

# Imaginative Insight : A Reading of *The Spanish Tragedy*

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## Introduction

*The Spanish Tragedy* was the first English revenge tragedy. “The earliest recorded performance of *The Spanish Tragedy* fell on 14 March 1592, by Lord Strange’s Men at the Rose Theatre, under the management of Philip Henslowe” (Freeman 1967 : 120). Terry Eagleton refers to the old play : “if the body-count, as at the close of *The Spanish Tragedy*, hovers around nine, exactly a third of the play’s total cast, then the spectacle is [...] indubitably tragic [...]” (8). It is remarkable that as many as nine people die on stage. Ghost [of Andrea] says :

Horatio murdered in his father’s bower,  
Vild Serberine by Pedringano slain,  
False Pedringano hanged by quaint device,  
Fair Isabella by herself misdome,  
Prince Balthazar by Bel-imperia stabbed,  
The Duke of Castile and his wicked son  
Both done to death by old Hieronimo,  
My Bel-imperia fall’n as Dido fell,  
And good Hieronimo slain by himself : ( . v . 3–11)

Nevertheless, whatever the number of the dead, what can we learn from this old tragedy? Hieronimo, who is one of the characters, “has a very clearly defined position that makes him an appropriate figure for a

middle-class London audience to identify with” (Barber 1988 : 135). In this article, I shall focus mainly on Hieronimo’s vengeance in *The Spanish Tragedy* and learn something essential to human beings which holds good in our world.

### **The Murder of Horatio**

A notable murder in *The Spanish Tragedy* is that of Horatio, the son of Hieronimo, who is killed by Balthazar and Lorenzo. Balthazar, the son of the Viceroy of Portugal, gives reasons for killing him :

Glad, that I know the hinderer [Horatio] of my love,  
Sad, that I fear she [Bel-imperia, Lorenzo’s sister] hates me whom  
I love.

Glad, that I know on whom to be revenged,  
Sad, that she’ll fly me if I take revenge.

Yet must I revenge or die myself,

For love resisted grows impatient. ( . i . 112-17)

Lorenzo, the son of the Duke Castile of Spain, persuades Balthazar to revenge himself on Horatio :

Let’s go my Lord, your staying stays revenge.

Do you but follow me and gain your love.

Her [Bel-imperia’s] favor must be won by his remove. ( . i . 134-36)

Lorenzo elicits information from Pedringano, a servant to Bel-imperia, about her lover’s name and lets him lead himself to the place of Horatio and her clandestine courtship. Lorenzo, Balthazar, Pedringano, and Serberine, a servant to Balthazar, all of them disguised, raid Horatio and Bel-imperia, and murder him.

What is the cause of the murder? It is hatred. “Horatio literally dies

at the hands of the jealous and vengeful Balthazar and Lorenzo” (Murray 1969 : 35). Their jealousy, which includes anger, leads to hatred and revenge because Bel-imperia whom Balthazar loves is showing an interest in Horatio ( . ii).

There seems to be another reason for his murder. As Barber points out, Horatio “is getting in the way of a dynastic marriage. He is put out of by the childless Spanish King’s nephew, Lorenzo, and the crown prince of Portugal, Balthazar, because the liaison Horatio is entering into with Lorenzo’s sister Bel-imperia would prevent her marrying the crown prince” (133). In this sense, Horatio is murdered for political reasons. Nevertheless, the act of murder arises from a fit of jealousy for his future.

### **Hieronimo’s Agony**

The murder of Horatio drives Hieronimo, a Knight Marshal of Spain, into the depths of despair. He decides to seek out the murderers of his son : “So shall we sooner find the practice out, / And learn by whom all this was brought about” ( . v. 62–63). At first Hieronimo does not know who the murderers are, and later he happens to pick up a letter from Bel-imperia giving the true facts :

For want of ink, receive this bloody writ.  
Me hath my hapless brother his from thee.  
Revenge thyself on Balthazar and him,  
For these were they that murdered thy son.  
Hieronimo, revenge Horatio’s death,  
And better fare than Bel-imperia doth. ( . ii. 26–31)

Quite reasonably, he distrusts the letter : “Hieronimo, beware, thou art betrayed, / And to entrap thy life this train is laid. / Advise thee, therefore, be not credulous” ( . ii. 36–39). Finally, only after Pedringano, one of Lorenzo’s contemptible accomplices, has been

executed, according to Lorenzo's plan, for killing Serberine, does he learn the facts of the murder from a letter for Lorenzo : "You know, my Lord, I slew him [Serberine] for your sake, / And was confederate with the Prince and you, / Won by rewards and hopeful promises, / I helped to murder Don Horatio, too" ( .vii. 39–42).

Hieronimo knows the whole facts of the murder of his son, and at first seeks not vengeance but justice : "I will go plain me to my Lord the King, / And cry aloud for justice through the court, / [...] / And either purchase justice by entreats / Or tire them all with my revenging threats" ( .vii. 72–76).

