

Hamlet, Titus Andronicus, and the Vicious Cycle of Revenge:
An Exploration of Shakespeare's Use of Humoral Theory & Humanism

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Abstract

The potential for revenge lies within everyone as flawed human beings, but how many people are known to actually act upon their desires? Many of William Shakespeare's works revolve around the cycle of revenge and the damaging influence it has on surrounding parties. A primary example of dramatic tragedy, *Hamlet* and *Titus Andronicus* demonstrate the way in which Shakespeare incorporates aspects of humoral theory into his works as a means of exploring the human mind. The connection to central ideals from the Renaissance era relates to humanism and provides deeper insight into the functions of Shakespeare's play. Scholars will engage with the core concepts of the Renaissance as they explore humoral theory and humanism and its influences on Shakespeare's intriguing moral ambiguity and the toll revenge takes on the human body, mind, and soul. Overall, this research essay is designed to show how both *Titus Andronicus* and *Hamlet* demonstrate that the desire for revenge leads to madness and moral corruption and is deeply rooted in Humoral Theory. By examining characters' physical states, particularly the imbalances in their humors, Shakespeare demonstrates how these imbalances contribute to the characters' mental deterioration and subsequent actions.

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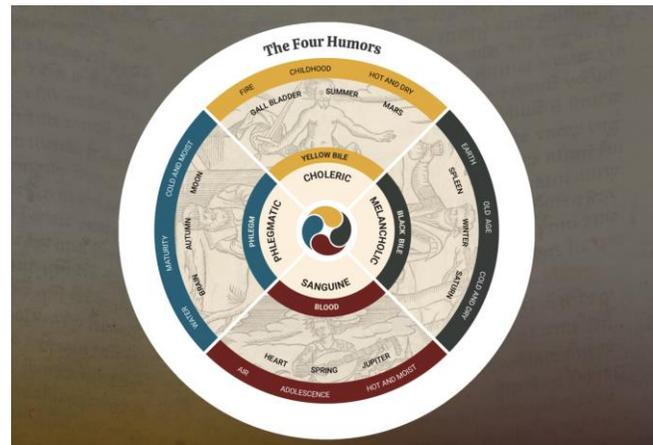
The urge to submit to a thirst for vengeance dwells within the existence of a flawed humanity — silently growing into an all-consuming force. The process of revenge begins with a catalyst through which a person feels wronged and seeks their own form of justice. Though it is often limited to visions of the mind that fizzle out before any actual harm comes of them, what happens when one's desire for "justice" becomes blurred and morality spirals out of control? This concept is examined throughout William Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* and *Hamlet* in which characters' desires for revenge lead to their physiological and psychological deterioration that bleeds into the lives of others in an unbreakable cycle. Within the context of Shakespeare's works, he directly links the detrimental effects of revenge on the body and mind to humoral theory. Furthermore, Shakespeare presents primary ideals of humanism utilizing his works as a means of exploring the human mind rather than merely telling a story. Both *Titus Andronicus* and *Hamlet* demonstrate how the desire for revenge leads to madness and moral corruption and is deeply rooted in Humoral Theory. By examining characters' physical states, particularly the imbalances in their humors, Shakespeare demonstrates how these imbalances contribute to the characters' mental deterioration and subsequent actions.

Shakespeare & Science

To begin understanding Shakespeare's intent with both *Titus Andronicus* and *Hamlet* one must examine the influences of humoral theory and humanism on his craft. Humoral theory and humanism were prevalent during the Renaissance era and were revered in medical and psychological practices. Humanism was an emphasis on the "revived interest in the classical world and studies which focused not on religion but on what it is to be human" (Cartwright). Shakespeare utilizes the ideals of humanism to challenge the social structure of his time as

“humanism has not one but two antagonists: specialisation and ‘modern scepticism’” (Mousley). Additionally, Shakespeare emphasizes the idea that humanism is an explication of morality, in that humanity is inherently flawed and predestined for a life of sin. This concept influences his use of the tragic hero, especially as he delves into the effects of the endless pursuit of revenge on the human mind and how far people will go to achieve their version of justice. Together, these concepts influence his construction of both *Hamlet* and *Titus Andronicus* as they are direct representations of a tragic hero dealing with an insatiable need for revenge. He ultimately uses both characters to examine how the pursuit of revenge can unravel the minds and push others towards moral ambiguity as their descent toward revenge can become inhumane.

