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ABSTRACT

This paper examines three of the earliest Elizabethan revenge tragedies, Thomas Kyd's The Spanish Tragedy, Christopher Marlowe's The Jew of Malta, and William Shakespeare's Titus Andronicus, in order to determine their significance in the development of Elizabethan drama. After briefly considering classical and contemporary influences, this study attempts to show how Kyd, Marlowe, and Shakespeare, building upon these influences, created dramas of action and variety which helped to establish a dramatic style which was peculiarly Elizabethan. Seemingly obvious correlations exist in the three plays; citations from the plays exemplify the similarities of themes and techniques. Moreover, analysis of the plays shows the influence of Kyd upon the early works of Marlowe and Shakespeare and also points out the disparate treatments of the revenge theme by each of the dramatists; each author treats the theme of revenge in his own manner, providing variety and complexity to the genre. The final consideration of this essay is the concern of each playwright with the nature of man and man's reactions to uncontrollable events in an unpredictable world. In presenting the dilemmas of man's nature, Kyd, Marlowe, and Shakespeare raised complex questions about the mysteries of life, thus adding richness and depth to their plays. This study concludes that the early experiments with revenge tragedy by Kyd, Marlowe, and Shakespeare provided a pattern which was seminal to the later development of an English drama of action, variety, complexity and depth.

A Comparative and Evaluative Study

of

Thomas Kyd's The Spanish Tragedy, Christopher Marlowe's The Jew of Malta

and

William Shakespeare's Titus Andronicus

as Revenge Tragedy

A Seminar Paper

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In Partial Fulfillment

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Master of Science in Teaching

by

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1 Fredson Bowers: Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy: 1587-1642 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1940), p. 41.

Tragedy has certain forms and conventions, no matter what literary period one may consider. But, inevitably, tragedy is concerned with disorder and human suffering. Unhappiness is emphasized not only in a conscious choosing of death by a protagonist, but also in an unhappy life destined for the survivors after the action of the tragedy has been completed. Moreover, tragedy, dealing as it often does with human suffering in its more horrible forms, offers psychological justification for the episodes of the action as opposed to the use of the horrible for its own sake.

Since the revenge motif in tragedy is one of the dominant factors in Elizabethan play-writing, the following study examines Thomas Kyd's The Spanish Tragedy, Christopher Marlowe's The Jew of Malta, and William Shakespeare's Titus Andronicus as tragedies, based largely on the theme of revenge as the motivating factor causing the inevitable disorder. In addition, this study points out that the dramatists, the audiences, the culture, and the times reinforce one another in a tolerance, perhaps even an unwitting desire, for revenge and its various manifestations. Although secondary sources treat the importance of revenge in the development of Elizabethan tragedy, in considering first the influences which fashioned the Elizabethan attitude toward revenge, one must recognize Seneca as a major source, particularly after the translations of Seneca into English between 1559 and 1581. Seneca handed down not only ghosts, witchcraft, and other

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supernatural stage devices, but also the spectacle of murders and other horrors openly on the stage. Elizabethans, familiar with Seneca, knew of his emphasis on blood revenge for flagrant injury, jealousy, and murder. Elizabethan England was delighted with Seneca's rhetoric and was intellectually young enough to be impressed by bombast, sensation-  
alism, and the enactment of physical horrors.<sup>2</sup>

The Italian novelle, also widely read, were the sources of many plots for tragedies. Many novelle portrayed lust, jealousy, ambition, and revenge, all of which often led to murders.<sup>3</sup> English belief in the inherent treachery of foreigners, whether true or not, made for fascinating reading and gossip. The Elizabethans were enthralled by the long, tortuous, horrible forms of revenge supposedly undertaken by the Spaniards and Italians. The novelle merely confirmed English prejudice on the general villainy and proclivity for vengeance of foreigners.<sup>4</sup>

The university play movement, after a long development through the Middle Ages, contributed to Elizabethan dramatic style by translating the tragedies of Seneca and by writing original plays based on the Senecan model. Gorboduc (1561), by Thomas Sackville and Thomas Norton, is a classic imitation which closely follows the Senecan pattern; there is little action on the stage, bloodshed and battle

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 75.

<sup>3</sup> J. M. R. Margeson, The Origins of English Tragedy (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), p. 128.

<sup>4</sup> Bowers, pp. 50-57, 61.

are announced by messenger, and a chorus and a dumb show recapitulate the situation at the beginning and the end of scenes.<sup>5</sup> At a time when the tendency of the popular playwrights was to satisfy a taste for stage spectacles without much regard for either form or structure, classical drama exercised an influence for good by insisting upon a definite form and structure.

Elizabethan England was also concerned with the causes and the effects of the accompanying passions which excited private revenge. In Elizabethan plays hatred, anger, jealousy, pride, ambition, and envy are all obvious. Certain types of revenge were frowned upon, such as the use of a professional assassin. The aversion to certain types of revenge merely implied a certain tolerance for other forms; for example, the necessity for a father to avenge his son was a strong belief.<sup>6</sup> Thus influences such as the Senecan joined with and supported a native presentation of tragedy, and the two themes of revenge and ambition grew in popularity and importance, especially as treated by Elizabethan moral philosophy.<sup>7</sup>

Elizabethan moral philosophy maintained that revenge belonged to God and that justice was supposed to be the prerogative of the state; however, the spirit of revenge had hardly declined in Elizabethan times--- its form had merely changed.<sup>8</sup> England had survived the prolonged agony

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<sup>5</sup> Wolfgang Clemen, English Tragedy before Shakespeare, trans. T. S. Dorsch (New York: Barnes and Noble, Inc., 1962), pp. 56-74.

