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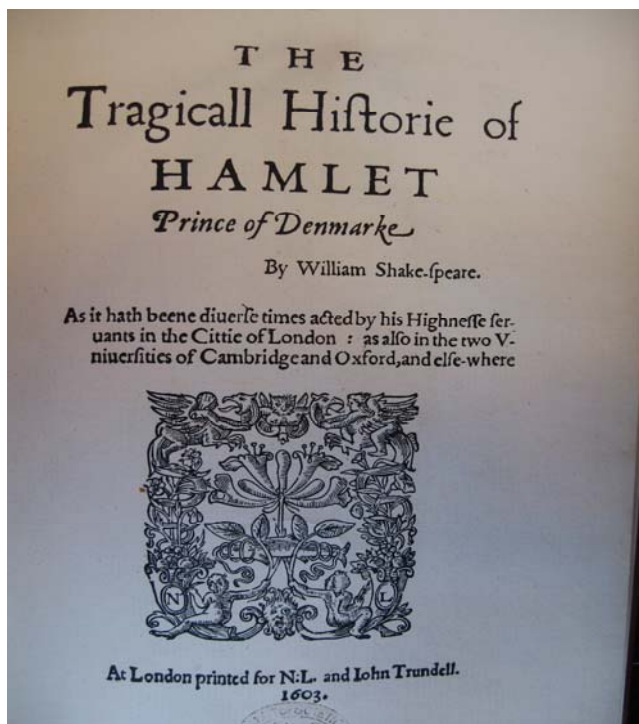
Thomas Kyd and Revenge Tragedy

NB: All photographs featured in this report are from the National Art Library at the V&A Museum and are not for reproduction (photography by Dr Maurice Hindle, ShaLT's Project Manager).

Renaissance drama is often sorted or classified into three distinct genres, 'tragedy' and 'comedy' (labels that go back to the classical period) and also 'history' or sometimes 'chronicle history' (as seen in Shakespeare's history plays including *Richard III* and *Henry V*). One reason for the persistence of this system of generic labelling has been the relative accuracy of the three categories as well as their use in the 1623 First Folio of Shakespeare, which sorted the plays accordingly on its page of contents.

However, this approach is now sometimes viewed in criticism as rather simplistic, and early modern theatre actually used and mixed several genres and sub-categories, the most notable being the Jacobean plays of Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher for the King's Men and the late plays of Shakespeare, including his *The Winter's Tale*. Many of these plays tend to be seen as 'tragi-comedies' as they blur the boundary between the two supposed extremes of comedy and tragedy. Furthermore, many genres actually incorporate plays that might be classified as sub-genres or types. For example, various dramatists including Ben Jonson and Thomas Middleton worked in the area of 'city comedy' (Shakespeare being a notable exception), a label useful for urban comedies set in London or other city landscapes (for instance, Jonson's *Volpone* being set in Venice). Similarly, although 'tragedy' might involve plays as diverse as *Othello* and *King Lear*, we should also remember the idea of Elizabethan

and Jacobean ‘revenge tragedy’, a form that can trace its roots back to the classical plays of the Roman writer Seneca. Indeed, scholars often refer to ‘Senecan revenge tragedy’ alongside Renaissance plays. Key components in an early modern revenge play include the depiction of tragic events (hence revenge plays are still classed as tragedies) as well as the frequent appearance of a ghost from hell or the classical underworld desiring revenge for its murder (an act usually having taken place before the play begins). The revenge play might also include further elements of supernaturalism, like a so-called ‘revenger’ who seeks vengeance, and last but not least, a good deal of bloodthirstiness, since such plays usually end with the destruction of an elite realm or court that includes the murder of most of the key characters. Indeed, a key denouement would be the death of the revenger who has usurped the function of justice, whether divine or monarchical. Thus, both the figure of the ghost and the revenger came to be stock character-types on the Renaissance stage.



