Troubled Speech: The Representation of Madness in Renaissance Drama

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Shakespeare's world believed that grief could send you mad. Its plays are filled, accordingly, with startling images of distraction. Men and women, young and old, rave, rant, and suffer, revile God, gods or the fates, at times in stately verse, at others in febrile prose. Mad-scenes became a staple item in the list of delights tragedies of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries offered for their audiences. Some of the lesser, perhaps more risible tragedies of the time, such as James Shirley's *The Maid's Revenge* (1625/6), seem to have been designed largely to allow their central characters as many opportunities to display distraction as possible. In what is perhaps the last undisputed masterpiece of Renaissance drama, Ford's *The Broken Heart* (c.1630), the heroine goes mad with quiet dignity. But that was at the end of an era, a time when refinement was perhaps the only quality left to exploit in a drama which had exhausted most of its possibilities in the previous three quarters of a century. In earlier, more lively plays madness was nowhere near so reticent: it sparkled and blazed, roared and groaned.

Observing the different ways in which dramatists presented their images of distraction, at different times within the tradition of drama that arose in the 1570s and came to an abrupt end in 1642, provides one perspective on the changing principles of mimesis that were brought to bear on it. Madness, because it is so vivid, and because it is at the same time an intensely personal experience and one beyond the individual's control, inevitably raises questions about how societies regard the representation of emotions and actions within the dramatic illusion. The great mad-scenes of Shakespeare's age provide, indeed, a topography of that large and difficult topic.

The earliest, in a way the archetypal, mad scenes of Renaissance drama are to be found in *The Spanish Tragedy*, almost without doubt the work of Thomas Kyd. Hieronimo,

Marshal of Spain, declines into madness by way of intense grief for his murdered son and through frustration at being unable to gain legal redress for the murder, or indeed to discover the murderer's identity.

The height of Hieronimo's madness is reached in III. xiii. Having resolved to be vigilant and constantly alert in his attempts to trap those whom he suspects to be guilty of the murder, his mind is suddenly unbalanced at the moment when he is confronted by an old man seeking justice for the death of his son. Hieronimo rushes from the stage in grief and distraction; when he returns he mistakes the grieving old man for his murdered son Horatio.

HIERONIMO
And art thou come, Horatio, from the depth,
To ask for justice in this upper earth?
To tell thy father thou art unrevenged,
To wring more tears from Isabella's eyes,
Whose lights are dimmed with over-long laments?
Go back my son, complain to Aeacus,
For here's no justice; gentle boy be gone,
For justice is exiled from the earth;
Hieronimo will bear thee company.
Thy mother calls on righteous Rhadamanth
For just revenge against the murderers.
SENEX
Alas my lord, whence springs this troubled speech?
HIERONIMO
But let me look on my Horatio.
Sweet boy, how art thou changed in death's black shade!
Had Proserpine no pity on thy youth,
But suffered thy fair crimson-coloured spring
With withered winter to be blasted thus?
Horatio, thou art older than thy father;
Ah ruthless fate, that favour thus transforms!
SENEX
Ah good my lord, I am not your young son.
HIERONIMO
What, not my son? thou, then, a Fury art,
Sent from the empty kingdom of black night
To summon me to make appearance
Before grim Minos and just Rhadamanth,

> To plague Hieronimo that is remiss,
> And seeks not vengeance for Horatio's death.[1]

Whatever else Hieronimo's tirade might be, it is far from being a 'troubled speech' in anything but content. Certainly, Kyd represents a confused and troubled state of mind. It is not entirely clear to what extent Hieronimo confuses the elderly man with the ghost of Horatio – the possibility that he is only mad north by north west cannot be entirely dismissed – yet all in all the episode may be taken to represent a deeply disturbed and troubled personality. It is notable therefore that Kyd seems to have made no attempt whatever to indicate, by way of metrical, grammatical or rhetorical devices, the difference between 'sane' and 'insane' uses of language. To put it in other words: the matter of Hieronimo's speeches in this episode certainly suggests a deeply disturbed personality and a failure to perceive reality. But the diction is no less grammatical, elevated or sonorous than his speeches in the early episodes of *The Spanish Tragedy*.