<sup>6</sup> Bowers, pp. 35-38.

<sup>7</sup> Willard Farnham, The Medieval Heritage of Elizabethan Tragedy (New York: Barnes and Noble, Inc., 1936), pp. 343-344.

<sup>8</sup> Bowers, p. 8.

of the Wars of the Roses. Duels and public executions were commonplace, and the bloody exhibitions were attended by Elizabethans as amusements.<sup>9</sup>

With this background and climate, the audience at an Elizabethan theater could reconcile the disparity between formal religious and moral ethics and informal ingrained native convictions. The protagonist in a revenge tragedy might even have had the audience's sympathy at the beginning of the play, especially if his cause seemed just. But when he turned into a bloody and indiscriminate killer, death was the only logical and expected solution.<sup>10</sup>

If the audience grew and developed with the times and the plays, the playwrights had to write for the audience and the times; tragedy had to grow beyond the stage of translation and imitation.<sup>11</sup> Elizabethan writers had no rigid set of tragic rules and principles. The Greek classics were almost unknown to these playwrights; their tragedies were based on known incidents and events and were as often as not called histories.<sup>12</sup> Perforce Elizabethan dramatists had to try to invent some way of showing the tragic and classical dilemmas of man's nature and its reaction to a disordered world of other men and uncontrollable events. Revenge was one method.

Elizabethan revenge tragedy begins with Kyd's The Spanish Tragedy.

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<sup>9</sup> Bowers, p. 16.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 40.

<sup>11</sup> Ashley H. Thorndike, Tragedy (New York: Cooper Square Publishers, Inc., 1965), p. 79.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 83.

Although the exact date of The Spanish Tragedy has long been a matter of dispute and conjecture, critics generally agree that it was a familiar play to Elizabethan audiences when Philip Henslowe recorded its performance by Lord Strange's Men on March 14, 1592. Philip Edwards, the most eminent critic of Thomas Kyd since T. S. Boas, states that most critics find 1586-1587 as an acceptable date of authorship.<sup>13</sup> The Spanish Tragedy presented revenge, blood revenge, as the sacred duty of a father to avenge the murder of his son. From this theme it derived its long popularity.<sup>14</sup> The Spanish Tragedy is representative of the "pure" type of revenge tragedy since revenge constitutes the main action of the play. In "pure" revenge tragedy, revenge must be the cause of the catastrophe, and the revenge must not be delayed beyond the point of the crisis. The ghost of the murdered person urges revenge; there is hesitation on the part of the revenger, and the revenge machinations are delayed. All this is coupled with the revenger's feigned or actual madness. The antagonist's counter-intrigue against the revenger may occupy a major part of the play.<sup>15</sup> The Jew of Malta and Titus Andronicus modified this basic outline of the revenge pattern.

In The Spanish Tragedy a Ghost and Revenge are in evidence from Seneca, but the plot of The Spanish Tragedy is original with Kyd. However, the whole theme of revenge, the prime mover of Kyd's play, is a

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<sup>13</sup> Philip Edwards, ed., "Introduction," The Spanish Tragedy by Thomas Kyd (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1959), p. xxii.

<sup>14</sup> Bowers, p. 65.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., pp. 63-64.

Senecan theme; Kyd also shares with Seneca a certain interest in mayhem and bloodshed, but The Spanish Tragedy is quite free of exaggerated relish of such horrors. Kyd's contribution is significant not so much for what he owed to Seneca as for what he made of his debt; Seneca's plays are largely verbal, whereas Kyd's work is a drama of action. Philip Edwards points out that "It is as though Kyd began to write a literary Senecan play, and, even as he wrote, learned to handle his material in more dextrous and dramatic fashion."<sup>16</sup> Within the framework of Senecan practice, the Elizabethan dramatists, Kyd among the first of them, built a new and far more robust drama.

The Spanish Tragedy introduced to the popular theater a peculiarly Elizabethan adaptation of Senecan revenge tragedy. For at least a decade Kyd's influence dominated the English stage. Thorndike says that Kyd, of the early playwrights, owes most to Senecan traditions of structure, ghosts, and theme.<sup>17</sup> Thorndike further says that according to both Senecan and English precedents, vengeance moved in the pathway of blood—"ghost-directed revenge, hesitation, insanity, and meditative soliloquies distinguished more specifically by the Kydian species."<sup>18</sup> Peter B. Murray states that the greatest innovation of The Spanish Tragedy is the union of comic and tragic elements, the combining of Senecan tragedy with the intrigue characteristic of Roman comedies.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Edwards, p. liii.

<sup>17</sup> Thorndike, pp. 99-100.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 101.

<sup>19</sup> Peter B. Murray, Thomas Kyd, Twayne's English Authors Series, 88 (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1969), p. 13.

