

**Thomas Rist, ed..** *The Spanish Tragedy: A Critical Reader*. London: Bloomsbury, 2016. 320 pp. \$29.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-4725-2895-7.

**Reviewed by** Rena Bood

**Published on** H-Nationalism (November, 2018)

**Commissioned by** Krisztina K. Lajosi-Moore (University of Amsterdam)

*The Spanish Tragedy: A Critical Reader* (2016) offers an interesting opportunity to explore Thomas Kyd's play at an in-depth and intertextual level. Although the idea is to offer students ranging from secondary school to university and educators a chance to become better acquainted with the play, the resulting study—divided into eight chapters with an introduction—causes some confusion as to the specific target group. Many of the chapters can only be understood if one is already familiar with the play and the cultural context that produced it. Perhaps there is an understandable gap between the contributors and those new to the study of early modern drama in general, and Kyd's play in particular, but the result is a less coherent and cohesive volume. However, most of the chapters, when read as individual studies, are well argued, clear, and thought-provoking. Most inspire curiosity, and the fact that they span a wide range of topics—both from the past and the present—means that there is something in this volume for everyone.

Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* contributed significantly to the formation of early modern English drama. Although soon considered outdated by Kyd's contemporaries, the play was the first in what would become the subgenre of the "revenge-tragedy." The best-known play belonging to this subgenre of tragedy is Shakespeare's *Ham-*

*let*, which develops some of the same themes as Kyd's tragedy, as explained by Thomas Rist in the introduction to the volume. Kyd's play was not only a first step towards the creation of a new subgenre; it likewise combined the classical and Christian approaches to death and retribution, and it propagated a cultural stereotype of the Spaniard that had risen to prominence since the 1560s. The plot is driven by revenge, an act necessitated by the murder of the protagonist's son. Hieronimo is the play's avenger, and though the audience (both the reading and the viewing one) would sympathize with his vow of revenge when he finds his son's bloodied corpse hanging from a tree in the inner courtyard of his own home, the problem that arises is that he takes this vengeance too far. Edel Semple points out that Hieronimo's scheme went well beyond honorable revenge. Instead, Hieronimo stages a play within the play which none of the "actors" survive, including all those responsible for his son's death. Hieronimo then concludes this horrific spectacle with his own suicide, after biting off his tongue, which seems to have been included purely for the added horror.

Leslie Drury's chapter, "*The Spanish Tragedy*: Resources for Teaching," helpfully provides a list of all the characters who died and how their deaths came about. Considering the late-six-

teenth-century diction of the play and the sheer number of its characters and their interrelations, this overview is a useful tool for both teachers and students of this play. However, besides offering potentially useful assignments for teaching, the chapter itself does not provide any new insights into the play or its author. In this it varies significantly from the other chapters of the volume, each of which offers a clear and concise argument. Because the volume is marketed as a “critical reader,” this chapter appears to be out of place despite its usefulness.

There are three central themes in the volume: previous scholarship on Kyd and *The Spanish Tragedy*, the sources likely used by Kyd, and the afterlife of the play. Both Edel Semple’s “The Critical Backstory” (the first chapter of the volume) and Stevie Simkin’s “*The Spanish Tragedy*: State of the Art” (chapter 3) focus on previous scholarship, though the former does so in chronological order and the latter approaches it thematically. Semple not only provides an overview of most of the critical studies on Kyd, but also offers the reader some international context to *The Spanish Tragedy* in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries by briefly discussing the translations that appeared in mainland Europe. Interestingly, it appears that these continental adaptations enjoyed a more stable afterlife than did Kyd’s original. At the same time, Semple shows the discrepancy between the play’s iconic status “in the collective cultural memory” and the fact that it was simultaneously referred to as a “common butt” of jokes and references “frequently divorced from their original meaning” (p. 29). Addressing many of the issues already reviewed by Semple, Simkin goes over the existing scholarship with a slightly different focus. Simkin is one of the few who explore the historical context that created the Hispanophobic overtones of the play. Although stressing its anti-Catholicism, he remarks that “irrespective of their faith, Elizabethans had enough cause to resent Spain on purely patriotic rather

than religious grounds,” recalling the 1588 defeat of the Spanish Armada (p. 94).

