

**Derek Dunne. *Shakespeare, Revenge Tragedy and Early Modern Law: Vindictive Justice*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016. Pp 229. Hardback £58.00. ISBN: 9781137572868.**

JESSICA APOLLONI

Christopher Newport University

This monograph offers a striking perspective on revenge tragedy by placing the genre within the combined field of law and literature. As Dunne notes, scholarship on the interchange between early modern drama and the English legal system often dismisses revenge tragedy as a representation of anti-legal vengeance made popular by spectators' brutal taste for blood (6). By instead reading revenge tragedy as a site of legal engagement, Dunne effectively argues that the genre reflects and responds to significant changes occurring in English common law. Specifically, Dunne illustrates how playwrights' focus on participatory justice in revenge plots speaks to the transfer of legal authority from local jurisdictions to centralized institutions occurring especially in the late sixteenth century. The introduction and first chapter skillfully set up this broader argument within Dunne's summary of recent studies in law and literature as well as his concise outline of the early modern justice system in England. At the same time, Dunne challenges binary understandings of revenge tragedy, such as public law vs private retaliation, to uncover the common aim of revengers and early modern law to achieve retributive justice. These opening sections provide a coherent picture of the book's historical scope as well as the broader connections between law, literature, and early modern politics central to Dunne's claim that 'revenge tragedy is never far from touching the nerves of the body politic' (32).

Dunne's succinct overviews in the beginning of the monograph aptly situate his examination of individual plays within contemporary legal debates. In chapters on Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy*, Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*, and Marston's *Antonio's Revenge*, Dunne illustrates how revengers reveal failures of the legal system and often come together to enact participatory justice in an unjust world. Dunne employs the forensic methodology exemplified by law and literature scholars such as Lorna Hutson and Barbara Shapiro to demonstrate the strong links between revenge plots and legal crises occurring in the 1590s. Dunne's analyses in these chapters especially shed light on the tension between local authority and royal power occurring in the late Elizabethan legal system: Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy* dramatizes the centralization of law courts; *Titus Andronicus* illustrates the diminishing authority of the jury; and *Antonio's Revenge* reflects connections

between legal changes and popular riots. Dunne sharply reconfigures the crux of revenge 'from private crime to collective justice' as a way of fleshing out the legal and political resonances of revenge tragedies (94). Within these chapters, Dunne weaves together an impressive range of archival materials from early modern jurists such as William Lambarde, Francis Bacon, and Sir Edward Coke, in addition to more generally pervasive influences on the revenge tragedy genre including Ovid and Seneca. Dunne's smart structural choice to begin with Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy* and proceed through a developmental arc of revenge tragedies allows for an organized approach to the genre and creates a solid foundation for his assertion that such plays respond to a time of legal turmoil in the 1590s.

The monograph develops its earlier insights on the participatory nature of revenge in subsequent chapters devoted to the intertextual dialogue occurring between *Antonio's Revenge*, Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, and Chettle's *The Tragedy of Hoffman*. The interconnected arguments in these later chapters at times forestall the development of individual readings of each play; yet the approach also allows for a broader view of the way the revenge tragedy genre developed to respond to issues of legitimacy, rebellion, and law. This method also highlights Dunne's fresh perspective on canonical texts like *Hamlet*, in which he interprets the impact of Shakespeare's choice to keep his protagonist a solitary figure. By placing Shakespeare's play in dialogue with conventions of revenge tragedy, and especially the participatory actions of earlier plays, Dunne exhibits how Hamlet's isolation reduces and ignores secular justice so that providential justice may succeed. Dunne then asserts that Chettle's *Tragedy of Hoffman* offers a deliberate contrast with *Hamlet* in order to align itself with the collective action and political aims in revenge tragedies like *Antonio's Revenge*. When placing individual plays in dialogue with each other, these later chapters uncover the social commentaries and political dynamics that became inherent features of the revenge tragedy genre. Dunne's close readings in this section especially highlight how texts speak to each other regarding legal, political, and social questions — questions all especially relevant to the transfers of power occurring contemporaneously in the English legal system.

The final chapter on Middleton's *The Revenger's Tragedy* offers an intriguing conclusion to the historical and literary claims of the monograph. Dunne asserts that Middleton's play responds to the end of the competing legal dynamics of the 1590s as the transfer of power to a central court system became more stabilized in the seventeenth century. The chapter works through self-reflexive aspects of *The Revenger's Tragedy* to argue that socio-legal critiques can become 'fossilised within the narrative arc of a revenge play, after their specific social charge is spent' (138).

Dunne explores this concept to illustrate the play's dramatization of what he calls 'post-participatory' justice (160). Dunne then discusses *The Revenger's Tragedy* as representative of other Jacobean revenge plots occurring in plays by Webster, Fletcher, and Chapman, in which vengeance is enacted through individual, private actions against tyrannical forces. This concluding chapter ties together the legal history of early modern England and the genre transformations of revenge tragedy from Elizabethan to Jacobean drama. Dunne also includes contemporary accounts of disputes between Sir Edward Coke and King James to support this historical claim concerning the centralization of English law. While these archival materials could have been expanded to fully encapsulate the transfer of legal power and consequent stabilization under Jacobean rule, Dunne builds from a solid foundation of English legal scholars such as J.H. Baker, J.A. Sharpe, and C.W. Brooks within the monograph's broader historical argument. Accordingly, Dunne's reading of Middleton provides a strong conclusion to the historical, literary, and legal aims of the book.

*Shakespeare, Revenge Tragedy, and Early Modern Law* offers a remarkable critical survey of the revenge tragedy genre. Dunne's original approach in considering the genre within law and literature scholarship offers a fascinating picture of the way literature responds to legal changes as well as law's connections to political and social power dynamics. The combination of canonical texts with lesser-known plays makes the monograph truly feel representative of the whole revenge tragedy genre, and Dunne's dialogic structure showcases how plays speak to each other when developing genre conventions. Dunne's layered method to his analysis of revenge tragedy — in which each chapter entwines close readings, legal scholarship, and historical documents — clearly elucidates the social and political ramifications of England's centralizing legal system. The monograph is an invaluable resource for scholars of early modern theatre as well as legal and social historians.

