

The Use and Development of Revenge Tragedy in the Comics *V for Vendetta* and *The Sandman*

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Norwegian Abstract – Norsk samandrag

Denne oppgåva ser på teikneseriane *V for Vendetta* av Alan Moore og David Lloyd, og *The Sandman* av Neil Gaiman som hemntragediar. Hemntragedietradisjonen er først og fremst assosiert med teater, og fekk sin noverande identitet i skodespel skrive på femten- og sekstenhundretalet. Hemn som drivkraft i historieforteljing er ikkje avgrensa til denne perioden, men dukkar opp overalt innan vestleg litteratur og kultur, men det har så langt vore lite fokus på teikneseriar i denne samanhengen. I denne oppgåva blir desse to teikneseriane plasserte i hemntragedietradisjonen. Det første kapitlet samanliknar teikneseriemediet generelt med teater, for å etablere at dei to media kan produsere liknande effektar. I det andre og tredje kapitlet blir dei to teikneseriane samanlikna med tidlegare hemntragediar for å finne fellestrekk som gjer det mogeleg å sjå på dei som verk som tilhøyrer denne tradisjonen, og det blir òg sett på korleis dei skiljer seg frå tidlegare hemntragediar og slik vidareutviklar hemntragedietradisjonen. *V for Vendetta* nyttar hemntragediestrukturen til å fortelje ei historie om politiske og ideologiske motsetningar, medan *The Sandman* blandar tradisjonar frå både gresk og engelsk hemntragedie, og nyttar spenningane mellom desse to modellane til å utforske kjønnsrelasjonar.

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Preface

In this thesis I discuss two comics in relation to revenge tragedy. The first is *V for Vendetta* by Alan Moore and David Lloyd, which was published in issue form between 1982 and 1989. It was later collected and published – along with a short preface from each creator and the article “Behind the Painted Smile”, written by Moore during the comic's initial run – as a single volume in 1990. This collected edition is the one used in this thesis. Moore is credited as the writer of the comic, and Lloyd as the artist, but as “Behind the Painted Smile” makes clear, both were collaborators in shaping the story. Despite this, I will in this thesis, mainly for the sake of convenience, often refer to Moore alone when speaking of the story, as he is the main writer, mentioning Lloyd only when the article makes clear that he had an influence on a particular aspect of the comic.

The second comic, *The Sandman*, was published over 75 issues between 1989 and 1996. This comic was written by Neil Gaiman, and was drawn by several different artists during its run. For this comic, I refer only to Gaiman as the creator. *The Sandman* was first collected in ten paperback volumes, and later in four hard-cover volumes. Scans from *The Sandman* are taken from the 10-volume edition. The 9th volume, which is extensively used in this thesis, unfortunately does not have a running page count, but elects instead to divide the volume into parts and start the page count anew for each part. References to this volume include both part and page number.

I also need to clarify the following before I begin. A comic, of course, uses a very different layout than a prose text, and a line of text may be spread over several speech bubbles. All of the comics I use in this thesis also use bold and italicised letters to indicate emphasis on certain words. When I quote from a comic in this thesis, I will reproduce this emphasis with italics. When I quote a passage which spans multiple speech bubbles or text boxes, I will mark the division between them by closing the quotation, inserting a space and beginning a new one, including the reference at the end of the complete quotation.

Introduction: The Revenge Tragedy Tradition

John Kerrigan opens his book *Revenge Tragedy – Aeschylus to Armageddon* by saying that “For almost three thousand years, revenge has been a central preoccupation of European literature.” (Kerrigan, 1996: 3) In the book's preface, he states that the term *revenge tragedy* “can be usefully applied to a great deal of literature, opera, and film produced since Aeschylus.” (*ibid.*, viii) It is his contention that revenge lies at the heart of much of fiction and literature, that the very concept as a driving force may be found in all manner of works. He also states that vengeance's “natural habitat is the stage” (*ibid.*, 3).

While it is clear, both from Kerrigan's book and from an examination of the field, that many revenge tragedies are indeed found in play form, Kerrigan's own book shows that there is more to the term than that. In this thesis, I will follow Kerrigan's approach, and attempt to apply the revenge tragedy term to *V for Vendetta* and *The Sandman* – two comics, a medium which Kerrigan does not mention in his book. Despite the significant difference in medium, comics have several things in common with theatre; they both, for instance, rely on a combination of the visual and the textual. Reading these two more pop-cultural works in light of the revenge tragedy tradition may bring to light new interpretation of both the works and of the continuing development of the tradition.

Can the term “revenge tragedy” be expanded to include these comics? Does it make sense to compare the Early Modern stage with contemporary sequential art? To begin answering these questions I will look at one of Kerrigan's own comparisons, which stretches the definition of revenge tragedy much further than I intend to do.

Kerrigan compares revenge tragedy to detective fiction, and specifically focuses on Sherlock

Holmes, drawing parallels with *Hamlet* and *The Spanish Tragedy* (*ibid.*, 59-63). Although he said in the preface that detective fiction is not tragedy (*ibid.*, viii), his arguments to show its relation to the revenge concept seem to go against this. He casts the detective in the role of the revenger, and compares the hunt for the criminal with the pursuit of vengeance. While this may be a useful comparison for Kerrigan's purposes of tracking revenge through many types and periods of fiction, it broadens the definition of both revenge and revenge tragedy to a degree which makes the terms almost useless. I would argue that there is a significant difference between the works usually considered revenge tragedy, and the works usually considered detective fiction. It is not necessarily a matter of genre, but of a mode of storytelling, of an aesthetic identity and a relationship to a tradition of revenge tragedy, marking a clear difference between the two.

Kerrigan uses *A Study in Scarlet* for his example, so let me look more closely at his points of comparison. Holmes, he says, hunts the criminal “like Nemesis in a deerstalker” (*ibid.*, 62), is “ambivalent in his relations with the 'powers that be'” (*ibid.*) and “like wild Hieronimo, goes outside the law for the sake of justice” (*ibid.*). While the comparison to Nemesis, as the agent of divine vengeance, might be apt, it does not follow that this is the same role as the revenger in a revenge tragedy. Nemesis is a divine figure of retribution, doling out appropriate punishment to hubristic offenders. While Hieronimo, from *The Spanish Tragedy*, could easily be considered Nemesis to his enemies, as could most revengers, this is a very incomplete reading. The revenger is not merely an impartial force of nature, an agent of justice beyond reproach – he is a very human and partial character, personally injured and offended. The revenger seeks not mere justice, but revenge. There is a violence of emotion which is not present in the cool, deductive eye of Sherlock Holmes following the clues and culminating in an arrest. The ideal embodied in Holmes is that of the detached detective, who cares more for the mystery than for the people involved. He can perhaps be said to be an avenger, and not a revenger, seeking justice for a third party – an echo of Nemesis's role – but it is in his nature to not have a personal involvement in the case. He acts on behalf of

others, for the satisfaction of his curiosity and intellect. Unlike Nemesis, the detective does not himself punish the criminal, but merely identifies and captures him so that others may decide upon the justice of the situation. The revenger, on the other hand, is passionate, personally involved, and driven by rage. In order to get at his target, he will often kill or injure bystanders who happen to be in the way, or who are connected to the target. In a revenge tragedy, when A has injured B, then C, D and E may all fall in B's quest to kill A.

As for an ambivalent relationship with the governing system, this is indeed something often found in revenge tragedies. Quite often, the enemy of the revenger is himself in charge of the system, or otherwise an agent for it – as in *The Spanish Tragedy*, *The Revenger's Tragedy*, *Titus Andronicus*, and *Hamlet* to name a few. In *V for Vendetta*, the system of government itself is one of the enemies the revenger seeks to bring low. And while it is true that Hieronimo, the judge, resorts to crime himself to gain his revenge¹, his methods differ greatly from those of the detective cutting corners the police cannot. While Holmes may occasionally let a murderer go free for thinking their actions justifiable², Hieronimo's bloody spectacle of deaths is a different matter entirely. Only if the detective frames his target with the result of execution, or outright kills his suspect, might the two be considered similar breaches of law. The role of the revenger and the detective are not the same.

Kerrigan next compares the reconstruction of a crime scene to Hamlet's staging of “The Mousetrap” (*ibid.*, 63). There are indeed similarities between “The Mousetrap” and the detective deducing the sequence of events and sketching them for his audience, but the function of this reconstruction as a story element is entirely different from *Hamlet's* play-within-the-play. Hamlet does not spend the play attempting to piece together the events of the past – he spends rather more time agonising over the actions to take place in the future. “The Mousetrap” is not put together to clarify and explain the circumstances of Old Hamlet's murder – the ghost has already done this,

1 In *The Spanish Tragedy*, Hieronimo is forced to choose between the two principles he promises in 3.6.35-36: “For blood with blood shall, while I sit as judge, / be satisfièd, and the law discharged.” (Kyd, 1995) He can have revenge, but only by breaking the law which has failed him.

2 As in “The Adventure of the Devil's Foot”.

both for Hamlet and for the audience. The play is rather intended as an acid test to the ghost's story, giving Hamlet the opportunity to observe his uncle's reaction to the play, thereby determining his guilt. Hamlet does not seek clues to find his father's killer, he seeks confirmation of what he already knows – much as when Hieronimo was handed the identities of Horatio's killers by Bel-imperia³, Hamlet has the solution to the murder mystery handed to him in the first act. The process in the revenge tragedy is to seek the appropriate vengeance and execute it; in the detective story it is to seek the right clues and follow them to the solution.

“The Mousetrap” has more in common, then, with the denouement Kerrigan next compares it to, where the detective finally accuses his suspect (*ibid.*). That is without a doubt a theatrical and dramatic moment in the detective story, but usually culminates in an arrest and the detective retiring, his job completed. Far from this the denouement of *Hamlet* and *The Spanish Tragedy* – the revenger does not get to retire in peace, he is dead, or destroyed, by his actions.

The part of *A Study in Scarlet* which is rather reminiscent of revenge tragedy is not the story of Holmes, but the story of the criminal he hunts. Jefferson Hope's quest for revenge, and the events that led up to it are given the second half of the book, and Kerrigan also makes note of how this is a clear revenge plot (*ibid.*, 64). Had Hope been the sole protagonist, I might have fewer qualms about calling it a revenge tragedy, but even with the second half of the book given to his back-story, I think it is clear that it is Holmes and not Hope who is the central character. The presence of Hope's revenge plot does not transform the detective fiction genre into revenge tragedies. The function of Hope's revenge in the story is not to be the focal point and instrument of a tragic downfall, it is there as the backdrop to Holmes's feats of deduction.

I do not mean to say by all this that it is fruitless to compare revenge tragedy and detective fiction, merely to point out the significant difference between them. There are of course also similarities, which is why Kerrigan focuses on them in his chapter. The detective is often, like the

³ Capitalisation conventions differ when it comes to Bel-imperia's name. In this thesis I follow the example of Maus (1995) in capitalising only the first letter of the first part of the name.

revenger, working outside the legal framework in order to achieve his goals, although the goals, as I have said, differ. Holmes is consistently portrayed as much more effective and clever than the officials in the police, and the trope of the detective operating outside the legal restrictions placed upon police officers is firmly established in modern detective fiction; perhaps the appeal of the detective lies partly in his depiction as an original thinker circumventing a bureaucratic system. The fact that they operate outside the system does link them to the older idea of personal involvement in seeking justice, and the detective and the revenger are also both concerned with establishing justice, with restoring equilibrium after a wrong has been committed. As I have already discussed, however, their methods and motivations differ so greatly that this basic principle underlying them is not enough to group them together as one and the same.

Returning, then, to the question I posed at the beginning, I say: Yes, it makes sense to call these comics revenge tragedies, in a way that it does not make sense to call detective fiction revenge tragedies. While the comics of course differ from the works of Ancient Greece and Early Modern England, they exist much more clearly in the same tradition, the same aesthetic and thematic mode which we call “revenge tragedy” than does Sherlock Holmes and his ilk, as this thesis will show. To compare detectives and revengers is all well and good, but admits a much broader view of the field than is necessary or even useful in reading *Sandman* and *V for Vendetta*. While there may be elements of revenge in the detective's motives, and revenge may play an important part in a given detective story, this is not all that makes revenge tragedy. Where Kerrigan is broad, I wish in this thesis to be more narrow, and say that from Aeschylus to Seneca to Shakespeare, the revenge tragedy as we know it has an identity beyond the desire for revenge.

There is a peculiar concern in many revenge tragedies, a macabre fascination for death and blood.

In the media of stage and comics, which are the main focus of this thesis, this has a significant effect on the visual elements. More than mere words on the page, the corpses and skulls and blood become focal points for the eye of the audience. In a visual setting, like on a stage or in a comic, the ritual embedded in this fascination is acted out by the characters, not just described.

As early as *The Oresteia*, we see this concern in Clytaemnestra's murder of Agamemnon. The murder itself occurs off-stage, with only the screams heard by the audience, while the chorus run about in confusion (Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*, 1367-1390). Then, the doors open, and Clytaemnestra displays Agamemnon's bloody corpse in his bath tub, standing above it while holding a sword. She then proceeds to remove the robes that bind him, and place them ceremonially at the altar. Her actions are explicitly ritualistic: "By the child's Rights I brought to birth, / by Ruin, by Fury – the three gods to whom / I sacrificed this man" (*ibid.*, 1459-1461). We see a different side of this death-fixated ritual when Orestes and Electra hold their ceremonies of prayers and oaths at Agamemnon's grave in *The Libation Bearers*. In *The Oresteia*, revenge itself is ritual, not merely the forms surrounding it. A murder must be answered by murder because it is divine law, explicitly enforced by the gods.

We also see the concern with the macabre in the works of Seneca, and in the Early Modern plays that followed them. While it is likely that Seneca's plays were read rather than acted out (Corrigan, 1966: 22), the Early Modern tradition that was so inspired by them were certainly acted out visually. In *The Spanish Tragedy* the concern is present in the dwelling on Horatio's corpse. In *Titus Andronicus*, it is apparent in the dismemberments and the cannibalism. By the Early Modern period, the ritual in the form may be toned down, but the ritual underlying the concept of vengeance itself is still present.

Detective fiction may have its share of the macabre, and its own aesthetic identity, but the function of it is different. When the detective is confronted with a grisly murder, it is there to give a sense of menace, to establish the wrong that needs to be righted by the apprehension of the

murderer, and the restoration of harmony to society. The revenger is also concerned with restoring equilibrium, but not in the same way. When Hieronimo is confronted with the corpse of his son, it is a deeply personal moment of despair, which infuses the rest of the play with its presence, colouring the chain of events that culminate in Hieronimo, the revenger, committing his own blood bath. Both revenger and detective seek to balance the scales of justice, but the revenger does this on a personal scale rather than on a societal scale. The detective is an agent against the macabre, the revenger is an agent of it – when the first is finished, order is restored; the second is likely to leave society in chaos.

Visuals are not everything, however. At this point, I feel I should explain what I mean by “the Senecan model”, or “post-Senecan tragedy” – terms which I will use frequently in this thesis, and which have a particular relevance to the aesthetic identity I am talking about here. I do not mean to say that the Senecan model is all there is to revenge tragedy, but it is a very significant model. The tragedies of Seneca have certain features in common, and these plays heavily influenced Early Modern revenge tragedy. The Elizabethans and Jacobean developed Seneca's tradition further, taking it in new direction and using its conventions to do new things, expanding the definition of “Senecan tragedy”. This continuation of a tradition going back to Seneca's plays, is still visibly apparent in the comics I will discuss.

Seneca's tragedies were translated into English in the 1560s, and in the later 16th century, playwrights in England began adapting and using elements from his plays in their own work (Winston, 2006: 30). They chose the features they liked in his plays, adopting his five act structure, his rhetorical devices, the long soliloquies, and crucially, the morally ambiguous revenger. Seneca's plays were also extremely violent. Winston (*ibid.*, 37) notes that the violence probably mirrors what Seneca personally experienced in the Roman imperial court. Seneca's own plays were interesting early examples of revenge tragedy, but their main impact on the tradition was in inspiring the many new Renaissance plays, which developed the model I am speaking of here.⁴ From Seneca, the

4 For a discussion focusing more on Seneca's own plays, and their popularity in England in the 1560s, see Jessica

Elizabethan playwrights borrowed the basic revenge plot, the importance of blood-revenge, the vengeful ghost and the catastrophic climax. This tradition emphasises the revenger's personal struggle, fighting to achieve his revenge and destroying himself along the way.⁵

The model of revenge tragedy that emerged in Early Modern England, which might be called post-Senecan revenge plays, was of course also dependant on the historical context. The very word revenge had a different meaning in the renaissance, being much more closely linked with the concept of justice than it is today – the question was who was entitled to carry it out, not whether it should be done (Broude, 1975: 40-41). England itself had a long history of settling debts by blood feud, with the various groups bound by family or loyalty each deciding what constituted an offence against them (*ibid.*, 44). The Tudor monarchs attempted to restrict private revenge, making punishment an official matter (James, 1988: 328), but self-governed groups outside the monarchy existed throughout the Jacobean era (Broude, 1975: 46). This tension between the law and the desire for revenge is apparent in many revenge tragedies, and is part of what makes the revenger a morally ambiguous figure – his actions puts him outside law and society.