From both Semple and Simkin we learn that the date of the first production of *The Spanish Tragedy* has been a frequent topic of debate in Kydian scholarship. Some scholars cite potential references to the Armada as a reason for placing the creation of the play after 1588, while others argue that these references are too flimsy, and that there are equally strong suggestions that the play was written before the defeat of the Armada. Either way, there appears to be a strong consensus amongst the play’s critics that “however ‘good’ the play is—original, ground-breaking, popular, the progenitor of a genre—it could always have been better” (p. 34). Yet despite the severity of this judgement, the play has been regularly studied and analyzed since the beginning of the twentieth century, gaining an iconic and canonical status in the process that facilitated its inclusion in curricula from secondary school to university.

On the whole, scholarship has focused mainly on the Hispanophobic tone of *The Spanish Tragedy*, whose characters display the typical characteristics of the Spanish stereotype: cruelty, vengeance, mercilessness, an extreme attachment to honor, imperiousness, and a dangerous ambition for power, amongst other things.[1] In this narrow focus, Kydian scholarship is not on its own. In the study of the image of the Spaniards in foreign nations, the primary focus has always been on the negativity of the image. In 1902, Julián Juderías was the first scholar to discuss *la leyenda negra española*, or “the Black Legend of Spain” which, he argued, dominated sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe. As a “European superpower”—a term used elsewhere by one of the contributors to the volume, Eric Griffin—Spain was considered the biggest threat, not just to other “nationhoods” but particularly to other religions. This image of Spain imposing its Catholicism, supported by its rich economy and strong military presence throughout early mod-

ern Europe, and with the support of the pope, still operates today: one example is the popular PC game *Sid Meier's Civilization 6* where players can choose to play as Spain with the monarch Philip II. The goal is “to unite the world under one faith and one empire, making you truly the Most Catholic king,” and before other nations in the game get the chance to do so, Spain can build “Fleets and Armadas” to further expand globally. [2]

Reading against the grain, Eric Griffin in his chapter, “New Directions: Geopolitics and *The Spanish Tragedy*,” shows that, contrary to popular belief, early modern European countries were not solely negatively predisposed toward Spain. Though the negative side of the Black Legend was certainly more strongly represented, Griffin points out that “the Hispanophilic qualities observable in *The Spanish Tragedy* were very much of their age” (p. 151). Furthermore, Griffin shows that the depiction of Spain as the “evil Other” also depended on the political environment of the time. Thus, while King James VI of Scotland (1567-1625) and I of England (1603-25) pursued a “Spanish Match” between one of his sons and the Spanish Infanta, the Hispanophobic narrative was toned down. But once the negotiations appeared to be stranded in 1624 and the Anglo-Spanish hostilities were resumed, the Hispanophobic narrative took center-stage once again. Griffin places *The Spanish Tragedy* within its appropriate historical context and takes a less conventional approach that allows for the study of the positive elements within this categorically “Hispanophobic” play. He thereby shows the two sides of the medalion while connecting it to an international context, pointing out that during Kyd’s lifetime and afterward, a desire for “imperial expansion” was by no means a replication of “period Hispanophobia” since “Spain was far from singular in its embrace of [the] somewhat contradictory geopolitical inclinations: national self-definition and imperial incorporation” (p. 137).

There are two chapters on the most important sources that Kyd used for his best-known play: the first by Gordon Braden on Seneca and *The Spanish Tragedy* (chapter 4), and the second by Tom Rutter on *The Spanish Tragedy* and Virgil (chapter 6). Both chapters thoroughly explore the similarities between the works of the classical authors and Kyd’s play and at the same time place these connections within the cultural dramatic tradition of classicism. Braden shows the importance of keeping in mind that Senecan tragedies were often driven by revenge, and though he does not mention it, this seriously undermines the argument that the severity of Hieronimo’s vengeance stems solely from his “Spanishness,” a point often made by scholars of the aforementioned Black Legend of Spain. The abuse of power, Braden notes, “is repeatedly cited as the primary substance of tragedy as a genre” (p. 118), which is further supported later in the volume by Katharine Goodland, who points out that “Kyd’s complex tragedy follows this deceptively simple blueprint: an upper-class tyrant murders a lower-class rival, the mother mourns, and during the festivities to celebrate his success, the tyrant is killed in retribution for his crime” (p. 182). The “deafness” of the powerful elite to Hieronimo’s lower-class—and therefore powerless—“complaints” is an important theme in the vengeance-driven plot of *The Spanish Tragedy*. Rutter does not refer overtly to the power dynamics in the play, but he makes an interesting point about “the centrality of revenge as a theme in *The Spanish Tragedy*, or the presence of a character called Revenge,” namely that a parallel can be drawn “between this sense of inevitability”—early on it becomes clear that Hieronimo *will* have his vengeance, one way or another—“and the way Virgil manipulates time in *Aeneid* 6” while Aeneas must endure hardships although the outcome is, “from a divine perspective, already ordained” (p. 157). Thus, Aeneas is powerless to alter his preordained fate, and in a similar sense, Hieronimo’s vengeance is inevitable—the narrative demands

it, and Hieronimo's capacity to exercise free will is by no means a given.

