

Hamlet as a Reflexive Revenge Tragedy*

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Park, Eonjoo. “*Hamlet* as a Reflexive Revenge Tragedy.” *Studies in English Language & Literature* 48.1 (2022): 47-64. This article argues that generic ambiguity of *Hamlet* results from its reflexive engagement with the genre of revenge tragedy. Renaissance revenge tragedy demonstrates a high level of self-consciousness about its own dramatic mode as well as its history and conventions. Yet *Hamlet* merits special scrutiny because its metatheatricality is intended to question the basic assumptions of the genre. Indeed, unlike other avengers, Hamlet postpones his revenge in order to debate and reflect on his obligation to vengeance itself. The prince hesitates because he is not able to naturally acquiesce to the obligation of revenge, which is predicated upon the kinship between the avenger and the victim as well as the unrepentant perpetrator. *Hamlet*'s self-reflexivity not only alludes to a common writing practice in the early modern period, but also contributes to establishing the genre of revenge tragedy as modern and open to constant change and innovation. (Jeonbuk National University)

Key Words: *Hamlet*, Revenge Tragedy, Reflexivity, Metatheatricality, Hesitation

I. Introduction

In Act 2, Scene 2 of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (c.1601-2), where the Danish court welcomes the travelling players, Polonius makes a pretentious remark that the “best actors” should be able to cross the classical boundaries of literary genres (2.2.420).

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In many ways, his comment speaks about not only actors but also playwrights and *Hamlet* itself: “The best actors in the world, either for tragedy, comedy, history, pastoral, pastoral-comical, historical-pastoral, tragical-historical, tragical-comical-historical-pastoral, scene individable, or poem unlimited” (2.2.420-24).¹ Polonius’ observation self-reflexively comments about how *Hamlet* is composed between a number of genres. The play mixes and dismantles generic conventions making classification of kind redundant. The mixed mode, on the one hand, challenged some contemporary writers, such as Philip Sidney and Ben Jonson, who desired to preserve classical notions of literary form. On the other hand, it opened up the possibility of locating *Hamlet* within the realm of self-representation that actively promoted generic ambiguity and, through its own self-reflexivity, the play’s modernity.

This article examines how Shakespeare’s tragedy reflexively engages with revenge tragedy. I argue that the uncertainty around *Hamlet*’s generic designation results from its constant process of problematizing of, responding to, and innovating within the dominant genre of Renaissance revenge tragedy. Indeed, while *Hamlet* has typically been categorized as a revenge tragedy, the play has also generated confusion among critics. In *Hamlet’s Choice*, Peter Lake describes the play as a revenge tragedy, a history play, a murder pamphlet, and even a conversion narrative. A similar concern can be traced in Chang Seop Song’s reading of *Hamlet* as an extension of the history play genre. Seok Ju Kang considers classical tragedy as another façade of the play. Besides the evolutionary nature of a literary genre, the difficulty with determining the genre of *Hamlet* stems from the mixed mode of composition, which was a common practice among early modern writers as Polonius’ remark above illustrates. In fact, *Hamlet* is not the only revenge play that shows the mixed mode of composition and, through that practice, self-reflexivity of the genre. Rather, how to place their own play in relation to the traditions and generic conventions of revenge tragedy was one of the major issues that early

¹ All references of *Hamlet* come from The Folger Library’s edition of *Hamlet*.

modern authors tapped into. This concern manifested in their attempts to imitate, twist, and comically parody earlier and contemporary works. While revenge plays are in general self-conscious about their own theatrical mode and genre, *Hamlet* merits further scrutiny because at the center of its metatheatricality lies a problematization of the whole structure and premise of the genre. While *Hamlet's* replication of the generic features is important in associating the play with the literary category of revenge tragedy, it is also vital to note that its way of repeating the generic conventions is subtly modified in order to comment on and respond to the basic assumptions of the genre.

