



The Prototypical Avengers in *The Spanish Tragedy* and *Hamlet*

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Abstract

During the height of the English Renaissance, the revenge tragedies *The Spanish Tragedy* and *Hamlet* were introduced to the English literary canon. In this essay, I will focus on the similarities that the protagonists, Hamlet and Hieronimo, share as prototypical avengers. Although Hamlet's contribution to the genre should not be discredited, I will argue that the similar characterisation of Hieronimo in *The Spanish Tragedy*, portrays the same depth and entitlement to the acclaim as a prototypical avenger as Hamlet. Even though their portrayal may differ in tone, their shared commonality attributes equal complexity to both characters. I will compare and analyse the two plays in order to demonstrate that both characters should be considered prototypical avengers. The essay concludes that a reluctance to revenge and a tendency to contemplate the morality of the action is prominently shared by both prototypical avengers. Although critics generally infer Hieronimo is a less complex character in comparison with Hamlet, this essay will show how both avengers deserve equal credit. This essay illustrates this statement by juxtaposing their equal need to find justification before taking revenge, use of suicide to emphasise their moral dilemma, and comment on the tragic consequences of revenge.

Since the early years of storytelling to its use in our day, revenge has persistently remained an enthralling theme in fiction. During the Elizabethan and Jacobean eras, the genre of the revenge tragedy introduced a significant rendering of its use. Helen Hackett explains that the genre proliferated in Elizabethan England with a new take on revenge that distinguished itself from the classic depiction of the Greco-Roman tragedies of Seneca (79). In addition, the characteristic features that led to the distinction were, for instance, the graphic depiction of mutilation and death, Machiavellian villains, supernatural elements, mad characters, and plays-within-plays (79). However, the central influence of the revenge tragedy genre was the complex characterisation of its avenger character. Naturally, when discussing complex avengers, William Shakespeare's monumental characterisation of his troubled protagonist in the play *Hamlet* (c. 1599-1601) is central. Frank Kermode praises the play as the first truly complex revenge play: "Certainly no play before *Hamlet* could have accommodated so much and so diverse metaphysical and psychological speculation ... *Hamlet* clearly works on a different level from any other play of its kind" (1135). Like Kermode, most critics regard Hamlet's iconic characterisation as a prototype to the later avengers of the revenge genre, and as the first truly developed revenge character. Similarly, Anna Blackwell defines *Hamlet* as "the archetypal period revenge text", where Hamlet's characterisation influences "the most iconic modern-day avatar of revenge" (6). As a result, however, critics fail to acknowledge another significant avenger who deserves equal recognition.

Another influential play of Renaissance England was the founding work of the revenge tragedy genre, *The Spanish Tragedy* (c. 1587), written by Thomas Kyd. Fredson Bowers defines the influence of *The Spanish Tragedy* in the terms of *the Kydian formula*, i.e., a precedent-setting model to the later works of the genre. Following Kyd's formula, the later tragedies either imitated or parodied the same plot elements and stock characters, in addition to conveying that the "fundamental motive for tragic action is revenge" (qtd. in Wetmore 5). However, the critics generally recognise the impact and popularity of the play rather than appreciating the significance of its main protagonist Hieronimo in the same way that they value Hamlet.

William L. Stull, for instance, typically argues that Shakespeare “returned to and perfected the Kydian formula” and although Kyd’s play “set a pattern for playwrights, *The Spanish Tragedy* contained a fatal antinomy that was to become increasingly troublesome” (39). Arguably, critics tend to interpret Hieronimo as a less developed, and less complex character whom Shakespeare later enriched in Hamlet. However, I find that these arguments fail to take into account the multifaceted nature of Hieronimo’s characterisation. Thus, I am more inclined towards T.S. Eliot’s beliefs that *Hamlet* includes “verbal parallels so close to *The Spanish Tragedy* as to leave no doubt that in places Shakespeare was merely *revising* the text of Kyd” (89). Although Hamlet’s contribution to the genre should not be discredited, this essay argues that the similar characterisation of Hieronimo in *The Spanish Tragedy*, portrays the same depth and entitlement to the acclaim as a prototypical avenger as Hamlet, i.e., that there are more similarities than differences between the two characters. Even though their portrayal may differ in tone, their shared commonality attributes equal complexity to both characters. Arguing for the similarities rather than the differences between Hieronimo and Hamlet, I will compare and analyse the two plays in order to demonstrate that both characters should be considered prototypical avengers. I will begin by examining their shared need to seek justification before taking revenge. Secondly, I will show that both characters use the act of suicide to emphasise their battle with the morality of revenge. I will finally demonstrate how both characters inevitably reveal the tragic consequences of revenge for those who pursue it, and not just for the pursued.

