

Madness and Meaning: *The Spanish Tragedy*

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When the revenge hero comes up against villainy and power, his alternatives are few—initially trickery and subterfuge, but in the end, only silence. Look, for example, at Hieronimo in relation to Lorenzo or the King of Spain, Hamlet in relation to Claudius, the Jacobean revengers in the face of state authority. One of the reasons, I think, that revenge is frequently linked to madness in Elizabethan plays is that the revenger, in the very act of pursuing revenge, moves outside the corridors of state power. He becomes ambiguous and displaced, the un-licensed fool. The call for revenge, of course, comes from the perception that order has been radically disrupted, that both the moral and political orders have been breached. The revenger's function is to set things right, thereby asserting the providential presence of justice in the heavens. This is precisely his task, and yet he goes mad doing it. At least Hieronimo does, not to mention Titus Andronicus, Hamlet, and Marston's Antonio, among others. Or they *seem* to go mad. They adopt a mask that is so convincing it creates an ambiguity. The line between fictive and real madness shifts unsteadily. Ethically, at least in a Christian context, there is no doubt that revenge is unacceptable, while at the same time the revenger's plight normally generates moral and emotional sympathy. And the ethical ambiguity finds a theatrical counterpart in the dramatic ambiguity of madness: i.e., is it real, what does it mean, how is it to be interpreted?

In *Madness and Civilization*, Michel Foucault has made a celebrated attempt to write a history of madness from within—what he calls an archaeology of the silence of madness—fully aware that the language of reason he has to use in so doing is a kind of betrayal of his project, or at least a trap that reason has set for him. For, as he says, if he seeks to give madness a voice, he cannot rely only on

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"those stammered, imperfect words without fixed syntax in which the exchange between madness and reason was [originally] made."¹ The problem for him is one of order and of language. If reason is interrogated from within madness, order from within disorder--and this is what Foucault seeks to do--and if reason has effectively *silenced* madness, what language can be used? This is a question that he not only poses to himself, but which Jacques Derrida, in his reading of Foucault's book, also raises: "Would not," he asks, "the archaeology of silence [by virtue of the fact that it is an archaeology, an ordered discourse] be the most efficacious and subtle restoration, the *repetition* . . . of the act perpetrated against madness?"² For Derrida, Foucault's resolution of this difficulty is "*practised* rather than *formulated*". It is precisely the literariness, the metaphoricity, the "pathos," of Foucault's book that makes present the silence of madness, which itself "cannot be said in the *logos* of this book."³

Foucault argues that madness is excluded by classical reason, interned not only by the hospitals and almshouses of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, but by the very structure of classical reason itself. "The classical period . . . covers precisely that epoch in which the exchange between madness and reason modifies its language, and in a radical manner." Before that, in the middle ages and until the Renaissance, "man's dispute with madness was a dramatic debate in which he confronted the secret powers of the world."⁴ Afterwards, madness is excluded, confined, refused. Derrida challenges Foucault on precisely this point; for him, reason *necessarily* stifles madness. This is not an historical event, but the very origin of historicity. History, the possibility of meaning itself, can only be opened up by such a stifling: "One could say that the reign of finite thought can be established only on the basis of the more or less disguised internment, humiliation, fettering and mocking of the madman within us, of the madman who can only be the fool of a *logos* which is father, master, and king."⁵ Note here the metaphor of reason as royal, paternal power. But madness is there too, as semi-licensed partner: the jester and man of the theatre, whose subversive murmur and oblique mockery are as much a part of the play as royal pronouncements and violent death. The significance of Derrida's metaphor, which moves the dialogue of *logos* and madness to the stage and insists on the rhetorical underpinning of the whole debate, is worth pausing over. Perhaps the theatre can represent a privileged realm where reason meets and is temporarily subverted by madness. Madness, in such a reading, would be the jester-hero, doomed finally, like Hamlet or Lear or Hieronimo, to silence, but at the same time redolent of meanings in a way ordinary reason is not. Shoshana Felman, in her reading of Foucault and Derrida, suggests that madness in a text may be best seen as a

rhetorical movement rather than a thematic presence. She argues that it is a metaphor for literature itself, for that "radical metaphoricality which corrodes concepts in their essence . . . (it is) unaccomplishment *at work*: active incompleteness of a meaning which ceaselessly transforms itself."⁶ Hence it foils the attempt to accomplish meaning, to stabilize the rhetorical movement. From such a point of view, we can thus see madness in the drama as a challenge not only to the moral and political orders but to the order of meaning itself, and concomitantly to that of literary structure as well. It is pre-eminently a form of play, a mode of symbolic inversion.

