

# Re:Search

## **Audience Vicarious Desire for Revenge: William Shakespeare's *Hamlet***

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### ABSTRACT

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The revenge tragedy rose to prominence during the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century and blossomed over the course of the next few decades. Audiences of the era returned to watch revenge tragedies almost religiously—a genre previously seen as lesser and improper took on new and uncharted territory. Throughout the period, playwrights toyed with the conventions of the revenge tragedy genre, and it steadily rose in notoriety and popularity among spectators. One playwright and his most well-known play, however, truly exemplified and used these conventions to the fullest extent. William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* used varied layers of audiences both on and off the stage, which allowed for spectators to create and interpret the ideas that were being acted out on stage in their own mind. Spectators vicariously lived out vengeful desires by watching revenge tragedies without having to face the consequences associated with these actions. Within each audience member exists a moral compass, one that Shakespeare acknowledged and manipulated so as to make each spectator draw ethical and moral boundaries. Through this, audiences gained more agency within the theater, and their tastes and ideals began to shape the way playwrights wrote during the period.

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### KEYWORDS

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Agency, Audience, Hamlet, Moral Compass, Revenge Tragedy, William Shakespeare

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Revenge has been a leitmotif in literature for as long as humans have been putting ink to parchment. Most modern critics assume that the genre of revenge was “primordial slime,” and yet, from this, the Shakespearean tragedy emerged and garnered vast popularity (Woodbridge 3). Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* (1603) epitomizes the conventions that had been grappled and toyed with since Thomas Kyd first introduced this genre to Elizabethan audiences with his play, *The Spanish Tragedy*, in 1587 (“Revenge Tragedy”). Many critics and scholars have looked at the ideals and themes within *Hamlet*, but few have contemplated the essential relationship between the production and its audience. Within the context of Elizabethan plays, audience is viewer specific—no two audiences are the same, mainly because each individual spectator reacts and engages differently with each play. To that extent, each individual spectator also forms connections with different characters, which in turn forces them to analyze their morals and ethics. The connection formed between the audience and Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* is one unlike any other—it instilled early spectators with a deeply embedded desire to live out vengeful desires without engaging legal codes, as would an actual crime. Elizabethan and Jacobean audiences remained attached to the revenge tragedy genre, and *Hamlet* serves as the prime example of how authors and playwrights realized and exploited this attachment so as to make audiences connect on a more emotional level with their works. Within revenge tragedies exists an underlying common essence that attracts audiences to return time after time. They are drawn back to this genre because of the nationalism exhibited, the justice attained, the omniscience gained by the audience, and the closure offered within these plays.<sup>1</sup>

The “pleasure of tragedy,” as some critics name this phenomenon, is ever-present in the revenge tragedy genre. Audiences remained attached to this genre of literary work because it invited them to vicariously live out their desires by siding with the revenger at the beginning of these plays. In Act One of *Hamlet*, Shakespeare establishes a connection between father and son that transcends life

and death—the ghost of Hamlet’s father comes and speaks with him. Hamlet tells the ghost, “Speak. I am bound to hear,” to which the ghost replies, “So art thou to revenge, when thou shalt hear” (1.5.7-8). It is at this point that Shakespeare persuades spectators to side with Hamlet, just as Hamlet is “bound” to listen to the ghost’s story, so too is the audience, and consequently, they become bound to the revenge that will soon transpire. Shakespeare used the moral compass embedded within every individual viewer to manipulate audiences to side with the revenger. Audience members thus serve as co-conspirators to Hamlet’s revenge, and they in turn question their moral and ethical limits by watching Hamlet avenge his father’s murder. This moral self-evaluation allows audience members to gain agency within theater.

