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Being Seen is Believing: Spectacle, Ethics, and the Others of Belief in Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy

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There is no question that Tudor revenge tragedy's graphic violence stimulates in audiences a combination of visceral pleasure and moral superiority. But how can these two responses, which the specimens of the genre elicit in varying mixtures and degrees, coexist? How does a revenge tragedy permit the audience to enjoy murderous carnage without provoking self-censure at the empathetic experience of bloodlust? Such staged bloodlust might be supposed to produce outrage and disgust in audiences on a massive scale. The explanation for this coexistence of rectitude and pleasure cannot but implicate the protagonist, the revenger, insofar as the spectator's response grows out of his vicarious engagement with revenge. The spectator's predicament finds its immediate source and correlate in that of the revenger. Thus how can the revenger enjoy a murderous rampage without suffering the pangs of conscience?

René Girard sensibly answers that it comes down to belief: "In order to perform revenge with conviction, you must believe in the justice of your own cause. The revenge seeker will not believe in his own cause unless he believes in the guilt of the intended victim" (p. 283). But because belief is always an intersubjective—even theatrical or staged—process, I want to argue

that a fuller answer to the question of the revenger's and spectator's guilt-free pleasure may be found in the title of this volume. No, I do not mean to suggest that "seeing is believing", as though seeing were a straightforward empirical act, but instead that believing is a matter of "being seen", that is, being recognized by a spectator in the widest sense of the term. What separates the revenger from a homicidal maniac is that others believe his subject position to be morally warranted. Because the revenger's mission must have credibility, the vengeful act operates according to the logic of belief, whose intersubjective parameters Michel de Certeau sets out succinctly: "belief occurs between the recognition of an alterity and the establishment of a contract" (p. 192).[1] The believer enters into a symbolic pact with an *other* or an object in the hopes that the present disadvantage of suspending the need for collateral security—a surety or proof—will receive remuneration at some future point. As indicated by its etymological roots in the Latin "creditus", belief presupposes an economy of exchange whereby an other, for future profit, places confidence in the believer's ability to make good on his belief. Like trust, beliefs are an inescapable mediator in everyday social relations, for if we did not give symbolic "credit" to people, our lot would surely be a lonely and frustrated one.

At first glance, de Certeau's formulation adds nothing illuminating to what critics of revenge tragedies already know well. As John Kerrigan notes, the exchange of injury, an eye for an eye, makes up the simplest of revenge plots (pp. 4-6). The protagonist of the Elizabethan revenge tragedy must recognize the murderer as owing the victim symbolic compensation for what he has done, whether or not—and generally not—the murderer recognizes his claim. The credibility of revenge depends upon an economy of exchange in which retaliation satisfactorily settles the debt. Hieronimo cautions himself to "be not credulous" (III.ii.39) after reading Bel-imperia's letter, which exposes the murderers. Before he can act, he must believe in the culpability of the accused. Since the murderers belong to the highest echelon of aristocratic society, the revenger, usually of an inferior status, has no recourse to the legal system. The revenger must then take the administration of *lex talionis* into his own hands. Because of his deep-seated conviction about observing contracts, tallies, and scores, he very much holds, not merely a belief, but a belief in belief's social efficacy. The symbolic accounts must be balanced at all costs.

1 My paper builds upon de Certeau's opening conceptualization of belief, but does not do justice to the detailed and sophisticated arguments of his intriguing essay.

The application of de Certeau's formulation to revenge, however, implies another distinct yet interrelated symbolic contract into which the revenger enters. The protagonist holds an obligation to the dead victim through kinship or erotic ties that demand that loved ones be remembered—that their scores be properly settled by their survivors. The revenger acts in the second economy of exchange as though it were, strangely enough, not just his belief, but the dead victim's belief, which spurs him on to action. The victim trusts that the revenger will carry out retribution on his behalf. That is not to say that the revenger receives nothing in this economy by fulfilling his obligation to his father, son, or lover. Once completed, the act of vengeance will discharge the revenger of responsibility and guilt, and will, as *Antonio's Revenge* spells out clearly, confer on him supernatural favour. When Antonio finishes stabbing Piero literally in exchange for his "father's blood", Andrugio's ghost signals the termination of the contract and the settling of all debts: " 'Tis done, and now my soul shall sleep in rest. / Sons that revenge their father's blood are blest" (V.v.81-82). Revenge tragedies solicit our belief in revenge most pressingly when the ghost of the victim, as in *Antonio's Revenge* and *Hamlet*, appears on the stage to establish the symbolic contract with the protagonist. The ghost is the most powerful guarantor of the credibility of the protagonist's revenge, because he makes visible the kinship demand upon the protagonist.

These two overlapping economies or contracts—the belief in the applicability of *lex talionis* to a villain and the belief in the obligation to the dead—interpellate the revenger as a mediator or factor. Like a functionary from a collection agency, the revenger retrieves from the debtor the outstanding payment owed to the creditor. Nonetheless, if the protagonist bore no personal or familial connection to the victim, he would be a mere vigilante, not a revenger. If he had no grounds for retaliation, his loved one being killed accidentally or justly, he would be only a murderous feudist. His peculiar interpellation gives every indication that his mission does not originate from his own impulses and desires. He finds himself discharging his duty to the dead by resolving the imbalance in the economy of the *lex talionis*, an economy centred not on himself but on two other parties, the victim and the villain. Revenge simultaneously restores two social rituals that have failed the victim: the administration of justice and the performance of mourning. Because the victim has been unjustly killed by someone in power, his obsequies cannot be carried out properly.

