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The Theme of Revenge and William Shakespeare's Hamlet

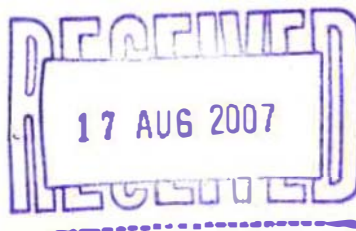
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Preface

I prepared this thesis in connection with the partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of M.A in English. The topic crossed my mind when I was an undergraduate student of English literature. My guide encouraged me to take up this theme and to do research in the area. The result is this modest paper.



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Chapter 1

THE BAGKGROUND OF REVENGE PLAY

BLOOD-REVENGE as a definite code appears sporadically in contemporary times; but it was universal among primitive peoples and strongly influenced their religion, law, and customs. The modern theory of crime presupposes the existence of a State whose laws or regulation are broken, and punishment inflicted by this State for the breach of its rules. But in the earliest times there could be no crime because there was no State. Instead, a simple injury was inflicted by one individual on another or on a group of individuals bound together by the tie of relationship. For redress of this personal injury, in present times distinguished as a tort, the only possible action for the primitive individual was a direct revenge upon his injurer. Since an act of violence was not a crime but merely a personal injury, the revenge for it in kind was the first manifestation of a consciousness of justice, for private revenge was the mightiest, the only possible form in which a wrong could be righted. Francis Bacon, with his usual acumen, recognized such a condition when he called revenge "a kind of wild justice."

In the first inception of revenge the injured person alone was concerned with the return of the injury. There was no question of right or duty but merely one of strength. If he were weak, he remained without vengeance and no one would procure it for him. With the growth of some sense of social consciousness there came a corresponding development from force to right in the theory of revenge. Finally, when the individual found himself an interlocking part of a family under the direct and terrible authority of a patriarch, the right to revenge was no longer a matter of choice but a binding obligation. Who offends a single member of the family now offends all. Two united families, sharing the possible spoils as a reward among

their members, now oppose each other instead of two private men. If one of its members is murdered, the injured family need not seek out and punish the actual murderer, The solidarity of the family is so strongly felt that it suffices or any member to kill any other representative of the murderer's family. This is the true collective justice, which makes an obligation of a right, and which lies, enforcing the duty to revenge, at the base of the long-surviving historical vendetta.

The vendetta may be divided into two chronological classes. First, the barbarous and unrestricted bloodfeud among savage races which lack social machinery for the determination of bloodguilt. Second, the personal, restricted vendetta marked by the contraction of collective and hereditary punishment. Revenge is still extralegal because there are no laws dealing with it, and the duty to revenge lies with the near relatives of the slain man but there is some power, whether of military autocracy or of public opinion, which prescribes bounds. These bounds usually take the form of talion, the strict law of like for like, which popularized exact and standardized punishments for certain injuries and thus made the penalty, inflicted on the injurer alone, more suitable to the offense.

At the time of the Anglo-Saxon migration to England the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes, among the most primitive of Germanic tribes in their law and social development, were just bridging the gap between the early and later forms of the vendetta. The earliest extant English laws are based on the characteristic system of wergeld and contain no theory of state punishment. Acts of violence were still regarded as torts against individuals and families and the intensified Anglo-Saxon family spirit made the kinsmen responsible alone either to offer reparation for a murder or to risk the consequences. Comparably, if an agreement were reached, the injured family alone had the responsibility of collecting payment. The right of private warfare, known as faehthe, or

feud, was inalienable to Anglo-Saxon freemen, since it distinguished them from the serfs.

The feud was finally broken up not so much by Christianity as by the growth of a central power which made attempts to concern itself in what had always been considered private wrongs. This step came when the king demanded a share of the wergeld. In civil cases only, as early as the late seventh century, the king was supposed to have a share of the damages. Later the king was paid a certain amount in criminal cases, and this requirement bolstered the idea that an offense against another subject was an offense against the king and state. The laws of Edward the Confessor disestablished the old kin-duties and instituted the man-bote payable to the king directly, although a small portion of the wergeld was reserved for the relatives. A further step limited this number of persons responsible for the wergeld and consequently the number on whom vengeance could be taken for non-payment. At last, in the mid-tenth century, the liability for a murder was fixed squarely on the shoulders of the slayer alone, and his kinsmen were allowed to repudiate the crime and their share of the wergeld. Progress was not always smooth. The intense individualism of the Danes and their more primitive civilization gave a temporary setback to the forward movement, and, although it has been stated that there is no evidence of legitimate blood-feud in England after the time of Edmund II lingering traces seem to have continued into the reign of Henry I. Indeed, it was not until the time of Edward I that the law of wergeld was dead. Private war, however, did not lose its legal sanction until the first half of the fourteenth century when the exaction of revenge by an individual began to be considered exclusively a crime against the state. And for many years individuals continued to value their own privileges far more than the common wealth. William the Conqueror brought with him the Norman code of state justice which also depended on the help of the kinsmen for enforcement. He introduced to England the class of prosecutions called appeals by

which the widow could prosecute the slayers of her husband, or a male heir the slayers of his ancestor. In the event of a conviction the king had no power to pardon; and to this extent the family rights of past ages were respected and the injury done was regarded as a private wrong. The legal procedure of the appeal, while abolishing the system of wergeld, retained the spirit of the old Mood-revenge, for the nearest of kin had to take up the suit against the murderer and frequently to fight it out with him in the direct revenge of judicial combat. Trial by jury was an alternative, but it is evident that most murderers preferred a judicial combat. The author of *The Mirror of Justices*, writing in the reign of Edward II, complains, "It is an abuse that justices drive a lawful man to put himself upon his country [i.e. by jury trial] when he offers to defend himself against an approver by body.

Appeals were apparently the common and established means of prosecuting murder until the end of the fifteenth century. The whole procedure was so slipshod, however, that the murderer stood an even chance of escaping punishment completely. To end the natural vices of the system Henry VII put forward the indictment, whereby the accused was to be tried at once merely on the presentation of information to the authorities. This indictment remained the legal method of prosecuting murderers in Elizabethan times, although the appeal was still known and in theory could be utilized. The appeal had been more or less a private matter and could be settled in a manner somewhat similar to the days of legalized private revenge. Indeed, Sir Thomas Smith (1583) calls it "battle upon his appeale & private revenge. But the indictment introduced almost in its entirety the system of state justice which operates today. The one remnant of the older times lay in the fact that the nearest of kin had to go to law with specific information and accusation before the state could move."

In spite of the fact that justice was the sole prerogative of the Elizabethan state, with any encroachment of its newly won privilege liable to severe punishment, the spirit of revenge had scarcely declined in Elizabethan times; its form was merely different. Murder was still regarded as an injury done by the slayer to the nearest relatives and the law tried to be as inflexible as possible in order to give the relatives justice. The rulers, of course, issued pardons but usually only in cases of manslaughter.

Chief Justice Coke, the ultimate authority for Elizabethan law, defines murder as the act of a man of sound memory and of the age of discretion who unlawfully kills another within the realm with malice forethought either expressed by the party, or implied by the law, so that the person wounded or hurt dies of the injury within a year and a day. "Malice prepensed is, when one compasseth to kill, wound but beat another and doth it sedato animo. This is said in law to.. be malice forethought, prepensed, malitia praecogitata. This malice is so odious in law, as though it be intended against one, it shall be extended towards another. Legally, therefore, Claudius in Hamlet is guilty of first-degree, murder and not of manslaughter when Gertrude dies of the poison he has intended for Hamlet.

The accessory who gives the command is as guilty as the principal who commits the murder but there are various fine distinctions. For one, the malice must be continuing until the mortal wound be given. Although there may have been feelings of malice between two persons who later met and were reconciled but afterward quarrelled again and one killed the other, the affair is one of manslaughter but not murder since the former malice did not continue. Thus if A commands B to kill C but before the act is done countermands the order and charges B not to kill C, A is not accessory if B afterwards kills C, for the malicious mind of the accessory must continue until

the act is done. Some such general situation is presented in D'Avenants tragedy, *The Cruel Brother*.

If, for instance, A tells B of facts which operate as a motive to B for the murder of C, it would be an abuse of the language to say that A killed C, although no doubt he had been the remote cause of C's death. If A stopped short of counseling, procuring, or commanding B to kill C, he would not be an accessory before the fact; even if he had expected and hoped that the effect of what he had said would be to cause B to commit murder. Iago, for example, could probably not have been convicted as an accessory before the fact Desdemona's murder, except for a single remark-"Do it not with poison, strangle her in her bed."

