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"See here my show": Providence and The Theatrum Mundi in Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*

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The work of art assumes the existence of the perfect spectator,
and is indifferent to the fact that no such person exists.
-E.M. Forster

It is only the one who knows God who can seek God.
You cannot seek God in ignorance of God.
You cannot seek the truth in ignorance of the truth.
You cannot be truthful in seeking ignorantly.
-Brayton Polka

We attack or defend, we build or tear down, fight or are at peace,
affirm or deny; but sooner or later we are compelled to halt
before a last threatening danger and a last heavy
punishment—the danger that, after all, we are men,
and the punishment for being so.
-Karl Barth

I

Languishing in prison awaiting execution, the sixth century senator and philosopher, Boethius, wrote his final work. Translated into English by both Chaucer and Queen Elizabeth I, *The Consolation of Philosophy* became a critical text for Renaissance students of history and philosophy, not least because it reaffirmed many of the theological beliefs already proclaimed by the Renaissance Christian. Preeminent among these shared beliefs was the unwavering commitment to providential thinking. In an apostrophic poem, Boethius outlines the basis tenets of providential thought:

Father of earth and sky, You steer the world
By reason everlasting. You bid time
Progress from all eternity. Yourself
Unshifting, You impel all things to move.
No cause outside Yourself made you give shape
To fluid matter, for in You was set
The form of the ungrudging highest good.

From heavenly patterns You derive all things.
 Yourself most beautiful, You likewise bear
 In mind a world of beauty, and You shape
 Our world in like appearance. You command
 Its perfect parts, to form a perfect world. (56)

Essentially, providentialism refers to the belief, staunchly held and vigilantly proclaimed, that the earth—indeed, the cosmos—is divinely ordered and that this order, when sensitively interpreted, reveals, at least in part, the divine will. Thus, it is unsurprising that the very word “providence” derives from the Latin *providere* meaning “to attend to” or “to foresee.” As Boethius clarifies, “It is better to term it *providentia* (‘looking forward spatially’) rather than *praevidentia* (‘looking forward in time’) for it [i.e. providence] is not apart from the lowliest things, and it gazes out on everything as from one of the world’s lofty peaks” (12). Boethius goes on to introduce the concept of the Eternal Present, arguing, “the foresight by which God discerns all things [is] not as a sort of foreknowledge of the future, but a knowledge of the unceasingly present moment” (112). God predates time by virtue of existing outside the constraints of temporality and it is from this vantage point that He orders human history. In both its temporal and spatial considerations providence is, by definition, all-encompassing.

Modernity, constantly wary of placing limits on individual sovereignty and free will, may be ill-prepared to subscribe to the tenets of providentialism yet it must be noted that “the doctrine of providence was not necessarily irrational. There is no logically self-evident boundary beyond which a sovereign creator can be deemed not to direct events. Providence seemed the friend of reason, even though it of course transcended it” (Worden, 63). It is equally true that “the disposition to see prodigies, omens and portents, sprang from a coherent view of the world as a moral order reflecting God’s purposes and

physically sensitive to the moral conduct of human beings” (Thomas, 91). It was this sense of reason and order that made providence so attractive, and so “in place of unacceptable moral chaos was erected the edifice of God’s omnipotent sovereignty” (Thomas, 107). Of course, “God” is here a flexible concept and the classical conceptions of Logos, Tyche, and Fortuna could be and were appropriately substituted for the Christian concept of God. Thus, in the same sense in which providence transcended reason, it transcended religions as well. Indeed, as sixteenth and seventeenth-century Christians extolled the virtues of providential thinking, they often pointed to their pre-Christian and pagan predecessors (Boethius among them) as evidence of the inherent truth within the doctrine of providence, arguing that if the heathens of antiquity could recognize providential design, clearly the Renaissance Christian should have no difficulty doing so as well. “It was felt necessary to establish the fact of Providence – not necessarily in a particular Christian sense, but in the general sense in which such a doctrine might claim to have universal acknowledgement by all men of good sense” (Battenhouse, 88).

This universal quality is attested to, in part, by the sociological function providential thinking served. After all, it “consoled men for the death of their close relatives, comforted them in their worldly misfortunes, and held out the prospect of eternal felicity as compensation for the short-lived sorrows of earthly existence” (Thomas, 82). These benefits, in conjunction with the reiteration of religious truths, may explain the perennial interest in providentialism exhibited by figures from Seneca to Calvin. This traditional concern with explicating providence is characterized by a reliance

upon the *theatrum mundi*. It is this partnership between providence and the *theatrum mundi* that I will now trace.

Historically, providence has encouraged, with startling frequency and a surprising lack of abstraction, conceptions of God as an “artificer,” an “author,” a “painter,” a “poet,” a *demiourgos* [artisan] and, most significantly, a *poëtês* [playwright]. The latter comparison is the foundation of the *theatrum mundi*, also referred to as either the play or theatre metaphor. A relic of antiquity, survivor of the Middle Ages, and cornerstone of Renaissance thought, the *theatrum mundi* is an essentially Stoic idea. Stoicism, a Hellenistic philosophy broadly concerned with the relationship of man to the natural universe, could hardly have avoided such considerations as providential design. It is telling that the earliest written instance of the *theatrum mundi* dates to the fifth century BCE and is attributed, with some reservation, to Democritus. In a surviving fragment of his work, the so-called “laughing philosopher” states,

The world’s a stage. Life’s a play.
You come. You look. You go away. (qtd. in Christian, 1)

Even in its brevity, this fragment is emblematic of the early *theatrum mundi*. The proposition that the world is a theatrical stage upon which the cosmic drama is performed and that man is merely an actor forms the foundation of the *theatrum mundi* and, as such, remains unaltered throughout its history. These terms of the *theatrum mundi* conveniently align with providential thought; both strive to articulate a world that is created and ordered by some supernatural force whose omniscience and omnipotence are absolute. Consequently, both the *theatrum mundi* and providence concern themselves with the relationship between this supernatural creator and man.

A few examples should suffice to introduce this relationship. Plotinus, in his essay on providence, encourages his readers, “Murders, death in all its guises, the reduction and sacking of cities, all must be to us just such a spectacle as the changing scenes of a play; all is but the varied incident of a plot, costume on and off, acted grief and lament” (173). This instruction is an extension of his observation that “it [i.e. the universe] has the unity, or harmony, of a drama torn with struggle” (175) – an observation shared by Thomas Aquinas who states that “since his [i.e. God’s] knowledge is related to things like that of an artist to his works of art...it must be that all things are set under his ordering, like works of art under the art that makes them” (93). This notion of the earth and its inhabitants as a work of art is elaborated upon by Jean Calvin who, in his exegesis on Genesis, notes, “After the world had been created, man was placed in it, as in a theater, that he, beholding above him and beneath the wonderful work of God, might reverently adore their Author” (qtd. in Cannon, 218). These three examples are meant to serve merely as touchstones to demonstrate that the *theatrum mundi* was available in classical, medieval, and Renaissance contexts as a productive metaphor for philosophers and theologians to invoke as a means of conceptualizing the workings of providence and man’s relation to his creator.

While this historical connection between the *theatrum mundi* and providentialism may have been initiated for convenience, this would not explain the prominent position of both within Renaissance thought. “Used in a multitude of ways, to describe the nature of deceivers, the splendour of man’s life and its transience, the inexorability of Fortune, or the character of individual moments of time, the play metaphor was for Elizabethans an inescapable expression, a means of fixing the essential quality of the age” (Righter, 84).

To understand how the play metaphor became the preeminent aesthetic manifestation of providential design and a vital component of Renaissance thought, we must first rehearse the history of the *theatrum mundi* from its classical beginnings to its home in late-sixteenth and early-seventeenth century England.

Like providence, the *theatrum mundi* is the product of an intense belief in the artistic perfection of the natural world and an equally intense insistence that this world was supervised, if not constructed, by some supernatural persona. According to the terms of the *theatrum mundi*, this supernatural figure was understood as the cosmic playwright yet a playwright who also performed the role of spectator, serving as audience to its own creation. In *De Providentia*, Seneca claims, “here is a spectacle worthy of God’s attention as he contemplates his own work...a brave man matched against bad fortune” (5-6).¹ Plotinus echoes this sentiment by nominating man, “the marvelous spectacle” (163). The *theatrum mundi* regards all of human history as a performance for the creator. This understanding of man as spectacular is not inherently complimentary. It merely contextualizes the performative aspect of man by juxtaposing it against the spectatorial position of God.

In his essay on providence, Plotinus cautions his reader,

We are like people ignorant of painting who complain that the colours are not beautiful everywhere in the picture: but the Artist has laid on the appropriate tint to every spot. Note also that cities, however well governed, are not composed of citizens who are all equal. Again, we are censuring a drama because the persons are not all heroes but include a servant and a rustic and some scurrilous clown; yet take away the low characters and the power of the drama is gone; these are part and parcel of it. (160)

¹ It may be worth noting that as Seneca was, in fact, a pagan, he is not here writing within a monotheistic tradition. The original Latin for this section reads: “...ecce spectaculum dignum ad quod respiciat intentus operi suo deus, ecce par deo dignum, uir fortis cum fortuna mala compositus, utique si et prouocauit.”

With an explicit reliance on the *theatrum mundi*, Plotinus admits to and justifies the existence of social class. The cosmic drama is characterized by variety.² Within the scheme of the *theatrum mundi*, these myriad roles are the *dramatis personae* assigned by the divine playwright and, as such, are inviolable.

Highly aware of these social distinctions, much of the drama of classical Greece and Rome was a result of the belief that one should perform one's role with both finesse and fidelity. Epictetus reminds his reader, "Remember that you are an actor in a drama of such sort as the author chooses, - if short, then in a short one; if long, then in a long one. If it be his pleasure that you should enact a poor man, see that you act it well; or a cripple, or a ruler, or a private citizen. For this is your business, to act well the given part; but to choose it, belongs to another" (223).³ The concept of self-fashioning (to borrow a phrase from Stephen Greenblatt) was antithetical to the classical terms of the *theatrum mundi*. Yet, this apparent lack of individual agency served as the catalyst toward a grander sense of metaphysical equality. The Stoic, unable either to select or alter his role, was advised not to attribute to that role determinative meaning. For the Stoic, "it mattered not what his station in life was. How he acted and how he quit the scene were the only important elements of his drama" (Christian, 15). Bion of Borysthenes cautions his readers, "Do not then, being the deuteragonist, wish to assume the role of the protagonist" (qtd. in Christian, 12). Rather than unveiled support for the status quo and a refutation of the personal freedoms that have come to characterize the modern world, Bion of Borysthenes

² It is interesting to note that this tradition of comparing the world to a stage also worked in reverse. As Thomas Stroup observed, "[Renaissance] dramatists generally attempted to put into each play, whether comedy or tragedy, representatives of a sufficient number of the orders of society to suggest, at least, that the action was representative of the whole" (165).

³ I am gratefully indebted to Lynda Christian for this quotation, though I use a more modern translation. This passage can be found in her work, pg. 20.

is here reassuring his audience of the irrelevance of social roles—at least in determining posthumous reward or punishment.

