

A KIND OF WILD MEDICINE: REVENGE AS REMEDY IN EARLY MODERN ENGLAND

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ABSTRACT

Within the rich theatrical legacy left by the English Renaissance, revenge may be the best-known dramatic motif. Not only does revenge lie at the heart of the most famous tragedies by Shakespeare and his contemporaries, including *Hamlet*, but it also plays a crucial role in the period's other dramatic genres, including histories, comedies, and romances. Critical discussions of this phenomenon have tended to view it in legal and political terms, but revengers in early modern drama repeatedly describe revenge primarily as a medicine to cure illness, particularly that of melancholy. This essay examines the rhetoric of revenge as remedy in light of paradigm shifts in early modern medicine, and argues that its prominence and ambivalent appeal in the period's drama suggests an urgent pressure to explore powerful but dangerous strategies for alleviating suffering, with roots in early modern medical upheaval.

KEY WORDS: Revenge, drama, Renaissance, William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, medicine, melancholy.

RESUMEN

De la gran riqueza teatral que nos ha legado el Renacimiento inglés, la venganza es quizás el motivo dramático mejor conocido. La venganza no sólo yace en el núcleo de las tragedias más famosas de Shakespeare y de sus contemporáneos, incluyendo *Hamlet*, sino que además juega un papel crucial en otros géneros dramáticos del período, incluyendo historias, comedias y romances. La crítica literaria sobre este fenómeno siempre ha mostrado una tendencia a estudiarlo en términos políticos y legales; pero en incontables ocasiones los personajes vengadores en el teatro moderno temprano describen la venganza fundamentalmente como una medicina para sanar enfermedades, en concreto la de la melancolía. Este ensayo examina la retórica de la venganza como remedio a la luz de los nuevos paradigmas en la medicina moderna temprana, y sostiene que su ambivalente y destacado atractivo en el teatro de la época manifiesta una apremiante necesidad de descubrir métodos potentes, aunque peligrosos, de mitigar el sufrimiento, a raíz de los cambios que sufre la medicina moderna temprana.

PALABRAS CLAVE: venganza, teatro, Renacimiento, William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, medicina, melancolía.



Be comforted.
Let's make us medicines of our great revenge
To cure this deadly grief.
William Shakespeare, *Macbeth* (4.3.214-16)¹

In the crowded landscape of English Renaissance theater, the motif of revenge stands out as conspicuously pervasive. Not only does revenge lie at the heart of the most famous tragedies by Shakespeare and his contemporaries, such as *Hamlet*, but it also plays a crucial role in the period's other dramatic genres, including histories, comedies, and romances.² Critics and scholars have long debated the reasons behind its explosive popularity in the period. For many, Francis Bacon established the framework for theorizing revenge when he famously described it as "a kind of wild justice": in the absence of external support, revengers take the law into their own hands and refashion it into an instrument to resolve unpunished grievances.³ While revenge in early modern drama inevitably becomes social and political, however, it is typically prompted by profoundly personal suffering. Revengers depict themselves as afflicted figures who have been driven by violence into a melancholic madness, and find that they can only cure themselves through recourse to an equal and opposing violence.⁴ Characters repeatedly voice a notion of revenge as healing, offering remedy to pain. As Malcolm tells Macduff in the epigraph above, revenge holds out the promise of medicines capable of curing even deadly grief.

If revenge offered the possibility of a curative power, though, this remedial status was deeply problematic. Bacon insisted "This is certain, that a man that studieth revenge keeps his own wounds green, which otherwise would heal and do well."⁵ Turning from his legal vocabulary to a medical metaphor, Bacon implicitly suggests a variation on his famous coinage: revenge, throughout the period's writings, is a kind of wild medicine, curing and destroying indistinguishably. As such, it bears a striking resemblance to the other wild medicine exploding into controversial popularity at the time: Paracelsian pharmacy, with its powerful but poisonous

¹ For suggestions during the writing of this essay, I would like to thank Matthew Greenfield and William Stenhouse. William SHAKESPEARE, *Macbeth*, *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt, Walter Cohen, Jean E. Howard, & Katharine Eisaman Maus (New York: Norton, 1997). Further references to other plays by Shakespeare, unless specified otherwise, will be to this edition.

² Revenge features heavily in the period's nondramatic literary genres as well, but this essay will focus particularly on the highly visible realm of the popular theater.

³ Francis BACON, "Of Revenge," *The Philosophical Works of Francis Bacon*, ed. John M. Robertson (Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries, 1970) 740.

