Introduction: The Actions and Delays of Gendered Temporalities

In the first scene of Middleton's *The Revenger's Tragedy* (1605–6), the opportune moment for Vindice to enact his revenge is figured as a disdainful and venereally diseased 'madam', or prostitute.[1] Having waited nine years for the right moment to punish the Duke for the murder of his beloved Gloriana, Vindice impatiently enquires of his brother and co-conspirator: 'Has that bald madam, Opportunity | Yet thought upon's?' (1.1.55–56).[2] This female personification of the temporal concept of opportunity as sexually available yet simultaneously elusive and potentially destructive was common in the dramatic and emblematic culture of the period: seizing the moment was often imagined as seizing the fleeing or fleeting woman on the early modern stage and in early modern visual culture (see Figures 1 and 2).[3] I begin this book with Vindice's evocation of Opportunity as a sexual temptress, and will return to it later in this introduction, because like many images and moments from the drama of England in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, it brings temporal concepts and gendered identities into conversation with each other in complex and revealing ways. This book argues that attending to time through the lens of gender, and gender through the lens of time, is crucial if we are to further develop our understanding of the early modern cultural construction of both, as well as our understanding of the sexual identities and behaviours that are often foundational to those constructions. It scrutinises the intersection of time and gender, and the identities and character types defined in relation to and as a result of that intersection, in both early modern culture and on the early modern stage.

With Gloriana's skull in hand, Vindice watches the Duke and his family process across the stage by torchlight at the beginning of *The Revenger's Tragedy*. '[S]ighing o'er death's visor', he ruminates on the lost beauty of his 'betrothed lady', and on the challenge of identifying the right moment in the future – the right 'day, hour, minute' – in which to take action and achieve his revenge against the 'royal lecher' who poisoned her when she

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Figure 1   George Wither, 'Occasions-past', *A collection of emblemes* (London, 1635), B2v
RB 601390, The Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

rejected his sexual advances (1.1.16, 49, 41, 1). The extended period of time he has waited to enact his vengeance is made clear by the time-ravaged 'ragged imperfections' of his prized death's head, which links him via parodic hyperbole to that most famously dithering and feminised of revengers, Hamlet (1.1.18). Although he is impatient for the time to be right for his vengeful plot to commence (he intends 'speedy travel' and will 'quickly turn into another'), Vindice is also presented as trapped in a past

Figure 2   Geffrey Whitney, '*In occasionem*', *A choice of emblems* (London, 1586), Z3r
RB 79714, The Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

he longs to return to; he is torn between action and inaction, waiting and not waiting (1.1.117, 136). Like all revengers, he is tied to stagnating memories of past injuries, whilst at the same time he is focused on the attainment of revenge in the future. This temporal discord is a conventional element of revenge tragedies, but also of the early modern stage and of early modern culture more broadly, and, as this book will argue, it is foundational to conceptualisations of both gender and time in the period.

During the opening scene of *The Revenger's Tragedy*, Vindice reveals his own oscillation between a retrograde temporality of mourning, as represented by the skull, and a future-focused ambition to murder the Duke, represented by Opportunity, both of which are central to his revenging quest. By conjuring the figure of Opportunity he also creates the first of many metatheatrical moments in the play: he seems to be enquiring about both his brother's and the audience's readiness for the play itself to begin, as much as he is considering whether now is the right moment for his quest

for revenge to commence. Moments such as this, when the temporality of the theatrical event itself and the temporality of the play world gain access to one another, are among the most productive within the scope of the analysis carried out in this book. We are embedded in the world of the play and in that moment with our protagonist, our 'man o' the time' (1.1.94). Yet simultaneously, this opening scene distances us from the Italian court, by drawing attention to the context of revenge tragedy and its conventional temporal mode of delay: Vindice's parodic nine-year lead-time, as represented by Gloriana's skull. This meta moment, in fact, potentially forces us to think about the temporal experience of watching the play itself, as well as the generic conventions of revenge and of theatrical performance more broadly. At the start of this play, we are led to wonder whether we will we be pleased with the denouement Vindice's vengeful ambition promises, or whether that dramatic satisfaction will elude us, as it has eluded him for nine years. In this opening scene, the actor playing Vindice works hard to secure the audience's attention, asking them to position themselves in his present moment through the construction of a possible future and his remembrance of a tragic past. The audience is asked to reflect on Vindice's fraught temporality through their own similarly fraught experience of the theatrical event; wavering, as all audiences must, between past and future, cause and effect, beginnings and endings.

