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# Bel-Imperia: The (Early) Modern Woman in Thomas Kyd's Spanish Tragedy

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Bel-Imperia: The (Early) Modern Woman in Thomas Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy*

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
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## Dedication

For Giulio and Valentina, without whose loving support I could not have come this far.

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## Table of Contents

Abstract	ii
Introduction	1
Chapter One: Historical and Critical Background	3
Historical Background	
Consensual, Companionate Marriage	3
Arranged Marriage	4
Issues of Consent	6
Patriarchal Marriage, Forced Marriage, and Rape	8
Women as Peacemaker, a Trans-tribal Bond	12
Critical Background	13
Chapter Two: Bel-Imperia	16
Chapter Three: Other Characters	25
Castile	25
The King	29
Horatio	31
Balthazar	33
Hieronomo	34
Lorenzo	37
Isabella	40
Conclusion	42
Afterword	44
Works Cited	49
Bibliography	54

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ABSTRACT

At the heart of Thomas Kyd's revenge tragedy *The Spanish Tragedy* lies an arranged marriage around which all of the other action revolves. Bel-Imperia of Spain has been betrothed against her will to Prince Balthazar of Portugal, but she is no ordinary woman, and she has plans of her own. Bel-Imperia's unwillingness to participate in the arranged marriage is indicative of the rise of the companionate marriage; it represents a rejection of the arranged marriage that dominated upper class society in earlier years.

This study seeks to throw light upon early modern attitudes towards marriage, focusing particularly on the arranged marriage, the companionate marriage, and the state marriage. Additionally, it examines the role of woman as peace-weaver, a practice that dates back as far as the *Beowulf* manuscript. Using historical as well as literary sources to delineate these forms, I apply this information to a study of the play itself, with an emphasis on its performative value. Since the proposed marriage dictates all of the action of the play, an analysis of the bartered bride, Bel-Imperia, is of particular importance. This essay examines her character in depth as well as her relationships with Andrea and Horatio, who love her; with Lorenzo, the King, and her father, who seek to exploit her; and with Hieronimo, who becomes her partner in revenge. Additionally, I contrast her with Isabella, one of only two other female characters in the play and conclude by

delineating how my analysis would affect a performance of the play and by “directing” a hypothetical interpretation of *The Spanish Tragedy*.

## Chapter One

### Introduction

Few experiences in the world of the performing arts exhilarate an audience more than a visit to the opera, and few dramas excite spectators more than a revenge tragedy. Julie Taymor's film *Titus*, a cinematic interpretation of Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*, provides a riveting, over-the-top example of the revenge tragedy, first introduced to the English stage with Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*. Taymor, in the years preceding the release of the film, built her reputation in New York as an operatic and theatrical director, and she made good use of her knowledge of the theatrical world to create an interpretation of Shakespeare's grisly play, which is visually stunning in the exaggerated style of grand opera. Moreover, the genre of revenge tragedy lends itself to hyperbolic visual representation, with its elements of gruesome death, madness, and ghosts (Bowers 63-64). Most operas present stellar roles for woman, and Kyd's play showcases an extravagant female character, the dynamic, unrestrained Bel-imperia.

Critical consensus accepts *The Spanish Tragedy* as the progenitor of the English revenge tragedy, and critics and audiences alike have tended to focus on Hieronimo as the main character and the principal revenger. In fact, this very popular play came to be known simply as *Hieronimo* in the common parlance of the period. Close attention to the action of the drama, however, reveals that the initial revenger is actually Bel-imperia, rather than Hieronimo. Furthermore, Bel-imperia's father and her king are trying to



arrange a marriage with Prince Balthazar, and this proposed marriage lies at the very heart of the play. Despite the intentions of the King to unite his country in marriage with Portugal, Bel-imperia has plans of her own. She takes control of her destiny and resists the arranged marriage to Balthazar. Therefore, Bel-imperia is of crucial importance to the action of the tragedy, both as the principal revenger and as the reluctant bartered bride.

In this thesis, I shall undertake a detailed analysis of Kyd's courageous heroine, since Bel-imperia offers an early example of the prototypical modern woman. Feisty, independent, and intelligent, she refuses to allow her father, her brother, or her king to determine her future. Resolute and relentless, she single-mindedly pursues her revenge. Sexually experienced, she chooses her own lovers, with an apparent affinity for men who fall below her in the class structure. Finally, she doggedly resists the proposed arranged marriage, a nuptial event around which much of the action of the play revolves. Since this proposed marriage remains vital to an understanding of *The Spanish Tragedy*, in this thesis I shall explore historical attitudes toward marriage, in particular the distinctions between the consensual, companionate marriage, the arranged marriage, and the patriarchal marriage. In addition, since Bel-imperia's interactions with the other characters contribute to an understanding of her character, I shall examine each of the main players, analyzing their relationship to Bel-imperia, and their contribution to an understanding of this forceful female character created by Thomas Kyd.

## Chapter Two

### Historical and Critical Background

#### HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

##### *The Consensual, Companionate Marriage*

Before examining the arranged marriage in the play, I shall explore the views on marriage in early modern England, in which two conjugal models dominated: the companionate marriage and the arranged marriage. The idea of marriage partners as soul mates was an emerging concept, and literature offers many examples of marital devotion. In the medieval period, Chaucer exemplifies the perfect marriage of “The Franklin’s Tale” in the following lines:

Who can recount, unless he has been married,  
The ease, the prosperous joys of man and wife?  
A year or more they lived their blissful life. (411)

As George Kittredge proclaims in his seminal work on this tale, “Without love, marriage is sure to be a failure” (Kittredge 33). Perhaps one of the strongest and most moving examples of marital love and devotion comes from John Donne, in his poem “A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning”:

Our two souls therefore, which are one  
Though I must go, endure not yet  
A breach, but an expansion,  
Like gold to airy thinness beat. (Donne 21-24)

Not only Donne, but also the other Metaphysical poets “celebrated love with an intensity and seriousness which it would be difficult to believe could be surpassed. Here, surely, was a passionate outpouring on love within and outside marriage that could not be rivaled” (Macfarlane 185). Religion also played a role in this emphasis on love in marriage. As Lisa Hopkins points out, “the advocates of the new Puritanism [. . .] placed great stress on the need for consent rather than coercion in marriage” (4). She cautions her readers, however:

. . . even this relatively limited concern for women’s happiness within marriage was taking place within a social order that was, by our standards, profoundly misogynistic and preoccupied with a deep fear of female sexuality and its potential consequences. (5)

Still, in this period, the consensual, companionate marriage was emerging as the standard. As Sara Munson Deats remarks, “most scholars agree that this conjugal pattern, which unites ‘esteem’ and ‘desire’ in an amorous mutuality, had become the dominant social ideal, if not always the reality, by the late sixteenth century. This matrimonial model affirmed individual choice as the soundest basis for marriage, with mutual support, companionship, and love its primary goals” (234).

### *The Arranged Marriage*

Although this era experienced the emergence of the companionate marriage, arranged unions remained the norm, especially amongst the upper classes. As B.J. and Mary Sokol observe, “The convention among the gentry and aristocracy was for marriages to be arranged by families with a view to securing advantages or alliances,

conforming to a patriarchal model” (Sokol 30). Furthermore, it was expected that “aristocratic children would submit willingly to such marriages, happy to comply with parental wishes” (Sokol and Sokol30). Looking at this issue through Western twenty-first century eyes, we can imagine that the children of the aristocracy may have been reluctant to go along with these arrangements, but resistance occurred less often than we might expect (Sharpe 64). According to J.A. Sharpe, “What they expected from marriage was often perfectly compatible with the interests of parents, kin and society as a whole. The love that might develop within an arranged marriage was not unconnected with the need for honour, status and security” (64).

Nevertheless, there must have been rebellious teens even then. In the non-historical film *Shakespeare in Love*, the female protagonist Viola, upon learning that a marriage has been arranged for her, exclaims in shock to her future husband, “But I do not love you!” However, she does eventually agree to “do her duty”; if only Viola had been aware that since the Anglo-Saxon period, English law had stated that “No woman or maiden shall ever be forced to marry one whom she dislikes, nor be sold for money” (Macfarlane quoting Whitelock 131), perhaps she would have resisted a bit more but upper class women of this period were accustomed to such arrangements.

