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(IN) THE HANDS OF VENGEFUL GOD:  
DIVINE ANGER AND JUST REVENGE IN ELIZABETHAN  
ENGLAND

VINDICTA MIHI, VINDICTA TIBI: WHOSE VENGEANCE?

The aim of this study is to provide a brief description of the dynamic field that poses a major challenge to scholarship striving to remain within any one given discipline. My concern is with the notion of vengeance and its underlying principles; even though the subject *per se* is most commonly lodged within the bounds of legal theory, I choose to treat it as a philosophical category with direct roots in theology on the one hand, and on the other as a culture-specific concept, whose exact definition is an outcome of a number of social variables. In this sketch I would like to demonstrate that the study of vengeance challenges many conventional notions that we have of the history of the Western civilisation: the most basic of them will be the traditional historical framework of continuous civilizing progress. The common presumption shared by a bulk of scholars active within the field of vengeance studies until 1990s was that the “long history of vengeance may be a history of the civilizing process – how states and societies repressed the urge to do violence”<sup>1</sup> and is based on the somewhat simplistic linear interpretation of a) Biblical themes of justice, where at first glance the excessive justice of the venge-

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<sup>1</sup> K. Gibson, D. Smail, *Vengeance in Medieval Europe: A Reader*, Toronto 2009.

ful Old Testament God is gradually but consistently replaced by the New Testamental ethics of forgiveness, and b) of Western history as such, in which the darkness of the barbaric *medium aevum* is gradually diffused by the light of Reason.<sup>2</sup> For one thing, this mode of reasoning follows a rather straightforward definition of violence as a purely physical (ab) use of power,<sup>3</sup> and for another, it neglects the fact that an act of revenge does not exist in an emotional / cultural void. To claim that the history of vengeance leads to a repression of the urge to do violence is to overlook the fact that the repression of the urge to do violence is connected with the modern repression of emotions, anger in particular,<sup>4</sup> and has much to do with the construction of what we conveniently dub “modern subjectivity” as well as the very notion of the rational self. To claim that “Old Testament themes of vengeance and hatred are largely absent in the books of the New Testament” is to reinforce the conviction that there exists a *telos* for religion, for ethics and for culture: in this case the *telos* will be the idea of distributive justice and state-sponsored retribution for perpetrated crimes.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Let us remember that the prejudice towards the Middle Ages was not created by the Enlightenment but was born already in the Renaissance: this is a context not without importance for the mixed approach towards vengeance that we observe in the early modern period.

<sup>3</sup> This view disregards the rich store of verbal violence: it suffices here to mention the new and interesting classification of verbal violence in medieval hagiographical writings provided by M. Johnson to see that vengeance has its very direct non-physical side. Among different expressions of retribution she mentions prayer vengeance, maledictions, negative prophecies and instances of passive retaliatory judgment, which can be accompanied by direct bodily manifestations of inflictions procured by saints’ verbal reprisal. See M. Johnson *Vengeance is mine: Sainly retribution in medieval Ireland* [in:] *Vengeance in the Middle Ages: Emotion, Religion and Feud*, ed. P.R. Hyams, A. Throop, Farnham 2010. Cf. the discussion of psalms of cursing in E. Zenger, *A God of Vengeance? Understanding the Psalms of Divine Wrath*, Louisville 1996.

<sup>4</sup> This is well reflected in the language of vengeance: we speak of the thirst/ desire / passion for revenge, all carnal sins, to be related to the body.

<sup>5</sup> Since 1990s there has been a growing revisionist stance towards the idea of revenge, Exemplary in this respect are the studies of P. French, *The Virtues of Vengeance*, Lawrence KS 2001 and S. Throop, P. Hyams, eds., *Vengeance in the Middle Ages: Emotion, Religion and Feud*, Aldershot 2010; and a harbinger of a more complex approach towards the concept itself is a collection by R. Verdier, *La Vengeance: Études d’Ethnologie, d’Histoire et de Philosophie*, 4 vols, Paris 1980–84.