The Senecan model is not the only significant one, however; older Greek tragedies, such as *The Oresteia*, are also part of the revenge tragedy tradition, and have relevance for *The Sandman* in particular. There are many differences between the ancient Greek and the Early Modern Senecan dramas, but perhaps the most important difference is the driving force behind the events in the plot. In a Senecan revenge tragedy, the driving force is the revenger, a person with a vendetta. The revenger's desire and pursuit of his revenge is what causes the tragedy to occur. In Greek tragedy, and certainly in *The Oresteia*, the driving force is not so much the angry revenger, but inevitable fate. The House of Atreus is cursed, and each generation doomed to repeat the pattern of atrocities and revenge which drive the play, until Orestes is able to end the curse by appealing to the new court in Athens, proving to them that his actions were justified.

Winston's essay "Seneca in Early Elizabethan England".

5 A thorough examination of Seneca's influence on Renaissance revenge tragedy is beyond the scope of this thesis, and is besides a topic covered in other places, starting with Fredson Bowers's *Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy*.

The issue of justification remains an important element of revenge tragedy. Seneca drew upon Greek tragedies in writing his own, and in the tradition he created, the moral ambivalence of the revenger becomes central. The revenger acts outside law, and yet draws upon deep traditions of blood debt. His anger may be righteous, but his actions often do much harm to innocent bystanders. The revenger exists in a space where the audience can both understand and sympathise with his actions, as well as be repulsed by them. This moral ambivalence is a key feature of revenge tragedy. The revenger begins as a sympathetic figure, struggling against more powerful enemies, but at some stage transitions into a monster, who performs acts that the audience or reader find abhorrent. Exactly when this change occurs may be difficult to pinpoint, or even vary from reader to reader, but it is a common occurrence for the revenger to take his actions too far. Since he seeks to inflict upon his enemy the same pain that he has suffered himself, he becomes like his enemy, repeating or echoing the original offence the enemy committed in order to punish him. If innocent bystanders are harmed in his rampage, the revenger becomes just as culpable as the one he seeks to punish. This whole issue is another strong contrast to detective fiction, where the justification for the detective's actions are rarely questioned, as he is a tool for justice rather than vengeance, and usually works to preserve the system of power already in place – he may work outside it, but rarely against it, as revengers frequently do. In *V for Vendetta* this opposition between the law and the revenger is especially marked, as the revenger has a political as well as a personal agenda, and acts as a terrorist against the state.

The two comics each follow the Senecan model, to an extent. *V for Vendetta* lies fairly close to the post-Senecan model, but develops it in interesting ways. *The Sandman* follows both the Senecan model as well as Aeschylus – it has two revenge tragedies playing out at the same time. There is the story of Morpheus, who for the sake of fate and technicalities is hounded by Furies and driven to his death. There is also the Senecan story of Lyta, who loses her son and goes on a bloody rampage to seek revenge, and in the process loses everything she has.

To sum up, then: Revenge as a driving force for storytelling is a device that transcends medium and even genre, and appears in many different forms throughout the history of Western literature, as Kerrigan has shown. Revenge tragedy is a much narrower tradition than revenge in general, but can also be traced from ancient Greece, through Seneca and the Early Modern stage where it found its current form, and into contemporary fiction. This thesis will examine the two comics *V for Vendetta* and *The Sandman*, and compare them to other works in the revenge tragedy tradition, as well as general features of the form, and show that these works exist in that tradition, and both draw from it and adds to it. They use the tradition in new ways, as a foundation of the story which can then be built on to explore other themes. The media of stage performance and comic are quite different, however, and before I begin discussing the comics as works in the revenge tragedy tradition, I wish to say something about the comic medium in general, how and why a comic works, and how the comic medium can be related to a stage performance.

Chapter One: Comics as a Medium and the Relation to Theatre

Since I will be looking at comics, and using related terms which may be unfamiliar, I feel I should take a moment to define my terms and talk about the tools of storytelling which are specific to comics. In this, I will be drawing mainly upon Scott McCloud's seminal work on the subject:

Understanding Comics.

McCloud defines comics as “Juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or produce an aesthetic response in the viewer.” (1994: 9) That is his most specific definition, intended to eliminate confusion, but for the most part he uses the phrase “sequential art”, coined by Will Eisner, to mean the same thing. The sequence of images is most often divided into panels, contained on a page⁶, which when seen as a whole make up the comic. A panel need not necessarily have clear and explicit borders, but can be isolated and perceived as distinct elements on the page. The space between the panels is commonly referred to as the “gutter”. Though this may seem self-evident, I mention it because the gutter is an important part of the comic, as much of the story takes place in it. The space between the panels is where they interact in the mind of the reader, and where the sequence of still images is animated into a coherent sequence of events.

McCloud devotes a full chapter of his book to this phenomenon, which he calls *closure*, the “phenomenon of *observing the parts* but *perceiving the whole*” (*ibid.*, 63). Closure is what allows the mind to see a string of separate images and connect them together. McCloud speaks of closure in a wide sense, including in it the wholly unconscious effect of seeing a moving picture when watching a film although it is really a rapid series of still pictures, and the perception of points of light on a television screen forming a full picture (*ibid.*, 65). While this may fit his definition of the word, McCloud is really describing two kinds of closure in his book, and this involuntary one is the

⁶ This is not necessarily true for a digital comic, but that discussion is well beyond the scope of this thesis; all the comics discussed herein are printed.

less interesting kind. When applied to comics, closure involves more than just sitting passively while the brain is tricked into seeing motion on a screen; filling in the spaces between the panels requires a degree of active, if not entirely voluntary⁷, participation.



Fig. 1: McCloud, 1994: 68.

This second type of closure is what makes comics function – in McCloud's words: “the audience is a willing and conscious *collaborator*, and closure is the agent of *change, time and motion*.” (*ibid.*, 65) The reader of a comic must fill in a great deal of the action in this manner, and each reader will of course have his or her own interpretation of precisely what happens in any given transition.

⁷ I say not entirely voluntary – The reader is of course conscious that he is reading, but I think it could be argued that making a connection between two panels is an instinctive reaction; as McCloud indeed argues earlier, humans are conditioned to see patterns.

Having established that reader participation is necessary for transitions between panels, and acknowledging that the manner in which this is achieved is a matter of both “art and craft” (*ibid.*, 69), McCloud proceeds to divide panel transitions into six categories based on the degree of reader involvement needed: moment-to-moment, action-to-action, subject-to-subject, scene-to-scene, aspect-to-aspect and non-sequitur (*ibid.*, 70-72).

Fig. 1 is an excerpt from McCloud's own explanation of closure. The two sample panels he provides are an example of a subject-to-subject transition, where the action remains in the same scene or idea, but the panel shifts to a different subject within it (*ibid.*, 71). The reader, using closure, connects the two panels, interpreting them as parts of a coherent whole. McCloud argues that this degree of reader participation creates “an intimacy surpassed only by the *written word*” (*ibid.*, 69).



Fig. 2: Moore and Lloyd, 1990: 71.

For an example of closure “in the wild”, so to speak, look at Fig. 2 from *V for Vendetta*. The middle two panels show the character Derek Almond pointing his gun at his wife and pulling the trigger. Except, that is not what these two panels show. The second panel is a picture of a gun with the hammer cocked, with a finger on the trigger. The third is a picture of a gun with the hammer in the

default position, with the finger still on the trigger and a speech bubble reading “bang.” It is through closure the reader connects the two and reads them as depicting Almond pulling the trigger, and it is by putting them into the context of the first panel that we interpret the gun as being aimed at the wife. The action takes place in the gutter between the panels, as the transition between them happens in the mind of the reader. The transition between the first and second, and between the third and fourth panel in Fig. 2 are action-to-action transitions in McCloud's scheme, while the transition between the second and third panels is a moment-to-moment transition, thus requiring the least amount of closure from the reader.

Neil Cohn (2007: 37) argues that McCloud's panel transition categories are inadequate. Instead, he posits a division between the active and passive elements in a panel, and proposes a division of panels into categories depending on the number of active elements. Cohn is interested in the syntax of comics, finding out how the visual language functions, and declares that the passive elements of a panel, i.e. the elements that provide backdrop rather than action, have no syntactic function (*ibid.*, 39). His categorisation of panels is based on the number of active elements and on the division of the panels; on whether the scene depicted is in one or more panels. In other words, he does not consider a single panel to be the basic syntactic unit, but claims that panels which depict separate pieces of a single narrative function, which in McCloud's scheme might be called subject-to-subject, are in fact joined together into a single unit on the page, through a process he calls Environmental-Conjunction, or E-Conjunction (*ibid.*, 41-42). Cohn also mentions Polymorphic panels, where a single active entity is depicted multiple times to indicate its movement (*ibid.*, 43). With these examples, he concludes that a panel is not a syntactic unit on its own, but merely a device that focuses the attention on a specific part of the message conveyed by the comics as a whole (*ibid.*, 44).

I do not feel that Cohn has repudiated McCloud's concept of closure in this. Even if we accept that the panel is not as basic a unit as McCloud holds it, Cohn's model does not address how

the various focal points the panels create are united into a coherent whole message, in the way that the closure model does. He also does not explain how the reader groups individual panels into larger syntactic units without using closure – indeed, his concept of E-Conjunction is not, as far as I can see, a different thing from closure at all. It is the reader uniting disparate elements into a single whole, just as McCloud posits. Even the progression of events in a Polymorphic panel is interpreted and understood through closure – each separate pose of the active figure acts as its own little panel within the panel. Polymorphic panels do not appear in the comics I will discuss in this thesis, so I will not discuss them further. Cohn seeks to systematise the visual language of comics into a recognisable syntax, regardless of the semantic meaning of the panels, but I find McCloud's closure model much more suitable for the discussion at hand, as it has applications outside of comics as well, as will be apparent in the next chapter. Cohn's model might be seen to complement McCloud's, since it does not really contradict it, but in this thesis, I will keep to closure as the name and explanation for the mechanism that makes comics function. Closure is what ultimately makes them something other than a string of unconnected images.

Closure as McCloud presents it concerns mostly the passage of time between panels, but he acknowledges that this can also be depicted in a single panel. The depiction of time passing is, according to him, produced by the depiction of either sound or motion (McCloud, 1994: 116). A speech bubble, in representing a spoken statement, automatically makes the panel which contains it last for at least as long as it would take to speak the statement. A panel can also have one character take an action, such as speaking, and show a different character react to it – what Cohn would call a Macro panel. McCloud argues that in this case, the space on the page itself becomes time, the “present” defined by the focus of the reader's eye (*ibid.*, 104). With the awareness of space and time being the same thing on a comics page, the cartoonist can use the space in order to manipulate the perception of time passing.

Closure is, in McCloud's words, the grammar of comics (*ibid.*, 67). It's vocabulary, on the

other hand, is the icon, a word which McCloud uses to mean “any image used to represent a a [sic] person, place, thing or *idea*.” (*ibid.*, 27) He goes on to discuss the idea of the cartoon, a kind of icon as a simplified representation of reality, and how a greater degree of simplification results in the reader identifying more with the character. I do not think it is necessary for me to repeat his arguments here, I mention this only for the following points: *V for Vendetta* is drawn in a highly realistic style, and thus further removed from the reader by McCloud's reasoning. *The Sandman* uses a variety of styles, and opts for a highly abstracted and simplified one for its climactic chapter – and thereby draws the reader more deeply in, if McCloud is correct. I do not necessarily agree with this, but I will return to that topic in my discussion of *The Sandman*.

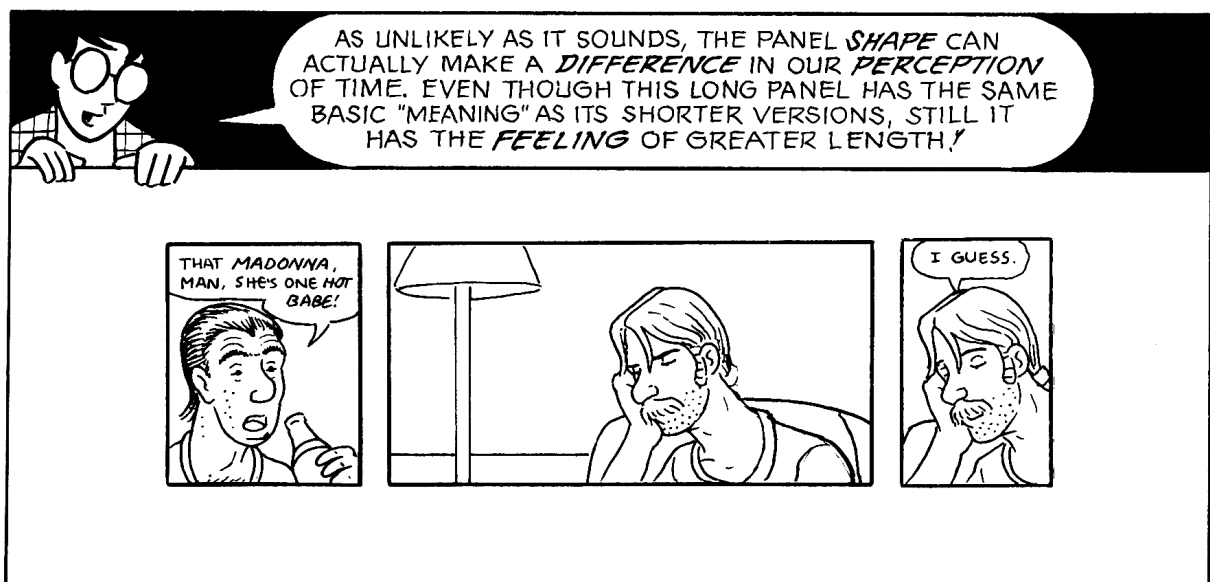


Fig. 3: McCloud, 1994: 101.

The panel itself is an icon, and the most important one, according to McCloud (*ibid.*, 98). In demarcating space it also demarcates time, and although the length of time it contains is indicted more by what the panel contains than its shape (*ibid.*, 99), Fig. 3 shows that the shape is also a factor. The shape of a panel can alter more than its time frame, however. Changing the shape of a panel will alter the reading of it, and can help make the action it portrays feel more dynamic without

necessarily changing the time frame at all. The event depicted appears to impact not only the elements in the story, but the medium it is told through as well. A panel can also be expanded to the edges of the page, letting the physical edge be its limit rather than the drawn borders. McCloud says this creates an effect of timelessness (*ibid.*, 103). This may not always be the effect, however.

