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Bound to Revenge: Multiple Revenge Tragedies in Shakespeare's Hamlet

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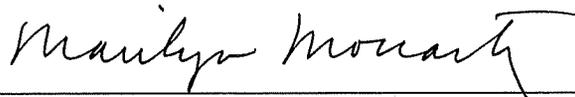
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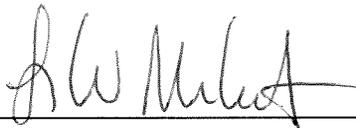
Bound to Revenge:
Multiple Revenge Tragedies in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*

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In act one of *Hamlet* when the Ghost appears, the Prince entreats the spirit, "Speak, I am bound to hear" (I.V. 6) The Ghost replies, "So art thou to revenge when thou shalt hear" (I.V.7) Once Hamlet hears these words, he knows he has to act on what his father's spirit is about to tell him. It's a part of his duty. He is "bound to hear" because he previously decided to call the Ghost his father. The apparition gives him instructions, and the Prince's relationship to the spirit "binds" him to act. As a son, his responsibility is to keep his family's honor intact. As the Prince of Denmark, his responsibilities double: First, because his father has given him a command he must obey. Second, because he was born a Prince, he has to keep his country safe from invasion and corruption. The Ghost turns Hamlet's statement of being "bound to hear" into a command, being "bound" to a certain act. With this shift, the spirit puts the burden of revenge on Hamlet's shoulders. From the moment the words are spoken and he is bound, revenge consumes the Prince.

Outside of drama, revenge in Renaissance England was a concept closely connected to the Anglo-Saxon idea of wergild, payment paid to the family as compensation for a wrongdoing to prevent personal revenge. Over time, this idea became connected to the biblical notion of an "eye for an eye." Per the biblical notion, revenge rested in balance. An equal act must be bestowed upon the wrongdoer in order for revenge to be complete. Taking more or less than what had been done was not to be done. Excess of revenge could easily cause more actions of vengeance until the balance was restored.

The concept of revenge found form in Elizabethan drama. The genre of revenge tragedy existed to depict the imbalance of retribution "an eye for an eye" sought to avoid. The genre was formulaic in plot structure. The action turned on the protagonist wanting

revenge imbalance in comparison to what was done to them. The balance of retribution becomes out of balance and must be set right for the play to come to a satisfying end.

Influences for revenge play were twofold: The earliest inspiration came from first century Roman philosopher and playwright Seneca. His works used revenge as a major theme in his drama, making fortune the agent of justice. New translations of Seneca's play emerged in the 1500's and they were also emulated by playwrights of the age. Eventually, it combined with morality plays that were popular during the Middle Ages. The modern idea of "an eye for an eye" was juxtaposed with Seneca's bloody works which centered around Fortune. These elements created the genre of Elizabethan revenge tragedy.

Though many works depicting revenge were written in the renaissance, Williams Shakespeare's *Hamlet* remains the most recognizable work in the revenge tragedy genre. The combination of the revenger's interiority and the tripled revenge plot make it more complex than other works of the time. The title character's thoughts are made clear to readers constantly through his soliloquies. He is accompanied in being called to revenge by two other men who have also lost their father. Each of the avenging sons represents the different levels a character could be consumed and bound by acts of retribution expected of them.

In some ways, *Hamlet* seems centuries ahead of its time. No heroes exist in Denmark. No outright villains do either. The closest person to a villain is Claudius. Yet, he at least knows what he did and feels some small bit of remorse for it. In *Hamlet*, characters are neither scourges nor ministers, they are simply human. They live their lives and make mistakes. They're capable of good and evil, love and hate.

Hamlet demonstrates the push and pull of the revenge tragedy genre at work. The Prince became increasingly consumed by the deed he was bound to do when he decided to

send his uncle to hell instead of simply killing him. Later, Laertes wants to cut Hamlet's throat in the church for the death of his own father. Laertes, like Hamlet, desires more than the righting the wrong that has been done to his family; his desire becomes excessive. Like all plays of the genre, this excess of revenge is a necessary shift. If reason accompanies revenge as it did with Hamlet, we can understand a character's motive. Even after plots and retribution becomes out of balance, something (an element known to Shakespeare and his fellow masters of revenge) is still present enough to enable us to mourn the death of the revengers at the end of the plays.

Perhaps revenge is why the story of the Prince of Denmark remains one of the most commonly adapted of Shakespeare's plays. Not only has it been performed on stage countless times, but many cinematic adaptations have been undertaken over the years since film has been popularized. From Oliver to Branagh and Zeffirelli, play and box office tickets continue to sell worldwide as audiences pay over and over to see virtually the same lines acted again, but with a new set of actors and new elements to the story.

Out of all of Shakespeare's plays and other works, why is it that *Hamlet* seems to get more attention than the rest? Like the Ghost of King Hamlet, the play itself is haunting. All of the characters have a skeleton hidden in their closet. They're all caught in a world where people seek imbalanced revenge. The title character himself is both a revenger and one of the people that revenge needs to be taken upon. We are both for and against his actions at different times within the five acts of the play. Hamlet's many soliloquies offer insight into his mind unlike any other characters that came before him.

This paper will examine the notion of revenge, beginning with a history of the revenge tragedy genre (including its roots in the works of Seneca) as well as how the term

was used to depict retribution during the Renaissance. A brief explanation of the differences between the different versions of *Hamlet* and why they are relevant to revenge accompanies the historical background. Using Shakespeare's *Hamlet* as one of the most famous examples of the genre, this thesis also explains multiple revenge tragedies occurring in the play and the common threads that unify them into a single piece of drama (specifically King Hamlet). Finally, a discussion of the film version of *Hamlet* and director and actor Kenneth Branagh follows. Branagh's interpretation supports all three of the revenging sons present in the text, primarily through his use of color scheme and his interpretation of certain characters.

Chapter 1:

“An Eye for and Eye”

History of Revenge Tragedy and Literary Background

Before and during the Middle Ages, the act of seeking revenge was a private matter in England. The term “revenge” meant virtually nothing to the government prior to the Renaissance. Retribution for a wrongful act was the responsibility of the one who had been wronged (or people associated with the wronged individual) and not a matter the state often interfered in. Early laws in England had no system in place for punishment by the crown for personal wrongs. As stated in a chapter within the work *Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy*, “The earliest extant English laws are based on the characteristic system of wergild and contain no theory of state punishment” (Bowers 5). To wrong a person was technically not always a crime, but rather a personal matter of little concern to anyone else other than the one who had been wronged. This practiced system of wergild was one that had been inherited by the earlier Anglo-Saxons into English law. Its workings included monetary payment to be offered to the family of one who had been killed as a way to prevent other forms of retribution. Or, rather than the family accepting payment, vengeance could be taken by a family member or associate of the wronged individual. To accept monetary payment or to seek private revenge were the only options available to those that had been wronged: “The basic mechanisms are two: death or injury can be compensated by mutually acceptable payments in cash or kind; injuries borne by individuals may be avenged by any one of their recognized associates or any recognized associate of the individual responsible” (*Medieval England: An Encyclopedia*). The system in place had little to do with the English crown or its

associates. It was not until during the rule of the Tudors that the idea of personal retribution and wergild was challenged and eliminated from law.

There was a shift during the Tudor Dynasty that sought to place the crown as the distributor of retribution for more crimes. According to new laws, revenge was to come from the state, which had not played an active role in many private disputes before, and not from private subjects. The types of crimes the crown had authority to punish grew greatly during this time: “English common law, originally concerned with felonies and with rites to feudal tenures, expanded its scope to accommodate a growing number of commercial cases, such as contracts and debt” (*Medieval England: An Encyclopedia*). Lines of distinction between public and private justice began to be needed. Vengeance for a crime could no longer (by law) come from the one the crime was committed against nor could it come from an agent or family member of theirs. According to the new Tudor view, retribution came from the authority of the English crown or, in extreme cases when the crime remained unknown to any person, from God.

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, revenge was first used to mean “Repayment of an injury or wrong by the infliction of hurt or harm. Also: an instance of this” (OED Online) in the year 1548 during the rule of King Henry VIII of England in Hall’s Union. In addition to the state mandating the people who were allowed to take revenge, the infliction of harm in retribution had specific specifications to be adhered to as well. Most of the Renaissance ideas of the word stemmed from their understanding of the Bible. In particular, passages such as in the book of Matthew which stated: “Ye have heard that it hath been said, An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth” (Matthew 5:38). Such verses instilled and promoted the idea that the proper retribution for any wrongdoing was an act equal to the

one bestowed upon wronged individual. A greater or lesser act in return would not be acceptable. Per these ideals, the only acceptable fate for one who had murdered was their death. A violent action was punishable by another similar act.

What had once been a private act was now a matter of state in a way it had never been in the past under the idea of wergild. Even the Bible, which demanded “an eye for an eye” was forced to endure shifts in its interpretation to accommodate the increasing interference of the crown. Passages that had once been looked to were either ignored or changed in their interpretation to justify the state as distributor of revenge. Scholar Fredson Bowers states, “The old Mosaic laws legitimizing blood-revenge in the Bible were either twisted so as to apply to state justice, or were ignored, or contrasted to the new world created by Christ” (13). The new laws sought to put a halt on most of the cases of private retribution, in part due to the fact a fee was imposed for formal hearings of cases. Being torn between a new form of government that relied on the sometimes biased justice of the crown and promised retribution in one of three different ways (illegal private revenge, from the crown, or from God) the common people of England were in a state of confusion. In an article entitled “Where Words Prevail Not: Grief, Revenge, and Language in Kyd and Shakespeare”, author Peter Sacks explains, “The loss of faith in legal justice, together with the doubts as to the existence of a divine justice, even in the next world, had a sever effect on any mourner seeking consolation, especially for an ‘unjust’ death” (578). The new laws led to men and women having little faith in receiving objective justice for wrongs done to them or their loved ones.

Senecan Drama

Because they were no longer permitted by law after the reign of Henry VIII, acts of wergild and private revenge became popular stage depictions for audiences of England. For inspiration for their works, playwrights of the time turned to the works of a first century Roman philosopher and playwright called Seneca. The nine surviving plays attributed to him include *Medea*, *The Madness of Hercules*, and *The Trojan Woman*. His work was staged often and emulated by many modern playwrights during the Renaissance.

The form as well as some of the key events in popular Elizabethan dramas such as *Hamlet* would not have been known without the influence of a previous genre that became known as Senecan drama, primarily because the majority of works attributed to it come from the playwright Seneca. New translations of his works began to surface in the mid-1500s. Many elements of structure and plot that made up much of the plays of the Elizabethan era take from these works, his in particular. In his Article “The Elizabethan Translations of Seneca's Tragedies”, E.M Spearing explains some of the influence of Seneca of Elizabethan playwrights:

It affected both the substance and the form of the drama. The division into five acts, and the introduction of the Chorus, as in *Gorboduc*, *The Misfortunes of Arthur*, and *Catiline*, may be taken as examples of the influence of Seneca on the form of the Elizabethan drama, whilst in regard to matter and treatment Senecan influence was yet more important. (Spearing)

The five act structure and the addition of a chorus were used throughout Shakespeare's work as well as utilized by other playwrights of his time. The new form became a model for the writers to both emulate and test the limits of in writing their own work.

