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Divine Vengeance and Revenge Tragedy in Renaissance England: *The Spanish Tragedy*, *Hamlet* and *Duchess Of Malfi*¹

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to examine the rhetoric of the revenge tragedy plot in the English Renaissance, a period of transition to the modern era, as a reaction to the tension existing between the humanist emphasis on agency and grand human potentials in pursuit of virtue and justice, and the Law as manifest in the socio-legal practices and theological discourse of the time. Based mostly on Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* (1589) and also referring to William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*, I want to suggest that revenge tragedies of the period propound the Christian teaching of patience as opposed to private revenge which is seen as a proud act of human interference with eternal justice. Although the individual is precluded from pursuing justice by violating either religious or secular law when it seems not to be functioning, the broken order and human faith in justice is restored by a demonstration of how divine retaliation operates through God's providence to which humans become only instrumental as well as the catastrophic consequences of individual attempts at taking revenge.

Keywords: revenge tragedy, divine vengeance, Law, *The Spanish Tragedy*, *Hamlet*, *The Duchess of Malfi*

¹ A different and shorter version of this article appeared with the title "Divine Vengeance and Revenge Tragedy in Renaissance England: The Spanish Tragedy and Hamlet" in *The English Renaissance*, a textbook prepared as a gift for the retirement of Prof. Cevza Sevgen, published by Boğaziçi Üniversitesi Yayınları in 2013.

Rönesans İngiltere'sinde İlahi Öç ve İntikam Trajedisi: *İspanyol Trajedisi, Hamlet ve Malfi Düşesi*

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Özet

Bu makalenin amacı modern çağa bir geçiş dönemi olan İngiltere Rönesansı sırasında yazılmış intikam trajedilerinin kurgularının içerdiği retorik, bir yanda humanizmanın insan ediminin özgürlüğü ile erdem ve adalet arayışı hizmetindeki büyük insan potansiyeli, diğer yanda dönemin sosyal hukuki uygulamaları ile dini söylemi arasındaki gerilime bir tepki olarak incelemektir. Çoğunlukla dönemin ilk intikam trajedisi olarak kabul edilen ve türe örnek teşkil etmiş Thomas Kyd'in *İspanyol Trajedisi* (1589) üzerinde yoğunlaşırken, William Shakespeare'in *Hamlet* ve John Webster'in *Malfi Düşesi* trajedilerine de değinerek, dönemin intikam trajedilerinde tanrısal adalete mağrur bir müdahale girişimi olarak görülen bireysel intikamdan ziyade sabra dayalı Hristiyan öğretisinin öne çıkarıldığı öne sürülecektir. Bireyin işlevini yitirmiş gibi görünse de dini ve dünyasal yasayı ihlal ederek adalet araması yasaklanırken, bozulan düzen ve insanın adalete olan inancı, ilahi öcün insanların ancak aracı olduğu ilahi takdir aracılığıyla nasıl alındığının ve bireysel intikam eylemlerinin korkunç sonuçlarının ortaya koyulması ile tekrar tahsis edilir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: intikam trajedisi, ilahi öç, Yasa, *İspanyol Trajedisi*, *Hamlet*, *Malfi Düşesi*

Tragedy has attracted philosophical attention since its emergence in antiquity due to its depiction of the plight of individuals in a universe beyond their control. It centers around the confrontation of the tragic hero with a dilemma to which s/he is required to respond in action. The tragic hero must decide between two conflicting claims to righteousness; s/he is to take an ethical stance to which there will be repercussions. In the long history of tragedy, the nature of the dilemma which constitute the backbone of the tragic action as well as the ethical choices available to the tragic hero, if any, have changed significantly; yet, what remained a constant is the representation of suffering individuals who find themselves frustrated by forces larger than or beyond themselves such as fate, divine providence, and state authority.

