

“The Proof of the Pudding is in the Eating”: *Sweeney Todd* and the Modern Revenge Tragedy

by

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Abstract

Revenge tragedies create a world where corruption leads to retribution through personal rather than civil channels. Although many have connected Stephen Sondheim's *Sweeney Todd* and the revenge tradition, few have explored how the adaptation recreates the genre in a modern theatrical context. This thesis discusses the various adaptations of *Sweeney Todd* leading to Sondheim's musical, with particular attention to the combination of revenge and melodramatic theatrical forms with modern theory and criticism. Through Bertolt Brecht's theories on epic theatre, one may discover the techniques that serve to separate the audience from the revenger's plight allowing examination of revenge's effects on the revenger. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels' ideas on class struggle offer a lens to explore the social injustice that feeds the genre. When combined, these elements define a modern version of the revenge tragedy the functions as a more radical social critique recreating the revenger as a revolutionary figure.

Table of Contents

Abstract.....	ii
Introduction.....	1
Motifs and Motivation	3
Audience and Alienation	13
Class Conscious Cannibalism	30
Conclusion	46
References	50

Introduction

Depending on the source, Sweeney Todd, also known as the demon barber of Fleet Street, may be viewed as an actual historical figure, an exemplary fictional villain, or a sympathetic antihero. Peter Haining holds that the “real” Sweeney Todd is a young man born in Brick Lane, Stepney, in 1756, who led a life of crime only to end up in Newgate Prison where he learned his barbering trade.¹ The printed version of Sweeney Todd’s story begins in the serialized Victorian genre of the Penny Dreadful. He emerges as one of many characters in the anonymously written *The String of Pearls: A Romance*, which began serialized publication in 1846 by Edward Lloyd in *The People’s Periodical and Family Library* (Kilburn 1).² Dick Collins notes that *The String of Pearls* warrants the label of ‘classic’ for its introduction of the demon barber to literature, and recognizes the debt that characters like Mr. Hyde and Count Dracula owe to the character Sweeney Todd. The story proved so popular that it was produced on stage prior to the completion of the serial publication. Although it was common for these ‘dreadfuls’ to be pirated by theatres, as well as the press, this premature production distinguishes *The String of Pearls* from other stories of the genre (Collins vi).

In *The String of Pearls*, as in the stage adaptations by Frederick Hazelton and George Dibden-Pitt, the story occurs in a recognizable London, but in times past; the writer specifically dates the tale by describing the “state of things, AD 1785, as regarded Sweeney Todd” (3). Robert Mack notes the tradition of gothic novelists, like Walpole, Radcliffe, and Lewis, setting their narratives in the past (17). So *The String of Pearls* follows this tradition, as will the later versions of the play written in the twentieth century, but set in the nineteenth century. The story

¹ This and further detailed discussion of Haining’s findings may be found in: *Sweeney Todd: the real story of the demon barber of Fleet Street*.

² Studies speculate the authorship based on writers that often worked for Lloyd, but point out that these works often changed hands many times before completion (Mack 143).

situates itself in a variety of traditions; in addition to drawing on elements of the gothic novel, the narrative incorporates characteristics of melodrama and terms itself “a Romance.” The term “romance” refers to works containing any combination of high adventure, thwarted love, mysterious circumstances, arduous quests, and improbable triumphs; *The String of Pearls* certainly delivers on all counts (Murfin, Ray 414-5). While situated in gothic and romance traditions, the story is, first and foremost, a melodrama. The settings are as familiar as the stock characters portrayed within them. As Michael R. Booth notes, this “familiarity was an essential aspect of melodramatic appeal” (155). Although the opening pages establish that the story occurs in the past, the continual reference to specific London landmarks offers a sense of immediacy. The characters, like the streets, range a variety of classes, but incorporate the urban working-class into the story. Although the stage melodramas condense the story, key elements remain the same.

In 1968 while working with the Victoria Theatre, Christopher Bond recreates the story as a revenge tragedy by incorporating elements of *The Count of Monte Cristo* (Dumas 1844), *The Spanish Tragedy* (Kyd 1580s), and *The Revenger’s Tragedy* (Middleton³ 1607) (Bond “Introduction” 3-4).⁴ Eleven years afterward, Stephen Sondheim and Hugh Wheeler adapt Bond’s version of the tale into a musical.⁵ In each incarnation the story becomes a slightly different genre. While the adaptations keep elements of the melodrama, Sondheim’s musical takes the play further toward the early modern revenge tradition, in the meantime, altering the function of that genre by incorporating modern theatrical theory into the play’s production.

³ Although much scholarship attributes *The Revenger’s Tragedy* to Cyril Tourneur, the version cited in this text is taken from a Norton Anthology that attributes the play to Thomas Middleton (Bevington et al. 1302).

⁴ Brian J. Burton also wrote a musical adaptation of the story in 1962, but makes no attempt to alter the melodramatic form.

⁵ Although Sondheim and Wheeler worked together on the musical adaptation, the work has a higher ratio of lyric to book so I will refer primarily to Sondheim throughout this thesis.

While the play's position as a revenge tragedy has been discussed by many, specific examination of the shifts in function accompanying the changes in genre are lacking. The following discussion explores the elements and motifs that transition the melodrama into a revenge tragedy, as well as Sondheim's particular choices that create a modern revenge tradition by incorporating early modern conceptions with those of contemporary theatrical practice. The examination will conclude with a specific inquiry into the relationship between madness and acts of cannibalism within the revenge tradition, and how these elements function as Marxist critique within Sondheim's musical *Sweeney Todd: the Demon Barber of Fleet Street*. When combined, these elements define a modern version of the revenge tragedy that functions as a more radical social critique than its predecessors recreating the revenger as a revolutionary figure.

Motifs and Motivation

The popularity of melodrama in the nineteenth-century derived from its "strong emotion, ... suspenseful plot, ... sharply delineated stock characters, domestic sentiment, the reward of virtue and the punishment of vice" (Booth 151). Although *Sweeney Todd* begins its life as a melodrama, changes in fundamental elements of the story recreate it as a revenge tragedy. Whereas melodramas cling to clear delineations between virtuous and immoral, the lines become blurred in the revenge tragedy. The characters gain more depth, and motives shift to make the qualification of one as good and another evil more difficult. The play maintains aspects of melodrama, but also incorporates motifs of revenge tragedy to create something more complicated and difficult to classify. The characters function to fulfill singular purposes, but they are more complex than the stock characters of melodrama. The play is no longer a romance in the sense that we focus on seeing virtuous love rewarded, the protagonist is the revenger and his purpose must be fulfilled. By drawing on previous revenge tragedies as a model for his

adaptation, Bond incorporates motifs common to those plays that bridge the gap between the two genres. Sondheim's musical adaptation of the play moves it further into the realm of revenge tragedy. In *The Revenger's Madness*, Charles and Elaine Hallet discuss elements that distinguish the revenge tragedy from other early modern plays. The incorporation of these motifs clearly alters the genre of the play. Characters develop beyond stock types, shifting motivations and relationships, while the key elements of fixation, ghosts, and masque identify the new version as a revenge play.

Although Sondheim insists that the characters in *Sweeney Todd* are larger than life and that this roots them in melodramatic traditions, the characters have more depth in both Bond and Sondheim's versions of the play than in the nineteenth-century melodramas ("Larger" 5).⁶ Character development becomes easier as both contemporary playwrights reduce the number of characters greatly, which also serves to simplify the plot. The version credited to Dibden-Pitt has a cast of twenty characters, not including those grouped by type: keepers of "madmen" and "spectators in the courtroom" (15). Hazelton's 1862 version has a cast of fifteen. Bond reduces the cast to twelve characters, which Sondheim further reduces to ten, adding a chorus that serves to supply the various Londoners needed to tell the tale. With fewer characters to follow, the background of the main characters becomes clearer and offers deeper examination of motivation. This compression of cast allows for more exposition of the character's backgrounds, which, in turn, allows for a more sympathetic barber.

In *The String of Pearls*, the only background that readers encounter on Sweeney Todd is the depth of his criminal enterprise. The agreement between Mrs. Lovett and Sweeney has been established prior to the story's beginning, and the people working with him are either assets or

⁶ Sondheim supplies his own definition of melodrama stating that he thinks of it "simply as being high theater... theater that is larger than life" (3).

threats. Sweeney cares for no one but himself. He has no emotional attachments at present, nor are readers led to believe he ever has had these attachments. He is emotionally isolated and skilled in cruelty. The same holds true for Dibden-Pitt and Hazelton's depiction of the character. With Bond's alterations, Sweeney gains motivation for his actions through the addition of a family. No longer a solitary man whose only associations are those who benefit him in business, Sweeney now has a wife, preyed upon by Judge Turpin, and a daughter, taken by Turpin as his ward. To gain access to Lucy Todd, Turpin removes Sweeney to prison. Sweeney's razor aims at the throat of "those who moralize," not because he is evil, but because they are false (Sondheim 24). The character may take drastic action, but as he points out "these are desperate times, Mrs. Lovett, and desperate measures are called for" (Sondheim 105). The emotions that drive Sweeney's action, as those that motivate any revenger, are intense, transformative, and "can provoke in us a conflict between sympathy and moral presupposition that ensure imaginative involvement with his predicament at the deepest level" (McAlindon 29). The failure of justice and tyranny of the powerful determine his reaction. Circumstances, not greed, drive this Sweeney.

Sweeney gains complexity from transition in form, but to maintain the play in its new format other characters must also have depth. Judge Turpin, though easily cast off as the villain, acknowledges his corruption when he scourges himself seeking contrition. His lines even call the audience to recognize their own faults; he enters reading from the Bible, "let him who is without guilt cast the first stone," following this verse with the question, "can there be such a man" (Bond 10). As Sweeney will do later in the play, Turpin recognizes his own faults as those shared by all humanity, but, as he is meant to stand on the side of justice, Turpin also serves to demonstrate the corruption of the government and order. Sondheim makes this scene more

complex by adding one small detail. Rather than hearing Johanna singing off-stage, Turpin whips himself while “he peers through the keyhole of the door to Johanna’s room” (68). Although this scene was eliminated from the Broadway staging, the script still includes the song Turpin sings as he attempts to purge himself of his lustful feelings for his ward. The juxtaposition of Sweeney with Turpin serves the transition from pure melodrama to revenge tragedy since “the tyrant and noble revenger emerge as complementary types and interacting extremes – law without justice and justice without law – through which the dramatists can explore the major evils that threaten man-in-society” (McAlindon 29). The corruption of authority connects the story securely with the early modern tradition and its Roman antecedents.

