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English Revenge Tragedy

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Justice, Revenge, and Law

In Henry Chettle's *Tragedy of Hoffman* (1602), the outlawed protagonist, driven to lead "a savadge life . . . amongst beasts" (sig. B3) whilst he seeks vengeance for his murdered father, forms a living picture of the contradiction that lies at the heart of English revenge tragedy: as a man seeking justice for unpunished crime he is an agent of the very principles on which the civil society depends for its survival; yet his wild appearance bespeaks a social alienation thar will drive him to extremes of destructive violence. "Caught in a double bind," as Katharine Maus puts it, "the revenger seems simultaneously an avatar and enemy of social order" (Maus 1995: xiii; Neill 1983: 39). This is the contradiction that Francis Bacon sought to define when, in a celebrated oxymoron, he wrote of revenge as "a kind of wild justice" (Bacon 1906: 13). Revenge, Bacon implied, was simply justice in its primitive, undomesticated condition; but because it remained wild, it constituted a danger to the order of the state, threatening to overrun and choke it like an invasive weed in some formal garden. Himself a jurist of distinction and later to be James I's Attorney General and Lord Chancellor, Bacon recognized in the ethos of revenge a fundamental challenge to the rule of law: "[f]or as for the first wrong, it doth but offend the law; but the revenge of that wrong, putteth the law out of office." This is why, in the harmonious resolutions of comedy, the man with revenge in his heart, like Malvolio or Shylock, however cruelly wronged, must be expelled from the reordered community.

Even Bacon, however, admitted the existence of "wrongs which there is no law to remedy"; and these, he felt, invited "the most tolerable sort of revenge." By conceding the possibility of circumstances in which usurpation of the law might be tolerated, Bacon pointed to the very tension that energizes revenge tragedy in its exploration of irreconcilable conflicts between the private desire for revenge, and the public constraints of law. As Fredson Bowers long ago demonstrated, revenge had become an increasingly political issue in early modern England, where the centralizing ambitions

of the Tudor monarchy led to an insistence upon the state's absolute monopoly of justice (Bowers 1940; Maus 1995: xiii–xiv). Endlessly reinforced in the propaganda of sermons, homilies, and pious tracts, this doctrine put the institution of law in conflict with the traditional code of chivalric honor.[1] Fastening on those scriptural texts which proclaimed that the right of vengeance belonged to God alone, official dogma asserted an absolute ethical divide between justice and revenge, insisting that, barring direct intervention from on high, only the King, as God's vicegerent, could inflict punishment. Under this dispensation, private retribution constituted, as Bacon recognized, an implicit challenge not merely to the authority of the state, but to its very legitimacy.

In its emphasis upon the potentially catastrophic consequences of putting the law out of office, revenge tragedy paid due regard to official doctrine; but at the same time it invested most of its emotional energy in the predicament of the revenger. Typically it chose to explore the conflict between law and revenge by imagining some crisis in which the state proved either unable or unwilling to satisfy an individual's demand for retribution. To this extent it was well calculated to speak to the resentments of those who, whether for political, religious, or social reasons, felt themselves victimized by what Hamlet calls "Th'oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely... the law's delay, / The insolence of office" (*Hamlet* 3.1.79–81). The generality of Hamlet's indictment draws attention to the thoroughly generic nature of his dilemma: more often than not the revenger finds himself pitched against the very authority that should be responsible for the implementation of justice. In Hamlet's case, his father's murderer is the King himself; in *Titus Andronicus* (ca. 1588–93), it is the Emperor who stands in the way of retribution against Tamora, her lover, and her vicious sons; in Thomas Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy* (ca. 1587), Hieronimo's only son is treacherously butchered by the King's nephew and presumptive heir, Lorenzo; in Marston's *Antonio's Revenge* (ca. 1601) it is Duke Piero, the ruler of Venice, whom the hero is bound to punish for his father's death; in the anonymous *Revenger's Tragedy* (1606–7),[2] the killing of Vindice's father and his betrothed mistress pitches the hero against the whole ruling family; while in *Hoffman* (1602) the outlawed protagonist becomes the enemy of the entire princely caste.

Katharine Maus has written of the way in which revenge drama, by presenting the delicious spectacle of subjects hoodwinking and finally annihilating their superiors, addressed the "repressed frustrations" of a society in painful transition – one still highly stratified along feudal lines, but exposed to sudden changes of economic and political fortune (Maus 1995: xi–xii); and it is clear that in some respects the revenger corresponds to the type of the "social bandit," that paradoxical "revolutionary traditionalist" whom Eric Hobsbawm has described as a characteristic phenomenon of popular resistance in periods of rapid social transformation. Like the social bandit, the revenger sometimes adopts a distinctive mode of dress as the sign of the alienation that drives him to "right wrongs and avenge cases of injustice"; like the bandit, he too feels himself committed to "the defence or restoration of the traditional order of things 'as it should be' (which ... means as it is believed to have been in some real or

mythical past)";[3] and insofar as he provides a kind of fantasy surrogate for all those elements in society whose powerlessness puts them beyond the solutions of law and reason, he becomes the scourge not just of his personal enemies, but of all those who (in Hoffman's words) "wring the poore, and eate the people up . . . such as have rob'd souldiers of / Reward, and punish true desert with scorned death" (*Hoffman*: sig. I2v). Something of this largeness of social scope is implicit in the sweeping satire of courtly mores that informs Vindice's tirades in *The Revenger's Tragedy* – reminding us that in Florio's dictionary "Vendice" is glossed as "a revenger of wrongs, a redresser of abuses, a defender, one that restoreth unto liberty and freeth from dangers, a punisher" (Florio 1611: 592). More speculatively, we might imagine that in its preoccupation with suppressed histories of crime, its pervasive use of Fall mythology, and its nostalgia for a vanished pre-lapsarian order, revenge tragedy provided a way of indirectly addressing the repressed guilts and anxieties arising from the crises of Reformation and Counter-Reformation and the oscillating political fortunes with which they were associated (Neill 1997: 245–7).

The exceptional power of the genre to compel the early modern imagination, then, had much to do with its ability to mobilize conflicting attitudes toward the subversiveness of personal vengeance. In several of the plays the process by which revenge puts the law out of office is rendered remarkably explicit. The action of *The Revenger's Tragedy*, for example – after the extended exposition that establishes Vindice's role as revenger – effectively begins with a trial scene: here the Duchess's youngest son is found guilty of raping Antonio's wife, only for the Duke to intervene, deferring judgment at his wife's behest (1.2.83). In turn, this spectacle of aborted justice is set against a scene in which Antonio and his faction, anticipating that "judgment [will] speak all in gold, and spare the blood / Of such a serpent," vow revenge for his wife's degradation and suicide.[4] In thus highlighting "the insolence of office" and "the law's delay" as motors for revenge, the playwright must have been inspired as much by the example of *The Spanish Tragedy* and *Titus* as by *Hamlet*. The protagonist of Kyd's play is the kingdom's principal judge, yet is humiliatingly unable to obtain justice for himself, even as he dispenses it to others:

> 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.
> (3.6.1–4)

The main action of *The Spanish Tragedy* is framed by a dramatized Prologue and Epilogue in which questions of justice are debated by the ghost of Andrea and the spirit of Revenge. In the Prologue Andrea's Ghost describes his arraignment before the three judges of the classical underworld, Aeacus, Rhadamanth, and Minos, who, failing to arrive at a decision, refer his case to Pluto, their "infernal king," for judgment (1.1.52–3). In his turn, however, Pluto yields the right of sentence to his

consort Proserpine, who, with an enigmatic smile, whispers her decision in Revenge's ear. The precise terms of her "doom," with its ominous delegation of authority from a court of law to the private jurisdiction of Revenge, are not explicitly revealed, but are left instead to be worked out in the tragedy for which Revenge and his ghostly companion are to serve as "chorus" (1.1.91).

