

## The Relationship between Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* and Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and *Titus Andronicus*

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**Abstract:** Scholars have attempted to dig deep to foster people's understanding on the literary production of the Elizabethan period. A critical reading of Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* and William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and *Titus Andronicus* would quickly trigger the question: what relationship can we draw between these Elizabethan tragedies? Despite Roger Stilling's claim that the forefather of all love tragedy and revenge plays is *Gismond of Salern: In Love*, this paper contends that Kyd's only surviving play, *The Spanish Tragedy*, has greatly contributed to, if not fathered, many Elizabethan revenge plays viz. *Titus Andronicus* and *Hamlet*. This study supports that there is a remarkable commonality between Kyd's play and Shakespearian tragedy in terms of plot and style, and other stupendous characteristics of a revenge play, be it the ghostly visitations, or the presence of the Machiavellian character, the play-within-the-play element and delay for revenge, as well as feigned madness and the suffering of the hero before the avenger comes to the ultimate act of revenge. Using close reading methods, the researcher agrees with earlier scholars that while Shakespeare might have followed Kyd's literary style, both playwrights are significantly influenced by the Senecan tragedies.

**Keywords:** Elizabethan drama, Revenge play, Thomas Kyd, Tragedy, William Shakespeare

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### I. Introduction

The Elizabethan reign marks the end of the regimes of Edward and Mary which are characterized by "defeat and humiliation abroad and persecution and rebellion at home" [1]p.99. Attributable to Elizabethan age are: religious tolerance, social contentment and enthusiasm marked by intellectual freedom and the need to express man in their entirety – their actions and reactions, emotions, and thinking. Drama becomes the suitable genre which can respond to these complex human expressions [1]. Within the conducive environment brought about by Elizabeth's tact and know how as well as her dexterity to rule, drama experiences a conspicuous development. The literary production of the time mostly manifests itself through the outstandingly artistic creativity of its playwrights which include, but are not limited to, Cyril Tourneur, Christopher Marlowe, William Shakespeare, and Thomas Kyd. These dramatists write from the Renaissance spirit and the Elizabethan worldview though their drama seems to owe a lot to the Roman stoic philosopher and tragedian, Seneca as far as revenge tragedy is concerned [2].

These writers cherish humanism and their works put emphasis on the achievement of an individual and how an individual acts to bring change and order in society, things which, in the previous era, were supposed to be done by God, the creator, who sets the society in ranks and order. One of these authors' grounds of predilection is revenge tragedy. Common features of revenge play range from motive for revenge to the experience and fall of the tragic, noble hero, as well as the ghostly apparition and the display of many corpses, which ends the play in an unhappy manner [3] p.2. Yet, what relationship can we draw between *The Spanish Tragedy* and the other Elizabethan tragedies? Despite Roger Stilling's claim that the forefather of all love tragedy and revenge plays is *Gismond of Salern: In Love*[4] p.11, Thomas Kyd's only surviving play, *The Spanish Tragedy* has greatly contributed to, if not fathered, many future Elizabethan revenge plays (*Titus Andronicus*, *Hamlet*) in terms of plot and style. This play exhibits some stupendous characteristics of a revenge play, be it the ghostly visitations, or the presence of the Machiavellian character along with the play-within-the-play element and delay for revenge, or feigned madness and the suffering of the hero before the avenger comes to the ultimate act of revenge.

### II. Relationship Between The Spanish Tragedy And Shakespearean Tragedies

Many attempts have been made in order to clarify what tragedy means and stands for, and what is its purpose, as a literary genre. Aristotle, to start with, asserts that tragedy is the "effects through pity and fear the purgation of these emotions" [5]p.89. Critic David Bevington defines tragedy "as the story of a great person," who "stood in greet prosperitee, / And is yfallen out of heigh degree / Into misery, and endeth wrecchedly" [6]p.39. Yet, it appears that people read tragedy because of the stories that it unfolds, that is, the fall of great individuals or critiques of society. All this happens through catharsis and hamartia which is "an error in action rather than ... a fatal weakness of character" [5]p.88.

Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* epitomizes the darkness of Senecan world with murky atmosphere, a world littered with villainy and conspiracy. The play is about revenge and the ability to judge a right. Hieronimo, the apparent protagonist, and Bel-Imperia want to avenge the death of Horatio, Balthazar desires to rid of Horatio out of jealousy, and Andrea's ghost strives to retaliate against Balthazar. In terms of judging a right, however, both kings show their inability to settle dispute. The Spanish king fails to solve the disagreement between Lorenzo and Horatio over the captive Balthazar. Viceroy, the Portuguese king, on the other hand, falls short to understand Villupo's conspiracy and emotionally orders the killing of the innocent Alexandro. Had the ambassador not come early from Spain, Alexandro would have been executed. The play ends in a ghastly bloodshed; Hieronimo plots the play-within-the play in which he kills Lorenzo, and Bel-Imperia slays Balthazar to wreck vengeance over the death of Horatio. Later on, Hieronimo advertently bites out his tongue before he assassinates Castile and commits suicide.

Similarly, Shakespeare's revenge tragedies (*Titus Andronicus* and *Hamlet*) present the conflicting forces of good and evil. Both plays reveal the playwright's ability to deliver to his audience exciting performances. *Titus Andronicus*, to begin with, as Shakespeare's early play, constitutes one of the Elizabethan prototype tragedies. Right from the opening scene of the play, the playwright alerts the reader about the conflicting events that are about to happen. The strife between the two brothers (Bassanius and Saturninus) over the Roman crown is paralleled by the Gothic brothers' (Demetrius and Chiron) competition over sex. The two Goths vie over the noble Lavinia who may, to some extent, symbolize Rome itself in the play. Indeed, *Titus Andronicus* underscores the long held assumption that the Romans are the best civilization compared to any other civilization by portraying their lack to contain the Goths and their inner factionalism. Titus, the apparent hero, suffers from his inner turmoil caused by the ravishing of his daughter, Lavinia, and his lack of nobility before he plots the ultimate slaughter in which he himself is killed by Saturninus.

However, *Hamlet*, as a revenge play, is a more careful study of humanity and the consequence of messing up with evil. Hamlet, the protagonist, has to avenge the murder of his father under his father's ghost's injunction. He appears very meditative, hesitant, and calculating in carrying out vengeance; this results in the deaths of other seemingly innocent people like Ophelia. Indeed, these two plays depict a striking similarity compared to *The Spanish Tragedy* at the point that some critics wonder if Shakespeare has not in mind this play while writing his plays *Titus Andronicus* and *Hamlet*.

*The Spanish Tragedy* is the first play to start with, and to be littered by, ghostly visitation which is one of Senecan dramatic singularities. For Howard Baker, "Kyd's use of the chorus is Senecan; the figures which compose the chorus – one of them or both – are Senecan" [7] p.108. Indeed, Andrea's ghost opens the stage with a plea, which is not all convincing for revenge to take place, but it, at least, sets the whole play in motion. Andrea's ghost not only reveals Andrea's secret affair with Bel-Imperia (1.1 10-11), but stays to watch how revenge is going to take place. "Kyd seems to be the first writer," Baker contends, "to stress the ghost's wonderment at what he sees" [7] p.114. The second reference to the ghost appears when Isabella, in her grief and bereavement before stabbing herself in act 4 scene 2, calls out:

See, where his ghost solicits with his wounds  
Revenge on her that should revenge his death!  
Hieronimo, make haste to see thy son,  
For sorrow and despair hath cited me  
To hear Horatio plead with Rhadamanth. (4.2. 24-28)

In fact, both Hieronimo and Isabella have in their visions the ghostly visitation of their dead son. Hieronimo believes that his son's ghost asks for revenge.

In a similar vein, king Hamlet's ghost overtly explains to young Hamlet the causes of his father's death, and then he puts the burden of vengeance on Hamlet's shoulders. Critics argue that Shakespeare had Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* in mind when he wrote the scene about king Hamlet's ghost's apparition in *Hamlet*. Bevington goes even further by stressing on the probability that "Kyd is also the author of the first dramatic version of the story of Hamlet" [6] p.43.