Before examining Hamlet and Hieronimo, however, it is useful to provide an example of a less complex kind of avenger: the character of Laertes from *Hamlet*. According to Susanne Wofford, Shakespeare comments on the “revenger of the old-school” in Laertes’s characterisation (20). The old-school avenger originates from the Senecan tragedies, a classical model for the revenge tragedy genre. Henry W. Wells points out that Seneca’s “untheatrical heroes and heroines are commonly engaged either in dialogue with the most colorless of confidants or in the delivery of the longest of soliloquies” (80). Moreover, the Senecan take on

revenge centres on how predisposed anger “overthrows reason” and results in the desire to take revenge (Kaster 6). Robert E. Kaster, for instance, summarises Seneca’s view on revenge with the phrase “I should be revenged, since I’ve been wronged” (8). Thus, in contrast to the more complex avenger, the old-school avenger is overtaken by rage and pursues a linear path to a simple revenge.

Wofford points out that Laertes, as a simple revenger, “is manipulated into becoming the agent of the king’s corrupt schemes” (20), and fulfils Claudius’s plans instead of his own. Not restrained by the Christian doctrine that prohibits personal revenge, Laertes shows no mercy during the climax of the play:

To my revenge, but in terms of honor
I stand aloof, and will no reconcilment
Till by some elder masters of known honor ...
To keep my name ungor’d. (Shakespeare 5.2.228-32).

In its place, Laertes embraces the pagan take on revenge by showing the need to abide to ancient honour codes and salvage his tarnished name, which is a defining aspect of the old-school avenger (Hackett 81). Laertes demonstrates his uninhibited devotion to revenge when he storms into Elsinore and accuses Claudius as being involved in his father’s death (Shakespeare 4.5.115-16). Later, Laertes displays the same kind of brute rage when he encounters Hamlet at Ophelia’s burial. As their dispute intensifies, he attempts to strangle Hamlet: “The devil take thy soul! [*Grappling with him*] / [...] I prithee, take thy fingers from my throat” (Shakespeare 5.1.244-46). The effect of Laertes’s desire corrupts his nature as he submits to his brutish urge to revenge. Thus based on these examples we can conclude that Laertes is lacking the aforementioned key features of the more progressive avenger character.

Among the old-school avenger-characters which critics believe Shakespeare is paralleling in Laertes, Hieronimo is mistakenly included. Critics believe Hieronimo abandons his reluctance and morality like Laertes and lowers himself to his villains’ level by seeking personal revenge (Ratliff 112). The remainder of the essay will illustrate how Hieronimo

diverges from that old-school portrayal in his path to revenge. The first aspect that separates both Hamlet and Hieronimo from the old-school avenger is their need to find justification before taking revenge. The first problem both protagonists of *The Spanish Tragedy* and *Hamlet* face is a crime that has been committed, and they share a continuing pursuit of finding evidence. Neither Hamlet nor Hieronimo directly attempts to kill the people who stand in the way of their revenge. On the contrary, in order to commit the heinous act of revenge, they emulate a private judicial proceeding. In a composed manner, they strive to justify their revenge by acquiring valid evidence. Thus, the importance of this need enhances their characterisations as complex avengers as both characters establish their sense of morality by abiding to justice.

Furthermore, this need for justification is also a valuable feature in terms of their influence as prototypical avengers. Richard Madeleine, for instance, recognises that “in a manner that foreshadows the genre of crime fiction in general, revenge tragedy is popular sensational fiction, to which crime and justice are central” and that the avengers of this era acted as *proto-detectives*, in their search for evidence (9). However, Madeleine mainly attributes this feature to Hamlet alone:

Hamlet’s emphasis on the intrinsic difficulties of detection ... and the consequent imperatives of scepticism and a developed mechanism for testing evidence ... interrogates the Senecan conventions of the revenge genre that raises so centrally the issues of detection and social justice. (1)

However, after discussing Hamlet, this part of the essay will also show how Hieronimo equally exemplifies this prominent feature in the prototypical avenger. The measures Hamlet uses in order to justify his revenge, demonstrate this similarity in *The Spanish Tragedy*. Thus, In order to illustrate this, I will firstly define Hamlet’s course of action and then juxtapose his with Hieronimo’s equal need to achieve justification before taking revenge.

Hamlet’s proto-detective “investigation” concerns the scepticism he feels when the ghost of his dead father implicates Claudius as his murderer. Early in the play, Shakespeare

establishes Hamlet's intellectual standard through his academic career at the University of Wittenberg (Hanson 222). In terms of his need to find justification before taking revenge, the importance of Hamlet's intellectual characterisation plays a vital part as he directs scepticism against his father's appearance. Instead of confronting Claudius, Hamlet needs confirmation, as he remains composed enough to realise the hazards of following a spirit,

The spirit that I have seen
May be the [dev'l], and the [dev'l] hath power
T' assume a pleasing shape, yea, and perhaps,
Out of my weakness and my melancholy,
As he is very potent with such spirits,
Abuses me to damn me. (Shakespeare 3.1.578-83)