The play proper then begins with its own judgment scene, in which the King apportions reward between Lorenzo and Horatio, the rival captors of the Portuguese Prince Balthazar. The judicious balance of the King's decision ("You both deserve and both shall have reward," 179), combined with Hieronimo's praise for his sovereign's wisdom and justice (166), suggest a perfect consonance between law and power. However, the murder of the ambitious Horatio, as a result of his erotic rivalry with Balthazar, drives a wedge between the protagonist and his avocation, between the judge and the regal fount of justice. Stiffening his resolve with reminders that vengeance belongs only to God and his royal deputy (3.13.1–5, 3.7.69–70), Hieronimo continues to perform his judicial duties, even presiding over the trial and execution of Lorenzo's tool villain, Pedringano (3.6); but he is increasingly maddened by his own inability to secure punishment for his son's killers. What results is a progressive destabilization of the image of authority, in which the King's indifference to the old man's frantic appeals for justice (3.12) seems mirrored in the deafness of the gods to all his "soliciting for justice and revenge":

> they are plac'd in those empyreal heights
> Where, countermur'd with walls of diamond,
> I find the place impregnable, and they
> Resist my woes, and give my words no way.
> (3.7.15–18)

As a result, Hieronimo's mind is increasingly filled with dreams of private vengeance and inspired by fantasies of the very underworld from which the play's vengeful chorus first emerged:

> Though on this earth justice will not be found,
> I'll down to hell, and in this passion
> Knock at the gates of dismal Pluto's court . . .
> Go back my son, complain to Aeacus,
> For here's no justice: gentle boy be gone,
> For justice is exiled from the earth . . .
> Thy mother cries on righteous Rhadamanth
> For just revenge against the murderers.
> (3.13. 108–10, 138–43)

When Hieronimo speaks of Justice as "exiled from the earth" he invokes a classical myth that will be cited again in Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*:[5] allegorizing a world of radical inequity, it concerns Astraea, goddess of justice and last of the immortals to

leave the earth after the onset of the impious and violent Age of Iron. "*Terras Astraea reliquit*," declares the despairing Titus, quoting Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (i.150), "She's gone, she's fled . . . If you will have Revenge from hell, you shall; / Marry, for Justice, she is so employed, / He thinks, with Jove in heaven, or somewhere else" (4.3.4–5, 39–41). In the case of Kyd's tragedy, although the changing fortunes of the plot persuade Hieronimo that "heaven applies our drift, / And all the saints do sit soliciting / For vengeance on those cursed murderers" (4.1.33–4), the ending amply confirms the pessimism of this pagan myth: the linguistic "confusion" of the play through which Hieronimo accomplishes his revenge against Lorenzo and Balthazar, followed by the senseless butchery of the innocent Castile, and his own suicide, far from restoring the order of law and justice, presents a spectacle of chaos that belongs to the antisocial wilderness of revenge; and it is the figure of Revenge himself who, together with Andrea's vindictive ghost, assumes the ultimate right to fierce and partial judgment in the final chorus:

> *Andrea:* Then, sweet Revenge, do this at my request.
> Let me be judge, and doom them to unrest . . .
> *Revenge:* Then haste we down to meet thy friends and foes
> To place thy friends in ease, the rest in woes:
> (4.5.29–30, 45–6)

"Blood Cries for Blood": The Scales of Revenge

"Revenge," according to one of its most recent exponents, "means seeking a kind of cosmic, primal balance, restoring equilibrium" (Blumenfeld 2002: 61). In the proem to Book 5 of Edmund Spenser's Elizabethan epic, *The Faerie Queene*, we learn how Artegall, the Knight of Justice, was tutored in his infancy by Astraea: in order that he might combat the excesses of "wrongfull powre," she taught him "to weigh both right and wrong / In equall ballance with due recompence, / And equitie to measure out along" (canto 1, stanza 7). Astraea's "equall ballance" will be familiar from the iconography of modern law courts, but it has an ancient history; and revenge might even be said to have owned the scales of justice long before they were usurped by law. Indeed, the earliest attempts to formulate a legal system, such as the Babylonian Code of Hammurabi (ca. 1780 BCE), were in many respects barely distinguishable from the primitive tit-for-tat code of revenge which they sought to displace; and the justice of God himself was often asserted in the language of vengeance, as Hieronimo reminds us when he quotes the biblical *Vindicta mihi* (3.13.1) – "Vengeance is mine, saith the lord, I will repay" (Romans 12.19).

In a famous scriptural episode, the great feast ordered by Belshazzar, King of Babylon, is interrupted by a fearful portent: the fingers of a man's hand appear and write three mysterious words on the palace wall; as interpreted by the prophet Daniel, these graffiti announce God's revenge against the iniquity of the King, and the

imminent destruction of his kingdom: "God Hath numbered thy kingdom and finished it . . . Thou art weighed in the balances and found wanting" (Daniel 6. 26–7). Not only did this episode provide a template for the murderous banquets at which the corrupt rulers of such plays as *Titus Andronicus, The Revenger's Tragedy, Antonio's Revenge*, and even *Hamlet* meet their ends; in its stress upon numbering and weighing it encodes an essential principle of the revenge ethic. Revenge, as the popular idiom expresses it, is about "getting *even*"; its satisfactions depend upon the ironic calculus of exchange announced by Iago when, his innards gnawed by the "poisonous mineral" of jealousy, he determines to be "evened" with Othello "wife for wife" (*Othello*, 2.1. 297). Its aesthetic of "proportion" is expounded in remarkably similar terms by characters in Chettle's *Hoffman* and Chapman's *The Revenge of Bussy D'Ambois*. "Revenge should have proportion," declares Chettle's Mathias, for "Then the revenge were fit, just, and square" (sig. I4v); while the Ghost of Bussy proclaims that

> To be [God's] image is to do those things
> That make us deathless, which, by death, is only
> Doing those deeds that fit eternity;
> And those deeds are the perfecting that justice
> That makes the world last, which proportion is
> Of punishment and wreak for every wrong,
> As well as for right a reward as strong.
> (*The Revenge of Bussy D'Ambois*, 5.1.89–95)

For all the high Renaissance solemnity of his rhetorical style, Bussy's idea of "proportion" expresses the same primitive notions of justice embodied in the biblical *lex talionis*, with its precise balancing of crime and requital: "thou shalt give eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burning for burning, wound for wound, stripe for stripe" (Exodus 21.23–5). Here and elsewhere in the Old Testament (Leviticus 24, 17–20), the languages of justice and revenge are virtually indistinguishable – as they are for Hieronimo, the frustrated justicer of *The Spanish Tragedy*: "For blood with blood shall, while I sit as judge, / Be satisfied, and the law discharg'd" (3.6.35–6). The same remorseless symmetries are invoked again and again in the world of Elizabethan and Jacobean revenge tragedy: "Blood cries for blood, and murder murder craves," proclaims the hero of John Marston's *Antonio's Revenge* (ca. 1601), as he sprinkles the tomb of his murdered father with the blood of the murderer's child (3.1.216).

