

**69. Revenge as a Mirror of Corruption in Shakespearean Drama<sup>1</sup>****Sibel İZMİR<sup>2</sup>****APA:** İzmir, S. (2023). Revenge as a Mirror of Corruption in Shakespearean Drama. *RumeliDE Dil ve Edebiyat Araştırmaları Dergisi*, (37), 1120-1130. DOI: 10.29000/rumelide.1405826.**Abstract**

Speaking in general terms, a revenge play is a genre of Elizabethan and Jacobean drama in which the protagonist is seen to seek revenge since, sometimes imaginatively, sometimes in reality, he has been exposed to injustice and/or injury and wronged. The approach to the notion of revenge was dualistic in early modern culture. Revenge was something accepted and approved in the feudal world. However, in the early modern period, it was solely God who had the responsibility of taking revenge. Plays which ended with the accomplishment of the avenger are indicative of the fact that feudal codes were more powerful than the Christian ones. However, the Christian notion of revenge in which God might be the only avenger was actually praised since it was believed that the sovereign represented God. Thus, early modern revenge plays, especially revenge tragedies, reflected this twofold consideration on the subject. Undoubtedly, Shakespeare was among those dramatists of the Renaissance period who illustrated his time's ambivalent treatment of the notion of revenge. This study proposes a reading of Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, *Julius Caesar* and *Hamlet* focussing on the notion of revenge to demonstrate that Shakespeare embedded revenge in his plays to mirror or even emphasize social/political corruption and inequity. Thus, the paper contends that Shakespeare's depiction of revenge becomes a solid metaphor to dramatize justice and the judicial system in the selected plays.

**Keywords:** Shakespeare, revenge, corruption, justice

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## Shakespeare Oyunlarında Yozlaşmanın Aynası: İntikam<sup>3</sup>

### Öz

Genel anlamda intikam oyunu, kahramanın bazen hayali olarak, bazen gerçekte adaletsizliğe ve/veya hasara maruz kaldığı ve haksızlığa uğradığı için intikam peşinde koştuğu Kraliçe Elizabeth ve Kral James dönemi dramasının bir türüdür. Erken modern kültürde intikam kavramına yaklaşım çelişkiler içerirdi. İntikam feodal dünyada kabul edilen ve onaylanan bir şeydi. Ancak erken modern dönemde intikam alma sorumluluğu yalnızca Tanrı'ya aitti. İntikamcının başarısıyla sonuçlanan oyunlar, feodal kuralların Hıristiyanlığın içerdiği değerlerden daha güçlü olduğunun göstergesidir. Hıristiyanlıkta tek intikamcının Tanrı olabileceği şeklindeki intikam anlayışı, hükümdarın Tanrı'yı temsil ettiğine inanıldığı için aslında övülmüştür. Dolayısıyla erken modern dönem intikam oyunları, özellikle de intikam trajedileri konuya ilişkin bu ikili düşünceyi yansıtıyordu. Şüphesiz Shakespeare, Rönesans döneminin intikam kavramına karşı kendi zamanının kararsız yaklaşımını örnekleyen oyun yazarları arasındaydı. Bu çalışma, Shakespeare'de intikam kavramına odaklanarak yazarın *Venedik Taciri*, *Julius Caesar* ve *Hamlet* adlı oyunlarında intikam temasını sosyal/siyasi yozlaşma ve eşitsizliği yansıtmak ve hatta vurgulamak için kullandığını göstermektedir. Bu nedenle makale, Shakespeare'in intikam tasvirinin seçilen oyunlarda adaleti ve yargı sistemini resmetmek için sağlam bir metafor haline dönüştüğünü ileri sürmektedir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Shakespeare, intikam, yozlaşma, adalet

### Introduction

Speaking in general terms, a revenge play is a genre of Elizabethan and Jacobean drama in which the protagonist is seen to seek revenge since, sometimes imaginatively, sometimes in reality, he has been exposed to injustice and/or injury and wronged. In *The Wordsworth Dictionary of Shakespeare*, it is stated that "A revenge play is a drama of retribution in which an evil is avenged-and often the vengeance itself repaid-in a series of bloody and horrible deeds" (Boyce, 1996, p. 534). Revenge plays were extremely popular, especially during the Renaissance. In a revenge play, murders and physical mutilations, insanity (or feigned insanity) and supernatural visitations coloured by extravagant imagery and bold rhetoric are to be found. Thomas Kyd, with his *The Spanish Tragedy*, paved the way for English playwrights to develop the genre, which was originally rooted in the works of the well-known Roman dramatist, Seneca (Boyce, 1996, p. 534).

