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Unresolved Resolutions in Renaissance Revenge Tragedies

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## 1. The Revenge Tragedy in the Early Modern English context

### 1.1 Renaissance Revenge Play

The renaissance revenge play is a subgenre of tragedy that, although widely considered to rely on specific conventions, has received a number of definitions throughout its critical exploration. I would like to refer to one particular approach by Katherine Eisaman Maus, to establish a matrix for this study:

Revenge tragedies feature someone who prosecutes a crime in a private capacity, taking matters into his own hands because the institutions by which criminals are made to pay for their offences are either systematically defective or unable to cope with some particularly difficult situation.<sup>1</sup>

According to this conception of the genre, a revenge play focuses on a wronged subject who decides to avenge without turning to the legal system of his community. This approach already alludes to the ineffectiveness of the *status quo*. My work aims to approach the extent to which this ineffectiveness in political matters receives criticism in this subgenre of tragedy, as well as the type of resolution offered in the plays.

The three revenge plays to be explored in this work are *The Spanish Tragedy* by Thomas Kyd, *Hamlet* by Shakespeare, and *The Revenger's Tragedy*; the latter play was formerly thought to be written by Cyril Tourneur, but more recent studies can almost prove that it was written by Thomas Middleton.<sup>2</sup> These plays were chosen on the basis that they are all tragedies of blood; this means that the initial offence that triggers the revenge was the murder of a relative or beloved, for which revenge was also murder.

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<sup>1</sup> K. E. Maus, *Four Revenge Tragedies*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995) ix

<sup>2</sup> An example of such a study comes from Brian Jay Corrigan, in his article entitled 'Middleton, *The Revenger's Tragedy*, And Crisis Literature' (published in 1998 in *Studies in English Literature*. 38:2, pp.281-295). In that article he devotes the second section to historical evidence about Middleton's career as a playwright for various companies, evidence that allows us to approach *The Revenger's Tragedy* as Middleton's work. The section concludes arguing that 'With all this in mind, we are prepared to explore the place of *The Revenger's Tragedy* in Middleton's work'.

Sometimes in this tradition of revenge, the avenger would go as far as killing the offender using the same means with which the latter killed his victim. This tendency is seen in *The Spanish Tragedy* but becomes the more obvious in *The Revenger's Tragedy*. It also echoes Aristotle's *Poetics*, as it stresses the similarities between cause and effect, namely the crime and the revenge:

...the effect is heightened when, at the same time, they [events] follow as cause and effect. The tragic wonder will then be greater than if they happened of themselves or by accident; for even coincidences are most striking when they have an air of design. We may instance the statue of Mityls at Argos, which fell upon his murderer while he was a spectator at a festival, and killed him. Such events seem not to be due to mere chance.<sup>3</sup>

For this study, the most important core that these three plays share is that the avenger has to face a person or persons who are superior to him in terms of sociopolitical status. In fact, that person is in many cases the very 'head' of the community, namely a Duke or a King.<sup>4</sup> Consequently, what the dramatists explored on stage in these plays was not merely a private issue between two people, but rather a subject's personal rebellion against his monarch. This idea and its influence by and on the actual socio-political system of Early Modern England will be the main focus of this work.

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<sup>3</sup> This extract was taken from the famous translation of S. H. Butcher, <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/poetics.html>

<sup>4</sup> This element, however, cannot be seen as part of the general conventions of the revenge tragedy, as there are Renaissance plays that deviate from this norm. In *The Duchess of Malfi*, it is Ferdinand and Cardinal, the heads of the State and the Church respectively, that seek revenge from their subjects for their transgressions.

## 1.2 Elizabethan and Jacobean Politics

*The Spanish Tragedy* and *Hamlet* were written during the reign of Elizabeth I, the last Tudor monarch of England, while *The Revenger's Tragedy* was written during the early reign of James I, the first Stuart King of England, who was also known as King James VI of Scotland. These two monarchs were characterised by dissimilar political approaches and priorities; however, they shared a common attentiveness to the centralization of power. In the case of Elizabeth, she had realised that in order to reign supremely, she had to effectively reject all of her many suitors who were aspiring to the throne, inventing ways to keep aristocrats at a distance. She was also cautious in religious matters, suppressing the potentially subversive inclinations both of Catholics and radical reformers while on the whole supporting the Protestants that constituted the largest part of the population, and promoted her religious office: "The Tudor monarchy [...] strove to exalt itself above both its lay and clerical publics, identifying itself with and deriving its powers from divine decree."<sup>5</sup>

More empathically, James I exhibited discernibly in his writings his ambition for absolute monarchy, with a particular interest in the notion that the King is the Lord's Anointed, to support the idea that the King was the head and the father of his subjects. His aspirations for centralized control, therefore, were based on patriarchal elements already promoted by Christian dogma. His despotic paternalism required obedience and subjection, and "the coronation ceremony was thus held to sacralise the ruler's person, uniting the king's natural and politic bodies in the figure of the concentrated sovereign..."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> R. Zaller, 'Breaking the Vessels: The Desacralization of Monarchy in Early Modern England', *The Sixteenth Century Journal*, 29:3 (Autumn, 1998) 757-778 (759)

<sup>6</sup> Zaller, 'Breaking the Vessels', 758

However, such a system could be successful if it were to rely not only on oppression, but also on consent, an element provided only by the subjects themselves. This consent was disturbed dramatically when their efforts for a 'concentrated sovereign' clashed with commonly accepted methods of private retribution, and more specifically, with the notion of self-government.

### 1.3 Self-government in Renaissance England

England in the late sixteenth- and early seventeenth century was undergoing major changes in political and economic matters. In terms of law and justice, the most important change, for the purposes of this study, is concerned with the issue of self-government versus administrative justice.

Before the creation of an increasingly complex administrative system in England, people were used to guarding and defending their honour, family and beloved ones in a private capacity, in other words, they dealt with private issues without the interference of the state. The tradition of the duel, for example, was a commonly accepted redress for wrongs. As Ronald Broude observed:

The duel, a vogue for which developed in England circa 1600, was useful primarily in matters of honor [...] and in cases of blood-spilling where lack of evidence or fear of judicial prejudice suggested that justice might not otherwise be obtained.<sup>7</sup>

Revenge was a bit more controversial; common ethics were against the murder of an individual, whatever the crime the latter had committed, but at times condoned revenge when it seemed fair. Christian morals were discernibly against any act of vengeance, only God had the right to practice it, while the people had to practice

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<sup>7</sup> R. Broude, 'Revenge and Revenge Tragedy in Renaissance England', *Renaissance Quarterly*, 28:1 (Spring 1975) 38-58 (44)

patience and have faith. However, the human urge for and pride in being self-governed made revenge, just like the duel, appealing to the people; both acts implied that the people could resolve their conflicts without the interference of the *status quo*.

However, the increasingly complex and codified social system of the time called for the suppression of practices that fell under the category of self-government; Tudor theory aimed at discrediting the duel of honour, and even more private revenges, arguing that they constituted a peril for the society as a whole: ‘The trend of medieval and Renaissance administration to larger, more complex, and more centralized institutions represented a serious challenge to the tradition of self-government.’<sup>8</sup>

However, revenge would always evoke feelings of admiration in the public, who would still consider revenge as the only efficient way to deal with crimes that affected only a few people and not the social system as a whole. Ronald Broude captures precisely the situation when he says:

...so much a part of English thought and custom were the assumptions and usages of self-government, and so far were the civil authorities from being able efficiently to discharge the functions claimed for them, that Tudor practice lagged well behind Tudor theory, and English socio-legal institutions retained their dual nature through much of the Renaissance.<sup>9</sup>

The opposition of the law and the Church to blood-revenge could not be satisfactorily explained by humanitarian reasons, which developed much later, about a criminal’s right to live. A person found guilty of murder would be executed, thus the result would be the same as in the case of someone avenging the initial murder by taking that person’s life. The significant difference in the second case is that justice would be reached without the interference of law. Such an act would formerly trigger the admiration of the people. However, in the increasingly complicated society of Early

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<sup>8</sup> Broude, ‘Revenge and Revenge Tragedy in Renaissance England’, 45

<sup>9</sup> Broude, ‘Revenge and Revenge Tragedy in Renaissance England’, 43

Modern England, State and Church aspired for a codification of social behaviour so that every possible act within the social circumference would have to be subjected to law, explained and analysed according to the needs of the Church for faith, and the State for submission.

The common link, therefore, that the playwrights managed to establish between their audience and their revenge plays was the act of revenge itself. Regardless of the characters' nationality and the audience's misconceptions of it<sup>10</sup>, the avenger and his act of revenge was exactly the element with which the English audience could identify. Were these tragedies of blood to be completely irrelevant to English predicaments, they would have only their gory feature to account for their attraction, and that seems insufficient.

The character who appeared on the stage dedicated to avenging, by killing, the murder of someone connected to him by blood or marriage had a great deal of the audience's sympathy, (...) revenge by murder for murder was not in itself wholly condemned by the Elizabethan and Jacobean audience.<sup>11</sup>

Consequently, it was rather the Englishman's aspiration for self-government that made the audience admire the character who took his fate into his own hands instead of seeking judicial support.

## 1.4 Crisis Literature and Censorship

The obvious deficiency of the system, despite its efforts for successful control over its subjects, created an intense polarity between self-government and judicial retribution when it came to crime and punishment. This tension is exactly what we can

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<sup>10</sup> The national misconceptions and stereotypes to which I am alluding to are analyzed more clearly in the next section of the introduction.

<sup>11</sup> S. Gamini, (ed) *Three Revenge Tragedies*, (London: Penguin Books Ltd,2005) 16



see depicted in the revenge plays, as one of their main themes, and is what B. J. Corrigan refers to as ‘crisis literature’: ‘Crisis literature is that artistic creation that, while containing its own artistic merit, also comments self-consciously upon the external times in which it is written.’<sup>12</sup>

Crisis literature also dealt with the rapid changes brought by early commercial capitalism, which caused clashes not only between the rising bourgeoisie and the aristocracy, but also between the monarch and every social rung: “To many in Renaissance England, the ancient system of authority and deference seemed to be deteriorating. In the past, they thought, people had ‘known their places’, whether those places were high or low.”<sup>13</sup> *Vindice* will provide an appropriate example of such a case; a malcontent aristocrat that has suffered degradation and humiliation because of the monarch’s misgovernment. This will be further explored in the following chapter. But to what extent could the playwrights engage in crisis literature and expose on stage the wrongdoings of their contemporary political context?

Elizabeth’s and James’ aspiration for control over their subjects necessitated the strict censorship of artistic production, especially of the theatre, that thrived during that time. Playwrights had to be particularly cautious with the contents of their plays, especially when they featured subjects acting against their King or the Church. The consequences of being found guilty of offending and creating revolutionary feelings against the current status quo could be calamitous for the playwrights’ careers and even their lives. Thomas Kyd himself was one of the victims of the austere supervision of the time.

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<sup>12</sup> B. J. Corrigan, ‘Middleton, *The Revenger’s Tragedy*, And Crisis Literature’, *Studies in English Literature*. 38:2 (1998) 281-295 (287)

<sup>13</sup> Maus, *Four Revenge Tragedies*, xii

[Thomas Kyd] died in 1594, seemingly in a wretched state, having suffered (unjustly, it seems) physical torture and disgrace for his alleged associations with the ‘atheistical’ Marlowe, with whom in fact he had shared rooms in which they did their writing.<sup>14</sup>

Such instances of authoritarian violence against playwrights who were suspected of having even the slightest or indirect connections to rebellious notions or figures, account for the conventional attitude towards power that characterizes a number of Renaissance plays. Shakespeare, in tragedies such as *King Lear*, definitely praises what could be called ‘the old order’ and the notion of resistance to political change. The chaos that follows after the decentralization and division of power in this play could be seen as a warning of the disasters that an attempt to disrupt the absolute power of a King could lead to. A King, despite his flaws, would still be considered the only safe option for the kingdom’s stability. Consequently, the play, despite the various and indisputably significant criticism provided on social matters and the human condition, still constitutes a celebration of monarchy, as it promotes hope in the form of Edgar’s succession and thus faith in the system as it already stood.

Despite such examples of more submissive-to-the-system plays, Kyd, Shakespeare and Middleton, as well as other playwrights, created tragedies in which the audience was confronted with a very controversial and many times self-contradictory material.

The structure of Elizabeth’s court affirms [...] that, regardless of veiled factionalism, the Tudor elite, and indeed the national culture [part of which was theatrical performance] affected an image of patriotic unity. But the key word here is “affected.” In actuality, this solidarity was performative; while appearing to reaffirm the hegemonic spirit, sometimes performances were transgressive, sometimes polemical, sometimes downright treasonous.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> D. Bevington, (ed.) *The Spanish Tragedy*, Thomas Kyd. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996) 2

<sup>15</sup> R. S. Westfall, W. P. White, (eds.) *Shakespeare and Theatrical Patronage in Early Modern England*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002) 26

In the three tragedies that will be the main focus of this study the playwrights seem to be playing with the rules of censorship and with the extent to which a playwright could surpass them without the play being banned from stage and himself being punished.

