

**From Samurai to Shakespeare:
Traditions of Revenge in Quentin Tarantino's *Kill Bill***



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Introduction

“Revenge is never a straight line. It’s a forest, and like a forest it’s easy to lose your way... To get lost... To forget where you came in.”¹ These words are spoken by Hattori Hanzo, the Japanese master sword maker character in Quentin Tarantino’s first *Kill Bill* film. Both the first and the second instalment of this film are saturated with acts of violence and revenge. The plot revolves around “The Bride”, otherwise known as Beatrix Kiddo. In a non-linear way the films portray her quest for revenge after her former lover Bill, with the help of the Deadly Viper Assassination Squad consisting of O-ren Ishii, Elle Driver, Vernita Green and Budd, kills her new fiancé and – unbeknownst to Beatrix – steals her baby. One by one, the Viper Squad is hunted down by Beatrix, until she finally reaches her goal: to kill Bill.

As always in Tarantino films, *Kill Bill* is filled with references to other styles of cinema, pop culture and more. Film critic Eric David also says that Tarantino “takes the old plots and stories that have become tired and reinvents them with a depth of subtle characterization and sublimity of dialogue that reminds people... well, of Shakespeare.”² The comparison Tarantino-Shakespeare has been made before, and I would like to see how much of Shakespeare and his work is present in Tarantino’s films. As he has said himself “I’ve always had a thought maybe that I might have been Shakespeare in another life.”³ Both the Renaissance playwright and the modern director are unafraid of combining violence and cruelty with comedy, and both have taken inspiration from a wide variety of sources. The work of both contains instances that can be taken strictly for their entertainment value, but there are also various layers of deeper, hidden meanings and messages. These are general comparisons, however. With this thesis, I will try to analyse how much of Shakespeare’s influence is really present in Tarantino’s work. To do this I have chosen a central

¹ *Kill Bill Vol.1*. Draft script. http://sfy.ru/?script=kill_bill. All other quotes from *Kill Bill Vol. 1* and *Kill Bill Vol. 2* (Miramax, 2003, 2004)

² Eric David. “KILL WILL: The Rough Magic of Quentin Tarantino” <http://www.theooze.com/articles/article.cfm?id=1247&page=2>

³ http://www.contactmusic.com/news.nsf/story/tarantino-shakespeare-in-a-past-life_1026081

theme on which to base the comparison: revenge. In order to make the picture more complete I will also look at other traditions of revenge, divided in different spatial and temporal perspectives.

The way in which revenge is perceived, accepted and incorporated in different times and cultures has changed over the ages. While it was perfectly acceptable in Ancient Greece – Aristotle wrote in his *Rhetoric* that “it is noble to avenge oneself on one’s enemies and not to come to terms with them; for requital is just, and the just is noble, and not to surrender is a mark of courage”⁴ – during the English Renaissance the act of revenge was frowned upon, because it interfered with the newly disseminated stoic philosophy as well as the laws that the Tudor and Stuart dynasties tried to impose. Nowadays, with the use of elaborate legal systems of trial and punishment, personal revenge is often perceived as ‘barbaric’ and unnecessary. On the other hand people can often sympathise with revenge plots, if it is obvious that the ‘law’ provides insufficient retaliation. While the views on revenge have changed, its central premises have not, and they have been the theme of plays, books and films from Antiquity until modern age. This consistency makes revenge a suitable theme for a comparison that runs from East to West and from the present to the past.

In this thesis, I would like to explore the different traditions of revenge that might be present in Tarantino’s work, more specifically in the two *Kill Bill* films. I write ‘might be present’ because there is a lot of personal interpretation involved in this work. There are so many influences and references in Tarantino’s work, that it is nearly impossible to identify them all, let alone catch their intended meaning. Next to that, the films are of course fictional and exaggerated at that. Beatrix can at times be compared to a superhero, and Tarantino shamelessly portrays her as almighty. He does this in a tongue-in-cheek manner, where the audience always knows that he is not serious but still willingly suspends its disbelief. I will do the same in this thesis, because analyzing the truth and fiction in this work is not my aim. The concept of revenge in his work is therefore a complex one, influenced by many different traditions. The director himself said about the ideas in his films:

Any time you try to get across a big idea, you’re shooting yourself in the foot. First you

⁴ Keyashian, *The Shapes of Revenge*, 19

need to make a good movie. And in the process, if there's something in it that comes across, that's great. And it shouldn't be this big idea. It should be a small idea, from which everyone can get something different.⁵

I will look at four different traditions of revenge, which are at a first glance each other's opposites. A spatial division can be perceived in the films; a large part is set in the United States of America, but there are also numerous scenes in Japan where Beatrix travels to kill O-ren Ishii. The traditions that are followed in these scenes are on the one hand the American, Western culture, on the other hand that of the Japanese samurai. The visual difference between them is already clearly stated; the Japanese scenes are clean, sophisticated and stylised, with elegant (but bloody) swordfights; the American scenes on the other hand are dirty and dusty, and the fights, often with guns, are far less sophisticated. I will explore and discuss the tradition and perception of revenge in Japanese samurai and American cowboy-and-western cultures, and see if and how they differ and what difference this makes for the films. In addition to the spatial division I will make a division in terms of time, and look at classic and modern influences on the revenge plot. Since Tarantino takes his inspiration from so many different genres and styles, it would seem likely that some of these influences stem from long ago. This is where Shakespeare comes into the equation. I will look at *Hamlet* for different motivations for revenge and to see how the characters deal with betrayal. This analysis will be based upon the text of the play, as written by Shakespeare. After that I will look at *Titus Andronicus* for the concept of comic violence and the bloody execution of a revenge plot. For this part I will focus not only on the text of the play but mostly on a recent screen adaptation, namely *Titus* by Julie Taymor (Clear Blue Sky Productions, 1999). If we want to see how Tarantino appropriates Shakespeare it might be useful to look at a director who has already done so, and Taymor and Tarantino seem to be similar in their ways of looking at and portraying revenge. After the focus on Shakespeare I will also look further back, to the Greek tragedy *Medea*, to discuss the

⁵ Eric David. "KILL WILL: The Rough Magic of Quentin Tarantino" <http://www.theooze.com/articles/article.cfm?id=1247&page=2>

earliest form of revenge drama and see how its conventions are still portrayed nowadays.

In this way, I will be discussing the films several times, each time from another perspective. From all this I hope to be able to demonstrate how various influences, both spatial and temporal, combine into a unique new type of revenge drama that is modern but still continues the ancient tradition. More specifically, following the clues that critics and the man himself have given about the similarities between Tarantino and Shakespeare, I hope to be able to show just how much of Shakespeare's presence can be found in Tarantino's work.

Chapter 1 – Revenge

Before discussing the *Kill Bill* films in relation to several other aspects from history and literature, I want to provide a framework for this thesis' central concept of revenge. When talking about revenge and its implications, two main areas may be distinguished: the ethical side, and the psychological side. The former has to do with the way society perceives justice and retaliation; the latter is more personal and deals with the effects on the avenger and his immediate surroundings.

The vengeance theme

Peter French writes about the ethical side of revenge: “The extremely early appearance of vengeance as a moral theme in our cultural history suggests that even the most primitive societies had a sense of injustice. [...] [T]he literary and religious story of Western culture is, in large measure, the tale of vengeance” (*The Virtues of Vengeance* 3). In earlier societies, where no judicial system had been laid out by a central form of government, retributive revenge was often an accepted practice. When a member of one family had committed a murder, the family of the victim was allowed and even expected to kill the original killer. This also held true for other forms of harm done, and is known as the *lex talionis* principle: the law of repayment in kind. There is evidence in both Greek philosophy and the Bible that these practices were condoned by the moral and intellectual leaders of the time, as proven by the biblical statement “life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand” (Ex. 21:23, 24) and the lines in Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* that read “It is noble to avenge oneself on one’s enemies and not to come to terms with them, for requital is just, and the just is noble, and not to surrender is a mark of courage” (in Keyeshian 19). While especially the biblical statement can be taken as a rather barbaric way of carrying out justice, it was originally meant to prevent cruelty. The less fitting a punishment was to a crime, it was thought, the easier it was to commit the crime. It should also be noted that exceptions were made for crimes that were

committed accidentally or unintentionally. Changes in the structure of government and society meant that these retributive laws changed as well. Punishment became centralised and was taken out of the private zone it had been in. The difference between revenge and retribution became more defined. French differentiates between the two:

revenge [...] can be desired only by the injured party or by someone who is closely linked to the injured party. Retribution, on the other hand, can be desired by anyone, or rather anyone can hope for, wish for, want to see retribution carried out against the offender. (68)

Revenge is therefore more personal and direct, while retribution is more distant, impersonal.

“Vengeance is warm, retribution is cold, poetic justice is frigid” (69), as French puts it.

However, while laws were written to prevent instances of personal revenge, scholars like Francis Bacon in the sixteenth century still argued that certain forms of revenge were justified. In *Of Revenge* Bacon wrote that “he who requites violence with violence sins against the law but not against the man” and in *De Augmentis Scientiarum* he added that “the fear of private revenge is a useful thing; for laws too often sleep” (both in Keyeshian 21, 22). Then, and maybe also now, private revenge was and is only considered to be ethical and allowed when the regular justice systems seem to fail to do their task and the enemy is going unpunished for his deeds. This principle is an endless source of inspiration for writers of plays, films and novels; who has not seen or read about a lone man taking on the killers of his family by himself because the law is corrupted? *Kill Bill* is only one of the many films carrying on this revenge tradition. Besides the feelings of sympathy for the hero that these revenge themes arouse, they have a broader function. According to Keyeshian

[The revenge theme] can also invoke and open to examination a number of significant social concerns: questions of suffering and identity; the extent and limits of personal responsibility, especially with regard to wrongs for which neither the state nor providence provides redress; the adequacy of human law and the legitimacy of the social order; the

existence and nature of providence. (*The Shapes of Revenge* 9)

This rings true especially for the revenge tragedies that were written and performed in the English Renaissance. The influence of the church diminished and the dogmas that many people had lived by during the Middle Ages were questioned more and more. While the Old Testament states that the Lord claims vengeance for himself – “Vengeance is mine, and recompense” (Deuteronomy 32:35) – this was taken less literal and law was no longer a matter of the church and the monarch only, but private revenge was no longer tolerated either. The general public needed to be taught what these new social changes meant and how they applied to their personal lives. Theatre was a good medium to get these messages across. As Kristine Steenbergh writes in her dissertation on revenge tragedies: “The plays shape a discourse in which private revenge is represented in terms of the feminine, the passionate, and the uncontrollable and contrasted to the rational, masculine, and public character of the law” (*Wild Justice* 41). This was initially done by rediscovering and translating Senecan tragedy, but soon playwrights like Shakespeare and Kyd wrote their own plays on revenge. Works like *Hamlet* thus helped in the establishment and acceptance of a general system of law in England. By showing the destructive effects of personal revenge on the mental and physical health of the characters the audience was persuaded to trust the official institutions for their affairs. Daniel Kornstein reads Shakespeare from a legal perspective and states that “criminal law really began when the state assumed the function of revenge and took away the right to retaliation from individuals. Hamlet’s hesitancy [in taking private revenge] comes from his being on the cusp of discovering criminal law” (*Shakespeare’s Legal Appeal* 94).

Revenge ethics

Discussions about the nature and legitimacy of revenge are still present in literature and society nowadays. Our world is deemed civilised and national and international laws are enforced to prevent citizens and countries from carrying out private revenge plots. On a personal level, even

though the repayment can be seen as talionic – in response to what harm the target has done to the avenger previously – it remains a matter of debate whether or not this retaliation is completely justifiable on moral grounds. On the one hand revenge is a response to harm done, and on this ground could be called ‘fair’. On the other hand, the avenger needs to stoop to the level of his enemy and perform the same hurtful deed; this gives way to an endless cycle of hurt and payback. Added to this issue is the fact that the avenger usually needs to enjoy the revenge, as seen described above. Without the savouring of that moment, the revenge is not complete. This feeling can be called ‘deserved’, because the avenger has suffered for a long time and is finally free from all the negativity that the enemy has caused. Trudy Govier writes about revenge in our modern-day society, and with respect to the debate on the legitimacy of revenge she states:

The fundamental objection to revenge is that it is founded on the cultivation in ourselves of a desire which is morally evil. Hatred that goes so far as to include joy at the evil meted out to another person is a morally unworthy emotion; we should not feel positive joy in the fact that we have caused the suffering of another person. (13)

Govier dismisses the argument that revenge restores a sort of balance between the original victim and offender. The plotting of revenge and the satisfaction that it brings puts the avenger at the same level as the original offender, so that the avenger too descends to a wrong moral level altogether. This line of thought is present in *Hamlet* too, as I will discuss in a following chapter. I would like to remark that even though I agree with Govier’s arguments on morality, they are not very useful within the theme and context of this thesis. For most persons there is a difference in the morals that they apply to their own actions, and those that they appreciate in the books that they read and the films that they see. While Govier’s arguments are excellent in a discussion about revenge in the real world, in this thesis I will lean more towards French’ point of view: “Revenge can be an appropriate, sanctioned response to a perceived personal injury or a sense of unwarranted victimization or both” (33). I would like to add to this, however, that the genre of revenge tragedy,

be it depicted in plays, films, or other works of art, is often a platform for excess. The reaction to an injury is, in many cases, not the “appropriate, sanctioned response” that French describes, but a messy affair in which those involved will stop at nothing to get their revenge, and preferably outdo the injury that started it.

Psychology and communication

Next to the violence and the feeling that man can overcome ‘the system’, the thing that probably appeals to most audiences is the psychological aspect of revenge. Even though one has to be fairly composed to complete the task of killing or hurting one’s opponent, a great deal of emotion is in play at the same time. As John Kerrigan writes about revenge in the first lines of *Revenge Tragedy*:

Much of its capacity to disturb stems from its paradoxical nature. A destructive impulse, it is mobilized by values and allegiances which would have to be called positive: a proper sense of self-worth, a willingness to strike back in defence of family or other social bonds.

(preface)

Even if the opponent has attacked the avenger’s sense of self-worth and has undermined his or her identity, the revenge process is a way of restoring one’s integrity. It is a way of showing the enemy, and the rest of the world, that even though one has been hurt, one still has to be reckoned with and payback is still possible. This is easiest when the revenge is ‘voluntary’ or stemming from a decision of the avenger him- or herself. Of course revenge is never completely voluntary; it is always a reaction to an intentionally hurtful action. However, a difference can be distinguished between revenge that is carried out of one’s own free will and revenge that is forced upon someone. The clearest example in this context is that Beatrix in *Kill Bill* is the heroine in her own revenge story. She (and her baby) have been hurt, and she personally is avenging these acts of violence. Another character from a work I will discuss, Hamlet, has to be told by his father’s ghost that he

needs to avenge his murder. His revenge plans do not come from himself, but are forced upon him. The difference is not always so clear-cut, but in this example it is clear that internal motivation is a much better spur to revenge than external insinuations or pleas.

Another important aspect of revenge, and crucial for its successful execution, is communication. However much loathing the avenger may have for the object of his revenge, he or she still has to get the ‘this is payback’ message across to his target; otherwise the revenge will not be satisfactory for the avenger’s hurt feelings. Along the same lines, if the object of revenge is hurt or killed in some other way, but not by the hands of the avenger, the avenger will not feel the satisfaction and relief that hurting the target with their own hands would have given them. Communication and proximity are important, and they imply or explain the often intimate relationship between the avenger and his or her target. “The avenger typically wants, in fact needs, to savor the sweetness of revenge in order to bring closure to his or her act of vengeance” (French 69). This need may well cause an obsession in the avenger, making it impossible for him to focus on anything else but his target. The problem disappears when the revenge is successful; when the avenger is able to pay back his or her target most of the hatred and hurt feelings will fade and only a sense of peace and accomplishment will remain. However, when the revenge is unsuccessful, for example because the target dies from other causes or cannot be told the reasons for the revenge before the execution of it, the avenger can be left with a sense of frustration and failure. This will only add to the wounded self-worth, leaving the avenger to feel worse still. Trudy Govier writes that “to satisfy our desire for revenge, we must be agents in bringing harm to others who have harmed us, and we must act with the intent to cause this harm in order to ‘get even’ or restore a balance” (*Forgiveness and Revenge* 3). Avengers have to be psychologically sound persons therefore, capable of handling the pressure that comes with taking revenge. “Successful avengers most likely will be persons with the emotional composure and physical stamina necessary to weather the personal pressures and losses that are likely to be endured” (French 34). The difference is made clear in the

presentation of revenge plots in plays and films; many revenge tragedies throughout history end in the death of most characters involved, because several matters complicate the simple revenge plan or because the hero is maddened by grief over what has been done to him, rendering him incapable of vengeance. Modern variations on the theme, Westerns, tend to be less tragically inclined and tend to have the hero ride off into the sunset, at peace with himself and the world after having fulfilled his desire for revenge.

