

Hamlet and Revenge Tragedy:
A Reappraisal

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Literary critics were not the first to speculate on the nature of Hamlet's problems and the reasons for his delayed revenge. Their various rewritings of *Hamlet* generally continue processes begun in the play itself. The reflections of Coleridge, for example, begin, and largely end, by concentrating on the Hamlet of the soliloquies, privileging one of his own pet theories as to the cause of his delayed revenge: that is, what Hamlet calls his 'craven scuple/ Of thinking too precisely on th' event'.¹ In this commonly accepted theory, an original Hamlet is postulated who is given to inaction and philosophy, and the unwelcome role of active revenger, thrust upon him by the Ghost, is perceived as somehow extra, or supplementary, to this 'real' Hamlet, causing him *angst* and tragedy. Yet even the Hamlet of the soliloquies is not always so convinced of this theory. He also suggests that the 'native hue' (presumably the 'real' self) consists in 'resolution', and it is only a *superimposed* 'pale cast of thought' (III. i. 90-91) which gets in the way of action. From this and other evidence, such as Hamlet's gleeful relish in the dispatch of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, one could argue that the 'real' or original Hamlet is a man of action, a typical stage revenger, such as Vindice in *The Revenger's Tragedy*. Here, Hamlet the procrastinator would be regarded as the extra or supplementary personality, a tragic flaw, as suggested by Bradley, threatening the expression of his 'real' heroic virtues.

Perhaps the divide comes about as a result of generic expectations. If *Hamlet* is viewed as primarily a revenge

1 *Hamlet*, ed. G.A. Wilkes (The Challis Shakespeare, Sydney University Press, 1984), IV. ii. 42-3. All subsequent references are to this edition.

drama, then Hamlet the procrastinator represents the supplementary role that impedes the fulfilment of revenge. Procrastination represents not only a threat to the honour and duty of revenger, but indeed, to the action of the entire play. This perhaps can be seen by comparison to the morally correct Charlemont in Tourneur's *The Atheist's Tragedy*, where dramatic interest in the revenger is stolen by the dramatic conflict within the villain, the Atheist. Yet, as we shall see, by comparison to Vindice in Tourneur's *The Revenger's Tragedy*, the sense of pity and loss aroused by the generic expectations of 'tragedy' can be subverted by those of the revenge drama. As Vindice exemplifies, the vindictiveness inherent in the idea of the stage revenger tends to bring into question the nobility essential to the character of a tragic hero, lessening the pity that can be felt for his inevitable demise. The duty of revenge must have tragic consequences for the revenger, but the audience need not sympathize. From this perspective, Hamlet's procrastination can be thought of as guilt, indeed, justifying it as a form of generalized, disillusioned idealism.

The role of private revenger represents a dangerous alternative to this, liable to destroy any sense of nobility by self-interested murder (such as those undertaken by Bosola in *The Duchess of Malfi*), or in a series of more or less perverted revenges, such as those undertaken by Vindice. Thus *Hamlet* presents a hero who is essentially ambiguous in terms of his dramatic origins, yet who continually opens the question: Who is the 'real' Hamlet? Writing an 'interpretation' inevitably becomes a business of attempting to close the question with a unitary explanation, while wallowing in the ambiguity. *Hamlet* arouses and subverts the critical need to find 'real' or original reasons for things.² We

- 2 Clearly I am indebted to Derrida's analysis of Rousseau in *Of Grammatology* for these ideas of the 'dangerous supplement', and to his critique of the metaphysics of presence. This essay, however, is not intended as a deconstruction of *Hamlet* or *The Revenger's Tragedy*, but as an attempt to illuminate some of causes of the difficulties in interpretation that *Hamlet* presents.

are all latter-day Horatios, tempted into reporting his 'cause aright' (V. ii. 353), but can generally only do so by ignoring crucial pieces of contradictory evidence.

To take a typical example of this, with the 'discovery' of psychoanalysis and the unconscious at the beginning of the twentieth century, critics such as Ernest Jones³ provided a realistic psychological explanation to account for the apparent contradictions in Hamlet's behaviour that were largely avoided by the romantic critics.⁴ To do this, Jones privileged the role that Hamlet himself presents as supplementary: that is, the infamous 'antic disposition'. Jones explained Hamlet's delayed revenge by re-expressing Hamlet's madness in terms of Freudian repression. He achieved this by subverting the accepted order of things in the play, where an original Hamlet is perceived as sane, and only feigns madness (or perhaps, goes mad) in the course of events. Jones' explanation seemed to provide a neat clinical diagnosis that reconciled Hamlet's various aspects: his 'mad' actions, that are so confusing to other characters within the play, and his 'rational' inaction, so beloved of the Romantic critics. Jones literally writes off Hamlet's contradictions in terms of unconscious Oedipal desires, where the delay in killing Claudius, his mother's lover, is the expression of an original, 'mad', repressed desire for her. Hamlet must insist on the supplementary nature of his madness, because it represents the expression of his taboo desires: it therefore cannot be 'real', it must be taken as an act, as 'mad in craft' (III. iv. 201). His assumed madness thus disguises the moral danger of incestuous desire where lies the 'real' madness of his passions.

3 Ernest Jones, *Hamlet and Oedipus* (1949).

4 To Coleridge and Goethe, for example, Hamlet, as stage revenger, offered obvious dangers to their version of Hamlet the romantic philosopher. Thus they relegated the avenger to the extra role, supplementary to his 'true' nature, responsible for some of his more unpalatable activities, and not to be addressed.

Jones thus seems to have his bases covered. But the catch, for such critics wishing to report Hamlet's 'cause aright', is that Shakespeare, being pre-Freudian, could scarcely have intended such a representation. It denies the genius of the play. But Hamlet himself also seems to have very contradictory attitudes to his madness. In the midst of the mad intensity of the closet scene where Hamlet kills Polonius, Hamlet insists to his mother he is not 'essentially' mad, but only 'mad in craft'. By the end of the play, however, in an attempt to defer his blood guilt, he pleads to Laertes that it was only Hamlet's madness, and not Hamlet, that killed Polonius. In other words, when it comes time to gather sympathy for Hamlet the tragic hero, actions which are typical of the stage revenger are relegated to the supplementary role of madman. The contradictions again seem to arise out of the essential ambiguity of Hamlet's dramatic origins.