In my present study I touch upon chosen literary and theological works of Elizabethan England to demonstrate their underpinning religious background in which wrathful Protestant God is directly or indirectly set as the *exemplum* and a model for action for the wronged party who chooses to become an agent in his hands. I consider such a study of literary inquiry into the religious context of revenge an important contribution to the reflection on the theories of social relations and political constitutions that circulated in the early modern England, most notably the management of conflict in the context of the early modern state formation in Elizabeth's times. As the scope of this study does not permit a detailed investigation into the changing paradigm of revenge – which with the onset of humanism and its rebuttal of the passions became excessive justice to be punished as a sign of inherent weakness of the mind – I choose to discuss only one strand in the whole complicated panoply of mutual relations between religion, theological reflection and literary production of the time which treats the notion of revenge in the light of Luther's argument on the hiddenness of God and Calvin's terrifying prospects of his wrath.<sup>6</sup>

SINNERS IN THE HANDS OF AN ANGRY GOD:  
A METAPHYSICAL TIT FOR TAT<sup>7</sup>

Contemporary theologians might recoil from the images of angry God as the presumable source of legitimization of religious violence, nonetheless Western Scripture abounds in graphic descriptions of God taking vengeance on the wicked.<sup>8</sup> It suffices to cite Isaiah who warns the peo-

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<sup>6</sup> What is of paramount importance for this notion of revenge is also a conflicted image of God: even though we cannot trace an "improvement" in the conception of God as the sole distributor of justice in the Scripture itself, from the Renaissance on ethics of forgiveness is definitely brought to the fore and the reprisal of the wrongs done is stressed as God's prerogative, a major reason for which I see in the consolidation of the state's judiciary power, whose source was to be validated by God.

<sup>7</sup> The title of the first part of this subsection comes obviously from Johnathan Edwards' famous sermon (1741).

<sup>8</sup> Indeed, as R.P.C. Hanson contends in *God: Creator, Saviour, Spirit* (London 1960, p. 37): "Most preachers and most composers of prayers today treat the biblical doctrine of the wrath of God very much as the Victorians treated sex. It is there, but it must never be al-

ple to hide “until [God’s] wrath is past” (Isa 26:20) or the Israelites’ song of praise to God who “loosed... [his] wrath to consume them [Egyptians] like stubble”,<sup>9</sup> to bring to the fore the whole rich store of the textual evidence that proclaims the wrath of God and indeed establishes it as one of his primary characteristics. In the Book of Revelation, where seven angels pour out bowls of God’s fury that changes the sea into blood (16:3), or in Paul’s admonition against Romans that “the wrath of God is indeed being revealed from heaven against every impiety and wickedness” (Rom 1:18), we can see clear signs that the image of a vengeful God is not limited to the Old Testament and that references to divine anger form an intrinsic part of the whole biblical tradition. As R.V.G. Tasker concludes in *The Biblical Doctrine of the Wrath of God*, the very notion of divine wrath is one of the factors that indicate the inherent unity of the Old and New Testament theology.<sup>10</sup>

Even though the tendency prevalent in modern theological thought is to suppress the very concept of the wrath of God as irrelevant in the light of his other attributes (most notably, love),<sup>11</sup> or to subsume it under the principle of impersonal *effectus* i.e. the dispassionate effect of, or reaction to human sin, for a long time in the history of religious thinking God’s wrath was considered to be *affectus*, i.e. an affect, or an ac-

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cluded to because it is in an undefined way shameful. [...] Presumably it is for such reasons that the Christian churches of the twentieth century have in practice turned their backs upon the biblical doctrine of the wrath of God.”

For the sake of my argument, I need to add, however, that the “embarrassment” with God’s wrath is not a specifically contemporary, or even modern, specialty: already in 313 or 314 Lactantius wrote in his *De ira dei* that God is indeed subject to anger; see e.g. M.C. McCarthy, *Divine Wrath and Human Anger: Embarrassment Ancient and New*, “Theological Studies”, no. 70/4, 2009, p. 845–874.

<sup>9</sup> We can read more on this subject e.g. in G.A. Herion, *Wrath of God: Old Testament*, [in:] *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 6 vols., ed. D.N. Freedman et al., New York 1992, vol. 6, p. 989–996; H. Travis, *Wrath of God: New Testament*, [in:] *ibid.* vol. 6, p. 996–998, as well as in G.H.C. MacGregor, *The Concept of the Wrath of God in the New Testament*, “New Testament Studies” no. 7, 1960, p. 101–9. An informative analysis of the 20th-century approach to the notion of divine wrath in theology is provided by J.K. Robbins, *God’s Wrath: A Process Explanation*, “Dialog” no. 33, 1994, p. 252–58.

