The Artifice of Revenge: Metatheatricality and Renaissance Revenge Tragedy

A thesis submitted to the Miami University Honors Program in partial fulfillment of the Requirements for University Honors with Distinction

by

Simone Waller

May 2011
Oxford Ohio
ABSTRACT

THE ARTIFICE OF REVENGE: METHATHEATRICALITY AND RENAISSANCE REVENGE TRAGEDY

by Simone Waller

Revenge functioned as a recurring theme on the early modern English stage, embodying evolving relationships between morality and law, Christian and secular ethics, the individual and the state. A controversial form of retributive justice, revenge threatened the power of the state and challenged Christian morals by encouraging acts of extralegal violence on the part of private individuals. The urge to pursue private revenge in response to a wrong nevertheless remained a part of popular culture, as attested to by various anti-revenge tracts, popular accounts of sensational revenges, and revenge plays themselves.

This paper seeks to explore the nature of the representation of revenge in several plays of the early modern period: Thomas Kyd’s The Spanish Tragedy, William Shakespeare’s Hamlet, John Webster’s The White Devil, and Thomas Middleton and William Rowley’s The Changeling. Specifically, it examines metatheatrical elements in these works and the manner in which they affect the plays’ positions with respect to the popular discourse surrounding the act of revenge. The first section focuses on the device of the play-within-a-play, delineating how the inclusion of such a metatheatrical motif helps contextualize the violence represented on stage as belonging exclusively to the realm of fiction. The second section deals with the motif of the revenger’s madness, exploring its potential as a tool of dissimulation for the playwright in obscuring any stance taken on the controversial subject of revenge in his work. The third section discusses the roles of female characters in these works, focusing on moments of metatheatricality that call attention to these characters’ performative acts and their implications for women’s agency in these plays.
Table of Contents

Introduction 1

Plays Within Plays 6

The Performance of Madness 20

Women as Performers 32

References 43
Introduction

Revenge functioned as a recurring theme on the early modern stage, embodying evolving relationships between morality and law, Christian and secular ethics, the individual and the state. Many controversies surrounding revenge sprung from these changing political and religious formations. As Fredson Bowers notes, “in the earliest times there could be no crime because there was no State” (3). In the absence of a unified source of governmental authority, violent offences were injuries against particular individuals rather than infractions of established law. Thus, without a state overseeing the recognition and punishment of offences, “the only possible [retributive] action for the primitive individual was direct revenge upon his injurer” (Bowers 3). This basic principle of revenge was formalized in the Anglo-Saxon wergild system, in which murders were reconciled through monetary reparations; the family of the offender would pay the family of the victim a price for the murdered man’s life (Semenza 51-2). With the development of central government, the right to revenge increasingly fell more to the monarch than to private individuals. William the Conqueror made a decisive move towards increased state authority by introducing the Norman appeals system, which supplanted wergild. The appeals system nevertheless “retained the spirit of the old blood-revenge” in that “the nearest of kin had to take up suit against the murderer” in court or through “the direct revenge of judicial combat” (Bowers 6-7). Henry VII completely dissociated the punishment of crimes from a family’s purview, though, in instituting the indictment system, whereby murders were viewed as felonies against the state rather than “wrongs involving only the offender and victim” (Semenza 53). Thus, a murderer could be prosecuted by the state “merely on the presentation of information to the authorities” without the involvement of the victim’s family (Bowers 7). The Tudor resistance to familial involvement in prosecuting revenge was in part an attempt to avoid the sort of familial
conflicts that led to the Wars of the Roses, in which disputes between the Lancaster and York families casted the nation into civil war: “In short, the need to counteract self-government, which caused devastating ‘national quarrels,’ leads to centralized government, which depends in turn upon an effective legal system” (Semenza 52). The growth of the English nation-state and centralization of power under a stable monarchy thus necessitated a delegitimization of private revenge in favor of justice mediated by the state.

The dictates of the Christian religion additionally discouraged such acts of private revenge. Christian scripture explicitly denounced private revenge, reserving the power to punish crimes for God. As the Bible passage quoted in anti-revenge tracts, Romans 12:19, states: “avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord.” Thus, Francis Bacon’s advocacy of the patient endurance of a wrong is based in such a scriptural call for restraint: “In taking revenge, a man is but even with his enemy; but in passing it over, he is superior; […] And Solomon, I am sure, saith, It is the glory of man to pass by an offence” (31). Those who failed to exercise such restraint and enacted their own revenge were thereby in direct opposition to God’s will: “with the word of God so expressly forbidding private revenge, it was only natural to believe damnation awaited those who disobeyed” (Bowers 13). As R.A. Foakes notes, though, there was also a strong, conflicting Biblical tradition advocating punitive violent acts: “The Old Testament offers a history of early civilization as one of more or less continual wars and atrocities, and God partakes of this violence. He is a punisher who causes others to suffer” (27). This acceptance of retributive violence is epitomized in the Old Testament “‘eye for an eye’ mentality” (Semenza 53). In his discussion of violence in general, Foakes makes clear that Elizabethan audiences were quite accepting of “public displays of cruel violence” in the form of state punishment of crimes. These
public punishments included “hangings of convicted criminals” and “public spectacles of torture and violence in the execution of criminals and traitors staged as ceremonies validating state power” (Foakes 28, 36). Retributive violence was also publically enacted by religious authorities, as “in the punishment by whipping until blood flowed that could be inflicted on fornicators by ecclesiastical courts” (Foakes 36). In accepting these instances of violent punishment of crimes, Elizabethan Christians showed an important distinction in their moral reasoning: “Christians differentiated private (i.e., personal) and public (i.e., governmental) revenge” (Semenza 53). As Semenza holds, “This distinction allowed Christians to heed the general message of the New Testament […] while upholding the Old Testament laws by shifting the burden of revenge onto the state or legal system” (53). Religious arguments against private revenge were therefore another means to bolster the sole right of the state to punish offences.

While private revenge was thus understood as an act of willful violence in defiance of both God’s and the king’s claims to final authority in the punishment of crimes, it sometimes remained a viable recourse for individuals seeking retribution. Bowers comments on various known instances of revenge in Jacobean England, such as the Countess of Essex’s machinations against Sir Thomas Overbury (25), and Foakes notes that duels were popular enough in the early 1600s to induce James I to make new proclamations against them (109). Both Foakes and Semenza find these acts of private revenge to be indicative of a perceived inability of the injured parties to achieve justice through the more widely sanctioned channels of government and religion: “revenge may seem the only way to achieve justice in cases where the law cannot be effective,” referencing the inefficiencies and uncertainties of the Renaissance English judicial system (Foakes 109). Semenza additionally casts doubt on the ability of such private acts to bring about conclusive resolution of wrongs, however, discussing the unsettling conclusion of
Thomas Kyd’s prototypical revenge play *The Spanish Tragedy* (as well as the “real-life” example of a mother who committed suicide after her daughter was paralyzed in the Columbine school shootings). “Revenge is art because it is constructed order,” writes Semenza, a human attempt to impose the logic of justice on events that lack logicality, to establish an illusory equilibrium of act and retributive act (59). Referencing the philosopher Simone Weil, Semenza states that “ethically and practically speaking, revenge is quite ugly precisely because equilibrium is illusory—an ‘imaginary’ construct” (218). Thus, the various historically contextualized arguments supporting or opposing private revenge aside, the action may itself seek to mask the ultimate absence of the possibility for retributive justice.

Renaissance playwrights dealing with the theme of revenge wrote within this nexus of political, religious, and ethical conflicts. The sheer recurrence of the theme indicates that such questions concerning proper social and religious roles as well as the ethicalness of revenge were continually readdressed and reinterpreted within the period. In addition to these concerns, though, the choice to represent revenge on stage added further conflict. In representing this controversial subject, playwrights, as producers of public media, must necessarily have been concerned with how their works would be received and interpreted by audience members. As Bowers notes, Puritan detractors of the public theater denounced such representations of revenge on stage on the basis that it “encouraged the spectators to violence in real life” (260). Behind such anxiety is an understanding of performance as potentially transformative: “Renaissance Protestants frequently imagined performative behavior to have a causal as well as reflective relation to the internal self; according to such accounts, the individual's assumption of external gestures prompted the corresponding internal conditions” (Targoff 60). This idea was based in the Aristotelian notion that habitual action was not merely an external performance, but possessed
the ability to permanently alter the individual (Targoff 60). Thus, the enactment of revenge, even within the context of the stage, could habitually induce players and audience members to such immoral action. The genre’s supporters, though, emphasized the didactic quality of the plays: “tragedy portrayed violent action […] but these deeds were always punished at the close. The firm object of Elizabethan tragedy, therefore, was the enacting not only of poetic, but more important, of divine justice” (Bowers 263). By representing revenge negatively, demonstrating its consequences, playwrights could discourage such acts for their audiences. Revenge tragedy, depending on the nature of its representation, could thereby be viewed as a fundamentally subversive or conservative form of public media, supporting or opposing private revenge.

