Women and Revenge in Shakespeare

Gender, Genre, and Ethics

Marguerite A. Tassi

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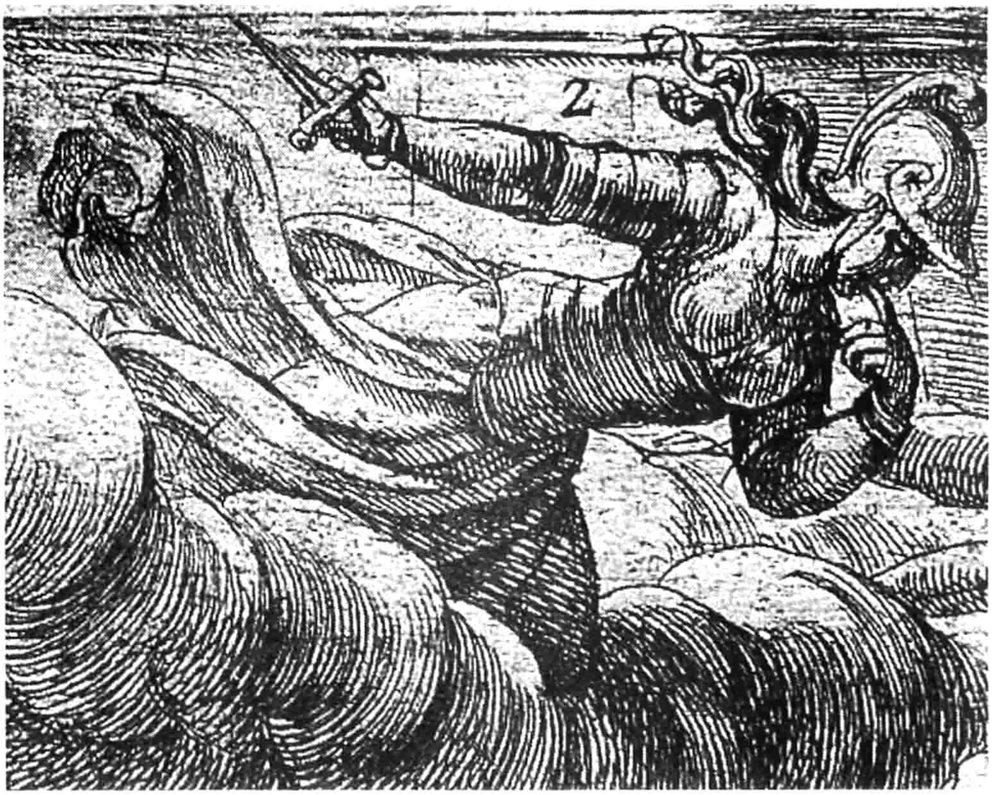

Revenge with a dagger (plate 22), by Antonio Tempesta (after a design by Otto van Veen), in *Historia septem infantium de Lara* (Antwerp, 1612). © The British Museum.

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To my loving family:
Shaun, Francesca, and James

> I had thought, before I began, that what I had on my hands was an almost excessively masculine tale, a saga of sexual rivalry, ambition, power, patronage, betrayal, death, revenge. But the women seem to have taken over; they marched in from the peripheries of the story to demand the inclusion of their own tragedies, histories and comedies, obliging me to couch my narrative in all manner of sinuous complexities, to see my "male" plot refracted, so to speak, through the prisms of its reverse and "female" side. It occurs to me that the women knew precisely what they were up to—that their stories explain, and even subsume, the men's.
>
> —Salman Rushdie, *Shame*

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Preface

SOME YEARS AGO, I WAS INVITED BY A MEDIEVALIST COLLEAGUE, JOHN Damon, to prepare a guest lecture on feuds in the Anglo-Saxon epic *Beowulf* for his graduate seminar. What I wished to do in that lecture was challenge a commonly held view of the feud, that the frequent eruptions of violence between clans illustrate the doom caused by revenge. It seemed to me that an anthropological approach to the text might offer significant insights into the cultural meanings of social codes and exchanges typical of an aristocratic, martial, prestate society such as we find in *Beowulf.* In particular, the function of women in the feud, often dismissed as tragically useless and exemplary of revenge's baneful effects, might be understood better. Perhaps the most troubling case of a female caught up in a feud is Queen Hildeburh, who appears in the Finnsburh episode. The anguished story of Hildeburh, a Danish princess married as a peace-weaver to the Frisian king, Finn, is a moving case-in-point of how the feud is stronger than any peace effort made between clans. She survives her son and brother who perish when violence erupts during the Danes' visit to King Finn. An unruly group among Finn's retainers reignite the Danish-Frisian feud, betraying the Danes and Finn in their efforts to maintain peace. With renewed bloodshed between clans, Hildeburh's peace-weaving inevitably fails. Her political purpose thwarted and her kin's lives lost on both natal and marital sides, Hildeburh would seem to exemplify the helpless victimization of women in a warrior society. What has she left but endless grief for her dead?