⁴ In conceiving of early modern revenge as at least partly (if dangerously) restorative, I concur with Harry Keyishian that critics have too quickly assumed the period's condemnation of revenge, and overlooked the affirmative power often attributed to it. See KEYISHIAN, *The Shapes of Revenge: Victimization, Vengeance, and Vindictiveness in Shakespeare* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities, 1995), esp. 1-2.

⁵ BACON, "On Revenge" 740.

chemical remedies.⁶ Dramatic representations of revenge underline its conflicted status. Even as characters on the stage proclaim the medical benefits of their vengeance, playwrights call attention to gaps between intentions and consequences, and between perceived and actual effects. The prominence and ambivalent appeal of revenge, especially as explored and articulated throughout the period's drama, suggest an urgent pressure to explore powerful but dangerous strategies for alleviating suffering, with roots in early modern medical upheaval.

1. PURGING GRIEF WITH VIOLENCE IN *THE SPANISH TRAGEDY*

Confronted with a “world of grief” after discovering the murder of his son Horatio, Hieronimo in *The Spanish Tragedy* immediately seeks solace in thoughts of retaliation: “To know the author were some ease of grief,/ For in revenge my heart would find relief” (2.5.38-41).⁷ Looking ahead to the revenge he will carry out, he similarly vows “Then will I joy amidst my discontent,/ Till then my sorrow never shall be spent” (2.5.51-6). Framed in the opposing symmetries of his easy end-rhymes, retribution becomes a form of cancellation; grief turns into relief, and discontent is spent. To Hieronimo, in fact, revenge is the only force that can eradicate grief. “But wherefore waste I mine unfruitful words,” he wonders, “When naught but blood will satisfy my woes?” (3.7.67-8). Blood itself, mirroring and negating the blood spilled by Horatio’s killers, is imagined as capable of undoing pain, holding out the promise of relief, joy, and satisfaction.⁸

While Hieronimo meditates revenge, his wife Isabella pores over the contents of her garden with her maid. Seeking an herbal remedy for grief, she finds all medicines impotent in the face of her loss:

So that you say this herb will purge the eye,
And this the head?
Ah, but none of them will purge the heart:
No, there’s no medicine left for my disease,
Nor any physic to recure the dead. (3.8.1-5)

⁶ I have discussed the ambivalent status of Paracelsian medicine in *Drugs and Theater in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford UP, forthcoming, 2005); see also Jonathan Gil HARRIS, *Foreign Bodies and the Body Politic: Discourses of Social Pathology in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998).

⁷ Thomas KYD, *The Spanish Tragedy*, ed. Philip Edwards (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1959). All following citations from the play will refer to this edition.

⁸ Describing Hieronimo as a failed mourner who “suffers from a sense of the inadequacy of language,” Peter Sacks discusses the relationship between grief and revenge in the play from a psychoanalytic perspective; see “Where Words Prevail Not: Grief, Revenge, and Language in Kyd and Shakespeare,” *English Literary History* 49.3 (1982): 576-601, 582.

In response to her grief, Isabella seeks purgation, the standard form of cure in the established Renaissance medical tradition inherited from the Greek physician Galen.⁹ Galenic medicine held that illness stemmed from an imbalance in the body's fluids, or humors—blood, phlegm, bile, and black bile—and that the path back to normal health consisted of rediscovering that balance, typically by ridding the body of excess humors. Although Isabella's surfeit of sadness might strike modern readers as an emotional, rather than physical, malady, an early modern understanding of the passions would have rendered this distinction tenuous, if not meaningless.¹⁰ Not only were the mind and the body understood to be profoundly permeable to each other, but melancholy, or black bile, was itself one of the humors coursing through the body, simultaneously a corporeal and spiritual phenomenon. As much a material substance as a mood, Isabella's grief can—at least potentially—be forcibly purged from her heart.

Although Isabella does not play a direct role in carrying out the play's revenge, her grief, and her reflections on its incurability by standard means, are crucial to its development. Not only does she reflect Hieronimo's own powerful sense of bereavement, but her resulting suicide spurs on his response. "Bethink thyself, Hieronimo," he reflects,

Recall thy wits, recompt thy former wrongs
Thou hast receiv'd by murder of thy son,
And lastly, not least, how Isabel,
Once his mother and thy dearest wife,
All woe-begone for him hath slain herself.
Behoves thee then, Hieronimo, to be reveng'd... (4.3.21-7)

Although Horatio's death remains the first cause of Hieronimo's revenge, Isabella's death offers another, no less powerful motive for recompense by violence. As the murderers' second victim, albeit indirectly, she multiplies his losses and increases the urgency of his need for retaliation.