Chapter 2 – the East

“Silly Caucasian girl likes to play with samurai swords” (*KBI* 1:30). Beatrix Kiddo may be called silly in this quote by O-ren Ishii, in the fighting scene that occurred moments prior to the one to one encounter between the two women she demonstrated some excellent swordfighting skills. Infused with the Japanese culture as *Kill Bill Vol. 1* appears to be, it is not strange that Beatrix seems to have some traits that resemble those of the samurai, the Japanese warrior class. In this chapter I will first look at the ethics of the samurai culture and their attitude towards revenge, and see how these are brought into the films. After that I will focus in more detail on some of the more practical aspects of the subject, and look at the samurai warrior religion and psychology and finally their weapon of choice, the *katana* sword. With this I hope to show how the samurai traditions have influenced a large part of *Kill Bill Vol. 1*.

Samurai ethics

‘Principled autonomy’ is how the basic moral code of the samurai was described by the Confucian scholar Muro Kyoso in the seventeenth century. He wrote:

The disciplined and rightful attitude of the samurai should include the following: not to speak falsehood; not to work for selfish gain; to keep the mind straightforward and honest; simplicity in external appearance; to maintain a disciplined and courteous bearing, neither flattering one’s superiors nor being arrogant toward one’s juniors; to keep promises unflinchingly; and not to ignore another in hardship. . . . (in Eiko Ikegami, “Shame and the Samurai” 1362)

In ideological terms therefore, Beatrix Kiddo does not seem to be a true samurai; her revenge can be said to be a very selfish act, for it is executed in order to retaliate the violence that is done to herself, and indirectly also to her daughter. In addition, Beatrix does not seem to care much about her

attitude and whether it is rightful or not; she does what she feels she needs to do. The comparison therefore, as we shall see later on, lies more in the practical execution of her revenge. There are some aspects of the samurai attitude that do apply to her though. She does not “speak falsehoods,” she is out for the truth and is not afraid to confront others with it herself. She also keeps her mind straightforward; her revenge and how to fulfill it is all she thinks about. In the films this becomes clear through the high tempo in which the killings follow each other. The time in between them is not shown, so there seem to be mere moments between the scenes in Vernita Green’s kitchen and the following in Hattori Hanzo’s sushi bar. This emphasises the fact that Beatrix has only one thing on her mind – kill every Viper, and then Bill. The list with the names of her targets, and Tarantino showing her cross off a name after each killing, underlines her urgency even further. Discipline is also a trait that she has an abundance of; after she has woken from her coma she stays in Buck’s car for several hours, forcing herself to regain the strength in her legs by starting to wiggle her little toe and continuing from there.

In her external appearance Beatrix differs from the ideal samurai. Obviously because she is female, and the samurai title was reserved for men only. Japan knows the concept of female warriors, known as *onna bugeisha* or *onna-musha*, which translates to ‘woman warrior’. However, as Ellis Amdur observes: Unless one is willing to imagine a conspiracy of silence in which women's role on the battlefield was suppressed in both historical records and battle-tales, it is a fair assumption that *onna-musha* (women warriors) were very unusual” (4). Since Tarantino just uses what he likes from his influences and disregards what does not suit his purpose, I believe it is safe to do the same here and compare Beatrix to a samurai, even if she could have never been one.

While Muro writes that their attire should have “simplicity” Beatrix’s style can be better described as “stylish”. When on her mission to find O-ren Ishii she has a yellow-and-black motor suit with matching motor and shoes. The armour of a samurai, however, could be just as elaborate and aesthetical. The helmet was often decorated with antlers or horns, while the chest piece and the

scabbard were adorned with colourful designs of for example flowers and birds. To give an idea of the variety of colours and detail that were used in these designs, Richard Storry, in *The Way of the Samurai*, quotes Sacheverell Sitwell on the subject of medieval samurai armour: “there is scarlet, or white-laced armour, or purple lacing, like as many clans of coloured lobsters [...] silk braid of ‘rotted leaf colour’, or deutzia blossom, or wistaria, or [...] cherry or pink plum blossom, and then, again, fern, or water plantain, or, more beautifully, jay’s feather, it must be blue wing feather, lacing” (50). In everyday life samurai might have dressed in a simple manner, when they were dressed for battle they definitely minded their appearance, just like Beatrix does.

Beatrix’s attitude towards others, be it superiors or juniors, can hardly be described as “disciplined and courteous”. In fact, she does not seem to consider anyone her superior. Once, of course, this would have been Bill, with whom she had a relation but who also was a boss-like figure to her. In their final scenes together there seems to be some mutual respect between them, but this may as well stem from their shared past as from the knowledge that Beatrix is going to carry out her mission to the end and be successful. Her attitude towards others can be explained with reference to her situation. She thinks she has nothing left to lose, and therefore does not fear anyone or anything. She was, for all intents and purposes, dead for several years while she was in a coma and the life that she thought she was going to have, with her husband and child, has been taken from her. In her previous life as a member of the Viper Squad she probably also did not fear many people or consider them her superiors, so in this aspect she has not changed much. The films do not show much interaction between Beatrix and characters that are not part of her revenge plot; it is therefore hard to establish if her attitude is pure arrogance or just one she upholds for her enemies. In the case of Hattori Hanzo, she gives him the respect that is due with regard to his status as master sword maker, but she does not respect his retired status – she convinces or better yet forces him to craft her a sword. In the behaviour towards those who are clearly her juniors – for example some of the members of O-ren Ishii’s Crazy-88 army – Beatrix even can be seen as condescending. In the final

moments of the fight with the army, when she has killed or disabled almost all her opponents, she faces a young man, almost a boy. She spans him with her sword and tells him that “this is what you get for fucking around with yakuza. Go home to your mother!” (*KBI* 1:24). A similar situation takes place shortly before that, when she faces the girl Gogo Yubari. Beatrix tells her to leave and that they do not have to fight, implying that it is a lost cause and that Gogo cannot win. Gogo ridicules her for it and in the end, of course, loses the fight. This apparent arrogance of Beatrix can be explained by another samurai trait, that of not fearing death in battle. I will discuss this later on.

Revenge in samurai culture

Since honour is so important in Japanese and samurai culture, it explains why revenge plays a large part too. If honour is insulted, it needs to be restored. Embedded in Japanese culture as these concepts are, revenge is something that is expected to be carried out; it is not frowned upon. Japanese culture can be described as a ‘shame culture’, meaning that a large part of a person’s motivation comes from the need to avoid shame or loss of face. Storry distinguishes between the concepts of “honour” and “face”: “Important as it is, face carries less weight than honour, and in feudal Japan those outside as well as those within the samurai order [...] could possess face, a quality that could be enhanced, saved, or lost. Honour on the other hand was something more, something extra, an addition to the moral cargo that every samurai was expected to carry” (15). This could mean that, while a person who has lost face would hide in shame, a samurai whose honour was insulted would feel an urgent need or even obligation to restore this honour by revenging himself. The great importance that a samurai warrior attached to the repayment of debts, and that he would risk his life to defend his honour, are recurring factors in many samurai stories. Ikegami, in his article “Shame and the Samurai”, writes that “concepts of shame and honour helped to construct the collective identity of the samurai that differentiated this category of warriors from the rest of Japanese society” (1352).

All this does not really seem to apply to Beatrix Kiddo in the *Kill Bill* films. Her revenge is, as Harry Keyeshian would put it, “a response to victimization” (2) rather than a response to her insulted honour. Beatrix wants to take vengeance on Bill and the other Vipers because she presumes they killed her fiancé and her baby and thereby undermined her identity. Bill’s order to shoot the wedding party is in a way a vengeful response to his honour being insulted; he does not take Beatrix’s leaving kindly. He reacts with the things he knows best: violence and cruelty. Beatrix’s revenge on the other hand, again in Keyeshian’s terms, is an attempt to “restore [her] integrity – [her] sense of psychic wholeness – and stabilize [her] identity” (2). On the other hand, the violent way in which she carries out this revenge is similar to the style of the samurai. As Ikegami writes:

violence, power, autonomy, become inextricably connected in the warrior’s sense of honour. [...] Accepting shame without fighting back would decrease a samurai’s independence and his power of self-determination. [...] Any challenges to their honour would be answered decisively, in physical terms. (1360)

Warrior religion and psychology

The ethics and morals of the samurai have throughout the ages been influenced by the different religions that Japan has known. Shinto has since long been the main form of religion in Japan; its predominant feature is the belief that *kami* or spirits are omnipresent and are part of every living being as well as of things like rocks, rivers, mountains and such. It is the influence of Shinto that led to the samurai belief that the sword has a spirit of its own and should therefore always be treated with respect. Another important aspect of the Shinto religion is the absence of a concept such as Original Sin, which has been quite important in Western religion. In Shinto, ‘sins’ or misdeeds fall into the same category as for example natural disasters; they are visitations from without and not under man’s influence. Someone who committed a crime is therefore not so much seen as guilty but more as impure or polluted. The impact of this can be diverted by means of rituals

of purification, a very important part of the religion. In this light, the way in which Beatrix kills Bill can be seen as an act of purification. Bill is some sort of evil spirit that brings trouble into Beatrix's life, and she needs to cleanse herself from it. All the blood that has been shed during the killings of the other Vipers can be seen as the major part of the purification, even though in Shinto the ritual usually involves the sprinkling of water instead of blood. The killing of Bill, with the highly ritualistic 'Five Point Palm Exploding Heart Technique' that Beatrix has been taught by Pai Mei, seems to be the final part of a ceremony that will free her from the evils that have so strongly dominated her life for the past years. There is swordfighting first, which shows that the pupil and her former master are equals and that a 'normal' death is not a possibility. In the heat of the fight, Beatrix comes closer and taps Bill's chest five times. The fight ends there, as they both realise the consequence of this: once Bill gets up, he will die before he has taken five steps. In a way, this is a peaceful way of dying for Bill, showing the respect and love that Beatrix still has for him, despite what he has done to her. This also reflects the calmness and peacefulness of Shinto religion, where death as a concept does not hold a negative connotation; it is merely seen as one of the external visitations that are not to be influenced.

Two other religions that have played a large role in the forming of the samurai morals are Zen, a form of Buddhism, and Confucianism. Confucianism mainly had its influence on some part of samurai ethics, but these are not relevant to discuss here. Zen Buddhism, however, shaped the samurai's thoughts on life and death. This school of thought originated in India and reached Japan via China around the twelfth century. Self-discipline and intuition are key concepts, with the ultimate goal being to reach Enlightenment. It was important for samurai conduct because it focused so much on a strong will and pureness of mind. As Storry writes, Zen "made demands not on the intellect, or on the emotions, but on the will or – to use another term – the moral fibre, the very source and stay of the warrior's pride. [...] Zen spirit must give greater self-control, fortifying that superbly confident indifference to death which every samurai was expected to display" (46).

Indeed, indifference towards life and death was one of the mindsets that made samurai warriors so successful in battle. It was considered dangerous to enter a battle with even the remotest thought of death in mind, for, as the sixteenth-century captain Uesugi Kenshin wrote: “Go to the battlefield firmly confident of victory, and you will come home with no wounds whatever. Engage in combat fully determined to die and you will be alive; wish to survive in the battle and you will surely meet death” (in Storry, 50). Ideally a warrior would think of nothing while engaged in combat, a concept for which the Japanese have the terms *munen* (no mind) or *mushin* (no thought). Catharina Blomberg in her dissertation on samurai religion describes this state as one which “transcends ordinary consciousness”, one where the warrior has “trained his reflexes until they are so perfect that he can act automatically without ‘stopping to think’ for even a fraction of a second” (77).

I find that this *munen* state of mind is clearly recognisable in Beatrix in the scene of the fight at the House of Blue Leaves. In this part of the film, she fights off O-ren Ishii’s entire army, plus her personal bodyguards, and in the end kills O-ren herself. She manages all this without getting seriously injured herself, so – apart from the fact that this is cinema and Beatrix is the heroine – she would have needed an enormous amount of skill and concentration to accomplish this.

Cinematically Tarantino has portrayed this state of mind in an interesting way, by showing the beginning of the fight in black and white, with almost no music and just the sound of cutting and screaming. There is also a lot of focus on Beatrix’s eyes, showing her calculating her chances and her strategy. After a while, the fight sounds become less and up-tempo music starts to play, placing less emphasis on the fight and more on Beatrix’s mental state and her dedication to her revenge. This effect culminates in the final part, where we first see the scene flash from black and white to colour with the blink of Beatrix’s eye. At that moment, when she seems to snap out of her concentration, the owner of the place shuts down the lights and the scene is just shadows fighting against a blue background. The tension breaks when the lights come back on and Beatrix is left facing a teenage boy, whom she spansks as described above. After this she still has to fight O-ren’s

personal bodyguard Johnny Mo and O-ren herself, and in these fights her fatigue is showing, indicating that the *munen* state is losing its power. However, thanks to Beatrix's *katana*, her "Japanese steel", she is able to kill O-ren Ishii and get one step closer to the fulfilment of her revenge.

Another psychological part of the warrior's religion was the *kiai* shout, or 'spirit-meeting' shout. According to Blomberg it is supposed to be "the emanation or physical expression of a psychological power founded on the concentration of mental energy" (76). Furthermore, persons proficient in this practice, called *aiki*, were supposedly able to see in the dark and break an opponent's sword with mere willpower when it was raised against them. Examples of all of these are found in *Kill Bill*. Beatrix disables all her opponents, even when the lights are out; before she spansks the teenager and sends him back to his mother she cuts his sword in several pieces with her own. The *kiai*, however, has been called before the fight, to catch the attention of O-ren Ishii herself. Beatrix is in the bathroom of the House of Blue Leaves, and O-ren is in her private room with some of her army. Then, over the noise of the band playing and people dancing, Beatrix shouts "O-ren Ishii! You and I have unfinished business!" (*KBI* 1:10). O-ren comes out of her room, and the two women look at each other, close-ups on the eyes. When Beatrix chops off Sophie's arm the tone is set and the balance of power shifts towards her, even though she is clearly outnumbered. It is the *kiai* that announces her presence and her purpose there, and she does not leave until she got what she came for.

***Katana* – the sword**

The long, slightly curved sword that is known as the *katana* in Japanese culture is one of the most important items in a samurai's life. They are regarded as having souls or spirits of their own, and treated accordingly. Taking care of the sword and keeping it in great condition is of the utmost importance to a samurai. It was also believed that a part of the spirit of the sword-maker was

present in the weapon. The sword is made by heating, flattening and folding steel, until the material takes the desired shape and sharpness. It is said that magic elements went into the sword with each fold of the steel, and once finished, the sword would take on the character of the one who made it. Thus, a calm and balanced sword-maker would create swords that would be used for peaceful acts, while a violent smith would make a sword that would take part in bloody battles. Richard Storry has written up a Japanese myth concerning this belief.

Murasama, a brilliant but mentally unstable swordsmith enjoyed a somewhat sinister reputation, since his superb blades always tended to bring their owners into bloody conflict with others, with ultimate disaster for themselves. A man who wanted to test the mettle of a Murasama sword placed one in a stream to see how it would react to the dead leaves floating on the current. Every leaf that touched the blade was cut cleanly in two. A sword made by the greatest of all swordsmiths, Masamune, was then placed in the stream. The leaves avoided the blade. This was said to reflect Masamune's own character; which had in it a measure of nobility. (49)

It is no wonder then that Beatrix Kiddo seeks out the Japanese sword-maker Hattori Hanzo to make her the *katana* with which she will face O-ren Ishii and her Crazy-88 army. As a historical figure, Hattori Hanzo was a well-known and honoured samurai. Tarantino's excellent sense of intertext is visible here, as the actor who plays the sword-maker in *Kill Bill*, Sonny Chiba, is the same actor that portrayed the historical samurai in a Japanese series called *Shadow Warriors (Kage no Gundan)*. This would imply that the *katana* that Hattori Hanzo makes will be as successful in battle as he had once been as a samurai. This is why Kiddo tells the former sword-maker now sushi-chef that she needs "Japanese steel" (*KBI* 0:47).