In relation to tragedy, Schopenhauer wrote:

... the goal of this highest of poetic achievements is the portrayal of the terrible aspect of life, that the unspeakable pain, the misery of humanity, the triumph of wickedness, the scornful domination of chance, and the hopeless fall of the righteous and the innocent are brought before us here: for here we find a significant intimation as to the nature of the world and of existence.²

That is to say, tragedy foregrounds issues of free will, meaning of existence, law and justice, as well as evil, condensed at a moment of crisis. Law, with its various manifestations through social institutions such as the family, state, and religion, is aimed to give coherence to life whereas the individual is confronted with its failure to do so.

Hegel distinguishes classical tragedy from modern tragedy, the beginnings of which he sees in the Renaissance, arguing that the former displays an ethical confrontation with two orders of law, religious or secular, for which Sophocles' *Antigone* is a great case in point, whereas the latter is more concerned with the individual's desire and freedom with respect to the law:

The heroes of ancient classical tragedy encounter situations in which, if they firmly decide in favor of the one ethical pathos that alone suits their finished character, they must necessarily come into conflict with the equally justified ethical power that confronts them. Modern characters, on the other hand, stand in a wealth of more accidental circumstances, within which one could act this way or that, so that the conflict which is,

² Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation: Volume I*, trans. & ed. by Judith Norman, Alistair Welchman and Christopher Janaway. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 280-1.

though occasioned by external preconditions, still essentially grounded in the character.³

In other words, the aforementioned dilemma challenging the tragic hero is to be found not external to the tragic hero but within the self, though s/he may still be acting under the influence of forces beyond his control, starting with the Early Modern period. In any case, tragedy ensues following a transgression of the law and disruption of the natural order of things, and is resolved by its restoration – until at least the whole notion of “the tragic” has been radically altered in the 20th century. If, in this more classical understanding of tragedy, law and order is eventually restored, which should be considered a happy ending from a more general perspective, and of the community, and no tragedy, it follows that the tragedy in question concerns the subject of the transgression, the tragic hero, whether s/he be acting upon an ethical pathos or individual desire. In that sense, tragedy is an account of a confrontation with the law, and modern tragedy is the tragedy of desire in this confrontation. Modern characters act upon their own will and interest to assert human freedom at the face of the world which is not “just” in its proscription of an authentic identity and demand for subordination to its law.

Revenge tragedies of both ancients and Renaissance playwrights, who engaged in a dialogue with the models of their predecessors, concerns itself particularly with the confrontation of the subject with the Law, its sustenance and failure, in more literal terms. As a concept, revenge is closely associated with the notion of justice. In his article on revenge tragedy, Ronald Broude reminds us that the Renaissance meaning of revenge was more extended and closer to retribution in the modern sense. For the Elizabethans, revenge was not simply a matter of personal retaliation for justice but more of retribution for an offence committed against an individual, family, the state or God.⁴ Since retribution connotes that the hurt or harm inflicted in revenge is “morally right and fully deserved”, it follows that revenge in Renaissance drama is a response to having been unjustly treated and a pursuit of justice. My aim in this article is to examine the rhetoric of the revenge tragedy plot in the English Renaissance, a period of transition to the modern era, as a reaction to the tension existing between the humanist emphasis on agency and grand human potentials in pursuit of virtue and justice, and the Law as manifest in the socio-legal practices and theological discourse of the time. Based mostly on Thomas Kyd’s

³ G.W.F. Hegel, *Hegel’s Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*. Trans. T. M. Knox. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1988).

⁴ Ronald Broude, “Revenge and Revenge Tragedy in Renaissance England”. *Renaissance Quarterly*, Vol. 28, No. 1 (Spring, 1975): 41-42, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2860421>.

The Spanish Tragedy (1589) and also referring to William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*, I want to suggest that revenge tragedies of the period propound the Christian teaching of patience as opposed to private revenge which is seen as a proud act of human interference with eternal justice. Although the individual is precluded from pursuing justice by violating either religious or secular law when it seems not to be functioning, the broken order and human faith in justice is restored by a demonstration of how divine retaliation operates through God's providence to which humans become only instrumental as well as the catastrophic consequences of individual attempts at taking revenge.