T. S. Eliot (following J. M. Robertson and critics of the 'Ur-Hamlet' school) seized on this generic duality to explain the play's problems by suggesting a literal duality in its literary origins, resulting in what Eliot regarded as the play's 'artistic failure'.⁵ Here, an older play, a typical revenge tragedy, is postulated as the original one, where madness and delays were part of a received plot which failed to provide an adequate 'objective correlative' for Shakespeare's more realistic presentation of Hamlet's passion. Here, if Hamlet contradicts himself, then Hamlet contradicts himself, since Shakespeare's genius has failed to convert a mere revenger, some sort of Hieronimo-like intellectual mess, into a Shakespearean tragic hero. On the one hand, Eliot seems to want to regard Shakespeare's tragedy as chronologically supplementary to the original revenge play, which, on the other hand, is artistically supplementary to Shakespeare's genius. (There are also tensions at a deeper level: *'Hamlet ... is full of some stuff the writer could not drag to light,*

5 T. S. Eliot, 'Hamlet and his problems', *The Sacred Wood* (Methuen, 1960), p. 98.

contemplate, or manipulate into art.⁶) Eliot resolves these problems of Hamlet's dramatic origin by living negatively with the contradictions, formalizing them as the play's 'artistic failure'.

Post-modern interpretations tend to live positively with these contradictions. If Hamlet feels he is in a play, but is uncertain of the genre, then like all humanity he is nothing but a product of words and victim of their uncertainties.⁷ Maurice Charney, for example, notes what he terms Shakespeare's 'Pirandellism', the way that the play *Hamlet* explores and plays with the fictive nature of reality, especially the 'fictions of passion'.⁸ That is, he posits a Shakespeare with the modernist, or indeed post-modernist, intention to reveal that what was once assumed to be 'human nature' is revealed to be nothing more than a literary structure or illusion, a Shakespeare manufacturing a Hamlet to reveal certain truths about how life imitates literature: how life defers to art.

The drama in Hamlet, I shall argue, is indeed that of deferral. But it is a two way deferral. That is, Hamlet's 'delay' is not an accidental occurrence that gets in the way of his 'real' nature, nor yet is it of his essence. Similarly, Hamlet is not just a pathetic victim of a textual problematic that surrounds him,⁹ but his problems are born out of an

6 *Ibid.* p. 60.

7 P. K. Ayers' essay, 'Reading, Writing and Hamlet', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 44 (1993), is an example of a more truly deconstructionist Hamlet, who with his 'Words, words, words' response to Polonius, is claimed to 'anticipate Derrida by some three and a half centuries ... announcing nothing less than a radical reformulation of conventional ways of looking at words, text, and the process of reading itself' (p. 424). Ayers privileges the interpretive activities of the characters in the play as its subject, rather than following the conventional approach which concentrates on the actions the words are attempting to interpret.

8 Maurice Charney, *Hamlet's Fictions* (New York, Routledge, 1988).

9 Here, I am not only thinking of the problems posed by the possible existence of the 'Ur-Hamlet' text, but also of the problems posed by

essential generic ambiguity. He is a stage revenger deferring to his tragedy, and a tragic hero condemned to defer to his revenge. The 'real' Hamlet (whatever that may currently constitute) can never finally stand up, because he is trapped in a becoming toward the contradictory ends of consciously seeking the role of, but dramatically evading the fate of, the stage revenger. As Bosola from *The Duchess of Malfi* opines, the actions and motivations of stage revengers tend to 'end in a mist'. In his attempt to justify the murder of Antonio, invoking a scarcely supported 'better nature' that has been denied, Bosola blames it upon the influence art seems to have had on his life: 'Such a mistake as I have often seen / In a play'.¹⁰ Such a 'mist', such 'mistakes' abound not only at the end of the archetypal revenge tragedies, Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* and Tourneur's *The Revenger's Tragedy*, but also at the end of *Hamlet* itself. But perhaps such 'mistakes' are not mistakes, nor can they be written off merely as the conventions of revenge tragedy. Perhaps the genre lives upon a certain self-subversive internal difference within itself, that these 'mistakes' serve to disguise. *Hamlet* is perhaps the exceptional example of a revenge tragedy that brings out the genre's self-subversive nature.

This can be seen by a detailed comparison with *The Revenger's Tragedy*. It is not often remarked, because it is not an important issue within *The Revenger's Tragedy*, that the idea of delay is a feature of Vindice's revenge just as it is of Hamlet's. As the Duke makes his final entrance to take fatal advantage of the 'country lady' provided by Vindice and his brother, Vindice remarks: 'now nine years vengeance crowd into a minute'.¹¹ It is thus clear that Vindice has been waiting nine years to take revenge on behalf of his Gloriana and his family fortunes. In contrast to Hamlet, whose revenge

the various quartos and the Folio, where the versions of his problems proliferate.

10 *The Duchess of Malfi* (New Mermaid), V. v. 93-5.

11 Cyril Tourneur, *The Revenger's Tragedy*, from *Three Jacobean Tragedies* (Penguin, 1965), III. v. 121). All subsequent references are to this edition.

has been waiting only a matter of months, Vindice never once accuses himself of being 'a dull and muddy-mettl'd rascal' nor a 'John-a-dreams'. Delay here is not a dramatized issue, it is a dramatic given. Eleanor Prosser points out that it is precisely the delayed nature of private revenge that renders it morally ambiguous. She remarks, taking an example from Anthony Copley's Elizabethan perspective, that revenge is regarded as 'blasphemy against God ... it begins in malice and ends in despair', while at the same time it can be seen as 'masculine and courageous'.¹² Prosser notes that it is only when revenge is taken immediately, when malice has no time to fester, that it is regarded as 'masculine'. If revenge is delayed, for whatever reason, the pure impulse toward revenge inevitably becomes consumed by supplementary impulses. As Bacon puts it: 'a man that studieth revenge keeps his own wounds green'.¹³ In the case of Vindice and Hamlet, their 'study' of revenge could be thought of as breeding malice and despair that morally destroys them. In other words, from the point of view of conventional morality, it is these supplementary emotions that represent the danger to the revenger, subverting any original impulse toward an 'honorable' revenge. Thus the very idea of the dramatization of revenge lives on the idea of its deferral: if it is carried out at once there is no dramatic conflict. If it is deferred, it has its own inbuilt differences of good and evil.

