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***Hamlet* and Pure Object Revenge – The Matter of Life and Death**

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Abstract: Why do we strike intrinsically inoffensive objects when they intrude upon our lives? Why, for example, do we kick the car when it breaks down, or slap the chair that pinches our finger against the table, or strike the open door that collides with our head? In this essay, I ask whether this phenomenon, which I call the performance of “pure object revenge”, might arise from an impulse to execute vindictory, and in that sense vengeful, justice upon the offending object. My new explanation for the phenomenon is that we strike the offending object because it has no life but has briefly acted as if it were alive. It therefore reminds us in the brief moment of its offence that our bodies are also inanimate dust and will return to dust and in the meantime are only briefly animated. In short, my argument is that we strike the object because it is a memento mori. To test and support this, I offer a reading of the “closet scene” at the centre of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* to illustrate the performative impulse to banish inanimate objects at the threshold of the living and the dead.

Keywords: object; revenge; liminal; memento mori; *Hamlet*; the cross

Why do we take revenge against inanimate objects? The question has usually been asked of acts against symbolically offensive stuff such as statues of slave traders and Russian flags in Ukraine. In such cases, the primary motivation might be the straightforwardly iconoclastic one of desiring to perform a new political statement in substitution for the old. In other common cases, objects are attacked as an act of vindictiveness against their owners. The question of why we take revenge against inanimate objects has also been asked, but less often, where an act against an intrinsically inoffensive object appears to be an end in itself. I will call this phenomenon, “pure object revenge.” Why, for example, do we kick the car when it breaks down, or slap the chair that has just pinched our finger against the table, or strike the open door that has just collided with our head? The answer to this question might incidentally identify an additional motivation for acts committed against objects because of personal and political grudges.

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The phenomenon of pure object revenge has been observed since ancient times. In the introduction to his 2013 book, *Malicious Objects, Anger Management, and the Question of Modern Literature*, Jörg Kreienbrock quotes Galen of Pergamon (129–216 AD):¹

When I was still a youth ... I watched a man eagerly trying to open a door. When things did not work out as he would have them, I saw him bite the key, kick the door, blaspheme, glare wildly like a madman, and all but foam at the mouth like a wild boar. (*The Diagnosis and Cure of the Soul's Passions*)

Like Galen, Kreienbrock sees anger as the major cause of pure object revenge. Anger is no doubt present in many cases, but why is it directed against stuff that cannot feel the hurt inflicted upon it? In this essay, we ask whether pure object revenge might arise from an impulse to execute vindictory, and in that sense vengeful, justice upon the offending object. We cannot rule out the more mundane possibility that we strike an offending object only as a means of letting off steam in times of stress or to distract us from the physical pain that the object has inflicted, although that hardly explains why parents in perfect calmness slap the “bad door, naughty door” when it swings open and hits their child. The parent is no doubt trying to teach the difference between right and wrong, but it is a poor lesson that attributes conscience to non-sentient stuff. Neither does pain relief readily explain why an insentient object is employed to ease pain and stress. Punching a door or kicking a stone in revenge is liable to cause as much pain as it dissipates, and such hard objects are not ideal for stress relief compared to a rubber stress ball or the like. The mystery of the motivation behind pure object revenge has exercised a wide range of thinkers down the years, including philosophers, anthropologists, and creative writers. Jörg Kreienbrock’s book examines numerous literary engagements with the phenomenon, one of which I will discuss briefly before we turn to Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* to shed a specifically dramatic light upon the dramatic performance of pure object revenge.

Commentators on the phenomenon have proposed many candidates to explain it. These range from a primitive urge to punish a spirit perceived to have acted maliciously through the medium of the object, to the almost opposite idea that we resent the object because in the moment of its offense it performed stupidly as if it had no sense of the human purpose for which it was designed. The latter explanation is a paraphrase of philosopher Elaine Scarry’s reading of the phenomenon.² In this essay, I will offer as a new candidate the possibility that we strike the hurt-inflicting

¹ Jörg Kreienbrock, *Malicious Objects, Anger Management, and the Question of Modern Literature* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013): further references in the text, abbreviated as MO.

² Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985): further references in the text, abbreviated as BP.

object because it has no life but has briefly acted as if it were alive. We strike not because we think that the object is motivated by malice, and not solely because we resent its stupidity in failing to fulfil a human design (Scarry's explanation applies well to some cases), but also because the spark that seemed to animate the object in the brief moment of its offence reminds us that our bodies are also inanimate dust and will return to dust and in the meantime are only briefly animated. In short, my new suggestion is that we strike the object because it is a *memento mori*. The case is altered where we deliberately select an object to perform as a *memento mori*, for then it is our will to confront death as a prompt to live life to the full. When we select and set up an object to perform as a *memento mori*, we have the satisfaction of being in control of the performance and can therefore celebrate our present vital superiority to the lifeless destiny of our own material form. It is quite a different matter when the bump on the door is unplanned, for in such events we lack control. The lifeless thing can appear to be in charge of the performance. We resent the trespass and strike back to demonstrate the difference between ourselves as living beings and the dumb door as insentient stuff, as if to say, "How dare you! Get back to the world of the lifeless. For now, I belong to the world of the living." Whatever our interpretation of the subconsciously instinctive behaviour of pure object revenge, we are likely to agree that the phenomenon is psychologically primal because it operates at the threshold between animate beings and inanimate stuff. My argument is that this threshold excites us emotionally because it is also the threshold between life and death. The object's intrusion across this threshold offends us and scares us and prompts us to gestures of revenge, reprimand, and expulsion.

In his Introduction to *Malicious Objects*, Jörg Kreienbrock observes that Galen is not the only writer to have located the "encounter with recalcitrant objects" (MO, 2) at the threshold site of the doorway. Indeed, Kreienbrock's Introduction is sub-titled "How (Not) to Do Things with Doors." In this essay, we will proceed on the assumption that the threshold zone of the phenomenon is crucial to its nature. More specifically, and this is a point that Kreienbrock does not attach importance to, we will be particularly concerned with encounters between animate beings and inanimate objects as representative of the threshold between the living and the dead. Psychologists and psychoanalysts can doubtless help us here, but so too can dramatists and philosophers who were wise in those sciences before they acquired modern names and modern methods. Shakespeare himself has been called a "very great psychologist,"³ and in *Hamlet*, which amongst its many epithets may be called a revenge play and play of the philosophy of death and a play of signal materials, we have some of the most telling insights into the ways in which people act, often

3 L. C. Knights, *Further Explorations: Essays in Criticism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1965), 42.

instinctively, at the liminal threshold where human animating spirit meets inanimate stuff.

1 What is Revenge?

The word “revenge” was originally French and seems to derive from the Latin idea of “vindication” which carries a sense of justified forceful expression. A sense of rough justice is also suggested by the idea of “payback” in the etymology of “retaliation” and “retribution.” To re-taliate, meaning “to give again the like,” is derived from the Latin *talio* meaning “exaction of payment in kind” and comes ultimately from the conjectured Proto-Indo-European root “**teh-li*” (“the like”) which is also the presumed origin of the Welsh verb *talu* (“to pay”). The talionic principle in the classic prescription “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth” seems from the language of *talio* to indicate that you must pay me back in kind for my loss. Such justice can only be “rough” because the last thing I want is the useless jelly of your eye in return for my most excellently useful living eye. Neither can I make much use of your disembodied tooth. Shakespeare alerts us to the fallacy of material repayment in *The Merchant of Venice* where Shylock makes clear that revenge does not depend upon a physical calculus of exchange. Salarino asks Shylock, “Why, I am sure, if he forfeit, thou wilt not take his flesh: what’s that good for?” (3.1.38–9) and receives the reply “To bait fish withal; if it will feed nothing else, it will feed my revenge.” (3.1.40–41) The justice of the so-called “Lex Talionis” does not aim to move equalising matter from the offender to the victim, but to make matters even by inflicting on the offender a loss equivalent to that of the victim’s loss. There is in fact no payback when we take revenge, but rather a “take back.” The word “reprisal” (to re-take) is more accurate as a description of revenge than “retaliate” and “payback” and “retribution.”

