

THE SUBJECTIVITY OF REVENGE:  
SENECAN DRAMA AND THE DISCOVERY OF THE TRAGIC  
IN KYD AND SHAKESPEARE

JORDI CORAL

D.PHIL

THE UNIVERSITY OF YORK  
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH AND RELATED LITERATURE

SEPTEMBER 2001

But all the time life, always one and the same, always incomprehensibly keeping its identity, fills the universe and is renewed at every moment in innumerable combinations and metamorphoses. You are anxious about whether you will rise from the dead or not, but you have risen already – you rose from the dead when you were born and you didn't notice it. Will you feel pain? Do the tissues feel their disintegration? In other words, what will happen to your consciousness. But what is consciousness? Let's see. To try consciously to go to sleep is a sure way of having insomnia, to try to be conscious of one's own digestion is a sure way to upset the stomach. Consciousness is a poison when we apply it to ourselves. Consciousness is a beam of light directed outwards, it lights up the way ahead of us so that we do not trip up. It's like the head-lamps on a railway engine – if you turned the beam inwards there would be a catastrophe.

'So what will happen to your consciousness? *Your* consciousness, yours, not anybody else's. Well, what are *you*? That's the crux of the matter. Let's try to find out. What is it about you that you have always known as yourself? What are you conscious of in yourself? Your kidneys? Your liver? Your blood vessels? — No. However far back you go in your memory, it is always in some external, active manifestation of yourself that you come across your identity — in the work of your hands, in your family, in other people. And now look. You in others are yourself, your soul. This is what you are. This is what your consciousness has breathed and lived on and enjoyed throughout your life – your soul, your immortality, your life in others. And what now? You have always been in others and you will remain in others.

(*Doctor Zhivago*, III.iii)

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	v
ABSTRACT	vi

## PART I

CHAPTER ONE The Question of Senecan Revenge in Modern Renaissance Criticism	1
A. The Criticism of Tragic Revenge	2
B. The Criticism of Senecan Influence: 'Senecanism' versus Seneca	29
C. Towards a New Public Seneca	60
CHAPTER TWO Senecan Drama	80
A. Stoicism and Revenge	81
B. The Revenge Plays: <i>Medea</i> and <i>Thyestes</i>	92
C. The Chorus	116

## PART II

CHAPTER THREE <i>The Spanish Tragedy</i> I	125
A. The Community	126
B. The Machiavel	147
CHAPTER FOUR <i>The Spanish Tragedy</i> II	170
A. The Avenger	171
B. The Chorus	218

CHAPTER FIVE	<i>Titus Andronicus I</i>	225
A.	A Plausible Community	226
B.	The Implausibility of Machiavellism	242
CHAPTER SIX	<i>Titus Andronicus II</i>	259
The Avenger		260
CONCLUSION		291
BIBLIOGRAPHY		297

## Acknowledgments

Writing this thesis would have never been possible without the financial support of the British Council and the Foundation La Caixa at Barcelona, the Batista i Roca Programme of the Generalitat de Catalunya, and the British Academy. But even more important, of course, has been the moral support, without which very little can be achieved. During my long stay in England I have been very fortunate in meeting the people who are now my friends. In particular I should like to thank Christopher James, who is coming to Barcelona, Luis Murillo, Maria Cubel, Ana Agúndez, Antonia Parera (Madò), from the sacred island of Mallorca, Roberto León González, Toni and Cassia Ramírez de Arellano, Enrique Alfonseca, Robert Arbuckle, David and Helena Alexander, for their warmth and hospitality, Michael Cordner, for many delightful and stimulating conversations, Geoffrey Wall, and Graham Parry, for helping me understand a bit more about his country. But, above all, my greatest debt of gratitude is to my supervisor, Jacques Berthoud, whose support and example have been invaluable. I have indeed learnt much more from him than a thesis can reflect.

## Abstract

This thesis re-examines the relationship between Senecan drama and the emergence of the public tragedy of the 1580s and '90s. In criticism, this relationship has been understood as a continuation of the 'influence' Seneca had been exerting on the Universities and the Inns-of Court since the 1560s. This thesis challenges this established view on the grounds that it fails to explain the innovativeness of the public tragedies: the formative impact of Seneca could not be the same on conventional academic authors as on creative public dramatists.

Chapter I of this thesis explores and formulates this unresolved problem. Challenging the established view depends on the possibility of a Seneca who could offer a tragic vision alternative to academic moralism.

Chapter II is concerned with showing that the plays of this Seneca dramatize not moral certitudes but tragic contradictions; the 'tragic' Seneca is made possible by an unstable conception of the individual – who is simultaneously individual and social, or individual because social. The privileged *tragic* expression of this ambiguous selfhood is revenge.

Essentially, this thesis attempts to demonstrate that Senecan revenge so understood was fundamental to the earliest masterpieces of public revenge tragedy, *The Spanish Tragedy* and *Titus Andronicus*, and that Kyd's and Shakespeare's new treatment of revenge was facilitated by a re-discovery of Senecan tragedy as opposed to Senecan sensationalism.

Chapters III and IV (on *The Spanish Tragedy*) and Chapter V and VI (on *Titus Andronicus*) attempt to show that this recognition has been impeded by the inadequate notion of revenge that has dominated modern criticism.

Founded upon the orthodox pieties that Kyd and Shakespeare challenge, much of this criticism has obscured the distinctiveness of the Senecan avenger as against the Machiavel. This thesis conceives the would-be a-social Machiavel and the highly-socialized avenger in opposition to each other, but in order to reveal the inescapable social condition of the individual in both cases. At its moment of inception public revenge tragedy appears as a synthesis of tradition and modernity, social commitment and individual endeavour.

## PART I

## Chapter One

### The Question of Senecan Revenge in Modern Renaissance Criticism



## A. THE CRITICISM OF TRAGIC REVENGE

### I

For a long time, a rare critical consensus has credited *The Spanish Tragedy* with a foundational role in Elizabethan drama. Few critics would deny that the play marked a watershed in the evolution of English dramaturgy. Barber judges the play ‘nothing less than great, strategically great’<sup>1</sup>, while some go further, distinguishing it as ‘quite the most important single play in the history of English drama’<sup>2</sup>. Kyd’s revenge tragedy opened up a new dramatic age, and enjoyed an unprecedented popularity on the English stage. Equally, few critics would question that its popularity had something to do with its innovative treatment of revenge – a treatment that, as many would also agree, was distinctly Senecan. In fact, we know from the abundant quotations and parodies in the contemporary drama, and also from Ben Jonson’s famous jibe in the ‘Induction’ to *Bartholomew Fair*, that the only play in the period to rival *The Spanish Tragedy* in popularity was another revenge tragedy of Senecan facture, namely, *Titus Andronicus*, with which Shakespeare launched his tragic career<sup>3</sup>. Seneca and revenge, or rather, Senecan revenge, seems then to be the key to the new drama and its spectacularly successful start. However, neither revenge nor Seneca can be said to be foreign to the pre-Kydian stage. English revenge plays existed well before the year of *The Spanish Tragedy*, the Senecanized *Gorboduc* of 1556 having been aptly recognized as the first English revenge tragedy. This being so, it would seem that to the extent that Kyd and Shakespeare made an unprecedented impact with their revenge plays, there must have been something distinctly original about their avengers. And, clearly, the extraordinary appeal of Hieronimo and Titus was not achieved in imitation of their academic predecessors. The new element in revenge that Kyd and Shakespeare introduce into the English stage demands, then, an explanation. Something deeply appealing about the new public avenger extinguished the preceding generation of

---

<sup>1</sup> C.L.Barber, *Creating Elizabethan Tragedy. The Theatre of Marlowe and Kyd*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1988, p.131.

<sup>2</sup> T.McAlindon, *English Renaissance Tragedy*, Macmillan, Hong Kong, 1986, p.55.

<sup>3</sup> For the context of Jonson’s remark, see Ian Donaldson, ‘Perishing and Surviving: The Poetry of Donne and Jonson’, *Essays in Criticism*, LI 1 (2001), pp.74-75.

avengers. What this may be, however, remains unclear, for revenge criticism has tended to stress the continuity, rather than the creative leap, existing between pre- and post-Kydian drama. In the following discussion I intend to address this problem, arguing that the distinct nature of the public avenger was made possible by a *re-discovery* of Senecan tragedy on Kyd and Shakespeare's part, a re-discovery that gave rise to a different conception of revenge from that found in academic 'Senecanism'<sup>4</sup>. I also propose to show that if this has not been sufficiently recognized it is because of the inadequate conception of revenge that prevails in the criticism of Elizabethan drama, which is able to do justice only to the academic drama's treatment of revenge. In this thesis I shall try to articulate a theory of vengeance that explains both the orthodoxy of Elizabethan academic drama and the creativeness of the public drama.

## II

The reductive idea of revenge that has dominated in criticism was established by Lily B. Campbell in 1931. Campbell's 'Theories of Revenge in Renaissance England' determined the modern approach to revenge tragedy by foregrounding, as the key to the interpretation of this tragedy, the Tudor-Stuart attitudes towards vengeful practice -- including the revenge of blood, the duel, and the blood feud. Against what she saw as an excessive emphasis on the 'dramatic forebears' of Elizabethan revenge plays -- that is, Senecan tragedy -- Campbell asserted 'the general philosophy of revenge' produced by the thinkers of the period to regulate contemporary vengeful practices. From the examination of Elizabethan moral philosophy, Campbell concluded that 'there was a persistent condemnation of revenge in the ethical teaching of Shakespeare's England, a condemnation which was logically posited and logically

---

<sup>4</sup> In the period covered by this thesis the meaning of the proper noun 'Seneca' is variable. I shall therefore distinguish between Seneca as interpreted by the public playwrights -- *public Seneca* -- and Seneca as received by the University and Inns-of-Court dramatists and translators -- *academic Seneca* or '*Senecanism*'. I will also refer to modern critics who fail to distinguish between these two different receptions as '*Senecanists*'. Occasionally, when I refer to the general engagement of the sixteenth century with Seneca, that is, in those contexts where the distinction between the academic and the public Seneca is not important, I will use the label '*Elizabethan Seneca*'.

defended'<sup>5</sup>. It is Campbell's thesis that this ethical reprobation must guide our understanding of revenge tragedy, as it guided that of Elizabethan audiences. Thus she posits Christian orthodoxy as the interpretative framework of revenge. As far as revenge is concerned, Christian orthodoxy means the orthodoxy of providentialism, founded upon the divine injunction from the Epistles to the Romans to leave all vengeance to God – in the Geneva Bible version: 'Recompense to no man evil for evil. . . . Dearly beloved, auenge not your selues, but giue place vnto wrath: for it is written, vengeance is mine: I will repaye, saith the Lord' (XII:17,19)<sup>6</sup>. For Campbell, the certainty of God's vengeance against crime, and the consequent prohibition of individual action against it, defines the co-ordinates in which the avenger operates:

the teaching of the Scriptures seemed to the Elizabethans to include both a command and a promise, not only did God forbid man to recompense evil for evil; he also proclaimed vengeance as his own prerogative, and he proclaimed the everlasting truth that he would repay. No consideration of the attitude towards revenge can, then, be complete which does not see the complementary nature of these two principles which must forever govern man's attitude towards revenge<sup>7</sup>.

Essentially medieval, this retributive framework characterizes a rich native tradition conformed by a) the metrical, i.e non-dramatic, tragedies inspired by the *Fall of Princes*, of which the most influential one in the period was *The Mirror for Magistrates*; b) the literature of prodigies and natural disasters (plagues, famine) revealed as visitations of God's avenging wrath; and c) the production of pamphlets disclosing the intricate workings of God's vengeance behind apparently fortuitous events. Campbell presents Elizabethan revenge drama as a continuation of this native medievalizing tradition, thus downplaying the specifically dramatic treatment of revenge. She derives her conception of revenge from sixteenth-century received ideas of revenge, and expects the plays to be a reflection of them. Revenge drama acquires a moral significance at the expense of its dramatic quality. As a result, the plays

---

<sup>5</sup> Lily B. Campbell, 'Theories of Revenge in Renaissance England', *Modern Philology* 38 (1931), p.281.

<sup>6</sup> All citations of the Geneva Bible are to *The Geneva Bible. A facsimile of the 1560 edition*, University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, Milwaukee and London, 1969.

<sup>7</sup> Campbell, *op.cit.*, p. 282.

become a reflection of the 'trickle-down' scheme of retribution as defined by orthodox morality:

[it is] apparent, it seems to me, that the great tragic theme of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century teaching is this theme of God's revenge for sin. Writers of tragedies, both dramatic and non-dramatic tragedies, were necessarily preoccupied with this fundamental teaching. And all Elizabethan tragedy must appear as fundamentally a tragedy of revenge if the extent of the idea of revenge be but grasped. The threefold aspect of revenge must, however, be always held in mind; and revenge must be reckoned as including God's revenge, public revenge committed to the rulers by God, and private revenge forbidden alike by God and by the state as his representative<sup>8</sup>.

After Campbell, this tripartite retributive scheme, in which the justice of God occupies the central place, has come to dominate modern criticism: public revenge is understood in relation to divine revenge, as its endorsement in the community through the office of lawful magistrates; and private revenge in relation to public revenge, as the sinful appropriation of this office by the private individual. When this scheme is applied to the plays (as is invariably the case) tragic revenge is equated with private revenge, and is thus interpreted as a condemnable transgression against the law of God.

With Campbell, too, the assimilation of Senecan revenge into this retributive scheme finds its beginning. To be sure, Campbell concedes that 'however much the contemporary interest in revenge determined the trend in Elizabethan drama in this period, no student is likely to forget for a moment the Senecan inheritance supremely influential in dramatic tragedies of the revenge type'<sup>9</sup>. Nonetheless, this Senecan inheritance is never considered for a moment as posing a challenge to conventional morality, always triumphant in its retributive design. Far from provoking a re-examination of the received conventions of orthodoxy, Senecan revenge is assimilated into the providential order as a sinful act for which the avenger pays with his life. Campbell's providential zeal is such that she even tries to 'convert' the Senecan universe into moral orthodoxy: 'In Seneca, too, private revenge seems to be taking the place of divine vengeance as it was seen in the older Greek tragedies'<sup>10</sup>. She may concede that not all of the Senecan input was providential orthodoxy; however to her mind this is immaterial since, whatever the input, the Elizabethan output must remain providential. In this view, Elizabethan drama

---

<sup>8</sup> Campbell, *op.cit.*, p.290.

<sup>9</sup> Campbell, *op.cit.*, p.293.

<sup>10</sup> Campbell, *op.cit.*, p.294.

is never interpreted as the original fusion of two traditions of revenge, but as the assertion of one over the other:

Those Elizabethan dramatists who used Seneca as a model were not all illiterate, uncomprehending writers [i.e. crude imitators of Seneca]. Even apart from the more learned writers who wrote for more or less restricted groups there were among the writers for the public stage men who were quite capable of translating the Senecan treatment of revenge into their own philosophical vernacular. Horror might be piled on horror in their plays, man might undertake his private revenge, but in the end God was seen to be the true avenger, and God did not permit one who seized his prerogative of revenge to go himself unpunished<sup>11</sup>.

Thus, the Seneca assimilated into Elizabethan drama can be interpreted as a reflection of the orthodox retributive scheme. Senecan revenge is classified as yet another case of private revenge, albeit an uncommonly outrageous one. To label an act of revenge as 'private revenge' is to take for granted the tripartite scheme of retribution. The only difference between Senecan and Elizabethan revenge is that the former enacts revenge in a universe of ambiguous morality which leaves unclear the condemnation of the avenger. Absorbed into the Elizabethan providential universe, where such moral ambiguity does not exist, the private avenger is duly punished for his transgression against the law of God and His commonwealth. This punishment confirms that Elizabethan playwrights received Senecan drama in the only way their Christian morality made possible: as a Seneca *moralisé*.

Since subsequent critics build on Campbell's retributive idea of vengeance, they retain the Seneca *moralisé* that derives from her scheme. In essence, if not in every detail, post-Campbell revenge criticism follows the programme that Campbell establishes for it:

Two questions must, then, must be borne in mind as we re-read the dramas of Kyd and Chapman and Marston and Shakespeare and Webster and Tourneur and all that great company of those who wrote of private revenge: Does the dialogue make clear whether the avenger has the right to take upon himself the prerogative of public avenger, executing God's justice upon others? Does the plot make clear whether or not God executes vengeance upon the avenger?<sup>12</sup>

As we shall see, the extent of Campbell's influence can be judged from the degree to which current discussions of *The Spanish Tragedy* continue to centre on the *legitimacy* of Hieronimo's vengeful act.

---

<sup>11</sup> Campbell, op.cit., p.294.

<sup>12</sup> Campbell, op.cit., p.296.

In order to transcend the moralizing interpretations of this seminal play (and of its successor *Titus Andronicus*) it is essential, therefore, to be aware of the assumptions about revenge on which they are founded.

Campbell's ethical approach to revenge tragedy – and the correlation of divine, public, and private justice on which it rests – became entrenched in criticism after its refinement by Fredson Bowers. In his 1940 *Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy 1587-1642*<sup>13</sup>, the most influential study on Elizabethan revenge drama to appear, Bowers consolidated the approach to revenge plays based on Tudor-Stuart attitudes towards vengeance. Bowers reaffirms Campbell's point that the Christian injunction against revenge determined the interpretation of the avenger's experience. But he expands Campbell's thesis by showing that, competing with the anti-revenge Christian lobby, there also existed a pro-revenge party which supported a secular ethic of blood revenge in the specific case of murdered kinsmen. In Bowers's analysis, the key to revenge drama remains the Elizabethan moral regulation of revenge. However, revenge plays dealing with murdered kinsmen do not simply present an avenger confronted by the prohibitions of vengeance, as Campbell believes. Torn between two contradictory ethical codes, what such an avenger experiences is a moral tension, which Bowers regards as reflecting a society in historical change. For him, Campbell's merely moral debate about revenge must be regarded as the product of a historical competition for moral centrality between two different codes of redress. The age of Elizabeth was experiencing a paradigm shift from an immemorial blood-revenge code to the centralized law of the modern state. Thus the moral ambiguity characteristic of the dramatic representation of revenge reflected a historical process. Bowers understands this process as follows:

In the earliest times, when there was no state, the individual could only right his wrongs through private revenge, for no other form of justice could exist. The consciousness of justice, and the need to make it the foundation of the community, had not yet materialized in a law that all could recognize to be in their interest to observe. Whenever a grievous injury was received, the victim, attacked directly

---

<sup>13</sup> Fredson Bowers, *Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy 1587-1642*, Peter Smith, Gloucester, Mass., 1959 [1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1940].

or through kin, had no option but to return violence for violence. Since to forgo his right to do so would imply to deny himself and his family justice, what was a right became a duty. As civilization progressed, this primitive state of private justice, that is to say, of public lawlessness, came gradually to be replaced by a proto-form of communal law which vindicated justice by prohibiting private revenge. Thus, as an obligation started to turn into a prohibition, the first step towards the modern state-based judicial system was taken. For Bowers, the evolution of primitive codes of redress is invariably in this direction. It is characteristic of barbaric tribes, for example, that sooner or later they replace the indiscriminate blood feud by the restricted vendetta. As a regulated mode of private revenge, the vendetta sets strict limits to retaliation, which usually take the form of the *talion* – ‘the strict law of like for like, which popularized exact and standardized punishments for certain injuries and thus made the penalty, inflicted on the injurer alone, more suitable to the offense’<sup>14</sup>. As they reached England, the invading Germanic tribes were in a state of incipient legality, their punitive practices switching from barbaric feud to restricted vendetta. Thereafter, the restrictions on blood revenge only increased. The well-known Anglo-Saxon system of *wergeld* – the amount paid in compensation for an injury– continued to regard punishment for injuries as a private matter between victim and offender, and endorsed the right of private warfare in the case of a failure of compensation. However, when the king started exacting a portion of the *wergeld* for himself, what had always been an offense between private subjects (or tort) was turned into a crime against the state (or felony). His action represented a leap towards state monopoly of punishment: ‘the feud was finally broken up not so much by Christianity as by the growth of a power which made attempts to concern itself in what had always been considered private wrongs’<sup>15</sup>.

Though uninterrupted, this attrition of blood revenge was only gradual, each new stage towards the establishment of the centralized law retaining significant traits from the previous, more primitive,

---

<sup>14</sup> Bowers, op.cit., p.4.

<sup>15</sup> Bowers, op.cit., p.5.

stage. For this reason, every period was a transitional one, and whatever form of justice characterized it, it never had a monopoly on redress: the archaic modes of retaliation it tried to supplant offered an alternative that was often resorted to. This transitional overlapping was also characteristic of later, highly developed societies, like that of the Norman period. The system of ‘appeals’ introduced by William the Conqueror, for example, meant the abrogation of the *wergeld* system; nonetheless, it retained ‘the spirit of the old blood revenge, for the nearest of kin had to take up the suit against the murderer and frequently fight it out with him in the direct revenge of judicial combat’<sup>16</sup>. Likewise, even after Henry VII had instituted the ‘indictment’ – effectively the last step in the configuration of public justice as understood in Elizabethan times – private revenge continued to exert its influence. The procedure of the ‘indictment’ – the accused was tried ‘on the presentation of information to the authorities’<sup>17</sup> – implied the total exclusion of victim and relatives from the punitive procedures, and demanded in consequence a surrender of any claim to revenge by private means on their part. All the same, the persistent belief in the right to avenge one’s private wrongs (or what was seen as such) meant that this legal injunction was often ignored. Thus, it is essential to recognize that, as Bowers concludes, ‘in spite of the fact that justice was the sole prerogative of the Elizabethan state, with any encroachment on its newly won privilege liable to severe punishment, the spirit of revenge had scarcely declined in Elizabethan times’<sup>18</sup>. Hence ‘the constant war against the private lawlessness of the times’<sup>19</sup>, in which the moral condemnation emphasized by Campbell was the principal weapon.

For Bowers, then, the appreciation of revenge drama demands a recognition of the fact that this major socio-legal change was incomplete by the time this drama was being produced. And this recognition exposes the partiality of Campbell’s reading:

According to this view [Campbell’s] the audience was prevented by its ethical and religious

---

<sup>16</sup>Bowers, *op.cit.*, p.7.

<sup>17</sup> Bowers, *loc.cit.*

<sup>18</sup> Bowers, *op.cit.*, p.8.

<sup>19</sup> Bowers, *op.cit.*, p.12.



education from applauding the motives of the stage-revengers. The last conclusion is perhaps too rigid. While it is impossible to deny the immense force of the ethical condemnation of revenge. . . yet the writings of the preachers, philosophers, and moralists of the age cannot be wholly depended upon to afford an accurate cross-section of the views of the dramatists or of the audience, both of whom were swayed by equally strong influences from another direction.<sup>20</sup>

In short, Campbell's theory needs to be complemented by the pro-revenge ethics of secular derivation.

Because of this alternative morality, avengers like Hieronimo or Hamlet appeared in a less damning light to Elizabethan audiences than Campbell believes:

There is no question that the Elizabethans firmly believed the law of God to forbid private vengeance. Correspondingly, there was a real tradition existing in favour of revenge under certain circumstances. . . many thoughtful men refused to condemn revenge entered upon in cases where recourse to the law was impossible. There would be few Elizabethans who would condemn the son's blood-revenge on a treacherous murderer whom the law could not apprehend.<sup>21</sup>

Whatever the reliability of Bowers' historical judgements, what is significant for our discussion about his qualification of Campbell is that it does not alter Campbell's principal premise, that the meaning of revenge tragedy must be understood as part of a moral debate about the legitimacy of private revenge. Bowers only adds one more element to this debate. Indeed, by emphasizing the claims of state law over private revenge, he further reinforces the tripartite scheme of private, public and divine justice, effectively defining revenge as the private attempt to secure justice 'when recourse to the law was impossible'. In the last analysis, then, the implication of this definition is that revenge means justice by extra-legal means.

Further proof of the essential continuity between Bowers and Campbell is their interpretation of the assimilation of Senecan revenge into Elizabethan drama. As in Campbell, so in Bowers: Senecan revenge is granted a significant role in the formation of Elizabethan tragedy. 'Senecan tragedy', he says, 'exercised for a time an important influence on the Elizabethan revenge play'<sup>22</sup>. But this 'important influence' is no more than a reinforcement of providentialism: what Elizabethan playwrights derive from Seneca is a sensationalist pagan background against which they assert their conventional morality. As

---

<sup>20</sup> Bowers, *op.cit.*, p.35.

<sup>21</sup> Bowers, *op.cit.*, p.40.

<sup>22</sup> Bowers, *op.cit.*, p.41.

a dramatiser of private revenge at its most scandalous, Seneca can offer no viable alternative conception of what avenging yourself means. For Bowers, Senecan tragedy must be regarded as a combination of morality and sensationalism. We confirm, then, that the ethical conception of revenge promoted by Campbell and adjusted by Bowers inhibits the discovery of a Seneca of any *conceptual* interest. As long as the ethical approach to revenge dominates, the Elizabethan Seneca must remain a Seneca *moralisé*:

The three main themes of Seneca's tragedies were lessons on the inconstancy of fortune, as in *Troades* and in the tragic story of Oedipus; portrayals of great crimes and examples of the evil results of murder, as in *Thyestes*, *Medea*, and *Agammenon*; and pleadings in favour of simplicity, of poverty, and of chastity, as in *Hercules Oetaeus* and *Hippolytus*. Of the three themes, that which treated murderers and their deeds is the most important, and inevitably made the greatest impression upon the Elizabethans. . . . Almost every one of the tragedies is built upon a 'strong' theme which gave ample opportunity for blood and horrors. Seneca delighted to dramatize the great crimes of antiquity, as in *Medea*, *Thyestes* and *Agammenon*.<sup>23</sup>

Thus the received conception of Senecan revenge derives from a preconception of what Elizabethan revenge drama was like. A re-examination of the impact of Seneca on Elizabethan revenge tragedy is bound to remain predictable until the original conception of Elizabethan tragic revenge is interrogated directly.

### III

Campbell and Bowers's tripartite scheme of vengeance systematizes the ethico-legal implications of revenge as conceived in Elizabethan orthodoxy. The correspondences that their model establishes between divine, public, and private justice regulate the various meanings that revenge could take in the sixteenth century. As a terminological guide, the scheme is entirely reliable. The problem arises with the interpretation of dramatic revenge. For these critics there is no problem: dramatic revenge is a function, and thus an illustration, of this orthodox scheme; and no distinction needs to be made between the doctrinal and the dramatic corpuses, since the second is a faithful reflection of the first. As one more product of Elizabethan orthodoxy, revenge tragedy must, and does, reflect the values of

---

<sup>23</sup> Bowers, *op.cit.*, p.41.

providentialism. What holds for doctrinal treatises also holds for revenge plays: the meaning of the latter is determined by our endorsement of the former. This seems to be the methodological premise that underpins the analyses of both Campbell and Bowers. For this reason, though their general theory has been largely found to be persuasive, readings of specific plays based on it have invariably run into difficulties. This is particularly the case with *The Spanish Tragedy* and *Titus Andronicus*. While it seems unlikely that Kyd's and Shakespeare's first treatments of revenge did not involve a profound and thus revolutionary insight into revenge, the moralized approach allows only for continuities of sameness between pre- and post-Kydian drama. The ethico-legal conception of vengeance cannot explain what is new about the public revenge plays of the 1580s and '90s.

The recognition of this problem is what prompted Ronald Broude to re-open the question of revenge and revenge drama in what is probably the most important article on this question since Bowers. Broude calls for the re-examination of the idea of revenge on the grounds that

subsequent critics [to Campbell and Bowers] have tended to read revenge plays in terms of the model thus established, and the actions of stage revengers are, accordingly, explained as fundamentally un-Christian, based upon a barbaric ethic derived from Senecan tragedy and the Anglo-Saxon blood feud. That this approach is not, however, entirely satisfactory is suggested by the inability of critics to agree upon the significance of several key revenges, notably those of Hieronimo and Titus.<sup>24</sup>

For Broude, the problem lies in the reductiveness of the idea of vengeance assumed by Campbell and Bowers. Accordingly, he argues for an extension of the concept of vengeance that reflects the fact that 'the Renaissance word *revenge* had a more extended meaning than the modern one, a meaning more nearly equivalent to today's *retribution*'<sup>25</sup>. The recognition of the wider sense of 'revenge' imposes a revision of the assumption that the avenger must necessarily be condemned for as great a depravity as those who wronged him – a conclusion to which Campbell and Bowers subscribe. According to Broude, Elizabethan audiences, aware of the retributive dimension of vengeance, would keep a double perspective on the play, certain that what appears to mortal eyes as unhallowed revenge may yet turn

---

<sup>24</sup> Ronald Broude, 'Revenge and Revenge Tragedy in Renaissance England', *Renaissance Quarterly*, XXVIII (1975), p. 39.

<sup>25</sup> Broude, loc. cit.

out to be an indirect form of divine justice. Events might seem to unfold in a random way, but audiences would know that God's directing hand would be present behind them. As a result of Broude's recovery of the full 'meanings and associations of the sixteenth-century word revenge'<sup>26</sup>, revenge begins to look different. He goes as far as to claim that 'the central interest of revenge tragedy is not, after all, revenge [but] . . . the operation of divine retribution and the ways in which various forms of human retribution are turned by Providence to the purposes of God's justice'<sup>27</sup>. Contrary to what Broude assumes, however, this qualification of Campbell and Bowers's theory does not offer a real alternative to the model he wants to transcend. What is more, in many ways his retributive emphasis intensifies the moralism on which the conclusions of his predecessors are predicated. Thus, though for Campbell private revenge constitutes a transgression against the law of God while for Broude it is a confirmation of this law, both critics agree that revenge tragedy inscribes itself in the moral tradition of 'broadside ballads, news pamphlets, metrical tragedies and novelle'<sup>28</sup>. Whether the avenger is seen to die in delivering the justice of God (Broude) or because he transgresses against it and must be punished (Campbell and Bowers), the climax of revenge tragedy is invariably perceived as a confirmation that God is in charge of the meaning of the play.

That Broude's re-examination of vengeance does not take us much beyond the conventional approach becomes clear when he proposes to break down the idea of retribution into 'each particular species of retribution authorized by any of the several socio-legal systems which co-existed uneasily in Tudor-Stuart England'<sup>29</sup>. As he spells out the variants into which retribution can materialize, the familiar tripartite scheme of justice re-appears – the term 'revenge', Broude explains, was used in the period to indicate a) 'retribution effected directly by an individual or family, that is, retribution effected without the intervention of any civil authority' (Broude notes that the word might be used 'without a shadow

---

<sup>26</sup> Broude, 'Revenge and Revenge Tragedy', p.40.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p.39.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p.54.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p.40.

of disapproval’); b) ‘the punishment meted out by the commonweal for acts defined by statute or custom as contrary to the public good: thus we find magistrates referred to as ‘the common avengers’ and the execution of their sentences as ‘public vengeance’; c) last but most important, ‘the Renaissance feeling for vengeance as a word proper to denote the retribution visited by God for transgression of His law’<sup>30</sup>. Thus, by emphasizing the retributive dimension of revenge what Broude does is to make explicit what has always been implicit in the model of his predecessors. His revision does not disclose any new meaning to the concept of ‘revenge’. He takes a different route, but he reaches the same moral predictability. Indeed, his description of the revelatory power of revenge drama is no less ‘formulaic’ than he thinks the plays to be:

the plays we call revenge tragedy may be read, at least on one level, as demonstrations of the ways in which God reveals and revenges secret crimes. Their treatments of this theme are highly conventionalized – indeed, formulaic. A secret crime – usually but not always murder – is committed. Fear of discovery goads the criminal into increasingly intricate and frantic stratagems, each of which Providence turns back upon him, so that his efforts to conceal his guilt serve instead to expose him.<sup>31</sup>

This analysis confirms that to approach tragic revenge from an ethical (Campbell) or legal (Bowers) or etymological (Broude) perspective is to end with the same orthodox conclusion. Broude rightly denounces the limitations of his predecessors’ approach to Kyd’s and Shakespeare’s early tragedies, but retains their tripartite scheme as his interpretative frame. As a result, the familiar socio-legal processes are invoked, and the predictable explicatory frame is generated:

It was not until the mid-sixteenth century, when the Tudor government pressed the claims of the state to a monopoly on all revenge, that the need was felt for terminology which would facilitate distinction among the agents by which revenge might be effected. To carve up the general ideal denoted by vengeance, the terms ‘divine vengeance’, ‘public vengeance’, and ‘private vengeance’ (vengeance taken by private subjects) were introduced.<sup>32</sup>

In the last analysis, then, Broude understands revenge as extralegal justice exactly like Bowers. When the legal machinery fails, private revenge takes over, and ‘justice’ is achieved:

---

<sup>30</sup> Broude, ‘Revenge and Revenge Tragedy’, p.41.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p.54.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p.42.

the world of the [revenge] play is shown in the end to be ruled by justice, and the impression of confusion to result from the limitations of human vision. If these limitations sometimes lead just men such as Hieronimo and Titus to feel deserted by their gods they also assure us that criminals such as Claudius and Barabas will end up hoist with their own petards. In a sense, then, revenge tragedy can be seen to mediate between the elegant simplicity of Tudor-Stuart theory and the demolarizing inconsistency of Tudor-Stuart justice<sup>33</sup>.

Hence Broude's conclusion that, in the end,

revenge tragedy may in some sense be understood as a form of response to the basic questions of crime and punishment posed by these transformations in socio-legal thought and practice<sup>34</sup>.

The result of interpreting revenge tragedy from this perspective is starkly revealed: revenge is entirely divorced from tragic experience to become an impersonal manifestation of bureaucratic progress. In Campbell, Bowers and Broude, revenge tragedy is conceived as an exploration of abstract laws in relation to which the avenger is purely instrumental, and the human factor marginalised. This approach takes the focus away from the avenger and, directing it upwards towards greater things, ignores the all too human suffering it leaves below. Revenge becomes impersonal and loses whatever claim it might have had to tragic status.

#### IV

This perspective on revenge drama I have been describing is the dominant one in its criticism. It is characterized by two complementary assumptions: a) that revenge is provoked, and therefore explained, by the collapse of the law in the community; and b) that this collapse creates a moral conflict for the avenger (and his audience), poised between two contradictory systems of redress, one legitimate but ineffective, the other effective but illegitimate. Conceived as an extralegal vindication of justice, revenge creates real problems for any complex reading of revenge plays. It prohibits any real contradiction between the moral and the social. When an injustice creates a momentary contradiction between the two, revenge brings about a restoration of the proper order of things. Revenge is defined, then, as a regulating function of justice in the community. In this tradition, revenge is a relational concept in that it is defined in relation to the alternative modes of redress it supplants – justice by other

---

<sup>33</sup> Broude, 'Revenge and Revenge Tragedy', p.58.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p.39.

means, or divine justice by human means – that is, in relation to the legal and moral regulations that operate in the community<sup>35</sup>. To this idea of revenge, and for the reasons just adduced, I shall refer as *the regulative idea of revenge*. Just how central the regulative interpretation has become can be confirmed by almost any sample of recent commentary. Consider, for example, Katherine Eisaman Maus's introductory remarks to *Titus Andronicus*. Maus presents the play as part of the revenge tradition initiated by Kyd, and describes the characteristics of this type of play. Her focus of attention is on the avenger's society, regarded in terms of relations of power. Nothing could be further from the moralized approach of Campbell or Broude than her ideological awareness. However, the assumption of revenge as extra-legality remains unchanged:

English Renaissance revenge tragedies typically feature a man whose family members have been raped or murdered by a king, duke, or emperor. Because the administration of justice rests in the hands of the very person who has committed the outrage, no redress is obtainable through established institutions. As a result, the hero takes matters into his own hands.<sup>36</sup>

For all the critical distance that separates Bowers from Maus, the focus of her analysis remains fixated on the moral legitimacy of the avenger:

Renaissance revenge tragedy taps into the frustrations and ambivalences that must have accumulated in the hierarchical, deliberately inequitable social arrangements of early modern England. Spectators could experience a vicarious thrill of sympathy with the revenger, even while, at the end of the play, acknowledging the moral unacceptability of revenge and the necessity of the revenger's death.<sup>37</sup>

That revenge equals extralegal justice remains, then, the foundational dogma of revenge criticism.

However, a powerful alternative to this view has emerged in recent years. As greater and greater

---

<sup>35</sup> Broude illustrates this point when he emphasizes that revenge must be understood in relation to legality and providence, as 'examining the nature and forms of retribution and exploring the courses open to just men living in societies where civil justice has broken down. However, even in the work of playwrights less concerned with the philosophical aspects of retribution, the multifaceted quality of revenge tends to impose this sort of thematic structure, for the various forms of revenge portrayed are most readily understood in terms of their relationship to each other. Thus the nature of the revenge theme combined with dramatic convention to invite consideration of the religious, ethical, and sociolegal implications of revenge' (Broude, *Revenge and Revenge Tragedy*, p.56).

<sup>36</sup> K.E.Maus, 'Titus Andronicus', in *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed.by S.Greenblatt et al., Norton and Company, London and New York, 1997, p.371.

<sup>37</sup> Maus, loc.cit.

emphasis has been placed on those aspects of revenge omitted in the regulative analysis, a different conception of vengeance has started to form itself. These aspects tend to be related to the personal or 'subjective' dimension of vengeance, which the regulative view considers marginal to its meaning – if only because it approaches revenge as something totally external to the avenger. As we have seen, for the regulative view, it is the punitive law that revenge is allegedly supplanting. Thus the avenger is simply regarded as an agent of this law. His suffering finds its meaning in a higher end that transcends individual experience, namely the restoration of universal justice. When the current of justice is interrupted by crime, the avenger acts as a switch that re-establishes its flow. Such an approach affords no insight into his psychic experience, that is, into how *the avenger* experiences the impulse to revenge. In short, the regulative interpretation rationalizes the avenging impulse, presenting it as a choice forced upon the avenger by an imperfect legal system. As a result, the psychic upheaval that precipitates the act of revenge is left unexamined and the tragic dimension of revenge drama ignored. Even at its most subjective, the experience of revenge is analysed as a moral dilemma that can be resolved by an act of will. What matters is the universal necessity that programmes the avenger to restore the order of the law of God. For this reason, the extreme suffering of the avenger, and the psychic crisis it signals, become sidelined.

The most interesting recent work on revenge drama, however, shows an increasing recognition that revenge must be approached first and foremost as a tragic experience defined by the subjective condition of the avenger. Thus, in her brilliant introduction to *Hamlet* (also a brilliant introduction to Elizabethan revenge tragedy in general) Anne Barton begins with the familiar description of two sixteenth century codes of redress, brought into conflict by a breakdown of the law:

In Elizabethan England, too, the conviction that retaliation for murder was solely the prerogative of the state and its legal institutions clashed with an irrational but powerful feeling that private individuals cannot be blamed for taking vengeance into their own hands, for ensuring that the punishment truly answers the crime. This response, arguably always latent in criminal cases, was likely to become especially forceful when, as sometimes happens, the law proved impotent or else



too corrupt to pass sentence<sup>38</sup>.

However, as her discussion turns to the plays, what was described as a conflict between two equally impersonal codes of redress (public versus private revenge) begins to appear as a conflict between the impersonal claims of the civic order and the personal claims of individual feeling. Thus, the tension between public and private revenge acquires a universal significance that has to do with an inward conflict that transcends the strictly Elizabethan ethico-legal conditions – a conflict that seems built into revenge tragedy at large:

Most important of all, *Hamlet* and *Oresteia* are alike in the way they juxtapose a primitive ethos in which personal retaliation for injuries is not only acceptable but mandatory, with a rival code in which ‘civilized’ considerations complicate what was once a relatively straightforward issue. . . . the uncertainty of Aeschylus’s hero also reflects the anguish of his position in a kind of no-man’s-land, poised between the old family-based law of blood vengeance and a new, essentially civic, order. The *Oresteia* is, among other things, about how an impersonal court of law, the Areopagus, finally superseded the claims of private revenge in historical Athens. It remembers a time, long before Aeschylus’s birth, of transition and conflict between contradictory systems.<sup>39</sup>

Barton is not formulating an alternative theory to Bowers; she retains the basic scheme of public and private revenge. Nonetheless, a new, distinctive element appears in her discussion that opens up a different perspective on revenge. I am referring to her recognition of the asymmetry between public

---

<sup>38</sup>Anne Barton, ‘Introduction’, in *Hamlet*, ed. by T.J.B. Spencer, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1980, pp.12-13.

<sup>39</sup>Barton, op.cit., p. 12. How universal this process is can be judged from the following description of the evolution of the legal system in Ancient Greece by the distinguished Hellenist Jean-Pierre Vernant. Vernant describes the legal context of Attic tragedy in exactly the same terms Bowers claimed to be specifically Elizabethan, adding the valuable observation that the emergence of the statal law is linked with the emergence of a consciousness of individuality: ‘From blood revenge between families – the vendetta, with its procedures of compensation and arbitration – to the establishment of courts of law, the passage from a prelegal state to a legal system brings about the notion of the individual criminal. The individual henceforth appears as the subject of the offense and the object of judgment. There is rupture between the prejuridical notion of crime and that of the law – between crime viewed as a miasma, a contagious and collective pollution, and crime understood as committed by a single person. . . . This juridical history has a moral counterpart: it involves notions of responsibility, personal culpability, and worth. There is also a psychological counterpart: it poses the problem of circumstances, constraints, and deliberate or spontaneous planning. . . . These problems will find an echo in Attic tragedy of the fifth century. The constant questioning of the individual agent is characteristic of this literary genre, the scrutiny of the human subject face-to-face with his action.’, J.P. Vernant, ‘The Individual within the City State’, in *Mortals and Immortals. Collected Essays by Jean-Pierre Vernant*, ed. by F.I. Zeitlin, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1991, p.325.

and private revenge, that is, of the qualitative difference between the 'justice' that both systems of redress seek to obtain. The fundamental distinction is between the *personal* nature of private revenge and the *impersonal* justice of the public law. This recognition has far-reaching consequences since private revenge would seem to satisfy something more than the impersonal justice public revenge aims at. Thus, as Barton implies, the existence of private revenge demands a different explanation than the supposed absence of public justice. The motivation that leads to private revenge begins to look more complex than dutifulness compensating for the shortcomings of the legal system. Instead, revenge has to be explained by more profound reasons, which have to do with the nature of the avenger and not with the legal environment in which he acts. This profound motivation explains why revenge persists despite the legal injunctions against it:

But what Francis Bacon was later to call the 'wild justice' of personal vengeance can never really be legislated out of existence. When Euripides, in his tragedy *Orestes* (408 BC), retold the story of revenge for Agammonon. . . . his Orestes. . . . ignored the means of legal redress available to him, for reasons which have something to do with the kind of person he is, but also with the ineradicable belief of human beings that only the man who actually suffers in a situation has the right to deal with that situation, that the very impersonality which, in certain respects, constitutes the strength of criminal law renders the law emotionally inadequate<sup>40</sup>.

In this alternative conception, revenge is no longer conceived as the result of a judicial crisis (avenger as wronged citizen), but as the expression of an emotional crisis (avenger as damaged human being). In consequence the focus of inquiry is displaced from the legality that regulates communal life to the emotional dependence of the avenger on this communal life. What is at the centre of the dramatic exploration of revenge is, then, the untransferable nature of an injury, which the impersonal office of the law cannot hope to redress. To be sure, in Barton revenge is still explained rationally as an act of retaliation seeking punishment for an offense. However, unlike Bowers or Broude, Barton envisages the possibility that the need for redress is generated by the avenger's suffering, rather than by his commitment to communal expectations. With the recognition that the law can be 'emotionally inadequate' Barton takes a decisive step away from the conventional view of revenge, opening up a new

---

<sup>40</sup> Barton, *op.cit.*, p.12.

subjective perspective on the avenging impulse.

A further, and more explicit, step towards its subjective recognition is found in John Kerrigan's more recent monumental study of three thousand years of revenge. From the plays of ancient Greece to the productions of Hollywood, Kerrigan reveals the universal fascination that this theme has exerted. Underlying all the various forms of (artistic) revenge, and perhaps explaining its timeless appeal, he detects a 'symmetrical structure which is simple but satisfying'<sup>41</sup>. This structure defines the retributive balance between offence and punishment that characterizes revenge: 'An eye is taken for an eye, a tooth punched out for a tooth, both agents have registered upon them what they have inflicted on the other'<sup>42</sup>. This reactive equation constitutes the most essential characteristic of revenge. No matter how complex and sophisticated it may be, any case of retribution will conform to this basic formula, which interlocks offender and avenger into a retributive symmetry. As an expression of this law, revenge drama, be it ancient or modern, reverses an unjust situation by inflicting on the criminal the role he forced on his victim. Revenge metes out justice by 'undoing' injustice. For this reason, the accomplishment of revenge requires that its symmetrical necessity be fully recognized by the offending party. Only when the culprit confronts the necessary punishment his crime has brought on himself is the retributive process complete – 'the object of retribution does not just suffer from what is done to him but from perceiving in what is done to him what he did to his victim, and from enduring that knowledge'<sup>43</sup>. Revenge imposes retribution like a mathematical necessity, transcending the particularities of the individual case. Bound to the criminal by the law of vengeful reaction, the avenger obeys its impersonal logic against his own identity if necessary:

For when B, injured by A, does to A what A did to him, he makes himself resemble the opponent he has blamed, while he transforms his enemy into the kind of victim he once was. Indeed, the more scrupulous he is in pursuit of retribution, the more exact in exacting revenge, the more he

---

<sup>41</sup> John Kerrigan, *Revenge Tragedy. Aeschylus to Armageddon*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1996, p.4.

<sup>42</sup> Kerrigan, loc.cit.

<sup>43</sup> Kerrigan, op.cit., p.6.

effects this interchange<sup>44</sup>.

By virtue of this 'principle of equivalence'<sup>45</sup> the avenger brings universal satisfaction by suppressing his individuality. This suppression is perfected in the case of what Kerrigan terms 'displaced agency', when the avenger undertakes to redress the injury of a third party, usually their murdered son or father. Here the suppression of identity can be complete:

If the victim of an injury resembles his opponent in the act of vengeance, the revenger who assumes the burden of another person's resentment suspends his own identity.<sup>46</sup>

To sum up, the avenger can only take on the load of revenge by first unloading his personality. This is so because the justice to which he aspires is an impersonal one: the expression of a law that is universally valid. The task the avenger performs in its name is an entirely rational one. So far, Kerrigan would seem to be offering yet another version, albeit a more refined one, of the regulative view. Characteristically he conceives of revenge as a law that regulates the punishment of offenses. As enforced by the avenger, this law loses none of its objectivity. In this view, the damage produced by the offense is only of secondary importance; much more relevant is the 'structure of obligation' which the offense imposes on the victim. However, Kerrigan introduces a footnote to his main argument that makes a difference to his conclusions, and indeed justifies them. I am referring to his recognition of what he calls 'some fascinating, if murky, issues'. The invocation of 'murky issues' begins to alter the picture he has drawn.

Noting the filial (or parental) anguish that is usually attendant on Elizabethan revenge, he observes that revenge drama has provided a 'happy hunting-ground for psychoanalysts'. Though he expresses salutary skepticism about the psychoanalytic approach to revenge, Kerrigan recognizes that at its most intense the familial anguish of the Elizabethan avenger demands an explanation. As in the case of Hamlet, the psychological torment of the avenger cannot be simply explained on the grounds of a moral

---

<sup>44</sup> Kerrigan, *loc.cit.*

<sup>45</sup> Kerrigan, *op.cit.*, p.115.

<sup>46</sup> Kerrigan, *op.cit.*, p.8.

obligation, no matter how much of an imposition that obligation can be. Something deeper seems to be involved, for revenge is experienced as a psychological upheaval that transcends the ethical plane. The revenge of blood does not only seem to activate a formal duty, but an emotional self-discovery that is deeply traumatic:

There is a sense, however, in which, the structure of obligation under which Hamlet labours makes him, on a *psychologically significant* level, a substitute for the father he is out to revenge.<sup>47</sup>

Instead of a depersonalization, the effect of revenge seems to be the opposite, namely, a traumatic surfacing of the structure of personality. It produces less a suspension of identity than a crisis of identity. From this alternative perspective, the revenger is seen to strive to balance something more fundamental than the scales of justice. The avenger becomes a 'quester after psychic balance as well as ethical equivalence', struggling to realize 'buried desires'<sup>48</sup>. Revenge, it seems, may serve as a vehicle for the achievement of goals other than those of rational justice. Beyond redress by law or any of its surrogates, what the avenger seeks is a restored sense of wholeness:

The equivalencing impulse of B against A cannot be understood simply in terms of the *praxis* because the idea of equilibrium-through-action is loaded not only with assumptions about justice as balance but with psychotherapeutic commonplaces about the need for a balanced psyche. The poise of a revenge action can bear intricately asymmetrical relations to the psychic needs and practicalities of A and B, or their agents<sup>49</sup>.

This recognition takes us very far indeed from Bowers and his legalistic conception of revenge as a private alternative to the law. It confirms Barton's insistence on the emotional origins of revenge; and the psychological cargo carried by revenge is confirmed by the modern insights invoked by Kerrigan – for example, by Simone Weil's 'the desire for vengeance is a desire for essential equilibrium', or Christian Wolf's '[revenge] becomes an irrational response to the world's failure to render what one imagines is his due'<sup>50</sup>. In this context, revenge ceases to appear as the assumption of a communal duty

---

<sup>47</sup> Kerrigan, *op.cit.*, p.9, my italics.

<sup>48</sup> Kerrigan, *op.cit.*, p.10.

<sup>49</sup> Kerrigan, *op.cit.*, pp.10-11.

<sup>50</sup> Kerrigan, *op.cit.*, p.11.

in order to become the opposite – an expression of one’s damaged relation to the community. Hence Kerrigan’s conclusion that ‘Vengeance is at the root of what many people now think they are doing when they write, or sing, or just strive for ‘achievement’<sup>51</sup> – which suggests that insofar as justice is the goal of revenge, this justice has to be understood in a much wider sense than mere legality.

Kerrigan’s recognition of the subjective dimension of revenge remains, however, marginal to his conclusion about the meaning of revenge. His idea of revenge, founded on its allegedly characteristic drive towards punishment, allows for a subjective dimension that can be only complementary to ‘the economy of vengeance’<sup>52</sup>, that is, to the retributive balance. Accordingly, he strains even further the distinction between direct and displaced-agency revenge by differentiating the ‘praxis’ of vengeance from its superimposed ‘systems of feeling which lead beyond the immediate action’<sup>53</sup>. Supposedly, these ‘systems of feeling’ apply most often to revenge by displaced agency. As I shall argue when I analyse the plays in detail, a full recognition of the subjectivity of vengeance renders superfluous any distinction between praxis and feeling, or direct and displaced revenge, because the filial or parental piety which revenge obeys is felt to be central to the avenger’s identity. However, what matters here is that although Kerrigan retains the idea of revenge as punitive law, this no longer inhibits, as it did in Campbell or Broude, an identification of the psychological dimension of vengeance. In conceding that ‘clearly the picture of A vs. B needs qualifying with the thought that motives are often rationalizations, that desires can go deep in disguise’<sup>54</sup>, Kerrigan reveals the complexity of revenge, and the fact that its meaning is not exhausted by the punishment it inflicts.

In Kerrigan’s view of revenge, which takes on board revenge’s subjective content, the violation of justice remains central. But the violated justice that provokes the vengeful impulse is no longer reduced to the legality of statal law. Rather, a more profound conception of justice is summoned to

---

<sup>51</sup> Kerrigan, *op.cit.*, p.12.

<sup>52</sup> Kerrigan, *op.cit.*, p 7.

<sup>53</sup> Kerrigan, *loc.cit.*

<sup>54</sup> Kerrigan, *op.cit.*, p.9.

account for the avenger's madness, now perceived as crucial to the meaning of revenge. The regulative thesis maintains that an injury brings home to the avenger the inoperativeness of the legal institutions, and prompts an attempt at extralegal compensation for this failure. By contrast, the new view suggests that an injury damages the social integrity on which the avenger depends, generating an excruciating sense of injustice that no merely legal redress can heal. In this context, the notion of 'justice' expands to take on the existential meaning of 'wholeness' – that is to say, it becomes a pre-condition for individual existence. As we shall see when we analyse *The Spanish Tragedy* in detail, only a distinction between legality and integrity can explain the central fact of revenge drama – namely, that the avenger is shown to be maddened by a suffering that no merely legal failure can produce. The suffering intensity of the avenger thus becomes central to the meaning of revenge. This means that the origin of revenge must be sought in the psychic rather than the legal damage that the avenger sustains. The *tragic* sense of revenge is thus recovered. The act of vengeance is not only preceded by an existential crisis (the madness of revenge): it is the result of this crisis. In order to correct the legalistic view what we need, then, is a recognition that the violated 'justice' behind revenge is 'justice' understood as *a constitutive ideal that builds up and sustains the existence of the avenger as a member of the community*. When more than legal justice is affected, the avenger is damaged as a social being; and revenge constitutes a symptom of this damage. As such, it exposes the vulnerable condition of this victim, totally dependent as he is on his fellow beings for his sanity. For this reason, and in contrast to the *regulative* conception, I shall continue to refer to *the constitutive idea of revenge*. Where the regulative view approached revenge as a regulatory code of crime, the constitutive view explores it as a manifestation of the constitution of the avenger as a human being.

As I have just formulated it, the constitutive thesis is not yet fully apparent in either Barton or Kerrigan. The formulation of an alternative revenge theory, consciously conceived as such, is, to my knowledge, only found in Harry Keyishian's 1995 *The Shapes of Revenge*, which has only latterly come

to my notice. In this strangely neglected study<sup>55</sup>, the emotional investment of revenge recognised in Barton and Kerrigan is given its full significance. Keyishian offers an interpretation of revenge that professes to repudiate the moralized approach in its totality, on the grounds that it fails to account for the specifically dramatic treatment of revenge. Thus, he explicitly challenges the unexamined assumption that revenge drama must be a reflection of contemporary ethical doctrine. In a reversal of common practice, he displaces the ethical in favour of the dramatic, and fully acknowledges the distinctiveness of enacted revenge. In this perspective, the vengeful act ceases to appear as the predictable result of a moral law. Instead, it is seen to be determined by the initial injury, so that the whole trajectory of the avenger's role becomes relevant to the meaning of revenge. As a result, a radically different picture emerges from that provided by regulative authors like Campbell and Bowers:

if we keep in mind the entire arc of experience, and not just its final moments. . . . the texture of the avenger's experience might then become clearer to us; we might more easily keep in mind, as various recent commentators have observed, that though 'vengeance composes the plot of the revenge play, grief composes its essential emotional content, its substance' (Kirsch); that because victimization is related to the process of mourning, revenge may function 'as a remedy for grief, even though a remedy that risks madness and mayhem' (Welsh); that 'the disintegrating effects of grief, are resisted not through Christian or Stoic renunciation of society, but a commitment to revenge – a vengeful re-engagement with the society and those responsible for that grief' (Dollimore)<sup>56</sup>.

Here revenge is recognized as the function of a damaged identity, and the insufferable grief of the avenger as its unmistakable symptom. Far from a legal malfunction, it is the psychic damage the avenger sustains that explains his trajectory. As a function of his grief, revenge aims at something very different from retribution: it seeks to re-assert the identity that has been destroyed. What is more, it seeks to reclaim an existence continuous with that of the community, which the malice inflicted on him has broken:

The malicious assaults. . . confound and disrupt the victim's sense of possessing a stable and

---

<sup>55</sup> That Keyishian's study has not proved quite as influential as it deserves is perhaps due to the fact that his analysis of particular plays is cursory, even mechanical, and is in no way of the same order of quality and persuasiveness as his formulation of a general theory of revenge.

<sup>56</sup> Harry Keyishian, *The Shapes of Revenge. Victimization, Vengeance, and Vindictiveness in Shakespeare*, Humanities Press, New Jersey, 1995, p.7.



inviolable identity. These characters discover instead that they are subject to multiple contingencies: malice, injustice, treachery, grief, unstable values, and deprivations of power or status. Through revenge they attempt with varying degrees of justification and success, to restore their integrity – their sense of psychic wholeness – and stabilize their identities, often by restructuring them around their new roles as revengers (retaliating for wrongs done to themselves) or avengers (retaliating for the wrongs and sufferings of others).<sup>57</sup>

Thus, with Keyishian we achieve the formulation of a truly alternative theory of revenge, which can rise to the tragic experience of the Shakespearean avenger.

In order to make this experience fully comprehensible, however, a final element needs to be brought into play. It seems to me essential to realize that the psychic damage exhibited by the avenger as he emerges in Kyd and the early Shakespeare implies that his identity is (as we have learnt to say) socially constructed, and that he is radically, and not merely incidentally, dependent on others for his sanity. Thus, the invariably malicious attack that is launched on him destroys him by destroying the sociality on which he depends, and ultimately renders his injury beyond redress, legal or otherwise. Kydian and Shakespearian revenge is a manifestation of this *irreparable* damage. Keyishian hints at this constitutive sociality when he observes that ‘the process by which revengers pursue the task of regeneration is inevitably a social one: they seek to assert themselves by displays of potency that confound the malice of the offender’<sup>58</sup>. However, in his analysis the sociality that the injury destroys and revenge reasserts keeps too low a profile. This seems to me so because Keyishian, as the flatness and conventionality of his reading of individual plays suggests, has not adequately understood or worked out the implications of his discovery. Thus he continues to feel the need to justify the avenger in moral, or even moralistic, terms. He even goes as far as to claim that revenge heals the inflicted wound. He refers to the ‘the potentially redemptive functions of revenge’<sup>59</sup>, going to the lengths of arguing for the existence of a ‘curative’, and ‘life-enhancing’ dimension of vengeance<sup>60</sup>. His complacent description of

---

<sup>57</sup> Keyishian, *op.cit.*, p.2.

<sup>58</sup> Keyishian, *op.cit.*, p.3.

<sup>59</sup> Keyishian, *op.cit.*, p.2.

<sup>60</sup> Keyishian, *op.cit.*, p.8.

revenge as ‘an effective redemptive force’ blunts its tragic edge, and threatens to redirect it towards a comic resolution. This is the consequence of ignoring the basic fact that the damage inflicted on the avenger is *irreparable*. For this reason, as we shall see, it gives rise to a *perverted* assertion of sociality.

This is the paradox that defines tragic revenge, making its sociality not that of the beehive but of normally free individual subjects. The sociality internalized by the avenger is asserted *in a mad way* that reflects the damage he sustains. Being anxious to redeem the avenger from condemnation by the moralists, Keyishian overlooks this central point and thus relapses into the regulative view, excusing the avenger on the familiar grounds of judicial collapse. Of *Titus Andronicus*, for example, he says that ‘there are characters in Shakespeare’s plays – I number Titus Andronicus among them – who have turned to revenge because other avenues for achieving vindication, honor, and equity have been closed to them’<sup>61</sup>. This demonstrates that, for all the novelty of his thesis, Keyishian continues to cling to the atomistic conception of the human self. His thesis, abstractly considered, is innovative: the establishment of the constitutive view of vengeance requires two steps-- first, the location of ‘the revenger’s madness’ at the heart of revenge drama, and second, the demonstration that this madness ‘may be seen more as a function of the character’s frustration and impotence than of his or her efforts to avenge wrongs’<sup>62</sup>. Once this is recognized he should be in a position to realize that the distinction between regulative and constitutive revenge has dramatic as well as conceptual consequences — for, as we shall see, it is deliberately enacted in both *The Spanish Tragedy* and *Titus Andronicus*, pioneering plays in which the difference between legality and justice in the wider sense of ‘wholeness’ is always kept in sight. But that he is incapable of rising to his discovery shows that there is a distinction between formulating something and understanding it, e.g. if one cannot apply one’s ideas one cannot be said to have understood them.

It is perhaps for this reason that Keyishian leaves Seneca entirely out of the picture. It is in

---

<sup>61</sup> Keyishian, *op.cit.*, p.4.

<sup>62</sup> Keyishian, *op.cit.*, p.7.

Senecan tragedy, I shall argue, that Kyd and Shakespeare discover, or discern confirmation of, the deeper sense of revenge that gave rise to their suffering avengers. Keyishian looks for the origins of the profounder notion of revenge as damaged identity in contemporary psychology, grounding his discussion in Renaissance books on the passions. Here Keyishian's case is much less persuasive than in his *formulation* of the alternative notion of revenge, perhaps because the material on which he focusses is entirely undramatic. And so it has been found to be. In his perceptive review of the book<sup>63</sup>, Maurice Charney welcomes the fact that it 'has an original point of view on revenge that disputes the tedious Christianizing' of its predecessors: but he laments that 'in a book-length discussion of revenge there is no mention of Seneca', adding to this that 'one can think of some telling Senecan answers to some of the questions the author proposes'. In particular, Charney proposes to recover through the Senecan link the perverted aspect of revenge that Keyishian downplays in his analysis: 'this [Senecan] sense of a wild and ferocious excess stands at an opposite pole from Keyishian's eloquent and persuasive reasonableness'. The problem of the origin of public revenge in Elizabethan drama and the problem of Senecan influence on it must be recognized as one and the same.

---

<sup>63</sup> Maurice Charney, reviewing Keyishian's book, *Shakespeare Quarterly* 49 (1998), pp.456-57.

## B. THE CRITICISM OF SENECA INFLUENCE: 'SENECANISM' VERSUS SENECA

### I

This thesis seeks to make a contribution to the subjective understanding of revenge. In the following chapters I shall argue that, unlike the regulative interpretation of revenge, the constitutive interpretation reveals the new drama of Kyd and Shakespeare as a departure from the Seneca of their academic predecessors and contemporaries, a departure made possible by a new engagement with Senecan tragedy. In so doing, I shall be claiming Senecan tragedy to be a fundamental factor in the formation of public revenge plays. Kyd and Shakespeare, I shall argue, discovered a new and tragic conception of revenge in Seneca's Roman tragedies, which differed from sixteenth-century received ideas of revenge. My contention is, therefore, that the subjectivity of revenge that is central to the new drama was made possible, or at the very least facilitated, by a re-discovery of Senecan tragedy. This recognition does not, of course, deny the existence of other causal factors in the emergence of Kydian and Shakespearean tragedy. It does deny, however, that one of these factors was the academic Seneca of pre-public tragedy. In my thesis, the Seneca assimilated into *The Spanish Tragedy* and *Titus Andronicus* was not the Seneca that the academic plays popularized. Contrary to the established view, I shall argue that there was no continuous tradition of Senecanism beginning with University and Inns-of-Court drama and culminating in the revenge plays of the public theatre. In this view, the problem of revenge becomes the problem of the 'influence' of Seneca on Elizabethan drama: the academic Seneca is explained by the retributive interpretation of revenge; the Seneca of public plays demands a subjective approach. This means that the transition from the first to the second form of drama cannot, therefore, be adequately explained by an approach that fails to distinguish between academic moralization (impersonal revenge) and public-stage socialization (subjective revenge). What is needed, then, is a revision of the prevailing interpretation of Senecan 'influence', the assumptions of which impede the recognition of this crucial difference. In the following discussion I shall try to bring to the light of day the unexamined assumptions of Senecan influence studies, and show that the moralized Seneca they discover in the academic plays they posit as the only Seneca available to Kyd and Shakespeare – which

I shall conclude is not what the examination of early popular revenge tragedy suggests.

## II

The early Elizabethan popular (or public) stage betrays unmistakable signs of Senecan activity. We have, of course, the external evidence provided by Thomas Nashe's famous attack on a popular playwright, whose methods he decries as characteristic of the popular trade, that is, of those who

busy themselves with the endeavours of art, that could scarcely Latinize their neck-verse if they should have need; yet English Seneca read by candle-light yields many good sentences, as *Blood is a beggar* and so forth; and if you entreat him fair in a frosty morning he will afford you whole Hamlets, I should say handfuls, of tragical speeches, But O grief! *Tempus edax rerum*. What's that will last always? The sea exhale by drops will in continuance be dry, and Seneca, let blood line by line and page by page, at length must needs die to our stage; which makes his famished followers. . . . to intermeddle with Italian translations. Wherein how poorly they have plodded. . . . let all indifferent gentlemen that have travelled in that tongue discern by their twopenny pamphlets. . . .<sup>64</sup>

But, in addition, we also have an abundance of literal quotations from the Latin originals, and of derivative and parodical *sententiae* from these, together with the reproduction of specific motifs and scenic designs to suggest that a vogue for Seneca attended the rise of Elizabethan public tragedy in the 1580s. Arguing that the fact 'that the professional dramatists (and their audiences too) were as well acquainted with Seneca in Latin as in translation is shown by their fondness for quotation from the original', a recent translator of the Senecan plays illustrates the point with a sequence that is typical of the vogue in question. In Seneca's *Agamemnon* we read, '*per scelera semper sceleribus tutum est iter*', which Watling translates as 'the safe way through crime is by [further] crimes'. Studley turned it into 'the safest path to mischief is by mischief open still'. Thomas Hughes in his Inns-of-court play *The Misfortunes of Arthur* (1587) rendered it as 'the safest passage is from bad to worse'; Marston's *The Malcontent* (1604) into 'Black deed only through black deed safely flies' (to which the reply is

---

<sup>64</sup> T.Nashe, 'Preface to Greene's *Menaphon*', in *Works*, vol. III, ed. by R. McKerrow, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, iii.315-16. Nashe's famous quip is understood as 'at least a fair indication that Elizabethan playwrights were familiar with contemporary translations of the plays' (Reuben A. Brower, *Hero and Saint: Shakespeare and the Graeco-Roman Heroic Tradition*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1971, p.148). But alternative sceptical interpretations exist, see for example Hunter, 'Seneca and English Tragedy', pp.193-94.

made: ‘Pooh! *Per scelera semper sceleribus tutum est iter*’); Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* (1605) as ‘Things bad begun make strong themselves by ill’; Jonson’s *Catiline* (1611) as ‘The ills that I have done cannot be safe/ But by attempting greater’; Webster’s *The White Devil* (1612) as ‘Small mischiefs are by greater made secure’; and Massinger’s *The Duke of Milan* (1620) as ‘One deadly sin, then, help to cure another’<sup>65</sup>. These Senecan tags may have been intended to give a ‘Senecan flavouring’<sup>66</sup> to Elizabethan plays; but the Senecan material assimilated into these plays would by no means be exhausted by any comprehensive list of surviving *sententiae*. This is confirmed by the two major studies of Senecan influence on the public drama to appear in the recent years: Robert S. Miola’s 1992 *Shakespeare and Classical Tragedy*, and A.J.Boyle’s 1997 *Tragic Seneca*<sup>67</sup>. Both of these exhaustive studies demonstrate the astonishing range of Senecan material absorbed by the Elizabethan playwrights. After Miola and Boyle we are in a better position to recognize how well-known Seneca was to the public playwrights of the 1580s and ‘90s. If Senecan influence were just a matter of *sententiae*, one could argue – indeed, as we shall see, some have done so – that the Senecan tags were transmitted by the anthological compilations of which the age was so fond. That this is not the case, however, can be illustrated by the borrowings Miola identifies in *Titus Andronicus*, a play central to our discussion. In *Titus*, ‘sometimes considered the most Senecan of Shakespeare’s plays’<sup>68</sup>, two slightly altered Latin quotations from Senecan drama stand out: Demetrius’s ‘*Per Stygia, per manes vehor*’ (II.i.135) and Titus’s ‘*Magni Dominator poli, / Tam lentus audis scelera? Tam lentus vides?*’ (IV.i.81-2), which derive respectively from ll. 1180 and 671-2 of *Phaedra*. Now, these lines do not seem to feature in any of the more popular anthologies and *florilegia* of the period, whence Miola concludes that they ‘provide

---

<sup>65</sup> E.F.Watling, trans., *Seneca. Four Tragedies and Octavia*, Penguin books, Harmondsworth, 1966, pp.29-31.

<sup>66</sup> Watling, op.cit., p.30.

<sup>67</sup> A.J.Boyle, *Tragic Seneca: An Essay in the Theatrical Tradition*, Routledge, London and New York, 1997.

<sup>68</sup> Miola, *Shakespeare and Classical Tragedy*, p.13.

evidence of direct contact with Seneca'<sup>69</sup>. Furthermore, Senecan material is by no means confined to these Latin quotations, nor is it extracted from a single play. Thus, *Phaedra* also contributes to 'Shakespeare's sense of locality' by providing a precedent in its extraordinary opening hunting scene for Act II of *Titus*. Moreover, *Titus*'s more general resemblances with aspects of *Troades* and *Thyestes* argue for influence of a different order of abstractness. Shakespeare's play, for example, exhibits 'similar configurations of action, character, and design'<sup>70</sup> to *Troades*, which are quite central to the design of the plays: 'both plays feature a vanquished mother who struggles in vain to preserve the life of a son; both depict human sacrifice in honour of the valiant dead; and both make use of the tomb as a potent symbolic setting'<sup>71</sup>. With *Thyestes* the link becomes harder to locate both in source and in recipient, and yet it seems more fundamental to the imaginative experience of the play, becoming a creative and intellectual engagement: 'Directly or indirectly, *Thyestes* lies behind the action of *Titus Andronicus*, a deep source of its energy and aesthetics of violence. Both plays feature a bloody spectacle of revenge that exceeds the accepted bounds of human action, both exhibit filicide and the ghastly banquet of the dead offspring as a horrid climax'<sup>72</sup>. In the face of this range of evidence – and Miola provides similar analyses of *Hamlet*, *Richard III*, *Macbeth*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, and even some comedies, such as *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (and which Boyle extends even further) – it is difficult to maintain that the Elizabethan public playwrights had at best a negligible acquaintance with Seneca's plays.

By and large, scholarship now accepts that Seneca was a shaping factor in the emergence of public drama<sup>73</sup>. However, to identify the presence of Senecan material in the Elizabethan plays and to interpret

---

<sup>69</sup> Miola, loc.cit.

<sup>70</sup> Miola, op.cit., p.19.

<sup>71</sup> Miola, loc.cit.

<sup>72</sup> Miola, op.cit., p.23.

<sup>73</sup> It has become customary for critics to state their view on the question, as a critical *prise de position*: e.g. Brower's 'if we should yield to the agreeable temptation to pass over Seneca and his example, we should find a considerable loss in our ability to define the nature of Shakespearian heroic

it are not quite the same. This is why, it seems to me, current understanding of the 'Elizabethan Seneca' is inadequate. The evidence of an Elizabethan engagement with Seneca has been taken as the meaning of this engagement. What this 'Elizabethan Seneca' means can be illustrated by any random description of the history of Elizabethan drama. George Steiner, for instance, in his book on the tragic genre makes a passing remark on Elizabethan Seneca:

The playhouse of Shakespeare and his contemporaries was *el gran teatro del mundo*. No variety, no element from the crucible of experience, was alien to his purpose. The Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatists ransacked Seneca. They took from him his rhetoric, his ghosts, his sententious morality, his flair for horror and blood-vengeance; but not the austere, artificial practices of the neo-classic stage.<sup>74</sup>

Here Steiner is (for once) not being controversial; he is simply echoing the conclusions of Elizabethan criticism. And in this echo we can hear the familiar tune of Seneca *moralisé*, as we heard it in Campbell, Bowers and the other proponents of retributive vengeance. The Senecan legacy is seen as a moral legacy wrapped up in glittering melodrama and sensationalism – that is to say, a fragmentary Seneca subservient to the sensationalism of revenge melodrama. This fragmented notion of Senecan influence was established in 1893 by J.W. Cunliffe's *The Influence of Seneca on Elizabethan Tragedy*, and it has governed the use of Senecan criticism to this day. The premise on which Cunliffe proceeded was that 'the influence of Seneca (or, to speak more correctly, of the tragedies ascribed to him) upon the Elizabethan drama is so plainly marked that no competent historian of our literature could fail to notice it'<sup>75</sup>. In order to establish this, Cunliffe compiled an extensive inventory of Senecan borrowings in Elizabethan drama. The inventory is organized in sections dealing with the features of Senecan

---

tragedy. There are simply too many instructive analogies and contrasts to leave Seneca out' (Brower, *op.cit.*, p. 149); or Emrys Jones's 'it seems to me likely that Shakespeare (to confine the discussion to him) would have had a knowledge not merely of phrases from anthologies or of discrete passages but of at least some entire plays. How closely he knew them we can hardly tell, of course, and there is no question of any extensive structural indebtedness. But he knew enough of the salient characteristics of Seneca's style to imitate them, and not necessarily just the most famous moments and sayings' (E. Jones, *The Origins of Shakespeare*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1977, p.268).

<sup>74</sup> G. Steiner, *The Death of Tragedy*, Faber and Faber, London, 1961, pp. 20-21.

<sup>75</sup> J. W. Cunliffe, *The Influence of Seneca on Elizabethan Tragedy*, Archon Books, Hamden, Connecticut, 1965 [1<sup>st</sup> edition 1893], p.1.



tragedy that were allegedly incorporated into the Elizabethan plays. A mention of the title of some of these sections shows how extraordinarily influential Cunliffe's study has been. Seneca is 'Introspective' (section 3), 'Sensational' (section 4), 'Rhetorical' (section 5); and the substantiation of Cunliffe's claim that 'the most obvious way in which Seneca affected the modern drama was in external form' has been equally influential, as the following topics show: 'Aphorisms' (p.23), 'Fatalism' (p.25), 'Stoicism' (p.28), 'the Chorus' (p.32), 'the Messenger' (p.43), 'the Ghost' (p.44), 'Use of Supernatural' (p.44), etc. The examples he provided to exemplify each section and each formal feature were taken from academic and public plays alike, no qualitative distinction between them being introduced or local effects acknowledged. In fact, his extensive 'Appendix II', which lists all the parallels between an Elizabethan play and the Senecan corpus, is devoted to *The Misfortunes of Arthur*. Subsequent criticism has challenged Cunliffe's identification of parallel passages, both in its conclusions about particular cases of borrowing and its over-generous inclusiveness. Nonetheless, the main assumption behind his study – that Seneca provided sensational dramatic material – has been largely accepted<sup>76</sup>. As a result, a fragmented Seneca has discredited *ab initio* the possibility of an integrated Senecan tragic vision to which Kyd and Shakespeare could have responded in their drama<sup>77</sup>.

---

<sup>76</sup> Motto and Clarke, for example, argue that 'Cunliffe's theses . . . were simply too sweeping, too grandiose, too inclusive. He often ransacked and distorted texts to establish his "case". His was another bubble to be exploded', but they accept Cunliffe's principal conclusion, namely that 'Seneca certainly did exert a general and important influence upon the Italian Renaissance theater, upon Garnier and the French, and upon the Elizabethans' (Anna Lydia Motto and John R. Clark, *Senecan Tragedy*, Adolf M. Hakkert, Amsterdam, 1988, pp.32-33). For a discussion of Senecan influence criticism see Motto and Clark, 'A Critique of Scholarly Trends', *op.cit.*, pp.21-42; and F.Kiefer, 'Senecan Influence: a Bibliographical Supplement', *Research Opportunities in Renaissance Drama* XXVIII (1985), pp.129-42.

<sup>77</sup> Cf. Motto and Clark, *op.cit.*, p.28: 'attention to single, isolated "questions" and "problems" in Senecan drama has tended to fracture and fragment the criticism, seemingly reducing the plays to illustrative bits and parts. Such a tendency in the criticism is only aggravated by the determination of modern scholarship that Senecan drama is rhetorical and without coherent dramatic composition'.

### III

This moralized, hyper-sensational, piecemeal Seneca that Cunliffe offers as the classical inheritance of Elizabethan tragedy I shall call 'Senecanism'. My proposal is that the Seneca that had a formative impact on Kyd and Shakespeare is not a derivation of this academic 'Senecanism'. To be sure, 'Senecanism' does explain the moralized engagement of pre-Kydian drama with Senecan tragedy in a satisfactory way. But, it seems to me, the same cannot be said of the innovative, creative plays of the public theatre. Thus, to reject 'Senecanism' (as defined above) as an explanatory or creative factor in *The Spanish Tragedy* and *Titus Andronicus* is to question the history of the sixteenth-century reception of Seneca as understood in criticism. The history of this reception was established by H.B. Charlton, who fully accepted Cunliffe's conception of the Elizabethan Seneca. Charlton's 1921 *The Senecan Tradition in Renaissance Tragedy*, which includes continental 'Senecanism', constitutes the only exhaustive systematisation of the transmission of Senecanism in the early modern period. To this day, Charlton's book remains a phenomenal achievement: the wealth of Senecan material he unearthed has not been equalled since or re-examined in such depth. Not surprisingly, despite reservations expressed over the years, his conclusions continue to prevail in criticism. As we shall see in due course, Charlton owes his invulnerability to the fact that his critics continue to share his basic premise – that 'Seneca' must mean 'Senecanism'. Indeed, the Senecan influence Charlton sets out to trace so elaborately is conceived in terms identical to Cunliffe's:

Seneca – whether the original Roman or in the English translation, or much more obviously in the modernised manner of the Italians already sanctioned by the learned circles – was their [i.e. that of the public dramatists] great storehouse of tragic material. He provided the most tragic motive, revenge exacted on the closest consanguinity. He provided the most tragic theme, the inevitability of Fate's decrees. He provided the most tragic appeal, horror piling itself on horror. He provided the most tragic machinery, ghosts, supernatural forces, and foreboding dreams. . . . He provided the superlative tragic style, whether for the utterance of passion, picture or sentence. Above all, he warranted the use of all these elements extravagantly and without restraint<sup>78</sup>.

