



State violence and last sentences in Thomas Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy*

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Thomas Kyd's fascination for violence and death in *The Spanish Tragedy* is obvious. The play stages two hangings, an execution at the stake interrupted *in extremis*, four murders and three suicides. Among the executions which are represented, that of Pedringano is particularly striking. Regarding the dramatic aspects, it is quite central in the play as it takes place in the middle of act three (III.vi) and – it is worth emphasizing – it is one of the rare execution scenes in the Elizabethan corpus which shows the death of the character on the gallows onstage rather than having him executed offstage.¹ In terms of drama, the scene is based on a major misunderstanding: the character condemned to death is convinced that he is going to be saved at the last minute and makes fun of the whole situation instead of uttering the last speech that is expected of him.

The spectacle of Pedringano's hanging echoes public hangings which took place outside theatres. Molly Smith explains that in a period when the increase in the number of scaffolds in the streets of London went along with the increase in the number of theatres, both stages drew their inspirations one from the other:

Indeed, the stage and the scaffold seem to have been closely related historically. The famous Triple Tree, the first permanent structure for hangings in London, was erected at Tyburn in 1571, during the same decade which saw the construction of the first public theatre... In short, hangings functioned as spectacles not unlike tragedies staged in the public theaters. The organization of spectators around hangings and executions and in the theaters, and the simultaneous localization of these entertainments through the construction of permanent structures, suggest the close alliance between these communal worlds in early modern

¹ James Shapiro, "'Tragedies Naturally Performed': Kyd's representation of Violence", *The Spanish Tragedy, Staging the Renaissance: Reinterpretations of Elizabethan and Jacobean Drama*, ed. David Scott Kastan and Peter Stallybrass, New York, Routledge, 1991, p. 99-113, p. 100: "Consequently, though Tudor and Stuart drama was an extraordinarily bloody affair, playwrights steered clear of trespassing on this royal prerogative: characters are stabbed or poisoned, have their throats slit, or are shot while hanging chained from the upper stage, but only on the rarest occasions do we see them hanged from a noose, decapitated, or tied to a stake and then burned, or punished in the other ways carefully prescribed by the state. We can search the canons of Marlowe, Shakespeare, Jonson, Webster, and others in vain for instances where characters are put to death the same way that convicted felons were in Elizabethan England".

England. Evidence also suggests that theater and public punishment provided entertainment to upper and lower classes and that both events were generally well attended.²

But it is the comic exchange between Pedringano and his executioner which arouses interest rather than the putting to death in itself. This leads us to define execution scenes as speech scenes as much as death spectacles, or as scenes in which victims do not just receive physical punishment since they are expected to provide a verbal performance.

In public executions, the role of the condemned on the scaffold, their deaths and their speeches were all determined in advance. The spectacle of the execution was a ritual of legal violence inflicted on the body of the victim, and it also aimed to reinforce and reassert the principles of subordination and obedience, which were necessary to maintain political power and social order. In other words, the orchestration of victims' confessions legitimised the monarchical power which organised and controlled the punishment. Committing a crime meant breaking the monarch's law indeed, and therefore harming the sovereign himself. The execution thus represented a powerful demonstration of repression and redress by the royal power for which "disobedience is an act of hostility, the beginning of an uprising, which is not very different from a civil war".³ When they suffered the punishment decided by the sovereign, the condemned were thus shown as counter-examples to the spectators and to society as a whole. It was then expected of them that they be the spokespersons for the sovereign's power as they acknowledged the monarch's success in eliminating the threat to the social and political order. In his study of sixteenth-century popular gallows literature, James A. Sharpe highlights the victims' willing disposition to play the role they were attributed by the authorities.⁴ This was suggested in the victim's last dying speech, which represented a major part of the execution ritual. The last confession by the condemned constituted a particularly significant and expected episode as it was supposed to be a spontaneously and publicly acknowledged proof of guilt or, in Foucault's words, one of the "peripeteia of the truth"⁵ expected by the spectators when they attended a public execution. Sixteenth-century texts which reported the last words of men and women condemned to death, whether of high or low birth, show that these last speeches almost invariably follow the same steps. First, the victims would accept their punishment as a deserved and just death; then they would express their will to be reconciled with their prince and with God; finally they would invite the spectators to behave in an exemplary manner unlike theirs. That's how the last confession not only warned the audience against any criminal intention, but also and above all served the royal authority by implicitly preserving it from potential questions about its impartiality or its justice's rigour. However, Foucault also underlined the carnivalesque potential of public executions as the criminal who is about to die has nothing more to lose and thus has the possibility to debunk the authorities. For Thomas Laqueur, the carnivalesque dimension of these spectacles was even central as he believes that the occasions when the crowd saw a reassertion of the

² Molly Smith, "The Theater and the Scaffold: Death as Spectacle in *The Spanish Tragedy*", *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, vol. 32, n°2, 1992, p. 217-232, p. 217-218.