To be even more accurate, there is not so much a “take back” as a “take away.” Despite the language of payback in a revenge performance, offenses are not levelled out by the payment of compensation from offender to offended but by a repayment of a debt to justice in the abstract. We are happy to throw the pound of flesh to the fish if the performance will vindicate our grudge. The myth of the divine Furies as avengers of human wrongs is just one of many to express the notion that transcendental entities vindicate uncompensatable human losses. In one account, the Furies were born from flesh cast into the sea, the flesh being the genitals of Uranus cut off and cast away by his son Cronus. It is fitting to our theme of object revenge that the Furies were generated out of living flesh turned into inanimate stuff and cast into a liminal space. Marie-Claire Anne Beaulieu explains that “the sea has an ambivalent character in Greek culture. It is a source of food and a path of communication, but also a

disquieting empty and barren space that evokes death and can even lead to Hades.”⁴ The debt that arises from uncompensatable loss is not a debt that can be satisfied by payments between the parties, but a reckoning that must be settled by some transcendental personification of justice. If we are not content to think of revenge as a payment made to an abstract sense of justice the only way to save the language of “payback” is to say, with some perversity, that when somebody takes my eye, they have “given” me a wound or a hurt and my retaliatory revenge is to give them the same wound back. We might now begin to see dimly, with one eye as it were, that revenge is never about what we receive through it, but about what we perform through it. We cannot impart physical pain upon insentient stuff, but we can perform the act of imparting pain. This inchoate performance is something akin to an apostrophe to the gods of justice, or like the symbolic justice of having one’s day in court even if there is no realistic prospect of winning the case. We might even say that in the moment of our revenge against the unfeeling object we are the ones acting as Furies. We do not act in our own personal cause but on behalf of humanity’s need to be superior to insentient stuff. We set ourselves up as gods over stuff to settle the score, forgetting the Biblical injunction, “Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord” (Romans 12:19).

The phrase “to settle the score” is another suggestive description of the revenge performance. It seems to originate not in the *talio* of payback but in the idea of a tally as keeping count, and specifically the ancient practice of tallying by scoring marks or notches on a stick. The revenge of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth is in this sense a reckoning that settles scores by marking a scar for a scar. The offender’s missing eye or tooth scores their flesh with a record of the performance of justice as vindictory revenge, and yet the absence in their flesh is also a marker and admission of the absence of full justice. As if it were a mark upon a tally stick, the justice gap between the performance of revenge and the right to the return of one’s missing member is recorded as a scar in the offender’s flesh and a corresponding score in the avenger’s mind. Hamlet records his right to avenge the loss of his father in “the table of my memory ... / the book and volume of my brain” (1.5.97, 102).⁵ Revenge by keeping scores depends upon the avenger keeping a material, or mentally objectified, record of wrongs that will enable them to bear or carry their grudge until such time as it is discharged. From this it follows that an act of pure object revenge might be regarded, in addition to its other significations, as a gesture of marking

4 Marie-Claire Anne Beaulieu, *The Sea in the Greek Imagination* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), “Introduction”, 2.

5 References to William Shakespeare are from Gary Taylor et al. (eds), *The New Oxford Shakespeare*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016.

or recording the debt to justice in the very body of the offending object. We kick the aberrant door in part as a gesture of scarring in its very flesh the score to be settled.

2 Primal Urge and Primitive Magic

In the ancient schemes of primitive sympathetic magic, cuttings of human hair and clippings of fingernails held particular significance as lifeless objects pared from living beings. The lock of hair and the cut nail represent in microcosm the death destiny of the entire being and therefore straddle the realms of living and dead, of animate and inanimate, of human and object. The inanimate object that appears to be animated against its human victim crosses the threshold in the other direction, from the lifeless world to the world of the living. It follows that one way of appreciating the phenomenon of pure object revenge is to regard it as a response to the magical contagion of an object that threatens to touch us with the taint of death. Where I see the intruder as an unwelcome reminder that our destiny is to become lifeless matter, to a more animist mindset the object might seem to be motivated by a spirit of death. The ancient Greeks subscribed to the animist notion that rocks, trees, rivers, and pools were the haunts of associated sprites and divinities. Was an animist notion of magical or spiritual pollution the reason why “[w]hen sticks and stones and iron, voiceless and senseless things, fall on any one and kill him” the ancient Greeks “cast them beyond the borders?”⁶ Some scholars have thought so,⁷ but more recent commentators have concluded to the contrary that the trial and expulsion of offending objects was more likely a symbolic form of retribution.⁸ Whatever the motivation, it is significant for us that the offending object was removed from human society by expelling it across a border. This is in keeping with the standard, though not universal, practice in Greek and Roman societies of burying their dead outside the city walls. The Twelve Tables of Roman Law, for example, forbade burial within the city (a point Cicero mentions in *De Legibus*). There is a sense, then, that in