Like Othello when he revenges himself on Desdemona's supposed infidelity, or Hamlet when he forces the poisoned chalice to Claudius' lips in a grisly parody of communion, Antonio turns murder into "sacrifice" (*Othello*, 5.2.65); and the ritualized nature of the gesture is a reminder that in the accomplishment of revenge more is at stake than simply the revenger's private grievance. In fact, so long as the original crime goes unpunished, society as a whole was felt to be contaminated: significantly, in Greek mythology, the "upholders of honour and vengeance," known as the Furies,

were also responsible for "keep[ing] categories clear, which is to say unmixed, unpolluted" (Visser 2002: 52). Thus revenge becomes an act of purgation, making the revenger "another Hercules," whose role it is to "rid . . . huge pollution from our state" by cleansing the Augean stables of the court (*Antonio's Revenge*, 5.3.129–30). This is why, for Bussy's Ghost, revenge is godlike: by perfecting justice, it "makes the world to last." Implicit in his claim is the notion that certain crimes (especially those against one's family, one's honor, or one's person) upset the proper balance of creation, rendering it, in Hamlet's phrase, "out of joint," so that only the application of an exactly proportionate vengeance can "set it right" (1.5.210–11). The crime that thus disjoints the world amounts to an act of radical disintegration, a dismembering of the body politic, whose "scattered limbs" it is the business of the revenger's "plot" to reunite (*Antonio's Revenge*, 5.1.12); for only when revenge is accomplished can the survivors (as Marcus expresses it in *Titus*) set about knitting "This scattered corn into one mutual sheaf, / These broken limbs again into one body" (*Titus Andronicus* 5.3.70–1).

This way of thinking about revenge appears to be widely dispersed across human cultures, and is closely linked to notions of "price" and "reward" (each of which can denote retribution as well as recompense). Thus in ancient Greece, for example, revenge was *poinē* (recompense), while the word for revenger was *timōros* (one who exacts a price, reciprocates, enforces an exchange) (Kerrigan 1996: 21). At the other end of the world, in New Zealand Maori the word commonly translared as "revenge," *utu*, is better rendered as "reward," "price," or "(re)payment." Vindice, in *The Revenger's Tragedy*, appeals to the same structure of ideas when he calls vengeance "Murder's quit-rent" (1.1.39), playing on the complex meaning of "quittance" as both "final repayment" and "reprisal," as well as "release from obligation," to express the relentless moral accountancy on which the ethos of revenge is constructed (Maus 1995: x).

Because the revenger can free himself from his burden of deadly obligation only by an action that precisely counteracts the original offense, revenge drama is characterized by a relish of witty symmetries, like that exemplified in Vindice's manipulation of Gloriana's poisoned skull to bring about the death of her poisoner: "Those that did eat are eaten," he exults, as the Duke's teeth are consumed by her corrosive kiss. This play of wit explains why, as John Kerrigan puts it, the best revenge often resembles "a form of practical joke" (Kerrigan 1996: 204). "The *sport*," as Hamlet puts it, is "to have the enginer / Hoist with his own petard" (3.4.229–30; emphasis added); and this is precisely how Macbeth, as though remembering Claudius' involuntary draft from his own poisoned cup (*Hamlet* 5.2.356–60), imagines the irony of his own destruction: "This even-handed justice / Commends the ingredients of our poison'd chalice / To our own lips" (*Macbeth* 1.7.10–12).

In early plays especially, such wit often extends from the ingenuities of the plot to a style marked by figures of antithesis and chiasmus, elaborate stichomythia, and self-conscious use of rhyme. So, in *The Spanish Tragedy*, the Viceroy's lament for his dead son lays down a remorseless chain of cause and effect that supplies a rhetorical pattern for the plotting of vendetta, even before Horatio's murder sets the main plot in train:

> My late ambition hath distain'd my faith,
> My breach of faith occasion'd blood wars,
> Those bloody wars have spent my treasure,
> And with my treasure my people's blood,
> And with their blood, my joy and best belov'd,
> My best belov'd, my sweet and only son.
> (1.3.33–9)

In a similar fashion, the chiastic balance of Hieronimo's couplets seems to anticipate the witty structural "rhymes" of the revenge plot – its dance of action and vindictive counteraction – at the very point when retribution seems to him most frustratingly elusive:

> O sacred heavens! if this unhallow'd deed . . .
> Shall unreveal'd and unrevenged pass,
> How should we term your dealings to be just,
> If you unjustly deal with those that in your justice trust?
>
> *   *   *   *
>
> 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
> (3.2.5–11, 3.6.8–10)

But even as rhetorical devices of this kind seem to articulate the ironic proportion by which revenge will ultimately perfect itself, they can also serve to highlight its dangerously recursive potential. At the end of *Titus Andronicus* (ca. 1593), the patness of the hero's sardonic rhyming points up the witty aptness of the revenge whereby he tricked Tamora into a perfect expression of her barbarous nature by making her feed upon her own sons: "Why here they are, both baked in this pie, / Whereof their mother daintily hath fed, / Eating the flesh that she herself hath bred" (5.3.59–61).

However, if Tamora is the deserving victim of Titus' fury, she herself is also a bereaved mother, seeking retribution for the butchery of her own son, Alarbus; and in the strangely masque-like 5.2 it is in the person of Revenge that, accompanied by her surviving sons in the suitable guise of Murder and Rape, she visits her adversary. This show, which constitutes a kind of ex post facto justification of her atrocities against the Andronici, is also a reminder of the extent to which their shared obsession with revenge reduces Tamora and Titus to a common savagery in which "barbarous Goth" and "pious" Roman are barely distinguishable. Thus the self-consuming savagery of Tamora's fate serves as an ironic pointer to the ultimately self-destructive character of Titus' rival passion: her feasting on her own flesh and blood is uncannily mirrored in Titus's "unnatural" butchery of his own daughter in the midst of the cannibal feast. A similarly self-annihilating logic is played out in a grim knockabout scene from *The Revenger's Tragedy* where Vindice, having been hired to kill his own alter ego, Piato, performs his

burlesque butchery on the Duke's corpse, dressed up in the same clothes that once disguised his own identity: "Brother that's I: that sits for me . . . And I must stand ready here to make away / myself yonder; I must sit to be killed, and stand to kill myself" (5.1.4–6). The eldritch humour of the scene perfectly anticipates the wry self-mockery with which, at the end of the play, Vindice will identify himself as his own undoer: "'Tis time to die when we are ourselves our foes" (5.3.112). Earlier in the play Vindice has commented sardonically on the scheming of his antagonist Lussurioso: "How strangely does himself work to undo him" (4.1.61); but his own plotting has had exactly the same effect – each proves to be like the silkworm of Vindice's misogynistic satire, expending "her yellow labours . . . [to] undo herself" (3.5.71–2).

The process of self-undoing revealed by the ironic symmetries of revenge tragedy is generally inseparable from the ironies that force the revenger to imitate the methods of the very adversary he seeks to destroy. Thus, in *The Spanish Tragedy*, there is a painful appropriateness in the casting of Hieronimo's "Soliman and Perseda" playlet, where Hieronimo takes the part of the Bashaw, whose murderous treachery resembles Lorenzo's, while Lorenzo himself is made to play the Horatio-like victim, Erasto. In *Hoffman*, the hero initiates his revenge by hanging up a second skeleton beside the "anatomy" of his murdered father, their skulls identically seared with burning crowns; but this ironic doubling will be turned against him at the end of the play when a third cadaver, etched with the same scar, is sentenced to join them – that of Hoffman himself. In *Hamlet* the principle of uncanny duplication is apparent not just in the way that Hamlet dispatches his father's killer with the murderer's own weapon, poison, but also in the weird doubling of bereaved sons, which turns both of Hamlet's rivals (the man who kills him, and the man who takes his throne) into mirrors of his own predicament – as the Prince himself recognizes when he says of Laertes that "by the image of my cause, I see the portraiture of his" (5.2.87–8).