³ Michel Foucault, *Surveiller et punir : naissance de la prison*, Paris, Gallimard, 1975, p. 69 [my translation]: "Que la faute et la punition communiquent entre elles et se lient dans la forme de l'atrocité [...] c'était l'effet, dans les rites punitifs, d'une certaine mécanique [...] d'un pouvoir pour qui la désobéissance est un acte d'hostilité, un début de soulèvement, qui n'est pas dans son principe très différent de la guerre civile."

⁴ James A. Sharpe, "'Last Dying Speeches': Religion, Ideology and Public Execution in Seventeenth-Century England", *Past and Present*, n°107, 1985, p. 144-167, p. 156: "They were the willing central participants in a theatre of punishment, which offered not merely a spectacle, but also a reinforcement of certain values."

⁵ M. Foucault, *Surveiller et punir*, p. 54.

sovereign's absolute power in the convicted person's last speech was purely accidental. On the contrary, he writes that comedy was at the heart of executions:

The laughter of derision and the chaos of comedy were also regularly brought to bear against the state's effort to re-establish order. Far from resigning themselves to their fate and to the legitimacy of the state's action against them – . . . it is unreasonable to expect traitors to consent to their deaths in this fashion – the condemned have laughed over the centuries at fate and authority.⁶

Clearly, a speech like Pedringano's was meant to emphasise this comic potential as a character shamelessly makes fun of a serious situation which requires his death.

The Spanish Tragedy, however, stages abusive and unjust condemnations at the Spanish and Portuguese courts. If Pedringano is executed because he is indeed a murderer, he is above all a scapegoat sent to the gallows to leave his hirer and accomplice in murder, Lorenzo, unpunished. This episode comes only five scenes after another demonstration of judicial inefficiency in act III scene i, when Alexandro, a Portuguese nobleman, is sentenced to the stake on the basis of false accusations. What should be an unbearable representation of horror is stopped at the last moment by the arrival of an ambassador who casts light on the judicial mistake. But already in act II scene iv, Lorenzo, who happens to be the King of Spain's nephew, had defied the law by murdering his rival in love affairs, Horatio, and by disguising the crime as a hanging. This initial crime sets off the revenge plot, which defines the tragedy's genre. It ends with the series of murders committed in a play-within-the-play directed by Hieronimo, who dispenses justice by executing the killers of his son Horatio.

In *The Spanish Tragedy*, it is hard to distinguish murders from official, legal death sentences and the definition of the word "execution" itself becomes blurred. Most critics, like Molly Smith, have studied the staging and mechanisms of violence rather than the verbal performances, which are also part of displays of violence, or they have endeavoured to study language in the play as a whole. In this paper, I will focus on execution scenes and I will show that the dramatist plays with the codes of the scene of execution and of the victim's last speech to foil his spectators' expectations, and create dramatic twists. I will also refer to Michael Boyd's 1997 production of *The Spanish Tragedy* for the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC), the only production of the play in Stratford-upon-Avon to date. In this production, the minimalist setting made of vertical planks incidentally echoes the motif of the execution, especially because some of the planks are turned into gibbets in some execution scenes.

I will first show that, because they occur in executions whose orchestration is rarely legally justified, the speeches of characters sentenced to death in *The Spanish Tragedy* are improvised or adapted. However, if the execution is defined as unjustified and/or unjust, it is because the condemning power itself is distorted, so that the speeches of the condemned characters denounce, in a satirical manner, the malfunctions of the condemnation and of the judicial process determining it. Finally, I will explore how the language used by the condemned characters has a key dramatic function as it re-establishes the truth in response to false accusations and fabricated spectacles.

⁶ T. Laqueur, "Crowds, Carnival and the State in English Executions, 1604-1868", ed. A. L. Beier, David Cannadine, and James Rosenheim, *The First Modern Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 305-355, p. 319.

