

The Scales of Justice: Revenge and Forgiveness in
Early Modern Revenge Tragedy

by

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Table of Contents

I:	Introduction.....	4
II:	The Scales of Justice.....	9
III:	“Pollution must be purged”: Blood for Blood in the Early Tragedies of Revenge.....	20
IV:	“That would be scanned”: The Late Tragedies and the Rejection of Revenge.....	47
V:	<i>The Tempest</i> and the Death of the Genre.....	64
VI:	Conclusion: Pardon-for-Blood and the New Equality..	71
	Bibliography.....	77

I.

Introduction

When Laertes in his dying breaths demands of his victim and killer, “Exchange forgiveness with me, noble Hamlet” (V.ii.308), the moment of Christian peace and purity may appear incongruous with the heaps of bodies that litter the stage, rapidly slaughtered in this final scene. For its Elizabethan audience, however, the moment would have captured an essential ambiguity of the times. The Bible insists upon a brutal payment for sin, in which wrongs must be met with exact revenge in the form of “Eye for eye, tooth for tooth” (Exodus 21:24). At the same time, indifferent to the contradiction, Christ enjoins that his followers “Turn the other cheek”¹ (Matthew 5:39) when injured, abjuring revenge. This intrinsic conflict is expanded by the Bible’s additional allocation of the revenge prerogative. “The revenger of blood himself shall slay the murderer,” Numbers (35:19) preaches, while in Romans God is explicitly possessive of His right, declaring unambiguously, “Vengeance is mine” (12:20).

Although *Hamlet* (c. 1600-1601) emerged as merely one in a stream of popular revenge plays that dominated the early modern stage, the play stood alone in its complex treatment of these conflicting commands. Making a dramatic plot out of the moral dilemma that arose from these incompatible orders, Shakespeare’s play foregrounded a debate that had hitherto remained largely unexplored within the revenger’s quest. Unlike his predecessors, who accepted the urgings of vengeful ghosts and delayed their revenge only until the moment when it could be most

¹ “I say unto you, That ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also.” Matthew 5:39.

perfectly achieved, Hamlet's delay springs from moral hesitations and religious development, ultimately taking the play out of its Senecan and Catholic origins and into a modern Calvinist realm which could not accept revenge as it had reigned before. By directly addressing forgiveness in a genre formerly dedicated to revenge, *Hamlet* ushered in a new era of plays that demanded a comprehensive justice that revenge alone failed to provide. *Hamlet*, moreover, acknowledges the dire consequences of revenge and leaves the play in a distinctly Calvinist context, one in which the quest for justice proves incompatible with the revenge quest with which it had once appeared synonymous.

The changes to the genre that occurred after *Hamlet* took the stage began to lead the tragedies of justice away from the genre of revenge tragedy. The very concept of this latter genre, however, was not born until centuries later, as modern critics sought a term under which to unite these late Elizabethan plays that centered upon the themes of justice and revenge. The label "revenge tragedy" was first applied by Fredson Bowers in the 1940s, used to identify and unite the series of plays from the early modern period that take revenge as their central motif. The unity that Bowers identifies, however, is founded upon the adherence of these plays to a series of conventions that, Bowers asserts (63-64), distinguish the plays from their peers. As even Bowers himself concedes, however, these conventions are frequently questioned or ignored in the very plays that Bowers seeks to unite. In *Antonio's Revenge* (c. 1599-1601), for instance, the revengers defy the convention calling for their deaths, in *A Woman Killed with Kindness* (c. 1603) the revenger deeply regrets his vengeful actions, and in *The Atheist's Tragedy* (c. 1611), most strikingly of all, the

would-be revenger never lifts a finger against the villain, who is slain by his own hand through an act of divine intervention. While these conventions appear and vanish in the various plays, however, one theme pervades each of the plays Bowers groups together. The quest for justice runs as a common thread through each of these plays, relying throughout on a definition of justice that is synonymous with the balance of good and evil. Furthermore, although Bowers' tracking of these oft-flouted generic conventions leads him to conclude that the genre survived effectively until the close of the theaters in 1642, a more focused study must take note of the overwhelming vogue for revenge tragedy between the years 1587 and approximately 1611, after which the production of revenge tragedies went into sharp decline. After *Hamlet's* complex probing of the questions of revenge and justice, the simple template provided by Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy* appeared startlingly insufficient to discuss the themes of revenge, justice, and religion, and the revenge tragedy began to decline in popularity. As a result, this study focuses on the two decades that transitioned from the sixteenth century into the seventeenth, containing within this brief period the birth, peak, and decline of the early modern revenge play. This small collection of years saw the creation of the vast majority of all plays now canonized as early modern revenge tragedies, which unite behind this single quest for a justice which serves as a guide for the play's morality and action.

Within the plays of these years, justice's demand for a precise, almost mathematical balancing of scales is immediately challenged by a crime that sets the world out of order and tips the scales in the direction of villainy. Distinguishing themselves from their early modern contemporaries, these plays unfailingly open in

worlds chaotically disrupted in this manner, in which the scales of justice have been tipped and the whole equilibrium of life upset. In the plays of justice that dominated the stage in the early modern period, such disorder was a requisite characteristic of the play's setting: in the lands that host the revenge plots, the skies burn and the heavens tremble (*Antonio's Revenge* I.iii.52-3), and princes fall ill (Rousard in *The Atheist's Tragedy*, III.iv.63-7) and maids and mothers fall mad (Ophelia in *Hamlet* IV.v and *The Spanish Tragedy's* Isabella III.viii). Murder and other wrongdoing set the world into chaotic disorder, the precarious balance in which the world hangs is set asunder, and revenge or another action must be precisely calculated to set it right.

Although modern generic conventions reductively group all these plays together as tragedies of revenge, in fact these early modern justice plays offer a variety of solutions to rectify this imbalance in the world. When Hieronimo takes the stage in Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*, he hesitates only briefly in determining the course of his action, dispelling all doubt over the morality of revenge in the course of one monologue in the Third Act in which he concludes, "I will revenge his death!" (III.xiii.20). Once decided, furthermore, Hieronimo blazes a trail in which he never again sways from this conclusion. Fifteen years later, in contrast, Hamlet's doubt is so complexly woven into the fabric of Shakespeare's play that it is "eventually doubtful whether [the play] ends in vengeance or not" (Kerrigan 211). While the first plays of the genre scream for blood, and the last renounce bloodshed as a solution to wrongdoing, all concede that balance must be obtained, and all revolve around this fundamental premise that balance must be returned to the world to ensure order and justice in society. At last, as the popularity of revenge waned, forgiveness came

forward as an alternative avenue to justice, and the tragicomedy of revenge stepped in for the revenge tragedy, adopting at its heart the same concept of justice even as it renounced revenge as a means by which to restore balance in the world. Thus this equilibrium remained intact even as the means by which it was achieved shifted over the years, ultimately abandoning the blood-for-blood ethic of Exodus and *The Spanish Tragedy* in favor of the more humane pardon-for-blood sentiment of the New Testament and the seventeenth-century tragicomedy. Revenge died out, but justice remained ever strong, and the scales of justice ceased to be a measuring device for human blood.

II.

The Scales of Justice

The particular conception of justice which bound together the Elizabethan revenge plays into a cohesive genre reflected a myriad of long-standing traditions which had dominated conceptions of justice for generations. Since the days of ancient Babylon, legal justice had lived in the code of *lex talonis*, the official payment of like for like. This legal system relied on payment in recompense for a crime, and sought to ensure that the payment exacted be precisely equal to the value of the crime that was committed. The system, which remained in many faculties in effect in Tudor England, was laid out in the ancient Code of Hammurabi, which officially established the values of crimes and the appropriate payments to be exacted from offenders. Although its reckonings are specific, a single belief lies at the heart of this complex Code: a criminal must pay for his crime, and a payment of money, time, or blood will make up for the wrong he has caused and return balance and order to the community.

The belief that the evildoer should suffer evil in return had retained its force ever since the days of classical Athens (Kerrigan 22), developing into the core of Western conceptions of justice. Most importantly of all, however, was the qualifying sentiment that the guilty party must pay in *exact proportion* to the crime he had committed; otherwise the scales of justice would remain unbalanced, and justice would not be served. By developing a code which enumerated specific payments, the Babylonians of the eighteenth century B.C. implicitly acknowledged that more than one form of payment might conceivably be exacted from a criminal. The blood-for-blood justice that dominated the early revenge plays of the Elizabethan age was

therefore just one form of retributive payment, and the thirst for revenge that drove the plot of so many plays of the early modern period was in fact just a single form of the quest for justice. This emphasis on balance that lives in the legal mandates of *lex talionis* provides the dominant force behind the tragedies of revenge, uniting them in their desire to extract from the villain payment of like for like.

Like this code of justice, the election of revenge as the means by which to achieve justice was also inherited by Elizabethan society. Alongside the talion structure of justice, which prioritized balance over all else, Renaissance Britain also inherited a brutal code of honor that specifically urged victims towards revenge as the means by which to extract the payment due to them. In many ways, this “brutal code of retribution” (McDonald xxxvii) lived inherently in the dictates of talion law, which intrinsically emphasized the equality of blood spilt for blood. The concept of honor, furthermore, redefined the nature of the victim of a crime, for under this code an unjust loss of life carried with it an additional wound to the honor of the victim’s family. As the equivalence of talion law dictated that this honor could only be restored through an equal retaliation against the evildoer, the code of honor itself reinforced the tradition of talion justice. Tradition dictated, moreover, that the noble response lay only in the killing of the guilty party, “for requital is just,” Aristotle himself reasoned, “and the just is noble” (59)². As the desire for revenge became over time inextricably bound to the concept of honor, revengers in Elizabethan England found themselves propelled towards vengeance not only out of a sense of the unjustness of allowing an evildoer to go unpunished, but also out of “the shame inherent in the failure to avenge the murder of a kinsman” (Ribner Li). Moreover, the

² *Rhetoric*, Book I, Chapter 9, lines 29-30.

conflicting demands within Christianity itself only served to reinforce these Roman traditions. Although in many respects Christian teachings resisted the urge to revenge, “Sympathy for blood revenge as a debt of honor, in spite of the Christian injunction, is so deeply rooted in European folk tradition that even Dante, the most Christian of poets, could write ‘Che bell’onor s’acquista in far vendetta’ (Canzone, xii, 83)³” (Ribner Li). Like Dante’s “Poems for the Stone Lady,” the plays that dominated the Elizabethan stage were likewise steeped in Christian morality at the same time as they underlined and advertised the violent Roman tradition, perpetuating the ancient code of honor and fostering a strong sense of “sympathy with...[the] duty of revenge” (Justice 217) and with the revenger.

Reflecting these dual commitments to justice and revenge, Elizabethan law officially offered legal means by which to exact blood for blood. “Execution of murderers, satisfying blood with blood, was not unknown in Elizabeth’s England” (275), Steven Justice points out, and the retributive implications of talion justice bred a legal system in which warranted and evenhanded revenge was perceived as a legal right. Martin Luther clarified this position for Elizabethan clergy and politicians alike by pointing with conviction to Genesis 9:6: “Whoso sheddeth man’s blood, by man shall his blood be shed.” In this passage, Luther argues, “the Lord established a new law and wants murderers to be killed by men” (*Lectures on Genesis* 140), thus justifying a legal system of capital punishment. When the dramatic figure of Hieronimo in Kyd’s *Spanish Tragedy* cries, “blood with blood shall, while I sit as judge,/Be satisfied, and the law discharged” (III.vi.35-36), he is therefore defended in both biblical and secular law in giving “the unbending principle of exchange and

³ Translated by Marc Cirigliano: “for one gains fine honor in taking revenge” (267).

revenge its proper name, ‘the law’” (Justice 274). In Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus* (dated from approximately 1594), Titus likewise acknowledges the law’s obligation of revenge. When his daughter’s tears are interpreted as sorrow over her brothers’ execution, Titus calmly points to the justice system of the State, reasoning, “If they did kill thy husband, then be joyful,/Because the law hath ta’en revenge on them” (III.i.116-17). The precision of like for like afforded by the laws of God and the State satisfy the Elizabethan conception of justice, and should, to Titus’ mind, grant comfort to the victim.

In England itself, however, deep-set corruption and inefficiencies in court procedures frequently interfered with the legal administration of this justice, and it was a fact of Elizabethan society that a villain’s crime frequently remained unpunished (Broude 45). Furthermore, the frequency with which Elizabethan courts served as instruments of political factionalism and their explicit function as a source of revenue for the Crown (raised through fines and fees levied against the accused) understandably “compromised the integrity of royal justice in the eyes of many” (Broude 46), and placed justice beyond the legal reach of many citizens. The Elizabethan revenge plays, taking as their dramatic plot the quest for justice in an unjust land, universally seized upon situations such as these as the backdrop for their dramatic societies, painting pictures of lands wherein legal access to justice is denied to the victimized family. Whether because the dramatized court is too corrupt to provide justice, or because the sovereign himself serves as the villain, the realms of the revenge tragedies are universally ones in which legal justice is defective, and the victim must find other means by which to balance the scales. When Amintor of

Beaumont and Fletcher's *The Maid's Tragedy* (c. 1608-1611) insists to Melantius that justice must be carried out, even outside the bounds of the law ("it will be called/Honor in thee to spill thy sister's blood/If she her birth abuse, and on the King/A brave revenge" III.ii.221-224), his message accordingly emphasizes the importance of private justice in a realm where legal justice is unavailable. In this dramatic setting as well as for the British audience before him, Amintor's declaration derives its resonance jointly from the active codes of Roman honor and talion law.

