CHAPTER 1

Plot Holes and Empty Spaces
The Ethics of Thomas Kyd's Revenge Paradigm

> Out upon it, it is odious, specially in this moralizing age, wherein everyone seeks to shew himself a politician by misinterpreting.
> —Thomas Nashe, *Pierce Penniless His Supplication to the Devil*

Hieronimo's Mystery

For all its superficial moralising, Thomas Kyd's box-office hit, *The Spanish Tragedy*, is a play dominated everywhere by the politics of misinterpretation. The induction scene of the play concludes with the actor playing the allegorical character of Revenge inviting the ghost of Andrea, and the audience, to watch the play: 'Here sit we down to see the mystery / And serve for chorus in this tragedy' (1.1.90–1). These lines are then followed in the first quarto of the play with the stage direction, 'They sit and watch the play.' Even before the play is properly underway, the audience sees itself curiously mirrored onstage by inhuman spectators who intrude upon the theatrical space as active participants with a vested interest in the unfolding drama. From the start, the interests and motivations of a ghost come from the dead in search of an obscure notion of revenge are aligned with the audience's growing sense of moral perplexity and anticipation. Several critics have commented on the play's powerful emotional pull on its audience in generating what Allison Hobgood, for example, has called the play's 'affective afterlife'.[1] While such observations indeed capture something of the play's affective power in generating intense emotions in

[1] See Hobgood, *Passionate Playgoing*, 68. Hobgood argues that the aim of Kyd's design is largely affective in that it secures for Hieronimo's fictional character an 'affective afterlife' in the lingering passions of revenge which audience members would have carried home with them after the play was over, and which would have served as a palliative against the fear of death.

its intended audience, I contend that we must also weigh the more concrete ethical effects of having the audience experience and work through the emerging moral dilemma of the suffering revenger, not as a remote thought exercise but as a deeply affective reaction to what the play shows.

Therefore, while the alignment of the ghost of Andrea's motives with the audience's affective interest and expectation sets the stage for a highly collaborative form of theatre, the dramatic mechanism through which this collaboration takes place is deeply ambiguous morally, for it is entirely unclear with whose impulse for revenge the audience is asked to sympathise. The choral persona of Revenge, watching the play from the wings, or perhaps from the gallery, is proleptically concerned not with justice for Horatio and Hieronimo for crimes it obliquely inspires but only with the alleged grievances done to Don Andrea, whose bemused ghost watches on anxiously as crimes only emblematically related to his original demise unfold on the stage. Andrea, a chivalric soldier and a Petrarchan lover, dies on the battlefield, as he reports the god Minos saying, 'for his love tried fortune of the wars, / And by war's fortune lost both love and life' (1.1.38–40). The chiasmus of these lines evokes the arbitrariness and interchangeability of either concept of 'love' and 'war', thereby enacting the confusion in which Andrea, now an 'eternal substance' (1.1.1), cannot be sure against which moral calculus of virtue his past life is now to be measured in eternity. This paradigmatic confusion also constitutes a gaping, and arguably deliberate, plot hole in Kyd's dramatic design. If Andrea's ghost cannot find rest in the underworld, it is not because he is unavenged but because the amoral Virgilian underworld he finds himself in cannot 'judge' the life he had lived by any common Christian moral standard. Horatio, meanwhile, also a chivalric soldier and a (perhaps reluctant) Petrarchan lover, is brutally hanged and stabbed in his father's arbour during a tryst with his beloved. The chiasmus is therefore also theatrical and dramatic: one young man dies on the field of battle, and the other in the field of love. However, the 'field' of revenge wherein the suffering victims act and react within our line of theatrical vision is an empty stage which calls for the performance of a wild justice that far exceeds either the moral rationale of providential vengeance or the socially desirable demands of retribution.

The dramatic strategy and structure of revenge Kyd envisions is based, therefore, on a perverse teleology of violence: to satisfy Andrea's ghost's sense of literary injustice of having died a courtly lover, Revenge stirs and orchestrates a series of crimes which mirror Andrea's tragedy. At the same

time, however, these crimes amplify hyperbolically the original injustice done to Andrea to such an excess that the demand for equally excessive retaliation exacts a terrible price on the play's only genuinely tragic victim, Hieronimo, the Knight Marshall of the Spanish Court and father of Horatio. Perhaps, as Empson long ago suggested, the audience must later infer that there was, in fact, a sinister plot to have Andrea murdered under cover of battle. That is, the main intrigue of the play's first and second acts, involving Lorenzo's and Balthazar's machinations against Horatio in the love interest of Bel-Imperia, mirrors what we are to assume was the original plot against Don Andrea.[2] However, if this is so, Kyd's dramaturgy restricts such readings to the edge of our consciousness, haunting us instead with anxious speculations. The connection between the two plots is not logically contingent but rather affective, so that the emerging plot hole becomes an ever-widening space for violent retributive action which is hard to justify by cool moral logic. Later in the first act, when Hieronimo stages for the King and the Portuguese Ambassador a 'pompous jest' (1.4.137) depicting the historically implausible tableau of three English knights deposing three Iberian kings, the King confesses that although 'this masque contents mine eye . . . I sound not well the mystery' (1.4.138–9). There is more to this line than a joke about the historical implausibility of the masque. Hieronimo finds that he must play the critic and lend words and meaning to the dumb show, just as we, readers and audiences, must lend words and meaning to Hieronimo's unfolding tragedy as the play's reluctant emerging revenger. The idea that the workings of revenge are theatrically mysterious is then made explicit, again, at the end of the third act when the figure of Revenge, having fallen asleep, unveils a dumb show of its mysterious designs involving the god Hymen and two torchbearers which 'mime'. The ghost of Andrea, unsatisfied, again finds the show perplexing and demands, 'Awake, Revenge, reveal this mystery' (3.15.28), prompting from Revenge an allegorical gloss of what we then understand was a representation of divine displeasure at Bel-Imperia's impending marriage.

For Kyd, the fury of revenge and the dark motives which drive it is ultimately mysterious in performance, requiring us to engage as spectators (and now more often as readers imagining the spectacle) in contested acts of judgment and interpretation frequently tending to the allegorical. As the

[2] William Empson, 'The Spanish Tragedy', *Nimbus* 3 (1956): 16–29, reprinted in R. J. Kaufman, ed., *Elizabethan Drama: Modern Essays in Criticism* (New York, 1961), 60–80.

dumb show in Act 3, scene 15 moreover reveals, this sense of 'mystery' is uniquely dramatic since it points to a disjunction between what a performance shows visually and how the audience is asked to interpret what they see. The word 'mystery', as most editors of the play indeed gloss it, connotes the secret rites (*OED* I.3), or sacraments, usually associated with the Christian church, but like many other keywords in this play, it is a multivalent term open to several contradictory interpretations. 'Mystery' simultaneously points in this case to the ineffable mysteries of religious faith, providence and divine justice, as well as to the earthlier mysteries of unsolved crimes or puzzles which call for analysis, resolution and redress. Ultimately, however, both senses of the word derive from the Greek verb μύειν (*mūein*), which means to close or shut one's eyes or lips. Initiates into mysteries were expected never to reveal the secrets of their mystical experience. When initiates into hidden mysteries – be they pagan celebrants at the mysteries of Eleusis or Christian monks contemplating the hidden God – broke this prohibition and spoke of their experiences to non-initiates, they had to do so without opening their lips. In theology, the emergence of apophatic discourse is the metaphorical consequence of this prohibition, but in secular drama, such metaphors stir multiple discourses which proliferate around the event of the dramatic spectacle ad infinitum, if not ad nauseam. The mystery which Revenge and the ghost of Andrea sit down to see with the audience in the theatre constitutes a providential, moral and ethical riddle which, as the King's metatheatrical comment ironically suggests, would be quite difficult if not impossible to sound. A theatrical scene may be 'emblematic' in that it alludes to or otherwise contains emblematic imagery which carries a fixed array of moral meaning and significance, but the theatrical context in which an emblem unfolds more often than not unmoors this semiotic fixity, subjecting it to somatic overdetermination.

