

**WE ARE ARRANT KNAVES ALL:
NOTES ON REVENGE AND JUSTICE IN SHAKESPEARE PLAYS**

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ABSTRACT: Shakespeare treatment of the revenge theme adds substantial complexity to a genre greatly appreciated by Elizabethans. In *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, for example, characters are troubled not only by the usual tension between Christian and honor ethics which were recurrent in such plays. They are disturbed by a feeling that the social system which gives sense to this tension is itself crumbling, making both action and inaction meaningless. Hamlet's soul-searching and Malcolm's discourse to Macduff echo a key Reform theological which posited the quintessential corruption of human nature. This paper discusses the dramatic implications of this new, controversial theological concept, on Shakespeare's presentation of revenge.

KEY-WORDS: Shakespeare; revenge plays; Luther; Hamlet; Macbeth.

Revenge plays in Elizabethan England drew much of their dramatic force from the clash they staged between two normative moral codes: the *honor ethics* inherited from medieval times, linked to time immemorial, and the *Christian ethics* which had for centuries shaped every institution of Western Christendom.

The ethics of honor was elemental to the very notion of what it meant to be the social elite. It demanded the avenging of the slightest affront to the name of a noble family. Homeric narrative, Roman history and medieval lore provided plenty of examples of the how necessary it was for a true noble person to be jealous of his reputation. Such requirement made the royal courts the stage of endless rifts about the minutest point of

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precedence or token of social prestige. Iago's bitterness against Othello was readily understood by Shakespearean audiences, who were familiar with courtiers' grievances over preferment.

Lawrence Stone, in his classic *The Crisis of Aristocracy*, stresses the centrality of the honor ethics for Elizabethan courtiers:

One of the most characteristic features of the age was its hyper-sensitivity upon the overriding importance of reputation. [...] The extraordinary seventeenth-century code of the duel, under which men felt impelled to risk their lives to avenge a casual word, was merely a cancerous growth from the same cells (1967, p. 25).

Noblemen who were insulted did not have the option of pardoning the insolent offender, even if they might want to do so for some personal reason. The public nature which is constitutive of insults – they are a form of refusing recognition to one's social status – made forgiveness impossible. Losing face was a supremely grave matter, full of very practical consequences in a society where access to offices and wealth was intimately linked to public prestige. Thus, lest their status as nobility be imperiled, courtiers were constrained to seek redress even from those they might believe had had no actual intention of affronting them.

As Castiglione suggests, with characteristic prudence, honor demands actions which would be deemed foolish or hasty in other areas:

Nor should he [the good courtier] be too ready to fight except when honour demands it; for besides the great danger that the uncertainty of fate entails, he who rushes into such affairs recklessly and without urgent cause, merits the severest censure even though he be successful. But when he finds himself so far engaged that he cannot withdraw without reproach, he ought to be most deliberate, both in the preliminaries to the duel and in the duel itself, and always show readiness and daring (1967, p. 62).

Christian meekness and fraternal love were not virtues for one involved in heated battles to save one's reputation and increase one's chance of preferment by being able to “bolster up his inherent worth with skill and cunning” (Castiglione, 1967, p. 141).

Rather paradoxically, if noblemen were required to be always ready to violence *when honor demands it*, they were simultaneously, and equally forcefully, supposed to act as good Christians and forgo any thought of reprisal against those who insulted them. The command expressed in Luke VI, 29 (“And unto him that smiteth thee on the one cheek offer also the other; and him that taketh away thy cloke forbid not to take thy coat also”) was so closely linked to what it meant to *follow Christ* that it became socially very costly to blatantly ignore it. Saint Francis’s humility was greatly admired even in Protestant England and the widespread practice of public penance bespoke the belief that exposing oneself to public humiliation was a powerful instrument for spiritual cleansing and improvement.

However, offering the other cheek, displaying Franciscan humility, or accepting being humiliated in public, was exactly what one could *not* do if the status and reputation of one’s lineage were to go untarnished. The nobility, arguably more than any other class at the time, was at great pains to live the paradox of simultaneously seeking a *kingdom which is not of this world*² and jockeying for the much needed patronage by the earthly monarch.

