
Shakespeare's Allusion to *The Spanish Tragedy* in *The Merchant of Venice* (2.2)

Frank Ardolino

As critics have pointed out, the “curiously layered scene” in which Launcelot Gobbo decides to serve a Christian rather than a Jewish master mirrors the major religious and biblical themes of the play (Anderson, 120).^[1] Moreover, as I will demonstrate, Shakespeare's use of lines from *The Spanish Tragedy* in the byplay between Launcelot and his father indicates that he is also making a critical statement about Kyd's use of the father-son relationship in the revenge play. Elizabethan authors did not write interpretative criticism in the way we have become accustomed to, but they sometimes provide it in a practical manner by imitating the methods of their contemporaries.^[2] Through his use of Kyd's methodology in this small scene, Shakespeare appears as both playwright and critic and demonstrates how the two functions serve each other.

In *The Merchant of Venice*, Shakespeare returns to *The Spanish Tragedy* and has old Gobbo and his son Launcelot play out a comic version of the celebrated scene of Hieronimo discovering his dead son hanging in the garden.^[3] The discovery by Hieronimo of his murdered son occurs at night when he hears the screams from the bower, which he initially thinks are cries of help from a woman. But he discovers the “murderous spectacle . . . [of] / A man hang'd up.”^[4] Then he recognizes his son's garments and realizes it is Horatio, who “whilom was my son.” When Isabella joins him to lament Horatio's death, she declares:

The heavens are just, murder cannot be hid,
Time is the author both of truth and right,
And time will bring this treachery to light. (57-59)

Isabella's declaration of the certainty of justice establishes the topos of “*Veritas filia temporis*,” which informs the play.^[5] In *The Merchant of Venice*, Launcelot recognizes his blind father approaching, but tells him that his son has died.^[6] When old

Gobbo laments his death, Launcelot asks him, “Do you know me, father?”^[7] Gobbo repeats that he is blind and does not know him. Then Launcelot reveals that he is his son, asks for his blessing, and concludes with his echoing of Isabella’s declaration in *The Spanish Tragedy*: “[T]ruth will come to light: murder cannot be hid long; a man’s son may, but in the end truth will out” (78-80). In the context of his relationship with his father, Launcelot is saying that he has revealed his identity as the old man’s son in the course of time, that is, their conversation. But his father continues to deny that the man standing in front of him is his son, until Launcelot mentions his mother’s name and old Gobbo touches his hair, which he mistakes for a beard, leading him to declare “Lord, how art thou chang’d!” (99). The scene has led from Launcelot’s announcement of his death, his declaration of his existence, his father’s denial of his son, and their reconciliation. Launcelot’s parody of Isabella’s lines adds the point that a man’s son may be hid or disappear, but in the end he will be discovered. On the most immediate level, Launcelot is joking about his momentary hiding of his identity from his father, but on a deeper level, Shakespeare is alluding to the relationship of Horatio’s murder to the topos of “Truth, the daughter of Time.”

As Horatio’s body is removed from the bower by his parents in a dirge-like ceremony, Hieronimo promises that he will not “entomb” him (2.5.54) until vengeance is exacted. No further mention is made of the disposition of the body until the conclusion of the revenge playlet. In the physical sense, Horatio disappears from the play, but a number of speeches by Hieronimo and Isabella describe his continuing presence as a ghost demanding revenge. Also, there is some indication that Horatio’s murder is not known by the Spanish King, who is disturbed by Hieronimo’s growing agitation and asks Lorenzo for an explanation. After Lorenzo responds that Hieronimo demands the ransom promised to Horatio, the King responds kindly and in so doing reveals that does not know Horatio is dead:

This is the love that fathers bear their sons:
 But . . . give to him this gold,
 The prince’s ransom: let him have his due,
 For what he hath Horatio shall not want. (3.12.91-94)

Similarly, Lorenzo's response to his father's questions about Hieronimo's hatred of Lorenzo indicates that Castile, like the King, is unaware of Horatio's murder.

