



# This Rough Magic

*A Peer-Reviewed, Academic, Online Journal*

*Dedicated to the Teaching of Medieval and Renaissance Literature*



"The Anxiety of Duality and the Reduction to One: An Introduction to *The Bloody Brother*"

Author(s): Patrick Aaron Harris, Mary Baldwin College

Reviewed Work(s):

Source: *This Rough Magic*, Vol. 6, No. 2, (December, 2015), pp. 11-18.

Published by: [www.thisroughmagic.org](http://www.thisroughmagic.org)

Stable URL: <http://www.thisroughmagic.org/harris%20article.html>

---

**"The Anxiety of Duality and the Reduction to One:  
An Introduction to *The Bloody Brother*"**

**By Patrick Aaron Harris, Mary Baldwin College**

A play entitled *The Bloody Brother* could only be about two things: homicidal friars or fratricide. To readers expecting a violent duel between men of the cloth, this play will be a sore disappointment. Still, fratricide is in its own right a compelling theme and, in this play, it is the inciting incident for a fast-paced and violent revenge tragedy. Never before included in anthologies of Renaissance drama for the undergraduate student, *The Bloody Brother* is in fact a prime example of Jacobean revenge tragedy and ideal for studying alongside the more famously noted plays of that kind.

Some editors will want to contend with classifying *The Bloody Brother* as a revenge tragedy, wanting instead to categorize it among history plays. While the central figure of the play, Rollo, is a historical Viking king who lived near the end of the first millennium AD, the events of the play hardly correspond to events in history. Moreover, with so much of our understanding of history plays from this period being informed by Shakespeare's *Henriad*, *The Bloody Brother* would hardly belong if for no

other reason than it is a play which is not about *English* history and fails to encapsulate the nationalist interest in plays of that sort.

Where *The Bloody Brother* fails to meet expectations when it comes to history plays, it excels in defining the genre of revenge tragedy. It shares in the generic conventions that *The Spanish Tragedy* is frequently credited with establishing. Like *The Revenger's Tragedy*, it is a frenetic play, with violence at the beginning, the end, and peppered throughout and yet it has all the thematic nuance of *Hamlet*. And because of its proposed dates of composition, anywhere 1612-1624, it allows us a chance to further observe the ways the dramaturgy of revenge tragedy changed as English theatre stopped being Elizabethan and became Jacobean.

Revenge tragedy as a genre is a popular one for undergraduate study because it has a highly stable set of conventions to which all plays of its kind adhere with almost unwavering faithfulness. Revenge tragedies usually begin with identifying a revenger who has suffered an offense against the life and honor of his family, either before or early in the events of the play. Though the law could see fit to reconcile the revenger and his offender, he is typically left without legal recourse because the offender is a ruler, a member of the ruling family, or has too much political and social clout to be prosecuted by the law. In *The Bloody Brother*, Rollo's successful murder of his brother Otto and the subsequent cover-up leave him with the governing power, making him nearly untouchable. Once the revenger takes the law into his own hands, he becomes a

criminal, not so much for the killing itself but for the premeditation involved. The government, purged of its former corruption, reestablishes order by eliminating the last threat to peace: the revenger. It is arguably a requisite trope of revenge tragedy that the revenger is executed, commits suicide, or dies accidentally by his own devious machinations, and we see this happen without fail in countless revenge tragedies.

Elizabethan and Jacobean government both condemned seeking personal vengeance fearing that allowing individuals to take matters into their own hands would cause chaos. The edict was difficult for many people to follow, however, since they were all inheritors of a medieval mentality that dictated that personal injuries, especially the rape or murder of a relative, had to be repaid in order to restore personal and familial honor. The political intrigue of revenge tragedies also appealed to the masses since plays of the genre frequently incorporate vengeful acts against a corrupt government. Economic inequalities and accusations of tyranny and nepotism within the court bred frequent, and unsuccessful, civil uprisings during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. The Oxfordshire Rising of 1596, the Essex Rebellion in 1601, and the famous Gunpowder Plot of 1605 are all examples of failed attempts to overthrow what the conspirators believed were oppressive and corrupt governments that are also contemporaneous with the rising popularity of revenge tragedy in Renaissance England. Since these insurrections all ultimately failed, interest in revenge tragedies

likely continued to draw interest because they provided a catharsis for suspicions of tyranny and corruption at court.

What makes *The Bloody Brother* unique in this genre is that its central figure is not the revenger. Rather, Rollo is a corrupt, tyrannical character whom revenge must eliminate in order to reestablish social normalcy. He becomes the epicenter of the play's tragedy; the homicidal energy he expends in killing Otto, Baldwin, Hammond's brother Allan, and the household staff he employs in attempting to poison his brother rebounds upon him and destroys him. In his place, Aubrey is appointed duke just as is Antonio in *The Revenger's Tragedy*. Ending the plays in this way moralizes that patience in the face of adversity will bring greater reward than the instant gratification of revenge.