Malice is the crux in determining murder, and is implied in the manner of the deed. One man kills another without provocation. According to the case, this might be simple malice, or malice prepense which carried the extreme sentence. Poisoning of a man so that he dies within a year implies malice in the eyes of the law and is therefore murder with malice prepense. If a person has no malicious intention but joins with others who commit a murder, he is judged guilty only of manslaughter. Other manslaughters can also be voluntary but not judged murder with malice, as when they are occasioned by a sudden quarrel. In such a case the man is killed without premeditation and therefore without malice prepense.

Private blood-revenge, because it necessarily arose from malice prepense, had no legal place in Elizabethan England. The only possible private retaliation at all countenanced was the instantaneous reaction to an injury, which was judged as manslaughter and a felony but which carried the possibility of royal pardon. The word "retaliation" is used advisedly, for the better minds allowed no "punishment" to be administered in his own behalf by a private man. Private punishment,

indeed, was not legal even in cases of injury for which the law provided no state punishment, as with opprobrious words and slight injuries to honor; although here Elizabethan sentiment was on the side of the revenger.

The right to punish their own wrongs was dear to many Elizabethans, who did not approve the interpretation of premeditated malice put by the law upon their revenges. James I took account of this attitude when he commanded "our louinge and faithful Subjectes . . . "upon payne of our highe displeasure . . . that from this tyme for warde they presume not upon their owne.

Imagination and constfuction of wronge . . . to aduenture in any sorte to ryghte (as they call it) or to reuenge (as the Law finds it) their owne quarrels. "The Elizabethans" were conscious of the earlier periods of lawlessness when revenge was a right, but Coke, speaking formally for the law, terms any and all private revenges "great misprisions," under no circumstances to be countenanced in the eyes of the courts.

Blood-revenge for the murder of a close relative, therefore, falls in the same legal category as any other murder with malice aforethought. No evidence can be found that Elizabethan law allowed for motive or extenuating circumstances in any murder which was the result of such malice and premeditation as was owned by an avenger of blood. An unequivocal statement of that fact was written about the year 1612: "It is trewe that the lawe doth not att all distinguish of the nature of the provocation whether it wear slight or violent nor the manner of the facte whether the armor wear equall or onequall valueing life above all. In case of murder the lawe makes no distinction between him that enjoyes the wife in reueng of injurie or him that expectes hit by practise. For though we make the conditions none so equall yet the [Law] allowes or admittes no wager for bloud."

Elizabethan law felt itself capable of meting out justice to murderers, and therefore punished an avenger who took justice into his own hands just as heavily as the original murderer. The authorities,

conscious of the Elizabethan inheritance of private justice from earlier ages, recognized that their own times still held the possibilities of serious turmoil; and they were determined that private revenge should not unleash a general disrespect for law.

Perhaps the most eloquent statement of the legal position was made by Francis Bacon when prosecuting a duelling case in 1615.

"For the Mischief itself, it may please your lordships to take into consideration, that when revenge is once extorted out of the Magistrate's hands, contrary to God's ordinance, 'mihi vindicta, ego retribuam', and every man shall bear the sword, not to defend but to assail; and private men begin once to presume to give law to themselves, and to right their own wrongs; no man can foresee the danger and inconveniencies that may arise and multiply thereupon. It may cause sudden storms in court, to the disturbance of his majesty, and unsafety of his person. It may grow from quarrels to bandying, and bandying to trooping, and so to tumult and commotion; from particular persons to dissension of families and alliances; yea to national quarrels."

Though legal condemnation of private revenge came slowly in England, it was preceded by the denunciations of the clerics and moralists. And after a system of state justice had finally been established, the religious and ethical protest against revenge increased until, in the God-fearing Elizabethan age, it exercised a force second to none in the constant war against the private lawlessness of the times. The old Mosaic laws legitimizing blood-revenge in the Bible were either twisted so as to apply to state justice, or were ignored contrasted to the new world created by Christ. The strongest expression of this overthrow of the Mosaic law as applied to life in England is given by Daniel Tuvil in 1609: "Ierusalem is new

erected; among her Citizens, there is now no thirsting for revenge. The law of Retribution is disanuld amongst them. It is not a *dictum est antiquis*, but a *dico vobis* which they follow. An eie no longer for an eie: a tooth no longer for a tooth."

The chief argument against revenge may be quoted from

Thomas Becon (1560), although it was the staple of every other moralist: "To desire to be revenged, when all vengeance pertaineth to God, as he saith, 'vengeance is mine, and I will reward' this to...do ye are forbidden." There was no gainsaying this direct command. "God would never haue assumed the power of reuenge as a parcell of his owne prerogatiue in case his purpos had bene to leaue all men to the reuenge of their owe particularities."

With the word of God so expressly forbidding private revenge, it was only natural to believe damnation awaited those who disobeyed. Cleaver (1612) declares that the revenger "strips himselfe of Gods protection, he neither can pray for a blessing, nor haue a blessing; because he is out of Gods defence: he promiseth no shelter, neither do his Angels watch ouer him that is out of his wayes." Bishop Hall (1612) predicts for the revenger a double death, of body and of soul. The religious writers denounced the fact that men could "thinke that God is fauorable . . . wilen as they imagine, that the reuenge they pursue is iust, and that they haue beene vnworthilie abused." No private revenge could everpartake of justice. On a lower and more practical plane, it was argued that an act of revenge decreased rather than increased honor, since "the honour that is wonne by her, hath an ill ground. Honour is a thinge too noble of it selie, to depend of a superfluous humour, so base and vilanous, as the desire of vengeance is."

Finally, moralist painted a gloomy picture of the mind of the man tormented by the lust for revenge, and of the tortures that awaited the successful revenger: poor reuenge! behold, he' thou hast slain e,
Sleepint: in rest. lies free from care and paine...

Whilst thou suruiuing feel'st the horrid smart
 Or many thousand tortures in thy hart.
 For say thou scape the rigour of the Law,
 Thy wounded conscience will haue many a flaw;
 Feares thou shalt passe by day, and then at night
 Dreames all of terrour thy scarr'd soule affright.
 Orphanes and V.Tidowes curses thou shalt haue,
 To bring thee with confusion to thy graue.
 Which if in mercy God doe shield thee from,
 Iustice hath set this vnauoyded Doome,
 The plague of bloodshed on thy stocke shall lie,
 Till she be quit in thy posterity.
 Poore world, if these thy best contentments be,
 Seeke blood and vengeance you that list to me.



So far attention has been paid only to the forces which were seeking to suppress private revenge, but it would be a grave error to neglect the stubborn, though not always articulate, resistance to reform.

The turbulent English nobles of the Middle Ages kept alive the spirit of violence and personal blood-revenge in times when the royal justice was more a name than a power. Later, the Wars of the Roses loosed a full tide of vengeance for relatives slain in civil broils. At the battle of Wakefield occurred perhaps the most example of the eagerness of a bloodthirsty revenger to exact the penalty on his helpless victim:

"He [the young Earl of Rutland] was by the sayd lord Clifford espied, folowed, and taken, and by reson of his apparell, demaunded what he was. The yag gentelman dismaied, had not a word to speake, but kneled on his knees imploryng mercy, and desiryng grace, both with holding upon his hades and making dolorous countenance, for his speche was gone for feare. Saue him sayde his Chappellein, for he is a princes sonne, and peradventure may do you good hereafter. With that word, the lord Clifford marked him and sayde by Gods blade, thy

father slew myne, and so wil I do the and all thy kyn, and with that woord, stacke the erle to ye hart with his dagger, and bad the Chappeleyn bere the erles mother & brother warde what he had done, and sayde."

In Tudor times the mass violence which had marked the preceding ages was succeeded by an age in which violence became confined to the individual. The state had been regulated and laws had been written on the books, but personal character, with its inheritance of fierceness and independence, had not changed. The idea of redress by private action was still very much alive, particularly among an aristocracy which prided itself on its individuality. Open assault and the duel were current practises, and for those too timid to take the law into their own hands there was no lack of private *bravi* ready to stab. A preacher (1585) inveighed from the pulpit: "For now a dayes the Courtier against his coequall...all and euerie one of these (I say) against another, (Yea for the least thing done amisse) doo on euerie hande breath out vengeance and recompence. Some doo it by bloodsheading in the streetes, as the Courtier." Sir Thomas Smith (1583) truly wrote, "The nature of our Nation is free, hault, prodigal of life and bloud."

The Elizabethans who attended public executions as an amusement was used to the sight of blood and would scarcely flinch from it on the stage. Rather, he would demand it, for he was keenly interested in murders for any other motive than simple robbery. Murder to expedite a theft was easily understandable, and the offender was promptly hanged; yet murder for different motives excited the Elizabethan audience's curiosity. An essentially religious person, the Elizabethan regarded murder as the worst of all crimes-with death, to his Renaissance spirit, the ultimate disaster. Characteristic English hatred of secrecy and treachery could, and did, excuse an open killing in hot blood, "For Actes done sodainly and without aduisement differ as much in kynde and qualitie from others that are done aduisedly and with prepensed malice in colde bloud, as reason dotli from rage,

chance from choice and necessitie from temeritie." Premeditated, secret, unnatural murder, however, struck a chord of horror.