In the Sweeney Todd melodramas, motivation within the story serves to delineate the good characters from those who are evil. A clear line distinguishes these groups and no one passes from one to the other; personal gain motivates the evil characters. While characters in the later versions of the play may be accused of single-mindedness, the depth of their development prevents them from being seen as the stock characters encountered in melodrama. The personalities of the characters that develop them beyond the stock “types” of melodrama drive the transition to revenge tragedy. As Bowers notes, the audience’s interest in the revenger’s personality and “specific dominating motive” carry this legacy to future writers (106). Sondheim observes that practicality, combined with greed, defines Mrs. Lovett, and that Sweeney “is a man bent on revenge, he thinks of nothing else; that is his dimension” (“Larger” 12). Although this may be true, the adapted Sweeney’s vengeance comes from a deeper place than the greed that motivates the melodramatic Sweeney; and while Mrs. Lovett works in response to her own greed, she also loves Sweeney. So their purposes may be singular, but their motivations cannot be defined as simplistic.

Bond's Sweeney begins with an understandable motivation for his actions, but we see, through the development of the play, that the focus on the singular purpose of revenge blinds Sweeney to all else. The Beggar Woman, who frequents the area, turns out to be Sweeney's wife, Lucy, who, Mrs. Lovett assured Sweeney, was deceased.⁷ Sweeney's intense focus on revenge prevents him from distinguishing one individual from another. He encounters Lucy more than once, first when he arrives in London and she seems to recall his face. Bond constructs the Beggar Woman as a victimized character, a portrayal continued in Tim Burton's 2007 film adaptation of the musical, but Sondheim makes this character even more complex. On her first encounter with Anthony and Sweeney, she begs for alms, but follows the begging with offers to both men for "A little jig jig, / A little bounce around the bush" (30). No longer simply a "beggar woman," she also works as a prostitute. Her aggressive manner complicates audience responses of pity for her plight. Although Anthony offers her money and reacts with embarrassment at her sexual aggression, Sweeney dismisses her on all accounts and becomes enraged when she says, "Hey, don't I know you, mister" (30). Sweeney's desire for anonymity first causes his mistake, once he believes Lucy to be dead; his desire for vengeance blinds him to all else. It is only when Turpin has finally been killed that Sweeney sees Lucy's face in that of the Beggar Woman. Scott Miller notes that the play does not intend to leave the audience "happy and safe in the knowledge that good always triumphs over evil" (205). By taking justice into his own hands, Sweeney has eliminated the corruption of Judge Turpin and the Beadle, but he has slain the very innocent person on whose behalf he acted. Sweeney's mania has blinded him to the extent that he becomes the perpetrator of the death he sought to avenge.

⁷ Bond's version has Mrs. Lovett tell Sweeney that Lucy is dead (5), but Sondheim's Mrs. Lovett only tells Sweeney that Lucy took poison (40).

Bond's and Sondheim's adaptations use relationships to motivate action, but in *The String of Pearls*, as in the Hazelton and Dibden-Pitt plays, profit motivates the barber. A gentleman entering the shop with cash or other valuables is certain not to be seen again. Material objects, not relationships, motivate the action of the story. Sweeney's collection of hats, canes, and jewels belonging to his victims confirms Tobias' suspicions that something odd is happening in the barber's shop. The pearls that Mark Ingestre sends to Johanna seal Thornhill's fate. This string of pearls also serves to call attention to Sweeney's actions. Colonel Jefferies knows that Thornhill had the pearls in his possession and that the last place he was seen was Sweeney's shop. The only connection to material possessions that receives emphasis in Bond's and Sondheim's adaptations is the connection of Sweeney to his razors. These tools of his trade offer him the strength to strike back at the injustice he has suffered. He does not seek reparation, but retribution. Just as love of his wife and daughter motivate his revenge, his "friends," the razors provide solace through their potential to destroy his enemies.

Sweeney's quest for revenge is motivated by love for his family and their memories. Fredson Bowers observes that Kyd's lesson, in developing the early modern form of revenge tragedy, was that no simpler method of motivating a conflict exists than "the revenge of a personal injury" (101). While personal injury may be the most powerful motivator, acts of revenge are anything but simple. Hallet and Hallet observe that playwrights of revenge tragedy "definitely understood revenge to be an emotion that could easily present itself as having a claim on the reasonable as well as the irrational, and on the moral as well as the evil" (7). The impetus to action in revenge plays often comes from a ghost. This ghost may be an actual specter, as in *Hamlet* and *The Spanish Tragedy*, or the memory of a wronged loved one as in *The Revenger's Tragedy* and *Sweeney Todd*. Whether a memory or a supernatural being, the ghost conveys to

the audience that, “the impulse to revenge originates outside of man, as a force in the universe resembling that force which the Greeks personified in the Furies” (Hallet, Hallet 8). The motivation driving the revenger exceeds his control because it is an external force created by extreme emotion.

Sweeney seeks to destroy Judge Turpin, not for his wrongful imprisonment, but for the Judge’s actions toward Sweeney’s wife and daughter. Sweeney returns to London hoping he might find a “loving wife and child,” but instead hears of his wife’s rape (Sondheim 40). Although Sweeney is far from happy when the play opens, he does not return to London to pursue revenge. Only after Mrs. Lovett reveals this background does he declare his intention to seek vengeance. Once back, Sweeney’s story incorporates ghosts as memories, which eventually drive his actions. Bond’s version permits Mrs. Lovett the first use of the word “ghost” in association with Sweeney; as he enters her shop, she asks “are you a ghost” (3). Sondheim makes the connection more direct allowing Sweeney to tell Anthony that he “feel[s] the chill of ghostly shadows everywhere” (31). As in Bond’s play, Sondheim’s version shows that Mrs. Lovett first believes Sweeney to be a ghost, but more importantly Sondheim clarifies the nature of the ghosts that drive Sweeney through Mrs. Lovett’s comment that people believe the room over her shop is haunted. While this observation adds to the overall mystery of the piece, it connects the ghosts to the specter of Sweeney’s past. The apparently empty room contains the memory of his once happy life. These memories serve the symbolic purpose of the ghost motif that Hallet and Hallet view as integral to the form.

Sweeney’s memories may be an indirect incarnation of the ghost as the spirit of revenge, but they do fulfill the function of that trope. Hallet and Hallet explain that the classic Kydian form incorporates a ghost that embodies the impulse for revenge, “its demands are unambiguous,

immoderate, and recognize no obligations in the direction of mercy or forgiveness” (21). Although these memories do not physically call out for vengeance in the same manner as Hamlet’s father or Don Andrea, they do affect Sweeney in the way that those supernatural ghosts do other avengers. These memories result in Sweeney’s altered perceptions and “transform his relations with other characters” (Hallet, Hallet 21). While focused on his task, Sweeney cannot “release the angers of the past,” and his obsession consumes him to the point that he becomes isolated from the present (Fraser 238). This alienation from individuals in his present prevents him from recognizing Lucy when he encounters her. Sweeney feels only numbness now that Lucy, his “reason and his life,” has become only his reason for revenge (Sondheim 32). The one way that Sweeney might be swayed from his task would be this recognition, but as she remains a memory for him, this memory drives his actions against Judge Turpin and the Beadle.

Sweeney’s family memories also provide the material for the play-within-a-play, another motif integral to the revenge tragedy. As with the manifestation of the ghosts, Sondheim and Bond’s versions alter the motif to suit their needs. Exposition of Lucy’s fate comes in the form of a dumb show. As Sweeney “watches,” Mrs. Lovett tells him how Turpin finally violates Lucy’s virtue. In both Hal Prince’s staging of Sondheim’s version and Burton’s film adaptation, the action begins in the space above Mrs. Lovett’s shop. By using the stage space in this manner, the connection of Turpin’s haunting crime to the location of Sweeney’s vengeful spirit solidifies. Although other plays use masques as the tool of revenge, the play-within-a-play in *Sweeney Todd* provides the impetus for action. Judge Turpin’s rape of Lucy occurs during a masked ball. The use of masks underscores the duality of characters, but also indicates the connection to masques used in the early modern revenge tragedies. This masque or dumb show allows Sweeney to ‘see’ what has happened to his wife and the cruelty of the people who would

not help a woman in distress. The action serves dual purposes: it connects the audience to Sweeney in that both learn Lucy's fate at the same time and it is Sweeney's observation of the action that brings forth the specter of revenge that will drive him throughout the play.

Hallet and Hallet note fixation on the masques that enact revenge often draws attention from other performative elements within the revenge tragedies (90). Just as Kyd uses the ghost of Don Andrea and the spirit of Revenge to frame the entire play as a performance, Sondheim uses his chorus of ballad singers to frame the performance of Sweeney's tale. The play opens with the prologue imploring the audience to "attend the tale of Sweeney Todd" (23). Throughout the musical, the chorus provides commentary on the action, functioning in the same manner that Kyd uses Don Andrea and Revenge and just as the chorus of Greek and Roman tragedy would. Individuals break from the chorus to interact with Sweeney and perform roles within the tale. In the final scene, the chorus even resurrects Sweeney after his death. The epilogue begins with the survivors calling once again for the audience to "attend the tale," one by one Sweeney's victims return to stage and join the song. Finally, through the recounting of Sweeney's tale, the chorus brings Sweeney back from the grave. His story lives on through the telling of tale of revenge and madness.

The revengers themselves take on roles in order to achieve their ends. Hamlet, Hieronimo, and Titus perform madness in the process of obtaining their revenge. Just as Vindice disguises himself as Piato to gain access to the Duke, Benjamin Barker takes on the role of Sweeney Todd, concealing his true identity to reclaim what he might of his former life.⁸ Once Barker learns that the Judge has raped his wife, he maintains his new identity as Sweeney Todd. Sondheim makes the moment clear, having him declare, "Not Barker! Not Barker! Todd now!

⁸ Bond does not provide Sweeney's "old" name in his version, so I will use Sondheim's here since he maintains this motif in the musical and it offers easier communication of the idea.