By its presence within a literary work, madness doubly marks this process of de-centering. It both signifies disjointure and is itself that which is signified. It is thus a message that overtly draws attention to its own signifying power, and at the same time deflects it. In the Elizabethan revenge play, madness is an ironic accomplice of revenge, obscuring the clarity of the project with which it becomes involved. By being implicated with madness, real or feigned, the act of taking revenge becomes self-consciously theatrical, violent, extravagant and stagey. Madness as an "act," a show, encourages this self-referentiality. Furthermore, within a text such as *The Spanish Tragedy*, which, as I shall argue, constantly calls the validity of interpretation into question, revenge becomes something to be interpreted, a series of gestures whose meaning is not transparent. Thus the clarity of revenge as a project, as something simply to be done, is clouded, and revenge moves from the realm of action (unself-conscious, direct) to that of act (self-aware, theatrical, indirect). This shift from transparent to opaque, from direct to self-reflexive, explains why revenge in *The Spanish Tragedy* is consummated in the course of an onstage drama, as it is also in *Titus Andronicus*, *Hamlet*, *Antonio's Revenge*, and *The Revenger's Tragedy*. Such "acts" are the culmination of a process by which revenge, often in association with madness, is theatricalized.

I am aware that by even invoking the names of Derrida and Foucault in relation to Elizabethan literature I am risking a certain resistance or, worse, a yawn. So I want to make it clear that I regard the recursive processes of madness in an age fascinated by both paradox and theatricality as culturally specific. Madness is represented as a kind of symbolic inversion, an escape from, or challenge to, hierarchical authority. At the same time it is undoubtedly true that the rifts and discontinuities in culture are more visible to us now in the wake of postmodernism where, as Lyotard would have it, what is produced is "not the known, but the unknown;" the postmodern "denies itself the solace of good forms."⁷ Indeed, it is likely that recent interest in historically oriented analysis of Renaissance

literature arises from a perception of similarity between our age and that of the Elizabethans. For many "new historicist" critics, "the late Renaissance was the age of skepticism in which in the drama in particular one finds recorded a recognition of the discontinuous nature of human identity and its social construction."⁸ But this of course does not mean that times have not changed, only that it is easier for us now to recognize the instabilities and slippages that fascinated many Renaissance writers and that have often been obscured by essentialist notions (of, for example, the "nature of man") derived from thinkers such as Burckhardt and the nineteenth century ideology that motivated them.

The Spanish Tragedy, the main focus of the present paper, raises the issue of madness and meaning in a tantalizing way. One of its most remarkable features is a constant misconstruction on the part of the characters, of the meaning of the spectacle before them. This comes out most clearly in the complaints of Don Andrea, the ghost whose presence on the stage is not, as might be expected, a spur to *action*, but rather a constant reminder of the theatrical *act* being presented.⁹ Andrea is continually shaking Revenge out of his sleepy, laconic spectatorship, demanding the meaning of the scenes he (Andrea) has witnessed, convinced of the inappropriateness of this spectacle and urging Revenge to take a more active part:¹⁰

Come we for this from depth of underground,
To see him feast that gave me my death's wound?

(I.5.1-2)

Brought'st thou me hither to increase my pain?
I looked that Balthazar should have been slain;
But 'tis my friend Horatio that is slain. . .

(II.6.1-3)

Awake, Revenge . . . (III.15.10)

Finally, before the last Act, all is explained and the ghost is satisfied: "Sufficeth me; thy meaning's understood" (III.15.36).

