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**‘His Death hath Buried my Delights’: Consecrating Love in  
Thomas Kyd’s *The Spanish Tragedy* (1592)**



Treball de Fi de Grau Estudis Anglesos

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<sup>1</sup> The cover image was taken from Penguin Classics, *Five Revenge Tragedies: Kyd, Shakespeare, Marston, Chattel, Middleton*, 2012, UK. [Link Accessed on May 15, 2015.](#)

- “Whereas true love is a love of beauty and order—temperate and harmonious?”
- “Quite true”, he said.
- “Then no intemperance or madness should be allowed to approach true love?”
- “Certainly not.”
- “Then mad or intemperate pleasure must never be allowed to come near the lover and his beloved; neither of them can have any part in it if their love is of the right sort?”
- “No, indeed, Socrates, it must never come near them.”

Plato, *The Republic* Vol. III 403a-b. 380 BC.



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<sup>2</sup> Image taken from [Link](#) Accessed on May 15, 2015.

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## **Abstract**

This essay discusses how in the Renaissance period, when revenge tragedies were considered the trend in terms of artistic composition and entertainment, Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* becomes a more complex and developed notion of this genre. Kyd introduces a plot of male violence and political chaos but above all, a psychological developed female character. Bel-Imperia is the focus of my analysis. At a time of social and political unrest, why is she the one to restore social order through a relative successful act of revenge? What are the reasons motivating her deeds? This degree paper underlines the importance of Bel-Imperia's love in her successful revenge. By analyzing Bel-Imperia's deeds and language, and in contrast with the main male character, Hieronimo, the argument of love as a purveyor of social order gains force and becomes the embodiment of a notion of spiritual love that imposes itself over patriarchy, violence and madness.



## Introduction

### **The Dynamics of Revenge in *The Spanish Tragedy***

*The Spanish Tragedy* by Thomas Kyd was written between 1588 and 1592 and premiered in 1593 by the company of Lord Strange's Men, only a few years before William Shakespeare premiered *The Merchant of Venice*. The play was successful at a time of intense anti-Catholic feelings in England, in which popular and theological discussions about predestination and the influence of God in human fate coexisted with a preoccupation with divine justice and revenge. This interest in the almighty powers led to question the relationship between divine rule and man-made institutions that regulate social order. This was also a time of anxiety about a possible Spanish invasion. Protestant broadsheets depicted Spain as a depraved and corrupted country enmeshed in political intrigues that offered the perfect dramatic scenario for a revenge tragedy. This was a sub-genre of Elizabethan plays, initiated by Kyd and followed on among others by Shakespeare or Marlowe, in which the action of the play is sustained by a revenge intrigue. There is not one single act of revenge in *The Spanish Tragedy*: Bel-imperia looks for vengeance for the death of her lover Andrea; Balthazar and Lorenzo seek revenge on Horatio for obtaining Bel-Imperia's love; Hieronimo pursues vengeance for the murder of his son Horatio. Underneath this "passion for retribution", as the scholar Philip Edwards defined it (p.li), there is a Senecan model of tragedy that Kyd recreates in dramatic structure and in the fundamental concept that evil persists in a politically corrupted scenario. As we shall see, it is possible to understand this Senecan base as being challenged by love in the case of Bel-Imperia.

Male characters in Elizabethan plays often represent the ways manmade institutions, sacred and secular, exercise their often repressive power. *The Spanish Tragedy* enacts the essence of the tragic element in which taboos imposed by social norms develop into a bloody turn of events. The plot and its characters challenge the law to create an illusion of escape

from a period in which crime and punishment were a daily routine. The main topic of this play is actually revenge itself following the Senecan model, and most scholars of Elizabethan drama agree that this classical pattern provided psychological intensity to Kyd's characters. According to Francis Bacon in his well-known essay "Of Revenge" (1597 and 1625) the play discusses the unavoidable necessity of revenge to impose divine justice and punish crimes that the state apparatus<sup>3</sup> is not able to resolve. He said "REVENGE is a kind of wild justice; which the more man's nature runs to, the more ought law to weed it out. For as for the first wrong, it doth but offend the law; but the revenge of that wrong, putteth the law out of office".<sup>4</sup> Thus Bacon was aware of the fact that revenge upsets the natural order, but it can be a form of justice if it readdresses a public wrong. The limited power of revenge as an instrument of state control is explored in *The Spanish Tragedy*. The hero always accomplishes his revenge as it is the case with Hieronimo, an avenger of the unpunished murder of his son Horatio. "The frustration of vengeful longing" writes Woodbridge, "leaves a person incomplete, as if he were maimed and revenge brings 'a deep pleasure' [...which] is often therapeutic" (22). *The Spanish Tragedy* is Senecan in the sense that it presents revenge as a challenge to the rule imposed by the state apparatus, despite the fact that chaos and personal imbalance are released by trying to re-address a wrong, ultimately leading to social unrest, madness, violence and death. State violence breeds personal violence, which is accepted in the Senecan model (spiced up with supernatural elements) and tolerated in Bacon's view. Kyd's revenge plot is at the heart of its dramatic tension, but its moral justification is complex and ambiguous. Essentially, the character of Hieronimo can be seen as a token of how "Senecan tragedy presents a natural order which convulses with horror at human perversion"

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<sup>3</sup>The State Apparatus exposed in "The Essentials of the Marxist Theory of the State" by Louis Althusser understands the State as a repressive power that aims at keeping the struggle between social classes.

<sup>4</sup>*The Essays or Counsels, Civil and Moral of Francis Id. Verulam Viscount St. Albans and The New Atlantis*. Ed. Jim Manis. Pennsylvania: An Electronic Classics Series publication, 2012.



(Kerrigan, 112). Hieronimo's madness and lack of consistency in his motivations to avenge the death of his son exemplify the instability between private and public<sup>5</sup>, especially when he evolves from being a hero 'with a cause' to a dangerous villain. The main reason behind his vengeful actions creates a sense of chaos, state anarchy and unresolved conflict that will mortify his being even in the afterlife.