Within the works of Seneca and those that later sought to emulate the playwright, there was a specific plot structure to which most of the work of the genre adhered. According to Fredson Bowers in his book *The Elizabethan Tragedy*, the structure of Senecan tragedy involved a catalyst, something that sets up the problem of the play, but happening just before the action begins (such as the death of the King before the action of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* begins.): "The whole of Act I is thus expository, since the play begins just after the crisis of the story and the drama is little more than the elaboration of the catastrophe" (46). Then, gradual build-up in the final acts until the final, bloody catastrophe that would take place at the end of the play, as Bowers writes: "Act IV provides either a lull in the action or else a partial fulfillment of the catastrophe. In Act V the catastrophe is completed" (46). This model for unfolding of action as well as the five-act structure utilized by Seneca provided a framework for a new genre to emerge and the tradition of this style of playwriting to continue and grow ever-popular among audiences.

Elizabethan playwrights borrowed from the work of Seneca not only for form and structure, but their use of certain other elements as well. Key to plays such as these was the use of Fortune, which had the ability to elevate some of the characters in things such as wealth and social status. However, it also had the ability to bring down the corrupt from their positions of power, simultaneously playing a blessing and a curse to the people of a play: "Senecan tragedy abounds in references or invocations to Fortune. She is fickle and usually malignant" (Wilson 127). With the growing emphasis on Christian ideals and "an eye for an eye" as the model for revenge, the works of Seneca were appealing also for their depictions of retribution. In plays such as these, vengeance for a wrongdoing was swift and occurred not in the next life, as if from God nor did it come from the state. Rather, vengeance occurred in

the wrongdoer's current lifetime as a result of the wrong, which was an element that would have appealed to audiences of the time. Literature Professor F.P. Wilson explained in his work *The English Drama*, "The Elizabethans would enjoy the impression which his [Seneca's] tragedies gave that crime meets its punishment in *this* life" (126). Because of the popularity of these works, Seneca's plays were both performed on stage as well as emulated by the playwrights of the age in hopes of catching the eye of the public and an audience.

Also taken from Senecan drama was the treatment of elements of the supernatural. Ghosts and spirits like the one found in *Hamlet* had their inspiration taken from earlier works. Also, the works of Seneca were key in selecting plot elements: The sensational and bloody nature of the works written by the early Roman playwright carried on into the later works inspired by his: "It [Senecan influence] was seen in the treatment of the supernatural, in the selection of horrible and sensational themes..." (Spearing). These elements of the supernatural present in Shakespeare's work would not have appeared in the same manner nor to the same extent had it not been for the works of Seneca and the translations of his works available to the playwright at the time.

The revival of the works of Seneca as well as other events that occurred during the reign of the Tudors in England (such as the laws set against private revenge) provided the proper climate for a genre of plays to emerge. It became known as revenge tragedy. The works of the genre depicted plots that resulted in madness and death of one or more characters. The plays were also concerned with the ever-changing ideas of revenge and retribution. In doing so, they called practices of private revenge into question. Works such as Shakespeare's *Hamlet* explored the idea of revenge on multiple levels and with more than one plot for retribution occurring during the action of a single play. Such works provide an

insight to the thoughts and attitudes regarding the subject of vengeance for wrongdoing at the time they were written.

The new genre had roots in many of the previous genres of plays. During the Middle Ages, depictions of revenge were not included in drama. Rather, they were often the subject of prose and other types of writing. Professor F.P. Wilson summarized, "In the Middle Ages tragedy was a matter for narrative verse and prose, and the definitions had not yet confined it to drama" (128). The popular dramas of this time in England were morality plays, used to depict Christian models of values. According to the *Encyclopedia of Medieval Literature*, "The morality is allegorical, illustrating the struggle between the forces of good and evil for the soul of a representative human figure. Thus the central character is generally a symbolic representation of the entirety of humanity-Everyman or Mankind-torn between good and bad influences." The morality plays of the Middle Ages were heavily rooted in allegory and meant to depict universal situations rather than create a specific character with physiological depth of their own.

When the new tragic genre emerged, it also mixed with the previous popular genre of plays modeled after the works of Seneca. In her book entitled *The Types of English Literature*, Ashley Thorndike explained the relationship between revenge tragedy and the works of Seneca. She writes,

In these plays we may trace the gradual emergence of tragedy in the popular drama in response to a growing knowledge of its functions and methods. It appears still mixed with farce and morality, but it has themes like that of Seneca, bloody, revolting, and sensational, and its freedom in stage presentation permits an emphasis on crime and death even greater than in the

Senecan imitations. Notably, it introduces the stories of the downfall of a tyrant and the revenge of a son for a father” (67).

The mixing of ideas of Christian values such as the “an eye for an eye” idea of revenge along with classical ideas such as Fortune from the works of Senecan drama created new conflict for writers seeking to write in the revenge tragedy drama: “The genre which began with Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy* had its limitations as an art form, not the least of which were the moral confusions which the pagan theme was sure to encounter in a Christian context.” (Forker). Juxtaposing Christian values with those of the ancients was a recurring problem writer of revenge tragedy faced in creating their work.

The plot structure of revenge tragedy soon took a different turn from the original intentions of the revenger. In their search and striving for retribution, the revengers of the genre find themselves consumed by that act. Most of them eventually became like twisted mirrors of the ones who committed the wrong they are seeking to revenge, usually mentally unstable from their preoccupation with the act they are striving to make right. Ronald Broude writes in his article “Revenge and Revenge Tragedy in Renaissance England”:

Revenge tragedy is usually understood to center around a figure who conceives himself to have been seriously wronged, and who, overcoming obstacles both within and outside himself contrives eventually to exact retribution, becoming in the process as depraved as those by whom he has been wronged (38).

In many cases such as *Hamlet*, the man that was once seeking retributions also became deserving of it himself through his actions. Therefore, many of the plays of the genre end

with the death of the once hero, who has by them committed a wrongdoing of his own that must be atoned for per the same idea.

The uncertainty and change of views at the time also created a change in the tone of works written by playwrights and authors. The works that had once depicted pastoral, country ideal scenes were no longer desired as they had been in the previous decades:

They [writers of the time] had lost their view of poetry as something simple, sensuous, and passionate, a symbolic reflection or a reflection of ideal truth in the accidents of life, a view which depended on the Renaissance psychology and philosophy. And finally they had lost vivid and personal interest in that interior life of which the pastoral elegy had been made an allegorical expression. (Wallerstein 135)

The taste of people and the tone of the writing produced shifted from the green world of pastoral to the decaying, unnatural worlds of revenge tragedy.

Because of the “an eye for an eye” idea of revenge during the time of the Renaissance, the genre of revenge tragedy was able to flourish by depicting events surround it. It allowed the playwrights and artists of the time such as Shakespeare to experiment and depict characters by stretching the limits of the formula they created. The heroes of the genre are all united by several common threads: they begin by seeking an act of retribution for a wrongdoing (often a murder), and in doing so they become consumed by the task they must do and the world around them. In the end, their obsessions cause them to become that which they once hated and to go mad. They create a cycle of revenge and violence and revenge that is only satisfied in the end with their death as well. In the characters themselves and the

inevitable journey they must take is where the works of the genre vary and become unique from one another.

Shakespeare's Sources for *Hamlet*

In Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, one of the most famous examples of the revenge tragedy genre, many of the events surrounding its history and influences remain unclear. The original, historical story that is believed to have first influenced *Hamlet* contains some of the key aspects of the later play. In the book *Shakespeare and his Sources*, Joseph Satin states, "Saxo's story matches, at least in broadest outline, the entire plot of Shakespeare's play" (382). In this version, the main character Amleth faces a situation similar to Hamlet. His father is murdered by his brother Feng, who afterwards marries Geruthm, his brother's widowed wife. To save himself from his uncle, Amleth pretends to be mad. In the story adapted, the Danish son Amleth freely went down the path of revenge. Unlike with Hamlet, there was no hesitation in the deed he is called to commit, one of the key ideas the play becomes concerned with. Harvard Professor Stephen Greenblatt explains in an introduction to *Hamlet*, "In doing so, the son suffers no pangs of conscience, since in pre-Christian Denmark revenge was not was not a violation of the moral or religious law but a filial obligation," (1069). The Christian ideals of "an eye for and eye" influence the later story greatly. It serves as the source for the Prince's hesitation, which lead to other events of the play such as Polonius' murder and the subsequent reversal of Hamlet of revenger to the object of revenge.

In addition to the Danish story, an earlier play now known as the *Ur-Hamlet* is believed to have inspired the play and other works of the time as well. Because a text has not

survived, exactly what events or to what extent the play inspired other works is not known. Its existence is only referenced in other surviving texts from the period. Yet some known similarities between the two *Hamlets* are known to exist. While some other works of drama (including *Hamlet*) are believed to have key aspects of the previous work, scholars cannot say which Elizabethan playwright followed the *Ur-Hamlet* more closely because other writes such as John Marston also have plays believed to be similar to the earlier *Hamlet*. It would be impossible to know which are the similarities and differences between surviving texts and the *Ur-Hamlet*.

Little is known about the *Ur-Hamlet* or in what exact ways Shakespeare used the material. One of the scarce details that are known is it contained a Ghost, similar to that of Shakespeare's version. There was also a cry for revenge, similar to the surviving *Hamlet*, given by the spirit to the title character. "There is no surviving copy of the *Ur-Hamlet* and the only information known about the play is that it was performed on the London stage; that it was a tragedy; that there was a character in the play named Hamlet; and a Ghost who cried 'Hamlet, revenge!'" (Mabillard). Aside from this knowledge, scholars can only speculate by other works written in the time frame the *Ur-Hamlet* is believed to have been written. Yet, because no surviving text exists, no possibility can be proven or completely disregarded in relation to the text.

Scholars have long endeavored to discover the author of the *Ur-Hamlet*. While the endeavor can never yield a conclusive answer, the most frequently agreed upon author of the work is Thomas Kyd, author of such works as *The Spanish Tragedy*. One of the main reasons for this attribution is a section of an epistle written by Thomas Nash to accompany Robert Greene's work *Menaphon*, which states: "Yet English Seneca read by candlelight yields

many good sentences, as blood is a beggar, and from forth: and if you entreat him fair in a morning, he will afford you whole *Hamlets*. I should lay handfuls of tragical speeches...” (Nash). According to this epistle, written before the completion of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, there was a playwright, who often wrote in the style of tragedy (particularly like Seneca), who had written a work called *Hamlet*. Primarily because of the words in this text, authorship of the *Ur-Hamlet* has often been given to Kyd. The mentioning of *Hamlet* in Nash’s epistle is believed to be the first reference of the name Hamlet or the play written. Scholar Albert Jacks states in his article “Thomas Kyd and the Ur-Hamlet”, “A study of the context has led students to the opinion that, according to Nash, Kyd was the author of the Ur-Hamlet” (279).