The ontological status and quality of represented revenge was thus highly important in determining the import of these plays for their audiences and the reaction of various authorities, including the state, to their performance. Through two generally recognized motifs of the genre, the play-within-a-play and the revenger’s madness, playwrights explored the topic of revenge in a manner that emphasized the difference between reality and representation, theater and life. They thus created self-consciously metatheatrical spaces in which to explore the nature of revenge and its larger ethical and political implications for Renaissance society without necessarily drawing the condemnation of those who opposed such potentially subversive enactments.
Plays Within Plays

Thomas Kyd’s *The Spanish Tragedy* and William Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* both choose to represent revenge as an artificial, theatrical production through the metatheatrical device of plays within plays. Neil Rhodes, in discussing Hamlet’s response to the Player’s Hecuba speech, articulates how these instances of explicit theatricality in *Hamlet* serve to establish a hierarchy of reality within the work: “If the play within the play is only a play, then by implication Shakespeare’s play, in which it appears, is real” (126). Thus, the play-within-a-play implies a contrast between “theatrical” and “real” moments in the larger work. In the *Spanish Tragedy*, revenge takes place within the explicitly artificial context of highly ordered, theatrical performances. Although its conclusion successfully achieves balance between injury and retribution, the overtly theatrical context within which balance is reached indicates the artificiality of such a state, demonstrating that balance cannot be achieved outside the world of the theater. A similar conclusion is reached in *Hamlet*, which highlights the disjunction between theatrical reality and authentic action to demonstrate that while equilibrium-satisfying revenge is possible within the artificial space of the represented play, this concept fails when applied to a more realistic situation. Thus both plays serve a conservative function by demonstrating the impossibility of a truly just revenge in realistic contexts.

Hieronimo’s successful revenge at the conclusion of *The Spanish Tragedy* is overtly framed as both highly theatrical and self-consciously artificial. Most significantly, the choric framing device of Revenge and Andrea’s witnessing and commenting on the events of the play grants the action represented therein a high level of artificiality. By functioning as a kind of framing audience, Revenge and Andrea foreground the idea that the events that they witness are themselves part of an extended performance. Their function as Chorus begins after the figure
named Revenge leads the ghost Andrea from Pluto’s underworld into the space of the play through the gates of horn, a reference to the tradition of the *Odyssey* and the *Aeneid*. Although classical tradition identifies the gates of horn as the means by which true dreams reach the world of the living and the gates of ivory as the origin of false dreams, Andrea here makes no such distinction. Instead, he designates these gates as simply the place “where dreams have passage in the silent night” (Kyd 1.1.82). He himself remains in a state of confusion after being transported to the scene of the action, as he states, “I wot not how, in twinkling of an eye” (1.1.85). Andrea and Revenge’s place and manner of origin, then, link their experience of the play to an ambiguous dream, a fictional experience with the semblance of truth. This association, when coupled with the fact that Revenge immediately frames Andrea and himself as the interpretative medium between the audience and the events of the main performance, saying that they will “serve for Chorus in this tragedy,” casts doubt on the degree of reality present in the actions that the audience will witness through this choric framing device (1.1.91). Due to the nature of their origin, both Andrea and Revenge are highly suspicious figures in that they could be participating in a dream or be dreams themselves. The experience of the main play that they share with and interpret for the audience is correspondingly implicated as potentially fantastic. Moreover, Revenge refers to the narrative that he and Andrea will witness as both a “mystery” and an explicitly theatrical form, a “tragedy” (1.1.90). His word choice indicates that this narrative will be somewhat removed from the ordinary and will adhere to a structured, artificial mode. Thus, the introduction of Andrea and Revenge indicates that the events of the main play are potentially delusional and will employ a high degree of theatricality and artifice.

The question of the agency of Revenge in crafting the action of this play additionally implicates the events surrounding acts of revenge as highly artificial. On several occasions,
Revenge assures Andrea of the certain outcome of the actions they witness. The choric frame continually reasserts itself and follows a predictable pattern in which Andrea questions how the current progression of events will culminate in his desired revenge, and Revenge reassures him that he as revenge maintains control over the narrative. Revenge indicates one element of the play’s conclusion before the play proper has even begun, promising Andrea: “tho shalt see the author of thy death, / Don Balthazar, the prince of Portingale, / Deprived of life by Bel-imperia” (1.1.86–8). Whether this prediction is enabled by Revenge’s special knowledge of a preordained fate or will be brought about by his own crafting of events, his foreknowledge of the conclusion makes clear that the events of the play do not develop organically. Bel-imperia does not make a choice as to whether or not she will kill Balthazar, as such a choice would imply that the play could have ended without this event’s occurrence. Instead, Revenge mandates that the play cannot end until this murder has been achieved and revenge carried out, indicating that some force or will external to Bel-Imperia has the power to dictate her actions in line with the play’s desired conclusion.

This will, then, as an imposer of order on the narrative, is marked as a force of creative agency. Revenge is a likely candidate for this creative agent, as he tells Andrea, “ere we go from hence, / I’ll turn their friendship into fell despite, / [...] Their joys to pain, their bliss to misery” (1.5.5–6, 9). Revenge thus identifies himself as director of the characters’ ends. Revenge could potentially be understood metaphorically in this instance, representing the specific retributive acts perpetrated by Bel-imperia and Hieronimo; however, the fact that Revenge himself is a

---

1 The certainty of Bel-Imperia’s murder of Balthazar serves as a strong contrast to the uncertainty of Hamlet’s murder of Claudius. In the latter case, Hamlet’s prolonged deliberation over whether or not he will enact revenge by killing his uncle, exemplified in the “To be or not to be” soliloquy (Hamlet 3.1.56–90), implies that such revenge is not the necessary conclusion to the action of the play, but rather an event that may or may not come to pass depending on Hamlet’s evolving thought process. This emphasis on the protagonist’s individual will, according to Rhodes, reflects the ideology of Renaissance humanism (127). Additionally, the fact that the play ends with an impulsive act of revenge serves to validate this privileging of the individual’s will in defiance of generic expectations.
character who predates the introduction of any specific revenger figure aside from Andrea, to whom Revenge obviously stands in a position of power because of his possession of superior knowledge, makes it fair to conclude that Revenge himself is an independent figure with his own authoritative agency. If the figure of Revenge is a creative agent, then the acts he orchestrates are his creations. Revenge therefore takes on the role of artist, and revenge itself is his artistic production.

Revenge’s orchestration of the dumbshow, simultaneously a theatrical production and an illustration of revenge, demonstrates his creative agency in orchestrating the enactment of revenge. Revenge summons the show in response to Andrea’s questioning his fulfillment of his duties after Hieronimo and Lorenzo have apparently reconciled. Revenge reassures Andrea that he is still the active force behind the narrative:

Content thyself, Andrea: though I sleep,
Yet is my mood soliciting their souls;
………………………………………
Behold Andrea, for an instance how
Revenge hath slept, and then imagine thou
What ‘tis to be subject to destiny. (3.15.19-20, 26-8)

Revenge is thus active even when seemingly inactive, a force “soliciting their souls” towards his desired outcome. This outcome is additionally “subject to destiny” and must come to pass. Again, Revenge implicates the events to come as highly artificial in that they do not evolve naturally in accordance with their perpetrators’ wills, but rather adhere to his own influence and established order. Along this same line of thought, the dumbshow Revenge summons not only comes into being as a result of his will, but also depends on his own exposition to become intelligible. After watching the display, a perplexed Andrea implores Revenge to “reveal this

---

2 Revenge’s agency contrasts with that of Hamlet in that Revenge is not a human character, while Hamlet is human. Revenge also freely exercises his will over the actions of other characters, while Hamlet’s main conflicts originate in his inability to do just that. Hamlet can tell Gertrude to “go not to my uncle’s bed” and order Ophelia to “get thee to a nunnery” (3.4.159; 3.1.121); however, he has no real control over either characters’ actions.
mystery” (3.15.29). Revenge then verbally reenacts the dumbshow, explaining the identities of its characters and the meaning of their actions, for a second time crafting this representation of revenge. He assigns the violent act itself to Hymen, for he blows out the nuptial torches and “quencheth them with blood” (3.15.34). Andrea, however, does not fail to notice that Revenge possesses ultimate agency in this scenario. He knows that the dumbshow is not a prophecy unto itself, but instead a vehicle created by Revenge to convey his will. Andrea accordingly acknowledges that he has comprehended Revenge’s message in the show, telling him “thy meaning’s understood” after its performance and the exposition (3.15.36). Revenge in this instance actively takes on the role of creator and interpreter of art, and his artistic product is symbolically linked with the revenge that concludes the work.