In the dialogue, *Menippus*, Lucian, resorting to the theatre metaphor, summarizes personal existence as such: “For a brief space she [i.e. Fortune] lets them use her costumes, but when the time of the pageant is over, each gives back the body, becoming what he was before his birth, no different from his neighbor” (qtd. in Christian, 32). The classical formulation of the *theatrum mundi* construed life as merely a performance for the supernatural *pôetes* in which the entirety of any individual life could be adequately summarized in the simple formula: “You come. You look. You go away.” Life for the Stoic was nothing more than “a temporal continuum of disparate experience molded into artistic perfection” (Christian, 17). While there was a peculiar form of consolation to be gained from this perspective, “the deceptive nature of [such a] life” (Christian, 20) was realized in that the achievement of artistic perfection was the ultimate success, and death brought nothing but the surrender of role and the promise of obscurity.

It is an historical curiosity that the precise phrase, “*theatrum mundi*,” does not appear until the writing of John of Salisbury’s *Policraticus* in the mid-twelfth century. That said, this historical introduction of the term belies the fact that the *theatrum mundi* was largely abandoned during the Middle Ages. Lynda G. Christian has posited the theory that this historical absence of the *theatrum mundi* was the direct consequence of a dramatic decrease in the number of theatres during the period. Whether due to the relative absence of theatres or not, the *theatrum mundi* was left unused during the medieval period, leading to a complementary increase in comparisons of life to an inn or to a dream and comparisons of man to a flower or to a book. These metaphors were

unsatisfactory in that they failed to achieve the religious significance of either their classical or Renaissance counterparts and, though they continued to be occasionally used, the sixteenth century saw the reemergence of the *theatrum mundi* as both an immensely popular and a uniquely productive metaphor.

From the fourteenth-century Lollards to Luther and Calvin to the Reformation and the Acts of Supremacy, the history of post-medieval England is a testament to the success of continental Protestantism. Though it is clear that the history of providentialism predates the advent of Protestantism, the latter established as part of its theology an unyielding commitment to the doctrine of providence. “All post-Reformation theologians taught that nothing could happen in this world without God’s permission. If there was a common theme which ran through their writings it was the denial of the very possibility of chance or accident” (Thomas, 79).⁴ In his preface to *The Theatre of God’s Judgments* (1597), Thomas Beard reiterates this denial of chance, saying, “Unto him [i.e. God] belongeth the direction and principall conduct of humane matters, in such sort that nothing in the world commeth to passe by chance or adventure, but onely and always by the prescription of his will.” Calvin is equally explicit in reminding his readers that “it belongs to God, not only to know the future, but also to ordain by his will whatever he wants to be done” (“Providence”, 267).

It deserves to be stressed that, for the Renaissance Christian, the concepts of providential design and chance are necessarily mutually exclusive. However, this eschewal of chance, beyond buttressing the doctrine of providence, saturated all secular events with metaphysical meaning. The Renaissance belief that all earthly events are

⁴ Blair Worden, in tracing the political use of providence by seventeenth-century factions, identifies 1620-1660 as the high age of English providentialism.

providential endows these events with personal significance. This belief, though widely popularized in the sixteenth century, was not isolated to the Renaissance. One of the earlier iterations of this idea is found in Boethius who, through the mouthpiece of Lady Philosophy, clarifies that “If one were to define chance as the outcome of a random movement which interlocks with no causes, I should maintain that it does not exist at all, that it is a wholly empty term denoting nothing substantial; for since God confines all things within due order, what place can be left for random processes?” (97). The notion of chance is a threat to the omnipotence of God, and thus the idea of a chaotic cosmos or a formless event would have been, to the Renaissance Christian, blasphemous.

This disavowal of chance allowed that all secular events, orchestrated by God, could be perceived as indicative of His favor or displeasure. Plague, fire, military and political success, etc., were all seen to impart knowledge of the divine will. As a direct result of this thinking, “until the end of the seventeenth century, and in many cases long afterwards, the overwhelming majority of clerical writers and pious laymen sincerely believed that there was a link between man’s moral behaviour and his fortune in this world” (Thomas, 89).

The conviction, common in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, that divine judgments were to be found in the workings of providence is reproduced in the Renaissance examples of the *theatrum mundi*. This theological severity is a consequence of the fact that “life never assumed for the Stoic the deeper profundities that it did for the Christian, for it was in no way a trial or testing-ground of the worth of a man” (Christian, 17). Consider the advice proffered by Marcus Aurelius at the end of his *Meditations*.

Mortal man, you have lived as a citizen in this great city. What matter if that life is five or fifty years? ... So what is there to fear in your dismissal

from the city? This is no tyrant or corrupt judge who dismisses you, but the very same nature that brought you in. It is like the officer who engages a comic actor dismissing him from the stage. ‘But I have not played my five acts, only three.’ ‘True, but in life three acts can be the whole play.’ ... Go then in peace: the god who lets you go is at peace with you. (122)⁵

Death, nothing more than the final scene of a play for which there is no encore, is unaccompanied by any sense of fear or dread. There are traces of Aurelius in Macbeth’s conclusion that

Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more.

(V.v.24-26)

Yet Macbeth’s sentiment is exceptional within the Renaissance and his nihilistic outlook is not wholly consistent with that of Aurelius.

In contrast with the above Stoic examples, there exists a relative lack of tranquility in Renaissance uses of the *theatrum mundi*. That lack is a consequence of the fact that the religious life of the Renaissance Christian was explicitly a trial.⁶ One would do well to recall the early Church Father, St. John Chrysostom, and his reminder that “when we come to the moment of death, having quit the theatre of life, all masks of wealth and poverty will be stripped away—each man will be judged by his works alone” (qtd. in Christian, 35). In terms of the *theatrum mundi*, the moment of death no longer promises the eradication of distinction as man becomes “no different from his neighbor” but instead is the moment of a literal judgment, implying some inevitable hierarchy

⁵ I am gratefully indebted to Lynda G. Christian for this quotation, though I here use a more modern translation of Aurelius. Her quotation can be found within her work, pg. 22-23.

⁶ One argument of Christian’s dissertation is that “it is the confluence of the Stoic insistence on the deceptive nature of life with the Christian awe of death (particularly the moment of death which unmask every man) that gives so much power to the literature of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in Europe” (Christian, 23). In articulating the importance of the *theatrum mundi*, one should note that both “the deceptive nature of life” and the “awe of death” are typical components of the theatre metaphor.

within the post-mortem life of the actors and introducing the conceit of God as divine adjudicator.

This conceit is a prominently exhibited within two Renaissance poems. The first, “What Is Our Life?,” is an overt statement by Sir Walter Raleigh of the *theatrum mundi*, in effect demonstrating the range of the metaphor’s application. Raleigh, after identifying the world as a stage, deems “Heaven the spectator is,/ Who sits and views whosoe’er doth act amiss” (5-6). God, spectator to “the play of passion” (1), performs the role of critic as dramatic ability is established as a rather transparent metaphor for religious morality. Thomas Heywood, in a prefatory poem to his tract, “An Apology for Actors” (1612), also invokes the *theatrum mundi* as a means both of positioning God and articulating His role. Heywood notes,

Iehove doth as spectator sit.
And chiefe determiner to’applaud the best,
And their indevours crowne with more then merit.
But by their evill actions doomes the rest,
To end disgrac’t whilst others praise inherit. (24-28)

As in Raleigh’s poem, righteousness is made manifest by theatrical language. God’s applause is a sign of divine praise while a poor performance is rewarded by disgrace and punishment.

The Renaissance man felt justified therefore in associating one’s role, whether king or beggar, with one’s moral position, linking in an intensely personal way secular success and spiritual status. Yet, “the belief in providence was ... extraordinarily elastic” (Thomas, 82) and “men saw only those judgments and providences which appeared to reinforce their own prejudices” (Thomas, 105). This included pro-self bias. Therefore, when misfortune befell the Renaissance man, this was no cause for despair since “the

Christian could submit himself to God, secure in the knowledge that no harm could befall him unless the Almighty permitted it, and that if adversities still came his way, they were at least intended for his own good” (Thomas, 81). In this sense, Sanders is correct in his assertion that the rise of providentialism during the Renaissance was “an act of faith in the morality of the universe” (119). Thus, while Renaissance providentialism may have been susceptible to a distinctive gloominess, it was also true that it provided its own particular brand of consolation.

This consolation was merely one aspect shared by Renaissance providence and the *theatrum mundi*. The necessity of action, the insistence on self-scrutiny, the importance of contemplation, the comprehension of the secular in terms of the cosmic, and the emphasis upon religious reconfirmation are vital elements of both providential thought and the *theatrum mundi*. Indeed, the numerous Renaissance iterations of the *theatrum mundi* nearly always illustrated, either implicitly or explicitly, the doctrine of providence.

“To understand the significance of this providential determinism, stated in these theatrical terms, is to understand the Renaissance’s fascination with the possibilities of the metaphor of man as actor, for it reconciles the desire of man for personal freedom, while granting him the comfort of divine direction in his life” (Christian, 54). This popular appeal of the *theatrum mundi* may partly explain its appearance, beginning in the sixteenth century, within dramatic literature. No longer confined to philosophical tracts, theological treatises, or pamphlets, the *theatrum mundi*, now freely expressed in the playhouses of London, was disseminated with startling rapidity. This need not imply that the increased frequency of the play metaphor was simply the direct result of an expanding

theatrical culture though the two are certainly related. Instead, it is by the mutually supportive relationship between providence, the examination of man's relationship to God, and the *theatrum mundi*, the aesthetic manifestation of this relationship, that the explosive interest in the latter can begin to be understood.

The association between religion and theatre, an often-overlooked intersection of Renaissance culture, is perhaps most clearly displayed in the writings of Jean Calvin, the early sixteenth-century French Protestant. In fact, Calvin's frequent reliance on the *theatrum mundi* was such that "a demonstration of the workings of God in human life and human history, Biblical, ancient, and modern, was after Calvin, always associated with the Calvinistic concept of the world as God's theater—both of God's glory and of his terrifying justice" (Christian, 97). Calvin, committed to proclaiming the truth of providence, insisted that "although God does not foretell the future to us, he wishes us to be eyewitness of his acts and to propound their causes wisely" ("Providence", 270). In emphasizing our role as eyewitnesses, Calvin elevates the need for such recognition to a moral imperative. The Renaissance Christian was besieged with reminders that it was his religious duty to take note, literally, of providences within both his individual and communal life. This insistence led to a remarkable contemporary increase in "diaries, commonplace-books, public speeches, [and] government declarations [which] all voluminously testify to the pervasiveness of the belief in providence, and to the anxious vigilance which attended the detection and interpretation of divine dispensations" (Worden, 55). Since man occupied a place within a moral universe in which secular events were determined to be indications of either divine mercy or judgment, the

Renaissance Christian was not only required to recognize these providences but was made to interpret them as well.

