

The Oddity of *Hamlet* as a Revenge Tragedy

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Abstract—This paper explores how *Hamlet* by Shakespeare rejects certain notions of revenge tragedies and stands out as an exception in the genre. It studies the instances and peculiarities typical to the play which Shakespeare ensured to add to it, to make an odd one among other revenge tragedies. In order to do so this paper studies the various characters along with Hamlet to find out how he deviates from the role of a hero in a revenge tragedy.

Index Terms— revenge tragedy, peculiarities, genre, Hamlet

Revenge as a concept is an ambiguity, because of the varying perceptions, and it isn't objectifiable as good or bad. In Ronald Broude's words,

"Unlike retribution, which suggests 'just or deserved punishment, often without personal motives', revenge has a distinctly personal cast, implying 'the carrying out of a bitter desire to inspire another for a wrong done to oneself or to those who seem to be a part of oneself.'"

A typical revenge tragedy starts with a wicked villain committing a reprehensible crime against an innocent victim, then an avenger is added who uses his courage or skill to overcome obstacles and inflict the ultimate punishment and the play ends. Shakespeare was aware and influenced by Seneca's work, which have set the trend for quotidian revenge tragedies. But in his play *Hamlet*, Shakespeare bungles with the arrangement of the genre to which it belongs. Although it is evident that Shakespeare borrowed the basic elements of the play's revenge plot from Kyd's *Amleth* and Bellforest's version of Saxo, one can note the obvious differences from them and from other revenge tragedies of that period.

Revenge tragedies work best when the victim is an innocent, but here in *Hamlet* the old king is no saint

and has got blood in his hands. He killed Old Fortinbras and waged a war against Poles, for some reason the readers are not made aware of. The ghost of the old king confesses in front of Hamlet about his routine punishment in hellish fire, to purge his sins and cleanse his soul when he says,

"My heart is almost come,

When I to sulph'rous and tormenting flames

Must render up myself."

So, instead of an innocent victim, Shakespeare takes up an angry, violent and sinful king who probably had it coming.

When one thinks of a villain in a revenge tragedy, one expects a remorseless and impenitent criminal. Quiet contrary to a reader's expectation is our villain, Claudius. He is brazen, but frequently feels pangs of guilt and avoids circumstances which would trigger his sense of guilt. He is disturbed by Hamlet's prolonged mourning and condemns his attitude when he says,

"But to persevere in obstinate condolence is a course of impious stubbornness; 'tis unmanly grief."

Even if he doesn't believe in redemptive powers of prayers, he wishes to be able to pray and cries out desperately for making him capable of praying to seek forgiveness for the fratricide he has committed. He says,

"Help angels, make assay. Bow stubborn knees, and heart with strings of steel, be soft as sinews of the new born babe."

These characteristics of Claudius makes him an exception to the garden variety villains.

Looking at the section of avengers and revenge plot, there isn't just one crime that needs vengeance. Instead of a simple revenge story with a beginning, a middle and a bloody end, there are three different stories, all of them tangled together. When Hamlet intends to kill Claudius, unfortunately ends up killing Polonius, and thus becomes the target of Laertes' revenge. Also, there is young Fortinbras, whose father was killed by old king Hamlet, and is well armed to avenge his father and take back their land. Hamlet is not the only one who is entitled to duty of revenge. Apart from the primary story of Hamlet, the other two stories have Hamlet on whom vengeance needs to be executed, thus making him both the agent and the object of revenge. So, this proliferation of avengers unsettles the revenge experience and one can expect an ending which will not be satisfactory for anyone.

In the words of Catherine Besley,

"It is, I think, a vestige of the romantic view of the play, which locates the central problem not in Hamlet's situation, but in his character: the tender, delicate, sensitive prince, unequal to the duty of revenge, endlessly inventing excuses to escape from the harsh reality of action. This Hamlet toys in his melancholy with notion of suicide, but he is incapable even of that, and the 'conscience' said to make a coward of him is speculative tendency which continuously supplies him with pretext for inaction."

Shakespeare, while writing *Hamlet* has very skilfully introduced an element of contemplation in between duty of revenge and the execution of the duty. The avenger of this revenge tragedy digs too deep into himself and his intentions. Hamlet stands out as an avenger since he is not driven by impulse and is an ardent listener of his conscience. He hasn't been given any skills by Shakespeare, other than procrastination. So, instead of watching Hamlet overcome obstacles and exact revenge, what we do is watch him soliloquize and differ and soliloquize some more. He tries to twist and misconstrue things until they line up, sort of with his revenge plot. A reader finds many loops in his words and actions and there isn't any clear picture of a revenge hero executing his final punishment.

