

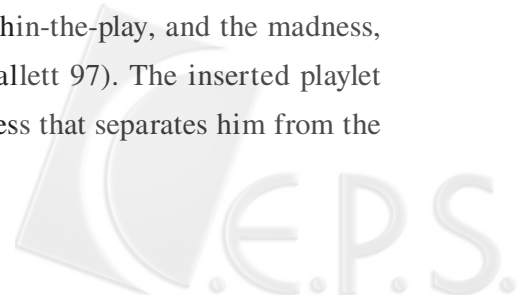
# Theatricality of Revenge: *The Spanish Tragedy* and Inset Performances

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## Introduction

Thomas Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy* (c.1587) started a vogue for revenge tragedies and remained popular on the stage for more than three decades. As the play was imitated or parodied by later playwrights, many of its dramaturgical features became the characteristics of the genre: for instance, a ghost that exacts revenge, a gloomy revenger that broods over his grievances, gratuitous violence, and elaborate spectacles. What must have enormously impressed the contemporaries is the way in which the tragedy concludes with an inset court masque, in the performance of which bloody revenge is accomplished on a grand scale. The effect of this device must have been powerful enough to be deemed by other dramatists as worth imitating. Moreover, although the actual number of fatal masques in Renaissance tragedy is not high, critical tradition has tended to regard the device as a distinct convention of revenge tragedy (Sutherland 7). To kill off the main characters in a bloodbath that is disguised as a court performance seems a contrived and overtly theatrical way of concluding a revenge tragedy. Why did Kyd and his followers of the genre adopt this dramaturgical sleight of hand? The imaginative Renaissance mind knew all sorts of means of causing violent deaths, from the devious (e.g. poison smeared on a skull that the victim would kiss, or mixed in incense that he/she would inhale) to the direct (stabbing, hanging, or shooting). Many opportunities existed — battles, duels, for instance — for carrying out revenge. In addition, revenge has been a theme of drama that goes back to ancient Greek theatre, but only in Renaissance theatre do we witness the flourish of revenge disguised as theatrical entertainment. Therefore, the fatal masque was not an inevitable end to the plot but a choice made by the playwright to produce certain effects.

In *The Revenger's Madness* the authors argue: "An integral relationship exists between the motifs of the multiple deaths, the play-within-the-play, and the madness, both experientially and aesthetically" (Hallett and Hallett 97). The inserted playlet represents an enclosed world, like the revenger's madness that separates him from the

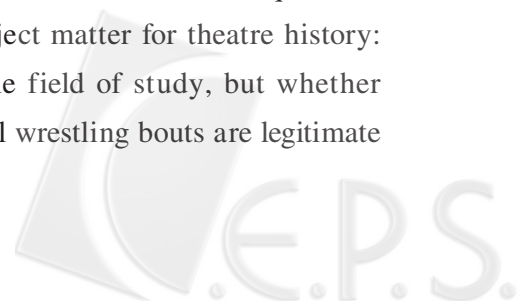


outside world. The fictiveness of the playlet creates an aesthetic distance between the audience and the revenge carried out within the show: the cruelty of the revenger in killing several people including the innocent thus seems less reprehensible but clearly exceeding what is deemed normal. Another perspective sees the realization of revenge in an inserted performance as an admission of the impossibility of the revenger's ever obtaining justice: successful revenge is achievable "only within a frame of fantasy" (Watson 323).

Critiques such as the above-mentioned regard theatre as a metaphor for what is unreal and interpret the revenger's final *coup de théâtre* accordingly. However, revenge tragedies often contain more than one inserted show as well as paratheatrical scenes; not all of these events are necessarily meant to suggest unreality, fantasy, or illusion. *The Spanish Tragedy*, for one, contains two masques, a dumb show, a victory parade, a public execution by hanging and the preparation for another execution by burning: all these scenes are miniature performances in themselves. We may wonder: Is it not extravagant to pack several shows into a single play? To find out why Renaissance playwrights and audiences had such an appetite for an abundance of show-like events in drama, we need to look at the concept of theatricality in early modern England, taking into account not only the native dramatic tradition but also the paratheatrical performances of festivities and ceremonies familiar to the general public. It is by seeing theatre as part of the cultural performances providing instruction and entertainment that we can appreciate the effectiveness of the fatal masque as a conclusion to a revenge tragedy.