Hamlet's metadramatic concerns with the genre of revenge tragedy are best represented through Hamlet's characteristic hesitation. Although the protagonist's reluctance to commit revenge is often considered as one of the common generic features of revenge tragedy, the hesitation dramatized in *Hamlet* differs from other revenge plays because it is geared towards questioning the role of the avenger and their obligation to vengeance, which are taken for granted in the genre. Avengers such as Hieronimo in Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* (c.1592), Titus in Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* (1594), or Vindice in Thomas Middleton's *The Revenger's Tragedy* (c.1605) are indecisive primarily due to the difficulty of figuring out how to successfully execute revenge. Hamlet, however, is reluctant because the duty of revenge itself is incomprehensible for him. If the avengers sincerely aspire to achieving vengeance as a way to recover justice, Hamlet needs an extended period of time to decipher why revenge should be his chosen path. In this sense, *Hamlet* reveals its modernity in that revenge is represented as a choice that must be debated and reflected on. While outwardly repeating the generic convention of the delay on the part of the avenger, *Hamlet* allows us to rethink what is taken for granted in the genre. It can be said that *Hamlet* employs the generic conventions of revenge tragedy in a way to consciously engage with the development of the genre itself.

II. Metatheatricality of Revenge Tragedy

The generic terminology of ‘revenge tragedy’ is an early twentieth-century coinage by Ashley H. Thorndike. In “The Relations of *Hamlet* to Contemporary Revenge Plays,” he posits the importance of Kyd’s *The Spanish Tragedy* and lost *ur-Hamlet* as precursors of revenge tragedy since they provided and shaped the central motifs of the genre. Furthermore, listing a number of revenge-themed plays that were published and performed more than once, Thorndike surmises the popularity of revenge tragedy in Elizabethan and early Jacobean theaters, especially between 1597 and 1604. According to his definition, revenge tragedy is “a distinct species of the tragedy of blood. . . whose leading motive is revenge and whose main action deals with the progress of this revenge, leading to the death of the murderers and often the death of the avenger himself” (125). The chronological development of the plays with the single motif of revenge is at the core of his definition. Furthering this definition, Thorndike specifies six characteristics of *The Spanish Tragedy*, which contributed to developing generic rules that subsequent revenge tragedy writers imitated and revamped at the same time: the motif of revenge, which is typically spurred by a ghost, the hesitation of the avenger, the madness of the avenger, plots engineered by or against the avenger, a final bloodbath, and the parallel between the main plot and minor plots (143-44).

Thorndike’s observation has been reiterated and expanded on for more than a century in a host of attempts to grasp the generic uniqueness of revenge tragedy. In *Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy, 1587-1642*, published about forty years after Thorndike’s work, Fredson Bowers marks at Kyd’s work as the start of the growth of revenge tragedy. He theorizes the “basic Kydian Formula” that influences the development of later revenge tragedies: revenge as a “fundamental motive for the tragic action,” the appearance of a “vengeance-seeking ghost,” the dramatic devices of the “hesitation of the revenger” and genuine or feigned madness, bloody and death-driven actions, the parallel between the protagonist’s situation and those of

minor characters, and the transformation of the avenger into a cunning villain (71-73). As Bowers himself reveals in the footnote, this formula heavily relies on Thorndike's 1902 work. In his 1987 book, *Hamlet and the Acting of Revenge*, Peter Mercer brings three plays, *The Spanish Tragedy*, *Hamlet*, and *Antonio's Revenge* (1600), together based on the principles of the "motive of blood-revenge for murder, a ghost urging vengeance, a hesitation and delay on the part of the revenger, a feigned or actual madness, and a counter-plot mounted by the villain" (6). Notably, the standards that Mercer uses to group these plays under the name of revenge tragedy strongly evoke Thorndike's as well as Bowers' descriptions of the genre.

Unspecified in the definition but discussed considerably is theatricality of revenge tragedy such as using a play-within-a-play as the means for vengeance. Although it is not included in Thorndike's definition, he still emphasizes that "the most notable in [*The Spanish Tragedy's*] relation to *Hamlet* is the play within the play by which the revenge is accomplished" (145). Similarly, Katharine Eisaman Maus, the editor of *Four Revenge Tragedies*, notes that "the idea of making the revenge itself a *coup de theatre* is probably [Kyd's] innovation, and certainly one of the ways *The Spanish Tragedy* most influences later Renaissance dramatists" (xvi, emphasis in original). On the intricate relationship between drama and revenge in Kyd's play, Mercer comments that the transformation from an anguished victim to an avenger is far from natural, and thus the protagonist is forced to intensify their sadness, frustration, and anger as well as to imitate the ancient examples of avengers. He argues, "Grief and tears may come to any man, but the single-minded channeling of all emotional energy towards a deed of horror demands a transformation of the self that borders on insanity. Such transformations. . . must draw on models, on ancient archetypes" (58). Mercer goes on to claim that this grand demand of transformation renders the revenge in the tragedy as not "something someone does but a role that awaits performance," and therefore "rhetoric and drama are not merely the trappings of revenge; they are of its essence" (58). In other words, the usage of drama and theater in the process of wreaking vengeance in the plays is more than just a

