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## THE SPANISH TRAGEDY: A METADRAMA BY THOMAS KYD

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### ABSTRACT

*The Spanish Tragedy* is a Senecan play by Thomas Kyd adapted according to the Elizabethan taste. It is perhaps the best revenge play in English which became a classic of its time. Kyd imported some features of Senecan tragedy into his play, the theme of revenge, a ghost and plenty of declamation. He discarded the antique story taken from mythology and gave instead a sizzling play of love and war introducing a bewildering variety of plot and sub plot to create striking variety with dull monotonous plots of Senecan tragedies. Kyd exhibited an uncanny knack of manoeuvring stage effects so that even the most patently lurid and melodramatic incidents assumed the power of gripping the attention of even the most sceptical audience. *The Spanish Tragedy* was the progenitor of all the plays that followed.

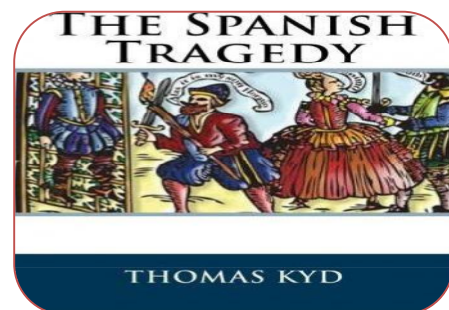
Thomas Kyd is unique in many ways. He was the first one to use the great qualities of blank verse which then were made a masterly form by Marlowe and Shakespeare. As a means of telling a complex story on stage, Kyd's work is brilliantly constructed. The scenes alternate between rapid, decisive and often startling action and slow contemplation of moral and other issues. The mystery unravels in slow motion, truth emerging bit by bit. The finale develops a crescendo of bloodily potent action out of the pretence of imposture and the comic play acting of the-play-within-the-play. The play reinvents classical tragedy for the Renaissance audiences freeing it from generic limitation and epistemological determinism of classical, Aristotelian tragedy; it advances the genre by rejecting its most basic rules and assumptions about the mimetic function of the drama establishing theatrical self-awareness or self-reflexive mode. It sets early a new trend of modern drama the presence of meta-theatricality in drama. This paper attempts to view *The Spanish Tragedy* as a metadrama.

**KEYWORDS:** *Revenge, justice, the-play-within-the-play, dumb show, metadrama, self-reflexive.*

### INTRODUCTION

*The Spanish Tragedy, or Hieronimo is Mad Again* is a play by Thomas Kyd which established a new genre in English theatre of the revenge tragedy. Critics say that *The Spanish Tragedy* resembles a Senecan tragedy. "The separation of acts, the emphasized bloody climax, and the revenge itself, make this play resemble some of the most famous ancient plays" (*The Cambridge Introduction to Shakespeare's Tragedies*).

We first see the makings of metadrama in Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*. Many elements of *The Spanish Tragedy*, such as dumb show, the-play-within-a-play which is used to trap a murderer for justice, soliloquies and asides are the characteristics which help to study this play as a metadrama.



## METADRAMA: DEFINITION AND MEANING

Metadrama is a “play that features another play as part of its plot” (*your dictionary.com*). So, “a play within a play is a dramatic plot device or extended metaphor where characters narrate one story while still part of another. Playwrights use such juxtaposition of nested plays to give a performance of self-reflection and to reiterate the play's main themes. The French term is *Mise en abyme*” (*www.reference.com*).

William Shakespeare cleverly deployed this device the use of the-play “Murder of Gonzago, within-the-play *Hamlet*”. However, it was Thomas Kyd who first used this device in *The Spanish Tragedy* creating new standards for plot construction.

Metatheatre, and the closely related term Metadrama, describe the aspect of a play that draws attention to its nature as drama or theatre, or to the circumstances of its performance. These may include the direct address to the audience (especially in soliloquies, asides, prologues and epilogues); expression of an awareness of the presence of the audience, an acknowledgement of the fact that the people performing are actors; an element whose meaning depends on difference between the represented time and place of drama (the fictional world) and the time and place of its theatrical presentation (the reality of its theatre event); plays-within-plays (or masques, spectacles or other form of performances within the drama)...” (*Metadrama- Oxford Reference*).