In Charlton, as in Cunliffe, no distinction between Seneca and 'Senecanism' is possible. The assumption

---

<sup>78</sup> H.B. Charlton, *The Senecan Tradition in Renaissance Tragedy*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1946, [1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1921], pp. clxix-clvxx.

is that the Senecan rattlebag that so successfully shook on the English stage contained the distilled essence of Roman tragedy – moralism and sensationalism. And this rattlebag tingled the creative nerve-ends of Kyd and Shakespeare as it had tingled those of their academic predecessors. Like a caricature, the Seneca of the academics was only deformed the better to bring out the characteristic features of the original:

The Seneca thus apparently maltreated and distorted by adoption in English tragedy is not only a Seneca following further and directly along the path first chosen in Italy; he is actually more comprehensibly and more powerfully realising the spirit of his begetter, the Roman Seneca; for Seneca's tragedies are really the product of a spirit Spanish-born, but constraining itself, however reluctantly, to obey the literary, as well as the civil, laws of Rome<sup>79</sup>.

What Kyd and Shakespeare offer is only one more angle of the Senecan tragic mask. Indeed, these authors were the recipients of a Seneca acclimatized to the English stage by more than three decades of dramatic hybridization. In Charlton's analysis, the formative impact of Seneca on Elizabethan tragedy was a sustained, continuous one which began in the 1560s and culminated with the creative exercises of *The Spanish Tragedy* and *Titus*. This continuity does not acknowledge the frontiers between staged and unstaged drama, nor does it recognize the qualitative divide between academic and public tragedy.

Thus, for Charlton, public revenge tragedy is the culmination of a Senecan momentum that starts with the University performance of Latin Seneca, rises into the 1581 translations, and accelerates with the Inns-of-Court productions of English Senecan plays. This chronology of 'Senecanism' is also logical.

Initially, performance in the original, then translation, then imitation in the vernacular, and finally free

---

<sup>79</sup> Charlton, *op.cit.*, p.clxxvii. The identification of sensationalist and moralizing Senecan drama as a product of the author's Spanishness is recurrent in the literature. Norman T. Pratt, for example, quoting some references to this effect – "this [the gory side of the plays] has been taken. . . . to be a markedly Spanish trait: and so it is". . . . "Stoicism, the instinctive philosophy of the savage everywhere, is the fundamental philosophy and almost the religion of Spain" . . . . "It is naturalism, the passion of life, the stimulating appeal of aspiring and inexhaustible energy, in harmony with the movement of life itself, that has forever moved the Spanish soul. There is no more inspiring moralist, it has often been said, than the old Spaniard Seneca" – concludes that 'Obviously we cannot securely interpret Seneca in terms of the so-called Spanish qualities, but it would be hyperskeptical not to keep them in the back of our minds as a potential cause contributing to the extreme tensions and reactions characteristic of him' (Norman T. Pratt, *Seneca's Drama*, The University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill and London, 1983, pp.36-37). The author of the present thesis, himself from Spain, remains 'hyperskeptical', but calmly so.

creation buoyed up by the tradition. The implication of this evolution is clear: there is a continuous Senecan tradition of which Kyd and Shakespeare are the culmination.

In the defence and promotion of this evolution or sequential division, Charlton has proved extraordinarily influential<sup>80</sup>. He breaks down the sequence of Senecan transmission as follows:

Up to 1559: the panorama is dominated by the native moralities and interludes.

From 1559 to 1570: Seneca arrives into English universities, conquers the taste of the intellectual vanguard and establishes himself on the three fronts from which he will exert his influence over the rest of the century. These fronts are: a) *Staging of Latin Seneca at universities and schools*. For example, an *Oedipus* and a *Hecuba* (i.e. *Troades*) were performed at Trinity College in 1559-60, and a *Medea* and another *Troades* followed the next year; b) *English translations of Seneca*. In 1559 Jasper Heywood of Oxford translated and published Seneca's *Troas* (reprinted the same year and again between 1560-62), his *Thyestes* followed in 1560 and his *Hercules Furens* in 1561<sup>81</sup>; c) *English imitation of Senecan Tragedies*. This started with the English *Gorboduc* by Thomas Sackville and Thomas Norton, acted at the Inner Temple in 1561-62. It inaugurated the Inns-of-Court productions of classicizing tragedy. Gascoigne's and Kinwelmershe's *Jocasta* appeared the following year, as did the other Inns-of-Court 'play of the decade', *Gismond of Salerne*. Thus, Seneca erupted in the 1560s and, in just three years, evolved from Latin performance to translation, and from translation to imitation in the English vernacular.

From 1570-1579: this decade witnessed what seems to be a lull in Senecan activity, even at the

---

<sup>80</sup> Cf. for example A. P. Rossiter's assumption in his well-known book of *Titus Andronicus* as the culmination of a Senecan crescendo of horror that unifies the Latin and the vernacular, the academic and the popular drama: 'The *Tenne Tragedies* of Seneca had been englished by Jasper Haywood [sic] by 1581, and his prologuistic, *Vindicta*-shrieking, corpse-cataloguing ghosts had come to haunt the stage where the horrors which he merely reports – albeit with sickening circumstance – were played out in well-dyed villainy. The horridness of Alabaster's Cambridge Latin *Roxana*, which sent a lady mad in 1592, was really quite endurable in comparison with the bloody horrors of *Titus Andronicus*' (A.P. Rossiter, *English Drama. From Early Times to the Elizabethans. Its Background, Origins and Developments*, Hutchinson & Co., London, 1958 [1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1950], p. 136).

<sup>81</sup> Neville's *Oedipus* appeared in 1560 and Studley's *Agamemnon* and *Medea* in 1566, and his *Hippolytus* and *Hercules Oetaeus* (of which there are no extant copies) in 1566 and 67 respectively. Finally, Nuce's *Octavia* saw the light in 1566-67.

universities.

From 1579 to 1590: there was a spectacular revival of Senecan activity on its three fronts, with Latin productions like William Gager's *Hippolytus* at Oxford (Christ's Church 1591-92), the completion of the Senecan translations by Thomas Newton, who published the entire collection in 1581 in a single volume (the famous *Seneca His Tenne Tragedies*), and one more Inns-of-Court production, *The Misfortunes of Arthur*<sup>82</sup>.

The Senecan revival of the 1580s produced original contributions on the three different fronts of 'academic' activity. But beyond the re-activation of the Senecan tradition of the 1560s, that decade generated the new drama of the University Wits. For Charlton, the emergence of this new drama of Kyd and the other public playwrights marks the culmination of Senecan influence. In the previous decade, the adoption of classical material in native plays had already indicated the possibility of a new dramatic form. However, this was the moment at which, for some unknown reason, Senecan influence had temporarily gone off the boil; Charlton says that 'the extant titles of plays on classical subjects would seem to imply that less direct traits of the Senecan type were welding themselves on a broad native tradition, without, however, as yet producing a virile dramatic species'<sup>83</sup>. But by the mid-1580s the new dramatic hybrid emerged in the form of public plays, and the Senecan evolution of English drama was complete:

The most important influence of Seneca during this period is to be found in the popular drama: in the plays of Peele (if he really be the author of *Lochrine*, and if *Lochrine* be of about 1586) and of Kyd, a sufficiently suitable amalgam of Seneca and popular tradition was brought together to serve substantially as the basis on which Elizabethan romantic tragedy should be raised.<sup>84</sup>

Thus, Charlton proposes Seneca as one of the principal factors in the formation of the revolutionary dramaturgy of Kyd. In his analysis, the public drama of the 1580s was made possible by a fusion of Seneca with the 'popular tradition'. But, how are we to understand 'Seneca' in this context? Here

---

<sup>82</sup> See Charlton, *op.cit.*, p.cxxxix-cxlvii.

<sup>83</sup> Charlton, *op.cit.*, p.cxliii.

<sup>84</sup> Charlton, *op.cit.*, p.cxliii-iv.

**PAGE  
MISSING  
IN  
ORIGINAL**

London, 'Senecanism' ceased to exert any influence on English drama. It could not even compete in its traditional strongholds of the Court and the Universities. Thus, academic Seneca vanished entirely from the Court while productions at the Universities, like Alabaster's *Roxana* (Trinity College, 1592), had to struggle against such public blockbusters as *Hamlet*, staged at both Oxford and Cambridge<sup>88</sup>. Subsequent attempts to revive the classical rigours of 'Senecanism' were all stillborn. Such was the fate, for example, of the challenge by the Countess of Pembroke and her circle of the monopoly the public playwrights enjoyed on dramatic taste. She assembled a group of wits who from approximately 1590 to 1607 produced a series of Senecan tragedies in the academic mould<sup>89</sup>. Modelled on French tragedy, these plays, even when conceived for representation, observed all the academic precepts, including the three dramatic unities. But they were never to see the stage. The trend away from academism could not be reversed: the question of the future of English drama had been settled by the plays of Kyd and his fellow University Wits<sup>90</sup>.

What Charlton proposes, then, is that the rise of the new dramaturgy produces two different Senecas: the traditional Seneca, which survives in academic circles, and the Seneca of the public stage, which has the future before it. Because of the University Wits' transformation of Seneca, it is no longer appropriate to think of a unified Senecan influence. After *The Spanish Tragedy*, Seneca means different things to different playwrights. Charlton's difficulty in identifying the Senecan origins of the last Inns-of-Court play, produced later than the rest when the public plays were already in vogue, exemplifies this

---

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Among the best-known of these plays are: the Countess of Pembroke's *Antoine* (printed 1592); Daniel's *Cleopatra* (pr. 1594 and frequently afterwards); Fulke Greville's *Alaham* (pr. 1633, written c. 1604-1609) and *Mustapha* (pr. 1609); and Sir William Alexander's *Darius* (1603) and *Julius Caesar* (1607).

<sup>90</sup> As T.S. Eliot puts it, 'in the early Elizabethan years appeared a succession of tragedies, mostly performed by the Inns-of-Court, and therefore not popular productions, which might in favourable circumstances have led to a living Senecan drama. . . when *The Spanish Tragedy* appeared. . . these feeble lights were snuffed out' (T.S. Eliot, 'Seneca in Elizabethan Translation', in *Selected Essays 1917-1932*, Faber and Faber, London, 1932, p. 93). For an interesting discussion on Neo-Latin drama in England see J.W. Binns, 'Seneca and Neo-Latin Tragedy in England', in *Seneca*, ed. by C.D.N. Costa, London and Boston, 1974, pp. 205-34.

point:

A difficulty arises with *The Misfortunes of Arthur*. . . How many of its qualities are a direct development of the Senecan tradition, how many caught up from the other Seneca of the popular stage? For by this time popular tragedy was in being and henceforward one must distinguish between the popular and the academic tragedy. But before the point of separation was reached, English Seneca, as we have seen, moved on in a direct line of forward growth, acquiring Italianate qualities progressively at each step.<sup>91</sup>

Charlton is very emphatic about this bifurcation of the Senecan path. But, as the quotation shows, he is equally emphatic about the single route of Senecan influence leading to Kyd and Shakespeare. There is one, and only one, Seneca in pre-Kydian drama but after Kyd one must distinguish between the public Seneca and the academic Seneca. Thus the unacknowledged problem of Charlton's Senecan genealogy presents itself: Charlton recognizes the qualitative difference between academic and public Senecan drama, but derives both of them from a common source: 'Senecanism'. Nothing in his history of the reception of Seneca identifies what it was that produced the qualitatively different Seneca of the public stage. Essentially, the problem of the reception of Seneca as defined by Charlton and unchallenged by his successors, can be formulated as follows: How can the 'Senecan tradition' (i.e. 'Senecanism') explain 'the other Seneca of the popular stage' (public Seneca)? Furthermore, how could the Senecanism of the 1560s generate a Seneca in the 1580s so original (i.e. radically different) that it extinguished the former? There is an imbalance between input and output that Charlton, even if he recognized the problem, cannot explain.

#### IV

There is an alternative possibility to Charlton's seamless Senecan transmission: that Kyd and Shakespeare did not derive their 'Seneca' from the academics but discovered their own Seneca in his Roman tragedies. This possibility, however, has not been seriously considered. It is the purpose of this thesis to do so. Unlike Charlton, my discussion shall explore the claim that the public drama, and the new intellectual climate to which it was responding, made possible the discovery of a non-moralized

---

<sup>91</sup> Charlton, *op.cit.*, p.clxvi.



'modern' Seneca challenging the received moral frame. This engagement with an unconventional Seneca, I shall try to show, is one of the factors generating the new dramaturgy of Kyd and Shakespeare. In this new perspective, Seneca explains what is new rather than what is conventional about the new drama. Seneca ceases to be regarded as a motive of continuity in order to be seen as a cause of innovation.

The hypothesis that I propose to examine is rendered all the more plausible by the recognition-- which Charlton denies -- that 'Senecanism' constitutes a culturally-determined interpretation of Seneca. Contrary to what Charlton assumes, the first English Seneca was not simply a reflection of the Roman original. Indeed, this could not be, there being no neutral absorptions of the kind Charlton implies. Conditioned by the orthodoxy to which the academics were subservient, the absorption of Seneca in the 1560s was perforce a moralized one which adapted Seneca to the expectations of their audiences, made up of the notables of the realm or their future successors. Contrary to what Charlton assumes, 'Senecanism' was the product of the moral acclimatization of Seneca to the training sites of the kingdom's ruling classes. Hence it perforce involved more than a theatrical enhancement of the Roman scripts. It required, for example, that retribution was to be imposed on the destabilizing (because individualizing) subjectivity of revenge. This *active* element in the academic reception of Senecan tragedy is what Charlton's analysis overlooks.

In his 1988 *Ancient Scripts and Modern Experience on the English Stage 1500-1700* Bruce R. Smith shows that Senecanism is the result of a particular reception of Seneca under specific intellectual conditions. Smith begins by emphasizing the fact that two different intellectual contexts, the academic and the public, generated two different universes of discourse. Charlton would not deny this. But Smith goes further in drawing the logical conclusion: that these dissimilar 'configurations of philosophical outlook, physical space and social circumstance'<sup>92</sup> produced two different responses to the classical material. The reception of Seneca by the exclusive academic circles could not have been the

---

<sup>92</sup> Bruce R. Smith, *Ancient Scripts and Modern Experience on the English Stage 1500-1700*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1988, p.202.

**PAGE  
MISSING  
IN  
ORIGINAL**

tragic bloodshedding: 'One of the first results of serious study of Latin tragedy was a widespread attempt to Christianize classical tragedy – or rather to classicize Christian drama – by applying Seneca's florid diction, five-act-structure, and sententious choruses to Biblical subjects'<sup>97</sup>. Thus, Nowell recast the incestuous story of Hippolytus and his stepmother as the Biblical tale of virtuous Joseph and the sinful wife of Potiphar. The other version of *Hippolytus* analysed by Smith – William Gager's *Hippolytus*, acted at Christ Church in 1592 – shows that four decades after Nowell the Christianization of Seneca was still going strong. Gager's 'strategic additions to the script'<sup>98</sup> heighten a moral lesson but not without disfiguring the Roman original:

One suspects that these academics simply delight in speechmaking and debate for their own sake. What the characters' elegant disputations solve or do not solve seems almost beside the point. The dramatic vehicle designed to satisfy such love for debate is the morality play, and Gager has simply added to Seneca's text two scenes of temptation and argumentation inspired by the polemical plays that he and his academic audience already knew and liked.<sup>99</sup>

The intellectual commitments of these academic authors generated the specific interpretation of Seneca of those productions which represented 'heavy-handed attempts to hammer out ethical irregularities into dogmatic certainties'<sup>100</sup>. In addition, their professional commitments defined the form of their Seneca -- argumentative set speeches of rhetorical effect. Charlton regarded William Gager as 'the most Senecan of our English dramatists'<sup>101</sup>. Smith shows that even the Seneca of this most Senecan of our English dramatists is a Seneca entirely mediated by a culture privileging moral argument over dramatic momentum. In this soil, the Senecan seed could not, then, have germinated as anything other than a Seneca *moralisé*:

Gager evinces the same easy moral self-assurance as Nowell. . . the same assumption that one can make a simple moral judgment about the tragic protagonist and the complicated situations in which those characters find themselves. Settled snugly within the walls of school or college,

---

<sup>97</sup> Smith, op.cit., p.200-201.

<sup>98</sup> Smith, op.cit., p.212.

<sup>99</sup> Smith, op.cit., p.215.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> Charlton, op.cit., p.cxlili.

Seneca's sixteenth-century English audiences were unprepared to acknowledge ethical ambiguities, unwilling to question the values that defined themselves as households.<sup>102</sup>

b) *Translations*: An examination of the sequence of translations initiated by Heywood's *Troas* in 1559 confirms that the Seneca of the academics was an actively Christianized one. Written by scholars and students of Oxford and Cambridge, the translations of the 1560s were the product of the same circles that staged the Latin Seneca. In Charlton's continuous tradition of 'Senecanism', the Englished Seneca of Heywood, Neville, Studley, and Nuce is regarded as the embryo from which the public Seneca gradually developed. These first translators, Charlton maintains, 'gave to their Seneca the first characteristic traits of our later Elizabethan Seneca'. They were the founding fathers of Senecan drama in English:

The Senecan translators were really founding a tragical tradition by exaggerating the rhetoric of their original, and increasing Seneca's ghostly apparatus, not only for its own horrible appeal, but for the wider limits it gave to these high-astounding terms. They were thus unfolding Seneca as a mine of tragical material, instinct with the melodramatic possibilities, and were giving the lead in the further exploitation of his extravagantly romantic appeal. And these were the very qualities by which Seneca later entranced the groundlings of the Elizabethan theatre.<sup>103</sup>

Examined from Smith's perspective, however, the translations tell a different story. In effect, as Smith concludes from an analysis of Neville's *Oedipus*, the alterations that allegedly anticipate the public treatment of Seneca are in fact features of a specifically academic reading of Seneca that cannot be identified with that of Kyd and Shakespeare. The academic conception of a 'Senecan play' is primarily oratorical, whereas that of the public stage is primarily interactional. As Smith reminds us 'what to us

---

<sup>102</sup> Smith, op.cit., p.215. Incidentally, that Gager was the target of John Rainolds's viciously pious attacks does not mean his plays were thought unorthodox: for Rainolds and his Puritan likes even the Passion plays were an offense in the eyes of God. Cf. Andrew Gurr, 'Metatheatre and the Fear of Playing', in R.H.Wells et al. (eds.), *Neo-Historicism Studies in Renaissance Literature, History and Politics*, D.S.Brewer, Suffolk, 2000, p.97: 'In the pulpits, theatres and their practices were often associated with popery and the idolatry that later evoked the doctrine of iconoclasm. Some explicitly related the falsity of clothing and players' rituals to Catholic practices. John Rainolds saw a feature of these popish practices in the Passion plays, which he called "profane and wicked toys"'.

<sup>103</sup> Charlton, op.cit., p. clviii. Likewise, Eliot even though he states that 'it has never been supposed, in spite of the acid taunt of Nashe, that any of the Elizabethan dramatists owe any great debt to these translations', he concludes that the latter are 'an embryonic form of Elizabethan tragedy', and that 'there can be little doubt that his [Heywood's] translations indicate a nascent interest in a new vernacular drama to vie with classical drama, and they in turn stimulated the beginning of this drama' (Eliot, 'Seneca in Elizabethan translation', pp.98-99 and 101).

seems cerebral intrusions that threaten both the dramatic illusion and the emotional continuity. . . . were for Neville and his contemporaries the thrilling highlights of the play-as-rhetorical-event'<sup>104</sup>. Smith demonstrates that the alterations Neville makes to Seneca's play – mainly amplifications of *sententiae* into full speeches of moral import – are intended to reinforce this rhetorical dimension. 'The aesthetic here', Smith concludes, 'has as much to do with St Dominic's pulpit as it has to do with Cicero's rostrum'<sup>105</sup>. We confirm, then, that the morality and thrilling sensationalism that defines Seneca in Campbell and Bowers (revenge criticism) and Cunliffe and Charlton (Senecan influence criticism) is in fact the specific product of an academic interpretation. These strategies that familiarize Seneca into the orthodox framework of medieval derivation feature in the whole corpus of the 1560s translations. As in Neville, so in the other translations. And the revenge plays constitute no exception to this: the universe of the Senecan avenger is recast in retributive terms.

Heywood's translations become more and more literal. *Troas* shows substantial modifications, *Thyestes* very few indeed<sup>106</sup>, and *Hercules Furens*, Heywood's last translation, none at all. The corpus of translations as a whole exhibits a similar pattern: the first translations, by Heywood and Neville, contain extensive alterations; Studley's *Medea* and *Agamemnon* far fewer, and the rest, which are almost verbatim translations of the original, hardly any<sup>107</sup>. Nonetheless, even those translators who did not 'improve' their plays theatrically, could not refrain from adding some moral signposts for the

---

<sup>104</sup>Smith, op.cit.,p.207.

<sup>105</sup> Smith, op.cit., p.208.

<sup>106</sup> The only major alteration that Heywood makes to his *Thyestes* is the addition at the end of the play of Thyestes's invocation of divine revenge, which is intended to blunt the edge of Atreus's triumphant cynicism, too sharp for the translator. Not in vain was Heywood destined to become a Jesuit. For a discussion of this point see Kerrigan, op.cit., pp 111-12, and *Thyestes*, ed. by Joost Daalder, New Mermaids, Ernest Benn Limited and WW Norton, London and New York, 1982, pp. xxxviii ff.

<sup>107</sup> Charlton speculates that this may be due to the fact that the first translations were intended for performance, but not the rest – 'the translators following Heywood and Neville within a year or two are in general much more literal, and seem by their prefaces to be thinking only of making literary translations, not plays; and the editor of the collected versions talks only of "the readinge of these tragedies" (*Ded.Letter*, 1581)' (Charlton, op.cit., p. clv). Smith takes for granted in his discussion that that was the case.

interpretation of the action. Studley's *Medea* – which Smith does not discuss – for example, provides a line-by-line version of the original. Only some minor additions appear occasionally as the translator glosses an obscure mythological or geographical reference. 'Bethis' in Seneca becomes 'Bethis. . . against [which] the Spanysche seas doth beat'<sup>108</sup>, for example, while 'Python' is rendered as 'Python whom Dame Juno sent to harme Diana and Apollo, both'<sup>109</sup>. There is one exception to this fidelity, though: Chorus I is entirely replaced by a chorus of Studley's own making, which significantly offers interpretative clues for the play. In Seneca Chorus I intones an epithalamium celebrating the impending marriage of Jason to Creusa, which to his wife Medea means emotional as well as political banishment. The epithalamium serves to set the disgraced Medea against the joy of the community, thus preparing for the tragic reversal. By contrast, Studley's Chorus prepares the audience not for an outrageous calamity that overturns and therefore questions the natural order, but for an illustration that those who do evil are punished for it. In Studley's hands, the play becomes a warning against deceitful love, as the *Mirror for Magistrates* against rebellious subjects. Studley opens his translation thus:

Who hath not wist that windy words be vayne,  
 And that in talke of trust is not the grounde,  
 Heere in a mirrour may he see it playne,  
 Medea so by prooffe the same hath founde.(I.v)<sup>110</sup>

Medea's story is offered as an illustration of the truism that appearances are deceitful. The role of Seneca's characters is accordingly re-adapted: Medea becomes a gullible princess fatally exposed to the ways of the world, and Jason (Seneca's true victim) assumes the human face of sin. The myth of the Argonauts is also readjusted: Jason appears as a swindler whose passion for Medea (milder than the lamb) has been feigned all along. And so the opening Chorus continues:

Her bleared Eyes could not beholde her blisse:  
 Nor spy the present poyson of her Joy,  
 While in the grass the Serpent lurked is

---

<sup>108</sup> *Seneca His Tenne Tragedies*, ed. by Thomas Newton, The Tudor Translations, David Nutt, London, 1927, p.86 [reprint of 1581 original version]. The lines are not numbered.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, p.85.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, p.58.

The ranckling head in dented heart that lyes,  
The cause that brought false Jason out of Greece,  
To come unto her fathers fertile land,  
Is not her love, but love of golden Fleece.

This has certainly little to do with the action of the play that follows. Only a marked predisposition for moral fables on the part of the audience can explain the conversion of Seneca's play into a confirmation of these commonplaces. Instead of being offered psychological insight, we are naggingly reminded to interpret Medea's plight in relation to a general truth given in advance. As she, and we with her, are instructed in the ways of the world, the ferocious female avenger from Colchis is turned into a naive country girl, completely defenceless against Mr Right of London, as Milton's Eve will be against the infernal Satan:

In double hearte blacke treason hydden lies,  
Dissembling thoughts that weave the webbe of woe

In subtle shew of paynted sheath is kept,  
The rusty knife of treason deemed least:  
Lyfe seems the bayte to sight that lyeth brim,  
Death is the looke that underlies the same,  
The Candell blase delight with burning trim  
The Fly, till shee bee burned in the flame.

This harmless fly that buzzes its last in Jason's lascivious flame, this defenceless mother and her babes dumped on the pavement, is a justified avenger:

Beholde the meed of this thy good desarte,  
The recompense that hee to thee doth gyve,  
For pleasure, payne, for joy, most eger smarte,  
With clogging cares in banishment to live.  
Thou, and thy babes, are like to begge and starve  
In Nation Straunge, (O miserable lyfe)  
While Jason from his promyses doe swarve,  
And takes delight in his new wedded wyfe.

To this insufferable traitor, Medea's reaction brings a due chastisement. Thus Studley rationalizes the most irrational of Senecan revenges, and vindicates the Christian principle of universal justice in the very midst of pagan Greece.

c) *English Imitation*: In Charlton and his followers, the 1560s translations are interpreted as the bridge between the Latin Seneca of schools and colleges and the vernacular Senecan tragedies of the Inns-of-Court. Following this tradition, T.S.Eliot, who re-edited Newton's *Tenne Tragedies* in 1927, argues that the translations acted as a catalyst for the Inns-of-Court tragedies. '[I]f we look at [their] dates we cannot overlook the probability that these translations helped to direct the course of events. They (all but one) appeared between 1559 and 1566. . . . Sackville and Norton's *Gorboduc*. . . . appeared in 1561, Gascoyne's *Jocasta* in 1566, and *Gismond of Salerne* in 1567'<sup>111</sup>. Whether the law students can be said to have been successfully 'exhorted to the task' by Heywood<sup>112</sup> or not, there is no doubt that both the translations and the Inns-of-Court tragedies were produced by an intimately linked group of authors. As Eliot reminds us, 'it is to be observed that Nevyle and Studley both joined Inns of Court; that Nevyle came there to know Gascoyne, the author of *Jocasta*; and that Heywood knew, or at least knew of, Sackville and Norton before they had written *Gorboduc*.'<sup>113</sup>

As members of the Inns, these young authors were part of an even more exclusive circle than the Universities. The Inns were the equivalent for the law of a university college and, as such, they were central to the exercise of power in the realm. In Charlton's words, 'the Inns of Court were the training ground of politicians, diplomatists, and the highest officers of Court and State. They were thus in close contact with the Court'<sup>114</sup>. Unlike the later university wits of the public theatre, Sackville, for example, was already as a student acquainted with the ways of the Court and had a first-hand knowledge of Italy. No doubt the privileged circles they entertained regularly and in which they found themselves at home explain some of the principal characteristic of the Inns-of-Court plays, like their delight in pomp and

---

<sup>111</sup> Eliot., 'Seneca in Elizabethan Translation', p.98.

<sup>112</sup> Charlton, op.cit., p.clix.

<sup>113</sup> Eliot, 'Seneca in Elizabethan Translation', p. 101. In addition, as Charlton points out, Studley and Gascoigne had been at the same college, Trinity, in their Cambridge days and Heywood commends the translation of *Thyestes* to Sackville and Norton as better able than himself to do the job – see Charlton, p.clviii.

<sup>114</sup> Charlton, op.cit., p.clx.



spectacle. More important for our concern here, however, is the fact that the elitism of the Inns continued to filter Seneca through an academic sieve. This is what Smith confirms with his examination of *Jocasta*, one of the three Inns-of-Courts tragedies of the 1560s. Acted at Gray's Inn for the 1566-67 Christmas Revels, George Gascoigne and Francis Kinwelmershe's tragedy is a remake of Ludovico Dolce's Italian *Giocasta* (1549), which is in turn based on a Latin translation of Euripides. As such, it exhibits the same 'combination of sensation and sententiousness' we encountered in Nowell, Gager, Neville and Heywood. The play pays tribute to the formalism of classical drama – a digressive Chorus, five-act divisions, the avoidance of enacted violence, messengers, sententious declamation – but the same familiarizing strategies have been applied to its pagan substance. Out of the subtleties of the original, the authors 'arrange reassuring symmetries by pairing the protagonists, simplifying their characters, and setting them in opposition as positive and negative examples'<sup>115</sup>. As a result, the characteristic moralization of classical material ensues: 'as Euripides handles it, the conflict between Eteocles and Polyneices admits of no easy solution: both brothers present rightful claims, and the conflict between them spells disaster for everyone. A struggle of such ironic cast, so utterly unlike the struggle of Satan against God. . . . was beyond the [authors'] ken. . . . It takes surprisingly few additions of lines and scenes to upset the delicately balanced irony of Euripides' play and offer us instead a dramatic universe where good and evil are clearly demarcated'<sup>116</sup>.

## V

Smith's examination of the three variants of 'Senecanism' shows that the reception of Seneca in the 1560s and 80s was conditioned, indeed determined, by the intellectual orthodoxy to which the academic authors were subservient. Far from a 'neutral' rendering, what the pre-Kydian Seneca reveals

---

<sup>115</sup> Smith, op.cit., p.219.

<sup>116</sup> Smith, op.cit., p.221. There is a consensus on the fact that Greek drama was largely unknown to Elizabethan playwrights, though this has become increasingly challenged. Jones, for example, has argued for the influence of the Latin translation of *Hecuba* and *Iphigenia at Aulis* on *Titus Andronicus* (see Jones, op.cit., pp.85-118). Kerrigan finds Jones's claim 'ponderable' (Kerrigan, op.cit., p.173).

is its absorption by the ideology of the Elizabethan establishment. The consequences for the original plays of their subjection to Christian conversion are far-reaching, not least for revenge. In effect, as the translation of *Medea* suggests, the academics transformed the individualized psychology of revenge into the universal truth of retribution. In the process, revenge became depleted of all subjective intensity and meaning. What this means for academic drama is most clearly revealed by the distinctive variant of 'Senecan' speech it generates.

To be sure, Seneca's intensely tragical, overtly patterned speech features in every study of Senecan influence on Elizabethan drama. Whether called rant, bombast, or simply hyperbolic speech, Senecan rhetoric is understood to be the expressive vehicle which, from the early translations to the public plays of the 1580s and 90s, avengers used to proclaim their insufferable grievances and describe the horrific crimes with which they intended to outdo them. However, as T.S.Eliot observes, it is not enough to label a speech as Senecan, for an attentive ear can discriminate between two kinds of Senecan speech. Two different Senecan idioms, it would seem, correspond to the two different Senecas of Elizabethan drama:

Where the popular playwrights travestied Seneca's melodrama and his fury, the Senecals [i.e. the academic authors of the Pembroke circle] travesty his reserve and his decorum. And as for the language that, too, is a different interpretation of Seneca. How vague are our notions of bombast and rhetoric when they must include styles and vocabularies so different as those of Kyd and Daniel! It is by opposite excesses that Senecals and popular dramatists attract the same reproach.<sup>117</sup>

In the last analysis, I would argue, the significance of this Senecan idiomatic duality lies in the difference in the subjective quality it expresses. The rhetorical heat is on in both cases -- fiery language, images of cosmic upheaval, infernal visions; the avenger of academic tragedy is as equipped with the Senecan loudspeaker as the avenger of public tragedy. However, only in the public plays is this rhetorical intensity felt to be reflecting a mind working at the same temperature. That is to say, only the public avenger's speech is felt to be in the grip of a psychic as well as rhetorical convulsion. In the academic plays, revenge is devoid of any psychic content. This is because revenge, and the mortal being who

---

<sup>117</sup> Eliot, 'Seneca in Elizabethan translation', p.95.

enacts it, are conceived as extensions of the universal moral order. Providence imposes a retributive dimension on revenge that makes it trans-personal, indeed impersonal.

What the resulting deflation of subjectivity means is best shown in relation to a concrete example. The example I propose to consider is taken from *Gorboduc*, arguably the most accomplished product of academic drama. There is no doubt that many speeches in *Gorboduc* are of Senecan facture. Indeed, we have unusual confirmation from a famous contemporary critic that they were perceived as such. Sir Philip Sidney's *Defence of Poetry*, published in 1595, singled out *Gorboduc* in its vindication of neoclassical drama. Sidney condemned 'our tragedies and comedies (not without cause cried out against)' for 'observing rules neither of honest civility nor skilful poetry', but with one exception -- *Gorboduc*. Even though, he argued, the play 'might not remain as an exact model of all our tragedies' because it is 'faulty both in place and time, the two necessary companions of all corporal actions', yet 'it is full of stately speeches and well-sounding phrases, climbing to the height of Seneca's style, and as full of notable morality, which it doth most delightfully teach, and so obtains the very ends of poesy'<sup>118</sup>. Now, it is precisely this 'notable morality' combining with Seneca's 'climbing' speech that results in what a recent commentator on Senecan influence regards as 'signs of cultural disorientation'. Robert S. Miola examines the following speech, in which Ferrex assures his counsellors that his heart has never known any violent thought against his father:

The wreakful gods pour on my cursed head  
Eternal plagues and never-dying woes,  
The hellish prince adjudge my damned ghost  
To Tantale's thirst, or proud Ixion's wheel,  
Or cruel gripe to gnaw my growing heart,  
To during torments and unquenched flames,  
If ever I conceived so foul a thought,  
To wish his end of life or yet of reign. (II.i.14-21)<sup>119</sup>

Clearly, Ferrex is here climbing the hill of the Senecan high style for which Sidney commends the play.

---

<sup>118</sup> Sidney, P., *A Defence of Poetry*, ed. by J.A. van Dorsten, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1966, p.65.

<sup>119</sup> Quotations from *Gorboduc* are taken from Irby B. Cauthen's edition in the *Regents Renaissance Drama Series*, Edward Arnold, London, 1970.

Nonetheless, insofar as it is Senecan, Ferrex's disclaimer gives out contradictory signals. As Miola observes, his manner of speech suggests that he is possessed by the outdoing impulse of *scelus* (or crime) that characterizes the Senecan avenger. Yet Ferrex turns up the Senecan volume only to inform us of the pious fact that he is not, nor shall he ever be, a sinful avenger. This mismatch, apparently inbuilt in 'Senecanism', leads Miola to the conclusion that 'the appropriation of Senecan rhetoric to disqualify oneself as Senecan avenger suggests divergent impulses – the one toward linguistic hyperbole, the other from the monstrous character thereby created: while delighting in the soaring excesses of Senecan speech, playwrights sometimes attempted to domesticate rhetorical passion, to locate it in familiar moral frameworks, to make it issue from the lips of recognizable human beings'<sup>120</sup>. Thus, Miola pins down the paradox of 'Senecanism'. But it is necessary to go beyond the explanation he proposes for it.

Academic bombast certainly generates conflicting impulses; but these, as Smith has demonstrated, betray more than 'cultural disorientation'. In fact, as Smith's work demonstrates, they suggest the opposite – an uncritical assumption of the moral and social conventions of the period. What deprives Senecan rant of all puzzling, conflicting subjectivity is the academic authors' confident endorsement of the intellectual *status quo*. This is certainly true of *Gorboduc*, the orthodoxy of which has long been established by scholarship. As a recent study of Elizabethan culture in transition concludes:

Perhaps there is no better dramatic expression of Tudor commonplaces and of the Tudor idea of order than Norton and Sackville's *Gorboduc*. Written in 1561-62, in the dawning years of Astraea, *Gorboduc* is about unity, about order, about degree, it is not a tragedy about person or about transcendence but a tragedy about social order and civil war. . . .the authors reveal no need to question the basic characteristic relations in society. There is no self-conscious anxiety, no restlessness about purpose or meaning in life. While the play is concerned with preserving the life of the 'body politic', it is never concerned with personal mortality. Redemption seems secure. Indeed, the promise of divine retribution with which *Gorboduc* ends expresses in an important way the basic understanding of man and of society that defined the commonplace Tudor idea of order.<sup>121</sup>

---

<sup>120</sup> Miola, *op.cit.*, p. 11.

<sup>121</sup> Stephen L. Collins, *From Divine Cosmos to Sovereign State. An Intellectual History of the Consciousness and the Idea of Order in Renaissance England*, Oxford University Press, New York and

In effect, the eponymous *Gorboduc* enacts the story of the king who, against the advice of his sagest counsellors, divided up his kingdom in equal parts between his two sons, Ferrex and Porrex. Misled by flatterers, the inexperienced new rulers soon find themselves competing for the extension of their rule to the entire kingdom, and plotting each other's downfall. Porrex, possessed by ambitious pride, ends up murdering Ferrex, the eldest son and favourite of the Queen, who then kills Porrex in revenge. Outraged at these unnatural crimes, the people rise in arms against their lords, plunging the realm into civil strife, which does not end until the noblemen quash the rebellion and secure the reinstatement of the legitimate rulers. The play is thus supposed to exemplify the evils caused by any uncertain settlement of royal succession – a question, of course, not entirely irrelevant to the real queen before whom the play was staged at Whitehall. Thus, the tragedy depicts the descent into civil chaos within a moral frame that makes this descent a necessarily transitory one. The note of moral optimism on which *Gorboduc* ends does not minimize the misfortunes the realm has known, but reveals them to have been necessary for the eventual triumph of Justice, guaranteed by God's design behind human history. This is what the well-known *topos* of *Vindicta Filia Temporis* that closes the play amounts to:

O happy man whom speedy death  
Deprives of life, ne is enforced to see  
These hugy mischiefs and these miseries,  
The civil wars, these murders, and these wrongs  
Of justice. Yet must God in fine restore  
This noble crown unto the lawful heir,  
For right will always live and rise at length,  
But wrong can never take deep root to last. (V.ii.272-79)

---

Oxford, 1989, p.3. Cf. Rossiter's verdict: 'In short, though all the form-contrivances of *Gorboduc* are either imported or influenced from Italian senecanizings, the play is a Moral History. . . [for it] shows the most unexpected retention of a "Morality pattern" within the sophisticated art-for-art's-sake form' (Rossiter, *op.cit.*, p. 134). For a recent analysis of these issues, see James Emmanuel Berg, 'Gorboduc as a Tragic Discovery of "Feudalism"', and Jacqueline Vanhoutte, 'Community, Authority, and the Motherland in Sackville and Norton's *Gorboduc*', in *Studies in English Literature* 40 (2000), pp. 199-226, and 227-39, respectively. For a detailed analysis of Senecan borrowings in the play, see Howard Baker, *Induction to Tragedy. A Study in a Development of Form in Gorboduc, The Spanish Tragedy and Titus Andronicus*, Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge, Louisiana, 1939, pp.9-47, which challenges Seneca's influence on the play, Marvin T. Herrick, 'Senecan Influence in *Gorboduc*', in *Studies in Speech and Drama in Honour of A.M.Drummond*, Ithaca, 1944, argues for the play's significant debt to Roman tragedy.

This *topos*, and the play it brings to culmination, assumes a providential universe in which the level of individual existence is regarded as continuous with supra-individual levels with which it forms an integrated and interdependent organic whole. Man, Family, Society, Nature, and Reason – each level contains, and explains, those below and is contained and explained by those above itself, with the whole scheme reaching up to its ultimate meaning: God<sup>122</sup>. In this organic universe, subjectivity, as consciousness of irreducible individuality, and of unassimilable discontinuity, is meaningless. The instability that subjective consciousness implies, and the potential conflict against the external order it entails, can only feature in this scheme as a wilful corruption of the natural conformity that defines individual life.

In radical contrast to this pious discourse, which denies that conflict is required by the sense of selfhood, what seems essential to the new Kydian drama is a consciousness of the unassimilable. Instead of a confirmation of the self, what God, Society and the Law come to define for Kyd is an experience of dislocation and instability. In the public drama, the individual is no longer automatically assumed to constitute an extension of the moral, and hence the social, order. With the new drama subjectivity comes into its own. The fault line between the individual and the ‘order of things’ is, in effect, the fault line between the academic drama and the new drama. Current investigations into the emergence of the public drama confirm this:

Where conventional tragedy promoted an unquestioning acceptance of the order of things, these plays [*Spanish Tragedy* and *Tamburlaine*] evoked a sense of regret that political and metaphysical circumstances should be such as to make suffering inevitable<sup>123</sup>.

Suffering – the intensest form that subjectivity takes – appears to be, then, what we find at the heart of the new drama. The declamatory plays of the academics demand a recognition of what one owes to the established order. Public tragedy, by contrast, seeks to activate one’s empathy with somebody

---

<sup>122</sup> The play is studded with doublets like ‘law and kind’ (I.ii.21), ‘ne kind, ne reason’ (204), ‘kind and custom’, whose frequency of appearance keeps constantly in mind the organic correspondences between Nature and Reason and Custom and Law.

<sup>123</sup> Wiggins, Martin, *Shakespeare and the Drama of his Time*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2000, p.43.

whose dislocation from others makes him most himself. 'Tragedy', Wiggins explains, 'had begun to ask its audiences to respond with humane subjectivity; the essence of the [theatrical] experience was now a relationship with another human being'<sup>124</sup>.

In this new context, to which subjectivity is central, revenge ceases to be understood as retribution. Born out of the avenger's suffering, revenge becomes the affirmation of a subjectivity that cannot be subsumed under the Law. Revenge is central to Kyd's dramatic experiment and to its unprecedented success. But this revenge is revenge understood as a subjective crisis, rather than as a retributive manifestation. What is at the heart of the new drama is entirely missing in the academic plays, namely the uncontrollable, indeed destructive, insane suffering of the avenger. As Wiggins emphasizes, what was so powerfully original about Hieronimo was his victimization, conveyed in a way that brought home to the audience what it means to suffer an intolerable injury:

*The Spanish Tragedy* was the most widely quoted, copied, and, later, parodied play of its time. This material helps us to assess its impact on early audiences, because it shows which elements they found most memorable. Hieronimo figures largely, of course, but it is telling that he does not seem to have been associated with the Marlovian self-empowerment of his revenge: in fact, the most widely quoted of all his lines was the one with which he prudently restrains himself from overstepping the mark, 'Hieronimo, beware! Go by, go by' (3.12.31). He seems to have been most compelling as an articulate but passive figure, a man to whom things are done: he was remembered as a character roused from sleep who demands, 'What outcries pluck me from my naked bed?' (2.4.63), just before discovering his dead son's body hanging in the garden, and who utters the manic poetry of grief – 'O eyes, no eyes, but fountains ....' (3.2.1) – that Kyd's successors found so powerful and imitable. The central experience of the play for sixteenth-century audiences was his suffering.<sup>125</sup>

Now, in the public plays it is precisely the victim's convulsive disintegration into revenge that their 'Senecan' language conveys. What is distinctive about the public avenger is also distinctive about his 'Senecan' rhetoric: the madness of revenge that bespeaks an intolerable suffering. This is the qualitative difference between pre- and post-Kydian avengers. The avenger's insane suffering is what Seneca offers, but academics fail to recognize<sup>126</sup>. Unlike his academic predecessors, vengeful Hieronimo

---

<sup>124</sup> Wiggins, op.cit., p.42.

<sup>125</sup> Wiggins, op.cit., p.42.

<sup>126</sup> Though he subscribes to the Senecanist thesis of Charlton, Rossiter was too attentive to his material to fail to recognize as much: 'The theme of retribution on prince and people in *Gorboduc*

experiences an anguish that confronts us with a subjective dislocation from the objective moral order.

The crime that has been inflicted on Hieronimo does not register as an evil that, being contrary to the universe of God, cannot prevail. Rather, his son's murder is seen to generate an infection that corrupts the very essence of things, questioning their basic arrangements. The crime pollutes the world by polluting the subject who registers it. Behind this degraded order we no longer find retributive certainty but a maddening absence of God. The continuity of self and world has been ruptured to disclose the revenger's madness. In the public plays, the infernal language of Senecan revenge does not flinch from the murderous monster it generates:

The night, sad secretary to my moans,  
With direful visions wake my vexed soul,  
And with the wounds of my distressful son  
Solicit me for notice of his death.  
The ugly fiends do sally forth of hell,  
And frame my steps to unfrequented paths,  
And fear my heart with fierce inflamed thoughts. (III.ii.12-18)

Like the soliloquy he delivers, the speaker reveals himself to be torn between redemption and perdition. The felt unresponsiveness of heaven, which betokens a dependence on it, generates the hell of revenge. Heaven and hell -- the need for moral recognition and the destructiveness its unavailability produces-- feed on each other; this fractured sense of selfhood generates madness. Thus at the heart of tragic revenge we discover a psychological rather than ethical or theological conflict. Hieronimo's initial soliloquy suggests that a dependence on the moral order can generate an utterly immoral impulse, or -- what is the same -- that a destructive impulse can be founded on a moral dependence. For this reason revenge appears at once self-empowering and self-destructive. Such a representation of the avenger is unthinkable in an academic play, for it implies the reality that academic drama negates -- namely that the individual integration in the moral and social order is unstable and can thus generate moral contradictions. It is in this fundamental respect that Hieronimo appears as a direct descendant of

---

cannot compare with the emotional stimulation of its originals in Seneca, with their expositions of the psychologies of savage passion, frenzy, or sheer madness. Crude as those garish colours seem to us, they came to our ancestors with a shock of brilliant discovery. One has only to turn from a sufficiency of morality-play reading to Seneca's Latin to catch a glimpse of what this meant.' Rossiter, *op.cit.*, p.160.



Senecan avengers. As we shall see in due course, like Hieronimo, Medea, for example, experiences an irrepressible impulse to destroy what her integrity depends on (maternal and marital piety) – an impulse that is fuelled by the very threat to this integrity. This is the paradox of Latin Senecan revenge, which is obliged to affirm moral and social dependence by negating it. What drives revenge and its infernal rhetoric is the psychic disintegration of unendurable grief. In this essential respect, Kyd's treatment of revenge can be said to be entirely Senecan. What this thesis seeks to challenge, however, is that this revenge constitutes a continuation of Elizabethan 'Senecanism'.

If we compare the transformation of Hieronimo and Medea into avengers with their parallels in *Gorboduc*, we instantly register a loss in subjective quality. The psychological charge of revenge is defused, and the avenger's suffering is flattened into rhetorical statement. In Act IV of *Gorboduc*, in which she learns that his beloved Ferrex has been killed by Porrex, Queen Videna produces the following lament:

O my beloved son! O my sweet child!  
My dear Ferrex, my joy, my life's delight!  
Is my beloved son, is my sweet child,  
My dear Ferrex, my joy, my life's delight,  
Murdered with cruel death? (IV.i.23-27)

Videna makes the point of her unbearable loss, but the predictable balance and symmetry of her speech contradicts the bewilderment and distraction it tries to convey. Hieronimo's soliloquy was also markedly patterned, but its symmetrical arrangement served the outrage it conveyed, representing the order, both personal and impersonal, that was collapsing under the pressure of grief. Rhetoric and speaker alike were collapsing under the effort of containing the pressure of feeling. In Videna we find none of this; the order and symmetry of her speech obey a formal law. That is why her outbursts of maternal piety – 'O my beloved son', repeated; 'O my sweet child', repeated; 'My beloved son', repeated; etc – refrigerate and domesticate whatever passion she may be thought to feel. To be sure, Videna's suffering is so intense that it expands in cosmic empathy. In Seneca, the language of revenge characteristically conflates self and universe into one and the same outrage. As the Senecan avenger becomes possessed by *furor*, the convulsion he experiences acquires cosmic proportions: the world

becomes the self and the self the world. By contrast the '*furor*' of despairing Videna remains on safe ground, and the threatened universal dislocation, dwindles into a domestic crisis.

For all of their bombast and fiery language, the academic avengers do not overstep the moral mark, and remain, firmly, this side of the moral law. Thus, in Videna's exclamation Senecan outrage culminates in legitimate rebuke:

O heinous traitor both to heaven and earth!  
Thou, Porrex, thou this damned deed hast wrought;  
Thou, Porrex, thou shalt dearly 'bye the same.  
Traitor to kin and kind, to sire and me,  
To thine own flesh, and traitor to thyself,  
The gods on thee in hell shall wreak their wrath,  
And here in earth this hand shall take revenge  
On thee, Porrex, thou false and caitiff wight. (28-35)

Thus, revenge and retribution are made equivalent, and Medea's (or Hieronimo's) psychic disintegration is converted into moral and political determination. *Gorboduc* forces aberration after aberration on us, never sparing gruesome detail (e.g. 38-44), but we never feel that these horrors express a nightmare inhabited by the avenger. In academic tragedy, characters behave like blocks of moral certitude. Medea is torn between two contradictory impulses and destroyed by the psychic tension they generate. Videna, on the contrary, confidently reasons her case against her son, and does her duty against him. For her, filicide becomes a sign of moral sanity:

Shall I still think that from this womb thou sprung?  
That I thee bare? Or take thee for my son?  
No, traitor, no; I thee refuse for mine!  
Never, O wretch, this womb conceived thee  
Nor never bode I painful throes for thee.  
  
But canst thou hope to escape my just revenge  
Or that these hands will not be wroke on thee?  
Dost thou not know that Ferrex's mother lives,  
That loved him more dearly than herself?  
And doth she live and is not venged on thee? (63-81)

When the intolerable suffering of revenge is taken into account, it becomes as plausible that there is a connection between the Senecan and the public avenger as implausible that such a connection was established via the academics.

## C. TOWARDS A NEW PUBLIC SENECA

### I

This unresolved problem of the two different Senecas of Elizabethan drama is central to the attack that G.K. Hunter launched on Cunliffe and Charlton's inherited model. Recognizing the distinctiveness of Senecanism, Hunter challenged Charlton's thesis of a continuous tradition, and reached the conclusion that Senecan influence on the public drama of the 1580s and 90s was minimal. Hunter's is the most influential case that has been made against Senecan influence on Kyd and his fellow dramatists. As such, it is very important for our discussion for it shows that the negation of Seneca as a significant factor in the emergence of public drama leaves unresolved the same problem Hunter accuses the Cunliffe-Charlton thesis of failing to account for, namely, the emergence of the new treatment of revenge in this drama. Hunter fully recognizes the fact that the Seneca of public drama – or more generally the dramatic features grouped under this label – demands an explanation that academic Senecanism cannot provide; and yet he rejects the possibility of an alternative public Seneca. The reasons why he does so are very enlightening as regards the reductive views of modern Elizabethan criticism. Let us follow the logical steps that lead Hunter to dismiss Seneca from his interpretative model.

Hunter begins by highlighting what Cunliffe and Charlton obscure, namely the qualitative difference that separates the academic from the public drama. By emphasizing, as Smith does, the fact that these dramatic corpuses are the product of two distinct social and theatrical contexts, Hunter draws a line between, on the one hand, the academics, the Senecals (in Eliot's sense of closet dramatists) and the continental authors, and, on the other, Kyd and Shakespeare:

The Senecan tragedies of the Italian cinquecento all seem to be designed for specific or private production. In this they are like tragedies in England before the opening of the public theatres in 1576, like *Gorboduc* of 1561, or Gaiscogne's *Jocasta* of 1566 (from Dolce), like *Gismond of Salerne* of 1567-8, or the Latin tragedies of the Universities. . . . or the later 'closet' (unacted) plays of aristocratic amateurs. . . . written in this way, no doubt, in reaction to the 'vulgar' form of the acted drama. As Greville says: 'be it known it was no part of my purpose to write for

them against whom so many good and great spirits have already written'.<sup>127</sup>

Having recognized the distinctiveness of the academic production, Hunter goes on to note that Cunliffe's thesis 'becomes less convincing as the works he treats become aesthetically more important. It works very well for *The Misfortunes of Arthur*, well for *Gismond of Salerne* (and not badly for Dr Legge's *Richardus Tertius*) but it is on very shaky ground with *The Spanish Tragedy*. . . . and works not at all for Marlowe's plays or for Shakespeare's'<sup>128</sup>. In other words, Hunter uncovers the distinctiveness of Senecanism – that is to say, the specifically academic reception of Seneca. On the basis of this identification, Hunter discloses what the continuous Senecan tradition posited by Charlton implies, to wit, that Senecanism is a major factor in the emergence of the new public drama, radically different though this drama is from the academic production:

[Charlton's] chronological model would. . . . suggest that the aristocratic plays of the 1560s should be regarded not only as precursors but also as progenitors of the popular tragedies of the 1580s and 1590s, so that Seneca operates on the popular drama at two removes, as well as directly, but with crucial effectiveness.<sup>129</sup>

It is *this* assumption that Hunter intends to challenge – the assumption, that is, that there is a continuous tradition that unifies English drama into a Senecan whole. Hunter questions this Senecan tradition on the grounds that Senecanism cannot explain the originality of the new Kydian tragedy:

From this [conventional] point of view there is a continuum of tragedy in England running unbroken from 1561. . . . to 1641. . . . It seems doubtful, however, if the Inns-of-Court private tragedies in fact led directly to or provided the primary stimulus for the public tragedies. University men writing for professional actors and a paying public had to take note of the popular interest in a crowded stage, a wide variety of passions, a Christian ethic, a patriotic enthusiasm, a joking immediacy of theatrical contact. Seneca, Groto, Thomas Hughes, and the Countess of Pembroke could provide little guidance to deal with such demands, less indeed than the popular strolling theatricals of the English countryside.<sup>130</sup>

---

<sup>127</sup> G.K.Hunter, 'Seneca and English Tragedy', *Dramatic Identities and Cultural Tradition*, Liverpool University Press, Liverpool, 1978, p.192; first published in *Seneca*, ed.by C.D.N. Costa, Routledge, London, 1974.

<sup>128</sup> G.K.Hunter, 'Seneca and the Elizabethans: a case-study in "influence"', *ibid.*, p.160; first published in *Shakespeare Survey* 20 (1967), pp. 17-26.

<sup>129</sup> Hunter, 'Seneca and English Tragedy', p.192.

<sup>130</sup> Hunter, 'Seneca and English Tragedy', pp.192-93.

In effect, what Hunter questions is Seneca as a factor of continuity between the old and the new drama. The Senecan hypothesis appears all the more questionable in view of the fact that, as Hunter emphasizes, the public drama is characterized by innovation, not continuity. Hunter thus raises the crucial question of Seneca versus 'Senecanism', and the need to differentiate between the two. This question will remain central to my thesis. I argue, with Hunter, that to the extent that Seneca is posited as a major factor in the emergence of Kyd's drama, Seneca cannot mean 'Senecanism'. The Seneca that helps explain the formation of public revenge tragedy cannot be the Seneca of the academics. *It has to be the product of a re-discovery of Roman tragedy made possible by the new intellectual climate to which the plays of public playwrights were responding.*

If Seneca were to be a powerful influence on the tragedy of the public theatre he would have, it seems, to make a fresh impact. His forms and his outlook could not be carried over, passively, from the private tragedies of the preceding decades.<sup>131</sup>

The substantiation of this claim requires the transcendence of Cunliffe's 'Seneca' and of the notion of influence from which it derives. Hunter recognizes as much when he proposes a re-definition of influence that allows for an *active* reception of Seneca into Elizabethan drama. Cunliffe's conventional notion of 'source' is too passively reductive to account for the fact that Elizabethan Seneca owes as much to the new Elizabethan tragedy as it owes to its Roman counterpart:

The process involved in this [Cunliffe's] type of study is. . . that the scholar looks at work B for evidence that it derived elements from work A, which then may be elevated to the status of '*an influence*'. But if work B is more than a passive and parasitic object – that is, if it is any good – it will make new whatever it borrows, it will render what it treats into organic substance, into substance whose principal relationship is to context not to source. The danger of *Quellenforschung* is that it tends to treat as *passive* a situation in which good work is essentially active, creative, and to this extent unique.<sup>132</sup>

Here – and without setting a precedent for the thesis that follows – I wholeheartedly agree with Hunter.

By questioning the established understanding of Senecan influence, Hunter envisages the

---

<sup>131</sup> Hunter, 'Seneca and English Tragedy', p.193.

<sup>132</sup> Hunter, 'Seneca and the Elizabethans', p.161.

possibility of a Seneca that was actively assimilated into the public drama, that is to say, of a Seneca re-discovered in the non-academic context. However, if the vindication of this unorthodox Seneca of public drama is still necessary – if the present thesis is still relevant -- it is because Hunter concluded *that this conceivable Seneca never materialized*. Hunter denies any significant role to ‘Senecanism’ in the formation of public tragedy on the basis that it could not have made the necessary ‘fresh impact’. Only a different Seneca from the conventional one could have made this impact. At this point, however, Hunter stops short of invoking any *unconventional* Seneca. He denies the plausibility of a fresh Senecan impact. Seneca, he concludes, was never significant to public tragedy. It is very important for our analysis to realize that, when all is said and done, what leads Hunter to discard this possibility is his incapacity to imagine a Seneca other than the conventional one. In effect, he remains in the grip of the academic conception of Seneca – indeed of the Cunliffe hypothesis. Thus, in a paradoxical way not uncharacteristic of him, he ends up endorsing the continuity of pre- to post-Kydian drama he set out to deny. This he does by arguing that those features of public drama associated with Seneca were in fact derived from the native, medievalized tradition of pre-Shakespearean times, which both Cunliffe and Charlton neglected in equal measure. What Hunter failed to notice is that this alleged native continuum obscures the originality of the public plays no less than the Senecan continuum of Cunliffe and Charlton.

Hunter’s rejection of a ‘fresh’ Seneca – of any Seneca for that matter – rests, then, on two related assumptions, by no means unique to Hunter’s interpretation of this dramatist. The first is that Senecan tragedy is a motley collection of material lacking in artistic unity. For Hunter, there is no integrated tragic vision to be discovered in Seneca, whose work means different things to different critics because it cannot mean one big thing:

‘Seneca’ himself never offered anything like a simple or homogeneous set of characteristics. Critics have tended to speak of ‘Senecan influence’ as if a single and homogeneous quality was being transmitted. . . .[but] when we speak of ‘Seneca’, do we refer to the doom-laden family histories of the Pelopidae (the *Thyestes* and the *Agammenon*), or do we refer to the tales of passionate and sorrowful womanhood (*Phaedra* and *Medea*), or are we thinking of the comparatively open atmosphere of the *Hercules Furens*. . . . If we are to take as ‘Senecan’ only what is common to the whole body of plays we are left with a residue of pretty obvious

features.<sup>133</sup>

The second assumption is that the public drama of the 1580s inscribes itself into a 'Gothic [i.e. native] tradition' that is primarily non-dramatic<sup>134</sup>. Despite having insisted on the radical innovation that attends the birth of the public drama, Hunter argues that the elements derived from Seneca are thought to be generative only because of the failure to recognize alternative non-dramatic traditions, traditions that precede this drama, often reaching back deep into the Tudor period and beyond. In the same vein, he argues that when non-dramatic classical material is taken on board, little is left for Seneca to claim as his own: if you 'take down the artificial barriers between tragedy and narrative. . . . Seneca all but disappears into the engulfing sea of Ovidian imitation'<sup>135</sup>. From this perspective, which plays down the specifically dramatic dimension of public revenge tragedy, Hunter concludes that 'if Seneca's tragedies had not survived, some details would have had to be changed – but the over-all picture would not have been altered'<sup>136</sup>. We soon discover, however, that to dismiss Senecan influence is to revert to moralizing readings of the public plays.

In effect, as he makes his case for the incompatibility of Senecan tragedy and public-stage drama, Hunter emphasizes the Christian orthodoxy that differentiates the latter from the former. In so doing, of course, he inadvertently reinforces the link between popular drama and its academic predecessors. Indeed, it is no accident that the contemporary evidence he advances is from the work of a Senecal author. The distinction he emphasized as so crucial between the two different theatrical

---

<sup>133</sup> Hunter, 'Seneca and the Elizabethans', p.177.

<sup>134</sup> Parallel to the Senecan case, a persuasive case has been made for the influence of the native tradition, specially the dramatic native tradition: see for example, Willard Farnham, *The Medieval Heritage of Elizabethan Tragedy*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1936; Bernard Spivack, *Shakespeare and the Allegory of Evil*, Columbia University Press and Oxford University Press, New York and London, 1958; and David M. Bevington, *From 'Mankind' to Marlowe*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1962. There is no doubt that the medieval tradition was relevant to the new drama. The question remains, however, to what extent and purpose did this tradition interact with the public Seneca of Kyd and Shakespeare.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, p.166.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, p.173.

contexts – the academic and the popular – does not seem now to be of any intellectual consequence.

For Hunter, now, public drama is no less orthodox than academic drama:

The ethic of Seneca was, as a unifying factor in his plays, quite hostile to the ethic that is tolerable to a Christian community. The most memorable statement of this incompatibility comes, fortunately enough. . . .from a ‘Senecan’ dramatist, Fulke Greville [who in his life of Sidney] speaks first of ancient tragedies which ‘exemplify the disastrous miseries of man’s life, where Order, Laws, Doctrine and Authority are unable to protect Innocency from the exorbitant wickedness of power, and so out of that melancholic vision stir horror, or murmur against Divine Providence’ . . . . On the other hand, [he argues] modern tragedies ‘point out God’s revenging aspect upon every particular sin, to the despair and confusion of mortality’<sup>137</sup>.

When Hunter insists that ‘Greville’s distinction is one that is particularly important when we deal with . . . revenge’<sup>138</sup>, the interpretation of revenge tragedy reverts in principle if not in detail to the conventional moralization of Campbell and Bowers. Thus revenge is equated with justice at the service of a providential design. The familiar tripartite scheme of private/public/divine revenge re-appears, and with it, the assertion that revenge means justice by extralegal means – ‘revenge is presented as a monstrous mutation of justice, isolating and maddening, in a world still ruled by “God’s revenging aspect upon every particular sin”’<sup>139</sup>. And so we re-encounter the familiar perception that Elizabethan revenge is Senecan revenge *plus*, the ‘plus’ being a final retribution that restores the order of God: ‘The revenge play of the Elizabethans would have been wholly unacceptable if Titus, or Hieronimo, or Hoffman, or Hamlet had been rewarded for their revenges, as Atreus and Clytemnestra or Medea are’<sup>140</sup>. From this, it follows that revenge is depleted of any subjective meaning, and that what it owes to Seneca can be reduced to a number of sensationalist tricks. ‘That strain of Elizabethan tragedy concerned with revenge’ thus becomes ‘a strain often thought to be particularly dependent on Seneca – though often this means no more than that there is horror in both’. Such reductiveness is the result of denying Seneca any major role in the formation of public revenge tragedy, and of trying to substitute the native tradition

---

<sup>137</sup> Hunter, ‘Seneca and English Tragedy’, p.182.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid., p.183.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid., p. 187.

<sup>140</sup> Loc.cit.



in its stead. In negating Seneca, Hunter affirms the orthodox continuities his attack on Senecanism was intended to dispel. Without a serious re-examination of the public Seneca we cannot prevent ourselves from regressing to the cul-de-sac of a retributive, medievalized revenge that cannot explain the new theatricals of Kyd and Shakespeare<sup>141</sup>.

## II

It will be agreed that, following from the preceding discussion, the number of critics who have had a say about Senecan influence is by no means modest. However, among these only one, T.S.Eliot, has argued for a specifically theatrical influence of Seneca on Elizabethan drama. This is because the recognition of the theatrical effect of Seneca on Kyd and Shakespeare requires liberation from the grip of the moralized approach. In this respect, it can hardly be a coincidence that the one critic who seeks to privilege a Seneca *tragicus* over the conventional Seneca *ethicus* happens to be a dramatist himself. Writing in 1932, Eliot declared that 'the influence of Seneca on Elizabethan drama has been exhaustively studied in its formal aspect, and in the borrowing and adaptation of phrases and situations' and proposed to reach beyond this by investigating instead 'the penetration of Senecan sensibility'. Aware that there are limits to the imaginative demands that can be made on scholars, Eliot hastened to add that this penetrating sensibility, unlike its formal aspects, 'would be much more difficult to trace'<sup>142</sup>. In this, he was not mistaken. Seventy years later, his request is often noted but rarely heeded. Eliot pointed the

---

<sup>141</sup> The other central attack on Senecan influence was that of Howard Baker's *Induction to Tragedy*. Like his successor (Hunter), Baker argued for the native origin of the Elizabethan material attributed to Seneca. In confirmation of the inadequacy of this thesis, we see that, as in Hunter's case, the rejection of Seneca leads to the affirmation of a dramatic continuity that cannot account for the innovative nature of the public drama. Baker's statement of purpose confirms this: 'the primary intention of this study is to show in some detail how Elizabethan tragedy, without changing importantly the kind of technical and moral material which it had inherited from the Middle Ages, and without being influenced centrally by Seneca, moved fairly smoothly through victories over more and more difficult and significant versions of those materials' (Baker, op.cit., p.2).

<sup>142</sup> T.S.Eliot, 'Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca', in *Selected Essays*, Faber and Faber, London, 1932, p.140. In fact, this essay marked the culmination of the Cunliffe-Charlton-Lucas sequence of Senecan studies, which was followed by the sceptical period of Baker and Hunter, in turn superseded by renewed affirmations of Senecan influence by Miola and Boyle.

way to the Senecan *tragicus*, but academic moralism is a tenacious phenomenon. Eliot proceeded on the conviction that, as he stated elsewhere, 'Seneca's influence upon dramatic form, upon versification and language, upon sensibility, and upon thought, must in the end be all estimated together, they cannot be divided'<sup>143</sup>. From this perspective, he discerned 'in some of the great tragedies of Shakespeare a new attitude'<sup>144</sup>. This he characterized as 'the attitude of self-dramatization assumed by some of Shakespeare's heroes at moments of tragic intensity', and argued that though it is not the attitude of Seneca, 'it is derived from Seneca [and] it is slightly different from anything that can be found in French tragedy'<sup>145</sup>. For Eliot this new attitude was typical of Elizabethan public drama in general, but 'Shakespeare, of course, does it much better than any others, and makes it somehow more integral with the human nature of his characters. It is less verbal, more real'<sup>146</sup>. This new attitude is not the result of a moral adherence to Stoicism as handed down by Seneca, but of a theatrical inventiveness on the part of the Elizabethan playwrights. As such, it bespeaks 'Shakespeare's instinctive recognition of something of theatrical utility'<sup>147</sup>. Eliot cites Othello's last great speech as a model of it. Othello, he observes, 'succeeds in turning himself into a pathetic figure, by adopting an *aesthetic* rather than a moral attitude, dramatizing himself against his environment'<sup>148</sup>. In this sense, Seneca can be said to bring to

---

<sup>143</sup> Eliot, 'Seneca in Elizabethan Translation', *ibid.*, p.95.

<sup>144</sup> What Eliot thought of Shakespeare's earliest tragedy is well-known: *Titus Andronicus* he famously described as 'one of the stupidest and most uninspired plays ever written, a play in which it is incredible that Shakespeare had any hand at all' ('Seneca in Elizabethan Translation', p.82). Not so, however, with *The Spanish Tragedy*, which he considered essential for the transmission of Seneca to Shakespeare (cf. 'Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca', p.129). In this respect, it is worth bearing in mind that, as Emrys Jones reminds us, 'the recovery of the very early Shakespeare is one of the achievements of twentieth century scholarship'. Belatedly as it comes, this recovery has been truly spectacular. As Jones further points out, '*Titus Andronicus* is no longer, or perhaps no longer so often, thought of as an embarrassing aberration. Indeed some may feel that, for many of our students, *Titus* has become almost too popular, too central, a text' (Emrys Jones, 'Reclaiming Early Shakespeare', *Essays in Criticism* LI 1 (2001), p.35).

<sup>145</sup> Eliot, 'Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca', p. 129.

<sup>146</sup> Eliot, 'Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca', pp. 129-30.

<sup>147</sup> *Loc.cit.*

<sup>148</sup> *Op.cit.*, p.131.

Elizabethan tragedy 'an influence toward a kind of self-consciousness that is new; the self-consciousness and self-dramatization of the Shakespearian hero, of whom Hamlet is only one'<sup>149</sup>. In Eliot's interpretation, Seneca ceases to align himself with Christian orthodoxy to join forces with those other two initiators of cultural earthquakes – Machiavelli and Montaigne – from whom a new dialectic of self and non-self emerges at the dawn of modern Europe. This dialectic characterizes the great new age of drama by bringing into question previous moral certainties. If Eliot's recognition of this fact had had the same effect on Senecan criticism, this thesis would, perhaps fortunately, not have been necessary.

### III

Recent contributions to the Senecan question continue to revolve around the fragmented Seneca of Hunter *et al*, neglecting the line proposed by Eliot<sup>150</sup>. This thesis seeks to take Eliot's insights further by arguing for a unified Senecan tragic vision which had a formative impact on early Elizabethan revenge tragedy. This task has been rendered safer after the publication of Gordon Braden's *Renaissance Tragedy and the Senecan Tradition: Anger's Privilege* (Yale University Press, New Haven, 1985), which takes an integrative line like Eliot's. In his ground-breaking study, which has not yet been fully recognized as such, Braden shows that Roman tragedy offers a consistent and powerful tragic vision that encompasses but transcends the Stoic doctrine expounded in Seneca's prose works. After Braden, the question of the public Seneca – that is, of a specifically tragic Seneca recognized as such by Kyd and Shakespeare – presents itself with renewed urgency.

---

<sup>149</sup> Op.cit., p.139.

<sup>150</sup> When we hear Hunter reject Eliot's thesis on the grounds that 'Othello does in a sense "dramatize himself" (and so does the Medea of *Medea superest*) but vivid self-description seems to be an inescapable dramatist's device (surely Sophocles's Oedipus "dramatizes himself", not to mention Ibsen's Hedda)' ('Seneca and English Drama', p.179), we cannot but conclude that gross simplification has played a part in the dismissal of Eliot's thesis. To understand, as Hunter does here, 'self-dramatization' as 'vivid self-description' is surely to trivialize the affective force the former carries. No matter how 'vivid' self-description is, it has little to do with the empowerment of selfhood to which Eliot refers.

The first step towards the establishment of a unified Senecan vision is the establishment of an affective, or psychological, Seneca. And the first step towards the establishment of the affective Seneca is the recognition that madness is what defines the experience of the tragic revenge. This is why Braden proposes to reclaim the centrality of *furor* to Seneca's tragic vision. In Braden's reading, *furor* is not just the most conspicuous aspect of the plays, it is also the key to their meaning. Admittedly, *furor* is not a theme exclusive to Senecan tragedy: it characterizes much of the Latin non-lyrical production of the first century. As Braden acknowledges, 'the works of Seneca, Lucan and Statius are dominated by titanic figures of insatiable appetite for conquest and destruction; the vehemence of their desire all but wrecks the classical forms into which they are put, and expresses itself in set pieces of hyperbolic rant that seem bent on violating all sensible standards of literary decorum'.<sup>151</sup> But this does not mean that it can be simply dismissed as a period feature. Its centrality has to be explained if this drama is to be accorded a meaning more profound than sheer sensationalism. Hence Braden's insistence that 'unless its primary topic can be taken seriously, Senecan tragedy will remain simply an unfortunate accident of literary history'<sup>152</sup>. But what does it mean to take *furor* seriously? It means not to take its meaning for granted as outrageous passion at the service of melodrama. Indeed, glancing back at Hunter, we confirm that Braden's urge to go beyond this superficial interpretation is entirely justified. For Hunter, who never discovers a Seneca *tragicus* other than that of conventional Stoic doctrine, *furor* is devoid of any psychological content. The opposite of reason, it constitutes a generalized expression of unreason. This governs his interpretation of the plays as conflicts of two abstract, impersonal forces. While it may be conceded that these conflicts have a measure of moral and philosophical interest, it is clear that for Hunter they lack any emotional base, any reality grounded in human nature:

When Seneca's slaves of passion are taken over by inhuman or anti-human emotions they are released from human responsibility . . . they become the vessels or instruments of the furor which is personified by the *Furiae* we meet in the infernal prologues. . . . It is impossible to know just how subjective or how objective Seneca intended *Erynis* or *Megaera* to be, but clearly

---

<sup>151</sup> Braden, op.cit., p.28.

<sup>152</sup> Loc.cit.

we are not dealing with a fluctuation of inner mood. A more objective description of human processes seems to be involved: reason has struggled with *furor* and lost, and thereafter the inner resource of the individual is empty and the infernal passions take its place.<sup>153</sup>

By de-personalizing *furor* as an abstract passion, indeed as Passion itself, Hunter reduces tragic experience to moral certitude. This reduction is typical of conventional instincts to supplant the subjective origins of *furor*, rooted in the character's conflict, with an objective aetiology, rooted in the philosophical tradition. Instead of an affective crisis Hunter perceives a Manichean allegory. This is the consequence of taking *furor* for granted when analysing the plays.

To counter this medievalization of Senecan tragedy, Braden proposes an investigation into the content of *furor* that achieves an understanding of the devastation it unleashes:

Even the recent revival of scholarly respect for the plays has tended to take the inexplicability of *furor* for granted: the opposite of *ratio*, it is a primal force of unreason that cannot be managed or diverted, only suppressed or resisted. That is the usual result of applying Seneca's philosophy directly to the plays, which then become cautionary fables about the destructive intractability of irrational *pathe*.<sup>154</sup>

Rejecting the fragmentation of the plays into unconnected rhetorical speeches, Braden aims at an integrated reading in which *furor* is seen as a drive to self-sufficiency that achieves the latter only at the price of madness. This interpretation reveals a Seneca totally different from the conventional one.

From an examination of the principal revenge plays, *Medea* and *Thyestes*, in relation to Greek tragedy, and of the extant fragments of other Roman tragedies, he concludes that Senecan drama is characterized by the absence of any social and familial web that could contain and hence relativize the hero's *furor*. To a large extent, the tragedy of revenge is the product of a crazed obliteration of this web. When, for example, Medea is confronted by the loss of her 'interpersonal bearings' (her familial, social and national position), she produces 'a gesture of mythic self-possession, establishing personal identity as a force that transcends its origin and context'<sup>155</sup>. As a result, the killing of Medea's children 'takes on an abstract meaning that it does not have in the Greek plays as part of a programmatic

---

<sup>153</sup> Hunter, 'Seneca and English Tragedy', p.185.

<sup>154</sup> Braden, op.cit., p.30.

<sup>155</sup> Braden, op.cit., p.34.

destruction of ties to the human race'<sup>156</sup>. For this reason, the typical plot of a Senecan play takes the form of an 'inner passion which bursts upon and desolates an unexpected and largely uncomprehending world' – that is, of an enactment 'of the mind's disruptive power over external reality'<sup>157</sup>. Thus, at the heart of Senecan drama Braden discovers a tragic dialectic of self and non-self, which manifests itself in the insanity of 'an expansive and seemingly illimitable selfhood'<sup>158</sup>. What Braden reveals is that *furor* is a form of madness that aims at the realization of 'a fantasy of individual autonomy beyond almost any kind of limit'. At its most fundamental, Braden's analysis shows that at the heart of revenge can be found a psychic crisis, and that an understanding of Senecan drama requires that it be taken on board.

I shall return to the crucial points Braden raises when I discuss *Medea* and *Thyestes* in detail. At this stage, what is important is to realize that Braden's interpretation of Seneca reveals a consistent tragic vision to which a crisis of identity, and the despairing madness it provokes, is the central issue. Thus it is not accidental that the comparison of a passage from *Medea* with a passage from *Gorboduc* showed Senecan 'bombast' to be imbued with a subjective dimension not found in 'Senecanism'. When Braden insists that 'the bombastic style that is the mainstay of Senecan tragedy' is 'the crux of any serious appreciation of the plays'<sup>159</sup>, he refers to that style as the expression of a psychic crisis. Senecan set speeches and soliloquies, Braden concludes, 'are distinguishable from Greek precedent as *Affektreden*, rhetorical expressions of the speaker's *affectus*'. Though it could be argued that the term *Affektreden* 'has played its role in the devaluation of Seneca's plays as incoherent rhetorical exercises, it has. . . . also been taken as the sign of a new and important interest in the subjectivity of consciousness'<sup>160</sup>. In this perspective, the Senecan avenger that Braden unveils shows an underlying affinity with suffering Hieronimo and Titus.

---

<sup>156</sup> Braden, loc.cit.

<sup>157</sup> Braden, op.cit., p.39.

<sup>158</sup> Braden, op.cit., p.42.

<sup>159</sup> Braden, op.cit., p.38.

<sup>160</sup> Braden, op.cit., p.40.

