

Love and Justice Flip, Insanity and Revenge Appear: Love, Revenge, and Justice in Kyd's *THE SPANISH TRAGEDY*.

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Abstract

Drama is the root of the Elizabethan period and based on drama, other branches of Renaissance literature grow. Thomas Kyd, following the footsteps of Seneca, pioneered a new form in Elizabethan England, the "Revenge Tragedy". Kyd's enchanting play *The Spanish Tragedy* is regarded as the very first English revenge tragedy. In this revenge tragedy Kyd beautifully amalgamated the elements of Senecan drama, classical drama, and medieval mystery and morality plays. The characters are well-designed to depict the central theme of the play, i.e., "revenge". The ghost of Andrea, the personification of Revenge, noble Hieronimo, Bal-Imperia, Balthazar, Lorenzo, Horatio and all the other major and minor characters were clouded by kindling love and toxic revenge. Here, through this work attempts are made to examine how lack of justice and incomplete love create the vortex of revenge which drowns the characters to their ultimate catastrophe and only whistles of painful deaths are heard.

Keywords: Thomas Kyd, Tragedy, Love, Revenge, Betrayal, Justice, Insanity, Law.

I. Introduction:

Drama illuminates human life with the help of vivid types of themes based on love, imagination, beauty, etc. The extent of drama is worldwide, and every human-related aspect could be revealed by it. Drama is the root of the Elizabethan period and based on drama, other branches of Renaissance literature grow. During the Elizabethan period, drama was adopted not only to entertain the masses but also to reflect human follies, vices and socio-cultural aspects of that said era.

The famous Elizabethan dramatist Thomas Kyd introduced the treatment of "revenge" in English tragedies. Thomas Kyd, following the footsteps of Seneca, propagated a new form in Elizabethan England, the "Revenge Tragedy". Kyd's enchanting play *The Spanish Tragedy* is regarded as the very first English revenge tragedy, composed in the Elizabethan era. In this revenge tragedy Kyd beautifully amalgamated the elements of Senecan drama, classical

drama, and medieval mystery and morality plays. The unique theme, the enigmatic characters, and the symbolic picturesque of revenge flourished *The Spanish Tragedy* into one of the finest revenge tragedies to date.

The play begins with the entry of the ghost of Don Andrea, a Spanish nobleman, and the ghost seeks revenge on his murderers. At the outset of the play, Don Andrea's death evokes traces of revenge within the play. The ghost declares his cause of death and also his love relation with Bel-Imperia. The ghost itself is used to give a poignant effect of tragedy. The death of the nobleman, his incomplete love, and his desire for ultimate revenge arrange the fragments of tragedy. The ghost of Don Andrea mourns about his life and love:

*“But in the harvest of my summer' joys,
Death's winter nipped the blossoms of my bliss,
Forcing divorce betwixt my love and me.”* (Kyd I.1.12-14)

The ghost, by mentioning his love, refers to his lover Bel-Imperia, the female protagonist, who is the cynosure of the plot of Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*. Bel-Imperia's love relationship with Andrea and Andrea's murder by Balthazar initiate the cycle of revenge within the play. It was Bel-Imperia's love that flickered the fire of revenge and also it was Bel-Imperia who took the terrible vow for revenge. She paved the way for her revenge by indulging herself in another love relationship with Horatio, but ill-fated Bel-Imperia had lost her second love too.

The other characters are also well-designed to depict the central theme of the play, i.e., revenge. The noble character of Hieronimo reflects the dangers of seeking revenge. Hieronimo is a playwright and a poet. He tries his best to dig the justice for his dead son Horatio. But his faith in law and justice is evaporated as justice is hidden beneath the machination of his son's killer Lorenzo, who is the representation of betrayal within the play. The noble Hieronimo used his creativity to take revenge although his wife Isabella warned him to stay away from such malicious deeds. Through the character of Isabella, “Kyd argues that revenge is best left to God and the law. Even though the law fails to get justice for Horatio, Hieronimo's disastrous end suggests revenge simply isn't worth it.”¹

The ghost of Andrea, the personification of Revenge, noble Hieronimo, Bal-Imperia, Balthazar, Lorenzo, Horatio and all the other major and minor characters were clouded by kindling love and toxic revenge. Here in Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*, all the themes are entwined together with the threads of love, revenge, and betrayal. Kyd, with those threads of love, revenge, and betrayal creates an irresistible web, in which all the characters eventually get caught. With this essay attempts are made to examine the love relations among the characters, socio-cultural traces and the justice system of that said era. Here, attempts are also made to examine how lack of justice and incomplete love create the vortex of revenge which drowns the characters to their ultimate catastrophe and only whistles of painful deaths are heard.