"Revenge tragedy" is a term first used by A. H. Thorndike at the turn of the century to refer retrospectively to a group of Elizabethan and Jacobean tragedies in which the main action rests on the desire to avenge a secret crime.⁵ The popularity of revenge tragedies during the English Renaissance was due to not only their exciting plots abound with bloody and criminal action as spectacle but also the prevalence of revenge as an important issue in everyday experience, socio-legal practices and religious discourse of the time. Vendetta had been a common means of exacting justice for centuries and continued to be so even after a law forbidding blood revenge was established in King Edward I's reign.⁶ People sought revenge privately on the basis of religion, honor, blood, and civil duty.⁷ Tudor monarchs adopted a stricter attitude and forbid private revenge, punishing avengers severely. Their claim on the right to prohibit revenge regardless of any "justifiable" cause rested on their divine right. Hence, not only as the head of state but also as the head of Church, which manifestly condemned revenge, Tudor government claimed monopoly over "private", "public" and "divine" vengeance through centralized state. Nevertheless, local practices of seeking vengeance in the smaller self-governing units persisted despite severe punishments. In order to obliterate such attempts, moralist and theological teaching against private revenge proliferated during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Broude points out that in Christian teaching, "[t]he good Christian was expected to suffer with resignation all injury to himself, and to remain impervious to the promptings of

⁵ A. H. Thorndike, "The Relations of Hamlet to Contemporary Revenge Plays". *PMLA*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (1902): 125-220.

⁶ See Fredson Bowers' *Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy, 1587-1642* for a more detailed discussion of pre-Tudor practices of blood feud and duel.

⁷ A period of transition, Renaissance England abound with conflicting arguments on revenge. See Lily Bess Campbell's "Theories of Revenge in Renaissance England" and Ronald Broude's article "Revenge and Revenge Tragedy in Renaissance England" for a detailed discussion of socio-legal and religious arguments on revenge.

hatred, anger, and self-interest”.⁸ This understanding rested primarily on the faith in divine providence.

Renaissance playwrights were interested in the theme of revenge not only for its being a central issue in socio-legal and religious terms but also for their interest in understanding human passions. Instigated by strong emotions such as anger, hatred or grief, revenge plots provided the playwright with the opportunity to explore the complex web of human faculties. Consequently, revenge tragedies written during the English Renaissance abound with manifestations of vengeful desire by characters that find themselves obliged to act to retaliate for what they believe to be an injustice. Seneca, whose work was translated into English between 1559 and 1581, was the literary inspiration for the form, and Thomas Kyd’s *The Spanish Tragedy* (1589) is the first example containing the basic elements of revenge tragedy. Seneca’s tragedies were considered to have little dramatic worth due to their limited development of character and poor handling of its themes. Nevertheless, his melodramatic plots and his take over the Stoic doctrine of passions, especially anger as the strongest passion, was a major influence on revenge tragedy in general, and particularly on Thomas Kyd’s *The Spanish Tragedy*.

The earliest example of revenge tragedy in English Renaissance drama, Kyd’s *The Spanish Tragedy* sets a pattern the basic elements of which were followed by playwrights after him. This conventionalized formula involves a secret crime which the criminal devises intricate and even immoral strategies to conceal. However, his efforts only fail him, and more is revealed than concealed owing to fate, which is tantamount to divine providence for the audience of the time. The revenger is usually not the direct victim of the injury but feels obliged to take on the responsibility of exacting justice for the crime with various motivations. The presence of a ghost and use of a play within the play structure to reveal the crime are among the other common elements of Kydian formula. In view of the strong attitude against revenge during Tudor and Stuart reigns of the Renaissance, a close examination of the text and plot structure allows us to see how Thomas Kyd’s *The Spanish Tragedy* foregrounds divine vengeance as the more legitimate means of instituting justice rather than the individual attempts at exacting revenge when the state power fails to do so.