One of the crucial points in the concept of revenge plays is that in Elizabethan and Jacobean times, there was no such definition or genre and that the term is a modern one which emerged at the turn of the twentieth century, first used by A. H. Thorndike, and then defined at length by Fredson Bowers (Broude, 1975, p. 38). Culturally speaking, the approach to the notion of revenge was dualistic in early modern culture. Revenge was something accepted and approved in the feudal world. However, in the early

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modern period, it was solely God who had the responsibility of taking revenge. The dualistic approach to the idea of revenge in the early modern era stems from the fact that the feudal and Renaissance codes on revenge were in opposition with each other. Plays which ended with the accomplishment of the avenger are indicative of the fact that feudal codes were still effective. However, the Christian notion of revenge in which God might be the only avenger was actually praised since it was believed that the sovereign represented God. Thus, early modern revenge plays, especially revenge tragedies, reflected this twofold consideration on the subject. Katharine Eisaman Maus in the "Introduction" to *Four Revenge Tragedies* states that most of the time "the deficiencies of the world presented in the play antedate the action we see on stage. Indeed the defectiveness of the status quo is virtually a precondition of the genre" (1995, p. ix). Revenge generally occurs after a crime has been committed and has remained unpunished. Therefore, the playwrights' concentration on revenge during the early modern era is caused by a general interest in the social and ethical issue of attaining justice. In other words, as Derek Dunne in *Shakespeare, Revenge Tragedy, and Early Modern Law* argues, many revenge plays are abundant with "the crisis of justice" which is a reflection of "a concurrent crisis in the legal system of early modern England" (Dunne, 2016, p.2). Revenge plays of the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods reflect and question the jarring social environment of late sixteenth and early seventeenth-century England. The feudal system promoted a social order depending upon "a traditional network of obligations and privileges..." (Maus, 1995, p. xi). Thus, the new system required a transformation of that network. As in all transitional periods, the transformation could not be rapid; the old existed side by side with the new. For example, the feudal chain of beings was still in effect in early modern culture and made everyone "humble himself before someone else" (Maus, 1995, p. xii). Hence, a bond between the dominant and the submissive was required.

One of the most influential philosophers contemplating the notion of revenge is Francis Bacon (1561-1626), a contemporary of Shakespeare, who sees revenge as: "a kind of wild justice, which the more man's nature runs to, the more ought law to weed it out. For as for the first wrong, it doth but offend the law; but the revenge of that wrong putteth the law out of office" (1998, p. 12). In "Of Revenge", Bacon puts special emphasis on the concepts of justice and law as for him revenge appears in their absence. Although as a humanist he does not approve of revenge thoroughly, he indicates an exception: "The most tolerable sort of revenge is for those wrongs which there is no law to remedy; but then let a man take heed, the revenge be such as there is no law to punish [...]" (Bacon, 1998, p. 12). In other words, revenge and retaliation caused by lawlessness were at least culturally acceptable. From this socio-cultural vantage, it can be seen that reverberations of revenge in Shakespeare's theatre were mostly picturing "wrongs which there is no law to remedy" (Bacon, 1998, p. 12).

Undoubtedly, from *Titus Andronicus* to *Othello*, from *King Lear* to *The Tempest*, the theme of revenge is embedded in Shakespeare's drama. He was among those dramatists of the Renaissance period who illustrated his time's ambivalent treatment of the notion of revenge. This study proposes a reading of Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, *Julius Caesar* and *Hamlet* focussing on the notion of revenge to demonstrate that Shakespeare embedded various representations of revenge in his plays to mirror or even emphasize social/political corruption and inequity. Thus, the paper contends that Shakespeare's depiction of revenge becomes a solid metaphor to dramatize justice and the judicial system in *The Merchant of Venice*, *Julius Caesar* and *Hamlet*.

