

**Shakespeare's Perspective On Revenge And Forgiveness : A
Comparative Study Of *Hamlet* And *The Tempest***

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Abstract

Seneca had an impact on Elizabethan tragedies. He added many elements like intrigue, a lot of blood – shed and murder on the stage. After the publication of Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*, revenge tragedies came into fashion on the Elizabethan stage. Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is considered to be influenced by Kyd. As *Hamlet* is fashioned after Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*, it is considered to be a revenge tragedy. In this play, the protagonist goes for revenge but he puts a question on the morality of seeking revenge. This paper tries to explore Shakespeare's perspective on 'revenge' and 'forgiveness' through a comparative study of his two plays : *Hamlet* and *The Tempest*. *The Tempest* deals with the theme of forgiveness. So it would be interesting to see Shakespeare's perspective on these two aspects. Hamlet delays the revenge despite the fact that he gets the opportunity to kill the murderer of his father. In *The Tempest*, Prospero, the dethroned and wronged duke, forgives his enemies who usurped his position and put his life at the risk of death.

Keywords: Morality, intrigue, Revenge, Repentance, Forgiveness

Introduction:

Shakespeare's plays have always been scrutinized from different perspectives. Shakespeare catered to the British audience of 16th century but he is much explored even today in 21st century. One of the factors that has made Shakespeare relevant even to present day is the universality of themes that his plays deal with. His plays mostly deal with family relationships (like father-daughter, father-son etc.), social relationships (like master and servant, king and subject etc.), and social and human values like love, marriage, forgiveness etc. These themes give universal importance to his plays.

This paper attempts to explore Shakespeare's perspective on revenge and forgiveness through a comparative study of his two plays: *Hamlet* and *The Tempest*. *Hamlet* is considered to be a revenge tragedy as Hamlet seeks revenge against his uncle

Claudius who, according to the words of his father's ghost, murdered his father and married his mother. Some critics find this play to be fashioned after Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*. *The Spanish Tragedy* is considered to be the first popularly known revenge play. Does Shakespeare follow Kyd in form and content? What is Shakespeare's perspective on revenge? This paper tries to answer these questions.

The Tempest is considered to be Shakespeare's last play. This play primarily deals with the theme of forgiveness. Prospero, the dethroned duke of Milan, forgives his enemies even though he was capable of taking revenge. These enemies had not only dethroned him but also banished him along with his three years' old motherless daughter. Why does Prospero decide to forgive his enemies? What is Shakespeare's perspective on forgiveness? This paper tries to answer this question also through a comparative study of *Hamlet* and *The Tempest*.

Shakespeare's perspective on revenge in *Hamlet*:

The plays that brought a lot of murders and blood - shed on the stage were very popular in the Elizabethan age. The influence of Seneca on the playwrights of the period cannot be ignored. The Senecan influence added so many elements to Elizabethan tragedies i.e. intrigue, revenge, conspiracy and a lot of blood - shed and murder. With the influence of Seneca, the trend of revenge tragedies came into fashion. The first popularly known revenge tragedy was *The Spanish Tragedy* by Thomas Kyd. This play influenced many dramatists of the time including Shakespeare himself. *Hamlet* is considered to be highly influenced by Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*. The similarity is in terms of genre : both of the plays are revenge tragedies. In Shakespeare's play, Hamlet seems to be modeling himself after Kyd's Hieronimo in his way of approaching revenge. "Kyd and Shakespeare seem to have utilized meta-theatres to exact revenge and reveal guilt" (Introduction 1). Though in both plays we have 'play within a play', it differs in layout and context. In *The Spanish Tragedy*, Kyd's intention to use 'play within a play' was probably for the format of Hieronimo's death. Whereas, *Hamlet* brings this device in order to confirm whether the words of the ghost are true or not. In this way, Shakespeare seems to be borrowing many elements from Kyd's play but he has either modified it or shaped it in a new way by adding some moral weight to it. It is necessary to go through the plot of *Hamlet* to know Shakespeare's perspective on revenge.

