

“None but I bestir me”: Failed Elegy
as the Absence of Communal Language
in Kyd’s *The Spanish Tragedy*

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In his essay “Of Sadness,” Michel de Montaigne describes the state of grief as a “bleak, dumb, and deaf stupor,” an emotional state so extreme and profound that it is as if the bereaved has been turned to stone (Montaigne 7). Citing the myth of Niobe, who transformed into a rock after losing her seven sons and seven daughters, Montaigne insists that entering this state of “benumbed” silence is the definitional impact of loss (7). If Montaigne’s assertions are correct, the formal elegy seems like a curious form: an eloquent articulation that ostensibly expresses the speaker’s grief in an attempt to immortalize the memory of the departed. Hardly “benumbed,” the speaker of elegy seems perfectly capable of speech, and even formal composition. At some point between observing the death of a loved one and producing the elegy, the elegizing subject has regained the capacity for articulation. Taking this view of elegy, it is clear that the form does more than describe the tragic life and death of the deceased; it re-introduces the bereaved into the community of language. The elegiac process, when successful, recuperates language itself as a tool for representing the emotional state of the speaker, the absent loved one, and also the world at large.

Thomas Kyd’s *The Spanish Tragedy* stages the dramatic consequences of the failure to elegize, and in doing so initiates a cycle of violence wrought not only upon persons, like Lorenzo and Balthazar, but upon language itself. The play’s apocalyptic conclusion portrays a world in which language has lost its representative capacity, a world whose strongest precedent is the biblical scene at the Tower of Babel. Importantly this vengeful apocalypse, enacted under the direction of Hieronimo, begins when he and his wife Isabella fail to properly elegize the death of their son Horatio. A close examination of their particular attempts at elegy reveals their inability to use the form as a way of integrating themselves into local, domestic, and archival communities of language. This failure eventually results in their individual and inevitable returns to Montaigne’s

“benumbed,” pre-linguistic realm, a place Karen Weisman describes as characterized by the “inchoate gasp” rather than the “formalized utterance” (Weisman 1). In this way *The Spanish Tragedy* articulates cultural anxieties about the degeneration of individual language as a representative tool, a degeneration that I will argue is caused by the departure from potentially restorative forms of communal speech such as song, symposium, and meaningful interaction with the archive of classic poetry and imaginative literature.

While it is clear that the elegiac tradition began in antiquity, it is difficult to find a totalizing definition of the form. As Weisman argues in her introduction to the *Oxford Handbook of Elegy*, “There is little scholarly consensus about what constitutes an elegy, or how to distinguish between elegy and the broader category of elegiac literature” (1). Though the definition of elegy continues to elude scholars, its characteristics remain clear enough: elegy seeks to describe the impact of loss and to recuperate its absent subject in language. Recognizing that the elegy can serve many functions, this paper will focus on the mediating capacity of the form, in particular the elegy’s role as a medium between individual, silent suffering and communal, uttered restoration.

In a recent article that explicates previously unexamined formal characteristics of Ancient Greek elegy, Gregory Nagy analyzes the unique meter of the elegiac couplet to characterize the form as a communal process of grieving rather than an autonomously derived and individually crafted speech act. Nagy points out that Greek elegy combines “two particular verses . . . the *elegiac hexameter* and the *elegiac pentameter*,” to build the elegiac couplet, and argues that the unique co-dependency of these two verses produce what is now understood as the formal elegy (Nagy 13, original emphasis). Drawing a distinction between lament as a traditionally female “act of singing in response to the loss of someone near and dear” and elegy as a traditionally male response to lament that orders the woman’s sung grief into more formalized speech, Nagy argues that both expressions relied on public address and participation from the community at large (13). In the case of the woman’s lament, the “prime mover” of the song “sings her lament. And in singing her lament, she can cry while she sings and sing while she cries (in traditional lament, the physiology of crying and gesturing is integrated with the art of singing)” (Nagy 21). The women of the community then take up the song as a chorus, as “the ensemble responds to the lament of the lead singer by continuing it” (21). In this way the women’s chorus becomes both the audience and producer of the song of lamentation, simultaneously overhearing and articulating the grief of the “prime mover.” The male component of the elegiac process, too, depends upon an audience; in response to the lamentations of the women in the chorus, the man crafts the formal elegy, traditionally delivered at symposia or a public festival (35, 38).