The mysteriousness of Kyd's dramatic design has indeed bedevilled the criticism and reception of *The Spanish Tragedy* since Philip Henslowe presumably first paid an anonymous playwright, or playwrights, for 'additions' to Kyd's enigmatic masterpiece. Likely written and first performed circa 1587–9, *The Spanish Tragedy*'s enormous popularity appears to have been dependent on its permeability. It is as if the Admiral's Men found that in reviving Kyd's original revenge play and allowing audiences to wrestle anew with its 'mystery', the play itself had to take on new ambiguities. The much-debated addition to the 1602 quarto containing Hieronimo's dialogue with Bazardo the painter is an interesting example of this process, especially if we consider that this addition might have replaced

the original, shorter scene with Old Man Bazulto.[3] The change from an old citizen who has suffered a similar tragedy to that of Hieronimo and can, therefore, offer him a mirror of genuine sympathy to an artist who has similarly suffered and is then asked to 'paint' a picture of their sympathetic woes is highly significant. In the added scene, Hieronimo's query whether the grief-stricken artist can 'paint a doleful cry' (3.12A.123) in sympathy with his suffering appears to be rhetorical, and augments, rather than resolves, the internal ambiguities of the earlier versions of the play. It shifts attention away from the performance of onstage sympathy to ask a more nuanced metatheatrical question about the element of mimesis *in* acts of mirrored sympathy. It also affords, as Hattaway suggests, a metatheatrical apologetic for what must have seemed to Elizabethan playgoers by 1602 a dated mode of theatrical pageantry, where 'characters move to the brink of caricature' by overacting a series of 'theatrical emblems', in this case of unjust suffering and moral wrongs.[4] When the surrogate playwright-painter, having listened to Hieronimo's hyperbolic account of his woes, finally asks, 'And is this the end?' (3.12A.158), Hieronimo's answer is sobering: 'Oh, no, there is no end; the end is death and madness' (3.12A.159–60). The painter's question, like that of Kent at the end of *King Lear* – 'Is this the promised end?' (5.3.261)[5] – no doubt echoes the feelings of many who have watched Kyd's play over the years. In this case, however, the question comes mid-play, and there is no deflection to providence and eschatology as in Shakespeare's subtle interjection of the word 'promised' in *Lear*. The playwright who added the scene, perhaps indeed Shakespeare himself, thinking about Kyd's play and what it meant, gives us instead a question of moral and ethical bewilderment: What does all this suffering finally amount to dramatically? What is its *end*, in the sense of dramatic goal and aesthetic design, as well as ultimate ethical function?

Indeed, this sense of protean mystery has carried over, perhaps understandably, into modern criticism of the play. Since Boas, Bowers, Ratliff

[3] See Calvo and Tronch, *The Spanish Tragedy*, p. 245n, quoting Carol Thomas Neely, *Distracted Subjects: Madness and Gender in Shakespeare and Early Modern Culture* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004): the painter scene 'exacerbates the father's conflict between fantastic denial and acceptance and dramatizes how grief and madness are purged through identification and self-representation' (37). For a survey of the knotty question surrounding the authorship of the 'additions' and their possible, even likely attribution to Shakespeare rather than the more traditional attribution to Jonson, see Calvo and Tronch, *The Spanish Tragedy*, 319–28.

[4] Michael Hattaway, *Elizabethan Popular Theatre: Plays in Performance* (London: Routledge, 1982), 105.

[5] *The Arden Shakespeare: King Lear*, ed. R. A. Foakes (London: Thomson Learning, 1997).

and others first attempted to explicate the play's structure and ultimate 'meaning', the play has been so variously interpreted that its sense of mystery continues to baffle.[6] Despite their seeming disparity, however, the questions raised by critics about *The Spanish Tragedy* are serious ones, and after more than a century of commentary, their dizzying array testifies to the play's unique hold over our imagination. What is fascinating, moreover, is the way in which each set of questions, rather than resolving anything, provokes new questions instead. The starting point of this ongoing process of debate with Boas and Bowers was one of moral bewilderment: Is Hieronimo a sympathetic tragic hero or a villain? Given the play's moral ambiguities, what are the ethical and religious boundaries between a villain and hero in the context of revenge drama in the first place, and where would the Elizabethan audience's sympathies have lied? Where do audiences' and readers' sympathies lie today (and since Boas or Bowers, the notion of 'today' has also radically changed)? Is there a difference between early modern and contemporary attitudes, and if so, what are those differences? Having answered that, is this then a play about revenge, or about justice? Or perhaps, asked another way, does Hieronimo's exploration of the moral dilemmas of revenge reflect finally on the failings of justice in the world of the play? However, if we ask this, then we must next answer what *is* the world of the play? Is it a remote caricature of Spanish and Roman Catholic decadence and barbarity, or an exposé of contemporary Elizabethan corruption and legal ineptitude? Were Elizabethan legal institutions in fact inept and if so how, or do the play's legal themes point to other areas of cultural anxiety? What, finally, does the framing onstage presence of Andrea's ghost and Revenge signify with respect to all the above quandaries? Do these quasi-allegorical personages provide a providential frame of divine retribution, or do they merely complicate matters by suggesting that as in earth, so in heaven? If the latter, is this then an indifferent pagan heaven, or a hellish nightmare concocted from the wild imaginings of a playwright displaying his classical erudition and fondness for the latest fashions in Senecan drama and rhetorical stylishness?[7]

[6] Frederisk S. Boas, ed., *The Works of Thomas Kyd* (1901), rev. ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1955); Bowers, *Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy*, 62–100; John D. Ratliff, 'Hieronimo Explains Himself', *Studies in Philology* 54.2 (1957): 112–18.

[7] The adjective 'Senecan' refers to a wide range of stylistic and generic codes that emerged from the scholarly and then commercial-theatrical uses of Seneca's tragedies, especially following the translation of the plays in the 1581 printing of *Seneca his tenne tragedies, translated into Englysh*. As Gordon Braden has shown in *Renaissance Tragedy and the Senecan Tradition: Anger's Privilege* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985), what defines a Senecan motif or stylistic influence in

Perhaps the answer to all of this is not thematic, but dramatic and aesthetic. In this case, what is the dramatic function of the play's numerous metatheatrical insets and its infamously violent denouement in the play within a play? Are these metadramatic tropes pointing to the excess of violence in the inferred offstage reality, which language and theatrical performance cannot contain, or do they expose the rhetorical and actual violence driving the theatrical play? Either way, one may still ask, what is the play's ultimate comment on its medium and its target audience's modes of satisfaction and enjoyment? Does it offer a critique of language, rhetoric and theatre, or perhaps an ironic and subversive celebration of what theatre can achieve in the face of mounting scepticism in the culture and the loss of transcendental meanings?[8] One could go on like this at much greater length, but what is immediately apparent from this exercise is that *The Spanish Tragedy* uniquely supports opposed answers to many of these and similar questions. This is not because it is a play which eschews meaning in some nihilist celebration of incoherence, but precisely because it is a play whose unique staying power depends on an excessive proliferation of meaning within its several nested dramatic frames. Kyd succeeded in setting up around the mutually co-dependent themes of justice and revenge a series of dramatic tableaus whose emblematic, somatic, rhetorical and theatrical elements invite audiences to reflect on their existential realities in relation to the unfolding onstage spectacles of grief, epistemic doubt, and violent retribution. While later playwrights, most notably Shakespeare, were able to achieve greater synthesis within these elements when reflecting afresh on the dramatic potential of the Kydian revenge plot, Kyd appears to have been the first to recognise this potential for popular commercial drama.

The potential Kyd seized on was first and foremost dramatic and theatrical, therefore, and only incidentally speculative and morally thematic. The experience of a play like *The Spanish Tragedy* is very much

commercial drama in the period can be enormously varied and mostly speaks to a particular tension, or ethos, of anger and other unbridled, violent emotions. It should be noted, however, that this also speaks to a deeper tension in these plays – which Kyd evidently responded to – between Stoic ideals, usually expressed in Seneca by minor, ancillary characters such as old men and nurses – and the hyperbolic rage, or *furor*, of the suffering protagonist unable to apply Stoic teachings to their immediate tragedy. For what I term in this context the revenger's Senecan 'mode of sinning' (*modus peccandi*), see Noam Reisner, 'The Theatricalization of Patient Revenge in English Renaissance Tragedy', special issue on 'Elizabethan Drama and Religion', ed. Line Cottegnies, *Etudes anglaises* 72.1 (2019): 393–408.

[8] The range of studies implied here far exceeds what can be summarised in a single note. I refer to most of these studies throughout this chapter in subsequent notes and in the Bibliography.

confined within the theatrical space that contains its 'mystery'. The play's peculiar hermeneutical indeterminacy precisely draws its audience in, rather than out, of the play in ways which result in competing modes of ethical judgement and identification which allow the audience, presumably, to enjoy the experience of seeing their own real-life experiences reflected in these dilemmas. In Abel's terms, we might indeed say that *The Spanish Tragedy*, like *Hamlet*, is only ever tragic in the metatheatrical self-consciousness it provokes for both protagonist and audience, where failing to perform can have – and in the play indeed does have – tragic consequences.