What is encoded in these recursive symmetries is more than simply an ironic comment on the folly of personal revenge: it is the fear that the desire for vengeance, unbounded by the restraints of law, will begin to operate like the "universal wolf," Appetite, as Ulysses describes it in *Troilus and Cressida*: a creature whose ravenous demand for "universal prey" will drive it in the end to "eat up [it]self" in a "chaos" of social disintegration (*Troilus and Cressida* 1.3.121–5). Revenge, as the familiar metaphor has it, is "sweet," something that human beings long to "taste"; but revenge, like Vindice's corrosive poison, can also eat. The vicious reflexivity of revenge is what underlies the farcical confusion at the end of *The Revenger's Tragedy*, where two identically clad groups of masquers, one consisting of the hero and his supporters, the other of his arch-enemies Ambitioso, Supervacuo, and Spurio, compete to murder Lussurioso and his banqueting courtiers, before rounding on one another (5.3.41 ff.); but it is perhaps most explicitly spelt out at the cannibal banquet in *Titus Andronicus*, when Marcus, fearing that his entire society may be caught up in the apocalyptic firestorm of revenge and counter-revenge that culminates in his brother's suicide, imagines how Rome, too, may become "bane unto herself" and "Like a forlorn and desperate castaway / Do desperate execution on herself" (5.3.72–5).

The hunger for payback, then, rests on deeply felt principles of natural reciprocity which reflect the need to preserve a prescribed equilibrium in the order of things; and it is on this ideal of balance that the vexed relationship between revenge and justice can be seen to turn. Yet the ironic mirror-effects displayed in episodes such as those we have just examined are a reminder of the fatality by which the symmetrical compulsions of revenge are liable to convert the revenger into the image of what he most abhors, turning the action back on himself in self-consuming fury.

"Wild Justice": The Garden State and the Wilderness of Revenge

When Bacon imagined revenge as a wild, undomesticated form of justice – a weed which "the more man's nature runs to [revenge], the more ought law to root it out," he drew on one of the most well-used political tropes of the day – one that imaged the state as a garden, tended by a ruler who must strive by constant discipline to return it to the ideal condition of the First Garden, the prototypical Adamic state (Wilders 1978: 137–8; Mack 1973: 83–4). This is the figure famously elaborated by Shakespeare in the garden scene of *Richard II*, whose Gardener the Queen addresses as "Old Adam's likeness" (3.4.73). The Gardener and his men expressly contrast Richard's feckless rule to the careful husbandry with which they preserve "law and form and due proportion" in their horticultural "commonwealth" by "root[ing] away / The noisome weeds which without profit suck / The soil's fertility" (3.4.35–46). Hamlet turns to this same figure when, brooding on his father's unrequited killing, he imagines Denmark as "an unweeded garden / That grows to seed," a wasteland possessed by "things rank and gross in nature" (1.2.135–6). Rendered uncannily literal in the Ghost's account of how he was murdered when sleeping in his "orchard" (1.5.46), this violated garden is twice brought to life on stage in the play-within-the-play when the Player King is "poison[ed] i'th'garden for his estate" (3.2.261).

In symbolic terms the garden / orchard *is* the King's estate, a model of the realm in its ideal perfection, which the "primal, eldest curse" of murder (3.3.37) has reduced to a wilderness governed only by revenge. This is the wasteland that Shakespeare placed at the symbolic center of his first essay in revenge tragedy, *Titus Andronicus* (ca. 1589–93). In act 2, scene 3 Tamora's savage longing for vengeance transforms the paradisal *locus amoenus* where she makes love to Aaron into the "barren detested vale" of her savage revenge against Titus – a place of death where

> nothing breeds
> Unless the nightly owl or fatal raven . . .
> A thousand fiends, a thousand hissing snakes,
> Ten thousand swelling toads.
>
> (2.3.93–101)

The accursed landscape Tamora evokes is the domain of the "ravenous tiger" she herself has become (5.3.194), the desert which, in her guise as Revenge, she will

identify as the "lurking place" of Murder and Rape (5.2.35–8), and the wilderness to which her own body will be consigned at the end of the play (5.3.197–9). At its heart lies the "detested, dark, blood-drinking pit" that will devour Titus' sons as though it were the mouth of hell itself (2.3.224, 236); and just as this "fell devouring receptacle" (235) symbolically displaces that "sacred receptacle" of Roman piety (1.1.91), the family tomb of the Andronici which dominates act 1, so Rome itself will be transformed into the "wilderness of tigers" denounced by Titus (3.1.54). By the same token, just as the barbarous Tamora becomes "incorporate in Rome" (1.1.462), so Titus, the former "[p]atron of virtue, Rome's best champion" (1.1.65), who imagines himself "Environed with a wilderness of sea" (3.1.94), will shortly feel that wilderness of passion drawn into himself:

> When heaven doth weep, doth not the earth o'erflow
> If the winds rage, doth not the sea wax mad,
> Threat'ning the welkin with his big-swoll'n face? . . .
> I am the sea.
> (3.1.220–4)

Nowhere perhaps is the idea of revenge as a force calculated to reduce the order of civilization to the chaos of wild nature more powerfully expressed than in the play that exerted such a formative influence on English revenge drama, Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*. At the emblematic center of its action is the garden where (in a scene displayed on the title page of successive editions) Hieronimo discovers the body of his murdered son. Represented by the same stylized stage property that would be used for the murder of *Hamlet*'s Player King,[6] this garden appears again in the quasi-allegorical scene (4.2) that ushers in the apocalyptic climax of the tragedy. Here Isabella, driven mad by Hieronimo's failure to avenge their son's death, lays waste this formerly "sacred bower" (2.5.27), transforming it into a snake-infested wilderness, in an action that not only replays the loss of Eden but symbolically prefigures the sanguinary chaos into which Hieronimo will plunge the Spanish state:

> Fruitless forever may this garden be,
> Barren the earth, and blissless whosoever
> Imagines not to keep it unmanured!
> An eastern wind commix'd with noisome airs
> Shall blast the plants and the young saplings,
> The earth with serpents shall be pestered . . .
> (4.2.14–19)

The evocative power of the garden icon as an image of political order was further enhanced by its metaphoric association with language, reflected in such titles as Richard Taverner's *Garden of Wysdom* (1539) and Henry Peacham's *Garden of Eloquence* (1593). Thinkers since Aristotle had recognized speech as the enabling instrument of human society: it was what ultimately distinguished the *polis* from the wilderness –

the world of barbarians, whose very name connoted the confused "ba ba" of their meaningless babble. In addition to its echoes of the Fall, Isabella's apocalyptic imagery identifies the destruction of her garden with the laying waste of Babylon envisioned by the prophets Jeremiah (51.1–2, 37–43) and Isaiah (13.19–22); and Hieronimo in turn conflates that devastation with the destruction of the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11.1–9 (Johnson 1963: 23–36): looking forward to the performance of the revenge-play in which his purpose will be accomplished, he announces the imminent "fall of Babylon, / Wrought by the heavens in this confusion" (4.1.195–6). The "confusion" he anticipates is represented by the babel of "unknown languages" in which, to his victims' dismay, his play is to be performed (4.1.172–83). Frequently identified as the Second Fall of Mankind, the destruction of Babel, when God "confound[ed] all the language of the earth," scattering its people abroad so that "they left off to build the city,' is the archetypal symbol of social distintegration. In Kyd's play Hieronimo's Babel-performance climaxes a series of episodes in which the failure of civil order is figured in the collapse of language. The first of these occurs in 3.12, when driven to fury by the King's deafness to his cries for justice, the old Knight Marshall abandons himself to frenzied gesture:

