Hamlet and the Complications of Revenge (emagplus)

Kate Baty suggests that reading Hamletalongside contemporary revenge tragedies, foregrounds the radical and challenging nature of Shakespeare's play.

At first sight, it might seem relatively straightforward to place Hamletinto the category of Elizabethan revenge tragedy. After all, it was written at the height of the genre's popularity and features many of the conventions that a contemporary audience would expect: a noble protagonist, a ghost spurring on revenge, metatheatricality, madness and a bloody finale. However, Hamlet'scontribution to the genre can be seen as much more complex and problematic that that of its predecessors. In Hamlet, revenge is less of a spectacle for audience consumption and more of a philosophical debate: is revenge a justified and fitting resolution? Hamletturns this into a question for dramatic exploration, rather than treating it as a given.

As 21st-century students of Shakespeare, it is too easy to retrospectively apply our own morals and sensibilities to a play that was written over 400 years ago and for a very different audience. However, even for a contemporary spectator, it must have been clear that Shakespeare was complicating the notion of revenge. Prior to Hamlet, revenge tragedy in the style of Thomas Kyd's influential The Spanish Tragedy (estimated to predate Hamlet by about 15 years) was the norm. Although Hamletand The Spanish Tragedyhave many similarities, not least the dramatic structure of a delayed revenge and the use of a play-within-a-play, it would be evident to a contemporary audience that Shakespeare's tragedy features a more complex

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protagonist than Kyd's Hieronimo.

'My thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth!'

Although the word 'psychology' was not in use before the 1650s, Hamlet's soliloquised ponderings on mortality, morality and misgivings about revenge reveal an internal life that suggests that revenge is not as simple as the Old Testament idea of 'an eye for an eye'. Indeed, Hamlet's late call to arms, 'My thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth!', seems insubstantial and a disservice to the deep thinking that has gone before.

Further complicating the idea of revenge is the presence of a 'smiling, damned villain' whose gracious appearance belies a guilty conscience; in granting Claudius his own soliloquy, Shakespeare allows the audience to empathise with the figure who recognises his 'offence is rank' but cannot atone for his sins without surrendering his crown and Queen. This humanising of Claudius as more than a simple 'villain' again makes the play's resolution a little less comfortable. Indeed, the structure of the play suggests that the philosophy of revenge is more of interest to Shakespeare than the final resolution; the action only really begins with the accidental killing of Polonius in Act 3, Scene 4. In comparison to what has gone before, the fulfilment of the revenge plot is almost incidental, the action taking up a tiny proportion of the lengthy running time of the play.

'O, cursèd spite/That ever I was born to set it right!'

Unusually, in HamletShakespeare gives the audience not just one but four different models of avenger, all of whom could, in their own way, be seen as deeply flawed. The four parallel characters are all seeking to avenge the deaths of their fathers, but none follow a path of revenge that is left unquestioned.

From the moment that Hamlet is given the task of avenging his father's murder, he is portrayed as less than enthusiastic about the prospect, bemoaning 'cursèd spite'. Much has been written on Hamlet's inability to exact revenge on Claudius. His prevarication sustains the play from the point that he learns of his father's murder in Act 1, Scene 5 right up to the play's climax in Act 5, Scene 2. However, his limitations as a suitable avenger are also evident when he does begin to act rather than just think; the killing of Polonius, which can be interpreted as the point of no return that seals Hamlet's fate, is a farcical accident, rather than an heroic act of revenge. The extent to which he can be considered truly mad at this point is also troublesome. Shakespeare, in presenting a menacing Hamlet who 'could [...] drink hot blood', may be suggesting that revenge is far from a justifiable ending as it has the power to corrupt even those with a previously 'noble mind'. Hamlet's instability calls into question the idea that a noble act of revenge by him is possible.