The play’s intricately contrived causal plot structure constitutes the basis for a rhetoric that supports the belief in a grand divine design preordaining the course of events. The opening dialogue between Andrea and the spirit of Revenge, who will be present on stage throughout, acting as a chorus, immediately establishes the theme of injustice and the disrupted order from which tragedy will ensue. Andrea gives an account of his death, and bemoans his unjust and untimely death. When his ghost appears before Pluto, the god of

⁸ Broude, “Revenge”, 51.

the underworld, he is permitted to return to earth, accompanied by the spirit of Revenge, to see vengeance taken on his murderer, Balthazar. This is not, however, the only revenge that will be sought in the play: Hieronimo, whose son Horatio is also mercilessly killed as a result of a plot by Andrea's murderer Balthazar and his accomplice Lorenzo, is distraught when he finds his son's dead body, and vows to avenge for the murder. The more Lorenzo tries to conceal his crime, the bloodier a murderer he becomes, scheming the deaths of those involved in the murder. Nevertheless, all these endeavors prove useless, as is usually the case in a revenge tragedy, and Hieronimo discovers the truth about his son's death. Hieronimo finds the opportunity to ask for help from Bel-Imperia, formerly Andrea's and after his death Horatio's lover, in a plan to take their double revenge. Given the responsibility over the entertainment for the, Hieronimo devises a play, a tragedy, to be acted by himself, Lorenzo, Balthazar and Bel-Imperia, during the marriage ceremony of the latter two. The tragedy covertly reiterates the events that lead to Horatio's death, and serves the purpose of punishing those responsible for the unjust deaths so far in the play. During the performance, Hieronimo stabs Lorenzo, Bel-Imperia kills Balthazar and then herself as if as part of the play. At the end of the play, Hieronimo drags out Horatio's dead body onto the stage, and explains to his royal audience that the killings in the play were real together with their reason. Before he attempts to kill himself, the king asks him to be caught and made to confess his conspirators. During the confusion, Hieronimo first bites off his tongue, then finds an opportunity to stab the Duke of Castile and commits suicide. Thus, Andrea's ghost, who has been witnessing the events with the spirit of Revenge since the beginning, receives full satisfaction for his untimely and unjust death.

Andrea's story and his visit to the world with the spirit of revenge frames the action of the play, and their comments at the beginning, and at the end of each act elaborate on the conceptualization of revenge intended by the playwright. Throughout the play, the murders of two noble soldiers, Andrea and Horatio, are conceived as unjust. Whereas Bel-Imperia decides to avenge for Andrea's death by making Balthazar jealous of her love for Horatio, Hieronimo vows to take the revenge of Horatio's death by killing those responsible for his son's death. The essential proposition of the play is articulated by the royal sovereign soon after the play opens, following the prologue of Andrea and the spirit of Revenge. Before the play begins, the Viceroy of Portugal had rebelled against Spanish rule, and in the battle Andrea was killed, the Portuguese were defeated. The king of Spain interprets this as a sign of divine justice: "Then bless'd be heaven and guider of the heavens, / From whose fair influence such justice flows" (I.1). The words of the king points at God as the sole source of justice, and acts as a warning to those who attempt at taking the exaction of justice into their hands. The following events are to demonstrate that an unjust death can only be avenged by divine

providence, and humans are only instrumental to it. The fate of those who attempt at the contrary is expressed by the spirit of Revenge at the end of Act I:

Be still, Andrea; ere we go from hence,
 I'll turn their friendship into fell despite,
 Their love to mortal hate, their day to night.
 Their hope into despair, their peace to war,
 Their joys to pain, their bliss to misery. (I, 6)

How human intentions of taking revenge are twisted by fate is first demonstrated through Bel-Imperia's desire to avenge for Andrea's death. Bel-Imperia falls in love with Horatio mainly because of his loyalty to her former lover Andrea. She also confesses that she will love Horatio all the more to offend Balthazar who now wants to marry her:

Yet what avails to wail Andrea's death,
 From whence Horatio proves my second love?
 Had he not lov'd Andrea as he did,
 He could not sit in Bellimperia's thoughts.
 But how can love find harbour in my breast,
 Till I revenge the death of my belov'd?
 Yes, second love shall further my revenge!
 I'll love Horatio, my Andrea's friend,
 The more to spite the prince that wrought his end.
 And where Don Balthazar, that slew my love,
 Himself now pleads for favour at my hands,
 He shall, in rigour of my just disdain,
 Reap long repentance for his murd'rous deed. (I, 4)

Ironically, however, her love for Horatio will be the cause for his death at the hands of Lorenzo and Balthazar: her love for Horatio leads to more suffering than revenge and gives rise to more vengeful events. Nevertheless, not in the way Bel-Imperia intended but through a twist of fate, Horatio's death becomes the means through which Andrea's death is avenged. If Horatio had not died, Hieronimo would not have devised the plan which enabled him and Bel-Imperia to kill Horatio's murderers Lorenzo and Balthazar.