In addition two sentences after the above text of the epistle, there is a reference believed to be specifically about Kyd: “The fee exhaled by drops will in continuance be dry, and Seneca let blood line by line and page by page, at length must needs die to our stage: which makes his familiar followers to imitate the Kid in Aesop...” (Nashe) The reference to “the Kid in Aesop” is believed to be a pun by the author on Kyd’s last name. Because of this believed reference to the playwright, the entire section of text is believed to be referring to him as both an English Seneca and the author of a work called *Hamlet*. Professor F.P. Wilson writes on the authorship of the Ur-Hamlet,

It has now come to be all but universally accepted by scholars that this paragraph refers to Kyd, and in it are found not a few otherwise unknown facts of his literary history Not perhaps very distinctive marks of identity in an age when scribes were many and Italian translations the fashion; yet since all three clues point to the author of *The Spanish Tragedy* and the reference to

'the Kid in Aesop' looks like a pun upon his name, it has been widely supposed that Thomas Kyd was the target aimed at (18).

While evidence supports Kyd as the author of the *Ur-Hamlet*, there are many other questions surrounding the text that even more scarce evidence has survived to assist in solving.

One of the most important events that remain unknown about the *Ur-Hamlet* is the ending. If, like in Shakespeare's work, the title character lost his life at the end of the play is a detail not known. The work of Shakespeare and many other playwrights of the time have led most scholars to believe that the title character in the previous version of the story met a similar end at the finale of the play: "Seemingly without exception, previous students have inferred that from what is the cast in *The Spanish Tragedy*, Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, and *Fratricide Punished* that the *Ur-Hamlet* ended with the death of the hero" (Smith 498). By this theory, the death of Hamlet at the end of the play was inevitable from the conception of the story. Only the means and path were for Shakespeare to depict differently.

However, one work of the time did not end in the way other works inspired by the *Ur-Hamlet* ended. In the play *Antonio's Revenge* the title character is able to end the villain's life without committing actions that resulted in his death at the end (Smith 498). Marston's work, believed to have been written at about the same time as Shakespeare's *Hamlet* had a much different ending. The question of which ending remained more faithful to the *Ur-Hamlet* and its original ending remains a mystery. Thus, at least the possibility Shakespeare was the first to depict the story in a way that ended with the death of the supposed hero remains. In his article "*Hamlet, Antonio's Revenge, and the Ur-Hamlet*", John Harrington Smith explains, "If the death of the hero at the end was original with Shakespeare, this was a

most important step indeed” (498). Aspects of *Ur-Hamlet*, its authorship, and its influence on that later work of playwrights remain unknown to modern scholars.

Various Versions of the Same *Hamlet*

Just as there are various versions of the story of *Hamlet*, there are conflicting copies of Shakespeare’s play. While Folio and Quarto versions exist for all of the playwright’s work, the versions of *Hamlet* differ in dramatic ways. These variations have led to an endeavor to try and deduce which of the versions of *Hamlet* left behind has the most in common with Shakespeare’s original manuscript. While many theories exist, the generally accepted conclusion among scholars is the Second Quarto is the closest to Shakespeare’s manuscript, the text which parts for the players were first derived from.

The Second Quarto was published in 1605. Its printing was preceded by the 1603 First Quarto, which was believed to have been written from memory of actors who had played the parts with no copy of Shakespeare’s text in consideration (British Library). The later Quarto is believed to have been derived directly from Shakespeare’s foul papers and also has the distinction of being twice as long as the First Quarto. Upon publication, it was decreed as “Newly imprinted and enlarged to almost as much again as it was, according to the true and perfect copy” on its cover (Wilson). The First Folio is believed to have been published in 1623. Although the Folio text resembles the Second Quarto in places, text is omitted and added in places. The overall length of the play is also shorter in this version. Text of the Folio was believed to be taken from papers of Shakespeare meant to become the promptbook, but was never used (British Library).

Scholar John Dover Wilson believed that only two of the surviving versions which can claim to be close to Shakespeare's original manuscript: the Second Quarto and the First Folio: "This [Second Quarto] and the First Folio text printed in 1623 are the only originals which can claim any material connection with Shakespeare's manuscript" (Wilson 26). Wilson also believed certain textual clues exist to support the theory Second Quarto was meant to be the definitive version of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. He writes:

The earliest copy known is a manuscript dates 1710; but the fact that Polonius is called Corambus, of which the 'Corambis' in the First Quarto is a patent corruption, together with other clues, makes it certain that it is a degenerate scion of the main English stock and at least possible that its derivation belongs to a date before that in which Shakespeare's Hamlet took final shape (25).

Scholars such as he have led to the acceptance of the Second Quarto as the material Shakespeare wrote and intended for his audiences to see on stage.

However, some scholars are not convinced that the Second Quarto is the only definitive version of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Dr. Paul Menzer, in his book *The Hamlets*, argues that other versions of *Hamlet* should not be entirely discredited. While he agrees insofar as that the Second Quarto was the one from which the actor's parts were generated: "A close comparison between Q2 and Q1/F can lead to the conclusion that the manuscript behind the second quarto generated parts" (Menzer 80). Menzer also believes that perhaps more versions exist because of the sheer number of times the play was performed. Because of the multiple performances and long runs of the play when it was introduced, different texts exist because they were (at least once) performed on an Elizabethan stage in that way. Menzer writes, "The most plausible vector through which Q2 reading omitted from F could

appear in Q1 is if they were spoken at least once upon the stage...” (80). The multiple surviving versions of *Hamlet* may be a way for scholars to consider how a script was edited over time and performed numerous times over the centuries.

While proof of which versions were closer to Shakespeare’s text cannot be conclusive, the Second Quarto version is the one that scholars agree bears the closest resemblance. Studies of the textual similarities and differences between the versions have led to an acceptance of the Second Quarto version. While debate continues over the place of the other text in relation to Shakespeare’s manuscript, the Second Quarto version remains the one most commonly printed as Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. The additional text available in the longer version allows more time for the story and the multiple revenge tragedies that occur throughout, such as the addition of lines mentioning Fortinbras’ potential invasion of Denmark.

Chapter 2:

Bound to Revenge:

Multiple Revenge Tragedies in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*

In his play *Hamlet*, Shakespeare depicts three examples of the plot of revenge. Each of the men seeks retribution for a wrong done to them or a member of their family. Revenge is what the Prince of Denmark seeks for the death of father. Laertes later desires the same retribution against him for the murder of his own father. Young Fortinbras also embodies a similar course through his quest to conquer Denmark throughout the play as the son of a ruler who lost land in battle and was killed. Though they are all different, the three revenging sons remain connected throughout the play, primarily by the deceased King Hamlet. Their plots work together to achieve a unified story of retribution and the madness that follows from obsession with such ideas. Thus, it remains an example of the genre of revenge tragedy and a test of its limits.

Central to all of the plots for revenge in *Hamlet* is the Ghost. The spirit prompts the actions of the Prince and, in many ways, the entire play. The murder of old King Hamlet is the wrongdoing that Hamlet seeks revenge for. The visit from the spirit compels the rest of the Prince's actions in the play, including his accidental murder of Polonius, the father of Laertes. This death causes the second revenging son to be called into action against Hamlet which calls for his death as well. During his life, the old King of Denmark also killed the father of young Fortinbras in a military battle. As a result, land was also lost and forfeited to Denmark. Revenge becomes a matter of personal honor for the young son. He feels he must seek back the land that was taken from him and the "eye" that feels he is owed in spite of the

honorable nature of his father's death. The past actions of King Hamlet and his Ghost after death serve as the catalyst for the multiple stories and the actions of revenge taken throughout the action of the entire play.

Despite the important nature of the deceased King and his spirit, the Prince interprets it in various ways throughout the play. Hamlet, the only one to hear the Ghost speak, is unsure of what appears to him. He describes the apparition as dressed in his father's armor (the same he wore on the day he killed old Fortinbras). At first, the Prince accepts it entirely as his father even before it speaks. He proclaims, "I'll call thee Hamlet, / King, father, royal Dane" (I. IV. 44-45). The Ghost serves to his son a reminder of the old Denmark that existed before his death. His presence is intended to symbolize the justice that is no longer carried out because of this death. New York University Professor Anselm Haverkamp believes that, just as Hamlet at first takes the Ghost at his word; readers and audience tend to do so as well. He writes, "Thus, even today, we tend to take the Ghost of Hamlet at face value, as an objective Ghost though which justice and order impose themselves during a time that has gotten 'out of joint'" (19). The old King is an embodiment of everything that existed before and was lost to the country as a result of his murder when the natural order of things was in place and right. The Denmark the spirit represents no longer exists, just as he does not in the world of the living. He appears to his son in armor, but the enemy no longer resides outside of the state walls as it did when he defeated old Fortinbras. Instead, the state is threatened from inside by the deeds of the man that now wears the crown. In the reign of Claudius, the invader resides within the very walls of Denmark. Marjorie Garber in her book *Shakespeare After All* writes of the Ghost, "Old Hamlet defended his country against invaders from outside and not, as now, and as we saw in the confusion of the very first scene—from civil

strife within” (487). He serves in the play as the image of what can no longer be in Denmark as long as a murderer is enthroned.

Old King Hamlet first cries for revenge in *Hamlet*. He was also the first in his realm to be poisoned, but is not the last by the end of the action. The state was metaphorically poisoned along with the actual deed acted upon the old King. At the beginning of *Hamlet*, Denmark is set to rot from the inside due to the rule of a false, murdering King rather than by outside invasion (much like a poison attacks the human body from the inside.) The poison spreads not only to the murdering King Claudius, but to the whole of his realm as well: “The world of the play is itself ‘distracted,’ maddened, diseased. Old Hamlet has been poisoned, and the poison affects not only the King, but the state” (Garber 469). The lies and false personas that the royal court of the state under Claudius display act as the new poison that causes the realm to decay around them throughout the course of the play. Their words and lies are just as deadly by the end as the actual poison used to commit murder. What the Ghost asks Hamlet to do when it appears is cleanse the politically and morally poisoned state of the source of all of the unrest: the murder-usurper King Claudius. The Ghost entreats his son to, “Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder.” (I.V. 25). Nature itself was usurped with the death of the old King and his son is bound by duty to seek revenge and restore the natural order which has been disrupted by his uncle.

Though what the Ghost asks of Hamlet is clear, the origin of the spirit remains a more complex question. It appears to come asking for revenge from a place of temporary punishment, burning during the day and walking the earth at night. The fire he claims to suffer resembles a Catholic purgatory, as the words it speaks implies:

I am thy father’s spirit,

Doomed for a certain term to walk the night,
 And for the day confined to fast in fires,
 Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature
 Are burnt and purged away... (I. V. 9-13).

