

REVENGE AND THE PROBLEMS OF JUSTICE IN THOMAS KYD'S *THE SPANISH TRAGEDY*

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Abstract: Thwarted love, ghosts, murder and intricate subplots are hallmarks of the dramatic revenge plays that thrilled audiences in the late 16th century. The first exponent of the genre is widely believed to have been Thomas Kyd, a contemporary of William Shakespeare, whose work enjoyed considerable success on the London stage before being lost for nearly two centuries. This essay examines Kyd's 1592 play, *The Spanish Tragedy*, focusing on the core themes of revenge and the problems of justice. The notion of revenge, as a desire for retribution, versus justice, which brings with it the burden of a legal, moral, or divine authority, is carefully explored within the context of Renaissance thought. These recurring themes are then considered from the perspective of individual characters within the play, focusing on Don Andrea, Hieronimo and Bel-imperia. The article also reflects on the significance of Kyd's use of language and the framing devices of the various narratives within the play.

Keywords: Kyd, Renaissance, Revenge Play, Justice, Drama.

Thomas Kyd was born in London in 1558 to a family of good standing and became an admired dramatist at a time when theatrical performance in the burgeoning London theatres was an intrinsic part of the thriving city. While Shakespeare's *Hamlet* remains the most enduring example of Elizabethan revenge tragedy, scholars recognise Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* as the first play of its kind. Like *Hamlet*, the play features several gruesome murders and a play within a play. Set in the courts of Spain and Portugal, the action follows the fortunes of the Knight Marshall, Hieronimo, whose son Horatio is murdered by the King's Machiavellian nephew, Lorenzo, for becoming romantically involved with Lorenzo's sister, Bel-imperia. The action is watched throughout by the ghost of Bel-imperia's former lover, the courtier Don Andrea, who was recently killed in battle, and his guide from the underworld, Revenge.

Before commencing the analysis, it is important to clarify what the words 'revenge' and 'justice' mean with respect to their use in Renaissance drama. Ronald Broude reminds us that 'Elizabethans themselves recognised no distinct dramatic type called revenge play – the term is a modern one' (Broude 1975, 38). Similarly, concepts of revenge and justice were viewed very differently by Renaissance writers and their audiences. Revenge, as a private act carried out by individuals, was once legal in England but, as Broude explains, in the mid-sixteenth century 'the Tudor government

pressed the claims of the state to a monopoly on all revenge' (ibid., 39). As such, in Elizabethan times, revenge tended to denote retribution that took place outside legal boundaries. In addition to the change in the law concerning private revenge, any discussion of revenge and justice in Renaissance drama must also be concerned with religious attitudes of the day. The Elizabethan attitude condemned personal revenge on the basis of verses from scripture, that warned: 'Recompense to no man evil for evil/ ... Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath; for it is written, Vengeance is mine, I will repay, saith the Lord' (The Bible [KJV], Romans 12:17 and 19). Lily B. Campbell points to a number of plays written in the decades prior to *The Spanish Tragedy* whose didactic themes reiterate the notion of divine justice, a legacy she describes as the Renaissance's 'inheritance from the Middle Ages' (Campbell 1931, 282). Broude suggests the way in which earthly rulers reconciled their positions within this overall structure was as follows: 'for run of the mill cases, God was represented as content that mundane retribution be effected by king and magistrates, whose offices had been ordained by God for that very purpose' (Broude 1975, 48). This is a particularly pertinent point to remember when we come to consider Hieronimo's dilemma within the play.

Kyd chose to set his play in the courts of Spain and Portugal, at a time when dramatic performance on the English stage was subject to state censorship. This, however, is a veneer; as Shapiro observes, 'Kyd's play did not contain lines or passages whose potential subversiveness could be easily identified' (Shapiro 1991, 102), hence, it is clear Kyd is offering a personal critique of the nature of revenge and justice within the English court. If we accept that a revenge play such as Kyd's presented audiences with a new perspective on the problems of obtaining justice within a tightly controlled state system, we must question why this shift occurred.