But the stakes that the revenger fights for are much larger than mere local contracts between individuals. Society around the protagonist is seriously affected by the injustice. Bel-Imperia chides Hieronimo,

> for shame Hieronimo,
> Be not a history to aftertimes
> Of such ingratitude unto thy son:
> Unhappy mothers of such children then—
> But monstrous fathers to forget so soon
> The death of those whom they with care and cost
> Have tendered so, thus careless should be lost. (IV.i.13-19)

In revenge, the other of belief is not merely the dead victim. Through shaming, Bel-imperia rouses Hieronimo to take up on behalf of his son the terms of the symbolic contract of vengeful remembrance. If belief requires the recognition of alterity, there are two kinds of others, who give credibility to revenge: the dead victim to whom the revenger is obligated and other survivors who believe in such obligations. This distinction only stands to reason, for, as de Certeau sensibly asserts, "thousands of procedures produce believers by creating the belief that 'there are many others who believe'" (p. 202). There is no such thing as a religion, or for that matter, a belief, of one adherent. In *Antonio's Revenge*, the title character is immediately supported by his mother and three conspirators, who make up the plexus of believers in which he locates his credible actions. It is through the process of identifying with other believers that an individual comes to embrace a belief, and it is no different for the revenger, who, in seeing others mirror his predicament, gives credence to the course of action he must take. Hieronimo simultaneously finds himself and his son reflected in the person of Bazulto, an old man who makes a humble supplication on behalf of his murdered son. Not only does Hieronimo read his own paternal grief in the father's "lively image" (III.xiii.161), but he also takes him to be the shade of Horatio, who has left the dark depths to beg for justice. The old man's supplication inspires Hieronimo with shame for neglecting to execute "sweet revenge" for his son (III.xiii.161). The others of belief, such as Bel-Imperia and Bazulto, speak with force for the dead victim whose accounts have not been settled.

The revenger assumes his role from other believers and, in carrying out the role, defends their belief in justice and in mourning the dead. To put it another way, the revenger believes in belief—in the importance of symbolic exchange as a basis for mediating social relations. Debts owed to individuals must be paid.

Flagrantly unrecognized debts owed to the dead cast aspersion on the symbolic order's overall integrity. The law becomes a mockery when a terrible injustice is left unresolved. Thus the suspension of symbolic reciprocity has not just personal but devastatingly global effects, most notably witnessed in the misgovernance of the state and disturbances in the supernatural realm. Marcellus's fear that "Something is rotten in the state of Denmark" (I.v.100) arises from the malodorous symptom of the ghost.

The revenger finds himself as a champion of the Other of others, or, rather the "Big Other", through taking up the cause of the "lower case" others, those persons who validate belief. In Lacanian psychoanalysis, the Big Other refers to the imaginary agent to which neurotic or "normal" subjects attribute the regular operation of the symbolic order.[2] It is a fantasy linchpin that, in arresting the contingent movement of the signifier, makes comforting sense out of culture's incomprehensible and inconsistent alterity. The revenger desperately projects onto social discourse's contingency and arbitrariness the principle of reciprocity, equity, adequation. When Titus fails to receive from the Emperor recognition of, let alone restitution for, the wrongs done to his family members, he appeals to the gods to send Justice earthwards, clinging to an imaginary agent that not only confers dignity and purpose on their meaningless deaths but also salvages for Rome reason within barbaric madness (IV.iii.52-53).[3] By championing the Big Other who obeys the principle of contractual reciprocity, the revenger serves society at large. Settling the earthly debt allows the revenger to recover the metaphysical balance between the supernatural world and this one—as though the principle of exchange were so vital for the maintenance of everyday reality that its significance extended to the great beyond. He keeps the symbolic order intact, for without the belief in exchange there is no ground for any belief. The world that has lost touch with the foundational belief before belief is surely depicted in Jacobean revenge tragedy, famously exemplified by *The Revenger's Tragedy* and *The Duchess of Malfi*. There, no one seems to believe in belief anymore, because the Big Other is a "big joke". Without a belief in the symbolic order's integrity, all beliefs decay into cynicism and, for those who do not slip into madness, morality becomes a game that one needs to cheat at to get ahead. Thanks to the earnest Elizabethan revenger, that defender of the economies of "justice", the living and

2 See Žižek, p. 18, for a discussion of the Big Other.

3 After Titus is cheated of his hand in the hope of redeeming his sons, he no longer believes in earthly economies of exchange (III.i).

the dead can both rest in peace, knowing that a rational and moral symbolic order still holds society together.