Improvised last speeches in unjustified and unjust executions

If the spectacle of execution is one of the leitmotifs in Kyd's play, none of the death sentences are complete. In fact, executions are each time represented as unjustified and/or rigged. In such a context, the character sentenced to death must refashion his last dying speech. The first equivocal death is Horatio's. He is found guilty of loving the same woman as his rival Lorenzo and is executed by the latter with his accomplices. The play thus introduces an ambiguity in the definition of the execution, confusing death on the gallows and summary killing. In this scene, the signifier is the death sentence while the signified is murder. The RSC production has Horatio fastened to one of the planks, which thus becomes a gibbet, while the ropes visually remind the spectator that he is hanged according to the original stage directions.⁷ Horatio's final question to his executioners ("What, will you murder me?", II.iv.53) emphasises another problem. First of all, the term "murder" indicates that, even if the act is disguised as an execution on the gallows, the executioners do indeed transgress the law. But the very fact that the character has the time to express nothing else than a question – which will not even be answered – shows that the execution is truncated twice: on top of imitating public hangings, the victim is deprived of his ultimate right: speaking his last words and wishes before departing. While in public executions the victims would have time to finish their last dying speeches, which were necessary to legitimate both the death and the authorities' judicial and political power, *The Spanish Tragedy* plays with the codes and the expectations of the last dying words up to the point of cutting short Horatio's sentence. Therefore, when the victim is denied his last speech in a spectacle which combines legal violence and verbal performance, the violence inflicted on the victim's body becomes excessive and transgressive. Horatio's executioner, Lorenzo, put this in his own words only a few scenes before, declaring "Where words prevail not, violence prevails" (II.i.108) and it is not long before he translates the idea into action.⁸

The next execution in the play is apparently a condemnation following the legal rules; yet it also shows major malfunctions. Act III starts with Alexandro's sentence to the stake for having, according to his enemy Villuppo, killed the Viceroy's son. The condemned character utters his last words in what seems an acceptance of the sentence. He celebrates his coming admission to heaven, so that he is ready to die according to the Christian principles of *ars moriendi* which taught men how to die well and guarantee their access to heaven. But he does not fail to underline the fact that he does not lose anything in leaving the corrupt world of men:

'Tis heaven is my hope.
As for the earth, it is too much infect
To yield me hope of any of her mould. (III.i.35-37)

Alexandro then turns to the Viceroy to reassert his innocence and the injustice of his condemnation:

⁷ The stage directions read: "[Pedringano and Serberine] hang him in the arbour" (II.iv.53).

⁸ Lorenzo's line inspired Peter Sack's article: "Where Words Prevail Not: Grief, Revenge, and Language in Kyd and Shakespeare", *ELH*, vol. 49, no3, 1982, p. 576-601. The author thus highlights the fact that Horatio's unfinished question is actually the ultimate escalation in a series of verbal and physical transgressions: "It is probably unnecessary to rehearse the plot, except to notice the persistent slighting of language at crucial moments of its development. Bellimperia, in love now with Horatio, rejects Balthazar's suit: 'these are but words of course.' And her brother, Lorenzo, in league with Balthazar, bribes Pedringano 'not with fair words, but store of golden coin' to assist in the murder of Horatio. Lorenzo has, after all, decided that 'where words prevail not, violence prevails'" (p. 581).

Not that I fear the extremity of death
(For nobles cannot stoop to servile fear)
Do I, O king, thus discontented live.
But this, O this torments my labouring soul,
That thus I die suspected of a sin
Whereof, as heavens have known my secret thoughts,
So am I free from this suggestion. (III.i.40-46)

With these words, Alexandro, rather than undermining his good Christian speech, gives it more substance by removing the ultimate burden weighing on his soul. His words are then double-edged: by accepting the sentence, he lets everyone know that those who condemn him got the wrong culprit. He thus introduces himself as a martyr who, like the persecuted Christ, accepts pain and death for the sake of faith. As if some providential reward were precisely granted to Alexandro, the Ambassador enters with the king's counter-order and, like the angel asking Abraham to substitute Isaac on the altar with a ram at the last minute, he causes the swap of Alexandro for Villuppo. Alexandro's speech, which denounced a deceptive condemnation, is proved right.