The “wise contemplation [of the world’s] numberless wonders” (Calvin, *Institutes*, II, vi) became a legitimate means of accessing, if not fully comprehending, the divine will. This contemplation was understood as an act of extraordinary prudence. Since “there was no such thing as chance[,] there could equally be no such thing as coincidence” (Worden, 64). The providential pattern allowed Renaissance Christians “not only to interpret their providential experiences but to anticipate them” (Worden, 73).⁷ The extent to which the Renaissance Christian subscribed to this belief is evidenced in part by the contemporary publication of several compilations of providential events. These compilations were titled, appropriately: *Theatrum Mundi* (1566), *The Theatre of God’s Judgments* (1597), and *A Divine Tragedie Lately Acted* (1642). The exhaustive quality of these works (these three examples alone comprise nearly one thousand pages) indicates their dual aims. These publications both attuned audiences to the proper perception (that is to say, interpretation) of providence and, as a consequence of their thoroughness, provided a more complete image of the divine will. The purpose of these texts was therefore largely didactic for “when God chastises someone under our very eyes, he does it so as to warn us of his judgments, in order that each one of us may learn to examine himself and to weigh the punishment he himself deserves” (Calvin, “Providence,” 281). The Renaissance Christian was instructed to serve as both spectator to the natural world and, perhaps more vitally, as spectator to himself. By committing one’s self to the truth of providence, the Renaissance Christian was able to observe his position within the earthly

⁷ An earlier expression of this idea, Aquinas, in his discussion of providence, notes that “[by] recalling what has happened before and sizing up what we are faced with we bend ourselves to providing for the future” (Aquinas, 89).

theatre and, by such observations, gain a sense of self-knowledge that would otherwise be withheld. This emphasis on self-scrutiny is revealed via the *theatrum mundi* as Antonio, in *The Merchant of Venice*, admits, “I hold the world but as the world, Gratiano,/ A stage, where every man must play a part,/ And mine a sad one” (I.i.77-79).

An extension of this emphasis on the act of witnessing as a means toward self-knowledge, drama itself began to be conceived of as an image of nature. Nowhere is this relationship between nature and drama made more explicit than in Hamlet’s instructions to the players:

Suit the action to the word, the word to the action, with this special observance, that you o’erstep not the modesty of nature. For anything so o’erdone is from the purpose of playing, whose end, both at the first and now, was and is to hold, as ‘twere, the mirror up to nature, to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure. . . . O, there be players that I have seen play—and heard others praise, and that highly—not to speak it profanely, that neither having th’accent of Christians, not the gait of the Christian, pagan, nor man, have so strutted and bellowed that I have thought some of Nature’s journeymen had made men, and not made them well, they imitated humanity so abominably.

(III.ii.17-35)

When Hamlet defines the purpose of playing as “to hold . . . the mirror up to nature,” he is speaking literally. In considering the affective quality of Renaissance drama, Maynard Mack notes, “The work [of theatre], though composed to be experienced as a Second Nature, is likewise to be experienced as art; the mirror remains a mirror, and our pleasure in the face we see in it comes as much from the fact that we know it to be a reflection as from the fact that it is a face we know” (277). While Renaissance writers used theatre to illustrate providence by invoking the *theatrum mundi*, they also established theatre itself as a providential experience. In other words, theatre, as a consequence of the *theatrum mundi*, becomes a form of reality in which the astute spectator is reminded of the ubiquity

of providential design and one's position within this design. If, as Hamlet argues, drama is a reflective art form, then the responsible watching of any theatrical performance provides the self-knowledge that Calvin identifies as a religious necessity. If it is by drama that both scorn and virtue are made to look in the mirror and see their own reality, then the meeting of spectacle and audience is the paramount act of prudence. To observe a drama is, significantly, to fulfill the religious obligations of recognition and contemplation.

Again, we are encouraged to understand providence and the *theatrum mundi* as intertwined concepts. However, as the *theatrum mundi* found repeated expression in the drama of the period and became an increasingly productive metaphor, the sticky questions surrounding human agency were made even stickier. Yet to conceive of the divine in terms of an omnipotent director of the cosmic drama does not necessitate belittling or disregarding the significance of human agency and, its inseparable companion, free will. To conceive of man within the hierarchical terms of the *theatrum mundi* as impotent is, to borrow from Shakespeare, to misconstrue everything.

That said, most would morally agree with Robert G. Hunter's claim that "the divine justice which punishes a man who has no freedom of choice must be called mysterious if it is not to be called monstrous and the spectacle of the destruction of a Richard III or a Macbeth in the context of a Calvinist universe must evoke some pity along with a great deal of terror" (1). Hunter is rightfully indicating the rather severe paradigm offered by Calvinism yet, although heavily indebted to Calvinism, the Renaissance Christian was reluctant to relinquish their considerably more Boethian understanding of free will.

In the final book of *The Consolation of Philosophy*, Boethius returns to the concept of the Eternal Present to argue that divine foreknowledge does not infringe upon free will because it does not dictate choice. In fact, Renaissance providentialism was invested in both free will and free choice. The Early Modern belief that “the Lord’s servants were not to ‘tempt’ providence by inaction or inertia” (Worden, 70) made effort a requisite component of providentialism. One contemporary aphorism warned, “as well as trust in God the saint must keep his powder dry” (Worden, 95). One is reminded of Macbeth and his mistaken belief that “If chance will have me king, why, chance may crown me/ *Without my stir*” (I.iii.146-147, emphasis added). Macbeth is here mistaken precisely because the operation of providential design is contingent upon human agents exhibiting effort and action. In a 1629 sermon, Donne articulates the freedom of will within a providential universe as such:

When man does any thing conducing to supernaturall ends, though the worke be Gods, the will of man is not meerly passive. The will of man is but Gods agent; but still an agent it is: ... For, the will considered, as a will, ... might refuse or omit that that it does. (75)

One stated purpose for publishing compilations of the workings of providence was to “reclaim the most incorrigible sinner” (Burton, Preface) or, conversely, “to strengthen and encourage [the righteous] in their good course” (Beard, Preface). This assumes the possibility of change which, in turn, admits to the existence of choice and the freedom of the will.

II

As drama became the primary outlet for the *theatrum mundi*, contemporary plays became increasingly self-conscious of their theatricality. Shakespeare's *Richard III* (1592), by the nature of its characters and the language of its text, is an ideal example of this peculiar self-awareness. As such, it provides a beneficial test case for examining the relationship of the divine will to human agents within a providential paradigm. While Queen Margaret, the figure around whom the play's theatricality assembles, may not offer an explicit iteration of the *theatrum mundi*, we are meant to see in the wide range of Margaret's commentary the logic of providence expressed in theatrical terms.

Margaret's absolute deference to "that high all-seer" (V.i.20)—the divine spectator—is justified by her belief that her explicit supplications for revenge must necessarily "ascend the sky/ And there awake God's gentle-sleeping peace" (I.iii.287-288). While Margaret's confidence in the ability and willingness of God to intervene is not surprising (it is, after all, derived from providential thought), what does deserve comment is her insistence that her curses (which may rightfully be considered prayers) initiate the subsequent ills suffered by Gloucester and the House of York. Significantly, this belief is not unique to Margaret. Margaret's curses, which may seem insignificant in part because they appear to be the frantic expressions of a depressed and deranged woman, are clearly not perceived as such by those they affect. Both Lord Grey and Lord Hastings, resigned to their impending execution, are confident they know the source of their woes. Lord Grey recognizes, "Now Margaret's curse is fall'n upon our heads"

(III.iii.15). Lord Hastings admits, “O Margaret, Margaret, now thy heavy curse/ Is lighted on poor Hastings’ wretched head” (III.iv.92-93).

Of course, this is not to say—and Margaret is careful to note the distinction—that the verbal curses are, in and of themselves, the literal manifestations of revenge. In the fourth act, Margaret conceals herself on stage in order “to watch the waning of [her] enemies” (IV.iv.4). She then greedily exclaims, “Bear with me. I am hungry for revenge,/ And now I cloy me with beholding it” (IV.iv.61-62), establishing herself as spectator to her own revenge. To ask why and how Margaret is made to watch the revenge she ostensibly instigated is to begin to comprehend the role of providence within English Renaissance drama. The implication is that divine vengeance, acting on behalf of Margaret, intercedes to punish the immoral faction of Gloucester and his followers and, by doing so, to assert providence. Queen Margaret is the mouthpiece of this process, her prayers constructing the dramatic context in which providential design may be observed.

Though ultimately unsuccessful, Clarence’s special pleading for divine due process is instructive. Clarence argues that

If God will be avengèd for the deed
O, know you yet, he doth it publicly.
Take not the quarrel from his pow’rful arm.
He needs no indirect or lawless course
To cut off those that have offended him.
(I.iv.215-219)

Clarence here reiterates the Calvinist belief that “God has revealed his will to us in the law” (Calvin, “Providence,” 263) and that, since divine vengeance operates through legal channels, the assumption of extralegal measures is necessarily sinful. The public nature of legal, and therefore divine, vengeance is rationalized in that providence was thought to

be public so as to present, in a distinctly theatrical sense, an exemplum unto the people.⁸

While Clarence is correct in arguing that divine vengeance may manifest itself within the constraints of secular law, he is mistaken in his assertion that it must do so.

Instead, the providential scheme illustrated by Margaret as she prepares to witness the catharsis of divine vengeance—vengeance she solicited throughout the initial three acts—is reinforced by the events of the play, not least of all by the potency and accuracy of the Queen’s curses. The actions of the families of York and Lancaster are not merely incidental to the conclusion of *Richard III* but are evidence of the providential universe in which the play operates—a universe that is revealed by the juxtaposition of a corrupted secular law with a righteous and efficacious system of divine vengeance. The events of *Richard III* prove that “amid all the shoutings of men, God directs men’s plans and efforts from Heaven, and finally accomplishes by their hands what he himself has decreed” (Calvin, “Providence,” 272) or, in the gruesome turn of phrase worthy of *Richard III*, “He [doth] force the swords of wicked men/ To turn their own points in their masters’ bosoms” (V.i.23-24).

Further, Gloucester illustrates the supremacy of providential design by attempting, and failing, to direct his own role. Sir Thomas More, in his history of Richard III, notes this relevant incident (alluded to in Shakespeare’s play):

Now was it before devised that in the speaking of these words the protector should have comen in among the people to the sermonward, to the end that those words, meeting with his presence, might have been taken among the hearers as though the Holy Ghost had put them in the preacher’s mouth, and should have moved the people even there to cry “King Richard! King Richard!”—that it might have been after said that he

⁸ In considering the relationship between providence and theatre, it may be useful to point out that both members of the Puritan antitheatrical movement and Renaissance proponents of the stage agreed that drama, partly as a consequence of its visual nature, was an extremely affective form. Thus, the sixteenth and seventeenth-century images of martyrs imitated the theatre in their focus and design.

was specially chosen by God and, in manner, by miracle. But this device quailed. (79)

This failure of Gloucester to stage his own ascension suggests the omnipotence of providence. More resorts directly to the *theatrum mundi* to explain this failure, stating, “they that sometimes step up and play... when they cannot play their parts, they disorder the play, and do themselves no good” (95).

The mounting anxiety of *Richard III* is a consequence of the pervasive belief that divine justice is both inevitable and unpredictable. Yet, it is equally true that the text is saturated by a dramatic irony as the curses and prayers, namely of Margaret and Buckingham, are shown to be more precise than even they themselves realize. This combination of providential design and dramatic irony implies that divine justice, while inviolable, must manifest itself by the verbal and physical agency of man.⁹

Another contemporaneous play, the anonymous *Arden of Faversham* (1592) is in many ways a complementary text to *Richard III*, foregrounding many of the same preoccupations prevalent within Shakespeare’s play. The eventual murder of the title character is repeatedly discussed in explicitly theatrical terms, often being deemed “Arden’s/ tragedy” (iii.105-106) while those responsible for his death are referred to, not insignificantly, as the “actors to Arden’s overthrow” (viii.30). As it does in *Richard III*, this theatrical framework invites contemplation of providence. This contemplation is encouraged in part because it is frequently exhibited by characters within the text itself—

⁹ Though merely tangential to the subject of this thesis, it is useful here to note the absence of the *deus ex machina* from Renaissance drama. Though relevant research does not yet exist, I am tempted to conclude that this lack may be the consequence of a newfound emphasis on human effort, a tenet of providential thought and an essential component of the *theatrum mundi*. This may also derive from Aristotle’s *Poetics* in which he argues, “it is obvious that the unraveling of the plot should arise from the circumstances of the plot itself, and not be brought about *ex machina*... The *deus ex machina* should be used only for matters outside the play proper, either for things that happened before it and that cannot be known by the human characters, or for things that are yet to come and that required to be foretold prophetically—for we allow to the gods the power to see all things” (52).

often as they are made to comment on the relationship between secular incident and divine will.