Kyd's avengers, like those of the Roman comedies, have simple motives: Villuppo, Balthazar, and Lorenzo are after worldly gain, political advantage, or an eye for an eye. When more complex issues like Hieronimo's concern for justice enter, they are clearly defined and limited. In Kyd's work the advantages of limitation and the start of a literary convention are evident. Hieronimo, the protagonist, has blood revenge forced upon him; he is comparatively helpless, and his single-minded purpose is to avenge the death of his son. His reasons for revenge form the crisis of the play and occur in Act III, scene xii, especially in his revenge soliloquy (III.xii.1-20).<sup>20</sup> The key lines are:

Away, Hieronimo, to him be gone:  
 He'll do thee justice for Horatio's death.  
 Turn down this path, thou shalt be with him straight,  
 Or this, and then thou need'st not take thy breath:  
 This way, or that way? Soft and fair, not so:  
 For if I hang or kill myself, let's know  
 Who will revenge Horatio's murder then?  
 No, no! fie, no! pardon me, I'll none of that.  
(III.xii.12-19)

He has first hoped for justice (III.vii). As Peter Murray describes it, "Hieronimo, who stands poised between suicide, justice, and revenge, rejects the first, tries to obtain the second, and is driven finally to seek revenge when the King cannot understand him. . . . Hieronimo's search for justice is frustrated in part by his despair of justice, his longing for revenge and then death. Even before he tries to approach the King, he has convinced himself that he will fail, and is ready and

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<sup>20</sup> References to the text of The Spanish Tragedy in this paper are to the edition prepared by Philip Edwards for Revels Plays (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1959).

anxious to kill himself."<sup>21</sup> His vindictiveness in his search for justice keeps him alive to complete his revenge.

Hieronimo believes that private revenge is an evil; he turns to it when he loses all hope that either heaven or the king will give him justice. When his mind breaks and he accepts the necessity of revenge, the audience can pity him.<sup>22</sup> He expresses his dilemma:

Thus must we toil in other men's extremes,  
That know not how to remedy our own,  
And do them justice, when unjustly we,  
For all our wrongs, can compass no redress.  
(III.vi.1-4)

His quest for justice and his obsession for revenge will prevent true justice from being done.

Kyd has introduced motives of revenge, love, and justice in the characters of *Andrea's Ghost and Revenge*. He transfers these motives from their origins into the action of the play proper, even though *Revenge* is always hovering on the periphery of the action. At the end of the play, revenge is finalized after a series of failures, a strong and diabolical villain, and intrigues and counter-intrigues of one formidable character against another; the avenger thus damns his own soul as well as that of the villain and victims.

The Jew of Malta was written between 1588 and 1592; it was first performed on February 26, 1592, by Lord Strange's Men for Henslowe.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Murray, p. 121.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 42.

<sup>23</sup> Irving Ribner, ed., "Introduction," The Complete Plays of Christopher Marlowe (New York: Odyssey Press, Inc., 1963), p. xxii.

Marlowe modified and elaborated on the revenge theme without bowing entirely to Kyd, especially in having his revenger a baser villain. The revenge theme is introduced in the first act by the actions of a state, Malta, against an individual, Barabas, the Jew of the play:

Bara. Why, I esteem the injury far less  
 To take the lives of miserable men  
 Than be the causers of their misery.  
 You have my wealth, the labor of my life,  
 The comfort of mine age, my children's hope,  
 And therefore ne'er distinguish of the wrong.  
 Fern. Content thee, Barabas; thou hast nought but right.  
 Bara. Your extreme right does me exceeding wrong.  
 But take it to you, i' the devil's name!<sup>24</sup>  
 (I.ii.147-155)

Barabas's motive for revenge, the confiscation of his wealth, is clearly stated, and one can sympathize with him for the "exceeding wrong" which he must suffer at the dictation of the state.

Barabas also has an intense love for his daughter—at least initially—and although he starts plotting against his enemies almost immediately, the audience can still feel a certain sympathy for his plight since Barabas, being a Jew, can hope for no means of redress within the structure of the law. But the play soon becomes a continuous round of intrigues, plots, policies, and murders, always overshadowed by the sinister figure of Barabas. Barabas's lust for revenge, power, and wealth make him fascinating, but one hardly cares about his inevitable death.

The aspects of counter-intrigue in The Jew of Malta come about in the person of Ithamore, ostensibly the ally of Barabas, but also almost

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<sup>24</sup> References to the text of The Jew of Malta in this paper are to the edition of The Complete Plays of Christopher Marlowe prepared by Irving Ribner (New York: Odyssey Press, Inc., 1963).

his equal as a villain. This is a modification of the counter-intrigue found in The Spanish Tragedy and Titus Andronicus, where the intricate treacheries are more obviously of opposing enemies.

Philip Hanslowe recorded in his diary a performance of Titus Andronicus by Sussex's Men on January 24, 1594.<sup>25</sup> Shakespeare, although melodramatic in Titus Andronicus, nevertheless uses a blood feud which, while having historical reference to Roman society, was certainly familiar to his audience.<sup>26</sup> The revenge theme in this play is introduced through the inflexibility of Titus, the noble Roman general. His moral choices, based on his Roman upbringing, customs, and stoicism, activate the various plots, murders, and horrors witnessed on the stage; they lead, of course, to his own downfall.