<sup>10</sup> R.V.G. Tasker, *The Biblical Doctrine of the Wrath of God*, London 1951, p. 45.

<sup>11</sup> E.g. as the outcome of the Second Vatican Council three imprecatory psalms and chosen passages were deleted from the Liturgy of the Hours, see: S. Campbell, *From Breviary to Liturgy of the Hours: The Structural Reform of the Roman Office, 1964–1971*, Collegeville 1995.

tual feeling.<sup>12</sup> Such an anthropopathic interpretation is supported by the reading of multiple passages both in the Old and in the New Testament, where there appear over six (according to Baird) or over twenty (according to Morris) different words relating to anger,<sup>13</sup> and even though I must concede after Tony Lane that the New Testament tends to be more “depersonalised” than the Old Testament, it remains an undisputable fact that “the anger of God signifies his emphatically personal character”.<sup>14</sup> Irrespective of its human/non-human agency, the personal character of anger does not occlude its connection with justice; quite to the contrary, already Lactantius defends the passion of anger against the Stoics and Epicureans and claims that the

[...] anger which we may call either fury or rage ought not to exist even in man, because it is altogether vicious; but the anger which relates to the correction of vices ought not to be taken away from man; nor can it be taken away from God, because it is both serviceable for the affairs of man, and necessary.<sup>15</sup>

Lactantius’s treatise was one of the many attempts of the patristic authors to explain the nature of anger against the background of non-Christian stoic philosophy underlining the need to control emotions, rage in particular. We could say that the tendency to deny God’s wrath would stem from the anxiety that it might be understood as an anthropomorphic projection of human anger, which is what Lactantius, and others after him, would point out to be the case of pagan deities<sup>16</sup>. What is of

<sup>12</sup> Cf. the use of the terminology to a contrary conclusion in: A.T. Hanson, *The Wrath of the Lamb*, London 1957.

<sup>13</sup> See, J.A. Baird, *The Justice of God in the Teaching of Jesus*, London 1963, p. 46; L. Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*, London 1965, p. 149–50; qtd. in: T. Lane, *The Wrath of God as the Aspect of the Love of God*, [in:] *Nothing Greater Nothing Better: Theological Essays on the Love of God*, ed. K.J. Vanhoozer, Grand Rapids 2001, p. 149.

<sup>14</sup> W. Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, Westminster 1961, p. 258.

<sup>15</sup> *A Treatise on the Anger of God*, [in:] *The Works of Lactantius*, Vol. 2, trans. W.D. Fletcher, ed. J. Donaldson, A. Roberts, Edinburgh 1871, p. 36. One needs to add here that many ancient authors addressed the issue of divine wrath: among others Tertullian (d. 235), Cyprian (d. 258), Arnobius (d. 330), and Augustine (d. 430); Lactantius is only one of them.

<sup>16</sup> Still the dynamic analogy between human and divine anger is visible in the Bible itself, see: M.C. McCarthy, *op. cit.*

paramount importance, however, is the fact that in this passage we come across the distinction between different kinds of anger that was first established by Aristotle who rather differently than the Stoics presumed that anger is not a sign of the weakness of the mind, indeed he would rather claim in his classic description of emotions in the *Nicomachean Ethics* that it is not an extreme emotion or a vice at all. In the Aristotelian paradigm anger must be seen as a continuum with a desirable mean:

The person who is angry at the right things and toward the right people, and also in the right way, at the right time, and for the right length of time, is praised. This, then, will be the mild person, if mildness is praised. For [if mildness is something to be praised] being a mild person means being undisturbed, not led by feeling, but irritated wherever reason prescribes, and for the length of time it prescribes. And he seems to err more in the direction of deficiency, since the mild person is ready to pardon, not eager to exact a penalty.<sup>17</sup>

This distinction, as it is, anticipates later theological and philosophical discussions of both Gods' wrath, human anger, and the moral character of the actions incited by the emotion itself: the link between the righteous nature of God's anger, his mercy and the "golden mean" of the Aristotelian virtue is especially evident in the choice of the Greek word *θυμός* (*thumos*) for God's wrath that appears seven times in the Book of Revelation, and is meant to mean "righteous anger" which is a foundation of just action. We have to remember that in this definition, which differs quite substantially from the post-Enlightenment approach to emotions to a large extent influenced by a neo-stoic set of beliefs, anger is a "desire, accompanied by pain, for a perceived revenge, on account of a perceived slight on the part of people who are not fit to slight one or one's own"<sup>18</sup>. *Thumos*, i.e. the "soul", "spirit", "heart", or "fierceness" is the high-spiritedness reserved for intentional offence that propels a social agent into action correcting the vices of one's subordinates, and thus is

<sup>17</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. T. Irwin. Indianapolis–Cambridge 1999, p. 61. More on that subject, see: D. Konstan, *The Emotions of the Ancient Greeks: Studies in Aristotle and Classical Literature*, Toronto 2006.