Vindice himself is clearly aware of this moral ambiguity in delayed revenge, and of the dangerous nature of these supplementary emotions. In his famous aside, after he has agreed to act as Lussurioso's pimp, he exclaims:

Now let me burst, I've eaten noble poison!
 We are made strange fellows, brother, innocent villains.
 (I. iii. 171-2)

12 Eleanor Prosser, *Hamlet and Revenge* (Stanford University Press, 1971), p. 33.

13 Francis Bacon, 'Of Revenge', *Essays* (Everyman, 1972), p. 14.

Revenge is regarded as a 'poison' because in its pursuance it has led Vindice to act as pimp to seduce his sister, but it is 'noble' in that it will end in the ridding of the world of evil. But Vindice seems to have no illusions that this paradoxical function of the revenger will ultimately excuse him. He is aware that in continuing the revenge he will 'Venture my lands in heaven upon their blood' (I. iii. 187). And indeed, to show how malice has so supplanted any original 'clean' impulse toward manly revenge, we may observe that not only does Vindice scarcely think of his original occasion for revenge after the opening speech of the play, but he actually seems to repudiate his affection, just as his revenge is about to be fulfilled:

And now methinks I could e'en chide myself
For doting on her beauty.

(III. v. 68)

Indeed, in *The Revenger's Tragedy* the reason for revenge is largely subsumed by the sport of its pursuance, the dressing up of Gloriana's skull to provide the ironically appropriate end for the Duke.¹⁴ As Hamlet puts it: 'the sport to have the enginer / Hoist with his own petar' (III. iv. 220-1). In short, the original purpose of revenge is treated by Tourneur as an unexamined 'given': the delay in revenge provides the dramatic space for Tourneur to follow his real interests, which are to revel in the sport of how it is to be done, exploiting the moral consequences of this sport and to display them in his now fatally damned hero, while making some moralistic points on the way about the vanity of worldly desire.

This suggests another way in which delay is an essential structural feature of revenge tragedy: in the element of suspense it provides. Revenge plays are largely melodramatic,

14 In this I do not wish to deny the moral point Tourneur is trying to make in this repudiation of Gloriana, regarding the vanity of worldly desires. Indeed, it ought to be regarded as a symptom of the despair to which his revenge had led him. A similar sense of worldly contempt and despair underlies Hamlet's rejection of Ophelia.

with larger-than-life villains surrounded by a corrupt court, with fragile innocent heroines and contrasting libertines and whores, but with morally ambiguous heroes. Usually initiated by the evidence of a ghost or a skull, the audience is hooked into another world of passion, intrigue and blood. In *The Revenger's Tragedy* the suspense depends on *how* Vindice will complete the revenge announced in the opening speech. In *Hamlet*, on the other hand, the question is whether or not Hamlet will do anything about his plausible, but villainous uncle. Shakespeare thus makes delay, the dangerous moral supplement of revenge, a major issue of the play. Hamlet talks about it endlessly. In this way, Shakespeare makes it seem as if the revenge were somehow supplementary to the real business of the play. Which is what? That is what not only the Hamlet industry, but also Claudius, Ophelia, Gertrude, Polonius all attempt to find out. In the end, Hamlet makes no plan at all to kill his uncle: he allows Claudius to arrange the circumstances of his own demise. Hamlet's only positive actions in this regard are to feign madness, ascertain guilt through his 'Mousetrap' play and accidentally kill Polonius, believing him to be Claudius. In all of this, Hamlet pursues no rational plan of revenge, but merely rouses suspicion, loses friends and gains enemies. For this reason, major critical attention has always focussed on those factors in Hamlet's character that render him atypical as a stage revenger. Yet from the perspective developed here, one could argue that the play gains its distinction from the exploitation of the dramatic qualities inherent in the idea of deferred revenge.

Perhaps the reason for this exploitation can be found in the need to defer Hamlet's blood-guilt as revenger. In the Rosencrantz and Guildenstern sub-plot, for example, Hamlet seems to experience none of the *angst* born of inaction, efficiently and gleefully disposing of the pair. The boast that their death is 'not near my conscience' (V. ii. 62) seems to be a gesture towards the moral ambiguity of revenger, while at the same time dismissing it. The possibility of guilt is not dwelt on, and indeed is deferred by the deliberate ambiguity of Horatio's mildly ironic: 'Why, what a king is this!'

suggesting the culpability of Claudius rather than Hamlet. Yet as the deaths of Hamlet's schoolfriends are announced immediately following his own, Horatio again defers Hamlet's guilt in the matter by omitting mention of his part in it, while excusing the king: 'He never gave commandment for their death' (V. ii. 393). Hamlet's moral culpability in this matter is again silently underlined, yet this time finally deferred as Horatio goes on to speak of 'accidental judgements' and 'purposes mistook/ Fall'n on th' inventors' heads' (V. ii. 401-4). The clear implication is that all the tragedy is a sign of the times, rather than the fault of the 'hero'. The contrast between the avowedly reluctant, yet demonstrably efficient revenger, in the two strands of plot, is one of the factors that has always rendered Hamlet's case so ambiguous and puzzling. Yet the deferral of guilt generated by the sub-plot is suggestive of the reason for the deferral of action in the main plot: to preserve a sense of Hamlet's nobility and innocence; to preserve Hamlet as part victim, rather than as inextricably implicated in evil like Bosola, or Vindice.

The sub-plots, moreover, reflect another feature of revenge in both *The Revenger's Tragedy* and *Hamlet*: they constitute a doubling, providing a supplementary revenge that brings out the essential evil in the nature of the role of stage revenger. In *The Revenger's Tragedy*, in the course of his primary revenge against the Duke, Vindice acquires a supplementary revenge against Lussurioso. From the dramatist's point of view, with the death of the Duke, he has nominally lost the plot. But with the fulfilment of his initial project, Vindice is not satisfied, he is left gloating and hungering for more royal blood:

The dukedom wants a hand, tho' yet unknown;
As fast as they peep up let's cut 'em down.

(III. v. 220-21)

The murder of the Duke has thus, arguably, murdered the 'innocent' side of his nature. This is demonstrated as the lines above but echo the sentiments of the evil Ambitioso: 'Drop one, here lies another' (V. i. 190). In the second half

of the play it becomes increasingly difficult to separate Vindice's pursuit of Lussurioso from that of the Duchess's idiot sons, Ambizioso and Supervacuo, and the Duke's illegitimate son, Spurio: all have in common a certain gleeful relish in the pursuit of blood. The supplementary revenge that doubles the original revenge, is thus redoubled in the revenges sought by the idiot half-brothers, and ends in almost farcical proportions, turning the play, ultimately, I believe, into a sort of black comedy. The audience's enjoyment derives from a continuing spectacle of diverse 'inventions falling on their inventor's heads'. As in comedy, each character receives his just deserts. Indeed, Vindice himself is not allowed a noble stage death; his tragic dimensions are finally arrested by Antonio, the new tyrant that his actions in his second round of revenge has ironically brought to power, as a common villain. Tourneur heavily underlines the ironies, allowing Vindice to prophesy and fulfil his own fate: 'time will make the murderer bring forth himself' (V. iii. 127). Vindice is made to underline the evil in his character by confessing to his crimes with pride: 'Twas somewhat witty carried, tho' we say it' (V. iii. 106). The supplementary revenge can thus be seen to be dangerous to the revenger, in that the developing of the evil side of his ambiguous nature leads not just to his downfall (which would be tragic), but to the downfall of his tragic possibilities, since there is little of any original 'good' remaining to be regretted at his final passing.