A brief outline of Titus Andronicus might better explain why the play qualifies as revenge tragedy. After a war against the Goths, Titus has some public support for becoming emperor; however, he supports Saturninus, the son of the late emperor. Meanwhile, Titus has had Tamora's son Alarbus killed. It is obvious that Titus's assent to Alarbus's execution is motivated by duty, moral code, and custom, but his action precipitates the vengeance of Tamora who, just as obviously, has been grievously injured. Nicholas Brooke notes that the roots of

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<sup>25</sup> J. C. Maxwell, ed., "Introduction," The Tragedy of Titus Andronicus by William Shakespeare, 3rd ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1968), p. xx.

<sup>26</sup> Nicholas Brooke, Shakespeare's Early Tragedies (London: Methuen and Co., Ltd., 1968), p. 27.

Titus's total alienation are embedded in Act I.<sup>27</sup>

Perhaps this factor of alienation was borrowed by Shakespeare from The Spanish Tragedy.<sup>28</sup> Hieronimo consciously repudiates orthodox approval for his actions. But Shakespeare makes the alienation a central fact. Tamora becomes diabolical in her desire for revenge as soon as she gains the favor of Saturninus:

I'll find a day to massacre them all,  
And race their faction and their family,  
The cruel father, and his traitorous sons,  
To whom I sued for my dear son's life;  
And make them know what 'tis to let a queen  
Kneel in the streets and beg for grace in vain.  
(Tit. I.i.450-455)<sup>29</sup>

The action of Tamora brings about the need for revenge on the part of Titus. After suffering the ignominy of disgrace, the horror of the rape and mutilation of his daughter Lavinia, and the injustice of the execution of his sons, Titus changes from the noble warrior into a savage beast. He becomes irrational and seeks revenge:

Marc. Rent off thy silver hair, thy other hand  
Gnawing with thy teeth; and be this dismal sight  
The closing up of our most wretched eyes.  
Now is a time to storm; why art thou still?  
Tit. Ha, ha, ha!  
Marc. Why dost thou laugh? it fits not with this hour.  
Tit. Why, I have not another tear to shed:  
Besides, this sorrow is an enemy,  
And would usurp upon my wat'ry eyes.

<sup>27</sup> Brooks, p. 38.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 38.

<sup>29</sup> References to the text of Titus Andronicus in this paper are to the edition prepared by J. C. Maxwell for Arden Shakespeare (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1968).

And make them blind with tributary tears:  
 Then which way shall I find Revenge's cave?  
 (III.i.260-270)

In this instance human suffering does not lead to ennoblement, as it does later in King Lear, but to bestiality, and there develops a degeneracy of characters that excludes them from all sympathy of the audience.

Before evaluating these plays as revenge tragedies, or arriving at any conclusions, one should examine the particular techniques that Kyd, Marlowe, and Shakespeare employ--the similarities and the differences in their approaches to the genre. All three of the plays have similar themes and styles, and include a profusion of blood. In The Spanish Tragedy Andrea's Ghost and Revenge return from the underworld, not only to view the action of the play as spectators, but also to insure that Andrea's death in battle will be avenged. The Ghost and Revenge are, in effect, the chorus, commenting on characters and action at the end of each act. There is nothing equivalent to a chorus in the other two plays, but Machiavel does set the tone of The Jew of Malta as a prologue-speaker:

But whither am I bound? I come not, I,  
 To read a lecture here in Britain,  
 But to present the tragedy of a Jew  
 Who smiles to see how full his bags are crammed,  
 Which money was not got without my means.  
 I crave but this: grace him as he deserves,  
 And let him not be entertained the worse  
 Because he favors me.

(Prologue 28-35)

In Titus Andronicus, Revenge is summoned, and when Titus inquires

whether Justice has been met, Publius answers:

No. my good lord, but Pluto sends you word,  
If you will have Revenge from hell, you shall.  
(IV.iii.37-38)

Later in the play, Tamora, disguised as Revenge, reminds the audience that Revenge has been summoned:

I will encounter with Andronicus,  
And say I am Revenge, sent from below  
To join with him and right his heinous wrongs.  
(V.ii.2-4)

Each of the plays also makes extensive use of asides as a method for deception and dissembling.

As for more substantive comparisons in content between the plays, one can note, for example, the following points of similarity between The Spanish Tragedy and The Jew of Malta. Kyd's Lorenzo is a prototype of Barabas, and the action of The Jew of Malta is mainly an elaboration of similar action in The Spanish Tragedy. Once Abigail turns against Barabas, the play concerns itself mostly with his attempts to do away with all those who have knowledge of the deaths of Lodowick and Mathias. Marlowe inverts the plot of The Spanish Tragedy by taking over the counter-action (Lorenzo's disposal of his accomplices) as the main line for The Jew of Malta: Barabas's scheming reminds one of Lorenzo's.