The providential significance of *Arden of Faversham* is largely indicated within the dramatic structure of the text. The tragedy is based upon the eventual assassination of Arden, an assassination organized by his wife. After numerous attempts to murder Arden fail, one of the conspirators, Greene, exclaims in frustration, “The Lord of Heaven hath preserved him” (x.144). Greene’s assumption of providential protection appears valid in part by the sheer number of failed assassinations and the unlikely means by which these assassinations fail. This series of attempted murders is interrupted by a scene in which Arden is solicited by Dick Reede for the return of his lands (rapaciously procured by Arden) and denies the request. This encounter prompts Dick Reede (rather like Queen Margaret) to resort to prayers in the form of curses. He pleads, “God, I beseech thee, show some/ miracle on thee or thine, in plaguing thee for/ this” (xiii.30-31) and, more to the point, he requests “vengeance on/ Arden or some misevent To show the world/ what wrong the carl hath done” (xiii.48-50).¹⁰ From a purely structural perspective, these curses are positioned at the intermission between the repeated failure of those actors in Arden’s tragedy and their success, thus revealing the potency of Dick Reede’s appeals to divine justice by foregrounding the haste with which his requests are realized.

The providential aspect of Arden’s murder is more explicitly indicated by Holinshed who, in his *Chronicles*, recounts,

Which field he [i.e. Arden] had (as some haue reported) most cruellie taken from a woman, that had beene a widow to one Cooke, and after

¹⁰ One should note that Dick Reede’s plea constructs vengeance as an exemplum (“to show the world...”), aligning the act of divine vengeance with one purpose of providence. If one is to accept that Arden’s death is a direct result of these prayers, then one must admit that divine vengeance (even when it manifests itself by an act such as the murder of Arden) is a facet of providential design.

married to one Richard Read a mariner, to the great hinderance of hir and hir husband that said Read: for they had long inioied it by a lease, which they had of it for manie yeares, not then expired: neuerthelesse, he got it from them. For the which, the said Reads wife not onelie exclaimed against him, in sheading manie a salt téere, but also curssed him most bitterlie euen to his face, wishing manie a vengeance to light vpon him, and that all the world might woonder on him. *Which was thought then to come to passe, when he was thus murthered*, and laie in that field from midnight till the morning: and so all that daie, being the faire daie till night, and the which daie there were manie hundreds of people came woondering about him. (1030, emphasis added)

As indicated in *Arden*, the murder of the titular character is the consequence of his unethical procurement of Reede's land. It follows that the anonymous playwright must postpone his death, in spite of all logic, until Reede curses Arden for that crime which God will justly punish. The "miracle" Dick Reede requests is realized in the eventual success of Arden's murderers—indeed, a miraculous feat given the play's repeated emphasis on the clumsy ineptitude of those actors.

Both *Richard III* and *Arden of Faversham* are embedded with theatrical language and characters. The curses of Margaret and Dick Reede betray an emphasis on divine participation in what may otherwise appear to be wholly secular vengeance. The understanding exhibited by these characters that God operates through the effort of man implies the understanding, at least in theory, of their respective playwrights. It is, then, in no way insignificant that *Arden of Faversham* is often supposed to have been the work of none other than Thomas Kyd.

III

In view of the alleged authorship of *Arden of Faversham*, it is noteworthy that one of the greatest examples of the relationship between Renaissance providentialism and

theatricality can be found within Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy, or Hieronimo is Mad Again* (1587). Now recognized as "the stage classic of its time, the model and progenitor for all the plays that followed" (Neill, vii) as well as England's "first major tragedy [and]...one of the first defenses of the play as an art form" (Hamilton, 190), Kyd's reputation as a competent playwright has been all but established on the merits of this one play.

These merits are frequently (and broadly) identified as Kyd's "theatricality." The ambiguity of this term may account for the critical ambivalence surrounding the very idea of Renaissance theatricality, an uncertainty that often characterizes criticism of revenge drama as a whole. The Halletts attest to this ambivalence in their remarkably succinct admission that "revenge tragedy is noted (or infamous) for its theatricality" (Hallett, 3). Ragnhild Tronstad, in noting the ambiguity and malleability of the term, "theatricality," observes, "The concept of theatricality has taken many forms during its history and—perhaps because of this—its meaning may seem difficult to grasp when one is to make a theoretical approach to the field. Often, theatricality shows itself as a metaphorical relationship between the theatre and the world" (Tronstad, 216). In other words, "theatricality" is one means of illustrating the relationship between illusion and reality, a relationship that both the *theatrum mundi* and the doctrine of providence seek to explore.

This understanding of theatricality as directly involved in constructing a dialogue between the supernatural and the earthly is immediately applicable to the style and content of Kyd's drama. Thus, while some critics define Kydian theatricality in terms of stagecraft, it is more productive, when considering *The Spanish Tragedy*, to consider theatricality as a certain breed of dramatic self-consciousness that reveals itself by a

systematic reliance upon the *theatrum mundi* as a foundation for both visual imagery and textual framework.

Unfortunately, these structural considerations are often unobserved; critics are more interested in cataloguing the failure of various characters, namely Hieronimo, to adequately elicit the sympathy of Elizabethan (and, for that part, modern) audiences. The violence of *The Spanish Tragedy* has obscured Kyd's vision. Thus, the critical appreciation of Kyd's play as "more than an important document in the history of Elizabethan revenge tragedy...and more than an exciting blood-and-thunder piece" (Adams, 236) is a relatively new development in the play's critical history.

The first anthology to ascribe *The Spanish Tragedy* to Kyd, Hawkins' *The Origin of the English Drama* (1773) enumerates selected examples of contemporaneous praise for Kyd and concludes that *The Spanish Tragedy* "had ever been an admired play" (II, 3). This admiration of both Kyd and *The Spanish Tragedy* was short lived. In 1780, Reed revised an earlier anthology of Early Modern drama, omitting Hawkins' praise and deeming *The Spanish Tragedy*, "the object of ridicule to almost every writer of the times" (qtd. in Lopez, 28). In the early nineteenth century, "Walter Scott ... and Collier ... would reprint Hawkins' text and also, word for word, Reed's [disparaging] note" (Lopez, 28). If there exists an historical motive for the modern dislike of Kyd's play, it almost certainly stems from these late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century editorial squabbles. It is clear that *The Spanish Tragedy* has become "a figure for the most persistent aesthetic idea about the history of the early modern dramatic period, which is that the spectacular explosions produced by its tremendous creative energy ultimately consumed that energy's vital source so that what remained was only a faint precipitate,

entropically dissipating” (Lopez, 30). Only recently have critics begun to recognize that Kyd’s play “marks the beginning of early modern drama’s ability to represent something beyond itself” (Lopez, 29).

This redemptive criticism dates not much earlier than the mid-twentieth century though it has gathered support in the intervening decades. Before this time, the play was largely disregarded as “notorious” (Johnson, 23). One example of this distaste for *The Spanish Tragedy* comes from Howard Scammon, a former professor of theatre at the College of William and Mary, who could not abide Kyd’s play.

There are too many plays which are produced under the aegis of “educational theatre.” These plays are presented on the assumption that the public will never see a production of a particular play unless the college or university theatre produces it. “The Spanish Tragedy” is a case in point. Even if adapted, why do a play which has not been done for obvious reasons which become very much more obvious during its performance? ... In my opinion, why call attention to the fact that ‘The Spanish Tragedy,’ as presented by the William and Mary Theatre, should have remained a dusty footnote on the pages of theatre history. “The Spanish Tragedy” had its moment of glory. Why not let it enjoy its past fame? (Scammon, II)¹¹

Scammon does not clarify what those “obvious reasons” may be yet he is far from alone in his aversion to the play. This attitude, shared by a wide range of twentieth century critics, indicates, at the very least, confusion as to the meaning of Kyd’s play—confusion that is exacerbated by a misunderstanding of Renaissance habits of thought.

The modern emphasis on “the peculiar violence ..., the sensational rhetoric, [and] the revenge theme” (Baker, 107) within *The Spanish Tragedy* amount to a sort of vivisection, isolating various components of the play in order to accentuate, if nothing else, their gruesome character. The unfavorable responses to *The Spanish Tragedy* have

¹¹ Howard Scammon does not make use of page numbers in his book, opting instead to identify pages by year number. The William and Mary Theatre produced *The Spanish Tragedy* in 1976. This information can be found accordingly.

been largely grounded in a supposed crudeness of the play's language and themes. The play has been disregarded, if not ridiculed, by critics who enumerate these poetic failures while simultaneously neglecting the play's structural framework. There is an historical lack of appreciation for the dramatic conventions that inform *The Spanish Tragedy*. These conventions operate to remind "us that the story is not presented for its own sake but for its deeper significance" (Mehl, 53).

The Spanish Tragedy is best understood as a providential drama. Indeed, Kyd's play is founded upon his use of the *theatrum mundi* as a means of indicating providential design. By fully acknowledging this dramatic structure, one is forced to acknowledge the greatness of a play that insists on the difficulty of performing one's divinely ordained role while presenting a hero who, in spite of legal, political, and social adversity, performs admirably his "strange and wondrous show" (IV.i.185).¹²

IV

The Knight Marshall of Spain, Hieronimo assumes the role of the providential revenger in Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*, his actions amounting to the temporal manifestation of divine vengeance. Nowhere is this more conspicuous than in the method and the means by which Hieronimo enacts his (that is to say, God's) revenge.

Though Revenge promises the prospect of "Don Balthazar, the prince of Portingale,/ Deprived of life by Bel-Imperia" (I.i.88-89), it is not until the final scenes that the design for this revenge is revealed. The fact that Balthazar and Lorenzo are

¹² Kyd, Thomas. *The Spanish Tragedy*. Ed. J. R. Mulryne. Kent: A&C Black Limited, 2009. Print.; All citations of *The Spanish Tragedy* are from this edition.

“conveniently” (IV.iv.134) murdered within the performance of *Soliman and Perseda* may encourage critics in their condemnation of Hieronimo. Kiefer argues that “The revenger’s premeditation ... has the effect of alienating the playgoer. The more that Hieronimo resorts to intrigue and deception as he pursues revenge, the more his deliberate action resembles the cold calculation of his antagonist [i.e. Lorenzo]” (162). Following Fredson Bowers, Adams claims, “Hieronimo’s decision ... to effect his revenge by secret and treacherous means marks his conversion from a sympathetic, admirable character to an Italianate villain” (221). Rozett agrees, stating that Hieronimo “has some of the craftiness of the incipient Machiavel” (*Doctrine*, 191). These charges of Machiavellianism have become a staple within criticism of *The Spanish Tragedy*. Of course, there is a problematically thin line between the machinations of the opportunistic Machiavel and the delicate observance of providential design.¹³ A more sensitive critic, Ratliff argues that “by explaining his conduct [in the final scene] he [i.e. Hieronimo] is making the charge of villainy impossible” (118). It is not merely by these rhetorical explanations that Hieronimo excuses his actions. Calvin reminds us, “the providence of God does not interpose simply, but, by employing means, assumes, as it were, a visible form” (*Institutes*, I.xvii.4). The play-within-the-play constitutes one of these visible forms.