They, as many other writers such as Webster and Tourneur, had to provide in their artistic creations the illusion that the depraved society they depicted in their plays did not bear any direct similarity to the English society. The solution was easily found in the Early Modern English attraction to exotic elsewhere, an attraction increased in this period because of the so-called 'discoveries'; they led to other countries being treated not as the actual geographical places their names denote, but rather as symbolic spaces:

It is no accident that nearly all revenge plays [...] are set in Italy or Spain (two countries which, as far as his attitude to them was concerned, were hardly distinguished by the seventeenth-century Englishman. Italy was the seed-bed of vice, villainy, and perversion so vast and various that it was all that the right-thinking sober-minded Englishman could do even to imagine it.<sup>16</sup>

These countries therefore were not treated as the actual geographical places their names denote, but they rather functioned as symbolic spaces where vice, corruption, lust and perversion thrived. These stereotypes the Englishmen had towards other countries facilitated the argument of the playwrights that what they presented in their plays was a castigation of the wicked and hot temperament of other nations. It even allowed them to construe their plays as a way of actually praising the Englishman, through contrast, for his practicality, rationality and lack of exaggeration in his behaviour. *The Spanish Tragedy* definitely alludes to the supremacy of the English over the Spanish in the masque Hieronimo offers to the King:

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<sup>16</sup> S. Gamini, (ed.) *Three Revenge Tragedies*, 17

Hier. The first armed knight that hung his scutcheon up  
*He takes the scutcheon and gives it to the King*  
 Was English Robert, Earl of Gloucester,  
 Who, when King Stephen bore sway in Albion,  
 Arrived with five-and-twenty thousand men  
 In Portingale, and by success of war  
 Enforced the king, then but a Saracen,  
 To bear the yoke of the English monarchy. (I.iv.140-146)<sup>17</sup>

This is only one of the three references Hieronimo makes in his masque to English knights and their triumphs against both the Spanish and the Portuguese. These references are fictional, and although the character aims at entertaining his King and the rest of the characters who attend the masque, the playwright aims, through Hieronimo, at pleasing the actual audience of the play. As *The Spanish Tragedy* is thought to have been written between 1586 and 1590, the hostility towards the Spanish in the face of the Spanish Armada and its defeat in 1588 shows that “Kyd is not above catering to his audience’s jingoistic faith in England’s national superiority”<sup>18</sup>. The audience, therefore, could take pride in their distinctness from the impulsive and passionate characters of the plays.

Differences in temperament, however, could create the illusion that the English were superior in political, religious and social issues as well. Since the corruption seen in the plays seemed to issue directly from those depraved elements of character stereotypically attributed to other nations, elements that the English did not recognise in themselves, the audience could infer that the political problem presented on stage was also meant to praise their own political system. Such a deduction was a positive factor for the play in the eyes of censorship; the theatregoers of London would not relate to the

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<sup>17</sup> The citations *The Spanish Tragedy* as well as *The Revenger’s Tragedy* are taken from the Oxford critical edition: Maus, K.E. (1995). *Four Revenge Tragedies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press

<sup>18</sup> Bevington, *The Spanish Tragedy/ Thomas Kyd*, 2

problems of the avenger and his reasons for revenge, thus the English monarch and Court could take no offence from what was presented on stage. This interpretation allowed many revenge plays that featured the corruption of the state and its downfall to reach the stage.

However, ‘crisis literature engages in a direct colloquy with its audience, intending a candid and topical commentary to be recognised’<sup>19</sup>. How, then, did the playwrights manage to communicate a different interpretation to their audience? According to Katherine Eisaman Maus, ‘Elizabethan and Jacobean revenge tragedies explore the particular stresses and incongruities produced by the highly stratified society of late sixteenth- and early seventeenth century England.’<sup>20</sup> For modern readers of the plays and theatregoers, the connections between the revenge plays and their contemporary socio-political context are obvious thanks to the various levels of interpretations offered by years of studies on the genre. How did the early- modern Englishman, however, identify those connections under the superficial layer analysed above?

To answer these questions, this work will focus on the central avengers<sup>21</sup> in *The Spanish Tragedy*, *Hamlet* and *The Revenger’s Tragedy*. I will proceed to examine the evolution of the initial victim from the condition of a subject and part of the public mass into an agent of action that emancipates himself from political oppression. I will also focus on the avengers’ self-conception as directors of the action, and finally the complications caused by the resolution of the plays.

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<sup>19</sup> Corrigan, *Crisis Literature*, 287

<sup>20</sup> Maus, *Four Revenge Tragedies*, xi

## 2. Becoming an Avenger

### 2.1 Turning a Subject into an Agent

The amount of admiration the avengers caused to the Renaissance audience in England must have been related to the formers' capacity to carry out their revenge, a capacity that fluctuates during the play and thus increases suspense. As Katherine E. Maus observed,

The protagonist must confront a dreadful situation not of his own making. His initial blamelessness is strongly emphasized. In *armadi*, Hieronimo does nothing to bring about Horatio's death, and Horatio himself is innocent of any wrongdoing.<sup>22</sup>

Part of the charm in this subgenre of tragedy, therefore, can be the fact that the necessity of such an act and, even more, the protagonists' capacity to carry it out, seems very low at the beginning of most of the plays.

The reasons for revenge lay mainly in the fact that the enemies to be faced were people of superior rank that could easily escape judicial prosecution. In *The Spanish Tragedy*, Hieronimo has to face the King's nephew, while in *Hamlet*, the Danish prince can hardly cry for justice when his father's murderer is the new King, and in *The Revenger's Tragedy*, Vindice's fiancée was poisoned by the Duke himself. The characters, therefore, had to undergo a transformation that would emancipate them from the power of the Church or the State, whose representatives, if not the criminals themselves, were in favour of the offender because of his higher rank.

To differentiate the two states of the protagonist, the terms subject and agent can be applied. In this work I would like to use the term 'subject' in the sense that its

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<sup>21</sup> *The Revenger's Tragedy* features more than one character in pursuit of revenge, but their motives are different and thus irrelevant to the particular topic of this work.

<sup>22</sup> K. E. Maus, *Four Revenge Tragedies*, x

etymology suggests; from the Latin prefix ‘sub’, which meant ‘under’, and the verb ‘iacere’, which meant ‘to lie down’<sup>23</sup>, a subject is someone under the control or dominion of another. On the contrary, the word agent comes from the Latin ‘agens’, which meant ‘powerful and effective’ and it was related to the verb ‘agere’, which meant ‘to set in motion, lead or conduct’. Therefore people described as agents are those who act on their own accord, defying the obedience that the monarchy of the time was so struggling to obtain.

There are, of course, difficulties in applying these terms with accuracy, as the protagonists of the tragedies do not suddenly pass from one state to the other; there are many intermediate phases between the two distinct notions. Apart from that, the characters themselves sometimes do not undergo a steady transformation, but rather move mentally back and forward between the two states. Moreover, the process of transformation from a victim to an agent is dealt with in different ways by each playwright. I would like to approach these variations in each of the three main tragedies considered in this thesis.

## **2.2 Multiplicity of Avengers**

It seems a common feature in the tragedies of blood that, despite the existence of a main avenger in the plays, there would be one or more other characters who strove for revenge, each of them for their own motives. In *The Duchess of Malfi*, the play by Webster that served as an example earlier in the introduction, we are initially introduced to Ferdinand and the Cardinal as the avengers of the private transgression of the Duchess and Antonio. However, the malcontent Bossola, whom they have used

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throughout the play to achieve their revenge, detaches himself from their control and seeks for his own revenge towards the end of the play. The same pattern, with variations in terms of the relationship between the avengers, is shared by the three tragedies examined in this work. Plays that shared this feature were enriched in terms of action and the length of the plot was facilitated and more easily justified, due to the parallel actions of revenge.

In *The Spanish Tragedy* the ghost of Andrea narrates the story of his death, accompanied by the allegorical figure of Revenge. The audience gets prepared to watch the revenge for a murder narrated to them in retrospect, a feeling enhanced by Bel-imperia's actual references to revenge:

Bel-Imperia. Aye, go, Horatio, leave me here alone;  
For solitude best fits my cheerless mood.  
Yet what avails to wail Andrea's death,  
From whence Horatio proves my second love?  
Had he not loved Andrea as he did,  
He could not sit in Bel-imperia's thoughts.  
But how can love find harbor in my breast  
Till I revenge the death of my beloved? (I.iv.58-65)

However, the audience will be taken by surprise when Horatio is suddenly killed on stage. Bel-Imperia is given a second motive to avenge, but Horatio's desperate father, Hieronimo, steps into the role of the main avenger. Soon after he discovers his son's body, he exclaims:

Hieronimo. To know the author were some ease of grief,  
For in revenge my heart would find relief. (II.iv.102-103)

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<sup>23</sup> The verb also had other meanings, such as 'to throw', but in this context 'lie down' is more relevant.



Before this scene, the passages that describe the King's methods of exercising his power, aim to present him as benevolent and just; this reinforces the illusion that injustice is unlikely to occur in the play. Hieronimo is praised for his services and the meritocratic nature of his position is strongly emphasized. Horatio's position is similarly presented, as the King rewards him for his achievements in battle. The King himself sets the moral framework of the play in his speech:

Then blest be heaven, and guider of the heavens,  
From whose fair influence such justice flows. (I.ii.10)

The belief in God's justice is thus acknowledged, and it increases the audience's expectations that the King will indeed execute God's will.<sup>24</sup> This initial false sense of security is vigorously contrasted with the brutal murder that is brought about by the King's nephew, Lorenzo.

Hieronimo's first reaction is that of a subject. He is shocked by the discovery of his son's body, and he laments along with his wife, Isabella. His reference to revenge<sup>25</sup> is very vague and we do not understand if what he has in mind is a private revenge or a public punishment. As Ernest de Chickera observed:

What disturbs Hieronimo at this moment is not the thought of private revenge but just how long the murder will remain unpunished or unrevenged, since he finds "all the murderers gone" (II.v.10). For him, as for the Elizabethans, every murder sent out a cry for vengeance; the longer it remained unrevenged or unpunished, the more terrible it was...<sup>26</sup>

At this point, the interference of Bel-imperia is of crucial importance. Sister to Lorenzo and only witness, apart from the accomplices, she is the only one who can reveal the identities of Horatio's murderers. Due to her high rank, she can be a very

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<sup>24</sup> The same idea was expressed as early as 1962 by Ernest de Chickera in his article 'Divine Justice and Private Revenge in "The Spanish Tragedy"', published in *The Modern Language Review*.

<sup>25</sup> The particular passage is quoted earlier on the same page.

<sup>26</sup> E. de Chickera, 'Divine Justice and Private Revenge in "The Spanish Tragedy"', *The Modern Language Review* 57:2, (April 1962), 228-232 (229)

helpful ally, but due to her sex, ‘her entitlements turn out to be largely illusory’.<sup>27</sup> Even so, she becomes the second avenger of the play with her double motive against Balthazar, and she will be the one to encourage at least twice Hieronimo’s own private revenge.

Hieronimo’s decision after receiving the mysterious letter containing the murderers’ identities has almost never been followed by other avengers in later revenge tragedies; he hopes for public punishment instead of immediately planning a private revenge. Despite the fact that the names he sees in the letter are of superior rank and directly related to the King, Hieronimo’s faith in the system has not been sufficiently questioned yet. This attitude can be explained by his profession: ‘Hieronimo has a preternaturally acute sense of right and wrong (III.vi. et passim); he is the Chief Magistrate of Spain, and his life has been devoted to administering the law.’<sup>28</sup> As part of the system and as a subject who has been praised for his services by the King only a few scenes earlier, Hieronimo turns to him who is legally appointed to rule for God:

I will go plain me to my lord the king,

And cry aloud for justice through the court. (III,vii,69-70)

However, partly because he chose the wrong moment to approach the King, partly because he was overcome by one of his sudden fits of madness that caused a huge distraction, and partly because of Lorenzo’s cunning interference, Hieronimo did not manage to draw proper attention from the King to his cries of justice.

It is at this point of disillusionment that the subject realizes that the King fails to attend to heinous crimes like murders and that the system of justice he has supported for so long is deficient. The process of becoming an agent that will take justice into his own

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<sup>27</sup> Maus, *Four Revenge Tragedies* xv

<sup>28</sup> M. H. Levin, ‘Vindicta Mihi!: Meaning, Morality and Motivation in The Spanish Tragedy’, *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 4:2 (Spring 1964), 307-324 (308)

hands is accelerated from that scene onwards, till the point when Hieronimo manages to disguise his hatred as friendship to Lorenzo and Balthazar, conspire with Bel-imperia, and finally provide the means for both of them to achieve their revenge.