Beyond intensifying Hieronimo's motives for revenge, however, Isabella also—and more importantly—offers a telling vocabulary for articulating what he hopes

⁹ On the Galenic medical tradition in the Renaissance, see especially Nancy SIRAISI, *Medieval and Early Renaissance Medicine: An Introduction to Knowledge and Practice* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1990). On the significance of Galenic medicine, and especially purgation, to early modern culture and literature, see especially Gail KERN PASTER, *The Body Embarrassed: Drama and the Disciplines of Shame in Early Modern England* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1993).

¹⁰ On the inseparability of mind and body in early modern thought, see Gail Kern PASTER, *The Body Embarrassed*, & Michael SCHOENFELDT, *Bodies and Selves in Early Modern England: Physiology and Inwardness in Spenser, Shakespeare, Herbert, and Milton* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999). On contemporary ideas about the passions, see especially *Reading the Early Modern Passions: Essays in the Cultural History of Emotion*, ed. Gail Kern Paster, Katharine Rowe, & Mary Floyd-Wilson (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 2004).

to gain by it. Although her reaction to Horatio's death takes a different path than Hieronimo's—exploding internally, into suicide, rather than externally, into murder—the grief that they share becomes the moving force behind both. Her formulation of her need as a quest for purgative medicines, then, offers an important parallel to, and model for, Hieronimo's quest for solace through revenge. In fact, Hieronimo's own health deteriorates rapidly over the course of the play: the melancholy into which he is plunged after Horatio's death escalates into a full-blown madness, which erupts into frenzied rants and hallucinations when petitioners come to him to seek his legal help. This madness, which seems to have been one of the most striking and popular aspects of the play to early audiences, identifies Hieronimo's suffering with a medical crisis.¹¹ Yet instead of turning to herbal remedies, as Isabella does, Hieronimo seeks to purge his melancholy and madness through action. Externalizing his suffering, he rids himself of it by violently transferring it onto those who first caused it, Balthazar and Lorenzo.

The play's dramatic logic enshrines this notion of symmetrical cure: as Lorenzo notes, of his plan to have Pedringano kill Serberine, "And thus one ill another must expulse" (3.2.107). Using retaliatory violence to expel the pain resulting from violence, revenge becomes a new form of medicine for grief, with an especially dangerous purgative power. From Hieronimo's perspective, it seems to succeed as a remedy: after having carried out his murders, he tells his stricken onlookers that "my heart is satisfied" (4.4.129). Whether or not the play corroborates his belief, however, is a more complicated question. Although Hieronimo, like the play's framing figure of Don Andrea, expresses pleasure at the end of the play, he, like his victims, is dead, and a new pair of bereaved fathers is left to mourn their own violent losses. The play attains a sort of equilibrium—there are, of course, no murderers left to punish—but it is an uneasy equilibrium in which griefs are ultimately multiplied, rather than extinguished.

2. CURING POISONS WITH POISONS: MELANCHOLY, REVENGE, AND EARLY MODERN MEDICINE

Hieronimo may be the first notable Renaissance revenger to tumble into a combination of melancholy and madness, but he is hardly the last. The melancholy revenger proved a compelling and generative figure for the stage.¹² Others who fol-

¹¹ Allusions to the play in contemporary drama, for instance, tended to emphasize Hieronimo's madness: Dekker refers to "mad Ieronimoes part," and to "when thou ranst mad for the death of Horatio." Thomas DEKKER, *Satiromastix* 4.1.131, 1.2.355-6.

¹² Bridget Gellert Lyons discusses "melancholy malcontents in tragedy" as a recurring literary category, although she does not distinguish the melancholy revenger as a specific type in itself. See *Voices of Melancholy: Studies in Literary Treatment of Melancholy in Renaissance England* (London: Routledge, 1971), 34-44.



lowed in Hieronimo's footsteps include Bosola and Ferdinand in Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*, Flamineo in the same author's *The White Devil*, Vindice in *The Revenger's Tragedy*, Antonio in Marston's *Antonio and Mellida* and *Antonio's Revenge*, and, most famously, Hamlet.¹³ In the less-examined realm of comic revenge, the bastard Don John in Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing* attempts to cure his "very melancholy disposition" by taking revenge against Claudio: "That young start up hath all the glory of my overthrow. If I can cross him in any way I bless myself every way" (2.1.5; 1.3.52-3). In *Twelfth Night*, a play whose principal characters are ruled by "the melancholy god" (2.4.72), even apparently jolly figures such as Sir Toby, Maria, and Feste plot revenge against Malvolio to stave off the melancholy malaise endemic to their household. If the appeal of revenge consisted, in large part, of its curative potential, melancholy was the signal ailment that invited its treatment.