#### IV

In more general terms, my thesis, as I have indicated, presents the theme of revenge as part of the larger question of the reciprocal relationship of self and society. Braden's Seneca, with its dialectic of self and non-self, would have been pretty meaningless to the academic authors. Writing from a providential perspective, they took for granted the individual's essential integration within the social and divine orders, as the natural condition of existence. With the public playwrights it was to be otherwise. The assumption of the discussion that follows is that the new public drama is the product of a world in transition from the moral certitudes I have described. Unlike academic drama, Kydian and Shakespearean tragedy were responsive to the transformations of modernity<sup>161</sup>. At the time Kyd and Shakespeare were writing the full impact of these changes was beginning to be felt in England. It is plausible to claim that the popular contexts of the public theatre would have permitted the perception and exploration of the conflicts generated by such socio-ideological mutations. The story of how the Reformation, the rise of the nation state, the emergence of secularism and science, the discovery of new continents, and the consolidation of colonial mercantilism fashioned a brave new world is a well-known story and need not be repeated here. However, it is well to remember that the geographical re-location of Europe brought about by its extraordinary dynamism must have radically affected the perception that people had of themselves as a community. As Barbara Ward vividly describes it in her study of Eastern-Western cultural collision, 'universal' Christendom was fragmented into a plurality of competing religious and national truths. In contrast to the static millenarian East, the kingdoms of the West were swept by a current of interminable change that started to flow irresistibly during Kyd's and Shakespeare's lifetimes:

Thus in every field of human activity, the Europe which thrust itself out over the world after the sixteenth century was a new phenomenon among political organisms. Its religion was becoming this-worldly. Its trading governments were either in the first stages of limited democracy – as in Britain and Holland – or, as in the case of France, were mined with philosophical ideas preparing

---

<sup>161</sup> For a discussion of modernity in Shakespeare and the attention it has received by critics see Hugh Grady, 'Renewing Modernity: Changing Contexts and Contents of a Nearly Invisible Concept', *Shakespeare Quarterly* 50, 3 (1999), pp.268-84.

to blow despotic governments to the skies. Any idea of a single theocratic civilization had vanished with the Reformation, leaving a group of strongly competing nation states. And the economies of the main trading communities – once Portugal and Spain were outstripped – were tending towards an entirely new type of organization – the industrial system. In the meeting of East and West, like no longer met like. European society, in spite of its material inferiority, suddenly took on a power of growth and change and dynamism, for good and for evil, on whose wave we and the whole world with us are still rushing along.<sup>162</sup>

In this perspective, what now obtained was a state of ebullient fragmentation in which the identification with the community perforce became much more conscious. In effect, as John Hale has taught us, the Renaissance was the age in which 'Europe' was discovered. When the notion of universal Christendom began to dissolve, it was quickly replaced by a European consciousness. But this consciousness must have implied, as that of being a member of Christianity did not, an awareness of relativity, accentuated by the discovery of alien cultures. The encounters with Muscovy, the Indies, America, Turkish pressure acting on nearby Vienna – all such factors combined to make Europeans feel such<sup>163</sup>. It is evident that an awareness, whether unconscious or lucid, of the relativity of one's community developed in this period. This would in turn have produced an awareness of *individual* relativity to the community, since it was the sense of belonging to a particular community, and not to another, that now determined the perception of who one was. The sense of belonging to a universal, immutable order was undermined by a sense of dependence on a much less stable entity. Thus, the often-trumpeted Renaissance discovery of the individual presupposes a simultaneous discovery of the community. For all the Burckhardts in the world, the Renaissance was the age of the community as much as, or rather because, it was the age of the individual<sup>164</sup>.

---

<sup>162</sup> Barbara Ward, *The Interplay of East and West. Elements of Contrast and Co-operation*, George Allen and Unwin Ltd, London, 1957, p.24.

<sup>163</sup> Cf. John Hale, 'The Discovery of Europe', in *The Civilization of Europe in the Renaissance*, Fontana Press, London, 1994, pp 3-50. The conceptualization of Europe manifested itself in various material ways. As Hale observes, 'It was during the period covered by this book that the word Europe first became part of the common linguistic usage and that the continent itself was given a securely mapped-based frame of reference, a set of images that established its identity in pictorial terms, and a triumphant ideology that overrode its internal contradictions' (Hale, *The Civilization of Europe*, p.3).

<sup>164</sup> This is particularly true of England, for, as Hale observes: 'During the sixteenth century Englishmen's interest in foreign countries and their awareness of the differences between them increased



It is in this new context that the Senecan tragic dialectic of self and otherness would have made its impact. At once complete in himself and yet dependent on the community, the individual was now perceived to be in unstable relationship to himself because he was in an unstable relationship to others, on whom his identity was seen to be dependent. What I propose to do, then, is to approach revenge as the privileged locus of the intersection of the self and the social – that is to say, as the tragic expression of the instability in which these two exist. Within my limited inquiry, the recognition of this basic instability is the recognition of the limitations of providentialism to explain the individual experience of revenge. What my thesis seeks to establish is the fact that Senecan drama played an important role in this recognition and in the dramatic expression it was given. In order to show this, I shall reclaim the specificity of the avenger figure as a Senecan figure. In the critical tradition of Senecanism, which endorses a continental connection for public drama, the avenger and the Machiavel are conflated into a single Senecan figure.<sup>165</sup> Against this tradition, I shall argue that the constitutive conception of revenge reveals the fundamental difference between the (Senecan) avenger and the Machiavel. There is an anticipation of this claim in Keyishian, who recognizes that Shakespeare ‘distinguishes – sharply and qualitatively I think -- between authentic revenge and vindictiveness, a malicious state of mind that resembles it like an evil twin’. For the avenger, Keyishian observes, ‘Shakespeare establishes credible, compelling motives. . . there are others, however – Iago is their type

---

enormously. The shifting alliances of the Italian wars at the beginning of the century and the use of powerful armies had helped the political divisions of the continent to be seen more distinctly. Definition was helped by the rapid growth of formal diplomacy and, for England, by the reflection of prosperity at home in a revived aggressiveness abroad. The Reformation emphasized political divisions still further, and at the same time it made necessary that England should understand and take advantage of them. The stress caused by internal change at home roused an interest in foreign institutions’ (J.Hale, *England and the Italian Renaissance*, Arrow Books, London, 1963, p.13).

<sup>165</sup> Cf. Rossiter: ‘The diabolical tyrant of Seneca fused with this myth [ of ‘a superhuman sub-man, a creature of heartless, cool-headed, pitiless intellect, with a tool-steel will’, i.e. the Machivel] to provide the Elizabethan stage with its teeming race of “glorious villains”’ (Rossiter, *op.cit.*, p158). Likewise, Mario Praz argues that ‘Senecan tragedy reached England first through the Italian imitations . . . when we come to examine closely Cinthio’s characters falling under that description, we find that he developed the type of superhuman knave to be found in Seneca with the help of elements derived from Machiavelli’. For Praz, the ‘villain’ of the Elizabethan public stage is a direct descendant of this obnoxious hybrid. (Mario Praz, ‘The Politic Brain: Machiavelli and the Elizabethans’, in *The Flaming Heart*, Doubleday, New York, 1958, pp. 116, 142).

in perfection – who are moved to chronic resentfulness by a combination of envy, excessive pride, and self-loathing, often hidden from consciousness'<sup>166</sup>. It seems to me to be essential to differentiate, as Keyishian does for the first time, between the Senecan avenger and the Machiavel; but it is not enough to say that these are sharply contrasting figures. In what follows I intend to show that the avenger and the Machiavel are conceived as complementary figures, as the two variants of the major theme under exploration in the plays, to wit, the social condition of the individual. The contrast between the Machiavel and the Senecan avenger, I shall argue, acquires its full significance only as part of the dramatization of the challenge of traditional communitarism by the new forms of radical individualism in Kyd and Shakespeare.

An interesting perspective on this dialectic as central to Shakespeare's age is found in Agnes Heller's *Renaissance Man*. In this book which, despite its Marxist simplifications, remains very useful, Heller approaches the Renaissance as a moment of transition in which individualism makes its appearance in a still traditional context that resists it. Heller reminds us that historical change is never simple or unitary. She recognizes of course that 'individuality' is a historical concept, and as such has a continuity:

Individuality, as it now exists both in reality and as an ideal, is the product of a long historical evolution. Different historical epochs have contributed differently to its development – and the Renaissance contributed a great deal – but even here one can still observe a certain continuity, a successive building of one age upon the other.<sup>167</sup>

Nevertheless, for Heller, the emergence of Renaissance individualism had profound effects on the sense of self or personal identity, and effectively altered the context of social interaction. As the medieval community retreated, an awareness of ambiguous selfhood – at once defined and limited by one's role in the community – developed. As a Marxist scholar, Heller attributes the origins of this ambiguity to the imperatives of nascent capitalism. For my purposes, her argument discloses the bottom line of the conflict between the Machiavel and the avenger. The tension between a declining feudal order and an

---

<sup>166</sup> Keyishian, op.cit., p.4.

<sup>167</sup> Agnes Heller, *Renaissance Man*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, Henley and Boston, 1978, p.198.

emergent capitalism gave rise to a duality according to which

man, as man, is independent of the position he occupies in the division of labour (everyone is equally a human being), while at the same time men can only realize themselves through the place they occupy in the division of labour (economic status is the sole universal norm). Thus man can be divided, relatively speaking, into 'individual' and 'role'.<sup>168</sup>

As the traditional hierarchical order gave way – a closed society in which one was most oneself when one knew one's place – 'character' ceased to grow mainly from 'the tasks and expectations fixed in advance by the system of feudal orders'; instead it became increasingly 'self-chosen, winding its way along relatively autonomous paths in the direction set by social expectations. . . and thus it drifted away from the general and approached ever closer to the individual'<sup>169</sup>. In other words, individuality and relativity went together, and an awareness developed that a single person contained more 'lives' than his (or even her) social and emotional relations to others actually realized. This is plainly what is implied by Heller's analysis:

In feudal society, a man did not 'play a role'; he *was* what he had been born to be. Capitalist division of labour and the loosening of the social hierarchy made it possible, however, for one and the same person to occupy quite different rungs of the social ladder. . . . one man could identify himself with different manners, different sets of rights and obligations, and different concrete norms, and yet 'he' would not be 'them'.<sup>170</sup>

In the new society, one became available as a person to others also as a persona – the inwardness that remained unexpressed coming to be felt as essential to one's identity as one's social and familial 'roles'. This created a split between inward and outward, the social and the individual – a split that was now potentially tragic<sup>171</sup>.

This new individuality affected the interactive 'playground' of society, for it was not only self-knowledge that became more problematic with the slippage between inwardness and social role, but also

---

<sup>168</sup> Heller, *op.cit.*, p.206.

<sup>169</sup> Heller, *op.cit.*, p.206.

<sup>170</sup> Heller, *loc.cit.*

<sup>171</sup> This theme has been studied by Katherine Eisamann Maus in her influential book, *Inwardness and the Theater in the English Renaissance*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1995. I shall discuss Maus when I analyse *The Spanish Tragedy*, but it is well to note that in Heller Maus has an important yet unacknowledged precedent.

the knowledge of one's fellow beings on which social intercourse is based. In a highly structured society (like ideal feudalism), Heller argues, it was easier 'to tell from someone's social position, previous life, connections and temperament how he would act'. For example, one could better 'foresee whether in a given case a person would or would not take vengeance, to what degree, in a passion or in cold blood'. Now 'knowledge of men became. . . more difficult. The situations which might confront men' became more 'unstructured, unexpected, incapable of being defined in advance'<sup>172</sup>. It is in this ambivalent context that the figure of the Machiavel comes to embody the new perils and possibilities. In Heller's perspective, the stage Machiavel ceases to be conceived in continuity with the Morality plays – that is to say, with the past – in order to become an embodiment of the most rabid form of modernity. What defines the appeal of the *stage Machiavel* is not only his capacity to seize the newly available opportunities for the manipulation of others, but his relish of the power that this afforded him. In the public plays, the Machiavel is invariably seen to exploit the split between the inner and the outer self as an act of aggression against the community at large. Obviously hypocrisy was not an invention of the Renaissance. But in the Italian early modern period it acquired a new competitive edge:

The active hypocrisy of the Renaissance did indeed have for its object to destroy the other man or to get him into your power. . . . Accommodation [to this hypocrisy] – assuming an honourable man – could be of two kinds. It meant, on the one hand, *training oneself to know men*, developing the ability to see behind the mask. On the other hand, it meant working out forms of defence, of *covering one's own exposed spirit* and limiting one's unlimited confidence. Only the two of these together could guard one against catastrophes, failures, and disillusionment.<sup>173</sup>

Hypocrisy, however, became a defensive strategy only because it had taken an aggressive or predatory form in an Italy in which the author of *Il Principe* could be regarded equally as a realistic preserver of the state and a cynical exploiter of moral good faith. What is much more significant for this thesis is Heller's account of why the stage Machiavel is a product of Elizabethan England. The reason she gives for this is that it was in England that the new individualism burst into existence in a context that was still largely defined by the old communitarian spirit:

It was in Elizabethan England that there emerged, together and simultaneously, these phenomena

---

<sup>172</sup> Heller, *op.cit.*, p.206.

<sup>173</sup> Heller, *op.cit.*, p.209.

which gave rise to this new . . . incognito [the Machiavel type], and not slowly and gradually as in Italy, but quite abruptly. Primitive accumulation, the dissolution of old traditions, the decay of feudal restrictions, and the restructuring of values all took place during the sixteenth century, at a time when inwardness and subjectivity had already developed. Thus it became possible to survey the whole problem in all its complexity. Such attempts can be seen above all in the works of Bacon and Shakespeare.<sup>174</sup>

In this context, the Machiavel represented much more than 'evil'; he embodied the anxieties created by the new society, especially the instrumentalization of man by man it permitted, and even promoted. In this perspective:

When they [Richard, Iago, and Edmund] toy with men who trust them, there is a secondary purpose to their sport alongside their main goal, which is always power and gain. That is to test their strength and their wits, and to enjoy the feeling that they know men and the world and know how to play with them at will. . . . Here the power of reason is realized, and yet at the same time is perverted by its negative moral content.<sup>175</sup>

Since in England the 'incognito' irrupted into a world in which the traditional communal bonds were still meaningful, indeed in large parts of the country still dominated, his limitations were at least as fully recognized as his appeal. Thus, Heller rightly notes that in Shakespeare, the Machiavels are presented as the counterparts of, say, figures like Clarence, Othello, and Lear, of whom, Heller notes, 'their naivety and their absolute trust is the source of their greatness as well'<sup>176</sup>. As such, they represent the inherited world that is gradually being wasted away by the new. In Heller's distinctive formulation:

As the possibility of a divergence between . . . the internal and the external grows ever more likely, and as the demand for a new, more complex knowledge of men grows ever more exacting. . . not only is the *world* of the great naive figures waning, but with it also the very possibility of *great* naive personalities existing at all.<sup>177</sup>

This contrast is of special importance to us because in the early revenge plays, notably *The Spanish Tragedy* and *Titus Andronicus*, but also, more collectively, the first Shakespearean tetralogy, the part of the 'great naive' figure is invariably represented by the avenger. The fact that this is so determines the meaning of revenge: the contrast between the avenger – originally a figure of great civic piety – and

---

<sup>174</sup> Heller, op.cit., p.209.

<sup>175</sup> Heller, op.cit., p.215.

<sup>176</sup> Heller, op.cit., p.217.

<sup>177</sup> Heller, op.cit., p.218.

the Machiavel – a figure who operates on a completely anti-social basis – articulates the tension between the old ‘hierarchical’ community and the new ‘atomistic’ society. What my thesis will argue is that the revenge enacted by the ‘pious’ figures shows that Renaissance individualism generated a more radical sense of the nature of the integrated or social individual than mere conservatism could have achieved. In *The Spanish Tragedy* and *Titus Andronicus* we find a new and deeper way of conceiving the conventional self, which has been forced upon the attention of playwrights by the emergence of the Machiavel. Thus, in transitional England, the individualism imported from the Italian High Renaissance led to a conception of the individual which required the acknowledgement of the traditional fact that family and locality constitutes the very essence of individuality. To conclude, the a-social claims of the Machiavel figure compelled a re-thinking of family relationships in which the fundamental instability of selfhood, which the assumptions of a providential universe obscured, are recognized. Such a re-thinking, however, must have taken the form of a new emphasis on the dependence of the individual on the community, and therefore must entail a repudiation of the Machiavellian claim. The brief of this thesis is thus twofold: first, to show how the recognition of unstable selfhood works in the plays; and second, to show how the re-discovery of classical Senecan revenge was a necessary if not a sufficient condition for this recognition.

## Chapter Two

### Senecan Drama

## A. STOICISM AND REVENGE

### I

There is little in Senecanism that can explain the insight into the human condition offered by the insane suffering of the Elizabethan public avenger. In this thesis I attempt to establish that the revelation of this suffering is the revelation of the social condition of human beings – a condition which acquires its full significance in terms of the irreducible individuality the plays also claim for human beings. Taken together, these two claims (to sociality and to individuality) amount to maintaining that the individual is made such by an identity that is socially constructed. Revenge tragedy reveals the social condition of the individual by showing his most antisocial acts to constitute an expression of his dependence on the community. When a pious father like Hieronimo or Titus turns against his community in atrocious revenge, he is confirming that his integrity rested entirely on its link to this community, which has become damaged in the vicissitude of events. This perspective is new insofar as the individual now appears as complete in himself yet relative to others, and is unorthodox insofar as it posits a permanent instability for the individual whose integrity is now perceived to depend on others as well as on himself. This ambiguity of selfhood is a factor defining the new public drama against the academic drama of the previous generation. Given that the academic plays could not have generated this conception of selfhood, it is problematic to assume that they constituted the only basis for the new drama.

That Senecanism could not have generated the complex vision of the ambiguous self is confirmed by the fact that the academic Seneca is of Stoic derivation. Effectively, as interpreted in today's criticism, Senecan tragedy appears as an exemplification of the fundamentals of Stoic philosophy. And there is no philosophy more committed to the denial of the ambiguity of selfhood than Stoicism. Given the affinities between Stoicism, or at least the late Stoicism of Seneca, and orthodox Christianity, the appeal of a Stoic drama to the academic authors of the 1560s and '80s should not be surprising<sup>1</sup>. Much more difficult to accept, however, is the supposed formative impact on the drama of Shakespeare and

---

<sup>1</sup> On the question of Stoicism and Christianity see Kerrigan, *op.cit.*, p.177 ff.



Kyd, so profoundly social in all its aspects, of a drama that repudiates the emotional and social expansions of the self. In the final analysis, the Stoic meaning of Senecan drama has been established not so much by Senecan-influence criticism, which is derivative in this respect, as by the criticism concerned with Senecan drama in its own right. Senecan criticism has obscured the alternative – psychological rather than moral – interpretation of Roman tragedy that in what follows I intend to recover. I refer to the *affective* Seneca, who, as I hope to demonstrate, was crucial for Kyd and Shakespeare.

## II

In literary scholarship and criticism, Senecan drama appears as a dramatized version of Stoic philosophy. The question of selfhood is central to this philosophy and hence – it is assumed – to Seneca's Stoic plays; but this selfhood is conceived in a-social terms. In effect, Stoicism is an art of living conducive to the good life or *eudaimonia*, the only life worth living, which is solely achieved through virtue. In its conception of ethics as a programme for the attainment of happiness, Stoicism proves itself a typical philosophy of Antiquity. However, what differentiates Stoicism from other classical schools and makes it a highly distinctive doctrine in Western thought is the notion that the reality external to the wise man is irrelevant to the achievement and sustainment of virtue. Unaffected by external events and relations, virtue resides solely within the fortress of the soul conceived as an entirely rational faculty. Thus, if the Stoic sage is to be such, independence from the external world is not only a possible but a necessary condition. Contrary to the common intuition from which Aristotle forms his opinion on external goods, Stoicism negates any intrinsic value to the things and relationships that escape the control of the individual. All positive states and desirable possessions, such as health, comfort, honour, riches, etc., are regarded as 'indifferents' – things that cannot alter the virtuous condition of the Stoic sage, whether they are present or absent. Illness, pain, suffering, joy, pleasure,

success – indeed any state motivated by causes beyond the control of the individual – are deemed irrelevant to *eudaimonia*. For this reason, as the distinguished classicist Martha C. Nussbaum has concluded in her well-known study of ancient moral philosophy, the Stoic ideal is the ideal of self-sufficiency:

Not only traditional ‘external goods’ like wealth and honour, not only ‘relational goods’ like having children, having friends, having political rights and privileges, but also individual forms of virtuous activity, such as acting courageously, justly and moderately, are held to be, strictly speaking, worthless, on the grounds that they can, as Aristotle has argued and anyone knows, be cut off or impeded by accidents beyond our control. But the wise man must be self-sufficient; his life is always *eudaimon*, no matter what happens.<sup>2</sup>

No other school of thought is more radical than Stoicism in the advocacy of individual autonomy. Hence Nussbaum’s emphasis on ‘the radical detachment of the Stoic sage, the detachment that receives the news of a child’s death with the remarkable words “I was already aware that I had begotten a mortal”’<sup>3</sup>. For our discussion, the crucial point here is that in denying any value to externals Stoicism is denying the social condition of the individual. Unlike Aristotle, the Stoics regard the social and affective bonds that conform the individual’s life-in-the-community as peripheral to his sense of himself:

Most ordinary people, and Aristotle with them, do ascribe intrinsic worth to love and friendship, which are in their nature relations with unstable and uncontrolled external items. Most people, again, see themselves as social beings for whom the loss of country or of political privileges is the loss of an intrinsic value. The Stoic is committed to denying all of this.<sup>4</sup>

One aspect of this programme of self-sufficiency has proved of special significance for the interpretation of Senecan drama. I am referring to the treatment that Stoicism prescribes for the passions. As an art of life committed to individual autonomy, Stoic philosophy functions as a ‘therapy

---

<sup>2</sup> Martha C. Nussbaum, ‘The Stoics on the Extirpation of the Passions’, in *The Therapy of Desire. Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1994, p.362.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p.363, quoting Cicero’s *Tusculan Disputations*.

<sup>4</sup> Nussbaum, ‘The Stoics on the Passions’, p.362.

of passions'<sup>5</sup>. As such, it is grounded in the idea that the passions are modes of belief, and therefore generated by the mind. This thesis seems to have been first formulated by Chrysippus (c.280-206 BC)<sup>6</sup>, and, striking as it may appear to us modern readers, it is in line with the classical tradition, which assigns cognitive value to the passions. In classical thought, the passions are conceived as both a response and an interpretation of that external world which generates them. However, Chrysippus went further than his predecessors. To claim, as he did, that the passions are forms of judgement is to claim that they are the product of the mind/soul. What is more, as judgements they are completely false, for they accord value to 'indifferents', thus implying – to continue with Nussbaum – that 'the good is not simply "at home" inside of him [the wise man], but consists, instead, in a complex web of connections between the agent, and unstable worldly items such as love of friends, city, possessions, the conditions of action'<sup>7</sup>. Since the Stoics deny this possibility, the passions, and the externals to which they respond, must be extirpated from one's life. This is perfectly feasible thanks to the fact that the passions are a function of the rational soul. In this fundamental respect, the rationalism of the Stoics contrasts radically with the common intuition behind the Aristotelian position. For the Peripatetics, who accept that externals have a measure of intrinsic good in themselves, the passions are positive as long as they are moderated. For the Stoics, no moderation of the passionate life is possible. Being a product of reason -- i.e., not rooted in any irrational, animal part of the soul<sup>8</sup> – and according value to things that are entirely

---

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 366.

<sup>6</sup> Together with Zeno (334-262 BC), Chrysippus is the most important author of the Early Stoa, which was followed by the Middle Stoa of Panaetius and Poseidonius (II-I BC) and the Late Stoa (I-II AD) of Seneca, Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius. For a discussion on each particular school see F.H. Sandbach, *The Stoics*, Gerald Duckworth & Co. Ltd., London, 1989 [1<sup>st</sup> edition 1975].

<sup>7</sup> Nussbaum, 'The Stoics on the Passions', p. 370.

<sup>8</sup> Stoicism seems to have developed towards a more complex view. By the time of the Middle Stoa, we find that the soul is no longer conceived as entirely rational, but is divided into parts, one of which is irrational. Nussbaum believes that Seneca is a follower of Chrysippus in this respect. For an alternative view see Norman T. Pratt, *op.cit.*, which argues for Seneca's fundamental debt to Posidonius and his postulation of an irrational part in the soul.

dispensable, the passions can and must be extirpated. In the Stoic analysis, the passions require the assent of the mind in order to develop. This assent the Stoics urge us in every case to refuse. As Nussbaum concludes, to be a Stoic, then, is to be free from any passionate entanglement with others: 'So the Stoic does not hesitate to describe the wise person as totally free from passion. . . from fear, distress, pity, hope, anger, jealousy, passionate love, intense joy, and all of the many relatives and subspecies of these. Free, as Seneca etymologizes, from all vulnerability and passivity towards the world. . . . The wise person is totally self-sufficient'<sup>9</sup>.

This doctrine about the passions has determined the critical approach to Senecan drama, which, as we shall see in the next section, is often presented as an exemplification of the calamities that ensue when the passions are not extirpated as prescribed. This is particularly true of Seneca's revenge plays, which are concerned with the most destructive of passions: anger, the only passion to which the philosophical Seneca devoted an entire essay. In his famous *De Ira (On Anger)* he argued for the total renunciation of revenge, and the complete suppression of anger this presupposes. Accordingly, the *Medea* and the *Atreus*, in which atrocious revenges are successfully enacted, have been interpreted as denunciations of the dangers of the passionate life, that is to say, as confirmations of Stoic morality. In what follows I propose to challenge this claim by showing that the plays are more complex than is commonly assumed. Before attempting to do so, we need to examine briefly the philosophy of revenge on which the meaning of the plays is usually predicated.

Seneca's point of departure in his diagnosis of 'the most hideous and frenzied of all the emotions' (I.i.1-2) is Aristotle's definition of anger as 'the desire to repay suffering' (I.iii.3: *iram esse cupiditatem doloris responendi*). The passage -- following I.ii.3 -- in which Seneca discusses ancient definitions of anger and proposes his own is unfortunately lost. However, in what remains of that section he affirms that the definition by Aristotle just quoted 'differs little from my own', adding that 'to trace the

---

<sup>9</sup> Nussbaum, 'The Stoics on the Passions', p.390.

difference between his definition and mine would take too long' (I.iii.3-4)<sup>10</sup>. Seneca begins then with the Aristotelian intuition that anger and injury are inextricable in the avenger's suffering, and that his revenge is a product of that suffering. At the root of this intuition is the recognition of the intrinsic value of some externals, that is, of their capacity to affect the individual *in a fundamental way*. Thus, in his *On Rhetoric* – where his first systematic analyses of psychology are found – Aristotle characterizes the emotions (*pathe*) as 'those things through which, by undergoing change, people come to differ in their judgments and which are accompanied by pain and pleasure, for example, anger, pity, fear, and other such things and their opposites' [1378a]<sup>11</sup>. Taking anger (*orge*) as an example, Aristotle maintains that the passions must be analysed in relation to three different aspects –

[1378a] I mean, for example, in speaking of anger, what is their *state of mind* when people are angry and against *whom* are they usually angry, and for what sort of *reasons*; for if we understood one or two of these but not all, it would be impossible to create anger [in someone] –

thus making it clear that anger is at least partially provoked by the externals against whom it is directed. As he develops his concept of anger, Aristotle reinforces the relation between anger and the aggression that provokes it by emphasizing the suffering that accompanies the desire to retaliate. Anger is thus conceived as the result of an injurious wrong that creates a deep distress which seeks relief in retaliation<sup>12</sup>. In Aristotle revenge is accorded a psychological function rather than a moral meaning:

[1378a] Let anger be [defined as] desire, accompanied by [mental and physical] distress, for conspicuous retaliation because of a conspicuous slight that was directed, without justification,

---

<sup>10</sup> The Loeb translator, John W. Basore, notes that at several points in his essay, Seneca's idea of anger recalls Posidonius', which has been preserved by Lactantius as '*ira est cupiditas ulciscendae iniuriae*' (p.112, footnote a). All citations to *De Ira* are taken from Basore's edition: *Seneca. Moral Essays*, vol.I, trans.by John W.Basore, The Loeb Classical Library, William Heinemann Ltd. and Harvard University Press, London and Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1958 [1<sup>st</sup> edition 1928].

<sup>11</sup> Aristotle, *On Rhetoric. A Theory of Civic Discourse*, trans. by George A. Kennedy, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1991, p.121. In all citations from Aristotle square-bracketed *addenda* are the translator's.

<sup>12</sup> Kennedy observes that Aristotle holds that anger does not obtain when one feels an aggression against oneself is justified, as when one is rebuked for perfectly valid reasons. (Aristotle, op.cit., p.124, footnote 8).

against oneself or those near to one. If this is what anger is, necessarily the angry person always becomes angry at some particular individual. . . . and because he has done or is going to do something to him or those near to him; [1378b] and a kind of pleasure follows all experience of anger from the hope of getting retaliation. It is pleasant for him to think he will get what he wants. . . . Thus, it has been well said of rage [*thymos*], 'A thing much sweeter than honey in the throat,/ It grows in the breast of men'. A kind of pleasure follows from this and also because people dwell in their minds on retaliating; then the image [*phantasia*] that occurs creates pleasure, as in the case of dreams.<sup>13</sup>

In terms of our discussion we can say that the view on revenge advanced here by Aristotle is a constitutive view. Thus, for him, what is central to revenge is not a rational duty to see justice done, but the relieving function of anger. From this perspective, the avenger's anger manifests his dependence on externals, and as an expression of this dependence, revenge reveals itself to be a manifestation of the avenger's constitution as a human being. At the heart of the desire to retaliate, Aristotle discovers an emotional charge in which injury, suffering, anger and revenge all conform into an inextricable subjective whole. It is significant that Seneca does not challenge this intuition of the intimate relationship between anger and revenge, and the subjective dimension of revenge it implies. What Seneca disputes in Aristotle is not what revenge and anger mean, but whether they can be moderated, and therefore accepted by the virtuous man. Aristotle thinks that anger, like the other passions, can be effectively managed and kept within beneficial bounds, as the worthy warrior does with his warlike anger<sup>14</sup>. Seneca denies this. For him, once the mind has given its assent to any passion, it is possessed by that passion, and all hope of moderation is lost<sup>15</sup>. Seneca makes this point repeatedly in his essay, always emphasizing the

---

<sup>13</sup> 'Slight' is the translation for '*oligoria*' which literally means 'belittling'. Later Aristotle observes that this 'belittling' or 'slight' at the heart of anger is 'an actualization of opinion about what seems worthless. . . . and there are three species of belittling: contempt [*kataphronesis*], spite [*epereasmos*], and insult [*hybris*]' [1378b], Aristotle, op.cit., p.125. It would seem, then, that the sense of injury is intimately linked to one's self-image, generated in relation to others' perception of oneself.

<sup>14</sup> Aristotle's famous example of warlike anger is cited by Seneca himself in *De Ira*, I.xiii.3.

<sup>15</sup> In the final analysis, this is because in Stoicism there is no difference between what possesses the mind and the mind itself. As Seneca explains, once the mind (or reason) has assented to passion, 'these two do not dwell separate and distinct, but passion and reason are only the transformation of the mind toward the better or the worse' (I.viii. 3). This is another striking consequence of the fact that the passion is a creation of the mind.

destructiveness of passion:

Reason herself, to whom the reins of power have been entrusted, remains mistress only so long as she is kept apart from the passions. . . . [O]nce the mind has been aroused and shaken, it becomes the slave of the disturbing agent. There are certain things which at the start are under our control, but later hurry us away by their violence and leave us no retreat. As a victim hurled from the precipice has no control of his body, and, once cast off, can neither stop nor stay, but, speeding on irrevocably, is cut off from all reconsideration and repentance and cannot now avoid arriving at the goal toward which he might once have avoided starting, so with the mind – if it plunges into anger, love, or the other passions, it has no power to check its impetus; its very weight and the downward tendency of vice needs must hurry it on, and drive it to the bottom. (I.vii.2-4)

The only way to control anger, therefore, is not to allow it to be felt.

From the Stoic perspective, the suppression of anger can be effectively achieved whatever injury has been inflicted on us. At this point it begins to appear how counter-intuitive the theory of the passions as beliefs really is. Seneca grants Aristotle that ‘there can be no doubt that anger is aroused by the direct impression of an injury’, but hastens to add that ‘the question is whether it follows immediately upon the impression and springs up without assistance from the mind, or whether it is aroused only with the assent of the mind’ (II.i.3). The distinction between impression and recognition that Seneca tries to introduce may look like hair-splitting, but it is entirely consistent with the logic of Stoicism. In effect, Seneca is trying to distinguish between the impression of an injury as a disturbance of the body, and the consequent eruption of anger, as a question of the mind. This distinction is certainly strained, but it is crucial to his essay. Seneca cannot deny that ‘that mental shock which affects us after we have formed the impression of a wrong committed’ (II.ii.2) is experienced by even the wisest of men. But this, he claims, is not yet anger proper: it belongs to the category of the sensations or bodily disturbances that no one can keep down. Anger, which (as we would say) can be repressed, follows only when to this initial, involuntary impression is added the assent of the mind. *That* is what the passion of anger really is. Seneca’s strategy is to identify the mind, and not the external stimulus, as the main cause of anger:

Our opinion is that it [anger] ventures nothing by itself, but acts with the approval of the mind. For to form the impression of having received an injury and to long to avenge it, and then to couple together the two propositions that one ought not to have been wronged and that one ought to be avenged – this is not a mere impulse of the mind acting without our volition. (II.i.4)

For this reason, too, Seneca argues that anger is not a sensation, or bodily disturbance, that escapes our rational control, like blushing or dizziness or recoiling from certain contacts. The mind *suffers* these sensations, but *causes* the passions, which must therefore be regarded as manifestations of the mind. In the perspective of this extreme rationalism, the process of becoming angry appears as a purely intellectual event:

The one [sensation] is a single mental process, the other [passion] a complex one composed of several elements; the mind has grasped something, has become indignant, has condemned the act, and now tries to avenge it. These processes are impossible unless the mind has given assent to the impressions that moved it. (II.i.4)

Thus, Seneca displaces the epicentre of anger from the received injury to its rational condemnation, effectively enabling the victim to admit or reject the madness of revenge in a rational act. On this Seneca is clear: once the mind has admitted anger, there is no going back, and the disaster of the passionate life will follow. Thus we are left with a threefold progression in anger, the pivotal point of which is an act of volition that is entirely rational:

That you may know, further, how the passions begin, grow, and run riot, I may say that the first prompting is involuntary, a preparation for passion, as it were, and a sort of menace; the next is combined with an act of volition, although not an unruly one, which assumes that it is right for me to avenge myself because I have been injured, or that it is right for the other person to be punished because he has committed a crime; the third prompting is now beyond control, in that it wishes to take vengeance, not if it is right to do so, but whether or no, and has utterly vanquished reason. (II.iv.1-2)

In this view, it is an act of will on the victim's part that makes anger what it is: 'the tumult of a mind proceeding to revenge by choice and determination' (II.iii.5).

Having re-located the epicentre of anger from the sense of injury to the will of the injured, Seneca places anger under rational control and can demand its suppression: 'that prompting (*motus*) which is born of the judgement, is banished by the judgement' (II.iv.2). Once he has ejected all trace of anger from his soul, the wise man is in a position to mete out whatever punishment the aggressor deserves, which will no longer be driven by revenge, but by a rational desire to deliver justice. The greatest punishment will be able to be dispensed without any disturbance of one's inner peace – that 'unbreakable



calm of the happy soul' (II.xii.6: *felicis animis immota tranquillitas*) which is the goal of the Stoic. This does not mean that punishment has to be any the less fearsome, but that it will not be a product of irrational passion. In effect, revenge is converted into the rational spirit of the law:

With outcry and uproar and gestures that shake the whole body it pursues those whom it has marked out, heaping upon them abuse and curses. Not thus does reason act. But if need should so require, it silently and quietly wipes out whole families root and branch, and households that are baneful to the state it destroys together with wives and children; it tears down the very houses, levelling them to the ground, and exterminates the very names of the foes of liberty. All this it will do, but with no gnashing of the teeth, no wild tossing of the head, doing nothing that would be unseemly for a judge, whose countenance should at no time be more calm and unmoved than when he is delivering a weighty sentence. (I.xix. 1-3).<sup>16</sup>

To resume the terms of our discussion of revenge criticism, if Aristotle can be said to advance a constitutive idea of revenge as psychic relief, Seneca can be said to be invoking here the rational spirit of the regulative revenge. Retaliation for a grievous injury is conducted as a rational act of justice that seeks to restore a legal rather than psychic balance. In this, unlike the conventional critic, Seneca entirely recognizes the de-personalizing effect that this ideal has on the avenger. More than that, he urges it as the ultimate goal of the injured victim. The rational retaliation that answers to the Stoic ideal of self-sufficiency demands a complete repression of the subjective surplus of revenge. This repression is possible for the Stoic because he denies any value to his relational links with others, that is to say, he repudiates any claim they may make on him. It is only by achieving self-sufficiency over affective and social bonds that the Stoic's retaliatory act ceases to be a recoil of the damaged self (the constitutive view) to become an act of justice born out of reason ( the regulative view). The pivot between these alternative conceptions of revenge is the injury: the Stoic would never acknowledge the 'belittling' effect Aristotle identifies at its root. To put the matter plainly: the Stoic acknowledges no injury that can be

---

<sup>16</sup> Bacon regarded the extirpation of anger as a Stoic bluff: 'To seek to extinguish anger utterly is but a bravery of the Stoics'. Instead, he proposed a procrastinating self-deception that assuages anger with the prospect of revenge: 'In all refrainings of anger, it is the best remedy to win time, and to make a man's self believe that the opportunity of his revenge is not yet come, but that he foresees a time for it; and so to still himself in the meantime and reserve it.' (Francis Bacon, 'Of Anger', in *The Essays*, ed. by John Pitcher, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1985, pp.226-27).

done to him. Thus Seneca accepts what critics of revenge tragedy omit in their promotion of the regulative view, namely that regulativeness entails a drastic emotional amputation on the part of the avenger. When Seneca describes a specific case of revenge – that of blood revenge, so important for Kyd and Shakespeare – we feel how unnatural, even inhuman, an avenger shorn of its subjective dimension really is. We feel, conversely, how far the anger of the Elizabethan avenger is, so to speak, symptomatic of his humanity:

‘What then?’, you ask; ‘will the good man not be angry if his father is murdered, his mother outraged [i.e. raped] before his eyes?’ No, he will not be angry, but he will avenge them, will protect them. Why, moreover, are you afraid that filial affection [*pietas*], even without anger, may not prove a sufficiently strong incentive for him? . . . . The good man will perform his duties undisturbed and unafraid; and he will in such a way do all that is worthy of a good man as to do nothing that is unworthy of a man. My father is being murdered – I will defend him; he is slain – I will avenge him, not because I grieve, but because it is my duty. (I.xii.1-3)

Such a conception of vengeance dispossesses the avenger of his suffering. It is only by ceasing to recognize yourself in those you avenge (your father, your mother, your son, your friend) that revenge can be disentangled from pain. Seneca claims that you must; Titus and Hieronimo show that you cannot, because you cannot choose not to be yourself. If Senecan revenge tragedy were a reflection of the Stoic doctrine of revenge, there could be nothing in it to inspire Kyd and Shakespeare to re-imagine revenge as an expression of Hieronimo’s and Titus’s commitment to fatherhood.

## B. THE REVENGE PLAYS: *MEDEA* AND *THYESTES*

### I

The two plays most often hailed as Seneca's best are both revenge plays<sup>17</sup>. Indeed, *Medea* and *Thyestes* have generated the most interesting criticism of Senecan drama<sup>18</sup>. Yet this critical attention has not resulted in a recognition of the specificity of Senecan revenge. This is, one suspects, because *Medea* and *Thyestes* have been approached as exemplifications of the general principles of Stoicism, which, as we have seen, negate any fundamental link between selfhood and revenge. In what follows I intend to recover Seneca's pre-philosophical insight into the avenger by bracketing out the Stoic interpretation of his two most accomplished plays. Stoic doctrine may provide a preliminary starting-point to an interpretation of the plays, but I shall attempt to show that the meaning of Senecan revenge is obscured if it is subjected to the requirements of Stoic morality, which predicts, indeed encodes, the meaning of the plays before they are read.

As things stand now, Stoic readings dominate the critical panorama. Though they vary in the degree of their refinement, they all start from the same assumption – that Seneca wrote his plays in order to exemplify the Stoic ethics he advocates in his moral essays. This is the case, for example, of Martha Nussbaum, who asks us to read her influential article on *Medea*<sup>19</sup> in parallel with her essay on

---

<sup>17</sup> e.g. cf. Motto and Clarke (op.cit., p.68) '*Medea* [is] . . . one of Seneca's most concentrated and powerful plays'; or Braden (op.cit., p. 42) '*Medea* and *Thyestes*, which I would argue are Seneca's best plays, as I would argue that *Medea* and *Atreus* are Seneca's strongest creations'.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. the collection of essays edited by A.J. Boyle, *Seneca Tragicus. Ramus Essays on Senecan Drama*, Aureal Publications, Victoria, Australia, 1983. Of special note is Helen Fyfe's 'An analysis of Seneca's *Medea*', pp.77-93, which rightly emphasizes the injury sustained by the avenger, and its effects on her social interaction, as the key to the meaning of the play. Like any other celebrity of Antiquity, *Medea* has visited the psychoanalytic couch: cf. Chapter 3 of Lillian Corti, *The Myth of Medea and the Murder of Children*, Contributions to the Study of World Literature, Number 89, Greenwood Press, Westport, Connecticut and London, 1998.

<sup>19</sup> M.C.Nussbaum, 'Serpents in the Soul. A Reading of Seneca's *Medea*', in *Medea. Essays on Medea in Myth, Literature, Philosophy and Art*, ed. by James J. Clauss and Sarah Illes Johnston, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1997, pp. 219-49. This article is a slightly altered version of chapter 12 of *The Therapy of Desire*.

the passions discussed above, as the two sides of the same Senecan coin. Her analysis of *Medea* is worth concentrating on because her grasp of Stoic philosophy is quite exceptional. A diagnosis of the limitations of her moral approach of the play will show that no matter how sophisticated a Stoic interpretation is, it cannot but prove inadequate, for it assumes that a play is the *illustration* of an established meaning, and not the *enactment* and discovery of a new one.

In her analysis of the Stoic theory of the passions, Nussbaum, as we have seen, brilliantly brings out the implications of that theory for selfhood. When she proposes to approach *Medea* as the tragedy to which an irrational life inevitably leads, she emphasizes that the question of the self, and what is outside it, is central to *Medea*'s tragedy. In this view, the play is about *Medea*'s exposure of her self-integrity to unstable 'externals', which in this case can be summed up in one word: Jason. To put the matter bluntly, *Medea* is a demonstration of the consequences of yielding to love. Against the Aristotelian claim that passion can be moderated, *Medea*'s case shows, in Nussbaum's memorable formulation, that

Love itself is a dangerous hole in the self, through which it is almost impossible that the world will not strike a painful and debilitating blow. The passionate life is a life of continued gaping openness to violation, a life in which pieces of the self are groping out into the world and pieces of the world are dangerously making their way into the insides of the self.<sup>20</sup>

As she elaborates this, Nussbaum fully recognizes that *Medea*'s tragedy is provoked by the violation of her emotional investment in another human being – that is to say, by the vulnerability that her emotional dependence on Jason has created in her:

Seneca forces us to see that it is the one who loves properly, loyally – the one who really understands what it is to value a commitment to an external object – who will be most derailed by the loss. It is precisely because these women [*Medea*, *Phaedra*, *Clytemnestra*] genuinely care about the external item, stake their whole being on it, that they are driven mad by grief and anger.<sup>21</sup>

Clearly, the conflict that Nussbaum identifies at the heart of the play is of a psychological kind, consisting

---

<sup>20</sup> Nussbaum, 'Serpents in the Soul', p.222.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p.224.

in the revelation of the nature of the avenger's integrity when it becomes damaged by the man she loves. Here we are concerned with an exploration of human experience, substantiated by specific relations, actions and reactions, and not with the definition of an abstract concept like 'love'. However, Nussbaum's initial insight is not what determines her analysis of the play. Having identified the central question of the play as emotional dependence, she proceeds to discuss it in the light of what Stoic philosophy has to teach about it. But to do this is to displace revenge from the centre of the play, and relegate it to a marginal issue.

Stoicism maintains that any passionate attachment to something external to the self is of necessity catastrophic. Accordingly, the play is nothing less or more than a particular instance – that of sexual passion – of this universal truth. The play *Medea* thus becomes 'a case against love – a case that might even convince the Aristotelian, antecedently convinced of love's truth and value'<sup>22</sup>. For Nussbaum, what is at stake is the moral clarification of the concept of 'love'. The point of the play becomes a moral one: a warning against the passionate life and the inevitable ills that attend on those who by leading such a life attach themselves to externals. In this scenario, revenge features simply as one of the evils to which love leads. The distorting consequences of this approach are made soon apparent. They are most evident in the interpretation of *furor*, which Nussbaum recasts into entirely de-personalized terms. The psychic energy that drives the avenger into her self-assertive crimes becomes an abstract universal force. Nussbaum comes up with the paradox that *furor* is a form of *amor*, an evil force in Nature that virtuous people can avoid because it does not really derive from anything they have to recognize as part of themselves:

[In *Medea*'s case] we are confronted with a love itself turned violent. Anger is only a stimulus. The primary strength of frenzy comes from love itself, unhappily blocked. Love is not a gentle, lovely passion. . . . It is the strongest form of violence in nature, a fire that burns now for our wonder, now for our terror. . . . Nor can we, if we once give ourselves to that flame, in any way prevent it from consuming innocent others. Now we know the deepest reason why the Aristotelian cannot say, 'I shall have love in my life, but I shall get rid of murderous rage'. It is because it is love itself

---

<sup>22</sup> Nussbaum, 'Serpents in the Soul', p.229.

that rages and does murder.<sup>23</sup>

This, we recall, is the moralization of *furor* which Braden denounced as ‘the usual result of applying Seneca’s philosophy directly to the plays which then become cautionary fables about the destructive intractability of irrational *pathe*’. We can now see how this moralization is achieved by imposing not only the Stoic philosophy on the play, but its interpretative methods, too. As a result, the play is not read as a dramatic product, that is as a discourse concerned with enacted truth, but as philosophy, concerned with the definition and illustration of concepts, in this case the concept of love. Instead of interpreting Medea’s predicament in terms of states and situations generated by her interaction with other characters, Nussbaum regards her tragedy as the explicit manifestation of what has been all along implicit in the concept of love. Indeed, Nussbaum makes no secret of the fact that she intends to ‘read this play as an extension of Stoic ethical arguments’<sup>24</sup>, which she achieves only by converting *Medea* into an allegory of fatal Amor<sup>25</sup>: ‘Seneca’s *Medea*’, she writes, ‘provides a clear expression of the strongest and least circular of the Stoic arguments against passion’<sup>26</sup>.

That plays, thus approached, become all-too-predictable moral emblems, stripped of all psychological plausibility, does not seem to worry Stoic critics. Norman Pratt, for instance, in his book-length study of Senecan drama as Neo-Stoic drama, goes well beyond Nussbaum in explicitly justifying an allegorical interpretation of the plays. Relying on a dictum of Epictetus – ‘what are tragedies but the

---

<sup>23</sup> Nussbaum, *ibid.*, p.234.

<sup>24</sup> Nussbaum, ‘Serpents in the Soul’, p.25.

<sup>25</sup> Of course, Nussbaum is aware that a play is not the same as a philosophical essay, and she herself insists that ‘the play is not a mere tract or handbook, nor is Seneca just paying lip service to an idea. The conviction and power of this [Senecan] dramaturgy is the work of someone who has found in the Stoic doctrine a true way of seeing human life’ (‘Serpents in the Soul’, p.229). The problem is, however, that to *state* a principle, even a principle of criticism, and to *act* by it is not the same thing.

<sup>26</sup> Nussbaum, ‘Serpents in the Soul’, p.223.

portrayal in verse of the passions of men who have completely fallen victim to external things?<sup>27</sup> – Pratt maintains that Senecan drama is an act of commitment to Stoicism by other means: ‘a poet committed to Stoicism uses conventional means, like traditional myth, to figure the insights of his philosophy. This is exactly what Seneca does in his drama’<sup>28</sup>. Not only is Senecan tragedy Stoic in its moral message but in the means adopted to communicate that message. For Pratt, the Senecan plays are philosophical *exempla* designed to warn off passion. The Senecan tragic heroes are emptied of all psychological content, and turn into personifications or embodiments of passions – Medea of Wrath, Atreus of Hatred, Phaedra of Lust. Unlike other moralizing critics, however, Pratt is prepared to acknowledge that his concern is not with individuals and that Senecan tragedy is tragic only in name:

Since the philosophy tries to minimize the importance of all external events for man, it eliminates the possibility of creating characters who suffer physically and morally without having subjective moral guilt, found in Greek tragedy and Aristotelian theory. The effect of Stoicism is untragic or antitragic. Consequently, Senecan drama cannot be tragedy in the sense of the fifth-century drama but uses characters who are illustrations rather than living human individuals in order to dramatize the pathology of the passions.<sup>29</sup>

To be sure, *War and Peace* read by the principles of *What is Art?* would exhibit ‘illustrations’ rather than living human individuals; but then no-one has seriously proposed that Tolstoy wrote his great novel in order to exemplify the morality he theorized in his essays. For some reason, however, Seneca does not seem to deserve the benefit of the creative doubt. His writing alone is required to be an occasion for intellectual ‘consistency’; thus his drama can be dismissed as ‘massive systems of words expressing abstract ideas’, or even as ‘pseudo-tragedies’<sup>30</sup>.

In view of these radical claims, it is not surprising to find in recent criticism a call for the re-examination of Senecan tragedy along non moralistic lines. Thus, after conducting what is the most

---

<sup>27</sup> Pratt, op.cit., p.79.

<sup>28</sup> Pratt, op.cit., p.74.

<sup>29</sup> Pratt, op.cit., p.81.

<sup>30</sup> As quoted in Motto and Clarke, op.cit., p.46.

comprehensive study of Senecan drama criticism, Motto and Clarke conclude that

perhaps the major stumbling-block to an understanding and appreciation of Seneca's theater is the fact that Seneca was a philosopher. For many, that fact virtually constitutes an insurmountable obstacle and blinding light. As a result, too many critics argue that Seneca wrote his tragedies to expound his philosophical doctrines. They postulate – what has been always suspected in some quarters – that the plays by the Stoic philosopher are fundamentally Stoical.<sup>31</sup>

Motto and Clarke recognize that the Stoic interpretation of the plays goes hand in hand with their moralization and that it is therefore necessary to rid ourselves of the former in order to overcome the latter. Against the prevalent trend, they propose 'momentarily to suspend the Stoic verdict on the plays and take a fresh look at them'. It is surely significant that once the Stoic veil has been discarded, what is revealed is a powerful spectacle in which suffering and its horrors manifest the psychic crisis in which the avenger comes to self-consciousness:

If we set aside hypotheses about instruction and philosophising for a time and examine squarely into [sic] Seneca's plays, we ought to discern those features that lend them psychic power and dramatic force. . . . Herington ['Senecan Tragedy', *Arion* 5 (1966), pp.422-71] stresses in Seneca a tone of 'almost religious fervor' and a 'terrible moral sensibility' realized by the playwright's 'concrete, pictorial imagination' and brilliant painter's eye for 'fantasy. . . [and] such features [as] lend an intensity to scenes of suffering. . . . Further, of course, such settings and distorting scenes suggest the nightmarish, almost hallucinatory visions that bespeak a lurid and perceptive psychological presentation – a presentation enhanced by his characters' soliloquies, dramatic laments, and 'self-apostrophes'.<sup>32</sup>

To argue for a Stoic meaning of the plays is to impose a moralized dimension on them. By contrast, to assert their affective or psychological dimension is to recover their dramatic power. From the perspective that takes account of the dramatic quality of the action and the psychological dimension of the characters, we can at last begin to understand how Senecan tragedy could have made such an impact on the pioneering playwrights of the 1580s, and to Kyd and Shakespeare in particular, with their profound interest in the crises of selfhood.

---

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43.

<sup>32</sup> Motto and Clarke, *op.cit.*, p.60.



## II

[Medea]

From the start Medea exhibits signs of contradictions characteristic of Elizabethan revenge tragedy. When the play opens, Corinth is in festive mood. The kingdom of the Isthmus is making ready to celebrate the nuptials of Jason and Creusa, Jason having renounced his barbaric wife Medea. The community comes together in joyous hope: its future promises to be secured in royal wedlock. Against this prospect of collective happiness, Medea stands isolated. The fulfilment of Corinth is to be achieved at her expense. Act I, which consists first of Medea's brooding soliloquy, then of the rejoicing Chorus, is designed to emphasize this exclusion. Both Medea and the Chorus produce prayers to the gods, but it is Medea who invokes the gods of hell. Chorus I (ll.56-115) calls on the gods to be propitious to the marrying couple whose beauty enchants mortals and divinities alike. Creusa, the united Corinthians pray, shall outshine all other Hellenic brides in her virginal purity; and Jason, rid at last of barbarous Medea, will redeem his impious past through this new alliance. Blessed by the gods, the royal couple shall seal a covenant of love, while their people exult in revelry and indulge every sensual impulse. Only on Medea, her shameful past standing out against the civic hopes of Corinth, is the doom of banishment pronounced:

Sport, youths, with free banter and jesting; let your songs ring out, O youths, in responsive cadence. . . . Let saucy, sharp wit pour forth festive banterings and let the throng be free with jesting. – Let *her* pass in silent gloom who steals away to wed with a foreign husband (107-108, 110-115).<sup>33</sup>

This common impulse towards a festive resolution in royal marriage strongly recalls the national optimism of the Court in *The Spanish Tragedy*, where the wedding of prince Balthazar and Bel-imperia is also threatened by a counterplot – that of infernal Revenge. In both plays, a threat is shown from the start to hang over the promise of national peace and prosperity, the tragic disruptions symbolized in

---

<sup>33</sup> All quotations from Seneca's plays are taken from Frank Justus Miller's Loeb Classical Library translation (William Heinemann and Harvard University Press, London and Cambridge, Mass., 1953 [1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1917]).

Kyd's play by the nuptial torches quenched with blood of Revenge's dumb show at the end of Act III, as in Seneca's play, where, too, Medea often visualizes such incidents in her rage (e.g. 27-28, 37-39, and passim). Formally, Medea's opening prayer to the gods against Jason's wedding acts as the reverse mirror image of the jubilant Chorus I. It thus anticipates the vindictive madness that shall eventually destroy the marriage of Jason and Creusa.

Against Corinth's expectations of triumphant fulfilment, Medea opposes her infernal curse, conjuring the snake-haired Furies from the underworld to defile the bride in hideous revenge (14-18). But a worst fate is reserved for the bridegroom, whom Medea wants to suffer exile, abhorred and roofless among strangers. As she thinks of Jason, Medea's rage intensifies, and a perverted thought seizes her mind: in anticipation of what she will eventually do, she declares her revenge accomplished in her curse of her own children (22-26). Then, in a swerving mood typical of Senecan protagonists, cursing yields to self-recrimination for her procrastination (26-27); and the self-empowerment that Braden identifies as the driving force of Senecan courage is activated. As she swears to herself to see the end of those who have turned their back on her, we are rapidly made to feel that we are in the presence of a massive personality, as absolutist in her love as in her hatred. Medea summons up in herself the concentrated power of her race, recalling her descent from the Sun. Between her invocation of her kinship to the Sun and her appropriation of his claims to supremacy is only one step, and Medea takes it. Now she demands nothing less than an apocalyptic response, an incineration of the hated Corinthian Isthmus:

Does he behold this, the Sun, father of my race, and do men still behold him as, sitting in his chariot, he courses over bright heaven's accustomed spaces? Why does he not return to his rising and measure back the day? Grant, oh, grant that I ride through the air in my father's car; give me the reins, O sire, give me the right to guide thy fire-bearing steeds with the flaming reins; then let Corinth, with her twin shores cause of delay to ships, be consumed by flames and bring the two seas together. (28-36)

Swept by her boundless rage, Medea abandons herself to an expanding spiral of criminal aspiration,

rising to her much-anthologized 'outdoing' *topos* of *scelus* or crime<sup>34</sup>:

Wild deeds, unheard-of, horrible, calamities at which heaven and earth alike shall tremble, my heart deep within is planning – wounds, slaughter, death, creeping from limb to limb. Ah, too trivial the deeds I have rehearsed; these things I did in girlhood. (45-49)

True, Medea is here willing herself into power, exhorting her suffering to grow, the more painful the better, until she is wholly possessed by vengeful desires:

Let my grief rise to more deadly strength; greater crimes become me, now that I am a mother. Gird thyself with wrath, and prepare thee for deadly deeds with the full force of madness. Let the story of thy rejection match the story of thy marriage. How wilt thou leave thy husband? Even as thou didst follow him. (50-55)

This opening soliloquy fully anticipates the *furor* within which Medea shall wreak her revenge. But it would not be enough to hold that Medea is generating an expansive selfhood which, cut loose from its anchorage in reality, madly competes against itself. To say this would be to identify only the *symptom* of her tragic condition. This initial soliloquy does indeed give a foretaste of Medea's insane megalomania, but it also shows how far her condition has been created by her repudiation by her lover and his city, on which her happiness utterly depends. Thus, even as it opens the play promises what Medea's revenge will make tragically apparent: that her claim to self-authorship is in fact a symptom of its opposite – that Medea loves Jason without qualification or restraint, so that his loss is insupportable. In Medea's revenge we encounter contradictions that will re-appear at the heart of the Kydian and Shakespearean tragedy of the early 1590s.

### III

From a perspective that minimizes the injury, and therefore the suffering, of the avenger, Braden describes the 'basic plot of a Senecan play' as 'that of an inner passion which bursts upon and desolates an unexpected and largely uncomprehending world, an enactment of the mind's disruptive power over

---

<sup>34</sup> See Boyle, *op.cit.*, pp.33-9, 53, 55, and *passim*; and Miola, *Shakespeare and Classical Tragedy*, pp. 12, 16-17, 29-30, and *passim*.

external reality<sup>35</sup>. In so doing, he identifies the characteristic dynamic of Senecan revenge, and assigns a content to what otherwise appears as sheer rant. 'Beneath all the noise', Braden concludes, 'such bombast draws on a rationale of expansion and conquest'<sup>36</sup>. The meaning of Senecan tragedy is determined by the meaning of its rhetoric, and the meaning of this rhetoric resides in the self-empowering dynamic it generates in the speaker's soul. Hence the 'expanding circle[s] of intimidation, drawing strength from a willingness to go farther than anyone else'<sup>37</sup>. Braden's work is seminal in identifying the logic of self-empowerment as characterizing the rage of the Senecan avenger. However, the dynamic and the purpose of revenge are not quite the same thing. Medea's vengeance is misrepresented if it is understood only in terms of a quest for power<sup>38</sup>. In her raging suffering, she expands her sense of selfhood in a derangement that obliterates all distinction between herself and the world. But, as her opening soliloquy suggests, the meaning of this pathological overflow of subjectivity is grounded in the injury that she has sustained. This the play confirms as it unfolds. Acts II and III show how intolerable Medea's suffering is. The two Acts that precede the final enactment of revenge are designed to create an overwhelming sense of violated piety. Braden rightly identifies the drive to vengeance as 'a programmatic destruction of ties to the human race'<sup>39</sup>; but the tragic paradox of revenge will be missed unless the destructiveness is recognized as a function of the damage that the avenger's link to the human

---

<sup>35</sup> Braden, *op.cit.*, p.39.

<sup>36</sup> Braden, *op.cit.*, p.49.

<sup>37</sup> Braden, *op.cit.*, p.52.

<sup>38</sup> Although Braden recognizes that revenge is linked to damaged identity, what holds the centre stage in his analysis is the omnipotence of *furor*. In Braden revenge is described primarily in terms of power. The reason why he neglects identity as central to revenge is that he interprets *furor* as a degeneration of the classical code of self-assertive honour -- that is, as the 'derangement of the classical competitive ethos with nowhere to go' that corresponds to Neronian Rome; in the imperial age Rome has no opposing forces against which to prove itself (see Braden, *op.cit.*, p.14). Effectively, what Braden does is to assign a historical origin to the avenger's madness. But the *intra-textual* origin of the avenger's madness is psychological, the product of a psychic wound, as Medea exemplifies.

<sup>39</sup> Braden, *op.cit.*, p.34.

race has sustained.

Act II opens with the sounding of the marriage hymn. The wedding between Creusa and Jason is on the point of consummation. Medea is in turn humiliated, indignant, utterly impotent, enraged, capable of anything in her despair. She feels – to use Aristotle's term for 'slight' – 'belittled', which reactivates her drive to unimaginable *scelus* (116-24). Nevertheless, she desperately seeks to excuse her husband and to persuade herself that it is all Creon's fault (137-49). The rest of Act II, and the whole of Act III, dramatizes the collision between her commitment to Jason and her recoil from him. The more intense her sense of betrayal is, the stronger the need for love becomes – until reaching the point of no return, her passion inverts itself into the perversion of revenge. Crucially, what becomes increasingly clear is that Medea's self-empowerment is the counterpart of her 'belittling', and thus the negative affirmation of the dependence of her self-integrity on Jason. Before she receives final confirmation from Creon that Jason has turned his back on her, she has an exchange with her Nurse in which she famously places herself above any wrong others can inflict on her. This Nurse, well-versed in the ways of the court, urges her to be secretive and false, hiding her feelings the better to calculate her vengeance:

Be silent, I pray thee, and confide to secret grief thy hidden plaints. Whoe'er has dumbly borne hard blows with patient and calm soul, has been able to repay them; it is hidden wrath that harms; hatred proclaimed loses its chance for vengeance. (150-54)

Plainly, this is a Nurse any Machiavel of means would be proud to have in his service; but Medea's antisocial aggression is not of the Machiavellian type. Unlike the 'revenge' of a Lorenzo or an Aaron, Medea's is the product of a commitment which cannot tolerate, as the Machiavel's social atrophy does, to punish the victim at safe emotional distance. To be sure, at this stage her claim to radical autonomy may anticipate that of the Machiavellian arch-individualist of the Elizabethan stage. To her Nurse's attempt to make her confront her predicament, she responds with prodigious self-assertiveness. Who she is and how she feels is beyond influencing:

*Nurse*      The Colchians are no longer on thy side, thy husband's vows have failed, and there is nothing left of all thy wealth.

*Medea*      Medea is left – in her thou beholdest sea and land, and sword and fire and gods and thunderbolts. (164-67: *Medea superest – hic mare et terras vides/ ferrumque et ignes et deos et fulmina.*)

Much more than the English of the Loeb translator, Medea's Latin – with its stunning *superest* fusing the idea of 'remaining' with that of 'over-topping', and with its centrally placed *vides*, objectifying to the gaze the self-transformation of Medea into the geography of the Cosmos in an accumulation of its constituent parts distributed, as it were, before and after her majestic command – enacts and projects her megalomania. This formidable declaration of autarchic selfhood easily outdoes the best Marlowe's Barabas can offer. But, when all is said and done, it is only a declaration. Her development as an avenger shows her to be anything but autarchic. This becomes apparent as soon as Creon, interrupting the scene with the Nurse, launches his moral offensive on those who threaten the peace of his realm. Determined to rid his kingdom of her disquieting presence, he asks Medea to leave Corinth immediately. Medea asks what she has done to deserve such drastic punishment, and is treated to the list of the crimes she committed during the Argonautic expedition – how she aided Jason to secure the golden fleece, how she delayed her father's pursuit by dismembering her own brother, and how, again out of love for Jason, she tricked Jason's sisters into slaughtering their own sire, for which crime he, Creon, gave them refuge in Corinth. Above all, Creon charges Medea with the worst of crimes – filial impiety. Medea remains unrepentant. Her only response is to ask that she be allowed to hide in some remote place with the man for whom she committed her crimes and for whose love she regrets nothing: for him she has suffered banishment from her homeland; for him she is ready to endure a second banishment (236-51). To this Creon responds that Jason is not to be held responsible for any of her crimes, and that as long as he renounces her Corinth shall consider him absolved of the sins of his past (262-65). At this, Medea's sense of moral isolation intensifies: with increasing desperation she asks that Jason be restored to her, refusing to accept that she has lost him; but we notice that for the first

time she is forced to regard herself as a victim of Jason, and of the past that, without him, will reduce her to an emotional wasteland:

Dost force me to flee? Give back then to the fugitive her ship, yea, give back her comrade. Why dost thou bid me flee alone? I did not come alone. . . . Why make distinction 'twixt two culprits? 'Tis for him Pelias lies dead, and not for me. Add flight, theft, a deserted father, a mangled brother, any crime which e'en now the bridegroom is teaching his new wives – 'tis no crime of mine. Full oft have I been made guilty, but never for myself. (272-80)

But Creon remains unmoved and grants her only the remainder of the day to take leave of her children and leave Corinth, never to return. His parting remark, as it were, slams the door in her face. Miller's translation ('But the marriage rites summon me, summons the festal day to pray to Hymen') does scant justice to Seneca's cultural expulsion: '*Sacra me thalami vocant,/ vocat precari festus Hymenaeo dies*' (299-300) – The holy rites (*sacra*) of marriage (*thalami* is, strictly, 'the marriage bed') call me, the hallowed (*festus*) day calls me to pray to Hymen. Creon does not choose to leave; he is compelled to do so; the call is repetitive, insistent (*vocant, vocat*); the sacred festivities are his and Corinth's. Creon's concluding, conclusive words expel her from Corinth, from its festivals, its gods, her children, and the only being who could reverse this doom for her – her husband. This is for her much more than a change of location. It deprives her of everything that means life to her. She is being radically damaged, that is, maddened.

For all of her claims to self-sufficiency, therefore, when Medea re-enters in Act III we feel the devastating impact that the confirmation of Jason's betrayal has had on her. She begins to suffer terribly under the humiliating deprivation to which she is brought, and to show signs that her mind is beginning to go. We feel that the more she suffers, the greater becomes her power, identified as *scelus*, but also the more acute the risk of psychic collapse. Medea's vengeful fury begins to project its anguished convulsions on external reality. Under its pressure she no longer distinguishes between herself and the objective world. Her mid-play soliloquy betrays the first signs of the pathological megalomania that Kyd and Shakespeare will identify in revenge:

If thou seekest, poor soul, what limit thou shouldst set to hate, copy thy love. Can it be that unavenged I should endure this royal wedding? Shall this day go idly by so anxiously besought, so anxiously bestowed? While the central earth shall bear up the balanced heavens, while the bright universe shall pursue its unchanging rounds, while sands lack number, while day attends the sun and stars the night, while the dry Bears revolve about the pole, and rivers fall to the sea, my madness shall never cease its quest of vengeance and shall grow on for ever. What ferocity of beasts, what Scylla, what Charybdis, sucking up the Ausonian and Sicilian waters, or what Aetna, resting heavily on panting Titan, shall burn with such threats as I? No whirling river, no storm-tossed sea, no Pontus, raging beneath the north-west wind, no violence of fire, fanned by the gale, could imitate the onrush of my wrath. I shall lay prostrate and destroy all things. (397-414)

*'Si quaeris odio, misera, quem statuas modum,/ imitare amorem'*: 'If you ask, poor woman, what quantity (*quem modum*) you should fix (*statuas*) to your hate, copy your love'. My hate, Medea is saying, is limitless because my love was limitless. Three lines later (401-405) she applies to hate the perfection of the ordered cosmos normally associated with universal love: the inversion of love, hate perforce reflects the same absoluteness. What converts limitless happiness to boundless horror is 'this royal wedding': it is the pivot that inverts perfect harmony into boundless rage. Medea's 'existential predicament' (as we would say) is a function of betrayal. Her 'insanity' is an extreme consequence of what happens to the self when it is suddenly deprived of the support of a being whose affection has guaranteed the integrity of that self. By repudiating Colchis for Jason, Medea has made herself entirely dependent on Jason as prince, lover and husband providing country, passion and children. For Jason to betray her, then, is to drop her into an existential void <sup>40</sup>.

It is therefore inevitable that when Jason comes again to her, the destabilized Medea's hopes soar.

In her exultation, she registers the situation as a new Argonautic adventure, ready to sacrifice herself

---

<sup>40</sup> This element of violated dependence is what Stoic readings leave out of the picture. Pratt, argues, for example, that 'there are no moderate emotions in the drama because the Stoic knows that passion disorders the balance of the soul and its destructive course is hard to reverse. Therefore he portrays emotion extravagantly in all its potentiality for evil'. From this, it follows that 'destructive emotion is a response to falsely valued external things, and overcoming this false evaluation leads to the goal of imperturbability, the prized freedom from passion' (Pratt, *op.cit.*, p.80). But when we read this against the play the question present itself: why should a 'falsely valued external thing' generate destructiveness? Why should the response be aggressive if this 'external' is no fundamental part of the self as the Stoic claim. Once Jason proves unworthy Medea should simply walk away from him, but she cannot. This is the problem Stoic readings fail to address.



once more for the man she loves unconditionally. But this is a fantasy. Jason reproaches her, she charges him with ingratitude: all for love, all for him, she betrayed her race, mangled her own brother, exiled herself from her native land. Jason does not want to hear any of this. Medea persists: without him, she is condemned to an exile that is more than geographical and physical, an exile from herself. Jason's moral repudiation of her leaves her wandering in a devastated past, polluted by a fraternal guilt endurable only when she knows that it was incurred for Jason's sake:

We are fleeing, Jason, fleeing. 'Tis no new thing to change our abode; but the cause of flight is new – 'twas for thee I was wont to flee. I withdraw, I go away, whom thou art forcing to flee forth from thy home; but whither dost thou send me back? Shall I seek Phasis and the Colchians, my father's kingdom, the fields drenched with my brother's blood? What lands dost thou bid me seek? . . . . All the ways which I have opened for thee I have closed upon myself. Whither dost send me back? Thou imposest exile upon an exile, but givest no place. (447-56, 58-60).

Only when we become aware of Medea's past are we in a position to weigh her case, which is the violation of an inordinate emotional investment in another human being. Race, country, family, all the elements out of which identity is constructed have been exchanged for a new identity as Jason's wife. '*Hos quoque impendi tibi, tibi patria cessit, tibi pater, frater, pudor – / hac dote nupsi*' (487-9): 'These, too, I expended for you, my homeland yielded for you, father, brother, chastity – with this dowry married you'. Thus, when the one person on whom Medea's sense of identity is now wholly concentrated proves false, she cannot repudiate him without repudiating the person she has become, that is to say, she must lose her reason. What begins to emerge is what Medea's avenging madness will fully reveal: that the self is socially constructed, so that the elimination of its social foundation will produce a collapse of identity. In Medea's repeated appeals to Jason – 'though all should hold thy wife infamous, do thou alone protect her, do thou alone call her innocent; let her be guiltless in thy sight, who for thy sake is guilty' (501-503) – we recognize a plea for a validation of her piety, for a self-confirmation that can only be found in reciprocal piety – which is precisely what she is being denied, and what she cannot do without. When Jason finally abandons her, cancelling the last remnants of a loyalty to the woman who exchanged her social existence for his, Medea's self is ravaged, but cannot be relinquished. Revenge

– the revenger’s madness – is the reflex symptom of this contradiction.

Thus, in Act IV Medea performs her magic incantations. The Nurse reports them with horror: Medea is summoning up ‘whole tribes of serpents’ (705), and ‘assembl[ing] her evil store of baneful herbs’ (706)<sup>41</sup>. Nothing good awaits Corinth; with good reason were Medea’s magic powers feared throughout the civilized world. Then Medea herself re-appears. Her human self has disintegrated; there are no more attempts to excuse Jason. In her frenzy, Medea almost transforms herself into a maenad (752-55), and, calling on Hecate to poison the robe she is going to present to the bride, she mutilates herself in sacrificial zest (807-811). Madness possesses her wholly: she inhabits the cosmos:

I have driven the seas back to their lowest depths, and the Ocean, his tides outdone, has sent his crushing waves farther into the land; and in like manner, with heaven’s law confounded, the world has seen both sun and stars together, and you, ye bears, have bathed in the forbidden sea. The order of the seasons have I changed: the summer land has blossomed ‘neath my magic song, and by my compelling Ceres has seen harvest in winter-time; Phasis [river in Colchis falling into the Black Sea] has turned his swift waters backward to their source, and Hister [the lower Danube], divided into many mouths, has checked his boisterous streams and flowed sluggishly in all his beds. The waves have roared, the mad sea swelled, though the winds were still; the heart of the ancient woods has lost its shadows, when the bright day has come back to them at commandment of my voice; Phoebus has halted in mid-heaven, and the Hyades [seven stars in the constellation Taurus], moved by my incantations, totter to their fall. (755-69)

This is the language of the damaged, that is to say, the deranged self, which projects the subjective condition of the speaker on the external world. That it is also the language of the great witch only serves to magnify the experience – not to render it unintelligible. The greater the humiliation, the greater the self-assertion. This is a point that no Stoic could make, but it is one that will interest those who, like Kyd and Shakespeare, have made the discovery that the self is not a sealed unit, since it cannot exist

---

<sup>41</sup> Though it is not my brief to enlarge the stock of Senecan borrowings by Elizabethan playwrights, I cannot help noticing that Medea’s herbs gathering expedition, as told by the Nurse at 705-30, is strongly reminiscent of the Latin dirge that Hieronimo produces at the end of Act II. Though the dirge does not contain any literal line from *Medea*, in both cases the process of herb gathering is a magical process that spans the Earth and its seasons in a vision of darkness and light, beauty and horror, life and death. In both cases, the avenger seeks to cope with his or her distress by harnessing the natural energies of the Earth.

without internalizing the world. The megalomania of revenge, as it will be understood by Kyd and Shakespeare, precedes Medea's enactment of vengeance.

#### IV

Before the day of stay she has been granted in Corinth comes to a close, Medea unleashes her elemental vengeance. The community's fears are justified beyond imagining. Empowered by her omnipotent rage, Medea accomplishes what the future history will not forget. The royal palace of Corinth is consumed by flames that seem almost human in their vicious destructiveness; the water that should quench only serves to feed the flames by which Creon and his virgin daughter are incinerated. Medea has laid the ungrateful nation prostrate; but this does not satisfy her. Despite her Nurse's urgings (891-92), she cannot leave: 'What I – shall I give ground? Nay, had I fled already, for this I should return. Strange nuptials (*nuptias . . . novas*) see I here' (893-94). Medea declares her vengeance unworthy of her ambition, and, fuelling her own suffering, demands a crime greater still than the one at which Corinth shudders in horror. In her orgy of retribution, Medea adds to her trauma by exulting in her familial impiety:

Glad I am, glad, that I tore off my brother's head, glad that I carved his limbs, that I robbed my father of his guarded treasure [the golden fleece], glad that I armed daughters [Pelias's] for an old man's death. Seek thou fresh fields, my grief; no untrained hand wilt thou bring to any crime. (911-15)

Driven by the intolerable thought that Jason's children by her are Creusa's, Jason's freshly killed bride, she frenziedly seeks to outdo her vengeance, willing her passion into further existence as sole master of her feelings and deeds:

Whither, then, wrath, art tending, or what weapons art thou aiming at the forsworn foe? A dark purpose my fierce spirit has resolved within me, and dares yet not acknowledge to itself. Fool! fool! I have gone too fast – would that mine enemy had children by his paramour! . . . *All offspring that thou hadst are Creusa's brood.* Resolved is this way of vengeance, rightly resolved for a last deed of guilt, I see it now, must my soul make ready. Children that once were mine, do you pay penalty for your father's crimes. (916-25, my italics)

But it soon appears that Medea can only say yes to her rage of suffering by destroying herself. She

thus disintegrates under the pain that sustains her self-empowerment. At the thought of Creusa, Medea's anger engulfs even her children; but at the thought of her children's death motherly piety returns, and revenge on them becomes unbearable (926-44). Medea is tossed in a 'double tide': '*ira pietatem fugat/ iramque pietas*' (943-44) – 'anger puts to flight love, and love anger'. The contradiction could not be more succinctly phrased; but what the English equivalent for 'pietas' – 'love' – fails to convey is the connotative density of the Latin term, which means piety towards the gods, the dutifulness to parents and native country, moral justice and compassion or tender-heartedness. Her maternal feelings are not hers only but bring into play a cluster of social, cultural and religious commitments normally erased by principled Stoicism. Hence the horrific climax of Medea's rage is no Stoic sign, as Nussbaum would have it, of an oscillation between two passions, one of which will take complete possession of the mind at the expense of the other<sup>42</sup>. Instead, we have two contradictory impulses born of the same source and feeding each other: Medea's piety and the destructiveness that its violation generates. To use Nussbaum's terms, what fuels Medea's rage is a love she cannot repudiate even as she tries to. Her rage is a tragic passion betokening an emotional investment in her human environment that is a constitutive part of her identity. Medea's revenge therefore is not the result of Medea's choosing of one passion – rage – against another – love. It is a psychic disintegration generated by a literally unbearable emotional tension. As the ultimate moment of her mad revenge approaches, it becomes clear how much damage Medea wreaks but also sustains. Medea is *at once* a devout mother, and a wife ready to commit matricide in order to harm the betraying father. This simultaneity is a madness in itself, and, as such, it shows *in a tragic way* the fundamental ambiguity by which our selfhood is constituted. What we witness

---

<sup>42</sup> Nussbaum, 'Serpents in the Soul', pp.226-7: 'Conflict, too, is shown in the Chrysippan way – not as the struggle of contending forces, but as an oscillation or fluctuation of the whole personality. . . The depth of Medea's conflict is shown in the fact that it is, precisely, an oscillation between two positions of the mind and heart, each of which represents a way in which Medea sees the world and her children in it'. It seems to me that this is very misleading: the depth of Medea's conflict, what makes it necessarily maddening, is that she is torn between two contradictory impulses, neither of which she can relinquish, for they both originate in the same piety that defines her.

in these final moments, in short, is the tragedy of the divided self.