As Keith Wrightson remarks, “among the aristocracy, the urban elite, and landed gentry families, as [Laurence] Stone has demonstrated, marriage was a matter of too great a significance, both in the property transactions which it involved, and in the system of familial alliances which it cemented, to be left to the discretion of the young people concerned” (72). However, although parents primarily facilitated marriages in aristocratic families, “a right of veto was conceded to the young parties to a match”

(Wrightson 70). By the end of the seventeenth century, the accepted policy had evolved into one of mutual agreement between parent and child. Antonia Fraser explains:

In 1673 the most influential book on domestic conduct published after the Restoration—*The Ladies Calling*, the work of a divine named Richard Allestree—summed up the prevailing view as follows: “As a Daughter is neither to anticipate, nor to contradict the will of her Parent, so (to hang the balance even) I must say she is not obliged to force her own, by marrying where she cannot love; for a negative voice in the case is sure as much the Child’s right, as the Parents.” (273)

### *Issues of Consent*

Consent is of crucial importance to any discussion of marriage in early modern England, an issue approachable from different points of view. First, both the bride and the groom must consent or else the marriage cannot possibly take place. As Alan Macfarlane explains, a marriage ceremony would have begun much as it does today with the solemn question, “Wilt thou have this woman [man] to be thy wedded wife [husband]?” If either of the partners says no, then the marriage service cannot proceed (130). As far as parental consent goes, however, the parties were free to marry without consulting their families. “There was no absolute requirement of parental consent of a certain age. All persons on reaching the years of puberty were declared capable of wedlock solely on their own authority” (Howard qtd. in Macfarlane 124). Church law dating from the twelfth to the eighteenth century stipulated that parents need not consent for the marriage to be legal (Macfarlane 124), although the actual reality of parent-child

relations may have been very different. Jean H. Hagstrum, for example, offers a contrary view, claiming that “the reformers [. . .] made parental consent as well as guidance *de riguer*” (294). David Cressy agrees: “They needed to be of marriageable age, at least 14 for a boy and 12 for a girl, and if under 21 should have the consent of parents or guardians” (311). Still, from a strictly legal standpoint, parents could neither force their children to wed nor prevent them from marrying.

The actuality of the situation, however, was perhaps not as clear-cut as historians would have us believe, and the 1617 case of Frances Coke, Viscountess of Purbeck, illustrates this difference between practice and theory. Sir Edward Coke was absolutely determined to see his fourteen-year-old daughter Frances marry Sir John Villiers—soon to become Viscount Purbeck—in order to augment his own position in King James’s court. Hardly a desirable mate, Villiers suffered from manic fits and a general lack of mental health; hence both Frances and her mother opposed the match, and much controversy, including lawsuits and kidnappings, ensued. Eventually, however, Coke ensured his daughter’s submission by tying her to the bedposts and whipping her until she agreed to marry Villiers. Thus, technically Frances did consent to the marriage, although her father obtained her submission only through torture (Fraser 12-15).

Hence, two different models of marriage struggled for dominance during the period in which *The Spanish Tragedy* was written: “The loveless arranged marriage, [that] was normal among the propertied classes” (Stone 104) and the companionate marriage: “a radical new orthodoxy of wedlock as a terrestrial paradise, where the love between husband and wife is an analogue for the love of God” (Belsey 20). The heroine of *The Spanish Tragedy*, Bel-imperia, would certainly prefer the companionate model,

that is, if she desires marriage at all. Significantly, in early modern England, “a woman was already a free and independent adult, irrespective of marriage [. . .] but [after marriage] in relation to one man she had become, as it were, a subject” (Macfarlane 149). Considering Bel-imperia’s nature, a reader might conclude that she has no desire to marry since she never alludes to marriage to either Andrea or Horatio. However, if she were to enter the bonds of wedlock, she would certainly wish to choose her own mate; even without marriage, she evidently wants to select her own lovers, whatever her attitude toward conjugality.

#### *Patriarchal Marriage, Forced Marriage and Rape*

Although the consent of both bride and groom was legally essential for any union, companionate or arranged, the patriarchal marriage, in which the father forced his will upon an obedient daughter, often amounted to a forced marriage. As Lagretta Tallent Lenker notes in *Fathers and Daughters in Shakespeare and Shaw*, “In many patriarchal contexts, women are denied the elementary rights of the subject, forced instead into an object position—to conform to the will of others” (71). I contend that a forced marriage is equivalent to a rape, since a father who would force his daughter to marry a man against her will, in effect, demands that she have sexual relations against her will.

Although this view of arranged marriage as rape indicates a modern sensibility toward women’s issues, it was arguably an attitude at least available in the early modern period, an assertion reinforced by the scholarship of both Jocelyn Catty and R. H. Helmholz. Catty finds this view expressed in a play by Lady Mary Wroth, the niece of Philip Sidney, best known for her prose romance *Urania* and its sequel. Wroth wrote a

play entitled *Love's Victory*, a pastoral tragicomedy about love, which emphasizes the agency of women, portraying Venus as more important than Cupid. Catty summarizes the play's attitude toward marriage:

Arranged marriage provides the main plot in *Love's Victory*. Like Pamphilia in the *Urania* sequel, Musella has agreed to marry a man she does not love, the boorish Rustic, and having changed her mind, she is forced by her mother to honour her promise. A series of comments emphasises that this marriage, although not involving physical compulsion, would constitute a sexual violation. (213)

As evidence for her assertion, Catty argues that “Dalina’s warning that ‘ . . . night, / I’le undertake much mirth will not apeere / In faire Musella, she’ll showe *heavy* cheere’ (V. 133-5, Catty’s emphasis) is followed by Silvestra’s lament for ‘Musella to bee forc’d e and made to ty / Her faith to one she hates, and still did fly’ (174-5)” (Catty 213). While Musella’s friends Dalina and Silvestra bemoan her fate, the villain Arcas seems to enjoy her predicament:

Now she that soar’d aloft all day, att night  
Must roost in a poore bush with small delight. (Wroth 138-9)

Dalina, appalled by the Rustic, laments: “Fy, / To thinke Musella by this beast must ly (268-69),” while the boorish Rustic can barely wait to claim his prize:

Come, lett’s alonge, and quickly fetch the bride,  
Mee thinks I long to have her by my side. (270-71)

Although the word *rape* does not appear in this dialogue, obviously, for Musella, sexual relations with the Rustic, either inside or outside of the marriage bonds, would be most



unwelcome. Thus, at least one contemporary critic, Catty, and one early modern writer, Wroth, agree that forced sexual relations at this period, either inside or outside of matrimony, were equivalent to rape. Unfortunately, however, we are a minority. The patriarchal society that dominated England in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries viewed women primarily as commodities; a wife was the property of her husband and a daughter belonged to her father (Sokol and Sokol 107). Moreover, the society of the period generally regarded intercourse, even within a patriarchal marriage arranged by a woman's father or a forced marriage insisted on by the suitor, as a natural event entered into willingly, which consummated the marriage and precluded annulment (Catty 213).

R.H. Helmholz observes that "a marriage contracted under duress could be subsequently dissolved" (90), but that sexual relations after the marriage implied consent and thus disallowed any possibility of annulment, even in the case of a forced marriage:

. . . action subsequent to the marriage could easily prevent the claim [for dissolution] from being made. Later consent, sexual relations (except where themselves extorted by violence), or cohabitation for a sufficient time meant that there could be no divorce. These acts were held by the law to purge the effect of force and fear, and to ratify the previously voidable marriage. (91)

The Sokols develop this idea further:

It has been suggested that this [marriage under duress] was because, even if a marriage was entered into under compulsion, subsequent consent was held to "purge the effect of force and fear" [Helmholz] and so ratify the marriage. Such consent could be implied by *apparently willingly entered*

*sexual relations* or cohabitation following the marriage. In addition, difficulties in producing witnesses to the force used, the typically late age for marriages, and English social customs in which many young people were in service or training away from their families, must also go some way to explaining lack of many claims of duress. (32, emphasis added)

Therefore, unless a woman could prove that she had been violently raped in the marriage bed, intercourse with her husband implied consent and consummated the marriage.