This aspect of the play may best be illustrated by a comparison with an incident in the drama of the age where another distracted old man mistakes the identity of a second old man – a situation analogous to that in III. xii. of *The Spanish Tragedy*. In IV. vi. of *King Lear*, the insane Lear and the blind Gloster meet near Dover. As the old King's anguish rises to a climax, Gloster cries out 'I know that voice'. Lear, whose diction had changed from verse to prose a few moments earlier, makes the celebrated comment:

> Ha! Gonerill with a white beard! They flatter'd me like a dog, and told me I had the white hairs in my beard ere the black ones were there. To say 'ay' or 'no' to everything that I said! 'Ay' and 'no' too was no good divinity. When the rain came to wet me once, and the wind to make me chatter, when the thunder would not peace at my bidding – there I found 'em, there I smelt 'em out. Go to, they are not men o' their words. They told me I was everything. 'Tis a lie – I am not ague-proof.[2]

1 Thomas Kyd, *The Spanish Tragedy*, III.xiii.133-158, ed. J.R. Mulryne (London, 1970). All quotations are from this edition.

2 *King Lear*, IV.vi.96-105. All quotations are from the Challis Shakespeare, ed. E.A.M. Colman (Sydney, 1982).

Lear's words represent an attempt to convey grammatically and rhetorically – by means of the jagged rhythms of prose – a linguistic image or 'picture' of his wandering mind. His misapprehension of Gloster's identity is no more distracted than Hieronimo's mistaking the old man for Horatio. As with Hieronimo, too, the encounter triggers a series of associations in Lear's mind that centre on his distress and dismay. The crucial difference is that the disjointed rhythms of Lear's words, their wild jumping from topic to topic, provide an imitation of madness, an enactment in what we might call psychologically acute terms, of the symptoms of that malady, in other words a mimesis of insanity.

That difference could be ascribed to Shakespeare's greater skill and to the growth in sophistication of the drama between the late 1580s and the mid 1600s. An argument could also be mounted – as has indeed been done on several occasions – that as a result of Shakespeare's genius and of the maturity and sophistication of the drama he had helped come into being, plays such as *King Lear* are able to enact with full dramatic, psychological and intellectual integrity potentialities which remain latent in, say, *The Spanish Tragedy*, where Kyd proved incapable of rising to the demands of his intentions – intentions which are usually taken, at least by implication, to be similar to those Shakespeare and his successors exhibit.

Some justification – though to my mind a spurious one – is afforded by an instance much closer in time to *The Spanish Tragedy*. In V. i. of the first part of Marlowe's *Tamburlaine*, Zabina discovers the body of her husband Bajazet, the captive Turkish basso who had brained himself on the bars of the cage where Tamburlaine had him confined. Zabina's speech (l. 304ff)[3] begins in terms of those conventional laments that Kyd had also perfected in *The Spanish Tragedy*:

> What do mine eyes behold? My husband dead!
> His skull all riven in twain, his brains dash'd out!
> The brains of Bajazeth, my lord and sovereign!

3 *Tamburlaine the Great*, ed. John D. Jump (London 1967). All quotations are from this edition.

> O Bajazeth, my husband and my lord!
> O Bajazet! O Turk! O emperor! Give him his liquor?

At that point she descends into madness, and, as in *King Lear*, insanity is conveyed by means of a change to fluid, nervous prose when Zabina begins to elaborate an answer to her own question:

> Not I. Bring milk and fire, and my blood I bring him again. Tear me in pieces. Give me the sword with a ball of wild-fire upon it. Down with him, down with him! Go to my child! Away, away, away! Ah, save that infant, save him, save him! I, even I, speak to her. The sun was down – streamers, white, red, black. Here here, here! Fling the meat in his face! Tamburlaine, Tamburlaine! Let the soldiers be buried. Hell, death, Tamburlaine, hell! Make ready my coach, my chair, my jewels. I come, I come, I come!

Those words seem to convey the authentic tones of grief and distraction – Shakespeare may have remembered them with Ophelia. In the modulation from formal verse to the highly-charged, fully dramatic mimesis of insanity and grief in the prose portions of the speech, the drama may be seen to have discovered its full, affective integrity.