The pleasure ignited by the expression of revenge is a double-edged sword of sorts. On the one hand, revenge brings about a sense of justice and righteousness—but on the other, it plays with the moral compass of every individual watching. It forces spectators to come to terms with the orthodox moral compass instilled in them, and consequently, they begin to draw moral boundaries—lines that they could never ethically cross.<sup>2</sup> As John Kerrigan has noted, “The avenger, isolated and vulnerable, can achieve heroic grandeur by coming to personify nemesis,” and therefore, audience members also join in on this “heroic grandeur” by siding with the avenger and coming to identify with him (3). The varying layers of understanding between the audience, the avenger, and the initial perpetrator become blurred. Rules and regulations, both within and outside the play, take on new meaning. Hamlet acknowledges these layers while performing “The Mousetrap,” telling, “Speak the speech, I pray you, as I pronounced it to you, trippingly on the tongue” (3.2.1-2). The individual Hamlet is addressing within this context is initially perceived to be one of the actors, but when looked at more closely, it is much more vague and elusive. Is Hamlet addressing the actor? The audience (specifically the King)? Or the audience who

is watching the audience watch the play? The degree of complexity associated with this scene of Hamlet adds to the overall intricacy and the iconic status associated with Shakespeare's most well-known revenge tragedy. By playing with what the audience believes is intended towards them and what is not, Shakespeare creates a new realm of perception in which audiences create new and varied meaning from the actions of the characters on stage.

Deeply embedded in the revenge tragedy genre is the unrelenting desire to avenge a wrong that has been committed against a character. Hamlet tells how he was "prompted to [his] revenge by heaven and hell" (2.2.505). There appears to be some externality associated with the yearning for revenge—some force greater than the will of man that lures these personas into vengeful thoughts and desires. Revenge has to be precise; it must make the offender suffer while simultaneously giving pleasure to the avenger, and through the avenger, pleasure to the audience. Hamlet had other various opportunities to kill Claudius, but he decides against it—his revenge must not only last while he attains it, but must last an eternity. Hamlet states:

Now might I do it pat, now he is praying;  
And now I'll do't. And so he goes to heaven;  
And so am I revenged. That would be scann'd:  
A villain kills my father; and for that,  
I, his sole son, do this same villain send  
To heaven (3.3.73-78).

The mere possibility of having Claudius enter heaven seems ludicrous to Hamlet; his revenge must endure even in death. This instance invites audience members to question what their ideal ending entails—mere death or eternal damnation? Through these moral qualms, audiences begin to frame their understanding of Hamlet's actions within their own set of moral boundaries.

Audiences were drawn to the revenge tragedy genre partially because it held the nation up on a pedestal. Most of Shakespeare's plays are set abroad

because of the prejudices early modern audiences had about other cultures. Revenge tragedy plays, such as *The Tragedy of Hamlet: Prince of Denmark*, *The Spanish Tragedy*, and *The Revenger's Tragedy*, were always set in non-English locations. This distance simultaneously allowed for audiences to look down upon other cultures for their apparent immoral tendencies and consequently made the English feel superior in moral standing as opposed to these other cultures. Prosser comments on this effect, saying, “[N]ot only did revenge violate religion, law, morality, and common sense, it was also thoroughly un-English” (10). Hamlet ends in complete surrender; Fortinbras says, “Bear Hamlet like a soldier to the stage,/ For he was likely, had he been put on,/ To have proved most royal” (5.2.370-372). Although there exists an ancestral tie that along with *Hamlet's* Protestant undertones allowed for audiences to more adequately identify with the avenger and his agenda, Hamlet fails to prove himself to be royal by dying. The demise of the Prince of Denmark invited audience members to contrast their lasting monarchy to the flimsy and incomparable ones throughout the rest of Europe. Through these plays, audiences gained false perceptions of what other cultures were like and through them became more aware of their own national identity.

