selfhood. C. L. Barber has found that the notion of revenge for honour became suddenly prominent in seventeenth-century drama. He wrote that sensitivity to affront or justice and the taking of revenge ‘all become almost everyday matters in the drama during the century, whereas they play a relatively minor part in Elizabethan drama.’

One of the playwrights who presents revenge in the context of honour, is George Chapman. In his tragedies we find a representation of anger and the masculine self that stresses the importance of self-control, in accordance with Michael Schoenfeldt’s view of the relation between the passions and the self. His plays negotiate the friction between two notions of honour: one in which all sense of honour derives and obedience to the monarch, another in which it is the nobleman’s aristocratic lineage, or his individual achievements that determine his reputation. Chapman’s plays were performed in the private theatres, which were visited by the aristocracy and the higher middle classes. He wrote his plays under the patronage of the Earl of Arundel, who was one of the noblemen who resisted the restriction of aristocratic privileges by the expanding state. Chapman in his plays explores the boundaries of aristocratic power in the early modern state, and examines issues of anger and revenge.

In Chapman’s tragedies, revenge is often motivated by a Stoic adherence to the concept of rational law. These laws of reason weigh more heavily than civil law in the view of Stoic philosophy, and therefore provide Chapman’s heroes with a justification of their revenge. The eponymous protagonist of his *The Tragedy of Bussy d’Ambois* (1604) has a choleric character and his angry passions and vindictiveness compromise his position at court. With the sequel *The Revenge of Bussy D’Ambois* (1610), however, Chapman is said to have presented for the first time on the English stage an avenger ‘who could be an English Gentleman’. The play is deeply concerned with the possibilities of achieving aristocratic honour at an absolutist court. In its opening scene, the nobility, like
William Cornwallis cited above, discusses the difficulty of gaining honour in a time of peace.\(^{47}\) The hero of this tragedy, Bussy’s brother Clermont, compares nobles without a task in war to pent-up lions who grow soft and lose their fire and greatness.\(^{48}\) Life at court is portrayed as effeminising, even more so because the king of France in this play is presented as a tyrant. Although he likewise explores the room for individual manœuvres within the monarchy, Clermont is different from his brother where his temperament is concerned. The play explicitly compares the brothers in this respect:

[Clermont] wears the crown of man, and all his parts,
Which learning is, and that so true and virtuous
That it gives power to do as well as say
Whatever fits a most accomplished man:
Which Bussy (for his valour’s season) lacked,
And was so rapt with outrage sometimes
Beyond decorum; where this absolute Clermont,
Though (only for his natural zeal to right)
He will be fiery when he sees it crossed
And in defense of it, yet when he lists
He can contain that fire, as hid in embers.\(^{49}\)

Whereas Bussy’s anger sometimes went ‘beyond decorum’, Clermont is able to contain his passion. He can make it lie hid in embers, allowing it to flare only when his sense of justice requires it. The capacity to control one’s passions is in this play indeed represented as empowering, as Schoenfeldt argues. Within Renaissance Neostoicism, this kind of controlled anger provided a means for the aristocracy to maintain a sense of masculine honour independent from the absolute king.\(^{50}\)

Clermont’s contained anger and rational blood revenge for his brother’s death, however, are not the only representations of retribution in the play. Interestingly, the tragedy also features no less than three vindictive women, who all desire to take revenge for Bussy’s death, and who, in contrast to Clermont, express their anger freely. One of them, Bussy’s former mistress Tamyra, echoes Seneca’s vindictive female characters when she invites revenge to take possession of her body:

Revenge, that ever red sitt’st in the eyes
Of injured ladies, till we crown thy brows
With bloody laurel, and receive from thee
Justice for all our honour’s injury;
Whose wings none fly that wrath or tyranny
Have ruthless made and bloody, enter here,
Enter, O enter! (1.2.1-7)

Her unbridled longing for revenge, marked as typically female, stands in shrill contrast to the reasoned challenge to a duel that Clermont sends Bussy’s murderer, and his patience in waiting for an answer. Another vindictive woman in the play is literally compared to Seneca’s Medea by her anxious husband. It seems as if the overload of feminine vindictiveness in the play serves as a foil to Clermont’s particular brand of masculine, militant Stoicism.

