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978-0-521-88459-4 - English Revenge Drama: Money, Resistance, Equality

Linda Woodbridge

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PART I

*Rampant revenge*

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## CHAPTER I

*Getting what one deserves*

Men and women of our century tend to endow the people of ancient Athens with moral concerns almost identical with our own, imposing qualities we like best in ourselves upon Greeks unable to resist.

Anne Pippin Burnett

We should recall that Drake named the sea vessel he led against the Armada not *Forgiveness* or *The Turned Cheek* but *The Revenge*.

Harry Keyishian

Our refined modern sensibilities recoil from blood revenge – a primitive, sub-literary motif. Revenge plays we regard as the primordial slime from which Shakespearean tragedy emerged. Evolving exquisitely, it transcended sensationalist forebears: “The revenge play before and outside Shakespeare can be a mechanical, shallow and violent form ... *Hamlet* is incomparably more” (Everett 21).<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, both *Hamlet* and Shakespeare’s first tragedy, *Titus Andronicus*, are sensational revenge plays. The civil wars in his eight-play history cycle are a vendetta between two families. In comedy, Shylock thirsts for revenge and Malvolio storms out of *Twelfth Night* vowing to “be revenged on the whole pack of you!” All but two of Shakespeare’s thirty-seven or thirty-eight plays mention revenge.<sup>2</sup> England’s public theater sucked in revenge with its mother’s milk: Kyd’s *Spanish Tragedy* was “one of the first extant plays to be written for adult players and performed on the public stage” (Erne 96). Renaissance drama gave us a vengeful annihilation of Spain’s ruling family; a Jew taking revenge on the whole island of Malta; an avenger

<sup>1</sup> More examples: “Compared to *The Spanish Tragedy* and *Antonio’s Revenge*, *Hamlet* exhibits a greater understanding and refinement”; “in *Hamlet*, we find everything transmuted. A finer imagination is at work” (Halletts 34, 182). “Shakespeare’s plays show a deeper penetration into the nature of the ethical dilemma involved in revenge ... than do the plays of his contemporaries” (Prosser 94).

<sup>2</sup> Thirty-eight, counting *The Two Noble Kinsmen*. The two plays that don’t mention revenge are *The Comedy of Errors* and *Love’s Labor’s Lost*. The Sonnets and *The Rape of Lucrece* also mention revenge.

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torturing a victim while making him watch his wife copulate with a lover; a king tied to his bed, who thinks his mistress is inventing new erotic sports, until she vengefully stabs him; an empress avenging her husband by poisoning his assassin's bay wreath. Avengers wield daggers, rapiers, axes, arrows, searing crowns, penknives. Poison is infused into books, flowers, wreaths, smoke, handkerchiefs, and the cosmetics of a corpse being wooed by a necrophiliac.

The sheer number of revenge plots attests to the theme's popularity – authors wouldn't have kept writing or companies staging such plays unless audiences flocked to them.<sup>3</sup> Where most plays enjoyed but a single theatrical run, ten revenge plays had three or more runs – two of them among the era's top three or four most-performed plays (*The Jew of Malta* with twenty runs, *The Spanish Tragedy* with fifteen).<sup>4</sup> Where most plays were printed only once (or never), twenty revenge plays saw two or more editions.<sup>5</sup> Cultural traces of these plays are all over the period's writings. Lukas Erne reports many parodies of *The Spanish Tragedy* (52), and Claude Dudrap finds it quoted in fifty-nine plays, 1591–1642 (II: 168). Poetry and a tragedy by the schoolmaster Nathanael Richards are shot through with plagiarisms from *The Revenger's Tragedy* (see A. Bradford). This aficionado of revenge tragedy also wrote commendatory poems for the 1657 edition of *Women Beware Women*, recalling how the audience thrilled to its “plots, poisons, mischiefs,” its “hell-bred malice”: “Never came tragedy off with more applause” (ll. 3, 9, 12), and for *The Rebellion*, where he salivates to find that “plots meet with counter-plots, revenge, and blood.” The age's premier dramatic genre, tragedy, was identified with revenge. As the allegorical figure Comedy sardonically notes, Tragedy “stabs, hangs, impoisons, smotherers, cutteth throats,” employs a howling “Chorus” and a “whining ghost,” crying “Vindicta! Revenge, revenge!” (*Warning for Fair Women* [anon.]