Such a conclusion, however, devalues the cultural work performed by women in Anglo-Saxon poetry and fails to attend to the epic's striking verbal clues offered in this episode. Such clues reveal a hierarchy in kinship ties, attitudes toward honor maintenance and revenge, and the potency of the female mourner's keening and management of the funeral pyre. The narrative clearly places the grieving queen at the political and "affective center" of the episode.[1] Hildeburh is introduced first by name and then by patriline as the Danish king "Hoc's daughter" (line 1076)[2] as she takes charge of the ritual lamentation of her brother and son. In his comparative ethnological study of *Beowulf,* John M. Hill has done a remarkable reading of this scene, urging readers to see how intensely purposeful Hildeburh is at the funeral pyre, where she holds court, as it were, over a funeral of terror.[3] To assume that Hildeburh is anything other than vengeance-minded and honor-bound to her natal clan and to her son is to lose sight of the cultural norms at work in the *Beowulf* poem. Furthermore, Hill points out that the kinship tie between uncle and nephew (Hildeburh's brother and son, respectively) is the most tender, most strongly felt blood connection represented in the poem's world. And this is the tie so brutally torn asunder by Finn's retainers.

Hildeburh's purpose at the funeral pyre, then, is not retrospective, as some critics assume; rather, she is urging a future revenge through her fierce lamentation. Hildeburh's vengeful spirit—her agency—is conveyed through the images of the devouring fire and the animism of the dead bodies on the pyre. The ghastly melting of heads and shooting up of blood bespeak the grieving sister-mother's bitter anger and, in their aggression, urge retribution. Her keening has the quasi-magical effect in the verse of appearing to rouse action: "the noblewoman wept, / mourned with songs. The warrior rose up" (lines 1117–18). The linguistic position of "warrior" stands ambiguously for both Hildeburh's dead and the living avenger, her brother's chief thane, Hengest, who in time *will* rise up as the agent of Hildeburh's will to avenge the Danes.

The conclusion I drew was that Hildeburh's keening perpetuates her culture's revenge ethic by inciting male kin to a just revenge. Her lamentation urges Hengest and the other visiting Danes to avenge the despicable slaying of their people. When the bloodletting is finished, King Finn is dead, and Hildeburh, still in possession of her rights as Danish royalty, sails back home with Finn's treasure to "her people" (line 1159). In the end, grim as it is, the Finnsburh episode recounts a Danish victory.

Working outside of one's area of specialty has the beneficial effect of defamiliarizing subjects that have become all too familiar. In my field of early modern English drama, one such subject is revenge, which has been treated extensively by critics and scholars for more than a century. To see revenge anew, to reopen such an old matter for reinvestigation, as I did in working on Hildeburh's function in *Beowulf,* seemed like an exciting prospect years ago when I started this book. Much to my surprise, I found that extended studies on women and revenge in Shakespeare's plays were hard to come by. Out of this neglect was born my intention to explore this subject in all of its nuances. Herein lies the promise and burden of the present book.

A number of pressing questions arose early in my investigation into Shakespeare's women: What understanding of revenge do women offer, and what relationship do they have with men who pursue revenge? Can women's revenge do ethical work? Can women exhibit a virtue in their vengeance? What can the rhetoric of revenge, the social circumstances, and the performance possibilities in drama show us about women's responses to injustice and the function of such responses in the theater?

Contemporary Western thought has long decried revenge as immoral, irrational, barbaric, and psychologically aberrant. The Christian-Stoic tradition, in particular, has suppressed and "denatured" what might be recognized as a natural moral instinct in human beings to revenge. In this tradition, revenge has been defined as the infliction of harm upon another out of anger and resentment, or the return of injury for injury. Morally speaking, this notion has fostered a sense of revenge as the return of evil for evil. Often, malicious intent, rather than just cause, is assumed in those who seek revenge, and forgiveness is held up as the rarer virtue. Today, we are the inheritors of this mind-set, which tends to color our understanding of the ethical dimension of literary revenge. For Shakespeare's contemporaries, Christian-Stoic ideas were prominent, and the conservative religious belief was that vengeance belonged solely to God and his ministers. The state and church alike upheld the authority of legally invested ministers, not the victims themselves, to execute what they perceived to be divinely sanctioned vengeance. Christians were to define their virtue through passivity, nonviolence, hope, and charity.

