
Translating Contexts: The Purpose of Hieronimo's
Soliman and Perseda Playlet in *The Spanish Tragedy*

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Soliman and Perseda was entered in the Stationers' Register on November 20, 1592. Like *The Spanish Tragedy*, it was an anonymous and undated play, whose first edition exists in a unique copy assumed to be published in 1592. Further, it was registered one month after Abel Jeffes entered his edition of *The Spanish Tragedy* by Edward White, who was involved in a legal battle with Jeffes over *Arden of Faversham* and *The Spanish Tragedy*. Finally, like *The Spanish Tragedy*, the original edition was followed by a subsequent edition which claimed to be "newly corrected and amended" but provided only two important emendations accompanied by a "haphazard" correction of spelling and punctuation errors (Murray viii). Its direct bibliographic, thematic, and stylistic similarities to Hieronimo's revenge playlet have given rise to the inevitable and probably warranted conclusion that the author of *The Spanish Tragedy* also wrote *Soliman and Perseda* (Erne 161).

The chronological relationship between the anonymous play *Soliman and Perseda* and the *Soliman and Perseda* play-within-the-play in *The Spanish Tragedy* is difficult to ascertain. Did Kyd expand the playlet into the play after he wrote *The Spanish Tragedy*, as Lukas Erne has maintained (160)? Or did Kyd write the play first and then reduce and adapt it for the play-within-the-play? Hieronimo explains that he wrote the playlet when he was a student and is adapting it now at the opportune time for revenge. Is this Kyd, in the guise of an author analogue, saying that he has condensed *Soliman and Perseda* to create Hieronimo's revenge playlet? Although it is impossible to state with certainty who is the author or what is the order of composition for these works, it is important to analyze the reasons for Kyd's inclusion of the material in *The Spanish Tragedy*. Hieronimo declares that the playlet is to be enacted in sundry tongues, a polyglot translation into Italian, French, Greek, and Latin, which are retranslated into English before its performance. Analogously, the various levels of *translatio*

illustrated by Hieronimo's condensed version of *Soliman and Perseda* exemplify Kyd's adaptation of multiple contexts to suit his literary and political purposes in *The Spanish Tragedy*.

The original English version of the story of Soliman and Perseda appeared as the first novella in Henry Wotton's euphuistic collection entitled *A Courtlie controversie of Cupids Cautels* (1578), whose source was Jacques Yver's *Le Printemps d'Yver, contenant cinq histories discoursues per cinq journees en noble companie au chateau du Printemps* (1572). Although Erne has analyzed how Kyd adapted Wotton's novella in the full-length *Soliman and Perseda*, he as well as other critics have not treated the reasons why Kyd included the material in *The Spanish Tragedy*.^[1] Hieronimo's revenge play-within-the-play represents not only an adaptation of the Soliman and Perseda story, but also of the larger framing play, albeit with some significant differences, and of the contemporary history of Turkish/Christian and Spanish/English conflict. Through this series of analogous adaptations or translation—as epitomized by the translation of the sundry languages into English—Kyd delineates his subtextual politico-religious theme of the translation of power from Spain to England.

Recent scholars, building on the work of S. F. Johnson and Ronald Broude, have delineated the anti-Spanish themes of *The Spanish Tragedy*. Johnson noted the identification of Spain with Babylon, which is established in Hieronimo's declaration, directly before the performance of the revenge playlet, "Now shall I see the fall of Babylon / Wrought by the heavens in this confusion."^[2] Relating Hieronimo's prediction with the confusion of the sundry tongues of the playlet, Johnson concluded that Kyd uses the analogy of Babylon/Babel (babble) to depict the fall of Babylon/Spain engineered by Hieronimo, the Spanish justice-figure who paradoxically represents for Elizabethan audiences the Protestant revenger (24-25). Similarly, in a series of significant articles, Broude placed *The Spanish Tragedy* as a revenge tragedy within the Anglo/Iberian conflict of the late sixteenth century. He concluded that Kyd's depiction of a merciless revenge exacted upon Babylon/Spain fits the age in which Sir Francis Drake and his ship the *Revenge* helped to defeat the Spanish Armada in 1588 ("*Vindicta*" 502).