¹ Rosewall, Kim. *The Spanish Tragedy*. LitCharts. LitCharts LLC, 22 Nov 2019. Web. 21 Apr 2020.

II. The Aroma of Love and The Cacophony of Insanity in Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*.

Love plays a very significant role in Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*. From the very beginning of the play, the playwright mentions the death of Bel-Imperia's lover Don Andrea, a Spanish courtier through the ghost of the deceased. The incomplete love of Andrea and the intimacy between the lovers made the dead soul of Andrea plead in front of Proserpine, the goddess of fertility and the queen of the underworld, for revenge and the goddess granted Andrea's ghost to witness the death of his killer Balthazar. The goddess orders Revenge to accompany the Ghost of Andrea back to earth. It is the incomplete love of Andrea that makes his ghost roam and expect revenge from his lover Bal-Imperia. Bal-Imperia's first mention of Andrea, highlights the intimate relationship between them.

*"Wherein I must entreat thee to relate
The circumstance of Don Andrea's death,
Who, living, was my garland's sweetest flower,
And in his death hath buried my delights."* (Kyd I.4.2-5)

Andrea's words for Bal-Imperia also testifies to their love.

*"...fair Bel-imperia,
On whom I doted more than all the world,
Because she loved me more than all the world."* (Kyd II.6.4-6)

By considering the dialogues of the lovers, Andrea and Bal-Imperia, the spectators can easily assume that the love relation between the two is a mutual one. The flower of love gradually blossoms within their mind, but before that flower produces its aroma Balthazar has snatched it away, by killing Andrea.

Soon after the death of Andrea, the spectators witness another love relationship between Horatio and Bal-Imperia. Bal-Imperia mentions Horatio as her "Second love" because the first part of her heart is already taken by Horatio's friend Andrea. Horatio performs the funeral rites of his dead friend, removes the "scarf" from Andrea's body and decides to wear it in his honour. Here, the "scarf" of Andrea symbolizes the in-depth friendship between Horatio and Andrea. Friendship is as strong as the relationship of love.

*"This scarf I plucked from off his lifeless arm,
And wear it in remembrance of my friend."* (Kyd I.4.42-43)

Bel-Imperia recognizes the "Scarf" and asks Horatio to wear it not only for her lover's honour but also for her honour. The "Scarf" was the last remnant of Bal-Imperia and Andrea's love.

“For had he lived, he would have kept it still,

And worn it for his Bel-imperia's sake,

For 'twas my favor at his last depart.

But now wear thou it both for him and me,” (Kyd I.4.45-48)

Here, Kyd uses the “Scarf” as the symbol of love: the love between Andrea and Bal-Imperia, the love between Horatio and Bal-Imperia, and the brotherhood between Andrea and Horatio. Later when Horatio is killed by Lorenzo and Balthazar, Hieronimo, the father of Horatio keeps the blood-stained “scarf” with him and vows to keep it until his son’s death is avenged. The blood-reddened “Scarf” always remembers Hieronimo and his wife Isabella about their deceased son. Isabella’s continuous grief and mourning lead her towards complete insanity. For a mother, it is not easy to tolerate her son’s death, and because of her love towards his son, she becomes insane. Driving to the limit of her insanity, she commits suicide. Before her death, “Isabella curses the garden and the tree Horatio was hanged from, so it may never bear fruit again”².