However, Kydian metatheatricality, in this case, does not simply impose order and form on abstract human existential concerns; rather, it allows the audience to reflect actively in performance on how every one of us routinely makes sense of our experiences by weighing our actions mimetically through a form of 'theatrical hypothesis'. All of drama can be said to engage in 'theatrical hypotheses', but Kyd's use of this technique is unique. A. D. Nuttall, for example, persuasively argues that tragic theatre in general allows us to see our hypotheses acted out and fall before us as part of a 'death-game . . . in which the muscles of psychic response, fear and pity, are exercised and made ready, through a facing of the worst, which is not yet the real worst'.[9] In Kyd's play, on the other hand, Girard's model of violence and mimetic desire is more accurately perceptible, since the violence of the play itself matters for the way in which it exposes the underlying connection in the idea of revenge between performance and violent retribution on the level of enactment or ritual. Indeed, Nuttall senses this problem when thinking about the literal violence of ancient Roman blood spectacles and even modern horror films. Noting that such spectacles are necessarily different, he goes on to qualify his thesis by pointing out that 'when hypothesis lapses into actuality one has indeed a

[9] A. D. Nuttall, *Why Does Tragedy Give Pleasure?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 77. Zamir offers a more evolved form of the theory implied here by suggesting that audiences often respond not just to the content of a play but also, and perhaps chiefly, to the 'existential amplification' undergone by the actor performing a given role which comes to determine what we then understand as various modes of audience identification: 'Identification, specifically in the theater, involves [a] twofold process: accessing a fictional character's state while simultaneously responding to real person's experience (the actor) . . . in accepting the actor's metamorphosis, the audience responds to, empathizes with, and thereby *validates* the actor's existential expansion. *Validation* means that in a persuasive dramatic embodiment the audience is willing to ignore what it directly recognizes to be unfolding on stage – an artificial activity organized by professionals situated in its own culture and time – and to respond to it as an altogether different event.' In enacting this, the 'audience accepts – not just intellectually but in what it itself *performs* – the ability to actualize possibilities that lie outside the limits of one's identity' (Zamir, *Acts*, 48).

corruption of tragedy, and the element of self-trial is replaced by simple cruelty'.[10]

Kydian revenge plays are not like modern slasher films, however, nor are they horrific spectacles where actors literally die, but they are plays in which a tantalising breach of theatre's hypothetical, mimetic nature often leads to violent consequences within the fictional world of the play and consequently, one assumes, for the audience as well on an imaginative level. In a performance of *The Spanish Tragedy* actors do not literally die, but in the play's imaginary world they do, and this alone is a frightening conceit. Kyd's revenge theatre invites its imagined audience to test through performance possible responses to a wide range of extreme moral and ethical dilemmas whose effects in real life are normally more diffused. It is not simply a case of aesthetics overriding ethics in our appreciation of the play, therefore, but the understanding that the process by which ethical or moral ideas take concrete form in our lives is often intrinsically mimetic in a performative sense and hence in part conducive to what we might term an 'aesthetic experience'. While this is true of all human art in a very general sense, in drama, because of its performative nature, this process can easily slip into tautology: a certain degree of metatheatrical manipulation within the illusion of theatre allows us to recognise the hypothetical nature of the processes by which we assign ethical value to our day-to-day conduct or performance. In sensing this, Kyd did not write a tragedy with clearly defined moral implications, but sought rather to create an entertaining aesthetic spectacle that will startle its audience with shocking ethical implications in performance. This was Kyd's brilliant insight, and it launched Elizabethan drama into a new phase of popular appeal and commercial success.

To illustrate this, let us take as our starting point one of the play's most quoted and debated scenes and speeches. The scene shows the bereaved Hieronimo entering 'with a book in his hand' crying out, apparently quoting Romans 12:19:

> *Vindicta mihi.*
> Ay, heaven will be revenged of every ill,
> Nor will they suffer murder unrepaid.
> Then stay, Hieronimo, attend their will,
> For Mortal men may not appoint their time.
> *Per scelus semper tutum est sceleribus iter.* (3.13.1–6)

[10] Nuttall, *Why Does Tragedy Give Pleasure?*

These lines and subsequent speech have proven a favourite chestnut of scholars and critics commenting on the play. As Lukas Erne points out, this one speech distils 'the shift in Hieronimo's trajectory from "public" to "wild" justice'.[11] Our first thought when we hear these lines is that Hieronimo, evidently reading the Bible, has found the Christian answer to his troubles and is echoing Romans 12:19, '*Vindicta mihi*' ('vengeance is mine', the Vulgate reads '*mihi vindicta*'). This seems to be supported by the following lines in which Hieronimo glosses the quotation to mean that he should 'stay' and attend on divine 'will'. However, there is a lacuna in the half line following the Latin tag, and instead of the qualification, '*ego retribuam, dicit Dominus*' ('I will repay, sayth the Lord'), we get a silent pause, perhaps an intake of breath, before the 'Ay' which signals Hieronimo's act of interpretation.

As many commentators have noted, this disturbing lacuna raises a difficult moral problem: Whose vengeance does Hieronimo invoke here, his or God's?[12] The moral-religious injunction to leave vengeance in the hands of the Lord and assume a posture of Job-like patience fails to console Hieronimo, a man who up until this point seems intent on securing justice through legitimate, public channels. The speech quickly moves on, erratically, to other quotations from Seneca's plays so that it soon becomes

[11] Lukas Erne, *Beyond 'The Spanish Tragedy': A Study of the Works of Thomas Kyd* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), 109.

[12] Arguments about the meaning and dramaturgical function of the 'vindicta mihi' speech reflect in microcosm wider disagreement about the play's moral outlook, or lack thereof. Bowers typically started things off by opining that the speech shows the unmooring of Hieronimo's mind as he misquotes Seneca and lapses from Christian patience to villainous insanity, turning the audience against him (*Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy*, 77–8); Empson, 'The Spanish Tragedy', meanwhile, pointed out that Hieronimo's misapplication of his Senecan quotations is purposefully ironic; Ratliff, 'Hieronimo Explains Himself', countered by arguing, contrarily, that the speech vindicates Hieronimo's right in seeking revenge in an unjust world; for David Laird, 'Hieronimo's Dilemma', *Studies in Philology* 62.2 (1965): 137–46, the speech is indeed a reasoned and carefully balanced exploration of the tensions in the period between concepts of Christian patience and honour; Scott MacMillan, 'The Book of Seneca in *The Spanish Tragedy*', *Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900* 14.2 (1974): 201–8, points out that the speech is rather about Hieronimo's sense of 'safety' and that its ironic misapplication of Senecan maxims, wrenched from the original dramatic context in which they appear, shows Hieronimo mastering the irony of the original Senecan protagonists and elevating this irony as the only ground of his action; Braden, *Renaissance Tragedy and the Senecan Tradition*, revives Bowers and argues, rather, that the speech dramatises Hieronimo's 'active solicitation of infernal power, as [he] compares himself to an unusually sinister version of Hercules, and promises a revenge very much like that of Senecan villainy' (202); for Geoffrey Aggeler, meanwhile, 'The Eschatological Crux in "The Spanish Tragedy"', *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 86. 3 (1987): 319–31, 'the lines from Seneca are not arguments to counter the biblical injunctions but sententiae he finds expressive of his own vengeful resolution and his readiness to accept whatever consequences "destiny" decrees' (327); for Kerrigan, finally, the classical commonplaces appear to console Hieronimo, whose will is puzzled by the impulse and injunction of memory which overrides the call to Christian patience (*Revenge Tragedy*, 177–8).

apparent that the book Hieronimo is holding is not the Bible, but perhaps the collected works of Seneca. Hieronimo's Senecan thoughts of fury, ironically wrenched from their source with little regard to the original dramatic context which prompted them, quickly outrun his biblical dignity. His Christian resolve to suffer quietly melts away in the face of a fundamental choice regarding what for him is a necessary and desirable course of action. The desire to suffer patiently turns finally into the Machiavellian resolve of a patient plotter abiding his time, waiting for the right opportunity to strike:

> Wise men will take their opportunity,
> Closely and safely fitting things to time;
> But in extremes advantage hath no time,
> And therefore all times fit not for revenge. (3.13.25–8)

Hieronimo's 'wise men' are not philosophers and sages, but practical men possessed of a sound measure of Machiavellian prudence. Hieronimo, randomly reading in Seneca, finds that he must rely on Stoic resiliency so that the fury of his grief and anger will not prompt him to act rashly. On the other hand, in wishing to secure the 'advantage' for revenge, Hieronimo condemns himself as a premeditated murderer on Christian moral terms. As Hamlet will later discover, time, with its providential rhythms of moral causality, is 'out of joint', and only the revenge act can mend the rupture.

This famous scene offers one of many different mimetic ethical exercises which drive the play's dramatic energy and engage its audience in complicated acts of ethical interpretation. It is very well to reflect abstractly what Hieronimo's speech might mean in broad moral terms, but in performance what dominates here is not only what Hieronimo says, but also the illegibility of the prop from which he appears to read. Any mildly learned member of the audience would have been able to recognise many of Hieronimo's sententious maxims as they follow in rapid associative succession, which ironises and complicates their original literary context. A maxim such as, '*Per scelus semper tutum est sceleribus iter*' ('crimes always find a safe way through crime') is spoken in Seneca's *Agamemnon* by Clytemnestra as she prepares to murder her husband. Here, however, it becomes a disembodied immoral proverb which quickly established itself in the period as 'the notorious Senecan code of Elizabethan stage revengers'.[13] Whether or not their source is biblical or

[13] Calvo and Tronch, *The Spanish Tragedy*, 256n, quoting James R. Siemon's Arden edition of Shakespeare's *Richard III* (2009).

classical, to the Elizabethan ear Hieronimo's random Senecan quotations are *proverbial*, and it is therefore doubtful that the book in his hands is the collected works of Seneca's plays. It is far more likely that Hieronimo is reading from some sort of Renaissance miscellany on moral philosophy or even his own commonplace book in which he once committed for useful reference pithy sayings of the wise. What matters theatrically, however, is not which book he is holding, but that it *is* a book. The scene creates an odd frisson in which the unmooring of Hieronimo's mind reverberates in the unmooring of the audience's ability to place in its correct context the learned authorities informing Hieronimo's mock-act of humanist deliberative reasoning. Kyd is satirising here Renaissance reading habits and the problematic way in which the pagan wisdom of the past was often transformed into Christian moral exempla through acts of deliberate misreading and misquoting. Such satire, however, is not merely thematic or abstract but contingent on the way in which Kyd dramatically shows how such practices of reading and interpretation can become a clear ethical problem for those caught up in the demands of violent, patently immoral action.