<sup>18</sup> Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 2.2, 1378, p. 31–33, qtd. in: Konstan, *op. cit.*, p. 41.

a reaction to a violation of the social norm. In this sense God's judgment is a social prerogative, whose nature is morally impeccable and fully justified. Already Tertullian claims in one of the earliest systematic studies of God's wrath and justice that the refusal to see anger as one of God's predicates can be compared with a refusal of operating by the surgeon: "It is much the same when you admit that God is a judge, yet you refuse those emotions and feelings by which he exercises judgment".<sup>19</sup> Divine anger as a function of justice or, as Augustine of Hippo would want, a "power of retribution" [*potentia vindicandis*]<sup>20</sup>, was taken up in the early modern England together with the Augustinian assumption that God's wrath realizes itself through humans who become the divinely-inspired agents bringing punishment to others for their trespasses.<sup>21</sup>

Consequently, when Martin Luther points to Gen. 9:6: "Whoso sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed," he refers to the law of retribution and the divine sanction of talion law that he explains in the following manner: "the Lord establishes a new law and wants murderers to be killed by men"; this is his argument for the birth of states in the postdiluvian world as well as for the justification of capital punishment i.e. the application of justice that is proportionate to the crime. What is significant, Luther qualifies the biblical statement and states: "Here God shares his power with man and grants him power over life and death among men, provided that the person is guilty of shedding blood,"<sup>22</sup> thus underlining the importance of human agency in keeping the scales of justice balanced. In this way he implicitly justifies a legal system which absorbs the right of individuals to seek vengeance. In his 1558 pamphlet, *How Superior Powers Ought to be Obeyed* (1558), the Calvinist clergyman Christopher Goodman goes one step further and claims that revenge pre-

<sup>19</sup> Tertullian, *Adversus Marcionem*, ed. and trans. E. Evans, Oxford 1972, p. 131. It is surprising to what extent the surgeon metaphor appears and reappears in this context: Luther would also write about it, pointing here directly to the underlying metaphor of the body politic of the state which was at the time the sacred *corpus mysticum*.

<sup>20</sup> Augustine, *Contra Adimantum* 11, CSEL 25.136.

<sup>21</sup> E.g. Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. M. Boulding, 1.5.5, CSEL 33, p. 42.

<sup>22</sup> M. Luther, *Lectures on Genesis* (1535–45), qtd. in: W.H. Lazareth, *Christians in Society: Luther, the Bible, and Social Ethics*, Minneapolis 2001, p. 143.

rogative is not only a right of subjects, but more than that: it is their duty to execute the laws of God if the princes and magistrates appointed for that very purpose fail in their obligations, for restoring the balance and order is the only way of appeasing the “might revenger”:

[...] it is lawful for the people, yea, it is their duty to do it themselves, as well upon their own rulers and magistrates, as upon other among their brethren, having the word of God for their warrant, to which all are subject, and by the same charged to cast forth all evil from them, and to cut off every rotten member, for fear of infecting the whole body, how dear or precious so ever they be. If death is deserved, death: if other punishments, to see they are executed to all.<sup>23</sup>

MINISTER DEI ENIM EST, VINDEXT IN IRAM EI QUI MALUM AGIT:  
FOR HE IS THE MINISTER OF GOD, A REVENGER TO EXECUTE  
WRATH UPON HIM THAT DOETH EVIL (ROM. 13:4)

The notion of God’s agents acting as his scourge is already present in the Bible (Romans 6:3; 13:4). However, the very concept of the *flagellum dei* does not preclude an inherent morality of God’s instruments: as we know from Plotinus, God’s wrath can be mediated with the use of both good Christians and tyrants. In the early modern era such a viewpoint is most clearly articulated in Erasmus’ and Calvin’s argument on the use of Pharaoh by God to exercise his will.<sup>24</sup> This complicates the correlation between human anger and divine wrath, as *lex talionis*, the law of retaliation, would usually embrace the notion that the punishment is proportionate to the crime (as we remember from the biblical “life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth. . . wound for wound . . .” principle worded in Exodus 21:22–5), and tyrants would err in their application of excessive justice or downright injustice. Thomas Jackson asserted in *A Treatise of the Divine Essence and Attributes* (1628):

<sup>23</sup> Ch. Goodman, *How Superior Powers Ought To Be Obeyed By Their Subjects And Wherein They May Lawfully By God’s Word Be Disobeyed And Resisted*, Whitefish, p. 71–72.