Even in the world beyond the theater, in the many situations where the courts were unwilling or unable to administer justice the rights of the private revenger were met with almost universal sympathy among Elizabethan citizens. "[C]ontemporary writers, including orthodox theorists," Mulryne illustrates, "expressed a certain sympathy for private vengeance" in such cases "when the law was unable or unwilling to provide an effective remedy" (xiii). Because of the court's disregard for justice, "self-government remained a viable and often necessary alternative to the justice of the king's courts," Broude asserts (45), and although the legitimacy of this alternative remained a subject of debate throughout Elizabeth's reign, many theologians, including Luther himself, defended the citizen's right. It was out of these anxieties over justice and equity that the genre of revenge tragedy was born in the late sixteenth century, taking as its primary theme the quest of a man to secure justice when the courts themselves are corrupt, and in doing so to return order and balance to an otherwise chaotic world. In a world devoid of justice, the revenger steps forward to right the wrong committed against him, taking his authority directly from the Bible: "The revenger of blood *himself* shall slay the murderer" the Bible

decrees (my italics): “where he meeteth, he shall slay him” (Numbers 35:19). This passage grants the duty of revenge not to the hands of the State, but to the revenger “himself,” the bloody hero of the tragedies of justice.

As it was so intimately linked with his own honor, moreover, the European revenger soon developed “a strong emotional commitment” (Ribner Li) to his personal right to revenge. “[P]opular thought was slow to accept a system which denied the individual or family their age-old right to secure their own redress” Broude asserts (46), a fact which further allied the audience with the stage revenger executing this right. At the time of the great upsurge of revenge tragedies on the Elizabethan stage in the late sixteenth century, popular opinion still clung to the belief that “injuries done individuals or their families are first and foremost offenses against the injured parties...and that the injured parties had the inalienable right to exact retribution” (Broude 47). Stage revengers thus commenced their plot with the audience’s encouragement, as honorable revenge was viewed as the victim’s prerogative. Even in plays which resisted the revenge genre, including Chapman’s stoical *Revenge of Bussy D’Ambois* (c. 1610-11), a fundamental belief lingered regarding the justice of private revenge outside of an unjust court, as Robert Ornstein notes: “Bussy’s advocate, Monsieur, argues the way of the world; he justifies revenge when the offense to honor cannot be rectified by law” (55). In this argument Monsieur echoes one of the most influential thinkers of the period, Francis Bacon. In his essay “Of Revenge” (1625), Bacon gives perhaps the most precise vocalization of Elizabethan sentiment concerning revenge, arguing, like Monsieur, that “the most tolerable sort of revenge is for those wrongs which there is no law to remedy...else a

man's enemy is still before hand, and it is two for one" (348). In his 1558 pamphlet on "How Superior Powers Ought to be Obeyed" (1558), the Scots Calvinist Christopher Goodman took this prerogative one step further. Not only is it a man's right to act in pursuit of justice, he argues, but, following the failure of the legal justice system, the private citizen has not only the right but the "dutie to do it them seules,...hauing the worde of God for their warrant, to which they are all subiect, and by the same charged to cast for the all euill from them" (189-90). Goodman's argument thus makes an obligation of the right to revenge, although this duty was in fact no more than the obligation to serve God in His maintenance of balance and order. Thus, as Mulryne argues in his introduction to the *The Spanish Tragedy*, "justice and revenge are not really separate issues" (xxii), but rather means and ends in God's command for order.

Revenge and justice, furthermore, are married in the language of the Bible itself. "[A] murderer is guilty of death and in justice is to be slain by the sword" ("Temporal Authority" 1) Martin Luther preaches, echoing the Bible's phrasing in its parallel structure: "He that takes the sword will perish by the sword" (Matthew 26:52). In these passages, sword is balanced by sword, blood is balanced by blood. Again in Exodus, the Bible stresses the significance of balance if an act of retribution is to be just, enumerating the ways in which a wrong shall be paid for equally, in kind:

life for life,
Eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot,
Burning for burning, wound for wound, stripe for stripe 21:23-25

As it is thus dwelt on in the Bible that retaliation is to be perfectly and divinely balanced, it becomes clear that allowing the imbalance of Bacon's "two for one" to continue stands in direct opposition to the word of God, as it is every Christian's duty to serve God in maintaining the equilibrium of justice. Since God Himself had commanded in Exodus 21:14 that "If a man willfully kills another, you shall take him from my altar, that he may die," the mere existence of murderers in Elizabethan society "rendered retribution necessary" (Broude 51) in compliance with this command. As servants of the Lord, Christians onstage and off had a duty to rid the world of criminals and villains. Even the villain in Marston's *Antonio's Revenge*, Piero, hauntingly confirms: "Pollution must be purged" (II.i.66).

Since Tudor theorists looked on crime as a transgression of God's law, therefore, this pollution represented a deep moral corruption of the society as a whole. Such a contamination, therefore, "threatened to bring divine wrath down upon the entire commonweal" (Broude 48). Luther himself dwells at length upon this menace, arguing in his "Against the Robbing and Murdering Hordes of Peasants" (1525) that a man responsible for overseeing justice

sins as greatly against God if he does not punish and protect and does not fulfill the duties of his office as does one to whom the sword has not been committed when he commits a murder. If he can punish and does not—even though the punishment consists in the taking of life and the shedding of blood—then he is guilty of all the murder and evil which these fellows commit, because, by willful neglect of the divine command he permits them to practice their wickedness, though he can prevent it and is in duty bound to do so. *Works* 251-52⁴

⁴ All quotations cited thus are lifted from the *Works of Martin Luther*. 6 vols. Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1931. Those lifted from Pelikan's edition are cited as coming from *Lectures on Genesis*.

Charged with this responsibility, the Elizabethan revenger was trained that the possibility of leaving the scales of justice unjustly tipped was not only reprehensible, it was sinful. When Hamlet returns from his voyage to England, he has come to terms with precisely this Lutheran concept, and he views his duty to strike down Claudius as a preemptive strike, rather than as retributive vengeance. Taking his cue from Luther's discourse, Hamlet declares, "is't not to be damned/To let this canker of our nature come/In further evil?" (V.ii.68-70). "Thou shalt not murder," the commandment reads (Exodus 20:13), not "Thou shalt not kill." Luther clarifies this distinction, drawing an analogy between the role of the administrator of justice to that of a physician amputating a diseased appendage, declaring,

a good physician, when a disease is so bad and so great that he has to cut off a hand, foot, ear, eye, or let it decay, does so in order to save the body. Looked at from the point of view of the member that he cuts off, he seems a cruel and merciless man; but looked at from the point of view of the body, which he intends to save, turns out that he is a fine and true man and does a work that is good and Christian

Works 35

Like a canker or cancerous cell, criminals represented a disease in their society that flouted God's law and threatened to turn His wrath upon the society as a whole. Because unrevenged crimes violated God's law and thus posed a threat to the entire State and society, therefore, Tudor political theory and religion alike embraced the principle of blood-for-blood, which Luther pointed to as "the source from which stem all civil law and the law of nations" (*Lectures on Genesis* 140). Thus when Evadne cries out of her obligation to kill her seducer in *The Maid's Tragedy* (appealing here to non-Christian gods in an otherwise Christian play) "All the gods forbid it!," the audience is more apt to agree with Melantius's reply: "No, all the gods require it"

(IV.i.145-6). A killer must be killed, “the revenger of blood” *must* “slay the murderer,” or else the foundations of a society built upon the equilibrium of justice will come tumbling down.

The plays of the emerging genre of revenge tragedy addressed this great need for justice by foregrounding the quest for justice in the form of the revenge plot. The initial crime, which produces an imbalance in the world that demands resolution, sets the action of the play in motion by upsetting the balance of the world and directly violating God’s command for equilibrium. Since the quest, therefore, was to regain this balance more than merely to exact revenge to satisfy a spiteful urge (such a goal disregarded religious and moral prohibitions which insisted that personal sentiment never enter into the conception and execution of a just revenge)⁵, the revenge exacted by the revenger must remain in precise balance to the sin committed. To tip the scales even slightly would set the revenger in the wrong and upset the delicate balance which maintained the audience’s sympathies for his cause. Without this moral sanction, the revenger becomes a villain, and the play loses the dedication to balance that had bound it to the genre of revenge tragedy, placing the revenger on the side of injustice alongside the original villain. This line is crossed in Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice*, a play notably classified as outside of the revenge tragedy genre. In this play, although a great blow has been struck to Shylock’s honor when Antonio spits on him in the street (I.iii.107), the payment that Shylock seeks in the form of a pound of Antonio’s flesh “cut off/Nearest the merchant's heart” (IV.i.228-29) exceeds the worth of Antonio’s attack. Shylock’s revenge would tip the scales of

⁵ Bowes’ 1594 translation of Pierre de la Primaudaye’s *The French Academy* states clearly that a “priuate Revenge proceeding of envy, or of hatred, or of anger, is vicious and forbidden by God.” (Ribner Lii).

justice more than it would right them, and he therefore forfeits the audience's sympathies and cannot be viewed as the hero of a tragedy of justice. The play is accordingly grouped outside of the genres of justice and revenge, in the genre of comedy. Likewise Piero's "revenge" on Andrugio, which opens the action of *Antonio's Revenge*, is not in fact a just revenge but rather a mischievous act of villainy, as Andrugio has fairly won Maria's hand and affection. Piero himself concedes this point, acknowledging that spite alone prompts his actions and gloating over his "topless villainy" (I.i.84). In contrast, with his father and friend murdered and his betrothed love dishonored, Antonio has no choice but to avenge himself on the wrongdoer. Should he fail in his vengeance, he would be just as guilty as the villain of allowing the world to spin into chaos and injustice. The play becomes Antonio's, and Piero in his patent disregard for justice is dismissed as a callous villain.

In the newly emerging genre of revenge tragedy, the distinction between murder and retributive violence remains clearly defined. It is nonetheless assumed that a second death can right the first, that blood spilt in revenge for a crime can correct the imbalance caused by the initial bloodshed. The scales must be righted, blood must be shed for blood, and the newly emerging genre of revenge tragedy seized upon these themes as the basis for a cadre of the justice play.

III.

“Pollution must be purged”: Blood for Blood in the Early Tragedies of Revenge

At the end of the third Act of *The Spanish Tragedy*, Hieronimo tears onto the stage, anguished, conflicted, but having arrived at last at the conclusion which will drive the final two Acts of the play and launch a genre of imitators: “*Vindicta mihi!*” (III.xiii.1). The phrase is chillingly lifted from Hebrews 10:20, removed from the attribution which, in the Bible, follows as a qualifier, “*dicit Dominus.*” In this two-word declaration, therefore, Hieronimo appropriates the divine right of vengeance, just as the revenge genre this play inspired brings to the mortal realm the Calvinist concept of payment for sins. By uniting the quest for revenge with the greater quest for justice, furthermore, Hieronimo laid the foundations for a dramatic genre of revenge dedicated to this placement of the sword of justice in the human revenger’s hand. By the time of its revival in the mid. 1590s (it was most likely first performed as early as 1586-87), *The Spanish Tragedy* had already spawned dozens of similar revenge plays, all of which looked to Kyd’s play (and potentially his similarly influential, although now lost, *Ur-Hamlet*) for their template of the revenger-protagonist. Following the model established by Hieronimo’s quest in this play, the early tragedies of revenge satisfied the demand for balance in the world by shedding blood for blood, trusting in the justness of revenge as it served to right the imbalance in the world.

The world in which Hieronimo strives for justice is one where corruption and injustice have penetrated the highest levels. In this play, it is the Duke’s own nephew who murders Hieronimo’s son and who stands incongruously between the mourning

Chief Justice and his office. By rendering Hieronimo impotent in his role as Chief Justice of Spain, the villain Lorenzo essentially reduces all justice in Spain to a fiction. In so doing, Lorenzo executes a transformation that would not have struck the Elizabethan audience as noticeably peculiar, as the general perception of Spain was of a country steeped in depravity and injustice. “Protestant polemic of the 1580s,” Mulryne notes, “depicted Spain as a place of personal depravity and political corruption” (xviii), a place where fraud within the courts regularly prevented victims from achieving their rightful recompense. Moreover, the Elizabethan audience would have repeatedly “learned from pulpit, pamphlet, and ballad that Spain was bad because of the Roman Catholic Church” (Justice 287), an antiquated Church that refused to accept the true form of Christianity in the vein of Anglo-Calvinism. Contempt for heathen Catholic countries ran deep in Elizabethan society, and it was generally agreed that without the correct religion—Protestantism as practiced in Elizabethan England—both justice and all Christian goodness would vanish from the Earth. Like Kyd’s play, therefore, the new revenge tragedies were not set “in England, but in Catholic Spain, Catholic Italy,” and, in the case of *Titus Andronicus*, ancient Rome (Justice 287): all heathen lands. Such lands were explicitly removed from the Elizabethan Protestant sphere of justice, having turned their backs on the true religion.

The Elizabethan revenge plays had to be set abroad in order to safely satisfy the genre’s principle requirement that the courts of the land be so corrupt that royal justice becomes unavailable to the characters in the play. This degree of royal corruption presents a dramatic situation that, if set in England, would not have passed

the censor's approval. In each dramatic society, however, corruption in the court runs so deep that the legal administration of justice proves impossible. Robert Ornstein best expresses the revenger's situation when he states,

[i]t is significant that the revenging hero almost invariably has no way of bringing his criminal opponent to justice, either because no proof of the crime exists, or because the criminal is placed beyond the reach of justice, or because justice itself is a mockery in the hero's society. 23

In fact, Hieronimo gravely suffers from this lack of justice. "Justice, O justice, justice gentle king!" (III.xii.62), Hieronimo cries, but the seat of power refuses to prescribe justice as it is bound to. Hieronimo's Spain is a world where "justice is exiled from the earth" (III.xiii.140) and "A fault so foul" as the murder of an innocent man might "scape unpunished" (III.vii.96). Although Hieronimo "[cries] aloud for justice through the court" (III.vii.70), he finds none, and his pleas for "Justice, O, justice to Hieronimo" (III.xii.27) go cruelly unanswered. The lack of justice in this society is great enough to drive Hieronimo into a state of distraction so immense that when "three citizens and an old man" come to him and plead for justice for various offenses done to them (III.xiii.50), their appeals launch Hieronimo into a fit of madness in which he tears their bonds (III.xiii.122) and hallucinates his dead son's return (III.xiii.133-159). Thus stripped of legal recourse to justice, Hieronimo is left with no alternative but to seek it out through his own actions.

