

“Stand you on that?”: The Emptiness of Signification in Thomas Kyd’s *The Spanish Tragedy*

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English

And, gentles, thus I end my play:
Urge no more words: I have no more to say.
- Hieronimo, *The Spanish Tragedy*¹

Since we have already said everything, the reader must bear with us if
we continue on awhile. If we extend ourselves by force of play.
- Jacques Derrida, “Plato’s Pharmacy”

What hath he in his box, as thou think’st?
- Pedringano, *The Spanish Tragedy*

Critics have often read *The Spanish Tragedy* as a play about language, not least so because of its hero’s dramatic self-mutilation in the penultimate act. Critical interpretation of the play’s concern with language has great breadth, due largely to the different, often conflicting, presentations of language within the play. Words in *The Spanish Tragedy* are essential and superfluous, malleable and uncontrollable. They are denigrated and idolized. Contrary to much *The Spanish Tragedy* criticism, readers and viewers need not pick an interpretational side regarding these paradoxes. Rather, if we read the play as presenting language as fundamentally empty and meaningless and exploring the anxieties this causes, then we might explain both sides of these issues, while furthering, not explaining away, their paradoxical nature. Moreover, understanding the semiotic and lingual crisis

¹ This and other citations of the play are from *The Spanish Tragedy*, ed. J.R. Mulryne, (London: New Mermaids, 2009). Occasionally I will cite the facsimile of the 1592 folio edition of the play, available on the Early English Books Online database. Those instances will be noted as such.

that is the locus of the play's concern with language allows us to explore the historical issue of the play-text's potential corruption and to compare the early modern theatre audience's experience of the play with our own as readers of the play-text. The significance of language in the play can only be understood by recognizing the emptiness and incomprehensibility of signification that *The Spanish Tragedy* espouses.

To summarize the plot briefly for unfamiliar readers: the action of the play is overseen by the ghost of Spanish war-hero Andrea and his companion Revenge, who will show the former his murderer, the Portuguese prince Balthazar, killed by his beloved, the Spanish Duke's daughter Bel-Imperia. Andrea's death unites Bel-Imperia with Horatio, his best friend and the son of Spain's Knight Marshall, Hieronimo. When the captured Balthazar falls in love with Bel-Imperia, however, he joins with Lorenzo, the Duke's son, against Horatio. With help from their servants Pedringano and Serberine, they hang and stab Horatio. The conniving Lorenzo then ties up loose ends by having Pedringano kill Serberine and then having him hanged for it. Upon discovering his son's murder, Horatio's father Hieronimo vacillates between Christian submission to God's will or revenge—and eventually opts for the latter. With Bel-Imperia's support, Hieronimo writes a play that he will perform with Bel-Imperia, Balthazar, and Lorenzo in front of their parents, the Spanish and Portuguese royalty. Hieronimo and Bel-Imperia, however, actually commit the murders the play stages, after which Bel-Imperia kills herself. When Hieronimo reveals to the unknowing fathers that they have just witnessed the real deaths of their children — and the end of the bloodlines of two nations — they accost him and demand an explanation. In a critically debated moment, he refuses and bites out his own tongue before stabbing the Duke and himself to complete the tragedy. The play closes with a satisfied Andrea ascribing pain or reward in the afterlife as appropriate to the newly deceased.

The epitome of the play's anxiety over the emptiness of language occurs in Act 3, scene 6, the servant Pedringano's hanging. In Act 3, scene 4, Lorenzo sends his page to the hanging with a box ostensibly containing Pedringano's pardon from the king. In the next scene, 3.5, the page, now alone on stage, opens the box and reveals to the audience that it is empty: "By my bare honesty," he exclaims, "here's nothing but the bare empty box" (3.5.5-6). He then plans to encourage Pedringano's overconfidence, "to stand and grace every jest he makes, pointing [his] finger at the box, as who would say, 'Mock on, here's thy warrant'" (3.5.12-

14). In the following scene, Pedringano does indeed mock on, and he is hanged accordingly, with no reprieve from his “pardon.” Though he predicts Pedringano’s response to his parcel, the page is wrong to say that he carries “nothing but the bare empty box.” He carries the box, of course, but it cannot be said to be “nothing but.” It is rich with significance in the text, representing as it does to various points of view life or death, safety or danger, hierarchical determinism or social mobility, openness or deception. Though he doesn’t recognize this representational ‘fullness,’ the page contributes to it: his gesturing adds to the spectacle of the box, increasing its significances. It does not hold a pardon, but it is heavy with the meanings that it carries.