The supposed binary opposition that defines Vindice's temporality – the patient inaction of his remembrance and impatient actions through which he drives towards an imagined future – in fact works to undo itself: it is in constant flux and under continual strain on the early modern stage and in early modern society. Identifying and examining the various fluctuations of that temporal opposition, and exploring how its instability is used to construct and deconstruct ideas about gendered behaviour, is at the heart of the readings of early modern drama and culture presented in this book. Three early modern dramatic character types in particular – patient wives, prodigals, and revengers such as Vindice – are presented on the early modern stage in ways that connect their gender to their behaviour through time. This study focuses on broadening our understanding of these characters and of the early modern discourses of patience, prodigality, and revenge in which they are embedded, in order to acknowledge the variety of ways in which the gendered self is also always a temporal self, and vice versa. In this introduction, I will first set out the critical and conceptual foundations of this book, explaining how scholarly work which has focused on time, gender and performance has helped me to develop an understanding of this opposition of action and inaction which I argue is

central to both the early modern temporal consciousness and the early modern construction of gendered identity. In the second part of the introduction, I go on to examine some of the ways in which early modern thinking about time and about gender developed in relation to classical ideas, religious and medical discourse, and conduct literature, all of which worked both to define and destabilise a conflicted binary opposition between waiting and not waiting. I then return to *The Revenger's Tragedy* to illustrate the range of ways in which this play engaged with this supposed binary opposition, suggesting that its negotiation and complication was central to early modern performances of both gender and time on the early modern stage.

Critical and Conceptual Foundations

Scholarly work across disciplines has focused on the multiple discourses that have shaped the way gender was conceptualised in the early modern period. Cultural historians and literary scholars have long acknowledged a variety of social relations (familial structures, service, inheritance, friendship, sex), systems of knowledge (religion, emotion, medicine) and frames of representation (language, performance, song, conduct literature) that worked to form gender categories in England in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.[4] This work has, in a range of ways, transformed our understanding of early modern society and the early modern self. Until relatively recently, however, early modern literary scholars have neglected the fact that, as Jonathan Gil Harris argues, temporality is a 'culturally variable production' that shapes social identities in the early modern period and beyond.[5] As Jeffrey J. Cohen suggests, 'time has been doomed to the vast realm of that which is unthought' because it 'seems so obvious', in the same way that gender seemed 'obvious' until relatively recently.[6] The moments from *The Revenger's Tragedy* that I consider in this introduction, and the plays I offer readings of throughout this book, draw our attention to time as a socially constructed category of selfhood. In recent years, temporal scholars working across a range of disciplines have begun to recognise the impact that discourses of religion, philosophy, cosmology, history, agriculture, technology and economics had on the early modern understanding of time, particularly in relation to ontological concepts of identity.[7] This book brings together these two fields of work to explore the ways in which gender is used to define time, and time is used to define gender, on that most temporal and gendered of spaces: the early modern stage.

As Harris suggests: 'Once upon a time, Time was all the rage in Shakespeare scholarship'.[8] The kind of scholarship Harris is here describing, published in the 1960s, 70s and 80s, presented time 'with a capital T', and tended to proffer a reductive and universalising picture of a homogenised and teleologically structured early modern temporal consciousness.[9] The mid- to late twentieth century saw the production of multiple books on the subject of 'Time' in Shakespeare, and in early modern culture more broadly, but none of these texts challenged the homogeneity of the critical notion of early modern temporality in order to explore the variety of ways in which different cultural groups experienced time and constructed themselves as temporal entities in early modern England.[10] Furthermore, although many of these studies of temporality recognise that broad ideological change affected the construction of time in the early modern period, they often consider 'Renaissance man' to be involved in a fraught relationship with temporality which distinguishes him from his medieval forebears, an oversimplification to which I will return later in this introduction.

In the last two decades of the twentieth century, new directions in early modern literary scholarship did little to address this reductive critical assessment of temporality in early modern England. New Historicism and Cultural Materialism tended to focus on local and specific constructions of space, rather than what they saw as essentialist and reductive constructions of time.[11] These critical approaches rightly rejected the universalising impulse that drove much of the early modern temporal criticism of the 60s and 70s, but in doing so they effectively sidelined considerations of temporality altogether. Postmodernism's focus on the spatial and its neglect of the temporal also meant that scholarship on time suffered in the last quarter of the twentieth century.[12] There has, however, been a resurgence of interest in time and its relation to cultural identity in recent years, through work which has rejected the linear and teleologically structured chrononormativity of earlier engagements with temporality. Scholars have drawn on the temporal philosophies of Latour, Serres, Deleuze and Guattari, all of whom reject the temporal binary of past and future to focus on the antigeneaological experience of time as folded or crumpled (Latour), as polychronic or multitemporal (Serres) and as matrixed rhizome (Deleuze and Guattari).[13] Increasing numbers of critics are exploring the literature and society of the early modern period in relation to multiple temporalities, and considering a variety of different kinds of temporal consciousness in relation to a wide range of social identities.[14]