Before pledging himself to a path of private revenge, Hieronimo acted as all good Elizabethans were instructed, seeking justice before all in the legal statutes of the court. Finding that the corruption of the Spanish court and the proximity of the murderers to the royal family conspire to deny him his legal recourse, however,

Hieronimo at last turns away from the courts, swearing himself to a greater law. In this “hopelessly corrupt polity” (Eugene Hill, quoted in Mulryne xvii), therefore, as in the cases of violence in England “where lack of evidence or fear of judicial prejudice suggested that justice might not...be obtained” (Broude 44), the victim retains no further option than to undertake the quest for justice outside of the courts. “In this world,” Steven Justice notes, “Hieronimo’s tragedy is not so much that of a man who makes the wrong choice as that of a man to whom the right choice is unavailable” (278). “The upshot” of this situation, therefore, “was that the audience accepted [Hieronimo’s] cause as necessary and just” (Bowers 184), and the precedent was set for a stage revenger to have the full and unabashed support of his Elizabethan audience.

Without the stabilizing force of justice, Hieronimo’s world threatens to disintegrate into chaos. Hieronimo desperately proclaims that even as he watches, the world is in fact slipping into just such a nightmare, and he cries out that nothing in this realm is as it should be:

O eyes, no eyes, but fountains fraught with tears;
O life, no life, but lively form of death;
O world, no world, but mass of public wrongs,
Confused and filled with murder and misdeeds! III.ii.1-4

This concept of a nightmarish realm devoid of justice was picked up and mimicked by each of Kyd’s many imitators, even lying at the heart of Marcellus’s chilling observation in *Hamlet*, “Something is rotten in the state of Denmark” (I.iv.90). In fact, following the unqualified success of *The Spanish Tragedy* (the play triumphed not only in its original run under an unknown company, but was subsequently performed at least a record-breaking twenty-nine times between the years 1592-1597,

surviving as a successful play under no fewer than four additional Elizabethan acting companies through the end of the century (Mulryne xxxi)), other plays took up Kyd's pattern as the archetype of the new genre of revenge tragedy, lifting intact this critical sense of a world devastatingly out of balance. In Marston's *Antonio's Revenge* (c. 1599-1600), the corruption in the land is all the more apparent because the villain is the Duke himself. At one point the villainous Piero even gloats, "what has our court to do/With virtue, in the devil's name!" (II.ii.27-28). As the play opens, Piero has recently killed two innocent men; the scales of justice have been tipped and the world set out of balance. Piero happily concedes:

There glow no sparks of reason in the world,
All are raked up in ashy beastliness;
The bulk of man's as dark as Erebus,
No branch of reason's light hangs in his trunk;
There lives no reason to keep league withal,
I ha' no reason to be reasonable. I.iv.242-28

Antonio, too, feels his unbalanced world pulling apart at the seams: in his topsy-turvy world, the very "frame of nature [shakes]" (I.v.32) under the weight of injustice, and Antonio wonders, "Cracks not the joints of earth to bear my woes?" (I.v.33). Likewise, Shakespeare's own *Titus Andronicus* depicts a realm that is utterly lacking in justice, even going so far as to open its curtain upon two brothers fighting over incompatible demands of justice (I.i.1-17). Like Kyd's depiction of Spain, both Marston's Italy and Shakespeare's Rome are utter vacuums of justice, teeming with corruption and villainy that prevent the legal administration of retribution for a crime.

Since legal recourse is proven barren in such corrupt societies, the blood-for-blood sense of justice that these plays endorse must come from outside of the law, commanding the audience to support the role of the private revenger. Titus's lament

of his own society, “*Terras Astraera reliquit*” (IV.iii.4 quoting Ovid’s lament that “Astrea, goddess of justice, has left the earth”) defines the worlds of each of these plays. Himself guilty of the murder of his own innocent son, Titus despairs, “there’s no justice” (IV.iii.50) in his world, and his appeal to the gods, “Shall I have justice? what says Jupiter?” (IV.iii.80), goes unanswered. These worlds are ones that have rejected the grace of God, and therefore they are ones in which mortal hands must right mortal wrongs, promising the most perfect realization of balance between punishment and crime when, as Tamora says, “Your mother’s hand shall right your mother’s wrong” (II.iii.121).

It is not only in the use of corrupt heathen countries as their settings that these and other plays mimicked Kyd’s *Spanish Tragedy*. Imitating Kyd’s successful play, numerous aspiring dramatists drafted revenge tragedies that closely mimicked the structure and content of this archetypal drama. Marston’s *Antonio’s Revenge* in particular lifts specific lines and actions from Kyd’s template, in addition to the themes and plot structure which became generic standards. W. Reavley Gair catalogues Marston’s debt to Kyd in his introduction to this later play, asserting that Marston’s imitation of Kyd’s play is apparent

not merely when he cites its dialogue but...[also in] the machinery of revenge and its atmosphere: like Horatio, son of Hieronimo, Feliche’s body is discovered hung up ‘in an arbor,’ and Antonio, like Hieronimo, digs into the stage with his dagger in a frenzy of revengeful passion. 19

“This density of literary allusion,” Gair concludes, “is surely deliberate” (19). McDonald likewise credits even Shakespeare’s choice of genre in writing *Titus Andronicus* to the success of Kyd’s *Spanish Tragedy*, which McDonald labels

“probably the most famous and popular play before *Hamlet*” (xxx). McDonald ultimately concludes, “in formal terms *Titus* is an imitation of Kyd’s thriller” (xxx). Both *Titus Andronicus* and *Antonio’s Revenge* were written during the years of *The Spanish Tragedy*’s reign of success; *Titus* being written most likely any time between the years 1584 and 1594, and *Antonio’s Revenge* belonging to the years 1599-1601. The persistent dominance of *The Spanish Tragedy* during the production of the later plays can be felt in these plays’ content, as Marston and Shakespeare each adopted, expanded, and exceeded precise moments from Kyd’s earlier work. Just as Hieronimo bursts onstage declaring “*Vindicta mihi!*,” so Antonio in Marston’s play adopts this same cry: “Vindicta!” (V.iii.1), “Oh, now, Vindicta! that’s the word we have” (V.iii.40). As in *The Spanish Tragedy*, this line opens the scene in which the revenger declares his intention to revenge, resolved at last to spill blood for blood. Separately, the passage from Exodus, highlighted by Hieronimo when he swears “blood for blood shall, while I sit as judge,/Be satisfied” (III.vi.35-36) is picked up by each of the two revengers in Marston’s play. The first, Antonio, muses “blood cries out for blood, murder murder craves” (III.iii.71), while Pandulfo Feliche, father of the murdered Feliche (who has, like Horatio, been hung up in an arbor), nearly closes the play with the strongly repetitive declaration that “Murder for murder, blood for blood doth yell” (V.v.80).

Since the judicial courts of Kyd’s Spain, Marston’s Italy, and Shakespeare’s Rome cannot live up to their obligation to enforce equality and right the imbalance rendered in the world through the murder of an innocent man, the revenger has no other recourse to justice than through private revenge. Only after legal justice is

denied to him does Hieronimo commence to “tire them all with my revenging threats” (III.vii.73). His appropriation of this right is both warranted and defensible, for he has been denied “that vengeance which, for Elizabethan audiences, was the most essential adjunct of his office” as Chief Justice (Kerrigan 177). The lack of justice is particularly painful in Hieronimo’s Spain, because it is coupled with a cruel irony: as Chief Justice of Spain, it should be Hieronimo’s professional duty to administer justice in the court; instead, this is precisely the justice which proves hauntingly absent in the wake of his son’s own murder at the hands of the Duke’s nephew. “[I]f I hang or kill myself,” questions Hieronimo, pondering his duty to his son, “let’s know/Who will revenge Horatio’s murder then?” (III.xii.17-18). In the absence of royal justice, private revenge is all that remains, and the revengers who commit themselves to this cause are merely acknowledging the realities of the worlds they inhabit.

Once the victim’s survivor accepts his responsibility to correct the “two-for-one” that the law has left to stand, the remaining action of the play focuses almost exclusively on the quest for order and balance. In fact, the instant the living victim of these early plays accepts the role of revenger, he thinks of little else. After declaring, “I will revenge his death!” (III.xiii.20), for instance, Hieronimo seems to develop a fascination with the mere word “revenge,” suddenly adopting a Senecan tone and employing the term repetitively and eagerly:

Behoves thee then, Hieronimo, to be revenged.
The plot is laid of dire revenge:
On then, Hieronimo, pursue revenge,
For nothing wants but acting of revenge. IV.iii.27-30

Antonio, too, vows vengeance again and again:

May I be cursèd by my father's ghost
And blasted with incensèd breath of heaven
If my heart beat ought but vengeance.
May I be numbed with horror and my veins
Pucker with singeing torture, if my brain
Digest a thought but of dire vengeance;
May I be fettered slave to coward chance,
If blood, heart, brain, plot ought save vengeance! III.ii.34-41

In accepting the role of private revenger Hieronimo draws his authority doubly from his position as Chief Justice of Spain and from the Bible itself, to which he turns despite his largely pagan surroundings. Alan Sinfield helps the reader rectify this discrepancy in the play's religious setting, explaining that "[a]lthough Revenge is a pagan figure based upon Seneca's *Thyestes*, [*The Spanish Tragedy*] is set in contemporary Spain and Portugal and its language often asserts a Christian world view" (114). In this play, "Pagan and Christian concepts and images jostle each other," but "[t]he slow but inexorable control exercised by Revenge is just like that which Calvin attributes to God" (Sinfield 114-115). Although the underworld of this realm is pagan, therefore, Hieronimo turns to the Bible like any good Spanish Catholic, appealing in his heathen way to the same text which lay as the foundation of all Protestant law.

In his appeal to the Bible for authority as a revenging figure, however, Hieronimo looks exclusively to those passages which demand blood. When Hieronimo debates with himself, "Is't I will be revenged?" (III.xiv.119), his response, "No, I am not the man" (III.xiv.119) never doubts that *somebody* is "the man" for the job, that revenge falls within mortal man's domain. This assumption is derived from the declaration in Genesis, "Whoso sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed" (Genesis 9:6). Like Hieronimo's argument, this passage emphasizes the role of

mortal man in achieving a just and retributive balance, as it is up to Man himself to right the imbalance according to God's law as stated in Numbers: "The revenger of blood himself shall slay the murderer" (35:19). When, at last, Hieronimo accepts his role as the "revenger of blood," he draws his conception of justice directly from the enumerations of Exodus, declaring, "blood with blood shall, while I sit as judge,/Be satisfied" (III.vi.35-36), echoing verbatim Exodus' demand that revenge match "Blood with blood" (21:23). "[Hieronimo] can conceive of justice only in the human (or carnal, or literal) vocabulary," Steven Justice explains: "the tooth-for-tooth language of the law. Whatever falls outside the justice of the Old Law cannot be justice for Hieronimo" (282). In the early tragedies of justice, private revenge offered the only path to the balance commanded in the Bible's "wound for wound, stripe for stripe" (Exodus 21:25). Accepting his duty from God and State, Hieronimo's arguments result in a situation where "the only problem is the straightforward practical one of arranging circumstances so that justice brings about revenge" (Mulryne xxii).

Mirroring the blood-for-blood justice that Hieronimo pursues on Earth, the afterlife from which Andrea emerges at the opening of *The Spanish Tragedy* is founded upon the precise payment of sinners for the sins they have committed in life. In this world,

Usurers are choked with melting gold,
And wantons are embraced with ugly snakes,
And murderers groan with never-killing wounds,
And perjured wights scalded in boiling lead,
And all foul sins with torments overwhelmed. Prologue 67-71

These punishments, divinely selected, are specifically designed to match the sinner's crime. It is in accordance with this sense of justice that Kyd's *Revenge*, sent from the spiritual realm, promises Andrea vengeance, assuring him that it will precisely repay his untimely demise: "thou shalt see the author of thy death,/Don Balthazar, the prince of Portingale,/Deprived of life by Bel-Imperia" (Prologue 89-91), Andrea's betrothed and the object of Balthazar's lust. Given the tit-for-tat system of justice established in the previous lines, this deprivation of life is just. Similarly, in his final tally of the dead, Andrea emphasizes the justice of each act of revenge by stressing that each death came at the hands of the character most harmed by the villain whose life they take in payment: "Prince Balthazar by Bel-Imperia stabbed,/The Duke of Castile and his wicked son/Both done to death by old Hieronimo" (IV.v.7-9). The precision of spiritual revenge is enacted in this final scene by mortal hands. Revenge literally and figuratively inhabits the mortal realm, guiding the mortals in a unified system of repayment and justice.