Elizabethan courtiers were thus trapped between the injunction to avenge and the commandment to forgive. Centuries of mingling of secular and spiritual power had created an uneasy coexistence of these two powerful role-models: the boastful and proud Achilles of the Illiad and the meek and humble Christ of the Gospels. In spite of their acute (if unstated) inner contradiction, the images of the pious knights, the peaceful warrior and the saintly king were commonplace in religious and political discourses of the time (Kantorowicz, 1957).

² See King James Bible, John, 18:36 – “Jesus answered, My kingdom is not of this world: if my kingdom were of this world, then would my servants fight, that I should not be delivered to the Jews: but now is my kingdom not from hence”.

The oxymoron *wild justice* which Francis Bacon used to refer to revenge bespoke this social perception of the insurmountable ambiguity of avenging offences. “Revenge is a kinde of Wilde Justice;” says Bacon in his 1625 treatise on the topic “which the more Mans nature runs to, the more ought Law to weed it out. For as for the first Wrong, it doth but offend the Law; but the Revenge of that wrong, putteth the Law out of Office” (Bacon *apud* Callaghan, 2007, p. 39). Revenge was thus at the same time *wild* (that is to say, at odds with reason and civilized mores) and *justice* (that is to say, attuned to a virtue desired by reason and civilized polities).

The theme of revenge expanded on the Christian paradox by establishing a tension between Nature and Law, and by bringing to the fore the uneasy coexistence between the impulses of the natural man, the rationality of the political subject and the self-denial of the Church faithful: it seems hardly surprising that Elizabethans audiences were fascinated by this genre.

In Shakespeare tragedies, however, this thug-of-war between equally cogent values gets further complicated by the Bard’s constant, if sober, *memento* of human wickedness which calls into question the very substance of the two types of ethics at odds in Elizabethan society. In Shakespeare’s version of the revenge theme, both Christian piety and noble pride seem to function primarily as a facade for the rather un-Christian, vile reasons characters actually have for their actions.

As it can be seen in *Hamlet*, the lofty arguments traditionally invoked to justify the need to avenge offenses to one’s noble lineage do not survive closer scrutiny and appear as a lame excuse for the exercise of that which is the worst in mankind: anger, pride, greed. Revenge, as the nuances of the play suggest, is not a chastisement of the bad man by the virtuous man, but just a momentary reprisal of one miserable individual over another. While plotting to murder Claudius, the prince confesses to Ophelia his own vileness:

I am myself indifferent honest, but yet I could accuse me of such things that it were better my mother had not borne me: I am very proud, revengeful, ambitious, with more offences at my beck than I have thoughts to put them in, imagination to give them shape, or time to act them in. What should such fellows as I do crawling between earth and heaven? We are arrant knaves all; believe none of us. (*Hamlet* III, 1)

Hamlet's harsh, encompassing invective against humankind certainly rang familiar to Elizabethan audiences. It embodied the theological notion of the fundamental wickedness of human beings, an idea at the heart of the Reform movement which helped to reshape England's political life forever idea.

Hamlet, it should not be forgotten, had attended the University of Wittenberg, where, in 1517, Luther's had started the theological tidal wave which would transform Europe's religious and political landscapes forever ("Let not thy mother lose her prayers, Hamlet:/I pray thee, stay with us; go not to Wittenberg". *Hamlet* I, 2). Shakespeare was certainly aware of the significance Wittenberg had for his Protestant audience and of the way this reference could subtly work to link Hamlet's gloomy appraisal of human nature to Luther's central theses.

As it was generally known, a key (and exceedingly controversial) argument in Luther's theological edifice was that of the *total depravity* of human beings. In his profoundly influential writings – as in those of Calvin, a few years later - original sin is presented as having corrupted humankind so completely that there was nothing Christians could do to increase their chances of salvation, let alone deserving it. Only faith in the merits of Christ could save one's soul (Dickens, 1967).³ Having the right sort of faith, however, was not something one could achieve by trying to perfect oneself and was a matter entirely unaffected by human action. Believing one could advance the cause of one's salvation by performing meritorious acts was

³ On Shakespeare's religious views see Dutton, 2003.

mad presumption, a trap by Satan to make us put our hope in the powers of flesh, not in God.