Nagy's historical and formal analysis describes a process by which tears and the "inchoate gasp" become song, the song becomes public speech, and the public speech becomes formalized poetry. Importantly, every step in this process requires both an audience and that audience's active participation in what Nagy calls the "communalization of emotions" (29). This process describes the codependency between female lament and male elegy reflected in the elegiac couplet, which channels feminine lament into the hexameter line and then responds to it with masculine "symptotic" speech in the pentameter line (38). Nagy's argument describes the elegy as a form built by a community in response to loss rather than one articulated by an autonomous subject as a way of describing his or her private grief. It foregrounds the role that communal speech, such as song and symposium, plays in the grieving process, and describes the community's role in the recuperation of language as a representative tool more generally.

While Early Modern iterations of the formal elegy tend to eschew Greek elegiac form, in particular the alternation of hexameter and pentameter verse, they maintain Nagy's sense of grief as communal expression, and often recast that sense as anxiety about the authenticity of individual speech. As Lauren Shohet argues in her article on women's elegy in the period:

The form of elegy is inherently concerned with the ways that poetry emerges through relationships between collectivity and individuality: the collective experience of mortality, the individual experience of mourning a particular death; the collective archive of the elegiac tradition, the individual voice of the current poem. (Shohet 433)

As Nagy points out, elegy in its Greek form had little, or perhaps no concern with the "individual voice" of the speaker or poem and instead focused on the collective recuperation of language to adequately address loss. Given this communal process of elegiac production, it is possible that insofar as the Early Modern elegist attempts to locate and describe the authenticity of grief individually, he or she does damage to the form itself and undermines its potential for producing consolation and catharsis. Under this view, any inward seeking gesture in elegy proves necessarily destructive, not only to one's emotional health but to one's linguistic capacity, which vanishes into the realm of the "inchoate gasp" at exactly the same rate that it retreats from the larger community.

Hieronimo and Isabella's elegiac attempts, while seemingly cogent, constantly seek validation and participation from a community fully absent from both the world of the play and its moment of historical performance. Neither the Spanish court nor the real-world audience of *The Spanish Tragedy* provide the communal participation necessary for the elegiac process to provide consolation to

the bereaved and re-establish the representative potential of language. As a result, Hieronimo and Isabella's elegies emerge as incomplete because they lack communal participation and are thus devoid of the definitional characteristic of their form. Their laments look increasingly inward as the play nears its final scene, and as bereaved characters they retreat further and further towards the realm of silence described by Montaigne, or the "inchoate gasp" described by Wiseman. Their elegiac lamentations late in the play articulate both the yearning for a community and the destructive potential of seeking authenticity in individual expressions of grief, and ultimately portray the poverty of autonomous speech in the wake of loss. Peter Sacks, quoting Lorenzo, aptly sums up the end of such a cycle: "where words prevail not, violence prevails" (Sacks 69). In *The Spanish Tragedy*, the degeneration of speech expresses itself as violence to both the self and others as the play spirals towards its blood soaked and literally incomprehensible conclusion.

The failed expression of Hieronimo and Isabella's grieving begins in Act II scene V, in which they discover the body of their son Horatio hanging in an arbor. At first glance, it seems as if their reaction to their son's death falls in line with Nagy's elegiac process, in which the woman stages an emotional lament that the man translates into a more formal elegiac address. After Hieronimo finds Horatio, Isabella enters the stage, and her husband explicitly seeks her participation in the grieving process when he cries: "Here, Isabella, help me to lament, / For sighs are stopped and all my tears are spent" (2.5. 36-37). Isabella then responds with a dramatic comingling of crying and speaking consistent with Nagy's description of lament:

ISABELLA: Then is he gone? And is my son gone too?
O, gush out, tears, fountains and floods of tears;
Blow, sighs, and raise an everlasting storm:
For outrage fits our cursed wretchedness (2.5. 42-45)

Finally, Hieronimo closes the scene with a formal elegiac dirge delivered in Latin, an address reminiscent of the public speech act delivered by male producers of elegy in ancient Greece.