<sup>24</sup> Erasmus, Desiderius, M. Luther, *Discourse on Free Will*, trans. E.F. Winter. London–New York 2005, p. 48.



[...] the motions of the creatures appointed to execute his wrath are more furious than any man's passions in extremest fury can be. What man's voice is like his thunder? What tyrant's frowns like to a lowering sky, breathing out the storms of fire and brimstone? Yet are the most terrible sounds which the creatures can present but as so many echoes of his angry voice; the most dreadful spectacles that heaven or earth, or the intermediate elements can afford, but copies of his ireful countenance: howbeit this change or alteration in the creature proceeds from him without any internal passion or alteration.<sup>25</sup>

Agents of God might be unknowing, and indeed, imperfect instruments of his will; Jackson asserts in the neo-platonic spirit that both human beings and natural elements are just shadows (or "copies") of God's anger, nonetheless his whole argument rests on the premise that human beings can be listed among "the creatures appointed to execute his [God's] wrath".<sup>26</sup> Even though this view was not held unanimously by all the early modern thinkers, we can find its reflection in many texts of the time, in the characters that, to use Fredson Bowers' famous distinction, can be interpreted as villainous protagonists who think themselves just (or justified) and "always believe that... [their] cause is pure" or as honest grief-stricken men (and women) who undertake the task of revenge to tip the scales of justice and restore the lost order.<sup>27</sup> As a detailed examination of the revenge tragedy genre goes beyond the scope of this study, I would like to concentrate here only on the brief analysis of the first major revenge tragedy on the early modern English stage, namely Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*, which for a decade or so set the example of blood-for-blood justice in the early modern English theatre and became a prototypical drama, whose content and structure were emulated by other playwrights.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>25</sup> T. Jackson, *A Treatise of the Divine Essence and Attributes*, vol 5, Oxford 1844, p. 197-198.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>27</sup> F. Bowers, *Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy 1587-1642*, Princeton 1948, p. 129

<sup>28</sup> The exact span of time when talion law was in vogue on the English stage is hard to ascertain, as Kyd's tragedy was written somewhere between 1582 (the date of the publication of *Hecatompithia*, the work from which Kyd borrowed seven lines, II. i. 3-10) and 1592 (the date of the first performance), whereas the first play mocking the notion of revenge appeared already in 1599 (*A Warning for Fair Women*).

When read hand in hand with the Book of Revelation, *The Spanish Tragedy* presents itself as a rather striking analogue to the Apocalypse that according to Protestant apologists may itself be seen as “as a play created and directed by God, with Christ, John, and the angels serving as actors who show the faithful the unfolding conflict between the Anti-christ and the true church”.<sup>29</sup> *The Spanish Tragedy* was written at the time when the Protestant opposition against the Catholic church exacerbated and the Book of Revelation became a primary tool in the ideological war waged against the Pope seen as Antichrist and therefore pointed to as the object of God’s coming wrath. Indeed, Protestant commentators would pay a lot of critical attention to the notion of ire and the coming end of all things: to them divine vengeance and justice were one. As George Gifford would state in his *Sermons Upon the Whole Book of Revelation*, “the unchangeable God declareth himselfe to bee just by taking vengeance,”<sup>30</sup> and revengers striving to restore the lost order were his heralds.

