

# *The Spanish Tragedy* and *Los Comendadores de Córdoba*. Two Different Approaches to the Senecan Revenge Theme

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Seneca's influence on Renaissance playwrights has not only been studied for a long time but it has also been carefully and fastidiously traced and highlighted. However, the over stress on the importance of this Latin author's tragedies in later literature led many scholars to adopt quite an opposite view on the issue. A reaction followed then which tried by any possible means to deny and even discredit the authority and relevance of Seneca in any subsequent piece of work<sup>1</sup>. These confronted opinions also found their way in the study of Renaissance plays. Scholars, therefore, do not seem to agree on the notions, devices and even characters that could have been due to this Latin philosopher and writer.

Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* (1582-1592) is a good illustration of the points mentioned above, since its reading has led to three different attitudes. Firstly, a large number of critics follow a traditional approach to this play and strongly defend Seneca's influence on it<sup>2</sup>. Secondly, another group of authors wildly denies any possible literary connections between Seneca and Kyd<sup>3</sup>. Finally, an increasing number of scholars try to conciliate these two extremes by not merely focusing on those aspects associated somehow with Seneca's literary works, but also by giving its due importance to any other material which contributed to frame Kyd's masterpiece. Lope de Vega's *Los comendadores de Córdoba* (1596-1598) presents quite a different situation, since this play has remained for long nearly forgotten by critics. An exhaustive analysis of Seneca's influence on this drama is not found and those who are familiar with Lope's works have generally tended to minimize the presence of the Latin author in the theatrical productions of the Spanish playwright.

The main aims of this paper is first to show how the classical notion of revenge is developed in *The Spanish Tragedy* and *Los comendadores de Córdoba*; thus, these two dramas can be suitably compared in order to illustrate to what extent Classicism was welcome in XVIth-century England and Spain. This will provide the basis for taking a further step in this study, as a second section here will be devoted to analyze and finally disclose the manner in which the English and the Spanish dramatists handled the same source material to produce radically different plays in both form and plot.

Seneca's concern with disproportionate passions has undoubtedly provided the basic framework for his own dramatic production. This was in fact the main reason why his tragedies attracted the attention of Renaissance playwrights who found in these plays precious material for inspiration and revival. Those dramatists particularly focused on the revenge theme, and *The Spanish Tragedy* as well as *Los comendadores de Córdoba* are, in this view, representative plays of this trend in drama which took revenge as the

main source of action and dramatic tension. Let us highlight those aspects in these dramas which determine the central relevance of the revenge theme. Considering *The Spanish Tragedy* first, up to five characters spend their time plotting on the stage in their quest for vengeance, and all of them hold a leading role in the play. Bel-Imperia has a double reason for revenge: first, the killing of Andrea, and secondly, Horatio's death<sup>4</sup>. She finds help in Hieronimo, the old Marshal, who desperately seeks to avenge his murdered son<sup>5</sup>. Balthazar, prince of Portugal, willingly assists in the murder of Horatio not only because the latter has made him prisoner, but also because he has discovered that the young warrior is having a love affair with the woman the prince wants to marry<sup>6</sup>. The Portuguese prince has a powerful ally in Lorenzo, whose reason for revenge is a matter of pride: Horatio proved to be more courageous in battle than the king's nephew himself. And finally, Andrea longs for revenge since he feels he was unfairly killed in combat. Such a complex network based on personal vengeance is not the only thing which demonstrates the crucial role that this passion plays in Kyd's drama. Revenge itself becomes a living character in this play, and together with Andrea, they observe and comment on the main action. It is therefore clear that they both play a similar role to that of the chorus in Senecan tragedy. No doubt the audience sees this allegorical figure as the one who decides and controls the movements of those in the Spanish Court and who is able to foresee the development of the whole tragedy. Revenge is then the passion which both generates the conflict and controls it all through the performance.

Lope de Vega also chose to deal with the vengeance theme when writing *Los comendadores de Córdoba*. Here only two characters, Veinticuatro and Rodrigo, obsessively try to mend their damaged social standing and manliness by means of revenge. It is true that the situation mostly concerns Veinticuatro, due to his social status and to the fact that he is the one deceived by his wife, his niece and the *comendadores*. Nevertheless Rodrigo has also reasons for revenge. His eagerness to encourage and help Veinticuatro in his murderous purpose is not merely a proof of his loyalty to him. Actually, his master's grievance turns out to be the best and safest means to punish Esperanza and Galindo<sup>7</sup>. The master's revenge also becomes his servant's. One thing however must be underlined at this point. In this drama, desire for revenge emerges from a firmly rooted social parameter: the Spanish honor code. According to this, the worthiness of the individual does not depend on his/her own merits but it is determined by his/her ability to acquire and maintain what is known as *honra*. Thus honor becomes a value constantly threatened and once it has been destroyed the only way to restore it is through public revenge<sup>8</sup>. That is, through the public recognition of the punishing of the offenders at the hands of the offended. The important point here is not the act itself but the social acknowledgement of such an act, and this provides the structure of the drama as well as the revenge motive.