One explanation is that the play was written at a time when individual freedoms were being undermined by the 'growth and concentration of state power' (Lever 1971, 27). Lever considers that in Jacobean drama, unlike Aristotelian works, 'The heroes may have their faults of deficiency or excess; but the fundamental flaw is not in them, but in the world they inhabit: in the political state, the social order it upholds' (ibid., 34). Lever also discusses two possible reasons for the rise in popularity of works whose plots centre on bloody tragedy. On the one hand, he queries whether 'the word tragedy is not a mere literary label we are attaching to a mode of "pure" theatre which makes its appeal at the subliminal level and does not speak to the rational mind' (ibid., 35). The opposing view, drawn from Fredson Bower's *Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy* (1940), is that the 'audiences regarded revenge plays as cautionary fables and watched the unfolding of the intrigues

with a mounting sense of disapproval and a growing conviction of the soundness of their own orthodox opinions' (Lever 1971, 36). Lever suggests neither of these extremes are convincing and I would argue that Kyd's play offers a more subtle and complex consideration of the problems facing the individual at a time when the state placed limitations on personal retribution. Despite portraying the upper echelons of the court, the basic principles at stake in *The Spanish Tragedy* must have held a wider social significance.

Hieronimo's pain as a grieving father is communicated to the audience through a series of heartfelt soliloquies which appeal to the most fundamental of human instincts. Robert Watson describes a time when local justice, with its focus on personal rights and honour, was being superseded by a centralized legal bureaucracy, in which the ordinary man would find it much harder to obtain a simple and swift form of vengeance. He concludes: 'The Senecan model of revenge tragedy could hardly have proliferated so rapidly unless there were tensions in Elizabethan society to which it answered' (Watson 1990, 318).

The play opens with the ghost of Don Andrea waxing lyrical about his earthly love for Bel-imperia and his journey through the underworld in search of a final resting place after being killed in battle. In his quest, Pluto's queen, Proserpine, has assigned him a guide, Revenge, who promises:

Then know, Andrea, that thou art arrived
Where thou shalt see the author of thy death,
Don Balthazar, the Prince of Portingale,
Deprived of life by Bel-imperia. (I.i.86-89)

These lines give the audience an expectation that the play will concern itself primarily with Don Andrea having the satisfaction of seeing his killer murdered by his lover. In fact, this introduction is merely a framing device and our attention is swiftly diverted to a new series of dramatic events, focusing on Hieronimo and the death of his son Horatio.

These parallel stories subsequently explore the very different nature of retribution desired by Don Andrea on the one hand and Hieronimo on the other. It is interesting that apart from being accompanied throughout by the personification of Revenge, Kyd does not allow Don Andrea explicitly to express his root desire until much later in the play. In the final scene of Act I, Don Andrea complains:

Come we for this from depth of underground
To see him feast that gave me my death's wound?
These pleasant sights are sorrow to my soul (I.v.1-3).

By the end of Act II, his frustration has intensified,

Brought'st though me hither to increase my pain?
I looked that Balthazar should have been slain,
But 'tis my friend Horatio that is slain (II.vi.1-3).

Don Andrea finally gives voice to the word 'revenge' when he pleads with the sleeping Revenge to wake up and declares, 'Hieronimo with Lorenzo is joined in league,/ And intercepts our passage to revenge' (III.xv.15-16). Katharine Eisaman Maus suggests that Kyd attaches a certain symbolism to Revenge sleeping that alludes to the unearthly machinations of vengeance (Maus 1995, 97). Whilst Don Andrea exhibits the frustrations of a man impatient for retribution to be exacted, Revenge gently reminds him that justice is not always swift, but is often best accomplished through restraint. 'Content thyself, Andrea; though I sleep,/ Yet is my mood soliciting their souls' (III.xv.19-20). I would argue that Kyd relates Revenge's willingness to bide his time with Hieronimo's careful deliberations, the actions of a man who is aware that he must move carefully if he is to achieve his desire for justice.

This question of how long a rational man should be expected to wait for restitution goes to the heart of Kyd's play and its representations of the problems of justice. Indeed, there is a vivid contrast between Don Andrea, who has already witnessed the result of punishment by the Gods of Hades, where 'murderers groan with never-killing wounds' (I.i.69), and Hieronimo, who represents the manifestation of earthly justice. The fact that Hieronimo is the Spanish court's Knight Marshall, a position that allows him to ensure justice is done to satisfy wrongs done to others, is no coincidence. By presenting Hieronimo with this dramatic irony, Kyd is able to scrutinize the complexities of justice and explore the options left open to a man when the institutional structure, of which he is a fundamental part, fails him.