The veneration for the *katana* is clearly depicted in the scene that follows. Hattori Hanzo takes Beatrix to a room that looks like his attic, and there all his swords are displayed. Even though he has not made a sword in 28 years and now merely owns a very simple-looking sushi bar, the

swords are all neatly placed on racks and appear to be in perfect condition. Somewhat mystical music is played during the scene, giving it an almost religious atmosphere. After admiring the swords for some time Beatrix wants to touch one, but before she can lay her hand on one of them she draws back and asks Hanzo for permission first. Once he states that “you may” she dares to try again. Hanzo then interrupts her and tells her to pick a specific sword. This is another indicator that the swords have a spirit of their own, and that not every sword is suited for every person. As the maker of the swords, Hanzo would know every sword by heart, and would therefore be able to match its characteristics with Beatrix’s character and purpose.

There is another reason why Beatrix seeks out Hanzo to make her a sword. In the same scene as described above, she reminds the Japanese that he has a “rather large obligation” (*KBI* 0:52) to fulfill, since the “vermin” that she wants to kill, Bill, is a former student of Hanzo. Once Hanzo knows what the purpose of the sword is, he does not object any further but instead tells Beatrix that her sword will be ready in a month. Following samurai ethics, Hanzo would indeed be unable to refuse Beatrix’s request. Honour is one of the most important things for a samurai, and a debt, whether this be a negative or a positive one, had to be repaid at some point. Hanzo knows that his former apprentice Bill is now the antagonist, and he has to help Beatrix to counteract his part in Bill’s training. Another example of this style of vengeance can be seen earlier in the film, when Beatrix kills Vernita Green. When Vernita’s daughter steps into the kitchen and sees the mess and the body of her mother, Beatrix tells her “when you grow up, if you still feel raw about it, I’ll be waiting” (*KBI* 0:14) because she knows that Vernita’s daughter has just as much right to her own revenge as Beatrix has to hers.

Another cruel detail concerning the *katana* can be found in the film. In samurai tradition, it has been reported that the sharpness of new swords was tested by hacking off the limbs of dead bodies, or more horrifically, of living criminals or others of inferior rank. The first cut seen made with Beatrix’s sword in the film is when she hacks off Sophie Fatale’s arm in the House of Blue

Leaves-scene. In flashbacks it has already been made clear that Beatrix has a great contempt for Sophie, and even though she is O-ren Ishii's general and not as inferior as many of the others present, her body is used to test and demonstrate the power of Beatrix's sword, as a cruel form of punishment and humiliation.

Chapter 3 – The West

At the end of *Kill Bill Vol.1*, when Beatrix has succeeded in killing O-ren Ishii and her army, we see a cartoon-like shot of a plane flying from Japan back to the USA. From the clean and ritualistic East to the dirty and disorderly West – as the culture changes, so does the film. *Kill Bill Vol.2* has a different take to the revenge theme, and Beatrix has to struggle even more to get to her final destination: Bill and her daughter. In this chapter, I will look at some Western traditions surrounding revenge, being the violent conflict and the right to wealth and freedom. I will show how they might be identified in the second film, and how they are part of the story of Beatrix's revenge.

There is a large contrast between most of the scenes that take place in Japan in *Kill Bill Vol.1* (where Beatrix is out to kill O-ren Ishii), and those in *Kill Bill Vol.2* (where she is attempting to defeat Budd and Elle). This contrast exists both in terms of place and tradition. While she was in the East, Beatrix seemed almighty. She convinced Hattori Hanzo to craft her a sword, something he had sworn never to do again. With that sword she defeated O-ren Ishii's complete Crazy-88 army and her personal bodyguards, finishing with O-ren herself. During these fights she was focused and concentrated and she took on several traits of the samurai, as discussed in the previous chapter. Following this tradition and the Japanese culture, the styling of the scenes is refined, with an eye for detail. It is clean, ritualistic, almost aesthetic if one disregards the blood spraying and limbs flying about. In *Kill Bill Vol.2* Beatrix goes back to the USA to find the next persons on her list, Budd and Elle, and finally Bill. The film starts with her telling how she arrived at that point, the back-story to her "roaring rampage of revenge". The following 'chapter' in the film is called "Massacre at Two Pines" and shows the justification for Beatrix's revenge: her wedding rehearsal and its interruption by the Viper Squad, killing all present and leaving the pregnant Bride for dead. The location immediately sets the tone for a large part of the film. A small wooden church in the middle of the

desert, somewhere in Texas. An empty, dusty landscape – passing tumbleweed would not have been out of place. Instead of the skilled swordfights that took place in the first film, the Viper Squad enters heavily armed and simply opens fire. The massacre is not shown in detail to the audience. The scene depicts the church from outside while gunfire and screams are heard. The beating up of the Bride cannot be called pretty either. It is brutal and violent and she is no equal match to the joined forces of her former colleagues. The difference between the clean and ritualistic East and the dusty and brutal West is clearly made.

History and Fiction

A distinction needs to be made between the image of the West that we know from Westerns, and the actual historical tradition. In comparison to the samurai tradition, which goes many centuries back and is very rich and developed, the cowboy and Western tradition is less well defined. This is probably because not all cowboys were the heroes that many films make them out to be; most were merely hard-working cattle herders. As Katie Arosteguy points out, “America was starved for an icon of rugged individualism to fit the ideal of an American ethos, so the mythic American cowboy was born” (118). While nowadays this myth has grounded itself firmly in the collective thought and is therefore no longer questioned, the choice for cowboys was actually a peculiar one, since, as Lee Clark Mitchell notes, in reality “cowboys in the peak years of the 1880s were essentially seasonal laborers whose modest skills earned them barely more than the average industrial worker” and who were “overworked, underfed, poorly paid, ill-educated” (25). Along the same lines, many of the stories about gangs of bad guys robbing and killing their way through the West are highly exaggerated to please the public interest. In his history of the Old West, Richard White writes that “myth makes all conflict personal and resolves all conflict with violence. The stock-figures of myth and folklore – mountain men, gunfighters, cowboys, Indian warriors, scouts and prospectors – come onto the scene armed and dangerous” (328). In reality, the majority of

conflicts were resolved by some authority of law, as I will discuss later on in this chapter.

Next to those influences that the media had and have on the image of the West, the many developments that society and even the country as a whole went through from the settling of Europeans in America to the creation of the USA made it even more difficult for a tradition to form. In contrast to Japan, which was almost isolated from foreign influences for centuries, America was overrun by many settlers- all with traditions and customs of their own. “Nineteenth-century migrants into the West established what amounted to a new world on top of the existing world of Indian and Hispanic villages. In some ways these worlds shaded into each other” (White 298). Combined with the fast development of society in terms of industrialisation, the invention of steam-operated machines and later even electricity, it becomes clearer that a tradition in terms of the Western lifestyle is as much formed by myth as by reality.

Western themes, ethics and revenge

The past century have seen the idealisation of the lifestyle in the film genre that became known as the Western, and reality and fiction have become intertwined. For this reason, I will not only look at the actual historical traditions but I will also take into account the themes and ethics that the Western film genre portrays. In *The Virtues of Vengeance* Peter French describes the Western as “a self-conscious morality play that seldom wanders far from an investigation of the social, psychological, political, and moral implications of revenge” (36). It has to be noted that not all Westerns are such “morality plays” as French likes to classify them. Many are merely designed for entertainment purposes, with a flimsy storyline that serves the more important aspects: a great number of shootings and explosions. For the purpose of this thesis however, these films can be disregarded as they do not contain the necessary elements for discussion. Therefore I will look at them in the way Patrick McGee does in *Rethinking the Western*:

If the Western can be considered one of the principle narratives in the discourse of mass

culture on the right to wealth and the legitimacy of class, the reason for this lies in the history from which it emerged [...]. To study the Western is to contemplate violent conflict as both a fact of social history and a figure of social transformation. (xvii)

While the right to wealth in the financial sense is not the main theme in the *Kill Bill* films, we may detect a struggle for the right to freedom and to live one's life as one chooses it. Beatrix, as far as the audience can tell, has been a voluntary member of the Viper Squad for some time, and she has been good at her job. Only when she realises that she is pregnant does she leave the Squad, and Bill. She knows that being a mother is not compatible with her lifestyle at that moment, and she chooses a safe environment for her daughter over her own relationship with Bill. However noble it might be to take this decision in theory, in reality it does not work out as well as Beatrix might have hoped. Maximilian Le Cain raises an interesting point with respect to this change in Beatrix's way of thinking:

The problem with these sudden renunciations is that the invocation of the noble intentions of redemption or, in this case, the desire to provide a normal family situation for a child, are both meaningless and hypocritical because they are without basis in the universe Tarantino has created. He arbitrarily appeals to values that he assumes are so strongly present in the audience *a priori* that he doesn't have to bother working them into the ethical mechanics of his cinema. (6)

This partially explains the struggle Beatrix has to go through to find her place in the world. She is so much part of the universe of violence and revenge that it takes an enormous effort to transfer into a universe in which she can peacefully raise her daughter. Like a cowboy, she is forced into a mythical role of superiority. However, instead of feeling honoured by this or becoming vain and hungry for power like Bill, she wants to step down from her pedestal and just be a mother. Since this cannot be easy in the universe she is in now, of course Bill traces her down and avenges what he sees as her betrayal. The conversation that they have outside the church makes it clear that he

looks down on the lifestyle that she has chosen for her and her daughter. As a true cowboy though, Beatrix feels that she has a right to this life; when it is taken from her, she will do everything in her power to get it back, and to get even with the ones that kept her from it.

Next to the wealth and class themes the role of revenge in Westerns is predominant. This is partially due to the way America was organised around the latter half of the nineteenth century. There were state laws, which were enforced by local sheriffs and deputies. However, due to the many isolated communities which were often located far from civilisation, it could be hard to uphold and maintain the laws. The diverse cultural backgrounds in those communities added to the rise of conflicts. As White states: “Differences in race, ethnicity, class, religion and earlier sectional loyalties created friction, and friction often sparked conflicts” (328). In some cases, rather than waiting for a judge to arrive and convict criminals, the locals dealt with bandits themselves; the eye-for-an-eye principle. Fred Veil raises an interesting aspect that can be connected to the personal revenge theme. On the one hand a sheriff could have difficulty protecting the townspeople against bandits because prisons were often primitive and easy to break out of. On the other hand he also needed to look out for his convicts, because the locals were often more than ready to take matters into their own hands and play for “Judge Lynch.”⁶ White elaborates on this situation, explaining that it had often to do with the high costs that an official trial and execution would require. “[Vigilantes] stormed jails to hang men already in custody, thus saving the town or county the costs of a formal trial and execution” (333). A recurring feature in many Westerns is the corrupt sheriff, who sides with the bad guys and leaves the hero no choice but to do the right thing himself. This image, although a cliché, is not entirely mythical. There was a well-organised system of law, but this system did not treat everyone as equal. Therefore,

The American political system did succeed in diverting many social conflicts into peaceful political channels, but in the West these channels were often not deep enough to contain all

⁶ Fred Veil. “19th Century ‘Old West’ law surprisingly sophisticated”. http://sharlot.org/archives/history/dayspast/text/2006_09_17.shtml

the enmities diverted into them. Complete diversion was impossible if only because the political system itself excluded significant groups of westerners [...] from political participation. Violence, therefore, occurred when social conflict spilled outside normal political channels, but this is only a partial explanation for violence, because violent conflict sometimes proved an integral part of the political system itself. (White 329)

Revenge was therefore somewhat accepted when executed by an individual or a group, when it appeared that the official authorities were failing. In *Kill Bill* law enforcement is almost completely absent, except for the sheriff and his deputy that come to investigate the shooting at Two Pines. The way the sheriff talks about the scene when he first enters the chapel, saying that “a kill-crazy rampage though it may be, all the colors are kept within the lines. If you was a moron, you could almost admire it” (*KBI* 0:17) is an indication that he is not going to be bothered too much with catching the perpetrators of the massacre. Besides that, Beatrix’s previous life as an assassin makes it hard for her to contact the authorities. The world in which she moves is one of *yakuza* bosses, hitmen and outlaws. She needs to do this on her own – for practical and psychological reasons, she has no choice. As French describes the mindset of the Western hero, he seems to be talking about Beatrix:

The avengers are self-reliant persons who set their own moral parameters. [...] They may be emotionally anchored in home, family, or friends, but their moral sense and confidence are drawn from an inner strength, a physical and moral self-sufficiency. They are self-reliant and motivationally independent. (64)

Violent conflict

The violent conflict in the films can also be discussed along the lines that McGee sets with respect to the violence in Westerns. One of the most violent scenes in *Kill Bill Vol.2* explains the background to Beatrix’s revenge story. Short flashbacks to it were already contained in *Vol.1*, but

the full event is presented to the audience in the chapter entitled “Massacre at Two Pines”. What starts out as a happy day for the Bride and her fiancé ends up in the massacre that the title of the chapter promises. The setting has a typical Western setting, a primitive wooden church building in the middle of the Texas desert. When the Bride hears the sound of a flute she leaves her company and goes outside, where she finds Bill. Supposedly she has not seen him since she left the Viper Squad after finding out about her pregnancy, so the reunion is emotional for her. Tarantino warns the viewer for the impending doom by making the encounter between the Bride and Bill look like a duel in which they approach each other one footstep at a time, all the while making remarks about the current situation and the past. The mixed feelings they have for each other are not hard to perceive. The Bride smiles when she first sees Bill there, and her eyes show that she is thinking about the past. Bill calls her ‘Kiddo’, an affectionate name that suggests that Bill will treat her nicely. What the audience does not know at that point is that Kiddo is also Beatrix’ last name, making Bill’s use of it less endearing. The Bride is not fooled by Bill’s friendly appearance, and she straightforwardly asks him how he found her. She obviously went through some troubles to get away from a man like Bill, and the fact that he found her nonetheless shows that he also made an effort to trace her. At this point in the film it is not yet clear if Bill’s search for Beatrix is fueled by his love for her, or by his rage about her leaving. His answer “I’m the man” (*KB2* 0:06) does not clear up this ambivalence. He could be referring to their relationship, placing himself above her current lover. He could also establish his position of power, implicitly telling her that he still has a great influence on her and that there is no escaping him. Since the Bride herself is not clear about Bill’s motives, she then asks him why he arrived at the scene. Bill keeps up the ambiguity, increasing the tension between the two characters. The dramatic irony of the flashbacks tells the audience that something is about to happen, but Bill behaves like a proper gentleman at that point. Beatrix knows him well though, and she knows that he is not as gentle as he might seem. Her third question therefore is “Are you gonna be nice?” (*KB2* 0:07), indicating that it is within the range of

possibilities that Bill has come to cause trouble. Although Bill says he is “gonna do his best to be sweet” (0:07) he does foreshadow the bloodshed to come when he is talking to the Bride’s fiancé and remarks “Isn’t it supposed to be bad luck for the groom to see the bride in her wedding dress before the ceremony?” (KB2 0:11). With the knowledge that the audience has about the Bride’s and Bill’s previous life of “getting around the world, killing human beings and being paid vast sums of money” (KB2 0:09), the fiancé’s answer “I guess I just believe in living dangerously” (0:11) does sound a bit ironic. The camera then zooms out of the church, and the four other members of the Viper Squad step into the shot, hoist their guns and enter the church. One of the last things we hear before the gunfire opens is the Bride screaming “Bill, no!”

This episode in the films seems to resemble the occurrence of so-called social violence in the Old West. While personal violence was mostly occurring in towns where the population consisted mainly of young men who would look for a fight when drunk and bored, social violence often came forth from communities with stronger ties. Especially when the young, the elderly or the weak were attacked, a lynching could take place before a formal jury could be assembled to consider the case. Next to that, groups of vigilantes arose, stepping in for the official government when they deemed it necessary. White writes that “vigilantes contended that when constituted authority broke down to such a degree that the communities were threatened with destruction by criminals, an armed citizenry had to take over to preserve order” (333). The reverse seems to be happening in *Kill Bill*. Bill, the criminal authority, broke down because Beatrix tried to escape him. The film does not show it so it is mere speculation, but her leaving may have caused the Viper Squad to fall apart, her loss being a threat to their small community. To restore Bill’s authority and power, the Viper Squad reforms itself and intervenes, showing Beatrix who is boss. The killing of all her loved ones is a message, telling her that it is unwise to disturb the hegemony of Bill.