However, by suggesting that marital intercourse could, under certain conditions, be considered rape, both Helmholz and the Sokols interrogate the accepted tradition that viewed sexual intercourse as the uncontested right of the husband. Of course, this idea of consummation implying consent, even in the case of a forced marriage, was not the only early modern view on rape completely foreign to today's attitudes. For example, Linda Woodbridge observes that "the question of consent was complicated by the Renaissance belief that pregnancy was a sign that a raped woman had actually consented, since in medical thinking orgasm was necessary to conception" (xxiv), and the Sokols remind us that "in practice severe punishments were only handed out for the rape of virgins; for other women an unspecified lesser scale of punishments applied" (107).

Undoubtedly, we have different ideas in the twenty-first century, and Catty begins her study with a caveat: "My definition of 'rape' in this study is the modern one, sexual intercourse without the woman's consent. Any study of its representation, however, needs to take into account the various early modern definitions of the word and their ideological implications" (10).

*Woman as Peacemaker, a Trans-tribal Bond*

Castile and the King in *The Spanish Tragedy* seek to use Bel-imperia as an instrument of peace, ensuring an amicable relationship between Spain and Portugal. She will be a nexus, employed

To knit a sure inexplicable band

Of kingly love and everlasting league

Betwixt the crowns of Spain and Portingale. (3.12.46-48)

This concept of a woman ensuring peace between nations or tribes dates back at least to the time of the *Beowulf* manuscript. Robert Morey discusses the peacemaker in his article “Beowulf’s Androgynous Heroism”:

The role of woman in *Beowulf*, as in Anglo-Saxon society, primarily depends on peace making, either biologically through her marital ties with foreign kings as a peace pledge or mother of sons, or socially and psychologically as a cup-passing and peace-weaving queen within a hall.

(Chance qtd. in Morey 2)

Morey concludes that “the poem indicates that the proper role for women is to nurture peace, through ritual behavior in the mead-hall or through intertribal marriage” (3).

Claude Levi-Strauss discusses the concept of women marrying across tribes in his landmark work *Structural Anthropology*: “They [kinship systems, marriage rules, and descent groups, all three of which constitute a coordinated whole] may be considered as the blueprint of a mechanism which ‘pumps’ women out of their consanguineous families to redistribute them in affinal groups, the result of this process being to create new consanguineous groups, and so on” (309). As Gayle Rubin observes, “It is certainly not

difficult to find ethnographic and historical examples of trafficking in women. Women are given in marriage, taken in battle, exchanged for favors, sent as tribute, traded, bought, and sold” (Rubin 175). Moreover, anthropologists have noted how the exchange of women can reinforce a homosocial bond amongst men: “If it is women who are being transacted, then it is the men who give and take them who are linked, the woman being a conduit of a relationship rather than a partner to it” (Rubin 174).

To recapitulate, in the early modern period, although the consensual marriage emerged as the ideal, the arranged marriage continued to be widespread, particularly in aristocratic families. Domineering fathers who constrained their daughters into unwanted nuptials enacted forced marriage, which modern attitudes may construe as a form of marital rape. Moreover, the writings of Lady Mary Wroth display an aversion to sexual relations within a forced marriage, although she falls short of actually naming such an act *rape*. Wroth’s work indicates at least an awareness that arranged marriage was not always acceptable to the bride, and that marriage conventions unquestionably experienced a state of flux during the early modern period.

#### CRITICAL BACKGROUND

A search for critical discussion of Bel-imperia in *The Spanish Tragedy* yields little material. She has unfortunately been egregiously neglected, and, surely, she deserves better, for in Bel-imperia Kyd depicts a woman of fortitude, courage, and independence long before anyone had coined the word *feminism*. Sacvan Berkovitch, in “Love and Strife in Kyd’s *Spanish Tragedy*,” considers the “growing passion” between Bel-imperia and Horatio (221), but mistakenly claims that love has driven revenge from her mind

(226). Scott McMillin, in “The Figure of Silence in the Spanish Tragedy,” characterizes Bel-imperia as a “forward looking girl” (30) when she takes a new lover to replace the old; however, he does not single out Bel-Imperia as a “figure of silence,” although in act 3, scene 14 Bel-imperia, although onstage, has no lines whatsoever, and remains mute while the King and Castile, along with the Viceroy, plan her marriage. Despite its promising title, “Antisocial Behavior and the Code of Love in Kyd’s *The Spanish Tragedy*,” Pierre Spriet’s essay also neglects Bel-imperia and treats her unjustly. Spriet’s argument objectifies Bel-imperia just as the characters in the drama do, focusing primarily on the motivations of Lorenzo and Castile (3-4) and characterizing Bel-imperia’s love for Andrea as “antisocial” (4). Marguerite Alexander barely mentions Bel-imperia, while Stephen Watt sees her as an avenger; and although he only refers to her briefly, he does focus on her motivations for and acts of revenge (98). Charles H. Stein also concentrates on Bel-imperia the avenger (97, 98, 99) with the addition of some attention to how she encourages and coerces Hieronimo (101). Conversely, Frank R. Ardolino wrote an entire book on Kyd’s tragedy, *Thomas Kyd’s Mystery Play: Myth and Ritual in The Spanish Tragedy*, but it contains very little commentary on Bel-imperia, and centers instead on Horatio and Hieronimo as the main figures. Although James Siemon’s excellent essay “Sporting Kyd” examines class differences in the play, and such an argument would seem to have ample room for Bel-imperia since both her lovers, Andrea and Horatio, are below her in class, this issue is hardly addressed in the essay. Kay Stockholder’s article “The Aristocratic Woman as Scapegoat: Romantic Love and Class Antagonism in *The Spanish Tragedy*, *The Duchess of Malfi* and *The Changeling*” again disappoints when it comes to an investigation of Bel-imperia. On the whole,

Stockholder's treatment of Bel-imperia is quite cursory, although her Marxist approach does examine Bel-imperia's romantic relationships in terms of class differences. For example, Stockholder points out that "There is no explicit mention made of Bel-imperia's intention to marry either Don Andrea or Horatio, or of the social consequences of such a liaison" (133). Stockholder also touches briefly on the question of chastity; she questions whether Bel-imperia has had sexual relations with Andrea and asserts that the bower scene between Bel-imperia and Horatio, had the two lovers not been interrupted, would have resulted in sexual intercourse, a point with which I agree and upon which I will later expound (134). Finally, Stevie Simkin's collection of essays on the revenge tragedy does not contain a single article that explores gender issues in this play; Bel-imperia is once again neglected, an omission I hope to correct in this thesis.

Thus, although many interesting and insightful articles have been published on *The Spanish Tragedy*, not one of them explores this play through the eyes of the feminist critic. Furthermore, little critical attention has been devoted to Thomas Kyd's bold Bel-imperia, a character clearly ahead of her time.

## Chapter Three

### Bel-imperia

Since the crux of the play involves the arranged marriage between Bel-imperia and Balthazar and her resistance to it, the character of Bel-imperia must be examined. Her father, her brother, and her king want to marry her off to the insipid Balthazar. Not only is Bel-imperia unwilling to be his wife, but it is difficult to imagine such a strong-minded woman wedded to a man like Balthazar. Kyd portrays Bel-imperia as stalwart, intelligent, and independent while depicting Balthazar as weak, simple, and easily led. In an era when women were assumed to be of lesser intelligence than men, Bel-imperia displays her intellect readily, as seen in act 1, scene 4, when she exchanges witty banter with Lorenzo and Balthazar. This scene underscores Bel-imperia's intelligence while highlighting Balthazar's dim-wittedness:

BALTHAZAR. What if conceit had laid my heart to gage?

BEL-IMPERIA. Pay that you borrowed and recover it.

BALTHAZAR. I die if it return from whence it lies.

BEL-IMPERIA. A heartless man and live? A miracle! (1.4.85-88)

Moreover, clever by her own admission, Bel-imperia states to Hieronimo in act 4: "You mean to try my cunning then, Hieronimo" (4.1.179). In addition, Bel-imperia frequently demonstrates her resourcefulness; for example, when she learns of Balthazar's interest in her, she decides that she will love Horatio to replace Andrea and to spite the Portuguese prince. It seems, at this point, that she plans only to feign interest in Horatio, but a real

affection later grows between them, and she undoubtedly intends to have sexual relations with him, a matter which I will elucidate below. Another example of her courage and resourcefulness occurs after her incarceration by her brother. Locked in the tower after Horatio's murder, a typical female character from the early modern period would probably be weeping in her prison cell and despairing over her confinement, the loss of her lover, and the horror of having witnessed a murder. Bel-imperia, however, apparently cuts herself to write a letter in blood. In this letter she records the circumstances of Horatio's death and drops the note from the tower window. Does Bel-imperia realize that her lover's father happens to be standing under her window, or does she blindly let it fall, for whoever happens by to discover? Kyd does not tell us, but I think that Bel-imperia prepares the letter and waits for the opportune moment to let it drop; Hieronimo's standing under her window as he soliloquizes about revenge coincides nicely with her plan.