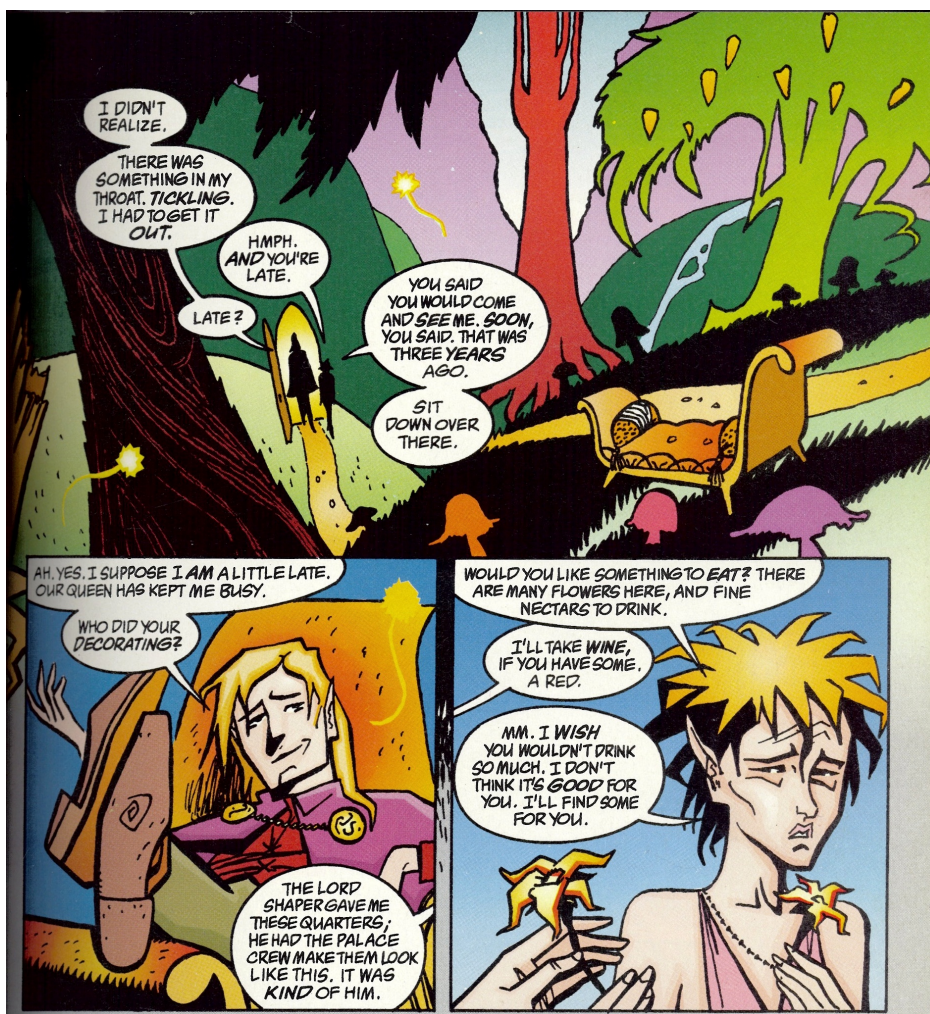


Fig. 4: Gaiman, 1996: part 2, page 10.

Fig. 4 shows part of a page from *The Sandman*. The first panel, showing the character Nuala's quarters, bleeds to the edge of the page, and continues behind the following row of panels. While there may be a sense of timelessness present, the more immediate and meaningful effect is one of space. Her quarters, which appear to be a vast forest landscape, gain the feeling of being limitless,

as they are not limited by a panel border. Another notably border-less panel occurs in part 5, page 3, where Lyta asks the gorgons for more water⁸. Here, too, timelessness is not the first thought that occurs. Rather, the suddenly vast space around Lyta makes her look small and timid, an impression reinforced both by her posture and her polite request for water. Further underlining this impression are the extreme close-ups in the previous two panels, where Lyta fills the whole panel, is depicted as dark and brooding, and fixated on revenge. The contrast to the open final panel of the page is striking, but it is a contrast of space, not time.

In addition to the panels and the cartoons representing people and objects, comics has developed an extensive set of symbols and conventions to represent thought, sound and motion. The most obvious representation of sound is the speech bubble, or speech balloon. This is an almost ubiquitous feature of modern comics, to the point where its absence is noteworthy. Like panels, the shape and colour of a speech bubble can be altered to produce a variety of effects to indicate the nature of the sound they represent.

The closely related thought bubbles are also very common, though not to the same extent – and I mention it precisely because both *The Sandman* and *V for Vendetta* eschews their use entirely. Moore notes in “Behind the Painted Smile” that for *V for Vendetta*, this choice was made by Lloyd, and intimidated Moore, who feared he would not be able to portray the depths of character he wished without them (Moore and Lloyd, 1990: 272-273). By not giving the reader a direct insight into the thoughts of the characters, the comics thus makes it harder to judge their motivations; they must be interpreted based solely on their actions.

V for Vendetta also refrains from several other common tools used in comics, such as onomatopoeia used to indicate a background sound, motion lines to indicate movement inside a panel, and other similar abstract representations of sound, smell and emotion as might otherwise be encountered. McCloud gives a range of examples of this type of icon (McCloud, 1994: 128-129), and shows how a simple curved line may represent anything from smoke to smell to confusion.

⁸ Reproduced in Fig. 16, on page 69.

Employing instead a more realistic and terse style, *V for Vendetta* thus helps set the mood for the story – breaking with conventions that are to an extent so common as to go unnoticed makes the break more noticeable in turn. For someone used to the convention of motion lines, the panels of *V for Vendetta* may appear static, or as using panels containing a shorter moment than a panel with motion lines. It allows the reader greater freedom in imagining the shape and path of the movement, and requires a greater degree of closure – and therefore a more engaged reader, per McCloud's theories.

One of the main strengths of comics as a medium is how it can use words and images together to convey its message, and how one can rely on the other to make a greater whole than the two apart. McCloud, despite admitting that the combination of the two is “more *alchemy* than science” (*ibid.*, 161), attempts to divide the various types of combinations into distinct categories. The first two of these, word specific and picture specific, concern combinations where either the words or the pictures carry the narrative, and the other merely illustrates or reiterates (*ibid.*, 153). In the third, duo-specific, words and pictures carry the same message (*ibid.*). These are straightforward combinations which, while they may be used to interesting effect, are not, in my opinion, as interesting as the rest. The remaining categories of combination are additive, parallel, montage and interdependent (*ibid.*, 154-155). Montage is, as the name implies, where words become parts of the picture (*ibid.*, 154), or rather are used as elements building the image. This category is not very relevant for this thesis. Additive is “where words *amplify* or *elaborate* on an image or *vice versa*.” (*ibid.*) In parallel combinations, the words and the pictures do not appear to be directly connected, instead presenting two different narratives. The final category is perhaps the most interesting, and according to McCloud the most common: interdependent, “where words and pictures go *hand in hand* to convey an idea that neither could convey *alone*.” (*ibid.*, 155)

McCloud goes on to clarify that attempting to measure exactly the proportions of text versus pictures may be impossible, but stresses that if the main burden of the narrative is performed by the

text, the images can instead focus on different objectives, and vice versa (*ibid.*)



Fig. 5: Moore and Lloyd, 1990: 29.

Fig. 5 shows an example of text and picture interacting in *V for Vendetta*. The second panel could be seen as an example of a duo-specific combination. The text square explains that Evey cries, while the drawing shows her crying. It could be argued that in isolation, without the text, the panel could be interpreted as showing other possible events, but in context it is clear that she leans into V's embrace to weep. Already, we see that McCloud's categories are not perfect, however – the panel cannot be so clearly categorised. The second half of the text clarifies what the character Evey is

feeling, something which is not as readily apparent in the picture. The panel therefore also has elements of the additive combination, with the text clarifying the picture. How one chooses to classify it would be a matter of subjective judgement – personally, I lead towards additive. This is also how I would classify the third panel; Prothero's comments explicate his confusion and point out his attire to the reader, which is highlighting elements already present in the image.

The final panel, however, is an interdependent combination. The picture shows the barbed wire and the sign identifying the camp – which in this instance functions as a part of the image, as in a montage combination, rather than added text. The black background indicates a lack of light and also gives the impression of a large, empty space. The posture of Prothero can easily be interpreted as surprised or shocked. The text states that this is the beginning of a nightmare for him, and assigns him an exclamation that could be both of surprise and horror. In combination, the panel conveys the idea that Prothero is horrified, confronted with something he considers a nightmare, and gives an indication of what that nightmare entails – the two elements work together to produce the final message of the panel.

McCloud's categories may not be perfect, and it is not really fruitful to stop at every panel to analyse it and assign it a category, but the categories are worth keeping in mind when reading a comic, if only to be more aware of how the images and text work together, and to what extent each relies upon the other. Comics are unique in this particular combination of words and pictures; I can think of no other medium which utilises both in this way to tell a story. It is also why a quote from any of the comics I will use in this thesis must be incomplete, unless I reproduce the full panel – something which is of course entirely impractical to do every time.

Of the two comics I will discuss in this thesis, *V for Vendetta* is the one that most obviously draws

on the revenge tragedy tradition, and mainly from the Early Modern, Senecan style. In order to both highlight the comic's position in this tradition and to compare the media of stage and comics, I have chosen to compare it to one of the earliest examples of the Early Modern stage adopting and adapting the tropes of Seneca: *The Spanish Tragedy* by Thomas Kyd. I do not mean to say that *The Spanish Tragedy* was a direct influence on *V for Vendetta* or on Moore, it may or may not have been, but to look at them as two different expressions of the same tradition, albeit a world apart in time and medium. During the course of the comparison, I will also discuss how the two media achieve similar effects through different means. This chapter will focus mainly on medium, while comparisons between *V for Vendetta* and more general features of revenge tragedy will follow in the next chapter. There, I will also discuss how *V for Vendetta* develops the revenge tragedy tradition, how it both uses and subverts the tropes and tools of the tradition to tell its story.

A play, like a film, is to a great degree a visual experience. A novel is experienced through reading words, but it is in the nature of a play that a visual performance is intended. Although I am working with the printed scripts of plays, even in these texts, a visual element is implicit. Since comics are also a primarily visual medium, certain comparisons between them are possible. Though the two use very different tools, the final effects actually have several things in common.

Early Modern plays do not have extensive stage directions. Often, only the bare minimum of indications is given to indicate critical actions. Take for instance the murder of Horatio in *The Spanish Tragedy*. Horatio speaks to his assailants, and after his line in act 2, scene 4, line 53, the simple stage direction reads “[Pedringano and Serberine] hang him in the arbour” (Kyd, 1995). Next follows a line from Lorenzo, followed by another terse direction, “They stab him” (*ibid.*). The whole thing takes place over the course of three lines. The implied action, however, is far more involved. It is difficult to imagine a staging that does not include a violent struggle between Horatio and his captors, and a striking visual focus point of Horatio's corpse once he is dead, displaying death with the fascination for the macabre that revenge tragedy has. The stage directions indicate

that the corpse remains hanging and visible as the murderers exit, to be found by Hieronimo. It remains on stage with Hieronimo and his wife until the scene ends, plainly in view for the audience to see. This passage illustrates nicely the vast difference between reading a play, and watching it. The compression of this sequence of events, this violent moment, to three terse lines, produces a very different impression from witnessing the act. While there may be some who consider a play to be something only to be read, there is no question that Kyd and his contemporaries wrote their plays to be performed. Even a reader lacking exposure to a staged version of the play can mentally mount his own staging, filling in the blanks in order to complete the scene, but a reader will not see the same powerful visual of a hanged corpse remaining on stage for the rest of the scene, colouring the action.

The stabbing of the hanged Horatio, in addition to being a striking visual sequence, involves another kind of implied action. The words on the page in the printed edition to a great degree imply the action taking place on the stage, but in the performance itself there is an implied element, an unspoken agreement between the actors and the audience to see something that is not there. Early Modern theatre used only a minimum of props, and as few sets as possible. This particular play twice calls for something a character can be hanged on, but it is likely these were simple set pieces as well. As Horatio is stabbed, the audience is asked to fill in the blood and gore themselves, as the actor on stage of course remains unharmed. Current theatre is not so different in this: although special effects have progressed, everyone knows they are not really witnessing a murder or mutilation. A similar leap of imagination, of the audience filling in the blanks, comes as Hieronimo seizes the blood-soaked handkerchief. The implied flow of blood cannot be seen by the audience, yet is there in the play.

In one way, the leap of imagination needed by someone reading rather than watching the play is greater, as he must fill in larger blanks, but in others it is less. It is a slightly different process, as it does not involve any actors who need to survive the play they appear in. In the mind

of a reader, the blood need not be implied – the imagination can be as gory as it pleases. So this is another difference between the printed and performed version of the play – the print edition lacks the tacit agreement between actor and audience to accept and fill in the missing elements.

When reading a comic, however, this willingness to fill in what is missing is, as discussed in the introduction, one of the most fundamental features of the medium. The act of filling in the missing elements is closure. For an example of implied action, of using closure to show movement and action, look at Fig. 7, on the next page, with a page from *V for Vendetta*, depicting another murder, the murder of Derek Almond.

Fig. 7 shows page 77 of *V for Vendetta*, and depicts a sequence of events as Derek Almond confronts V. The first two panels show Almond pulling the trigger of his gun, being almost a mirrored version of the two panels seen in Fig. 6, where Almond pretended to shoot his wife only to reveal that the gun was not loaded. As with that previous example, what it actually shows is not this, but two images of a gun with the hammer in different positions, leaving the reader to fill in the action between using closure. In McCloud's terms, the transitions between the panels on this page are action-to-action transitions, except for the transition to the second panel which is moment-to-moment, and the transition to the fourth panel, which is subject-to-subject.

Given that closure happens in the mind of each reader, it is of course an individual reading that will vary from person to person. With that in mind, my own act of closure leads me to read the page as follows: Almond pulls the trigger, but discovers that he has still not loaded the gun. V pauses only for a short moment, then lunges at Almond, pinning him to the wall and killing him, before Almond even has time to move the arm holding the gun. What V does to Almond is not visible, blocked from view by V's body, but the murder is obvious even so; this too is closure, but within a panel rather than between them. No motion can be depicted in a still image, and yet the page is dynamic, and relies entirely on the movement of the characters on it. No sound is described, and yet the dying scream of Derek Almond is present. The blood, like Horatio's, is implied.



Fig. 6: Moore and Lloyd, 1990: 71.

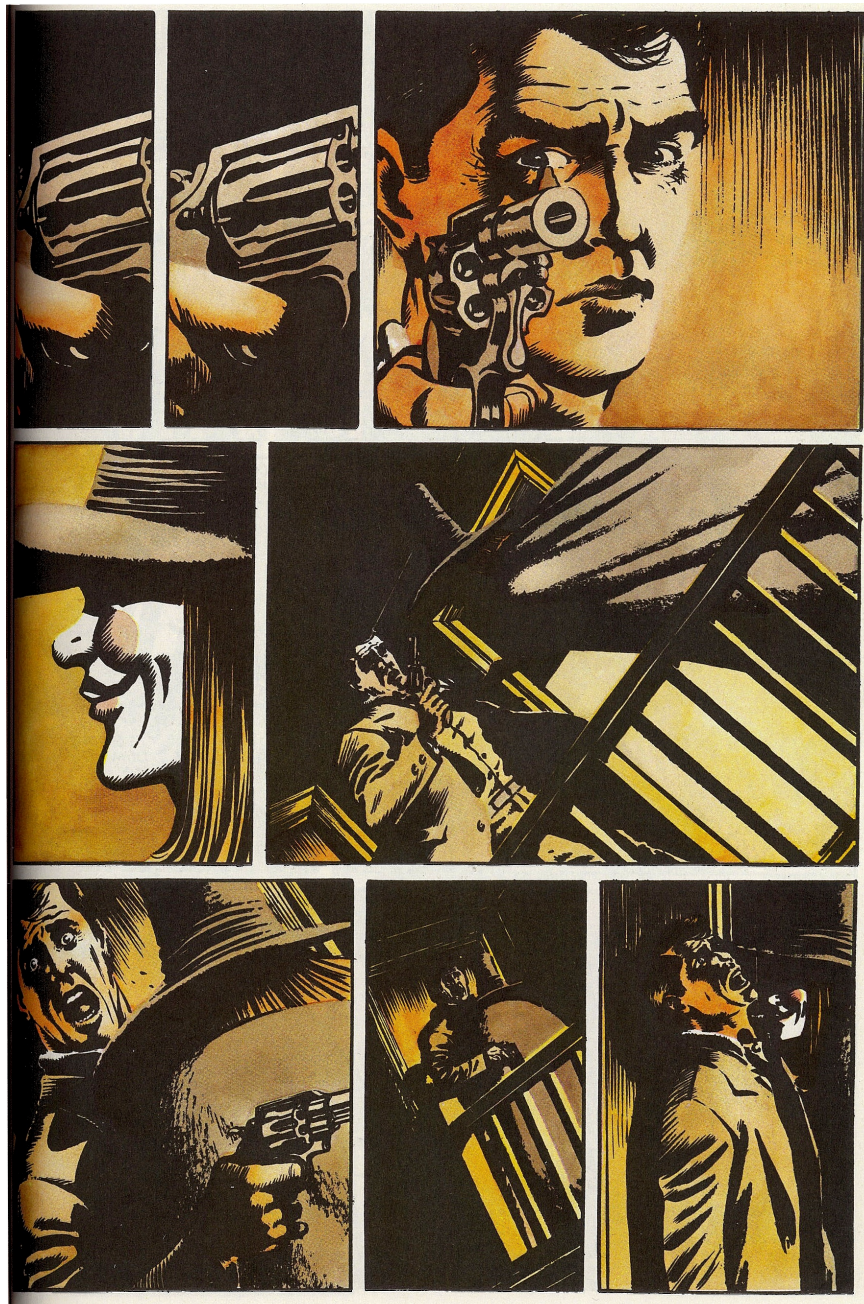


Fig. 7: Moore and Lloyd, 1990: 77

This particular page uses no words, only pictures, to advance the narrative. The complete lack of explanatory text makes it very well suited for an example of using closure to fill in blanks. It could easily have included text in an additive combination, or indeed any other combination, but instead the scene is presented purely visually. The effect is a moment of “silence” - even though Almond clearly screams on the page, the lack of words, either as captions or as dialogue, makes the scene seem quiet. The focus is kept on the images, on the situation and movement they depict. As Horatio is murdered in a brief stage direction, with no dialogue to accompany the act itself, Almond is killed in silence, with the action taking the focus.