Not all literary critics would agree with this analysis, however. Alison Findlay in her Feminist Perspective on Renaissance Drama regards the vindictiveness of the female characters in The Revenge of Bussy D’Ambois as a path to agency and self-determination. Although she sees that the women’s vengefulness does not lead to any result in the play, she does dub the vindictive Tamyra ‘feminist’. I cannot agree with such a reading of the play. I do not see these vindictive characters as primarily related to female rebellion, or a desire for vengeance on the part of female spectators, as Findlay argues. Rather, their fury functions as a foil to the ideal of masculine aristocratic heroism in the play. The representation of manhood in The Revenge of Bussy D’Ambois reacts to recognizable and nuanced social and cultural developments, while the portrayal of femininity grasps back to misogynist classical stereotypes, the better to nuance the change in masculine ideals.

Conclusion
We have seen, then, that both Gail Kern Paster’s view of a fluid and changeable self, as well as Michael Schoenfeldt’s view of a self-controlled subjectivity, exist in early modern culture. What is important, however, is that both discourses were circulated in specific contexts, and their production of images of anger and the masculine self had a political function in debates about the validity of revenge. It is therefore problematic to argue that the early modern period is characterized by increased control over the emotions, as Elias did. A discourse of control certainly existed, but collided with other discourses. Categories of class and gender certainly play a role in this process, as Paster argues, but these categories are dynamic and constantly shifting. Masculinity and femininity are defined against each other, but not always in relation to actual men and women or ideas about them. Rather, gender operates as a mechanism in relations of power, shifting about in the dynamics of discourses. Fictional texts offer a space in which discourses are brought into contact, and in which their conflicts are explored and problematized. Chapman’s Bussy D’Ambois, Cornwallis’s essay, and perhaps most famously Shakespeare’s Hamlet, all revolve around ruptures and fractures in thinking about anger, re-
venge and the self. Because gender oppositions often signal these points of conflict, a
gender analysis provides a way into this dynamics of historical emotion discourses.

NOTES

1 N. Elias, The Civilizing Process, Volume 1: The History of Manners, translated by Ed-
2 See B. H. Rosenwein “Worrying About the Emotions in History,” Review Essay in Amer-
ican Historical Review 107:3 (2002), pp. 821-45, and see G. Schwerhoff, ‘Zivilisa-
tionsprozess und Geschichtswissenschaft. Norbert Elias’ Forschungsparadigma in histor-
3 See B. H. Rosenwein (ed.), Anger’s Past: The Social Uses of an Emotion in the Middle
4 From a biological-behaviourist and bioeconomic perspective, the tit-for-tat principle is
also seen to sustain social order. See M. Ridley, The Origins of Virtue (Harmondsworth:
5 F. T. Bowers, Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy 1587-1642 (Princeton: Princeton University
justice.’
6 W. I. Miller’s analysis of Icelandic sagas led him to conclude that honour and justice in
this genre are inextricably connected to a notion of reciprocity ‘by a foundational meta-
phor based on debt, obligation, and the exchange of gifts.’ W. I. Miller, ‘In Defense of
Revenge’, in B. A. Hanawalt and D. Wallace (eds) Medieval Crime and Social Control,
Medieval Cultures, vol. 16 (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press,
1999), pp. 76 and 81.
7 K. M. Brown, Bloodfeud in Scotland 1573-1625: Violence, Justice and Politics in an Ear-
stresses that in medieval England, blood revenge and the feud were not considered dis-
ruptive elements as we would consider them today. Rather, they were inseparable from
concepts of justice, order, equity and stability. R. Fletcher, Bloodfeud: Murder and Re-
8 K. Schoemaker, ‘Revenge as a ‘Medium Good’ in the Twelfth Century’, Law, Culture
10 Ibid., p. 15 and 14 resp.
13 Significant recent works in this field are: Embodiment and Environment in Early Mod-
ern England, edited by M.Floyd-Wilson and G. A. Sullivan, Jr. (Houndmills, Basingstoke:
Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); Paster, Rowe and Floyd-Wilson (eds), Reading the Early
Modern Passions; G. Kern Paster, Humoring the Body: Emotions and the Shakespearean
Stage (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004); M. Schoenfeldt, Bodies and Selves in
Early Modern England: Physiology and Inwardness in Spenser, Shakespeare, Herbert,
and Milton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); J. Sutton, Philosophy and
Memory Traces: Descartes to Connectionism (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,
1998); J. Vaught, Masculinity and Emotion in Early Modern English Literature (Aldershot:
Ashgate, 2008).
Schoenfeldt, *Bodies and Selves*, p. 17.