In a play widely accepted as the progenitor of the revenge tragedy (Bowers 65), it bears notice that a woman, Bel-imperia, represents the main revenger, and she vows to take revenge long before Hieronimo does:

But how can love find harbor 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. (1.4.64-67)

Bowers observes:

The first human note is struck when Bel-imperia resolves to use second love, in the person of Horatio, to revenge the death of her first lover . . . .



Furthermore, at the moment she was the logical revenger since women were noted for their revengefulness in elizabethan (sic) life and the Italian *novelle*. The whole first act is devoted to the exposition and to the resolution of the beloved to revenge the death of her lover. (66-67)

Not only the avenger, she is the encourager of revenge, inciting Hieronimo to seek retribution for the murder of his son, and she admonishes him when he seems to falter: “Be not a history to aftertimes / Of such ingratitude unto thy son” (4.1.15-16). Moreover, she tells him quite plainly that she intends to take her revenge whether or not he participates:

For here I swear, in sight of heaven and earth,  
Shouldst thou neglect the love thou shouldst retain,  
And give it over and devise no more,  
Myself should send their hateful souls to hell. (4.1.25-29)

Not simply full of talk, as she accuses Hieronimo of being, Bel-imperia translates her statement into action. She kills Balthazar during the play within the play, before she knows whether or not Hieronimo has followed through with his vow to slay Lorenzo. Her main goal throughout the drama has been to avenge herself on a man whom she truly hates and to whom, ironically, most of the main players are trying to assure that she be married.

One area of Bel-imperia’s character not immediately clear is her level of sexual experience. Has she been intimate with Andrea, and does she plan to be intimate with Horatio? I believe the answer to both questions is “yes,” and I offer the following as proof. Andrea refers to himself as a “lover” (3.15.38), confiding that he has “possessed”

the high born lady (1.1.10); these sexually loaded words strongly suggest that sexual intercourse has taken place. Lorenzo seems to support this statement when he reminds Pedringano, “Since I did shield thee from my father’s wrath / For thy conveyance in Andrea’s love / For which thou were adjudged to punishment” (2.1.46-48). These two statements combine to create the impression that Andrea and Bel-imperia had engaged in sexual activity; Pedringano probably performed some kind of lookout duty, the same task assigned to him before the bower scene between Bel-imperia and Horatio. Later, when Bel-Imperia meets with Horatio in the garden, a strong suggestion that they are meeting there for sexual intimacy permeates the scene.

The setting of a garden, made even more intimate by its specification as a bower, suggests a romantic location conducive to lovemaking. The garden has connotations of sensuality. Adam and Even frolicked naked in the Garden of Eden, and Milton viewed Paradise as a place where sexual bliss was as natural to humans as it was to animals:

Fair couple, linked in happy nuptial league.

Alone as they. About them frisking played

All beasts of th’ earth, since wild, and of all chase. (Milton 339-41)

Moreover, a tryst occurs in a garden in Chaucer’s “Merchant’s Tale,” and another in *Measure for Measure*; Titania and Bottom also enjoy a sensual encounter in the fairy queen’s bower in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*:

So doth the woodbine the sweet honeysuckle

Gently entwist; the female ivy so

Enrings the barked fingers of the elm.

O, how I love thee! How I dote on thee! (4.1.41-44)

Thus both before and after Kyd wrote *The Spanish Tragedy*, the garden evoked connotations of physical desire and sensual delight.

Furthermore, when Bel-imperia and Horatio are planning their assignation, they are careful to ensure that no one will detect or interrupt them. If they were planning only to have a chat, albeit a romantic one, they would have been unlikely to take such elaborate precautions. Horatio must anticipate making love to Bel-Imperia, for she has told him that the nightingale will “carol [them] asleep” and tell [of their] “delight and mirthful dalliance”(2.2.48-51). The conversation of act 2, scene 2, in which Bel-imperia and Horatio plan their encounter, is evocative and full of sexually suggestive images. She observes that “pleasure follows pain” (2.2.11) and “That sweetest bliss is crown of love’s desire” (2.2.17), while he eagerly alludes to “pleasures to ensue” (2.2.27) and “pleasures of our love” (2.2.30). Significantly, Bel-imperia portrays the bolder of the speakers in this erotic repartee, even as she has been the pursuer of Horatio all along:

. . . thy war shall be with me,  
But such a war as breaks no bond of peace.  
Speak thou fair words, I’ll cross them with fair words;  
Send thou sweet looks, I’ll meet them with sweet looks;  
Write loving lines, I’ll answer loving lines;  
Give me a kiss, I’ll countercheck thy kiss. (2.2.32-38)

The tentative Horatio can be in no doubt that Bel-imperia will be just as passionate as he and will requite his caresses with her own.

Bel-imperia presents an aberration amongst the women of her era and her class; she chooses her own lovers, and would like to choose her own mate, if she marries at all.

It is she who boldly and aggressively pursues Horatio in an inversion of the more traditional courting of the woman by the man. Moreover, it appears that her relationship with Andrea was one of real love as well as physical desire. Andrea's allusion to her in the opening scene of the play laments the death that has separated him from the physical love of Bel-imperia:

In secret I possessed a worthy dame  
Which might sweet Bel-imperia by name.  
But in the harvest of my summer joys  
Death's winter nipped the blossoms of my bliss,  
Forcing divorce betwixt my love and me. (1.1.10-14)

Significantly, Bel-imperia's first mention of Andrea also evokes the sensual delights of the garden:

Wherein I must entreat thee to relate  
The circumstance of Don Andrea's death,  
Who, living, was my garland's sweetest flower,  
And in his death hath buried my delights. (1.4.2-5)

However, I do think that Andrea and Bel-imperia truly loved as well as desired each other, and Andrea assures the audience emphatically of their mutual admiration: ". . . fair Bel-imperia, / On whom I doted more than all the world, / Because she loved me more than all the world" (2.6.4-6).

However, both Andrea and Horatio, significantly, are of lower estate than Bel-imperia. Why does Bel-imperia choose lovers who are beneath her in class? Perhaps for reasons of control: she could have the upper hand with a man outside her upper class

circle, an advantage that she certainly does not have in her dealings with Lorenzo, Castile, or the King. Of course, she could also have controlled the flaccid Balthazar, but her two lovers certainly seem to be more interesting men than the vapid Prince of Portugal. If Balthazar represents the type of man available to a noble woman of Spain, one can hardly wonder that such a fiery spirit as Bel-imperia would look elsewhere for a lover who can hold her attention and equal her passion.

Perhaps Kyd found a model for Bel-imperia's sexual independence and reluctance to marry in the reigning sovereign, Queen Elizabeth I, who refuted all attempts to see her married. Scholars' opinions on her aversion to wedlock vary. Leah Marcus opines that "Elizabeth Tudor may never have married in any case—her mother's execution, her father's parade of wives, and the tragic farce of her sister's marriage in themselves would have generated skepticism about the value and endurance of wedlock" (406). Alison Weir observes:

. . . Elizabeth hesitated to demean her royal blood by marrying a commoner. Above all, she did not want to lose her newly-gained freedom, having suffered constraints of one kind or other throughout her young life. Sixteenth-century husbands—even those married to queen regnant—were notoriously autocratic, and society regarded them as the masters in their homes. (45-46).