<sup>3</sup> The authors, as “middle-class professionals,” were “concerned with attracting a large popular audience to the commercial theaters. They were not subsidized to any significant extent by patronage, nor did they have private means. They had to ascertain and cater to their audience's theatrical tastes” (Griswold 66).

<sup>4</sup> Based on Yoshiko Kawachi's performance calendar. The *Spanish Tragedy* count includes Henslowe's references to “Jeronimo.” Other revenge plays on the pre-1642 most-performed list are *Othello* (nine runs); *Hamlet*, *Cupid's Revenge*, and the anonymous *Caesar and Pompey* (six runs each); *The Maid's Tragedy* and *1 Henry VI* (five runs each); and *Antonio's Revenge* and *The Merchant of Venice* (three runs each).

<sup>5</sup> *The Spanish Tragedy* (nine editions); *Hamlet* and *The Maid's Tragedy* (eight editions each); *The Merchant of Venice* and *Romeo and Juliet* (six editions each); *2 and 3 Henry VI* (five editions each); *Titus Andronicus*, *Othello*, *The Duchess of Malfi*, and *Cupid's Revenge* (three editions each); *The Atheist's Tragedy*, *The Revenger's Tragedy*, *Antonio's Revenge*, *Revenge for Honor*, the anonymous *Caesar and Pompey*, *1 Henry VI*, *Thomas Lord Cromwell*, *Muleasses the Turk*, and *The Duke of Milan* (two editions each).

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Ind. 51–57).<sup>6</sup> One hundred and twenty English Renaissance plays use the word “revenge” or its derivatives ten times or more; *Antonio’s Revenge* uses it fifty-five times, *The Spanish Tragedy* sixty times.

A. H. Thorndike in 1902 and Fredson Bowers in 1940 isolated revenge tragedy as a genre (see Broude 41). The Halletts’ chapter “Delimiting the Genre” warns that only “finely tuned critical judgments” can determine whether a work is “part of the genre” (280). Eleanor Prosser polices genre boundaries, and Peter Mercer, disqualifying plays that fail to question the morality of revenge, declares even *Hamlet* “not a revenge tragedy” (246). Isolating revenge tragedy as a genre has helped obscure the prevalence of revenge across many genres. I will speak more of revenge *plays*, downplaying the genre issue. To the Halletts’ pigeon-holing rhetorical question, “What is to be gained by defining revenge tragedy so broadly that it cuts across well-established genre borders to herd together a mass of plays having very little in common?” (265–6), I reply that much is to be gained by transgressing such boundaries. I will be generously inclusive because my quarry is not genre definition but the cultural work that literary revenge performs.

Why did revenge permeate this drama? England was not a feud culture like Scotland, or Friuli in Italy.<sup>7</sup> Why did a Christian nation relish vengeful and (often) religiously skeptical plays? (While I give different answers from those of Prosser and other religiously oriented writers, the question they raise is crucial: what *is* a substantial body of revenge drama doing in a Christian society?) Why, in a monarchy, did stage avengers assassinate kings? Why did a hierarchical nation relish scenes of commoners killing dukes? What cultural work did revenge perform?

A clue lies in plays’ interest in fairness and just deserts. The anonymous *Liberty and Prodigality*, 1601, counted on government officials to restore a square deal:

Some men deserve, and yet do want [i.e., lack] their due  
Some men again, on small deserts do sue.  
It therefore standeth princes’ officers in hand,  
The state of every man rightly to understand,

<sup>6</sup> The reference might specifically be to *Locrine*, one of whose two ghosts howls, “Revenge, revenge for blood!”, pursuing a victim with “Vindicta! Vindicta!” (3.5.112, 125), or to George Peele’s *Battle of Alcazar*, which features “Three ghosts crying Vindicta” (2.1.8 s.d.).

<sup>7</sup> As Bowers noted, “In spite of the preoccupation of the age with the subject of private revenge, not many narrations of Elizabethan revenges ending in murder have come down to us, with the exception of ... duels” (*Elizabethan* 23). In contrast to “peripheral regions of Europe in which feuding was common, places such as highland Scotland, Iceland, or Corsica,” in medieval England “royal justice stamped out blood feuds earlier than in any other kingdom” (Muir 275).

