

2009

The Spanish Tragedy and the Supernatural: Exploring the Coexistence of Patriotic and Subversive Interpretations in *The Spanish Tragedy*

Michelle Mercure

Follow this and additional works at: https://vc.bridgew.edu/undergrad_rev



Part of the [Dramatic Literature, Criticism and Theory Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Mercure, Michelle (2009). *The Spanish Tragedy* and the Supernatural: Exploring the Coexistence of Patriotic and Subversive Interpretations in *The Spanish Tragedy*. *Undergraduate Review*, 5, 140-143. Available at: https://vc.bridgew.edu/undergrad_rev/vol5/iss1/28

This item is available as part of Virtual Commons, the open-access institutional repository of Bridgewater State University, Bridgewater, Massachusetts.
Copyright © 2009 Michelle Mercure

The Spanish Tragedy and the Supernatural: Exploring the Coexistence of Patriotic and Subversive Interpretations in *The Spanish Tragedy*

MICHELLE MERCURE

Michelle Mercure is currently a senior majoring in English. She presented this paper at the 7th Annual Undergraduate Shakespeare Conference of New England at Worcester State College this past spring, the theme of which was "The Natural, The Unnatural, The Supernatural." She received an ATP travel grant to help her to attend the conference. Her mentor, Dr. Michael McClintock, is also credited for making Michelle aware that such opportunities exist in the first place. After graduation Michelle hopes to continue on to graduate school and pursue a career in academia.

The title of Thomas Kyd's play, *The Spanish Tragedy*, is as ambiguous as the play's content. According to critic Ian McAdam, the play's ambiguity allows for two conflicting interpretations. He writes that the play is . . . in its very complexity, marked by gaps and discontinuities which, while not rendering it artistically incoherent, have led to striking discrepancies in critical readings; while some see Kyd patriotically asserting England's political ascendancy over Spain's 'evil empire,' others see the playwright taking a dangerously subversive stance toward (English) society itself. (33)

Both of these interpretations render different but equally limited conclusions about both the play's title and its content by marking it as either exclusively a Spanish tragedy or an English tragedy. By focusing on Kyd's character of Revenge and the underworld as figures of the supernatural that are deliberately situated between these two interpretations, I will make the claim that the play is both a Spanish tragedy and an English tragedy. What Kyd does by using the supernatural as a device in a play that is simultaneously patriotic and subversive is make the audience's "naturally" held assumptions about Spain and about English society seem potentially unnatural.

The first questions to consider are Kyd's purpose in using Revenge as a supernatural character in the play, who Revenge is, where he comes from, and what he represents in the play. In order to answer these questions, one must begin by focusing on Revenge's first appearance in the play. Revenge operates as a part of a framing device along with the ghost of Andrea; they both appear together at the very start of the play. The Ghost of Andrea, a Spanish warrior who has been killed in a battle between the warring nations of Spain and Portugal, is the first character to speak in the play:

For in the late conflict with Portingale
My valour drew me into danger's mouth,
Till life to death made passage through my wounds.
When I was slain, my soul descended straight
To pass the flowing stream of Acheron:
But churlish Charon, only boatman there,
Said that my rites of burial not perform'd,
I might not sit amongst his passengers. (1.1.15-22)

Charon, in Greek mythology, is the ferryman of the dead. The souls of the deceased are brought to him by Hermes, and Charon ferries them across the river Acheron; he only accepts the dead which are buried or burned with the proper rites (Charon). Andrea, his "rites of burial not perform'd," is not permitted to ride with Charon and is sent, instead, to a series of judges. There is indecision over what is to be done with him in the underworld and so he ends up in Pluto's court, the court of the underworld, where Andrea's fate is given by Proserpine. The text states,

Whereat fair Proserpine began to smile,
And begg'd that only she might give my doom.
Pluto was pleas'd and seal'd it with a kiss.
Forthwith, Revenge, she rounded thee in th'ear,
And bade thee lead me through the gates of horn,
Where dreams have passage in the silent night.
No sooner had she spoke but we were here,
I wot not how, in twinkling of an eye. (1.1.78-85)

Revenge replies,

Then know, Andrea, that thou art arriv'd
Where thou shalt see the author of thy death,
Don Balthazar the prince of Portingale,
Depriv'd of life by Bel-imperia:
Here sit we down to see the mystery,
And serve for chorus in this tragedy. (1.1.86-90)

And he does just that: he sits down with Andrea and watches the mystery unfold along with the audience. Both Revenge and Andrea interrupt the play at the end of each act. These easily overlooked interruptions (which will be discussed in further detail shortly) would have had a profound effect on the audience viewing the play.

Before investigating these interruptions, however, we should consider the significance of Revenge indicating that he and Andrea will act as a chorus for the play that the audience is about to view. The term "chorus," deriving from the Greek word *choros*, played an important role in classical Greek drama (Chorus). One of the main functions of the chorus in Greek drama was to mediate between the fictional world of the drama and the real world of the spectators (Chorus). Revenge taking on this choric role at the very beginning of the play makes the audience fully aware of that separation between the audience (the audience including the characters of the framing device, Revenge and Andrea, as well as themselves) and the actors (the characters in the interior play, the mystery Revenge is about to show).

