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Vengeance Is Yours: Reclaiming the Social Bond in *The Spanish Tragedy* and *Titus Andronicus*

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Since the 1960s the original reputations of *The Spanish Tragedy* and *Titus Andronicus* have been wonderfully recovered. We now recognise that their unprecedented successes on the Elizabethan stage were owed to their seminal representation of revenge. However, we have continued to see that representation as a product, in the public theatre, of the received values of conventional academic drama. This article disputes such assumptions. It seeks to show that the currently received idea of Elizabethan revenge as extra-legal retaliation has concealed a more radical link between the act of vengeance and the psychic damage suffered by the avenger. Instead, it argues that in these two plays the self is conceived of as fundamentally social – that is to say, as inseparable from the internalised sociality of the avenger. This means that the 'new drama' requires an enactment of individual subjectivity rather than a repetition of received verities.

Keywords: revenge tragedy, Kyd, early Shakespeare, *Titus Andronicus*, early modern subjectivity, identity

1. Introduction

Today the claim that Shakespeare's 'texts' are primarily 'scripts' may seem platitudinous. However this discovery is recent. Throughout the nineteenth century the Romantic foregrounding of individual poetic genius blocked the recognition that serious stage performances are the result of a collaborative effort required to convert a script into a performance. The myth of Shakespeare's absolute originality has served only to obliterate the interactive quality of his achievement. Martin Wiggins has pointed out that Shakespeare, "once part of a group, has been reduced over time to pre-eminent singularity – and it is easy, though obviously mistaken, to assume that his plays are bound to be originals because they are more familiar" to us than those of other playwrights (2000: 2). This assumption also implies that Shakespeare's early plays must be regarded as training exercises for his later masterpieces. However, a truly theatrical perspective must take on board the material, professional and institutional contexts of his production. No satisfactory justice will be done to the early Shakespeare until one

takes these plays as responses to the achievements of the first generation of Elizabethan public playwrights. Even Shakespeare's masterpieces exist in dialogue with the drama of their time.

This interactive context allows a more interesting, because less abstract, picture of the dramatic revolution of the late 1580's and early 1590's to emerge. In particular, Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* can now be seen to have played a pivotal role in the development of Elizabethan drama. Indeed, in the light of the dramaturgical possibilities it opened up, Kyd's play can plausibly be regarded as the single most influential script of Renaissance tragedy. C.L. Barber, for example, considers it as "nothing less than great, strategically great" (1988: 131) while McAlindon hails it as "quite the most important single play in the history of English drama" (1986: 55). It is an established fact that its first run proved to be a success without precedent. Between 1592 and 1597 no other extant play except for *The Jew of Malta* seemed to have been performed as often as *The Spanish Tragedy*. Evidence survives to show that it was probably staged by at least four of the major Elizabethan companies, and at no less than seven of the London play-houses. This popularity is confirmed by the number of editions it went through: eleven between 1592 and 1633 – a figure which no Shakespearean play can match. Moreover, parodies of and allusions to Hieronimo not only in Elizabethan but also in Jacobean plays such as Beaumont's *The Knight of the Burning Pestle* demonstrate the duration as well as the brilliance of its celebrity. Indeed, *The Spanish Tragedy* can claim many 'firsts' in the history of Elizabethan drama: the first stage Machiavel, the first play-within-the-play, the first attempt to intermingle black humour and stately tragedy, and the like.[1] Of these firsts, the most significant and productive for the future of Elizabethan-Jacobean drama was its treatment of revenge – hence its recognition as "the first modern revenge tragedy" (Erne 2001: 96) – a subtitle more honoured in its bestowal than in its effects. What does the 'modernity' of the avenger Hieronimo consist in? In the theatre the play's association of erotic dalliance with pathological cruelty is extraordinarily effective. Yet neither eroticism nor cruelty can be said to be entirely absent from the pre-Kydian stage, as *Horestes* (c.1567) and *Gorboduc* (c.1562) show. Nevertheless, a play that released a current of fashion that ultimately culminated in *Hamlet* must surely have struck a deep chord with Elizabethan audiences. Its novelty was truly revolutionary and demands an explanation.