The situation in *Hamlet* has many parallels, but also many distinctions. In contrast to Vindice, by the middle of the play, Hamlet has patently failed in his revenge: indeed, he has just spared the king at prayers. But not from any high-minded Christian humility, like Charlemont in *The Atheist's Tragedy*, but because he does not believe revenge at this point will be sincere enough. Leaving aside for the moment the question as to whether this constitutes the 'real' reason, one could argue from the dramatist's point of view, that with a hero refusing to take revenge, Shakespeare avoided Tourneur's predicament with his all-to-successful revenger: he has *not* lost the plot. Yet his theatrical problem is similar. He has to

find something else for his hero to do till the consummation of his revenge. So Shakespeare pursued a similar tactic to Tourneur by providing a series of supplementary plots to occupy his hero until the end of the play. Primarily, this revolves around the accidental killing of Polonius, and its effect on his son and daughter, as well as the plot to hoist Rosencrantz and Guildenstern 'with their own petar'.

The murder of Polonius is telling: Shakespeare uses this, as Tourneur used his sub-plot, as the trigger that finally leads to his hero's downfall, but in such a way as to maximize the retention of Hamlet's tragic possibilities. By making the murder of Polonius accidental, and carried out in the heat of the moment, Shakespeare preserves Hamlet from the moral odium of being perceived by the audience as a cold-blooded murderer. This I believe to be a major consideration in painting Hamlet as the reluctant revenger from the 'rogue and peasant slave' soliloquy onward, which as we shall see, significantly, immediately follows upon the recount of the dark tale of Pyrrhus. Shakespeare thus preserves for Hamlet more of the 'innocent' and less of the 'villainous' nature of the revenger's character. Yet in that Hamlet does present himself as relatively indifferent to the killing ('Thou wretched, rash, intruding fool, farewell! I took thee for thy better' (III. iv. 35-6), Shakespeare shows him to be at least self-absorbed, if not heartless. He seems to have no insight into the effect this is likely to have on either Ophelia or Laertes, despite his own recent emotional experiences. In madness and the pursuit of revenge, the siblings reflect and double Hamlet's own behaviour.¹⁵ This murder, of course, ends up being dangerous to Hamlet, since he dies by Laertes' sword. Paradoxically, however, it is because Hamlet dies as victim of the underhand plot devised by Laertes and Claudius, that his tragic status is preserved and enhanced. He is even preserved from the ignominy of the cold-blooded murder of Claudius, as Claudius himself 'accidentally'

¹⁵ The parameters of the various doubles in *Hamlet* are explored at length in Anthony Miller's '*Hamlet: Mirrors of Revenge*', *Sydney Studies in English*, 11 (1985-6), 3-22.

arranges it so the revenging sword gets into his hands. In the end, even the guilt inherent in delayed revenge is deferred by the fact that Hamlet kills Claudius in a moment of manly, unpremeditated anger — in contrast to the confessed treachery of the underhand plot undertaken by Laertes to fulfil his own revenge. The whole end of the play, in other words, seems constructed to deflect attention from perceptions of Hamlet's revenge guilt. That which is dangerous in the role of revenger is elided in the final projection of Hamlet as a tragic hero.

One can view the thematic function of the sub-plots from a slightly different angle. They can be seen as functioning within the play to expand aspects of a particular individual's revenge to make some sort of general moral or philosophical point, expanding the revenger's significance to include taking on all that's 'rotten in the state'. In the case of *The Revenger's Tragedy*, the moral opprobrium of Vindice's wilful pursuit of murder is somewhat lessened by the realization that in his supplementary pursuit of the duke's sons, he is in fact amplifying what seems to be one of the dramatist's main thematic purposes, which is to portray a corrupt society receiving its just deserts. Vindice thus has a double dramatic function. He has his private reasons for revenge, but he also functions as the hand of God, the agent to 'Break ice in one place' so that 'it will crack in more' (IV. iv. 82). To state what is made obvious by his name, above his 'realistic' function of personal revenger, he carries the thematic function of acting as the personification of Vengeance. In *The Spanish Tragedy*, Vengeance stands outside the play, a *deus ex machina* who causes things to happen within it. Hieronimo, the revenger, has thus only his personal vengeance to carry out, and is perceived and pitied by the audience almost purely in terms of his loss and personal tragedy, ultimately being allowed the dignity of dying by his own sword. Vindice, on the other hand, is not only denied hero status as an individual, he is finally punished for his private murder. Yet we do not quite know what or how we are supposed to feel at the end of *The Revenger's Tragedy*: on the one hand, the dispatch of villains

and the moral triumph of Vindice's mother and sister (an element lacking in *Hamlet*) suggest order has been restored, while realistically, Antonio's attitude may also be interpreted as the beginning of a new reign of terror. Tourneur's realistic mode is undermined by his thematic mode; the private revenge plot by the supplementary generalized revenge plot. The audience does not know whether to laugh or cry, and perhaps must satisfy itself with cheering, which somewhat lessens the play's claim to the 'tragedy' in its title. Indeed, the audience is implicated in the play's moral ambiguities. Each time Vindice takes the audience into his confidence in the creation of some new plot for revenge, the audience's enjoyment in witnessing the writing of the plot, and then at the spectacle of its execution, involves it in the same moral ambiguity as the revenger.

As external evidence that Tourneur was aware of this unresolved ambiguity in the revenger, one could turn to Tourneur's other essay into the genre, *The Atheist's Tragedy*. In that play, the potential revenger Charlemont refuses the roles both of private revenger and that of acting as the hand of God in pursuing a more general public revenge. He chooses instead to look after his own lands in heaven, and wait for the hand of providence to strike down his, and God's adversary, the Atheist. But the result of this morally correct solution to the revenger's dilemma simply shifts the site of dramatic conflict from the hero into the villain. The drama of revenge becomes the drama of the Atheist's dawning remorse — a more successfully repentant Claudius at his prayers. Yet *The Atheist's Tragedy* also points out the dangers of perceiving Hamlet as too much of a reluctant revenger. The revenger who too successfully resists the temptations of revenge is in danger of losing his 'hero' status because of this lack of action. This danger is averted in *Hamlet*, because although Hamlet defers the assassination of his adversary, he does show himself as a man of action against Claudius' henchmen. Yet such action is never thought of as action by Hamlet, as if the concern for such sycophants was scarcely worthy of his heroic ambitions. Indeed, the 'How all occasions do inform against me'

speech, following soon upon the dispatch of Polonius, has the effect of deferring attention from his bungled revenging activities, even as he pines after the role of a heroic man of action such as Fortinbras.