Another feature that appears in *The Spanish Tragedy* and which becomes dominant aspect of future revenge plays is the presence of the Machiavellian character. Lorenzo is the apparent embodiment of the Machiavellian villain in that play. He blatantly states that "I will trust myself; myself shall be my friend/ For die they shall" (3.3.118-119). He seems resolute to use his cunning and wit to accomplish his evil deed by wiping out all those he believes may reveal Horatio's murderers. As a consequence, after plotting the death of the naïve Serberine by using Pedringano (3.3.33), he goes on to exterminate the poor Pedringano, and he views his machination as a "policy" (3.4.38). This type of dramatic style opens the way for the coming Shakespearean tragedies, *Titus Andronicus* and *Hamlet*. The role of the Machiavellian villain, in these plays, is played respectively by Aaron and Claudius.

Aaron embodies villainy in all its forms [8]. In his attempt to appease his mistress, Tamora, though married to Saturninus, Aaron reveals to the audience his devilish conduct in these words:

Hark, Tamora, the empress of my soul,  
Which never hopes more heaven than rests in thee,  
This is the day of doom for Bassianus.  
His Philomel must lose her tongue today,  
Thy sons make pillage of her chastity  
And wash their hands in Bassianus' blood. (2.3.40-45)

In order words, Aaron tells Tamora that he has plotted the killing of Bassianus and the rape of Bassianus' 'Philomel,' that is, Lavinia's rape before her tongue is cut by Tamora's sons. Additionally, Aaron fools Titus to sever his right hand in compensation for his sons' arrest or to rescue them after they are trapped in Aaron's devised conspiracy. Meanwhile, he has an affair with the former Goths,' and newly Romans,' Queen, Tamora. This affair results in the birth of a black boy before Aaron's villainy has been dismantled.

Similarly, Claudius, in *Hamlet*, typifies the Kydian villain used by Shakespeare in a more refined form. Claudius solely devises regicide and fratricide of his brother, king Hamlet, before he hastily marries the widow, Gertrude as revealed by the ghost in act 1 scene 5. The ghost and Hamlet view Claudius as "wicked," "incestuous," "adulterate beast," (1.5. 43-45). He uses all his possible cunning and wit to rid of young Hamlet whom he sees as a threat to his rule. Claudius sends Hamlet to England where he thought Hamlet could be killed (4.3.41-47). After his plot failed, he machinates a duel between Hamlet and Laertes in which he wishes Laertes would slay Hamlet (5.2). Thus, Shakespeare exploits the dramatic element of villainy started by Kyd.

In a related development, *The Spanish Tragedy* uses Senecan feigned madness and delay for revenge, which becomes a model for the later Elizabethan revenge tragedies. In act 3 scene 12, Hieronimo's conversation with the king and Lorenzo makes him appear foolish, especially when he keeps calling for "justice, O justice" (3.12.63-65). Also, Hieronimo's encounter with the two Portuguese exposes him as quite mad, as he cries, "ha, ha, ha! / why, ha, ha, ha! Farwell, good, ha, ha, ha!" (3.11.30-31). His feigned madness becomes more pronounced when he sees Senex as Horatio in (3.13.145-152). He appears mad because he does not want the king and Castile to know his plan of performing the play-within-the-play which will enable him to avenge the dead Horatio. Kyd is probably the first playwright to come up with such an artistically imagined craftsmanship; that is, feigned madness in drama.

This dramatic element is later on found in Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* when Titus learns that his two sons are slain despite the fact that he has severed his hand to save their lives. He exclaims: "ha, ha, ha!" (3.1.269), in a kind of lunatic manner; "But the madness of Titus," Baker posits, "is also feigned; he simulates in order to allay the suspicions of his enemies and to contrive his triumph over them" [7] p.126. Titus' mind is, for sure, overcharged by the inhumane treatment that his daughter undergoes in the hands of the Goths (Demetrius and Chiron), but his madness appears as a stratagem to hide his real intention to trap his foes and wreck vengeance.