“And with this weapon will I wound the breast,

The hapless breast, that gave Horatio suck.” (Kyd IV.2.37-38)

Thus, it is Isabella’s love for her son that compels her to take up the ultimate decision. Hieronimo and Bal-Imperia’s revenge dreadfully paints the sombre spectra of love. Although the love sung in the tunes of *The Spanish Tragedy* is non-harmonic, the screaming hearts of Hieronimo and Bal-Imperia cry for revenge, which makes the euphony of love transition into the cacophony of deaths. The lover Bal-Imperia and Horatio’s father Hieronimo, later killed Balthazar and Lorenzo to avenge Horatio and Andrea’s murder. All these characters, and finally Isabella showcase the autopsy of sanity. All of them are related to multiple homicides, and the murderers are observed to possess an unstable psyche. The characters are all in one way or the other suffering from mental instability, which turns the aroma of love into the stench of bloodshed.

III. The Flicker of Revenge and The Smoke of Deaths in Kyd’s *The Spanish Tragedy*

Revenge is the key theme in Thomas Kyd’s *The Spanish Tragedy*. Love kindles the flicker of revenge within the play. For example, Bel-Imperia’s love for Don Andrea motivates her to take revenge against her lover’s murderer. She, to avenge Andrea’s death, uses her love for Horatio as a weapon for revenge.

“But how can love find harbor in my breast,

Til I revenge the death of my beloved?

² Ibid

Yes, second love shall further my revenge:

I'll love Horatio, my Andrea's friend," (Kyd I.4.64-67)

In the initial part of the play, the playwright depicts the hidden agonies of Bal-Imperia's heart. She vows for the terrible revenge and directs her stream of love towards Horatio. Later, Horatio is also killed in front of Bel-Imperia and it is Bel-Imperia who later writes a letter with her blood to Hieronimo, unveiling the murder.

Hieronimo is the epitome of Elizabethan revenge in Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*. Hieronimo, witnessing his son's death, gradually build up the feeling of revenge despite the warnings of his wife Isabella. Isabella warns him not to fall into the trap of revenge because according to her, revenge is best left to heaven and time.

"The heavens are just; murder cannot be hid:

Time is the author both of truth and right,

And time will bring this treachery to light." (Kyd II.5.57-59)

Isabella argues that heaven would provide justice and that "time will bring this treachery to light". But after the suicide of Isabella, Hieronimo's control over his feelings is shattered. He tries his best to give justice to him and his dead son. His growing desire for revenge leads him to his catastrophe.

In the play, when Hieronimo finds the blood-stained "scarf" of his late son, he vows to keep it with him until his son's death is avenged.

"See'st thou this handkercher besmeared with blood?

It shall not from me, til I take revenge.

See'st thou those wounds that yet are bleeding fresh?

I'll not entomb them, til I have revenged." (Kyd II.5.51-54)

The quoted dialogues of Hieronimo emboss the exasperated agonies of a father, whose young heir is brutally murdered. He tries his best to console his vengeful mind but after the suicide of his beloved Isabella, he is determined to take revenge. In the final act of *The Spanish Tragedy*, Kyd uses his literary excellence and leads the play to its climax. Kyd mentions Hieronimo as a poet and a playwright and later makes Hieronimo use his artistic creativity to take his revenge. Kyd designs a play-within-a-play where Hieronimo and Bal-Imperia convince Lorenzo and Balthazar to participate.

"And never hath it left my bloody heart,

Soliciting remembrance of my vow With these,

Oh, these accursed murderers:

Which, now performed, my heart is satisfied.” (Kyd IV.4.125-28)

During this play, “Bal-Imperia kills Balthazar and herself, and Hieronimo kills Lorenzo and commits suicide after killing the Duke of Castile”.³

The character of Hieronimo, in an actual sense, unified the vivid themes within the play. It is the character of Hieronimo that differentiates Kyd’s *The Spanish Tragedy* from the other contemporary tragedies. Through this character, Kyd designs the first English Revenge tragedy where “revenge” plays a poignant role.

In *The Spanish Tragedy*, the spectators witness multiple homicides, which suggests how revenge not only harms the one who is avenged but also harms the avengers. By killing her lover’s killer and by killing his son’s slaughterer both Bal-Imperia and Hieronimo remove the spike of revenge that has been scratching their hearts for so long. Both the characters, Bal-imperia and Hieronimo are clouded by their love for Andrea and Horatio, and that love instigates the flicker of revenge which soon becomes a vortex of catastrophe, leaving the smoke of deaths.