Surplus Revenge

Yet Elizabethan revenge tragedies readily attest to the fact that the revenger's service to society cannot be the entire story. No matter how apparently selfless, the protagonist experiences tremendous pleasure in slaughtering the villain or villains, for they are his personal antagonists, too. The villain has, of course, dealt a direct psychological wound to the protagonist by killing his loved one. From this perspective, the revenger is never an impassive proxy, insofar as the individual upon whose behalf he acts must have been dear to him. As Richard Hillman traces the pattern in early modern revenge tragedy, the protagonist perceives "the injury as rendering his existence meaningless" (p. 1). Because identity formation establishes itself in a dialectical relationship with someone else, the existential crisis of revenge tragedy occurs through a counterpart's outrageous murder. If any given individual's world consists of the various gravitational bodies around whom his sense of self revolves and rotates, the violent removal of the protagonist's beloved throws his world out of orbit and his time out of joint. In killing the beloved, the villain savagely strips from the protagonist his role as son, father, or lover. Thus, over and beyond the familial debt to the dead, the revenger stands to gain personally from paying back the villain. Revenge offers the narcissistic pleasure of reasserting one's self with murderous aggression after having suffered a traumatic blow to one's self-image. The revenger stabs the villainous other with the shards of the broken mirror of imaginary identification.

The protagonist is a kind of "moonlighter", in that he seeks on the sly to make a profit in his own imaginary register, while officially labouring to protect the symbolic order's integrity for the good of all. The imaginary register, which Lacanian psychoanalysis describes in part through the mirror stage, strikes a chord with class-driven pre-modern society, for a significant power differential exists between the revenger and his antagonist, who invariably holds a more elevated aristocratic, if not royal, status. Although Lacan theorizes contemporary identity formation through positing a specular encounter between subject and social reflection, his ideas are deeply rooted in Kojève's commentary on Hegelian dialectic of the master and servant, which initiates for Hegel the arc of history and the establishment of society. As Katherine Maus states, "Renaissance revenge

tragedy taps the repressed frustrations" of a highly stratified society dependent on "displays of dominance and subservience", by "presenting the delicious spectacle of subjects hoodwinking and finally annihilating their superiors" (p. xii). The revenger's quest for vengeance opens up the brutal struggle for domination subtending the coalescence of the classes and promises to yield the tremendous narcissistic pleasure of striking down the master, who keeps in place one's lowly, servile identity. If all acts of identity formation constitute, at their basis, an imaginary struggle to dominate the other, then the revenger's act against his social superior stands as an even more profound bid for self-aggrandizement. It releases the fundamental narcissism articulated by Kojève's explanation of the emergence of civilization out of the death-struggle to be recognized by the other. The Elizabethan revenger cannot avoid the enjoyment of avenging his own oppression as a servant held thrall to the master's command.

The imaginary struggle described by Kojève underscores the inequity inherent in premodern identity formation across the classes. Neither the established master nor the retaliatory servant operates according to the principle of reciprocity so fundamental to a belief in revenge. To assert oneself as master by dominating someone as servant is to embrace an egregious imparity. In a class-structured society, the ego craves unequal power, pure and simple. It cannot but express the will to dominate when the alternative is cringing servitude. Doubtlessly, the pleasure derived from slaying the master cannot be openly broached in revenge tragedies without the protagonist losing the moral high ground and the audience denouncing his actions. Nothing is more repellant than the naked narcissism of others, and, in the absolutist early modern state, no one is vilified more than the traitor, the figure who seeks to overthrow royal authority.[4]

If a revenge tragedy is going to be successful in eliciting guilt-free pleasure from the audience, then the revenge must appear necessary, not as the means for asserting the revenger's identity, but as a duty to society. The restitution of the Big Other, the preservation of the superego, must coincide with the villain's death in order to conceal the revenger's imaginary desires. The villain's death is an obligatory sacrifice that protects, first and foremost, the integrity of the symbolic order. Then, and only then, can the revenger experience narcissistic pleasure without any guilt. His pleasure is a stolen surplus, a profit in excess of the economies of revenge. It is a surplus, because the protagonist labours on behalf

4 See Smith, *passim*.

of others. He need not acknowledge any personal contract with the master. For all intents and purposes, he is not collecting what is due to himself. As a result, the pleasure simply accrues to the revenger as a by-product from the settling of the victim's account. The revenger enjoys his expenditure of violence guilt-free because he believes in revenge's capacity to make a difference for others, and what convinces him of the importance of retributive justice is precisely the others of belief. The others of belief are the guarantors of the revenger's credibility.

The Spectacle of Revenge

If believing is being seen, then the protagonist's credibility as a revenger stands or falls upon the skill with which he elicits recognition from others. Although numerous scenes of recognition may occur throughout any given revenge tragedy, the case for the revenger's credibility is made the strongest for onstage and offstage spectators through a spectacle occurring frequently—but not always—at the play's climax. *The Spanish Tragedy* is considered to be the first play to establish for the genre the convention of making revenge a *coup de théâtre* (Maus, p. xvi). But during the period, spectacles did not provide the playwright with merely metadramatic opportunities to reflect upon the business of theatre, players, and play-going. A wide range of spectacles constituted public events that solicited belief in aristocratic and royal status. Elizabeth's progresses, the Accession Day tilts, and courtly masques were all acts of heraldic display designed to capture the recognition of the other.[5] This is not to say that theatre and heraldry are opposed to one another in a false binary, but to suggest that theatrical spectacle might have more to do with heraldic identity formation than has been previously appreciated.