*The Bloody Brother* also presents an intellectual curiosity. It poses the question "who is the 'bloody brother?'" While Rollo is certainly of central importance to the play, it is difficult to say that he is the title character. In fact, if we stretch our understanding of what it means to be "bloody", we will find that there is not one "bloody brother", rather there are four. Rollo is the obvious first choice since his hands are stained with the blood of his murdered brother Otto. But then, so is Otto; run through by his brother's sword, his body becomes blotted with his own blood as he slowly bleeds to death. Allan, brother to Rollo's guard Hammond and unjustly beheaded by Rollo, is another bloody brother. And Hammond, being the play's revenger, must necessarily spill the blood of his offender and himself if this play is to adhere to convention. Just

from this cursory analysis of the title, we can see how this play spends its energy generating too many of something (characters, plots, etc.) and then attempts to snap back from multiplicity into singularity.

Their mother Sophia is integral to understanding the plays anxieties about duality and reducing multiples to one. She pleads for them to turn their aggression on her saying, “turn all your swords on me/And make this wretched body but one wound,/So this unnatural quarrel find a grave/In the unhappy womb that brought you forth” (1.1). Sophia insists that her womb is the source of their division and that division is the source of their conflict. Telling her fully grown sons to reunify is therefore essentially a request to have them return to the womb. The potentially suggestive use of swords as a euphemism for genitalia gives the request that they be buried in her womb take on an incestuous tone; she proposes intercourse with her second-born son in an attempt to un-birth him or to sexually receive them both simultaneously as way of taking in their divided substance and producing one whole, son instead of two divided ones.

Just as there are too many sons in this play, so are there too many plots. And just as the play works to reduce the number of sons to one, it also works to eliminate the supernumerary plots. In the beginning of the play, there is the small subplot involving the members of the household staff. Having been approached by Latorch, Rollo’s advisor, and asked to poison Otto’s dinner and been promised social advancement in

return, the servants muse pleasantly on how much more comfortable their lives will be having earned the favor of the duke-to-be. The play, and Rollo, cannot allow them to live because they are witnesses to his murderous deception. Warrants for their execution are issued and they are escorted to the gallows.

There is a second subplot at work as well and it only barely survives to the last scene of the play before it too is carted off to be hanged. The five rogues, who in performance would make an ideal doubling for the five servants executed in the first half of the play, deceive Latorch into believing they are “mathematicians” though the nearer sense would be that they pretend to be numerologists. Like the servants, they seek remuneration from Latorch and Rollo in the form of money and advancement. But once Aubrey is appointed Duke in the closing scene, he orders their execution for practicing numerology, a condemnation of black magic especially common in Jacobean drama. In eliminating these minor plots, the structure of the play maintains a singular through line from the conflict between Rollo and Otto, to Otto’s murder, to the enactment of revenge, to the restoration of order in appointing an uncorrupted ruler.

The problems of duality and reduction are only a few critically important features of this play. Students and scholars will continue to find other equally valid reasons for exploring this work. The goal of this introduction has been more to address the problem of canonicity. Though *The Bloody Brother* is not a part of the accepted dramatic canon of the English language, it shares so much with its canonical

counterparts in genre, theatricality, and sociohistorical interest. Including *The Bloody Brother* in anthologies of early English drama and integrating it into the undergraduate curriculum may spur a new wave of dramatic collections that more closely interrogate the processes of anthologization, the purpose of “canon”, and what “good” really means to us.

The only critical, modern-spelling edition of the play is a 1991 edition by Bertha Hensman that includes an introduction and annotations. Despite the obvious dearth of critical paratext on *The Bloody Brother*, instructors might use this as an opportunity to invite undergraduate students to question why certain plays receive critical study and others do not. A quarto facsimile of *The Bloody Brother* is available through the Early English Books Online (EEBO) database. [A digital edition is available through Project Gutenberg](http://www.gutenberg.org/files/50031/50031-h/50031-h.htm#THE_Bloody_Brother) ([http://www.gutenberg.org/files/50031/50031-h/50031-h.htm#THE\\_Bloody\\_Brother](http://www.gutenberg.org/files/50031/50031-h/50031-h.htm#THE_Bloody_Brother)). The text is often also included in editions of the complete works of Beaumont and Fletcher.

### **Works Consulted:**

Allman, Eileen. *Jacobean Revenge Tragedy and the Politics of Virtue*. Newark: U of Delaware P, 1999.

Bowers, Fredson. *Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy 1587-1642*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1971.

Findlay, Alison. *Illegitimate Power: Bastards in Renaissance Drama*. Manchester: Manchester UP, 1994.



Frye, Susan. "Incest and Authority in *Pericles, Prince of Tyre*," *Incest and the Literary Imagination*. Ed. Elizabeth Barnes. Gainesville: UP of Florida, 2002: 39-58.

Griswold, Wendy. *Renaissance Revivals: City Comedy and Revenge Tragedy in the London Theater, 1576-1980*. Chicago: U of Chicago Press, 1986.

Hunter, G.K. "Ironies of Justice in *The Spanish Tragedy*," *Renaissance Drama* 8, (1965): 89-104.

Mercer, Peter. *Hamlet and the Acting of Revenge*. Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 1987.

Tricomi, Alberth H. *Anticourt Drama in England, 1603-1642*. Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 1989.

Whigam, Frank. "Sexual and Social Mobility in *The Duchess of Malfi*," *Incest and the Literary Imagination*. Ed. Elizabeth Barnes. Gainesville: UP of Florida, 2002: 59-93.