That is why the Catholic praise of good deeds as ways of laying up “treasures in heaven treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal” (King James Bible, Matthew, 6:20) was attacked as dangerous. It was seen as conveying a distorted idea of human nature, as presumptuously stressing the value human powers in face of Divine might (Gillespie, 2008, p.143-144). Reformers accused it of misleading people by instilling in them the false belief that praying, penance, fasting and almsgiving could, of themselves, help one overcome one’s sinful nature and justify oneself. According to the theology coming out of Wittenberg, there is nothing whatsoever we can do to alter our wretched nature - *we are arrant knaves all; believe none of us*.

Luther’s *Treatise on Good Works* (1520), which focuses precisely on this topic, became the paradigm view for a large number of Reformers. It is faith, not works, which ultimately may redeem the human misery:

In this way I have, as I said, always praised faith, and I rejected all works which are done without such faith, in order thereby to lead men from the false, pretentious, pharisaic, unbelieving good works, with which all monastic houses, churches, homes, low and higher classes are overfilled, and lead them to the true, genuine, thoroughly good, believing works. [...] Indeed, they consider the works best of all, when they have done many, great and long works without any such confidence, and they look for good only after the works are done; and so they build their confidence not on divine favor, but on the works they have done, that is, on sand and water, from which they must at last take a cruel fall, as Christ says, Matthew vii (Luther, 2015).

The political implications of the belief in the absolute corruption of human beings would prove profound and long-lasting, as Hobbes’ works eloquently shows. The need for the Leviathan is linked to the dangers of letting loose a primarily evil natural man. In Shakespeare plays, such view makes even more complex the already thorny theme of revenge.

In *Hamlet*, the audience grows slowly aware that a major source of the melancholy of the prince is the fact that he sees little point in avenging the murder of a father who was himself a murderer, i.e. his act would be ultimately ineffectual in straitening things up once it would simply mean the adding of one more link to the long chain of murderous sovereigns. No matter how elaborate a discursive frame tradition and custom may furnish to portray the commandment to avenge as virtuous and commendable, Hamlet sees the raw, selfish violence beneath his ‘honorable duty’: “The harlot’s cheek, beautied with plastering art, Is not more ugly to the thing that helps it/ Than is my deed to my most painted word” (*Hamlet* III, 1).

All his philosophical reluctance notwithstanding, Hamlet knows that individual feelings and private reasons cannot stand in the way of the duty to chastise those who have affronted the honor of a noble clan. Hamlet cannot forgive Claudius and remain a hero in the audience’s eyes, regardless how senseless he may consider the act. Neither the prince’s tormented indecisiveness nor his philosophical soliloquies can be understood if the coexistence of the inescapable duty to avenge and its pointlessness to Hamlet are not grasped. The gap between action and meaning mirrors the chasm between the claims of revenge and the nature of justice.

Exposing the cruel imposture of traditions – cruellest because one cannot escape them - becomes a key point in the play. It also works to shifting the focus from the act of revenge to the agent who avenges, from the supposed nobility of the gesture to the quintessential corruption of its perpetrator, no matter how virtuous he may appear to others. This turn to the inner turmoil of the main character and the subtle psychological nuances the play offers the public anticipates the Modern readings of individuality and self which would have in time prove incompatible with the *Ancien Régime* (Taylor, 1992, p.127-142).

This pessimistic view of humankind as a whole tends to make *tabula rasa* of social ranks: in a world of villains, no one can claim to be the better

man. This recognition of the common spiritual insufficiency of both king and peasant was pregnant with politically dangerous (democratic, revolutionary) innuendoes, as vividly demonstrated by the Great Peasant's Revolt (1524-1525), in Germany and by the Levellers movement throughout the Puritan Revolution (Hill, 1972).

What is more, the recognition of the radical depravity of humankind did not only work to blur the differences between social ranks. It also led to the rather Machiavellian suggestion that, upon closer scrutiny, bloody tyrants and righteous princes might not be so different after all. The uncomfortably close vicinity of virtue and vice in *realpolitik* finds a super illustration in *The Tragedy of Macbeth*, another Shakespearean masterpiece which explores the deep ambiguities of revenge .