*The Spanish Tragedy* can be somewhat simplistically described as the story of two characters, Hieronimo and Bel-Imperia, who plot the deaths of those who murdered Horatio, Hieronimo’s son and Bel-Imperia’s lover. Their plot is carried out successfully and brings about the fall of Spain that in the eyes of Kyd’s Protestant contemporaries bore all the characteristics of the biblical Babylon. It is true that throughout the play Hieronimo fulfills the role of a villain revenger, but only to a certain extent. Despite the insistence of many of the play’s critics, who would put forward claims to its essentially ironic or secular character, a careful reading will prove that religious context plays an important part in Kyd’s tragedy and that the absence of God is not “conspicuous” at all,<sup>31</sup> considering the apocalyptic undertone of the writing and thinking of the time. In the eschatological view shared by the majority of Kyd’s contemporaries, the time of Last Judgment was near; the only thing that was restraining God’s anger was his mercy and the work of his magistrates on

<sup>29</sup> F. Ardolino, *Apocalypse and Armada in Kyd’s Spanish Tragedy*, Kirksville 1995, p. 48.

<sup>30</sup> G. Gifford, *Sermons Upon the Whole Book of Revelation*, London, 1596, p. 310.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. the argument to the contrary, A. Kiss, *The Semiotics of Revenge: Subjectivity and Abjection in English Renaissance Tragedy*, Szeged 1995, p. 43.

earth executing his laws: “[the] argument was over the interpretation of God’s plan for history rather than over the issue of man’s role in bringing that plan to completion”.<sup>32</sup> In the sphere of the early modern Protestant thought (and in Kyd’s play) God is indeed Luther’s *deus absconditus*, but to claim that he has abandoned the world to disorder and injustice (as it is claimed in the staple of revenge tragedy criticism) and that he is to be treated as a distant and unresponsive *deus otiosus*, is to misunderstand the intricacies of the paradoxical theology of the hidden God.<sup>33</sup> He does not act in the world, as the era of miracles had ended:<sup>34</sup> instead, he relies on his agents who are to test their faith.<sup>35</sup>

Hieronimo’s first instinct is to relegate the responsibility for the pursuit of the murderers to the king, but he is bitterly disappointed to discover that at court he will not find the succor he is looking for. In his futile search for institutionalized justice Hieronimo comes to the point in which his faith is tested. He lives through the agony of doubt, when his

[...] tortured soul  
 Beats at the windows of the brightest heavens,  
 Soliciting for justice and revenge: But. . . I  
 find the place impregnable; and they  
 Resist my woes and give my words no way” (3.7.10-14, 17-18).

<sup>32</sup> R.B. Barnes, *Prophecy and Gnosis: Apocalypticism in the Wake of the Lutheran Reformation*, Stanford 1988, p. 31.

<sup>33</sup> According to Luther who picked up Aquinas’ notion of *deus absconditus*, the apparent absence of God has a reason, as it is a condition of faith:

“Faith’s object is things not seen. That there may be room for faith, therefore, all that is believed must be hidden. Yet it is not hidden more deeply than under a contrary appearance of sight, sense and experience. Thus, when God quickens, He does so by killing; when He justifies, He does so by pronouncing guilty; when He carries up to heaven, He does so by bringing down to hell. . . . Thus God conceals His eternal mercy and loving kindness beneath eternal wrath, His righteousness beneath unrighteousness. . . . The impossibility of understanding makes room for the exercise of faith. . . .”

(M. Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, trans. O.R. Johnston, J.I. Packer, London 1957, p. 101.)

<sup>34</sup> See D.P. Walker, *The cessation of miracles*, [in:] *Hermeticism and the Renaissance: Intellectual History and the Occult in Early Modern Europe*, ed. A. Debus, I. Merkel, Washington 1988, p. 111-124.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. B.A. Gerrish, *To the Unknown God*, [in:] *The Old Protestantism and the New*, Chicago 1982, p. 131-49; D. Tracy, *The Hidden God: The Divine Other of Liberation*, “Cross Currents” no. 46(1), 1996, p. 5-16.

We have to remember that Hieronimo is the Knight Marshal of Spain, and his function is of importance to the logic of revenge, as his task is to maintain the peace.<sup>36</sup> The test of his faith comes at the point when he has to turn away from the external vestiges of the law and to look for its source in himself. Once he has become a dispenser of justice, he states that the time has come “for just revenge against the murderers” (3.13.143). As Steven Justice has written: “An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, and blood for blood: Hieronimo gives the unbending principle of exchange and revenge its proper name, ‘the law.’ This is not Hieronimo the revenger, but Hieronimo the knight marshal, the ‘judge,’ that is speaking.”<sup>37</sup>

It is already at the scene of the murder that Hieronimo links heavenly justice with punishment and retribution for the crime that has to be accounted for and avenged; otherwise it will be impossible to trust God:

