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THE BALANCE AND THE SWORD:  
A STUDY OF JUST REVENGE IN  
ELIZABETHAN TRAGEDY

A Thesis

Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies  
in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements  
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by

Dorene Joyce Irvine

Written under the Supervision of

A. W. Plumstead

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The Faculty of Graduate Studies,  
University of Saskatchewan.

We, the undersigned members of the Committee appointed by you to examine the Thesis submitted by Dorene Joyce Irvine, B. A., in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts, beg to report that we consider the thesis satisfactory both in form and content.

Subject of Thesis: "The Balance and the Sword: a Study of Just  
Revenge in Elizabethan Tragedy"

We also report that she has successfully passed an oral examination on the general field of the subject of the thesis.

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

The Revenge Play<sup>1</sup> in the form Thomas Kyd gave it in The Spanish Tragedy, and in the form used subsequently by Marston in Antonio's Revenge, Shakespeare in Hamlet, and Tourneur in The Atheist's Tragedy, to mention a few examples of the type, has several well-known characteristics. The fundamental motive of the tragedy is revenge for a murdered kinsman. The revenge is supervised by a ghost. The revenger is hesitant and delays his revenge. Madness, intrigue, blood and death, are important elements in the play. The main situation of the play is often contrasted and enforced by similar situations. This is the basic formula of the Revenge Play as it inspired the pens of so many Elizabethan playwrights.<sup>2</sup>

Within this conventional framework, of course, each Revenge Play varies according to the individual talent of the playwright. For example, The Revenge of Bussy D'Ambois, by George Chapman, follows the basic pattern but adds a philosophic colouring to the treatment of revenge; philo-

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<sup>1</sup>A term used by Percy Simpson in Studies in Elizabethan Drama (Oxford: Clarendon, 1955), ch. VII, and hereafter used to refer specifically to the kind of tragedy of revenge transformed into a convention by Kyd.

<sup>2</sup>Ashley, H. Thorndike, "Hamlet and Contemporary Revenge Plays", PMLA, XVII (1902), 143-4.



order. Bussy believes that justice itself demands revenge for his murder and refers to Clermont's final killing of Monsurry as a "just revenge" (V, v, 126).

Although Chapman focusses on the morality of revenge more acutely than do his contemporary revenge dramatists, many other plays of the period are concerned with the justice of revenge. Terms like "just revenge" and "due revenge" appear frequently throughout Elizabethan drama. In fact, the term "just revenge" or some close variation of it appears in some twenty plays of the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods.<sup>5</sup> Most of the plays are either revenge tragedies or chronicle histories and they range in date from Gorboduc, first presented in 1562, to The Tragedy of Hoffman, written in 1631. The playwrights include Sackville and Norton (Gorboduc), Gascoigne and Kinwelmershe (Jocasta), Thomas Hughes (The Misfortunes of Arthur), Kyd (The Spanish Tragedy), Peele (The Battle of Alcazar), Marlowe (Dr. Faustus, Edward II, The Massacre at Paris), Shakespeare (3 Henry VI), Marston (Antonio's Revenge, The Malcontent), Chapman (Bussy D'Ambois, The Revenge of Bussy D'Ambois), Webster (The Duchess of Malfi), Tourneur (The Atheist's Tragedy, The Revenger's Tragedy), Beaumont and Fletcher (The Maid's Tragedy), and

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<sup>5</sup>Any close association of the two ideas has been counted. "Vengeance" is often used as a synonym for "revenge" (n.). "Venge" and "wreak" are synonyms for "revenge (v.). The noun "justice" sometimes appears in place of the adjective and adverb "just".

Chettle (The Tragedy of Hoffman). Five plays, unassigned with certainty to specific playwrights, also contain references to "just revenge". These are Gismonde of Salerne, variously known as Tancred and Gismunda, Soliman and Perseda (perhaps written by Kyd), The True Tragedie of Richard III, The Troublesome Reigne of King John, and Titus Andronicus (commonly thought of as Shakespeare's). Lochrine, and several of Shakespeare's plays--Julius Caesar, Richard II, Richard III, Hamlet and Othello--are examples of plays in which the notion of a just revenge is implicit, to a greater or lesser degree depending upon the play.

Many questions are suggested by this prevalent concept in sixteenth and early seventeenth century drama. First, it does seem to be a meaningful concept and not merely "a sensational cliché", one of many expressions "in themselves bombastic" current in the drama of the time.<sup>6</sup> Where reference to "just revenge" appears in a given play, it is almost always connected with attitudes and motives bearing on the dramatic action. Two examples, in themselves insignificant, may suffice to illustrate this point.

In the fourth act of Marlowe's Dr. Faustus, the learned Doctor is preparing to display his magical prowess to the German Emperor. Leaning out from an upper window,

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<sup>6</sup>Howard Baker, Induction to Tragedy (Louisiana: Louisiana State University Press, 1939), p. 90. Also see n. 47 in "Notes to Chapter II", p. 234.



Benvolio, one of the gentlemen of the Court, persists in open and mocking scepticism of Faustus. Moments later, he finds his head adorned with a magical set of spreading horns, witty proof of Faustus' ability. Mortified, Benvolio decides that his honour requires Faustus' death. Later, near a grove where Faustus has come to conjure, Benvolio knocks off Faustus' head (unaware that it is a false one) and, to return shame with shame, announces this plan to his fellow courtiers:

First, on his head, in quittance of my wrongs,  
I'll nail huge forked horns, and let them hang  
Within the window where he yok'd me first,  
That all the world may see my just revenge.<sup>7</sup>

In this case, the notion of a "just revenge" both motivates Benvolio's treatment of the head he supposes to be Faustus' and justifies the action in his own eyes. This situation is actually a double case of "just revenge" since Faustus' original trick was meant as a facetious punishment of Benvolio's flippancy. Explaining to the Emperor why he had "justly requited this injurious knight", he turned to Benvolio and reminded him of the provocation for the act with the words, "Hereafter, sir, look you speak well of scholars".<sup>8</sup>

Cyril Tourneur's The Revenger's Tragedy provides a second example of the close relationship between the concept of "just revenge" and motivation for action. In a scene rank

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<sup>7</sup>Christopher Marlowe, Dr. Faustus, ed. John D. Jump (London: Methuen, 1962), sc. xiii, ll. 55-58. Italics mine.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., sc. xii, ll. 106-12. Italics mine.

with the Italianate corruption so common in Jacobean tragedy, the Duchess approaches Spurio, her husband's bastard son, with the honeyed words of seduction. She is angry with the Duke for failing to pardon his legitimate youngest son (her stepson) for the crime of rape, and thinks that dalliance with Spurio is the surest way to injure the Duke. To make Spurio willing to enter upon an incestuous relationship with his stepmother, she must both foster his grievance against the Duke for fathering him illegitimately, and convince him that an affair with her is the best way of gaining revenge. Spurio is quick to seize on the idea that he should be revenged for his father's crime against him, but he is somewhat hesitant about the form of revenge his stepmother suggests. After the Duchess leaves him, Spurio mulls over his wrongs, re-creates in imagination the circumstances of his begetting, then seems suddenly to realize the justice of the revenge the Duchess has suggested.

O damnation meet!  
 The sin of feasts, drunken adultery!  
 I feel it swell me; my revenge is just!  
 I was begot in impudent wine and lust.  
 Stepmother, I consent to thy desires.  
 . . . . .  
 For indeed a bastard by nature should make  
cuckolds,  
 Because he is the son of a cuckold-maker.<sup>9</sup>

Much as reference to justice seems out of place in this

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<sup>9</sup>Eric Bentley, ed., John Webster and Cyril Tourneur (New York: Hill and Wang, 1956), Act I, sc. ii, pp. 314-15. Italics mine.

situation, it is important to Spurio because he decides for the justice of the revenge before fully resolving to go along with it. Incest sticks in his craw until it strikes him that a sexual wrong is justly repaid by a wrong in kind. In drama, as in life, action is often rationalized by a subtle adjustment of attitudes.

Benvolio's and Spurio's self-styled "just revenges" involve little of the philosophic questioning of a Clermont; nor do Benvolio's and Spurio's revenges have anything like the centrally important position in their respective plays that Clermont's has in his, since Clermont's revenge, and its justice or injustice, is a main thematic concern of The Revenge of Bussy D'Ambois. One wonders, however, whether the attitudes of these three "revengers" may not be in some way related. At any rate, this study will propose that the justice of revenge is a more prevalent concern of Elizabethan revenge tragedy than has heretofore been acknowledged.

The description of a given revenge as a "just revenge" in so many plays outside the main stream of the Revenge Play, suggests that this ethical view of revenge is not a product of that particular "species" of play.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, the extreme sensationalism usually associated with the species tends to obscure the ethical question. A case in

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<sup>10</sup>Thorndike, in "Hamlet and Contemporary Revenge Plays", 125, uses this term.

point is the term "Tragedy of Blood", coined as a generic term for the Revenge Play by J. A. Symonds. The term does not mean, as one might assume, that blood-revenge is the subject of these plays; rather, the term means that in these tragedies blood runs freely. In Symonds' own words: "Playwrights used every conceivable means to stir the passion and excite the feeling of their audience. They glutted them with horrors; cudgelled their horny fibres into sensitiveness. Hence arose a special kind of play, which may be styled the Tragedy of Blood, existing, as it seems to do, solely in and for bloodshed".<sup>11</sup> Blood and gore a-plenty there is in Elizabethan revenge tragedy--a count of the murders in any one play, say, Titus Andronicus, would alone suffice to support that claim--but the usefulness of any good generalization is limited, and this one obscures the equally real moral aspect of Elizabethan revenge.

A short etymological discussion reviving Elizabethan usage of the word "revenge", combined with a survey of Elizabethan attitudes to revenge, will help us to view three plays --Gorboduc, Titus Andronicus, and Antonio's Revenge--with some of the preconceptions which an Elizabethan might bring to the theatre.

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<sup>11</sup>J. A. Symonds, Shakespeare's Predecessors in the English Drama (London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1906), pp. 387-8. *Italics mine.*

## CHAPTER TWO: ELIZABETHAN ATTITUDES TO REVENGE

When the word "revenge" is denuded for a moment of connotations of blood and violence, it becomes apparent that revenge and justice are very closely related. In the strict dictionary sense, "to revenge" is simply to "retaliate, requite, exact retribution for".<sup>1</sup> Revenge is retaliation; the nature of the retaliation is not implied in the definition. Now an act of retaliation, like a demand for retribution, is itself an expression of justice, of a sense that a wrong has been done and must be righted. Conversely, the concept of justice is closely connected with the principle of retribution (or requital, or retaliation). As evidence of this, one of the earliest concepts of justice is the lex talionis, the law of retaliation in similar kind and degree, given to Moses as: "Breach for breach, eye for eye, tooth for tooth: as he hath caused a blemish in a man, so shall it be done to him again" (Lev. 24:20). In this law the amount of retaliation is strictly specified; exact "eye for eye" requital replaces the more primitive demand of death for an eye; the offence and the retaliation are precisely balanced. The idea of balance is also part of the more comprehensive and more refined concept of justice which Plato unfolds in The Republic. For

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<sup>1</sup>H. W. Fowler and F. G. Fowler, The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English (4th ed.; Oxford: Clarendon 1952), p. 1048.