Sweeney Todd!” (40). He rejects the naïve identity in favor of a wiser one who “will have no mercy either” (Bond 4). Sweeney does only what others do throughout the play. Turpin puts on the face of a just magistrate, although his actions testify to the opposite. Alfonso Pirelli also demonstrates the necessity of performance within this corrupt world.⁹ In addition to his professional showmanship, Pirelli has learned how useful the cultivation of two identities may be in a world that punishes those who are too straightforward. The story holds up the danger of exposing one’s “true self” through Pirelli’s death. Once Pirelli reveals his true identity, Sweeney kills him. His death enables Sweeney to maintain his own performance and keep his former identity from exposure. Although focus generally falls on the performance of vengeance through the play-within-a-play, these other layers of performance within revenge drama help make the plays complex and help continue the genre.

The motifs explored by Bowers and the Halletts are common to most plays of the revenge genre; however, as more dramatists take up the form, they utilize the motifs to varying extents. By incorporating these motifs into the melodramatic tale of Sweeney Todd, Bond transforms the play into a far more complex work. The changes in genre alter more than the story of Sweeney Todd; they shift the genre and develop function of the form. Taking up the revenge tragedy motifs and incorporating them into musical theatre makes new changes in the function of the drama. Instead of a simple battle between forces of good and evil, audiences witness a complicated tale of a man tortured by grief and memories of his once happy life. Sondheim further develops the play by incorporating Brechtian elements of alienation, that while present to some extent in early modern revenge tragedies, work within the musical to create a critique of the social conditions within the play.

⁹ Different “real” names are provided for Pirelli by Bond and Sondheim. Bond names him Alf Spiral (14), while Sondheim give him the name Danny O’Higgins (78).

Audience and Alienation

Scholarship on revenge tragedy examines its origins both in early modern England and the earlier incarnations present in Seneca's works. Although Thomas Kyd is given credit for beginning the revenge tradition on the Elizabethan stage, the concept reaches back to Greek and Roman tragedy and continues in modern stage and film.¹⁰ Key elements common to the tragedies are examined and used to include and exclude works within the genre.¹¹ Hallet and Hallet's work focuses on madness and other motifs that tie the genre together, but concentrates on the necessity of madness and its function within the plays. Others examine the importance of law, justice, and their function within the genre. Molly Easo Smith examines the conflation of theatre and punishment as spectacle within Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*. Katherine Maus points out that these plays "testify to an apparently ineradicable yearning for justice - a yearning that abides even, or especially, in the most unfairly victimized persons" (ix). Michael Neill sees the plays as a "vehicle for exploring deeply felt anxieties about the very possibility of justice in a fallen world" (343). The alienation of protagonists within the world of the play often draws the focus of critics.¹² The plays present a world in which corrupt justice leaves a presumably law-abiding citizen with no recourse within the accepted order. When the corruption and powerlessness combine to feed the avenger's obsession, the single act of vengeance becomes an uncontrollable bloodlust.

As a revenger, Sweeney Todd reacts to his powerlessness by striking out at Judge Turpin, who has prevented him from living the dream of his formerly happy life. Characters situated

¹⁰ Katherine Maus' introduction to *Four Revenge Tragedies* notes not only "Greek and Latin" forbearers of Renaissance revenge plays, but also the descendants found in modern film genres like Westerns and detective thrillers. Others have explored the genre in conjunction with films like Greenaway's *The Cook, The Thief, His Wife and Her Lover*, and Tarantino's *Kill Bill*.

¹¹ See Fredson Thayer Bowers' *Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy 1587-1642*.

¹² For example see Michael Neill's, "English Revenge Tragedy" and C. L. Barker, *Creating Elizabethan Tragedy*.

outside the social mainstream and given to feelings of powerlessness may be seen in other Sondheim musicals including *Assassins* (1976) (Lovensheimer 212). Most scholars agree that there is something different about Sondheim's approach to musical theatre. His compositions have drawn interest for Bernard Hermann's influence.¹³ Barbara Means Fraser discusses his use of the Greek Chorus, while Mari Cronin explores the social issues highlighted in his works. The interest in social commentary, seen in Sondheim's works, connects him to revenge tragedy, a genre "through which the dramatists can explore the major evils that threaten man-in-society" (McAlindon 29). In addition to Sondheim's focus on social outsiders, Jim Loversheimer examines his use of pastiche – "the presence of music and/ or musical styles from various sources in a single work" (207). Although Loversheimer refers to pastiche in a musical sense, the same melding of style may be seen in Sondheim's approach to *Sweeney Todd*. Sondheim takes the structure and motifs of the revenge tragedy and creates a contemporary version of the genre by incorporating modern ideas on theatre and its function.

Aristotle provided the template for tragedy to early modern dramatists in the *Poetics*. These tragedies, through dramatic rather than narrative form, attempted to achieve "through the representation of pitiable and fearful incidents, the catharsis of such pitiable and fearful incidents" (63). Early modern audiences expected to feel what the characters might feel, and through the experience of these emotions purge themselves through empathy. This establishes the function of theatre as one that creates fellow feeling between the audience and the characters. Through camaraderie with these characters, the audience may gain insight and understanding. In Aristotle's view the function, or one of the functions, of tragedy was an elimination of these emotions through vicarious experience of the emotions. Aristotle's view of tragedy particularly

¹³ See Craig M. McGill, *The "Hitchcock/Hermann" Chord and Cinematic Devices in Stephen Sondheim's Sweeney Todd*.

emphasizes the importance of emotional connection; in the twentieth-century, the theatrical theories of German playwright and director Bertolt Brecht directly oppose this emphasis on emotional connection as a means of purgation.

Brecht's ideas aimed at taking theatre in a different direction by eliminating uncritical emotional response. The changes Brecht suggests shift the spectator to an objective role through techniques that alienate the audience rather than allowing an indulgent emotional connection to the stage action. He emphasizes that epic theatre forces the spectator to "face something" rather than be involved, and that the spectator "stands outside, studies" rather than sharing the experience (37). The audience should not empathize with the characters through experience but learn from them through scientific observation. Epic theatre may not encourage fellow feeling or attempt catharsis, but should rouse the audience to act based on the unnecessary sufferings of those at the center of the narrative (37,71).

Although these theories differ in their opinions of emotional connection in tragedy, the interests of tragedy do not shift; the form remains a means of inquiry into humanity and experience (Brockett, Pape 9). If we choose to emphasize the modern in early modern theatre, it becomes fruitful to interrogate the function of the works within Brecht's conception of the modern theatre as the epic theatre.¹⁴ Sondheim's works have often been tied to Brecht's theories, and the connections between the elements present in *Sweeney Todd* and other revenge plays show that these approaches had been utilized in the early modern works.¹⁵ Just as scholarship that focuses on the concern over law and justice examines revenge tragedy as work with contemporary social implications, Brecht sees the necessity of theatre as a means to move

¹⁴ Brecht's theoretical writings make frequent reference to Shakespeare and the Elizabethan stage, including the acknowledgement that this "dynamic, idealistically-oriented kind of drama, with its interest in the individual, was in all decisive respects more radical when it began life (under the Elizabethans)" (45).

¹⁵ Sondheim does not profess that his shows are Brechtian, as observed by Scott Miller: "Sondheim has frequently said quite strongly that he does not think that his shows are Brechtian" (207).

audiences to consider the world around them and their involvement in it. Brecht expresses that it is “theatre, art and literature which have to form the 'ideological superstructure' for a solid, practical rearrangement of our age's way of life” (23). Looking at the social function of revenge tragedies, both the early modern incarnation and the contemporary version seen in Sondheim’s *Sweeney Todd*, the questioning of the societal function of law and justice becomes apparent. The plays function according to the rules of the epic theatre and involve the audience in a social inquiry by complicating their view of the revenger’s situation and actions.

The position of the spectator is integral to Brecht’s construction of epic theatre; for theatre to shift from dramatic to epic, the spectator must be in a position to observe the action rather than experience it. Theatre remains a means of discovery for the audience, but rather than the cathartic experience championed by Aristotle, the action forces the audience into a critical evaluative experience. For the function of epic theatre to be fulfilled, the spectator must not be allowed to empathize with the protagonist, but Brecht also recognizes the necessity of some identification with the characters. Revenge tragedies utilize multiple levels of spectator involvement. Most obviously the theatrical audience watches the play’s action, but the motifs of revenge plays require a play-within-a play to move the revenge plot forward. So the theatrical audience watches the characters, the characters watch a masque, and finally the revenger has an audience of conspirators within the play. The pursuit of revenge undergoes scrutiny on many levels imploring the theatrical audience to consider the actions of the play. While, as with Aristotle, the characters in Brecht’s epic theatre still connect with the audience, the connection may not be passive.

Judith Schlesinger points out that, “the characters’ concerns must resonate with our own before we care what happens to them” (126). In his discussion of revenge in *The Spanish*

Tragedy, Gregory M. Colon Semenza points out that, “there is no such thing as a clean act of revenge” (51). If there is no clean act of revenge, then how do playwrights construct a protagonist from the avenger that the audience will support? While revenge tragedies may function in both of these capacities, it must be remembered that acts of vengeance stem from feelings of love. Brecht notes the importance of the 1928 production of *The Threepenny Opera* as the first successful demonstration of epic theatre, and he stresses that, “the play showed the close relationship between the emotional life of the bourgeois and that of the criminal world” (85). The protagonists in these plays are not criminals as those at the center of *The Threepenny Opera*, but through their suffering the revengers, who become criminals, display the conditions common between themselves and the audience. By establishing the desire for revenge as emanating from the wrongful death of a loved one, revenge plays work in the same manner as Brecht sees *The Threepenny Opera* functioning. The emotional field is leveled; no matter a person’s background, the violent death of a loved one will awaken primal urges. The audience must feel that the revenger’s need for blood originates as a justifiable impulse that might be felt by any one else in the audience.¹⁶

The more heinous the injustice endured, the more the audience may see the revenger as a victim justified in the action he undertakes; so what may be seen as gratuitous violence actually serves to excite the audience’s support of the revenger in his actions. In these plays, the suffering of the revenger is laid bare before the audience. Hieronimo sees his son Horatio’s body hanging in his arbor, having been stabbed repeatedly and left for Hieronimo “to drown [thee] with an ocean of [his] tears” (II.iv.23). Like Horatio’s murder, Lavinia’s rape and mutilation occur during the course of the play. We see Titus’ immediate response to the brutality inflicted upon

¹⁶ In this case the feeling is one of sympathy or pity, not empathy. The audience should not feel that they fully comprehend the protagonist or experience his emotions vicariously.

his daughter. He hysterically calls for a sword to cut off his hands that “have fought for Rome, and all in vain...they have served [him] to effectless use” (III.i.73-6). These grieving fathers crumble in the face of their children’s fates, and their visceral reactions attempt to connect with the theatrical audience in the same manner the characters seek connection with the judges who might bring them justice. Even when the event does not occur during the action of the play, as it does in *The Spanish Tragedy* and *Titus Andronicus*, we see the lasting effect of criminal trespass on the revenger. Vindice keeps the “sallow picture of [his] poisoned love” as a reminder of the “Once ... bright face of [his] betrothed lady” killed for resisting the Duke’s “palsy lust” to whom he still speaks devotedly as the play opens (I.i.14, 16, 34). His faithfulness to his dead bride makes him pitiful, so the time past only heightens the drama of his situation.