In general, critical opinion disagrees with the page’s assessment of the box, finding it to be neither “without contents” nor “without literary or artistic effect.” It is certainly not “unconcealed, undisguised, open to view.”² There are two generally accepted source-myths for Pedringano’s box: Pandora’s box and the box of Silenus in Plato’s *Symposium*.³ Of the two, I find the argument for the latter more convincing, particularly as formulated by Barbara J. Baines, who believes that Pedringano’s box is “the unifying symbol of the ontological and epistemological concerns of the play and that it is a metaphor for the play’s complex structure.”⁴ She identifies Plato’s *Symposium*, Erasmus’s *The Praise of Folly* and *Sileni Alcibiadis*, and Rabelais’s “The Author’s Prologue” to *Gargantua* as possible access points to the story for Kyd, marking Erasmus as his most probable source.⁵ In the *Symposium*, Alcibiades accuses Socrates of being similar to the figurines of Silenus, which are ugly on the outside but reveal figures of the gods when opened.⁶

² “bare.” The Oxford English Dictionary. 2nd ed. 1989. *OED Online*. Oxford UP.

³ Aside from these, Fredson Bowers discusses interesting parallels and potential historical sources for the event itself, but not the box, in “Kyd’s Pedringano: Sources and Parallels,” *Harvard Studies and Notes in Philology and Literature* 13 (1931): 241-49.

⁴ Barbara J. Baines, “Kyd’s Silenus Box and the Limits of Perception,” *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 10 (1980): 41. For the reading of the box as Pandora’s box, see Frank Ardolino, “The Hangman’s Noose and the Empty Box: Kyd’s Use of Dramatic and Mythological Sources in *The Spanish Tragedy* (III.iv–vii),” *Renaissance Quarterly* 30 (1977): 334–40.

⁵ “Given the importance of Erasmus in the Elizabethan grammar school, the numerous editions and translations of his works, and his international acclaim, it is hard to imagine that a reasonably well-educated writer at the end of the century would not have known his works” (Baines 1980, 46).

⁶ Plato, *The Symposium*, trans. Benjamin Jowett. (Charleston, SC: Forgotten Books, 2008), 54-56.

For Erasmus, the Sileni represent “a thing which in appearance (at first blush, as they say) seems ridiculous and contemptible, but closer and deeper examination proves to be admirable, or else with reference to a person whose looks and dress do not correspond at all to what he conceals in his soul.”⁷ Erasmus acknowledges that this deception is not necessarily for ill: “In living things, what is best and most vital is secreted in the inward parts. In man, what is most divine and immortal is what cannot be seen. In every kind of thing, the material of which it is made is the baser part, most apparent to the senses, and the essence and value of it is felt through its usefulness, and yet that is far from sense-impressions.”⁸ However, while he marks Christ, the Sacraments, and the Scriptures as examples of this sort of Silenus, Erasmus warns of the “inside-out Sileni,” beautiful on the outside but wicked within. “Among all kinds of men, there are those everywhere to be found whose physical appearance would make you think they were not only men, but noble examples of mankind: but, if you open up the Silenus, you will perhaps find a pig, or a lion, or a bear, or an ass,” he cautions.⁹

Kyd’s box has resonances of the Silenus box, as read from the *Symposium* by Erasmus. However, critical interpretation of the box’s relationship to the rest of the play, I believe, misses its most crucial quality.¹⁰ Although noting the similarities between Pedringano’s box and the Sileni is useful, I believe their differences are more interesting and emblematic of the play’s theme. The deceptive countenances of literal and metaphorical Sileni hide internal truths: the foolish figures hide images of gods, the satyr-like face of Socrates masks inner wisdom, and the façade of the son of a carpenter covers soteriological divinity. Pedringano’s box poses as pardon, immunity, freedom, and life. But what is hidden within? Here, Lorenzo’s page got it right: the box is not bare, but it is *empty*. Unlike the Sileni, it does not present one thing and conceal another; rather, it presents a thing and conceals nothing. If, as Baines argues, the box represents the difference between illusion and reality, then all signification is illusory, and the inner parts of meaning are emptiness and nothingness. Language’s essence and value is defined

⁷Desiderius Erasmus, *Erasmus on His Times; A Shortened Version of the ‘Adages’ of Erasmus*, trans. Margaret Mann Phillips, (New York and London: Cambridge UP, 1967), 82.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 82.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 83-84.