With this passage, Hamlet shows that he has come to his senses after previously having pledged his revenge to the Ghost: "Haste me to know 't, that I, with wings as swift / As meditation or the thoughts of love, / May sweep to my revenge" (Shakespeare 1.5.29-31). Thus, the restraint Hamlet shows in his scepticism against the Ghost confirms his need for justification before taking action. In the same soliloquy, Hamlet reveals the method that he will use to refute his scepticism. By defining the reason for his ingenious *Mousetrap* play, "I have heard / That guilty creatures sitting at a play ... / have proclaimed their malefactions" (Shakespeare 3.1.568-72), Hamlet reveals how his need is to be fulfilled. Finally, with his remark regarding how Claudius's reaction will provide more relevant grounds for his revenge, "If a do blench, / I know my course" (Shakespeare 3.1.577-78), Hamlet demonstrates how his need for revenge must be validated by empirical evidence rather than the controversial testimony of devilish spirits.

Similar to Hamlet, Hieronimo also undertakes an investigation in his identical need for justification. Hieronimo similarly receives judiciary evidence that implicates the main offenders in his revenge, Lorenzo and Balthazar. The letter written by Bel-Imperia retells the story of Horatio's murder. However, due to the mystical circumstance of the allegation,

Hieronimo demonstrates a parallel restraint and scepticism against the validity of its content: “What means this unexpected miracle / ... what cause had they Horatio to malign?” (Kyd 3.2.33). Thus, even though his grief is immeasurable, Hieronimo portrays a great sense of restraint: “Hieronimo, beware, thou art betrayed” (Kyd 3.2.38). In addition, instead of throwing himself at Lorenzo and Balthazar’s throats, he encourages himself to remain logical: “And to entrap they life this train [trap] is laid. / Advise thee therefore, be not credulous: / This is devised to endanger thee” (Kyd 3.2.39-41). Similar to Hamlet, Hieronimo adds “And of his death behoves me be revenged: / Then hazard not thy own, Hieronimo” (Kyd 3.2.46-47), which shows that he also realises the hazards of following evidence that might be used to harm him. Hieronimo’s scepticism thereby indicates his need for more relative grounds and restraint before taking his revenge, instead of mindlessly taking violent action. The measure of restraint and scepticism that Kyd places in Hieronimo, despite his urge to revenge, convey his need for justification before taking revenge. The same aspect also adds to Hieronimo’s claim as a proto-detective, attributed to the prototypical avenger. In his subsequent investigation of the crime, Hieronimo systematically examines the evidence that has come to his attention: “I therefore will by circumstances try, / What I can gather to confirm this writ” (Kyd 3.2.49-50). Moreover, as he carries an esteemed title within the law as Knight Marshal, the effect of his characterisation further credits him as a proto-detective character.

Subsequently, Hieronimo fulfils his need for justification by confirming his first piece of evidence in the same way as Hamlet does. Following his investigation, he comes across conclusive evidence in the discovery of Pedringano’s letter to Lorenzo. The result of the second letter provides him with an additional source to the controversial letter from Bel-imperia. With new evidence from yet another source, Hieronimo can no longer disregard the implications against Lorenzo and Balthazar: “Now see I, what I durst not then suspect, / That Bel-imperia’s letter was not feigned” (Kyd 3.7.49-50). Thus, Hieronimo has fulfilled his need to justify his revenge. However, an aspect of great significance after this insight is Hieronimo’s ensuing reaction. Despite all of Hieronimo’s previous outcries for a gory revenge—for

instance, “But wherefore waste I mine unfruitful words / When naught but blood will satisfy my woes?” (Kyd 3.7.67-68)—Hieronimo does not originally attempt to achieve it through personal revenge. Instead, he shows reluctance as he prioritizes legal justice above personal revenge:

I will go plain me to my lord the king,
And cry aloud for justice through the court. [...]
And either purchase justice by entreats,
Or tire them all with my revenging threats. (Kyd 3.7.69-73)

This passage shows that even though he acquires evidence to justify his revenge, his primary instinct is the ethical form of revenge. We thus see how Hieronimo’s characterisation conveys an adherence to justice since he does not see personal revenge as his only option. Accordingly, before finding the second letter, Hieronimo again hints that he prioritises legal justice above personal revenge, as he comments on Pedringano’s sentence:

For blood with blood shall, while I sit as judge,
Be satisfied, and the law discharged.
And though myself cannot receive the like,
Yet will I see that others have their right.
Dispatch, the fault approved and confessed,
And by our law he is condemned to die. (Kyd 3.5.35-41)

The effect of this comment is to show how Hieronimo believes that “the law discharged” has the ability to take a righteous revenge through justice. In addition, the passage carries another significant function, by reducing his rather malicious desire for blood. By explaining that the established laws have power to fulfil his desire for blood, Hieronimo places value in revenge achieved through legal means to satisfy his woes rather than by his own doing.