Of the four humors in the Galenic system, melancholy was considered to be the most dangerous.¹⁴ Cold, dry, and identified with death, it was the prevalent humor of aging men with little or no life left in them. Like a drug, melancholy was ambivalent in its effects; although in small doses it could be intoxicating, in excess its dull chill could poison the body's interior workings, resulting in diseases such as cancers and other tumors, epilepsy, ulcers, and paralysis.¹⁵ While any humoral excess had to be purged in order for the body to return to balance, the uniquely dangerous properties of melancholy made the case for its expulsion especially urgent. For those suffering from violence-induced grief, retaliation could be cathartic in more ways than one. Planning and perpetrating revenge involved transforming passive grief into active anger, or choler. The two humors were closely connected, both physiologically and linguistically. Melancholy, or black bile, was a variation upon choler, or bile. Since both humors were dry, the primary distinction between

¹³ The authorship of *The Revenger's Tragedy* is uncertain, but recent critical consensus leans towards Middleton; see, for example, R.V. HOLDSWORTH, "Introduction" and "*The Revenger's Tragedy* as a Middleton Play," in *Three Revenge Tragedies*, ed. R.V. Holdsworth (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1990) 11-25, 79-105.

¹⁴ As an example of early modern preoccupation with melancholy, see especially Robert BURTON's *Anatomy of Melancholy* (Oxford, 1621). For a thorough account of early depictions of melancholy, see Raymond KLIBANSKY, Erwin PANOFSKY, & Fritz SAXL, *Saturn and Melancholy: Studies in the History of Natural Philosophy, Religion, and Art* (London: Thomas Nelson, 1964). Lyons gives an overview of the humor and its literary treatment in *Voices of Melancholy*; recent psychoanalytic and feminist critical accounts include Lynn ENTERLINE, *Tears of Narcissus: Melancholia and Masculinity in Early Modern England* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1995), and Juliana SCHIESARI, *The Gendering of Melancholy* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1992).

¹⁵ Aristotle likened its effects to those of alcohol, noting that "wine in large quantities seems to produce the characteristics which we ascribe to the melancholic, and when it is drunk produces a variety of qualities, making men ill-tempered, kindly, merciful, or reckless [...]" ARISTOTLE, *Problems* XXX, "Problems Connected with Thought, Intelligence, and Wisdom," in *Problems: Books XXII-XXXVIII*, trans. W.S. Hett (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1937) 953a. This capacity for intoxication explained the identification of melancholy with intellectual, and especially literary, gifts, lending it a curious prestige along with its stigma.



them was of temperature: through heat, melancholy could theoretically be concocted into cholera, a more lively and pro-active humor, whose dangerous effects were likely to be taken out on others rather than on the self. Marlowe's Tamburlaine, for instance, seeks to avert his grief at his wife's death by turning to a raging fury and burning down the city where she died: "As I have conquer'd kingdoms with my sword,/ This cursed town will I consume with fire,/ Because this place bereft me of my love."¹⁶ Just before his death, not much later, his physician confirms that he suffers from an excess of cholera: "Your artiers, which amongst the veins convey/ The lively spirits which the heart engenders,/ Are parch'd and void of spirit" (5.3.93-5).

From a different perspective, blood-letting—which revenge tended to entail, whether literally or figuratively—was often seen as medically therapeutic, not only for purposes of physical purgation, but for curing a tumultuous mind. Discussing the treatment of wounds, Cornelius Schilander argued that "the blood is not forthwith to be stopped, but suffered to issue foorth by little and little, till the boyling heat of the blood caused of anger, or some great trouble of mind, be quieted or calmed."¹⁷ Although the blood let by revengers was not usually their own, the notion of the operation's purgative function seems to have carried over, offering the possibility of bringing about similar results.

Beyond its capacity for transforming melancholy into rage, and rage into calm, the appeal of violence conjured an idea from folk-medicine, newly re-emerging in early modern medical theory, of curing through similitude rather than opposition. If melancholy was a destructive substance flowing through the body, conquering it might require exposure to similar destructive substances. Onstage revengers demonstrate this idea in practice: not only do they turn to violent aggression for solace and relief, but the vast majority of them rely on powerful, dangerous drugs to enact their vengeance. If the melancholy humors flowing through the bodies of revengers constituted figurative, internal poisons with the potential to wreak havoc on both themselves and their victims, these poisons were mirrored by the external, literal poisons that were revengers' weapons of choice.