This scene affords us a paradigmatic example, therefore, of how the prototypical Elizabethan revenge play dramatises an ethically complex reality framed by the impossibility of moral idealism, and the resulting socio-political mayhem of revenge acts and cycles of violence which ensue. The idea finally is a simple one: abstract religious morality and articles of faith depend on human acts of learning to transmit and inculcate them as cultural values. Christians know what is morally expected of them because it is *written* in the Bible, and because qualified authorities (most of them educated men) help interpret the Bible in exegetical works and sermons. However, as the Reformation battles over textual authority demonstrated, where there are multiple authorities and multiple texts, relativism breeds anxiety, on which the medium of secular commercial drama especially thrives.[14]

The Empty Box

The illegibility of Hieronimo's book is only one instance in the play of the systematic manner by which Kyd taps into Elizabethan culture's anxiety about textual meaning and transforms it into elaborate ethical theatre. Throughout *The Spanish Tragedy*, the dramatic preoccupation with the

[14] On this wider point, see Brian Cummings, *The Literary Culture of the Reformation: Grammar and Grace* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

translation of humanist learning and moral values into embodied action actively depends on the use of props associated with the written transmission of knowledge, such as letters, books, pens and even a playbook. Kyd's Hieronimo is not only a judge in the Spanish court but also a learned man of letters and amateur playwright who finds that to enact revenge he must first enact the failure of speculative moral philosophy to avert the unfolding horrific reality he finds himself in.[15] The most interesting props in this context are the various actual as well as imagined letters and bills of writing which are referenced onstage at critical moments in the play, dramatically focalising the multiple acts of (mis)interpretation and (mis) communication that drive the play's moral chaos. Such documents abound in the play: the ghost of Andrea reports that he was only able to travel through the underworld with the aid of a drawn 'passport'; the political negotiations between the King of Spain and the Viceroy of Portugal are conducted through the exchange of onstage letters; Bel-Imperia famously reveals the identity of the murderers by writing a letter in her blood from her place of imprisonment which then just happens to fall 'from above' for Hieronimo to find; and finally, and perhaps most importantly, Pedringano, who initially acts as postman between the lovers Bel-Imperia and Horatio, ultimately falls foul of a non-existent letter of pardon that is promised but never arrives, prompting him in turn to write a letter which implicates Lorenzo in the murder of Horatio – a letter which Hieronimo then intercepts and which propels him to his final act of revenge.

The heightened dramatic preoccupation in the play with missing or intercepted letters allows Kyd to relate the idea of revenge to a broader engagement with the overall semiotic collapse of 'meaning' in the Spanish court, where 'meaning' is ultimately understood in moral and providential terms. Given the predominance of letters in the play, it is tempting, indeed, to read such stage-business in terms of post-modern semiotic theory in seeing in Kyd's play an early modern dramatisation of the social chaos which ensues in the wake of a total breakdown in signification and

[15] See David Cutts, 'Writing and Revenge: The Struggle for Authority in Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*', *Explorations in Renaissance Culture* 22.1 (1996): 147–60. For the overall use of props in the play and their theatrical function, see Eleanor M. Tweedie, '"Action Is Eloquence": The Staging of Thomas Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy*', *Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900* 16.2 (Spring 1976): 223–39. For the semiotic illegibility of Hieronimo's staging of the play within the play and its horrific effects, see more recently Alexandra S. Ferretti, '"This Place Was Made for Pleasure Not for Death": Performativity, Language, and Action in "The Spanish Tragedy"', *Early Theatre* 16.1 (2013): 31–49; and Jennifer Flaherty, 'Violence of Rhetoric: Silencing the Tongue in Kyd and Shakespeare', *Actes des congrès de la Société française Shakespeare* 31 (2014): 89–101.

structures of 'meaning'.[16] However, as was intimated in the Introduction, the irruption of something like post-modern scepticism in early modern drama, in this case about the ability of language to convey fixed meaning, is never an exercise in outright nihilism or relativism. In other words, Kyd was not trying to point to what Derrida would call centuries later the imposed structures of 'logocentric' meaning which are always extrinsic to any text, but was showing, rather, how a particular mode of communication valorised by humanist virtue ethicists as morally constructive was open to violent abuse and misinterpretation. A Derridean might counter that this is what deconstruction, as a theoretical reading practice, precisely aims to reveal, but, in this case, the abuse of logocentric meaning does not show it to be constructed but rather affirms the presence of logocentrism as a potent metaphysical force whose inscrutability in all human affairs baffles moral concepts in ethical practice. Kyd's dramatic strategy is to force on his audience an analogy between acts of private revenge, which disrupt and undermine a transcendental idea of providential justice, and acts of written miscommunication, which disrupt the humanist cultivation of idealised civic virtue through the circulation of letters.

Beginning with Petrarch's rediscovery of Cicero's letters to Atticus, the 'familiar letter' quickly gained a central place in humanist teaching as a distinct genre of the rhetorical arts deemed especially useful for the refinement of Latin eloquence. Following on from the teachings of Erasmus and Vives, letter-writing formed a core component of grammar school education in sixteenth-century England and was closely allied to the humanist program of training up young boys in the practical ethics of an active civic life, modelled primarily on Cicero's *Epistles* and *De officiis*.[17] While most sixteenth-century rhetoricians followed the traditional division of epistolary writing into the three main types of oration (judicial, deliberative, demonstrative), they also followed Erasmus in placing particular emphasis on the unique sub-genre of the 'familiar letter' as a more intimate

[16] For an early discussion of this theme, see Peter Sacks, 'Where Words Prevail Not: Grief, Revenge, and Language in Kyd and Shakespeare', *ELH* 49.3 (1982): 576–601. See also Daniel T. Kline. 'The Circulation of the Letter in Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*', in Lloyd Edward Kermode, Jason Scott-Warren and Martine Van Elk, eds., *Tudor Drama before Shakespeare, 1485–1590* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 229–47. Kline offers the predictable reading of the use of letters in the play along Derrida's response to Lacan's seminar on Poe's 'The Purloined Letter', whereby he concludes that in Kyd's play 'embedded frames of reference serve to diffuse meaning through repetition rather than to ground it structurally and to generate supplementary texts rather than arrive at conclusive truths' (232). See also Ryan Chabot, '"Stand you on that?": The Emptiness of Signification in Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*', *Concept* 34 (2011): 1–20.

[17] See Peter Mack, *Elizabethan Rhetoric: Theory and Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 23–7.

form of communication. It is a mode of communication which, because of its assumed ethos of intimacy, relies heavily on various tropes of personal appeal and anecdotal colouring to render its wider rhetorical argument persuasive. Unlike the Montaignian essay, which is a self-reflexive mode of associative exploration, the familiar letter is inherently dialogic, at once anticipating and often proleptically answering its implied addressee in the intimate, but implicitly very public, marketplace of ideas in which a published letter circulates.[18] As such, the familiar letter came to be associated more than any other type of oration with the moral *ethos* of its author, where the writer's overall temperament and distinct style ultimately become a demonstration of virtuous character in practice.

Angel Day, author of the popular Elizabethan manual for letter-writing, *The English Secretorie* (1586), revealingly defines a letter in the following terms:

> A letter therefore is that wherein is exprestlye conceived in writing, the *intent and meaning of one man*, immediately to passe and be directed to an other, and for the certaine respects thereof, is termed the messenger and *familiar speeche of the absent*: for that all occurrences whatsoever, are thereby, as faithfully advertised, pursued, and debated, as firemly might fall out in any personall presence or otherwise to be remembred. (My emphases)[19]

Taking his lead from Erasmus's canonical Latin treatise on the same subject, *De conscribendis epistolis*, Day places the letter – any letter – in the distinctly ethical realm of civic communication, which he evocatively terms the 'familiar speech of the absent'. Such written speech is a rhetorical composition that is at once familiar – that is, private and intimate – and hence subjective, but also *absent* in the sense that one person's intent and meaning, or rather one person's *content*, is always perceived to be in transit towards an absent addressee. The letter, in other words, gives otherwise abstract thoughts concrete transitive ethical force since the movement of communication passing between two correspondents always translates thoughts into potential action in missive form.

[18] See Kathy Eden, *The Renaissance Rediscovery of Intimacy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012). Using Gadamer's hermeneutical theory, Eden offers a compelling analysis of the ways in which Petrarch bequeaths to future writers in the humanist tradition a rhetoric and style of intimacy centred on letter writing. As Eden shows, 'the concept of intimacy or *oikeiotes* in Greek also corresponds to *familiaritas* in Latin, with its roots in the *familia*, the Roman counterpart of the *oikos*; and this correspondence ... includes the legal as well as the affective dimensions of the household, the center of belonging' (59).

[19] Angel Day, *The English Secretorie, Wherein is contayned, A Perfect method, for the inditing of all manner of Epistles and familiar letters* (London, 1586), 1.