It has become clear that what is at stake in Senecan revenge is much more than a 'passion' that the Stoic self is free to repudiate. The issue is selfhood itself, and the social base from which it is constituted. This is how should be understood Medea's revenge which crazily (that is unhyprocritically) takes the form of a vindication of the piety that Jason has violated – the family piety she originally sacrificed to gain a new identity by the side of her husband. Medea's revenge should be understood in relation to her past, as a symptomatic attempt to alter the past that makes her present identity insufferable. It is not insignificant that when she finally breaks down to kill her first child, she does so in response to her brother who emerges from her mental inferno to demand satisfaction for the wrongs she did to him:

Whither hastes that headlong horde of Furies? Whom seek they? Against whom are they preparing their flaming blows? Whom does the hellish host threaten with its bloody brands? A huge snake hisses, whirled with the writhing lash. Whom does Megaera [a Fury] seek with her deadly torch? Whose shade comes there dimly seen, its limbs all scattered? It is my brother, and 'tis punishment he seeks. We'll pay, yes, all the debt. Plunge your brands into my eyes, tear, burn; see my breast is open to the Furies. O brother, bid the avenging goddesses depart from me, and go in peace to the deep-buried ghosts; to myself leave me and use this hand, brother, which has drawn the sword – [*She slays her first son.*] With this victim I appease thy ghost. (958-71)

This psychic breakdown, which engages Medea's deepest selfhood, is what Nussbaum's reading, any Stoic reading for that matter, excludes. Love does not make Medea evil by virtue of its evil nature (the academic reading); it makes her mad because her sanity depends on its not being betrayed (the dramatic reading).

Jason's love for Medea, which she has received at the cost of her natural and cultural origins, has become dangerously constitutive of her sense of self. When she is made to reject it, therefore, her reaction, horrific as it is, asks to be received as a defence of her sense of wholeness. There can be no doubt that Medea in killing her and Jason's children regards herself as doing more than punishing Jason in an act of regulatory vengeance; she is also expunging or erasing in an act of constitutive vengeance what he means to her sense of being. Of course, this recovered identity is completely illusory; but this is not the point at issue, which is what the meaning of her madness is, that is to say, what it reveals about

her condition of self. The equally symptomatic relief that follows her terrible crime, when she feels that her identity is no longer threatened by Jason's marriage to his virgin princess, takes the form of the feeling that she is herself once again a virgin, in re-possession of her native land to which she owes her identity:

Now, now have I regained my regal state, my brother, my sire; and the Colchians have once more the spoil of the golden fleece; restored is my kingdom, my ravished virginity is restored. Oh, divinities, at last propitious (*o placida tandem numina*: oh, divine powers at last pacified), oh, festal day, oh nuptial day! (982-86)

In this reading, which relies on the interpreting of an enactment rather than the decoding of a message, Medea's revenge arises from a human condition that can be perverted, to be sure, but not transcended. Seneca's play enacts a revenge that is much closer to Keyishian's conception of revenge as a 'declaration of selfhood'<sup>43</sup> than anything we find in the moral essays of Seneca, including *De Ira*. Thus, as Keyishian argues of the Elizabethan public avengers, Medea also 'choose[s] an act of retaliation that punishes the injurer, matching – and thereby in some *psychological* sense undoing – the original harm'<sup>44</sup>. As such Medea is certainly mad, but by no means absurd. Beyond Keyishian one must emphasize that Medea has 'undone' the original injury, but in a way that confirms it, as madness confirms the reality of intolerable pain. As Medea stands on the palace roof against the sky, defiant of the crowd that Jason has gathered against her, it is her suffering that she invokes in denying the pity that could spare their surviving son:

If this hand could be satisfied with the death of one [of her two sons], it would have sought no death at all. Though I slay two, still is the count too small to appease my grief. If in my womb there still lurks any pledge of thee, I'll search my very vitals with swords and hale it forth (1009-1013).

Medea thus triumphs, expelling the last vestiges of her husband from herself. But, as the gynecological expulsion she threatens confirms, in terms of personal identity, revisionism and mutilation are one and the same. Medea can only triumph over herself at the expense of herself. There could hardly be a less Stoic recognition than this.

---

<sup>43</sup> Keyishian, *op.cit.*, p.3.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, my italics.

## VI

### [*Thyestes*]

Medea's tragic convulsions deny the Stoic assumption of a unitary self kept unified by detachment from the world. This they do by showing that the self simultaneously belongs to itself and to other selves. How central this recognition is to Senecan revenge drama is confirmed by *Thyestes*, in which the self-empowerment of the avenger acquires, even by Senecan standards, a truly incomparable magnitude. Atreus's megalomania goes well beyond anything Medea produces. And yet an attentive reading of the play does not contradict what Medea's revenge has also revealed – that the megalomania of the avenger is the function of a damaged identity, where the damage has been done by others, and thus testifies to his dependence on others for his sense of himself. Nothing of this is recognized by critics of Senecan drama. Atreus is usually presented as an 'exuberant, histrionic villain'<sup>45</sup> whose impact on Elizabethan playwrights had to do with the horrific nihilism of his revenge. While it is true that the brutalities of *Thyestes* are particularly direct and explicit, to construe his revenge as merely sensationalist blood-spilling is to miss the point of the play. Hunter, for example, tries to define Senecan tragedy in nihilistic terms: 'where Seneca *does* differ from Ovid – as in his gloomy devotion to horror as the only real truth about humanity – the Elizabethans seem to have avoided noticing the fact'<sup>46</sup>. But we notice that his premise is that Atreus's revenge is entirely undirected: 'it is indeed difficult to speak at all of Atreus's motivation'<sup>47</sup>. It is no accident that this nihilist interpretation requires the perception that Atreus's revenge is motiveless. Here again, against such a reading, I propose to recover Atreus's paranoid concern with identity as central to the meaning of his revenge. If I do so I will have shown how central a theme damaged identity is in Senecan revenge drama.

---

<sup>45</sup> See Miola, *Shakespeare and Classical Tragedy*, p.25.

<sup>46</sup> Hunter, 'Seneca and the Elizabethans', p.166.

<sup>47</sup> Hunter, 'Seneca and English Tragedy' p.187.

At the opening of Act I, Atreus appears possessed of the same self-recriminatory mood as agitated Medea at the start of her vengeful career. Atreus blames himself for remaining inactive against the offenses of his brother Thyestes (176-80) – offenses that are never confirmed as justified. Soon, as with Medea, this mood starts up the dynamo of *furor*, generating the familiar self-obsession which seeks to prostrate the world by unimaginable crime: ‘Up!, my soul, do what no coming age shall approve, but none forget. I must dare some crime, atrocious, bloody, such as my brother would wish were his. Crimes thou dost not avenge, save as thou dost surpass them.’ (192-96: *scelera non ulcisceris, nisi vincis*; literally, ‘you will not avenge crimes unless you overcome/ pass beyond them’). And, thus, as the Senecan protocol demands, Atreus soon appears in infernal orbit, wilfully ejecting the last remnants of piety from his soul, and abandoning himself to its darkest impulses:

Begone, Piety, if ever in our house thou hadst a place. Let the dread band of Furies come, the fiend Discord, and Megaera, brandishing her torches twain; not great enough the frenzy with which my bosom burns; with some greater horror would I be filled. (249-54)

Thus, Atreus wills himself into absolute power:

Some greater thing, larger than the common and beyond the bounds of human use is swelling in my soul, and it urges on my sluggish hands – I know not what it is, but ‘tis some mighty thing. So let it be. Haste, thou, my soul, and do it. (267-70)

This confirms how right Braden is to emphasize that Atreus’s soliloquies, which ‘raise momentum for increasingly drastic action’, are sustained by a lawlessness ‘relentlessly informed by a longing for competitive greatness’<sup>48</sup>.

Obeying the infernal dictates that possess him, Atreus lures his brother back to Argos from exile, and, as a Messenger reports to the awestruck Chorus in Act IV, kills his children in the sacred recess of the home, cuts their bodies into pieces and cooks a ghastly dish to offer Thyestes in the welcome-to-Argos banquet he is preparing for him. Such a deed convulses the world with horror, forces the sun to withdraw in mid-sky, and provokes the fall of the Zodiac (827-74). A sense of universal doom possesses

---

<sup>48</sup> Braden, *op.cit.*, p.43.



Argos as Atreus fills the place vacated by the withdrawing gods. His sense of himself now becomes as absolute as the cosmos. Atreus is now master of the universe, but his thirst for still greater vengeance remains unsatisfied:

Peer of the stars I move, and, towering over all, touch with proud head the lofty heavens. Now the glory of the realm I hold, now my father's throne. I release the gods, for the utmost of my prayers have I attained. 'Tis well, 'tis more than well, now 'tis enough even for me. But why enough? Nay, I will go forward, e'en though the father is full-fed with his dead sons. That shame might not hold me back, day has departed. On! while heaven is tenantless. O that I might stay the fleeing deities, might force and draw them hither that they all might see the avenging feast! But 'tis enough if but the father see. (885-95).

Atreus's self-assertiveness is truly deranged, more devouring than anything imagined by Medea. However, despite, or perhaps because of its claims to totality, Atreus's omnipotence reveals itself, like Medea's, to be a function of a radical insecurity about the place he occupies in others' affection and respect. The start of the play gives some indications of this, when he accuses his brother of what amounts to an appropriation of his identity:

Whate'er is wrong to do unto a brother is right to do to him. For what has he left untouched by crime, or where has he failed to sin? My wife has he debauched, my kingdom stolen; the ancient token of our dynasty [a ram with golden fleece whose possession secured the kingdom's throne] by fraud he gained, by fraud o'erturned our house. (220-24)

The play does not enact this injury, nor does it offer confirmation of these suspicions. Nonetheless, Atreus appears to be obsessed with the idea of his brothers' usurpation of his roles as king, father, and above all husband. A primal terror of loss of identity, understood of course in terms of these social relations, seems to destabilize Atreus into a rage of omnipotence. Seneca shows Atreus casting himself as a new Medea; but Atreus is exiled from himself by a much smaller event than the expedition of the Argonauts. The expedition of Thyestes – for sure no new Jason – leads straight into his sister-in-law's bed. The mythical origins of Atreus's claim to a god-like absoluteness seem to conceal an ordinary case of cuckoldry:

Him [the golden fleece] did the perfidious one, daring a monstrous crime, steal away, with the partner of my bed helping the sinful deed. From this source has flowed the whole evil stream of mutual destruction; throughout my kingdom have I wandered, a trembling exile; no part of my family is safe and free from snares; my wife seduced, our pledge of empire broken, my house

impaired, my offspring dubious. (234-40)

The ensuing self-summoning rage and aggressiveness is revealed, at the climax of Atreus's revenge, to be nothing more than an attempt to correct the alleged betrayal that threatens his sense of himself. After he has glutted his appetite on his own flesh, Thyestes misses his children and asks that they be brought to him. Atreus reassures him with a promise of familial concord. Unlike Atreus, whose paternity has been called into question by his brother's seizure of his marital bed, Thyestes shall never have to endure any anxiety about filial abandonment. This is the perverse logic of Atreus's challenged fatherhood, and of the crazed relish of his revenge:

Be sure that here, in their father's bosom, are thy sons; – here now, and here shall be; no one of thy children shall be taken from thee. The faces thou desirest shall be thine, and wholly with his family will I fill the sire. Thou shalt be satisfied, have no fear of that. (976-80).

This horrible perversion is of course strictly dependent upon what it perverts – the social-sacred institution of the banquet, which Atreus needs as much as Medea her ghostly insane wedding. Both banquet and wedding affirm the private in a public act that brings together the concord of individuals in a ritualistic celebration of the community's joyful energies. Thus, when Atreus accomplishes the grotesque carnival of his vengeance by announcing the terrible truth (that as a social being Thyestes has in effect *eaten himself*), we cease to believe that Atreus registers revenge merely as a punishment of his brother for turning him into a cuckold. What it registers as is a complete erasure of his cuckoldry, that is to say, as a restoration, even a resurrection, of the integral self:

Now do I praise my handiwork, now is the true palm won. I had wasted my crime, didst thou not suffer thus. Now do I believe my children are my own, now may I trust once more that my marriage-bed is pure. (1096-99)

Thus, both Medea and Atreus confirm that revenge and personal identity are fused together in the tragic experience of the Senecan hero. Senecan drama, contrary to received opinion, did not entirely part company with its ritualistic ancestry in the great dramatic festivals of fifth-century Athens. That these shocked and even traumatised their audiences is certain. But it is also more than probable that in so doing

they consolidated and strengthened, at subliminal level, these audiences' sense of human solidarity.

## C. THE CHORUS

### I

No analysis of Senecan drama can be complete which omits to consider the role of the Chorus. Its presence in the plays is spectacular and its function central to the meaning of the tragic experience. Nonetheless, no other major element in Senecan drama is more misrepresented. This failure is a product of the critical bias against the dramatic quality of the plays as plays, the Choruses being regarded as their least dramatic expression. However, there are clear signs in the criticism that the interaction between the Chorus and the plot has been far from well understood. Differing critical perceptions of the Chorus's function have generated an unresolved polarity. Howard Baker, for example, feels that what characterizes the Senecan Chorus is its intimate involvement with the tragic events:

Seneca's choruses are composed of people fairly intimately allied with the protagonists. . . rather than being strictly interpretative agents, [they] are strictly choral adjuncts to the action; they are extensive enough to share acts with the protagonists. . . they participate with messengers and other characters.<sup>49</sup>

In puzzling contrast, what Braden – to take another example – regards as typical of the Senecan plays is the detachment of the choruses from the action:

[In Senecan drama] the Chorus has become almost completely disengaged from the action. It takes virtually no part in the dialogue and is rarely referred to at all by the characters; its odes, now clearly set as formal dividers in a five-act structure, seldom have more than the most general links to the surrounding action.<sup>50</sup>

These contradictory perceptions are by critics too well acquainted with the plays to come up with a totally distorted picture. It would seem, then, that we have to accept that the Chorus is at times deeply engaged with the tragic action, and at other times quite distanced from it. This would seem to offer us

---

<sup>49</sup> Baker, *op.cit.*, p.143.

<sup>50</sup> Braden, *op.cit.*, p.35.

an interesting ambiguity, yet its significance is never considered. Instead, we find a consensus on the Chorus's static, utterly undramatic nature, together with the assignment of a moralizing purpose to it.

For example, Norman Pratt, discussing the Chorus of *Medea*, reaches this conclusion:

The Argo odes are typical of many of the Senecan choruses. The function of the Corinthians is not fully dramatic. They have no organic part in the action and no clear individuality, only general characteristics and attitudes, such as antagonism towards Medea, which attach them to this play. On the other hand, these odes serve the purpose of the kinds of drama Seneca is writing, educative exhortatory drama demonstrating the destructive forces in human nature. The Argo theme is developed to show the absolute nature of the evil portrayed in Medea. Seneca is using the Chorus for philosophical commentary on the significance of the action, communicating directly to the audience the lesson of the drama.<sup>51</sup>

Pratt's assertion that the Chorus 'stands above the dramatic events, not deriving insights from events, but giving insights to them'<sup>52</sup> is entirely representative of Senecan criticism<sup>53</sup>. As usual, the *coup de grace* is performed (with much relish) by G. K. Hunter, who concludes that the Senecan Chorus is nothing more than 'a dead letter'<sup>54</sup>.

More generally, the Chorus in Seneca is understood to represent the middle stage in the history of its abolition in drama. In Greek tragedy, the story goes, the Chorus is naturally integrated into the dramatic whole of which it forms an indispensable element. By contrast, in Seneca the Chorus constitutes a qualitatively different entity from the rest of the play; its presence is felt as an interruption of rather than a contribution to the dramatic flow. As C.W. Mendell puts it in his book-long comparison of Greek and Roman tragedy (a comparison that, needless to say, is always unfavourable to Roman tragedy):

---

<sup>51</sup> Pratt, *op.cit.*, p.87.

<sup>52</sup> Pratt, *op.cit.*, p.79.

<sup>53</sup> Nussbaum's analysis is no exception: 'unlike the Euripidean Chorus, Seneca's is not sympathetic to Medea. Throughout it is the sober voice of Stoic morality, counseling the extirpation of passion, the containment of daring – a life that stays at home with its own virtue, never overstepping the limits of nature' (Nussbaum, 'Serpents in the Soul', p. 240). In the course of her discussion Nussbaum qualifies this assertion, but the function of the Chorus, as she conceives it, remains doctrinal.

<sup>54</sup> Hunter, 'Seneca and the Elizabethans', p.167.

The Senecan choruses serve as useful breaks in the dramatic recital but they do not necessarily, as did the Greek, fill natural intervals in the action. It is a further step in the decline of the chorus as an essential part of the play and therefore another factor contributing to its ultimate elimination. If the slight mechanical function of the chorus were handled as it readily may be by some more dramatic device. . . . [it] would have become. . . . an undramatic interlude between episodes. Already it *makes* the breaks between acts instead of *filling* breaks created by the natural dramatic progress of the play.<sup>55</sup>

This interpretation has proved particularly influential with Elizabethan scholars, who see the Chorus in Kyd and Shakespeare as the product of the academic adaptation of Seneca in the 1560s and '80s<sup>56</sup>. In their view, the process of choric dissolution started by Seneca and accelerated by the Elizabethan academic playwrights and translators finds its culmination in the public plays of the 1580s and '90s. Charlton, for example, observes that the Elizabethan translations of Seneca tend to be freer in dealing with the Chorus, which they invariably shorten. The assumption that underpins this view is that the Chorus is intrinsically undramatic: 'those [alterations] affecting the Chorus are greatest: thus at the outset the translators are instinctively preparing Seneca for the theatre by coping with the most obvious impediment to his appearance on the modern stage. Neville frequently shortens Seneca's choruses, and the mere shortening is a dramatic gain in the direction of ultimate exclusion'<sup>57</sup>. Furthermore, whether or not one assumes that the academics derived this treatment from Seneca, what is clear is that both in the academic and the public drama the Chorus has a moralizing function. Thus Baker regards the moral function of the Choruses in *Gorboduc* as a precedent for the public Choruses of Kyd and the early

---

<sup>55</sup> C.W. Mendell, *Our Seneca*, Archon Books, Hamden, Connecticut, 1968 [1<sup>st</sup> edition 1941], p.135.

<sup>56</sup> Thus Cunliffe: 'Seneca's use of the Chorus was a plain forewarning of its ultimate fate. In the early plays of Aeschylus supreme importance is attached to the Chorus, which was the kernel from which the drama had sprung. In Sophocles the Chorus has become subordinate to the dialogue. In Euripides its connection with the action is often slight; in Seneca this connection disappears altogether; the Chorus is already on its way to exclusion from the play and final disuse' (Cunliffe, *op.cit.*, p.34).

<sup>57</sup> Charlton, *op.cit.*, p clvi. Charlton cites as supporting evidence Heywood's remark that 'such alteracyon [of the Chorus] may be borne with all, seeing that the Chorus is no part of the substance of the matter' (p.159). For Charlton, only the Elizabethan public playwrights solved the problem by virtue of the fact that 'the philosophical atmosphere which is the excuse for the dull sermons of the Chorus was to be more cogently supplied by closer attention to the portrayal of character' (p.clxx).

Shakespeare:

It is singly and alone as an interpreter of what has gone before (especially the symbolic material presented in the dumb shows) and what is to come afterwards that the Chorus in *Gorboduc* functions. So, too, in general, functions the Chorus, in so far as it persists, in the later tragedy.<sup>58</sup>

Now, it seems to me that Baker's description of the Chorus in *Gorboduc* is quite accurate. In effect, the play introduces every Act by means of a musical dumb show in which a symbolic representation is enacted. At the end of the Act the Chorus spells out the moral truth signified by the dumb show, which now appears as a warning against the misfortunes enacted in the intervening Act. Thus, the Chorus makes of each of the five Acts a self-contained unit at the expense of the momentum of the play; the meaning of the play is established in a cumulative way (as an aggregation of moral episodes) rather than in a culminative way (as an overall design tending towards a final revelation). But this is not the dramatic scheme we find in either Seneca, or Kyd, or Shakespeare; and I would argue further that the role of the Chorus contributes to this. Contrary to the established view, my contention is that a) an attentive examination of the Senecan Chorus reveals that it is far from static, and not irrelevant to the tragic representation; and b) it is the dynamic Chorus of Seneca, rather than the static Chorus of academic drama, that Kyd assimilated into his seminal play, among whose much-celebrated innovative features is the upper-stage presence of Revenge.

## II

In general terms, the Senecan Chorus – often in conjunction with an infernal Prologue – casts a shadow of fatality over the unwitting characters, whose actions thus appear to obey a supra-human as well as a human logic. This creates a double perspective on events: on one level the tragic conflict is perceived to be generated by the psychic crises of deeply socialized characters (fathers, mothers, lovers, etc); on a parallel level it is seen to be governed by a supra-human, abstract dictate – a curse, generational in

---

<sup>58</sup> Baker, *op.cit.*, p.143.

*Thyestes* (the curse of the house of Pelops), and mythical in *Medea* (the curse of the Argonauts). From the start, then, we know that the human conflict obeys a larger design that escapes the control of its protagonists. But *the gap never ceases to be perceived as such*: what we feel all along to be more vivid, urgent and, in the final analysis, real is the interpersonal tragic conflict. Thus, we experience the two levels of causation as much in terms of discontinuity between the supernatural and the natural as in terms of continuity. This continuous discontinuity we shall re-encounter in *The Spanish Tragedy*, where while Hieronimo's revenge is seen to be dictated from the upper-stage by Revenge, its realization below is felt to surpass anything Revenge could have anticipated. But the connection between the Kydian and the Senecan Chorus is not exhausted by this theatrical effect, which enhances the human (and therefore the psychological) dimension of revenge. The Chorus not only embodies the supernatural forces that shape the avenger's madness: it evolves in the play, and this evolution serves to mark the avenger's progression towards his or her crazed achievement of mental omnipotence. In order to appreciate these effects, however, it is necessary to realize that what the Elizabethan public dramatist found in Seneca were plays in which all elements are enactments, and not the static truths applauded by academics.

My contention is that the Chorus neither represents a Stoic stance towards the action of the play, nor contributes little to the development of the tragedy. On the contrary, it is an essential tragic device characterized by an evolving relationship with the action. This can be most interestingly illustrated in relation to *Thyestes*, the choral function of which has proved to be the most intractable to interpretation in Senecan criticism. Following Act II, in which Atreus lists his grievances against his brother and vows to wreak revenge on him, the Chorus enters rejoicing in the fact that 'at last our noble house, the race of ancient Inachus, hath allayed the strife of brothers' (336-8); and for another seventy lines it exults at the reconciliation of Atreus and Thyestes. Plainly, the chronological disarray exposes Seneca to a charge of dramatic incompetence that has not passed unremarked in criticism. Indeed, various explanations have

been offered to account for this most exceptional thing – ‘a deluded Chorus’, in Boyle’s phrase<sup>59</sup>. For example, E.F. Watling observes in his well-known Penguin translation:

That the Chorus, here and again at 546, appear to be ignorant of Atreus’s treacherous intentions, is a considerable strain on the dramatic convention. Some suppose that the Chorus is absent from the stage between the acts. But no realistic solution need be looked for; the Chorus may participate as much, or as little, in the action as convenient; here they are assumed to be aware only of the ‘overt’ situation – the apparent reconciliation of the brothers.<sup>60</sup>

Having recommended that no ‘realistic’ solution be sought, Watling offers a casually unconvincing one himself. Yet the Chorus does seem to vary in its degree of involvement in the action. Indeed, comparative readings reveal these variations to follow an identifiable pattern, which consists of a movement from an almost complete detachment from the tragic events to a total identification with them. The initial detachment usually comprises a vision of an idyllic, or at least non-tragic, reality, characterized by communal and religious harmony, and located in an organic world of vast open spaces. And so with the first Chorus:

If any god loves Achaian Argos and Pisa’s homes renowned for chariots; if any loves Corinthian Isthmus’ realm, its twin harbours, its dissevered sea; if any, the far-seen snows of Mount Taygetus, snows which, when in winter-time the Sarmantian blasts have laid them on the heights, the summer with its sail-filling Etesian breezes melts away; if any is moved by the cool, clear stream of Alpheus, famed for its Olympic course – let him his kindly godhead hither turn, let him forbid the recurrent waves of crime to come again, forbid that on his grandsire follow a worse grandson, and greater crime please lesser men. (122-35)

This initial anti-tragic vision, I would argue, does not constitute a ‘break in the dramatic recital’ but represents an *alternative* stance to that which brings about the catastrophe. Far from a product of dramatic incompetence, the detached Chorus serves to intensify the tragic effect by defining the harmonious world out of which the enacted play tears us. It allows us to perceive how the solipsistic disposition of the avenger will progressively swallow up any vision of normality. In this view, the Chorus fulfils a representational rather than chronological function. Thus, contrary to the received view, Senecan

---

<sup>59</sup> Boyle, *op.cit.*, p.50.

<sup>60</sup> Watling, *op.cit.*, p.60.



tragedy does not use the Chorus to moralize the action, but to anticipate by contrast the avenger's tragic conflation of self and universe, making us feel what it means to be possessed by self-assertive avenging *furor*. In sum, the Chorus serves a dramatic rather than doctrinal purpose. That its initial stance is the counterpart of the hero's stance is confirmed by the similar procedure that opens the *Medea*, where Medea's opening curse on the marrying couple is set against their blessing by Chorus I. Indeed, there is little Stoicism in the *Medea* Chorus's encouragement of the Corinthians to indulge in revelry and merrymaking!<sup>61</sup>

The Senecan Chorus, however, is by no means confined to offering the audience or even the hero the alternative space of normality. From its initial 'objective' stance it is sucked into its increasing concern with the tragic figure and its fate. Eventually it joins the action and takes part in the dialogue. That in most of the plays this happens only in Act IV is no accident. Generally a Senecan play – certainly the revenge plays – concludes with the engulfing of the luminous reality that the Chorus proclaimed by the infernal darkness of the avenger's mind. Once the Chorus has been sucked into the tragic nightmare, the everyday world ceases to withstand the tragic momentum. This descent from detachment to surrender is represented by the second and the third Choruses. Normally in Seneca the second Chorus can still be seen to counterbalance the avenger's rage, as the 'ignoring' Chorus in *Thyestes* shows. The third Chorus, however, invariably begins to mark the transition from commentary, even commentary addressed to the protagonist, to involvement. The sense of a universe ruled by impersonal, fixed laws has not yet been lost, but it is now affected by the impending horrors. Chorus III in *Medea* no longer rejoices in the

---

61

From a perspective that rejects any moralization of the plays, Motto and Clarke recognize the need to interpret the meaning of the Chorus in representational rather than chronological terms: 'Jo-Ann Shelton speaks of the temporal repetitions in the *Hercules Furens* and the *Thyestes* and the playwright's presentation of "simultaneous events linearly", but what is achieved is a staccatoeffect [sic] in the dreamlike tracing not of clock but of psychic time. For example, in the *Thyestes* when Tantalus curses the House of Atreus, characters in the play are *already infected*, and subsequently edged and jarred and caromed onward into a mainstream of fever pitch and taut melodramatic posturing and performance' (Motto and Clarke, p.61).

communal festivities, but fears Medea's intentions and prays for the safety of Jason; while its counterpart in *Thyestes* fearfully admonishes Atreus to check his inordinate pride. This Choric evolution makes us feel how external reality is relentlessly made to yield to the growing force of the tragedy.

When following Act IV we get to the final Chorus, we are confronted by the collapse of the objective world. *Furor* has succeeded in engulfing the public world. Thus, in *Thyestes*, the fourth Chorus appears in dialogue with the Messenger, who is asked to describe the horrors at which he is shuddering (639-40). The dialogue is followed by the Chorus's lament, which takes up and amplifies the drift of the Messenger's narrative, thus dissolving the final differences between enacted events and choric commentary, but thereby also removing the alternative reality to horrors. Vision has yielded to terror, description to feeling. In *Thyestes*, the Sun withdraws in revulsion at Atreus's crime, and the Chorus is overwhelmed by a nightmare of universal chaos:

Whatever this may be, would that night were here! Trembling, trembling are our hearts, sore smit with fear [the Latin enacts the very voice of eschatological despair: '*trepidant, trepidant pectora magno/ percussa metu*' ], lest all things fall shattered in fatal ruin and once more gods and men be o'erwhelmed by formless chaos; lest the lands, the encircling sea, and the stars that wander in the spangled sky, nature blot out once more. (827-35)

The Chorus' final utterance is a cry against cosmic injustice; indeed of the disappearance of justice itself:

Have we of all mankind been deemed deserving that heaven, its poles uptorn, should overwhelm us? In our time has the last day come? Alas for us, by bitter fate begotten, to misery doomed, whether we have lost the sun or banished it! Away with lamentations, begone, O fear! Greedy indeed for life is he who would not die when the world is perishing in his company. (875-84)

Incapable of distinguishing between desert and misfortunes, between victimization and responsibility, it concludes by repudiating life itself. Whatever our identification with this view, however, we are left with something slightly different. Atreus's subjective dissolution of the cosmos leaves us, unlike the Chorus whose relationship with Atreus as a fellow *dramatis persona* is different from ours, with a vision of the horror of solipsism. Seneca's representation of mental omnipotence shows us that to attain it is to achieve solipsistic madness. This overwhelming climax could not have been achieved without the participation of an evolving Chorus.

This *affective* Seneca underpins the chapters that follow, in which I argue that the earliest masterpieces of the public drama, *The Spanish Tragedy* and *Titus Andronicus*, are not without predecessors in their elaboration of an interactive dramaturgy dependent upon the conception of human beings as simultaneously social and individual. My thesis is that they found their antecedents in the original Latin plays of Seneca, which are utterly unlike the received Senecan platitudes of academic drama. From this, it will be evident that my treatment of Kyd and Shakespeare will not take the form of detecting Senecan verbal fingerprints. Despite the massive differences between the age of Nero and that of Elizabeth, what these Elizabethan dramatists responded to in their Roman ancestor was his overpowering representation of tragic contradiction in his protagonists, and in particular, in the avenger.

## PART II

## Chapter Three

### *The Spanish Tragedy I*

## A. THE COMMUNITY

### I

At the beginning of this century Somerset Maugham wrote:

The character of a scoundrel, logical and complete, has a fascination for his creator which is an outrage to law and order. I expect that Shakespeare devised Iago with a gusto which he never knew when, weaving moonbeams with his fancy, he imagined Desdemona. It may be that in his rogues the writer gratifies instincts deep-rooted in him, which the manners and customs of a civilized world have forced back to the mysterious recesses of the subconscious. In giving the character of his invention flesh and bones he is giving life to that part of himself which finds no other means of expression. His satisfaction is a sense of liberation.<sup>1</sup>

Inspired by the life of Paul Gauguin, *The Moon and Sixpence*, to which this paragraph belongs, explores the anxieties and fulfilments of artistic creativity in the stifling context of a bourgeois society. The above excerpt, and the entire novel for that matter, exemplify a conviction about human beings that has come to dominate modern culture, namely that the individual is not a social being by nature. His nature is constituted in such a way that his social existence demands a constant repression of his instincts. For this reason, his civic life must remain peripheral to his deepest self. The 'instincts deep-rooted in [the individual]' that fascinate Maugham are in radical opposition to 'the manners and customs of a civilized world', which means that 'law and order' are always experienced oppressively. This understanding of human beings leads to the conclusion that, as Freud put it, 'civilization has to be defended against the individual and its regulations, institutions and commands are directed towards that task'<sup>2</sup>. Civilization is a burdensome cloak over our naked nature, a castrating impediment to individual fulfilment. Accordingly, Freud argues that 'If civilization imposes such great sacrifices not only on man's sexuality but on his aggressivity, we can understand better why it is hard for him to be happy in that civilization. In fact, primitive man was better off in knowing no restrictions of instinct'<sup>3</sup>. The fundamental antagonism Freud posits between individual and society has become so prominent in our culture that it

---

<sup>1</sup>Maugham, S., *The Moon and Sixpence*, Vintage, London, 2000 [1<sup>st</sup> edition 1919], p 137.

<sup>2</sup>Freud, S., *Civilization and its Discontents*, The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, v. XXI, The Hogarth Press, London, 1961, p. 112.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 115.

now passes for a self-evident truth<sup>4</sup>.

Modern literary criticism constitutes no exception. As a result, this basic dissociation of human agent from social context mediates and conditions its critical readings. In many ways, it has offered an escape route from the moralizing of conventional criticism. Examples are not hard to find. To stick to the main concern of this thesis: we find that Boyle, for example, in the most recent study of Senecan tragedy to appear, departs from previous moralizations of Senecan tragedy by interpreting the avenger's experience as follows:

Atreus outbeastialises the beasts by inverting the kinds of institution which make human civilized life possible: kingship, sacrifice, feast. The beast Atreus triumphs through civilization's controlling forms. . . In Act 3 to 5 central rituals of political, religious and social life, emblematic of civilization's controlling forms, are used not to promote community, not to confirm socio-religious realities, not to harness individual differences and instinctual energies into a larger, more stable entity, but to implement savagery. . . The structures of civilization dissolve into man the beast-god, the beast-king, the beast-sacrificer.<sup>5</sup>

Implicit in Boyle's analysis is the notion that when the make-up of civilization is washed off, the ugly face of individual nature stands revealed. Civilization imposes its 'controlling forms' on the individual, but the socialization these forms make possible is in permanent danger of 'dissolving' into natural savagery whenever the pressure eases off. Similarly, T. McAlindon favours a non-moralistic reading of *The Spanish Tragedy* that takes on board the violent instincts of the individual:

Kyd's imaginative energies are devoted not to the exploration of a moral problem but to a psychic upheaval in which the protagonist oscillates between the poles of his being until his darkest instincts take complete control, silencing his noble self or using it as their instrument.<sup>6</sup>

As he elaborates on the meaning of individual instinct McAlindon reveals that he takes for granted the existence of the 'volcanic forces' he finds trapped by the restraints of society:

much of the play's power as drama, and no doubt the principal reason for its Renaissance popularity, stems from its recognition of the volcanic forces that slumber lightly in the souls of

---

<sup>4</sup> Freud himself feels that, in making this point, 'what I am describing is common knowledge. . . [I am expounding] things which are, in fact, self-evident'; Freud, op.cit., p.117.

<sup>5</sup> Boyle, op.cit., pp. 46-48.

<sup>6</sup> McAlindon, T., op.cit., p. 66.

civilized men and beneath the elegant structures and procedures of an advanced society.<sup>7</sup>

Were these forces perceptible before the manufacture of the Freudian spectacles early this century? Do they exist at all as such? The popularity of this scheme among critics suggests an affirmative answer.

McAlindon is not alone in approaching Elizabethan tragedy from this polarized perspective. Indeed, Renaissance texts have proved particularly vulnerable to it. This is because of the importance that 'individuality' has for the period. At least since Burckhardt published his seminal *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (1860), the dichotomy of individual and society has become fundamental to any discussion of the Renaissance. Burckhardt famously argued that the start of the modern age was marked by the emergence of individuality. He defined the individualism of modernity – 'the growth of individual character'<sup>8</sup> -- in opposition to medieval communitarianism, in which he argued that 'man was conscious of himself only as a member of a race, people, party, family, or corporation – only through some general category'<sup>9</sup>. In the Burckhardtian tradition the transition from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance is presented as a displacement of 'the social' that defined the traditional world of the Middle Ages by a renewed sense of individuality that served to generate the dynamism defining the Renaissance. The resulting polarization – social communion on the one hand and individual atomism on the other – is now taken for granted in standard presentations of the rise of modernity<sup>10</sup>. Obviously, the Freudian theory of a-social individuality becomes particularly relevant in this context, conditioning the interpretation of the Renaissance as a liberation from oppressive sociality.

The interpretative consequences of adopting this perspective on Renaissance literature can be

---

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 56.

<sup>8</sup> Burckhardt, J., *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, Phaidon Press, London, 1960, p.83.

<sup>9</sup> Burckhardt, op.cit., p.81.

<sup>10</sup> e.g. Mario Praz's: 'The theocratic, collectivist ideals of the Middle Ages were being replaced by a conception of life based on a pre-Christian polity and the individuum. The new conception emphasized the plastic force of the individual at the expense of the surrounding atmosphere; the new hero stood out arrayed in the full glory of his strength, almost too intense to be real. . . The medieval man was too much of a man in the mass; the Renaissance man, on the other hand, was isolated as a self-sufficient unit, since a reaction must go its whole length before the balance is re-established' (Praz, op.cit., p.96-97).



illustrated in relation to *The Spanish Tragedy*, a play which heralded the new kind of revenge drama. Kay Stockholder's analysis of the play, for example, is so mediated by Freud that it bafflingly postulates the entire action of the play as the dream of its protagonist Hieronimo. For Stockholder, the suffering of bereaved Hieronimo manifests the hatred he repressed in his role as the happy father and state servant in Act I, before his son Horatio is killed:

The combination of Hieronimo's self-definition and the world he confronts as external to himself shows him to be like a person who unconsciously harbors fierce resentment towards and subversive ideas about the system he consciously serves. . . so that the sequence of action functions as a means by which Hieronimo permits himself to enact, and partially to acknowledge, the passions he previously repressed. In this way renegotiating his relation to the hierarchical world in which he has defined himself, he simultaneously endorses and opposes to it incompletely conceptualized passions that in more recent times became part of the fabric of an individualist value system.<sup>11</sup>

As a vehicle of liberated social resentment, Hieronimo's violence signals the advent of modern individualism. In his alienated state he ceases to define himself 'only through some general category' as Burckhardt had it. Going well beyond Burckhardt, Stockholder aligns individualism with subversiveness, and society with oppressiveness. Tacitly, society is reduced to 'the system', and with the help of Freud, Burckhardt's Renaissance individualism is recast as a form of antisocial subversiveness. Hieronimo's 'incompletely conceptualized passions' prefigure an individual freedom that will have to await Robespierre before it is recognized as such. Stockholder's conclusions confirm, then, that 'individualism', as used in criticism, depends on the unexamined notion of society as a medium unnatural to individual fulfilment.<sup>12</sup>

Stockholder's conclusions are in line with a more general conception of Elizabethan drama that strives to locate politics at the heart of that drama. In this conception, society becomes synonymous with an intrinsically oppressive 'system', while the individual's antisocial instincts translate into a

---

<sup>11</sup> K. Stockholder, "“Yet Can He Write”: Reading the Silences in *The Spanish Tragedy*", *American Imago* 47 (1990), p.98.

<sup>12</sup> Revenge is particularly vulnerable to this assumption, as Kerrigan's generalization to the effect that 'injury breaks a taboo and disinhibits violence' (Kerrigan, op.cit., p.4) shows. The assumption behind this claim is clear: there is a natural aggressiveness in human beings that is only repressed by social norms. If these dissolve, aggression follows naturally.

subversive assertion of 'freedom' from this system. In this view, the emergence of Elizabethan popular drama is grounded in an incipient consciousness of individuality. Such a consciousness, however, is understood as a rebellious awareness of political consequence. Thus the Freudian postulate of antisocial instinctivity is matched by the axiom of the intrinsic oppressiveness of the 'the system', as if the *sine qua non* of individuality were social injustice. Hunter's account of the origins of Elizabethan popular drama is entirely characteristic in this respect:

In making their move towards individualism, the Wits were, we might say, establishing the necessary precondition of a sophisticated drama in which the individual voice can be made to represent the struggle for freedom to defy the system.<sup>13</sup>

Thus a radical dissociation of individual and society has come to dominate criticism of Elizabethan drama. However, against such a dogmatic emphasis, it is necessary to remember that alternative approaches exist. A strong case can be made, for example, for the claim that human beings are by nature social, in the sense that they are entirely dependent on the state of plurality into which they are born. This means that the individual does not simply *operate* in society, but is *constituted* by the ties he develops in it. Henri Bergson, an exact contemporary of Freud, argues, for instance, that the pressure that society exerts on the individual invigorates rather than castrates:

Even if we were only in theory under a state of obligation towards other men, we should be so in fact towards ourselves, since social solidarity exists only in so far as a social ego is superadded, in each of us, to the individual self. To cultivate this social ego is the essence of our obligation to society. Were there not some part of society in us, it would have no hold on us. . . . Its presence is more or less marked in different men; but no one could cut himself off from it completely. Nor would he wish to do so, for he is perfectly aware that the greatest part of his strength comes from this source, and that he owes it to the ever-recurring demands of the social life that unbroken tension of energy, that steadiness of aim in effort, which ensures the greatest return for his

---

<sup>13</sup> Hunter, G.K., *English Drama 1586-1642. The Age of Shakespeare*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1997, p.31. Hunter's work is not, on the whole, representative of this school, whose most influential products are Stephen Greenblatt's *Renaissance Self-fashioning*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1981; Jonathan Dollimore's *Radical Tragedy: Religion, Ideology, and Power in the Drama of Shakespeare and His Contemporaries*, Brighton, Harvester Press, 1984; and Catherine Belsey's *The Subject of Tragedy: Identity and Difference in Renaissance Tragedy*, Methuen, London, 1985. These authors understand the social structures as impediments to individual fulfilment, but they do not deny that personal identity is constituted in relation to them.

activity.<sup>14</sup>

The creative effect of this pressure, Bergson goes on to show, is testimony to the constitutive link between society and individual:

But he could not do so [cut himself off from society] even if he wished to because his memory and his imagination live on what society has implanted in them, because the soul of society is inherent in the language he speaks, and because even if there is no one present, even if he is merely thinking, he is still talking to himself. Vainly do we try to imagine an individual cut off from all social life. Even materially, Robinson Crusoe on his island remains in contact with other men, for the manufactured objects he saved from the wreck, and without which he could not get along, keep him within the bounds of civilization.<sup>15</sup>

By virtue of such a constitutive link the individual is social in a fundamental way, which means that he can only be true to himself by being true to others, i.e. taking them seriously:

Certain aquatic plants as they rise to the surface are ceaselessly jostled by the current: their leaves, meeting above the water, interlace, thus imparting to them stability above. But still more stable are the roots, which, firmly planted in the earth, support them from above. However, we shall not dwell for the present on the effort to delve down to the depths of our being. If possible at all, it is exceptional: and it is on the surface, at the point where it inserts itself into the close-woven tissue of other exteriorized personalities, that our ego generally finds its point of attachment; its solidity lies in its solidarity. But, at the point where it is attached, it is in itself socialized. Obligation, which we look upon as a bond between men, first binds us to ourselves.<sup>16</sup>

Apart from the beauty of his prose, which survives even in translation, Bergson is worth quoting at length because his position is so under-represented in the current critical debate. The alternative of a natural solidarity among individuals is never even considered by those who argue against 'the system'.

Despite the absence of a recognized alternative, even some of those who fully adhere to the Freudian notion of the self find its application to the Renaissance problematic. Significantly, this is the case of Greenblatt, whose 'Psychoanalysis and Renaissance Culture', while not reneging on Freud's understanding of the individual in any way, questions 'the historical mode of selfhood psychoanalysis

---

<sup>14</sup> Henri Bergson, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, Indiana, 1977, pp.15-16.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.15-16. Crusoe's experience may seem that of the radical individual, but Bergson's point has not escaped the finest criticism: 'From the moment Crusoe domesticates and diarises his desert island, the novel reflects the confidence the individual derives from the society he lives in. . . Crusoe is the least lonely man in the world' (V.S.Pritchett, *The Complete Essays*, Chatto and Windus, London, 1991, p.610).

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p.15.

has tried to universalize into the very form of the human condition'<sup>17</sup>. Greenblatt tries to expose the incapacity of the Freudian conception of selfhood to account for sixteenth-century phenomena. His discussion is symptomatic of the impasse to which a polarization of self and society leads. To begin with, Greenblatt shows how 'in Freud individuation characteristically emerges at moments of risk or alienation', and how 'those moments do not so much disrupt as secure authentic identity'<sup>18</sup>. For Freud what is most defining about the individual is what he reveals when, as it were, he is least himself. Given this premise, one can see why Freudian critics like Stockholder would tend to privilege Hieronimo's experience of dislocation from society over his initial adjustment to the community, which is dismissed as illusory or bogus. To this, however, Greenblatt adds that there is a sense in which the Freudian subject transcends its divisions and instabilities and remains 'permanently anchored, even to his own horror', in himself<sup>19</sup>. Such anchoring secures a continuity of individuation, an 'irreducible identity'<sup>20</sup> whose roots

lie deeper than society; they reach down, as psychoanalysis would assure us, through the frail, outward memories of his [relatives]. . . and friends to the psychic experience of his infancy – the infancy only he can possess and that even the most skilful impostor cannot appropriate – and beneath infancy to his biological individuality<sup>21</sup>.

It is, of course, this 'biological individuality' -- this 'primary individuation' of 'irreducible identity'<sup>22</sup> which cannot be taken away from us – that characterizes the Freudian subject.

Admittedly, Greenblatt feels 'quite comfortable'<sup>23</sup> with this understanding of individuality.

---

<sup>17</sup> S. Greenblatt, 'Psychoanalysis and Renaissance Culture', in *Learning to Curse*, Routledge, New York, 1990, p. 137.

<sup>18</sup> Greenblatt, *op.cit.*, p.135.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* We recall what Bergson suggested about 'the effort to delve down to the depths of our being'.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

Nonetheless, he feels less certain about its applicability to sixteenth-century selfhood. Examining the historical case of Martin Guerre, a French peasant whose identity was supplanted by an impostor, and which became the subject of a judicial inquest, he finds that Martin Guerre's contemporaries do not appear to share the Freudian assumptions about the self. As the judicial proceedings and their resolution suggest, they looked outwards, not inwards, in order to discover their sense of themselves:

The move is not from distinct physical traits to the complex life experience generated within, but outward to the community's determination that this particular body possesses by right a particular identity and hence a particular set of possessions. At issue is not Martin Guerre as subject but Martin Guerre as object, the placeholder in a complex system of possessions, kinship bonds, contractual relationships, customary rights, and ethical obligations. . . Martin's subjectivity. . . does not the less exist, but it seems peripheral, or rather, it seems to be the *product* of the relations, material objects, and judgments exposed in the case rather than the *producer* of these.<sup>24</sup>

This seems to suggest an alternative perspective on identity, which provokes Greenblatt to contemplate the 'disconcerting recognition' that 'our identity may not originate in (or be guaranteed by) the fixity, the certainty, of our own body'<sup>25</sup>. What his evidence is really suggesting is that identity is constructed *in relation to others* as well as to oneself, that is, that our sense of ourselves depends on the relationships one establishes in one's community. Despite the Oedipus complex, this idea is entirely foreign to Freud. Greenblatt acknowledges as much by considering the un-Freudian possibility that 'the secure possession of one's body is not the *origin* of identity but one of the consequences of the compulsive cultural stabilizing'<sup>26</sup>. Freud's atomistic individualism cannot explain the identity of the placeholder subject of kinship, bonds and contractual relationships. 'In such a discursive system', Greenblatt concludes, 'psychoanalytic interpretation seems to me to be crippled'<sup>27</sup>. The examination of contemporary drama leads to the same conclusion:

for what most matters in the literary texts [by Shakespeare and other Renaissance dramatists he examines], as in the documents that record the case of Martin Guerre, are communally secured rights to a name and a place in an increasingly mobile social world, and these rights seem more an

---

<sup>24</sup> Greenblatt, *op.cit.*, p.137.

<sup>25</sup> Greenblatt, *op.cit.*, p.138.

<sup>26</sup> Greenblatt, *op.cit.*, p.139.

<sup>27</sup> Greenblatt, *op.cit.*, p.137.

historical condition that enables the development of psychoanalysis than a psychic condition that psychoanalysis itself can adequately explain.<sup>28</sup>

What Greenblatt does, therefore, is to expose the limitations of psychoanalysis by setting historical demarcations to individualism. Psychoanalysis is relevant to the Renaissance insofar as this period marks the inception of modern individualism – of the assertion, that is, of the ‘proprietary rights of the self’. Because of ‘the communally secured rights to a name and a place’ against which such an assertion is made, psychoanalysis proves inadequate fully to account for the transitional selfhood of the sixteenth century. Indeed, Greenblatt would seem to be re-fashioning the Burckhardtian thesis in Freudian terms, equating Burckhardt’s modern individualism with Freud’s post-social selfhood. In this respect, he keeps in line with the standard polarization of self and society, adding nothing new to it.

There is a sense, however, in which Greenblatt’s discussion not only qualifies the Freudian conception of the self but suggests a way of transcending it. This he does when he indicates – no more than that – that feudal communitarianism continues to underlie modern individualism. In so doing, he manifests the need to collapse the dichotomy of self and society – or ‘psyche’ and ‘property’ as he refers to them – in favour of an integrated view. Thus, if the Renaissance marks the ‘early stages of the slow, momentous transformation from ‘property’ [socialization] to ‘psyche [individualism]’<sup>29</sup>, this transformation, Greenblatt is forced to add, must be seen as incomplete, so that our present-day selfhood continues to be affected by the social selfhood of the pre-modern period:

but that transformation had by no means already occurred; it was on the contrary the result (not yet perfectly realized in our own time) of a prolonged series of actions and transactions.<sup>30</sup>

The difficulty that Greenblatt encounters in identifying the modern self in terms of pure ‘psyche’ leads to the recognition that the medieval sense of place continues to underlie modern individualism. But when he further observes that

it is important to grasp that this transformation is at once a revolution and a continuation;

---

<sup>28</sup> Greenblatt, *op.cit.*, p.141.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> Greenblatt, *op.cit.*, pp.141-42.

'psyche' is neither a mere mystification for 'property' nor a radical alternative to it<sup>31</sup>, he is taking a step further, acknowledging the social dimension of selfhood irrespective of its historical conditions. In the following discussion I propose to show how this ambiguous notion of selfhood, compounded at once of the individual and the social, is at the heart of the new revenge tragedy of Kyd and Shakespeare. To accept this conception of selfhood as the valid one demands a recognition that in the alternative visions of 'property' and 'psyche' we do not have two different conceptions of the self, but two complementary falsifications. In the first the social is real (medieval communitarism), in the second the individual is real (modern individualism). What the early tragedies of the Elizabethan popular stage show is that both are real and, for that reason, exist in unstable relationship. *The Spanish Tragedy* was none the less seminal for being first in exploiting the tragic potential of this instability of the self.

## II

After Andrea delivers his Prologue from the realm of the dead, the living over whom he watches with Revenge make their appearance in a state of national grace. This opening contrast announces the central dramatic and thematic conflict of the play, between individual vengefulness and collective integration. The promise of revenge embodied by the upper-stage must be understood in relation to the social harmony it threatens to disrupt. C.L. Barber identifies the dynamic of the play in terms of this initial contrast:

What he [Kyd] presents is a Senecan mood and logic of violence breaking out in a world of social values of graciousness, loyalty, heroism, familial love, and romantic love<sup>32</sup>.

Andrea's Prologue represents the Senecan inferno of revenge<sup>33</sup>. By contrast, the Spanish court of Act I represents a spirit opposite to that of vindictiveness – that of social harmony. Barber notes that the

---

<sup>31</sup> Greenblatt, *op.cit.*, p.145.

<sup>32</sup> Barber, *op.cit.*, p. 142.

<sup>33</sup> On the Senecan (and Virgilian) derivation of the Prologue see E. Hill, 'Senecan and Virgilian Perspectives in *The Spanish Tragedy*', *English Literary Review* XV (1985), pp.143-65.

Spanish court lives up to 'the possibility of a sanctified, legitimate social order, to which men of integrity are internally related'. In the course of Act I it becomes clear what this communal spirit means.

Andrea has told the sad story of his death in battle, and of his passage into the dark, claustrophobic other-world in which he discovers Revenge. But the Spanish General, who next enters the court, brisk and 'with cheerful countenance' (I.i.4), triumphantly proclaims the victory of Spain over Portugal. On hearing the news of the capitulation of the rebellious Portuguese, who are to pay tribute and homage to Spain, the King thanks Heaven. The victory is received by the court as proof of God's directing hand in human affairs. The King's pious recognition that the world is just expresses the feelings that all share at this moment:

Then blest be heaven, and guider of the heavens,  
From whose fair influence such justice flows. (I.ii.10-11)

Effectively, what the King is here declaring is his belief in the providential dimension of earthly events. For him, History is the product of divine Right and Reason. Human history reflects God's order, and in God's order, the King is to society what God is to Creation<sup>34</sup>. Hence Castile's invocation of the King as the ruler of a chosen people:

O multum dilecte Deo, tibi militat aether,  
Et conjuratae curvate poplite gentes  
Succumbunt: recti soror est victoria juris. (12-14)

O one much loved of God, for thee the heavens contend, and the united peoples fall down on bended knee: victory is sister to just right.<sup>35</sup>

As the King reveres God as the source of a Truth and Justice that cannot be opposed, so Castile venerates his King. This hierarchical order of God, King and People appears as a representation of 'the Augustinian world complex, where everything must be squared not with itself but with the will of

---

<sup>34</sup> For a discussion of this point as a fundamental tenet of Tudor political orthodoxy, see chapter 1 of Felix Raab, *The English Face of Machiavelli. A Changing Interpretation 1500-1700*, Routledge and Kegan Paul and University of Toronto Press, London and Toronto, 1964.

<sup>35</sup> As translated in J.R. Mulryne's edition, p.10. All quotations from the play are taken from that edition: J.R. Mulryne (ed.), *The Spanish Tragedy*, New Mermaids Series, A&C Black and W.V. Norton, London and New York, 1989 [1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1970].



Providence which is logically external to the social machine over which it presides'<sup>36</sup>. What is more, this order is presented as an actual realization that is also recognized as ideal by both ruler and ruled.

In such a social order, a perspective higher than that of the personal imposes itself; individual existence becomes meaningful in relation to the collective destiny it serves. Accordingly, when the General celebrates the 'blissful chivalry' (21) that has inspired the Spanish victory, Andrea's personal misfortune, no matter how traumatic it appeared to be in the Prologue, becomes reduced to an anecdote. From the perspective of a destiny decreed by God, the tragedy of a few dead soldiers dissolves into the collective glory it has procured: 'All [is] well', the General reassures his King, 'except some few/ That are deceased by fortune of the war' (2-3). In the General's account, Andrea's tragic death -- 'the blossoms of my bliss' truncated in 'death's winter' (I.i.13) -- redounds to the invigoration of the community. Andrea may grieve, but Spain rejoices in the fact that 'all (except three hundred or few more)/ Are safe returned and by their foes enriched' (I.ii.108-109). Nonetheless, the General's world is not our contemporary world of alienated masses, nor is his battlefield a Second World War theatre of confusion, wholesale death and statistical compassion. On the contrary: the uplifting pageantry of a Renaissance battlefield dispels the nightmare of Andrea's airless Prologue, opposing to its inferno a world of public splendour. Even at its most violent, the chivalric world reveals an order and balance in which equilibrium does not impede but generate vitality and dynamism:

Where Spain and Portingale do jointly knit  
Their frontiers, leaning on each other's bound,  
There met our armies in their proud array,  
Both furnish'd well, both full of hope and fear,  
Both menacing alike with daring shows,  
Both vaunting sundry colours of device,  
Both cheerly sounding trumpets, drums and fifes,  
Both raising dreadful clamours to the sky,  
That valleys, hills, and rivers made rebound,  
And heaven itself was frighted with the sound. (I.ii.22-28)

This is a universe where forces in conflict limit each other in perfect harmony: one army defines another, one squadron another, down to the individual knight. The collective impetus of chivalry ennobles

---

<sup>36</sup> Raab, op.cit., p.50.

rather than de-personalizes the individual soldier:

Don Pedro, their chief horsemen's colonel,  
Did with his cornet bravely make attempt  
To break the order of our battle ranks:  
But Don Rogero, worthy man of war,  
Marched forth against him with our musketeers,  
And stopped the malice of his fell approach. (40-45)

Clearly, nothing could be more opposed to the self-assertive omnipotence of the avenger than this balanced limitation of chivalry. Thus, when in this context anything resembling Seneca's cosmic rhetoric appears, it does not signal an awesome expansiveness of the self, but a collective climax:

While they maintain hot skirmish to and fro,  
Both battles join and fall to handy blows,  
Their violent shot resembling th'ocean's rage,  
When, roaring loud and with a swelling tide,  
It beats upon the rampiers of huge rocks,  
And gapes to swallow neighbour-bounding lands. (46-51)

To be sure, this victorious chivalry of God defines as much a realization as an aspiration or, indeed, a perfect symmetry between them. For this reason, the martial idealism of Spain has little to do with the historical chivalry of the knightly ranks; this was an exclusive and therefore excluding chivalry. Not so the General's 'blissful chivalry'. How far Kyd's General is from the flesh-and-blood Condottieri we find in Burckhardt, for example, can be judged by the response of these Condottieri to the introduction of firearms. When firearms first appeared they rendered base-born artillerists more decisive in battle than their sword-wielding lords. The Condottieri greatly resented the empowerment of their social inferiors, and often reacted like Paolo Vitelli, who, according to Burckhardt:

while recognizing and himself adopting the cannon, put out the eyes and cut off the hands of the captured 'schioppetteri' (arquebusiers) because he held it unworthy that a gallant, and it may be noble, knight should be wounded and laid low by a common, despised, foot soldier<sup>37</sup>.

In contrast, Kyd presents a chivalry of civic idealism. The historical importance of this alternative ideal has been revealed by Huizinga's classic study of early modern civilization. At the heart of the chivalric ideal Huizinga detects the notion of an ordered society:

---

<sup>37</sup> Burckhardt, *op.cit.*, p.62.

In the fifteenth century chivalry was still, after religion, the strongest of all the ethical conceptions which dominated the mind and the heart. It was thought of as the crown of the whole social system. Medieval political speculation is imbued to the marrow with the idea of a structure of society based upon distinct orders.<sup>38</sup>

As he elaborates on the society of 'orders' that chivalry crowns, it becomes clear that its ideal was an inclusive one:

The words "estate" and "order", almost synonymous, designate a great variety of social realities. The idea of an "estate" is not at all limited to that of a class; it extends to every social function, to every profession, to every group . . . The functions or groupings, which the Middle Ages designated by the words "estate" and "order", are of very diverse natures. There are, first of all, the estates of the realm, but there are also the trades, the estate of matrimony and that of virginity, the estate of sin. At court there are the "four estates of body and mouth": bread-masters, cup-bearers, carvers and cooks. In the church there are sacerdotal orders and the monastic orders. Finally, there are the different orders of chivalry. That which, in medieval thought, establishes unity in the very dissimilar meanings of the word, is the conviction that every one of these groupings represents a divine institution, an element of the organism of Creation emanating from the will of God, constituting an actual entity, and being, at bottom, as venerable as the angelic hierarchy.<sup>39</sup>

We realize, then, that Kyd's 'blissful chivalry' in whose exercise Spain fulfils the decrees of God constitutes the social expression of a divine scheme<sup>40</sup>. As part of this scheme, the individual does not experience his life in the community as mutilating in any way. On the contrary, the individual is most himself when he acts in accord with what the community expects from him. In my reading, it is no coincidence that the avenger – Hieronimo – makes his first appearance at the heart of this godly community.

In effect, Hieronimo's entrance reveals him to be a representative of the traditional society centred on God, King and Chivalry. In the course of his narration, the General makes a point of commending

---

<sup>38</sup> Huizinga, J., *The Waning of the Middle Ages*, Edward Arnold, London, 1924, p. 47.

<sup>39</sup> Huizinga, op.cit., pp.47-48.

<sup>40</sup> Talbot's ideal society in *I Henry VI*, against which the future decay of England is measured, is also defined by chivalry. Shakespeare is, however, more historically-conscious than Kyd, and makes a point of identifying the chivalric figures by the weaponry they use. Thus, only with the generation of antichivalric heroes that follows Talbot's do firearms make an appearance in England. For a stimulating discussion of Talbot's chivalry, and of the whole *Henry VI* trilogy for that matter, see D.Riggs, *Shakespeare's Heroical Histories. Henry VI and Its Literary Tradition*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1971. For a historical assessment of Burckhardt's observations see, J.Hale, 'Gunpowder and the Renaissance. An Essay in the History of Ideas', in *From the Renaissance to the Counter-Reformation. Essays in Honour of Garrett Mattingly*, ed. by C.H. Carter, Jonathan Cape, London, 1966, pp.113-44.

the valiant son of the Knight Marshal, whose vanquishing of the Portuguese prince was decisive for the victory. The King is clearly pleased that his Knight Marshal is a special party to the victory, and urges him to rejoice in his son's exploits on the double count of his fatherhood and his loyalty to his sovereign – 'now, Knight Marshal, frolic with thy King,/ For 'tis thy son that wins this battle prize' (96-97). To this show of royal affection Hieronimo obliges with the claim that in his case to be loyal to the King and to be a worthy father are one and the same:

Long may he live to serve my sovereign liege,  
And soon decay unless he serve my liege. (98-99)

Thus, Hieronimo proclaims service to the state as the reason of his existence. Without allegiance to his King there can be no future: the King and the state are viewed as the sustaining force of life – the goal to which natural growth and increase is directed. This suggestion is reinforced by the repetition, at the end of successive lines, of the feudal name 'liege'. For Hieronimo, service expresses the natural law that regulates personal and familial life. This association of service with the energies of life bespeaks Hieronimo's internalization of the ideal of chivalry. In the traditional order which he serves, the natural law constitutes both an imperative and an aspiration. For the individual, the adjustment to the universal pattern of Nature is a form – indeed, the only possible form – of self-fulfilment. Nature defines an actual that is as much imperative as it is normative. In a universe where God, Nature, and Community make an organic whole, the individual can only actualize his potential by being faithful to his condition as, in the words of Huizinga, 'an element of the organism of Creation emanating from the will of God'.

Behind the chivalric Spain of Hieronimo and his God-sanctioned King there is an intellectual tradition reaching back to Antiquity and represented in Kyd's England by the work of Thomas More and Richard Hooker among others. For these authors, 'degree' and 'order' are the natural expression of 'the essential congruity of the actual with the ideal (no matter how far short of what it ought to be any *particular* actually may fall)'<sup>41</sup>. In this tradition the Freudian notion of instinctive anti-sociality is meaningless. And so it is for Hieronimo. As part of such a universe, he has integrated service as the

---

<sup>41</sup> H. Haydn, *The Counter-Renaissance*, Harcourt Brace and World Inc., New York, 1950, p.294.

pre-condition for self-fulfilment. For this reason, he can only regard his fatherhood as part of the communal future for which he works.

This is confirmed when the General is interrupted by a 'tucket afar off' that announces the return of the victorious troops. As these march around the walls paying tribute to their sovereign, Horatio appears, leading the captive Portuguese prince with Lorenzo. The King wonders who Lorenzo's 'partner of the prize' (115) may be. Hieronimo's reply –

That was my son, my gracious sovereign,  
Of whom, though from his tender infancy  
My loving thoughts did never hope but well,  
He never pleased his father's eyes till now,  
Nor filled my heart with overcloying joys. (116-20) –

measures the fulfilment of his parental expectations. It is no accident that Kyd makes this parental climax coincide with the national climax. Hieronimo's paternal hopes are realized in the glory his son earns for Spain: the public spectacle that delights his eyes is the natural extension of his child's 'tender infancy'. In the Spain of chivalry the family does not appear, as it does today, as refuge from the public realm. At this stage in the play's action Hieronimo achieves a balance of the public and the private that makes him whole. Nothing could be more foreign to Spain's Knight Marshal than a sense of self constructed in opposition to the social and its values. Thus, the Spain of chivalry is something more than a positive community: it constitutes an affirmation of the interdependence of its members.

### III

The chivalric community excludes by nature any possibility of revenge. For this reason, Spain's national victory marks the beginning of an inclusive future. After the defeat of its enemies, the court turns to the consolidation of peace, banishing any temptation of vindictiveness. The King sets the festive tone by assuring the captive prince that 'Our peace shall grow the stronger for these wars' (146), and he promises a new union:

Young prince, although thy father's hard misdeeds,  
In keeping back the tribute that he owes,  
Deserve but evil measure at our hands,

Yet shalt thou know that Spain is honourable. (134-37)

The Portuguese court is the anti-image of this jubilant Spain: in defeated Portugal, 'nightly dreams' (I.iii.76) fill the Viceroy with foreboding about the death of his son. But even this melancholy mood is overcome by the festive climax that closes Act I. When the Portuguese ambassador arrives in Spain, the contrast between the two realms seems at first to make their reconciliation impossible:

*King* See Lord Ambassador, how Spain entreats  
Their prisoner Balthazar, thy viceroy's son:  
We pleasure more in kindness than in wars.

*Ambass.* Sad is our King, and Portingale laments,  
Supposing that Don Balthazar is slain. (I.iv.116-20) –

but a comic resolution imposes itself, and the melancholic shadows are dispelled:

*Balt.* You see, my lord, how Balthazar is slain:  
I frolic with the Duke of Castile's son,  
Wrapped every hour in pleasures of the court,  
And graced with favours of his majesty. (122-25)

At the state banquet that celebrates the new league Horatio is, once more, honoured as a waiter on the King's cup:

Sit down young prince, you are our second guest:  
Brother sit down and nephew take your place;  
Signior Horatio, wait thou upon our cup,  
For well thou hadst deserved to be honoured.  
Now, lordings, fall to: Spain is Portugal,  
And Portugal is Spain, we both are friends. (128-34)

These are the celebrations Hieronimo is requested to crown by staging a masque. He chooses one that conciliates the pride of Spain with the dignity of Portugal. The King is pleased with his 'pompous jest' (137), and pledges his health with the cup which Horatio presents to him. These celebrations mark the summit of Spain's confidence as a community, and Hieronimo is an integral, indeed functional, part of them.

No wonder, then, that from Andrea's hell the prospect of violence and dissension looks bleak:

Come we for this from depth of underground,  
To see him feast that gave me my death's wound?  
These pleasant sights are sorrow to my soul,  
Nothing but league, and love, and banqueting! (I.v.1-4)

To be sure, Andrea's presence must mean that these celebrations can be but temporary. Nonetheless, in Act II the comic energies released by the victory continue to press for consolidation and perpetuation. The victorious King seeks to marry Bel-imperia to the Portuguese heir to the throne, and asks the Ambassador to make the necessary arrangements. If the marriage 'goes forward', strengthening 'our late-confirmed league', the King promises that the child who is born to the couple shall 'enjoy the kingdom after us' (I.iii.10-21).

The prospect of this marriage generates a movement counter to Andrea's destructive design. In it we discern the pattern of the New Comedy, which celebrates the socialization of the individual on which the continuity of life depends. As Northrop Frye shows, this comic plot develops towards an inclusive social rebirth: 'A new society is created on the stage in the last moments of a typical New Comedy, when objections, oppositions, misunderstandings and the schemes of rivals are all cleared out of the way'<sup>42</sup>. In this tradition, of which Elizabethan comedy is part, 'there is a social as well as an individual theme which must be sought in the general atmosphere of reconciliation that makes the final marriage possible. . . . Thus a new social unit is formed on the stage, and the moment that this social unit crystallizes is the moment of the comic resolution'<sup>43</sup>. This is what would be realized if the marriage of Bel-imperia and Balthazar took place. The wedding envisaged by the King responds to a communal interest which the marrying couple are expected to assume as continuous with their own. It will sanctify the procreating act on which the future of the nation depends. This socialization of sex into marriage becomes possible, however, only with the individual's recognition of the sanctity of his bond with the community. In this context, the community regards individual conformity as an expression of self-fulfilment, and thus takes it for granted. Nothing could be more opposed to this 'comic' vision than the self-assertiveness of revenge.

As the court starts diplomatic negotiations towards the marital alliance, it begins to emerge that

---

<sup>42</sup> N.Frye, 'Old and New Comedy', in *Shakespeare Survey* 22 (1969), p.1.

<sup>43</sup> N.Frye, 'The Argument of Comedy', in Lerner, L. (ed.), *Shakespeare's Comedies. An Anthology of Modern Criticism*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1967, p. 316.

what makes traditional Spain very strong as a community – its members’ recognition of the interests of the community as their own – makes it also very vulnerable to individuals who refuse to act on the basis of this recognition. To put it crudely, traditional Spain makes no provision for the accommodation of self-interest. It never considers the possibility that personal interest may be perceived to be opposed to the communal interest. Unsurprisingly, then, the King shows little regard for the opinions of the marrying couple. He simply assumes that what is good for Spain must be good for its subjects. This is especially evident in the case of the bride, whose reactions can only be imagined as those of a dutiful daughter. Thus, when the question of her conformity is raised, Castile does not doubt for a moment that Bel-imperia will do what she is told:

Although she coy it as become her kind,  
And yet dissemble that she loves the prince,  
I doubt not, I, but she will stoop in time.  
And were she froward, which she will not be,  
Yet herein shall she follow my advice,  
Which is to love him or forgo my love. (II.iii.3-8)

The King’s reliance on Castile’s paternal authority confirms that traditional order relies on an individual flexibility that cannot always be taken for granted, but which the court nevertheless does take as such.

Indeed, individual non-conformity is unthinkable:

Now, brother, you take some little pains  
To win fair Bel-imperia from her will:  
Young virgins must be ruled by their friends.  
The prince is amiable, and loves her well,  
If she neglect him and forgo his love,  
She both will wrong her own estate and ours.  
Therefore, while I do entertain the prince  
With greatest pleasure that our court affords,  
Endeavour you to win your daughter’s thought:  
If she give back, all this will come to naught. (40-50)

The possibility of disobedient individualism is what the King and Castile ignore in planning a wedding designed to expand the chivalry bonds and secure the futurity of the realm. In Kyd’s conception of the play, the triumph of revenge is to be the triumph of ‘tragic’ self-assertiveness over ‘comic’ sociability. The meaning of revenge in *The Spanish Tragedy* shall not be grasped, therefore, unless the meaning of the vision it disrupts is thoroughly grasped. This requires us to recognize the implications of the



marriage arranged by the court. We must realize that the traditional community is based on an 'extensive', rather than 'intensive' (or 'modern'), form of marriage. The tradition of 'extensive' marriage has been well established by social historians. John Bossy, terming it 'marriage as alliance', describes it as follows:

The law of charity obliged Christians to seek in marriage an alliance with those to whom the natural ties of consanguinity did not bind them, so that the bonds of relationship and affection might be extended through the community of Christians: the sexual relation was to be legitimated by the social relation it created. The form in which the doctrine was normally held was that marriage alliance was the pre-eminent method of bringing peace and reconciliation to the feuds of families and parties, the wars of princes, and the lawsuits of peasants. What one may call the Romeo-and-Juliet theory of marriage, except that it normally implied the subordination of the wishes of the children to the decisions of the parents and the general good, was scarcely formulated in the writings of the learned until sixteenth-century critics obliged them to think about it. But it had always been embodied in the unspectacular workings of the church<sup>44</sup>.

Unlike the King and Castile, Kyd is under no illusion that the individual's identification with sociality will be automatic. The scenario the King is able to contemplate is limited by the expectations of his ideal piety. For Kyd, however, the order the King seeks to consolidate in a 'marriage as alliance' represents the order of tradition, against which a new mode of individualism is conceivable. This is indicated by the direction that the sexual energies of the future bride are seen to take. In her first appearance in Act I, when she hears from Horatio the story of Andrea's death, Bel-imperia shows none of the willingness to be ruled by her betters assumed by her father. She proves not only able to make her own choices but to take serious risks for their sake. As we learn later (III.x.54-59 and xiv.110-13), she had in the past incurred Castile's anger for her love of Andrea, her social inferior. But this does not seem to have checked her impulsiveness. Indeed, her attraction to Andrea is not a one-off incident, as we soon discover.

Horatio comes to inform her of the manner of Andrea's death. Even as he does so, Bel-imperia falls for him. Under the circumstances this new passion is somewhat premature, to say the least. Bel-imperia herself sees this, and tries to reconcile this new love with the loyalty she owes to her former

---

<sup>44</sup> J.Bossy, *Christianity in the West 1400-1700*, Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York, 1985, p. 20.

lover, killed in battle for her sake. Indeed, Bel-imperia shows an astonishing capacity to adapt herself to her own fickleness. When Horatio concludes his tale, she asks him to leave her to her bereavement: 'Ay, go Horatio, leave me here alone,/ For solitude best fits my cheerless mood' (I.iv.58-59). But she has fallen for Horatio and persuades herself that her love is a manifestation of her generous nature: she will love Horatio, but only for Andrea's sake:

Yet what avails to wail Andrea's death,  
From whence Horatio proves my second love?  
Had he not loved Andrea as he did,  
He could not sit in Bel-imperia's thoughts.  
But how can love find harbour in my breast,  
Till I revenge the death of my beloved?  
Yes, second love shall further my revenge.  
I'll love Horatio, my Andrea's friend  
The more to spite the prince that wrought his end. (60-68)

'Bel-imperia's love for Horatio', writes Mulryne,<sup>45</sup> 'may strike us as sudden, unmotivated and even (ll. 66-68) unpleasantly mixed with calculation'. This, he goes on to observe, is because Kyd is developing 'a portrait of Bel-imperia as a formidable woman'. In effect, the impression we form suggests that if the necessities of the community and those of her sensuality clash, the latter will prevail. And, indeed, what the following Acts offer serves only to confirm this. In Act II she appears to be arranging a clandestine sexual encounter with Horatio. 'By favour of your love/ Our hidden smoke is turned to open flame' (II.ii.1-2), he says to her, and she does not contradict him. It is not only Andrea's ominous presence on the upper-stage that threatens a festive resolution: the sexual energies of the future bride bode ill for the future of pious conformity.

---

<sup>45</sup> Mulryne, *op.cit.*, p.24, note to ll. 60-68.

## B. THE MACHIAVEL

### I

As the previous section has tried to show, *The Spanish Tragedy* begins with a full representation of the traditional community as the natural location of individual fulfilment. At the start of the play, this community seems to be driven by a 'comic' thrust towards expansion and inclusiveness. The tragedy of Hieronimo must be understood in terms of the disruption of this ideal evolution – that is to say, of the dislocation of his life. Even at the earliest stages of the action, when the gap between the 'Senecan mood and logic of violence' and the 'world of positive social values' (Barber) is at its widest, there are signs of the vulnerability of the latter to the former, for it is too dependent on the individual's disinterestedness. As Bel-imperia's risqué behaviour shows, the weakness of chivalric society lies in its failure to take uncompromising wilfulness seriously enough. But it is not until Lorenzo launches his assault on chivalry that the space separating the Senecan world and the ideal world begins to close.

In criticism, the conflict between Lorenzo and Hieronimo, and what they represent, has usually been interpreted in terms of class struggle. Thus Barber sees the gap closing, and the court plunging into the chaos of revenge, because of the hierarchical class order of traditional Spain. The play, Barber argues, is

heroic insofar as it is a play of protest, grounded in a demonstration of the ruthless forces latent beneath the ideal of benevolent royalty sustaining a sanctified society – forces ready to destroy at need the new high middle-class servants of the state, the English equivalents of the French *noblesse de robe*, when their rising fortunes challenged caste interests. It is tempting to use our contemporary phrase "social protest" here, but misleading, for the phrase implies that basic social arrangements can and should be altered, an idea not present in Kyd's play nor, as such, in Kyd's world. If Bertold Brecht had made an adaptation of *The Spanish Tragedy*, as he might indeed have done, he would have had to put into it some implication of alternatives to the structural evils it presents. Kyd simply shows the terrible logic of Lorenzo's and Balthazar's interest and power, and Hieronimo's protest at their consequences. As long as his protest remains charged with the sense of outraged commitment to traditional society, it has the heroic dignity of a desperate reinvestment of social piety<sup>46</sup>.

