Thomas Kyd's Christian Tragedy

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Abstract

Arguing against the critical position according to which 'Marlowe never wrote a less Christian play', the article proposes that Thomas Kyd's The Spanish Tragedy is firmly set within Christian parameters and is a profound and moving dramatization of the struggle involved in seeking yet failing to recognize a benvolent deity in a situation of intense grief.

Reference


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theatrical medium for that shaping, bear fuller consideration in
the study of early modern plays in the context of English culture.

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Thomas Kyd's Christian Tragedy

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The Spanish Tragedy is among the great plays of the English
stage. C. L. Barber has rightly called its theatrical design
"nothing less than great," and T. S. Eliot's judgment that
Thomas Kyd was a "theatrical genius" is chiefly based upon The
Spanish Tragedy.¹ In its own time, the play had enormous success.
Henslowe's diary records no fewer than twenty-nine perform-
ances between 1592 and 1597, more than for any other play ex-
cept The Jew of Malta and the lost The Wise Man of Westchester.² As
late as 1619/20, the play seems to have been performed—or con-
sidered for performance—at court.³ Between 1592 and 1633, The
Spanish Tragedy passed through at least eleven editions, more
than any play by Shakespeare.⁴ The number of contemporary or
near-contemporary allusions to the play is probably greater than
that of any other early modern play and easily exceeds one hun-

¹ C. L. Barber, Creating Elizabethan Tragedy: The Theater of Marlowe and
131; T. S. Eliot, Selected Essays (London: Faber and Faber, 1932), 142.
² See R. A. Foakes and R. T. Rickert, eds., Henslowe's Diary (Cam-
bridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1961).
³ See Frank Marcham, ed., The King's Office of the Revels 1610-1622:
Fragments of Documents in the Department of Manuscripts, British Museum
(London: F. Marcham, 1925), and E. K. Chambers's review of this in
⁴ For the fullest discussion of the various editions of The Spanish
Tragedy, see Josef Schick, ed., Thomas Kyd's "Spanish Tragedy": Kritischer
Text und Apparat (Berlin: E. Felber, 1901), xiii-xlii. For the play's convo-
luted publication history in 1592, see the introduction to W. W. Greg,
ed., The Spanish Tragedy, 1592, Malone Society Reprints (London: Ox-
ford Univ. Press, 1948).
The tremendous sway Kyd's play held over the popular imagination is perhaps best inferred from an anecdote that is told in both Braithwaite's *English Gentlewoman* (1631) and Prynne's *Histrio-mastix* (1633): a lady who is close to death stubbornly refuses to turn her thoughts toward the next world and, thinking that there is no need to trouble herself with such thoughts yet, cries out: "Hieronimo, Hieronimo; O let me see Hieronimo acted."6

One of the chief explanations that critics have advanced to explain the popularity of *The Spanish Tragedy* is that, written around the time of the Armada, Kyd's play must have activated a good deal of anti-Spanish feeling. It is true that the play is not free from associations with the anglo-hispanic conflict. Hieronimo's multilingual play brings about a metaphorical "fall of Babylon" (4.1.195), which must have reminded the audience of the Protestants' association of the corrupt Old Testament Babylon with the Roman Catholic Church. The name of the city having been "Babel" in the Geneva Bible, the reference extends to the confusion of tongues at Babel (Genesis 11:1-9).7 God's punishment for the people's ambition and pride is thus skillfully worked into Hieronimo's play by means of the incomprehensible sundry languages. Also, it is certainly interesting to notice that Hieronimo's play has precisely those characteristics the reformers objected to in the Roman Mass, the linguistic unintelligibility and the "real presence."8

In general, however, the play precisely lacks the anti-Spanish tone that might be expected from a work composed around the time of the Armada. The Spanish king is depicted as a generous character who is conciliatory throughout toward the Portuguese. There seems nothing ironic about his "We pleasure more in kindness than in wars" (1.4.118), or his "Spain is honourable" (1.2.137).9 Kyd goes out of his way to stress that the King's treatment of Horatio is fair. He rewards Lorenzo and Horatio for Balthazar's capture according to their merits, granting the latter Balthazar's ransom (1.2.180-4), stresses that Horatio "deserved to be honour'd" (1.4.131) and sees to it that the ambassador dispatched to Portugal returns with Horatio's ransom:

> Amongst the rest of what you have in charge,  
> The prince's ransom must not be forgot:  
> That's none of mine, but his that took him prisoner,  
> And well his forwardness deserves reward:  
> It was Horatio, our Knight Marshal's son. (2.3.32-6)

This clearly is not a corrupt King bent on mistreating Horatio and Hieronimo. Similarly, the play is careful to clear Castile from blame when, for example, he intercedes for Hieronimo with Lorenzo:

> I tell thee son, myself have heard it said,  
> When to my sorrow I have been asham'd  
> To answer for thee, though thou art my son:  
> Lorenzo, know'st thou not the common love  
> And kindness that Hieronimo hath won  
> By his deserts within the court of Spain?  
> Or seest thou not the king my brother's care  
> In his behalf, and to procure his health? (3.14.58-64)

If the "Spanishness" of *The Spanish Tragedy* had originally contributed so much to the play's popularity as some critics assert, it

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9 There are similarly pro-Spanish passages in Kyd's *Soliman and Perseda*, 1.2.57 and 1.3.35-46. For Kyd's works other than *The Spanish Tragedy*, all references are to Frederick Samuel Boas, ed., *The Works of Thomas Kyd* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1901; rpt. with a supplement 1955).
would seem surprising that none—to my knowledge—of the innumerable early allusions to Kyd's play take up its historical relevance or point to its alleged anti-Spanish prejudice. Contemporary authors alluded to the Ghost of Andrea, in particular to his opening monologue, to certain catch-phrases, to Hieronimo's madness, to his grief, to the rhetoric in his soliloquies, but not to corrupt Spain and the wiping out of her royal line. Contrary to what we might expect and to what has often been argued, Kyd's play does not seem to have greatly activated the audience's hispanophobic prejudice.

A way to bypass this evidence is to assert that the play's "real meaning" would only have been available to the initiated few. This line of argument is taken by Frank R. Ardolino, who holds that "Kyd has created an apocalyptic revenge play which presents in a mysterious subtext the overthrow of the Antichrist, Babylon/Spain, by England in 1588." The play, Ardolino argues, is a "Protestant Apocalypse": "The Spanish Tragedy contains many of the elements found in Revelation, including the four-act structure"; "Kyd symbolically recreates the struggle with Spain in 1588"; he sees The Spanish Tragedy as "a work containing hidden meanings available only to the initiated and concealed from the uninitiated" and goes on to explain these meanings in his study. Ardolino's far-fetched analyses, attempting to show, for instance, that Hieronimo's revenge scheme reenacts "the famous Pazzi plot in 1478 to kill Lorenzo de Medici," will hardly find many followers.

When it comes to dating the play, Ardolino subordinates all scholarly evidence to the needs of his analysis, sweepingly dismisses all previously adduced evidence and unconvincingly argues for 1592 as the date of composition. In fact, there is little to support Ardolino's argument. Kyd carefully avoids a dichotomy between "evil Spain" and the sympathetic revenger Hieronimo. In both Spain and Portugal, there is one Machiavellian figure, Lorenzo and Villuppo, apart from whom no character is either black or white.

The Spanish Tragedy is much more of a personal and, in particular, Christian tragedy than has hitherto been recognized, as much so, in some ways, as Doctor Faustus. Kyd's play has been singled out as one of the least Christian plays of its period. Philip Edwards, for example, holds that "Marlowe never wrote a less Christian play," and Arthur Freeman agrees with Edwards and points out that the Christian concept of mercy is only present ex negativo in the word "merciless." Nevertheless, I will attempt to show just how firmly Kyd's play is set within Christian parameters. It is Kyd's profound and, I believe, moving dramatization of the struggle involved in seeking yet failing to recognize a benevolent deity in a situation of intense personal grief which is responsible for much of the play's success.

To illustrate this point, I am going to explore two aspects of Kyd's play. Firstly, I propose to investigate the sequence of scenes from act three scene two to act three scene six, which I would like to call the "Lorenzo and Pedringano" movement. It has been curiously neglected by critics, despite the fact that its structural importance is considerable. Moving up to Pedringano's execution on a scaffold, it closes the play's first half, mirroring and anticipating the play's conclusion with Hieronimo's execution of his antagonists on a scaffold or stage. Whereas the play's conclusion will dramatize the effects of a miscarriage of justice, the five consecutive scenes in act three show the course of justice in an ordered universe: crime (Pedringano's murder of Serberine) is followed by punishment as Pedringano is sentenced by Hieronimo and hanged.