generic code that repeats. When Kyd started this device and when other dramatists took this up and developed it further, the fundamental affinity between revenge and theatricality was at the core of their endeavor.

The centrality of theatricality in revenge tragedy further allowed early modern writers to engage with diverse metatheatrical concerns. Editing *Five Revenge Tragedies*, Emma Smith notes in the introduction that “Revenge tragedies exhibit a high degree of self-consciousness, both about their own theatrical status and about previous plays in the genre” (xxii). By having the avengers execute their dramatized vengeance, the writers actively promote the audiences to recognize that what they are watching is also part of drama.

In *The Spanish Tragedy*, Hieronimo shows important steps to mounting a play. As a writer of *The Tragedy of Soliman and Perseda*, he recruits players, assigns roles to them, and provides them with specific instructions in regards to costume, props, and speech style. These behind-the-scene practices stimulate the actual audience in the theater to imagine the inception of the play that they are watching. Kyd also includes the interaction between Hieronimo as a playwright and the Duke of Castile as an audience. Before the show starts, Hieronimo gives Castile a copy of his tragedy that contains the plot summary while explaining how the duty to check “all things may go well” on stage is the “author’s credit” (4.3.4; 3).² During the show, the audiences of *The Tragedy of Soliman and Perseda* including King of Spain, Viceroy of Portugal, and the Duke of Castile constantly comment on the players’ performance, which itself shows their total immersion as well as enjoyment. With this device, the actual audiences of *The Spanish Tragedy* are given an opportunity to look at themselves through the players who perform the roles of audience members. The court audiences’ reception of *The Tragedy of Soliman and Perseda* invites the actual audiences of *The Spanish Tragedy* to reflect their own engagement with the play.

Ending the show, Hieronimo corrects the assumption that the court audiences

² I refer to the Oxford edition’s *Four Revenge Tragedies*.

have concerning how drama typically works. He laments, “Haply you think- but bootless are your thoughts- / That this is fabulously counterfeit, / And that we do as all tragedians do, / To die today, for fashioning our scene, / . . . And in a minute starting up again, / Revive to please tomorrow’s audience” (4.4.77-80). On the one hand, Hieronimo effectively conveys how his own drama is entangled with the reality by denying this conventional mechanism of theater. These lines, on the other hand, enable the actual audiences of *The Spanish Tragedy* to acknowledge the fictitious nature of the drama that they are watching. Upon entering a theater, the audiences are willing to accept that they will enjoy the story of the dramatic world as if it is real. This make-believe is shattered when Hieronimo emphasizes how death in a dramatic work is inauthentic unlike his own tragedy. Hieronimo’s assertion shocks his own court audiences as it reveals the reality of killing scenes in his tragedy. At the same time, Kyd’s audiences are also astonished at the fact that one of the dramatic characters willingly exposes the fictitiousness of *The Spanish Tragedy*.

As Smith’s quotation above indicates, the play’s metatheatrical attention is further directed toward other preceding and contemporary revenge tragedies. The competitive nature of the theater industry in the Renaissance era certainly played a pivotal role in pushing the authors to try to outdo their rival work. Also called as “Wars of Theaters,” the competition around writing a compelling revenge story became a hallmark of the genre in two senses (Smith xxiv). First, as Tanya Pollard points out in “Tragedy and Revenge,” metatheatricality is one of the “distinctively Renaissance innovations” (64). Competition promoted playwrights to be conscious of generic conventions so that they could surpass the already popular ones. These efforts drove the growth and establishment of the genre of revenge tragedy. Although early modern writers were indebted to Greek and Roman revenge plays in developing their own work, the uniqueness of Renaissance revenge tragedy came from its historical conditions that were specifically defined by flourishing of the theater industry.