## Theatricality

In her introduction to a special issue of *Theatre Research International* on theatricality, Erika Fischer-Lichte remarks that "the term 'theatre' is culturally and historically determined" and that "within Western culture from the sixteenth century, the concept of theatre has constantly changed" (86). Hence it is difficult to define what theatre is and list its distinctive features. In the same issue Marvin Carlson questions by what criteria scholars decide what is a proper subject matter for theatre history: nineteenth-century melodrama is now an acceptable field of study, but whether activities such as circus, medicine shows or professional wrestling bouts are legitimate



subjects is less certain (91). The development of performance studies since the 1960s has further broadened the area of enquiry, and theatre may be regarded as a type of performance among many others. The term “theatre” is also continuously being applied to a wide range of activities studied by anthropology, sociology, psychology, philosophy, and so forth. Only a very broad definition of the term can accommodate its numerous applications. In this regard Peter Brook’s succinct opening statement in *The Empty Space* seems particularly apt: “I can take any empty space and call it a bare stage. A man walks across this empty space whilst someone else is watching him, and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged” (11). At this very basic level, theatricality is “a mode of perception” and “a mode of behaviour and expression” (Fischer-Lichte 87).

In Elizabethan England dramatic productions staged in London’s public and private theatres were part of the cultural performances exhibited to the public eye. Professional theatres flourished alongside performances mounted in churches, at court, in universities, in the halls of aristocratic households, in the streets and market squares<sup>1</sup>. Royal entries to the capital or provincial cities impressed the common people with pomp and circumstance. London’s annual Lord Mayor’s Show was an occasion to display the growing power and importance of the merchant class. Those who loved blood sports could attend bear- or bull-baiting; for more sensationalism, there were public executions of criminals and burning of heretics. In the end the golden age of English theatre closed with by far the most theatrical event in seventeenth-century England: the public execution of Charles I in 1649.

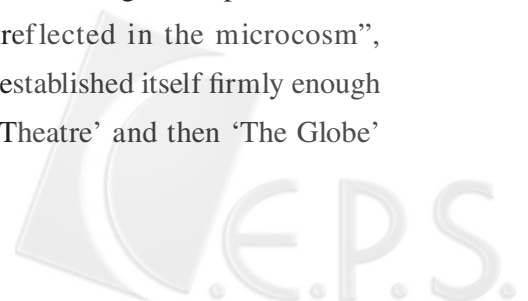
Scholars commenting on the gruesome scenes of violence and terror in many of Renaissance tragedies often remark that the Elizabethans were much less squeamish than modern audiences about representations of blood-letting, mutilation, and violent death because they were no strangers to the sights of these things. A visit to a public execution could satisfy one’s voyeuristic appetite. In her article “The Theatre and the Scaffold” Molly Easo Smith describes how hangings were experienced as theatrical events by the Elizabethan public: one could hire a seat or a room near the scene for a good view and better comfort; and there were peddlers selling refreshments and pamphlets. “In short, hangings functioned as spectacles not unlike tragedies staged in the public theatres” (72). Smith notes that the construction of the first permanent scaffold in London happened in the same decade as that of the first permanent public

theatre in the city. Both stage performances and public executions could be regarded as providing cheap entertainment or edifying lessons, depending on how one looked at them. Theatricality of public executions and hangings came from the audience's expectation of a spectacular display of authorized violence. This expectation in turn transformed the prisoners into larger-than-life "characters" in a show. In other words, some fictiveness entered the event even if the result was real death.

The state had an interest in keeping the borders between theatre and the scaffold well-defined because blurred boundaries would mean that either the public at the scene of a hanging did not take seriously the state's authority in punishing crime or that the audience in the theatre approved of the perhaps unorthodox manner in which the issue of justice was addressed in the drama. Either way, the prerogative of the state would seem to be somewhat chipped away. In "Kyd's Representation of Violence" James Shapiro cites contemporary accounts of a few instances of theatres being used for public executions and of pickpockets caught stealing in the theatre being dragged onto the stage and tied to the stage post for public display (104, 106). Shapiro then puts forward a hypothetical scenario: suppose during a performance of *The Spanish Tragedy* a pickpocket was caught and brought onstage at the moment when the villainous servant Pedringano was bound to the scaffold. Would the actor playing Pedringano have been replaced by the pickpocket? If so, what difference would there be between the hanging of a dramatic character and that of a real pickpocket? "For that matter, when actors punish cutpurses onstage, is it still theater? Theater within theater? A state within theater?" (106-07). Had such an incident occurred in the theatre, it would have been a case of life imitating art: it would have paralleled the way Hieronimo punishes his enemies in a theatrical context.