But with Pedringano's death comes the most distorted spectacle. In the 1997 RSC production, the physical likeness between Horatio and Pedringano is emphasised as both have long black hair and black beards. Pedringano's execution then echoes the first one, all the more so as Pedringano was involved in Horatio's killing. But instead of offering a counterpoint to previous executions in the play, it looks like the repetition of an incomplete execution scene as the victim is the only one who does not know he is going to die indeed. In fact, his hirer, Lorenzo, promised to save him with a fabricated pardon. Instead, Lorenzo sends a page with an empty box. While, in the previous case, Alexandro thought he would die and was saved *in extremis*, exactly the opposite situation is presented in this scene. Dramatic irony is thus created by the discrepancy between the situation which requires Pedringano's death and the parodic language used by the character, thus making a normally serious and tragic discourse comic. The condemned character thus starts his speech with what seems a confession by the book:

This is short work. Well, to your marshalship
First I confess – nor fear I death therefore –
I am the man, 'twas I slew Serberine. (III.vi.28-30)

But these words are as false as the sentence is falsified, and as empty as the box carried by the Page, because Pedringano does not intend to repent⁹. The words thereby become a means to gain time, rather than to ensure Christian salvation, as the questions asked by Pedringano to the hangman show:

But, sir, then you think this shall be the place
Where we shall satisfy you for this gear? (III.vi.31-32)

Or when the hangman asks him if he's ready:

To do what, my officious knave? (III.vi.42)

⁹ Carol McGinnis Kay, "Deception through Words: a Reading of *The Spanish Tragedy*", *Studies in Philology*, vol. 74, no.1, 1977, p. 20-38, p. 30: "Carried by the Boy throughout the following scene of Pedringano's trial and execution, this empty box exemplifies the complete emptiness not only of Lorenzo's words but also of language in general throughout the play. In *The Spanish Tragedy* man's word is but a hollow sham, and it seldom contains what it purports to contain".

While he makes fun of the hangman and believes he is misleading his onstage audience, Pedringano himself is misled. It is true that, in public executions, the monarch had the power to grant the culprit a last-minute pardon and thus save his or her life. These acts of royal mercy were certainly extremely rare and calculated, but they may have kept more than one condemned person hoping they would live. Laqueur examined the comic dimension which lay in such a lack of preparation for death.

Last-minute or too-late pardons, even if they were . . . part of an elaborate system of patronage and control, also poised every execution on the brink of comedy. The condemned might show up on the scaffold looking foolishly unprepared because he had expected a pardon. The audience was constantly titillated by the possibility of a sudden reversal.¹⁰

Criminals so desperately clinging to the hope that they would live rather than praying for salvation went against the rules of *ars moriendi* and exposed themselves as bad Christians. But what Kyd's play does is precisely to allow and encourage the transgression of political and religious codes. The series of executions in Kyd's increasingly allows the condemned characters to expose the distortions of death spectacles to a burlesque imitation of the scene of execution. In order to complete the dramatic irony of this scene, Pedringano's execution is the only one in the play – and a rare example in the whole Elizabethan corpus – to be shown onstage: it is also the only one which is supposed to make the spectators laugh. If the play's executions do not function properly, however, it is because the authorities are also dysfunctional and fail to show themselves as vectors of social justice. This is highlighted in last dying speeches too.

Demystifying the malfunctions of the condemnation and the judicial process

While public executions were organised in such a way as to promote the sovereign as a protector of social balance and justice, the character invested with monarchical authority at the Portuguese court is ruled by emotions rather than by reason and he lets himself quite easily be persuaded by the envious Villuppo that Alexandro killed his son. As early as act I scene iii, when the Viceroy learns the supposed death of his son Balthazar, he is no longer master of his speech: his tongue becomes insulting towards Alexandro, he removes his crown – a high attribute symbolising kingship and power – before putting it again on his head, and he shows himself thereby unable to do justice and to distinguish the truth from the lies. The Viceroy therefore embodies a system in which values are reversed. This is what Alexandro expresses in what should be his last speech. According to James Sharpe, the convicted persons who persisted in their impenitence and maintained their innocence in spite of the sentence were considered as lost sheep and were "regarded as abnormal and reprehensible".¹¹ But by reasserting his innocence and by deferring to divine justice, Alexandro not only presents himself as an honest man whose Christian values are flawless, he also implies that the flaws lie in royal justice. He then questions the divine right of kings which determined the nature of monarchical power in Europe. The death sentence decided by the Viceroy thus cannot be issued by divine justice. Fortunately, the king in person restores order as he is the one who sends the letter which reverses the Viceroy's condemnation.