Lorenzo sets up his plot when Hieronimo's attempt to contact Bel-imperia arouses his suspicion (3.2.56-77). As Pedringano and Serberine, Balthazar's servant, were the prince's only confederates in the murder of Horatio, he determines to eliminate

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11 Ibid., xiv-xv.
12 Ibid., 96.
13 Ibid., 166. Kyd's play is likely to have been written ca. 1587.
them. He bribes Pedringano (3.2.78-86) to kill Serberine “this night” (3.2.82) in St. Luigi’s Park, while commanding his page to send Serberine to the same place (3.2.94-9). Alone, the villain confesses his intention to have the King’s watch patrol the park at the appointed time (3.2.100-4). The following scene stages in fewer than fifty lines the arrival of the three independent parties at the park, Pedringano’s murder of Serberine, and his arrest by the guard. Early next morning (3.4.1), Lorenzo and Balthazar are told by the page of Pedringano’s murder of Serberine (3.4.20-25). Balthazar, outraged, departs to the King to have Pedringano speedily sentenced and executed (3.4.26-37), whereupon a messenger brings a letter from Pedringano (III.iv.50-4). Lorenzo sends him back to Pedringano, assuring him of his help (3.4.55-9), and commands his page to carry a box with his pardon to Pedringano (3.4.61-76). In a scene barely twenty lines long, the page, tickled by his curiosity, opens the box only to discover that it is empty (3.5.1-19). When Pedringano enters in the following scene (3.6.16), Lorenzo’s page has arrived and given him the false assurance of his pardon. Hieronimo makes Pedringano confess his guilt and orders his execution. Convinced that he will be saved in extremis by the pardon in the page’s empty box, Pedringano keeps jesting with the hangman until he is finally hanged (3.6.104).

The sequence packs a great amount of intricate action into fewer than three hundred lines. The page, the messenger, the watch, Pedringano, Serberine, and even Balthazar rush on and off stage as Lorenzo stage-manages his “plot.” The action advances with great economy, and the language is direct, concise, and without the rhetorical ornament of Hieronimo’s laments. When the action reaches its crisis, Pedringano is standing on the scaffold with the halter around his neck, still indulging in gallows humor. The tone is not that of tragedy, but of farce:

PEDRINGANO. What, do you hang by the hour? If you do, I may chance to break your old custom.

HANGMAN. Faith, you have reason, for I am like to break your young neck.

PEDRINGANO. Dost thou mock me, hangman? Pray God I be not preserved to break your knave’s pate for this!

HANGMAN. Alas sir, you are a foot too low to reach it, and I hope you will never grow so high while I am in the office.

(3.6.57-64)

The humor is of a robust and physical kind, much like the slapstick knock-about between Petruchio and Grumio in The Taming of the Shrew:

PETRUCHIO. Here, sirrah Grumio, knock, I say.

GRUMIO. Knock, sir? Whom should I knock? Is there any man has rebused your worship?

PETRUCHIO. Villain, I say, knock me here soundly.

GRUMIO. Knock you here, sir? Why, sir, what am I, sir, that I should knock you here, sir?

PETRUCHIO. Villain, I say, knock me at this gate, And rap me well or I’ll knock your knave’s pate. (1.2.5-12)

Apart from the broad, farcical humor, the sequence of scenes in what I believe to have been the original “third act” is likely to evoke a twofold response from the audience. On the one hand, spectators will derive the intellectual pleasure of comic intrigue.