Strangely enough, the majority of the murders at the conclusion of The Spanish Tragedy are neither anticipated by Revenge nor demanded by Andrea as acts of retributive justice for his own death. These murders themselves are authorized as part of the artificial equilibrium of revenge, though, by nature of Hieronimo’s performative actions. Hieronimo’s son Horatio stands as an innocent casualty in Revenge’s orchestration of Andrea’s satisfaction. Andrea laments upon Horatio’s death: “I looked that Balthazar should have been slain, / But ‘tis my friend Horatio that is slain” (2.6.2-3). Andrea’s death calls only for the murder of his killer, and thus, within this schema, Horatio stands as collateral damage. Horatio’s death, although unjust because it is prompted by Lorenzo’s Machiavellian machinations, does not go unanswered given that it initiates Hieronimo’s revenge, which includes the retributive murder of Balthazar for

---

3 The logic of Andrea’s “revenge” on Balthazar may itself be called into question, since Minos pronounces that Andrea died as a result of “war’s fortune” (1.1.40). Semenza concludes from this emphasis on Andrea’s manner of death that Andrea’s revenge is meant to be understood as “unjustifiable both morally and legally” (57). Hieronimo’s revenge adheres more closely to the wergild system that was recognized as the proper recourse for revenge in the Anglo-Saxon period in that he seeks justice for a son murdered “in cold blood” (Semenza 51). This son’s murder, though, is part of the overall sequence of events of which Revenge claims authorship in act one, scene five. Hieronimo’s revenge is thus ultimately tied to Andrea’s, casting doubt on the potential moral and legal justification of either.
Andrea’s killing and the murder of Lorenzo for killing Horatio. These murders cannot come about, though, without the artifice of Hieronimo’s play-within-a-play, *Soliman and Perseda*. Stemming from Rhodes’ reading of *Hamlet* as establishing contrasting theatrical and mimetic spaces, one recognizes that Hieronimo, denied his revenge in the more realistic spaces of the play, must pointedly author a theatrical opportunity to carry out his appointed deed. Hieronimo’s “vindicta mihi” soliloquy initially expresses an understanding that he should bide his time until some force external to him enacts his revenge: “Ay, heaven will be revenged of every ill, / Nor will they suffer murder unrepaid: / Then stay, Hieronimo, attend their will, / For mortal men may not appoint their time” (3.13.1-5). After reflection, though, Hieronimo concludes that he will enact his own revenge. His act, however, at this point will still depend on external factors because he concludes that “all times fit not for revenge” (3.13.29). He therefore resolves to maintain a state of passivity: “No, no Hieronimo, thou must enjoin/ […] Thy heart to patience, and thy hands to rest, / […] Till to revenge thou know, when, where and how” (3.13.39, 42, 44).

Hieronimo, then, in choosing to perform his own tragedy when offered the chance to entertain at court, willfully creates a theatrical space in which to take revenge, for he has not been able to find such an opportunity in a more ordinary occasion.

Aside from providing the space for revenge, Hieronimo’s play also casts characters in roles that allow their killings to fulfill the requirements of retributive justice. Hieronimo insists that the people on whom he wishes to enact revenge take active part in his play, telling them: “I mean each one of you to play a part” (4.1.83). He is also particular about what part each will play, ensuring that their artificial roles display a level of poetic justice by mirroring the actual roles the characters played in the murder of Horatio (Mulryne xxv-xxvi). The King and Viceroy comment on Balthazar’s performance: “How well he acts his amorous passion” (4.22). They also
note that “Bel-imperia plays Perseda well” (4.4.69). These comments ironically serve to call attention to the idea that Hieronimo has cast these two characters to play themselves. They recite lines that Hieronimo has written in “unknown languages” and take on foreign names, but their fundamental characters are preserved (4.1.173). Their performance is thus on one level natural and on another imposed on them through Hieronimo’s will.

Hieronimo exercises more extreme creative agency, however, in casting Lorenzo as the knight Erastus and himself as the Bashaw who murders this knight. He manipulates the roles to invert the murderer-victim relationship, having Lorenzo stand in for Horatio and claiming Lorenzo’s prior role of murderer for himself. He rewrites the past to allow for his own and, by extension, Horatio’s, triumph over Lorenzo. At his tragedy’s conclusion, Hieronimo declares for his ignorant audience the manner in which his casting and plot construction have allowed for the satisfaction of his grievances, his revenge. He summarizes the actual conflict that led to Horatio’s death, which is mirrored by the rivalry in the play leading to the murder of Soliman: “The cause was love, whence grew this mortal hate, / The hate, Lorenzo and young Balthazar, / The love, my son to Bel-imperia” (4.4.98-100). He additionally points out how his assumed theatrical role allows for his actual revenge: “O these accursed murderers: Which now performed, my heart be satisfied. / And to this end the bashaw I became / That might revenge me on Lorenzo’s life” (4.4.128-131). His tragedy, then, in effect explains the justification for each murder to his audience. He expounds each character’s guilt, calling attention to his own theatrical role of the Bashaw in the play as the final culmination of his revenge. It is also

---

4 Charles and Elaine Hallett comment on the moral implications of Hieronimo’s choice: “In the play Hieronimo is no longer the impartial advocate he claims to be. In order to carry out the action demanded by the Ghost and Revenge, he has had to cast himself in the role that Lorenzo should have played, that of Soliman’s corrupt Bashaw, while Lorenzo took the place that was Horatio’s. Hieronimo, that is, unwittingly reveals himself to be the villain of his piece at the very moment that he has assumed the role of God’s agent; he has transformed himself into the image of Lorenzo” (157). This interpretation reveals that Hieronimo’s play and his act of revenge itself is thus partially outside of his control in that his choice to assume Lorenzo’s role is necessitated by “the action demanded by the Ghost and Revenge,” making Revenge himself the ultimate author of the play-within-a-play and the driving force that necessitates Hieronimo’s villainy.
important to note that the only deaths that can be said to go unaddressed, those of Isabella and Castile, occur outside of the poetic justice of Hieronimo’s crafted work, for Isabella commits suicide before the play commences and *Soliman and Perseda* has ended when Hieronimo attacks Castile. Hieronimo’s authorship and direction of the drama as the vehicle of his revenge thus mirrors Revenge’s crafting of events for Andrea’s satisfaction, implying that the logic of retributive justice can only be upheld within the context of artful manipulation and within an order that is purely theatrical.

Under similar circumstances, Hamlet employs a theatrical work as a device meant to secure an act of retributive justice, revisiting the play-within-a-play element. Hamlet intends for his play to mirror actual events to such an extent that it will cause Claudius to recognize his own crime in it and, as a result, to respond with genuine emotion: “I have heard that guilty creatures sitting at a play/ Have by the very cunning of the scene / Been struck so to the soul that presently / They have proclaimed their malefactions” (*Hamlet* 1.2.528-531). Hamlet’s use of the adjective “cunning” to describe this scene’s design implies a particular form of representation, perhaps corresponding to his later direction to the Player to maintain the “special observance, that / you o’erstep not the modesty of nature” and “to hold, as / ‘twere, the mirror up to nature” (3.2.18-9, 21-2). Hamlet’s play, then, is intended to correspond as closely as possible to nature, to possess such a high degree of realism that Claudius, while watching in the audience, will consider the feigned actions he witnesses to be intimately related to his own past deeds.

The play-within-a-play, however, remains an artificial, constructed representation in that it contains lines inserted by Hamlet—an important departure from the original murder which it is meant to double. The level of artistic liberties Hamlet takes with the original script of “The Murder of Gonzago” is demonstrated by his renaming the play “The Mousetrap.” Although this
new name reflects the play’s purpose, it also indicates that Hamlet has taken creative control of
the original work. While the “dozen or sixteen lines” that Hamlet inserts in the play are not
identified, they likely relate to its function of elucidating Claudius’ guilt, either in relation to his
marrying Gertrude or in relation to the murder itself (2.2.480). Additionally, within the play that
he has ostensibly crafted to mirror Claudius’ alleged crime as much as possible, Hamlet yet
allows for a marked divergence between this play and the Ghost’s tale. Much like Hieronimo’s
choice to invert the roles of murderer and victim in his play in order to script Lorenzo’s death,
Lucianus, the murderer in Hamlet’s play, is the nephew of the king he kills, not his brother.
Lucianus is never referred to as the King’s nephew in the dialogue of “The Mousetrap,” but
Hamlet supplies this identification while commenting on the action of the play. Whether a result
of an original feature of “The Murder of Gonzago” or part of Hamlet’s revisions, this difference
indicates that not only Claudius, but also Hamlet is meant to see himself reflected in the play’s
events. Furthermore, Hamlet explicitly authorizes Lucianus’ killing of his uncle. Before
Lucianus pours the poison into his uncle’s ear, Hamlet states, “Begin, murderer. Leave thy
damnable faces and begin. Come, the croaking raven doth bellow for revenge” (3.2.248-50).
Thus, Hamlet encourages Lucianus’ violent act, perhaps out of anticipation to witness Claudius’
reaction, or possibly because he views this murder as a favorable event. Notably, Lucianus’
words spoken prior to the murder point to a sense of purpose and intentionality on his own part,
as he murders with his “thoughts black, hands apt, drugs fit, and time agreeing” (3.2.251). The
contrast between Lucianus’ intentional murder and Hamlet’s eventual killing of Claudius
highlights how Hamlet’s fantasy of perfect retributive justice, in which Claudius is killed in the
same manner as his father, is untenable outside of the artifice of this play-within-a-play.
The highly inartistic context of Hamlet’s late-coming murder of Claudius springs from a larger meditation on the divide between authenticity and performance. According to Rhodes, the main subject of Hamlet’s various ruminations throughout the play is the divide between “theatrical representation and truth” (126). Hamlet arrives at the idea that one’s observable actions may not correspond with one’s inner consciousness, that actions may themselves be performances for others that are not necessarily authentic. This distrust of action is revealed by Hamlet’s discomfort with the evident divide between authenticity and artifice. He notes that the signs of grief are in part “actions that a man might play” and enjoins Gertrude, “Assume a virtue, if you have it not” (1.2.84, 3.4.160). Hamlet therefore realizes that “action may indeed only be ‘acting’—histrionic, theatrical, insincere, untrue” (Rhodes 126-7). While Rhodes argues that Hamlet never fully resolves these problems of “being” and “acting” (127), the stance Hamlet takes in act five is, in fact, ultimately a rejection of theatrical action in favor of spontaneous, authentic reaction.