¹⁰ T. Laqueur, "Crowds, Carnival and the State in English Executions, 1604-1868", p. 325.

¹¹ James A. Sharpe, "Last Dying Speeches", p. 155.

The situation is far from being more stable at the Spanish court. While the Portuguese Viceroy is not very competent, at least he legitimately derives his power from the sovereign. But in Spain, one character monopolises the right of life and death which is normally the king's right: Lorenzo. If he has the possibility to do so, it is because his royal uncle shows himself, as early as the first act, extremely tolerant and lenient towards him and, therefore, remiss towards the rest of his subjects. The play in fact represents a corrupt system in which public and private interests are mixed up. The king of Spain incidentally appears no fitter to satisfy Hieronimo and to punish his son's murderers as Hieronimo demands. It is then not surprising that Lorenzo conforms to the unfair system which his uncle embodies by defending his love interest towards Bel-Imperia and by eliminating his rival, Horatio, in spite of the rules and the laws which should be applied. Yet, when he describes Lorenzo's act as a "murder", Horatio uses a mirror-word which sends his executioner back to the regular legal and judiciary system. Thus, disguising a premeditated killing as an execution is nothing else than a cynical diversion, an abuse of power which Lorenzo is not even supposed to hold.

The dialogue of the deaf which takes place between Pedringano and the hangman points even more to Lorenzo's vice. The condemned character on the one hand, the hangman and Hieronimo on the other hand, don't understand each other because their speeches are based on two opposite sets of assumption (determining whether Pedringano is or is not going to die).¹² The uses of the verb "think" and of the modal "shall" emphasise the discrepancy between the two models in the following exchange:

PEDRINGANO. But, sir, then you think this shall be the place
Where we shall satisfy you for this gear?

DEPUTY. Aye, Pedringano.

PEDRINGANO. Now I think not so.

HIERONIMO. Peace, impudent, for thou shalt find it so:
For blood with blood shall, while I sit as judge,
Be satisfièd, and the law discharged. (III.vi.31-36)

If the verb "think" reflects a personal manner of seeing and judging, the use of "shall" is linked to the ineluctability of an event which does not depend on the will of the one who speaks but on a superior will. Obviously, Lorenzo originates disorder in communication, so he makes himself a crafty and warped stage director of death spectacles. As they are rendered physically powerless, the condemned characters can use their tongues to denounce, challenge, parody, but not only. In a play where accusations are false or falsified and executions are fabricated, the condemned character, by occupying the central place on the theatrical scaffold, finds himself in a position to claim and/or re-establish the truth.

¹² Carol McGinnis Kay, "Deception through Words, p. 29: "Even when characters may not intend deception their words often achieve no real communication. Perhaps the most vivid examples of the play's many 'non-conversations' of this sort are the painfully funny exchanges between Pedringano and his arresting officer and between Pedringano and his executioner. In both instances (III.iii and IV.vi) Pedringano, fully confident that he will be rescued by his employer in murder, smugly jests about his superiority to petty law and his invulnerability to any hurt. His listeners speak seriously of justice, while he speaks flippantly of immunity. Like Revenge and Andrea in the Induction, Pedringano and his companions can never communicate so long as they are operating from opposing sets of assumptions about the world and each other".

Last words, true words

Ronald Broude writes about the play:

Time as the revealer of truth and bringer of justice was a *topos* well known in Humanist circles, and is frequently to be encountered in the art, literature, politics, and religious controversy of the sixteenth century.¹³

The scenes of execution illustrate this sentence, first with Alexandro's interrupted burning and the revelation *in extremis* of truth and lies by the messenger's letter.¹⁴ Although they are isolated from the following events, one could interpret Alexandro's threatening words to Villuppo as a curse pronounced in desperation by a powerless man:

My guiltless death will be avenged on thee,
On thee, Villuppo, that hath maliced thus,
Or for thy meed hast falsely me accused. (III.i.51-53)

But the Ambassador comes on stage with the saving message from the king precisely when Villuppo finishes answering Alexandro's threats. Kyd resorts to the dramatic stratagem of the letter several times in the play because it is particularly useful to create twists in the dramatic plot.¹⁵ From the moment the Ambassador brings the letter to the Viceroy, the situation turns against Villuppo, thus echoing Alexandro's speech. Alexandro's curse takes on a prophetic dimension with an immediate effect and the messenger is the agent who gives substance to the words and will of the condemned character: first because he brings their material, written manifestation, then because the words are followed by action as the two convicted persons are swapped. Just in time, truth is revealed.