Indeed, once a letter is sent out, everything it contains becomes potentially performative. As Day writes,

> seeing that the declaration of every Letter is no more, then what the minde in all occasions willeth to have perfourmed, and according to such instigations, wherewith at that instant men are sedde, when they write, taketh his formal substaunce, whether it be to require, councell, exhort, commaund, informe, commende, entreat, confirme, or whatsoever other intent determination or purpose therein had, as cause and matter may fall out to be in anye sort required.[20]

The 'formal substaunce' of the letter is a rhetorical frame, therefore, which gives a performative sense of direction and urgency to whatever content, or moral form of character, the author intends to communicate of themselves. Consequently, when a letter fails to arrive at its destination or is somehow interfered with, more than just a sense of intimacy or private property is violated. In the humanist ethical sense, such sabotage or failure to communicate disrupts the very network of exchange which allows ideas to circulate in the first place and gain the necessary foothold in the culture to assume the authority of maxims, proverbs or the received opinions of learned men deemed paragons of humanist virtue. A culture of letters positively depends on the safe transit and communication of its core values in written form, exemplified in the case of familiar letters in the virtuous character of its cultural custodians, be they teachers, scholars, authors or philosophers.

Given this narrower humanist context, it is understandable therefore why some of the most destabilising mimetic ethical exercises in *The Spanish Tragedy* focus on moments in which the transit of letters is either disrupted or altogether falsified. The two letters which lead to Hieronimo's discovery of the identity of his son's murderers and propel him to seek revenge outside the law are obvious examples. However, the most intriguing example from a theatrical point of view is Pedringano's letter of pardon, which only ever exists as a withheld promise. In a scene of low comedy, a young page acting as postman enters the stage carrying a box supposedly containing the letter, but which we soon learn is in fact empty. In between being given the empty box by Lorenzo and using it to torment Pedringano in his trial for murder, the page suddenly finds himself alone on the stage with the box, unable to resist peering into its contents. Noticing the audience in this brief interlude of sudden intimacy, moving

[20] Ibid., 2.

as it were between writer and addressee, the page then delivers the following metatheatrical soliloquy:

> My master has forbidden me to look into this box, and, by my troth, 'tis likely, if he had not warned me, I should not have had so much idle time; for we men's-kind in our minority are like women in their uncertainty: that they are most forbidden, they will soonest attempt. So I now. [*Opens the box.*] By my bare honesty, here's nothing but the bare empty box! Were it not sin against secrecy, I would say it were a piece of gentlemanlike knavery. I must go to Pedringano, and tell him his pardon is in this box. Nay, I would have sworn it, had I not seen the contrary. I cannot choose but smile to think how the villain will flout the gallows, scorn the audience and descant on the hangman, and all presuming of his pardon from hence. Will't not be an odd jest for me to stand and grace every jest he makes, pointing my finger at this box, as who should say, 'Mock on, here's thy warrant?' Is't not a scurvy jest that a man should jest himself to death? Alas, poor Pedringano, I am in a sort sorry for thee, but if I should be hanged with thee, I cannot weep. (3.5.1–20)

What immediately stands out about this soliloquy is that it is strangely redundant in terms of dramatic action and plot. In the previous scene, we see Lorenzo giving the box to the page with the following words of admonition, 'Show him this box, tell him his pardon's in't . . . [*gives box*] But open't not, an if thou lovest thy life; But let him wisely keep his hopes unknown' (3.4.68–70). These are hardly words suggestive of fair play; Lorenzo all but gives the game away by warning the page *not* to open the box in Pedringano's presence, so that the mere show of the box will raise Pedringano's hope of his lord's intercession on his behalf. In other words, even without looking into the box, we are invited to assume that it contains nothing but false hope. Kyd could have proceeded directly to the trial scene where the page is shown executing his task by standing in the wings while pointing to the box silently, as Pedringano, convinced of his immanent pardon, mocks the proceedings with tragic banter.

One plausible explanation, as Barbara Baines suggests, is to allow the page to alert the audience to the symbolic significance of the empty box, which evokes here both the myth of Pandora and more specifically the *sileni* of Plato's *Symposium*. The *sileni* alluded to in Plato were small containers shaped like the god Silenus, the ugly companion of Dionysus, containing hidden images of the gods. In the *Symposium*, Plato's Alcibiades likens Socrates to the *sileni* since like these containers Socrates is ugly on the outside, but wise and beautiful on the inside. As Baines points out, following Erasmus's widespread use of this trope in his adages, the *sileni* had become in the sixteenth century a proverbial image for the misleading

nature of exteriors, but more specifically for a particular mode of Socratic irony which Erasmus ultimately identifies with Christ. Christ, like Socrates, uses irony in the Gospels to lead his disciples away from 'ugly' things and the foolishness of this world to the hidden wisdom of God. Baines goes on to suggest that this same irony pervades Kyd's play in its exploration of 'the limitations of individual perspective' for which the empty box becomes a powerful symbol.[21] However, this symbolic analogy only works if, like Socrates or Christ, Kyd's empty box might lead the play's audience through this maze of error into the luminous perception of some greater, transcendental moral truth. This of course never happens. As Maus aptly puts it, 'the box that pretends to contain an authoritative, salvific text may be understood as a figure for the opaque, perjured subjectivity of the machiavel, but also, perhaps, as a comment upon the hollow promises of a Christianity *The Spanish Tragedy* both evokes and renounces'.[22]

The page's soliloquy is interesting, therefore, because despite its overt dramatic redundancy as well as symbolic indeterminacy it does important ethical work with the audience. Kyd seems very anxious to explain to his audience, and even apologise for, the unfolding cruel joke about to be executed on Pedringano by having the page vocalise and appear horrified about the moral implications of this device. The reference to the actor's physical youth ('for we men's-kind in our minority are like women in their uncertainty') is not, as we shall later see in Marston's *Antonio's Revenge*, a metaphor for childhood innocence. It is, rather, a metatheatrical allusion to the feminine boy-actor's promiscuous infidelity as one who dissembles and lacks a moral compass grounded in a fixed (and entirely conceptual) masculine identity, especially if, as is likely, the actor who plays the page is also the actor who plays Bel-Imperia. There is a fascinating ironic wink here to the antitheatrical invectives levelled at the time against the moral turpitude of actors. When the page opens the box and is mildly shocked to find it empty, the line 'Were it not sin against secrecy, I would say it were a piece of gentlemanlike knavery' allows the moral emptiness of the box to force on the audience a difficult exercise in ethical discrimination. Superficially, the page's words are meant to echo the audience's moral outrage at Lorenzo's diabolic actorly manipulation of appearances to

[21] Barbara Baines, 'Kyd's Silenus Box and the Limits of Perception', *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 10 (1980): 41–51, at 43. See also more broadly Frank Ardolino, 'The Hangman's Noose and the Empty Box: Kyd's Use of Dramatic and Mythological Sources in *The Spanish Tragedy* (III.iv-vii)', *Renaissance Quarterly* 30 (1977): 334–40.

[22] Maus, *Inwardness and Theater*, 66.

entrap and deceive others. However, the instant the page opens the box, he becomes complicit in the cruelty of the joke discovered in its emptiness. When he decides nevertheless to participate in a 'scurvy jest' in which a victim is literally about to 'jest himself to death', the final excuse that his own life would be forfeit if he did not comply with his master's command carries very little weight *morally*. For example, he could pretend not to have opened the box at all, but then in moral terms, such an act of dissembling dishonesty would amount to the same thing.

Strangely, however, the page never says that such a jest would be sinful, merely 'odd', presumably here in the sense of 'strange' or 'surprising'. He reserves the word 'sin' not for the trick of the empty box but for his misconduct in betraying his master's secret to the audience. The phrase 'were it not sin' suggests that the moment the page opens the box while breaking the mimetic illusion of theatre in alluding to his role as a young actor, he implicates the audience in the apparent sin of deriving sadistic pleasure from the joke. As long as the box remains closed, the audience, like the page, do not know it is empty. The audience may guess, but crucially do not *know*. As the page worries, however, the moment the box opens, there is indeed here a 'sin against secrecy', but not against Lorenzo so much as against the audience's secret and therefore tacit acquiescence in their role as willing spectators. The oddness of the jest – its exceptional strangeness – accounts for the sudden and unexpected change this device has on the audience in shifting their perspective from being passive spectators asked to interpret unfolding events morally to active participants who are suddenly in on the Machiavellian immoral plotting. Before the page opens the box, he worries that the jest will 'scorn the audience' about to gather for Pedringano's trial, but once he opens the box, the theatre audience members are those about to scorn Pedringano with the page. In this way, Kyd invites the audience to be in on the joke instead of feeling that it is played at their expense. This is deceptive, however, because the word 'sin' deeply ironises the entire metadramatic moment of the box in relation to its status as an object in transit containing a missing letter. Given the overriding moral assumptions of the Christian culture in which the play's plot unfolds and which the intended audience implicitly shares, the page's borrowed use of 'sin' to mean ethical breach of trust alerts us that the moral debate about what is sinful in all cases has been completely turned upside down by a pseudo-Machiavellian dramatisation of what is ethically prudent or imprudent in *some* cases. Crucially, the audience must now choose where to position themselves ethically in this emerging network of casuistic incidents.