A recent study by Eric Rothstein points out that Marlowe has also inverted the parent-child relationship. The essence of this inversion is expressed in the lines where Abigail professes herself "The hopeless daughter of a hapless Jew" (I.ii.316) to gain admission to the nunnery,

a line that parodies Hieronimo's "The hopeless father of a hapless son" (IV.iv.84).<sup>30</sup>

The Jew of Malta owes an obvious debt to The Spanish Tragedy for much of its characterization and action, and yet in many respects it is just as obviously different from the latter play. The villain is now the protagonist, and thus the theme of blood revenge in a revenge play is discarded. Revenge of another nature motivates the action of The Jew of Malta, and other villainous motives are added to show the evil character of the protagonist. In the end it is Barabas's lust for wealth and power, not lust for revenge, that causes the catastrophe. Marlowe awards a financial plot the dignity of Kyd's revelation of blood revenge.<sup>31</sup>

Aaron in Titus Andronicus and the Jew Barabas are similar characters, seeming to enjoy villainy for villainy's sake. Aaron's circumstantial account of his misdeeds (V.i,124-144) suggests at once the similar claims of offenses which Barabas lists in The Jew of Malta (II.iii.171-198). A few lines from each will suffice to show the glee with which each views his life-long iniquities:

Few come within the compass of my curse,  
Wherein I did not some notorious ill:  
As kill a man, or else devise his death;  
Ravish a maid, or plot the way to do it;  
Accuse some innocent, and forswear myself;  
Set deadly enmity between two friends.

(Tit. V.i.126-131)

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<sup>30</sup> Eric Rothstein, "Structure and Meaning in The Jew of Malta," Journal of English and Germanic Philology, 65 (April 1966), 265.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 265.

He closes this speech with:

But I have done a thousand dreadful things  
As willingly as one would kill a fly,  
And nothing grieves me heartily indeed  
But that I cannot do ten thousand more.  
(Tit. V.i.141-144)

Similarly, Barabas boasts:

As for myself, I walk abroad 'a nights  
And kill sick people groaning under walls,  
Sometimes I go about and poison wells.  
(Jew II.iii.171-173)

Aaron's scheming parallels and complements Tamora's revenge plans, as in the rape and mutilation of Lavinia, but, inexplicably, Aaron does not then fall a victim, as Tamora does, to Titus's blood revenge.

This playing out of blood revenge is the major similarity between Titus Andronicus and The Spanish Tragedy. Revenge constitutes the main action of both plays. Both Titus and Hieronimo believe that there is no hope of justice on this earth. Each alienates himself from society and resorts to dissembling and deceit as the means of accomplishing revenge. Both experience periods of madness, and the madness of Titus, like that of Hieronimo's, has a method in it. Hieronimo's Vindicta mihi speech (III.xiii.1-44) is carefully reasoned and reflects a mind neither confused nor strained; but in the words of David Laird, Hieronimo's mind is "acutely and precisely capable of confronting the issues that the question of revenge would have inevitably raised for the thoughtful men of the Renaissance."<sup>32</sup> Hieronimo uses the performance which

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<sup>32</sup> David Laird, "Hieronimo's Dilemma," Studies in Philology, 62 (April 1965), 138.

his enemies have proposed as a means of destroying them. Likewise, Titus, even in his frenzied madness, is still shrewd enough to see through the disguises of Tamora and her sons to turn their treachery to their own destruction.

The three plays also contain a number of parallel episodes. The feigned reconciliation in Titus Andronicus between Saturninus and Titus, brought about by Tamora (I.i.428-495) to facilitate her scheme of revenge, reminds one of the similarly hypocritical scene of reconciliation between Hieronimo and Lorenzo in The Spanish Tragedy. When Titus arranges a hunt in honor of the emperor's marriage (Tit. II.ii), his role is similar to that of Hieronimo when he entertains the king and the Portuguese ambassador with his Masque in Act I of The Spanish Tragedy. The scene in Titus Andronicus where Chiron and Demetrius murder Bassianus in a forest and drag off Lavinia resembles that scene in The Spanish Tragedy in which Lorenzo and Balthazar murder Horatio in the forest bower and drag off his love, Bel-imperia. Even more striking are the lamentations of the two fathers. Thus Titus cries:

'Tis you must dig with mattock and with spade,  
And pierce the inmost centre of the earth;  
Then, when you come to Pluto's region,  
I pray you, deliver him this petition;  
Tell him, it is for justice and for aid,  
And that it comes from old Andronicus.  
(Tit. IV.iii.11-16)

Hieronimo laments:

Though on this earth justice will not be found,  
I'll down to hell, and in this passion  
Knock at the dismal gates of Pluto's court.  
(Span. Trag. III.xiii.108-110)

Although the playwrights handle the plays differently, the episode in which the revenge in each play is consummated makes use of a similar technique. Hieronimo's play within a play, Titus's banquet feast, and the defense preparations in The Jew of Malta all have a direct bearing on the downfall of the villains and the deaths of the protagonists.

Finally, it is probably true that the execration of Jews in Elizabethan England dictated the choice of Barabas as Marlowe's villain. The distaste shown for Moors, who by their color were commonly associated with Satan, lent credence in the choice of Aaron and Ithamere as consummate villains.<sup>33</sup> These two classes of pariahs do not appear in The Spanish Tragedy, but the prevailing English belief in the vengeful and villainous qualities of foreigners suited the Elizabethan audience in this instance and thus lent a similar tone to the three plays.

Along with these similarities of character types, theme, episodes, techniques, and attitudes which have been considered, there are obvious differences in the three plays. Barabas, as opposed to both Hieronimo and Titus, is basically evil. Hieronimo and Titus have tragic character flaws that cause the chain reactions of the pursuit of blood revenge. However, The Jew of Malta does not have this kind of revenge as its basic theme; rather it has a protagonist who pursues power and greed for their own ends. One has the feeling that, even if the governor had not confiscated his property, Barabas would eventually have conspired to seize control of Malta anyway. The Spanish Tragedy and

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<sup>33</sup> Bowers, p. 117, n. 6.