The English insistence on a semblance of fair play discountenanced the hiring of *bravi*. Queen Elizabeth herself frowned on bands of retainers, fearful that they might sow the seeds of revolution, and, to keep her kingdom peaceful, put down with an iron hand the squabbles of her touchy nobles. Foreign ideas filtered in, however, and the Earl of Oxford, returning from travels abroad, was with great difficulty dissuaded from hiring *bravi* to revenge himself on Sidney.

Points of honor and political grudges kept quarrels smouldering during Elizabeth's reign, but under James a' fresh influence appeared following the sudden influx of Scotsmen into London. The strict application of state justice by the Tudors had done much to eradicate such motives as fed to the murder of the young earl at the battle of Wakefield, but the Scots who came down with James had experienced no such weakening of the old tradition. Self-help and blood-revenge flourished practically unchecked in Scotland, where the powerful nobles played battledore and shuttlecock with the royal authority. James himself asserted that in 1600 he had a narrow escape from revengers of blood, and the revengeful passion was not unknown to him. The weak state of the law in Scotland forced men to take their own satisfaction when they failed to obtain revenge by legal means. Lord Uchiltrie, seeing how valueless were James's promises to prosecute vigorously a murderer of his kindred, rode to all his friends and asked them to sign a bond that they would assist his revenge. After he was captured he "afformit" and confest his traueilling and obteaning of the samyn bond, alledging that he had great resoun so to doe, for he saw no other appearance of reuendge to come; afferming oppinlie to his Maiestie at all tymes, that he wald embrace and refuse no friendship that wald assist and tak pain in the reuendge of that murthour."

The best example of the distinction the Scotsman drew between ordinary murder and what he considered a just slaying in private revenge, is found in the murder of the Regent Murray by Hamilton in January 1670. Murray had persecuted Hamilton, who was of the queen's party, and finally, after clapping him in jail, endeavored to confiscate his property. When the strain drove his wife insane, Hamilton broke prison, and, lying in wait, shot Murray as he rode through the streets. He escaped to France "and liued cenaine yearesafter, protesting many times that he had taken priuate reuenge on *Murray*, for that his patience could hold out no longer against the iniuries he had done him. . . . Neither could he be perswaded in *France* afterward, though he seemed a man forward.to commit a villanous fact, to attempt the like against Admiral *Coligny* saying many times that he had beene a just reuenger of his owne grieffe whereof he repented him, but to a reuenger of another mans, he would neuer be drawn, neither by entreaty nor reward."

The Elizabethans recognized to the full the quarrelsome ness of the Scot. "It is well knowne in *Scotland* how insatiable is the passion of Ire, and the appetite of Reuenge, for their deadly flod il neuer be quenched, but with the blood of al their enemies and heir adherents."Peter Heylyn (1621) is even more definite:

"The people have one barbarous Custome yet continuing, if any two be displeased they expect no law, but bang it out brauely, one and his kindred against the other and his; and thinke the king much in

their common, if they grant him at a certaine day to keepe the peace. This fighting they call their *Feides*." The virus was transferred to London and by their example the Scots had a distinct effect in increasing the personal violence of the age among the English. In addition, the irritation of the English at the Scotch invasion of their city and the favoritism shown to them by the king, provoked such bad feeling between the two races that the anonymous (and scandalous) author of *the Reign of King James 1*, written about 1615, comments, "Private quarrels nourished-but especially between the Scottish and the English, duels in every street maintained."

The quarrelsomeness of the times was also extended to the law courts; every satirist had something to say about the multitude of cases brought before the judges from a spirit of private vindictiveness. When the legal decision was not that expected, retaliation and even murder could result. In 1616 John Bartram, being foiled in an unjust lawsuit by the judge, Sir John Tyndall, resolved himself, and, preparing carefully, assassinated him.

The influence of the Scotch traditions of blood-revenge cannot be ignored in considering the attitude of the audiences at Elizabethan tragedies, but the Englishman was fully conscious of the workings of revenge in his own midst. Robert Anton (1617) writes, "Neuer more cholericke constitutions knowne, So practick in reuenge, -as now are showne." Wither (1626), enumerating the passions, assigns to Revenge a principedom as one who wishes to be sole commander. And when revenge was mentioned, murder was always in mind. James I (1618) says plainly, "Reuenge and Murder come coupled together." The EarL of Clarendon calls revenge the great patron of murder since the spilling of the first blood; and Bishop Hall (1625) writes, "There are those, whose hands are white, and clean from bribes, from extortions; but their feet are yet swift to shed blood upon

their own private revenge." Cleaver (1612) exhorts men to take heed of revenge and God will keep them from murder.

Since revenge was a serious matter, the Elizabethans' interest in it as a criminal passion led to various analyses of the subsidiary passions which excited it. Anger was often assigned as the first cause. Grimestone in his study of the passions (1621) draws distinctions between anger and hatred which are important for a study of the villain revengers of Elizabethan tragedy. Hatred, in the eyes of another, was to be defined as natural wrath which had endured too long and had turned to unnatural malice. According to Grimestone, choler (or anger) coines from personal wrongs, but the person need not be touched to feel hatred; choler is felt for particular men, hatred may be for all humanity; choler can be cured by patience, but hatred is everlasting; choler wishes the victim to recognize the revenger, hatred desires only to watch the destruction of the victim without recognition; choler is full of pain, hatred is cold; choler has bounds in revenge, but hatred is boundless and always seeks the absolute ruin of its object.

Jealousy was another prime mover of revenge and murder: "It sometimes bursteth out so farre, and exceedeth beyond her bounds so much, as it turneth it selfe into extream Hatred, and from thence falleth into a Frensie, and Madnesse, not alone against the partie it loueth, or his aduersary or Riual, but as well against all such, who, as he thinkes, may be any way an obstacle or let, to hinder or crosse him in his dissigne and purpose, whereupon haue ensued most cruell reuengements, and most horrible and sauage. murthers, beyond all common sense and reason; yea, many times against their owne reputations and Honours, and against their owne proper selves, and lifes."

Pride and ambition were also considered the forerunners of revenge and death: "For all unbridled passions in man, and upon which reason beares not a hard hand, are uppertuous; but that of

ambition is impetuously furious, and (when ioyned with reuenge ful disdaine) furiously outrageous. Iniustice is the minister of disdaine, and reuenge is the executioner of iniustice."

To judge by the number and the quality of the outbursts against it, envy was perhaps the greatest Elizabethan vice, and it may be considered one of the most powerful of the passions inducing revenge. Indeed, Burton (1621) believed revenge arose almost solely from emulation and envy; another (1611) directly called it the fountain of murder. The grudge deriving from envy was greater than that from direct injury, for a wronged man could forget or else pocket the injury, "but who is settled in enuie, leaues nothing vndone that maye aduance to reuenge." Envy's hatred was so great that, in contrast to anger, no wrongs were necessary for a person to become the recipient of its malice; indeed, it was often directed against 'the most virtuous and peaceful of men.

The envious man was not hesitant to shed blood even without provocation, but when, according to his lights, he was actually wronged, the injury became magnified tenfold, and "by secret ambushes, or by open hostilitie, he must carue himselfe a satisfaction. No plaister will heale his pricked finger, but his heartbloud that did it. . . . Malice is so madde that it will not spare friend, to wreake vengeance on foes."

In spite of the preoccupation of the age with the subject of private revenge, not many narrations of Elizabethan revenges ending in murder have come down to us, with the exception of the numerous accounts of private duels. We do know that feuds between families, frequently resulting in blood, were not unknown in Elizabethan times, and James I (1610) avowed his incessant care "to suppress all factions and deadly feuds which are the motives of greate mischief in

greate families." These feuds were spoken of as "endless" and were caused by "contempt of all indifferent and equitable endes ... as well betweene great families as priuat persons." Saviolo commented that private quarrels between two or three persons not infrequently spread to whole families and ended in great hurt and bloodshed. One of the arguments seriously advanced in favor of duelling (1612) was "wher mani members of great howses or allies into those howses are like to make an euerlasting quarrel it were better with the hasarde an euent of one battaile to make an ende of the matter and in this case the Duells may be warranted." A glimpse of such a feud is given by the repentance, before his beheading in 1601, of Sir Charles Danvers, who craved the pardon of Lord Grey "to whom he professed hee had bene a great enemy, not for any wrong clone to him by that Lord, but out of entire loue to Southampton, with whom the Lord Grey had beene at deadly feude."