When it comes to *Hamlet*, the avenger's process of emancipation is quite unorthodox. Shakespeare explores in depth the inner issues rather than the external forces that the avenger had to face. On the one hand, we observe 'a habitual confidence in his intuitive powers'<sup>29</sup>, as Hamlet wholly trusts his instinct about Ophelia's hidden nature, the Queen's role in his father's death, and the various conspiracies against him. On the other hand, the Danish prince is very uncertain of his capacity to physically act; he even contemplates suicide when he feels incapable of bringing about the revenge that his father's ghost is calling for. As Harold Jenkins observed, 'Hamlet himself was of course the first to raise it [the issue of delay in the tragedy], and to be defeated by it'<sup>30</sup>.

Hamlet. I do not know  
Why yet I live to say this thing's to do,  
Sith I have cause, and will, and strength, and means  
To do't. (IV.iv.43-46)

It seems, therefore, that when he is considering his task, his view of his own self brings more problems to him than his external enemies; quite curiously, external factors are what assist him in taking a course of action.

Hamlet acts sporadically, often in tangents to his avowed purpose; his self-criticisms are seldom triggered by inner motivation, and it takes external objects [...] to rouse him from the gloomy lassitude which is his normal state of being in the play.<sup>31</sup>

For a while, Hamlet doubts the nature of the ghost and decides to wait for extra proof before he acts; a tactic that seems to echo Hieronimo's.

Hamlet. The spirit that I have seen ,

<sup>29</sup> H. Skulsky, "I know my course": Hamlet's Confidence', *Modern Language Association* 85:1, (Jan. 1970) 477-486 (480)

<sup>30</sup> H. Jenkins, (ed.) *Hamlet* (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd, 1982) 136

<sup>31</sup> Levin, "Vindicta Mihi!": Meaning, Morality and Motivation in The Spanish Tragedy' 309

May be a devil, and the devil hath power  
 T'assume a pleasing shape, yea, and perhaps,  
 Out of my weakness and my melancholy  
 As he is very potent with such spirits,  
 Abuses me to damn me. I'll have grounds  
 More relative than this. The play's the thing  
 Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King. (II.ii.594-601)

Even though this argument sounds very convincing about the righteousness of his decision to wait, he soon gets increasingly distracted by issues like female chastity, loyalty and betrayal by friends, to such an extent that 'his purpose is not just blunted; he often forgets it entirely in the course of philosophic musings of life, death and corruption'.<sup>32</sup>

However, Hamlet does show his admiration for men of action, even for Fortinbras, who has no legal reason to aspire for revenge. 'Like Laertes and Hamlet, Fortinbras too has a father to avenge. His 'enterprise', we are clearly informed, has no legal or moral basis; it is purely an affair of honor'.<sup>33</sup> But for Hamlet, such acts contrast with his own passive state and remind him of his task.

I would like to argue that Hamlet's impact on other characters during the play usually comes through words rather than actions; his offensive behavior towards Ophelia bring about her madness and death, he forges a letter to eliminate Rosencratz and Guildenstern rather than directly facing them, and he adds words to the script of a play to cause Claudius's reaction that will provide proof of his guilt. The only case in which he actually decides to act, is when he kills Polonius by accident. Throughout the play till the time when he finally manages to stab Claudius, the audience cannot be entirely sure of his identity as a real agent. It seems that his recklessness and inability to really define his course is what will cost him his life; the audience can probably guess

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<sup>32</sup> Levin, ' "Vindicta Mihi!": Meaning, Morality and Motivation in The Spanish Tragedy' 309-310

that Laertes will appear as the secondary avenger towards the end of the play, to take revenge for his sister's death and his father's murder. Hamlet dies just like his own victim, stabbed for the same reasons; the murder of a father, and the manipulation of a woman, in his own case his mother, in Laertes's case, his sister.

In the case of *The Revenger's Tragedy*, Vindice demonstrates his own peculiarities. We learn from the start that he has waited for nine years to have his revenge. One explanation could be that the skull of his beloved had to be in the right physical conditions so as to become the fatal seducer of the Duke. Vindice insists on killing the Duke in the same way that the latter had killed Gloriana for not sleeping with him: poisoning. Therefore the first issue to avenge is his fiancée's death.

Another motive is that 'Vindice and his family are accidental casualties of the Duke's misgovernment, not deserving targets of his wrath.'<sup>34</sup> Vindice refers to the skull as 'my study's ornament' (I.i.15), which can signify both the subject of his thought, but also the decoration in his study. This second interpretation alludes to the fact that Vindice is an educated young man that has turned into a malcontent figure; the idea is reinforced by his reference to his father:

Vindice. The duke did much deject him.  
 Gratiana. Much!  
 Vindice. Too much,  
 And through disgrace oft smothered in his spirit  
 When it would mount. Surely I think he died  
 Of discontent, the nobleman's consumption. (I.i.124-127)

Vindice's direct reference to discontent as a nobleman's consumption leads directly to what I was alluding in the introduction; the issues of upward social mobility that during the time affected negatively most of those who belonged to the aristocracy. Vindice seems to come from a previously wealthy, intellectual family that was

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<sup>33</sup> H. Skulsky, 'Revenge, Honor, and Conscience in "Hamlet"', *Modern Language Association* 85:1 (Jan. 1970), 78-87 (81)

<sup>34</sup> Maus, *Four Revenge Tragedies* ix

‘dejected’ due to the Duke’s misgovernments. According to Vindice, his father suffered from melancholy, what Vindice himself seems to be suffering from right now, but only to a certain extent; for Vindice has already passed through the process of disillusionment concerning justice, and is ready to seize the opportunity that will bring about his revenge.

Disguised as a bawd, he offers his services to Lussurioso and thus approaches the circles of the court, only to find out that Lussurioso is interested in Vindice’s own sister. Consequently, he and his brother Hippolito are offered an extra motive to turn against the Duke’s family.

Vindice. Wilt not be angry when thou hear’st on’t, think’st thou?  
 I’ faith, thou shalt. Swear me to foul my sister!  
 [Unsheathes his sword]  
 Sword, I durst make a promise of him to thee:  
 Thou shalt disheir him; it shall be thine honour. (I.iii.166-169)

While we get prepared to see Hippolito participating actively in Vindice’s revenge, as he shares two of Vindice’s motives, we are also exposed to secondary conspiracies. The Duchess and Spurio prepare their own revenge on the Duke by sleeping with each other. The Duchess wants to cuckold him for not acting swiftly enough to save Junior, while Spurio for being socially castigated as a bastard. The rest of the members of the royal family also conspire against each other, mainly for the throne.

Vindice, whose name means ‘revenger’ and who has two offences to requite<sup>35</sup>, is only one among many agents of retaliation in the play. The Duchess and Spurio think of their incest as

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<sup>35</sup> I would like to disagree at this point; Vindice has three distinct motives to avenge. Against the Duke, it’s the degradation of his family and Gloriana’s poisoning, and against Lussurioso, it’s his efforts to take Castiza’s chastity by all means.

revenge upon the Duke, revenge that in Spurio's case is meant to spite the Duke and Duchess's legitimate children as well.<sup>36</sup>

Along with the various plots for the throne, all those motives for revenge create an intense atmosphere that has been one of the reasons why this play has been considered a parody of this subgenre. '...The Revenger's Tragedy sounds in many places more like a comedy than a tragedy: perhaps we should say a satirical or 'black' comedy'.<sup>37</sup>

### 2.3 The influence of Ghosts

The actual execution of the revenge seems to be reached through a series of decisions that the avenger makes thanks to various external factors. One such factor is the appearance of a ghost. Most of the Revenge Renaissance tragedies feature them: '... importunate ghosts who haunt revenge tragedies remind characters and audience of constraints the past places upon the present, of obligations the living bear to the departed.'<sup>38</sup> Therefore, the avenger's action and thus the plot itself can be propelled by the presence of a ghost that calls for action.

This feature becomes the more obvious in *Hamlet*, where the ghost of Hamlet's father appears several times to remind Hamlet of his obligation.

Ghost.                    I find thee apt.  
And duller shouldst thou be than the fat weed  
That roots itself in ease on Lethe wharf,  
Wouldst thou not stir in this. (I.v.31-34)

The Ghost seems to doubt Hamlet's abilities and even hints that he may forget his task very easily. Soon after the ghost disappears, Hamlet asks the characters who

<sup>36</sup> Maus, *Four Revenge Tragedies* xx

<sup>37</sup> B. J. Corrigan, 'Middleton, *The Revenger's Tragedy*, And Crisis Literature', 290

<sup>38</sup> Maus, *Four Revenge Tragedies* ix

saw the ghost to swear that they will not tell anyone what they saw that night, and the ghost feels the need to intervene various times, crying under the stage so as to make sure that Hamlet seals their oath, as if he doubts his ability to complete that task as well.

Consequently, Hamlet's decisions are triggered and encouraged by the ghost, whose doubts on Hamlet's abilities are later to be echoed by Hamlet's own soliloquies. *Hamlet* is one of the plays that give the ghost a very prominent position. However, things are quite different in the other two plays.

In *The Spanish Tragedy* we have an interesting variation on the role a ghost could have in a Renaissance tragedy, represented by Don Andrea's ghost:

He becomes an amazed spectator of happenings in a realm completely different from his own. In these happenings he can foresee nothing; he shows no inclinations toward vengeance until, late in the play, he sees his friend murdered and his enemies flaunting their prosperity. The Ghost proves himself the most curious member of the audience.<sup>39</sup>

The actual ghost, therefore, becomes part of the audience, filling a completely different role than the ghost in *Hamlet*; he is there to guide the audience's expectations and reactions, representing their thoughts when he speaks his own mind about the performance. However, Hieronimo's hallucinations over ghosts compensate for the kind of ghost that we would expect to encourage the protagonist to avenge, as in *Hamlet*.

*Exeunt all but the Old Man. He remains till Hieronimo enters again, who, staring him in the face, speaks*

Hieronimo. And art thou come Horatio, from the depth,  
To ask for justice in this upper earth?  
To tell thy father thou art unrevenged?  
To wring more tears from Isabella's eyes,  
Whose lights are dimmed with overlong laments? (III.xiii.132-136)

While Kyd, therefore, created a different kind of ghost for *The Spanish Tragedy*, Hieronimo creates in his mind the typical image of a Renaissance ghost on the face of a



secondary character; it is as if he needs to give form to his guilt for delaying the revenge while he knows the identity of the offenders.

In the case of *The Revenger's Tragedy*, however, the feature of the ghost has been completely discarded, and in its place we can only observe Vindice's sheer determinism. This can be considered as a reaction against a notion that was promoted by a number of tragedies, namely that the avenger's determination was dependent on the presence of a ghost; Vindice has waited for nine years and he has not forgotten nor neglected the purpose of his revenge, and he can serve it without spiritual encouragement or support.

## 2.4 The Avengers as Real Agents

The topic of the avengers' emancipation from power calls for the consideration of another issue, and that is the relationship between God and the avengers. According to Ronald Broude '...the plays we call revenge tragedy may be read, at least on one level, as demonstrations of the ways in which God reveals and revenges secret crimes.'<sup>40</sup> However, such a perspective comes into conflict with most approaches that see the avengers as impious rebels. We need to keep in mind that Church and State overlapped in their coercive duties, as the monarch was the representative of God on Earth and not just a political figure. Therefore, the avenger could not be characterized as a rebellious figure if his actions were determined by God throughout the play. According to the quote above, God would be the real agent behind each avenger, and

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<sup>39</sup> H. Baker, 'Ghosts and Guides: Kyd's "The Spanish Tragedy" and the Medieval Tragedy', *Modern Philology*. 33:1 (Aug. 1935) 27-35 (32)

<sup>40</sup> R. Broude, *Revenge and Revenge Tragedy in Renaissance England*, *Renaissance Quarterly*. 28:1, (Spring 1975) 38-58 (54)

what we call private revenge would rather be divine vengeance instead, the avenger thus constituting a mere puppet figure in the plays.

But why should someone subject to God's will be punished so harshly towards the end of the play? All revenge tragedies feature the punishment of the avenger by the status quo, in gory scenes that could hardly persuade their contemporary audience that the avenger's actions could be associated with divine prerogative. In fact, in the same article Broude states that 'private revenge...[is] associated with rebellion and riot, and represented as an impious infringement of the divine patent granted the king and the magistrates.'<sup>41</sup> This argument alludes to the idea that the avengers act as if they are guided by God, or pretend to take action only because they want to serve God, but in fact deviate a great deal from their initial purpose.

