

# THE SOUTH ATLANTIC QUARTERLY



W I N T E R

I 9 6 6

V o l u m e

L X V

No. I —

\$ I . 2 5

PAGE

## ARTICLES

- The Great Reversal: The Republican Party's  
First Century *Carl N. Degler* 1
- A Little Bit of a Revolution: Bolivia *Sanford Cohen* 12
- Topical Satire and the Temper of the  
Early 1930's *Don Hausdorff* 21
- Memoirs of a Civil War Non-Buff *D. E. Zuhl* 34
- The Function of Poe's Pictorialism *Nina Baym* 46
- The Missouri Crisis, Slavery, and the  
Politics of Jacksonianism *Richard H. Brown* 55
- Financing Italian Industrial Development—  
Examples of the State's Role *Shepard B. Clough* 73
- Sir Richard Temple: Literary Proconsul *Mark Naidis* 82
- The Revenger's Tragedy: Hamlet's  
Costly Code *Victor H. Strandberg* 95
- Unity and Diversity in East Africa:  
A Bibliographical Essay *J. S. Nye* 104
- From McKinley to Kennedy: New Appraisals  
of Recent America *Willard B. Gatewood* 124

## BOOK REVIEWS

- Barnett, *The Treasure of Our Tongue* *Raven I. McDavid, Jr.* 143
- Stewart, *The Burden of Time: The Fugitives  
and Agrarians* *James Boatwright* 145

# The Revenger's Tragedy: Hamlet's Costly Code

*Victor H. Strandberg*

By the time Shakespeare's *Hamlet* was produced around 1600, over fifteen centuries had elapsed since the Crucifixion and its epochal promulgation of the ideal of forgiveness over the revenge code. And two whole millennia had passed since pre-Christian reformers like Aeschylus and Euripides in Greek literature and Isaiah and the writer of Jonah in Hebrew thought had insisted on the breaking of the revenge code as a prerequisite for civilization's progress. Yet very few critics have questioned Hamlet's adherence to the ideal of revenge, and most in fact have criticized Hamlet for, if anything, failing to enact vengeance with adequate speed and vigor. Such readers assume the propriety of the revenge code on two grounds, one commercial and one literary. The commercial basis of *Hamlet* is simply the lucrateness of such a work as Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*, the most popular of all Elizabethan plays. Like the bestseller thrillers of our time, Kyd's work was perhaps too profitable not to merit imitation by a playwright whose earliest venture in tragedy, *Titus Andronicus*, had shadowed forth an uncommon business acumen. The literary basis for accepting Hamlet's revenge code rests, it seems safe to say, upon the ghost's injunction to the bereaved son (Act I, scene v, line 23): "If thou didst ever thy dear father love—/Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder." This command—with its compelling "if" clause—seems to brook little gainsay.

Either of these grounds seems reasonable for accepting Hamlet's purpose as bona fide and, if accepted, would justify traditional criticism of Hamlet as a dreamer, neurotic, bungler, madman, or perhaps heroic failure in achieving his purpose of revenge. But

MR. STRANDBERG, who teaches English at the University of Vermont, has published articles on Melville, Faulkner, and Robert Penn Warren, and has a book on Warren's poetry in press.

there is evidence both within and outside the text why we may doubt Hamlet's rightness in following the revenge code—provided that we rule out the “potboiler” theory of a *Hamlet* written to cash in on a ready audience. External evidence includes not only the general tradition of Christianity—seen incidentally in *Hamlet* when Claudius tries to pray or when Marcellus refers to “that season . . ./ Wherein our Saviour's birth is celebrated” (I, i, 158)—but also Shakespeare's handling of the revenge code in his other works. *Romeo and Juliet*, *Othello*, and *Hamlet* are tragedies precisely because the revenge code unjustly inflicts death upon such people as Mercutio and Paris, Bianca and Desdemona, and Ophelia and Polonius, along with the title characters. And works like *The Tempest*, *Measure for Measure*, and *The Winter's Tale* are comedies precisely because revenge is set aside in favor of forgiveness, deliberate and magnanimous.

Such external evidence is impressive, when totaled up, but the chief evidence against the revenge code lies within *Hamlet* itself. As against the father's explicit injunction to revenge his foul and unnatural murder, we find much implicit judgment against the revenge code. There is, for example, the disproportion between the original sin and its prospective punishment. As we know, on one occasion Hamlet refuses to kill Claudius at prayer because he wants to ensure that his victim's “soul may be as damned and black/As Hell, whereto it goes” (III, iii, 94). And yet the ghost of Hamlet's father, though killed unshriven, is not in Hell but purgatory, according to the ghost's own testimony:

I am thy father's spirit  
Doomed for a certain term to walk the night  
And for the day confined to fast in fires  
Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature  
Are burnt and purged away. (I, v, 9)

Hamlet's is a very negative ethic indeed, if Christianity has value to him not because it invokes grace toward one's enemies but because it insures their permanent stay in Hell.