But what is a silly man, distract in mind,
To think upon the murder of his son?
Alas, how easy is it for him to err! (3.14.87-89)

Finally, just as we have a quasi-resurrectional motif in the Gobbo scene when the father thinks his son has died but discovers he is alive, in *The Spanish Tragedy* Hieronimo "resurrects" his dead son at the end of the revenge playlet. Hieronimo "Shows his dead son" (SD 88), recounts the night he discovered him in the bower, and explains the reason for his murder of Lorenzo and Balthazar.^[8] The manner in which Horatio was murdered, his subsequent disappearance, and his return as the bloody spectacle from whose "wounds came breath that gave me [Hieronimo] life" (4.4.96) have led Barber (151-53) and Sofer (142) to compare Horatio to a Christ figure hanged on a tree in the arbor, which becomes a Calvary or Golgotha. Sofer also maintains that in the revenge playlet ". . . Hieronimo . . . [b]randishing the bloody handkerchief, travesties the ritual gesture of visual display common to the Mass and the religious drama of the *sudarium* . . ." (Sofer, 145). Hieronimo, whose name in Greek means "sacred name," resurrects Horatio, the sacrificial Christ-figure, as the culmination of the scheme of truth coming to light in the course of time.

The topos of "Truth, the daughter of Time" involves the contrast between Fortune and fate. To the onstage characters the events of the play appear to be directed by chance or Fortune. But the otherworldly audience of Andrea and Revenge and the theater audience view the events under *sub specie aeternitatis*. Revenge establishes this perspective at the conclusion of the induction when he declares that in the earthly play Andrea will see Balthazar "Depriv'd of life by Bel-imperia" (1.1.89). This is the prophecy the play will fulfill through the process of Truth coming to light, which is illustrated by a succession of seemingly fortuitous events, including the last-minute rescue of the innocent Alexandro at the Portuguese court; the letter from the imprisoned Bel-imperia implicating Balthazar and Lorenzo, which appears to drop from heaven; and, finally, the discovery of Pedringano's posthumous letter, which confirms Bel-imperia's letter. All of these incidents

create the sense of a destined movement toward the fulfillment of Revenge's prophecy in the revenge playlet.⁹¹

In *The Merchant of Venice* (2.2) Shakespeare uses Gobbo's reference to the "*Veritas filia temporis*" topos as a comic imitation of and comment on Kyd's methodology. He thus provides contemporary awareness of how Kyd raised Hieronimo's act of revenge to a destined level through the death, disappearance, and resurrection of Horatio.

Notes

1. In addition to Anderson, the following critics have analyzed the religious themes and images in *The Merchant of Venice*: Cunningham and Slimp, Fortin, Grant, Lewalski, Marx, and Rockas.
2. Bireck has stated that "theatrical history can tell us a good deal about the way a society perceived a play. . . . Imitation is a form of criticism" (57).
3. One of the major reasons for the popularity of *The Spanish Tragedy* was the emotional impact of the scenes showing Hieronimo's grief for his dead son. To capitalize on this appeal, the 1602 edition of *The Spanish Tragedy* contains five additional passages which expand the scope of Hieronimo's mourning for Horatio. During the time he was writing *The Merchant of Venice*, which is dated 1601, Shakespeare could have been familiar with the "additions," one of which was referred to by Marston in *Anthony and Mellida* (1599). Stevenson has suggested for stylistic reasons that Shakespeare may have been their author.
4. 2.5.9-10. All citations to *The Spanish Tragedy* will be from Edwards' edition and henceforth will be noted in the text. For an analysis of the influence of *The Spanish Tragedy* on *The Taming of the Shrew*, see my forthcoming "The Induction of Sly: The Influence of *The Spanish Tragedy* on the Two *Shrews*," *Explorations in Renaissance Culture*, 31.2 (2005): 165-87.

5. For analysis of the role of this topos in the play, see my “*Veritas Filia Temporis*” and Broude. A popular ballad entitled *The Spanish Tragedy*, which was published at least seven times between 1599 and 1638, recounts the plot of the play and ends with the “*Veritas filia Temporis*” topos: “For murder God will bring to light, / Though long it be hid from man’s sight” (Quoted in Boas, 347).