Fortinbras, Hamlet, Laertes and Pyrrhus

In direct opposition to Hamlet's inability to avenge his father's death, Fortinbras is a character who does decisively take action. He is presented as being 'young' and 'of unimprovèd mettle, hot and full', with the implication

that he is impulsive and inexperienced. Thwarted in his plan to attack Denmark, he indiscriminately shifts his focus to Poland and is overly concerned with military honour, prepared to take an army to war over a piece of land '[w]hich is not tomb enough and continent/To hide the slain'. Although it is this latter action that gives Hamlet resolve to act, Shakespeare does not suggest that Fortinbras' deeds are without their own problems, being ultimately self-destructive like 'th'imposthume of much wealth and peace' that kills like a burst abscess in a body. Again, revenge has the power to corrupt.

In between the two extremes of Hamlet (inaction) and Fortinbras (action), Shakespeare presents the character of Laertes. He is prepared to act, but there are deep moral issues with his vow to 'cut [Hamlet's] throat i'th'church'. Again, revenge proves a problematic concept in that Laertes, blinded by grief, chooses the dishonourable solution of bringing poison to a sword fight, as well as allowing himself to be manipulated by Claudius. Laertes' revenge can be seen as unsatisfactory given that, ultimately, he is little more than a tool used to achieve Claudius' own ends.

A fourth and final unsound model of avenger is given to us by the players in Act 3. Pyrrhus, an active avenger like Fortinbras, is shown by Shakespeare to be another undesirable role model for Hamlet. From his sinister appearance, clad in black armour and 'tricked/With blood of fathers, daughters, mothers, sons', he is without remorse and preys on Priam; with Priam portrayed as 'unequal' and 'unnerved' with his 'milky head', our sympathies lie with the old man and not the sociopathic Pyrrhus. Once again, Shakespeare shows us that the morality of revenge is far from uncomplicated.

‘Such a sight as this/Becomes the field, but here shows much amiss’

The ending of a play gives a strong sense of what messages we should take away with us, and it also raises the question of whether the final act, or acts, of revenge have actually solved anything. An audience viewing Hamletwhen it was first performed may have felt that there had been a purging of negative emotions and that order had been restored: the high body count and the arrival of Fortinbras, a man of military standing and action, may have felt like a satisfying resolution in a more bloodthirsty and martial age than our own. The fact that he claims ‘rights of memory’ in Denmark may further comforted Shakespeare’s audience whose belief in the divine right of kings would have shaped their reaction to any contender for the throne.

For a modern audience, however, the context is very different and the ending of the revenge plot is less obviously cathartic and ‘right’. As we have already seen, Fortinbras is a problematic figure, prone to action over thought. Assuming that we have invested emotionally in the character of Hamlet over the hours he has been on stage in front of us, then surely we cannot see his antithesis as the rightful ruler of Denmark, someone who has the emotional and intellectual qualities needed to eradicate the corruption of the ‘rotten’ state. In this light, Fortinbras’ assertion that the final death scene ‘shows much amiss’ can be interpreted ironically as a comment on the future of Denmark; the violence evident in the court is more suited to the (battle) ‘field’, a setting also more befitting Fortinbras himself and certainly not implying a lasting peace for the

country in turmoil. Even the command to '[b]ear Hamlet like a soldier' to a military-style funeral chimes discordantly, especially to a modern audience who have seen Hamlet as a thinker, a philosopher in the Renaissance humanist vein, rather than a fighter.

'Of deaths put on by cunning and forced cause'

InHamlet, Shakespeare suggests that revenge is complicated by moral questions, unachievable without great spiritual cost and not invariably a route towards the restoration of justice and order. Perhaps, however, revenge, while far from being a perfect solution, is also the only possible ending for Hamletfrom the point of view of plot and drama. From the point that the murder of Old Hamlet triggers the intertwined cycles of crime and retribution in the play, the final scene is tragic in its inevitability. Perhaps this is what makes the play a revenge tragedy with a difference; while the plot takes its expected course towards revenge, the rights and wrongs are put under an unusually close and questioning scrutiny.