Second, there is a link between real world competition, including the repetition of conventions, and the logic of vengeance. The action of revenge is always a response to an attack or harm coming from another party. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the first meaning of revenge is an “action of hurting, harming, or otherwise obtaining satisfaction from someone in return for an injury or wrong suffered at his or her hands; satisfaction obtained by repaying an injury or wrong” (“revenge,” n.l.a). The words, “return” and “repaying,” gesture toward the assumption that the action of revenge involves an exact reciprocity of the initial harm. This idea is deeply rooted in the ancient code, “an eye for an eye,” that found its expression in diverse sources including the Code of Hammurabi, the Old Testament, and Roman *lex talionis*. A mere repetition of the original attack, however, is not always believed to guarantee a satisfying revenge. Rather, many revenge plots entertain the idea that going beyond the initial harm leads to a more successful revenge. Atrous in Seneca’s *Thyestes* succinctly delivers this rule: “To revenge a crime / You must go one better” (Line 195-6). The competition among revenge tragedy authors, thus, shows a conceptual affinity with the rule of vengeance. Indeed, as each author repeated generic conventions of others and went beyond them to attain higher levels of success, we can see how playwriting was a matter of slights and reprisals, of one-upmanship, and possibly of plagiaristic storytelling, which having no law to prevent it required authors to take to their pens to deal out retribution.

III. Reflexivity in *Hamlet*

Hamlet has been understood as an eminent representative of revenge tragedy. Indeed, Thorndike’s formula offers a convincing tool to read *Hamlet* within the genre of revenge tragedy. First, the play chronicles how Hamlet takes up the duty of revenge and works toward accomplishing this task. In the process, the ghost,

which resembles the deceased King Hamlet, appears as the driving force of the play by imposing the role of the avenger on the protagonist. Second, despite the ghost's constant call for vengeance, Hamlet delays his plan until he stabs Claudius in the final scene. Third, Hamlet's plan to feign his madness is implied when he swears his friends to secrecy about the ghost: "How strange or odd some'er I bear myself / As I perchance hereafter shall think meet / To put an antic disposition on / That you, at such times seeing me, never shall. . . note / That you know aught of me" (1.5.190-201). Fourth, Hamlet's engineering of vengeance is challenged due to Claudius, and their rivalry reaches its peak when Claudius plots to kill Hamlet on his way to England. Fifth, the bloodbath in the final scene resulting in the deaths of Hamlet, Claudius, Gertrude, and Laertes is not only visually presented but also verbally delivered through the remaining characters' speeches. The British ambassador laments, "The sight is dismal," while Fortinbras connects this sight with the feast that "proud Death" creates in his "eternal cell" (5.2.407; 403; 404). Lastly, Hamlet's struggle with the task of taking revenge for his father parallels that of Laertes as well as that of Fortinbras over the course of the play.

Among these distinctive features that help us label *Hamlet* as a revenge tragedy, Hamlet's hesitation needs to be further examined because its motif is slightly different from other revenge plays. The avenger's reluctance has been traditionally associated with the necessity of discovering proof that affirms the guilty of their target. In explaining *The Spanish Tragedy*, Thorndike notes that the avenger's hesitation results from the requirement of "much inciting and superabundant proof" (143). Similarly, Bowers argues that an "important dramatic device is the justifiable hesitation of the revenger, who requires much proof" (71). The avenger's endeavor to gather sufficient evidence before obtaining justice by their own hands has also been read as a strong ground for placing revenge tragedy in line with crime fiction. In *Revenge Tragedy: Aeschylus to Armageddon*, John Kerrigan draws a broad picture of literary history encompassing ancient Greek and Roman tragedy, Renaissance revenge tragedy, and the detective stories of Sherlock Holmes. Furthering this line of

thought, Lorna Hutson, in “Rethinking the ‘Spectacle of the Scaffold’: Juridical Epistemologies and English Revenge Tragedy,” points out that Renaissance revenge tragedy models the “participatory, open, and adversarial jury trial” through foregrounding the avenger’s detective-like qualities (32). By doing so, she effectively tackles a widely accepted Foucauldian interpretation that the spectacle of torture and punishment is an indication of the secret, top-down, state-led inquisitorial investigation and truth-making process. Rather than focusing on the violence in the justice system led by the monarch and professional judges, Hutson stresses how revenge tragedy is sympathetic with the common practices of “lay instigation and lay participation in judgment” (31).