¹³ Hieronimo’s aphoristic assertion that, “the conclusion/ Shall prove the invention” (IV.i.182-183) may recall Machiavelli’s infamous belief that a prince should “have a mind so disposed that he can turn as the winds of fortune and the variations of things command him; and ... not to depart from the good, if he is able, but to know how to enter the bad, when necessitated to do so” (109). In both cases, the ends are said to justify the means yet, in the context of *The Spanish Tragedy*, the murderous plot of *Soliman and Perseda* is not the end. The final allotment of posthumous reward and punishment is. As Revenge tells Andrea, “The end is crown of every work well done” (II.vi.8), meaning the supernatural—not earthly—conclusion.

The play-within-a-play structure has attracted an unsurprising amount of attention from a wide range of critics.¹⁴ Unfortunately, few of these critics recognize the fact that Kyd's play consists of a play-within-a-play-*within-a-play*. Since this telescopic structure is rarely explored, the implications of Kyd's structural symmetry are left unnoted. This is unfortunate because it is by Hieronimo's repetition of the play-within-the-play convention that the providential significance of *Soliman and Perseda* is revealed.

Adams correctly recognizes that "we may conclude that Revenge-as-Playwright is not an imitator of a reality fixed by some power outside of himself, but in some sense a maker of his own reality" (229). "Bade" (I.i.82) by Proserpine to present a "tragedy" (I.i.91), Revenge represents the providential playwright of the *theatrum mundi* tradition. Within the play proper, Hieronimo assumes an analogous position, recollecting, "When in Toledo there I studied,/ It was my chance to write a tragedy" (IV.i.77-78). In preparation for his final performance, Hieronimo tells Castile, "O sir, it is for the author's credit/ To look that all things may go well" (IV.iii3-4), echoing the doctrine of providence while emulating the providential playwright. Hieronimo assumes a position parallel to that of Revenge while maintaining a ministerial stance. Alone on stage, he anticipates,

Now shall I see the fall of Babylon,
Wrought by the heavens in this confusion.
And if the world like not this tragedy,
Hard is the hap of old Hieronimo.
(IV.i.195-198)

Recalling Queen Margaret, Hieronimo positions himself as witness to his own revenge while associating the ensuing performance with the divine will. His understanding that

¹⁴ This attention is unsurprisingly largely because the play-within-the-play structure, as a crucial element of *Hamlet*, could hardly have been overlooked.

Soliman and Perseda, “this confusion,” will be the means by which heaven enacts the “fall of Babylon” is consistent with Hieronimo’s persistent recognition of the dramatic potential of providential design.

As Hieronimo discovers the mutilated body of his son, he exclaims, “But stay, what murderous spectacle is this?” (II.v.9). The theatrical quality of the murder in no way mitigates the emotional impact of his realization. What appears to be staged is shown to be painfully real. It follows that, when Hieronimo recognizes Lorenzo and Balthazar as “actors in th’ accursed tragedy” (III.vii.41), the metaphor diminishes neither the horror of their actions nor their responsibility for them. The play metaphor is a way of acknowledging that what appears to be theatrical may, in fact, be real.

In speaking of *Revenge*, Anne Richter notes, “It is the symmetry and violence of these events [i.e. the events of the play proper], together with the position of himself and his companion, which suggest to *Revenge* the comparison with tragedy. Knowing what is to come, in all its complexity and horror, he implies that in these particular happenings, at least, life appears to imitate the drama” (79). It is fitting, then, that Andrea’s revenge is encapsulated within a tragedy. There is a poetic justice to that structure—a poetic justice that is, from the first scene, presented as a characteristic of divine vengeance. The same judicial symmetry exhibited in the underworld—“usurers are choked with melting gold,/ and wantons are embraced with ugly snakes,/ And murderers groan with never-killing wounds” (I.i.68-70)—is repeated by *Soliman and Perseda* as the theatrical murder of Horatio is revenged within a tragedy. The poetic justice of Hieronimo’s play is made more explicit in that it reconstructs analogically the precise crime it punishes. It is particularly instructive to our appreciation of Hieronimo that, in so constructing his

vengeance, he admits to comprehending the significance and potential of the *theatrum mundi*.

By aligning Hieronimo with the supernatural playwright, Kyd identifies *Soliman and Perseda* as indebted to the same providentialism that structures the play proper. In each case, the presentation of a tragedy is intended to impart more than mortal knowledge. Hieronimo, speaking of Horatio's body as a stage prop, warns that

...the conclusion
 Shall prove the invention and all was good.

 And with a strange and wondrous show besides [i.e. Horatio's corpse],
 That I will have there behind a curtain,
 Assure yourself, shall make the matter known.
 (IV.i.182-187)

Soliman and Perseda is designed not only to accomplish Hieronimo's revenge but to explain it as well. This didactic function closely resembles the Calvinist belief that the earthly theatre revealed the divine will to the responsible onlooker. As Huston Diehl comments, "If theatre is understood to mirror a natural world that is itself a divinely created theatre the faithful are exhorted to gaze upon, the playwright is no presumptuous rival of God but someone who simply records what God causes to be done in the world...the playwright is no cunning artificer but someone who directs attention to 'God's workmanship'" (86). One should not disregard the fact that, under the gaze of Revenge, Hieronimo's play is presented within a providential universe. By enacting the divine vengeance promised in the opening scene, *Soliman and Perseda* implicates the divine will; it is both the consequence and evidence of providence. Of course, the providential quality of *Soliman and Perseda* is contingent upon its reality, a characteristic

supported by the *theatrum mundi*. An examination of the idiosyncrasies of the play-within-the-play as a dramatic device encourages this understanding.

Rozett, writing in 1979, notes that “in recent years...scholars have become increasingly interested in the play as perceived by the spectator” (“Aristotle”, 241). This persistent focus on the affective quality of theatre has polarized dramatic critics as they consider the implications of the play-within-the-play. Most agree that “an audience in the theatre will ordinarily find in the playwright’s image of itself a guide or model, and its responses will be affected accordingly” (Adams, 223)¹⁵. That said, Maynard Mack is correct in his justly equivocal argument that “[Renaissance drama] enjoyed a system of built in balances between the forces drawing the spectator to identify with the faces in the mirror and those which reminded him that they were reflections” (227). In speaking of the Renaissance play-within-the-play, Brown concludes, “at its best, it can give an extra depth, almost an extra dimension, to the play of which it forms a part; for a time some of the actors themselves become an audience, inducing the actual audience to believe that they are watching not a play but something closer to real life; paradoxically it produces further realism through further illusion” (48). Similarly, Cannon notes, “as the gyre of illusion closes toward a point of greatest intensity, an opposite gyre of reality is opening, so that the more deeply we look into the artifice, the wider becomes our understanding of the truth imaged in the artifice. ...As Novalis realized, ‘When we dream that we are dreaming, we are close to waking up’” (210). These various effects of the play-within-

¹⁵ Of course, one must recognize that, during the performance of *Soliman and Perseda*, there are two on-stage audiences. The degree to which any audience may recognize themselves in either of their on-stage counterparts must necessarily be dependent on the extent to which they recognize providence in the play. The incomprehension of the King and Castile is, to some extent, incomprehensible while the insight demonstrated by Revenge and Andrea encourages our understanding of the former as a bad audience, ill-attuned to those events that demand their exhaustive attention.

the-play are logically consistent with the effects of the *theatrum mundi*. As Mack notes, “the ineradicable awareness of a man moving on a scaffold could be made to merge at chosen points with awareness of a larger scaffold, so that the dream one watched melted imperceptibly—for the time being—into the dream one lived” (285).

Just as the *theatrum mundi* insists that the reality of the world is revealed by its illusory qualities, the theatricality of a playlet is evidence of the reality it occupies. As Nelson argues in his study of the play-within-the-play, one absolutely cannot forget that “the relationship of the inner play to the outer play prefigures the relationship between the outer play and the reality in which it occurs: life” (10). This insistence on reality is vital to the operation of the dual playlets for it reinforces the providential significance of both the play proper and *Soliman and Perseda*.

As Cannon implies by quoting Novalis, it is undeniably provocative to compare the play-within-a-play structure to that of a dream-within-a-dream.¹⁶ While the history of the *theatrum mundi* would seem to encourage such a comparison, the insubstantiality of the dream metaphor is misleading in the context of Kyd’s play. Consider Prospero’s assertion in *The Tempest* that

...the great globe itself,
Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve,
And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,
Leave not a rack behind.

(IV.i.153-156)

Prospero’s conclusion that the end of life is defined by an almost idyllic dissolution into nothingness is precisely the nihilism Christian uses of the *theatrum mundi* actively sought to refute. Kyd’s use of the *theatrum mundi* grants to the play proper a significance that

¹⁶ Faber, referring to the play-within-the-play in *Hamlet*, presents an interesting Freudian interpretation of plays-within-plays that directly relates the playlet to a dream-within-a-dream.

saturates both the framing play and the play-within-the-play with transcendent meaning. The dramatic structure provided by the use of the *theatrum mundi* characterizes both the play proper and *Soliman and Perseda* as metadramatic performances, granting both “a kind of detachment that enables self-reflection” (Calderwood, 9). This emphasis on self-reflection, a product of the plays-within-the-play, further connects the dramatic conventions of *The Spanish Tragedy* to the tenets of both providence and the *theatrum mundi*.

In speaking of the play metaphor, Anne Righter argues that “the comparison between life and the theatre serves...to define the depth and realism of the play world itself. It provides a vivid demonstration of the fact that characters—and by implication the audience—can accept the imaginary environment of the play as reality” (66). Righter goes on to correctly note, “For Don Andrea...the events occurring on the stage below are painfully real, in no sense a rehearsal at second-hand. As he watches, Horatio is murdered, Bel-Imperia proves her loyalty, and Hieronimo exacts his terrible revenge for the first and only time” (79). Righter’s insistence on this reality is a further testament to its importance.

Contrary to Righter, Adams argues erroneously that the introduction of the play proper as a “tragedy” (I.i.91) indicates both to Don Andrea and to the audience proper that “what they are about to see is not to be confused with ‘reality’; instead, it is to be perceived as a determinate construct ordered by principles which are not necessarily those which govern the world of nonartistic experience” (227). The mistake here is innocent enough; it is bred from an ignorance of the play metaphor. Adams’ argument is untenable precisely because it entertains the possibility of “nonartistic experience,” a

possibility denied by the terms of the *theatrum mundi*. All experience is artistic experience; all artistic experience is also real. That said, the assumption that there is an inviolable distinction between reality and the theatre is not unique to Adams; the King and Castile are guilty of the same misunderstanding.

In preparing for *Soliman and Perseda*, Hieronimo promises, “it will prove most passing strange/ And wondrous plausible to that assembly” (IV.i.84-85)¹⁷. As Hieronimo ends his play, he taunts his audience,

Haply you think, but bootless are your thoughts,
That this is fabulously counterfeit,
And that we do as all tragedians do:
To die today, for fashioning our scene,
The death of Ajax, or some Roman peer,
And in a minute starting up again,
Revive to please to-morrow’s audience.