Besides underlining the spectacular quality of undertaking and pursuing revenge, Andrea's concern points to the problem of meaning, of interpreting the act with which he is confronted. The characters *within* the drama (i.e., that being presented for Andrea), are involved in a series of actions which they themselves construe in a different way from Andrea or Revenge. Convinced that they are acting independently, freely, that what they are doing is *real*, they are unaware of the shadow that the choric frame casts on their behavior. They

are unable to see themselves as part of the spectacle or to understand themselves as agents of a meaning imposed by Revenge. They think they are generating their own meanings.¹¹

But the action continually reminds us that confidence in a fixed meaning is misplaced. That is why there is such repeated misconstruction in the play, everyone, including Andrea, reading into what he or she observes meanings that turn out to be wrong. And that is also why madness is such an apt metaphor for the difficulty of getting a clear understanding, a firm hold on what is going on. Hieronimo's mad misunderstanding, his misreading of the old man, for example, or his failure to see Horatio's corpse for what it is, can thus be seen as symptomatic of the various misinterpretations that dot the play, such as the court characters' misreading of Hieronimo or their failure at the end to see what is really happening during the masque.

The hanging of Pedringano is a fine ironic example of this same tragicomedy of misinterpretation. It shows how the prevailing motif reaches down even to minor incidents. Confident of a reprieve, Pedringano taunts the hangman, pointing to the boy with the empty box which Pedringano believes contains his pardon. The page too points to his box, but with a mockingly ambiguous gesture: "Will't not," he asks in his earlier soliloquy, "be an odd jest for me to stand and grace every jest he [Pedringano] makes, pointing my finger at this box as who would say, 'Mock on; here's thy warrant'" (III.5.13-15). So Pedringano goes to his death, mocking its very possibility, misinterpreting every sign, until it is too late. Serberine, in a parallel scene, misconstrues the meaning, for him, of the place he has come to be murdered, and thus is unaware of the irony of his comment: "How fit a place, if one were so disposed, / Methinks this corner is to close with one." (III.3.26-7). Pedringano too thinks that "This place is free from all suspect," even as the watch is closing in on him. A shift of perspective will quickly reveal a different, unlooked-for interpretation. The Portuguese scenes, maligned by critics for their improbability and woodenness, and defended for their reiteration of the justice theme,¹² can also be seen as exemplifying the process under discussion. The Viceroy, sure that his son is dead, is quick to believe the accusations made by Viluppo against Alexandro. His gullibility is so patent that it seems almost emblematic, inserted to focus the fallibility of confident interpretation.

In the love scenes between Horatio and Bel-Imperia, we again have a multiple perspective shadowing the event. The highly contrived quality of the language in II.2 is enhanced by the staging, in which Balthazar and Lorenzo secretly look down on the lovers, adding their own voices to the operatic duet:

BEL-IMPERIA: But whereon dost thou chiefly meditate?
 HORATIO: On dangers past, and pleasures to ensue.
 BALTHAZAR: On pleasures past, and dangers to ensue.
 BEL-IMPERIA: What dangers and what pleasures dost thou mean?
 HORATIO: Dangers of war, and pleasures of our love.
 LORENZO: Dangers of death, but pleasures none at all.

(II.2.26-31)

The words of the lovers are immediately reinterpreted by their spectators, a different significance is suggested, and the supposed freedom of their action is revealed to be encased in a rigidly formulated system of reversed expectations, exactly as the play itself is enclosed within the Revenge frame, which reverses the meanings intended by the participants. Thus Horatio and Bel-Imperia here have one set of ideas ironically undermined by the intentions of their spectators, Lorenzo and Balthazar. But these latter, who think the chain of observation stops with them, are unaware that their meanings are part of someone else's pattern (that of Andrea and Revenge) and will eventually be reversed in turn.

The same shift occurs in the murder scene itself, in which the consciously articulated language of war and "dying," used by the lovers in a way they think they are able to control, suddenly becomes literally and violently true:

HORATIO: Then thus begin our wars: put forth thy hand
 That it may combat with my ruder hand . . .
 BEL-IMPERIA: Then ward thyself: I dart this kiss at thee.
 HORATIO: Thus I retort the dart thou threw'st at me . . .
 BEL-IMPERIA: O let me go, for in my troubled eyes
 Now mayst thou read that life in passion dies.
 HORATIO: O stay awhile, and I will die with thee . . .