However, while this sequence unfolds according to a process of communal grieving and elegy production, it is conspicuously devoid of an actual community and thus the elegies produced within it prove vacant of meaning and ultimately ineffectual. First, while Isabella could be reconceived as the "prime mover" of the lament she delivers in her immediate grief, there is no chorus of women on stage to "respond to her lament by continuing it" (Nagy 21). She remains a lone stricken mother on stage, absent the female community necessary to ease her out of the

realm of the “inchoate gasp” and into the proper song of lamentation. Indeed, the failure of the community at the Spanish court to adequately respond to the injustice of Horatio’s death and thus recognize Isabella and Hieronimo’s grief becomes a defining feature of the play as it nears its close. Although Isabella seems initially convinced that “The heavens are just, murder cannot be hid,” the various institutional apparatuses of the Spanish court seem increasingly incapable, or unwilling, to address Horatio’s death as the play moves forward (2.5.57). Finally, Isabella becomes completely detached from her community and delivers an apocalyptic soliloquy indicative of this isolation to which this paper will return later.

Hieronimo’s Latin dirge similarly communicates a failure to adequately engage with the various communities that could potentially render his elegy meaningful and thus contribute to his consolation. If we reconstitute this scene in performance, it becomes clear that the spectating audience itself emerges as one possible community with whom Hieronimo fails to engage. William N. West employs this strategy in his essay on the role of confusion in *The Spanish Tragedy* and foregrounds “moments where the performance of the play seems to try to produce confusion in its audiences (which might include actors) rather than merely representing it” (West 224). In reconstituting the final scene of *The Spanish Tragedy*, West reminds us that Hieronimo’s play within a play was very likely performed in four different languages, a moment which would render the audience completely oblivious to the machinations of the revenge plot the play is meant to conceal. Similarly, the audience-witnesses of Hieronimo’s dirge, not likely fluent in Latin, would have no way of translating and understanding it.

If we agree with Nagy that public delivery and communal consumption are constituent features of formal elegy, then Hieronimo’s dirge fails in its elegiac capacity precisely because it does not adequately “communalize” his grief. Reimagining this moment in performance, we can envision Hieronimo’s earnest, learned, and ritualized attempt to address a body of spectators who hear his speech as pure nonsense, a string of sounds that may as well be meaningless vowels and consonants. In this way, the scene dramatizes the failure of Hieronimo to build a communal bond with the audience, effectively foregrounding the broken circuit between the bereaved individual and the larger world and presenting it as a failure in linguistic representation. The surviving frontispiece of *The Spanish Tragedy* in print reiterates this audience failure and expresses the unbridgeable gap between Hieronimo in performance and the audience as communal witness; there, the full title of the play runs “The Spanish Tragedie, Containing the lamentable end of *Don Horatio*, and *Bel-Imperia*: with the pitifull death of olde *Hieronimo*.” (*The Spanish Tragedy* 1). By describing Horatio’s death as “lamentable,” the frontispiece foregrounds Hieronimo’s incomplete and unrequited grieving, as if the death is not

“lamented” but remains forever “lamentable.” Although the frontispiece explicitly permits lamentation from the audience and reader, they remain unable to join Hieronimo in his elegy, and instead must observe in mute witness.

While the performance of the Latin dirge foregrounds Hieronimo’s inability to connect with the community of the audience, the contents of the dirge foreground his failure to meaningfully connect with the larger archival community of classical elegy. Lauren Shohet remarks on the potential for engaging with a community of poets that the Early Modern elegiac form offers in her reading of “A Doleful Lay,” a poem from the multi-authored piece *A Pastoral Elegy Upon the Death of the Most Noble and Valorous Knight, Sir Phillip Sidney*. Shohet focuses on the pastoral speaker Clorinda, sister to the deceased Astrophil, and argues that Clorinda’s poem “thoroughly interweaves community and individuality to produce poetic voice” (Shohet 435). The article draws a distinction between Clorinda’s early lamentations, which focus on isolation and individual mourning (“to myself will I my sorrow mourn”), and her later recognition of the restorative function of polyphony, concluding that “entering into poetic community produces art” (435). In an era defined by classical humanism, the literary past proved particularly important and could theoretically yield examples of successful elegiac expression with which Hieronimo could productively engage as a means of reaching consolation.