The Ghost claims to suffer in fiery, hell-like torment, but also says that he will not remain in such a place forever. Because he died suddenly and was unable to seek forgiveness for his lingering sins, he must endure punishment until they are purged away. Such was the Catholic ideal of purgatory: temporary punishment for sins, rather than eternal punishment. If this is true, then the Ghost is not a devil or a damned spirit, as Hamlet, question later in the play. After the Ghost leaves, he mentions Saint Patrick, a Saint often associated with Purgatory and called "The Keeper of Purgatory: "Yes, by Saint Patrick' is an important clue to Hamlet's intentions at the beginning of the speech; for Saint Patrick was 'the keeper of Purgatory'" (Wilson 79). The deed the Ghost invokes Hamlet to perform is not evil, if taken in the Catholic context: "If the Ghost is a spirit from Purgatory, then his command to avenge his murder can be seen as morally good, something quite in accord with justice and the virtue of vengeance" (Beauregard 53). Because he is not doomed to hell and currently purging himself of his sins, he would not want to commit more. He resides in the middle ground between heaven and hell, seeking to be purified for heaven, a spirit that will remain in torture temporally and then pass onto peace for the remainder of eternity.

A deeper issue arises with the Ghost in Shakespeare's play implying he is suffering a seemingly Catholic fate. The English people had broken off with the Roman Catholic Church years before during the reign of Henry VIII. The official religion of the country was no longer Catholic. Thus, they had also rejected the idea of purgatory along with it:

There is a famous problem with all of these heavy hints that the Ghost is in or has come from purgatory: by 1563, almost forty years before Shakespeare's *Hamlet* was written, the Church of England had explicitly rejected the Roman Catholic conception of Purgatory and the practices that had been developed around it (Greenblatt 304).

Depicting a Catholic-like place or making references to it on the stage would have been a very dangerous enterprise for a playwright of Shakespeare's time.

However, Protestant allusions exist throughout as well. Along with mentioning Saint Patrick, Hamlet also calls the Ghost a "perturbed spirit" implying a more Protestant notion that the spirit is from hell rather than Purgatory. Neither angel nor heavenly messenger would be "fasting in fires." Because there is no temporary Purgatory for Protestants, hell is the only other option for the Ghost's origin. Harvard Professor Stephen Greenblatt writes, "And a moment later, hearing the Ghost's voice once again, he addresses it directly in words that would have been utterly unfamiliar to a Catholic and deeply suspect to a Protestant: 'Rest, rest, perturbed spirit'" (302). This would imply the non-Catholic idea that the Ghost comes from hell and is seeking to damage and condemn the soul of the Prince.

What follows from Protestant assumptions about the Ghost and the command to revenge is a dilemma. Since according to Protestant doctrine Ghosts are either evil spirits or illusions, it follows with some consistency that the Ghost's command to revenge must be taken to be immoral... (Beauregard 53).

If the Ghost is from Protestant hell rather than Catholic Purgatory, its intentions toward Hamlet are evil. An already condemned spirit would seek to also condemn others to the same fate they will suffer for eternity.

Thus, there are opposing allusions made in reference to the Ghost almost side by side. Each of them implies a different origin and different intentions toward the Prince. Stephen Greenblatt in his article “Hamlet in Purgatory” does not believe that the seemingly conflicting religious references were included by the playwright without forethought. He writes, “The issue is not, I think, simply random inconsistency. There is, rather, a pervasive pattern, a deliberate forcing together of radically incomparable accounts of almost everything that matters in *Hamlet*” (308). By making both Catholic and Protestant references throughout the play (with opposite implications about the origin of the Ghost), Shakespeare keeps readers and viewers in doubt about the true origin of the spirit.

The Prince of Denmark is unsure sure himself of what the Ghost is from. He admits that it may be something evil and damned, waiting to prey on his already apparent dislike of his uncle. When he first sees the Ghost, he is unsure of its origin:

Be thou a spirit of heath or goblin damned,
 Bring with thee airs from Heaven or Blasts from Hell,
 Be thy intents wicked or charitable,
 Thou com'st in such a questionable shape
 That I will speak to thee... (I.IV.40-45).

Almost solely because of the form it takes before it has spoken a word, Hamlet decided to call it his father. When the Ghost begins to talk to him, then the cry for revenge is heard, an act of retribution per the “an eye for an eye” definition of the term. Perhaps this demand of punishment and blood is one of the reasons that cause Hamlet to continually question the Ghost and delay killing his uncle.

Whatever the reasoning, Hamlet decides to put the Ghost (and his uncle) to the test. This comes in the form of the play *The Mousetrap*. During the play, the Prince hopes to trick Claudius into a display of guilt and, thus, prove the Ghost to be honest and his plot for revenge against him to be justified. He commissions the actors that have arrived at court to put on a play similar to the supposed murder of old Hamlet. In putting the Ghost's words into question, he also puts his own plot for revenge in question. If Claudius had not shown any signs of guilt at the performance of the play-within-the-play, all of Hamlet's vengeful thoughts up until then would have no been justified. Absolute belief in the guilt of the one who had wronged is essential to the structure of vengeance, according to scholar René Girard:

The revenge seeker will not believe in his own cause unless he believes in the guilt of his intended victim. And the guilt of that intended victim entails in turn the innocence of that victim's victim. If the victim's victim is already a killer and if the revenge seeker reflects a little too much on the circularity of revenge, his faith in vengeance must collapse (Girard 169).

If he had not been sure of Claudius' guilt and killed him when he was indeed innocent, Hamlet would not have been a revenging son, but a villain strikingly similar to what he accused his uncle of being. Not only would the Ghost have been proven to be "a goblin damned," but the Prince himself would have been proven to be one conspiring to murder without cause or the justification of revenge.

Yet, despite the importance of the event, the test of the Ghost and his own motives for revenge that he depicts is flawed. The character that is to kill the King in the play is not his brother (the relationship of Claudius to King Hamlet). Rather the actor is the King's nephew

(the relationship of Hamlet to Claudius) The Prince says of the actor, “This is one Lucianus, nephew to the King.” (III.II. 229). The results of Hamlet’s test are questionable at best. The reaction of the King not being able to watch the play, presumably due to his guilt about killing his brother, is achieved. He rises from his seat and cries, “Give me some light. Away!” (III.II.265). The reaction could have been generated his own guilt. In contrast, his departure from the play could have been due to fear of the actual events of the play taking place: A nephew murdering his uncle (Hamlet murdering him.) *The Mousetrap* in the mind of the new King could potentially foreshadow things to come rather than depict a crime he had committed in the past.

After the performance of the play and the King storms out, Hamlet proclaims, “Oh, good Horatio, I’ll take the Ghost’s word for a/ thousand pound...” (III.II.268-269). Yet, despite now being sure of Claudius’ guilt, he still continues to delay killing the King and taking his revenge. Right after the play, he is given an opportunity to kill him, he does not. He contemplates, “Now might I do it, But now ‘a is a-praying/ and now I’ll do it. And so ‘a goes to heaven,/ and so I am revenged...” (III.IV. 172-174). Once he was sure Claudius was guilty, the Prince moved beyond the scope of traditional “an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth” revenge. At that point, he is no longer satisfied with the mere idea of retribution. The Ghost that appeared to Hamlet spoke of being in a place of temporary punishment (with the implication that it will end.) Yet, he is determined from this point forward to eternally send the soul of his uncle to hell, a punishment which would never end. His desire has outreached the kind of revenge that he originally thought to seek before the play-within-the-play.

If *The Mousetrap* was meant by Hamlet to be the test for Claudius’ guilt, then the Ghost itself was perhaps means to test the Prince. Again, Hamlet himself states afterwards

that, it perhaps “Abuses me to damn me” (II.II. 524). The spirit, unlike the play, was a test that was not flawed as the one the Prince gave his uncle. In his article “Revenge, Honor, and Conscience in Hamlet”, Harold Skulsky argues Hamlet’s failure resides in his interpretation of the Ghost. He writes:

Shakespeare has left the identity of the Ghost a matter of conjecture, however straightforward, and this should warn us that the importance of that figure is not its identity but its effect on Hamlet, which is to test the Prince more cannily than the Prince ever contrives to test anyone else. It is by his interpretation of the Ghost that Hamlet is tried and found wanting” (87).

While the identity of the Ghost is never realized, Hamlet’s actions are. If the Ghost was, as he thought at first “a goblin damned,” then, it achieves its end of damaging his soul by the closing of the play. Not only did the Prince kill his uncle, but he was also responsible for the deaths of Polonius, Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern. He did not heed the Ghost’s command not to taint his mind with the deed he set out to do. “But, howsoever thou pursues this act,/ Taint not thy mind...” (I.V.84-85). With three additional murders on his soul, Hamlet did taint both the deed he was called to do and his mind. His continued hesitation causes his end to be achieved at the cost of his own life as a kind of divine retribution for his own actions.

Hamlet’s Madness

The idea of vengeance is the also the catalyst that spawns one of the play’s great mysteries: Hamlet’s madness. Whether it was entirely an act, a false and “antic” disposition or not is a question that haunts scholars and audiences. Yet, it is one of the central concerns of the play. The genre of revenge tragedy functioned in large part by the hero becoming

consumed by the idea of revenge, resulting in madness and like the one who had done them wrong before. Per the genre, Hamlet's madness was necessary to his eventual resembling Claudius. Yet, because the possibility exists that his "antic disposition" was merely an act and never real madness, whether or not he ever came to resemble the one who had wronged him also remains in question.

In many ways, the Prince's disposition is one of the outward representations of the political state of his home Elsinore. The place is no longer what it once was: ruled by a proper King and threatened only by forces from the outside like old Fortinbras. Similarly, the Prince also slowly becomes less and less of what he was before the play began: son, student, and lover of Ophelia. The state of the county is often parallel to the state of its ruler in Shakespeare's works. Denmark is now under the rule of a man who himself confesses, "O, my offense is so rank, it smells to heaven" (III.III. 36). His country is under the rule of the very murderer of the previous King. This usurpation has not only affected Hamlet and the ones closet to him, but the whole of Denmark as well. Both the country and the state of mind of the title character were slowly becoming decayed from the inside.

The "antic disposition" of Hamlet can be viewed in different ways. One of which is seeing it is a false façade put on by a man who shows himself to be a lover of drama and plays throughout the story. Because of the act he sets out to commit, his madness acts like a shield that allows him to speak the truth and achieve what he becomes determined to do, to kill his murdering uncle and set the political state of Denmark right once again. At the beginning of the play when he is chastised by his mother for continuing to wear the color of mourning, he tells her freely that he does not only look the part, but still feels the loss his father as well. His black clothing is an outward depiction of what he feels. "'Seems,' madam,

may, it is. I know not 'seems.'" (I. II. 76). He claims to not be merely acting the part of a son in mourning, but also feeling the emotions suggested by his clothing as well. In fact, he claims to not even know what it is to only "seem" to be something and not to feel it entirely. Before he is called to revenge, Hamlet views himself as one who does not seem to be anything that he is not.