Private revenge among the nobles and gentlemen took almost exclusively the form of a duel, but the ill-famed Leicester was scandalously accused of endeavoring to revenge himself on Simier (who had revealed his marriage to the queen) by hiring one of her guards to murder him. So Felton's assassination of Buckingham in 1628 was almost universally attributed to motives of private revenge, in spite of his obstinate denials. An accuser at his trial asserted that he was "of a stout and revengeful spirit, who having once received an injury from a gentleman, he cut off a piece of his little finger, and sent it with a challenge to the gentleman to fight with him, thereby to let him know that he valued not .the exposing his whole body to hazard, so he might have an opportunity to be revenged."

Masters had occasionally to fear the revenge of their servants. Fulke Greville was stabbed in the back by his servant in 1628 for not sufficiently rewarding him. A servant in 1605 had been vowed the hand of his master's daughter and some land; but when this offer was

replaced by vague promises, he swore revenge and succeeded in murdering his employer. The pamphleteer of the event romances vividly: "Thirtie pounds a yeare shall not satisfie him that should haue beene heire to five hundred, nor faire wordes tempt me from reuenge, which haue been wronged in my wife, yet I wil seeme calme, shew diligence, and creep againe into your loue, but as a serpent in your bosome, that when I seeme most kind, I will be subtile, and my reuenge most sudaine." Chamberlain in 1623 records "a foul barbarous murder committed in Lombard Street by a prentice, upon two of his mistress's children, of six or seven years old, by cutting their throats, and then hanged himself. The reason is said to be some devilish revenge for ill usage." But there is no reason further to consider the long lists of such vulgar crimes which are common in any age.

The murder of Sir Thomas Overbury in 1613 was one of the most "Machiavellian" and complicated of all Elizabethan revenges. About the year 1601 Thomas Overbury, vacationing in Edinburgh, met young Robert Carr, an obscure page. The two became fast friends and journeyed to London together, where in 1606 Carr attracted the attention of James and rapidly became the royal favorite. Carr and Overbury retained their friendship to such an extreme that when Carr was created Lord Rochester in 1610, contemporary gossip made fun of Overbury's dominance over the favorite and thus indirectly over the king himself.

Early in 1611 Rochester fell under the spell of the young Countess of Essex whose reputation was already unsavory. Overbury remonstrated strongly, and Rochester was foolish enough to repeat Overbury's denunciations of her character to the countess. About this time the appearance in manuscript of *The Wife*, attributed to Overbury, increased the countess's anger, since she regarded it as an open exposure, by contrast, of her defects. Overbury fell into disfavor with the king through her machinations and, in April 1613, was thrown into

the Tower. Rochester, disgusted by Overbury's arrogance and the gibes of his friends at Overbury's governance, made no effort to support the prisoner. The countess had Sir William Wade removed as governor of the Tower, and installed Sir Gervase Helwys, whom she believed corruptible, in his place. Mrs. Turner, an apothecary Franklin, and Richard Weston followed her orders and for some time attempted to poison Overbury, probably with doses of copper vitriol. Sir Gervase Helwys may perhaps be exempted from actual participation in the crime, although he had knowledge of it, and indeed protested at the trial that he did not inform the king because he believed that James knew what was going on.

The poison doses were sent to Overbury throughout the summer, but he remained alive, even though in great agony. The usual explanation for the poison's inefficacy is that either the poisoners were too timid in their doses, or else they were cheated in their purchase of the poisons, a not unusual occurrence. The real reason may have been that Helwys diverted most of the poisoned food. At any rate, the countess's patience was exhausted by September of 1613, and Overbury was finally murdered by a poisoned clyster and hurriedly buried. Two months later Rochester, now Earl of Somerset, married the Countess of Essex. More than a year passed before suspicion was aroused by Somerset's enemies and the whole plot was discovered. The accomplices were executed, Somerset and his wife condemned by the court, but their lives were spared by royal intervention. Contemporary opinion laid, correctly, the motive for the murder to the Countess of Essex's desire for revenge on Overbury for defaming her character in his attempts to obstruct her marriage with Rochester. Gossip was no more tender of her reputation than Overbury had been. Her divorce from the Earl of Essex was accompanied by highly scandalous allegations, and she was even believed to have consulted some time before with Doctor Forman and Doctor Savory, two conjurers. about

poisoning her husband Essex, lest he discover her adultery with Rochester and revenge himself on them.

The curious ineffectiveness of the poison which tortured but did not kill Overbury has already been remarked. Its slowness, however, was one of the strong points of the legal prosecution, which declared that murder was the most horrible of all crimes and of all murders that by poisoning the most detestable, but murder by lingering poison was the worst of all. The Elizabethan was prepared to defend himself in open feud, "for by vigilancie and industrie meanes may be had to resist. or euite the most violent beast that euer nature bred, but from false and treacherous hartes. from poysoning murtherers what wit or wisdom can defend?"

Simple poisons were frequently used in Elizabethan times among the common people, and especially among wives who for one reason or another wished to rid themselves of their husbands; in deed, Coke during the trial of Weston for the murder of Overbury, observed that adultery was most often the begetter of poisoning. Grudges between gentlemen were customarily settled by the sword, not by the cup. Whether the comparative absence of known poisonings in high life during the period was entirely due to the fact that poisons were not used, whether various poisonings were successfully hushed up (as the Overbury affair nearly was), or whether the poisons used by the wealthier persons defied the analysis of the doctors, must remain largely a matter of guesswork.

There is always the possibility that certain initiates in Italian poisons did employ strange potions which escaped the inexperienced English doctor. Certainly strange methods were believed in and many deaths were imputed in the gossip of the times

to poison. On July 2, 1595, Edward Talbot complained before the Star Chamber against one Woode, who had "charged the plaintiff that he should secretly intend the poisoning of the Earl of Shrewsbury, his brother, by this defendant...For the said Wood hath suggested that more than three years, since this plaintiff wrought secretly under hand with this defendant to poison the said Earl by gloves." According to scandalous gossip, the Earl of Leicester had poisoned the Earl of Essex, "so hee died in the way of an extreme Flux caused by an Italian *Recipe*, as all his friends are well assured: the maker whereof was a Surgeon (as is believed) that then was newly come to my Lord from Italy. Neither must marvel though all these died in diverse manners of outward diseases, for this is the excellency of the *Italian* art who can make a man die, in what manner or shew of sickness you will." Leicester was also credited with the poisoning of his wife Lettice and of Lord Sheffield. The death of many a prominent man aroused whispers of poison and it is not too much to say that the Elizabethan courtier believed implicitly that death by poison was common in his circle. The uncommon number of diatribes against poison in Elizabethan literature of all sorts is not without significance; nor without significance is the fact that official Elizabethan law covered specifically the various subtle means by which it was believed poison could be administered: "gustu by taste, that is by eating, or drinking, being infused into his meat or drink: amhelitu, by taking in of breath, as by a poisonous perfume in a chamber, or other room: contactu, by touching: and lastly suppostu, as by a glyster or the like." The poisoning incidents in the tragedies were by no means so outlandish and beyond the experience or credulity of the audience as is usually believed.

But the lurid details of suspected poisonings probably existed for the greater part only in the Elizabethans' imaginations. Two cases may be

selected to illustrate revenges that could and did occur. The first illustrates the unromantic course of a quarrel between one Mallerie and one Hall, which first arose in 1573 when Hall repeated a friend's caution that Mallerie cheated at cards. Hot words ensued between Mallerie and Hall over the accusation, but there was no immediate action until Hall, angry at malicious reports that Mallerie had spread about London, assaulted him with a dagger but did no very great damage. Mallerie and his brother hatched various schemes of retaliation which they threatened darkly without putting into effect. Nevertheless, Hall's servants became angered and attacked and further wounded Mallerie. Hall asserted that he had not directed this second assault; nevertheless when Mallerie sued in court and had the servants jailed, Hall countered by arresting Mallerie for threats against his life. all received no satisfaction from his suit but the jury awarded Mallerie £ 100 damages with judgment stayed on Hall's appeal. A short time later Mallerie arrested Hall himself for the first personal assault, and Hall again countered by arresting Mallerie for drawing a weapon against one of his servants. Both men were now at fever heat, and a personal encounter between them would have been inescapable had not Mallerie suddenly died. The case is interesting for the combination of private and legal revenge employed in quarrels where, though neither man was too anxious to fight, natural death alone finally prevented a murderous assault.

The second case had a more serious conclusion. In 1607 the Lord Sanquire, who had followed James I from Scotland, was practising the foils with the fencing master Turner, and had the misfortune to lose his eye in the bout. Upon his recovery he went to France where the king, one day noticing the mutilation, inquired the reason and exclaimed in astonishment that the giver of the wound still lived. Sanquire was stung by the reproof and returned to England where some time after, in 1612, two of his hired ruffians, Carliel and Graye,

murdered Turner. This murder caused considerable excitement, and James himself personally hurried and directed the capture of Sanquire and his two accomplices, who were all tried and executed. The trial was significant from the point of view of Sanquire's confession in which he asserted that no honorable man would have remitted such an injury and that here was no law to redress him:

"I must confess I ever kept a grudge in my soul against him, but had no purpose to take so high a revenge: yet in the course of my revenge, I considered not my wrongs upon terms of Christianity . . . but being trained up in the courts of princes and in arms, I stood upon the terms of honour. . . . Another aspersion is laid on me, that I was an ill-natured fellow, ever revengeful and delighted in blood. To the first I confess I was never willing to put up a wrong, where upon terms of honour I might right myself, nor never willing to pardon where I had the power to revenge.