Just as in *The Revenger’s Tragedy*, the events that form Sweeney’s outlook occur prior to the play’s opening. The beginning of the musical finds Sweeney returning from Botany Bay, having been sent there on a false charge by Judge Turpin. Through his response to Anthony’s positive comparison of London to the Daredenelles and Peruvian mountains, the audience sees his contrasting worldview. Sweeney views London as “a hole in the world / Like a great black pit” inhabited by the “vermin of the world” where “morals aren’t worth/ what a pig could spit” (32). The lines that follow show that his image of the city has changed in response to his experience. The first verse transitions through the explanation that the “privileged few” at the top turn “beauty into filth and greed” and through his song we understand that this transition has occurred in Sweeney’s life as well (32). But Sweeney’s suffering is not at an end. He has struggled to return from Botany Bay to seek out his family only to hear the tale of Lucy’s rape from Mrs. Lovett, to which he responds with “a wild shout” and the decision to make those responsible pay for what they have done (40). But as Cronin acknowledges, “Sondheims’s

vision is a complex one. He sees all sides of an issue. There are no easy solutions to the characters' problems in his musicals" (145). This complexity connects the work with Brecht's own work. His plays present issues for consideration by the audience, to which he provides no answers. That *Sweeney Todd* may be viewed as "both social commentary and horror story, a musical *Twilight Zone* set in nineteenth century England" demonstrates that the play provides the complexity necessary to support its connection to Brecht's epic theatre (Miller 205).

As witness to the acts perpetrated against the revenger, and often the continued corruption of the individuals committing these crimes, the theatre audience passes judgment in favor of the avenger's impulse to action when witnesses within the plays remain unmoving. This identification is imperative to the revenge tragedy. Hieronimo, the Knight Marshal, seeks to avenge the brutal murder of his son; Vindice, a nobody at court, to avenge Gloriana's murder; Titus, a victorious and loyal general, the death of his sons as well as the rape and mutilation of his daughter; and Sweeney, a barber returned from a penal colony, his own wrongful imprisonment, but also the death of his wife and essential kidnap of his daughter by the crooked Judge Turpin. No matter what the revenger's background, the audience recognizes him as the sufferer of injustice. The powerlessness of the revenger overshadows whatever position he may hold; there is still another in power over him inhibiting his access to justice. These criminal actions must be punished, and, as law-abiding citizens the audience recognizes that the only recourse the wronged individuals have is private justice. So the audience watches these characters experience incidents constructed by the writer. As the audience views the narrative, they connect with the story through the artist's medium. Schlesinger suggests this creates a kind of "shared paranoid disorder" (125). The characters, artists, and audience identify with one

another through the work, all accepting this temporary “madness” of a fictional world.¹⁷ The audience agrees to a pact with the artists by watching these events and believing them, although this is not a belief in their veracity, but a belief that what happens on stage could happen in life under the proper circumstances. The audience connects to the characters by accepting the terms of this contract. This identification involves the audience in the plot and complicates their thinking about the matter; as a result of this connection they cannot remain passive.

Brecht sees the necessity of the audience’s active involvement in the plays, stating, “the spectator, instead of being enabled to have an experience, is forced as it were to cast his vote” (39). The shift from Aristotelian to Brechtian theatre occurs in the *way* that the audience engages with the play. Both theories require a connection between audience and characters, but Aristotle sees passive absorption into the emotion of the material, while Brecht requires an active participation in the narrative. This engagement of the audience in a new way, which forces them to consider the action and question the play’s action, creates the beginnings of change. These plays do not address issues of justice in a way that can be viewed in clear black and white terms. The audience is forced into a realm of gray by their involvement and sympathy with the victim/revenger. In discussing the difficulties of epic theatre, Brecht acknowledges that the point of this theatre is “that it appeals less to the feelings than to the spectator’s reason... at the same time it would be quite wrong to try and deny emotion to this kind of theatre” (23). The audience’s emotions and reason combine, both are appealed to and they serve to make the issues more complex. In his notes to *The Threepenny Opera*, Brecht states that the play reports life as the spectator would *like* to see it, but the inclusion of things that he would rather not see causes him to see his wishes both fulfilled and critiqued (43). Maus presents some of the questions the audience must ask: “How, then, do we evaluate the actions of the revenger? Does the

¹⁷ Schlesinger calls this *folie partagee* – shared craziness (125).

Protagonist's victimization exonerate him, partially or fully? Do we condone crimes that retaliate for previous crimes?" (x). The spectator's sympathy for the revenger's condition implicates him in the acts in a manner that prevents him from passing easy moral judgment; the topic must be studied and carefully considered.

It is important to recall that the acts of vengeance viewed by the spectator are not taken by a lone individual. The revenger may be the driving force, but, just as the response of the theatrical audience is complicated by the revenger's actions, those characters within the play who are initially complicit in the revenge plot eventually find themselves involved in actions that have exceeded the brutality of the initial act. The conspirators may have a personal interest in seeing the revenger's plans fulfilled. Mrs. Lovett's interest in supporting Sweeney's desire for revenge is primarily self-serving. She loves Todd and does not want to anger him, but she also earns a comfortable living as a result of his labor. She feels that she has control over him, but when Toby questions the actions taking place in the tonsorial parlor, she must choose between the people she cares for and her self-love wins out, sealing Toby's fate. Likewise, Bel-Imperia assists Hieronimo and urges him to pursue vengeance, because she too has been affected by the murderous actions of Lorenzo and Balthazar. She takes her fate into her own hands, choosing suicide when Hieronimo has rewritten the end of his play to spare her. Vindice has numerous accomplices, although not all of them are involved as deeply in the plot as he and his brother. The Duke's son has wronged a noble and virtuous woman, angering a large portion of the population. Vindice finds support because the Duke has failed to enforce justice on her part. Even though Antonio supports Vindice's actions on his wife's behalf, once Vindice admits to murder, Antonio's complicity ends. At some point each accomplice must make a decision to continue working with the avenger, or to operate based on his/her own interests. Just as with the

internal audience, the spectators must make a choice in regard to the avenger's actions. Brecht explains that "alienation... is necessary to all understanding" (71). For the audience to benefit from the actions they witness, distance must be restored. This distance will offer the audience an opportunity for objectivity. After having carefully constructed protagonists that the audience will support, how do the playwrights then attempt to achieve alienation?

To force the audience away from empathy and into their appropriate role as distanced observer, the playwrights use a number of tactics. The audience must be reminded that the play is a narrative. One method of achieving this distance is the use of a chorus. The original chorus of Greek tragedy functioned in a number of ways. The members of the chorus might represent a character, an ideal spectator, set the mood of the play, add spectacle, discuss what has happened, what may happen, or individual members might step out of the chorus to participate as a character in the action of the play.¹⁸ In addition, the chorus also serves to establish social and ethical framework for a standard of judgment, and a spectator reacting to events as an internal audience (Brockett, Hildy 23).¹⁹ The reactions of the chorus may be seen as a means of directing the audience to think or feel a particular way about the action. Claude Calame notes that the tragic chorus may exhibit "tension between a powerful emotional implication and a critical distance that allows for universalizing commentary" (229). If the reaction of the chorus and the drive of the protagonist are at odds, even if the audience feels compelled by the chorus to react to the action of the play in a particular manner, a tension still exists that prohibits simply empathizing with the characters. While Kyd restricts his chorus to verse speech, Sondheim's chorus sings their commentary on Sweeney and his actions.

¹⁸ Brockett and Hildy note that the occasions for an individual chorus member stepping out to speak lines were rare (23).

¹⁹ The Greek chorus served a number of additional functions including setting rhythm, and although these apply in some ways to the choric elements of the Revenge Tragedy, they are less pertinent to the alienation effect achieved through the use of choric characters.

Kyd's chorus in *The Spanish Tragedy* is comprised only of Revenge and Don Andrea's ghost, while Sondheim's is composed of the entire company, including Sweeney Todd. Both playwrights make use of the chorus to establish the play as a narrative that they will witness along with the audience. After Don Andrea's explanation of his death and travels to the underworld, Revenge informs him that they will sit to "see the mystery/ And serve for chorus in this tragedy" (I.i.90-1). Although he reveals little regarding the outcome, other than its tragic nature, Revenge establishes himself as knowledgeable regarding the events that will pass on the stage. The only plot point that Revenge reveals is that Don Andrea "will see the author of [his] death,/ .../ Deprived of life by Bel-Imperia," but he passes judgment by referring to the narrative as a tragedy (I.i.87-9). Although this outcome should be joyous to Don Andrea, we are told that the story will be tragic. Through the label of tragedy, Revenge points the audience toward the tension of the play. If Balthazar will be killed by Bel-Imperia, and Balthazar deserves death for his part in Don Andrea's murder, why would the play be tragic? Tragedy, defined by its "serious or sorrowful character," may only have a "fatal or disastrous conclusion" (OED). By making the declaration that the play will be a tragedy, Revenge indicates that the audience will not be pleased with the outcome of the play, despite the accomplishment of Don Andrea's desired revenge.

Like Revenge, the chorus in *Sweeney Todd* has foreknowledge of what will occur in the play.²⁰ We are told from the beginning of the play that Sweeney Todd should be seen as a "demon." The chorus clearly describes Sweeney as someone who differs from what they consider the norm. We are told, "his skin was pale and his eye was odd," and that he "heard music that nobody heard" (23, 25). Neither description indicates an individual with whom one

²⁰ Sharon Aronofsky Weltman also notes the inclusion of a chorus in Pitt's version of *Sweeney Todd*, but acknowledges that this chorus serves a primarily comic purpose "offering no moral analysis and no disturbance of the fourth wall" (307).

might want to associate. Sweeney is an outsider; by establishing Sweeney as someone apart, Sondheim attempts to distance us from the protagonist. What follows the description of Sweeney as a man differentiated from the norm, will offer the audience a glimpse of the “phenomenon in all its strangeness and incomprehensibility” (Brecht 27). Sondheim establishes Sweeney’s unusual nature and then presents the audience with the tale by which they may make their judgments regarding the matter.