Titus Andronicus have a seriousness of purpose that is not as evident in The Jew of Malta. Barabas is avenging a material injury, and his revenge in The Jew of Malta ends in Act III; the primary concern in the rest of the play is his attempts to save himself and to become master of Malta--the action of the play centers almost exclusively on Barabas. In The Spanish Tragedy the interest of the audience is divided between Hieronimo's revenge and the treacheries of Lorenzo. Marlowe's purpose, or lack of purpose, will receive careful examination later.

The differences in character between Titus and Hieronimo are more subtle; the most important difference is that Shakespeare takes pains to show Titus's flaws early in the play, whereas Hieronimo has a more sudden or at least rather inexplicable change of character; Titus is overbearingly proud and arrogant from the moment he steps on stage. Perhaps Shakespeare better prepares the audience for the shocking conclusion. Titus's demand that Alarbus be slain is justified by his moral beliefs; his murder of his son, Mutius, though righteous according to Roman standards, is an atrocity and is probably designed to move the audience's sympathy away from him; Titus suffers far more horrible tortures than Hieronimo, and in turn his retaliations are far more frightful. The audience is then psychologically prepared for the justice of his death. In the first two acts of The Spanish Tragedy Hieronimo is portrayed as a humble, obedient servant to the king. Serving in the capacity of the king's marshall, Hieronimo has gained renown as a just administrator. His character changes radically after he vows revenge in Act III; from this point on he is a deceitful, devious, unjust man.

Titus Andronicus, The Spanish Tragedy, and The Jew of Malta also have plot differences. Aaron is more than the equal of Ithamore as a villainous accomplice, but is dropped out of the play before the culmination of the action, nor does he suffer the downfall that overcomes the principal characters of the other plays. Titus's madness also is more natural than Hieronimo's in similar circumstances, probably because Titus suffers more horrendous tortures.

Atmosphere and spectacle comprise the ultimate difference within the three plays. Although each drama is full of deeds of violence, none of the characters can match Barabas's deception and villainy. Only Titus Andronicus has bloody spectacles, rapes, mutilations, and killings directly on the stage throughout the course of the play. In The Jew of Malta, and to a lesser extent in The Spanish Tragedy, the audience hears of most violent acts only after they have taken place off-stage or, alternatively, views them dimly in the shadows of night.

Although treatment and emphasis of plot and characters differ, one can see in these three early English revenge tragedies a definite promise of the later complexity that was to enrich Elizabethan drama. The three plays not only make use of episodic scenes, but they also encompass extended periods of time, as distinct from classical tragedy, which characteristically focuses on one moment of crisis. Even within the narrow framework of revenge, the individual authors show a keen insight into human nature. In Hieronimo one sees hesitation and indecision overcome, but not to any noble end. Barabas illustrates the part that sinister policy can play in human affairs. In the character

of Titus the paradox of nobility gone mad is presented to the audience for their bemusement.

In all three of the plays, none of the characters really attracts much sympathy. The protagonists, and those close to them, are isolated from and by a corrupt society. As Titus reflects in one of his anguished outbursts:

Why, foolish Lucius, dost thou not perceive  
That Rome is but a wilderness of tigers?  
Tigers must prey, and Rome affords no prey  
But me and mine.

(III.1.53-56)

It is this general malaise of society, almost as much as their injuries, that spurs the characters to action. Nevertheless, the protagonists, even the despicable Barabas, represent facets of the human condition; driven to act, they rely on their own cunning to enforce their "justice" but end up ensnared in their own carefully-crafted schemes.

A more detailed evaluation of the revenge and tragic aspects of the three plays makes clearer the concern of the playwrights with the human condition. In The Spanish Tragedy the fundamental motive for tragic action is, as previously established, revenge. However, the actual vengeance of Hieronimo for the murder of his son is not conceived until midway in the play (II.iv). Although the initial motive for revenge is that of Andrea's death in battle, and although Andrea's Ghost and Revenge return from the underworld to view the workings of revenge as spectators of the stage action, Kyd never conclusively establishes that Andrea's death justifies revenge. Given the nebulous justification for Andrea's revenge, Kyd shifts the action of revenge from

Andrea to Hieronimo. The tragedy begins when the murder of Horatio provides a more justifiable cause for revenge. The play does conclude in the satisfaction of Andrea and Revenge, but the audience may find morally questionable the unnecessary deaths that minister to that satisfaction.

Hieronimo's revenge extends to the murderer's innocent kin and includes the suicide of Bel-imperia, after which Hieronimo stabs himself. The revenge is accomplished with irony and deceit. The audience might also find deplorable the epilogue in which the Ghost gloats over the prospect of his enemies suffering in hell. Kyd's use of the Ghost and Revenge as characters is an awkward device; this he must have realized since they become unimportant to the action of the play after the first scene.

A reasonable dramatic device is the hesitation of Hieronimo, who requires much proof and the failure of legal justice before overcoming his doubts and resorting to private revenge. Kyd has been especially careful in making Hieronimo the kind of man who would, in the Elizabethan climate of opinion, escape censure. Hieronimo has been grievously wronged, but before deciding to take justice into his own hands, he tries to effect revenge through the legal system of which he is an honorable representative. His madness, brought on by his grief and sense of obligation to his dead son, also delays his actions.