Lionel Abel, in his book, *Metatheatre: A New View of Dramatic Form* (1963), is credited with coining the term metatheatre. However, despite this pioneering move, Abel's interest lay not with metatheatre but rather primarily with tragedy and the setting up of metatheatre as a new genre carved in the early modern era to replace the ailing classical tragedy. As a result, “Abel's contribution to the field has been of slight theoretical weight apart from his lexical addition. Independent of Abel, self-reflexive qualities in the plays of Shakespeare in particular and Renaissance drama in general have attracted significant scholarly attention, beginning with studies of specific metatheatrical devices such as dumb shows, insets, frames and extra-dramatic moments, but also extending beyond initial census-taking to considerations of the thematic implications of metatheatre with regard to individual plays” (*Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticis*, p.115). In recent years, similar approaches have been applied to metatheatrical events in Greek and Roman classics and contemporary British plays.

## REVENGE AND JUSTICE

*The Spanish Tragedy* established a new genre in English theatre, of the Revenge Tragedy. “The genre is not original to the period, deriving from a revival of interest in the revenge tragedies of the Roman playwright Seneca. Nor is it exclusive to the past, as anyone who has seen the ‘Death Wish’ or ‘Lethal Weapon’ films can attest. The revenge-play satisfied a deep longing in its audience for simple black-and-white rough justice that seems to be universal” (*Tragedy*, 317). “While the brutal quest for vengeance drives Kyd's play, justice is ultimately its main thematic concern: what is it, who has the right to administer it, and is any sacrifice too great for its final attainment” (Hunter, 217)?

There are whisperings of revenge throughout the play. Bel-Imperia's soliloquy contains the second repetition of the word ‘revenge’. Revenge itself is personified. Andrea addresses his shadow ‘Forthwith, Revenge, she rounded thee in th'ear...’ (*The Spanish Tragedy*, l.i.81). The first use of the word is by the Viceroy of Portugal (*The Spanish Tragedy*, l.iii.48). In Act IV,i. Hieronimo has made ‘invention’ with a strange and wondrous show by his own savage plot, by hiding Horatio's body behind a curtain to be discovered as the justification and explanation of his own plot to be followed after the-play-within-the-play.

“The Book of Exodus in the Holy Bible states that everyone should ‘give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot’ (*NLT 21:23*) in order for the world to be a fair place. Thomas Kyd developed the Kydian Formula not to veer away from revenge tragedy, but to completely distinguish revenge tragedies from other plays” (*www.123helpme.com/searc...*).

## SOLILOQUIES

The first soliloquy which hints the theme of revenge and the progression of the plot is Bel-Imperia's soliloquy which she utters after Horatio's death-

Ay, go Horatio, leave me here alone,  
 For solitude best fits my cheerless mood.  
 Yet, what avails to wail Andrea's death, (*I.iv.58-60, p.23*)  
 She further stresses her feelings of revenge for her beloved Andrea as well as Horatio-  
 "Yes, second love shall further my revenge..." (*p.23*)

Hieronimo, the Knight Marshal of Spain, is a symbol for the authority of law within *The Spanish Tragedy*. His character grows over a series of soliloquies dealing with several key questions. The first soliloquy occurs when Hieronimo is awakened from his sleep by Bel-Imperia's cry:

What outcries pluck me from my naked bed,  
 And chill my throbbing heart with trembling fear,  
 .....  
 Who calls Hieronimo? Speak, here I am.  
 .....  
 And here within this garden did she cry,  
     And in this garden must I rescue her.  
 But stay, what murd'rous spectacle is this?  
 .....  
 Alas, it is Horatio, my sweet son! (*II.v.1-14, p.43*)

Hieronimo is alarmed and agitated. He mutters to himself and blames God in utter despair. This soliloquy informs the future action.

The second soliloquy of Hieronimo in Act III, scene ii, shows his conflict in retaining faith in the justice of Heaven.