However, although Hamlet and Hieronimo in the end feel that revenge must follow, both characters show reluctance prior to their revenge. As both characters show signs of understanding the irony in punishing evil with evil, they begin to debate the morality of

revenge. Aware of the Christian attitude towards revenge, they yearn for righteous vengeance. However, by not punishing the ones who murdered their loved ones, their guilt intensifies. As a result, both characters exhibit their second shared quality as prototypical avengers: their moral dilemma. Helen Hackett acknowledges that the inclusion of an avenger character pressured by a moral dilemma became “central to [the] continuing appeal” of the revenge genre since it introduced a more conscientious avenger (81). For that reason, the upcoming part of this essay will illustrate that Hieronimo as well as Hamlet share this trait. The similarity centres on how both Kyd and Shakespeare use the drastic act of suicide to emphasise the despair that their avengers experience while combating the dilemma.

Before examining their contemplation of suicide, however, it is important to discuss the exact nature of their dilemma. In this dilemma, personal revenge battles against the natural and ethical form of revenge. By committing an eye-for-an-eye personal revenge, the avenger would attest to pagan honour codes of humanity’s more bestial and instinctive urges (Hackett 81). The other side of the dilemma, however, defines the revenge ratified by justices of human law or, more importantly, divine justice. According to Robert E. Watson, the Christian notion of revenge implies that only God should act as the ultimate avenger (308). As Paul instructs in Romans 12:19, “Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, ‘vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord’” (*The New Oxford Annotated Bible*). However, this path to revenge requires the necessary strength and restraint to fight against one’s innate bestial urges, which for both Hamlet and Hieronimo proves to be difficult. For this purpose, the effects of envisioning the drastic act of suicide as a remedy to their tormented souls accurately portray and emphasise the suffering that they experience because of their dilemmas with revenge.

Hamlet expresses his contemplation and torn mind in his famous “To be or not to be” soliloquy. The foundation to this soliloquy, however, is to first identify Hamlet’s reluctance to commit evil. Charles Boyce identifies that an important feature in Hamlet’s characterisation is that “as [an] avenger, Hamlet is both opposed to and involved in evil” (137). Thus, the first

instance to establish Hamlet's opposition to the bestial side of the dilemma is evident just after the Ghost implies Claudius as his murderer. Even though he swears to revenge: "Now to my word: / [...] I have sworn't" (Shakespeare 1.5.110-12), Hamlet later condemns his role as an avenger, "O cursed spite, / that ever I was born to set it right" (Shakespeare 1.5.188-89), which reflects his reluctance to punish murder with murder. Even though Hamlet, struck by the passion of the moment accepts his task to revenge, he later exhibits indecision as he realises that revenge is an equally foul deed:

[O vengeance!]

Why, what an ass am I! This is most brave,
That I, the son of a dear [father] murdered,
Prompted to my revenge by heaven and hell,
Must like a whore unpack my heart with words ...

A stallion. Fie upon't, foh! (Shakespeare 3.1.560-66)

This passage explicitly acknowledges the resentment Hamlet has against revenge, in that he has to abandon his opposition to evil in order to fulfil his pledge. Later, Shakespeare again uses the simile where Hamlet compares himself with a male prostitute in order to emphasise further that Hamlet undertakes his revenge unwillingly: "A stallion. Fie upon't, foh!" (Shakespeare 3.1.567).

As Hamlet enters the scene to deliver his "To be or not to be" soliloquy, however, his unwillingness to avenge his father is increasingly weakened by the bestial side of his character. The growing guilt that Hamlet experiences by not honouring his murdered father contradicts his own principles of evil. In this soliloquy, to mirror his now tormented mind, Hamlet exclaims how easy it would be to simply end "The heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks" (Shakespeare 3.1.61) that his revenge causes him. Furthermore, he then signifies that to embrace death would be a sweet release from his burdens: "To die, to sleep. / To sleep, perchance to dream—ay, there's the rub" (Shakespeare 3.1.63-64). Hamlet then further emphasises his torn mind and contemplation by saying "For who would bear the whips and

scorns of time, / Th' oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely, / The pangs of despis'd love, the law's delay" (Shakespeare 3.1.69–71). As Hamlet lists these injustices, he not only stresses the pointlessness of life but also criticises the inefficiency of human justice. In addition, by commenting on the inefficiency of justice, he further stresses why he must take revenge into his own hands, as the difficulty of implicating Claudius, being the head of the nation, renders his justice unobtainable.

Subsequently, Hamlet returns to the same kind of despair that he portrayed in the first act when he states that life is lacking purpose: "How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable / Seem to me all the uses of this world!" (Shakespeare 1.2.133-34). Furthermore, Shakespeare uses the simile where life is an "unweeded garden that grows to seed" (Shakespeare 1.2.135) to emphasise Hamlet's grim perspective on life. The reason for comparing the two instances is to show that Hamlet shows another inhibition to revenge. Even though his purpose should be devoted to revenge, he still finds life as pointless as it was before. By asking *why* we continue to "grunt and sweat under a weary life" (3.1.76), Hamlet adds to the same feeling of a pointless life as he reaches the peak of his contemplation to commit suicide: "When he himself might his quietus make / With a bare bodkin? Who would fardels bear" (Shakespeare 3.1.74-75). Hamlet wonders why anyone would want to face the burdens of life when the ease of death would remove us from our responsibilities. As a result, by celebrating the relieving sensation that suicide would bring, Hamlet emphasises his torn mind, caused by his moral indecision towards revenge.