Trickery and counter-intrigue are other dramatic devices used extensively by Kyd. The unscrupulousness of the villain Lorenzo is matched against the increasing monomania of Hieronimo. Kyd also draws

parallels to emphasize the main situation; Hieronimo's grief, for example, is paralleled by the petitioner whose son has been killed, and Hieronimo's madness has a counterpart in Isabella's.<sup>34</sup>

Kyd's use of irony further heightens the dramatic and tragic effects of The Spanish Tragedy. The audience realizes that Horatio must contribute to his own murder to unleash the furies of revenge. Horatio's words of love to Bel-imperia--which he speaks without realizing their full significance in the presence of the traitorous Pedringano--are poignant in their irony:

Now that the night begins with sable wings  
To overcloud the brightness of the sun,  
And that in darkness pleasures may be done,  
Come Bel-imperia, let us to the bower,  
And there in safety pass a pleasant hour.  
(II.iv.1-5)

When Bel-imperia is uneasy, Horatio tries to reassure her by reference to the romantic situation:

Bel. I know not what myself:  
And yet my heart foretells me some mischance.  
Hor. Sweet say not so, fair fortune is our friend,  
And heavens have shut up day to pleasure us.  
The stars, thou seest, hold back their twinkling shine,  
And Luna hides herself to pleasure us.  
(II.iv.14-19)

But Horatio's references to night, darkness, and the actions of the heavenly bodies in providing concealment for the lovers point not to happiness, but to disaster. Hieronimo exclaims on the discovery of Horatio's body, "O heavens, why made you night to cover sin? / By day this deed of darkness had not been" (II.v.23-24).

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<sup>34</sup> Bowers, p. 72.

In addition to the immediate grief and suffering caused by the avenger's obsession with revenge, Kyd also makes his audience aware of the tragic side effects that can result in the pursuit of revenge and power. The royal houses of both Spain and Portugal suffer. This suffering is somewhat akin to the civil destruction in Rome in Titus Andronicus which is caused by Tamora and Aaron when they try to maintain their political positions by intrigues against Titus. Similarly, in The Jew of Malta, the government, by seizing Barabas's property and provoking his scheming, is trying to save itself from the Turkish invasion. Love too is corrupted. Peter Murray notes that Balthazar's love for Bel-imperia leads him to hate and kill, just as Hieronimo's love for his son leads to a lust for justice that makes him paradoxically unjust.<sup>35</sup>

The range of attitudes in The Spanish Tragedy that prompt the characters to vengeance is remarkable: the slight to Andrea's honor and the ending of his love plans that come with his death in battle; the envy nurtured by Balthazar toward a successful rival in love and war; and the outrage felt by Hieronimo on the assassination of his innocent son. Each of these characters suffers injury, and each seeks bitter retaliation. Kyd, by making revenge central to The Spanish Tragedy, presents a cogent way of dramatizing human conflict and competitiveness; for the sake of the audience, blood revenge exaggerates familiar antagonisms.

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<sup>35</sup> Murray, p. 38.

In Titus Andronicus and in The Jew of Malta revenge is also the mainspring of action. Titus follows the same single-minded pursuit as Hieronimo, but Shakespeare places greater emphasis on the counter-revenge of the antagonist villains. Barabas's pursuit, equally single-minded, spreads beyond the bounds of mere revenge to include the lust for power. Marlowe places his villain in the position of protagonist and emphasizes the master-villain role. As noted before, each author makes certain that sympathy is withdrawn from the protagonist when his actions become diabolical. The audience perceives the ultimate injustice of revenge—and the destruction of the innocent as well as the guilty—whenever a man, blinded by his lust for justice, turns to private revenge. The avenger may even become so deluded that he believes he is directed by some divine purpose.

The Jew of Malta, different from the other two plays in that blood revenge is not evident, nevertheless can be understood in terms of revenge, passion, lust, and love turned sour. T. S. Eliot suggests that The Jew of Malta might be considered as a farce; if so, the last act becomes understandable and not a mere deterioration in craftsmanship as some readers might otherwise dismiss it.<sup>36</sup> If Marlowe intended his play to end as a farce, it serves to show how the Elizabethan stage was developing a drama rich in human variety, although initially it was based on a narrow theme such as the pursuit of revenge. Viewing the play as a farce would also help to explain what some readers might con-

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<sup>36</sup> T. S. Eliot, "Seneca in English Translation," Essays on Elizabethan Drama (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1956), p. 62.

sider to be a lack of purpose and seriousness on Marlowe's part. There is certainly no doubt where Barabas stands in life:

Thus loving neither, will I live with both,  
 Making a profit of my policy,  
 And he from whom my most advantage comes  
 Shall be my friend.

(V.ii.111-114)

The other characters in the play with whom Barabas comes into conflict, except for the short-lived Abigail, cannot elicit sympathy or partisanship. They are mostly double-dealing accomplices, such as Ithamore, or stupid friars and greedy government officials. Marlowe depicts a de-based humanity, empty men living in a world of ostentatious wealth.