At the beginning of Act scene xii, Hieronimo enters with a dagger and a rope which are associated with suicide. He seems to kill himself and to entreat an infernal judge for justice :

Hieronimo, 'tis time for thee to trudge.  
Down by the dale that flows with purple gore,  
Standeth a fiery tower. There sits a judge  
Upon a seat of steel and molten brass,  
And 'twixt his teeth he holds a firebrand,  
That leads unto the lake where hell doth stand.  
Away, Hieronimo, to him be gone.  
He'll do thee justice for Horatio's death. ( . xii. 6–13)

But he thinks better of suicide after hesitating to choose "This way, or that way", "For if I hang or kill myself, let's know / Who will revenge Horatio's murder then?"( . xii. 16–8). Hieronimo chooses the "way" to ask the King for justice : "And here I'll have a fling at him, that's flat." ( . xii. 21). He cries "Justice, Oh, justice to Hieronimo!" and "Justice, oh justice, justice, gentle King!" ( . xii. 27, 63). But his petition for justice is rejected. He realizes that his petition is in vain.

He decides to avenge himself on the murderers of his son in Heaven's name :

*Vindicta mihi!*<sup>1)</sup>

Aye, Heaven will be revenged of every ill,  
Nor will they suffer murder unrepaid.  
Then stay, Hieronimo, attend their will,  
For mortal men may not appoint their time.

*Per scelus semper tutum est sceleribus iter.*<sup>2)</sup> ( . xiii. 1–6)

Now that Hieronimo has seen that there is no hope that either heaven or the King will give him justice, he abandons the idea of suicide and accepts that his revenge will have to be fallen in private : “For evils unto ill conductors be, / And death’s the worst of resolution, / [...] / And to conclude, I will revenge his [Horatio’s] death!” ( . xiii. 8–9, 20). In Dozier’s view, “hate can erupt not only from a perception of being physically trapped, but through a sense of being emotionally trapped as well” (186). Similarly, at this point, Hieronimo’s hate and anger are on the point of exploding.

### **Hieronimo’s Insane**

In the very next scene Hieronimo, who has just decided to seek private revenge, sees three appellants and an old man, Bazulto who has “The humble supplication / Of Don Bazulto for his murdered son” ( . xiii. 78). He comes to see Hieronimo to ask for justice for the murder of Bazulto’s son. Although Hieronimo is driven temporarily insane at the sight of Bazulto’s “supplication”, he demonstrates strong determination :

Though on this earth justice will not be found,  
I’ll down to hell, and in this passion  
Knock at the dismal gates of Pluto’s court,  
Getting by force, as once Alcides did,  
A troop of Furies and tormenting hags  
To torture Don Lorenzo and the rest. ( . xiii. 108–13)

This scene is suggestive. Hieronimo is a Knight Marshal, but even before these appellants he denies justice to others, just as he despairs of justice for himself and turns his thought to revenge.

Besides, Hieronimo takes the old man for Horatio: "But let me look on my Horatio. / Sweet boy, how art thou changed in death's black shade!" ( . xiii. 145–46). And then, "he sees that Bazulto is an image of himself (Murray 38): "Aye, now I know thee, now thou nam'st thy son, / Thou art the lively image of my grief" ( . xiii. 161–62). In this scene, Hieronimo identifies with the old man and his son, and displays an insane obsession with a quest for justice, grieves for his dead son. He regards Bazulto as a mirror in which he sees his own need for revenge, unconscious of his true reflection of an ugly, vengeful old man.

While he is a judge and a representative of balance and rationality, why is Hieronimo so driven by this primitive quest for vengeance? Undeniably, his grief for his lost son is unbearable, furthermore, his petition for justice was refused. But this does not justify or explain his obsession. Murray points out the relationship between love and hatred in *The Spanish Tragedy*:

One might blindly think of love and hate as unrelated opposites, but they are related in many ways in *The Spanish Tragedy* and in life. Hieronimo loved his son Horatio. But now Horatio has been murdered, and for Hieronimo the positive relationship to his son is ended. Love for his son is now to be expressed negatively in hatred of the murders. From this ironic reversal of emotion the motive of revenge arises. (33–34)

From another point of view, Dozier explains the relationship between love, hate, and the primitive neural system: "Love and hate exist on the opposite ends of the same axis within the primitive neural system. The two poles of the binary classification of like–dislike, when experienced at maximum intensity, lead to the emotions of love and hate" (200). That is, the deeper his love for Horatio, the greater

Hieronimo's hatred: Hieronimo's love for Horatio turns to anger and hatred for the murderers and makes him an obsessive avenger. Hieronimo's entire act of vengeance originates in his intense love for his son.