Since the mortals are acting in precise accord with the workings of the spiritual realm, the divine figure present in this play greets the revenger's actions with overwhelming approval. In this play, "the divine power we are shown is...Revenge, and it appears to endorse Hieronimo" (Sinfield 116), reflecting the divine sanction with which each stage revenger was accorded in these early plays. In each of these dramas, when the correct villains have shed their blood in payment for the innocent blood that stained the stage at the opening of the play, the ghosts of the departed are able at last to rest in peace. This union between the wishes of the spiritual realm and the actions of the mortal is reflected in the dramas both through the ghosts' spoken

approval of the revenge and through the violent objection of the heavens to the initial crime. Throughout the dramas, the disorder of the Earth has been reflected in the displeasure of the heavens. The disorder and corruption of Antonio's world, for instance, are announced to the audience through his dream, in which

The verge of heaven
Was ringed with flames and all the upper vault
Thick-laced with flakes of fire; in midst whereof
A blazing comet shot his threat'ning train
Just on my face. I.iii.52-6

The burning of the heavens is an indisputable sign of the displeasure of the Lord, and the sure sign of the comet proves that violent evil is soon to arrive on Earth (Gair 69). Throughout the plays of this genre, the spiritual realm is portrayed as an angered force that joins with the mortal realm in its desire for vengeance against the villains. Before Hieronimo claims the role of revenger as his own, he is confident that the heavens will fulfill the duty of revenge, as Lorenzo and Balthazar "did what heaven unpunished would not leave" (III.vii.56). Sincere in this faith, Hieronimo beats "at the windows of the brightest heavens/Soliciting for justice and revenge" (III.vii.13-14). Isabella shares her husband's confidence, assuring herself that "The heavens are just, murder cannot be hid:/Time is the author both of truth and right,/And time will bring this treachery to light" (II.ii.57-59). Her language in this passage is later echoed in a claim made by *Titus's* Marcus, who describes the transparent sins enacted on Lavinia as "what God will have discovered for revenge" (IV.i.74). Although Hieronimo and the ghost of Andrea seek revenge on Balthazar for different crimes, they are united in a desire to shed his blood in order to return the equilibrium of justice, and the various spirits of Hieronimo's heathen religion all unite to urge him

onward: “all the saints do sit soliciting/For vengeance on those cursed murderers” (IV.i.33-34).

The clearest sign of the encouragement of the heavens for the revenger’s actions, however, lives in the urgings of the murdered victims’ ghosts that populate the early revenge dramas. The framing device in Kyd’s play is based entirely on this spiritual desire for vengeance, as both the mortal man’s ghost and the eternal spirit of Revenge await the recompense due to Balthazar. Like Andrea, many other murdered victims return from various afterlives to demand revenge: Andrugio and Feliche in *Antonio’s Revenge*, the image of King Hamlet in Shakespeare’s play, and (if the director wishes it so), even a silent Horatio in *The Spanish Tragedy*. Both of Horatio’s parents imagine their son’s return, soliciting “with his wounds” (IV.ii.242) revenge on his wanton murderers. “[A]rt thou come, Horatio, from the depth/To ask for justice in this upper earth?” worries Hieronimo, believing that his son has returned “To tell thy father thou art unrevenged” (III.xiii.133-35). “Antonio, revenge!” the ghost of Andrugio also cries unambiguously (III.i.34): “Revenge my blood!—take spirit, gentle boy--/Revenge my blood!” (III.i.36-7). Andrugio’s ghost also advances the earthly revenge for his death by announcing to his son both the identity of the murderer and the nature of the crime, declaring, “I was empoisoned by Piero’s hand” (III.i.35). “As a ghost,” W. Reavley Gair comments, “Andrugio...is definite and explicit; because he makes the situation so clear, and because everyone in the play accepts his assessment, he denies both suspense and uncertainty to the plot” (26). Indeed, the ghost’s firm command in the third Act appears specifically designed to

dispel any lingering resistance on the part of the audience to the revenger's cause at the same time as it provides momentum for the revenge plot onstage:

Thou vigour of my youth, juice of my love,
Seize on revenge, grasp the stern-bended front
Of frowning vengeance with unpeisèd clutch.
Alarum Nemesis, rouse up thy blood,
Invent some stratagem of vengeance
Which, but to think on, may like lightning glide
With horror through thy breast. Remember this:
*Scelera non ulcisceris, nisi vincis.*⁶ III.i.44-51

The ghost assures Antonio that, when “Piero’s blood/May even o’erflow the brim of full revenge,” then Heaven will bestow “Peace and blessed fortunes” to the revengers (III.v.26-28). Despite the clarity of these commands, however, Antonio still struggles with his duty, finding himself divided between the mortals to whom he owes allegiance and the voices of the dead:

Antonio [*to Julio*]: Oh, for thy sister’s sake I flag revenge.
Ghost: Revenge!
Antonio: Stay, stay, dear father, fright mine eyes no more.
Revenge as swift as lightning bursteth forth
And clears his heart. III.iii.26-33

The spiritual demand for justice is so intense that it ultimately secures Antonio’s allegiance, convincing him that his revenge advances God’s will. Since Antonio never questions the ghost’s authenticity, the voice of Andrugio carries for him the full authority and significance of the spiritual realm. Mere mortal ties yield speedily to the force of this command.

In *Titus Andronicus*, Titus and his mortal kinsmen tie pleas for justice to arrows which they shoot to heaven, hoping to “solicit heaven, and to move the gods/To send down Justice for to wreak our wrongs” (IV.iii.51-52). The justice these

⁶ Keltie’s translation of this final line, lifted from Seneca, is “you do not avenge crimes unless you conquer” (Gair 105).

men seek is synonymous with revenge (since it will “wreak” their wrongs), and the means by which they solicit heaven physically binds justice to instruments of bloody revenge. Nonetheless, it is to the gods above that the men turn as the source of justice on Earth. In *Antonio’s Revenge* and *The Spanish Tragedy*, in contrast, the spiritual realm looks to earthly mortals for the execution of justice, demanding that mortal hands do what divine spirits cannot. In each of these latter two plays the ghost of the victim not only returns to call for revenge, but relies on his mortal kinsmen to provide the release that only comes when the scales are finally balanced. The ghost in *The Spanish Tragedy* sits, a visible surrogate for the audience, merely a witness to the events taking place onstage. Likewise Andrugio, at the end of *Antonio’s Revenge*, declares his position as a witness: “Here will I sit, spectator of revenge,/And glad my ghost in anguish of my foe” (V.v.22-23). Nor is the ghost the only spectator to this revenge. Providence itself merely looks on, and when at last Antonio achieves the vengeance he set out to accomplish, Andrugio happily declares, “Now down looks providence/T’attend the last act of my son’s revenge” (V.i.10-11), a statement that again reduces “Providence” to the role of spectator. Aware that he acts according to heaven’s designs, however, Antonio views himself as an agent of divine retribution, uniting heaven’s agency with his own actions as he declares, “Thus the hand of heaven chokes/The throat of murder. This for my father’s blood!” (V.v.76-77). Although it is *his* hand that kills the villains, Antonio cites the action as that of “the hand of heaven.” Even within the play, however, the ghost resists this conflation of divine and mortal action. “Blest be thy hand” (V.v.36), the ghost declares, insisting through his language that the hand remains mortal, despite being kissed with spiritual

approval: “I taste the joys of heaven,/Viewing my son triumph in his black blood” (V.v.36-7). Pandulpho senses this pleasure as well, happily declaring, “Heaven sits clapping of our enterprise” (V.iii.15). Like the heavens above Antonio and Pandulpho, in *The Spanish Tragedy* the ghost of Andrea concurs from above: “Ay, these were spectacles to please my soul” (IV.v.7-12). “The last scene seems to put the stamp of divine approval on the bloodletting in the Spanish court” Steven Justice (286) concludes, as the ghost also notes, “Ay, now my hopes have end in their effects,/When blood and sorrow finish my desires” (IV.v.1-2).

Since divine spirits are generally assumed to be above mortal fallibility, the ghosts’ cheerleading throughout the plays for bloody vengeance on Earth and their contentment once the villain’s blood has been shed assure the audience that honorably pursued revenge is both necessary and morally sanctioned, serving as a reflection of “divine retribution, having as [its] ends the maintenance of cosmic and political order through the enforcement of God’s laws” (Broude 55). The ghost of *Antonio’s Revenge* at last sums up the spiritual sentiment, sighing, “’Tis done, and now my soul shall sleep in rest:/Sons that revenge their father’s blood are blest” (V.ii.114-15). Since the messengers of the divine realm so completely support Hieronimo’s endeavor in the play, the audience is carefully led to the conclusion that Hieronimo acted justly and in accordance with divine will. Although Hieronimo’s gods are pagan, the divine mandate that he obeys is specifically Christian, originating in the Bible, and the spiritual realm under which Hieronimo operates is closely allied with the Christian doctrine obeyed by his Elizabethan audience. Following their deaths, Hieronimo’s friends will be eternally rewarded in Proserpine’s underworld, the divine

spirit of Revenge assures the audience, while the play's villains will meet with greater and eternal punishments in "deepest hell/Where none but Furies, bugs and tortures dwell" (IV.v.27-28). As Sinfield emphasizes, "[i]t sounds very like the protestant dispensation, despite the admixture of pagan imagery" (116). Christian or pagan, the spirits' visible goals of restoring order and appeasing the dead not only lend the seal of divine approval to the revenger's cause, but also assure the audience's endorsement of the cause as just.

Just as the spirits emerge from a realm in perfect order of precision and balance, the revenge pursued onstage must reflect this perfect equity. To retain the ghosts' support, that is, mortal justice must obey these same laws of balance, of "Eye for eye" and precisely calibrated punishments. "If Balthazar be dead, [Alexandro] shall not live" (I.iii.91), the Portuguese Viceroy of *The Spanish Tragedy* declares, revealing the law's obedience to this spiritual command of balance. This command of balance, however, serves to spur on total revenge as much as it serves to reign in a revenger's actions. A death must not merely be revenged, the revengers universally note, but be revenged to a degree sufficient to right the imbalance in the world. When Hieronimo urges, "Nor think I thoughtless think upon a mean/To let his death be unrevenged at full" (IV.i.40-41), his emphasis that the revenge must be to the "full" reflects a fear that the assassination of the murderer alone might fail to allow for the full value of a crime. If the blood spilt proves insufficient to right the imbalance caused by the criminal's actions, then the revenger's job is incomplete, and the world remains unbalanced, at risk of disintegration into the chaos of a lawless realm. If, alternately, the blood spilt in revenging a crime were to surpass the blood spilt at the

hands of the villain, then the revenger's right would be called into question and he himself labeled a murderer. To avoid these dread alternatives, the early revenger attempted to obey talion law to the letter, careful always that a fitting revenge befall the correct villain.

In *Titus Andronicus*, Shakespeare grants physical form to this concept of meticulous retribution when Tamora enters in the final Act with her two sons ironically disguised as "Rape and Murder; therefore callèd so/'Cause they take vengeance of such kind of men" (V.ii.62-3). "[W]orse than Philomel you used my daughter," Titus declares in response, "And worse than Procne I will be revenged" (V.ii.194-5). His declaration touches the very core of the genre's calculus of revenge, as do Titus's urgings to the disguised brothers as he calls on each to issue forth the repayment they have earned: "Good Murder, stab him; he's a murderer....Good Rapine, stab him; he is a ravisher" (V.ii.100-103). With each command, Titus encourages Revenge to enact the same violence on each son as they had taken against Lavinia and Bassianus, concluding with a sense of parallel justice, "I pray thee do on them some violent death;/They have been violent to me and mine" (108-9).

In *The Spanish Tragedy* and *Antonio's Revenge*, each death is likewise marked by language that dwells on the perfection of each particular loss. "Was he thy flesh, thy son, thy dearest son?" Pandulpho demands as Piero mourns over Julio's mutilated corpse. "So was Feliche my dearest son," Pandulpho insists; Antonio adds, "So was Andrugio my dearest father," and a newly-arrived Maria chimes in as well, "So was Andrugio my dearest husband" (V.v.50-53). Since, as the revengers declare, "My father found no pity in thy blood...Remorse was banished when thou slew'st my

son...When thou empoisonèd my loving lord,/Exiled was piety” (V.v.54-57), their insistence that now “therefore, pity, piety, remorse,/Be aliens to our thoughts” (V.v.58-59) is cast as just, for Piero receives no more in punishment than he gave in crime. Instead, each blow is specifically justified: he receives only “This for my father’s blood...This for my son,” and “This for them all” (V.v.77-79), each blow against him a strike that he has earned with his own villainy. The language which colors the penultimate scene of *The Spanish Tragedy* likewise emphasizes the precise repayment inherent in each death:

As dear to me was my Horatio
As yours, or yours, or yours, my lord, to you.
My guiltless son was by Lorenzo slain,
And by Lorenzo and that Balthazar
Am I at last revenged thoroughly. IV.iv.169-73

With each of these villains justly dispatched, Hieronimo’s conclusion of “thoroughness” appears correct: those responsible for death have suffered death in return. The ghost of Andrea proudly delivers the final tally, emphasizing how each villain was undone by his own treachery, justly slain by their most direct victim:

Vild Serberine by Pedringano slain,...
...Prince Balthazar by Bel-Imperia stabbed,
The Duke of Castile and his wicked son
Both done to death by old Hieronimo IV.v.3-8

As this tally reveals, each villain ultimately falls victim to his own scheming, a theme which greatly enhances the justice of the finale and which will remain an inseparable element of the genre right through its final plays. In this masque, Bel-Imperia was “Solely appointed to that tragic part/That she might slay him that offended her” (IV.iv.138-39) in killing her betrothed. Hieronimo himself deals the blow to Lorenzo; thus each victim gets to slay the villain most responsible for his own

suffering, rendering more perfect the final feeling of equity emphasized by Hieronimo's lines to the king declaring how he is "Pleased with their deaths, and eased with their revenge" (IV.iv.190). Hieronimo's satisfaction is one with that of Andrea, and the mortal revenger, satisfied in the justice he has rendered, wastes no time in joining Andrea in the afterlife of pleasing repose.