The following scenes, where the wedding’s attendants are killed and the Bride severely beaten and left for dead, can be seen as the origin of the violent conflict and following social

transformation that McGee wrote about. Before the incident the Bride was separating herself from her old life and her former colleagues, but it was not clear if she was holding a grudge against them. After the killing of her fiancé and the apparent loss of her baby, she transforms into the avenger that she is shown to be throughout the films. It is this transformation, together with the training that she has gone through for her former job, that allows her to be so effective in her revenge. All the knowledge of the sword fighting, the kung-fu and the other techniques that she uses to survive were already present, but she needs to transform from being what she wanted to be, a wife and a mother with a simple kind of life, to being what she had to become to get her life back – an avenger. As Michael Crowley puts it: “The heroine of *Kill Bill* dismantles a false Self she has outgrown in order to reconstitute, or reunite with, her authentic, pre-conditioned Self. She transcends a legacy of violence and delusion to become reacquainted with her innate nature” (2). Only after all the persons on her list are dead and she is reunited with her daughter can she change back to her old self, and immediately transform again into a mother. It is a social transformation, but not a spiritual one. An important notion that is connected to revenge is redemption, or the deliverance from sin, evil or the past. Crowley notes that “although Beatrix experiences a change of heart about what degree of risk she is willing to assume, her transformation is produced by a desire for self-preservation rather than a vexed conscience or the arousal of her deepest moral impulses” (1). This ties in with the vigilantes of the Old West, who also operated for the sake of self-preservation and “claimed that they were only observing [...] the right of the people to assume sovereignty when government proved incapable of protecting their rights and property” (White 333). Beatrix feels that her authority at the time she finds out she is pregnant, Bill, is not capable of ensuring a safe future for her child. She has to become a vigilante for her daughter and herself, and through this she succeeds in prevailing over her old authority figure and giving herself the life she wants.

Right to Wealth

The third member of the Viper Squad on Beatrix's list is Budd, the only man of the group and Bill's brother. Of all Beatrix's former colleagues, Budd seems to have the least successful life. Whereas Vernita Green had a family and a house in the suburbs, O-ren Ishii was the head of the Tokyo mafia and Elle Driver still is Bill's assistant, Budd lives alone in a trailer and has a job as a bouncer in a seedy strip club. In comparison to the money that he must have made while in the Viper Squad, and to the lives that the other members lead, Budd is not well off. As far as the Western style of the film goes, his cowboy glory has faded and all that is left is his cowboy hat, for which he is scolded by his boss: "The hat. That fucking hat. How many times did I tell you not to wear that fucking hat?" (*KB2* 0:20). He is also belittled by Bill, who has come to offer him protection against Beatrix's rampage. Bill warns Budd that Beatrix has a Hattori Hanzo sword and that she has killed O-ren and her entire army, and that he is certain that Budd will not survive alone against her. During this conversation it becomes clear that Budd used to own a Hanzo-sword as well, but that he has pawned it some time ago. Bill is astonished at that, because to him these swords are priceless. When Budd answers "Well, not in El Paso, it ain't. In El Paso I got me \$250 for it" (*KB2* 0:15) it shows how low he has sunk and how little is left of his former lifestyle and prestige. As said above, McGee qualifies the Western narrative as one of the principle ones in "the discourse of mass culture on the right to wealth and the legitimacy of class" (xvii). If we consider Budd in this light it seems that he takes his right to wealth into his own hands and feels that he is entitled to it, even though with his current lifestyle he does not seem to be very deserving of anything. He probably had his share of wealth while he was a Viper, and when he tries to get something of it back by selling Beatrix's sword to Elle Driver, his greed comes back to bite him in the form of a black mamba snake that Elle had hidden in the suitcase with money. Incidentally Black Mamba was Beatrix's code name in the Squad, giving her a symbolic part in Budd's death.

Apart from his greedy nature, Budd seems to be the only one of the Vipers that gives Beatrix

a form of recognition for her actions of revenge. When he and Bill are talking, he says “That woman deserves her revenge... and we deserve to die”. Any sympathy that he raises with this remark is then cancelled out again when he finishes his sentence with “But then again, so does she” (KB2 0:16). This seems to exemplify the law of the Western, in which everyone has a right to their revenge. This can be seen as honest; every man or woman gets a chance to redeem him- or herself. On the other hand, it also makes a lot of people the possible subject of an avenger. For some of the Vipers it is not clear why they want to kill Beatrix, except because Bill probably told them to. Budd gives her an explicit reason before he buries her alive: “This is for breaking my brother’s heart” (KB2 0:34). Even though Budd and Bill have fallen out with each other, Budd still wants to avenge the hurt that Beatrix has caused Bill. Budd wants her to know this, because according to French:

revenge is a very personal matter, and when it is inflicted, it is important that the target grasp the reason why. If the target does not know that he or she is paying the penalty because of his or her specific prior harming or injury of someone or of the avenger himself or herself, the act of revenge has misfired. (12)

Bill, the Vipers and Beatrix were already wrapped up in a cycle of revenge, so in that respect Budd did not really have to explain why he did what he did to Beatrix. He wanted to make sure, however, that Beatrix knew that he did not just make her suffer for his enjoyment, but for her failed relationship with Bill. While many of the killings are arguably deserved, the torture that Budd puts Beatrix through can, in my opinion, only be compared to the chopping off of Sophie Fatale’s limbs by Beatrix - revenge at its cruellest.

Even if the line between actual historical truth and created myth is blurred at times when it comes to the Old West and the Westerns that are situated in the period, some general characteristics can be traced. Self-preservation is an important value, as well as the right for everyone to wealth and personal freedom. While the Western genre might suggest that law enforcement was non-existent, there was in fact a well-established and respected legal authority. Next to that, groups of

vigilantes preserved justice on their own, where they felt the official system failed. The combination of authority, vigilance and a social control network made for the crime numbers to be far lower than the myth might make us believe. However, individuals did sometimes take the law into their own hands when they were done wrong, and this was not always frowned upon. Where everyone has a right to freedom, it seemed that everyone had a right to revenge as well. What is present of these values in *Kill Bill Vol.2* is most importantly the search and struggle of Beatrix Kiddo for her own personal freedom. When the authorities, in the form of Bill, fail in her opinion to provide a safe environment for her and her daughter, she leaves to find a new life for herself. She seeks social transformation, and to rephrase McGee, has to go through violent conflict in order to complete this. The tone of the film can also be said to correspond with the tone of many Westerns – the hurt individual has the right to their revenge and the revenge is justified. Budd's character, finally, exemplifies the individual's right to wealth and how the search for it can turn into greed and then lead to disaster. In the end, the shot of Beatrix and her daughter cuddling in a hotel room is almost as peaceful as that of the lonesome cowboy riding off into the sunset – what the future holds is unclear, but at that moment, personal freedom is the greatest wealth.

Chapter 4 – Shakespeare

In the previous chapters the focus was mainly on the cultural roots of the revenge plot in *Kill Bill*, and on the practical execution of that revenge. This chapter changes from a spatial to a temporal perspective, investigating the historical sources for Tarantino's works. As mentioned in the introduction, Tarantino's storytelling has been compared to that of Shakespeare. The comparison might be slightly exaggerated, but there are indeed certain themes that can be found in both Shakespeare and Tarantino. In this chapter, I will discuss two of Shakespeare's plays, *Hamlet* and *Titus Andronicus*. The former is one of the best-known revenge plays. Prince Hamlet and his inability to take action after the death of his father have been the source of a great number of discussions about the morals and ethics of personal revenge. The revenge theme and the cycle of violence that follows from it may be the most explicit examples of similarity in play and film, but also betrayal and the overthrow of patriarchal hierarchy are found in both works. I will also look at the motivations that both protagonists have for their revenge. After that I will turn from the serious towards the comical, and look at comic violence in *Titus Andronicus* and *Kill Bill*. Both storylines are full of chopped off limbs, bloodshed and other cruelty, but most of it is so extreme that it stops being horrible and starts to be amusing.

Renaissance

As stated in the first chapter, revenge tragedies were a popular form of theatre at the time of the English Renaissance. The emotions involved were recognisable for viewers, but the plays were also a means of educate the audience about the changing morals in society. As Ronald Broude points out, the terms vengeance and revenge in the Renaissance were used for cases in which the individual – without the interference of an official authority – retaliated wrongs done to him. In this sense, the word did have a negative connotation, because with the establishment of socio-legal

institutions the practice of ‘taking things into one’s own hands’ started to be seen as barbarian, hence Francis Bacon’s term “wild justice”. He used this term to refer to man’s instinct to avenge himself, and the growing need for an official government to “weed it out”. However, revenge was also used as a term for the punishment that the commonweal inflicted upon those that did harm to the public good. According to Broude, these sentences were seen as “public vengeance” (41). Besides that, the general public in the Renaissance would have been familiar with the divine form of vengeance, as these terms are present in the bible. One of the best-known phrases from the Christian school of thought with respect to this is “For it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord” (Romans 12:19). With private, public and divine revenge taking place alongside each other “revenge tragedy may in some sense be understood as a form of response to the basic questions of crime and punishment posed by these transformations in socio-legal thought and practice” (Broude 39). The plays showed that only a higher form of justice would bring back peace, from which the audience could hopefully gather that this would work the same in real life. All the confusion that would hold the characters in its grip during the first acts of the plays resulted “from the limitations of human vision” (Broude 57). In a more philosophical vein, Robert Ornstein writes that on the other hand, “through the vehicle of revenge tragedy [the Jacobean tragedians] grapple with the question of how virtuous action itself must be devious, politic, or tainted with evil” (in Keyishian, 9). Revenge tragedy was a source of enjoyment for the audience, but important issues were dealt with at the same time.

Hamlet

One play that deals with these moral issues in a gripping way is *Hamlet*. Even though nowadays it is said to be Shakespeare’s, he adapted it from one or more other stories that were written much earlier. Nonetheless, Shakespeare’s version is the one that became one of the best-known revenge tragedies in history. Endless debates have been held in literature about the play and

its meaning and relevance. Next to the obvious revenge theme, issues such as suicide, betrayal and loyalty to family are part of the play. Hamlet's struggle to avenge his father and clear his conscience is a good example of how no one can be a complete morally correct person. Besides that, according to Theodor Lidz the play "conveys how primal sin corrupts, corruption disillusion, disillusionment breeds a preoccupation with death, and a preoccupation with death destroys Eros" (33).

Cycle of Violence

Since revenge is always a reaction to an earlier attack or insult, it can trigger a cycle of violence. The avenger takes his or her revenge, and in turn becomes the target of another revenge action from the perpetrator. Boyd writes that "revenge is, by its very definition, imitative violence, where each blow is modeled on the prior one, where a 'tit for tat' economy obscures the differences between rivals, no matter how vigorously each proclaims his priority and self-justification" (440). As discussed in the first chapter, this is one of the main ethical problems that surround revenge. No matter how justified the avenger feels in his desire to hurt his attacker, he has to stoop to the same level. If the avenger kills the murderer of a family member, the avenger becomes a murderer himself. Furthermore, since the act of revenge brings along a certain sense of fulfillment and pleasure connected to the pain and suffering of the target, it can be argued that in some cases the avenger is even more erroneous, morally speaking. Once the revenge is fulfilled and the avenger has vindicated his attacker, he has to face the danger that the revenge will be avenged. This process, and the difficulties that come along with it, can be found both in *Hamlet* and *Kill Bill*.

Prince Hamlet, as we know, is not too keen to carry out his revenge. The reasons for this are plenty, and centuries of research have not reached a conclusive theory. Hamlet has doubts about its legitimacy and has to deal with his mother's possible betrayal. He also fears God, as we saw above that the Bible states that revenge is to be left for the Lord. With the legitimacy of the revenge and the betrayal I will deal later in this chapter. While I recognise that Christianity is an important

revenge-related theme in *Hamlet*, I choose not to discuss it in this thesis because it does not fit in with the *Kill Bill*-comparison. Hamlet may be a devoted Christian, but none of the characters in Tarantino's work seem to concern themselves with divine wrath and therefore I think religion has little relevance to the argument in this chapter. I want to start by focusing on the cycle of revenge. The characters in *Hamlet* get involved in several layers of revenge and reciprocation. Hamlet wants to avenge his father's death on Claudius; Laertes wants to kill Hamlet after the death of Polonius and Ophelia; Claudius wants to have Hamlet killed for being a threat to his reign. The latter is probably what most usurpers would do to the rightful heir and therefore not immediate revenge, but the situation connects it all into a complex cycle of action and reaction, resulting in the death of all those involved. Even though, according to Harold Bloom, "Hamlet, whatever his protestations, is truly not interested in revenge, since no one could be more aware that in revenge all persons blend into one another" (in Boyd 441), he cannot escape the destiny of the avenger, which is often to kill and be killed.

In addition, his uncle Claudius seems to live without any morals, appearing to show no remorse about killing his brother, marrying the queen and usurping the throne. His only weakness is shown in his prayer, as I will discuss in a moment. Claudius is, like his brother was, part of the older generation, one which does not fear retribution from a formal institution. He does not expect that anyone knows about his crime either, and therefore does not fear any retaliation. His motivation might be jealousy for his older brother's successful rule and marriage, and by murdering him and taking his place on the throne and in his bed he places himself "at the apex of institutional and cultural power" (Sterrett 752). In this position he stands in the way of the justice that Hamlet seeks, for he is at once the highest legal institution and the offender that needs to be put on trial. On the other hand, his position of power makes it impossible for him to relate his crime to anyone. This becomes painfully clear in the confession soliloquy in the third act, where Claudius wants to confess his crime, but realises that if he truly wants to repent his act of murder, he has to give up the

benefits of power and marriage that came with it:

‘Forgive me my foul murder’?

That cannot be; since I am still possess’d

Of those effects for which I did the murder,

My crown, mine own ambition and my queen.

May one be pardon’d and retain the offence? (3.3.52-6)

Furthermore, because he has defied the hierarchy that was present in society, it seems that now he has nobody that will listen to his confession, something that is reinforced theatrically by Claudius’ lonely presence on stage during his speech. And, as Sterrett quotes Foucault: “[O]ne does not confess without the presence (or virtual presence) of a partner who is not simply the interlocutor but the authority who requires the confession, prescribes and appreciates it, and intervenes in order to judge, punish, forgive, console, and reconcile” (745). Without someone who consciously listens, the confession is not valid. Even if Claudius were to be prepared to give up his profits, there would be no one to judge and forgive him, for “words without thoughts never to heaven go” (3.3.98). Since Hamlet only sees Claudius in a praying position and merely assumes that his uncle is involved in some holy act, the fact that Claudius did indeed commit the murder on King Hamlet remains unknown to all other characters in the play. As Sterrett writes:

Its own truth, the truth of the confessed act, remains hidden both from the Prince and the rest of the play, and it remains, as Derrida described it in *Spectres of Marx*, the ‘spectral anteriority of the crime – the crime of the other, a misdeed whose event and reality, whose truth can never present themselves in flesh and blood, but can only allow themselves to be presumed, reconstructed, fantasized’. (756)

However much Hamlet tries to “catch the conscience of the king” (2.2.605-6), he never gets definite proof that Claudius murdered his father. His revenge, therefore, remains based upon hearsay and speculation, which do not exactly help his doubtful disposition. Because of this the revenge cycle

can never be successfully concluded, since the ones involved are not sure about their respective roles in the situation; French follows Nozick in saying that “the avenger must somehow communicate to the target the reasons for the infliction of the punishment” (69). The issue is in the end resolved by default – all those involved are killed, albeit not all explicitly in revenge for the crimes they have committed. Hamlet kills Claudius in response to the King poisoning the Queen, and “treason” is at that moment the reason why the King, Laertes and Hamlet die. Horatio explains this to Fortinbras, telling him

Of carnal, bloody, and unnatural acts,
Of accidental judgments, casual slaughters,
Of deaths put on by cunning and forced cause,
And, in this upshot, purposes mistook
Fall'n on th' inventors' heads (5.2.381-85)

With this he analyses the doubts, misunderstandings and deaths that have played themselves out before the audience in the previous acts, and shows that revenge is never as simple as it seems.