### **Hieronimo's Vengeance**

Hieronimo avenges himself on Lorenzo and Balthazar with Bel-imperia in the play-within-the-play. She is Lorenzo's sister and her lover Andrea was killed by Balthazar in the battle. She accepts Horatio's love: "Yet what avails to wail Andrea's death, / From whence Horatio proves my second love? / Had he not loved Andrea as he did, / He could not sit in Bel-imperia's thoughts" ( . iii. 60-3). She expects Horatio to avenge himself on Balthazar for herself: "Yes, second love shall further my revenge" ( . iii. 66). But after the murder of Horatio, she condemns Hieronimo for his delay of revenge: "why art thou so slack in thy revenge?" ( . ix. 8) and blames him for his heartless to his son: "Thus to neglect the loss and life of him / Whom both my letters and thine own belief / Assures thee to be causeless slaughtered" ( . i. 10-3). Hieronimo and Bel-imperia swear to revenge themselves on Lorenzo and Balthazar. Hieronimo asks her, "But may it be that Bel-imperia / Vows such revenge as she hath deigned to say?" ( . i. 30-1). She replies, "I will consent, conceal, / And aught that may effect for thine avail, / Join with thee to revenge Horatio's death" ( . i. 46-8). Thus, they have formed an alliance to retaliate their enemies.

As soon as Hieronimo murders Lorenzo, he, as a man suffering the extremest torments, demands that the Duke of Castile, the father of Lorenzo, and the Viceroy of Portugal, the father of Balthazar should be made to suffer the same loss of their sons as he does: "Speak, Portuguese, whose loss resembles mine: / If thou canst weep upon thy Balthazar, / 'Tis like I wailed for my Horatio. / [...] / How can you brook our play's catastrophe?" ( . iv. 114-16, 121) Hieronimo also explains the reason for the murder to the Duke: "As dear to me was

my Horatio / As yours, or yours, or yours, my Lord, to you. / My  
guiltless son was by Lorenzo slain, / And by Lorenzo and that Balthazar  
/ Am I at last revenged thoroughly, / Upon whose souls may Heavens  
be yet avenged / With greater far than these afflictions” ( . iv. 169–75).  
Ultimately Hieronimo’s vengeance is to make the fathers of the  
murderers feel the same great grief as he feels.

It is important that Hieronimo kills Lorenzo with Bel-imperia in the  
-play-within-the-play. He weaves this intrigues in advance: “why, the  
plot’s already in mine head” ( . i. 51). Lorenzo and Balthazar are  
deceived into playing their roles in the-play-within-the-play by  
Hieronimo and Bel-imperia. In the end, Hieronimo ironically becomes  
the same man as Lorenzo in that he resorts to private revenge and is  
conspiracy to murder Lorenzo with Bel-imperia.

Nothing can justify Lorenzo’s and Balthazar’s murder of Horatio.  
Although Hieronimo “is driven to revenge by injustice, not to injustice  
by revenge” (Freeman 84), he similarly cannot be justified when he  
turns to private revenge even if he is a victim. He just revenged himself  
on them in the name of justice. He executed vengeance as an agent of  
justice.

## **Conclusion**

Hieronimo is a judicious and loyal subject and a proud father. But  
the failure of justice for his own son’s murder drives him extremes of  
hatred and of despairing madness. He hates the murderers all the more  
because he loves his son. Hieronimo and Bel-imperia are in conspiracy  
to revenge themselves on the murderers. But their revenge is exactly  
like Lorenzo’s and Balthazar’s revenge in that both are private revenge.  
Hate produces nothing except death.

Love and hate are universal to all humankind. Love often turns into  
hate and the extreme hate leads to violence as a form of revenge.  
Revenge always causes a tragedy. “The revenge motive often becomes  
the basis for a vicious cycle of violence and retaliation that seems all but



impossible to break. Hate fuels violence which only escalates into ever more destructive levels of hate and violence” (Levin and Rabrenovic 2004 : 62). Sadly, “a vicious cycle of violence and retaliation” is “impossible to break” unless the vengeful parties die. Hieronimo and Bel-imperia kill themselves in the-play-within-the-play (IV. iv).

One of the greatest values of *The Spanish Tragedy* is that it is imaginatively gratifying to identify with the tragic character and to share with his grief. In order to do so, we are required as a result of imaginative insights into the nature of others, or a deep feeling for the sufferings of others. The ultimate purpose of Hieronimo’s vengeance is to make his enemies acknowledge these perceptions. Imaginative insight plays a powerful role in our treatment of others. A better understanding of others is based on our powers of imaginative insight. Understanding ourselves helps us understand others. Both understandings are connected because as human beings we all have love, hate, anger, and sorrow in common.

In the case of Hieronimo, the hatred, which has been transformed into a private quest for revenge, is itself an emotional block against understanding of himself and others. In failing to understand others or to see others as a mirror of his own failings, he loses the ability to know his own and others empathetically, because, at the same time, he rejects the chance to learn and benefit from his own sad experience. As a result, “good” Hieronimo becomes a villain without mercy. Consciously or unconsciously, making his enemies recognize the essential nature of imaginative insight becomes the ultimate purpose of his vengeance, but his own behavior denies this very purpose.

#### Notes

- 1 ) “Vengeance is mine [,saith the Lord]”. This English translation is cited from the footnote in “*The Spanish Tragedy.*” In *Renaissance Drama : An Anthology of Plays and Entertainments.* p.80.
- 2 ) “The safe way for crimes is through (further) crimes”. *ibid.* p.81.

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