

# Vengeance and its consequences in the tragedy

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“ Hamlet challenges the conventions of revenge tragedy by deviating from them” (Sydney Bolt, 1985)

The typical Elizabethan theatre-goer attending the first production of ‘ Hamlet’ in 1604 would have had clear expectations. The conventions of Elizabethan revenge tragedy were already well established, drawn initially from the Senecan model of revenge tragedy, which combined bloody and treacherous actions with sententious moralising, and later developed by Thomas Kyd, who established the ‘ Kydian Formula.’ This framework, comprising all the typical elements of an Elizabethan revenge tragedy, appeared in ‘ The Spanish Tragedy’ and begins with a murder, committed by a subsequent King, who is thus beyond the reach of the law. The victim’s ghost, returning from Purgatory to command his son to avenge his death, functions as a Chorus in the course of the play. His revenging son pretends to be mad and presents a dumb-show in court in order that he may be confident of the murderer’s blame. The play, full of melodrama and rhetoric, ends with the death of almost all the characters, including the murderer, revenger, and revenger’s accomplice. In ‘ Hamlet,’ Shakespeare ensures that he adheres to all of Kyd’s salient elements. Therefore, Sydney Bolt’s contention that Shakespeare deviates from the conventions of revenge tragedy is highly disputable. In fact, Shakespeare transcends these conventions, producing something far more powerful than a traditional revenge tragedy. However, by building upon the structure of a conventional revenge tragedy to create what emerges as more of a psychological drama, the playwright instead focuses on the tortured personality of the protagonist and his motivation, rather than the act of revenge itself.

Shakespeare uses Hamlet's soliloquies to convey to the audience his instability and depression. In Act I, scene ii he exclaims 'O, that this too too sullied flesh would melt,' because he sees all the ways of ordinary life simply as 'weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable.' Shakespeare uses the image of an 'unweeded garden' as a metaphor for Hamlet's own existence, full of worthless things that in their coarseness are choking his life. From this torturous despair and self-doubt stems his indecision, even concerning his own hopelessness; 'To be, or not to be – that is the question.' Hamlet's dilemma as to whether he should end his life or not is followed by a sequence of rhetorical questions:

Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer

The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,

Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,

And by opposing end them?

These emphasise further his philosophising about suicide and his uncertainty about his situation, and appear almost as if Hamlet is conducting a rhetorical exercise in a matter of philosophical debate. Significantly, Hamlet does not use the first person 'I' but abstracts the speech further with the accumulation of infinitives; 'To be', 'To die', 'to sleep'. Whilst Hamlet clearly seems to be talking about suicide, the impersonal impression this removes creates actually distances the speech further from the character and the audience, and the metatheatrical effect prompts not only the individual Hamlet but also the audience to consider the nature of life and reality.

Indeed, there seems to be very little consistency in Hamlet's life; his father has been murdered, and his own mother has married the murderer only a short time after the funeral, and his lover, Ophelia, has 'denied him access', at her father's prompting. The fact that both the two women in his life seem to have rejected him obviously fuels his ardent misogyny: 'Frailty, thy name is woman!' (I, ii). What is clear is Shakespeare's concentration on the nature of the protagonist, rather than on the subject of revenge, as in Act III Scene I the tension between Hamlet and Ophelia is obvious from the outset. She addresses him as 'Good my lord', but what dominates the conversation is Hamlet talking about his loss of faith in women. Abandoning verse for savage prose, Hamlet's disjointed speech communicates to the audience that he believes all women (significantly, he uses the address 'yourselves') are treacherous deceivers that 'jig', 'amble', 'lisp', 'nickname God's creatures' and make their 'wantonness' their 'ignorance'. Hamlet later expands further upon his hatred of women when he confronts Gertrude with her sins; 'As kill a king, and marry with his brother.' Hamlet attacks the Queen:

It will but skin and film the ulcerous place,

Whilst rank corruption, mining all within,

Infects unseen.

With his violent and repellent imagery of what he considers incest, he not only greatly upsets his mother ('O Hamlet, thou hast cleft my heart in twain') but, by implication, also condemns all of womankind. Shakespeare therefore inserts a psychological aspect into the play, and whilst the typical

revenger places himself outside the normal moral order of things, becoming more isolated as the play progresses, such vociferous debate about something not immediately related to the subject of revenge is unusual.