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That so by balance of equality,  
Each man may have his hire accordingly.

(3.6.33–38)

That many plays harp on fairness suggests that audiences felt they were *not* fairly treated. In *The Revenge of Bussy d'Ambois*, a ghost believes in justice: "All the joints and nerves sustaining nature / As well may break, and yet the world abide, / As any one good unrewarded die, / Or any one ill [i.e., evil] 'scape his penalty" (5.1.29–32). When his faith proves naïve, he organizes revenge. In revenge plays, a resort to private retaliation is a vote of no confidence in official bodies charged with providing fair treatment. Dramatic revenge mimics Tudor law, where "condign" penalties suited crimes – thieves' hands were cut off, scolds' tongues bridled.<sup>8</sup> Trying to administer a condign revenge, Othello smothers Desdemona in the "bed she hath contaminated" (4.1.197–8). When Titus Andronicus' son avenges him, rhyme and alliteration stress equivalence: "Can the son's eye behold his father bleed? / There's meed for meed, death for a deadly deed" (5.3.64–65).

Many yearn for just deserts. Lear finds it unfair that he gave his daughters "all" and they don't love him. Petrarchist love lyrics rest on the (sadly fallacious) belief that one can attain love by deserving it. Wyatt accuses a woman who doesn't love him of "*undeservèd* cruelty!" (Blage mss. 4); "disdain me not without *desert*," one lover cries (*Court of Venus* 5). Arthur Marotti argues that "marriage for love was a metaphor for advancement by merit rather than by birth or influence. But ... in neither love nor politics did this system obtain" (416). Playgoers deplored unfairness. What impressed the seer Simon Forman in one play was the unfair execution of a seer, simply for telling the truth (Chambers II: 340). A *Love's Labor's Lost* playgoer grumbled that an excellent servant is "as slenderly rewarded" as one "of no merit" (Markham Sig. 1<sup>r</sup>). Asking readers, "Hast thou of thy country well deserved? and art thou of thy labor evil required?", Thomas Heywood recommends identifying with staged Roman heroes Marcellus and Scipio, unfairly exiled (*Apology* Sig. 6).

Unfairness was like the weather: everyone talked about it. But revenge plays did something about it. Many revengers are disempowered people, unjustly treated, who step up and take control. Such figures suffer "malice, injustice, treachery, grief, unstable values, and deprivations of power or status. Through revenge they attempt ... to restore their integrity – their sense of psychic wholeness" (Keyishian 2). But rather than viewing revenge through a lens of individual psychology,<sup>9</sup> I suggest that the fairness fixation and relish

<sup>8</sup> For a discussion of condign punishment, see Jorgensen 32–39.

<sup>9</sup> Charles and Elaine Hallett's book on revenge also focuses mainly on the hero's psychology.

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of vigilantism reveal widespread resentment of systemic unfairness – economic, political, and social – as the Renaissance witnessed severe disproportion between crime and punishment, between labor and its rewards.

ELIZABETHAN AND JACOBEAN SOCIETY: THE  
DEFAULT ON FAIR PAYMENT

Four violations of fair payment fuel revenge plays: unrewarded merit, unmerited reward, unpunished guilt, and undeserved punishment. Despite the Byzantine scheming and outlandish gore that make these plays hard to discuss with a straight face, they tackle serious contemporary issues. Although Italian and Spanish settings displace vengeful intrigue into the papistical Mediterranean, the plays stage, in kaleidoscopic refraction, some very Elizabethan concerns.<sup>10</sup>

*Unrewarded merit*

The heroic military service of Titus Andronicus goes unappreciated by the Saturninus administration; Hieronimo's public service is ignored as he seeks justice for his son's murder. In *The Tragedy of Hoffman* a soldier, after fighting thirty battles, "for his merits ... was nam'd / A prescript outlaw for a little debt" and forced to become a pirate (1.1.161–4). The neglected soldier, a recurrent figure in plays,<sup>11</sup> had a basis in reality: many Elizabethan soldiers were demobilized without pensions, disability compensation, or even full wages. Many people felt under-rewarded economically: through the sixteenth century, wages stagnated or fell while prices rose, and inflation was desperate. Tudor wage and price controls had minimal effect.<sup>12</sup> Monetarist solutions also fizzled: after Elizabeth revalued the debased coinage, prices remained high. The pound sterling's value fluctuated

<sup>10</sup> Ancient settings were another self-protective ploy – *Hamlet's* medieval Denmark, *Valentinian's* ancient Rome. Remote time and place were standard covers for comment on contemporary affairs, in many literary genres: as Spenser confessed in the letter to Raleigh prefixed to *The Faerie Queene*, "I chose the history of King Arthur as ... furthest from the danger of envy and suspicion of present times."