Ignorant of Horatio's secret love affair with Bel-Imperia, Hieronimo cannot think of any reason that would lead anyone to murder his son. What Christian Wolff says in relation to Euripides' *Orestes* is also relevant for Hieronimo's case: "Revenge ... becomes an irrational response to the world's failure to render what one imagines his due. It could be an attempt to force repayment on

the loss between what seems and what is".⁹ Hieronimo resents the world where wickedness triumphs: "O life! no life, but lively form of death / O world! no world, but mass of public wrongs, / Confus'd and fill'd with murder and misdeeds!" (III, 2). Thus begins Hieronimo's tragedy; his anger and grief cause him to rebel against law although as the marshal of the state he should have more faith in justice than anyone else. He vows to avenge his son's death as soon as he discovers Horatio's body hanging from a tree in the garden, and takes his bloody handkerchief to keep as a token until he takes revenge, for only then can he find relief:

See'st thou this handkercher besmear'd with blood?
It shall not from me, till I take revenge.
See'st thou those wounds that yet are bleeding fresh?
I'll not entomb them, till I have revenge.
Then will I joy amidst my discontent;
Till then my sorrow never shall be spent. (II. 3)

Witnessing his best friend Horatio's death and Hieronimo's despair, Andrea questions the spirit of Revenge's intentions since the course of events do not seem to be moving towards an end satisfactory for him. Horatio was a paragon of honor and decency. He was the person to give Andrea proper burial after his death in the battlefield and make his access to the underworld possible. He was a noble soldier who defeated and captured Balthazar, the rebel against state, and thus gained the king's praise. Furthermore, he had always been a good son to his parents. His death is a source of grief to Andrea as well as his father, and seems to serve only to further his murderer's aims than revenge. However, the spirit of Revenge advises him to be patient implying that everything has its time and reason in the grand design of God:

Thou talk'st of harvest, when the corn is green:
The end is crown of every work well done;
The sickle comes not, till the corn be ripe. (II. 6)

Hieronimo also knows that there is a right time for everything in the grand design as he later observes in his soliloquy known as *Vindicta mihi*. Yet, the undeserved murder of his son leads him to question divine justice:

O sacred heav'ns! if this unhallowed deed,
If this inhuman and barbarous attempt,

⁹ Christian Wolff in Kerrigan, John. *Revenge Tragedy: Aeschylus to Armageddon*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996): 11.

If this incomparable murder thus
 Of mine, but now no more my son,
 Shall unreveng'd and unreveng'd pass,
 How should we term your dealings to be just,
 If you unjustly deal with those that in your justice trust? (III, 2)

He needs proof of divine providence and seeks the help of heaven to send him a means to discover the murderer of his son: "Eyes, life, world, heav'ns, hell, night, and day, / See, search, shew, send some man, some mean, that may—" (III, 2). Almost as a response to his prayer, before he can even finish his sentence, he discovers Bel-Imperia's letter written in Horatio's blood that informs him about on whom to revenge. However, he will be cautious and not act before he confirms the accusation. Unable to reach Bel-Imperia, imprisoned in her room by her brother, Hieronimo laments his fate which put him in a position to distribute justice as the magistrate while he cannot have it for himself:

Thus must we toil in other men's extremes,
 That know not how to remedy our own;
 And do them justice, when unjustly we,
 For all our wrongs, can compass no redress.
 But shall I never live to see the day,
 That I may come, by justice of the heavens,
 To know the cause that may my cares allay?
 This toils my body, this consumeth age,
 That only I to all men just must be,
 And neither gods nor men be just to me. (III. 6)