A far cry from the man who orchestrated a play to determine the appropriateness of action or inaction, the Hamlet of the last two scenes acts without thinking or planning his responses in advance. As Rhodes comments, in these final scenes “Hamlet becomes not the agent of revenge but its instrument and then its victim. He does not act; he only reacts. In the end, his killing Claudius is not an act of vengeance for the death of his father but impulsive retribution for the death of his mother” (127). This designation of Hamlet as impulsive and spontaneous in effect does express Hamlet’s rejection of the theatrical and the artificial. In acting spontaneously, or reacting to stimuli as they come, Hamlet abandons any attempt to intentionally script his actions or the outcome of events. He abandons all attempts to impose creative order or
intentionality on his reality and thus reaches a point where his actions are authentic responses to external stimuli, the fatal machinations of Laertes and Claudius.

In direct contrast to Hieronimo’s artistic scripting of his revenge scene, Hamlet enters his encounter with Claudius as a willing victim of another’s deceit, receiving action rather than crafting it. He tells the courtier Osric: “I am constant to my purposes; they follow the / King’s pleasure. If his fitness speaks, mine is ready; now / or whencesoever” (5.2.179-81). Hamlet grants Claudius, then, the authoritative position of initiator of action, creating the sense that Hamlet acts without premeditated aims. Hamlet’s lack of intentionality is again evinced in this same scene when Horatio warns him that it may be advisable to reject Claudius’ invitation to the duel. Hamlet responds: “If it be now, ‘tis not to come; if it be not to come, if will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come. The readiness is all. Since no man of aught he leaves knows, what is’t to leave betimes? Let be” (5.2.198-202). His words indicate that he is allowing events to run their providential course, refusing to act intentionally in order to alter reality. Although he maintains that “There is a special providence in the fall of a sparrow” and that “There’s a divinity that shapes our ends,” he locates this creative authority outside of the realm of human control, surrendering all attempts to craft existence to providential design (5.2.197-8, 10). Upon agreeing to the duel with Laertes, then, Hamlet characterizes himself as entering a state ruled by unmediated impulse. He demonstrates an inability or an unwillingness to employ artifice at this point, refusing the role of artist in favor of a more spontaneous existence.

As a consequence of Hamlet’s rejection of artifice, his revenge scene unfolds without any particular design. When he enters the duel, Hamlet is apparently unaware that this is the space in which he will finally have the opportunity to dispatch his revenge. Hamlet speaks of reconciliation with Laertes rather than remembrance of wrongs: “Let my disclaiming from a
purposed evil / Free me so far in your most generous thoughts / That I have shot my arrow o’er the house / And hurt my brother” (5.2.219-22). His thoughts are not bloody, and his words do not indicate that he has any idea that he will soon kill this man with whom he now proposes to make peace. In fact, Hamlet remains completely unaware that he, Laertes, and Gertrude have been killed until after the acts leading to their deaths have already been committed. Each character is poisoned without Hamlet’s knowledge, and he only realizes that both Laertes’ blade and the cup were lethal weapons when the already dying Laertes reveals Claudius’ deceit. Thus Hamlet, unlike Hieronimo, who takes his own life and thereby authors his own end, lacks the authority to define the terms of his own death, instead merely noting, “O, I die, Horatio” (5.2.336).

Additionally, Laertes must first inform him of his end, “Hamlet, thou art slain; / […] In thee there is not half an hour’s life” (5.2.296, 298). Rather than an assertion of the revenger’s will, these deaths are accidental, the result of others’ designs and chance. As noted by Rhodes, in what should be the scene’s final act of climatic revenge, the killing of Claudius occurs as a mere afterthought (127). After he and the others have already been poisoned and thus doomed to death, Hamlet quickly dispatches Claudius with no other statement of purpose than “Follow my mother” (5.2.310). In his impulsivity, Hamlet fails to properly frame this act as a revenge with the sort of expository speech delivered by Hieronimo. Such a speech, though, would demonstrate intentionality and artifice, two qualities Hamlet has at this point rejected. Thus, without recourse to theatricality and constructed order, Hamlet’s revenge loses its function as a reasonably intelligible retributive device. Instead, the play ends with a mess of “accidental judgments” and “casual slaughters” that cast doubt on the ability to attain such a state of perfect revenge (5.2.365).
Both *The Spanish Tragedy* and *Hamlet* thus indicate the highly theatrical nature of revenge through their employment of the device of the play-within-a-play. The *Spanish Tragedy* supports this theme by utilizing metatheatricality to make the events that facilitate revenge part of an artificially constructed order, a theatrical production within the space of the play itself. Both Revenge and Hieronimo function as the authors and directors of these plays, orchestrating revenge by scripting the actions of others. Each death, within this theatrical context, is satisfactorily contextualized as retribution for a previous act. The logic of equilibrium only breaks down in the moments directly before and after Hieronimo’s production of *Soliman and Perseda*, with the suicide of Isabella and Hieronimo’s murder of Castile, reinforcing this idea that equilibrium is only proper to art. *Hamlet*, in contrast, ends without any act of satisfying revenge. This play utilizes contrasting spaces of theatrical action and authentic action to demonstrate that true revenge can only be achieved within Hamlet’s constructed reality, whereas a murder proper to the realm of authentic action fails to embody these principles of retributive justice. Revenge and just equilibrium, then, are represented by both plays as distinctly artistic products.

Such a statement of revenge’s relationship to art must call into question the justification behind such acts. If an acceptable revenge can only be achieved in a highly controlled, artistic context, then attempts to enact revenge outside the world of the theater must inevitably fail to embody true justice. The plays demonstrate that revenge can only achieve just equilibrium when the revenger has total control over the people and events surrounding his violent act. Otherwise, his killing is simply a murder without any distinct justifying logic, and his violence has casualties outside the scope of retribution. As Francis Bacon wrote, “revenge is a kind of wild justice” that can have adverse effects on the revenger (31). These plays seem to indicate that allowing the law
to account for offenses, as Bacon recommends, may be a recognition of the private individual’s inability to exercise the level of authority or control over people and events sufficient for a clean act of revenge. Revenge tragedy would thus seem to serve a conservative, didactic function in that its depiction of revenge advocates against such acts.
The Performance of Madness

The artifice of plays within plays and their import for the moral status of revenge is complicated in these works, however, by the ambiguous mental state of their authors. A recurring motif in revenge tragedy, the madness of the revenger has vast thematic consequences. As Charles and Elaine Hallett argue, “the whole structure of the revenge tragedy can be understood in terms of the revenger’s efforts to free himself from the restraints that forbid the act of vengeance, a process that involves moving from sanity to madness” (9). Revenge in Renaissance England could be termed a mad pursuit in that it opposed both the reasonable order of the state and the “divine order” of God (Hallett 9). This framework was additionally coupled with a Renaissance understanding of inordinate passion as inducing mental disorder; the revenger’s grief, hatred, or other violent emotions connected with the original offence contribute to “the overthrow of the reason by the passion of revenge” (Hallett 44, 62). Violent revenge thus seems reasonable to the revenger, who comes to view his environment irrationally in projecting his own illogical passion for vengeance onto his perceptions of the world (Hallett 79). This fundamental irrationality is reflected in the revenger’s play-within-a-play, in which he is “symbolically confusing the real world with a world created out of his own psyche” (Hallett 10). The violence of the revenger is thereby only reasonable in the world as perceived and crafted by his disordered mind, and the path to revenge becomes a conflict between the revenger’s reason on the one hand and his developing madness on the other.

The madness of the revenger, then, is intrinsically a function of the play’s final denunciation of his actions. Revenge can only be successfully enacted within the artificial space of the play-within-a-play because that space is also the product of a disordered mind. Exemplifying this point, as William West holds, the murders that take place during Soliman and
*Perseda* are initially indecipherable, both to the internal audience of the play-within-a-play and to the actual audience of *The Spanish Tragedy* itself: “The reactions of the onstage audience make explicit that they do not understand what has happened; nor is it likely that the offstage audience can see any difference between the body of an actor playing a character playing dead, and an actor playing a dead character” (229). The meaning of Hieronimo’s play-within-a-play only becomes decipherable after he has delivered his explication, revealing that the murders are not “fabulously counterfeit” and that the actors will not “in a minute starting up again, / Revive to please to-morrow’s audience” (4.4.77, 81-2). With Hieronimo’s speech, “The real audience must […] reinterpret the signs of the actors’ bodies in front of them; the feigned corpses onstage, without changing their appearance, suddenly change their meaning and become, in the fiction of the play, real” (West 229). The meaning of the action of the *Soliman and Perseda* is thus literally made by Hieronimo’s explication, which establishes a logic of retributive violence that temporarily resolves the audience’s confusion by both conveying the idea that actual murders have been committed and detailing the justification behind the murders of the involved parties (4.4.98-100). This meaning is compromised, though, in that its source is a man who is understood to be of unsound mind.

This temporary moment of the audience’s confusion is ultimately not resolved by Hieronimo’s explanation, but instead extended to the play’s entire conclusion when he proceeds to murder the innocent Castile. Although Hieronimo explicates the violence of *Soliman and Perseda*, his final violent act is left unexplained because Hieronimo literally renders any explanation unspeakable through his self-mutilation and suicide. These acts, coupled with the murder of Castile, the King describes as “monstrous deeds” befitting a “wretch” (4.4.202, 192).