The character who appeared on the stage dedicated to avenging, by killing, the murder of someone connected to him by blood or marriage had a good deal of the audience's sympathy, to begin with at any rate. He may, as the action proceeds, exhaust this sympathy by the use of treacherous tactics, by employing hired assassins, or by becoming more obsessed with his revenge than with the motive for it.<sup>42</sup>

Even if we are to accept that the avengers could do nothing but kill their enemy to retaliate for the latter's initial crimes, we have examples of unjust deviation in all three tragedies that make us question the objectivity of the avengers. Hieronimo kills the Viceroy, a character who had not offended him in any way, Hamlet drives Ophelia to madness and kills Polonius, and Vindice wants to kill every offender in the play, even when the offence was not towards him.

Therefore, the exigencies, in most tragedies, of punishing the avenger as harshly as the initial offenders that triggered the revenge, suggest that the playwrights did not

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<sup>41</sup> Broude 'Revenge and Revenge Tragedy in Renaissance England' 48

aim at associating the avenger's actions with God's will. The avenger undergoes an inner development through the play that can hardly emanate from divine interference. This becomes the more obvious in the way the revenge is staged, the way they approach their own actions, and the way in which they deviate from their initial goals.

### 3. The Meta-theatricality of Revenge

#### 3.1 Plotting the Revenge

The protagonists reach a certain amount of emancipation from the sociopolitical restrictions imposed by their superiors, and thus become determined and committed to their revenge as their aspirations rise. Their ambition to claim the sort of authority that will allow them to inflict punishment in the name of justice is depicted in the way they plot their revenge; the main avengers of the plays embellish their revenge with theatrical elements, so that it is staged in a way that alludes to the art of the theatre itself. I would like to refer to this feature as meta-theatricality; it is the element that allows the dramatic performance to reflect upon its own nature.<sup>43</sup> Vindice makes a clear reference to the Theatre in his first soliloquy:

Vengeance, thou murder's quit-rent, and whereby  
Thou show'st thyself tenant to Tragedy, (I.i.39-40)

Addressing revenge as a repayment for murder, he talks about Tragedy not as his personal experience, but rather as the dramatic genre itself. At the same time, he personifies Tragedy and portrays it as served or assisted by Revenge; this service or

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<sup>42</sup> S. Gamini, (ed.). *Three Revenge Tragedies*,16

<sup>43</sup> The Greek prefix 'meta' has various meanings, in this case what applies better is 'transcending' and 'dealing with the most fundamental matters of', while theatricality may refer to the art of the theatre, script and performance altogether.

allegiance almost takes the form of acting as a dramatic character, thus reinforcing the meta-dramatic dimension of Vindice's soliloquy. He anticipates, therefore, those elements that constitute revenge as a dramatic performance of its own. In the same context, Scott Mcmillin observed:

The play is virtually an exercise in theatrical self-abandonment, and if its commentary on theatricality is taken as seriously as [Howard] Felperin prompts one to do, the "disorientation" will be found to be aesthetic rather than moral. Along with being about Hamlet, *The Revenger's Tragedy* is about the theater, and its disorientation lies there.<sup>44</sup>

The issue of disorientation in *The Revenger's Tragedy* will be further explored in the following chapter, so, for now, only its metatheatrical function will be stressed.

The theatre's ability to reflect upon its own nature is even more obvious in *The Spanish Tragedy*, which has been considered to be the play that introduced and established meta-theatricality in early-modern English drama. Hieronimo seems to be the first avenger in the tradition of this subgenre of tragedy who opts for meta-theatricality to achieve his revenge.

Though Kyd derives the revenge plot and the revenger's heightened rhetoric from classical models, the idea of making the revenge itself a *coup de theatre* is probably his innovation, and certainly one of the ways *The Spanish Tragedy* most influences later Renaissance dramatists.<sup>45</sup>

Truly enough, Vindice seems to be following Hieronimo's example very closely, while Hamlet slightly deviates from this course of action. We see Hieronimo staging an entire play-within-the-play, whose plot insists on didacticism against immorality and corruption, the social elements Hieronimo wants to castigate in front of his audience. Hamlet alters a part and adds words in the *Mouse-trap*, in order to trigger the King's guilty reactions and verify the ghost's story. Vindice wants not only to kill

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<sup>44</sup> S. McMillin, 'Acting and Violence: The Revenger's Tragedy and Its Departures from Hamlet', *Studies in English Literature*. 24:2 (Spring, 1984) 275-291 (276)

<sup>45</sup> Maus, *Four Revenge Tragedies* xvi

the Duke, but also to give him a lesson by killing him in exactly the same way that he had killed Gloriana. Later on, his second revenge towards Lussorioso is achieved through a masque, which is again, a type of Renaissance play.

Their *modus operandi*, therefore, resembles that of the actual playwright; they need to set up a plot, whose bloody resolution provides their revenge. Hieronimo, Hamlet and Vindice become directors of the action as a play-within-the-play is staged by all three of them in order to achieve their revenge; Hieronimo and Vindice stage their plays exactly at the moment of retribution, while Hamlet does so long before his revenge, to gather proof of Claudius's culpability.

### 3.2 Punishment as a Renaissance Performance

Before going into details about these particular plays and the various ways in which the avengers stage their revenge, I would like to explore the connection between social context and meta-theatricality on stage. For the tendency to present revenge as a play in itself was directly connected to the actual practices of judicial retribution at the time when the plays were written and first performed. The law was strict in its endorsement of a sense of retribution and catered for a certain didactic element that would serve as a warning for the rest of the citizens. To that purpose, the punishment of the criminal took the form of public revenge, strongly stressed by the fact that the public could attend, condone and celebrate the act of retribution.

Legally prescribed punishments were themselves popular spectacles throughout Renaissance Europe. Beheadings, hangings, whippings, and pillorying occurred on raised platforms before large crowds. Many such penalties had symbolic dimensions. Adulterers were paraded in bedsheets; traitors disemboweled to signify the exposure of their secret malice.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Maus, *Four Revenge Tragedies* xvi

Punishment as a spectacle that somehow replicated the transgression was therefore very popular in the Renaissance. People would not only feel warned by the particular form of punishments presented to them, but they would even enjoy them as a performance. This taste for gore at the time can be further supported by other forms of spectacles that existed, such as fights between packs of wild dogs and bears; the death of the latter would give the audience excitement and pleasure.

Since punishment was so directly associated with public performance and pleasure, it is no wonder that it is employed in the tragedies as a means of attracting the audience's interest even more. The playwrights knew that presenting revenge as an additional performance within the existing play would add to the success of their tragedy.

The revenger's methods, in other words, do not deviate as markedly as a modern audience might assume from the normal routines of Renaissance justice. The effects of public punishments upon their audiences were, moreover, akin to some of the purposes of tragedy as Renaissance literary theorists construed them: rising horror and pity, emphasizing the affinity between sin and its castigation, heightening awareness of the mutability of fortune.<sup>47</sup>

These elements of a prevalent early modern English attitude towards punishment and performance facilitate a better understanding of the motives of the avengers to make their revenge as big a performance as the play itself. Despite the fact that this could reveal their identity and cost them their own lives, the avengers usually opted for extravagant and gory plots rather than quietly murdering their offenders.

### ***3.3 Soliman and Perseda in The Spanish Tragedy***

Hieronimo's revenge begins to take shape at the beginning of Act IV. Until that point, we witness his cautiousness regarding the sufficiency of the proof that he has against Balthazar and Lorenzo, followed by his fits of madness during his brief effort to

attract the King's attention. When he realizes that he cannot hope for royal justice, his attitude towards Lorenzo and Balthazar changes to the point that the audience, Bel-Imperia and Don Andrea's ghost are uncertain about whether he will pursue revenge or not.

GHOST. Awake, Revenge, if love – as love hath had –  
 Have yet the power or prevalence in hell.  
 Hieronimo with Lorenzo is joined in league,  
 And intercepts our passage to revenge.  
 Awake, Revenge, or we are woebegone! (III.xv.11-15)

As Howard Baker observed, 'Kyd seems to be the first writer to stress the ghost's wonderment at what he sees'<sup>48</sup>. Don Andrea's ghost, as explained in the previous chapter, has become a member of the audience and expresses the audience's expectations and emotions. He, and thus the rest of the audience, has become very uncertain as to whether Hieronimo actually has a plan to take his revenge or not; he has not presented the audience with any concrete course of action, unlike other avengers that would promise quite early in the play that their revenge is at hand.<sup>49</sup>

Don Andrea's ghost certainly thinks that Revenge's sleep signifies that the avenger will not pursue his revenge after all, and his hopes for retribution almost evaporate. However, Revenge's sleep is rather symbolic of the time that the avengers would have to wait before pursuing their revenge; a delay that is needed for them to prepare their own plot, but also for the actual plot to unfold for a considerable time and increase the suspense of the audience.

Revenge seems mainly indifferent to the suffering and searching of the human characters who for so long remain impotent in the face of unpunished evil; yet that seeming indifference is at

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<sup>47</sup> Maus, *Four Revenge Tragedies* xvii

<sup>48</sup> Baker, 'Ghosts and Guides: Kyd's "Spanish Tragedy" and the Medieval Tragedy', 26

<sup>49</sup> Vindice in *The Revenger's Tragedy* is a typical example of an avenger that raises the audiences' expectations since the very beginning of the play.

the least a masked certainty. Revenge's deceptive sleep through part of the play only affirms his strength; ...<sup>50</sup>

We quickly have to admit, as Act IV scene I unfolds, that Hieronimo has planned a very concrete and precise plot for his revenge. The scene starts with Bel-Imperia's frustration at his friendly behavior towards Lorenzo and Balthazar, a frustration that echoes that of Don Andrea's:

BEL-IMPERIA Is this the love thou bear'st Horatio?

Is this the kindness that thou counterfeitst? (IV.i.1-2)

But Hieronimo is ready to commit to revenge and form an alliance with Bel-Imperia in order to achieve it. 'When Bel-Imperia upbraids him for his delay he requests her to wait and to expect great things'<sup>51</sup>. This is the first moment in the play when the audience's expectations are raised.

Truly enough, when Balthazar and Lorenzo enter the stage and ask him to organize a play to please the Viceroy, Castile and the King, Hieronimo already has a play prepared, and he is actually carrying the plot written with him.

HIERONIMO When in Toledo there I studied,

It was my chance to write a tragedy,

See here, my lords –

*He shows them a book*

Not only that, but Hieronimo has already prepared arguments to persuade them why a tragedy is fitter than a comedy to please the lords. This can also be considered a meta-theatrical moment, as Hieronimo briefly analyses his opinion about the superiority of tragedy over comedy as a theatrical performance.

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<sup>50</sup> T. N. Greenfield, "'The Spanish Tragedy': Revenge's and Andrea's Kindred', *Pacific Coast Philology*, 16:2, (Nov. 1981), 33-43 (35)

<sup>51</sup> H.T. Stephenson, ' "The Spanish Tragedy" and "Hamlet" ', *The Sewanee Review*, 14:3, (1906) 294-298 (296)



HIERONIMO. A comedy?  
 Fie, comedies are fit for common wits;  
 But to present a kingly troop withal,  
 Give me a stately-written tragedy;  
 Tragodia cothurnata, fitting kings,  
 Containing matter, and not common things. (IV.i.150-155)

When he actually narrates the plot, the audience certainly starts doubting that Hieronimo wrote this play a long time ago in Toledo; the plot reflects the main plot, namely what happened to Horatio and Bel-Imperia, only too well. It seems more probable that he came up with this story after Horatio's death. That could also explain the fact that he has the tragedy's script with him and the script was not forgotten somewhere.

Therefore, Hieronimo steps into the role of the actual playwright, his own creator, and recreates the story of the play in the plot of his own play-within-the-play. What is even more interesting is that Hieronimo follows Kyd's way of avoiding censorship; he sets the plot far from Spain, just like Kyd had to set his own play far from England. Perseda is an Italian Dame in love with Erasto, who is a knight of Rhodes. Soliman, the man who interferes and ruins their relationship by arranging Erasto's murder, is a Turkish emperor. Last but not least, the man who is hired to kill Erasto is a bashaw.

As he persuades Balthazar and Lorenzo to become actors and play two characters in his play, our expectations about the success of his revenge through this play raise even more, when he claims the character of the bashaw as the most suitable for him.

