

Revenge Tragedy

History and Background as it
applies to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*

Revenge Tragedy History

- Very popular in Shakespeare's time
- Influenced by the Roman dramatist, Seneca
- Predecessors to *Hamlet*:
 - Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*
 - Marlowe's *Jew of Malta*

**So audiences knew what to
expect**



Ingredients: How to build a revenge tragedy



- A melancholy hero/avenger
- A hesitating avenger (what happens if there is no hesitation?)
- A villain to be killed in the revenge
- Complex plotting

Ingredients: How to build a revenge tragedy (continued)

- Murders and other physical horrors
- A play-within-a play
- Sexual obsession and lust related to the passion for revenge
- A ghost who calls for revenge
- Real or feigned madness
- Death of the avenger



Structure Revenge Tragedy

- Exposition
- Anticipation
- Confrontation
- Delay
- Completion



Exposition



- Background information
- Usually provided by a ghost
- Provides motivation for revenge

Anticipation



- Detailed planning of revenge takes place
- Complexity of the revenge plot builds tension and anticipation

Confrontation

- Confrontation between the avenger and the intended victim
- Builds tension



Delay

- Avenger has second thoughts
- Hesitation causes delay--slows down the play
- Delay increases tension



Completion



- The plan is carried out
- The revenge is complete
- Often the avenger is killed

Four Revenge Plots in *Hamlet*

1. Pyrrhus
2. Hamlet (the main one)
3. Laertes (complicates matters)
4. Fortinbras (opens and ends play)

Morality of Revenge

- How is revenge viewed today?
- How was it viewed in the Old Testament?
 - eye for an eye?
- Shakespeare's time (late 16th century)
 - Crime: revenge against the law
 - Sin: Church said that the avenger's soul would suffer everlasting torment in hell
- What are the implications?

Revenge according to Francis Bacon (1625)

Revenge is a kind of “wild justice”

The most intolerable sort of revenge is for those wrongs which there is no law to remedy, but then let a man take heed the revenge be such as there is no law to punish; else a man's enemy is still beforehand, and it is two for one. Some, when they take revenge, are desirous the party should know whence it cometh. This is the more generous. For the delight seemeth to be not so much in doing the hurt as in making the party repent. . . . This is certain, that a man that studieth revenge keeps his own wounds green, which otherwise would heal and do well. Public revenges are for the most part fortunate. . . . But in private revenges this is not so. Nay rather, vindictive persons live the life of witches, who, as they are mischievous, so end they unfortunate.

Adapted from

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