## **Theatrum Mundi**

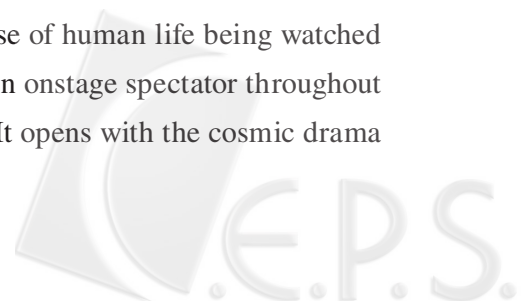
*Theatrum mundi*, the idea that "God and Lucifer viewed mankind's brief struggle in the theatre of mortal existence as audiences watched actors strut and gesticulate upon the stage", had been a familiar concept since the Middle Ages and passed down to the Renaissance. The notion "of the macrocosm reflected in the microcosm", Glynne Wickham points out in *The Medieval Theatre*, "established itself firmly enough in the play called Corpus Christi to suggest first 'The Theatre' and then 'The Globe'



to the Burbage Company as names for their playhouses in Elizabethan London” (65). Just as medieval audiences found it natural for Paradise, Jerusalem and Hell to be simultaneously present on the stage, so the Elizabethan spectators had no objection to two large armies fighting on a battlefield the size of the bare stage of the Globe. Theologians saw in the ephemeral nature of theatre an apt metaphor for the transitory human existence. Compared with the eternal reality of God, human life is so brief as to be as insubstantial and illusory as a dream. This view of the human world as an illusion, however, was not as pessimistic as it may sound, for it was backed up by the firm belief in the true reality of heaven. It is small wonder that Renaissance dramatists could be playful with the notion of *theatrum mundi* and devised various ways to remind audiences of the artificiality of theatrical presentation.

Early modern English plays are full of metatheatrical speeches, episodes and actions that directly or indirectly call attention to the operation of theatre. The devices range from the framing of the main plot by a prologue or induction that introduces the plot as a performance, or the insertion of a self-contained playlet within a play, to instances of characters putting on a disguise to assume a different identity. The frame may be closed or open-ended: closed if, like *Doctor Faustus*, the main plot is preceded by a prologue and concluded by an epilogue, and open-ended if, like *The Taming of the Shrew*, the play ends at the end of the main plot without providing a conclusion to what is begun in the induction. Inserted playlets vary in degree of completeness: “Pyramus and Thisbe” is given in full in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, whereas in *Hamlet* “The Murder of Gonzago” is abruptly stopped halfway. A play-within-a-play may be performed by the characters from the main plot or by an entirely different set of people. Significantly greater in number than framed plays and inserted playlets are plots in which characters wear a disguise, whether it is a heroine disguising herself as a male in order to pursue her lover, or a charlatan out to cheat the gullible, or a revenger clothing himself in madness to fool his enemy. Many such characters comment on their own disguise as one would talk about an actor’s performance on stage. It is not unusual for a play to contain several metatheatrical devices, which suggests the self-consciousness of the playwrights and professional players of their art.

Into the framing device directly translates the sense of human life being watched from above, especially if the presenter figure remains an onstage spectator throughout the play. *The Spanish Tragedy* is just such an example. It opens with the cosmic drama



of Revenge and the Ghost of Don Andrea coming to the Spanish court from Hades (presumably entering the stage from the trapdoor) and sitting on the stage (either on the side or above the stage in the gallery) to watch the unfolding of “the lamentable end of Don Horatio and Bel-imperia: with the pitiful death of old Hieronimo”. The main plot is distinctly referred to as a play, as Revenge bids the Ghost to attend the show:

Here sit we down to see the mystery,  
And serve for Chorus in this tragedy. (1.1.90-91)<sup>2</sup>

The real audience in the auditorium, in a sense, is also openly invited by Revenge to see what follows as a play. The presenter-like role of Revenge comes from the Vice-figure in the morality play, who is “half in and half outside the dramatic action,” addressing the audience directly and hence obscuring the border between the stage and the auditorium (Braunmuller 83). It is important to bear in mind that Revenge and the Ghost sit on the stage throughout the play. Despite being introduced as a fictional story, the tragedy at the Spanish court does not lose its relevance in the eyes of the audience: after all, the spectators’ lives are not more real in the eyes of God. The frame also links historical time in the story of the Spanish court to universal time in the mythological experience of the Ghost. In his opening narrative the Ghost, formerly Don Andrea, describes how his soul journeys to Hades, meets its ruler and his queen, and obtains their permission to return, in the company of Revenge, to earth and see for himself the fallout of his untimely death. At the end of the tragedy the Ghost announces how he will place his friends in the comfort and joy of the underworld but sentence his enemies to eternal tortures. Revenge agrees to oversee the punishment:

For here though death hath end their misery,  
I’ll there begin their endless tragedy. (4.5.47-48)

Hence the end of an earthly existence marks the start of an eternal existence.