Fig. 7 displays a series of moments linked together by closure, but it is fairly unusual for a comic panel to contain only one single instant. Even in *V for Vendetta*, which eschews many of the tools common in Western comics to depict motion, sound and movement within a panel, such as motion lines or onomatopoeic sound effects, there is usually more than a snapshot in each panel. Merely by having a character speaking, the panel is expanded to include the time it takes to say the line, and often the panel will also show a reaction to what is being said. This is the more common type of panel. Looking at the title page from the 1615 edition of *The Spanish Tragedy*, we find a similar construction, showing time passing in a single panel, with characters reacting to other elements within the panel.

Fig. 8 is an illustration of events in act 2, scene 4, but it conflates two distinct and separate moments. It plays with the way time is perceived within a single panel. It was made well before comics as we know them, but it is still a moment in an implied sequence of events. Even without a clear panel division, the illustration complies with McCloud's “sequential art” definition. There are, as I said, two distinct moments depicted in it, which do not influence each other. One could easily

draw a line down the middle, between Hieronimo and Bel-imperia, and consider the two moments to be different panels – even without this imaginary line, the effect is that of having two moments in sequence. This panel plays, however, with the order of that sequence.



Fig. 8: Illustration from the title page of The Spanish Tragedy, 1615.
<http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/4/46/Spanish-tragedy.gif>

Normally, in the West, we read from the left to the right, and our comics follow a similar arrangement of events from left to right to indicate the sequence. This picture also does this: We see Horatio's body, and then Hieronimo's reaction to it, and we see Bel-imperia shout for help, and then the figure wishing to silence her – a sequence of left to right. However, the two moments depicted occur in the opposite order in the play. Bel-imperia's shouts for help occur as Horatio is murdered, and only after the murderers have taken her away does Hieronimo appear on stage, discovering his dead son. Hieronimo's speech bubble is a shortened form of his line in 2.4.76, while Bel-imperia's speech bubble is taken from 2.4.61. The black figure in the illustration speaks the line from 2.4.62, which in the play is spoken by her brother Lorenzo. Why he is depicted as black in the illustration is

unclear – the character in the play is never indicated to be a different ethnicity from the rest.

In making the transition from the stage version to the illustration, the sequence of events has become reconfigured, showing events happening in a different order. The fable remains the same as in the play, but the configuration has been changed. While the purpose of the illustration is clearly to highlight two of the more dramatic moments in the play, the purpose behind reversing them is opaque. The illustration is most interesting for demonstrating how an Early Modern play could be moved into the medium of comics even at the time – the situation, the fable, can be reconfigured for different media.

Fig. 8 shows Horatio hanged on a trellis, consistent with the murder occurring in the arbour. Whether this is the prop used in when the play was staged at the time is not certain; it could well have been a tree prop, or the same prop which is used for Pendringano's gallows later in the play (Maus, 1995: 337). The exact nature of the prop is less interesting than the fact that it keeps Horatio's body on display on stage, from his murder till the end of the scene. If the play is staged such that the dialogue in 2.5 occurs while Hieronimo and Isabella gather up the corpse and leave, the body remains visible till the end of the act. The corpse returns in the final act, as Hieronimo arranges it for display at the end of his play-within-the-play. The unveiling of the corpse is the climax of Hieronimo's plan, showing his audience the reason for his actions.

In *V for Vendetta*, the dead bodies left behind by V are not dwelt upon extensively – though a reader can of course linger at each panel depicting them at choice. In his drug-induced hallucinations, Eric Finch sees decapitated and dismembered corpses impaled upside-down on a barbed wire fence at Larkhill (Moore and Lloyd, 1990: 211). This macabre vision is visible for three panels before being revealed as actually being burlap sacks. While the deaths of his victims are

taken for granted and left behind by the narrative, V's own dead body is given a great deal more focus. Much of part 3, chapter 9 concerns Evey staring at the corpse, imagining who she would see, were she to take off the mask. The first page of chapter 11 in part 3 shows V laid out for his Viking funeral, in a transparent coffin allowing full view of the body amidst lilies and high explosives. This display is the culmination of V's scheme, as the train containing his body is sent to explode beneath Downing Street.

In a less literal way, death is always on display in *The Spanish Tragedy*, as the ghost of Don Andrea remains on the upper stage, observing the action, throughout the play. Sitting with him is the figure of Revenge. Andrea introduces the play, and frames the plot around his own desire for revenge against his murderer, Balthazar. Revenge comes with him from the Underworld to grant it to him. Although these two characters do not do much, their constant presence on stage colours the perception of the events in the play. The character Revenge merely observes, and even falls asleep at one point (Kyd, 1995: 3.15.1), but the concept revenge is alive in the play, giving Revenge some legitimacy in claiming responsibility for the acts on the lower stage.

This comparison has focused on *V for Vendetta*, but as the discussion of the tools of comics show, the similarities in effect can be extended to include the comics medium as a whole. Theatre and comics are of course quite different media, but they can achieve similar effects in their audience, so a comparison between the two forms is possible. With this in mind, I will move on to discussing the comics themselves as they exist in the revenge tragedy tradition, and look at how they develop revenge tragedy and use it to make points that go beyond the revenge plot itself.

Chapter Two: *V for Vendetta* and Reinventing Revenge

The previous chapter showed that comics and stage performance have some similarities, in effect if not in form. *V for Vendetta* emphasises this relationship with its many references to drama, and its theatrical main characters. I will begin, in this chapter, by looking at the ways the comic is similar to revenge tragedies in many details, continuing with *The Spanish Tragedy* as the main example, and towards the end of the chapter discuss how it departs from the tradition in the larger view.

The act of acting in itself is a concern in both *The Spanish Tragedy* and *V for Vendetta*. In *The Spanish Tragedy*, it is in the play-within-the-play Hieronimo achieves his vengeance. His revenge is not just an act of violence, but a performance as well – doubly so, as the play is of course being performed for an actual audience. Hieronimo makes his enemies act according to his script, and has them killed right before the eyes of an unsuspecting audience of the King and the Duke – an act he can only achieve because he is in a play himself. In real life, the deaths by stabbing would be obvious, but because his victims exist on a stage where the convention is a bloodless death, he can have the characters killed without causing alarm. The bloodless death reads as an actual death to the audience, and a false death to the audience-within-the-play – just as the real audience of course know it is a false death. It is a clever use of the convention to conceal a murder in the story, and to make Hieronimo's enemies participate in their own deaths in a way that could not work realistically.

This manipulation of enemies, making them follow the revenger's script, is also present in *V for Vendetta*, where V effortlessly manipulates Norsefire party members into killing each other – for instance when he sends a video tape of Helen Heyer being unfaithful to her husband, prompting the husband to bludgeon the other man to death with a wrench (Moore and Lloyd, 1990: 254). He also indirectly claims to have manipulated Rose Almond, who after the death of her husband at V's hands is left destitute and eventually decides that the fascist system is the cause of her problems and assassinates the Leader. Exactly how V believes he has brought about this chain of events is unclear,

his only direct intervention in her life was killing her husband, but he clearly takes the credit for her actions. V leaves roses with his victims, and when Evey asks if there is a rose in his garden intended for the Leader, he responds: “Oh no. Not here. For him, I've cultivated a most *special* rose.” (*ibid.*, 221) Since the comic uses only capital letters in the speech bubbles, there is no distinction between the word *rose* and the name *Rose*. In this way, V takes credit for the drive to revenge in others, much as Revenge in *The Spanish Tragedy*. I will get back to this comparison shortly. His manipulation of events is also hinted at in a sequence of pages in chapter 3 of book 3. For the first part of the chapter, each page shows a particular set of characters planning for the days to come, and on each page the final panel shows V placing dominoes in a row. (*ibid.*, 202-206) On the final page of the issue he knocks over the first domino in the penultimate panel, while the final panel shows the Leader learning that V has taken control of the Fate computer. (*ibid.*, 209)

In addition to the focus on manipulation, *V for Vendetta* is also greatly concerned with performance. V is constantly performing, bringing theatrical flair to his escapades. There are even a couple of plays-within-the-comic: When V captures Lewis Prothero, he leads him through an elaborate re-enactment of daily life in the Larkhill concentration camp, using Prothero's prized doll collection to stand in for the prisoners. Another elaborate performance is his television appearance – after hijacking the station, V broadcasts a programme which takes the form of a performance review. V plays the part of the boss, informing his employee, humanity, that their work has been unsatisfactory. The gist of his message is that the people of Britain must chose to be better, but his delivery is in the form of an extended metaphor. V identifies with the characters of Early Modern drama to the point that he even occasionally speaks in iambic pentameter, as for instance on page 201. The meter serves to link V as a character with other characters speaking in blank verse, i.e. stage characters, and emphasises his actions as a performance. While the text is not entirely regular, the rhythm of it is apparent. The text is spread over several speech bubbles, and so the rhythm is partly concealed in the comic form, and might be missed by a casual reader. If the words are taken

out of their bubbles and placed in the form of a play manuscript, the pattern becomes much clearer. This following quotation has been rearranged, with line breaks inserted by me, to clarify the rhythm. Apart from the last line, which acts almost as a closing couplet, it follows iambic pentameter. The original arrangement can be seen in Fig. 9.

You see, my rival, though inclined to roam,
possessed at home a *wife* that he *adored*.
He'll rue his promiscuity, the rogue
who stole *my* only love, when he's informed
how many years it is since first I bedded *his*.
(*ibid.*, 201)

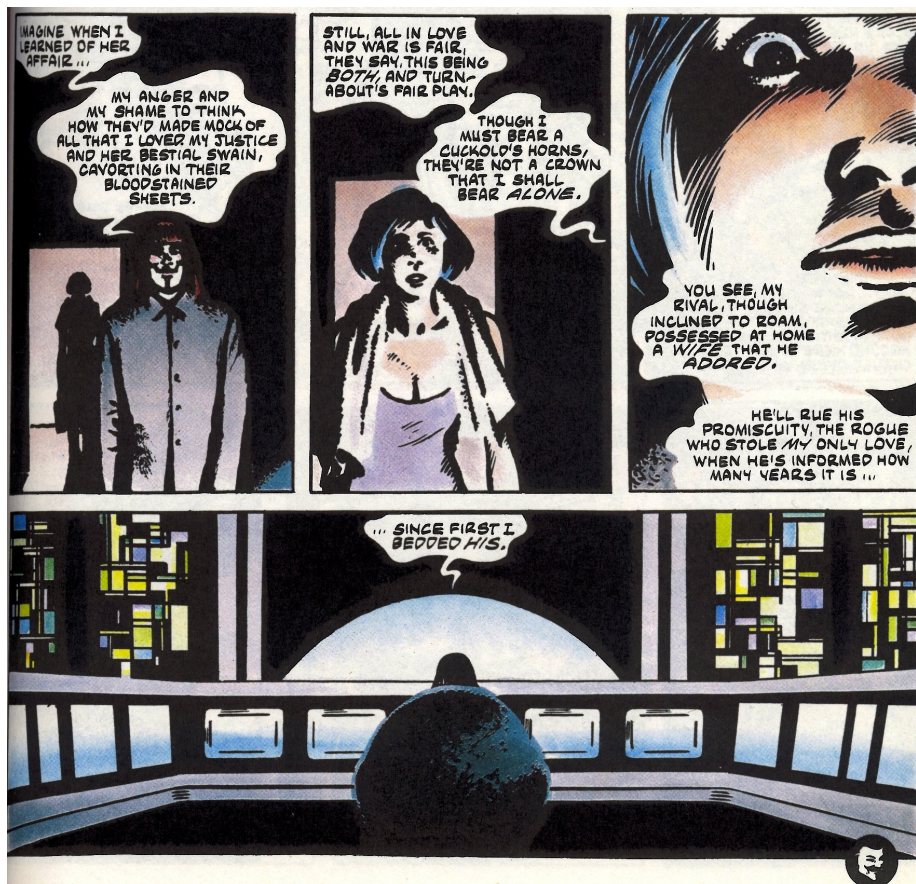


Fig. 9: Moore and Lloyd, 1990: 201.

V also expresses his admiration for a good performance earlier in the comic: “It’s everything, Evey. The perfect entrance, the grand illusion.” “It’s everything.” (*ibid.*, 31). His obsession with performance is also visible in his Guy Fawkes costume, the mask keeping anyone from seeing his true face. V performs even when there is no audience – or rather, when there is no audience internal to the story. Like the soliloquising characters of the stage, V behaves dramatically and explains his actions aloud, although only the reader is able to observe him. As mentioned earlier, Moore and Lloyd deliberately did not use thought bubbles in *V for Vendetta*. Lacking a direct insight into V’s thought process, we have only the performance to judge him by – just as with a stage show.

For an example of V performing for no audience but the reader, we can look at his conversation with Madam Justice, the statue on the Old Bailey (*ibid.*, 39-41). He carries out the conversation, also speaking the part of Madam Justice, chastising her for unfaithfulness and explaining that he has chosen a new lover, anarchy. He concludes by leaving a heart-shaped chocolate box containing a bomb, and taking a bow before leaving. This is visual and dramatic, and done for the sake of performance itself. In the prologue to book 3, each page ends with a panel of V conducting, as if before an orchestra, with the sheet music of the 1812 overture in front of him. As he conducts, buildings in the skyline beyond explode. The final panel shows V taking a bow, faced towards the reader (*ibid.*, 183). No other character is hinted at being present, this is a performance for the reader alone. While the “fourth wall” is never directly broken, meaning that V never outright acknowledges that he is a character in a comic, the concept is played with much as when an actor on stage whispers an aside to the audience.

A slight bending of the rules also occurs in *The Spanish Tragedy* – a use of the stage space in a way that acknowledges the fact that the play is being performed on a stage, but without outright admission that its characters are actors rather than real people. In act 3, scene 2, as Hieronimo is on stage, lamenting his son’s death, “*a letter falleth*” (Kyd, 1995: 3.2.23/24). The letter is from Bel-imperia, explaining that Lorenzo has sent her away, and names Horatio’s killers. The letter is likely

dropped from the upper stage by Bel-imperia herself, the same upper stage which acts as the location of her exile in 3.9. (Maus, 1995: 339). In the internal world of the play, Bel-imperia and Hieronimo are separated by an unknown distance, specifically to prevent Bel-imperia from communicating with anyone. However, in the space of the stage, they are quite close, and a letter dropped from Bel-imperia's upper stage will land at Hieronimo's lower stage. This acknowledges the stage space, without breaking the flow of the story. Highlighting the form, it is a metatheatric moment, much as V's performance to the reader might be called metacomic – both implicitly acknowledge the form, but without mentioning this explicitly.

V for Vendetta does not go so far in playing with the form as to escape the panel borders, but it does make use of the reader's ability to go back and compare a panel with a previous one, setting up echoes or duplicates – such as Derek Almond firing his unloaded gun, or Evey sitting numb on a flight of stairs staring at the corpse of her protector in both book 2, chapter 8 and book 3, chapter 9. The important point to note is the degree of performance embedded in the character V, and the many deliberate parallels between him and characters from plays in general, and revenge tragedy in particular.

In addition to the many visual echoes of stage traditions, *V for Vendetta*'s plot follows the revenge tragedy form in other ways. In the first chapter, I said that the moral ambivalence of the revenger is one of the key features of the tradition, and V fits perfectly into this trope. From his very first appearance, his ambiguous role is highlighted. Fig. 10 is the first real look at V in the comic, prior to this panel he has been a shadow. The reader first sees him clearly in a mirror, as he has just finished putting on his costume. The title of the first chapter is shown in a text box superimposed on the scene. Since the chapter title, “The Villain”, and the main character are introduced at the same

time, the title could almost be taken for a caption to the image of V, identifying him.



Fig. 10: Moore and Lloyd, 1990: 10.

V remains a largely inscrutable figure throughout the comic. He is an unreliable narrator, and almost everything the reader learns about him is filtered through him. His history is obscure, and what little is pieced together by the detectives tracking him may be false. Even the diary that reveals his origin has been edited by him, to remove certain passages. With only his word to go on, the mystery surrounding him makes it harder to judge the reasoning behind his actions. His statements about himself, and even his actions cannot be fully trusted as revealing his true motive, as his obsession with performance demonstrates. There is no telling which actions are genuinely motivated, and which are included to confuse and obfuscate. This prevents the reader from considering V purely as a person; his nature as a character in a comic is highlighted instead, and becomes another self-reflexive element in the comic. As such, it is difficult to assign any views on morality to the character himself, and we must instead consider the story as a whole to see what emerges.