IV. The Crux of Justice and The Socio-political Flux in Kyd’s *The Spanish Tragedy*

People have been fighting for justice since the beginning of human civilization. Thomas Kyd, in *The Spanish Tragedy*, provides a critique of the Elizabethan justice system. His play highlights that the Elizabethan period “is a world littered with injustice and the questioning of cosmos to bring equity on the earth”⁴. The Spanish Knight Marshall Hieronimo has to fight for his justice. Although he provides justice to the common people, when it comes to his part of justice, he gets only the label of insanity. What could be more painful than a judge having to suffer for the sake of justice? It is the political configuration of that said era that deprived Hieronimo of justice as he had to fight against a member of the royal family, Lorenzon, son of the Duke of Castile.

Soon after the death of his son, Hieronimo is thirsty for revenge. But his wife Isabela warns him not to take shelter in the lap of revenge. Hieronimo, too believes in the justice system but gradually his belief in the traditional justice system has faded.

“Thus must we toil in other men's extremes,

That know not how to remedy our own;

And do them justice, when unjustly we,

For all our wrongs, can compass no redress.

But shall I never live to see the day,

³ Ibid

⁴ Alou, Yacoubou. “The Relationship between Kyd’s *The Spanish Tragedy* and Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* and *Titus Andronicus*.” *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science Invention*, Vol. 6, Issue 5, May 2017, p.56.

That I may come (by justice of the heavens)

To know the cause that may my cares allay?

This toils my body, this consumeth age,

That only I to all men just must be,

And neither gods nor men be just to me.” (Kyd III.6.1-10)

The above lines portray Hieronimo's inability to achieve justice for his dead son. The grieving Hieronimo solves everyone's problems but, ironically, his rights for justice are violated.

When the old Bazulto comes to Hieronimo for his son's justice, "drowning in grief and beginning to mentally unravel, Hieronimo corrects Bazulto and tells him that it is *his* son, Horatio, who has been killed. Hieronimo mistakes Bazulto for Horatio, and when Hieronimo offers the old man a handkerchief to dry his eyes, Hieronimo hands him Horatio's bloody scarf. Like Hieronimo, Bazulto never gets justice for his son. "Go back my son, complain to Aeacus," Hieronimo says to Bazulto. "For here's no justice; gentle boy be gone." The character of Bazulto highlights Hieronimo's building insanity and bolsters Kyd's argument that justice for the lower classes is often unobtainable"⁵.

*“And art thou come, Horatio, from the depth,
 To ask for justice in this upper earth,
 To tell thy father thou art unrevenged,
 To wring more tears from Isabella's eyes,
 Whose lights are dimmed with over-long laments?
 Go back, my son, complain to Aeacus;
 For here's no justice; gentle boy, be gone,
 For justice is exiled from the earth:
 Hieronimo will bear thee company.”* (Kyd III.13.132-40)

Through the above lines, the spectators witness the struggle of the lower class for their legitimate justice. The social class system plays an important role in Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*. During Elizabethan society, the judiciary was the puppet of the upper class, which was always in favour of them.

The readers and the spectators should also consider the character of Isabela. She has deep faith in divine laws and she believes that the almighty and the passage of time would surely bring light to her son's murder and who deeply believes that justice would be served. But she has lost her sanity out of her love for Horatio and commits suicide.

The socio-political system of that era not only highlights the polluted judiciary but also highlights the gender conflict and the power relations where women are oppressed by the

⁵ Rosewall, Kim. *The Spanish Tragedy*. LitCharts. LitCharts LLC, 22 Nov 2019. Web. 21 Apr 2020.

male-oriented patriarchy. Although, “gender comes from the flesh. The unenlightened value the flesh, hence gender, over the soul. Such an unenlightened being values the male flesh over the female flesh, the young flesh over the old flesh, flesh encased in fair skin rather than dark skin, the property owned by that flesh, the family to which that flesh belongs, the stature of that flesh in society”.⁶

Kyd’s *Bal-Imperia* is the victim of patriarchal notions. She has lost both her lovers Andrea and Horatio, only for her brother Lorenzo. Lorenzo wants his sister to marry an upper-class prince or king but the independent *Bal-Imperia* enjoys the company of her low-born lovers.