As the metatheatrical techniques flourished, we can see that human beings in Renaissance drama became actors, not only in the eyes of God but also in the eyes of their fellow humans and even themselves. A play-within-a-play often includes some moments of backstage activities. The scene of preparation for “The Murder of

Gonzago” gives Hamlet (as well as Shakespeare and Richard Burbage, chief actor of the Lord Chamberlain’s Men) an opportunity to comment on the acting styles popular on the late sixteenth-century English stage. Prior to this, the player’s recitation of a dramatic passage about Priam’s death prompts Hamlet to reflect on his own inability to demonstrate the emotional signs of a bereaved son, let alone to proceed with the revenge demanded by his father’s ghost. Hamlet recognizes his inadequacy as an actor who fails to play his part properly. Yet, while acknowledging the existence of signs denoting grief, Hamlet questions their connection to the real emotion. The signs can be produced by a person who does not feel the emotion: an actor can do it, and so can anyone after some practice. Consequently acting becomes associated with disguise; the definition of disguise is frequently couched in the language of acting — gestures, manners, speeches, costumes, etc. To follow her husband secretly to Venice, Portia gleefully plans to dress like a young man, wear a dagger, “speak between the change of man and boy with a reed voice”, and walk in “a manly stride” (*The Merchant of Venice* 3.4.66-68). When a gullible victim turns up at his door, Volpone immediately dons his role of an invalid, putting on a night cap, anointing his eyes with ointment, and calling on “my feigned cough, my phthisic and my gout, my apoplexy, palsy and catarrhs” (*Volpone* 1.2.126-27) to complete a perfect picture of a dying man. Moreover, even when not in disguise, some characters can see their own behaviour as if from a spectator’s point of view.

In the fourth addition of 1602 to *The Spanish Tragedy*, between 3.12 and 3.13, a painter visits Hieronimo to seek justice for his murdered son, at the mention of which the Knight Marshal thinks of his own grievance. He then asks the painter to draw a picture of his family as it was five years earlier, and the scene of his discovery of Horatio’s death:

Then, sir, after some violent noise, bring me forth in my shirt, and my gown under mine arm, with my torch in my hand, and my sword reared up thus; and with these words:

— *What noise is this? Who calls Hieronimo?*

May it be done? (139-44)

No doubt Hieronimo has replayed over and over in his mind the horrible moment of his





discovering Horatio's hanged and stabbed body. This speech also gives us the clue as to how the actor playing Hieronimo might have enacted the old man's agitation in the discovery scene (2.5).

The theatrical self-consciousness in *The Spanish Tragedy* culminates in the fatal masque devised by Hieronimo, bringing to the fore the overlapping of illusion and reality, role and identity, which is the hallmark of theatre. "Soliman and Perseda", a tragedy about love, betrayal, and war, is a fitting conclusion to Hieronimo's revenge. This inset playlet serves a triple function of "reveal — revel — revenge" (Schmeling 18), advancing the main plot to the denouement, providing entertainment for the onstage audience, and enabling Hieronimo to complete his revenge plan. Its storyline broadly mirrors the main plot of *The Spanish Tragedy*; the relationship between the characters parallels that in the main plot, with an ironic difference. Hieronimo plays a scheming bashaw, whereas Lorenzo undertakes the role of an honourable knight. The performance shows how thin the dividing line is between reality and the make-believe of the stage. Just when the unsuspecting King of Spain praises the aristocratic actors for their vivid portrayal of murder by stabbing, Hieronimo takes off his actor's disguise to tell the king how seriously he is mistaken:

Haply you think, but bootless are your thoughts,  
That this is fabulously counterfeit,  
And that we do as all tragedians do:  
To die today, for fashioning our scene,  
The death of Ajax, or some Roman peer,  
And in a minute starting up again  
Revive to please tomorrow's audience.  
No, princes, know I am Hieronimo,  
The hopeless father of a hapless son. (4.4.76-84)

Hieronimo distinguishes between theatre and reality and describes the former as "counterfeit". Normally, the fiction enacted onstage would not intrude upon real life; the audience of a play of foul murder need not fear the violence of the "murderer" or live with the consequences of the tragic events. If theatre were content to remain a sign rather than the real thing, both the actors and the spectators would be safe.