HIERONIMO O, that will I, my lords, make no doubt of it.  
 I'll play the murderer, I warrant you,  
 For I already have conceited that. (IV.i.127-130)

Since Balthazar and Lorenzo are stabbed and killed before realizing that the play is a trap, the didactic function of Hieronimo's play-within-the-play is fulfilled by addressing his on-stage audience, namely the characters of the main plot that are watching Hieronimo's tragedy. He cannot afford the time to explain to his offenders the cause of their fatal punishment, this is something that the off-stage and most important audience already knows, but he wants to make a connection between himself and the royal audience before him. He comments on human loss due to corruption, a loss that exceeds social rungs, for the loss of a son causes the same pain to a commoner as to a lord:

Hieronimo defiantly insists upon the similarities between king and subject, aristocrat and commoner. To prove that identical losses produce identical grief he uses theatre, the most powerful tool the Renaissance had to assert the resemblances among human beings, and to induce empathetic identification.<sup>52</sup>

In *Soliman and Perseda* the Viceroy loses Balthazar, and Castile loses Lorenzo. Hieronimo is very careful in explaining his motives for the murders of the two royal sons. His tragedy is followed by a long soliloquy; the following part can be particularly illuminating concerning his attitude towards his own deeds:

HIERONIMO. Speak, Portuguese, whose loss resembles mine:  
 If thou canst weep upon thy Balthazar,  
 'Tis like I wailed for my Horatio.  
 And thou, my lord, whose reconciled son  
 Marched in a net, and thought himself unseen,  
 And rated me for brainsick lunacy,  
 With 'God amend that mad Hieronimo!' –  
 How can you brook our play's catastrophe? (IV.iv.113-120)

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<sup>52</sup> Maus, *Four Revenge Tragedies*, xvii

The royal party seems to find it quite difficult to understand Hieronimo's motives and stream of thought, and as they continue to interrogate him, Kyd gives his avenger additional opportunities to make himself clear to the audience, on-stage and off-stage. He finally reacts desperately to all this miscommunication, biting out his tongue so that he cannot be forced to provide more explanations than he wishes. This verbal termination precedes his physical termination; he manages to kill himself, as his play instructed.

### **3.4 *The Mouse-trap in Hamlet***

Hieronimo filled the audience with doubts about his capacity to execute his revenge until as late as Act IV. In the case of *Hamlet*, the Danish prince is even less predictable. Moreover, the fact that Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet* after a previous and lost version of a similar play written by Kyd, requires that we approach Hamlet's revenge by comparing it, to a certain extent at least, with Hieronimo's.

A disputed passage from Thomas Nashe's *Menaphon* seems to credit Kyd with having written an early and now-lost *Hamlet*, a play that no doubt featured, like Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*, a revenge plot, ghosts, chorus figures, [...] a love affair blighted by mayhem, and a play-within-the play.<sup>53</sup>

Hamlet's loss can be viewed as more intense than that of Hieronimo's, as the latter does not have to face direct political implications after his son's death, nor his replacement. However, Hamlet's father's replacement by Claudius comes too soon after his death. It is a replacement that carries political and sentimental consequences, as Hamlet has to accept the replacement of his father and King, as well as the postponement of his own right to become a King.

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<sup>53</sup> D. Bevington, (ed.) *The Spanish Tragedy/Thomas Kyd*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), 1

The splitting and doubling forces Hamlet into odd, three-way relationships with those closest to him. Not only does the rivalry with his parents place the son into a relationship that is the opposite of the Holy Family, but the son is also one member of an unholy trinity that is subject to the competing wills of (step) father and ghost.<sup>54</sup>

Hamlet is very keen on demonstrating the duality of the problem:

King. How is it that the clouds still hang on you?

Hamlet. Not so, my lord, I am too much in the sun. (I.ii.66-67)

As Harold Jenkins observed, there is a pun on 'son' in this line; Hamlet's function as a son does not leave him when his father dies, because he has a substitute father figure almost immediately after the death. Later on, he comments:

King. How fares our cousin, Hamlet?

Hamlet. Excellent, i' faith, of the chameleon's dish. I eat the air, promise-crammed. You cannot feed capons so. (III.ii.92-94)

Hamlet says that he is fed with promises and, as Jenkins observed, 'it must be to the King's 'voice' for the succession'<sup>55</sup>. The pun on 'air' and 'heir' further encourages this approach.

When he is first informed about the murder, Hamlet seems to believe the ghost's story unquestionably and swiftly vows for revenge. In doing so, the audience is also given an indirect promise from the very beginning that Hamlet will pursue his revenge immediately and that the play will have a quick and exciting plot.

Ghost. Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder.

Hamlet. Murder!

Ghost. Murder most foul, as in the best it is,

But this most foul, strange and unnatural.

Hamlet. Haste me to know't, that I with wings as swift

As meditation or the thoughts of love,

May sweep to my revenge. (I.v.25-31)

The theatrical element enters the play much earlier than in other revenge plays of the time, for Hamlet uses the power of the theatre to provoke his uncle's guilty

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<sup>54</sup> S. E. Watson, 'Old King, New King, Eclipsed Sons, and Abandoned Altars in "Hamlet"', *The Sixteenth*

reactions. The play-within-the-play is thus to provide only proof for the crime, rather than the means for Hamlet to carry out his revenge.

Hamlet. ... - I have heard  
That guilty creatures sitting at a play  
Have, by the very cunning of the scene,  
Been struck so to the soul that presently  
They have proclaim'd their malefactions. (II.ii.584-588)

The specified criterion, then, will be Claudius' reaction, that will convict him if it involves an immediate proclamation of guilt.

Act III, Scene 2 opens with Hamlet's very detailed and precise instructions to the first player about the *Mouse-trap*. In this passage, Hamlet informs his audience that he has altered the play-within-the-play that is at hand, by adding 'his lines' and wanting them to be expressed correctly.

Hamlet. Speak the speech, I pray you, as I pronounced it to you, trippingly on the tongue; but if you mouth it as many of your players do, I had as lief the town-crier spoke my lines... (III.ii. 1-5)

Most importantly, he offers his own remarks on the art of the theatre, just like Hieronimo talked about the superiority of tragedy over comedy.

Hamlet. ... For anything so o'erdone is from the purpose of playing, whose end, both at the first and now, was and is to hold as' twere the mirror up to nature; to show virtue her feature, scorn her own image... (III.ii.19- 23)

Hamlet's reflection on the theatre has to do with the tendency in Renaissance culture to uphold the imitation of nature, supposedly as it is (without deviation or exaggeration), as the basis for intellectual and artistic creation. Jenkins adds in his footnotes that 'the widespread Renaissance theory of drama as an image of actual life

derives from Donatus on comedy, where it is attributed to Cicero [...] “comediam esse Cicero ait imitationem vitae, speculum consuetudinis, imaginem veritalis”<sup>56</sup>

Hamlet, therefore, wants to make sure that the play will reflect the story that the ghost narrated to him. For now we are not sure whether it will be a representation of reality or not, as we only have the ghost’s word about what had really happened in the royal garden. But as soon as the *Mouse-trap* starts with the dumb-show, we have to admit that it reflects perfectly the ghost’s story, and thus Hamlet’s reflection on the precise theatrical representation of nature is reinforced.

It seems that the King was so engrossed in discussing Hamlet’s sudden interest in Ophelia with the Queen and Polonius, that he did not pay attention to the dumb-show. However, his reaction during the rest of the play is very illuminating:

King. Have you heard the argument? Is there no offence  
in’t? (III.ii.228)

As Jenkins observed, this is ‘the first sign of uneasiness in the King’, but he seems worried about the Queen’s reputation rather than his own exposure, as ‘the pointed remarks on second marriage are obviously provocation enough’<sup>57</sup>.

As soon as the King wants to know the play’s name, Hamlet follows Hieronimo’s example in setting his play away from Denmark, in Italy, typically construed as a place of corruption for his off-stage, early-modern English audience.

Hamlet. The Mousetrap – marry, how tropically! This play  
is image of a murder done in Vienna – Gonzago  
is the Duke’s name, his wife Baptista – you shall see  
anon. (III.ii.232-235)

Hamlet’s pretended naivety about the King’s feelings towards the play adds to his effort, along with setting the play away from Denmark, to follow his own creator’s example. Just like Shakespeare had to pretend that any potentially offensive

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<sup>56</sup> Jenkins (ed.) *Hamlet*, 288.

representations of royal figures in his plays had nothing to do with the actual court of England, Hamlet claims that this story is a recreation of a murder far away from their kingdom.

However, Claudius cannot handle the similarity of the plot with his own misdeeds; as soon as the play-within-the-play reaches the point when the poison is poured in the King's ear, he rises asking for lights and storms away.

Consequently, Hamlet's play has proved more than successful, at least according to his own instinct; he is certain that Claudius's reaction was very illuminating concerning the verisimilitude of the ghost's story. The audience probably shares the same feeling and anticipates Claudius's further exposure.

However, it seems that Hamlet has not made further plans concerning the actual revenge; after this performance he becomes obsessed with his mother's betrayal, Ophelia's supposedly lost chastity, and the betrayal of friends. The impression caused by these various distractions is that he will not manage to commit to Claudius's murder, despite his initial promises to his father's ghost.

Here lies the great difference between Hieronimo and Hamlet. 'When the Knight- Marshal's vengeful momentum is augmented by Bel-Imperia's (V.i.1-50), the avenger begins to act in earnest, and his acts are not, like Hamlet's, subconscious excuses for delaying a larger action'<sup>58</sup>. Though, as I have argued previously, Hieronimo seems to have planned his revenge in detail even before Bel-Imperia's encouragement, I would like to agree with Levin's approach towards Hamlet; the Danish prince delays his revenge till he is forced to it. He even misses his big opportunity in Act III, scene iii, when the King has kneeled in prayer and Hamlet holds his sword in his hands.

Hamlet. Now might I do it pat, now a is a-praying.

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<sup>57</sup> Jenkins (ed.), *Hamlet*, 301

And now I'll do't. [Draws his sword.]  
 And so a goes to heaven;  
 And so am I reveng'd. That would be scann'd: (III.iii.73-75)

The sudden opportunity and its rejection requires an elaborate excuse, and as Hamlet points out, he has to 'scan' the situation. He considers that killing Claudius while he prays is not the best time; his soul might be saved thanks to repentance. Consequently, he makes his decision:

Hamlet. Up, sword, and know thou a more horrid hent:  
 When he is drunk asleep, or in his rage,  
 Or in th'incestuous pleasure of his bed,  
 At game a-swearing, or about some act  
 That has no relish of salvation in't,  
 Then trip him, that his heels may kick at heaven  
 And that his soul may be as damn'd and black  
 As hell, whereto it goes. (III.iv.88-95)

Hamlet insists on providing convincing arguments for delaying his revenge, his nature as an avenger, therefore, is far more contradictory than that of Hieronimo and Vindice. However, the play-within-the-play in *Hamlet* has in fact become the most famous example of such a meta-theatrical device in the history of drama. It does not become the main means of reaching revenge, but it reveals a different and equally important function that a play-within-the-play could serve: the reenactment of a deed bears the power to convict the offenders thanks to their guilty reactions.

### 3.5 Vindice's performance

When it comes to *The Revenger's Tragedy*, Vindice does not create performances with a distinct name and plot, but he does integrate theatrical elements in the two main revenges he carries out. The fact that the main avenger creates subplots without distinctively separating them from the main plot does not undermine Vindice's

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<sup>58</sup> Levin, "Vindicta Mihi!": Meaning, Morality, and Motivation in The Spanish Tragedy, 311



capacity as a director; far from that, he is, out of these three plays, the avenger that takes the most pride in his actions:

Duke. Is it thou, villain? Nay, ten –

Vindice. 'Tis I, 'tis Vindice, 'tis I. (III.v.164-165)

Vindice is the first character to speak on stage and he immediately introduces his main opponents to the audience, the initial motives he has for revenge against the Duke, and his own determination to commit to that revenge. As analyzed at the beginning of this chapter, in this same speech he makes clear references to the art of the theatre and the way revenge serves the subgenre of tragedy. Since this is an introductory speech to the rest of the play, the fact that it refers to meta-theatricality signifies that this is part of the main themes of the tragedy that is to unfold.

Vindice's initial motives for revenge are two; his father's melancholy, degradation and death, and Gloriana's murder. However, although Vindice is ready to take action, he is not given the time, as the rest of the characters take turns in exposing their own motives for revenge and conspiring against one another. Not only that, but Vindice and Hippolito are suddenly given an extra reason for vengeance against Lussurioso this time. The eldest son of the Duke reveals his lust for Castiza, a lust that reflects that of the Duke's towards Gloriana. I would like to approach the first revenge against the Duke as Vindice's manifestation as a director, while the second revenge can be read as Middleton's approach to the meta-dramatic elements that thrive throughout his tragedy. As Leslie Sanders argued,

*The Revenger's Tragedy* is self-consciously and insistently theatrical. From the opening lines which introduce, in procession, the "four excellent characters" to take part in the tragedy, to the

final enactment of all the revenges, which occurs during what is in itself an entertainment, a masque, the play insists on itself as play.<sup>59</sup>

Concerning the initial offences against Vindice, both were caused by the same person, whose murder is staged very carefully. Vindice uses Gloriana's skull to poison the Duke, an act that is frequently commented negatively due to the allusions to the objectification of women and even to pimping, since Vindice is already pretending to be a bawd. His sexual innuendos definitely encourage this approach:

Vindice. *[to the skull]* Madam, his grace will not be absent long. –  
 Secret? ne'er doubt us, madam. 'Twill be worth  
 Three velvet gowns to your ladyship. – Known?  
 Few ladies respect that! – Disgrace? A poor thin shell;  
 'Tis the best grace you have to do it well.  
 I'll save your hand that labour' I'll unmask you! (III.v.43-48)

'Do it well' does not only refer to poisoning effectively the Duke; it can also be interpreted as 'perform well sexually'. However, Vindice does talk to his fiancée's skull as if it will be his valuable accomplice in carrying out his revenge in exactly the same way as the offence was committed, and not simply as a fatal prop.

