Revenge and Revenge Tragedy in Renaissance England
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in Renaissance England

by Ronald Broude

When we speak of 'revenge tragedy,' we are often unaware of
the extent to which our approach to these important Renais-
sance plays has been conditioned by the name we have given them.
Elizabethans themselves recognized no distinct dramatic type called
revenge play. The term is a modern one, made current at the turn of the
century by A. H. Thorndike, and first defined at length by Fredson
Bowers more than thirty years ago.1 As a critical term, it depends upon
the modern meaning of revenge, and it simultaneously reflects and
shapes both modern assumptions about the subject matter of the plays
and modern prejudices about the ethical principles upon which they are
assumed to be predicated.

In modern usage, the noun revenge, according to the American College
Dictionary, denotes 'retaliation for injuries or wrongs.' Unlike retribu-
tion, which 'suggests just or deserved punishment, often without per-
sonal motives,' revenge has a distinctly personal cast, implying 'the
carrying out of a bitter desire to injure another for a wrong done to
oneself or to those who seem a part of oneself.'2 The definition of
vengeance runs along similar lines: vengeance usually indicates 'wrathful,
vindictive, furious revenge,' although on occasion it may also have the
more impersonal meaning of 'retributive punishment.' Among scholars
dealing with Elizabethan mores, revenge is often used as if it were iden-
tical with extralegal retaliation.3

Revenge play criticism reflects modern colloquial usage. Revenge
tragedy is usually understood to center around a figure who conceives
himself to have been seriously wronged, and who, overcoming obsta-
cles both within and outside himself, contrives eventually to exact
retribution, becoming in the process as depraved as those by whom he

1 'The Relations of Hamlet to the Contemporary Revenge Play,' PMLA, 17 (1902),
125-220; Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy (Princeton, 1940), passim, but esp. pp. 61-65.
2 New York, 1962. See especially the study of synonyms under revenge.
3 See, for example, C. B. Watson, Shakespeare and the Renaissance Concept of Honor

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has been wronged.\textsuperscript{4} Investigations of Tudor-Stuart attitudes toward revenge, recognized as necessarily prerequisite to the study of the plays, have focused on the blood feuds, duelling, and allied customs which revenge suggests today. Lily B. Campbell has indicated the scope and volume of the quasi-official condemnations of these practices, while Fredson Bowers has documented the persistence of the secular ethic favoring them.\textsuperscript{5} Subsequent critics have tended to read revenge plays in terms of the model thus established, and the actions of stage revengers are, accordingly, explained as fundamentally un-Christian, based upon a barbaric ethic derived from Senecan tragedy and the Anglo-Saxon blood feud. That this approach is not, however, entirely satisfactory is suggested by the inability of critics to agree upon the significance of several key revenges, notably those of Hieronimo and Titus.

Several recent studies of individual revenge plays have stressed the concern of these works with the operation of divine retribution and the ways in which various forms of human retribution are turned by Providence to the purposes of God’s justice.\textsuperscript{6} Taken all together, such studies suggest that the central interest of revenge tragedy is not, after all, revenge—at least not revenge in the modern sense of the word. We seem to have forgotten, however, that the Renaissance word revenge had a more extended meaning than the modern one, a meaning more nearly equivalent to today’s retribution. Significantly, the various concepts and customs subsumed under the Renaissance word were the objects of searching reevaluation during the sixteenth century, as the Tudor and Stuart dynasties sought to adapt medieval English socio-legal institutions to the needs of a Renaissance state. Revenge tragedy may in some sense be understood as a form of response to the basic questions of crime and punishment posed by these transformations in socio-legal thought and practice. It is the purpose of the following pages to re-examine some of the institutions with which revenge tragedy deals,

\textsuperscript{4} See, for example, Irving Ribner, \textit{Patterns in Shakespearean Tragedy} (London, 1960), pp. 15–16.


and, by recovering the meanings and associations of the sixteenth-century word *revenge*, to indicate some of the ways in which preconceptions conditioned by modern usage may unduly influence our readings of these Renaissance plays.

In their most general sense, the Renaissance nouns *revenge* and *vengeance*, often used interchangeably, denote retribution, the response which is made to an offense. When the context manifests no concern with the agent effecting retribution, *revenge* may correspond to the modern *punishment*. Thus, Thomas Kyd writes that 'the blood of the just Abel cried . . . for vengeance and revenge upon the murderer' (1592); Kyd means simply that Abel’s blood called for the murderer’s punishment. John Rider’s English-Latin dictionary, *Bibliotheca Scholastica* (1589), provides interesting confirmation of this usage: Rider offers the nouns *ultio* and *vindicta* as equivalents for *vengeance*, while the verbs *ulcisor* and *vindico* are adduced as equivalents of *to punish*. Along the same lines, John Florio’s Italian-English dictionary, *A Worlde of Wordes* (1598), gives both *revenge* and *punishment* as translations for *vendetta*; for *vindice* Florio offers a catalogue of words and phrases which underline how close Elizabethans might regard *revenge* and *punishment* as being: ‘Vindice: . . . a reuenger of wrongs, a redresser of things, and abuses, a defender, one that restoreth and setteth at libertie or out of danger, a punisher of things done amisse.’