The exact balance offered in such a retributive system, however, is challenged by the fact that the villain is deserving of death, whereas the original victim was wrongly deprived of innocent life. "Were there worse end than death,/That end upon them should be executed" (II.iii.302-303), Saturnius declares of Martius and Quintus, who stand accused of the vicious murder of Bassianus. At the end of *The Spanish Tragedy*, however, Kyd offers a solution to this inequality. While innocent victims shall spend eternity "in ease" (IV.v.46), villains rightly deprived of life on Earth shall face eternal torment as their further punishment, ultimately returning the scales to equilibrium. Therefore, at the end of the play, the only remaining imbalance, that Horatio died an innocent while Lorenzo and Balthazar deserved their bloody ends, shall be resolved in the afterlife, a fact which both Hieronimo and Revenge declare: Hieronimo speaking of the villains "Upon whose souls may heavens yet be avenged/With greater far than these afflictions" (IV.iv.174-75) and Revenge promising that "though death has end their misery,/I'll begin their endless tragedy" (IV.v.45-48).

Although the divine sanction voiced by the ghosts lends the seal of spiritual approval to the revenger's cause, it remains critical that the quest retain justice as its primary goal, producing a quest in which revenge is only the means to an end. If the

desirability of revenge were to overtake the ultimate goal of justice, the revenger should lose his moral superiority over the villain, who also killed for pleasure. The authors of these early tragedies for this reason work tirelessly to maintain the staunch morality of the revenging figure. This deliberate emphasis on the revenger's morality and on the precision in his acts of vengeance are most apparent in Marston's Antonio, who struggles deeply with his responsibility to kill the child Julio. "O that I knew which joint, which side, which limb/Were father all, and had no mother in't,/That I might rip it vein by vein and carve revenge/In bleeding rases!" (III.iii.20-24) Antonio cries, as he approaches the child with a knife. Antonio's intent is just: he wishes to spill all of Piero's blood, even that which flows in the veins of Piero's young child. "It is not thee I hate, not thee I kill," he insists to Julio (III.iii.34): "Thy father's blood that flows within thy veins/Is it I loathe, is that revenge must suck" (III.iii.34-36). Yet Antonio knows, however, "since 'tis mixed together" (III.iii.35) the child entire must die. Since it is not possible to strike against only the blood of the father without harming the child himself, Julio's death qualifies as a legitimate revenge on the sinful father. "I love thy soul," Antonio cries to Julio just before killing him,

and were thy heart lapped up
In any flesh but in Piero's blood
I would thus kiss it; but being his, thus, thus,
And thus I'll punch it. III.iii.37-40

The irony of these conflicting emotions is striking as Julio's blood spills forth onto the stage. "He is all Piero, father, all; this blood,/This breast, this heart, Piero all,/Whom thus I mangle" (III.iii.56-58), Antonio assures himself and the audience, and he begs the child, "Sprite of Julio,/Forget this was thy trunk. I live thy friend" (III.iii.58-59) at the same time as he reminds himself of why he acted as he did:

but thy father's blood
I thus make incense of...to Vengeance!
Ghost of my poisoned sire, suck this fume;
To sweet revenge, perfume thy circling air
With smoke of blood. III.iii.61-65

Abruptly Antonio's self-doubt ceases, and Antonio reaffirms his commitment to the cause of revenge. If Julio's death appeared absurd a moment earlier, it is here revealed once again to be a deliberate and necessary element of the overall retribution against Piero.

“[S]een purely in terms of its revenge tragedy structure, the play presents Antonio as blameless” (38), Gair emphasizes. Moreover, the play strongly argues that Antonio “acted as a dutiful son should, in the appeasement of his father's ghost by shedding the blood of the murderer and his kindred” (Gair 39). When his revenge is finished, and justice has been served, Antonio again proves his inherent morality, pledging to spend his days in “the holy verge of some religious order” (V.vi.35). His morality, moreover, is reflected back through his reception at the hands of a grateful community. Instead of the retaliation which might be expected to await men whose hands are (if justly) stained with blood, “Antonio and the other gloating revengers face a group of public-minded spirited citizens, who laud their achievements and hope that their ‘honours live/Religiously held sacred, even forever and ever’ (V.ii.127-28)” (Ornstein 155).

In the absurdity it offers in this simple happy ending, the conclusion of *Antonio's Revenge* represents an extreme example of the acceptance the revenge plot could win from the audience. Although the death and cooking of the child Julio and the feast in which he was fed to his own father stressed the bounds of revenge tragedy

convention, according to the law of retribution these acts could be interpreted merely as a just comeuppance for the villain Piero. The Elizabethan acceptance of *Antonio's Revenge* thus demonstrates the degree to which its Elizabethan audience was willing to embrace the revenger's duty, and to applaud the man who restores order to the world. Nonetheless, the excesses in Marston's play still strain against the bounds of acceptability. A stage revenger must at all times maintain his moral authority over the villains as the defender of Christian justice, and the killing of an innocent child necessarily falls far beyond the realms of Christian mercy. Moreover, the absurdity in Antonio's desire to divide Julio's blood into his father's and mother's contributions reveals the essential futility of all revenge: the justice of slaying the villainous part of a man is innately nullified by the injustice caused by slaying that same man's innocent parts. Each retributive killing thus contributes as much injustice to the world as it rectifies, perpetuating the cycle of violence and injustice. In this scene, therefore, Marston not only casts a harsh light on the excessive violence inherent in the genre of revenge tragedy, but also reveals the inherent futility of the act of revenge itself. In fact, although the Elizabethan revenger characteristically retained the audience's sympathies, within the action of the play this character is typically revealed to be irrevocably stained by the blood on his hands, the executor of similar injustices to those he avenges. This presents a final imbalance that is normally rectified by the revenger's death in Act Five. In Marston's play, however, the Court's acceptance of Antonio and Pandulpho is so wholehearted that the revengers not only survive the play, but end the play by reasserting their moral purity. Although the play remains within the bounds of its revenge tragedy conventions, its hyperbolic quality

appears to question the same conventions that it obeys by extending these conventions to excesses that border on parody. These excesses emphasize the dramatic nature of the play, Barbara Baines argues, making the audience “acutely conscious of the dictates of the convention and [inviting] an assessment of the generic form” (280). Indeed, Julio’s mangled corpse appears an odd symbol of humble and moral revenge, just as the overwhelming approval with which the revengers are met at the close of the play stretches the conventional approval to the point of suggesting a society that has completely abandoned human sympathy and the understanding of nuance. The utter certainty that the play demonstrates regarding the justness of revenge is so nearly absurd that Gair quips, “One might have hoped for a less dogmatic apparition and one less sure of the moral desirability of revenge” (26).

The death of the innocent Julio, furthermore, calls attention to the dreadful cycle of violence set in motion by the initial crime. In gruesomely slaughtering an innocent child, the play offers a critique on the excessive violence that appears in revenge tragedies such as *The Spanish Tragedy* and *Titus Andronicus*. Even though each death is earned through an act of violence in *Titus Andronicus*, for instance, the cycle of violence seems to overtake the reasoned revenge one desires, and Shakespeare falls victim to one of the dire consequences of the endorsed system of retribution. “Injury breaks a taboo, and disinhibits violence” (4) Kerrigan notes, leading inevitably to this endless cycle of violence:

revenge is a building-block, the seed from which something larger can grow, since, one man’s vengeance being another man’s injury, the single exchange on an open stage will breed others as blood calls for blood and the symmetries of action extend into plot. 5

In Shakespeare's play, "Tamora takes revenge for the execution of her son by assailing Titus's offspring; he replicates her crime by murdering her two remaining sons" (McDonald xxxviii). One killing inevitably leads to another, disintegrating into a cycle of violence that in this system appears inevitable. *Titus*, furthermore, is heavily populated with such mirrorings: McDonald points out that no fewer than four pairs of brothers populate the play (xxxviii), and Tamora's ignored pleas return as she demands, "Remember, boys, I poured forth tears in vain/To save your brother from the sacrifice,/But fierce Andronicus would not relent" (Ii.iii.163-5) in order to justify her cold refusal of Lavinia's pleas to spare her chastity. Such doublings and redoublings cheapen each loss and subsequent act of revenge, furthermore, making the deaths serve more to highlight an unstoppable cycle of violence than any particular experience of loss. Only the initial revenge play, *The Spanish Tragedy*, retains a sense of significance in the play's limited mirrorings; although one bloodletting leads to the next, as "now the Viceroy's son has committed the murder of another son, Horatio, a crime which must inevitably lead to his own destruction" (Mulryne xxiv), that revenge plot occupies the remaining two-thirds of the play, and drives the plot in a forward, rather than circular, motion, cycling back only in the final moments when Hieronimo's death pays for the violent acts he himself has committed.

In *Titus*, in contrast, the mirroring and matching of crimes and punishments cycle and repeat until of the play's end, where inevitably revenge is achieved "at full" and a rapid balance is secured. In *Titus*, justice is finally served when Titus stabs Tamora, to which Saturninus immediately responds, "Die, frantic wretch, for this accursèd deed!" (V.iii.62) and stabs Titus. Lucius instantly demands, "Can the son's

eye behold his father bleed?/There's meed for meed, death for a deadly deed!" (V.iii.65-66). With these final words of justice, he stabs Saturninus, and puts an end to the cycle of bloodshed that derives from the "blood-for-blood" system of justice in operation only because there are none left of Saturninus' kin to slay his killer. After the first murder breaks the taboo of violence and sets in motion the system of bloody retribution, all the subsequent killings are inevitable. According to the tradition of retributive justice, that is, the agent responsible for Julio's death is not Antonio, who acted rightly and out of a desire for justice and order, but Piero, who in willfully murdering two innocent men turned his blood villainous, and made anyone carrying his blood in their veins a fair target for revenge. Thus Piero's murder of Andrugio and Feliche, which he mistakenly terms "revenge" (erroneously applying a moral term to villainous actions founded upon no initial victimization I.i.85), leads directly to Antonio's revenge against Piero and his kin. Antonio, in turn, is now at risk of vengeful retaliation. "The theme of retribution lends itself to such mirroring" (xxxviii), McDonald concurs, and so, like the schemes of the plays' villains, retribution contains within itself the means of its eventual downfall in circular plotlines.

In these early tragedies, the use of revenge to right the imbalance in the scales of justice is thoroughly endorsed by the plays and meets with popular approval from the audience. The precision in this retributive form of justice appears logically fair: he who murders should be killed; he who causes pain should feel the same pain returned to him. "Wound for wound, stripe for stripe," the Bible declared (Exodus 21:25), and the early plays of the revenge genre accepted without question this system

of justice which found its authority in the long-standing tradition of talion law. Debates about the morality of revenge did not appear in earnest until Shakespeare's *Hamlet* broke the tradition of trust in the ghost and the revenge quest. Until then, the logical balance of retributive justice lay so deeply imbedded in Elizabethan religion and cultural thought that early tragedians could devise few other ways to right the scales than by the repayment of blood with blood. In the audience, the Elizabethans' overwhelming support of the plays that urged this sense of justice (Mulryne points out that "*The Spanish Tragedy* proved on its first appearance an overwhelmingly successful stage play" xxx) launched the revenge genre to the forefront of the Elizabethan stage. Beginning with the absurd elements of *Antonio's Revenge*, however, later plays began to challenge the certainty with which revenge was approached as the means by which to achieve justice. As *Hamlet* and *The Atheist's Tragedy* took the stage, doubt crept in where confidence had reigned before, and the revenge tragedy entered a new stage, where justice resided less surely in the hands of the revenger.

IV.

“That would be scanned”: The Late Tragedies and the Rejection of Revenge

In pushing the limits of generic convention almost to the point of parody, Marston's *Antonio's Revenge* merely illustrated a fact of the genre: its simplistic approach to revenge was becoming outdated. The extreme bloodshed of *The Spanish Tragedy* and *Titus Andronicus* lent themselves easily to parody, a demand that was partially met with the gruesome excesses of *Antonio's Revenge*. In this play, although the paradigm of blood-for-blood justice is reinforced through repetition and through the approval with which this system is met in the text of the play, the play's near-absurd level of violence and the simplistically positive acceptance of the revengers' cause also casts an ironic light on this system of justice. Since, as Broude notes, “the ironic handling of revenge play conventions can sometimes communicate serious reservations about the ‘official’ values with which they are usually associated” (57), even the repetition of *Spanish Tragedy* themes and dialogue in *Antonio's Revenge* may indicate a critical commentary that began to reject revenge tragedy solutions. Therefore, although *Antonio's Revenge* repeats the patterns and motifs of its predecessors in the revenge genre, its treatment of these themes calls into question the contemporary value of the centuries-old system of revenge-justice, prompting the viewer to speculate that a newer, more humane system might be required.

By the time of its first production, the challenge that Marston's play posed to the value of the revenge genre was by no means revolutionary. Although the revenge genre continued for a number of years into the reign of James I, even as early as the

turn of the century the vogue for revenge tragedy had begun to wane. The stylized conventions, so potent in *The Spanish Tragedy* years before, had by the time of *Antonio's Revenge* already been reduced to the subject of mockery. In the Induction to *A Warning for Fair Women* (1599), for instance, the ghost that Kyd used chillingly to command revenge and Marston mimicked repetitively is mocked as

a filthy, whining ghost
Lapped in some foul sheet, or a leather pelch,
Comes screaming like a pig half sticked,
And cries Vindicta, revenge, revenge.
(quoted in Greenfield *Induction* 45)

Along with the ghost's ability to inspire awe, the power of the revenge-plot to hold the audience's attention had waned, and as the genre progressed the simplicity of the revenge-plot was dismissed as outdated. After Marston's absurdist treatment of the revenge template mocked the simplicity of the classic plot and challenged the audience to question the genre of revenge tragedy, new plays, in order to hold the audience's interests and sympathies, had to treat the quest for justice with greater complexity than had been afforded in the earlier revenge plays of the Elizabethan era. Emerging from Marston's critique, Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (c. 1599-1601), *The Revenger's Tragedy* (most likely penned by Tourneur or Middleton at the beginning of the seventeenth century), Tourneur's *The Atheist's Tragedy* (c.1611), and Heywood's *A Woman Killed with Kindness* (c. 1602-1603) more explicitly challenged the idea that blood retaliation is the correct means by which to achieve the desired balance.