(II.4.36-48)

The "unmetaphoring" of this language, to use Rosalie Colie's term,¹³ takes place a few lines later when violence and death replace sexual passion. "This place," moans Hieronimo in the next scene, "was made for pleasure not for death," bringing the two perspectives together in oppositional tension. But the main point is that one kind of meaning has given way to another; what the lovers meant (i.e., what they meant to mean and what they were sure about meaning) has proved to be unstable.

This systematic series of reversals would seem by implication to extend beyond the play, to invade even the interpretations that audiences and critics may devise. I am thus in the ambiguous position of

having to displace any confidence I may have in my own interpretations, not exactly because I am part of someone else's play, though that may indeed be the case, but because the theatricality of *The Spanish Tragedy* calls into question all such authority--though in its own, not our, language. In the 1980s, we are of course flirtatiously alert to deconstructive turns, and we have a language for describing them. In the 1580s, Kyd had no such vocabulary, no such concept. He in fact had a theatrical tradition that provided for straightforward moral and allegorical representation, one that would rarely call its own truth claims into question. Kyd seems determined to make use of the certainty his tradition encouraged, while at the same time he persists in displaying collapses of certainty, the inappropriateness of confident interpretations. Living in a time of ideological confidence but actual social disruption, inflation, and imminent crisis, he perhaps sensed the gap and represented it in the theatrical confidence and hidden uncertainties of his text.

Madness re-enters our discussion at this point, together with the vexed problem of the 1602 additions to the text of *The Spanish Tragedy*. In that version, Hieronimo's madness follows hard on the discovery of his murdered son and is manifested first in the conviction that Horatio is still alive, that the corpse in front of him is some other body wearing Horatio's clothes. Madness displays itself as misinterpretation of patent evidence, though its language is very much that of a kind of reason.

I would like to suspend, for a moment, the problem of the additions, by considering the text in its totality, as it has come down to us and "as it hath of late been divers times acted." My point is that the revised text replays the dominant motifs of the earlier text, especially misconstrual, in a different key. It is even arguable that the additions respond to a felt lack in the original, that the spaces left by Kyd's version are filled up by them. Madness as pure theatrical spectacle certainly receives a lift from these additions. But more important, the additions, except for the last one whose primary function is to clear up the fuzziness of the original ending, highlight a process by which madness intrudes upon the clear project of revenge. What is meant turns out to be what is not meant and meaning becomes unmoored. Madness as a signifier emerges as a strategy of undermining the stability of signification itself. It is in that sense self-referential, and destructively so, just like Hieronimo's final masque.

The first addition, in II.5, introduces the fact of madness itself, long before it appears in the original text. This may look like a dramaturgical mistake, because instead of the first version's slow build-up associated with Hieronimo's desire for revenge and his growing frustration, in the revised, the mere announcement of the project

of revenge coincides with the onset of madness: "To know the author [of "this endless woe"] were some ease of grief, / For in revenge my heart would find relief" (II.5.40-41). Immediately after this comes Hieronimo's interpolated delusion about the identity of the corpse before him. Revenge generates madness--not for any moral reasons but because its seeming clarity as a project is in fact delusory. In the original text this only becomes evident after an extended interval. At the end of III.7, Hieronimo gets what he thinks is proof positive of the guilt of Lorenzo and Balthazar. But instead of leading to his revenge, this discovery leads, in III.8, to Isabella's madness and, in III.11, to the first instance in the original text of Hieronimo's madness (bolstered later by the third addition). In the revised text, however, the first addition announces the shift right away. Revenge is turned from action to act, from desire to theatrical spectacle, via the self-referencing intermediary of madness. In the original version this process is gradual and hidden, in the revised it is immediate, bold, and evident.

The second addition offers an interesting variation on the process. In a scene that begins with the famous declamatory lines, "O eyes, no eyes, but fountains fraught with tears; / O life, no life but lively form of death" (III.2.1-2), and continues with the pointedly theatrical touch of a letter written in blood being dropped into Hieronimo's praying hands, the interpolated lines deliver a new and startling note:

HIERONIMO: Who, you, my lord?

I reserve your favor for a greater honour;
This is a very toy, my lord, a toy.

LORENZO: All's one, Hieronimo, acquaint me with it.