While preparing to attack the villainous Macbeth, Malcolm, the virtuous son who justly seeks to avenge his murdered father, discloses to Macduff (and the audience) a rather disturbing picture of his innermost feelings. He confesses to Macduff his fear that the downfall of the tyrant might make Scotland suffer even more because of the absolute evil sleeping in the heart of the new monarch:

MACDUFF
What should he be?
MALCOLM
It is myself I mean: in whom I know
All the particulars of vice so grafted
That, when they shall be open'd, black Macbeth
Will seem as pure as snow, and the poor state
Esteem him as a lamb, being compared
With my confineless harms.
MACDUFF
Not in the legions
Of horrid hell can come a devil more damn'd
In evils to top Macbeth.
MALCOLM
I grant him bloody,
Luxurious, avaricious, false, deceitful,
Sudden, malicious, smacking of every sin
That has a name: but there's no bottom, none,
In my voluptuousness: your wives, your daughters,
Your matrons and your maids, could not fill up
The cistern of my lust, and my desire
All continent impediments would o'erbear
That did oppose my will: better Macbeth

Than such an one to reign. [...] (*Macbeth* IV,3)

The disingenuous justification Malcolm gives to his astonishing speech is that he was just testing the loyalty of Macduff (Macduff, this noble passion,/Child of integrity, hath from my soul/Wiped the black scruples, reconciled my thoughts/To thy good truth and honour - *Macbeth* IV, 3) a rather surprising thing to do at that point. Nowhere before had it been even hinted that Macduff might want anything other than the death of the tyrant who had massacred his wife and children.

Malcolm's speech therefore halts the action without any strong external reason. A similar dramatic interlude, this suspension of action to disclose the troubled conscience of the character had already taken place early in the play (3, 1), but the protagonist is here not the Duncan's honest son but the treacherous Macbeth. Day-dreaming of the greatness promised by the witches, Macbeth – now thane of Cawdor – loses himself in his own thoughts and abandon action, forcing everybody to stay still with him. It is Banquo who has to take him out of his self-centered slumber ("Worthy Macbeth, we stay upon your leisure") back into the dutiful performance of actions.

Malcolm's breaking the pace of action by an extemporaneous speech becomes thus even more of an omen in that it mirrors the same inner struggle which would eventually lead to Macbeth's murderous decision. Once the poison of desire enters the mind, the tragedy seems to warn the audience, it does not stop working – such is our lot as decayed creatures. Moreover, this kind of soul-searching by the prince is all the more puzzling once there seems to be no doubt in the audience's mind, as the tragedy draws to a close, over what the right course of action is,: Malcolm must ride to Inverness and overthrow Macbeth.

The prince's internal doubt, his troubled self-awareness, as it was already pointed out, brings to mind the protracted action in *Hamlet*. It is the *why* which becomes less clear to him after, by his soul searching, the avowed reasons to the traditional injunction of revenge are pierced through

to their depths. There seems to be very little sense in replacing the *bloody, luxurious, avaricious, false, deceitful, sudden, malicious* Macbeth by one who acknowledges to be worse than him. *We are arrant knaves all; believe none of us.*

Thus, the theological notion of the radical corruption of humankind works in Shakespeare's plays to call the justice of revenge into question not because of any doubt as to the facts or to the identity of guilty party. Revenge seems pointless in his plays for the much broader reason that it is rooted in a socio-political order whose core beliefs are foundering. Such broadening of vision, it must be noted, is characteristic of Shakespeare, not a necessary component of this genre. On the contrary.

Though revenge is itself problematic, revenge plays did not usually question the setting in which this century old custom is embedded. The ambiguities of the topic could be – and were – explored to function as an extreme example of the knotty though commonplace dilemma of Western Christendom: one had to live in this world while renouncing it.⁴ In traditional renderings of this impasse, action could be rather straightforward: though tormented by pangs of conscience arising from the usual tension between Christian and honor ethics, the hero fulfills his duty as a nobleman by murdering the culprit and brings forth the familiar *wild justice*.