But copresent with the antirevenge ethic was an alternative view, barely acknowledged by critics of early modern thought, drawn from the philosophical tradition of Aristotelian-Thomistic virtue ethics. From that tradition, which would have been known to Shakespeare and his contemporaries, came the idea of a noble or virtuous vengeance. To avenge wrongdoing meant activating justice and giving the guilty party what was due, in keeping with the moral order. While ministers of justice were authorized to practice lawful revenge, individuals, as well, if acting in the name of virtue, God, and the harmed party, might claim moral authority for their actions. From classical and medieval sources, too, came ideas of revenge as a cultural practice and ethical action that maintained or restored honor. Revenge in ancient and medieval literatures is represented often as coequal with justice, reflecting societal norms, a god's will, and a moral obligation.

In Shakespeare's England, the terms *vengeance, revenge, retaliation,* and *retribution* were used somewhat interchangeably to signify punishment or repayment for an injury or wrong.[4] The concept of debt governed early modern meanings of these terms, suggesting that wrongdoers who harmed individuals, families, and communities incurred a debt that must be repaid by a sufficient punishment. Justice is the underlying concern expressed in this metaphor, for the notion of balance (as a moral and social good) is articulated here. We might recall the traditional image of Justice with her balanced scales and sword. Justice referred to a system of rewards and punishments—legal vengeance, if you will—that vindicated what was right. Sixteenth-century definitions of *revenge* included *satisfaction* as part of the emotional and psychological terrain of punishment. The old phrase "to satisfy a debt" was imaginatively transposed into the realm of revenge to articulate the kind of transaction at work here. *Revenge* also could mean *chastisement* of a wrongdoer, which stretched the notion of punishment to include verbal rebuke and other symbolic cultural actions. *Retribution* most readily suggested the expression of God's will, yet the terms *revenge* and *vengeance* could be used as well in early modern texts to refer to God's punishments. *Retaliation* recalled the ancient *lex talionis,* a retributive form of justice that attempted to create an equation or fitting balance between crime and punishment (thus, an eye for an eye). *Avenge* and *revenge* as verbal forms both referred to inflicting punishment upon a wrongdoer and vindicating a wronged party, though *avenge* in some cases indicated requital on behalf of another. I tend to use the terms *revenge, avenge,* and *vengeance* interchangeably, as they were used by Shakespeare and his contemporaries, though when necessary I make distinctions or clarify nuances in my use of a concept.

In the pages that follow, I explore the multifaceted character of vengeance, as it is given moral force and compelling dramatic representation in Shakespeare's plays. In the process, I review, refine, and sometimes contest the insights of critics on the ethics of early modern revenge and its attendant passions—anger, resentment, vindictiveness, and hatred. I argue that the fundamental passion motivating revenge is, more often than not, a love of justice. Much criticism has been devoted to showing how Shakespeare calls into question or condemns revenge in both male and female characters. Few critics have wished to marshal arguments for revenge as virtuous or ethically justified, but this is precisely what I do with some of Shakespeare's women and, in doing so, I offer an alternative vision to the negative view of revenge more readily understood and assumed today. By attending to classical resonances in Shakespeare's texts and applying literary analogues to his works, I develop a culturally nuanced ethical perspective on revenge. In some cases, I show how women's vengeance can activate morality, bringing into play an ethic that critiques male acts of revenge and patriarchal systems of governance and law. I show, as well, how women usurp male social roles or incite men to exact revenge.

Just as there is no denying revenge as an aspect of our humanity, so there is no escaping the controversial nature of this subject as it arises in life and literature. This book represents an engagement with difficult ethical questions that matter deeply to all of us. At the heart of this book lies the challenge of how to understand and come to terms with women's passionate, sometimes violent, responses to moral outrages. In the face of injustice and injury, Shakespeare's women choose revenge more readily than they do forgiveness, and there is often just cause for their vengeance. I focus on these bold, outspoken dramatic women, rather than the Desdemonas and

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