2. The Received Idea of Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy

The received account of Elizabethan revenge tragedy – revenge means the sinful appropriation of the punitive rights of the law – cannot explain the creative leap that this drama took with *The Spanish Tragedy*. All it does is to assert continuities of sameness between pre- and post-Kydian drama, that is to say, between the academic plays of the 1560's and '70's and the public plays of the 1580's and '90's. It owes its beginnings to Lily B. Campbell in 1931 and became widely accepted in the expanded

[1] See Mulryne in his introduction to *The Spanish Tragedy* (1989) and Erne (2001) for a detailed discussion of these data.

versions of Fredson Bowers (1941) and Ronald Broude (1975). Though in apparent disagreement, these authors shared a basic understanding of the meaning of revenge and revenge tragedy that has remained largely unchallenged. Essentially, the Campbell-Bowers-Broude conception of revenge takes the Tudor-Stuart moral and legal regulations of revenge, including the duel and the blood feud, as the key to the interpretation of revenge tragedy. It assumes that revenge plays reflect a moment of historical change when an immemorial ethic of blood revenge was supplanted by state monopoly of the redress for private wrongs. As the earthly expression of divine justice, state law laid exclusive claim to the right to mete out punishment. What Romans 12.17-19 had always demanded of the faithful – that they abstain from any personal initiative and leave vengeance to God – now became a legal requirement.[2] This major socio-legal change was not yet fully in place when revenge plays emerged. Thus a conflict was created between variants of retribution, which now required to be distinguished. Broude identifies them as follows: a) "retribution effected directly by an individual or family, that is, retribution effected without the intervention of any civil authority"; b) "the punishment meted out by the commonweal for acts defined by statute or custom as contrary to the public good: thus we find magistrates referred to as 'the common avengers' and the execution of their sentences as 'public vengeance'"; c) last but most important, "the Renaissance feeling for vengeance as a word proper to denote the retribution visited by God for transgression of His law" (1975: 41). For Broude, private, public and divine vengeance exhausts the possible meanings of the Renaissance concept of revenge. Broude expects creative plays dealing with characters to adjust to a taxonomy derived from theoretical tracts and non-dramatic literature. It follows that, no matter how outrageous an avenger may seem at first to be, in the end his actions will reveal themselves as enacting one of the three modalities of retribution. The critics' task is to perform this act of classification and thus establish whether the avenger's choice of the means of redress is legitimate. Only then will he or she be in a position to know whether Elizabethan audiences would have condemned or sympathised with the avenger. Revenge tragedy is thus reduced to a predictable tale of crime and punishment, and the critics' task to an act of passing sentence.

Since Campbell and Bowers' ethical construction of revenge, criticism has evolved in radical ways. Yet theirs remains the founding assumption of current analyses of Elizabethan revenge tragedy. The identification of tragic revenge as private revenge, and hence as sinful deviation from legality, has remained unchallenged. Katharine E. Maus's remarks on *Titus* is a case in point. Maus presents the play as continuing the revenge tradition initiated by Kyd: as victims of extreme violence, avengers resort to private means of redress only when they find legal justice denied to them. In other words, Elizabethan public-stage avengers are the product of a breakdown of legality:

[2] In the Geneva Bible version (1969): "Recompense to no man evil for evil . . . . Dearly beloued, auenge not your selues, but giue place vnto wrath: for it is written, vengeance is mine: I will repaye, saith the Lord".

> English Renaissance revenge tragedies typically feature a man whose family members have been raped or murdered by a king, a duke, or emperor. Because the administration of justice rests in the hands of the very person who has committed the outrage, no redress is obtainable through established institutions. As a result, the hero takes matters into his own hands . . . Spectators could experience a vicarious thrill of sympathy with the avenger, even while, at the end of the play, acknowledging the moral unacceptability of revenge and the necessity of the avenger's death. (1997: 371)

In this view, revenge is regarded as an example of Bacon's "wild justice, which the more man's nature runs to, the more ought law to weed it out" (1985: 72), that is to say, as an "outlaw legalism" (Maus 1995: 55) that can be explained but not justified. As such, it invariably brings about the destruction of its protagonist. Those cases in which the avenger does not meet a disastrous end are not exceptions. On the contrary, what they show is the avenger acting as an instrument of God's retribution that restores its natural order to a corrupt court. Whether as straightforward affirmation of religious and social piety (the avenger as an instrument of divine justice) or as a radical repudiation of it (the avenger as a bloody maniac who repays his villainous enemies in kind), revenge has to do with the regulation of offences in the community. It follows that there is no specifically dramatic treatment of revenge. In this perspective, Elizabethan revenge tragedies are seen to grow not out of the theatrical experiments of the 1580's but of a more general contemporary debate about law and order. Admittedly, this socio-ethical notion is well able to account for the treatment of revenge by academic plays, whose function is to vindicate the received ideas of social, political and moral order before the elite audiences of Oxford, Cambridge and the Inns-of-Court. It is precisely what *Gorboduc*, arguably the most accomplished surviving revenge tragedy before Kyd's, illustrates. This conventional idea that revenge belongs to God and King is by no means irrelevant to *The Spanish Tragedy*. However, it would be quite wrong to conclude that it exhausts the meaning of the revenge that Hieronimo enacts. Public revenge makes far greater demands.