Barber's study is seminal in its recognition that the 'sanctified, legitimate social order' is an ideal one to which the characters are 'internally related'. However, his location of a class conflict at its heart

---

<sup>46</sup> Barber, *op.cit.*, p.159.

anachronistically distorts the implications of this recognition. As I have implied in my treatment of Act I, the interpretation of Hieronimo's predicament in terms of social injustice falsifies the play. In identifying Lorenzo's Machiavellism as a 'structural evil' of society Barber is effectively reverting to the notion of society as inherently oppressive. Thus, his 'ruthless forces latent beneath the ideal of a benevolent royalty sustaining a sanctified society' appear as the supra-individual counterpart of the Freudian 'volcanic forces that slumber lightly in the souls of civilized men' (McAlindon): they are both a symptom of the maladjustment that inevitably defines the relationship of the individual to his group. In this view, Hieronimo's tragedy is brought about by a class system that frustrates the legitimate aspirations of the individual; and Lorenzo is the enforcer of this unjust order, designed as it is to preserve an immobilism favouring aristocratic privilege over middle-class ambition. Plainly, the aristocratic elite depends for its survival on the exclusion of the new technocrats. As preserver of the aristocratic *status quo*, Lorenzo must ensure such exclusion, even if this demands the destruction of challengers like Horatio. The inclusive chivalric community celebrated in Act I is thus redefined as an excluding aristocratic order, founded upon repressive social division. On the one hand, Barber recognizes the Spanish society as an ideal one; on the other he presents Lorenzo as its representative, that is, as the dark force sustaining its shining surface. Barber thus runs into the conundrum of an 'ideal' ruthlessness. He tries to untangle it by introducing a generational distinction:

The incongruity between ruthless maneuver and the ideal social norm is built into *The Spanish Tragedy* by the contrast between the younger members of the Spanish and Portuguese royal houses and the fine, upright, well-meaning king of Spain, with his brother Castile, and their trusted official Hieronimo.<sup>47</sup>

This contrast, which in any case cannot account for the probity of younger Horatio, generates as many puzzles as it tries to solve. Take Hieronimo, for example. In terms of class conflict, Hieronimo sides with the party of modernity, as one of 'the new high-middle class servants of the state'. But when it comes to the generational divide, he joins the 'fine, upright, well-meaning' older generation who are expediently dealt with by the younger one. In the first case, he threatens the traditional aristocratic

---

<sup>47</sup> Barber, *op.cit.*, p.134.

order; in the second, he is swept away by the gusts of modernity. Hieronimo's contradictory alignments expose the difficulty of interpreting his tragic experience in terms of class.

I am not, of course, denying the significance of class distinctions for the play. These are certainly present, and with a subtlety perhaps unprecedented on the English stage. Indeed, a case could be made that one of the merits of the play is the sophistication of its representation of the community, which depends on the class location of its members. Rather, what I am questioning is that Kyd intended to make tragic capital out of this representation, writing a play featuring Hieronimo & Son, pioneers of bourgeois consciousness challenging aristocratic *hauteur*. Barber is far from alone in this interpretation: there is a critical consensus that the play is about class warfare. The presence of class distinctions is automatically assumed to imply a conflict of class. Why? What is required is historical imagination, not a conditioned reflex.

The partiality of class-governed readings is confirmed by another fundamental study of the play, that of Katharine E. Maus, who follows Barber closely in presenting Hieronimo as a victim of social injustice. Her study reinforces Barber's thesis by adding a further dimension to the conflict, that of birth versus merit:

[Kyd's play] concerns a violent struggle between male members of the aristocratic and professional classes over the competing claims of birth and merit . . . It is also easy to see allegorized in the struggle between Lorenzo and Hieronimo the conflict between an old-fashioned aristocratic esteem for inherited status and a new emphasis on the intellectual and practical accomplishments demanded by the recently centralized Tudor bureaucracy<sup>48</sup>.

It is indeed easy for us, post-Marxist critics and spectators, to allegorize the play in this way – even too easy, as the fact that Maus runs into the same difficulty Barber encountered suggests. Maus, too, presents Hieronimo as a middle-class upstart challenging aristocratic prerogatives; however, she does not go on to deny that the Spain of the King and Castile is meant to be ideal, and that Hieronimo is meant to be seen as part of this ideal order:

the fathers and the uncles – the King, Castile, Hieronimo – provide hints of a bygone order in

---

<sup>48</sup> Maus, *op.cit.*, pp.57-58.

which inherited and acquired entitlements were not imagined to be at odds.<sup>49</sup>

As a member of this 'bygone order', Hieronimo would not be able to feel that his middle-class merit was being unfairly threatened by the rights of aristocratic birth, since the chivalrous tradition explicitly rejected the notion that birth alone sufficed to make a worthy man. True nobility demanded that lineage be supplemented by virtue<sup>50</sup>. As Act I shows, the King keeps this tradition alive by making a point of publicly honouring those distinguished by merit. The captive prince, for instance, is declared 'free from bearing any servile yoke' (I.ii. 148) not only in deference to his royalty but because of his military prowess – 'for in our hearing thy deserts were great,/ And in our sight thyself art gracious' (149-50). Likewise, the King ensures that the two captors of the prince, Lorenzo and Horatio, are rewarded according to their valour rather than their social standing:

You both deserve and both shall have reward  
.  
.  
.  
But nephew, thou shalt have the prince in guard,  
For thine estate best fitteth such a guest:  
Horatio's house were small for all his train.  
Yet in regard thy substance passeth his,  
And that just guerdon may befall desert,  
To him we yield the armour of the prince. (179, 185-90)

More generally, this complementarity of birth and merit was a function of the inclusive ideal of the chivalric society. As Huizinga explains again:

The ideal of chivalry implied, after all, two ideas which might seem to concur in forbidding a haughty contempt for the small man; the ideas, namely, that true nobility is based on virtue, and that all men are born equal. We should be careful not to overrate the importance of these two ideas. They were equally stereotyped and theoretical. To acknowledge true chivalry a matter of the heart should not be considered a victory over the spirit of feudalism or an achievement of the Renaissance. This medieval notion of equality is by no means a manifestation of the spirit of revolt.

---

<sup>49</sup> Maus, op.cit., p.58.

<sup>50</sup> For a rigorous and updated discussion on lineage and virtue in the sixteenth century see M. James, 'English politics and the concept of honour, 1485-1642', in his *Society, Politics and Culture. Studies in Early Modern England* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1986), which concludes that 'Both Ramon Lull [author of *The Book of the Ordre of Chyvalry*] and the St Albans author [*Boke of Saint Albans*], in their insistence that the nobility which the lineage conferred needed to be supplemented by virtue (conceived as an unswerving exercise of the will), stood within the Bartolan tradition [which emphasized the nature of honour as the reward of virtue]. It was virtue which made the potential honourable quality of man actual' (p.312). See also Riggs, op.cit., pp.62-92, for a discussion of 'parentage' and 'deeds' in early Elizabethan popular drama.

It does not owe its origin to radical reformers. In quoting the text of John Bull, who preached the revolt of 1381, “when Adam delved and Eve span, who was then the gentleman?” one is inclined to fancy that the nobles must have trembled on hearing it. But, in fact, it was the nobility themselves who for a long time had been repeating this ancient theme<sup>51</sup>.

This ideal inclusiveness the nobility was ordained to expand is what Barber and Maus leave out of the picture in presenting Lorenzo as a hardliner of traditional Spain. His alignment as a representative of this Spain of tradition becomes no less uneasy than Hieronimo’s.

Barber and Maus reduce Lorenzo to a fleshed instrument of ‘political and social processes’ that seek the perpetuation of class and privilege through Bel-imperia’s marriage. This claim can only be made in utter disregard of the celebratory comic spirit with which the prospective marriage is imbued. In Barber and Maus, Bel-imperia’s marriage ceases to be recognizable as the alliance-marriage described by Bossy. It thus becomes a mercantilist transaction that has nothing to do with extending the bonds of affection through the Christian community:

The political and social processes which lead to the murder of Horatio are clearly worked out. He is getting in the way of a dynastic marriage. He is put out of the way by the childless Spanish king’s nephew, Lorenzo, and the crown prince of Portugal, Balthazar, because the liaison Horatio is entering into with Lorenzo’s sister Bel-imperia would prevent her marrying the crown prince.<sup>52</sup>

This interpretation is not only problematic because it ignores the celebratory impulse behind the marital agreement. As its emphasis on the childless condition of the King suggests, Barber’s interpretation of Lorenzo as a defender of the status quo clashes with his identification of him as a Machiavel. Clearly, by promoting Balthazar’s marriage in the interests of his social class, Lorenzo would seem to be denying himself the throne of his childless uncle. What is more, he would seem to be acting against the fierce

---

<sup>51</sup> Huzinga, *op.cit.*, p. 53. Ultimately, this ideal egalitarianism goes back to the belief in the Chain of Being, which regards all individuality as part of a perfect Creation. Since this must contain the greatest variety of things, each creature, no matter how insignificant it is, is indispensable. As Aquinas reasons: ‘Although an angel, considered absolutely, is better than a stone, nevertheless the two natures are better than one only; and therefore a universe containing angels and other things is better than one containing angels only, since the perfection of the universe is attained essentially in proportion to the diversity of natures in it, whereby the divers grades of goodness are filled, and not in proportion to the multiplication of individuals of a single nature’, as quoted in Haydn, *op.cit.*, p.296. For an assessment of Huizinga’s historical claims see William J. Bouwsma, ‘*The Waning of the Middle Ages Revisited*’, in *A Usable Past. Essays in European Cultural History*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1990, pp. 325-35.

<sup>52</sup> Barber, *op.cit.*, p.133.

self-interest one expects of a Machiavel. The absurd crux of a *disinterested Machiavel* is thus generated. Such an abortion has prompted several ad-hoc explanations. Maus, for example, concedes that coming from a Machiavel Lorenzo's 'corporatism' is puzzling:

Although Lorenzo is quite as ruthless and manipulative as Shakespeare's Richard [III], his 'machievellianism' contrasts markedly from Richard's in its motivation and its goals. Lorenzo curiously combines the revolutionary possibilities of amoral individualism with intense class pride. Far from attacking wholesale the structure of the aristocratic order, Lorenzo attempts to preserve it for those born into it, against the pretensions of those who practice its ancestral virtues. To effect this preservation he actually disregards his individual interests, narrowly conceived.<sup>53</sup>

Maus further observes that William Empson, baffled by the rarity of a disinterested Machiavel, proposed as the only possible explanation for such contradiction that the printed text of the play is 'a version massively cut by the censor'<sup>54</sup>. Even Barber, who interprets Lorenzo as a promoter of the interests of his class, is hard pressed to find a measure of selfishness and ambition in his Machievellian activities. These he can only discover in the 1602 additions to the play, from which he extracts in support of his characterization of Lorenzo the idea of him as 'an actively ruthless Machiavel, expert in "policy" and like to "wear the crown of Spain"'<sup>55</sup>. In conclusion, Barber and Maus refrain from questioning Lorenzo's Machievellian credentials, and so assume that he must be motivated by the ambition to attain political power for *himself*. However, their class-centred reading enforces the conclusion that Lorenzo acts as a disinterested preserver of the traditional order. As an examination of Machievellian criticism confirms, such a conclusion contradicts the very of essence of the Machiavel figure.

## II

Machievellian criticism was founded in 1897 by E. Meyer's *Machiavelli and the Elizabethan Drama*, which is to Machiavelli what Cunliffe's 1893 *The Influence of Seneca on Elizabethan Drama* is to Seneca. This pair of studies determined the critical approaches to Senecan and Machievellian

---

<sup>53</sup> Maus, *op.cit.*, p.59.

<sup>54</sup> Maus, *op.cit.*, p.59, footnote 28.

<sup>55</sup> Barber, *op.cit.*, p.133.



influence from that time to this. Their underlying assumption is that the identification of the source and the interpretation of the incorporated material are synonymous. In the case of the stage Machiavel, this means that its interpretation depends on the Machiavellian doctrine that the playwright is supposed to have used. Given that several versions of Machiavellism were available to Elizabethan playwrights, it is a disputed question as to whether the stage Machiavel is a faithful reflection of Machiavel's thought. The debate has tended to centre, in effect, on Meyer's conclusion that Elizabethan playwrights made their acquaintance of Machiavelli through Gentillet's distorted account, and that the stage Machiavel should be recognized as a monstrous misrepresentation of Machiavelli's statesman<sup>56</sup>. Thus, Elizabethan playwrights came up with what Mario Praz baptized 'the Machiavellian scarecrow'<sup>57</sup>, a figure that does not reflect Machiavelli's teachings but only the abhorrence they inspired.<sup>58</sup>

Against this genealogic narrowing of Machiavellian studies, some critics have called attention to the meaning of the Machiavel as represented *in the plays*. Wilbur Sanders, for example, does not question the traditional account of Gentillet's influence, but directs attention to the specific treatment Machiavelli receives at the dramatist's hand – Marlowe's in this case:

When we have read Professor Praz's pioneering study, or followed Meyer through his 295 allusions, or discovered by honest dint of sweat that his list is incomplete, it is questionable whether we are any better equipped to read Marlowe. Most readers know a bogey when they meet one, and it is far more interesting to ponder what Marlowe has done with his, than to trace its

---

<sup>56</sup> For a discussion of Gentillet see Irving Ribner, 'The Significance of Gentillet's *Contre-Machiavel*', *Modern Language Quarterly* 10 (1949), pp.153-57.

<sup>57</sup> Praz, *op.cit.*, p.94.

<sup>58</sup> In favour of this conclusion, a number of historical facts have been advanced: Machiavelli's works were banned in England during the sixteenth century, and Dacre's first published translation of *The Prince* did not appear until 1640, the Englished *Discourses* having come out only four years earlier. By contrast, Patericke's English translation of Gentillet dates from 1577. Against this, contenders of Meyer's theory argue that Machiavelli's unadulterated work was facilitated by an existing 1533 French translation of *The Prince* and the copies of *The Prince* and the *Discourses* published illegally by John Wolfe, a London printer. In addition, there were easily available Latin translations, and several manuscript translations circulated throughout the 16<sup>th</sup> century. In the face of such inconclusive evidence, Meyer's position has tended to be favoured, most influentially by Mario Praz who, after examining the evidence in support of the dramatists' first-hand contact with Machiavelli's texts, concluded that 'a gross travesty of Machiavelli's political science prevailed with most.' (Praz, *op.cit.*, p.103).

configurations in the vulgar error and superstition from which it takes its rise<sup>59</sup>.

In demanding a dissociation between source and meaning Sanders is exposing the assumption that underlies most influence studies, namely, that influence must manifest itself in the plays as a reflex – that is to say, that dramatic treatment can be dissociated from intellectual (re)action. Of course, the source is relevant to the meaning, but the point is that there can be no *neutral* incorporation of source material into a play. The incorporation of material into a different context implies an interpretation of this material. Sanders, let alone the author of this thesis, is not trying to formulate a theory of influence. He is simply emphasizing that the playwright is *active* in his treatment of source material. He is active as a reader because he is active as a writer. This needs emphasizing because even recent attempts to transcend Meyer's reductive approach seem to retain the assumption of the Machiavel as a transcription of Machiavellian theory.

This is the case, for example, with Margaret Scott's re-examination of the question. Intent on dispelling the legend of the dramatist's indebtedness to Gentillet, Scott seeks to reach beyond Meyer's conclusions. For her, 'the more important question is whether the playwright's knowledge of Machiavelli, first-hand or not, was associated with any genuine understanding of Machiavellian theory' (152). She thus denounces those who assume that such 'genuine understanding' enters the drama as a reflex:

Even those scholars who have rejected the time-honoured 'Gentillet theory' and who acknowledge that Machiavelli was available and even known to Elizabethan dramatists have been reluctant to admit that the Machiavel owes anything of substance to his namesake. Barabas, they insist, still stands at a great distance from Machiavelli's ideal statesman, and does not so because Marlowe had failed to read *The Prince*, but because he lacked the historical perspective that might have enabled him to understand his reading<sup>60</sup>.

That Barabas is no Cesare Borgia proves how little benefit Marlowe derived from his readings of the Italian thinker. Scott departs from such a reductive view by arguing that dissimilarities between source and incorporated material may be intentional and, therefore, not an indication of mediated transmission

---

<sup>59</sup> W. Sanders, *The Dramatist and the Received Idea. Studies in the Plays of Marlowe and Shakespeare*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1968, p. 62.

<sup>60</sup> M. Scott, 'Machiavelli and Machiavellianism', *Renaissance Drama*, New Series, XV (1984), pp. 147-74.

of 'influence'. This she confirms by showing that the idiosyncratic features of the stage Machiavel respond to a dramatic purpose, which is not to bastardize the Italian prince. Against those who seize on the atheism of the stage Machiavel – an atheism allegedly unknown to the prince – to present him as a grotesque libel on Machiavelli, Scott maintains that the 'politic hypocrite' appropriates religion to legitimize his claims to power – 'religion remains simply as grist to the prince's mill'<sup>61</sup>. In her reading, the Machiavel ceases to be seen as a compendium of evils in order to become a political *arriviste* whose secrecy and hypocrisy are designed to secure absolute power.

Scott's departure from Meyer is necessary but not sufficient to reinvest the Machiavel with a dramatic meaning. This is confirmed by the figure of Lorenzo, whose Machiavellism has long been recognized as seminal for Elizabethan drama<sup>62</sup>. In effect, as Barber's and Maus's readings show, when Lorenzo's political programme is overemphasized, the motivation of the Machiavel becomes almost altruistic. There is no doubt that the Machiavel is a figure close to the exercise of power. Nonetheless, it seems to me that what is a symptom – the criminal exercise of power – has been taken for the disease itself. Even if Lorenzo secured power, he would continue to act in a Machiavellian way.

Against the political definition of the Machiavel, I propose to argue that Lorenzo is constituted by what Maus refers to in passing as 'the revolutionary possibilities of amoral individualism'. To propose this is to lend weight to an aspect of the Machiavel's personality that his political interest has concealed from others as well as from himself. Scott is a case in point. She rightly perceives that the Machiavel is 'the supreme egoist, who recognizes no power which transcends his own'<sup>63</sup>. This allows her to bring out the social heresy that defines him. But in her analysis the radical individualism that distinguishes the Machiavel is still regarded as subservient to a political ambition:

---

<sup>61</sup> Scott, *op.cit.*, p.158.

<sup>62</sup> E.g. Praz, *op.cit.*, p.121: '*The Jew of Malta* and . . . *The Spanish Tragedy* [are] the two plays which gave birth to the type of the Machiavellian knave on the Elizabethan stage. Indeed the question of Machiavellian influence on Elizabethan drama is complicated by the influence of those two plays, which was still more far-echoing than it is thought.'

<sup>63</sup> Scott, *op.cit.*, p.167.

Such indifference to the commonweal, which is the hallmark of the Machiavellian rebel, usurper or tyrant, implies on the one hand rejection of the whole order of which just and godly rule is a part, and on the other allegiance to an egocentric code, which in Elizabethan drama, is seen as inevitably anarchic and antisocial. It is this charge of indifference, of readiness to destroy the lives and liberties of subjects in the pursuit of personal ambition, that is repeatedly leveled at the Machiavellian ruler and which often defines him as what he is.<sup>64</sup>

As with Barber and Maus, here we confirm that the perception of a political ambition in the Machiavel almost leads to his social redemption. In Scott this takes the form of a supposed political constructiveness on his part:

Whereas Machiavelli is primarily concerned with the reconstruction or establishment of stable power, once any necessary destruction has been carried out, the political Machiavel is rarely, if ever, allowed to proceed to the creative stage. . . in the world in which the Machiavel moves there is no possibility of erecting stable political structures in isolation from the universal hierarchy which the ambition of the Machiavel inevitably violates.<sup>65</sup>

In the plays -- certainly in Kyd's play -- we never feel that the destructiveness that the Machiavel inflicts on his fellow beings answers to any *raison d'état* which would become fully apparent if his objective were not thwarted by the disaster he brings on himself. Rather, as the following analysis will try to show, Lorenzo's Machiavellism is best approached as a version of the 'incognito' described by Heller, which means that insofar as he is defined by a quest for power, it is a less obvious form of power than is usually assumed. What the Machiavel claims for himself is a moral and social autonomy that can only be realized at the expense of his fellow beings. An understanding of the avenger demands a conception of 'justice' more complex than legality. Equally, the analysis of his counterpart the Machiavel requires a more complex notion of 'power' than political rule.

### III

Right from the beginning, when he is excluded from the General's account, there are signs that Lorenzo, though he is a central figure of the court, does not take its chivalric values seriously<sup>66</sup>. This is

---

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Scott, *op.cit.*, p.168.

<sup>66</sup> During Act I we hear several accounts of Andrea's defeat in battle. With every new version, the ethos of revenge becomes more pervasive. Thus, the General tells how Andrea was slain because

confirmed by the corrupting effect he has on Balthazar, who is welcomed at the Court as a worthy prince, renowned for his valiant exploits (I.ii.148-50). This is the initial Balthazar, who demands that 'Don Horatio bear us company,/ Whom I admire and love for chivalry' (193-94), and adopts the courtly-love postures that befit his chivalric figure when he falls for Bel-imperia. However, Lorenzo soon takes over his suit, and his will with it, diverting him from the chivalric path. As he does so, Lorenzo's anti-chivalric stance is made apparent. This happens immediately after Bel-imperia has received the news of Andrea's death from Horatio, and resolved that she will love Horatio in order to spite Balthazar. Unfortunate Balthazar enters at this point (I.iv.77), interrupting her private meditation. Faithful to her resolution, Bel-imperia is unashamedly curt with her suitor, and gives short shrift to his feeble Petrarchisms. Balthazar's tentative offers of servitude, conceits and hearts cut no ice with this Laura, who demands 'less words of course' (98) if they are not to 'drive me from this place' (99). Bel-imperia proves as good as her word, and a formidable stichomythic rebuff of the prince follows. But she does not seem to have grown half as impatient with Balthazar's fashionable clumsiness as her brother does. Like steel, Lorenzo cuts through the sentimental web of his conceits: 'Tush, tush, my lord, let go these ambages,/ And in plain terms acquaint her with your love' (90-91). As Bel-imperia leaves the talkative fools to themselves, Horatio happens to come in. Her glove drops. Horatio picks it up, and is asked to 'take it for thy pains' (101). This incident further discomfits the prince, who sees the attentions he desires going to a meaner rival. The prince yields to Lorenzo's initiative:

My lord, be not dismayed for what is passed,  
 You know that women oft are humorous:  
 These clouds will overblow with little wind;  
 Let me alone, I'll scatter them myself. (104-107)

When they re-enter at II.ii., we still find Lorenzo reassuring him that Bel-imperia will be won.

---

he was 'Brave man at arms, but weak to Balthazar' (I.ii.72). In Horatio's version Andrea's defeat is a less fair one – 'Then young Don Balthazar with ruthless rage/ Taking advantage of his foe's distress./ Did finish what his halberdiers began' (I.iv.23-25). Finally, in Bel-imperia's account, Andrea's slaughter becomes a truly ignominious act that demands vengeful satisfaction: 'For what was't else but murderous cowardice,/ So many to oppress one valiant knight,/ Without respect of honour in the fight' (I.iv.73-75).

Lorenzo's conviction that time will do exhibits the same virile confidence that prompted his father to assure the King that Bel-imperia 'will stoop in time' (II.iii.5) to marry the Portuguese prince. But Lorenzo expresses this conviction in a painfully sexualized language that is entirely his own:

My lord, though Bel-imperia seems thus coy,  
Let reason hold you in wanted joy:  
In time the savage bull sustains the yoke,  
In time all haggard hawks will stoop to lure,  
In time small wedges cleave the hardest oak,  
In time the flint is pierced with softest shower,  
And she in time will fall from her disdain,  
And rue the sufferance of your friendly pain. (II.i.1-8)

This fails to cheer up Balthazar, who insists in persuading himself, as a true lover should, that his lady is beyond reach. Clearly, this courtly posturing exasperates Lorenzo, who asks the prince to get rid of his sentimentalism and be more pragmatic:

My lord, for my sake, leave these ecstasies,  
And doubt not but we'll find some remedy.  
Some cause there is that lets you not be loved:  
First that must needs be known, and then removed.  
What if my sister love some other knight? (29-33).

It thus begins to emerge that Lorenzo's impatience at the prince's gallantry manifests something more than unsentimental expediency. Indeed, the equation with which he proposes to solve Balthazar's problem betrays what amounts to an emotional incapacity on his part. At this initial stage, this incapacity manifests itself only passively, as his failure to sympathize with the lovelorn prince, and his insensitiveness to the lady for whom the latter so deeply sighs. But as he gets more and more involved with the lovers and comes into contact with sensuality, his contempt takes on a destructive edge that suggests an unacknowledged insecurity<sup>67</sup>.

The practices of chivalry do not leave Lorenzo indifferent. Indeed, his revulsion against them is

---

<sup>67</sup> Later, when Lorenzo momentarily appropriates Balthazar's Petrarchisms, Bel-imperia's affected surprise confirms that Lorenzo's reputation in matters of the heart is not high. Even his potency comes under question: 'Brother, you are become an orator – I know not, I, by what experience' (III.x.83-84), she taunts. It is perhaps for this reason that, as a baffled Maus notes, Lorenzo is condemned as what she calls an 'erotomaniac' at the end of the play, when the other-world deities allocate their punishments to the protagonists.

beyond what is reasonable, even for the unsentimental man he believes himself to be. This becomes more and more evident as the play progresses. Thus when Pedringano, the servant of Bel-imperia Lorenzo and Balthazar bribe, takes them to the secret meeting place of the lovers, the contrast between Balthazar and Lorenzo's reactions is telling. They are equally shocked at the encounter they witness, and the involvement between Bel-imperia and Horatio it reveals. However, where Balthazar averts his gaze, in self-indulgent self-pity –

O sleep mine eyes, see not my love profaned;  
Be deaf, my ears, hear not my discontent,  
Die, heart, another joys what thou deservest (II.ii.18-20) –

Lorenzo activates in himself a murderous hatred that is in inverse proportion to the joy he witnesses –

Wake still mine eyes, to see this love disjoined;  
Hear still mine ears, to hear them both lament;  
Live, heart, to joy at fond Horatio's fall. (21-23).

Lorenzo's malevolence is here too intense, too irrational, to be the product of a perceived challenge to his aristocratic privileges. He wants to do much more than stop the affair. What he needs to do is to make them pay dearly for their pleasure, turning the joy he sees into the bitterness he feels. By the end of the encounter, when the lovers arrange their tryst in Hieronimo's bower, Lorenzo can scarcely contain the sexual envy Horatio provokes in him: 'Ay, danger mixed with jealous despite,/ Shall send thy soul into eternal night' (56-57).

The degree of Lorenzo's emotional castration, as it were, is fully revealed only when he intervenes to interrupt the fulfilment of sexual love. This occurs, of course, in Hieronimo's bower, when the frightening expectations generated by the previous encounter reach their tragic climax. In their previous meeting, the naive precautions taken by the lovers – 'Return we now into your father's sight:/ Dangerous suspicion waits on our delight' (II.ii.54-55) – are ominously contrasted with the 'jealous despite' that has spied on them. In the bower scene the contrast is masterfully exploited to create the effect of utter ruthlessness on Lorenzo's part. As arranged, Bel-imperia and Horatio meet when 'Vesper gins to rise' (II.ii.45). Bel-imperia has chosen that time of day for the peaceful quietness it affords. However, when their moment comes, inexplicable fears take possession of her. She very reluctantly

follows Horatio to the bower – ‘I follow thee my love, and will not back,/ Although my fainting heart controls my soul’ (II.iv.6-7). In the protective seclusion of the private garden, her expectant anguish can only increase: ‘I know not what myself/ And yet my heart foretells me some mischance’ (14-15).

Amorous and tender, Horatio tries to dispel her gloomy mood, invoking the propitious spirit of the Night:

Sweet say not so, fair fortune is our friend,  
And heavens have shut up day to pleasure us.  
The stars thou see'st hold back their twinkling shine,  
And Luna hides herself to pleasure us. (16-19)

Bel-imperia is rescued from her primal fear of the dark, and abandons herself fully to her vital lover:

Thou hast prevailed, I'll conquer my misdoubt,  
And in thy love and counsel drown my fear.  
I fear no more, love now is all my thoughts. (20-23)

Her conquest of her fear of darkness, so evocative of death, makes the fate we now know awaits her and her lover all the more cruel. The world of natural exuberance that love is offering her is about to be savagely taken from her:

*Horatio* Hark, madam, how the birds record by night,  
For joy that Bel-imperia sits in sight.  
*Bel-imp.* No, Cupid counterfeits the nightingale,  
To frame sweet music to Horatio's tale. (28-31)

But at this passionate moment, the lovers seem to flow with life. They perform, like a Venus and a Mars, the ‘warring peace, and peaceful war’ (II.ii.38) they have been longing for. Their ‘conflict’ resolves all tensions, reconciles all opposites: neither Venus nor Mars, neither conqueror nor conquered, neither self nor non-self, but one wholeness. The fulfilment of lovers who propagate life by dying in each other's arms is approaching:

*Bel-imp.* O let me go, for in my troubled eyes  
Now may'st thou read that life in passion dies.  
*Horatio* O stay a while and I will die with thee,  
So shalt thou yield and yet have conquered me. (46-49)

It is into this moment, when the personal is on the point of blending with the universal, that Lorenzo irrupts with his envious dagger. The lovers are torn apart. Horatio is dead.



Like a confirmation of Bel-imperia's dark intuition, Lorenzo comes to wrench the lovers from their embrace, stripping them of the illusion of an erotic shelter from death. As he interrupts the procreating flow of life, he becomes the cynic denier and negator of the energies that sustain life in the community. He not only frustrates Horatio's attempt to die a honourable death, mocking the impotence of his chivalry – 'O, sir, forbear, your valour is already tried' (52) – but effects a deadly reversal of love. In a frightful perversion of the lovers' expectations, he repeatedly knifes Horatio, who now literally 'dies' of coital penetration:

*Horatio*    What, will thou murder me?

*Lorenzo*    Ay, thus, and thus; these are the fruits of love. (54-55)

Lorenzo's cynicism thus converts the procreative act itself into a form of death, and Horatio reaches love's fulfilment by hanging in the bower, like the fruit of death: 'Although his life were still ambitious proud,/ Yet he is at the highest now he is dead' (60-61). In the face of such cynicism, the political Machiavel strikes us as a positively charitable figure.

#### IV

Lorenzo's savage attack on the lovers makes it clear that his contempt for chivalric love implies nothing less than a rejection of the traditional community. Indeed, one is tempted to conclude that in the final analysis Lorenzo's hatred of Horatio is motivated by the fact that he is the chivalric paragon Lorenzo cannot hope to be. Despite being one of the realm's grandees, Lorenzo cannot live up to what Spain values most. The successes of graceful Horatio act as a constant reminder of this fact: Horatio may be of lower station, but he achieves the martial distinction and the sexual fulfilment that Lorenzo lacks. As a failure in gallantry, what makes Lorenzo feel alive is the destruction of chivalry and the community it knits together. Thus, it soon appears that the only art at which Lorenzo excels is the ignoble art of machination<sup>68</sup>. This is most evident in his dealings with Pedringano, whose betrayal of his

---

<sup>68</sup> That calculating manipulation is the most radically opposed disposition to chivalry can be judged from James's description of the ethics of honour, which a sixteenth-century gentleman of birth would certainly be expected to uphold: 'Honour was established, not primarily by the skill with which events

lady, Bel-imperia, makes the destruction of Horatio possible. Lorenzo begins to corrupt Bel-imperia's servant when he takes over Balthazar's suit. He then decides to find out whether 'some other knight' (II.i.33) stands in Balthazar's way. He therefore summons Pedringano whom he knows to be fully in her confidence. As he extracts the truth from the reluctant servant, Lorenzo shows that he has little time for chivalric gallantries. Other options failing, he is more than prepared to have recourse to force, even if his rival is weak and in a vulnerable position: 'Nay, if thou dally than I am thy foe,/ And fear shall force what friendship cannot win' (67-68). But this is not all: what makes him truly contemptible is that he appropriates the discourse of chivalry to achieve abject goals. To begin with, he tries to corrupt Pedringano into disloyalty with promises of a higher station and the respectability this brings with it:

Now to these [past] favours will I add reward,  
Not with fair words, but store of golden coin,  
And lands and living joined with dignities,  
If thou but satisfy my just demand.  
Tell truth and have me for thy lasting friend. (51-55)

In his falsification of the chivalric code, by his promise to raise an unworthy member of the community to status, there is little sign that Lorenzo is a defender of aristocracy of birth. Moreover, his heresy against the traditional community does not stop here, however, for he also introduces the corruption of gold into the chivalric world, eroding the web of allegiance on which it depends. This is soon confirmed by the effect his golden promises produce on the servant who has his sister's trust. Pedringano pretends to take Lorenzo's bribe out of faithfulness to his chivalric duties:

Whate'er it be your lordship shall demand,  
My bounden duty bids me tell the truth,  
In case it lie in me to tell the truth. (56-58)

Both the treacherous servant and his newly-adopted master renege on chivalry by claiming allegiance to each other: servant and master are now bound not by duty and respect, but by the string of the purse. Thus, the social body begins to be corrupted by the extraneous element that Lorenzo introduces into it --

---

and situations were manipulable with a view to a successful outcome, important though this may be to confirm and enhance standing and status, but by the determined "steadfastness" with which they were confronted' (James, op.cit., p.316). If only because of his manipulative fanaticism Lorenzo cannot in any way be taken for an aristocratic paragon.

or, more accurately, by its logic, which substitutes mercantilist price for traditional value. Lorenzo is undermining a noble society founded upon the belief that, as Marlowe's Governor of Malta (another considerable hypocrite who invokes official doctrine) puts it, 'honour is bought with blood, not with gold' (*The Jew of Malta*, II.iii.56).

To be sure, Lorenzo may pretend to balance material with moral gain, offering Pedringano 'friendship and reward' (62), and promising to be 'kind and liberal' (82). And he may indeed do so by appropriating the rhetoric of public recognition of his King, who conferred 'deeper wage and greater dignity' (I.ii.19) on the General, the champion of chivalry, and who exacted 'tribute' but also 'wonted homage' from the defeated Portuguese (I.ii.9). As for Pedringano, he may equally pretend that his treacherous shift of allegiance does not imply the negation of allegiance itself, and that he can uphold chivalric service by vowing fidelity to Lorenzo's currency:

What I have said is true, and shall for me  
Be still concealed from Bel-imperia.  
Besides, your honour's liberality  
Deserves my duteous service even till death. (94-97)

But when they enact the little liturgy that seals their league of villainy –

*Lorenzo* Swear on this cross that what thou say'st is true,  
And that thou wilt conceal what thou hast told.  
*Pedring.* I swear to both by him that made us all. (87-89) –

the mutual hypocrisy on which their agreement is founded stands revealed. The destructive consequences this has for the community becomes, of course, fully evident with the murder of Horatio, which reveals how horribly unnatural Pedringano's betrayal of his lady's trust is. When he decides to betray the lovers' encounter to Lorenzo, Pedringano effectively turns his back on all human decency – and he does so in the hope of gold:

*Horatio* Why, make you doubt of Pedringano's faith?  
*Bel-imp.* No, he is as trusty as my second self.  
Go Pedringano, watch without the gate,  
And let us know if any make approach.  
*Pedring.* [Aside] Instead of watching, I'll deserve more gold,  
By fetching Don Lorenzo to this match. (8-13)

When, immediately after the murder, Hieronimo comes across Pedringano, the fact that

Pedringano's corruption has more than an individual significance is confirmed. Brief though it is, their encounter demonstrates that the order of the community is being subtly but radically overturned. Hieronimo has just received Bel-imperia's accusatory letter, and, meeting her servant by chance, he decides to inquire as to her whereabouts. Hieronimo addresses him laconically with a 'Now Pedringano' (III.ii.53), as befits a social inferior. But Pedringano's reply is not that of an inferior servant. Boldly, returning tit for tat he levels his social standing with an unthinkable 'Now, Hieronimo' (53). The Pedringano who now lives in hope of gold has lost all respect for degree and station. Too upset by the reception of the letter to notice, Hieronimo keeps to his point, demanding, 'Where's thy lady?'. Pedringano continues to defy the social norm by contemptuously replying, as Lorenzo enters, 'I know not; here's my lord' (54). Dizzied by Lorenzo's glittering promises, Pedringano seems to have lost his head, and to be openly flaunting his disloyalty. Indeed, it will not be too long before Lorenzo decides that this servant must lose his real head, too. But at this stage Pedringano does not grasp the implications of his betrayal. In fact, he never realizes that by selling his loyalty to the 'liberality' of the best bidder he has renounced any hope of human 'kindness'<sup>69</sup>.

Lorenzo, of course, understands much better the implications of the 'anti-community' he is creating. Such an anti-community is the product of his putting into practice the conception of human nature in terms of which he operates. As he progresses through the play, it is his conception of life that is seen to define him as a Machiavel. The more and more definite in his mind this conception is, the vaguer and vaguer the goal of his machinations becomes. In principle, he appears to be casting his Machiavellian net in order to advance Balthazar's suit for his sister, securing the match that means so much for the nation. In Act III, however, he sends Pedringano to dispose of the prince's servant, Serberine, with the assurance that 'when things shall alter, as I hope they will,/ Then shalt thou mount for this: thou know'st my mind' (III.ii.92-93). The allusion to some personal ambition of his is clear enough to leave us in the dark.

---

<sup>69</sup> Before killing Serberine, Pedringano reassures himself with the following thought: 'As for the fear of apprehension,/ I know, if need should be, my noble lord,/ Will stand between me and ensuing harms' (III.iii.12-14). To his regret, he will soon discover that outside chivalry there can be no worthy lords.

Whatever the specific prospect that motivates him may be, it no longer seems to be that of maintaining the status quo: Lorenzo wants things to 'alter'. Of course, he may be simply bamboozling the foolish servant, but by the end of this long Act, he is suspected even by his father of trying to impede the wedding in his own interest (III.xiv.40-76). But Lorenzo strongly denies this. Hard as it is to admit it, this may well be the only occasion Lorenzo is caught telling the truth. Although Castile's fears confirm that Lorenzo's character is suspect, nothing seems to indicate that they are justified. On close inspection Lorenzo's cynicism does not seem to result from the pursuit of a specific objective demanding the adoption of a 'Machiavellian' strategy. On the contrary, his Machiavellism is revealed as an attitude to life in general; an attitude too central to his being to be reducible to any particular goal or circumstance. In the course of his pursuits, Lorenzo comes to rationalize this mode of being in a theory of human nature. This theory fully reveals the obsessive anti-sociality that sustains the Machiavel.

Right after his first Machiavellian exercise – the extraction of the truth from Pedringano about his sister and Horatio – Lorenzo begins to spell out the guidelines of his 'policy'. To his mind, his successful handling of the reluctant servant demonstrates that manipulation is the best, and indeed the only, way of dealing effectively with other people:

Why so: *tam armis quam ingenio*:  
Where words prevail not, violence prevails;  
But gold doth more than either of them both.  
How likes Prince Balthazar this stratagem? (II.i.107-110)

This view of his he confirms with every triumph he secures. Every fulfilment of his anti-chivalric expectations confirms Lorenzo more deeply in his impious beliefs. Unlike Pedringano, he knows that the counter-community he is creating implies the destruction of the collective bonds of loyalty and trust. Gold makes a cheap purchase of human decency. Once the affective bonds of chivalry are severed, only relations of power remain. Thus the state of self-contradiction in which the Machiavel exists is suggested: Lorenzo justifies his cynicism on the grounds of a self-protectiveness made necessary by the inhuman jungle he himself is creating. What the play shows is how the Machiavel's isolationist credo and the chaos he brings on the community feed on each other – Lorenzo's anti-social premises lead to the

destruction of the enemies of these premises; in turn the fate of *these* victims confirms him in the belief that it is fatal not to act, as he does, on such premises. This is particularly manifest in the sequence of his soliloquies, in which he formulates the Machiavellian doctrine he shall bequeath to his successors on the Elizabethan stage.

Suspicious of Hieronimo's inquiry after Bel-imperia, Lorenzo decides to set his accomplices against each other, and so rid himself of both of them at a single stroke. He delivers his first soliloquy as the plan of action takes shape in his mind. In his self-address, he wavers in the pronomial choice, switching from 'thou' to 'I' to 'we', as if the Machiavel was groping for the language of self-possession:

Now to confirm the complot thou hast cast  
Of all these practices, I'll spread the watch,  
Upon precise commandment from the king,  
Strongly to guard the place where Pedringano  
This night shall murder hapless Serberine.  
Thus must we work that will avoid mistrust,  
Thus must we practise to prevent mishap. (III.ii.100-106)

As his reasons for preventing 'mishap' suggest, Lorenzo sends his victims to destruction in order to preserve himself. But it soon emerges that such self-preservation is rendered necessary by the fear and suspicion with which he has replaced the communal spirit:

This sly inquiry of Hieronimo  
For Bel-imperia breeds suspicion,  
And this suspicion bodes a further ill.  
As for myself, I know my secret fault;  
And so do they, but I have dealt for them.  
They that for coin their souls endangered,  
To save my life, for coin shall venture theirs:  
And better it's that base companions die,  
Than by their life to hazard our good haps.  
Nor shall they live for me to fear their faith (108-107)

Lorenzo's need to retreat into the fortress of the self is thus the result of his enforcement of Machiavellian violence on the pious community. As his conclusion shows, the anti-community he substitutes for it reserves all positive impulses for the preservation of the self:

I'll trust myself, myself shall be my friend,  
For die they shall, slaves are ordained to no other end. (118-19)

Lorenzo's vision puts paid to the traditional, naive community of chivalry: his principle of self-

comradeship may well serve as its epitaph. To be sure, the aristocratic disdain he reserves for his servants reveals his social standing and the snobbery that goes with it<sup>70</sup>; but it is hard to deduce from this that his self-centredness is an expression of aristocratic solidarity. The more definite his Machiavellian conscience becomes, the less evident it is that 'Lorenzo's "machievellianism" is founded upon an allegiance not to "himself alone" but to a particular social order'<sup>71</sup>. Rather, Lorenzo's philosophy of life suggests that he defines himself in opposition to the collectivity, whose harm increases in direct proportion with his good. Thus, Lorenzo effects not only a revolutionary split between his destiny and that of the community, but conceives of them in antagonistic terms: the worse for others, the better for himself.

For this reason, the greater advantage he gains over the community, the more intense the state of self-contradiction in which he exists becomes. In effect, the 'safety' he claims to achieve with the murder of Serberine and the arrest of Pedrigano is shown to be nothing but fuel to his manipulative obsession. The more he triumphs the less scheming is a matter of preventing mishap. No longer content with protecting himself against an uncertain turn of events, the Machiavel takes control of events themselves. Lorenzo begins to experience his emotional isolation as a strategic higher ground from which he can manipulate the meaner creatures, ignorant of the laws of self-preservation:

Why so, this fits our former policy,  
And thus experience bids the wise to deal:  
I lay the plot, he prosecutes the point;  
I set the trap, he breaks the worthless twigs,  
And sees not that wherewith the bird was limed. (III.iv.38-42)

Only emotional self-mutilation allows the Machiavel to turn his fellow beings into quarry on which to

---

<sup>70</sup> Incidentally, Hieronimo does not seem to be free from a snobbish assumption of superiority. When, for example, he compares his plight to that of the commoner Balzulto, the terms in which he refers to him hardly anticipate the French Revolution: 'See here a loving father to his son/ Behold the sorrows and the sad laments/ That he delivereth for his son's decease!/ If love's effects so strive in *lesser things*,/ If love enforce such moods in *meaner wits*,/ If love express such power in *poor states*/ Hieronimo, whenas a raging sea...' (III.xiii.96-102, my emphasis). It should be noted that this comes from a Hieronimo who, in Maus's and Barber's analyses, has already become a vindicator of social equality.

<sup>71</sup> Maus, *op.cit.*, p.61.

prey:

Thus hopeful men, that mean to hold their own,  
Must look like fowlers to their dearest friends.  
He runs to kill whom I have help to catch,  
And no man knows it was my reaching fatch.  
'Tis hard to trust unto a multitude,  
Or anyone, in mine opinion,  
When men themselves their secrets will reveal. (43-49)

Clearly, the delight he takes in validating his self-preservationist doctrine by the downfall of his victims denies the self-sufficiency which he claims to possess. Nonetheless, Lorenzo's Machiavellism begins to be felt as an appropriation of God's position. His plots keep gathering momentum. When he learns that Pedringano is about to be tried for Serberine's murder, he envisages an absolute triumph: with the servant out of the way, no trace of his crime shall be left. He receives word from Pedringano that he is in need of help, and feels that everything is working to his advantage: the exhilaration of the control freak intensifies. 'This works like wax' he exclaims on receiving the news, then urges himself to higher feats – 'yet once more try thy wits' (III.iv.60). To the satisfaction of being in exclusive control, he now adds the pleasure of possessing absolute knowledge of what is really going on. He is the only one, as it were, whose perspective is high enough to encompass the whole scene. As one would to the Redeemer, Pedringano asks him 'to stand good lord and help him in distress' (III.iv.54). In return, Lorenzo admonishes him to emulate the Psalmist and trust that 'he shall not want while Don Lorenzo lives'<sup>72</sup>. The intensity of Lorenzo's self-delight at his God-role is matched only by his profound naivety about possessing absolute control. Such naivety is – as readers of the play may tend to forget – evident at all times in the upper-stage presence of Andrea and Revenge; but it is most ironically exposed in the fatal mistake he commits at this critical moment. Lorenzo, of course, is going to abandon his accomplice to his fate. He knows he cannot allow any loose string to remain. This is the decisive moment:

Now stands our fortune on a tickle point,  
And now or never ends Lorenzo's doubts.  
One only thing is uneffected yet,  
And that's to see the executioner. (78-81)

---

<sup>72</sup> Cf. Psalm XXIII: 'The lord is my shepherd, I shall not want' (*The Geneva Bible*, op.cit., p.239).



Chary of letting the executioner into his secret, Lorenzo decides not to approach him:

But to what end? I list not trust the air  
With utterance of our pretence therein,  
For fear of privy whispering of the wind  
Convey our words amongst unfriendly ears,  
That lie too open to advantages.  
*E quel che voglio io, nessun lo sa;  
Intendo io: quel mi basterà. (82-88)*

Thus, the very secrecy he so obsessively seeks to secure is what will unmask him in the end. Once Pedringano is executed, the hangman takes the letter of ultimatum Pedringano wrote for Lorenzo to Hieronimo. The first step on the road to the Machiavel's downfall is thus taken.

## Chapter Four

### *The Spanish Tragedy II*

## A. THE AVENGER

### I

As the previous chapter has tried to show, the Machiavel must be understood in relation to the possibility of the 'sanctified, legitimate social order' he negates. The chivalrous Spain Hieronimo serves fully lives up to this possibility. As such, it is characterized by the fact that this order's virtuous members have formed an *internal* bond with it; their sense of themselves is dependent on a reciprocal chivalry. Thus, the murder of Horatio, which effectively shatters this internalized ideal, registers for Hieronimo as an assault on the very foundations of his being. Lorenzo's crime provokes a vengeful response that is determined by the communal investment it violates.

Right from the outset it is clear that Lorenzo enjoys trampling on the human decencies that make life in the community possible. How destructive his contempt for human kindness is becomes fully apparent with the murder of Hieronimo's son. In the bower scene Kyd intensifies our perception of Lorenzo's cynicism to the utmost. This he achieves by showing the sociality he negates to be an intimate need of his victims. Away from the court and the conventionalism it imposes, in the private arbour in Hieronimo's garden, the lovers prove to be most themselves by answering the universal call of love. Like the Hieronimo who is about to be 'plucked' from bed, Lorenzo's victims are presented not as the powerful figures of the court but as ordinary people with whose feelings and reactions we totally identify. Indeed, what could be more human than the intimate and safe domesticity of a private garden at sunset. In continuity with but more fundamental than the need for public recognition, this private sociality humanizes the individual by showing his vulnerable side. In it the individual drops his defences, and allows his need for reciprocity to emerge in full. For this reason, when Lorenzo massacres the unguarded Horatio he reveals what amounts to a pathological incapacity for feeling. What is more, he reveals that this incapacity situates him below, not above, the common humanity he rejects. The circumstances of the murder are thus designed to bring out Lorenzo's vicious cynicism, which creates an overwhelming impact on Hieronimo.

Roused by Bel-imperia's cries for help, Hieronimo enters the pitch-dark bower, half-naked and

in anticipation of he knows not what. In the dark, he is surprised by a 'murderous spectacle' (II.v.9), so incongruous as to appear an illusion. But he remains cool-headed, keeping to the facts: his first concern is about the legal implications of a crime committed in the Knight Marshal's property:

A man hanged up and all the murderers gone,  
And in my bower to lay the guilt on me.  
This place was made for pleasure not for death. (10-12)

However, this objectivity is short-lived. When he takes the corpse down, he recognizes it as his son's, and his torment of paternity begins. As he takes in what has happened he is overwhelmed by the inexplicable callousness and spite of the murder, and he bursts out into anguished interrogations:

I am thy father. Who hath slain my son?  
What savage monster, not of human kind,  
Hath here been gluttoned with thy harmless blood,  
And left thy bloody corpse dishonoured here,  
For me, amidst this dark and deathful shades  
To drown thee with an ocean of my tears? (17-23)

The traumatic effect of this discovery cannot be exaggerated; all the circumstances of the murder indicate an unbelievable desire to inflict pain. The location of the murder: in the place chosen for pleasure, the seat of love and protectiveness; the manner of the murder: his vulnerability, his chivalric pride mocked ('Fair worthy son, not conquered but betrayed'); the timing of the murder: his son's body dishonoured and abandoned, left there in the dead of night to await his father's discovery – the thought of any one of these would be enough to madden the most uncaring of fathers, let alone one who has just celebrated his son's chivalric coming of age. Has Horatio's martial distinction come to this? He has not died the honourable death of the battlefield, but has been snuffed out and hung up like a carcass. Lorenzo has raped the most sacred values of the home.

The absolute contempt the murderer manifests for his victims is so foreign to Hieronimo that it shakes the foundations of his world. He vainly interrogates the universe about a crime that registers as a second Fall, a new expulsion from the Garden, and a further postponement of Christ's second

coming<sup>1</sup>:

O, heavens, why made you night to cover sin?  
By day this deed of darkness had not been.  
O earth, why didst thou not in time devour  
The vild profaner of this sacred bower?  
O poor Horatio, what hadst thou misdome,  
To leese thy life ere life was new begun?  
O wicked butcher, whatsoe'er thou wert,  
How could thou strangle virtue and desert? (24-30)

As these anguished interrogations lapse into his grieving fatherhood – ‘Ay me, most wretched that have lost my joy/ In leeing my Horatio, my sweet boy’ (32-33) – Isabella enters. Anxious about her husband, she calls him and approaches the bower, but only to find that it is her son who must grieve her:

What world of grief! My Horatio!  
O where's the author of this endless woe? (38-39)

The grief of Hieronimo was already inhuman, but when his wife adds hers to it, it simply becomes too much to bear: Hieronimo's mind drifts towards revenge –

To know the author were some ease of grief,  
For in revenge my heart would find relief. (40-41)

On hearing that the murderer has escaped and will not be punished, Isabella also gives in to despair, anticipating the madness of revenge that shall destroy her:

Then is he gone? And is my son gone too?  
O, gush out, tears, fountains and floods of tears,  
Blow, sighs, and raise an everlasting storm  
For outrage fits our cursed wretchedness. (42-43)

The absence of the murderer returns their attention to the corpse he has left behind. The old couple

---

<sup>1</sup> I take the meaning of the obscure line ‘To leese thy life ere life was new begun’ to be determined by the context of universal profanation, and evoke Christ's second coming. This is the first instance of the incongruous Christian allusions Hieronimo produces by associating the death of Horatio with Christ's. At a parallel moment in Act V, when he reveals to the baffled court the corpse he mourns here, Hieronimo proclaims his devotion to his son in a similarly incongruous line – ‘From forth these wounds came breath that gave me life’ (IV.iv.96) – that makes a Christ-figure of his son. In relation to this line, Barber observes that ‘Hieronimo has made him [his son] the object of a total devotion, into the service of which his whole social piety has been channelled’ (Barber, *op.cit.*, p. 152). The radicalness of this pious re-investment is proportional to the piety that has been violated, and confirms the irreparable damage Lorenzo has done.

kiss their son a final goodbye, and close his eyelids for ever. Then the love and tenderness that make their son's loss unbearable revives for a moment:

Sweet lovely rose, ill plucked before thy time,  
Fair worthy son, not conquered but betrayed:  
I'll kiss thee now, for words with tears are stayed. (46-48)

This is a grief that only the thought of revenge seems able to alleviate:

See'st thou this handkercher besmeared with blood?  
It shall not from me till I take revenge.  
See'st thou those wounds that yet are bleeding fresh?  
I'll not entomb them till I have revenged.  
Then will I joy amidst my discontent,  
Till then my sorrow never shall be spent. (51-56)

The prospect of revenge, and the hope of its accomplishment, calm them for a moment. Certain that the identity of the murderer will out, they regain a measure of self-possession. For Isabella:

The heavens are just, murder cannot be hid:  
Time is the author of both truth and right,  
And time will bring this treachery to light. (57-59)

Ronald Broude has shown that Isabella is invoking here the Renaissance *topos* of *Veritas Filia Temporis* – the belief in ‘time as the revealer of truth and bringer of justice’<sup>2</sup>. But Isabella is doing more than seeking solace in a pious commonplace: she is expressing the expectations of ideal justice that characterize the chivalric community. She is assuming that history and time obey a teleological purpose that guarantees the prevailing of Right over Wrong, and of Truth over Falsity. This is the providential justice that the King discerned in the defeat of the rebellious Portuguese. It is this promise of eventual retribution that keeps the distressed couple in hope, and makes their grief slightly less intolerable.

Even at this initial stage, however, it becomes clear that any relief can only be passing. At the close of this searing scene, we are left with the perception that they desperately need instant alleviation from their grief. Hieronimo and Isabella take up the corpse of Horatio, and carry it out of the cursed

---

<sup>2</sup> R. Broude, ‘Time, Truth, and Right in *The Spanish Tragedy*’, *Studies in Philology* LXVIII, (1971), p.131.

bower. Overwhelmed by his loss, Hieronimo utters a lament which reveals that *his* wounds bleed more than his son's. Indeed, it expresses a desperate need for healing: the herbs of forgetfulness that 'spring fosters'; the restorative plant 'the sun draws forth into the fair regions of light' of the 'great world'; that death which would make 'every feeling [die] in this dead breast' and a journey 'to the shades below' pleasing – all of this Hieronimo pleads for as he considers killing himself in order to end his pain. Only the duty to avenge his son holds back his hand, confirming that revenge is an absorption of the destructiveness generated by his grief. Like the tortured soliloquies he will shortly produce, this dirge shows a Hieronimo poised between redemptive light and damning darkness. But what his dirge makes most poignantly clear is that the light of heaven and the darkness of hell are the two sides of a single suffering which obliterates every need except that of immediate relief.

## II

The contrast of heaven and hell that articulates Hieronimo's laments, starting with his dirge, has been sufficiently emphasized in criticism. Its interpretation, however, needs further attention. For critics of the play, the opposition of heaven and hell embodies two conflicting principles of retribution, of which the avenger must choose one and discard the other. Thus, interpretations of Hieronimo's revenge vary according to which one of the two alternatives, hell or heaven, is chosen to direct Hieronimo's vengeful steps. At one interpretative extreme, Broude argues that Hieronimo's revenge should be seen as the central example of the theme that unifies the play, namely the providential dimension of history and time as first invoked by Isabella. In this reading, the avenger is regarded as an instrument of divine retribution, and the experience of revenge as a trial of the avenger's faith in God:

The development of the action is designed to bring out two ideas: that the heavens *do* reveal and revenge secret crimes (albeit not always in ways immediately comprehensible to mortals), and that man must not lose faith, even though he may not understand the heavens' way.

In Broude's view, human and divine revenge go hand in hand: what the avenger does is to materialize the justice of God in the human realm. Hence, by the end of the play the providential beliefs of the

characters have been entirely vindicated<sup>3</sup>.

By using this argument, Broude is effectively turning Kyd's play into a case-study of his general theory of revenge, which we discussed in Chapter One. As we saw, for Broude the difference between divine, public and private revenge is purely a matter of agency, and so it is in *The Spanish Tragedy*:

The chain of events by which Horatio's murder is revealed and revenged gives dramatic form to several variants of the *topos* of Time as revealer and revenger of secret crimes. As Lily B. Campbell has shown, Renaissance Englishmen were likely to regard all vengeance as divine – i.e. as coming directly or indirectly from God. . . . When the justice of man was 'too blunt', God often wreaked his vengeance through human instruments.<sup>4</sup>

In line with the regulative approach, revenge is presented here as the appropriation of the punitive rights of the law provoked by its inefficiency or collapse. Revenge and legality are, in the final analysis, the two sides of the same coin: revenge always presupposes, logically and chronologically, a breakdown of legality. I shall return to this crucial point when I discuss Hieronimo's petition for justice to the King and the interpretation it has received in criticism. More important at this stage is that by applying this 'trickle-down' notion of revenge to the play, Broude brings out its providential dimension. But we realize that he does so at the expense of the hell of Revenge: the hell inside the avenger is simply ignored, and the one outside on the upper-stage is recast as an embodiment of Divine Justice:

Revenge is a personification of an abstraction in the tradition of the morality play. The revenge he personifies, however, is not the extra-legal retaliation which the word suggests today but rather the retribution which played so important a part in the Elizabethan concept of justice<sup>5</sup>.

---

<sup>3</sup> Broude's main aim is to show that *The Spanish Tragedy*, conceived in the decade of the Armada, was designed by Kyd to boost his countrymen's confidence in the triumph of godly England over perfidious Spain. He thus emphasizes, or as I shall argue over-emphasizes, the providential dimension of the play. The historical dimension of *The Spanish Tragedy* has given rise to a bulk of revealing criticism that approaches the play from the Hispanophobic perspective the Elizabethan audiences must have possessed at the time of its staging – see, for example, J. R. Mulryne, 'Nationality and Language in Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*', in *Travel and Drama in Shakespeare's Time*, ed. by Jean-Pierre Maquerlot and Michele Willems, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1996, pp.87-105; and Eric Griffin, 'Ethos, Empire, and the Valiant Acts of Thomas Kyd's Tragedy of "The Spains"', *English Literary Renaissance* 31 (2001), pp.192-229. For a full discussion of this issue and its criticism, see F. Ardolino, *Apocalypse and Armada in Kyd's The Spanish Tragedy*, Sixteenth Century Essays and Studies, Kirksville, Missouri, 1995.

<sup>4</sup> Broude, 'Time and Truth in *The Spanish Tragedy*', pp.139-40.

<sup>5</sup> Broude, 'Time and Truth in *The Spanish Tragedy*', p.142.



Broude's emphasis on the providential universe the avenger inhabits obscures the fact that this universe also knows its hell.

At the other extreme of this Manichean tradition of criticism, Aggeler maintains that the providential expectations of Hieronimo and Isabella are raised only to be frustrated by the nihilistic reality in which they exist. For Aggeler, the avenger's universe is not Christian but Senecan, 'Senecan' meaning here nihilistic. As Aggeler sees it, Senecan drama represents a conflict between the avenger's belief in a divine presence and the reality of a universe indifferent to his predicament. Thomas Rosenmeyer has argued that in their distress Senecan heroes appeal to the gods, but obtain no positive response from them. Following Rosenmeyer, Aggeler concludes that 'the Nature apostrophized by the Senecan hero or heroine is powerless to respond'<sup>6</sup>. Thus, *The Spanish Tragedy* recreates this Senecan sceptical universe: the avenger is directed by amoral deities who, far from responding to his appeals for intercession, lead him into an absurd self-destruction. In this reading, the supernatural upper-stage ceases to embody a providential presence to represent the dark forces of pagan nihilism. Like Broude, Aggeler recognizes that the pious characters, starting with Isabella, express 'Christian Stoic beliefs . . . with regard to the process of divine justice', that is to say, providential beliefs<sup>7</sup>. But, unlike Broude, Aggeler argues that in so doing they are vindicating an illusion. Where Broude sees a providential fulfilment that vindicates the avenger's trust in God, Aggeler discerns a confirmation that these beliefs are tragically at odds with the senseless universe of violence they inhabit. For Aggeler the play offers no indication that the providential beliefs may be justified. The pious characters, he concludes, 'still cling to the idea of providential order and divine justice in spite of the empirical evidence that the gods are indifferent or hostile'<sup>8</sup>. In such a reading no providential presence is acknowledged. Only the hell of Revenge is real.

---

<sup>6</sup> G. Aggeler, *Nobler in the Mind. The Stoic-Skeptic Dialectic in English Renaissance Drama*, University of Delaware Press and Associated University Press, Newark and London, 1998, p. 46.

<sup>7</sup> Aggeler, *op.cit.*, p.61.

<sup>8</sup> Aggeler, *op.cit.*, p.46.

This denial of the providential dimension of the play, which implies that the avenger ceases to be regarded as an instrument of divine justice, allows Aggeler to bring out the irrational component of revenge. Most importantly, it allows him to recognize that this irrational element is present from the outset, at the very inception of Hieronimo's vengeful impulse. This avenging fuse, as I have just pointed out, is lighted in the bower scene, where the suffering of the victims and their need for its relief produce a destructive undercurrent in their pious expectation of retribution. In Aggeler the irrational element of revenge obscured by Broude's providential reading emerges in full:

At this moment [II.v.40-41, 51-52] he [Hieronimo] does not supplicate the heavens for justice, nor does he speak of seeking public revenge. On the contrary, he obviously yearns to administer some terrible form of retribution.<sup>9</sup>

Aggeler recognizes this element for what it is: a suicidal and murderous impulse that co-exists with the avenger's resolve to see justice done:

Isabella's response [the invocation of time as the bringer of truth and justice] is a pious affirmation that echoes the King's joyful response to the good news from the battlefield. . . [and] serves to divert her husband from bloody, futile thoughts of personal revenge and to remind him of his duty as an earthly instrument of heaven's justice.<sup>10</sup>

The dirge that closes the scene impresses on us the fragility of Hieronimo's pious determination:

the courses of action that tempt and terrify him are undefined, but we may guess on the basis of his dirge over the dead Horatio. . . that they include suicide and senseless bloodshed to satisfy his craving for vengeance.<sup>11</sup>

Aggeler exposes the limitations of Broude's retributive scheme by emphasizing the irrational impulse of revenge. But the nihilistic vortex he substitutes for Broude's providential Heaven –

Kyd's perspective in *The Spanish Tragedy*, I will argue, is essentially skeptical, pagan and humanistic. His universe is as hostile to man or at least as indifferent to human suffering as Marlowe's, hence, his treatment of Revenge as literally a force from Hell that good men must resort to if they would see justice done<sup>12</sup> –

cannot work the miracles we witness along the way to the final enactment of revenge: these would seem

---

<sup>9</sup> Aggeler, op.cit., p.64.

<sup>10</sup> Aggeler, op.cit., p. 64.

<sup>11</sup> Aggeler, op.cit., p. 65.

<sup>12</sup> Aggeler, op. cit., pp. 60, 65.

to offer support for some of Broude's providential claims for the play. Broude's and Aggeler's mutually excluding theses reveal the unacknowledged problem within the play's criticism, namely that in revenge there is an interplay between the rational and the irrational, the pious and the impious that has so far not been integrated into a coherent reading of the play.

### III

The first and most wondrous of these miracles occurs in the opening scene of Act III, following on the paternal despair we have witnessed. Act III precedes Hieronimo's sequence of grieving soliloquies with an episode in the Portuguese court. Like that of its counterpart in Act I, the relevance of this episode to the main events has been questioned<sup>13</sup>. However, it has been increasingly recognized that the Portuguese scenes not only bear a relation to Hieronimo's revenge, but attest the remarkable skill with which Kyd dramatized it<sup>14</sup>. In Act I, the Portuguese Viceroy's anxiety about his son's fate is shown to destabilize him to the point of being persuaded of the worst with terrifying ease. Villainous Villuppo falsely accuses Alexandro of betraying the prince in the battle and shooting him in the back; all too eagerly, the Viceroy takes this for the truth. His paternal despair prepares us for the reactions of Hieronimo, whose son is indeed dead. Act III, which follows Hieronimo's discovery that his son has been murdered, opens with the Viceroy's complaints of fortune. Once again, that the Viceroy is the victim of a deception emphasizes that for Hieronimo the news is for real. This contrast is reinforced by the conventional lament the Viceroy delivers – a speech on the dangerous condition of kingship in the tradition of Senecanism – which reads like a succession of clichés compared to the laments that Hieronimo will shortly produce. If the Viceroy's paternal anguish anticipates Hieronimo's, so does the injustice Alexandro receives. When Alexandro enters, he is being conducted to the stake, to be burnt alive on the basis of Villuppo's contrived charges. His situation is indeed extreme, as is his sense of

---

<sup>13</sup> See Mulryne, *op.cit.*, xxi.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18, note to 1.5.

wrong: Alexandro is entirely innocent, yet he can have no hope of redress. So, no longer protesting his innocence, he disposes himself to leave this world, whose corruption he feels more painfully than victims of injustices normally do. Those who are with him in these last moments of his urge patience, but Alexandro, his eyes lifted towards heaven, is already displaying an exemplary fortitude:

*2 Nobleman*      In such extremes will naught but patience serve  
*Alexandro*        'Tis heaven is my hope.  
                         As for the earth, it is too much infect  
                         To yield me hope of any of her mould. (III.i.31, 35-37)

When the Viceroy confirms his doom of death, God's chief Justicer on earth has never appeared more misled, nor have the heavens ever appeared more unresponsive to the plight of a mortal. Alexandro's chivalric resolve becomes tragic:

Not that I fear the extremity of death,  
For nobles cannot stoop to servile fear,  
Do I, O King, thus discontented live.  
But this, O this torments my labouring soul,  
That thus I die suspected of a sin,  
Whereof, as heavens have known my secret thoughts,  
So I am free from this suggestion. (40-46)

But the Viceroy remains unmoved and Alexandro is tied to the stake. He trusts to God for retribution; it seems as if the heavens will allow Villuppo's deceitfulness to have the last word, his cynical hell triumphing over Alexandro's heaven:

*Alex.*            My guiltless death will be avenged on thee,  
                         On thee, Villuppo, that hath maliced thus,  
                         Or for thy meed hast falsely me accused.  
  
*Villup.*        Nay, Alexandro, if thou menace me,  
                         I'll lend a hand to send thee to the lake  
                         Where those thy words shall perish with thy works –  
                         Injurious traitor, monstrous homicide! (51-57)

For a moment, the Machiavel appears undefeatable in his cynicism. Villuppo, indeed an 'injurious traitor' and a 'monstrous homicide', dupes everybody by his effrontery. But the unexpected happens.

Even as Villuppo's final slanders reverberate in the air, the Ambassador irrupts onto the scene with the news of Balthazar's good fortunes in Spain. The situation undergoes an instant reversal: Villuppo's

falsity is exposed, and Alexandro is set free. Indeed, the rescue is nothing short of miraculous – the Viceroy himself remarking on the perfect timing of ‘this sudden entrance’ (60). The workings of the Providence, which Villuppo’s triumph seemed to be denying, have manifested themselves. The victim himself receives his liberation not as the result of chance but as the vindication of innocence against treacherous falsity: ‘Thus we see our innocence hath saved/ The hopeless life which, thou, Villuppo, sought/ By thy suggestions to have massacred’ (82-84). At this point even the Machiavel -- admittedly an amateurish one – accepts his defeat as part of the proper order of things, and admits his guilt (92-96). More generally, what this providential intervention vindicates is the pious confidence in the justice of the heavens that keeps Isabella in hope. Alexandro’s nightmare of universal corruption is dispelled. In sum, before we witness the sequence of Hieronimo’s soliloquies the prospect of a divine resolution of human injustice has been impressed on us. A providential presence in the universe of the avenger has been attested, exposing the limitations of Aggeler’s infernal reading. This does not mean, however, that the avenger’s evolution shall be, as the opposite critical view claims, a straightforward enactment of this providentialism. The reason lies in the suffering he sustains, which mediates between the ideal fortitude of Alexandro on the one hand, and his own crazed revenge in the play’s final Act.

#### IV

As the Portuguese court leaves the stage under the grace of God, a last mention is made of the marital alliance between Spain and Portugal. The arrangements are under way. When Hieronimo enters next, however, the communal inclusiveness at which this alliance aims seems no longer possible. A fundamental change has occurred. Hieronimo is now alone, and expresses himself in soliloquy. What he occupies is neither the public space of Act I, nor the private intimacy of Act II. It is solitude, in which the individual relates only to himself. Following the murder of his son, Hieronimo discovers his constituting solitude in his trauma. As Maus observes, ‘the immediate formal consequence of Hieronimo’s transformation is a new preference for soliloquy, for speech too conspiratorial, too

intimate, or too unbalanced for another's ear.'<sup>15</sup> This is the mode of speech that befits a Hieronimo who, in this Act, comes to 'self-consciousness'. But in the same way that a soliloquy is a dialogue of the self, Hieronimo's self-consciousness is – can only be – a consciousness of his ruptured continuity with the community. Thus, Hieronimo's grieving solitude discloses his social dependence no less than his parental fulfilment when Horatio was publicly honoured in Act I. Thus, by proclaiming his tragic solitude Hieronimo manifests his natural solidarity with his fellow men. At this moment, the crucial difference between the avenger and the Machiavel fully emerges, in the way they construct their respective 'interiorities'. In an indication of the control he exerts over his play, Kyd makes the sequence of Hieronimo's soliloquies parallel to Lorenzo's. The parallelism is clearly intentional since it allows Kyd to bring out the divergent consciousnesses of the Machiavel (Lorenzo) and the avenger (Hieronimo). Hence, where (as I tried to show in the previous chapter) Lorenzo constructed his Machiavellism by expunging all social awareness, Hieronimo's grieving isolation reveals his identity as radically dependent on a sense of communal integration. This fundamental contrast between both kinds of consciousness, radically social and radically asocial, defines the *conceptual* relationship between the avenger and the Machiavel: they represent two opposite poles of one investigation into the social condition of human beings. The development of Hieronimo's 'interiority' should be understood, then, *in contrast to* that of Lorenzo's. This contrast, central as it is to the play, has not been sufficiently recognized. No doubt this is mainly due to the prevailing conflation of the avenger and the Machiavel in modern criticism. Thus, Maus, for example, recognizes the process whereby both Lorenzo and Hieronimo come to self-consciousness in Act III – 'Kyd's machiavels do not disavow their social positioning, but rather create their interiors by a process of introjection'<sup>16</sup>. But predictably she interprets the contrast between the two protagonists in terms of class consciousness. Because her understanding of society remains at the level of politics – which is superficial in relation to what the play

---

<sup>15</sup> Maus, *op.cit.*, p.60.

<sup>16</sup> Maus, *op.cit.*, p.67.

asks us to take as fundamental -- Maus's Machiavel appears too socialized, while her avenger proves too Machiavellian: '[J]ust as Lorenzo's "machiavellianism" is founded upon a primary allegiance not to "himself alone" but to a particular social order, Hieronimo's "machiavellianism" redeploys rather than repudiates family and class ties'<sup>17</sup>. As a result, she fails to distinguish between the figure of the avenger and that of the Machiavel. Against this prevailing view, I intend to establish that we need to distinguish clearly between the *radical independence* Lorenzo claims for himself and the *radical interdependence* that makes Hieronimo suffer as he does. This is what their contrasting soliloquies reveal.

The essential continuity between Hieronimo and his fellow human beings has been ruptured by Lorenzo. Lorenzo's deed of darkness destroys the social piety that has defined Hieronimo's sense of himself as a father, as a justicer, as a believer in God. With the murder of his son, Lorenzo kills Hieronimo's sense of belonging. It is this profound dislocation which Hieronimo's first re-appearance after the murder shows:

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! (III.ii.1-4)

Like the innocent Alexandro condemned to death, Hieronimo is possessed by a perception of universal corruption, and mourns a world he can no longer recognize as his. But his sense of loss is beyond anything Alexandro knows. His mind's eye remains fixated on the 'murderous spectacle' that awaited him in the dark; the infection that he caught with his sight has impregnated the rest of his organism, then the whole of Creation -- 'eyes', 'life', 'world'. The bottomless cynicism he experienced that night produces obsessive regressions. Hieronimo mentally revisits the scene of the murder over and over again: Horatio was not simply killed, he was knifed again and again, then abandoned in an 'inhuman', a 'barbarous', an 'incomparable' way. Lorenzo has opened a split between the ideal and the actual in Hieronimo that redefines his entire reality. This redefinition is not conceptual or intellectual: it affects

---

<sup>17</sup> Maus, op.cit., p.61.

him integrally, as a disease of the body affects the health of the mind. Hieronimo's disillusionment, therefore, registers as a physical revulsion against a world which now breathes mortality and decay throughout, and promises but the grossness of matter. This new reality he is obliged to confront will eventually break his mind, for Hieronimo cannot reconcile himself to the dislocation of the 'is' from the 'ought'. With Hieronimo it is not as it is with us, post-chivalric modern citizens who, certain of the inadequacy of the real, aspire to the ideal. For him, any distinction between the two negates rationality itself. Thus, the crime pollutes every rung of the ladder of being ('eyes', 'life', 'world'), reaching up to the Heavens themselves. The absent, unresponsive heavens to which he appeals are themselves part of his diseased perception:

O sacred heavens! if this unhallowed deed,  
If this inhuman and barbarous attempt,  
If this incomparable murder thus  
Of mine, but 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. (5-11)

Hieronimo calls for vengeance from heaven, but we feel that the justice he so desperately needs is something more than the punishment of the murderer. The justice whose absence produces this intolerable suffering is justice in a wider and deeper sense than legality: it is the sense of wholeness he has lost with Horatio's murder. That Hieronimo needs more than he consciously demands will become more and more apparent as he progresses towards madness. In order to appreciate the *tragic* evolution of Hieronimo it is crucial to recognize that, as this first soliloquy shows, by the time Hieronimo appeals to the heavens, the damage that unhinges him has *already* been done.

The profundity of this damage shows how much Hieronimo's sense of identity depends on the sense of belonging that has been destroyed. His suffering reveals what makes Hieronimo who he is. Thus, immediately after the murder Hieronimo is *already* experiencing insufferable psychic pain<sup>18</sup>. Kyd

---

<sup>18</sup> How little time has elapsed since the murder is emphasized when Pedringano next reassures Lorenzo that their accomplice in the murder, Serberine, has not let on about the crime because 'he could not, *'twas so lately done/* And since, he hath not left my company' (72-73, my emphasis).



reproduces his afflictions almost with clinical accuracy. Hieronimo's nocturnal rest is impeded by hellish visitations. Visions of Horatio's bleeding wounds torment his sleep, and rouse him to Satanic temptations that terrify his soul (12-18). His obsessions are given no pause: equally disturbed by apparitions, his days begin 'early' to register his 'dreams' (20), confusing night and day into the nightmare. He lives in exhausting oppressiveness: the terror of being on his own in 'unfrequented paths' (17), the claustrophobic anxiety of his 'cloudy days' (19) – these are the symptoms of a psychic damage that cannot be attributed to retributive delay from heaven. This damage has been done by the murder – most emphatically not by the heavens' dilatoriness to it – and, from the beginning, produces destructive impulses which were unthinkable in his previous existence. His antisocial impulses are the manifestation of a social need, and generate a tension that is unhinging his mind. In this, then, we begin to recognize the paradox of Senecan revenge, which will become fully apparent in his demented convulsion of retribution in Act IV. Thus, Hieronimo's anti-social impulses come to be represented in the Senecan manner, as a dark hell of revenge:

The night, sad secretary to my moans,  
With direful visions wake my vexed soul,  
And with the wounds of my distressful son  
Solicit me for notice of his death.  
The ugly fiends do sally forth of hell,  
And frame my steps to unfrequented paths,  
And fear my heart with fierce inflamed thoughts.  
The cloudy day my discontents records,  
Early begins to register my dreams. (12-21)

Like Medea, Hieronimo appears torn between two contradictory impulses that feed each other: on the one hand a desperate need to validate his piety, and on the other the violent recognition of the fact that his piety has not been reciprocated. The gap between the inferno of Revenge on the upper-stage and the ideal court below is beginning to close, and is doing so through Hieronimo. Contact between the two realities has been made: a ray of hell, so to speak, has penetrated into the soul of the Knight Marshal of Spain. We begin to realize that no response from heaven, no matter how favourable it might be to his demands, will be able to check his progressive disintegration. Similarly, his final frenzy of revenge should not be dissociated from the disintegration that precedes it.

The first confirmation that Hieronimo's perception of heaven's unresponsiveness is mediated by his need for immediate relief is given even as he speaks. The very moment he summons 'eyes, life, world, heavens, hell, night and day' to 'see, search, show, send some man, some mean, that may-' (22-23) the identity of the culprits is revealed to him. In a timeliness that betokens the same providential care that rescued Alexandro, Hieronimo receives a letter from Bel-imperia urging revenge on her brother and the prince, whom she identifies as Horatio's murderers. This letter comes to add further confusion to his mind. Why should Bel-imperia accuse her own brother? Why should the prince and Don Lorenzo wish to kill his son? Fearing a plot to destroy him, Hieronimo recoils further into his damaged perception of reality, adopting a mistrustful stance that is painfully unnatural to him. However, despite its shocking content, the letter offers unmistakable evidence that Hieronimo's call for divine help is being heeded. Its timing and the manner of its delivery – the letter 'falleth' from above – are clearly intended to imply as much. Hieronimo seems to recognize this, wondering 'What means this unexpected miracle?' (32). And he finds prompt confirmation that there is some truth in the letter. Moments after he has received it, he runs into Lorenzo and finds out from him that Bel-imperia has been arrested: the murderer assures him that 'The duke my father hath/ Upon some disgrace awhile removed her hence' (57-58). The effect this has on Hieronimo is immediate -- 'my grief no heart, my thoughts no tongue can tell' (67). And we begin to wonder what so much suffering will lead to.