In the world of revenge tragedy, where questions of class disparity coexist with a desire for social stability, heraldic rituals commonly circle around the main action. At the beginning of Act Two of *Antonio's Revenge*, a dumbshow depicts Andrugio's funeral procession, during which a herald takes charge of solemnly bearing the dead Duke's helm and sword and arranging the coffin's drapery. This heraldic spectacle would not have been lost on Elizabethans, since the College of Arms orchestrated lavish and symbolically grandiose funerals to celebrate the noble household's status and strengthen the English nobility's image in the

5 For an introduction to sixteenth-century English processions and spectacles, see Strong.

public eye.[6] Besides mentioning the tournament in praise of Lucibella's excellence (I.ii.252-53), *The Tragedy of Hoffman* includes in its *Dramatis Personae* a herald, who conducts a ceremony to disinherit Jerom, the son of Ferdinand, the Duke of Prussia, and to adopt the disguised revenger, Clois Hoffman, as heir (II.i.486-93). Heraldry, with all its pomp and circumstance, engineers belief in class position. These two heraldic displays, no matter how marginal to the plots of their respective revenge tragedies, underscore the genre's awareness of the importance of acquiring recognition from the other in order to legitimate social identity. Consistent with his society, the revenger capitalizes on this recognition as well.

Perhaps it is no accident that the first extant English revenge tragedy should have a protagonist whose office intersects with heraldry. Regardless of whether or not his title alludes to the Earl Marshal who presided over the College of Arms,[7] Hieronimo clearly discharges the duties of a herald in orchestrating the masque at the banquet for the Ambassador of Portugal (I.iv.138). Apart from a staged skirmish, it involves three knights presenting scutcheons to the King of Spain. Hieronimo, who literally assumes the role of herald in proclaiming the identities of the famous English heroes behind the three coats of arms, permits the King to exercise his wit through paralleling Spain's and Portugal's current situation with former military struggles against England.[8] The identified coats, according to the King's commentary, are supposed to mollify the ambassador, whose country has been defeated by Spain. In inviting spectators to find in the scutcheons allusions to the present, the masque seeks the recognition of the Spanish King's gentle supremacy but, even more significantly, captures the gaze of the English playgoers, who see their nation glorified directly through the arms once borne by fellow aristocratic countrymen. What Hieronimo stages is less a metadramatic production—a play-within-a-play—than a variant on a helm show, the public display of knights' coats of arms. During the Elizabethan tilts, participating nobles would hang their scutcheons upon a tree or present decorative shields to the queen.[9] This type of spectacle hearkens back to the medieval practice of jousting knights exhibiting their aristocratic credentials to heralds.

6 For descriptions of such funerals, see Gittings.

7 Hieronimo is a knight marshal, an officer in the royal household who held military or administrative authority (*OED*), but for the Elizabethan period the title resonates with that of Earl Marshal. See Wagner, p. 197.

8 Boas, pp. 397-98, and Edwards, p. 26n., point out the historical inaccuracies of these English triumphs in the Iberian peninsula, indicating the clearly ideological function of the heraldic display.

9 See Keen, pp. 204-5, and Young, p. 46.

Heraldic spectacle could take a humbler but no less memorable form in day-to-day activities wherever a coat of arms was emblazoned. Guillim's *A Display of Heraldrie* describes the way in which arms are designed to secure recognition from others:

> How great the dignities and estimation of Armes ever hath been, and yet is, we may easily conceive by this, that they doe delight the beholders, and greatly grace and beautifie the places wherein they are erected; so also they doe occasion their spectators to make serious inquisition whose they are, who is the owner of the house wherein they are set up, of what Familie there is descended, and who were his next, and who his remote Parents or Ancestors. (Guillim, p. 2)

The coat of arms does not provoke disgust in the viewer at aristocratic narcissism in the same way that Kojève's brutal master-and-servant struggle might. Heraldic display makes an individual's narcissism socially acceptable. It recruits public recognition by capitalizing on aesthetic pleasure. It establishes the dignity and status of the noble household without emphasizing the violent power struggles that made possible and maintain its status. The spectacle solicits the recognition of others to engineer belief. It seeks to capture the imaginary gaze of the Big Other, the Other of others.

I want to argue that the revenger makes use of the spectacle as a kind of heraldic display for his own cause. He occupies a subject position akin to the herald who engineers belief by capturing the imaginary gaze of the Big Other. Just as a coat of arms, a coronation, or a masque appeals to the beholder to validate the noble aristocrat's social superiority, the spectacle of revenge solicits belief from the plexus of onstage spectators and confirms for the revenger the credibility of his identity as a revenger, that is, someone whose retaliation is justified. The ghost or the co-conspirator or the sympathizer returns the revenger's call to the imaginary Big Other, as if the revenger's actions were officially acknowledged to protect the symbolic order. The revenger has nothing to hide because his vengeance is not a private matter between him and the villain—that is, something worked out behind closed doors. Even though the dancing maskers in *Antonio's Revenge* persuade Piero to dismiss the courtiers and the attendants from the room, Antonio takes full responsibility for his actions when the first Senator asks, "Whose hand presents this gory spectacle?" (V.vi.1). By being seen by others, the revenger makes public the symbolic contracts that motivate his actions: Hieronimo explicitly tells the court about the bloody handkerchief symbolizing his vow to avenge Horatio's death, and answers the distraught fathers that

he killed their sons in exchange for his, hoping that heaven will continue the murderers' afflictions (IV.iv.72-151). The socially acceptable spectacle fogs up the mirror stage of violence from which the protagonist narcissistically profits.