HIERONIMO: I' faith, my lord, 'tis an idle thing.

I must confess, I ha' been too slack,
Too tardy. Too remiss unto your honour.

LORENZO: How now, Hieronimo?

HIERONIMO: In troth, my lord, it is a thing of nothing;
The murder of a son, or so;
A thing of nothing, my lord.

(Second addition, at III.2.65)

The paradoxes of the opening lines of the scene ("O eyes! no eyes...") are, despite their rhetorical elaboration, relatively clear and straightforward. Hieronimo reveals himself directly. The interpolated lines, in contrast, are covert, deft and probing, if not strictly mad. They remind us, not only in the verbal echo but in form and approach, of Hamlet. (Perhaps Shakespeare really did write them, although that

is not the point here.¹⁴) The lines darken and complicate the interplay between Lorenzo and Hieronimo, which in the earlier version is based on cautious deceit on both sides, making it warier and more challenging. I am not arguing that the lines are necessarily better than the original, but rather that they fill out what is missing; they explore what is not expressed by Kyd's rhetoric but what lies hidden behind it. Hieronimo's condition itself becomes more ambiguous and more oscillating by virtue of the additions. If this be madness, then indeed there is method in it--the method of the *text*, that is, not precisely of the character. Madness, like literary criticism in the deconstructive mode, highlights meaning and at the same time makes it more elusive.

It is appropriate at this point in the play to interpolate a moment of madness, or at least hesitant obscurity, because Hieronimo has just received Bel-Imperia's letter urging revenge on her brother and Balthazar. Instead of seeing it as she intended, as a projection of an action to be taken, he sees it as a trap: "Hieronimo, beware, thou art betrayed, / And to entrap thy life this train is laid" (III.2.37-8). The call to action leads instead to deceit, to an "act." The antic interplay in the addition expresses and deepens this act at the very moment it takes root, exactly as in *Hamlet* madness and revenge coalesce in the decision to put an antic disposition on. As in the first addition, in which Hieronimo's failure to interpret correctly the evidence before him reflects the concern of the text with mistaken and shifting interpretations, so here, in the second, the addition fills out the intentionality of the original. It is as though the earlier text of *The Spanish Tragedy* needed these additions to extend and resonate its meaning, and therefore generated them. This may be a rather whimsical way of putting the case, but the fact that we don't know who wrote the additions is not inconsistent with it.

In her book, *Ben Jonson Dramatist*, Anne Barton makes a strong case for Jonson's authorship of the additions.¹⁵ All she succeeds in proving, however, is that Jonson *could* have written them; she seems to regard the issue as closed, but herself admits that her case depends on a remarkable concatenation of circumstances and an equally surprising, though not impossible, suppression on Jonson's part of his own stylistic individuality. Perhaps it would be best to regard the additions, which could have been written as early as 1597, as expressive cadenzas, picking up on themes and motifs at play in Kyd's original score but insufficiently developed there. If we see them that way, as a part of the whole text, it doesn't matter all that much who wrote them. If indeed Jonson did, the sternness with which he suppressed his own style is itself evidence of the authority and generative power of Kyd's text.

Throughout the latter part of the third act, Hieronimo oscillates between determination to revenge his son's death and a spectacular madness that impedes him. When he gets close to revealing all to the King, he subverts himself by suddenly digging at the ground with his dagger (III.12) or adopting a self-defeating caution (III.14). The parallel scenes with the painter (the fourth addition) and with Bazulto (III.13) give free play to the theatrical pathos of madness. Once again, the addition helps to fill out the original: "And is this the end?" asks the Painter after Hieronimo's long tirade. Hieronimo's answer poses the problem of closure, the end of tragedy that traditionally bestows meaning, in the face of reason's abuse:

O no, there is no end; the end is death and madness. As I am never better than when I am mad; then methinks I am a brave fellow . . . but reason abuseth me, and there's the torment, there's the hell.

(Fourth Addition, 159-62)

Where does it all lead, what sense does it make? The very making of sense is an abuse. Revenge is the task of reason, but it cannot be separated from madness; it is a mad task that can only be pursued within reason--there's the torment, not only for Hieronimo but for Hamlet and others as well. This is why it is made, in these plays, to double back on itself in a theatrical gesture. That self-conscious gesture expresses the bind of an unclosed closing; the *end* does not confer meaning, only images which ambiguously mix un-meaning and significance. To borrow terms from *King Lear*, there is no "promised end" but only images "of that horror."

