

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## **THE SPANISH TRAGEDY. 1582-92** **Thomas Kyd 1556-1594**

### BACKGROUND

Thomas Kyd is widely viewed as the master of the revenge tragedy in Elizabethan literature. Once again, as in *Gorboduc*. it is the figure of the Roman playwright and *essayist*, Seneca, who looms generatively in the background, delighting in the self-nourishing substance of 'getting back at someone.' Elizabethan audiences proved reliably sensitive to this genre of forbidden emotions, and more than able, say in Shakespearian drama like *Hamlet* or *MacBeth*, to turn the inherent complexities of revenge into powerful theater.

The writer to whom the present adventure in revenge is owed, Thomas Kyd, is little known to us from his time, and yet his thrilling excursus into psychological horror has made him one of the most fascinating Elizabethan dramatists. We can read Kyd today with an awe as great as Shakespeare inspires in us.

Thomas Kyd was the son of a scrivener. He seems not to have attended University, He seems do have worked for some years in the employ of a Lord, and yet little more is known of his public life than that which is involved with his equally powerful contemporary Christopher Marlowe. (Kyd is known for one other play, *Cornelia* (1594).) In 1591 Kyd was sharing lodgings with Christopher Marlowe; in this situation Kyd was arrested and put to torture, suspected of treason. His room had been searched, and certain 'matheistical' documents found there, denying the divinity of the birth of Jesus Christ. Kyd himself, apparently attributed the papers to Marlowe. The rest of the affair, and of Kyd's biography, remains there.

Kyd himself was dead by the end of 1594.

### The Plot

We know little about Thomas Kyd's life, thus must if possible understand him from the inside out, by observation and analysis. Behind the present play churns a bitter battle between the forces of Spain and Portugal, events normative for this age of adventure, discovery, and the incorporation of vast new sums of wealth. In the present battle a singular event sets fire to the sequence of events that trigger the drama. The Spanish King's son, Balthazar, kills the Spanish officer, Andrea, before being taken prisoner by the Spaniards. Thus the scene is set for an inward struggle between the ghostly Spanish Andrea--for this brave warrior has survived the war as a ghost, and appears to us at the outset of the play as a spirit buddy to the Personification of Revenge--and to the Figure of Balthazar, prisoner of the Spanish. The mediaeval taste for allegory continues to direct the movement of the drama, for all the fustian clutter of languages and people that crowd its pages. The Ghost of Andrea and Revenge continue to hover over the play, invoking Andrea's lust for Revenge. Mustn't we interpret this audience taste as an Elizabethan melodramatic version of our current taste for television murder and horror? Hadn't the Elizabethan audience some of the bloodlust that keeps many of us glued to True Crime on the tv?

A romantic complication is soon introduced, with the hatred of Be-Imperia--the Spanish daughter of the Duke of Castille-- toward Balthazar, the killer of her former lover.the Andrea who has paired himself with the spirit of Revenge. Be-Imperia, like the ghost of Andrea, devotes her passions to the desire for revenge, which is on its way toward becoming the overriding theme of the play. The reader of *Hamlet* will find himself freshly immersed in the argument of that play: that when the need for revenge meets intellectual indecisiveness action is thwarted and easily turned self-destructive. Hamlet himself is turned by the evolution of such a crisis, into an exemplar of conflicted modern man, cut off from his roots in belief.

A labyrinth of events brings Hieronimo, the Marshall of Spain, to the center of the action. In essence Hieronimo is a slighted figure; his son, Horatio, is denied credit for the capture and slaying of Balthazar, at

the outset of the play. Then Bel-Imperia falls in love with Horatio, Hieronimo's son. (She wishes to torture Balthazar, who killed her former lover, Andrea, and she knows that erotic jealousy is the sharpest way to torture him.) In the event, Hieronimo does his best to intervene, which he does, only further inciting the passion of Balthazar and ultimately leaving Hieronimo and his wife Isabella to find the fruits of their intervention, their son, Horatio, hanged. The total devastation of Hieronimo, by this tragic and unexpected loss, gives the drama its powerful and unexpected center.

Hieronimo essentially goes mad with the discovery of his son's body. His wild horror brings the entire tragedy to a standstill.

Lorenzo, who is behind the murder of Horatio, does all he can to conceal the truth of the murder. But the truth comes out, insistently, thanks to Bel-Imperia and Hieronimo, alerted by the truth, realizes how deeply he has been deluded. His whole mental house collapses, especially after the grief-destroyed Isabella commits suicide. (The verse of Kyd fits hand to glove around line 431 of T.S. Eliot's *Wasteland*, in which the author declares himself ready to write a tale of the greatest destruction. Eliot's brilliant adaptation of Kyd's lines brings the Elizabethan vision potently to the center of contemporary English poetry.)

The audience, properly horrified by the injustice done to Hieronimo and his son, will have watched with fascination, to see what kind of revenge Hieronimo will exact, for the suffering he and his family have been through. After a period of anxiety, during which the murderer Lorenzo does everything possible to keep the actual truth away from Hieronimo--he explains to the King that preoccupation with Isabella's death is the source of her husband's deranged behavior--Lorenzo goes on to fabricate a fantasy psychology for Hieronimo, which ultimately only deceives the liar himself. Finally Hieronimo goes beyond himself with acting out--incoherent rants, stabbing the earth with his sword--and decides on a genuine strategy. Taking Bel-Imperia as an ally, Hieronimo fakes a reconciliation with the murderers, and asks them to work with him in staging a play. The play, *Soliman and Perseda*, is intended as an entertainment for the court. Hieronimo so arranged the play that real--rather than make believe--daggers were used; in the course of the drama, and Lorenzo and Balthazar are stabbed to death in front of the Spanish King. The play inside a play, which makes us think ahead to the same literary device in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, 'the play's the thing wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King' being brutally foreshadowed in the murderous intent of Hieronimo. As we read the play today, in our studies or library carrels, we need to stretch the mind backward into an era of bloody staged melodrama, in which traits of our own taste can be keenly read.