It is true that Hieronimo, on finding Horatio's stabbed body hanging in the garden, cries to his wife Isabella, 'To know the author were some ease of grief,/ For in revenge my heart would find relief'

(II.v.40-41). But in his use of the word 'revenge' we are reminded of Campbell's point: that the 'threefold aspect of revenge ... must be reckoned as including God's revenge, public revenge committed to the rulers by God, and private revenge forbidden alike by God and by the state as his representative' (Campbell 1931, 290). Hieronimo's subsequent speeches show that his innate belief is in God's justice, but the depth of his anguish is already leading him to question the outcome should this fail.

If this incomparable murder thus
Of mine, but now no more, my son
Shall unrevealed and unrevengéd pass,
How should we term your dealings to be just,
If you, unjustly deal with those that in your justice trust? (III.ii.7-11)

Ernst de Chickera argues that 'the rhetorical question does not imply disbelief or rejection of the justice promised by heaven' (1961, 229). In fact, Hieronimo is unnerved by the failure to discover who has murdered his son and frightened at the direction his deranged thoughts are taking him. 'The ugly fiends do sally forth of hell,/ And frame my steps to unfrequented paths' (III.ii.16-17).

In stark contrast to Hieronimo's uncertainty, Bel-imperia's attitudes towards revenge for the death of her lover Don Andrea, and the murder of her new suitor Horatio, are distinctly more determined. Kyd introduces us to the King of Spain's niece in the first scene of the play, revealing at once to the audience, via Revenge, that she will be the instrument of Balthazar's murder. Thus, from the outset we are presented with the image of a strong woman willing to take control of her own destiny. In Bel-imperia, Kyd gives us a character well aware that the notions of divine or earthly justice are unlikely to offer any satisfaction for the crimes done to her. In our first meeting with Bel-imperia, she entreats Horatio to give his version of Don Andrea's death and upon hearing that Balthazar was captured, leaves us in no doubt as to what she believes would have constituted justice for this act, 'Would thou hadst slain him that so slew my love!' (I.iv.30). When Horatio leaves her alone, Bel-imperia is shown to be particularly calculating in her own quest for justice:

But how can love find harbour in my breast,
Till I revenge the death of my beloved?
Yes, second love shall further my revenge (I.iv.64-66).

I would argue that the problems of justice facing Bel-imperia are simply those of her sex. As sister to Lorenzo, who contrives a socially beneficial marriage between her and Balthazar, the son of the Portuguese viceroy, she understands fully that the men around her believe that they control her future. Kyd uses Bel-imperia's defiance of the patriarchal limitations placed upon her as a plot device which sees her acting intently, in the background, to ensure her desire for justice is realized. Peter Happe argues that Kyd intentionally manoeuvres Hieronimo into a position where unsanctioned revenge becomes his only option. 'The King's refusal to hear his cry for help, the Machiavellian brutality of Lorenzo, his own madness and the prompting of Bel-imperia are all contributing factors which operate causally' (Happe 1999, 209). Thus, as we shall see, Bel-imperia becomes instrumental in the ultimate acts of violence that take place.

Hieronimo's struggles are born of the murder of his son Horatio, at the hands of Bel-imperia's brother Lorenzo, in league with Balthazar. Kyd accentuates the subsequent twists and turns in his battle to seek justice through the recurring images of blood and ink. Upon discovering Horatio's body, Hieronimo vows to his wife Isabella, 'Seest thou this handkercher besmeared with blood?/ It shall not from me till I take revenge' (II.v.51-53). This motif is sustained with Hieronimo's discovery of a letter written by Bel-imperia in blood, 'for want of ink' (III.ii.26), which accuses her brother Lorenzo and Balthazar of Horatio's murder. The link between blood, as a reminder of active revenge, and ink, the more cerebral approach that Hieronimo favours, is compounded when, in his role as Knight Marshall, he is approached by Senex who seeks revenge for his own murdered son. Here Kyd reintroduces the semiotic marker of the bloody scarf, which he draws out of his pocket to wipe the old man's tears. When Hieronimo asks him to explain his suit, Senex replies:

No sir, could my woes
Give way unto my most distressful words
Then should I not in paper, as you see,
With ink bewray what blood began in me. (III.xiii.74-77)

In Senex's desperation, Hieronimo's mind is tipped over into madness as he imagines him to be Horatio back from the dead to admonish his father for his failure to exact revenge.