Generally, an avenger deliberately puts his life and reputation at stake. Unaware of the vicious cycle, an

avenger does the duty of revenge. Contrary to this, Hamlet believes in divine justice and has fear of damnation, which makes him procrastinate and brood over his duty, which is assigned to him by his father's ghost. Revenge is considered a wild justice and Hamlet believes in this and so he is hesitant to exact revenge. His dilemma and inaction, is because of his conscience and not because he is a coward. One shouldn't mistake his delayed action as indecisiveness, because he has been quick to decide and execute when required. For example, his plans for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, also when he kills Claudius, after his mother dies because of poison in her drink. As a Renaissance prince, steeped in the values of his class and culture, Hamlet is naturally appalled to find himself failing to play his prescribed royal part of righteous avenging son. He frequently questions his intentions and doubts his ability to execute a given task. It is clear when he says,

"Yet I, a dull muddy mettled rascal, peak like John-a-dreams, unpregnant of my cause, and can say nothing-no, not for a king upon who property and most dear life. A damned defeat was made. Am I a coward?"

A reader finds huge gaps between his words and actions. Before he heard about the brutal murder of his father, he is quick to say,

"Haste me to know't, that I with wings as swift as meditation or the thoughts of love may sweep to my revenge."

But within no time, after being given the duty of avenging his father's death by killing his uncle, he feels burdened with such a task and says,

"O cursed spirit, that ever I was born to set it right!"

One will be right to question the avenger spirit of Hamlet and his legitimacy as a hero in a revenge tragedy. Many critics have varying views on this debatable topic, whether Hamlet's delayed action and prolonged procrastination is a virtue. A.C. Bradley diagnoses the prince to be afflicted by a form of pathological depression called melancholy, and Ernest Jones attributes this to his fear of killing his mother's new husband and indirectly killing the mirror image of his secret oedipal self. But what stands strong is

Kiernan Ryan's thought on Hamlet's situation. He says,

"Whatever personal satisfaction killing Claudius might afford him would be purchased at the price of complicity with a ruthless society that's bound to fester crimes like Claudius'. It would mean becoming a clone of Claudius, the mirror-image of his father's murderer, and believing like Laertes that taking revenge is enough to right the wrong and settle the matter."

The character of Laertes ignites the reader's ability to compare and weigh these two characters, Hamlet and Laertes, who are supposed to avenge their fathers. Laertes is very eager and impatient to avenge his father and one can see this when he says,

"That drop of blood that calms, proclaims me bastard."
(Act IV Scene II)

"It warms the very sickness in my heart that I live and tell him to hi teeth, 'Thus did'st thou'." (Act IV Scene IV)

One finds conviction in the words of Laertes, and may wonder that Laertes fits better to the role of a hero in a revenge tragedy, when he says,

"But my revenge will come."

Laertes unlike Hamlet, is not bothered about the place and time of his revenge and goes on to say,

"To cut his throat in the church."

But a close look at Shakespeare's work tells us how effortlessly he has made sure to give values to Hamlet which place him in a higher pedestal than that of Laertes. By creating two characters with similar motive but different approach towards their duty of revenge, Shakespeare has deviated from the general view of thoughtfulness, and enhance the idea of revenge tragedy.

Hamlet is not like young Fortinbras, but that doesn't mean he is a coward. This is Shakespeare's genius which again puts forth that the opposite of hero is not always a coward. In most revenge tragedies the strain on the avenger is so great that he snaps. But Hamlet

pretends to be insane and uses his antique disposition to benefit for his plans to execute his punishment.

Hamlet's procrastination and conscience put him in double jeopardy. So, here a reader sees that despite of a virtue in him, he ends up in a conflicting situation for that very reason. All along the play he draws a reader's attention towards his plight and gains sympathy, inquisitiveness and even disgust at times.

Revenge is a trade of losses of equal weightage, but Hamlet ends up losing more than he is supposed to. One may account this to his use of madness in order to play safe and reach to his planned end.

Hamlet contradicts to Francis Bacon's idea about a wise man, which says, 'That which is gone and irrevocable; and wise men have enough to do with things present and to come.' One may disagree to this and counter with the fact that Hamlet was robbed off of his father, his mother and his right to the throne by his uncle, and thus had nothing left in his life to think about.

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