## V

When Hieronimo re-appears he does so in his capacity as Knight Marshal of the realm. As such, he is going to pass a death sentence on Pedringano, one of the accomplices in Horatio's murder. This is ironic in view of the fact that, ignoring Pedringano's part in the crime, he continues to lament the heavens' neglect of his cause. But his complaint is now less extreme. In public engagement, he seems to regain a measure of self-possession. And prepares himself, accompanied by his Deputy, to deliver the justice he cannot obtain for himself:

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.  
 But shall I never live to see the day  
 That I may come, by justice of the heavens,  
 To know the cause that may my cares allay?  
 This toils my body, this consumeth age,  
 That only I to all men just must be,  
 And neither gods nor men be just to me. (III.vi.1-10)

This is Hieronimo in his role as upholder of public law, who is going to dispense to others the heavens' and the King's justice he lacks himself. Mistaking this lamentation for a sign of Hieronimo's reluctance to perform his office, the Deputy reminds him (as well as us) that the enforcement of the law, however cruel, is exactly what is expected of him – the chief Magistrate of the Court appointed by God to implement His justice: 'worthy Hieronimo, your office asks/ A care to punish such as do transgress' (11-12). Hieronimo interprets this call to duty, as everything else, in terms of his obsession, and urges himself to avenge Horatio by keeping to his remit – 'So is't my duty to regard his death/ Who when he lived deserved my dearest blood' (13-14). This is indeed the resolve one would expect from a principled Magistrate who has sustained an injustice: he adds his need for private redress to his professional commitment to the law. His vengeance will uphold the justice he represents and the social order it makes possible.

Such vengeance is in line with Broude's idea of revenge as continuous with divine retribution and public justice. For a Knight Marshal like Hieronimo, vengeance does not even imply, as it does for Broude, justice by extra-legal means. It simply involves the punishment of the guilty party by the application of the law. In such a context, legal justice and revenge are synonymous. Titus the Roman patrician illustrates this point when he reassures Lavinia that 'if they did kill thy husband, then be joyful/ Because the law hath ta'en revenge on them' (*Titus Andronicus*, III.i.116-17). This revenge is the prerogative of Hieronimo's divinely-appointed office as defined by Renaissance orthodox moralists:

so proper is vengeance to God, that it belongs to none beside him, except only those, to whom he has given special license to execute it, that is, to publicke Magistrates, and Superiors in Authority, who by virtue of their Office, are also Avengers; but what is inflicted by them, is to be accounted

**PAGE  
MISSING  
IN  
ORIGINAL**

this initial social commitment. Thus neither wilful Bel-imperia, nor frivolous Balthazar, nor even arch-individualist Lorenzo will prove the most ferocious avenger. In a play that features almost as many avengers as major characters, it is the loving father and dutiful state servant who responds to injury with incomparable violence<sup>20</sup>. This is the same terrifying transformation undergone by that other father of popular revenge, Titus Andronicus, who starts as the most exemplary of Roman generals and ends, after a period of insufferable grief, as the most extreme of bloody maniacs. Such a transformation cannot be attributed to any rational choice by the avenger, such as the decision to discard the sanctioned means of vengeance. To be sure, Hieronimo's revenge will assert the social ideal which summons his deepest commitment in this scene. More than that: it will highlight his entire dependence on it – but not in the rational manner with which he pledges himself on the present public occasion. In sum, Hieronimo's revenge will assert his identity, and the sociality on which it rests, but in a mad way that expresses the damage that their destruction has wrought on him. The avenger in Kyd thus testifies to his Senecan ancestry of fierce Medea or demented Atreus, whose revenge is also the product of a damaged selfhood. This means that Kyd is concerned, like the classical Seneca, with identity and damage, rather than punishment and retribution. In both playwrights the meaning of the culminating crime (revenge) depends on the meaning of the crime to which it responds (offense). The furnace which transmutes the injury into the retaliatory crime is the madness of revenge. The process of destabilization that precedes the revenge and the final enactment of the revenge cannot be treated separately. And the reason is simple: by the time Hieronimo seeks redress, the *irreparable* damage that generates his revenge has *already* been wrought by the injury. Hence despite the resolve he has just expressed, the soliloquy that follows his public performance as a magistrate takes him one step closer to psychic collapse.

---

<sup>20</sup> The excellent normality of Hieronimo is rightly perceived as central to his identity: 'Before he is transformed by his son's murder, Hieronimo is the embodiment of all that is best in his own society. He is a father and a husband of loving heart, a man of law noted for his energetic yet "gentle" pursuit of equity (II.xiii.51-4, 93-4), and a courtly poet and entertainer who uses his art for socially binding purposes' (McAlindon, *op.cit.*, p.64). What is not sufficiently stressed here is the causal link between his initial civism and the inordinate ferocity of the end. This link is essential to the meaning of his revenge.

## VI

Affected by the violence he has imposed on Pedringano, Hieronimo leaves the court. His anguish about Horatio has returned. When he re-enters by himself his suffering is more intense than ever. His mind begins to give way: his woes have turned the world to grieving, nature laments with him, and heaven remains silent:

Where shall I run to breathe abroad my woes,  
My woes whose weight hath wearied the earth?  
Or mine exclaims, that have surcharged the air  
With ceaseless plaints for my deceased son?  
The blustering winds, conspiring with my words,  
At my lament have moved the leafless trees,  
Disrobed the meadows of their flowered green,  
Made mountains marsh with springtides of my tears,  
And broken through the brazen gates of hell. (III.vii.1-10)

Like his first soliloquy, this outburst is compounded of hell and heaven. However, as a sign of his worsening condition the order has been reversed: hell now comes first, heaven, remoter than ever, second. Hieronimo is indeed deteriorating: the endless persistence of his grief continues to produce a feeling of utter claustrophobia, except that now it is not only himself who feels it. The skies above are airless, suffocated by his 'ceaseless plaints', and the earth below, image of melancholy, is weighed down with his 'woes'. The whole universe, sickened, mourns with him: his laments unleaf the trees, make the plains barren of their 'flowered green', and drown the mountains with the 'spring-tides' of his tears. A universal waste is being created: Nature is destroyed in its prime, blasted with sudden and merciless violence, like Horatio has been. Hieronimo is transforming the world in terms of the desolate landscape of his fatherhood. And, disoriented, he wanders alone in it, searching for signs of God's hand in this universal wreckage.

With this pathological melding of self and universe, Hieronimo announces his incipient madness in the Senecan manner. At their most tragic, his emotions, like those of the Senecan avenger, become cosmic in their scope – the very hallmark of the madness of revenge. Hieronimo's madness manifests itself in bouts of extreme rage. The cosmic delusions they generate signal, as they did in Seneca, the insufferable pressure that the dislocated sense of self puts on the avenger. In Kyd, as in Shakespeare,

the fact that revenge is the function of violated social piety is emphasized by the fact that the avenger is made such by an assault on somebody else. It is the destruction of his son that destroys Hieronimo's identity. In this we recognize why the social self (this phrase is a tautology) is always potentially tragic. Compared to Seneca's, the horrors of *The Spanish Tragedy* may well appear, in Bowers's memorable phrase, as 'honest English horrors'. But if Seneca and Kyd are taken seriously we cannot fail to realize that they share the vision of an 'emotional' horror – the horror of being deprived of one's sense of being – that is not foreign to any member of the human race, honest as he or she may be <sup>21</sup>. That Hieronimo is being driven to extremity by his grief rather than by the unresponsiveness of heaven is confirmed by the fact that the reception of Bel-imperia's promising letter does not seem to have diminished in the least his sense of impotence. In fact, as this second soliloquy shows, Hieronimo's grief is increasing in proportion to his reception of positive signs from heaven:

Yet still tormented is my tortured soul  
With broken sighs and restless passions,  
That winged mount, and hovering in the air,  
Beat at the windows of the brightest heavens,  
Soliciting for justice and revenge;  
But they are placed in those empyreal heights,  
Where, counter-mured with walls of diamond,  
I find the place impregnable, and they  
Resist my woes, and give my words no way. (10-18)

In effect, for a second time Hieronimo's perception of abandonment by heaven is shown to be entirely unjustified. No sooner Hieronimo invokes the help of the 'brightest heavens' than he receives another revelatory letter. Addressed to his master Lorenzo, Pedringano's posthumous note, which Hieronimo receives through the executioner, confirms all the accusations Bel-imperia has made against her brother and the prince. This time there can be no questioning of the credibility of the revelation. The miracle Hieronimo had been praying for is with him. The identity of the culprits is now beyond

---

<sup>21</sup> 'The horrors of *The Spanish Tragedy* are honest English horrors based on the copiousness with which blood is shed and the resulting emotional response of the audience, and have little to do with the unnaturalness of the crude Thyestean banquets and elaborate dissection and poisoning scenes of the Italian' (Bowers, op.cit., p.84). Because Senecan revenge means to Kyd something deeper than the ghastly melodrama of 'Senecanism', he is able to make revenge all the more horrific by presenting it in a familiar context.

question; justice against them must be done. To be sure, the truth is shocking indeed. The murderers of Horatio are no anonymous ruffians, but Balthazar and Lorenzo 'of whom my son deserved so well' (43) since he had saved the life of the first, and risked his own to perpetuate the dynasty of the second. But the justice of God triumphs over sinfulness, vindicating the piety of those who like Isabella and Hieronimo have been mercilessly victimized. Hieronimo himself recognizes this when he declares: 'Now I feelingly perceive/ They did what heaven unpunished would not leave' (55-56)<sup>22</sup>. For a moment it seems as if the proper order, outside and inside Hieronimo, has been re-established. All that remains for justice to be done is that Hieronimo makes his case to the King. This he decides to do:

But wherefore waste I mine unfruitful words,  
When naught but blood will satisfy my woes?  
I will go plain me to my lord the King,  
And cry aloud for justice through the court,  
Wearing the flints with these my withered feet,  
And either purchase justice by entreats  
Or tire them all with my revenging threats. (67-73)

He tries to but fails. Before we witness the failure, two brief contrasting scenes prepare us for it.

At III.ix Bel-imperia appears in a captivity forced upon her by Lorenzo. Outraged at his violence, and consumed by her inexplicable misfortune, Bel-imperia barely manages to keep calm. But she retains self-control by trusting to the heavens for her release:

Well, force perforce, I must constrain myself  
To patience, and apply me to the time,  
Till heaven, as I have hoped shall set me free. (III.ix.12-14)

In yet another vindication of that fortitude first exhibited by Alexandro, no sooner does Bel-imperia utter these exemplary words than she is released. Once more we appear to see the pious response to adversity confirmed as the right way to secure redress for wrongs. But yet again, we are made to feel that extreme grief blocks off this ideal path. Moments before Hieronimo has the chance to plead to the

---

<sup>22</sup> As Broude observes, 'this apostrophe to the heavens is worded to underline the fact that Hieronimo has found the answers to the questions he has raised in the first soliloquy. He had wondered if "this inhuman and barbarous attempt" would "unreveal'd and unrevenged pass"; he now knows that the "monstrous and detested deed" has through Pedringano's note been "venged and reveal'd"' (Broude, 'Time and Truth in *The Spanish Tragedy*' p. 137).



King, we witness the disintegration of Isabella. In a scene that parallels Bel-imperia's, the distraught Isabella 'runs lunatic'. When her maid offers her medicinal herbs, she breaks out into 'ecstasies' about her dead son. In her mad lament, she demands what she truly needs – the restoration of her son: 'there is no medicine left for my disease/ Nor any physic to recure the dead' (III.viii.4-5). Such remedy, of course, she cannot possibly have. For this reason, no remedy, least of all legal redress, can hope to heal her distraught soul, which flying on silver wings reaches heaven to find Horatio 'backed with a troop of fiery cherubins/ Dancing about *his newly-healed wounds*' (18-19, my italics). But her soul must return to earth and her torment begin anew, and she must yet again demand the identification of the culprits (23-25), but it is clear that this is irrelevant now. By the time the murderers are exposed she has reached the limit of her endurance: for her despair, legal redress comes too late. Isabella's breakdown anticipates Hieronimo's. Her equal in suffering, the Hieronimo who is about to appeal to the King, is also beyond redress.

That this is indeed the case is confirmed as soon as he re-appears. On his way to the King, Hieronimo meets two Portuguese visitors. These, who are no doubt members of the Portuguese embassy to the forthcoming nuptial celebrations, ask him for directions to the Duke of Castile, Lorenzo's father. At the mention of Lorenzo, Hieronimo is overcome by an inferno of revenge. As he rages at them his madness surfaces in uncontrollable images of hell:

Not far from thence, where murderers have built  
 A habitation for their cursed souls,  
 There, in a brazen cauldron, fixed by Jove  
 In his fell wrath upon a sulphur flame,  
 Yourselves shall find Lorenzo bathing him  
 In boiling lead and blood of innocents. (III.xi.24-29)

This Jove is not the Divinity in whose name the King dispenses justice. Nor is the rage of desire that generates this vision a quest for rational retribution. Hieronimo is about to appear before the King, but the prospect of punishing the criminals does not restore his wonted peace of mind. Indeed, his thirst for blood and destruction reaches a new level of intensity. Baffled by his bizarre reactions, the Portuguese courtiers objectively diagnose his condition as insane – 'Doubtless this man is passing

lunatic/ Or imperfection of his age doth make him dote' (32-33). Hieronimo can no longer keep his inner hell in check. This is the point, we realize, at which a new form of consciousness will emerge out of the emotional dependence that has made him suffer so much.

## VII

The turning-point in Hieronimo's progression towards revenge is marked by his appearance in court. There he breaks out into 'outrages' that testify to the depth of the psychic damage he has sustained, but impede his plea for redress from the King. That his supplication to the King marks a turning-point is emphasized by every commentator; but no commentator considers Hieronimo's madness the catalyst of the change. On the contrary, criticism emphasizes the reaction of the King, thought to be marked by indifference. In the face of such indifference Hieronimo's response, it is argued, is the logical one: to bypass the law and assume the task of redressing his wrongs himself. Thus, the scene is not regarded as the culminating point of his long-endured grief, but as the starting-point of his forced alienation from official Spain and its law. This rare critical consensus seems to me suspect, if only because agreement is often the product of an unexamined assumption – here about the meaning of revenge, which takes the form that a breakdown of legality precedes the enactment of private revenge by an avenger deprived of the sanctioned means of redress. Thus, in the most influential analysis of the play, Bowers claims that

it is important to note that Hieronimo first endeavours to secure his legal rights before taking the law into his own hands.<sup>23</sup>

But being frustrated, Hieronimo 'realizes that he can never find legal justice but must act as the executioner himself'<sup>24</sup>. For Bowers, a 'failure of legal justice' occurs<sup>25</sup>, which, in his reading, takes place when the King, failing in his duty as Chief Magistrate of God, ignores Hieronimo's desperate plea.

---

<sup>23</sup> Bowers, *op.cit.*, p.64.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> Bowers, *op.cit.*, p.71.

However different their conclusions from Bowers's now classic condemnation of the avenger<sup>26</sup>, subsequent critics retain this premise. Maus, for example, despite centring her discussion on power rather than morality, takes for granted the idea of revenge as extra-legal justice or 'outlaw legalism':

revengers are driven to their bloody task because a ruler has failed to punish injustices properly, usually because he himself or members of his family are implicated in the wrongdoing. Less obviously, the revenger's outlaw legalism commandeers the monarch's exclusive prerogative over the prosecution of felonies, which were defined as crimes to which the crown was supposedly a party.<sup>27</sup>

Accordingly, she insists on identifying a breakdown of the law as the catalyst of Hieronimo's revenge.

When justice is denied him, Hieronimo becomes a particular instance of the archetypal avenger, fulfilling the predictable pattern:

As Hieronimo increasingly loses faith in the procedures of justice he has always taken for granted, the supervinient authority that had seemed to guarantee just outcomes early in the play simply evaporates. The King alert and responsive to his subjects in the first act, becomes strangely distracted and unreachable.<sup>28</sup>

That this interpretation has turned into a critical dogma can be seen from the fact that even Aggeler, who fully recognizes the interpenetration of madness and revenge, reverts to the legalistic reading at this crucial moment. As we have seen above, his repudiation of providentialism allowed him to bring out the avenger's irrational impulses generated by psychological tension on the avenger. However, the standard view has become so entrenched that at this critical moment Aggeler interrupts Hieronimo's mad progress and recasts it in rational terms: it is not his madness but his conviction that the law is corrupt that pushes him into private revenge. So the usual scapegoat appears:

The king's apparent indifference, his amazing ignorance of the fact of Horatio's death, and the machinations of Lorenzo to hinder his efforts to present his suit all combine to convince Hieronimo that the heaven-sanctioned means of obtaining justice on earth are hopelessly corrupt and

---

<sup>26</sup> For Bowers, when Hieronimo 'consciously gives up an open revenge in favour of a secret, treacherous device', he turns from honourable hero to despicable villain. According to him, the Elizabethan audience would stop sympathizing with Hieronimo at this point. After he gives up on the justice of God and the King, 'according to English standards he inevitably becomes a villain' (Bowers, *op.cit.*, p. 77).

<sup>27</sup> Maus, *op.cit.*, p.55.

<sup>28</sup> Maus, *op.cit.*, p. 65.

ineffectual. In his rage he announces his commitment to the lawless 'path' of private revenge.<sup>29</sup>

However general the consensus is on this point, an attentive look at the actual scene reveals that the interpretation is too mechanical. Much more is involved than a royal snub. In fact, the very critics who endorse the standard view seem to recognise this, though it does not affect their theory of legal collapse. Bowers, for instance, sees no contradiction in holding the standard view while claiming that Hieronimo's madness impedes a favourable response from the King. The reason why Bowers can live with the contradiction is that he sees the avenger's madness as a delaying device by Kyd to keep us in suspense. Hence the illogical conclusion he draws at the end of his otherwise perceptive description:

It is evident that the revenger must be made to delay once more . . . and clearly the only possible means is . . . to introduce some motive that would lead the King to discredit him. Once again Kyd brilliantly solves the problem by introducing the motive of madness. Isabella, Hieronimo's wife, runs mad, and Hieronimo next appears so stunned by grief for her and for his son that his own wits have been unsettled. He answers a request for information so wildly that his questioners think him wholly insane. . . Realizing that his madness has made him impotent, he meditates suicide but thrusts the thought aside before reviving the sense of his duty to revenge. His distraction, however, keeps him from gaining the King's ear, and when he recovers his senses *he realizes that he can never find legal justice.*<sup>30</sup>

If it is his outburst of madness that comes between himself and the King, why should Hieronimo deduce that 'he can never find legal justice', unless he thought that the King's attitude impeded his request?

My claim is that this crucial scene is much more carefully managed than these analyses suggest.

Once at court, as he awaits the King's passage, Hieronimo rehearses his supplication mentally. And he does not anticipate indifference from his sovereign. On the contrary the King, Hieronimo knows

---

<sup>29</sup> Aggeler, *op.cit.*, p.67. Similarly, we now realize that Wiggins (*op.cit.*, p.41) rightly identifies the crucial link between identity, madness and revenge, but distorts the logical conclusion by insisting that a) the King is not available to the avenger; and that b) for this reason Hieronimo must resort to private revenge in order to right his wrongs. Thus Hieronimo vindicates divine justice among mortals, though at a very high price for both himself and his fellow beings. As usual, the pivot in this interpretation is the unresponsive King: 'Hieronimo knows intellectually that he has two avenues of redress, first the king and then providence, and though his access to the former is blocked, he can still rely on the biblical assurance of God's justice . . . yet such patience is stressful beyond mortality's tolerance: it drives him over the edge into a madness which alienates him from his public identity as the state's principal executive officer of justice, but which also makes him, as a private revenger, the agent of a higher, supernatural justice. . . the conclusion is just. . . but we can never forget the cost of that justice in human pain and innocent life'.

<sup>30</sup> Bowers, *op.cit.*, p.69, my emphasis.

well enough, will be only too well-disposed to hear his suit. What he fears is not royal aloofness, but that an inexplicable paralysis will overcome him in his Majesty's presence, to humiliate him before the entire court. The confident, even defiant spirit which Pedringano's letter produced has deserted him. What now possesses him is the sense of utter insecurity generated by the breakdown – his first – which we have just witnessed in the scene of the Portuguese visitors:

Now sir, perhaps I come and see the King,  
The King sees me, and fain would hear my suit:  
Why, is not this a strange and seld-seen thing,  
That standers-by with toys should strike me mute?  
Go to, I see their shifts and say no more. (III.xii.1-5)

This is the language of disintegrating self-confidence. Once more, his impulse to seek redress exposes a wound that has no legal cure, and as Hieronimo feels the psychological trap closing on him, violent impulses of hellish revenge take over. He will vindicate Horatio's death by bringing some terrible form of violence and damnation on himself:

Hieronimo, 'tis time for thee to trudge:  
Down by the dale that flows with purple gore  
Standeth a fiery tower; there sits a judge  
Upon a seat of steel and molten brass,  
And 'twixt his teeth he holds a fire-brand,  
That leads unto the lake where hell doth stand.  
Away, Hieronimo, to him be gone:  
He'll do thee justice for Horatio's death. (6-13)

Yet once more, these impulses are themselves checked, or rather redirected, by the reminder of his duty to avenge his son (16-19).

This surely suggests that Hieronimo does not confuse the hell of revenge with this duty. But, most importantly, what Kyd highlights here is that it is Hieronimo, rather than the King, who is not in self-possession. In a final effort, Hieronimo plucks up courage as the King passes (21-24), but he fails to stop him. Now the King sits in session with the Portuguese ambassador, but Hieronimo is undeterred, and cries out for 'Justice, O, Justice to Hieronimo' (27). Intercepted by Lorenzo, the moment of boldness passes; and when the King demands 'who is it that interrupts our business?' (30), Hieronimo pulls back in a fearful precaution that became legendary on the Elizabethan stage – 'Not I, Hieronimo,

beware: go by, go by.' (31). That, still cautious, Hieronimo is able to restrain himself at this moment brings out the irrepressible force of his second outburst. This takes place when the name of Horatio is pronounced in the course of the official proceedings. Like the name 'Lorenzo' in the previous scene, 'Horatio' triggers another raging breakdown. As Barber observes, 'the effect of Hieronimo's famous "outrage" – as the king calls it – depends on the context of ongoing, coherent state business, including the rewarding of the loyal service of which Hieronimo was so proud and about which the king is so scrupulous'<sup>31</sup>. It is however possible, indeed necessary, to go further than that. The context in which Hieronimo's suffering 'peaks' reproduces the context of his ideal existence which the murder of his son destroyed for ever. That is to say, Hieronimo's hell erupts at the evocation of the condition of justice on which his integrity depended. I am, of course, referring to the all-including conciliation that the ambassador anticipates as he makes arrangements with the King for the royal wedding:

As a man extremely overjoyed  
To hear his son so princely entertained,  
Whose death he hath so solemnly bewailed,  
This for thy further satisfaction  
And kingly love, he kindly lets thee know:  
First, for the marriage of his princely son  
With Bel-imperia, thy beloved niece,  
The news are more delightful to his soul,  
Than myrrh or incense to the offended heavens.  
In person, therefore, will he come himself,  
To see the marriage rites solemnized;  
And, in the presence of the court of Spain,  
To knit a sure, inexplicable band  
Of kingly love, and everlasting league,  
Betwixt the crowns of Spain and Portingale. (34-48)

This ideal justice works like a mirage for Hieronimo: the closer he thinks he is to slaking his thirst, the remoter the oasis becomes. The moment of his supplication to the King must also be the moment of the disintegration of his decorum as justicer.

This is the contradiction that lies at the heart of Hieronimo's tragic experience. Not to recognize it is to fail to see why Hieronimo's position is *necessarily tragic*. This ideal condition is internalized

---

<sup>31</sup> Barber, *op.cit.*, p.139.

in Hieronimo's sense of himself; its destruction entails the disintegration of selfhood. This is what is taking place now. 'League' and 'love' and 'incense to the offended heavens' in celebration of a resuscitated son: this is the miracle his Christ-like Horatio cannot have. Thus, when the King refers to a living Horatio, Hieronimo breaks out into 'outrages'. This time there is no restraining him:

*Hier.* Justice, O, Justice! O son, my son,  
My son, whom naught can ransom nor redeem!

*Lor.* Hieronimo, you are not well-advised.

*Hier.* Away, Lorenzo, hinder me no more,  
For thou hadst made me bankrupt of my bliss.  
Give me my son, you shall not ransom him. (65-70)

This is the tragic summit of Hieronimo's anguish of paternity, which exposes the fearful a-symmetry between the legality he can dispense and the integrity he needs. We are not witnessing a collapse of the law, but the collapse of a father mortally wounded by the killing of his son. *Wholeness*, rather than *legality*, is what is at stake here. For this reason, in his vengeful madness, Hieronimo is not seeking redress against the criminals, but the impossible restoration of his son. Like crazed Isabella, Hieronimo demands: 'Give me my son, you shall not ransom him'. As he rages in uncontrollable fury, the hell of Revenge breaks loose within the heart of the chivalric court:

Away! I'll rip the bowels of the earth,  
*He diggeth with his dagger*  
And ferry over to th' Elysian plains,  
And bring my son to show his deadly wounds. (71-73)

The two opposing poles of the beginning of the play – the vindictive hell of Revenge and the social Spain of chivalry – come together, and they do so in Hieronimo's madness, which he can no longer keep to himself.

This madness anticipates the paradox of the revenge to which it leads, namely, that the social dependence of the destroyer is asserted by his anti-social destructiveness. The moment of Hieronimo's assertion of his need for wholeness is also the moment of his attempt to purge himself of the social commitment that causes his suffering:

Stand from about me!

I'll make a pickaxe of my poniard,  
And here surrender up my marshalship:  
For I'll go marshal up the fiends in hell,  
To be avenged on you all for this. (75-79)

What we witness here, then, is Hieronimo's renunciation of the King and of the order he represents rather than the King's repudiation of a loyal servant.

## VIII

This culminating scene confirms that the notion of legality is necessary but not sufficient for a full appreciation of Hieronimo's evolution as an avenger. Hieronimo's predicament depends on a profounder, more 'existential' ideal of justice. In terms of our discussion, we could say that what Hieronimo needs is *constitutive* rather than *regulative* justice. That this is so has been recognized by those critics who have been most responsive to the play. Mulryne, for example, refers to 'justice in the emotionally loaded sense that Andrea, Bel-imperia, and sometimes Hieronimo [i.e. the non-villainous avengers] mean the word', adding that 'when Hieronimo protests the seeming absence of Heavenly justice, he is protesting certainly the failure of human courts to bring to justice his son's murderers. But he is really talking about a far larger issue, and one that becomes a leading preoccupation of dramatists like Shakespeare and Webster'<sup>32</sup>. This recognition allows Mulryne to break through the critical aporia of justice and revenge as two mutually excluding principles competing for centrality in the play<sup>33</sup>. Whether the main theme of the play is justice or revenge can only become an issue if revenge is reduced to extra-legal justice, and justice to legality. For Mulryne, the objection to this long-standing critical debate is clear: 'But justice and revenge are not really separate issues'<sup>34</sup>. What allows him to suggest an alternative view that integrates justice and revenge is his 'constitutive' idea of justice.

To be sure, the fact that the progress of Hieronimo towards revenge is not marked by a collapse

---

<sup>32</sup> Mulryne, *op.cit.*, p. xxii.

<sup>33</sup> See Mulryne, p. xxi, for a discussion on this point, and references to the relevant criticism.

<sup>34</sup> Mulryne, *op.cit.*, p. xxii.



of the law is further impressed on us when, still raging in his madness, he leaves the court with: 'You shall not need to strive/ Needs must he go that the devils drive' (81-82). Then, once again, the King exhibits his personal affection for Hieronimo. The play emphasizes that the attention Hieronimo obtains from the King exceeds even that which he, as a senior official of the court, should reasonably expect. Naturally, the King is shocked by Hieronimo's wild manner, and fears that something must be truly amiss. He even interrupts his official business to find out what is wrong with him: 'What accident hath happed Hieronimo?', he asks; 'I have not seen him to demean him so' (83-84). The explanation he receives confirms that it is not the Spain of chivalry that is destroying Hieronimo, but Lorenzo's corrosion of everything this Spain stands for. Lorenzo's reply gives as perverse a misrepresentation of the truth as can be expected from a Machiavel:

My gracious lord, he is with extreme pride,  
Conceived of young Horatio his son,  
And covetous of having to himself  
The ransom of the young prince Balthazar,  
Distract, and in a manner lunatic. (85-89)

This strike at chivalric values has truly aberrant consequences, as can be judged from the comment Lorenzo's lie elicits from the King:

Believe me, nephew, we are sorry for't:  
This is the love that fathers bear their sons. (90-91)

The Hieronimo we have just seen deranged by bereavement for his son is publicly reproached for paternal impiety! Such is the scandalous order the Machiavel substitutes for chivalry. But, whatever the explanation for Hieronimo's outbursts, the King is anxious to excuse him, and noting that perhaps he needs money, orders that Horatio's ransom be given to him. This gesture alone suffices to rebut the charges of royal indifference. The King is clearly on Hieronimo's side.

It is thus difficult to go along with the standard view that

the King fails when Hieronimo attempts to present his case. He is so preoccupied with the Portuguese Viceroy's response to his proposal of a marriage that would unite the kingdoms that he will not even listen to pleading cries for 'justice' from the good and faithful servant who has devoted his life to the cause of justice in his kingdom. He also, as has been pointed out, is guilty

of another failing that renders a magistrate impotent as justicer – partiality.<sup>35</sup>

We have just seen that the King is quite prepared to interrupt his negotiations with the ambassador for the sake of Hieronimo. In fact, his attention only reverts to him once he is satisfied that Hieronimo's problem will be properly looked into (102 ff.). The charge of partiality or favouritism, though often made<sup>36</sup>, is equally unjustified. Aggeler notes that in Act I 'the king's public avowal of faith in the process of divine justice sets up, as has been pointed out, "expectations that he will execute God's justice should the occasion arise"<sup>37</sup>. Aggeler thinks that these expectations fail to be realized in Act III. To me, it not only seems that they are realized, but that as early as Act I they are confirmed by the King's Solomonic intervention in the dispute about Balthazar's capture (I.ii.152-97). Both Lorenzo and Horatio claimed to be authors of this capture. The King had to decide whether his nephew Lorenzo or the underling Horatio should take the credit for it. The sentence he passed did not show the slightest favouritism to his nephew. Kyd highlighted this point by having Hieronimo plead for Horatio (I.ii.166-72), and by having the King reassure him that his son, even for his sake, would be fairly treated: 'Content thee Marshal, thou shalt have no wrong,/ And for thy sake thy son shall want no right' (173-74). And, indeed, the King proved as good as his word by passing a sentence that satisfied all the parties involved, Hieronimo included.

At any rate, the clearest indication that the law is not biased towards Lorenzo is given by Lorenzo himself when, after Hieronimo's outburst, he seizes on it to insist to the King that Hieronimo be stripped of his Marshalship:

But if he be thus helplessly distract

---

<sup>35</sup> Aggeler, op.cit., p.67.

<sup>36</sup> E.g. by Broude, 'Time and Truth in *The Spanish Tragedy*', p. 143: 'The Spain of Kyd's play is corrupt. The King, who should be responsible for maintaining justice is, as Ernst de Chickera has suggested, swayed by partiality. He allows his nephew's ridiculous claim to a share in Balthazar's capture, and he is unwilling or unable to listen to Hieronimo's pleas for the punishment of Horatio's murderers'. The qualification – 'unwilling or unable' – should be a significant one, but it carries no weight in Broude's argument: whatever the King's actual response, he must be condemned.

<sup>37</sup> Aggeler, op.cit., p. 63, quoting Ernst de Chickera, 'Divine Justice and Private Revenge in *The Spanish Tragedy*', *Modern Language Review*, 57 (1962), p.228.

'Tis requisite his office be resigned  
And given to one of more discretion. (96-98)

This anxiety about Hieronimo's judicial powers and the access they guarantee to the King does not argue for Lorenzo's sense of patrician impunity. Furthermore, the King's refusal shows, yet again, his fondness for Hieronimo: the personal welfare of his Knight Marshal must take personal precedence over the smooth functioning of his bureaucracy:

We shall increase his melancholy so.  
'Tis best that we see further in it first:  
Till when, ourselves will exempt the place. (99-101)

There is little here (and for that matter anywhere else) to endorse the view that the highest Seat of Justice in the realm is filled by Corruption – let alone the perception on which Maus bases her reading of Hieronimo's revenge as a crusade against class oppression:

To their betters, Hieronimo and Bel-imperia do not count, that is, they do not constitute independent centres of consciousness that need to be taken seriously.<sup>38</sup>

Rather, the humanity and respect the King shows his loyal servant suggest that Castile is right to be concerned about the effects of Hieronimo's making a public case against his son:

Lorenzo, knowest thou not the common love  
And kindness that Hieronimo hath won  
By his deserts within the court of Spain?  
Or seest thou not the King's my brother's care  
In his behalf, and to procure his health?  
Lorenzo, shouldst thou thwart his passions,  
And he exclaim against thee to the king,  
What honour were't in this assembly,  
Or what a scandal were't among the kings  
To hear Hieronimo exclaim on thee. (III.xiv.61-70)

The feeling of any attentive spectator is not, then, one of moral outrage at the corruption of the law, but one of tragic inevitability. As we watch the action unfold, the dramatic tension for us takes the form '*if only* Hieronimo could make his case to the King'; and '*if only* Lorenzo were fully exposed'. But

---

<sup>38</sup> Maus, *op.cit.*, p.67. Equally, there is plenty of evidence that Bel-imperia is not in-existent to their superiors, as can be seen, for example, from Castile's permanent concern for her activities. Balthazar alludes to this concern when Lorenzo decides to set his sister free from captivity: 'And time, Lorenzo', remarks the prince, 'for my lord the duke,/ You heard, enquired for her yester-night' (III.x.13-14).

Hieronimo cannot, and Lorenzo will not be unmasked. And tragic revenge must ensue.

## IX

The failure to diagnose Hieronimo's true condition at the moment when he gives up his marshalship means that his final enactment of revenge is misconstrued. The immediate consequence of his repudiation of civic justice is the announcement of his commitment to covert vengeance. This announcement is made in the 'Vindicta mihi' soliloquy that follows the scene of supplication. In it Hieronimo debates whether vengeance should be left to God or undertaken by himself; and he finally decides for the latter option. This debate takes the form of a syllogism, which emphasizes the rational treatment Hieronimo tries to give to his situation. The premise – 'Vindicta Mihi' (III.xiii.1) – is the biblical injunction to leave vengeance to God; the counter-premise, which Hieronimo presumably reads from a Seneca he holds in his hand, urges the return of violence for violence – '*Per scelus semper tutum est sceleribus iter*' (6). The inference that follows is evident to Hieronimo: 'And to conclude, I will revenge his death' (20). It is evident to him, but much less so to us. The logical pattern of his reasoning is clear, but the conclusions to which this leads are, to say the least, strained. In effect, Hieronimo thinks he is deducing the right course of action by objective calculation. But we realize from his strained logic that he is in fact rationalizing the course of action he has *already* taken in turning his back on the King's justice. In other words, Hieronimo tries to reason the vengefulness generated by the destabilization of his grief<sup>39</sup>.

---

<sup>39</sup> This interpretation departs from the standard view, which sees the soliloquy as proof of Hieronimo's deliberate and calculated embracement of 'private revenge'. However, I am not alone in supporting it. Scott McMillin, for example, -- 'The Book of Seneca in *The Spanish Tragedy*', *Studies in English Literature*, XIV (1974) -- argues along the same lines: 'Hieronimo has clearly declared for revenge before the soliloquy. In the preceding scene, having failed to present his cause in search of justice, he has turned furious before the uncomprehending eyes of the King. He has knifed the ground in a bizarre gesture to reach the corpse of his son . . . Such a man has passed beyond the deliberation of alternatives, and when he returns a moment later for the 'Vindicta Mihi' speech he is not reaching a decision through logical discourse. He is recapitulating a decision already achieved in feeling and gesture' (pp. 203-204). McMillin's departure from the standard interpretation is motivated, as it is in my case, by the recognition of the centrality of madness to the avenger's evolution.

As he goes on to announce his conversion to Machiavellism, this impression is reinforced. Hieronimo is applying a rational veneer to a transformation provoked not by choice, but by the psychological turmoil from which he suffers. He thus may advise himself on the wisdom of being cunning and may even begin to scheme covert rather than open vengeance; but his plodding, faltering logic betrays the fact that he is far from Machiavellian self-possession<sup>40</sup>:

But how [will I revenge]? Not as the vulgar wits of men,  
With open, but inevitable ills,  
As by a secret, yet a certain mean,  
Which under kindship will be cloaked best.  
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.  
Thus therefore will I rest me in unrest,  
Dissembling quiet with unquietness,  
Not seeming that I know their villainies. (21-31)

Hieronimo thinks he is ridding himself of his social inheritance, and that he will repay Lorenzo in cynical kind. He thus rationalizes the recoil from the community he performed at court, fashioning himself into an anti-chivalric cynic. His credentials for such a part are genuine: from now on his patience will no longer be that of the pious awaiting a signal from God, but that of the beast of prey watching for the right moment to strike. Nor are his civilities produced by an identification with chivalry; they are now proof of his ascendancy over others, achieved by superior self-control:

Nor aught avails it me to menace them,  
Who, as a wintry storm upon a plain,  
Will bear me down with their nobility.  
No, no Hieronimo, thou must enjoin  
Thine eyes to observation, and thy tongue  
To milder speeches than thy spirit affords,  
Thy heart to patience, and thy hands to rest,  
Thy cap to courtesy, and thy knee to bow,  
Till to revenge thou know when, where and how. (36-44)

But Hieronimo's Machiavellism is pressurized at too high a temperature. Wrought by insufferable grief

---

<sup>40</sup> Empson, for example, noted that 'the arguments [here produced] were meant to seem mad to the audience, or at least tragically deluded', as quoted in Aggeler, *op.cit.*, p. 68.

– and not, as he persuades himself, by deliberate apostasy – this cold rationality will not last. At the first return of parental anguish the mask will drop. And this happens only too quickly, when three commoners and Bazulto, an old man pleading with them, interrupt his meditation with a request for legal help. Hieronimo discovers that Balzulto is pleading for his murdered son, and reverts to yet more frantic excesses, including a visit to the underworld and a crazed identification of young Horatio with the old man (145-51). The quest for ‘justice’ has become still more desperately irrational. Hieronimo tears up the petitions given by the commoners, enacting the extent to which he has lost touch with his Marshalship of the realm. The objective world is being fast devoured by corrosive grief. To be sure, Hieronimo may have rejected the ideal justice of God and King, but we see that its absence continues to provoke extreme suffering. By demanding justice from him, the petitioners externalize his grief, and madden him by, in effect, confirming that his purge of the social-in-himself has not been – indeed cannot be – realized. The tension between his need for wholeness and his need for vengeful relief remains unresolved; the difference now is that the pressure for un-chivalric violence has in his new Machiavellism become conscious. This makes Hieronimo truly dangerous. How much will be fully revealed only by his monstrous enactment of revenge in Act IV.

If one of these two factors (collaborative wholeness and destructive individualism) is omitted in the equation of revenge, its meaning becomes distorted. It is therefore crucial to recognize that the rupture marked by the ‘Vindicta Mihi’ soliloquy is only a partial one. This ambiguity between rupture and continuity, however, has not been adequately recognized by criticism. The familiar polarization reappears at this point in the interpretation of the play. On the one hand, Broude argues for an absolute continuity:

The point at issue in this much discussed soliloquy is not, as some commentators have suggested, whether or not it is proper for Hieronimo to avenge his son; Hieronimo has, quite rightly, always considered himself a just revenger, the human agent of divine vengeance whose mandate, his blood-tie to the victim, has been confirmed by the information which the heavens have vouchsafed him. What the soliloquy has been designed to clarify for the audience is Hieronimo’s recognition that although Horatio’s murder *will* be avenged. . . he must ‘stay’ – i.e wait patiently – for the time

appointed for him to act.<sup>41</sup>

On the other hand, Aggeler perceives a radical transformation:

The question that exercises some scholars, whether or not his revenge could be justified as an act of public vengeance, simply does not enter his mind, because he has abandoned his office along with everything it signifies and has surrendered himself to what he sees as a damned role.<sup>42</sup>

Broude's assumption of total continuity is made at the expense of the avenger's madness. Aggeler's model of drastic discontinuity is asserted in disregard of the unhealing social wound that generates the madness and its vengefulness. At this point in the play, even the most sophisticated criticism seems to become reductive. The premises on which Maus builds her case – the negation of the communitarian ideal, including its providentialism, and the negation of the fundamental distinction between avenger (Hieronimo) and Machiavel (Lorenzo) – now reveal their full inadequacy. She concludes that the Machiavellization of Hieronimo constitutes an act of realism on his part, which produces a new, sustainable identity. For her, this soliloquy marks the rebirth of Hieronimo as a 'kindless' hypocrite:

"Kindship" – both "benevolence" and "blood-relatedness" in Renaissance English – once wholly determined Hieronimo's sense of identity. Now, however, "kindship" is hollowed out, a mask behind which the alienated subject works out his treachery.<sup>43</sup>

This repudiation of his former identity, Maus argues, is the repudiation of an illusion. Through his Machiavellization, Hieronimo is won over to a pragmatism that, while not admirable in itself, must be accepted as necessary to survive in the real world:

The skepticism, even nihilism, of *The Spanish Tragedy* makes the machiavellian adaptation to hostile circumstances seem more justified than it does in *Richard III* . . . In the world of *The Spanish Tragedy*, riddled from the top down by hypocrisy and manipulation, Hieronimo's behaviour seems the comprehensibly desperate adaptation of a decent man to a bad world . . . Without any transcendental guarantee of absolute equity, without any hope of an all-knowing supervisor in whom justice and mercy are miraculously combined, intuitions about just treatment become not imperfect human reflections of divine perfection, but fallible forms of myopic and narcissistic special pleading that may or may not happen to be rewarded. The mystery of *The Spanish Tragedy*, then, is not where "machiavellianism" originates, but rather where convictions

---

<sup>41</sup> Broude, 'Time and Truth in *The Spanish Tragedy*', pp.137-38.

<sup>42</sup> Aggeler, op.cit., p.68.

<sup>43</sup> Maus, op.cit., p.60.

about order, virtue, and justice derive.<sup>44</sup>

The persistence of these convictions remain a puzzle to Maus because her fixation on aristocratic oppressiveness blinds her to the reality of the chivalric ideal<sup>45</sup>. But if Hieronimo's universe were really corrupted at root and if *realpolitik* were its natural norm, if his piety were an illusion he could renounce by an act of will, if, in short, Hieronimo could make a successful 'adaptation' to pragmatism – then his experience would cease to be tragic. But Hieronimo's piety has been internalized in his very sense of himself, so that his piety is not merely a matter of 'convictions about order, virtue and justice' to be shrugged off when more mature experience invites him to do so. If this were the case, Hieronimo's suffering would be *inexplicable*. But the one thing that is obvious about Hieronimo's evolution is that it is marked by suffering. For this reason, the moment he ceases to suffer and regains real self-possession, we can be sure that far from having cured himself he is now a serious danger to others, as well as to himself. This does not declare itself until Act IV, when the repeated breakdowns into paternal anguish cease. At that point the avenger's disintegration has given way to an altogether different kind of madness.

## X

In Act IV Hieronimo re-appears in court, in a state of now truly sinister calm. His grief and fury have crystallized into a mad clarity of purpose. Like a laser, Hieronimo's mind stays fixed on a single point, rendered incredibly powerful by this act of contraction. It is only now, in this frightful fixation, that he interprets every circumstance favourable to him as proof of heavenly intercession. Thus, when Bel-imperia rebukes him for delaying his revenge, Hieronimo takes her support as a divine signal for action –

---

<sup>44</sup> Maus, *op.cit.*, p.66.

<sup>45</sup> Of course, Maus's reading of the play is too responsive not to register that 'the weird persistence of those convictions, despite their apparent groundlessness, help determine Hieronimo's calamitous course of action in the final act of the play' (p.67). This is a significant qualification, but her analysis of this final act, as we shall see, continues to over-emphasize class warfare.



But may it be that Bel-imperia  
Vows such revenge as she hath deigned to say?  
Why, then, I see that heaven applies our drift  
And all the saints do sit soliciting  
For vengeance on those cursed murderers. (IV.i.30-34) –

and he vows with her to avenge Horatio's death. To be sure, there continues to be little method in his new madness: 'Nor think I thoughtless think upon a mean/ To let his death be unrevenged at full' (40-41) he assures Bel-imperia; but he has now reached the God-like altitude of the Machiavel. For a moment it seems as if he has successfully Machiavelized himself. In a trance of absolute control, he now places himself above his fellow beings, who will dance to whatever tune he plays. Like Lorenzo recruiting Balthazar<sup>46</sup>, he asks his accomplice that 'whatsoever I devise/ Let me entreat you, grace my practices' because 'the plot's already in mine head' (49-51). With her help Hieronimo will avenge Horatio by means of the nuptial 'show' he is invited to stage. As a Machiavel, Hieronimo will ensure that the devastation he unleashes will strike at the heart of the community: nuptial celebrations will turn into a bloodbath, and their conviviality into a festival of death. He will effect the implosion of two royal houses; and only then as author and director of this Armageddon, will he have revealed the meaning of his revenge.

The space travelled between the initial masque of Act I and his final 'playlet' measures the extent of the perversion of his former sociability. In Act I, Hieronimo put on a 'show' whose 'mystery', as he explained it after the performance, was designed to promote good-will between the reconciled nations and appease the defeated Portuguese. The parallel is made explicit when Balthazar invites Hieronimo to entertain the court:

It pleased you  
At the entertainment of the ambassador  
To grace the King so much as with a show:  
Now were your study so well furnished,  
As, for the passing of the first night's sport,  
To entertain my father with the like,  
Or any such-like pleasing motion,

---

<sup>46</sup> See Lorenzo at II.i.35-38: 'I have already found a stratagem,/ To sound the bottom of this doubtful theme./ My lord, for once you shall be ruled by me:/ Hinder me not whate'er you hear or see'.

Assure yourself it would content them well. (60-67)

As on the former occasion, in Act IV the Knight Marshal remains obliging, but this time his agreement to please is disquieting – ‘Why then I’ll fit you; say no more’ (70). So unthinkable are his real motives that, as the relatives of crazed Titus will also do, his victims agree to all his bizarre demands, believing they are humouring a distracted old man. Balthazar and Lorenzo even concede him the pointless whim of playing the tragedy in several different tongues<sup>47</sup>. In the avenger’s terrible lucidity, however, every detail has its purpose:

It must be so, for the conclusion  
Shall prove the invention and all was good.  
And I myself in an oration,  
And with a strange and wondrous show besides,  
That I will have there behind a curtain,  
Assure yourself, shall make the matter known.  
And all shall be concluded in one scene,  
For there’s no pleasure ta’en in tediousness. (182-89)

And so the tragedy of Soliman and Perseda is staged before the King and his royal guest. The argument of the playlet is simple, but effective. In Hieronimo’s mind there is no doubt as to the assignment of each dramatic role: Erastus Knight of Rhodes (Lorenzo speaking Italian) is married to Perseda (Bel-imperia speaking French), who is loved by great lord Soliman (Balthazar speaking Latin). Soliman confides his love to one of his Bashaws (Hieronimo speaking Greek), who persuades him that Erasto must be killed. The Bashaw kills Erasto at the command of Soliman, who is then killed by Perseda in revenge, who then kills herself. Finally, the spectacle is to end with the Bashaw hanging himself. ‘These be our pastimes in the court of Spain’ (IV.iv.8) the King proclaims with massively unconscious irony as the court makes ready to watch a carnival of blood. When the play concludes, little do they know that what they are applauding are the dead bodies of Lorenzo, Balthazar and Bel-imperia lying in real blood on stage, never to rise again.

The horror of the spectacle is compounded by the pleasurable response it elicits from the audience.

---

<sup>47</sup> Despite numerous attempts to ascertain so, it remains unclear whether the playlet was actually performed according to Hieronimo’s multilingual directive. See Mulryne, p. 109, note to l.172 ff.

Its achievement bears witness to Hieronimo's supreme Machiavellism. One kind of show represents another, but in these games of mirrors only Hieronimo knows which is which. The audience does not actually *see* what it is watching. Hieronimo is in full control of their perception of reality; he has become the Creator of Meaning. To be sure, as in all plays a frame demarcates a segment of reality as a picture, thus determining the interpretative rules that apply to it: what Hieronimo does is to falsify a factual frame of the illusory playlet, substituting the consensual illusion of the theatre with the crazed reality of his revenge. Real actions sustain the audience's suspension of disbelief. Thus Hieronimo reveals himself as a Machiavellian genius, showing an inventiveness to which not even Lorenzo could aspire. This genius is a child of true madness; where the achievement of the common hypocrite is to pass his illusion for reality, Hieronimo confounds everybody by substituting reality for conventional illusion. The horror of this 'confusion' is naively anticipated by some members of the audience who, like the Portuguese Viceroy, wonder for an instant what would happen if a fictional frame did not separate the stage from real life: 'Were this in earnest, Bel-imperia/ You would be better to my son than so' (70-71), he calls out as Bel-imperia, if ever she did anything in earnest, knives hated Balthazar to death. The terrible revelation must now follow. Taking his cue from the King, who, amused, demands, 'But now what follows for Hieronimo?' (72), he comes forward to deliver the epilogue of his tragedy. The 'confusion' will be unpacked: Hieronimo reverts to 'our vulgar tongue' (75). The avenger is now God the Author of 'History' and, as such, will enlighten mortals about the meaning of this history. 'Haply you think, but bootless are your thoughts, that this is fabulously counterfeit' (76-77), he tells them as he turns the epilogue they expect, like the entire show, into a means of self-assertion. With God-like omnipotence, he re-invents conventional reality as an expression of his outraged paternity:

No, princes; know I am Hieronimo,  
The hopeless father of a hapless son,  
Whose tongue is tuned to tell his latest tale,  
Not to excuse gross errors in the play. (83-86)

At this ultimate moment, Hieronimo acts on an illusion of absolute control. Beyond even any autonomy Lorenzo could claim for himself, his declaration of supremacy nullifies all possibility of human

reciprocity. Hieronimo directs events, invests them with meaning, and deciphers this meaning to the confused spectators of, but also in, his reality show.

But Hieronimo's revenge involves much more than an assertion of power. When he next draws the curtain hiding Horatio's corpse, and asks the court to 'behold the reason urging me to do this' (88), the tragic conundrum of his revenge becomes fully apparent: the violence we have witnessed, the vengeful impulse driving Hieronimo to his horrific carnage is revealed to be a means of reclaiming his lost bond with the community. We now confirm that Hieronimo has never emptied himself emotionally like Lorenzo. On the contrary, his Machiavellism, or the Machiavel he believes himself to be, is now revealed not as a nullification of his social condition, but as a perversion of it. He will therefore 'make the matter known' (IV.i.187), exposing the guilt of Balthazar and Lorenzo to the world, denouncing the fatal blow they dealt to his house, showing how much he has suffered in silence. Hieronimo proclaims how 'hope, heart, treasure, joy, and bliss/ All fled, failed, died, yea, all decayed with this' (94-95) as he re-lives, yet again, the fateful night of the murder. He spares his audience none of the circumstances of his anguish: Balthazar and Lorenzo 'had sorted leisure/ To take advantage in my garden-plot/ Upon my son, my dear son Horatio' (103-105), and they butchered him mercilessly, in 'black dark night'. He shrieked, he found his body too late, already 'through-girt with wounds' (107-12). Moreover, Hieronimo does not proclaim the story of his suffering only to justify the deaths of the prince and Lorenzo. This final exegesis is much more than a tale of crime and punishment. *What Hieronimo seeks to exact from the community is a recognition of his suffering.* By eliciting this recognition Hieronimo vindicates his piety as a father, and restores the violated bond between himself and his fellow beings. *At the heart of his revenge we find a truly insane but insanely true affirmation of common humanity:*

And grieved I, think you, at this spectacle?  
Speak, Portuguese, whose loss resembles mine;  
If thou canst weep upon thy Balthazar,  
'Tis like I wailed for my Horatio.  
And you, my lord, whose reconciled son  
Marched in a net, and thought himself unseen  
And rated me for brainsick lunacy  
With 'God amend that mad Hieronimo!' –  
How can you brook our play's catastrophe? (113-21)

Though it declares the avenger's inescapably social condition – the fact that as a human being he is born into a condition of plurality – this affirmation is, of course, a product of madness. As such it bears the marks of a tragic contradiction. Hieronimo manifests his social dependence by vindicating his paternal suffering, but he does so through a violence that entirely nullifies this dependence. His social identity is asserted by an attack on the community. We realize, therefore, that the revenge (crime) responds to the offense (crime) by producing not a corrective balance of retribution, but a destructive excess symptomatic of damaged sociality. Because his sanity is dependent on others, when others launch a radical – an essential – attack on him, he is destroyed. In the course of vindicating his suffering, Hieronimo has blinded himself to the suffering of others. Lorenzo's perversion of Hieronimo's sociality becomes even deeper than his own. This is made even clearer by the events that follow Hieronimo's act of vengeance.

Only contraction or refrigeration of Hieronimo's social self has made possible his God-like appropriation of the fate of his fellow human beings. The dutiful servant of the community has repudiated all human debts, and become author of himself and his destiny. He thus declares his revenge accomplished and calls his programme – into which all reality has been absorbed – to an end:

Now behold Hieronimo  
Author and actor in this tragedy,  
Bearing his latest fortune in his fist:  
And will as resolutely conclude his part  
As any of the actors gone before.  
And, gentles, thus I end my play:  
Urge no more words: I have no more to say. (146-52)

But in Kyd's play, even more than in Seneca's, the mental solipsism of the avenger registers as a pathological attempt to claim self-sufficiency. The external, multi-polar reality of the community withstands the scenario of the deranged avenger. Hieronimo's conclusion is checked; his suicide is impeded, and he is drawn back into the reality his illusion of self-authorship had negated. Hieronimo is now inside a 'play' he has not written. No longer in control, he must now engage with others as an equal. In a further indication that the world of the play is not corrupt, as it is widely thought to be, Hieronimo is promised, even as he is restrained, fair treatment by the Viceroy:

Hieronimo, do but inform the king of these events;  
Upon mine honour thou shalt have no harm. (157-58)

Plainly, Hieronimo's explanation has been entirely lost on the court, for whom his unilateralism in meaning cannot be distinguished from meaninglessness. Furious, the King demands an explanation for 'this undeserving deed' (165), while Castile insists on knowing 'who were thy confederates in this' (176)<sup>48</sup>. But Hieronimo has nothing to say, he refuses to renew his case. As in the supplication scene, he can only produce a crazed response. Insisting that his revenge has been fulfilled, he reveals what price he has paid for it; that is to say, what the 'contraction' of his social being signifies. Literalizing his social mutilation, he repudiates the very possibility of human interaction by biting out his tongue:

Thou may'st torment me, as his wretched son  
Hath done in murdering my Horatio,  
But never shalt thou force me to reveal  
The thing which I have vowed inviolate.  
And therefore in despite of all thy threats,  
Pleased with their deaths, and eased with their revenge,  
First take my tongue, and afterwards my heart. (185-91)

Undeterred by this monstrosity, the courtiers persist in seeking the disclosure of the secret of his revenge. Persuaded that Hieronimo must have some accomplices, they insist that 'yet can he write' (195) and provide him with a pen. Hieronimo demands a knife to mend it and instantly knifes first Castile and then himself with it.

'What age hath ever heard such monstrous deeds?' (202), laments the shattered King, accepting the inevitable. The perspective now broadens into a historical dimension, and reveals a desolate future:

My brother, and the whole succeeding hope  
That Spain expected after my decease!  
Go bear his body hence, that we may mourn  
The loss of our beloved brother's death;  
That he may be entombed, whate'er befall:  
I am the next, the nearest, last of all. (203-208)

It has been argued that this final irrational outburst of Hieronimo's is an action determined by vengeful

---

<sup>48</sup> Castile's assumption of a political conspiracy highlights, by its manifest inadequacy, the purely personal vindication of Hieronimo's revenge. Attempts like Maus's to locate a political vindication at the heart of his revenge should justify why Kyd emphasizes this misinterpretation on Castile's part at this crucial moment.

calculation. With the murder of Castile, it is maintained, Hieronimo achieves the perfect retribution: the realm is deprived of its continuity as his house was with the murder of Horatio. However, the fact is that Hieronimo considers his vengeance accomplished, and declares it to be so, before he commits this final act of despair<sup>49</sup>. Rather, the random destruction of Castile impregnates the community with the avenger's sense of tragic self-loss and dislocation. The faithful servant of state who would gladly have given his life for the realm has brought about its downfall. The King and the Viceroy survive, but they abandon themselves to the future as a death and an oblivion. And so the scene concludes:

And thou, Don Pedro, do the like for us;  
Take up our hapless son, untimely slain:  
Set me with him, and he with woeful me,  
Upon the main-mast of a ship unmanned,  
And let the wind and tide haul me along  
To Scylla's barking and untamed gulf,  
Or to the loathsome pool of Acheron,  
To weep my want for my sweet Balthazar:  
Spain hath no refuge for a Portingale. (209-217)

## XI

The devastation of the realm is now complete – like the obliteration of its pious embodiment Hieronimo. He has vindicated his suffering, that is, himself – but not by an act of justice. The revenge he has wreaked makes a more complex point than a judicial or political one. We never feel for a moment that the devastation we have witnessed was intended to be politically constructive. However, this is precisely what Maus seems to assume when she presents Hieronimo as the type of the Elizabethan avengers, who

---

<sup>49</sup> James P. Hammersmith ('The Death of Castile in *The Spanish Tragedy*', *Renaissance Drama*, New Series, XVI (1985), p. 16), for example, holds that 'In the revenge tradition the Duke of Castile must not remain alive to enjoy the spoils of the original crime. . . through the parallel between the Garden and the Court the design of the play itself imposes another condition which makes the Duke's death necessary and inevitable, namely, that poetic justice be satisfied by depriving the Court of its heritage through the revenge just as Hieronimo was deprived of his heritage through the original crime.' Hammersmith does take account of the objection that Hieronimo considers his revenge completed before he kills the Duke – that is, before his suicide is impeded. However, this does not alter his final judgement. For Hammersmith, 'that Hieronimo himself never explicitly articulates his own understanding of the need for Castile's death may be seen as a flaw in the completion of the design of the play' (p. 15). He suggests that the 1602 additions to the play compensate for such a 'flaw'.

despite their corrosive attack on royal power, are not primarily concerned with establishing their own claims to the throne. Most are too obsessed with retaliation to concern themselves with their personal prospects afterwards, and at any rate their deaths follow so quickly upon the wreaking of vengeance that they have no time to instal themselves in place of their enemies.<sup>50</sup>

As if they would if they could! On the contrary, it seems to me that Hieronimo's bloodbath broadcasts his incapacity to survive the destruction of the moral order shattered by Lorenzo's murder of Horatio. Maus emphasizes the fact that Hieronimo's revenge functions as an attempt to reclaim his 'fellow feeling', but insists in reducing it to a political protest – indeed, to an anachronistic endorsement of eighteenth-century values:

One effect of Hieronimo's seditious infiltration of court spectacle, then, is to suggest an alternative to what has become, in the course of the play, the radically atomized individualism of the Spanish court. . . Hieronimo's [theatre] obliterates, in sumptuously bloody catastrophe, the ideological gap between royal and subjected flesh. Kyd apparently recognizes that such drama of fellow feeling although it may seem to rely on a communal impulse, hardly conduces to the maintenance of social stability: just the opposite, in fact, insofar as grating the full humanity of one's inferiors tends to call into question the naturalness and propriety of disproportionate entitlements.<sup>51</sup>

But against such a 'reduction', we affirm the need to understand that society is not reducible to politics, if we are to appreciate Hieronimo's experience of revenge. Maus is misled by this reduction (which of course does not entail a demotion of the political), and thus fails to recognize that Hieronimo has integrated within himself a social order he cannot relinquish without relinquishing his sanity. Kyd's exploration of society goes further, then, than relationships of power and authority. The play is not interested in what makes a dependable servant of state, but in what makes a dependable human being.

In the final analysis, the revelation that *The Spanish Tragedy* provides is the revelation of the instability of the self. This instability is generated by the fact that we belong to others as well as to ourselves, which means that the self is fundamentally ambiguous, at once complete and relative. It is this social condition of the individual that determines Hieronimo's tragedy. Hieronimo depends for his life's meaning on the condition of justice that only others can create. However, when this condition is damaged, his reaction confirms his social dependence *in a mad way*. This is the paradox of revenge

---

<sup>50</sup> Maus, op.cit., p.56. We recall Scott's identical assumption about the Machiavel.

<sup>51</sup> Maus, op.cit., p.69.



as we discovered it in Senecan drama. Because justice is a fundamental need for him, as for every other human being, the avenger becomes capable of the greatest injustice. Were the human community made up of programmed creatures without volition or intention of their own, Hieronimo would have responded with the pious response that ignores suffering – that is to say, with the patient fortitude dictated by providentialism. But this is no longer possible in Kyd's post-academic drama, which recognizes and accepts the free agency of the individual. Given that we interact with others on a double basis of agency and dependency, the self exists between tension and collaboration. The balance between self-possession and relationship on which our sanity depends is always a precarious one, and therefore potentially tragic. However, if this balance is radically dislocated -- as it is in Hieronimo's case – and tragedy ensues, what it provides is a confirmation of the fragility of this balance, never a transcendence of it.

Thus, Kyd's ground-breaking treatment of revenge, which he owes in part to the non-academic Seneca, consists in his ability to find it revealed in the duality of the avenger. Instead of a privileged locus of the social (in the moral tradition) or of the self (in egocentric Machiavellism), revenge becomes the privileged locus of their intersection. In other words, revenge constitutes the *tragic* experience of this ambivalence of the self, just as marriage constitutes its fulfilling experience in comedy. For this reason, a rigorous analysis of revenge must resist the well-worn polarization of individual against society. We can now see why the Freudian premise that the self is antisocial is an inadequate starting-point for an analysis of Elizabethan revenge drama. As Stockholder's description of Hieronimo's vengeance shows, to approach the avenger on this basis is to fail to recognize the self-destructive dimension of his attack on the community:

Hieronimo's assertion of his son's rights, informed as it is with this egalitarian conception of justice, can be seen in retrospect as a gesture towards an ethos of individualism for which he lacks a conceptual framework that would permit its articulation.<sup>52</sup>

This rebellious Hieronimo is unrecognizable because he shows no signs of self-mutilation. Only the

---

<sup>52</sup> Stockholder, *op.cit.*, pp.106-107.

recognition of his radical – that is to say, his unconscious – social commitment will do justice to that.

## B. THE CHORUS

Just how central the destructive element is to Hieronimo's revenge is confirmed by the appearance of Andrea with which the play concludes. Immediately after the massacre, Andrea comes forward to declare that the Destiny of Revenge has been accomplished. The ghost congratulates himself on the fulfilment of his expectations, taking stock of the destruction that he has wreaked among his fellow beings. His satisfaction is now complete. And this satisfaction does not appear to be qualified in the least by the fact that his victims include his friends. On the contrary, Andrea numbers them amongst those whose deaths bring joy to him, and he exults at the blood that has engulfed the entire court. The greater the devastation, the greater his fulfilment. This seems indeed to be the Spirit of Revenge:

Ay, now my hopes have end in their effects,  
When blood and sorrow finish my desires:  
Horatio murdered in his father's bower,  
Vile Serberine by Pedringano slain,  
False Pedringano hanged by quaint device,  
Fair Isabella by herself misdome,  
Prince Balthazar by Bel-imperia stabbed,  
The Duke of Castile and his wicked son  
Both done to death by old Hieronimo,  
My Bel-imperia fallen as Dido fell,  
And good Hieronimo slain by himself:  
Ay, these were spectacles to please my soul. (IV.v.1-12)

To be sure, Andrea entreats Proserpine to permit that 'I may consort my friends in pleasing sort,/ And on my foes work just and sharp revenge' (15-16). This may or may not be interpreted as an act of justice on his part – the punished 'foes' include innocent Castile, for example – but the fact remains that this intention affects only the afterlife of the courtiers. As far as their enacted life is concerned, the outcome over which Andrea rejoices cannot be called 'just' in any sense of the word. Indeed, this outcome seems to bring him joy because of, rather than in spite of, its random distribution of misfortune.

Clearly, the 'spectacles' that please Andrea's soul are spectacles that satisfy an irrational desire for universal devastation, and thus include the deaths of Bel-imperia and Hieronimo as well as those of their

villainous enemies. In so far as the upper-stage embodies the Spirit of Vengeance, this spirit seems to have little to do with punitive fairness.

Andrea's destructive desire seems to be connected with Hieronimo's. This is suggested by the fact that his 'passion' appears to evolve in parallel with Hieronimo's. Andrea's bloody desire intensifies with the passage of time, keeping pace with the increasing grip of Revenge on Hieronimo. As Hallett and Hallett observe,

the desire [for vengeance] is simple but not static. It is worth noting that the Ghost's passion is much like that of the revenger; it intensifies as the frustrations to its fulfilment increase. Initially, Andrea's desire is almost unstated. . . at last he is imploring all the inhabitants of Hades to come and enforce his right. . . and though at first he viewed the methods of Revenge with dismay, at the end we find him delighting in the carnage<sup>53</sup>.

This evolving nature of the Chorus – 'Here sit we down to see the mystery/And serve for Chorus in this tragedy' are Revenge's directions at I.i.90-91 – confirms its Senecan derivation. As I sought to show in Chapter II, it is characteristic of the Senecan Chorus that it evolves with the action, so that the 'objective' reality which it represents becomes, in the course of the action, swallowed up by self-assertive vengefulness. In *The Spanish Tragedy* the procedure is reversed, but to similar effect: the Spirit of Revenge for which the Chorus stands takes command over the chivalric, anti-tragic court of Spain, plunging it into a bloodbath.

That the Chorus is of Senecan derivation has long been recognized<sup>54</sup>, but not until Barber has it

---

<sup>53</sup> C.A. Hallett and E.Hallett *The Revenger's Madness. A Study of Revenge Tragedy Motifs*, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln and London, 1980, p.142. These authors identify the Chorus with the irrational: 'Because this mysterious force represented by Andrea is in essence irrational, part of its reality is a tendency to run to excess. . . His allegorical companion symbolizes the inevitable destruction which this particular passion will produce' (p.143). However, their reading retains the standard notion of revenge as alternative justice, insisting on the corruption of Spain, and negating Hieronimo's internalization of the ideal – 'much of the conflict of the main revenge action arises from Hieronimo's refusal to accept a world that is imperfect' (p.145).

<sup>54</sup> Bowers (op.cit., p.67), for example, notes that 'Kyd started to make a Senecan imitation adapted to the popular stage. Someone has been killed, and the slayer is to suffer the revenge of the ghost, presumably by becoming tangled in his own misdeeds as in *Hercules Furens*, or, as in *Thyestes*, through the malign influence of the supernatural Chorus'. Bowers insisted that 'the most specific contribution of Seneca to the dramatic form of the *The Spanish Tragedy* is the ghost', but, given that he identifies revenge with 'outlaw legalism', he could attach no meaning to this Senecan presence, and therefore concluded that 'Kyd was gradually led away from the Senecan construction so that his supernatural

been made clear that its meaning is constructed *in contrast* to the civic world of the court. As opposed to the ‘valid social order in Spain’<sup>55</sup>, the upper-stage represents the antisocial logic of violence: ‘the ghost of Andrea and Revenge are the representatives of a Senecan underworld from which they have come to watch its logic of vengeance assert itself in the upper world’<sup>56</sup>. This Senecan violence breaks out through Hieronimo, whose heart warms more and more to the hell of Revenge, until it explodes into his bloody ‘show’. Hence the connection that has been observed between Hieronimo’s inner self and the upper-stage: ‘Kyd seems to share with his more orthodox contemporaries a conviction that the otherworld has an especially intimate relationship to the personal interior’<sup>57</sup>. Also in the Senecan manner, this connection is emphasized by a Prologue. In Seneca, the Prologue embodies the psychic forces that overcome the hero in his vengeful madness. In *Thyestes*, for example, the Fury drags the ghost of Tantalus from the underworld in order to madden the house of Pelops, to which the ghost belongs – ‘Onward, damned shade, and goad thy sinful house to madness’ (ll. 1-2). Accordingly, when Atreus becomes possessed by the madness of revenge, this is signalled by the infernalization of the *penetrable* in which he finds himself at that moment: the world of Tantalus, and its madness of revenge, becomes his own. Likewise, in the Prologue of *Hercules Furens*, Juno, enraged by unconquerable Hercules, promises to work his self-destruction through madness. In order to madden Hercules, however, she insists she must first madden herself, as if *she* were the insanity that will overcome her enemy: ‘That Alcides may be driven on, robbed of all sense, by mighty fury smitten, mine must be the fury first – Juno, why rav’st thou not?’. This is the very world of supernatural essences we find in the upper-stage of *The Spanish Tragedy*. But in Kyd the temporal arrangement is rather more linear, as befits the providential universe of Christianity he inhabits. Kyd’s Prologue establishes the connection

---

chorus became superfluous and even intrusive’ (p. 74) – of course, this is in line with the conventional discernment of the undramatic quality of the Chorus.

<sup>55</sup> Barber, *op.cit.*, p. 134.

<sup>56</sup> Barber, *op.cit.*, p. 144.

<sup>57</sup> Maus, *op.cit.*, p. 65.

between psychic essence (Revenge) and the individual realization of it (Hieronimo) through the story of Andrea, of whom Horatio appears as the living counterpart. When Horatio is killed for his love of Bel-imperia, as Andrea was before him, Revenge takes over by taking possession of Hieronimo. This connection is visually reinforced by the memento of the handkerchief, which passes from Andrea to Horatio, and from Horatio to Hieronimo – like a transmitter of the energy of revenge<sup>58</sup>.

Although this connection has often been remarked upon, its significance has been distorted by the assumption of revenge as extra-legal justice. Thus, despite the Senecan ascendancy of the infernal world<sup>59</sup>, it has been interpreted as the embodiment of Christian Providence, which directs humans to a destiny of perfect justice. Only the assumption that revenge must equal justice could lead to this misrepresentation of the Chorus. This view holds that Hieronimo's objective is 'justice'. Given that Hieronimo's progress below is directed by Revenge, it follows that Revenge and justice must be the same thing. One of the main reasons why this view has prevailed over the alternative view of Revenge as irrational violence is because of Hunter's influential study, 'Ironies of Justice in *The Spanish Tragedy*'. In his analysis, Hunter foregrounds the link that exists between abstract Revenge and the human enactment of revenge, and emphasizes the role of Andrea in establishing this link:

The discovery of [murdered] Horatio is the centre of the main plot, being the re-enactment in real life of the death which began the action of the play; for Don Horatio is, as it were, the living surrogate for the ghost of Andrea. . . the death of Horatio re-presents the death of Andrea<sup>60</sup>.

For Hunter, this 're-enactment' activates the providential mechanism of retribution represented by Revenge and Andrea. He thus refers to 'the expectation which Revenge and Andrea arouse by their very presence – that wrong must soon, and inevitably, be followed by retribution'<sup>61</sup>. From this perspective, the three planes of the play – the infernal, the providential, and the human – are reduced

---

<sup>58</sup> For an interesting analysis of the motive of the handkerchief and the relation between revenge and memory, see Kerrigan, *op.cit.*, p. 174 ff.

<sup>59</sup> For an analysis of the Senecan derivation of the Prologue, see Hill, *op.cit.*

<sup>60</sup> G.K.Hunter, 'Ironies of Justice in *The Spanish Tragedy*', in *Dramatic Identities and Cultural Tradition*, Liverpool University Press, Liverpool, 1978, p. 222.

<sup>61</sup> Hunter, 'Ironies of Justice', p.221.

to the latter two and eventually to one: for Hunter the play constitutes 'an allegory of perfect justice'. Andrea, he concludes, 'was returned to earth by the just gods, to witness a parable of perfect recompense'<sup>62</sup>. As we have seen, by the end of the play nothing indicates that this perfection of justice has been achieved, but for Hunter this is irrelevant. It is only our human finitude that impedes the acceptance of utter injustice as perfect justice. As a mortal, Hunter perceives the human wreckage that Revenge brings about, but this does not affect his verdict. In his reading, no affinity exists between Providence and its pious believers. Like Saturn, Providence devours its own children, but it does so for the sake of justice:

it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of a just god. The absorption of the human into the divine justice machine means the destruction of the human, and Hieronimo becomes the perfected instrument of Revenge only by becoming inhuman.<sup>63</sup>

Whatever 'justice' means here, it has ceased to have a human meaning. But Hunter does not stop there. In his grim universe, the very humanity of the characters becomes a macabre joke. The stronger the characters' sense of purpose, the greater the testimony of their fettered condition:

*The Spanish Tragedy* as a whole has continuously set the marionette-like action of the man whose destiny is predetermined against the sense of choice or willpower in the passionate and self-confident individual. Continuously we have had actors watching actors but being watched themselves still by other actors (watched by the audience) . . . and at each point in this chain what seems free will to the individual seems only a predetermined act to the onlookers.<sup>64</sup>

There is no doubt that one of the most striking effects of the Chorus lies in the ironies it generates out of human limitation. But the effect of these ironies is not to annul the possibility of individual freedom. That Hunter reaches this implausible conclusion is not surprising given his intention of reclaiming the play for the moralizing native tradition<sup>65</sup>, in which the claims of providentialism are absolute.

---

<sup>62</sup> Hunter, 'Ironies of Justice', p.222.

<sup>63</sup> Hunter, 'Ironies of Justice', p.226.

<sup>64</sup> Hunter, 'Ironies of Justice', p.227.

<sup>65</sup> Hunter makes his case on the basis that if the play 'is seen not so much as the harbinger of *Hamlet* . . . but more as the inheritor of a complex and rich tradition of moralizing dramaturgy, the actual structure of the play begins to make more sense' (Hunter, 'Ironies of Justice', p.216).

Contrary to Hunter's Grand Guignol thesis, it seems to me that the Chorus is designed to create the opposite perception, to wit, that of distinctive individual agency. To be sure, with the presence of Andrea and Revenge Kyd achieves a multiple-perspective effect that puts the audience ahead of the characters, casting their actions in an ironic light. But the effect of the Chorus is more complex than that, for Kyd gives it a playful, and even comic tone that cannot anticipate the ferocity of Hieronimo's revenge<sup>66</sup>. Though Hunter's conclusions seem to ignore this aspect of the Chorus, the fact remains that Kyd exploits our foreknowledge in order to make Hieronimo's enactment of revenge even more shocking. The Chorus anticipates such an enactment, but its comic tone in no way prepares us for the carnage we witness. As a result, the sublunary plane of the humans gains rather than loses in prominence in relation to the plane of the eternal Substances. Contrary to the providential ethos of medieval derivation, the parallelism between the upper-stage and the main stage serves to highlight the self-consistency of the human world, which is perceived as the more intense and real world of the two.

The play does include the nihilistic vision of life Hunter tries to place at its heart. But this vision is not allowed to become the normative one, and indeed is rejected as the monstrous product of a diseased conscience – the conscience of the Machiavel. In effect, the frightful possibility that life may be but an absurd joke flashes before us when Pedringano, confident that his Lord Lorenzo shall save him, refuses to face up to death, mocking his executioner's recommendation of contrition and repentance. Pedringano is promised a pardon from the king, and stakes his hopes on it, confident he shall be spared from the gallows. However, as the messenger who brings it discovers, behind such a pardon lies nothing but a final, mocking emptiness:

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 gentleman-like 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

---

<sup>66</sup> Barber (op.cit., p.145), for example, refers to 'these choruses, playful in a delightful way'. This playful tone is set by the Prologue, in which the underworld court of Pluto and Proserpine appears as frivolous as any earthly court can be: 'Here finding Pluto with his Proserpine/ I showed my passport, humbled on my knee,/ Whereat fair Proserpine began to smile/ And begged that only she might give my doom./ Pluto was pleased, and sealed it with a kiss' (I.i.76-80). And continues right through to the end of Act III, where Revenge falls asleep and Andrea is at pains to wake her up.

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 would say, 'Mock on, here's thy warrant.' Is't not a scurvy jest that a man should jest himself to death? (III.v.5-17).