This degree paper (TFG) will not focus on the motivation and justification of revenge in the case of Hieronimo following the Senecan model, as most scholarship of revenge tragedies from the Elizabethan period stands now. While acknowledging the validity of these analyses, my interest gravitates towards the nature of revenge in the role of the main female character which is, as I will argue, more consistent in its representation. Before Kyd, female roles were of a minor order and women were relegated to become either the prize or the conflict within the plot<sup>6</sup>. But the female role of Bel-Imperia in *The Spanish Tragedy* is "an eloquent and purposeful female figure"<sup>7</sup>. Due to a general academic focus on the topic of revenge, Bel-Imperia has been acknowledged as a relevant role in the plot because she sparks off the need to revenge. This view understands Bel-Imperia as a seductress and manipulative woman who guides her actions and bases her behavior on vindictive passions due to the death of both her lovers Andrea and Horatio. Fiona McHardy drew the attention to the issue of linking women with the claim of blood in a vengeful development of events, a notion that can be traced back from the Classical period with its Homeric epics. She argues "the association of women with the encouragement of blood revenge, especially in laments, leads to their depiction in literature as bloody avengers" (37). She further observed that "as previously noted, women were usually thought incapable of taking violent action against men

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<sup>5</sup> The notions of private and public revenge were elaborated by Francis Bacon. Private revenge is the one which tries to set justice for the injuries provoked by injustices against the person or his relatives. Public revenge is the one which seeks social profit by fighting against an evil that harms many people.

<sup>6</sup> From McAreavey's commentary on the female roles in revenge tragedies.

<sup>7</sup> *The Routledge Anthology of Renaissance Drama*. Simon Barker and Hilary Hinds (ed.). p. 35

without help and so they needed to rely on their ability to persuade others to aid them” (39). This leads me to a discussion of the figure of *Carmilla* that Kyd anticipates as a model of a female avenger that he might have transformed from Medean myths. Despite the anachronism, *Carmilla* is relevant to this discussion because of her literary antecedent in *Bel-Imperia* and because this literary character created by J. Sheridan LeFanu (1814-1873) has often been associated with the exaltation of passions. She is the first female vampire who chooses as a victim someone of the same sex, Laura, with whom to transgress moral codes. *Carmilla* can be considered the symbol of youth, a *carpe diem* that promotes extreme behaviour when public and personal moral codes fail. She is an example of female ‘irrationality’ that is nevertheless not condemned, since *Bel-Imperia* and *Carmilla* choose not to be locked in a world of restraint. They act according to their passions without questioning the reasons or the consequences of these actions. *Carmilla* is the embodiment of “sexual tension, sexual awakening and lesbian desire” (Hayley Cotter, 1)<sup>8</sup>. Thus, she pushes the borderline of what is acceptable by defending love at all cost, which often leads to madness and finally, death. In this sense, *Carmilla* understands love as a chasing game of the damsel which leads to mortal pain since the relationship is impossible. These statements are precisely the ones that this paper wants to question. I argue against the misconception of *Bel-Imperia*’s role as a *Carmilla* to support McHardy’s observations as the starting point in my discussion (chapter 1) of this stereotype that associates women “with brutal revenge acts against their enemies” (McHardy, 39).

The main discussion of this TFG develops the idea that *Bel-Imperia*’s actions and behaviour lack vindictive passions, which leads me to question the misconception around her performance and *raison d’être* within the play. Hers is a revenge indeed, but above all, it is

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<sup>8</sup> For the symbolism behind *Carmilla*, I recommend Hayley Cotter’s “Female Sexuality as Vampiric in Le Fanu’s *Carmilla*” @[academia.edu](http://academia.edu). Accessed on the 1<sup>st</sup> of June.

motivated by spiritual and honest feelings of love which lead her to stand against social codes to become an active character who sets justice and restores social order. This essay seeks to examine the motivations behind Bel-Imperia's revenge as an act of love. Set in a bloody, violent and threatening plot, love still stands as the most powerful force. To what an extent is Bel-Imperia's revenge an unavoidable event that reveals the depth of the commitment that she professed to her lovers? Without Bel-Imperia's reaction against a patriarchal society that is intent on injuring her heart, her role in the play would not have warranted so much attention. At the same time, by examining revenge as a course of action stimulated by spiritual love we can gain a better understanding of its complexity beyond the Senecan model. Bel-Imperia's revenge is not only different from Hieronimo's in its motivation (since paternal love is not a form, as we shall see in chapter 1, of spiritual Petrarchan love) but also more successful in its outcome. Despite her suicide and the fact that her revenge does not bring her lovers to life, it leaves behind a bitter-sweet feeling that never spoils her memory. It extols her right to claim moral compensation from the state and regrets her death –even though, as we shall see, death will become the only pure locus for the realization of love. Is her death, in fact, perceived as the ultimate compensation that restores a sense of order and justice? Kyd goes beyond the Senecan model in representing Bel-Imperia's means as necessarily successful, and her revenge necessarily accomplished, because love must prevail over violence and madness. A powerful and articulated female voice emerges to claim something that no men and not even the system itself are able to restore: justice. Her voice then questions the expectations placed on her sex to embody not passion but spiritual love, not madness but constancy. Therefore, at the end of the play, audiences feel that though Bel-Imperia is a sinner by taking away a man's life, she is still worthy of compassion. She is also aware of the dramatic consequences of her actions, and these lead her to redeem her own soul by committing suicide, which in turn is perceived as sort of sacrificial martyrdom.