16 The early quartos divide the play into four acts of which the third is longer than any two of the other acts together, suggesting that an act break went lost in the original printing. In fact, the play’s dramatic architecture shows a careful five-act construction. The first act, the introduction, sums up what happened before the beginning of the play leading up to the play’s first conflict caused by Bel-imperia’s resolution to love Horatio in order to “spite the prince” (1.4.68). The last act, the dénouement, prepares and presents the fatal play-within-the-play. The plot between the first and the last act falls naturally into three parts: act 2 leads up to Horatio’s murder; 3.1 to 3.7 deals with the Lorenzo and Pedringano episode which is set between Bel-imperia’s two letters to Hieronimo, the first causing him to doubt, the second bringing him to believe; and 3.8 to 3.14 dramatizes Hieronimo’s descent into madness and culminates with his decision to take revenge into his own hands. Hieronimo’s seventy-line bravura piece in 3.7, only briefly interrupted by the hangman reporting that Pedringano has been unaduly hanged, brings the central sequence to an end. A “Chorus” may have originally followed this scene, though another possibility is that Hieronimo’s soliloquy was meant to replace it.
As the audience shares Lorenzo's knowledge and enjoys his cunning schemes, moral judgment is partly suspended and yields to approval of the trickster's cleverness. Alfred Harbage was certainly right in locating Kyd's ultimate ancestors for this device in New Comedy. On the other hand, an audience is also likely to react emotionally with an "oddly mixed response—of amusement and horror, revulsion and admiration." As Pedringano is about to "jest himself to death" (3.5.17), the terribly serious and the comic interact. T. S. Eliot called The Jew of Malta a "terribly serious" farce, an apt description of portions of The Spanish Tragedy as well as of Kyd's Soliman and Perseda. Pedringano's foolery oddly jars and comes to a sudden end as the hangman "turns him off" (3.6.104).

For an audience with strong Christian beliefs, Pedringano's end would also have been "terribly serious" in a way to which many modern spectators are less sensitive. Pedringano becomes the subject of the ultimate Christian tragedy as, on the point of death, he refuses the hangman's advice to "hearken to [his] soul's health" (3.6.75). In the entirety of the original third act, Kyd buried a playlet that owes much to the tradition of the Morality plays. Pedringano, like Everyman or Mankind, is the sinner faced with death and thus in danger of forfeiting his soul. He considers, but then rejects, prayer (3.6.84-88). Half-Cain (slaying his brother-servant Serberine), half-Judas (as he accepts money for the betrayal of his former confederate and is finally hanged), Pedringano is the archetypal confirmed sinner. As Hieronimo puts it, his "soul, that should be shrin'd in heaven, / Solely delights in interdicted things" (3.6.91-2). In the fast-moving plot, the characters around him are little less than roles and personifications rather than three-dimensional characters. Lorenzo, the Devil, cunning engineer of murder and corrupter of souls, cynically comments that "They that for coin their souls endangered, / To save my life, for coin shall venture theirs" (3.2.113-4). Having committed murder, Pedringano, on Judgment day, has to face Hieronimo, the just Judge, who insists that "blood with blood shall, while I sit as judge, / Be satisfied, and the law discharge" (3.6.35-6). The hangman, finally, commissioned to end Pedringano's life, is a fitting emblematic equivalent of Death at his poignant encounter with Everyman.

In the Morality play The Pride of Life, the haughty protagonist is told to prepare for death. He stubbornly refuses, sends a challenge to Death and dies in the fight. His soul is conveyed to hell, before being saved by the intercession of the Virgin Mary. Apart from the ending, which is surprising and theologically problematic, the play dramatizes the same story as what would have been the third act of The Spanish Tragedy. Of course, a full-length dramatization of roughly the same tale was composed only a few years later in Marlowe's Doctor Faustus. Kyd and Marlowe are not likely to have known The Pride of Life, one of the few extant Morality plays along with The Castle of Perseverance, Mankind, Wisdom, and Everyman. Yet, they did know and made use of a dramatic tradition that was more powerful and widespread than its scarce remnants suggest.

We are now in a position to understand better why Kyd has the playlet turn on a pardon that fails to materialize: the word is meant to carry as much theological as legal meaning. While Pedringano is vainly waiting for the King's pardon, or the legal document containing the remission of his crimes, he refuses to beg humbly for God's pardon. Putting all his hopes in a secular indulgence, he fails to petition for and obtain the remission of his sins. Pedringano thereby becomes the double victim, that of intrigue tragedy and that of the Morality play. On the one hand, he is a tool in Lorenzo's intrigue tragedy; on the other, he is the subject of the ultimate Christian tragedy as he suffers death unprepared.

