

The Theme of Revenge In Cyril Tourneur's The Revenger's Tragedy

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Abstract: The word "revenge" is known all over the world from remote periods till nowadays either from radio, movies, people, or other sources. Because people cannot always take vengeance, they like to see it played out in the forms of entertainment such as books, films, and plays; and Tourneur's plays are prominent in this province.

In most of the plays written by Jacobean dramatists there is always some act of revenge and Tourneur's The Revenger's Tragedy (1606-1607) is no exception. Since revenge is the major theme of The Revenger's Tragedy, the study is an attempt to discuss this theme in this play.

The study deals with the definition of revenge, its features, and Seneca's influence on Jacobean revenge writers in general. Then, it shows the cases Tourneur chooses to present the theme of revenge in The Revenger's Tragedy. Finally, the study sheds light on the consequences of revenge and its effects on the human nature on the one hand, and its effects on the transformation of the nature of the characters of the play on the other hand.

The study ends with Notes and a Bibliography.

The theme of revenge was popular in the Jacobean drama because "it touched important questions of the day: the social problems of personal honour and the survival of feudal lawlessness; the political problem of tyranny and resistance; and the supreme question of providence, with its provocative contrasts between human vengeance and divine."¹

Revenge means a desire inside an injured person to retaliate against his injurer without consideration to or respect for law and religion, i.e. it is "blood asking for blood".² In many Jacobean plays, revenge is conceived of as the duty of the injured to defend himself and his family by restoring honour without knowing that revenge decreases rather than increases honour because honour is something noble and cannot be a basis or a cause of something mean as the desire of revenge is³. In this case, the revenger is moved also by a sense of sacred duty and not only by passion, malice, or hatred for some personal injury.

In all revenge plays; first and foremost, a crime is committed and for various reasons laws and justice cannot punish the crime doers. So, the injured takes law into his hands and goes through with the revenge in spite of everything. Then, the revenger has a period of doubt whether he can have his vengeance or not which usually involves tough and complex planning. Finally, he decides to have his vengeance. Other features that are typical in revenge plays are the appearance of the ghost to get the revenger to go through with the deed, bloody deeds, intrigues, insanity, high melodrama, and the death of the revenger and sometimes the death of his accomplice at the moment of success or even during the course of revenge.

Revenge plays originally stemmed from the Greeks who wrote and performed the first organized plays. After the Greeks came the Roman philosopher and playwright Lucius Annaeus Seneca (4 B.C. - A.D. 65), who had a great influence on all Jacobean revenge writers.

The Senecan model presents a story of bloody revenge, occasioned by the murder or rape of a person whose near relatives (fathers, mothers, sons, sisters, or brothers) vow by sacred oath to revenge the atrocity. The revenger must proceed with caution since his enemy is cunning, strong, and ruthless. The revenger becomes mad or feigns madness to cover his intent. He becomes more and more ruthless and unjust himself the moment he moves towards his goal of vengeance. At the

same time, he is hesitant whether he goes on in his vengeance or leaves it to heaven because vengeance is religiously forbidden. The revenger may see the ghost of the person who urges him to have revenge. Sometimes, he may employ the device of a play within the play as a means to accomplish his aims. The play ends in a bloodbath with the revenger's confession⁴. This model inspired all revenge writers in all ages.

The two masters of the revenge play are: Thomas Kyd, the pioneer, and William Shakespeare, who perfected this pattern. Closely allied to them is Cyril Tourneur with his tragedy, The Revenger's Tragedy. There is no exact date of his birth, but it is said that the birth happened between 1570 and 1580, and that his death was in 1626⁵.

The Revenger's Tragedy was published in 1606-1607. It is set somewhere in Italy. That is why the names of its characters are Italian or derived from Italian words. The meanings of their names reflect their nature: Lussurioso, lust; Spurio, a bastard; Amitioso, ambitious; Spurvaco, Superfluous; Vindice, revenge; Gratiana from grace; and Castize from chaste⁶. The world of the play is wicked, almost beyond belief, in which not only evil controls everything but, more alarmingly, morality is subverted by the destruction of what is good. In the centre of this world stands Vindice like the figure of death itself⁷. The theme is revenge and punishment, and the action moves swiftly, clearly, and with intensity.