In this regard, my paper will also consider the representational similarities between Bel-Imperia and the Virgin Mary, since Elizabethan poetry and drama –despite its Protestant refusal of iconic images– still retained a pre-humanistic interest in Marian tropes. I do not seek to compare the purity of the love feeling in Mary and Bel-Imperia's, since they differ in their provenance. However, there is a resemblance in the way both women divinize the object of their love. Mary's grief when she is forced to witness the death of her son Jesus is known as "The Passion and Stigmas of Mary". For once her facial representation, always stoic and elegant, becomes full of sentiment since medieval times. Bel-Imperia's reaction at the news of Andrea's death upsets her countenance as a court lady, being honorable, unreachable and virtuous. Another show of her feelings of deep love, comparable to those of Mary, occurs when she witnesses Horatio's death. While Mary behaves as it is expected from a lady in her position, by sincerely showing her emotions but limiting her reaction, Bel-Imperia is proactive. As we shall see, her involvement in the revenge plot puts her into a conflictive position that nevertheless shows her genuine commitment to restore love rather than satisfy a sense of injured self. Bel-Imperia is the perfect embodiment of the social portrait of the lady in distress. After the death of her second lover, her performance becomes relevant to the resolution of the play and her voice rises over patriarchal power. She is the embodiment of a love of neo-platonic inspiration which tries to impose itself over the mourning of those who are deeply loved.

My discussion starts by elucidating the type of love professed by Bel-Imperia and why this is relevant to introduce the death of her two lovers, Andrea and, later, Horatio. We shall see how the representation of Bel-Imperia as the schemer of vindictive actions does not sustain itself, putting forward instead my thesis that Bel-Imperia is not a Carmilla but a worshiping figure who fights to restore a spiritual notion of love. This brings forth social order within a framework of social and patriarchal violence. Finally, the revenge plot is going

to be analyzed by means of performance and language to support the thesis that Bel-Imperia is not the active creator but the victim of the events. In this regard, Hieronimo is the character used to show the contrast between passion and love. A male character is the embodiment of vindictive impulses whereas Bel-Imperia is closer to a notion of love that transcends its materiality and embraces its spiritual nature. Ultimately, we shall see how Bel-Imperia's love for Andrea and Horatio inspires her into a course of action that claims revenge not as an act of retaliation but as a needed action to honour the love between her and Horatio. Her role is one that tries to fulfill the social expectations of her sex and position, but the measure of her feelings pushes her to act against the aggressors of her happiness. This does not make her a heartless seductress who seeks revenge above all things, but a fair and loyal lady who suffers for love.



## Chapter 1

### What's Love Got to Do with It? Bel-Imperia and Petrarchan Love

Sacvan Bercovitch tells that “in Kyd’s world [...], love must take possession in order for its opposite to ‘bring its revenges’” (221). This implies that there is a contrast of feelings taking place in the play. There is a clash of opposite forces that allows the progress of the plot from its pleasant opening to its tragic conflict until its violent resolution. If there is revenge, violence and death, there must be love as well. Who is the character bringing this sense of love and peace not just in between sexes but also in between nations? Bel-Imperia, the only female character of relevance in Kyd’s play. She can get married for political allegiance between countries and bring peace, as it would have been the case if she had ended up marrying Balthazar, thus unifying Portugal and Spain. However, her emotional depth develops throughout the play until it creates a strong attachment to Horatio after Andrea’s death.

BEL-IMPERIA: Let dangers go, 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 fair words, I’ll meet them with sweet looks;  
Write loving lines, I’ll answer loving lines;  
Give me a kiss, I’ll countercheck thy kiss:  
Be this our warring peace, or peaceful war (2.2.32 - 38).

These lines mark the identification between love and peace in Bel-Imperia’s mind. While Horatio keeps underestimating the force of love by linking it with the dangers of war, Bel-Imperia’s discourse becomes a soothing ode to spiritual love which exceeds violence and imposes itself as the truthful force of justice.

However, the concept of love in Elizabethan times was firmly rooted in Petrarchan poetic conventions. Love was a spiritual force, a passion devoid of carnality that was

nevertheless profoundly eroticized. This notion of love is originally found in Platonic dialogues. The dialogue *Symposium* argues the origin of love and its essence. For Plato, love and the soul come together linked by virtue. In this regard, it is easy to see these characteristics in Bel-Imperia's expression of love for Andrea and Horatio. She describes her feelings for the loss of her lover as "[Andrea] was my garland's sweetest flower, / And in his death hath buried my delights" (1.4.4-5). What is more, for Plato, the realization of love comes from the observation of beauty. Beauty sparks off a willingness to wonder and the progression from wonder and observation to questioning leads to a discovery of new forms of beauty, which stimulate feelings of love. Andreas' description of Bel-Imperia follows this line as he regards her as "worthy", "sweet" or "fair" and Horatio's as "gracious", "honey sweet" and "honourable love". Since love is a transcendent notion and regarded as a universal concept, its purity must be implicit. Purity was described by Plato as eternal and immutable. It cannot be corrupted by the sensible world, that is, the world of mutable feelings, materiality and perception. In this case, love is beyond change and hence it is elevated to the unification of the souls, which are also immutable and eternal. Therefore, love elevates physical union to a matter of spiritual connection, when love becomes eternal. Plato discusses this in one of the books of *The Republic*: "Then mad or intemperate pleasure must never be allowed to come near the lover and his beloved; neither of them can have any part in it if their love is of the right sort?" (*The Republic III*, 403a). This is the case in Bel-Imperia, who establishes spiritual connections with her lovers that transcends the physical realm. That makes her virtuous and therefore, a server of love.

BEL-IMPERIA: To love and fear, and both at once, my lord,  
In my conceit, are things of more import  
Than women's wits are to busied with (3.10.93 - 96).

This particular speech captures nicely Bel-Imperia's fundamental conception of love. It challenges the traditional image of Bel-Imperia as a seductress and materialist woman who is

guided by greed and rage. Her reasons to seek revenge are pushed by “things of more import” or beyond the corruptions of her world. She is beyond that, and so will be her actions motivated by spiritual love.

From this Platonic starting point, a poetic genre was developed in medieval times which emphasized courtly love, or the gentle and knightly wooing of the lady. Most of the ladies were married, so the expression of feelings was purely an admiration of their beauty and virtues. This issue has been already introduced when commenting upon Andrea and Horatio’s use of positively-connoted adjectives to extol Bel-Imperia’s charms and her pure essence. Besides, courtly love used to idealize in some instances the same course of wooing the perfect lady to achieve her affections. In those cases, the spiritual love of the couple is described as the secret world created by them, sometimes as a *Hortus conclusus* or *enclose garden* of Marian connotations, which became their refugee to express their emotions. The evening (*vespers*) was the perfect hour to keep the secret confession of their mutual love, when darkness cast shadows that would become their protection from the threatening world outside.

