

‘By heaven *and* hell’: Re-evaluating representations of women and the angel/whore dichotomy in Renaissance revenge tragedy

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Abstract

This essay explores the treatment of female characters in Renaissance revenge tragedy: specifically in Kyd’s *The Spanish Tragedy* and Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. Revenge tragedy is a dramatic sub-genre that conventionally develops an unsettling level of audience sympathy for male characters who are, essentially, murderers. The paper shows how famous male revengers such as Kyd’s Hieronimo and Shakespeare’s Hamlet are characterised in a way that subtly resists their firm categorisation either as righteous *or* truly immoral figures. By contrast, it suggests, early modern culture displays a pronounced tendency to judge women only in relation to the divisive ideological dichotomy of the angel or the whore. The context of ambivalence which revenge tragedy creates for its male protagonists, does, however, have implications for women. The essay goes on to illustrate ways in which the portrayal of female characters in these plays transcends the rigid prescriptions of the angel/whore binary. It argues that Kyd’s Bel-Imperia and Shakespeare’s Ophelia and Gertrude cannot be fully aligned with either pole; theirs is a necessarily transgressive position through which the dramatists emphasise the problematic insufficiency of this divisive cultural model. Revenge tragedy, the essay argues, therefore grants its female characters an ambivalent status that notably parallels the intriguing allure of the tragedy’s male protagonists. In both cases, however, this challenging status is licensed by, and limited to, the consciously illusory space of the playhouse stage itself.

Keywords: Renaissance, revenge tragedy, drama

First performed in 1585, Thomas Kyd’s *The Spanish Tragedy* is usually credited with establishing the hugely popular - but often morally ambiguous - conventions of revenge drama. Prominent among these conventions is a challenging approach to the ideology of division that pervaded Renaissance society. In the tragedy’s opening scene, for example, Kyd pits love against war and Christianity against classical mythology as the authorities of the underworld debate the fate of the deceased Don Andrea. This essay is concerned with the similarly polarised female paradigm of the angel and the whore, an ideological dichotomy that dominated Renaissance constructions of femininity. As I will show, plays like *The Spanish Tragedy* and its successors in the revenge genre – most notably Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* – strikingly emphasise the damaging insufficiency of the angel/whore division. Simultaneously, however, these tragedies admit and indeed, even contribute to the continuing cultural dominance of this problematic early modern binary.

As he recalls his clandestine relations with the Spanish King’s niece, Bel-Imperia, Kyd’s Andrea strives to maintain notions of her ‘worthy’ passivity as an angelic receptacle of masculine passions, rather than as a sinful, desiring creature in her own right: ‘In secret *I possessed* a worthy dame / Which hight *sweet* Bel-Imperia by name.’² This claim becomes

more complicated since, as Frank Whigham (24) has observed, such a socially transgressive liaison could not have occurred 'without encouragement, given the lady's extreme dynastic status [and] her fiercely protective family'. Andrea's active self-assertions are darkened by a shadow of desperation that reveals the utter lack of transitional space existing for Renaissance women between the dominant cultural categories of the angel and the whore. Andrea struggles to locate his beloved convincingly on either side of this chasm, yet it remains equally impossible to conceive her intermediate status. The difficulty of comprehending a median behavioural model is confirmed by the widespread popularity of the myriad of male-scripted advice books that emerged at this time, including Thomas Bentley's *The Monument of Matrones* (1582):

There is nothing that becommeth a maid better than soberness, silence, shamefastnes, and chastite, both of bodie and mind. For these things being once lost, she is no more a maid, but a strumpet in the sight of God (qtd. in Hull 142).