Another aspect of Revenge's declaration that might be examined is his use of the term "mystery." Revenge says, "Here sit we down to see the mystery," but he has already informed Andrea that Andrea's murderer was Balthazar. So what exactly is the mystery? In his essay "The Influence of Spencer's *Faerie Queene* on Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy*" Frank Ardolino explains that the term "mystery" indicates that *The Spanish Tragedy* is a literary work marked with hidden meanings meant for its theatre audience to discover. He elaborates,

Kyd uses the basic distinction between ignorant and learned audiences as an ongoing pattern of dramatic irony by which he demonstrates to the theatre audience that it enjoys a detached perspective which enables it to understand the mystery. As Barry Adams has shown, Kyd presents various onstage audiences which are unaware of the meanings of the playlets they watch, but we in the theatre audience are shown how our awareness goes beyond theirs. For us, attending and interpreting the play is a process of initiation into its hidden meanings. (1)

For Ardolino, the "mystery" that Revenge alludes to might be addressing the theatre audience who, unlike himself, being removed from the play, have the capability to understand the hidden meanings (mysteries) within it.

The main hidden meaning (mystery) concerning the play is connected with its meaning as both a Spanish and an English tragedy; it is mysterious in the sense that it cannot be reduced to a single meaning. Returning to a consideration of Revenge and Andrea's end of act interruptions will further prove this claim. The framing device of Revenge and Andrea not only establishes a separation between audience and actor at the very beginning of the play; by stating that they will "serve for chorus in this tragedy," they also continue to remind the audience of this separation by interrupting the play at the end of each act. After Revenge's line "Here sit we down to see the mystery," the interior play, the one that the audience is being shown by Revenge, who along with Andrea, sits down and watches it with us, begins. Act I begins with the defeat of Portugal by Spain. What is found out in Act I is that Balthazar, who murdered Andrea in battle, has been captured by Horatio and Lorenzo and taken to the King of Spain, who proceeds to reward them. Hieronimo, Horatio's father and the Knight Marshal of Spain, does not believe Lorenzo, the king's nephew, deserves reward for Balthazar's capture; he believes his son should receive all of the reward. He states,

But that I know your grace for just and wise,
And might seem partial in this difference,
Enforc'd by nature and by law of arms

My tongue should plead for young Horatio's right.
He hunted well that was a lion's death,
Not he that in a garment wore his skin:
So hares may pull dead lions by the beard. (1.2.166-72)

The King replies, "Content thee Marshal, thou shalt have no wrong, / And for thy sake thy son shall want no right. / Will both abide the censure of my doom?" (1.2.173-75). This is the beginning of Hieronimo's search for justice for his son, a search that continues to drive the plot of the interior play after Lorenzo and Balthazar murder Horatio in Act II.

Act I ends in a celebratory feast over the defeat of Portugal and the hopes that there will be peace between the two nations. Balthazar is a guest at this feast, which upsets Andrea. Andrea interrupts,

Come we for this from depth of underground,
To see him feast that gave me my death's wound?
These pleasant sights are sorrow to my soul,
Nothing but league, and love, and banqueting! (1.5.1-4)

Revenge replies,

Be still Andrea, ere we go from hence,
I'll turn their friendship into fell despite,
Their love to mortal hate, their day to night,
Their hope into despair, their peace to war,
Their joys to pain, their bliss to misery. (1.5.5-9)

Interruptions by Revenge and Andrea such as this force the audience to break away from the natural illusion of the interior play each time the choric characters interrupt it. And when that illusion is broken, the audience, instead of focusing on the plot of the interior play surrounding Hieronimo and his search for justice, then begins to focus on the exterior plot with Revenge showing Andrea the "mystery" of his death. So the audience viewing the play would on the one hand identify themselves as the audience viewing the interior play with the Hieronimo plot, whereas on the other hand, when Revenge and Andrea interrupt that play, they would be forced to identify themselves as a part of the same audience as Revenge and Andrea, for they are allowed to have the same knowledge as Revenge and Andrea. But the audience would also recognize that Revenge and Andrea are a part of the play as well, which would have them identifying themselves also as an audience who is completely separate from the frame of the play. What these interruptions do then is confuse the audience's sense of reality and leave them in a state of indeterminacy.

But the interruptions also do something else: they show the audience that Revenge exerts some control over what is happening in the interior play with the Hieronimo plot. Revenge is shown reassuring Andrea by claiming that he will do such things as "turn their friendship into fell despite," and "Their love to mortal hate, their day to night." If Revenge is controlling the plot of the interior play where Hieronimo is searching for justice for his son's murder, would this not distort the audience's view of where that justice is coming from? If Revenge is in control of what is going on in the play then is he the one who is in control of divvying out the justice that Hieronimo is searching for? Another good example of this problematic justice occurs in the interruption at the end of Act III. Andrea pleads,

Awake, Revenge, if love, as love hath had,
Have yet the power or prevalence in hell!
Hieronimo with Lorenzo is join'd in league
And intercepts our passage to revenge:
Awake, Revenge, or we are woe-begone!