See also Jacqueline Miller, who writes that although the passions in early modern culture are associated with inwardness, they were thought to come into being through the imitation of external signs. ‘The Passion Signified: Imitation and the Construction of Emotions in Sidney and Wroth’, *Criticism* 43:3 (2001), pp. 407-21.

This has been argued, for example, by Stevie Simkin in her introduction to *Revenge Tragedy: Contemporary Critical Essays* (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), 2.

An exception is Jessica Winston, who reads the translations against the background of social, political, and literary culture. She argues that the play provided a vehicle for their individual authors ‘to participate in the political world they sought to serve’, but does not discuss the revenge theme of the plays in its historical political context (J. Winston, ‘Seneca in Early Elizabethan England’, *Renaissance Quarterly* 59:1 (2006), pp. 29-58.


These are the authors and the translations collected in *Seneca His Tenne Tragedies*: Jasper Heywood, *Troas* [*i.e.* *Troades*] (1559), *Thyestes* (1560) and *Hercules Furens* (1561); Alexander Neville, *Œdipus* (1563); Thomas Nuce, *Octavia* (1566); John Studley, *Agamemnon* (1566), *Medea* (1566), *Hercules Œtæus* [*i.e.* *Phaedra*] (1567); Thomas Newton, *Thebais* [*i.e.* *Phœnissæ*] (1581).


Agamemnon Act II, p. 107. Agamemnon was translated by John Studley in 1566. The Latin reads: ‘Maiora cruciant quam ut moras possim pati; / flammae medullas et cor exurunt meum’ (Loeb edition, vol. 2, 13), translated there as ‘Passions rack me too strong to endure delay; flames are burning my very marrow and my heart.’


Agamemnon Act II, pp. 139 and 141.

Tantalus, Pelops, Atreus and Thyestes, Aegisthus and Agamemnon, Orestes and Elektra.


J. W. Cunliffe, *The Influence of Senecan on Elizabethan Tragedy* (Hamden, CT Achron Books (1893) 1965), p. 50. The plot of Gorboduc, with its two brothers involved in civ-
il war, bears resemblance to Seneca’s Thebais. In that play, however, the mother, Jo-
casta, seeks to reconcile the warring brothers, instead of avenging one of them.
31 T. Sackville and T. Norton, Gorboduc or Ferrex and Porrex, edited by Irby B. Cau-
then (London: Edward Arnold, 1970), 5.2.29-33 and 5.2.240-43.
32 B. Travitsky, ‘Child Murder in English Renaissance Life and Drama’, Medieval and Re-
33 Travitsky, ‘Child Murder’, p. 64.
34 L. Woodbridge, Women and the English Renaissance: Literature and the Na-
ture of Womankind, 1540-1620 (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1986), pp. 312-
13.
35 A more subtle reading of the vindictive female characters in the Inns of Court plays is
given by Paul Raffield, who writes that the irrational woman was “perceived as a serious
threat to the order of the commonwealth, and could reasonably be said to represent the
antithesis of law and reason.” P. Raffield, Images and Cultures of Law in Early Modern
England: Justice and Political Power, 1558-1660 (Cambridge: Cambridge Univer-
36 J. W. Scott, ‘Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis’, The American Historical
38 On the use of the Historia Regum Brittaniae, see Brian Jay Corrigan, Introduction, The
40 Corrigan ed., Misfortunes, 1.2.39-47 (ll. 250-54 in Thyestes).
41 Ibid., 1.3.72-73.
42 Ibid., 1.3.77, Agamemnon l. 115.
43 Ibid., 1.3.150-54.
44 Ibid., 1.1.33-42; these lines appear in Thomas Hughes’s version of the play, not in the
version presented before court. Corrigan corroborates this parallel between Guene-
vora’s vindictiveness and civil unrest in the play when he argues that Guenovolta is not
a human character, as is Seneca’s Clytemnestra, but is illustrative of the state of Brit-
aín (Corrigan, Misfortunes, p. 23).
45 C. L. Barber, The Theme of Honour’s Tongue: A Study of Social Attitudes in the En-
glish Drama from Shakespeare to Dryden (Gothenburg: Acta Universitatis Gothoburgen-
46 Bowers, Revenge Tragedy, p. 145.
47 G. Chapman, The Revenge of Bussy D’Ambois, in Four Revenge Tragedies, edited by
48 Ibid., 2.1.154-71.
49 Ibid., 2.1.83-94.
50 G. Braden, Renaissance Tragedy and the Senecan Tradition: Anger’s Privilege (New
Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1985), 5-27; Andrew Shifflet, Stoicism, Politics,
and Literature in the Age of Milton: War and Peace Reconciled (Cambridge University
Press, 1998), pp 3-34.
51 A. Findlay, A Feminist Perspective on Renaissance Drama (Oxford: Blackwells, 1999),
p. 69. Findlay’s analysis does, however, take into account the possible effect of the per-
formance of vindictiveness and anger on members of the audience. This is an aspect that
is missing in my analysis here, and which I will take up in my current research project Moving Scenes (see author bio).

