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محاضرات مادة المسرح الشكسبييري (الانتحار والعدالة في مسرحية هاملت)

IT HAS ALWAYS struck me as rather curious that the ghost should begin its final instructions to the Prince of Denmark with the words: "But howsomever thou pursues this act" (I.v. 84).¹ This evasive "howsomever" serves to point up the fact that the ghost has been disobliging enough to leave the task of defining revenge squarely up to Hamlet. The play, however, taken as a whole, is rather more obliging; for it illustrates two popular alternatives-the law of the talon and the code of honor, we may call them-either of which Hamlet might well choose. It will repay us to consider the light in which these are exhibited to Hamlet, and to us, before looking at the terms in which Hamlet eventually defines his mission, thereby resolving the ambiguity to his own satisfaction

Strictly considered, the principle of the talon is not very aptly described as a law at all, for its essential motive is not obligation but will, and the satisfaction it seeks is limited neither by reciprocity nor, for that matter, by any other standard. What the talon lusts after is nothing less than the total destruction of the hated object and of all that can be identified with it. This "all," of course, will normally have its posthumous element. In a culture without a clear concept of damnation or of an immortal soul substantial enough to be worth the damning, the self may still be thought of as surviving, and vulnerable, in its lineal posterity. Aristotle's argument for a degree of misfortune after death is a celebrated case in point;² and the archetypal avenger in this sense will be a figure like the Virgilian Pyrrhus of the Player's Speech, for whom all Troy-"fathers, mothers, daughters, sons"

(II.ii.462)-is a single hated extension of his own father's murderer. The indiscriminate bloody-mindedness of Pyrrhus' kind of revenge is faithfully reproduced in another Renaissance imitation, the brutal Rodomonte's atrocities at the siege of Paris:

But Rodomont whose men consum'd with fire, Do fill their masters mind with double rage, Yet to avenge their deaths doth so desire, As nought but blood his thirst of blood can swage: ...

He kills alike the sinner and the good, The reverend father and the harmlesse child, He spills alike the yong and aged blood, With widowes, wives, and virgins undefil'd

Even in a pagan, Rodomonte's homage to grief was barely explicable to Ariosto, much less excusable. For Shakespeare's audience, one strongly suspects, a Christian Prince of Denmark could embrace the law of the talon only by forfeiting all claim to sympathy. It is instructively ironic, in this connection, that the passage in which Hamlet castigates his failure to speak out should be so closely parallel in cadence to the passage in which the Player describes the only failure to act of which a votary of the talon is capable:

Yet I, A dull and muddy-mettled rascal, peak Like John-a-dreams, unpregnant of my cause, And can say nothing. (II.ii.569-572)

So as a painted tyrant Pyrrhus stood, And like a neutral to his will and matter, Did nothing. (11. 484-486)

But for the example of Pyrrhus, it been far easier to agree with Hamlet's of John-a-dreams. In the Greek warrior hesitation is no sign of conscience, only prise at the shuddering of Troy, which with a hideous crash Takes prisoner Pyrrhus' ear. after Pyrrhus' pause, A roused vengeance sets him new awork. (11. 480-481,491-492)

Better to "peak" like a John-a-dreams tains some moral awareness than be "roused" to the insensibility of a Pyrrhus.

But the deeper irony of the passage exemplifies, as often in the play, the difficulty of penetrating the mind at the back of an utterance: where Hamlet, for reasons of dramaturgical symmetry cogently argued by Harry Levin,⁴ may well be moved to tears because he sees in Priam "a dear father murder'd" (1. 587) and in Pyrrhus, consequently, the uncle who did the deed, the spectator with even a smattering of Virgil could probably

be relied on to recognize Pyrrhus as the son of Achilles, "of a dear father murder'd," quite specifically bent on the "vengeance" (1. 492) for which Hamlet cries out (1. 585) at the turning point of his meditation on the Player's Speech. And Hamlet himself reinforces the latter identification. For it is to this vengeance without bounds, vengeance by total destruction, that the Prince at a crucial point commits himself.