But the Renaissance *revenge* and *vengeance* denoted not only the general idea of retribution but also each particular species of retribution authorized by any of the several socio-legal systems which coexisted uneasily in Tudor-Stuart England. An offense might be understood to

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Although the *OED* recognizes ‘punishment’ and ‘chastisement’ as meanings of *revenge* (Def. 5, obsolete), it erroneously places Kyd’s example under Def. 1 (‘The act of doing hurt or harm to another in return for wrong or injury suffered; satisfaction by repayment of injuries,’) and under Def. 1 of *vengeance* (‘The act of avenging oneself or another, retributive infliction of injury or punishment; hurt or harm done from vindictive motives.’). The *OED* does not consistently give sufficient weight to the impersonal element in early occurrences of these nouns: there is no implication in Kyd’s passage of the personal animus so important to the *OED* definitions. Several other examples cited by the *OED* may also be questioned, e.g., under *vengeance*, Def. 1, the passages from Coverdale and Purchas, where the use of *vengeance* clearly does not contain the element of ‘vindictive motives.’
have been committed against an individual or family, against a commonweal, or against a divinity, and in each case a different concept of wrong and retribution was operative. In all cases, however, revenge and vengeance were appropriate to denote the response of the outraged party, whether individual, state, or god. Revenge was used to indicate retribution effected directly by an individual or family, that is, retribution effected without the intervention of any civil authority. Used in this sense, the word might sometimes exert the negative force it does today: Francis Bacon exploits these pejorative overtones when he speaks of revenge as 'a sort of wild justice' (1625). On the other hand, the word might be used in much the same sense, but without any shading of disapproval: Vincentio Saviolo, discussing how satisfaction for injuries is to be obtained, advises that 'the revenge ought to be done honorably' (1595). Again, revenge and vengeance could be used to describe the punishment meted out by the commonweal for acts defined by statute or custom as contrary to the public good: thus we find magistrates referred to as 'the common revengers' and the execution of their sentences as 'public vengeance.' Finally, the Renaissance feeling for vengeance as a word proper to denote the retribution visited by God for transgression of His laws survives to this day, partly, no doubt, because of its recurrence in the King James Bible in phrases such as 'the vengeance of the Lord.'

The scope—and ambiguity—of the Renaissance revenge and ven-

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8 'Of Revenge,' Essays.
9 Vincentio Saviolo His Practice (London, 1595), Aa.
11 Of the 47 occurrences of the nouns vengeance and revenge given by Robert Young in his Analytical Concordance to the Bible, 22nd American ed. revised by William Stevenson (Grand Rapids, 1955), 16 occur in conjunction with the words God or the Lord, 9 are spoken by God, and 4 appear in contexts clearly indicating that the vengeance at issue is divine. In all, Young cites 103 occurrences of vengeance, revenge (noun and verb), avenge and their derivatives. The Hebrew words which they most often render are the noun negamah (19) and the verb nagam (40). The Greek words most frequently rendered are καφεσια and its derivatives (13). As The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible (New York and Nashville, 1962) notes in its entry for vengeance, ‘seldom does “vengeance” in the Bible carry the connotation of “vindicativeness” or “revenge”.’ Rather, vengeance is associated with ‘the restoration of wholeness, [and] integrity to the community, by God or man. The various terms translated “vengeance” are part of the legal terminology of the Bible.’
result, in large part, from the fact that their introduction into English predates the sixteenth-century concern with distinguishing among socio-legal systems and their forms of retribution. Both revenge and vengeance derive, through the Old French revenger and vengeance respectively, from the Latin vindicare.¹² Neither the Old French nor the Latin suggests any of the distinctions which the Renaissance was to consider so important: the words could denote with equal propriety the retribution exacted by a private man for the murder of a relative, or the punishment meted out by a king for the transgression of his kingdom’s laws. When, circa 1300, vengeance entered English, it denoted simply a response to a wrong, the operation of the ethical principle that harm inflicted is to be paid for with harm suffered. This element of striking a balance is apparent in the word’s earliest occurrences, for example: ‘he that spilleth mannes lyf, Venjounse hyt schel awyte’ (ca. 1315).¹³ It was not until the mid-sixteenth century, when the Tudor government pressed the claims of the state to a monopoly on all revenge, that the need was felt for terminology which would facilitate distinction among the agents by which revenge might be effected. To carve up the general idea denoted by vengeance, the terms ‘divine vengeance,’ ‘public vengeance,’ and ‘private vengeance’ (vengeance taken by private subjects) were introduced. These terms, however, do not seem to have gained any permanent hold, and the ambiguity of revenge and vengeance remained a problem as late as the eighteenth century. Dr. Johnson sought to clarify matters by declaring, in the fourth (1773) and subsequent editions of his Dictionary, that ‘vengeance is an act of passion; vengeance is justice.’ This distinction, he ruefully noted, however, ‘is perhaps not always observed.’ Modern usage has to some extent done away with the ambiguity by declining to use either revenge or vengeance in connection with the state justice which the Renaissance called ‘public revenge.’ Modern usage thus encourages distinction between state justice and the other forms of retribution—private and divine—with which it was formerly coordinate, and which the noun vengeance continues to denote.