And so Lorenzo the Almighty Lord allows his servant to jest himself to death. Indeed, we momentarily tremble at the prospect that, in our hour of need, our Lord may prove no less witty than Lorenzo. Lorenzo's is a truly nihilistic vision, but it is a vision defeated by another nightmare that Lorenzo's nihilism creates, the nightmare of revenge. The vision of the avenger is as pathological as that of the Machiavel, but it is born of piety and affection. When Hieronimo enacts his playlet, the Machiavel is defeated by the pious humanity he negates. To claim that the play is an affirmation of nihilism is to ignore, or misconstrue, the ironic defeat of the Arch-individualist <sup>67</sup>. Hieronimo can say with Pascal that 'the eternal silence of these infinite spaces frightens me' but, unlike his seventeenth-century successor, he cannot say it and retain his sanity. Hieronimo's madness of revenge belongs to a universe in whose silence the music of the spheres still reverberates.

---

<sup>67</sup> E.g., Barber, *op.cit.*, p.159: 'One way to define what Kyd did is to call it an heroic-nihilistic play. . . . [its] final scenes are devoted largely to a nihilistic wish-fulfilment, the motive contracted entirely to the enjoyment of quid-pro-quo violence, made possible by the drama's actualization of the fantasy that art can become life'.



## Chapter Five

### *Titus Andronicus I*

## A. A PLAUSIBLE COMMUNITY

### I

Modern criticism acknowledges the relationship that exists between Kyd's seminal play and Shakespeare's first tragedy, but it rarely explores this relationship beyond the most general points of contact between them<sup>1</sup>. Critics recognize, of course, that both plays are unconventional revenge plays, but they do not seem to lend any weight to the fact that *Titus Andronicus* was as successful in its own day as *The Spanish Tragedy*. On the contrary, Shakespeare's first tragedy is often presented as an inferior derivative that contributes little to the new possibilities of revenge tragedy. Shakespeare failed to engage creatively with Kyd's revolutionary play, producing an imitative, rather flawed tragedy of no special consequence:

Designed in obvious imitation of Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy*, *Titus Andronicus* has an aged, worthy pillar of social piety, who suffers outrage to his children, is driven to desperate, extravagant grief and protest, "takes false shadows for true substances" (III.ii.80) under the intolerable pressure of feeling, and finally, by turning dramatic fiction into physical action, achieves outrageous revenge. . . . Because motives remarkably similar to those handled in *King Lear* are projected in symbolic action for which there is no adequate social matrix, there can be no control by ironic recognition, no clarification of what these motives mean as they are expressed in relation to a plausible community whose stability they disrupt. *Titus Andronicus* fails, by contrast with *The Spanish Tragedy* (let alone *King Lear*), because there is in effect no larger social world within which the outrage took place, no ongoing business of state and private life within which the isolation of the injured hero can be presented, in the way that Hieronimo's desperate, helpless isolation is conveyed. The revenge motive as a struggle for vindication of what is at the core of society is only formally present in *Titus Andronicus*<sup>2</sup>.

This verdict of failure rests on a clear claim, namely that *Titus Andronicus* fails to represent a plausible

---

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Waith's judgement in his 1994 Oxford Shakespeare edition of the play, p.38: 'The great distinction of *The Spanish Tragedy* is Kyd's theatrically effective portrayal of an admirable magistrate driven to commit murder by his desire for revenge. Grief for a murdered son and frustration of his inability to obtain justice are more than Hieronimo can bear; madness and the terrible ingenuity of his reprisal are the result. To anyone seeking to exploit the success of this play the story of Titus Andronicus offered another public official unable to obtain justice and driven to madness and revenge. Some of the most startling features are probably due in part to the model provided by Kyd. Like *The Spanish Tragedy*, *Titus Andronicus* is sensational, serious, learned and spectacular.' Barton is more specific: 'In the early *Titus Andronicus* (c.1594) Shakespeare had experimented successfully with the type of play made popular by Kyd: classicizing, rhetorical, beautifully patterned in terms of stage action, and coolly horrible. Titus himself, a father with two dead sons, and a raped and mutilated daughter to avenge, produces many of the reactions of Hieronimo' (Barton, prologue to *Hamlet*, p.19).

<sup>2</sup>C. L. Barber and R. Wheeler, *The Whole Journey: Shakespeare's Power of Development*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1986, p.125.

community. The play fails in its representation of revenge because it fails in its representation of the social environment of revenge. What makes of *Titus Andronicus* a much less accomplished play than its predecessor is its failure to establish a credible connection between the avenger and his society. In Barber and Wheeler's view, *Titus* recasts the Kydian avenger in a context that fails to embody those social norms and values against which the violence of revenge can be measured. To put it crudely, in Shakespeare's play the avenger unleashes his violence in a community that knows no meaningful alternative to violence. Thus, of *Titus* it cannot be said – as it can of *Hieronimo* – that his revenge vindicates 'what is at the core of [his] society'. To be sure, both plays exhibit the same basic pattern: in Act II of *The Spanish Tragedy*, Lorenzo launches his Machiavellian attack on the community of chivalry represented in Act I by performing his "deed of darkness" against Horatio. In Act II of *Titus Andronicus*, at the instigation of the Machiavellian Aaron, the barbarous Goths launch a similarly savage assault on the virtuous Romans by destroying Lavinia and her husband Bassianus. The revenges of *Hieronimo* and *Titus* – paragons of the civic ethos under attack – respond to this Machiavellian assault. The claim of Barber and Wheeler is that in Shakespeare's play the savagery of the aggressor is not clearly counterpoised against an unambiguously positive world of social values like *Hieronimo*'s. In *Titus* the community exhibits an element of barbarity foreign to the ideal civism of chivalrous Spain; Rome's violent tenor of life – to use Huizinga's phrase – seems to make the distinction between aggressors and victims much more tenuous than in Kyd. Thus, the normative features of Roman civilization appear to blur into a pagan barbarity that does not distinguish between Goth and Roman, Machiavel and avenger. Emrys Jones, for example, finds that the play is 'Greek in feeling', and that 'the setting is Roman, but the story it tells is one of Thracian violence'. For Jones, who is trying to link the play to Euripides's *Hecuba*, the Greek character of the play manifests itself in its barbaric atmosphere, to which Romans contribute no less than Goths: 'The play's first act of barbaric violence is *Titus*'s own – his sacrifice of Alarbus, son of Tamora. This act of human sacrifice, an addition to the

source, is itself not Roman but Greek<sup>3</sup>. The perception of a common barbarity to Goths and Romans underpins, then, the charge of implausible representation of the community. But is this an accurate perception of the play? It seems to me that it is not.

What Shakespeare represents in his tragedy of Romans and Goths is their reciprocal perception of barbarity, which is entirely different from the representation of a shared barbaric disposition. To be sure, the first to perform a barbaric act are the Romans. Carrying the coffins of his dead sons, victorious Titus returns to Rome. He enters the city in triumphal procession, and pays tribute to Jupiter at his Temple or Capitol, the religious heart of Rome. He then opens the family tomb in order to inter his dead sons. This ritual re-encounter with the city after ten years of war is completed with the sacrifice of Alarbus, the eldest son of the captive Queen of the Goths. The sacrifice is patently barbaric – involving the rending and disembowelling of the body, its severing into parts and its consumption by fire – but not for that any the less Roman. Shakespeare stresses the fact that the sacrifice responds to no vindictive impulse; it is conducted in perfect accord with Roman religious practice. It is not the vengeful living, but the dead who ‘religiously. . .ask a sacrifice’ (I.i.127)<sup>4</sup>. As Lucius shows, the satisfaction the Andronici take in Alarbus’s slaughter is the satisfaction of accomplished duty:

See, lord and father, how we have performed  
Our Roman rites. Alarbus’ limbs are lopped,  
And entrails feed the sacrificing fire,  
Whose smoke like incense doth perfume the sky.  
Remaineth nought but to inter our brethren. (145-49).

For the mother of the victim it is quite different, of course. The violence that is being done to her appears incomprehensible to Tamora. But she condemns it as a mark of *romanitas*, which she so much hates: ‘O cruel, irreligious piety’ (133). To her foreign eyes, the demands that Roman piety makes seem utterly inhuman. As outsiders to the faith, the Goths perceive in Roman rites nothing but sheer barbarity. Compared to Rome, ‘was never Scythia half so barbarous’ (134), says Chiron, one of

---

<sup>3</sup> Jones, *op.cit.*, pp. 106-107.

<sup>4</sup> All citations to the play are taken from Jacques Berthoud and Sonia Massai’s 2001 The New Penguin Shakespeare edition of *Titus Andronicus*.

Tamora's two surviving sons. Chiron's imputation of barbarism is an ironic reversal of the cultural righteousness of Marcus, who announced Titus's return from 'weary wars against the barbarous Goths' (28). These mutual perceptions of barbarity do not argue for a condition of barbarousness that Goths and Romans share. Rather, they establish a cultural relativity: each culture is shown from the perspective of the other, so that their limiting relativity is exposed. 'Barbarism' is the perceived cultural limitation of the other tribe that remains unexamined in one's own. Thus, what Shakespeare establishes from the start is the limitation that his culture imposes on the perceiver of another culture. Contrary to what many critics assume<sup>5</sup>, Shakespeare emphasizes the barbarity of Goths and Romans alike in order to emphasize the cultural divide separating them.

The importance of this for my discussion is that such relativity defines a historico-cultural dimension for the community that makes its members' dependence on it more, not less, definite than in Kyd. Characters are more definite in Shakespeare because they are more relative, too -- relative to their community. This significant advance on Kyd's generic representation of the community is totally disregarded by Barber and Wheeler. Against Shakespeare's culturally specific communities, Kyd's Spain appears abstract and schematic. *The Spanish Tragedy* certainly generates a sense of "ongoing business of state and private life", in a way unknown to the declamatory drama of its predecessors. As I argued in the previous chapter, the play successfully represents a community, the identity of whose members is shown to rest on their location in a network of sexual, familial, and social relations, all of which are seen simultaneously at work in their actions and speeches. Shakespeare, however, takes the Kydian development further by giving the characters' speeches and actions a historico-cultural dimension. Two different societies are shown from each other's perspective so that their respective members are seen to interact on the basis of their cultural limitations. In this sense, where Kyd's achievement was to represent *the community*, the achievement of Shakespeare is to recreate *a community*. Of course, the social reality in *The Spanish Tragedy* is not timeless. The Spanish court

---

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Jonathan Bate's perception that the sacrifice of Alarbus is intended to 'break down the distinction between Romans and barbarians' (J. Bate, *Shakespeare and Ovid*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1993, p.108).

appears as a recognizable traditional court of chivalric values. But Kyd's main concern in dramatizing a chivalric community is to represent a social ideal with which one can identify. What is most fundamental about the social norm Kyd establishes is its universal validity. By contrast, Shakespeare not only imagines a pagan world that is designed to be completely foreign to his Elizabethan audience, but produces two different societies that have a life of their own, thus making us conscious of the fact that our society has also a life of its own, which determines our identity, creating insiders and outsiders. In the last analysis, the difference between Kyd and Shakespeare is that only in the latter is the historico-social dimension of the community recreated from within the characters. In *The Spanish Tragedy* the different nationalities of the characters remain purely nominal: nothing in their actions or speeches shows the Portuguese to be different from the Spaniards. On the contrary, in *Titus Andronicus* we constantly feel that a Roman acts as he does because of his Roman affiliations, the same applying to the Goths. But if Shakespeare's representation of the community is richer than Kyd's it is no less true that this representation was made possible by Shakespeare's assimilation of Kyd's example. Kyd learnt from Seneca, and Shakespeare learnt from Seneca and Kyd, to represent a society by showing that the individual self is such by virtue of its being social. Contrary to Barber and Wheeler's claim, *Titus Andronicus* not only represents a 'larger social world within which the outrage' of revenge takes place, but shows this outrage to express the avenger's internalization of his society.

## II

Much in the same way that Kyd's community is generic, his tragic hero is also sized up as one of us. Hieronimo embodies the average family man, with whose suffering we fully identify when he is brutally uprooted from his secure world of respectability and affection. In this respect, in so far as he is a hero Hieronimo is a forced one. Titus is not. How differently their roles are conceived is evident from the start. Hieronimo makes his first appearance on the occasion of Spain's victory over Portugal, as one more member of the party who welcomes the triumphant troops back home. His is not an outstanding presence. Only when his son Horatio enters leading the Portuguese prince captive does

he come to notice. It then becomes clear how profoundly he identifies with the values of his community.

Titus's first appearance is similarly intended to impress on us his strong identification with the community. But it soon appears that this identification is not of the common sort. In the speech that precedes Titus's entrance, Marcus announces to his fellow Romans that the glorious warrior is returning home. In so doing he refers to him as 'Andronicus, surnamed Pius' (I.i.23). It is no coincidence that the first we hear about Titus is that he is "pius", an epithet associated with Aeneas and usually glossed by editors as '[devoted] to patriotic duty'<sup>6</sup>. In his justly famous study of Roman civilization Barrow brings out the deeper resonances of the phrase:

For a 'religious man' the phrase is usually 'a man of the highest *pietas*' and *pietas* is part of that subordination of which we have spoken. You are *pius* to the gods if you admit their claims: you are *pius* to your parents and elders, and children and friends, and country and benefactors, and all that excites, or should excite, your regard and perhaps affection, if you admit their claims on you, and discharge your duty accordingly; the claims exist because the relationships are sacred.<sup>7</sup>

To be *pius* then is to excel in the recognition of the outside claims on the self, in the acceptance of the communal dimension of your individual life. To excel in such a capacity among the Romans is to be extraordinarily devoted to familial and social piety, for the Romans were 'perhaps the most political people we have known, [who] used the words "to live" and "to be among men" (*inter homines esse*) or "to die" and "cease to be among men" (*inter homines esse desinere*) as synonyms'<sup>8</sup>. As part of the Roman ethos of service, which rejects any claim to self-sufficiency, *pietas* appears as the radical opposite of any form of individualism like the Machiavel's:

Throughout their history the Romans were acutely aware that there is 'power' outside man,

---

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Waith's edition, p.84, footnote 23. J. Bate's quotation from Cooper (*Thesaurus Linguae Romanae et Britannicae ... accessit dictionarium historicum et poeticum propria vocabula*) – "religious; devoute; godly; mercifull; benigne; that beareth reverent love towarde his countrei and parentes; Naturall to his kinsefolke" -- confirms the social content of the epithet. (Cf. J. Bate's 1995 Arden Shakespeare edition, p.129, footnote 23).

<sup>7</sup>Barrow, R.H., *The Romans*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1949, p. 22.

<sup>8</sup>Arendt, H., *The Human Condition*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1958, p. 32.

individually and collectively, of which man must take account. He must subordinate himself to something. If he refuses, he invites disaster . . . Willing co-operation gives a sense of dedication; the purposes become clearer, and he feels he is an agent or an instrument in forwarding them; at a higher level he becomes conscious of a vocation, of a mission for himself and for men like him, who compose the state. When the Roman general celebrated his 'triumph' after a victorious campaign, he progressed through the city from the gates to the temple of Jupiter (later in imperial times to the temple of Mars Ultor) and there offered to the god 'the achievements of Jupiter wrought *through* the Roman people'.<sup>9</sup>

When Titus enters in ceremonial procession, the appositeness of Marcus's epithet is confirmed. Unlike Hieronimo, a mere spectator of the triumphal return of the Spanish troops, Titus enters Rome (and the play) as an embodiment of national glory; Titus occupies the centre-stage of Roman life. Re-enacting the rite described by Barrow, he pays tribute to the God who has directed him in his Roman mission. It soon emerges that Titus's identification with such a mission is absolute, beyond anything possible in Hieronimo's chivalric world: Titus's return is the last one over ten years of war against the Goths, during which he has lost twenty-one of his twenty-five sons. The epic simile with which he opens his salutation speech (I.i.73 ff.) shows that he projects himself in the light of the ancient warrior-heroes of the *Iliad*, in whose example he has made his great sacrifices, perpetuating the glorious tradition of Rome. Jonathan Bate remarks that 'from the outset, the characters in *Titus* establish mythical and historical patternings for the action'<sup>10</sup>. For him, this shows that with his first tragedy Shakespeare was competing with his erudite fellow playwrights who, unlike him, had received university training. For this reason, he argues, the play exhibits such unusually high number of mythical and historical allusions – 'precisely because Shakespeare had less formal education than certain other dramatists, his play has more display of learning. He trumps his contemporaries with their own suit'<sup>11</sup>. However, that this may be so should not obscure the fact that the characters are seen to think of themselves and their actions in the light of the classical figures they invoke, that is to say, they are seen to be constituted by their precedent. The traditional examples invoked by the Andronici show much more than their (or

---

<sup>9</sup> Barrow, *op.cit.*, pp.9-10.

<sup>10</sup> Bate, *Shakespeare and Ovid*, p.103.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p 112.



Shakespeare's) acquaintance with the Roman past: they reveal that they live in emulation of ancient precedent. In short, they show that the Andronici are the product of the culture in which they exist. And, of course, this also holds for the Goths, who are shown to be Rome's cultural outsiders. Accordingly, where Titus is capable of the greatest sacrifice in deference to legendary precept, the Goths exhibit a contemptuous skepticism about it – for example, Tamora's allusions to Aeneas ('conflict such as *was supposed*/ The wand'ring prince and Dido once enjoyed' (II.iii.21-22)) or to Diana ('Had I the power that *some say* Dian had' (II.iii.61))<sup>12</sup>. Thus, the fact that Titus's commitment to his society is of an heroic proportion unknown to Hieronimo has to do with the fact that Titus's society is also heroic in a way that chivalrous Spain is not, either.

However, from the start there are signs that the extraordinary civic commitment of the Romans is not unproblematic. If Shakespeare represents a more extreme piety than Kyd's, he does not do so by ignoring the limitations that this piety imposes on the individual. In *Titus* we re-encounter the tension between the communally-orientated and the self-centred claims we found in Kyd's play. The enactment of this tension is proof of Shakespeare's full assimilation of the Senecan (and Kydian) conception of unstable selfhood. In Shakespeare's play, the tension generated by the instability of the self is brought to its limit. Just how radical the Andronici's assumption of Rome's interests is – especially that of the *paterfamilias* Titus – is made clear by the sacrifice of Alarbus. Appropriately, it is in contrast to the undisciplined Goths that the limitations of *romanitas* emerge in full. Thus, when Tamora pleads to Titus to spare her eldest son in the sacred name of their common parenthood and humanity:

[I]f thy sons were ever dear to thee,  
O, think my son to be as dear to me.

O, if to fight for king and commonweal  
Were piety in thine, it is in these. (I.i.110-18),

and he refuses:

Patient yourself, madam, and pardon me.  
These are their brethren whom your Goths beheld  
Alive and dead, and for their brethren slain

---

<sup>12</sup> See Berthoud and Massai, *op.cit.*, p.29.

Religiously they ask a sacrifice.  
To this your son is marked, and die he must  
T'appease their groaning shadows that are gone. (124-29),

the unbearable demands on Roman virtue reveal themselves. Tamora tries to activate the warrior's sensibility as a father, asking him to recognize his own parental loss in hers. The fact that Titus responds with an impersonal endorsement of the strict Roman law shows the extent to which he represses his own paternal affection. At this moment, we feel that this repression is the same that has allowed him to sacrifice so many of his sons; Titus surrenders Tamora's son to the dictates of virtue in the same way he has surrendered his before. Titus's assumption of the demands of Rome is so complete as to render his actions almost impersonal. He condemns Alarbus to be sacrificed without the slightest feeling of vindictiveness. Titus here dispenses the rational revenge that Seneca the Stoic philosopher prescribes for the wise man. This revenge is inspired by a desire to endorse the law only. Far from manifesting the subjective condition of the avenger, it expresses his objective recognition of the law as the highest principle of action. The regulative revenge Titus enacts here is the mark of his radical socialization, by virtue of which he surrenders all his individual claims in the interest of the common good. Indeed, at this initial moment, Titus the martial Stoic seems incapable of the self-assertive convulsion of the constitutive avenger. Nonetheless, Shakespeare never allows us to forget the price at which Titus's exemplary virtue is achieved. Thus, the repressiveness of the demands that Rome makes on Titus's parental affection is shown by contrast with Tamora's protective motherhood. This perception of the unnatural severity of Rome is reinforced by the fact that, as it appears later, the Andronici seem never to have known anything like Tamora's protective motherhood. In effect, if it is clear that the Andronici are characteristically Roman in valuing the family above all -- which makes Titus's sacrifice of his sons all the greater -- it is no less plain that their familial make-up remains disturbingly incomplete, to the extent that even the younger generation seem never to have been duly mothered, as young Lucius's allusion to his dead mother shows (IV.i.23). Rome belongs to the warlike patriarchs, not to the feeling mothers who try to cushion the blows they receive. But a human being

needs both a father and a mother (or the equivalents to them) to be complete.

### III

What Titus's absolute commitment to Rome means in terms of personal sacrifice is further emphasized by the election of the new emperor, which follows next. In effect, it soon becomes apparent that in his commitment to *romanitas* Titus operates on a basis that ignores the temporal pressure under which the community exists, and the resulting instability of the elements that configure its identity. That Rome proves to be much more porous than its monolithic defender assumes in his civic purity is made apparent from the start, in the events immediately preceding Titus's triumphant entrance, which show Rome to be divided into factions. The competition between Saturninus and Bassianus for the imperial crown exposes an ominous dissension at the heart of the empire. In this respect, it is no accident that their dispute takes the form of a conflict between the prerogatives of birth and the rights of merit – what David Briggs terms the dispute of 'parentage versus deeds'<sup>13</sup> -- since it shows how questionable Rome's assumption is that individual will and state power can be made to coincide harmoniously. The tension between the immutable order of tradition (parentage) and the dynamism of individual aspiration (deeds) reveals the permanent state of potential disintegration in which the communal order exists.

Saturninus claims that only his primogeniture can legitimate the future of Rome as continuous with its past:

I am his first-born son that was the last  
That wore the imperial diadem of Rome;  
Then let my father's honours live in me,  
Nor wrong mine age with this indignity. (5-8)

To the claims of tradition Bassianus opposes the manifest moral inadequacy of the primogenitor; only Bassianus will be guarantor of enthroned virtue:

And suffer not dishonour to approach

---

<sup>13</sup> See Riggs, *op.cit.*, pp. 62-92 for a discussion of the prominence of this topic in early public tragedy, as popularized by *Tamburlaine*.

The Imperial seat, to virtue consecrate,  
To justice, continence, and nobility;  
But let desert in pure election shine,  
And, Romans, fight for freedom in your choice. (13-17)

In view of the patent reality that birth and merit are sometimes at odds, that the order of tradition is not always at one with the order of morality, Titus's code of service proves too reductive in its expectations of absolute individual conformity. Hence, his catastrophically naive assumption that whoever heredity chooses shall prove worthy of that choice. The unsuitability of Saturninus becomes exposed in the impatience and foolish pride with which he threatens Titus when Titus is proposed as the people's candidate for the crown (206-20). Yet Titus throws his decisive weight behind the primogenitor's candidacy. On the basis that descent and virtue cannot fail to be mutually inclusive, and given that he cannot conceive of any tension between communal demand and personal fitness for the task, Titus overrides the people's trust in his proven honourableness and calls for, and obtains, the election of the primogenitor:

Tribunes, I thank you, and this suit I make,  
That you create our emperor's eldest son,  
Lord Saturnine, whose virtues will, I hope,  
Reflect on Rome as Titan's rays on earth,  
And ripen justice in this commonweal.  
Then if you will elect by my advice,  
Crown him and say, 'Long live our emperor!'. (226-32)

It has been observed that Titus's insistence on primogeniture seems to be out of context in a Rome that freely elects its emperors on the basis of their personal worth, and indicates a historical vagueness uncharacteristic of Shakespeare's Roman plays:

In *Titus Andronicus* Rome seems to be, at times, a free commonwealth, with the usual mixture of patrician and plebeian institutions. Titus is himself elected emperor of Rome on account of his merits, because the senate and people do not recognize an hereditary principle of succession. But Titus disclaims the honour in favour of the late Emperor's elder (and worsen) son. Titus is a devoted adherent (not to say a maniacal one) of the hereditary monarchical principle in the commonwealth that only partly takes it into account, and he eventually acknowledges his mistake. He encourages, by his subservience, the despotic rule on which Saturninus embarks . . . Now, all these elements of the political situation can be found in Roman history, but not combined in this way.<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> T. J. B. Spencer, 'Shakespeare and the Elizabethan Romans', *Shakespeare Survey* 10 (1957), p. 32.

The author just quoted concludes that such apparent incongruities are due to Shakespeare's effort to bring a political and institutional conspectus of ancient Rome to life. In other words, they are due to the fact that the playwright is, in Spencer's famous formulation, 'more anxious, not to get it all right, but to get it all in'<sup>15</sup>. The play, it would seem, does not attempt to recreate a specific moment of Roman history but to provide 'a faithful picture of Roman civilization' as a whole<sup>16</sup>. If one subtracts Spencer's implication that Shakespeare put everything he knew about Rome in a bag and then shook it, this seems to me to be right. The play presents two different Romes that are the same: an early period of upright martialists devoted to patriotic duty -- broadly corresponding to the ethos associated with the Republic -- and a later decadent age of self-indulgent kings -- like that of the Empire of the Twelve Caesars. The play thus encompasses the two fundamental cultural modes that characterized Roman civilization -- the first associated with Titus, the second with Saturninus. But Shakespeare does more than provide an inclusive cross-section of Roman history: he shows how the moral relaxation of the imperial age is a consequence of the extraordinarily demanding Republican code of virtue. In other words, he shows the limitations of the martial code of virtue on which Rome rests. With the accession of Saturninus, the self-indulgent streak of the individual, so drastically repressed by the Rome of the martialists, re-asserts itself. Just as the discipline of Cato the Elder paved the way for the imperial whimsicalness of Nero, so does Saturninus's appetite come to replace Titus's asceticism. In this sense, Titus's emphasis on primogeniture is intended to highlight the crucial role that martial uprightness plays in the emergence of Saturninian decadence. It is by being strictly faithful to the suppression of self-interest that Titus renounces the throne in order to fill it with a creature of appetite like Saturninus.

In the play, the transition from a Rome of discipline to a Rome of self-indulgence is carefully articulated: Saturninus's age is shown to follow the climax to which Titus brings the spirit of *romanitas*. To be sure, Roman piety, as the positive force that drives the united community, seems to reach its ideal

---

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

summit with Titus's rejection of the crown. From the outset it is clear that Titus's triumphant return, despite the fact that it begins by turning into a funeral, signifies the fulfilment of Roman patriotism. Its hero has given Rome all he had to give of himself, and his exemplary life of service comes now to a fruitful conclusion in the achievement of victorious peace for his people. Such achievement marks an end of cycle for Roman history as it introduces a new era of peace that justifies the sacrifices of the past. At this culminating moment Titus's devotion to Rome appears in all its exhausted exigency. The war hero is very conscious that Rome owes him a debt of gratitude, but he characteristically declines the reward of the emperorship in Rome's interests. When Marcus, in the name of the people, presents him with the 'pallament of white' of imperial candidacy, Titus makes humble way for a fitter candidate:

A better head her glorious body fits  
Than his that shakes for age and feebleness  
.  
.  
.  
Rome, I have been thy soldier forty years,  
And led my country's strength successfully,  
And buried one-and-twenty valiant sons  
Knighted in field, slain manfully in arms,  
In right and service of their noble country. (190-200)

In a last act of self-denying service, Titus submits himself and his 'honour's spoils' to the man he raises to the imperial throne:

And here in sight of Rome to Saturnine,  
King and commander of our commonweal,  
The wide world's emperor, do I consecrate  
My sword, my chariot, and my prisoners,  
Presents well worthy Rome's imperious lord.  
Receive them then, the tribute that I owe,  
Mine honour's ensigns humbled at thy feet. (249-55)

This last act of service to the commonweal is the *non plus ultra* of self-denial. As such, it is also a public assertion of the honour by which Titus has lived and in which he hopes to die. It becomes now more apparent than ever that Titus sustains his terrible loss because of the communion in which he lives with his fellow Romans. As the enthroned Saturninus promises gratitude to his benefactor, the ideal of *pietas* seems fully to realize itself for a moment, in a magnanimity that guarantees the order of family, community and history in the name of which *romanitas* makes its unbearable demands:

Thanks, noble Titus, father of my life.  
How proud I am of thee and of thy gifts  
Rome shall record, and when I do forget  
The least of these unspeakable deserts,  
Romans, forget your fealty to me. (256-60)

This ideal communion, however, proves very short-lived. When the first aside in the play -- 'A goodly lady, trust me, of the hue/ That I would choose were I to choose anew' (264-65) -- ruptures the stately tone that dominated the election, the new reign announces itself as unheroic, even anti-heroic. Saturninus's aside voices his uncontrollable excitement over the Queen of Goths, who is offered to him as part of Titus's tribute to his emperorship. In total disregard of the dignity for which his office calls, Saturninus revokes his promise to marry Lavinia, with which he intended to reward her family's loyalty. Instead, he chooses to advance Tamora, a stranger to Rome and its traditions. That this is the first decision the new emperor makes augurs no good at all for the imperial city.

The crisis that follows Saturninus's accession is a momentary one, but it suffices to expose the full tragic potential of the instabilities that the patrilinear code of honour negates. The crisis is precipitated from inside the ranks of the Andronici themselves when Bassianus 'surprises' -- that is, seizes -- Lavinia and claims her as his own, in spite of the fact that Titus has just given her in betrothal to the emperor. When this happens, Marcus, Lucius, all of the Andronici help in the abduction, challenging the authority of the patriarch. Lavinia is taken away while her brother Mutius covers her escape, blocking Titus's way. Challenged by his own family in Rome, Titus reacts brutally, killing Mutius with a single unstoppable stroke that re-defines his son as an enemy of Rome. Clearly, this peremptory slaughter reveals the absolute claims that the authority of Rome makes, and the tragic contradictions it can generate. In effect, Titus has almost in a conditioned reflex defended the authority on which Rome rests. However, in the eyes of his family his act could not be less Roman. Though Titus's hand was directed by the purest Roman zeal, the killing of Mutius has demeaned him in 'wrongful quarrel' (296) and proved him so 'unjust' (295) that he is accused by his own family of sheer 'impiety' (358). What is more, Bassianus claims right and reason to be on his side (281-82), which Marcus confirms by appealing to Roman law -- '*Suum cuique* is our Roman justice;/ This prince in justice seizeth but his own' (283-84).

And, as Lucius insists, in the eye of the law Bassianus has seized but his 'lawful promised love' (301). In short, by acting so faithfully to Rome Titus is acting against the family and the law that are so central to *romanitas*. The contradiction of so pious a *pietas* simultaneously being sheer impiety is further exposed when, in the name of the same honour for which he has killed Mutius, Titus refuses to allow his burial in the family tomb. In this extremity, Marcus's plea in his nephew's favour reveals how far Titus is betraying what is most sacred to him by trying to defend it at all costs: the paragon of Roman virtue, the *pius* hero who has won the city's acclaim has to be reminded that 'Thou art a Roman, be not barbarous' (381). These ironic contradictions alert us to the instabilities that the Roman ideal of service can generate when realized in a community of free individual agents. That Titus can de-Romanize himself by being inflexibly Roman confirms that the Rome to which Titus has made an absolute commitment is not the immutable entity he takes it to be. But what is most disturbing about the killing of Mutius is that it gives the first sign of how insecure this absolute commitment renders the martial hero. Because his devotion to Rome is absolute, the merest challenge to its existence provokes an overreaction. We begin to fear, then, that if a real crisis of *romanitas* were to occur, it would be absolutely intolerable for Titus – and so would be his response. Thus, it begins to emerge here what Titus's enactment of revenge will make tragically apparent in Act V, namely that it is because of his radical socialization that the avenger acts in the most outrageously anti-social manner. Titus's killing of Mutius is desperate and unjust, but it is produced by the same pious commitment for which he Stoically sacrificed Alarbus. As in Seneca, as in Kyd, here we confirm that *the avenger attacks his society not because of his pure individualism, but because he is constituted by society*. When 'the social' inside Titus is destroyed, he must be destroyed as an individual, and manifest his damage in an act of constitutive revenge, asserting the *romanitas* on which his integrity depends.

When Saturninus next scorns Titus's attempts to regain Lavinia and announces that he shall have Tamora instead, we realize that the new moral relaxation inaugurated by Saturninus has the potential to downgrade heroic Rome and its chief representative beyond recognition. In Saturninus's vulgarly sexualized version of events, the tragic assertion of loyalty to Rome and its emperor we have witnessed



becomes a misdeed of hooliganism:

But go thy ways, go give that changing piece  
To him that flourished for her with his sword.  
A valiant son-in-law thou shalt enjoy,  
One fit to bandy with thy lawless sons,  
To ruffle in the commonwealth of Rome. (312-16)

In the light of this frivolity Titus's civic devotion appears in all its frightful disproportion: in the new Rome of Saturninus Titus's unquestioning self-sacrifice has the potential to become truly tragic. Thus, in just one Act Shakespeare has established the communal norm and shown what it means to have profoundly internalized it as the Andronici have done. In this he proves no inferior apprentice to Kyd. On the contrary Shakespeare has fully assimilated Kyd's example. Thus, he not only represents 'a plausible community' but establishes from the start how intrinsically predisposed the community is to implosion, and how necessarily tragic this implosion must be for someone like Titus. Fundamental to this sophisticated representation of the community is – to use a metaphor of our own times – the cellular structure of the social body, whose integrating members – individual, family, state – are interdependent, but on an autonomous basis. By virtue of its aggregation of self-serving cells, communal life cannot be either intemporal or immutable: the community, as a living organism, is in a permanent state of potential disaggregation. In general terms, this is what Titus does not recognize and what anticipates his brutal reaction to the discovery that it is the case. Even in the first Act we find, then, the preparation of a revenge that shall only be enacted in the final Act. In this, the design of Shakespeare's first tragedy proves even more controlled than that of its Kydian precedent.

## B. THE IMPLAUSIBILITY OF MACHIAVELLISM

### I

Shakespeare, like Kyd, begins, then, by establishing a strong social norm and a community of worthy individuals living up to it. Among these, the future avenger stands out as the embodiment of the communal ideal at its most intense. As is also the case in Kyd, revenge will be activated when the Machiavel, who represents the cynical negation of communal piety, savages the family of 'the worthy pillar of the community'. Like Kyd, Shakespeare articulates the play through the pairing of a profoundly socialized avenger and a fiercely individualistic Machiavel. The revenge that results from their intersection brings to culmination the exploration of the social nature of the individual. But Shakespeare does not simply reproduce Kyd's basic design. Before the Machiavel launches his attack, the play has already made it clear how extreme Titus's commitment to Rome is, and how desperate his response can be to a fundamental challenge to its integrity. There is something excessive in Titus's civic virtue that has to do with the greater vulnerability Shakespeare's community exhibits. Because of the Romans' pressurized communal integration, the Machiavellian rupture will do much greater damage than in *The Spanish Tragedy*; Titus's hyper-charged civism raises the dramatic tension by anticipating a spectacular collision.

After their precarious reconciliation, the parties of the emperor and the Andronici leave the stage. Peace has been momentarily restored to Rome. Then, as public speech modulates into private thought, the first soliloquy of the play is delivered. Throughout Act I Aaron has been a conspicuously black and silent figure. Now Aaron remains on stage to proclaim the existence of himself. In a private space apart from multitudinous Rome, the private self opens up before us and reveals the intensity of its life. Aaron speaks, and his self-revelation vindicates an aspiring individualism that acknowledges none of Titus's pieties. Like that of Lorenzo, Aaron's egocentrism presents itself as an attempt at self-preservation, a quest for absolute safety from the dangers of life, the sort of safety Titus envisaged when he interred the sons he lost to war in Act I:

Rome's readiest champions, repose you here in rest,

Secure from worldly chances and mishaps.  
Here lurks no treason, here no envy swells,  
Here grow no damnèd drugs, here are no storms,  
No noise, but silence and eternal sleep. (I.i.154-58)

But, whereas Titus knows that only death can ensure safety from life's troubles, Aaron is persuaded that power can guarantee the unassailable existence he desires:

Now climbeth Tamora Olympus' top,  
Safe out of fortune's shot, and sits aloft,  
Secure of thunder's crack or lightning flash,  
Advanced above pale envy's threat'ning reach. (II.i.1-4)

This certainly recalls Lorenzo's aspiration to rise above events and direct them at will. But Aaron's aspiration is loftier. A quantitative difference in the scope of his Machiavellism makes it qualitatively distinct. In his vision, the safety that Tamora obtains confers on her a godlike status: Tamora now sits in Olympus. Aaron's desire for control transcends the manipulation of human agents to become a thirst for absolute omnipotence. His fantasies of utter supremacy are elevated above the mundaneness of Lorenzo's plotting by the grandiose design that inspires him. As he continues to ecstasize over Tamora's triumph, it emerges that his is a heroic Machiavellism of cosmic perspectives and more-than-human reach:

As when the golden sun salutes the morn  
And, having gilt the ocean with his beams,  
Gallops the zodiac in his glistering coach  
And overlooks the highest-peering hills,  
So Tamora. (5-9)

Aaron's envisioning of power is not of a common sort: for him power means a self-generated energy that, like the glorious sun, irradiates itself on the inert landscape at its feet – except that, unlike the astral king, the Machiavel warms to his own brightness, taking pride in the beauty of his own golden rule. Aaron's vision conjures up a vitality that overrides, nay, subjugates morality itself – 'upon her wit doth earthly honour wait,/ And virtue stoops and trembles at her frown' (10-11) – and engulfs the currents of gregarious eroticism; in Aaron's case even sensuality becomes a form of domination. It is love for him that has enslaved this Olympian Goddess as one

Whom thou in triumph long

Hast prisoner held, fettered in amorous chains,  
And faster bound to Aaron's charming eyes  
Than is Prometheus tied to Caucasus. (14-17)

Aaron's lust for power determines his vision of reality, his relationship with others, his relationship with himself. It soon appears that this obsession with power conceals an imperious need of self-sufficiency. As conceived by Shakespeare, the Machiavel marries power and self-sufficiency in an inextricable way: the vitality that animates Aaron is that of an arch-individualist who seeks to will himself into absolutism. The incongruity of his stance is thus apparent from the outset: the power he demands over his fellow beings, over the course of events, over reality at large, is in fact regarded as an emanation from himself. He projects on Tamora's public triumph his delusions of measureless grandeur and universal admiration, but what her ascent is seen truly to activate is the dynamics of self-authorship:

Then, Aaron, arm thy heart, and fit thy thoughts  
To mount aloft with thy imperial mistress

Away with slavish weeds and servile thoughts!  
I will be bright and shine in pearl and gold  
To wait upon this new-made Empress. (12-20)

To be sure, in his first appearance he proclaims Aaron author of himself. But his Machiavellism is shown to contain a destructive element that sits uncomfortably with his declared autonomy. Though it is part of the formidable energy propelling his ascension towards omnipotence, his need to bring about the downfall of Rome betrays the delusion under which he operates:

'To wait', said I? – to wanton with this queen,  
This goddess, this Semiramis, this nymph,  
This siren, that will charm Rome's Saturnine,  
And see his shipwreck and his commonweal's. (21-24)

Why should the Machiavel need to bring Rome to its knees if he is above everybody and everything that is not himself? This contradiction, however, will not emerge with its full revelatory force until later. At this stage, it does not detract from the impression we have of Aaron's formidable self-reliance. Like Lorenzo, he is possessed by the hyper-individualism of the control freak, but this is enhanced by a tremendous vitality that his predecessor lacks. Lorenzo's Machiavellism is defined by its emotional barrenness – that is to say, it appears as a complete deprivation of the sensual and affective energies

possessed by his victims. In Kyd the Machiavel was, as it were, negatively conceived: Lorenzo appeared as a castrated individual operating on a flawed, distorted understanding of himself. As it emerges later, in Shakespeare's play Aaron, too, operates on a self-deceptive basis, but his Machiavellism possesses a vitality that makes it less unambiguously negative, in the sense that his evil is seen to generate a zest, a quickness and inventiveness of mind that are positive in themselves. In relation to the guild of villainy to which Richard III, Iago and Edmund belong, J.B. Steane observes that 'in Shakespeare we are constantly aware of the vitality in evil'<sup>17</sup>. Aaron, the ancestor of this distinguished progeny, confirms it: Shakespeare's Machiavel exerts a much greater fascination than Kyd's. And he does so because we perceive more in him than we can condemn.

## II

With the proclamation of Aaron's Machiavellian credo we are taken away from the public Rome of the Capitol into a world more congenial to the baser nature of the Goths. The transition from Roman *urbanitas* to Gothic provincialism is signalled by the mirror-like opening of Act II: Chiron and Demetrius, Tamora's surviving sons, re-enact the confrontation between Bassianus and Saturninus, the two Roman aspirants to the throne, by disputing each other's right to possess Lavinia. This re-start of the play signals that the Goths are taking the initiative from the Romans who dominated in the previous Act. In real control of this initiative, however, is Aaron, the true outsider, whose Machiavellism will preside over the terrible events this scene sets in motion. Aaron establishes his dominance over the Goths in a subtle way that fully reveals his manipulative expertise.

Like the Roman primogenitor in Act I, Demetrius disqualifies his junior brother on the grounds of his inadequate age:

Chiron, thy years want wit, thy wits want edge  
And manners to intrude where I am graced,  
And may, for aught thou knowest, affected be (26-28) --

---

<sup>17</sup> J.B. Steane, *Marlowe. A Critical Study*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1964, p.175.

while, making the case of the younger patrician anew, Chiron opposes merit against the unfair prerogatives of birth --

‘Tis not the difference of a year or two  
Makes me less gracious, or thee more fortunate:  
I am as able and as fit as thou  
To serve and to deserve my mistress’ grace. (31-34)

The parallelism is strong enough to reinforce the cultural divide between the Gothic and the Roman contenders. The political contest of the Romans becomes here a sexual competition of the basest kind. Though a crown may not be a loftier prize than Lavinia, the Goths demean that contest in a bid for priapic supremacy. In effect, Demetrius, contemptuous of Chiron’s youth, urges his brother to go and ‘have your lath glued within your sheath/ Till you know better how to handle it’ (41-42). Where Bassianus vindicated the ‘justice, continence, and nobility’ his opponent lacked (I.i.15), Demetrius disqualifies his rival for lack of ‘edge’ to ‘intrude’ into the disputed booty (26-28). Chiron’s retort – ‘with thy weapon nothing dar’st perform’ (59) – continues the phallic contest. Soon the contest turns murderous and Demetrius swears not to put up ‘till I have sheathed/ My rapier in his bosom, and withal/ Thrust those reproachful speeches down his throat,/ That he hath breathed in my dishonour here’ (54-57). Then Aaron intervenes and turns off the heat. By then the inflammatory nature of the Goths, who are as wrathful as they are sensuous, has become fully apparent. Unlike the self-denying Andronici, the Gothic princes are programmed by the irascible and concupiscible passions, whose ignition is with them as sudden as it is intense.

Aaron’s obsessive hatred of Rome finds in the Goths the perfect material for his fatal device against the Andronici. In the course of his recruitment of Chiron and Demetrius it begins to emerge what his Machiavellism, with its claims to individual supremacy, really involves. In the grand soliloquy, Aaron envisaged individual glory towering over inferior collectivity. It now becomes clear that such glory can only materialize *against* the community. The omnipotence to which Aaron aspires, we begin to see, becomes in practice individual terrorism against the dominant community. As Aaron’s practices gradually confirm, Machiavellism is not a case of an absolute ‘I’ above others, as Aaron pretends, but

of an 'I' absolutely against others. This distinction is crucial for what follows throughout the play.

Thus, in contrast to Marcus's pacification of Roman factionalism, Aaron ensures that the alliance he forges between the warring brothers brings dissension into Rome. His first reaction is to dissuade the contenders from their pursuit, warning them that the Romans 'cannot brook competitors in love' (77). But the two lovers refuse to attend to reason, insisting on their powers of persuasion: 'why should he despair that knows to court it/ With words, fair looks, and liberality?' (91-92), protests Demetrius. When Aaron is satisfied that they want Lavinia badly enough to put themselves at risk for her, he casts his Machiavellian net. He asks them, 'would it offend you then/ That both should speed?' (100-101). Confirming that they are no Romans, Chiron and Demetrius answer in the negative. Then, displaying the less grandiose credentials of the Machiavellian plotter, Aaron unfolds the plot that shall bring the Romans endless grief: a rape of Lavinia in the forest, during the hunt in which the emperor shall take part. As Aaron persuades the moronic Goths that this is the only cure for their love, we gain confirmation that the force directing events is now inimical to *pietas*:

For shame, be friends, and join for that you jar.  
'Tis policy and stratagem must do  
That you affect, and so must you resolve  
That what you cannot as you would achieve,  
You must perforce accomplish as you may. (103-107)

Under a peacemaker's cloak, Aaron enlists the two would-be courtly lovers as a pair of bloody rapists. Thus Chiron and Demetrius are induced to abandon the road of 'words, fair looks, and liberality' for the path of the forest. As he instructs the neophytes on how to take this darker route Aaron unveils his intention of brutalizing Lavinia as the 'dainty doe' of the 'solemn hunting', which is to be conducted by the Roman court to seal the reconciliation between the Andronici and Saturninus.

It is no accident that Aaron chooses the solemn hunt as the occasion on which to strike against the Romans he hates so much: a stately hunt is traditionally associated with the celebration of the social order, represented by a warlike court that exhibits its might in a civilized manner<sup>18</sup>. But the hunt in this

---

<sup>18</sup> Cf. J.E. Roberts, (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Comparative Iconography. Themes Depicted in Works of Art*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Vol., Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers, Chicago and London, 1998, p. 421: 'By far, the most

play takes an even greater social significance, for it was proposed by Titus to solemnize the reconciliation of the two courtly factions and sanction the nuptials of the emperor with Tamora, and of Bassianus with Lavinia. In a word, the hunt that Aaron is plotting to disrupt constitutes a symbolic expression of the social peace, and of the civilized order that makes it possible<sup>19</sup>. With the hunt the Romans celebrate their capacity to live as a peaceful community with no internal divisions. It is in awareness of the cultural meaning of their 'sport' that Saturninus proclaims to his foreign Empress: 'Madam, now shall ye see/ Our Roman hunting' (II.ii.19-20).

This pride the Romans take in their civilized practices Aaron cannot stand. He needs to turn the hunt *against* the Romans, so that its celebration of Roman manners results in unmitigated barbarity. He accordingly begins by redirecting the sexual energies of the Goths into an unnatural course, setting them loose on Lavinia as two savage dogs on their prey<sup>20</sup>. To be sure, in converting their fatuous gallantry to the primitivism of the huntsmen, Aaron is greatly assisted by the Gothic predisposition to appetite. But much more is involved here than a Machiavel's control of a pair of incompetent innamoratos. Aaron cynically exploits the age-old conception of love as a hunt by proposing Lavinia's hunt as a form of love<sup>21</sup>. By converting the hunt of the doe as social ritual into the chase of Lavinia as sexual conquest,

---

persistent notion of hunting has been as a prerogative of the upper classes of society. As a sport, hunting offered the opportunity to display heroism in an act of danger and to demonstrate the skill and strategy needed to kill the game. A proper training ground for kings and nobility, hunting became a major form of court entertainment and a vehicle for kingly glorification.'

<sup>19</sup> See Anne Barton ('Parks and Ardens', in *Essays, Mainly Shakespearean*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1994, pp.359-60) for an analysis of the 'ceremonial detail' with which Shakespeare constructs the initial proceedings of the hunt, and of their ritual significance.

<sup>20</sup> The transformation of Lavinia into the doe is not more frightfully literal than the canine metamorphosis underwent by the Goths – cf. Barton, 'Parks and Ardens', p.361: 'When he [Demetrius] reminds Chiron that 'we hunt not, we, with horse nor hound,/ But hope to pluck a dainty doe to ground'' (II.2.225-26), he has ceased to be the human hunter and become the hound, one of those masterless 'whelps, fell curs of bloody kind' (II.3.281) that Saturninus, speaking more truly than he knows, accuses of having murdered Bassianus.'

<sup>21</sup> I am referring to the traditional metaphor that underlies the rest of the Act. As Roberts, *op.cit.*, p.421, describes it: 'European hunting scenes also frequently contain an undercurrent of amorous dalliance, sometimes depicted quite overtly. The chase is not limited to the animals alone. As the milieu is out of doors in woodlands or flowering fields, a connection with the Garden of Love (another popular courtly motif) is evident. In fact, the entire hunting genre can be construed as an elaborate metaphor



Aaron is effectively substituting national concord with aberrant sexuality, the celebration of wholeness with its sadistic negation – in sum: the order of the community with the lawlessness of Machiavellism.

The extent to which Machiavellism constitutes disorder can be judged by the light in which Aaron regards his role as the destroyer of the Romans. When the hunt is about to start – the emperor has just been summoned by the ‘hunter’s peal’ of the Andronici (II.ii.5) – Aaron and Tamora appear together in a secluded part of the forest. Then, just before he realizes his anti-Roman vision, Aaron, in a model exercise of Greenblattian self-fashioning, projects himself as the anti-image of sociability:

Madam, though Venus governs your desires,  
Saturn is dominator over mine.  
What signifies my deadly-standing eye,  
My silence, and my cloudy melancholy,  
My fleece of woolly hair that now uncurls  
Even as an adder when she doth unroll  
To do some fatal execution?  
No, madam, these are no venereal signs.  
Vengeance is in my heart, death in my hand,  
Blood and revenge are hammering in my head. (II.iii.30-39)

The ‘madam’ of the address is, of course, Tamora, who serves here as a mirror in which Aaron can contemplate the appealing features of his malevolence. Aaron pictures himself in brooding detachment, as a figure of awesome malignity exuding fatality and death. As such, he claims to be entirely possessed (‘heart’, ‘hand’, ‘head’) by a deadly concentration of ill-will ready to explode against the slightest sign of affection from his fellow beings. But what his speech reveals above all is that nothing possesses Aaron as much as this vision of himself.

The intensity of Aaron’s sadistic desires can be measured by the intensity of the eroticism it supplants. With the same persuasive power that moments later transforms it into a hellish pit inviting revenge, Tamora recreates a *locus amoenus* for Aaron and herself to take their pleasure in. In her

---

of the pursuit of the sexes. In *Ars Amatoria*, Ovid suggested the hunt as an amatory pursuit, and in the *Aeneid*, Virgil has used the simile of Dido, the mythological founder and first queen of the ancient city of Carthage in Libya, as a wounded hind. Images of Dido and Aeneas, son of Aphrodite, taking refuge in a cave after being caught in a storm during an elaborate hunt were popular, as were those of the Greek hero Adonis being seduced by Aphrodite as they rest from hunting. The connections between the pursuit of game and the pursuit of the opposite sex are thus made explicit.’

vision, she and her lover become Dido and Aeneas, enjoying their love against a distant background of hounds and horns, which sing them into a 'golden slumber' that crowns their post-coital bliss (26). But Aaron interrupts the flow of her sensual tale, announcing that she is about to witness the massacre of her most-hated enemies:

Hark, Tamora, the empress of my soul,  
Which never hopes more heaven than rests in thee,  
This is the day of doom for Bassianus.  
His Philomel must lose her tongue today;  
Thy sons make pillage of her chastity  
And wash their hands in Bassianus' blood. (40-45)

But even as he speaks, Bassianus and Lavinia come into sight. Aaron swiftly prepares himself to fetch his accomplices to deal with this 'parcel of our hopeful booty,/ Which dreads not yet their lives' destruction' (49-50), but voluptuous Tamora is not cooled by promises of pain and destruction, and she persists in her amorous invitation – 'Ah, my sweet Moor, sweeter to me than life!' (51). However, with characteristic Gothic changeability, Tamora becomes possessed by wrath as soon as she confronts the Roman couple, giving free expression to her vengeful feelings. By now Chiron and Demetrius have arrived and Tamora mercilessly sets them on the unsuspecting couple. Bassianus is fatally stabbed and Lavinia taken away to be 'enjoyed' and then, as she thinks, killed.

The destruction of Bassianus and Lavinia reactivates, by partially fulfilling it, Tamora's desire to extinguish the whole Andronican race. However, the prospect of their eradication, much as she desires it, does not seem to put out her sensual fire. As soon as she has done with her victims, her thoughts revert to her sexual accomplice:

Ne'er let my heart know merry cheer indeed  
Till all the Andronici be made away.  
Now will I hence to seek my lovely Moor,  
And let my spleenful sons this trull deflower. (188-91)

With Aaron it is otherwise: Tamora's sexuality will not fulfil his desires. What, as it were, turns him on is the sadistic deflowering of Lavinia.

Aaron reaches his Machiavellian climax with the 'framing' of Lavinia's brothers for the murder of Bassianus – a device to bring endless shame to the Andronici. As Tamora leaves the stage in pursuit of

her 'lovely Moor', Aaron re-enters with two of Titus's sons, Quintus and Martius, who unsuspectingly follow him into the 'barren, detested vale' where Lavinia is being ravished. Aaron has promised to bring them 'to the loathsome pit/ Where I espied the panther fast asleep' (193-94) -- a promise that ironically reverses the sylvan optimism with which Marcus and his Roman party undertook the hunt:

I have dogs, my lord,  
Will rouse the proudest panther in the chase  
And climb the highest promontory top. (II.ii.20-22).

Marcus's vaunt -- with which he intended to help Saturninus impress his new wife with the fineness of Roman customs -- had been in turn fatefully reminiscent of Aaron's aspiration to rise like Tamora, the newly-made empress now climbing 'Olympus's top' (II.i.1). Fittingly, Aaron's ascendancy over his enemies is signalled by his appropriation of the black panther's role, which turns the Romans from hunter to hunted<sup>22</sup>. Such transposition lands Martius and Quintus into the panther's pit. Not accidentally, their entrapment where the panther lies 'fast asleep' is simultaneous with the off-stage rape of their sister, a concurrence suggested by Quintus's anguished description of the 'subtle hole' as one

Whose mouth is covered with rude-growing briars,  
Upon whose leaves are drops of new-shed blood  
As fresh as morning dew distilled on flowers. (II.iii.199-201)

Thus, it is at this devastating moment for the Romans that the sweet drowsiness of sexual fulfilment anticipated by Tamora seems to take over. As they penetrate into this womb-cum-tomb of perdition (obviously a counterpart of the family tomb of Act I), Martius and Quintus become possessed by their version -- a debilitating one -- of Tamora's 'golden slumber': 'were it not for shame', Martius admits, 'well could I leave our sport to sleep a while' (196-97). Aaron's true sexuality is sadistic.

Aaron asserts thus his supremacy. But we will do no justice to his Machiavellism unless we notice that he does so by exploiting the exemplary solidarity of his victims. To ruin his enemies, Aaron

---

<sup>22</sup> The whole scene is fraught with ironical reversals of the Romans' civilized expectations. Richard Marienstras notices some of them: 'Tamora is compared to Diana, surprised by voyeurs, and the myth of Actaeon to which she refers is transposed literally by Shakespeare, who has the doe violated and Bassianus killed by those dogs, Chiron and Demetrius' (Richard Marienstras, *New Perspectives on the Shakespearean World*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1985, p.45).

capitalizes on the sociability he seeks to undermine. He is thus able to 'frame' Titus's brothers because, when Martius falls into the pit of his ruin, Quintus finds it impossible not to share his fate. Acting on the premise of fraternal solidarity, the self-evidence of whose requirements he so movingly expresses -- 'Thou canst not come to me – I come to thee' (245) – Quintus lets himself rejoin his fallen brother 'below'. But if it is true that the Machiavel brings his victims to grief by turning their collaborative values against them, it is no less true that he reveals the incredible strength of the community that these values make possible.

### III

With Bassianus dead, Lavinia raped and her brothers deep in the pit, Aaron seems to be in absolute control of events, and of their perception by their protagonists. From such a Machiavellian height, Aaron would appear to be taking charge of the play itself:

Now will I fetch the King to find them here,  
That he thereby may have a likely guess  
How these were they that made away his brother. (206-209)

True to his word, he returns with Saturninus, whose brotherly piety he exploits in the same way he has exploited Quintus's. As planned, Saturninus finds Titus's sons in what look like incriminating circumstances. Saturninus's reaction to the news of his brother's death shows how incongruous the savagery unleashed by Aaron is in the context of Roman festivity:

My brother dead! I know thou dost but jest  
He and his lady are at the lodge,  
Upon the north side of this pleasant chase (253-56).

Also as arranged, Tamora then enters with Titus and Lucius to deliver the *coup de grâce* to the Andronici. Displaying the histrionic powers for which she is renowned, she pretends to be the innocent hand that unveils the truth:

Then all too late I bring this fatal writ,  
The complot of this timeless tragedy,  
And wonder greatly that man's face can fold  
In pleasing smiles such murderous tyranny. (II.iii.264-67)

Predictably, the credulous emperor is taken in. For him the 'fatal writ' constitutes incontestable proof of Martius's and Quintus's part in his brother's assassination. Tamora thus secures the downfall of Andronicus's sons. Though for her it remains, as it were, a part-time job, only second to her amorous campaign, Tamora's Machiavellism here deserves a measure of credit. She not only turns the Romans into characters in a 'timeless tragedy'; but she greatly enjoys the God-like prerogative of sympathizing with the unwitting mortals who enact it:

What, are they in this pit? O wondrous thing!  
How easily murder is discovered! (286-87)

Tamora invokes here Isabella's belief that 'murder will out', continuing to pose as a naive collaborator of retribution. It thus becomes clear that the triumphant Machiavellism of Aaron and Tamora constitutes nothing less than a defiant appropriation of the rule of Providence. Tamora pretends to wonder at the fortunate coincidence that has exposed the murderers, knowing that it is but the result of her malicious planning. In so doing, she is implicitly denying the existence of a purpose larger than individual interest. Aaron and Tamora regard events as a source of possibility to be exploited for self-advantage. All that is required is to be clever enough to do so. The quasi-authorial control of participants and events carries the victors to Olympus's top. But Shakespeare's play is much more than the Machiavel's play.

The atrocities Aaron commits in the forest to gratify himself show that his fixation on power acts as a substitute for natural communion with others. For him power means the capacity to disrupt the conviviality beyond which he claims to exist. His sadism should not be seen, therefore, as proof of his a-social condition, but as a negative form of bonding with others that argues for a *perversion* of his social condition. Indeed, the satisfaction he takes in reversing the expectations of his trusting victims makes us suspect that Aaron needs constant confirmation that others come to grief because they fail to act in cynical self-interest. Aaron actively and continually seeks reassurance that his emotional hermetism gives him an advantage over the rest – that is to say, that his isolationism is a form of power over collective strength. This is exactly the conclusion he draws from his final, decisive blow against Titus. In Act III Aaron obtains Titus's hand on the false promise that it shall redeem Martius and Quintus from the

execution Emperor Saturninus has decreed. Aaron, who knows perfectly well that Titus's sacrifice will only excite the court's contempt, exults at the grief Titus will bring on himself from his acts of paternal love. It will, and does, renew his commitment to self-authorship: once more he has proved to himself that altruism and misery are identical:

O, how this villainy  
Doth fat me with the very thoughts of it!  
Let fools do good, and fair men call for grace;  
Aaron will have his soul black like his face. (III.i.201-204)

Because of his need to undermine the bonds that unite others in a strong community, the Machiavel's vindictiveness is of a generalized kind. This vindictiveness is the mark of the Machiavel. Aaron's violence, like that of his predecessor Lorenzo, *does not respond to a specific injury but expresses a condition*. Unlike the avengers, in opposition to which they are conceived, Lorenzo and Aaron define themselves against the decent people, and seek to destroy the communal life these make possible. An understanding of Hieronimo's or Titus's experience demands an answer to the question of *why the punishment the avenger metes out is so in excess of the injury he receives*. Conversely, the experience of a Lorenzo or an Aaron requires an explanation as to *why the excessive punishment the Machiavel inflicts is so lacking in an injury*. The failure to distinguish between the two different questions posed by these two figures has led to their reductive assimilation into each other. For example, Miola conflates the Machiavel with the Senecan avenger in a compound category: 'though swaggeringly Senecan, Aaron claims descent from other progenitors including the Machiavel and Vice, and from other stage figures including Barabas' (p.27)<sup>23</sup>. The consequence is predictable: the distinctive generalized aggressiveness of the Machiavel is explained away as a psychological implausibility:

Aaron also shares with Atreus and his many descendants a thirst for bloody vengeance, though his thirst is not well motivated in the play, where he, a captured enemy, enjoys considerable freedom and power<sup>24</sup>.

---

<sup>23</sup> Miola is consistent in negating the specificity of the avenger as he also negates that of the Machiavel: 'Though not so spectacularly evil as Aaron, Titus too develops as a revenger along well-marked Senecan lines' (*Shakespeare and Classical Tragedy*, p.27).

<sup>24</sup> Miola, *Shakespeare and Classical Tragedy*, p.25.

As we have seen in the case of Lorenzo, if one bears in mind the distinction between the Machiavel and the Senecan avenger, the Machiavel ceases to appear all-of-a-piece, without psychological division or depth. Instead, he reveals himself as the opposite of the avenger – as a figure that is sustained by a grievance totally different from that which produces a crazed avenger. That the playwrights' intuition of two different kinds of 'injury' – one unprovoked and rationally controlled, the other provoked and uncontrollable – is psychologically profound is confirmed by contemporary accounts of human character, in which we find a sharp distinction between 'choler' or 'anger' on the one hand, and 'hatred' on the other. The two distinguishable 'passions' generate two different kinds of aggressors:

According to Grimestone, choler (or anger) comes from personal wrongs, but the persons needs not be touched to feel hatred; choler is felt for the particular men, hatred may be for all humanity; choler can be cured by patience, but hatred is everlasting; choler wishes the victim to recognize the revenger, hatred desires only to watch the destruction of the victim without recognition, choler is full of pain, hatred is cold; choler has bounds in revenge but hatred is boundless and always seeks the absolute ruin of its object<sup>25</sup>.

Like Lorenzo's, Aaron's hatred is 'for all humanity' – 'everlasting', 'cold', and wishing to 'watch the destruction of the victim without recognition', and seeking 'the absolute ruin of its object', which has never given him any offense in the first place. Aaron's malice is well motivated in the play because it is shown to be not the product of a specific injury, but the result of an unexamined relationship with himself. Shakespeare, however, goes beyond any psychological theory, contemporary or otherwise. He not only assimilates the Machiavellian type as represented by Kyd, but produces a profound meditation on his nature: Shakespeare's Aaron reveals the state of fundamental self-contradiction in which the Machiavel exists. In *The Spanish Tragedy* the motivation for the Machiavel's aggression was disturbingly vague; in *Titus* the fact that his rancour is unprovoked rancour is emphasized to the point, as we have noted, of prompting verdicts of dramatic incompetence. But then Aaron undergoes a volte-face transformation that would have been impossible in Kyd. This transformation – an indication of a dramatic boldness no mere imitator of Kyd could have produced – reveals a profound insight into the 'motivation' of the Machiavel

---

<sup>25</sup> Grimestone, *A Table of Humane Passions* (1621), pp. 196-200, as quoted in Bowers, op.cit. p. 21.

and of all those who, like him, operate on the basis of emotional self-sufficiency.

#### IV

The birth of his child turns Aaron inside out like a sock. The Machiavel of empire-dominating soliloquies and inhuman atrocities in a forest, the unrepentant cynic who prays to the devils in the conviction that 'the gods have given us over' (IV.ii.48) – this Machiavel experiences an emotional earthquake of a suddenness and depth only comparable to one of those about-turns of the will found in Marlowe. In Aaron's case, however, it is not a matter of the will: he is completely transformed by his fatherhood. The news of the birth finds him in conversation with Chiron and Demetrius, in the course of which it emerges how complacently cynical the master rapist and his acolytes remain about their bloody deeds. Aaron boasts about the enviably safe position they now enjoy in Rome, and Chiron and Demetrius wish they 'had a thousand Roman dames/ At such a bay [like Lavinia], by turn to serve our lust' (IV. ii.41-42). Then the Nurse abruptly enters carrying the black new-born babe to Tamora, and demands on her behalf that it be liquidated. This announcement revives for a moment the spirit of the hellish forest — she says she would 'hide [him] from heaven's eye' (IV.ii..59; cfr. II.i.130) because he is 'joyless, dismal, black .../... as loathsome as a toad' (IV.ii.67). But in the presence of the newborn, Aaron shows an unprecedented, utterly astonishing tenderness. What is more, together with his sudden pride in paternity Aaron displays a positive racial pride which has up to now only expressed itself in contempt for Demetrius and Chiron: 'Zounds, ye whore, is black so base a hue?' (71), he threatens the Nurse as he seizes his son from her clasp: 'Sweet blowze, you are a beautous blossom, sure' (72). Aaron peremptorily refuses to kill him, ordering the Nurse to 'tell the Empress from me I am of age/ To keep mine own, excuse it how she can' (103-104). And, indeed, he seems to have undergone an emotional conversion, allowing him to celebrate a reciprocity of tenderness: 'Look how the black slave smiles upon the father' (119); together with a sense of belonging -- 'As who would say, 'Old lad, I am thine own' (120-21). Recognizing the child as his own extension into futurity, he is already thinking in social terms, acknowledging a community larger than himself: he solemnly nominates his boy as 'my first-born son



and *heir*' (92, my emphasis).

But Aaron cannot do this without becoming one of us. The moment he recognizes himself as a father, that is, the moment he takes responsibility for somebody other than himself – the moment he feels he belongs – his relationship to the world ceases to be that of a Machiavel. This new Aaron who recognizes a vulnerable creature as part of himself, even as the best part of himself, becomes defensive against the world:

My mistress is my mistress, this myself,  
The vigour and picture of my youth.  
This before all the world do I prefer;  
This maugre all the world will I keep safe,  
Or some of you shall smoke for it in Rome. (106-10)

Inhabited by paternity, Aaron has reclaimed himself from the cosmic aspiration of his beginnings, and, limited by emotional attachment, he has ceased to embrace the world in Olympian conquest. To be sure, he is still capable of the language of aspiring hyperbole:

I tell you, younglings, not Enceladus  
With all his threat'ning band of Typhon's brood,  
Nor great Alcides, nor the god of war,  
Shall seize this prey out of his father's hands (92-95) –

but now, put to the service of a doting fatherhood, it loses its blinding lustre, rupturing into a colloquialism which has brought the Machiavel down from his god-like height to meet his rivals on common ground:

What, what, ye sanguine shallow-hearted boys,  
Ye white-limed walls, ye alehouse painted signs!  
Coal-black is better than another hue,  
In that it scorns to bear another hue:  
For all the water in the ocean  
Can never turn the swan's black legs to white,  
Although she lave them hourly in the flood. (96-102)

Aaron's self-aggrandizements here and at lines 135-39 now sound hollow, marking the change his relationship with himself has undergone:

Why, so, brave lords, when we join in league  
I am a lamb, but if you brave the Moor,  
The chafed boar, the mountain lioness,  
The ocean, swells not so as Aaron storms.

Of course, his fatherhood does not deprive him of his fierceness, but it exhibits a racial edge that indicates

his perceived disadvantage. Aaron's aggressiveness is now an explicitly racial hatred, which acknowledges his membership of a human group, albeit a still superior one in his eyes. Thus, his re-socialization as a father confirms what his abnormal individualism had suggested all along, namely, that his Machiavellism was a symptom of an unexamined sense of exclusion. Only after his child restores his repressed sense of belonging does he become capable of admitting what his violence against the community has indirectly betrayed: that his stance of autonomy was an alienated and alienating response to his difference as a black. It is for this reason that his Machiavellism cannot survive his fatherhood. Once affection cracks the fortress of the self, Aaron's aggression ceases to be solipsistic (me against all) and turns plural (we against you). To be sure, he continues to perform 'deed[s] of policy' (147), killing the Nurse with the same satisfaction of a cook spitting his squealing pig. But once he begins to plot the protection of others, rather than their destruction, his logistical powers desert him entirely. Thus, as soon as he takes away his son – 'this treasure in mine arms' (172) – his concern and affection for him makes him careless, and he falls into his enemies's hands. Aaron fails to take account of the fact that the invading Goths are allies of Lucius against Tamora, now a Roman Queen. As for Kyd, for Shakespeare the Machiavel is the radical opposite of the avenger; but his evolution tells the same story about social dependence as the avenger's, to wit, that all that can be achieved by attempting to transcend one's social dependence is to pervert it. In this sense, one can say that Shakespeare's Aaron makes explicit what was only implicit in Kyd's Lorenzo – that it is the repression of the social self that sustains the Machiavel.

## Chapter Six

### *Titus Andronicus* II

## THE AVENGER

### I

Aaron's attack is directed against Lavinia as the purest expression of Roman virtue. As such, it shall be most devastating for Titus, who on his return from the wars saluted his daughter as the 'cordial of mine age' which Rome has preserved 'to glad my heart' (I.i.168-69). Lavinia embodies the civilized norm for which the Andronici have waged their wars against the barbarous Goths. The salutation Titus pronounces on his reunion with her suggests how tragic her destruction must be to him: 'Lavinia live, outlive thy father's days/ And fame's eternal date for virtue's praise' (170-71). Lavinia is the future for which Titus has suffered in military service for twenty years. In *The Spanish Tragedy*, the irrational anxiety of the Portuguese Viceroy, who insists his son has been killed in battle, reveals the overwhelming power of parental piety, and, as we have seen, prepares us for the consequences of Hieronimo's outraged fatherhood. Likewise, Titus's spectacular response to Lavinia's mutilation and defilement and to the execution of his sons Martius and Quintus is anticipated by Tamora's revenge of her murdered son.

Tamora's maternal love is characterized by an abnormally intense protectiveness. This she displays from the beginning, when she accepts Saturninus's proposal with the pledge that 'she will a handmaid be to his desires/ A loving nurse, a mother to his youth' (334-35). Such protectiveness manifests itself on repeated occasions, notably when she seduces Aaron, envisaging a post-coital bliss as sweet as 'a nurse's song/ Of lullaby to bring her babe asleep' (II.iii.28-29). It is this overprotective mother who has to witness, utterly impotent, the ritual slaughter of her eldest son before the Roman Capitol. Tamora's violated motherhood generates a perversion the full horror of which becomes apparent only in the revenge she enacts. When the moment of vengeance comes, it takes the form of a maternity that demands rape and murder as proof of filial devotion. Tamora destroys Bassianus and Lavinia by activating the filial dutifulness of her sons. With the offending Roman defenceless in the 'dreadful, deaf, and dull' woods (II.i.128), Tamora challenges her sons to 'revenge' the offense 'as you love your mother's life,/ Or be ye not henceforth called my children' (II.iii.114-15). Lavinia's plea for

mercy fails to untwist this umbilical cord ('O, do not learn her wrath. She taught it thee:/ The milk thou suck'st from her did turn to marble,/ Even at thy teat thou hadst thy tyranny' (II.iii.143-45)), and she is taken away to be raped and 'lopped'. To be sure, measured by the standards of Titus's madness, Tamora's anger remains that of a second-division avenger, but in the perspective of the perversion the sacrifice of Alarbus generates in her, Titus's response to the savaging of his dearest daughter announces itself as a fearsome one.<sup>1</sup> When Marcus first discovers what remains of Lavinia after her encounter with Demetrius and Chiron, he anticipates unending grief for her father:

Come, let us go and make thy father blind,  
For such a sight will blind a father's eye.  
One hour's storm will drown the fragrant meads;  
What will whole months of tears thy father's eyes? (II.iv.52-55)

Marcus is here thinking of the hardened martialist. But the Titus to whom he is going to inflict the deepest wound is already being transformed by grief.

## II

The radical overturn of fortune that Titus suffers in Act III is signalled by his entrance, which contrasts strikingly with his triumphal return to Rome. The Rome on which Titus's sense of being depends is disintegrating under his feet; so Titus must disintegrate with it. In Act I Titus marched through the streets of Rome as its victorious defender; now he is forced to walk backwards, 'going before' the official procession, followed by his two sons as felons, and whose inexorable progress he tries to check with his pitiful demands. He reminds the senators and tribunes of the 'dangerous wars' and 'frosty nights' he has endured for the sake of the Rome that is about to execute Martius and Quintus, and he invokes the blood he has shed, and the tears 'which now you see' (III.i.1-11) – but to no effect. The procession moves on, leaving him prostrated by grief. At this Titus undergoes a change as sudden and extreme as the grief that afflicts him. As his plea meets no response, Titus's emotions

---

<sup>1</sup> In the same way, Tamora's callous 'wit' identifies her as a minor Machiavel. She is too keen on sexual exploits to claim the radical autonomy of an Aaron. From this perspective, Tamora is the yardstick by which the titanic pathologies of the arch-villain and his main victim are measured.

intensify to the point of creating for him visions of his sons' blood, which, unjustly spilled on the earth will make the earth 'shame and blush' (14-15). That Titus's suffering is beginning to turn his mind is signalled by his expansive rhetoric, which soon encompasses the whole of nature. As he begins to project his plight onto the universe, we recognise the conflation of self and cosmos that characterizes the Senecan avenger:

O earth, I will befriend thee more with rain,  
That shall distil from these two ancient ruins  
Than youthful April shall with all his showers.  
In summer's drought I'll drop upon thee still,  
In winter with warm tears I'll melt the snow  
And keep eternal springtime on thy face,  
So thou refuse to drink my dear sons' blood. (16-22)

Titus's social intercourse begins to be rent by moments of a subjectivity so intense that it obliterates his actual environment. His pleading is directed to identified addressees – 'O reverend tribunes, O gentle aged men' (23) – but the need it obeys seems no longer social, it has become elemental. Thus, when Lucius – banished for his attempt to rescue his brothers – enters next, he finds his noble father on the ground, desperately pleading for a reversal of 'the doom of death' (24) from those who have long ceased to be present. Lucius insists that 'the tribunes hear you not, no man is by/ And you recount your sorrows to a stone' (28-29), but Titus cannot stop; the presence of those entreated has become utterly irrelevant to him:

*Titus* Ah Lucius, for thy brothers let me plead.  
Grave tribunes, once more I entreat of you–

*Luc.* My gracious lord, no tribune hears you speak.

*Titus* Why, 'tis no matter, man. If they did hear,  
They would not mark me; if they did mark,  
They would not pity me; yet plead I must,  
And bootless unto them. (30-36)

Titus's pain is corroding the objective world, generating a need of abatement that cannot be assuaged. This is the mark of insufferable suffering, the herald of his eventual madness.

It is at this moment, when Rome's public repudiation brings on him a parental suffering he has never known before, that he discovers the horrific mutilation of his daughter. Dishonour has provoked

in Titus an anguish of love for his sons that can only be measured against the intensity with which he suppressed it when he served Rome. In this condition the impact of his daughter's destruction on him could not be more brutal. Preparing him for what he is about to be shown, his brother Marcus announces, 'I bring consuming sorrow to thine age' (61). Titus replies with the defiance of one who thinks that his despair has already reached its summit – 'Will it consume me? Let me see it then' (62). Titus little knows that the execution of his sons is only the first in a string of calamities. Catastrophe after catastrophe will be heaped on him, and each will turn the rack, in defiance of the logic of limit, from absolute pain to still more absolute pain, reaching a pitch beyond the imagination of those who, like Marcus, suffer with him. In effect, Titus's heroic stature is also manifest in the way he receives the horrors of life. Shakespeare is of course enacting in his protagonist the subjectivity of maximum damage. This becomes apparent in the way Titus reacts to the sight of Lavinia before him. Titus, Marcus, Lucius – all are equally aghast at the spectacle of her disfigurement; but the determination, indeed the capacity, to stare horror fully in the face is only Titus's. The way Shakespeare creates this effect merits attention, for it bears directly on his inquiry (so to speak) into the limits of subjectivity.