Rather than becoming actually mad, the Prince makes the decision to "seem" mentally unstable. The "antic disposition" acted out by Hamlet sets into motion once he has seen the Ghost that claims to be his father. After meeting with the spirit and being called to revenge his murder, he warns those that were with him, "How strange or odd soe'er I bear myself-/ As I, perchance, here after shall think meet/ to put an antic disposition on" (I.V.178-179). The Prince says he will, and begins to appear, mad. The "antic disposition" is also meant as a way for him to disguise his intentions and to also keep himself from actual madness. He alone bears the burden of his revenge and knowing just how poisonous his home state truly is. He must pretend to be mad to prevent himself from becoming like those around him and to maintain some aspect of himself: "Hamlet says he may pretend to be mad because he feels that he must struggle to retain a modicum of self-control. He is now burdened to the breaking point" (Lidz 59). Even though he himself claimed before to not "know not seems," he is in the presence constantly of very polished actors: his uncle King Claudius, pretending to be King when he does not deserve to be, the Queen, who seemingly and suspiciously pretends to know nothing of her first husband's murder, and Polonius, who gives his son leave to return to France, but soon after sends a man to spy on him. René Girard in his article "Hamlet's Dull Revenge" argues that Hamlet is looking for a model which to imitate in order to survive. He writes,

He [Hamlet] is trying to achieve what everybody else seems to achieve without difficulty. He is trying to be a normal man himself; he is aping the well-adjusted personality of Laertes, the man who can draw his sword when he should and who can jump into his sister's grave when he should, without looking like a madman (175).

Being convinced that everyone else around him is merely acting a part, Hamlet himself resolves to play the part of a mad man in order to gain his revenge and survive in the poisonous world around him.

In spite of acting in the role of madness, Hamlet still provides insight that others fail to see throughout the action. Even in the opening scene of Gertrude and Claudius announcing their marriage and appearing to the state as new King and queen, he is the only one who sees it for what it truly is: showy and in bad taste so little time after King Hamlet's death. The Prince states,

But two months dead-nay, not so much, not two
 So excellent a King that was to this
 Hyperion to a satyr, so loving to my mother,
 That he might not beteem the winds of heaven
 Visit her fact too roughly. Heaven and earth,
 Must I remember? (I.II. 140-145)

In his mind, he alone remembers his dead father and is the only one still in mourning. His mother, after not even two months, has moved on and married her deceased husband's brother.

In addition to his “antic disposition”, some of his lines almost border on precognition, a trait which would not have been possible for someone actually mentally ill. Both before and after he decided to appear mad, this trait is present. Prior to anyone informing him of the Ghost of his father appearing, the Prince foreshadows it. In the presence of Horatio, he proclaims “My father, methinks I see my father.” (I.II.183). It is not until lines later that Horatio actually reveals to him that the watch has been seeing the Ghost on their watch at night. “My lord, I think I saw him yesternight” (I.II. 189). In these lines, it’s almost as if the Prince could foresee the presence of his father’s spirit and the fact that it has been appearing to others. He is more observant than others in the Royal Court of Denmark.

Hamlet again demonstrates another form of this strange ability after his “antic disposition” is on with he is with Ophelia. King Claudius and Polonius are hiding in the room and watching the scene unfold, they believe, without the knowledge of the Prince. However, during his speech he seems to pause and sense that they are intruding on them. “Go thy ways to a nunnery. Where’s your father?” (III.I 130). Even though Polonius and Claudius think themselves to be hidden where Hamlet could not see them, the sudden shift of his speech to Ophelia seems to suggest he knows that he and his former lover are being watched during their conversation. Moments like these that occur consistently (even after he begins to appear mad) along with the insight he provides into the other characters throughout the play particularly in his soliloquies imply Hamlet is merely acting mad.

Like his old jester Yorick, Hamlet has become the fool and is thus able to speak truths without being reprimanded for it, as all Shakespearean fools often do. By acting in such an extreme manner and hiding the real meaning his words behind convoluted speech, he is able to say what others in the play cannot. Thus, he provides insight into the other

characters they themselves may not be able to comprehend: “Hamlet, however, is more clearly related to the ‘trickster’ of various myths and to the jester, the fool who makes others look foolish” (Lidz 62). He can also speak the truth of situations going on in the state. Acting in the way he does also saves him from fear of being reprimanded for his words. No one in King Claudius’ court would pay mind to Hamlet playing the palace fool: “Hamlet the Prince now becomes his own household fool, and allows himself to speak the truth” (Garber 479). In doing so, he becomes yet another actor in the ongoing play that is now life and politics in the state of Denmark.

The supposed madness of the Prince due to his becoming increasingly consumed by his plot for revenge also inadvertently causes a second revenge plot to form. By the time he refuses to kill Claudius while he is praying, Hamlet is not only after revenge in the form of death, but also the damnation of his uncle’s soul. He seeks a twisted divine retribution for the murder of his father. Human, physical revenge is no longer enough for him. The plot has gone farther than revenge and the normal scope of revenge tragedy, which would call for those who have wronged others being punished, but having a part in their own punishment (at least in part): “That the secret criminal may be hoist with his own petard is central to revenge tragedy’s meaning, for the essence of criminal depravity is conceived to be the criminal’s pride in his own cunning and his consequent contempt for divine justice” (Broude 54). While the play does end with Claudius being killed in the midst of his own murderous plot, Hamlet’s determination to not only kill him, but to send his soul to hell as well is what ultimately causes his own death in addition to his uncle’s. In the process of seeking his own revenge, he commits a murder and welcomes another plot of revenge to enter the story: that of Laertes against him.

Laertes

In contrast to Hamlet, Laertes, seeks vengeance for two members of his family in his plot for revenge. The first is his father Polonius, who was stabbed in Gertrude's closet by Hamlet thinking it was Claudius. By the end of the play, has the added burden of avenging a sister as well. With the rejection of her former lover and the death of her father, Ophelia becomes mad and drowns in a brook. Because the death of Polonius left Laertes as the head of their family unit, revenging the wrong done to his sister is his personal responsibility as well. The role that the Prince played in driving Ophelia into madness causes Laertes also to blame Hamlet for her death as well. He feels that he has wronged him twice. He vows to Claudius:

And so have I a noble father lost,
 A sister driven to desp'rate terms,
 Whose worth, if it praises mat go back again,
 Stood challenger on mount of all the age
 For her perfections. But my revenge will come. (IV.VII 25-30)

Thus, he sets out to seek the retribution he is owed. However, as with the first revenging son, his intentions soon become convoluted as well.

Several important parallels exist between both men's paths to revenge. Just as the Ghost willed Hamlet to remember him and the deed he is called to perform, Ophelia, in her madness, also bids Laertes to remember something as well. "There's rosemary, that's for remembrance; pray you,/ love, remember. And there is pansies, that's for thoughts" (IV. V. 170-171). Although it's not clear what she is asking him to remember, he the mere sight of

her in her madden condition it in his mind as a call for revenge, like the words spoken to Hamlet by the Ghost. He says upon seeing her mad, “Hadst thou thy wits and didst persuade revenge, / it could not move thus” (IV. V. 167-168). With his father already dead by the Prince and his sister’s eventual death, which he is also partially responsible, Laertes resolves to have revenge for the deaths of his family members. The deaths of King Hamlet and Polonius leave the two sons as head of their own respective families. Laertes’ father is also suddenly, just as the Prince’s father with no time to pray or ask forgiveness of any lingering transgressions that he may have to make atonement for in the afterlife. Just as Hamlet did, he becomes consumed by the act he feels the need to commit and begins a dangerous road that leads him to a similar end.

Laertes is also not to be satisfied with the mere death of the one he seeks retribution from. He too is determined, at points in the play, to damage Hamlet’s soul in the process as well. In order to achieve damaging the Prince’s soul, he turns to the new King for help and, thus, pollutes his own revenge. He allows his grief for his lost family members to cloud his judgment. Author Arthur Kirsch in his book *The Passions of Shakespeare’s Tragic Heroes* explains, “Laertes’s sorrow and anger are quickly corrupted; and his poisonous allegiance with the King simultaneously dramatizes the most destructive vengeful energies of grief and seems to draw those energies away from Hamlet and into himself” (41). He conspires with King Claudius and tells him that he would resolve “To cut his throat i’the church” (IV.VII. 125) in a similar way to Hamlet who had previously justified delaying the killing of Claudius because he was at prayer and his soul would have potentially not been damned. As with his adversary in his plot for revenge, a physical death is not enough: “Hamlet embraces revenge in its extreme, but with honor as we have observed, he is not wholly satisfied...” (Skulsky

84). The soul must suffer in the next life as well. Likewise, it has become a matter of pride and honor for Laertes and no longer the singular quest for retribution, which would be satisfied with merely the death of the murderer's body. As he states to Hamlet before their fatal duel

I am satisfied in nature,
 Whose motive in this case should stir me most
 To my revenge. But in terms of my honor
 I stand aloof and will no reconciliation
 Till by some alder masters of known honor
 I have a voice and precedent of peace
 To keep my name ungorged... (V.II.213-219).

The wronged son is now seeking the retribution for not only the deaths of two of the members of his family, but his honor as well. If it had solely been a matter of revenge, Laertes could have forgone the battle that costs him and Hamlet their lives. However, the path to retribution becomes blurred for both of the sons. Their intentions to go beyond the normal call for revenge at last ends up not only taking the lives of those that they sought to punish, but causing their demises as well.

Laertes becomes like a striking mirror images of the Prince and the way he has allowed the single act of retribution to consume him. The final struggle between Hamlet and Laertes begins at Ophelia's funeral. The Prince, who scorned her the last time he saw her, sees the spectacle and shows up to mourn. This begins a physical struggle and Laertes reveals the true intentions of his revenge, which now have doubled in his mind with the death of his sister. During the confrontation, he shouts, "The devil take thy soul!" (V. I. 237). By his

words, it becomes clear that divine retribution and the soul of his adversary is what he seeks to take. Hamlet replies to his cry by telling him, "Thou pray'st not well." (V. I. 238). Even though he himself seeks a similar kind of retribution for the death of his father, he acknowledges that it is not proper for his foe to call for his soul, despite the role he has played in the deaths that he is being pursued for. Both of the sons have lost their fathers and have heard a cry to remember. Each of them also comes not only to demand the death of the murderer that has taken family from them, but to damn their souls as well. Although Hamlet tells Laertes he does not pray well, he fails to see the similarities in their situations and that by refusing to kill Claudius at prayer, his intentions and prayers are not well either.

The scene at Ophelia's grave also becomes a battle over the right to mourn the young woman. Laertes leaps into the grave with his deceased sister, consumed by his grief. Since he is now the head of what was her family, mourning and grieving are his duties. Yet, when Hamlet comes into the mourner's view and the quarrel begins, he makes the case that having been her lover he too has a right to show his grief over her death. "I loved Ophelia. Forty thousand brothers/ Could not with all their quantity of love/ Make up my sum. What wilt thou do for her?" (V.I.258-260). In this reasoning, he seems to invoke a speech earlier given by his mother. "I had hoped thou shouldst have been my Hamlet's wife" (V.I.234). Had they been married, the right to mourn would have belonged to him as it actually did to Laertes. But because a marriage between the two never took place, the right to mourn and revenge wrongdoing on her behalf remained with the brother.