Sanquire would probably have been pardoned by the king if he had killed Turner himself and without delay. As it was, the Italianate features of the long nursing of revenge and the use of accomplices—both brought out skilfully by his prosecutor Bacon as opposed to English sentiment and usage—procured for him an execution by hanging, since a nobleman's death was refused. Such a murderous, long-continued revenge was evidently considered unusual, for English practice confined itself in general to immediate assault or formal duel, or to a combination of personal assault and legal proceedings as with Hall and Mallerie, or else to court intrigue either such as Raleigh was supposed to have conducted to bring about Essex's downfall, or the machinations that laid Overbury open to James's displeasure and so made him vulnerable for slaughter.



When in January of 1603 the Sieur de Chevalier wrote that the English "doe not fight in single combate," he was at least half right; a few years later he could not have been farther from the truth. England in the sixteenth century had scarcely been free from loody affrays, but these were mostly straightforward fights on the spot or surprise assaults without the formality of challenges and all the punctilio attached to the duel. With the success of the oppressive measures adopted by the authorities in France and Italy, the virus transferred itself to England in the latter years of Elizabeth's reign: the rapier supplanted the sturdier sword as the English weapon, honor grew more valuable than life, and the word "valiant" took on a new meaning. This private duel, though interdicted, became the most honorable and popular Elizabethan method of revenging injuries. And since Englishmen required instruction in managing their revenges according to the new imported etiquette, a number of books appeared which thinly masked their real purpose by pretending to give an historical account of the judicial combat, long since in disuse, though actually instructing the reader in the code of the private duel. In general, Elizabeth kept a firm hand over her courtiers and, whenever possible, forcibly reconciled them or allowed them to suffer the harsh penalties of the law. In 1592, for instance, the Privy Council sent John Hollys and Jarvis Markham, who had disobeyed the queen's orders forbidding them to fight, to prison. For a similar act of disobedience to Elizabeth, John tanhope was committed to prison for challenging Sir Charles Cavendish. In 1600 the Council sent a letter in the queen's name to the Earl of Southampton forbidding him to fight the Lord Grey de Wilton in the Low Countries as Southampton had purposed in leaving Ireland.

The sudden extraordinary increase in duelling soon after the accession of James I has never been very definitely explained. It is true that James did not have Elizabeth's gift for controlling the court,

that bribery could help a guilty gentleman, and that more knowledge of Italian and French practices had seeped into England. It may also be true that there was an added emphasis on court life and that courtiers in the midst of that precarious and competitive existence, each one jealous of his prerogatives adopted a more highly sensitive code of honor. In a life where each strove to surpass his fellow in a sovereign's favor, personal honor had almost daily to be vindicated. The most trivial causes could excite bloodshed: "A crosse word is ground enough for a challenge. We fall out for feathers; some lie dead in the Chanell, whiles they stood too much for the wall: others sacrifice their hearts blood for the loue of an Harlot. Not to pledge a health, is cause enough to loose health and life too."

It is probable, however, that a great part of the growth in the duel can be traced to the Scots who invaded London, and who were, as has been said, nearer to barbarism than the English. The ill-feeling between the two nations frequently broke out between their partisans at court.

To what extent duelling was in the air may be seen in an extract from a letter by John Chamberlain dated September 9, 1613:

"Though there be in show, a settled peace in these parts of the world, yet the many private quarrels among great ones prognosticate troubled humours, which may breed dangerous diseases, if they be not purged or prevented.

"I doubt not but you have heard the success of the combat betwixt Edward Sackville and the Lord Bruce of Kinlos betwixt Antwerp and Lille, wherein they were both hurt, the Lord Bruce to the death. Here is speech likewise that the Lord Norris and Sir Peregrine Willoughby are gone forth for the same purpose, and that the Lord Chandos and

Lord Hay are upon the same terms; there was a quarrel kindling betwixt the Earls of Rutland and Montgomery, but it was quickly quenched by the king, being begun and ended in his presence. But there is more danger betwixt the Earl of Rutland and the Lord Danvers, though I heard yester day it was already upon the point of compounding. But that which most men listen after is, what will fall out betwixt the Earl" of Essex and Mr. Henry Howard, who is challenged and called to account by the earl for certain disgraceful speeches of him."

The code of honor was carried to so high a pitch that "men so farre allow and commend, as they are not ashamed to say . . . that a man for cause of honour may arme himselfe against his country, the respect whereof is and euer was so holy; yea eue ..against his father, and with cursed hands violate his person, unto whom (next after God) he must acknowledge his life and being, and what else soeuer he hath in this world." Various "brainlesse boutefeux" defended publicly "that what soeuer a man hath once affirmed be it true or false; though he knowe in his owne conscience that the grounde is vniuste. 'upon which he gaue the Lie, yet he must constantly mayntayne it, only because it came once out of his lippes."

The stream of popular opinion upholding the duel was so strong that even persons who believed thoroughly in its unlawfulness were forced to conform to the practice or else to withdraw entirely from social intercourse lest they should be considered base cowards. Arguments in favor of the duel were listed: (1) If there were no duels, all persons would draw their swords who have an interest in the injured person's honor [i.e. collective revenge]; (2) The fear of damnation keeps men from indulging in unjust quarrels; (3) If an act is lawful for many, it is lawful for one: armies challenge one another and so should individuals; (4) Since laws value private honor no farther than

concerns the public safety, the individual must revenge his own dishonor; (5) The laws of knighthood bind all men to revenge an injury; (6) Since no one shall judge of honor but him who has it, the judges of civil courts (who are base in their origin) are unfitted for the duty; (7) Soldiers are reasonable men, yet we condemn a custom which they have brought in and authorized; (9) Many murders are committed which are undiscovered by law; if private men were allowed to punish these with the sword, murders would decrease. This last shows that the desire for personal blood-revenge was by no means dead in England.

By the year 1610 duelling had become a serious menace. In February of that year Sir John Finet wrote to the Earl of Northampton that worse would come unless "the blisshed .order intended bring not a speedy remedye." The order referred to may have been the proclamation which James issued later in the year or his elaborate Edict of 1613, for which plans were certainly on foot as early as 1610. James followed these works with a more dissuasive tract in 1618 entitled *The Peacemaker*, but it was not in his power to stamp out the duel. Even Cromwell was obliged to issue a proclamation promising stricter penalties and Charles II wrote two orders. The long list of eighteenth-century duelling books shows no abatement in the practice of illegal private revenge, and duels were fought well into the nineteenth century.

So far this illustrative material has concerned itself more with the general ideas of the age about private revenge and with the various methods employed by individuals, than with revenge tragedies themselves or the state of mind of their audiences. Discussion of the tragedies must be delayed, but it is time more particularly to examine the ideas of the audiences if we are ever fully to evaluate and understand the Elizabethan revenge tragedy of the whole period, What

did these audiences think of the plays? How close were their sympathies with the revenge motives of the characters? How outlandish did the plays seem, or how familiar were the revenge situations to Elizabethan life? Were the tragedies as far removed from actual English as were *The Libation Bearers* of Aeschylus and the *Thyestes* of Seneca from their times? Partial answers have already been given to some of these questions, while others must wait upon the discussion of the plays; but it is possible at this point to examine the matter with some, if not a complete, particularity.

The traditional critical view of the audience's reaction has been stated: "The notion that it was morally wrong for a son to avenge his father's murder-especially a murder conceived under such circumstances as represented in the play-was not entertained in Hamlet's time. . . . We must be careful not to import into the play modern conceptions of ethical propriety. To the people of his own time, and even to the audience of the Elizabethan age, Hamlet was called upon to perform a 'dread' duty." This assertion, so far as it relates to the Elizabethans, has been challenged by the theory that "there was a persistent condemnation of revenge in the ethical teaching of Shakespeare's England, a condemnation which was logically posited [on the biblical injunction, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, saith the Lord'] and logically defended." According to this view the audience was prevented by its ethical and religious education from applauding the motives of the stage-revengers. The last conclusion is perhaps too rigid.

While it is impossible to deny the immense force of the ethical condemnation of revenge by certain classes among the Elizabethans, yet the writings of the preachers, philosophers, and moralists of the age cannot be wholly depended upon to afford an accurate cross-section of the views of the dramatists or of the

audience, both of whom were swayed by equally strong influences from another direction. To explain these influences is at present our concern.