Hieronimo, although not as vividly as Hamlet, still portrays the same kind of depth when revealing his torn mind. When he finds his murdered son, Horatio hanging from the arbour, he cries out:

See'st thou this handkercher besmeared with blood?
It shall not from me till I take revenge
Seest thou those wounds that yet are bleeding fresh?
I'll entomb them till I have revenged. (Kyd 2.5.51-54)

Thus, similar to Hamlet, Hieronimo pledges himself to revenge. However, whereas Hamlet expresses his opposition to the evil nature of revenge after his pledge, Hieronimo cannot. Kyd uses Hieronimo's trauma as a tool to make us sympathise with his character. Although Hamlet experiences similar grief, he does not originally know that his father was murdered. Thus, the brutality and gore in the murder of Horatio renders Hieronimo's grief understandable in comparison with Hamlet's restraint. Although Hieronimo, for that very reason, does not explicitly condemn his role as avenger, he presents his opposition to the evil side of the dilemma elsewhere. The most apparent characteristic, which Kyd uses to establish Hieronimo's opposition, is seen in his characterisation as Knight Marshal to the Spanish court, an esteemed title that conveys a character adhering to justice. Accordingly, I would argue that his characterisation aligns him with Watson's view that Hieronimo "wanders into a play-world thematically charged with a paradox" (314). Thus, Hieronimo's unwillingness resides in his paradoxical characterisation, and his dilemma with revenge centres on the contradicting morality of revenge set against justice. Despite his esteemed title within the law he cannot obtain the justice he pursues. Consequently, Hieronimo's inaction results in an increasing amount of guilt. Similar to Hamlet, the ensuing guilt increases his urges to honour his murdered son through personal revenge, which thus contradicts his characteristic adherence to justice.

The first indication of Hieronimo's suicidal contemplation and his battle with issues of justice presents itself when he, similar to Hamlet, expresses the pointlessness of life: "Oh life, no life, but lively form of death" (Kyd 3.2.2). In addition, he explicitly emphasises his tormented soul as he further questions where he is to find solace to the injustices that he has been subjected to: "Where shall I run to breathe abroad my woes / ... Yet still tormented is my tortured soul / With broken sighs and restless passions" (Kyd 3.7.1.10-11). Subsequently, in a metaphor where Hieronimo's tormented soul is described as a winged mount "Soliciting for justice and revenge" (Kyd 3.7.13), he expresses his inability to reach the impregnable heavenly justices as they are "placed in those empyreal heights", and fortified by "countermured [...]"

walls of diamond” (Kyd 3.7.15). As a result, the metaphor explains how his tormented soul cannot reach its remedy of justice by neither human nor divine forces. This is an apt metaphor as it further conveys how Hieronimo’s torn mind is the result of his moral dilemma between justice and revenge.

Hieronimo’s contemplation reaches its climax in the thirteenth scene of the same act. Although many consider Hamlet more vibrant when speculating about his act of suicide, Hieronimo is also eloquent in his use of symbols. His torn mind, while battling his dilemma, has led him to this point and he enters the scene with a poniard in one hand and a rope in the other. These symbols represent his dilemma explicitly. The poniard represents taking revenge according to the bestial side of his character. The second symbol, the rope, however, carries a significant ultimatum in relation to the moral and legal side of his character. Although he would be choosing the more ethical form of revenge by not using the poniard to kill, it would create a scenario in which he would hang himself to escape it. Hieronimo’s ultimatum hints at his attitude towards a society lacking justice, as he would not want to partake in such a world. Subsequently, similar to Hamlet, Hieronimo chooses not to commit suicide:

Turn down this path, thou shalt be with him straight,

Or this, and then thou need’st not take thy breath.

This way or that way? soft and faire, not so:

For, if I hang or kill myself, lets know

Who will revenge Horatio’s murder then?

No, no, fie, no! Pardon me: I’ll none of that: (Kyd 3.12.14-19)

The indecisiveness of this monologue ends with him opting for action. By expressing his final decision to pursue his revenge, he portrays the inescapability of his unjust situation. In addition, his indecisiveness also presents the very centre of a tragedy, by displaying the futility in any action, i.e., that no act of human justice, suicide, or revenge, has the ability to affect the permanent fact of death (Watson 315).

Later in the scene, the King of Spain, accompanied by the antagonist, Lorenzo, joins Hieronimo. Hieronimo attempts to plea for justice to the King but Lorenzo brushes his attempts aside. Significantly, at this point, Hieronimo further exemplifies how his sense of justice as Knight Marshal is a vital part in his reluctance to revenge: “And here surrender up my marshalship; / For I’ll go marshal up the fiends in hell, / To be avenged on you all for this” (Kyd 3.12.76-77). In effect, by renouncing his honours as Knight Marshal, Hieronimo conveys that in order to take revenge he would have to renounce his adherence to justice first.