The object of the letter is used once more to extend Pedringano's speech even after his execution. He first evokes the letter, which he addressed to his master Lorenzo, as the Page comes near him with the treacherous box:

Gramercy, boy, but it was time to come;
For I had written to my lord anew
A nearer matter that concerneth him,
For fear his lordship had forgotten me. (III.vi.18-21)

This is one of the rare times in the play when Kyd lets his audience know in which circumstances a letter was written before it circulates on stage. This can be explained by the key function this letter will have in the plot, since it is given to Hieronimo, the father

¹³ Ronald Broude, "Time, Truth and Right in *The Spanish Tragedy*", *Studies in Philology*, vol. 68, n°2, 1971, p. 130-145, p. 131. The author's analysis comes from Isabella's line "Time is the author both of truth and right" (II.v.58).

¹⁴ Ronald Broude, "Time, Truth and Right in *The Spanish Tragedy*", p. 134: "Alexandro's patience is rewarded when the Ambassador, arriving just in time, is able to persuade the Viceroy that Balthazar is alive and well. Alexandro is released, and Villuppo is taken into custody and borne off to punishment. The relevance of these scenes at the Portuguese court, long a troublesome problem in criticism of *The Spanish Tragedy*, seems to me satisfactorily explained if we see the Alexandro-Villuppo episodes as giving dramatic form to an important aspect of the Time, Truth, and Right theme – Calumny unmasked by Time".

¹⁵ Carol McGinnis Kay, p. 29-30: "Deception through Words", p. 29: "we never know whether Pedringano's claim that Bel-Imperia has written love letters to Horatio is fact or fiction, we never know the contents of several letters brought to the Portuguese Viceroy in III.i, and we never learn what excuse Lorenzo is supposed to have given Don Cyprian for Bel-Imperia's absence from court... The thwarting of our desire to know here is typical of the Kydian world, where there is a Lear-like onslaught of unexplained letters and conversations, both off-stage and on. And they function in much the same way as in *King Lear*: they contribute to the play's general atmosphere of confusion about the validity of words, and they add to our sense that we are watching a society bordering on dissolution and chaos".

who wants to avenge his son's murder because it is the long-awaited piece of evidence which exposes the criminals:

"My lord, I writ, as mine extremes required,
That you would labour my delivery:
If you neglect, my life is desperate,
And in my death I reveal the troth.
You know, my lord, I slew him for your sake,
And was confederate with the prince and you;
Won by rewards and hopeful promises,
I holp to murder Don Horatio too." (III.vii.32-39)

While Lorenzo thought he would silence for ever the assassin he hired and while Pedringano believed the letter would be a last-resort weapon to blackmail Lorenzo and keep his life safe on the gallows, the letter eventually appears to reveal the truth about Horatio's hanging. The condemned character, Pedringano, is thus allowed to speak beyond death, so that his written and posthumous tongue gets a specific function in the play: it sets Hieronimo's revenge scheme off. From this moment in the play, it is no longer Lorenzo who orchestrates things, but Hieronimo because he now knows as much as Lorenzo.

With Pedringano's letter, Hieronimo now has private knowledge of the role of the murderers and needs to publicise the truth. To do so, he resorts to a theatrical trick and directs a play-within-the-play which ends with the criminals' deaths. The embedded tragedy is played in various foreign languages, which alienates the performers by putting them in the place of strangers.¹⁶ Moreover, Hieronimo verbalises the switch back to English to reveal that the performance was false theatre:

Here break we off our sundry languages,
And thus conclude I in our vulgar tongue. (IV.iv.73-74)

As opposed to the "sundry languages", English is the official and formal language in which verdicts are handed down (ironically at the Spanish court), the language of truth. But as he reveals that the murders in his play are real murders, Hieronimo becomes a criminal himself, both condemned and condemning, a victim and an upholder of the law. In anticipation, Hieronimo claims that this tirade shall be his last one, which should therefore make his revelation of the *coup de théâtre* a memorable last speech:

And, gentles, thus I end my play;
Urge no more words, I have no more to say. (IV.iv.150-51)

