



The Spanish Tragedy

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Bel-Imperia, niece of Spain's king, is loved both by Horatio, a war hero, and by the captured Portuguese prince, Balthazar. Her brother Lorenzo aids Balthazar and together they murder Horatio. The murdered man's father Hieronymo seeks revenge; he must first identify the murderers, then use guile to trap them. Distracted by grief, Hieronymo pretends madness to hide his bloody intent.

Finally Hieronymo arranges a play to entertain the visiting Portuguese king; it is a short tragedy in which the actors are his enemies and the murders are not pretended but are real. As their fathers watch and applaud, Lorenzo and Balthazar are killed and Bel-Imperia kills herself; Hieronymo then gloats over his revenge before biting out his tongue and stabbing himself.

Kyd's highly popular play established on the Elizabethan stage the revenge tragedy, a genre which included William Shakespeare's *HAMLET*. Kyd introduced many of the stock features of the type: classical quotations and allusions, allegorical characters and ghosts, rhetorical verse style, play-within-the-play, dumb show, real and feigned madness, and a bloody ending.

Bibliography:

Ardolino, Frank R. *Thomas Kyd's Mystery Play: Myth and Ritual in "The Spanish Tragedy."* New York: Peter Lang, 1985. Argues that the play is a combination of murder mystery, allegory, and religious ritual. Heironimo chooses pagan vengeance over Christian forgiveness because the latter does not seem to offer justice.

Barber, C. L. *Creating Elizabethan Tragedy: The Theater of Marlowe and Kyd.* Edited with an introduction by Richard P. Wheeler. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988. Argues that Lorenzo's murder of Horatio violates the social order and disrupts Heironimo's belief in an ordered universe. Heironimo's violence is at first improperly directed but finds a proper focus at the end of the play.

Bowers, Fredson T. *Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy, 1587-1642.* Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1940. Still useful, tracing the origins of revenge tragedy to Senecan drama. Shows how *The Spanish Tragedy* follows Senecan patterns closely.

Edwards, Philip. *Thomas Kyd and Early Elizabethan Tragedy.* New York: Longmans, Green, 1966. Analyzes Elizabethan tragedy from the 1560's to the 1580's. Gives a brief biography of Kyd.

Murray, Peter B. *Thomas Kyd.* New York: Twayne, 1969. Puts *The Spanish Tragedy* in its cultural context. Explores the play's influence on later authors. He examines the play sequentially, explaining how its central theme is the corruption of love.

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