6 Aeschines, ‘Against Ctesiphon’, C D Adams (trans), *The Speeches of Aeschines*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1919. 3.244.

7 Walter Woodburn Hyde, ‘The Prosecution of Lifeless Things and Animals in Greek Law: Part II,’ *The American Journal of Philology* 38.3 (1917): 285–303.

8 Raphael Sealey, ‘*Athenaion Politeia* 57.4: Trial of Animals and Inanimate Objects for Homicide’ *The Classical Quarterly* 56.2 (2006): 475–485. Sealey cites Robert Parker, *Miasma: Pollution and Purification in Early Greek Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), and Ilias N. Arnaoutoglou, ‘Pollution in the Athenian Homicide law’, *Revue internationale des droits de l’antiquité* (3rd ser.) 40 (1993): 109–37.

the ancient world the noxious object was banished from the world of the living to the world of the lifeless in the moment of its expulsion beyond the border. It is hard to fault Oliver Wendell Holmes's assertion that:

The hatred for anything giving us pain . . . which leads even civilized man to kick a door when it pinches his finger, is embodied in the *noxæ deditio* and other kindred doctrines of early Roman law.⁹

If we combine this with Holmes's assertion in the same place that "early forms of legal procedure were grounded in vengeance,"¹⁰ we are a short step from concluding that the removal of offending objects was a vindicatory revenge performance. Assyriologist J. J. Finkelstein was of the view that the rule of talio was not a law that the drafters believed would be acted upon (monetary compensation being in practice preferable on all sides) but a symbolic statement of the transcendental debt that continues to be owed to justice whenever a person inflicts uncompensatable bodily loss.¹¹ The impracticality of the rule of talio is illustrated by the case of the one eyed man who accidentally takes the eye of a two-eyed man, but Finkelstein stresses that the practical absurdity of the talionic formula "in no way vitiates its validity as an 'ideal' or as a principle."¹²

3 Scarry's Body in Pain

The rationale that Elaine Scarry advances in *The Body in Pain* to explain our phenomenon of pure object revenge is in one sense opposite to the one that I propose. Where I argue that the offending object offends us by acting briefly as if it is alive, Scarry proposes that in the moment of its offense the object is acting as if it is senselessly unaware of its proper purpose. She argues that we attribute a sort of common sense to made objects when they do what they were fabricated to do and that they outrage us in the exceptional moments when, by hurting us rather than helping us, they act stupidly. Where my account agrees with Scarry, indeed where mine is indebted to hers, is in regarding the exceptionality of the object's intervention as key to appreciating our innate and instant punitive response. In her own words:

⁹ Oliver Wendell Holmes, *The Common Law* (1881) (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009) 7.

¹⁰ Holmes, *Common Law*, 2.

¹¹ J. J. Finkelstein, "The Ox That Gored" 71.2 *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society* (1981): 1–89, fn.1.

¹² Finkelstein, "The Ox", 34.