Both Kyd and Sondheim make use of the chorus repeatedly during the play. Don Andrea and Revenge’s conversations bridge the acts and the two remain on stage throughout the action of the play. Their commentary questions the action and provides a continuous drive toward the end of the play. Don Andrea grows impatient with the action that Revenge reveals, asking Revenge, “Brought’st thou me hither to increase my pain” (II.vi.1). His friend has been slain rather than his enemy and Bel-Imperia suffers abuse at Lorenzo and Balthazar’s hands. Kyd reiterates the narrative control of the chorus by permitting Don Andrea to determine the fate of those who have been slain in the pursuit of his cause. Just as Hieronimo controls the fates of the court through his masque, Don Andrea uses the play in which he has watched Hieronimo perform to determine the afterlives of the players. Those who have wronged Don Andrea, as well as his friends, are sent into the afterlife where he determines their eternal fates sending some to suffer and some to eternal joy.

Sondheim’s chorus interjects with songs throughout the play. They set the stage in the prologue with “The Ballad of Sweeney Todd,” reminding the audience that what they will witness “is a story, that it’s not real” (Miller 206). The choric interjections both summarize plot for the audience and “protect us from it” (Schlesinger 130). As Scott Miller points out, story telling dominates throughout the play: Sweeney conveys his tale to Anthony and Mrs. Lovett

relates the story of Lucy's rape to Todd when they first meet. The chorus seems to have insight into what will occur and what Sweeney is thinking. Mrs. Lovett has more information concerning Sweeney's quest than he does, just as the chorus knows more than Sweeney does regarding the outcome of the tale and Revenge knows more than Don Andrea or Hieronimo. They are the storytellers and the continual input from these choric characters prevents the audience from sinking into the story and letting emotion have free reign. Whether providing moral commentary or narrative insight, the chorus prevents the maintenance of the fourth wall by directly addressing the audience. The elimination of this fourth wall prevents the audience's passive reaction to the play by involving them in the plot and repeatedly requiring judgment.

Sondheim then takes his attempt at creating alienation one step further. Sweeney speaks of himself in the third person when the audience first meets the character. This serves to "introduce the spectator to the person whom he [will] be watching acting and being acted upon for some hours" (Brecht 59). Brecht acknowledges the importance of this method in Helene Weigel's performance as Vlassova in *Die Mutter*. Following the model set by Weigel, Todd steps out from the chorus and begins to sing along with the company:

Attend the tale of Sweeney Todd.

He served a dark and a vengeful god.

(He continues alone)

What happened then – well, that's the play,

And he wouldn't want us to give it away,

Not Sweeney,

(with company)

Not Sweeney Todd,

The Demon Barber of Fleet Street. (25)

He begins as a member of the chorus, speaking of himself as a separate person, so the actor introduces the character that he will play throughout the narrative. In this moment, he does not pretend or claim to be the character that he will play (Brecht 58). Approaching Sweeney's introduction in this manner prevents "the spectator from transferring himself to a particular room, as habit and indifference might demand" (Brecht 58). For the play to function successfully, the audience must be made to decide. Brecht's use of habit and indifference highlight the key elements of the epic theatre's function. The habit that audiences have of sinking into their seats and becoming lost in the world of the play must be broken because this habit enables the audience to continue to experience the play without intellectual involvement.

The playwrights infuse the stories with humor as a method to prevent the audience's emotional attachment to the characters. The humor often presents itself in a kind of dissonance between mode and matter. Twice, scenes involving justice and the Duke's family become comedies within the structures of *The Revenger's Tragedy*. While Junior Brother sits awaiting his sentence for raping Antonio's wife, he takes the execution of justice for such a joke that his answers verge on comic one-liners. When asked why he committed the crime, his honest answer gets taken for a "jest" by Lussurioso (I.ii.49). The Duchess and her other sons plead for Junior Brother to be shown mercy while he only mocks the court, seeming to believe firmly that he will be favored as a result of his status and that his crime is minor since he could not resist temptation: "My fault being sport, let me but die in jest" (I.ii.66). Later, when Ambitioso and Supervacuo contrive to seal Lussurioso's doom, a comedy of errors ensues. With death warrant and royal signet in hand, the brothers arrive at the prison ignorant of the fact that the Duke has freed Lussurioso. The brothers, intent on ensuring their own succession to the dukedom, deliver

the death order directly to the officers and order their brother's "present death" completely ignorant that they have ordered Junior Brother's execution (III.iii.3). These comic scenes serve both to break the gravity of the play's action, and to emphasize the miscarriage of justice in a realm where social influence trumps proper enforcement of law.

The use of comedy as a tool for alienation continues in the revenger's gleeful enactment of vengeance. Although not presented comically in all revenge tragedies, the revenger's pleasure in his actions serves effectively to break the audience from their complicity with his actions. Vindice responds to the Duke's inquiry "What are you two," by mockingly reminding him that they are "Villains all three" (III.v.152-3). His joy at finally avenging Gloriana's death echoes his Act One direction for her to "Be merry, merry" (I.i.44). However, because he continues in his quest to enforce justice, he falls victim to the pleasure he takes in his own cleverness. When Antonio questions the circumstances of the Duke's death, Vindice is so pleased with himself that he responds " 'Twas somewhat witty carried" and "Nay 'twas well managed" (V.iii.117, 120). The audience knows that Vindice should not share this information, but his perception of his actions has been so altered that he believes that treason should be excusable. Both Vindice and Titus set up their revenge as entertainment. Vindice carefully sets the stage and dresses Glorianna's skull for her performance. Titus sets an elaborate table at which he will serve Tamora's sons to her in a pie. Once vengeance has been taken, they sing out their glee. Vindice tells the Duke "Alas, poor lecher, in the hands of knaves! / A slavish duke is baser than his slaves" (III.v.158-9). Titus informs Tamora that she has eaten her sons in a tidy rhyming couplet, then stabs her, calling the knife to witness his act:

Why, there they are, both bakéd in this pie,
Whereof their mother daintily hath fed,

Eating the flesh that she herself hath bred.

‘Tis true, ‘tis true; witness my knife’s sharp point. (V.iii.60-3)

The couplets, followed by his quick action against Tamora, create a dissonance that shocks the spectator. Vindice and Titus create an impish tone in the reveal of their crimes insisting that attention be paid to the action in a way that emotional reaction will not permit.

Sondheim uses a similar tactic in *Sweeney Todd*, although he utilizes actual song rather than the singsong rhythm of rhyming couplets. The dissonance that shocks the audience to attention in Sondheim’s revenge play comes from the difference between what the characters sing and *how* it is sung. When Anthony has interrupted Sweeney’s first chance at Judge Turpin, Sweeney sings his harsh, grating “Epiphany” that ends with his claim to be “full of joy” (103). Only moments later, Sweeney and Mrs. Lovett break into the peppy “A Little Priest.” Their discussion of the flavors that the pies will come in takes on the pattern of a rhyming battle of wits. Sweeney challenges Mrs. Lovett to match his tastes with a person; she becomes his sommelier pairing identities of the people to suit his taste requests. His requests rhyme with the flavor she has previously offered:

Mrs. Lovett: We’ve got tinker...

Todd: Something pinker.

Mrs. Lovett: Tailor?

Todd: Paler. (108)

Once Mrs. Lovett defeats him with “Locksmith,” the game then shifts to word games with the employment of the person in the pie (108). This portion of the song takes up the rhyming couplets used by Vindice and Titus: “Try the financier. / Peak of his career” (109). The quick rhymes make the song easy to remember, and easy to get stuck in the head of the spectator. This

toe-tapping song ends the first act, giving the audience the entire intermission to recognize that the happy tune they are left humming centers around eating human flesh in pie form. Sondheim has made a game out of cannibalism and the dissonance forces them to question their reaction to the play as it goes forward. In this song as with other points in the play, the music and characters draw the audience in and repel them at once (Schlesinger 140).

The dissonant use of humor heightens the alienation effect of the plays. Brecht's epic spectator reacts to plays in the opposite manner from the characters in them. If a play truly fits this model, the audience then should see "nothing obvious in it" (71). Creating dissonance through the use of humor in these highly dramatic circumstances, the playwrights keep the audience off balance and prohibit the easy assimilation of protagonist and spectator. Maus notes that Vindice's success as a revenger "depends upon a talent for improvisation"; the same may be said for Sweeney Todd (xxi). Sweeney succeeds in his quest to avenge Lucy mostly because he remains adaptable. When opportunity presents itself, Sweeney acts quickly managing to kill the Beadle only moments before the judge arrives to have his own throat slit. Nicholas Brooke points out that the English tradition of tragedy "springs from violent farce" (8). The protagonists' twisted sense of humor draws on this tradition, and by taking a sick pleasure in the acts they perpetrate, the revengers ensure that the audience will be unable to empathize with their plight.

What then would be the purpose of creating this separation between spectator and character? Alienation effects serve to separate the audience from the characters so that the revenge acts may be carefully considered and evaluated objectively. As pointed to by the alienation effects employed, revenge tragedy functions, not to move the audience through experiencing the events along with the revenger, but by witnessing the events as an outsider.

The impulse should be to question the situation that necessitates the revenge. By preventing the audience from becoming one with the protagonist, the playwrights position them to have a clinical objectivity, becoming the scientists that Brecht believes an audience should be. Armed with this scientific stance, the observer of vengeful action must question the shades of gray created by a situation that forces a private citizen to enact justice that should be handled through civic channels. Through the use of alienation effects, the playwrights position the spectator to question these actions.

Class Conscious Cannibalism

Societies that necessitate revenge are those ruled by corrupt power structures where justice cannot be attained through accepted civil channels. As the revenger begins to understand the reality of his situation, his reasoning becomes corrupt. The Halletts emphasize the importance of madness in the early modern revenge tragedy, stating “the whole structure of the revenge tragedy can be understood in terms of the revenger’s efforts to free himself from the restraints that forbid the act of vengeance, as a process that involves moving from sanity to madness” (9). As Maus notes, “a revenge that begins as a carefully regulated exaction of eye for eye often veers into uncontrolled excess” (xi). The excess results from the revenger’s obsessive focus on the revenge act. His focus on how to achieve his ends eventually drives the revenger to a state of madness. The revenge becomes more than a personal vendetta; the wrongs affecting the avenger are connected to a growing number of people and he takes “purgative action – to cleanse his world of a terrible wrong” (Maus xi). This expansive way of thinking leads to the view that “more is at stake than simply the revenger’s personal grievance... society as a whole was felt to be contaminated” (Neill 330). By examining this madness as a result of the revenger’s

feelings of impotence in society, the derangement becomes a clearer social commentary and the resulting actions become revolt.