Plato, justice is the principle of order, proportion, harmony, and balance, in the universe and all its microcosmic parts.<sup>2</sup> His concept of justice, although in severely impoverished form, remains at the root of the theory of retribution. Retributive justice presupposes a just order which an offence disturbs, and which punishment or requital restores. A passage on legal justice from a recent book will amplify this point:

By his verdict, the arbitrator restores a just order which has become unstable; in the same way the criminal judge also restores a just order. The man who has been robbed has his property returned to him, he who has lost his good name receives it again, he is restored to honour. A sentence is essentially a process of restoration . . . . The wrongdoer who cannot make the actual injury good . . . receives his due in the form of a just penalty or symbolic atonement, that is, a penalty corresponding to the injury. Thus the primary concept of justice is seen to be equivalence, the balance of guilt or injury with symbolic restitution or punishment. Punishment is just retribution for the disturbance of the social order.<sup>3</sup>

The concept of retribution as symbolic restitution, the restitution symbolizing the original offence, is simply a refined form of the lex talionis; the principle of balance as

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<sup>2</sup>E. M. W. Tillyard in Shakespeare's History Plays (London: Chatto and Windus, 1944), p. 18, suggests that Plato was one of the fountainheads of general cosmic doctrine in Elizabethan times. At least one translation of Plato's complete works (by Serranus in 1578) was widely current at the time. See T. W. Baldwin, Shakespeare's Small Latin & Lesse Greeke (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1944), I, 394, n. 45.

<sup>3</sup>Emil Brunner, Justice and the Social Order, trans. Mary Hottinger (New York: Harper, 1945), pp. 221, 222.

a basic ingredient of justice is unchanged.

The Elizabethan personification of justice is a figure, blindfolded for impartiality, holding in one hand an upraised sword and in the other a balance.<sup>4</sup> The offence is weighed in the "scales of justice" before the sword of retribution falls; retribution tempered by the principle of balance is clearly the concept of justice implied.<sup>5</sup>

John Webster makes fruitful use of this figure of justice in the last act of The Duchess of Malfi. Bosola, regretting his part in the murder of the Duchess, resolves to make amends by protecting Antonio, the Duchess' virtuous husband, from a similar fate. When the Cardinal, one of two brothers involved in his sister's murder, instructs Bosola to kill Antonio, Bosola inwardly refuses. Later, addressing Antonio rhetorically in a soliloquy, Bosola comments:

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<sup>4</sup>Samuel C. Chew, The Virtues Reconciled (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1947), fig. 14. Chew notes, p. 98, that the scales of justice are omitted in several portraits of Queen Elizabeth and goes on to comment that "Elizabethan Justice is retributive; perhaps remedial and corrective, but perhaps also vengeful; in function not always distinguishable from Nemesis; more concerned to punish the wrongdoer than to satisfy the righteous claims of the innocent". If my analysis is correct, the oppositions he sets up are not mutually exclusive.

<sup>5</sup>Elizabethan usage confirms this meaning of justice. Othello, when Iago suggests that Desdemona be strangled in the sheets she has wronged, says: "Good, good; the justice of it please, very good (IV, i, 222-3)". Death, inflicted in bed, will balance the supposed adultery enacted in bed.

It may be,  
 I'll joyne with thee, in a most just revenge.  
 The weakest Arme is strong enough, that strikes  
 With the sword of Justice.<sup>6</sup>

Bosola uses this metaphor again in the final scene of the play after he has been tricked into killing Antonio. Turning on the Cardinal, he upbraids him for having used the sword of retribution unjustifiably and without the constraint some notion of balance would have taught him. Bitterness compresses this observation into the words:

When thou kill'dst thy sister,  
 Thou tookst from Justice her most equall ballance,  
 And left her naught but her sword. (V, v, 52-4)

The idea of balance as a principal ingredient of justice has implications larger than simple "tit for tat". Maintaining balance is a way of maintaining order, and in this sense justice becomes the virtue which best preserves order in all areas of life--public as well as personal. Elizabethans rated justice highest of the virtues,<sup>7</sup> an indication of how greatly they valued order. Indeed, the particular Elizabethan perception of "order" is one of the great distinguishing marks of the period.

We have seen that retribution is part of the concept of justice, since a balanced and equal retribution is justice.

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<sup>6</sup>F. L. Lucas, ed., The Complete Works of John Webster (London: Chatto and Windus, 1927), Act. V, sc. ii, ll. 377-80.

<sup>7</sup>E. M. W. Tillyard, Shakespeare's History Plays (London: Chatto and Windus, 1944), p. 15.



Revenge, then, construed as retribution (or retaliation, or requital) is an expression of justice and the subject of revenge is a moral issue. A given revenge may be wicked and wrong, it may also be fair and just, but it cannot, and this is the important point, be morally neutral.

Once the relationship between revenge and justice has been grasped, it is an easy step to see how revenge can appear in a Christian context as God's sacred punishment for sin. According to Christian cosmology, God made the world and is thus responsible for its orderliness. The harmonious relationship between man and God, the moral order, is part of this universal orderliness. But sin, by interfering with the relationship between man and God, disrupts the moral order and demands atonement. God's vengeance, an aspect of His justice, is the means of bringing the sinner to atonement, and thus of restoring the disrupted moral order. In a God-centred world-view, a crime automatically becomes a sin because a crime disturbs not simply order, but God's order. Since justice, too, is God's justice, His revenge upon sin is, by definition, just revenge. It can readily be seen that justice, in the abstract, is not appreciably changed by ascribing it to God. Order and retribution, the balance and the sword, are still its major components.

Lily B. Campbell is the critic most responsible for emphasizing the theme of Divine vengeance in Elizabethan

literature.<sup>8</sup> As she has made clear, for devout Elizabethan Christians, God was primarily a God of retributive justice and the conviction that His just vengeance followed sin as surely as the night follows the day was one of the commonplaces of the period. Miss Campbell shows that the theme of God's just and inevitable requital of sin permeates not only the sermons and ethical treatises, but also the chronicle histories, and the political writings of the period. The drama of the period, too, is far from untouched by this ubiquitous theme. Of an unlimited number of possible illustrations of the theme of Divine vengeance in the drama, two brief ones may suffice. In Gismond of Salerne, a love and revenge play acted in 1567-8, Gismonde's father, greatly chagrined by his daughter's unfaithfulness to her husband, casts about for a suitable method of revenge--but first, he prays:

O great almighty Iove, whome I haue heard to be  
 the god, that guides the world as best it liketh thee,  
 that doest wth thōder throwe out of the flaming skies  
 the blase of thy reuenge on whom thy wrath doeth rise;  
 graunt me, as of thy grace, and as for my relefe,  
 that wch thow pourest out as plages, unto the grieffe  
 of such, whoes sines haue whet thy sharp and deadly ire.<sup>9</sup>

In a better-known play, The Massacre at Paris, by Christopher Marlowe, the Duke of Navarre, in the face of the

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<sup>8</sup>See Lily B. Campbell, "Theories of Revenge in Renaissance England", MP, XXXVIII (1930-31), 281-296, and Tudor Conceptions of History and Tragedy in "A Mirror for Magistrates" (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1936).

<sup>9</sup>J. W. Cunliffe, ed., Early English Tragedies (Oxford: Clarendon, 1912), Act. IV, sc. ii, ll. 1-7.

Guise's villainous actions, piously states his confidence that God will revenge:

But he that sits and rules above the clouds  
Doth hear and see the prayers of the just,  
And will revenge the blood of innocents,  
That Guise hath slain by treason of his heart,  
And brought by murder to their timeless ends.<sup>10</sup>

The Christian point of view on the relationship of justice and revenge is paralleled in some respects by the Greek point of view, notably as it appears in Aeschylus. A religious world-view informs Aeschylus' plays, with the result that, in his work, wrongdoing is referred to the gods in the same way that sin is referred to God in Christian plays. His play, The Eumenides, exploits dramatically the moral ambiguity of revenge. Orestes has just killed his mother, Clytemnestra, in revenge for her murder of his father, Agamemnon. The Furies, who are Queens of Hell and the vindictive deities of revenge, demand vengeance on Orestes in return for his sin of matricide. Orestes, claiming that he has not sinned, appeals to the gods Athena and Apollo who arrange a hearing of both Orestes' and the Furies' case. After a hard-fought debate, and a tense period of suspense while the votes are cast, Athena decides a draw with her vote in favour of Orestes. The crux of Orestes' problem was whether or not his deed was an impious one--an offence against the gods. If it was, atone-

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<sup>10</sup>Christopher Marlowe, The Jew of Malta and The Massacre at Paris, ed. H. S. Bennett (London: Methuen, 1931), sc. i, ll. 42-6.

ment would be necessary; this the Furies knew and were ready to expedite. However, during the debate, the fact emerged that Zeus, through an oracle, had advised Orestes to kill his mother. This balanced Orestes' revenge on the side of piety, and the hellish sisters agreed that Orestes' revenge was atonement for Clytemnestra's sin, that it was just atonement, and that further vengeance on Orestes was unnecessary.

A passage from The Libation-Bearers indicates more of Aeschylus' thought on the question of revenge and justice:

Is it well of these tales to tell; for the sword in  
the grasp of Right  
With a cleaving, a piercing blow to the innermost  
heart doth smite,  
And the deed unlawfully done is not trodden down  
nor forgot,  
When the sinner out-steppeth the law and heedeth  
the high God not;  
But Justice hath planted the anvil, and Destiny  
forgeth the sword  
That shall smite in her chosen time. 11

Justice and Destiny are combined in the Greek idea of Nemesis, often personified as the goddess of retributive justice. The notion contained in this passage, that Nemesis, or just retribution, will eventually smite the sinner is closely parallel to the Christian notion that God's vengeance upon sin is inevitable.

Nemesis is invoked in a context of revenge more than once in Elizabethan drama. In Peele's The Battle of Alcazar,

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<sup>11</sup>The House of Atreus, being the Agamemnon, Libation-Bearers, and Furies of Aeschylus, trans. E.D.A. Morshead, (London: Macmillan, 1928), p. 111.

for example, Nemesis, personified as a chariot-riding war goddess, functions as a revenger. The Presenter in Act I summarizes the plot thus:

And understand how . . .

. . . this unbelieving Moor,  
 . . . . .  
 Triumphs in his ambitious tyranny;  
 Till Nemesis, high mistress of revenge,  
 That with her scourge keeps all the world in awe,  
 With thundering drums awakes the God of War,  
 And calls the Furies from Avernus' crags  
 To range and rage, and vengeance to inflict,  
 Vengeance of this accursed Moor for sin.<sup>12</sup>

Nemesis appears again with "bloody whip in hand" (II, 2), and, yet again, riding a "fiery cart" (IV, ii, 80).

George Gascoigne personifies Nemesis, too. In his elegy on the subject of the rape of Philomela, he lays heavy stress on Philomela's need for revenge, and, at one point, has Nemesis speak these words:

She calles on Nemesis  
 And Nemesis am I,  
 The Goddessse of al just revenge  
 Who let no blame go by.<sup>13</sup>

Without suggesting direct influence, there is a certain degree of similarity between Greek and Elizabethan conceptions of Nemesis.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup>The Works of George Peele (London: John C. Nimmo, 1938), Vol. I, Act I, ll. 31-40.

<sup>13</sup>George Gascoigne, "The complaynt of Phylomene", in J. W. Cunliffe, ed., The Glasse of Governement (Cambridge: University Press, 1910), p. 202.

<sup>14</sup>Simpson, in Studies in Elizabethan Drama, p. 138, mentions the ignorance of the Elizabethans about forces like Ate and Nemesis.