### **A comedy filled with revenge: *The Merchant of Venice***

Labelled as one of the major comedies, *The Merchant of Venice* is a play which problematizes the issue of anti-Semitism and hence some critics label it as a problem play or problem comedy. The issue of anti-Semitism as most of the critics refer to and discuss can be said to be what urges, the avenger of the play,

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Shylock to take revenge on Antonio. As Marjorie Garber points out, historical, political, literary, and theatrical components in *The Merchant of Venice* caused a great deal of uneasiness in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. This anxiety revolves around the depiction of Jews and Christians in the play, as well as the exploration of sexuality and gender. Originally a comedic portrayal with a Shylock character wearing a false nose, the play has evolved over time, particularly after the Holocaust, into a poignant tale of sorrow, loss, and mutual misunderstanding. Consequently, Shylock often appears as a sad and tragic character in the middle of a romantic comedy (Garber, 2004, p. 282). Therefore, the character who makes *The Merchant of Venice* something other than a comedy for the modern audience is undoubtedly Shylock. The figure of Shylock rouses deep emotions in the audience:

not only because his plight seems in some ways to mirror that of Jews in Europe from Shakespeare's time to the present, but also because of the desire on the part of many readers, editors, and actors to protect Shakespeare against the accusation of anti-Semitism. The term is anachronistic for Shakespeare's time (it was coined at the end of the nineteenth century; before that one might speak of anti-Judaic feeling), but the prejudice to which it gives a name is not (Garber, 2004, p. 296).

As Linda Anderson points out in *A Kind of Wild Justice. Revenge in Shakespeare's Comedies*, retribution is a frequent topic and plot technique in romantic comedies. These plays often centre on a character that is unique compared to the other characters, and by their acts, the other characters unite against them. Even if there may occasionally be an attempt at reconciliation with the victim of the retaliation, the primary goal is to hold the offender accountable and punish them appropriately. This entails exposing their transgressions or folly to both themselves and society in an effort to persuade them to alter their conduct (Anderson, 1987, p. 57). It is also noteworthy to point out that in his comedies, Shakespeare does not condemn revenge especially if it is used to "correct the behaviour of a social offender, he [Shakespeare] advocates it as a method of obtaining justice through humour" (Anderson, 1987, p. 57).

In the play, we see that Shylock is a Jewish usurer. However, we are more made to see him as a revenger because "his behaviour is entirely that of a committed revenger. There are other Jews, and presumably other usurers, in Venice, but Shylock is Shylock because he seeks revenge" (Anderson, 1987, p. 59). However, unlike most revengers, Shylock does not have solely one or two reasons for revenge; his hatred for Antonio is caused by any reason. In his first soliloquy, he states two reasons for his hatred, religious and economic:

I hate him for he is a Christian,  
But more for that in low simplicity  
He lends out money gratis and brings down  
The rate of usance here with us in Venice.  
If I can catch him once upon the hip,  
I will feed fat the ancient grudge I bear him.  
He hates our sacred nation, and he rails,  
Even there where merchants most do congregate,  
On me, my bargains and my well-won thrift,  
Which he calls interest. Cursed be my tribe,  
If I forgive him! (I, iii, 42-52)

At this point in the play, many critics agree that Shylock is justified in his hatred toward Antonio. This motive is especially emphasized since even during his pursuit of a loan, Antonio is not apologetic about his insult. As Anderson states, it is impossible to disagree that Antonio might be perceived as a bully and

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that Shylock has a legitimate justification for his outrage, even though Jews and usurers were despised throughout the Elizabethan era. However, Shylock, who we are aware feels animosity towards Antonio (and even wishes to exact revenge), acts not as a furious Jew or offended moneylender but rather as a cunning and scheming avenger. Antonio, while unpleasant in this setting, is at least honest (Anderson, 1987, pp. 59-60). Shylock makes a list of his reasons for enforcing his bond and reflects his spirit as a revenger, which is indeed influential:

To bait fish withal: if it will feed nothing else, it will feed my revenge. He hath disgraced me, and hindered me half a million; laughed at my losses, mocked at my gains, scorned my nation, thwarted my bargains, cooled my friends, heated mine enemies; and what's his reason? I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes? hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer, as a Christian is? If you prick us, do we not bleed? if you tickle us, do we not laugh? if you poison us, do we not die? and if you wrong us, shall we not revenge? If we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in that. If a Jew wrong a Christian, what is his humility? Revenge. If a Christian wrong a Jew, what should his sufferance be by Christian example? Why, revenge. The villainy you teach me, I will execute, and it shall go hard but I will better the instruction (III, i, 51-73).