To be sure, the Hieronimo of Act I seems to promise a vindication of his belief in God-sanctioned justice. The play opens with a court that seems to be living up to what Barber identifies as "the possibility of a sanctified, legitimate social order, to which men of integrity are internally related" (1988: 142). One of the fundamental achievements of *The Spanish Tragedy* is that it is able to represent a community the identity of whose members is shown, and not merely stated, to be supported by a system of sexual, familial and hierarchical relations which are perceptible in what they do and say. When Hieronimo makes his appearance after Spain's victory over Portugal, Kyd shows us how profoundly he identifies himself with the values of the Spanish court. For him, service of king and country expresses the natural law that regulates personal, familial and social life. When the king commends Horatio for his capture of the Portuguese prince, Hieronimo replies that his loyalties as a subject and as a father are identical. In his exclamation: "Long may he [his son] live to serve my sovereign liege,/ And soon decay unless he serve my liege". (I.ii.98-99)[3], he shows himself, at this stage of his career, to believe himself to belong to a unified moral world. Hieronimo has internalized what

[3] All citations of *The Spanish Tragedy* are to Mulryne's edition (1989).

may be termed the Tudor idea of order.[4] For those who live by its principles, authority – even in its most restrictive aspects of law, order and degree – is never conceived as an impediment to self-fulfilment. On the contrary, to rebel against authority would be to rebel against reason itself. To such a man as Hieronimo, Hooker's precepts of Christian charity are not only an injunction to proper behaviour but the sacred foundations of the community – "God to be worshipped, parents to be honoured, others to be used by us as we ourselves would be by them" (quoted in Danby (1961: 46)). As post-Darwinian and post-Freudian readers and spectators, we may assume an inherent antagonism between society and the individual, but this idea would be foreign to both Hooker and Hieronimo. In effect, in Act I, Hieronimo's sense of himself is shown to be dependent on the observance of his rightful place in the community. Broude's tripartite scheme of private, public and divine vengeance is entirely apposite to this context. This is emphasized by the fact that Hieronimo is the Knight Marshal of Spain, a man deeply committed to the pursuit of justice in the name of God and His community. However, much of the excitement of *The Spanish Tragedy* resides in its radical overturning of these initial expectations: in a play with almost as many avengers as main characters, it is the Justicer of the Realm that proves the wildest of them all. Essential as it is, this radical overturning of expectations is often downplayed by commentators of the play. As a result, inevitably polarized readings are generated. At one critical extreme, Broude, for example, regards Hieronimo's revenge as a providential fulfilment that vindicates his initial trust in God. For him, revenge is a function of the Knight Marshal's commitment to divine law. Although adverse circumstances "combine to try his faith in the Divine Justice of which he, as Knight Marshal, is an earthly agent" (1971: 135), he remains its effective instrument. However irrational it may appear at first sight, Hieronimo's carnage in Act V confirms that "the heavens *do* reveal and revenge secret crimes (albeit not always in ways immediately comprehensible to mortals)". At the other extreme, Maus is far from alone in presenting Hieronimo's retaliation as a subversive act that repudiates his pious beliefs and reveals the "desperate adaptation of a decent man to a bad world" (1995: 66).

Titus's first appearance is similarly intended to impress on us his strong identification with the community. In the speech that precedes Titus's entrance, Marcus announces to his fellow Romans that the glorious warrior is returning home. In so doing he refers to him as "Chosen Andronicus, surnamèd Pius" (I.i.23).[5] It is no coincidence that the first thing we hear about Titus is that he is 'Pius', an epithet associated with Aeneas and usually glossed by editors as "[devoted] to patriotic duty" (Waith 1998: 84). In his justly famous study of Roman civilization, Barrow brings out the deeper resonance of the phrase:

> For a "religious man" the phrase is usually "a man of the highest *pietas*," and *pietas* is part of that subordination of which we have spoken. You are *pius* to the gods if you admit their claims: you are *pius* to your parents and elders, and children and friends, and

[4] Collins (1989) analyses this concept and its controversial implications for Renaissance literature.

[5] All quotations from *Titus Andronicus* are taken from Bethoud and Massai (2001).

> country and benefactors, and all that excites, or should excite, your regard and perhaps your affection, if you admit their claims on you, and discharge your duty accordingly; the claims exist because the relationships are sacred. (1963: 22)