While it is an important issue to link the investigative process to the avenger’s delay of revenge, it should be also noted that this connection only intensifies the assumption that the avengers faithfully accept their duty of revenge. Strikingly, Hamlet denies the general tendency shared by the avengers in the genre that the duty of revenge is as natural as their expression of sadness for their family members’ unfair death. Hamlet’s main concern is the obligatory nature of revenge and who should be the one to fulfill this duty. Reflecting his uncanny first encounter with the ghost of his father, Hamlet overrides the duty of revenge with the duty of remembrance rather than admitting his natural role as avenger:

O fie! Hold, hold, my heart,
 And you, my sinews, grow not instant old,
 But bear me stiffly up. Remember thee?
 Ay, thou poor ghost, whiles memory holds a seat
 In this distracted globe. Remember thee?
 Yea, from the table of my memory
 I’ll wipe away all trivial, fond records,
 All saws of books, all forms, all pressures past,
 That youth and observation copied there,
 And thy commandment all alone shall live
 Within the book and volume of my brain,

Unmixed with baser matter. Yes, by heaven!

. . .

[He writes.] So, uncle, there you are. Now to my word.

It is "adieu, adieu, remember me,"

I have sworn 't. (1.5.100-19)

Although the ghost explicitly asks him to "Revenge [Claudius'] foul and most unnatural murder," Hamlet is preoccupied with the dictum, "remember me," rather than "avenge me" (1.5.31). In order not to forget the ghost's call for remembrance, he strives to delete all trivial memories and knowledge that he has accumulated from his mind. He even writes down his duty on his notebook, which literally records the ghost's "remember me," instead of the duty of revenge. By replacing revenge with remembrance, Hamlet seems to avoid or want to avoid the duty of revenge, which is taken for granted in the genre of revenge tragedy. This suspicion grows stronger when he cries that "O cursed spite / That ever I was born to set it right!" at the end of the same scene (1.5.210-11). Here he laments about his fate that pushes him to take up the role of the avenger. Hamlet's alienation from his role as avenger shows his dislocation within his own social position. Notably, the avengers in the genre are bound by the duty of revenge due to their biological connection to the victims. Hieronimo and Titus are fathers of the victims; Antonio declares revenge for his father Andrugio. Hamlet's discomfort with the fact that he was "born to set it right" breaks with the biology of nobility and points toward the civility of mourning. Hamlet attempts to resist how the duty of revenge is naturally assigned based on familial relations.

Hamlet's reaction to the ghost's request for vengeance is contrasted with that of the avengers who accept their duty of revenge without any resistance. Upon encountering the horrific murder of his own son, Hieronimo in *The Spanish Tragedy* states, "To know the author were some ease of grief, / For in revenge my heart would find relief" (2.4.112-13). Unlike Hamlet, Hieronimo invokes "revenge" as the very first option to address his pain and grievance. Hieronimo also uses material

objects to urge himself to remember his duty: “Seest thou this handkercher besmeared with blood? / It shall not from me till I take revenge. / Seest thou those wounds that yet are bleeding fresh? / I’ll not entomb them till I have revenge” (2.5.113-16). If Hamlet’s notebook works to aid him in remembering the ghost’s demand, Horatio’s dead body and handkerchief, both of which palpably preserve his unfair and early death, function as a reminder of the duty of vengeance that Hieronimo as father should fulfill. Indeed, Hieronimo declares that he would keep Horatio’s corpse and blood-stained handkerchief only until he executes his revenge.

Over the course of the play, Hieronimo hesitates to take revenge, but as critics have mentioned, this reluctance is partly from the uncertainty surrounding the identity of the murderers. Another important aspect of Hieronimo’s hesitation is related to his identity and profession as a religious knight marshal because private revenge goes against his faith in both legal and divine justice. Although Hieronimo expresses his frustration over the failure of justice system as well as his concern about the ethics of revenge, his hesitation has less to do with the duty of revenge. Hieronimo never questions the duty itself and accepts it as natural.