At this point, it is important to bear in mind that revenge is by no means the only feature that the English and the Spanish dramas considered here have in common with Seneca's tragedies. As the classical author did before, Kyd and Lope concentrated on the plottings and sufferings of the avenger and they both also provided their plays with a bloody end. Seneca's influence is then quite clear. Nevertheless this resemblance remains only on a superficial level. A closer study shows that these sixteenth-century authors, when compared to Seneca, adopted a different approach to the vengeance theme and in doing so the result was completely different in each case. The following section will be devoted to analyzing this last point.

Common to all three playwrights seems to be their interest in the manifestations and consequences of revenge. However, they considered the same material from very distinct perspectives. Seneca, being

himself a philosopher, employed his dramas as a way of exploring the human soul from a philosophical point of view. In *The Spanish Tragedy* however it is the ethical concern which prevails. The choice of the revenge theme was not a mere chance but it was in fact a very controversial issue of the age: it sets the question of whether murder can be ethically and morally accepted on the grounds of personal revenge. Actually, vengeance generates a double conflict: on the one hand it is contrary to social laws which punish any kind of murder; on the other hand it is contrary to the religious and moral laws of God which establish that He is the only one entitled to destroy a human life. Kyd perfectly outlined this twofold situation in his play showing the anguish of a father who tries by all means to avenge his murdered son. This, in fact, explains Hieronimo's performance and his delay in carrying out his intentions. Considering his behaviour carefully, it is easy to realize that the old Marshal does not plan his revenge immediately after the discovery of his murdered son, but he tries first to get justice from the King, the major representative of the community and the law. He is therefore unwilling to break the first of those precepts mentioned above. Nevertheless, all his efforts are in vain and it is then when he turns to the heavens craving for justice. The famous soliloquy opening act III serves to mark this change:

HIERONIMO *Vindicta mihi!*

Ay, heavens 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.

(*The Spanish Tragedy*, III, xiii, 1-5)

In fact, the first line here is not taken from Seneca, as it might be thought<sup>9</sup>, but from the Bible (Romans, xiii, 19) and clearly states that revenge is not an instrument of man but of God. Thus the audience becomes perfectly aware that the hero feels trapped between these two forces: the social and the moral-religious one. Thereby, as soon as he decides to break with them both it becomes clear to all that he is doomed to die at the end of the tragedy. At this point then Hieronimo sets himself apart from the community: he becomes a madman<sup>10</sup>. There is no room for murder in such a society, therefore there is no room either for a murderer, no matter the nature of his crime and its possible explanation and justification on emotional or personal grounds.

Concentrating now on Lope's *Los comendadores de Córdoba*, it must be said that such a play, being free from the Senecan philosophical approach to the revenge theme, does not share with Kyd's the very same view on the subject. Here the Spanish honor code is so powerful a force that it seems to take precedence over the social and the religious-moral laws. As it has been previously said, such a code points to the death of the offender as the necessary requirement to restore the lost *honra*<sup>11</sup>. That is why as soon as Veinticuatro's dishonor has been publicly disclosed, his main goal is to regain social credit through revenge regardless of the fact that this may contradict law and morals. But all this does not mean that human sense of justice has vanished from that play. Veinticuatro is actually seen coming back to Court after the murders to receive the deserved punishment for his crimes and he says: "y ahora a tus manos llega (=the sword) / desnuda como la ves, / a que cortes mi cabeza" (*Los comendadores de Córdoba*, III, 1258). The avenger is therefore aware that he is breaking the law, but he feels at the same time that his performance is somehow socially and morally justified. The King's reaction at the discovery of

Veinticuatro's dishonor and revenge shows the way in which social laws yield ground to the strong imperatives of the honor code. There are then two occasions on which the major representative of the community demonstrates his approval of revenge in certain circumstances: when he indirectly suggests how the betrayed husband should recover his honor<sup>12</sup>, and when he makes the surprising decision to reward assassination.

Something similar takes place at the religious-moral level. The point of view here is that the avenger does not go beyond morality in his murderous business, he becomes instead an agent of moral justice itself. Thereby special care has been taken to underline the sinful and guilty behaviour of the adulterous couple and their friends. They were the ones who first transgressed the principles of morality and because of this Veinticuatro considers himself entitled to impart the penalty. That is why he thinks God is assisting him at the very moment of his revenge<sup>13</sup>. The Spanish cuckolded husband sees no reason then to question his actions and the end of the play seems to prove this.

At first sight then, there is a striking difference between these plays. Whilst in the *The Spanish Tragedy* the murderer is a character outcast from society and for that reason he is bound to die, in *Los comendadores de Córdoba*, however, he finally becomes a hero. It could be argued then, that Kyd and Lope de Vega pursued completely different aims in writing these two dramas. Nevertheless such a contrast may turn out to be, at a deeper level, the point that makes these two dramas alike in their subject matter and purpose. Following closer the Senecan parameters Kyd offers in his play a direct criticism of vengeance. The conclusion of it makes this clear since all the characters involved in a killing are condemned in their earthly existence to the same penalty: death. However something else needs to be mentioned. There is also a kind of heavenly justice, for in the afterlife Revenge is more selective. This figure suggests at the very end that Andrea's friends will be rewarded (that is, those whose acts were somehow justified) while his foes will suffer an everlasting torture<sup>14</sup>.

