
New Version of the Vengeful Hero

Hamlet challenges the conventions of revenge tragedy by deviating from them.

- Sydney Bolt, 1985

The typical Elizabethan theatre-goer attending the first production of *Hamlet* in 1604 would have had clear expectations. The conventions of Elizabethan revenge tragedy, initially dating back to the Roman poet Seneca, had already been well-established. Later, Thomas Kyd established the "Kydian Formula", a framework comprising all of the elements of a typical revenge tragedy, when he published *The Spanish Tragedy* in 1586. The event that fuels the plot of Kyd's play is a murder, committed by a future King, who is thus placed beyond the reach of the law. The victim's ghost, returning from Purgatory to instruct his son to avenge his death, functions as a Chorus over the course of the play. His son pretends to be mad and presents a dumb-show in court so that he may be assured of the murderer's blame. This play, full of melodrama and rhetoric, ends with the death of almost all of the characters, including the murderer, the son, and the son's accomplice. In *Hamlet*, Shakespeare adheres to all of Kyd's salient elements. I would, therefore, challenge Bolt's declaration that Shakespeare deviates from the conventions of revenge tragedy. In fact, I would suggest that Shakespeare actually transcends these conventions, producing something far more powerful than a traditional, conventional revenge tragedy. Shakespeare builds on the structure of a conventional revenge tragedy and creates a psychological drama, focusing on the tortured personality of the protagonist and his motivation, rather than on the act of revenge itself.

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

Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer

The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,

Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,

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And by opposing end them?

These questions further Hamlet's philosophising about suicide and his uncertainty about his situation. Indeed, there seems to be very little consistency in Hamlet's life; his father has been murdered, and his own mother has (in ignorance) married the murderer; his lover, Ophelia, has "denied him access," at her father's prompting. The fact that both of the women in his life seem to have rejected him obviously fuels his ardent misogyny. In Act I Scene II, he exclaims "Frailty, thy name is woman!" In Act III Scene I, the tension between Hamlet and Ophelia is obvious from the outset. She addresses him as "Good my lord," but what dominates the conversation is Hamlet's discussion about his loss of faith in women. Abandoning verse for savage prose, Hamlet's disjointed speech communicates to the audience that he believes all women (he uses the address "yourselves") are treacherous deceivers; that "jig", "amble", "lisp", "nickname God's creatures" and make their "wantonness" their "ignorance". Hamlet later expands upon his hatred for women when he confronts Gertrude with her sins: "As kill a king, and marry with his brother." With his violent and repellent imagery of what he considers incestuous conduct by the Queen ("It will but skin and film the ulcerous place,

Whilst rank corruption, mining all within,

Infects unseen") he not only greatly upsets his mother ("O Hamlet, thou hast cleft my heart in twain") but, by implication, also condemns all womankind.

In Act I Scene VI, Hamlet talks to Horatio and scorns not only Claudius, but also the Danish nation for its "custom" of holding grand "feasts". He disapproves of the Danes' way of celebrating because he considers this one flaw to let the country down, giving it a bad reputation. Hamlet compares this idea to a man, saying that if a man is born out of nature he will have a fundamental flaw that will bring him down as it gradually grows. This idea causes the audience to pity Hamlet since, with hindsight, they know that he is actually describing himself when talks about this man. In keeping with the traditions of revenge tragedy, Shakespeare provides Hamlet with one fatal flaw, but ironically the flaw is an inability to fulfill what his father's ghost asks him to do. For the hero not to take revenge would have considerably surprised the Elizabethan audience. In Act III Scene III, Hamlet is presented with a perfect opportunity to kill Claudius when he finds him apparently praying in the chapel ("Now I might do it pat"), but he eventually decides not to do so, a decision perhaps borne out of his scholarship. The student Hamlet's fatal flaw stems from the way that he begins to think carefully and consider the consequences of committing the murder. Indeed, in his soliloquy, Hamlet says "that would be scanned" and begins to contemplate his actions. In keeping with the religious beliefs prevalent during the time, Hamlet genuinely believes that if he kills Claudius while praying, Claudius' soul will go straight to Heaven. At any other time, Claudius would have gone to Purgatory, which is where Hamlet's father now resides, since he did not receive absolution for his sins before being

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murdered. However, if Hamlet had been the conventional avenger that his Elizabethan audience expected, he would not have stopped long enough to fully comprehend the consequences of his actions; he would have rather killed Claudius as soon as he got the chance.