Elizabeth I's life may also provide a clue to Bel-imperia's affinity for lower-class lovers. The queen was the subject of much gossip regarding her relationship with Robert Dudley, the Earl of Leicester. "She admired his nerve, his sense of adventure, and his robust masculinity. She could not resist the challenge of taming such a charmer and making him

her creature” (Weir 72-73). These same reasons for favor may be applied to Bel-imperia’s partiality for Andrea and Horatio. Additionally, like Elizabeth, Bel-imperia does not appear to desire marriage of any kind, precisely the appeal that the already married Dudley seems to have held for the reigning queen: “For Elizabeth, Robert Dudley had one supreme advantage over all her other male admirers. He could not offer her marriage. With him, she had the best of both worlds” (73). Perhaps Bel-imperia was of the same opinion; being ruled by *any* husband would be distasteful to her at best.

I have demonstrated Bel-imperia to be assertive, comfortable with both her intelligence and her sexuality, and determined to avenge herself on Balthazar, thereby avoiding marrying the hated Prince. We know that she recognizes Balthazar’s admiration for her, but it is unclear just when she learns of the arranged marriage. Does she know that the King and her father are planning a state marriage between Spain and Portugal, and, if so, exactly when does she find out? These scenes are missing from the play; Kyd does not give Bel-imperia a voice in these matters. Furthermore, when the decision has been made and a deal has been struck, she remains completely silent in the ensuing scene. Act 3, scene 14 opens with seven actors on the stage: three representatives of Spain—the King, Castile, and Lorenzo—and three representatives of Portugal—the Viceroy, Don Pedro, and Balthazar; the seventh person in this scene, the reluctant bride Bel-imperia, has no lines. If I were directing this play, I would place Bel-imperia downstage and center, apart from and between the two evenly divided groups of three to emphasize her isolation and what little importance is placed on her as an individual. This position signified power on the early modern stage (Mosley), and an odd dichotomy exists here; Bel-imperia has the power to bring the two countries together, yet she seems to lack

personal autonomy. The two rulers propose that Bel-imperia will unite their nations, but she is utterly alone. Significantly, Bel-imperia remains silent throughout this scene; while the men congratulate each other on the fine deal that they have made, she stands by, completely mute. They talk about her, not to her; no one asks her to speak or even acknowledges her presence. Later in the scene, Balthazar, Bel-imperia, and Castile are presented together on the stage. Significantly, the Duke speaks first to Balthazar and then only briefly and condescendingly to his daughter; this scene represents the only moment in the play when he speaks directly to Bel-imperia, and again she remains silent. Perhaps she does not deem her father worthy of a response, but, more likely, she declines comment because she knows that she will not marry the prince. Balthazar will be dead.

## Chapter Four

### The Other Characters

To gain further insight into Kyd's portrayal of this formidable female character, I would like to examine the other characters' images of and reactions to Bel-imperia, as well as their stake in the arranged marriage, since the play largely defines her by her interactions with others. Mary Lane Roble agrees and reminds her readers of the significance of the people who surround Bel-imperia:

It is important to recognize that Bel-imperia's world is clearly a male-dominated one; we are invited to consider her solely in terms of her relationships to the male characters in the play: she is Andrea's lover, the Duke's daughter, Lorenzo's sister, the King's niece, Horatio's paramour, and Balthazar's desire. (18)

The one other significant female character in the play, Isabella, contrasts markedly with Bel-imperia; she conforms to the expected behavior of a woman of that era, a paradigm that her younger counterpart does not fit.

#### CASTILE

Bel-imperia's father, on whom she should be able to rely for love and protection, represents one of her greatest tormentors. Castile plots an arranged marriage for his daughter to a man she loathes without her knowledge or consent. The Duke's actions suggest social climbing, for certainly this marriage, were it to take place, would greatly



enhance his position in the court, especially with the additional titles that the King and Viceroy have promised to bestow to bless the union: “And if by Balthazar she have a son, / He shall enjoy the kingdom after us [the King]” (2.3.20-21) and “. . . he [the Viceroy] will give his crown to Balthazar / And make a queen of Bel-imperia” (3.12.49-50). Castile enacts the tyrannical father, the *senex* from Latin New Comedy, when he says to the King: “Yet herein shall she follow my advice, / Which is to love him or forgo my love” (2.3.7-8). Oddly enough, this line, while demonstrating Castile’s domineering parenting style, also implies an acceptance of the companionate marriage, for he insists that his daughter must love Balthazar, the suggestion being that without love there will be no marriage. Castile makes a statement shortly before this one that renders him very unsympathetic. The King asks him what his daughter Bel-imperia says to the proposed marriage, and Castile replies: “I doubt not, but she will stoop in time” (2.3.5). Although David Bevington, in a footnote to this line, asserts that “Bel-imperia must be trained to ‘stoop,’ or fly down to the lure” (26), I see this line as a vulgar sexual remark, especially abhorrent since the speaker is a father referring to his daughter.

In the previous scene, just a few lines prior to Castile’s “stoop” remark, Bel-imperia tells Horatio that the nightingale with “the prickle at her breast” (2.2.50) will sing them to sleep. Bevington’s footnote states that this line refers to Ovid’s Philomela; it bears noting that Bevington creates a link between Philomela, who is raped, and Bel-imperia, whom her father is seeking to force into an undesired marriage, and who, like Philomela, will thus also be sexually violated. Moreover, Shakespeare utilizes the story of Philomela in *Titus Andronicus*, when the raped and mutilated Lavinia employs a book of Ovid to relate what has happened to her. Carolyn Sale points out that there are two

types of rape in the Bard's early tragedy: "*Titus Andronicus* stages two very different acts defined as rape in England at the end of the sixteenth century. In the opening scene of the play, Lavinia is 'ravished,' conveyed 'out of possession and against the will of her father' into the possession of another man, and in 2.3 she is 'raped,' enforced violently to sustain the fury of [the] brutish concupiscence' of two men" (3). In *The Spanish Tragedy*, Castile attempts to forestall the former type of rape in order to ensure that the second type is effected on his daughter. Lenker discusses the acquiescent daughter and the domineering father as follows:

Although they never condone them, both Shaw and Shakespeare dramatize the passive daughter or patriarchal methods of father-daughter interaction, those in which the wishes of the father subsume those of the daughter. Such patterns deny the possibility of any meaningful, prolonged exchanges between the members of this pair because of the unequalness of power inherent in the two participants involved. In keeping with the patriarchal dictates, the father must be obeyed—the very foundations of society, both publicly through the state and privately through the family, depend on this premise. And yet, the father is not always right. When his own ego is served before the needs of his family, the results often turn tragic, benefiting neither the father nor his daughter. (49)

As noted earlier, Castile does bear a striking resemblance to the *senex* from the Latin New Comedies. The *senex*, "a blocking figure who deals harshly with suitors" (Miola 144) would not have tolerated a courtship between Bel-imperia and Andrea, and

apparently Castile did not either. Lorenzo reminds Pedringano, who apparently abetted the romance betwixt Bel-imperia and Andrea:

Since I did shield thee from *my father's wrath*

For thy conveyance in Andrea's love

For which thou wert adjudged to punishment.

I stood betwixt thee and thy punishment. (emphasis added 2.1.46-49)

Certainly, upon learning of his daughter's amorous liaison with Horatio, Castile would have reacted just as harshly. Interestingly, however, although Castile may have appeared to fit the mold of the *senex*, and the audience would probably have viewed him as such, before act 2 has ended he has nothing left to block; both of Bel-imperia's inappropriate lovers are dead. Now by attempting to ensure that his daughter marries a man she loathes, he is no longer blocking a marriage between lovers, but is attempting to establish a union that would surely block her happiness.

The younger members of the audience would probably not have sympathized with Castile, and the play seems to censure him as well. At the end of the play, as Andrea and Revenge hand out sentences to the dead, Don Cyprian, Duke of Castile, is the first to be banished to Hades:

Then, sweet Revenge, do this at my request:

Let me be judge and doom them to unrest.

Let loose poor Tityus from the vulture's gripe,

And let Don Cyprian supply his room. (4.5.29-32)

Thus, Andrea and Revenge condemn the Duke of Castile to take the place of Tityus, a permanent resident of Hades, whose liver is perpetually and eternally eaten by vultures (Bevington 71).