In this revelation, it seems that Shylock has given up his identity both as a usurer and as a Jew because he does not care about profit and is ready to compromise his ethical values by conforming to “Christian example”. Instead of focusing on his personal agenda, he has become a vigilante seeking revenge. Even Jessica’s flight becomes a motive for Shylock’s revenge against Antonio. Despite his grief and anger over his daughter’s elopement with his “ducats”, “his obsession with his revenge has become so great that not even such losses can long distract him” (Anderson, 1987, p. 61). The extent Shylock’s obsession grows is apparent in the trial scene in which he expresses his hatred of Antonio: “So can I give no reason, nor I will not,/ More than a lodged hate and a certain loathing/ I bear Antonio, that I follow thus/ A losing suit against him. Are you answer'd?” (IV, i, 59-62).

While reading the play, one cannot help asking herself whether Shakespeare did really scorn or dislike Jews or not, who, most probably, did not see or know a Jew. Even if the author was not “anti-Semitic”, did he write an anti-Semitic play? Garber answers this question:

Whatever *The Merchant of Venice* might be said to ‘mean’, or to connote, today, it is not the same thing as what it might have meant or connoted in the last decade of the sixteenth century, in an England ruled by Queen Elizabeth, an England that had officially banished all Jews for the previous three hundred years (2004, p. 296).

It is true that the modern audience, especially non-Christians, find the issue of Jewishness irritating in the play. But, what about the hypocrisy of the Christians presented in the play? Are Salerio and Solanio, who tease Shylock, ideal Christians? And Antonio’s “spitting upon” Shylock’s gabardine? As Garber explains, in this play: “Ambivalence is everywhere, at least to a modern audience” (2004, p. 303). The ambivalence that is sensed concerning Christianity and Jewishness can be said to be related to Shakespeare’s humanism. As a humanist, he would not allow one religion or race to beat or outweigh another. He would not fully make fun of the Jew. The result is the creation of this “different” character of Shylock. It can be said that Shakespeare is both blaming and defending Shylock at the same time. This intentional ambiguity about the character of Shylock is due to Shakespeare’s desire to write a comedy and be a fair judge of humanity. Besides, by making Antonio remain a sad man at the end of the play, Shakespeare is doing justice to Shylock. What is of relevance and utmost importance is the fact that Shakespeare does not allow Shylock to take his revenge; he is not allowed to satisfy his appetite as an avenger not because Shakespeare sided with Christianity but mainly because he, as a humanist, wanted to visualize a world where the Christian ideals are favourable instead of feudal ones and hence justice is maintained not through revenge but through judicial system implicating the power of sovereignty.

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**‘Blood will have blood’: *Julius Caesar***

*Julius Caesar* is another popular play by Shakespeare which revolves around the idea of revenge. There are three lines of revenge that are seen in the play: those associated with Marc Anthony, the Roman populace and Julius Caesar himself. As Harry Keyishian suggests, “Each thread has in common the idea that blood is eloquent and demands vengeance that ‘blood will have blood’” (1995, p. 81). In the play, the idea that the victim’s blood inspires vengeance is vividly reflected in Antony’s thinking about the assassination of Caesar and this motivation makes him persuade the Roman mob to avenge Caesar’s death as the sight of Caesar’s dead body transformed Antony from a naive and inattentive young man to a determined avenger. (Keyishian, 1995, p. 82). Antony’s obsession to take revenge stems from a motive to punish the assassins and to vindicate Caesar and Caesarism. Thus, he becomes able to convince the Roman mob that Caesar’s death is a sort of violation of their most precious values and to regain their psychological health, they must avenge it. (Keyishian, 1995, p. 82). The important point is that whatever the general expectation about retribution is and whatever its specific sources and objects are, it is considered a part of the natural order. Although Shakespeare does not give a compelling portrait of Antony in the moments before the murder, it is clear that Antony has been feeling intimate with Caesar. Antony is picked to stand in for Caesar’s vigour and is thought to have the ability to conceive Calpurnia. He is also given the possibility of hearing Caesar’s private concerns (Keyishian, 1995, pp. 82-83).