6. For an analysis of the encounter between Launcelot and his father as a comic incarnation, see my article “The Incarnation of Launcelot Gobbo.”

7. 2.2.69. All quotations of Shakespeare in this article follow *The Riverside Shakespeare*.

8. Leggatt observes that “not only has Horatio come back but the actual scene of his murder has come back with him” (220).

9. Ultimately, as I have argued in *Apocalypse and Armada* (*passim*), Kyd’s use of the topos has a political meaning, representing the English Protestant triumph over Catholic Spain. When Hieronimo fulfills his prophecy that “Now shall I see the fall of Babylon” (4.1.195), he has, as Hill has argued, accomplished the translation of power from Babylon/Spain to England (163).

Works Cited

Anderson, Douglas. “The Old Testament Presence in *The Merchant of Venice*.” *English Literary History* 52 (1985): 119-32.

Ardolino, Frank. *Apocalypse and Armada in Kyd’s Spanish Tragedy*. Kirksville, Missouri: Sixteenth Century Essays & Studies 29, 1995.

_____. “Lord, how art thou chang’d!: The Incarnation of Launcelot Gobbo in *The Merchant of Venice* (2.2).” *Shakespeare Newsletter* 55.2 (Summer 2005): 55-56.

_____. “*Veritas Filia Temporis*: Time, Perspective, and Justice in *The Spanish Tragedy*.” *Studies in Iconography* 3 (1977): 57-69.

Barber, C. L. *Creating Elizabethan Tragedy: The Theater of Marlowe and Kyd*. Ed. Richard Wheeler. Chicago: Chicago UP, 1988.

Bireck, Peter. "Tamburlaine's Weak Sons: Imitation as Interpretation Before 1593." *Renaissance Drama* 13 (1982): 55-82.

Boas, F. S., ed. *The Spanish Tragedy. The Works of Thomas Kyd*. 1901; rpt. Oxford: Clarendon, 1954.

Broude, Ronald. "Time, Truth, and Right in *The Spanish Tragedy*." *Studies in Philology* 68 (1971): 130-45.

Cunningham, John and Stephen Slimp, "The Less into the Greater: Emblem, Analogue, and Deification in *The Merchant of Venice*." *The Merchant of Venice: New Critical Essays*. Ed. John Mahon and Ellen Mahon. New York: Routledge, 2002. 225-82.

Fortin, Rene. "Launcelot and the Uses of Allegory in *The Merchant of Venice*." *Studies in English Literature* 14 (1974): 259-70.

Grant, Patrick. "The Bible and *The Merchant of Venice*: Hermeneutics, Ideology, and Displaced Persons." *English Studies in Canada* 16 (1990): 247-62.

Hill, Eugene. "Senecan and Vergilian Perspectives in *The Spanish Tragedy*." *English Literary Renaissance* 15 (1985): 143-65.

Kyd, Thomas. *The Spanish Tragedy*. Ed. Philip Edwards. London: Methuen, 1959.

Leggatt, Alexander. "'A Membrane Has Broken': Returning from the Dead in *The Spanish Tragedy*." *Renaissance Go-Betweens: Cultural Exchange in Early Modern Europe*. Ed. Andreas Höfele and Werner von Koppenfels. N.Y. Walter de Gruyter, 2005. 214-30.

Lewalski, Barbara. "Biblical Allusion and Allegory in *The Merchant of Venice*." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 13 (1962): 327-43.

Marx, Stephen. *Shakespeare and the Bible*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000. 103-24.

The Riverside Shakespeare. Ed. G. Blakemore Evans, 2d ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997.

Rockas, Leo. "A Dish of Doves': *The Merchant of Venice*." *English Literary History* 40 (1973): 339-51.

Sofer, Andrew. "Absorbing Interests: Kyd's Bloody Handkerchief as Palimpsest." *Comparative Drama* 34.2 (2000): 127-53.

Stevenson, Warren. "Shakespeare's Hand in *The Spanish Tragedy* 1602." *Studies in English Literature* 8 (1968): 307-21.