With Shakespeare's unique art of nuance and complexity, *Hamlet* picked up on this criticism and brought it to the foreground. While in *Antonio's Revenge*,

“Marston amplifies the cruelty of his villain and the tyranny of his ghost at the same time that he allows his protagonist little opportunity to contemplate his actions” (Baines 279), in Shakespeare’s play, in contrast, Hamlet spends most of the play in contemplation of his actions, as well as of the greater and deeper themes they invoke. When the ghosts in *The Spanish Tragedy* and *Antonio’s Revenge* return to command revenge or to chide tardy revengers, furthermore, the living men to whom they return immediately respond with contrition and instantly accept the ghost as a visitor from a benevolently divine afterlife. *Hamlet*, conversely, accepts no such simple solution. When the ghost appears in *Hamlet*, in contrast to the plays before, the human prince’s reaction is one of a modern man facing a fiction of the past. In Shakespeare’s play, the return of the ghost is suddenly confronted with a doubt that never before existed: Hamlet does not share Antonio’s conviction that the ghost in fact comes bearing the word of God. Shakespeare revitalizes the revenge-plot by replacing the morally unambiguous ghost of the early tragedies with a figure that no-one, least of all the revenger, confidently trusts.

This doubt emerges above all from the fact that Hamlet, as well as his audience, does not presume to know whether the ghost emerges from the divine light of heaven or the vast pits of purgation or hell. “Be thou a spirit of health, or goblin damned,” Hamlet demands of the image in front of him, and he wonders, “Bring with thee airs from heaven or blasts from hell,/Be thy intents wicked or charitable” (I.iv.39-44). Like the Spain of Kyd’s *Spanish Tragedy*, *Antonio’s Revenge* had been set in a world (here, Italy) governed by the Catholic religion. Hamlet, on the other hand, is a scholar from Wittenberg, properly educated in the religion of Martin

Luther. When Hamlet, accepting his fate after discovering Claudius's warrant for his death, declares that "There is a special providence in the fall of a sparrow" (V.ii.192-93), his observation is clothed in significantly allusive language. In this passage, Hamlet directly references the philosopher at the heart of the Anglican religion, John Calvin. In this moment, Hamlet is directly citing Calvin's *Institutes* and *Commentaries*, echoing Calvin's claim that there is "a special Providence sustaining, cherishing, superintending, all the things which he has made, to the very minutest, even to a sparrow" (*Institutes* 1.16.1), and effectively declaring his adherence to this modern and (to his audience's mind) correct religion. In proclaiming fidelity to Calvin's teachings, Hamlet implicitly declares the ghost a fraud; for Hamlet, as well as his Protestant audience, there can be no such thing as the Purgatory from which the ghost claims to emerge, as this divine realm is an exclusively Catholic concept.

"I am thy father's spirit," the ghost asserts to Hamlet,

Doomed for a certain term to walk the night,
And for the day confined to fast in fires,
Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature
Are burnt and purged away. I.v.9-13

The afterlife the ghost here describes is quite clearly the Purgatory of the Catholic Church, and shortly after he vanishes Hamlet himself invokes St. Patrick, patron saint of Purgatory (I.v.144). These Catholic sentiments, however, are merely remnants of a belief system that the play itself wrestles with and at last dispels, ultimately embracing the more modern system of Protestant belief. By identifying himself as coming from Purgatory, therefore, the ghost aligns himself with a Catholic conception specifically renounced by the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Anglican Church. In Article Twenty-Two of the Thirty-Nine, the Church determines, "the

Romish Doctrine concerning Purgatory, Pardons, Worshipping and Adoration...is a fond thing, vainly invented, and grounded upon no warranty of Scripture, but rather repugnant to the Word of God.” Hamlet confirms his agreement with this refusal of Purgatory and the possibility of ghosts emerging from it in his most famous monologue, in which he terms the afterlife “The undiscovered country from whose bourn/No traveler returns” (III.i.78-79). This permanently removed realm represents the Calvinist view of eternity, and it is incompatible with the Purgatory from which the ghost claims to arrive, literally a ‘traveler returning’ from the realm beyond the grave. According to the religious viewpoint endorsed by Hamlet and the majority of his British audience, therefore, the ghost could not in fact be Hamlet’s father’s spirit, as he claims. Hamlet himself paints an image of the alternative, declaring that “This spirit that I have seen may be the devil” (II.ii.596), since the devil could send to Earth images intended to trap mortal souls; Hamlet accordingly fears that this specter “Abuses me to damn me” (II.ii.601). Even after *The Mousetrap* confirms Claudius’ guilt, this confirmation of the phantom’s claims reveals nothing about the true nature of the apparition, since the devil himself may speak truth in order to advance his evil schemes. When the ghost instructs Hamlet, “So art thou [bound] to revenge” (I.v.7), therefore, his word has been stripped of the weight of divine sanction.

Since the plot of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* was most likely lifted from Thomas Kyd’s earlier *Ur-Hamlet*, the essential structure of the Kydian revenge play remained in effect. Yet the religious and moral separation between the essentially Calvinist Hamlet and the earlier revengers requires a significant development of the revenger’s motive. If Hamlet is to kill Claudius and rid the world of the villain that has upset the

balance of justice, it cannot be because a ghost from Purgatory has commanded him to do so. If, like Hamlet, the audience is to grant Calvin's "special providence," then this negates the Catholic conception of the divine realm, rendering a ghost from Purgatory an impossible apparition. The ghost is thus stripped of his credibility as a messenger from God, and his command to "Revenge [this] foul and most unnatural murder" (I.v.25) no longer carries any weight. The bloodshed that ultimately occurs at Hamlet's hand, therefore, is specifically prompted by motives other than revenge, and although the play is classified as a revenge tragedy, ultimately it becomes "doubtful whether the play ends in vengeance or not" (Kerrigan 211). Since Hamlet has revealed himself to be a faithful Calvinist, he must obey Calvin's interpretation of Christian doctrine, which commands (in Calvin's *Commentary on Romans* 12:19), "however grievously we may be injured, we are not to seek revenge, But to commit it to the Lord," always leaving to the Lord "the right of judging." Calvin often stresses this point, arguing repeatedly that "It is not lawful to usurp the office of God," or to from "God take the office of executing vengeance" (*Commentary*). In a play with a Protestant revenger, the days of moral certainty afforded by divine spirits and of "This for my father's blood" (*AR* V.v.77) are gone. When Prince Hamlet ultimately dies, he instead makes no remembrance of his father, flying in the face of revenge tragedy convention and emphasizing his departure from the motive of revenge.

When at last Hamlet does strike against his enemies, his motives are pre-emptive and defensive, rather than vengeful. The defensive nature of Hamlet's actions is highlighted by the fact that each of Hamlet's enemies is dispatched with the very weapon he brought to the scene with the intention of taking Hamlet's life.

Hamlet forces the villainous Claudius to “Drink off this potion” (V.ii.305) that Claudius himself poisoned in Hamlet’s cup, and Laertes, stabbed with his own poisoned rapier, admits, “I am justly killed with mine own treachery” (V.ii.287). Although the ghost’s command of vengeance no longer bears weight in this play, therefore, the conception of justice as a direct reckoning of the scales remains in effect through the very end. “[V]enom, to thy work!” (V.ii.301) Hamlet declares, stabbing Claudius with the rapier Claudius himself poisoned; “He is justly served,” Laertes notes, “It is a poison tempered by himself” (V.ii.306-7). Claudius’s death ultimately pays for his attempt on Hamlet’s life, and not his treachery against the Elder Hamlet. Examining skulls and looking at his own death warrant, furthermore, Hamlet is painfully aware that the revenge the ghost commands is in fact an exercise in futility. “[H]e cannot overcome his radical sense of its pointlessness,” (188) Kerrigan comments of the revenge with which Hamlet is charged, and, in the end, Hamlet anticipates the conclusions soon to be drawn by Francis Bacon: “That which is past is gone, and irrevocable; and wise men have enough to do, with things present and to come” (347). Ultimately, the bloodshed executed at Hamlet’s hands comes not from vengeance for “that which is past,” but rather out of protection against things to come under a tyrant’s rule. “[I]s’t not to be damned,” Hamlet asks Horatio, “To let this canker of our nature come/In further evil?” (V.ii.70-71). Just as Luther commands Christ’s followers to strike down criminals who shall likely sin again, declaring that “he is guilty of all the murder and evil which these fellows commit, because, by willful neglect of the divine command he permits them to practice their wickedness, though he can prevent it” (*Works* 252), Hamlet ultimately kills Claudius

in order to prevent him from committing future acts of villainy. In a genre formerly dedicated to the past, Hamlet looks forward.

In contrast, Laertes stands as Hamlet's dramatic foil, as this second son does subscribe to the former and outdated school, and does ultimately kill on behalf of his murdered father. The scholarly Hamlet chooses always to obey the canon of "the Everlasting" (I.ii.131), which he cannot bring into line with the command of revenge. The hot-blooded Laertes, in contrast, accepts as duty the quest for revenge, although he, too, believes that the act will damn him:

To hell, allegiance! vows, to the blackest devil!
Conscience and grace, to the profoundest pit!
I dare damnation. To this point I stand,
That both the worlds I give to negligence,
Let come what comes; only I'll be revenged
Most thoroughly for my father. IV.v.133-38

Even Laertes, however, eventually discovers the futility of this action. Obeying his vow, "Laertes kills Hamlet but," Sinfield notes, "wishes he had not" (96). After the blood has been shed, Laertes begs Hamlet (his victim and executioner all in one) for forgiveness, but receives in reply only the unsatisfying "Heaven make thee free of it" (V.ii.311). Hamlet's enigmatic response to Laertes' earthly demand underlines the fact that God in this play is reduced to a silent force, whom mortals cannot hope to understand as one formerly could when ghosts could be trusted, or when Revenge himself came from heaven to oversee earthly justice. In this moment, however, a critical new idea has entered into the fading genre. Laertes' introduction of forgiveness into the revenge tragedy genre exposes the genre to a whole new avenue by which to arrive at justice, inviting a new wave of plays at the same time as it ensures that the Kydian revenge plot is indeed archaic.

The shifting attitudes towards revenge which *Hamlet* brings to the fore are also captured in the ending of Thomas Heywood's *A Woman Killed with Kindness* (1602-1603). In this play, the revenger, Frankford, is responsible for the death of his adulterous wife since his public forgiveness of her causes Anne to pine away and die. This mode of revenge is equally harsh to those in which actual blood is shed: "It is possible to indulge in vindictiveness by acts of generosity because the obligations imposed by a gift can be as disabling as a dose of arsenic" (95), Kerrigan explains. As the play ends, however, Frankford appears to deeply regret his wife's death. Unlike classic revengers who gloat over their vengeance, the tone with which Frankford dwells upon his culpability for his wife's death is one of sorrow and irony: "I will shed tears for thee," Frankford proclaims, "and in mere pity/Of thy weak state I'll wish to die with thee" (XVII.95-97). "The play opened with a wedding," Fossen notes with irony: "It closes with a wedding that is also a funeral" (xl). It is with painful irony that Frankford himself notes this fact, commenting that "a cold grave must be our nuptial bed" (XVII.124) as "Here lies she whom her husband's kindness killed" (XVII.140). Far from the glee felt by Hieronimo or Marston's Antonio at the culminations of their revenges, Frankford appears even to regret his revenge, repeatedly lamenting Anne's death at his hands and noting the irony of killing one whom he loves. Furthermore, prompted by his regret over the loss of his wife, Frankford openly and effusively pardons his wife's wrongdoing:

As freely from the low depth of my soul
As my Redeemer hath forgiven His death,
I pardon thee. XVII.3-95

Even as I hope for pardon at that day
When the Great Judge of Heaven in scarlet sits,
So be thou pardoned. XVII.105-107

In pardoning his wife after completing his revenge Frankford joins with Laertes to become one of the new breed of revengers who consider (if too late) the other side of revenge, the alternate that may right the scales as completely as precise bloodshed had before: the act of forgiveness for a wrong.

The possibility of forgiveness appears yet again in Beaumont and Fletcher's *The Maid's Tragedy* (c. 1608–11). As with Laertes and Frankford, however, Evadne discovers the futility of revenge and the desirability of forgiveness only after she has damned herself through the killing of her enemy. In this play, the theme of revenge is originally treated just as it was in the genre's first plays: as a lingering necessity that haunts the revenger until his duty is complete. "The faithless sin I made/To fair Aspatia is not yet revenged," Amintor laments: "It follows me" (III.i.217-19). Unrevenged wrongs appear in this play as in *The Spanish Tragedy* as unpaid debts that set the world out of balance, and the completion of revenge insists on being called an act of "justice": "I...stand here in mine own justice," Melantius announces, "to revenge/What I have suffered in him" (V.ii.50-51). Yet this certainty in the value of revenge is undermined even within the text of the play. Strato argues the futility of revenge, declaring, "What's done is past recall,/And past you to revenge" (V.ii.61-2), and Evadne, after completing the revenge task assigned to her, discovers for herself the impossibility of clearing a wrong with another evil act, as Craik explains: "[Evadne's] tragedy is that when she presents herself to Amintor as purged of guilt he can see only that she has piled a second crime upon her first" (12). Evadne's act of

forgiving the King after spilling his blood comes, like those of Laertes and Frankford, too late. Her statement, “Die all our faults together! I forgive thee” (V.i.113) fundamentally underlines the fact that the king’s death at her hands merely compounds her faults, rather than laying them to rest. Even more than in *A Woman Killed with Kindness*, the language of forgiveness saturates this play, indirectly suggesting the solution to the problems caused by the cycle of revenge-violence. The words “forgive” or “forgiveness” appear eleven different times in the play, and “pardon” is demanded or granted by four separate characters (“mercy” and “pity” by two more). This theme of forgiveness indicates that *The Maid’s Tragedy* is not altogether a classic revenge play, as “The revenge element, set in motion by the King’s misdeeds, reaches its climax in the first scene of Act V with his murder” (Craik 10), while in a classic revenge tragedy this moment would have occurred in the final scene. In the wake of *Hamlet*, the revenge genre was changing shape.