In this essay, I will explore ways in which Kyd's *Bel-Imperia* and Shakespeare's *Ophelia* and *Gertrude* transcend the rigid demands of this habitually certified Renaissance dichotomy. Ultimately, I will suggest that the briefly transgressive potential of these female characters reflects many of the typical moral ambiguities of the revenge genre – ambiguities that typically serve to intensify the allure and tragic stature of the primary revengers in these plays: their male protagonists. For this reason, it will first be useful briefly to outline the usual tragic dilemma of the revenge 'hero', a convention established so influentially by *The Spanish Tragedy*. The moral equivocalness of figures like Kyd's Hieronimo and Shakespeare's Hamlet is epitomised by Francis Bacon's description of the revenge act itself as: 'a kind of wild justice' (9). Even when sparked from the searing fire of personal vengeance, murder – the pinnacle of revenge - was clearly a crime, an action contravening the dominant inflictions of early modern Christian morality: 'Thou shalt not avenge nor beare any grudge against the children of thy people' (Leviticus XIX). Yet equally, revenge attacks were also subject to some form of justification in terms of familial duty, as Fredson Bowers (39-40) has famously noted:

There is no question that the Elizabethans firmly believed in the law of God to forbid private vengeance, correspondingly there was a very real tradition existing in favour of revenge under certain circumstances, and especially of the heir's legal duty to revenge his father.

The impossibility of reconciling these contrasting demands casts avengers like Hieronimo and Hamlet in a similarly uncertain light. Fundamentally, both are violent murderers, yet their presentations are hardly unsympathetic. In the final scene of *Hamlet*, for instance, Fortinbras offers an epitaph of loss and wastage, rather than retributive judgement: 'For he was likely, had he been put upon / To have proved most royally.'³ Much of the play's sense of tragedy evolves from this sympathetic understanding. Nonetheless, as Bowers has observed, we cannot escape the inevitable conclusion of Hamlet's death: 'given his sympathetic characterisation he is a hero, but he must die' (94). To allow even a possibly mitigated murderer to live would be to negate God's justice, and by extension, to question divine order. I suggest that, despite their

challenging potential, the female characters in both tragedies ultimately suffer a parallel, socially sanctified fate. The consciously illusory space of the Renaissance stage allows both dramatists many opportunities to criticise the unrealistic conventions of contemporary feminine expectation. Yet like the revenge motif itself, the limited, performative context of such transgressions conversely highlights the enduring ideological strength of these very polarities.

‘Prompted to my revenge by heaven *and* hell’ (Shakespeare, “Hamlet” II.ii.562). The conflicting pressures that here inspire so much pathos for Hamlet are echoed in Bel-Imperia’s first scene. Her opening dialogue initially paints her in the sombre shades of an innocent victim, mourning the late Andrea who ‘in his death hath buried [her] delights’ (Kyd I.iv.5). However, her actions in the play as a whole can equally undermine ideals of feminine passivity, defining the Spanish heiress as a plotting, desiring agent of revelation. For example, her expository grievances concurrently remind us of the union’s illicit nature, and, as I have already implied, the licentious alignment she invites thorough sustaining it. Similarly, although Bel-Imperia’s first lines are peppered with melancholy, they also reinforce typically damning allegations of her unfeminine agency. Her exchange with Horatio is punctuated with imperatives: ‘I must entreat thee’ (I.iv.3), ‘But now wear thou it’ (I.iv.48). For Kyd’s contemporary audience, this commanding tone would be synonymous with physical licentiousness. Maureen Quilligan expresses this equation in her essay ‘Staging Gender’ (211):

The triple injunction to be ‘Chaste, Silent, and Obedient’ is the fundamental tenet for the social control of the female; sexual order is ensured by policing language. It would seem that a female body must be silent in order to be chaste.

In this light, perhaps Kyd *does* intend us to condemn Bel-Imperia. Like the stigmatised Mariana in Shakespeare’s *Measure for Measure*, her furtive involvement with Andrea certainly casts her as ‘neither maid, widow, nor wife’ (V.i.176), essential categories which also emphasise the overriding masculine dependency of Renaissance women’s social definition. Such negative interpretations are reinforced with reference to the legalities of Bel-Imperia’s sexual choice. In terms of class, her involvement with both Andrea and Horatio would inspire contemporary censure, as although both are gentlemen of some rank, they remain far below the regality which exudes from even her name. Most dramatically, since her uncle is childless, Bel-Imperia is Spain’s sole female heir and these romantic liaisons are actually high treason: ‘if a *man* do violate the king’s [companion] or eldest daughter unmarried... *his* act will be judged treasonous’.⁴ Notably, this sentence’s masculine specificity also demonstrates the transgressive potential of Kyd’s heroine; female agency is not legally recognised, yet the encouragement and the crime are undoubtedly hers.