Fortinbras

The last avenging son in *Hamlet* is the invader Fortinbras. He is initially seen as a threat to the state of Denmark. Unlike Hamlet and Laertes, his initial plot for revenge is not justified by the “an eye for eye” idea of revenge. The death of his father was the result of an honorable hand-to-hand combat with old Hamlet. His intentions begin in the way the other two plots end: as merely a matter of honor and no longer concerned with merely an act of retribution. Yet, he is determined to seek revenge (however not justifiable) for the wrong he feels was done to him and his father: “[Like] Laertes, and Hamlet, Fortinbras has a father to avenge. His ‘enterprise,’ we are clearly informed has no legal or moral basis; it is purely an affair of honor” (Skulsky 81). He sees no honor in the death of his father at the hands of old Hamlet, though there was no indication of foul play. Harold Skulsky writes in his article “Revenge, Honor, and Conscience in Hamlet”, “Young Fortinbras lives by the code and his career is consequently a fairer gauge of the standing in the play of honor as a standard for conduct” (1). In order to gain back the land that was justly taken from him and his realm, he is willing to sacrifice more soldiers than there would be room to bury in the piece of land. When the Prince meets his army, he is struck that Fortinbras is willing to battle and die over a small piece of justly lost property so fervently and he is unable to justly kill his uncle for the murder his father. He observes,

Witness this army of such mass and charge,
 Led by a delicate and tender Prince
 Whose spirit with divine ambition puffed
 makes mouths at the invisible event... (IV.V. 48-51)

From the beginning, he is shown, if nothing else, as more active and decisive of a man than the title character, embodying an act of revenge that he himself cannot yet find it within himself to commit to.

Despite the differences in action throughout the play, many similarities are present between the invader and Denmark's Prince. They have both lost their father in a way that they both consider to murder and unjust. Neither of them, upon the deaths of their father, were able to take control of the countries they were next in line to rule. Many parallels between them are set up in the play: "Fortinbras and Hamlet, in strict parallel, are both born on the same day, both lost their father to a murderer, and both lose their succession to their father's brother" (Haverkamp 29). What makes for the defining difference between the two Princes is action. Hamlet is prompted to revenge by a Ghost he is never sure is his father and hesitates to carry out the deed that he is bound by honor to do. Fortinbras, in contrast, is willing to act in revenge in spite of whether his father's death was a result of an honorable duel or not. In short, he is the revenger that Hamlet cannot bring himself to be until the end of the play. Scholar Anselm Harverkamp writes, "Hamlet, rather than the drama of Hamlet's revenge might as well be taken as a shrewd anamorphous of the revenge of the other price, Fortinbras" (27). Fortinbras, like Laertes, is a model for the definitive kind of action Hamlet must learn to embody in order to take his revenge on Claudius and set the state of Denmark right again.

Fortinbras is a potential invader, as his father was before him. However, the decay in the state of Denmark is no longer from the inside but, like poison, decaying and dying from the inside out. Through not acting on his revenge in haste, he becomes the solution and no longer the threat he was seen as in the beginning of the action. He is the one that is left to

reclaim and revive the poisoned Denmark. He embodies the possibility of Denmark being restored to how it was before King Hamlet died. Stephen Greenblatt's introduction to *Hamlet* states of Fortinbras, "The possibility of cleaning, definitive action at once continually eludes the Prince. Such action is embodied in the soldier Fortinbras..." (1072). Unlike Hamlet or Laertes, he does not wish for more than retribution or the damnation of the soul of his enemies. He is one of the characters left alive at the end of the play. He has not been corrupted by the poison of Claudius' rule or the decayed state. Rather, he comes from outside inward as the only one who could potentially restore the state. Fortinbras serves as the reversed mirror image of the intentions of Hamlet and Laertes and the example of definitive action that both of them could (and should) have followed during the action of the play.

In *Hamlet*, Shakespeare show three different sons all seeking revenge for the deaths of their father and members of their families. They have each become the head of their respective families and the burden of revenge fall on them. Hamlet and Laertes, by seeking more than "an eye for eye" become consumed by the plot they are to carry out. In the process of seeking vengeance for the wrongdoing bestowed on their honor, they become very like one another and must forfeit their lives in order for nature to be restored to Denmark. Fortinbras, by coming from outside the polluted the state, does not become mad in the way that the other sons do. When he enters Denmark, Hamlet is already dead. He cannot seek anymore revenge than what has already been done at the hand of Laertes. Thus, he is left as the only one unpolluted and fit to rule at the end of the play. By the deaths of all of the wrongdoers, the cycle of revenge started by the death of King Hamlet is allowed to come to a close and a new chapter in the state of Denmark is allowed to begin.

Imbalance of Revenge Tragedy

Rather than depict the simple “an eye for an eye” kind of revenge that was the belief of the time, works of revenge tragedy focused on the imbalance of retribution. While the hero might initially begin his intentions as an act merely of revenge, the genre relied on them becoming lost in the process. They would become obsessed with the act they were striving to commit and come to resemble the initial wrongdoer by the end of the action. Thus, he would attempt to skew the balance of revenge and become a villain himself in the process.

In *Hamlet*, what would have been a simple act of revenge becomes skewed and leads to many more deaths at the end of the play than the wrongdoer. Because of his desire to make the soul of his uncle suffer as well as his body, the Prince of Denmark begins a new plot of revenge and becomes a wrongdoer like the very murderer he is attempting to take revenge on. Because of this, Hamlet himself and many others in the play lose their lives as a result of the attempted imbalance of retribution.

The initial death that brings about the action of *Hamlet* is the murder of King Hamlet by his brother Claudius. This is an act that occurred before the action of the play begins, yet serves as the catalyst for most of the action. Because of this act, Hamlet is bound to an act of revenge against his uncle: “So art thou to revenge when thou shalt hear.” (I.V.7). Hamlet feels his duty as his father’s son is to kill the man who murdered him. By the “an eye for an eye” system of belief as well, the death of Claudius is called for. However, the Ghost of Hamlet’s father who emerged to call him to act also warns him against vengeance that is out of balance with the act that was done to him. “But howsoever thou peruses this act,/Taint not thy mind, nor let thy soul contrive/Against thy mother aught ...” (I.V.84-86). The Ghost of Hamlet’s father gives the Prince specific commands, both of which are not heeded.

When the opportunity to take the revenge he is entitled to comes, Hamlet refuses to kill Claudius. Because he is prayer, the Prince believes that death at that moment would send him to heaven.

A villain kills my father, and for that
 I, his sole son, do this same villain send
 To heaven
 Why, this is [hire and salary,] not revenge.
 A took my father grossly, full of bread,
 With all his crimes blown, as flush as May;
 And how his audit stands, who knows save heaven? (III.III.76-82).

He is now concerned with more than the simple act of revenge. He believes that killing his uncle while he is at prayer will do nothing more than send him to heaven. This conclusion, to him, is neither revenge nor the balance he seeks to restore.

When Claudius killed King Hamlet, he did so suddenly and in a way that did not allow him to obtain revenge for his own sins. Because of this, the Ghost that appeared to his son to call him to revenge was one in that came from a place of punishment.

I am thy father's spirit,
 Doomed for a certain term to walk the night,
 And for the day confined to fast in fires,
 Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature
 Are burnt and purged away... (I. V. 9-13).

The spirit of his father is suffering and Hamlet desires the same for the spirit of his uncle. However, this desire is also out of balance of the "an eye for an eye" ideal. The Prince sought

to send the murdering soul of his uncle to hell, a place of eternal fire and damnation. Yet, the Ghost of his father is only “doomed for a certain time” to endure the punishment his is enduring. The refusal of Hamlet to kill Claudius at the proper time and his instance to obtain more than revenge are the catalysts to yet another plot for revenge.

Shortly after Hamlet makes the decision not to kill Claudius at prayer, the Prince of Denmark kills a man in his mother’s closet. Though he believed it to be Claudius, he quickly learns it is not the man he thought it would be. “Thou wretched, rash, intruding fool, farewell/ I took thee for thy better” (III.IV.32-33). The man is Polonius, the father of Ophelia (Hamlet’s former love) and Laertes. With the murder of his father, the man’s son is also bound by his duty to seek revenge. This wrongdoing will only be satisfied by the death of Hamlet. The same son that began as the revenger of wrong has now also become the object of another son’s revenge. In order for balance to be maintained, both of them must be fulfilled. At the end of the play, both sons at last obtain revenge for their own fathers, but it comes at the price of more lives being taken.

Later in the action of the play, Laertes also has the added responsibility of avenging his sister Ophelia. She has gone mad and drowned, possibly intentionally. For this, Laertes also blames Hamlet. He once loved the young woman and gave her tokens of his feeling toward her. However, after he is called to revenge his father and makes the decision to put “an antic disposition on,” he scorns her and says that he no longer loves her. He tells her, “You should not have believed me; for virtue cannot/ so inoculate our old stock but we shall relish of it. I loved/ you not” (III.I.117-119). The rejection she receives by her once lover along with the murder of her father causes her to go mad and eventually die. With her father

dead, it's also up to Laertes to seek revenge for the treatment of his sister. He blames the Prince for not only one death, but both of them as he seeks retribution.

The final call for revenge in *Hamlet* comes to Fortinbras, a potential invader of Denmark. Unlike Hamlet and Laertes, he does not begin with intentions of “an eye for an eye.” Though his father was killed by King Hamlet, it was a death in honorable combat of war, not a murder like the deaths of the King Hamlet and Polonius.

Thereto picked on by a most emulate pride,
Dared to the combat; in which our valiant Hamlet-
For this side of our known world esteemed him-
Did slay this Fortinbras, who by a sealed compact
Well ratifies by law and heraldry,
forfeit his life and all these lands. (I.I. 85-90)

Even though the terms were agreed upon and honorable, the son still saw the death of his father and the forfeiture of his land dishonorable. There was no actual wrongdoing, yet Fortinbras seeks retribution for what he lost as a result of the battle of his father and King Hamlet. He seeks the restoration of his land he was taken from him as a form of revenge, one that he is not entitled to.

In the final act of the play, vengeance is finally taken against those that have wronged others throughout the action. By this time, Claudius has preyed on Laertes' want of revenge. He offers to assist him in killing Hamlet, and thus save himself from being killed by his plot of retribution. Together, the two come up with a plan that Laertes will challenge the Prince to a fencing match. The event would be an honorable duel, such as the one King Hamlet killed old Fortinbras in years before. However, they conspire to put the odds in their favor and

manipulate the situation to ensure Hamlet dies regardless of winning or losing the duel. Rather than fight him fairly, the revenging son decided to poison the foil he will use against the Prince.

And for the purpose I'll anoint my sword.
 I bought an unction of a mountebank
 So mortal that, but dip the knife in it,
 Where it draws blood no cataplasm so rare
 Collected from all the simples that have virtue
 Under the moon can save the thing from death (IV.VII. 139-144).

If the Prince is touched with the foil Laertes' uses, it will mean his death. For Hamlet the match is an unbalanced fight.

King Claudius also offers a solution should he not be touched with the foil or if the poison doesn't work. Just as he poisoned his brother to kill him and usurp his throne, he also prepares poison for his nephew Hamlet.

And that he calls for drink, I'll have prepared him
 A chalice for the nonce, whereupon but sipping,
 If he chance escape your venom'd stuck,
 Our purpose may hold there.... (IV. VII. 158-162).