Vindice. *[To the skull]* Hide thy face now for shame, thou hadst need have a mask now. (III.v.113-114)

The Duke's murder is not set as a theatrical play as such, but the scene offers an abundance of meta-theatrical elements; Vindice sets up the whole setting for the romantic encounter with all the necessary props, and prepares the 'main characters' of the scene; he decorates the skull and encourages the Duke to kiss it. He has already assumed a different character for this part of the play; he is disguised as a bawd. That

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<sup>59</sup> L. Sanders, 'The Revenger's Tragedy: A Play on The Revenge Play', *Renaissance and Reformation*, 10:1 (1974), 25-36 (25)

element offers a meta-dramatic perspective as well, as a character assumes a different character within the main play.

When the Duke is poisoned, Hippolito and Vindice are given the time to teach the Duke the moral lesson they had been waiting to express for years. Unlike Hieronimo, who could not provide any explanation to his offenders but only to his audience, they allow the Duke to find out their real identities and their motives:

Vindice. Your tongue? 'twill teach you to kiss closer,  
Not like a slobbering Dutchman. You have eyes still:  
Look, monster, what a lady hast thou made me  
My once-betrothed wife. (III.v. 161-164)

And Hippolito soon after adds:

Hippolito. And let this comfort thee: our lord and father  
Fell sick upon the infection of thy frowns  
And died in sadness; be that thy hope of life. (III.v.166-168)

Finally, they make their revenge even more intense by exposing the Duke to the sight of the Duchess with Spurio enjoying their affair, before stabbing him to death. This last addition to their revenge, aiming at the further degradation of the dying Duke, is also presented as a performance that Vindice has arranged for him, and this performance is another kind of meta-drama; a piece of the main plot that is shrewdly applied in his play-within-the-play. These various levels of theatricality offered in this scene have been also discussed by Sanders:

Vindice employs the skull of Gloriana as prop in his drama – he makes explicit reference to its costume in lines 99-102. However, he is not content with merely the play (the revenge) within the play (his disguise as Piato) within the play (The Revenger's Tragedy). Vindice arranges yet another play for the Duke. The audience, the revengers and the Duke will observe the Duchess commit incest and adultery with the Duke's bastard son, Spurio.<sup>60</sup>

The success of their first revenge leads to Vindice's and Hippolito's second revenge towards the Duke's oldest son and successor to the throne, Lussurioso. Their revenge takes place in a masque, after which other avengers enter only to find,

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<sup>60</sup> Sanders, 'The Revenger's Tragedy: A Play on The Revenge Play', 27

comically, that their target has already been eliminated. The masque is not Vindice's creation, but rather Middleton's way of presenting the resolution of the play; as Corrigan has observed, 'Thomas Middleton had a meta-dramatic view of his composition'<sup>61</sup>. However, it is still a play-within-the-play that enhances the meta-dramatic element in *The Revenger's Tragedy*,

*The Revenger's Tragedy* also deals with issues that are prominent in *Hamlet*. When Vindice enters the stage in the first scene of the first act, holding the skull and talking to it, the Renaissance audience could hardly miss the connection between the mal-content Vindice, and the melancholy Hamlet. The problematic relationship of fathers and sons also enhances this connection, to the point that Middleton increases the meta-theatrical element not only because of what happens on stage, but also because of the allusion that those happenings allow the audience to recognise, on the basis of its past theatrical experience:

The play's theatricality emerges in several forms. There are explicit references to the theatrical nature of the activity on stage through comments to the audience, through the use of plays within the play, through echoes from other revenge plays, especially Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.<sup>62</sup>

In conclusion, I would like to emphasize that the element of meta-theatricality is of crucial importance, not only because it contributed to the plays' gory attractions, but also because it created a connection between the play and the judicial practices of the time. It can therefore serve as a means of examining the indirect political connotations that the playwrights strove to provide in their plays despite the strict censorship that characterized the age. This approach will be further analyzed in the following chapter.

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<sup>61</sup> Corrigan, 'The Revenger's Tragedy, and Crisis Literature', 287

## 4. Unresolved Resolutions

### 4.1 The Death of the Avenger as a Necessity

We have observed so far the way in which the playwrights present the transformation of the main victims into victimizers, as well as the increasing confidence of the avengers, which is depicted in their plans to carry out their revenge as if it were a theatrical performance itself. The main revenge, usually taking place towards the resolution of the plays, provides the bloodshed that the plot has been promising all along, and the audience's expectations are fulfilled.

The avengers are allowed to carry out their plans. Would that, at surface level, mean that their chosen course of action against injustice is condoned by the script? The playwrights could not encourage such an interpretation. Be it their own beliefs that the avenger should be punished, be it the censorship of the time, the playwrights could not allow the avenger to outlive his revenge for long. For his revenge includes not only regicide, the most serious crime according to Elizabethan politics, but also a series of other crimes that point to the avenger's own increasing corruption. Thus we witness the murder or manipulation of characters that have not been involved in the initial offence; the murder of the avengers' offender is only part of the bloodshed.

'The death of the revenger is a virtually unbreakable rule in English Renaissance revenge plays: the success of his plot incurs a blood-guilt for which his life must satisfy.'<sup>63</sup> Consequently, soon after the avengers' success, it becomes apparent that their own downfall is at hand.

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<sup>62</sup> Sanders, 'The Revenger's Tragedy: A Play on The Revenge Play', 25

### 4.1.1 Hieronimo's Suicide

In the case of *The Spanish Tragedy*, Hieronimo forewarns his audience about his intention to kill himself after accomplishing his revenge, when he analyzes the plot of *Soliman and Perseda* to the other three characters that will participate in the play-within-the-play.

BEL-IMPERIA.            But say, Hieronimo,  
    What then became of him that was the bashaw?  
 HIERONIMO. Marry, thus: moved with remorse of his misdeeds,  
    Ran to a mountain top, and hung himself. (IV.i.123-126)

The bashaw of Hieronimo's play had participated very actively in the initial crime, as he is the one that advises the Turkish emperor to kill the knight of Rhodes in order to win Perseda. This behaviour alludes much more to the role Lorenzo played in the actual play, when he persuaded Balthazar that they had to kill Horatio. In any case, even if Hieronimo's actual role does not accurately coincide with his role in the play-within-the-play, he refers to the bashaw's actions as misdeeds; indirectly he castigates his own actions, or at least realizes that they will be perceived as serious crimes by his on-stage and off-stage audience. '... He [Hieronimo] has no desire to outlive his vengeance, and his suicide suggests his own acceptance of the stern law by which he is judged'.<sup>64</sup>

Clearly at the end of the play, he hopes to run away after his soliloquy and kill himself exactly in the way he described before the performance, but he is stopped by the royal audience that is desperate for further explanation. He is forced to speak, and when he exhausts the patience of the King and the rest of his royal audience, he is threatened with tortures:

HIERONIMO. What lesser liberty can kings afford

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<sup>63</sup> Maus, *Four Revenge Tragedies*, xxi

<sup>64</sup> Maus, *Four Revenge Tragedies*, xxi

Than harmless silence? Then afford it me.  
 Sufficeth I may not, nor I will not tell thee.  
 KING. Fetch forth the tortures! Traitor as thou art,  
 I'll make thee tell. (IV.iv.180-184)

The King has appeared, as discussed in the second chapter, to be a stable and compassionate leader throughout the play; however, right at the closure of the play, he turns to his authority as a monarch to force Hieronimo to speak.

In these last few moments of the play, the King becomes almost the tyrant some critics believe him to be. Not hearing or not comprehending Hieronimo's responses to his questions, totally out of character, he threatens torture to make the man explain his actions.<sup>65</sup>

Hieronimo has already analyzed and explained perfectly well the reasons for his actions, which makes us wonder: is the King genuinely listening attentively to his subject's pain and reasoning? Earlier in Act III, the King was unable to comprehend Hieronimo's appeals for justice and did not make an effort to investigate the issue; thus, the murder of Horatio remained secret due to his own negligence. It seems that the same inability is repeated here; Hieronimo has delivered a long soliloquy (IV.iv.72-151) and he continues explaining (168-175), but the King still says 'Why speakest thou not?' (IV.iv.179). As Carol McGinnis Kay observed,

To this litany of needless questions Hieronimo replies, "Oh good words!" (168), revealing his awareness that words in this society have small value. What follows is an almost ludicrous exchange between Hieronimo and the court, as he continues to tell why he and Bel-Imperia killed Lorenzo and Balthazar, and his audience continues to ask why they did so.<sup>66</sup>

Following these chaotic moments of miscommunication, we witness the desperate reaction of Hieronimo at the failure of language to convey substantial meaning; he cuts off his tongue. Self-mutilation would definitely cause a sensation with the Elizabethan audience, but many critics (McGinnis et al.) have argued that it was not only meant to serve up the pleasures proper to gore. Hieronimo shows in the most

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<sup>65</sup> J. T. Henke, 'Politics and Politicians in "The Spanish Tragedy"', *Studies in Philology*, 48:4 (Autumn 1981), 353-369 (364)

elaborate way his disbelief in the communicative power of language, he cannot find nor convey meaning through words anymore, and he will not need to use language; he only wants to end his suffering.

‘Even when characters may not intend deception, their words often achieve no real communication’<sup>67</sup>. Hieronimo is fully aware of that, and thus he decides that the ability to articulate words is useless to him. The mute Hieronimo finally manages to kill himself by tricking the nobles into giving him a knife. However, committing suicide could still be considered a death that does not come as a punishment to the avenger; it is his own decision and the audience might still sympathize with him. Moreover, since Kyd is exposing the dark side of the King at the same time as Hieronimo is trying to end his life, an interpretation in favour of Hieronimo is even more probable.

We may consider the unexpected murder of Castile as a possible solution to this problem. It is very difficult to understand Hieronimo’s motives at this point, since ‘his [Castile’s] only conceivable offence has been his disapproval of Bel-Imperia’s affair [with Horatio]’<sup>68</sup>. Consequently, the audience is offered substantial food for thought, along with Hieronimo’s earlier fits of madness, to reconsider the stability of Hieronimo’s actions. His violence has to seem disproportionate, so that audience sympathy can be cancelled, or at least challenged severely. As a result, Hieronimo’s death is followed by mixed feelings, a complexity of response that usually marks the climatic point in tragedy.

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<sup>66</sup> K. McGinnis, ‘Deception through words: A reading of “The Spanish Tragedy”’, *Studies in Philology*, 74:1 (Jan. 1977), 20-38 (36)

<sup>67</sup> McGinnis, ‘Deception through words: A reading of “The Spanish Tragedy”’, 29



#### 4.1.2 Hamlet's murder

In *Hamlet*, the Danish prince is presented as the malcontent intellectual that contemplates the subject of revenge more than the mode of its actual execution. 'In 1808 A. W. von Schlegel coined the term 'tragedies of thought' in connection with Shakespeare's earlier work – especially *Hamlet*. Anyone can see that the earlier tragic heroes have a high IQ; they are very conscious, reflective people...'<sup>69</sup>

Hamlet, therefore, does not offer us in his soliloquies a precise course of action that will lead to his revenge. However, the audience is offered a different kind of knowledge; we have hints as to what is going to bring about Hamlet's downfall. For, just like Hieronimo can be accused of a redundant murder in the course of *The Spanish Tragedy*, so is Hamlet guilty of an early murder in the play that is not directly connected to his revenge.

In Act III scene iv, the Queen tries to reason with Hamlet in order to understand his behaviour, while Polonius stays hidden behind the arras, fearing that Hamlet may attack his mother. As soon as Hamlet realizes that their conversation is being overheard, he thrusts his rapier through the arras and Polonius is killed. His reaction afterwards reveals that he secretly hoped that the person behind the arras was the King:

Hamlet. How now? A rat! Dead for a ducat, dead.

[Thrusts his rapier through the arras]

Polonius [behind] O, I am slain.

Queen. O me, what hast thou done?

Hamlet Nay, I know not.

