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The Price That Women in Renaissance Drama Pay for Taking Initiative: Isabella's Soliloquy in Act IV of *The Spanish Tragedy*

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Abstract

The article is a close reading of Isabella's soliloquy in act IV of *The Spanish Tragedy* by Thomas Kyd. Pointing at the difference between the role of women in Early Modern reality and their function in contemporary plays, it demonstrates the perversity of a society where women were regularly marginalized and where, even in theatre, their transgressions of the boundaries imposed on them by the patriarchal social apparatus led to extremely unfavourable repercussions. Isabella, emotionally crushed by the foul murder of her son, decides in her helplessness to take her own life. In a world dominated by men, she does not quietly accept her passive role, but works within its limitations to become a character that takes action, albeit action that ends her life. Before making the symbolic gesture of stabbing herself, she exclaims against the circumstances which drove her to it. Her speech can be seen as one of the climactic points of the play.

Keywords: Renaissance drama, Senecan tragedy, Thomas Kyd, *The Spanish Tragedy*, patriarchy, soliloquy, suicide

INTRODUCTION

The Spanish Tragedy by Thomas Kyd is a play in the tradition of Senecan tragedy, and it is fairly loyal to its mother genre (Bevington 3). There are properties, however, that differentiate it from the prototypical Senecan play: it is meant to be staged; it disregards the unities of time, place, and action; and it brings the violence from behind the curtains into plain view. Violence itself is an important part of the revenge tragedy, a genre that *The Spanish Tragedy* initiated (Lamb 33–37), and in tandem with eloquent, powerful speeches written in perfect iambic pentameter, it resonates particularly strikingly. One such powerful speech can be found in the second scene of act IV of *The Spanish Tragedy*. Isabella, driven to despair by the foul murder of her son and her husband's seeming incompetence to revenge Horatio's death, decides to end her life. She goes to the scene of the original crime, the garden of her own house, takes her anger out on the arbour in the garden where her son was hanged, calls once more upon Hieronimo to pursue the deaths of Horatio's killers, and stabs herself in the chest. In her pre-suicide soliloquy, Isabella is equated to the arbour she destroys. The (double) perversity[1] of laying harm first upon her symbolic self, then upon her physical self, reflects the perversity of a society in which women seemingly had no power to act, despite their irrepressible impulse to do so.

THE VOICE OF WOMEN AND THE DUTY OF KINGS

Act IV is the last act of the play. Previously, the Portuguese Viceroy's son, Prince Balthazar, had led a rebellion for Portuguese independence, but his forces were defeated and he himself was taken prisoner by the oppressing nation. Lorenzo, the Spanish king's nephew, and Horatio, son of the Knight Marshal, dispute over who captured Balthazar. Lorenzo essentially takes credit for something he had no part in, but the King nevertheless gives half of the spoils of victory to him. Furthermore, he leaves Balthazar in Lorenzo's charge, which infuriates the real captor Horatio.

To complicate matters, Lorenzo's sister Bel-Imperia falls in love with Horatio (despite having previously loved his best friend Andrea, an officer who fell in battle under Balthazar's sword), and all the while, Balthazar himself is becoming enamoured with Bel-Imperia. When Lorenzo discovers Horatio and Bel-Imperia's romantic connection, he does not dawdle but immediately starts convincing the Portuguese heir to help him to get rid of Horatio. This goes in line with the Spanish king's decision that a marriage between Balthazar and Bel-imperia would

1 Suicide was at the time seen as an abhorrent act and a deadly sin (Steltzer 67–68).

be an excellent way to repair the peace with Portugal.[2] Lorenzo and Balthazar calculatingly murder Horatio, stabbing him and hanging him from an arbour in his family's garden. When Horatio's parents find him thus assassinated, his mother Isabella loses her mind. Even though her husband Hieronimo later learns the identity of their son's killers and even though he is the Knight Marshal, the executor of the law, he cannot find justice for Horatio. Sadly, even his high office is none compared to the authority of the King – the King himself, it must be underscored, being tied by blood to one of the responsible parties.

