

Theater of the grotesque: the spanish tragedy and foucault



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It is easy to look at Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*, widely considered the first revenge tragedy play, as having a completely nonsensical ending. While the proceeding three acts are fairly typical for a revenge narrative, with machinations deceptions stabbings and heartfelt vows for murder, the penultimate scene defies logic to the point of nearly being comical. However, despite the surreal and uncanny feeling of what occurs therein, much of which initially appears to defy our notions of causality, there is, to quote another revenge play, "a method to this madness." Through his grim and performative finale, Kyd is depicting the strength of a proto-Foucaultian state which has the power to control the secular bodies of all who reside beneath them.

We should preface this examination by addressing several formal and narrative aspects of the first three acts of *A Spanish tragedy* before analyzing the ways in which its fourth espouses the absolute authority and power of the state. Firstly, readers recognize that this is, despite the appearance of Andrea the ghost, a largely secular play. Though the dead can speak, they can not affect change in the world of the living, as demonstrated by Andrea's outrage at being made to watch his good friend's suffering at the conclusion of the first half of the play. Revenge, the entity with whom Andrea holds discourse, may appear to be architect of what unfolds, but may also merely have foresight into the future, as we never see Revenge actually do anything other than speak. And though Hieronimo makes multiple pleas to the heavens for guidance and closure, it is Bel Imperia who answers his prayers with a well-timed letter. With this absence of higher moral authority,

the only real exchange of power and of order is between the state and its subjects. There is no other recourse for justice.

We must also establish that the state has been, in a sense, violated by both Lorenzo and Balthazar. There is an established order to martial victory and custody which is demonstrated early in the play when ransom is set for Balthazar under Horatio and his armor is given to Hieronomo. Balthazar then conspires to escape this De facto custody through a combination of murder and mendacity, convincing Lorenzo and his servants to assist in Horatio's premature departure. Lorenzo then manipulates the court system, supposedly the ultimate indicator of innocence and guilt, by creating a fake pardon and allowing Pedringano to hang for the crime of killing Lorenzo's servant, simultaneously concealing his involvement in the killing of Hieronomo's son. These two characters have, in a sense, made fools of the state of Spain and the Spanish government in the pursuit of their own gains by breaking the established laws.

The fourth scene of the fourth act begins with Hieronomo staging a play which he has concocted and assigning roles to each character based on how he wishes to kill them. He then sets off a violent chain of bloody murders in front of an amassed audience, here comprised of three noble lords. By the end of his brief one-act, the architects of his misery, Lorenzo and Balthazar, are dead, and Bel Imperia has also taken her own life. This is perhaps fairly typical of plots where retribution is the instigator of conflict, but what follows is certainly not. Hieronomo then comes on stage, and explains to the three noblemen exactly what he has done. His world choice in particular is if

interest: " See here my show; look on this spectacle!/ Here lay my hope, and
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here my hope hath end," (Kyd 4. 4. 89). It is extremely important to him that he reveal dramatically, to these government bodies, what he has just accomplished and why. Further more, we must examine the word "Spectacle" as something of supreme importance here. It brings to mind immediately the eponymous spectacle of the Spectacle of the Scaffold from Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*: "Many...non corporeal punishments were accompanied by a degree of torture: public exhibition, pillory, carcan, flogging, branding," (Foucault 32). The brains extension of itself is tortured in these instances, as it causes a figure to become an object of shame, or to be viewed as such by other people. A competent and powerful body, should it wish to discourage behavior without accusations of barbarism, may use a combination of an audience and the recipient's awareness of themselves to force rectification. This publicity of punishment is somewhat troubling to the ethics of the period. On the one hand, the state has failed; it has allowed several good people to perish while the true culprits have not faced consequences. Thus these two private citizens take the law into their own hands, and then publicly display their bloody handiwork (Bel Imperia in spirit at least) ostensibly as a message. But emulate its practices and its ethics. Namely, they publicize the humiliating and shocking deaths and make the motivations for the murders clear for future wrong-doers, as a deterrent. Hieronimo doesn't, however, blame the Spanish government or its officials. In fact, he addresses Balthazar's father, the Viceroy, somewhat sympathetically: "Speak, Portugese, whose loss resembles mine; if thou canst weep upon thy Balthazar, 'Tis like I wailed for my Horatio," (4. 4. 114). Despite the enmity which would ostensibly exist between two such fathers and sons, Hieronimo identifies with this militaristic oppressor, claiming they

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have some kindred understanding of pain. Even in abject agony, he cannot taunt this high Viceroy. Hieronimo, who is a nobleman, immediately begins to leave in order to hang himself. This form of suicide is particularly significant, because as Foucault points out “ Death is a torture insofar as it is not simply a withdrawal of the right to live, but is the occasion and culmination of a calculated graduation of pain: from decapitation (...the zero degree of torture) through hanging, the stake, and the wheel,” Foucault 33). Beheading is a death normally reserved for lords as it is painless, and Hieronimo, even if not in possession of the flexibility and creativity required to cut his own head off, could have devised a less painful method of death. But this would most likely be one which was clean, and could perhaps be covered up or misinterpreted. Through a hanging, his body is, by his own design, to become a warning to all those who see it. If we continue with our interpretation of Hieronimo as channeling the authority of the state, which surely we must, given what has preceded it, the Hieronimo is using the power vested in him to damn himself to death.