In Act I Scene VI, Hamlet talks to Horatio and scorns not only Claudius but also the Danish nation for its ' custom' of holding grand ' feasts'. He disapproves of the Danes' way of celebrating because he considers this one flaw to let the country down, giving it a bad reputation. Hamlet compares this idea to a man, saying that if a man is born out of nature he will have a fundamental flaw that will bring him down as it gradually develops and increases. With hindsight, the audience realises that Hamlet is actually describing himself when talks about this man. In keeping with the traditions of revenge tragedy, Shakespeare provides Hamlet with one fatal flaw, but ironically the flaw is an inability to fulfil what his father's ghost asks him to do: for the revenge hero not to take revenge would have been a considerable surprised for the Elizabethan audience. In Act III Scene III, Hamlet is presented with a perfect opportunity to kill Claudius, when he finds him apparently praying in the chapel (' Now I might do it pat') but he eventually decides not to do so, a decision perhaps borne out of his scholarship. The student Hamlet's fatal flaw stems from his consideration of the consequences of committing the murder now: ' that would be scanned'. The belief that if killed when praying, Claudius would go straight to heaven and not to purgatory like Old Hamlet would certainly be the reason why Hamlet chooses not to kill Claudius in the chapel. However, if Hamlet had been the conventional revenger his Elizabethan audience expected, he

would not have stopped long enough to fully comprehend the consequences of his actions; he would have killed Claudius as soon as he got the chance.

Hamlet's awareness of his fatal flaw makes him even less the conventional revenge hero; in his soliloquy in Act III Scene I, he resolves

' Thus conscience does make cowards of us all'. He calls himself a

' rogue and peasant slave' that whilst the Player is distressed simply over acting in the dumb show (' And all for nothing!') he himself is unable even to conjure up the same emotion. He speculates:

What would he do,

Had he the motive and the cue for passion

That I have? He would drown the stage with tears

Hamlet feels guilty for the fact that his inability is stopping him doing this, calling himself ' unpregnant of my cause.' He questions himself; ' Am I a coward?', interjecting his soliloquy, already punctuated with exclamations such as ' O vengeance!', with broken sentences and verse that dissolves into the single syllable line ' Ha!' His concentration on his own failure is also shown through the language itself. Whilst his first lines, focusing on the player, as emotionally charged – ' monstrous', ' passion' and ' Tears' – they are nonetheless controlled, rooted in the regular structure of the iambic pentameter verse. However, as soon as he begins to consider himself, the organisation of Hamlet's speech begins to break down again; ' Yet I' disrupts the regular rhythm of the lines. Despite the maintenance of regular heroic

verse, Shakespeare punctuates the flow of Hamlet's speech with semi-colons or full stops, colloquialism ('I should 'a' fatted'), and short questions and exclamations ('Am I a coward?', 'Who does me this?', 'Bloody, bawdy villain!'). Whilst Hamlet does violently curse Claudias, his diatribe, that has by the end lost any order or shape, focuses on self-hatred: 'A dull and muddy-mettled rascal' and 'Why, what an ass am I!' Here, his explosive insults are ironic; although Hamlet is criticising his lack of any real passion, he is actually exhibiting ardent emotion, but the audience is forced to acknowledge that even his more restrained comparison between real and theatrical passion at the beginning of his soliloquy actually achieved nothing.

Hamlet's inner turmoil at his inability to act is made more powerful as Shakespeare juxtaposes his protagonist's situation with two similar ones, in which the heroes are actively seeking revenge. In Poland, Fortinbras fights to recapture a tiny, worthless 'little patch of ground' and Hamlet compares himself unfavourably and accuses himself (quite correctly) 'Of thinking too precisely on th' event'. He believes it a mark of greatness to 'find quarrel in a straw' (over a trivial matter) 'When honour's at the stake' and realises that his own honour is far more at stake than that of Fortinbras, and yet he is willing to 'let all sleep'. Fortinbras' activity seems to spur Hamlet to act - 'My thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth!' - but there is no more evidence in the play after this point to suggest he is plotting to kill the king than there was before.