By deploying spectacle for the purposes of vengeance, the playwright puts the offstage spectators in the position of onstage ones. The work of spectacle solicits our belief in revenge too. The degree to which we believe in revenge's symbolic efficacy in fulfilling moral contracts determines whether or not we identify with the revenger and thus determines whether or not we tacitly and vicariously enjoy his surplus pleasure at slaying the master. Revenge would lose its credibility if the revenger's narcissistic pleasure were to show through the economies of exchange too clearly, and it would become apparent that the spectacle for the Big Other is really only the revenger's solipsistic mirror stage of murderous self-aggrandizement.

Ethics and the Other of Belief

Up until now, I have discussed the spectacle of revenge as if it were successful in soliciting belief, but I would like to submit that the ways in which specific revengers succeed or fail in orchestrating their spectacles engender various ethical effects. Revenge tragedies do not always elicit recognition from the other and may even expose the violent narcissism inherent in the protagonist's enterprise. If belief is a matter of being seen—for it has been my contention that revenge tragedies advocate, to one degree or another, the credibility of revenge—then the onstage spectator encourages the offstage spectators to view the violence from his or her ethical perspective. The other of the spectacle either buys into the belief of revenge or disturbs belief's economy.

Of all Elizabethan revenge tragedies, *Antonio's Revenge* stands out as the most obviously manipulative and the most ethically suspect, if it is not read as a parody of the genre. The spectacle of revenge coincides with an entertainment presented to the villain Piero. Disguised as festive maskers, the conspirators perform a "measure", a stately dance noted for its elegance and gravity (Gair, ed., IV.v., n. 4.2). This spectacle of revenge takes place before the Ghost of the murdered Andrugio, Antonio's father, who, just prior to the conspirators getting down to business, finds the best seat in the theatre: "Here will I sit, spectator of revenge, / And glad my ghost in anguish of my foe" (V.v.22-23). The ghost positions himself between the music houses, the galleries where the musicians would play for the

audience. Looking down upon the scene from his raised location, he can be seen by all offstage spectators (Gair, p. 28). As the other of the spectacle, he is a guarantor for Antonio's credibility, modeling our own spectatorship. When the spectacle has reached its gory conclusion, the ghost's incantatory words, "'Tis done, and now my soul shall sleep in rest. / Sons that revenge their father's blood are blest" (V.v.81-82), anticipate the gratitude and blessing of the Venetian Senators, who are relieved to have rid themselves of the Duke (V.vi.1-35). When initially confronted by the senators, Antonio and his co-conspirators vie to be seen as the chief instigators of the spectacle, because they apparently reckon that it confers heroic glory on the doers. In this play, the plexus of believing others who simultaneously strike down the tyrant are unimpeachable guarantors of revenge's credibility in preserving the symbolic order. When Maria, mother to Antonio, calls upon the conspirators to mourn for the dead, no one mentions the child Julio, son to Piero, whom Antonio slaughtered for blood to sprinkle around his own father's hearse (III.iii.65-66). If the dead will have what is due to them, the play does not explain why the horrific slaughter of Julio is at all justified in light of Piero's comeuppance. The bloodlust exhibited by Antonio's sacrifice of the innocent Julio—a deed superfluous to the settling of scores—rather forcefully depicts the surplus pleasure inherent in revenge. The scene's ethical insight into the revenger's narcissism loses its force as the play reaches a conclusion in which revenge is championed for restoring the symbolic order.

The Tragedy of Hoffman might stand at the opposite end of the ethical spectrum from *Antonio's Revenge*, if we view the eponymous character as the play's chief revenger. It opens with the protagonist proclaiming the justness of avenging his father's death, which occurred before the play begins. Soon after, when opportunity throws his way Otho, the son of the Duke of Luningberg who executed Hoffman's father, Hoffman carries out vengeance through a parodic coronation, a ritual usually orchestrated by royal heralds. He places on Otho's head a heated iron crown that roasts out his brains, executing his enemy's son with the same instrument of torture used against his own father. Even though this spectacle differs dramatically from typical revenge tragedies in occurring, not at the climax, but at "the prologue to the'nsuing play" (I.i.237), two more parodic coronations taking place later on reinforce the association of the act of vengeance with ironic heraldic display (II.i.481-93; V.iii.2582-84). But, even more crucially for my purposes, Hoffman's opening spectacle with its minimum of onstage spectators deviates dramatically from that of *The Spanish Tragedy* and *Antonio's Revenge*.