BEL-IMPERIA: The court were dangerous, that place is safe.  
Our hour shall be when Vesper ‘gins to rise,  
That summons home distressful travelers.  
There none shall hear us but the harmless birds: (2.2.44 - 47).

This symbolic union and secretive language was created by means of metaphors or the exchange of articles of clothing symbolizing “love for the living” (Thomas Rist, 35). This is what happens when Bel-Imperia gives Horatio her scarf, that had once belonged to Andrea, and also her glove. Besides, she describes her love as a boat without safe haven, threatened by the untamable sea of emotions after the loss of Andrea.



BEL-IMPERIA: My heart, sweet friend, is like a ship at sea:  
She wisheth port, where, riding all at ease,  
She may repair what stormy times have worn,  
And leaning on the shore, may sing with joy  
That pleasure follows pain, and bliss annoy.  
Possession of thy love is th' only port,  
Wherein my heart, with fears and hopes long tossed,  
Each hour doth wish and long to make resort; (2.2.7 - 14).

This fragment conveys in a poetic manner the self-realization of Bel-Imperia's own psychological state after the loss of her beloved one. Comparing her state with a boat without 'port' already expresses her need to feel love and be loved again. That is her strength, what keeps her sane, thus emphasizing the importance that love has for her. Her reasons to love are no joke or mere poetic convention, but it dwells in her soul. A love such as this can only elicit a powerful response of it is denied.

The topic of admiring the lady grew in Elizabethan poetry. Neoplatonism found its way into early modern poetic conventions, firmly rooted in Plato's theory of Ideas. As Gary Waller explains. "The poet's greatness is built upon his aspiring to encapsulate in his poem the beauty and splendour that shine in all natural things, and thus continuing God's divine creativity in his work" (43). Henceforth, one of their main topics of discussion was "the beauty of the mistress" (Waller, 44) which "delighted" them until the point of feeling the reconnection with the divine. In this regard, women were "Beauty" in itself and hence, "above time, beyond criticism" creating the "the experience of participating in a timeless world" (Waller, 45). This notion uplifts Bel-Imperia to this transcendent world that cannot be corrupted by violence and desire, while these are going to be absorbed by men, trapped in the ordinary world. This goes hand in hand with the emergence and adaptation of Petrarchism. The Petrarchan lover admired a fair lady, most of the times idealized, whose rejection or ignorance provoked a state of continuous pain and suffering to the lover. "Petrarchism focuses on physical characteristic less than their effect on the lover. Typically the effect is expressed

as what [...] we might fairly term masochism, as cruelty, distress, and torture” (Waller, 76). In this regard, Balthazar becomes the suffering lover of the idealized pure, fair and virtuous lady as Bel-Imperia has been previously described.

BALTHAZAR: Led by the lodestar of her heavenly looks,  
Wends poor oppressed Balthazar,  
As o'er the mountains walks the wanderer,  
Uncertain to effect his pilgrimage (3.10.106 - 109).

However, this Petrarchan tradition has been linked “with a flexible rhetoric of erotic desire” (Waller, 75) which ironically justifies Bel-Imperia’s rejection of Balthazar, as she is love and not lust. Bel-Imperia seems to reject the premises of Petrarchism as different from the worshiping of her beauty. She is more concerned with the effects of love on her. She comes to terms with her grief and revenge appears to her as a restorative. As we shall see, the power of her love is capable of achieving a fair revenge that brings back a sense of social order.

We can find traces of these stages of spiritual love in Bel-Imperia’s behaviour and language. Bel-Imperia’s love is of spiritual caliber since it is not merely based on passion. It honors the medieval tradition of courtly love together with a mystical union that makes it Neoplatonic in origin. She supports a love that divinizes her lovers due to the fact that their connection is spiritual, beyond an earthly understanding and physical need.

This development in the notion of love prevents the connection of Bel-Imperia with the instinctual world ruled by passions and physical desire. Her love is elevated to the world of the spiritual and eternal. Her feelings must be placed in this location as the representation of spiritual love that overcomes all obstacles, including life and death. In this sense, Bel-Imperia’s involvement in the revengeful plot is understandable as the only way of action left to fix unpunished crimes and also, as a way to express the depth of her feelings. From this moment on, the audiences sympathize with her cause and grief; they pity her and feel identified with her impotence. She is almost divine in her feelings and so the misconception

of her being driven by vindictive passions does not sustain, because she is beyond that. She is love. She is divine justice.

Along these lines, Evelyn Gajowski states that “although lust, love and marriage inhabit mutually exclusive conceptual universes for centuries, a literary ideal of romantic marriage emerges in early modern England [...]. It is nearly always framed, however, by both Ovidian and Petrarchan discursive practices” (19-20). Therefore, Bel-Imperia’s love can be framed in between her conception of love as the spiritual force that can fight any injustice and the idealization of her position which makes her unreachable in appearance but emotionally vulnerable.



## Chapter 2

### Justice is a not a Blind Lady: Bel-Imperia and the Feminization of Revenge

Bel-Imperia's role in *The Spanish Tragedy* has been generally approached from multiple feministic perspectives: she is either seen as a lady trying to make room for the female voice to establish a sense of divine justice; or as a dangerous female that manipulates men using the stereotypes of her sex such as sensuality, voluptuousness, jealousy, greed and desire. But Bel-Imperia is also an example of the struggle of an ego<sup>9</sup>, a subject that loves too much to be openly announced in the threatening environment of the Court. As a result, the superego rules and represses her actions, behaviour and feelings. Bel-Imperia is able to raise her voice, create an escape to express her limitless feelings of love and trust towards the men she connects with in a spiritual way. According to Gajowski "Even as neither female is heroic in the conventional sense of performance of deeds within public realms of action -given the constraints of the patriarchal cultures in which their plays are set -they are remarkably resilient and strong when it comes to matters of the heart" (51). However, her actions led to a misconception of her role, turning her into the embodiment of a Carmilla when she is actually the embodiment of a worship figure comparable to Virgin Mary.