The departure from the earlier form of revenge tragedy nears its peak in Cyril Tourneur’s *The Atheist’s Tragedy*, which, although it maintains a staunch adherence to the quest for a balanced justice, abandons entirely the revenge motif. “*The Atheist’s Tragedy*,” Irving Ribner notes, “stands apart from [earlier] plays in offering us a hero who refuses revenge” (Li). Although Hamlet ultimately rejects the ghost’s command for revenge, killing instead in self-defense more than out of duty to his father’s honor, the ghost nonetheless returns in the shape of the Senecan ghost employed by the early tragedies. In *The Atheist’s Tragedy*, however, the return of the ghost is employed to a distinctly different purpose. In this play, the ghost emerges from the spiritual realm, not to command revenge, but expressly to forbid it as

contrary to God's law. "Hold, Charlemont!" (III.ii.322), the ghost declares. Echoing God's word in Deuteronomy, "To me belongeth vengeance, and recompense" (32:35), the ghost continues, "Let him revenge my murder and thy wrongs/To whom the justice of revenge belongs" (III.ii.33-34). Significantly, the ghost does not question the justness of revenge, but merely restricts the action of this justice to the arm of the Lord. The ghost is firm on this point, returning repeatedly to stress the exclusiveness of God's right: "Attend with patience the success if things,/But leave revenge unto the King of kings" (II.vi.22-23), yet even when revenge is withheld for the Lord alone, the system of balance is precisely maintained. Although God insists, "Vengeance is mine," He is equally clear on the point of precise repayment, declaring, "I will repay, saith the Lord" (Romans 12:19). Repayment for crimes remains as always at the center of justice.

Obeying these commands, *The Atheist's Tragedy* assures the audience that the revenge that both Charlemont and the audience crave shall still be served, and that a restraint from revenge on the part of the victim shall not subvert justice and allow the imbalance to remain unrighted. Instead, Charlemont's "universe is a divinely ordered one, where the sufferings of mankind are always in just proportion to their sins," Ribner assures his reader (Liii). Charlemont trusts deeply in God's deliverance of this balance, musing, "I grant thee, Heaven, thy goodness doth command/Our punishments, but yet no farther than the measure of our sins" (III.iii.1-2), yet the culmination of the play dramatizing the ultimate death of the villain through an act of divine providence assures the audience that justice can arrive in a manner that both retains the purity of the revenger's soul and stops the cycle of violence. D'Amville

concedes that divine retribution “meets me/I’ the face with all her light corrupted eyes/To challenge payment o’ me” (IV.iii.227-29), but his world is one in which the payment is claimed by God alone.

The payment owed by all villains to compensate for their crimes may come immediately or after long delay. God’s reckoning of accounts can be swift, as in the case of the invalid Rousard:

A gen’ral weakness did surprise my health
The very day I marry’d Catabella,
As if my sickness were a punishment
That did arrest me for some injury
I then committed. III.iv.63-67

Alternatively, the accounts can be balanced long after the crime is cold, as in the case of D’Amville himself. Fossen suggests that, like an overburdened accountant, God may get bogged down in all the imbalances in the world, which may delay His action:

Will ‘t but be a chargeable reckoning, think you, when here
are half a dozen fellows coming to call us to account, with
ev’ry man a several bill in his hand that we are not able to
discharge. IV.v.48-50

Be it immediate or delayed, however, God always ultimately fulfills His promise of revenge, honoring the conception of justice to which both mortal and divine realms are bound. Charlemont’s final lines, therefore, close the play on a note of gratitude and, ultimately, vengeance:

Only to Heav’n I attribute the work,
Whose gracious motives made me still forbear
To be mine own revenger. Now I see
That *patience is the honest man’s revenge.* V.ii.275-78

Like Titus and Hieronimo before him, Charlemont inhabits a world where the guilty must pay for their crimes to retain the balance of justice, but Charlemont’s refusal of

revenge allows him to survive the play with a clear conscience. Order is restored without the cost of the revenger's purity.

If revenge is to be employed as the means by which to arrive at balanced justice, it can no longer come at the hands of a mortal revenger. In this new era, the renouncing of revenge is the only acceptable route by which to achieve justice, although the concept of justice as balance in the world holds firm. Unlike Antonio, whose hands are vilely stained with the blood of both the villain and the villain's family and who is nonetheless embraced by society at the end of the play, Charlemont's triumph comes in his refusal to dirty his hands and soul with the bloodshed reserved by God.

A more striking contrast, however, comes in the form of Vindice, the aptly-named revenger of *The Revenger's Tragedy*. In this play, Vindice thinks and behaves like an early-era revenger. "The rape of your good lady has been 'quited/With death on death" (V.iii.92-93), Vindice happily declares at the end of the drama, expressing his commitment to the legal and moral code formerly extant in the biblical commands of Exodus. When Antonio believes this deliverance of justice to be the work of the Lord, he praises the heavens, declaring "Just is the law above" (V.iii.93). Once a gleeful Vindice gloatingly proclaims his responsibility for the death, however, Antonio's tone instantly shifts. "Lay hands upon those villains," he declares: "Bear 'em to speedy execution" (V.iii.103-04). The killing which Vindice had regarded as a just execution is instead deemed to be "murder," and Vindice himself labeled a "villain." Like Hamlet, however, Antonio's response derives not from a wish for vengeance, but out of foresight and desire to prevent further evil: "You that would

murder him would murder me!” (V.iii.107). Although Vindice had eagerly awaited the gratitude and accolades that accompanied Marston’s Antonio off the stage at the end of the earlier play, his world is no longer one grounded in “blood-for-blood” justice. Instead, like Evadne, he is rejected for the blood on his hands, and, as he stammers bewilderedly “are we not revenged?/Is there one enemy left alive amongst those?” (V.iii.110-11), he is swept away to a speedy execution, “destroyed...for the vehemence of his vengeance” (Ribner Lv). Like Hamlet, whose one attempt at swift revenge merely resulted in further injustice through the unwarranted death of Polonius, Vindice discovers that revenge only breeds further imbalance. Just as Marston subtly mocks the pleased acceptance of the bloody revenger in the early plays, so the author of *The Revenger’s Tragedy* illustrates that society cannot accept such bloody deeds, regardless of the revenger’s good intent. Instead it is Antonio, the character who like Charlemont rejects revenge, who triumphs; meanwhile the revenger, loyal to a code no longer sufficient in the world of the play, meets with utter destruction and rightful execution at the hands of the divinely sanctioned Law. If Hieronimo’s tragedy was one “of a man to whom the right choice was unavailable” (Justice 278), Vindice’s is one of a man acting anachronistically and punished modernly.

Emerging from the questions posed by *Antonio’s Revenge* and Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, these new plays in the revenge genre take us from the period endorsing revenge into a period where it must be rejected. In so doing these plays doomed the revenge-plot to the tombs of literary history and opened the “revenge tragedy” plays of justice to a new cadre of plays which would continue as ever the same quest for

earthly justice, found in the balance of crime and payment, while abandoning the revenge ethic of ‘blood for blood.’ As balance remained paramount in importance, however, the new option of forgiveness stepped in to fill the absence left by the rejected ethic of revenge. Whether God and Man are united in a quest for revenge, as in the early tragedies of revenge, or divided by a barrier of authority, as in the later plays of the genre, the conception of justice as a balance of wrongs remained firm across the genre. When in the later plays, however, revenge became solely God’s prerogative, it ceased to be a means by which man himself could achieve balance and return the world to the order that justice provided. At this time, as revenge declined as a desirable reaction to crime, the act of forgiveness began to achieve a weight which offered to right the scales of justice as only revenge could before. Emerging from the doubt of (as in *Hamlet*) and resistance to (as in *The Atheist’s Tragedy*) the paradigm of revenge, therefore, the possibility of forgiveness rose as a balancing force capable of rectifying the imbalance in the universe.

In his seminal *The French Academy*, translated and popularized in England by Thomas Bowes in 1594, Pierre de la Primaudaye recognizes the idea of repaying an evil action with a good one. La Primaudaye states, in Bowes’s English, that “wee may well conclude, that all priuate Revenge proceeding of envy, or of hatred, or of anger, is vicous and forbidden by God, who commaundeth us to render good for evill, and not evill for evill” (quoted in Ribner Lii). This command appears at first a far cry from the “blood for blood” that God explicitly commands in Genesis 9:6. The reckoning of accounts, however, promises to remain the same, so long as the act of “good” is equal to the evil action committed by the instigator. This balance remains a

distant hope, however, in many of the first revenge plays that strive to incorporate the exchange of good for ill. In *A Woman Killed with Kindness*, for instance, the multiple acts of forgiveness in which Frankford participates arrive only *after* Anne has paid for her sins with her life. Likewise in Beaumont and Fletcher's *The Maid's Tragedy* (c. 1610-1611), Evadne forgives the king's seduction only after she has spilt his blood as payment for the theft of her chastity.

By this period the traditional form of revenge tragedy in the vein of Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy* had been proven an archaic and gruesome genre, out of touch with contemporary attitudes towards revenge and justice. What remained was the first plays' insistence on balance, a need that was met increasingly in the later plays through the bloodless alternative of forgiveness. With *Hamlet's* challenge to revenge as their launching ground, the new earthly revengers increasingly found the order and balance they sought in actions of forgiveness, rendering, as la Primaudaye demands, "good for evill, not evill for evill."

V.

The Tempest and the Death of the Genre

Following the challenges posed by *Antonio's Revenge* and *Hamlet* to the genre of revenge tragedy in the pattern of Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy*, the genre entered a new era in which earthly retribution was spurned, and the right of judging was left to the Lord. Yet divine balance in the spiritual realm does little to right the imbalance on the Earth, and legal and moral codes still commanded that justice be served and the villain's wrong somehow countered in this world. With revenge newly classified as outside the bounds of moral decency, dramatists required a new means by which to achieve the desired balance. Taking its cue from the conclusions to the last wave of revenge tragedies, *The Tempest* (c. 1611) offers its audience just this new way to right the scales. In this play, the vacancy created by the rejection of revenge is filled instead with the more Christian option of forgiveness suggested by the repentant revengers of the late revenge tragedies, and a great act of forgiveness is newly portrayed as equivalent to a large act of wrongdoing. *The Tempest* thus completes the transformation begun in the final revenge tragedies, maintaining the quest for justice at the same time as it completely supplants the revenge plot with a storyline ending in forgiveness.

Like its forefathers in the revenge tragedy genre, *The Tempest* opens with a victim dwelling in vengeful rage over a wrong perpetrated upon him. From the moment of the play's opening, Prospero is exclusively dedicated to his plan of revenge, which is intended to reverse the "foul play" (I.ii.62) that stripped him of his power and honor and "sucked [his] verdure out" (I.ii.87), and to punish the brother

who callously usurped Prospero's position of power and set him out to die in "A rotten carcass of a butt, not rigged,/Nor tackle, sail, nor mast" (I.ii.146-47), so ill-equipped for a voyage at sea that "the very rats/Instinctively have quit it" (I.ii.147-48). As in the classical revenge tragedies of the preceding two decades, the villain in *The Tempest* is the man in the seat of power, and Prospero as his victim has zero legal access through which to right the wrong perpetuated against him (even though Prospero is the rightful duke, he has lost the support of his people, who have been conned by his usurping brother: "Being once perfected how to grant suits," Antonio "set all hearts i' th' state/To what tune pleased his ear. I.ii.79-85). Because of Antonio's crime against Prospero, the world is out of order, and the scales of justice have been set gravely askew. Prospero's quest is therefore, like that of the early revengers, to retrieve this absent justice. In pursuit of this quest, Prospero acts for the first four Acts of the play like a classic Kydian revenger, and in his play "the structures and dynamics of revenge tragedy are active right to the end" (Kerrigan 213). In fact, the play's parallels to revenge tragedy structure eventually lead Kerrigan to conclude that *The Tempest* is ultimately "a work which is as much a revenge play as it is a 'late romance'" (144).

In their first scene onstage, Miranda demands of her father "your reason/For raising this sea storm?" (I.ii.176). Prospero's response reveals his intent to render justice: "By accident most strange, bountiful Fortune/(Now, my dear lady) hath mine enemies/Brought to this shore" (I.ii.178-80). Seizing upon this gift of Fortune, Prospero devises a complicated revenge, sending Ariel at last to complete the revenge and explain the justice of Prospero's revenge to his enemies:

remember
(For that's my business with you) that you three
From Milan did supplant good Prospero;
Exposed unto the sea, which hath requite it,
Him and his innocent child; for which foul deed
The pow'ers, delaying, not forgetting, have
Incensed the seas and shores, yea, all the creatures,
Against your peace. III.iii.53-60

Even before this declaration, Alonso sensed the justice in his wreck at sea, and the audience does not know whether it is magic or conscience that made Alonso hear “the name of Prosper” (III.iii.99) in the stormy sea: “Methought the billows spoke and told me of it, . . . it did bass my trespass” (III.iii.95-102). Throughout the play, Prospero is a man full of vengeful wrath, who “pinches” (V.i.74) and torments his brother in order to exact revenge for the wrongs Antonio and the King committed against him. Ultimately, however, Prospero sheds no blood in his vengeance, although under the former system of honor and talion justice the villain’s life was rightfully Prospero’s to dispense with (just as Evadne takes blood revenge on her seducer in *The Maid’s Tragedy*, who, like Antonio, committed a crime of honor, not blood). Instead, the terrors, gastric torments, and “fairy pinchings” that Prospero inflicts upon his enemies prove to be “proportioned punishments,” “rather than taunting preparations for a bloodbath” (Kerrigan 215). Prospero, like his revenger forefathers, acts throughout the play more in the desire to right a grave wrong that has set the world out of balance than out of any spiteful urge to cause pain to his evildoer. In this fashion *The Tempest* proves to be the next stage in the plays of justice, balancing a wrong without reverting to forbidden and intolerable revenge.