Our behavior toward objects at the exceptional moment they hurt us must be seen within the context of our normal relations with them ... [When a chair collapses] The very reason the chair's object-stupidity strikes all who witness its collapse as a surprise, an outrage, is that it has normally been wholly innocent of such object stupidity. (BP, 295-6)

For Scarry, “the moment of revenge merely occasions the dramatization of the ongoing assumption of animism rather than occasioning the animism itself.” (BP, 296) By this account, it is the momentary absence of animism that prompts our outrage. My account proposes the opposite possibility that the appearance of animism in the object is what makes its offence exceptional and that our outrage is prompted by the offending trespass of lifeless stuff into the world of the living. Despite the contrast between my account and Scarry's, it is quite possible, and even very likely, that motivations for so ancient and visceral a response as pure object revenge are mixed and manifold. I will happily concede that Scarry's explanation fits especially well the case of the stubborn object that stupidly refuses to act – the car that refuses to start and the door that refuses to open or, to cite Scarry's own example, the chair that collapses under our weight. These are objects that in their moment of refusal are failing to live up to their fabricated design. It is our will that they should act according to their form and function, and we are outraged when they will not. The edge of the open door that we bang our head upon and the bench that pinches our thigh are rather different cases. Here the object might have hurt us in the very course of doing what it was designed to do. The door opened and the bench provided support. The unforeseen additional element that causes hurt is offensive not because it has failed to live up to our design, but because it has deigned to act beyond the bounds of its prescribed sphere of passive performance.

4 Jörg Kreienbrock on Friedrich Theodor Vischer

Kreienbrock devotes a chapter of his book *Malicious Objects* to Friedrich Theodor Vischer's novel *Auch Einer* in which Vischer explores absurd, even comical, human encounters with what Vischer terms the spite of objects (“Tücke des Objekts”).¹³ Kreienbrock doesn't pursue any connection between offending objects and death, but Vischer hints at such a connection when he describes a scene in which his protagonist is frustrated when his spectacles become stuck in a hole:

¹³ Friedrich Theodor von Vischer, *Auch Einer. Eine Reisebekanntschaft* (Bd. 1. Stuttgart u. a., 1879), 24: further references in the text, abbreviated as AE.

It wasn't easy to get the glasses out of the hole. The effort was totally disproportionate to the value of the object. He finally succeeded, held them up and let them fall, shouting with a solemn voice: "Death sentence! Supplicium!". He raised his foot and crushed them with his heel. Glass flew everywhere in little shards and dust. (AE, 19)

The explanation proffered by the owner of the spectacles to account for their destruction is, in Kreienbrock's summary, that his "perception of the world as possessed by evil demons demands the destruction of all recalcitrant objects." (MO, 162) Kreienbrock adds that "[t]he act of destruction resembles a judgment proclaimed by a court of law." (MO, 162) This, I would suggest, is a clue to vengeful vindication being a candidate motivation for the act of destruction. As I read them, Vischer's references to "death" and "dust" are also significant, for the sentence he passes upon the spectacles is to remove their human functionality and to return them to a state of insentient dust. The fact that spectacles are a sort of window is also liminally significant, as is the fact that the struggle to free them occurred at the threshold of the hole – the living actor on one side trying to liberate the spectacles on the other. The episode is more like Galen's door that will not open than the door that opens against us. The human actor is in these examples not so much offended by the object's movement in the world of the living, but by the object's stubborn and apparently wilful resistance to human agency and control. His act of destruction is not avenging any physical hurt inflicted by the object but the psychological hurt that is received when we are made to feel powerless to take control over stuff. The anger may be more acute in such situations of object stubbornness than in situations of object intrusion because the object's wilfulness feels more present and pronounced in its seeming to resist than in its seeming to strike.

5 *Hamlet*

Shakespeare's *Hamlet* might seem a surprising choice to illustrate the phenomenon of pure object revenge, for nowhere in the play does the text show Hamlet discharging a grudge against inanimate stuff. Other plays approach the phenomenon more directly. Towards the end of *2 Henry IV*, for instance, we have the tender scene in which prince Hal, believing that the weight of the crown has worn his father to death, reports, 'I spoke unto this crown as having sense, / And thus upbraided it: "The care on thee depending / Hath fed upon the body of my father"' (4.3.287–9). In the middle Act of *King Lear*, when Gloucester cries for 'winged vengeance' against Lear's daughters in the liminal language of 'sea', 'gate', and a 'porter' with a key, his punishment is to have his eyes plucked out by Cornwall who, having turned the living organ into a lifeless object, crushes the 'vile jelly' under foot to mock Gloucester's

