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Seeking Vengeance: Revenge Tragedy, Coherence and Scepticism from Sophocles to Shakespeare

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And if any mischief follow, then thou shalt give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burning for burning, wound for wound, stripe for stripe.
(*Holy Bible*, Exodus 21:23-25)

The rolling rhetorical cadences of this now proverbial passage from the Book of Exodus illustrate superbly the dynamics of logical and proportional exchange, strike and counter-strike, which animate many of our most basic ideas about the nature of revenge. Writing in 1625, Francis Bacon asserts that “Revenge is a kind of wild justice...it putteth the law out of office” (10). Here Bacon suggests that private vengeance is a threat to the law, not because it exists to oppose the claims of equity but because its aims are too much like the aims of justice in such a case – that is, to restore parity between two opposing parties after an injury has been done. It threatens to usurp the function of the state-sanctioned justice system by providing an alternative means of satisfaction, reciprocating the injury done and thus restoring the equilibrium. Revenge is satisfyingly legalistic in the way in which it very deliberately goes about re-establishing symmetry and order. The satisfaction that we take in contemplating the idea of revenge – either our own vengeance or that of others – is bound up with the satisfaction of seeing pattern and coherence established, balance and symmetry restored. But as Exodus so graphically suggests, at the heart of such an action lies the fragile human body, grotesquely mutilated: it is the site upon which such symmetry is punitively achieved. Eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot.

Literary representations of revenge frequently encourage us to question the motivations behind such an impulse towards symmetry and coherence, as well as the outcomes of such a quest. In this sense, such literary representations relate closely to tragedy itself, the dramatic genre in which revenge is most often given aesthetic form in the shape of revenge tragedy. While this particular sub-genre is principally located on the Renaissance stage, it has its roots in the Senecan tradition, which itself draws on classical Greek drama. This article aims to explore representations of revenge in tragedy from Sophocles to Shakespeare, focusing on the scrutiny under which such representations repeatedly place the idea of “coherence”, the attempt to find pattern, meaning and justice in the midst of tragic horror and destruction. In so doing, it aims to draw parallels between the drive towards revenge and the quest for coherence in tragedy, suggesting that an obsessive attempt to find satisfaction in order and symmetry is repeatedly found to be ethically questionable, as it can be both punitive and violent.

Before turning to tragedy, however, I would like to look briefly at an example of revenge in comedy, Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice*. This play provides a particularly good example of the

tensions between the excesses of revenge and the supposedly measured dictates of the law. It investigates what happens when the desire for vengeance, in the shape of a grotesque physical mutilation akin to the “eye for eye, tooth for tooth” found in Exodus, becomes articulated in terms of a natural and reasonable desire for legal compensation. This Biblical passage, part of the old Law of Moses and supposedly superseded by the new Law of Christ, haunts Shakespeare’s problematic comedy. It explores the tangled relationship between revenge and public justice as the Jewish moneylender Shylock remorselessly pursues his enemy through the law courts of Venice, demanding that the law should recognise his right to gouge out a pound of Antonio’s living flesh in payment of his debt. Defending his actions, Shylock argues passionately that the desire for revenge is a natural and logical human response to the injuries he has suffered, and one which defines not only the Jews, who might be expected to live by the Law of Moses, but the Christians too. “If you prick us, do we not bleed? if you tickle us, do we not laugh? if you poison us, do we not die? and if you wrong us, shall we not revenge?” (3.1.58-60). The grotesque physical violence which he proposes to wreak upon Antonio’s living body is presented as a response as moderate and proportionate as any other physical response to a stimulus. Shylock’s vengeance is as calculated, as mathematically precise, as any credit and debit sheet. What he asks is not unreasonable; it has become simple economics: “I will have my bond” (3.3.17). A modern Shylock might have phrased this more crudely: “It’s payback time”. It is not at rhetoric that Portia can defeat Shylock and frustrate his quest for vengeance, but at mathematics. His mistake is a simple miscalculation; he has tried to charge interest, to take more than he is owed. It is then that the Christian wolves of Venice fall upon him to wreak their own vengeance.