(IV.iv.76-82)

Soliman and Perseda, as a successful act of revenge, is dependent upon the Spanish court’s assumption that what appears to be theatrical must be, by definition, illusion. The confusion experienced by the King and Castile is bred from the belief that theatre is inherently the province of make-believe. In the penultimate scene, *The Spanish Tragedy* reiterates what is made manifestly clear by the relation of Revenge to the play proper—that there is no productive distinction to be made between theatricality and reality, essentially restating the central observation of the *theatrum mundi*.

Kyd is diligent in constructing Revenge and Hieronimo as parallel figures; Hieronimo’s assertion of the authenticity of *Soliman and Perseda* is not unlike the textual

¹⁷ It is sometimes noted that Hieronimo’s argument, “Nero thought it no disparagement./ And kings and emperors have ta’en delight/ To make experience of their wits in plays!” (IV.i.87-89) is referred to in Thomas Heywood’s *An Apology for Actors*. Heywood reminds us of the ancient tradition of executing criminals on stage in the course of a performance. The play metaphor finds a rather macabre expression in this historical curiosity as the life that is taken onstage is taken in earnest. Of course, the application of this to the final scene is obvious.

and thematic insistence that the frame narrative be understood as real. The “Chorus” (I.i.91) of *Revenge* and the ghost of Don Andrea arrive onstage via the Virgilian “gates of horn” (I.i.82), the gates through which only *true* dreams may journey. The initial eighty-five lines of *The Spanish Tragedy* are dedicated to Andrea’s soliloquy. Introduced as medieval drama gave way to Renaissance expectations, the soliloquy is intended to transcend the stage boundaries in order to connect with the audience proper and to convey to that audience essential, typically expositional, information. This functional consideration lends the soliloquy a certain undeniable veracity. Andrea’s memories are not to be doubted; to do so would shatter the established conventions, undermine the expository premise, and render the remainder of the play moot. One needs only to consider “William Empson’s ingenious theories about the play, which call for seeing Proserpine’s behavior as part of an elaborate trick played on Don Andrea” (Kay, cf. 5) to understand the necessity of maintaining the integrity of this initial scene. The induction establishes the sincerity of Andrea (as both character and chorus member) and introduces the *theatrum mundi* as the structural basis—the master trope—from which the drama unfolds.

While an investigation into the physical staging of *The Spanish Tragedy* lies outside the bounds of this paper, it is useful to note, if only in a cursory fashion, that “Kyd’s distinctive contribution [to the history of English drama] was his sense of theatrical space...He exploited visual frames provided by elements of the tiring-house façade” (Hattaway, 192). These frames and levels recalled and relied upon the residual medieval appreciation of visual allegory of the up/good, down/bad variety. “It has been suggested that the original production had them [i.e. Don Andrea and *Revenge*] come up

through the stage trapdoor to acknowledge their place in the underworld, and then positioned them on the stage balcony” (Gurr, xvi). This physical position of Don Andrea and Revenge above the stage visually reinforced the *theatrum mundi* by reiterating the relationship of God to the earthly drama and elevated the two within the audience’s moral consciousness. Their omnipresence constructs the play proper within the terms of the theatre metaphor and accommodates, in a metadramatic sense, the numerous references to the theatre within the play proper. This framing produces the paradoxical effect of rendering *The Spanish Tragedy* self-contained while simultaneously presenting the play as both intentionally real and immediately instructive.

This argument for understanding the play proper as authentic—that is to say, as not merely a staged performance for the entertainment of Don Andrea—aims to situate the play in terms of providential design. *The Spanish Tragedy* operates “by calling to mind what is absent, promised, or invisible and pointing to a world beyond the physical” (Diehl, 13).

The providential structure of the play proper is not only distinctly indicated by the presence of Revenge and Andrea; it is recognized and relied upon by Hieronimo. The play proper neatly begins with the King testifying to a just and omnipotent God, exclaiming that “blest be heaven, and guider of the heavens,/ From whose fair influence such justice flows” (I.ii.10-11). The providential logic here employed by the King is in a significant way corroborated by Castile’s admission that

Both [armies] furnished well, both full of hope and fear,
Both menacing alike with daring shows,
Both vaunting sundry colours of device,
Both cheerly sounding trumpets, drums and fifes,
Both raising dreadful clamours to the sky,
That valleys, hills, and rivers made rebound,

And heaven itself was frightened with the sound.
(I.ii.25-31)

The stark anaphora establishes the symmetry between the Portuguese and Spanish armies and implicates divine intervention in the eventual success of the Spanish faction.¹⁸ It may be useful to note that this is the same logic upon which jousting was rationalized. In a judicial case that, for whatever reason, could not be decided by a secular adjudicator, the two parties would joust with the expectation that God would take the part of the righteous. Similarly, Calvin advises his readers that “when the tumultuous aspect of human affairs unfits us for judging, we should still hold that God, in the pure light of his justice and wisdom, keeps all these commotions in due subordination, and conducts them to their proper end” (*Institutes*, I.xvii.1).

This illustration of God as legally efficacious is immediately presented by Andrea’s recollection of the supernatural judicial system. The indecision of “Minos, Aeacus, and Rhadamanth” (I.i.33) is appealed to Proserpine whose “doom” (I.i.79) is presented, quite explicitly, as the play proper. The doctrine of providence asserts that “[God] looks on at what is taking place in the world, . . . holds the helm, and overrules all events. Hence his providence extends not less to the hand than to the eye” (Calvin, *Institutes*, I.xvi.4).

The promise of justice articulated by Revenge at the end of the first act supports Isabella’s claim to Hieronimo that “The heavens are just, murder cannot be hid:/ Time is the author both of truth and right,/ And time will bring this treachery to light” (II.v.57-59). This unwavering belief in a just providentialism informs Isabella’s insistence that patience is the proper response to adversity. As such, Hieronimo becomes defined as “the

¹⁸ The opening of Shakespeare’s *Richard II* illustrates this nicely.

wise man who watches and waits and recognizes the time” (Johnson, 28). The crucial moment of Hieronimo’s development, the “*Vindicta mihi!*” soliloquy considers the ramifications of revenge and concludes that “wise men will take their opportunity” (III.xiii.25). Hieronimo’s insistence on the importance of attending providence is encapsulated in the final lines of this soliloquy as he confirms,

No, no, Hieronimo, thou must enjoin
 Thine eyes to observation, and thy tongue
 To milder speeches than thy spirit affords,
 Thy heart to patience, and thy hands to rest,
 Thy cap to courtesy, and thy knee to bow,
 Till to revenge thou know, when, where, and how.
 (III.xiii.39-44)

Hieronimo, here dedicating himself to patience while acknowledging the presence of providential signs, demonstrates the proper relationship of the Renaissance Christian to providential design. The solicitation of Hieronimo’s soul, admitted to by Revenge (III.xv.20) and recognized by Hieronimo (IV.i.33), creates between the two an alliance that is prominently acknowledged in Hieronimo’s relentless patience. Hieronimo recognizes that he “must attune himself to the divine timetable” (Worden, 65). His attendance to the divine will is justified on the belief that any subsequent act of revenge will be directed by a just providentialism. This belief is ultimately rewarded through the conspicuous involvement of Revenge within the play proper.

One instance of this involvement, Bel-Imperia’s letter drops to the ground at Hieronimo’s feet directly after his request that “Eyes, life, world, heavens, hell, night, and day,/ Seem search, show, send some man, some mean, that may—“ (III.ii.22-23). Hieronimo immediately recognizes this as a “miracle” (III.ii.32). While it may be tempting to deem the association of Hieronimo’s prayer and the “letter [that] falleth”

(III.ii.23.S.D.) as merely fortuitous, the physical staging of *The Spanish Tragedy* encourages understanding these events as providentially linked. The letter, dropped from above the stage, is necessarily associated (at least to the audience proper) with the superior placement of Revenge.

This precise convention is repeated five scenes later as Pedringano's letter is delivered to Hieronimo immediately following his exasperation that

...still tormented is my tortured soul
 With broken sighs and restless passions,
 That winged mount, and hovering in the air,
 Beat at the windows of the brightest heavens,
 Soliciting for justice and revenge;
 But they are placed in those empyreal heights,
 Where, counter-mured with walls of diamond,
 I find the place impregnable; and they
 Resist my woes, and give my words no way.
 (III.ii.10-18)

The irony of this complaint is visual in that those supernatural representatives to whom Hieronimo is here addressing are not "placed in ... empyreal heights" but, rather, are directly overhead. The irony is also thematic in that, as Hieronimo articulates his despair, the audience is cognizant of his position within the supernatural mechanism that has already ensured the success of his vengeance. That said, Hieronimo understands, upon reading the letter, that "such a monstrous and detested deed,/ So closely smothered, and so long concealed,/ Shall thus by this be vengéd or revealed!" (III.vii.45-47). This understanding identifies the letter as providential and confirms to Hieronimo and, by extension, to the audience that "[Lorenzo and Balthazar] did what heaven unpunished would not leave" (III.vii.56). These letters confirm both the culpability of Lorenzo and Balthazar as well as the providential significance of Hieronimo as revenger.

It is this providential significance that saturates with dramatic irony Hieronimo's later declaration that

I'll down to hell, and in this passion
 Knock at the dismal gates of Pluto's court

 Till we do gain that Proserpine may grant
 Revenge on them that murdered my son.
 (III.xiii.109-121)

Hieronimo's desires have already been fulfilled and, though not yet wholly recognized, it is by him that his revenge will come to pass. "For Hieronimo, for all his devotion to the cause of justice, is as much a puppet of the play's divine system of recompense as are the other characters in the action" (G. Hunter, 98). Hieronimo, though an agent of providence, does not act outside the boundaries of that design he here endorses.

It is therefore more than appropriate that Hieronimo enacts his revenge within a playlet. This play "is neither a momentary inspiration prompted by the arrival of some strolling players, nor the result of an agonized realization of neglected duty, but the product of a magistrate's mind still bent on doing justice" (Levin, 311). In other words, it is as ordered and deliberate as the providentialism it mimics. In employing a play as the means by which to enact revenge, Hieronimo argues for the same theatrical providentialism Kyd establishes by the relation of the frame play to the play proper. By invoking the *theatrum mundi*, Hieronimo acknowledges providence and it is this acknowledgement, more than any other factor of the play, that identifies Hieronimo as a providential revenger, executing justice by relentlessly considering the divine will.

In spite of the fact that Revenge does, in fact, "sit soliciting/ For vengeance on those cursed murderers" (IV.i.33-34), *The Spanish Tragedy* is rarely understood in the context of providentialism. Critics throughout the twentieth century have been either

unable or unwilling to acknowledge this particular aspect of the play, focusing instead on the penultimate scene and condemning Hieronimo for the violence of his vengeance and the means by which he accomplishes his revenge. This condemnation is predicated on a fundamental misappropriation of Renaissance perspectives on revenge.

V

“In 1619 or 1620 the Master of the Revels, Sir George Buc, looking over what plays might be suitable for presentation in the Christmas season of court revels that year, thought that *The Spanish Tragedy* might make a good pairing with *Hamlet*” (Gurr, xviii). A survey of twentieth century criticism will attest to the fact that this pairing has remained attractive. Unfortunately, the comparison of Kyd’s play to *Hamlet* is primarily founded on their shared classification as revenge tragedies, a sub-genre of English Renaissance drama. This is unfortunate, in part, because it fails to acknowledge that not all critics agree with this generic classification.