Of course, what is being described here as ‘revenge tragedy’ includes a very famous play indeed, as Shakespeare’s late-Elizabethan *Hamlet* is in many ways the most important – or at least the most well known – work in the genre. By the early 1600s the genre had come a long

way and progressed to the far more advanced philosophical ponderings of Prince Hamlet and his clashes with Claudius at the court of Elsinore. What is of interest here, however, is the earliest surviving play in the genre, *The Spanish Tragedy* by Thomas Kyd from the 1580s. This is of particular concern because the Dyce collection at the National Art Library contains two Stuart reprints of this Elizabethan blockbuster, published several decades later in the Jacobean period.

In terms of the play's early life and its dramatist, little is known about Kyd when compared to his contemporaries Marlowe or the young Shakespeare of the 1590s. Indeed, only one other play from Kyd's dramatic catalogue survives (a translation of *Cornelia*), and we only know that he appears to have shared rooms with Marlowe at some point in the early 1590s before being arrested and possibly interrogated. He died soon after his release. As with some of Marlowe's plays and those of the young Shakespeare, Kyd's name is absent from the title-page of the play's first printing in 1592. Yet his play – the first surviving Senecan revenge play in Elizabethan England – seems to have been enormously influential and inspired a generation of writers. Indeed, one of Shakespeare's earliest plays, his Roman revenge play *Titus Andronicus*, was a work almost certainly produced in order to cash in on the success of Kyd's drama.

Scholars have dated the play as belonging to the early 1580s, the mid-1580s, and even as late as the late 1580s or early 1590s. However, there is some agreement that the play's anti-Spanish content (it is set in a corrupt Catholic court in Spain) was designed to remind the audience of the failed 1588 Spanish invasion attempt via the huge Armada, and so a date of 1588 or after is often seen as realistic. Because the play wasn't printed until a few years later, we cannot name a theatrical company of players as having performed it, nor can we reliably locate its performance at any specific London theatre, though it seems highly likely to have been acted at one or all of the four city inns, the Theatre, the Curtain, and perhaps the newly-

built (1587) Bankside Rose. Similarly, we know that after 1594 it belonged to Philip Henslowe's Admiral's Men and was performed at the Rose, showcasing the period's leading actor Edward Alleyn. Later it continued to enjoy success at the Henslowe-Alleyn venture, the Fortune, and it seems to have been constantly revived and put on in playhouses right up to the closing of the theatres by Parliament in 1642. Thus, here is a play that premiered in the 1580s and ran for over fifty years, featuring in every decade of activity in London's theatre industry other than the 1570s (when the first Theatre opened in 1576 at Shoreditch). One of the earliest theatrical hits, *The Spanish Tragedy* survived right through our period.