The Merchant of Venice remains a comedy, albeit a problematic one: obscene physical violence may be threatened, but the threat is overcome. It is in tragedy that such acts of bodily mutilation can actually be carried out, and unsurprisingly it is in revenge tragedy that we find the genre’s most sustained and harrowing explorations of the significance of the human body and its vulnerability to violence. One of the most spectacularly violent and gruesome of the classical Greek tragedies, Euripides’ *The Bacchae*, is also a revenge tragedy, the story of the god Dionysus’ vengeance upon the city that has insulted him. Like *The Merchant of Venice*, this play asks searching questions about what it might mean to take solace in seeking coherence.

Agave. Father, where is the beloved body of my son?

Cadmus. Here. It was I who brought it, after painful search.

Agave. And are his limbs now decently composed? (239)

This question appears just after the tragic climax of the play, at which the ecstatically maddened Agave recognises the head she is carrying as that of her son, Pentheus. The climax of the play explores questions of tragic images, and of what it is to look at tragedy. These lines evoke several of tragedy’s most central preoccupations: the idea of searching; the need for pattern and clarity; the importance of

tragic images and what makes them bearable to look at; the idea of fragmentation and mutilation, a dislocation which embodies total disaster. Tragedy throughout different ages and cultures has always questioned this need for pattern and clarity, probing it and exploring both the tragedy of pattern and the tragedy of having *no* final pattern. In this sense, tragedy questions whether this apparent human need to solve problems and overcome fragmentation of bodies, languages and worlds, finding meaning and explanation behind all of them, can finally be met without illusion, and whether things can at last be fitted together to find coherence or not.

From its earliest days in Greek culture, tragedy has always examined patterns, seeking to find coherence by juxtaposing past with present, looking for the roots of present-day violence or misfortune in past events, past wrongs or acts of violence. The most famous problem-solver in Greek mythology is undoubtedly Oedipus, who after Sophocles' *King Oedipus*, and until Freud's time, was at least as famous for his skill at solving the riddle of the Sphinx, and subsequently for solving that of his parentage, as for the actual acts of parricide and incest he committed. In his book *Revenge Tragedy Aeschylus to Armageddon*, John Kerrigan calls one of his chapters "Sophocles in Baker Street", juxtaposing Oedipus with the famous detective Sherlock Holmes. In so doing, Kerrigan draws parallels between the intense desire for knowledge evinced by both of them, the need to trace origins, explain histories, find causes and explanations behind apparently mysterious deeds of violence and death. Oedipus' attempts to solve problems and answer riddles are performed as an act of healing and mercy. His answer to the Sphinx's riddle saves Thebes from her violence, and his efforts to solve the murder of Laius are at first motivated by the pleas of his people, who once again suffer a mysterious plague of death, a curse of barrenness and pestilence. It is this consciousness of the healing power of problem-solving that causes Oedipus to say angrily to Teiresias, "You taunt me with the gift that is my greatness?", only for the seer to respond instantly, "Your great misfortune and your ruin" (*King Oedipus* 38). Oedipus is set apart from the city by his power of finding solutions to riddles, but it is this power which will eventually cause him to be set apart in a more profound sense, ostracised and driven out as a scapegoat to remove the pollution from the city. Yet while it begins as a healing effort, Oedipus' relentless drive to seek and search out the truth, to find the pattern and unity behind the event, moves to a profoundly personal need. The search for Laius' killer becomes sidetracked in the search for the truth of his own parentage, and begged by Teiresias, Jocasta and the Shepherd to desist, he cannot and will not listen. For the city of Thebes the truth does indeed liberate, the discovery of pattern freeing them from pollution and plague. But for Oedipus the truth is something more complex, causing his downfall but also the discovery of his own identity, the falling into place of the jigsaw.