Revenge replies,

Thus worldlings ground, what they have dream'd, upon.
Content thyself, Andrea; though I sleep,
Yet is my mood soliciting their souls:
Sufficeth thee that poor Hieronimo
Cannot forget his son Horatio.
Nor dies Revenge although he sleep awhile,
For in unquiet, quietness is feign'd,
And slumb'ring is a common worldly wile.
Behold, Andrea, for an instance how
Revenge hath slept, and then imagine thou
What 'tis to be subject to destiny. (3.15.13-28)

Here we have a sleeping Revenge being awakened by Andrea who wants him to help Hieronimo achieve revenge within the interior play. Up until this point Hieronimo has attempted to achieve justice on earth through the courts and in heaven, but to no avail, as he himself states with this speech:

Yet still tormented is my tortur'd soul
With broken sighs and restless passions,
That winged mount, and, hovering in the air,
Beat at the windows of the brightest heavens,
Soliciting for justice and revenge:
But they are plac'd in those empyreal heights
Where, countermur'd with walls of diamond,
I find the place impregnable, and they
Resist my woes, and give my words no way (3.7.10-18).

At this point in the play he is turning to revenge as a way of achieving justice for his son's death. But he feels that justice and revenge are silent and unresponsive. By having Revenge and Andrea interrupt at the end of the act, the audience is again left in the position of seeing justice and revenge as both absent and present. Revenge has the supernatural power here to control the outcome of Hieronimo's fate. The commentary between Revenge and Andrea provides an understanding that Revenge is not only showing the "mystery" to Andrea, but that he has a hand in it as well. Revenge says, "Thus worldlings ground, what they have dream'd, upon. / Content thyself, Andrea; though I sleep, / Yet is my mood soliciting their souls." It is as if even though he is sleeping his mood is somehow affecting the characters in the play. If he has even that amount of control over the characters in the play what does that say about his character? How much control does he have over Hieronimo's attempt to achieve justice? And what does it mean if Revenge is the one controlling justice in the play? Is there no justice in the world of the play, only revenge? And if the audience's sense of reality has already been confused would they not identify with this sense that there is no justice to be found?

Would the English audience apply this fundamental sense of injustice to themselves, or would they conclude that this is merely a reflection on Spain, taking a patriotic view of the play and viewing England as superior to Spain? In terms of the setting of the play, it could be perceived in these patriotic terms. But if one looks at the "hidden meanings" of the play as suggested by Revenge's use of the term "mystery," then it could also be viewed as Ian McAdam suggests, as taking a "subversive stance toward (English) society itself" (33) through its focus on contemporary social tensions.

In fact, if one looks at the very end of the play, after Hieronimo's revenge, it is not Hieronimo who gets the last word in the play (he actually bites his own tongue out, refusing to speak

after the King tries to force him to tell why he did all of this). Instead, it is a conversation between Revenge and Andrea that ends the play, in which Andrea asks Revenge if he (Andrea) can assign all the play characters to various eternal rewards and punishments. While Andrea allots their fates, it is Revenge who is in control here. He has all of the power, and the audience being thus removed from the interior play would be aware of this. Although it is still a part of the play, the confused sense of reality felt by the audience would have them identifying with the idea that in this play there is no justice, only revenge, and this would in turn have them questioning the world that they live in, making it both an English and a Spanish tragedy. Ending the play in the realm of the supernatural underscores the play's "mystery" as a work that is simultaneously patriotic and subversive and which consequently makes the (English) audience's "naturally" held assumptions about Spain and about their own society seem potentially unnatural.

Works Cited

- Ardolino, Frank. "The Influence of Spencer's *Faerie Queene* on Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy*." *Early Modern Literary Studies* 7.3 (2002): 4.1-70. 10 March 2008 <<http://purl.oclc.org/emls/07-3/ardofaer.htm>>.
- "Charon." *Encyclopedia Mythica*. 2009. Encyclopedia Mythica Online. 23 Feb. 2008 <<http://www.pantheon.org/articles/c/charon.html>>.
- "Chorus." *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary*. 2008. Merriam-Webster Online. 14 Feb. 2008 <<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/chorus>>.
- Kyd, Thomas. *The Spanish Tragedy. Renaissance Drama: An Anthology of Plays and Entertainments*. Ed. Arthur F. Kinney. 2nd ed. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005. 143-192.
- McAdam, Ian. "The *Spanish Tragedy* and the Politico-Religious Unconscious." *Texas Studies in Language and Literature* 42.1 (2000): 33-60. *Academic Search Premier*. EBSCO. Maxwell Library, Bridgewater, MA. 26 Feb. 2008 <<http://search.ebscohost.com>>.