Roman Seneca, despite his very tangible influence on Elizabethan drama, cannot be claimed as the source of Elizabethan ideas about "just revenge". Characters in his plays occasionally call upon heaven or the gods for justice or revenge, but they seldom receive an answer. In the world of Seneca's plays, a world dominated by Fate and the vagaries of Fortune, these pleas are rhetoric, rather designed to show the injustice which prevails in the absence of gods than the justice which prevails in their presence. Seneca's Moral Essays, known to the Elizabethans and influential from about 1595,<sup>15</sup> mention the duty of revenge and recommend delay as a means of discouraging anger and facilitating the use of reason. A sense of justice is implied in these essays, but nowhere is "just revenge", as such, discussed.

Jasper Heywood, translating Thyestes for Newton's edition of Seneca, at one point significantly extends the meaning of the Latin to accommodate an Elizabethan attitude. Near the end of the play, Thyestes says to Atreus: "Vindices aderunt dei; / his puniendum vota te traderunt mea".<sup>16</sup> ["The gods will be present to avenge; to them for punishment my prayers deliver thee."]

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<sup>15</sup>Ralph Graham Palmer, Seneca's De Remediis Fortuitorum and the Elizabethans (Chicago: Institute of Elizabethan Studies, 1953), p. 19.

<sup>16</sup>F. J. Miller, trans., Seneca's Tragedies (London: Heinemann, 1927), II, 180.

Heywood's translation reads: "The gods shall al of this re-  
 vengers be / And unto them for vengeance due my vows thee  
 render shall".<sup>17</sup> Seneca can have Thyestes call upon the gods  
 for revenge, but it takes an Elizabethan to point the moral  
 that such revenge is "due" (i.e. "coming to him", in other  
 words, justified).

Now that the relationship between revenge, justice,  
 and religion has been established, and Aeschylus and Seneca  
 rejected as main sources of Elizabethan interest in this re-  
 lationship, we may proceed to a more specific discussion of  
 Elizabethan beliefs about and attitudes towards revenge, par-  
 ticularly as these beliefs and attitudes pertain to the drama.

The belief in God's revenge for sin, alluded to ear-  
 lier, is the most comprehensive of Elizabethan beliefs about  
 revenge. It permeates, during this period, the interpretation  
 of everything from history and politics to human biography and  
 psychology. The ill-success of battles, the downfall of princes,  
 the failure of private lives, the emotional discomposure of  
 individuals--all might be interpreted as manifestations of  
 God's revenge for sin. Thus, a chronicle-history play, by  
 portraying the downfall of a faction, might illustrate God's  
 revenge on that faction. Similarly, a conventional revenge  
 play, by portraying the downfall of an avenger, might illus-

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<sup>17</sup>Jasper Heywood, "The Second Tragedie of Seneca en-  
 titled Thyestes", in Thomas Newton, ed., Seneca: His Tenne  
 Tragedies (London: Constable, 1927), Vol. I, Act V, sc.iii, p.93.

trate God's revenge on that avenger. The idea of God's ubiquitous revenge provides a valuable frame of reference for an overall understanding of revenge in Elizabethan drama. Lily B. Campbell goes as far as to say that all Elizabethan tragedy is fundamentally a tragedy of revenge, because all Elizabethan tragedy involves, in one form or another, the theme of God's vengeance.<sup>18</sup>

As we have already seen, God's revenge is, by definition, just revenge. From a strictly theological point of view, then, only revenges which are interpreted as God's can partake of justice. "Public revenge" was the Elizabethan term for revenge (i.e. punishment) committed to the rulers by God.<sup>19</sup> This was the only kind of revenge (state punishment), other than God's direct revenge, which was sanctioned by the religious and ethical teaching of the period. Miss Campbell finds an attitude of "persistent condemnation" towards private revenge, logically based on the New Testament injunction: "Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves . . . for it is written, Vengeance is mine, I will repay, saith the Lord".<sup>20</sup>

Other scholars dissent somewhat from Miss Campbell's conclusions about private revenge as it appeared to the Elizabethans. Sister Mroz in a doctoral dissertation on

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<sup>18</sup>Campbell, "Theories of Revenge in Renaissance England", 290.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., 290.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., 281.



Divine vengeance points to an interpretation of private revenge which satisfies the theological requirement that all revenge must come from God: a private avenger may execute God's vengeance on the same principle that a public ruler does--by God's deputation. "English belief is continuous and firm: divine justice postulates divine vengeance for sin . . . [but] in the execution of that vengeance God is not limited in His choice of agents or instruments."<sup>21</sup>

While Christian beliefs were very influential in determining Elizabethan attitudes to revenge, beliefs springing from more secular sources also exerted their influence. Elizabethan beliefs about private revenge, in particular, cannot be explained wholly in terms of religion. Blood-revenge, for example, is a common form of private revenge in Elizabethan revenge tragedy. The idea that justice is in the hands of the individual in cases of wrongs done to him or to members of his family is one which preceded the rise of the English state and its system of law and one which, despite more sophisticated ethical teaching, survived in Elizabethan times. The obligation of blood-revenge, in accordance with the lex talionis, goes back as far as family obligations themselves. During feudal times in England, the right to

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<sup>21</sup>Sister Mary Bonaventure Mroz, Divine Vengeance: A Study in the Philosophical Background of the Revenge Motif as It Appears in Shakespeare's Chronicle History Plays (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1941), p. 48.

revenge wrongs done to one's family (the right of feud or vendetta) was a distinguishing mark of the freeman and this served to entrench the custom of blood-revenge. The rise of the English state and a system of state justice did not diminish the traditional regard for private revenge as a right. The fact that the law considered blood-revenge in the same light as the original murder did not seem to affect native convictions to the contrary.<sup>22</sup>

It can be seen how a fundamental tension could emerge between the claims of state justice for the right of revenge and the claims of private justice for the right of revenge, and how both state and individual might claim the sanction of religion by claiming to be instruments of God's revenge. But that observation leads into the intricacies of Tudor politics, and for present purposes we need only comment on what effect the belief in obligatory blood-revenge had on Elizabethan attitudes to revenge. The force of this traditional code made the murder of a relative justifiable cause for revenge in Elizabethan eyes.<sup>23</sup> A particularly base injury or circumstances which permitted no recourse to law also came, by the force of social custom, to be considered justi-

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<sup>22</sup>F. T. Bowers, Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy (Princeton University Press, 1940).

<sup>23</sup>F. T. Bowers, "The Audience and the Revenger of Elizabethan Tragedy", SP, XXXI (1934), 166.

fiable cause for revenge.<sup>24</sup> Hence a stage-avenger whose revenge fit any one of these three categories might receive a measure of sympathetic attention from the audience which would be impossible if the strict condemnation of revenge which Miss Campbell postulates were the whole story. "The audience at the theaters seems to have made the customary compromise between a formal set of religious and moral ethics and an informal set of native convictions. Under these circumstances--and the evidence of the tragedies bears out the theory--the revenger of the drama started with the sympathy of the audience if his cause were good . . ."<sup>25</sup>

If unwritten law made private revenge a right when the cause was the murder of a relative or a base injury, or when no recourse to law were possible, this right did not provide the avenger with free scope to wreak revenge as he chose. In the first place, humanist writers emphasized the desirability of foregoing the recognized right to private revenge. This applied especially to so-called "revenges of honour" in which death might be required in return for an insult. Christian writers refer wrongs to the retributive justice of God, rather than to His mercy. In the same way, the humanists, when they speak of foregoing revenge, refer less to the motive of mercy than to the motive of courtliness.

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<sup>24</sup>Ibid., 163.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., 175.

Bacon, in his essay, "On Revenge" (1597), emphasizes that it is "a prince's part to pardon".<sup>26</sup> Castiglione in "The Book of the Courtier (1561) tells a story about a French king in which he highlights the king's forbearance from revenge.<sup>27</sup> And Sir Thomas Elyot in The Boke Named the Governour (1531) suggests that "whosoever puttethe on the habit of a common persone or gouernor, it shall not beseme him to reuenge priuate displeasures".<sup>28</sup> Public revenges come off better with the humanists. Bacon says they are "for the most part fortunate". An Italian humanist, Machiavelli, with typical originality and shrewdness, advises the prince to avenge wrongs for the sake of justice and peace. His argument is that an injury neglected by public authority will be revenged privately at possible cost to the order of the state or to the welfare of the prince.<sup>29</sup>

But aside from the teachings of the humanists, Elizabethan opinion demanded certain standards of behaviour in a private revenge. As Sister Mroz puts it, "However persistently English popular opinion clung to traditional sanctions of private revenge, it nevertheless did not fail to disting-

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<sup>26</sup> Essays, Civil and Moral and The New Atlantis, ed. Charles W. Eliot (New York: Collier, 1909), pp. 15-16.

<sup>27</sup> The Book of the Courtier, Done into English by Sir Thomas Hoby, 1561, ed. Ernest Rhys (London: Dent, n.d.), p. 156.

<sup>28</sup> The Boke Named the Governour, 1531, ed. Ernest Rhys (London: Dent, n.d.), p. 260.

<sup>29</sup> Niccolo Machiavelli, The Prince and the Discourses, trans. Luigi Ricci (New York: Modern Library, 1940), p. 379.

uish the revenge postulated by reason and an instinctive sense of justice from the eruptions of passion which weighed neither the gravity of the cause nor the malice of the retaliation".<sup>30</sup> Under no circumstances was a revenge motivated by sheer malice or vindictiveness condoned, while diabolic poisonings, treachery and intrigue, as concomitants of revenge, were associated in the average Elizabethan mind with "foreign" Italy and the horror-inspiring stage-Machiavel. Excess of any kind was antithetical to Elizabethan notions of justice, whether justice was construed in terms of the Old Testament lex talionis or whether, as in the case of a dramatist like Chapman, justice was construed in classical terms. For this reason extremity could have no part in a just private revenge. The contrast between a passionate and vindictive kind of revenge and a "just revenge" is well brought out in a play by Thomas Hughes, produced by the gentlemen of Gray's Inn in 1588, The Misfortunes of Arthur. Guenevera, thinking herself scorned because her husband, Arthur, has been absent from her for nine years, responds with Medea-like fury:

Come, spiteful fiends, come, heaps of Furies fell,  
 Not one by one, but all at once! my breast  
 Raves not enough: it likes me to be fill'd  
 With greater monsters yet. My heart doth throb,  
 My liver boils: somewhat my mind portends,  
 Uncertain what; but whatsoever, it's huge.  
 So it exceed, be what it will, it's well.

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<sup>30</sup>Mroz, Divine Vengeance, pp. 106-7.

Omit no plague, and none will be enough,  
Wrong cannot be reveng'd but by excess.<sup>31</sup>

At this point Guenevera's handmaiden, Fronia, breaks in with: "O, spare this heat! you yield too much to rage: /Y'are too unjust. Is there no mean in wrong?" Guenevera answers Fronia with the comment "Wrong claims a mean, when first you offer wrong: / The mean is vain when wrong is in revenge". Guenevera and Fronia continue to argue the nature of revenge, but the significant point of the passage is this: the last line of Guenevera's first speech is a direct translation from Seneca's Thyestes. Fronia's "Is there no mean in wrong?" and Guenevera's words of reply are also direct translations of Seneca.<sup>32</sup> In the Senecan play, Thyestes makes revenge synonymous with excess; revenge, by its very nature, obviates any consideration of justice. But note the words Hughes himself puts into Fronia's mouth. In response to Guenevera's spiteful and excessive outburst Fronia voices a very Elizabethan judgment: ". . . you yield too much to rage: / Y'are too unjust". Violent emotions, because they suggest imbalance and lack of reason, did not accompany what an Elizabethan termed a "just revenge". Fronia's reference to the Aristotelian "mean" indicates her creator's acceptance of a classical

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<sup>31</sup>Thomas Hughes, "The Misfortunes of Arthur", in W. Carew Hazlitt, ed., Robert Dodsley's Old English Plays (London: Reeves and Turner, 1874-6), Act I, sc. ii, pp.266-7.