Marcus is the first to meet Lavinia after she has been 'trimmed' as Aaron calls it. When he surprises her in the forest, physically and socially traumatized, he instantly recognizes the work of a 'craftier Tereus' (II.iv.41). Sensitive to the shame she feels, he woos her out of her fears of repudiation. Marcus is quick to respond to her suffering which is also his own. However, his original reaction is different: the unexpected horror of the mutilation produces a momentary recoil; Marcus is unable to take what he sees to be real:

If I do dream, would all my wealth would wake me!  
 If I do wake, some planet strike me down,  
 That I may slumber an eternal sleep! (13-15)

Marcus first processes the horror as surreal; the aberration, so utterly out of the context of normality, that confronts him registers as a dream: this must be otherwise, my real world elsewhere, not here in this place of horror. This of course is the master-dramatist's *progression d'effet* – the gradualness of the contact with horror, from nightmare to reality. Marcus's hallucinatory protectiveness recalls

Hieronimo's discovery of his butchered son in the bower. Like Marcus, Hieronimo also receives the initial impact of unexpected horror as a dream image. As paralysed by foreboding he enters the pitch dark bower, Hieronimo responds – in Hunter's words – 'to his night fears as if they were only irrational *lacunae* in a naturally benevolent world'<sup>2</sup>. Assaulted in his intimacy -- he enters in his nightshirt-- initially he registers the vision as unreal. I say 'registers', and not 'dismisses', since we are here dealing with a process that is unconscious. Only after asserting himself over his fear -- 'Speak, here I am' -- is he able to confront the situation for what it is -- 'I did not slumber, therefore 'twas no dream'. Then follow his famous lines:

What outcries pluck me from my naked bed  
And chill my throbbing heart with trembling fear,  
Which never danger could yet daunt before?  
Who calls Hieronimo? Speak, here I am,  
I did not slumber, therefore 'twas no dream. (II.v.5)

Delivered at such a moment, the speech reveals – to continue with Hunter – 'the ways in which the mind seeks to naturalize aberrant experience, the steps it takes to bring it under control'. This is the defence Hieronimo's mind re-activates a moment later when he takes the corpse down from the arbour and recognizes it as that of Horatio. Objective perception– 'those garments that he wears I oft have seen' – leads to emotional identification – 'Alas, it is Horatio, my sweet son!' – but its impact, too great to sustain, produces a recoil into psychological distance: 'Oh, no, but he that whilom was my son' (13-15). That such an adjustment – from 'is' to 'was' – is psychologically motivated is confirmed by the plea that follows it: 'O, was it thou callest me from my bed?/ O speak, if any spark of life remain: who hath slain my son?' (16-18), which shows that Hieronimo did not revert to the past tense because he accepted Horatio was dead. Rather, his mind, independently of him, as it were, sought to cope with the fact that the repulsive sight before him is what had become of his dear son. Kyd's words, simple as they are, reveal a dramatization of horror and suffering of which his predecessors were completely incapable. In contrast to the sensationalism of the academic 'Senecanists', Kyd's representation of horror reveals a psychological subtlety that is truly remarkable. This example was not lost on

---

<sup>2</sup> Hunter, *English Drama*, p.77.



Shakespeare.

Their need, as it were, to avert their gaze from horror reveals Hieronimo's and Marcus's ordinary human condition; Titus's heroic stature is proclaimed in his refusal to do so. Marcus delivers disfigured Lavinia to his brother in characteristic mitigation of the horror, grimly announcing, 'This was thy daughter'. But Titus's correction shows his determination not to minimize what has happened: 'Why, Marcus, so she *is*' (III.i.63, my italics). The impact of accepting his Lavinia as the thing Marcus brings shall not be diminished by self-deluding concessions. Indeed, Titus will prove as ferocious in his reception of pain as fate is extravagant in allotting it to him. Lucius is overwhelmed by the familiar face horror bears – 'Ay me, this object kills me' (64) --, but he is forced to look at it by his father: 'Faint-hearted boy, arise and look upon her' (65). As Lavinia's torment is fully disclosed to his father, his reception of it sustains a directness that matches the brutality of the crime. This effect is achieved by the contrast between the rhetorical mediacy of Marcus's and Lucius's laments (anaphoric parallel), and the unflinching simplicity of Titus's directness. The discovery of Lavinia's ruination has for Titus an essential destructiveness that it cannot have for the others:

*Marcus* O, that delightful engine of her thoughts,  
That babbled them with such pleasing eloquence,  
Is torn from forth that pretty hollow cage,  
Where, like a sweet melodious bird, it sung  
Sweet varied notes, enchanting every ear.

*Lucius* O, say thou for her: who hath done this deed?

*Marcus* O, thus I found her, straying in the park,  
Seeking to hide herself, as doth the deer  
That hath received some unrecuring wound.

*Titus* It was my dear, and he that wounded her  
Hath hurt me more than had he killed me dead.

Hardened into monosyllabic Anglo-Saxon simplicity, Titus's last line cuts through the anaphoric web of the subordinate Andronici like the knife of his pain. But the inner effect of the devastating impact

risers and broadens into fullness of expression: <sup>3</sup>

For now I stand as one upon a rock,  
Environed with a wilderness of sea,  
Who marks the waxing tide grow wave by wave,  
Expecting ever when some envious surge  
Will in his brinish bowels swallow him. (93-97).

More than the unjust condemnation of the two sons he has just seen gone to death, or the banishment of Lucius brought to his knees in front of him, Lavinia's destruction, as Titus puts it in a moving recognition of the violence that is being done to him, 'gives my soul the greatest spurn' (101). Rome is pouncing on him with a ferocity whose reality is incomprehensible. The Roman order Titus has served all his life is disintegrating, and so is Titus's sense of himself. In recognition of the ingratitude of the new Rome, and of the tragedy it promises for him, Titus professes to repudiate the martial idealism by which he has lived all his life:

My grief was at the height before thou cam'st,  
And now like Nilus it disdaineth bounds.  
Give me my sword, I'll chop off my hands too:  
For they have fought for Rome, and all in vain,  
.....  
And they have served me to effectless use.  
Now all the service I require of them  
Is that the one will help cut the other.  
'Tis well, Lavinia, that thou hast no hands  
For hands to do Rome service is but vain. (70-80).

But this repudiation is not possible. Rome may disown Titus's heroism but Titus cannot cease to be heroic Rome. The consequences of this, however, will not become fully apparent until Aaron brings about the useless mutilation Titus's last line envisages. Then Titus will go mad.

#### IV

With Aaron's intervention, Titus is pushed into this very extremity of self-mutilation. Aaron's

---

<sup>3</sup> How much Titus has changed from the martial Stoic of Act I is indicated by the spectacular reversal of Stoic commonplaces that his image of suffering effects: 'More than a rock amidst the raging seas/ The constant heart no danger dreads nor fears' (From an inscription on a sixteenth-century English portrait, as quoted in Peter Burke, *The Renaissance* (Macmillan, Hong Kong, 1987, p. 44). Burke does not identify the portrait from which the inscription is extracted.)

vicious prank jars horribly against Titus's sincerity of sacrifice. Once again the *paterfamilias* sacrifices himself to satisfy Rome's demands and, once again, he finds himself spurned for it. Titus surrenders his hand, and with it the martial prowess that made him Rome's champion. Utterly impotent now, he appeals to the heavens for protection:

O, here I lift this one hand up to heaven,  
And bow this feeble ruin to the earth.  
If any power pities wretched tears,  
To that I call. (205-208)

Kneeling down, Lavinia joins her father -- 'What, wouldst thou kneel with me?/ Do then, dear heart' (208-209) -- producing a striking tableau of their reversal of fortune. This moment constitutes the mirror reverse of Lavinia's welcoming of Titus in the Capitol, when she knelt by the Andronici's 'monument' and shed joyful tears for the victory that Titus's unconquerable hand had secured:

Lo, at this tomb my tributary tears  
I render for my brethren's obsequies,  
And at thy feet I kneel with tears of joy  
Shed on this earth for thy return to Rome.  
O bless me here with thy victorious hand,  
Whose fortunes Rome's best citizens applaud. (I.i.162-67)

But Titus's impotence produces something more ominous than an appeal to the gods; his mind begins to give in, generating the vision of a universal commotion that matches his own:

For heaven shall hear our prayers,  
Or with our sighs we'll breathe the welkin dim  
And stain the sun with fog, as sometime clouds  
When they do hug him in their melting bosoms. (209-12)

Alarmed at these signs of instability Marcus tries to keep his brother within the bounds of reason:

O, brother, speak with possibility,  
And do not break into these deep extremes (213-14).

But against reason, Titus re-asserts the enormity of his suffering:

Is not my sorrows deep, having no bottom?  
Then be my passions bottomless with them. (215-16)

Marcus's efforts to keep his brother calm re-create the Senecan 'Domina-Nutrix' convention, which Shakespeare exploits to make Titus' vengeful transformation still more poignant. As in *Thyestes* or

*Medea*, the avenger's cosmic *furor* is measured against the patience urged by his reasonable attendant:

If there were reasons for these miseries,  
Then into limits could I bind my woes.  
When heaven doth weep, doth not the earth o'erflow?  
If the winds rage, doth not the sea wax mad,  
Threat'ning the welkin with his big-swoll'n face?  
And wilt thou have a reason for this coil?  
I am the sea. Hark how her sighs doth blow!  
She is the weeping welkin, I the earth;  
Then must my sea be moved with her sighs;  
Then must my earth with her continual tears  
Become a deluge, overflowed and drowned. (218-228)

But we soon discover that, unlike in Seneca, Titus's vengeful *furor* does not climax into the mental omnipotence of a *Medea* or *Atreus*, but settles into a more ambiguous state that keeps an audience in suspense until the enactment of revenge at Act V. But before this climax, *the Senecan rhetoric of damaged subjectivity* enacts the intolerable psychic torment that Titus has to endure. Referring to this speech Miola observes: 'Titus's rhetoric here, particularly the fusion of self and natural elements, is distinctly Senecan'<sup>4</sup>. However, Miola fails to identify the *subjective* significance of Titus's rhetoric – that is to say, he fails to root that rhetoric's cosmic (con-)fusion in the psychic convulsion it signals. Instead he argues, with Rosenmeyer, for its philosophical significance. For him, this kind of rhetoric must be interpreted in relation to its 'traceable origins in Stoic cosmology', that is, to a property of the objective universe of the speaker, rather than of his subjective state:

Behind such expression . . . is the Stoic doctrine of *sympatheia*, or as Cicero defines it, '*rerum consentiens conspirans continuata cognatio*' ('the kinship of things united in feeling, in aspiration, and in extension' – Rosenmeyer's translation). This doctrine receives its most radical development in the concept of *krasis*, or coextension, which assumes that the universe is physical and that bodies have neither extremities, nor beginnings, nor ends, but are capable of infinite extension and interpenetration. ('A drop of wine penetrates the whole ocean', says Chrysippus.) Accordingly, any disorder in the infinitely extended and interconnected universe affects the whole. This doctrine lies at the heart of Seneca's distinctive and expansive rhetoric, inspiring numerous later expressions, including this of Titus, in Renaissance drama.<sup>5</sup>

To deprive the cosmic 'sympatheia' that Titus envisages of its subjective origin is to show how difficult, it would appear, it is to recognize the true debt that Shakespeare owes to Seneca. Titus is a Senecan

---

<sup>4</sup> Miola, *Shakespeare and Classical Tragedy*, p.28.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

avenger not because he shares a philosophical outlook with Atreus or Medea, but because he shares their psychic crisis, and its consequence – insane revenge.

Even as Titus produces his moving plea for relief, a Messenger enters, bringing back Titus's hand, together with the heads of Martius and Quintus the hand has failed to protect. As the pitying Messenger puts it, Titus's sacrifice, though worthy of the best of Romans, has been derided by the court. Saturninus's Rome has brought to culmination the systematic violation of the sacred values in whose name Titus called himself a Roman. Titus's exemplary act of self-denial, which would have made heroic Rome proud, is incomprehensibly mocked by Saturninus and his post-heroic court: 'Thy grief their sports, thy resolution mocked' (237) laments the Messenger. No more perverse response to Titus's piety can be imagined than this. This is more than is humanly bearable, even for a military Stoic like Titus. Marcus – himself the embodiment of rational self-possession -- explodes into hyperbole:

Now let hot Etna cool in Sicily,  
And be my heart an ever-burning hell!  
These miseries are more than may be borne.  
To weep with them that weep doth ease some deal,  
But sorrow flouted at is double death. (240-44)

At every stage since the start of the crisis, Marcus has been one step behind Titus's emotional progression. But now Titus is beyond anything Marcus, and the rest of the Andronici, can possibly imagine. Instead of producing a roaring appropriation of the heavens like Atreus or Medea, Titus remains eerily silent. When he speaks, once more, his words are more monumental than those of the others. Against Marcus's hyperbolic outburst or Lucius's argumentative lament --

Ah, that this sight should make so deep a wound  
And yet detested life not shrink thereat!  
That ever death should let life bear his name,  
Where life hath no more interest but to breathe (245-48) –

Titus's response is devastatingly simple:

When will this fearful slumber have an end? (251)

This time, however, Titus's 'un-rhetorical' response does not betoken his capacity to stare horror in the face. On the contrary, his dream-like reception of the horror is the unequivocal sign that he can no

longer assimilate it. Confronted by what is too much to take, he produces the same defensive reflex of mind that Marcus (and Hieronimo) have exhibited before. However, what in Marcus was a sign of his unheroic vulnerability is for Titus an indication of psychic break-up. It is thus ironic that Marcus urges on Titus the brave realism that Titus has been exhibiting from the start, at the very moment Titus can no longer sustain it:

Now farewell, flatt'ry; die Andronicus.  
Thou dost not slumber. See thy two sons' heads,  
Thy warlike hand, thy mangled daughter here,  
Thy other banished son with this dear sight  
Struck pale and bloodless, and thy brother, I,  
Even like a stony image, cold and numb. (252-57)

Instead of producing the frantic 'griefs' that Marcus anticipates --

Ah, now no more will I control thy griefs:  
Rend off thy silver hair, thy other hand  
Gnawing with thy teeth, and be this dismal sight  
The closing up of our most wretched eyes (258-61) –

Titus remains puzzlingly calm, and then bursts into sudden laughter. Marcus's naively rational reproach -- 'Why dost thou laugh? It fits not with this hour'(264) – confirms how profoundly out of touch he has become with his brother, who will no longer be a passive recipient of blows. At this moment, the emotional function of revenge is made fully apparent. Titus's embracement of revenge is not a rational act, but a symptom of unsustainable grief. His suffering is checked by revenge; to his grief, Titus opposes the ferocity of revenge:

Why? I have not another tear to shed.  
Besides, this sorrow is an enemy  
And would usurp upon my wat'ry eyes,  
And make them blind with tributary tears.  
And then which way shall I find Revenge's cave? (265-269)

To be sure, Titus's does not disintegrate into impeded coherence in action and speech; unlike Hieronimo, he does not experience a dysfunctional madness preliminary to an insane lucidity. But this should not be taken as a sign that the damage done to him is any less serious than Hieronimo's. Titus evolves directly from the passive reception of pain into the mad lucidity of the last stage of Hieronimo's revenge. His uncontrollable subjectivity solidifies into an unflinching purposefulness that cannot be

termed anything other than mad:

For these two heads do seem to speak to me,  
And threat me I shall never come to bliss  
Till all these mischiefs be returned again  
Even in their throats that hath committed them.  
Come, let me see what task I have to do. (270-75)

Regaining the initiative, Titus asks Lucius, Marcus and Lavinia to encircle him, and vows to right the wrongs of each one of them. Indeed, the Andronici have become a grotesque party: when they shortly leave the stage Titus will carry in his remaining hand the head of one son, Marcus of the other, while the handless Lavinia will hold his father's severed hand in her teeth. But they have re-taken the initiative against Saturninus's Rome.

The moment that marks the nadir of the Andronici's fortunes also marks the beginning of the regeneration of the Rome they represent. In effect, by enjoining Lucius to raise with the Goths an army against Rome, Titus is sowing the seeds of recovery, if not rebirth. The beginning of degenerating revenge coincides with the emergence of a counteracting renewal. Thus, the claustrophobic atmosphere of this great Act of suffering finds some release in Lucius's farewell speech to Rome, which closes the scene – and perhaps originally the whole Act, too – by setting the personal agony of the Andronici against the larger context of Roman history. From this historical perspective, and in the impersonal, choric tone that befits it, Lucius's speech articulates the dynamics of retribution. In contrast to Titus's vision of 'Revenge's cave', Lucius's retributive prescience promises the restoration of his family's dignity:

Farewell, Andronicus, my noble father,  
The woeful'st man that ever lived in Rome!  
Farewell, proud Rome, till Lucius come again:  
He loves his pledges dearer than his life.

Farewell, Lavinia, my noble sister:  
O, would thou wert as thou tofore hast been! (287-292)

Titus's revenge shall mark the degenerative climax of the Roman ideal he embodies, but it will be followed by a regeneration that shall take Rome into a new glorious historic phase:

If Lucius live, he will requite your wrongs,

And make proud Saturnine and his empress  
Beg at the gates like Tarquin and his queen.  
Now will I to the Goths and raise a superpower,  
To be revenged on Rome and Saturnine. (295-99)

Thus, the progression of revenge is made parallel with the retributive regeneration of Rome. Titus's outrageous carnage will restore the order of pious Rome. As in *The Spanish Tragedy*, in *Titus* there is a correlation between the individual or human plane of revenge and a higher plane of supra-individual forces – supernatural in Kyd, historical in Shakespeare. In *Titus* these forces are unambiguously positive, in that they re-establish the sanctioned communal order. After the enactment of revenge there is no sense, as there is in Kyd, that the community has been dealt a blow from which it shall not recover. However, in both Kyd and Shakespeare the retributive parallel serves to bring out the self-consistency of the individual and the social worlds, whose unstable co-existence is revealed by the avenger's mad vindication of sociality. In these plays there cannot be any automatic correspondence between the individual, the social, and the providential or historical. That Titus's ghastly banquet re-asserts the ideal rule of *romanitas* confirms the inadequacy of a-social conceptions of individuality. That Lucius, who embodies the sanctity of the self in society, is forced to regenerate Rome with the help of its former enemies exposes the reductiveness of immutable conceptions of the communal or national. These are (albeit in a much more sophisticated form) the discontinuous continuities we discovered in Seneca between the psychic foundation of revenge and its origin in generational or mythical curses.

## V

After Act III it becomes clear that Titus has been so badly wounded that he is going to take revenge against his enemies. However, the full extent of his damage, and what it reveals about his Roman identity, does not emerge until he enacts his vengeance at the end of Act V. In the meantime, Shakespeare keeps us guessing about Titus's real state. The fact that Titus does not exhibit until Act V the full extent to which he has been damaged by the disintegration of his sense of identity has led critics to disregard the importance of this final revelation, and present Titus's revenge as a



straightforward case of honour revenge, that is to say, the revenge one would expect, under normal conditions, of a dutiful Roman like Titus. Revenge and retribution thus become identical. This reductiveness is the consequence of ignoring the Senecan contribution to the idea of revenge as understood and developed by Kyd and Shakespeare. Robert Miola's *Shakespeare's Rome*, for example, helped to establish *Titus Andronicus* as a play more than superficially concerned with Rome, and its protagonists as embodiments of *romanitas*. Although Miola recognizes that the Titus of Acts I and II is profoundly transformed by Act III, he presents Titus's progression towards revenge as part of a collaborative endorsement of family honour:

The new Titus [i.e. mad Titus] immediately assembles the family into a conspirational circle that recalls the similar circle of Brutus Collatine, and the others around the body of Lucrece. As Brutus did earlier, and as another Brutus will do later, Titus presides over a solemn ceremony. . . . Lucius notes the similarity between the actions of the Andronici and those of the earlier rebels against Tarquinian tyranny and injustice. . . . Lucius and Titus, the men who avenge the misdeed, find a pattern and precedent in the actions of Brutus, Collatine, and Lucrece's father, who together expelled the Tarquins from Rome. . . . clearly, the rape of Lucrece functions as the deep source for *Titus Andronicus*. It serves to articulate the various violations implicit in Lavinia's rape and to illuminate the revenge action, emphasizing in the process the importance of familial unity to the reordering of the savage city.

Of course, Miola recognizes that Lucius 'provides clear contrast to Titus.' 'Instead of searching the skies for a banished goddess' Miola observes, 'he turns to the Gothic warriors outside the city and organizes an invasion'<sup>6</sup>, a contrast that is further accentuated in Act V, where he is characterized by 'the restraint of emotion. . . the tacit recognition of higher obligations than personal satisfaction, the steady refusal to pursue a violent course of vengeance that will shed innocent blood'<sup>7</sup>. Nonetheless, for him, Titus the mad avenger and Lucius the regenerator of the city serve the same honourable purpose. Some interpretations go even further. Hunter, for example, asserts that

*Titus Andronicus* repeats the central situation of *The Spanish Tragedy*. Like Kyd's play [it presents]. . . the inability of a father to find legal redress for the secret murder (or, in this case, rape) of his child. His frustration makes him grasp at the fantasy of total individual justice, and it is by enacting that fantasy that he is able to bring his life to rest on the idea of a perfect retribution. Titus, like Hieronimo, achieves this in a theatrical celebration which satiates the

---

<sup>6</sup> Miola, *Shakespeare's Rome*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1983, p.69.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

hunger (ours as well as his) to see absolute and unimpeded justice taking over from the imperfect world.<sup>8</sup>

In the same way that Hunter's study of *The Spanish Tragedy* obscured the subjective dimension of revenge by presenting Hieronimo as an instrument of divine justice, so Hunter tries to root Titus's revenge in universal retribution. The familiar tripartite scheme of vengeance is thus applied to Shakespeare's play: Titus's 'hunger' for justice (private revenge) seeks to obtain the 'legal redress' (public revenge), which a breakdown in the law does not permit to satisfy legally. Hence Titus's revenge brings about by default the 'perfect retribution' that universal justice demands (divine vengeance). In other words, Titus resorts to vengeance to compensate for the corrupted justice of Rome and, in so doing, re-establishes the necessary prevalence of good over evil. Where Miola downplays the subjective damage that revenge betokens by explaining revenge as an imperative of honour, Hunter does the same by casting the avenger as an automaton of the play's retributive machinery. Neither of these authors, of course, understand Senecan revenge in relation to damaged identity. For them Senecan revenge means passion, and revenge, regulative revenge.

Unsurprisingly, it is those studies less directly concerned with revenge – that is, those which have no pre-established conception of what revenge means – that bring out the subjective dimension central to Titus's experience. This, for example, is the case of Emrys Jones. In trying to demonstrate that Shakespeare's play owes a debt to Euripides's *Hecuba*, Jones emphasizes the fact that Titus's madness is precipitated by the psychological imperative to find relief for his grief. For Jones, the central experience of the play is not concerned with a frustrated course of legal redress, but with suffering. The crucial moment when revenge is embraced must be explained, therefore, in emotional rather than rational terms –

Titus's feelings can go no further in that direction – helpless acceptance of bad news, ghastly pain, frightful grief. Such emotion must be converted into something else; relief of some sort must be found<sup>9</sup> –

---

<sup>8</sup> Hunter, *English Drama*, p.87.

<sup>9</sup> Jones, *op.cit.*, p. 89.

and so must Titus's evolution as an avenger:

this two-part movement of feeling, however we choose to describe it, this intensification of tragic grief until it is converted into the ferociously gleeful pleasure of wrath spending itself in a hated victim.<sup>10</sup>

In this view, Titus's tragic experience is defined as 'suffering intensified to intolerable pitch [Act III] followed by the relief of aggressive action'. The synapse of suffering and relief is of course the madness of revenge. As dramatized in Act III, this transition from grief to revenge is so 'effective and assured'<sup>11</sup> as to suggest that the apprentice tragedian was assisted by a master. Jones finds such a master in Euripides, whose *Hecuba* is built on an analogous 'rapid yet convincing' transition. Though Jones's case for Euripidean influence has not been found to be persuasive<sup>12</sup>, its identification of an emotive origin of revenge remains valuable. But it is not enough to say that revenge has a subjective origin; one must also recognize that it has a subjective 'goal': the assertion of the socially-dependent identity of the avenger. Not to do so is to revert to the simplistic view of revenge as 'passion'. Thus, when Jones fails to explore the Senecan connection, claiming instead that 'we shall not properly appreciate the play unless we see that Shakespeare's Titus is in essence nothing else than a male Hecuba', he depletes the avenger of his social dimension. In effect, for Jones the avenger wreaks his revenge at the price of his humanity. Hecuba was not only, as young Lucius remembers in Act IV, a legendary example of tragic grief but also of its awesomely destructive power. Hecuba's revenge is seen to relieve the intolerable pitch of her emotion by transforming her into something less than a human being. It is no accident that in the process of her revenge Hecuba is transformed into a dog. As Grube shows in his study of the Euripidean play, the Trojan Queen becomes de-socialized, which is to say de-individualized, as she enacts her revenge:

we see Hecuba as the suffering queen. . . then something snaps. She loses all dignity and nobility in her thirst for vengeance and is to become, as is foretold at the end, a hound of hell baying upon the plains of Troy. . . . The first part of the *Hecuba* is dominated by sorrow and the second by

---

<sup>10</sup> Jones, *op.cit.*, p.90.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> There are, however, exceptions. See note 114 in Chapter I.

vengeance. Both together give us the complete picture of the so pitiful and yet so terrible queen upon whom the greatest burden has fallen: she has right on her side, but, because she has suffered more than human nature can bear, she becomes less, not more, than human.<sup>13</sup>

This view which fails to see that revenge constitutes an affirmation of the identity of the avenger, and of its dependence on his society, has been entrenched in the criticism of the play by Eugene Waith. In his most influential article on *Titus Andronicus*, Waith tried to establish Ovid, rather than Seneca, as the major source of the play. Now, there is no doubt that the play is greatly indebted to Ovid, as Aaron's Ovidian fashioning of his crime shows. It is a different matter, however, to accept that Shakespeare's treatment of revenge is *Ovidian*. To claim this is to reduce Shakespeare's engagement with *both* the Senecan *and* the Kydian avenger to an anecdotal level. The distorting consequences for the play are evident: in 'The Metamorphosis of Violence in *Titus Andronicus*' Waith argues that Ovid's characteristically detached treatment of emotion helps us to understand the incongruous combination of precious style and enacted violence that has earned the play its bad name. Waith proposes Ovid as the redeemer of such a tasteless combination, trying to show how Shakespeare reproduced the Ovidian technique in his first tragedy. In so doing, he metamorphoses Titus's revenge into an Ovidian story. Waith does not omit to notice that Titus remains entirely Roman till the very end –

Titus, unlike Tamora, is not finally shown as bestial or degenerate. His slaying of Lavinia, also somewhat prepared for by the first act, has overtones of nobility, though Saturninus's comment 'unnatural and unkind' is uncomfortably close to the truth<sup>14</sup> –

but concludes that, in the final analysis, what is distinctive about Titus the avenger is that he undergoes an Ovidian transformation that deprives him of his individuality. Waith argues with reference to Ovidian Hecuba that the stories of the *Metamorphoses* are characterized by the loss of humanity their protagonists experience: '[Ovidian characters] are built up only to be obliterated by an impersonal force working from within'. Titus's revenge can be termed Ovidian in that its intensest emotion is seen to deprive him of individuality. In Ovid, as Waith sees it, 'character and personality miraculously give

---

<sup>13</sup> As quoted in Jones, *op.cit.*, p.99.

<sup>14</sup> Waith, 'The Metamorphosis of Violence in *Titus Andronicus*', *Shakespeare Survey* 10 (1957), p.46.

way to naked, abstract emotion'<sup>15</sup>; in Shakespeare the 'pitch of emotion' brings about a similar loss of humanity to the avenger. As a result revenge, far from asserting the damaged identity of the avenger, completely obliterates it:

Like Ovid, he [Shakespeare] was more interested here in portraying the extraordinary pitch of emotion to which a person may be raised by the most violent outrage. The passions of Titus transcend the limits of character to become in their own right, so to speak, phenomena of nature. . . the grotesqueries of his mad scenes contribute to this effect, and the end is pure frenzy. If the violence of the play serves the theme as an emblem of disorder, it also serve as both agent and emblem of a metamorphosis of character which takes place before our eyes. Character in the usual sense of the word disintegrates completely. What we see is a personified emotion.<sup>16</sup>

This is the result of endorsing a notion of revenge based on an unexamined 'passion'. For critics like Waith Titus's revenge, as it was also claimed of Hieronimo's, constitutes a nihilistic act<sup>17</sup> with no other significance than the confirmation of the terrible suffering that has been inflicted on the avenger. Unsurprisingly, Waith reaches the same conclusion that those who regard the public Seneca as a continuation of the academic 'Seneca', to wit, that revenge means sensationalist passion and overelaborate rhetoric, and that, for this reason, it is not amenable to dramatic treatment. Revenge plays have more in them of revenge than of plays, and so with *Titus Andronicus*: 'In taking over certain Ovidian forms Shakespeare takes over part of an Ovidian conception which cannot be fully realized by the techniques of drama'<sup>18</sup>.

It would seem, then, that we have on the one hand those who, like Miola (honour) and Hunter (retribution), see revenge as an entirely rational act of social and moral consequence. On the other hand,

---

<sup>15</sup> Waith, op.cit., p.42.

<sup>16</sup> Waith, op.cit., p.46.

<sup>17</sup> How influential Waith's article remains can be judged by the assumptions of studies apparently at the antipodes of Waith. Thus, S.J. White, for example, argues that: 'Titus moves beyond despair to the next plateau – madness. . . When he calmly serves Tamora the Thyestian banquet he prepares for her, there is no shred of humanity left in him. In effecting his revenge, Titus seemingly gets the last ghastly laugh. But it has no significance, for in reality he wins nothing. Having transgressed the boundaries of decency and forfeited his humanity, all that is left for him is to become the butt of Aaron's jokes' (S. J. White, 'Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*', *The Explicator*, 54 4 (1996), p.208). Examples are abundant: see, for example, A. Tricomi, 'The Mutilated Garden in *Titus Andronicus*', *Shakespeare Studies IX*, p. 95: 'Titus and Lavinia . . . never regain the humanity they lose'.

<sup>18</sup> Waith, op.cit., p.48.

Jones and Waith brutalize the avenger beyond social (and therefore human) recognition. As usual, we are confronted with a reductive polarity that demands a synthesis: revenge is a *perverted* manifestation of the avenger's *inescapable sociality*.

## VI

There is no doubt that, in contrast to Hieronimo, Titus shows a remarkable degree of self-possession. Titus's madness does not declare itself in any loss of self-control of the type Hieronimo exhibits when trigger-words like 'Horatio' remind him of his plight and send him into 'ecstasies'. This is shown at III.ii when Titus rebukes Marcus for alluding to 'hands' in Lavinia's presence, producing himself a famously infamous pun: 'O, handle not the theme, to talk of hands,/ Lest we remember still that we have none' (III.ii.29-30). Immediately, however, he corrects himself, showing a capacity to rationalize what has happened which Hieronimo could not reproduce. Titus seems fully to have lived down what has been inflicted on him: 'Fie, fie, how frantically I square my talk,/ As if we should forget we have no hands/ If Marcus did not name the word of hands' (31-33). This remarkable self-possession has led critics to assume that Titus's madness is not mad, but is strategically feigned to outwit his enemies. Titus, it is claimed, dissembles the better to strike against Saturninus once it has become evident that otherwise he shall have no redress:

What Titus does is first to withdraw into an equivocal state of apparent insanity, itself a partial relief, and then having failed to secure justice from the gods to proceed with his own satisfyingly horrible revenge.<sup>19</sup>

The assumption is familiar: Jones, despite his recognition of the subjective origin of revenge, reverts here to the regulative view of vengeance in positing an absence of legitimate redress as the ultimate precipitant of revenge. Thus, Act IV is interpreted as Titus's attempt to obtain justice by sanctioned means, followed by his determination to take justice into his hands, which he does in Act V.

To be sure, in Act IV the pieties of retribution are invoked, but what we witness is far from an

---

<sup>19</sup> Jones, *op.cit.*, p.89.

unresponsiveness of the gods. At IV.i. in the secure context of family life Lavinia seeks to make the shameful authorship of her rape known to her kinsmen. She frantically strives to get hold of the books her nephew is carrying, among which she knows there is a copy of the *Metamorphoses*. This is the book, Lucius tells us, 'my mother gave it me' (IV.i. 43): Lavinia is going to express herself by means of the culture which the Andronici, as Romans, share with each other. Frightened by his strangely agitated aunt, Lucius is reminded of Hecuba:

For I have heard my grandsire say full oft  
Extremity of sorrow would make men mad,  
And I have read that Hecuba of Troy  
Ran mad for sorrow. That made me to fear. (18-21)

The idea of the maddening effect of sorrow draws attention to Titus: instead of the Hecuban despair one would expect from someone in his state, he appears to be composed, patiently awaiting the heavens to redress his wrongs. He tries to calm Lavinia down:

Come and take choice of all my library,  
And so beguile thy sorrow, till the heavens  
Reveal the damned contriver of this deed. (34-6)

At the mention of 'the damned contriver' of her rape, Lavinia starts to gesture frantically. 'Why lifts she up her arms in sequence thus?' asks her puzzled father. Marcus's guess --

I think she means that there were more than one  
Confederate in the fact. Ay, more there was,  
Or else to heaven she heaves them for revenge (38-40) --

reinforces the idea of heavenly redress. As the expectation grows about the impending disclosure of the culprits' identity, the divine powers seem to take over, responding to the plea that the victims send up to them.

Marcus appeals to the gods -- 'Apollo, Pallas, Jove, or Mercury' -- for divine inspiration, 'that I may this treason find', and struck by ingenuity, he directs Lavinia to write the name of the culprits in the sand:

Write thou, good niece, and here display at last  
What God will have discovered for revenge.  
Heaven guide thy pen to print thy sorrows plain,  
That we may know the traitors and the truth. (72-5)

Clearly, Marcus is here invoking the same trusting piety that prompted Isabella's

The heavens are just, murder cannot be hid,  
Time is the author both of truth and right,  
And time will bring this treachery to light (II.v.57-59).

As in *The Spanish Tragedy*, this trust in heaven is rewarded. No sooner Marcus invokes retribution than the names of Demetrius and Chiron appear in the sand for all to see: '*Stuprum – Chiron – Demetrius*' (77). Titus is overwhelmed at the revelation: '*Magni dominator polis/ Tam lentum audis scelera, tam lentus vides*' (80-81). But Marcus takes the initiative and gathers around him Titus, Lavinia and the boy, and with all of them kneeling down, they vow to avenge themselves against the barbarous Goths:

Swear with me – as, with the woeful fere  
And father of that chaste dishonoured dame,  
Lord Junius Brutus swore for Lucrece's rape –  
That we will prosecute by good advice  
Mortal revenge upon these traitorous Goths,  
And see their blood, or die with this reproach. (88-93)

The revenge Marcus is here thinking of is the revenge of honour, as his concern with 'reproach' shows--revenge, that is, as the duty to defend the solidarity of the family and the dignity of Rome. This is, in short, the pious revenge that corresponds to the signal they have just received from heaven. But Titus's dismissal shows he has something else in mind: 'Tis sure, an you knew how' (94), he cynically mocks Marcus's naive civism. At this moment we begin to suspect how profoundly Titus has been transformed by his ordeal. Instead of the pious man who, in scandalous naivety, had expected gratitude from Tamora because she had been made empress in her captivity (I.i.399-400), Titus now sees through people and their motives in ways ominously similar to those of his Machiavellian enemies:

But if you hunt these bear-whelps, then beware:  
The dam will wake an if she wind ye once.  
She's with the lion deeply still in league,  
And lulls him whilst she playeth on her back,  
And when he sleeps she will do what she list.  
You are a young huntsman, Marcus. Let alone. (95-100)

Titus's cynical repudiation of the sanctioned means of redress should alert his relatives to the dangerous



being he has become. But these will do as Marcus does, misinterpreting Titus's rejection of the noble path of revenge as a sign that he has become incapable of action, and can only pitifully await the action of the heavens:

O, heavens, can you hear a good man groan  
And not relent, or not compassion him?  
Marcus, attend him in his ecstasy,  
That hath more scars of sorrow in his heart  
Than foeman's marks upon his battered shield,  
But yet so just that he will not revenge.  
Revenge the heavens for old Andronicus! (122-8)

Marcus is confirmed in his naive interpretation of Titus's intention by what follows next. Titus organizes a shooting party to demand justice from the gods. He enters with his bevy of protective relatives, accoutred with digging and shooting implements with the help of which they propose to search the seas, the heavens and hell for Astraea, the goddess of Justice whose flight from the earth has left it orphaned of justice. Titus's kinsmen think they are humouring their mildly distracted uncle, who urges them to the crazy task:

Publius and Sempronius, you must do it.  
'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. (IV.iii.10-16)

Titus's demand for justice is strongly reminiscent of Hieronimo's similar invocation of underworld deities, of his hellish visions, of his anguished perception that justice has deserted his world. It is no accident that his petition to the heavens follows the identification of the culprits. As in Hieronimo's case, the positive responses from heaven – which we have just witnessed – do nothing but increase Titus's perception that justice has fled the earth. Publius, Marcus, all those present are saddened by the spectacle of Titus's distraction – 'O, Publius, is not this a heavy case,/ To see thy noble uncle thus distract' (25-26), laments Marcus – and movingly make a commitment to protect him in his distress:

Therefore, my lords, it highly us concerns  
By day and night t'attend him carefully  
And feed his humour kindly as we may,

Till time beget some remedy. (27-30)

At this stage, then, everything seems to indicate that Titus is not up to his bloody task. Instead of preserving his dignity, Titus puts up a shooting pantomime:

He [Jove] doth me wrong to feed me with delays.  
I'll dive into the burning lake below  
And pull her out of Acheron by the heels  
.  
And sith there's no justice in earth nor hell,  
We will solicit heaven and move the gods  
To send down justice for to wreak our wrongs. (43-52)

On Marcus's orders, the arrows are shot into the imperial palace, and irk Saturninus with their demand for justice. Titus is enraptured by their celestial exercise – 'Now, masters, draw./ O well said, Lucius!/ Good boy, in Virgo's lap! Give it Pallas!' (64-65) – his absurd game indulged by his relatives – 'My lord, I aim a mile beyond the moon,/ Your letter is with Jupiter by this' (66). Indeed, Titus seems as entitled to claim a Senecan avenger's role as Falstaff is a valiant knight's. He makes such an unlikely avenger that Marcus permits himself a little Senecan joke at his expense. It is only in order to humour a distracted old fool that the celebrated Senecan fall of the Zodiac appears in Titus's Rome! The awesome astral breakdown that marks the avenger's triumphant omnipotence at the end of *Thyestes* here becomes deflated into a jibe at his enemies. All that Marcus and his relatives expect Titus to do in order to avenge himself is to indulge in the slanderous fantasies of the impotent. Thus Saturninus is cuckolded with gallactic horns<sup>20</sup>.

*Titus*      Ha, ha! Publius, Publius, what hast thou done?  
See, see, thou hadst shot off one of Taurus's horns.

*Marc.*      This was the sport, my lord! When Publius shot,  
The Bull, being galled, gave Aries such a knock  
That down fell both the Ram's horns in the court,  
And who should find them but the Empress' villain!

---

<sup>20</sup> Shakespeare's refashioning of the Thyestean Fall of the Zodiac does not seem to have attracted much critical attention. Miola's reference (*Shakespeare and Classical Tragedy*, p. 32) to Titus's 'astrological derangement' (which he puzzlingly assigns to 'III.ii') and the possibility that was modelled on 'the chaos of the fourth chorus in *Thyestes*', seems to be the only remark the passage has produced. This may be due to the fact that Shakespeare gives us a parody of it. Nonetheless, Shakespeare's re-contextualization loses no significance for being humorous.

She laughed, and told the Moor, he should not choose  
But give them to his master for a present. (68-75)

## VII

The extent to which Titus is misunderstood by his entourage is made apparent in the scene that follows. As Marcus intended, the soliciting arrows have hit the imperial palace, enraging Saturninus to an utmost degree:

Why, lords, what wrongs are these! Was ever seen  
An emperor in Rome thus overborne,  
Troubled, confronted thus, and for the extent  
Of equal justice, used in such contempt?  
My lords, you know, as know the mighty gods,  
However these disturbers of our peace  
Buzz in the people's ears, there naught hath past  
But even with law against the wilful sons  
Of old Andronicus.

And now he writes to heaven for his redress.  
See here's 'to Jove', and this 'To Mercury',  
This 'to Apollo', this 'to the god of war' –

As who would say, in Rome no justice were. (IV.iv.1-20).

Saturninus – who also assumes that Titus's madness is a matter of 'feigned ecstasies' – finds it incredible that Titus may seek to vindicate the cause of Roman justice. To be sure, no legal breakdown has attended his accession to the throne: Titus's sons were guilty in the eyes of the law and were thus lawfully punished. However, Titus continues to demand justice. Saturninus's manifestly inadequate interpretation of the 'justice' Titus seeks highlights the same crucial difference we encountered with Hieronimo: it is not the legality the king dispenses that Titus needs. What victimizes him is the constitutive justice of which the collapse of his Rome has deprived him. Because it is the latter, more profound, kind of justice on which his integrity rests, Titus is now well beyond any legal redress. The failure of his fellow beings to understand this shows how little prepared they are for what is coming. Titus's revenge is the result of a profound psychic damage that only his heroic commitment to Rome can explain.

How tragically ironic Titus's transformation is becomes apparent with Tamora's reaction to the news of his distraction. She is elated to confirm that her malevolence is bearing fruit in the suffering of her hated enemies. Of course, she continues to assume the role of the good-willed conciliator, compassionately urging Saturninus to 'bear the faults of Titus's age'. But her pleasure at her manipulative skills is now greater than ever. Having destroyed her enemies, she now feels beyond the reach of any danger:

*(Aside)* Why, thus it shall  
become  
High-witted Tamora to gloze with all.  
But, Titus, I have touched thee to the quick:  
Thy life-blood out, if Aaron now be wise,  
Then all is safe, the anchor in the port. (34-38)

At this moment, news reaches the court of the approach of a Gothic army led by Lucius. Saturninus instantly caves in at the prospect of Lucius's return. But not Tamora. For her, the crisis offers only another opportunity to prove herself master, or mistress, of events: 'enchant Old Andronicus' and use his influence over Lucius to our party's advantage, she urges. Unsurprisingly Tamora counts on the full co-operation of her enemy. The old fool's resistance to her siren songs being inconceivable, Tamora asks Saturninus to 'bury all thy fear in my devices'; Titus shall obey her commands as a puppet obeys the puppeteer:

If Tamora entreat him, then he will,  
For I can smooth and fill his aged ears  
With golden promises, that were his heart  
Almost impregnable, his old ears deaf,  
Yet should both ear and heart obey my tongue. (95-99)

The moment of truth for Rome and its ruined hero is approaching. Tamora re-enters in Act V dressed up as Revenge, in a 'strange and sad habiliment', accompanied by Chiron and Demetrius as Rape and Murder. She knows perfectly well that revenge is the most 'golden' of the promises with which she can beguile Titus. Knocking at his door, she prepares herself to take full advantage of Titus's pathetic obsessions. Titus emerges from his cave-like study, resenting the interruption of his meditations of bloody vengeance. Of course, Titus recognizes Tamora, and welcomes her for who

she is, insisting that 'I am not mad; I know thee well enough' (V.ii.21). But Tamora, ignoring completely what this implies about the insanity on which she wants to capitalize, instructs Titus on how he is to interpret her coming to him:

Know, thou sad man, I am not Tamora.  
She is thy enemy, and I thy friend.  
I am Revenge, sent from th'infernal kingdom  
To ease the gnawing vulture of thy mind  
By working wreakful revenge on thy foes. (28-32)

Tamora is of course impersonating a Revenge like that of Andrea's Hell. But the situation ironically suggests that this Revenge is far from being in control of her avenger. Thus, as her direction to 'come down and welcome me to this world's light;/ Confer with me of murder and of death' (33-4) suggests, it is the avenger who is on the upper-stage while Revenge looks up to him from below. Titus's ascendancy is thus visually marked. He seizes the initiative: in this play it is the mortal avenger who solicits the Infernal Deity to prove herself worthy of the title she bears by killing her attendants, Rape and Murder. Titus shall go along with the game, but making it clear that he shall play on the same level as his would-be controlling deities. His jibe could hardly be more disarming:

Good lord, how like the Empress' sons they are,  
And you the Empress. But we wordly men  
Have miserable, mad, mistaking eyes.  
O sweet Revenge, now do I come to thee. (64-7)

Intoxicated with her fanatic self-reliance, Tamora, however, remains blind to all these indications that Titus is not mad in the way she thinks. To Tamora everything Titus says serves only as a confirmation of the effortless duping she anticipated:

This closing with him fits his lunacy.  
Whate'er I forge to feed his brain-sick humours  
Do you uphold and maintain in your speeches,  
For now he firmly takes me for Revenge. (70-3)

As Titus comes down to embrace Revenge we wonder what the outcome of this comic situation will be. Tamora has no doubts about it; she interprets Titus's descent as further proof of the hold she has on him. Tamora believes she is about to enjoy her final triumph on Rome:

Being credulous in this mad thought,

I'll make him send for Titus his son;  
And whilst I at a banquet hold him sure,  
I'll find some cunning practice out of hand  
To scatter and disperse the giddy Goths  
Or at the least make them his enemies. (74-9)

Titus enters 'below', welcoming the 'dread Fury' for which he has so long been 'forlorn', and turns the tables on Tamora by pretending that her feigned identity is the real one, and her striking resemblance to Tamora an accidental one:

How like the Empress and her sons you are!  
Well are you fitted, had you but a Moor.  
Could not all hell afford such a devil?  
For well I wot the Empress never wags  
But in her company there is a Moor,  
And would you represent our Queen aright,  
It were convenient you had such a devil. (84-90)

The effect is comic, but Titus's self-confidence remains disturbing, against which Tamora's manipulative skills begin to lose their lustre. Without the slightest concession to his intelligence, Tamora bluntly tells him what he is to do for her sake. She does not even bother to bring up the matter in a tactful way. Having him within earshot is enough; she commands what she wishes and, such are her powers of persuasion, he shall obey:

Well has thou lessoned us; this shall we do.  
But would it please thee, good Andronicus,  
To send for Lucius, thy thrice-valiant son,  
Who leads towards Rome a band of warlike Goths,  
And bid him come and banquet at thy house. (110-4)

Fittingly, it is her Machiavellian hubris which creates the opportunity for Titus's final reckoning: at the moment Tamora believes she is ridding herself of the Andronici and their upright Rome she is unwittingly anticipating her own downfall:

When he [Lucius] is here, even at thy solemn feast,  
I will bring in the Empress and her sons,  
The Emperor himself, and all thy foes,  
And at thy mercy shall they stoop and kneel,  
And on them shall thou ease thy angry heart. (116-20)

Before she departs, Titus asks Revenge to leave Rape and Murder with him. The contrasting asides the two parties then produce leave us no longer in doubt as to who shall prove the master Machiavel:

*Tam.* What say you, boys? Will you abide with him,  
Whiles I go tell my lord the Emperor  
How I have governed our determined jest?  
Yield to his humour, smooth and speak him fair,  
And tarry with him till I turn again.

*Titus* I knew them all, though they supposed me mad,  
And will o'erreach them in their own devices,  
A pair of cursèd hell-hounds and their dam. (137-44)

With these brilliant ironies, Shakespeare exploits the providential world Tamora pretends to embody in order to highlight the independence of the human world. The effect of human self-consistency that Kyd achieved with his comic upper-stage is here brought to perfection. Shakespeare's avenger is no automaton in a providential design. But is Titus in complete control of himself as he thinks he is? His 'comic' calm deceives his friends and enemies alike, but his newly-adopted Machiavellism deceives us, too. Titus is not going simply to repay his tormentors in kind, sending them to their destruction at a safe emotional distance. Seneca would, of course, be quite incapable of the ironies Shakespeare creates here, but these are designed in the same direction, namely to the *generation of mad horror as perverted sociality*.

## VIII

Once Chiron and Demetrius are in his power, Titus is in a position to 'o'erreach them in their own devices'. He fetches Lavinia, and they return, Titus carrying a knife in his remaining hand and Lavinia a basin between her stumps. Slowly they approach the rapists: 'Come, come, Lavinia', urges Titus, 'look, thy foes are bound' (165). Recounting their hideous crimes, Titus assures them that they shall be repaid in kind. Though Titus claims he is returning tit for tat – 'For worse than Philomel you used my daughter/ And worse than Procne I will be revenged'(194-95)– the excesses that he promises them are well beyond anything the villains could have conceived:

Hark, wretches, how I mean to martyr you:

Hark, villains, I will grind your bones to dust,  
And with your blood and it I'll make a paste,  
And of the paste a coffin I will rear,  
And make two pasties of your shameful heads,  
And bid that strumpet, your unhallowed dam,  
Like to the earth swallow her own increase.  
This is the feast that I have bid her to,  
And this the banquet she shall surfeit on. (179-92)

Titus cuts Chiron and Demetrius's throats, on stage, and unveils his extraordinarily brutal intentions:

Come, come, be every one officious  
To make this banquet, which I wish may prove  
More stern and bloody than the Centaurs' feast.  
*He cuts their throats*  
So, now bring them in, for I'll play the cook,  
And see them ready against their mother comes (200-4).

That this is the distracted Titus of Act IV shows how profoundly he was damaged by what happened in Act III: his absurdities did not reveal but conceal his true condition. Now his ferocity wells up to its full extent. To be sure, Titus's madness involves much more than his conscious Machiavellization. As his persistent denial of his insanity suggests, Titus's transformation goes deeper than he himself knows, and is not simply effected by his opting for a criminal course of action. That Titus has adapted to the ways of his aggressors is the symptom, not the cause of his perversion: Titus has become a maniac. Why this was inevitable after Act III will become evident in his final enactment of revenge.

It is not a coincidence that Titus chooses the banquet as the occasion on which to wreak his vengeance. Whether the details of the banquet derive from Seneca or from Ovid, there is no doubt that following Seneca in *Thyestes*, Shakespeare capitalizes on the conviviality of the banquet in order to highlight the social norm that revenge perverts. This is the spirit with which Marcus invites Lucius and Saturninus to sit at the same table<sup>21</sup>:

---

<sup>21</sup> It is not necessary to insist on these well-known connotations of the banquet. See for example H. Fichtenau's description of a medieval banquet: 'A banquet served also for initiation into a society or the establishment of friendly ties between equals. Conviviality promoted a quasi kinship of familial relationships. Two lords had been carrying on a feud; when they were reconciled, friendship was sworn and one invited the other to a *convivium*' (H. Fichtenau, *Living in the Tenth Century, Mentalities, and Social Orders*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London', 1991, p. 59). In modern times the same connotations obtain: 'An excellent dinner is the most pleasing occurrence and a great triumph of civilized life. It is not only the descending morsel and the enveloping sauce, but [the setting and the



Rome's emperor and nephew, break the parle;  
These quarrels must be quietly debated.  
The feast is ready which the careful Titus  
Hath ordained to an honourable end,  
For peace, for love, for league, and good to Rome;  
Please you, therefore, draw nigh and take your places. (V.iii.19-24)

In the same way that Hieronimo disrupted the nuptial celebrations with his tragic revelation, Titus is going to assert his pain in the midst of this *convivium*. The reason why he does so is fundamental to an understanding of the meaning of his revenge.

In effect, with the noble guests at table, and to the solemn sounding of trumpets, Titus enters attired as a cook. Such garments, and his obsequious attendance on his guests, seem to confirm that Titus has shed the last vestiges of his heroic dignity<sup>22</sup>. Puzzled, Saturninus asks him about the reason of his weird humbleness. We, but not Saturninus, know the monstrous degeneration his reply implies: 'Because I would be sure to have all well/ To entertain your highness and your Empress' (31-2). While Titus seems to have exchanged for his heroic service of Rome a degrading servility to the emperor, his guests masticate Chiron and Demetrius's flesh. It would appear that Titus has degenerated in revenge beyond anything his enemies or Shakespeare's audience could have dreamed. But then, addressing the emperor, Titus asks him 'to resolve me this':

Was it well done of rash Virginius  
To slay his daughter with his own right hand  
Because she was enforced, stained, and deflowered? (36-8)

Saturninus does not hesitate and answers in the affirmative. Titus further demands 'why', and the emperor, little knowing that he is about to witness a like case, replies in order to humour a simpleton like a schoolboy repeating a lesson he has learnt by heart:

Because the girl should not survive her shame,  
And by her presence still renew his sorrows (40-41).

Thereupon Titus shows him what it means to be a Roman:

---

company]' (Sydney Smith as quoted in Jacques Barzun, *From Dawn to Decadence. 500 Years of Western Cultural Life*, HarperCollins, London, 2000, p.532).

<sup>22</sup> Cfr. Miola, *Shakespeare's Rome*, p. 70.

A reason might, strong, and effectual;  
A pattern, precedent, and lively warrant  
For me most wretched to perform the like. (42-44)

He kills Lavinia in the tradition of the heroic Rome of Livy, and then, after revealing the reason why he has done so, he discloses to Tamora where Lavinia's rapists are now located, kills her, and then is himself killed by Saturninus, who in his turn is killed by Lucius.

At this climactic moment we realize why Titus's experience has been fated to end in madness. For all his endurance, suffering, patience, anguish, and for all of his adaptation to the cruel naturalism of his enemies, for all the scorn, ingratitude and injustice of Rome, Titus cannot cease to be a Roman. For him, no repudiation of the heroic ideal is possible, because he is constituted by it. Thus, when this ideal is destroyed, Titus must go mad, and his sociality must be perverted, for he has no existence outside Rome. This is the paradox of revenge we encountered in Seneca and Kyd: the paradox of a revenge that asserts the avenger's dependence on his society in his very attempt to destroy it. Shakespeare's depiction of Rome – of Rome's history, institutions, culture, recreations, has a density that outstrips Kyd's depiction of Spain, rich as it is, just as Kyd's has a fullness that Seneca's depiction of Argos or Corinth cannot begin to rival. So, to a greater degree than his predecessors, Shakespeare, as it were, puts Rome's reality into Titus, showing how fully he has internalized what I have perforce abstractly called 'the social'. Titus's commitment to his society is of a radicality that is not to be found in Seneca or Kyd. His perversion must, therefore, be also of a radicality that exceeds theirs. In the context of this thesis, the monstrosity of Titus's vengeance is proof that Titus's social impulses have been perverted, *but not transcended*. Barber and Wheeler dismiss the play as a failure because the 'revenge motive as a struggle for vindication of what is at the core of society is only formally present in *Titus Andronicus*'. We now realize that Shakespeare's first play not only represents this vindication, but it does much more: it demonstrates that revenge shows that society is also at the core of the individual. He proves that he has fully assimilated the lesson of Senecan revenge drama.

## Conclusion

This thesis has sought to demonstrate that Seneca plays a significant part in the evolution of the revenge tragedy of the public stage. Why, then, has Christopher Marlowe, for some the most Senecan of the public playwrights, been excluded from this thesis? By offering the challenge of an alternative perspective on my claims, the case of Marlowe will serve as a conclusion to an argument that has maintained that the single most striking innovation of the new drama, as exemplified in revenge tragedy, is the discovery that the social is a necessary condition for the construction, and above all the *enactment* of individuality. My further claim has been that Senecan drama offered a simplified, and therefore, clear-cut model of this interpenetration of the social and the individual. Marlowe, dazzling translator of Lucan and Ovid, is surely a much better Latinist than either Kyd or Shakespeare; moreover he produced the most sensational representation of revenge, or at least of crime, in such plays as *Tamburlaine* and *The Jew of Malta*. However, his conception of selfhood, entirely opposed to Kyd's and Shakespeare's, impeded a profound engagement with Senecan revenge. As I have tried to show, Senecan drama represents the psychic damage done to the individual when he is attacked by those on whom he depends for his sanity. The premise of Senecan revenge is, therefore, that the individual is socially dependent, that is to say, that he has internalized his emotional attachments in his sense of identity. From this it follows that where there is no such emotional investment of the self in other people there cannot be a Senecan reaction (or avenger's madness). A – necessarily brief -- analysis of Barabas's evolution as an 'avenger' shows that the protagonists of Marlowe's plays exist on an entirely unemotional basis challenging the social foundation of selfhood. This is the reason why they cannot react to injury in the Senecan manner.

The moment *The Jew of Malta* opens with an exultant Barabas we recognize the arch-individualist and his claims to self-sufficiency. Indeed, the vital Barabas of the beginning strongly

recalls the Aaron of the empire-dominating soliloquies<sup>1</sup>. Aaron's and Barabas's vitality is felt, as Steane puts it, 'principally. . .through pride'<sup>2</sup>. Barabas's opening soliloquy evokes the vastness of the world (Persia, Arabia, Greece, Spain) and the infinite variety of its riches (sapphires, opals, wine, oil), all of which Barabas feels to converge on him as the magnetic centre of power. The Jew appears as the very hub of the expansive, dynamic world of trade and enterprise he envisages. What energizes Barabas is a centripetal egocentrism of extraordinary vitality that strives to 'enclose/ Infinite riches in a little room' (I.i.36-37)<sup>3</sup>. To be sure, a man like Barabas owes little to his fellow beings; the reverence of such a man is offered only to the power he discovers in himself. Barabas's faith in himself is absolute: he acts on the belief that his fate is in his hands, and that he can insulate himself from the common destiny of mankind. Thus, he turns his back on his fellow beings as soon as he feels they are in need of him. This happens when Malta is suddenly threatened by the approach of a Turkish fleet, which serves only to excite his contempt for fates meaner than his own: 'Nay, let'em combat, conquer, and kill all, / So they spare me, my daughter, and my wealth' (151-2). Safe in the fortress of the self, Barabas proclaims that his salvation is himself in a maxim that all future Machiavels shall make their own:

Howe'er the world go, I'll make sure for one,  
 And seek in time to intercept the worst,  
 Warily guarding that which I ha' got,  
 'Ego mihimet sum semper proximus.'  
 Why, let'em enter, let'em take the town! (185-9)

Soon, however, fortune turns against him, and Malta confiscates his possessions in order to satisfy the demands of the Turks. Malta takes away from Barabas his wealth, position, and dignity in an act of cynicism that destroys what little respect the Jew had for the Christian community. As the play unfolds,

---

<sup>1</sup> The parallel has been aptly described by Nicholas Brooke in his 'Marlowe as Provocative Agent in Shakespeare's Early Plays', *Shakespeare Survey* 14 (1961), pp.34-44.

<sup>2</sup> Steane, *op.cit.*, p.175. As John Bossy reminds us, 'pride was a social, not a metaphysical or Promethean, phenomenon and consisted essentially in putting the claims of degree before those of sociability' (Bossy, *op.cit.*, p. 33). Barabas's pride, like Aaron's, does not only question class distinctions, but the very existence of the society on which they rest.

<sup>3</sup> All quotations from *The Jew of Malta* are taken from N.W. Bawcutt's 1978 *The Revels Plays* edition.

his Christian countrymen prove more and more hypocritical, and his position becomes more and more unbelievably desperate. But Barabas undergoes no traumatic change of the Senecan avenger's type. When he reaches the summit of distress, he experiences no crisis of selfhood. Instead, he responds by proving himself the self-reliant man he has been from the beginning. As Steane observes in his brilliant study of the play:

He [Barabas] has experienced injustice and disaster and his character changes. He is represented as being in Job's position. . . . But as soon as the Jews leave him [I.ii.214 ff.], he drops this, snaps out of his self-pitying inactivity, and we see that this is the point where some new form of life is going to emerge from the cocoon of misery in which he has been wrapped. What it turns out to be is not the man who patiently rebuilds, or the Job who submits and still blesses, but a vindictive and still more self-centred schemer. This is the natural development. We recognize the change but also the essential continuity<sup>4</sup>.

In effect, unlike Titus, who emerges from the stormy sea of his grievance psychically damaged --

For now I stand as one upon a rock,  
Environed with a wilderness of sea,  
Who marks the waxing tide grow wave by wave,  
Expecting ever when some envious surge  
Will in his brinish bowels swallow him. (III.i.93)

Barabas seems to grow stronger, and all the more determined, in emotional banishment from the community:

You partial heavens, have I deserved this plague?  
What, will you thus oppose me, luckless stars,  
To make me desperate in my poverty?  
And knowing me impatient in distress,  
Think me so mad as I will hang myself,  
That I may vanish o'er the earth in air,  
And leave no memory that e'er I was?  
No, I will live: nor loathe I this my life;  
And since you leave me in the ocean thus  
To sink or swim, and put me to my shifts,  
I'll rouse my senses, and awake myself. (I.ii. 259-69)

To be sure, Barabas's treatment by his fellow Maltese is injurious enough to destroy anyone's faith in his society. But then Barabas has never had any faith in Malta or in anybody other than himself. Unlike the pious Hieronimo or Titus, Barabas has never internalized the values of communal life. Thus, when

---

<sup>4</sup> Steane, *op.cit.*, pp. 181-2.

Malta preys on him, he only becomes confirmed in his initial cynicism. Of course, Barabas is made worse by every act of aggression against him, to the point of becoming almost a monster. But his monstrosity is not revelatory of the tragic contradiction the Senecan avenger exhibits when he inflicts suffering in order to vindicate his dependence on fellow feeling. Marlowe cannot respond to the Senecan representation of the damaged self because his starting-point is not the socially integrated self-- that is to say, the 'sane' self.

Marlowe does not recognize the lesson of Senecan revenge. Instead he offers the Machiavel. But, to what extent does the Machiavel contradict the social premise on which Senecan revenge tragedy is founded? Marlowe's protagonist enacts a savage comedy which depends on the energy-giving repudiation of the social or externalization of the social, and not that internalization of the social which is a necessary condition for the full individuality of the tragic. Society seems to be entirely outside Barabas. Unlike Aaron's son, for example, Abigail does not awaken affection in his father; to Barabas his daughter is only the opportunity for greater crime, greater 'independence', greater vitality. Marlowe's protagonist, it would seem, requires other people to exist, whereas Kyd's and Shakespeare's require other people to exist inside themselves. But it would be inadequate to conclude from this that Marlowe's drama contradicts the social foundation of the self. The reason is that Barabas's alienation (the reverse of the avengers who are deeply committed to roles as fathers and public figures, because the family and the community are the very conditions of their being) is negatively as profound as their engagement. This means that the Machiavel bears equal witness to the social condition of individuality, except negatively, not by attachment and dependence, but by repudiation and detachment -- that is to say, by a recoil whose very intensity bespeaks the despised commitment. This is exactly what we discover in the Barabas who emerges from his 'cocoon of misery': a criminal whose very life-intensity depends on what he rejects and despises and wishes to dominate. Barabas needs others in order to be able to generate *a maximum sense of self*; he owes his prodigious energy to that which he repudiates: the social as a condition of human life. Thus, if the Senecan avenger asserts his involvement with mankind positively, by going mad when his fundamental attachment to 'mankind' is destroyed, the

Machiavel betrays his involvement by a solipsism sustained from the compulsion to exercise power over others. In Kyd and Shakespeare society has to be internalized, in Marlowe it has to be kept out, but in both cases it is fundamental to the sense of self. Marlowe, then, can be said to complement Kyd and Shakespeare in the same way that Lorenzo 'complements' Hieronimo, and Aaron Titus. The reception of Senecan revenge allows us to recognize how different and yet profoundly related are the two kinds of tragedy – Marlovian and Kydian-Shakespearean – which inaugurate the Elizabethan public stage.



## Bibliography

## PRIMARY SOURCES

- ARISTOTLE, *On Rhetoric. A Theory of Civic Discourse*, trans. by George A. Kennedy, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1992.
- BACON, FRANCIS, *The Essays*, ed. by John Pitcher, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1985.
- The Geneva Bible. A Facsimile of the 1560 Edition*, introd. by Lloyd E. Berry, The University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, Milwaukee, and London, 1969.
- KYD, THOMAS, *The Spanish Tragedy*, ed. by J.R. Mulryne, New Mermaids, A&C Black and WW Norton, London and New York, 1989 [1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1970].
- , *The Spanish Tragedy*, ed. by Philip Edwards, The Revels Plays, Methuen & Co. Ltd., London, 1959.
- MARLOWE, CHRISTOPHER, *The Jew of Malta*, ed. by N.W. Bawcutt, The Revels Plays, Manchester University Press, The John Hopkins University Press, Manchester and Baltimore, 1978.
- NASHE, THOMAS, 'Preface to Greene's *Menaphon*', in *The Works of Thomas Nashe*, ed. by Ronald B. McKerrow, vol. III, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1958.
- NORTON, THOMAS and SACKVILLE, THOMAS, *Gorboduc*, ed. by Irby B. Cauthen, Regents Renaissance Drama Series, Edward Arnold, London, 1970.
- SENECA, Lucius Annaeus, *Seneca's Tragedies*, II vols., trans. by Frank Justus Miller, The Loeb Classical Library, William Heinemann Ltd. and Harvard University Press, London and Cambridge, Mass., 1953 [1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1917].
- , *Moral Essays*, vol. I, trans. by John W. Basore, The Loeb Classical Library, William Heinemann Ltd. and Harvard University Press, London and Cambridge, Mass., 1928.
- \_\_\_\_\_, *Seneca His Tenne Tragedies*, ed. by Thomas Newton, introd. by T.S. Eliot, The Tudor Translations, David Nutt, London, 1927 [reprint of Newton's 1581 edition].
- \_\_\_\_\_, *Seneca: Four Tragedies and Octavia*, trans. by E.F. Watling, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1966.

-----, *Thyestes*, trans. by Jasper Heywood, ed. by Joost Daalder, The New Mermaids, Ernest Benn Limited and WW Norton, London and New York, 1982.

SHAKESPEARE, WILLIAM, *Titus Andronicus*, ed. by Jacques Berthoud and Sonia Massai, The New Penguin Shakespeare, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 2001.

-----, *Titus Andronicus*, ed. by Jonathan Bate, The Arden Shakespeare, Third Series, Routledge, London, 1995.

-----, *Titus Andronicus*, ed. by Eugene Waith, The Oxford Shakespeare, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1984.

SIDNEY, PHILIP, *A Defence of Poetry*, ed. by J.A. van Dorsten, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1996.

## SECONDARY SOURCES

(Select List of Works Consulted)

- AGGELER, G., *Nobler in the Mind. The Stoic-Skeptic Dialectic in English Renaissance Drama*, University of Delaware Press and Associated University Press, Newark and London, 1998.
- ALTMAN, JOEL B., *The Tudor Play of Mind. Rhetorical Inquiry and the Development of Elizabethan Drama*, University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London, 1978.
- ARDOLINO, FRANK, *Apocalypse and Armada in Kyd's The Spanish Tragedy*, Sixteenth-Century Essays and Studies, Kirksville, Missouri, 1995.
- ARENDT, HANNAH, *The Human Condition*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1985.
- BAKER, HOWARD, *Induction to Tragedy*, Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge, Louisiana, 1939.
- BARBER, C. L., *Creating Elizabethan Tragedy. The Theatre of Marlowe and Kyd*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1988.
- BARBER, C.L., and WHEELER, R.P., *The Whole Journey: Shakespeare's Power of Development*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1986.
- BARISH, JONAS, 'The Spanish Tragedy or The Pleasures and Perils of Rhetoric', in *Elizabethan Drama*, Stratford Upon-Avon Studies 9, ed. by J.R. Brown and B. Harris, Edward Arnold Ltd., New York, 1966, pp.59-85.
- BARROW, R.H., *The Romans*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1949.
- BARTON, ANNE, 'Parks and Ardens', in *Essays, Mainly Shakespearean*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1994.
- , 'Introduction', in *Hamlet*, ed. by T.J.B. Spencer, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1980.
- BATE, JONATHAN, *Shakespeare and Ovid*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1993.

- BERG, JAMES EMMANUEL, 'Gorboduc as a Tragic Discovery of "Feudalism"', *Studies in English Renaissance Literature*, 40 (2000), pp. 199-226.
- BERGSON, HENRI, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, Indiana, 1977.
- BEVINGTON, DAVID, *From 'Mankind' to Marlowe*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1962.
- BINNS, J.W., 'Seneca and Neo-Latin Tragedy in England', in *Seneca*, ed. by C.D.N. Costa, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London and Boston, 1974, pp. 205-234.
- BOSSY, JOHN, *Christianity in the West 1400-1700*, Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York, 1985.
- BOWERS, FREDSON, *Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy 1587-1642*, Peter Smith, Gloucester, Mass., 1959 [1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1940].
- BOUWSMA, WILLIAM J., *A Usable Past. Essays in European Cultural History*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1990.
- BOYLE, A.J., *Tragic Seneca. An Essay in the Theatrical Tradition*, Routledge, London and New York, 1997.
- , (ed.), *Seneca Tragicus. Ramus Essays on Senecan Drama*, Aureal Publications, Victoria, Australia, 1983.
- BRADEN, GORDON, *Renaissance Tragedy and the Senecan Tradition: Anger's Privilege*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1985.
- BROOKE, NICHOLAS, *Shakespeare's Early Tragedies*, Methuen, London, 1968.
- , 'Marlowe as Provocative Agent in Shakespeare's Early Plays', *Shakespeare Survey*, 14 (1961), pp. 34-44.
- BROUDE, RONALD, 'Revenge and Revenge Tragedy in Renaissance England', *Renaissance Quarterly*, XXVIII (1975), pp. 38-58.
- , 'Time, Truth, and Right in *The Spanish Tragedy*', *Studies in Philology*, LXVIII

(1971), pp. 130-45.

BROWER, REUBEN B., *Hero and Saint: Shakespeare and the Graeco-Roman Heroic Tradition*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1971.

BURCKHARDT, JAKOB, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, Phaidon Press, London, 1960.

CAMPBELL, LILY B., 'Theories of Revenge in Renaissance England', *Modern Philology*, 38 (1931), pp. 281-96.

CHARLTON, H.B., *The Senecan Tradition in Renaissance England. A Re-Issue of an Essay Published in 1921*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1946 [1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1921].

CLAUSS, JAMES J., and JOHNSTON, SARAH ILLES (eds.), *Essays on Medea in Myth, Literature, Philosophy and Art*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1997.

CLEMEN, WOLFGANG, *English Tragedy Before Shakespeare. The Development of Dramatic Speech*, Methuen & Co. Ltd., London, 1955.

COLLINS, STEPHEN, *From Divine Cosmos to Sovereign State. An Intellectual History of the Consciousness and the Idea of Order in Renaissance England*, Oxford University Press, New York and Oxford, 1989.

CUNLIFFE, J.W., *The Influence of Seneca on Elizabethan Tragedy*, Archon Books, Hamden, Connecticut, 1965 [1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1893].

DANBY, J.F., *Shakespeare's Doctrine of Nature. A Study of King Lear*, Faber and Faber, London, 1961.

DE CHICKERA, ERNST, 'Divine Justice and Private Revenge in *The Spanish Tragedy*', *Modern Language Review*, 57 (1962), pp.228-32.

DONALDSON, IAN, 'Perishing and Surviving: The Poetry of Donne and Jonson', *Essays in Criticism*, LI (2001), pp. 74-75.

ELIOT, T.S., *Selected Essays, 1917-1932*, Faber and Faber, London, 1932.

FREUD, SIGMUND, *Civilization and its Discontents*, The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, V.XXI, The Hogarth Press, London, 1961.

- FRYE, NORTHROP, 'Old and New Comedy', *Shakespeare Survey*, 22 (1969), pp. 1-5.
- , 'The Argument of Comedy', in Lerner, L., (ed.), *Shakespeare's Comedies. An Anthology of Modern Criticism*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1967.
- GRADY, HUGH, 'Renewing Modernity: Changing Contexts and Contests of a Nearly Invisible Concept', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 50 3 (1999), pp. 268-84.
- GREENBLATT, STEPHEN, *Learning to Curse*, Routledge, New York, 1990.
- , *Renaissance Self-fashioning*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1981.
- GRIFFIN, ERIC, 'Ethos, Empire, and the Valiant Acts of Thomas Kyd's Tragedy of "The Spains"', *English Literary Renaissance*, 31 (2001), pp. 192-229.
- GURR, ANDREW, 'Metatheatre and the Fears of Playing', in R.H. Wells et al., (eds.), *Neo-Historicism. Studies in Renaissance Literature, History and Politics*, D.S. Brewer, Suffolk, 2000, pp. 91-110.
- HALE, JOHN, *The Civilization of Europe in the Renaissance*, Fontana Press, London, 1994.
- , *England and the Italian Renaissance*, Arrow Books, London, 1963.
- HALLETT, C.A., and HALLETT, E., *The Revenger's Madness. A Study of Revenge Tragedy Motifs*, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln and London, 1980.
- HAMMERSMITH, JAMES P., 'The Death of Castile in *The Spanish Tragedy*', *Renaissance Drama*, New Series, XVI (1985), pp. 1-16.
- HAYDN, HIRAM, *The Counter-Renaissance*, Harcourt Brace and World Inc., New York, 1950.
- HELLER, AGNES, *Renaissance Man*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London and Boston, 1978.
- HERRICK, MARVIN T., 'Senecan Influence in *Gorboduc*', *Studies in Speech and Drama in Honor of A.M.Drummond*, Ithaca, 1944.
- HILL, EUGENE, 'Senecan and Virgilian Perspectives in *The Spanish Tragedy*', *English Literary Review*, XV (1985), pp. 143-6
- HUIZINGA, JOHAN, *The Waning of the Middle Ages*, Edward Arnold, London, 1924.

- HUNTER, G.K., *English Drama 1586-1642. The Age of Shakespeare*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1997.
- , *Dramatic Identities and Cultural Tradition*, Liverpool University Press, Liverpool, 1978.
- JAMES, MERVYN, *Society, Politics and Culture: Studies in Early Modern England*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1986.
- JONES, EMRYS, *The Origins of Shakespeare*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1977.
- , 'Reclaiming Early Shakespeare', *Essays in Criticism*, LI 1 (2000), pp 35-50.
- KERRIGAN, JOHN, *Revenge Tragedy. Aeschylus to Armageddon*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1996.
- KEYISHIAN, HARRY, *The Shapes of Revenge. Victimization, Vengeance, and Vindictiveness in Shakespeare*, Humanities Press, New Jersey, 1995.
- KIEFER, F., 'Seneca's Influence: A Bibliographical Supplement', *Research Opportunities in Renaissance Drama*, 28 (1985), pp. 129-42.
- LOVEJOY, ARTHUR O., *The Great Chain of Being*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., and London, 1936.
- LUCAS, F.L., *Senecan and Elizabethan Tragedy*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1922.
- MARIENSTRAS, RICHARD, *New Perspectives on the Shakespearean World*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1985.
- MAUS, KATHARINE EISAMANN, *Inwardness and the Theater in the English Renaissance*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1995.
- MCALINDON, T., *English Renaissance Tragedy*, Macmillan, Hong Kong, 1986.
- MCMILLIN, SCOTT, 'The Book of Seneca in *The Spanish Tragedy*', *Studies in English Literature*, XV (1974), pp. 201-8.
- MENDELL, C.W., *Our Seneca*, Archon Books, Hanover, Connecticut, 1968 [1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1941].
- METZ, HAROLD, *Shakespeare's Earliest Tragedy. Studies in Titus Andronicus*, Fairleigh Dickinson University Press and Associated University Presses, Madison, Teaneck and London, 1996.
- MIOLA, ROBERT S., *Shakespeare's Rome*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1983.



- , *Shakespeare and Classical Tragedy: The Influence of Seneca*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1992.
- MOTTO, ANNA LYDIA, and CLARK, JOHN R., *Senecan Tragedy*, Adolf M. Hakkert, Amsterdam, 1988.
- MULRYNE, J.R., 'Nationality and Language in Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*', in *Travel and Drama in Shakespeare's Time*, ed. by J.P. Maquerlot and M. Willems, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1996, pp. 87-105.
- NUSSBAUM, MARTHA C., *The Therapy of Desire. Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1994.
- PRATT, NORMAN, *Seneca's Drama*, The University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill and London, 1983.
- PRAZ, MARIO, *The Flaming Heart*, Doubleday, New York, 1958.
- RAAB, FELIX, *The English Face of Machiavelli. A Changing Interpretation 1500-1700*, Routledge and Kegan Paul and University of Toronto Press, London and Toronto, 1964.
- RIGGS, DAVID, *Shakespeare's Heroical Histories. Henry VI and Its Literary Tradition*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1971.
- ROSSITER, A.P., *English Drama. From Early Times to the Elizabethans. Its Background, Origins and Developments*, Hutchinson & Co., London, 1958 [1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1950].
- SANDBACH, F.H., *The Stoics*, Gerald Duckworth & Co. Ltd., London, 1989 [1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1975].
- SANDERS, WILBUR, *The Dramatist and the Received Idea. Studies in the Plays of Marlowe and Shakespeare*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1968.
- SCOTT, MARGARET, 'Machiavelli and Machiavellianism', *Renaissance Drama*, New Series, XV (1984), pp. 147-73.
- SMITH, BRUCE R., *Ancient Scripts and Modern Experience on the English Stage 1500-1700*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1988.
- SPENCER, T.J.B., 'Shakespeare and the Elizabethan Romans', *Shakespeare Survey*, 10 (1957), pp.

SPIVACK, BERNARD, *Shakespeare and the Allegory of Evil*, Columbia University Press and Oxford University Press, New York and London, 1958.

STEANE, J.B., *Marlowe. A Critical Study*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1964.

STEINER, GEORGE, *The Death of Tragedy*, Faber and Faber, London, 1961.

STOCKHOLDER, KAY, "“Yet Can He Write”": Reading the Silences in *The Spanish Tragedy*', *American Imago*, 47 (1990), pp 93-124.

TILLYARD, E.M., *The Elizabethan World Picture*, Chatto and Windus, London, 1943.

VANHOUTTE, JACQUELINE, 'Community, Authority, and the Motherland in Sackville and Norton's *Gorboduc*', *Studies in English Renaissance Literature*, 40 (2000), pp. 227-39.

VERNANT, JEAN-PIERRE, 'The Individual within the City State', in *Mortals and Immortals. Collected Essays by Jean-Pierre Vernant*, ed. by F.I. Zeitlin, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1991.

WAITH, EUGENE, 'The Metamorphoses of Violence in *Titus Andronicus*', *Shakespeare Survey*, 10 (1957), pp. 39-49.

WHITE, S.J., 'Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*', *The Explicator*, 54 4 (1996), pp. 207-209.

WIGGINS, MARTIN, *Shakespeare and the Drama of his Time*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2000.