Temporality has once again come to the fore of Shakespeare and early modern studies, and exciting work in this field has increasingly drawn attention to the instability of early modern pasts, presents and futures, an instability that highlights the unsustainable nature of the binary opposition between active linear progression and delaying passive endurance. For example, J. K. Barret has challenged the accepted wisdom that historical recuperation was key to the early moderns, as well as the belief that a Christian end-time was central to temporal consciousness, arguing for a sense of 'anticipatory nostalgia', which denies the binary opposition of past/future and 'provides a vision of the future that is uniquely open-ended and non-apocalyptic'.[15] Work by Chloe Porter similarly explores the early modern paradoxical rejection of and commitment to the achievement of endings, whereas studies by Lucy Munro and Lukas Lammers have complicated our ideas about the early modern construction of the past.[16] Others, such as Jonathan Gil Harris and Tiffany Stern, are interested in the conflicted nature of the present moment, which for Harris, drawing on Serres, is polychronic or multitemporal, and for Stern, analysing the temporality of the theatrical experience itself, is inaccurately measured and marked, and often, as a result, obscure.[17] Some critical work, particularly in the field of Queer Studies, has specifically considered how notions of time worked to shape early modern concepts of gender and vice versa, and this book has been influenced by a handful of key studies which have begun to bring these two fields together.[18] These works are all concerned with complicating our sense of the early modern temporal consciousness as operating beyond the binary of past and future/linear action and retrograde delay, and with recognising the important part temporality plays in defining subject positions in the literature of the period. As such, they have enabled me to develop my own focus on the complex push and pull between action and inaction that I argue in this book is foundational to both early modern temporal concepts and gender politics.

Critics have long considered the ways in which the reading and staging of early modern drama draws our attention to the performative construction of gender. This book recognises that early modern drama also asks us to think about the performative nature of temporality, which, like gender, is both historically and culturally specific. Temporality is the currency of the theatre in terms of both audience and actor experience and dramatic narrative structure, and plays from the period employ temporal imagery in order to present characters of different genders, social statuses, or national identities moving through and responding to time in different ways. Therefore the theatre of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries

is perhaps the most dynamic site for early modern society's exploration of its own constructions of both time and gender. The experience of play-going is fundamentally temporal at the same time as it complicates what we might think of as the inherently linear experience of temporality. The theatre industry was born of and is reliant upon the individual's desire to return. Visiting an early modern theatre was a regular occurrence for large numbers of early modern Londoners, and theatre-going was, for many, a repetitive action which defined, through its regularity, the steady onward march of days, weeks, months and years. However, going to the theatre also extracted those audience members from the linear progression of their quotidian lives: the time within the theatre was, in many ways, a time outside of time itself. Theatrical time is in this sense fleeting and imper-manent, a grasped, unrepeatable instant; complex, uneven and difficult to define. Yet within the narrative structures of these ephemeral perfor-mances, actors and audience members can present and experience longev-ity and, to some extent, permanence; these plays present times past, times to come and enduring presents in ways which challenge notions of temporal flow and teleology. The temporal frameworks of the play worlds that are presented on stage are also often complicated and confusing. Therefore, both experiential and narrative dramatic time is malleable: years of plot are condensed, and moments of reaction are lengthened, and, as a result, time is both stretched and compressed by and for actors, characters and audience members alike.[19]

Early modern definitions of delay and of action, temporal concepts that are central to every chapter of this book, allow me to begin thinking about the ways in which both the urge to advance with agency through time and the necessity of passive endurance in time are sustained alongside each other on the early modern stage and beyond. In early modern lexicons, delay is defined as both a prevention of action and a profusion of action. It is both, as defined in Randle Cotgrave's *A dictionarie of the French and English tongues*, 'a stay, lingering, protraction [. . .] deferring or driuing off; a pause, a space, an intermission', and is used to describe a 'dilation, enlarging or ouerspreading'.[20] Delay is too much and too little all at once. Similarly, an 'action' itself is defined as a 'deed, exploit, enterprise' and yet it is also used to describe something which 'plunges, or hinders from proceeding'.[21] Actions can work to delay and delays can be defined by action. The deconstruction of the binary opposition between action and delay in the temporal discourse of the period, and particularly in relation to the concepts of patience, prodigality and revenge, is central to the argu-ments this book presents. By exploring the construction of gender through

the dual temporalities of action and delay and the tensions they produce – both forward- and backward-looking, both waiting and not waiting – this study gives us another way to understand the inherent malleability of temporal concepts and gendered identities as they are negotiated in early modern society and on the early modern stage.