William Empson, in his 1950 article on Kyd's play, speculates that Castile is sent to Hell because he has planned and executed the murder of Andrea: "In any case, the Ghost of Andrea is then allowed by Revenge to arrange punishments for the villains; he starts the list cheerfully with the duke, and it is clear that Revenge thinks that this is proper. The reason must be [. . .] that the Duke had arranged the death of Andrea" (18). Although an intriguing and perhaps plausible solution to a vexing crux, Empson's thesis fails to convince since it is based essentially on one statement made by Lorenzo to Bel-imperia concerning the murder of Horatio: ". . . I knew no readier mean / To thrust Horatio forth my father's way" (3.10.58-59). Empson contends that "my father's way" refers to Castile's plotted murder of Andrea. However, Bevington glosses *forth* as "out of," and the line would then read: "To thrust Horatio out of my father's way." Bevington's explanation makes sense and is more convincing than Empson's murder-for-hire theory. Lorenzo's line represents a concession that he murdered Horatio in order to assist his father's efforts to join his daughter with Balthazar. Therefore, the reason for Castile's ultimate sentencing to Hades must be a condemnation of his behavior regarding his daughter. Kyd and the play clearly reject the idea of the arranged marriage.

#### THE KING

The King relies on Bel-imperia; she holds the key to peace between the warring countries of Spain and Portugal. He treats her much the same as Castile does, although

we can more easily forgive him; he is not her father, after all, and he does have the responsibility of a country to rule and keep safe. For practical purposes, a marriage between Bel-imperia and Balthazar would be a boon to him. The King seems at least aware that Bel-imperia has a mind of her own; he also seems somewhat cognizant that her wishes matter, but ultimately places more importance on Balthazar—and on the good of his country—than on his niece Bel-imperia:

Now, brother, you must 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. (2.3.41-46)

The King believes Bel-imperia to be a virgin, a condition which I have already established to be quite unlikely. I wonder, if “virgins must be ruled” by others, does that mean that non-virgins can think for themselves? It is amusing to speculate how Bel-imperia would have responded to the King were she present when he made this particular remark. Moreover, if he were aware of her sexual experience, he would certainly have been highly vexed since his plan for a state marriage would probably have fallen apart. As Leslie Richardson points out, “*The Accomplished Rake* (Mary Davys’s 1727 novel) demonstrates the brutal power of reputation through its reluctant capitulation to a representation of women as commodities” (21). Furthermore, if it became public knowledge that Bel-imperia has had a sexual relationship with Andrea, the marriage negotiations would presumably have been revoked. Of course, without explicit

knowledge of such a liaison, it would be natural to assume, as the King does, that Bel-imperia is a virgin. In this case, as Richardson remarks, reputation becomes more important than actuality: “Comparing a woman’s reputation to credit thus suggests that the popular conviction of her chastity is more significant than the chastity itself” (27).

HORATIO

Horatio plainly admires Bel-imperia. When she apparently falls in love with him, he seems unable to believe his luck. We must remember that he is not entirely innocent of cunning, however. Horatio knows that Balthazar is pining for Bel-imperia, with Lorenzo abetting his quest; he may be guilty of looking for trouble when he pursues her (1.4.104-06). Additionally, he could be exaggerating his role in battle when he tells Bel-imperia of Andrea’s death. The audience hears four differing accounts of Andrea’s demise, the first from the General and then subsequent narratives from Balthazar, Viluppo and, finally, Horatio (Kay 22). Significantly, Horatio’s version portrays Balthazar very negatively and himself very positively:

Then young don Balthazar, with ruthless rage,  
Taking advantage of his foe’s distress,  
Did finish what his halberdiers begun,  
And left not till Andrea’s life was done.  
Then, though too late, incensed with just remorse,  
I with my band set forth against the Prince,  
And brought him prisoner from his halberdiers. (1.4.23-29)

Previous versions of the story vary; the General, in his report to the King, gives Horatio credit for valor in battle:

Pricked forth Horatio, our knight marshal's son,  
To challenge forth that prince in single fight.  
Not long between these twain the fight endured,  
But straight the Prince was beaten from his horse  
And forced to yield him prisoner to his foe. (1.2.76-79)

Conversely, Lorenzo, true to form, attempts to denigrate Horatio's role and claim the prisoner Balthazar for his own:

LORENZO: I seized his weapon and enjoyed it first.

HORATIO: But first I forced him lay his weapons down. (1.2.155-56)

It is noteworthy that the professional soldier, the General, makes no mention of Lorenzo in his account of the battle. The Portuguese nobleman Villuppo provides still another version which completely excludes Horatio (1.3.59-71); however, since he later proves to be a liar, his entire account remains suspect, a fabrication. Andrea's opening speech mentions only Horatio's attention to his "funerals and obsequies" (1.1.26), with no reference to his friend's role in battle. Since Horatio's story is the fourth version we have heard, it is difficult to ascertain what actually happened, but we can reasonably presume that Horatio would want to appear valiant to Bel-imperia and may be exaggerating his valor in battle.

## BALTHAZAR

In many ways, Balthazar portrays the typical courtly lover, enamored with Bel-imperia upon his first sight of her, moping around, and claiming that he is “slain” by his love for her. Paloman and Arcite, the protagonists of Chaucer’s “Knight’s Tale,” exemplify the characteristics of the courtly lover, typified by “great emotional disturbances” and symptoms such as “pallor, trembling, loss of appetite, sleeplessness, sighing and weeping” (Harmon and Holman 122):

The freshness of her beauty strikes me dead,  
Hers that I see, roaming in yonder place!  
Unless I gain the mercy of her grace,  
Unless at least I see her day by day,  
I am but dead. There is no more to say. (33)

Balthazar conforms to this formula and seems exceptionally wimpy in his lengthy

Senecan rant:

But wherefore blot I Bel-imperia’s name?  
It is my fault, not she, that merits blame.  
My feature is not to content her sight;  
My words are rude and work her no delight. (2.1.11-14)

He drones on for twenty-eight lines, and his words “work . . . no delight” on Bel-imperia or the reader, and probably not on the early modern audience either (2.1.9-29); James Siemon agrees and declares, amusingly, that Balthazar is “manifestly an idiot” (556). It is not clear when Balthazar becomes smitten with Bel-imperia; the beginning of his infatuation occurs sometime in the interval between his capture and subsequent



domiciling in the home of Lorenzo, and the scene in which Horatio recounts the details of Andrea's death to Bel-imperia. As far as the audience knows, up to this moment (1.4.), she has never met the Portuguese prince. But midway through the scene, in soliloquy, Bel-imperia apprises her listeners of Balthazar's interest in her: "Don Balthazar, that slew my love, / Himself now pleads for favor at my hands" (1.4.69-70). Presumably, Balthazar has encountered Bel-imperia while staying in her family home with Lorenzo. There may be another element at work here, however, for Balthazar has struck up a friendship with his captor, and his admiration for Lorenzo's sister may be a way for him to cement the bonds of friendship. As Rubin suggests, the woman often provides the means for a homosocial relationship to endure (174). Whatever his intellectual capacity, his skill in the art of courtship, or his motivation, Balthazar is not such a bad person; he enacts the role of a follower, not a leader, and would not have killed Horatio without Lorenzo's inducement. Balthazar is, however, far too uninteresting for the fiery Bel-imperia, and I doubt that he could handle her were they ever to marry.

#### HIERONIMO

Hieronimo initially misjudges Bel-imperia, but later comes to recognize her fortitude and, I think, to have great admiration for her. After the murder of Horatio, Bel-imperia, imprisoned in the tower by her brother, writes a letter in blood to Hieronimo that apprises him of the killers' identities and urges him to take revenge on Lorenzo and Balthazar:

"For want of ink, receive this bloody writ.

Me hath my hapless brother hid from thee;

Revenge thyself on Balthazar and him,  
For these were they that murderèd thy son.  
Hieronimo, revenge Horatio's death,  
And better fare than Bel-imperia doth." (3.2.26-31)

When the letter first falls from the tower, however, Hieronimo is initially "not credulous" (3.2.39), probably because the missive comes from a woman. Of course, a letter that simply falls from the sky would naturally be suspect and since Hieronimo does not seem to notice that he happens to be standing right under the tower window, perhaps his doubt is understandable. However, he later credits Bel-imperia's epistle when a letter comes from the condemned Pedringano, a letter originally written to Lorenzo, which appears to confirm Bel-imperia's story:

"My lord, I writ as mine extremes required,  
That you would labor my delivery.  
If you neglect, my life is desperate,  
And in my death I shall reveal the troth.  
You know, my lord, I slew him for your sake,  
And was confederate with the Prince and you,  
Won by rewards and hopeful promises;  
I holp to murder Don Horatio, too." (3.7.32-39)

This letter should be suspect, deriving as it does from an unreliable source of information—a convicted and confessed killer and a man of low estate. Therefore, I must question whether Hieronimo accepts this second letter because since it confirms the first or simply because it comes from a man. The latter is probably true, and he apologizes to

Bel-imperia for not giving her credence: “Pardon, oh, pardon, Bel-imperia / My fear and care in not believing it” (4.1.38-39).