O Eyes! no eyes, but fountains fraught with tears;  
 O life! no life, but lively form of death;  
 O world! no world, but mass of public wrongs,  
 Confused and fill'd with murder and misdeeds! (*1-4, p.53*)

Hieronimo's third soliloquy at the beginning of Act III scene xii is an acted soliloquy, where he enters with a dagger in one hand and a rope in the other to await the arrival of the King.

In the fourth soliloquy Hieronimo appears on stage with a book by Seneca. He reads the passage which says that the safe way for crimes was further crimes. Strike hard against injustice lest it should lead to further injustice. He decides to avenge Horatio's death not in an open hostile manner but hiding behind the cloak of kindness. He says-

*Vindicta mihi!*  
 Ay, heaven will be revenged of every ill, (*III. xiii. 1-2, p.88*)

Hieronimo's madness has been given a new function which is dramatically effective at the same time sound psychology. Kyd knew how to make dramatic capital out of the greatest variety of dramatic effects. The structure and proportions are worked out with an almost mathematical precision and stylistic figures make powerful impact of metatheatricality. A quality or force in the play which challenges theatre's claim to be simply realistic.

## THE DUMB SHOW

The dumb-show is defined by *Oxford Dictionary of English* as "gestures used to convey a meaning or message without speech; mime" (<https://en.m.wikipedia.org>). It refers to a piece of dramatic mime in general, and particularly an action which summarizes, supplement or comment on the main

action of the play. It came into fashion in 16<sup>th</sup> century English drama in interludes featuring “personifications of abstract virtues and vices who contend in ways which foreshadow and moralise the fortunes of the play’s characters” (<https://en.m.wikipedia.org>). There are examples from *Gorboduc* George Peele’s *The Battle of Alcazar*, and Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. Two dumb shows occur in this play.

First appears in Act I, scene iv where the royal guest ‘sit to the banquet’ (p.25) which is in the honour of the Portuguese ambassador to celebrate the new alliance between two countries. This masque is staged by Hieronimo to entertain the guests. He is appreciated by the King - “Hieronimo, this masque contents mine eye” (138, p.26).

The second dumb show is staged by Revenge for the Ghost. The Ghost of Andrea feels fearful and appeals Revenge to wake up - “*Erictho! Celebrus*”.

“Hieronimo with Lorenzo is join’d in league” (15, p.102).

To which Revenge replies that Hieronimo cannot forget his son Horatio.

“Nor dies Revenge, though he sleeps a while,

For in unquiet quietness is feigned....” (*III. xv. 23-24*, p.103).

Soon, follows a dumb show. In which the first two knights carry the bright burning torches like the mid-day sun, as usual in a marriage procession. Revenge explains what the audience has just seen, a bleak inversion of a wedding ceremony, where Hymen as a god of marriage, puts out the nuptial torches in pots of blood.

The mime presented by Hieronimo and the dumb show presented by Revenge may seem extraneous in reality they present simultaneously spectacle and melodrama and foreshadow the catastrophe in store for Spain and Portugal.

### THE-PLAY-WITHIN-THE-PLAY

The most interesting feature of the play which makes it a metadrama is the-play-within-the-play. Soon after the dumb show, wedding festivities start. In Act IV, scene iii, Hieronimo starts building the stage. The play is based on the story of Soliman and Perseda. The chronicles of Spain contain the account of a Knight of Rhodes who was betrothed and finally wedded to an Italian beauty Perseda. She captured the heart of Soliman. He spoke of his love to one of his friends Bashaw, who tried to persuade Perseda. But she would not agree till her husband is alive. So, he contrived to kill the knight of Rhodes. Soliman is killed by her and she stabs herself.

The-play-within-the-play is a fine illustration of Kyd’s structural skill. It reflects the main theme. Hieronimo, who, desperate by not getting justice for his son’s murder is ready to take revenge. He expected justice from the king, if not, then from heavens.

“The heavens are just, murder cannot be hid’ (*II. v. p.45*).