Audiences returned to watch these plays almost religiously, despite authorities who claimed that their values were degenerate, immoral, and unchristian. Woodbridge tells, “The sheer number of revenge plots attests to the theme’s popularity—authors wouldn’t have kept writing or companies staging such plays unless audiences flocked to them” (4). By watching revenge tragedies, audiences vicariously lived out these desires without any of the moral ramifications or legal consequences associated with seeking revenge:

[M]ost critics still hold that the average Elizabethan believed a son morally bound to revenge his father’s death. The most thoughtful of these critics have not ignored the orthodox code; they have insisted, rather, that a popular code approving revenge had far

more influence than the code of the Elizabethan Establishment  
(Prosser 4)

The “code” referenced by Prosser is one of moral awareness, and “popular literature and dramatic conventions indicate that the orthodox code did in fact have widespread influence. At the same time, they indicate that the average spectator at a revenge play was probably trapped in an ethical dilemma—a dilemma, to put it most simply, between what he believed and what he felt” (Prosser 4). Going a step further, by placing religion as a central part of *Hamlet*, Shakespeare was able to play with his audiences’ moral limits in a remarkable way. The ghost of his father alludes to the Roman Catholic idea of purgatory, yet much of Hamlet’s thoughts, asides, and conversations are Protestant in nature. This entanglement of Catholicism and Protestantism manipulated audiences into questioning not only what they saw as right and wrong but also their thoughts on afterlife (Taylor 3).

In order for closure to be attained within the play itself, the act of revenge must be made public. The audience plays a key role in this aspect of revenge and is largely why Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* resonated with audiences so profoundly. Hamlet’s tale lived in and through them—his act of revenge, in the name of his beloved father is carried out in front of them, and following Claudius’ death, Hamlet inadvertently addresses the audience:

You that look pale and tremble at this chance,  
That are but mutes or audience to this act,  
Had I but time (as this fell sergeant, Death,  
Is strict in his arrest) O, I could tell you-  
But let it be. Horatio, I am dead;  
Thou liv'st; report me and my cause aright  
To the unsatisfied (5.2.308-313)

As his final act, he assures justice, but more importantly, he assures his revenge against Claudius. Without witnesses to tell his tale, there is no rationale behind

seeking revenge—“revenge cannot bring back what has been lost . . . only memory, with all its limitations, can do that” (Kerrigan 188). By watching the play, the audience becomes complicit with the revenge. This is why when Hamlet asks Horatio not to drink from the poisonous cup, Hamlet begs him:

As th'art a man,  
Give me the cup. Let go! By heaven, I'll ha't.  
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 (5.2.316-323)

They fulfill the necessity of acknowledging the events that led to the final moments in the play. Act Five of *Hamlet* gives spectators this cross to bear: they are a living testament to what happened and must judge whether or not the ends justify the means.

Hamlet's monologue at the end of Act Two serves as a direct connection between Hamlet and audience members. Having just concocted the idea of producing a play as a means of clarifying whether or not his uncle murdered Hamlet's father, he states:

For murder, though it have no tongue, will speak  
With most miraculous organ. I'll have these Players  
Play something like the murder of my father  
Before mine uncle. I'll observe his looks;  
I'll tent him to the quick (2.2.514-518).<sup>3</sup>

Observing becomes key within this play and outside this play—Hamlet's perception of his uncle, Hamlet's perception of his mother, the audience's perception of Hamlet and those around him. Observation becomes key in the revenge tragedy, and without it, the act of revenge would serve no purpose. Without observation, there would be no closure: “[Hamlet's] struggle with the constitutive pressures of court and family takes place in the audience's

acknowledged presence” (Escolme 55). Herein lies the recurring back-and-forth between the stage and the audience’s relation to it—without establishing a connection between the revenger and spectators, it would be impossible for spectators not to question the moral grounds on which these vengeful acts are based upon.

Essential to the revenge tragedy is assuring the audience that they are in possession of all relevant information at the play’s finale. Spectators become all-knowing, and in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, they are perceived to be unbiased witnesses to the events that have transpired. At the play’s end, Fortinbras says,

Let us haste to hear it,  
And call the noblest to the audience.  
For me, with sorrow I embrace my fortune.  
I have some rights of memory in this kingdom  
Which now, to claim my vantage doth invite me (5.2.360-364)

This acknowledgment at the end of the play exemplifies the spectator’s importance within *Hamlet* because of the power Fortinbras receives through their presence. The audience’s omniscience throughout *Hamlet* adds to their agency because spectators become fully aware of their role within the play.