Now that we have assessed the two avengers’ moral dilemma, the remainder of the essay will focus on how they achieve their sought after revenge. It is at this point, however, critics believe Hieronimo diverges from Hamlet, by turning into a villain in his quest for revenge. For that reason, this part of the essay will mainly focus on Hieronimo. Nevertheless, by comparing Hieronimo’s act of revenge with Hamlet’s, the following analysis will show that both characters make an equivalent comment on the tragic consequences of revenge.

The alleged division between the two occurs as Hieronimo delivers his *Vindicta Mihi* soliloquy. After finding the antagonists unattainable by legal amendment (firstly, by his own jurisdiction as Knight Marshal and then by attempting to address the King), Hieronimo realises that action is inescapable. Critics interpret the effect of this soliloquy as the point where he embraces the pagan act of personal revenge above the Christian induction (Ratliff 113). Furthermore, this view of *The Spanish Tragedy* is aptly summarised by Paul Gottschalk when he criticises the ambiguity of Hieronimo’s moral character: “Kyd leaves it unclear whether his protagonist is hero or villain. At one point Hieronimo renounces the biblical injunction that vengeance is the Lord’s and embarks on a mission of Italianate revenge” (170). Granted, as Hieronimo introduces the quote from Romans, “Vengeance is mine” (Kyd 3.13.1) before seemingly favouring a quotation from Seneca, “The safe way for crime is always through crime” (Kyd 3.13.6), such an interpretation might be made. However, even though Hieronimo subsequently undertakes an unprompted act of vengeance upon his villains, Gottschalk and other critics alike fail to see how Hieronimo’s action is not bound by bloodlust but by the

surrounding injustices, forcing his hand, making him in effect the instrument of God's vengeance.

In order to illustrate this feature, a more comprehensive interpretation of Hieronimo's soliloquy is required. John D. Ratliff, for instance, makes a significant analysis of the soliloquy, which actively shows that Kyd did not intend to vilify Hieronimo nor serve the Senecan tradition of revenge, but instead intended "to allay [the audience's] qualms and to state clearly the view of the play that the revenge upon which Hieronimo was embarking was just and necessary" (115). According to Ratliff, Kyd's purpose with Hieronimo's soliloquy is to present his need for self-defence (117), a need caused by Hieronimo's realisation of Lorenzo's villainous methods. As Hieronimo witnesses how Lorenzo arranged the deaths of his accomplices to Horatio's murder, by reading Pedringano's letter he realises that Lorenzo would surely take the same precautions against him in order to remove liability for his actions. Hieronimo's fears increase as he sees Lorenzo and his father, Castile, closely intertwined with the King. After his attempt to plea "Justice, O justice, justice, gentle King", the King answers Hieronimo with scepticism: "What means this outrage? will none of you restrain his fury?" (Kyd 3.12.62-88). Additionally, as Lorenzo stands in his way, Hieronimo may fear that the nobility that he faces will prevent him righteous justice for the death of Horatio. Presumably, Hieronimo believes that the King, related by blood, would undeniably take Lorenzo's side above his regardless of his efforts. Therefore, evidence as to why Hieronimo no longer can wait for "heaven to revenge every ill" presents itself (Kyd 3.13.2).

Taking his need for self-defence into consideration, the actual context of the Senecan quotes becomes important. Ratliff argues that if we credit Kyd's citation to be appropriate, an explanation of the usage of Senecan quotes is obvious (117). The provocative quote "The safe way for crime is always through crime" (Kyd 3.13.6) is originally uttered by the character Clytemnestra, in the Senecan tragedy, *Agamemnon*. Clytemnestra utters the line as she realises that she has to take revenge on Agamemnon before he kills her (Ratliff 116). The context of the quote therefore clarifies that the purpose of its use is to outline the need for self-

preservation. Instead of finding Senecan inspiration, Hieronimo uses the quote as he associates himself with Clytemnestra's situation. Similar to Agamemnon's desire to kill Clytemnestra, the men who murdered Horatio will strive to remove him as well. Thus "crime for crime" does not represent how Hieronimo grants himself permission to use the same evil that he has experienced, but instead as a revelation that he has to commit crime to protect himself. Hieronimo further conveys his need for self-defence in a later scene, as he quotes the Italian phrase "He who shows unusual fondness to me has or wishes to betray me" (Kyd 3.14.174-75) in response to Lorenzo and Castile's acts of kinship towards him. Accordingly, the lines "For he that thinks with patience to contend / To quiet life, his life shall easily end" (Kyd 3.13.10-11) explain why he needs to act hastily in doing so, i.e., that the man living the quiet life of inaction is an easy target to eliminate (Ratliff 117).