The original dishonour, Andrea’s death which will be revenged through the action of the whole play sets of Bel-Imperia’s quest of revenge on Balthazar. Hieronimo assigns the role of Soliman to Balthazar; the role of Erasto to Lorenzo; Hieronimo himself took the role of Bashaw. The proposed drama requires that Bashaw should stab Erasto and Perseda should stab Soliman. The stabbings are supposed to be unreal in a drama. But they stab in reality to avenge Horatio’s murder. Hieronimo feigns madness earlier in the play. Now, he wants to enact this tragedy to take revenge in a most spectacular and shocking way. The-play-within-the-play makes tragedy more gruesome and terrible. It is self-reflective.

The critical work, which theorizes the nature of self-reflexivity in theatre, is *Drama, Metadrama, and Perception* (1986) by Richard Hornby. Hornby derives metadrama as a mode of non-mimetic criticism presenting a different method of relating art to life. This relation manifests in the reflection of the drama/culture complex in dramatic art....It is the role of serious art (as opposed to conventional art) to call into question the artistic system by invoking this reflection in the plays themselves. Through

this discussion, he does deal with most traditional instances of metatheatre like the-play-within-a-play (*Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism*, p.116).

In his *Dictionary of the Theatre*, Pavis offers four principal strands of metatheatre - "The first of these is the standard theatre-within-theatre model represented by Lionel Abel. Here, a play is nested inside the play already in progress. Characters in the fictional world of the play assume roles, becoming themselves actors and subsequently second order characters in the fictional world of the play-within. Formal plays-within also feature a doubled audience, with some characters arranged as spectators to this event, mirroring the actual-world audience-without. Play-within as a model of metatheatre, however, need not always reproduce a complete performance. The same effect can be achieved through informal plays-within, through characters who play roles or who direct the actions of others" (*Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism*, p.123). In this manner, the play-within exhibits both a fictional world of *Soliman and Perseda* and the actual world of *The Spanish Tragedy* in which the-play-within-the-play is produced for the audiences that is the King of Spain and his royal guests at the court. The whole event is self-reflexive in producing a meta dramatic effect in the real play for the audiences within and on the whole the world of the audiences outside.

## CONCLUSION

Drama of all forms of art is most immediately affected by material circumstances. It involves creation by the dramatist, recreation by a company of actors on stage, and third incarnation in the illusion of the spectators. Thomas Kyd holds his importance as the maker of Elizabethan Revenge tragedy. Kyd is a craftsman and an artist. His *The Spanish Tragedy* is a great advance upon earlier tragedies, and no other tragedy is near it in quality and tone. It makes a turning point in the history of tragedy. Its ghosts, horror, murders, vindictiveness are few common elements of Senecan tragedy. But in management of his language, he shows a great advance upon the contemporary playwrights. His characters are distinct, situations theatricality effective, and the plot a unified whole. Kyd's dialogue maintains decorum, reflecting the characters. It's the Virgilian framework within which Kyd has placed the main action. By virtue of the framing action in particular with the help of asides and soliloquies audience enjoys knowledge hidden from participants. The two dumb-shows and the-play-within-the-play is an example of Kyd's structural craft which reflects the play's governing theme. The roles of the character in the-play-within-the-play are equal to their actions in the main play. The Ghost of Andrea is a spectator as well as a character and a chorus simultaneously in the play. According to Anne Barton "For Don Andrea the actions occurring on the stage below are painfully real, in no sense rehearsal at second hand" (*The Structure and the Meaning of the Spanish Tragedy*).

As the result of the complicated structure, the events involving Hieronimo and Bel-Imperia, in the-play-within-the-play, which was to be merely fictitious acquire an unexpected reality. Through this act, Hieronimo performs the main action of the play. Here the focus of the creator moves towards hidden action under the guise of an art, a play presented for the entertainment. The opportunity is sought by Hieronimo to fulfil individual objective along with Bel-Imperia and Don Andrea's. At the same time the world of chorus who is engaged in the real action of watching a play uses its inherent reality and merges with the fictitious world of drama. In *The Spanish Tragedy*, use of this dramatic device of plot construction by Kyd set a new standard of structure of the plays - the metadrama.

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