In this scene, the only guarantor of revenge, the other of belief with whom the offstage spectators can identify, is Lorrique, Hoffman's accomplice, who explains his recent betrayal of his master Otho by appealing to innate villainy, irreligiosity, and cowardice (I.i.89-90). As though performing spectacles for one another, Hoffman shares with Lorrique his excitement over the people they ensnare in their deadly deceit: after witnessing Ferdinand's and Jerom's poisoning, he asks Lorrique, "Art thou not plumpt with laughter"? (IV.ii.1663). His henchman eventually betrays Hoffman's secret plottings, leaving him alone in his vengeance. This single, discreditable, fair-weather spectator contributes to our alienation from revenge.

But the opening spectacle rather radically disturbs the economy of revenge with another onstage spectator—of sorts. When first soliloquizing upon his situation, Hoffman vows to his father's corpse, which he keeps hanging from a tree:

> I will not leave thee, untill like thye selfe,
> I've made thy enemies, then hand in hand
> Wee'le walke to paradise. (I.i.23-25)

And after torturing Otho to death, he calls out to the visible cadaver, "Father I offer thee thy murtherers sonne" (I.i.239), as though it were a witness to the grim scene. The play makes us dis-identify with the subject position of Hoffman's spectator, simply because it is abject, a moss-covered skeleton. If the ghost of Andrugio from *Antonio's Revenge* and the ghost of Andrea from *The Spanish Tragedy* feast their eyes on the spectacle of revenge, the silent anatomy's empty eye sockets fail to reflect Hoffman's deeds. No actual ghost haunts the stage. The other of revenge's belief, like Vindice's Gloriana, is a psychopath's grotesque delusion, the materialization of death. Given the few onstage spectators, Hoffman's acts of revenge are thus shown to be unequivocally private spectacles feeding his narcissism. Disguise and secrecy allow him to prolong the pleasures afforded by vengeance. When Saxony, Rodorick, and Mathias chance upon Hoffman's solitary cave, grimly guarded by the skeletons, they enter Hoffman's interior world, secretive, private, perverse, where festishized cadavers are left unburied. Martha, Otho's mother, describes it as "the dismal'st grove / That ever eye beheld ... Some basiliskes, or poysonoous serpents den!" (ll. 1999-2000, 2005 [V.i]). If anything, the remote grove, in which the spectacle of revenge is entombed, obstructs the public gaze. The play exposes the revolting pleasures that Hoffman takes in inflicting violence and gives us no vantage point from which to relate to his spectacle.

If we view, however, the survivors as usurping Hoffman's role of revenger later in the plot, then the play's implicit ethical stance toward revenge quickly loses ethical ground. The ministers of justice, namely Martha, Saxony, Rodorick and Mathias, problematically employ the same vengeful language that motivates the villain. Upon realizing that her son's bones hang beside the remains of Hoffman's father, Martha tells Lorrique, "Let them hang a while / Hope of revenge in wrath doth make mee smile" (ll. 2129-30[V.i]). Is she also not performing for a cadaver? Furthermore, Mathias advocates imitating Hoffman's diabolical deception to carry out vengeance:

> Revenge should have proportion,
> By slye deceit he acted every wronge,
> And by deceit I would have him intrapt;
> Then the revenge were fit, just, and square. (ll. 2200-3 [V.i])

With geometric terms, Mathias appeals to the economy of exchange, even as his mode of vengeance mirrors Hoffman's madness. To swear vengeance against Hoffman, the revengers form a ring around Lorrique and lay their right hands on his head (ll. 2245-47 [V.i]). This circle centred on his head creates a human crown, anticipating the repetition of the ghastly coronation ritual that initiated the action. If the play has up till now exposed the perverse narcissism driving the spectacle of vengeance, its finale appears to re-mystify revenge by depicting it as the basis of social contracts for establishing community. The co-revengers serve each other as the other of belief. The concluding coronation ritual seeks justification for a brutal act that the play earlier on did not allow us to accept. Now, it promises to restore the symbolic order, left in shambles by the tyrant Hoffman, who rules Prussia. This crown is a fitting emblem of revenge itself, which, like Fortune's wheel, comes full circle and at the same time promises no end. Is the spectacle an ethically fashioned irony, which bitterly foregrounds the perverse pleasures behind all kinds of vengeance? Or is the irony only a further obfuscation designed to sanctify a "purer" revenge beyond that which Hoffman has perpetrated? I would tend to go along with the latter case: the play's probing critique of revenge gives way to the acceptance of a socially expedient vengeance, as though Chettle were, after indulging in Hoffman's mad antics, salvaging for his spectators a justified, credible mode of vengeance.

Hamlet questions the ethics motivating the spectacle of revenge with more generic sophistication and psychological depth, certainly, than does *Hoffman*. The

play gradually undercuts the oppressive presence of the spectral spectator established in the first act. This other of belief, upon whom Hamlet's revenge depends, diminishes in influence as the play progresses: in the scene with Gertrude, only Hamlet can see and hear the ghost, and in the graveyard scene, a natural place for supernatural visitations and hauntings, there are only earthly remains—the play has finally exorcised the purgatorial spirit. The other of belief decays and cools into Yorick's skull, which does not return Hamlet's philosophically subdued gaze. In stark contrast to *Antonio's Revenge*, the father's ghost does not gain admittance to the theatrical death of his murderer. Why should he be absent from this momentous scene? Perhaps because the spectacle is not engineered for him, the other of belief. Without premeditation, Hamlet reacts to the first strike of Claudius. He is not carrying out revenge by settling old scores, but retaliating in the heat of moment to someone else's staged spectacle. With the ghost's absence, the final scene encourages us to forget revenge. The offstage spectators are thus dissuaded from viewing the finale from the point of view of Hamlet's father. The finale is not Hamlet's spectacle, in contrast to Hieronomo's, Antonio's, or even Martha's, but, more significantly, that of Claudius and Laertes.