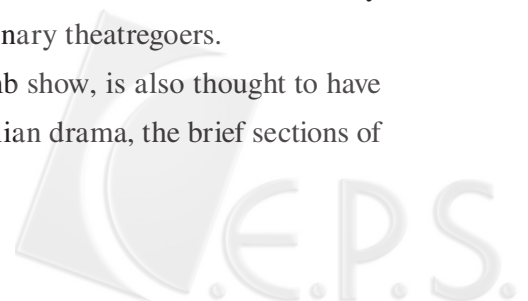


The striking effect of Hieronimo's revenge is premised upon the generally accepted convention that theatre pretends to be something that it is not. But when the convention is not observed, the audience would feel disoriented, just as the Spanish king does to his dismay and chagrin.

## Entertainment

Theatrical self-consciousness in Renaissance drama manifests itself not only in the enactment of the notion of *theatrum mundi* but also in the acknowledgment of its borrowing from various traditions of public entertainment. An important source of influence was court entertainment, particularly the masque. The first use of the word "mask" in the sense of an entertainment was in the chronicler Edward Hall's account of a Twelfth Night revel in 1512 when Henry VIII and eleven aristocrats entered the banqueting hall in disguise and danced with members of the court. Hall commented that this practice was an imitation of Italian fashion (Parry 196). The court masque began as a prelude to or a pretext for dancing (the "revels"); later, plots involving allegorical or mythological figures started to be added to the masquers-led entertainment. The court masque was an unusual form of entertainment because the masquers consisted of members of the nobility and the centrepiece of the show was the dance in which the masquers invited the spectators to join. It was an entertainment by the court and for the court. Tudor court masques were simple in form, compared with the Stuart versions which developed to an extraordinary degree of sophistication through the collaboration of the poet Ben Jonson and the designer Inigo Jones as well as the active support of the Stuart monarchs. Simple or elaborate, the court masque had a political significance that went beyond the occasion on which it was presented. If theatre holds up a mirror to nature, then in the mirror of the masque the court would like to see itself reflected in splendid images. The masque transferred well to the public theatre where common people could have a taste of the sight and sound usually enjoyed at court or in aristocratic households. Although in Kyd's time the masque was still a relatively straightforward affair, the splendor of the costumes and the formality of presentation must have had enough appeal to the ordinary theatregoers.

Another frequently used device in drama, the dumb show, is also thought to have a European origin, in the *intermedii* of Renaissance Italian drama, the brief sections of



allegorical characters' songs and dances inserted between acts of the drama. However, in his book-length study of the Elizabethan dumb shows Dieter Mehl questions the link of influence between Italian *intermedii* and English dumb shows on the grounds that the Italian insertions of songs and dances play no part in the drama that contain them except as diversions, whereas the English inserted mimes are always thematically connected to the surrounding drama (5). Instead, he believes that the dumb show has more similarities with the public ceremonies in sixteenth-century England such as royal entries, civic pageants, and Lord Mayor's shows (7). These events featured allegorical performances the meanings of which were to be interpreted by the spectators. The allegorical messages went hand in hand with the spectacles. Likewise, the dumb show was not created only to enliven scenes of long speeches but to illustrate or reinforce the moral lessons in the dramatic action.

In addition to the mythological frame and the fatal masque at the end, the self-referential aspect of *The Spanish Tragedy* is further enhanced by two pieces of inserted entertainment: a "pompous jest" presented by Hieronimo at a banquet in honour of the Portuguese ambassador in 1.4, and a dumb show foreshadowing the ultimate tragedy presented by Revenge to calm the impatience of the Ghost in 3.15.

Hieronimo's "pompous jest", a masque about the legendary English knights' victories over Spain and Portugal, contributes little to plot advancement. Kyd arranges this scene to establish Hieronimo's role as the provider of court entertainment, in addition to his normal duty as Knight Marshal, so that the presentation of "Soliman and Perseda" by Hieronimo for the royal wedding will seem a natural extension of his responsibility at court. The masque is an amusing diversion for both the characters-spectators — the Spanish king and the Portuguese ambassador — and the real audience in the English theatre, who could indulge in the jingoistic satisfaction of watching the English heroes triumph over the Iberian kings.