Tragedy – and indeed poetry and drama of all genres – has always sought the satisfaction of such patterns; we still use the phrase "poetic justice" today to describe a satisfactory pattern of events, action and reward, which seem to us to make sense, reassuring us of some fundamental logic behind apparently irrational events. In Sophocles' play *Women of Trachis*, Heracles discovers some similar comfort in his death agony from the consciousness of pattern, the realisation that his death is a revenge from beyond the grave. It is rooted in the past, being the revenge of the centaur Nessus whom

Heracles killed for attempting to rape Deianeira, and it arrives at the very moment in which Heracles himself is to do violence to Deianeira by betraying her for another woman. Adrian Poole comments critically upon Ezra Pound's translation of these lines: "Come at it that way, my boy, what SPLENDOUR, IT ALL COHERES" (Pound 50). Pound finds the satisfactory matrix of the play in such a statement of cohesion, a poetic justice of pleasurable, logical epiphany. But Poole argues that Sophocles does not end here, that he goes beyond such apparently satisfactory conclusions into a greater, more painful scepticism, in which the potential for finding irradiation, of somehow justifying such pain and suffering through truth and explanation, are fundamentally questioned. The death of Heracles himself may be satisfactorily transformed by coherence, but the silent suicide of Deianeira, like that of Jocasta in Sophocles' *King Oedipus*, reminds us that for others, the innocent pawns in the game of hide-and-seek logic, such coherence brings no such satisfaction. The figure of the tragic tracker who seeks, in the words of Hamlet, to "pluck out the heart of [the] mystery" (3.2.356-57), is also a tragic avenger in his or her punitive search for coherence. Kerrigan's identification of a parallel between the search for knowledge and the quest for vengeance, linked by their common quest for satisfaction and symmetry, illuminates a fundamental tragic scepticism. We can find neither consolation nor coherence in the mutilated body of Pentheus; the vengeance which the god has wreaked upon him, upon his royal house, is far in excess of the young king's just deserts, and it is no more possible to find "decency" and coherence in such excessive divine retribution than it is to find satisfaction in fitting together the mangled limbs of Pentheus himself.

This Greek tragic scepticism comes to a head in the plays of Euripides, who is a poet of disjunction as much as of unity, of fragmentation as much as of pattern. The quotation with which we began describes a search for a body torn utterly in pieces, a body which began in unity and has been pulled apart. Tragedy is full of such images of bodily mutilation: the blinding of Oedipus is a famous example, but Euripides is the first to display it upon such a graphic scale, and Seneca and Shakespeare take up some of the possible significance behind such bodily fragmentation, the converse of the quest for unity and coherence. Euripides' plays push the boundaries of human disaster further than either of his great predecessors, Aeschylus and Sophocles; the mutilation of Pentheus, the total disaster of his *Trojan Women*, the depths of wretchedness and horrible revenge in his *Hecuba* explore what happens when disaster and destruction go further than ever before. Shakespeare does much the same in his tragedy *King Lear*, which like *Trojan Women* explores a suffering and disintegration which has no apparent end: "O gods! Who is't can say 'I am at the worst?' ... the worst is not, / So long as we can say 'This is the worst'" (4.1.27-30). Human bodily disintegration on one level explores the depths of disaster: it is a symbol of human suffering and of apocalypse without pattern or meaning. Agave's insane action rips apart the body of tragedy, exposing it as a pile of dismembered, scattered limbs without life or meaning. Her desperate question, "And are his limbs now decently composed?" seeks to restore at least the illusion of life, an image and illusion of decency and coherence which in the face of such savage insanity and vengefulness carries only a hideous parodic force, a moment almost of

horrible comedy. To speak of decency at such a time speaks of the human need for decorum to create illusion, to hide the eyes of the spectator from the naked, mangled truth.