The preoccupation with poisons in revenge tragedies is striking both for its intensity and for the lack of critical commentary that it has generated.¹⁸ Poisons

¹⁶ Christopher MARLOWE, *The Second Part of Tamburlaine the Great*, in *Christopher Marlowe: The Complete Plays*, ed. J.B. Steane (London: Penguin, 1969), 2.4.146-9; subsequent references are to this edition. On this episode, and Tamburlaine's humoral constitution more broadly, see Matthew GREENFIELD, "Christopher Marlowe's Wound Knowledge," *PMLA* 119.2 (2004): 233-246.

¹⁷ Cornelius SCHILANDER, *Cornelius Schilander His Chirurgie* (London, 1596), A4r, cited in Matthew GREENFIELD, "Christopher Marlowe's Wound Knowledge," *PMLA* 119.2 (2004): 233-246, 241.

¹⁸ I have explored this issue at greater length in *Drugs and Theater in Early Modern England*; my discussion of poisons here draws on material which I develop towards a slightly different argument there. See also HARRIS, *Foreign Bodies and the Body Politic*, and Fredson BOWERS, "The Audience and the Poisoners of Elizabethan Tragedy," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 36 (1937): 491-504.

pervade the genre, in a wide range of forms that can be terrifying, ludicrous, haunting, melodramatic, and sometimes darkly comic. Characters in revenge drama die from poisoned ears, poisoned swords, poisoned wine, poisoned medicine, poisoned gruel, poisoned books, poisoned paintings, poisoned skulls, poisoned flowers, and poisoned handkerchiefs, among other devices. In tragicomic variations, apparent poisons at times turn out to be only sleeping potions; with a darker twist, sleeping potions can themselves prove poisonous. Poison, in the drama, is a ubiquitous and imperceptible threat. As the religious writer William Crashaw wrote of its unsuspecting victim,

if he misse it in meate, he may haue it in his drinke, if in both, he may haue it in his water, if in all, his turne may be serued in his apparell, nay, in any peece of it, from head to foote; if all these be free, he may be dispatched in his scents or perfumes, nay, in his seate, or saddle, & if Papists be about him, he is not sure that the Bread and Wine in the blessed Sacrament are safe, nor the Booke he opens to reade in: In a word, he eates, drinks, puts on, vseth, or toucheth nothing in the world, but may kill him.¹⁹

Identifying poisons not only with the inevitable insecurity of life, but especially with the active treachery associated with Catholics, Crashaw implicitly echoes the dark warnings of revenge dramas, in which sinister Italian characters and settings render self-protection both crucial and impossible.

At one level, as Crashaw's quote suggests, the fascination with poison in revenge drama reflects broader a contemporary anxiety about this threat. As a Protestant island in a sea of Catholic nations, the English saw themselves as constantly vulnerable to invasive foreign dangers, and rumors of poisoning attempts flourished. In 1594, Queen Elizabeth's doctor Roderigo Lopez was convicted of attempting to poison her medicines; in 1598 Edward Squire was identified with a Jesuit plot to poison her saddle; and at various points the Earl of Leicester was rumored to have poisoned the Earl of Essex, the Lord Sheffield, and his own wife.²⁰ Under King James, Buckingham was suspected of trying to poison James; and James himself of trying to poison Prince Henry.²¹ Famously, Sir Thomas Overbury died in 1613 from the gradual poisoning of his food while he was imprisoned in the Tower of London.²²

¹⁹ William CRASHAW, *The Parable of Poyson* (London, 1618) 68-9.

²⁰ On Lopez, see, for example, Martin A.S. HUME, *Treason and Plot: Struggles for Catholic Supremacy in the Last Years of Queen Elizabeth's Reign* (London: James Nisbet, 1901), esp. 143-144. For further background on the Squire case, see James SPEDDING, ed., *The Letters and the Life of Francis Bacon*, vol. 2 (London: Longmans, 1862) 2. 108-120.

²¹ On the notoriety of these cases, as well as others, see Bowers, "Poisoners" esp. 498-501.