¹⁰ Baines, for one, reads the box as “defin[ing] deception and delusion and [suggesting] the inability to distinguish illusion from reality,” which she considers emblematic of the theme of Kyd’s play (Baines 1980, 41).

by what is not. Pedringano's box illustrates the crux of the play's concern with language, which is not the dichotomy between illusion and reality, or the ability of language to align itself with either end, but rather the *inability* of language to represent at all. Erasmus argues that the Sileni demonstrate that the best and most vital is secreted in the inward parts. Pedringano's box symbolizes *The Spanish Tragedy's* epistemological and lingual concern that beneath our words, symbols, and signs lies not the best and most vital but emptiness, insignificance, and meaninglessness.

However, the emptiness of language in *The Spanish Tragedy* does not mitigate its power. Those characters without lingual acumen, such as Balthazar, Horatio, and Pedringano, are at the mercy of the more dominant linguists, Bel-Imperia, Lorenzo, and Hieronimo, who often disavow the usefulness of language while simultaneously wielding it to accomplish their ends. By capitalizing on "language" and its multiplicity as a tool and weapon, they become aware that language is not an infallible, essential part of human interaction in which a symbol stands in for a real thing, but rather an inherently flawed system that is uncontrollable and ultimately meaningless. The epistemological realization of the multivalence of language unwittingly effects semiotic anxiety over the ability and reliability of signs to convey meaning. Thus it is skill with and understanding of language that leads characters to doubt its authenticity and to fear its uncontrollable dissemination.

Among the linguistically unaware characters, Balthazar is the most severe example of manipulability caused by linguistic obtuseness. Bel-Imperia verbally baffles him from their stichomythic first exchange onwards (1.4.77-91). While her lines are rich with mocking innuendo and irony, his are conventional and hyperbolic. His solemn, passionate response to Bel-Imperia's sarcasm epitomizes his lingual obtuseness: she exclaims, "A heartless man, and live? A miracle!" and he replies, "Ay lady, love can work such miracles" (1.4.88-89). Lorenzo is right to step in and rescue him. He is clearly lost among "these ambages" and might have a chance "in plain terms" (1.4.90-91).¹¹ Lorenzo, for his part, uses Balthazar's "words of course" to his advantage (1.4.98). In the following scene, he initiates the use of couplets and quotations, conventions that Balthazar eagerly embraces (2.1.9-28, 116-129). Lorenzo's initiation of the tropes of unrequited love stimulates

¹¹ Mulryne glosses "ambages" as "roundabout modes of speech" (24).

Balthazar's (conventional) imagination, by which he eventually agrees to the murder plot. In this scene, Lorenzo's romanticizing of his plan fuels two sustained speeches and forty-two lines of dialogue from Balthazar. In contrast, Balthazar speaks exactly one of the murder scene's sixty-three lines, which include declarations of love, (possibly) love's consummation, hanging, stabbing, and kidnapping: to Bel-Imperia's "O save him, brother, save him, Balthazar: / I loved Horatio, but he loved me not," he responds rather stupidly, "But Balthazar loves Bel-Imperia" (4.4.56-59).¹² Happy to pile convention on convention beforehand, Balthazar is all but mute during the actual crime. Lorenzo's memorable declaration "Ay, thus and thus: these are the fruits of love" as he stabs Horatio and his vicious pun, "Although his life were still ambitious proud, / Yet is he at the highest now he is dead," underscore the disparity in verbal perspicacity between the two characters (2.4.55, 60-61).

Horatio shows a similar penchant for dealing in conventions, and he is manipulated accordingly. We might compare Horatio's "And, madam, Don Horatio will not slack / Humbly to serve fair Bel-Imperia" to Balthazar's "No madam, but in pleasing servitude" (1.4.53-54; 1.4.81). If he is more sophisticated than Balthazar, he is only just so. He fares slightly better in his own sometimes stichomythic repartee with Bel-Imperia and (verbally at least) in the scene of his murder (2.4.1-50). (Although after the entrance of his would-be killers, he too manages only one unimpressive line: "What, would you murder me?" [2.4.54].) Where the two men are most unaware of language's power and thus deprived of autonomy is in their relations with Bel-Imperia. As other critics have noted, she is the driving force behind her romance with Horatio, which she admits she will

¹² For other instances where Balthazar refers to himself in the third person, see 1.4.122, 3.10.100, 3.10.107, and 3.14.95. In these four instances, Balthazar seems caught up in the conventions that he views himself as playing out of either, respectively, the gallant soldier ("You see, my lord, how Balthazar is slain") or pining lover ("Then, fair, let Balthazar your keeper be"; "Led by the loadstar of her heavenly looks, / Wends poor oppressed Balthazar"; "Come, Bel-Imperia, Balthazar's content, / My sorrow's ease and sovereign of my bliss"). These lines, though unflattering of his verbal intelligence, do not speak as strongly to how out of touch he is as "But Balthazar loves Bel-Imperia," spoken moments after participating in the murder of her lover. As example of the disparity in cunning between the two, note Lorenzo's skillful, performative deployment of the third person in 3.4.75 ("But let him [Pedringano] wisely keep his hopes unknown, / He shall not want while Don Lorenzo lives"), to his father on stopping Bel-Imperia's happiness in 3.14.51 ("Heavens would not let Lorenzo err so much"), and on intercepting Hieronimo's complaints to the king in 3.14.73 ("My lord, it lies not in Lorenzo's power").