The Revenger's Tragedy, as its title implies, is a tragedy caused by a revenger, who is Vindice. The question which is posed is: why does Vindice avenge and make this tragedy? It is not amazing that it is for the sake of a woman, Gloriana who, as presented in the play in the form of a skull, has a central role in provoking Vindice to seek revenge, which is the theme of the play.

The play opens with Vindice holding the skull of his beloved and promising to have revenge upon the Duke who killed her because she was virtuous, chaste, and refused to submit to his lust. So, Vindice's aim is to return the offence to

the Duke. From the first lines of the play, which are said by Vindice, we have an idea about its characters:

Duke; royal lecher; go, grey-haired adultery;
And thou his son, as impious steep'd as he;
And thou his bastard, true-begot in evil;
And thou his duchess, that will do with devil.
Four excellent characters.
(I, i, 1-6)⁸

From these lines one knows that corruption spreads among the royal family. Also, lust and adultery are prevalent among its members, for the father, who is supposed to be a symbol of honour and chastity, is an adulterer and a murderer. Vindice uses the skull of Gloriana as a prop to authorize his revenge and violent action. Gloriana, in this case, is not just a woman, but a “signifier who confirms Vindice’s central, dominant, and meaningful position”⁹. Vindice is obsessed with her. Even his identity is affected by the overwhelming presence of this female power which makes him enter the Duke’s world disguised as Piato, though “he has no ambitions to usurp the ducal seat, and he believes himself to be a good man and a virtuous revenger.”¹⁰ This means that Vindice seeks justice in an unjust society.

Vindice succeeds in achieving his revenge by planning a trap with his brother, Hippolitio, to murder the old Duke, because of what he has done to Vindice’s beloved. He exploits the Duke’s trust to bring a beautiful woman. Vindice brings the skull of his beloved dressed up and masked as a living woman with its poisoned lips, so that the Duke will be poisoned the moment he kisses the lips of the skull. Vindice’s great love for Gloriana is shown when he kills the Duke in the same manner in which the Duke killed his beloved:

This very

skull,

Whose mistress the duke poison'd, with
this drug,

The mortal curse of the earth, shall be
reveng'd,

In the like strain, and kiss the lips to death.

(III, v,

103-107)

It is obviously grotesque and ludicrous, but at the same time it is like a joke which makes the action seem comic, as the Duke prepares to enjoy himself with a woman whom Vindice has promised to bring for him¹¹. Vindice extends his revenge by showing the Duke, as he is dying, how the Duchess betrays him with his own son, Spurio, and this means that Vindice is not satisfied with only poisoning him. The significance of poisoning here is that its results are like those of disease, so it is a fitting death for an adulterer and a murderer¹².

This Scene, Scene v of Act III, is the core of the whole play. It illustrates that even if an earthly law is corrupt, there is "an unbribed everlasting law"¹³, which is pure. Paradoxically, even at her death, Gloriana's character refuses to fade out. She is remote from the action, but she is roaming over it like a black shadow. She provokes Vindice's nostalgic events. And this is the main reason behind the Duke's murder.

Actually, the Duke is murdered twice. The first time is by the poisoned lips of the skull, and the second is by the betrayal of his Duchess with his bastard son, Spurio. The second one is mortal. It is stronger than the first. The Duke endures poison, but cannot endure the betrayal of his wife: "O, kill me not with that sight!" (III, v, 191). In other words, the Duchess indirectly participates in killing the Duke. By doing this, she fulfils her revenge upon the duke without realizing that.