Shakespeare, later on, uses this dramatic style in his *Hamlet*, a play in which the employment of feigned madness appears so complex that it is even hard sometimes to draw a line between sincerity and pretense. Hamlet cannot stomach the "most wicked speed," of his mother "to post / With such dexterity to incestuous sheets" (1.2.156-157). This shocking feeling and the ghost's apparition trigger Hamlet's depression and melancholia which make it hard to distinguish appearance from reality. This creates a real confusion for the audience [9]p.218. We are even more confused when Hamlet cries out, "for oh, for oh, the hobbyhorse is forgot" (3.2.133); is he crazy or does he just devise his madness to conceal his motive and his deadly plan of killing Claudius?

Furthermore, most revenge plays follow the Kydian pattern in the way the avenger proceeds before the final blow. Indeed, in *The Spanish Tragedy*, Hieronimo laments in the following words:

Where shall I run to breathe abroad my woes,  
My woes whose weight hath wearied the earth?  
Or mine exclaims, that have surcharged the air  
With ceaseless plaints for my deceased son?  
The blustering winds, conspiring with my words,  
my lament have moved the leafless trees,  
Disrobed the meadows of their flowered green,  
Made mountains marsh with springtides of my tears,  
And broken through the brazen gates of hell. (III.vii.1-10)

This soliloquy "exhibits," [10] supports, "what Titus will establish as the mark of the mad avenger – a subjectivity so intense that it obliterates the distinction between inner and external reality, confusing the self and the world into one turmoil" p.67. Coral's observation and Hieronimo's lament strikingly points at the unobvious similarity between *The Spanish Tragedy* and *Titus Andronicus* regarding the way the avenger proceeds in his quest for vengeance.

Additionally, *The Spanish Tragedy* depicts overwhelming delay for revenge which becomes a salient pattern of the coming Shakespearean revenge tragedies. While Hieronimo is thinking about how to wreck vengeance, the death of his son devastates him so terribly that his mind is overcharged and he just indulges in internal havoc (3.13.1-44). He first considers acting right away, but then he questions the validity of Bel-Imperia's letter in act 3 scene 2:

Or what might move thee, Bel-Imperia,  
To accuse thy brother, had he been the mean?  
Hieronimo, beware, thou art betrayed,  
And to entrap thy life this train is laid.

This partly explains his tardiness to proceed to avenge his son. Indeed, the audience may contemplate how Hieronimo's personality is torn between the Christian idea of leaving vengeance to God suggested by "vindictamihi," or vengeance is mine (3.13.1) and his inner desire to deal with a corrupt and infected Spain. The same aspect appears in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*; Hamlet procrastinates too much to avenge his father. His delay appears right from Hamlet's first soliloquy when he complains, "oh, that this too too sullied flesh would melt (1.2. 129) and contemplates suicide which he could have committed if "the Everlasting had not fixed / His canon 'gainst self-slaughter" (1.2.131-132). He first appears depressed and suspicious even before the ghost tells him about the cause of his father's death. That is why he reacts to the ghost's revelation by exclaiming, "Oh my prophetic soul! My uncle!" (1.5.42). In his famous speech, "To be, or not to be, that is the question" (3.1.57-90), Hamlet lingers much on the "not to be" part which shows his lack of action. Instead of considering himself to be the one who should wreck vengeance, he ponders putting an end to his life. He even reasons against his first assumption that the ghost "is an honest ghost" (1.5.144) when he later on questions that belief by thinking that "the spirit that I have seen / May be the devil" (2.2.599-600). Hamlet waits in his action because he thinks he is not the right person to respond to the ghost's injunction when he laments "that ever I was born to set it right" (1.5.198). The play portrays Hamlet as the embodiment of elaborate rationalization of the failure to act. This philosophical reasoning triggers Hamlet's delay to wreck vengeance. One would argue that Kyd has credit for starting the employment of such well-crafted artistic element in the Elizabethan theater.