initiate as part of her revenge on Balthazar: “Yes, second love shall further my revenge. / I’ll love Horatio, my Andrea’s friend, / The more to spite the prince that wrought his end” (1.4.66-68). Thus it is “by favour of [Bel-Imperia’s] love,” as Horatio proclaims, that their “hidden smoke is turned to open flame” (2.2.1-2). While Horatio and Balthazar are oblivious, Lorenzo is aware of and concerned about the dangers of his sister’s verbal dexterity. Following an exchange of curt, short lines that leaves even Lorenzo a bit shaken, Bel-Imperia states, “No, Balthazar doth fear as well as we: / Et tremulo metui pavidum junxere tomorem, / Et vanum stolidae proditiōis opus” (3.10.101-103).¹³ In response to her verbal skill and use of Latin, Lorenzo says, “Nay and you argue things so cunningly, / We’ll go continue this discourse at court” where, of course, he’ll have the advantage as a man (3.10.104-105).¹⁴ If we are to hierarchize linguistic skill among the main characters, Horatio might barely edge Balthazar, but Bel-Imperia would easily surpass them both.

In the cleverest characters, Lorenzo and Hieronimo, we find the most skill with and awareness of words. Lorenzo’s manipulation of Balthazar, some evidence of which has been discussed above, is achieved by his superior lingual sophistication. He deceives Pedringano similarly. In the scene when he sends Pedringano to murder Serberine, Lorenzo tells him, “When things shall alter, as I hope they will, / Then shalt thou mount for this: thou know’st my mind” (3.2.92-93). The irony (“thou know’st my mind”) and the pun (“shalt thou *mount* for this”) are both lost on Pedringano. For his part, Hieronimo does not at first use his power with words to manipulate, but to lament, in the most famous and often quoted speeches of the play.¹⁵ As he turns to revenge, however, he also turns to more vicious uses of language. He tells Lorenzo and Balthazar, “Why then I’ll *fit* you; *say no more*” and continues “methinks, you are too *quick* with us” (4.1.70, 76). He

¹³ Mulryne translates the Latin as “They yoked cowardly fear to trembling dread, as a fruitless act of stupid treason” (80).

¹⁴ See also 1.4.100-105. When Bel-Imperia drops her glove during her departure and bestows it to Horatio when he picks it up, Balthazar (“Signior Horatio stooped in happy time”) and Horatio (“I reaped more grace than I deserved or hoped”) are quick to attribute the event to luck. Lorenzo knows better, and spots the action as intentional: “My lord, be not dismayed for what is passed, / You know that women oft are humorous” (1.4.103-105).

¹⁵ See, for example, such memorable lines as “Sweet lovely rose, ill plucked before thy time, / Fair worthy son, not conquered, but betrayed: / I’ll kiss thee now, for words with tears are stayed” and the famous “O eyes, no eyes, but fountains fraught with tears” speech (2.5.46-48; 3.2.1-25).

assures them that “all shall be *concluded* in one scene (4.1.188; emphases mine).¹⁶ Lorenzo and Hieronimo interweave double, unnoticed meanings into the semiotic gaps in their language. Bel-Imperia’s accusation, “Brother, you are become an orator” (3.10.83) and Hieronimo’s own “And I myself in an oration” (4.1.184) underscore their infusion of the act of speaking with multivalent, often manipulative, meanings.¹⁷ As orators, Hieronimo and Lorenzo are more than just speakers: they are wielders of language, adding to and manipulating its significances while exploiting its depths and gaps.

Yet both men are quick to deny the efficacy of language. After the identities of his son’s murderers have been confirmed, Hieronimo asks, “But wherefore waste I mine unfruitful words, / When naught but blood will satisfy my woes?” (3.7.67-68). Since his unheard words have not hastened his revenge, he plans to “plain” and “cry aloud” with “entreats” or “threats” to those in power (3.7.69-73). In this model, words are effective only as acknowledged by political or hierarchical authority. Lorenzo too debases language. He avers, “Where words prevail not, violence prevails; / But gold doth more than either of them both” (2.1.108-109). Despite these avowed dismissals, words are the means by which Hieronimo and Lorenzo achieve their violent ends. Lorenzo’s verbal manipulation of Balthazar, Pedringano, and Serberine allows him to murder Horatio. Hieronimo finds words directed through the proper channels ineffective, but when he takes language’s power into his own hands through his play-within-the-play, he achieves his revenge. Though both men declare language fruitless, their plans are fueled by its careful and complicated implementation.