Matters are not helped, moreover, if we consider the two actual letters that frame, as if to contain, box-like, Pedringano's missing letter of pardon. On the one hand, Bel-Imperia's letter written in blood, which serendipitously falls from 'above' for Hieronimo to find in Act 3, scene 2, and reveals the identity of his son's murderers. On the other hand, the letter that Hieronimo retrieves from the dead Pedringano in Act 3, scene 7, which corroborates Bel-Imperia's revelation and offers Hieronimo the necessary legal evidence of the murderers' guilt – ironic, of course, in that it cannot serve to bring them to justice in a court of law.[23] However, notwithstanding Hieronimo's compulsion for due legal process as Knight Marshal, it is meaningful in ethical and metaphysical terms that he should not find Bel-Imperia's first letter sufficient proof, even though he thinks of its revelations as an 'unexpected miracle' (3.2.32). Bel-Imperia's letter, written in blood and falling from above – indeed in some modern productions dropped from above by the figure of Revenge observing the play from the gallery – represents symbolically the primordial and strictly divine demand for retribution for the unjust spilling of blood. What is odd about Hieronimo's reaction to the letter is that he does not find Bel-Imperia's blood testimony, indeed the very contents of her letter, trustworthy. On the contrary, he fears the letter might be some 'train' laid 'to entrap [his] life', and he advises himself not to be 'credulous' (3.2.38–9). It is not just that Hieronimo fears being betrayed by the letter into falsely or prematurely accusing Lorenzo. The very nature of the letter, with its metaphysical trajectory from 'above', pushes him to take revenge in the name of ancient blood rights, here emblematically related to a Senecan theatrical tradition of female *furor*. However, such modes of action are wholly extrinsic to both Hieronimo's legal and moral worldview at this stage of the play and hence clearly unthinkable to him.

Bel-Imperia's letter offers, then, the first frame to the emptiness of Lorenzo's box and advances the play's theatrical metaphor of epistolary content in ethical transit. Ironically, however, its very presence becomes, in dramatic terms, the impetus which drives Hieronimo to act as revenger rather than seek to rely patiently on divine providence, whose failure to

[23] See Jean Fuzier, 'Le déni de justice dans *The Spanish Tragedy* de Thomas Kyd: Hieronimo, juge et justicier', in Marie-Thérèse Jones Davies, ed., *Actes du Congrès, 1980, Société Française Shakespeare* (Paris: J. Touzot, 1981), 85–97. See also Dunne, *Revenge Tragedy and Early Modern Law*, 40–3. As Dunne points out, citing Hutson's *The Invention of Suspicion*, 'it is not the rejection of legal redress, but rather its denial that forces Hieronimo to seek vengeance . . . Hieronimo's inability to secure legal satisfaction stems directly from a judicial system that does not treat everyone as equals' (41).

satisfy the hunger for revenge Kyd opposes to the failure of the legal system to deliver justice. Indeed, these are Hieronimo's exact sentiments moments before the hangman delivers to him Pedringano's letter, sealing this dramatic movement into a single epistolary frame. The more his laments and prayers beat at 'the windows of the brightest heavens, / Soliciting for justice and revenge' (3.7.13–14), the more he finds these 'windows' impregnable, 'countermured with walls of diamond' and giving his words 'no way' (3.7.16–18). Both letters then, on either side of the frame, fall into Hieronimo's hands as if answering his prayers, but one should be wary of assuming that his prayers are ever answered in any metaphysical or spiritual sense. Hallett and Hallett rightly remind us that we should distinguish in Kyd's imagination between the justice of Heaven and the justice of Hades. In despairing of the justice of the former, Hieronimo finds his satisfaction (tragically from a Christian point of view) in the justice of the latter. Moreover, as the Halletts argue, 'the two realms have distinct functions in the play as alternative forces operating on Hieronimo's psyche, the former appealing to his faith and the latter to his instinct'.[24] However, either Heaven or Hades is extrinsic to the world of the play, except as imaginary vistas, the former propped up by biblical imagery and concepts, the latter by Virgilian and Ovidian poetic echoes and pastiches. Ontologically and theatrically, Heaven and Hades are interchangeable therefore because whether 'above' or 'below', either realm is radically offstage, while the staged action is all that we can see and interact with in assessing Hieronimo's state of mind. Indeed, this is how the King reacts when he sees a desperate Hieronimo digging in the ground with his dagger as if trying to 'rip the bowels of the earth' (3.12.70) in an effort to conjure hell's fury. This histrionic gesture does not render hell real; it merely confirms in the King's mind, and one assumes the audience as well, that Hieronimo has simply gone mad.

A Protestant audience, attuned to the dangers of unruly passions, could well make the next leap in thinking that hell, after all, is not so much a place as a state of mind marked by the language of despair. Indeed, as Milton was to develop this trope later in his psychological reimagining of Satan (while building on Marlowe's Faustus), the vastness of hell is reflected in the interior wasteland of its possessor. In this respect, Hieronimo's beautifully excessive and patterned rhetorical soliloquy minutes before Bel-Imperia's letter drops from above is instructive. This speech, much ridiculed on the later Elizabethan and Jacobean stages for

[24] Hallett and Hallett, *The Revenger's Madness*, 138.

its overwrought pathos, prepares us to see Hieronimo as a man whose virtuous 'content' has been erased by the unspeakable murder of his son, reducing him figuratively as well as literally into a state of 'discontent' (3.2.19). Moreover, it is a state of eviscerated discontent that can only be 'recorded', as he says, by the oneiric unreality of 'night' and 'cloudy day' which 'register [his] dreams' for revenge:

> 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 attempt,
> If this incomparable murder thus
> Of mine but now no more my son,
> Shall unrevealed and unrevenged pass,
> How should we term your dealings to be just
> If you unjustly deal with those that in your justice trust?
> . . .
> The cloudy day my discontents records,
> Early begins to register my dreams,
> And drive me forth to seek the murderer.
> Eyes, life, world, heavens, hell, night and day,
> See, search, show, send some man, some mean that may –
> *(A letter falleth.)* (3.2.1–23)

As Barish demonstrates in what is still one of the best analyses of Kyd's patterned rhetorical art in *The Spanish Tragedy*, the disjunction between rhetorical aural display and violent action radically destabilises both the moral platitudes one might associate with the condemnation of violent action as well as the cultural acquisition of rhetorical stylishness as an exercise in the humanist virtue of eloquence.[25] More precisely, however, in dramatic terms, the erasure effected by the chiastic repetition of 'O eyes, no eyes', 'O life, no life' and 'O world, no world' again frames the prayerful appeal to 'sacred heaven'. As in the discourse of negative theology, 'sacred heaven' becomes a reality that can only be inferred negatively by saying what it is not and pointing to its hidden absence in the worldly theatre of human action. It emerges as something denied in the erased space of eyes that are not eyes, life that is not life and a world that is not a

[25] Jonas Barish, '*The Spanish Tragedy*, or The Pleasures and Perlis of Rhetoric', in John Russell Brown and Bernard Harris, eds., *Elizabethan Theatre*, Stratford-Upon-Avon Studies 9 (London: Edward Arnold, 1966), 59–86.

world. In turn, the psychic erasure of Hieronimo's sacred morality yields, therefore, only the embodied and actorly reality of 'tears', 'public wrongs', 'murder' and what he describes as the mimetic oxymoron of a 'lively form of death'. The appeal to heaven, on the other hand, literally yields in theatrical terms a letter that *falls*, but whose content is received as miraculous rather than legally efficacious. More than any other form of suffering, this, precisely, is the essence of Hieronimo's moral tragedy as Kyd conceives of it dramatically.

In the moral void of Hieronimo's death-in-life existence, where even living has been reduced into a lively (i.e., life-like) theatrical and rhetorical performance, Hieronimo emerges as someone ready to receive, in missive form, Bel-Imperia's heaven-sent content that will help redress the wrongs he has suffered. The redress, however, requires Hieronimo tragically to assume the role of an immoral revenger forced to seek satisfaction, rather than justice, outside the law. That he should initially resist this and seek further corroborating evidence serves to enhance this deep tragic irony, but also to foreshadow the new ethical field of play in which the actor-cum-revenger must now seek to justify his actions performatively. Crucially, such modes of satisfaction are never far from Hieronimo's mind. Indeed, the impulse for revenge marks Hieronimo's first, visceral reaction to the unbearable sight of his son's murdered corpse, as he finds the love token of Bel-Imperia's handkercher and dips it in his son's blood for remembrance. As Kerrigan points out, Kyd introduces the handkercher as a prop as well as an emblem which creates a 'chain of remembrances' between Hieronimo's revenge plot and the framing 'moral landscape' of Andrea's ghost.[26] The blood-besmeared handkercher allows Hieronimo to keep the memory of his son and his hunger for revenge fresh. At the same time, it also serves to focus, like Bel-Imperia's nearly identical blood-written letter, his 'discontent' as an unfixed state of mind that cannot find its place of rest: 'I'll not entomb them till I have revenge. / Then will I joy amidst *my discontent*. / Till then my sorrow never shall be spent' (2.5.54–6, my emphasis). Like the empty grave, therefore, which cannot contain the body of Horatio until his murder is avenged, the empty box with its two framing letters is a powerful metaphor for the missing moral centre of the revenge plot. More specifically, it points to the yawning gap between assumed knowledge and revealed knowledge in theatre's mimetic engagement with the audience's platitudinous moral assumptions. In Kyd's innovative dramatic design, this emerging gap, or ethical space, ultimately and quite

[26] Kerrigan, *Revenge Tragedy*, 174–5.

literally emerges as a theatrical space or field of play where 'joy' and 'sorrow' are reduced to interchangeable and therefore spent emotions. The deferral of entombment becomes the deferral of *moral* action and, therefore, in dramatic terms, the play's actual *duration* of performance where, as if suspended in a 'lively form of death' with the dissembling actors, the audience struggles to make moral sense of Hieronimo's discontented emotional state.