To be 'Pius', then, is to excel in the recognition of the outside claims on the self and the solidarity into which one is born.[6] And to excel, as Titus does, in this capacity among the Romans is to be extraordinarily devoted to familial and social piety, for the Romans were "perhaps the most political people we have known, [who] used the words 'to live' and 'to be among men' (*inter homines esse*) or 'to die' and 'cease to be among men' (*inter homines esse desinere*) as synonymous" (Arendt 1989: 132). It is this absolute identification with Roman moral-religious practice that allows Titus to sacrifice Alarbus. That Titus's actions appear to Tamora as cruel and irreligious emphasizes her foreign condition rather than the actions' un-Roman nature. To the Andronici, the sacrifice is the necessary fulfilment of their duty as Romans. Titus the martialist sheds the blood of his adversaries in the Stoic mood that befits impersonal law. As in the case of Hieronimo, the tragic paradox of the play lies in the apparent incongruity between Titus's wholly unemotional implementation of the law in Act I and the vengeful frenzy he delivers at the end of the play. It seems to me that, as in the case of Hieronimo, this paradox has been insufficiently recognized. For some critics, only the mad Titus is real; for others, only the Stoic martialist. Consequently, we are left with the impossible alternative of Titus the avenger either as a monster beyond human recognition or as a *paterfamilias* who reacts in a predictable way to the challenge of his honour. These mutually excluding theses reveal that in revenge there is an interplay between the rational and the irrational, the pious and the impious, that needs to be integrated into a coherent reading of the plays.

3. The Discovery of the Damaged Subjectivity of Revenge

In Kyd Shakespeare found not only a representation of an interactive community whose members have internalized their social bonds. *The Spanish Tragedy* also dramatizes the sense of inwardness that this internalized sociality allows characters to develop. A character is shown to construct his or her identity in relation to others, as a father of sons and daughters, a servant of the king, a martial leader of his people, etc. When he feels his identity to be radically threatened, he experiences a recoil into the self. In both *The Spanish Tragedy* and *Titus*, this inward recoil betrays a psychic crisis provoked by an attack on the avenger's family. The attack shatters the civic ideal by which the victim has lived, and dislocates him from his place in the community. Lorenzo's butchering of Horatio makes a mockery of the chivalrous reciprocity that has sustained Hieronimo's ideal of service. Titus's devotion to Rome is likewise destroyed

[6] As Jonathan Bate argues in his edition of the play, that this meaning of *pius* was available to the Elizabethans is confirmed by the relevant entry in Thomas Cooper's *Thesaurus Linguae Romanae et Britannicae . . . Accesit dictionarium historicum et poeticum propria vocabula* (1565), which reads: "Religious; devoute; godly; mercifull; benigne; that beareth reverent love towarde his countrei and parentes; Naturall to all his kinsefolke" (1995: 129).

when Lavinia and her brothers become the victims of an incomprehensible violence that obliterates the solidarity that communal life requires. That their ties to the community are essential to their sense of self is revealed in the degree to which the assaults they experience unhinge Hieronimo and Titus. But their madness is preceded, and explained, by a process of the most intense suffering. This suffering on the part of the avenger generates an outpouring of subjectivity that constitutes the central experience of the play. It is not the collapse of institutional justice but the intolerable pressure of his suffering that transforms the paragon of civic virtue of the beginning of the play into the maniac avenger of Act V. It corresponds to those scenes which Elizabethan audiences seem to have found most memorable and playwrights writing for them most inspiring.

The contrast between Hieronimo's subjectivity, enacted in his famous soliloquies, and in its academic precedents more than justifies the enthusiasm of contemporary audiences. In Act IV of *Gorboduc*, Queen Videna, on learning that her beloved son Ferrex has been killed by Porrex, produces the following lament:

> O my beloved son! O my sweet child!
> My dear Ferrex, my joy, my life's delight!
> Is my beloved son, is my sweet child,
> My dear Ferrex, my joy, my life's delight,
> Murdered with cruel death?
> O heinous traitor both to heaven and earth!
> Thou, Porrex, thou this damned deed hast wrought;
> Thou, Porrex, thou shalt dearly bye the same.
> 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
> On thee, Porrex, thou false and caitiff wight. (IV.i.23-35)[7]

Videna makes the point of her unbearable loss, but the predictable balance and symmetry of her speech detracts from the bewilderment and distraction it tries to convey. We feel that the order and symmetry of her speech obeys a rhetorical rather than an emotional necessity. Hieronimo's 'O eyes, no eyes' monologue, extensively imitated and parodied in contemporary plays, is also markedly patterned, but its symmetrical arrangement serves the outrage it conveys, representing the order, both personal and impersonal, that is collapsing under the pressure of grief:

> O eyes, no eyes, but fountains fraught with tears;
> O life, no life, but lively form of death;
> O world, no world, but mass of public wrongs,
> Confused and filled with murder and misdeeds!
> O sacred heavens! if this unhallowed deed,
> If this inhuman and barbarous attempts,
> If this incomparable murder thus

[7] All citations of *Gorboduc* are to Cauthen (1970).