The plots of Claudius and Laertes shift what could have been an honorable duel into a twisted trap that ensures the death of Hamlet by one of their means. However, by attempting to unbalance the fight, they also set events into motion that they did not intend and cannot control.

On the day of the duel, there is a poison blade and a poisoned cup, just as they have planned. Though the objects of their scheme are there to fulfill their purpose of killing Hamlet, neither man can control where they end up. Hamlet refuses the drink when the cup is offered to him, leaving the container free. Gertrude, however, drinks from the chalice ignorant of its harm. She, not her son, dies from the plot that Claudius put into place. The Queen of Denmark, in spite of her quick marriage to her deceased husband's brother, was not part of any plot for revenge. In fact, the Ghost forbade Hamlet from taking any action against his mother: "nor let thy soul contrive against thy mother aught." Though she was not innocent of any wrongdoing, she was not part of any plot for retribution. Just as he did his brother, Claudius kills his Queen and wife with the poison meant for her son.

Hamlet and Laertes continue to duel before Gertrude dies of the poison. The man at last succeeds in wounding the Prince. In the struggle afterwards, Hamlet gets his blade and wounds him. Thus, he too dies of his own plot to revenge his father and his sister. Laertes, in choosing to conspire with the murderer Claudius and attempting to put the duel out of balance, has become mad and like the very man who wronged him. Although he and Hamlet exchanges forgiveness before the duel, the poison is already in place and Laertes still believes he "stands aloof" in terms of his honor. Each of them meets their end by the same poisoned blade. Both sons die in part due to being consumed by their plots for revenge and have allowed it to make them mad and like the very men who have murdered their fathers. Their desire for more for more than "and eye for an eye" revenge skewed their intentions like other works of the revenge tragedy genre.

One of the final men to die in *Hamlet* is the man that began the plots for revenge and caused the events to unfold. One of the final acts of the Prince of Denmark is to at last take

his revenge against Claudius. He is both wounded by the poisonous blade he urged Laertes to use in the duel and is also forced to drink from the poisoned cup that was his own contribution to the plot against Hamlet. The objects he hoped would be used to kill another were thus turned against and used on him. He was doubly poisoned after using the same device to kill King Hamlet and Gertrude. In killing his uncle, Hamlet has revenged his father and mother that were both killed by his hand. Yet because he failed to heed the spirit of his father's command to not taint his mind with his plot of revenge, his death is inevitable as well. With the final death of Hamlet, Laertes' revenge is complete as well for his own dead family members.

In the final scene of the play, young Fortinbras arrives in Denmark. He finds Gertrude, Claudius, Hamlet, and Laertes all dead upon his entering. Every member of the royal family of the country is now gone as a result of the plots for revenge generated by the initial murder of the former King. With no one to stand in his way or stop him, the man is free to take back the land he lost as a result of his own father's death and to seize the country. His revenge is thus fulfilled as well. Balance is once again able to exist in the state with all plots for retribution fulfilled and ended at the close of the action.

In his play, *Hamlet* Shakespeare tells the story of what began as a single plot for revenge and how it quickly spiraled into more. In keeping with the genre of revenge tragedy both Hamlet and Laertes become mad and very like the men that wronged them. Because of the balanced, "an eye for an eye" nature of the Renaissance idea of revenge the deaths of both men were called for by the end of the play. Had they been able to content themselves with retribution not beyond the wrong that was done to them and tainted their own minds, they could have survived passed the fulfilling of their own plots. Because of Forinbras'

actions, he did not taint his own mind in his quest for revenge. He remained honorable, like King Hamlet (the man that killed his father) in the military battle years ago. The balance of revenge was at last restored to Denmark at the end of the play, but only after many deaths that were not necessary in the beginning

Chapter 3:

A Mirror Up to Nature:

Kenneth Branagh's *Hamlet*

Long before the film version of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* opened in movie theaters on Christmas day in 1995, director Kenneth Branagh had experience with the character and world he was to bring to life. He had performed the role during his time with the Royal Shakespeare Company and even participated in a production that used the full text (a compilation of the Second Quarto text along with the addition of lines added by the later First Folio) (Crowl 225). By the time he began to create his film *Hamlet*, he had already established and proven to the world that he could make successful film adaptations of Shakespeare's plays and that these were, contrary to the belief of the time, critically and financially successful. "Only Branagh had created the track record which allowed him to secure the financing for such an enterprise..." (Crowl 227). By the use of the full text and visual devices such as color, Branagh managed to emphasize all three of the revenge tragedies present in Shakespeare's text. His directing choices allow us to see that play from his point of view. Rather than seeing a dark, decaying world, he sees polish and pomp being used to hide secrets and sins that none of the characters want to be confronted with.

Branagh's decision to utilize the Second Quarto and First Folio additions of Shakespeare's play and not to make the cuts that filmmakers and directors of the stage had done previously was vital to his interpretation. Film scholar Samuel Crowl writes of the decision:

For fifty years, stage and film *Hamlet* productions, based on their approach to the play and subsequent editing of the text, had downplayed and even eliminated the play's larger social and political implications to focus on Hamlet's psychological struggle and its domestic impact on his immediate family. (130)

He allowed every scene to occur and every storyline to have the attention that Shakespeare intended. Branagh's *Hamlet* does not only function on the personal level of the title character's struggles for personal revenge on his uncle for his father's murder. The Film also shows the revenge plots of Laertes and Fortinbras. For example, Zeffirelli's film version of *Hamlet* starring Mel Gibson ignores Fortinbras and his subsequent conquest of Denmark after the death of Claudius and Hamlet altogether. The film ends with the fate of the country and the future ruler all in question. Branagh allowed the story to continue in order to show Fortinbras' arrival and the funeral rites given to the Prince. No question of succession or who is revenged is left unanswered at the end of Branagh's *Hamlet*.

The film's length also functions in part by showing what is inside the Prince's head to show visual images of things alluded to. For example, the flash to Troy during the actor's recitation, perhaps most strikingly to a mourning Hecuba to accompany the lines spoken about her: "With bisson rheum, a clout upon that head/ where late the diadem stood, and for a robe/ About her lank and o'erteemed loins/ A blanket, in alarm of fear caught up- (II.II. 501-504). To explain his reasoning, he wrote, "I longed to allow audiences to join Fortinbras on the plain of Norway, to be transported, as Hamlet is in his mind's eye, back to Troy to see Priam and Hecuba. I felt all my experiences with the play and with Shakespeare was leading me in one direction." (Branagh 180). The treatment each story line receives and visual

accompaniment to Hamlet's "mind's eye" are utilized by Branagh to show more of the world than Hamlet sees.

Political unrest is shown in Branagh's film in a way that films that came before it had not. Flashes to Fortinbras making preparations to invade Denmark are shown throughout the film. Viewers are not permitted to forget he is coming and part of the occurring revenge plots as well. The invader also seeks revenge the death of his father, killed by King Hamlet in a military duel. Fortinbras is an active character in Branagh's *Hamlet*. At the end of the film, he is the one to take control of Denmark after the deaths of the members of the royal family. He and his soldiers are seen entering the castle, prepared for a battle that is no longer necessary. The son is seen being crowned the new King as Hamlet is being laid to rest.

The setting is important aspect of Branagh's interpretation. Previous interpretations had been dark, in keeping with the tone of the amount of death in the end and the family and eventual political decay of Elsinore. In his 1948 version, director Laurence Olivier chose to film his *Hamlet* entirely in black and white. Automatically, he sets his film and title character as melancholy and full of the foreshadowed moral decay. He would later write, "While the camera was showing much of Hamlet's melancholy and the decay and decadence of Claudius's court, I was able to use the empty spaces for exciting physical action..." (Olivier 171). Interpretations such as his seemed to draw from the lines of the title character in act two of the play. When speaking to his friends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Hamlet makes the claim, "Denmark's a prison" (II.II. 239). Upon protest from his school friends, he does admit that his own view of his homeland is skewed due to the death of his father and marriage of his mother to his uncle. To the Prince, Denmark is a prison because of his state of mind: "Why, then 'tis none for you, for there is nothing either/good or bad but thinking

makes it so. To me it is a prison” (II.II. 244-245). This comment of his title character allows for Branagh’s vision to be different than those that came before it. He creates a home for his royal characters that is visually stunning to look at on screen and a contrast to the “prison” Hamlet mind sees, partially as a result of the revenge his is bound to carry out.

Rather than use a gothic setting in keeping with the dreary outlook of the place that the title character has, Branagh chose a beautiful Elisnor in the form of Blenheim Palace for the exterior. A set with many rooms and secret passages for the athletic motion of his characters was also needed to complete his Elisnor. The time period is changed from the Renaissance to the 19th century, and is set in a palace actually in Denmark. The structure has all of the charm and character of a castle, complete with marble pillars and grand staircases throughout. Vast grounds also accompany the structure, full of gardens which allow for the space to feel open. Visually, the setting does not look like the “prison” Hamlet see it as in his dialogue.

Just as elaborate as the palace itself is the palate of colors that go along with it. The color scheme is evident upon the first view of the inside just after the wedding of Gertrude and Claudius. The floor is tiled with an alternating black and white pattern. These opposite colors appear side by side, not only to show personalities of the characters, but to visually depict aspects of the revenge tragedy genre as well, rather than the mere melancholy of previous versions of *Hamlet*: “The film is at its best when it moves inside Elsinore and presents us with red, white, and gold glitter of Claudius’s court. In another contrast from previous *Hamlet* films” (Crowl 226). In Branagh’s interpretation, everyone in the play has two sides to them: a pristine white side which they show to the public and among people they wish to fool. Yet, there is a darker side to many characters that is shown in private.

The opening scene that first shows Gertrude and Claudius is visually extravagant. The tile on the palace floor is black and white, opposite colors to represent the opposite public and private personas that everyone in the new royal court of Denmark exhibit. The wardrobes of the actors in the scenes are extravagant and colorful, providing a contrast to Hamlet. Red is also shown several times in many important places in the film such as in the rug laid out for Hamlet and Laertes' fencing match, also in the stripe down the side of the pants in the Prince's fencing outfit. The color is both passionate, as the rash emotions acted on by many characters throughout the action, but is also the color of blood, which will be shed primarily in the final part of the film.

The colors also add visual to enhance aspects of the revenge tragedy genre. Black and white are opposite colors. Revengers such as Hamlet begin by seeing themselves as different from the one they seek revenge for. The Prince stands out in his black mourning clothes while Claudius dresses as King. As time goes by and the Prince kills people himself, the opposite shield he wished to reveal dissolves. By the end, there are no black and white difference between Claudius and Hamlet, or the Prince and Laertes. The fencing outfits they wear are similar, with white on top and black on the bottom. Everyone has been drenched in the red of their own blood as a result of being consumed by revenge and attempting to seem opposite to those who had wronged them.

In addition to color, Branagh's *Elisnor* is full of mirrors. The glasses are particularly prominent in the main throne room of castle, where the walls are fully covered in floor to ceiling mirrors. Visually, this serves to put multiples of the same people on the screen, adding show of the dual personality or personas of the people in the interpretation presented. The mirrors are particularly prominent when Hamlet delivers his "To be or not to be" speech.

