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FACULTY OF PHILOLOGY

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## ONE RECURRENT THEME: REVENGE IN SHAKESPEARE'S TRAGEDIES, HISTORIES AND COMEDIES

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**Abstract:** This paper's aim is to show that not only the revenge tragedies Hamlet and Titus Andronicus are shaped or influenced by the notion of revenge, but that Shakespeare used that notion in most of the other 34 plays featured in the 1623 First Folio, both as a major theme and as a device, the latter primarily in the comedies. In addition, the presence of revenge in his plays indicates that Shakespeare follows the platitude "Omni ars naturae imitation est" and the *zeitgeist* at that time particularly regarding Southern Europeans and revenge. Besides Shakespeare, other play writers who acquainted the public with this notion through their plays were Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* (1592), Marston's *Antonio's Revenge* (1600) and Middleton's *The Revenger's Tragedy* (1606). Another aim of this paper is to establish how far revenge can be detrimental to the characters involved. For obvious reasons, this paper cannot cover all the instances of revenge in the thirty analyzed plays.

**Key words:** *revenge, Shakespeare tragedies, Shakespeare's histories, Shakespeare's comedies, occurrence of the word, outcome of the revenge*

Francis Bacon described revenge as a kind of "wild justice" that "does... offend the law [and] putteth the law out of office."(Francis Bacon, *Essays*, p.11)

### Introduction

Although none of the analyzed plays in this paper is regarded as a pure revenge tragedy, it is worth mentioning that the notion of revenge in English plays stems primarily from Seneca. The first translation of a Senecan tragedy into the English language took place in 1559. Other translations followed suit in 1561, 1566, 1567, 1581. We would better understand the frequent occurrence of the notion of revenge in the analyzed plays if we are better acquainted with how primarily the Italian vendetta or revenge, but also the Spaniard and the Turk revenge were seen and described in Elizabethan and Jacobian society. According to the historian William Thomas the Italians "ware of theyr tongues, that a man maie goe .x.x. yeres through Italie without finding reproche or villanie, vnlesse he prouoke it hym selfe" (The historie

of Italie (1549), fol. 4). Thomas Write (1601) compared the Englishmen and Italians and Spaniards with the following words: “Our people (for the most part) reueale and disclose themselves very familiarly and easily; the Spaniard and the Italian demurreth much...he will shew a countenance of friendship although he intends to reuenge, he can traine his purposes afarre off to vndermine where he pleaseth, he will praise where he hateth, and dispraise where he loueth for a further proiect; he can obserue his times better than we for his plots, and marke out fitter occasions to effectuate his intent.” (The Passions of the Minde in General (ed.1630). Simultaneously with translations of Seneca a large number of Italian novels were translated into English language. Some of them are: *Les Histoires Tragiques* (1559-1570) of Belleforest, later mirrored in 1614 by *Les Histoires Tragiques de nostre Temps of Rosset*, William Painter and his *Palace of Pleasure*(1567-1568), George Touberville in *Tragical Tales* (1574), Robert Smith in *Straunge, lamentable, and Tragical Hystories retold from Belleforest and Bandello* (1577), Thomas Lodge in *The Life and Death of William Longbeard* (1593), and Thomas Beard in his *Theatre of Gods Judgments* (1597). Of particular importance was the book *The Historie of Guicciardin* containing the warres of Italy, translated in 1579 and Gentillet “*A Discourse... Against Nicholas Machiavel*”. These books gave the Englishmen plenty of examples of revenge. According to Gentillet:

According to the honour of his [Machiavelli’s] Nation, vengeance, and enmities are perpetual and irreconcilable; and indeed, there is nothing wherein they take greater delectation, pleasure, and contentment, than to execute a vengeance; insomuch as, whensoever they can haue their enemy at their pleasure, to be reuenged vpon him they murder him after some strange & barbarous fashion, and in murdering him, they put him in remembrance of the offence done vnto them, with many reproachfull words and iniuries to torment the soule and the bodie together; and sometimes wash their hands and their mouthes with his blood, and force him with hope of his life to giue himselfe to the diuell; and so they seeke in slaying the body to damne the soul, if they could.

(Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy, 1587-1642, p.52)

In passing, there aren’t any records of Shakespeare visiting Italy although he places ten plays in Italy and in additional two plays part of the plot takes place in Italy, namely Antony and Cleopatra and Cymbeline.