---

5 Bowers admits that Castile’s murder may be somewhat authorized by “the primitive custom where, in a state of family solidarity, any member of a family is as acceptable as the criminal” (81). The King’s strong denunciation and the graphic nature of Hieronimo’s suicide, however, indicate that this act goes beyond such a recognized custom of retributive violence.
The King thus presents these final deeds as beyond the limits of reasonable human understanding, the actions of a man who has abandoned the norms of human behavior and descended into the realm of the unintelligible. Thus, West’s observation that “in the deadly play that Hieronimo stages, meaning is replaced by violence” is better generalized to *The Spanish Tragedy*’s conclusion as a whole (229). No attempt is made to rationalize Hieronimo’s final actions, and these acts thereby appear the irrational, “monstrous deeds” of a mad individual.

Such an assessment is complicated by the ambiguous nature of Hieronimo’s shifting mental state. West holds that “because his intentions go unexplained, […] [i]t is impossible for the audience to tell which of Hieronimo’s actions point to his authorial intent, and which simply show his madness or are free of intention” (227). Hieronimo himself, however, asserts that his madness is merely a device to entrap his adversaries, addressing Castile:

> And you, my lord, whose reconciled son  
> Marched in a net, and thought himself unseen  
> And rated me for brainstruck lunacy,  
> With ‘God amend that mad Hieronimo!’-  
> How can you brook our play’s catastrophe? (4.4.117-21)

Hieronimo cruelly points out that Lorenzo’s credulity in believing that Hieronimo’s actions were the product of “brainstruck lunacy” facilitated his ensnarement in Hieronimo’s plan by granting him a false sense of security, “unseen” as the perpetrator of Horatio’s murder and the necessary target of Hieronimo’s revenge. Prior to this point, however, Hieronimo has made no indication that his seemingly mad acts, such as his misrecognition of Don Bazulto, are feigned. On the contrary, he explicitly states that he will adopt a calm demeanor, awaiting an opportunity to pursue revenge: “And therefore all times fit not for revenge. / Thus therefore will I rest me in unrest, / Dissembling quiet in unquietness, / Not seeming that I know their villainies” (3.13.28-31). The scenes immediately following this resolution, though, display Hieronimo pursuing a
contrary course, publicly drawing out the handkerchief stained with Horatio’s blood and
professing his passion for revenge:

I’ll down to hell, and in this passion
Knock at the dismal gates of Pluto’s court,
Getting by force, as Alcides did,
A troop of Furies and tormenting hags
To torture Don Lorenzo and the rest.

Then will I rent and tear them thus and thus,
Shivering their limbs in pieces with my teeth. (3.13.109-13, 122-3)

Accompanied by the protests of various citizens as he tears their bonds to pieces just as he
intends to dismember Lorenzo, this declaration in no way adheres to Hieronimo’s prior
resolution to pursue “milder speeches” in awaiting a chance for revenge (3.13.41). Additionally,
his address of Don Bazulto as Horatio “changed in death’s black shade” and eventual imposition
of his own consuming grief onto the old man, “Thou art the lively image of my grief: / Within
thy face my sorrows I may see (3.13.146, 162-3), display a psyche increasing consumed by the
passion for revenge. Subsequently, though, Hieronimo maintains the feigned composure he
originally proposes, “dissembling quiet in unquietness” by treating Lorenzo congenially and
agreeing to orchestrate the ambassador’s entertainment with his play, telling the court, “I’ll be
friends with you all” (3.15.157). The play nevertheless closes with sudden, confusing outbursts
of inexplicable violence. Hieronimo thus appears to fluctuate between states of composure and
states of mad disorder, which, combined with this declaration that his madness is merely feigned,
leave his mental state, and by association the potential reasoning behind his violence, somewhat
ambiguous at any given instance.

Due to this ambiguity, Hieronimo’s “madness” has been variously interpreted. Bowers
holds that “Hieronimo is entirely sane in his revengeful plans,” although the stabbing of Castile
coupled with his refusal to answer the king’s questioning cause him to depart “so far from the
English sense of justice as finally to withdraw all sympathy” (80-1). Others find the murder of Castile a fundamentally inexplicable act of madness: “Much critical ink has been spilled in seeking reasons for Hieronimo’s murder of Castile, when the point is precisely that there is no reason for it—it is a mad act, an act of cruelty and of waste, and one dramatically calculated to differentiate the justice of nature from earthly or heavenly justice” (Hallett 158). This reading interestingly characterizes Hieronimo’s murder as both “a mad act” and an act that adheres to “the justice of nature.” This conflation of madness with nature tellingly indicates a privileging of the social order over the natural order, since to follow nature against the strictures of society is deemed a mad pursuit.

Christopher Crosbie similarly posits that Hieronimo’s violent actions are an expression of natural impulses; however, he situates these impulses as reactions to rather than deviations from the social order:

By presenting ambition, the latent desire for growth and advancement, as the natural product of a human psychology informed by Aristotle, Kyd reveals both the artificiality of socially constructed class hierarchy and a legitimized rationale for middling aspiration. More significantly, however, he imaginatively depicts revenge as not simply irrationally brutish, or, conversely, highly calculative, but also as instinctively reproductive, a mode of production that functions as an outlet for thwarted material fecundity. (4)

Revenge is thus the natural result of conflicts between “the aristocracy and the middling household” composed of industrious individuals affiliated with the aristocracy, but not noble by birth (Crosbie 5). These members of what Crosbie terms “the middling sort” seek “future advancement through prudent [household] management,” or oeconomia (9). Crosbie draws on Kyd’s translation of The Householder’s Philosophy to identify Kyd’s reinterpretation of Aristotle’s concept of the vegetative soul as a natural force that not only drives such individuals to sustain their lives, but also to improve their social positions:
What in Aristotle is simple nutrition and “nourishment” becomes glossed in *The Householder’s Philosophy* as a process whereby one ‘getteth the living’ by way of nature for “mans use and service” in order to acquire ‘gayne.’ The *Householder’s Philosophy* is thus informed by both the Aristotelian vegetative soul and the material, economic concerns of the middling sort regarding self-preservation. (11)

The action of *The Spanish Tragedy*, though, depicts the limits of such natural ambition and growth through Lorenzo’s blocking of Horatio’s relationship with Bel-imperia. Lorenzo takes offence with Bel-imperia’s choice of lovers from a lower class, telling her he chose to dispose of Horatio after “remembering that old disgrace, / Which [she] for Don Andrea had endured, / And now were likely longer to sustain, / By being found so meanly accompanied” (3.10.54-7). With Horatio figured as a symbolic “outgrowth […] of the Knight Marshal’s ambition,” his murder at the hands of the aristocratic Lorenzo “depicts oeconomia as useful only to a point, as the promise of social advancement remains starkly delimited by existing social hierarchies” (Crosbie 24, 6). Hieronimo’s conflict with Lorenzo is thus not merely a personal dispute, but also symbolizes a larger social conflict between the ambitions of members of the “middling sort” and the restrictions on social mobility imposed by the practices of the aristocracy.

Within this framework, Hieronimo’s revenge becomes the outgrowth of a flawed, artificial social order that does not accommodate any natural self-advancement. In the speech Hieronimo delivers upon discovery of Horatio’s slain body (2.5.67-80), Crosbie finds that Hieronimo expresses “a shift in his own ambitious energies” that “figures his revenge as a modified application of the vegetative faculty”: “Hieronimo desires a scenario where rational and sensitive functions dissipate, leaving him […] with only his impulse to revenge Horatio remaining” (25).6 This impulse to revenge is figured in vegetative terms, as Hieronimo calls for

---

6 Hamlet makes a similar pronouncement during his encounter with the Ghost: “Yea, from the table of my memory/ I’ll wipe away all trivial fond records, / […] And thy commandment all alone shall live” (1.5.98-9, 102). While Hieronimo proposes a complete block of his rational and sensory functions, though, Hamlet is focused solely on memory. Thus, Hamlet continues to reason vigorously throughout his pursuit of revenge, often offering quite vocal critiques of the behavior of those around him.
medicinal herbs to suppress his non-vegetative functions of reason and sensation, leaving him only the involuntary, natural functions of the body meant for self-preservation (Crosbie 25). The remaining drive towards revenge is thus a form of Kyd’s oeconomia, figuring revenge as “as an altered type of ‘getting,’” a different king of natural growth (Crosbie 28). As Crosbie states: “Revenge […] becomes […] a form of propagation and extension of one’s self by way of alternate means when lawful attempts to advance become retarded” (28). The seemingly unjustified murder of Castile, then, can be viewed as a means for Hieronimo to reassert his identity within a society that has denied his natural propagation by murdering his son. The murders of Castile and Balthazar rob the two kingdoms of their successors, creating “in the two Kings two Hieronimos, establishing his [Hieronimo’s] perpetual presence at court by puncturing it with irremediable absences” (Crosbie 32). Hieronimo’s seemingly unjustified murder of Castile is thereby accounted for when considered part of his attempt to propagate Hieronimo’s own image in lieu of Horatio, his natural progeny. By denying the Viceroy his son and the King his successors, Hieronimo reproduces his image as the head of a dying household in the form of the two newly bereft men. This understanding of Hieronimo’s revenge thus casts it as adhering to a natural logic that functions destructively when thwarted by restrictive, artificial social conventions.