Zabina's ravings in V.i. of *Tamburlaine* certainly incorporate two sharply opposed principles of dramatic representation – the one formal, dignified, emblematic and 'tragic', the other more directly mimetic, attempting to find a means of utterance which would produce a simulacrum of distraction, madness and grief. The history of English Renaissance drama, as it evolved from its tentative beginnings to its triumphs of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, illustrates the manner in which the latter mode came to be dominant, perhaps as a result of Shakespeare's adoption and transformation of the mode Marlowe employed from time to time, as in Zabina's speech cited above.

The additions to *The Spanish Tragedy*, of uncertain date and authorship, provide a particularly notable instance of that shift in dramatic sensibility. The following was added, for instance, to the opening of III.xi.

> [1 PORTINGALE
> By your leave, sir.]

HIERONIMO

'Tis neither as you think, nor as you think,
Nor as you think: you're wide all:
These slippers are not mine, they were my son Horatio's.
My son, and what's a son? A thing begot
Within a pair of minutes, thereabout:
A lump bred up in darkness, and doth serve
To ballace these light creatures we call women;
And at nine moneths' end, creeps forth to light.
What is there yet in a son
To make a father dote, rave or run mad?
Being born, it pouts, cries, breeds teeth.
What is there yet in a son? He must be fed,
Be taught to go and speak ... (ll. 1-13)

As Hieronimo's distress and anguish grow, the speech concludes with an agonized lament for Horatio in which the basically pentametric beat of the opening section of the speech dissolves:

This is a son:
And what a loss were this, considered truly?
Oh, but my Horatio
Grew out of reach of these insatiate humours:
He lov'd his loving parents,
He was my comfort and his mother's joy,
The very arm that did hold up our house:
Our hopes were stored up in him,
None but a damned murdered could hate him.
He had not seen the back of nineteen year,
When his strong arm unhors'd the proud Prince Balthazar,
And his great mind, too full of honour,
Took him unto mercy,
The valiant but ignoble Portingale.
Well, heaven is heaven still,
And there is Nemesis and Furies,
And things called whips,
And they sometimes do meet with murderers ... (ll. 26-43)

This is much closer to the spirit of Zabina's diction, or to the ravings of Lear. The spiky rhythms of the latter portion, the mordant irony, and the sense of a mind leaping from topic to topic all indicate a desire to convey an imitation (that is, a mimesis) of distraction and madness by means of devices that

suggest that the actor is 'living' out the behaviour of such distracted persons. Nevertheless, whoever was responsible for these additions seems to have been aware that they represent a dramatic mode essentially different from Kyd's. The opening measures of this passage accordingly attempt to retain something of the characteristics of that other mode – its classicizing formality and predominantly *emblematic* temper – which must be perceived not as inferior to this later mode of representation, but as a different, to my mind equally valid, means of conveying the idea of madness, if not its manifestations in speech and behaviour.

Though Kyd's original text was no doubt performed with an elaborate repertoire of affective gestures, its language is stately and formal; no attempt is made to catch the individual tone of voice or utterance of the various personages as they display suffering, grief, anger, hope or defiance. Instead, their diction, especially in the play's many elaborate set-pieces, provides impersonal icons or emblems that allow an apprehension of the implications or the significance of the individual state of mind experienced by the characters. And that is something that the later drama, for all its dramatic immediacy, lost to a large extent. *The Spanish Tragedy* is one of the last instances, and certainly the greatest example, in English drama of a play intent on the general, rather than the particular, of a play concerned with displaying the moral, philosophical even perhaps religious implications of its characters' fortunes and actions, rather than their individuality. It was, in short, a more contemplative, abstract, essentially non-mimetic drama, much closer to the aspiration of late seventeenth century French tragedy than to the very different Shakespearian mode.

The play's most celebrated passage, Hieronimo's famous lament in III. ii – a speech remembered and parodied for the best part of a century after Kyd's time – is also the most elaborate instance of that rhetorically intricate mode which I would style by the term 'emblematic'. Its rhetorical elaboration is particularly notable:

> O eyes, no eyes, but fountains fraught with tears;
> O life, no life, but lively form of death;

> O world, no world, but mass of public wrongs
> Confused and filled with murder and misdeeds!