The notion of revenge in Shakespeare’s plays is so omnipresent that is part of the plot, subplot or both of most of the tragedies, comedies and histories. There are 259 references to the words “revenge”, “revenged”, vengeance”, “avenge/avenged” in the entire corpus of Shakespearean plays. This paper analyzes only the plays published in the First Folio of 1623.

In the tragedies the notion is obviously the moving force in the two revenge tragedies that Shakespeare wrote: *Hamlet* and *Titus Andronicus*. In a previous paper entitled: *Some Common Traits Shared by English Renaissance Revenge Tragedies* the



author and al. of that paper have compared the common traits of these two revenge tragedies together with *The Spanish Tragedy* by Thomas Kyd. Since these two plays were already analyzed, these two revenge tragedies are not analyzed in this paper. However, the notion of revenge, although not as a moving force, is also present in the tragedies: *Troilus and Cressida*, *Coriolanus*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Timon of Athens*, *Julius Caesar*, *Macbeth*, *King Lear*, *Othello* and *Anthony and Cleopatra*, in other words in all of the tragedies that Shakespeare wrote, of course to a larger or to a lesser extent.

In the histories the notion of revenge is present in the two tetralogies: *Richard II*, *Henry IV Part 1*, *Henry IV Part 2*, *Henry V* and *Henry VI Part 1*, *Henry VI, Part 2*, *Henry VI Part 3*, *Richard III* and in the play *King John*.

With regard to the comedies/romances the notion is present in: *Cymbeline*, *The Tempest*, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, *Much Ado about nothing*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *As You like It*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, *All's Well That Ends Well*, *Twelfth Night* and *The Winter's Tale*. Revenge is mentioned 34 times in these comedies, and vengeance 9 times, for a total of 43 times.

The presence of this theme is minor or non-existent in four plays out of the thirty-six: The history play *Henry VIII*, and in the comedies *Love Labour's Lost*, *The Comedy of Errors* and *Measure for Measure*. This is the reason why these plays are not analyzed.

In the play *Troilus and Cressida*, Troilus plans to revenge himself to his lover Cressida for her flirtation with Diomedes and for the death of his brother. Achilles on the other hand wants to avenge the death of his friend Patroclus at the hands of Hector and changes his mind and fights the Trojans.

In *Coriolanus* the theme of revenge is one of the main themes. Coriolanus wants to take revenge on Rome for being banished from his native city. He sides with the Volsces, Rome's principal enemies, but is eventually killed by the Volsces for refusing to destroy his Rome.

In *Romeo and Juliet*, Tybalt a Capulet challenges to a duel Romeo, a Montague, for the fact that the latter sneaked uninvited into the Capulet's ball. After Romeo refuses to participate in the duel, Mercutio takes up the challenge but is slain by Tybalt. In revenge Romeo slays Tybalt.

In *Timon of Athens*, Timon's generosity exceed all limits. He helps everyone who has any kind of need. When he runs out of money and his friends refuse to help him out. Timon invites his friends to the usual feast, but in an act of revenge puts rocks and lukewarm water instead of exquisite food and drinks. Later, disappointed by almost everyone he becomes a misanthrope, pledges revenge on Athens and funds with the gold he has found, funds Alcibiades and prostitutes in order that they destroy Athens.

In *Julius Caesar* the idea of revenge is also present. Marcus Antonius and Octavian Caesar heed the citizens' cries demanding revenge for Caesar's death, assemble an army and defeat the conspirators/murderers of Caesar, led by Brutus and Cassius.

In *Macbeth* the idea of revenge is also present. For example fearing the witches' prophecies, and envying their chivalrous behavior Macbeth kills Banquo and Macduff's family. On the other hand Malcolm and Donalbain avenge the murder of their father King Duncan, by siding with Macduff and defeating and killing Macbeth.

In *King Lear* the idea of revenge is represented by Lear himself who vows revenge on his two flattering and ungrateful daughters, Goneril and Regan. In addition the Duke of Cornwall and Regan are acquainted with the fact that a French Army has landed in Britain in order to save Lear. Edmund betrays his father Gloucester that the latter is aware of the imminent invasion. In an act of revenge, The Duke of Cornwall and Regan gouge out Gloucester's eyes. The sisters Regan and Goneril both lust after Edmund. However, after Regan, thinking that Edmund loves her and will marry her, learns that Edmund had made promises to Goneril also, in an act of revenge, poisons her sister.