In a similar way, Shakespeare utilizes humoral theory to support this examination, arguing that imbalance within the body is the catalyst of spiraling human emotion that contributes to the loss of control over oneself. Like humanism, humoral theory was once regarded as an



indisputable science and heavily influenced the plot of revenge within Shakespeare’s two works. Humoral theory was the belief that human temperament was connected to four fluids: phlegm, blood, yellow bile, and black bile. Each is assigned to their respective temperaments of phlegmatic, sanguine, choleric, and melancholic with these “four humors [being] understood to define peoples’ physical and mental health, and determined their personality, as well” (NLM). It was believed that an imbalance of these fluids within the body could alter a personality, even to the point of no return. This concept is one that Shakespeare emphasizes heavily with several of his characters being driven mad due to an excess or lack of one of the essential humors. Thus,

Shakespeare “added credibility and motive to the stories that he used by giving characters a convincing psychology . . . based on the popular science of the age” (Draper), known as Shakespearean drama. The aspects of humanism and humoral theory create an intriguing argument as to the physiological and psychological effects of revenge through Shakespeare’s characters that parallel possibilities of the living world.

Vengeance Initiated & Instances of Humoral Theory

Revenge is like an explosion, beginning with one act initiated by one person, yet its shrapnel is capable of destroying much more. The plots of *Titus Andronicus* and *Hamlet* are driven by one major theme — revenge. The emotional turmoil caused by a desire for vengeance radiates from within a person as it corrupts them, blurring the lines between morality and a monster. Across the dramatic tragedies, the desire to avenge a loved one is preceded by acts of violence and death. Within *Titus Andronicus*, its namesake and protagonist murders the eldest son of Queen Tamora as an act of tradition in accordance with the ways of Old Rome. Queen Tamora lividly vows vengeance that will entrap Titus Andronicus, his family, and the citizens of Rome in an inescapable desire for their own warped sense of “justice.” This instance characterizes “Yellow bile [which] renders the soul bold and daring” (Jouanna) which Andronicus embodies.

For *Hamlet*, the murder of King Hamlet at the hands of his brother, Claudius, invokes the melancholic action of his son, Prince Hamlet, to avenge his father and eliminate those who would hinder his goal. The plot centers on a desire to “Cure the Prince of a melancholy madness that he assumes to save himself from” (Draper) dealing with his grief in a rational manner. Furthermore, Hamlet’s melancholic motivations cause him to fixate on one person, Claudius, rather than everyone around him as in *Titus Andronicus* — highlighting sorrow and rage as emotions of revenge and how the two create different, though still all-consuming. As a result of

allowing themselves to succumb to their motivators, these characters have created a susceptibility to the poison of revenge and meet their demise as tragic heroes. These acts initiate the cycle of revenge in their respective stories and seal the fates of his characters within this tragedy.

Shakespeare highlights the humoral imbalances within his characters to emphasize their flawed humanity and the psychological descent that fuels their tragic demise or leads to their tragic destinies. Particularly evident in *Hamlet* is an excess of black bile (melancholy) is present within the young prince. Prince Hamlet is characterized as “wearing black clothes . . . with . . . eyes to the ground remembering [his deceased] noble father” (Hamlet 1.2.68-71) and his emotional state is exhausted. This is reflective of an excess of black bile which becomes more evident as Hamlet haphazardly concocts a plan to avenge his father, who he suspects was murdered by his Uncle Claudius, and isolates himself from support which only hastens his descent into madness. Similarly, Titus Andronicus suffers from an excess of temperament though it is the choleric humor that contributes to his downfall. A returning war veteran, Titus Andronicus idolizes the traditions of Rome and prioritizes its greatness in the present above the benefit of its future. His unyielding nature is characteristic of yellow bile also associated with cruelty and anger. Following a series of traumatic events, Titus Andronicus literally hits rock bottom, where he “tell[s his] sorrows to the stones, Who, though they cannot answer to [his] distress” (Titus Andronicus 3.1.37-38). This is the moment in which any remnant of humanity within Andronicus dies and he reanimates as a choleric spectre, hellbent on the most brutal revenge. Within his protagonists over his two works Shakespeare focuses on an excess of bile rather than a lack of it, in order to effectively initiate and demonstrate the effects of humoral theory in relation to revenge.