The dumb show comes at a time when Hieronimo pretends to be mad and seems reconciled to Lorenzo. The theatre audience knows that Hieronimo is only pretending, having heard his resolve of "dissembling quiet in unquietness" (3.8.30). But the Ghost has somehow missed the message in that important soliloquy and fails to understand Hieronimo's role-playing strategy. What's worse, he finds Revenge has fallen asleep! In the midst of grief, anguish, and gathering disturbance in the main plot, the Ghost's reaction provides some comic relief: an uncomprehending spectator impatiently

wakes up his companion and guide for clarification of the dramatic action. Revenge's reply echoes Hieronimo's resolve: the slumber is merely an appearance to hide the determination of revenge, "for in unquiet, quietness is feigned" (3.15.24).

The stage direction for the dumb show, "Enter a Dumb Show" (3.15.29 s.d.) does not specify how it is to be performed. However, we may assume that it is played as described by Revenge: two actors enter first, carrying torches and immediately followed by an actor dressed as Hymen, the god of marriage. Revenge points out that this latter is "clothed in sable, and a saffron robe" (3.15.33). The costume is significant: although saffron (orange-yellow) is an appropriate colour to wear in a wedding ceremony, sable (black) looks ominous. Moreover, Hymen proceeds to blow out the torches and pour blood over them. The meaning is clear: the forthcoming wedding of Bel-imperia and Balthazar is going to end in disaster. The Ghost is satisfied with Revenge's explication and agrees to sit quietly till the end of the tragedy.

The dumb show is thematically linked to the main plot but, like the masque of the English knights, does not further the plot. Nor is the dumb show indispensable. The tragedy is a foregone conclusion, as Revenge promises the Ghost at the beginning that Bel-imperia will avenge his death by killing Balthazar. Similarly at the ends of Acts 1 and 2 Revenge assures the Ghost of his desired outcome. Since Revenge acts as a presenter, his words can be trusted. The dumb show simply repeats what has been said and known. However, it is quite common for dumb shows inserted in plays to repeat in an allegorical form the surrounding dramatic actions. As Mehl observes in *Elizabethan Dumb Show*, "the drama as well as the prose literature of the Elizabethan period expresses a strong desire for explicitness and repetition. To be considered effective, everything had to be said more than once, if possible, in continually new and hitherto untried ways" (17). The dumb show not only provides some additional spectacle to the play but also reinforces the certainty of revenge. It is also a prelude to a more elaborate spectacle in the next act.

The masque of the English knights and Revenge's dumb show, deriving their forms from court entertainment and public ceremonies, connect *The Spanish Tragedy* to continental European as well as native English performance traditions. These inset performances make Kyd's drama a sort of repository of past theatrical practices. As Manfred Schmeling argues, the device of play within a play can be regarded as constituting a kind of literary history within the work itself. The self-reflexive work

includes, as it were, a critique or judgment on the literary past in general and on the conditions of production and reception of the genre in particular (8). The self-conscious theatricality of *The Spanish Tragedy* can be understood in this way. The inserted masque and dumb show point to a rich heritage from which the theatre professionals can draw materials for new works.

The three inset shows in *The Spanish Tragedy* display different degrees of integration with the main plot. The masque of the English knights is the least integrated, functioning as a court entertainment much in the same way as Tudor interludes did at the intervals of banquets. The performance does not involve any character of the main plot. The dumb show of the blood wedding is similar to those found in early Elizabethan dramas like *Goboduc* (1562) in which the dumb shows are placed in between acts and thematically linked to the main plot but do not involve the characters nor advance the plot. “Soliman and Perseda”, in contrast, is played by the characters in the main plot and propels the dramatic action to its tragic ending. Therefore, within *The Spanish Tragedy* we can see the evolution of the merging of a speech-dominated dramatic tradition and a performance tradition of visual displays in Renaissance drama toward the late sixteenth century. The success of *The Spanish Tragedy* on the Elizabethan stage showed that Kyd found a way to employ forms of court and civic entertainment for use in spoken drama: masques and dumb shows were no longer incidental additions that could be omitted without loss of dramatic force.