In Thomas Lodge's novel, *A Margarite of America* (1596), Arsadachus is about to depart from his country when his father gives him this parting advice, "Be . . . in thy reuenges bolde, but not too bloody." These words may well sum up the average Elizabethan's moderate conception of personal justice. John Norden (1597) admits on the one hand that revenge is a desire to requite an evil received by returning an evil, "which hath some colour to worke iniurie, for iniurie." While Bacon agrees with Sanquire on the other that murder for revenge of a serious injury was to be regarded with less horror than a slaying for jealousy or gain. Sir William Segar (1590) defended his book on honor from the imputation that it would incite men to needless revenge, by the argument that it was intended to prevent offenses, but for a man "being offended, [it] sheweth the - order of reuenge and repulse, according upto Christian knowledge." One of the occasions when he allows the worth of personal revenge-and it should be noted by dishonorable means-is when the offense has been given in a particularly dishonorable way: "for reuenge of such cowardlie and beastiall offences, it is allowable to use any aduantage or subtiltie one aduantage requireth another, and one treason may be with another acquitted." Retaliation for base injuries, then, was the first occasion on which certain writers tolerated revenge. There was a second occasion (highly important in a consideration of such revenge tragedies as *Hamlet*, *Antonio's Revenge*, *The Maid's Tragedy*, *Valentinian*, and *All's Lost by Lust*) when revenge was considered allowable. After justifying the use of force in self-defense, William Perkins (1606) whose books carried weight with every Elizabethan, argues that defense by force is lawful "when violence is offered, and the Magistrate absent; either for a time, and his stay be dangerous;

or altogether, so as no helpe can be had of him, nor any hope of his coming. In this case, God puts the sword into the private mans hands." Of practically the same import is the statement (1612) condemning by God's law revenge of private passion "that Iustice can decide."

Undoubtedly there seems to be a loophole here for the stage-revenger in a good cause who, like Hamlet, Antonio, and Maximus, may not be able to procure justice by law. Thus Bacon, in the midst of a condemnation of revenge, admits that "the most tolerable sort of revenge is for those wrongs which there is no law to punish; else a man's enemy is still before hand, and it is two for 'one.'"¹⁹ Advocates of the duel extolled its virtues in maintaining law and order, and even went so far as to maintain that the privilege of blood-revenge would strike more fear into the hearts of murderers than the cumbersome and often faulty processes of the law, which could not always discover and punish the slayer. Segar (1590) considers the suit at law to be the true revenge for injuries offered in public but for those in private without witnesses, and therefore without proof for law, it lies within the choice of the injured party either to revenge himself by challenge or by retaliation of like for like.

There can be little question that many an Elizabethan gentle man disregarded without a qualm the ethical and religious opinion of his day, which condemned private revenge, and felt obliged by the more powerful code of honour to revenge personally any injury offered him. The ordinary Englishman did not abjure revenge as such, especially when the duel was the means of action. It was only when the more treacherous and Italianate features were added (as in the murder of Overbury) or when accomplices were hired to revenge (as by Sanquaire) that he considered revenge despicable. The frequency with

which open assaults, even with disparity of numbers, and "honorable" duels were pardoned by the rulers of England in the seventeenth century indicates strongly that-no matter what the position of the law-it was the method and not the act itself which was largely called in question.

We come now to the third and most important justification of revenge: blood-revenge for murder. Legally the avenger of blood incurred the same penalties as any other murderer. Religiously, too, he was banned, since all revenge belonged to God. There is, however, much evidence of an Elizabethan sympathy for blood-revenge, which had survived from the tumultuous times not so long past. Thus Cornwallis (1601) inveighs against all private revenges, but specifically excepts murder, which he thinks needs punishment. The influential fencing-master Saviolo writes (1595) that among the few injuries it is impossible not to revenge are treacherous rape and murder. Treacherous murder would imply a lack of evidence for a legal conviction, and so the revenger would be justified by the sentiment for revenge in cases not covered by law or which could not be proved in the courts.

Although the Elizabethan had a strong native tradition of blood-revenge behind him, some of his ideas on the subject must inevitably have come from foreign sources. The correct revenge-code of the Italian gentleman given by Count Romei was known through Kepers's translation, *The Courtiers Academie* (1598). In essence it was this: revenge may be undertaken on those who wrong our father, son, brother, friend, and so forth, if the injury was done in contempt of us and through no manifest fault of the injured one. The person injured, however, must be impotent to revenge himself, else there would be a loss of honor in allowing another to perform the revenge; thus the father is not bound to revenge his strong and able son, or the son his

able father. The strong are always bound to revenge the weak, for it is considered that the offense is done as an injury to him who is able to revenge. English practice coincided, since we find the statement (1612), "It is dishonor to reuenge the fathers wronge if he be able to reueng it personally if he be not the son is bounde to it."

The statement made by the extremely influential Gentillet that the civil law refused the inheritance to the heir of a murdered father unless he revenged the father's death, *is* extremely interesting, since we find that the same opinion was held in England. Writing against duelling, an anonymous author (probably the Earl of Northampton) lists various current ideas (1612) in favor of the duel and then refutes each item. Of importance is his mention of the prevalent idea that "the ciuile law denies the fathers inheritance to that son which will not reuenge the death of his father." The author answers, " The lawe means judicial and ordinar meanes of which in like sort I aim for beside the bond of nature Justice it self barres all particular agreements [that] stoppes mens mouthes from clamor in a cause of bloud qua sanguine clamat."

How this belief in the legal necessity for the son to revenge a murdered father may have had its origin and development has been noted elsewhere. Of course, no such English law existed, but that there was no law is of little moment. What is of interest for the attitude of an Elizabethan audience towards a stage-revenger *is* the fact that it was popularly believed by Elizabethans to exist separately in England or else as a general law governing Western civilization. This idea, combined with the plea of the duellists for the right of blood-revenge, shows a very strong undercurrent favoring private justice for murder in Elizabethan times, a sympathy with (and native knowledge of) blood-revenge, and a persistent tradition by which the son, or heir, must take personal cognizance of the murder of his ancestor.

The Elizabethan audience's reaction to the revenge tragedies must be considered with an eye to this tradition as well as to their religious and ethical education. It would be far too much to assert that Elizabethans believed every murder should be privately revenged by the son as a sacred duty: this Greek and Roman, although scarcely Scandinavian, conception of a "sacred" duty was no part of any Elizabethan code except on the stage. Nor, on the other hand, can the view be wholly accepted that every private revenger of blood was automatically considered by the man in the street as a criminal who must receive his reward in death. The truth lies somewhere between these two extremes. There is no question that the Elizabethans firmly believed the law of God to forbid private vengeance. Correspondingly, there was a very real tradition existing in favor of revenge under certain circumstances, and especially of the heir's legal duty to revenge his father, even though this could be satisfied (if the individual chose and if the legal evidence were so strong as to assure conviction) by bringing a legal appeal or indictment. Certainly the Elizabethan son was more personally concerned in such a murder than in later times under a system of complete state justice. Many thoughtful men refused to condemn revenge entered upon in cases where recourse to the law was impossible. There would be few Elizabethans who would condemn the son's blood-revenge on a treacherous murderer whom the law could not apprehend for lack of proper legal evidence.

Such being the case, the audience at the theaters seems to have made the customary compromise between a formal set of religious and moral ethics and an informal set of native convictions. Under these circumstances and the evidence of the tragedies bears out the theory—the revenger of the drama started with the sympathy of the audience if his cause were good and if he acted according to the

typically English notions of straightforward fair play. It was only, as with Hieronimo (although this example may seem the most debatable of the many available), when he turned to "Machiavellian" treacherous intrigues that the audience began to veer against him. That the majority of stage-revengers-Hieronimo, Titus, Hoffman, Sciarrha, and Rosaura, to name only a few-met their death, may be attributed either to the fact that they turned from sympathetic, wronged heroes to bloody maniacs whose revenge might better have been left to God; or else that the strain of the horrible situation in which they found themselves so warped their characters that further existence in a normal world became impossible and death was the only solution.



Chapter 2

Source of the play Hamlet

Shakespearean experts are sure that his source for his play *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* was a play on the same subject attributed to Thomas Kyd and performed in London before 1590. This play whose manuscript has since disappeared was called the *Ur-Hamlet*. Phillip Henslowe, an Elizabethan theatrical manager, made a reference in his diary to a performance of this play on June 11, 1594. Acting in it were members of the Lord Admiral's Men and of the Lord Chamberlain's Men, a group in which Shakespeare was an actor. Another Elizabethan, Thomas Lodge, referred to it in his *Wits Miserie and the Worlds Madness*.

History relates that this *Ur-Hamlet* included dramatic elements like the ghost, the play within the play and the duel, just as Shakespeare's *Hamlet* did further, *Laertes* and *Fortinbras* were characters in this version.