Is it the King? (III.iv.22-26)

The audience knows now, that when Laertes discovers his father's death, he will want to revenge, echoing Hamlet's own quest. Truly enough, when the King explains what has happened to Laertes, the latter exclaims:

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<sup>68</sup> Maus, *Four Revenge Tragedies*, xxi

Laertes. And so have I a noble father lost  
 A sister driven into desp'rate terms,  
 Whose worth, if praises may go back again,  
 Stood challenger on mount of all the age  
 For her perfections. But my revenge will come. (IV.vii. 25-29)

Apart from Polonius's unjust death and the dishonourable treatment of his body, an extra reason is given to Laertes to kill the Danish prince, and to the audience to reconsider its sympathy towards Hamlet. Even though he cannot be directly accused of Ophelia's death, her drowning comes as a consequence of his actions. In her fits of madness she does not only refer to her father's death, but also to Hamlet as a lost love.

Oph. (*sings*) Larded with sweet flowers  
 Which bewept to the grave did not go  
 With true-love showers.  
 King. How do you, pretty lady?  
 Oph. Well, good dild you. They say the owl was a baker's daughter. Lord, we know what we are, but know not what we may be. God be at your table.  
 King. Conceit upon her father. (IV.v.38-45)

Harold Jenkins (1982) observed that 'The King, not alone, apparently takes her to allude to the lack of burial rites and is blind to Ophelia's frustrated love for Hamlet'. However, the audience knows very well that her madness and, later on, her death, are also triggered by Hamlet's indifference, scorn and verbal offences against her chastity. The audience and Horatio also know that Hamlet forged a letter on the ship to England, not only to escape his death, but also to lead to Rosencrantz's and Guildenstern's deaths:

Horatio. So Guildenstern and Rosencrantz go to't.  
 Hamlet. Why, man, they did make love to this employment. (V.ii. 56-57)

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<sup>69</sup> A. D. Nutall, *Why does tragedy give pleasure?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

However, as H. Jenkins observed, ‘it does not appear from the text that they knew the nature of the commission they carried. But it is made abundantly clear that they were willing agents. Hamlet assumes them to be willing for the worst (III.iv.204-9)...’<sup>70</sup>. Without sufficient evidence, Hamlet has superficially lost his affection and trust towards Ophelia, believes his mother to be an accomplice to his father’s murder, and distrusts people to the point that he does not care whether they lose their lives or not.

Hamlet can be considered, therefore, the type of avenger that exhausts the audience’s patience, not only because of his inconsistency towards the execution of his own revenge, but also because he victimizes characters that are not related to his father’s murder.

Hamlet’s flaws are exposed at the same time as Claudius’s. Even before suspicions are raised against him, the King shows his annoyance towards Hamlet’s lament for his father’s death, an annoyance that he tries to justify:

In filial obligation for some term  
To do obsequious sorrow. But to persevere  
In obstinate condolment is a course  
Of impious stubbornness, ’tis unmanly grief,  
It shows a will most incorrect to heaven,  
A heart unfortified, a mind impatient,  
An understanding simple and unschool’d; (I.ii.91-97)

However, the audience will soon realize that his objections towards Hamlet’s behaviour derive from his insecurities as a new king who has acquired his power through treachery.

To Claudius, the issue is not just Hamlet’s self-preoccupied mourning: traditional rites are rights, after all, and difficult for an insecure king to control. Claudius interprets his nephew’s persistence in wearing black as symbolic criticism that is all too visible to the entire court and subversive in its reminder of the previous king.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Jenkins (ed.), *Hamlet*, 397

<sup>71</sup>Watson, E. S. Old King, New King, Eclipsed Sons, and Abandoned Altars in “Hamlet”, *The Sixteenth Century Journal*, 35:2 (2004), pp.475-491

Claudius thus seizes his opportunity to get rid of Hamlet as soon as he murders the wrong person; and since the first plan of having him executed in England did not work, the King turns to Laertes as the last resort.

King. [To Laertes] Strengthen your patience in our last night's speech:  
We'll put the matter to the present push. – (V.i.289-290)

The audience knows that the offence inflicted on Hamlet by Claudius is reflected in the offences Hamlet himself caused to Laertes. Hamlet recognizes this similarity when he says:

Hamlet. But I am very sorry, good Horatio,  
That to Laertes I forgot myself;  
For by the image of my cause I see  
The portraiture of his. (V.ii.75-78)

Quite ironically, even though Hamlet realizes that there are similarities between him and Laertes, he does not seem to realize that these similarities imply that his life is at stake. As Jenkins observed in his notes about the passage above, 'The irony, which Hamlet does not remark on but which we can hardly miss, is that the *image* which shows Laertes as a revenger like Hamlet must also show Hamlet as revenge's object'<sup>72</sup>.

Later on in the same scene, we finally witness the death of the remaining main characters; Claudius employs treacherous means to ensure Hamlet's death, and it is once again, poison. His methods betray him this time; by accident, the Queen is the first to die poisoned, and Hamlet realizes that Laertes's rapier bears poison as well, so he quickly wounds the King with it.

Before the wounded Laertes and Hamlet die, they show their compassion for each other's identity as an avenger. They recognize a necessity to put the blame not on themselves, but rather on the King:

Laertes. He is justly serv'd.  
It is poison temper'd by himself.

Exchange forgiveness with me, noble Hamlet.

Mine and my father's death come not upon thee,

Nor thine upon me.

Hamlet. Heaven make thee free from it. I follow thee. (V.ii.332-337)

Both avengers, therefore, recognize that their course of action has not been completely their own, but that they have rather been manipulated; their revenge came as the result of their context and not simply of their own will.

#### 4.1.3 Vindice's execution

In the case of *The Revenger's Tragedy*, Vindice's plans seem to be successful till the very end of the play; there are no suspicions raised against him and Hippolito despite the sensational performances they put up. What could, then, bring about the avenger's downfall, as it is required by the unwritten rule of this subgenre of tragedy? The answer is found in Vindice's inner rather than outer transformation.

Vindice. And therefore I'll put on that knave for once,

And be a right man then, a man o' th' time;

For to be honest is not to be i' th' world. (I.i.93-95)

Vindice seems to believe that he can simply assume a role to carry out his plans 'for once' and then step out of it with his personality intact. In *Hamlet*, however, there is a reference to a proverb that was quite famous at the time and suggests that Vindice has a very naïve and simplistic view of the task he assigns to himself. Hamlet tells the Queen: 'for use almost can change the stamp of nature' (III.iv.170). Commenting on this proverb, Skulsky argued that 'no change in the human exterior, then, is ever quite meaningless'.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Jenkins (ed.), *Hamlet*, 398

<sup>73</sup> Skulsky, H. (1974). "I know my course": Hamlet's Confidence, *Modern Language Association*, 89:3, pp. 477-486

Truly enough, as *The Revenger's Tragedy* unfolds, we come to realize that Vindice's obsession with the act of retribution increases to the point that he attends to matters that are completely irrelevant to the offences initially laid against him.

In the *Revenger's Tragedy*, one of the richest sources of characterization is the contrast between the idea of revenge [...] and Vindice's changing awareness of it, from a stern embracing of duty to a savage and sadistic lust for destruction. The dramatist is not depicting an abstract quality but an action or aim, the pursuit of revenge which is by its nature more dynamic and dramatic.<sup>74</sup>

In the beginning, Vindice had to address his family's degradation and his fiancée's murder, both caused by the Duke. In Act I scene iii, Lussurioso's lust for Castiza and his attempts to sleep with her by hiring the disguised Vindice as a bawd, come as an additional motive for revenge. But Vindice's first contact with the court is going to completely change the way he perceives justice and corruption.

*Vindice.*O!

Now let me burst, I've eaten noble poison.

We are made strange fellows, brother: innocent villains.

Wilt not be angry when thou hear'ston't, think'st thou?

I' faith, thou shalt. Swear me to foul my sister!

[Unsheathes his sword]

Sword, I durst make a promise of him to thee:

Thou shalt disheir him, it shall be thine honour. (I.iii.164-169)

Vindice describes himself and his brother as 'innocent villains', a very interesting term to approach the nature of the avengers; they are drawn to crimes, but Vindice considers themselves innocent despite their future course of action.

'When Vindice dons his disguise as the malcontent Piato, we begin to think of the original Vindice as the "real" person, and his doings in his new role acquire another kind of reality.'<sup>75</sup> However, we soon realize that Vindice cannot make the same

<sup>74</sup>Gamini, S. (ed) (2005). *Three Revenge Tragedies*, 19

<sup>75</sup>Gamini, S. (ed) (2005). *Three Revenge Tragedies*, 20

distinction in his mind; he believes that he is entitled to eliminating corruption, and thus he strives to get all the royal family killed and not just the Duke and Lussurioso.

This is achieved in the very last scene of the play. Vindice enters in a masque with Hippolito and two accomplices and at the end of the dance they kill the three nobles and Lussurioso, who thinks they are his brothers and Spurio:

*Enter the masque of revengers: Vindice, Hippolito, and two lords more*

Lussurioso. Ah, 'tis well. –

[*Aside*] Brothers, and bastard, you dance next in hell.

*The revengers dance; at the end, steal out their swords, and these four kill the four at the table, in their chairs. It thunders*

The second masque, which consists of Supervacuo, Ambitioso, Spurio and a fourth man, finds their victims already murdered, and they turn against each other. In this sudden bloodshed, Antonio arrives and Vindice and Hippolito have the opportunity to pretend that the fourth man who survived the second masque is responsible for the murders. Vindice and Hippolito are still beyond suspicion, is the play going to allow them to outlive their misdeeds?

Revengeurs like Chapman's Bussy D'Ambois or Vindice of The Revenger's Tragedy turn by some fateful logic into the image of those they hunt down, growing less and less distinguishable for them. If Vindice punishes the wicked, he also gloats over doing so.<sup>76</sup>

Exactly because Vindice has assumed this double role in the play, he is betrayed by his own confidence. The uncontrollable impulse to reveal his identity as the man responsible for the murders makes him reckless. Firstly, he tells the Duke that he is Vindice, that he killed him and then delays the Duke's death so that he can show him the Duchess with Spurio before he dies.

Duchess. Why, now thou'rt sociable; let's in and feast.

Loud'st music sound! Pleasure is banquet's quest.

Exeunt

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<sup>76</sup>Eagleton, T. (2003). *Sweet Violence; The Idea of the Tragic*, Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 216

Duke. I cannot brook –

[Vindice stabs the Duke to death]

Vindice. The brook is turned to blood.

Hippolito. Thanks to loud music.

Vindice. 'Twas our friend indeed. (III.vi.214-227)

Vindice repeats a similarly risky action with Lussurioso:

Vindice. Air, gentlemen, air!

[The others step back. Vindice whispers to Lussurioso]

Now thou'lt not prate on't, 'twas Vindice murdered thee –

Lussurioso. O.

Vindice. [whispers] Murdered thy father –

Lussurioso. O.

Vindice. [whispers] – and I am he. (V.iii.76-78)

Towards the very end of the scene, we are informed that Antonio will be the new ruler, thanks to the elimination of the Duke and all his heirs. Vindice and Hippolito can still get away with their crimes. However Vindice is simply and quite ironically 'dying' to reveal his identity as the murderer of the Duke, Lussurioso and the nobles, and this is what leads to his own downfall.

Vindice. All for your grace's good. We may be bold

To speak it now. 'Twas somewhat dirty carried,

Though we say it; 'twas we two murdered him.

Antonio. You two?

Vindice. None else, I' faith, my lord; nay, 'twas well managed.

Antonio. Lay hands upon those villains. (V.iii.95-100)

Vindice's confidence and misconception of the way a monarch thinks is therefore what leads to his death. After all the murders that he managed to commit without getting caught, it seems impossible that he felt secure enough to reveal

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everything to the new Duke and expect his gratitude. Vindice and Hippolito will thus be taken to a 'speedy execution' (V.iii.101).

## **4.2 A dead-end for self-government and Monarchy?**

By the end of the plays, the avengers, the initial offenders and various other characters are found dead on the stage. The unfair death of characters that do not seem to commit any misdeed facilitates the exploration of the avengers' negative transformation. The avengers' actions, however, would never be completely justified even if they were to harm only their offenders. 'The revenger is both a criminal and a law-enforcer, custodian of order and violator of it.'<sup>77</sup> The reasons that allow the avenger to be called a law-enforcer, and not only a violator of it, is the fact that he has to confront characters of superior status, who would never punish themselves for their own crimes; therefore the avenger enjoys a certain amount of sympathy because if he were not to act, the judicial system would never provide retribution. The political system is thus severely criticized for its inefficiency and corruption.

However, all three tragedies analyzed above present the avengers not only as law-enforcers, but also as violators of justice; as soon as they are given the chance and a certain amount of power, they misuse it in ways similar to their superiors. The resolution of *The Spanish Tragedy*, for instance, is quite problematic in the sense that it does not really bring closure; the avenger's decisions bring him to a dead-end where justice is nowhere to be found, not even in the after-life. When Don-Andrea is given the opportunity to determine the fate of the dead characters that join him in Hades, his judgment is clearly blurred by favouritism.