Claudius murders his own brother, King Hamlet, and marries his wife. When the Prince Hamlet returns to Denmark, Horatio introduces him to the ghost who looks like his father. The ghost did not want to speak to any courtier including Prince Hamlet's close friend Horatio. When the Prince Hamlet tries to approach the ghost, he tells him that he is his father's ghost. The ghost tells him that he did not have his natural death, he was rather murdered by Claudius. The ghost of King Hamlet asks his son to seek revenge against his uncle who killed him and married his wife. But the ghost asks Prince Hamlet not to do any harm to the queen. Hence Hamlet proceeds in his way of seeking revenge against his uncle, Claudius. He devotes himself to avenge his father's death. Since he is a contemplative and thoughtful by nature, he delays revenge. He suspects the words of the ghost. Such a state of mind

led him to a deep melancholy and even to an apparent madness. Polonius interprets Hamlet's madness as the consequence of his love for his daughter, Ophelia.

The main challenge for Hamlet is find out whether his uncle is really guilty or not. Though his mother's hasty marriage seems to be certifying the truth, he decides to confirm ghost's words. Before implementing the revenge, Hamlet wanted to be confirmed of Claudius' guilt. When the group of travelling actors comes to Elsinore, he gets the opportunity to test his uncle's guilt. He asks the players to perform the same scene closely resembling the sequence by which Claudius murdered his father. Hamlet thinks that if his uncle is guilty, he would certainly react. When the scene of murder resembling to that of Claudius' act of murdering King Hamlet takes place, Claudius feels uncomfortable and leaves the room. It gives Hamlet the certificate of his uncle's guilt. Now Hamlet is determined to avenge his father's death. He seeks the opportunity to kill Claudius. Once he succeeds also in getting the chance when Claudius was praying. But Hamlet leaves him arguing that if he kills him while praying he would go to heaven. If the murderer goes to heaven, it would not be a revenge so Hamlet remains in ambush to find a proper time.

At the end of the play, Claudius arranges a fencing match between Hamlet and Laertes. He manipulatively poisons Laertes blade so that Hamlet could be killed. He concocts a back up plan to give Hamlet a poisoned drink if he anyhow escapes from Laertes' blade. In the sword fighting, Hamlet scores the first hit but declines the offer of drink. Gertrude drinks it and dies. Laertes is injured by his own poisoned blade. Before death, Laertes reveals the secret of Gertrude's death. Hamlet instantly stabs Claudius through poisoned sword but he himself dies just after completing his revenge.

In this play, we see that Hamlet finally completes his revenge but he undergoes a very difficult experience. He seems to be struggling for establishing a harmony between his course of thought and his course of action. So it would be interesting to see Shakespeare's perspective on revenge through Hamlet. We find that Shakespeare has subverted the genre and nature of revenge tragedy in this play. In a typical revenge tragedy, the hero, most often, faces two obstacles in completing his revenge: to find out the murderer and to get himself in a position to kill the murderer. In *Hamlet*, Hamlet knew the murderer of his father right from the beginning of the play as the ghost had already informed him that Claudius was the murderer. Further, Hamlet does find himself in a position to kill the murder but he delays the revenge by being too thoughtful. What does Shakespeare have to say on the genre of revenge tragedy? Hamlet seems to be putting question the morality of seeking revenge. He shows his dilemma: should he believe the words of the ghost? And Should he act without being confirmed of the significance of his action? 'To be or not to be' seems to be question poised by Shakespeare on the morality of seeking revenge (Hamlet 2). By making certain abstract obstacles to Hamlet's revenge, Shakespeare introduces a few philosophical questions to the revenge tragedy that were never seen before him. Through Hamlet, Shakespeare seems to be asking the questions: Should one believe the evidence of one's eyes? Is revenge justified? Can one predict the consequences of one's actions? Ultimately, Shakespeare seems to be asking the question: what happens when one dies? Hamlet's mind was occupied with 'to be or not to be...' and by presenting such a state of mind in Hamlet, Shakespeare seems to be mocking the

genre of revenge tragedy “Remorseless, treacherous, kindless villain / O vengeance..” (2.2, 26/27). Hamlet seems to be the sillier version of Hieronimo.