20 See lines 85-183. References are to Everyman, ed. A. C. Cawley (Manchester: Manchester Univ. Press, 1974).
22 C. L. Barber identified a different "Christian shaping" in the play, "used to express family feeling in extremis," which may serve to com-
A second aspect of Kyd's play that shows how firmly it is set within Christian parameters concerns the supernatural powers that are repeatedly evoked. At first, it seems that pagan and Christian deities are juxtaposed in the most puzzling manner. Noticing this simultaneous presence, critics have struggled to recognize its logic: Edwards believed that "The references to a Christian mythology seem so fitfully and arbitrarily interspersed with the pagan that I do not think one can separate them." This misses the crucial point, however, that it is part of Hieronimo's trajectory to turn from one mythology, one set of references, and one understanding of justice to another.

From the moment he discovers his dead son, Hieronimo repeatedly appeals to one set of powers, identifiable as heavenly, Christian, or both:

O heavens, why made you night to cover sin? (2.5.24)

O sacred heavens! if this unhallow'd deed,
If this inhuman and barbarous attempt,
If this incomparable murder thus
Of mine, but now no more my son,
Shall unreveal'd and unrevenged pass,
How should we term your dealings to be just,
If you unjustly deal with those that in your justice trust? (3.2.5-11)

But shall I never live to see the day
That I may come, by justice of the heavens,
To know the cause that may my cares allay? (3.6.5-7)

It is no doubt part of Kyd's design that these references continue with regularity until the end of the play's first half, probably the end of the original third act. Up to this point, Hieronimo, even though deeply distraught, is essentially sane. Trying in vain to obtain justice himself, he still administers justice to others. Even though he may have doubts that justice will be done, he has not given up hope. Having been handed Pedringano's letter by the hangman, Hieronimo has just obtained the necessary evidence that Lorenzo and Balthazar were responsible for Horatio's death. For Hieronimo, the confirmation brought about by "this" (3.7.48), paving the way to revenge, at first seems to be the working of providence. As long as Hieronimo has not given up hope in the workings of divine justice, he also believes in the possibility of obtaining public justice from the King. It is true that, from the moment he discovers Horatio's body, he craves revenge: "For in revenge my heart would find relief" (2.5.41). But what Hieronimo means at this stage has nothing to do with extralegal retaliation. At least one critic has gone astray by arguing that "Hieronimo is not interested in royal justice, but in murderous vengeance." As Ronald Broude has shown, in Renaissance England "revenge had a more extended meaning than the modern one, a meaning more nearly equivalent to today's retribu-

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Consequently, the words “revenge” and “vengeance” could denote not only the private retribution of an individual, but also the public punishment exacted by the king or the state. Up to the end of the play’s first part, Hieronimo seeks the latter, as the final lines of the part make clear: “But wherefore waste I mine unfruitful words, / When nought but blood will satisfy my woes?” (3.7.67-8). So far, this may sound as if Hieronimo was already considering private revenge. As the next two lines make clear, however, he is not: “I will go plain me to my lord the king, / And cry aloud for justice through the court” (3.7.69-70). Hieronimo’s sanity and his hope for both heavenly and human justice—all characterizing Hieronimo up to the end of the play’s first half—go hand in hand.

When we next see Hieronimo, he is in a notably different state. If a hiatus can be determined in Kyd’s depiction of Hieronimo’s otherwise gradual transformation, it is between act three scene seven, where he makes plans and shows new courage, and his next appearance in act three scene eleven, where he faces the two Portingales with wild speech:

HIERONIMO. Good leave have you, nay, I pray you go,
For I’ll leave you, if you can leave me, so. (3.11.2-3)

It is not surprising that one of the Portingales concludes that “this man is passing lunatic” (3.11.32). Hieronimo’s change is underscored by a change in imagery, with references to pagan hell replacing those of Christian heaven. In the same scene, Hieronimo describes the descent to the deepest hell where Lorenzo is to be found “in a brazen cauldron fix’d by Jove” (3.11.26). Later, he pictures his own descent to a pagan underworld (3.12.6-16), and in the Senex scene Hieronimo hopes that “Proserpine may grant / Revenge on them that murdered my son” (3.13.120-1). Shortly after, he imagines Bazulto to be a fury

Sent from the empty kingdom of black night
To summon me to make appearance
Before grim Minos and just Rhadamanth,