The Tragic Hero & Other Renaissance Ideology Within *Titus Andronicus* & *Hamlet*

After the initiating catalysts, themes of revenge are especially prominent throughout *Titus Andronicus* and *Hamlet* particularly in relation to the decline of mental and physical health. Misfortune follows Titus as he grapples with the brutal trauma that clinging to his political ideals has brought him. His conviction to uphold Rome proves to be his undoing similar to how Prince Hamlet's conviction to avenge his father's death is his. The stubborn refusal to give up one's ambition to consider options or receive outside help in the face of isolation are Andronicus' and Hamlet's fatal flaws respectively — solidifying their roles as tragic heroes. Otherwise known as “Hamartia [which] refers to the tragic flaw or error in judgement that leads to the downfall of the tragic hero” (Grozav). Despite this, both characters continue down their destructive paths, inflicting damage on themselves and those around them. The concept of not knowing when to quit is explored by Shakespeare utilizing humanism.

Furthermore, Shakespeare utilizes themes of vengeance to explore the human mind, also known as humanism, and reflects cultural aspects of the Renaissance era. As a philosophy, humanism focuses on the morality of the human mind. In making a primary theme of his works about vengeance, Shakespeare pushes this ideology to its limits as he portrays the process of moral corruption within his characters. Particularly with the gore of *Titus Andronicus* and the horrific mutilation of characters, Shakespeare exposes the false sense of judgement humans have. Andronicus and Tamora bat back and forth, each feeling entitled to vengeance on the other, going so far as to mutilate each other's children. The engagement between internal and external turmoil can be described as “An emotional roller coaster. [That] contains mixed feelings for the hero and their antagonists” (Grozav). Not only does this apply to Shakespeare's characters, but his audience too, drawing them into the ambiguous area of morality. Shakespeare adopts

humanism as a means of claiming that humanity is incapable of attaining true morality and challenging the social ideals of his time.

The Influence of Vengeance on Various Characters

Shakespeare examines different effects of vengeance on the human mind depending on the character and setting such as *Titus Andronicus*. For instance, Lavinia is the daughter of Titus Andronicus and described as the beautiful, obedient daughter of Rome – the qualities of a “perfect” Roman woman. Lavinia is representative of Rome itself and its traditions, which her father clings to as a patriotic Roman citizen. It is due to this perception of honor that Andronicus kills the son of Queen Tamora, a tragic woman who loses herself to vengeance in her love for her sons, inciting her vengeance and snaring surrounding characters into its crossfire. Unfortunately, Lavinia takes the brunt of Tamora’s wrath as despite her pleas “be called a gentle queen, / And with thine own hands kill me in this place!” (2.3.168-169,), the former encourages her sons to rape and mutilate her. A piece of Queen Tamora dies in her rage as she will not “hear her [Lavinia] speak. Away with her” (2.3.137) and succumbs to her plot for revenge only to lose everything she was fighting for. This defilement represents not only the dangers of vengeance but also the disarray that the current Roman body is in and the disrespect of its traditions.

Arguably, the disrespect for his nation's ideals, i.e., the mutilation of Lavinia, is why Titus Andronicus is consumed within the cycle of vengeance and loses his sense of humanity in the process. After killing, dismembering, baking, (an exploration of the human mind cracking under the pressures of vengeance and insanity) and then feeding Tamora her two sons, Andronicus can be described as truly lost, he no longer values Rome’s traditions and proceeds to kill Lavinia as a means of visualizing his broken faith. This demonstrates that his desire for vengeance has eroded him as though a boulder, leaving him as helpless as the stones his true self perished with. Andronicus brokenly cries “Diem die, Lavinia, and thy shame with thee, And with

thy father's sorrow die" (5.3.46-47) as he kills his daughter, his only act of mercy in the play, highlighting the importance of Rome adopting a merciful future. Furthermore, Lavinia's death symbolizes a resolution to the violence and chaos Rome has endured as well as the end to traditional Rome, emphasized further in the deaths of all who have a connection to the old Rome.

As in *Titus Andronicus*, Shakespeare presents a different cause for revenge within *Hamlet* that demonstrates a different, yet similar viewpoint of vengeance and its effects on the human mind. Unlike *Titus Andronicus*, the primary motivation for revenge within *Hamlet* is that of sorrow as opposed to rage, which signifies the effects of distinct types of vengeance. The young Prince Hamlet is the catalyst for the cycle of revenge that threatens the order of the lives of many. Hamlet is visited by the ghost of his deceased father, who claims to have been murdered by his brother Claudius and determines to avenge his father no matter the cost. However, Hamlet's melancholic state isolates him from allies, ruins his relationships, and results in easily preventable deaths. His grief creates delays in his plans, symbolizing a difference in effects of bile, while dismissing all forms of potential aid fueling his vengeance and exacerbating his melancholy. Hamlet contemplates "To be, or not to be? That is the question—Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer" (3.1,57-58). Questioning his will to live, Hamlet's infamous monologue allows readers to view the depths of his grief and the results of his melancholic state. Due to the influence of vengeance, Hamlet loses all sight of himself to his grief, which bleeds into others' lives, especially Claudius and Ophelia.