In *Hamlet*, there is one more character—Laertes-- who seeks revenge. Unlike Hamlet, Laertes is ready to accomplish his revenge but Claudius easily manipulates him. At the end of the play, Laertes dies begging forgiveness from the man he wanted to murder. So, both of the characters, who seek revenge, not only question the morality of seeking revenge but also poke fun at the traditional heroes of revenge tragedies. We find that at the end, Laertes lightens himself by choosing forgiveness over revenge. Hamlet’s peace of life is lost once he involves himself in revenge. What does Shakespeare want to say? He has almost made traditional revenge tragedies look ridiculous. Shakespeare seems to be saying that philosophical doubt of Hamlet is more realistic than the passion and fury of revenge plays like *The Spanish Tragedy*. Thomas Middleton’s *The Revenger’s Tragedy* came after *Hamlet*. Middleton did not follow the traditional pattern of revenge tragedy, he rather went after Shakespeare by introducing humour at the expense of revenge tragedy genre itself. Hamlet doubts the morality of seeking revenge and Middleton’s hero is immoral in pursuing his course of action; at the end he is more a villain than a hero.

After discussing the character of Hamlet, we come to know certain important points that may help us to get Shakespeare’s perspective on revenge. We find that Hamlet does accomplish his revenge but his own life is destroyed. Before he accomplishes his revenge, he questions the morality of seeking revenge. Unlike traditional revenge heroes, he knows the man he has to murder right from the beginning of the play. He does not murder Claudius, he first raises some serious questions of spiritual significance. Francis Bacon writes in his essay ‘Of Revenge’ “Revenge is a kind of wild justice” (Bacon 1). Shakespeare does not seem to be saying it so directly but he does show that the revenge destroys both: the seeker and the person on whom it is sought. Middleton also seems to be saying that if you go for revenge, you start off as a hero and end as a villain. The revenge tragedies written after Shakespeare have questioned the morality of seeking revenge itself.

Shakespeare’s perspective on forgiveness in *The Tempest*:

The Tempest is considered to be the last play penned by Shakespeare. In this play, Prospero is a duke of Milan. He is more interested in reading books on the metaphysical topics than in administration. So, he hands over the yoke of administration to his trusted younger brother, Antonio, and confines himself to his library. Antonio hatches a conspiracy to usurp the position of Prospero. He turns the mind of the courtiers and persuades them to side with him in his plan. He seeks the help of Alonso, the king of Naples, in overthrowing Prospero. He betrays his elder brother who shows great trust on him. Prospero is ordered to set adrift at sea. Gonzalo, a very loyal person, helps Prospero at the time of expulsion by supplying him with the provisions and the most important books from his library.

Prospero had a daughter, Miranda, who was only three years’ old at the time of banishment. His wife is absent, probably she would have died. Since Miranda is only three years’ old, she would have died very early. It was going to be a very difficult experience for Prospero as he has to look after a motherless child who is only 3. Anyhow, he lands on an inhabited island. There is no creature on this island except

Caliban, who is half a fish and half a monster, and an Ariel, an airy spirit whom Prospero saves and makes his servant. Before the arrival of Prospero at this island, Caliban claimed the island inherited from his mother, Sycorax. Prospero occupies the island with the help of his white magic and makes Caliban his servant. As a father, he has not only a responsibility to look after his motherless daughter but also to secure her future.