> Away! I'll rip the bowels of the earth,
> *He diggeth with his dagger.*
> And ferry over to th'Elysian plains,
> And bring my son to show his deadly wounds.
> (71–3)

This is followed in the next scene by an even more eloquent gesture of linguistic repudiation in which the instrument of speech itself, the mouth, becomes the agent of violence. Surrounded by petitioners who look to him for "equity" (54), Hieronimo is accosted by an old man whose bereavement mirrors his own, and who complains that the "distressful words" of his petition "With ink bewray what blood began in me" (75–7). Proclaiming the old man his "Orpheus" (a figure for the magical power of language to bring order to nature), Hieronimo suddenly seizes their legal papers from his petitioners and rips them to pieces in a ferocious mimicry of revenge, rending and tearing the words as though they were his enemies, "shivering their limbs in pieces with my teeth" (123). In a last variation upon this trope, those same teeth become the instrument by which his speech is permanently silenced, when, following the performance of his babel-play, Hieronimo bites out his own tongue (4.4.191) in a gesture designed (according to the gloss supplied by the play's reviser) "to express the rupture of my part" (5th Addition, l. 47).[7]

Linguistic breakdown is likewise a symptom of the social disintegration attendant upon revenge in *Titus*, where Aaron's description of the imperial palace as "full of *tongues*, of eyes and ears" and the woods as "ruthless, dreadful, *deaf* and dull" (2.1.128–9; emphasis added) figures the contrast between the eloquent world of the city, and the inarticulate wilderness whose only mouth is that of the "blood-drinking

pit" where Bassianus meets his end (2.3.224, 236). The excision of Lavinia's tongue and the amputation of those other instruments of eloquence, her hands,[8] by Tamora's sons, consigns her father to a world of mute semiotics in which he dreams of "cut[ting] away our hands" or "bit[ing] our tongues, and in dumb shows / Pass[ing] the remainder of our hateful days" (3.1.130–2). Scanning Lavinia's "map of woe," he seeks to "interpret all her martyred signs," assuring his "speechless complainer" that he will perfect his mastery of her "dumb action" to the point where he can "wrest an alphabet" from her repertory of frantic gesture (3.2.12, 36–45).

If speech is the faculty that distinguishes men from beasts, then the loss or abandonment of language becomes a potent metaphor for the anarchy produced by the lonely frenzy of the revenger: "Where words prevail not," declares Kyd's Lorenzo, "violence prevails" (2.1.108). That is why the figure of Lavinia as "speechless complainer" is charged with a horror that goes beyond the mere shock of mutilation and violated innocence; it is also what gives a particular edge of menace to Hamlet's gathering contempt for "Words, words, words" (2.2.210, 614), and what seems to charge the wild, disordered "nothing" of Ophelia's mad speech (4.5.9 ff.) with a murderous power beyond the reach of rational discourse: "Hadst thou thy wits and didst persuade revenge, / It could not move thus . . . This nothing's more than matter" (4.5.192–8).

"Endless Tragedy": Dramatic Structure and the Rhetoric of Excess

The moral and emotional contradictions from which revenge tragedy draws its ferocious energy also have a structural equivalent in a recurrent tension between the tightly contained formal patterns dictated by the revenge ethic and its appetite for chaotic excess. Revenge tragedy is the most remorselessly plot-driven and end-directed of dramatic genres: indeed, it might be said that the hero's sole *raison d'être* is to drive the plot to its conclusion, to accomplish the ends of revenge. When Hamlet, after killing Polonius, resolves to "draw [him] towards an end" (3.4.239), this is the destiny he punningly enacts as he drags the old man's corpse from the stage; and however much the Prince may recoil from the obligations of his role into the labyrinths of ratiocination, it is as the instrument of an ineluctable plot that he is finally compelled to see himself: "There's a divinity that shapes our ends, / Rough-hew them how we will" (5.2.11–12; Neill 1997: 237–442).

In the play that established the generic mold for later dramatists, Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*, the overwhelming agency of plot is represented by two supernatural figures, the Ghost of Andrea and the spirit of Revenge, who place themselves on stage at the beginning of the play to "serve for Chorus in this tragedy" (1.1.91). Their silent presence throughout the action serves (together with the commentary they supply at the end of each act) as a constant reminder of the characters' subjection to the predetermined pattern of revenge; and although the Ghost is repeatedly frustrated

by seemingly retrograde twists in the plot, Revenge reassures him as to its true direction. At last, after the murderous catastrophe has consumed his enemies in the Spanish court, Andrea declares his satisfaction: "Ay, now my hopes have *end* in their effects, / When blood and sorrow *finish* my desires" (4.5.1–2; emphasis added). The rhetorical stress on ending in these lines, complementing the ceremonial gestures of closure in the funeral procession that ends scene 4, appears to announce a perfect resolution of the plot. However, the succeeding dialogue undercuts this comforting sense of finality, as Andrea assigns "endless" punishments to the victims of Hieronimo's vengeance (31–44) while Revenge insists that, although on earth "death hath end their misery," in the underworld the dead will be compelled to play out "their endless tragedy" (47–8). What is especially chilling about Revenge's promise is not so much its (quite orthodox) confirmation of eternal punishment, as the way in which his theatrical metaphor threatens to turn the afterlife into an infinitely protracted repetition of the drama of retribution we have just witnessed – a repetition which, because of the unspecified referent of "their," disturbingly threatens to encompass friend as well as foe, good and bad alike.

This is an ending that promises no end, withdrawing the satisfaction of aesthetic closure in the very couplet that should seal it; and the paradox it entails was one to which later dramatists repeatedly returned – notably the author of the 1602 additions to Kyd's play, whose remarkable "Painter Scene" extends the queasy *mise en abime* of Revenge's "endless tragedy." Here Hieronimo commissions a painter to prepare a revenger's memento – a work not unlike the Darnley Memorial,[9] the painting through which the infant King James was adjured to seek vengeance for his murdered father. Outlining the program for his own revenge painting, Hieronimo begins with an extravagantly colored description of the scene in which he discovered Horatio's boy; but then, to the puzzlement of his interlocutor, he suddenly breaks off:

> *[Hieronimo:]* . . . make me curse hell, invocate heaven, and in the end, leave me in a trance – and so forth.
> Painter: And is this the end?
> Hieronimo: *O no, there is no end: the end is death and madness* . . . . reason abuseth me, and there's the torment, there's the hell. At the last, sir, bring me to one of the murderers: were he as strong as Hector, thus would I tear and drag him up and down.
> (4th Addition, ll. 160–9; emphasis added)

At this point, in a frenzy of grief and frustration, Hieronimo assaults the luckless painter: thus the revenger's attempt to write a proleptic *finis* to his plot through the agency of art collapses, as fiction breaks its boundaries to engulf the real world. Much the same thing will happen, of course, in the final scene of the play, where the metatheatrical conceit created by the onstage audience of Andrea and Revenge, is mirrored in the theatrical performance staged by Hieronimo for the edification of the court: his tragedy enables the "acting" of his "plot . . . of dire revenge" (4.3.28–30), dispatching his son's killers by maneuvering them into a witty reenactment of their

original crime. "See here my show," Hieronimo urges his audience, gesturing at his motive in the suddenly revealed form of Horatio's butchered carcass, "look on this spectacle: / Here lay my hope, and here my hope hath end" (4.4.89–90). He follows this with an elaborate explanatory epilogue, climaxing in the offer to "conclude his part" in suicide: "And gentles, thus I end my play: / Urge no more words, I have no more to say" (4.4.146–52). The carefully orchestrated closure announced in this couplet is delusive, however, proving the artifice of the hero's theatrical design inadequate to contain the savagery of revenge: instead of the terminal silence he promises, Hieronimo becomes embroiled in a bitter debate with the onstage audience, which culminates in a fresh explosion of violence, as he bites out his tongue and then stabs the Duke of Castile to death, before killing himself.