He does not yet know that he will discover the further proof about the criminals he seeks with the next case he will have to deal with as the magistrate. He finds the letter Pedringano wrote to Lorenzo in the hope of being rescued from execution at the end of this scene. Once again, his prayers are answered as proof of divine providence but he misconceives his role in the grand design. His *Vindicta mihi* soliloquy initially displays his awareness of his role as instrumental to divine will:

Ay, heav'n will be reveng'd of every ill;
 Nor will they suffer murder unrepaid.
 Then stay, Hieronimo, attend their will:
 For mortal men may not appoint their time!— (III. 13)

He observes that all evil doings beget more evil, but does not realize that he will become a double of the criminals he hopes to punish by reiterating their crime of murder, and thus going against heavens:

And to conclude, I will revenge his death!
 But how? not as the vulgar wits of men,
 With open, but inevitable ills,
 As by a secret, yet a certain mean,
 Which under kindship will be cloaked best.
 Wise men will take their opportunity
 Closely and safely, fitting things to time,—
 But in extremes advantage hath no time;
 And therefore all times fit not for revenge. (III. 13)

He decides to act in secrecy, conceal his knowledge and intentions under a cloak of kindness, and wait for the right time. From this aspect, he is no different from the criminals who murdered his son in the first place. His patience and faith in heavens displaced by his anger and passion for revenge, he even has fits of madness, especially after he witnesses an ordinary man grieve the death of his son and fervently demand justice for it. The duty of revenge has turned into a matter of honor for him, and his postponement a shame:

Then sham'st thou not, Hieronimo, to neglect
 The sweet revenge of thy Horatio?
 Though on this earth justice will not be found,
 I'll down to hell, and in this passion
 Knock at the dismal gates of Pluto's court,
 Getting by force, as once Alcides did,
 A troop of Furies and tormenting hags
 To torture Don Lorenzo and the rest. (III. 13)

From one perspective, Hieronimo is right in his argument that Horatio did not deserve being killed for he was a perfect young man in every aspect; however, no cause legitimizes private revenge any longer in Renaissance England. It not only implies taking execution of justice into individual's hands but also defiance of God's will. Furthermore, what legitimizes revenge can be subjective and should not be decided upon privately. Ironically, for instance, Balthazar also explains his motive to murder Horatio with revenge:

Both well and ill; it makes me glad and sad
 Glad, that I know the hind'rer of my love;
 Sad, that I fear she hates me whom I love.

Glad, that I know on whom to be revenged;
 Sad, that she'll fly me, if I take revenge.
 Yet must I take revenge, or die myself, (II, 1)

For Balthazar thinks that his revenge is justified because Horatio first caused him to be captured by wounding him, and now inflicts further pain by hindering Bel-Imperia from loving him: "Thus hath he ta'en my body by his force, / And now by sleight would captivate my soul" (II, 1). However, this subjective view has no socio-legal or religious basis as a legitimate claim for revenge and justice. Hence, though he manages to kill Horatio, divine providence will not suffer him to go unpunished. He meets his death at the hands of Bel-Imperia whose lovers he murdered unjustly.

Although Heironimo and Bel-Imperia act as instruments for the execution of divine justice, they both have to die because they have committed a crime and a sin. On the other hand, their suicides both circumvent any possibility of punishment and leave no one directly responsible for their death, thus precluding a possible vendetta.

The ending of the play is noteworthy in that the deaths of not only Lorenzo and Balthazar but also all the others please Andrea's ghost:

Ay, now my hopes have end in their effects,
 When blood and sorrow finish my desires:
 Horatio murder'd in his fathers bower;
 Vild Serberine by Pedringano slain;
 False Pedringano hang'd by quaint device;
 Fair Isabella by herself misdome;
 Prince Balthazar by Bellimperia stabb'd;
 The Duke of Castile and his wicked son
 Both done to death by old Hieronimo;
 My Bellimperia fall'n, as Dido fell,
 And good Hieronimo slain by himself:
 Ay, these were spectacles to please my soul! (IV. 5)

Andrea's ghost seems to imply that their deaths were only necessary for the exaction of revenge for his death as part of divine vengeance, and hence pleasing. Horatio's death impelled Hieronimo to take revenge; the deaths of Serberine and Pedringano were necessary – and deserved owing to their evil characters – as in this way was Hieronimo informed about whom to pursue in revenge; Isabella's death added to Hieronimo's grief and anger causing him to seek vengeance privately¹ since otherwise Balthazar and Lorenzo could have gone unpunished; Hieronimo and Bel-Imperia are the main agents of revenge and had to die as a consequence of their defiance of divine and state law.