After the revenger has shed “the restraints that forbid the act of vengeance,” very little seems unreasonable in his mind. The truth of the world he has trusted reveals itself as illusion; he becomes mad through the knowledge of how the world actually works. The knowledge facing the protagonists of revenge tragedies rocks their long held view of civilized behavior. The madness alters the revenger’s reason, making those acts he may previously have found barbarous seem acceptable solutions to the problems facing this new world. Abuse of power and unjust behavior monopolize the revenger’s new worldview. Those who previously appeared rational and civilized now seem savage and opportunistic. Armed with this new perception of those at the top of the social ladder, the revenger seeks a means to bring this corrupt power down. In each case the audience witnesses an avenger suddenly confronted with his lack of social and civil power. The law that maintains civility is corrupt and leading to a view of society as fully contaminated by its civil leadership. When those trusted to enforce the laws of civilization are the very people flaunting those laws, what recourse does one have? The revenger sees no legal means to address the crumbling of social norms and must turn to extra-legal means of punishment to reassert his power in a corrupt world.

Once the revenger understands that he has no recourse to justice through civil channels, he must come to grips with his powerless position in the world. This sense leads him to be overcome by the need to exact justice. The grief over the wrongs done to him overwhelms his sense of reason and becomes a passion. As Thomas Hobbes observes, “to have stronger and more vehement passions for any thing, than is ordinarily seen in others, is that which men call madness” (qtd. in Hallet, Hallet 44). This passion would not grow to the heights that require

private justice if the revenger felt a sense of empowerment through the political structure. In taking action to exact justice, the revenger takes the power restricted to the regent, and places himself in the role as minister of divine justice. Through the possession of the madness, the revenger comes to view himself “not as a man committing murder but as a minister of God” (Hallet, Hallet 29). Kyd makes this most apparent through Hieronimo’s declaration “Vindicta mihi!/ Ay heaven will be revenged of every ill,/ Nor will they suffer murder unrepaid;” Hieronimo justifies his activities by connecting them with scripture (III.xiii.1). What man has failed to do through civil channels Hieronimo will do through private action, and, by doing so, satisfy what he views as Heaven’s thirst for vengeance. When earthly power is denied the revenger, he turns to heavenly power to lend credence to his actions, trumping the authority of secular law. The playwrights present a character possessed by a sense of injustice, and through this possession he seeks a means to support his reasonable desire for the situation to be rectified. The characters may seem at once “as having a claim on the reasonable as well as the irrational” (Hallet, Hallet 7). It is reasonable that Hieronimo, Titus, Vindice, and Sweeney should seek justice for the wrongs done to them and those close to them, but the irrational element emerges from the intense desire for vengeance. This desire must escalate to the point of obsession so that reason, constructed by the avenger, comes from a questionable place. Once this obsession takes control of the revenger’s mind, he feels that he may exact revenge by whatever means necessary. Acts that exceed the bounds of accepted civilized behavior become reasonable means to compensate for his lack of power. The need for power presents itself most plainly in the revenger’s use of cannibalistic acts to carry out his revenge and take the power he lacks.

As a trope, cannibalism may take on a variety of meanings, which may shift based on details like who is eaten.²¹ In *Totem and Taboo*, Freud observes the belief of some cannibalistic tribes that eating the flesh of another helps the feeder to absorb powers held by the one being eaten (136). The act may also be seen as a way to delineate social boundaries creating one group as morally superior to another through the accusation of cannibalism (Macbeth, Schiefenhövel Collinson 190). Most often, literary representation of cannibalism correlates to conquest, colonization, and alienation of the ‘other.’²² Louise Noble views the act as a tool “to demarcate cultural boundaries and sharply discriminate between ‘civilized’ and ‘barbaric’ modes of behavior” (678). Raymond J. Rice views “the consumption of human flesh...[as]... the symbolic order’s limit point, a threshold that must not be crossed” (298). In “Of Cannibals,” Michel Montaigne states, “there is nothing barbarous and savage ... except that each man calls barbarism whatever is not his own practice” (152). Cannibalism may also represent a breakdown of social contract or covenant. Biblical uses of cannibalism demonstrate acts of vengeance on groups that have turned their back on God.²³ Revenge plays demonstrate, through the use of cannibalism, the literal expression of power relations in their respective social structures. The feeding off of one group by those above it is turned back on the oppressor. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels convey the same expression of the parasitic nature of man’s relations to one another in the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*. Terms of oppression come to express a food chain enacted through capitalist practices. Once driven mad by his lack of power, the revenger then utilizes cannibalism as a means to subvert the existing social structure that has failed to deliver justice for his wrongs. Utilization of cannibalism to achieve his ends demonstrates the

²¹ Macbeth, Schiefenhövel, and Collinson note the differences between endocannibalism (ingestion of people from one’s own group) and exocannibalism (ingestion of people from ‘other’ groups).

²² Some examples include: Megan A. Norcia’s “The Imperial Food Chain: Eating as an Interface of Power in Women Writers’ Geography Primers” and Jay Rubenstein’s “Cannibals and Crusaders.”

²³ See Zechariah 11:9, Leviticus 26:29, Deuteronomy 28:53-57.

heights of madness to which the revenger is driven by his feelings of powerlessness. When viewed through Marx and Engels' social criticism, Sondheim's combination of cannibalism with social commentary in *Sweeney Todd* takes this trope to another level, making the act of revenge an act of revolt against the people and conditions that necessitate the act.

With these observations of oppressive history in mind, the question becomes whether these "mad" avengers, having been carried away by their passion, are in actuality in possession of new knowledge denied the general population. By turning the focus in this direction, the role of class status becomes integral to revenge plots. When Hieronimo attempts to confront the King about Horatio's death, Lorenzo blocks his access and tells the King that Hieronimo is "Distract and in a manner lunatic" (III.xii.89). Hieronimo's capacity to present his case rationally has been eliminated by his grief, and those around him see him as incapable of reason. However, he, unlike other Spanish subjects, knows what corruption lies within the ruling family. Like Hieronimo, Sweeney recognizes the unethical uses of power. The clarity of his position and powerless within this corrupt structure drives him toward a condition that seems like madness to outsiders. The revenger, faced with the truth of his situation, is driven mad by his inability to attain satisfactory redress for the wrongs acted upon him. His own truth must be faced before he can present anyone else with this clarity of vision. The passion of the revenger develops as a direct result of the real circumstances he is suddenly forced to face.

In *Sweeney Todd*, the connection between madness and clearer perception of the social situation is emphasized by the Beggar Woman's presence in the opening of the second act. She and the other Bedlamites present characterizations of madness accompanied by truth. The madness becomes further emphasized when Bedlam's inhabitants break free and march through the final scenes. Although Sweeney, as the revenger, gains a clear view of his social situation

that expands to the greater population, the inhabitants of Fogg's Asylum proclaim the truth of Sweeney's revolution through the final scenes of the play. They bring with them a proclamation of apocalypse. Their declaration that "it's the end of the world" is repeatedly followed by the chant "City on fire! /City on fire! /City on fire!" (186). This chant recalls the beggar woman's earlier song, "Smoke! Smoke!/ Sign of the devil! Sign of the devil!/ City on fire!" (156). Her repetition of this song attempts to warn the customers of Mrs. Lovett's cannibalistic enterprise. Before anyone else can see what "mischief" Sweeney and Mrs. Lovett have been doing, the Beggar Woman, like a contemporary Cassandra, calls out her warning – and like Cassandra her truth remains unheeded. Although she sees the truth of the situation, no one listens to her mad ravings. The chorus of Bedlamites marching over the stage at the play's conclusion is harder to ignore. Schlesinger notes that Lucy (the Beggar Woman), the character least likely to understand the true situation, is the only one who does. The connection reiterates the fact that "madness becomes the carrier of truth, a truth that needs to come out, a true apocalypse" (Menton 73). The revenger, like Titus, Hieronimo, Vindice, and Sweeney, armed with the truth of his situation, decides to act rather than call the truth out in the streets, but his "madness" offers the vision upon which he acts.

The Spanish Tragedy and *Titus Andronicus* begin with the hero believing that order will win out and make things right. Both Hieronimo and Titus belong to the power structure of their respective societies. Titus and Hieronimo defend the status quo, supplying service that maintains the current order. Only when they discover, at various stages within the plays, that those who are trusted to maintain order are the same individuals or groups who have committed the injustice, do they lose faith in the current ruler. This loss of faith is directly connected to the specific individuals in power ruling as a tyrant, not a lack of faith in the social order. Unlike Hieronimo

and Titus, Sweeney and Vindice *begin* with the knowledge that those trusted with authority and power have corrupted their positions to attain their own ends. Sondheim shows this strikingly through Sweeney's contradiction of Anthony's positive view of London noting that the "cruelty of men is as wondrous as Peru" (32). Once he hears of Lucy and Johanna's fates from Mrs. Lovett, Sweeney's worldview will be further confirmed. Sweeney has held on to the image of his preserved family throughout his incarceration; Mrs. Lovett's revelation of the truth forces him to recognize that his past has been destroyed. The harsh reality of his lack of power leads him to the extremes typical of the revenge tragedy. The madness that develops from this powerless feeling intensifies during the delay experienced by the revenger, and drives the revenger to the excess that will define his acts.

The delay, a motif critical to the mental instability of the revenger, feeds the development of the obsessive focus on justice into madness. Although Hallet and Hallet argue that the "revenger welcomes the delay, because he really does not want to act," Sweeney has already experienced a long enough delay; further denial of access to his victim tortures him to the point of madness (89). Sweeney takes his cue from Vindice, reveling in the activity that occupies the delay and eagerly anticipating the final act. Sweeney appears as a man possessed from the very beginning of the play; he apologizes to Anthony with the excuse, "my mind is far from easy" (31). Sweeney's false conviction and imprisonment have already stripped him of the naiveté he recognizes in Anthony, but he has not quite reached the point of madness. His troubled mind may indicate an individual on the verge of madness, but does not indicate anything more insane than "exaggerations of normal emotions" (Macdonald 120). His passions grow stronger when he arrives at Mrs. Lovett's only to find that his wife has poisoned herself and his daughter has been taken in as Judge Turpin's ward; he moves away from reason at this news: "Let them quake in

their boots – Judge Turpin and the Beadle – for their hour has come” (40). At this point he still maintains some rational thought; he has not yet gone far enough to the extreme to label him as mad. Sweeney directs his anger specifically at those he views as responsible for his misery and suffering. While he does view revenge as a viable solution, he has not been carried away by his passions; he still specifies the persons at which he directs this vengeful urge.