²² The literature on the Overbury poisoning is enormous. For records of contemporary accounts, for example, Andrew AMOS, *The Great Oyer of Poisoning: The Trial of the Earl of Somerset for the Poisoning of Sir Thomas Overbury, in the Tower of London* (London: Richard Bentley, 1846), and



Despite this plethora of historical examples, though, the pervasive poisons of revenge drama cannot be explained away as direct mirrors of social concerns. These apparent poisonings were for the most part rooted more in fantasy than in actual fact; they seem to have drawn on the same broad fears and fascinations that lay behind the drama. In both cases, the escalating obsessions with poisons can be traced to radical changes in scientific paradigms: in particular, in the field of medicine.²³ Over the course of the sixteenth century, the influential theories of the Swiss physician Paracelsus (1493-1541) led to the rapid expansion of a new model of medical philosophy and treatment.²⁴ Challenging the Galenic approach of treating ailments with their opposites, Paracelsus believed in the homeopathic idea that like should be treated with like, or poisons with poisons. Accordingly, he suggested both that medicines were poisonous and that poisons had medicinal value, erasing the possibility of clear boundaries between the curative and the toxic. “Poison is in everything,” Paracelsus noted, “and no thing is without poison. The dosage makes it either a poison or a remedy.”²⁵ Through this logic, he popularized a new set of remedies—including highly toxic chemicals such as mercury and arsenic—stirring both excitement and fear about these uncertain, volatile substances. Epidemic diseases such as plague and syphilis, over which Galenic treatments proved powerless, responded relatively well to these new aggressive chemicals, intensifying evidence and support for the new and controversial medicines.

The impact of Paracelsian medicine on cultural fears and fantasies suggests a powerful explanation for the sudden pervasiveness of poisons in the early modern English popular imagination, and especially on the stage. More than that, however, it offers a scientific correlative to, and foundation for, the striking success of revenge drama in the period’s literary landscape. If chemical poisons can be shown to function as a powerful, if risky, cure for the poisons of illness, they can potentially also act, albeit in a different capacity, as a cure for the poisons of melancholy. More

Francis BACON, *A True and Historical Relation of the Poysoning of Sir Thomas Overbury* (London, 1651). For a more recent scholarly analysis, see David LINDLEY, *The Trials of Frances Howard: Fact and Fiction in the Court of King James* (London: Routledge, 1993).

²³ For a good overview of the changes in medical remedies during this period, see Andrew WEAR, *Knowledge and Practice in English Medicine, 1550-1680* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000), esp. 46-103.

²⁴ On Paracelsus, see especially Walter PAGEL, *Paracelsus: An Introduction to Philosophical Medicine in the Era of the Renaissance* (Basel: Karger, 1958), Charles WEBSTER, *From Paracelsus to Newton: Magic and the Making of Modern Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1982), and Henry PACHTER, *Paracelsus: Magic into Science* (New York: Henry Schuman, 1951). On the impact of Paracelsus in England, see Allen DEBUS, *The English Paracelsians* (London: Oldbourne, 1965), and Paul KOCHER, “Paracelsan Medicine in England,” *Journal of the History of Medicine* 2 (1947): 451-480. On the relationship between Paracelsian conceptions of pharmacy and early modern fears political ideas about national identity and its boundaries, see HARRIS, *Foreign Bodies*.

²⁵ PARACELUS, *Selected Writings*, ed. Jolande Jacobi, trans. Norbert Guterman (New York: Pantheon, 1958), 107.

fundamentally, if the effects of mercury on syphilis offered tangible proof that one evil can expel another—the essential premise of revenge—the genre of revenge drama acquired a powerfully magnified authority, legitimacy, and appeal.

3. *HAMLET* AND THE MEDICAL POISONS OF REVENGE

Among the period's poison-drenched dramas of revenge, Shakespeare's *Hamlet* dramatizes the ambivalent status of revenge as remedy with especially striking intensity and complexity. The play juxtaposes the damage of the figurative, internal poisons of illness, especially melancholy, with the damage of literal, external poisons; for both sorts of damage, revenge offers both the possibility of cure, and the threat of intensified degeneration. Although the play's characters, like Hieronimo, look to retaliation as a means to purge suffering, the play itself raises questions about the extent to which the poisons of revenge can be controlled.