As a result, the play calls into question much more sharply than does *The Tragedy of Hoffman* the way in which spectacles are deployed to legitimate the narcissism and violence of social authority. The duel between Hamlet and Laertes stages the early modern variant on the aristocratic tournament, Kojève's master-and-servant struggle for imaginary supremacy. It mirrors Hamlet's father's formal combat with old Fortinbras, a duel whose terms were "ratified by law and heraldry" (I.i.99). We are prepared to suspect the veneer of noble ceremony as early as Hamlet's diatribe against "customary suits" (I.ii.79-89) and prepared to discredit revenge couched in armorial garb as early as the speech on the "rugged Pyrrhus" (II.ii.450). The honour of Pyrrhus's vengeance is undermined by his bloodthirsty savagery. He has "sable arms" signifying his "black purpose" (477-78), while his complexion is "smeared / with heraldry more dismal": "Head to foot, / Now is he total gules, horridly tricked / With blood of fathers, mothers, daughters, sons" (480-83). Heraldic discourse, in directly betokening narcissistic violence, loses its power to legitimate Pyrrhus's deeds. Laertes, the naïve revenger, has an appropriately naïve attitude toward ceremony and spectacle. His desire "to cut [Hamlet's] throat i' th' church" (IV.vii.144) expresses less blasphemy than a confidence in public support for his violent cause. He intends a noble sacrifice that should be recognized by the community; conversely, he is

outraged by the fact that his father received no heraldic funeral, "nor hatchment o'er his bones, / No noble rite nor formal ostentation" (IV.v.239-40), and curses the Doctor roundly for presenting not enough "ceremony" at Ophelia's interment (V.i.231-52). Try as he might, Hamlet cannot—unlike Laertes—find ready belief in revenge through spectacle. Neither Pyrrhus's speech nor the Mousetrap can incite him to action. Indeed, Hamlet's meditation on Fortinbras's "rousing military parade", in Girard's words (p. 288), only serves to expose the manipulation inherent in heraldic display, which moves men to dare death and danger for an "eggshell" (*Ham.*, IV.iv.56). By the time we arrive at the finale we understand that Hamlet has repudiated the typical revenger's role by not orchestrating a self-validating spectacle. Spectacles are not vehicles of justice but are designed to entrap the gaze of the other. As the scene closes, the play seems to communicate that the revenger must break the spell of the spectacle if the cycle of vengeance is to broken,[10] just as Laertes deviates from his allocated role at the last moment to seek forgiveness.

Although Hamlet refuses to stage a heraldic display for his own vengeance, this metatheatrical play does not abandon the logic of spectacle entirely. In a way, this play's finale commits an ethical relapse not unlike that of *Hoffman*, but far subtler. If individuals are warned not to take revenge into their own hands, the play still displaces the principle of symbolic reciprocity onto a higher, albeit inscrutable, plane. The lesson we learn is that the potential revenger should bide his time in waiting for the heavens to restore the imbalances and injustices within the symbolic order. Before the finale, Hamlet resigns himself to providence:

> let us know,
> Our indiscretion sometime serves us well
> When our deep plots do pall; and that should learn us
> There's a divinity that shapes our ends,
> Rough-hew them how we will. (V.ii.7-12)

In other words, the potential revenger should submit to his role in a higher spectacle of divine retaliation. Those who take violence into their own hands are "Hoist with [their] own petar" (III.iv.207), as Laertes realizes too late: "Why as a woodcock to mine own springe, Osric, / I am justly killed with mine own treachery" (V.ii.336-37). Though killed in the final scene, Hamlet is not killed with his own treachery but resigns himself philosophically to fate. Horatio, the sur-

10 Girard posits that the play urges us to break out of the ceremony of the sacrificed scapegoat if we are to forge a better society.

viving other of belief with whom we identify, will "Truly deliver" to Fortinbras Hamlet's narrative of "purposes mistook / Fall'n on th'inventors' heads" (426-28). He bears witness to retribution crystallizing from apparently contingent events. As John Holloway says about the play, "chance turns into larger design, randomness becomes retribution" (cited in Kermode, p. 1188). Are we to believe that if we wait long enough, a divinely orchestrated spectacle ensnaring the villain in his own web will enact our vengeance for us? The Big Other—God, providence, fate, karma, etc.—will not only take care of the symbolic order but also realize quite conveniently the revenger's own narcissistic wishes. Because the Big Other ultimately runs the show, Hamlet's own surplus pleasure is concealed behind the force of necessity. But really, why should the finale correspond with Hamlet's vindication, when the court has witnessed him murder the king. He is a traitor. As Greenblatt observes, Hamlet does not "establish unequivocal and unambiguous public confirmation of his uncle's guilt" (p. 1664).