Therefore, Andrea's ghost promises to beg Proserpine to grant those who died in pursuit of just revenge, Hieronimo and Bel-Imperia, and innocently, Horatio and his mother Isabella, a "pleasing" eternal life. The spirit of Revenge assures him that the rest will go down to the "deepest hell, / Where none but Furies, bugs and tortures dwell" (IV. 5). Hence, the ending of the only clearly establishes that it is divine providence, which sets the course of events in motion, and all the crimes, as well as innocent deaths, become subservient to justice being exacted for the death of Andrea.

While Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* is the first example of revenge tragedy in English Renaissance drama, and Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, with its all too familiar plot, is perhaps the best-known. *Hamlet* contains many of the elements of Kyd's formula: a ghost, a secret crime, a criminal who resorts to insane schemes to conceal his crime, madness, a play within the play intended to reveal the horrid crime, and revenge which leads to the death of not only the criminal but also all those guilty of several sins as well as the innocent. However, the bard construes revenge in the frame of a more sophisticated philosophical and socio-legal questioning. It is impossible to exhaust the multiple facets of Hamlet's dilemma here. Nevertheless, it is worthwhile to pinpoint some of its variations on the theme of revenge especially after having mentioned its similarities with *The Spanish Tragedy*. Hamlet decides to take revenge for his father's murder, elder Hamlet the former king of Denmark, in the name of justice, and as part of his familial responsibility but, unlike Hieronimo, does not get carried away with uncontrollable passion. He is already in despair at the beginning of the play especially because of his mother's hasty marriage before he could mourn his father's death. His grief is aggravated when the ghost of his deceased father informs him about "his foul and most unnatural murder" and asks him to revenge (I. 5). Unlike Hieronimo's, however, Hamlet's madness is not caused by his grief or anger but feigned, as a strategy in his scheme of revenge. Furthermore, he has no one to demand justice for his father's murder since it is the king who is supposed to be God's deputy that committed the crime. Thus, *Hamlet* poses a situation in which means of executing justice by the state are foreclosed, and he seems to have no other choice than undertake revenge as the son of the deceased and the prince of Denmark. However, he decides not kill Claudius when he finds him praying although he has the opportunity because he wants Claudius to die as "He took [his] father grossly, full of bread; / With all his crimes broad blown" (III. 3). Otherwise, he will not feel fully avenged: "and am I then revenged, / To take him in the purging of his soul, / When he is fit and season'd for his passage?" (III. 3). His understanding of justice is not simple retaliation and has not only secular but also religious implications involving the consequences in afterlife.

Claudius provokes Laertes to take revenge on Hamlet by invoking his love and loyalty to his father Polonius, who was killed by Hamlet, by saying “Laertes, was your father dear to you? / Or are you like the painting of a sorrow, / A face without a heart?” (IV. 7). When Laertes hesitates to kill Hamlet at church out of his respect for the sanctity of the place, Claudius’s response, that “Revenge should have no bounds” (IV. 7) only fits a criminal king who is himself guilty of regicide than a royal sovereign representing divine justice on earth. The dramatic irony in the scene is, of course, that the same argument is also valid for Hamlet, who will take his revenge on Claudius regardless of the sanctity of his status although after prolonged episodes of hesitation. When Hamlet kills Claudius, he reiterates Claudius’ foul crime of regicide and cannot become another king guilty of the same crime: he has to die. Another tragic hero distraught with the absence of meaning and justice in the world dies in his confrontation with the law.

