

NOTES ON THE GENRE OF *HAMLET*

Drama – Tragedy - Revenge tragedy

Drama: it's neither narrative (a novel, or an epic poem) nor lyrical poetry [expression of subjective]

Tragedy: Requirements of classical tragedy:

- “serious action”, usually the downfall and resultant misery or death of a person of significance (since the late 1800s, high rank has not been a prerequisite) [Guerin p. 36]
- tragic hero = a person of heroic proportions going down to defeat under circumstances too powerful for him to cope with

Hamlet's tragic flaw = overintellectual detachment and indecision (cf. Macbeth = vaulting and unscrupulous ambition; Lear = childish willfulness and impulsiveness)

Hamlet was probably written 1600 or 1601. Elizabethan tragedy took the tragedies of Seneca (1st century) as a model.

Senecan tragedy compared to *Hamlet* → *Hamlet* uses one of the key themes in Senecan tragedy: vengeance. It shows a Senecan climate of corruption and malignity dominated society. It contains some Senecan violent speeches, as well as a restless ghost. But unlike Seneca it shows physical violence on stage instead of having it reported by "longwinded messengers with a passion for detail"

Against tragedy:

E. M. Tillyard questions the classification of *Hamlet* as tragedy (also L. Abel): it is not essentially tragic, it should be considered a “problem play”

p. 176 In tragedy, motives are unambiguous and life is depicted with clarity and force.

In *Hamlet* the emphasis is on the variety and complexity of human thought and experience, and so the play is removed from the realm of tragedy

Tragedy requires three “types of feeling or situation”: suffering, sacrificial purgation and spiritual renewal. The first two occur in *Hamlet* but the hero does not experience any kind of spiritual renewal or enlightenment

Revenge tragedy

For some critics: the revenge tragedy is a subdivision of the "tragedy of blood" (tragedy of the macabre, but for F. Bowers "tragedy of blood" is a designation for the external characteristics of violence, blood (p. 62-3)

In "revenge tragedy", vengeance is the real dramatic motivation behind the action

the audience is chiefly interested in the events which lead to the necessary revenge for murder, and then the revenger's actions in accordance with his vow.

revenge must be the cause of the catastrophe, and its start must not be delayed beyond the crisis

The Spanish Tragedy (1585x1589) attributed to Thomas Kyd, is perhaps the first significant revenge tragedy in Elizabethan drama.

Spanish Tragedy first popularized revenge as a tragic motive on the Elizabethan popular stage by using blood-revenge [revenge in kind] as the core of its dramatic action" (Bowers p. 65)

Elements in common between *Spanish Tragedy* and *Hamlet*

ghosts of the murdered urging revenge

a hesitation on the part of the avenger (Hieronimo in *Spanish Tragedy*, Hamlet in *Hamlet*)

a delay in proceeding to his vengeance

feigned or actual madness

antagonist's counter-intrigue may occupy a prominent position in the Plot

suicide (Isabella and Hieronimo in *Spanish Tragedy*, Ophelia in *Hamlet*)

philosophic soliloquies

sensational murders

dead bodies on stage

What is new in *Hamlet*?

"The Prince himself seems to step outside the conventions of revenge tragedy to reflect on his own predicament and comment on his own volatile impromptu performances" (Dobson & Wells p.181)

"... explores the theme of revenge even further, by focusing on the protagonist's delay and his resistance to action, violence, and blind retaliation (S. Massai in Dobson & Wells p. 377)

Shakespeare re-examines the revenge mechanisms of the revenge play, not so much for a more efficient spectacularity, but rather for its internal logic: the purpose is to examine how it is made and why (Melchiori p. 419)

Act 1 contains question "why the ghost?", its answer will not have a definitive form

Before Act 1 finishes, another question is raised "what is the ghost? how reliable it is?"

This starts further investigations over the other characters: is his uncle really guilty?

is Hamlet really mad? Polonius asks Reynaldo to inquire about Laertes

The play loses the character of the cruel deception games needed by a revenge plot and become a passionate exploration of the human condition

The revenge mechanism is dismantled in order to study the origin and nature of all its parts: -> a new structural of drama =

not so much a conflict between two opposing forces that seek power or seek destruction other through deception and violence,

but an interrogation over the nature of these forces, of their motives, and ultimately over the motivations of every human action

From an interrogation into the mechanism of revenge, to an inquiry into the internal mechanisms of the complex and mysterious machine that is man, his psychological motivations, his socio-cultural conditions (Melchiori p. 419)

Hunter: Revengers can be villains or virtuous characters.

Virtuous revenger : shows a divided duty: to pursue individual justice and to avoid damnation = the ethical paradox of the good man acting inside bad society

The contradiction of these inner and outer commands pointed towards madness: madness in Hieronimo, Hamlet, Ferdinand's lycanthropy (*The Duchess of Malfi*) indicate an unnatural fragmentation of consciousness, a liberation of integral aspects of the mind normally kept under control

In the virtuous-revenger pattern, a political order is destroyed so that a quality of character be exposed and an individual crime be punished, a personal wrong be righted. Ethics is given an absolute priority

Revenge cleanses the state but not with a view to seize political power. They move from a marginal or detached position towards the centre which controls the political and moral ideology of the world

Hamlet as revenger: an educated Humanist, with a refined ethical distress, who finds himself caught in the same self-conscious double-bind of 'damned if you do' and 'damned if you don't' as is Hieronimo, but unlike Hieronimo his double attitude toward justice is rather psychological and raises less the issue of 'what can I do' and more that of 'How am I to understand what I have to do' (p. 426).

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