Hieronimo may underestimate Bel-imperia at first, but he soon learns of her determination and resolution. First she berates him for weeping rather than taking revenge:

Hieronimo, are these thy passions,  
Thy protestations, and thy deep laments  
That thou wert wont to weary men withal? (4.1.4-6)

Later she encourages him to seek retribution, as she vows to do:

But monstrous father, to forget so soon  
The death of those whom they with care and cost  
Have tendered so, thus careless should be lost!  
Myself, a stranger in respect of thee,  
So loved his life as still I wish their deaths,  
Nor shall his death be unrevenged by me. (4.1.2-23)

At the instigation of Bel-imperia, the two avengers, lover and father, join forces in the pursuit of revenge, and, significantly, Bel-imperia acts as catalyst to this final vengeance:

Hieronimo, I will consent, conceal,  
And aught that may effect for thine avail  
Join with thee to revenge Horatio’s death. (4.1.46-48)

## LORENZO

Bel-imperia's father treats her like an asset and an object, and her brother treats her even worse. Lorenzo is absolutely determined that Bel-imperia marry Balthazar and employs despicable and base tactics to bring about this union. One question remains, however: does he represent a Vice character, enjoying evil for its own sake, or is he a stage Machiavel, plotting to achieve his own ends? What motivates Lorenzo? Some critics believe that the answer lies in class distinctions. James Siemon acknowledges the lack of clarity concerning Lorenzo's motives: "Horatio is murdered by Don Lorenzo, who, for reasons never precisely defined, favors the vapid Prince Balthazar as suitor for his sister" (556). However, Siemon later concedes that "Lorenzo's choice in furthering Balthazar's suit and rejecting Horatio may appear arbitrary to the outsider, but they bespeak the mysteries of hierarchy and class solidarity" (556-57). Katharine Eisaman Maus, in her article "*The Spanish Tragedy*, or, The Machiavel's Revenge" maintains:

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 practise [sic] its ancestral virtues. To effect this preservation he actually disregards his individual interests, narrowly conceived. For if his sister remains unmarried, or marries a commoner, or irremediably disgraces herself, he may well inherit the Spanish throne; but one of the provisions of the nuptial treaty between Balthazar and Bel-imperia provides for the passage of the kingdom directly to their male issue. Therefore Lorenzo's father, trying to puzzle out Lorenzo's hostility to Hieronimo, supposes that it obscurely reflects Lorenzo's desire to

“intercept” Bel-imperia’s marriage—whereas in fact Lorenzo is its principal contriver. (92-93)

Maus raises an interesting point; a marriage between Bel-imperia and Balthazar will not benefit Lorenzo. Since the King has no children, we must presume that under normal circumstances, Lorenzo would be heir to the throne. However, it is very probable that the marriage between Bel-imperia and Balthazar would produce a child who would precede Lorenzo in the line of succession. On the other hand, Rubin’s theory that marriage provides the means for men to maintain their homosocial bonds could provide an explanation; Lorenzo seems to enjoy Balthazar’s company. I am not implying that there is evidence of any homoerotic bond between the two, but we can reasonably assume that Lorenzo would enjoy having the Portuguese prince for a brother-in-law. Kyd never explicitly states Lorenzo’s motivation, perhaps deliberately creating ambiguity, but class snobbery provides the most likely explanation. One thing remains sure: Lorenzo’s concern lies more with pleasing Balthazar than with supporting his sister. In addition to his self-serving motives, whatever they are, Lorenzo—associated with fraud, guile, and intrigue—does possess the other characteristics of the stage Machiavel (Scott 164-70).

I have already found a stratagem

To sound the bottom of this doubtful theme

.....

By force or fair means will I cast about

To find the truth of all this question out. (2.1.35-40)

Moreover, he performs the requisite secret murder, although not by the usual Machiavellian method of poison. Instead, he stabs when occasion serves:

HORATIO: What, will you murder me?

LORENZO: Ay, thus and thus! These are the fruits of love (2.4.54-55)

He further employs the tool villain Pedringano to aid him in his machinations, and he scorns the common people, reminding his sister that Andrea was of lower estate than she:

Why, then, remembering that old disgrace

Which you for Don Andrea had endured,

And now were likely longer to sustain,

By being found so meanly accompanied. (3.10.54-57)

One additional element not part of the traditional formula for the stage Machiavel is the attempt to conceal his or her evil deeds and the fear of being caught. Lorenzo murders Serberine for just this reason, to effect a cover-up. As Lorenzo directs Pedringano, “There take thy stand, and see thou strike him sure, / For die he [Serberine] must, if we do mean to live” (3.2.85-86). Of course, Pedringano will have to die as well, since both of these men are witnesses and accomplices to Horatio’s murder although, ironically, in his death, Pedringano will reveal Lorenzo and Balthazar as murderers. Further evidence for the attempted cover-up is apparent in the following conversation:

BALTHAZAR: How now, my lord, what makes you rise so soon?

LORENZO: Fear of preventing our mishaps too late. (3.4.1-2).

Conversely, although Lorenzo probably does enjoy evil for evil’s sake, as does the Vice figure, he lacks the comic elements of the emblematic character from the morality play. The Vice would be an enjoyable figure for the audience to watch whereas Lorenzo is not

likeable at all. He has no redeeming qualities, and the director who would try to transform him into a crowd pleaser would be making a serious mistake.

ISABELLA

For the purposes of this study, Isabella functions primarily as a contrast to Bel-imperia. Certainly her role is much smaller than that of Bel-imperia; she appears in only three scenes: in the second act when Horatio's body is discovered, in act 3 when she begins to go mad with grief, and in her poignant suicide scene in the fourth act.

Isabella's immediate reaction to her son's death is to shed copious tears:

Oh, gush out, tears, fountains and floods of tears!

Blow, sighs, and raise an everlasting storm!

For outrage fits our cursèd wretchedness. (2.5.43-45)

Conversely, Bel-imperia reacts to Horatio's murder with courage and self-sacrifice:

Oh, save his life and let me die for him!

Oh, save him, brother, save him, Balthazar!

I loved Horatio, but he loved not me. (2.4.56-57)

Later, in act 3, in a very brief scene containing only twenty-five lines of dialogue

between Isabella and her maid, the distraught mother begins to go mad with grief.

Isabella's mad scene is immediately followed by a brief solo appearance by Bel-imperia,

which serves to emphasize the contrast between the two women. Although imprisoned

by her brother, Bel-imperia continues to display her fortitude and courage. Dry-eyed, she

does not succumb to grief as we would expect an early modern woman to do, and as

Isabella does. Instead, she affirms a stoic patience:

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. (3.9.12-14).

Isabella contrasts most markedly with Bel-imperia in the manner of her death, for although they both commit suicide—as is traditional in the revenge tragedy—Isabella dies distraught and desperate, while Bel-imperia's death, like that of Cleopatra, becomes a triumphant assertion of her own agency.

Each of the main players—Castile, the King, Horatio, Balthazar, Hieronimo, Lorenzo, and Isabella—provides useful insight into the character of Bel-imperia. Her resistance to the arrangements of her father and her king demonstrate her independent nature; her assignation with Horatio displays her sexual experience and appetite. As Bel-imperia encourages Hieronimo to seek revenge for his murdered son, she exhibits her fierce resolution and unwillingness to forego revenge, while her repudiation of her brother's machinations demonstrates her courage and persistence. Finally, Isabella, representative of a more typical early modern woman, serves as a contrast to the exceptional Bel-imperia.



## Chapter Five

### Conclusion

*The Spanish Tragedy's* theme of revenge stems from the indomitable Bel-imperia. She suffers the loss of two lovers and vows to take revenge; she pressures Hieronimo to do the same. Moreover, Bel-imperia emerges as the first of the still living Spanish characters to contemplate revenge, initially for the loss of her lover Andrea and later for the murder of Horatio.