Ghost. I'll lead my Bel-Imperia to those joys  
 That vestal virgins and fair queens possess;  
 I'll lead Hieronimo where Orpheus plays,  
 Adding sweet pleasure to eternal days. (IV.v.21-24)

And later:

Let loose poor Tityus from the vulture's gripe,  
 And let Don Cyprian supply his room;  
 Place Don Lorenzo on Ixion's wheel, ... (IV.v.31-33)

This is another way to suggest that the characters that have been considered throughout the play as the good and mistreated ones, may also, when they are given the opportunity, be unfair in their judgment. It is not only Monarchy, therefore, that is questioned in the plays, but also the power and righteousness of the tradition of self-government. These two notions seem to create two opposing polarities in the plays.

On the one hand, we have the 'honour' of the individual subject, generally represented by the notion of self-government:

The older system, characteristic of multicentric societies in which numerous relatively small social units practice 'self-government', protecting their members from injury by outsiders, views violence against person or property as an injury to the victim or his family, and recognizes both their interest in the offender's punishment and their right to seek satisfaction.<sup>78</sup>

Though the strong element of self-government in England could result in the audience's sympathy when they witnessed a murder as repayment for murder, the revenge itself could not be openly condoned, especially in a society that is constantly under administrative changes. 'The trend of medieval and Renaissance administration to larger, more complex, and more centralized institutions represented a serious challenge to the tradition of self-government.'<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>77</sup>Eagleton, T. (2003). *Sweet Violence; The Idea of the Tragic*, Blackwell Publishing Ltd

<sup>78</sup>Broude, R. *Revenge and Revenge Tragedy in Renaissance England*, *Renaissance Quarterly*, 43

<sup>79</sup> Broude, R. *Revenge and Revenge Tragedy in Renaissance England*, *Renaissance Quarterly* 45

Witnessing the avenger's survival or escape at the end of the play would bear a positive message towards private revenge and rebellion against the King; it would appear as the solution to the political crisis and the corruption in the play. The celebration of such acts on stage was impossible, for, despite the fact that the story takes place away from England, the audience would start considering the feasibility of a successful reaction against their superiors. Besides, as explained above, self-government is genuinely challenged for its capacity to be just in the plays, it is not merely a way to avoid censorship.

On the other hand, the monarchic system is also exposed for its malfunction. 'The other system, usually a product of larger and more complex socio-political structures, sees crime as an antisocial act, a threat to the well-being of the entire body politic to which society as a whole responds through the appropriate agents.'<sup>80</sup> All three plays discussed in this work evaluate negatively the effectiveness of monarchy; the bearers of power are corrupt or blind to the problems of their people.

Not only that, but in the cases in which the tragedy offers us the identity of the new monarch, we are not introduced to a man with a new and hopeful perspective; the new King is not better than the previous monarch. Antonio, in *The Revenger's Tragedy*, is a typical example of a monarch that ascends to power by taking advantage of the current political circumstances. Every heir of the royal family is dead, and without elections, Antonio becomes the new Duke. His first command as he assumes this new position is to send Vindice and Hippolito to their deaths without allowing them to have a proper trial. His haste can be easily explained; the new Duke wants to distance himself as soon as possible from the misdeeds that offered him his power, and at the same time

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<sup>80</sup>Broude, 'Revenge and Revenge Tragedy in Renaissance England', *Renaissance Quarterly*, 43

he is worried about his own fate, when he realises what Vindice and Hippolito have done to the previous Duke.

Consequently, the plays reach their goal of presenting the avenger's action as a dead-end and not as a solution against injustice, but at the same time, as the only solution to provide some kind of retribution and satisfaction to the initial victims. The general message is that socio-political corruption cannot be dealt with on an individual level, the avengers become criminals in the process. Yet the system cannot prevent injustice and corruption. The audience is offered at the end of these plays a very complicated resolution of an unresolved situation. Both revenge and the system fail to meet the socio-political needs of the people.

Is there any course of action that would be successful? Do these tragedies call for a radical change? Do they pave the way for the English Revolution that takes place a few decades after the first performances of these plays? I would like to say yes. These plays are directly connected to the exposure of the deficient English system and share concerns about the possible nature of a future society.

From the protagonist's point of view, he is simply the random victim of appalling misfortune. In order for his predicament to interest an audience, however, it must somehow pertain to the audience's own concerns. The revenger's problem must be shared, albeit in an attenuated form, by the spectators to his tragedy; or, to put it the other way around, his dilemma must condense some more widely experienced anxiety into an artistically persuasive form.<sup>81</sup>

Therefore the plots unfolding on the stage are directly connected to concerns of the early modern English audience. Not only is the audience interested in the plot, but it is also provided with radical and subversive ideas towards contemporary monarchy, concerning possible ways of eliminating their problems. By providing unresolved resolutions, the playwrights criticize the options provided to the early-modern English

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<sup>81</sup>Katherine Eisaman Maus (1995) *Four Revenge Tragedies*, Oxford: Oxford University Press. p. xi

subjects, hinting that the real solution may be hidden not in private revenge, but in an organized public reaction. It would be very interesting, therefore, to witness a more sustained study of the way in which the revenge play is connected both to the Reformation and the interregnum in Early Modern English history.

## 5. Conclusion

In this work I have approached *The Spanish Tragedy* by Thomas Kyd, *Hamlet* by Shakespeare and *The Revenger's Tragedy* by Thomas Middleton, three tragedies that belong to the subgenre of the Revenge Play. These Renaissance plays consciously explore and criticize the limitations of various social rungs when monarchy is the dominant political system. It seems that the revenge plot serves this purpose more than adequately, since it involves an offence caused to a subject by someone of superior rank, usually the monarch himself/ herself. Thus the focal point of the plays is not simply the conflict of two or more people, but rather the clash of the two distinct social rungs that those people represent. This clash, its representation on stage and its open-endedness became the main focus of this work.

This work departed from an inquiry into the reasons why this theme was so appealing to the early-modern English audience: identification. Elizabeth I was the ruling monarch when *The Spanish Tragedy* and *Hamlet* were written, while *The Revenger's tragedy* was written when James I reigned. Both monarchs exhibited a strong interest in securing their power and control over their subjects. At the same time, there were tremendous changes concerning the basis for holding influence and power; while the aristocracy was used to being the dominant class thanks to their lands, they suddenly witnessed the rise of monetary values that were represented by the bourgeoisie and early modern commercial capitalism. Such momentous changes created a situation

of instability that included a certain amount of mistrust of the political system, a mistrust experienced and expressed in various ways by the different social groups. People wondered whether the monarch's interests were going against those of his or her subordinates of all social levels, rather than serving them.

The Renaissance revenge plays, therefore, capture these insecurities and frustration vis-à-vis the Crown; the playwrights opted for plots that, usually in an exaggerated and gory way, demonstrated the results of a possible reaction against an unjust monarch. While considering the exposure of corruption and deceit in those plots, I also referred to the dislocation that the plays undergo. There were various stereotypes about other ethnic groups and their countries that were to some extent shared by the early-modern English audience. As the plays were set in different countries, those stereotypes were presented as an extra interesting element on stage. However, I also approached this tendency of the playwrights as an additional indication that the plays promote a critique of their contemporary *status quo*; the censorship of the time would ensure that the current monarch would not be offended by the political troubles presented on stage. A direct connection between the play and its contemporary background would imply the insufficiency of the current monarch, thus the playwright could not be accused of subverting the current monarch if the play was set in a different country.

Justice and retribution are of crucial importance when we consider the potential agency of the subject. As Terry Eagleton observed, 'A theatre which affirms human value and agency also provides in its very structure a graphic image of fate, passivity and alienation'<sup>82</sup>. Truly enough, alienation is what characterizes the avenger's evolution throughout the play. The victims' initial innocence and impotence are presented in the

beginning so as to highlight the radical transformation later on. The avenger becomes alienated from his social context and demonstrates an increasing decisiveness, which legitimates the victim's capability to take arms against the offender. Although we are not offered a definite moment when the avenger's emancipation from his superiors is fulfilled, the transgression is clear as the plot unfolds. Thus the victim that we initially described as a person subjected to power becomes an agent and aspires to inflicting punishment and retribution. Hieronimo, Hamlet and Vindice demonstrate this transformation of character in similar but also very different ways. Hieronimo is the only avenger who makes an effort to approach the monarch before he realizes that his only option is revenge. Hamlet and Vindice are very conscious from the beginning that offender and monarch coincide in such a way that public justice is unreachable. And while Hamlet moves slowly towards his revenge without a particular plan, Hieronimo and Vindice consciously construct their own plots to achieve their revenge.

The agency demonstrated by the avengers has been challenged by critics, as it sometimes seems to derive from God's will rather than personal decision. Ronald Broude (1975) observed that '...the plays we call revenge tragedy may be read, at least on one level, as demonstrations of the ways in which God reveals and revenges secret crimes.'<sup>83</sup> Wanting to oppose this view and reinforce the avengers' own agency, I approached the notion of meta-theatricality that is prominent in most tragedies of this subgenre, and definitely constitutes a major feature in the tragedies that I chose for this work. 'I know my course', states Hamlet in Act II scene ii, this phrase points to the inevitability of the events to follow, but at the same time, to the determination of the avengers to fulfill their revenge. Retaliation may appear as the inevitable and sole

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<sup>82</sup> Eagleton, T. (2003). *Sweet Violence; The Idea of The Tragic*, 216

<sup>83</sup> Broude, R. (1975). *Revenge and Revenge Tragedy in Renaissance England*, 47

answer, but the avengers thoroughly design and execute their revenge with a remarkable zest for agency. I therefore argued that the existence of a play-within-the-play in all three tragedies becomes a symbol of personal choice and the avengers' own fortitude. The avengers become directors of a sub plot within the main play, and actually follow patterns that their own creators used: we can detect a spatial dislocation to avoid censorship in the case of Hamlet and Hieronimo, and a strong need for didactic demonstration in the case of Hieronimo and Vindice.

At the same time, I approached the connection between meta-theatricality and the Renaissance judicial practices that presented punishment as a performance, in order to enhance the argument that although these plays are dislocated in time and space, they are directly connected to their contemporary sociopolitical background.

After exploring the transformation of the avengers and the way they achieved their revenge, I considered the resolutions that are provided in the plays. These resolutions seem to be particularly vague as to the morality of the avengers, their offenders, as well as of various other characters. Following the emotional progress of the off-stage audience, we could say that the plays are designed to make it sympathize with the avengers in the beginning and view negatively their corrupted superiors. Later on, the audience is led to doubt the avengers' righteousness as they deviate from their initial course of action. In the end, the audience is left in some uncertainty as to who committed more crimes; the avenger, or the initial offender-the monarch? Hieronimo is guilty of a seemingly redundant murder, Hamlet is responsible for Ophelia's madness and drowning as well as Polonius's murder, Vindice murders people that he considers wicked even though they have not inflicted an offence on him.

According to my approach, this procedure is designed for at least two distinct reasons. First of all, the playwrights were to abide the strict code of censorship; they



could not let their avengers exit the stage triumphant at the end of the play after killing the monarch. Regicide could not be encouraged or condoned in early-modern England, even if the plays were supposedly exposing other countries' corruption. Secondly, it would be impossible for the plays to provide definite answers to the issues that their plot and themes explored; divine, public and private justice, revenge and murder for murder, were all precarious issues, on which the playwrights could only give food for thought, rather than clear indicators as to what is morally correct for a subject to do when victimized by an unjust monarch.

Clearly, with the downfall of the avenger who has deviated to extremes, private revenge is presented as the wrong course of action, the avenger's punishment comes as a warning to the audience. At the same time, however, the plot makes it clear that a passive acceptance based on the belief that retribution will be delivered in the life to come is impossible, as it is unbearable for the victim.

Last but not least, after considering this controversy in moral meaning and the plays' problematic resolutions, I returned to the argument that these plays are dealing with Renaissance England rather than any of the countries where the tragedies nominally take place.

The insupportable situations in which revengers find themselves therefore tend to reflect contradictions in which their entire society, or some large subsection of it, participates: points at which its self-conception is perniciously inconsistent, or at which it makes conflicting demands upon its members.<sup>84</sup>

The unresolved resolutions of the plays, therefore, stress the need for radical changes in early modern English society, and that need is represented by the comparison of the avenger's torment with the audience's concerns, and the acceptance that they are similar and need to be addressed. An organized reaction arguably took

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<sup>84</sup>Maus, K.E. (ed 1995) *Four Revenge Tragedies*, xi

place a few decades later in the form of the English Civil War, which led to the creation of the Commonwealth of England.

Consequently, I believe that it would be of great interest to explore in further studies the connection between this subgenre of tragedy and the sociopolitical conditions that historically led a great number of English subjects to turn against monarchy, an urge that escalated and brought about a revolution a few decades after the plays were performed.



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