In the second scene of act IV, Isabella, disappointed with her husband and the world, decides to end her life and stabs herself in the chest. Her tragic if self-inflicted demise foreshadows the violence that is to follow, but also, and more importantly, sheds light on the helplessness of women in an aggressively male world. Renaissance women were treated legally and socially as inferior to men and had no obvious channel to voice their disagreement with this discriminatory order. Of course, "critiques of sexual inequality and tentative proposals for rectifying women's inferior social roles" were nascent in 17th-century Europe, and they had started to pave the long way to equality (Gwyneth Ross 276–77), but the average genteel Renaissance woman's voice was mainly restricted to her household, while the household was represented outwardly by the *pater familias*. As such, it was nearly impossible for a woman to become a renowned philosopher of womanhood, a humanist fighter for the feminist cause, an intellectual star of literary salons. Such women did exist, and their names are now famous,[3] but they are the brilliant exception to a rather unfair rule. Isabella of *The Spanish Tragedy* is unfortunately not one of them. She desperately has something to exclaim in a public forum but cannot not do so because of her situation as a woman. Wanting to express her tragic helplessness, her character turns to the audience with the most moving soliloquy of Kyd's tragic play.

Isabella begins her speech by expressing her impatience and frustration, exclaiming against the "monstrous homicides" (4.2.1). Homicides can either be the persons committing murder or the acts of murder themselves. The ambiguity in meaning makes Isabella denounce both at the same time, which is efficient and carries much rhetorical weight. The idea is that homicide is a monstrous deed, which makes anyone performing it monstrous by association. A great portion of Isabella's vocabulary, in fact, has several possible meanings; this makes her speech rich in allusion and metaphorical association. Line 2, for example, contains two graphically very similar words, *piety* and *pity*: "Since neither piety nor pity moves / The King to justice or compassion" (4.2.2–3). Both emotions are associated more with the feminine than with the masculine, and indeed in Isabella's eyes the King

2 Indeed, a morganatic marriage between Horatio and Bel-Imperia would be much less fortuitous.

3 Christine de Pizan, Mary More, Batsua Makin, Lucrezia Marinella, to list just four.

does not feel them, or is at least unmoved by them. The two near-homographs become truly illustrative when we look at them closely. According to the Oxford English Dictionary,[4] "piety" had two groups of meanings at the time when the play was written: one was related to "the quality of feeling or showing pity", while the other was related to devotion, as in the "faithfulness to the duty naturally owed to someone". The second definition adds a layer of meaning to what Isabella is conveying: it hints at the King's duty as the sovereign to be reverent to God, the source of his power, and, accordingly, to rule justly, punishing those who deserve to be punished. Since "pity" not only means "the disposition to mercy or compassion", but also "a ground or cause for pity", Isabella is implying that because the King is not acting compassionately despite having good cause to do so – in her mind, acting compassionately would mean finding and punishing Horatio's murderer – he is neglecting his divine duty.

Frustrated with the King's passivity, Isabella decides to act herself, and in doing so, she transgresses the boundaries of her traditional gender role. Most Renaissance scholars agree that it was untypical of women in Early Modern society to undertake operations beyond the domestic sphere (Camden; Fletcher; Rose). Biblical "evidence" in support of this hierarchy was often put forward,[5] mainly, but not exclusively, because it was difficult to argue against the Holy Scriptures. And even though *The Spanish Tragedy* in its entirety does not closely observe a Christian vision of the world – its eschatological crux essentially being a Classical pagan one (Aggeler 330) – orthodox beliefs nevertheless pervade the work. The orthodox patriarchal structure of Renaissance society meant that possibilities for women were very restricted: they had fewer legal rights, virtually no access to education, and no real professional opportunities. Their submission to male authority was regarded as a necessity and, as it was mentioned earlier, they were mostly limited to the confines of their household. If decision-making and taking up various forms of action were tasks dispensed to men, women were expected to wait for male authorization or, better yet, intervention. This had been the case ever since the Middle Ages gave way to the Renaissance and "the relations of the sexes were restructured to one of female dependency and male domination" (Kelly 20). Even though she was "in charge" of her house and household, the married woman was legally still *in potestate mariti*.[6] Such a subdued position was naturally a great source of frustration for powerful women, as can be seen in the example of Isabella.