*Othello* is the tragedy where revenge reaches fever pitch. After Othello is misled by Iago's machinations about the supposed infidelity of his wife Desdemona, who is in fact innocent, he cries out: "Arise, black vengeance, from thy hollow cell!" (III. iii. 450). In the final act Othello smothers Desdemona, and Iago out of revenge for exposing his plot, kills his wife Emilia.

In *Antony and Cleopatra*, the notion of revenge is also present. When Cleopatra learns from the messenger that Antony has married Octavia, out of revenge she strikes the messenger twice and threatens that he will "be whipp'd with wire, and stew'd in brine, Smarting in lingering pickle" (II. v. 81-82). After Cleopatra abandons Antony in a decisive battle, Antony decides to kill her, apparently in an act of revenge. However, Cleopatra sends false news that she had killed herself with *Antony* as her last word.

In these tragedies, the words: "revenge", "avenge" or "vengeance" are mentioned 83 times. If we add the references from *Hamlet* and *Titus Andronicus* the number amounts to 127.

With regard to the history plays, the notion of revenge is present in the first tetralogy: *Richard II*, *Henry IV Part 1*, *Henry IV Part 2* and *Henry V*. For example, in *Richard II*, Henry Bolingbroke is arbitrarily banished and after Bolingbroke's father dies, Richard confiscates all of his father's money and land. In an act of revenge, Bolingbroke returns to England with an army, defeats Richard, imprisons him and proclaims himself King Henry IV. In *Henry IV part I*, the tough conduct towards the House of Percy, who has helped Henry IV to become a king, forces them, to ally with the Scots and the Welsh in the war against Henry IV. Hotspur explicitly says: "we'll be revenged on him" (I.iii.287). In *Henry IV part II*, Henry IV takes revenge on his old friend Sir John Falstaff for misleading him, although without being forced, into living a debauched life, not fit for a king. In an act of perhaps undeserved revenge, Hal (Henry V) urges Falstaff to watch his steps in the future: "Leave gormandizing; know the grave doth gape /For thee thrice wider than for other men" (V.v.53-54) and banishes the moving force of his riots "Till then I banish thee, on pain of death, / As I have done the rest of my misleaders, /Not to come near our person by ten mile" (V.v.63-65). In *Henry V*, Henry in an act of revenge, since he regards himself as the rightful heir to the French throne, he orders the murder of the prisoners since the

French have rallied their forces at the battle of Agincourt. Henry proclaims: "Then every soldier kill his prisoners:/Give the word through" (IV. vi. 39)

In the second tetralogy consisting of *Henry VI Part 1*, *Henry VI Part 2*, *Henry VI Part 3* and *Richard III* the theme of revenge is also present. For example in *Henry VI part I*, the Duke of Bedford wants revenge on the French after the latter recapture Rouen but refuses to fight on the battlefield. In *Henry VI part II* an example of revenge is the fact that Queen Margaret vows revenge on the Yorkist for the death of their military commander Lord Clifford: "Oft have I heard that grief softens the mind, /And makes it fearful and degenerate;/Think therefore on revenge and cease to weep. /But who can cease to weep and look on this?" (IV. Iv. 1-3)

*Henry VI Part III* is the historical play where the theme of revenge is the most rampant. As Michael Hattaway has stated "In Henry VI, we witness the final degradation of chivalry: this play contains some of the most horrific scenes in the canon as England's warlords sacrifice honour to a remorseless ethic of revenge" (The Third Part of *King Henry VI*, p. ix). In fact there are 23 instances of the words "revenge", "revenged" and "vengeance". At various instances Warwick, Clifford, Northumberland, Richard Westmorland, Edward, all assert at in the play that their actions are a result of a desire for revenge on the opposed side.

In the play *King John*, revenge is also present. Namely, in an act of Philip Faulconbridge beheads The Duke of Austria, called Lymoges who was responsible for the death Richard Coeur de Lion, the father of Faulconbridge. In the histories the word "revenge" is mentioned 69 times, "avenge" 3 times and "vengeance" 17 times for a total of 89 times.