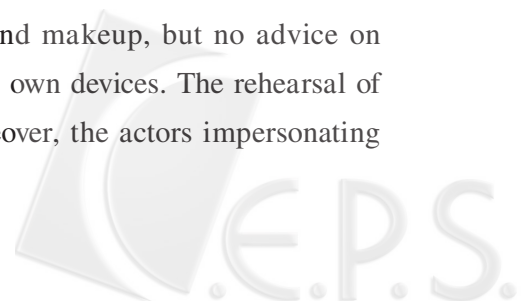
In addition to acknowledging its dramatic heritage, *The Spanish Tragedy* also indirectly reflects the conditions of its own production. In “Soliman and Perseda” Kyd performs a curious experiment by having Hieronimo ask each of his aristocratic cast to play in a foreign language so that “it may bring more variety” (4.1.174). Yet, the stage direction in the printed text tells the reader: “Gentleman, this play of Hieronimo in sundry languages was thought good to be set down in English more largely, for the easier understanding to every public reader” (4.4.11 s.d.). This explanation leaves us to speculate how the playlet might have been performed in Kyd’s time. If the actors actually played in English, the audience would have to participate in imagining that the language they heard was not English but Greek, Latin, French, or Italian, depending on which character was speaking. This kind of “pretending” could be accepted by the audience as just one more convention among many on which non-realistic staging must rely. On the other hand, it would not be inconceivable to play “Soliman and

Perseda” in various tongues. The plot outline has been described by Hieronimo in 4.1 as he distributes the script to his cast. During the actual performance the educated spectators could probably follow some of the speeches, especially Latin ones; the uneducated would have to rely on the outline heard earlier and the body language of the actors, as if they were watching a mime. The characters in “Soliman and Perseda” are types and do not require nuanced acting to demonstrate their psychological depth. After the first nine lines of Soliman’s speech, the King of Spain praises Balthazar’s acting: “How well he acts his amorous passion!” (4.4.22). This is the gist of Soliman’s opening speech. The rhetoric in those nine lines can be ignored; as long as one gets the idea that Soliman is passionately in love with Perseda, it is easy to follow the rest of the plot.

The actors might also rely heavily on a very broad, exaggerated acting style if they did speak different languages, for they might not understand each other’s speeches. In her study of rehearsal practices in England between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, Tiffany Stern finds that, due to the need to change programmes every few days, professional actors did not have much time for preparation. They mostly rehearsed individually in private and only gathered for a few group rehearsals just before the opening performance. Moreover, they did not have the whole script, only the “parts”, consisting of “the individual actor’s lines only, each speech preceded by a short ‘watchword’ or ‘cue’ of the last one to four words of the previous speaker’s lines” (10). In other words, when actors prepared for a new play, they had no idea what others would say until the first group rehearsal. Therefore, they needed to observe carefully the gestures and tones of those who were present in the same scene so as not to miss a cue. The preparation for “Soliman and Perseda” is done in a similar way. Hieronimo briefs his actors on the plot and the dramatis personae before giving them their “parts”:

And here, my lords, are several abstracts drawn,  
For each of you to note your parts  
And act it as occasion’s offered you. (4.1.141-43)

He also gives specific instructions about costume and makeup, but no advice on how to act. Presumably the acting is left to the actors’ own devices. The rehearsal of *The Spanish Tragedy* could proceed in this way. Moreover, the actors impersonating

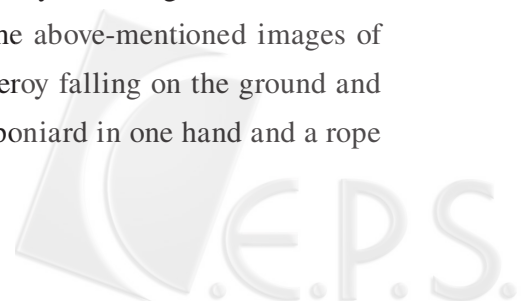


Hieronimo, Balthazar, Bel-imperia, and Lorenzo might even be encouraged to improvise their lines in “Soliman and Perseda” in foreign languages. In that case, the four of them could face a similar situation as the audience, relying on the plot outline and the non-verbal clues to know where they were in the dramatic action. The only difference is that the players had to act as if they knew what their fellow actors were saying. There was of course the risk that the theatre audience might not find their way around the stage Babel tower and so lost their interest in the performance. We can almost hear the actors voicing their skepticism when Balthazar says: “But this will be a mere confusion, / And hardly shall we all be understood” (4.1.180-81). Despite this worry, perhaps the experiment went on all the same and the actors would need to muster all their physical skills to be intelligible to their audience. In addition to the mime, it is also possible that Kyd “was trying to see whether he could employ a theatre language that would, to the unlettered at least, communicate by its mere sound” (Hattaway 110).