<sup>32</sup>J. W. Cunliffe, The Influence of Seneca on Elizabethan Tragedy (London: Macmillan, 1893), Appendix II, p. 133.

idea of justice, but her association of justice with revenge betrays her creator's Elizabethan outlook, for, as we have seen, this association does not appear in Seneca, nor is there reason to suppose that Hughes is following Aeschylus.

To summarize, a private citizen might enact a "just revenge":

- a. if the provocation was murder of a relative
- b. if the offence could not be redressed by law
- c. if the offence was a particularly base one  
e.g. the rape of Lavinia in Titus Andronicus
- d. if the act of revenge was motivated by reason not by passion, and by a sense of justice not by malice
- e. if the act of revenge did not exceed in violence or horror the original offence i.e. if a sense of balance was observed
- f. if the revenger was God's instrument, in which case none of the foregoing rules necessarily apply.

The three just causes for revenge give the dramatists large scope. A villain has only to murder a man or commit some other base crime and, if no recourse to law is available, "just revengers" are called forth. This provides a basic dramatic situation: conflict between two protagonists, or two sets of protagonists. But the difference between the villain and "just revenger" must be clarified, since the villain usually considers himself a "just revenger", too, revenging some real or imagined slight or injury. The distinctions under d. and e. above are useful in differentiating the justi-

fied revenger from the sheer villain.

"Just revenge", then, stands in direct opposition to villainous revenge. This polarity can provide not only plot and character, but dramatic irony. Even when both the "just revenger" and the villainous murderer are death-dealing in their actions, the latter is the instrument of evil, the former of justice. These two kinds of revenge enable dramatists to maintain a dramatic tension, now between an outright villain and a notably good man in a play, now between conflicting elements--reason and passion, justice and malice--in the same man.

Now a caveat must be entered against applying the foregoing moral distinctions too rigidly. After all, plays are not sermons or ethical treatises, and neither dramatists nor audiences are contained by moral definitions. The rule of thumb I have outlined is merely a tool for carving into relief whatever moral attitudes relevant to revenge a play may present.



### CHAPTER THREE: GORBODUC

Sir Philip Sidney in The Defense of Poesy (c. 1583) commended Gorboduc for its "stately speeches and well-sounding Phrases, clymyng to the height of Seneca his stile".<sup>1</sup> A commonplace of criticism ever since has been that Sackville and Norton's play brought Senecan drama out of the closet and put it on the stage.<sup>2</sup> There is truth to this commonplace: Gorboduc's five-act-and-chorus structure, and patches of pure Stoic philosophy in the dialogue, can quite certainly be traced to Seneca. Moreover, the significance for the later drama of Gorboduc's debt to Seneca justifies stressing it. But the derivation of Gorboduc from Seneca cannot be defended when the play's debt to the Roman dramatist is extended to include everything from its diction to its revenge theme; emphasis on Seneca obscures the play's abundant indebtedness, both in theme and structure, to Elizabethan thought.

Superficially, the prominence in Gorboduc of violence, murder, and revenge, heightened by discourses full of blood and fury, suggests a parallel with Seneca's sensational treatment of revenge. A remark of Small's in an article on the

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<sup>1</sup>Sir Philip Sidney, "An Apology for Poetry" in G. Gregory Smith, ed., Elizabethan Critical Essays (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1904), I, 196-7.

<sup>2</sup>Felix E. Schelling, Elizabethan Drama 1558-1642 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1908), I, 96.

political teaching of Gorboduc is typical of the common assumption that the play's theme is deeply indebted to Seneca. Having formulated the conclusion that the political advice in Gorboduc is pointedly directed against kings who neglect good counsel and thereby bring about civil war, Small comments that "This motivation does not interfere with the story-motif which is Senecan".<sup>3</sup> Actually, the sensational aspects of the treatment of revenge in Gorboduc are wholly subservient to a basically moral treatment of the theme. This moral point of view is not classical in origin.

The announced theme of the play articulates an Elizabethan commonplace--

And this great king that doth divide his land,  
 . . . . .  
 A mirror shall become to princes all,  
 To learn to shun the cause of such a fall.<sup>4</sup>

With this statement the chorus assures the audience that the play has a familiar moral purpose: the presentation of a lively instance of "the fall of princes" in the past will excite present rulers to virtue and wisdom.<sup>5</sup> The political theme, too, is English. Problems of succession constitute a

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<sup>3</sup>S. A. Small, "The Political Import of the Norton Half of Gorboduc", PMLA, XLVI (1931), 646.

<sup>4</sup>Ernest Rhys, ed., The Minor Elizabethan Drama (London: Dent, n.d.), Act 1, sc. ii, ll. 458, 463. All other references to the play are from this edition.

<sup>5</sup>Howard Baker, in his book, Induction to Tragedy (Louisiana: Louisiana State University Press, 1939), aligns Gorboduc with the metrical tragedies--Lydgate, and A Mirror for Magistrates (including Sackville's contribution)--and

major threat to civil unity in Gorboduc.<sup>6</sup> Shakespeare's history plays are sufficient evidence of the interest in civil order at the time.

If the moral and political theme of Gorboduc is Elizabethan, so, too, is the philosophical framework of the play. In Gorboduc ideas stick out in bald, didactic fashion from lengthy wooden debates and from long explanatory soliloquies. The philosophical skeleton of the play is thus laid bare. Careful reading shows that two or three controlling assumptions dominate Gorboduc; none of these principal assumptions is Senecan.<sup>7</sup> Four words--"law", and "order", "nature" and "kind"--suggest the conventional beliefs which dominate the play. "Law" and "order" are synonyms, as are "nature" and "kind", and both concepts unite in Gorboduc to form the oft-repeated tenet that there is a natural order of things, a law of kind which governs all personal and political relationships. Summing up a piece of advice he has just given King Gorboduc, counsellor Philander voices the familiar belief:

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states, p. 16, that the play's political morality "was the matter of perhaps greatest interest and importance to both authors, as well as the deliberately chosen theme of the whole tragedy".

<sup>6</sup>Baker suggests, pp. 18-19, that the problem of succession had topical interest because of fears that Queen Elizabeth's apparently failing health and her unwillingness to name a successor might precipitate a similar situation in her kingdom.

<sup>7</sup>cf. Baker, Induction to Tragedy, ch. 1, pp. 30-41.

Only I mean to show, by certain rules,  
 Which kind hath graft within the mind of man.  
 That Nature hath her order and her course,  
 Which (being broken) doth corrupt the state  
 Of minds and things, ev'n in the best of all.  
 (I, ii, 287-291)

"Nature hath her order and her course"--this belief, applied especially to family relationships and to affairs of state, informs every part of the play.

Natural law, in itself a powerful sanction of the existing order of things, is further sanctioned in Gorboduc by a "Jove" and "gods" who in function bear less resemblance to Roman deities than to the God of Christianity.<sup>8</sup> For example, the gods are said to "have the sovereign care / For kings, for kingdoms, and for common weals (I, ii, 116-117)". In addition, Jove is characterized in one place as a loving deity who disposes the order "of things and times" in accordance with a plan for the king's welfare (III, i, 115-126). A deity who presides over the welfare of state and monarch and whose benevolent plan can be discerned in the pattern of events would not appear to be one of that capricious company of gods who reside on Mt. Olympus. The important point, however, is not that Gorboduc's gods are more Christian than Roman, but that divinity is present in Gorboduc in the role of presiding over and sanctioning the natural order of the state.

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<sup>8</sup>"Jove", "God", and "the gods" are used interchangeably in the play--a not uncommon Renaissance practice.

This makes the political status quo not only "natural" but "sacred".<sup>9</sup> With this sacred natural order, an integral part of conventional English thought, a discussion of "just revenge" in Gorboduc must begin.

In the mouths of the play's characters, "traitor", "rebel", and "treason" are powerful epithets signifying the blackest denunciation. In the interest of justice, treason and rebellion must be revenged. The reason given in the play is that proper revenge will maintain civil order--"For nothing more may shake the common state / Than sufferance of uproars without redress (V, i, 34-35)". But the reason for the necessity of revenge goes deeper than that. Rebellion and treason are sins because to rise up against a ruler is to rise up against "God's substitute / His deputy anointed in His sight", to borrow John of Gaunt's words about Richard II (I, ii, 37-8). Early in the last scene of Gorboduc, rebels are described as "aweless of God" and they are condemned for their behaviour towards "their sacred prince (V, ii, 203-217)". Sinfulness, then, or wrongdoing in relation to God, is the characteristic of rebellion which requires atonement through God's just revenge. "Just" revenge implies that retribution will restore the order and balance which wrongdoing has de-

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<sup>9</sup>cf. E. M. W. Tillyard, Shakespeare's History Plays. On p. 95 Tillyard states "In general political doctrine Gorboduc is orthodox and close to A Mirror for Magistrates. It is even more emphatic than the Mirror on the theme that political order is part of a larger order, natural and divine".

stroyed.

But before looking more closely at the theme of rebellion and civil disorder in Gorboduc, let us consider for a moment some of the action which led to that disorder. We shall see that notions of what constitutes a "just revenge" affect individual actions as well as the overall conception of the play.

In the opening scene Queen Videna discloses what she sees as King Gorboduc's monstrous plan to halve his kingdom between his young son, Porrex, and his elder son, Ferrex. Videna feels that Ferrex, as elder son, is entitled to the whole kingdom, and she views Gorboduc's plan of partition both as a flagrant violation of natural paternal affection and as a wicked disruption of the natural pattern of succession. Videna forecasts the fate of those responsible for putting this plan into action should it result in "ill-success". "Mischief", she feels, caused by wrongful interference with the "course of governance", or line of succession, will fall on the heads of those responsible for the interference through Jove's or the gods' "just revenge" (I, i, 55,67). While Videna refers the wrongdoing to Roman deities, both her concept of wrongdoing and her concept of the function of deity are Elizabethan. Videna's first reaction to wrongdoing is to refer it to "the gods" for punishment--"and so I pray the gods requite it them; / And so they will, for so is wont to be (I, i, 57-8)". There would be no logic in re-

ferring wrongdoing to the gods for punishment unless the gods were considered agents of retribution, and unless the misdeed was considered an offence against the gods. That Videna believed the first of these is borne out by her categorical statement that "Jove's just judgment and deserved wrath" will bring them to "cruel and reproachful death" (I, i, 65-6); Jove is not only an agent of retribution but an agent of just retribution. Moreover, Jove's retribution may take many forms. According to Videna's analysis, the wrongdoers may meet their death by means of "Murders, mischief, and civil sword at length, / Or mutual treason, or a just revenge, / When right-succeeding line returns again (I, i, 62-4)". This statement demonstrates the prevalent Elizabethan view that the possible forms of God's revenge are limitless; murder, civil war, treason--all may be manifestations of His vengeance. The "just revenge" to which Videna refers is what the Elizabethans knew as "public revenge", or revenge inflicted by a public ruler as a mediator of God's justice. This is another form God's vengeance may take. Later events prove Videna's forecast to be<sup>a</sup> prophetic outline of Gorboduc's informing theme--the theme of God's or Jove's just and inevitable vengeance upon wrongdoing.