Commentators are often puzzled by the excess of violence in this scene: what, after all (apart from fathering Lorenzo), has the wretched Castile done to merit death – let alone the eternal torture reserved for him by Andrea? Why should Hieronimo, whose epilogue constituted a full and frank confession, chose to devour his own tongue rather than reveal the mysterious "thing which I have vow'd inviolate" (188)? But of course excess – the breach of proper bounds – is precisely what is encoded in Hieronimo's violent repudiation of speech, and in the other episodes we have been considering, with their repeated frustration of aesthetic closure (Neill 1997: 211–15). The fondness for excess was part of the Elizabethan inheritance from the Roman dramatist Seneca, who, in revenge dramas like *Thyestes*, with its ferocious cannibal banquet, provided an unimpeachable classical model for their violent sensationalism. But the dramatists display a self-consciousness about the debt which suggests that something more than simple mimicry was involved. Kyd, for example, openly signals his indebtedness in the motto drawn from Seneca's *Agamemnon – Per scelus semper tutum est sceleribus iter* (the safest route for crime is always through more crime) – which Hieronimo uses to refute the quietism enjoined in the biblical claim that vengeance belongs only to God (3.13.1–6); "Seneca cannot be too heavy" for Hamlet's tragedians of the city (2.2.424); and in *Hoffman* the protagonist is made to boast that the murder with which he has initiated his revenge is only "the prologue to a Tragedy" that will surpass the bloodiest of Seneca's murderous extravaganzas: "Thyestes, Tereus, / Jocasta, or Duke Jason's jealous wife" (sig. C2v).

Metatheatrical allusions of this kind help to extend the function of excess beyond mere narrative sensationalism, to the level of rhetoric and psychology. It is the destiny of every revenge-hero to produce a holocaust – one in which the ends of justice are swamped in a savage mini-apocalypse of blood; but what is striking about Elizabethan and Jacobean revenge plays is the way in which their heroes and villains openly embrace an ethos of excess, triumphantly rejecting all constraints of law and custom: "They reck no laws that meditate revenge," declares the bereaved Viceroy in *The Spanish Tragedy* (1.3.48), acknowledging that to embark on revenge, is to commit oneself to a course of extremity that knows no limit. "Revenge," declares Claudius, in response to Laertes' maddened undertaking to cut Hamlet's throat in the church, "should know no bounds" (*Hamlet* 4.7.100). In *The Revenger's Tragedy*, one of Vindice's

co-conspirators proclaims "our wrongs are such, / We cannot justly be revenged too much" (5.2.9), while Vindice himself, not content with killing the old Duke who murdered his beloved, crows with satisfaction at the extermination of a whole "nest of dukes" (5.3.128). In *Antonio's Revenge*, Piero and Andrugio, villain and victim, are similarly at one in their insistence that their vindictive appetites are "boundless," and therefore to be satisfied only by a piece of "topless villainy" or "peerless . . . revenge," which, because it cannot be "equalled," excels any conceivable response (1.1.79, 85, 102, 3.5.29). By the same token, Antonio, still unsatisfied after his murder of the infant Julio, compares himself to "insatiate hell, still crying 'More!'" (3.1.212–13). Blood for blood is no longer enough: Antonio claims "large interest for blood" (5.6.22). Beginning in a frustrated desire for condign punishment, revenge becomes a kind of competition in atrocity, where the revenger's greatest satisfaction is not to match but to outstrip his opponent as bloodily as possible – as Vasques gloatingly does in John Ford's *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* (ca. 1629–33), when he boasts of how "a Spaniard outwent an Italian in revenge" (5.2.145–6).

There is a point to all of this reveling in excess, of course; for it once again draws attention to the fundamental contradiction at the heart of early modern revenge narratives – the conflict between the revenge-hero's longing to restore order and balance to the world, and the self-confounding extravagance of the method he employs.[10] By exploiting and probing such contradictions, revenge tragedy became a vehicle for exploring deeply felt anxieties about the very possibility of justice in a fallen world. But the tendency of revenge to generate "endless tragedy" also served to point up a crucial paradox in the genre's treatment of memory and time.

"Remember Me": The Time of Revenge

In accordance with the patterns of ironic duplication so characteristic of revenge tragedy, the action of *Hamlet* sets two bereaved sons, each seeking requital for a father's murder, in opposition to one another. The resemblances between them go well beyond their common thirst for justice, however; for each seems haunted as much by the contemptuous neglect of his father's memory as by the murder itself. When we first meet him, Hamlet – set apart from the gaudy court by his "customary suits of solemn black" and by the "mourning duties" and "obsequious sorrow" that keep him seeking "his noble father in the dust" (1.2.81, 91–6) – rails against the scanting of the dead king's funeral rites, and the shameless impropriety by which "[t]he funeral baked meats / Did coldly furnish forth the marriage tables" (187–8). Later we will hear Laertes lamenting not merely the "means" of Polonius' death, but the public insult of his hugger-mugger interment – "his obscure funeral, / No trophy, sword, nor hatchment o'er his bones, / No noble rite, nor formal ostentation" (4.5.238–40) – an insult that will be compounded in his mind by the shrunken obsequies allowed to his sister Ophelia (5.1.230–52). The intense emotional significance that both characters attach to funeral ceremonies in *Hamlet* can be illuminated by comparison with

two particularly striking scenes in a play closely modeled on *Hamlet*, *Antonio's Revenge*. The second act of Marston's drama opens with an unusually lengthy stage direction, detailing the ornate funeral procession of Duke Andrugio, the murdered father whom the hero will be bound to avenge. This display of pageantry is complemented by a second, equally elaborate dumb show at the beginning of the third act, where Andrugio's widow and son enter to perform their mourning obsequies at Andrugio's tomb. These two shows, with their shared display of knightly achievements – helmet, sword, and banners – represent successive phases of a single ritual. Like any of the great heraldic funerals that announced the passing of the rich and powerful, while simultaneously proclaiming their triumph over death, Andrugio's is designed both as an act of ceremonial closure and a rite of memory, whose lavish parade of the dead man's fame will reach its designated "end" in the monument where his memory is to be enshrined forever (Neill 1997: ch. 8). Andrugio's rites, however, are deliberately violated by his murderer, who concludes the funeral procession by consigning the corpse to oblivion, in a parodic inversion of the conventional funeral oration with its proclamations of immortal renown:

> Rot there, thou cerecloth that enfolds the flesh
> Of my loathed foe; moulder to crumbling dust;
> Oblivion choke the passage of thy fame!
> Trophies of honoured birth drop quickly down;
> Let naught of him, but what was vicious live.
> (2.1.1–5)

Determined to extend his "snaky Vengeance" beyond the grave (6–8), Piero goes on to woo Maria as she kneels at her husband's "honoured sepulchre," beneath the streamers bearing his arms (3.1.0, 5, 12) – an insult which, combined with Antonio's pious invocations of his father's "mighty spirit" (27), is sufficient to summon Andrugio's ghost from his coffin to demand revenge (32–51).