G.K. Hunter astutely observes, “the assumption that *The Spanish Tragedy* is usefully categorized as a revenge play and that this categorization gives us a means of differentiating what is essential in the text from what is peripheral—that has governed most that has been said about Kyd’s play. And this is a pity” (89). Likewise, Carol McGinnis Kay advised as early as 1977 that “we should begin to wonder whether critical emphasis on the play’s theme of revenge has not resulted in neglect of another important theme” (21).¹⁹

¹⁹ This frustration with critical emphasis on revenge is prevalent within *Hamlet* criticism as well. Robert G. Hunter expresses this frustration as such: “Far too much has been made of *Hamlet* as a play about revenge.

As these concerns indicate, revenge has relentlessly occupied a focal point in the criticism of *The Spanish Tragedy*. Yet, while the notion of revenge was problematically evocative during the English Renaissance and remains so today, it is also an undeniably useful entry into the text of Kyd's play. This is not to neglect the concerns of Hunter and Kay but, instead, to advocate a more complex and nuanced understanding of revenge—an understanding that more correctly illustrates the debate surrounding the ethics of retributive justice. This debate situated revenge at the center of a complex nexus of Renaissance anxieties—social, political, and religious. As both *Richard III* and *Arden of Faversham* indicate, revenge is one means of examining the role of the divine within worldly events. In this sense, revenge is not unlike the doctrine of providence and the *theatrum mundi*.

The Spanish Tragedy, in establishing Revenge as a literal liaison between the underworld and the earthly arena of the play proper, encourages our understanding of revenge as one means by which the supernatural creator intervenes within the secular sphere; revenge is immediately identified as providential. Unfortunately, within the critical history of Kyd's play, Revenge is accorded substantially less attention than the revenger. Although Revenge may establish the events of the play proper by the mechanical summary: “[Here] thou shalt see the author of thy death,/ Don Balthazar, the prince of Portingale,/ Deprived of life by Bel-Imperia” (I.i.87-89), Bel-Imperia is neither the protagonist of the drama nor its resident revenger—it is Hieronimo who occupies both positions.

It is also... a play about the divine retributive justice that is the first and final cause of that revenge, and Hamlet, though he seeks revenge and not justice, is the agent of divinity” (106).

It is his role as revenger that has exempted Hieronimo from critical sympathy. Fredson Bowers deems Hieronimo's eventual death "'absolutely necessary' to satisfy an Elizabethan sense of justice" (qtd. in Adams, 221). Rozett argues that "Unable to share the certainty with which he [i.e. Hieronimo] links heaven and revenge, the Elizabethan audience would begin to see him as an 'other.' ... They have been through the experience of suffering, indecision, and resolution with him, but now they pity him in his madness from an emotional remove" (*Doctrine*, 192). By this logic, it is the very fact of Hieronimo's revenge that requires his death and alienates him from any audience whose collective response may amount to nothing more than a condescending sort of pity. Bowers and Rozett here reflect the tenor of many twentieth-century responses to Kyd's play.

The position illustrated by Bowers is founded upon the assumption that an Elizabethan audience of any composition would find solidarity in their unequivocal disgust for revenge. Edwards, in attempting to salvage Hieronimo's reputation from such explicitly negative assessments, notes that "what an Elizabethan might think of Hieronimo's actions in real life may be irrelevant to the meaning of *The Spanish Tragedy*. Hieronimo may still be a sympathetic hero in spite of Elizabethan indignation against private revenge" (lix). Though attempting to reclaim Hieronimo as a sympathetic character, Edwards continues to buttress the same assumption flaunted by Bowers, essentially arguing that an Elizabethan audience would have been able to check their perspectives on revenge at the box office. Edwards maintains that Elizabethans had a single, uniform perspective on revenge and fails to recognize the complexity of Renaissance attitudes toward vengeance.

One consequence of the trend of selectively accentuating negative Renaissance perspectives on and reactions to revenge is that many modern critics have reached the misguided conclusion that “Christian values have no place in the world of the revenge play” (Rozett, *Doctrine*, 192). This conclusion undermines the revenge hero and ultimately condemns revenge drama as nothing more than a spectacle of sin. This perspective is often supported by a reliance upon contemporary philosophy and, as is more often the case, contemporary literature. Though these texts are undeniably useful in reconstructing a fraction of the Renaissance debate on the principles of revenge, providentialism may provide a more productive framework for the complex ethics of the revenger within Renaissance drama.

Bowers argues that for the Renaissance man contemplating revenge “it was the method and not the act itself which was called into question” (165).²⁰ Francis Bacon famously calls revenge, “a kind of wild justice” (347). Often cited as a complete denouncement of revenge, it is important to note that Bacon establishes revenge as a form of modified justice, not the antithesis of justice. Bacon goes on to allow that “the most tolerable sort of revenge is for those wrongs which there is no law to remedy” (348). Both Bacon and Bowers are persistent in their condemnation of revenge yet they simultaneously admit, however reluctantly, that within certain circumstances vengeance remains appropriate. These circumstances are largely dependent on method and, a closely related concept, process. Revenge and justice are complementary terms and one’s understanding of revenge must necessarily be informed by its relation to justice.

²⁰ Bowers himself is apparently unsure as to the Renaissance perspective(s) on revenge. This is evidenced, in part, by his reluctance to completely disavow the revenger as a potential hero. There are discrepancies between his various works that indicate this uncertainty. This is not to fault Bowers but, rather, to underscore the complexity of revenge as a concept both during the Early Modern period and the twentieth century.

One must recall the absolute nature of divine providence. In the providential scheme of Renaissance England, all secular events were construed as either divine mercies or judgments, rendering both justice and vengeance the consequence of providence. The frequently proposed argument that revenge is immoral or unethical precisely because it undermines divine authority fails to appropriately subscribe to the unadulterated providentialism of the Renaissance. In other words, in spite of the legal and ethical dilemmas, to deem revenge an act of anarchy or chaos would be to admit that it exists somehow contrary to the divine will. All acts of revenge must necessarily participate in the providential design. The argument that the character of “[Revenge] represents the element of disorder and destruction that operates in the affairs of mortal men” (Hamilton, 190) can be discounted for the same reasons. Consequently, how revenge operates—the *method* of revenge—was the focus of Renaissance theology.

In speaking specifically of Renaissance perspectives on revenge, Campbell asserts, “God’s revenge is the general theme dominating all the tragedies of the period, the revenge play is concerned with one variant of this theme, that of private revenge in its relation to God’s revenge” (293). As hinted at by both Bowers and Bacon, the justification for secular revenge is heavily invested in the relation of that revenge to the divine will. As such, a reliance on scripture is not only appropriate but also vital in order to fully appreciate the ethical boundaries—however fluid they may be—of revenge.

Hieronimo cites scripture once throughout *The Spanish Tragedy*.

Vindicta mihi!

Ay, heaven will be revenged of every ill,
 Now will they suffer murder unrepaid:
 Then stay, Hieronimo, attend their will,
 For moral men may not appoint their time.

(III.xiii.1-5)

Romans 12:19, the passage here quoted, reads, “Dearely beloved, avenge not your selves, but give place unto wrath: for it is written, vengeance is mine: I will repay sayth the Lord.” Consistently referred to in discussions of revenge, this verse is often interpreted as an unambiguous prohibition against private revenge. However, the explicit quality of this interpretation obscures the fact that this prohibition is also a promise. In his discussion on the uses of providence Keith Thomas notes, “It had never been clear by what mechanism God’s rewards and punishments in this world had been distributed” (Thomas, 107). Thus, the divine vengeance promised by Romans 12:19 could manifest itself in any number of ways. With this in mind, Campbell encourages the reader of revenge drama to question whether “the dialogue make[s] clear whether the avenger has the right to take upon himself the prerogative of public avenger, executing God’s justice upon others?” (296). Campbell admits to the possibility that some acts of retributive violence may be divinely sanctioned. In other words, there exists a potential relationship between private revenge and divine vengeance. This relationship is most thoroughly explicated in Calvin’s essay concerning providence.

The Calvinist appreciation of revenge is based on a religious understanding of the law. Calvin is adamant that “God has revealed his will to us in the law” (“Providence”, 268), equating lawfulness with righteousness and encouraging the Renaissance Christian to “seek the will of God in his law” (“Providence”, 268). St. Paul, in the chapter immediately following the supposed prohibition of revenge, makes a similar argument. St. Paul orders that “every soule be subject unto the higher powers: for there is no power but of God: and the powers that bee, are ordained of God” (Romans, 13:1). This passage has particular application to the English Renaissance as divine-right theory, articulated by

Bodin and promoted extensively by King James I, came to be an accepted tradition of the English monarchy. Calvin's assertion that secular law is one outlet for divine will is therefore compatible with both biblical exegesis and contemporary political theory.

The divine right of kings, however, may be a somewhat misleading referent; the Geneva Bible accompanies Romans 13:1 with the gloss, referring to those powers that be, "some are greater, some small." Thus, the entire political framework, not merely the head of state, serves as the mechanism by which divine vengeance is enacted. In other words, the actions of Hieronimo, as Knight Marshall of Spain, are equally significant in relating the divine will. In fact, it is Hieronimo's religious duty to punish evil for, as St. Paul asserts, "hee [i.e. the magistrate] is the minister of God for thy wealth, but if thou doe evill, feare for he beareth not the sword for naught: for he is the minister of God to take vengeance on him that doeth evil" (Romans, 13:4). This passage contains two glosses. The first warns, "God hath armed the magistrate even with a revenging sword." The second gloss reiterates that these magistrates, both great and small, are "by whom God revengeth the wicked." To construe Hieronimo as merely a private revenger is to discount his position as Knight Marshall. Indeed, in the same passage in which Calvin considers Romans 13, he stresses that

When those who bear the office of magistrate are called gods, let no one suppose that there is little weight in that appellation. It is thereby intimated that they have a commission from God, that they are invested with divine authority, and, in fact, represent the person of God, as whose substitutes they in a manner act. . . . For it is just as if it had been said, that it is not owing to human perverseness that supreme power of earth is lodged in kings and other governors, but by divine providence, and the holy decree of Him to whom it has seemed good so to govern the affairs of men, since he is present, and also presides in enacting laws and exercising judicial equality. (*Institutes*, IV.xx.4)

Some critics have argued that Hieronimo's development into an unsympathetic revenger is marked by the resignation of his legal position. Though it is true that Hieronimo exclaims,

I'll make a pickaxe of my poniard,
 And here surrender up my marshalship:
 For I'll go marshal up the fiends in hell,
 To be avenged on you all for this.

(III.xii.75-78),

this resignation is refused, confirming Hieronimo's position as a legal agent of Spain. Not only is Hieronimo's position reestablished in this scene, the following scene highlights his reputation for justice and equity as one citizen proclaims,

...I tell you this, for learning and for law,
 There's not any advocate in Spain
 That can prevail, or will take half the pain
 That he will, in pursuit of equity.

(III.xiii.51-54)

Hieronimo, a magistrate of Spain is, by definition, a minister of God. In the world of *The Spanish Tragedy*, characterized by political ignorance and corruption, it is probable that Hieronimo's devotion to the principles of equity identifies him as the ideal minister of divine vengeance. Indeed, one is led to agree with Johnson that "it is unfortunate that most critics have tended to discount Kyd's emphasis on Hieronimo's official function and have seen him merely as a 'private' revenger, for in doing so they have missed the point of Kyd's brilliant invention: the tragic dilemma of the officially appointed minister of justice who is forced by circumstances to take justice into his own hands" (31).