In this string of revenge tragedies that I am examining, *The Spanish Tragedy* rather unexpectedly offers the most compelling ethical platform from which to view the genre. At first glance, it seems to advocate a belief in revenge comparable to that of *Antonio's Revenge*, in that its final spectacle is also performed in front of a spectral spectator. From the play's opening, the ghost Andrea, in the company of Revenge, eagerly awaits the death of Balthazar, who killed him in battle.[11] At the play's conclusion, when the carnage has reached its climax in Hieronimo's suicide, the ghost exclaims, "Aye, these were spectacles to please my soul!" (IV.v.12). Andrea, whom Revenge calls the chorus of the tragedy, gives the offstage spectator cues as to how to respond throughout the plot: from impatience when the action slows down, to satisfaction when the finale provides the long-delayed vengeance. Because this onstage spectator from the supernatural realm tempts us, the spectators, to identify with his superior perspective on the dramatic action, is the play not manipulating us into guaranteeing the credibility of Hieronimo's vengeful actions?

Not entirely. Although the ghost of Andrea gives the spectator more to identify with than does the corpse of Hoffman's father, his credibility falls deeper and deeper into disrepute from his opening monologue. Andrea confesses that in Hades he has been the victim of administrative indecision. Minos, Aeacus,

11 See Hillman's "Out of their Classical Depth" for a genealogy of the pagan eschatology that is superimposed upon the nominally Christian world of early English tragedy, including *The Spanish Tragedy*.

and Rhadamanth cannot reach an agreement as to where he should dwell in the afterlife—with lovers or soldiers. The three judges thus send him to Pluto, the infernal king, to pronounce his doom. Before the king and queen, Andrea exhibits courteous humility, so much so that Proserpine begs her husband to be allowed to decide the shade's fate. Having received royal permission, she sends him to Revenge, with whom he watches the ensuing tragedy. The climax of this tragedy, the spectacle of revenge, which in no uncertain terms pleases Andrea's soul (IV.v.12), and which has presumably been staged for him by omniscient Revenge at Proserpine's bidding, has come about through arbitrarily circuitous means. If it were not for the ineptitude of the three infernal judges and the caprice of a king who foregoes his duty to indulge his wife, there might have been no vengeance. Andrea, whose initial status in the underworld seems dubious, quickly finds himself in the Queen's favour. Why? He has made her smile (I.i.78). The god Revenge, like Hieronimo, is a kind of Marshal whose spectacles obeys royal whim; he does not serve any ultimate legal code, supernatural audit, or impartial authority.

What is shocking about Andrea's spectatorship is that this other of belief has not entered into any contract with Hieronimo, who for all intents and purposes labours to avenge his son's murder, no one else's. Why does Horatio not haunt his father or at least attend the final spectacle? Does he not rest in peace, now that his murderer has been violently dispatched to Hades? These questions are left unanswered. We are not even prompted to ask them. Horatio's death, which appears significantly more unjust than does Andrea's, has little bearing on underworld politics or law, and the retaliation against Balthazar satisfies less a supernatural accounting for Hieronimo's family than the desires of another shade, whose death on the battlefield hardly warrants "credible" vengeance. In contrast to the subsequent Elizabethan revenge tragedies previously discussed, all of which offer the possibility of an ultimate—even supernatural—justice where all accounts are balanced in the symbolic order, *The Spanish Tragedy* rather radically punctures the fantasy of the Big Other in the person of Andrea. Who is Andrea that he can preside over the doom of the dead? In the final scene, Andrea says to Revenge that he will beg Proserpine to permit him to dispense justice to his friends (Horatio and company) and foes (Balthazar and company). After describing what rewards his friends deserve, he requests Revenge to let him judge his enemies and then, as if given this responsibility, delivers their sentences of eternal torment. Revenge does not hesitate in going along with the desires of this

self-appointed and self-interested judge—an ambitious courtier who has made Proserpine smile, an unsuitable substitute for the noble Astraea or the blindfolded Themis. It is not just that Hieronimo's spectacle has been performed for the surplus pleasure of another shade, but that this shade has so easily usurped the divine office of administering justice, pronouncing doom on others. What would Hieronimo think of Andrea after suggesting earlier by his "Vindicta mihi" speech (III.xiii.1-4) that a Christian judge presides over all human actions? The play thus exposes the Big Other, the Other of others, as an alienating, arbitrary narcissism that the revenger unwittingly serves. The Big Other is not beyond the imaginary register of revenge but already implicated in it. To view Hieronimo's spectacle from the perspective of Andrea is to realize the incredible and discreditable contingency of vengeance.

The Spanish Tragedy, despite being the recognized progenitor of Tudor revenge tragedy, holds a strange and disturbed relation to its progeny. Subsequent dramatists liberally plunder Kyd's motifs in bits and pieces but avoid and conceal his grim vision of collapsing revenge into the Big Other. *The Spanish Tragedy* offers spectators such a comfortless view of the ultimate horizon of vengeance that an entire genre emerged on the Tudor stage to recuperate the fantasy of a revenger serving justice. Andrea is the traumatic spectral spectator that the others of belief in subsequent Tudor plays strive to displace and domesticate if not exorcise. Kyd creates a persistent nightmare from which Tudor revenge drama desperately tries to awaken.

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