It can be understood that Antony’s having been drawn from Caesar’s side just before the assassination and letting down such a great leader fosters his revengeful feelings. In other words, vengeance becomes the means for him to honour Caesar and recover his lost pride. Thus, he cries:

O, pardon me, thou bleeding piece of earth,  
That I am meek and gentle with these butchers!  
Thou art the ruins of the noblest man  
That ever lived in the tide of times.  
Woe to the hand that shed this costly blood! (III, i, 254-258)

Just after killing Caesar, Brutus declares that “Ambition’s debt is paid” (III, i, 84) hoping that no revenge will be taken. Besides, he seems to have acted “as an authorized agent of a legitimate authority, that is, the Roman Republic whose institutions Caesar had, by his ambitions, threatened (Keyishian, 1995, p. 84). Although Brutus confesses that his killing of Caesar appeared “bloody and cruel”, it was actually an act of pity “to the general wrong of Rome”. However, Antony thinks the opposite and he is determined to deny moral authority to Brutus by persuading Rome and its citizens that the assassination was a very cruel slaughter orchestrated by selfish and envious corrupts. The hypocrisy of the conspirators, their pretence that they love Caesar, enrages Antony:

In your bad strokes, Brutus, you give good words:  
Witness the hole you made in Caesar’s heart,  
Crying ‘Long live! hail, Caesar!’  
...  
Villains, you did not so, when your vile daggers  
Hack’d one another in the sides of Caesar:  
You show’d your teeth like apes, and fawn’d like hounds,  
And bow’d like bondmen, kissing Caesar’s feet;  
Whilst damned Casca, like a cur, behind  
Struck Caesar on the neck. O you flatterers! (V, i, 30-31, 41-44)

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Finally, it is apparent that Antony's vengeance is highly satisfying to him because Antony not only damages his rivals but also undermines their cause in the eyes of others. He takes delight in demonstrating off-base those who, like Brutus, belittled him. By outsmarting those who had already outsmarted him, Antony uncovers his sense of pride, similar to that of Caesar. In any case, he moreover brings something particular to the table: a scornful advantage that gets to be clear in his proficient control of the Roman crowd (Keyishian, 1995, p. 84).

The crowd stands as the second "avenger" to be mentioned in the play whose vengeance is complementary with that of Antonio. It seems that from the beginning of the play, Shakespeare gives the Roman mob a particular identity. Just like Antony, they want heroes who they make idols. However, unlike Antony, they are inclined to "forget". For instance, they adore Pompey and assemble to see him pass the streets of Rome. Later on, they are ready to receive Pompey's killer enthusiastically. Still, they do not like being accused of lacking gratitude and feeling.

After Caesar is assassinated, the crowds want an explanation from the conspirators. They hastily accept Brutus' explanations about Caesar's career and his justification for the conspiracy. However, with the same quickness, they change their minds upon the funeral oration of Antony. Thus, Antony becomes able to reverse the situation and make the crowd adore the dead Caesar again. He turns "their mood from triumph to one of victimization" (Keyishian, 1995, p. 86). In his most ironical funeral oration, he is very skilful in making the crowds understand everything:

Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears;  
I come to bury Caesar, not to praise him.

The evil that men do lives after them;  
The good is oft interred with their bones;  
So let it be with Caesar. The noble Brutus  
Hath told you Caesar was ambitious:

...

I speak not to disprove what Brutus spoke,  
But here I am to speak what I do know.  
You all did love him once, not without cause:  
What cause withholds you then, to mourn for him?  
O judgment! thou art fled to brutish beasts,  
And men have lost their reason. Bear with me;  
My heart is in the coffin there with Caesar,  
And I must pause till it come back to me. (III, ii, 78-83, 104-111)

Thus, the crowd decides to take Caesar's revenge and shout: "Revenge! About! Seek! Burn! Fire! Kill! Slay! Let not a traitor live!" (III, ii, 208-209). As for Caesar's revenge, it is doubtless that "with the deaths of Brutus and Cassius, Caesar's revenge is complete; though his body is dead, his spirit has triumphed" (Dorsch qtd in Keyishian, 1995, p. 89). Cassius is aware of the fact that his own death is linked with that of Caesar at his very last moments: "Caesar, thou art revenged, / Even with the sword that kill'd thee" (V, iii, 45-46). The same is true for Brutus: "Caesar, now be still: / I kill'd not thee with half so good a will" (V, v, 50-51).