<sup>11</sup> Shakespeare's general Alcibiades muses bitterly, "I have kept back their foes / While they have told [i.e., counted] their money and let out / Their coin upon large interest – I myself, / Rich only in large hurts ... / Is this the balsam that the usuring senate / Pours into captains' wounds? Banishment!" (*Tim* 3.6.104–9). See also Montford in Chettle and Day's *Blind Beggar of Bednal Green* and Bosola in *The Duchess of Malfi*.

<sup>12</sup> "Grain prices rose, and not just occasionally as a result of bad harvests, but quite generally and extending over many generations ... Wages did not keep up ... At the beginning of the seventeenth century weavers and carpenters earned twice as much as at the beginning of the sixteenth century, while the price for food had almost tripled" (Jütte 29). On wage and price controls,

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ruinously on the global market. A 1564 Royal Commission Report wrongly assumed that “bankers ruled the exchange”; in fact bankers were “ruled by the forces operating on the money market” (De Roover, *Gresham* 185). Sir Thomas Smith’s *Discourse of the Commonweal* recognized the dependence of domestic prices on foreign trade – the English couldn’t compel foreign suppliers to lower prices: “We may not set the price of things at our pleasure but follow the price of the universal market of the world” (86). In a global market, economic problems exceeded the reach of national governments. During a serious recession in 1622, Gerard de Malynes, an advocate of currency regulation, listed thirty-five “defective means and remedies ... tried these 350 years” (*Lex* 76) – an average of one defective remedy per decade. Three hundred and fifty years of failed regulation overwhelmed his optimism about his own remedies. And the laissez-faire belief of his ideological opposite, Edward Misselden – that no one could control markets or currency value – played into public fear of government economic impotence. Revengers with their artful decapitations were among many craving fair payment, control over their own fortunes. For all their fanciful poisonings and picturesque Italianate villains, revenge plays obliquely respond to inflation and failed economic regulation.

*Unmerited reward*

Viluppo in *The Spanish Tragedy* is rewarded for perjury and Tamora in *Titus Andronicus* promoted from vanquished enemy to Roman empress on slim qualifications. Elizabethans hated usurers, resenting their alleged profit without honest labor. Venture capitalists and global traders dodged charges of undeserved windfall profits by trumpeting their arduous toil.<sup>13</sup> Elizabeth’s granting of monopolies was resented as unmerited reward (enriching monopolists) and unrewarded merit (wage-earners’ buying power eroded by high prices on monopolized items). Stuart kings’ opulent gifts to favorites fueled public discontent over unmerited reward,<sup>14</sup> as did more accessible targets such as the “undeserving poor.”

see Palliser 130–60. Muldrew summarizes, “Despite all the effort which went into framing and enforcing the ‘massive’ statute of artificers, in which wages were to be legally determined and set by local justices of the peace,” such regulation ended as “the least important factor in determining wage rates” (49).

<sup>13</sup> Leinwand 111, 115, 138. Exposing oneself to risk was also a sign that one *deserved* profits: “Just as the law depended upon evidence of risk to distinguish a lawful lender from a usurer, so an adventurer’s *bona fide* consisted in his willingness to put himself at ‘fortune’s hazard’” (111).

<sup>14</sup> Robert Harding documents complaints about “systematic neglect of merit, status, or services in making appointments and awards” (47). See also Elliot/Brockliss, and Peck.