In both play and films, the cycle of violence, once set into motion, can no longer be stopped by those involved. The centre of the revenge cycle in *Kill Bill* is Bill. His brother Budd recognises this when they talk about the sword that Hattori Hanzo has made for Beatrix even though he had sworn to never craft a sword again. Budd contemplates that “them Japs sure know how to hold a grudge”, laughs and adds “or maybe... you just tend to bring that out in people” (*KB2* 0:15). With this it becomes clear that not just Beatrix has a problem with Bill, but that more people have fallen out with them before. The relation between the two brothers Bill and Budd is not a good one either, and Hattori Hanzo obviously also still holds a grudge against Bill. This history of setting up people against him intensifies the cycle of revenge, because it becomes more than just an issue between Bill and Beatrix. Beatrix leaves Bill, and Bill has the whole Viper Squad join in on the Bride-bashing in retaliation for this, and Hattori Hanzo and indirectly Pai-Mei turn against Bill by helping

Beatrix in her quest for revenge. Bill seems to take his reaction to Beatrix's leaving him lightly: he tells her that it was an "overreaction." However, he knows that if he did not kill her, she would come back. He tells her:

I'm calling you a killer. A natural born killer. You always have been, and you always will be. Moving to El Paso, working in a used record store, goin' to the movies with Tommy, clipping coupons. That's you, trying to disguise yourself as a worker bee. That's you tryin' to blend in with the hive. But you're not a worker bee. You're a renegade killer bee. And no matter how much beer you drank or barbecue you ate or how fat your ass got, nothing in the world would ever change that. (KB2 1:42)

By sustaining her as such a killer, he created the basis for a cycle of violence. Most other women would either die or give up after what Bill did to Beatrix, but he knew that she would eventually come back for him, and that she would show no mercy. This is why Esteban Vihaio, the pimp who is Bill's father figure, tells Beatrix where she can find Bill, because "he would want me to" (KB2 1:23). I believe that Bill never meant to kill Beatrix in the church, because he wanted her child. When she is in a coma Elle Driver wants to give her a lethal injection, but she is stopped by Bill because he claims that she deserves a better death than that. This implies that he wants to make her suffer even more by becoming aware of the loss of her child, even though he can suspect this would drive her towards a meticulous revenge.

In *Hamlet*, the revenge cycle must end in death for nearly all because of the complications that arose during the cycle. In *Kill Bill*, not all those involved in the cycle have been killed, and the two films therefore do not give a final conclusion. Sophie Fatale is still alive, although severely mutilated; the fate of Elle Driver is undecided – the odds of her dying in the trailer are high, but in Tarantino's work the odds do not work the same as in the real world. Vernita Green's chapter is not yet closed either, as her daughter is almost invited into the revenge cycle by Beatrix: "When you grow up, if you still feel raw about it, I'll be waiting" (KB1 0:14). The end of *Kill Bill Vol. 2*

therefore shows only temporary relief and peace for Beatrix and her daughter.

Betrayal

Another theme that can be traced back from *Kill Bill* to *Hamlet* is that of betrayal, most importantly by a parental figure. Both Hamlet and Beatrix have a complex relationship with their father figures, with Hamlet's mother, Queen Gertrude, as an additional influence on the Prince's mental state. The old King Hamlet does not betray his son in a literal sense, because he cannot help being murdered. However, by involving his son in the situation and demanding revenge, the Ghost is at least partially responsible for young Hamlet's moral dilemmas. Kerrigan writes that "Old Hamlet is, in the end, his son's as well as Claudius' nemesis. If too much attention is given to antagonism in revenge drama [...] the destructive implications of loyalty will be missed" (18). Without the Ghost's call for revenge the whole story would not take place, because no one but Claudius knew what had happened between the two brothers. Only when Prince Hamlet learns of the murder and feels the pressure to avenge his father and honour the patriarchal bonds does the play really take off. Boyd quotes Mehta who has argued that the main reason for Hamlet's delay in carrying out his revenge is the "the internal divisions arising from his mother's marriage to Claudius, her late husband's brother, the very individual who Hamlet has been commanded to kill" (432). I do not agree that this is the main reason, but I do believe that the changed relation between Prince Hamlet and Claudius is one of the factors connected to his delay. Next to being the murderer of his father Claudius is still Hamlet's uncle, and now also his new father figure and his king. In these roles he demands a certain type of loyalty from Hamlet, making it more difficult to simply avenge the old King. Something similar happens in *Kill Bill*, where Bill is not just the initiator of the massacre at Two Pines, but also Beatrix's lover and mentor, the father of her child and even a fatherlike figure to her – she introduces him to her fiancé as her dad. Even though this is just to avoid awkward questions from the groom, the fact that Beatrix calls Bill her father and not just an

old acquaintance is telling for their relationship.

Hamlet's mother Gertrude can also be seen as a disturbing factor in his life. Next to dealing with his father's death, he has to accept the fact that his mother moves on swiftly and marries her deceased husband's brother. This becomes even more painful when Claudius' murderous acts are revealed. Thus, "Hamlet's love for his mother turns into bitterness because of her actions. He is now overwhelmed by hostility toward the person he had once loved most" (Lidz 18). When Gertrude asks him the reason for his anger towards her, he tells her that it is because of

Such an act

That blurs the grace and blush of modesty,

Calls virtue hypocrite, [...]

makes marriage-vows

As false as dicers' oaths: O, such a deed

As from the body of contraction plucks

The very soul, and sweet religion makes

A rhapsody of words (3.4.40-8)

This shows that Hamlet is indeed affected by his mother's betrayal, because he mentions several things that are supposed to be sacred and true above anything else: virtue, marriage-vows and religion. These three things stand for her former purity, and by marrying her brother-in-law so quickly after her husband died she has blemished her own virtue, desecrated her marriage-vows and her religion, because Hamlet implies that God would not approve of such a thing. With her betrayal she destroys the values of virtue, love and religion, and by depriving Hamlet of these foundations she is also responsible for his troubles.

A similar pattern of response to betrayal can be found with respect to Beatrix, who once loved and looked up to Bill more than anything and then is brutally betrayed by him, turning all her love for him into hatred. Lidz continues to observe that Hamlet's pre-occupation with his mother's

infidelity is almost larger than his indignation about his father's murder. Again, Beatrix shows this same strong emotion; she is more enraged about Bill's betrayal and the theft of her baby than about the murder of her friends and fiancé. However, she experiences no doubts and she lets the anger fuel her quest for revenge.

A third victim of betrayal is Ophelia. Hamlet seems to love her at first, but then turns away from her during his periods of madness. On top of that, he kills her father and does not seem to show her remorse about that. While the female characters in *Kill Bill* are powerful women who rule their own lives, Ophelia is "as one incapable of her own distress" (4.7.178), as Queen Gertrude describes her. Keyishian writes that "when her life collapses around her, she falls apart because, love having failed her, she has no alternative organising principle – such as the anger that consumes Hamlet – on which to rebuild her existence" (26).

Finally, there is the betrayal of friendship, in both the play and the film. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are the two old friends that come to get Hamlet out of his madness. The Queen welcomes them with:

Good gentlemen, he hath much talk'd of you;
And sure I am two men there are not living
To whom he more adheres (2.2.19-21)

Even though they are supposed to be Hamlet's friends and care for him, they place themselves under the command of the King and Queen, as Guildenstern says:

But we both obey,
And here give up ourselves, in the full bent
To lay our service freely at your feet,
To be commanded (2.2. 29-32)

They pretend to just be friendly towards Hamlet and have no ulterior motive, but he sees right through them and confronts them about it after the staging of 'The Mousetrap':

Why, look you now, how unworthy a thing you make of
me! You would play upon me; you would seem to know
my stops; you would pluck out the heart of my
mystery; you would sound me from my lowest note to
the top of my compass: and there is much music,
excellent voice, in this little organ; yet cannot
you make it speak. ‘Sblood, do you think I am
easier to be played on than a pipe? (3.2.363-370)

Once more, Hamlet is betrayed by someone he considered as being close to him, and it makes him
all the more resolved to finally act out his revenge:

Now could I drink hot blood,
And do such bitter business as the day
Would quake to look on (3.2.390-92)

Beatrix knows similar feelings from the moment she wakes up from her coma and gathers her
strength to start her revenge journey. There are not many flashbacks to show that the characters in
the Viper Squad were close friends, and the scenes that show interaction between them are often not
very friendly. In the scene where Budd calls Elle Driver to tell her that he has captured Beatrix and
wants to sell her Hattori Hanzo sword, he calls Elle a “hateful bitch” and she asks to what she owes
the “dubious pleasure” (*KB2* 0:27). They were colleagues however, and there must at least have
been some level of cooperation and understanding between each other while they were working
together. Beatrix may not have liked them very much, but she probably respected them for their
skills. All these feelings turn to pure hatred when she remembers that all of them were present at the
chapel and they all contributed to ruining her chosen life. A good example of how this hate
overwhelms her is at the beginning of the House of Blue Leaves-scene. Beatrix is in the restroom,
mentally preparing herself for her confrontation with O-ren Ishii. In the background the music from

the dancefloor can be heard. Then Sophie Fatale walks into the restroom, and her phone rings. Beatrix immediately recognises her ringtone – the French national anthem – and a flashback is shown of Beatrix being beaten up while Sophie is telephoning and laughing right next to her. The characteristic siren-sound drowns out all surrounding sounds, emphasising that Beatrix’s emotions about the situation still overpower her completely.

Overthrowing hierarchy

Another similarity between *Hamlet* and *Kill Bill* is the presence of a father figure with a strong influence on the protagonist. In *Hamlet* this is the ghost of Hamlet’s father, who urges the Prince to avenge his murder. In *Kill Bill* Bill – who is Beatrix’s lover and the father of her child – may also be seen as a mentor and father-like figure for her and the rest of the Viper Squad. Both Prince Hamlet and Bride Beatrix have their reasons to be influenced by their father or father figure. They also, however, feel the need to free themselves from this influence and overthrow the hierarchy under which they have been living.

In *Hamlet*, the Ghost and Prince Hamlet represent two different worlds. King Hamlet is a warrior king, who fought wars with the Norwegian king Fortinbras. His norms and values come from a time when blood was avenged with blood and family ties and the family honour were more important than anything. Steenbergh calls his character “anachronistic” in the play because he is a “representative of the residual discourse of an older warrior culture” (105). His return from the land of the dead to spur Hamlet to his revenge also makes him an outsider in the world of the living. Hamlet on the other hand is more of a Renaissance man *avant la lettre*. He studied in Germany, in Wittenberg, the centre of the Protestant Reformation. Unlike his father, Hamlet is not a warrior. He thinks – or thinks too much – about everything that is happening to him, questions the authority of God and cannot immediately obey his father’s wishes to avenge him because he doubts the legitimacy of this revenge and the intentions of the Ghost. He believes that a judicial system should

solve the murder of the king and the usurpation of the throne by Claudius. This was a relatively modern idea at the time, possibly meant to influence the audience's opinion about private revenge. Hamlet and his father, therefore, represent the clash between the old values of private revenge and the newer ones in which the body of law is more important. Steenbergh quotes Philip Fisher stating that "when the ghost demands that his son avenge his murder, the old world is summoning the new to rise to its now archaic laws – those, for example, of revenge and the primacy of the father-son bond" (105). Hamlet, as the personification of this new world, struggles with the balance between loyalty to his father and the new values that he wants to live by. Caught in this conflict he feigns madness in order to buy time to find a solution for his dilemma. In the final act this all comes to a dramatic conclusion, when Hamlet severs all ties of friendship and family and almost all characters get killed in a violent scene. After Claudius ends the rule of his brother, and Hamlet tries to escape the pressure of the old values that his father is trying to impose on him, all characters in the end make sure that the hierarchy as the state of Denmark knew it is overthrown, leaving the territory to Fortinbras.

The hierarchy that Bill has established in the time before the *Kill Bill* storyline starts is also a strong one. King Hamlet is said to be respected by his people during his life and reign: "our valiant Hamlet – /For so this side of our known world esteem'd him" (1.1.84-85) is what Horatio says about him. Bill on the other hand enforces his position by violence and cruelty. In the films the background to his rise to power is not shown, so we do not know how he became so powerful, feared, loathed but also loved. From what evidence can be gathered it can be deduced that he has contacts in high places, and that many people owed him favours. How he helped O-ren Ishii to her position as the leader of the Japanese mafia is one example of Bill's power: "Bill backed his Nippon progeny financially and philosophically in her Shakespearean in magnitude power struggle with the other Yakuza clans, over who would rule vice in the city of Tokyo" (*KBI* 0:56), as the Bride says in the voiceover during the scene where the yakuza bosses celebrate O-ren's victory. Coincidentally,

this is the only instance in the film where Shakespeare is directly referred to.

To Beatrix, Bill seems to be a father figure and a lover at the same time. Although ages are not given for the characters, Bill seems to be considerably older than the rest of the Viper Squad. In his position of power, he manipulates the women in his environment and enjoys his influence over them. As a Viper, Beatrix looks up to Bill as a mentor. He is the one that trains her as a killer and he leads her to Pai-Mei, the martial arts teacher who perfects her fighting techniques and teaches her several methods that will save her life later on. Bill gives her her assignments, and it is him who she looks up to for approval. When he shows her affection, the plot seemingly evolves like it would in every romantic tragedy – she falls for him and thinks they can be happy forever. This is not shown in the film and therefore all speculation from my side, however if we imagine Beatrix not as the strong woman that she is during the films but as a younger, more emotionally vulnerable woman, it might just have happened this way. In a way Bill might have been good to her as her lover; it is only when she tries to escape him and the Viper Squad that he becomes angry with her and plans the massacre at Two Pines.

While in *Hamlet* the Prince's need to escape his father's rule comes from his newly learned values about justice, in *Kill Bill* it is Beatrix's mother instinct that makes her leave her old lifestyle and relations. From the moment she finds out she is pregnant, she knows that the life she was living up until then is not compatible with the needs of a child. Even if it means she has to leave Bill and build a future without him, she is willing to do so in order to keep her child safe. She later tells Bill that

Before that strip turned blue, I was a woman. I was your woman. I was a killer who killed for you. Before that strip turned blue, I would have jumped a motorcycle onto a speeding train... for you. But once that strip turned blue, I could no longer do any of those things. Not anymore. Because I was going to be a mother. Can you understand that? [...] it was the right decision and I made it for my daughter. She deserved to be born with a clean slate. But with

you, she would have been born in a world she shouldn't have. I had to choose... I chose her.

(KB2 1:49)

Unlike Hamlet, she immediately knows what she has to do and acts accordingly. However, quick decisions can backfire, as Bill finds Beatrix and leaves her for dead while stealing her baby. This is how Bill responds to threats to his position, and he admits this freely by telling her: "I'm a killer. A murdering bastard, you know that. And there are consequences to breaking the heart of a murdering bastard" (KB2 1:52). In *Hamlet* Claudius initially says he wants to send Hamlet to England to cure his madness – "Haply the seas and countries different / With variable objects shall expel / This something-settled matter in his heart" (3.1.171-73) – but later shows that he means to have the Prince killed there – "Do it, England; / For like the hectic in my blood he rages, / And thou must cure me" (4.3.65-67). Bill does a similar thing to Beatrix, when he shows up at her wedding pretending to want to be there on such an important occasion. When she asks him what he is doing there, he replies "this moment, I'm looking at the most beautiful bride these old eyes have ever seen". When she then asks "why are you here?" he says "last look" (KB2 0:06) to give her a false sense of ease about his being there, while he actually comes to shoot her and the whole wedding party, in response to her leaving him some months prior, as discussed in the paragraph above.

The acts of violence that are done to Beatrix leave her stronger in the end. Finding out that her baby has been taken from her is her fuel for revenge. All the skills and techniques that she has learned during her time in the Viper Squad now help her eliminate all the members of that Squad. The films show no doubts about morality and the validity of revenge, such as in *Hamlet*. Tom Carson writes that "Tarantino clearly thinks female empowerment is a tautology. He wants to gaze on a goddess while she smites her enemies, and you suspect he wouldn't give a damn if she were in the wrong" (par. 11). And so Beatrix overthrows the male hierarchy that she has been under when living with Bill, and places herself on top. For all the macho, chauvinistic male characters that Tarantino portrays in earlier works such as *Reservoir Dogs*, his later works have an unexpected

feminine touch. From *Jackie Brown* to Beatrix to the stunt women in *Death Proof*, the female protagonists are strong, independent women that are in no way inferior to their male opponents. Many critics have written about this, and the consensus seems to be that Tarantino is not necessarily a feminist as such, but he does love women, and he loves to portray them in a powerful way. John Powers admits that Tarantino is not a director who creates complex characters such as for example Ingmar Bergman would. However, “he likes to give actresses something they can sink their teeth into—big emotions, nifty dialogue, and action sequences that show off their physical grace” and on top of that, “what separates Tarantino from so many other directors who turn out male pop extravaganzas [...] is that his cinematic universe makes plenty of room for women.”⁷ Film critic Anne Billson agrees with this, as she writes that “Tarantino has since shown himself to be one of those rare directors who film actresses so they appear like real people rather than airbrushed fantasy objects. [...] Only a director who really likes women could film them like this.”⁸ I think therefore that Tarantino’s choice for a female revenger is not so much fuelled by his strong feminist ideas as by his love for female actresses and the many possibilities for showing their strength, intelligence and beauty that a revenge plot offers.