Hieronimo’s dirge, however, rather than finding solace in the poetic archive, dramatizes a violent schism between several diametrically opposed modes of discourse by drawing equally from classical elegiac literature and the literature of the revenge tradition. As the footnotes to the New Mermaid edition of *The Spanish Tragedy* describe, the dirge “contains reminiscences of Lucretius, Vergil, and Ovid, [and] is a *pastiche*, in Kyd’s singular fashion, of tags from classical poetry, and lines of his own composition” (*The Spanish Tragedy* 46). The early lines in the dirge look outwards, seeking remedy from the pain of grief in the community: “Let someone bind for me the herbs which beautiful spring fosters, and let a salve be given for our grief; or let him apply juices, if there are any that bring forgetfulness to men’s minds” (46). While the historical provenance of these lines remains unclear, their adherence to Nagy’s model for the communal production of elegiac literature suggests that they constitute one of Kyd’s borrowings, likely from the poets of antiquity. As argued above, Hieronimo’s communal plea falls on uncomprehending ears; only the audience and the equally bereaved Isabella overhear his dirge, and for this reason it is clear that he will not find the “someone” who can produce a “salve” to soothe his grief. Although Hieronimo is right to look towards the archive of classical elegy to find words for his immediate grief, his co-opting of that form proves mistaken precisely because the classical form depended

upon a community he sorely lacks. Therefore the elegy is stripped of meaning the moment it leaves his mouth and can provide him no consolation.

As if he has recognized this failure in his first lines, Hieronimo turns inward in the middle portion of his dirge, and insists upon his autonomy and private inner strength as a means of seeking remedy from his grief:

I myself shall gather anywhere in the great world whatever plants the sun draws forth into the fair regions of light; I myself shall drink whatever the wise woman devises, and whatever herbs incantation assembles by its secret power. I shall face all things, death even, until the moment our every feeling dies in this breast. (46)

Here Hieronimo resorts to the inflated, hyperbolic speech common to the heroes of the Virgilian epic. However, while these grandiose pronouncements prove inspirational in the context of an epic Virgilian battle, they seem absurd in the context of a 16th century revenge drama. Given that the audience knows Hieronimo is doomed to fail from the opening moments of the drama, the heightened register of these lines play as ironic, and Hieronimo's repeated insistence on "I, myself" only serves to foreground the empty redundancy of that phrase.

Hieronimo very quickly abandons this inward-seeking language in the final lines of the dirge, and this abandonment suggests that his autonomously derived and self-insistent language could not adequately solve the problem of his grief. Failing to produce both communal and individual language capable of alleviating his pain, Hieronimo's final recourse is to turn towards violence, specifically the violence of the revenge tradition: "I shall perish with you; thus, thus would it please me to go to the shades below. But none the less I shall keep myself from yielding to a hastened death, lest in that case no revenge should follow your death" (46). Hieronimo's failure to engage with the available archives of traditional and classic elegy forces him to seek language within himself capable of alleviating grief, a quest that will necessarily fail given that elegiac language relies upon communal rather than individual production. This linguistic failure further isolates him from the community and leaves him in a realm of silence from which only violence can emerge. Peter Sacks describes this degeneration from elegized speech into violence in his essay on Elizabethan Revenge drama, arguing that revengers "are, in a sense, elegists manqués" (Sacks 65.) Sacks argues that revengers, having no recourse towards justice in the community, must turn inward to dispatch a private brand of justice, a turn that inevitably dooms them to the same bloody fate as their enemies. Under my argument, elegiac language has the same fate if it is not communally produced according to a process similar to the one described by Nagy. The moment an elegist turns inward to produce language to solve the problem of

his or her grief, the elegy implodes, leaving behind only the pre-linguistic silence described by Montaigne. It is appropriate, then, that Hieronimo's dirge ends here: having sworn an oath to revenge Horatio, his powers of language are no longer necessary, and only his revenging actions prove important. Again, as Sacks argues via Lorenzo: "Where words prevail not, violence prevails" (69).