> Of mine, but now no more my son,
> Shall unrevealed and unrevengèd pass,
> How should we term your dealings to be just,
> If you unjustly deal with those that in your justice trust? (III.ii.1-11)

Rhetoric and speaker alike buckle under the effort of controlling feeling. Hieronimo is possessed by a perception of universal corruption, and mourns a world he can no longer recognize as his. But his sense of loss is not merely stated as in Videna's case. It is enacted, in the sense that even as he tells the audience about his plight he is being affected by it. The character is changing as he hears himself speaking. The progression of his speech is thus not logical but emotional, and reflects the tortuous associations of a disintegrating mind. Hieronimo's memory remains fixated on the "murderous spectacle" that awaited him in the dark; the infection that he has caught with his sight overwhelms the rest of his being, then flows over the whole of Creation – "eyes", "life", "world". The cynicism he experienced that night produces obsessive regressions. Hieronimo mentally revisits the scene of the murder over and over again: Horatio was not simply killed, he was knifed repeatedly, then abandoned in an "inhuman", a "barbarous", and "incomparable" way. Lorenzo has opened a gulf between the ideal and the actual in Hieronimo that redefines his entire reality. This redefinition is not conceptual or intellectual: it affects him integrally, as a disease of the body affects the health of the mind. As a believer in the legitimate social order to which he is bound, the new reality he is obliged to confront will eventually derange him.

The profundity of this damage shows how much Hieronimo's sense of himself depends on the sense of belonging that has been destroyed. His experience of deprivation reveals what he needs in order to feel whole. Hence when we compare Hieronimo and Videna's transformation into avengers we instantly register in the latter a loss in subjective quality. The suffering of Videna is flattened into rhetorical statement because the psychological pressure of revenge is inexistent in her. In her rage she raises 'hell', but only as conventional punishment, the hell Christianity reserves for transgressors of the law of God. Videna conceives of revenge as continuous with the providential pieties which she, as queen of England, or which Hieronimo, as Spain's Knight Marshal, are expected to uphold. By contrast, Hieronimo's outrage promises something different. In him, revenge appears remote from a rational commitment to justice. He is fully aware of his duty as chief magistrate of the realm (III.vi.35-38; xii.17-18 *inter alia*); but professional zeal cannot explain the form his vengeful impulse takes. He does not raise the bogeyman of hell in order to force the culprits to repent. Rather, he himself becomes possessed by an inferno of vindictiveness. Hence his soliloquies express and enact the mental hell he inhabits – and do so with an almost clinical accuracy. His nocturnal rest is impeded by hellish visitations. Visions of Horatio's bleeding wounds torment his sleep, and rouse him to temptations that terrify his soul (III.ii.12-18). His obsessions are given no pause. Disturbed by apparitions, his days begin "early" to register his "dreams" (20), confusing night and day into nightmare. He lives in exhausting oppressiveness. The terror of finding himself alone in "unfrequented paths" (17), the stifling claustrophobia of his "cloudy days" (19) – these are the symptoms of a psychic damage quite beyond anything that Videna's moral

righteousness can produce. This damage is the result of an act of murder, and it generates destructive and self-destructive impulses unthinkable in a Chief Justicer acting on principle. Even at this initial stage, it is clear that Hieronimo's revenge far outstrips the need to protect his honour as a father or his dignity as a justicer.

Thus, when at III.vii he re-enters alone, *even though his plea for justice has met with a response from heaven* – which he terms "this unexpected miracle" (III.ii.32) – and he now possesses the identity of the murderers, his suffering has only increased. His mind begins to give way. His woes have turned the world to grieving, nature laments with him, and the heavens remain silent:

> Where shall I run to breathe abroad my woes,
> My woes whose weight hath wearièd the earth?
> Or mine exclaims, that have surcharged the air
> With ceaseless plaints for my deceased son?
> The blustering winds, conspiring with my words,
> At my lament have moved the leafless trees,
> Disrobed the meadows of their flowered green,
> Made mountains marsh with springtides of my tears,
> And broken through the brazen gates of hell. (III.vii.1-10)

The whole universe, sickened, mourns with Hieronimo. A universal waste is being created: Nature is destroyed in its prime, blasted with sudden and merciless violence, as Horatio has been. In his advance into revenge, Hieronimo breaks out into the language of damaged subjectivity. In effect, this his second soliloquy exhibits what *Titus* will establish as the mark of the mad avenger – a subjectivity so intense that it obliterates the distinction between inner and external reality, confusing the self and the world into one turmoil. The pathological condition of the avenger is expressed in the cosmic scope of his feelings. These delusions betray the intolerable pressure that alienation from the community is putting on the avenger. In this perspective, one begins to see that Hieronimo's revenge obeys an emotional function that cannot be brought under the retributive scheme of public or divine law. Hieronimo's interiority, as defined by his crisis of faith in God and Man, exhibits a psychic tension that no academic playwright could have hoped to bring home to his audience. Only a public playwright like Shakespeare would be able to assimilate Kyd's example.