In the chapters that follow, I engage with two theoretical concepts that negotiate and complicate the linearity of pasts, presents and futures, and the supposed binary opposition between action and delay. The first of these is Jacques Derrida's *différance*. Derrida defines *différance* as follows:

> The verb 'to differ' [*différer*] seems to differ from itself. On the one hand, it indicates difference as distinction, inequality, or discernibility; on the other, it expresses the interposition of delay, the interval of a *spacing* and *tempo-ralizing* that puts off until 'later' what is presently denied, the possible that is presently impossible. Sometimes the *different* and sometimes the *deferred* correspond [in French] to the verb 'to differ'.[22]

The French verb *différer* can mean both to differ in kind and to defer in time, and it is this dual meaning which Derrida identifies through *différance*. *Différance* exemplifies the way in which systems of signification such as language perpetually defer meaning through differences of meaning. As Derrida suggests,

> [t]he sign represents the present in its absence [. . .] The sign, in this sense, is deferred presence [. . .] the circulation of signs defers the moment in which we can encounter the thing itself, make it ours, consume or expend it, touch it, see it, intuit its presence.[23]

This deferral is infinite: meaning is always postponed in language and finite signification is perpetually delayed through the 'systematic play of differences'.[24] Derrida suggests that *différance* 'is not simply active (any more than it is a subjective accomplishment); it rather indicates the middle voice, it precedes and sets up the opposition between passivity and activity'.[25] Through *différance*, Derrida deconstructs the binary opposition between action and the delay of action, and it is this that is of central importance to my understanding of early modern temporalities and genders. The impossibility of reaching a conclusive 'meaning' or ending is also the defining temporal position of an early modern Christian society anticipating the perpetually deferred Day of Judgement. Thus, Derrida's *différance* resonates throughout this book in that it describes culture and language as circumscribed by the interplay of action and delay. It is this interplay that contributes to the construction and presentation of gendered identities and temporal modes of being on the early modern stage.

The second theoretical concept which has been crucial to the shaping of this book is Judith Butler's definition of gender as a '*corporeal style*, an "act", as it were, which is both intentional and performative'.[26] This proposition is central to *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, in which Butler suggests that the performance of gender is reliant upon the '*stylized repetition of acts*'.[27] It is through repetition that gendered identity is constituted as a '*social temporality*':

> If the ground of gender identity is the stylized repetition of acts through time and not a seemingly seamless identity, then the spatial metaphor of a 'ground' will be displaced and revealed as a stylized configuration, indeed, a gendered corporealization of time. The abiding gendered self will then be shown to be structured by repeated acts that seek to approximate the ideal of a substantial ground of identity, but which, in their occasional *dis*continuity, reveal the temporal and contingent groundlessness of this 'ground'.[28]

Time and gender for Butler are inextricably linked, and her argument for the eternal deferral of any kind of definitively gendered subjectivity is founded on what she considers to be the necessarily repetitive nature of gendered actions of 'self'. Meaning for Derrida and gender for Butler are both, therefore, perpetually delayed; neither can, or should, be finalised. It is through the actions of repetition that these delays are born, and it is this paradoxical interaction between action and inaction, between waiting and not waiting, which is foundational to this book.

The Early Modern Temporal Consciousness

Classical and Biblical Influences

'[O]f that day and *that* hour knoweth no man'.[29]

Classical and religious discourses in the early modern period suggest that a constant fluctuation between the drive to act and the need to delay action in the face of time either as destroyer (*tempus edax rerum*) or as revealer of truth (*veritas filia temporis*) was central to temporal consciousness and identity formation in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The Greeks, whose temporal philosophies were key to early modern considerations of time, like other non-Judaeo-Christians of the ancient Mediterranean, considered the world to be 'moving aimlessly in a circle'.[30] Historical events were meaningless, unconnected and eternally repeated without beginning or end. Greek thinkers believed in the notion of the 'Great Year', a period of ten thousand to thirty thousand years that was repeated