When talking about morality in revenge tragedy, the topic of religion is relevant, as it has certainly played a large part in shaping the moral conventions of both our own, and Early Modern

society. In *The Spanish Tragedy*, act 3, scene 13, Hieronimo gives a soliloquy while debating with himself how to proceed. He opens with the words “*Vindicta mihi!*” (Kyd, 1995: 3.13.1) – an excerpt from Romans 12:19: “Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord.” He next quotes Seneca, and ponders whether he should trust to divine justice or seek revenge himself. In the end, of course, he chooses the final option. In *The Spanish Tragedy*, there is no divine intervention on Hieronimo's behalf – he must seek justice himself. Despite the supernatural spectre Revenge sitting on the upper stage taking credit for the events of the play, it is Hieronimo who must perform the action. At the very end, Revenge promises to place the now dead enemies of Andrea in various positions of eternal torment, letting them replace classical figures like Sisyphus and Tityus at their tasks, while Hieronimo and his friends are taken to paradise, but in the earthly world, there is no justice but what the revenger creates.

In *V for Vendetta*, the same is even more true than in *The Spanish Tragedy*. There is no indication of divine intervention, no appropriate punishment or poetic justice handed down to sinners from on high, before or after death. Nothing punished V, he succeeds exactly as he planned to. Nothing punished Norsefire, the fascist party, except V himself. Moore's universe is uncaring, and devoid of any justice beyond what Man makes for himself.

This is not to say religion does not enter into the story, on the contrary. In Norsefire's England, religion is again a tool of the regime, meant to control the people. Posters bearing the slogan “Strength through purity – Purity through faith” along with a winged cross appear several places in the comic, including V's simulated government prison (Moore and Lloyd, 1990: 148). Bishops are high-ranking party members, and the Sunday service is a propaganda exercise. The congregation of bishop Lilliman sing a hymn: “One race, one creed, one hope in thee” (*ibid.*, 44). Moore's clergy are hypocrites. Bishop Lilliman speaks in religiously informed terms, and keeps the forms of his station, including being addressed as “your grace”, but he shows no indication of belief in the Christian God. He refers to the Fate computer as “the almighty” (*ibid.*, 46), sardonically,

indicating that the regime is where is loyalties lie. He is also a paedophile, which appears to be an open secret – his guards seem aware of his propensities, and his aide arranges for prostituted children to be sent from an agency (*ibid.*, 47). Evey takes the place of one of these prostitutes, and the bishop delights in giving her a repeat performance of his sermon of the day. Moore has gone out of his way to portray the church as a corrupt tool of the state.

The only one who could fill the role of the divine avenger is V, and he never claims divine mandate. On the contrary, he says “I am the devil, and I come to do the devil's work.” (*ibid.*, 55) This is in sharp contrast to the hypocrisy of the corrupt bishop. V the forces the bishop to swallow a poisoned communion wafer, delivering the poetic justice that God would not. Moore emphasises the lack of divine intervention through this method of murder, and also has the character Finch, the inspector tracking V, explicate the situation over two pages, explaining the miracle of transubstantiation, and finally concluding: “And you know what?” “When it reached his abdomen it was *still* cyanide.” (*ibid.*, 62)

In *V for Vendetta*, then, religion is no guide to morality, and no obstacle for the revenger, as it was for Hieronimo. The world of the comic itself does not make clear judgements on the rightness or wrongness of its characters' actions. The reader is left to make his own judgement calls on what is presented and by the standards of our Western moral code, V is far from being above reproach.

V's murders are mainly aimed at the people who imprisoned him, or the people who created the system which oppressed him. While one can debate the morality of any murder, within the context of revenge tragedies this is not extraordinary, and is in fact fairly tame since it does not include many innocent bystanders⁹. What makes his actions uncomfortable to read, however, is the pleasure he takes in the murders, the production he makes of them. This is something he reserves for his most hated foes; when he kills random soldiers of the fascist state, it is noted that he does it “ruthlessly, efficiently, and with a minimum of fuss.” (*ibid.*, 24) The inspector, Finch, finds this

⁹ Explicitly, at any rate. V causes many explosions, and there is no indication in the story whether or not anyone happened to die in them.

appalling, likening it to slaughtering animals (*ibid.*), but I react far more to the cruel games V plays with those he truly focuses on. He painstakingly recreates the concentration camp in order to give Prothero a tour of it, burning his prized doll collection in place of the prisoners in a macabre ceremony. He dresses in devil horns and poisons the bishop with a communion wafer. He does not want to just kill them, he wants to break them. Only the doctor who experimented on him gets a quiet death from a painless poison.

This perverse pleasure in murder is not on its own enough to push him into the monster category, however. They are only the expected fare in a revenge plot. While it is often hard, or even impossible, to pinpoint the exact moment where a revenger passes the threshold between a sympathetic and justified avenger, and the more complicated villain, there are certain points which alter the reader's perception of the character. In *V for Vendetta*, such a moment comes when V kidnaps Evey. Evey is not one of his enemies, but rather a frightened bystander who has become swept up in his revenge plot. At that point in the comic she has even assisted him in some of his plans, but it is obvious that she is just another pawn in his game. The kidnapping is just one of many tools he uses to mould her into the person he needs her to be, but it is the most brutal and unfair of them. He snatches her off the streets, as she is about to shoot a thug, and pretends to be a police officer. He puts her in a simulated government prison, and acting the part of the fascist regime mistreats her as they would do. The revenger becoming like his enemy is a common theme of revenge tragedies, but here V is literally assuming the role of his opponents, doing to an innocent what they have previously done to him. He shaves Evey's head, keeps her in a cold, bare cell, and tortures her to see if she will give away information. He shows no remorse for these actions, and when, after the reveal, Evey demands to know why he did it, he replies: "Because I love you." "Because I want to set you free." (*ibid.*, 167) V does many cruel things to his enemies, but this instance of torturing a friend and ally is the most egregious example of him crossing the indefinable line and becoming someone whom the reader does not necessarily sympathise with fully, and whose

actions can be both repulsive and understandable.

V's justification for the kidnapping is that he needed to cure Evey of her fear of death, thereby releasing her from the hold of the fascist government. Even if this explanation can be trusted, the act is that of a madman, thoroughly emphasising V's nature as an unbalanced figure not to be trusted. From that moment, the reader must view him as something other than a justified victim seeking redress; he has crossed the moral line and entered the ambiguous territory where revenge tragedy revengers exist.

The theme of the past returning to haunt the present is an important feature of the comic. A ghost egging the revenger on is common in Senecan tragedies, and appears in many Early Modern plays influenced by them, including *The Spanish Tragedy*. Old Hamlet may be the best known example of such a ghost. This goes beyond Seneca, however: even in the earlier *Oresteia* we see the ghost of Clytaemnestra demanding retribution. In *V for Vendetta* the ghost is more metaphorical, it is largely the past as a whole that haunts the present rather than a particular figure. The comic does not have the chorus the two spirits provide in *The Spanish Tragedy*, nor does it have the actual ghosts of *Hamlet* and *The Oresteia*, but V himself echoes both Revenge and Andrea. Or rather, V echoes Revenge, and the nameless man beneath the mask echoes Andrea. The victim of the concentration camp has returned as a ghost, accompanied by the masked, larger-than-life figure V, who is in many ways Revenge personified. Like Revenge in *The Spanish Tragedy*, V claims responsibility and credit for the actions of others, who were motivated by desires for revenge, change and stability. V is never explicitly identified as a supernatural personification the way Revenge is, but it is clear that V only came into being after the man in the concentration camp was destroyed by the medical experiments done to him. It is stated that the drugs gave him a psychotic breakdown (*ibid.*, 81), and

whatever character he was before was transformed into the vengeful V. Revenge and Andrea, the ghost and the concept, are both present in the figure of V. Unlike the pair from *The Spanish Tragedy*, V also acts directly in the main story, he is more than an observer. He is both the drive for revenge and the active revenger. The role of the supernatural, which is so important in Seneca, and implicitly active in *The Spanish Tragedy*, is non-existent in *V for Vendetta*. Moore is no Aeschylus; in his story, the agency lies with the human characters, not mysterious divinities. Even though religion is highlighted by the comic as an element of society, there is no god intervening in the affairs of the characters. Fate is a computer, man-made, and subverted by V to do his bidding rather than its makers. Fate is ruled by the revenger, the opposite of the situation typical in Greek tragedies, but consistent with the post-Senecan tradition of the revenger himself being responsible for his actions, but unlike Seneca's plays, the ghost is metaphorical, and not an actual ghost figure.

V is further emphasised as a ghost of the past through the costume he wears: the wig, the cape and the Guy Fawkes mask. The character takes great pleasure in theatricality, and clearly means the costume to be unsettling – an echo perhaps of the comic's roots lying partly in the superhero genre; the character Batman dresses as a bat, to play on the fears and superstitions of criminals. In choosing Guy Fawkes as his persona, however, the comic casts V as the ghost of that rebel. V, like Fawkes, wants to overthrow the government, and unlike Fawkes, V succeeds in blowing up the houses of Parliament on the 5th of November (*ibid.*, 14). The costume marks V as a clear subversive element, opposed to existing order. The situation of the historical Guy Fawkes and the fictional V are very different, however. Fawkes was a Catholic dissenter protesting Protestant rule, while V is an anarchist opposing a fascist regime. Whatever similarities there may be in methods, Fawkes's ideals were far from the ideals attributed to V. In “Behind the Painted Smile”, Moore recounts how it was Lloyd who suggested the Fawkes costume, and quotes the letter where he first proposed it: “I was thinking, why don't we portray him as a resurrected Guy Fawkes, complete with one of those papier mâché masks, in a cape and conical hat? He'd look *really* bizarre

and it would give Guy Fawkes the image he's deserved all these years. We shouldn't burn the chap every Nov. 5th, but *celebrate* his attempt to blow up Parliament!" (*ibid.*, 272)

This quote indicates that, at the outset at least, the authors intended to equate the two figure to a large degree, but as I have already stated, their motives and beliefs differ greatly. Fawkes sought to bring England back under the influence of the Pope, while V opposes church and other authorities equally. So, Lloyd's initial ambitions of glorifying Fawkes through V do not appear to have reached fruition, but the choice of the costume serves instead to highlight the degree to which V is an actor, thereby further cementing his relationship with stage traditions. V is as the actor performs the part of the revenge tragedy ghost, taking it upon himself to represent the past as a whole and seek revenge both for himself and for the society he considers to have been usurped by corrupt enemies, represented by the church and the government. In the end, even his revenge plot is a performance.

For all the features it has in common with other revenge tragedies, *V for Vendetta* was not simply poured into an existing mould; it does some things which the Early Modern tragedies do not, just as the Elizabethans and Jacobean experimented and developed the model of Seneca. The most obvious experimentation with the form is the question of to what extent the story is a tragedy at all.

On the surface, it follows the normal pattern of a revenge tragedy. A man, wronged by his enemies, wreaks bloody havoc to punish them, and is ultimately killed himself as he achieves his goal. While this follows the structure of tragedy, the outcome in the story is not necessarily tragic. V is killed by inspector Finch, but does not take this too hard. It appears he has planned for exactly that to happen, as he had already prepared his coffin amid the explosives that would destroy 10 Downing Street. He is not the only revenger to plan for his own death as part of his revenge;

Hieronimo certainly did not expect to survive after killing Lorenzo and Balthazar. Unlike Hieronimo, V's plans extend beyond his own death. He carefully instructs Evey, preparing her to take up his role when he is gone, though she does not realise this until after he is dead. Evey also dons the mask and cape of his Fawkes disguise, and presents herself to the public as the same V: "Reports of my death were ..." "... exaggerated." (*ibid.*, 258) However, she is instructed to be a different kind of V, a builder rather than destroyer. "Away with out destroyers! They have no place within our better world." (*ibid.*, 222) says V to Evey as he loads his train with explosives. Later, as he is dying, he says: "This country is not saved ... do not think that ... but all its old beliefs have come to *rubble*, and from rubble may we *build* ..." (*ibid.*, 245). Despite this optimism he also notes that the new England might not take hold in time, and that his actions may have caused the collapse of society without possibility of a new one. Several times in the comic, the fascist regime is depicted as holding society together, in a situation which would otherwise have destroyed it. The end result of his schemes is therefore uncertain, and could still result in societal collapse rather than re-established order.

This brings up another feature departing from most revenge tragedies. While many of the Early Modern plays have a very political component – portraying kings and other people in power as at best ignorant of the realities surrounding them, at worst corrupt – obliquely commenting on contemporary situations, *V for Vendetta's* political message is not as clear cut. There are definite and loud echoes of the dissatisfaction Moore and Lloyd felt with the Thatcher administration, but the final impression is more nuanced than that of corrupt versus just. The comic uses the basis of the revenge tragedy plot to tell a story of conflicting ideologies, and indeed, V's revenge is stated to be not just against the people who have wronged him, but against their ideas as well:

"How *purposeful* was your vendetta; how *benign*, almost like *surgery* ..." "Your foes assumed you sought revenge upon their flesh alone, but you did not stop there ..." "You

gored their ideology as well.” (*ibid.*, 260)

This conflict of ideologies is not a simple good-versus-evil plot. Instead of presenting the fascist regime as the stereotypical evil empire and V as the champion of liberty, the two are depicted as opposite extremes of the political spectrum, both with their upsides and downsides. The Leader readily admits that he is a fascist, and does not see this as anything other than a necessity. He is portrayed as a man who despite his flaws genuinely believes a strong hand is the only way to ensure humanity's survival in the post-nuclear war world. His internal monologue in Fig. 11 shows his views on himself and his methods.

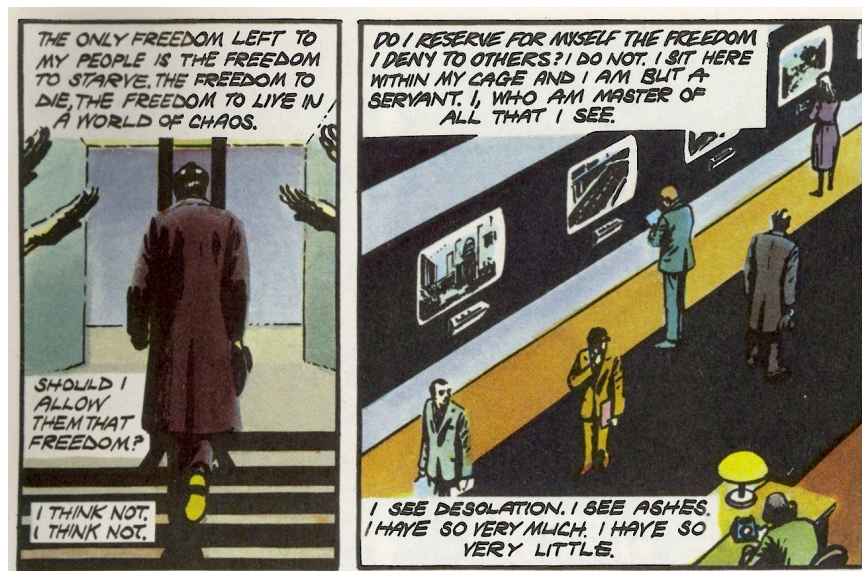


Fig. 11: Moore and Lloyd, 1990: 38.

As the comic progresses he descends into madness, becoming obsessed with the Fate computer and losing touch with the real world. He truly believes the people love him, as they cheer him at gunpoint (*ibid.*, 232). In addition to this weakness of the Leader, the upper echelons of the government appear to be constantly scheming against each other, vying for position and personal power. Helen Heyer is the best example of this, as she constantly schemes, seduces and bribes to

ensure her domineered husband a favourable position. The weaknesses of the fascist government are obvious, it is vulnerable to abuse by the insane and the corrupt. The atrocities – concentration camps, ethnic cleansing and persecution of homosexuals – are also clearly in view. Its strengths are not so highlighted, but the mere fact that Britain still operates after a nuclear holocaust indicates that the Leader's claims of necessary stability have some basis in fact in the world of the story.