Earlier, Kyd had written *The Spanish Tragedy*, a prototype of the Senecan tradition then popular on the Elizabethan stage. In that play are elements of the same revengeful ghost, the protagonist's determination to seek revenge and his emotional imbalance. Kyd's play was also characterized by an ingenious plot, clearcut motivation and rising suspense.

But the original story of *Hamlet*, one in which revenge is the dominant theme, can trace its roots back to the early middle ages in Northern Europe. We first hear about *Hamlet's* story in the *Historia Danica* written by Saxo Grammaticus, a Danish historian between 1180 and 1208 he put together a collection of true stories, legends and

folk tales of Northern Europe. The story of Hamlet or Amlethus as he was called is found in the third and fourth books of Saxo's *Historia*. According to Saxo, Amlethus was a legendary hero from the tenth century who was locked for many years in a brutal struggle with his enemies. His father, Horwendil, Governor of Jutland, who was married to Gerutha, daughter of the King of Denmark, is openly slain by his brother Fergon who seizes the throne and marries Gerutha. Amlethus, a young boy at the time, grows up determined to avenge his father's murder.

Like Shakespeare's Hamlet, Amlethus feigns madness to deceive his suspicious uncle who devises several schemes to entrap him, all without success. His attempts include arranging for a woman to seduce him, hiding a courtier in his mother's room to kill him unaware and sending him with two false friends to an intended death in England.

But Amlethus triumphs over these adversaries. He marries the English king's daughter, returns to Denmark and murders his enemies including his uncle. After ruling Denmark for several years, he marries second Englishwoman who betrays him and he is killed in battle by another uncle.

A second story of Hamlet was included in the fifth series of the *Histoires tragiques* written by Francois de Belleforest in 1576, in 1608, Thomas Pavier translated this version in England and called it *The Hystorie of Hamlet*. Belleforest's tale of revenge featured some differences from the original Saxo version. In Belleforest's story, Gerutha and Fergon commit adultery before Horwendil's murder, Hamlet is in love with the woman ordered to seduce him and he suffers from a melancholic disposition.

It can be concluded that although Elizabethan audiences were familiar with the Hamlet story, Shakespeare's version of a young man's brutal struggle to avenge his father's murder incorporated

elements from the Saxo, Belleforest, and Ur-Hamlet versions of Amlethus, Prince of Denmark. Shakespeare turned the basic plot into "Superb theater not only by applying the conventions of Elizabethan drama but also by showing the character development of a complex tragic hero in superior and timeless language.

Chapter 3

Hamlet as a Revenge Tragedy

Through the influence of certain Plays of the Roman philosopher Seneca, an important strand of drama developed in the late sixteenth century: revenge tragedy. Its popularity seems to have begun around 1589 with Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*-and to -have continued until 1614 with James Shirley's *The Cardinal*. Its ingredients were a son who sought revenge for some wrong done to his father, a ghost who incited the revenge, a hero who approach himself for some inability and adopted a pose of madness, crimes of adultery, incest, or murder, intrigue and counterintngue, and devices such as witches and cemetery scenes. All these conventions, with the exception of witches, are found in some form in *Hamlet*. Nonetheless *Hamlet* is subject to interpretation as "pure revenge tragedy" because the revenge motif is not unquestionably set forth to Hamlet and it does not explain the full conflict which he feels within him.

There are many ways of defining revenge tragedy and thus many tragic elements that may appear in a literary work. Perhaps the simplest definition requires that the protagonist die at the end. However, to make his death significant enough for drama, it was felt that the protagonist should be of noble or important position, for others would then be affected directly by his death. Notions of tragedy developed in the Renaissance from Boccaccio's *De Casibus Illuſtrum Virorum* (Concerning the Fall of Noble Men), through John Lydgate's *The Fall of Princes*. Aristotle's discussion of tragedy was also influential. Hamlet's fall from the noble courtier described by Ophelia results in his death and the deaths of Polonius, Rosencrantz, Guildenstern. Ophelia, the queen, Laeatres and the king. The people

of Denmark have also suffered because of what happens to Hamlet and the ruling nobility of Denmark.

Another element which *The Fall of Princes* introduced into the tragic formulas of the Renaissance was that the fall should arise from the shortcoming within the prince: pride, perhaps or an error of judgment. This idea coincides with Aristotle's statements concerning *hamartia* (popularly known as a tragic flaw, but better translated as an excess of some quality which becomes harmful). The tragic hero was dominated by this weakness and was thus responsible for his own misfortune and death either through action or through inaction. The conflict of the play could arise from the hero's external relationships because of his *hamartia* or from internal struggles to overcome it or from both.

The most discussed question about *Hamlet* is just what is Hamlet's tragic flaw. There are those who believe it is his inability to act or to make up his mind; there are those who see it as an Oedipus complex or as a death wish. Is his reason submerged by excessive passion. Does he really become temporarily insane? The narrative presenting his story should raise *pathos* (great feeling, suffering) in the audience through their recognition of at least potential elements within themselves or others they know and *catharsis* (a purging of that pathos) through pity and fear. The play objectifies these feelings and thus eliminates them which is the psychological definition of catharsis. At the conclusion of the play there should be an uplifting of the spirit if catharsis has taken place. Perhaps, therefore, the sense of a tragic "flaw" in Hamlet that an audience receives is one involving uncertainty through not knowing what is truth, what course of action to take and what results will ensue upon the action taken.

A more profitable way of looking at *Hamlet* as a revenge tragedy is to perceive the wasting of good (Hamlet) in the process of driving out evil (Claudius). The emphasis, however, is upon the character of evil not of good. At the moment of tragic vision, the hero comes to recognize the nature of things fully and his relationship to them; this is called *anagnorisis*. Action then occurs which will both reverse the course of the play and bring an end not fully expected or intended; this is called *peripeteia*. As Hamlet acknowledges Claudius' guilt, he resolves to act. But his actions bring ends unforeseen by him at this time: Polonius' death, Ophelia's death, his own death.

Such ironic results are the foundation of the tragic spirit; they cast a pessimistic gloom over the play until the paradox of good and evil is understood. Hamlet's act brings suffering but ultimately achieves learning (*mathematic*), to employ Kenneth Burke's expression of tragic vision.



Chapter 4

Treatment of Revenge in Helmet

Hamlet has its origin in the dramatic tradition of Revenge Tragedy. Revenge implies the wronged individual taking the law into his own hands in order to satisfy an inner passion though incivilised society, this function of punishing the wrong-doer is entrusted to the government of the state. The motive for revenge is a primitive emotion to be found in natural man, though it is a dangerous emotion. Revenge-the action of retaliating for an injury done, proved a popular theme for dramatists for it enabled them to depict human passions, render rhetorical speeches, and present violent action. The dramatic value of these features was great in the secular theatre. Early dramatists as well as early audience considered vengeance to be a pious duty laid on the next of kin, it was wild justice, but for drama to be satisfactory and successful something more than strict justice was needed. The old Law claimed an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth vengeance demanded both the eyes a jaw full of teeth, and above all that the victim, after exquisite torments of body and mind should go straight to hell there to remain in everlasting torment. A perfect revenge required, therefore, great artistry.

Seneca: a name associated with Revenge Tragedy. The very name Revenge Tragedy brings to our mind Seneca, the ancient Roman dramatist, who in turn was indebted to Greek mythology for his material. But he varied in his treatment of the themes and produced tragic effect by horrifying incidents, bloody actions and ranting speeches.

The chief features of the Revenge Tragedy. The Revenge Tragedy -has a set pattern.

- (i) It deals with crime, usually murder, with varying motives.
- (ii) The duty of vengeance is laid on the next of kin or near relative.
- (iii) Invariably a ghost is involved; generally the ghost of the dead which reveals the crime committed and lays upon the hero the duty of avenging the murder.
- (iv) The person who is charged with the duty of avenging the murder encounters many impediments to vengeance.
- (v) The duty is accepted as something sacred and the murder is avenged with disastrous consequences.
- (vi) There is much blood-shed and crude physical horrors and when the murder is avenged. the avenger and all others closely concerned perish together in one gory ruin.
- (vii) The language is generally astounding and bombastic.

The revenge theme was very popular during the Elizabethan era, for it offered much scope for the display of passions, ranting speeches and bloody actions. The revenge theme deals with exciting plots which arouse the people's emotional excitement to a much greater level than an ordinary theme could. Such plots are found in the revenge tragedy and they have an immediate appeal for the audience. Hence Shakespeare, in his *Hamlet*, adopted the dramatic tradition of the revenge tragedy, but his artistry lifted the play much higher than any play treating this theme. During the Elizabethan era, the Greek and Latin classics were of much interest and the dramatists found the theme of revenge quite imitable. They adopted not only the bloody action and ranting speeches of those early plays presenting the revenge theme but also the supernatural figures and the madness brought on the characters by desperation. Kyd's "*The Spanish Tragedy*" and Shakespeare's own *Titus Andronicus* are the best

examples of the dramatic use of this revenge theme in the early Elizabethan age. In both plays are pictured the difficulties which are faced by an injured man in identifying the murderers and punishing them. But they avenge the murders successfully and are satisfied with their revenge.