In Act III of *Titus Andronicus* Saturninus's new Rome brings to culmination its violation of the sacred values in whose name Titus calls himself a Roman. Titus's exemplary self-denial (the severing of his hand), which would have made heroic Rome proud, is mocked by Saturninus and his post-heroic court. The Roman order which Titus has served fanatically all his life is collapsing, and so is Titus. When Marcus presents the disfigured Lavinia to his father, and her torment is fully disclosed to him, Shakespeare highlights the contrast between the declamatory lament of Marcus and Lucius (in anaphoric parallel) and the unflinching simplicity of Titus's utterance. The discovery of Lavinia's mutilations has for Titus a destructiveness that it cannot have for the others:

Marcus	O, that delightful engine of her thoughts, That babbled them with such pleasing eloquence, Is torn from forth that pretty hollow cage, Where, like a sweet melodious bird, it sung Sweet varied notes, enchanting every ear.
Lucius	O, say thou for her: who hath done this deed?
Marcus	O, thus I found her, straying in the park, Seeking to hide herself, as doth the deer That hath received some unrecuring wound.
Titus	It was my dear, and he that wounded her Hath hurt me more than had he killed me dead. (III.i.82-92)

Hardened into monosyllabic Anglo-Saxon simplicity, Titus's last line cuts through the anaphoric web of the Andronici like the knife of his pain. But the effect of the devastating impact rises and broadens into fullness of expression:

> For now I stand as one upon a rock,
> Environed with a wilderness of sea,
> Who marks the waxing tide grow wave by wave,
> Expecting ever when some envious surge
> Will in his brinish bowels swallow him. (93-97)

How fast Titus is changing from the martial Stoic of Act I is indicated by the spectacular reversal of Stoic commonplaces that his image of suffering achieves: "More than a rock amidst the raging seas/ The constant heart no danger dreads nor fears", reads an inscription on a sixteenth-century English portrait (Burke 1987: 44). However, Titus's misery is not yet complete. The unjust condemnation of his two sons, the banishment of Lucius, the mutilation of Lavinia – these would suffice to make any man lose his reason. And this is only one stage in his progress into the most extreme accumulation of anguish in dramatic literature. Thus, Titus's mind begins to give in, generating a vision of universal commotion that matches his own:

> If there were reasons for these miseries,
> Then into limits could I bind my woes.
> When heaven doth weep, doth not the earth o'erflow?
> If the wind rage, doth not the sea wax mad,
> Threat'ning the welkin with his big-swoll'n face?
> And wilt thou have a reason for his coil?
> I am the sea. Hark how her sighs doth blow!
> She is the weeping welkin, I the earth;
> Then must my sea be moved with her sighs;
> Then must my earth with her continual tears
> Become a deluge, overflowed and drowned. (218-28)

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Like Hieronimo's blasted earth, this is the language of damaged subjectivity, which, in hyperbolic self-assertion, collapses the distinction between self and non-self. That this cosmic expansion of the self is pathological and not just rhetorical is confirmed by the alarm it creates in Marcus. Measured against the patience urged by Marcus, Titus's suffering swallows the entire universe. It is now too late to rescue Titus from his vortex of mad revenge. To attempt to explain what will ensue from this in terms of the Elizabethan conventions and regulations of revenge would be to fail to take on board the tragic dimension of Titus's experience.

4. Beyond 'Outlaw Legalism': The Tragic Impasse of Revenge

After Act IV it becomes clear that Titus has been so badly wounded that he is going to take revenge against his enemies. However, the full extent of the damage does not emerge until he delivers his vengeance at the end of Act V. In the meantime, Shakespeare keeps us guessing about Titus's real state. This has led critics to disregard his convulsive condition in Act III, and the madness it betokens, when attempting to explain the meaning of revenge. In consequence, Titus's vengeance is often interpreted as a straightforward case of honour revenge – that is, as the retaliatory action one would expect of a dutiful *paterfamilias* who has not been fundamentally changed by the horrors of Act III. Robert Miola's *Shakespeare's Rome* (1983), for example, helped to establish *Titus* as a Roman play, and its protagonists as embodiments of *romanitas*. Although Miola recognizes that the Titus of Act I and II is transformed by Act III, he presents his revenge as part of a collaborative endorsement of family honour, modelled on the non-dramatic source of the rape of Lucrece. This assumes that Titus's retaliation is controlled by the dictates of family honour and serves as an instrument of retribution to restore natural order to the city. The standard tripartite scheme of vengeance is therefore applied to the play: Titus's private retaliation seeks to obtain the redress which a breakdown in the law does not make legally possible. Hence it brings about by default the retribution that universal justice demands and public revenge should provide. In other words, the function of Titus's revenge is to fill in the gap left by the inoperativeness of Saturninus's law. The continuity that G.K. Hunter discerns between *The Spanish Tragedy* and *Titus* exemplifies this reading of the play:

> *Titus Andronicus* repeats the central situation of *The Spanish Tragedy*. Like Kyd's play [it presents] . . . the inability of a father to find legal redress for the secret murder (or, in this case, rape) of his child. His frustration makes him grasp at the fantasy of total individual justice, and it is by enacting that fantasy that he is able to bring his life to rest on the idea of perfect retribution. Titus, like Hieronimo, achieves this in a theatrical celebration which satiates the hunger (ours as well as his) to see absolute and unimpeded justice taking over from the imperfect world. (1997: 87)

Neither of these authors understands revenge in relation to damaged subjectivity. For both Miola and Hunter, the law that regulates revenge is a rational and objective

one. Hence their utter disregard of the subjective crisis of the avenger and what it reveals about his identity.