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Contrary to *The Merchant of Venice*, retribution is attained in this play. Antony takes the revenge of Caesar and though it has been bloody, justice is attained as well. From the perspective of Bacon and Renaissance understanding of revenge, it can be seen that although *Julius Caesar* does not praise the ideas of revenge, vengeance or retaliation, it still corroborates the idea that in the absence of law and justice, revenge is acceptable as opposed to Protestant view which sees God as the only avenger.

### To be or to kill? *Hamlet*

*Hamlet* is the last play to be examined which is often classified as a “revenge tragedy” in terms of its genre. *Hamlet* is different from the two plays examined previously because Hamlet’s “circumstances are more complex and his psychology more deeply explored, his revenge is necessarily more problematic” (Keyishian, 1995, p. 53). In this play, Shakespeare creates a young avenger who is stuck between medieval and Renaissance values and procrastinates the task of revenge which leads to self-doubt and self-blame. In other words, being the “first modern man”, it would not be easy for Hamlet to avenge his father’s death. He is trapped between the feudal codes which promote revenge-taking and early modern codes which see God as the only avenger. Besides, since it is his father’s Ghost who initiates this revenge issue, Hamlet also struggles with discrepancies between his priorities and those of the Ghost. What makes *Hamlet* the greatest play of all times, besides many other explanations, is that the play deals with many paradoxes and is, in itself, a paradox. A. C. Bradley expresses the feelings of anyone who sees the play for the first time: “But why in the world did not Hamlet obey the Ghost at once, and so save seven of those eight lives?” (Bradley, 1978, p. 73). Richard Courtney explains that the hero’s delay is “a common convention of Elizabethan revenge tragedy” (Courtney, 1995, p. 237).

If the Ghost is taken as an authentic spirit of Hamlet’s late father, who was a proud King of great physical strength and courage as well as an excellent King and an ideal husband and father, it is really a humiliating fate for such a man to be disfigured so horribly, “to have his life ended and his wife seduced by a betraying coward who would stoop to the use of poison, the most despised form of murder among Elizabethans” (Keyishian, 1995, p. 54). The Ghost has also political motives for desiring revenge. He is angered because of the contamination of the state by an unworthy usurper:

Now, Hamlet, hear:  
 ’Tis given out that, sleeping in my orchard,  
 A serpent stung me; so the whole ear of Denmark  
 Is by a forged process of my death  
 Rankly abused: but know, thou noble youth,  
 The serpent that did sting thy father’s life  
 Now wears his crown. (I, v, 34-40)

The Ghost feels that he has been a victim of injustice and has been complaining since he suffered a lot. However, it seems not to remember that his avenger is a young scholar still at university and still needs parental permission to travel abroad and can be subjected to humiliating scolding before the court. All these explain many of the tensions Hamlet experiences.

When we first encounter Hamlet, he is suffering from the Ophelia problem. He is an alienated figure, especially from the court. He then reveals the actual reason for his sadness-his disappointment with his mother’s hasty marriage to his uncle. Obviously, Hamlet is more disturbed by this “incestuous marriage” than his father’s unexpected death:

Frailty, thy name is woman!—  
 A little month, or ere those shoes were old

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With which she follow'd my poor father's body,  
 Like Niobe, all tears:--why she, even she—  
 O, God! a beast, that wants discourse of reason,  
 Would have mourn'd longer--married with my uncle,  
 My father's brother, but no more like my father  
 Than I to Hercules: within a month:  
 Ere yet the salt of most unrighteous tears  
 Had left the flushing in her galled eyes,  
 She married. O, most wicked speed, to post  
 With such dexterity to incestuous sheets!  
 It is not nor it cannot come to good:  
 But break, my heart; for I must hold my tongue. (I, ii, 146-159)

Here, his resentment towards his mother's frailty is so great that he projects his mother's sin onto his own being in desire of melting, and he even considers "self-slaughter" (I, ii, 134). In his famous words in "O that this too too sullied flesh would melt" (I, ii, 131), the word "sullied" meaning "tainted" stresses Hamlet's viewing of himself as tainted by his mother's "incestuous" marriage. It is evident from this remark that his mother's indecency and sexual appetite disgust Hamlet so much "that he feels himself corrupted" (Dodsworth, 1985, p. 46).