Tragedy often explores this need to create art out of horror as a means of relief, to create the illusion of beauty from hideousness, or harmlessness from horror. Thus Hecuba in *Trojan Women* speaks of her comfort in the thought that Troy will be immortalised through song, the pain of its people transformed into poetry, and the chorus sings, "In times of sorrow it is a comfort to lament, / To shed tears and find music that will voice our grief" (110). Shakespeare's *Macbeth* also explores this necessity of displacing death and bodily mutilation with art: Lady Macbeth, steeling herself to the sight of Duncan's body, the use of his blood as if it were paint, says self-persuasively,

The sleeping, and the dead,
 Are but as pictures; 'tis the eye of childhood
 That fears a painted devil. If he do bleed,
 I'll gild the faces of the grooms withal,
 For it must seem their guilt. (2.2.52-56)

Her attempt at creating an image out of the reality of the old man's murdered body, and stage-paint out of his blood, will of course backfire: in another case of poetic justice, she will herself become insanely obsessed with her own body, seeing real blood where there is only her imagination. But it is not merely the guilty who seek to express horror through art. Macduff, discovering the body, cries out,

O horror! horror! horror!
 Tongue nor heart cannot conceive, nor name thee!
 ...
 Approach the chamber, and destroy your sight
 With a new Gorgon.- Do not bid me speak:
 See, and then speak yourselves. (2.3.62-72)

Mirroring the actions of Agave and Lady Macbeth, Macduff seeks to create an image, a picture, as he struggles to describe and to deal with a sight so terrible that it *cannot* be described, cannot begin to be understood. Similarly, at the end of *King Lear*, the spectators surrounding Lear and Cordelia struggle to cope with something that does not make sense, that does not cohere.

Kent. Is this the promised end?

Edgar. Or image of that horror? (5.3.261-62)

Kent's question is double-edged. He asks if this is the end of all things, the apocalypse, but also puts into words the feeling of utter betrayal, the consciousness that things here do *not* make sense, that any promised redemption, unity, clarity, has not been fulfilled, that Cordelia's death and Lear's agony are indecent, unnecessary, utterly cruel. To the earlier part of his question Edgar has already given the answer: "the worst is not, / So long as we can say, 'This is the worst'"(4.1.28-30). But his direct answer here instantly and defensively deflects the terrible barb of Kent's remark: faced with the prospect of contemplating betrayal and incoherence, Edgar instantly turns to art for protection, turning the naked, disjunct reality into an "image" in order to be able to accept it.

Violence against the human body, and especially the dismembering of it, is an act central to revenge tragedy; the mutilated corpse is an image with which it confronts us again and again. Bodies are dismembered under the influence of evil; their fragmentation represents the total destruction of the fundamental unit. Thus while Agave's crime is for her too hideous to contemplate, the crime of deliberately destroying bodies in the full comprehension of what one is doing is far worse. Senecan revenge tragedy, like Euripides' *Bacchae*, uses bodily mutilation to push boundaries, but his are boundaries of evil, of the disintegration of bonds, duties, obligations, affections, even of humanity itself. *Thyestes*, with its infamous cannibalistic banquet, is Atreus' attempt to go further in evil than has ever been done before, to tear apart all human feeling and turn it into bestiality, to transform human emotion into animal appetite. Images of humans feeding upon one another take even the fragmentation of the human body beyond itself, an apocalyptic sense of what happens when all goodness and order have gone from the world. Thyestes cries out in horror that the gods themselves have fled from this unholy feast, and Albany tells Goneril that if there is no sign from heaven, no divine retribution and re-establishment of order, then "It will come: / Humanity must perforce prey on itself, / Like monsters of the deep" (4.2.49-51). Human dismemberment, and human self-consumption, are linked to the presence of order, coherence, power in the world. A random and godless world is a world in which human evil has full sway, tearing apart human good and coherence, fragmenting itself and gorging itself in displays as far from Agave's "decently composed" limbs as it is possible to be. Such bodily fragmentation may as well be of oneself as of another; the Macbeths attempt to wreak havoc upon their own bodies, creating disjunction between different body parts and between inside and outside. So Lady Macbeth bids her husband,

To beguile the time,

Look like the time; bear welcome in your eye,

Your hand, your tongue: look like th'innocent flower,

But be the serpent under't. (1.5.63-66)

Such disjunction between meaning and appearance, instrument and reality, does violence to the unity of the body with itself, the unity of language and meaning. No wonder then that human beings should seek decency in unity and clarity, if evil and despair are so firmly rooted in fragmentation and disjunction.