Hieronimo's play turns theatrical illusion ironically around on the actors, and the revenger gets his revenge by both literally and metaphorically acting it out. The constant interruptions that madness has forced on the project of revenge are finally circumvented by the semi-mad, semi-sane theatrical plot of the masque. That provides a self-referential focus where madness and revenge can work together as act and action, thus completing the revenge of both Hieronimo and Don Andrea. Frame story, main plot and play-within coalesce in a climactic *tour de force*. But despite this emphatic closure, the question of meaning is still left diaphanously in the air. The text subtly interrogates its own adroitly dramatic end. Reason is still an abuse and meaning a gabble of different languages; silence, tonguelessness, the sense of no ending--these elements help deconstruct the seemingly solid edifice.

The word "tragedy" runs obliquely through this final scene, always signalling an ambiguity, an interplay between dramatic

performance and real action.¹⁶ The word, of course, occurs in the title of the play, and is as well its very last sound: "For here," says Revenge at the close, "though death hath end their misery, / I'll there begin their endless tragedy." The Tragedy is over, but the tragedy has just begun. Back at the beginning, Revenge has introduced the spectacle we and Andrea are to witness in the same kinds of terms: "Here sit we down to see the mystery, / And serve for chorus in this tragedy" (I.1.90-91).¹⁷ However, what we perceive there as fairly straightforward theatrical self-consciousness has by the end become much more complicated. After the masque, Hieronimo plays with the fact that reality has invaded the dramatic world, "real" tragedy has replaced dramatic tragedy:

And princes, now behold Hieronimo,
 Author and actor in this tragedy,
 Bearing his latest fortune in his fist,
 And will as resolute 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.

(IV.4.146-52)

Thus Hieronimo completes his mocking explanation to the court that they have been duped into accepting a tragedy as just that, a kind of play, whereas it has been in fact a part of their reality (although from the point of view of Don Andrea, and even more from ours, it is indeed a dramatic spectacle). His speech forces the court characters to un-suspend their disbelief, to "unmetaphor" not just a word, but a whole theatrical scene. They have to reinterpret what they have seen, to realize that in accepting the actors as different characters, they have been mistaken. Their carefully articulated recognitions at the beginning of the masque of the "part" that each person (i.e., each character) was playing are retroactively revoked--they must see Balthazar not as Soliman but as Balthazar. The normal audience-stage relationship is thus repudiated, and by extension our own participation in the drama is called into question. The fact that the whole main plot is contained within a further illusion (Don Andrea's) and the further fact that that spectacle is watched over by us (and do we not, as we are invited to do in *The Tempest*, cast a glance back over our own shoulders?) only add to the overall inconclusiveness, the lack of a single defined meaning. The mocking grotesquerie of Hieronimo's penultimate act, his biting out his own tongue, underscores the refusal of explanation, of speech itself, which goes with the general feeling of repudiation.¹⁸ The rest is silence, for him as for Hamlet. The

apparently motiveless slaying of Castile fits with, and adds to, the sense of inconclusiveness projected by this ending (in tandem, however, with its sweeping theatrical closure discussed above). And the notion of "endless tragedy," of tragedy trailing off from the illusory significance of art to the actual chaos of life (or even afterlife), caps our sense of the difficulties of bringing forth meaning. These difficulties have been present all along and are intricately linked to the meaningful opacities of madness.