In the second part of the first act, King Gorboduc lays his plan to divide the kingdom before his secretary and two counsellors and invites their opinion. Arostus gives full assent to the plan, but both Philander and Eubulus advise

against it. Philander fears that jealousy will grow between the brothers and result in untold harm. Eubulus supports this view by citing a precedent. Brute, the first monarch of Britain, partitioned his kingdom among three sons--

But how much British blood hath since been spilt,  
 To join again the sunder'd unity!  
 What princes slain before their timely hour!  
 What waste of towns and people in the land!  
 What treasons heap'd on murders and on spoils!  
 Whose just revenge ev'n yet is scarcely ceas'd.  
 (I, ii, 345-350)

Eubulus, like Videna, recognizes the fundamental importance of order in the state. Like Videna, too, he is afraid of the consequences of wrongful tampering with the line of succession, fearing that slaughter and treason will result, and knowing that such evils entail punishment. His suggestion that the evils caused by Brute's partition of the kingdom were so numerous that it has taken from Brute's reign to Gorboduc's for retribution to even the balance is intended as a forcible argument against Gorboduc's plan to imitate Brute's action. But Gorboduc is unmoved by the fears of two of his three advisors. Politely discounting the possibility of friction arising between his sons, he announces his intention to proceed with his original plan and assigns the southern half of the kingdom to Ferrex, the northern half to Porrex. However, in earnest of his attention to his counsellors' advice, he appoints Dordan to Ferrex and Philander to Porrex that they may, by wise counselling, avert any potential danger.

The partitioning is no sooner accomplished, and the



trusted counsellors at their posts, than the violence forecast by Videna becomes reality. The first fruits of Gorboduc's action are mutual treason and murder within the royal family. Herman, an evil counsellor, has fanned Ferrex's grudge against his young brother Porrex into an active distrust which causes Ferrex secretly to arm against possible attack from his brother. Porrex, hearing of this deed from the lips of his evil counsellor, Tyndar, hastily assumes that Ferrex's intentions are aggressive and takes immediate decision to invade Ferrex's realm and seek Ferrex's life.

The idea of a "just revenge" is intimately involved with Porrex's avowed reason for murdering his elder brother and with Gorboduc's and Videna's later reaction to Porrex's crime. Porrex rationalizes his decision to kill Ferrex by an appeal to the lex talionis:

Mischief for mischief is a due reward.  
 His wretched head shall pay the worthy price  
 Of this his treason and his hate to me.  
 (II, ii, 269-271)

By interpreting his brother's gathering of arms as treason, Porrex gives weight to his argument that death is a "due reward" for Ferrex's wrongdoing, but his reasoning is a patent distortion of the lex talionis, which calls for retaliation in similar kind and degree. Death is not a balanced return for hatred and aggressive intent; murder is a crime, pure and simple.

Videna's and Gorboduc's reactions to the murder of

their elder son are very different, but both assume without question that justice requires revenge on Porrex. Gorboduc makes the most complete statement of the views he and Videna share on the subject in the course of an address to Porrex:

Porrex, if we so far should swerve from kind,  
 And from those bounds which law of nature sets,  
 As thou hast done by vile and wretched deed,  
 In cruel murder of thy brother's life;  
 Our present hand could stay no longer time,  
 But straight should bathe this blade in blood of thee  
 As just revenge of thy detested crime.  
 No; we should not offend the law of kind  
 If now this sword of ours did slay thee here:  
 For thou hast murder'd him, whose heinous death  
 Even nature's force doth move us to revenge  
 By blood again; and justice forceth us  
 To measure death for death, thy due desert.  
 (IV, ii, 96-108)

Two general principles form the core of Gorboduc's argument. The first is that nature's law requires blood-revenge for murder. The particular application of this principle forces Gorboduc into the "unkindly" position of having to take revenge on his own son, a position which would be equivalent to the unnaturalness of the original fratricide if it were not that, in the context of the play, the obligation itself was part of the nature of things. Gorboduc reasons that the murder of a son is just cause for revenge, in spite of the tragic circumstance that another son is the murderer. This is a case of one natural law cancelling out another. The second general principle that Gorboduc makes use of is the lex talionis--"justice forceth us to measure death for death, thy due desert". Both the law of justice and the law of

nature, then, require Porrex's death in return for Ferrex's death--a "just revenge".

But consider Gorboduc's next words:

Yet since thou art our child, and sith as yet  
 In this hard case what word thou canst allege  
 For thy defence, by us hath not been heard,  
 We are content to stay our will for that  
 Which justice bids as presently to work.  
 (IV, ii, 109-113)

That justice requires the immediate death of Porrex throws into relief Gorboduc's mercy in giving Porrex a chance to speak in his own defence, but it also points up a flaw in Gorboduc's character as king. "Yet since thou art our child" is the telling phrase which reveals Gorboduc's tendency to put personal interests above the public interest, in this case, above the requirements of impartial justice. Sackville and Norton do not explore the personal problem--the potential tragic conflict for Gorboduc between the conflicting demands of paternal affection and magisterial duty. Gorboduc's failure in his public duty, his delay of Porrex's punishment, simply results in Videna's stealing a march on justice by killing Porrex in a fit of passion.

Despite the motivation for her revenge on Porrex, a violent emotional reaction to her favorite son's death, Videna is not totally blind to the justice of her revenge, considered rationally. To begin with, she views Porrex's crime primarily as treason, not simply in the restrictive sense of regicide, but in the broad sense of a violation of the order

of nature. She says, rhetorically, to Porrex:

O heinous traitor both to heaven and earth!  
 . . . . .  
 Traitor to kin and kind, to sire and me,  
 To thine own flesh, and traitor to thyself;  
 The gods on thee in hell shall wreak their wrath,  
 And here in earth this hand shall take revenge  
 (IV, i, 28-34)

She also shares Gorboduc's belief in the obligatory nature of blood-revenge:

But canst thou hope to 'scape my just revenge?  
 Or that these hands will not be wroke on thee?  
 Dost thou not know that Ferrex' mother lives,  
 That loved him more dearly than herself?  
 And doth she live, and is not veng'd on thee?  
 (IV, i, 77-81)

Like Gorboduc, too, she is aware of the paradox of a position which demands that a parent kill a son. She solves this paradox to her own satisfaction by formally renouncing her kinship with Porrex and refusing to recognize that he was born of her womb. In spite of these overtures to justice, however, Videna's total reaction to Ferrex's death and to her own revenge of his death, makes clear that personal considerations motivate her desire for revenge far more than considerations of justice. Within the morality of the play, the murder of her elder son is justifiable cause for her to take revenge on the murderer, but the violence and passion with which she contemplates and enacts the revenge vitiates its justice.

Marcella, Videna's handmaiden, indicates the attitude the audience should take to Videna's action in her report of

Videna's killing of Porrex. Her speeches, Ophelia-like in their poignancy, are among the few lyrical passages in the play. Part of a beautiful elegy on the death of Porrex reveals her attitude to Videna's self-styled "just revenge":

Should nature yet consent to slay her son?  
 O mother, thou to murder thus thy child!  
 Even Jove with justice must with lightening flames  
 From heaven send down some strange revenge on thee.  
 (IV, ii, 325-328)

Porrex's misdeed has been revenged, but not by God's instrument in the spirit of His justice. Marcella recognizes that now, ironically, Videna has invited Jove's just vengeance upon herself.

That revenge comes from an unexpected quarter. The people, incensed by the murderous behaviour of their rulers, rise up in rebellion and traitorously murder both queen and king. Meeting with Eubulus, the king's secretary, a group of dukes come to the decision that the subjects had no right "to work revenge upon their prince's fact (V, i, 18)", and decide that they must be punished. The noblemen think only in terms of swift retaliation--"There can no punishment be thought too great / For this so grievous crime: let speed therefore / Be used therein . . . (V, i, 27-29)". But Eubulus, while recognizing that justice requires the punishment of the traitors, at the same time cautions the nobles to be mindful of first principles:

But now, my lords, before ye farther wade,  
 Or spend your speech, what sharp revenge shall fall  
 By justice' plague on these rebellious wights;

Methink ye rather should first search the way,  
 By which in time the rage of this uproar  
 Might be repress'd, and these great tumults ceas'd.  
 Even yet the life of Britain land doth hang  
 In traitors' balance of unequal weight.  
 (V, i, 44-51)

Eubulus is reminding the noblemen that revenge on the rebels is, after all, but a means to an end. The rebels' crime has been to upset the proper order of the state; the purpose of just punishment, or "just revenge", must be the restoration of that order; but order, not revenge, is the primary consideration. Eubulus has a suggestion for a revenge which will at once justly punish the rebels and restore a measure of civil order:

Let us, therefore, use this for present help;  
 Persuade by gentle speech, and offer grace  
 With gift of pardon, save unto the chief;  
 And that upon condition that forthwith  
 They yield the captains of their enterprise,  
 To bear such geurdon of their traitorous fact,  
 As may be both due vengeance to themselves,  
 And wholesome terrour to posterity.  
 (V, i, 77-84)

Eubulus here suggests that a form of symbolic atonement be substituted for full revenge. He feels that revenge on the rebel leaders will be as effective a punishment and deterrent as revenge on the entire rebel faction. However, if the rebels do not accept this "gentle mean of proffer'd grace", Eubulus advises:

such slaughter to be made,  
 As present age, and eke posterity,  
 May be adrad with horreur of revenge  
 That justly then shall on these rebels fall.  
 (V, i, 110-113)

Eubulus does not forget that treason is an enormous crime, which, according to the lex talionis kind of justice, calls for an equally enormous revenge. Unfortunately, his plan for restoring order is aborted by Fergus, the duke of Albany, who seizes the opportunity of civil unrest and a vacant throne to pursue, by conquest, his own illegitimate claim to the throne.

Throughout the first four acts of the play, fear for the royal succession is a fairly generalized fear that any disturbance of the established order of the monarchy will result in trouble. But in the fifth act the assassination of the King and Queen, and Fergus's attempt to capitalize on the throne's vacancy, crystallizes the general apprehension into a specific fear of the dangers of an uncertain succession. Grim descriptions of the anarchy attendant upon a country left without a guide, like a ship without a stern, are almost certainly directed at Queen Elizabeth. Repeated references are made to the anarchic horror of, specifically, an uncertain succession, and to the likelihood, under the circumstances, of foreign or domestic usurpation. These references stand out from the rest of the play by reason of their very pointedness and leave little room for doubt that the concluding act of Gorboduc is being stressed for contemporary political purposes.

It appears, then, that King Gorboduc seriously erred in dividing Britain between his sons while he lived, instead

of following the natural course of succession which would call for his elder son to succeed him at his death. God's revenge for this sin against his ordained political order resulted in the mutual treason, murder, private revenge and civil war, which, as we have seen, comprises the main action of the play. Within this general pattern of God's revenge on Gorboduc's political transgression, attitudes to blood-revenge for murder appear through Porrex's crime and Videna's and Gorboduc's reaction to it. Each of these three people considers the justice of his acts--Porrex distorts the lex talionis code of justice for his own purposes, Videna's passion causes her to vitiate a just cause for revenge by an unjust execution of the revenge, while Gorboduc's cool and rational perception of the justice of revenge enhances his failure to enact it. We cannot look at revenge in Gorboduc without seeing the shadow of justice and behind that shadow, God. Eubulus concludes the play with this confident statement:

Of justice, yet must God in fine restore  
 This noble crown unto the lawful heir  
 For right will always live and rise at length  
 But wrong can never take deep root to last.  
 (V, ii, 438-441)

Eubulus is sure that God's justice will see that law and order are not upset beyond His power to restore.