In addition, Hieronimo's need for self-defence also sheds light on why he befriends Lorenzo and Balthazar as he arranges his dumb-play. Hieronimo realises that he will gain nothing by menacing them openly as the effects of their nobility will brush him aside. He parallels this unequal encounter in the simile of a "wintery storm upon a plain" (Kyd 3.13.37). In the simile, the plain represents the common man, who cannot take up resistance against the harsh, winter storm, which symbolises the power of the nobility. Furthermore, instead of simple perversity, Hieronimo explicitly states that he will not inspire his revenge by the "vulgar wits of men" (Kyd 3.13.21) but with the necessity of his task. Michael Henry Levin makes a similar argument in relation to this interpretation (312), arguing that Hieronimo's intentions, unlike Hamlet who was inspired by the accidental arrival of strolling actors, are "the result of a magistrate's mind bent on doing justice" and "planned to prevent external interference" (311). In addition, Hieronimo aims to gain time to determine his best course of action, "Till to revenge thou know when, where, and how" (Kyd 3.13.44). Hieronimo thereby designs a plan that will expose his enemies, as he defines it: "With open but inevitable ills" (Kyd 3.13.22). Finally, the effect of his planning also demonstrates that Hieronimo still remains composed and calculating and disproves that he has embarked on an infuriated quest for carnage.

In the context of Hieronimo's revenge, I find that his principle that "heaven will be revenged of every ill, / Nor will they suffer murder unrepaid" (Kyd 3.13.2-3) is intended for himself, as well as for his enemies. Hieronimo has previously shown similar awareness regarding the morality of following the path to revenge. Kyd aptly portrays Hieronimo's awareness in the metaphor of the directions to Lorenzo,

The way to him, and where to find him out, ...

There is a path upon your left hand side,

That leadeth from a guilty conscience,

Unto a forest of distrust and fear.

A darksome place and dangerous to pass,

There shall you meet with melancholy thoughts

Whose baleful humours if you but uphold,

It will conduct you to despair and death: (Kyd 3.11.13-21)

This passage explains that, although he will experience relief from his guilty conscience, the path to revenge will inevitably lead him to a darkness that causes death and misery. Again, in his *Vindicta mihi* soliloquy, Hieronimo explains his principles on evil. The injustice that has spawned his revenge has resulted in evil in him, which now forces him to follow this path. However, although the supernatural revenge endorses him, Hieronimo still finds revenge an inexcusable action. Thus, despite his dire need of self-defence, in addition to all of Lorenzo's sinful deeds, he still conveys a reluctance to revenge. More importantly, Hieronimo thereby shows insight. Instead of embracing a pagan, personal revenge, he embraces his inescapable tragic punishment: "If destiny deny thee life Hieronimo / Yet shalt thou be assured of a tomb" (Kyd 3.13.16-17). Instead of seeking a scenario where he is living with the satisfaction of revenge, these lines hint that he recognises his upcoming fate for committing his unsanctioned actions. Hieronimo foreseeing the effects of his revenge, however, hints that he will not go unpunished after he has fulfilled his task. I believe Hieronimo adheres to this principle until the end. In his final words, although "Pleased with their death, and eased with their revenges"

he surrenders his claim to life: “First take my tongue, and afterwards my heart.” (Kyd 4.4.189-90).

In a sense, by being pushed into taking revenge, Hieronimo is no more. The former man adhering to justice as Knight Marshal is gone and the revenger remains. He reveals this aspect and the reason for it, as he displays the murdered Horatio to the audience of his play:

Behold the reason urging me to this. ...

Here lay my hope and here my hope hath end;

Here lay my heart, and here my heart was slain; ...

All fled, failed, died, yea, all decayed with this. ...

They murdered me that made these fatal marks. (Kyd 4.4.88-97)

The effect of this passage further distances him from exemplifying an original willingness to seek revenge. In relation to this argument, Levin argues that Kyd depicts an examination of the morality of revenge in Hieronimo. In order to enable the higher powers to establish justice in a pitched battle where evil has the advantage, good cannot triumph if it is playing by the rules of goodness (322). Thus, in Hieronimo, Kyd, in a “dramatic exposition of vengeance, not an explanation” comments on the duality when good is suppressed by evil (Levin 323). The unpunished crimes against him, was the reason for his descent into revenge and subsequent death. Thus, a significant meaning in Hieronimo, which he illustrates in saying “Though on this earth justice will not be found, / I’ll down to hell ... in this passion” (Kyd 3.13.113-14) and “For here’s no justice ... / For justice is exiled from the earth” (Kyd 3.13.144-45), depicts how the lack of justice in a distorted society spawns evil in him and righteous men alike.