But he is prevented from committing suicide. He then spectacularly bites out his tongue, a deliberately rebellious act to deprive his enemies of the pleasure of hearing him further and to refuse to play the part of the repentant criminal on the scaffold. Indeed, expressing regrets for the murders would be one more lie in the play and his *dénouement* puts an end to all forms of deceptions. He then expels his tongue, the tool which could make him utter falsehoods. When his enemies urge the criminal to shift to the written language, which was used by previous condemned characters, Hieronimo once more catches everyone off-guard by making the pen he is given a destructive weapon to kill himself as he asks for a knife to mend his pen. Hieronimo's persistence in refusing to obey, to speak and to write gives him an inalienable power. And he is also granted the power to end not only "his" play as he says,

¹⁶ For Carol McGinnis Kay, p. 35-36, this ultimate play-within-the-play epitomises the failure of communication and linguistic chaos. By speaking in various foreign languages, the characters therefore speak only for themselves, so that the remaining means of communication for Hieronimo is no longer verbal but physical: "he knows better by now than to trust words alone to convey truth. He offers visual proof."

but *the* play since with the achievement of his vengeance, the revenge plot comes to an end.

When fiction becomes reality

In Thomas Kyd's revenge tragedy, the characters who are condemned to death play a major part. They respond to, improvise and reinvent their death speeches in a context where the ritual of execution is constantly subverted. Kyd thus plays not only with the staging codes of the execution, but also with the rhetoric which was expected from the convicted. Far from giving in to the authorities' demands and expectations, the tongue of the condemned denounces the political power which legitimately or illegitimately orders their execution, but also and above all speaks the truth. In order better to surprise his audience by creating dramatic twists, the playwright does not hesitate artificially to extend the convicted persons' speeches, to turn them into written words, even though they are posthumous words. This dramatic trick, which grants the character condemned to death the power to make revelations to the other protagonists, actually gives a new impulse to the dramatic plot and helps the revenge to be achieved in the tragedy. Besides, *The Spanish Tragedy* allows the condemned to denounce the transgressions of unjust violence and thus to expose the flaws of corrupted forms of power that are supposed to guarantee social balance and justice. If public executions were meant to reassert the strength and legitimacy of the political power, Kyd lets us see the limits of the king's power, which makes his play potentially subversive.

Ironically, Thomas Kyd was condemned too. In 1593, he was arrested because atheistic tracts were found at his home, at a time when atheism was punishable by death. He was imprisoned in Bridewell and tortured. In his letters, Thomas Kyd continued to maintain his innocence, and some critics have drawn attention to the similarity between his situation and that of the characters condemned to death in his play. Indeed one can see Kyd in Alexandro claiming his innocence until the end,¹⁷ or in Pedringano whose letters aim at disclosing the truth. Kyd died as a consequence of his stay in prison in August 1593 and James Shapiro highlights that:

In one of the darker ironies of the period, a playwright who explored so insightfully the workings of state violence had become, through unforeseen circumstances, its victim. It is likely that even as Kyd suffered in prison, his play was being performed to admiring spectators.¹⁸

This may not have been fortuitous. By setting the tragedy at the Spanish and Portuguese courts, Thomas Kyd raised questions which were relevant to the English system above all. After all, only the play-within-the-play is performed in foreign languages, but the play's language is English. As for the monarchs who originate a confusion between public and private interests, leave murders unpunished, and maintain the ambiguity in the definition of the execution, there are not many elements (except perhaps for the costumes) which characterise them as Spanish or Portuguese rather than English. And, after all, the play was most likely written the same year Mary Stuart was executed in questionable conditions in

¹⁷ In "Tragedies Naturally Performed", p. 101, James Shapiro explains how Kyd defended himself by claiming that the tracts were Marlowe's and had been accidentally shuffled among his papers at the time they shared chambers, two years earlier. Shapiro then adds "Life, cruelly, was imitating art: five years before, Kyd had written a comparable declaration in *The Spanish Tragedy*, when Alexandro, falsely accused of treason, protests that he is innocent."

¹⁸ James Shapiro, "Tragedies Naturally Performed", p. 102.

1587. The same Elizabethan audiences who heard the characters who are sentenced to death in the play question the legitimacy of the execution and the justice embodied by the sovereign would then attend public executions and bear those questions in mind. The fact remains that last dying sentences were a site of exploration of "the workings of state violence", to use Shapiro's words in the quotation above, but also of its limits and of its failures.

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