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*Unpunished guilt*

In revenge plays, murderers and rapists threaten to go scot free – Aaron, Chiron, and Demetrius in *Titus Andronicus*, Balthazar and Lorenzo in *The Spanish Tragedy*. In real life, many malefactors did go free. Rape, a common crime, was seldom successfully prosecuted (see Bashar, “Rape,” Cockburn). The literate were exempted from prosecution by benefit of clergy. And judges could be bribed. “Royal justice failed to gain public confidence,” Ronald Broude notes, because it was unable “consistently to safeguard life and property” and because its “integrity was often suspect” (45). Revenge sometimes seemed the judicial system’s evil twin (see Chapter 4), and some plays vilify the “wild justice” of revenge in a sleight of hand that keeps institutional justice pure. G. K. Hunter’s “revenge on the Elizabethan stage ... is a perverted form of justice” (*Dramatic Identities* 185) elides the Tudor tendency to see justice itself as perverted.<sup>15</sup>

*Undeserved punishment*

Titus’ sons, framed for murder, are hustled off to execution. Hoffman indicts the legal system that condemned his father: “Wretches sentenced never find defense,” even if “guiltless” (1.1.222–3). The Tudors enacted harsh penalties for petty crimes. Execution levels were much higher than in the eighteenth century: convicted Elizabethan felons “stood a one in four or five chance of being executed ... under Queen Anne, the chances

<sup>15</sup> On bribery: William Wentworth advised his son, “Though your cause be never so just ... yet must you ... procure [the judge’s] good opinion by discretion and gifts” (17). On judicial corruption:

Many offenses (for example, rape and murder) traditionally regarded as torts (wrongs involving only the offender and victim) were made into felonies (offenses in which the king was concerned). The fact that the crown received fees for cases tried in its courts, and that the goods of convicted felons were escheated to the crown provided strong inducements for often impecunious sovereigns to enlarge the number of offenses which their courts were competent to try. However, the potential for judicial profits thus created compromised the integrity of royal justice in the eyes of many. (Broude 45–46)

Both *The Spanish Tragedy* and *Titus Andronicus* employ the image of a just Astraea, often identified with Queen Elizabeth, absenting herself from earth (see Bate 280). Bate argues that “the necessity to revenge reveals the inadequacy of the law; the formalization of revenge in performance acts as a substitution for the law” (278). And rage at the legal system reached a high pitch of intensity during the radical mid seventeenth century in England, when “calls for reform arose from a deep hatred for lawyers and a deep dissatisfaction with the present state of the law. There were those against Star Chamber, which was abolished; there were those against the ‘norman yoke’ of common law; many voices were raised against Chancery; the practice of law was seen as elitist, esoteric, and biased” (Fortier 160).



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were more like one in ten” (Sharpe 93). Felony, consisting “overwhelmingly of property offenses – larceny, burglary, housebreaking, highway robbery, robbery and pickpocketing,” was a capital offense (79). Many opposed such harshness. A Parliamentarian decried as “oversharp and bloody” a law stipulating execution for a third vagrancy conviction (Leonard 69). In *Utopia*, More protested disproportion between crime and punishment: that English thieves are “executed everywhere,” as many as twenty at a time “hanged on a single gallows,” his Hythlodaye finds against “the public good. The penalty is too harsh ... Simple theft is not so great a crime that it ought to cost a man his head” (9). Thomas Starkey deplored that “for every little theft a man is ... hanged without mercy or pity,” even if stealing “for necessity” (114). He denounced corrupt judges, with “little regard” for “true administration of justice. Lucre and affection ruleth all”; defendants have no worries “if the judge be their friend” (86). John Ponet wanly hoped that judges would impose sentences “not greater or less than the fault deserveth, and that they punish not the innocent or small offender ... and let the mighty and great thief escape” (8). Imprisonment for debt was keenly resented as a penalty only for ill fortune (Leinwand 75). Juries sometimes “found offenders not guilty” to avoid “unjust capital punishment for crimes such as theft” (Fortier 81–82).

## ECONOMIC AND LEGAL UNFAIRNESS

Part I of this book deals with economic unfairness and related legal unfairness, reflected in revenge plays’ pervasive economic language.