What emerges from the penetrative drive to *know*, to find satisfaction in understanding and order, appears uncomfortably close to the “eye for eye, tooth for tooth” pattern of revenge, which penetrates and dissects the human body according to a grim and unyielding logic. If in *Hamlet*, the antithetical revenge tragedy, Shakespeare gives us a revenger unable to exact vengeance without first *knowing* the truth, he also gives us a revenger conscious that such a penetrative drive is ultimately always frustrated, always defeated by the destructive power of scepticism and doubt, but also that the drive itself is a violent and a vengeful one. David Hillman points out that Hamlet’s obsession with knowledge and certainty is associated with an imaginative desire to penetrate not just veiled truths but human bodies.

Hamlet again and again displays his sense of the importance of corporeal insides. This, coupled with his bodily (and psychological) solitude, and his sense of being denied access to the interior by the bodies around him, leads to an urge to open these bodies. When Hamlet thinks of catching the conscience of the king, for example, he thinks in terms of penetrating to the very center of his body: “I’ll tent him to the quick” (2.2.593) he says, as he plans the staging of “The Mousetrap.” What Hamlet eventually finds, however, is that the central truth hidden within the body, his fantasies and desires notwithstanding, is not the other’s truth – not by any means “the quick” – but simply death. ... All, it seems, that one can ever know of the living interior of the human body is that it is destined for death and decay. (92)

When Kerrigan’s avenging tragic detective seeks to pluck out the heart of the mystery he seeks coherence in revenge, but in *Hamlet*, the heart of this mystery would be a human heart, just as Shylock’s bond is paid in human flesh. To seek coherence in revenge appears very much like the kind of penetrative, punitive drive which will relentlessly tear apart the body of the other in order to locate some mythical answer which will provide satisfaction, but which in actual fact achieves only violent destruction and mutilation.

Euripides’ lines give us an insight into the way in which we might deal with the anguish of watching tragedy, the inability to see or to comprehend such total disaster and disintegration. Revenge seeks to tear apart and destroy: the unity of the human body and the unity of its language are prey to attempts at reducing them to nothing, to a heap of mangled fragments, a jigsaw puzzle without meaning. Human beings respond to the horror of such disintegration by the instinctive quest for logic, for coherence. Seeking for the gods and for faith in the face of apparently inexplicable horror and suffering is an attempt to make sense of the fragments, to retain a unity and togetherness resistant to destruction. Fundamentally, however, revenge tragedy questions such attempts. Exploring the human need for cohesion, it explores the consistent attempts at making sense of horror through art, which

itself can sometimes create an unsatisfactory displacement, an insistence that artistic beauty and coherence can somehow displace and even justify terrible suffering – a splendour of coherence which some, like Heracles, may claim but others reject or cannot feel. In the end, tragedy draws our attention to the fear that some things cannot be fitted back together, that the revenge exacted is far in excess of the original crime, and that if we try as Agave wishes, we create not a whole but an illusion of a whole, something we can contemplate more easily but which does not negate the tragedy of the original fragmentation. Revenge tragedy teaches us among other things to be deeply sceptical about the impulse to seek consolation in coherence and symmetry: the vengeful quest for knowledge and coherence may cause both the tracker and his victim to lose their eyes, and as Mahatma Gandhi is supposed to have once said, an eye for an eye will make the whole world blind.

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