Within the revenge tragedy genre exists the blurring of roles—initially, you have the first offender (Claudius, in *Hamlet*’s case), who, in his conquest for power, falls from grace and commits heinous crimes that usually involve killing someone. Consequently, this allows for the creation of the revenger, Hamlet, whose relationship to the initial offender forces him into this role out of duty to the memory of his father. Despite having strong moral convictions, the revenger is overtaken by the desire to exact revenge and will not rest until justice has been achieved. This clash between morals and justice causes confusion for not only the revenger, but audience members as well. Kerrigan writes that “Its ‘confusion’ intelligently reflects the ‘confused system of values’ which ‘our culture’ has

inherited from the classical and Christian worlds” (139). Linda Woodbridge has posed the question: “Can two wrongs ever make a right?” (22). Within the context of Christian values, this question, however, is much more complex than just its surface level interpretation. Revenge has always been looked down upon within Christian ideology, yet seeking revenge completely alienates any and all other aspects of Hamlet’s life. He does not see a future after revenge, and thus, it foretells Hamlet’s certain death. Redemption serves no purpose while seeking revenge, which entices the audience—it allows them to dabble with unchristian ideas without suffering the damnation associated with them.

Audiences and the revenger take on the role of God—audiences do so in a more figurative manner, while the revenger does so more literally. Salvation, at least within the context of what is transpiring on the stage, becomes irrelevant to the actions being perpetrated. Hamlet’s actions not only avenge his father’s death, but also make amends for what was stolen from him. Claudius’s actions not only cause his father’s death, but also disrupt the line of succession to the throne.

Hamlet makes this known by stating:

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? (5.2.63-70)

Morals become overshadowed by the desire for justice to be served; “when [the offender and avenger] represent single omnipotence and multiple human frailty, [the offender and avenger] become incommensurable” (Kerrigan 119). And, to the same extent, the audience also stands to have their own standard by which they are judged and how they judge others’ actions.

Hamlet's revenge must also be made public so that the Claudius becomes aware of the actions that are taken against him. As the final act of *Hamlet* unfolds:

Hamlet registers a recognition that revenge is incoherent unless it possesses that recapitulative power which the passage of experience makes impossible... it not only compromises action by substituting remembrance for revenge but points up the incoherence of violence by staging more persuasive recapitulation than stabbing in the back could contrive (Kerrigan 187)

Having Claudius die becomes unimportant to Hamlet; Claudius must suffer at his hands in order to truly bring about a full onslaught of revenge. These dark and wicked desires entrapped within Hamlet are now being experienced by the audience, and thus they become implicit in the revenge that Hamlet accomplishes.

Elizabethan revenge tragedies awakened a genre that had been seen as lesser, and as the genre quickly flourished, it took center stage because it allowed audiences to enjoy revenge tragedies without the condemnation that the church associated with the actions being acted out on stage. William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* utilizes the conventions of the revenge tragedy genre magnificently—it produces varying layers of understanding for the audience, which challenges their perception of their relationship to the stage. Within *Hamlet*, the audience is seemingly addressed various times, which adds to this inherent connection between the play and audience members. The main conventions used by revenge tragedies gave way to greater audience enjoyment and allowed for them to gain more of a role within the theater. Their tastes, ideals, and visions of the world allowed them to help shape the way in which playwrights and authors viewed and wrote their works throughout this time period.

## NOTES

[1] Although modern day conceptions of nationalism were not present in the early modern era, the roots that gave way to it were beginning to flourish in theater as playwrights set their productions abroad so as to glorify England and place it as superior to other cultures.

[2] Anything that serves as a guide to making a morally informed choice

[3] To watch, examine, to see an action or acknowledge an occurrence.

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