¹² The Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology, ed. C. T. Onions et al. (Oxford, 1966). The element of striking a balance persists in French cognates to this day, e.g., en revanche, on the other hand. The etymology of French cognates seems to have paralleled that of the English revenge and vengeance in several ways. For sixteenth-century French usage, see Edmond Huguet, Dictionnaire de la langue française du seizième siècle (Paris, 1925–66).
The various concepts and customs comprehended under the Renaissance *revenge* and *vengeance* fall between socio-legal systems embodying complementary definitions of ‘offense’ and ‘punishment.’ The older system, characteristic of multicentric societies in which numerous relatively small social units practice ‘self-government,’ protecting their members from injury by outsiders, views violence against person or property as an injury to the victim or his family, and recognizes both their interest in the offender’s punishment and their right to seek satisfaction. The other system, usually a product of larger and more complex socio-political structures, sees crime as an antisocial act, a threat to the well-being of the entire body politic to which society as a whole responds through the appropriate agents. During the Middle Ages, Englishmen maintained law and order through an array of institutions in which these two systems were mixed in varying proportions. The creation of a Renaissance monarchy, however, necessitated the suppression of those practices in which the elements of self-government were strongest, and official Tudor theory sought, accordingly, to discredit such practices by stressing the antisocial nature of crime while playing down its anti-personal aspect. But so much a part of English thought and custom were the assumptions and usages of self-government, and so far were the civil authorities from being able efficiently to discharge the functions claimed for them, that Tudor practice lagged well behind Tudor theory, and English socio-legal institutions retained their dual nature through much of the Renaissance. A more immediate effect of Tudor policy, however, lay in Englishmen’s heightened sense of the tension between the two systems so central to English concepts of crime and punishment, and in their new readiness to examine the needs filled and the problems posed by each.

From the Anglo-Saxon invasions down to the Renaissance, the English socio-legal institutions in which the tradition of self-government was strongest operated in those times, places, and circumstances where no state or similar authority was available to provide redress for wrongs. Under such conditions, individuals or relatively small groups must respond themselves to offenses committed against them, the threat of retaliation providing the only effective deterrent to potential aggression.\(^{14}\) English socio-legal history exhibits several well-defined species

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\(^{14}\) On the forms of self-government practiced by various societies, see Bertha Pippotts, *Kindred and Clan in the Middle Ages and After* (Cambridge, 1913); H. J. Treston,
of self-government, each being distinguished by the social unit responsible for effecting retribution. The blood feud, in which the social unit is established by kinship, provided security for the individual by conferring upon him the protection of a group to which he belonged by virtue of his birth. Lordship and maintenance, the institutions by which powerful noblemen waged their private wars, were predicated upon a set of mutual obligations between nobleman and retainer, the former to employ his influence and forces to protect the latter, and the latter to support the former in all his quarrels. The duel, a vogue for which developed in England circa 1600, was useful primarily in matters of honor (offenses against which the civil authorities did not punish) and in cases of blood-spilling where lack of evidence or fear of judicial prejudice suggested that justice might not otherwise be obtained.\footnote{15}

While such institutions helped Englishmen to protect their lives, property, and honor, they were not without potential dangers of their own. Oriented to the interests of relatively small social units—or, in the case of the duel, to the interests of individuals—these institutions were often indifferent to the welfare of society at large. Thus, the blood feud, the purpose of which was to ensure the safety of a family or clan, did not have to concern itself with anything beyond the jealous maintenance of the reputation for swift reprisal which alone could discourage future aggression. The justice of the blood feud was, accordingly, a ‘subjective’ justice, a justice which each family identified with its own interests. The ‘objective’ justice concerned with the rights and wrongs of the offense to be punished often had little relevance: the warrior fairly slain in battle or the murderer struck down by his victim’s kinsmen might require the same vengeance as an innocent man killed without provocation.\footnote{16}

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\footnote{15} On the duel, see Frederick Bryson, \textit{The Sixteenth Century Italian Duel} (Chicago, 1938); Bowers, pp. 30–34; Mroz, pp. 40–43; and Watson, pp. 69–73, 127–135.

\footnote{16} In connection with this ‘subjective’ justice, consider Gawain’s vengeance for his slain brothers in Malory’s \textit{Morte Arthur}, and Talbot’s instructions to his son in Shakespeare’s \textit{I Henry VI}, iv.vi. So little was blood revenge often concerned with ‘objective’ justice in
Similarly, the duel, although defended as a means of upholding truth and justice, often had less concern with honor than with reputation: a challenge was likely to be considered obligatory regardless of whether the insult provoking it had been bestowed with just cause or not. Awareness of these problems has always been a factor in English thought—even when the available alternatives to self-government were clearly unable to provide acceptable levels of security: we can trace this tradition from *Beowulf*, with its sobering handling of the feuds usually so central to Germanic epic, through *The Morte Arthur*, with Malory’s melancholy depiction of the ills proceeding from Gawain’s insistence upon vengeance, to the moralists’ and theologians’ condemnations of ‘private revenge’ which proliferated in the sixteenth century.\(^{17}\)