The text thus moves in two directions at once, hearkening after closure and the clarity it bestows, and signalling at the same time that such clarity is at best delusory. The masque inverts the project of making sense, fixing the notion that reason abuseth, and puncturing the illusion that understanding or meaning or even fixed form can ever be fully achieved. This is not to say exactly that the text deconstructs itself, that it is Derridean "avant la lettre." It needs to be recognized, I think, that postmodern instabilities are not the same as Elizabethan, though the former may help to alert us to the latter. Hence what I see today is not precisely what Kyd, or the 1602 reviser, saw then. One way of talking about the differences (and there are many, not the least of which is the status of representation itself) may be in relation to power; what role, that is, does the unstable theatricality of *The Spanish Tragedy* play in a culture that defines power in theatrical terms?¹⁹ Denied access to legitimated sources of redress (the justice system, for example), the revenger seeks power through forms of theatricality that he himself invents. The masque thus becomes a power grab, or better, a form of negotiation in which Hieronimo outwits the King himself, both establishing and undoing theatrical roles and thereby gaining power over life and death. But with his silence and his self-mutilation he also admits defeat--the masque, like *The Spanish Tragedy* itself, is after all only a play. From the point of view of the institution of the theatre, which *The Spanish Tragedy* represents, indeed almost initiates, the elaborate theatricality of the text calls attention to itself, linking its adventurous questioning and its multiple perspectives with madness. Is, then, the instability associated with the representation of madness perhaps a sign of anxiety about achieving, or being shut out from, power? The whole text might then be read as anxious about the theatre and its theatricality succumbing like Hieronimo to powerlessness. But there is another way of looking at the problem. Hieronimo's defeat is also his victory. State power seeks explanation, fullness, disclosure, control over discourse (an ending), all of which Hieronimo refuses. The theatre cannot compete with power directly, but it can, and does, invent a form of subversion nestled within its construction of ends, its display of meanings. The text thus uses theatricality paradoxically to

challenge hierarchical certainties as they were displayed theatrically within the culture, by directing the considerable derisive power of the theatre obliquely against them. Madness returns to center stage as the unlicensed fool.

Let me end my own text with a note about Isabella, the most truly "mad" character in the play. She is primarily a choral figure. Her grief and her desire for revenge echo Hieronimo's. But it is she who introduces the note of "endless woe" (II.v.39) which sounds throughout, figuring the lack of finality or closure. And it is she who executes the mute act of revenge on the bower that has sheltered the love and death of her son. This last act is the end-point and ultimate manifestation of her madness and culminates in her suicide. Unable to focus action or revenge outward, she turns it inward, on herself and on the hitherto fecund femininity of the bower, with which she identifies herself:²⁰

Fruitless forever may this garden be!
Barren the earth, and blissless whosoever
Imagines not to keep it unmanured . . .
And as I curse this tree from further fruit,
So shall my womb be cursed for his sake.

(IV.2.14-16, 35-36)

Her death, in another of the many ironic misapprehensions that give the play its overall shape, comes as a result of her mistaken belief that Hieronimo is doing nothing to revenge their wrongs--when in fact this scene comes directly between the planning and execution of that revenge. "And none but I bestir me--to no *end*," she says, seeing her own act as isolated and purposeless. "To no end"--her act makes no sense, does not participate in even the delusive finality of Hieronimo's plotted revenge. It joins hands with the endless woe at the outset, the endless tragedy at the close. Meaning, finality, closure--an "end" in various senses--lose their force. Juxtaposed with the planning and presentation of Hieronimo's masque, Isabella's project becomes a mocking companion of her husband's, setting his already highly ambiguous, even delusory, meaning in still more ironic perspective.

The importance of the self-subverting direction in the text of *The Spanish Tragedy*, opposing its ideological effort toward closure, can hardly be overestimated. The play, as is well known, was one of the most popular and most quoted of Elizabethan plays. It set the tone for the many revenge plays that followed it, and lent its intricate self-consciousness and subtle subversiveness to a whole tradition. The fact that it could do this is more than a matter of "influence"; there seems to me little doubt that the play seized upon an awareness

of uncertainty and instability of meaning that the whole of Elizabethan confidence conveniently occluded and that burst out so alarmingly in the early years of the next reign. At the same time, the play found in the theatrics of madness a fruitful metaphor for its awareness, one that allowed for the stringency of reason and form, but mocked it from within.

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Notes

1. Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization*, trans. Richard Howard (New York, 1967) x.

2. Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago, 1978) 35 (author's italics).

3. Derrida 37.

4. Foucault xi.

5. Derrida 61.

6. Shoshana Felman, "Madness and Philosophy or Literature's Reason," *Yale French Studies*, 52 (1975) 227.

7. Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. G. Bennington and B. Massumi (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota 1984) 60, 81.