Counterfeiting Ethics

In speaking of Hieronimo's 'discontented emotional state', one is effectively saying that Hieronimo's grief and hunger for revenge have reduced him to madness. Saying this, however, is not the same as knowing this, especially in performance where much would depend on the actor's interpretation of the text. Here too, however, Kyd anticipates much in placing the question of Hieronimo's apparent insanity at the metatheatrical intersection of play-world and audience. It would be too easy to watch Hieronimo undergo his painful process of mental breakdown towards revenge and merely dismiss it with the words of the second Portuguese visitor to the Spanish court in the third act by saying, 'Doubtless this man is passing lunatic' (3.11.32). The various onstage characters who respond to Hieronimo's antics mirror and anticipate the audience's bewilderment, but in doing so also raise, more importantly, the question of how we might assess Hieronimo's performance of madness rather than its reality. The long third act, which mostly focuses on Hieronimo's inner struggles and psychic transformation into revenger, concludes with Hieronimo trying very hard to seem sane; or rather, it shows us Hieronimo realising that in order to find a suitable opportunity for revenge he must bide his time and appear other than what he is to those he plans to wreak vengeance on: 'Is't I will be revenged? No, I am not the man' (3.14.120). A cynic might say that much like Hamlet after him, Hieronimo is putting on and off 'an antic disposition' to suit his plot for revenge, but that would be both irrelevant to the play and unknowable in terms of what the play can show through embodied action. From a religious-moral perspective, the evidence for Hieronimo's madness, as Bowers opined, is not in dispute, but once the play divorces morality from tragic causality, the question of Hieronimo's madness becomes *dramatically* irrelevant. What matters here is that by the end of the third act, the issue of Hieronimo's state of mind has become inextricably bound with his performative ability to display that state of mind in the theatrical field of play which the pursuit of revenge opens for him.

As a purely theatrical space, this new field of play (within a play) calls for various dishonest or deceptive acts of dissimulation. More specifically, it calls for a new ethical understanding of revenge as a counterfeiting, mimetic action that can only ever be justified ethically in precisely these 'counterfeiting' theatrical terms. The counterfeiting metaphor, again, is Kyd's. As Hieronimo's mind unravels, Kyd increasingly focuses our attention on acts of playacting and counterfeiting in which Hieronimo borrows from all the cultural and literary resources available to him in trying to rise above his unbearable grief into a resolute mode of action. We began this discussion by assessing the mimetic ethical exercise attached to the prop of Hieronimo's commonplace book of Senecan reading, but the same scene then concludes with a mimetic ethical moment of a very different kind. To return to the scene cited at the opening of this study, when the two citizens, accompanied by old man Bazulto, appeal to Hieronimo as judge and give him their legal 'papers', his unbearable grief at being confronted by his imagined inadequacies as judge and father sparks in him the wished-for desire for a chthonic journey. Echoing the imagery of the ghost of Andrea's opening account of his journey through the underworld, Hieronimo fantasises about exacting his revenge through the agency of the primordial pre-Christian, pre-moral gods of the Virgilio-Ovidian imagination. What is striking about this flight of morbid fancy is that Hieronimo considers the possibility that he may have to rely on the old man's acting skills in completing this journey. Seeing in Bazulto a counterfeit mirror of his suffering, Hieronimo addresses the old man as if he possessed mythic and genuinely miraculous acting or impersonating skills:

> Yet lest the triple-headed porter should
> Deny my passage to the slimy strand,
> The Thracian poet thou shalt counterfeit.
> Come on, old father, be my Orpheus.
> And if thou canst no notes upon the harp,
> Then sound the burden of thy sore heart's grief
> Till we do gain that Proserpine may grant:
> Revenge on them that murdered my son.
> Then will I rend and tear them thus and thus,
> Shivering their limbs in pieces with my teeth.
> *Tears the papers.* (3.13.113–22)

The wish that the old man would counterfeit Orpheus is a wonderfully loaded literary metaphor since Orpheus is one of several mythic poets and artists whose art transcended mimetic boundaries in actively shaping and reordering reality. Moreover, this image evokes the potential power of the

arts – especially the Orphic art of poetry and rhetoric – to alter states of mind and perception. In this case, however, such powers are to be mobilised in the interests of Hieronimo's hunger for revenge 'on them that murdered my son', where it is hoped the rhetorical display of Bazulto's grief will move Proserpine to unleash the powers of hell against Horatio's murderers. If this were to happen, Hieronimo fantasises, 'Then will I rend and tear them thus and thus, / Shivering their limbs in pieces with my teeth.' 'Thus and thus' echoes the stage direction that tells us that Hieronimo tears at this point the legal papers and petitions the citizens in the scene submit to his consideration as a judge. If we recall that the mythic Orpheus indeed finds his death at the hand of Dionysian maenads who tear him limb from limb for snubbing their god and patron – a god intimately associated in antiquity and the Renaissance with tragic theatre – then this theatrical metaphor finally collapses on itself in sheer horror reminiscent of Euripides's *Bacchae*. Hieronimo is on a chthonic trajectory so excessive in its unruly, destructive potential that it far exceeds any conceivable moral or tragic decorum; it is, indeed, a process which leads to psychic and eventually literal fragmentation and self-mutilation as Hieronimo, in the end, will bite off his tongue, the organ of his eloquent rhetorical expression. What is especially disturbing here, therefore, is the slip in Hieronimo's language as he connects the effect of shivering his victim's limbs, 'thus and thus', with the cause of the old man's putative counterfeiting powers: he enacts and shows (i.e., performs the tearing of the papers) what the mimetic mirror of the old man can only point to, ineffably, beyond the limit of any sense-making system of thought. That is, in Hieronimo's mind the metaphor of the paper has collapsed into grotesque literalisation, and this is a mode of 'madness' symbolic language cannot penetrate. It is, we might say, pure theatre of the most violent kind.

In this moment of symbolic and rhetorical violence, where Hieronimo tears the papers most associated with his role as a dispenser of legal justice, Kyd explores the psychology of revenge as the site of a new, counter-cultural theatrical ethic. It is, nevertheless, a 'counterfeit' ethic both because it restores a vague sense of justice through acts of mimetic dissembling, but also because it is in itself a false or 'counterfeit' moral paradigm, which like a counterfeit coin lacks any intrinsic value (where the 'value' here one would expect is moral edification).[27] It offers a tableau that

[27] On the wide and fertile use of 'counterfeiting' metaphors in early modern English literature and drama in relation to the criminal practices of 'coining', see Stephen Deng, *Coinage and State Formation in Early Modern English Literature* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 103–33. While

appears to be shaped morally, but its moral is purely histrionic and theatrical. Whenever Hieronimo performs actions in the name of a higher ideal of justice, he is necessarily falsifying that ideal much in the same way Girard, for example, discusses the 'sacrificial crisis' endemic to a failing punitive legal system in a given society. The famous climax of the play where Hieronimo finally executes his elaborate revenge through the staging of the polyglot tragedy of *Suleiman and Perseda*, supposedly written by Hieronimo in his youth, is the logical outcome of Kyd's ethical understanding of revenge as counterfeiting theatre. The device of the play within a play, which was to become a required feature of the emerging Kydian tradition, has drawn a large body of commentary, especially for what it says about the anarchic and semiotically disruptive qualities of mimetic theatre. As Preiss rightly argues, such instances of theatricalised violence and mimetic confusion signal a moving away from moral didacticism, whereby Kyd 'preserves the hermeneutic assumptions of morality drama precisely to subvert them, exposing the very rift between word and image, sign and meaning that theatre claimed to bridge'.[28] Jonathan Bate similarly discusses Kyd's innovation of Hieronimo's polyglot play within a play as a 'kind of total theatre, in which every object, word and action becomes potentially illusory ... where the law becomes a text, something as vulnerable as the author's foul papers'.[29]

While such claims are true in a general sense, they elide the particular ethical implications of the theatricalised revenge act Kyd's Hieronimo is aiming for here. During the final, fourth act of the play, Hieronimo the beleaguered judge and father assumes the role of playwright, stage builder, set designer, director, actor, chorus and finally revenging murderer, as if this last role depended on the former theatrical ones. As Bate remarks, the illusion implied here makes the theatrical concerns of the play very real, as

the counterfeiting of coins could stand metamorphically for any number of falsifying acts where something's (usually a person's) debased intrinsic moral 'value' was somehow falsified to appear other than what it is (as in Iago's famous 'I am not what I am'), Deng shows how this was first and foremost related to the falsification of justice in that coining de facto usurped the crown's authority. While Deng applies this to a reading of *Measure for Measure*, the relevance of this metaphor to Hieronimo's counterfeiting ethic in *The Spanish Tragedy*, which emerges precisely in the space vacated by the failure of the king's justice, is deeply revealing. See also David Landreth, *The Face of Mammon: The Matter of Money in English Renaissance Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 150–83. I return to Landreth's compelling analysis of *The Merchant of Venice* later in Chapter 2.

[28] Preiss, 'Interiority', 64.