Another negative effect of the revenge code is the lack of self-insight it causes in its adherents. For all his soliloquizing on sex and death and treachery, and despite his self-castigation as a weakling, Hamlet never does really hold his standards aloft for inspec-

tion. Indeed, it seems ironic that the Hamlet who tells Horatio, "Give me that man/That is not passion's slave" (III, ii, 76), is himself so ruled by passion as to soliloquize with endless revulsion about sex and death and man's corruption. Hamlet's lack of self-scrutiny is also evident when he contrives a play "to catch the conscience of the king," but fails to catch his own conscience when those same players enact before him, in vulgar parody, a gory piece from the greatest revenge tragedy of classical times: the fall of Troy. Hamlet, beguiled by the absurdity of their bombast, sees nothing of himself in this portrayal of the revenge code's absurdity: "Roasted in wrath and fire/ . . . the hellish Pyrrhus/Old grandsire Priam seeks. . . . And never did the Cyclops' hammers fall/With less remorse than Pyrrhus' bleeding sword/Now falls on Priam" (II, ii, 483, 511). No, Hamlet's use of the players is strictly to catch *other* men's consciences. And yet his own motives are not entirely free of self-interest. Like Euripides' Electra, whose passionate mourning for her father failed to conceal her resentment at having to live in a hut instead of the royal palace, Hamlet counts his own loss as well as his father's in passing the death sentence on him "that hath killed my king and whored my mother,/Popped in between the election and my hopes . . ." (V, ii, 64). Furthermore, once having determined "that I, with wings as swift/As meditation or the thoughts of love/May sweep to my revenge" (I, v, 29), Hamlet devotes all his thought and questioning exclusively to his function as "I, the jury," and none whatever to his role as judge and executioner. That is, he ascertains the defendant's guilt—and does so fairly and objectively—but passes a death sentence upon that guilt without questioning the justice of the penalty or the possibility of mercy. This failure to examine his code is quite ironic in view of the mirror he holds up wherein he wants his adversaries to see themselves. First, he holds his father's picture for his mother to look into, to see there not only the father's godlike majesty but also her own wretched defects of character: "O Hamlet, speak no more./Thou turn'st mine eyes into my very soul,/And there I see such black and grainéd spots/As will not leave their tinct" (III, iv, 88). So sensitive is poor, scatterbrained Gertrude to her failure that from this point on Hamlet wins her over to be his ally. And then in the device of the play within a play, Hamlet's main purpose

is to hold the mirror high wherein King Claudius can see his own murderer's visage—and again the effect is to wound his adversary's conscience. But like the Electra of Euripides, again, Hamlet never speculates that a conscience susceptible of such wounding might thus display something redeemable in its make-up, as we in the audience might believe when witnessing Claudius looking into the soul's mirror with deep self-loathing: "Oh my offense is rank, it smells to Heaven" (III, iii, 36). Hamlet thus not only does not inspect his own code; he also fails to see anyone else in the play in anything but a superficial and sardonic way: hence he brutally mistreats Ophelia, he baits and ridicules Polonius and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and fails to understand the inner workings of his mother's and uncle's characters.

This leads us to the main objection to the revenge code: its exorbitant price, both in terms of the dehumanization of the revenger and in terms of the destruction of the rest of the cast. The latter point is clear enough in the general blood bath that ends the play, taking into oblivion not only the play's one guilty man but the innocent Gertrude, the noble Hamlet and Laertes, and presumably even good Horatio, who desires suicide in his bereavement over Hamlet. These bodies join the previous victims of Hamlet's aberrant machinations—Polonius, Ophelia, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern—leaving Fortinbras to emerge as the only survivor and the beneficiary of the wreckage, that same Fortinbras who gave up the revenge code at his uncle's bidding. In Act I, Horatio tells of Fortinbras' uprising against the Danish royal house because Hamlet's father had killed his father (ll. 80-107); in Act II, Voltimand brings news from Norway of how Fortinbras' aged uncle "sends out arrests/On Fortinbras; which he, in brief, obeys,/Receives rebuke from Norway, and in fine/Makes vow before his uncle never more/To give the assay of arms against your Majesty" (ll. 60-75). It may be significant that the young prince who forsook the revenge code concerning *his* father rules both Norway and Hamlet's own Denmark by peaceful inheritance in the end.