Conflicting motivations

An important difference in the background to the revenge plots in *Hamlet* and *Kill Bill* is the underlying motivation that the protagonists have for their revenge. For Hamlet, the revenge is a task imposed on him by his father, and he struggles with the legitimacy of the calling. For Beatrix, revenge is something she needs to do to get her life back. Even though the circumstances have forced her into the position of avenger, she readily takes it on. In this section I will discuss how these underlying motivations influence the characters and the plot.

About the protagonists in a tragic plot Kerrigan writes: “recognition of their role in the

⁷ John Powers. “Pulp Goddesses: Tarantino and his Women” <http://www.vogue.com/culture/article/vd-pulp-goddesses-tarantino-and-his-women/>

⁸ Anne Billson. “Why Quentin Tarantino should be celebrated by women” <http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/2009/may/29/tarantino-female-roles>

making of what afflicts them is a large part of what makes their catastrophes tragic” (12). Hamlet knows that he needs to avenge his father, or else he will not be able to live with the situation in which his murderous uncle claimed his mother and his father’s throne. As discussed above, the ‘blood for blood’ values of his father’s generation are not his, and so Hamlet struggles to find the avenger inside of himself, the one that is capable of killing. The role of avenger does not come naturally to him, but “his predicament is imposed on him, and to know this is part of his plight” (Kerrigan 12). One of the main problems he has with the task that his father has set for him, is that he does not know if the Ghost he saw in the first act was real or some satanic imposter: “Be thou a spirit of health or goblin damn’d, / Bring with thee airs from heaven or blasts from hell, / Be thy intents wicked or charitable” (1.4.41-42). Even though he cannot be sure of the good intentions of the Ghost – if revenge can ever be called a *good* intention – the seeds of doubt about his uncle’s story have been planted in his mind, and he knows that either way he has to act upon them, whether he likes it or not: “The time is out of joint: O cursed spite, / That ever I was born to set it right” (1.5.188-89), or as Boyd puts it: “It seems a given that Hamlet must move inexorably toward a violent conclusion” (431). It becomes even more obvious that Hamlet sees his need for revenge as an imposed one, when he tells his mother after he sees that he has killed Polonius: “heaven hath pleased it so, / To punish me with this and this with me, / That I must be their scourge and minister” (3.4.173-75). Next to the obligation to his father, he also sees his task as a punishment from heaven, and himself as an instrument to carry out a divine wrath. By seeing himself as such, it seems that he takes away some of his own responsibility for his deeds. By committing the murders in the name of his father and of heaven, and combined with his feigned madness, he tries to make himself unaccountable for them. They do not fit in his thoughts and values about punishment and justice, and so he seeks a way to not be held accountable for them. In the end this seems to work out for him, as Hamlet manages to fulfill the obligation to his father by murdering his uncle. It can be argued, however, that his father’s death is not properly revenged. I agree with Boyd that “Hamlet

kills his uncle 'on impulse' when his mother becomes the unintended victim of the king's plotting; the more mature and fatalistic Hamlet of Act V renounces any interest in the 'balance, reciprocity and accounts-keeping that underlies a revenge system'" (444). Even though Hamlet undergoes the psychological growth that allows him to set aside his doubts and act upon his uncle's wicked deeds, he fails to provide for one of the most important factors of a proper revenge – communicating to the target what the reason for the retaliation is. *Hamlet* is a tragedy in more than one way.

Beatrix Kiddo on the other hand performs her acts of vengeance almost with delight. Never do we see an internal struggle like Hamlet has, never do we doubt that Beatrix will succeed in her mission to kill Bill. Her motivations are clear: she wants to take revenge on the ones that have wrecked her life and motherhood. However, she was placed in that position through an act of her own; she "is shot in the head in retaliation for escaping not only her life of crime, but the love of her life: Bill", and now she is "a character striving for redemption from his/her self-made prison of sins, crimes and misdemeanors" (David 2). While Hamlet might have been, according to Lidz, "obligated to vengeance and murder, but such deeds require him to become someone other than the person he seeks to be" (23), Beatrix needs to return to the person she was and she wanted to escape from, to be able to become the person she wants to be. She tried to leave Bill, the Viper Squad and her lifestyle of killing for money in order to become a mother and raise her child in a safe environment. Once Bill ruined that environment for her and took her baby away, there is nothing to stop her from using the knowledge and skills from her previous life to strike back. As seen in the final scenes of *Kill Bill Vol.2*, once Beatrix has successfully completed her revenge, she immediately turns back to the motherly figure that emerged from her during her pregnancy, and as the final title card of the film shows: "*The lioness has rejoined her cub, and all is right in the jungle*".

The different attitudes towards violence and revenge in Shakespeare's work versus Tarantino's film are in a way reflecting moral changes in society. Even if many Renaissance plays were meant as entertainment, most of them contained an ethical message and a story about right and

wrong. Violence, if it was present, served the purpose of identifying evil, and was usually condemned in the end. To say that these moral messages have disappeared from modern works would be an exaggeration, but there are works that seem to lack any form of ethics, and this is tolerated by some audiences. Tarantino is one of those director's that does not seem to concern himself too much with ethics. Journalist Johann Hari is concerned about this lack of morality in Tarantino and quotes the filmmaker saying "Violence in the movies can be cool. It's just another color to work with. When Fred Astaire dances, it doesn't mean anything. Violence is the same. It doesn't mean anything. It's a color."⁹ Hari himself observes that "in the slightly pretentious language of postmodernism, [Tarantino] is trying to separate the sign (movie violence) from the signified (real violence) -- leaving us floating in a sea of meaningless signs that refer to nothing but themselves and the sealed-off history of cinema."¹⁰ As mentioned above, Tarantino does not seem to aim for the complexity that filmmakers as Bergman create, and the ethical perspective is the first to fall victim in his works. Unlike Prince Hamlet with his doubts, fears and existential questions, the characters in *Kill Bill* switch between being a lover, a killers, a parent, an enemy without any qualms about morality. The either leaves the audience to fill in those blanks themselves; or, as Hari fears, does it

leave the viewer just a millimetre more morally corroded. Laughing at simulated torture -- and even cheering it on, as we are encouraged to through all of Tarantino's later films -- leaves a moral muscle just a tiny bit more atrophied.¹¹

In the following paragraph I would like to look a bit closer at how this violence is portrayed and used to influence the audience.

Comic Violence – *Titus Andronicus*

⁹ Johann Hari. "The Terrible Moral Emptiness of Quentin Tarantino is Wrecking His Films"
http://www.huffingtonpost.com/johann-hari/the-terrible-moral-emptin_b_270809.html

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

From the tragic resemblances in the revenge plot that occur in *Kill Bill* and *Hamlet* I want to move on to another one of Shakespeare's plays: *Titus Andronicus*. This is also a revenge play, and thought to be Shakespeare's first tragedy. Other than *Hamlet*, which focuses mainly on the ethical side of revenge and is centered around words and not actions, *Titus Andronicus* is a violent play, with a wide variety of acts of torture, mutilation and murder, "until the play culminates in a body count that staggers even Elizabethan numbers" (Lugo 407). According to Deborah Willis the play "stands out among revenge plays for its insistent exposure of revenge as a cross-gender and cross-cultural phenomenon" (25). Defined in this way, it fits into the many layers of culture and history that inform the *Kill Bill* films. However, in this part of my thesis I want to move away from a discussion of the ethics and moral consequences of revenge, and take a look at the concept of comic violence. This idea has been present in tragedies for ages and is still a tool used by playwrights or directors to make their dramatic plot temporarily a bit less tense. Often it takes an innocent form. A funny side character may make a witty remark when the tension in the scene rises. In other settings, like the one I will discuss here, the relief is a little more uncomfortable for the audience, because of its violent nature. However, due to the often extremely graphic form in which this is displayed, it becomes, for some at least, funny. Since basing myself on the original text means that I conjure the imagery of the violence myself, I will use a modern-day appropriation of the play for this. Julie Taymor's *Titus* (Clear Blue Sky Productions, 1999) is a recent screen adaptation, and Taymor plays with comic violence in a manner not unlike Tarantino. Both Tarantino's film and Taymor's adaptation have copious amounts of this type of violence. Dror Poleg quotes Gary Indiana saying that Tarantino brings his audience into "a world whose particular deity extends compassion only to the stylish and the violent" (1) and this applies to *Kill Bill* as much as it does to *Titus Andronicus*. For those who are not amused by extreme violence it can still work as a means to distance themselves from the emotions in the scene, as Nancy Christiansen quotes Eugene Waith: "The seemingly illogical combination of emotional excitement and physic distance contributes to the

effect of impersonalization” (368). In this part of my thesis, I want to discuss several instances of comic violence in both *Titus Andronicus* and *Kill Bill*, and argue that in both works mutilation and graphic violence are used to reach a highly similar effect with the audience, namely the release of tension and the creation of psychological distance.

While *Titus Andronicus* was popular when it was first staged, probably around 1594, it has been regarded as one of Shakespeare’s weakest plays. Jacques Berghoud, in his introduction to the Penguin edition of the play, writes that for a period that lasted roughly from the Restoration to the Second World War, so for around three hundred years, “readers, when they could be found, mostly regarded it as a contemptible farrago of violence and bombast” (xxi). In recent times this attitude towards the play has changed, and nowadays it is performed on stage, has been adapted for the screen and written about by many scholars.

Although there is a lot of violence and cruelty in the play, not all of these instances serve the same purpose. Some cruel acts are meant to show the complexity of the characters, and explain why they act as they do. Titus’ demand for the sacrifice of Tamora’s eldest son Alarbus in the first Act of the play is an example of this. It is a dramatic scene, where Tamora pleads emotionally for the life of her son, and Titus is displayed as a tough warrior who cares only about his family and city traditions. It establishes Titus as a true Roman, with an excess of the so-called *romanitas*, the notion of placing everything, including one’s life and family, in the service of the Roman Empire. During this scene the audience might grow more sympathetic towards Tamora and less towards Titus. Shakespeare turns all this around in the rest of the play, though, when Tamora becomes the cold-hearted empress and Titus the one who loses almost everything. He realises that all his sacrifices to the Roman Empire have brought him nothing and that the very empire he served is now destroying his family. From the events in the first act it becomes clear that Tamora and Titus will enter a cycle of revenge that leads to the downfall of the Roman dynasty. The rape and mutilation of Lavinia in Act 2 scene 4 do not serve a comic purpose either, and can in fact be considered one of the most

tragic scenes in the play. The scene does build up resentment in the audience towards Charon and Demetrius, Lavinia's attackers. They seem to revel in their evil deeds, so that their cruel deaths as part of Titus' revenge scheme is a form of catharsis for the audience, as I will discuss later on. In terms of sentiment, I think Lavinia's fate is comparable to the Two Pines Massacre-scene in *Kill Bill Vol.2*. Here too an innocent woman is abused by multiple offenders too strong for her to withstand.

Heads

One bodypart that is chopped off with comic effect in both play and film is the head. This is one of the most extreme forms of mutilation, because it by definition ends the life of the victim. It can also be very graphic, as the sight of a severed head immediately shows the state the victim is in – not a good one. In *Kill Bill* it is the act itself that lessens the tension in the scene; in *Titus Andronicus* it is the effect that the severed head – heads, actually – have on the other characters that breaks the tragic situation of the scene.

The severed heads in *Titus Andronicus* belong to two of Titus' sons, Martius and Quintus. They have been falsely accused of the murder of Bassianus and are captured by emperor Saturninus' soldiers. Titus goes to the court to plead to the judges, but they walk by him without paying attention to his cries. Titus feels that his cause is lost, when he tells his other son Lucius "Why, 'tis no matter, man. If they did hear, / They would not mark me; if they did mark, / They would not pity me; yet plead I must" (3.1.33-35). In the end Titus goes away without success, his sons remain sentenced to death by Saturninus. He then finds his brother Marcus carrying the ravished Lavinia. Another shock to the grieved *pater familias*, and the dramatic tension and emotions in the scene rise high as Titus and Marcus try to learn from Lavinia who did her wrong. Titus exclaims that "he that wounded her / hath hurt me more than had he killed me dead" (3.1. 91-92). All characters further lament their bitter fate, making this scene laden with emotions for the

audience as well. At that point Aaron, the evil Moor and Tamora's lover, comes to see Titus and tells him that the emperor requires Titus' hand in exchange for the lives of his sons. While Lucius and Marcus argue over who gets to sacrifice their hand instead of Titus, the old man asks Aaron to help him and his left hand is quickly cut off. All the while, Aaron is making remarks to the side that imply that Titus' sacrifice will be in vain, as he says "I'll deceive you in another sort, / And that you'll say ere half an hour pass" (3.1.189-90) and later he tells Titus "I go, Andronicus, and for thy hand / Look by and by to have thy sons with thee" but adds, in an aside, "Their heads, I mean. O, how this villainy / Doth fat me with the very thoughts of it" (3.1.199-202). When a little later a messenger appears with the severed heads of Titus' two sons and his hand, the dramatic events become too much for Titus and he seems to lose his mind. Marcus and Lucius are again lamenting their cruel fate, but Titus starts laughing:

Why? I have not another tear to shed.

Besides, this sorrow is an enemy

And would usurp upon my wat'ry eyes

And make them blind with tributary tears

Then which way shall I find Revenge's cave? (3.1.265-69)

Titus then pledges revenge to his ravished daughter and murdered sons, and they walk off, both Marcus and Titus carry a head in their hand, and Lavinia takes her father's severed hand into her mouth. However tragic the background to this scene is, there is still an absurdity to this exit that makes all the emotions a little less intense. While the rest of the scene in the actual play might not be very comical, it can be interpreted that way. In Julie Taymor's screen adaptation of the work, *Titus*, she enlarges the absurdity of the scene by turning the messenger into some sort of traveling freak show. The man comes along pulling a cart with a stage on it, closed off by curtains. He invites Titus and the rest to sit down, and when he has their full attention the curtains open and the two severed heads, locked up in glass barrels, are displayed. By turning the scene into something so

extreme, it can be considered a true freak show by the audience. The immediate horror of the events is overshadowed by the grotesque depiction of it, and thus it becomes easier to observe from a distance. Taymor herself said about this: “I think that when we’re in our deepest, darkest circumstance [...] the only way to survive is through humor. [...] It’s simultaneously disturbing and exciting. It freaks you out. Nervous laughter is an incredible thing – it’s off-setting” (De Luca & Lindroth 31). This is the effect that she achieves with her depiction of the scene described above. The spectacle with the cart and the heads on display is so surreal that as an audience, you forget for a moment what it really means and how tragic it actually is.

Another, comparable interpretation of the grotesque can be found in the *Kill Bill* films, and especially in the scenes that take place in Japan. Since Quentin Tarantino pays so much tribute to Japanese cinema, he could not leave out the extreme bloodiness that seems to be a signature of the genre. In the part where O-ren Ishii’s victory in what is described as the “Shakespearean in magnitude power struggle” (*KB2* 0:56) for the leadership of the Tokyo mafia is told, we see her and the other yakuza bosses in a meeting. They have just decided that O-ren will be their new leader, but boss Tanaka is not pleased and sees her as a “perversion”. He voices his doubts, and since these are all powerful men, in a criminal scene, the seriousness of such an allegation is severe. It could be a dramatic scene therefore, with his racist exclamation and the shocked reaction of the others. Tarantino puts in small details to ensure that the scene does not become overly serious. Several *yakuza* bosses are fanning themselves rapidly, which seems an oddly feminine thing to do for mafia leaders. Napkins are thrown over the table at each other by two grown men and Boss Tanaka is smashing his plate, which makes him resemble a small child that is angry that it does not get its way. After a heated discussion he shouts: “I speak, of the perversion done to this council... which I love... more than my own children, by making a Chinese Jap-American half-breed bitch its leader!” (*KB2* 0:59). His fate is decided in the next five seconds. O-ren Ishii jumps on the table, the shot is of her bare feet shuffling along until they reach boss Tanaka’s seat. She kneels, draws her *katana*

and beheads the man in one fluent motion. It all happens so quickly that the audience barely has time to process the cruelty taking place. The shots directly after, when the severed head flies about the table and lands on the plate of one of the other bosses, also help with distancing from the horror. All bosses – who can be expected to have seen some cruelty in their mafia career – scream like little girls, with their faces wrought in caricature shock. The headless body of boss Tanaka is the source of a true blood fountain, a trademark of Japanese gore cinema. O-ren is watching the lifeless body, as its spewing lessens after a while.

