THE AVENGING HERO:
REVENGE TRAGEDY AND THE
RELATION OF DRAMATIST TO
GENRE, 1587-1611

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SUMMARY

The first section of the dissertation examines the literary background of justified revenge. This is a necessary prelude to Part II, which is taken up with an inquiry into the relations of individual authors to the genre they work in and modify.

Chapter I is involved with the justified revenger in Elizabethan narrative literature; the narratives offer a more fruitful avenue for inquiry into the probable response of Elizabethan audiences to stage revengers like Kyd's than contemporary essays and sermons, which tend to reflect the orthodox attitudes of church and state on the subject of private revenge. Chapter II examines the most important pre-Kylian revenge play, Moretus, and its author's unorthodox handling of his subject matter. The morality of revenge in The Spanish Tragedy, the first and most influential revenge tragedy, is next inquired into and found to be equally unorthodox. Kyd, in fact, encourages his audience to see his protagonist as justified throughout the play. The fourth chapter closes Part I
with an attempt to isolate some important anticipations of the changes wrought in the Kydian form after 1600.

Part II is given over to the central inquiry: to what extent and in what ways did dramatists working in the form of Kydian revenge tragedy from 1600 to 1611 show their concern for the kind of play they were developing, and how conscious were the changes they effected in the concept of the hero? Marston’s *Antonio’s Revenge* provides the best example of a conscious reaction against the dramatic representation of justified revenge, a reaction against the kind of revenge figured in *Hieronimo* (and probably Hamlet). Marston’s play is in a sense a parody of the tragedy of blood, but it is a serious parody. Marston inverts commonly accepted moral standards and shows up the morality of a revenge like *Hieronimo* for what it is. The hero is presented as noble and justified to the end, but the response sought from the audience is in fact the opposite of that apparently encouraged on the surface of the play. *Lost’s Dominion* is important in that it offers an extended examination of the causal relationship between vindictiveness and villainy, although here there is much less evidence of a conscious relationship between dramatist and generic tradition. *Roffman* exhibits Chettle’s concern for the genre
in several ways; significantly, the hero is allowed to retain his noble stance in his own eyes while being reduced in the eyes of the audience. The reduction of the hero is also a central element in The Revenger's Tragedy, where again there is evidence that the analysis of the morality of revenge is being undertaken in reaction to the concept of the revenger as justified and noble.

Chapman's The Revenge of Bussy D'Ambois and Tournier's The Atheist's Tragedy embody a new kind of hero, the "honest revenger" who is content to wait until he can achieve a morally acceptable revenge or until divine retribution relieves him of responsibility. In this sense, these two plays are the culmination of a transitional period in the history of revenge tragedy. Along with the others, they provide an area for research into the intellectual bases, the conscious nature, of generic change.