The indiscriminate blood bath, then (which led G. Wilson Knight to call Hamlet "the ambassador of death"), would seem to indicate that the price of revenge comes perhaps too high. This wholesale slaughter would seem to constitute an ironic dramatur-

gical reproof of Claudius' statement to Laertes: "Revenge should have no bounds" (IV, vii, 129). But the blood bath is the lesser price compared to the dehumanizing effect the revenge code has upon the avenger. From his surly opening speeches in Act I through his macabre jesting with the gravediggers in Act V, Hamlet is one who subordinates all ordinary human feeling to despairing resentment or the desire for revenge. To be sure, he does show some tenderness toward his mother, but he ceases his brutal language toward her only after she submits to become his confederate in the revenge cycle. And toward all others, excepting his henchman Horatio, he is peevish, unmagnanimous, and sour. The revenge code may well be responsible for the psychopathology that turns the positive Renaissance image of man—"What a piece of work is a man! . . . The beauty of the world!"—into Hamlet's ruling misanthropy: "And yet, to me, what is this quintessence of dust? Man delights not me—no, nor woman neither" (II, ii, 315).

The greatest evidence of Hamlet's dehumanization is of course his callous treatment of Ophelia. Although Hamlet's twin obsessions with sex and death, the subject of nearly all his soliloquies and dialogues, may be justified—the revulsion against sex because of his mother's remarriage and the obsession with death because of his father's demise—he is surely not justified in transferring his revulsion toward his mother's "enseamed bed" to his young love, Ophelia, merely because she is female. Some critics have excused this behavior on the grounds that either Hamlet is mad or is actually trying to protect Ophelia by sending her to a nunnery. But a close examination refutes both these excuses. First, although Hamlet may have obsessions or neuroses, he makes his sanity perfectly apparent both in his unfailing wit and resourcefulness and in the scene where he warns his mother not to reveal "That I essentially am not in madness, / But mad in craft" (III, iv, 187). And the idea that Hamlet is protecting Ophelia quickly breaks down upon a closer look at their dialogue together. First of all, Hamlet fills out his "get thee to a nunnery" speech with some wholly gratuitous insults and cruelty, ranging from "I loved you not" to calling her a whore like all other women: "Get thee to a nunnery, go. . . . Or if thou wilt needs marry, marry a fool, for wise men know well enough what monsters [cuckolds] you make

of them." It seems likely that he wants her in a nunnery not for protection from danger but because such a course is the only alternative to any woman's becoming an adulterous whore. Moreover, this treatment of Ophelia is not just a momentary flare-up caused by his revulsion at his mother's "incest," but is methodical and consistent until after Ophelia's suicide. Thus, Hamlet keeps plying his obscenities as the play within a play gets under way:

OPHELIA: Will he tell us what this show meant?

HAMLET: Aye, or any show that you'll show him.

Be you not afraid to show, he'll not shame  
to tell you what it means.

OPHELIA: You are naught [disgusting], you are naught.

(III, ii, 153)

To be sure, such language may be explained as psychological transference, Hamlet taking out his resentment toward his mother's lust on all women, but unless we grant that he is so unbalanced as to be not responsible, he is certainly giving evidence of dehumanization here. Revenge has so narrowed his sight that he can neither see nor respond to any higher emotions, such as Ophelia's innocent love for him.

Yet originally his love for her was fervent and wholesome, as attested by his doggerel verse to her ("Doubt truth to be a liar,/But never doubt that I love"—II, ii, 118) and his protestation at her funeral: "I loved Ophelia. Forty thousand brothers/Could not, with all their quantity of love,/Make up my sum" (V, i, 292). Ironically, he sacrificed this love on the altar of vengeance in the tragic pattern followed by revengers since Orestes drew his cloak over his eyes so as to kill his mother, or since Medea, weeping with grief, murdered her children to avenge herself upon Jason in the way most certain to hurt him. Like Othello, Hamlet subordinated love to revenge and so set the awesome machinery of destruction in motion. And in so doing he destroyed most of all his own humanity, supplanting his love for Ophelia with a misanthropy so great that he wants to terminate not only his own wretched life but the whole human experiment. This is a further effect of his "get thee to a nunnery" speech: he wants women to stop marrying so that there will be no more children, no continuation of the human project, now rendered by its turpitude a total failure: "Get

thee to a nunnery. Why wouldst thou be a breeder of sinners? . . . I say we will have no more marriages. Those that are married already, all but one, shall live; the rest shall keep as they are. To a nunnery, go" (III, i, 122, 153).