ambition to ‘see vengeance’. *Hamlet*’s relevance to pure object revenge is less direct and more significant than the mere plot feature of striking out against offending material. The play’s relevance to our theme resides in what the play has to say about the threshold between lifeless stuff and humans as living, breathing, wilful actors. It also has something to say about the performance of revenge at that threshold. The theme of the threshold between the living and the dead is introduced with the initial appearance of the ghost, but it is Hamlet’s mother who first brings the theme into the light when she says to her son, “Do not for ever with thy veiled lids / Seek for thy noble father in the dust. / Thou know’st ‘tis common: all that lives must die, / Passing through nature to eternity” (1.2.70–73). It is fitting that Gertrude should be the one to bring the theme of the threshold into the central business of the play, for the most significant scene to our purpose is the one set in her closet in which she and Hamlet confront each other and in which Hamlet kills Polonius and the ghost of Hamlet’s father makes his last appearance to Hamlet. As the closet scene is central to our theme, so it is central in other respects. For one thing, its significance is signalled by its central position in the play, coming by one calculation at scene 11 out of 20. In terms of plot, it is significant for shedding the first blood seen on the stage and thereby commencing the bloodletting that will ultimately lead to the fatal stabbing of Hamlet, Laertes, and Claudius with the poisoned blade of a fencing rapier. It is also significant for character development as the scene in which Hamlet for the first time confronts his mother with his belief that her former husband, his father, was murdered by her new husband and that Gertrude was complicit in the crime.

As regards our theme of the threshold between the living and the lifeless, the closet scene rivals even the graveyard scene that is animated in part by the eruption of skulls out of the grave freshly dug for Ophelia. The skulls, passing from the world of the dead to the world of the living, are objects in the etymological sense of being stuff thrown against (*ob-jactus*) our senses. There is a parallel to be drawn between the grave of the dead woman and the closet of the living woman, for both are intimate zones into which the men of the play intrude to transact their business. When we first encounter Ophelia’s grave it has the chief gravedigger in it and when she herself is laid there, the stage directions in the reliable Q2 and First Folio agree that Laertes leaps in to embrace her one last time, while Q1, the so-called ‘bad quarto’, contains the stage direction ‘*Hamlet leapes in after Leartes*’ (5.1). I suspect that Hamlet did leap in, as an act consistent with Hamlet’s sustained obsession with delving under surfaces.¹⁴ Gurr and Ichikawa apparently concur, for they point out that an Elizabethan audience would see Hamlet’s leap as a sign of his readiness to descend into hell in pursuit of revenge.¹⁵ If Hamlet did leap in, he probably did so after Laertes had

¹⁴ Gary Watt, *Shakespeare’s Acts of Will: Law, Testament and Properties of Performance* (London: Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, 2016), chapter 5.

climbed out of the grave or we would have an undignified and barely stageable scuffle between the two men in a space already crammed with Ophelia's corpse. This unseemly prospect was Harley Granville-Barker principal reason for rejecting the Q1 stage direction as unreliable.¹⁵ The queen's closet is similarly busy with intruding men. First Polonius, that great intruder, conceals himself in the closet behind a curtain (an 'arras') to eavesdrop upon the queen's pending encounter with Hamlet. Next comes Hamlet, at his mother's invitation. Then the ghost of Hamlet's father comes in. Then, when Hamlet has left with the body of Polonius, Claudius comes in to assess the state of play.

One of the standard criticisms levelled at Hamlet, including by Hamlet himself, is his tardiness in enacting his revenge. In the closet scene, the ghost returns for the express purpose of reminding Hamlet to get on with it. The irony is that moments before the ghost's return, Hamlet had attempted to enact his revenge. Having heard someone calling from behind the curtain, he drove his sword through it in the belief (as he soon after explains) that he was striking the concealed Claudius. It was fair to assume that the master concealer would be there. Why, after all, would Polonius or anybody else be hiding in his mother's closet? Hamlet's words just before he strikes were "How now, a rat? Dead, for a ducat, dead." (3.4.22). Hamlet instinctively attaches an animal animus to the intruder and imagines instant payback in the act.