When *The Tempest* opens, it seems that it would develop as a revenge tragedy as Prospero is overthrown from his own power and position by his perfidious younger brother. When he safely lands at the island and becomes powerful through his magic. He takes everyone in his service and rules the island as per his desire. The only problem to him at the island was the intractable Caliban who had the intention to ravish his daughter. But Prospero controlled him through harsh punishments. When Prospero comes to know that all of his enemies along with his perfidious brother, Antonio, are travelling on a ship and are near to this island, he raises a storm through his magic and brings all of them ashore. Through Ariel, Prospero disperses them and brings them on this island. E.M.W. Tillyard writes on this event:

For the re-enactment of tragedy it is possible to think with Dover Wilson that the storm scene does this. But it does nothing to re-enact the specific tragic plot in the play, the fall of Prospero; and one of its aims is to sketch (as it does with incomparable swiftness) the characters of ship's company. The true re-enactment is in the long first scene of the second act where Antonio is persuading Sebastian to murder Alonso, personates his own earlier action in plotting against Prospero, thus drawing it out of the past and placing it before us in the present. This long scene, showing the shipwrecked king and courtiers and the conspiracy, has not had the sufficient praise nor sufficient attention. Antonio's transformation from the cynical and lazy badgerer of Gonzalo's loquacity to the brilliantly swift and unscrupulous man of action is a thrilling affair (133).

The above statement of Tillyard shows the tragic fabrication in the play. A villain tries to arouse villainy in one more person resembling to him. The action of Prospero to bring all of his enemies under his control surfaces his probable intention of revenge. We prepare ourselves to see Prospero taking revenge against his enemies. But Prospero is not Hamlet though both of them seem to be thoughtful and contemplative, Prospero is more mature. Hamlet is a bachelor and has no filial responsibility on his shoulder except to carry out the order of the ghost. Prospero, on the other hand, is a single parent to his daughter. To take risk at his own life meant to leave his daughter all alone in the world. These may be the probable reasons why Prospero's stand is different. Critics have different opinion on Prospero's attitude towards life. G. Wilson Knight writes about Prospero:

Prospero is a composite of many Shakespearean heroes; not in 'character', since there is no one quite like him elsewhere, but rather in his fortunes and the part he plays. As a sovereign wrongfully dethroned he carries the overtones of tragic royalty enjoyed by Richard II. Ejected from his dukedom by a wicked brother—'that a brother should be so perfidious'(1.2 67)—he is placed, too, like the unfortunate Duke in As

You Like It and as Don Pedro might have placed had Don John's rebellion succeeded in *Much Ado About Nothing*. Clarence, Orlando and Edgar suffer from similar betrayals (146).

From the perspective of Knight, Prospero represents many Shakespearean heroes. The composition of so many heroes in Prospero means a unique creation of Shakespeare, through whom he wants to serve his special purpose. Such a creation would undoubtedly be a very mature and composed one. Prospero reflects it well in his personality. Unlike traditional Shakespearean fathers, he remains quite calm and cool when his daughter disobeys him by revealing her identity to Ferdinand. Prospero had forbidden Miranda to disclose her identity to anyone. In many of Shakespeare's father-daughter plays, we see that the disobedience of daughter is taken very seriously by the father. The typical fathers either punish their daughters harshly or banish them from the state. Such fathers never accept that their daughters are grown up now and have right to express their individual freedom. Capulet would like to see his daughter dead but not to be disobeyed by her. Cymbeline imprisons Imogen when she disobeys him by marrying a person whom he does not like. Moreover, he banishes the self-chosen husband of his daughter. Like these two fathers, many Shakespearean fathers behave even more harshly when they are disobeyed by their daughters. But Prospero is a different father. He knows well that his daughter is now grown up and has right to express her individual freedom of thought and action. The Critics, who try to see how Shakespeare looks at the World, identify Prospero with Shakespeare. Knight writes :

Prospero is a matured and fully self conscious embodiment of those moments of fifth act transcendental speculation to which earlier tragic heroes, including Macbeth, were unwillingly forced. He cannot be expected to do more than typify; there is not time; and, as a person, he no doubt, less warm, less richly human, than most of poetic ancestors. But only if we recognize his inclusiveness, his summing of nearly all Shakespeare's more eminent persons, shall we understand clearly what he is about. He, like others, Vincentio and Oberon preeminently, is controlling our plot, composing it before our eyes; but, since the plot is, as we shall see, so inclusive an interpretation of Shakespeare's life work, Prospero is controlling, not merely a Shakespearean play, but the Shakespearean world. He is thus automatically in the position of Shakespeare himself, and it is accordingly inevitable that he should often speak as with Shakespeare's voice (Bloom 150).