[29] Jonathan Bate, 'Enacting Revenge: The Mingled Yarn of Elizabethan Tragedy', in Nicoleta Cinpoeş, ed., *Doing Kyd: Essays on* The Spanish Tragedy (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), 25–42, at 37.

it forces 'the critical gaze to turn from art to life'.[30] Bate is echoing here Barry Adams, who, in a seminal essay, was the first to weigh in on the earlier argument about the moral coherence or incoherence of *The Spanish Tragedy* by suggesting that what we construe as the play's questions about morality and ethics are really concerned with dramaturgical questions about aesthetics. As Adams argues with the violent metatheatrical ending of the play in mind, Kyd, like Shakespeare after him, is 'in effect reaching beyond the confines of the theater in an attempt to impose artistic form on a reality which is all too often experienced as formless. And by converting an audience analogue to an artist analogue, each is suggesting the active role of the theater audience in achieving this ordering of experience.'[31]

This helpful Hegelian insight is nevertheless fraught with difficulty, in both Adams's and Bate's thinking about this. How can a playwright reach beyond the confines of the theatre, if, by the famous analogy of the *theatrum mundi*, the world itself is nothing but theatre? The trope of the world's theatre is inherently chiastic. It both draws attention to theatre's mimetic fallacy and mirrors an inherent mimetic fallacy in the world itself; it both validates antitheatrical moral censure and empties such moral censure of coherent meaning; it at once allows us, indeterminately, to think of the world as theatre, and of theatre as the world, thereby blurring the mimetic boundaries between them.[32] Consequently, reality can be said to be 'formless' only if one already assumes by the word 'form' a mimetic pattern or construct which is somehow distinct, say, from what we might deem to be 'real' in any number of metaphysical senses. In other words, what renders our experiences somehow unreal when we see them represented in artistic form is the very process by which artistic form itself is imposed. When someone enjoys looking in a gallery at a realistic painting of still life depicting a vase of flowers or assorted dead game animals sprawled on a kitchen table, one typically appreciates the artist's ingenuity and the oxymoronic metaphor of 'still', or dead, life. Normally, what one

[30] Ibid.

[31] Barry B. Adams, 'The Audiences of *The Spanish tragedy*', *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 68.2 (1969): 221–36, at 235. See also Donna B. Hamilton, *'The Spanish Tragedy*: A Speaking Picture', *English Literary Renaissance* 4.2 (1974): 203–17.

[32] For a good survey of the *theatrum mundi* trope, see Björn Quiring in Björn Quiring, ed, *'If when the world as theatre present . . .': Revisions of the Theatrum Mundi Metaphor in Early Modern England* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014), 1–24. As Quiring points out, the metaphor of the world's stage is on the terms of Hans Blumenberg an 'absolute metaphor', that is, 'a metaphor that cannot be translated into non-metaphorical, conceptual terms but rather precedes and conditions the process of concept formation. Because of its absoluteness, the metaphor of the world-stage is hopelessly overdetermined' (2).

does not do is reach out to touch the painting, mistaking it to be real. In Pliny's famous myth, Parrhasius defeats the fabled painter Zeuxis in a contest of realistic painting when he paints a curtain veiling another hidden painting beneath it, which Zeuxis then attempts to unveil, discovering the curtain itself to be a painting. The regress of this phantasmagorical slip in mimetic art between that which veils and unveils reality is potentially infinite (as in the effect that is produced when a TV monitor displays a camera displaying the monitor itself).

If Kyd, as many argue, makes the connection between violence and mimetic art explicit, we still need to determine what would be the ethical outcome of such an aesthetic outlook in practice. If the emblematic prop of the empty box serves to vacate the field of morality in which Hieronimo must act, then the ethically performative force of the two letters that frame this void call on Hieronimo to fill it with a new form of action. Moreover, this action – performative, histrionic and theatrical in its aesthetic concerns for what it displays, as when Hieronimo tears the legal papers – reveals itself as a naked or pure action that does not signify anything but merely *is*, a bearer of its own sign, both signified and signifier. Such purity of action (ironically much like Aquinas's formulation of the *actus purus* extending from the mind of God) would be impossible, of course, in the semiotic reality of human culture and language. Kyd, however, comes very close to suggesting that such actions would be possible if we pushed the world-as-theatre metaphor to its most extreme logical conclusions, not as if to say that the metaphor of the world's theatre *explains* the world, but that it *is* the world.

As Sigurd Burckhardt noted long ago with Shakespeare in mind, early modern English playwrights had 'pressingly concrete reasons to know that when [they were] plotting a tragedy. . . [they were] not just retelling a story in dramatic form; [they were] committing an act – the action of [their] play – in the full moral and social sense of the word "act"'.[33] It is in this sense that Burckhardt speaks of tragedy as a 'killing poem' purposefully designed by the playwright 'toward the end of bringing a man to some sort of destruction'.[34] There is something very suggestive about this formulation when applied more specifically to revenge drama under Kyd's hand.

[33] Burckhardt, *Shakespearean Meaning*, 16. For a good discussion of Burckhardt's 'killing poem' model when applied more widely in the ethical reader or audience-response landscape of Renaissance drama and poetry, see Dennis Kezar, *Guilty Creatures: Renaissance Poetry and the Ethics of Authorship* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 3–16. I return to Kezar's argument in more detail in my discussion of *Hamlet* in Chapter 4.

[34] Burckhardt, *Shakespearean Meaning*, 15.

By Burckhardt's terms, we might say that Kyd, rather than Shakespeare, was the first to build an entire 'killing poem' around the moral implications of violent action with one striking difference: Kyd is more interested in the violent act itself than the destruction it brings. Kyd's play is not concerned with the *ends* of action in terms of moral consequence, nor indeed with an end when conceived absolutely in eschatological terms. This is especially noticeable in the play's epilogue when the ghost of Andrea attempts to outdo Virgil and Ovid in assigning to each of the play's moral 'villains' a lurid, pseudo-mythic torment in hell to fit with their crimes, but which, as Aggeler notes, is whimsical and arbitrary.[35] For Aggeler, this proves that divine justice is illusory, but it is perhaps more accurate to say that in the context of what the play shows, the epilogue merely confirms that the moral coherence of whatever we deem to be 'divine justice' is impenetrable. Instead, the play forces on us a different array of culturally emblematic props of letters, books, bills, playbook and a penknife which become, finally, deadly theatrical objects in the performance of a naked, purely theatricalised revenge act. Correspondingly, Hieronimo's last histrionic gesture before biting out his eloquent tongue in a violent act of humanist self-mutilation is to unveil the murdered body of his son Horatio, hanging in the inner recess of the stage behind a screen: 'See here my show, look on this spectacle' (4.4.88). This act of unveiling inverts the mimetic metaphor of the Zeuxis myth. What the audience sees behind the screen is precisely that unburied, unbearable and unspeakable object which launched the play's ethical mayhem to begin with. The audience recognises Horatio's corpse as the body of an actor previously able to produce meaning somatically now reduced violently to the functional reality of a stage prop. It is, in other words, an object which is unbearably real at the moment of its unveiling because it is a mimetic representation only of itself, and therefore a visual metaphor for the radical reality of tragic theatre, or, more precisely, of death as the play's and all life's ultimate and incomprehensible end.

This, finally, is the most elaborate mimetic theatrical exercise Kyd's play offers: in rejecting either Christian patience in the face of suffering or the suicide of the rope and poniard on either side of the heaven/hell moral frame (as in his despairing suicide speech in 3.12), Hieronimo must explore with the audience an ethical alternative for action that is at once 'real' for being performed but also strangely hypothetical for being *merely* performed. The act and impulse for revenge do not emerge here as a

[35] Aggeler, 'The Eschatological Crux', 330.

shocking, immoral capitulation to sin, but rather as a theatrical metaphor for a culture of virtue ethics which depends at every turn on a mimetic coherence about what specific actions can show and display. That is, Kyd's theatre insists on displaying the anti-moralist ethical understanding which judges the 'good' or 'bad' of actions based on demonstrable effects. This means that a member of the audience may feel, for example, that Hieronimo's final action of revenge through the enactment of theatre is justified and makes ethical sense internally but is, nevertheless, morally 'evil', or, at the very least, incoherent. In the end, the character of Revenge promises that the villains of the play shall endure an 'endless tragedy' (4.5.48) in the eternity of the underworld, but given the play that preceded this fantasy, such claims are deeply ironic. Kyd leaves the door open for any reasonably educated member of his Christian audience to feel that some form of moral justice, after all, has won the day. At the same time, however, to allow for this comfort to take hold, the same member of the audience must then also suppress almost everything they saw enacted before them. What the play within the play shows in the unfolding of its action is a desperate man taking his revenge through the vexed enactment of the same culturally overdetermined spectacle the audience has opted to enjoy as entertainment. Kyd, however, gives his audience much more than they have bargained for. He has allowed his audience to experience through the play (and perhaps also worry) that performing violent, morally questionable actions may be ethically justifiable in some cases if such actions, as with the empty box, can be divorced from the moral judgement that would predetermine their *moral*, rather than strictly actual, outcome. In hell, tragedy is 'endless', but in the world of the play it is a function of failed performance and ethical consequence. Kyd may not have been the first to hold such views in the wider realm of early modern thought, but he appears to have been the first English playwright to grasp that revenge drama could explore with its audience such an ethical reality in mimetic practice.