## Conclusion

The ostensible purpose of Hieronimo’s staging of “Soliman and Perseda” is to kill those who are responsible for the murder of his son. However, the true purpose, or the real show, is reserved after the masque ends: in a dramatic gesture, Hieronimo draws back the curtain to reveal Horatio’s dead body and, pointing to the corpse, harangues the astonished court audience: “See here my show, look on this spectacle” (4.4.89). The masque is only an overture; the “strange and wondrous show” (4.1.185), the pitiful sight of the murdered Horatio, is especially prepared for the King to show him the failure of royal justice. The corpse calls to mind the “murd’rous spectacle” (2.5.9) of Horatio hanged and stabbed in the arbor, one of the powerful images of violence in the play. This image of violence is again repeated in the scene at the Portuguese court where the maligned Alexandro is bound to the stake to be burned (3.1.49 s.d.), and in the scene of the prosecution and hanging of Pedringano (3.6).

In fact *The Spanish Tragedy* contains many visually arresting scenes that are meant to be seen as a show or a spectacle: besides the above-mentioned images of violence, emotional scenes such as the Portuguese Viceroy falling on the ground and taking off his crown (1.3), Hieronimo entering with a poniard in one hand and a rope

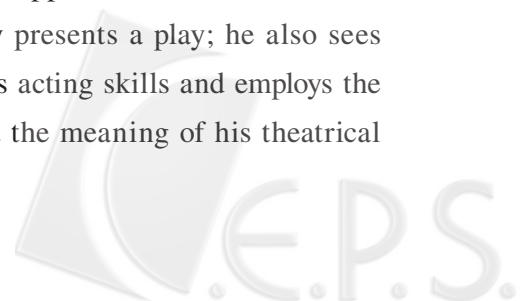


in the other (3.12), and Isabella cutting down the arbor and then stabbing herself (4.2) foreground highly theatrical postures and gestures. Their theatricality is by no means gratuitous. These images originated in the tableaux vivants seen in court and civic pageantry, in public executions, in emblem books that the Elizabethans knew well: “They are images or icons that combine the everyday and the fictional, the real and the artificial, and which, by this combination, achieve their particular dramatic, eidetic effects” (Hattaway 111). Renaissance theatricality is presented and perceived as being artificial, yet the artificiality is not deemed the opposite of reality but rather a part of reality.

The shows in *The Spanish Tragedy* — the masques, the dumb show, and the final “discovery” scene—have this in common: like the pictures in emblem books<sup>3</sup>, they are accompanied by verbal explications which reveal their moral lessons. The spectacles do not function alone; they work in tandem with expository speeches to fulfill the task of entertainment and instruction. Therefore, we can understand why Hieronimo’s revenge cannot be concluded simply in a bloodbath that merely kills the relevant persons: the revenge has to be packaged in a form that allows the presenter to convey and the spectators to absorb the message. Taking revenge is important, but revenge is incomplete if the motivations of the revenger remain unknown and the lessons not expounded. Once he has fully explained the cause of his grievance, Hieronimo is happy to die:

And princes, now behold Hieronimo,  
Author and actor in this tragedy,  
Bearing his latest fortune in his fist;  
And will as resolute conclude his part  
As any of the actors gone before.  
And gentles, thus I end my play.  
Urge no more words, I have no more to say. (4.4.146-52)

His concluding remarks are an example of the application of the notion of *theatrum mundi* in one’s action: Hieronimo not only presents a play; he also sees his action in terms of a play. In doing so, he exerts his acting skills and employs the necessary performance conventions with the aim that the meaning of his theatrical





endeavour must be properly understood by his audience. For the Elizabethan theatre professionals, this was how theatre addressed the beliefs and tensions in their culture.

## Notes

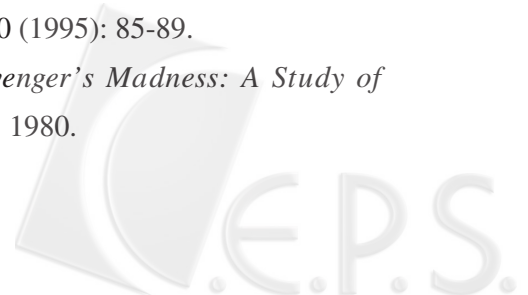
<sup>1</sup> See the essays collected in *A New History of Early English Drama* edited by John D. Cox and David Scott Kastan.

<sup>2</sup> All citations of *The Spanish Tragedy* are to the Revels Student Editions edited by David Bevington.

<sup>3</sup> The emblem books popular in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries are compilations of “emblems”, each of which consists of three parts: a short motto (*inscriptio*) introducing the emblem and printed above a picture, the picture (*pictura*) depicting objects, persons, or events, and an explanatory prose or verse quotation (*subscriptio*) beneath the picture (Daly 7).

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