The shift in Hieronimo’s trajectory from “public” to “wild” justice is most clearly dramatized in the “Vindicta mihi” soliloquy (3.13.1-44), which has long been identified as a turning point in the play.26 The initial quotation from the letter of St. Paul to the Romans is followed by an assertion of faith in Christian providence:

Ay, heaven will be reveng’d of every ill,
Nor will they suffer murder unrepaid:
Then stay, Hieronimo, attend their will,
For mortal men may not appoint their time. (3.8.2-5)

This succinctly articulates the belief Hieronimo held until the end of the play’s first half (3.7). In the following lines, however, he turns to the copy of Seneca he carries in his hands: “Per scelus

26 The speech has probably received more attention than any other single passage in the play. Fredson Bowers held that the soliloquy in 3.13 “marks the turning point from Hieronimo the hero to Hieronimo the villain” (Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy 1587-1642 [Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1940], 70). Dissatisfied with Bowers’s reading, John D. Ratliff argued that “Hieronimo is here justifying his course for the audience and preparing them for the dramatically necessary delay in his revenge. He is not revealing himself as a villain; on the contrary, by explaining his conduct he is making the charge of villainy impossible” (“Hieronimo Explains Himself,” Studies in Philology 54 [1957]: 118). David Laird tried to show that the speech “reflects a state of mind neither confused nor strained beyond reason but acutely and precisely capable of confronting the issues that the question of revenge would have inevitably raised for thoughtful men in the Renaissance” (“Hieronimo’s Dilemma,” Studies in Philology 62 [1965]: 138). Scott McMillin made the important point that the three Senecan passages from which Hieronimo quotes bear upon self-destruction rather than revenge. Hieronimo three times wrenches them from their original meaning to justify his course of action, a rhetorical move which, as Hieronimo must be aware, reflects the step he is deciding to take, as his revenge can only be brought about at the same time as his self-destruction (see “The Book of Seneca in The Spanish Tragedy,” Studies in English Literature 14 [1974]: 201-8).
semper tutum est sceleribus iter. / Strike, and strike home, where wrong is offer'd thee" (3.13.6-7). It is an intriguing detail that the two voices competing within Hieronimo are that of St. Paul, on whose conversion Kyd planned to write a poem, and that of Seneca, whose importance for Kyd's drama has long been illustrated. The two contemporaries were long thought to have known each other, an erroneous belief strengthened during the Middle Ages by the discovery of a correspondence between them that was later judged spurious. Within twenty lines of deliberation, Hieronimo moves from the Pauline "heaven will be revenge'd" (3.13.2) to the Senecan "I will revenge" (3.13.20), from faith in Christian providence to a complete loss of it. The natural conclusion follows: "justice is exiled from the earth" (3.13.140). From this moment, Hieronimo's disposition has shifted to a point where bloody, private revenge only awaits execution.

Two basic stages can thus be distinguished in Hieronimo's trajectory. In the first, leading up to act three scene seven, he is shown to be essentially sane and intent on public justice. In the second, starting with act three scene eleven, the protagonist seeks extralegal revenge and comes across as "passing lunatic," madly digging the earth with his dagger, tearing the petitioners' papers, and mistaking Bazulto for Horatio. It is surely significant that during the first stage, Hieronimo appeals to Christian and/or heavenly powers, whereas in the second he turns to pagan deities. Of course, these deities are the very ones that spur Andrea to revenge. It therefore will not do to argue, as Edwards does, that "Hieronimo's relation with the divine must be discussed in terms of a single providence, even though there are two different metaphors for this providence." Nor is it possible to assimilate the world of Andrea's hell to the world of Hieronimo's heaven, an error to which a number of critics have been prone. The Christian and pagan references are not arbitrarily mingled but deliberately opposed to each other. Likewise, the play as a whole contrasts a Christian attitude—characterized by trust in providence and verbalized by Hieronimo's citation of Romans—with a pagan "wild justice." It is thus appropriate that the fatal outcome is brought about when Hieronimo succumbs to the passion for which Revenge stands.

The final dialogue between Andrea and Revenge about rewards and punishments in the after-life needs to be understood in the same context. Revenge, not the play, places Andrea's "friends in ease, the rest in woes" (4.5.46). Kyd's dramatization of Hieronimo's delicate balancing act between the pursuit of justice and the rejection of God reveals the inadequacy of Revenge's facile black-and-white distinctions.