Like Broude, Eugene Hill argued that *The Spanish Tragedy* involves the transfer of empire from Spain to England. This triumph is accomplished in Hieronimo's playlet where the sundry languages emblematic of Babylonian confusion are replaced by the English vernacular, an act of translation which signals the passage of power from Catholic Spain to Protestant England in the last decade of the sixteenth century (159-60, 163-64). Finally, in *Apocalypse and Armada in Kyd's Spanish Tragedy*, I maintained that the play contains a subtext which concerns the defeat of Spain in 1588. Thus, scholars have established that in *The Spanish Tragedy* Kyd has created a popular revenge tragedy which at the same time belongs to the anti-Catholic tradition and the Spanish black legend (cf. Justice).

The revenge playlet is a close parallel to the "reality" we have seen taking place in Spain. Bel-imperia and Horatio are equivalent to the doomed lovers Perseda and Erasto; Balthazar and Lorenzo serve as analogues to Soliman and his evil advisor, the Bashaw, who eliminate the blocking lover Erasto/Horatio, so that Soliman/Balthazar can marry Perseda/Bel-imperia. In reviving his student tragedy, Hieronimo sees it as the means of effecting vengeance within a dramatic context that is analogous to the events that led to his son's death.

A dual perspective is set up by the multiple analogies between the playlet and the larger playworld, which represents the overriding reality. Balthazar and Lorenzo are unaware of the parallels between the playlet and their reality, but Hieronimo and Bel-imperia—as well as the theater audience—know these relationships and are determined to turn the playlet into reality by actually killing Horatio's murderers. Hence Hieronimo casts characters in roles that will enable him to accomplish this revenge, but, at the same time, some of these characters are by necessity put into roles different from the ones they enact in the framing play.

The differences between the roles of Lorenzo and Hieronimo in the playlet and the framing play further illustrate the process of adaptation that Hieronimo as playwright has accomplished. Hieronimo is not the evil advisor that he is in the playlet; he has adopted the role of the Bashaw to effect his vengeance. This discrepancy in Hieronimo's roles is indicative of another level of meaning concerning his identity. In the larger play or reality, he is

not who he appears to be, the Spanish Lord Marshall; rather, he is the symbolic representative of England who effects the fall of Babylon/Spain in the marriage playlet (Ardolino, *Apocalypse* 159-61).

Similarly, Lorenzo has a role different from his Machiavellian one in the framing play. He should have played the Bashaw to match his role as Balthazar's evil counsellor. However, in the playlet he appears as the innocent victim Erasto, who should have been played by Horatio had he not been killed by Balthazar and Lorenzo. In effect, Hieronimo becomes Lorenzo in the playlet, and he makes Lorenzo play the role of the man he murdered so that Hieronimo can kill him. Balthazar plays Soliman, the lustful Sultan of Turkey, who wants Erasto murdered as a rival for Perseda's love. This role fits Balthazar's actions in the framing play because he helps to murder Horatio to eliminate him as a rival lover. However, Balthazar also parallels Erasto in that he is a foreigner at the court of Spain, who was captured in battle, befriended by his enemy, and then killed on his wedding day.

The dual perspective on the roles of these characters in the framing play and the playlet is indicated by the manner in which the text prints their "real" names as they act in the playlet. We are thus reminded that each of the characters exists in a larger world that is analogous to the smaller play. In addition, the various national identities of the characters and the foreign languages they are assigned for the playlet are another indication of the multiple adaptations which Kyd and his author-figure employ to create their respective dramas. Lorenzo, the Spanish lord, plays a Rhodian who speaks Latin in the playlet. Bel-imperia, his sister, appears as an Italian dame, based on a Rhodian heroine, who speaks French. Her suitor Balthazar, a Portuguese prince imprisoned at the Spanish court, plays a Turkish ruler who speaks Italian. Finally, Hieronimo, the Spanish Lord Marshall, plays the Turkish Bashaw who speaks Greek. The languages and identities adopted are, as I have argued, related to the Danielic context and the Babel-like confusion of tongues, but they are also dramatic expressions of the various adaptations which Kyd and Hieronimo make ("Daniel" *passim*). The culminating adaptation, of course, is the translation of all of these languages into "our vulgar tongue" (4.4.75), English, by Hieronimo, which represents the *translatio imperii* to English power.^[3]