The view that Gorboduc is to a great extent a moral play (and that this moral treatment of revenge provides a key both to the total conception of the play and to much of



its action) is supported by the findings of several critics. H. A. Watt notes that the provision of a good and evil counsellor for each of Gorboduc, Ferrex, and Porrex is "an evidence of the influence of the moral plays on the structure of Gorboduc".<sup>10</sup> A. P. Rossiter terms the play "a Moral History" and remarks on "the most unexpected retention of a 'Morality-pattern' within the sophisticated art-for-art's sake form".<sup>11</sup> Howard Baker's findings on the formal aspects of Gorboduc further the same point. Revenge as it appears in Gorboduc seems to be little influenced by Senecan sensationalism, much influenced by Elizabethan notions of retributive justice.

The moral frame of reference to which the idea of "just revenge" in Gorboduc points, serves to intensify the immorality of the lawless treason and murderous violence in the play. Moral judgment, if not moral horror, is invited. Many Revenge Plays, two of which, Titus Andronicus and Antonio's Revenge, we will discuss in the chapters immediately following, share with a chronicle history play like Gorboduc this moral stance towards revenge.

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<sup>10</sup>J. W. Cunliffe, Early English Classical Tragedies, with notes by Dr. H. A. Watt (Oxford: Clarendon, 1912), pp. 301-2.

<sup>11</sup>English Drama from Early Times to the Elizabethans (London: Hutchinson's University Library, 1950), p. 134.

## CHAPTER FOUR: TITUS ANDRONICUS

When E. K. Chambers describes Titus Andronicus as a "meal of horrors",<sup>1</sup> he is not overstating the case. Whoever is finally responsible for writing the play, whether Shakespeare himself, or Shakespeare in conjunction with one or more of his contemporaries,<sup>2</sup> he has plied his audience with terrifying scenes of brutality and violation. Important events in the play parallel the story of Tereus and Philomel as told in Ovid (Metamorphoses, Bk. VI).<sup>3</sup> Lavinia, like Philomel, is raped in the woods and has her tongue cut out. Later, both help to prepare a banquet of flesh for their ravishers. The banquet also resembles the well-known Thyestean feast in Seneca<sup>4</sup> and since there are other Senecan parallels in the play<sup>5</sup> it seems reasonable to believe that both Ovid and Seneca have influenced the playwright's conception of this grim

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<sup>1</sup>E. K. Chambers, Shakespeare: A Survey (London: Sedgwick and Jackson, 1925), p. 31.

<sup>2</sup>J. M. Robertson, in Introduction to the Shakespeare Canon (London: Routledge, 1924), makes the most extensive case for multiple authorship. H. T. Price in "The Authorship of Titus Andronicus", JEGP, XLII (1943), 55-81, answers all revisionists and argues for Shakespeare's sole authorship of the play. See also J. C. Maxwell, ed., Titus Andronicus (London: Methuen, 1953), pp. xxx-xxxiv, for a review of the problem of authorship.

<sup>3</sup>The Metamorphoses may not be a direct source. R. M. Sargent in "The Source of Titus Andronicus", SP, XLVI (1949), 167-183, argues convincingly that a prose history surviving in an eighteenth century chapbook, The History of Titus Andronicus

incident.<sup>6</sup> Aaron owes his place in the play, but not his characterization, to the sources. He is presented as a superlative villain only in the play.

In a revenge play noted for its horror, as Titus Andronicus is, it is somewhat surprising to find justice an important consideration. However, the justice of revenge becomes a significant question in direct proportion to the proliferation of injustice in the play, both in the state, where "order" is violated and authority abused, and in private lives, where wrong is heaped on wrong.

As in Gorboduc, public justice in Titus depends upon civil order. Also as in Gorboduc, a problem of succession threatens civil order. In Rome, where the play is set, two sons compete for the people's favour, each hoping to be the one chosen to replace their late father as Roman Emperor. Titus, a renowned Roman soldier, and the obvious favourite of the citizens, is named a third candidate, but he uses his influence to have Saturninus succeed to the throne. Since

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the Renowned Roman General, is a version of Shakespeare's immediate source. All but one of the Ovidian elements in the play are present in the history (Maxwell, p. xxxviii).

<sup>4</sup>See Maxwell, p. xxix, for a full discussion of parallels with Ovid and Seneca.

<sup>5</sup>Cf. J. A. K. Thomson, Shakespeare and the Classics (London: Allen and Unwin, 1952), pp. 52-3.

<sup>6</sup>Following Howard Baker in Induction to Tragedy (Louisiana: Louisiana State University Press, 1939), Maxwell is inclined to disclaim Senecan influence. This can perhaps be carried too far.

Saturninus is the elder son, this act accords with the rule of primogeniture, but Saturninus' questionable character makes the application of the rule unfortunate. Titus is a good man, wise and free from ambition, while Saturninus, unchecked by scruples, is motivated by a naked desire for power. The rightful head is set "on headless Rome (I, i, 186)" according to the familiar analogy between body and body-politic, but Saturninus' "virtues" are no assurance that "justice will be ripened in this commonweal (I, i, 227)". The nature of the situation in Titus represents a considerable dramatic advance over Gorboduc. Saturninus threatens the body-politic, not because he is the wrong successor by birth, but because he is a selfishly ambitious person. This places the problem squarely in the character of a single man (though this character is not developed), not, as in Gorboduc, in a mesh of royal court procedure governing succession, qualified by the thoughts and feelings of an aging king, his conflicting advisors, his shrewish wife, and his envious sons.

In a jealous and ambitious character, the seeds of disorder are quick to germinate. Saturninus' first act upon being made Emperor is to choose Titus' daughter, Lavinia, to be his Empress; this, despite his full knowledge that Lavinia is betrothed to Bassianus. Bassianus quite naturally refuses to support his brother's action and, instead, carries Lavinia off. But an act against the will of the Emperor, whatever its nature, is treason. Titus is the first to recognize and de-

nounce this; in fact, he is so honourable, that he disavows his own sons for their part in aiding Bassianus. Saturninus repays Titus' loyalty with the coin of insult (I, i, 299-314), and takes the captive Queen of the Goths, Tamora, to wife. Although Tamora persuades Saturninus to be reconciled with Bassianus and Titus, her motive is guile, and, when Act I ends, the stage is set for a chain-reaction of revenges.

Saturninus, Tamora and her sons, and Aaron are aligned as the villainous forces of disorder in the play, while Titus and his family--"good citizens" in the best and fullest sense--are forces for order. Although Titus and Lucius join the company of Saturninus and Tamora as revengers, the revenges of father and son differ significantly from the revenges of husband and wife, as we shall presently see.

Aaron is the most morally unambiguous revenger in the play. Passionate and wicked, he is the self-conscious villain familiar to Elizabethan tragedy, a "Machiavellian" villain who operates by "policy and stratagem (II, i, 104)" and whose motive, beyond a sheer delight in deviltry, is an ambition to rank in importance with his fellow Moor, Tamora. At the hunt which he has masterminded as a means for Chiron and Demetrius to effect a double-rape upon Lavinia, he announces privately to Tamora, with the rant typical of his stock-type, "Vengeance is in my heart, death in my hand, / Blood and revenge are hammering in my head (II, iii, 38-9)".

Tamora, for her part, falls in with Aaron's villainous

plans because of her desire for revenge on the Andronicus family. Her motive is explicit--Titus offered her eldest son as a sacrifice to the gods following the victory over the Moors which he effected immediately prior to the action of the play. Justifiable as Tamora's revengeful feeling is in human terms, it is clear that the playwright expected his audience to accept the morality of Titus' action, and to believe that Titus was merely following an obligatory ritual whereby the sacrifice of a high-ranking Moor was required to appease the spirits of his own dead sons.<sup>7</sup> Had Tamora been as "public-spirited" as Titus (witness his displeasure with his own sons about their quite justifiable "treason" I, i, 276-296) presumably she would have assented to the justice of this situation. Since she did not, we must take it that she has no morally justifiable cause for revenge. In addition, her deceitful and scheming approach to revenge, combined with the malice of her intent, brands her as a villainess.

When Titus comes to consider revenge, his case is quite different from Tamora's. Ordinarily an honourable and obedient citizen, respectful of the state and its laws, Titus, like Hieronimo in The Spanish Tragedy, does not think of revenge

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<sup>7</sup>The tone of Titus' remark to Tamora is notable:  
 Patient yourself, madam, and pardon me.  
 These are your brethren whom your Goths beheld  
 Alive and dead, and for their brethren slain  
 Religiously they ask a sacrifice;  
 To this your son is mark'd, and die he must,  
 T'appease their groaning shadows that are gone.  
 (I, i, 121-6)

until provocation has surpassed all bounds. Even then it is not until he realizes that the rightful administrator of justice, Emperor Saturninus, is thoroughly corrupted, and until, Lear-like, he is nearly mad with grief and sorrow, that he decides to act. Titus' ability for quick, decisive action, as when he killed his son Mutius for playing the traitor (I, i, 289-295), throws into relief his hesitation in his later circumstances. Lavinia has been violated, her tongue cut out and her hands cut off; Titus' two sons, Martius and Quintus, have been falsely accused of Bassianus' murder and beheaded; and Titus has lost a hand in a false bargain with Saturninus, before Titus calls for the location of Revenge's Cave. His sons' heads, eloquently symbolic of the corruption of Saturninus' regime,<sup>8</sup> precipitate his decision to take justice into his own hands. He says:

For these two heads do seem to speak to me,  
 And threat me I shall never come to bliss  
 Till all these mischiefs be return'd again  
 Even in their throats that hath committed them.  
(III, i, 271-4)

Realizing that there is no political recourse to justice, no "public revenge" to appeal to, Titus despatches Lucius, his only remaining son, to raise an army of Goths "To be reveng'd on Rome and Saturnine (III, i, 300)". Titus realizes that injustice must be attacked at its source.

After this action, Titus continues to refrain from personal revenge. Marcus, his brother, voices his belief

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<sup>8</sup>See messenger's speech at III, i, 234-240.

that God approves of revenge upon these crimes, and vows to become an instrument of that revenge. As Lavinia contrives to reveal the circumstances of her undoing and the number of men involved (IV, i), Marcus urges her on with the words: "Write thou, good niece, and here display at last / What God will have discovered for revenge (IV, i, 73-4)". When the tragic details come out, Marcus kneels and swears "that we will prosecute by good advice / Mortal revenge upon these traitorous Goths (i.e. Tamora's sons)". Marcus, knowing the justice of Titus' cause, also realizes how scrupulous is his brother's conscience in delaying revenge so long--his brother

That hath more scars of sorrow in his heart  
 Than foeman's marks upon his batt' red shield,  
 But yet so just that he will not revenge.  
 (IV, i, 126-8)

Marcus calls upon the heavens to revenge Titus' wrongs; a little later Titus makes the same plea.