Abstract
Current debate in the cultural-historical study of the early modern emotions centres on the relation between the passions and the self. On the one hand, Michael Schoenfeldt (Bodies and Selves in Early Modern England, 1999) argued that notions of selfhood and identity took shape through the control of the passions in the early modern period. On the other hand, Gail Kern Paster in Humoring the Body: Emotions and the Shakespearean Stage (2004) stressed that humoral discourse emphasizes change and penetrability rather than identity and stasis. The body is not self-contained or self-controlled, but is in a constant state of flux with its environment, a condition that Paster calls ‘the humoral ecology’. If Schoenfeldt posits that identity is produced by the control of the passions, Paster argues that the historical self is not as stable as we tend to think: un-self-sameness in her view is the signal feature of early modern selfhood. The concept of gender plays an important role in the friction between these two models of emotions and selfhood. In Paster’s view, Schoenfeldt’s model ignores the realities of social and gender hierarchy in the early modern period. She writes that it presumes the existence of an ‘individual’ prior to biological and hierarchical classification.

Steenbergh argues that both Schoenfeldt and Paster’s concepts of the relation between emotions and the self exist in early modern culture, but they circulate in different institutional and political contexts. The category of gender plays a significant role in the conflicting discourses of emotion and self, a role that is more dynamic than the biological and hierarchical classification Paster suggests. Steenbergh’s chapter focuses on the representation of anger in early modern revenge tragedies. In some contexts, that emotion is represented as controllable and as contributing to a stable sense of masculine self. In other political contexts, however, anger is portrayed as uncontrolled and changeable, and associated with the feminine gender.

To analyse the role of gender in these historical views of emotions and the self, Steenbergh make use of Joan Scott’s theoretical model of gender as a category of historical analysis. In her model, gender is not primarily related to biological sex, but functions dynamically as a rhetorical tool in shaping relations of power. Steenbergh argues that when we read early modern revenge tragedies in the political context of the emerging nation state’s attempt to establish its monopoly on the right to punish and the resulting frictions with aristocratic traditions of blood revenge, we can see how gendered representations of anger function politically in early modern culture, and are not primarily related to biological hierarchies.
Author bio
Kristine Steenbergh is assistant professor in English Literature at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. She defended her PhD thesis ‘Wild Justice: The Dynamics of Gender and Revenge’ at Utrecht University in 2007. Her current research project ‘Moving Scenes: Theatre, Passions and the Public Sphere in Early Modern England’ examines the role of the theatre in thinking about the (political) effects of emotions on audiences in the context of the emerging public sphere in early modern England.