The opening lines are organized around the rhetorical figure usually known as *Correctio*, where propositions ('eyes'; 'life'; 'world') are immediately withdrawn in order to indicate their inadequacy or inability properly to account for the concept or emotion the speaker is wishing to convey. It is therefore used as an emblem or abstract representation – not in the strictest sense a mimesis – of Hieronimo's inability to accept or absorb his grief and it implications.

It is followed by a rhetorically complex invocation that questions the justice of heaven in allowing not merely Horatio's undeserved death, but Hieronimo's inability to obtain justice for that outrage:

> If this inhuman and barbarous attempt,
> If this incomparable murder thus
> Of mine, but no no more my son
> Shall unrevealed and unrevenged pass,
> How should we term your dealings to be just,
> If you unjustly deal with those that in your justice trust?
> (III.ii. 6-11)

Amid the elaboration of rhetorical devices in this passages one stands out as particularly significant: the last line quoted, a hypermetric line of fourteen syllables, which would have been regarded by many as a fault of style (since elsewhere in Kyd's text the pentametric line is consistently maintained). In Shakespeare, and in the additions to this play, such hyper- or hypometric lines are often used to convey strength of emotion, of distraction, of the mind's incapacity to tolerate more suffering or distress. Here the implication of such excess is more philosophical and moral. Hieronimo challenges divine justice and authority; in so doing he reveals himself to be guilty of a type of excess or impiety, even perhaps of arrogance, in questioning divine providence. Excess, arrogance and impiety are marked and commented on by the excessiveness of the utterance: the pentameter is broken, at precisely the moment when Hieronimo infringes the limits placed on humanity's privilege to question the ways of God.

A few lines later the heavens answer Hieronimo's question and challenge. Lines 21 and 22 are a virtuoso passage in which the key terms of the previous part of the speech are summed up by means of several well-known rhetorical devices in the manner of a *stretto* in music;

> Eyes, life, world, heavens, hell, night, and day
> See, search, show, send some man, some mean, that may –

ending with a figure known as *Praecisio*, the abrupt cutting-off of speech because of emotional stress or altered circumstances. Hieronimo's monologue, which at this point seems to be reaching a formal conclusion, is interrupted by a letter – written in Belimperia's blood, and identifying Horatio's murderers – falling from the upper-stage. There is no need to surmise that the theatre in which the play was first acted possessed a 'heavens' – the canopy over the acting-area embellished with a representation of the night sky – in order to stress that this fluttering piece of paper, which cuts off and answers Hieronimo's complaint and challenge, is a species of heavenly reply to his impiety and arrogance. The formal elaboration of Kyd's diction enacts not merely an emblem of the character's predicament but provides, simultaneously, a commentary on it.

This aspect of the play is replicated in many other episodes and incidents. The tendency is consistently towards a grave, though by no means solemn, dignity enlivened by a stately wit – as in the manner in which the heavens both answer and in a sense condemn Hieronimo's impiety. In such drama – closer to the universalizing ambitions of neo-classical tragedy than later plays of the age – stress on the individual, and on the individual nature of a person's suffering or distraction, would be out of place. *The Spanish Tragedy* offered a model of serious drama for Shakespeare's age where, by means of an essentially emblematic manner of construction and dramatization, the moral, political and even perhaps theological predicament of one such as Hieronimo may be fully disclosed *sub specie aeternitatis*. In such circumstances, mimesis of 'troubled speech', in the manner of Marlowe or Shakespeare, would be inimical to the dramatist's purposes.

These observations about the representation of such

heightened states in the drama of Shakespeare's age are no more than a preliminary to what should be a more extended argument about their underlying assumption. That assumption may at least be stated fairly simply. Kyd's play, far from representing something primitive or underdeveloped – that is to say, the drama waiting for a Marlowe or a Shakespeare to unlock its unrealized potential – is a splendidly sonorous and confident example of a type of drama which practitioners of the craft of tragedy chose not to pursue in the years after the play's first performance. Why that should have been so must remain a matter of conjecture. Perhaps it had something to do with national temperament, preferring the romanticism of a Shakespeare to the neo-classical poise of Kyd. Jonson certainly found that to be true in his two idiosyncratic attempts to write what he regarded as responsible tragedies. It was left to the French to bring that sort of drama to a triumphant culmination.