4 All subsequent definitions of lexical items are taken from that source.

5 The commonest references were the story of Adam and Eve from Genesis (e.g. Gen 2:5–7 and Gen 2:15–24) and the letters of Saint Paul (e.g. Eph 5:22–30 and Col 3:18–19).

6 Before getting married, of course, she was under the authority of her father. The only women who did not have to answer to anyone in this manner and who enjoyed relative independence were widows.

ISABELLA'S ACTION AND ITS SYMBOLISM

Isabella of *The Spanish Tragedy* is torn between being an active and being a passive character. Working within the limitations of being a woman, she wants to "revenge [herself] upon [the] place / Where thus they murdered [her] beloved son" (4.2.4–5). Since on her own she is unable to prosecute the culprits legally or kill them in a duel (or some other form of physical confrontation),[7] the main object of her wrath becomes the garden arbour. One could imagine this arbour as "a bower or shady retreat, of which the sides and roof are formed by trees and shrubs closely planted or intertwined" or as "lattice-work covered with climbing shrubs and plants". Either explanation works within the context of this speech and play. The former is supported by the use of vocabulary in the passage, while the latter would be easier to build and use onstage.[8] The arbour reappears several times in the play and at this point of the narrative symbolically refers both to the past and to the future. Horatio was hanged from it, so it symbolizes him, the unfair circumstances of his death, and, through synecdoche, death itself.[9]

As for its future signification, it is when Isabella revisits the arbour that the reader gets a hint at what she is about to do. Even without the connection to the two previous deaths, one might suspect the development of the scene: an arbour, being an arch-like construction, adopts the symbolism of the arch; arches, looking somewhat like doors, are symbolic passageways, symbols of transition (O'Connell and Airey 10), and since transition in tragedy is seldom something other than death, the arbour is a foreshadowing of Isabella's suicide. It emphasizes Isabella's determination to take action, even if this means her simultaneous demise. The stage directions call for Isabella to cut down this arbour while she exclaims,

> Down with these branches and these loathsome boughs
> Of this unfortunate and fatal pine!
> Down with them, Isabella, rend them up. (4.2.6–8)

Then, in line 9, Isabella mentions burning "the roots from whence the rest is sprung". This directly refers to the roots of the growth on the arbour, but it is

7 As a woman she would not be educated at arms.

8 The arbour they used in the Renaissance production would likely have looked like a hybrid between the two kinds of arbours described above, but a question arises when talking about the staging of this particular scene. Would Isabella actually destroy the arbour onstage? Two arguments speak against this supposition: one is pecuniary (despite it being made of wood, building a new arbour for every performance would be simply too expensive and inefficient), while the other is dramaturgical (the noise of axing down the arbour would interfere with the gravitas of the words being said, possibly even drowning them out).

9 This symbol is enhanced when the arbour likely reappears as the gallows where Pendringano is executed.

also a metaphor later repeated in lines 35 and 36 that go: "And as I curse this tree from further fruit, / So shall my womb be cursèd for his sake." It is not hard to see that in both cases Isabella is making a metaphorical parallel between a woman and a fruit-bearing tree. In Latin, the word for tree, *arbor*,[10] is feminine because it gives birth to leaves and fruit.[11] Both women and trees are begetting entities, so to speak. Line 9 is a variation of this metaphor. It replaces (α_1) the tree and (β_1) its fruits by (α_2) the roots and (β_2) the parts of the tree that are not the roots but spring from the roots. Isabella sees herself as the roots that gave birth to Horatio, but more broadly, she identifies herself with the arbour in its entirety. This identification is at the very heart of her speech. By cursing and felling the arbour which has, she finds, complotted her misery, she is, in fact, attacking herself. With this desperate act she is pointing at the twistedness of the society that does not leave her any alternative ways of asserting that she is an active character.