Such accusations are strikingly reaffirmed by the circumstances of Bel-Imperia’s second affection. Her flirtation with Horatio seems calculated, conceived as a revenge plot rather than reflecting romantic attraction: ‘Yes, second love shall further my revenge’ (I.iv.66). During the couple’s primary courtship scene, Bel-Imperia’s agency - ‘I dart this kiss at thee’ (II.iv.40) – powerfully refutes the lingering myths of demure, feminine passivity that so unconvincingly punctuate Andrea’s introduction. Horatio’s response ‘Thus I retort the dart thou threw’st at me’ (II.iv.41) echoes her language and

(notably masculine) warlike imagery: he is the object, she the temptress. However, like her former lover, we find ourselves similarly unwillingly to condemn her actions. Despite all her transgressions of the angelic virginal ideal, Frank Whigham (25) notes, 'Kyd does not invite us to occupy a traditional politico-moral posture regarding this unmarried woman's heterodox sexual behaviour... Bel-Imperia's sexual freedom is placed by its author in detachment from the usual, straightforward moral responses.'

How does Kyd achieve this? Perhaps ironically, the first seeds of Bel-Imperia's defence are sown in her plans to entice Horatio. As cold as such premeditated desire appears it could, for a contemporary audience, actually have distanced her from the stereotype of the uncontrolled whore and her voracious carnality. In *Hymeneutics* (39) Marie H. Loughlin exposes the early modern fear of female hysteria, an anxiety apparent in the diagnosis of 'Womb-fury' given by the seventeenth-century physician Lazarus Riverius: 'A sort of Madness arising from a vehement and unbridled desire of Carnal Imbracement, which desire dethrones the Rational Faculty so far, that the patient utters wanton and lascivious speeches'. Although the erotic implications of her murmurs like 'life in passion dies' (II.iv.47) cannot be entirely discounted, Bel-Imperia's ulterior motives for pursuing Horatio define the attachment as an informed decision, rather than simply a physical response to the overflowing carnality with which women's bodies were so often equated. In *The Spanish Tragedy*, the latter is epitomised by Lorenzo's misguided assumption that, upon Horatio's death, his sister's unquenchable desire will be instantly transferred to Balthazar, his preferred recipient: 'Her favour must be won by his remove' (II.i.136). Recalling the mournful innocence of her introduction, Lorenzo's homicidal intentions also invite sympathy for Bel-Imperia's position as a pawn in her family's plot to unite Spain and Portugal through this arranged marriage. Lorenzo notably employs the angel/whore dichotomy to justify Horatio's murder, claiming he acted to defend his sister's honour. However, his scheming, Machiavellian associations warn us to distrust his promises, and by extension to question the validity of the binary he invokes. Lorenzo's political incentives also invalidate this excuse: how can he care for her chastity if he is so willing to marry her off for familial gain? Is this not effectively an act of enforced prostitution? Such mitigating questions, and the unusual feminine sympathy they provoke, inevitably recall Juliet Dusinberre's memorable proposal in *Shakespeare and the Nature of Women* (123) that, 'in the arranged marriage the parent is the bawd of polite society'. Kyd's flirtation with similarly damning implications subtly slows his audience in their judgmental haste to confirm Bel-Imperia's position within the expected binaries of feminine behaviour. Whilst the heiress clearly does not embody a paradigm of angelic chastity, we cannot entirely condemn her transgressions either, since they illustrate the converse social vulnerability of any woman who *does* attempt to fulfil such unrealistic models.