Hamlet was no doubt reckless as to the hidden recipient of his sword's point, but it may be significant that he was entirely deliberate in two things – first, in the act of performing his revenge, and second, in doing so through the medium of inanimate stuff. In his revenge, Hamlet does not strike a person, but a curtain. This inanimate stuff exemplifies the concealment that he so strongly objects to. The object's offense is the offense of wilfully refusing to reveal what it is hiding. The arras is also representative here of the covering (the shroud or veil) of death that hangs across the threshold between the world of the living on one side and on the other side what Hamlet in his most famous soliloquy calls the "undiscovered" world of the dead. In Greg Doran's televised production for the RSC (2008), Polonius hides behind a tall mirror and David Tennant's Hamlet shoots through it with a pistol. When the mirror shatters, every shard remain elegantly in place except for the small hole left where the bullet passed through. This has the excellent effect of making the broken barrier itself a significant player in the scene. The mirror, a lifeless object that throws back upon us the image of our own living selves, brilliantly represents the liminal space between animate human actors and inanimate stuff. The choice of stage property suits well with the script, for textual references to mirrors feature in Act 3 (the central Act which mirror-like divides the sides of the play). In the closet scene,

15 Andrew Gurr and Mariko Ichikawa, *Staging in Shakespeare's Theatres* (Oxford: OUP, 2000), 153.

16 Harley Granville-Barker, *Prefaces to Shakespeare* (London: Batsford, 1930), 139n.

Hamlet says to Gertrude, “You go not, till I set you up a glass / Where you may see the inmost part of you” (3.4.17–18), and two scenes earlier he had advised the visiting players that the “purpose of playing” is “as ‘twere, to hold the mirror up to nature; to show virtue her feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure.” (3.2.16–19). At the start of the closet scene, Polonius pays Gertrude the compliment of saying “your grace hath screened and stood between much heat and him” (3.4.3–4). It is good that Hamlet wasn’t there to hear it, for Polonius’ description of Gertrude’s role as a “screen” would sound to him like damning confirmation of the concealment he suspects her of.

The mirror is not the only element in the closet scene to confirm that the threshold between life and death is excited by the contrast between animate and inanimate stuff. Hamlet continues his scrutiny of his mother when he wonders if her heart “be made of penetrable stuff” or has become an insentient object “brazed ... proof and bulwark against sense” (3.4.35–6). He borrows his conclusion from Aristotle’s idea of the soul as the animator of animal life – “Sense, sure, you have, / Else could you not have motion” (3.4.69–70).¹⁷ Aristotle again hovers in the background when Hamlet accuses Gertrude of murdering his father by “such a deed / As from the body of contraction plucks / The very soul” (3.4.43–4). The callous reference to the dead Polonius as “guts” to be lugged “into the neighbour room” (3.4.209) is another performance in which lifeless stuff is animated to move across a threshold. As is the appearance of the ghost of Hamlet’s father who in Hamlet’s estimation has the power to animate insentient stuff even in death (“His form and cause conjoined, preaching to stones, / Would make them capable” (3.4.123–4)). In addition to pure textual references, stage properties join with the arras and (if it is a different place) the “portal” in giving material form to the sense of things acting at the threshold between lifeless objects and living actors. We have, for example, Gertrude’s portraits of her two husbands, the present and the past, and her observation that Hamlet’s “bedded hair, like life in excrements, / Start up, and stands on end” (3.4.118–9). The actor David Garrick reportedly used a device here to animate the hairs of a wig to stand on end. Hair, we have noted, has the powerfully liminal, and primitively magical, attribute of being dead matter that grows from a living person. When the hair is cut off, it ceases to grow and so crosses the threshold from the animate world of the living to the inanimate world of death. It is at the moment of being excreted from the body that it is in Gertrude’s word “excrement” (in *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, Berowne refers to his moustache as his “excrement” (5.1.81)). The word is more interesting in its etymology than in its modern usage, for it connoted an idea of banishment which combined the “ex” of expulsion with the “crement” of judgment,