At the other critical extreme, Emrys Jones emphasizes the suffering of the avenger in order to foreground the emotional function of revenge. For him, the progression towards revenge is dictated by the fact that "relief of some sort must be found", and that "Titus's emotions must be converted into something else". In his view, Titus's tragic experience is defined as "suffering intensified to intolerable pitch followed by the relief of aggressive action" (1977: 89-90). The interface between suffering and relief is of course the madness of revenge. Jones thus identifies psychic relief as the function of revenge. However, his premise that the play is modelled on Euripides's *Hecuba* and hence "Greek in feeling" means that, for him, Titus is in essence "nothing else than a male Hecuba" (1977: 106). Hecuba was not only, as young Lucius remembers in Act IV, a legendary example of tragic grief but also of its awesomely destructive power. Like Hecuba, Titus becomes less than human. Jones's position is in line with Eugene Waith's reading of the play, expounded in what is probably the most influential article on *Titus.* Waith tried to establish that Shakespeare's treatment of revenge is Ovidian. Consistent with his assumption that *The Spanish Tragedy* and *Titus Andronicus* share only a few "startling features" (1998: 38), this claim implies that Shakespeare's avenger owes nothing fundamental to Kyd's. Waith argues that the stories of the *Metamorphoses* are characterized by the loss of humanity experienced by their protagonists: like Hecuba, Ovidian characters "are built up only to be obliterated by an impersonal force working from within" (1957: 42). In Shakespeare, the pitch of emotion produces a similar loss of humanity to the avenger. As a result, revenge, far from disclosing identity, completely obliterates it. "The passions of Titus", Waith concludes, "transcend the limits of character to become in their own right, so to speak, phenomena of nature". Thus, in the final Act, "character in the usual sense of the word disintegrates completely. What we see is a personified emotion" (1957: 46). Once again, therefore, we are confronted with a reductive polarity that demands a synthesis: revenge is neither dehumanizing brutality nor self-denying piety. My claim goes quite against this consensus. These plays are tragic by virtue of the fact that revenge is a *perverted* manifestation of the avenger's *inescapable* bond with his community. For me, this is what makes Hieronimo's and Titus's concluding enactments of revenge astounding.

Hieronimo delivers his vengeance in a carefully crafted act of theatrical illusion. He gathers the members of the court around his stage and forces them to turn into unwitting witnesses of the annihilation of their royal houses. From beginning to end, Hieronimo remains in complete control of events and of their perception by the audience. Thus, when his playlet is over, he discloses its meaning to the confused spectators, and justifies his revenge to them. Commentators on the play have rationalised Hieronimo's desperate attempt in political terms, as a subversive appropriation of power (eg. Maus 1995: 67-71). But much more than this is involved. When Hieronimo draws the curtain hiding Horatio's corpse, and asks the court to "behold the reason urging me to do this", the tragic paradox of his revenge becomes fully apparent: the violence we have witnessed – the vengeful impulse driving Hieronimo to his horrific carnage – is revealed to be a means of reclaiming his lost

bond with the community. He exposes the guilt of Balthazar and Lorenzo to the world, denouncing the fatal blow they dealt to his house, and showing what he has suffered in silence. Hieronimo proclaims how "hope, heart, treasure, joy, and bliss,/ All fled, failed, died, yea, all decayed with this" (IV.iv.94-95), as he re-lives, yet again, the dreadful night of the murder. He does not invoke the story of his suffering only to justify the deaths of the prince and Lorenzo. Kyd's climactic scene is much more than a tale of crime and punishment. Despite her emphasis on court politics, Maus notices that Hieronimo's "seditious infiltration of court spectacle" produces a kind of "drama of fellow feeling" which seems to rely "upon a communal impulse" (1995: 69). It is possible, indeed necessary, to be more precise about the significance of this "communal impulse": what Hieronimo seeks to exact from the court is a recognition of his suffering. He wants them to know what it means to suffer his loss. By eliciting this recognition he is able to vindicate his piety as a father and servant of the realm:

> And grieved I, think you, at this spectacle?
> Speak, Portuguese, whose loss resembles mine:
> If thou canst weep thy Balthazar,
> 'Tis like I wailed for my Horatio.
> And you, my lord, whose reconciled son
> Marched in a net, and thought himself unseen,
> And rated me for brainsick lunacy,
> With 'God amend that mad Hieronimo!' –
> How can you brook our play's catastrophe? (113-21)

What he generates at this crucial moment is, then, not the deposition of a corrupt regime; it is a restoration of the severed or violated bond between himself and his fellow beings. He is affirming rather than disclaiming his dependence on the court. This affirmation of communal dependence is, of course, a product of madness. As such, it exhibits the damage that Lorenzo visited on him when he drove a wedge between himself and his community.