During her following speech, the body remains seated upright in its chair, hands loosely resting on the table, the only thing missing the head. Dieter Mehl describes what Shakespeare does to distance the audience, but this also applies to Tarantino's work: "[he] distances us from the horrifying events by rhetorical virtuosity and self-conscious artifice, to remove them from any idea of immediate personal experience" (in Lugo 415). Tarantino probably knows that a human body does not produce a fountain of blood when beheaded, but it makes the shock-effect so much better. At the same time, the audience knows that this scene is exaggerated, making it more difficult to involve themselves too deeply. It is so extreme that it becomes surreal and therefore less intense for the audience.

Limbs

The mutilation discussed in the previous section is a very definitive one, since it is highly unlikely that the victim survives. Both works also show less deadly but therefore maybe all the more cruel instances of mutilation. The "lopped and hewed" (2.4.17) hands of Lavinia for example, which are mirrored in the many limbs that are cut off by Beatrix during the scene in the House of Blue Leaves, with the first cut into Sofie Fatale's arm to set the tone. However, both women endure their tragic fate in completely different ways, which also alters the way the audience perceives them.

Catherine Lamb discusses the effect of the physical trauma on Shakespeare's characters:

“Suffering the loss of crucial body parts, [...] characters are forced to rethink the internal relationship between all parts of their bodies, to develop a new physical habitus that enables them to communicate and to act” (43). Lavinia is a clear example of this. She is presented as a quiet and obedient daughter, but right before her ravishing she speaks fiercely to Tamora when she finds the Empress in the woods with Aaron. She insults her first and calls her “barbarous Tamora” (2.3.118), but when Tamora wants to hand her over to Chiron and Demetrius Lavinia makes a feverish appeal to the other woman and pleads for her chastity: “O Tamora, thou bearest a woman's face” (2.3.136). Her desperation is clearly visible to the audience, which makes the next time she comes on stage all the more tragic. She has been ravished, her hands are cut off and her tongue is cut out. Chiron and Demetrius mock her with her injuries and then leave her for her uncle Marcus to find. While he grieves about her fate in a long monologue, she is silent and hides her head in shame. She seems to carry her burden without showing her pain and emotions. She stands by her father in the misery that is to follow for the Andronici, and the only time she shows excitement is when she finally finds a way to point out her attackers. All this makes the audience sympathetic towards her, and the pain that is suffered by her makes a great impact. The final scene of the play may be considered comical in its exaggeration, but the death of Lavinia in that very scene is nothing but sad.

Sofie's mutilation by Beatrix, on the other hand, evokes much less sympathy in the audience. This is mainly due to her behaviour, which contrasts with the calm way Lavinia carries her fate. Sofie, as O-ren Ishii's personal assistant, appears composed and professional during the flashbacks that Beatrix has to the Two Pines Massacre. This façade disappears the moment Beatrix performs the cruel deed of severing Sofie's arm from her body with her *katana*. Right before that, when O-ren Ishii answers Beatrix's call and comes out of her private room, Sofie looks frightened and not as cool as she appeared moments before she was captured by Beatrix. The cut to her arm comes quite unexpected, and Sofie screams and squeals like a pig. She falls to the floor while

another fountain of blood can be seen spraying from where her arm once was. She stays on the floor, crying and writhing in pain, for the rest of the scene. The extreme way she reacts to her mutilation might be justified by the amount of pain she is suffering, but it does not evoke sympathy in the audience. Her reaction to the pain can be said to be too real, which causes the audience to distance itself from her in order not to become too involved. As said above, by making the cruelties surreal they become less intense and less personal for those who watch them. Sofie's screams remind the audience too much of the actual pain that is caused by such deeds, and that makes it uncomfortable – even if Sofie's fate is less tragic than Lavinia's because she is one of the bad 'guys'.

Finale

After a great amount of cruelty and bloodshed in both works, they both end in style in a finale filled with dramatic tension. Where Titus stretches his revenge plot to its limits, however, the final scenes of *Kill Bill Vol.2* are emotional and void of comic relief. *Titus Andronicus* is continually adding up cruelty, murder, rape and revenge. Tamora is trying to destroy the whole Andronicus clan in return for the murder of her eldest son, and she shows no mercy in the process. Titus then must resort to extreme measures to outdo her, as Deborah Willis analyses:

Titus is forced by circumstance to seek out other ways of overtopping Tamora; piling up more bodies isn't possible here. Hence he embellishes on the style of her revenges rather than increasing them in number, outdoing Tamora in macabre wit, getting the last laugh through new, more horrific ways of causing pain and degradation. (50)

This revenge is no longer about equal retaliation but about excess. The original crime has almost been forgotten as Titus and Tamora strive to outdo each other in cruelty. Titus captures Tamora's two remaining sons and explains to them in detail why they will be killed and what he will do with their dead bodies afterwards. As seen in previous chapters, this communication of the reason for the

revenge is one of the most important acts of the revenge, making Titus' scheme all the more successful. Their death is also important for the audience, invoking a sense of catharsis. As Lugo writes: "When Chiron and Demetrius are captured and slaughtered like pigs, justice is served before horror is considered. They are dead, and the spectators may rest easily once the temptation to blissful, joy-filled evil is removed" (50).

The banquet that Titus organises for the Emperor, Tamora and Lucius is the culmination of his revenge plot. He has killed Chiron and Demetrius to "make a pastry of [their] shameful heads" (5.2.188) and plans to feed this to Tamora. He is inspired by Ovid's myth about Philomel and Procne, who as revenge for rape and mutilation feed their husband and brother-in-law his own children. Titus has been comparing especially Lavinia's faith to that of Philomel, and therefore he thinks it just to execute his revenge in the same style, for "worse than Philomel you used my daughter, / And worse than Procne I will be revenged" (5.2.193-94) he tells Tamora's sons. Although the thought of Titus baking the two bodies into a pie and feeding it to his guests seems gruesome, his apparent madness makes it bearable, if not a little uncomfortable. He dresses up as a professional cook and entices his guests to enjoy their food: "Will't please you eat? Will't please your highness feed?" (5.3.53). His extremely polite treatment of Saturninus and Tamora, while the audience knows what has been baked into the food, gives the scene a dramatic irony and draws the spectators to Titus' side. They are distanced from Tamora and therefore can look at the horrifying scene of her eating her own children with a combination of unease and delight. Unease at the horror of involuntary cannibalism, delight at the fact that the evil queen gets what she deserved for plotting against the Andronici. For full effect, Titus rubs in the fact that Tamora has just "daintily fed" upon her sons before he stabs her and is killed in return by Saturninus.

The final scenes in *Kill Bill Vol.2* are less violent and gruesome, but emotionally just as intense. Beatrix has only just recovered from the shock that her daughter is still alive, and now she has to steal little BB from her father. The audience is deceived as well, because throughout the film

Beatrix has emphasised that Bill is the cause of all her pain and suffering, establishing him as her nemesis and the one that deserves to die in response to what he did to her. However, when she finds him in his home he seems to be a good father, taking care of BB and telling her nice stories about her mother. Something of the affection that must have been present between Beatrix and Bill can be found, but there is also an enmity that fuels all their actions and it is obvious that they do not trust each other at all. It remains unclear for most of the scene if Beatrix will ultimately kill Bill, but in order to complete her revenge she has to. Just as Titus has to outdo Tamora's revenge, Beatrix has to exceed Bill in manner of killing. Whereas Bill shot her in the head, she performs the Five Point Palm Exploding Heart technique, taught to her by Pai Mei. Earlier on Bill has mentioned that the Chinese teacher does not tell that specific technique to anyone, and since both Bill and Beatrix have been pupils of Pai Mei Beatrix is established as the better one. In my opinion the scene has a great emotional impact, especially because of the great contrast between Bill's relatively peaceful death compared to that of the others. The other Vipers are stabbed, hacked or poisoned to almost instantaneous death, but Beatrix just fiercely taps Bill's chest five times. He does not die immediately, so they can exchange a few words. Beatrix's crying shows that even despite all her hatred she still loves Bill somehow, and that his death affects her even though she longed for it so fervently. After acting like a superhero for most of the films, this makes her human again and that is what makes it have such an impact.

A strong stomach is needed when watching *Titus Andronicus* performed or *Kill Bill* shown. The violence is graphic and the ways in which the characters avenge themselves are as inventive as they are cruel. In this chapter I have tried to analyse this type of violence and see what effect it might have on the audience. It appears that extreme graphic violence can help the spectators to distance themselves from the events, thereby making less of an impact. It can even be considered comical, although often combined with an uneasy feeling. These effects are reached either by the events themselves, such as the severing of a head and the absurd amount of blood that follows, or

by the reaction of the characters to these events, such as Lavinia's strength versus Sofie's screams of agony. The dramatic tension that is present in the scenes discussed above is released by the act of violence, be it through the shock of the horror or the exaggeration and absurdity of the situation. The release of tension makes the scene bearable to watch again and can even be a cathartic experience where the audience can rest easily after watching the antagonists get what they deserve.

Chapter 5 – Ancient Greece

After taking *Kill Bill* back in time to Shakespeare's world and comparing the films to two of his plays, I now want to go back even further – to ancient Greece. The birthplace of the tragedy, and even though *Kill Bill* does not adhere to all the 'rules' or guidelines that Aristotle wrote down for this type of play in his *Poetics*, I will compare the films to a play with a similar theme from antiquity to see what elements can be traced back to them. The revenge plot is a storyline that has been used for a very long time, even though its staging and purpose have changed in different ways during the ages. Not only the theme, but also parts of the practical execution of such works quite closely resemble Tarantino's work. Despite the enormous amount of influences on Tarantino's work, relatively little has been written about his work in comparison to Greek tragedy. In my opinion there are some elements, though, that originate in Antiquity and are still used in modern works, more specifically *Kill Bill*.

I have chosen to focus on the *Medea* by Euripides, because this play deals with extreme reactions to betrayal. Like Beatrix, Medea is a powerful and strong woman who seems brought down by the betrayal of her husband Jason, but recovers herself and returns with a revenge that is one of the most ruthless in the history of revenge tragedy. Both women are in fact outsiders, and a main reason for that is their extraordinary capacity for killing. Medea is actually a 'barbarian' in the Greek world, because she comes from unknown lands. Burnett says that "this agent of revenge has already been guilty of the worst crimes known to humanity" and is therefore perceived as "a barbarian indeed" (10). According to the myth, Medea killed her own brother during the flight of Jason's ship from her father's land. In order to distract her father she then chopped up her brother's body and threw the parts into the sea. Beatrix, in her past as an assassin, has surely done a great deal of killings as well, so neither woman is a stranger to the violence of murder. This makes them stand out from the society they live in, and enhances the chance that their revenge will be meticulously

performed. In this chapter, I will look at some theatrical conventions from antiquity that can be found in *Kill Bill*, and move on to discuss *Medea* and its revenge plot with respect to Tarantino's films.

Theatre and the role of women in antiquity

The meaning and significance of the tragedy have been elaborately described by Aristotle in his *Poetics*, one of the earliest treatises on dramatic theory. According to him, "tragedy is the 'imitation of an action' (*mimesis*) according to 'the law of probability or necessity'" (McManus 2). This makes it different from History, because it explores what *may* happen instead of what *has* happened. This makes it more engaging for the audience, because they see the cause-and-effect that takes place and are able to relate this to their own lives. Tragedy is therefore "an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of action, not of narrative; with incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish its *katharsis* of such emotions" (McManus 1). By arousing pity and fear, the tragedy aims to purge the excess of these feelings in the audience, making them more balanced and healthy. This catharsis can even be called pleasant, as Aristotle also writes about "the 'pleasure' that is proper to tragedy, apparently meaning the aesthetic pleasure one gets from contemplating the pity and fear that are aroused through an intricately constructed work of art" (McManus 9). I must add here that I am aware that Aristotle's work is over two thousand years old and that conflicting views have been written ever since. However, I do not think this thesis is the place to elaborately consider this discussion. I use Aristotle's ideas because they were written with tragedies such as *Medea* in mind, and therefore they are useful in the comparison between old and new forms of revenge tragedy. Theatre then, in antiquity, was more than just entertainment for the audience. It was a way to investigate life and the mysteries of the world. Through the catharsis that took place on stage the audience could once again

come to terms with their personal feelings and leave the theatre purged and balanced.

Next to the ethical and psychological investigations that were made through the staging of a tragedy, there were also more practical rules and customs related to the theatre. Helene Foley, in *Female Acts in Greek Tragedy*, writes about theatrical conventions of the stage during the time of the ancient Greeks, but she could just as well have been talking about *Kill Bill*: “elaborate costumes that do not resemble ordinary dress; the public setting before the stage building; mythical plots and exotic or historically remote locales for action; stylized gesture; the changing media for linguistic expression” (16). All these qualifications for tragic characters can be found in Tarantino’s modern revenge drama. Beatrix is shown in a variety of clothing, ranging from a hospital gown to a leather jacket to a wedding dress to a yellow cat suit with matching shoes and motorcycle. O-ren Ishii is wearing traditional Japanese clothing, including white socks in small slippers. Buck has the cowboy hat, for which he is ridiculed. Elle Driver wears a costume version of a nurse’s outfit, with matching eye patch. Through this, the characters become a stylised version of real humans; their sometimes superhuman strength and actions become more believable because they are portrayed as prettier versions of themselves. Location is also important in *Kill Bill*, where Beatrix’s quest for revenge leads the audience from the white picket-fenced American suburbs to the oriental setting of a Japanese restaurant to the beautiful snow-covered garden behind the House of Blue Leaves; after that it changes to a dusty trailer in the Texan desert, then to a cabriolet on its way to a Mexican brothel, and finally to a mansion somewhere in the south of the USA, where a large green garden is the location where Bill finally gets what was coming to him. Just like the costumes most of the fighting scenes can be seen as stylised gestures. The swordfight between Beatrix and O-ren is like a dance, with the snow softly falling around them. The manner of Bill’s death can also be seen as merely an elegant gesture. Beatrix simply taps on his chest five times, Bill takes a few steps and then collapses. Linguistic expression also differs according to the situation. A substantial part of the first volume has Japanese speech and English subtitles; Beatrix herself proves to be fluent in

Japanese. Her register also changes: to her enemies she is cold and ruthless, but when she speaks to her daughter she uses child-friendly language to explain why “mommy” has been away from her. Even though these conventions were already applied several thousands of years ago they are still, in new and more elaborate ways, being used in theatre and film.

Historically all the roles in a play were played by a maximum of three actors, all men. They changed between roles with the help of masks that represented the different characters. Female roles were also played by men, since women were not allowed to perform. Women were not considered equal to men at all in ancient Greece, and from the sources that survive it seems that “women were largely regarded as inferior creatures scarcely more intelligent than children” (Thompson 4) and “without autonomous moral authority” (Foley 263) because of their incapacity to separate their emotions from reason. This situation was reflected in many plays, where women were often seen as the source of trouble and misery. Foley says about plays in antiquity that “Greek tragedies are undeniably androcentric and do indeed provide poetic justification for the subordination of women, foreigners and slaves” (12). The curious thing is that although women were seen as inferior, almost all plays had at least one female role, and often an important and complex one. Pietro Pucci recognises this portrayal of strong women in antiquity:

A common mythical pattern presents women as fighters when they are deserted by men. I am referring, for instance, to the myth of the Lemnians, who turn into warriors when they are abandoned and betrayed by their husbands. (67)

Steve Wilmer writes that “Their actions, although unacceptable as social behaviour, can seem appropriate within the context of the drama” (108). The suffering of these strong women makes it possible for the audience to identify with them, enriching the theatrical experience. This might be part of the reason why many Greek tragedies are still regularly performed nowadays. Wilmer continues that the viewpoints of these tragic women “resonate in today’s more sexually liberated, divorce-prone society where women have gained unprecedented power in government and the

workforce but continue to strive for equality, respect and control over their own bodies” (109).