This idea is poignantly echoed in Shakespeare's presentation of Ophelia. During her first appearance, the girl's father warns her to reject Hamlet's advances: 'Tender yourself more dearly' (I.iii.107). As this suggestively financial terminology implies, Polonius is open to the same accusations of hypocrisy as *The Spanish Tragedy's* Lorenzo: most notably when he later contradicts his own recommendations, happily using Ophelia as a lure to divulge Hamlet's troubling intentions. Such incongruity powerfully illustrates the dangerous paradox of the angelic feminine ideal, as Marilyn French (100) has commented:

Female virtue is identical with chastity; thus Polonius, who has carefully trained his daughter to be obedient and chaste, is able to use her as a piece of bait for his spying without any sense that he has compromised her – after all, her hymen is still intact.

An enduringly inspiring character, Shakespeare's Ophelia has, since her creation, provoked a strikingly varied iconography of artistic and critical reappraisal: invoked simultaneously as an ideal of natural innocence and as a destructive exemplar of feminine sexuality.⁵ This strikingly ambivalent interpretative potential is perhaps epitomised by the above instance of paternally sanctified compromise. Ophelia *is* pure: both in terms of sexual restraint, and also through her less explicit attempts to conform mentally to the subservient demands of the 'angel' stereotype: 'I shall obey my lord' (I.iii.136). Yet this obedience simultaneously facilitates her corruption as part of a trap to defeat Hamlet. Such notions are dramatically verified during Hamlet's heated exchange with Polonius. Here, his bawdy allegations reveal Hamlet's own astute understanding of Polonius's paternal authority and its corruptive potential: 'You're a fishmonger' (II.ii.175). For Shakespeare's contemporary audience this subtle warning would have been intensified by this profession's sustained alignment with the carnal trade of the pander. Most notably, this base equation reiterates the chasm of difference that Ophelia perceives between her chaste, yet simultaneously compromised reality and either of the rigidly defined poles of dominant feminine expectation.

Hamlet's famous attack, 'Get thee to a nunnery' (III.i.122), similarly confirms this dilemma, highlighting the fundamental impossibility of *any* woman fulfilling the rigid demands of the angel ideal. Since 'nunnery' was Elizabethan slang for a brothel, his vitriolic command blurs divisions between abstinence and sin, implying that even the most chaste intentions will suffer inevitable corruption: 'be thou chaste as ice, pure as snow, thou shalt not escape calumny' (II.ii.136). For the play's original early modern spectators, these sentiments were also furthered in more practical terms by the vivid changes of the Reformation (from 1536), which included the widespread closure of monastic institutions. The removal of this spiritually sanctified escape left marriage, and the associated sexual union that Hamlet so abhors, as the only remaining pathway not barred to respectable women.

Scholars of *Hamlet* (for example, Walley 778) once laboured to amplify the contrast between the protagonist's madness and that of Ophelia. Such divisive interpretations, however, are perhaps over-simplified. Both characters are dramatically affected by the death of their respective fathers; but, if as I have already suggested, our sympathy for Hamlet emerges from an awareness of the contrasting legal and familial duties tearing him asunder, then surely Ophelia's loss of 'fair judgement' (IV.v.81) reveals a similarly devastating impact in relation to the dichotomous prescriptions for femininity: 'I think nothing, my lord' (III.ii.106). Here, in addition to Hamlet's vulgarly inferred pun on the female genitalia, Ophelia's words invoke a broader paradox: the contradictory social requisites daunting the Renaissance woman. 'Nothing,' or perhaps 'nowhere,' accurately summarises her (lack of) status within these. As neither angel nor whore, she is an ideological anomaly, since early modern cultural prescription lacks the space fully to express her necessarily transgressive position. In French's words: 'Ophelia

is part of a trap, but she is innocent' (103). The many parallels between her ambivalent situation and that of Bel-Imperia reiterate the wider, social relevance of this dilemma. Neither woman is able to reconcile the demands of familial duty with either her own impulses or, essentially, the idealistic social expectations of her gender.