Shakespeare's works on the theme appear substantially more complex because this conventional ambiguity is not contained within its prevailing medieval limits but overflows to challenge these limits themselves. This overflowing seems to be what James Marino suggests when he observes that

[Shakespeare's] revisions [of *Doctor Faustus* and *The Spanish Tragedy*] are like adding a new room to an existing building. Shakespeare's revisions are like incorporating a Tudor country house into a newer and grander edifice. The resulting house preserves features of

⁴ See *King James Bible*, 1 Corinthians, 7:31.

the original but is renovated and integrated into a larger, more modern whole (Marino, 2012, p. 325).

Both poles of the traditional dilemma (Christian/honor) seem farcical to characters who realize that they have no real place in an intrinsically corrupt world. In spite of all the official repudiation of Machiavelli's shrewd observations – or because of it – his diagnosis of the workings of political power grew more and more credible to a Europe in which confessional strife steadily corroded traditional religious justifications of authority. “If men were all good”, says Machiavelli when advising the Prince to be cunning, “this precept would not hold but because they are bad, and will not keep faith with you, you too are not bound to observe it with them” (1990). *We are arrant knaves all; believe none of us*.

Shakespeare's treatment of revenge is thus disturbing because it hints at a much broader discomfort, one which cannot be made right by the punishment of a few. The melancholy of Hamlet, the confessional outburst of Malcolm and the stoic resignation of Macbeth go much beyond the stock contradictions of revenge plays. They present the whole age to us out of joint and life as “a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing” (*Macbeth* V, 5).

This harsh invective against the times was not only destructive, however, but sprang from an understanding of human agency which would become dominant for a long while in the West. The sophistication which Shakespeare adds to his characters within the traditional theme of revenge anticipates the political consequences of the creative energy unleashed by the theological earthquake of the Reformation. For the very reason that traditional beliefs had been shaken, an opportunity opened up for the emergence of new ones, for the rise of social groups who had so far been outside or mostly at the fringes of power. Edmund's *now, gods, stand up for bastards!* (*King Lear* I, 2) expresses exactly this new attitude.

The ambiguity of heroes and villains in some of Shakespeare most accomplished tragedies (Hamlet, Macbeth, Othello, King Lear) arguably

springs from the incongruence between the dual set of socially-approved sources of behavior which made up the Elizabethan worldview: one (Medieval) still commanding widespread social adherence, (though on the verge of its final downfall); the other (Modern), still seen as socially disruptive (though on the verge of becoming mainstream). The notion of radical corruption, which Shakespeare plays with in his tragedies, would in time lead to the gradual devaluation of the medieval virtues which were based on the renunciation of desire (chastity, humility, patience, etc). Such devaluation is not as odd as it may sound. If, as it was now preached, these *monkish virtues* were useless to further one's lot in the world to come then they should be dropped and replaced by a set of virtues which might help one at least thrive in this earthly world (courage, intelligence, industry).

Rather paradoxically, the pessimistic take on humankind would ultimately give rise to what Charles Taylor (1992) calls *the affirmation of ordinary life* which he sees as a key characteristic of the Modern Era and to a quite optimistic understanding of human nature. Arguably, this new valuation of everyday affairs plays a key role in the transformation Brian Morris detects in English drama after 1560: "After 1560 there appear more and more plays whose interests are secular. [...] Plays tend to be less about virtues than about people" (Morris, 1971, p. 57).

The corollary of this valuing of the secular world would be a slow – and profoundly contentious - reappraisal of the dignity of desire and will,⁵ as they manifested themselves in the *natural man*, and the rise of novel readings of what *justice* meant and required in a new political order. Shakespeare's masterful handling of the Elizabethan theme of revenge subtly capture the ideological intricacies of a world which his contemporaries saw as being *upside down* and our contemporaries see as a

⁵ It is no accident that the problem of free-will became a burning issue at that time, as well illustrated by the famous debate between Erasmus and Luther. They exposed their sharply antagonistic views in *The Freedom of the Will* (1524) and *On the Bondage of the Will* (1525). See Gillespie, 2008, p. 151-161.

prelude to Modernity. It is no surprise that they keep on being played for huge audiences centuries after Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*, so popular at the time, and many other revenge plays, have become, for most people, a curiosity of literary history.

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