The trend of medieval and Renaissance administration to larger, more complex, and more centralized institutions represented a serious challenge to the tradition of self-government. But the ability of the crown effectively to employ the increasingly sophisticated governmental machinery fluctuated with the power which circumstances and personal ability permitted each king to exercise. The operation of state justice was, accordingly, liable to lengthy periods of impaired efficiency, so that self-government remained a viable and often necessary alternative to the justice of the king’s courts. Seignorial and royal justice failed to gain public confidence in part because of their inability consistently to safeguard life and property, and in part because their integrity was often suspect.\(^{18}\) The development of state justice in England was motivated less by a disinterested desire to maintain law and order as efficiently as possible than by the crown’s need to increase its powers and revenues, a need which it satisfied after the Conquest by extending the definition of the King’s Peace so that many offenses (for example, rape and murder) traditionally regarded as torts (wrongs involving only the offender and victim) were made into felonies (offenses in which the king was concerned).\(^{19}\) The facts that the crown received fees for cases

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Anglo-Saxon times, that the Dooms of Edward (III.2) specifically forbid prosecution of the blood feud against slayers of pursued criminals. On abuses of the duel, see Bowers, pp. 32–33.

\(^{17}\) On pre-Tudor sentiment against self-government, see Bowers, p. 12; on sixteenth-century objections to ‘private revenge,’ see Campbell, above, n. 5.

\(^{18}\) On abuses of legal justice, see Mroz, pp. 49–65.

tried in its courts, and that the goods of convicted felons were escheated to the crown provided strong inducements for often impecunious sovereigns to enlarge the number of offenses which their courts were competent to try. However, the potential for judicial profits thus created compromised the integrity of royal justice in the eyes of many, and this distrust, aggravated by the periodic use of the courts as instruments of political factionalism, persisted through the Renaissance. Moreover, while legal theorists could explain at length the process which transformed torts into felonies, popular thought was slow to accept a system which denied the individual or family their age-old right to secure their own redress. Significantly, the principles of the blood feud were reflected in the new state justice, in the provisions for judicial combat and in the system of appeals whereby prosecution of the offender was initiated by the victim or his kinsmen. Both institutions, introduced by the Normans, were still on the books in Elizabeth's day, although the former does not seem to have been in use during the sixteenth century.\(^{20}\)

As Bowers, Mary Mroz, and C. B. Watson have demonstrated—and as the volume of the anti-'private revenge' literature cited by Campbell and Eleanor Prosser must presuppose—the tradition of self-government enjoyed continued currency during the reigns of Elizabeth and James.\(^{21}\) Official records mention blood feuds in England quite late in the sixteenth century, while the practice survived in Scotland well past 1600.\(^{22}\) Powerful noblemen continued to maintain bands of armed retainers under both Elizabeth and James; indeed, on occasion they threatened to bring their quarrels into the royal presence, appearing at court with numbers of armed supporters. So widespread was duelling during the early years of James’s reign that the practice was considered a serious threat to civil order.\(^{23}\)

The currency of institutions such as blood revenge, maintenance, and

\(^{20}\) On the judicial combat and appeals, see Sayles, p. 336; and Maitland, p. 128. For an Elizabethan’s view of these institutions, see Thomas Smith, De Republica anglorum (London, 1583), Book iii, chap. 3.

\(^{21}\) Bowers, pp. 15–40; Mroz, passim; Watson, pp. 127ff.


\(^{23}\) Bowers, pp. 30ff.
the duel both reflected and contributed to Renaissance Englishmen's continued belief in the principles of self-government. Indeed, many an act of retaliation which did not fall within one or another well-defined tradition was nevertheless grounded upon the premises that injuries done individuals or their families are first and foremost offenses against the injured parties (rather than against the commonweal), and that the injured parties have the inalienable right to exact retribution. This general set of mind was reinforced by 'literature'—on one level by classical tragedy and epic, and on another by contemporary *novelle* and a lively ballad tradition—which often celebrated the heroes and values of the feud and duel. Frequently, the tendency of such literature is to abstract the basic propositions of self-government from the multiplicity of event and the confusion of irrelevant considerations by which they are often obscured in everyday life. Such presentation is particularly important in creating a climate for revenge tragedy, which, after all, does not reproduce Tudor-Stuart life with naturalistic attention to detail, but rather deals in a conventionalized way with basic issues which everyday experience, socio-legal practice, and ethical speculation have made relevant.

The transformations which the Tudor dynasty sought to work upon English socio-legal institutions were motivated by the determination of Henry VII and his successors to secure their power by creating a central government strong enough to counteract the sort of baronial license which had led to the Wars of the Roses. Officially sanctioned Tudor theory stressed the derivation of royal power from God and, recalling the horrors of the internecine strife recently ended, extolled the virtues of peace and order, condemning out of hand all actions, no matter what their justification, which might disturb civil harmony. Defining England's laws as a reflection of God's, Tudor theorists explained crime

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24 On feuds, duels, and allied customs in literature read by Elizabethans, see Bowers, 41–61. A number of Child ballads deal with such feuds; some of them, e.g., 'The Bonny Earl of Murray' (no. 181), deal with affairs almost contemporary with their creation.

as an offense against God, a source of communal pollution which, should the criminal long remain unpunished, threatened to bring divine wrath down upon the entire commonweal. By the words ‘To me belongeth vengeance, and recompense’ (Deuteronomy 32:35), God was understood to have reserved to Himself the punishment of those who offended Him by transgressing His laws. Only in exceptional instances, however, was His direct intervention required; for run-of-the-mill cases, God was represented as content that mundane retribution be effected by the king and magistrates, whose offices had been ordained by God for that very purpose.