Moreover, Kyd seems to be the first Elizabethan playwright to coin a complex female character around which the theme of vengeance is woven. Bel-Imperia looks courageous despite her deviant attitude vis-à-vis the norms of her society by secretly sleeping with Andrea before marriage. She uses her female stratagem to convince Horatio to wreck vengeance. She also refuses to be used as a political toy between Spain and Portugal by declining any relationship with Balthazar. Also, Bel-Imperia stands as a prop for the undecided Hieronimo in carrying out vengeance. In act 4, we can see her furiously rebuking Hieronimo for not acting:

Is this the love thou bear'st Horatio?  
Is this the kindness that thou counterfeitst?  
Are these the fruits of thine incessant tears?  
Hieronimo, are these thy passions,  
Thy protestations and thy deep laments,  
That thou wert wont to weary men withal?  
O unkind father, O deceitful world!  
With what ... (4.1.1-29)

Even Stilling, who rejects the idea that *The Spanish Tragedy* models the Elizabethan drama, goes against his own argument by recognizing that Bel-Imperia "is the first genuinely seductive heroine to take the Elizabethan stage" [4] p.27. Indeed, Bel-Imperia paves the way to the most passionate, to some extent, victims of the Elizabethan patriarchal and political order, female characters of the theatrical productions of that period.

Shakespeare probably gets inspiration from heroic Bel-Imperia in the way he crafts his female characters. In *Titus Andronicus*, he creates Tamora and Lavinia. Tamora, as a captive, employs her strong character and tact to avenge her son, Alarbus, slaughtered (despite Tamora's plea and kneeling 1.1. 105-115) by the Andronici. She instructs her sons to undertake the awful deed of plotting and massacring Bassanius as well as mutilating and ravishing the poor Lavinia. Tamora's opening speech, "have I not reason, think you, to look pale?" (2.3.91) is not only addressed to her sons but also to the whole world. She wants people to sympathize with her and understand her plight, an empress reduced to nothing but wretchedness and humiliation in Rome. Tamora uses all negative and anger stimulating words to make sure that her sons understand how important it is for her to wreck vengeance. She recounts to her sons how Romans are treating her in the following words: "foul adulteress," "lascivious Goth," and the "bitterest words." This may certainly trigger anger and acrimony in any son whose mother has been treated as such. Also, the last two lines ("Revenge it as you love your mother's life, / Or be you not henceforth called my children" (2.3.114-115)) of the speech work as a strong impetus for Demetrius and Chiron in undertaking their disastrous action.

Lavinia in *Titus Andronicus*, however, appears innocent; a young girl torn between her inner and legitimate feelings and her tendency to abide by the demands of her society. She has been treated as a toy by her

father who wants her to be the bride of the newly selected king, Saturninus. Her brother, Mutius, abducts her and gives her to her beloved Bassanius. The two Goths (Demetrius and Chiron) target her to avenge the slaying of their brother, Alarbus. They ruthlessly lavish her by raping her before they cut her hands and her tongue (2.3). Lavinia suffers and perishes under the whim of a male dominated society.

Gertrude and Ophelia, in *Hamlet*, face a similar fate as Lavinia. Hamlet treats Gertrude with contempt and rancor for her rash and incestuous marriage with King Claudius. Her act poisons Hamlet's mind and leads him to come up with the generalization that "frailty, thy name is woman" (1.2.146). Ophelia, on the other hand, endures Hamlet's seeming madness and her father's intrusion to use her in order to figure out what is wrong with Hamlet. She probably suffers from her love towards Hamlet. "To the Victorian mind," [11] observes, "Ophelia typified the kind of mental breakdown women were believed to be prone to in adolescence, during the period of sexual awakening" p.214. But, for many Twenty First Century readers, she instantiates a female who is torn between her legitimate inspiration and the injunction of a male dominated society. "Ophelia has come to be viewed," [11] contends, "perhaps as a madwoman but as a heroine as well, as a "sister" who "refuses to speak the language of the patriarchal order" p.214.