Not all revengers are tragic heroes, however. In John Webster’s *The Duchess of Malfi*, it is Bosola, gentleman of the horse to the duchess, hence a servant, who takes upon himself the duty of taking revenge for the death of the duchess after an experience of recognition. Bosola is no noble character or a tragic hero either in the Aristotelian or Hegelian sense of the word, and his sense of justice is hardly based on his virtuous character and is partly motivated with selfish reasons. He only gets involved in the events after being appointed as a spy on the Duchess by her two brothers, Ferdinand, the Duke of Calabria, and the Cardinal. Bosola, who she has taken as a gentleman of horse upon Cardinal’s suggestion, betrays her secret of having married Antonio, a lowly steward, to her brothers. He betrays her once again when she makes the mistake of confiding her plan to escape from his brothers in him. Captured, not only the duchess but also her two children and maid are killed while Antonio manages to escape with their eldest son. When Bosola overhears the Cardinal confess his share in the death of the duchess and his intention of killing him, he decides to take revenge for all the injustices done, especially for the murder of the duchess. He goes to the chapel where he knows the Cardinal will be praying but mistakenly stabs Antonio much to his regret. However, he also manages to kill the Cardinal, and in a following brawl stabs Ferdinand to death. Nonetheless, he cannot escape the same fate, and dies. Hence, it is Bosola’s betrayal that leads to the injustice that demands vengeance but he also becomes instrumental in exacting the justice. The eldest son of the duchess arrives only too late at the scene and inherits the Malfi fortune.

The tragic transgression that sets the events of the play in motion is not as easy to identify in *The Duchess of Malfi* as it was in the cases of *The Spanish Tragedy* and *Hamlet* since this question is best answered in relation to who the tragic hero of the play is. Whether there is a tragic hero in *The Duchess of Malfi* is disputable and a discussion that exceeds the limits or the purposes of this

paper. Suffice us to say here that the play defies many of the conventions of tragedy especially with its treatment of its characters. The Cardinal and Duke Ferdinand are depicted as villains from the beginning of the play and hardly qualify as tragic heroes. Both are greedy for financial gains, and the Cardinal, contrary to his position as a clergyman, is admittedly licentious. The duchess is an epitome of perfection with her modesty, elegance and lack of interest in material gains or social status. Bosola remarks her exceptional character thus:

Do I not dream? Can this ambitious age
Have so much goodness in 't as to prefer
A man merely for worth, without these shadows
Of wealth and painted honours? Possible? (III. 4)

Nevertheless, she transgresses social and religious law by marrying Antonio, someone not from her class, in secrecy and outside the sanction of the church, and gives birth to three children. Moreover, she dies way early in the end of the play, and it is her death that motivates the urge for revenge, which is undertaken unexpectedly by Bosola. Antonio, another character with admirable qualities of honesty, courage and disgust for power games at court, is far from being the main character of the play not only due to his lower social status but more so for his lack of agency in most events taking place. He fulfills the role ascribed to him by fate, and hardly confronts anyone or law directly. Even his defiance of social and religious law by marrying the duchess is occasioned through the initiative of the duchess.

A revenge tragedy, *The Duchess of Malfi* presents Bosola as the character through whom divine providence retaliates for the unjust murder of the duchess. Bosola is a complex character with true insight into the personalities of the people around him. He becomes instrumental in the deaths of the duchess and other innocent characters not because of his wickedness but because of his unquestioning obedience to his master, the Cardinal:

I serv'd your tyranny, and rather strove
To satisfy yourself than all the world :
And though I loath'd the evil, yet I lov'd
You that did counsel it ; and rather sought
To appear a true servant than an honest man. (IV. 3)

In the end, Bosola displays integrity of character after an episode of anagnorisis, and dares what many so-called noble characters dare not by rebelling against his master whom he finds in the wrong. Nonetheless, he dies, as all avengers do, in his attempt after achieving his aim.

In revenge tragedies of the English Renaissance, revengers invariably die. Revenge is prohibited by the state and religion, and the individual attempts at vengeance only lead to more deaths, of the innocent as well, even when it is the sole means executing justice. In a sense, they are the sacrifices divine providence demands for the sustenance of law and order in the cosmos.

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