Within this framework, the forms of self-government which fell under the heading of ‘private revenge’ were essentially political problems. The earliest discussions of private revenge, it should be noted, tend to occur in political contexts, where it is dealt with as one among a complex of evils associated with rebellion and riot, and represented as an impious infringement of the divine patent granted the king and magistrates.26

Despite the apparent simplicity of Tudor-Stuart theory, we must not be misled into assuming that the line between ‘public’ and ‘private’ vengeance was either clearcut or generally agreed upon. Indeed, the word magistrate militated against a precise definition of ‘public revenge,’ for, retaining traces of its Latin derivation, it might denote not only a formally commissioned justice, but also a nobleman, military officer, or other person in authority.27 The line between ‘public’ and ‘private’ revenge was further obscured by the perpetuation of pre-Tudor institutions requiring private subjects to perform functions which would today be regarded as routine police work. The ‘watches’ which patrolled city streets each night were made up of citizens expected to serve by turn.28 The ‘hue and cry’ placed upon all able-bodied men in each

26 See, for example, Cranmer, ‘A Sermon Concerning the Time of the Rebellion’; and Latimer, ‘A Sermon on the Gospel of All Saints,’ Miscellaneous Letters and Writings, p. 481.
27 Thus the Mirror for Magistrates deals with the careers of public figures relatively few of whom were commissioned justices. See also Mroz, pp. 32–39.
parish responsibility for pursuing malefactors discovered within parish limits. Thus, as the Elizabethan statesman Sir Thomas Smith explained, 'euerie English man is a sergiant to take the theefe, and who sheweth himselfe negligent therein, doth not only incure euill opinion therefore, but hardly shall escape punishment.'

Central to the concept of 'public' revenge was the principle of divine mandate, upon which the king and magistrates grounded their authority. Divine mandate, however, might be understood to extend beyond the formal structures of civil government, so that practices which did not conform to orthodox definitions of 'public' vengeance might nevertheless be defended from the imputation of 'private' revenge. The revenger of blood (the next of kin of a criminal's victim) could be regarded as acting with divine mandate, for the Pentateuch, which reflects the history of a blood revenge tradition similar to England's, defined his duties in Numbers 35:19: 'The revenger of blood himself shall slay the murderer: when he meeteth him, he shall slay him.' The duellist might also claim to be a human agent of divine retribution, since, according to an argument frequently adduced, such combats 'are euermore directed by the secret will of God, and are the executions of his hidden judgements.'

The exigencies of Reformation politics encouraged considerable flexibility on the question of the alternatives open to private subjects when public justice fails. With the accession of a Catholic queen in 1553, Protestant thinkers began to consider with increasing openness the circumstances which might justify bypassing royal authority. Thus, Christopher Goodman argued that when civil authorities prove negligent in administering justice, 'the people' have not only the right but the 'duetie to do it them selues, . . . hauing the worde of God for their warrant, to which they are all subject, and by the same charged to cast forthe all euill from them.' The same argument was put forth by the Scottish Protestants who deposed Mary Stuart, accused of having been

29 Smith, II, 20.
30 On the vendetta among biblical peoples, see Treston, passim, but esp. pp. 1–10: and Forsyth, pp. 60ff.
31 Saviolo, fol. c2v.
a party to her husband’s murder. Similar reasoning lay behind the Instrument of Association, the bond by which thousands of English gentlemen, fearful that Catholic conspiracies might bring Mary to the English throne, vowed ‘in the presence of the eternal and everlasting God . . . to act the utmost revenge’ for any attempt on Elizabeth’s life upon all who stood to benefit by her death.

Neither Tudor political theory nor Tudor religion rejected the blood-for-blood ethic which was the basis of private, public, and divine vengeance alike. It was simply asserted that in matters of felony God and the king were the parties most offended, and that to them was reserved the right to exact retribution. In general, Tudor attitudes toward crime and punishment manifested little concern with either ‘Christian’ mercy or the social rehabilitation of the criminal. The sterner aspects of Tudor justice were reinforced by the Reformation, with its shift in emphasis from God’s saving mercy to His avenging wrath.

‘Whoso sheddeth man’s blood, by man shall his blood be shed,’ the Bible (Genesis 9:6) had decreed, and no less an authority than Luther had cited this verse as the mandate upon which all civil government is based. Sincere repentance and faith in God’s mercy might save a criminal’s soul from damnation, but it could not save his neck from the hangman’s rope. Sentences were severe, and executions, publicly attended, were regarded as conveniently combining instruction and delight.

33 This idea is presented in pictorial terms in the ‘Darnley Memorial Portrait,’ attributed to Livinus de Vogelaare, and now at Holyrood, in which the infant James VI kneels at Darnley’s tomb, calling upon God to avenge his murdered father. The banner under which the Protestant lords rode to Carberry Hill bore a similar picture with the words ‘Judge and revenge my caus O Lord.’

34 For the text of the Instrument, see The Trial of Mary Queen of Scots, ed. Steuart (London, etc., 1951), pp. 31–32. The major provisions of the Instrument were subsequently passed into law as 27 Elizabeth, cap. 1.