## CHARACTERS

### *The Frame*

The ghost of Don Andrea  
The embodiment of revenge

### *Spain*

The King of Spain, a figurehead, overseeing the turbulent events which transpire in his postwar court  
Don Cyprian, Duke of Castile; the King's brother  
Don Lorenzo the Duke of Castile's son  
Bel-Imperia, the Duke of Castile's daughter; central to various consequential love affairs at the Spanish court  
Pedringano, Bel-Imperia's servant  
Christophil, Don Lorenzo's servant  
Don Lorenzo's page boy  
Hieronimo, Knight Marshall of Spain; father of the murdered Horatio; ultimately deviser of the play, in which the murderers of Horatio are themselves stabbed to death  
Isabella, his wife; commits suicide after murder of her son  
Don Horatio, Isabella and Hieronimo's murdered son  
Don Bazulto, general in the Spanish Army

A hangman

### *Portugal*

The Portuguese Viceroy

Prince Balthazar, his son; captured by the Spanish and a major player in the court intrigues which lead up to the murder of Horatio.

Don Pedro, the Viceroy's brother

Alexandro and Villuppo; Portuguese noblemen

The Portuguese Ambassador

### *In Hieronimo's Play*

Soliman, sultan of Turkey

Erasto, Knight of Rhodes

Bashaw

Parseda

### EVENTS

The play opens with the apparition of Andrea, who was killed by the Portuguese, and of The Spirit of Revenge. These symbolic figures, each speaking for a dominant element of the play, an inevitable feature of the human landscape, book-end the language of the drama, reminding us that from start to finish the desire for revenge drives the action. From the outset, with the defeat of the Portuguese and the capture of Balthazar, each side has undertaken actions which infuriate the other. The open dagger slaughter, during the inner play of Hieronimo, is the climax of the central revenge of the play.

Hieronimo increasingly moves into the deepest role in the play. Once he has learned, through Bel-Imperia that Lorenzo and Balthazar are behind the murder of Horatio, his desire for revenge grows overwhelming. We are not led to the interior of the play, *Soliman and Parseda*, but are able to judge. From the assignment of roles--Balthasar as Soliman; Bel-Imperia as Parseda--that the play brings together forces violently opposed to one another as well as forces eager for revenge.

Heralding in the final drama, the Hieronimo play, we are introduced to the true madness and suffering of this bereft father, Hieronimo. It is only in view of this inner scenery that we understand how murderously ready Hieronimo is to take action. The entire play has oscillated between melodrama and hard core emotions, and at this point the stress on Hieronimo breaks out into violence, leaving him digging in the soil with his sword, and crossing the line between insanity and homicide. We are reminded, perhaps, of the madnesses of Ajax or Lear, whose playwrights have barely been able to contain them.

### THEMES

**Revenge** \The personification of revenge--the making this abstraction into a concrete figure--hovers over the beginning of the play. It is paired with the soul of Andrea, who is himself determined to have vengeance on the Portuguese. This note of profound resentment sequesters, in the magic hand of Kyd, into high poetic divagations into the ancient underworld, with a profusion of gate Guardians, myth figures, Acherontic borders and sulphurous fires of hell; the classical landscape of Hades, in and through which the present play will regularly take us. Revenge is the basic diet of many of the players: the tenor of the entire play will drift through this wounded atmosphere. Within the play, Bel-Imperia smarts with desire for revenge against Balthazar who killed her former lover, Andrea. Above all Hieronimo is vengeful, consumed in the end by fury at the murder of his son.

**Love** The emotion of love is complicatedly intertwined with the emotion of love. The emotions of Bel-Imperia provide a case in point. She is comforted by Lorenzo for the loss of Andrea, with whom she was in love, to the Portuguese. Before long, however, Bel-Imperia falls in love with Horatio, The lady confesses that her falling in love with Horatio is in part driven by her desire to take vengeance on

Balthazar, who killed her former lover Andrea. Hieronimo learns that Bel-Imperia is in love with Horatio. Ultimately Bel-imperia is able to inform Hieronimo that the murderer of his son was Balthazar. From this complexity it turns out that the nexus of love with vengeance is a constant threat to human relations.

**The Depths of Human Experience**     *The Spanish Tragedy* is a deeply felt excursus into modalities of human experience. From the outset of the work a great loss is made apparent--the Portuguese loss to the Spaniards. Ghosts have appeared, as have dead men walking, who are the relics of the war. From that point on we plunge into the intricacies of life at the Court of Spain, much involved with the events of the previous war, jealousies (swirling around Balthazar, the captured relic of the Portuguese army) or agonies attached to the dreadful loss of Andrea, which ushers in the ghostly presences which preside over the entire play. One might say that the entire play is a ghostly love sonata, leading up to the excruciating cadenza of the murder of Horatio and the madness of Hieronimo.)