Their denial of the power of language is further contradicted by their anxiety over its uncontrollable dissemination. Both Hieronimo and Lorenzo refuse to speak their plans aloud in an attempt to control them. Lorenzo says,

¹⁶ Thus, through his “invention,” or “contrivance, design, plan, scheme,” Hieronimo means to “fit,” or “visit (a person) with a fit penalty; to punish,” Lorenzo and Balthazar so they are not “too quick,” or “living, endowed with life, animate,” and will literally “say no more.” He does not exaggerate when he avers that “all shall be concluded,” or “put an end to . . . a person,” “in one scene” (“invention, II.6,” fit, II.12,” “quick, A.I.1.a,” and “conclude, II.5.b,” *OED*.)

¹⁷ The *OED* defines oration as a “formal discourse delivered in elevated and dignified language, esp. one given on a ceremonial occasion such as a public celebration, a funeral, etc.” (“oration,” 2).

But to what end? I list not trust the air
With utterance of our pretence therein,
For fear the privy whispering of the wind
Convey our words among unfriendly ears,
That lie too open to advantages.
E quell che voglio io, nessun lo sa;
Intendo io: quell mi bastera. (3.4.82-88)¹⁸

Similarly, Hieronimo states,

And to conclude, I will revenge his death!
But how? not as the vulgar wits of men,
With open, but inevitable illls,
As by a secret, yet a certain mean,
Which under kindship will be cloaked best.
(3.13.20-24; emphasis mine)

Thus the most powerful manipulators of language in the play are the most anxious over words and resolve to achieve their ends through unspoken, silent means. In doing so, they hope to allay their fears by encapsulating, directing, and therefore controlling language. Hieronimo speaks his plan aloud to neither the audience nor his co-conspirator Bel-Imperia, and Lorenzo fears that the very wind will convey his meanings to uncontrollable places.

And, indeed, his fear is justified. As careful as he is in his use of words, disseminated language is his downfall. Lorenzo does not deign to read the letter Pedringano writes him, but assumes he knows its content: “What would he with us? He writes us here / To stand good lord and help him in his distress” (3.4.55-56). The unread letter’s counterpart appears on stage in the scene of Pedringano’s hanging: “Enter *Officers, Boy, and Pedringano*, with a letter in his hand, bound.”¹⁹ These two letters bring about Lorenzo’s death, as the latter confirms his role in Horatio’s murder. Assuming that the first letter contained lines similar to “in my death I shall reveal the troth,” we cannot imagine Lorenzo would have gone through with his cruel ploy had he read it (3.7.35). These letters, directed to but

¹⁸ “And what I want, nobody knows; it is enough that I alone understand” (Mulryne 2009, 64).

¹⁹ Thomas Kyd, *The Spanish tragedie, Containing the lamentable end of Don Horatio, and Bel-imperia: with the pitiful death of olde Hieronimo*,” (London: Printed by Edward Allde, for Edward White, 1592), F2.

ultimately betraying Lorenzo, parallel and return us to consideration of Pedringano's box. Like the second letter, the box has an unplanned opener. The difference, of course, is that Pedringano's box is never meant to be opened at all, and, indeed, as far as the plot of the play is concerned, it is never opened. Act 3, scene 5, when the page opens the box and reveals its emptiness to the audience, changes nothing within the parameters of the play. Though the reading or viewing audience now knows that the box is empty, the scene of Pedringano's hanging proceeds entirely with the box closed. Excluding the aside of 3.5, there could very well be a pardon within the box. Where, then, does meaning reside within *The Spanish Tragedy*? Heroes and villains alike wield signifiers to their own devices. The most skillful orators of the play are also the most wary of language. Letters confuse, complicate, and deceive—whether they are opened and read or not. A box-without-a-pardon represents a box-with-a-pardon, and to the same effect; emptiness and fullness become one in the same, and neither matters. The box, full of significance but empty of a pardon, remains closed. Pedringano hangs.