Kyd's political subtext is epitomized in the playlet, which represents on one level his symbolic recapitulation of Turkish/Christian warfare in the Mediterranean, beginning with the Turkish conquest of Rhodes in 1522. Primarily, Kyd uses the playlet as the means of depicting the Protestant equation of Catholic Spain and the Turks as the composite apocalyptic threat to Protestant England under Elizabeth.

Founded in the late eleventh century during the First Crusade as an order of Christian soldiers, the Hospital of St. John of Jerusalem, who were also known as the Knights of Rhodes and Malta, acquired Rhodes in the early fourteenth century following the fall of Acre in 1291, the last mainland Crusader enclave in the Near East. In securing control of Rhodes, they created "an island order state," a base from which to continue their military mission against the Muslims (Wolfe 206). At the end of the fifteenth century, the Turks attempted to conquer Rhodes, but they were defeated in 1480 and 1485. Pierre d'Aubusson, the hero of these victories, was praised as a brave and virtuous Knight of Rhodes:

[H]e understood that the *Knights of Rhodes* were to joyn together in Valour and Piety: . . . [T]hat for them to live according to . . . their calling, there was a necessity . . . to follow the maxims of the Gospel . . . [and] . . . for that reason they wore their Cross upon their Habit and . . . their Imprese was, *For the Faith*. (Bouhours A2v)

In 1522, Suleiman the Magnificent (1494-1566) besieged Rhodes for six months, finally conquering the island with the aid of Christian turncoats. The Knights left Rhodes rather than submit to the tyranny of the Turks:

"Thus did the Order of St. *John* loose *Rhodes*, after they had held and maintain'd it with so much constancy, so much Expense of treasure, and loss of blood, against the whole power of the Barbarous Mahometans, for the space of two hundred and thirty years" (Bouhours 506).

In the decades following the conquest of Rhodes, the Turks continued their attacks against Christian territories in the Mediterranean. Suleiman suffered a setback against Malta in 1565, and in 1571 under Suleiman's son Selim II, the Ottoman

empire experienced its greatest defeat at Lepanto against combined Christian forces commanded by Don John. Even England, Spain's greatest enemy, celebrated Don John's victory as a decisive blow against the Turks, who hitherto had almost been invincible:

“For her [Elizabeth], Lepanto was not so much a victory for Spain or the Pope as a triumph for all Christendom—a guarantee that the values upon which Western Europe had been established would survive. To show . . . what she thought, the Church of England . . . was ordered to hold services of Thanksgiving” (Beeching 225).

In medieval epics and romances, the Knights of Rhodes, along with the Knights Templar and Teutonic Knights, were celebrated as crusaders waging war against the Turks in the Near East and Spain. The romances containing these characters were based on real heroes and battles, being more like “*romans à clef*” rather than fictionalized histories . . . [which] actually spoke more directly to the dynastic policies of major princely families in France and Germany . . .” (Wolfe 206). In the sixteenth century as the Turkish threat proliferated, novellas and histories which emphasized their rulers' cruelty and lust for conquest were written and translated. In *The Palace of Pleasure* (1566-67) the novellas William Painter translated from Italian into English included *A Cruelle Facte of Soltan Solyman*, which tells how Sultan Soliman, twelfth emperor of the Turks, ordered the execution of his eldest son Mustapha in 1553 (Bonavita 1023). Francesco Guicciardini in *The History of Italy* (1537-40) declares that Suleiman was an enemy of the faith who, “for the greater contempt of the Christian religion, made his entrance into the city on the birthday of the Son of God . . . had all the churches of Rhodes converted into mosques of the Mohammedan religion, and according to their custom all Christian rites exterminated” (qtd. in Bisaha 176). The translation of such foreign texts showing the reputed cruelty of Turkish society was viewed as a patriotic act (Bonavita 1027).