Ophelia is often characterized by her desperate love for Hamlet, though her actions throughout the play reflect a deeper view of revenge as an all-consuming force, even on parties indirectly involved. Ophelia is concerned for Hamlet and works with his mother to discover the truth of his afflictions and is often torn between her loyalty to her family and her love for Hamlet. After the murder of her father, Ophelia is left detrimentally unstable, feeling abandoned

by her family and rejected by her love interest, leading her to dissolve in insanity, “As one incapable of her own distress, or like a creature native and indued unto that element” (4.7. 177-179) ending in her death. Ophelia’s death is very much entwined with sorrowful devotion and is, again, representative of vengeance as a brutal cycle, while demonstrating sorrow as Hamlet’s primary motivation for revenge. In particular, Claudius is impacted by the melancholic motivation as he is slowly consumed by the guilt of murdering his brother. He acknowledges that “Oh, my offence is rank. It smells to heaven. It hath the primal eldest curse upon’t, a brother’s murder” (3.3.37-39), further reinforcing the blurring lines of morality by Shakespeare. This leads to his own undoing, resulting in the deaths of Laertes and Hamlet’s mother, which only fuels Hamlet’s sorrows and fixation for revenge against Claudius alone, ending in the demise of both.

Although the cycle of revenge consumes all, Shakespeare introduces a means of breaking the cycle as well as preventing it, which lies in the future. Despite most characters meeting their demise (symbolizing the all-destructive nature of revenge), certain characters are left alive to share the stories of the deceased. For instance, Lucius, Andronicus’ last living son, addresses Rome “Thanks, gentle Romans. May I govern so / To heal Rome’s harms and wipe away her woe!” (5.3.149-150) and turn towards a more merciful future (exemplified earlier by his sparing of Aaron’s baby) and modern Rome. An emphasis placed on Young Lucius and the baby conveys a hopeful tone for Rome’s future and the importance of mercy. Similarly, Horatio raises awareness of the unfortunate demise of his dear friend Hamlet, who ended his life in grief, and the toxic nature of revenge. In his dying moments, Hamlet beseeches Horatio to preserve order while moving towards a modernized world where fairness presides over injustice to prevent revenge. Horatio “presently performed, even while men’s minds are wild, lest more mischance on plots and errors happen” (5.2.397-399), effectively preserving his friend’s memory by breaking the cycle of revenge. The two characters, though from different tales, each symbolize

the importance of mercy and awareness in the face of revenge. Additionally, the shift from past to future reinforces Shakespeare's exploration of Renaissance ideals which revitalized classic, traditional ideals. In emphasizing the future through his characters, Shakespeare warns against clinging to the past as it will be the undoing of humankind, showcasing that the future is not to be feared.

Closing Statements

William Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* and *Hamlet* demonstrate how the desire for revenge, influenced by humoral motivations, leads to madness and moral corruption. In examining characters' humoral imbalances, Shakespeare demonstrates how characters from both stories align with scientific beliefs of the Renaissance, adding a sense of reality to the otherwise fictional situations. Shakespeare does this as a political statement in order to warn against fearing what the future holds and that blindly clinging to traditional ideals leads to the corruption of the human soul that can bring about the cycle of revenge he heavily emphasizes. An embodiment of the beliefs of humanism, Shakespeare presents an exploration of what it means to be flawed in which his characters suffer, so people don't have to. Scripted by William Shakespeare, *Titus Andronicus* and *Hamlet* are masterful explorations of the human mind and serves as a reminder that vengeance, as a force, is all-consuming. Shakespeare explores the depths of the human mind through various characters and the effects of grief and revenge impact their tragic fates. However, even in the face of suffering, Shakespeare makes it evident that even the yellow flames of rage that consume Titus Andronicus and the black tears of sorrow that drown Prince Hamlet, scatter and nurture the seedlings of a potentially sound future — prioritizing mercy and fairness above all.

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