The crux of the discussion of madness in The Spanish Tragedy, then, lies in the relationship between the natural and the artificial. Although Crosbie maintains that Hieronimo’s revenge may be termed “irrationally brutish, or, conversely, highly calculative,” his appeal to its basis in Aristotelian instinctual growth grants that Kyd also represents revenge as a natural pursuit (4). While revenge may be depicted as an artificial, illogical attempt to impose retributive justice, justice itself may simultaneously be presented as an artificial ideal of the constructed
social order. Semenza writes that revenge is a direct result of malfunction of this social order: “the impulse toward self-government emerges precisely out of those moments in which specific laws and customs break down or fail to achieve their intended purposes. In such situations, human beings are faced with the simple fact of injustice” (55). Rather than a failure of the social order, injustice may be inherent in the system. As Crosbie notes, the King’s settling of Lorenzo’s and Horatio’s conflicting claims on Balthazar’s ransom displays such anxiety over fairness in a society highly influenced by hierarchical class divisions: “Although the King presents his adjudication as according with the claims of merit, the unequal, artificially constructed social positions—not the martial exploits of Horatio and Lorenzo—influence significantly the division of Balthazar’s ransom and goods” (16). Although the General reports that Horatio defeated Balthazar “in single fight,” Lorenzo inserts himself as Balthazar’s co-captor, seizing his horse and weapon after Horatio caused him to dismount (1.2.77). The dispute over reward for the capture is largely settled in terms of class. The King repeatedly emphasizes Lorenzo’s superior social status, referring to him as “our nephew” (1.2.112), and bases his awarding Lorenzo guardianship of Balthazar on Lorenzo’s superior “estate” because “Horatio’s house were small for all his [Balthazar’s] train” (1.3.186-7). This initial conflict, then, indicates that Lorenzo’s murder of Horatio is an extension of such thinking based in the system of class privilege. Thus, when Bel-Imperia confronts Lorenzo concerning her perceived mistreatment, he can claim that he has acted for her benefit: “For I have done you no disparagement; / Unless, by more discretion than deserved, / I sought to save your honour and mine own” (3.10.36-8). Lorenzo’s murder logically adheres to a social order in which males of the aristocracy merit more without “merit” and can practice the arbitrary rule of force over their social inferiors.7

---

7 Foakes trances this idea of the illogical or the arbitrary as the basis of civilization in his discussion of biblical stories that influenced the Renaissance Christian worldview. Particularly, he discusses the story of Cain and Abel as a “founding legend of
Rather than directly articulate this unsettling assessment of society, though, Kyd can use the ambiguous mental state of the revenger to mask his critique of the social order. When viewed as a mad act, Hieronimo’s violence against the state, symbolized in his dual attacks against Spain’s and Portugal’s heirs, remains inexplicable. Instead, madness becomes the direct cause of the violence rather than Lorenzo’s original offence motivated by his promulgation of the social hierarchy. Thus, the relationship between this causal offence and the effect of Hieronimo’s “monstrous deeds” is somewhat blurred by Kyd’s presentation of Hieronimo’s ambiguous mental state. If Hieronimo’s violence is viewed as a natural reaction to the offence, though, the principle of causation reenters the scenario, and one is forced to speculate as to how Lorenzo’s act originating in the social order generates Hieronimo’s violent conclusion. Kyd thus avoids directly implicating the existing social order as inducing such monstrosities by veiling his critique in the shroud of Hieronimo’s madness. He thereby avoids directly presenting Hieronimo’s revenge as legitimate while incorporating elements that can provide just such a reading.

Similarly, Shakespeare utilizes the device of the revenger’s madness as a means to allow Hamlet to articulate his intention to murder Claudius in such a way as to mitigate the consequences for such proclamations. As Steven Greenblatt notes, Hamlet’s feigned madness is highly ineffective as a means to conceal his intent to pursue revenge: “As soon as he learns of the murder, a truly cunning avenger […] would begin to feign psychic healing, not madness. Hamlet’s antic disposition instead sufficiently arouses Claudius’s wary interest” (219). The Christianity” that implies that the “conflicting impulses” for violence and order are at the core of human society (25). Cain is presented as “the founder of civilization,” in that his son “builds the first city;” however, his descendants and their civilizing mission are set in motion by “an act of wanton violence for which no motive is given” (25). Thus, at the foundation of society is inexplicable violence: “Cain could be related to many other examples of fratricidal conflict in myth and history, and seen both as initiator and as scapegoat, if the murder of a brother is what it takes to establish the city…” (25). While Cain my be derided for his act, it is ultimately necessitated by the emerging social order, just as Lorenzo’s act in murdering Horatio may be unjust, but not unjustified within its social context.
precedent for Hamlet’s madness is likely derived from an earlier version of the play and the Scandinavian tale on which it was based, in which both the father’s murder and the son’s obligation to pursue revenge were publicly known (Bowers 90). Yet the secrecy of the murder in *Hamlet* removes this necessity for dissimulation in that Claudius is initially unaware that Hamlet knows he has cause to avenge his father. What Hamlet’s “antic disposition” does accomplish, though, is to discredit his statements for those who do not know that his madness is feigned.

Before his assumption of feigned madness, Hamlet commits to masking his displeasure with the state of Denmark’s monarchy: “It is not, nor it cannot come to good; / But break, my heart, for I must hold my tongue” (1.2.158-9). Hamlet’s “madness,” however, grants him occasion to freely vent his antipathy towards Claudius. In his seemingly mad condemnation of Ophelia, Hamlet articulates a threat against Claudius’ life: “I say we will have no more marriage. Those that are married already—all but one—shall live” (3.1.146-7). Hamlet again voices this intent when he asks after murdering Polonius, “Is it the King?” and makes clear that Claudius is the intended target of his violence in his address to the corpse, “I took thee for thy better” (3.4.24, 30). Hamlet thus repeatedly verbalizes his intent to pursue violence against the King.

These pronouncements are made possible by Hamlet’s feigned madness, as both Ophelia and Gertrude discount his threats as the ravings of a madman (3.1.149, 3.2.102). Thus, Hamlet’s madness insulates him from the women’s condemnation. Tellingly, Claudius is not as credulous in attributing Hamlet’s words to madness. He comments somewhat skeptically on Hamlet’s “mad” speech to Ophelia: “Now what he spake, though it lacked form a little, / Was not like madness.” (3.1.161-2). While Hamlet’s “mad” discourse puts Claudius on his guard against “some danger” (3.1.166), the other characters’ inability to recognize this threat in Hamlet’s ravings insulates him from Claudius taking public action against him. Claudius must thus be
careful in condemning Hamlet, not disclosing his intent to have Hamlet executed in England. Claudius makes clear that an open act of treason will not be tolerated in his dismissal of Laertes’ threats: “Let him go, Gertrude, do not fear our person. / There’s such divinity doth hedge a king/ That treason can but peep to what it would, / Acts little of his will” (4.5.122-25). The veiled threats of a madman, however, present a more difficult challenge in that Hamlet’s real threat to Claudius remains a secret, hidden behind the veil of madness that also obscures his traitorous sentiments. Thus disguised, Hamlet cannot be openly condemned and prosecuted as an enemy of the state. The performance of madness thereby becomes Hamlet’s means to power in that it grants him the agency to actively denounce Claudius and to pursue revenge without incurring the direct condemnation of the state. Hamlet thus practices the art of performance to achieve his ultimate goal of regicide.

In both plays, then, madness becomes a tool of dissimulation that allows for the propagation of a message or the furtherance of a goal without implicating the actor. While Kyd’s Spanish Tragedy can be read as a critique of hierarchical class structure, the mere presence of Hieronimo’s madness allows Kyd’s depiction of society and Hieronimo’s final grotesque actions to remain ambiguously suspect, leaving the potential rationale behind the murder of Castile inexplicable. Hamlet uses this obfuscating function of madness to his advantage, feigning such a disorder in order to actively pursue his revenge without the sort of opposition that more direct, unambiguous acts of treason would engender.

The performance of feigned madness is thus potentially a device of the inhibited individual, such as Hamlet, who can be granted greater liberty in oppressive situations. More broadly, however, for the author of a tragedy of revenge, the performance of the revenger’s madness introduces an ambiguity that prevents one from precisely identifying the playwrights’
attitude toward revenge. Such ambiguity effectively avoids the censure of those I examined earlier who found that representing revenge on stage could incite others to imitate such acts, instead leaving the door open to a didactic interpretation that equates revenge with madness. Yet the incorporation of madness as a device also allows the playwright to avoid issuing a direct challenge to the dominant social order by locating any critique in a character whose mental function is suspect. The metatheatrical aspect to madness, however, or the suggestion that the revenger’s madness is merely feigned, ironically perhaps gestures to the fact that madness is indeed just so, a device meant to obscure meaning. Hamlet’s performance of madness, much like the actual player’s performance of the mad revenger, allows for the communication of potentially subversive messages in a context that displaces their author’s responsibility for their suggestion. Hamlet is not directly held accountable for his inappropriate acts because he is deemed mad, just as the playwright cannot be directly charged with communicating subversive sentiments in a revenge tragedy because these sentiments come from the mouths of madmen.
Women as Performers

Madness in revenge tragedies can thus serve as a means for the playwright or revenger to acquire agency in restrictive situations. By masking his actual motivations or intentions, the performance of or appeal to madness grants the playwright the freedom to write or act outside the scrutiny of others. Given that the revenger’s act of violence is highly constrained by dominant socio-political structures in these plays, this freedom is also integral to his ability to ultimately achieve his ends. In parallel instances, the women of revenge tragedy repeatedly utilize performance or dissimulation in the attempt to gain increased agency. Denied access to traditional forms of masculinized revenge, female characters attempt to achieve their ends through the performative manipulation of others. The women of John Webster’s *The White Devil* and *The Changeling*, co-authored by Thomas Middleton and William Rowley, enact such performances in the attempt to mitigate masculine control over their actions.