An important feature of the revenge tragedy is the ghost of the dead which reveals the crime committed and the identity of the culprit and lays the duty of avenging the murder. The role of the ghost is to urge the avenger to action and the avenger encounters many impediments in achieving the goal. Finally he avenges the murder with much difficulty and perishes in the encounter. Hamlet, no doubt, conforms to the tradition of revenge play in the light of these points. Hamlet is enjoined by his father's ghost with the duty of avenging his father's death. When it finds him inactive it appears again to 'whet' his action and exhort, him to a speedy revenge.

Hamlet, though finds the time 'out of joint' and determines to set it right. He considers' the entmsted work of the ghost .as something sacred but he also thinks about the action required of him. Hence he avenges the murder at the cost of his own life as well as the lives of many others. Thus, revenge becomes the central theme of *Hamlet*, and the supernatural element is fully exploited.

Revenge motif in '*Hamlet*'. The theme of revenge is extended beyond the main character. There are other revenges also. Fortinbras wants to take revenst" on Denmark for the losses sustained by his father in a duel with Hamlet's father. Fortinbras is frank and openly expresses his motives. His actions too are honourable; hence he manages to vindicate his father and to win back much more than his father lost. Laertes too seeks to avenge his father's death and the insanity of Ophelia. He succeeds in

punishing the murderer at the cost of his own life for his indulgence in foul deeds. Hamlet wants to take revenge against Claudius, the murderer of his father, the usurper of his rights to the throne and the seducer of his mother. He too avenges the death of his father at the cost of his life due to his irresolution and inactiveness. Thus there is the element of murder, adultery, incestuous marriage, insanity, faithlessness"-all elements of Revenge Tragedy.

Apart from the above mentioned elements, there is the melodramatic element also. There is bloodshed, violent, terrifying scenes are depicted or described in keeping with the Revenge tragedy tradition. For example there is the eavesdropping-scene, Hamlet's assumed madness. Ophelia going mad and drowning, Polonius being killed by Hamlet. Claudius plotting against Hamlet and sending him to England with orders to execute him on English soil, An enraged Laertes attacking Claudius's castle and demanding justice, Laertes and Hamlet leaping into the grave of Ophelia and grappling with each other, the ship in which Hamlet travels to England being attacked by the pirate vessel and finally in the closing scene several deaths taking place. Gertrude dies having drunk the poisoned wine, followed by Claudius who is wounded by Hamlet with the envenomed sword and compelled to drink the remains of the poisoned wine: Hamlet and Laertes die with the wounds of the same poisoned sword at each other's hands. The staging of the 'Mouse-trap' play represents all the horrors on the stage.

Shakespeare's *Hamlet* has all the elements of a Senecan revenge play; however, his treatment of the revenge theme makes the work much more than a mere Revenge Tragedy. Though it is a tragedy of blood and horror the treatment of the theme is not so crude and gross as that of the conventional Revenge tragedy. These elements have been refined to raise *Hamlet* far above cheap melodrama. The

supernatural element is not crude but acts as an instrument of justice to punish the evil-doer. Again Shakespeare's treatment of the theme of duty, a son's duty of avenging his father's death-is more complex than others. In avenging the murder, in other plays, the material considerations act as impediments. But in *Hamlet* it is Hamlet's own conscience, and his psychological refinement that are the impediments. Above all, the language lessons the tone of cruelty and violence and makes *Hamlet* a higher work of art.

In *Hamlet* Shakespeare presents a revenger who is both ruthless and reluctant. As a revenger he must act, on behalf of outraged virtue, to restore a violated order, set right what is out of joint. But the act he is impelled to do, involve him in evil of the kind which he would punish. As the ruthless revenger he exemplifies in his own person the evil which is inseparable from the good in human nature, as the reluctant revenger he can symbolize the good's abhorrence of it.

Goggin's remarks on *Hamlet* that it "is not to be regarded as a tragedy of revenge, but as a tragedy of the human soul", is true, for Shakespeare has portrayed Hamlet as a man of irresolution in spite of his extraordinary intellectual genius and personality. Whenever he is called to act upon the Ghost's injunction, he vacillates due to the conflict which is going on within his mind. He meditates upon each of his actions and reflects on life, this makes him an inactive man. A man of deep thought is less man of prompt deeds. Whenever he acts, he does so on impulse, but he is incapable of pre-planned action. Only in his soliloquies do we come to know his real nature. It is Shakespeare's skill in the presentation of the character of Hamlet that distinguishes his play from the conventional Revenge Tragedy.



Hamlet is no simple Revenge Tragedy. Shakespeare has woven into the play complex threads of contrast of character and ideas on the efficacy and value of revenge to elevate it much above the common plays of the Revenge genre. Shakespeare has broadened the vision of the play to a consideration of the universal mysteries of man's being. Hamlet's task, when placed in the widest moral context, is not simply to kill his father's killer but by doing so to rid the world of the satire and restore it to Hyperion. The theme of revenge is repeated and contrasted in case of Fortinbras and Laertes. Fortinbras, the son of a dead king and nephew of a reigning king (comparison with Hamlet is obvious) is actively campaigning to set right his father's alleged wrongs. He is all 'hot' for action. Even when his efforts for his father's lands are over and his soldiers are diverted against the Polack, Fortinbras is a contrast to Hamlet as a man of action in a daring enterprise. The sight of his army risking death for a worthless patch of ground comes to Hamlet as a rebuke. Hamlet's soliloquies point out that he is aware of delaying rightful revenge, but he cannot help it. Fortinbras finds a quarrel in a straw. Hamlet, having a powerful and genuine incitement, yet delays his revenge. When he does act, he kills Polonius in mistake for the King, and the second revenge action is ready to begin.

Laertes, as the young son of a murdered father, is all the situation asks for. He is the typical revenger -all that Hamlet is not. His every word and gesture invites comparison with Hamlet. He would cut his enemy's throat in Church while Hamlet spare the king at prayer. If Hamlet feels conscience makes coward of men, Laertes consigns conscience to the devil and declares: "I dare damnation". But the contrast does not disparage Hamlet. What we see of Laertes as revenger, unhesitant and violent, with neither awe nor scruple, careless both of the safety and of his own salvation makes Hamlet's

deficiencies in this part glaring. But the revenge of Laertes involves Hamlet as its object. The situation of revenge is revealed as one which the same man may act both parts; and the paradox of man's dual nature compound of nobility and baseness, God and beast, is exemplified in the hero's dual roles. And a hero whose tragic role it is to punish and be punished, to do evil with good, might well be reluctant to perform it. Thus the delay in the action required of Hamlet.

The theme of revenge is seen in no narrow sense in *Hamlet*; it is part of a much broader, much more universal vision—the issue of the human condition. 'To be or not to be' is a question that Hamlet muses upon. It is the premise of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, of the traditional Hamlet legend, that a son should avenge a father's death. But Shakespeare's concept of revenge is not simple. If the play imposes on its hero the duty of revenge, it does not follow that revenge has unqualified approval. The question of revenge is caught up with issue of good and evil. Evil is implicit in the very task of revenge which nature imposes on Hamlet. Thus the theme of revenge becomes part of the fundamental conflict the play exhibits in Hamlet. He must participate in life, though reluctantly. However, in the last scene there comes a change, Hamlet has come to terms with the destiny of man. He is ready for the death. He perceives that the universe is governed by some supreme, mysterious design. Revenge still has its ruthlessness, as whimsical what it does to Rosencrantz. But reluctance, now that he recognizes and submits to a universal order, is at an end. He has accepted his place in this mortal world and instead of reconciling from what life involves, he is willing to play his part, in the final contest between the two sons avenging their fathers, such tainted with the evil he would destroy, punish one another, yet die forgiving one another. The avenger who kills the King when he has himself received his own death would at

last fulfill his duel role. The avenger has recognized a truth which goes beyond all petty' revenges and conflicts in the readiness is all.

Conclusion: To call *Hamlet* a Revenge Tragedy would be to do the work a great injustice, it would ignore the play's artistic superiority over other plays of this genre. The language which evokes a special world befitting great tragedy, the universal issues it takes up and tries to resolve, the complex nature of its hero-all these qualities lift *Hamlet* much above what is conventionally termed 'Revenge Tragedy'. It is a standing example of what a great artist can do with a conventional theme. It is only fitting that its avenging hero Hamlet dies to the beautiful heavenly benediction of Horatio, his friend:

Flights of angels sing thee to thy rest.

rather than to the satisfied gloatings of a ghost as in other revenge plays.

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