A similarly equivocal reading can be made of Hamlet's mother. Initially, the Danish prince's nauseatingly vivid description of her sexual insatiability colours Queen Gertrude in the black hues of a 'fallen' woman:

In the rank sweat of an enseamed bed,
Stewed in corruption, honeying and making love
Over the nasty sty- (III.iv.83-5).

The raw power of Hamlet's language makes it very difficult to mitigate the whore stereotype as he chronicles the alarming rapidity and incestuous possibilities of Gertrude's remarriage to his uncle Claudius. In order to do so, we must remember exactly that: that all these judgements *are* Hamlet's, and that Shakespeare's protagonist remains a very persuasive manipulator of language. In contrast, as Rebecca Smith remarks (85), 'Gertrude...speaks very little, having less dialogue than any other major character in *Hamlet* – a mere 157 lines out of 4,042 (3.8 percent)'. For our purposes, this striking statistic is most relevant because it aligns Gertrude perfectly with the era's previously described models of silent and restrained femininity, a sharp departure from Hamlet's base allegations. The deferential tone of the Queen's first speech enhances this kinder interpretation: 'Good Hamlet, cast thy nightly colour off / And let thine eye look like a friend on Denmark' (I.ii.68-9). This plea immediately exposes her pronounced awareness of duty as a defining feature of Gertrude's character. Here, her words remind us of both her maternal duty to Hamlet, and his political responsibilities as heir to the Danish throne. Concurrently, in the play as a whole, Gertrude's attentions seem to be divided between the former and her equally engaging attachment to Claudius: 'how fares my lord?' (III.ii.245). Momentarily sweeping aside any incestuous allegations, such devotion seems laudable: the epitome of the chaste marriage prescribed by writers such as Thomas Bentley. Yet the engaging nature of Hamlet's character, and the sheer passion of his insistence - 'frailty thy name is woman' (I.ii.146) - renders it very difficult convincingly to overlook his derogatory accusations.

However, when viewed alongside the critical paradoxes embodied by Bel-Imperia and Ophelia, Gertrude's behaviour can perhaps be understood in less damning terms. For example, her quiet conformity to the demands of the 'angel' ideal can be conversely used to elucidate the puzzling and, in Hamlet's terms, 'most wicked speed' (I.ii.156) with which she remarries. Having identified her passive, intensely malleable characteristics we must ask: how would she have managed the public-sphere responsibilities that would inevitably plague the life of a royal widow? It is conceivable that she could not, and her union with Claudius is, as Dorothea Kehler concludes, 'the corollary of an otherwise praiseworthy habit of obedience to male authority' (405). This somewhat recontextualises Hamlet's famous criticism: Gertrude's remarriage *is* a sign of feminine 'frailty,' but it is the socially encouraged weakness of passive models, rather than the inability to suppress sexual desire. From this perspective, Hamlet's words become a criticism of the angel/whore dichotomy itself, which facilitates the manipulation of women by

encouraging such total compliance. Bel-Imperia's story warns us that female agency rapidly provokes censure: 'stop her mouth, away with her' (II.iv.63). But as Ophelia and Gertrude learn, uncompromising passivity can still lead to corruption.

If we embrace the perspectives of Smith and Kehler, then like Bel-Imperia, Gertrude becomes a woman who accentuates the fundamental limitations of the angel/whore binary through the simple fact of our inability fully to align her with either pole. However, for both characters, the scope of the ideologically transgressive space in which they seem briefly to exist remains painfully limited. For example, Shakespeare grants Gertrude her most ideologically transcendent moment during the duel between Hamlet and Laertes (V.ii), which is, of course, also the scene of her death. This is the only time we witness the Danish Queen directly disobeying her husband, and significantly she does so *only* to fulfil her opposing maternal duty and celebrate Hamlet's martial prowess:

KING CLAUDIUS	Gertrude do not drink
QUEEN GERTRUDE	I will, my lord, I pray you pardon me. (V.ii.233-4)

The poisoned cup that ends Gertrude's life becomes strikingly symbolic of the prevailing moral problems that haunt the genre of revenge tragedy itself. Just as the challenging ethical questions posed by the male revengers are developed sympathetically but must eventually be suppressed in death, so the cultural world of *The Spanish Tragedy* and *Hamlet* allows only a limited potential for the similarly transcendent presentation of female characters. The cultural threat posed by Ophelia's socially unrecognised intermediacy is quickly neutralised by her madness and subsequent death, while this, Gertrude's most strikingly mitigated act of disobedience, also necessarily enables her demise. This idea is most emphatically enforced with reference to *The Spanish Tragedy's* climactic end sequence. From one perspective, it is here that Kyd allows Bel-Imperia to stray furthest from her era's concrete prescriptions of feminine behaviour. Many heroines of Renaissance tragedy, including Kyd's Isabella, Shakespeare's Juliet and perhaps Ophelia too, resort to suicide to end their suffering.⁶ Yet although the Spanish heiress does conform to this dark convention, she does so only after she has been granted the stereotypically masculine 'privilege' of killing her enemy, Balthazar. This murder is the pinnacle of Bel-Imperia's departure from the limited sphere of womanly expectation: just as the circumstances of her romantic agency are simultaneously condemned and mitigated, so her public actions are deeply immoral, yet we sympathise with her desire to avenge the deaths of her two lovers. However, even this most transgressive position remains carefully predefined and severely limited in duration. Paradoxically, Bel-Imperia kills only in accordance with the masculine authority of Hieronimo's play script: '*But were she able, thus she would revenge / Thy treacheries*' (IV.iv.65-6). As there is no stable ideological space for her to exist between the male-scripted polarities that define her sex, she must act out another predetermined role, which is of course dramatically constricted by the unities of Hieronimo's drama.

A kind of careful choreography thus epitomises both dramatists' paradoxical approach to constructions of femininity. By presenting complex heroines who cannot be comfortably categorised as either angels or whores, Kyd and Shakespeare subtly undermine the unrealistically limited scope of this binary and emphasise the suffering of

women who are restricted but not recognised by the dominant sexual paradigms of early modern culture. Yet despite their challenging potential, Bel-Imperia, Ophelia and Gertrude can exist only within an intricately woven dramatic context: a notion recapitulated by the foreign detachment of the plays' respective Spanish and Danish surroundings. With no ideologically accepted space to which to return, Bel-Imperia's briefly transgressive life must end when Hieronimo's internal drama ends: '*stab herself*' (IV.iv.67). Her scripted suicide powerfully reiterates the pervasive nature of the angel/whore binary. Although, as both dramatists illustrate, such prescriptions *are* fatally flawed, the theatrical limitations of this very act of criticism conversely renew the dichotomy's potency as an enduring facet of Renaissance ideology. Suffering in revenge drama is conventionally a consequence of the irreconcilable nature of society's dominant ideological precepts, a tragedy as devastating for the women in these plays as it is for their famously challenging male protagonists.

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² Thomas Kyd, *The Spanish Tragedy* (I.i.10-11, my italics) in Barker and Hinds. All subsequent references are to this edition, and will be included in the text.

³ William Shakespeare, *Hamlet* (V.ii.341-2) in Greenblatt. All subsequent in-text citations use this edition.

⁴ Edward III, statute number 5c.2, (qtd. in Whigham 25).

⁵ For a concise outline of Ophelia's myriad incarnations see Showalter.

⁶ In *The Spanish Tragedy*, Isabella is Horatio's mother. She expresses her grief at his death by wreaking her vengeance on a tree (IV.ii), a symbol of fertility and the bodily matter with which women were usually associated, as opposed to the intellect and spiritual alignment of Renaissance men. Thus, Isabella's role is far more conducive to prevailing feminine ideology than that of Bel-Imperia.