Bel-Imperia is the perfect portrait of social expectation on the female sex. As a well-off woman, she needs to keep what in the period was considered to be the essence of femininity: her maidenhood until marriage. Women's expectations within society were deeply rooted into the values of modesty, honesty and subjugation to the male power. According to Richardson, the "concern for reputation, once fully internalized, becomes virtue, if we

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<sup>9</sup>According to Anthony Storr, the concepts of the *id* the *ego* and the *superego* proposed by Sigmund Freud take into account the repressive instincts of human nature. He established that the *id* had to do with the inner and repressed desires. The *ego* was related to the rational part of humans which controls their actions, becoming the intermediary between the *id* and the *superego*. Finally, the *superego* consisted of the social rules and laws that must be respected to coexist with other human beings.

imagine virtue as the power to resist temptation, to how carefully to the straight and narrow path: the virtuous woman needs to appear worthy even in her own eyes” (24). The virtuous woman loves unconditionally and follows merrily the commands of her man. In this regard, Bel-Imperia is presented during the first scenes of the play as the perfect maiden. She was deeply in love with a soldier, Andrea, killed honorably in battle against Portugal. Bel-Imperia’s virtuous description is actually provided to the audience through the dead eyes of Andrea, being his ghost the witness of the plot that it is about to occur. Bel-Imperia’s reaction when knowing the death of her platonic lover devastates her. She becomes the mourning widow of Andrea. Her honest level of commitment to his death is just the expression of the depth of her feelings for Andrea. Up to this point, Bel-Imperia must be considered the embodiment of Mary, who Christianizes and divinizes the feeling of love to a spiritual sphere which recalls Thomas Aquinas<sup>10</sup>. Her relationship with Andrea was not carnal but ultimately based on high feelings of true love. Her reaction to Andrea’s death is her expression of the kind of feelings she had for him.

Bel-Imperia’s virtuous way of understanding love can be put to the test when Horatio appears on the stage. Horatio is the breaking point of Bel-Imperia’s ultimate change of mood. She will remain still but at the same time, with a capacity to enact her profound feelings. Horatio is precisely the one who took care of Andrea’s funerary ritual. This action connects him directly to something that Bel-Imperia will not have, Andrea’s last moments in this world. Consequently, Bel-Imperia becomes attached to Horatio. Thanks to Andrea’s death the audience can see the virtue of Bel-Imperia’s conception of love. She creates the secret and private world of the lovers when Horatio seems unsure of how their relationship evolves in

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<sup>10</sup> Thomas Aquinas’ conception of love was based on the unselfish relationship between lovers. For him, feeling love was the closer step toward reaching the divine. However, true love was based on indulgence and pure feelings for the other’s happiness and joy. Therefore love is based on charity or *caritas*, that is, “the friendly relationship of man with God”.

the Court. She expresses her affections with the offer of her glove. She uses tender words and starts to open herself to Horatio until the point in which she fulfills her social role when expressing “I follow thee my love, and will not back, / Although my fainting heart controls my soul” (2.4.6-7). However, Horatio is not Andrea but a second chance to love and be loved. As a result of this, Bel-Imperia decides that if Horatio has been put in her path to be loved again, she needs to be more careful. Her error is to trust. In the threatening environment of the court, nobody could be trusted as most of the courtiers and servants had individual profit as their ultimate goal. Bel-Imperia and Horatio are caught when they are openly confessing their mutual affections of love, and soon afterwards Horatio is killed. Her reaction is just the one of a true lover in despair to protect what loves the most. Proved of her Mary-like portrayal is her level of sacrifice for love “O save his life and let me die for him!” (2.4.56). Horatio follows the same fate of Andrea and Bel-Imperia breaks apart. However, this time she is on her own and her unlimited love feelings cannot be repressed anymore due to her grief. After Horatio’s death her resolution is just the proof of her feelings. According to Jean I. Marsden “the evident intensity of the heroine’s pain demonstrated the validity of both her emotion and the drama’s action”<sup>11</sup> (61). Therefore, she loved virtuously and according to social expectations of a maiden and yet men took away what she loved the most so she decides to act, and as Marsden commented, the plot evolves to its tragic end. Needless to say, the tragic nature of the events is not pushed by vindictive feelings but by the limitless measure of love and grief for the loss of the beloved ones. Nevertheless, Bel-Imperia’s change and resolution in her mood can be justified as Deborah Willis pointed out from his analysis based on Trauma

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<sup>11</sup> Marsden introduces in her chapter on “*Falling Women*” an interesting theory on the “she-tragedy”. As Kyd’s play was the starting point to develop the gender of tragedy we just can see reminiscences of Marsden’s point on categorizing the play as a “she-tragedy” in which “women are presented to the audience’s gaze, established as desirable, and then driven into prolonged and often fatal suffering” (60).

Theory<sup>12</sup>. She noticed “the play invites us to see how characters of both sexes turn to revenge in the aftermath of trauma to find relief from terrible pain. Traumatic loss gives rise to a “gnawing vulture” (26).

Most critics believe that her revengeful action is based on vindictive passions, irrational and impulsively emotions. As Willis observed “women are sometimes active participants in revenge plots [...] actively engage in honor-driven quarrels or exhorts others to do so. They are typically presented -as male revengers are- in ambivalent terms” (24). Nevertheless, I would like to question these premises and justify Bel-Imperia’s transcendence in the development of the plot.