Hieronimo's play-within-the-play, performed in the "sundry languages" (Latin, Greek, Italian, and French) and manifesting fiction into reality, has appropriately received the attention of critics considering language in *The Spanish Tragedy*. Carol McGinnis Kay, for example, reads this as the final disintegration of an ever-degenerating language within the society of the play.²⁰ I read this moment not as a culmination, however, but as an explanation of how language has worked throughout the play. It is a meta-instance of a repeated pattern in which a "performance" occurs and is retroactively explained, or, in some cases, in which explanation retroactively makes action performative. Take for example Hieronimo's masque in Act 1, scene 4, after the first part of which the King says, "Hieronimo, this masque contents mine eye, / Although I sound not well the mystery" (1.4.138-139). Hieronimo then offers significance where it was unavailable in the viewing present. This repeats: after each event in the masque, "He doth as he did before."²¹ I read the penultimate scene, 4.5, as following this

²⁰ Carol McGinnis Kay, "Deception through Words: A Reading of *The Spanish Tragedy*," *Studies in Philology* 74 (1977): 2-38.

²¹ Mulryne, 2009, 26. This same pattern occurs between Revenge and Andrea (3.15.26-35). Each description of Andrea's death is a similar instance of this retroactive application of meaning (some more truthfully than others) (1.1.1-26, 1.2.63-84, 1.2.155-165, 1.3.59-71, and 1.4.6-43). On the repetition of the story of Andrea's death, see Carol McGinnis Kay, "Deception through

pattern; it is the retroactive explanation of how language has functioned. The play-within-the-play, then, is not indicative of the degeneration of meaning or the exacerbation of deceptive relational language. Rather, its confusion reveals that language has been meaningless, in-significant, throughout. Balthazar's concern that "this will be a mere confusion, / And hardly shall we all be understood" may seem an uncharacteristically astute point (4.1.180-181). However, it is based on the assumption that language would otherwise be "all . . . understood" and has not, in fact, been a "mere confusion" all along. The malleability and disconnection from any inherent truth of language becomes apparent to Balthazar here for the first time, but it is a constant anxiety for the more sophisticated characters, Hieronimo and Lorenzo. The play-within-the-play and this penultimate scene make it apparent that we (readers and audience members) are meant to question the meaningfulness of language in the entirety of the play.

Much has been made about the polyglot nature of the murderous play and the affect/effect of Hieronimo's post factum explanation of it.²² Among these, William N. West has made a convincing argument that the confusion of the final act would have extended to the Elizabethan theatrical audience.²³ He writes, "The reactions of the onstage audience make explicit that they do not understand what has happened; nor is it likely that the offstage audience can see any difference between the body of an actor playing a character playing dead, and an actor

Words: A Reading of *The Spanish Tragedy*," *Studies in Philology* 74 (1977): 2-38, and Scott McMillin, "The Figure of Silence in *The Spanish Tragedy*," *ELH* 39:1 (March 1972): 27-48.

²² For interpretation of the use of 'sundry languages,' see Janette Dillon, "*The Spanish Tragedy* and Staging Languages in Renaissance Drama," *Research Opportunities in Renaissance Drama* 34 (1995): 15-40; S.F. Johnson, "*The Spanish Tragedy* or Babylon Revisited," *Essay on Shakespeare and Elizabethan Drama: In honour of Hardin Craig*, ed. Richard Hosley. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1963); Carla Mazzio, "Staging the Vernacular: Language and Nation in Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*," *Studies in English Literature* 38 (1998): 207-32; and Scott McMillin, "The Figure of Silence in *The Spanish Tragedy*," *ELH* 39:1 (March 1972): 27-48. On the affect of the play-within-a-play, see Molly Easo Smith, "The Theatre and the Scaffold: Death as Spectacle in *The Spanish Tragedy*," *New Casebook: Revenge Tragedy*, ed. Stevie Simkin. (New York: Palgrave, 2001): 88-106; Tzachi Zamir, "Wooden Subjects," *New Literary History* 39:2 (Spring 2008): 277-300; and William N. West, "'But this will be a mere confusion': Real and Represented Confusion on the Elizabethan Stage," *Theatre Journal* 60:2 (2008): 217-233.

²³ William N. West, "'But this will be a mere confusion': Real and Represented Confusion on the Elizabethan Stage," *Theatre Journal* 60:2 (2008): 217-233.

playing a dead character.”²⁴ Thus the dramaturgy of confusion displaces signification and a need for mimetic reassessment in the real audience as well as the represented one. Indeed, the confusion is even greater in the real audience, for the performance is one step further removed: an actor is playing the character playing dead (or the dead character). With each level of meaning introduced, meaning-as-truth recedes further into the distance. The proliferation of meaning, then, creates meaninglessness. The multivalence of the representations manifests in and through a play-within-a-play that brings signifier (the performance) together with its signified (death), so that unification of signified and signifier effects and is effected by the proliferation of signifiers and the infinite regress of the signified. Representation simultaneously effects reality and is exposed as meaningless.