¹⁷ Aristotle *Physics*, P. H. Wicksteed and F. M. Cornford trans, Loeb Classical Library, (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1957), Volume II, Books 5–8.

the latter being the source of the words “discrimination” and “crime”. All hair is excrement that the body has decided to banish, so to cut hair off serves to amplify the sense that the stuff has been judged worthy of banishment. The act of striking offensive and intrusive objects gestures in the same way to a judgment to expel the stuff. Why does pure object revenge occur so instantly and instinctively? Perhaps because the judgment is as naturally innate as such excremental acts as sneezing and growing hair out. In the same way that cutting hair adds a deliberate judgment to natural banishment from the body, so the expulsion or repulsion of an offending object might serve to blend deliberation and bodily instinct in a way that makes it almost impossible to isolate a solitary motivation for the act.

6 Conclusions

The principle of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth stages its performance at the threshold of the living and the dead. When an eye is removed from me, it is removed from life. It becomes an inanimate object. It is death in part. When I lose a tooth, it becomes an inanimate thing. It is no longer animated by the jaw to perform its roles of biting, chewing, voicing. The liminal threshold between the living and the dead has traditionally been reserved for the most powerful performances of the rough justice of revenge. It is in this site that corporal punishment can turn the living eye into a dead eye, or the thief’s living hand into a dead hand chopped off, or the woman’s embodied hair into disembodied locks. It is also at this site that capital punishment can remove the head entirely and so turn a person’s entire living flesh into dull, insentient stuff. A door that swings into this threshold space and causes harm to a human must be struck not only for the offence of reminding humans that they are but briefly animated dust, and not only as a gesture of marking or scoring the scar, but also because the door has trespassed upon the sacred space between life and death – between animate and inanimate stuff – that has traditionally been reserved for the performance of judgment. We demonstrate the true use of that space and cleanse the sacred ground when our act of pure object revenge against the interfering stuff drives it out of the liminal zone and back into the world of the lifeless and the dead. Of course, this response is as primitive and unedifying as corporal and capital punishment always are. The better way is not to pay back or to take away (“payback” is really “take away”), but to maintain a state of mind that is willing always to give back before the offence occurs. Forgiveness can be understood in this sense as being “before-giveness”. The Duke in *The Merchant of Venice* is pretending to forgiveness in this vein when he says to Shylock, “I pardon thee thy life before thou ask it” (4.1.362). Revenge is a puzzle, but forgiveness is the real mystery. It is, of course, the mystery at the heart of the Christian message which commands the believer to keep no record of

wrongs but to accept that by the crucifixion of Christ all debts to justice and revenge, all scores to be settled, were settled once and for all by a Divine bearing of scars.

Twice Hamlet makes an oath on the Christian symbol of the cross. The first instance comes at the opening of the crucial closet scene. Hamlet alerts us to the material significations of stuff, even stuff recorded on the tablets of the mind, when he asks his mother, “What’s the matter now?”. She replies, “Have you forgot me?”, and he retorts, “No, by the rood, not so” (3.4.11–12). The “rood” here indicates the wooden cross, the crossing point where scores are settled. The other time when Hamlet swears on a cross comes early in the play where the context is the parallel one of swearing not to forget his father. Hamlet repeats the words of his father’s ghost “Adieu, adieu! remember me,” and confirms, “I have sworn ‘t” (1.5.110–11). We can assume that his oath was made upon the cross-shaped pommel of his sword, where blade crosses handle, for this was a standard early modern practice of oath-swearing at a time when gentlemen more often carried swords than bibles. It is precisely the performance that Hamlet demands of Horatio and the soldiers of the watch when he commands them, “Never to speak of this that you have seen, Swear by my sword.” (1.5.153–4). The Christian cross, a very specific memento mori, operates in both instances to mark the memory of Hamlet’s parents. Countless crosses have been set up on graves to perform the same filial memorial at the threshold of life and death. If instead of swearing revenge upon the cross, the prince had followed the example of forgiveness upon the cross, *Hamlet* would have been a play without a point. The dramatic performance of pure object revenge will suffer no such fate, for so long as confrontational objects remind us of death, so long will we exact revenge upon them.

Bionote

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