As has been often noted, Elsinore is a world of disease, corruption, and taint. Though he reluctantly agrees to be its physician, accepting the commission to eradicate the taint of his father's death through killing Claudius, Hamlet himself serves as a microcosm for the illness pervading the world of the play. From the beginning of the play, well before the ghost's command to revenge, Hamlet is conspicuously identified as suffering from melancholy. In his first appearance, Gertrude chides him for his "nighted colour" and "veiled lids"; later, Hamlet himself refers explicitly to "my weakness and my melancholy."²⁶ Even aside from his own self-conscious diagnosis, Hamlet's introspective, intellectual brooding, along with the madness (whether real or feigned) into which he descends, would have been quickly recognized by the play's audiences as signalling melancholy. Even Claudius, who suspects other forces at work in Hamlet's apparent madness, takes for granted that his nephew is a classic melancholic. "There's something in his soul," he muses, "O'er which his melancholy sits on brood" (3.1.166-7). As a sophisticated and skeptical observer, Claudius suggests that melancholy may not be a sufficient explanation for Hamlet's behavior, but it is nonetheless fundamental to his condition.

Hamlet himself is self-conscious, throughout the play, of his affliction. "Thou wouldst not think," he tells Horatio, "how ill all's here about my heart" (5.2.208). As he plots his revenge, he explicitly identifies the illness at the heart of the play with Claudius, "this canker of our nature" (5.2.69). Yet his explanations of how he plans to treat this illness are ambiguous, suggesting simultaneous intentions to cure and to kill. When he conceives of "The Mousetrap" as a tool to bring Claudius's guilt into the open, Hamlet proclaims "I'll tent him to the quick" (2.2.592), refer-

²⁶ William SHAKESPEARE, *Hamlet*, ed. Harold Jenkins (London: Routledge, 1982), 1.2.68, 1.2.70, and 2.2.597. All subsequent citations to the play refer to this edition.

ring to an invasive medical instrument for examining or cleansing a wound.²⁷ Similarly, when Guildenstern tells him, after the performance, that Claudius is “marvellous distempered... with choler,” Hamlet responds by describing himself as a malevolent physician: “Your wisdom should show itself more richer to signify this to the doctor, for for me to put him to his purgation would perhaps plunge him into more rare choler” (3.2.293-9). Playing on the idea of purging Claudius’s excess choler, or bile, Hamlet implicitly suggests both that he might enrage Claudius by forcing him to confess his guilt, and that he might simply purge, or eradicate, Claudius himself. If Hamlet sees Claudius as embodying Denmark’s ills, his approach to remedy hovers uneasily between destructive and curative violence.

Although Hamlet is ostensibly the play’s revenger, commissioned by his father to restore his honor by murdering Claudius, he is not, ultimately, the play’s most forcefully vindictive character. Whereas Hamlet is tortuously ambivalent towards punishing his father’s killer, Laertes, his key double in the play, seeks out revenge with fervent intensity and the confidence that it will provide a remedy for his sufferings. Discussing his imminent duel with Hamlet, Laertes muses

But let him come.
It warms the very sickness in my heart
That I shall live and tell him to his teeth,
“Thus diest thou.” (4.7.53-6)

The sickness in Laertes’ heart, like “the poison of deep grief” (4.5.75) that Claudius identifies in Ophelia’s madness, is rooted in Hamlet’s murder of Polonius. Accordingly, the prospect of retaliation against Hamlet offers Laertes a crucial remedy, the only medicine he believes can cure him.

While Hamlet and Laertes each has a father’s death to avenge, and while each conceives of that vengeance in explicitly medical language, the figure in the play who most frequently and explicitly articulates the notion of using violence to restore a disordered constitution is, strikingly, Claudius. If Claudius is a revenger, it is only in an abstract and indirect sense: until the end of the play, the only injury he sustains is Hamlet’s attack on his conscience in “The Mousetrap.”²⁸ Alert and self-protective, however, he is quick both to absorb this veiled attack and to defend himself pre-emptively against more. To Claudius, Hamlet is the disease that threatens both Denmark and himself, and his proposed treatment to purge and cure the body politic is sending Hamlet to his death in England. “Diseases desperate grown,”

²⁷ See Jenkins, 273. Jenkins cites Sidney’s claim that tragedy “openeth the greatest wounds, and showeth forth the ulcers that are covered with tissue.” Hamlet notably refers to ulcers, throughout the play; he tells Gertrude, for instance, that applying an “unction” to her soul “will but skin and film the ulcerous place,/ Whiles rank corruption, mining all within,/ Infects unseen” (3.4.149-151).

²⁸ It could be argued, in addition, that Claudius perceives Hamlet’s murder of Polonius as an attempted attack on himself: “O heavy deed! It had been so with us had we been there” (4.1.12-3).



he muses, “By desperate appliance are reliev’d,/ Or not at all” (4.3.9-11). In his urge to heal the state by expelling what he sees as the illness at its core, Claudius demonstrates a more forceful version of Hamlet’s rhetoric of purgative violence.