Elizabethans applied monetary terms to both reward and punishment. To pay was either to reward or to punish/be punished.<sup>16</sup> “Let good Antonio look he keep his day, / Or he shall *pay* for this” (*MV* 2.8.25–26). In *Women Beware Women*, a woman has “paid well” for a lover: “He kept a quean or two with her own money, / That robbed her of her plate, and cut her throat” (2.2.164–5 – here “paid” means both cash to a gigolo and a cut throat). A victim could “pay” or *be* paid. “Paid” or “paid home” anticipated our “paid back”: “Thou art now paid home / For all thy counseling in knavery” (*Hoffman* 5.3.2462–3). When Antony marries, Cleopatra feels Caesar’s revenge: “In praising Antony, I have dispraised Caesar... I am *paid* for’t

<sup>16</sup> And “reward” meant both “recompense” for a service or merit and “retribution for evil-doing; requital, punishment.” “Retaliate” meant “requite, repay in kind” for both “injury” and “kindness.” From *re-* plus the Latin *tālis* or “such-like,” retaliation was condign payment (OED). In the revenge play *The Bastard*, revenge is retaliation (5.4.139), and a grateful character vows to “retaliate thy just deserts” (2.3.281).

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now" (*Ant* 2.5.108–10). In Falstaff's whoppers, injury is payment: "Two I am sure I have *paid*"; "seven of the eleven I *paid*" – ironic for one who has *paid* tavern bills only "three or four times" (*iH4* 2.5.176, 201–2; 3.3.15). Reward is not an addition, like a pay hike, and punishment a subtraction, like a salary decrement: for Elizabethans, punishment too was an addition, a through-the-looking-glass payment, a negative salary. "The wages of sin is death," the Bible put it (Romans 5: 18). Pain, like money, was a payment.

An unfair exchange sparks Titus' revenge. He judges the exchange of his hand for his sons' lives, though "dear," an "easy price"; but the messenger's unlovely burden of heads and hand exposes the deal as a trick: "Ill art thou *repaid* / For that good hand" (3.1.233–4). Violation of fair payment sparks revenge, whose idiom is monetary: heaven will not "suffer murder *unrepaid*" (*Spanish Tragedy* 3.13.3). Vindice demands, "who'er knew / Murder *unpaid*?" (*Revenger's Tragedy* 1.1.42–43). When Ithimore snarls, "Pay me my wages," Barabas menaces, "I'll pay thee with a vengeance" (*Jew of Malta* 3.4.118–19). Avengers' economic idiom is often one of debt repayment – "For this I *owe* you" (*Ado* 5.4.52). In Chapter 4 I will inscribe the preoccupation with revenge within what Craig Muldrew calls a "culture of credit" – widespread indebtedness.

Stage revengers often encounter a corrupt legal system: "God's justice could be slow, his earthly representatives corrupt, the machinery of state out of order, so that flagrant wrongs went unpunished" (A. Burnett 21). Titus' sons, tried for murder, are not allowed to testify.<sup>17</sup> Judges fear public loss of faith in the judiciary: if they acquit the rapist of one virtuous victim, "judgment itself / [Will] be condemned and suffer in men's thoughts" (*Revenger's Tragedy* 1.2.58–59). The English translator of a Senecan revenge play added a passage indicting the judiciary: "The subtle science of the law, / The statutes of our land, /... / Thou dost not understand. / The judges be malicious men" (*Agamemnon* Sig. [c6]). "The law's delay" (*Ham* 3.1.74) also frustrated justice: "If the legal mechanisms of the state ... ordained to take retribution ... grind exceedingly slowly ... a lifetime could pass without the proper redress of the grievance" (French 31).

<sup>17</sup> Unlike the judiciary, revengers demand evidence: Hamlet performs the mousetrap experiment and, for Hieronimo, Pedringano's letter corroborates Bel-Imperia's accusations (*Spanish Tragedy* 3.7.50–52). Revengers delay partly to seek evidence. Often decried as mere dithering, such delay can lend an air of rational judiciousness. The aversion to rash haste is something revengers share with the Deity: "Heaven hath ever been to vengeance slow" (Bellany/McRae Niv2, 12). Affecting saintly patience, King James, answering a libel, claimed that "slow I am revenge to take" (Bellany/McRae Nvii, 169). The Halletts hold that delay indicates qualms about the morality of revenge (84–85). Confessing that "the evidence offers little support for a claim that the delay calls attention to the promptings of conscience" (88), they fall back on subconscious motivation.