By virtue of their spectacular character and structural prominence, these two episodes serve to highlight the crucial importance of memory in this form of drama, where the protagonist and antagonist find themselves locked in a battle for the control and disposition of time. In his drive to control the future, the usurping villain of revenge tragedy seeks, like Macbeth, to annihilate the past, to make the death-blow of murder "the be-all and the end-all" so that nothing can "return / To plague th'inventor" (*Macbeth* 1.7.4–5, 9–10). The revenger, by contrast, is wedded to the past: his role is that of a "remembrancer" in both senses of that formerly potent word – one who exacts payment for past debts, and one whose task it is to rescue the past from the grave of oblivion. The badge of this function is the memento or relic that he treasures, both as a covert warning to his enemies and as a proof of the guilty history that tyrannical power seeks to erase. In *The Spanish Tragedy* Hieronimo hides away Horatio's body, but carries with him a handkerchief besmeared with the youth's blood as a constant incentive to revenge; in *Antonio's Revenge*, Pandulpho produces the

corpse of his murdered son and "*lay{s} it thwart Antonio's breast*" to spur his fellow-revenger to his duty (4.5.0.2); in *Hoffman*, the hero has carefully preserved the "dead remembrance of [his] living father" in the form of the skeleton hanging in his arbor; while in *The Revenger's Tragedy*, Vindice has spent nine years sighing over the skull of his poisoned mistress, awaiting the moment of retribution. By contrast, the more civilized Hamlet carries only the portrait of his dead father, but even he will find its symbolic surrogate in the graveyard, where, as a prologue to the achievement of his task, he broods over the skull of poor Yorick. Revenge, as we are reminded when Horatio's corpse, the "bare bones" of Hoffman senior, or Gloriana's skull become essential properties in the conduct of revenge, is merely remembrance continued by other means (Kerrigan 1996: ch. 7; Neill 1983; 1992: 316–20; 1997: chs. 7–8; Blumenfeld 2002: 34–49, 53–64).[11] The crime which the hero seeks to avenge lies beyond the reach of the law precisely because authority denies its very existence, casting it into the shameful "oblivion" which Piero reserves for his victim.

When Claudius cynically erases the memory of "our dear brother's death" by appealing to the more pressing need for "remembrance of ourselves" (*Hamlet*, 1.2.1–7), the subtext of his smooth oration is a contemptuous reproof to his nephew, whose defiant exhibition of mourning constitutes a wordless insistence on the claims of the past. But, as the anguish of Hamlet's ensuing soliloquy ("Must I remember," 147) immediately demonstrates, this lonely commitment to the preservation of memory constitutes an almost intolerable burden. To insist upon it in the teeth of the bland oblivion to which his whole society subscribes is to appear mad. Moreover, it has the potential to destroy him: the revenger's virtuous desire to rejoint the *membra disjecta* of the violated past – even to making it live again through the conduct of a plot that, like Hieronimo's "Soliman and Perseda," Hamlet's "Murder of Gonzago," or Vindice's puppet play, replicates the original scene of murder – is proof of his integrity; but it is also the source of his corruption. This was what Bacon had in mind when he wrote of "vindictive persons liv[ing] the life of witches" (Bacon 1906: 14) – being possessed, as it were, by the evil spirit of the past, which must in the end undo them. Although at the level of convention they can be explained away as survivals from Senecan drama, the restless, unappeased ghosts of revenge tragedy are the manifestations of that fearful incubus – representations of a past that refuses to be buried: "The time has been," agonizes Macbeth, haunted by Banquo's ghost, "That when the brains were out, the man would die, / And there an end; but now they rise again" (3.4.77–9).

In Kyd's "endless tragedy," the Ghost of Andrea might be read as a figure of historical destiny, representing the way in which the dead hand of the past exercises a grip on the present of which its denizens are not even conscious. But more typically it is the tormented imagination of the living that summons these specters of history: so in *Antonio's Revenge*, as Antonio vows his nightly ritual of mourning, his father's spirit rises from his tomb to command vengeance: "Thy pangs of anguish rip my cerecloth up; / And lo, the ghost of old Andrugio / Forsakes his coffin. Antonio, revenge!" (3.1.32–4). In *Hamlet*, when the "canonized bones" of the dead king, "hearsed in death," similarly "burst their cerements," it is to the mourning Prince alone that the

Ghost reveals its meaning – though (like some shadow of a forgotten past) it troubles the minds of his fellow-watchers on the battlements. Unlike Andrugio's ghost, or its own more primitive predecessor in Shakespeare's putative source, the lost Ur-*Hamlet*, however, this Ghost seems less pressingly concerned with revenge than with remembrance itself. Where the Ur-*Hamlet* ghost was notorious for its shriek of "Hamlet, revenge!," this Ghost is notable for its preoccupation with the story of its silenced past and for the plangently yearning "Remember me" (1.5.98), which Hamlet makes his watchword:

> Remember thee?
> Ay, thou poor ghost, whiles memory holds a seat
> In this distracted globe. Remember thee?
> Yea, from the table of my memory
> I'll wipe away all trivial fond records
>
> *　*　*　*　*　*
>
> Now to my word.
> It is "adieu, adieu, remember me."
> (1.5.102–18)

When the Ghost reappears in the closet scene to whet Hamlet's "almost blunted purpose," it does so with stern reproof: "Do not forget" (3.4.126). However, this shift from the rhetoric of revenge to that of remembrance does not, in the end, signal any abatement in the violence of the narrative: despite his intellectual disposition and propensity for melancholy introspection, the Hamlet who longs to "drink hot blood" (3.2.423), who refrains from assassinating Claudius only because he seeks to extend his revenge beyond the grave (3.3.92–100), who stabs Polonius to death with no more compunction than if he had killed a rat (3.4), and who takes a gloating satisfaction in tricking his old schoolfellows, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, into carrying their own death warrant, proves to be no less ruthless than other revenge heroes. Rather, the difference is one that enables Shakespeare to shift the ethical attention of the play from debate over the morality of private retribution, to an extended meditation on the ambiguous function of memory in the mythos of revenge.

The result is that *Hamlet* focuses to an unprecedented degree upon the inner life of a revenger who, condemned to sweat under the burden of memory in a world of "bestial oblivion," finds himself tormented by the disparity between the truth of the past and the lying version propagated by official history. If the Ghost is Hamlet's "cherub" of remembrance (4.3.58), then the King is a spirit of oblivion; and to Hamlet, not only Gertrude with her scandalously hasty remarriage, but Polonius, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and even Ophelia ("I have remembrances of yours, / That I have longèd long to redeliver", 3.1.102–3) are pliant accessories in Claudius' conspiracy to deny the past. Hamlet's obsession with remembering (1.2.96) – dismissed by Claudius, with a contemptuous quibble, as "obsequious sorrow" (1.2.96) – commits the Prince

(who represents the future of a past that Claudius has "cut off") to "follow" the Ghost in an enactment of due sequence that answers the claims of memory, consequence, and succession (1.4.70, 76, 87, 96). What he inevitably discovers, however, is that such a commitment to the rejointing of time also embroils him in an all-too-familiar kind of plot, one which, because its only imaginable end is death, threatens the radical undoing of self represented by the anonymous skulls of the graveyard: "Imperious Caesar, dead and turned to clay, / Might stop a hole to keep the wind away" (5.1.220–1).