The final important component of Hieronimo’s delayed revenge is his lower social status. Lorenzo, one of the murderers of his son, is the kin of the King of Spain; the other, Balthazar, is son to Viceroy of Portugal and is about to marry Lorenzo’s sister, Bel-imperia. Since the king is heirless, it is most likely that Lorenzo or Balthazar will assure the crown. Hieronimo, on the contrary, is a chief justice who is a subject of the king. One of the main reasons that drives him to turn to revenge comes from his inability to reach out to and plead with the king for his son’s case. In this context, Hieronimo’s choice invites the audience’s sympathy because revenge remains the only possible route for him to redress injustice. Similarly, Titus in *Titus Andronicus*, Antonio in *Antonio’s Revenge*, and Vindice in *The Revenger’s Tragedy* end up pursuing private vengeance because the state justice system represented by the monarch is either silent about their misery or the main cause of the very injustice that they suffer. The avenger’s hesitation, then, can also

be understood as a result of the avenger's powerlessness and struggle with the low probability of completing the task of revenge. Due to their social status, revenge is a challenging and even unrealistic task. In order to come up with a successful means for revenge under this condition, it is necessary for the avenger to take time, contemplate various possibilities, and choose the most probable way of revenge. Hieronimo's engineering of vengeance through his play-within-the-play and Titus' theatrical imitation of the Philomel story, then, are intended to minimize the social hurdle that they need to overcome to execute revenge on their superiors.

Unlike the avengers in the genre, Hamlet is not only the next sovereign but also a legitimate prince whose revenge plan to kill Claudius might be pardoned and could easily be seen as justified. Claudius even expresses his concern over Hamlet's popularity with the people twice. Discussing the difficulty of punishing Hamlet for his murder of Polonius, he points out that Hamlet is "loved of the distracted multitude" (4.3.4). While conversing with Laertes on his plan to kill Hamlet, Claudius also speaks about "the great love the general gender bear him" (4.7.20). It can be surmised that the immediate execution of vengeance is less risky for Hamlet due to his own claims on the crown as well as the Danish people's support and love for the prince. In this sense, Hamlet's social position as Danish prince further sets him apart from other avengers in the genre.

Moreover, in regards to social class in the genre of revenge tragedy, Hamlet is closer to the criminal while Laertes shows typical traits of the avenger. For Laertes, Hamlet is the perpetrator who murders his father, Polonius, and abuses his sister, Ophelia. Furthermore, similar to typical villains in the genre, Hamlet is exempt from punishment and is sent to England after he accidentally kills Polonius. From the perspective of Laertes, the slain Polonius' son, Hamlet is as sinful as Lorenzo and Balthazar in *The Spanish Tragedy*, whose social position exonerates them from the charge of murder.

In other words, Hamlet is not as desperate as other avengers in the genre whose last and only choice is revenge. Thus, while Hamlet is known for his philosophical

interrogation and introspection, the object of his reflection is not the best method of revenge. This is also the reason why his vengeance appears to be spontaneous rather than thoroughly planned. When he accidentally stabs Polonius, who was hiding behind a curtain, Hamlet shouts, “is it the King?” (3.4.32). This moment tells us that Hamlet diverges from the generic characteristics of the avenger by indulging his whims instead of planning his vengeance. Rather than being a calculating avenger, Hamlet vacillates between questioning vengeance altogether and blindly carrying it out. Even the denouement of the play where Hamlet finally takes revenge on Claudius is far from Hamlet-the-avenger’s meticulous stage production. The duel between Hamlet and Laertes is set up by Claudius, and Hamlet’s killing of Claudius is impulsive rather than calculated.