The epiphany that brings Sweeney to the conclusion “They *all* deserve to die,” results directly from Anthony’s interruption (emphasis mine 101). Sweeney has already waited to discover the fate of his wife and daughter while he served fifteen years at Botany Bay; he has waited until Judge Turpin walked into the tonsorial parlor, and, at the very moment when revenge seems imminent, the satisfaction of vengeance is once again delayed (40). This moment drives Sweeney further toward the conclusion that violence will solve his problem, but it is no longer isolated violence directed at specific individuals. He sings once again of the “hole in the world,” but rather than concluding his thought, he breaks off as he finds a solution to rid that world of the vermin that “inhabit it - / But not for long” (101). The shift in thinking shows through the familiar line repeated, halted, and given a new conclusion. Sondheim’s music drives home the mental break occurring in this moment. Prior to Anthony’s entrance, Sweeney and Turpin sing together hypnotically. In the moment after the judge leaves, the “music begins under, very agitated” while Sweeney “stands motionless, in shock” (100). The harmony present in “Pretty Women” dissipates as Sweeney’s agitation counters Mrs. Lovett’s attempts to sooth him with her reprise of “Wait.” That Sweeney uses the word “deserve” draws attention to the change in role he has undertaken as a revenger; no longer an individual seeking personal vengeance, Sweeney has taken on the role of God’s minister. He seeks to deliver vengeance he sees as earned by the entire population; the death that he brings is only what the people have

asked for through their own unjust behavior. He no longer focuses on those who have directly offended him, but extends his vengeance to a society that has lost all sense of meaning.

When confronted with his powerlessness directly, Sweeney loses what little connection with rationality he retained. Following Pirelli's murder, Mrs. Lovett questions his sanity, but determines he was reasonable in taking action against Pirelli. Pirelli holds information fatal to Sweeney's existence and uses that information as power over Sweeney for his own financial gain. While Sweeney may not be completely insane, the immediate instinct to kill shows his regression toward animal instincts. Violence becomes his first reaction when threatened. He sees his own situation expanded to the general population and extends his means of redress to the wider populace in the moment he finally plunges toward insanity. Sweeney acts without prejudice, viewing everyone as equally corrupt and responsible for the proliferation of decay in London. Hallet and Hallet view the delay as a motif necessary to cultivate the revenger's madness because of his reluctance to act, but Sweeney's madness develops, not from an unwillingness or inability to act, but from his lack of power. His social station, a prisoner in hiding, forbids his approach to legal justice, as does his experience of legal corruption in London. Even if he could approach the law, he has learned from direct experience that the incarnation of law currently ruling London serves only its own ends.

To attain satisfaction, Sweeney must get the law to come to him. As Mrs. Lovett tells him, "Everybody shaves," so Sweeney obtains access to the judge through his work (108). Because Sweeney works in a service industry he must wait until Turpin comes to him. Through his arrangement with Mrs. Lovett, Sweeney's work as a barber and his work as an avenger become conflated. These two functions become united by the fact that they define Sweeney. Sweeney's story is explained in terms of his labor; four of the five variations from melodrama to

musical identify Sweeney Todd as the “barber.”²⁴ The focus on Sweeney’s labor turns attention to the social function of Sweeney’s action as more than a personal vendetta. In his madness, Sweeney, as both the barber and avenger, partially fulfills the function of Marx and Engels’ proletariat. Sondheim’s play enacts the kind of social upheaval that Marx and Engels view as necessary, but no alternate structure is offered to take the place of the current system. The murder spree, on which Sweeney embarks, aims to eliminate those who keep the proletariat in its place, and those of the proletariat who accept their place as well. By taking aim at the social structure, Sweeney’s vengeance becomes an eruption of anarchic rage; unlike Marx and Engels’ proletariat, he leaves the world in chaos.

The importance of the social strata in Sweeney Todd’s story gains emphasis through the direction that the play open with a “drop depicting in a honeycombed beehive the class system of mid-19th century England” (23). Sweeney’s moment of “Epiphany” recalls his earlier view of London as “a hole in the world like a great black pit” where the “privileged few” sit on top “Making mock of the vermin/ in the lower zoo” (32). When Judge Turpin evades Sweeney’s vengeance, Sweeney experiences a moment of clarity explaining his revelation that the world is filled with “two kinds of men...the one staying put in his proper place/ and the one with his foot in the other one’s face” (101). By focusing Sweeney’s rage on this particular aspect of his situation, Sondheim draws attention directly to the class structure present in all revenge plays. Sondheim focuses his inquiry on a man whose only strength comes from his labor as a barber with no illusion of lasting power within society. Sweeney’s occupation as a barber underscores the connection of labor with power. The only time that Sweeney may hold power over those in the upper classes connects directly to his use of the razor. When the men of London step into

²⁴ This includes the Bond, Sondheim, Hazelton, and Burton adaptations of the story. Dikken Pitt does not include reference to Sweeney’s profession in his title and *The String of Pearls* is not included in this reference as it was not entirely focused on Sweeney as a subject.

Sweeney's tonsorial parlor, they make themselves vulnerable to him by sitting in his chair and baring their throats to his razor.

The modern revenger, as viewed in *Sweeney Todd*, must be a common man defined by the work that he contributes and which offers his livelihood. Because Sweeney's employment defines him, the message of the function of the revenge tragedy shifts. Rather than remain a story about a solitary avenger whose personal vendetta maddens him to the point of excessive violence, Sweeney directs his anger at the social concerns that have created his situation. Sweeney's action espouses no alternate agenda meant to correct this situation; he simply seeks to end it by ending the lives of those who enable the injustice. All revenge tragedies utilize excessive violence to make their point. Although early modern versions incorporate a certain amount of collateral damage as the revenger's madness increases, Sweeney's fixation on revenge brings him clarity of vision that his situation extends to the entire population. By focusing on his individual experience, Sweeney becomes enlightened to a universal problem. Sweeney sings, "*We* all deserve to die," including himself in the larger group of those to whom "death/ Will be a relief" (emphasis mine 101). As Benjamin Barker, "he was – Naive" regarding the extent of man's cruelty; as Sweeney Todd, he has gained knowledge and no longer maintains the foolish notions like those Anthony holds (32). Sweeney holds a darker view of the world, having been educated by his experience with Judge Turpin. He speaks of beauty only in the past tense:

There *was* a barber and his wife,

And she *was* beautiful.

A foolish barber and his wife.

She *was* his reason and his life,

And she *was* beautiful.

And she *was* virtuous. (emphasis mine 32)

Just as Benjamin Barker exists only in the past tense, the beauty in the world - personified by Lucy - exists in the past. Sweeney Todd sees no beauty and maintains no foolish notions about the workings of mankind. So Sweeney's personal vengeance becomes an act of rebellion because he experiences illumination that demystifies man's relation to man. But this illumination does not bring hope of a preferred world order, only an end to human existence. When thwarted in his initial attempt at revenge, his solution takes on the universal problem by eliminating those he sees as the cause, as well as the "less honorable throats" of the wider population (102).

Sweeney's explanation that the "crunching noises pervading the air" are the sounds of "man devouring man" emphasizes Marx and Engels' claim that societies are historically based on the antagonism between oppressor and oppressed (Sondheim 105, Marx, Engels 483). The dysfunctional social structure that results from this parasitic relationship must be righted through revolution that upturns the social structure in favor of a new way. By focusing on the social leveling that results from Sweeney's slaughter, one may view the act as "the revolt of modern productive forces against modern conditions of production, against the property relations that are the conditions for the existence of the bourgeoisie and of its rule" (Marx, Engels 478). Maus notes that the conditions of the early modern period are those of a society in transition. She focuses on the economic changes explaining that the powerful classes adapted to new circumstances based on their interpretation of "where their self-interests lay, and how those interests might conflict with their role as it had traditionally been defined" leading to potential dislocation of those beneath them (xiii). The tale of Sweeney Todd develops during the Victorian era, and the updated versions by Bond and Sondheim transfer the tale, originally set in

the eighteenth century, to the Victorian era from which it originated. The mid-Victorian period, in which *Sweeney Todd* is set, witnesses much economic change including the rise of the middle classes who “were the chief agents and beneficiaries of these unprecedented developments, the parvenus who transformed a ‘feudal’ society into a ‘modern’ state” (Gilmour 3). Although Sondheim does not classify himself as a political playwright, his musical adaptation was also developed during a period of social change in the United States. The development of these plays in times of change and turmoil links them directly to the idea of revolution, that these changes were largely linked to economics, and the changing ways that people made their living make the connection to Marx and Engels’ ideas on social developments through revolution.

Just as Gilmour recognizes the importance of the middle class in the transitions occurring in nineteenth century England, Marx and Engels recognize that “the bourgeoisie, wherever it has got the upper hand, has put an end to all feudal, patriarchal, idyllic relations. It has pitilessly torn asunder the motley feudal tie that bound man to his ‘natural superiors,’ and has left remaining no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest” (475). Thus, the identification of Sweeney as “barber” indicates Sweeney’s association with the economic market and his function within the capitalist system. Like Sweeney, the people that he and Mrs. Lovett will use for pie filling are reduced to their professions. The reputation of the occupation determines the quality of the meat. The extensive word play in “A Little Priest,” provides a biting commentary on the various strata of society and how they might affect the taste of the pie. A sweep comes “cheap,” while the Beadle “isn’t bad till you smell it/ And notice how well it’s / Been greased,” and the priest has an “awful lot of fat” (109, 106). The poorer profession comes cheap, while those in power are noted for their corruption. The fat priest calls attention to the wealth of churches, meant to avoid excess, and the Beadle’s willingness to accept bribes demonstrates that law

enforcement comes with a price. The song brings forward the way that “the bourgeoisie has stripped of its halo every occupation...[and] has converted the physician, the lawyer, the priest, the poet, the man of science, into its paid wage laborers” (Marx, Engels 476). So the quality of the meat directly relates to the value of the occupation. Even those previously revered have lost their value as they have sold the occupation out to the bourgeoisie. By exploiting these occupations as products, the bourgeoisie has enforced a system of oppression. The professions that have served the bourgeoisie will now be slaughtered for their value as a literal product.