A woman taking an active role in the action of the play is actually a crucial mechanic in Renaissance drama. In many plays of the period, "women […] seem continually to be evading what is expected of them" (Eisaman Maus and Bevington xxxvii), sometimes to a greater and sometimes to a minor extent. If Isabella does not exactly take action against the murderers of her son, she does not mourn in a closed chamber either. She will not be one of those grieving mothers whose loss has rendered them hopeless and inert, she will not passively pine away in silence and submission – she will do something, even if it is just symbolic. This break with social convention is not unique to her character. In Renaissance drama – as opposed to contemporary Early Modern reality – it is quite common for women to act contrary to the expectations of the misogynous society. By doing so, they rise above the mundane and often render themselves more interesting than their male counterparts (against whom they have, among other things, a numerical disadvantage[12]).

Even if one restricts oneself to *The Spanish Tragedy*, one can find another example of such female unconventionality. Bel-Imperia is in fact even more rebellious than Isabella. She constantly defies her male relations: first by taking a morganatic lover, then, after the former dies, by getting involved with his friend despite all interdictions. Following her involuntary betrothal to the Prince of Portugal, she ruins the wedding by first killing the Prince, then herself. In the context of Renaissance theatre in general, "play after play contains unforgettable

10 The Latin *arbor* is in fact not an etymological predecessor, but merely a distant cousin of the English *arbour*. The OED traces the origins of *arbour* to the Latin *herbarium*, a collection of grass and herbs. It is evident that the word has undergone great change of signification and form.

11 Grammatical gender in Latin is interestingly based partly on semantic criteria, which is relatively rare and does not hold true for languages that developed from Latin (cf. French *un* arbre).

12 For almost all English Renaissance plays it holds true that there are fewer female roles than there are male roles.

portraits of strong-minded, articulate, intelligent women [whose] very transgressiveness makes them dramatically interesting" (Eisaman Maus and Bevington xxxviii). In fact, their transgressions frequently prove decisive for the denouement. They themselves, however, are dealt with in the spirit of the time: one need only remember the fates of the Duchess in *The Duchess of Malfi* and Beatrice-Joanna in *The Changeling*, who "elude patriarchal control by joining themselves to servingmen […] and transgress both class and gender hierarchies" (Suzuki 43). They are severely punished for their guilt – guilt, which from today's perspective is dubious at best.

Returning to the soliloquy of Act IV, when Isabella enumerates the parts of a tree, this is a clear demonstration of her earnest wish to take action:

> I will not leave a root, a stalk, a tree,
> A bough, a branch, a blossom, nor a leaf,
> No, not an herb within this garden plot. (4.2.10–13)

After she has razed the arbour with the ground, she wants that piece of garden to stay forever empty and unproductive (again, she is playing with the double meaning of words, "fruitless" signifying both). Her wish is that the soil there remain barren and that "whosoever / imagines not to keep it unmanured," (4.2.14–15) be blissless. The unnatural stress in lines 14 and 15 makes for an eerie tone that goes very well with her curse: the traditional foot in Renaissance drama is an iamb, repeated five times, but lines 14 and 15 both begin with a trochee, and only then continue with four iambs. This breaks up the rhythm in a peculiar, cacophonous way. There is also a metaphor hidden in lines 14–16: just as Hieronimo is not tending to justice for their son, no one should take care of the garden.

Strong imagery follows to support this demand. All the senses are evoked: the rustling wind can be heard and felt, the unpleasant odours smelled, the swirling snakes seen. All will keep away from this ungodly place "for fear to be infect". The word *infect* means not only "tainted with disease", as from a snake bite, but also "morally corrupted". Isabella suggests that even by approaching, people could become contaminated with vice. They will therefore rather stand at a distance and solemnly discuss the importance of the unlucky garden plot. The plot is, of course, unlucky through association to Horatio. Isabella exclaims: "Ay, here he died, and here I him embrace. / See where his ghost solicits with his wounds / Revenge on her that should revenge his death!" (4.2.23–25). The use of the present tense in line 23 is meaningful. She says "embrace", not "embraced". She is not referring to scene 2.5, where she and Hieronimo found Horatio in the garden and discovered he was dead. The tense indicates that she is embracing Horatio as she speaks, although we know he is not there anymore. Horatio is on a different metaphysical

plane, but she can nonetheless see him. Because she is so close to death herself, the boundaries between this world and the other are blurred for her, so she sees Horatio's ghost and reads in his wounds a cry for vengeance – vengeance that she as a woman sadly cannot bring to fruition.