Hamlet also stages a rare moment in the genre of revenge tragedy, allowing alternative dynamics between avenger and murderer to be explored. In Act 3, Scene 3, we can see Claudius’ admittance of his crime and repentance. If the avenger’s delay has to do with gathering sufficient proof that verifies the guilt of the criminal, this scene provides decisive evidence that halts Hamlet’s reluctance because he directly witnesses Claudius confessing his sin and praying for forgiveness. Ironically though, Hamlet hesitates eleven more scenes until he finally stabs Claudius. The uniqueness of this scene can explain the origin of Hamlet’s further delay. If the audiences of revenge tragedies are familiar with Machiavellian villains, this scene reveals an alternative point about the criminal through Claudius’ guilt-driven soliloquy. Lorenzo in *The Spanish Tragedy*, for example, has been read as the first Machiavellian character-type in Renaissance revenge tragedy, and his soliloquies only concern his schemes. In Act 3, Scene 2, he decides to ensnare his sister’s servant, Pedrigano, in order to smoothly execute the evil deed that he designs: “better it’s that base companions die / Than by their life to hazard our good haps… I’ll trust myself, myself shall be my friend; / For die they shall- / Slaves are ordained to no other end” (3.2.116-21). Lorenzo actively utilizes his own class status to pursue his plan even though it can generate unnecessary harm especially to the

lower class. His soliloquy demonstrates how the class divide is employed in the genre of revenge tragedy as a central mechanism through which the protagonist's revenge is registered as the only available option to stop the criminal from an upper-class background.

Claudius' speech, however, highlights not only his abuse of power but also his sincere regret at this abuse. He asks, "O, what form of prayer / Can serve my turn? 'Forgive me my foul murder'? / That cannot be, since I am still possessed / Of those effects for which I did the murder: / My crown, mine own ambition, and my queen" (3.3.55-59). Claudius' honest revelation of his crime and penitence creates an emotional hurdle for the audience so that they cannot easily identify with the avenger. This uncommon moment provides the audience with an alternative route for appreciating the genre. It is also understandable why Hamlet is unable to speedily execute his revenge even after he can confirm the veracity of the ghost's words and request.

Hamlet's transformation into an avenger is fully accomplished in the very last scene, Act 5, Scene 2. What impels him to take up the role of the avenger is not his filial obligation but the fear of his own imminent death as well as his anger at Claudius' schemes for murdering him. Narrating how he comes to know and avoid Claudius' plot on his way to England, Hamlet confesses that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern were killed because of his intercepting of his own execution letter. Interestingly, his attitude to their deaths reminds us of how Lorenzo lightly treats Pedrigano's death: "Their defeat / Does by their own insinuation grow. / 'Tis dangerous when the baser nature comes / Between the pass and fell incensed points of mighty opposites" (5.2.65-69). Hamlet believes that their deaths are a deserving result because those from "the baser nature" should not involve with the matters of their "mighty opposites". His class consciousness resembles not the avenger but the criminal. Hamlet goes on to ask Horatio that "Does it not, think thee, stand me now upon- / He that hath killed my king and whored my mother, / Popped in between th' election and my hopes? / Thrown out his angle for my proper life" (5.2.71-74).

Hamlet emphasizes that “now” is the time he can wholeheartedly accept his duty of revenge. He reiterates what Claudius has committed in order to give a rationale for his vengeance, and among these Claudius’ interference with his succession and life is highlighted. Furthermore, Hamlet equates revenge with “perfect conscience” (5.2.75-76). In this way, the play twists the generic conventions by presenting the protagonist who fully shows his desire for revenge in the very last scene.

IV. Conclusion

This article interrogates *Hamlet*’s self-reflexive engagement with the genre of English revenge tragedy. While *Hamlet* has been considered as a representative example of revenge tragedy, the play blurs generic boundaries by actively questioning the basic premise and structure of the genre. In “*The Spanish Tragedy* and Metatheatre,” Gregory M. Colón Semenza has argued that Kyd’s play is the most influential achievement of the Elizabethan theater because “it frees later tragedians from the generic limitations and epistemological determinism of classic, Aristotelian tragedy” (153). Through the metatheatrical devices, *The Spanish Tragedy* constantly asks the audience to recognize the impossibility of making a clear-cut conclusion and judgment. In this way, *The Spanish Tragedy* as a revenge play enables the “intentional, dramatic indeterminacy,” which represents the hallmark of ‘modern’ tragedies (160). By the same token, *Hamlet*’s metadramatic engagement with revenge tragedy is geared toward expanding on and establishing the genre as a modern one. If the innovation of tragedy on Elizabethan stage began with Kyd’s work, *Hamlet* draws on the freedom from generic boundaries and actively questions its own relationship to other tragedies. By doing so, it shows how the generic label of revenge tragedy itself was open to change and innovation.

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