As readers, confusion is not available to us affectively in the same way that it is to an audience. However, there is a moment in the text of the play that is unavailable to a theatre audience that could cause a mimetic and, in this case, semiotic crisis that parallels their vexed experience. To open the culminating Act 4, scene 4, the Spanish king and Portuguese viceroy have this exchange:

KING: Now, Viceroy, shall we see the tragedy
Of Soliman the Turkish emperor,
Performed of pleasure by your son the prince,
My nephew Don Lorenzo, and my niece.

VICEROY: Who, Bel-Imperia?

KING: Ay, and Hieronimo, our marshal,
At whose request they deign to do't themselves:
These be our pastimes in the court of Spain.
Here, brother, you shall be the book-keeper:
This is the argument of that they show. (4.4.1-10)

In the 1592 folio and modern editions, this is followed by:

He giveth him a booke.
*Gentlemen, this play of Hieronimo in sundrie Languages, was
thought good to be set downe in English more largely,*

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 229.

*for the easier understanding to every
publique Reader.*²⁵

In a moment that J.R. Mulryne glosses in the New Mermaids edition as “almost unique in early modern drama,” the author’s voice breaks open the scene to inform the reader that he or she will be receiving the translated version of the various languages so that the play might be easier to understand.²⁶ The effects of this are numerous, and all contribute to a destabilization and proliferation of meaning. It is a startling moment that demonstrates that this authorial other, who has the power to choose the interpretational differences between the text and the performance, has been present though invisible all along. A disquieting parallel to the theme of post factum authorial explanations, this moment of disruption retroactively renders every previous word of the text “interpreted.” Every word is and was “translated” just as the sundry languages will be. One more layer of mediation and signification is revealed. However, this layer is not added in this moment; it is only avowed. It has, in fact, been present throughout: an undetectable, unquestionable, authoring and translating other.

The preceding lines further complicate this moment. The king has apparently read the written argument of the play, and after describing it to the Portuguese viceroy, passes it on to the Duke. In the play-text, this creates the uncanny moment when the king says “Here, brother, you shall be the book-keeper: / This is the argument of that they show,” followed by the stage direction (with masculine pronouns) “He giveth him a book,” immediately after which begins the authorial aside “*Gentlemen . . .*” (4.4.91-10). These opening moments of 4.4 uncomfortably destabilize our privileged position as readers. Our private reading is intruded on by a voice of authority that we then realize has been there all along, but the lines and stage direction leading up to this moment create the uncanny sensation that *the King is addressing us*. We shall be, indeed we are, the “book-keepers” and “This,” this text that we are holding and reading from, is indeed the “argument of that they

²⁵ Thomas Kyd, *The Spanish tragedie, Containing the lamentable end of Don Horatio, and Bel-imperia: with the pitiful death of olde Hieronimo*,” (London: Printed by Edward Allde, for Edward White, 1592), K3. Here I have modernized only the long “s.” This appears on p. 116 of the New Mermaids edition, ed. Mulryne, I have quoted throughout.

²⁶ Mulryne 2009, 116. I use “author’s” here for convenience, but not decisively; this “voice” could be an editor’s, a publisher’s, or collaborative authors’.

show.”²⁷ “He giveth him a book” (presumably a book in English) that describes the sequence of the play so that he might better understand it, which is almost exactly equal to *our* book, which, we are told, has been set down in English for us so that we might better understand it.²⁸ The feeling of disquiet and uncanniness in the reader that is the result of the disruption of the suspension of disbelief in the text, the intrusion of an interpreter/narrator/authority, and the feeling that the lines leading up to this disruption may just as easily have been addressed to us the readers as to the Duke of Castile parallels the confusion that the Elizabethan theatre-goer, as described by West, would have experienced.

Like the confused theatre audience, readers are forced by this blurring of the lines between author and reader, reader and character to reassess mimetic signifiers and signifieds. We read Hieronimo’s play-within-the-play disturbed and suspicious, as we find ourselves unwilling to trust the translation, the author, or the characters — in short, any of the words that we are reading. What has been created in the reading audience is then presented in the represented audience. After the end of the play-within-the-play, Hieronimo explains that the actors will not “Revive to please to-morrow’s audience” because the murders represented were real (4.4.82). Hieronimo’s explanation, which lasts almost eighty uninterrupted lines, does not satisfy the represented audience. They demand the retroactive explication that they have come to expect after confusing representations—the very explication that has just been given. They chase Hieronimo as he flees to kill himself and demand that he provide them the means to understand, to signify and thus to encapsulate and control, what they have seen, as he has done in the past.