In the first place, Bel-Imperia is not a direct avenger though she does not refuse this role on moral grounds. Her way is not actually revengeful in itself but rather the fulfillment of the duty of a woman who loved the son of somebody else and also the one of a witness in a criminal scene. She writes a letter revealing the identity of the murderer hand of Horatio. Ironically, the contents of this letter will not be believed until the very end, and this leaves us wondering if she is really manipulating the will of men to seek revenge from the very beginning. I cannot see traces of this in Bel-Imperia. As part of the development of the plot, she is being locked in her room, segregated from the public life. How could she come up with a vindictive plan when her main distress was the death of her two lovers and the threat of being married to the murderer of both of them? Actually and according to Jocelyn Catty “women are denied empowerment and revenge as well as language”<sup>13</sup> which supports the idea that Bel-Imperia cannot be considered the schemer of such vindictive plan not only because of her virtuous essence but because of the repression of her own sex.

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<sup>12</sup> Deborah Willis develops Trauma Theory in her article pp. 26 - 34.

<sup>13</sup> Catty, Jocelyn. “Virtue and Inviolability” in “2. Damsels in Distress: Romance and Prose Fiction”. *Writing Rape, Writing Women in Early Modern England*. New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1999. pp. 31 - 32.

Another key issue is the way Bel-Imperia is involved in Hieronimo's plot to take revenge on the death of her son Horatio. We understand she is part of the plot even though she just did what it was expected from a person who loved. Female protagonists in early modern tragedies are usually the victims of circumstances, something supported by a feminist claim realized by Willis when saying "feminists have confronted the issue, they have tended to downplay women's participation in revenge, emphasizing instead their roles as victim" (22) what is more "Women are the nonviolent sex, far more likely to be victims of violence than its perpetrators. When they do fight back, it is often argued, their violence is a justifiable act of self-defense" (22). Richardson quotes Carole Pateman when discussing "Women are excluded from the original pact. Men make the original contract" (28). Henceforth, Bel-Imperia does not come up with an elaborated plan to seek revenge. A proof of her innocence as the master mind who seeks raw revenge is the fact that the weight of the sin is too much for her. A proper avenger is the one who accomplishes his revenge but as a sense of justice must prevail in the end, there is always a way to punish him in order to restore a sense of balance. Bel-Imperia does not need punitive consequences to her actions because she is perfectly aware of her murder. Besides, she kills the one and only person responsible for her griefs. After that, her life is not worth living anymore. She decides to commit suicide because in a world of female repression her escape was to love and be loved. After the loss of her soul mates, the most desirable relief is to kill herself, redeem her sin and meet her lovers in the after-life. This idea was supported by Richardson when analyzing Davys's novel *The Accomplished Rake* whose protagonist shares the same social expectations as Bel-Imperia. Though her tragedy is based on rape and Bel-Imperia deals with the murders of her lovers, both outcomes are very similar. Both female protagonists are victims of their circumstances and as the social context makes it unbearable to overcome their tragedies, they either have to be segregated from society or face their ultimate release. Davys's protagonist copes with



being a mother after rape and she has to face social criticism for having an illegitimate child, as if she had been guilty of her own disgrace. For Bel-Imperia, who manages to kill the antagonist of her happiness and the ultimate murderer of her lovers, this still means a crime and a transgression of the law of men. Thus, her only way to escape from the weight of the consequences of her act is to put an end to her life. After accomplishing his revenge as well, Hieronimo kills even another person and attempts to do so with the king and the own mutilation of his body –biting his tongue–, following the impulses of his rage and grief which make him mad and unstable. According to Richardson “Davys's novel suggests that, for women at least, social reality trumps personal experience of the natural world, creating a social identity that in turn shapes personal identity” (20). Henceforth, Bel-Imperia’s reaction to the death of her lovers is the one of a honorable lady whose feelings are faithful and trustful. She fulfills the social expectations of her time for a woman of her position, and respects the social norms which make women virtuous and desirable. After her revenge, she is aware of the consequences of her sin and decides to kill herself. Richardson argued that “gender complicates personal identity, and that a woman’s subjective reality is amped by her status as object -by the understanding others have of her. Emphasizing women’s increasing vulnerability in a rapidly-changing world” (21).

Thus the character of Bel-Imperia as a seductress who uses men’s by exploiting the stereotypes of her gender to achieve her ultimate desire of revenge is put into question. Actually, Joyce rejects this hypothesis when she discusses that “The idea that a woman’s beauty gives her power over men is a cover for its justification of male sexual violence”<sup>14</sup>. Henceforth, Bel-Imperia behaves at all times as a proper lady deeply affected by the grief of losing her lover Andrea. The murder of Horatio is the death of her aspirations to be loved and

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 33 - 34.

it carries out her deed by fulfilling her duties as a witness of a crime. Afterwards, the plot advances towards the resolution of the events in blood and sacrifice. Her death is significant because it is the reminder that she was faithful and virtuous and that her sin was to love too much.



## Chapter 3

### Vindictive Passion and Madness in Performance

Following on the discussion in our last section, it is interesting to emphasize that Bel-Imperia is an innocent woman involved in Hieronimo's revengeful and violent plot. Due to this active planning mind, he is actually the one ending up playing the role of the instinctual and cruel avenger that most critics have wrongly attached to Bel-Imperia's personality. This section will prove, by engaging with the primary text, that Hieronimo's behaviour offers a contrast with Bel-Imperia's, what in turn leads us to question the origin of the manipulative and instinctual force interested in killing for revenge. Bercovitch agrees with this concept:

Similarly, though from an opposite motive, Bel-Imperia unwittingly falls in love with Horatio. She clearly believes at first that she desires only to avenge Andrea; her subsequent actions reveal that, even as she considers her scheme, love has in fact driven all such thoughts from her mind. Hieronimo, on the other hand, turns against his will into a criminal villain (225 - 226).