Hamlet's awareness of his fatal flaw makes him even less of a conventional revenge hero; in his soliloquy in Act III Scene I, he declares, "Thus conscience does make cowards of us all." He calls himself a "rogue and peasant slave"; while the Player is distressed simply for acting in the dumb-show ("And all for nothing!"), Hamlet himself is unable even to conjure up the same emotion. He speculates:

What would he do,

Had he the motive and the cue for passion

That I have?

He would drown the stage with tears.

Hamlet feels guilty for his inability to do so, calling himself "unpregnant of my cause." He questions, "Am I a coward?", interjecting his soliloquy, already punctuated with exclamations such as "O vengeance!", with broken sentences and verse that dissolve into the single syllable line, "Ha!"

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

The second contrasting character that Shakespeare offers is Laertes. After Hamlet killed his father, Polonius, and was indirectly responsible for Ophelia's madness ('desperate terms') and death (since she most likely committed suicide), Laertes, spurred on by the Machiavellian Claudius, desperately seeks revenge. Laertes is furious at Claudius when he hears of his father's death, and immediately rushes back to Denmark to avenge the terrible insult to his honour. Shakespeare presents us with the powerful symbolism of "The ocean, overpeering of

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his list" - the rising tide of Laertes' "rabble" quickly covering the seashore, and continues the sense of tense urgency with Laertes' aggressive dialogue: "That drop of blood that's calm proclaims me bastard." Laertes refuses to be calmed, protesting that to do so would deny his status as his father's son. When Claudius relates to Laertes his desire for Hamlet to be killed by "accident", to ensure Gertrude does not suspect anything Laertes immediately proffers himself as the "organ" of Hamlet's death. Although Claudius manipulates him, Laertes plays an active role in formulating the conspiracy, himself conceiving the idea to poison the already "unbated" sword; so strong is his desire for revenge that he would even be willing to kill a childhood friend. However, Hamlet, the unconventional revenge hero, cannot himself kill a man who murdered his father and then immediately married his mother! When Claudius questions him as to what he would be prepared to do to avenge his father's death, Laertes' response is violent and unequivocal: "To cut his throat I' the' church." This, ironically, parallels Hamlet's earlier inability to kill Claudius in church, as seen in Act III Scene III.

Laertes' aggressive response reveals that he is a man of action, and thus a Mediaeval man. Hamlet, on the other hand, is very much a thinker; a Renaissance man. I believe that it is entirely consistent with Shakespeare's approach of transcending the elements of revenge tragedy that rather than keeping Hamlet as a conventional seeker of vengeance in the Senecan mould, he sculpts a contemporary figure. Shakespeare presents a protagonist, who, far from a conventional Roman Catholic, is actually part of a new breed of man. Hamlet goes to university in Wittenberg in Germany, the birthplace of Martin Luther's Protestantism and of the Reformation. Shakespeare also crafts a humanist quality in Hamlet, with his thirst for knowledge and a pre-occupation with the complexity of man's personality ("What a piece of work is man"). By creating a university-educated Renaissance Humanist, Shakespeare sets Hamlet apart from other revenge heroes such as Hieronimo in *The Spanish Tragedy* and Laertes, thereby emphasising Hamlet's unconventionality.

Some critics argue that the final scene of the play sees Hamlet transformed into the conventional revenge hero that he always aspired to be, as he kills Claudius in a fit of passion. Indeed, it is certainly true that the final scene, where the stage is littered with bodies, complies with the traditions of conventional revenge tragedy. The Elizabethan audience would have gone home satisfied! However, Shakespeare's treatment of revenge in Hamlet is unusual because while revenge is clearly the subject matter fuelling the plot, it is only a subsidiary issue. Far more central is Hamlet's inability to exact revenge, a byproduct of his instability, indecision and misogyny. Shakespeare creates a conventionally-structured revenge tragedy, but ensures that his hero is not trapped within these confines. By making use of theatrical conventions such as soliloquies and asides, Shakespeare not only builds a relationship between the hero and the audience, but allows the audience to see into the mind of the hero and understand what he is feeling. By erecting a psychological drama within the structure of a revenge tragedy, Shakespeare ensures that the essence of the play is not revenge in itself, but is rather a

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psychological and emotional study of Hamlet's disturbed character. Shakespeare thus transcends the conventions of revenge tragedy, rather than deviating from them, as Sydney Bolt argues.

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