WRITING AND REVENGE:
THE STRUGGLE FOR AUTHORITY IN
THOMAS KYD'S THE SPANISH TRAGEDY

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While searching for the author of certain "duers lewd and mutinous libells," officers of the Privy Council found an "'Atheistic' pamphlet" among Thomas Kyd's belongings, which in turn led to his arrest and torture in Bridewell in 1593. Kyd insisted that the "waste and idle papers" had been authored by Marlowe, with whom he had been sharing a room. Although he was acquitted of the charges, this ordeal seems to have contributed to his early death the following year. Ironically, Kyd had dramatized the dangers and the authority of writing just a few years earlier in *The Spanish Tragedy*, a play that exemplifies how writing can keep an author's secrets but also can expose and condemn him. Hieronimo constructs his revenge out of a written text, a tragedy he wrote as a student at Toledo, and thus takes up the deceptively passive but actually deadly weapon—writing—that will destroy his enemies. *The Spanish Tragedy* thus identifies the revenger as a kind of author and writing as one of the weapons available to him. However, although Hieronimo attains his revenge by becoming an author, he does so at the cost of his own life and the lives of those who were not direct targets of his revenge. The author ultimately loses control of his creation, and he is displaced by the text of his revenge.

*The Spanish Tragedy* repeatedly demonstrates how writing can serve as a deadly weapon for anyone who wields it effectively. Kyd's audience would presumably recognize, for example, the probable source for the epistolary war between Lorenzo and Pedringano—the banned *A Copie of a Letter* (1584) in which the Earl of Leicester arranged the death of a thief formerly in his employment while pretending to stand his protector (Freeman 57–58). In *The Spanish Tragedy*, Pedringano stands trial for a murder that his master, Lorenzo, has arranged: Lorenzo promises to send a pardon for his servant but secretly plans to rid himself of a witness to his crime. Fearful that his lord will betray rather than protect him, Pedringano writes a letter that names Lorenzo as Horatio's murderer. Lorenzo does not know of the letter's existence, just as Pedringano is not aware that the letter containing his promised "pardon" does not exist (3.6.103), so the latter does not expect to be executed while the former does not know that he must defend himself against Hieronimo's revenge. For Lorenzo and Pedringano, then, writing becomes a weapon in their literary
duelling. This darkly humorous incident warns both authors and audiences alike to heed the authority of the written word.

If a text written in ink becomes fixed and, as such, assumes a certain authority, then the text written in blood-ink shares that same authority but it also symbolizes the extremity of the author’s emotions and purpose. Blood-written texts abound in *The Spanish Tragedy* as Kyd metonymically substitutes blood for ink in order to connect the act of writing to the bloody act of revenge. Bel-imperia communicates to Hieronimo in a letter written with her own blood (3.2.24–26); the bloody, scarred body of their son makes Hieronimo and Isabella think of the murderer as an “author” who has carved the deadly letters on Horatio’s body (2.5.39); at the close of the performance in which he takes his revenge, Hieronimo calls his audience’s attention to the “fatal marks” inscribed upon his son’s body (4.4.97); Bazulto, the old man, is unable to write his appeal for justice, complaining that he cannot “with ink bewray what blood began in me” (3.13.77). Mistaking the petitions of the citizens for enemies, Hieronimo cannibalistically tears them apart with his teeth, and then mocks the outraged citizens because not “one drop of blood” fell from the “wound[s]” he gave to their papers (3.13.129–30). The blood-written texts become part of the play’s bloody spectacle and foreshadow Hieronimo’s decision to let the text of his playlet determine the bloody fate of his enemies.

Because in *The Spanish Tragedy* sword and blood often substitute for pen and ink, acts of writing and stabbing an enemy become synonymous. Thus, when one character strikes another, he inscribes his signature, his mark, on the body of his victim—though that signature does not reveal the assailant’s identity. Confronting their son’s murdered and mutilated body, Hieronimo and Isabella are shocked to find their authorship as parents undermined by another “author” who has destroyed their offspring:

*Isabella:* Oh, where’s the author of this endless woe?
*Hieronimo:* To know the author were some ease of grief,
For in revenge my heart would find relief.

(2.5.39–41)

For Hieronimo and Isabella, the wounds represent the persuasive appeal of the text, which horrifies and holds the attention of Horatio’s parents. Horatio’s disfigured body becomes a text wherein the wounds and scars stand as the signs of writing, and the message inscribed there confirms the existence of an “author.” The marks scratched there challenge the father to seek revenge if he can first *read* the text accurately and identify that “author.” In order to do so he must rely on the lifeless text in his possession, a murdered body. Finding no legible answers, he attempts to speak with Bel-imperia about the blood-written letter she sent him.