The Duchess, from the beginning of the play, threatens to have revenge upon the Duke, because he does not pardon her youngest son, Junior Brother, who is executed for having raped Antonio's wife. The Duchess weeps and kneels for her son to be pardoned, but in vain. Therefore, she tempts Spurio with

money and jewels, because Spurio is her instrument of vengeance, so that her “vengeance shall reach high” (I , ii, 177) though, at the same time, she really loves him: “ he whom my heart points unto ; / His bastard son, but my love’s true-begot” (I, ii, 110-111).

If Vindice is avenger of good, the Duchess, in this case, is the avenger of evil. Simultaneously, Spurio is the avenger of evil. He is thinking of having revenge upon the Duke, who is responsible for Spurio being a bastard. So, if Spurio had not wanted to have revenge upon his father, he would not have accepted the temptation of the Duchess, especially as he hates her and finds in her temptation his chance of vengeance: “step-mother, I consent to thy desires,/ I love thy mischief well, but I hate thee” (I, ii, 193-194).

We can see that Vindice is not the only revenger in the play, but that there is a number of avengers which makes the play a tragedy of revengers¹⁴.

The role of the Duchess in this play is not only that of a revenger, but a provoker of vengeance also. Spurio is motivated by her to have revenge upon his father. Human and family ties are not binding any more. The Duchess breaks the holy knot of marriage. She co-operates with Spurio to have revenge upon her husband by making an incestuous relationship. This justifies her banishment as a kind of punishment at the end of the play.

The Duchess is a typical example of a vicious, faithless, and revengeful woman in Renaissance drama. She reflects a pattern of women (in real life) who defied the conventions and traditions of their society and followed their whims and lusts, thinking that it was a kind of freedom they looked for. Castiza is perfectly her opposite.

Castiza reflects the influence on Tourneur by the Puritans’ doctrine of “chaste marriage” and their attitudes toward female chastity .This is illustrated by Castize’s and Gratiana’s reaction to the news about Antonio’s wife. They are shocked as they hear that Antonio’s wife was raped by Junior Brother. Castiza’s reply: “Royal blood monster, he deserves to

die / If Italy had no more hopes but he” (I, i, 112-113) shows, as her name also indicates, that she is chaste and virtuous. She considers chastity as the soul of woman.

With the death of the Duke, Vindice is supposed to have achieved his aim. But we see that he wants to continue his role as a revenger to get rid of the other members of the royal family. At this point Vindice turns to be a villain. The first member of the royal family Vindice decides to have revenge upon is Lussurioso, the luxurious son. He is, as his name implies, as lustful as his father is. His misfortune makes him trust Piato, who is Vindice in disguise, to bring him a chaste woman. Lussurioso does not merely want woman, but chastity itself. This strange lust or desire was the obsession of the seventeenth and eighteenth century in Britain¹⁵.

When Vindice knows that Lussurioso wants to prostitute his sister, Castiza, he is shocked. He is afraid that his tragic story may be repeated. This situation provokes him to have revenge upon Lussurioso in order to protect Castiza’s chastity. So, Castiza’s role in the play is provocation. Because of her, Vindice agrees to play the role of a pander in order to test her chastity. He feels happy when she refuses his request to be one of Lussurioso’s mistresses: “Tell him my honour shall have a rich name / When several harlots shall share his with shame” (II, i, 38-39).

Consequently, Vindice turns to test his mother, and he is happy thinking that his mother will reject his request and dismiss him like Castiza, but he is shocked when he sees that his mother has lost the natural feeling of a mother for her daughter and agrees to prostitute her daughter. This proves the frailty of Gratiana and emphasizes Lussurioso’s idea that women are changed “Into white money” (II, ii, 28).

In contrast to the mother is Castiza. She is the incarnation of chastity, who displays a candid and pure nature. She boldly stands against her mother to save her honour. During these moments, a conflict arises between mother and daughter because of their different concepts of morality. Gratiana considers Lussurioso’s request like “Fortunes flowing

to [Castiza],” (II, i, 171) and that it is not something shameful. Whereas Castiza describes honesty as her “fortunes”, and her “child’s-part” (II, i, 2-3).

