

Hieronimo's transformation in the spanish tragedy



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

By the thirteenth scene of Act III in Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*, the character Hieronimo has finally emerged as a major character and transformed significantly. He has gone from a commendable subordinate of the King, to a grieving father, to a man on the verge of losing his wits. Yet it isn't till Act III, scene XIII that his ultimate, determined character emerges. Until this soliloquy, it is unclear who will be doing the avenging in a play that was framed from the opening scene as being about revenge for the unsettled ghost of Don Andrea. But by the end of the speech, and despite the ensuing delays that occur before the conclusion of the play, it is certain that Hieronimo will become the agent of revenge. This scene can be variously seen as Hieronimo's transformation from by-standing victim to protagonist, from Knight Marshall of the King to incarnate scythe of God's judgment, or even from hero to villain. What is unambiguous is that from Act III, scene XIII forward Hieronimo's mind is determined, his role is active, and revenge is inevitable. Hieronimo begins his soliloquy with the Vulgate phrase, "Vindicta mihi!" (3. 13. 1), meaning, "Vengeance is mine," quoting the passage from the book of Romans that continues: "'I will repay,' says the Lord." This is his essential problem since Hieronimo is aware of this explicit New Testament decree against personal revenge, as would have been the Elizabethan audience for which this play was written. It was understood that God would avenge all wrongs, either directly or through his representative on earth, which was believed to be the King. However, it is interesting to note that he chooses to quote a phrase that is supposed to be in God's voice, possibly hinting at his ultimate, personal appropriation of the role of final Judge in the play. Yet, with this understanding that he may "come by justice to the heavens" (3. 6. 6) since "they [Lorenzo and

Balthazar] did what Heaven unpunished would not leave" (3. 7. 56)

Hieronimo has attempted to inform his " Lord the King/And cry aloud for justice through the Court" (3. 7. 69-70). Nevertheless, he has been repeatedly denied access to the king by Act II, scene XIII. So the first five lines of the soliloquy in scene XIII, which consist of Hieronimo claiming to " attend [the] will" (3. 13. 4) of Heaven, lack the connotation of the monarch standing in for God and, in fact, literally mean that he must wait for the Heavens to carry out revenge. The idea of waiting on the Heavens is only toyed with though and by line 6 Hieronimo has pulled his head out of the clouds and into the pagan or Old Testament world of personal vengeance and action. This change is indicated by the fact that line 6, like line 1, is delivered in Latin, but this time does not quote the New Testament. Instead he references a line from the book that he holds in his hand containing the plays of Seneca. The quote, loosely translated two lines later as " For evils unto ill conductors be" (3. 13. 8), are spoken by Clytemnestra in the play Agamemnon as she plans to preempt the violence she expects from her husband. Based on this context, it would seem as though Hieronimo expects more violence from the murderers of his son (which is not unreasonable given his knowledge of the Pedringano execution) and may even fear his own life. So it is out of necessity of preemption, or preempting his enemies' preemption, that he abandons the will of the Heavens in order to prevent further ills and guarantee revenge. Nevertheless, while Hieronimo has abandoned the idea of waiting on Heavens' will, there is some indication that he feels that he will be carrying that will out. His second Seneca quote is again loosely translated into English in the following lines as " If destiny thy miseries do ease,/Then hast thou health, and happy shalt thou be;/If destiny

<https://assignbuster.com/hieronimos-transformation-in-the-spanish-tragedy/>

deny thee life, Hieronimo,/Yet shall thou be assured of a tomb" (3. 13. 14-17). This essentially means that if everything works out in seeking revenge, then perfect, and if it leads to "the worst of resolution" (9) (ie his death), then he shall be righteously entombed. Finally, he concludes in lines 19-20 that even if he dies and doesn't receive the proper burial rites, he indicates that he will still be accepted into heaven. The succession of these lines gives the firm impression that Hieronimo sees the mode of action and revenge as just. Thus Hieronimo abandons his role as vassal to the King for his newly perceived role as answering directly to and carrying out the will of a higher Lord. It is at this point in the soliloquy that Hieronimo drops all pretense and concludes that he "will revenge his [Horatio's] death" (3. 13. 20). From this point on, Hieronimo's soliloquy introduces a darker, Machiavellian side that seems to emulate the thoughts and actions of his enemy, Lorenzo. He thus decides to employ "secret" (23), "cloaked" (24), and "dissembling" (30) means to achieve his end. This decision contrasts with the heroic nobility and sincerity with which he has conducted himself up to this point and replaces it with conniving villainy and deceit. By the conclusion of this vengeance soliloquy, Hieronimo has developed fully into that character who will bring about the blood-soaked conclusion of the play. He incrementally convinces himself of the righteousness of vengeance in such "extremes" (3. 13. 27). He simultaneously abandons waiting on the will of God in favor of action, convinces himself that God will view his resolve to action as just, and adopts the underhanded tactics of his enemies to the detriment of his character. What emerges from this admixture is an understanding of Hieronimo as a newly resolved man of action, and while his proposed means are morally

questionable, their announcement thankfully heralds the long delayed raison d'etre of the play.