As Christina Luckyj notes, the main instances of female performance in *The White Devil* take place in its two scenes of semi-legal proceedings: Isabella’s “divorce” from Brachiano and Vittoria’s trial for adultery (192). In both cases, the women employ conspicuous performances as the means to gain some control over proceedings that are initially dominated by masculine will. Isabella first introduces the difficulty that women encounter when seeking such favorable outcomes. She enters her conflict with Brachiano confident in her ability to persuade her husband to cease pursuing his affair with Vittoria, telling her brother: “these arms/ Shall charm his poison, force it to obeying/ And keep him chaste from an infected straying” (2.1.16-18). Brachiano, however, denies her attempts at reconciliation, presenting his word as carrying the force of law:

by this

This wedding ring: I’ll never more lie with thee.
And this divorce shall be as truly kept
As if the judge had doomed it: fare you well,
Our sleeps are severed. (2.1.196-198)

Rather than openly oppose Brachiano’s decree, Isabella attempts a subtle subversion, transforming herself from the victim of Brachiano’s will into the author of their separation. She tells Brachiano, “you shall have present witness/ How I’ll work peace between you; I will make/ Myself the author of your cursed vow” (2.1.215-7). Isabella proceeds to express her frustration with her impotence in terms of a desire for masculine authority, the same authority which Brachiano has practiced against her: “O that I were a man, or that I had power/ To execute my apprehended wishes/ I would whip some with scorpions” (2.1.242-4). This desire for vengeance in reaction to adultery is presented as not only justified but necessitated by the situation, as Monticelso finds Camillo’s inaction in the face of such an offence more deplorable than his own betrayal of a kinsman: “It may be objected I am dishonourable/ To play thus with my kinsman, but I answer, / For my revenge I’d stake a brother’s life/ That being wronged durst not avenge himself” (2.2.286-288). Isabella’s hypothetical revenge, however, is imaginatively practiced against her husband’s mistress rather than the offending male himself: wishing, “To dig the strumpet’s eyes out, let her lie/ Some twenty months a-dying […]/ Preserve her flesh like mummia, for trophies/ Of my just anger!” (2.1.245-6, 247-8). This curse adheres exactly to Francisco’s expectations of feminine behavior, labeling her “a foolish, mad, / And jealous woman” (2.1.263-4) in her fixation with Vittoria as the indirect cause of her marital strife (Luckyj 194).

Isabella’s mad display is just that, however, a performance. According to Luckyj, “Isabella plays out both the hysterical impotence of the jealous woman and the tyrannical potency of the autonomous male,” ultimately revealing the theatricality of both gender roles and
thus her ability to represent either (195). This feminized performance is coupled with Isabella’s performance of masculine authority in that she repeats Brachiano’s previously stated declaration of divorce, acting out this script before an audience of men: “Henceforth I’ll never lie with you, by this, / This wedding ring” (2.1.251-2). Isabella subverts Brachiano’s prior divorce, though, by rephrasing the terms of its declaration. While Brachiano references his own authority in declaring the finality of the divorce, stating “this divorce shall be as truly kept/ As if the judge had doomed it” (2.1.196-7), Isabella references the witnesses of the declaration as the sources of its authority: “And this divorce shall be as truly kept/ As if in thronged court a thousand ears/ Had heard it” (2.1.255-7). As many have observed, Isabella’s reference to the “thronged court” is an instance of metatheatricality, referencing the play’s audience members who do indeed witness this decree (Luckyj 192).

Isabella’s invocation of the audience at this particular moment is key in that, unlike Francisco, it has just witnessed Brachiano’s denunciation of Isabella and their son Giovanni: “accursed be the priest/ That sang the wedding mass, and even my issue” (2.1.190-1). Although Isabella patiently endures Brachiano’s disparagement of her own character in the form of accusations of political and sexual betrayal, she condemns this curse of their union and its offspring (2.1.192). She additionally reminds Brachiano of dynastic concerns, mentioning his “hopeful son” and telling him to allow her to claim to initiate the divorce in front of her brother “for the weal/ Of both [their] dukedoms” (2.1.212, 2.1.219-20). The audience, mindful of this prior conversation, thus witnesses Isabella’s declaration not as the jealous act of the “foolish, mad” woman she plays (2.1.263), but as an intelligent, reasoned political maneuver meant to ensure dynastic stability and her “hopeful” offspring’s inheritance. Francisco’s critique of foolish madness thus falls more rightly on Brachiano, as Isabella notes of the divorce: “I have some
cause to do it, you have none” (2.1.218). Isabella makes clear that she recognizes the injustice of this situation in another change to Brachiano’s original discourse: “After making him kiss her, she reinscribes his discourse; whereas he refers to her ‘love’ (l. 200) for him, she recasts it sardonically as her ‘former dotage’ (l.259)” (Luckyj 195). Isabella thus recharacterizes her devotion to Brachiano as a form of foolish affection, perhaps due to his displayed lack of merit. Isabella’s performance thus signals to the knowing audience that she has been foolish and mad in her devotion to Brachiano, while prudent and wise in her choice to enact their separation. Brachiano, in turn, appears the passive fool, as Isabella proceeds to take the very kiss that he has previously denied her, unable to offer protest in the context of her performance lest he signal his complicity to Francisco. Isabella’s performance thus becomes a means for her to emphasize and communicate the injustice of Brachiano’s imprudent actions without voicing a direct critique. In doing so, she simultaneously recasts herself as a character with the agency to implicitly condemn this behavior through the prudent enactment of her own divorce.8

Vittoria similarly utilizes performativity to subvert masculine authority in her trial scene. This scene, along with Isabella’s divorce, is one of many in which male characters attempt to explicate the behavior of female characters. The most important instance of such explication occurs when both Brachiano and Flamineo offer interpretations of Vittoria’s dream. Although Vittoria makes no explicit call for the murder of Isabella and Camillo, Flamineo interprets her

---

8 Laura Bromley finds Isabella’s enactment of divorce as one of submission rather than subversion: “Far from daring to act in her own behalf, Isabella is actually demonstrating her compliance with Francisco’s advice that she suffer ‘slight wrongs’ such as her husband’s with the patience shown by other women” (52). Isabella’s performance of the divorce, though, publicizes and condemns these “slight wrongs” to the audience, which she invokes as a witness. By setting Brachiano’s wrongs in contrast to her own virtuous action, she recasts herself as a morally superior martyr rather than as a subjugated victim. At the same time, her performance is in part an expression of her feminine lack of power in that it is necessitated by her inability to otherwise oppose the growing conflict between her two male relations, Brachiano and Francisco. Isabella’s choices are thus constrained, but her decision to perform a divorce grants her a measure of agency in creating a space in which she can publicly deploy her critique of Brachiano as an unfaithful husband and negligent political leader without endangering political stability. Thus, Bromley’s assertion that when Isabella and Cornelia perform “they do so not to assert themselves and defy the values and actions which they oppose, but only to avoid still more disruption and violence” (53) neglects to take into account the effect of the discrepancies between Brachiano’s declaration and Isabella’s subsequent performance as well as its metatheatricality, which signal both Isabella’s agency and her implicit critique of her unfaithful husband.
conveying this dream to Brachiano as implicating her in the violence to come: “Excellent devil. / She hath taught him in a dream/ To make away his Duchess and her husband” (1.2.238-40). Monticelso attempts to charge Vittoria with just such an offence at her trial, questioning her, “Who lodged beneath your roof that fatal night/ Your husband brake his neck?” (3.2.153-4). Although Vittoria is not afforded a response to Flamineo’s comment, she is able to publicly deny Monticelso’s charge, telling him, “These are but feigned shadows of my evils” (3.2.146). As Laura Bromley notes, such a defense “departs from the norms of passivity and silence”; Vittoria is thus caught in a paradoxical situation: “The only way a woman can defend herself against such accusations is with words. […] But in this society, a woman who demands to be heard, who asserts herself rather than yielding to her adversary, proves herself to be a whore, fury, or devil” (50). Vittoria avoids such definition, though, by declaring her defense a performance, kneeling as she addresses the ambassadors who witness her trial:

Humbly thus,
    Thus low, to the most worthy and respected
    Lieger ambassadors, my modesty
    And womanhood I tender; but withal
    So entangled in a cursed accusation
    That my defense, of force, like Perseus
    Must personate masculine virtue to the point. (3.2.130-136)

Vittoria appeals to these ideals of “modesty and womanhood,” but insists that the “cursed accusation” she currently faces forces her to “personate masculine virtue.” According to Luckyj, “‘personate’ had by the early seventeenth century become a new and specifically theatrical term” and “was also commonly used to mean ‘imitate, feign, counterfeit’” (192). Like Isabella, Vittoria thus utilizes a metatheatrical reference to make clear that her speech is a performance enacted before an audience. She thus avoids the condemnation of the ambassadors for her behavior, having designated it as an imitation of masculinity rather than a corruption of femininity. This
acknowledgement of performance grants her the ability to respond defiantly to Monticelso’s accusations, creating a space for her own defense.