8. Jean E. Howard, "The New Historicism in Renaissance Studies," *ELR* 16.1 (Winter, 1986) 16.

9. Thus Fredson Bowers was right years ago when he suggested that the ghost was quite unconnected to "the action of the latter half of the play." What Bowers missed and what many later critics have picked up on is the role of the ghost as a spectator marking one of many different levels of illusion within the presentation. See *Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy* (Princeton, 1940) 71.

10. The text I have used is the New Mermaid edition, ed. J.R. Mulryne (London, 1970). This text is based on the 1592 edition, with the additions of 1602 printed at the end.

11. See Mulryne's introduction to the New Mermaid edition, xxiii-xxv, for parallel commentary on the ironies generated by Kyd's exploitation of his characters' ignorance. Several other critics have commented on the skillful play of ironies in the text. See, for example, G.K. Hunter, "Ironies of Justice in *The Spanish Tragedy*," *Renaissance Drama* 8 (1965) 89-104; Alexander Leggatt, "The Three Worlds of *The Spanish Tragedy*," *Southern Review* 6 (1973) 35-47; and Carol McGinnis Kay, "Deception through Words: a Reading of *The Spanish Tragedy*," *SP* 74 (1977) 20-38.

12. Hunter 95-97.

13. Rosalie Colie, *Shakespeare's Living Art* (Princeton, 1974). "An author who treats a conventionalized figure of speech as if it were a description of actuality is unmetaphoring that figure" (11).

14. Various critics have tried to argue for Shakespeare's authorship (not to mention Jonson's, Dekker's or Webster's), but most readers remain unpersuaded. See, for example, Warren Stevenson, "Shakespeare's Hand in *The Spanish Tragedy* 1602," *SEL* 8 (1968) 307-322.

15. Anne Barton, *Ben Jonson Dramatist* (Cambridge, 1984) 13-28.

16. I am indebted to Charles J. Sugnet for some suggestive remarks in an unpublished paper on the "false endings of *King Lear*," which influenced my thinking about the ending of *The Spanish Tragedy*.

17. Harriet Hawkins, in "Fabulous Counterfeits: Dramatic Construction and Dramatic Perspective in *The Spanish Tragedy*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and *The Tempest*," *ShS* 6 (1970) 53-4, comments acutely on the wordplay in Revenge's first and last speeches. See also Leggatt 42-3.

18. Scott McMillin, in "The Figure of Silence in *The Spanish Tragedy*," *ELH* 39 (1972) 27-48, emphasizes the central movement of the play toward silence: "In the solipsism of his [i.e., Hieronimo's] ritual, language and silence come to the same point in the end, a point of identity where . . . acting and dying are figures of each other" (48).

19. Here I am drawing on recent work that examines Elizabethan culture in just such terms, notably Stephen Orgel, *The Illusion of Power* (Berkeley: U of California, 1975), Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (Chicago: U of Chicago, 1980), Jonathan Goldberg, *James I and the Politics of Literature* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1983), Leonard Tennenhouse, *Power on Display: The Politics of Shakespeare's Genres* (New York and London: Methuen, 1986), and especially Louis A. Montrose, whose various essays conduct a rigorous analysis of Elizabethan play (e.g., pastoral poetry, drama) as *work*, as a form of negotiation that involves courtiers, poets and playwrights as contestants with the prince for authority. See in particular "Of Gentlemen and Shepherds: the Politics of Elizabethan Pastoral Form" *ELH* 50.3 (Fall 1983) 415-459; "The Purpose of Playing: Reflections on a Shakespearean Anthropology," *Helios* 7 (1980) 51-74; and "Shaping Fantasies: Figurations of Gender and Power in Elizabethan Culture" *Representations* 1:2 (Spring 1983) 61-94.

20. Peter Sacks, in "Where Words Prevail Not: Grief, Revenge and Language in Kyd and Shakespeare," *ELH* 49 (1982) 576-601, suggests that for Isabella as well as for Hieronimo, words simply fail. Her attack on the bower is a literal enactment of the traditional elegiac curse on nature and, far from prevailing against grief, succumbs self-destructively to it (581). She too, of course, is reduced to muteness.