38 On the theological and civil implications of crime, see H. H. Adams, English Domestic or Homiletic Tragedy (New York, 1943), pp. 12ff.
The New Dispensation, which we might suppose to have been considered a moderating influence upon the stern justice of the Old Testament, was seen to complement rather than supersede the Mosaic Code. Significantly, the Geneva Bible glosses the ‘eye for an eye’ passage in Exodus 21 not with a reference to Christian mildness but simply with the assertion that ‘the execution of this law only belonged to the magistrates.’ Indeed, the demonstration that the Mosaic Code had not been abrogated by Christ’s admonition to ‘resist not evil’ (Matthew 5:38–39) was a popular theme in early Protestant writing.39 The pervasiveness of evil, it was argued, rendered retribution necessary, and the intent of Matthew 5:39 was, accordingly, not to let criminals off scot-free but rather to discourage Christians from seeking retribution for un-Christian reasons. The good Christian was expected to suffer with resignation all injury to himself, and to remain impervious to the promptings of hatred, anger, and self-interest. However, when wrongs were perceived disinterestedly as offenses against God and commonweal, and when the response was motivated by piety and love of justice, action might be permissible. ‘On behalf of others,’ writes Luther, ‘he [the good Christian] can and should seek vengeance and protection, and help and do as much as he can to achieve it.’40

Today, with three centuries’ hindsight, we can discern the trend of Tudor-Stuart socio-legal institutions away from self-government. However, we ought not to suppose that most Renaissance Englishmen, confronted with an assortment of practices—some complementary, some overlapping, some redundant, but none so manifestly effective as to render the others superfluous—could readily understand or appreciate the nature of the transformation through which they were living. If James’s subjects realized how socially disruptive the duel might be, they also recognized that it was in the eyes of many the only means available for the protection of their reputations and honor. If they were cognizant of the potential danger of other forms of self-government, they were also aware of the inefficiency of the civil authorities—of their inability in many cases to identify and apprehend criminals, and to see them convicted and punished.

40 Temporal Authority, p. 101. Luther is not speaking of ‘private vengeance,’ but rather of seeing justice done.
There existed in Renaissance England no official agency comparable in function to today's police.\footnote{The most competent investigative force, Walsingham's aggressive and astute intelligence, confined itself largely to seeking out political and religious 'subversives.'} In the development of a standing force responsible for the maintenance of internal order, England lagged somewhat behind the Continent, a fact which has been attributed on the one hand to libertarian fears that such a corps might prove an instrument of tyranny and, on the other, to Englishmen's reluctance to bear the costs of supporting such an organization.\footnote{Pringle, pp. 55-56.} Responsibility for investigating most acts of violence fell to the constables and justices of the peace, who, already overburdened with duties, and often unequal to the tasks entailed by their offices, had neither training, time, nor inclination sufficient to render them effective in this capacity. Moreover, Renaissance criminology was extremely primitive, and, unless he were unlucky enough to be discovered in the act, a clever felon intent upon hiding his tracks stood an excellent chance of escaping altogether. Indeed, a competent poisoner could usually manage to conceal all evidence of foul play.

Given the confused state of English socio-legal institutions circa 1600, we can understand why, despite the growing feeling against all forms of self-government, there remained sufficient diversity of opinion to confer some measure of legitimacy upon most existing practices. Indeed, the dilemmas created by the conflicting claims of religion, honor, philosophy, blood, and civil duty were a commonplace of Renaissance thought. As Montaigne observed, 'By the law and right of arms, he that putteth up an injurie shall be degraded of honor and nobilities and he that revengeth himselfe of it, shall by the civill Law incure a capital punishment.'\footnote{The Essays, tr. Florio (London, 1603), 1.22, cited by Watson, p. 128. On Renaissance ambivalence regarding 'private revenge,' see Watson, pp. 127ff.} It is against this background of divided loyalties, ambivalence, and ethical groping that we must regard the measure of acceptance accorded by Renaissance Englishmen to even the most elaborate and consistent theories of retribution set forth in political and moral treatises or implicit in novelle and plays.

Divine vengeance, certainly one of the most important concepts to exert its influence on sixteenth-century thought, was, as has often been noted, a pervasive theme in Tudor-Stuart tragedy. Yet it is improbable
that we shall ever be able to unravel the threads of faith and skepticism which made up the fabric of Renaissance Englishmen's attitudes towards this far-reaching idea. On the one hand, divine vengeance was in certain respects a hollow convention, an all too convenient theory of retribution the very neatness of which rendered it suspect. On the other hand, however, it was an extremely useful concept which could serve as a sort of ethical touchstone by means of which the various forms of human retribution could be evaluated and related to each other. Moreover, it provided comforting reassurance that even the apparent triumphs of evil and the depressing failures of human justice had their places in the Divine Plan and would, in God's time, be reversed, to His glory and the joy of all Christians. Thus, the Reformation was seen by Protestant thinkers as the providentially ordered visitation of God's vengeance upon the Satanic forces which had corrupted the Church.44 During the dark days of the 1580's and '90's, when the Catholic Enterprise threatened to snuff out English Protestantism, the operation of divine retribution was seen in the exposures of Campion, Throckmorton, Babington, and other Catholic conspirators, while the destruction of the Armada was read as the punishment visited by God upon proud and papist Spain.45 On the politico-legal level, divine vengeance reaffirmed the authority of the king and magistrates by making them its agents, while holding forth the promise that even those criminals who chanced to evade civil justice would not escape punishment.