The second foil that Shakespeare lays for Hamlet is Laertes. After Hamlet killed his father, Polonius, and was indirectly responsible for Ophelia's

madness ('desperate terms') and death, Laertes desperately seeks revenge, spurred on by the Machiavellian Claudius. Laertes' fury, initially directed at Claudius, when he hears of his father's death, prompts him to immediately rush back to Denmark in order to avenge the terrible insult to his honour. Shakespeare presents us with the powerful symbolism of 'The ocean, overpeering of his list' – the rising tide of Laertes' 'rabble' quickly covering the seashore, and continues the sense of tense urgency with Laertes' aggressive dialogue: 'That drop of blood that's calm proclaims me bastard'. . Laertes refuses to be calmed, protesting that to do so would deny his status as his father's son. When Claudius relates to Laertes his desire for Hamlet to be killed by 'accident' to ensure Gertrude does not suspect anything, Laertes immediately proffers himself as the 'organ' of Hamlet's death. Although Claudius manipulates him, Laertes plays an active rôle in formulating the conspiracy, himself conceiving the idea to poison the already 'unbated' sword; so strong is his desire for revenge that he would be willing to kill a childhood friend. However, Hamlet, the unconventional revenge hero, cannot find it in himself to kill the man who murdered his father and then immediately married his mother! When Claudius questions him as to what he would be prepared to do to avenge his father's death, Laertes' response is violent and unequivocal: 'To cut his throat I' the church'. This ironically parallels Hamlet's earlier inability to kill Claudius in church in Act III, scene iii.

Laertes' aggressive response shows him to be a man of action, and thus a mediaeval man. However, Hamlet's main problem in this play is that Shakespeare casts him as a thinker – a Renaissance man. It is entirely



consistent with Shakespeare's approach in transcending the elements of revenge tragedy that rather than keeping Hamlet as a conventional revenger in the Senecan mould, he sculpts a contemporary figure. Shakespeare presents the audience with a protagonist who, far from a conventional Roman Catholic, is actually part of a new breed of man. Hamlet goes to university in Wittenberg in Germany, the birthplace of Luther's Protestantism and the Reformation. Shakespeare also crafts a humanist quality in Hamlet, with his thirst for knowledge and a pre-occupation with the complexity of man's personality ('What a piece of work is man'). By creating a university-educated Renaissance Humanist, Shakespeare sets Hamlet apart from other revenge heroes such as Hieronimo in 'The Spanish Tragedy' and Laertes, emphasising Hamlet's unconventionality.

Some critics argue that the final scene of the play sees Hamlet transformed into the conventional revenge hero that he always aspired to be, by killing Claudius in a fit of passion. Certainly the final scene where the stage is littered with bodies entirely complies with the traditions of conventional revenge tragedy. The Elizabethan audience would have gone home satisfied! However, in Hamlet, the question of how to act is affected not only by rational considerations, such as the need for certainty, but also by emotional, ethical, and psychological factors. Hamlet himself appears to distrust the idea that it's even possible to act in a controlled, purposeful way, and when he does eventually act, it is ironically in a blind recklessness, rather than a pre-meditated way. In his speech 'O what a rogue and peasant slave am I', he berates himself for not being able to reasonably express this grief and anger in action, but Shakespeare implies that it is precisely by not thinking

so much about 'action' in the abstract that the other characters are able to fulfil their action, since they are less troubled about the possibility of acting ineffectively. The indecisiveness Hamlet exhibits, and his consequent failure to act appropriately, is certainly central to the plot, but the play becomes a more internal quest for vengeful action as Hamlet is consumed with moral questionings and self-lacerating analysis.

Shakespeare's treatment of revenge in Hamlet is unusual because whilst revenge is clearly the subject matter fuelling the plot, it is only a subsidiary issue. Far more central is Hamlet's inability to take revenge, coupled with his instability, indecision and misogyny. Shakespeare creates a conventionally structured revenge tragedy but ensures that his hero is not trapped within these confines. By making use of theatrical conventions such as soliloquies and asides, Shakespeare not only builds a relationship between the hero and the audience, but also allows the audience to see into the mind of the hero and understand what he is feeling. By erecting a psychological drama within the structure of revenge tragedy, Shakespeare ensures that the essence of the play is not revenge in itself, but the psychological and emotional study of Hamlet's disturbed character. Shakespeare thus transcends the conventions of revenge tragedy, rather than deviating from them as Sydney Bolt argues.