Another instance of metatheatricality allows Vittoria the second means of her defense, this time making a direct appeal to the audience of *The White Devil*. As many have noted, Vittoria’s appeal to the Lawyer to deliver his denunciation in the vernacular rather than Latin seems inappropriate in the context of her trial: “Pray my lord, let him speak his usual tongue. / […] amongst this auditory/ Which come to hear my cause, the half or more/ May be ignorant in’t [Latin]” (3.2.13,16-7). The auditory Vittoria refers to cannot be the “all the grave lieger ambassadors” assembled to hear her trial, who would be likely to understand Latin, but more aptly describes the audience of the play itself (3.1.2; Luckyj 192). Such a direct appeal to the audience serves to focus its reception of the following dialogue. By identifying the reason for the audience’s presence as “to hear [her] cause,” Vittoria establishes herself as an active agent in the trial rather than its passive object:

By asking the audience to espouse her cause, she exchanges the position of defendant for that of plaintiff in a slander trial. In order to gain the pity and support of the audience—both on-stage, represented by the ambassadors, and off-stage in the theatre—she fashions herself as a ‘slandered heroine,’ emphasizing her own helplessness and the injustice of the proceedings. (Habermann 110)

Vittoria thus actively redefines her role in the trial from defendant to prosecutor, and she proceeds to play that part by countering Monticelso’s accusations with her own. Particularly, Vittoria foregrounds the theatricality of Monticelso’s part as prosecutor, telling him: “It doth not suit a reverend cardinal/ To play the lawyer thus” (3.2.60-1). Thus, “the Cardinal himself is as deeply implicated in performance as the woman he condemns” (Luckyj 199). This idea that both Monticelso and Vittoria are merely playing parts in the trial puts them on more equal ground, revealing that the words of both characters are performative rather than direct statements of truth.
Vittoria can thus continually counter Monticelso’s interpretations of her appearance and actions with different readings of her own. Therefore, when Monticelso appeals to the simple truth of his denunciations—“I shall be plainer with you, and paint out/ Your follies in more natural red and white/ Than that upon your cheek” (3.2.51-3)—Vittoria can counter by emphasizing the potential discrepancy between such a display and reality: “O you mistake. / You raise a blood as noble in this cheek/ As ever was your mother’s” (3.2.53-5). Her words are ambiguous, either a subtle insult directed towards Monticelso or a sincere defense on her own behalf, foregrounding the difficulties of interpretation. Such insistence “on the ambiguity of visible signs,” which Vittoria consistently develops throughout the trial, serves to discredit its proceedings by revealing the impossibility of ascertaining her guilt from such ambiguous evidence as Brachiano’s letter and her choice of clothing; Webster also implies that Monticelso’s performance as lawyer may be as deceptive as Vittoria herself is charged with being (Luckyj 200). Both Vittoria’s rhetorical performance, which appeals to the audience for its support, and her exposure of Monticelso’s performativity serve to support her cause in a trial that offers no other defense.

Although Isabella’s performance of divorce and Vittoria’s metatheatrical defense in the trial scene grant them increased agency, they ultimately lack the power to counter male condemnation. Isabella must submit to Brachiano’s will even as she subverts it, and while Vittoria gains the esteem of her audience, which recognizes her “brave spirit” (3.2.140), she is ultimately condemned and led away to the house of convertites. For women, then, these performances are enactments of power, but not the means of its possession. Additionally, the performance in itself, in Isabella’s case, may reflect her internalization of masculine prerogatives, as her divorce in deed if not in word fulfills Francisco’s suggestion to “suffer these slight wrongs (2.1.240)” (Bromley 53). Such is also the case in *The Changeling*, where Beatrice-
Joanna is able to partially subvert Alsemero’s control over her body through performance but simultaneously conforms to a patriarchal ideal in doing so.

Through her discovery and performance of the virginity test, Beatrice-Joanna is able to deny Alsemero authority over her body. Beatrice-Joanna’s pre-marital loss of her virginity denies her one of the few means of power or esteem women possessed, since with the vanquishing of her virginity “she loses all power of sexual negotiation. Given the valuation placed on female, corporeal enclosure, the rude and sudden loss of her virginity would signify the first and last gesture of her patriarchally idealized self” (Little 28). Beatrice-Joanna, in departing from the patriarchal ideal of preserved virginity, loses her value within that system, allowing her to perceive a devaluation of her very life; she states that, upon discovering her fault, Alsemero “cannot but in justice strangle [her]” (4.1.14). Beatrice-Joanna initially identifies Alsemero’s power to discern the loss of her virginity with that of the enforcers of state authority, much like Brachiano implicitly casts himself as a judge in his divorce. She muses that Alsemero is one “So clear in understanding (that’s [her] plague now), / Before whose judgment will [her] fault appear/ Like malefactors’ crimes before tribunals” (4.1.6-8, 14). This expression of Alsemero’s perceived power over her, though, is immediately subverted by her discovery of his “physician’s closet” (4.1.20). This discovery reveals that Alsemero’s mastery “need in fact to be maintained by the most artificial of helps,” his ‘Book of Experiment’ and diagnostic potions (Hopkins 151). After discovering that Alsemero’s authority is merely “artificial,” then, Beatrice-Joanna can also employ artifice to gain power of her own.

Beatrice-Joanna’s performance of the virginity test, though, itself reinscribes her subjugation. The test calls for mad behavior on the part of the virgin who drinks the potion, making her “incontinently gape, then fall a sudden sneezing, last into a violent laughing” (4.1.48-
As Arthur Little notes, these signs of virginity are also the symptoms of the innate hysterical diseases that men historically attributed to women:

In order to prove herself worthy of patriarchal enclosure, the woman must physically prove her hysterical disposition. […] Rather than simply evoke images of Beatrice as polluted, we need to think about the ways in which she comes into a pollution which her male audience knows to be ever present. The virginity test presents the woman with two choices: either she is mad in her purity or sane in her pollution, which amounts to one and the same thing. […] Before accepting Beatrice, Alsemero must first demand her madness as proof of her virginity. (33)

In enacting the behavior demanded by the test, Beatrice-Joanna thus conforms to and replicates women’s innate physical flaws. At the same time, the only woman who can be accommodated in the patriarchal system is one who is thus flawed, in that a woman is either mad in her virginity or impure in her sexual experience (Little 33). As Lisa Hopkins asserts, Beatrice-Joanna’s final imprisonment in the very closet from which she first sought agency indicates the inversion that her performance, meant to establish her freedom from her husband’s condemnation, has actually wrought: “she has now come to internalize her husband’s, her father’s, and even her lover’s assumptions about her own status as whore and villainess. The brief moment of freedom in which her preemptive reading of him [Alonzo] had rendered her opaque has been lost; she has resumed her designated position as the objectified other of demonization” (156). Having been trapped in Alsemero’s closet, Beatrice-Joanna’s final words signal that she recognizes and accepts her guilt as a transgressive female. Thus, Beatrice-Joanna comes to devalue her own life, killing herself with much the same attitude that initially led her to expect violence from her husband: “’Tis time to die, when ‘tis a shame to live” (5.3.79). Beatrice-Joanna’s performance of “virgin’s symptoms,” while granting her the temporary ability to circumvent Alsemero’s denunciation, ultimately results in her enacting and accepting an oppressive identity that leads to her death.
Performance, like madness, thus functions somewhat ambiguously in these works. Female characters utilize performance to their advantage, taking on roles that allow them to criticize others without suffering the condemnation of those in power for their critique. At the same time, such performances adhere to the stereotypes of “dissembling women” and virginal sickness and do not alter the original ends that men set out for these female characters. While Isabella, Vittoria, and Beatrice-Joanna are able to critique male power in their performances, each eventually falls prey to that which they attempt to oppose. Thus, women’s performative agency highlights this disjunction between performance and reality. While each can enact agency, none can actually possess it in a meaningful manner, allowing them to fall victim to men in ways they cannot requite. Such an understanding of the limits of female performance is somewhat similar to the function of devices such as the play-within-a-play and revenger’s madness I reviewed earlier. While these devices, set out along gendered lines, may allow for the inclusion of potentially subversive material in plays, their obfuscating function may render that critique illegible compared to the more conservative condemnation of revenge.

In conclusion, the genre of revenge tragedy is intimately concerned with these questions of the relationship between reality and representation. Metatheatrical devices were utilized to allow for a complex exploration of the controversial subject of revenge on stage that could simultaneously avoid the charge of supporting such violence or female agency. By writing explicitly metatheatrical texts containing the device of the play-within-a-play, both Kyd and Shakespeare allow their audiences to witness, and perhaps to condone, the murders of the guilty within the “safe zone of fiction,” but they also remind those same audiences that their works are just that, fiction. This reminder helps avoid the charge of plays supporting subversive activities. The distancing function of the play-within-a-play is mirrored in the incorporation of the
revenger’s madness, which similarly allows the playwright to depict revenge without explicitly sanctioning the acts of the revenger. Madness makes the relationship between the playwright’s depiction of the world and the revenger’s actions within that world ambiguous, masking any social critiques that may be implicit in the text. This performance of madness is mirrored in female characters’ performance of various roles in these texts, which similarly work to create artificial spaces in which they can exercise increased agency and offer critiques of the men in power. The limits of such performances is made clear, though, in that women are ultimately the victims of the very forces which they seek to critique, sometimes within the very act of performance. The failure of such performances calls into question the efficacy of theater itself as a socially transformative medium. While the theatrical representation of revenge may be intended to serve a didactic or critical function, it remains an artificial performance, not an enactment of reality. Coupled with the obscurity of interpretation, the potential efficacy of such representations is difficult to imagine.
Works Cited


Habermann, Ina. “‘She has that in her belly will dry up your ink’ Femininity as Challenge in the ‘Equitable Drama’ of John Webster.” *Literature, Politics, and Law in Renaissance England.* Ed. Erica Sheen and Lorna Hutson. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005. 100-120.