He is standing with his face next to a mirror with a knife in hand, delivering the speech to a reflection to himself. It represents the two choices he is considering: to live or to commit suicide. During the speech, his choices have embodied themselves in the form of multiple Hamlets. His choices have manifested themselves in the doubling of his body on screen. For other characters, multiples of them represent the multiple fronts they are keeping up throughout the action of the play. Claudius is King, but also murderer of his brother. Polonius gives Laertes his consent to leave for France, but then sends a man to watch him. Gertrude is wife to both the late King and his brother after King Hamlet's death. She has portraits of them both in her closet. All of the main characters have secrets they wish to hide, but are revealed by the end of the film and play.

The mirrors located in the palace that cast the multiples of the characters are also spotless, as is the entire castle for the most part. The glass of the mirrors shines in a very polished way, representing the front that characters in the film are putting on in the public's eyes. They polish themselves to hide the moral grim underneath that no one else can see that would form if the polish was not there. Because of the initial death of the rightful King, Denmark is no longer a pleasant place. As Claudius must hide the murder he committed from the rest of the world, the effects of his sin spreads. All the people of the state must keep their true selves hidden. For Hamlet, this comes in the form of his "antic disposition." He must not act as he did before in order to hide the revenge he seeks against his uncle.

This idea of polished fronts put on by the characters of the film is culminated in Branagh's filmed interpretation of the character Ophelia. His treatment of her character makes her yet another product of the polished world of Denmark. In the text of the play, she is called a maid. She is told to go to a nunnery, which in one meaning is a place of life-long

chastity. However, Branagh undermines all of these situations by making a sexual relationship between her and Hamlet explicit. Scenes of them in bed naked together are shown multiple times in flashbacks. In the various flashes, they act loving to one another, consummating a relationship and exchanging tokens of love. These recur, especially during the conversation the young woman has with her father when discussing Hamlet's intentions. This realization confirms her father's fear that Hamlet is after her in order to use her and leave her and that his intentions toward her are not honorable. By adding the aspect of pre-marital relations, everything he said is made true.

The young woman is made even more important in the view of revenge. In Shakespeare's play, Laertes not only seeks revenge for his father's death, but hers as well. Ophelia's death is, at best, questionable in circumstances. The audience hears the story of her falling off of a tree and drowning from someone else. The action does not occur on camera and is not shown in the film. Nevertheless, she is given a church burial and the rites of a maid. Because Branagh has made the relationship explicit in the film, the audience knows she does not deserve the maiden rites. This makes the showing of her death, in a way, unnecessary. The knowledge that she is not a maid makes it far easier to believe that her death was suicide. She too is putting out a front and hiding the extent of her relationship with Hamlet. Her brother, however, continually asks for more ceremony at her grave. The more honor she is given, the more justified his revenge can come in his mind.

In terms of his own revenge, the character of Hamlet becomes more and more lost. He gets himself deeper and deeper into his plot and the line of seeing him as a hero and villain become more and more blurred. This unsteadiness of mind becomes particularly obvious in the changes in wardrobe that occur during the film. When we first see him, he is a

strange contrast to the red uniforms and the white of his mother's wedding dress. The black that he wears to show his mourning is worn by him alone. The black clothes also serve to show that he is the only one still mourning the death of his father, the rest have long forgotten their grief. He is the depressed, black spot on the pomp and circumstance that is occurring within Elsinor. He does not see himself as part of the Royal Court, unable to wear the bright gold and red of their wardrobes. Later, he becomes one of the only ones to know the truth surrounding the circumstances of the death of his father (that it was a murder.) the combination of already grieving his father and then the knowledge that it was a murder committed by his uncle (who also just married his mother) causes Hamlet to become unstable. While his appearance in the beginning of the film was buttoned up and polished, it becomes more and more disheveled as the action progresses, at last shifting into the black and white of his fencing uniform. He is consumed by what he knows and seeking revenge, no longer concerned about how he looks or how he appears to others.

However, despite the black and white tiles and personas of Hamlet's world, he himself is not so easy to classify. On one hand, his intentions initially are justifiable in the beginning. He seeks revenge for his father's death. The murderer is also his uncle who now not only sits on Denmark's throne, but has also married the Prince's mother far too soon after the death to avoid suspicion. The murder of a King is treason by law and punishable by death (not mention an act against nature, since the King is a God-appointed ruler of the people). The means used are what turn Hamlet to a shade of grey: from black of mourning to the black and white of his fencing uniform in the end. In his rage, he becomes a killer of another man's father by accident. Therefore, this man is also justified in seeking revenge on him. The film and play are so long and so central in focus in the title character that we cannot simply

write him off as a villain. He is a man that made a mistake by acting too hastily. His insights into the rest of the character and the society lend him a credibility that simply cannot be denied even by his mistakes. He is neither saint nor blatant sinner.

Shakespeare's play *Hamlet* tells stories of revenge. In making choices as a director, Kenneth Branagh's film remained true to this aspect of the story. His decision to lengthen the text enabled him to make a film over three hours long, but also allowed all of the plots of revenge to be depicted as well as visually exploring Hamlet's "mind's eye." His use of color distinguishes his film. The black and white set up the character's intended differences from one another, but the red of blood in the end reveals they are more alike than they care to admit. Also the film's use of mirrors, the constant reflection that none of the people of Branagh's Elsinore can hide from forever. While they are pretending to be one person, a double is constantly on stage to remind them of the crimes that will not go away.

Conclusion

In *Hamlet*, Shakespeare not only created an example of revenge tragedy, but provided other plots that mirror the larger story of Hamlet's quest for revenge in Laertes and Fortinbras. All three of the sons of the play undergo changes in keeping with the plot of seeking retribution. Each of them become mad in different ways and, in doing so, begin to echo the ones who wronged them as a result of seeking more than "an eye for an eye." The action of the drama functions in part as a result in the multiple changes of perspective.

The Prince of Denmark, at the beginning of the play, is the one who has been wronged. His father had been murdered by his uncle and usurped the throne. The call for revenge comes in the form of a Ghost whom he is never entirely sure he can trust. As a result, he hesitates in taking his revenge and killing Claudius. Due in part because of his hesitation, the change occurs. Once he kills Polonius in Gertrude's closet, he becomes a target of the resulting plot of revenge. Because of this, his death as well as that of the man who killed his father is called for at the end of the play.

Laertes also undergoes a change during the course of the play. When his father is killed by Hamlet, he too is called to revenge. This call is made all the more strong with the eventual death of his sister Ophelia as well. He conspires with King Claudius for his revenge, who feeds upon this same sense of duty to attempt to satisfy his own desire to kill the Prince. As a result, he poisons his blade during the final battle between them. His desire to turn what was potentially an honorable duel into certain death for his opponent not only results in the poisoning of Hamlet as he desired, but his as well. In his becoming a revenger, he becomes consumed by the idea and became very like the man who killed his father.

Fortinbras too changes significance throughout the story. In the opening acts, he is a potential invader. He is a man who has lost land and honor as a result of his father losing a duel against old King Hamlet. In a contrast to Hamlet's hesitation in killing Claudius, he is much more active in his role of seeking revenge. In order to achieve this goal, he is willing to fight for a piece of land that would potentially be too small to bury the soldiers that he would lose in the battle. His Captain says of the land:

Truly to speak, and with no addition

We go to gain a little patch of ground

That hath no profit in it but the name

To pay five ducats, five, I would not farm it. (IV.IV.17 -20)

Regaining the land is simply a matter of honor and revenge for the son. At the end of the play when he enters Denmark, he finds the entire royal family dead. From being an invader at the beginning, in the end he becomes the only one in a position to take control of the state. He is poised to rule the country he once thought to invade. Fortinbras will occupy the throne previously held by the man that killed his father.

By the end of the play, situations have reversed. Laertes becomes the avenger that Hamlet was meant to be: "But in *Hamlet*, the conventional situation is reversed: the revenger enters the final scene with no set plan, and it is the antagonist who has worked out the ceremony of death; the roles of duper and duped are reversed" (Gottschalk 169). The Prince no longer has a plot to kill Claudius, yet there is a set plot to ensure his death by poison at the time. Being led on by a murderer, Laertes goes down the path of madness and revenge that Hamlet has already been emerged in.

This is in part due to the ones seeking revenge demanding more than the “an eye for an eye” vengeance they are entitled to. Hamlet becomes determined to damn the soul of his uncle for the murder of his father. However, the Ghost that appear to him does not specifically call him to such revenge. Rather, it sees the act as a cleansing of the poisoning of Denmark that began with his death: “The Ghost is concerned with the spiritual health of his nation, his son, and his queen; he shows no private thirst to see Claudius suffer what Claudius had made him suffer. He is concerned with restoration, not with retaliation” (Gottschalk 165-166). The Ghost merely wants revenge for what was done to him and for a rightful ruler to once again sit on the throne of Denmark. At no point does he ask for the soul of his murder. However, Hamlet becomes unwilling to be satisfied with anything less.

Similarly, Claudius appeals to Laertes’ sense of duty and honor to his deceased family members in trying to convincing him to take revenge against Hamlet. He attempts to convince him to strike against anyone, friend or enemy:

Good Laertes,
 If you desire to know the certainty
 Of your dead father, is’t writ in your revenge
 That, swoopstake, you will draw both friend and foe,
 Winner and loser? (IV.V. 139-142).

The King convinces him to go after Hamlet, never considering that the death was accidental and the Prince struck thinking that it was him hiding in his mother’s closet. In part because of this influence, Laertes too becomes unsatisfied with a simple, equal act of revenge. He resolves “To cut his throat i’the church” (IV.VII.125). Thus, the he poisons the blade that not only kills Hamlet, but him and Claudius as well.

Fortinbras seeks land and revenge for the death of his father. However, his father was killed in an honorable duel in a military conflict with King Hamlet. He enters the state that he is determined to take to find his revenge already taken for him: the son of the man who killed his father dead and the throne of Denmark unclaimed with no one else of royal blood to prevent him from taking it. He is satisfied at the end of the play by the bloodshed that has already occurred without his influence. He can take no more vengeance against those that he feels wronged him than what has already been done.

Acts of revenge become unbalanced and out of control, resulting in madness in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. The three plots of revenge result in the deaths of all but one of the revenging sons in the play. This is in part due to their unwillingness to accept "an eye for an eye" revenge. Instead, they seek the very souls of the ones who have wronged them. Per the plot of revenge tragedy, the sons become mirror images of the ones who have murdered ones close to them by the time of their death or the end of the story. Their plots for revenge not only poison themselves, but the entire state of Denmark as well.

In his film, Kenneth Branagh enhances the reading of *Hamlet* as a revenge tragedy by many different visual cues. He puts his characters up against actual mirrors in the throne room of Elsinore. He uses opposite colors in the color scheme to juxtapose the way the characters seem themselves and how they really are. In terms of their revenge, all of them are equally guilty and will all end up clothed in the same color (red) by the end of the film. The director's creation is long enough and broad enough in its focus to show all three of the revenging sons and the results of their actions. Like Shakespeare's play, the film is centered around the effects of unbalanced retribution and bloody revenge.

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