*Cymbeline* today is mainly regarded as a comedy/romance, but in the First Folio it was classified as a tragedy. In this play there are also examples of revenge. Namely, after Posthumus has been convinced by Iachimo, that the latter has slept with Posthumus' wife Imogen, Pothumus arranges that the servant Pisanio kills Imogen. The murder however doesn't take place. Pisanio reveals the plot to Imogen and arranges her to be disguised as a boy. Cloten, Queen's son by a former husband and step-brother to Imogen, is also in love with Immogen although she is in love with Posthumus. Since she doesn't love him, he is bent on taking revenge on her: "I love and hate her:" (III, v, 90). .... "and in that point/I will conclude to hate her, nay, indeed, /To be revenged upon her" (III. v. 99-100).

However, he is not able to do much harm to Imogen, as he is killed by Guiderius, Imogen's brother and in the end the truth is revealed and Posthumus and Imogen marry.

In *The Tempest* there is also presence of revenge. Namely, Prospero wants to take revenge on his brother Antonio who has usurped his throne in Milan. However, in the end Prospero forgives them proclaiming:

The rarer action is/In virtue than in vengeance: they being penitent,/The sole drift of my purpose doth extend/Not a frown further. Go release them, Ariel.  
(V. i. 31-32)

There is implicit revenge in the comedy *Two Gentlemen of Verona* also. Namely, both Proteus and Valentine, who are best friends, are in love with Silvia, the Duke's

daughter. The Duke wants to marry Silvia to Thurio, against her wishes and locks his daughter in a tower. When Valentine tells Proteus that he plans to free Silvia from the tower so that they can elope, Proteus in an act of jealousy and revenge informs the Duke who subsequently captures and banishes Valentine. In the end Valentine marries Silvia and Proteus his first love Julia.

In the comedy *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, the person who is the subject of revenge is Falstaff. Falstaff is over-confident and believes that he can sleep with two married wives, sending two identical love letters to both of them. However, his scheme is revealed, the wives are insulted by his advances and vow revenge. As a result, Falstaff is forced to enter into a laundry basket filled with filthy clothes and thrown into the river, he is beaten and in the end he is forced to disguise himself as "Herne the Hunter" so that he can meet them at Windsor Park, but instead of the rendezvous he is pinched and partially burned with candles.

In the comedy *Much Ado About Nothing*, the person behind the revenge is Don John who was defeated by Claudio in a battle. After Don John sows the seed of doubt regarding Hero Claudio a count of Florence, wants to get revenge on Hero daughter of the governor of Messina, because he was misinformed that she is unfaithful. Claudio vows to publicly humiliate Hero stating: "If I see any thing to-night why I should not marry/her to-morrow in the congregation, where I should/ wed, there will I shame her" (III. ii. 96-98). During the wedding, Hero is accused of impiety by Claudio and subsequently swoons.

In *Midsummer's Night Dream* there is also a hint of revenge. As Demetrius and Lysander are about to fight for Hernia's love, Lysander vows revenge "Come, thou gentle day! /For if but once thou show me thy grey light, /I'll find Demetrius and revenge this spite" (III, ii, 420-422). However they are distracted by Puck by mimicking their voices and are separated.

In the comedy *The Merchant of Venice* the theme of desire for revenge can be compared in magnitude, but not in nature and outcome, to that of Othello. The moneylender Shylock has loaned to Bassanio, who wants to woo Portia and needs the money, and Antonio (as loan's guarantor to bond) 3.000 ducats on the condition that they return the money on a specified date without interest. Previously Antonio has angered Shylock with his antisemitism and his practice of lending money without interest. The deal states that if Antonio doesn't return the money, Shylock is entitled to cut one piece of Antonio's flesh. Antonio's ships are reported lost at sea and consequently he can't return the money. In Shylock conversation with Salarino one can see his desire for revenge:

Salarino. Why, I am sure, if he forfeit, thou wilt not take/his flesh: what's that good for?

Shylock. To bait fish withal: if it will feed nothing else,/it will feed my revenge. (III. I. 41-45)

.....  
After a few lines Shylock continues to argue in favour of revenge:  
...and if you wrong us, shall we not  
revenge? If we are like you in the rest, we will  
resemble you in that. If a Jew wrong a Christian,  
what is his humility? Revenge. If a Christian  
wrong a Jew, what should his sufferance be by  
Christian example? Why, revenge. The villany you  
teach me, I will execute, and it shall go hard but I  
will better the instruction. (III. I. 57-64)

As Shylock is about to cut the piece of flesh, as a result of certain Venetian law stipulations he is disgraced, he is forced to convert to Christianity and his daughter Jessica marries a Christian, Lorenzo. Shylock is also forced to bequeath his entire property to his daughter and her husband.