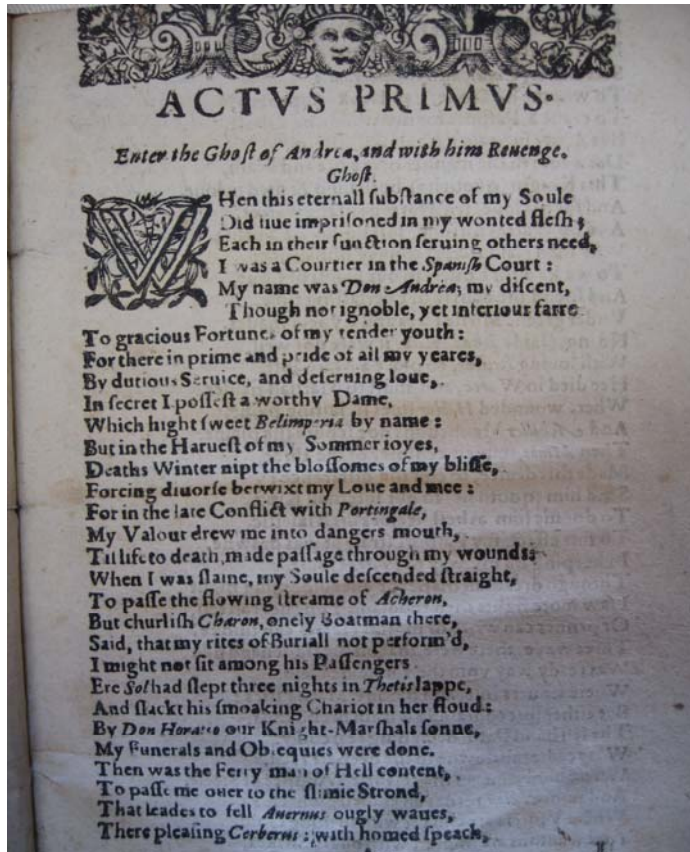


The Dyce collection has one copy of the text from 1618, a Jacobean reprint. Above is the title-page of that edition and this would be very suitable indeed as a Theatre and Performance exhibit, for a number of reasons. Firstly, as a contemporary print, the title-page is of interest

in itself, being an example of early modern publishing that relates to theatre culture. Secondly, the fact that the Dyce copy is from 1618 is noteworthy as it demonstrates the continued popularity of the play as a staged drama and shows it was still being printed and bought. In fact, we know that the play continued to be performed and published for many years (Dyce actually has a second copy from the early 1630s that could be shown alongside this version). A visitor to the Museum might also be interested to know that the title-page shows no information concerning author, playhouse or theatrical company, revealing much about the difference between the early modern period and the twenty-first century in terms of attitudes to authorship and publication details, issues of copyright being a more recent procedure. Furthermore, the Museum might mention in the accompanying narrative that this 1618 version highlights the additions to the play that were actually made in 1602. These used to be attributed to Ben Jonson, but Brian Vickers and Hugh Craig have recently claimed – independently of each other – that the additions may have actually been by Shakespeare. Thus, the Museum might exhibit this copy of the play in order to show the additions towards the end of the text, since they are something of a ‘hot topic’ in modern critical work at the time of writing.

Furthermore in terms of the title-page, the image depicting Hieronimo discovering his hung murdered son, Horatio, is actually very famous as one of the few examples of an illustration being used on a title-page that depicts a scene from the actual play. This first appeared in the 1615 printing and so it is revealing that the same image is still in use three years later, as it was clearly synonymous with the play in the minds of printers and those readers who purchased a printed copy of the text. The Museum might also highlight the rather obvious point that the use of this picture suggests a continuing appetite among audiences for the revenge genre’s depiction of violence and spectacle. Similarly, the picture shows a *coup de theatre* (the hanging of a character) and also displays the fact that a boy

actor played the female part. The image was used to make it clear to the general public of early modern London that this was a revenge play, encouraging them via this type of marketing to purchase it.



Finally, the Theatre and Performance Department might exhibit the above page from the very start of the play, as it shows the entrance of the two characters of Revenge and the Ghost (the Ghost is asking Revenge to influence events at the Spanish court in order to achieve the desired revenge for his murder). Furthermore, 'Revenge', although clearly standing in for the concept of vengeance in the play, is also a 'real' person who watches the drama of the play unfold from outside its action, giving a detailed instance of metadrama. At one point, Revenge actually falls asleep while he is watching the very same play as the audience, as Kyd literalizes the court's failure to impose justice by showing Revenge to be well-aware of the delay. The Museum might also point out the way this is staged as an opening to the play, with the Ghost's words telling the tale of his murder in order to enlighten the audience at the

play's beginning. Similarly, violent rhetoric is used here and throughout the play (itself a generic marker for the revenge plays) and we have an early reference to the setting at the Spanish court on this page, a feature that would have been of considerable interest to an Elizabethan crowd of theatre-goers in the years after the Armada. Lastly, as an example of early blank verse from the 1580s, this opening scene is of great importance in terms of the influence of the play on Marlowe and Shakespeare in the early 1590s. Indeed, as the Dyce collection owns the edition of *Hamlet* shown above from 1603 it is conceivable that the two plays could be showcased together in any event on Shakespeare and early modern theatre.