Furthermore, the alliance between Spain and Portugal cannot take place without Bel-imperia becoming Balthazar's bride. By placing Castile in Hades at the end, the play seems to interrogate the accepted practice of parents arranging marriages for children of the aristocracy. The disparity between the two types of marriage characterized a topical discourse and controversy in the early modern period; the consensual, companionate marriage represented the emerging ideal, and literature from the Renaissance provides solid evidence of its popularity. Moreover, families often subjected women who rebelled against patriarchal authority to harsh treatment, even though, ostensibly, in order for the marriage to take place, the bride must necessarily give her consent.

The other characters in Kyd's play, when examined in light of their reactions to and relations with Bel-imperia, exhibit varying degrees of likeability and interest. Castile and Lorenzo depict the most unsympathetic characters in the drama, especially as they relate to Bel-imperia, while Isabella, the weak woman, provides a striking contrast to the

self-possessed Bel-imperia. Hieronimo, although often interpreted as the main character in the play, would not be even contemplating revenge had Bel-imperia not shaken him out of his stupor.

The independent minded Bel-imperia resembles Queen Elizabeth I; she refuses to marry and yet enjoys the company of lower-born lovers. Intelligent and resolute, she eschews being the bartered bride, preferring to die rather than marry Balthazar, but not before killing him. In *Bel-imperia*, Thomas Kyd creates a remarkable and indomitable female character; she emerges as the center of the play, the nexus of all the action. If Balthazar had not become enamored of Bel-imperia, she would not have pursued Horatio for spite. Hieronimo, generally seen as the central character of the play, would have had nothing to avenge without the love affair between Bel-imperia and Horatio and its ensuing murder. Because Bel-imperia represents such a modern woman—intelligent, resolute, and passionate—her actions dictate almost all of the events in the drama. Had she not resisted Balthazar's advances, the state marriage would have taken place in short order; Spain and Portugal would have been aligned in peace, and Thomas Kyd would have sent his audience home very early and greatly disappointed.

## Afterword

*The Spanish Tragedy* was hugely successful in its time. With this play, Thomas Kyd adapted Seneca to pioneer a new form in Elizabethan England, the revenge tragedy. Bevington opines that “Kyd’s genius is in bringing to rough-and-tumble life on the popular stage the major elements of the Senecan closet drama. Excitement, intrigue, betrayal, and above all violence pervade *The Spanish Tragedy*” (3). Moreover, in the first scene, Kyd combines elements of Classical drama as well as the medieval mystery and morality plays, for the emblematic character Revenge is clearly a legacy from the morality play. Revenge references both the mystery play and the Classical use of the chorus in the closing lines to act 1, scene 1: “Here sit we down to see the mystery, / And serve for chorus in this tragedy” (90-91).

Thomas Kyd’s play enjoyed enormous financial success and popular approval. Jasper Ridley points out:

Although the comedies of Ben Jonson and Shakespeare were popular, the dramatic tragedies were appreciated even more. By far the most successful was *The Spanish Tragedy*. The great feature about all of them was the violence and cruelty in the stories, though unlike more modern examples of violence in the theatre they were dignified by the magnificent verse in which they were written. (266)

Moreover, the success of *The Spanish Tragedy* was long-lasting; the play was written around 1585-9 (Bevington 3), and it “turned up trumps on 7 January 1597 in a version so

new it even required relicensing. It was one of the few plays to be a £3 hit, so not surprisingly, it was repeated four times that month” (Eccles 47). Edward Alleyn, the famous Renaissance actor, made the part of Hieronimo so famous “that later, in Henslowe’s Diary <sup>1</sup>, the play is always referred to by its hero’s name, ‘Jeronymo’” (Eccles 25).

Although analyzing the play as a work of literature is interesting and valuable, we must remember that Kyd wrote his tragedy to be performed on the stage. While studying this or any play, we should remember its original intention, to entertain, and should attempt to picture its being performed. Pascale Aebischer agrees: “My premise is that Shakespeare’s plays are works that live as much in their written/printed as in their performative re-productions and that they are therefore most fruitfully examined in both forms side by side” (13). Thus imagining what a modern interpretation of the play would or could be like is gratifying, especially in such capable hands as those of renowned director Peter Brook, who declares:

I can take any empty space and call it a bare stage. A man walks across this empty space whilst someone else is watching him, and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged. (Brook qtd in Aebischer 4)

While I agree with Brook and these remarks certainly reflect his status as a master director, set design remains another important element of contemporary theater. As Stephen Unwin observes, “The theatre is, of necessity, a ‘visual experience’: audiences watch with their eyes as much as they listen with their ears. The visual element is as old

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<sup>1</sup> Philip Henslowe, owner of the Rose Theater (Eccles 1)

as the theatre itself” (80). Although elaborate set design is popular in today’s theater, in the early modern period plays “were performed without any sets at all, in an emblematic theatre, with a painted heaven above, and a metaphorical hell below” (Unwin 36). For this particular play, a simple set design that will serve for all the scenes while providing an interesting visual backdrop would be best. A recent production of *The Comedy of Errors* in Stratford, England employed just such a set; it featured a group of randomly placed sails, somewhat tattered, with the lighting reflecting off the white fabric beautifully, and the nautical ambience serving to emphasize the idea that the characters were lost, still victims of a shipwreck.

A film production of Kyd’s play would be marvelous and probably quite successful since revenge tragedies are featured at the cinema all the time. Although such speculation may seem to take this discussion from the domain of the scholarly to the realm of “pop” culture, it deserves mentioning that *The Spanish Tragedy* represented an important part of the popular culture of sixteenth-century England, when the playhouses enjoyed the benefits of mainstream popularity, a position occupied by the cinema today. Using Bowers’ formula for the revenge tragedy—which includes revenge as the main plot line, as well as violence, Machiavels, ghosts, and *memento mori*—one could easily devise a list of modern movies that conform to the genre; *A Fistful of Dollars*, *Death Wish*, *Kill Bill*, and *Desperado* are just a few that come to mind. In a film version of *The Spanish Tragedy*, casting would be of crucial importance. To start, I would cast the insipid Balthazar with an actor who could portray the uninteresting Portuguese prince not as a figure of disgust, but as someone so boring that a woman like Bel-imperia would never be interested in him. He should be reasonably attractive, or at least not unattractive, to

emphasize that she is repulsed by qualities other than physical ones and captivated by traits other than good looks. The insipid Keanu Reeves comes to mind, but I would prefer to find someone with better acting abilities. By contrast, the roles of both Andrea and Horatio should be enacted by men who are both visually and psychologically interesting. Each would need to have the *je ne sais quoi*, that certain something, which makes him sexually enticing. Joseph Fiennes would make a wonderful Andrea, and his acting abilities are manifest from his portrayal of Bassanio in the 2004 version of *The Merchant of Venice*, as well as his roles in *Shakespeare in Love* and *Elizabeth*. Lorenzo, on the other hand, should be played as the Machiavel, not as the gleeful villain; therefore the actor should be capable of portraying malice, cunning, and malignancy, and Edward Norton would be perfect for this role.

Although I have stressed the importance of Bel-imperia in this thesis, the role of Hieronimo is still a highly significant one that needs a powerful presence to portray the poignancy of a father's grief. For this role, I choose Tom Wilkinson, a talented man, more "actor" than "movie star." His fine acting abilities are on display in such films as *Sense and Sensibility*, *Wilde*, and *Shakespeare in Love*. However, it is his performance as the father mourning his murdered son in the 2001 film *In the Bedroom* that makes him my standout choice to play Hieronimo.

To play Bel-imperia, an actress needs to be reasonably attractive; she has, after all, many men vying earnestly for her love. In addition, she needs to have the depth of feeling necessary to transcend the role of the ingénue and portray the strength and resolution embodied by Bel-imperia. For this role I opt for Kate Winslet, whose natural beauty and superior acting in *Quills*, *Sense and Sensibility*, and *Holy Smoke* make her an

easy choice. The casting of the ideal actor in the role of Bel-imperia would be crucial to the success of the film since this unconquerable woman remains the cynosure of the tragedy, around whom all the action of the play revolves. Moreover, she is a tremendous creation—a thoroughly modern woman in the early modern period.

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