But he never gets the chance to act fully on these desires. Almost immediately after Hieronimo finishes, the Viceroy foils his attempt to hang himself by grabbing him and demanding he “ in form the king of these events. Upon my Honor, thou shalt have no harm,” (4. 4. 158).

Why does the viceroy desire this clarification? Surely the earlier line “ So Viceroy, was this Balthazar, thy son...which Bel Imperia... murdered,” (4. 4. 135). And the viceroy demands that this confession be made to the king, Hieronimo’s lord and due to the military engagement which preceded the play, the Viceroy’s superior as well. Hieronimo shocked his audience by <https://assignbuster.com/theater-of-the-grotesque-the-spanish-tragedy-and-foucault/>

telling them about his plan and motivation; by attempting to make him retell it through threats of harm, the state re-asserts its control over his body and mind. The king even brands him a traitor, an entity harmful to the state merely in its existence in other words, even though Hieronomo has not sabotaged Spain in his massacre. Thus either out of spite at this body for denying him the chance to be his own executioner and retain agency, or merely out of pride and a refusal to confess, Hieronomo balks, refusing to comply and to identify his accomplice—despite seriously implicating her in his initial confession. However, the Viceroy brandishes some ice-cold reason heretofore unseen, and quickly and decisively comes to the correct conclusion that “ Was... Bel Imperia / for by her hand my Balthazar was slain / I saw her stab him,” (4. 4. 177). Portugal did not even need to synthesize the largess of information which could have incriminated her that Hieronomo freely gave up; he, the envoy of the state, was able to quickly and independently determine who was guilty and their culpability in what had occurred either through deduction based on the play’s plot, or through seeing her kill Balthazar and withholding the information. Having him say this also drives home the omnipotence of state authority. These monarchs and lords may have been duped and used as a cat’s paw in the murder of Pendrigano, but they will inevitably discover the truth. The state is, in a sense, more powerful than God himself—a character who cannot affect change and ignores the pleas of his supplicants. At this point, our ‘ hero’ chews off his tongue in order to keep from confessing, and from revealing the identity of his co-conspirator. But this action proves to be too little too late; The Viceroy has already discerned that Bel Imperia played a crucial role in the massacre that has just been witnessed, not to mention informed <https://assignbuster.com/theater-of-the-grotesque-the-spanish-tragedy-and-foucault/>

everyone else. Thus the reader is forced to assume that there is some other reason for this painful and disfiguring action. And while, for obvious reasons, the dishonored warrior cannot explain himself, the reader can come to three different possible motives fairly quickly. Either this is masochistic self-punishment for his failure to conceal Bel Imperia's involvement, a deliberate taunt aimed at these powerful foes—implying that they will never know the full truth or get him to yield before them, or, that he is so terrified of the tortures that will be used to compel him to confess, that he bites off his tongue in order to ensure they shall never attempt this.

If we follow the logic of Foucault, there really wouldn't be much reason to torture a body who cannot scream or convey suffering to other bodies around him. But when further lambasted and threatened, Hieronomo calls for writing implements in order to write out his confession. But this proves to be a ruse, and an ineffective one: He manages to kill but one of the three nobles, one who had done him the least amount of wrong, before killing himself. Kyd ends the whole affair then, with the Kings of Portugal and Spain still in power, all of those who broke the laws of the land dead, and many of them situated in an oddly ironic hell, which affects only Andrea's enemies oddly enough, though he of course seems not to be there, stuck in some other existence. Even Hieronomo's final act of defiance is erased; the last lines in the mortal world are by the monarchs who claim Hieronomo's deeds are "Monstrous," and proceed to give a battery of orders regarding the bodies of the dead—flexing their institutional muscles, if you will. The entire final act of the play is a long and elaborate re-enforcement of the ultimate authority of the reigning government. Given Kyd's eventual torture and

judicial ordeals it is hard not to read the work against both the volatile political environment and the run in with the state which was to occur shortly after the first performance. Whether the uncannily repetitive nature of the last scene is intended to demonstrate a sort of break from reality, implying this total control is a fantasy, or if Kyd merely found this atypical way of portraying the power dynamics of his era in such a format is unclear.