In the play *As You Like It*, Olivier and Orlando are brothers that entertain mutual antagonism. Olivier is the older brother and he inherited his father's estate but didn't fully provide for his younger brother, which was his obligation. Orlando is cleverer, stronger and more liked than Olivier. Olivier plans his revenge on Orlando through Charles the Wrestler:

I'll tell thee,  
Charles, it is the stubbornest young fellow of France; full of  
ambition, an envious emulator of every man's good parts, a secret  
and villainous contriver against me his natural brother.  
Therefore use thy discretion: I had as lief thou didst break his  
neck as his finger. (I. I. 129-134)

In the final act Olivier repents for mistreating Orlando, and the two brothers are reconciled.

In *The Taming of the Shrew*, Katherina the "shrew" wants to have revenge on her sister Bianca, who is more liked by their father than Katherina. Katherina wants revenge and proclaims: "I will go sit and weep, /Till I can find occasion of revenge" (II.1. 35-36). In the final scene, Katherine and Bianca are reconciled and marry respectively Lucentio and Petruchio.

In the comedy *All's Well That Ends Well*, Bertram is forced unwillingly to marry Helena. Soon Bertram goes to war in Italy without even a goodbye kiss. There he is engaged in a number of affairs with virgins. Helena goes to Italy and befriends a virgin, Diana, with whom Bertram is infatuated. Helena and Diana hatch a plan to switch places so that Bertram sleeps with Helena disguised as Diana. In that way Helena revenges herself on Bertram for his infidelity and for the fact that she was neglected.

In the comedy *Twelfth Night*, the subject of revenge is the puritan Malvolio from the comic subplot, who chastises Sir Toby and Sir Andrew for their revelry and for disturbing the peace of Olivia's house till late in the night. They convince him that

Olivia is secretly in love with him. Malvolio believes the story and acts in accordance with the supposed “love” letter, wearing yellow stockings is rude to the servants and constantly laughs at Olivia. Everybody believes that Malvolio is mad and he is locked in a dark chamber. In the end Malvolio pledges revenge on everyone involved: “I’ll be revenged on the whole pack of you” (V. 1. 397).

In the *Winter’s Tale*, Leontes falsely suspects that his friend Polixenes is the father of his child from his wife Hermione. Leontes, in an act of revenge, orders the murder of Polixenes and for that reason he also imprisons Hermione.

Leontes: The thought of my revenges that way  
Recoil upon me: in himself too mighty,  
And in his parties, his alliance; let him be  
Until a time may serve: for present vengeance,  
Take it on her. Camillo and Polixenes  
Laugh at me, make their pastime at my sorrow: (II. 3. 22-27)

Polixenes however is warned and escapes. Leontes learns from the Oracle of Delphi about his mistake and repents and decides to reconcile with Polixenes: “New woo my queen, recall the good Camillo,/Whom I proclaim a man of truth, of mercy;/ For, being transported by my jealousies/To bloody thoughts and to revenge”(III. ii.173 -176).

In the final act Perdita, Leontes and Hermione’s daughter Perdita, marries the son of Polixenes, Florizel. Thus the sins of the fathers are expiated.

### **Conclusion**

Revenge is most frequently encountered and is most detrimental to the psychological state of the characters in the tragedies. If we include Hamlet and Titus Andronicus, one can find the largest number of references to revenge in the tragedies. The usual result is murder and death and even madness as in the cases of Hamlet, King Lear, Lady Macbeth, Ophelia even Othello. Even without these two revenge tragedies, the number of references is 83, only 5 less than the histories. In the Histories the pattern is similar to the tragedies, usually the end result is murder/death. The lowest amount of references of the word “revenge” is, as expected in the comedies, 43 instances. In the comedies the end result of revenge is rarely murder /death. Only Cloten in *Cymbeline*, which in the Folio was listed as a tragedy is beheaded. This murder and the fact that Mamillius and Antigonus die in *The Winter’s Tale*, are rather the exceptions that confirm the rule (exceptio probat regulam).

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