Culminating this dehumanizing misanthropy is the gravediggers scene, where for the first time in the play—to the great discredit of the code which has so warped his thinking—Hamlet finds himself among people who readily understand him and who do not think him mad or wayward for his macabre jokes and obsession with death. Essentially, it is clear, Hamlet has had a gravedigger mentality throughout the play—in his soliloquy on suicide, his puns about his victim Polonius' "last supper," and elsewhere—but until now his morbidity has raised that alarm or pity which normal men accord the mentally ill:

KING: Now, Hamlet, where's Polonius?

HAMLET: At supper.

KING: At supper! Where?

HAMLET: Not where he eats, but where he is eaten. . . .  
We fat all creatures else to fat us, and we fat  
ourselves for maggots. . . . That's the end.

KING: Alas! Alas! (IV, iii, 17)

But now for a change Hamlet is among his kind of people—the diggers who cheerfully trade him pun for pun and song for song among the bones of the dead, and who find nothing grisly in his singing: "Imperious Caesar, dead and turned to clay,/Might stop a hole to keep the wind away" (V, i, 236). This deepening morbidity—Hamlet's being so terribly at ease here and his fitting so naturally into the gravediggers' mode of thought—is what makes this play the tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark. That is, this scene marks and measures that final deterioration of psyche which unfits Hamlet for his designated role as heir apparent, "Prince of Denmark," and denotes his psychological abdication in favor of Fortinbras. Even the loyal Horatio finds Hamlet a little too morbid at this point:

HAMLET: Why may not imagination trace the noble dust of  
Alexander till he find it stopping a bunghole?

HORATIO: 'Twere to consider too curiously to consider so.

(V, i, 225)

It is true that other influences than the revenge code contribute to this gravedigger mentality, but to the extent that the revenge code motivates most of his thinking and acting, it is responsible for bringing Hamlet into this unkingly perspective. Indeed, in terms of dramaturgy, the revenge code has made Hamlet in one way or another the great gravedigger of the play. Since the father's initial injunction, it has caused all the machinations and counterplots by which Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, Polonius, and Ophelia have perished. While Hamlet is not so hard-boiled as Macbeth, who called all those who died during our yesterdays "fools," his lack of compunction for all his victims save Ophelia (in whose case he wrongly denies responsibility) says little for the code he follows.

A final grotesquerie which bespeaks the folly of the revenge code and its unworthiness is the Hamlet-Laertes antagonism whereby we presently witness *two* revenge cycles stalking each other about on stage like cunning animals, each son perfectly justified in seeking to avenge his father and each becoming inhuman in the attempt. Just as Hamlet sacrificed his love for Ophelia (and worse yet, hers for him) on the altar of vengeance, so Laertes gives over his normal nobility of spirit to become a dishonorable coward and liar. So, at least, Laertes himself comes to judge the deceit by which he and Claudius insure Hamlet's death—the rigged swordplay, the poisoned wine, and his pretense of forgiving Hamlet: "I am justly killed by mine own treachery" (v, ii, 318). But until this last moment of his life, when he gives up the revenge code to say, "Exchange forgiveness with me, noble Hamlet" (V, ii, 340), Laertes only strengthens all the previous evidence indicting the revenge code and demonstrates anew how it corrupts or dehumanizes all it touches. Everyone connected with it has thus been witnessed engaging himself in little else than lies and duplicity: Claudius drawn into the cycle in self-defense; his agents, Polonius, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and Laertes, practicing their various duplicities; and Hamlet, confiding to his mother that he is only "Mad in craft" and yet blaming his madness when trying to win Laertes over in the denouement ("What I have done . . . I here proclaim was madness"—V, ii, 241).

To sum up, then, if we are going to judge *Hamlet* as a serious rather than commercial piece of literature, I think we might find

the revenge code the ideological villain of the play. The Renaissance Christian cultural setting, the comparison with Shakespeare's other plays—especially the later comedies, and the plot and characterization within the text itself all seem to argue that the revenge code, so unquestioningly accepted by Hamlet and Laertes, is an unworthy, subhuman ethic for civilized men to follow. It sweeps innocent and guilty alike into their various premature graves, leaving the one character who forsook the revenge code, Fortinbras, to prevail over the wreckage at the end. Subordinating both romantic and humanitarian love to hatred, it debases and dehumanizes both its adherents and their adversaries. And it leaves us who have seen Hamlet's and Laertes' and even Claudius' plainly redeemable qualities feeling that the code which so requires the subversion of their humanity is wrong.