Medea

The eponymous protagonist of Euripides' *Medea* is one of those women who turn into a force to be reckoned with after her husband leaves her. She is portrayed as a woman from a 'barbarian' country, falling in love with Jason when he came to her father's land on his quest for the Golden Fleece. In return for her help – in many versions of the story Medea is considered a sorceress or witch – Jason marries her and takes her to Corinth. Once there, he abandons her for the king's daughter. Although Jason tries to convince Medea that it is also for her own good, because his influence will provide for her and her children, she is furious about what she considers his betrayal and vows revenge. What follows is a struggle between the scorned Medea who wants to avenge her insulted honour against all costs, and Medea-the-Mother who tries to resist the inescapable fact that her children have to be involved in the revenge plot. In the end the scorned Medea wins, and executes her revenge meticulously – she concocts a powerful poison that kills Jason's princess and her father, before she murders her own children. To her, the suffering that Jason must undergo is more important than her own motherhood and grief. According to Foley:

The avenging Medea thinks and acts not like a classical woman but like an archaic and Sophoclean hero when he feels he has been wronged. [...] She has the stubborn individualism, intransigence, power, near-bestial savagery, and lack of pity of such beleaguered heroes. (260)

The cruelty that Medea displays by using the lives of her children for her revenge has not lost any of its shocking effects in the centuries that have passed. Anne Burnett argues that Euripides breaks with the tradition of the “elegant mitigations” of earlier revenge drama to embrace “the rudeness of a simple archaic revenge” (9). She continues: “The Euripidean refusal of the traditional niceties is so thorough in the *Medea* that it seems to constitute a kind of manifesto on the poet's part, an

announcement that he intends to rediscover the vengeance action in its naked state” (11). Defined like this, Euripides could be seen as an early Tarantino, using elements from earlier works to create a whole new form of theatre capable of moving the audience in new and possibly shocking ways.

When comparing *Medea* to *Kill Bill* it seems at first as if the roles are reversed. Medea is left by Jason, but Bill is left by Beatrix. Medea takes Jason’s children as punishment; Bill deprives Beatrix of their daughter. If Bill had murdered the little girl BB, the reversal would have been complete. He does not, however, giving Beatrix a chance to find them. The plot then turns around again, making Beatrix resemble Medea in her wish to bring suffering to the man who has betrayed her. Jane Stewart recognises traces of *Medea* in *Kill Bill*: “Done in a dark way, this is Medea where a man was wrong when he thought a woman who devoted herself to him and his career would not mind him taking their sons and moving on to greener pastures” (4). This proves fatal, as Foley also writes:

Medea exposes the tragic results of a male refusal to recognise in women the capacities, feelings and needs that they accept for themselves; and it shows the corrupting effects of this mistreatment on a woman of tremendous feeling and intelligence. (268)

In her article on revenge tragedy, Burnett writes about the disappearance of direct violence from the stage. The actual killing almost always happened off-stage and was often not even retold by a messenger. To make up for this lack of action, two other scenes were devised

The first of these was a scene of decision, wherein the weakness and reluctance of the principal was pitted against the strength of his motive, and the second was a scene of intrigue, in which he showed his cunning and so by inference made physically plain the dangers that he dared to run. (4)

In both *Medea* and *Kill Bill*, such scenes can be distinguished for the protagonists. For Medea, the scene where she shows her resolve is when she first enters the stage and talks to the chorus about her situation. Before that, she has only been heard off-stage, lamenting her fate. This first

characterises her as weak and vulnerable, unsure what to make of her life now that Jason has left her:

this unexpected blow that's hit me,
well, it's destroyed my heart. My life is gone,
dear friends. I've lost all joy. I want to die (257-59)

She continues to stress the fact that she has no one in Corinth to look after her, and that she is an outsider in the country:

But I'm alone.
I have no city, and I'm being abused
by my own husband. I was carried off,
a trophy from a barbarian country.
I have no mother, brother, or relation,
to shelter with in this extremity (294-99)

Just when she seems to be at her weakest, when she has described the desperate fate of women and her own solitary state, she shows a glimpse of her vengeful intentions:

And so I want to ask something from you.
If I find some way to punish Jason
for these injustices, and his bride, as well,
and father, too, say nothing. In other things
a woman may be timid—in watching battles
or seeing steel, but when she's hurt in love,
her marriage violated, there's no heart
more desperate for blood than hers (300-307)

Here she shows that she is willing to go far to get her revenge. There is no talk of her children just yet, but she already mentions not only Jason, but also his new bride and her father. This indicates

that she not only wants to punish the man who has left her, but also the others that are associated with this betrayal. In the scene that follows, she shows her cunning and her power to deceive those who want to harm her. King Creon comes to tell her that she and her children have to leave his country as soon as possible. He claims that he knows Medea's true nature, as he tells her:

I'm afraid of you.

I won't conceal the truth. There's a good chance
you might well instigate some fatal harm
against my daughter. Many things lead me
to this conclusion: you're a clever woman,
very experienced in evil ways (327-32)

Medea deceives him, however, by saying that "Alas, this is not the first time, Creon, / my reputation has badly damaged me" (340-41). She pleads with him that she means no harm to him and that she will not cause trouble for the newly wedded Jason and Creon's daughter. Once he has left, she tells the chorus her actual plans, with elaborate descriptions of the evils that she is capable of: "Now, I can slaughter them in many ways. / I'm not sure which one to try out first" (444-45) but "The best method is the most direct, / the one at which I have a special skill – / I'll murder them with poison" (453-55). She resolves herself to get to work on making the poison for the robe and veil she will send to Jason's bride as gifts:

So come, Medea,
call on all those things you know so well,
as you plan this and set it up. Let the work,
this deadly business, start. It's a test of wills.
You see what you have to put up with.
You must not let Jason's marriage make you
a laughing stock among Corinthians (474-80)

Once she has also deceived Jason, making him think that she acted foolishly in her anger and is now willing to accept the circumstances, she sends her children to his bride with the poisoned gifts and revels in the idea that her revenge plans are now set in motion. She reminds the Chorus once more that she is to be reckoned with:

Let no one think that I'm a trivial woman,
a feeble one who sits there passively.

No, I'm a different sort—dangerous
to enemies, but well disposed to friends.

Lives like mine achieve the greatest glory (957-61)

These lines could also be true for Beatrix Kiddo in *Kill Bill*. Even if she wanted to live the life of an ordinary woman, the fact that she was of a “different sort” beforehand makes it impossible for her to be trivial. So when she needs to prove her strength and resolve, she does so by waking up from a coma she has been in for four years, and killing the man that raped her. This is not as telling as the scene that follows, however. The muscles in her legs are weakened and she has to drag herself out of the hospital. She hoists herself into the truck of the rapist and stares at her feet. “Wiggle your big toe” (*KBI* 0:33) is the only line that comes from her. The camera switches between her face and her feet as she is “trying to will my limbs out of entropy” (0:33). The voice-over starts talking about the Viper Squad and the whole story of O-ren Ishii’s background is shown in between. The scene then returns to Beatrix, who is still in the car and has just managed to wiggle her big toe. As she succeeds, she smiles and says “Hard part’s over. Now, let’s get these other piggies wiggling” (0:42). The screen then turns black and tells us that thirteen hours pass until the next shot, which is Beatrix walking from the back seat to the driver’s seat and driving away, headed for revenge. This scene shows that she has an enormous dedication towards her revenge, and also a huge amount of willpower with which she forces her body to cooperate with her.

The scene that shows her cunning and establishes her position as a powerful enemy to Bill

and the Vipers is the fight with the Crazy-88 army in the House of Blue Leaves. As I have argued in the chapter on the Eastern influences, she takes on samurai warrior traits to enable her to fight even more effectively. To fight off that many skilled opponents at once has to be called impressive.

Where Medea tells the Chorus what she is capable of, Beatrix shows her audience just how powerful she is.

Even though both women had already displayed their power before the stories that I discuss here had started – Medea when travelling with Jason and the Argonauts and helping them with her magic, Beatrix by being a successful assassin in the Viper Squad – both Bill and Jason felt secure in their own sense of superiority. Despite their background, Beatrix and Medea seem to have been knocked down temporarily by the betrayal of their men. They have to re-discover themselves to transform into avengers, as Pucci also considers with respect to Medea:

By seeing herself as the innocent victim of outside, arbitrary, and continuous violence, Medea pities herself and is able to give voice to her legitimate sudden desire to take revenge. The powerless female finds in her pain the force that she did not possess when the master abused her. Medea's self-pity manipulates her situation in such a way that she discovers her right and power. (71)

Beatrix does not give much evidence of self-pity, but she has moments of weakness. One of her lowest moments (literally) is when she is buried alive by Budd and lies in the confined space of the coffin, hands and feet tied by rope. This situation almost breaks her and she seems ready to give up, until she remembers the techniques she was taught by Pai-Mei. These enable her to break free from her grave and return, even more determined to complete her quest for revenge. The force that stems from her pain can be perceived again in the final moments of *Kill Bill Vol. 2*, when Beatrix is on the verge of killing Bill. As Jane Stewart perceives, Beatrix's resolve is threatened when she finds her daughter alive and well with Bill: “[S]he's met with a surprise that pits her realities one against the other. She discovers an outer reality that she definitely wants to be a part of. But there is also the

internal reality - being in service to Bill - that goes directly up against it” (pp. 13). It clearly hurts her to see Bill and her daughter together as a family, because it reminds her of what could have been and what she will be depriving her daughter of. The conversation with Bill on the other hand fuels her belief that he has to go in order for her to be free. Bill still sees her as a killer, and she needs to leave that life to be a mother. By contrast to Medea’s, Beatrix’s motherhood wins the internal struggle and the pain that it causes enables her finally to kill Bill. However terrible, Medea’s infanticide in some way resembles Beatrix’s decision. If she were to take the children with her, their future would be uncertain and they would always remind her of Jason’s betrayal and how he insulted her. If she had left them with Jason, he would have ‘won’ and her need for revenge would not have been satisfied. The Chorus leader tries to dissuade Medea from slaying her children by trying to remind her of her own motherhood: “But, lady, can you stand to kill your children?” Medea answers: “Yes. It will be a mortal blow to Jason”. The Chorus uses its final argument: “But as a woman it will devastate you”, to which Medea replies: “That’s beside the point” (968-71). Just as killing Bill was the only option for Beatrix, murdering the children was the only way for Medea to free herself from her time with Jason.

These women were scorned, and since they were not trivial women to begin with, their response to such insults could not be trivial either. Their respective backgrounds as sorceress and assassin made sure that they had the potential and the knowledge to carry out a meticulously planned revenge, and they did not hesitate to make use of their strengths to their full extent. Both play and film show that, whether in ancient Greece or our modern world, women are a force to be reckoned with and scorning them will have consequences.

Conclusion

From past to present, from East to West – revenge is an ever-present phenomenon. Whether it is embedded in the culture of the Japanese samurai or the American cowboys, or is represented in art by playwrights and filmmakers, the subject is universally appealing. Even though systems of government and law enforcement have tried to rid society of personal revenge for ages, the raw emotions that stem from being hurt and getting even with one's enemy make tales of vengeance relatable to audiences worldwide.

In this thesis I have used the scope of revenge to look at several influences on Quentin Tarantino's *Kill Bill* films. In these works, Tarantino has combined aspects from different cultures, time periods and art forms, and transformed them into a spectacular and unique new type of revenge drama. The story is a modern one, but with themes and rituals that go back to Ancient Greece and the samurai culture of Japan.

I have approached the films from several angles, first looking at samurai rituals. A large part of the first *Kill Bill* volume takes place in Japan, and analysis shows that Beatrix, although not officially trained as a samurai, does take on multiple traits that made these Japanese warriors so fearsome and hard to beat in combat. She is disciplined and focuses on her ultimate goal – to kill Bill. She shows no fear for death in battle, which to the samurai is an essential skill for survival. She also masters the *kiai* or 'spirit meeting' shout, a powerful method of intimidating the enemy. Finally, the scene at the House of Blue Leaves shows that she attains a state of *mushin*, a state of mind in which the consciousness is so heightened that the reflexes take over and the warrior can fight without thinking, a useful skill when one is fighting off an entire army of heavily armed bodyguards. By using these techniques that were developed hundreds of years ago, Beatrix is established as a skilled and powerful warrior who lets nothing stand in the way of her revenge. From the East the films move to the West, as Beatrix goes after Bill's brother Budd. Where the

previous section portrayed the practical and refined rituals of the samurai, the ‘chapters’ that take place in America show the cowboy-and-western culture. Part of this culture is the violent conflict as a means of social and personal transformation, something that can be found easily in *Kill Bill*. In order to leave the life of an assassin she was living and transform into a mother, Beatrix has to end the violent conflict she has with Bill and the other Vipers. She fights for her right to wealth and freedom, another common Western theme. The use of these themes, whether they are portrayed in an obvious manner or subtly referred to, give the films a deeper layer of meaning, fitting Beatrix into a long tradition of lone warriors and cowboys looking for revenge.

After making a spatial division and looking at different cultures, I also wanted to look at literary sources that have influenced Tarantino. My main aim with this was to find out how much of William Shakespeare is actually present in Tarantino’s work. The two have been compared by critics and the filmmaker himself has alluded to a connection, and so I wanted to make these assumptions more concrete. To do this I have compared the *Kill Bill* films to two of Shakespeare’s plays: *Hamlet* and *Titus Andronicus*. I used the former to discuss emotions and actions connected to revenge, and the latter to look at the concept of comic violence and how it is used. For this I based myself not only on Shakespeare’s play but also on Julie Taymor’s screen adaptation, *Titus*.

To answer my question as to how much of Shakespeare is actually present in *Kill Bill*: not much. In a literal sense, there is only one direct reference to the playwright, when Beatrix’s voice-over describes O-ren Ishi’s way to the top of the Tokyo mafia as a “Shakespearean in magnitude power struggle”. There are no other direct references to Shakespeare himself or any of his works. The direct connection between the two men and their work seems to stop there. However, there are certain elements that do suggest that Tarantino knows at least some of Shakespeare’s work – be it the original or an adaptation. To me, this becomes most visible in the comparison between *Kill Bill* and *Titus*, Taymor’s adaptation of *Titus Andronicus*. Both films show the desperation of the protagonist for getting hurt after doing what they thought was best for their family. To portray this,

both directors make use of extreme violence. They use this in such a way, however, that it becomes almost funny and therefore at first less intense and dramatic. In both works, the violent events lead up to a tension-filled finale. Whereas Shakespeare (and Taymor) takes the level of cruelty even further and has Titus killing his own daughter and feeding his enemy her own sons for dinner before he gets killed himself, Tarantino ends in a more emotional manner. Beatrix finds Bill and is reunited with her daughter, and while this does not lessen her resolve to kill Bill, it makes it a bit more difficult for her. Compared to the violent killings that have preceded, Bill's death is almost a peaceful one. While the endings differ, the two films can be compared in terms of the amount of violence and the way it is portrayed, and to me the comparison is a legitimate one. On the other hand, there is *Hamlet*, one of the best-known plays when it comes to revenge tragedy. Thematically there are some similarities to *Kill Bill*, so the two works are interesting to compare, especially in the light of the remarks on the similarities between the two authors. There is betrayal, the overthrowing of (patriarchal) hierarchy, and a cycle of violence that can only be halted when most or all of the characters involved are dead. There are, however, also a lot of differences between the two protagonists, Prince Hamlet and Beatrix. Too many, in fact, to state confidently that *Hamlet* can be considered a legitimate source of inspiration for Tarantino.

After looking at Shakespeare I went back in time even further, to discuss one of the earliest accounts of a revenge plot, Euripides' *Medea*. I chose this play because at first glance the story is very similar to *Kill Bill*, with a woman taking revenge after being scorned by her former lover. Tarantino, whether he is aware of it or not, uses several theatrical conventions that were written down in Antiquity, such as elaborate costumes, exotic locations and stylised gesture. The way in which both Medea and Beatrix deal with their anger and grief can also be seen as similar: they are both strong women who have the skills and resources to strike back mercilessly to the men that have scorned them. While it might not have been Tarantino's intention to trace his influences back that far, to me it shows once more that revenge is a universal theme that has been and will be an

inspiration for writers and directors from all times and places.

While Shakespeare may not be directly present in Tarantino, this thesis led me to appreciate even more the wide variety of references and influences that Tarantino uses in his works. In addition, my research was not exhaustive. There might not be enough Shakespeare in *Kill Bill* to conclude that Tarantino is the next Bard, but there are still other Shakespeare plays and other Tarantino films that can be compared and discussed. As Beatrix tells Vernita Green as well as O-ren Ishii, and what Tarantino might want to say to Shakespeare: “You and I have unfinished business!”

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