²⁷ This is, perhaps, a rather loose interpretation of “argument.” The King has a similar declaration at 4.4.33-34: “Here comes Lorenzo; look upon the plot, / And tell me, brother, what part he plays.” Explicitly and specifically, “argument” and “plot” are used to mean “the summary or abstract of the subject-matter of a book; a syllabus; *fig.* the contents” and “a plan of the actual or proposed arrangement of something; a sketch, an outline, *esp.* a synopsis of a literary work,” respectively (“argument,” 7, “plot,” II.3.a, *OED*). “Plot” is further defined as “the plan or scheme of a literary or dramatic work; the main events of a play, novel, film, opera, etc., considered or presented as an interrelated sequence; a storyline. Also in extended use” (“plot,” II.6, *OED*). This is more closely aligned with the meaning I explore. Though the text we are reading is not, precisely, a summary or abstract in the way the *OED* defines “argument,” the parallels between our text and the king’s argument are strong enough to create the uncanny effect of this moment.

²⁸ Modern readers of the Mermaids edition have a further authorial decision made for them without acknowledgement by Dr. Mulryne. Starting with Balthazar’s first speech as Soliman, the words of the play-within-a-play are italicized. No such demarcation is made in the 1592 edition.

“Speak, traitor; damned, bloody murderer,” the king curses, “speak! / For now I have thee I will make thee speak” (4.4.163-164). “Why . . . ,” “Why . . . ,” “Why . . . ,” the king, Duke, and Viceroy ask, and Hieronimo mocks their need for an explanation that has already been given: “O, good words” (4.4.165-168). Language has lost its ability to mean and to signify, and thus Hieronimo’s explaining speech, so similar to that following the dumb show in Act 1, serves only to destabilize meaning further.

Much critical attention has been paid, and rightfully so, to the inconsistency in this scene. The king, viceroy, and Duke demand that Hieronimo speak and tell what he has already spoken and told. Hieronimo himself declares, “never shalt thou force me to reveal / The thing which I have vowed inviolate” (4.4.187-188). This sequence often contributes to arguments that regard the text as corrupt, since there is nothing left for Hieronimo to reveal here. This moment, I believe, stands as a bookend to the authorial interruption near the beginning of the scene. That destabilizing break in verisimilitude disturbs the text and the reader of the text in the same way that Hieronimo’s confirmation that he hides something when there is nothing left to hide does. This disruption sticks with the reader and the audience as the play ends, as much as the disruption of the author’s aside to the reader disturbs the action of the penultimate scene. The too-tidy assignment of punishment and reward in the final scene does little to relieve it. The play presents and effects the emptiness of language in much the same way that West observes it does confusion. If Pedringano’s box is emblematic of the play’s presentation of language, the epitome is Hieronimo’s self-mutilation. His biting out of his own tongue is akin to the revelation that the performed murders were real. Paradoxically, these instances represent the unity of sign and signified and, simultaneously, the infinite proliferation of signs that precludes true representation. The represented killings are real, but they are uninterpretable and thus meaningless since signs are revealed as empty. Likewise, Hieronimo physically manifests his disavowal of speech by biting out his own tongue, but in collapsing signifier and signified, he creates an infinite regression of “true” meaning into conjecture. We ask, ‘What was Hieronimo hiding? What was left to reveal?’ His meaning is unattainable, retreating exponentially the more we try to interpret it. Every significance we place on it only exacerbates its unknowability. This dissemination of meaning into meaninglessness is the result of, not in spite of, the merging of represented signified and representing signifiers.

It is not surprising that in 1602 a revised edition of *The Spanish Tragedy* was produced, one in which Hieronimo's insanity is made clearer, earlier. The final scenes too are modified to make them *represent something* better. In 1592, the play ends without meaning, creating in the audience and the reader the emptiness of language that is presented throughout the play. The need to read and understand meaning, to lock down and control signification and its dissemination, is pervasive throughout the play and the play's history. In Act 4, scene 4, the figures of authority demand a way to signify what they have just seen: surely the play-within-the-play cannot end in infinite expansion. Act 4, scene 5 serves only to exacerbate our feelings of discontent at an ending that, though it kills off almost every character, has no resolution. And so, changes were made in the revised edition to signify what was otherwise a void. Even in modern criticism of the play, the 1592 text is viewed as potentially corrupt, lacking, or missing something, because surely *something must need to be said there*. *The Spanish Tragedy* is a play that ends on a lack, an unsignifiable emptiness, and, given the model of retroactive application of meaning throughout the text, it leaves us with the fear that the words we have clung to from the first utterance of Andrea's ghost have been as empty as Pedringano's box.

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