For the sake of money, Gratiana here plays the role of a bawd in provoking and persuading her daughter to go to Lussurioso “For in that shell of mother breeds a bawd” (IV, iv, 10). This sentence is said by Vindice while he and his brother, Hippolitio, with daggers in their hands, are confronting their mother. They are furious at her behaviour, and if they had not made a trick to trap Lussurioso and stop him, Gratiana would have forced Castiza to go to him. Therefore, their action can be considered as a spontaneous reaction. Though to many readers and spectators, this reaction may seem inhuman and unnatural, it emphasizes how important the idea of chastity is in Jacobean drama. It also shows how people were ready to sacrifice even their mothers, fathers or anyone of the family for the sake of honour in the Jacobean period. This matter is clearly reflected in this play through Castiza’s insistence on remaining virtuous, and in Vindice and Hippolitio’s reaction to Gratiana’s behaviour. For her sons, Gratiana is a disease and pain while Castiza is a drug and relief.

Gratiana’s self-awareness is shown when she realizes her fault, wakes up from her illusion, and asks for forgiveness: “Forgive me; to myself I’ll prove more true ;”(IV, iv, 37). She is, no doubt, aware of the terrible situation which she might have put her daughter in. Castiza frightens her mother by telling her that her repentance is too late, because Castiza has prostituted herself to Lussurioso in order to please her mother. Gratiana’s shock is great, to the extent that Castiza confesses directly to her mother that the matter is untrue, but a falsehood to test her mother to see whether or not she has really repented. Tourneur now stands with Gratiana in her new state. She is even treated with great sympathy by Castiza:

O mother, let me twine about your neck,
And kiss you till my sound melt on your
lips;

I did but this to try you.

(IV. i. 146-149)

Castiza now feels happy, because her mother withdraws to her previous life and her former concepts of morality and chastity, i.e. she returns the kind and understanding mother. Castiza's trick to test her mother makes the Scene interesting. At the same time, it depicts her as a woman and not an allegory, though she is too good to be true to life as the others are also too bad to be true to life¹⁶.

Castiza cannot be considered a tragic figure, because she is incorruptible. She defends herself, her chastity, and her honour strongly against not only the pander, who is her brother, Vindice in disguise, but even against her mother. She defies both of them, admits none of them, and refuses to be stigmatized as unchaste woman.

This little sub-plot, which carries moral lessons about chastity and repentance, has a happy ending, though the play is a tragedy. This does not mean that it is remote from the rest of the play, for it contains ironies and reversals¹⁷: Gratiana submits to Vindice's temptations and, in turn, tries to tempt her daughter. Castiza refuses Gratiana's temptation. Then Castiza pretends that she accepts Gratiana's temptation when the latter has repented. So, Gratiana and Castiza change their roles temporarily. They play the role of temptress once and jump to play the role of virtuous woman another time. Then they settle on one role, which is the role of the virtuous woman.

Hence, Castiza is considered "a glass for maids, and [Gratiana] for mothers" (IV, iv, 157). This sub-plot also shows that the family ties are strong again.

In The Revenger's Tragedy, Tourneur depicts a chaotic universe. Characters attempt to live in this world that accepts the individual as a god. It is a world in which man is free to do what he desires, to generate his own values and principles, and to act according to them. Honour, virtue, and nobleness are wasted here. Revenge is the aim of all characters, especially Vindice, whose revenge is for his betrayed Gloriana¹⁸.

All the betrayed women in this play are represented by the poisoned skull of Vindice's beloved. Not only Gloriana suffers from betrayal, but also Antonio's wife, the "religious lady" (I, i, 111), Castiza, who would have been betrayed, and the "county lady", whom the Duke thinks that she is really a woman he is about to seduce¹⁹.