On the other side, we are shown V, the anarchist. He professes his allegiance to the philosophy in his conversation with the statue of Madam Justice, where he names anarchy as his new lover: “*She* has taught me that justice is meaningless without freedom. *She* is honest. She makes no promises and breaks none.” (*ibid.*, 41) The more violent side of his ideology is shown almost immediately as he blows up the Old Bailey and leaves praising “the flames of freedom” (*ibid.*) The positive sides of anarchy are shown in the large number of people who respond to V's message, indicating that it is indeed the will of the people that they should be free. V displays a strange optimism that anarchy will work, saying “With anarchy comes an age of *ordnung*, of *true* order, which is to say *voluntary* order.” This contradicts his admonishment of mankind as always choosing corrupt and dictatorial leaders earlier in the comic, and the contradiction highlights the very real danger that his optimism may be misplaced. As already mentioned, he admits that his new anarchic society may fail as he dies. Moreover, V's own erratic nature and previously discussed moral ambivalence is a reminder that anarchy is as vulnerable to madmen as fascism is.

So, neither ideology is presented as black or white, but overall anarchy is left with a slightly more favourable impression than fascism. *V for Vendetta* was written during the Thatcher administration, and as I already mentioned, both Moore and Lloyd were dissatisfied with the political direction of the government. In his preface to the comic from 1988, after its completion, Moore lists several similarities between his fictional Norsefire and then-contemporary Conservative policies (*ibid.*, 6). The comic, then, can be read as a reaction and warning against the politics of its day. The fact that anarchy is not given a complete pass, and fascism not a complete condemnation,

however, indicates rather that Moore and Lloyd use the revenge plot underpinning to tell a story that warns against political extremes.

In addition to this political dimension, the comic departs from the post-Senecan mould by its depiction of revenge as partly a means to an end, and not merely a goal in itself. As already noted, V's revenge encompassed not just his enemies, but the system in which they existed. The new world which V laboured to bring about is left for Evey to build, however. Evey dons the same mask and becomes the new V, and changes the focus to building rather than destroying. The cycle of vengeance is broken as she does not carry the old V's hatred. Evey could easily have become a revenge like V, and nearly does at one point. As V kidnapped her for his extended prison simulation, she was about to kill the man who had killed her lover; she is thwarted in this only by V's intervention. In the prison simulation, V puts her through much the same experience he had in the concentration camp, even delivering to her the same letter that he had received from the woman in the next cell. The entire point of the simulation, according to him, is to give Evey the same freedom that he himself feels. Where he came out of the camp filled with rage and desires for revenge, however, Evey is much milder. Some time after the simulation, V offers to kill the man Evey intended to shoot, saying in his rose room: "There is a rose here for him. You only have to pluck it and hand it to me." (*ibid.*, 176). Evey turns down the offer, telling V to let the rose grow. Having thus refused to become the revenger, she becomes instead the builder after the revenge plot is over. Shaped by V's tutelage, she is ready to step in when revenge has served its purpose, and further V's plan in its constructive phase.

V for Vendetta certainly exists in the same revenge tragedy tradition as *The Spanish Tragedy* and other revenge tragedies, drawing mainly on the post-Senecan tradition developed by Elizabethan

and Jacobean playwrights, containing both common themes and direct allusions. It also distinguishes itself from this tradition with new approaches. It highlights performance and uses elements of it within the conventions of comics to obfuscate the nature of the main character. It uses the revenge plot as the vehicle for other themes, looking mainly at political ideologies, casting them as opponents in the same way that the revenger and his target are opponents. The cause of the revenger is both personal and ideological, and the ideology ultimately takes precedence. The revenge plot is a tool, revenge itself an arrow in the quiver of a character who wants and plans for more than just the destruction of those who have wronged him. Ultimately, the comic resonates with earlier texts which have as their subject the corruption of state, church and self.

Chapter Three: *The Sandman* and the Mixing of Traditions

The Sandman is a much longer work than *V for Vendetta*, and a less focused one. Though there is an overarching story being told throughout the comic, it is divided into several chapters, some of which are almost stand-alone stories, and feature the title character only in a background role. As it nears the end, however, the varying threads are pulled together for the climax, the chapter called “The Kindly Ones”. This is the chapter which I focus on in this thesis, as it is both the climactic chapter of the work as a whole, as well as the chapter most engaged with the revenge tragedy tradition. In very broad strokes, *The Sandman* as a whole concerns the character Morpheus, the personification and ruler of the concept of dreams, who struggles to change his ways after being made aware of his character flaws. In “The Kindly Ones”, his enemies come to kill him, and realising that he cannot change to the extent needed to defeat them, he allows himself to die. The specifics of the plot as it relates to the revenge tragedy tradition will of course be expanded upon in the discussion of that relationship. Where *V for Vendetta* was mainly a development of the post-Senecan Early Modern tradition of revenge tragedy, *The Sandman* draws on a wider range of sources. The Senecan tradition is present, but it is contrasted with a strong influence from Greek drama, and mainly from Aeschylus's *Oresteia*. By drawing from both models, *The Sandman* develops its own strange brand of revenge tragedy, using the tradition to tell a different kind of story, examining gender roles and the concept of predestination. Before I begin the discussion of the plot, however, I wish to say something about its use of the medium.

The same use of implication and closure to tell the story as seen in *V for Vendetta* are of course also found in *The Sandman*, because this use of closure is a feature of the comics medium as a whole. There is no need to retread ground, then, to show how panels in *Sandman* function in the same way as panels in *V for Vendetta* in relation to theatrical performance. There are, however, some interesting differences between the way these two works use the comic medium. *Sandman* makes

use to a much greater extent of the comic page as a tool. By this I mean that it utilises panel shape and placement, fonts and the colour of the page itself to emphasise or make points in the storytelling. *V for Vendetta* for the most part uses a very regular panel layout: three rows of panels on each page, with clear and uniform gutters and margins. The number of panels in each row varies, as does the height of each row, but the end result fits in the same rectangle each page. Fig. 7¹⁰ is a good example of this layout.

“The Kindly Ones” begins with a similarly rigid layout, with three rows of panels, and two or three panels in each row. This regularity is kept throughout most of the chapter, but on occasion it is altered. The fact that these deviations are relatively rare makes them stand out and emphasises the action depicted in them. When a pattern is followed constantly, when the regular layout is kept, it fades from the mind, becomes a background detail that is not noticed while reading, so that breaking it becomes an effective tool for focusing attention. The ways in which this pattern is broken varies. Some panels lack borders, and other reach the edge of the page without any margin, bleeding into the gutters of the panels that follow, such as in Fig. 4¹¹.

Even more striking are the rare occasions when the panel borders are given unexpected shapes to thoroughly underscore the action depicted in them. Three that stand out are Lyta breaking the mirror, Morpheus trashing Thessaly's motel room, and Morpheus being hit with the scorpion whip. The first and last of these three are reproduced in Fig. 12 and Fig. 13. The middle is found on page 22 of part 9 of the 1996 edition of “The Kindly Ones”. Of these, the first is the most drastic departure from the mould. Lyta smashes her fist into the mirror, and as it shatters, the panel containing the action is shattered as well. This is once again me sharing my own reading through closure – what is on the page is an image of Lyta with an outstretched arm, as if having thrown a punch, pointed through a broken mirror, with pieces of glass flying around her. The jagged border of the panel, cutting deep into the image itself, also mimics the shape of glass shards. “The Kindly

10 On page 35.

11 On page 27.

Ones”, like *V for Vendetta*, does not use onomatopoeia to portray sounds, but in this panel, the crash of the shattering mirror is quite clearly present in the mind of the reader, if not spelled out in words on the page.



Fig. 12: Gaiman, 1996: part 7, page 18.



Fig. 13: Gaiman, 1996: part 11, page 19.

Fig. 13, from later in the chapter, has a similar effect. In this case, the shards formed by the panel border are fewer, and have straight edges. In addition to the shards, the entire panel is tilted slightly to the right. The impact of the scorpion whip is greatly magnified – the sting is such that it alters the page the story is told on as well as the actors in it.

Other than panels, *Sandman* also uses several visual techniques to imply different voices for the various characters. The most prominent example is Morpheus himself – his speech bubbles are always drawn with a wavy, uneven line, coloured black and filled with white text. This colour scheme is inverted when Daniel becomes the new Dream – the bubbles remain wavy, but are white, with black text, in the same text style as Morpheus. The raven Matthew speaks in jagged bubbles, shaded in a yellow colour, with a slightly jittery font, except for when he imitates Morpheus in “The Wake”, where he uses the same white-on-black as Morpheus. A different raven's speech is portrayed

identically, but with a red shading. The angel Remiel's words are written in a cursive script, while Lucifer's are written in a formal, more old-fashioned typeface. The most unusual representation of speech is given to Delirium, whose speech bubbles are constantly changing, with varying font sizes from word to word and even letter to letter, and a variety of colours forming the backdrop. The voices of the characters become identified with how they appear on the page, and are therefore sounded out differently in the mind of the reader. This distinctive style also allows a specific mimicking or echoing of a character or event. When Delirium speaks with Lucifer, she interrupts his quotation of Poe: "Quoth the raven ..." "Whatever." (Gaiman, 1996: part 12, page 13). In the next issue, the raven Matthew responds to Lucien's quote from *The White Devil* with "Whatever." (*ibid.*, part 13, page 4.) with the stress indicated identically with Delirium's comment. These tools used to differentiate the voices of the characters could again be compared to stage performance, or any audible performance, where characters are more easily distinguished by differing voices in a way that plain text cannot capture.

The last technique used in "The Kindly Ones" which I want to mention is the use of colour in the gutters. Throughout this chapter, the colour of the page, filling the margins and the gutters between the panels, changes depending on the setting of the story, as Hildebrandt (2007) makes clear. If the action takes place in the waking world, or in Faerie, the gutters are white. If it takes place in the dream world, or in Lyta's hallucinations, as well as the realm of the triple goddess and Svartalfheim, the gutters are grey. This colour-coding of setting is almost invisible – I did not notice it even after reading it several times – but does set the tone of a given page, if subconsciously. Several times, the colour fades from one to the other, usually as Lyta has a moment of clarity during her hallucinations. The page is also white when Lyta smashes the mirror, a change from the perpetual grey of her hallucinations up till that point. Her encounter with the Furies is real, according to the colouring of the page, although the landscape she moves through is as strange and unreal as the grey-coded journey she has taken so far.

The final colour of note comes on page 290, where Lyta attempts to stop the Furies after discovering Daniel is still alive. The setting is vague, with distant rock formations and plumes of fire making the background of the panels. The gutters are coloured a deep red. This sends the mind both to thoughts of anger, which is an appropriate emotion to associate with the Furies, and, in conjunction with the background of the panels, to Hell – also not a foreign setting for Furies, who in mythology lived in Hades.

Finally, there is the matter of the drawing style. In chapter one, I mentioned that McCloud argues that a more abstract drawing style causes the reader to identify more with the characters, and thus be more engaged with the story. The arguments he presents for this view state that a person's visualisation of themselves is conceptual rather than realistic, (McCloud, 1994: 35-36), and that a more abstracted, or cartoonish, image is thus easier to identify with. As with many of McCloud's theories, this may well be true in many cases, but this is not the only effect of an abstracted drawing style, and should not be seen as a categorical rule. He also argues that a cartoonish drawing style amplifies features of the image: “When we *abstract* an image through *cartooning*, we're not so much *eliminating* details as we are *focusing* on *specific details*.” (*ibid.*, 30) This is perhaps a more universally applicable principle, though I will not get into a detailed discussion of that question in this thesis. I agree with McCloud that a more abstracted image allows the reader to focus more on the elements which are present, and that this can be used to highlight features which the artists wish to call attention to, but only to an extent. At some point of simplification, we are left with stick figures, with so few details on them that they convey only the sketchiest of impressions, with no details left to focus on. “The Kindly Ones” is not so abstracted as that, and the style used may indeed be intended to focus attention of the details included, but I do not think heightened identification is the primary consequence of its art style.

The Sandman, over the course of its run, had many different artists responsible for drawing the comic, and consequently displays several different art styles. In “The Kindly Ones”, the style is

markedly more abstract than the rest of the comic, and the contrast is highlighted by the much more realistic style of the chapter which follows, “The Wake”. Compare the depiction of the new Dream in “The Kindly Ones”, in Fig. 14, and “The Wake”, in Fig. 15:



Fig. 14: *Gaiman*, 1996: part 13, page 22.



Fig. 15: *Gaiman*, 1997: 24.

The difference is obvious. “The Kindly Ones” uses fewer, stronger lines and clear shapes, where “The Wake” uses softer lines, emulating real life to a greater degree – though not, obviously, photo-realistic. Previous chapters use different art styles, sometimes differing from issue to issue, but none are so clearly abstracted, so cartoonish, as “The Kindly Ones”.

The sharp contrast of this abstracted style to the rest of the comic seems jarring. When the reader reaches “The Kindly Ones”, there has been a sudden gear change, and the effect may be a bit disorienting. “The Kindly Ones” is one of the final chapters of *The Sandman*, and any casual readers who have reached that point will have found a flow in their reading, immersing themselves in the story, and possibly ignore entirely medium through which it is delivered. When “The Kindly Ones” suddenly appears in a very different style, this flow is broken. Rather than being a tool for increased identification, the sudden shift in art style instead forces the reader to remember the

medium. The drawn nature of the comic comes into focus, and the reading experience is altered by the sudden awareness of the tools used to present the story, and may cause one to notice the techniques I have discussed here more readily. As the reader continues through “The Kindly Ones”, familiarity with the new style emerges, and immersion into the story again takes over, and this is where McCloud's ideas on identification may come into play, though none of the characters in “The Kindly Ones” are depicted as cartoonishly simple as McCloud's examples.

When the art style changes again in “The Wake”, a similar awareness of the medium emerges. This time, the art style is much more realistic, and therefore – by McCloud's argument – further removed from the reader. This is, however, closer to the rest of the series than “The Kindly Ones”, and therefore not so startling a change. It is only in that climactic chapter that Gaiman chose to jolt the reader out of his comfort zone and focus attention on the way the story was told as well as the story itself, while possibly also increasing the reader's sympathetic identification with the characters.

The Sandman exists in the revenge tragedy continuum, much as *V for Vendetta* and *The Spanish Tragedy* do, but it shares more than just the tradition with *The Oresteia*: there is a clear and explicit relationship between “The Kindly Ones” and *The Eumenides*. This relationship is made clear from the very title of the chapter: *eumenides* is Greek for *kindly ones*.

Like the events of *The Oresteia*, the climactic chapter of *The Sandman* is driven as much by fate as by the characters. A triple goddess is a recurring character in the comic, filling the role of several mythological trios, such as the Grey Ladies and the Fates. A sequence of these three women in an ordinary, modern house frames “The Kindly Ones”. In this sequence, the mother figure is knitting, while the maiden is handing her the thread, and the crone finally cuts it off – a clear

reference to mythology indicating that they are acting as the Fates. With this framing sequence, the events of the whole chapter are cast as inevitable fate, rather than driven purely by the actions of the characters. This places the events of the story in the same tradition as Aeschylus, as opposed to the character-driven revenge tales of Seneca and the Elizabethan and Jacobean playwrights that followed in his wake.

The same triple goddess appears as the Furies in the chapter itself. The drawings show them as slightly different from the Fate aspect, but still clearly the same character design. The Furies are thus clearly and explicitly tied to fate, as agents or even masters of it. The same relationship is hinted at in *The Oresteia*, where the Furies also claim a mandate of predestination:

"This, this is our right,
spun for us by the Fates,
the ones who bind the world,
and none can shake our hold" (Aeschylus, *The Eumenides*, 334-337)

In *The Sandman*, the question of predestination is complicated by the character Destiny, who is the personification of that concept. During the course of the chapter, he discovers duplicates of himself, causing confusion as to what is the true destiny to come. The Fates apparently supersede him, despite his many assertions to be the embodiment of all that was, is and will be. The feminine Fates and Furies control events to a degree that the masculine Destiny cannot; I will return to this point later.

The basic situation in the two works is the same. In *The Eumenides*, Orestes is hounded by the Furies, who wish to punish him for the murder of Clytaemnestra. In "The Kindly Ones", Morpheus is similarly hounded by Furies, because he has killed his son, Orpheus. Though the two characters are quite different in terms of personality, their situation has many more parallels.

Morpheus is a vengeful character, often inflicting cruel punishments for even minor slights against him. These various acts of revenge on his part throughout the comic are not revenge tragedies, however, merely a tyrant exercising his power, and it is not his tendencies towards harsh retribution which lead to his downfall, but rather the softening of his character. The comic as a whole is to a large degree the story of how Morpheus begins to see the error of his ways, change towards a milder nature and make amends for his past mistakes. Only then does he leave himself open to retribution: It is because he finally agrees to Orpheus's pleas for a merciful death that the Furies come after him. For all his impulses towards revenge, he is not the revenger in his tragedy, he is the victim, just as Orestes, who was the revenger in *The Libation Bearers* is the victim in *The Eumenides*.