Isabella, Hieronimo's wife and companion in bereavement, precisely duplicates the pattern established in Hieronimo as she calls on the heavenly powers in the first part of the play (2.4.57, 3.8.14-20) but invokes pagan hell before her suicide (4.2.26-8).
One of the insights scholars owe to the twentieth-century stage revivals of *The Spanish Tragedy* is that the tremendous impact the play can have is not so much a matter of its spectacular features as of the personal drama of Horatio, Bel-imperia, Isabella, and Hieronimo. Like *Hamlet*, *The Spanish Tragedy* is very much a family play, exploring powerful emotions in what are the most basic human relationships. Experienced in a good production, *The Spanish Tragedy* is simply a very moving play. Reviewing Michael Bogdanov’s National Theatre production of 1982, Emrys Jones wrote that Kyd “shows later dramatists what it was to move audiences: not appall or astonish them (though he does all these) but move them to sympathy and pity, possibly to tears, and do so to a degree which was unforgettable.” As early as 1620, Thomas May’s *The Heire* commented on the powerful emotions *The Spanish Tragedy* can elicit in performance:

ROSCIO. Has not your Lordship seen
A player personate Hieronimo?

POLIMETES. By th’masse tis true, I haue seen the knaue
Paint griefe
In such a lively colour, that for false
And acted passion he has drawne true teares
From the spectators eyes, Ladies in the boxes
Kept time with sighes and teares to his sad accents
As had he truely bin the man he seemed. (B1 r)

This should allow us to adjust the critical focus. Philip Edwards concluded that *The Spanish Tragedy* has “a view of human life not remotely identifiable or compatible with a Christian view of providence.” He goes on to assert that “Kyd’s play is a denial of God’s care for man.” I find it impossible to share this view. Kyd’s play is not so much a cosmic drama about a world deserted by God as the personal drama of Hieronimo deserting God. Expecting to see heavenly justice accomplished, he despairs when in waiting and turns to the infernal deities instead. He invokes God’s word and command (“heaven will be reveng’d” [3.13.2]), only to reject it and to substitute his own (“I will revenge” [3.13.20]); his tragedy ensues as a consequence, a pattern that affirms rather than questions a Christian view of providence. As he gives way to the passion of revenge, he turns to the very powers that send the Ghost of Andrea back to the world of the living in company with Revenge. Kyd’s treatment of his hero, however, is not harsh but humane. Hieronimo’s rejection of the Pauline precept is not in scorn and defiance, but in bereavement and near insanity. It is less grandiose but more intimate than Dr. Faustus’s. As the attribute “pittifull” on the original title page suggests, *The Spanish Tragedy* invites us to sympathize with rather than condemn Hieronimo’s inability to recognize a benevolent divinity when confronted with evil. The enormous success
Kyd's play had on the English Renaissance stage suggests that Hieronimo's is a plight with which spectators were able to sympathize.

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“"You are now out of your text": The Performance of Precocity on the Early Modern Stage

ROBERT REEDER

When Dean of St. Paul's, John Donne's job description apparently entailed giving audience to remarkable children. At least, in one of his sermons Donne retells this incident:

An artificer of this Citie brought his childe to mee, to admire (as truly there was much reason) the capacitie, the memory, especially of the child. It was but a Girle, and not above nine years of age, her parents said less, some yeares lesse; we scarce could propose any Verse of any Book, or Chapter of the Bible, but that childe would go forward without Booke. I began to catechise the child; and truly, shee understood nothing of the Trinite, nothing of any of those fundamentall poynets which most save us; and the wonder was doubled, how she knew so much, how so little.

This paper explores precocity in early modern theater, but, as Donne's story suggests, precocity itself is almost inherently theatrical. (Donne here even questions the honesty of the "stage parents"; he suspects that they are backdating the girl's impressive achievement.) While scholarship on boy actors has tended to focus on the boys' status as erotic objects, on the complex erotic dynamics of child performance, this paper situates them in an-

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character with whom the audience identifies (see Thomas Kyd [New York: Twayne Publishers, 1969], 54, 127).

35 Parts of this essay are adapted from different chapters in my Beyond "The Spanish Tragedy": A Study of the Works of Thomas Kyd, The Revels Plays Companion Library (Manchester: Manchester Univ. Press, 2001). Permission to reproduce is gratefully acknowledged.