Titus's absurdities of Act IV did not reveal his true condition, but concealed it. Now that in Act V Chiron and Demetrius are in his power, his ferocity expands to its full extent. That Titus has adapted to the ways of his aggressors is the symptom, and not the cause, of his perversion. This is not a Titus who simply opts for an unlawful course of redress. He has become a bloody maniac: Titus cuts their throats on stage and fulfils intentions of the utmost ferocity (V.ii.200-04). For this reason, it cannot be a coincidence that he chooses a banquet as the occasion on which to wreak his vengeance. The traditional connotations of banqueting as reconciliation are as old as civilization. Shakespeare capitalizes on the conviviality of the banquet to underscore the social norm that revenge proposes to pervert. It is this social norm that Marcus evokes when he invites Saturninus and Lucius to sit at the same table – "For peace, for love, for league, and good to Rome/ Please you, therefore, draw nigh and take your places" (V.iii.23-24). Just as Hieronimo disrupts the nuptial celebrations with his bloody show, Titus pours out his pain in the midst of this *convivium*.

With the noble guests at table, and to the solemn sounding of trumpets, Titus enters attired as a cook. These garments, and his obsequious attendance on his guests, seem to confirm that Titus has shed the last vestiges of heroic dignity. Puzzled, Saturninus seeks the reason for his weird humbleness. We, but not Saturninus, understand the monstrous degeneration his reply implies: “Because I would be sure to have all well/ To entertain your highness and your Empress” (31-32). While Titus appears to have replaced his heroic service of Rome with a degrading servility to the emperor, his guests devour Chiron and Demetrius’s flesh. It would appear that Titus has degenerated beyond anything his enemies – or indeed Shakespeare’s audience – could have dreamed of. But, then, addressing the emperor, Titus asks him “to resolve me this”:

> Was it well done of rash Virginius
> To slay his daughter with his own right hand
> Because she was enforced, stained, and deflowered? (36-38)

Saturninus instantly answers in the affirmative. Titus asks “why”, and the emperor, little knowing that he is about to witness a like case, replies in a tone humouring a simpleton, like a schoolboy repeating a lesson he has learnt by heart but does not understand:

> Because the girl should not survive her shame,
> And by her presence still renew his sorrows (40-41) –

and gives Titus his cue to demonstrate what it means to be a Roman:

> A reason mighty, strong, and effectual;
> A pattern, precedent, and lively warrant
> For me most wretched to perform the like. (42-44)

He kills Lavinia in the tradition of the heroic Rome of Livy, and then, after revealing the reason why he has done so, he discloses to Tamora where Lavinia’s rapists are now located, kills her, and then is himself killed by Saturninus, who in his turn is killed by Lucius.

At this climactic moment we realize why Titus’s experience has been fated to end in madness. For all his endurance, suffering, patience, anguish, and for all his adaptation to the cruel naturalism of his enemies, for all the scorn, ingratitude and injustice of Rome, Titus cannot cease to be a Roman. For him, no repudiation of the heroic ideal is possible, because he is constituted by it. Thus when his ideal is destroyed, Titus must go mad, and his sociality must be perverted, for he has no existence outside Rome. This is the very paradox of the revenge we have encountered in Kyd: the paradox of a revenge that affirms the avenger’s dependence on his society in the very act of attempting to destroy it. Shakespeare, as it were, puts Rome’s reality into Titus, showing how fully he has internalized what I must perforce abstractly call ‘the social’. Titus’s commitment to his society is of a radicality that is not to be found in Kyd: his perversion must therefore be of a radicality that exceeds Hieronimo’s. When *The*

Spanish Tragedy and *Titus Andronicus* are examined in the perspective of the continuity of revenge tragedy, *Titus* often emerges as an inferior derivative. Barber and Wheeler, for example, claim that Shakespeare's play is "designed in obvious imitation of Kyd's", and go on to dismiss the former as a failure because the "revenge motive as a struggle for vindication of what is at the core of society is only formally present in *Titus Andronicus*" (1986: 125). This is the result of measuring these masterpieces of early public drama by conventional ideas of revenge. We now realize that Shakespeare's first tragedy not only represents this vindication, but does much more: it demonstrates that revenge shows that society is at the centre of the individual. Shakespeare proves that he has fully assimilated the lesson of Kydian revenge drama.

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