This quote is relevant to set forth the first and most important distinction between Bel-Imperia and Hieronimo. While Hieronimo seems to introduce himself as the heroic figure with the mission to avenge the unpunished murder of his son, his motivations throughout the play will be driven by madness and rage due to his frustrated attempts to bring justice through revenge. His instinctual violence guides his actions to punish not just the murderer of his son but also the whole system that refuses to listen to him and assist him in his pain. His revenge becomes a grotesque and atrocious act of bloody deaths that reinforce his role of villain. On the other hand, Bel-Imperia's revenge is more successful in punishing evil and restores a measure of social order, killing herself in an act of forgiveness. These differences in the way revenge is carried out will be discussed further in connection with the deaths of these two characters. Zachariah C. Long discussed in his essay how the reminiscence of trauma prompts men to take revenge. He wrote:

What emerges over the course of Hieronimo's first soliloquy is nothing less than a transformation in the relationship between his inner and outer worlds. At the center of this transformation is a reversal of affect: once Horatio dies, the feelings Hieronimo attaches to him and the world change from joy to sadness. This reversed affect then circulates throughout Hieronimo and his environment in a neatly defined progression, as the grief and anger that Hieronimo feels within him become externalized in his surroundings (157).

This transformation allows for differences in what we consider revengeful needs motivated by instinctual passions and Bel-Imperia's case, which is the one of transcendent love that overcomes everything. Her actions bring out poetic justice, perhaps divine justice, by trying to fix an unpunished crime that the state cannot redeem. After her frustrated aims to raise her voice to restore justice on her own terms, she ends up getting involved in Hieronimo's vindictive plans. After the death of his son, Hieronimo is driven out by madness. This madness is the constant reminder of his loss. After Horatio's death, and as opposed to Bel-Imperia, his reason to live is to kill in the name of his son. Bel-Imperia needs to release herself from her painful loss and to do it with temperance and fairness. Even when she incites revenge in Hieronimo, she uses the language of love. She reminds Hieronimo of the need to avenge his son and to return the love his son had for him:

BEL-IMPERIA: 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; (4.1.19-22).

In these lines, Bel-Imperia's words are not tainted with violence, rage, despair or death, they reveal justice and nostalgia. Revenge has a deeper meaning for her, since it shows the importance that the deceased person had in one's heart and the deeper sorrow left after death. As Gajowski writes, "self-realization occurs obliquely through learning how to love. The female protagonists are catalysts in this process of reconstructing male identity" (23). But Hieronimo ends up taking revenge as a device to challenge authority, and kill anybody who

becomes an obstacle to the achievement of revenge. He uses as much violence as possible to release physical and psychological pain.

HIERONIMO: Now shall I see the fall of Babylon,  
Wrought by the heavens in this confusion.  
And if the world like not this tragedy,  
Hard is the hap of old Hieronimo (4.1.197-200).

In this fragment Hieronimo is driven away by rage and needs bloody revenge. His irrational madness is based on his own masochistic memory though in here it is clear that he has forgotten his reasons for revenge due to “this confusion” which clouds his mind and reason. He never recalls his son but his corrupted corpse. His memories of the beloved ones to justify the need for revenge in the name of love becomes the image of a corpse in decay which does not keep anything related with what Horatio meant to him. Hence, during the metatheatrical scenario created by Hieronimo to achieve his revenge, he stabs Lorenzo to death, the man who was the master mind of all the crimes of the play. However, contrary to Bel-Imperia’s sacrifice, he cannot stand the thought of dying. Before seeking his own end, he needs to let loose his rage with the aim of being finally heard. For him behaving as an irrational beast may lead to recognition, since being gentle-like in accordance with his position in the court did not work out to impose the need of justice. Just when his madness drives him towards the dreadful resolution of the events, he becomes the center of attention. He seems to enjoy that, as after murdering Lorenzo he stabs the king’s brother, the Duke of Castile, to spread suffering even in the higher spheres. His does not seem to be an individual revenge, but a political punishment to promote anarchy<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>15</sup> Actually this distinction was made by McHardy when stating that the tendency of men is to end up falling into public revenge whereas women keep their interest on a private revenge. She said that there is an “association between the ‘masculine’ desire to look out for the common good and reject private revenge as opposed to the ‘feminine’ desire to pursue private interests and seek revenge” (41).

HIERONIMO: Indeed,  
You may'st torment me, as his wretched son  
Hath done in murdering my Horatio,  
But never shalt thou force me to reveal  
The thing which I have vowed inviolate.  
And therefore in despite of all the threats,  
Pleased with their deaths, and eased with their revenge,  
First take my tongue, and afterwards my heart (4.4.185-191)

He claims blood creating a cruel and aberrant scenario of his own son's corpse in decay, fresh corpses, knives stained with blood, even the mutilation of his own body, thus turning Hieronimo into a grotesque villain, rooted in a world of instinctual passions and violence. Brian Sheerin discusses the mutilation of Hieronimos's own body by biting off his tongue as an inner message, rather than being a political criticism of the king as a sovereign who must apply justice. Sheerin argues about the symbolic significance of Hieronimo's tongue. He asks for justice after the death of his son, and mutilates his own tongue after his petitions have been unheard. It is just when the chaos threatens the Spanish court that the king asks for information but it is too late for that. According to Sheerin:

The tongue that futilely beseeched favors from the sovereign in the first part of the play becomes itself an ironic favor for the sovereign. In effect, Hieronimo reifies the bodily obedience that the King desires from his subjects into a literal piece of his own body that may be given to the royal patron (269).

Thus, cutting his tongue is deeply symbolic even in an act of sheer madness that prompts him to act randomly by killing without a reason. Hieronimo decides to get rid of his tongue to show the uselessness of words to restore justice. He tried to expose the murder of his son, the need to punish the crime. When his pleas were ignored he opens the door to madness and performs the most monstrous show ever seen in a court. This sets Hieronimo in the sensible world of corruption and vindictive passions. On the other hand we can see what Bel-Imperia means in the revengeful plot that has nothing to do with Hieronimo's deeds and language.

After trying to settle justice by writing a confession letter and finally reaching Hieronimo's ear, Bel-Imperia gets basically speechless. Whereas scholars support an active role in the revengeful plot in *Bel-Imperia*, her opinion in this case is virtually non-existent. After reminding Hieronimo his duties towards his dead son, her soliloquy keeps using elevated terms which cannot relate her in the violent world of men.

BEL-IMPERIA: For here I swear in sight of heaven and earth,  
Shouldst thou neglect the love thou should retain  
And give it over and devise no more,  
Myself should send their hateful souls to hell,  
That wrought his downfall with extorts death (4.1.25-29).