Isabella then hails Hieronimo, declaring that "sorrow and despair hath cited [her] to hear Horatio plead with Rhadamanth" (4.2.27–28). Her careful use of law-specific vocabulary in lines 22–27 is very important. She says that Horatio's ghost *solicits,* the personified Sorrow and Despair *cite,* and Horatio himself *pleads.* These evocations of the judiciary process put her – in anachronistic terms, of course – in the middle of a courtroom, where she, too, is on trial. She is being accused of not avenging Horatio's death, although this accusation is clearly unfair. Hieronimo is the male character, he is the one with administrative power, he is the one with the ability to administer justice, he is the one who can make himself heard outside the sphere of his household. Alas, he does not do so because he is too afraid of the king. Not acting despite having the ability to act, he is failing their son more than Isabella is failing him by committing suicide. It is no wonder Isabella chides Hieronimo for this with her final words:

> Make haste, Hieronimo, to hold excused
> Thy negligence in pursuit of their deaths
> Whose hateful wroth bereaved [Horatio] of his breath.
> Ah, nay thou dost delay their deaths,
> Forgives the murderers of thy noble son,
> And none but I bestir me – to no end. (4.2.29–34)

CONCLUSION

Isabella – despite her passive role as a woman and even though it was ultimately to no avail – still did more than the (supposedly) active male Hieronimo. With a terrifying symbolic gesture she showed that the murder of her son remained unpunished. Her misplaced retribution through self-sacrifice speaks strongly of the time's societal structure: it points out the inability of women to voice their grievances, help themselves, take action into their own hands, and it stresses their reliance on men to act in their stead. In this light, Isabella's son's solicitation for her to do something – which is of course only a figment of her grief-struck imagination – is unfair. Horatio pressures Isabella into action, knowing perfectly well she cannot act.

As the close reading of this passage has proved, Isabella is a hapless victim of a world dominated by male violence, forced to destroy herself because of the sins of others. Nevertheless, what she does can readily be described as active and

dynamic, even if her actions fall somewhat short of Bel-Imperia's. But what unites both is the headlong termination of their earthly existence, which comes hand in hand with their transgression of gender boundaries and links them to other "disorderly" women in Renaissance drama. Speaking in more general terms, *The Spanish Tragedy* reveals the paradox of women's marginalization in contemporary reality and their prominence in dramatic works, even if that prominence always comes at an excessively high price.

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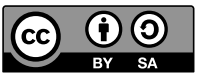

Cena, ki jo morajo ženske v renesančni drami plačati, če prevzamejo pobudo: Izabelin samogovor v IV. dejanju *Španske tragedije*

Prispevek je poglobljena analiza Izabelinega samogovora v IV. dejanju *Španske tragedije* Thomasa Kyda. Članek pokaže razkorak med podrejeno vlogo žensk v renesančni dobi in njihovo pomembno funkcijo v dramskih delih tistega časa ter obelodani perveznost družbe, kjer so bile ženske marginalizirane in kjer je celo v dramatiki vsakršna prestopitev mej, ki jim jih je določil patriarhat, imela zanje izjemno neugodne posledice. Izabela, ki jo čustveno grudi pokvarjeni umor njenega sina, se v svoji nemoči odloči, da si bo vzela življenje. V svetu, ki ga vodijo moški, glasno zavrne svojo predpisano pasivno vlogo in znotraj njenih omejitev najde dejanje, ki bo vsaj na simbolični ravni aktivno. Preden se zabode, vzklikne proti okoliščinam, ki ji vežejo roke in so jo do tega pripeljale. Njen samogovor je ena klimaktičnih točk dramskega dela.

Ključne besede: renesančna dramatika, seneška tragedija, Thomas Kyd, *Španska tragedija*, patriarhat, samogovor, samomor