O sacred heavens! if this unhallowed deed,  
 If this inhuman and barbarous attempt,  
 If this incomparable murder thus  
 Of mine, but now no more my son,  
 Shall unrevealed and unrevenged pass,  
 How should we term your dealings to be just,  
 If you unjustly deal with those that in your justice trust?<sup>38</sup>

He speaks here as a grief-stricken parent, but in the course of the play he has to embrace the notion that his compensation for the vacuum of official justice will not come from the God-appointed princes and magistrates who are degenerate: it has to come from him. When he “transcends his role as vengeful father to fulfill the apocalyptic ethos of just revenge and to effect the fall of Babylon/ Spain,”<sup>39</sup> he turns into

<sup>36</sup> C.L. Barber, *Creating Elizabethan Tragedy: The Theater of Marlowe and Kyd*, ed. R.P. Wheeler, Chicago 1988, p. 135.

<sup>37</sup> S. Justice, *Spain, Tragedy, and The Spanish Tragedy*, “SEL: Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900”, no. 25.2 (Spring 1985), p. 271-288, q 274.

<sup>38</sup> Kyd, *op. cit.*, 3.2.5-11, p. 53.

<sup>39</sup> Ardolino, *op. cit.*, p. 62.

an instrument of God's justice who not only kills the murderers of his son, but by disposing of those who are vital for the continuation of the kingdom, he cleanses it. Indeed, Hieronimo himself claims not only the ethical character of his endeavour, but also heavenly support that is the warrant of its justness. When a happy coincidence (or rather Providence) reveals Bel-Imperia's honesty, he reasons:

But may it be that Bel-Imperia  
Vows such revenge as she hath deigned to say?  
Why then, I see that heaven applies our drift  
And all the saints do sit soliciting  
For vengeance on those cursed murderers.<sup>40</sup>

The (un)incidental righteousness of the other avenger's intentions is to be read as a providential sign that Hieronimo's search for vengeance is a just enterprise; this view is further strengthened by Hieronimo's prophesizing abilities so cogently described by Ardolino (and linked etymologically with the figure of Hieronimo's biblical antecedent, Jeremiah) in the already cited *Apocalypse and Armada in Kyd's Spanish Tragedy*.<sup>41</sup> When Hieronimo exclaims: "*Vindicta mihi!*" (3.13.1), he uses the phrase taken directly from Hebrews 10:30: "For we know him that hath said, Vengeance belongeth unto me, I will recompense, saith the Lord. And again, The Lord shall judge his people". The exclamation is truncated, however, as in the Bible it is followed by a qualifier: *dicit Dominus*, "saith the Lord". Hieronimo quotes God, and in that he does not blaspheme, but rather assumes divine agency as the administrator of God's "power of retribution". He becomes the hand of vengeful God.

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<sup>40</sup> T. Kyd, *The Spanish Tragedy*, 4.1.30–34, ed. J.R. Mulryne, New York 1970, p. 103–104.

<sup>41</sup> There is a problematic connection between revenge, anger and gender that complicates the reading of Hieronimo as an unequivocal proponent of what Francis Bacon calls "public revenge", but this relationship goes beyond the scope of this study; more on this subject in L. Stanavage, A. Kowalcze-Pawlik, *Queering Justice* (working title), [in:] *Revenge and Gender*, ed. L. Dawson, F. McHardy, in preparation.

VENIT IN NOSTRAS MANUS / TANDEM VINDICTA VENIT ET TOTA  
 QUIDEM: AT LONG LAST REVENGE HAS COME TO MY HANDS,  
 AND COME TO THE FULL<sup>42</sup>

Repetitions abounding in the penultimate scene of *The Spanish Tragedy* emphasize the vindic(at)ive character of justice delivered by Hieronimo and Bel-Imperia: their revenge is an unwavering act of claiming an exact price for a life lost: the lives of sinners are to be taken in return for their mortal sins (etym. *vindicare*, “to clear from censure or doubt by means of demonstration”):

Vild Serberine by Pedringano slain,...  
 ...Prince Balthazar by Bel-Imperia stabbed,  
 The Duke of Castile and his wicked son  
 Both done to death by old Hieronimo (4.5.3–8)