Her words do not question this view of her excellence as a lady and a faithful lover. Even in such a threatening moment, she is still clear-minded on her motivations: punish evil through an act of revenge that is on a par with her love. Her means to readdress justice cannot be accomplished with words but with bloody actions. This runs contrary to the course of action of another female character in the play, Isabella, who is Horatio's mother. She is a noble woman that places a high value in the bonds between mother and son. However, she realizes that the only way to free herself from the grief is by embracing the honorable and atrocious act that proves her commitment to her own son's unfair murder: suicide. By deciding to put an end to her life, women's tendency to claim love as a powerful force that gives joy or torture is emphasized. In Isabella's case, the depth of her feelings for her son, exposed in her act of suicide when losing him, turns her into a better parent than Hieronimo will ever be. Hieronimo seems to use Horatio's death as an excuse to revolt against social and political order. On the other hand, Isabella decides to act in discretion for a sense of respect towards her son. However, in *Bel-Imperia's* case, she is not as fragile as Isabella and for this reason she is the focus of attention in this essay. She is unique and relevant, even a transgressor of the social expectations imposed on her. She acts. She forcefully agrees on her involvement in Hieronimo's revengeful plot. Though her lack of resistance is basically her realization that the

only way to show the depth of her feelings is by killing the murderer of her lovers. She grants importance to active revenge and this is precisely what makes the audience aware of the depth of her feelings, which impose themselves over her awareness of the immoral acts she is about to commit herself to. Her words as Perseda in the play by Hieronimo, become the speech of her unconsciousness. She is repressed by men but still she loved men, and this situation may just lead her towards the only escape: death.

BEL-IMPERIA (as Perseda): Yet thy power thou thinkest to command,  
And to thy power Perseda doth obey;  
But were she able, thus she would revenge  
Thy treacheries on thee, ignorable prince: *Stab him*  
And on herself she would be thus revenged *Stab herself* (4.4.63-67).

Her death can be understood in different ways but the means she uses is a reflection of her virtuousness in life. She might be aware the whole time of the weight of the crime and sacrifices herself to redeem herself from the sin. She may kill herself as a way to escape patriarchal power, as after the death of her lovers, there is no other man she wants to live for. She might kill herself to come back to her lovers, as in the present state of her life there is nothing else to live for and no one else she would rather stay for. Either way, her death lacks grotesqueness or dirtiness. It is clean, fast and dramatic. The audience sympathizes with her to the point that her death leaves a bitter-sweet feeling. She is free but her suffering was unfair. Even in death, people still recall her sincere feelings of love.

HIERONIMO: Poor Bel-Imperia missed her part in this:  
For though the story saith she should have died,  
Yet I of kindness, and of care for her,  
Did otherwise determine of her end;  
But love of him whom they did hate too much  
Did urge her resolution to be such (4.4.140-145).

It is worth noting that due to the anti-Catholic feelings of the period, suicide was no longer considered a sin and that can be seen in the way the characters and the audience felt on her



death. Therefore, Bel-Imperia becomes a symbol of justice, braveness and love even in the afterlife by achieving the perfect revenge. The one that, though questioning moral codes, is able to set justice without damaging more innocent souls. That is precisely what everybody will recall.



## Conclusions

### Consecrating Love in *The Spanish Tragedy*

This degree paper has reviewed the ways in which Thomas Kyd created something more than a revenge tragedy based on a Senecan tradition. His is a really complex plot which questions the reasons behind the psychological construction, development and performance of his characters. More specifically, it was proven how his female protagonist, Bel-Imperia, becomes the most iconic and transcendent figure in *The Spanish Tragedy*. Bearing in mind the historical context and the development of the genre, together with a close-reading of some passages of the play, it was possible to argue against what I consider a misconception of Bel-Imperia's significance in *The Spanish Tragedy*. To support this argument, I discussed the motivations of Bel-Imperia, which remain constant throughout the development of the plot. A spiritual notion of love inspired by (but not limited to) the Petrarchan model guides her actions. She becomes the embodiment of a cult figure in the play whose influence manages to achieve one of the main goals of humanity: justice. Due to her unstable depiction as a seductress woman under the effects of instincts and violent revenge, most scholars have understood Bel-Imperia as the plotter of bloody revenge. However, by paying attention to her performance, language, behavior and development as a character it was possible to establish that she is the only character whose performance is guided by faithfulness and trust. Love is the main quality that defines Bel-Imperia, as she stands above the corruption of a patriarchal society. She is more than what she appears to be. She is peacefulness in a world of tension, love in a play full of violence, constancy at a time of chaos and justice in a corrupted court.

Even though at times it may look as if social order and justice may be restored with utter revenge, actually the comparison of Bel-Imperia with Hieronimo proves this statement wrong. Kyd reminds us that revenge becomes a threatening force that triggers social chaos and madness. With Hieronimo's lack of consistency in his motivations to achieve revenge, he

loses track of his role as the hero with the duty to restore justice and finally becomes an anarchical figure. On the other hand, Bel-Imperia is the one to promote a sense of order by restoring the need for love. She dies leaving behind a sense of peacefulness that obliterates the rage of men. The significance of her character comes from her ability to reestablish a sense of balance while human law fails to do so. That is due to the fact that Bel-Imperia's love is spiritually grounded and beyond the corruption of the world of men. Her motivation is steady as opposed to that of Hieronimo's. While she takes it upon herself to revenge for love, even if this entails the breach of moral codes to achieve it, her indulgence justifies and condones her sins. That can be seen even after her suicide. Citizens still keep her in high regard. Therefore, the evil she has embraced is never remembered as her reasons are always linked to the need to revenge for love and restore justice. All in all, Bel-Imperia is the transgression of the role of the superficial damsel in distress who decides to fight against the social expectations imposed on her sex due to the fact that she loves too much. The spiritual love that links her to her lovers, gives her the power to claim her position as a capable woman and faithful lover who cannot forget how patriarchal justice has taken away from her what women treasure the most: love.

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