Yet here again, the sub-plot in *Hamlet* may provide a clue to the reasons for this delay. We have seen how the supplementary plot of the murder of Lussurioso functioned to generalize Vindice's personal revenge, and render him as the personification of divine revenge. In the same way, the supplementary plots in *Hamlet*, the accidental killing of Polonius and its aftermath, and the sending to their ironic deaths of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, function to generalize Hamlet's discontent with the world. In as much as Hamlet is a disillusioned idealist (as evidenced from his vision of the nobility of man as 'the quintessence of dust' (II. ii. 323), these deaths are justified because they represent the demise of aspects of the world that are less than ideal. The killing of Claudius in the prayer-scene would have left Hamlet's revenge to be expressed only at the individual and private level. The delay allows him to pursue an arguably 'mad', more generalized project of a revenge against the world for not living up to his expectations. This can be observed in the third act, as he consigns Polonius to his fate as a meal for a 'convocation of politic worms' and harangues his mother on the improprieties of her hasty remarriage. And indeed, it is due to this supplementary generalized pursuit of revenge that Hamlet's case has been found to be most intriguing over the years: for Hamlet is never revered as the personification of vengeance, but rather as the representative type of disillusioned youth. While it will not do to say that Hamlet delays his killing of Claudius in order to personify disillusioned youth, it is not difficult to argue that to Hamlet, Claudius is but a symptom of what is 'rotten in the state of Denmark'). He is but a sign of the times:

The time is out of joint: O cursed spite,
That ever I was born to set it right!

(I. v. 204-5)

There is a general perception about Hamlet that there is more to him than a simple stage revenger, and thus the simple death of Claudius would not answer his needs. Indeed, as Hamlet argues in the prayer-scene, simple death is too good an end for Claudius. Although this statement is made for mistaken reasons at the time (namely, the thought that his prayers may save his soul), Shakespeare's dramatic irony could be taken as pointing out that Hamlet speaks more *truly*, in a general sense, than he knows. In his mistaken apprehension as to the direction of Claudius's thoughts, Hamlet is acknowledging that the secret, private murder of Claudius is less than he deserves: it would be a killing that would fail to put the time back in joint because there would be no public acknowledgement of its justice. It is in this sense that Claudius's reputation, at least, if not his soul, would fly to heaven, since no one but Hamlet knows of his guilt. The delay, then, if nothing else, allows the supplementary plot the time to develop so the murderer may reveal himself, and that which is rotten in Denmark be brought to light. Yet Hamlet, unlike Tourneur's Charlemont, does not express his reasons for delay in these righteous terms: paradoxically, he begins to express himself as a typical stage revenger:

And am I then revenged,
 To take him in the purging of his soul,
 When he is fit and season'd for his passage?
 No.
 Up sword, and know thou a more horrid hent.
 (III. iii. 87-91)

This suspended sentence on Claudius allows Shakespeare to steer a course between the vindictiveness of a Vindice and the idealistic inaction of a Charlemont, allowing an active role for Hamlet, fit for a 'hero', without forfeiting morality and sympathy by an excess of calculated, cold-blooded murder. Hamlet's 'delay', in other words, is used by Shakespeare to suspend the moral contradictions in an active revenger like Vindice, and the dramatic boredom of an inactive revenger like Charlemont.

Another important technique that seeks to suspend the moral ambiguity of the revenger, while allowing the luxury of morally dubious action, is the use of disguise. This functions to project the guilt of the revenger upon his other, his double: the corrupt Piato, in *The Revenger's Tragedy*, and the 'mad' Hamlet of *Hamlet*.

In *The Revenger's Tragedy*, it could be argued that Tourneur sought to contain the doubleness of the revenger's function by doubling Vindice's personality. If, as Vindice proclaims, he is indeed an 'innocent villain' (I. iii. 171), one could argue that his disguise as Piato, as Lussurioso's pimp, is somehow intended to perform and take the blame for the villainous part of the revenger's role, while the 'real' Vindice remained innocent of incestuous seduction and murder. In his final speech, having just boasted of his murder of the Duke, Vindice brings forth the speech of Piato as if speaking of another:

Now I remember too, here was Piato
 Brought forth a knavish sentence once:
 No doubt, said he but time
 Will make the murderer bring forth himself.
 'Tis well he died he was a witch.

(V. iii. 123-8)

The implication is that if Piato was the 'witch', then Vindice is less of a devil. Piato is clearly conceived as a devil-disguise, not only in terms of his accomplished activities, but also in terms of his role as a tempter. Speaking of his need to seduce his sister for Lussurioso, Vindice justifies it thus:

It would not prove the meanest policy
 In this disguise to try the faith of both;

(I. iii. 178-9)

In this role of tempter-Piato, Vindice claims (only too truly as it turns out) he is to 'forget my nature'. But dramatically, this, it seems, is exactly what the audience is required to do as it witnesses the trial of Castiza and the disposal of the Duke with a growing sense of glee, and a willing suspension of the audience's sense of moral judgement. This is accompanied

by a willing suspension of disbelief as it is also asked to accept that even his own mother and sister are unable to penetrate Vindice's disguise. In the end, therefore, the doubling of Vindice as Piato creates a sort of fantasy world, where revenge can take place as a sort of ironic sport of the gods.

One of the charms of *The Revenger's Tragedy* is the playfulness of Tourneur's use of disguise. As if to underline Vindice's dual role of private and public revenger, he brings back Vindice in his supplementary revenge against Lussurioso disguised as himself, Vindice, the discontented country lawyer. Yet this is ironic, for in this round of revenge Vindice is less himself than when he was pursuing his private revenge as Piato. Indeed, for 'Vindice-disguised-as-Vindice', we should translate 'Vindice-disguised-as-Vengeance', observing how Tourneur playfully brings out the generalized nature of this round of revenge, with Vindice functioning as the avenging hand of God, dramatized in the masque of the *danse macabre*, the dance of death to which all are subject. This is Tourneur's ultimate revelation, the one to which he brings both Vindice and the audience to, by the ironic unveiling of masks and disguises at the end of the play. Thus when he finally stands before Antonio — waiting like a schoolboy before the new headmaster to receive his just reward — the futility of temporal desire is the reality exposed as the mask of Vindice the country lawyer is unfolded to reveal Piato, that is, unfolded to reveal the 'real' Vindice and his 'real' moral guilt. The various disguises have functioned to defer this realization, from both Vindice and the audience. The shock of Antonio's judgement, in turn, functions to suspend Vindice's heroic status: it makes the moral point that his murderous actions are not to be emulated. This intention is also reflected in the ending, where Vindice's death is deferred beyond the play's conclusion. This suspends the possibility of a 'tragic' status for Vindice when the audience is denied the chance to feel sorry for him in the spectacle of his death (in contrast, say, to Hieronimo or Hamlet). In *The Revenger's Tragedy*, then, we can observe how disguise serves to delay the recognition of Tourneur's

final scene of moral revelation, just as the doubling of the revenge plot serves to generalize that of private or individual revenge.