Power, then, appears to be a common theme in the chapters on Kyd's sources. Braden addresses it directly in terms of the Senecan tragic genre and Kyd's avenger, Hieronimo. Rutter addresses it indirectly by including the discussion on "free will" and "pre-ordainment," and by connecting *The Spanish Tragedy* not only to Virgil's *Aeneid* but likewise to Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and the prophecies of the witches—how independently is *Macbeth* acting when his fate has been revealed to him? Goodland, in her chapter on female mourning, revenge, and Hieronimo's Doomsday play, notes the power discrepancy between the lower class to which Hieronimo belongs and the upper class to which his son's murderer belongs. Here Goodland takes a novel standpoint by arguing that "armed with seemingly divine vindication, Hieronimo does not seek revenge, but justice," which, though interesting, is perhaps overly downplaying Hieronimo's cruelty at the end of the play (p. 189). After all, though the power to bring his son's murderer to justice is denied him by the king and his court, Hieronimo does not just avenge the murder: he literally turns his revenge into an orchestrated and bloody spectacle.

Though we will never know exactly what Hieronimo's revenge spectacle looked like on the London stage of the late sixteenth century, Peter Malin, discussing *The Spanish Tragedy* in performance, turns to more recent performances of Kyd's play. The chapter offers a refreshing perspective on the afterlife of an early modern play by looking at modern performances, the reviews of these performances, and the scripts used for them. Of course, Hieronimo has a central place in the chapter, but as the modern depictions of him show, he "is neither king, nobleman nor warrior but an ageing, albeit respected, functionary of pointedly inferior status in Spain's rigidly hierarchical court" (p. 74). This is perhaps the most accurate description of Hieronimo's character,

which, especially in early scholarship, has often enjoyed an inflated status, and one likely to provide a more understandable justification for Hieronimo's actions—it is bad that Hieronimo does not get justice as a lower-class citizen, but it would be worse if he did not receive it as a character in close proximity to the status of a nobleman. The closer the gap between the social statuses of Hieronimo and the murderer, the greater the offense of injustice. Yet Malin devotes most of his character analyses to the character of Revenge, who receives only occasional or passing mention in the other chapters, but is discussed here in detail. After all, Malin rightly questions, "What are we to make of a dramatic narrative that unfolds within the scrutiny of a supernatural entity and a personified abstraction?" (p. 68). Noting that recent performances tend to cast children in the role of Revenge, he concludes that this character is in fact the "author" of the play's events," and not just any author, but one who "revels in piling unnecessary suffering on characters *en route* to the narrative's pre-ordained outcome" (p. 70).

Overall, the volume offers a mixture of critical readings and reviews of secondary literature. It discusses a wide variety of subjects for such a concise book, which greatly improves its accessibility, but it does raise the question of just how critical its "critical reader" should be. At the same time, though it is clearly stated that the target audience ranges from secondary-school students to university lecturers, the diction and argumentation of the chapters is more at the level of experienced students with at least some prior knowledge of Kyd, *The Spanish Tragedy*, and perhaps English early modern drama in general. Power is but one of the themes addressed directly or indirectly in several chapters, and I believe students can benefit greatly from learning how to approach a particular topic or theme from different angles. By leaving it up to the (inexperienced) reader to create most of these connections, the volume does not reach its full potential. However, most chapters are not only informative but also

well written and thus more enjoyable to read—which is of course not a priority, but definitely a bonus. Besides a couple of embarrassing mistakes (such as referencing “Michelle Foucault”) and the at times confusing use of a double referencing system, the volume is a well-thought-out contribution to the study of Kyd, *The Spanish Tragedy*, and its underlying themes of cultural representation, power relations, afterlife studies, early modern international relations, and historical context analysis.

#### Notes

[1]. See José Manuel López de Abiada, “Spaniards,” in *Imagology: The Cultural Construction and Literary Representation of National Characters: A Critical Survey*, ed. Manfred Beller and Joep Leerssen (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2007), 242-47.

[2]. Firaxis Games, “Spanish Empire, Philip II,” *Sid Meier’s Civilization 6* (2K Games, 2017).

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**Citation:** Rena Bood. Review of Rist, Thomas, ed. *The Spanish Tragedy: A Critical Reader*. H-Nationalism, H-Net Reviews. November, 2018.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=53347>



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