As Martha Rozett claims, Hieronimo indeed “takes God’s role upon himself employing the concealed stratagem, the sudden unveiling of purpose behind events, the patient biding of time, and the well-chosen punishments that typify God’s control of human events”.<sup>43</sup> By measuring out justice in proportion to the perpetrated crime Hieronimo becomes *Vindicta Dei*, a personification of God’s wrath who steers the action of the play to its gory conclusion in accordance with the eye-for-eye ethics of *lex talionis* that “has its basis in the Bible, and was an integral part of the Renaissance Protestant concept of Justice”.<sup>44</sup>

The “thorough” nature of just revenge is only the beginning of that repayment, as revenge is also a show of authority (*vim dicare*, “to show strength”) which has to be reasserted once God’s laws have been breached. The villains “Upon whose souls may heavens yet be avenged/ With greater far than these afflictions” (4.4.174–75) will not spend eter-

<sup>42</sup> Seneca, *Thyestes*, 494–5; qtd in J. Marston’s *Antonio’s Revenge*, who replaces the word *vindicta* for *Thyestes* 154–155; in: *The Selected Plays of John Marston*, CUP Archive 1986, p. 144.

<sup>43</sup> M. Rozett, *The Doctrine of Election and the Emergence of Elizabethan Tragedy*, Princeton 1984, p. 180.

<sup>44</sup> R. Broude, *Vindicta Filia Temporis: Three English Forerunners of the Elizabethan Revenge Play*, “Journal of English and German Philology” 72, 1973, 498–99.

nity “in ease” (4.5.46): that is the lot of their victims. Their fate is sealed, as they will face eternal torment. At the end of *The Spanish Tragedy* the personified allegory of Revenge says: “though death has end their misery,/ I’ll begin their endless tragedy” (4.5.45–48). That “I” is a note of the “might revenger’s” divine sanction and satisfaction, not in the sense of “contentment”, but rather in the sense of *satis-facere*, “doing enough”: by the workings of Providence the mortal hand of God brings sinners to the hands of immortal God, so that they can feel the full extent of his wrath.

In the early modern English society that embraced the Protestant ethics of divine retribution, crime was a transgression of God’s law and had to be punished accordingly. Already Luther would admit that unrevenged crimes posed a threat to the entire state and society, and for this very reason political theory and religion of the time was based on the principle of blood-for-blood, which Luther pointed to as “the source from which stem all civil law and the law of nations”.<sup>45</sup> In the absence of just state the prerogatives of just revenge should be taken up by individuals who as the “hands of God” were to cleanse the society of the elements which “threatened to bring divine wrath down upon the entire commonweal”.<sup>46</sup> Early revenge tragedies with the notable example of *The Spanish Tragedy* would reflect both this conviction as well as the sum of the Protestant insistence on the inscrutability of God and his justice, his paradoxical hidden nature and the terrifying prospects of his anger. As Alan Sinfield has written:

Surely we cannot overestimate the impact upon the Reformation mind of the Church’s insistence upon attributing good and bad alike to a special providence whose justice cannot be demonstrated to the ordinary intellect... My contention is that the paradoxes of Protestant theology provoked alarm and confusion and that it is apparent in Hamlet and other tragedies.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>45</sup> M. Luther, *Lectures on Genesis*, *op. cit.*, p. 140.

<sup>46</sup> R. Broude, *Revenge and Revenge Tragedy in Renaissance England*, “Renaissance Quarterly” no. 28.1. (Spring, 1975), p. 38–58, q 48.

<sup>47</sup> Alan Sinfield, *Hamlet’s Special Providence*, “Shakespeare Survey” 33, ed. K. Muir, Cambridge 2002, p. 94–98, q 95.

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#### ABSTRACT

#### (IN) THE HANDS OF VENGEFUL GOD: DIVINE ANGER AND JUST REVENGE IN ELIZABETHAN ENGLAND

The aim of this article is to define the early modern notion of revenge as a concept rooted in the history of the Western religious thought. Revenge functioned on the Elizabethan stage as a broad category used in the creation and description of a deeply metaphysical reality: a major context conditioning such a functioning was the Protestant theological reflection which at the time was preoccupied with the ideas of divine justice and punishment. The figure of the human avenger that becomes the instrument of God's wrath appears among others in one of the earliest revenge tragedies, *The Spanish Tragedy* by Thomas Kyd: the problems of interpretation and reception of the whole play are clearly connected with the complex character of divine anger in theology.

#### **Keywords:**

revenge, God's wrath, just anger, Reformation, Thoms Kyd, Elizabethan drama

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