From another point of view, one can also see how these doublings and disguises serve to underline the theatricality of Tourneur's stage. By emphasizing Vindice's staginess, Tourneur projects the moral purposes of his drama and undermines any realistic expectations the audience may have cherished. Hamlet, on the other hand, begins his play as a (relatively) realistically portrayed individual, who is unexpectedly asked to take on the role of revenger by his father's ghost. Yet his first impulse, on being asked to take on the role of revenger, is the same as Vindice's (who, remember, has been thinking it out for nine years): he promises he will adopt what can only be regarded as a disguise — his famous 'antic disposition'. The eternal question has always been, why? And further, is the 'disposition' only an act, or does it somehow become actual?

One facile, yet profound, suggestion is that Hamlet affects madness because it is traditional in revenge tragedy. It is one of the so-called conventions that these tragedies of the blood in some way result in, or from, madness. The is facile because it suggests that there is no 'realistic' explanation to be found, except perhaps, as Eliot opines, in Shakespearean incompetence. It is profound, however, in the senses that the adoption of the role of madness may be understood in terms of Hamlet seeking the role of some traditional stage revenger such as Kyd's Hieronimo. The problem is, nevertheless, that the claim that Hamlet feigns madness merely because he feels that this is what a revenger ought to do, is supported by no direct evidence from the text. Hieronimo went mad from genuine grief, and indeed it is the expression of his grief and madness that brings an otherwise flat play to life for the audience; Hamlet on the other hand, claims he is not really mad, but 'only in craft' (III. iv. 201), and from the outset his madness is presented only as an 'antic disposition' (I. v. 188). At the beginning, then, his madness is staged; it is his supplementary personality. It is proclaimed initially at the

end of the strange, but stagey, cellarage scene. Here the stagey nature of the Ghost himself is hinted at when Hamlet jocularly refers to him as 'old mole' (I. v. 179) and 'boy' (I. v. 166). One explanation for this theatrical self-consciousness could indeed be that Shakespeare has taken a somewhat Pirandellian attitude to the revenge genre. If this were the case, then indeed it may be interpreted as indirect evidence that Hamlet's madness begins from a preconception that stage revengers must 'act' mad. Yet Hamlet's contrived madness seems to be used by Shakespeare to differentiate him from the actual madness of a stage revenger, such as Hieronimo, whose intellect dies in his grotesque misapprehensions. Hamlet's 'antic disposition', on the other hand, allows him to give witty voice to satirize his society's humbug as well as the humanistic aspirations of Renaissance man, revealing them to be nothing but 'the quintessence of dust'. Indeed, these concerns, these pale casts of thought, serve to distract not only Hamlet, but the audience from his role as revenger. If it is the project of the 'sane' Hamlet to remove Claudius, it seems to be the project of the 'mad' Hamlet to revenge himself upon the world at large, including himself as a 'dull and muddy-mettl'd rascal', for being less than ideal, for behaving less than nobly or heroically. Hamlet's madness, in short, seems inextricably linked to his procrastination, which as we have discussed, defines Hamlet's difference from the role of stage revenger.

It is interesting that the notion of Hamlet the procrastinator first arises in the 'rogue and peasant slave' soliloquy that is delivered immediately upon the presentation of Pyrrhus' version of the revenger. Conventionally, the tears of the player over the sufferings of Hecuba are taken to be the main dramatic point of the story of Pyrrhus that Hamlet requests. This follows the critical gloss immediately offered by Hamlet. Yet from another point of view, this poem and Hamlet's gloss could be viewed as a distraction from the main action, to give the audience the impression that enough stage time has elapsed to give credibility to Hamlet's self-accusation of being a 'John-a-dreams' (II. ii. 578) that introduces the new role of procrastinator. Yet as Miller and

Prosser point out, the player's narration of the tale of the revenger Pyrrhus really provides a 'mirror of revenge' for Hamlet. From the point of view established in this essay, however, Pyrrhus could be regarded as a role model silently offered by Shakespeare of the stage revenger. I say silently, because as in the case of Hamlet's madness, no direct explanation is offered of why Hamlet requests these lines, nor is any direct comparison made to link Pyrrhus to Hamlet. It is one of the play's great elisions, considering its potential thematic relevance, and indeed, considering that Hamlet claims it is 'the one speech in't I chiefly loved' (II. ii. 458). Why does he love it? Is it because Pyrrhus presents him as an ideal revenger? If so, why does Hamlet say nothing more about him? Or is it because Pyrrhus presents him, and the audience, with all the negatives of the stage revenger, painted in

total gules, horridly trickt
With the blood of fathers, mothers, daughters, sons.
(II. ii. 469-70)

This could be regarded as a reasonable description of Hamlet by the end of the play, if one considers he is directly or indirectly responsible for the deaths of Polonius, Ophelia, Laertes, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Despite the fact that most of these deaths are unintended by Hamlet, the same may be argued for the 'collateral damage' caused by the Trojan war. Again, we are informed how Pyrrhus makes

malicious sport
In mincing with his sword her [Hecuba's] husband's limbs
(II. ii. 524-5)

This could be regarded as a reasonable description of Hamlet's dispatch of Claudius, or, indeed, his joyful anticipation of the dispatch of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern:

O, 'tis most sweet
When in one line two crafts directly meet.
(III. iv. 224-5)

If Shakespeare did not wish us to make the direct comparison between Hamlet and Pyrrhus, why is the speech included in the play? Yet why is no direct comment made, when in many ways Hamlet seems to aspire to the Pyrrhus model of the stage revenger? He says he

should 'a' fatted all the regions
Kites with this slave's offal.

(II. ii. 589-90)

He spares Claudius so that he may kill him during some act

That has no relish of salvation in't —
Then trip him, that his heels may kick at heaven

(III. iii. 95-6)

Again, he admires the mindless war-monger Fortinbras and enjoys the fabrication of the Rosencrantz and Guildenstern plot.