Knight finds Prospero as the representative of Shakespeare. In this light, Prospero's stand on revenge or forgiveness would probably be the stand of Shakespeare. Having brought his enemies under his control, Prospero is in position to go for revenge. Knight continues "Prospero uses his tempest – magic to draw his enemies to the island, and there renders them harmless. He wrecks and saves, teaches through disaster, entices and leads by music, getting them utterly under his power, redeeming and finally forgiving" (Bloom 160). Knight takes us to Prospero's final choice of 'forgiveness' over 'revenge'. It is noteworthy that Prospero decides to forgive those people who dethroned him and put his life at risk. Derek Traversi is of the opinion that "repentance is the necessary consequence on the human side, of accepting judgment" (170). Traversi seems to be suggesting that Prospero's desire was not to

take revenge but to bring repentance in the evil-doers. It is a possible fact that Prospero would have thought about killing evil in man rather than the man himself. Mark Van Doren points out that “The plot of *The Tempest* is a complex of separations—and swiftly, and harmoniously, of reconciliations” (140). Doren points to the genre of the play. In comedies, the tragic twist concludes with the comic end, but there are some certain devices brought into use by the author to give it such an end. Those devices could be reversal and recognition. But Shakespeare does not seem to be interested in such devices particularly in *The Tempest*. Prospero would decide the end of the play. John Ruskin points out:

The enemies of Prospero are now completely in his power. How shall he deal with them? They had perfidiously taken advantage of his unworldly and unpractical habits of life; they had thrust him away from his dukedom; they had exposed him with his three years' old daughter in a rotten boat to the mercy of the waves. Shall he not now avenge himself without remorse? (102).

When we look at the questions raised by Ruskin, we, for a moment, get ready to see the revenge of Prospero on his enemies. But Prospero, frustrating dramatic irony, decides :

Though with their high wrongs I am stuck to the quick
Yet with my nobler reason 'gainst my fury
Do I take part. The rarer action is
In virtue than in vengeance. (5.1, 25-28) (Vaughan 253).

Prospero decides to forgive all of his enemies. He chooses ‘forgiveness’ over ‘revenge’ for it is the rarer action in his eyes. If we look at the justification of Prospero’s action, he has ensured many things by choosing forgiveness. He paves the way of his only daughter to a new world. He can assure himself that his daughter would lead a happy life in the family of Alonso whom he has forgiven for his wrongdoing. He gives a chance to his perfidious brother to rectify and transform himself positively. And above all, his forgiveness has united two families and two new generations and has brought about a new world of love.

Conclusion:

If we look at Shakespeare’s perspective on ‘revenge’ and ‘forgiveness’, we will have to look at the turn of events in both plays—*Hamlet* and *The Tempest*—that represent these two aspects. We see that Hamlet, though accomplishes his revenge, puts a question on the morality of seeking revenge. By organizing the ‘play within a play’ and suspecting the words of the ghost, he seems to be asking the question ‘Is revenge justified?’. As discussed in the first half of this paper, Shakespeare has not followed the tradition of revenge tragedies. He probably made Hamlet too thoughtful and contemplative to ask a few philosophical questions on the morality of seeking revenge. At the end, we find that Hamlet does accomplish his revenge but at the cost of his own life. Revenge does take place at the end but there is death and destruction everywhere. On the other hand, in *The Tempest*, Prospero chooses forgiveness, despite the fact that he was dethroned and conspired to be put to death

by the same people whom he forgives. He unites two families and nations and brings peace and happiness. Thus to conclude, Shakespeare seems to be giving his agreement with the Biblical precept 'Revenge is mine, saith the Lord'. Moreover, he seems to be suggesting that the 'rarer action is in virtue than in vengeance'.

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