NOTES

¹L. G. Salingar, "Tourneur and the Tragedy of Revenge," in The Pelican Guide to English Literature. Vol. 2: The Age of Shakespeare, ed. Boris Ford (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1955), p. 334.

²Percy Simpson, Studies in Elizabethan Drama (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1955), p.138.

³Fredson Bowers, Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy (1587-1642) (Princeton University press, 1966), p. 14.

⁴Ibid., p.17.

⁵George Partiff, "Introduction," in The Plays of Cyril Tourneur: "The Revenger's Tragedy" and "The Atheist's Tragedy", ed., George Partiff (Cambridge University Press, 1978), p. ix.

⁶R. A. Foakes, "Introduction," in Cyril Tourneur, "The Revenger's Tragedy", ed., R. A. Foakes (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd, 1966), p. xxii.

⁷Hardin Craig, A History of English Literature, Vol. II: The Literature of the English Renaissance (1485-1660) (New York: Collier Books, 1962), p. 173.

⁸Cyril Tourneur, The Revenger's Tragedy, ed., R. A. Foakes (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd, 1966). All subsequent quotations from the play are taken from this edition and will be enclosed within the text in parentheses.

⁹Kathryn R. Finin , "RE-membering Gloriana : 'Wild Justice' and the Female Body in The Revenger's Tragedy," (2003.URL: [http:// www.hull.ac.uk/ren_forum/v6non2/fiin.htm](http://www.hull.ac.uk/ren_forum/v6non2/fiin.htm)) March 2, 2010, p.3 of 18.

¹⁰Fredson Bowers, p. 133.

¹¹Nicholas Brooke, Horrid Laughter in Jacobean Drama (London: Open Books Publishing Ltd, 1979), p. 22.

¹²M.C.Bradbrook, Themes and Conventions of Elizabethan Tragedy (Cambridge University Press, 1960; 2nd edition, 1980), p. 164.

¹³Ibid., p.165.

¹⁴Michael E. Mooney, “‘This Luxurious Circle’: Figurenposition in The Revenger’s Tragedy,” in English Literary Renaissance, Vol. 13, No.2 (spring 1983), p.170.

¹⁵Nicholas Brooke, p. 15.

¹⁶R. A Foakes, p.xxx. .

¹⁷Ibid., p.x1ii.

¹⁸Ibid., p.x1iii.

¹⁹M. C. Bradbrook, p.163.

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الخلاصة

إن كلمة "انتقام" معروفة في جميع أنحاء العالم منذ القدم و حتى الوقت الحاضر من خلال المذيع، أو السينما، أو الناس، أو مصادر أخرى. و لان الناس لا تستطيع دائما أن تنتقم لنفسها، فإنها ترغب في مشاهدته عبر أساليب فنية و أدبية مسلية مثل الكتب، و الأفلام، و المسرحيات؛ و مسرحيات تيرنر رائدة في هذا المضمار.

في اغلب مسرحيات كتاب العصر اليعقوبي وهي فترة حكم الملك جيمس الأول، نجد هناك مشهد انتقام و لا يستثنى من ذلك مسرحية ((مأساة المنتقم)) (١٦٠٦-١٦٠٧). لان الانتقام هو المفهوم المهيمن في مسرحية ((مأساة المنتقم))، فان هذه الدراسة هي محاولة لمناقشة هذا المفهوم في هذه المسرحية. تتناول الدراسة تعريف الانتقام، و مميزاته، و تأثير سنيكا على كتاب المسرحيات الانتقامية في العصر اليعقوبي عموما". و من ثم بيان حالات الانتقام التي اختارها تيرنر ليعرض مفهوم الانتقام في مسرحية ((مأساة المنتقم)). و أخيرا تلقي الدراسة الضوء على عواقب الانتقام و تأثيراته على الطبيعة البشرية من جانب، و تأثيراته على تحول طبيعة شخصيات المسرحية من جانب آخر. تنتهي الدراسة بقائمة الهوامش و قائمة المصادر.