Of particular interest to Renaissance Englishmen were the ways in which the heavens were thought to reveal and revenge secret crimes. As Campbell, Willard Farnham, and H. H. Adams have shown, stories depicting the complicated workings of divine retribution enjoyed considerable popularity during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth


45 See, for example, among the ballads published by R. W. Morfill, Ballads Relating to the Reign of Queen Elizabeth, Part II, Ballads from Manuscripts, vol. II (London, 1873), 'The Complaint of a Christian . . .' (pp. 189-190); 'A Brief Answer . . .' (pp. 180-181); and 'A Proper New Ballad . . .' (p. 92). On contemporary views—both English and Spanish—regarding the hand of God in the Armada's destruction, see Garrett Mattingly, The Armada (Boston, 1939), pp. 387-392; and A. M. Hadfield, Time to Finish the Game (London, 1964) pp. 198-217, but esp. 198 and 210. The 'Armada medals' bore the motto Flavit et Dissipati Sunt—God breathed and they were scattered.
centuries. Broadside ballads, news pamphlets, metrical tragedies, and novelle in increasing numbers dealt with the careers of criminals who had contrived to escape detection, often for years, only to be exposed by the heavens at the appointed moment. Although the raw material of these narratives came from diverse sources—from classical authors, continental novelle, English history, and contemporary scandal—the events were often reconceived and presented to English readers in a pattern designed to emphasize the inevitability of God’s vengeance. Such tales are novelle in the sense of the word—retellings of remarkable happenings. It is the odd, unexpected, sometimes bizarre, but always relentlessly logical ways in which the heavens work that give these stories their point.

Dramatic counterparts of such narratives, the plays we call revenge tragedy may be read, at least on one level, as demonstrations of the ways in which God reveals and revenges secret crimes. Their treatments of this theme are highly conventionalized—indeed, formulaic. A secret crime—usually but not always murder—is committed. Fear of discovery goads the criminal into increasingly intricate and frantic stratagems, each of which Providence turns back upon him, so that his efforts to conceal his guilt serve instead to expose him. The device by which he hopes once and for all to escape his pursuers, destroy his enemies, or secure the power which will guarantee him safety is transformed by Providence into the opportunity for which his enemies have been waiting, so that at his end, as at each stage of his career, the criminal proves the instrument of his own undoing.

That the secret criminal be hoist with his own petard is central to revenge tragedy’s meaning, for the essence of criminal depravity is conceived to be the criminal’s pride in his own cunning and his consequent contempt for divine justice. Illustrating the text ‘The Lord is known by the judgment he executeth; the wicked is snared in the work of his own hands’ (Psalms 9:16), revenge tragedy underlines the limitations of criminal vision, using dramatic irony to enable the audience to savor the process by which the criminal, too nearsighted to doubt his control over events, proceeds headlong toward death and damnation.

46 Campbell, ‘Theories of Revenge,’ pp. 238ff; Farnham, pp. 271–339; and Adams, pp. 26–53.
47 Compare, for example, the story of Bianca Maria, Countess of Celant (Marston’s ‘insatiate countess’) as told by Bandello (i, 4), Belleforest (11, 20) and Painter (11, 24).
REVENGE AND REVENGE TRAGEDY

Time is the medium in which Providence works, weaving events into complex patterns which remain beyond mortal ken until the moment of their completion. Retribution, we hear again and again, is merely a matter of time: ‘Time is the author both of truth and right’; ‘Time / Will make the murderer bring forth himself’; ‘De Flores has a wondrous honest heart; / He’ll bring it out in time.’

Within this formula, a revenger may play any of several parts. He may, like Hamlet, be the righteous agent of God’s vengeance upon the secret criminal. He may, like Barabas, be the secret criminal. Or, like Giovanni and Soranzo, he may be both instrument and victim of divine retribution.

The nature of Renaissance revenge—a set of diverse customs united by the principle of retributive justice but differentiated by their several origins, definitions of offense, and modes of response—lent itself readily to the sort of dramatic structure in which a play is built up from several actions presenting complementary aspects of a central idea. Around the divine vengeance, the operation of which forms the narrative and thematic center of each revenge play, are disposed the various forms of human vengeance, arranged so that they may define and comment upon one another. In general, these forms of human vengeance are seen as reflections of divine justice. At their best, they are imperfect images of divine retribution, having as their ends the maintenance of cosmic and political order through the enforcement of God’s laws. At their worst, they are perversions of divine vengeance, impious insofar as they place other ends—the satisfaction of personal passions or the defense of family honor—above divine justice. Thus, vengeance such as Clermont d’Ambois’, untainted by hatred or anger, and executed with an awareness of divine mission, is most nearly in accord with Divine Purpose. (Clermont’s vengeance is contrasted with that which Montsurry has taken upon Bussy and that which Charlotte recommends be taken upon Montsurr.) At the other extreme is Hoffman’s vengeance for his pirate father: it is dictated by family loyalty, motivated by hatred and lust for power, conducted at the expense of innocent bystanders, and devoted to the subversion of political and cosmic order. (Hoffman’s