Hieronimo and Isabella's elegiac expressions late in the play signal both isolation from a meaningful community and the poverty of language itself as a tool for representing grief, and in doing so highlight the impossibility of producing autonomous speech capable of either representing grief or recuperating loss. Hieronimo addresses this impossibility in soliloquy in Act 3 scene 7:

HIERONIMO: Where shall I run to breathe abroad my woes,
My woes, whose weight hath wearied the earth?
Or mine exclams, that have surcharged the air
With ceaseless plaints for my deceased son?
The blust'ring winds, conspiring with my words,
At my lament have moved the leaveless trees,
Disrobed the meadows of their flowered green
Made mountains marsh with spring-tides of my tears
And broken through the brazen gates of hell.
Yet still tormented is my tortured soul
With broken sighs and restless passions (3.7.1-9)

Before moving on the particulars of these lines, it is important to note that as a soliloquy Hieronimo's lament holds a privileged place in the discourse of individual, autonomous speech versus communally conceived language. Given that an actor delivers a soliloquy onstage alone, it is possible to understand the theatrical device as the verbal expression of the speaking character's interior, his or her private thoughts made public in theatrical performance. Here, Hieronimo enters the stage begging for a place to go where his lamentations will be overheard, somewhere to "breathe abroad his woes" where a community will overhear and respond to them. Existing as they do only as interior expression and not communal address, his "plaints" remain "ceaseless," and as a result the words themselves eventually begin to break down and become meaningless. His "sighs" are "broken," and though his words "move the leaveless trees," they never find a human community to overhear them. The soliloquy concludes with Hieronimo complaining that though his complaints reach great heights, the heavens "resist my woes, and give my words no way," suggesting that his lack of community corresponds to a failure in language (3.7.18).

Isabella's response to the community failing to recognize her grief proves far more apocalyptic and demonstrates the process by which failed elegizing can lead to both a violent disavowal of both language and the possibility of a future. Crazed with grief, Isabella returns to the arbor where Horatio was hanged, declaring that "Since neither piety nor pity move, / the king to justice or compassion," she must not only destroy the tree itself but rip up its roots and destroy its soil to prevent any further growth. (4.2. 3-4). In destroying the tree and its soil, Isabella instantiates the failure of her own productive capacity, both linguistic and maternal, and renders the world "barren." Because she has been rendered incapable of effective utterance and has continually failed to successfully mourn her son's death in elegy, she, like Hieronimo, turns to revenge and violence, and destroys the productive capacity of the arbor, a metonym for the community of the Spanish court that has failed her. Isabella's last words finalize this gesture and signal the pressures of autonomy and painful isolation that produced them:

ISABELLA: And none but I bestir me—to no end.
And as I curse this tree from further fruit,
So shall my womb be cursed for his sake,
And with this weapon will I wound the breast,
She stabs herself
The hapless breast, that gave Horatio suck. (4.2. 34-39)

Like Niobe transforming into a rock, the grieving mother here retreats into the pre-linguistic state better suited for individual sufferers of grief, in this case by ending her life. Her words "none but I bestir me—to no end" foreground the ineffectiveness of her speech, her extreme isolation, and her profound longing for a community with which to grieve. Isabella's dramatic and apocalyptic final gestures articulate the danger of losing one's expressive capacity and perform the inevitable violence resulting from the realization that language can no longer adequately represent the interior world of emotions nor the exterior world of the community at large.

Although he does not take his own life, Hieronimo's last violent act similarly instantiates his failure to elegize and mourn his son's death, and initiates a literal return to Montaigne's realm of "benumbed silence." After fulfilling his oath as violent revenger, Hieronimo vows never to reveal "The thing which I have vowed inviolate," and then bites out his own tongue as proof (4.4. 188). Having failed to enter into any form of communal speech that may have contributed to the production of successful elegy, Hieronimo disavows language completely in the final moments of the play, convinced that it no longer has the power to represent his emotions in grief. In the wake of this gesture there remains only the severed

tongue, a visual reminder of the violent but inevitable result of facing the inadequacy of language alone in grief.

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