There are, then, many similarities of plot and character situation in “The Kindly Ones” and *The Eumenides*. The two works diverge, however, in how the situation is resolved. Orestes is tried by Athena and the court she establishes in Athens, and is allowed to leave, free of the Furies, cleansed of his crime. The curse on his family is lifted, as the cycle of vengeance is broken, and the new court in Athens will hear cases against future transgressors, rather than the Furies. The same result, the breaking of the cycle of vengeance, occurs in “The Kindly Ones”, but through different means. Morpheus, as is made clear several times in the comic, is Dream, the concept personified, but he is only one aspect of Dream. When Morpheus allows himself to die in order to stop the Furies, the child Daniel is transformed into the new personification of Dream, a different aspect, thus completing the transformation of character that Morpheus had already begun. Shortly before the Furies come after him, Morpheus remarks to a friend: "I do not recommend revenge. It tends to have repercussions." (Gaiman, 1996: part 3, page 15), a view completely opposite from the ones he espouse in the early chapters. The new Dream exhibits none of Morpheus's old tendencies towards harshness and vengeance – on the contrary, he is noted as being more affectionate than his previous incarnation, who never once touched the animal guardians of his gates (Gaiman, 1997: 72). Instead

of punishing Lyta, the woman responsible for Morpheus's death, he forgives her, and gives her protection from others who might want to punish her, echoing Morpheus's sentiments by saying: "You sought vengeance, Lyta. But that is a road that has no ending." (*ibid.*, 88) The cycle is broken, and Dream is cleansed of his past crimes, just like Orestes.

"The Kindly Ones" is not just following the pattern of *The Eumenides*, however. On top of the Aeschylean framework, there is also a pattern more reminiscent of Senecan tragedy being played out. The role of the revenger is filled by Lyta Hall, who is deceived into believing that Morpheus has murdered her son. Lyta spends the first part of the chapter seeking the power that will allow her to destroy Morpheus – i.e. looking for the Furies. Her quest for revenge and her quest for the Furies is the same thing, emphasising the role the Furies play in this work, as the personification of revenge, or rather the act of revenge. This contrasts them with Revenge in *The Spanish Tragedy*, who personifies the drive for revenge, as it is the desire for revenge which drives the events of the play. The Furies are the act, the rampage. Lyta seeks them out because she already has the desire for revenge, but lacks the means to carry it out. Lyta's search for them is portrayed as a fairy-tale quest, where she moves around in a fantasy world encountering talking animals and one-eyed monsters, telling anyone who will listen of her desire for revenge (Gaiman, 1996: part 4, pages 8, 16; part 5, page 3, and others). Like any fairy-tale heroine, she receives advice from the creatures she encounters on her way. On one level this is a metaphorical journey – we are shown that Lyta is actually walking around a mundane city, hallucinating. However, it is a recurring theme in *The Sandman* that dreams are not trivial or unreal; Lyta's experiences in the dream world are taken seriously and have real consequences for the world and the characters. It is part of the ritual of her revenge quest that she must go on this fairy-tale journey, in order to reach the power to act. This separation between the dream and the real world is also visible outside the panels, as already mentioned – when Lyta is in the dream world, the page borders are grey, and when she is in the real world they are white.

As Lyta continues to seek revenge, her appearance changes, becoming more like the appearance of the Furies. Her quest for vengeance is corrupting not just her judgement, but her physical form as well. After spending the night with the two surviving gorgons, Lyta wakes to find snakes growing in her hair. While this image is of course first and foremost associated with gorgons, the Furies have also been portrayed as snake-haired. Serpent-headed Furies appear both in Greek sources and in Dante's *Inferno* (Dante, 1982: 79).

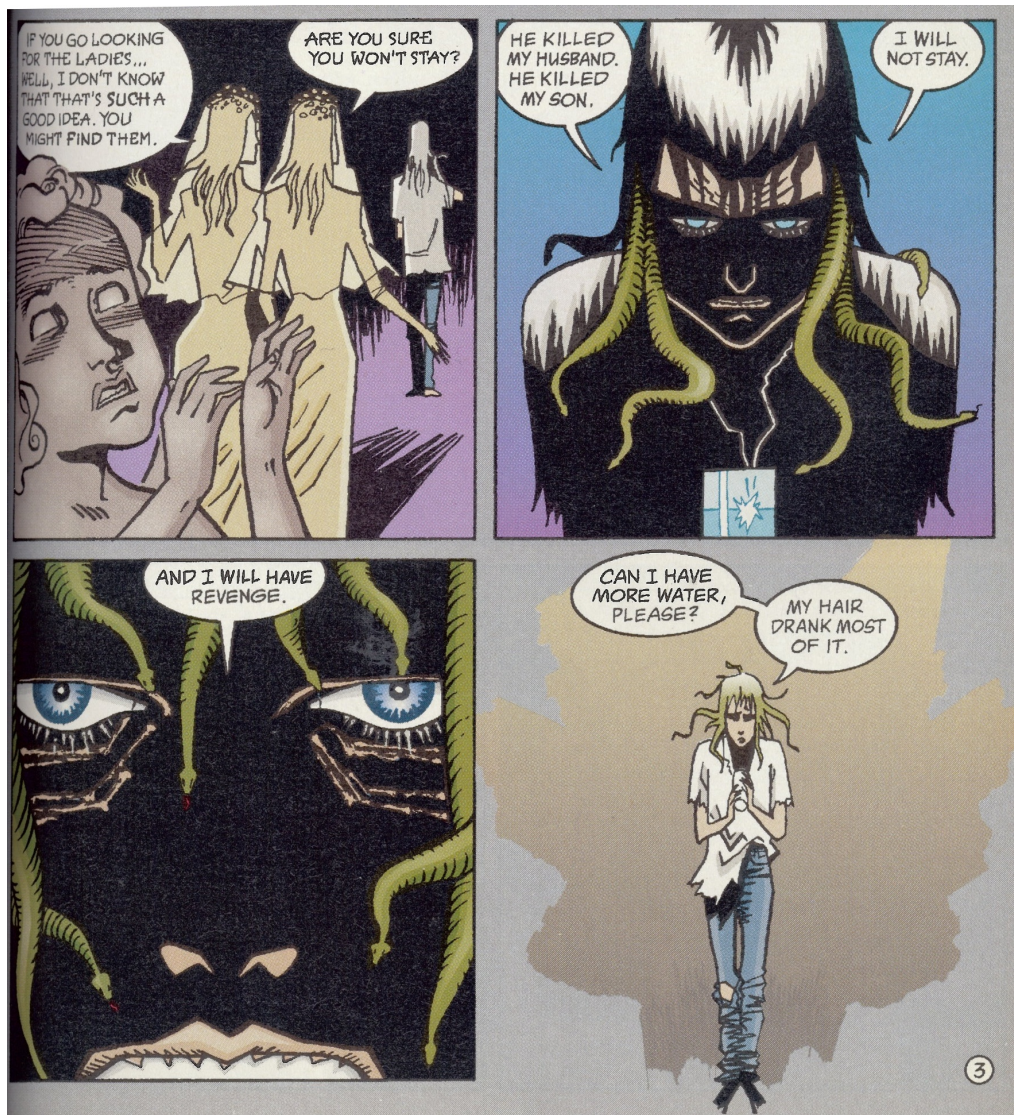


Fig. 16: Gaiman, 1996: part 5, page 3

Fig. 16 shows Lyta transformed by her obsession for revenge, dark and crawling with serpents, but

follows it with the more polite and timid woman she has been before. In the fourth panel, she stands alone, with no borders of the panel separating her from the grey background, looking small and lost in the now limitless space around her; a sharp contrast to the imposing close-up in the previous panel. The first panel in Fig. 16 shows the gorgons warning Lyta that if she goes looking for the Furies, for revenge, she might find what she is looking for. This both foreshadows the specific misfortunes of Lyta, and comments on the destructive nature of revenge. The most interesting panel is the third one, where Lyta's dark face fills the whole panel. Compare her appearance here with the depiction of the maiden Fury, in Fig. 17, on page 72. Although far from identical, the similarities are obvious. The face of Lyta is grimmer than the smiling Fury, and the eyes are very different, but the same darkness dominates both. The Fury's hair curls in a serpentine manner, recalling the literal serpents in Lyta's hair. Once Lyta becomes the vessel of the Furies, she is no longer shown in any panel until Morpheus is dead. The only thing seen of her in that role is her shadow, which has three heads, one of which has long, serpentine hair like Lyta's own (Gaiman, 1996: part 8, page 18). The panel also has parallels with the second panel in Fig. 18, found on page 75, where Lyta first decides to seek revenge. In that panel, her hair is still, white, and her face not shrouded in darkness, and although she looks manic, she is not as threatening as in Fig. 16. In that panel, she is only beginning her quest for revenge; by the time of Fig. 16, the corruption and madness her obsession brings upon her is much more visible.

The Furies, in both works, to an extent represent revenge personified. As I have already said, they are the act of revenge rather than the drive for it in *The Sandman*, and they fulfil a similar function in *The Oresteia*. They could also be said to represent guilt, the bad conscience of their victims, who have murdered their own kin, as they cannot kill their targets directly, only drive them to suicide. Their actions, however, are not really focused on achieving justice; their only drive appears to be to avenge themselves on those who have spilled the blood of their family. Their power lies in ritual, they can only act within these set rules. Had Morpheus not killed Orpheus, they could

not have acted against him. In *The Eumenides*, the Furies are egged on by the ghost of Clytaemnestra, who wants her killer dead. In that play, Athena accuses them of being more interested in destructive revenge than in doing what is right: “And you are set / on the name of justice rather than the act.” (Aeschylus, *The Eumenides*, 442-443) The same comment can certainly be applied to Gaiman's Furies – they have no ghost to egg them on, because Orpheus desired death. Morpheus killing him was an act of mercy, not a crime. They are also well aware that Lyta's motives for seeking revenge are based on false premises, but instead of informing her that her son is still alive, they use her as their vessel to assault Morpheus. They had no particular attachment to Orpheus, instead they state that they hated him (Gaiman, 1996: part 11, page 21). They have nothing to do with justice or even motive, they are revenge, pure and simple and destructive. When confronting Morpheus, they describe themselves: “We are vengeance and hatred unending. We are your doom.” (*ibid.*, part 8, page 18). Even when Lyta discovers the truth about her son, their hold on her is too strong for her to stop the rampage. Revenge, the character in *The Spanish Tragedy*, was a passive observer, taking credit for the impulse to revenge in the other characters. The Furies are a more active personification of vengeance, consuming Lyta and leaving her powerless to stop before her victim is destroyed. Since they are so linked to the Fates, this takes all the power away from the individual and places it in the hands of higher powers – once Lyta has found the Furies, she is powerless to act.

This message of revenge overpowering all other motivations is also evident in the colours of the gutters. I mentioned that the colour of the page between the panels change from white to grey depending on the setting of the panels. When Lyta finds the Furies, her conversation with them takes place over several pages, always in the bottom row of panels – echoing the triple-goddess's earlier words: “There's a downstairs in everybody. That's where *we* live.” (*ibid.*, part 2, page 15) Placing the Furies in the bottom row, the “downstairs” of the page, emphasises this image. The background colour of these pages, be they grey, white or some other colour, gradually become

black. It is not a gradual fade, but splotches of black appear in the transition, until black is the dominant colour, almost as if the black colour was a mould growing on the page. Fig. 17 shows an example of this happening, the intricate pattern surrounding the realm of Irish mythology is swept aside by black. The final page of part 9, page 24, is given entirely to Lyta and the Furies and is entirely black. Revenge has driven colour away. When we next see Lyta and the Furies conversing, as Lyta attempts to stop the rampage, the colour is red, leading the mind to thoughts of rage and fire, especially since the landscape the characters are standing in appears to be burning as well (*ibid.*, part 11, page 21). Black is the colour of the Furies idling, red is the colour of the Furies in action – revenge and death are red and furious.



Fig. 17: Gaiman, 1996: part 7, page 21

It is meaningless to speak of morality in regards to the Furies, as they are concerned only with destruction and punishment without consideration of circumstances – the name of justice, in Aeschylus's words. Whether Morpheus was morally in the right when he killed his son, who begged for death after centuries of unnatural life, is immaterial; they care only for the legal wrong. Despite this thirst for destruction and revenge, they insist on being referred to as kindly ones, which seems to cast them in a morally ambiguous light after all. In *The Eumenides*, the Furies are given this new name by Athena, to go with their new role as the guardians of Athens, as their role will no longer be to revenge. In “The Kindly Ones”, however, they claim this name but continue their function as revengers. In Fig. 17, Lyta states that she thinks the Furies look kind, wise and gentle, while the dark colours and depicted situations portray them as cruel and harsh. Although they initially appear to help Lyta get the revenge she so desperately desires, their actual actions and outlook are anything but kind. As already mentioned, they mislead Lyta when she comes to them for help, and furthermore refuse to stop when she realises her son is still alive, saying “We *don't* rescue. We *revenge*.” (*ibid.*) Justice does not enter into it, nor does kindness: they only revenge.

When it comes to moral ambiguity of the revenger, Lyta is more interesting, since it is she who fulfils that role. Lyta's actions are understandable, she believes her son is dead, and wants revenge. The reader might be frustrated with her inability to understand the truth of the situation, but she is still very much someone to sympathise with. Ambiguity enters the picture when she begins to become more like the Furies, and once they are in the driving seat, her actions become harder to defend. Unable to harm Morpheus directly – another ritual rule – she and the Furies instead go about killing the other residents of the dreamworld, including characters which have been part of the comic from the very first chapter. Lyta crosses the threshold between the sympathetic revenger and the monster as characters that have so far been comic relief and kind mentor figures are brutally butchered. Lyta is not fully in control during this, as her attempt to stop the rampage shows, but she is still the one who initiated it. Read as a metaphor, her desire for

revenge is a kind of madness that prevents her from acting rationally once she learns the truth. The revenger driven mad by his need for retribution is a figure found in other works as well, a notable example once again being *The Spanish Tragedy*, with its alternate title of *Hieronimo is mad again*. Hieronimo does indeed descend into madness as his efforts to seek revenge are thwarted, and he begins to rave and imagines a random citizen to be the ghost of Horatio (Kyd, 1995: 3.13.132). Another famously ambiguously mad revenger is of course Hamlet.

Even after seeing Daniel alive, however, Lyta is unapologetic for her actions. At the wake, she calls Morpheus a monster, and his funeral a celebration of his death (Gaiman, 1997: 57). Ultimately, she loses everything – her actions have led to Daniel transforming into the new Dream, and the new Dream makes it clear to her that he is not Daniel any more. She is sent away with his blessing, and the promise of no further reprisals, but is still left without her son as a direct result of her own actions – in seeking revenge for her son's imagined death, she causes him to cease to exist. Having passed through the madness of revenge and obsession, she comes out on the other side alive, unlike many other revengers, but is still left alone and grieving.

So, *The Sandman* mixes influences from both Greek and post-Senecan revenge tragedies, creating its own blend of the fate-driven and the character-driven plot. It also uses this unusual combination to explore other topics. Intertwined with the issue of fate versus personal agency, there is a question of gender. At several points in “The Kindly Ones”, gender is made an issue, directly or indirectly. These points are sometimes accompanied by quotations from John Webster's play, *The White Devil*, a revenge tragedy which exists in the post-Senecan tradition, but which has departed from the model to a greater degree than earlier plays. There are few parallels between the play and the comic, neither the plot nor the characters are much reminiscent of each other. Instead, the quotes seem to

be chosen for their references to Furies and their mentions of gender. The question that arises is whether revenge has a gendered component, or if there is a difference between male and female revenge. One of these quotations comes as Lyta decides to seek out Morpheus to get revenge: She hears three voices, and one of them speaks a line from *The White Devil*, act 2, scene 1. The fact that she hear three voices is significant, because it once again brings in the triple-goddess as the instigator of her revenge quest.