Interestingly enough, *The Spanish Tragedy* seems plausibly to be the first play to make use of the play-within-the-play. When Hieronimo is resolute to wreck vengeance, he comes up with a stratagem: the performance of a play called the tragedy of Soliman the Turkish emperor in which the actors are he himself, Bel-Imperia, Lorenzo, and Balthazar (4.4). It is during the performance of this play, in front of the king of Spain and Viceroy, that the real tragedy occurs when Bel-Imperia pitilessly stabs Balthazar before killing herself, and Hieronimo ruthlessly assassinates Lorenzo before he bites out his tongue and finally commits suicide after he slays Castile (4.4). This gory show of corpses on stage is one of the distinctive features of revenge play that Kyd authors and which influences the future Elizabethan plays, for example, *Titus Andronicus*. But, Hieronimo's mischievousness in carrying out his action helps critics to posit that Hieronimo is not better than Lorenzo. Thus, the play may have two Machiavellian villains and arguably no real hero. A similar pattern is followed by Shakespeare in *Hamlet*. Hamlet's request about the performance of the play-within-the-play, however, differs from that of *The Spanish Tragedy*. Hamlet wants to enact the play because of the arrival of the players (3.2) whereas Hieronimo invents his own device just to catch Lorenzo and Balthazar before slaying them during the performance. Hieronimo does not use the play-within-the-play to confirm the revelation of Bel-Imperia's letter about the murderers of Horatio (4.4), yet Hamlet uses it to further his conviction about Claudius' culpability. Hence, Kyd's the play-within-the-play inspires Shakespeare who uses it in a different manner with a different purpose.

Furthermore, Kyd appears as the initiator of the use of the darkness of Senecan world with murky atmosphere on the Elizabethan stage. This is a world littered with injustice and the questioning of cosmos to bring equity on the earth. Hieronimo expresses the way he views the Kydian world in the following verses:

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 filled with murder and misdeeds!  
O sacred heavens! If this unhallowed deed,  
If this inhuman and barbarous attempts,  
If this incomparable murder thus  
Of mine, but now no more my son,  
Shall unrevealed and unrevengèd pass,  
How should we term your dealings to be just,  
If you unjustly deal with those that in your justice trust? (3.2.1-11)

Critical to these lines is a world shadowed by darkness and injustice. Similarly, in *Titus Andronicus*, Titus claims that "Rome is but a wilderness of tigers" (3.1.55). Hamlet, likewise, sees Danmark as "an unweeded garden / that grows to seed. Things rank and gross in nature" (1.2.135-136). Then, Marcellus observes that "something is rotten in the state of Denmark" (1.4.90). Thus, Shakespeare makes use of the murky world started by Kyd to refine his tragedy. The three plays depict the Elizabethan theatrical world as a disintegrating world in need of salvation, but at the end of these plays, the forces of good eventually defeat the forces of evil and restore order and justice.

However, what most critics fail to show is the romantic flavor that characterizes *The Spanish Tragedy*. Though Bel-Imperia may be judged for using Horatio, it is obvious that both have enjoyed some erotic good time. In act 2 scene 4, she whispers to Horatio: "O, let me go, for in my troubled eyes/Now may'st thou read that life in passion dies," Horatio romantically responds, "O, stay awhile and I will die with thee" (2.4.46-48). Thus, *The Spanish Tragedy* is not all about chaos and turmoil, but a play which mingles love story and the suffering of lovers just as we see it in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*.

### III. Conclusions

Elizabethan playwrights have unquestionably marked the English literary arena. There is vibrant and striking commonality between *The Spanish Tragedy* and Shakespearean revenge plays. This conspicuous resemblance suggests that Shakespeare might have got his inspiration from Kyd's employment of Senecan theatrical elements. Critics like David Bevington equate Kyd as "the greatest genius in adapting Senecan action to the English theater [6] p.42. Indeed, Bevington continues, Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* has played a pivotal role in the development of Elizabethan drama by opening some dramaturgical possibilities in the script of Renaissance tragedy. It owes its merit by introducing many foremost theatrical elements in Elizabethan theater. For Coral, "*The Spanish Tragedy* can claim many 'firsts' in the history of Elizabethan drama: the first stage Machiavelli, the first play-within-the-play, the first attempt to intermingle black humour and stately tragedy, and the like" [10] p. 60. Talking about *Titus Andronicus*, Jordi Coral E. views it "as continuing the revenge tradition initiated by Kyd" (ibid.). Thus, *The Spanish Tragedy* has significantly impacted the Elizabethan drama, and Bevington goes deeper and argues that "it was the acknowledged grandfather of the revenge play" [6] p.4. This assertion further stresses on how tremendous the influence of Kyd is on his Elizabethan contemporaries. His influence becomes unobvious when we consider the plot and style and other theatrical elements employed by Shakespeare in his revenge plays.

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