48 These passages are from, respectively, The Spanish Tragedy, ii, 2, l. 58 (Revels Plays ed.); The Revenger’s Tragedy, v.iii.117 (Revels Plays ed.); and The Changeling, iv.ii.57–58 (Revels Plays ed.).

vengeance is set off against the just vengeance taken upon him by Mathias, Martha, and John of Saxony.) This mode of thematic organization is well suited to the purposes of playwrights who, like Chapman and Tourneur, may be concerned with examining the nature and forms of retribution and exploring the courses open to just men living in societies where civil justice has broken down. However, even in the work of playwrights less concerned with the philosophical aspects of retribution, the multifaceted quality of revenge tends to impose this sort of thematic structure, for the various forms of revenge portrayed are most readily understood in terms of their relationships to each other. Thus the nature of the revenge theme combined with dramatic convention to invite consideration of the religious, ethical, and socio-legal implications of revenge.

While the narrative and thematic structure of revenge tragedy asserts, in accordance with orthodox Tudor-Stuart doctrine, the precedence of cosmic and political order over the principles of family solidarity and personal honor, the tension between these two sets of values often provides a focus for dramatic interest. The moral of The Atheist’s Tragedy—that ‘patience is the honest man’s revenge’—depends for its force upon the conflict between blood revenge—the principles of which Charlesmont is at first prepared to accept—and the faith in God which Tourneur here recommends as the pious alternative. The vengeance of Tamora is firmly grounded in the vendetta, and our appreciation of this tradition enables us to see the element of justice in her position, and thereby to understand Titus Andronicus as a work more complex than simple good-guys-versus-bad-guys melodrama. In Hamlet, both blood revenge and divine justice work toward similar ends, but the rival claims of the former, which would be satisfied with Claudius’ death, are never completely reconciled with those of the latter, which require Hamlet’s death as part of the providential program for Denmark’s regeneration. This tension contributes to Hamlet’s tragic dimension, leaving an uncomfortable awareness of the price in suffering and life which Providence sometimes exacts for keeping the cosmos in order.

Notwithstanding their dependence upon orthodox conceptions of divine and human vengeance, revenge plays are by no means simple dramatic homilies. On the contrary, revenge tragedy, as a corpus, reflects a considerable range of Renaissance attitudes toward revenge. There are, to be sure, plays predicated upon the conventional trust in God’s justice and doctrinaire condemnation of all vengeance visited
outside official channels. The two plays attributed to Cyril Tourneur fall under this heading, their elements of undisguised didacticism being generally agreed to constitute an important factor in their dramatic effectiveness. But the revenge play form could also be made to accommodate more liberal attitudes toward retribution. Chapman’s *Revenge of Bussy D’Ambois* is a thoughtful and intelligent analysis of the circumstances which can justify a private subject’s filling the place of a negligent prince. Going beyond Chapman’s liberalism to a position diametrically opposed to Tourneur’s orthodoxy, we find that the ironic handling of revenge play conventions can sometimes communicate serious reservations about the ‘official’ values with which they are usually associated. Read thus, Marlowe’s *Jew of Malta* seems a most effective vehicle for its author’s reputed skepticism: the cynical indifference of Ferneze and Del Bosco to the religious and moral principles they profess lends a sardonic note to the pious closing couplet in which credit for Malta’s deliverance is given ‘neither to Fate nor Fortune, but to Heauen.’

While revenge tragedy presents a highly formalized and rather idealized picture of divine justice, its portrayal of human vengeance tends to be more in keeping with the harsh realities of Renaissance life. Both ‘public’ and ‘private’ vengeance are depicted with a sharp eye for their various failings. Civil justice is rarely presented running a smooth course. At its worst, it is manifestly corrupt, perverted to the uses of tyrants such as Saturninus or Piero. In its better moments, it is likely to be well intentioned but nearsighted: witness the judges who preside at Charlemont’s trial. With the exception of hero revengers such as Hieronimo, Hamlet, and Clermont (who are products of carefully contrived combinations of circumstance, motivation, and action providing maximum provocation and manifest evidence of divine mandate), vengeance which bypasses the king or magistrate is usually represented as irresponsible and dangerous. Families and individuals are shown avenging themselves with callous indifference to social repercussions, injuring the innocent, and undermining civil order.

The world of revenge tragedy is, then, one in which murder, rape, adultery, and assorted other evils flourish, and in which the existing forms of human retribution seem unequal to maintaining order. In short, it is a world which, allowing for a certain degree of poetic exaggeration, may seem as senseless and chaotic as the real one. Yet the world of the plays is shown in the end to be ruled by justice, and the
impression of confusion to result from the limitations of human vision. If these limitations sometimes lead just men such as Hieronimo and Titus to feel deserted by their gods, they also assure us that criminals such as Claudius and Barabas will end up hoist with their own petards. In a sense, then, revenge tragedy can be seen to mediate between the elegant simplicity of Tudor-Stuart theory and the demoralizing inconsistency of Tudor-Stuart justice. Revenge tragedy enabled conflicts to be identified and formalized within the conventions of an established dramatic form, opening for the audience the possibility of resolution on both the intellectual and emotional levels.

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