We have already noted Tourneur's difficulties in maintaining for his hero, Vindice, the role of tragic hero that the title of his play promises. We have also noted how Hamlet's delayed revenge helps him to retain some of the audience's pity, and hence the possibility of a tragic quality. The suggestion, therefore, could be that with Pyrrhus, Shakespeare deliberately presents the audience with the evil side of the stage revenger, and then ignores it, indeed, emphasizes Hamlet as a man of inaction, precisely to defer the perception of Hamlet as such a revenger. This silently underlines the difference between Hamlet and the stage revenger. Hamlet the prevaricator would thus assume the significance of a role that defers the guilt of the revenger. Why? To maintain his tragic possibilities. Hamlet the tragic hero lives in a suspense between his possibilities for action, and his denial of them. To have murdered Claudius in the third act, for example, could have murdered these potentialities, the cowardly nature of a stab in the back and its secrecy, constituting the private and public murder of the nobility of his character. But it is not simply the loss of tragic possibility that Shakespeare would have been faced with. It

would have diminished the play's entire intellectual dimension into another breathless bloodbath. In the end, the role of prevaricator/procrastinator fuses with the role of madman to allow Shakespeare to establish the dramatic space to develop Hamlet's 'mad' project of revenging himself intellectually upon a less than ideal world. This can be seen if we look in detail at Hamlet's treatment of Ophelia.

Hamlet begins the play with a particularized grievance against his mother for her over-hasty remarriage. But Hamlet does not tell her that this is the main reason for his melancholy at this point. Gertrude and Claudius conclude that unreasonable, but not insane, grief accounts for it. The audience, however, gets the real reasons for Hamlet's grief in his first soliloquy. It is here, in the privacy of public declaration, Hamlet makes his first 'mad' generalization about women. Expanding from the particular case of his mother to include all of female kind, he proclaims:

Frailty, thy name is woman - (I. ii. 146)

I say 'mad', yet few have taken this fairly common transition, a personal case of disillusionment generalized to a *contemptus mundi*, to be so.

By the third act, however, after Hamlet has characterized himself as a 'dull and muddy-mettl'd rascal', and underlined his role as procrastinator in the 'To be or not to be' soliloquy, Hamlet's generalization about the frailty of women is more likely to be regarded as 'mad' as he takes out his revenge against the gender upon the innocent Ophelia. She is condemned in Hamlet's eyes, not for what she has done, but for her potentiality as a 'breeder of sinners' (III. i. 129). The 'madness' of this revenge can be seen from several angles. Firstly, Hamlet seems to have no insight into the distress he causes Ophelia in this and the following scene, and later, no insight into the effect the death of her father is likely to have on her. This is ironic, since Hamlet, above all, should have some insight into what the murder of a father means. Ophelia's madness is another silent underlining of a difference within Hamlet: he does not

go mad like Ophelia or Hieronimo with grief. He does not lose his power of ratiocination. Indeed, he becomes almost hyper-rational in his suggestion that Ophelia avoid being a 'breeder of sinners' by taking herself to a nunnery. Despite this hyper-rationality, however, the sanity of this extreme conclusion is suspect, like those of Swift's mad Laputan projectors. This is reflected in the tone of his utterance to Ophelia in the 'nunnery' scene, as he rants 'Get thee to a nunnery' repeated in various forms, five times. The extreme solution, in itself is not 'mad', nunneries having been a respectable escape from a less than ideal world by ascetics since the beginning of the Christian era. In this scene, however, Ophelia, at least, perceives it as such: 'O, what a noble mind is here o'erthrown!' (III. i. 158), she exclaims upon his exit. Perhaps she is disturbed, too, by what many have regarded as the bawdy pun in Hamlet's suggestion, that 'nunnery' is a slang word for a brothel, implying that women are inevitably harlots. Yet, in all this, Hamlet is not 'acting' madly at all: he is expressing exactly what he thinks, his generalized position against women. From this line of argument, then, one can see how time and again Hamlet uses his supplementary 'antic disposition' to express his actual feelings, which those around him, for various reasons, perceive as both mad and dangerous. And this reveals the danger of the role to him. His 'madness' gives him the scope to live out his intellectually generalized position, regardless of its cost to individuals. His 'mad' attitudes can now be seen to have been a part of him from the start of the play, predating his assumption of the 'disposition'. Yet if he has always been mad, the audience can only hypothesize on the nobility of mind that must have existed before the play began, and it becomes ever more difficult to sympathize with its downfall since the audience has never witnessed it in a state of grace upon the stage.

The killing of Polonius is another manifestation of the 'disposition'. Hamlet, it seems, has always scorned Polonius as a 'foolish prating knave'. His 'madness' allows him to give expression to that scorn. His death is thus made to seem

almost the death of something sub-human, certainly sub-Claudian, as scarcely worthy of attention:

Thou wretched, rash, intruding fool, farewell!
I took thee for thy better.

(III. iv. 35-6)

He quickly dismisses the matter, instructing his mother: 'Leave wringing of your hands ...'. It takes Hamlet a while to realize the implications of his action, repenting some one hundred and forty lines later. But Hamlet does not dwell on the repentance, regarding Polonius' death as heaven's punishment on himself, for which, he predicts in true revenger fashion, he 'will answer well' (III. iv. 188). In all of this, Hamlet does not seem to be acting particularly 'madly': he has made a mistake which he regrets for what mainly seem self-interested motives. Indeed, he has tried to perform an action worthy of a revenger, which he has continually informed us, is his main project in the play.

What then are we to make of Hamlet's final prevarication to Laertes when he tries to excuse his murder of Polonius on the ground of 'madness':

Was't Hamlet wronged Laertes? Never Hamlet.
If Hamlet from himself be ta'en away,
And when he's not himself, does wrong Laertes,
Then Hamlet does it not, Hamlet denies it.
Who does it then? His madness. If't be so,
Hamlet is of the faction that is wronged;
His madness is poor Hamlet's enemy.

(V. ii. 232-8)

This specious argument is certainly typical of Hamlet the procrastinator/prevaricator. From the perspective developed earlier, its immediate dramatic function seems to be to defer Hamlet's guilt towards the play's tragic conclusion, make him seem more 'sinned against than sinning'. It also seems to be insisting on the supplementary nature of the 'antic disposition', with the clear implication that the 'real', sane, Hamlet is back with us, ready to heroically face his fate. But now it seems, the 'disposition' was no put-on: it was the real

thing. And if it cannot be used to acquit him of the crime, it at least obtains forgiveness. Laertes says: 'I am satisfied in nature ...' (V. ii. 244). Laertes goes on to publicly name the king as author of the plot which has led to the Queen's death and has wounded him. Hamlet, poisoned, is immediately perceived as the victim of the plot between Claudius and Laertes. From the public point of view, Hamlet is finally given a chance to avoid the moral ambiguities of delayed revenge. As soon as Claudius' guilt is public he at once slays him, indeed, as if his 'native hue' always had been 'resolution'. Thus literally, Hamlet's procrastination has served to defer the guilt of the revenger, and in this way, the play *Hamlet* finally eludes the revenge genre. Far from being led off to an ignominious fate, like Vindice, Hamlet is allowed finally to adopt the heroic stance of an Achilles whose exploits will live on in story. He instructs Horatio:

Absent thee from felicity awhile,
And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain,
To tell my story.