The Reformation added the element of the threat from within to the depiction of Christianity imperiled by the Turkish empire. Both reformers and Catholics accused each other of being the insidious heretics threatening true religion. Benedict Robinson has traced the history of such tropes starting with *Gerusalemme Liberata* in which Tasso turns the ideology of crusade against the Reformation. The contemporary history underlying this is signaled

by the role of Solyman, namesake of the sixteenth-century Suleiman who fought the Habsburgs in Eastern Europe and the Mediterranean . . . Tasso's use of crusade history encodes a Counter-Reformation polemic that blames the Protestants for the continued power of the Turks (Robinson 42).

On the other hand, in *The Faerie Queene* Spenser appropriates romance for a Protestant ethos and equates Islam with Catholicism by joining crusade narratives with Protestant apocalyptic, which emphasized both of these religions as false belief systems (Robinson 37, 40). Prince Arthur represents divine grace who exacts "divinely inspired violence" against the Souldan, a political and religious enemy who refers to Suleiman and also to Philip II: "Islam and Catholicism are collapsed in the figure of the Souldan, so that Spenser can appropriate the battle of Christian against infidel for a Protestant vision of the struggle of true and false belief" (Robinson 44). Through this conflation, Spenser suggests that the English war against Spain was a kind of crusade against the infidel.

Similarly, Protestant apologists declared that Catholicism was as great a threat to true Christianity as the Turks. Shelton à Geveren aligned the Pope and the Turk as the twin scourges whose conquests will be stopped by Christ in due time:

[F]rom the *Venetians*, he the [Turk] hath taken Cyprus . . . [H]e . . . threatneth utter destruction to all the world. And therefore we doe plainly perceiue, the state of these times . . . to answere unto the prophesie of *Daniel* . . . But the Lord God . . . will bring to naught these endeavors of Turke and Pope, and will cast that beast . . . into the fornace which burneth. . . (Geveren 16v)

Lawrence Deios adds Spain to these twin beasts to create a triumvirate of evil:

"To the Turke, that is . . . *Magog* . . . , the East is allotted; to *Gog*, that is, the Pope, and *Tubal* . . . , which . . . is Spaine, . . . the West part of the empire, which hath hitherto returned the name of *Christian* religion, is assigned" (Deios 14).

In the pamphlet *A Declaration of the True Causes of the Great Troubles, Presupposed to be Intended against the realme of England* (Cologne, 1592), the anonymous author says that Philip II was

ridiculed in satirical plays as being no better than the Turk: “[T]o make him [Philip] odious unto the people, certaine players were permitted to scof and jest at him, upon their comon stages. And the like was in contempt of his religion . . . to make it no better then Turkische . . .” (*True Causes* 21). Thus, Spain under Philip II was depicted as the antichristian partner of the Pope and the Turks in the effort to destroy true Christianity.

In the *Soliman and Perseda* playlet Kyd draws upon these literary, historical, and reform traditions to convey the theme that Hieronimo’s play combines reality and drama to represent in small the Mediterranean wars between Turkey and Christian Europe. Soliman has conquered Rhodes in the playlet as did Suleiman I in 1522, but Kyd purposely diverges from historical fact when he has Soliman murdered shortly after the conquest of Rhodes, whereas Suleiman I died naturally in 1566. Kyd is creating a quasi-allegorical version of history in which Balthazar/Soliman’s murder by Bel-imperia, like Arthur’s defeat of the Souldan, stands for the conflation of the Iberian countries with Turkey as the antichristian forces which are eliminated symbolically in the playlet.^[4] Spain, the savior of Christianity at Lepanto, has been transformed into the pernicious enemy equal in threat to the Ottoman empire and has been defeated by Protestant England.

Notes

1. For a discussion of Kyd’s adaptation of Wotton see Erne’s chapter 8.

2. 4.1.195-96. All quotations of *The Spanish Tragedy* will be from the Edwards edition and henceforth will be cited within the text.

3. For a treatment of Hieronimo as an analogue to St. Jerome see Ardolino, “Hieronimo.”

4. For a discussion of *The Spanish Tragedy* in the context of the depiction of Islam onstage in early modern England see Dimmock 107-10.

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