Hamlet escapes the net of Claudius's narrative, only to become entangled in that of the Ghost. If it is true that those haunted by the wrongs of the past "live the life of witches," then it is with good cause that Horatio fears that the Ghost may draw Hamlet into insanity, despair, or suicide (1.4.77–86). The Prince himself suspects that "the spirit that I have seen / May be a devil" (2.2.627–8), and there is an uncanny congruence in the way its tale of poison-through-the-ear itself acts like a kind of "leprous distilment" poured in Hamlet's own ear and then coursing "through / The natural gates and alleys of the body" (1.5.71–4), before breaking out in the canker of revenge. Thus the Ghost appears to contain in itself the contradictions by which the revenger is typically destroyed: on the one hand, as the embodiment of the obliterated past, an uncanny return of the repressed, it represents the indestructible power of memory to contest the dispensations of tyrannous usurpation; on the other, as it takes possession of Hamlet's mind, it too becomes a kind of usurper, not only (in Horatio's resonant metaphor) "usurping" both the night and the "fair and warlike form" of the dead King (1.1.54–7), but acting upon Hamlet like the poison that "usurps" the "wholesome" life of the Player King (3.2.286).

Hamlet's ambiguous feelings about the role to which he is committed by the Ghost's narrative and his own vow of remembrance are revealed in his anxious "scourge and minister" speech, with its sense that the killing of Polonius amounts to a punishment that is fated to rebound upon himself (3.4.194–6). This deep ambivalence is what underlies the inability to match actions to words or thoughts to ends, which becomes a recurrent theme of his self-tormenting soliloquies; and it helps to explain the curiously indecisive use to which he puts the play-within-the-play in the Murder of Gonzago, where (in contrast to the perfect concatenation of memorial and vengeance in Hieronimo's or Vindice's theatrical performances) the reenactment of Claudius's crime serves a purely diagnostic function. Thus Hamlet's play, like the fantasy of blood-revenge in the Player's Hecuba speech, is reduced to a mere "fiction, [or] a dream of passion" (2.2.579). Yet (as critics have often observed) the metatheatrical satisfactions so frustratingly deferred by the abortive "Mousetrap" are brought to a kind of consummation in the self-consciously theatrical "play" of Hamlet's exhibition bout with Laertes – another scene of pretended violence that becomes the real thing, and that concludes in a properly ironic compacting of past and present, as the Prince forces his uncle to drink the poisonous instrument of his own treachery. One reason for the extreme importance which the revenger attaches to symmetrical schemes of "balance" and "proportion" is that, by producing a kind of

reversed reenactment of the past crime, they magically cancel out its power to hurt. In this case, however, the accomplishment of revenge is shorn of the triumphant swagger with which the traditional revenger invited the simultaneous admiration and horrified recoil of the audience; for, unlike the ingenious Machiavellian designs of a Hieronimo or a Vindice, the plot worked out here is conspicuously not of the hero's own composition. Instead, as Hamlet's fatalistic surrender to the shaping hand of "providence" emphasizes, it is as though he had now become the merely passive instrument of memory, abandoning himself to a "special providence" whose script is barely distinguishable from those hoary old revenge dramas that his temperament seemed most inclined to resist. Like the revengers described by Laura Blumenfeld who "try to rewrite history by reliving it," Hamlet "get[s] stuck inside a story" (Blumenfeld 2002: 45).

It is not perhaps surprising that, after the probing inquisition to which *Hamlet* subjected the conventions of revenge tragedy, dramatists like Chettle, Marston, and Middleton should have approached the genre in a style increasingly inflected by ironic burlesque and satiric exaggeration; or that Chapman in *The Revenge of Bussy D'Ambois* (ca. 1610) and Tourneur in *The Atheist's Tragedy* (ca. 1609), should have turned the genre on its head by crafting what Katharine Maus has called "anti-revenge plays" (Maus 1995: xxiii). But possibly the most interesting response to Hamlet's agonizing over the ambiguous seductions of memory and revenge was provided by Shakespeare himself in his last independently written work; for *The Tempest* is a drama that artfully converts the conventions of revenge tragedy to the benevolent ends of tragicomic romance (Neill 1983: 45–9; Kerrigan 1996: 211–16). Here once again, in a play whose patterns of conspiracy and betrayal, possession and dispossession, shipwreck and rescue, suggest a past constantly reimposing itself upon the present, the words "remember," "remembrance," and "memory" are repeated with almost incantatory insistence. *The Tempest* is dominated, however, by a reformed revenger, for whom "the rarer action is / In virtue than in vengeance" (5.1.27–8) – one whose talisman is a living daughter rather than the revenger's deathly memento, and whose very name suggests hope for the future (*Pro-spero*) rather than obsession with the past. The protagonist, like Hamlet, is a "minister" of remembrance whose mission is to those, like his usurping brother, Antonio, and King Alonso, who have "made . . . sinner[s] of [their] memory" (1.2.101); but, although Prospero's patience must struggle to contain his fury, in his scheme of renewal compassion will supplant passion, and repentance displace revenge. "That which is past is gone, and irrevocable," Bacon wrote at the end of his essay on revenge, "and wise men have enough to do, with things present and to come; therefore they do but trifle with themselves, that labor in past matters" (1906: 14). *The Tempest* does not dismiss the "labor" of remembering quite so lightly: at the beginning of the play Prospero (like Hamlet, weighed down by the "fardels" of agonized recollection) continues to groan under the "burden" of his past (1.2 156); but (as if in extended meditation upon John Donne's luminous aphorism that "the art of *salvation*, is but the art of *memory*" – Donne 1952ff.: 2, 73) this play imagines a process by which human beings, through a full remembrance

of their past errors, can free themselves from the cycle of revenge – allowing them to move through a series of unburdenings (both literal and metaphorical) toward the blessed oblivion envisaged by a forgiving Prospero: " Let us not burden our remembrance with / A heaviness that's gone" (5.1.199–200).

Notes

1. On revenge as a function of honour societies, see Visser (2002: 43–5).
2. Thanks to the work of David Lake and Mac Jackson, this play, formerly attributed to Cyril Tourneur, is now widely regarded as an early work by Thomas Middleton – for a summary of the arguments see R.A. Foakes's introduction to his edition of the play (Anon.: 1996).
3. Hobsbawm (1972: 29, 35–6).
4. All citations from *The Revenger's Tragedy* are to Brian Gibbons' New Mermaid edition (Anon.: 2000).
5. Recent work by Mac Jackson, Brian Boyd, and Brian Vickers makes it clear that *Titus* was the result of collaboration with George Peele, who seems to have written at least the first act; but Shakespeare was clearly the principal partner in this enterprise, and it seems reasonable to grant him responsibility for the overall design. The authorship arguments are extensively rehearsed in Vickers (2002: 148–243).
6. The stage direction in the First Quarto (1603), which, despite its notorious textual deficiencies, is a mine of information about original stage practice, indicates that Player King "sits down in an Arbor" before his murder.
7. The 1602 quarto of *The Spanish Tragedy* contains five significant additional passages by an unknown hand. The case for Ben Jonson's authorship is powerfully stated by Anne Barton (Barton 1984: 13–28).
8. On the hand as a primary vehicle of meaning in early modern culture and its significance in *Titus Andronicus*, see Neill (2000).
9. George Vertue's engraving of the memorial is reproduced in Frye (1984: figs. 11.3–11.5).
10. The paradox is perhaps already implicit in the *koros* of revenge as understood by the Greeks: this could mean either "satiety" (sufficiency) or the excess that produced *ate* (disorder, confusion) – Visser (2002: 59).
11. On the importance of memory in revenge drama in general and *Hamlet* in particular, see Kerrigan (1996: ch. 7) and Neill (1983: passim; 1997: chs. 7–8, and in n. 11.

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