Hieronimo, in The Spanish Tragedy, is another revenger who seeks justice both from public and heavenly sources before taking revenge into his own hands. For a long time he cannot approach the law because he does not know the identity of his son's murderer. When, through Pedringano's letter, he does discover the murderer, he is prevented by Lorenzo from presenting his case before the king. Heaven, too, at first fails Hieronimo (III, ii, 10-11) though later it offers encouragement (IV, i, 32-4). It is not usually recognized that Hieronimo's and Titus' delay of private revenge is partly a



result of seeking justice from public sources.<sup>9</sup>

By the end of Act III Titus has begun to "lose his mind" in accordance with the Elizabethan belief that "Extremity of griefs would make men mad (IV, i, 19)". This state increases the poignancy of his position in the third scene of Act IV, where his continuing desire for justice is dramatically portrayed. In his crazed state, he shoots (with bow and arrow) written petitions to the gods for justice, saying, with the sanity often found in madness: "Terras Astraea reliquit: [The goddess of justice has left the earth] . . . / She's gone, she's fled (IV, iii, 4-5)". With impeccable logic, he resolves to petition Pluto's region for justice, and Publius, humouring him, informs him that

Pluto sends you word  
If you will have Revenge from hell, you shall:  
Marry, for Justice, she is so employed,  
He thinks, with Jove in heaven, or somewhere else,  
So that perforce you must needs stay a time.  
(IV, iii, 37-41)

Titus, now impatient, threatens to pull Revenge out of Acheron by the heels, but concludes by deciding to solicit heaven:

And sith there's no justice in earth nor hell,  
We will solicit heaven and move the gods  
To send down justice for to wreak our wrongs.  
(IV, iii, 49-51)

By cosmic parallel, this scene serves to underline the state of justice in Rome. Saturninus, receiving some of the missiles, is not slow to gather their import. In the tones of

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<sup>9</sup>Cf., Thomas Kyd, The Spanish Tragedy, ed., Philip Edwards (London: Methuen, 1959), pp. liv-lxi.

one mightily wronged, he complains:

Sweet scrolls to fly about the streets of Rome!  
 What's this but libelling against the senate,  
 And blazoning our injustice every where?

• • • • •  
 As who would say, in Rome no justice were.  
 (IV, iv, 16-20)

Saturninus refuses to take Titus' implied accusations seriously until a messenger brings news that the Goths are approaching.

In the last act, Titus retires to his study to "ruminate strange plots of dire revenge (V, ii, 6)". Here, three of his enemies, thinking to trick him, play right into his hands (and surprisingly lucid mind). Tamora disguises herself as a personification of revenge, her sons as Rapine and Murther, respectively. Titus pretends to be fooled but, after Tamora leaves, he murders her sons and prepares to serve them to Tamora in a pasty. Grossly horrible as this deed is, mad Titus shows some awareness of the balancing required by justice when he says: "For worse than Philomel you us'd my daughter, / And worse than Progne I will be reveng'd (V, ii, 194-5)". Four deaths accompany the grisly feast--Lavinia's and Tamora's by Titus' hand, Titus' by Saturninus' and Saturninus' by Lucius', who says, "Can the son's eye behold his father bleed? / There's meed for meed, death for a deadly deed (V, iii, 65-6)".

The tragedy is that a brave and honourable man, by unbearable provocation combined with lack of recourse to law, has been reduced through intensity of grief to madness and finally

to a brutal revenge. Sympathy with Titus is assured by his stature as a victorious Roman general, by his deep respect for law, and by his long delay of private revenge in order to be just, and to allow legal and cosmic justice its chance. This sympathy readily turns to tragic pity as Titus is loaded with grief and injustice and robbed of any opportunity to rectify his wrongs by lawful means.

The final events of the play give added support to a moral interpretation. Following the killings of Titus' feast, Marcus' first concern is for the welfare of the body-politic. He addresses the "sad-faced men of Rome" in these words:

O, let me teach you how to knit again  
 This scattered corn into one mutual sheaf,  
 These broken limbs again into one body.  
 (V, iii, 70-2)

Marcus and Lucius then lay their family's case before the Roman people. After each give evidence, Marcus requests that the Romans "judge what cause had Titus to revenge / These wrongs unspeakable, past patience (V, iii, 125-6)" and the pair submit themselves to the citizens' judgment. Lucius is immediately acclaimed Roman Emperor, indicating the full sympathy of the Roman people and the playwright's general endorsement of the virtue of the Andronici family.<sup>10</sup> Lucius' first act as Emperor, an act symbolic of the re-establishment

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<sup>10</sup>The survival of two Andronici from the otherwise wholesale slaughter of Act V might also be interpreted as endorsement.

of just rule, is to mete out punishment to Aaron. Thus, the situation which began with a poor choice of Emperor eventually threatened the well-being of the entire state, and order was not restored until a just man was placed in authority.

It is notable that Lucius' previous role as both a public and private revenger left no stain on his character. His raising of the Goth army was a justifiable "revenge" on Saturninus and the ungrateful Roman people, while his only act of private revenge was the killing of his father's murderer.

Although, without doubt, the main impact of this play is sensational (with Lavinia displaying her bleeding stumps and mouth through much of the play, with Martius falling into Bassianus' bloody grave to be followed by Quintus, with the onstage display of heads and a severed hand and so on), nevertheless a moral framework is not only present and clearly discernible in the play but consistent throughout it. The concept of "just revenge" enables us to see this moral pattern, throws into relief the meshed themes of private and public justice and revenge, and guides our attitude to the various characters.

## CHAPTER FIVE: ANTONIO'S REVENGE

John Marston's Antonio's Revenge (the second part of a play the first part of which is called Antonio and Mellida) shares with other revenge plays of the period the conventional plot elements which we associate with Kyd--a father-ghost who demands revenge, a revenger who feigns madness, revenges marked by violence and bloodshed to a superlative degree, and characters who display vindictive passions. But Marston's dramatic idiom is so distinctive that his play stands out as quite different from earlier revenge plays. Anthony Caputi, in a new book-length study of Marston, claims that he brought to English letters "a new voice . . . a voice by any standard startling and highly individualistic".<sup>1</sup> A satirical point of view is characteristic of Marston. Also characteristic are Stoical beliefs. Both are important to Antonio's Revenge.

By Marston's own statement, Duke Piero, the Italian villain of the play, is a burlesque of the "Machiavellian" figure. Piero is a veritable Tamburlaine of villainy; in action and speech he portrays vice on the grand scale. The play opens with the entry of Piero, according to the stage direction, "unbrac'd, his armes bare, smear'd in blood, a

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<sup>1</sup>Anthony Caputi, John Marston Satirist (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1961), p. 1.

poniard in one hand bloodie, and a torch in the other".<sup>2</sup> The announcement (to Strotzo) of two murders freshly completed, an explanation of his motives, and plans for more killings comprise the first scene of the play. Four mighty lines accurately summarize Piero's attitude:

Lord, in two houres what a toplesse mount  
Of unpeer'd mischief, have these hands cast up!  
I can scarce coop triumphing vengeance up,  
From bursting forth in braggart passion.  
(I, i, p.71)

In several like speeches Piero, bloated with hatred and vengefulness, exults in blood and grief.<sup>3</sup> His actions and speeches differ from other villains--from Aaron to the Guise to Iago--only in their superlative degree of excess. Marston seems bound to make Piero represent the nadir of villainy; taken in the context of the play, and of Marston's other work, it appears that this is the exaggeration of satire, satire doubtless directed at his fellow-dramatists.

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<sup>2</sup>John Marston, The Plays of John Marston, H. Harvey Wood, ed. (London: Oliver and Boyd, 1934), vol. I, p. 71. All other references to the play are taken from this edition.

<sup>3</sup>Cf.

Though thou art deade, thinke not my hate is dead:  
I have but newly twone my arme in the curld locks  
Of snakie vengeance. Pale beetle-brow'd hate  
But newly bustles up. Sweet wrong, I clap thy thoughts  
.....  
I have bin nurst in blood, and still have suckt  
The steeme of reeking gore. (II, i, p. 85)

and He greeves, laughe Strotzo: laugh, he weepes.  
Hath he tears? o pleasure! hath he teares?  
Now doe I scourge Andrugio with steele whips  
Of knottie vengeance. Strotzo, cause me straight  
Some plaining dittie to augment despaire.  
Tryumph Piero: harke, he groanes, o rare! (II, iv, p.94)

Marston began his writing career with the publication in 1598 of a verse satire entitled The Metamorphosis of Pygmalion's Image and Certain Satires. Caputi argues that Marston retained this satirical bent when he turned to the writing of drama.<sup>4</sup> The element of satire in Antonio's Revenge seems to confirm this thesis. Balurdo's malapropisms betray his characterization as the fool. Alberto, who with the other characters, introduces his part in a prologue to Antonio and Mellida, describes himself as "a servile hounde, that loves the sent of forerunning fashion, like an emptie hollow vault, still giving an eccho to wit: greedily champing what any other well-valued judgement had beforehand chew'd (p. 6)". Strotzo is a Roderigo-like gull and Matzagente is introduced to the audience as a Bragadoch. Such characters are instruments of burlesque and satire in Marston's hands.

The presence of a satirical element in Antonio's Revenge should not lead to the supposition that the play is a total burlesque. The main revenge action of the play, the tragedy of Antonio's revenge, is entirely serious in intention. The Dedication to the two part play apologizes for being "(a little too much) . . . seriously fantastical", while the Prologue to Antonio's Revenge recommends the play

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<sup>4</sup>See Caputi, p. 23. "Although he was soon prevented from publishing verse satires by the Order of Conflagration of 1599 and although his literary efforts after that were almost wholly dramatic, once he had turned to satire he never abandoned it."

to persons filled with grief, anguish and misery. The play concludes with the couplet: "And when the closing Epilogue appears, / Instead of claps, may it obtaine but teares (p. 133)".

The serious revenge action falls into the same pattern we saw in Titus Andronicus of just and unjust revenge. Also, the private revenge motif is mingled with a public revenge motif as in Titus, and Gorboduc. Marston's approach to "just revenge" is coloured by his Stoicism but he reconciles his Stoic beliefs with Christian ones, rejecting attitudes which prove resistant to reconciliation.<sup>5</sup> One Stoic belief that Marston expressly rejects is the view that man should be "patient" in the face of evil. When, in Antonio's Revenge, Alberto advises Antonio to be patient, Antonio answers: "S'lid, sir, I will not in despight of thee. / Patience is slave to fooles: a chaine that's fixt / Onely to postes, and senseless log-like dolts (I, v, p. 82)".

In Marston's skilful hands, Piero becomes an instrument of didactic satire. He bears witness to a standard of goodness and justice by his very wickedness which is a fully conscious deviation from that standard. He proves that he knows what justice is, at least in theory, by pretending,

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<sup>5</sup>Marston became a parson after his writing career. Reconciling Stoicism with Christianity was not uncommon at the time. Seneca, for instance, was popular because of his salutary moral views. He preached good conduct, as did Christians; the difference in metaphysics counted for little.



upon occasion, and for his own purposes, to be its advocate. The moral is not far to seek--the devil knows how to "make the worse appear the better reason"--appearances are easily manipulated. In a piece of dialogue between Piero and Pandulpho, the contrast between Piero's person and his words creates burlesque of the first order. Feliche's murdered body has just been found in Mellida's bedchamber--a circumstance planned by Piero as part of his plan to cast doubt on his daughter's chastity and prevent Antonio's marriage to her. His self-righteous decision to punish his daughter is pure Orwellian "double-think":

My lustfull daughter dies: start not, she dies.  
I pursue justice, I love sanctitie. (II, ii, p. 88)

Going on to inform Pandulpho of Andrugio's death, he tries to enlist Pandulpho's aid against Antonio (who he imputes to be Andrugio's murderer), by saying:

You are of honour'd birth, my very friende,  
You know how god-like tis to roote out sin.  
(II, ii, p. 88)

Next, as if to seal the cause of virtue, he intones:

I lov'd him well, yet I love justice more:  
Our friends we should affect, justice adore.  
(II, ii, p. 88)

The Stoical Pandulpho is not fooled by Piero's duplicity;<sup>6</sup> he remains clear-sighted even when Piero makes appeal to his loyalty:

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<sup>6</sup>For more of Piero's hypocritical righteousness, see IV, ii, pp. 111-12.