(V. ii. 362-4)

Thus Horatio is instructed to validate the idea of 'this harsh world' — the non-ideal world — against which Hamlet has been struggling since the first act. Which he duly does. Hamlet is thus finally perceived as a hero fighting against a corrupt world, which up to this point, only he has perceived.

However, as we have seen, there was nothing particularly mad in the killing of Polonius, except what was always 'mad' in Hamlet — his contempt for anything less than ideal. His excuse of 'madness' to defer guilt for the murder of Polonius does not hold up in court. Although Laertes forgives him 'in nature', yet 'in terms of honour' he 'stands aloof'. Although forgiven, Hamlet dies, technically, as the 'villain' in Laertes' revenge tragedy. Thus, in this part of the plot, divine justice is satisfied. Yet in comparison with *The Revenger's Tragedy* — where it is just deserts all round — this is the very point that the whole end of *Hamlet* seems designed to deny. If the main plot of *Hamlet* is regarded as a revenge drama deferred to enable tragedy to emerge, the

Laertes/Polonius sub-plot is a perfectly consummated revenge drama illustrating all the games of the genre of 'purposes mistook/ Fall'n on th' inventors heads'. Yet this perfected double (so to speak) supplements the main plot perfectly, providing a neat demonstration of the corrupt world which Hamlet has always projected in his 'madness', but has never been able to objectify: which is precisely what has constituted his 'madness' as he wrought revenge for it on innocent bystanders like Ophelia and Polonius. In his final speech, as he names Fortinbras the heir to the kingdom he never had, he undoes what seems to have been the main political achievement of his father. It seems indeed as if the achievements of man are nothing but 'the quintessence of dust', and death has befallen sinners and potential 'breeders of sinners' alike. If 'the rest is silence', the implication is there is no divine justice. This is the tragic realization to which Hamlet has driven the world.

The extent to which Hamlet approaches and evades the role of stage revenger, symptomatic of his essential ambiguity, may now be clear. His famous 'delay' is used to defer revenge until it is performed in such a way as to defer guilt as incurred by Vindice in his murder of the Duke. Yet this deferral, this evasion of the role of revenger, is performed against Hamlet's expressed desire. Pyrrhus and Laertes in the text represent doubled versions of this desire, expressive of the blood-lust and treachery inherent in the role. As they, and Vindice, exemplify, such aspects tend to be destructive of nobility of character, hence by extension, the fate of generic tragedy which Shakespeare had in store for Hamlet. Yet Hamlet is not an inactive revenger like Tourneur's Charlemont, which would have been equally destructive of tragedy, since it would have robbed Hamlet of the heroic side of his character (for which he admires Fortinbras). In his supplementary role of 'madman' as we have seen, Hamlet is anything but inactive, not only as director of the play to 'catch the conscience of the king', but more dubiously, accounting for Polonius, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and less directly, Ophelia. Indeed, the final act of *Hamlet*, while not exactly a whitewash, addresses these

results of his 'madness' by having Hamlet assert his love for Ophelia transcends that of 'forty thousand brothers'; by having him claim that the deaths of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are 'not near my conscience'; by obtaining Laertes' forgiveness 'in nature' for Polonius' death on the excuse of madness; and finally, most tellingly, by having Horatio tell his story 'aright' — that is, from Hamlet's perspective — in the final remarkable elision, as the deaths of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are announced by the ambassador. Rather than announcing who is responsible, Horatio provides the evasive answer that Claudius 'never gave commandment for their death'.

This final, telling, suspended accusation reveals the manner in which the revenge tragedy genre lives with difference within itself. As we have seen, in the case of Tourneur's *Vindice*, the 'revenge' and 'tragic' elements tend to work against each other as far as perceptions of the heroic agent are concerned. Indeed, in the case of Webster's *Bosola*, one could even argue that his final revenge against the evil brothers and consequent death, far from constituting a 'tragic fall' of any description, in fact embodies a moral elevation, and a release from his prisonhouse of infamies. On the surface, Kyd's *Hieronimo* might seem an exception to this by being a revenger whose fall is perceived as pitiable, tragic and, indeed, morally excusable. The problem here, though, is that *Hieronimo*'s final revenge is wreathed in textual difficulty, which perhaps reflects its realistic difficulties — where such a hitherto pitiable victim should have the wherewithal to arrange such a strange final plot. Yet *Hieronimo*'s pitiable madness also provides an instructive contrast to Hamlet's methodical madness. Had Hamlet been painted as an unambiguous victim, like *Hieronimo* (or, indeed, Ophelia within the play) and driven mad as a result of it, the ultimate danger represented by this supplementary role would have been the possible forfeiture of the heroic possibilities of action, which Hamlet's killings remind us of, even as the text attempts, for other reasons, to render them invisible. This then, is the way in which the revenge genre desires, yet evades generic tragedy.

Hamlet's delay and procrastination, therefore, have more to do with his author's dramatic problems rather than his own psychological problems. But does this mean that Hamlet as a stage presence, or *Hamlet* as a stage drama, is torn apart by these internal differences as suggested by Eliot? I would suggest not, and say rather it is living with these differences that is the cause of *Hamlet's* sparkle.

I have suggested, for example, that Shakespeare caused Hamlet to spare Claudius at his prayers in order to preserve the villain so that Hamlet may constitute a more noble presence when he finally does kill him. I have not suggested, however, that this is Hamlet's reason. Shakespeare, if you like, simply invents the 'occasions' that 'inform' against Hamlet's revenge. But Hamlet is always quite clear that he wants revenge. He spares Claudius, as he says, that Claudius' soul may not be saved. It is Shakespeare's irony that reveals this reasoning as faulty. Hamlet may rail against himself for squandered opportunities and inaction, but his author is preserving him for a greater good. The pay-off, for Hamlet, is that his frustratingly deferred revenge elevates it from a petty, private affair to the public revelation of all that is 'rotten in the state of Denmark', and himself, from a petty revenger to the heroic stature that he himself envisaged.