The Role of Memory in revenge tragedy drama
of the early modern period
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“...and though one must be extremely careful to distinguish between art proper and the art of memory, which is an invisible art, yet their frontiers must surely have overlapped. For when people were being taught to practice the formation of images for remembering, it is difficult to suppose that such inner images might not sometimes have found their way into outer expression.” Dame Frances Yates, The Art of Memory.

“The teaching of rhetoric and the method of the transmission of knowledge” occupied a predominant position in the curricula of English schools and universities between the mid-sixteenth and mid-seventeenth century.” Paolo Rossi, Claire Janszynski.

This project addresses the role that memory plays in revenge tragedy drama of the early modern period. The project asserts the primary cultural importance of memory studies in this period, and examines how contemporary theatre (and more specifically the genre of revenge tragedy) appropriated this subject. The main aims and objectives of this project are to:

• Show that revenge tragedy playwrights adopted a formal approach to mnemonic studies in their drama through the repetition of non-linguistic sounds, spectator and spoken patterns or certain phrases.

• Explain how such repetition can be traced to medieval and early modern memory treatises and highlight the contemporary importance of this subject.

• Explain why revenge tragedy plays specifically are preoccupied with the topic of memory.

• Assert the interrelationship between aural, visual and verbal analogues in theatrical practice and similar sounds, spectators and words in cultural practices outside the theatre.

• Explain how such practices are foundational to the subtext of the individual tragic action and religious authority. Such practices assert prudential behaviour in the individual; it is the existence of such prudence which is a central theme of revenge drama.

• Explain how such conceptions of prudence can be traced to medieval studies of the Ars Memorativa and how this finds greatest expression in the Arte Memorativa of later medieval and early modern painting, sculpture and literature.

• Explain why revenge tragedies can be seen to represent a merging of various strands of early modern thought: from a reconfiguration of medieval mnemonic practice to an illumination of the modes of social institutions, from a fascination with the representations of the past in the present to contemporary humanist ideology and erudite writings.