There is, of course, an important distinction to be made between the vengeance enacted by a recognized system of government and a private individual. The above emphasis on Hieronimo's position as a legal agent of Spain is not meant to imply that

only political parties are permitted to execute justice. Echoing Francis Bacon, William Perkins argues that “when violence is offered and the Magistrate absent, either for a time, and his stay be dangerous; or altogether, so as no helpe can be had of him, nor any hope of his coming. In this case, God puts the sword into the private man’s hands” (qtd. in Bowers, 163). Perkins, utilizing the same language with which the Geneva Bible presents legal power, cites a circumstance in which the performance of revenge by a private man is permitted. In this sense, the publicly acknowledged righteousness of Hieronimo juxtaposed with the corruption of the Spanish court further identifies him as a legitimate wielder of the divine sword of vengeance.

Rather than manifesting itself through special providence, divine vengeance is realized through distinctly secular events. Genesis 9:6 articulates this belief in warning that “Whoso shedeth man’s blood, by man shal his blood be shed, for in the image of God hath he made man.” God is not absent from this interaction yet revenge is accomplished by the actions of man rather than by direct divine intervention. One would do well to recall that the purpose of compiling providences was to assemble meaning by the careful consideration of secular events. Calvin notes that God, “wishes us to be eyewitnesses of his acts and to propound their causes wisely” (Calvin, 270). By this Calvinist belief, acts of secular vengeance can also be understood as acts of providence. This does not repudiate the claims that rightly identify secular revenge as morally and theologically problematic. However, it should be noted that even Calvin, who “was opposed to private vengeance [,]...believed God works through it” (Sinfield, 172).

These various perspectives on secular revenge have at their core an ingrained conviction to the doctrine of providence. Central to this doctrine is the understanding that

all worldly action is viewed by the divine spectator. Referring to this belief, Thomas Beard consoles his readers, “though it may seeme for a time that God sleepeth, and regardeth not the wrongs and oppression of his servants, yet he never faileth to carry a watchfull eie upon them, and in his fittest time to revenge himself upon their enemies” (qtd. in Campbell, 286). The image of a sleeping God is popularized during the Renaissance as an ironic indication of the perpetual oversight of God. *The Spanish Tragedy* illustrates this conceit as Revenge, being awoken by a frantic Andrea at the close of act three, retorts,

Content thyself, Andrea: though I sleep
 Yet is my mood solliciting their souls;
 Sufficieth thee that poor Hieronimo
 Cannot forget his son Horatio.
 Nor dies Revenge although he sleep awhile,
 For in unquiet, quietness is feigned,
 And slumbering is a common worldly wile.
 Behold, Andrea, for an instance how
 Revenge hath slept, and then imagine thou
 What ‘tis to be subject to destiny.

(III.xv.19-28)

Revenge, operating as a god, argues that his slumber does not prevent his providential solliciting. Reminding Andrea of the omnipotence of destiny (that is to say, of providential design), Revenge admits that he is capable of “solliciting their souls” even while asleep. Interestingly, by “solliciting” the souls of those actors within the play proper, Revenge reiterates the premise of providence while inverting the relationship typically represented by prayer. This operates to place paramount significance upon Hieronimo who, since he “cannot forget his son,” is identified by Revenge as the guarantee of his success.

This one passage, however, goes further by aligning the figures of Revenge and Hieronimo. Revenge, reminding Andrea that “in unquiet, quietness is feigned” recalls Hieronimo’s plan to enact his vengeance by “dissembling quiet in unquietness” (IV.xiii.29-30). This parallel position bestows upon Hieronimo the sympathy and permission of Revenge while encouraging Andrea to exhibit patience, a virtue rewarded by the resolution of the final act and guaranteed by the providential certainty here articulated by Revenge.

Of course, patience promises reward. As Hieronimo notes in his famous (or infamous) soliloquy, “Wise men will take their opportunity,/ Closely and safely fitting things to time” (III.xiii.26-27). This emphasis on opportunity illustrates Hieronimo’s as a righteous witness of providence and indicates his sensitivity to the providential universe overseen by Revenge. It is this notion of a providential revenger that problematizes the assumption of those critics who deem Hieronimo a pitiless villain worthy of indisputable condemnation.

To condemn Hieronimo merely because he commits revenge would be to egregiously oversimplify the complex relationship between divine intervention and human action. However, it is also true that God does not always select his ministers on the quality of their virtue. Calvin, in discussing the uses of providence, notes that “[even] while acting wickedly, we serve his righteous ordination, since in his boundless wisdom he well knows how to use bad instruments for good purposes” (*Institutes*, I.xvii.5).

Isaiah 10:5 reads, “O, Assyria, the rod of my wrath: and the staff in their hands is mine indignation.” In his exegesis of this passage Calvin argues, “He calls men ‘the rod of God’s anger’ because God uses them like a rod, he calls the weapons of men God’s

‘indignation’ because they are not directed by men’s own will but are the evidence of God’s anger” (Calvin, 272). This leads Calvin to conclude, “God acts by the hand of the wicked” (Calvin, 272). Hieronimo, as an Elizabethan revenger, may very well be unrighteous and worthy of condemnation but, if this is so, it cannot be argued on the basis of his merely being a revenger.

Thus, revenge, similar to providence and the *theatrum mundi*, is one lens through which the relationship of the divine playwright to his creation can be examined. There are those who argue that revenge posed a threat to the Renaissance conception of an ordered universe; however, it is also true that revenge was understood to function as part of that providential universe. As Campbell concludes, “all Elizabethan tragedy must appear as fundamentally a tragedy of revenge if the extent of the idea of revenge be but grasped” (290).

The critical obsession with revenge—the obsession that worries both Hunter and Kay—conceives of revenge largely as a mechanical act; these critics fail to position revenge within the complex Renaissance debate. By calling Kyd’s play a revenge tragedy I do not mean to condemn it to nearsighted analysis but, rather, to locate revenge at the center of the contemporary conversation surrounding man’s place in the cosmic drama. This sentiment is shared by Campbell who, after elaborating upon the nuances of Renaissance revenge, argues that the sensitive critic must necessarily examine the play itself to determine “whether the avenger has the right to take upon himself the prerogative of public avenger” (Campbell, 296). As the above section makes clear, Hieronimo not only has the prerogative to serve as public avenger; he has the responsibility to do so.

VI

The final lines of *The Spanish Tragedy* anticipate the series of punishments and pleasures to be allocated in the afterlife. Revenge prompts Andrea,

Then haste we down to meet thy friends and foes,
To place thy friends in ease, the rest in woes:
For here though death hath end their misery,
I'll there begin their endless tragedy.

(IV.v.45-48)

While Johnson recognizes that “Obviously the audience is supposed to accept Andrea’s dispensations as the judgments of God” (36), the critical reception of Kyd’s play has demonstrated that such recognition is all but obvious. Rozett deems these final lines a “curious pronouncement” (*Doctrine*, 192). Katharine Eisaman Maus claims that

If a beneficent providence does not exist, there is little hope for the redress of injustice in this world or the next: . . . Instead of reassuring his audience with a theologico-theatrical fiction of beneficent omniscience, Kyd acquaints it with the disquieting possibility that it is caught in the same ironies that doom his characters, victims of powers that are not necessarily either just or merciful, and whom they are incapable of understanding.
(70)

To Maus, as to many, *The Spanish Tragedy* is a morally ambiguous play. The image of Proserpine whispering in Revenge’s ear captures the uncomfortable mystery of divine judgment. Yet the claim that Kyd’s play is not providential is to accuse it of being disordered, an accusation that is effortlessly dismissed once one properly recognizes the influence of Kyd’s dramatic conventions on the very meaning of the play.

The play-within-the-play is a remarkable tool, “remind[ing] us that the story is not presented for its own sake but for its deeper significance” (Mehl, 53). Evoked by the series of plays-within-the-play, the *theatrum mundi* aligns drama and providence, effectively “pull[ing] us in both directions simultaneously, reminding us of the real world whose image the playhouse is, but also of the playhouse itself and the artifice we are

taking part in” (Mack, 281). Kyd’s use of the *theatrum mundi* as the master trope of *The Spanish Tragedy* articulates the dual Elizabethan desires both to order and enjoy life. “Used in a multitude of ways, to describe the nature of deceivers, the splendour of man’s life and its transience, the inexorability of Fortune, or the character of individual moments of time, the play metaphor was for Elizabethans an inescapable expression, a means of fixing the essential quality of the age” (Righter, 84). This essential quality is one of unfathomable faith. This faith, however, does not require passivity. Instead, “[the] implicit faith in the rightness of retribution is the human translation of the ... assumption that a greater power supervises the feeble deeds of man” (Levin, 320). Hieronimo, in trusting that the world in which he serves as Knight Marshall must necessarily be ordered by moral principles, epitomizes this faith and dedicates his life to its exhibition. His recognition that he is both “Author and actor in this tragedy” (IV.iv.147) amounts to nothing less than an understanding of the workings of providence, an understanding that Maus incorrectly determines to be inaccessible.

The justice of *The Spanish Tragedy* is regularly questioned on the basis of those deaths within the penultimate scene yet

to say, without qualification, that Hieronimo and Bel-imperia are guilty is to regard them without respect to their meaning in the pattern of the play. We cannot condemn them as we condemn Lorenzo and Balthazar; they are far too sympathetic. Furthermore, the infernal powers remind us that they *are* good; they are endorsed by Revenge, and since we see them from his viewpoint as well as ours, we do not seriously challenge the judgment that places them in Elysium at the close” (Levin, 322).

Kyd’s play may not be wholly reassuring but it does, in fact, present “a theologico-theatrical fiction of beneficent omniscience” and it is at this intersection of the theological and theatrical that Hieronimo is situated.

The 1615 title-page of *The Spanish Tragedy* promises a performance of “the lamentable end of *Don Horatio* and *Belimperia*...[and] the pittifull death of *Hieronimo*” (Neill, xxii). Though Kyd would not have known Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*, it may be impossible (if not, it is surely ill-advised) to disassociate Aristotelian pity from our appreciation of Hieronimo. Aristotle defines pity as such:

a sort of pain occasioned by an evil capable of hurting or destroying, appearing to befall one who does not deserve it, which one may himself expect to endure, or that some one connected with him will; and this when it appears near: for it evidently is necessary that a person likely to feel pity should be actually such as to deem that, whether in his own person or of some one connected with him, he may suffer some evil. (136)

Those events that evoke pity are undeserved yet not unimaginable. To describe Hieronimo’s death as “pittifull,” is to encourage sympathy—sympathy that has historically been withheld as critics consistently condemn Hieronimo on the basis of his revenge. Yet once understood as the providential revenger of Kyd’s play, it becomes apparent that it is precisely *because* of his revenge that Hieronimo deserves sympathy.

For when one understands Kyd’s play as a providential drama dedicated to illustrating the ways in which the supernatural playwright employs human agents to enact its poetic justice, the final lines of the play are understood to be anything but “curious.” Indeed, the anticipation of the “endless tragedy” (IV.v.48) of divine vengeance recalls the “tragedy” (I.i.91) just witnessed. When Hieronimo pleads, “See here my show” (IV.iv.89), his appeal transcends the boundaries of the stage as the audience of *The Spanish Tragedy* is called upon to recognize the workings of providence and to situate Hieronimo, and themselves, within that providential design.

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