Although he describes Hamlet as a disease, Claudius more specifically identifies himself as diseased, as suffering personally from Hamlet’s presence in his body politic. Lamenting to Gertrude over his failure to excise Hamlet sooner, he explains

But so much was our love,
We would not understand what was most fit,
But like the owner of a foul disease,
To keep it from divulging, let it feed
Even on the pith of life. (4.1.19-23)

Here, as elsewhere, Claudius draws on an explicitly physical and pathological vocabulary to express his political decisions: Hamlet becomes a parasite cloistered secretly within the body, devouring its interior workings. Later, when meditating on the urgency of having Hamlet killed, he envisions his execution as a purgation that will protect his own body from a violent fever:

Do it, England;
For like the hectic in my blood he rages,
And thou must cure me. (4.3.68-70)

Murder, to Claudius, becomes a medicine, a purgative measure that can protect not only Denmark’s body politic, but, more immediately, his own private body, from a rapidly intensifying disease. While revenge, as theme and genre, may become a powerful symbol of a certain kind of dangerous medicine in the period, Claudius’s example suggests that it may be only a synecdoche for violence more generally.

Both Claudius and Laertes envision their violence against Hamlet as serving a remedial purpose, a medicinal purgation that will cast out the disease afflicting Denmark. For both of them, moreover, the most effective way to purge the body politic of Hamlet’s melancholy illness proves to be by way of poison. In revisiting the very medium with which he inaugurated the corruption at the heart of Denmark, Claudius implicitly suggests that poison is the only cure for poison: that is, poison is the necessary remedy both for the poison of Hamlet’s melancholy humor, and for the poison of Denmark’s regicidal corrosion. Through the curious symmetry that pervades the play, however, their poisons are transformed, just at the moment when they serve their purpose, into simultaneously working as Hamlet’s weapons against them. The intended symmetry of revenge—an eye for an eye—explodes into an alternate symmetry in which would-be revengers become their own victims. “I am justly kill’d with mine own treachery,” Laertes notes (5.2.312-313), adding that Claudius as well “is justly serv’d. It is a poison temper’d by himself” (332-333). Rebounding on its perpetrators, revenge comes to embody Hamlet’s maxim that “’tis the sport to have the enginer/ Hoist with his own petard” (3.4.208-9). Yet the deaths multiply beyond both primary and secondary



targets to include innocent bystanders, such as Gertrude, illustrating René Girard's observations on the impossibility of symmetry or closure in revenge.²⁹

Is there, ultimately, anything in the achievement of the play's revenge that offers medicinal benefit? For Hamlet, Laertes, and Claudius, the answer must be no: far from being cured, they are all dead by the end of the play. In a larger, structural sense, on the other hand, the sudden onslaught of deaths that ends the play can be seen as the long-awaited curative purgation that each of the play's characters has been striving to attain. With Elsinore's ominous diseases all expelled at once, the kingdom can —potentially— begin again from a cleansed, if shaken, foundation. Even this possibility, however, is uncertain. Ending where it began —with another poisoned king of Denmark, and another usurper taking over— the play implies a stronger likelihood of repetition than resolution.

In describing revenge as a wild medicine, this essay departs from the usual identification of the theme with social and political functions, to argue that in the early modern period it was widely understood as, first and foremost, a remedy for suffering. The medical, or restorative notion of revenge draws on a homeopathic idea of fighting like with like, or poisons with poisons: an idea widely, if controversially, popularized by the influential new medical paradigms introduced in the sixteenth century by Paracelsus. Plays such as *The Spanish Tragedy* and *Hamlet* show revengers identifying retribution with medical cure; eradicating evil, in the form of villainy, becomes a necessary form of purgation, without which they will never be able to return to the comfort and health they enjoyed before the original crime. In both plays, however, and especially in *Hamlet*, this medical notion of revenge ultimately comes full circle to encompass the social and political ends with which revenge is more familiarly linked. In carrying out their retaliatory violence, revengers rarely, if ever, succeed in healing themselves; in fact, they inevitably destroy themselves in the process. In carrying out their personal vengeance, however, they point to another, broader conception of revenge as remedy. By purging the body politic of both the original crimes and their own, these figures may potentially succeed in turning revenge into some sort of medicine. Even then, however, as these plays show, it is a kind of wild medicine, destroying as it cures, and leaving more obvious victims than beneficiaries.

²⁹ See René GIRARD, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1972), especially 1-38.