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Revenge in *Romeo & Juliet* and *Hamlet*

Shakespeare is well known for his introspective plays into a character's desires and emotions. For example, there is Romeo with his romantic affiliation and Hamlet with his vengeance. Both of these characters are from two very different narratives, yet both struggle with the idea of revenge. Romeo seeks out Tybalt after Tybalt stabs Mercutio in a brawl, killing Mercutio. Hamlet decides to go after Claudius, who has likely killed Hamlet's father for the crown. Both of these two eventually achieve the revenge they seek, but at a much higher cost. Their actions create a greater tragedy and restarts the cycle of revenge anew. Romeo's and Hamlet's fates show the audience that pursuit of revenge will only result in grief, violence, and death.

In *Romeo and Juliet*, Tybalt first sees Romeo at the masquerade ball, inciting his desire to attack Romeo. Although Capulet insists that Tybalt does not attack Romeo during the ball, Tybalt refuses to let the offense pass. As Tybalt says, "Patience perforce with wilful choler meeting/ Makes my flesh tremble in their different greeting. / I will withdraw; but this intrusion shall / Now seeming sweet, convert to bitterest gall" (I. v. 87-90). Later, Tybalt seeks out revenge for Romeo for wrongly intruding into Capulet's household. Tybalt's petty desire for retribution is what eventually gets Romeo, Mercutio, and Tybalt into a fight, and results in getting both Tybalt and Mercutio killed. Tybalt's anger may seem trivial at first, but it escalates

into a situation that is beyond his control. By killing Mercutio in their encounter, he provokes Romeo into going after him for the sake of Mercutio, restarting the circle of revenge that proceeds to end in the tragedy of Romeo and Juliet.

Romeo goes after Tybalt to avenge Mercutio, killing Tybalt and resulting in Romeo's banishment. Romeo, at first, is passive and refuses to fight Tybalt, but after Mercutio dies, he swears vengeance for Mercutio as Tybalt returns. As Romeo says, "Now Tybalt, take the 'villain' back again. That late thou gav'st me, for Mercutio's soul / Is but a little way above our heads ... Either thou, or I, or both must go with him"(III.i.121-125). In a fit of passion, Romeo kills Tybalt. Almost, immediately, Romeo is regretful, calling himself "fortune's fool" (III.i.132). This leads to Romeo's banishment which causes every single event hereafter, including Paris's, Romeo's, Juliet's, and Lady Montague's death. It is only after the majority of the cast has died that everyone realizes how frivolous the feud between the Capulets and Montagues are. Not only has the family feud taken the lives of the family members on both sides, but also that of the Prince's close friends and relatives. If only the Capulets and Montagues were more forgiving, then this whole disaster could have been averted. By displaying the results of Romeo's and Tybalt's revenge, Shakespeare portrays how revenge only ensues greater catastrophe.

In *Hamlet*, Hamlet is constantly debating whether Claudius has killed or has not killed his father and whether he should kill Claudius in turn. Although the ghost of his father tells him to kill Claudius for poisoning him, Hamlet is still confused on whether Claudius killed King Hamlet. In fact, he chides himself for not acting upon his father's death, moaning, "Why, what an ass am I! This is most brave, / That I, the son of a dear father murder'd, / Prompted to my

revenge by heaven and hell, / must like a whore unpack my heart with words / and fall a-cursing like a very drab, / A scullion!” (II.ii.571-576). His inaction to avenge his father is understandable, as he believes he can’t trust the words of a ghost, but he torments himself on his lack of conviction. Eventually, his indecisiveness leads him to brashly kill Polonius when he tries to confront his mother about Claudius in Act III. His thoughts of revenge have tainted his mind so much that even though his actions were well intentioned at the beginning, he has become mad with thoughts of retribution. As Hamlet says at the beginning of the play, “His virtues else, be they as pure as grace . . . Shall in the general censure take corruption / From that particular fault. The dram of evil / doth all the noble substance of a doubt / To his own scandal” (I.iv.36-41). He feels no regret at Polonius’s death either, as when he discovers his body he simply calls Polonius a “wretched, rash, intruding fool” (III.iv.36).

By killing Polonius, Hamlet kills an innocent bystander while also inciting Polonius’s son, Laertes, to revenge and causing Ophelia to go mad with grief. When Laertes returns from France, he is outraged and Claudius for allowing Polonius to be killed. As Laertes states, “How came he dead? I’ll not be juggled with. / To hell, allegiance! Vows to the blackest devil! . . . Let come what comes, only I’ll be revenged/ Most thoroughly for my father’s death” (IV.v.141-142, 146-147). Laertes vows to kill Hamlet, ignorant to the fact that Claudius is manipulating Laertes to kill Hamlet in his stead. Again, we see how revenge overpowers logics, and in this case, provokes Laertes to follow Claudius’s plan to have Hamlet to be killed in the fencing match. This culminates when Laertes and Hamlet meet before the fencing match, and Hamlet apologizes for his actions. As Hamlet remarks, “Give me your pardon, sir. I have done you wrong. . . What I have done / That might your nature, honour, and exception / Roughly awake, I here proclaim was

madness” (V.ii.217-223). Although Laertes seems to accept Hamlet’s apology, he still goes for the poisoned rapier in his duel, solidifying Hamlet’s fate and his own. He refuses to let go of his pride and his desire for revenge, and, ironically, is slain by his own sword. Only then does Laertes realize the depths of his folly, telling Hamlet to complete his revenge by pointing the blame at the king. At last, Hamlet also realizes he wrong he was to pursue single mindedly the death of the king, and tells Horatio to properly recount his story to ensure it never happens again. The slaughter between Claudius, Gertrude, Hamlet, and Laertes, shows the audience that revenge will only lead to tragedy.

It’s ironic that revenge only leads to the downfall of those pursuing it. By seeking Romeo, Tybalt indirectly digs his own grave, resulting in his death and Mercutio’s. Romeo’s revenge killing of Tybalt leads to his banishment and the confusion thereafter. If both Romeo and Tybalt simply forgave each other for the other’s transgressions, it’s likely neither would have died. Hamlet wouldn’t have accidentally killed Polonius if he didn’t desire to kill Claudius so vehemently, and therefore Laertes wouldn’t have tried to kill Hamlet in the first place. As Francis Bacon says, “ A man studieth revenge keeps his own wounds green”.