The more Hamlet becomes certain about Claudius's guilt, the greater his dissatisfaction with himself grows. In his soliloquy "O what a rogue and peasant slave am I" where he compares himself to the actor who skilfully "acts" his pain out, his dissatisfaction with himself is obvious. He blames himself for not taking any action against his uncle, when even a player can show more reaction to pain though it is only a pretence (II, ii, 543-53). Despite his passionate remarks in different scenes where he desires revenge, as in "O from this time forth / My thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth!" (IV, v. 67-8), Hamlet never seems to find the right time to act. And, when he learns that Fortinbras has sacrificed two thousand soldiers for a land as unimportant as an eggshell, in Act V, his self-accusation for remaining passive is at its peak. He asks himself how he could remain silent "with his father killed and mother stained" when Fortinbras willingly sacrificed thousands of his soldiers for his passions (IV, iv, 58-67).

When Hamlet summarizes his reasons for taking revenge, he startles the audience with a new motive: Claudius wrongfully took the crown that rightfully belonged to him. He also expresses another justification for revenge. "Since Claudius represents the fundamental flaws of human nature, original sin itself, hating him is a moral obligation; by rooting him out, we cure ourselves of a deadly ill. This conclusion further clears Hamlet's conscience and removes more barriers to actions" (Keyishian, 1995, p. 66).

Does it not, think'st thee, stand me now upon—  
 He that hath kill'd my king and whored my mother,  
 Popp'd in between the election and my hopes,  
 Thrown out his angle for my proper life,  
 And with such cozenage--is't not perfect conscience,  
 To quit him with this arm? and is't not to be damn'd,  
 To let this canker of our nature come  
 In further evil? (V, ii, 63-70)

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It is also worth mentioning that Hamlet's first attempt to kill Claudius by sword is not for his father but for himself. "Hamlet stabs Claudius for himself, but poisons him for his father" (Calderwood qtd in Keyishian, 1995, p. 66). When his revenge is completed he wants everybody to be informed and assigns Horatio, the only person whom he has trusted throughout the entire play, to tell his story: "O good Horatio, what a wounded name,/ Things standing thus unknown, shall live behind me!/ If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart/ Absent thee from felicity awhile,/ And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain,/ To tell my story" (V, ii, 342-348). Hence, Hamlet gives the task of telling his story to Horatio not for the sake of being remembered but out of a desire to consign to posterity the value of justice. Whether the play negates or approves the phenomenon of revenge may have varied interpretations as, in the end, Hamlet achieves to kill Claudius because he has no other option. However, as Kiernan Ryan indicates, "taking revenge could never settle the matter for Hamlet, because the root cause of his quandary lies deeper than his uncle's villainy". Because "The time is out of joint", there's no way he could 'set it right' (1.5.188-89)" (2016) and obviously killing Claudius "who's merely a product of the barbaric era in which Hamlet finds himself stranded" (Ryan, 2016) would never ease the soul of Hamlet and make him feel that he achieved his task of revenge.

### Conclusion

As it has been discussed, Shakespeare's treatment of the concept of revenge and retribution may change from one play to another. In *The Merchant of Venice*, the avenger/Shylock fails since his motives are purely religious. Although Shakespeare allows Shylock to justify himself for the hatred he bears against Christians, he cannot forgive his character because of his manipulations, opportunistic and expedient attitudes in the court scene. In *Julius Caesar*, Caesar's revenge is taken since the play is set in ancient Rome and hence there is no Christian God. In *Hamlet*, the playwright creates an avenger who cannot act due to the fact that he is stuck between feudal and humanistic values. Although he seems to succeed in the end, he is rather pushed to take his revenge as an outcome of the intrigues orchestrated by Claudius. Thus, it would not be wrong to claim that Shakespeare reflects almost all the traits of a revenge play in the Renaissance convention and once again creates such "avengers" that the revenge tradition goes one step further in its development. He achieves this by highlighting the justice-corruption dichotomy. As this study suggests, he uses retribution in his plays to replicate, mirror or even emphasise social/political corruption and unfairness.

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