Feeding one group to another points out Marx and Engels’ belief that the bourgeoisie has outlived its usefulness as a ruling body when the leadership fails to feed those it oppresses. Individuals are no longer people, but meat to fill pies that serve the masses. Mrs. Lovett and her competitor, Mrs. Mooney, are driven to use alternative sources of meat in their pies because capitalism has made socially acceptable sources of meat unattainable. As the bourgeoisie controls the market, it fails to feed the lower classes that support its existence. The necessity of turning the upper echelon of the social structure into meat for pies that feed the general populace reiterates Marx and Engels’ point that the ruling class demonstrates its inability to rule when “it has to feed him [the slave], instead of being fed by him” (483). Sondheim makes the metaphor of the social crisis literal by putting the sale of human flesh on stage for audience consumption. As Sweeney and Mrs. Lovett observe, if the historical precedent is “those below serving those up above,” the social turn of “those above serving those down below” becomes gratifying (108). The oppressed finally have a means to exert power over their oppressors by feeding them to “anyone at all,” thereby overturning the existing social order (112). The popularity of the pies served at Mrs. Lovett’s pie shop demonstrates that man does not only feed upon man, but he also enjoys it.

Maus points out that the revengers in early modern tragedies are conservative rather than revolutionary figures because the aim of the revenger is not to “overturn the social hierarchy but to restore its proper function” (xiii). This certainly holds true for Titus and Hieronimo, even for Vindice, who is happy to see Antonio in power after the death of the lecherous Duke and his heirs. Sweeney, however, sees no redeeming qualities in society and seeks to destroy the social structure that has allowed Turpin to exercise power. Thomas McAlindon points out that revengers are “pitted against tyrants or other ‘great men’ who use rank to frustrate justice” (29). Sweeney does not seek legal justice; he does not seek to see Turpin serve time for his misuse of power. Sweeney seeks social upheaval rather than legal justice. The problem that Sweeney seeks to right extends beyond his own personal situation to the entire population, but it also extends beyond the inept rule of the powerful. Sweeney recognizes that the structure of the capitalist society in which he exists reduces the worth of human beings to “exchange value” (Marx, Engels 475). Sweeney’s value directly correlates to his skill as a barber. While the devaluation of human worth might be explored through Judge Turpin and Beadle Bamford’s corruption, the partnership between Sweeney and Mrs. Lovett demonstrates the dehumanizing nature of capitalism that leads to the corruption of those in power and, in turn, results in the powerless feeling that leads to Sweeney’s insane, vengeful enterprise.

By associating capitalism with cannibalism, *Sweeney Todd* continues the commentary Montaigne begins. Montaigne points out the hypocrisy of civilized society by highlighting that those who view themselves as civilized rarely take note of their own barbarous acts: “I am not sorry that we notice the barbarous horror of such acts, but I am heartily sorry that, judging their faults rightly, we should be so blind to our own. I think there is more barbarity in eating a man alive than in eating him dead” (155). By feeding Tamora “the flesh that she herself hath bred,”

Titus highlights her barbarous behavior (V.iii.61). As Mrs. Lovett does with Sweeney's victims, Titus puts his victims into a pie and feeds them to their "unhallowed dam" (V.ii.191). Tamora seeks to avenge her eldest son's death and to obtain this sinks to secretive means attacking Titus' daughter. Her behavior, despite her current position as Queen in Rome, reaffirms her place as a barbarian, or "uncultured, uncivilized...not Roman" (OED). Sweeney achieves the same ends by feeding members of London's population to one another. He believes that "many a Christian" would have left him to die on the seas, "and not lost a wink's sleep for it," so he views people as hypocrites (30). While the customers at Mrs. Lovett's emporium might look on barbarous cannibals with disgust, they fail to see the barbarity in their own everyday activities. Sweeney achieves a coup by feeding 'civilized' people to one another without distinguishing "great from small" (112). The strike is more complete because the customers cannot get enough of the pies. Sondheim emphasizes the truth of Sweeney's view through "God that's Good," sung by the chorus at the top of Act Two. While some may look upon Titus or Sweeney's actions as barbarous, they must, as Montaigne points out, ensure that they do not "surpass them [cannibals] in every kind of barbarity" (156). The excessive violence used by revengers to attain justice both highlights the barbarity of the avenger and that of the society that makes revenge necessary. Through the mad passion that eliminates restraint, the revenger becomes the barbarian that he seeks to destroy.

The excess of revenge tragedy develops from the corruption of reason related to the revenger's madness. Beyond reason, the revenger's acts defy restraint. The madness seen in these plays results directly from the frustration of justice causing the revenger's sense of powerlessness. Once madness takes hold, the revenger's acts take on a broader meaning. Although early modern revengers may be seen as restorers of order, including their active

participation in their own deaths, the modern revenger, as seen in *Sweeney Todd*, takes a less orthodox view. If “society as a whole [is] felt to be contaminated,” then society as a whole must pay the price. Sweeney does his best to overturn the unjust structure of London society while taking his revenge out on those individuals responsible for his suffering. By combining the motifs of early modern revenge tragedy with modern social theory, Sondheim’s adaptation of *Sweeney Todd* becomes a revenge tragedy that enacts not only the change in power structure demanded by the revenger, but also a social destruction. Through close examination of the revenger’s status, one may recognize the use of cannibalism as means by which Sweeney attempts to level the power structure keeping him from achieving his goal. The excessive violence typical of revenge tragedy expands to include the mass population permitting unchecked corruption. Sondheim’s references to Marx and Engels’ social theory tie the acts of cannibalism to insurgency aimed, not at restoring previous order, but creating chaos that destroys the social ladder which has kept men like Sweeney down. Unlike Marx and Engels’ ideal revolutionary, Sweeney leaves no hope of order in his wake. He, like all avengers, must die once his task has been completed; the world he creates does not lend itself to neat resolution, but to more questions and consideration of what might “fix” the situation that made him and others a victim of unjust civil law.

Conclusion

Revenge tragedies may be seen as works highlighting the proliferation of injustice in a corrupt society, or commentaries on the madness that emanates from obsession. These plays “force the viewers to suffer through the same feelings of anguish and moral uncertainty” experienced by the protagonists “in order to highlight the dehumanizing power of the revenge impulse” (Semanza 56). The violence of revenge tragedies dehumanizes to the extent that it

leads not only to numerous deaths, but also to deaths that are increasingly brutal and shocking. Moving beyond the horror of mutilation, Sweeney Todd feeds the flesh of his victims to others. “The consumption of human flesh represents the symbolic order’s limit point, a threshold that must not be crossed”; Sweeney has crossed one boundary by committing murder but goes further in feeding his victims to the populace (Rice 298). By crossing this point, the door of that threshold is closed to him forever once he and Mrs. Lovett begin to use the flesh of other humans as meals. The boom in business resulting from the new recipe emphasizes Sweeney’s belief that the “vermin of the world” inhabit London (32). In the early modern form, if society is to function, a norm must return after vengeance has been taken. The absent law that necessitates revenge must re-form and return to maintain the norm, which will not permit participation of the revenger. The shock value of cannibalism emphasizes that justice cannot be taken into the hands of individuals. In the final chorus of “The Ballad of Sweeney Todd,” Sweeney and Mrs. Lovett sing, “To seek revenge may lead to hell,/ But everyone does it, and seldom as well/ As Sweeney” (204). If everyone does seek revenge the results will be some version of the carnage demonstrated by *Sweeney Todd*.

Whether real or fictitious, Sweeney Todd has integrated himself into British cultural heritage. From Penny Dreadfuls to the stage melodramas of the 1800s, the Demon Barber of Fleet Street has become a fascinating villain. When Bond adapted a version of the melodrama for contemporary audiences in the 1970s, the tale of Sweeney Todd became a different dramatic form, which was further altered through Sondheim’s adaptation into a musical. Sondheim’s musical adaptation of the tale of Sweeney Todd utilizes the elements of revenge tragedy along with the source material’s romance and melodramatic aspects to create a modern revenge tragedy. Drawing on centuries of theatrical tradition, *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of*

Fleet Street (1979) has become a vehicle to examine the genre of revenge tragedy and its function within society.

Through a combination of the motifs delineating the early modern tradition with theories of modern theatre, the play becomes even more socially conscious than its early modern predecessors. Sondheim's incorporation of Brecht's ideas on epic theatre creates a class-conscious drama that moves Sweeney's vengeance into the realm of social criticism. His inclusion of comedy and other alienation devices works toward a less Aristotelian form of drama that prohibits uncritical audience response. By using these tactics, Sondheim heightens the capitalist critique created in Bond's adaptation. When viewed in a Marxist context, cannibalism demonstrates that capitalists thrive by feeding off the miseries of others. Where early modern dramatists would provide a sense of restored order following the revenger's demise, Sondheim refuses to give this sense of closure. Rather than restore order, Sweeney creates chaos. *Sweeney Todd* leaves audiences with the understanding that one corrupt individual has been eliminated, but Sondheim offers no clarity as to London's future in the aftermath of Sweeney's revenge. To complete the transition from melodrama to modern revenge tragedy, *Sweeney Todd* insists on the audience's critical involvement without offering up answers to the questions raised within the text. The play leaves one wondering what form of order might have prevented this tragedy, and how might society reform itself to eliminate the corruption that leads to the barbarism portrayed in these dramas.

Aristotle views tragedy as an "imitation of... human action and life and happiness and misery" (63). Revenge tragedies, including *Sweeney Todd*, present the audience with all of these elements, but by taking them in a direction that prevents uncritical, empathetic response, Sondheim recreates the revenge tragedy as a modern dramatic genre. The audience may find

itself in sympathy with Sweeney, but through approaches that attempt to separate the audience from the characters' plights a less cathartic experience is achieved. Sweeney's passions reach out to the broader injustices of the world requiring spectators to question the extent of their own involvement in metaphoric cannibalism that might lead to such extreme actions. If the history of the world "is the history of class struggles," then how long might that world continue without creating another Sweeney (Marx, Engels 475)? Sondhiem's answer seems to be that Sweeney exists in all of us. The final input from the chorus tells the audience "No one can help, nothing can hide you - / Isn't that Sweeney there beside you" (203). If the social cannibalism presented in revenge plays continues unchecked, society may be ripe for another demon barber to rise in revolt and set the city on fire once again.

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