Without *Bal-Imperia*’s consent, her father, Castile and her brother Lorenzo arranged her marriage with Balthazar, the son of the Viceroy of Portugal. Both Castile and Lorenzo, arranged the marriage only to increase their social status, and the king of Spain supported the marriage only to ensure peace between the warring Spain and Portugal. The King, Lorenzo, and her father Castile, all regarded her as an object to satisfy their own personal or social needs. Here *Bal-Imperia* resembles the character of *Philomela* in Ovid *Metamorphosis*. Like *Philomela*, *Bal-Imperia* too had to sacrifice her freedom for the sake of her father’s and the king’s reputation.

Although *Bal-Imperia* is walking through a burning sheet of fire, the spectators or the readers can easily assume her courage. She is the person who informs Hieronimo about Horatio’s murderer, with a letter, which is written by her blood.

*“For want of ink, receive this bloody writ:
Me hath my hapless brother hid from thee;
Revenge thyself on Balthazar and him:
For these were they that murdered thy son.
Hieronimo, revenge Horatio's death,”*

(Kyd III.2.30)

Her determination for revenge is clear in her letter. She tries her best to persuade Horatio’s father to take revenge and succeed. Later she assists Hieronimo to complete his revenge. In the Play-within-the-play, *Bal-Imperia* kills Balthazar and stabs herself. She pours down her hatred for Balthazar through revenge. Balthazar’s murder not only avenged her incomplete love but also paved the way for her freedom, the eternal freedom of death. Kyd designs his *Bal-Imperia* as a caged bird, who eventually flies away from all social, and political bondage of her life. The crux of justice drowned the noble judge, poet and playwright Hieronimo to his doom; and the drenched socio-political flux provides enough fuel to the flicker of *Imperia*’s revenge which flips the aroma of love to the stench of death.

V. Conclusion

Thomas Kyd begins his play *The Spanish Tragedy* with a mix of flavoured love and revenge and holds its consistency. *The Spanish Tragedy* is one of the widely acknowledged revenge

⁶ Patnaik, Devdutt. *Sikhandi and other queer tales they don’t tell you*, Zubaan and Penguin Books India 2014, p. 11.

tragedies, where the playwright places love and revenge as the two different sides of the same coin. Extreme love shatters Hieronimo and Bel-Imperia's heart. Reminisces of their joyous days and the visages of their beloveds descend on their heart, sparking the fire of revenge.

Thomas Kyd, in *The Spanish Tragedy*, includes revenge as a character of the play. From the dialogues and conversation between Revenge and the ghost of Andrea, the playwright unveils the major themes, motifs and symbols of the play. In the penultimate part of the play when the vengeful characters successfully obtain their revenge, the ghost of Andrea finally gets satisfaction. But in the final dialogue, the anthropomorphic Revenge warns the spectators that revenge is not the responsibility of mortal man.

“Then haste we down to meet thy friends and foes:
To place thy friends in ease, the rest in woes;
For here though death hath end their misery,
I'll there begin their endless Tragedy.” (Kyd IV.5.45-48)

Kyd argues that insufficient justice and insurmountable love lead the characters of Hieronimo and Isabela from sanity to insanity. Isabela kills herself and Hieronimo too, after killing his moral values and ideals, kills himself. The social position of Hieronimo and his failure to obtain justice provides an irony to that society and Bel-Imperia's love, and her terrible vow for revenge all suggest how love and justice metamorphose into insanity and revenge. “Love and hate are universal to all humankind. Love often turns into hate and the extreme hate leads to violence as a form of revenge. Revenge always causes a tragedy”⁷.

The ghost of Andrea, the personification of Revenge, noble Hieronimo, Bel-Imperia, Balthazar, Lorenzo, Horatio and all the other major and minor characters were clouded by kindling love and toxic revenge. Here in Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*, all the themes are entwined together with the threads of love, justice, and revenge. Kyd, with those threads of love, justice, and revenge creates an irresistible web, in which all the characters eventually get caught.

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⁷ Yutaka, TOHGO. “Imaginative Insight : A Reading of the Spanish Tragedy.” *CORE*, <https://www.core.ac.uk/works/68479882>. Accessed 24 Sept. 2023.

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