In Titus Andronicus Shakespeare not only shows the meaning of human destruction, but develops further aspects of revenge drama as well. Aaron, for example, is more than an accomplice in the manner of Ithamore in The Jew of Malta. For a while, Aaron forces Tamora into the background as he deals with Titus, while at the same time looking out for his own interests as well as those of his bastard son. Shakespeare not only gives Titus one antagonist but also complicates the counter-action by creating a villain who pursues evil for its own sake. This emphasis on the satanic Aaron distorts the symmetry of the plot, but Titus Andronicus can be considered an experimental play, uniting two dissimilar methods of plotting and tragic theories.<sup>37</sup> Certainly, Aaron can be recognized as a prototype of later stage villains, but he cannot be equated with such subtle and well-rounded villains as Iago and Edmund.

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<sup>37</sup> Bowers, p. 118.

As one evaluates The Spanish Tragedy, The Jew of Malta, and Titus Andronicus as revenge tragedies, he questions whether there is a just basis for revenge in these plays, or if the pursuit of vengeance and its consequent tragedy lie in the movement of character, action, and the conjunction of circumstances? Peter Murray, in his analysis of The Spanish Tragedy, says that one cannot be sure whether Horatio is a liar or a hero. The audience can question Hieronimo's adulation of his son and view the situation not only from Hieronimo's point of view but also from that of Horatio's enemies. The murder of Horatio cannot be justified, but the audience can also question Hieronimo's obsessive pursuit of revenge for either Andrea or Horatio. The killing of Balthazar and Lorenzo is justified by their viciousness; Lorenzo in particular reaches the depths of evil in his dissembling to conceal murderous intentions.<sup>38</sup>

Character, action, and circumstances have even more obvious roles in The Jew of Malta. The list of Barabas's deceptions is too long to detail; circumstances dictate his devious stratagems. Barabas is always prepared to strike back at his enemies, but his rage is carefully controlled and his intentions always devious:

Ay, let me sorrow for this sudden chance.  
'Tis in the trouble of my spirit I speak:  
Great injuries are not so soon forgot.  
(I.ii.207-209)

Barabas also excuses his actions in terms of his Jewishness when it serves his purpose:

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<sup>38</sup> Murray, pp. 48-49.

Hard-hearted to the poor, a covetous wretch  
 That would for lucre's sake have sold my soul,  
 A hundred for a hundred I have ta'en,  
 And now for store of wealth may I compare  
 With all the Jews in Malta. But what is wealth?  
 I am a Jew, and therefore am I lost.  
 (IV.i.54-59)

Like Barabas, his accomplice Ithamore is unscrupulous; he is only too eager to attempt blackmail, and he turns against his master when he becomes involved with a courtesan who lusts after Barabas's gold. Ultimately, The Jew of Malta concerns the siege of Malta with emphasis upon the desperate plots of a vengeful Jew.

The crimes and passions of Titus Andronicus originate in an inflexible character, a man who slays his virtuous son in a quarrel:

Luc. My lord, you are unjust, and, more than so,  
 In wrongful quarrel you have slain your son.  
 Tit. Nor thou, nor he, are any sons of mine;  
 My sens would never so dishonor me.  
 (I.i.292-295)

Titus displays equally poor judgment when called upon to arbitrate rival claims for the empire; after accepting the invidious role of arbiter, he decides, without any consideration of the merits of the man, in favor of the boorish Saturninus. Titus, despite the misfortunes that result from his repeated lack of judgment, never arrives at any self-knowledge.

Kyd, Marlowe, and Shakespeare were experimenting with newly-created tragic rules of drama. They were stating truths about the human condition in a narrow theme—revenge and its concomitant effects. The fact that they could include so much variety despite this restrictive convention illustrates the validity of their experimentations. Their

plays, it would seem, were seminal to the English drama.

Although Shakespeare has proved to be the supreme exponent of tragic drama, the influences of Kyd and Marlowe are equally important in the early development of tragedy. Of special significance for the future of English tragedy was the theme of blood revenge forced as an obligated duty upon an avenger who was, at the start, powerless. When Kyd, in The Spanish Tragedy, abandoned the Ghost and trappings of Senecan revenge for a revenge based on a murder that had taken place before the audience, he gave them characters and a real life situation which they could appreciate.<sup>39</sup>

Although Marlowe wrote a villain play, it is doubtful that it could have been written as it was without the precedent of The Spanish Tragedy; Marlowe's use of Kyd's counter-action brought the role of the villain-protagonist into its own right. Shakespeare, in Titus Andronicus, experimented with greater emphasis on the actions of the villains than on the tardy revenge of Titus, the protagonist. Modifications and variety were now obviously possible, and a native English tragedy was well on its way to development.

The debt of later playwrights to the early experimentation with revenge as tragic drama by Kyd, Marlowe, and Shakespeare is probably greater than anyone realizes. The development of Elizabethan revenge tragedy began in an atmosphere of sober morals and newly-found philosophical insight. The insistence on duty, helplessness in the grip of

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<sup>39</sup> Bowers, p. 268.

circumstances, and the depicting of the vagaries of human emotions that faced the authors of these early revenge tragedies can only make one grateful for their creative efforts.

Furthermore, special credit must be given to Thomas Kyd who was the first to take over the old themes and use them in the creation of a drama of action which was swift, complicated, and enthralling. Marlowe could go on from this point, while Shakespeare, building upon his own early efforts and upon the achievements of Kyd, could carry the revenge play to its triumph in Hamlet with its ghost and its play within a play.

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