Pie. Tis just that subjectes acte commaundes of kings.  
Pan. Commaund then just and honorable things.  
 (II, ii, p.88)

The standard of justice to which Piero points in this oblique way is the same standard, where revenge is concerned, which has been presented in the foregoing pages. When he and Mellida hear the false news that Antonio is drowned, Antonio, in the meantime, having been blamed for falsely defaming Mellida, Piero upbraids Mellida for her grief:

How now? Ay me? why, art not great of thanks  
 To gracious heaven, for the just revenge  
 Upon the author of thy obloquies! (V, iii, p. 115)

"Just revenges" come from heaven; even a Piero knows this, although as usual, he interprets "heaven's justice" to suit himself.<sup>7</sup>

Conventional beliefs about revenge and justice, acknowledged obliquely by the blackest villain in the play, also appear clearly in the judgments and actions of the "good" characters in Antonio's Revenge. Hamlet-like, Antonio tortures himself with thoughts of his dead father and his dishonoured fiancée. He refuses alike Alberto's attempt to solace him (p. 82) and the advice he reads from a Stoic treatise (p.91). The additional knowledge that his mother's love and his own life are sought by Piero fills him with despair. In his own words:

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<sup>7</sup>Strotzo, too, knows that revenge can come from heaven. In a feigned confession at IV, iii, p. 114, he pretends an agony of remorse and petitions the "Supreame Efficient" with the words, "Why cleav'st thou not my breast with thunderbolts / Of wing'd revenge?"

why, mother, is't not wondrous strange  
 I am not mad--I run not frantic, ha?  
 Knowing my fathers trunk scarce colde, your love  
 Is sought by him that doth pursue my life?  
 Seeing the beautie of creation,  
Antonio's bride, pure heart, defam'd, and stoad  
 Under the hatches of obscuring earth.  
 (II, iv, p. 95)

In this frame of mind, Antonio visits his father's grave to perform "dewe obsequies". His anguish rouses Andrugio's ghost who proceeds to lay bare Piero's plot and to tell Antonio to revenge. Antonio is troubled by this demand but realizes that honour and duty to God requires him to obey it. Solemnly swearing to be revenged, he says: "So I may sleepe toumb'd in an honour'd hearse, / So may my bones rest in that Sepulcher (III, ii, p. 101)". Interrupted momentarily by Maria, he proceeds:

May I be cursed by my fathers ghost,  
 And blasted with incensed breath of heaven,  
 If my heart beat on ought but vengeance.  
 (III, ii, p. 101)

Heaven will be angered, so thinks Antonio, if he avoids his duty of revenge.

Conventional moral attitudes shape Antonio's decision to revenge, then, but it must be added at once that the words and deeds which follow this decision do not all combine to illustrate an ethical treatise. Both Andrugio and Antonio at times become extreme and even bloodthirsty in pursuing their revenge, as when Andrugio says:

Fly deare Antonio:  
 Once more assume disguise, and dog the Court.  
 In fained habit, till Piero's blood  
 May even ore-flowe the brimme of full revenge.  
 (III, v, pp. 107-8)

After killing Julio, Antonio cries "My heart hath thirsting Dropsies after goare (III, iii, p. 104)".

This brings us to an interesting problem about the would-be "just revenger". Regardless of motive, how, in actual fact, can he bloody his hands with murder and still remain a just man? In practice, what differentiates him from a villain? Obviously this is a problem for the revenge dramatist who must, at all cost, portray action on the stage.

Little about Antonio's actions suggest the good man. He kills Julio simply because Julio is Piero's son, and the act puts him in ecstasy:

O my soule's inthroan'd  
 In the tryumphant chariot of revenge.  
 Methinks I am all ayre, and feele no waight..  
 Of humane dirt clogge. (III, iv, p. 107)

Later (IV, i, p. 109) he invokes the genius of "deepe, deepe observing, sound brain'd Macheveil" to justify his disguising himself as a fool, while still later, with Pandulpho's and Alberto's aid, he murders Piero and rips out his tongue. But if these acts make Antonio appear to be a villain, it is only because they are being considered out of context and quite apart from Marston's manifest intention. Antonio is meant to be considered a good man, while his revenge against Piero, so hugely provoked, is meant to be thought right and just.

The last act of Antonio's Revenge most fully clarifies Marston's intention in this matter. It opens with the ghost of Andrugio soliloquizing:

Now gins the leprous cores of ulcered sins  
 Wheale to a head: now is his Piero's fate grown  
mellow,  
 Instant to fall into the rotten jaws  
 Of chap-falne death. Now downe lookes providence,  
 T'attend the last act of my son's revenge.  
(V, i, p. 123)

In the distinctive imagery which yet expresses a familiar Elizabethan idea, the Andrugio-ghost sees Piero's evil deeds as manifestations of the disease of sin; the sins have come to a head and must be purged. Hence, by implication, Antonio's function as revenger is that of a priest-physician who will purge Piero's sin.<sup>8</sup> Of this function, Providence, the Punisher, approves. The final lines of Andrugio's soliloquy underscore this point:

O, now tryumphes my ghost;  
 Exclaiming heaven's just; for I shal see,  
 The scourge of murder and impietie.  
(V, i, p. 124)

In the third scene of the same act, Pandulpho, who with Alberto has become a party to Antonio's cause, rings a change on Antonio's theme. Excited about growing civil dissatisfaction and about new evidence pointing to Piero's guilt, he interprets these successes as Divine encouragement. Two lines reveal both his mood and his belief: "O' my lustie bloods, /

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<sup>8</sup>Cf. Tamburlaine, characteristically described as "the scourge of God". God "scourges" or punishes the unrighteous. Hence Tamburlaine, His instrument, is called His scourge.

Heaven sits clapping of our enterprise (V, iii, p. 125)". Piero's capture, torture, and death follows shortly upon Pandulpho's words. Antonio grabs Piero for the fatal stabbing, saying as he does so: "Thus the hand of heaven chokes / The throate of murder (V, v, p. 130)".

Neither Andrugio, when he justifies his demand for revenge by reference to Providence, nor Antonio and Pandulpho, when they consider themselves agents of heaven's will, are victims of self-delusion in Marston's eyes. In the final scene Venetian senators bless the revengers; Galeatzo, a Florentine, congratulates them for "ridding huge pollution from our state"; while Pandulpho announces their joint resolution to retire to a religious order. These events signify approval and make it quite certain that Marston subscribes to conventional beliefs about revenge and justice.

The doctrine of "just revenge" informs the whole of Antonio's Revenge in most explicit fashion. Constant repetition of its tenets enables the audience to differentiate between villainous murder and righteous requital, between "bad guys" and "good guys". The difficulties Marston encountered in making his revenge play conform to these moral requirements is instructive. In reality, as has been noted, the mutilation and murder of Piero is as violent and bloody as any of Piero's own villainous work. As well, in the words of Marston's chief editor, "There is something shocking in

the complacency with which the final butchery is accepted".<sup>9</sup> It turns out that Marston as the moralist is hard put to convince his audience that Antonio's actions are good and pure, especially when Marston as playwright is busy making theatrical capital from the blood and violence of those same actions. Explicit statement must intrude to clarify the import of otherwise ambiguous deeds, which is another way of saying that the moral issues in the play are not completely realized in dramatic terms. In the play's last scene, a senator prays that the honours of the revengers be "religiously held sacred" and Antonio suggests that the trio cleanse their hands and purge their hearts of hatred. These are concessions to the convention, last-ditch attempts fully to justify the revenge action, but their very presence suggests special pleading and a failure effectively to justify the revenge action in terms of itself. Antonio's Revenge, as drama, is perhaps the worse because its moral intentions are so explicit. It remained for Shakespeare to transform the matter into living tissue, to create in Hamlet a revenge play where the genuine ambiguity of life replaces the simplifications of conventional morality.

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<sup>9</sup>Wood, ed., p. xxxv. Caputi, p. 154, echoes this judgment: "The murder of Julio and the orgy of vengeance in the last scene are proofs too strong to be set aside by the logic of Marston's theoretical position, and the unconventional conclusion permitting Antonio and his allies to live seems, however intended, inevitably arbitrary".

## CHAPTER SIX: SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

This study of three plays--Gorboduc, Titus Andronicus, and Antonio's Revenge--against a background of the Elizabethan understanding of revenge, leads to a number of conclusions. The most basic realization is that the word "revenge" had much broader significance in the sixteenth century than it has now. Revenge was an important theological, political, and moral phenomenon in the sixteenth century. In a chronicle history play like Gorboduc, revenge takes the form of Divine punishment for political sins. In a conventional Revenge Play like Antonio's Revenge, Antonio takes revenge on Piero, and the act is intended to represent the triumph of justice over villainy. Clearly, the Elizabethan concept of revenge is not confined to an Italianate vendetta. The term "just revenge", widely current in Elizabethan times, brings the extended sixteenth century meaning of revenge into focus.

Christian and moral presuppositions are part of the fabric of English Renaissance literature. This study shows that Elizabethan revenge drama, despite its sensationalism, has significant ethical content. A major part of the action even of plays as bloody as Titus Andronicus and Antonio's Revenge is motivated by considerations of justice.

A moral understanding of revenge cuts across genres and reveals much fundamental unity of attitude to the subject



among Elizabethan dramatists. The opposition in the chronicle history play between forces of rebellion and forces of order and authority is paralleled in the conventional Revenge Play by opposition between the malicious and unmotivated murderer and the upright man seeking justice through the punishment of evil-doers. Both oppositions resolve into the conflict between good and evil and suggest that in the realm of attitudes to revenge, the revenge plays are closer to their medieval roots than to their classical ones.

To illustrate this point, Seneca's influence on the structure and verse of early Elizabethan tragedy is pronounced, but his influence on its content appears to have been considerably modified by native English tradition. The theme of civil order, for example, runs through both chronicle history play and conventional Revenge Play; this theme is not a major concern of Seneca's. Similarly, as this study has attempted to show, the moralistic bias of both chronicle history play and conventional Revenge Play is native rather than Senecan.

Another observation provoked by this study is that early plays like Gorboduc (1562) and The Misfortunes of Arthur (1588) demanded that revenges be "just" or "fair", but did not question the right of revenge. The right of revenge is not explicitly called in question in Titus Andronicus (1594) or Antonio's Revenge (1601) either, but the dramatists seem to strain to win audience sympathy for their "good" revengers. By the time of The Revenge of Bussy D'Ambois (1610), Chapman

seriously questions the justice of personal revenge. This suggests not so much a change of attitude toward revenge, as a change of attitude toward revengers. Chapman, in effect, brought into the dramatic arena this question: "Whose right is the right of revenge?"

"Just revenge", then, seemingly a mere tag, is the surface tip of a pyramid of ideas reaching deep into the thought of an age. An appreciation of these ideas leads to a deeper understanding of the many revenge plays produced in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.

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