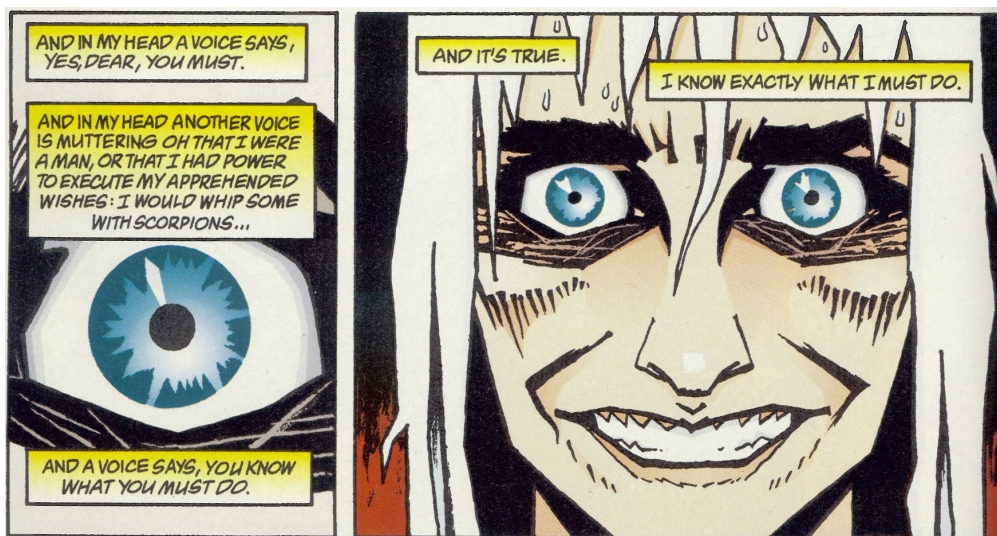


Fig. 18: Gaiman, 1996: part 3, page 24.

This quote would suggest that a woman is not able to act as she will, as Isabella in the play indeed is not. However, the comic appears to place the power of revenge in the hands of women. I have already discussed how the Furies function as the personification of active revenge in the comic, and Gaiman's Furies are explicitly and definitely female. They are presented as part of the triple-goddess, which is consistently portrayed as a female divinity, to the point of refusing aid to a transsexual woman, explained by one character with the line: “It's chromosomes as much as uh anything.” (Gaiman, 2007: 383) In Fig. 17, we see the Furies reject that name as a name used to subjugate women, to dismiss and take the power away from what they can do, which in the case of the Furies is to exact revenge. For all their dislike of the name, it clearly does not diminish their

potency.

The question is whether this power is active or reactive. There appear to be many restrictions placed on the Furies – they are not able, for instance, to kill Morpheus directly, only destroy his realm and drive him to end his own life. Even the Fates, in the very beginning of the chapter, express a lack of power. Speaking of why they bother knitting their threads together, one of them says: “We bother because we have no choice. Because that is what we are, in this aspect.” (Gaiman, 1996: part 1, page 2) Despite these restrictions, they appear able to choose how events are to proceed, and even supersede other powers of predestination. Earlier in this chapter, I mentioned the character Destiny, who is male. In the events of the chapter, his role as the embodiment of destiny appears to fail, and multiple versions of him appear in his realm, reading conflicting prophecies from the books they carry. When the female Fates drive the story, the male Destiny is left in confusion. This would again seem to place the agency into the hands of women.

Later in the comic, the character Rose is visiting the nursing home where her grandmother lived, and meets three old women, who discuss the justice of revenge with her, and the role of women. In Fig. 19, these women are implicitly linked to the triple-goddess figure, through the maiden-mother-crone grouping. In this sequence, contrary to the previous point, they are describing women as reactionary, defining them in relation to men.

In the first panel of Fig. 19, women are defined as creatures of the real world, opposed to dreams. The Furies later echo this disdain of fiction: “He made the ladies weep with his song and his things that never were and never *shall* be. *Stories*.” “Made-up rubbishy stories.” “Makes you *sick*.” (*ibid.*, part 11, page 21.) Dreams, of course, are both the realm and nature of the main character, Morpheus, who is often given the appellation “Prince of Stories”. Here, dreams are defined as a masculine realm, opposing the realistic realm of women, while at the same time, women are assigned the task of supporting and shaping men. In this sequence, they are painted as the power behind men, but this is still denying them a role independent of men. They are the

practical background characters, while men are the dreamers and doers, the actors of the story. This position is contradicted by the events of the chapter, where women are the driving forces causing Morpheus's downfall: The Fates and Furies are women, Lyta is a woman, Thessaly, who prevents Morpheus from killing Lyta, is a woman, and Nuala, who summons Morpheus away from the safety of his realm is a woman. The story portrays women as active, not just reactive.

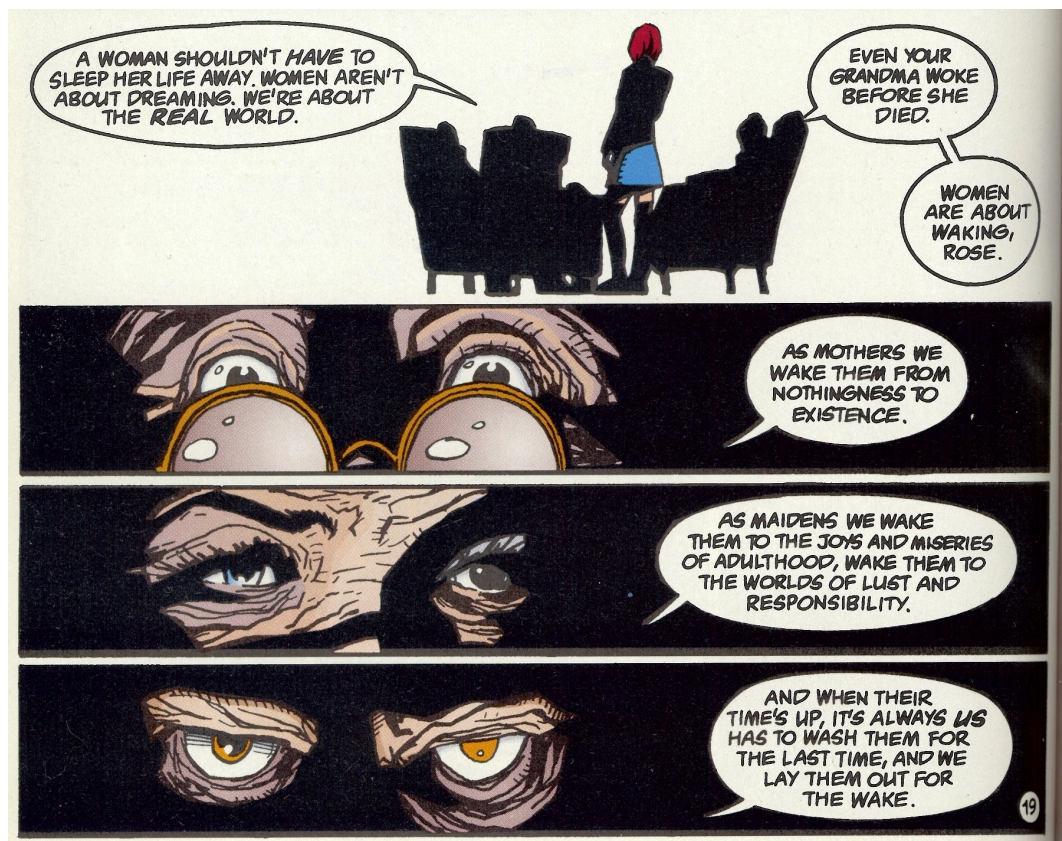


Fig. 19: Gaiman, 1996: part 6, page 19.

There is a question raised, however, concerning how any of the events of the chapter have been manipulated and orchestrated by Morpheus himself. There is a second significant quotation from *The White Devil*, in part 13, page 4, when Lucien the librarian quotes Lodovico's words from 4.3.151-152: "There's but three Furies found in spacious Hell; / But in a great man's breast three thousand dwell." (Webster, 2008) This line again casts men as the actors, containing in this case a thousand times the potential of the feminine Furies. This is directed inward, however, in both the

original play and the comic; the three thousand Furies are a torment to the great man, not a blessing. In other words, the great man punishes himself far more than anyone else can do. And this is the point of it, Morpheus is cast as the chess master moving the other characters, even the Fates and Furies, around on the board to suit his own desire. It was he who freed Loki, who kidnapped Daniel and deceived Lyta to seek revenge. It was Morpheus who on two occasions threatened Lyta that he would one day take her son away from her. He sent Nuala away, with the power to summon him, so that she could remove him from his safe place. Ultimately, Morpheus desires to be free of his position and function, and since he cannot bring himself to simply abandon his responsibilities, he engineers a revenge plot which will end his life. He may not be aware that he does this – Death accuses him of not even admitting his plans to himself (Gaiman, 1996: part 13, page 5) – but has nevertheless set the events of Lyta's revenge plot in motion. As Lucien notes in “The Wake”: “I think he did a little more than *let* it happen ...” (Gaiman, 1997: 59)

The unresolved question, then, is whether Morpheus, the masculine Dream, has manipulated the feminine Fates, or if his manipulation happens because of their influence. The comic does not answer this question, leaving the ultimate power balance unresolved in the background of the revenge plot. It simply uses the strange blend of revenge tragedy traditions to set up the question. Fate versus personal free will, male versus female, both come back to Aeschylus versus Seneca, and in this comic the answer is “both”.

To sum up, *The Sandman* draws upon both Greek and post-Senecan revenge tragedy in constructing its narrative, and makes use of the differences between these two traditions to examine questions of gender role and power. It highlights its nature as a comic, emphasising the medium as much as the story, and uses tools like fonts and colours to emphasise certain aspects of the story. It portrays

revenge as a dangerous obsession, consuming those who seek it, and indirectly likens it to madness, while also telling a story where revenge is used as a tool to bring about a change in the status quo. Like *V for Vendetta*, it engages with the revenge tragedy tradition, but diverges from it to a greater degree by mixing different models together to tell its story.

Conclusion

In the first chapter I asked whether these two comics could be called revenge tragedies. Looking at Kerrigan's approach in comparing revenge tragedy to detective fiction, I said: yes, they can be seen as revenge tragedies, and more so than Sherlock Holmes. While Kerrigan's comparisons between revenge tragedy and detective fiction have their value, that is a comparison between two different traditions, and labelling them as equivalent requires stretching of definitions and overlooking the many differences. *V for Vendetta* and *The Sandman*, however, do exist in the same revenge tragedy tradition as the Early Modern plays such as *The Spanish Tragedy*. In this thesis, I have gone through each of the comics, compared them to other examples of the revenge tragedy tradition, and looked at how they use this tradition in new ways. Returning, then, to that first question, I can say with much more weight that these two comics definitely belong in and engage with revenge tragedy as a storytelling tradition.

A second question I asked in the first chapter was whether a comic could be reasonably compared to the Early Modern stage. Comics, as a medium, differ greatly from these theatrical stage performances which are often associated with revenge tragedy. Despite this, the two media can produce similar effects, albeit with different tools, as I showed in chapter one. A key comparison can be made between comics' use of closure, where the reader fills in the movement and action between the still moments displayed in the panels, and theatre's use of implication in performance, where the audience must suspend disbelief and themselves fill in the blanks to imagine the tableau on the stage as a realistic depiction of events. Furthermore, the events of a play can be conceived of in the same framework as the events of a comic, and the story can be reconfigured to fit the different medium, as the illustration from *The Spanish Tragedy* demonstrates. With this comparison established, and the basic tools of the comic medium explained, I could make my comparisons between the comics and the revenge tragedy tradition.

V for Vendetta draws heavily upon the Early Modern, post-Senecan tradition of revenge tragedy, and deliberately plays upon references to theatrical performance through the character V. It has new interpretations of some of the common features, such as making the ghost stock character into a more metaphorical and implied haunting of the present by the past. The comic uses the basic revenge plot as a frame for a story about clashing political extremes. In the process, it extends the traditional revenge plot, from being just about a revenger seeking vengeance against a personal enemy, to seeking to destroy the political ideology the enemy stands for as well. It also comments on the then-current political climate. In addition, by leaving the final fate of the characters and the world open, the comic plays with the tragedy label.

The Sandman also draws upon the post-Senecan tradition, but mixes in a strong influence from earlier Greek tragedy as well; and specifically engages with Aeschylus's *The Eumenides*. In mixing these traditions in an unusual way, the comic sets up a duality of themes, where both personal action and fate are present as driving forces in the narrative. Predestination and free will, and the question of which controls the course of events are a major focus of the story. These revenge tragedy traditions, as well as the two driving forces, are also linked to a gender theme, and this framework is used to pose questions regarding gender relations and who has the power to act, and the power to revenge.

In both comics, revenge is used partially as a tool to achieve a change in the status quo, changes which may ultimately be positive. Both works also stress the breaking of the revenge cycle. In this way, revenge is depicted as both a destructive act, but also one that can be used somewhat constructively. When V's revenge plot is complete, having achieved his goal of toppling the fascist government, he removes himself from the world, and instructs Evey to become a new V, free of revenge, who will build a new world. Even though society may be collapsing around them following the demise of the fascist state, the V character is remade, in a more constructive form. The exact same thing happens in *The Sandman*, where Dream is transformed from the vindictive

and harsh Morpheus into his new, forgiving incarnation, through the execution of Lyta's revenge. This progress of turning from destructive revenge to a more constructive focus also mirrors *The Oresteia*, where the Furies are redefined as protectors rather than revengers. Lyta herself, however, is a more classically tragic figure, who loses everything because of her rampage. Both comics feature elements and themes common to revenge tragedy, and both develop them in new directions.

Throughout this thesis I have been talking about revenge tragedy traditions, or models, because it is not possible to boil revenge tragedy down to a single set of defining features. It has a common theme of, or focus on, revenge as a motivator and as an act, but each single revenge tragedy uses the tradition in its own way, and thereby develops it further. We can track the influences backwards in time, through Early Modern playwrights like Webster, Shakespeare and Kyd, and further through Seneca and eventually back to the oldest preserved plays where we find Aeschylus. When looking at works as contemporary as *V for Vendetta* and *The Sandman* it is one thing to examine their influences and how they make use of the tropes of revenge tragedy, but it is much more difficult to say how they impact on the revenge tragedy tradition.

Further work in this area might attempt to track other works influenced by these two, and examine which marks they have left on revenge tragedy, if any. It may be that their innovations and experiments are discarded entirely and only the already established features of the form survive. *V for Vendetta* was adapted into a feature film of the same name, released in 2006. This film kept the basic revenge plot, and the theatrical bent of the main character, but discarded many of the political themes. The fascist government was portrayed in a purely negative light, and V lost his anarchist philosophy, instead being portrayed as a simple freedom fighter with no particular political affiliation. Alan Moore complained that the film had reduced the political tensions of his story to an

allegory of “current American neo-conservatism vs. current American liberalism.” (MacDonald, 2006). For a variety of reasons, he refused to have his name associated with the film production. A more thorough examination of the adaptation might reveal more about which revenge tragedy features it kept from the comic, and which it discarded, and also how it might have developed the tradition on its own.

A further expansion of the topic could also be a possible avenue for further study, looking at revenge tragedy in a larger pop-culture perspective. No direct adaptation has been made of *The Sandman*, but it was largely tone-setting for DC's Vertigo brand, and several spin-off series have been made from it. Whether any of them are revenge tragedies, or use the revenge tragedy tradition in some way could be an interesting question to pursue. Very little work has been done in this area, to my knowledge, and there are sure to be other comics which engage with the subject of revenge in interesting ways. One could also examine unrelated pop-culture works in relation to revenge tragedy. The 2003/2004 two-part film *Kill Bill* springs to mind as an example of a pop-culture work concerned mainly with revenge, but which could not really be called a tragedy. Kerrigan asserted that revenge has been a driving factor in Western fiction for centuries, and it would certainly be interesting to track revenge tragedy's development in current works, as well as expand the focus to compare works which concern revenge but do not necessarily fit into the revenge tragedy tradition. The concept of revenge is still alive and well in our modern society, and still provokes debate, as the recent killing of Osama bin Laden reveals; his death has sparked celebrations in the streets as well as debates regarding the propriety of such jubilation. His death happened outside any legal system, and without any kind of trial, and could – without much controversy I think – be termed an act of revenge. An examination of the concept, of the drive for revenge, in the context of our current society could be very interesting.

Alternately, further study could focus more closely on either of these two comics, going further in depth and tracking both explicit references and echoes of former revenge tragedies, as

well as other literary traditions. Such work could bring out more clearly what points the comics use the revenge tragedy framework to make, and attempt to find out what exactly they try to say about politics and about gender, and about the other, lesser themes also present in the texts. This thesis has been mainly about establishing the comics' relation to the revenge tragedy tradition, but further work might give a much greater focus on the themes and points made clear underneath the revenge plot structure, where this thesis could only scratch the surface.

In scratching that surface, however, this thesis has established that these two comics have a depth and richness beyond what might often be associated with comics, both in engaging with and developing an established literary tradition, and in exploring complex ideas and giving a nuanced depiction of moral values.

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