Maus suggests Hieronimo's madness is caused by his incapacity to accept the 'drastic crisis of authority' he is faced with and concludes: 'the immediate formal consequence of Hieronimo's

transformation is a new preference for soliloquy' (Maus 1995, 93). Kyd uses classical rhetorical devices, such as anaphora, in these soliloquies to emphasise his torment:

Woe to the cause of these constrained wars,
Woe to thy baseness and captivity,
Woe to thy birth, thy body and thy soul (III.vii.61-63).

Yet even in his grief, Hieronimo seems committed to pursuing justice through official channels: 'I will go plain me to my lord the King,/ And cry aloud for justice through the court' (III.vii.69-70).

Hieronimo's loss of faith in the system is gradual, but Kyd uses the repeated mention of Horatio's violated body as a dramatic device to reinforce the wrongs that remain unpunished. Molly Easo Smith points to at least two scenes that 'serve to keep the gruesome murder firmly in our minds' (Smith 1992, 80). One sees Hieronimo alone on the stage with a rope in his hand as he considers replicating his son's death with his own suicide by hanging. Notably, Hieronimo at this point is also still hopeful that divine justice will be forthcoming:

... there sits a judge
Upon a seat of steel and molten brass,
And 'twixt his teeth he holds a firebrand,
That leads unto the lake where hell doth stand.
Away Hieronimo, to him be gone!
He'll do thee justice for Horatio's death (III.xii.8-13).

After the meeting with Senex, however, a seismic shift seems to take place in which Hieronimo begins to see himself as a tool of God and is thus permitted to take justice into his own hands. He is encouraged in this by Bel-imperia's impassioned speech, which twists Hieronimo's honest failure to secure justice into the worst kind of behaviour from a supposedly loving father. Kyd uses rhetorical questions to beat down any resolve left in Hieronimo:

Is this the love thou bear'st Horatio?
Is this the kindness that thou counterfeitst?
Are these the fruits of thine incessant tears? (IV.i.1-3)

Bel-imperia's mocking tone ultimately shames Hieronimo into action. When he finally vows to 'ere long determine of their deaths' (IV.i.44), it is still with what he believes to be divine sanction: 'Why then, I see that heaven applies our drift,/ And all the saints do sit soliciting,/ For vengeance on those cursed murders' (IV.i.32-34). Slowly but surely, Kyd has developed a fully believable transformation in Hieronimo, that finds him plotting a violent revenge with Bel-imperia in the form of another framed narrative: a play for the rulers of Spain and Portugal that results in an orgy of death which will claim the lives of Lorenzo, Balthazar, Bel-imperia, the Duke of Castile and Hieronimo himself.

In conclusion, *The Spanish Tragedy* deals at length with the themes of revenge and justice, both of which I have shown to be complex, particularly at the time of the Renaissance. That Kyd ultimately believes in the necessity of the bloody resolution enacted by Bel-imperia and Hieronimo appears to be borne out by the fates dealt to his characters. This task he places in the hands of Don Andrea and Revenge, a narrative device that distances Kyd somewhat from explicit comment. With Revenge's encouragement, Don Andrea places 'Don Lorenzo on Ixion's wheel' (IV.v.33) and hangs 'Balthazar about Chimaera's neck' (IV.v.36). Alternatively, he resolves to 'lead my Bel-imperia to those joys,/ That vestal virgins and fair queens possess' (IV.v.21-22). While we can accept that Don Andrea is inevitably biased towards his former love, he has no similar motivation for securing Hieronimo's future, 'where Orpheus plays,/ Adding sweet pleasure to eternal days' (IV.v.23-24). As de Chickera notes: 'In an emotional experience of this sort there is not likely to be a place for the judgement that demands or executes vengeance' (1962, 232). Kyd's skilful handling of Hieronimo's predicament throughout the play imbues a sincerity in his central character that allows his auspicious fate to seem entirely apposite. We have been moved by Hieronimo's plight and the intense, heartfelt response provoked in him and, as such, we welcome the prospect of eternal paradise for his troubled soul.

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