Just as the return of the ghost in *The Atheist’s Tragedy* serves to dissuade Charlemont from pursuing bloody revenge, so the intervention of Ariel in *The*

Tempest convinces Prospero that justice may lie in a bloodless act of forgiveness, rather than in the torture and death that are suggested by Prospero's mighty wrath at the play's opening. Throughout most of the play, Prospero's instincts urge him towards revenge. When Caliban, Stephano, and Trinculo plot against Prospero's life, for instance, the magician again resorts instinctively to revenge: for this scheme, he declares, "I will plague them all,/Even to roaring" (IV.i.192-93). When the magician gleefully declares, however, that "At this hour/Lies at my mercy all mine enemies" (IV.i.262-63), the language of his gloating cry hints at the dénouement of his long-pursued revenge plot. Shockingly, the enemies against whom Prospero has long plotted revenge do find his mercy. With the help of the "airy spirit" Ariel, Prospero is shown what recent revenge plays had hinted: that revenge is morally unacceptable to any decent soul. Ariel helps Prospero to this conclusion by sympathetically describing Antonio's sufferings and repentance. He describes:

The king,
His brother, and yours abide all three distracted,
And the remainder mourning over them,
Brimful of sorrow and dismay...
...Your charm so strongly works 'em,
That if you now beheld them, your affections
Would become tender. V.i.11-19

Ultimately, this appeal to Prospero's human sympathy sways his intent. Both Ariel and Prospero refer to the quality of mercy as being specifically human: Ariel's affections would be swayed "were I human" (V.i.20), and Prospero indeed feels his human heart soften, such as Ariel's cannot. He demands of the sprite,

Hast thou, which art but air, a touch, a feeling
Of their afflictions, and shall not myself,
One of their kind, that relish all as sharply
Passion as they, be kindlier moved than thou art? V.i.22-25

The human duke cannot remain unswayed by Christian mercy while his nonhuman slave yields to it. Conscious of this necessity, Prospero abandons his revenge, “Though with their high wrongs” he remains “struck to th’ quick” (V.i.22-23). At last, Prospero speaks for the period, declaring, “The rarer action is/In virtue than in vengeance” (V.i.27-28).

By accepting this moral stance, *The Tempest* takes the plays of justice out of the revenge tragedy genre by carrying the implications of the later plays to their only logical conclusion: the complete rejection of revenge. In contrast to Hieronimo and the many who followed in his wake, Prospero rights the egregious wrong done to him before the opening of the play by engaging in an equally large act of forgiveness. To forgive a usurping—and nearly murderous—brother is to engage in an act of such enormous magnitude that it matches the weight of the wrong it nullifies. Prospero indirectly emphasizes this equality in his long speech to his guilty brother:

you, most wicked sir, whom to call brother
Would even infect my mouth, I do forgive
Thy rankest fault—all of them; and require
My dukedom of thee, which perforce I know
Thou must restore. V.i.130-34

Antonio’s sins, like Claudius’s, are “rank” (*Hamlet* III.iii.36); thus the forgiveness of these wrongs must also be of enormous gravity to achieve the equality that remains at the bedrock necessity of justice and order. “Most cruelly/Didst thou, Alonso, use me and my daughter” (V.i.72), Prospero insists, and yet, “They being penitent,/The sole drift of my purpose doth extend/Not a frown further” (V.i.19-30). Thus, as Kerrigan notes, “[t]he fairy pinchings and gastronomic deprivations inflicted on the island turn out to be proportioned punishments,” executed by the rightful ruler and guardian of

justice, “rather than taunting preparations for a bloodbath” (215). With one large act of forgiveness, the need for a large act of revenge is nullified, and order restored, as Prospero himself reasons in the epilogue, “I have my dukedom got/And pardoned the deceiver” (6-7). The world is again as it should be.

Ultimately, therefore, although the play opens in the pursuit of the exact payment for crime laid out in Exodus’s “eye for an eye” command as Prospero seeks to make his brother feel the pain that he himself suffered, “the spirit of *The Tempest* is the much more radical spirit of pardon found in the New Testament, where, for example, Peter is told that he must forgive his brother not seven times, ‘but vnto seuentie times seuen times’ (Matthew xviii.22)” (Hoyle 360). At the same time, the triumph of forgiveness signals the death of the genre that originally demanded revenge for crimes of blood or, as in *The Maid’s Tragedy*, honor. The theme could now only be dealt with, as here, in the form of the tragicomedy which came into vogue just as the era of the revenge tragedy began to wane. “In this [later] period revenge has no advocates” (185), Bowers announces, as Jacobean playwrights ultimately “recognized the fact that the compromise between stage and public morality in the treatment of a bloody revenge could no longer be effected and that the audience could not accept a murderer as a hero no matter how just his motive” (185). “They are purified in vain with blood, those polluted with blood, as if someone who stepped in mud should try to wash himself with mud,” Kerrigan states, quoting Heraclitus (47). This sense of futility ultimately devastated the revenge plot, as revenge was revealed to be not only morally prohibited, but ineffectual as well. The Elizabethan revenge drama, once committed to blood, had entered a new era. If

revenge could no longer win public approval, then revenger-heroes lost their sympathetic appeal, and revenge tragedies ceased to appeal to large numbers of paying theatergoers. The new form of tragicomedy came into vogue as a direct replacement, treating with more complexity the same themes of justice and balance that had dominated the tragedies before it. As *The Tempest* most decisively illustrates in this final period, to achieve the balance that justice required, the moral and civilized soul must reject the appeal of revenge, opting instead for forgiveness as the more humane means of returning the scales to equilibrium. The conception of justice as a precise reckoning of the scales so strongly emphasized in the revenge tragedies outlived the means of achieving this balance the genre originally proposed, and remained the unifying concept which linked the late tragicomedies of revenge with their earlier predecessors, the Elizabethan revenge tragedies.

VI.

Conclusion: Pardon-for-Blood and the New Equality

The concept of payment for sins was not new at the time of the revenge tragedies' brief triumph. Even before Christ paid for human sins by offering His blood on the Cross, a legal system was in effect that demanded the payment of like for like. In the sixteenth century, however, it was above all the teachings of John Calvin that lay at the heart of Tudor religion, and that asserted fundamentally that God in the heavens held a dread reckoning of human sins. In Elizabethan law, and for a period on the early modern stage, this concept of payment for sins was appropriated and brought to Earth. Talion law had long insisted that villains must pay for their crimes, and the revenge tragedies insisted that this payment come in the form of blood. In many passages, the Bible itself seemed to endorse this philosophy. The logic of a payment of like for like lived in the books of the Old Testament, and the list in Exodus 20:23-25 (repeated in Leviticus 24:20) enumerating the costs of crimes ("wound for wound, stripe for stripe") appeared identical with the law of talion that dominated Elizabethan justice systems. Yet in the Book of Matthew, Christ specifically renounces this earlier passage, urging instead a forgiveness altogether incompatible with the earlier theme of revenge: "Ye have heard that it hath been said, An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth: But I say unto you, That ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also" (5:38-39).

In Kyd's groundbreaking tragedy, this later command is not only unheeded, it simply does not penetrate the theology of the play. Hieronimo roars across the stage,

the very embodiment of the vengeful God of the Old Testament; as a revenger Hieronimo even goes so far as to seize the Lord's lines for his own: "*Vindicta mihi!*" (Romans 12:19 in the Bible, III.xiii.1 in *The Spanish Tragedy*). All the while, the heavens sit applauding, and Hieronimo through violent revenge ensures his place in the comforts of the afterlife (IV.v.45-46). As later revengers tried to imitate Hieronimo's certainty, however, they found invariably that in advancing societies the complexities of justice were intruding on the Kydian revenge plot, gnawing away at the certainty that once propelled a dramatic plot from injustice to justice, from imbalance to payment and order.

When Laertes forgives Hamlet in his dying breath for his and his father's deaths, he transforms the shape of justice on the Elizabethan stage. Having acted like Hieronimo, Laertes now wishes he hadn't, and he faces death painfully aware of his disobedience to Christ's command. As Bacon famously warned, "Revenge is a kind wild justice, which the more man's nature runs to, the more ought law to weed it out, for as for the first wrong, it doth the law; but the revenge of that wrong, putteth the law out of office" (347). In *Hamlet*, the "wild justice" of revenge has decimated the Danish court, leaving it unprotected against the advancing army of Fortinbras of Norway. Laertes' forgiveness offers a new alternative, one that strengthens more than it destroys. The faith in revenge eliminated, *Hamlet* closed the door to the simple solutions of the past, and the early Jacobean stage promised to seek justice with less blood.

This promise was taken up in the tragicomedies of revenge, which broke with their predecessors in selecting the path of forgiveness before shedding blood for

blood. The tragicomedy of revenge, however, was only part of *Hamlet's* greater legacy. Although they replaced revenge with forgiveness, these plays revolved around the same fundamental belief as the revenge tragedies before them: justice was viewed as an achievable goal, and justice lay in returning balance to the world. Jacobean thought, however, questioned even this fundamental assumption. In their faith in the availability of justice, the revenge tragedies—now tragicomedies which renounced revenge—reflected a great sense of optimism that, as society grew older, died out as a fiction of youth. Just as the revenge tragedy had been dismissed as an overly simplistic approach to balancing the scales, so now the tragedies and tragicomedies of justice were dismissed as exceedingly optimistic. Universally, these plays succeed in capturing the justice they seek. Yet as the genre advanced, increasingly an unsettling element of injustice worked its way into the revenge plots. Despite Antonio's lengthy proclamations to the contrary, Julio's trunk is not "all Piero, father, all" (III.iii.56). Julio is as much his mother's child as he is his father's, and Antonio's violence against the child has replicated Piero's murder of an innocent son just as much as it has righted Piero's initial wrong by killing his kinsman, exacting blood for blood. Hamlet's slaughter of Polonius is still more conclusive: violence breeds injustice, not balance.

What, then, remains? Although God's justice promises balance in the afterlife, court corruptions and the apparent futility of mortal actions suggest that earthly Man is trapped in a lawless realm, one in which the disorder and injustice which open the revenge tragedies are in fact the permanent state of the world. After a brief vogue of tragicomedy attempted to secure the balance of justice through actions

of Christian mercy, the tragedies of justice at last fell by in the manner of the outdated tragedies of revenge. Just as revenge proved futile as an avenue to justice, later tragedies of James and Charles' reigns concluded at last that the quest for justice itself was in vain. Finally, emerging from a newfound despair in the very possibility of earthly justice, the tragedies of injustice came to the stage, replacing the tragedies of justice that had reigned before. In these later plays—those of Webster, Middleton, Shirley, Ford, and Rowley, among others—the quest for justice was abandoned as futile and the spectacle of blood given center stage. While in the earlier plays, bloodshed was merely the means to a greater end, in these later plays carnage and terror were ends in themselves, and playwrights gloried in the violent deaths of innocent men. In this period the physical and psychological torture and eventual killing of the largely innocent Duchess of Malfi is given the central and climactic role in the play that bears her name (Webster 1613-14), while the revenge for this murder is relegated to a mere afterthought in the final Act. The Duchess is tortured and murdered onstage in the climactic scene of the play, while her revenge, swiftly and pointlessly carried out by her own executioner in the Fifth Act, is speedily executed and ends with the seemingly senseless deaths of every significant character on the cast list.

Emerging at length from the futility Hamlet feels in his play at the turn of the century, the late plays of the Jacobean stage surrender to an overwhelming sense of the pointlessness of a quest for justice. Ultimately, this sense of futility replaced the sense of duty and value that had dominated the earlier plays of revenge. These plays of anarchy and injustice thrived as Britain heaved towards civil war, denied the faith

in justice that had formerly provided the backbone for society itself. As the glory of blood supplanted the desire for justice, the Jacobean tragedies abandoned the faith of the revenge tragedies and embraced the world of chaos and bloodshed that Hieronimo had fought so hard to correct. Revenge had been supplanted as means to justice, and now justice itself was supplanted as the endpoint of the play.

Although steeped in blood, the revenge tragedy was at its heart a very moral genre. In these plays, blood was only ever shed as part of a program serving the greater good, and revengers honestly felt that they served God and defended the sanctity of their State. This genre's fall from fashion thus foretold the death of these morals, of justice on Earth, and of obedience to the one true law of divine balance. When Titus declares "*Terras Astraea reliquit*" (IV.iii.4), the call he issues is a battle cry to restore the departed justice to its throne. And although the road they take is bloody and tragic, the revenge tragedies invariably in the end achieve this goal. Justice always returns by the end of Act Five, even if this triumph comes at the expense of nearly all characters, good and evil alike. Such conclusiveness, however, is barred from the later tragedies of blood. As Delio declares in the final scene of Webster's *Duchess of Malfi*:

These wretched eminent things
Leave no more fame behind 'em than should one
Fall in a frost, and leave his print in snow;
As soon as the sun shines, it ever melts,
Both form and matter. V.v.112-116

Webster's is a world in which the Duchess' death serves no final cause; her husband and children are killed for no reason other than to please an audience thirsty for blood. Life continues, brutal and unjust, the same before as after the actions of the

play. Faithless in justice, happy in blood, the world beyond the stage was ripe for civil war. The revenge tragedy, an odd beacon of hope in its obsessive pursuit of justice, was dead.

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