Although not as resolute as Hieronimo, Hamlet shares a similar forced transformation. Hamlet’s equivalent of Hieronimo’s *Vindicta mihi* is the soliloquy he delivers before travelling to England. Similar to Hieronimo’s self-defence, the accidental death of Polonius forces Hamlet into taking action and this passage reveals his newfound take on revenge in particular. His reluctance to avenge made him gain nothing in return, as everything spurred him toward

sin, resulting in the death of Polonius: “How all occasions do inform against me, / And spur my dull revenge!” (Shakespeare 4.4.32-33). Hamlet then questions humanity’s beastlike nature: “What is a man / If his chief good and market of his time / Be but to sleep and feed? a beast, no more” (Shakespeare 4.4.33-35). Subsequently, Hamlet again questions humanity’s greater cause in life if we are unable to use our given ability for reason:

Sure He that made us with such large discourse,
Looking before and after, gave us not
That capability and godlike reason
To fust in us unused. (Shakespeare 4.4.36-39)

The effect of this passage corresponds to Hieronimo’s soliloquy, as Hamlet argues that action is inevitable, as everything around him spurs him towards it.

However, Hamlet’s main unsympathetic characteristic is the failure to portray remorse for the killing. Moreover, the perplexity of *Hamlet* focuses on more issues than only revenge, and Hamlet is not always in the centre of the stage. In addition, Hamlet is not as resolute as Hieronimo at this stage of his revenge. For instance, Hamlet does not show guilt for killing Polonius: “Thou wretched, rash, intruding fool, farewell! / I took thee for thy better” (Shakespeare 3.4.31-32), or for killing Rosencrantz or Guildenstern, whose deaths he either directly or indirectly causes: “They are not near my conscience. Their defeat / Does by their own insinuation grow” (Shakespeare 5.2.57-58). Based on these carefree comments about the lives he has ended, it seems that his earlier reluctance against murder have abandoned him. However, that is not to say that Hamlet has become an old-school avenger. As Polonius’s death was accidental, Hamlet has already fallen into committing a sin, which has spoiled his nature. In addition, much like Hieronimo’s need for self-defence, the deaths of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern filled the same function for Hamlet. Hieronimo’s unwarranted killing of the unknowing Castile has the same unsympathetic effect on him. Instead, the unsympathetic traits *both* characters acquire should be interpreted within their context. For that reason, we should interpret both Shakespeare and Kyd’s use of a hero going bad as an intentional element.

In light of such an interpretation, both characters succeed in revealing one of their main characterisations.

A main pillar within both texts is an absence of justice that results in the need for personal revenge. Essentially, the tragic path both protagonists have to pursue depicts the corrupting consequences of a failed justice. Their initial reluctance to revenge highlights this aspect as both characters transform from intellectual, philosophical, characters, abiding to justice and moral codes into a foul image of themselves, as they must take revenge. For in their inevitable situations, both authors have pitted their reluctant avengers in an unjust setting. The setting thereby represents a broken social order. The use of corrupted and villainous aristocracies as the motifs for those in charge adds to the cause of this social order “out of joint” (Shakespeare 1.5.188). Hamlet, who faces the highest monarch of his nation and Hieronimo against high-ranking members of the nobility in both Portugal and Spain exemplify this aspect. The tragic consequences of their undesired revenge underscore the main meaning of both texts: a lawless society breeds nothing but death and chaos. In such a society, the need for personal revenge will arise. In discussing the value of the characters, it is evident that both Shakespeare and Kyd accurately depict what the tragic consequences of personal revenge entail.

To conclude, in contrast to the belief that Hieronimo strives for a violent, personal revenge in a homage to the old-school depiction of the avenger, this essay demonstrates the opposite. By juxtaposing Hamlet and Hieronimo, it is evident that both characters possess equal complexity as avengers. Their first defining similarity is evident in their need to find justification before taking revenge. Instead of running amok and killing their alleged villains, both characters show a reluctance to personal revenge as they undertake a simulated judicial process in order to let justice take its course. Secondly, both characters culminate their struggle with the morality of revenge in their will to commit suicide. The effect of portraying their inner turmoil with the severity of suicide conveys both characters’ similar comment on the illogicality of punishing evil with evil. The final aspect conveys a vital meaning within their

texts in relation to the tragic consequences of revenge. Due to their failures to obtain justice against their high-ranking villains, their unjust situation forces both characters into revenge. By forcing their characters into their revenge and making justice unobtainable, both authors mirror what a corrupt social order will cause as a cavalcade of deaths follow.

The shared features between Hieronimo and Hamlet confirm that both characters are worthy of equal acclaim as prototypical avengers. The core components both characters share consist of a reluctance to revenge and an examination of the morality of the action itself. Whereas the eloquently perplexing poetry of *Hamlet* stands for itself, it does not convey the same definite statement on revenge as Kyd achieves in *The Spanish Tragedy*. Hieronimo conveys a significant message, which Shakespeare later endorses. Instead of glorifying Hieronimo's actions, Kyd shows that people murdering each other for the sake of revenge results in chaos. Thus, Kyd, as accurately as Shakespeare, shows that the effects of a corrupt social order results in a national tragedy, as both Spain and Denmark suffer the consequences of Hieronimo and Hamlet's revenge.

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