In Lope's case however it is necessary to go beyond the bare facts. A superficial reading of this play will lead the reader to conclude too hastily that Lope made this drama as a defence of unpunished personal revenge. Further analysis however shows that, scattered all throughout the play, there are some clues to suggest that beneath its first reading as a celebration of murder there lies in fact an attack on the socially accepted honor code. In the article "Celebration or Subversion? *Los comendadores de Córdoba* Reconsidered" Meelvena McKendrick has pointed to Veinticuatro's weakness as an individual and the surprising end of this play as the elements which confirm the implicit irony in *Los comendadores de Córdoba*. But, in my opinion, it is not only this that provides us with the necessary clues to fully understand Lope's real purpose. Act III, the scene which presents how the murders take place, shows certain comic situations that are deliberately intended to ridicule Veinticuatro's reaction. The way a parrot and a monkey are menaced and finally killed because they obviously could not inform of their master's dishonor cannot be taken seriously and the same applies to the scene which presents Galindo and Esperanza awaiting death wrapped in rugs. It is also relevant to comment at this point on Lope's own opinion on this subject. He certainly disliked the idea of revenge when this was merely directed at clearing up one's own reputation, and he clearly states so in the preface to "La más perfecta venganza" (184). It seems natural then that such ideas could have also been introduced in his plays, even though they appear to have been adapted to the popular taste to such an extent that they are impossible to detect at first sight. No doubt Menéndez Pelayo could not perceive the irony in Lope's lines when he concluded: "La matanza final hace poco efecto por su misma atrocidad y por los estúpidos chistes del gracioso, y por

los grotescos incidentes de la mona y el papagayo” (282).

All this lead us to conclude that *The Spanish Tragedy* and *Los comendadores de Córdoba* do take the Senecan revenge motive as an excuse to discuss the crucial personal dilemma that vengeance sets. But the English and the Spanish dramatists chose different paths to approach the topic: Lope’s satirical mood produced a subtle parody of a ruthless social imperative while Kyd’s grave tone resulted in a deep reflective tragedy.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> CND Costa, for instance, believes some of Seneca’s verse to be “a grotesquely sick joke” (110), while F.L. Lucas states in similar terms that the plot in *Tiestes* “is as simple as revolting” (61).

<sup>2</sup> John Cunliffe as well as J. A. Symonds can be pointed out as representatives of this traditional trend.

<sup>3</sup> M.J. Anderson, F.L. Lucas, M.K. and A.L. Kistner and Martin Helzle are worth mentioning in this case.

<sup>4</sup> There is something enigmatic about Bel-Imperia’s role. It is impossible to discover whether her true reason for revenge is her love for Andrea or for Horatio or for them both.

<sup>5</sup> See *The Spanish Tragedy* II, v, 51-54.

<sup>6</sup> Notice that he was defeated in both war and love by the same man and that is the reason why he exclaims: “Glad that I know on whom to be revenged” (*The Spanish Tragedy*, II, , 114).

<sup>7</sup> Some allusions in the play suggest that there was some kind of relationship between Rodrigo and the young chambermaid. But as soon as the comendadores arrived her favours were shown towards Galindo.

<sup>8</sup> The idea that the *honra* does not depend on one’s own merits is underlined by the main character himself (*Los comendadores de Córdoba*, III, 1251), and it is to Rodrigo to explicitly indicate the way such Spanish honor code works:

RODRIGO            Señor, no le ha perdido (=el honor) quien le cobra:  
                          ¿un mentís no se cobra por un duelo,  
                          por dar de palos, y esos con la muerte?  
                          Pues también la corrompida fe se niega  
                          por dar muerte a los que son culpados.  
                          (*Los comendadores de Córdoba*, III, 1251)

<sup>9</sup> Remember that Hieronimo is holding a book that is supposed to be by Seneca because the old Marshal quotes from it some maxims attributed to this Latin author.

<sup>10</sup> Hieronimo’s madness also becomes a proof that this character no longer fits the community since madmen are normally described as antisocial individuals.

<sup>11</sup> That is the reason why Veinticuatro exclaims that the murders have resulted in “que volviese mi honra/ a estar sobre las estrellas” (*Los comendadores de Córdoba*, III, 1258).

<sup>12</sup> See the royal maxim in which the King refers to both the ring and Veinticuatro’s honor:

Si a tu mujer se la diste,  
que tu mujer te la dé.

(*Los comendadores de Córdoba*, II, 1246)

<sup>13</sup> See Veinticuatro's own words:

Tomó don Jorge su espada,  
pero Dios, que a tiempos ciega,  
o el miedo que el Sacramento  
pone a quien sus leyes quiebra  
hizo que de una estocada  
cayese su infamia a tierra.

(*Los comendadores de Córdoba*, III, 1258)

<sup>14</sup> See Andrea's last lines:

Then haste we down to meet thy friends and foes:  
To place thy friends in ease, the rest in woes.

(*The Spanish Tragedy*, IV, v, 45-6)

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