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See table of contents

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Article abstract

This article reads Thomas Kyd's The Spanish Tragedy within the context of the popular practice of the Prayer Book Communion service contemporary with the play's performances in Elizabethan playhouses. It stresses the continuities between Kyd's theatrical appropriation of the Eucharist and a popular conception of the Communion service that emphasizes its role in establishing and affirming public reconciliation, neighbourly concord, and parochial unity. Through an allusion to the Eucharist in Hieronimo's handkerchief, The Spanish Tragedy deploys the Communion's penitential, soteriological, and communitarian associations to serve its uniquely theatrical ends. The play's metatheatrical thematization of representational modalities allows the audience to collectively confront their own sinful desire and then witness their pardon from punishment for that desire at the expense of the onstage representational substitutes.

Prayer Book Communion and *The Spanish Tragedy**

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This article reads Thomas Kyd's The Spanish Tragedy *within the context of the popular practice of the Prayer Book Communion service contemporary with the play's performances in Elizabethan playhouses. It stresses the continuities between Kyd's theatrical appropriation of the Eucharist and a popular conception of the Communion service that emphasizes its role in establishing and affirming public reconciliation, neighbourly concord, and parochial unity. Through an allusion to the Eucharist in Hieronimo's handkerchief,* The Spanish Tragedy *deploys the Communion's penitential, soteriological, and communitarian associations to serve its uniquely theatrical ends. The play's metatheatrical thematization of representational modalities allows the audience to collectively confront their own sinful desire and then witness their pardon from punishment for that desire at the expense of the onstage representational substitutes.*

Cet article propose de lire La Tragédie espagnole *à la lumière de la pratique populaire du service de la communion du Livre de la prière commune, une pratique qui était contemporaine des représentations de la pièce dans les théâtres élisabéthains. Il souligne les continuités entre l'appropriation théâtrale de l'eucharistie par Kyd et une conception populaire du service de la communion mettant l'accent sur son rôle dans la mise en place et le renforcement de la réconciliation publique, de la bonne entente entre voisins et de l'unité au sein de la paroisse. En faisant allusion à l'eucharistie par le truchement du mouchoir de Hieronimo,* La Tragédie espagnole *convoque les références pénitentiaires, sotériologiques et communautaires qui étaient communément associées à la communion, pour servir ses fins spécifiquement théâtrales. La réflexion métathéâtrale portant sur les modalités de la représentation qui s'esquisse à travers cette pièce permet aux spectateurs de se confronter collectivement à leurs propres désirs coupables, puis de d'assister à leur absolution, aux dépens des personnages qui les représentent sur scène.*

I

The task of this article is to situate the Eucharistic allusions in Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* (1592)[1] within the context of the popular religious

* I am very pleased to thank my anonymous readers for their helpful feedback. I would also like to thank Gary Kuchar, who offered crucial insight on an early draft. My biggest thanks go to Erin Kelly, who offered incisive and generous support through several stages of this article's development. Errors or misjudgements are mine alone. This article was made possible thanks to funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

1. This is the inferred publication date of the first quarto (see the introduction to Calvo and Tronch's edition of the play, 85–86). Scholars' estimates for the date of composition and first performance range

experience of Kyd's London audience. This aim redirects the critical focus of the play's sacramental themes away from both its medieval liturgical inheritances and its engagements with reformed sacramental theology. Instead, I emphasize the popular practice of the Prayer Book Communion service contemporary with the play's performances in Elizabethan playhouses. London playhouse audiences would primarily recognize and respond to this felt and lived Eucharist of local parish Communion services rather than that of reforming divines or pre-reformed cultural memory. I argue that the play's Eucharistic program is best understood in the context of a popular Eucharistic practice emphasizing the promotion of parochial unity and neighbourly concord, a practice that is reducible to neither Prayer Book conformism nor nostalgia for pre-reformed liturgy.[2]

Considering *The Spanish Tragedy*'s sacramental and metatheatrical concerns in light of this popular practice of late-Elizabethan Communion leads me to conclude, moreover, that Kyd translates this communitarian, sociality-based conception of the Eucharist to *The Spanish Tragedy*, which alludes to the Eucharist at the very moment of its theatrical climax, as a vision of what theatre as public event could be: an occasion for communion and reconciliation between fellows, which, at its zenith, is also the mutual participation in God. Just as the reformed communicants are an audience for the very spectacle in which they participate, so I understand *The Spanish Tragedy* in terms of a theatrical effect that is not limited to the stage in itself but brings the audience to the stage and the stage to the audience in the mutual participation of the theatrical-sacramental event.[3] This event involves a thematization of the distinction between stage and audience that allows the audience to see themselves mirrored in the sinful onstage characters but then spared from the punishment that those characters must consequently endure.

This approach to the theatrical-sacramental effect of the drama also clarifies the interpretive impasse concerning the play's presentation of the ethics of Hieronimo's revenge. On one hand, a Christian framework forces us

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throughout the 1580s, and, crucially, no consensus has emerged on whether the play predates or postdates the 1588 Spanish Armada.

2. See especially Maltby, *Prayer Book and People*, and the discussion in section II below.

3. This conception of Kyd's dramatic vision builds on C. L. Barber's brilliant reading of *The Spanish Tragedy*'s "Christian shaping of an alternative theatrical mythopoeic and ritual creation" (Barber, *Creating Elizabethan Tragedy*, 154).

as audience members to confront our own sinfulness in our desire for revenge at the expense of patience, forgiveness, reconciliation, and faith in God's own righteous judgement, just as Hieronimo wrongfully claims for himself the agency that should be left to God. His death at the play's conclusion is, in this light, a just punishment. On the other hand, we learn in the epilogue of Hieronimo's experience of an afterlife with "sweet pleasures" and "eternal days" (4.5.24)[4] that seems to reward him for his action. Moreover, he is repeatedly figured as an embodiment of true divine agency. The "wrath" of Romans 12:19 (quoted in Hieronimo's *vindicta mihi* [vengeance is mine] speech) through which God's vengeance will be expressed is the eschatological "day of wrath" accompanying the "declaration of the just judgement of God" (Romans 2:5). The agent of this judgement is the faithful rider of Revelation 19:13: "he was clothed with a garment dipped in blood, and his name is called, The Word of God."[5] Hieronimo bears both this Name of God (from *hieron onoma*, "holy name") and the garment "dipped" (4.4.123) in blood as the handkerchief on which he vows revenge. Christ's triumph over the beast, the kings of the earth, and the false prophets is mirrored by Hieronimo's sworn revenge against the "savage monster" responsible for his son's death—a revenge that will also entail the destruction of the worldly rulers and false prophets of Iberian-Catholic empire.[6] Hieronimo's discovery of Horatio's body and his vow upon the handkerchief thus begin the eschatological sequence that culminates in what Hieronimo promises will be the unveiling depiction of "the fall of Babylon," with Hieronimo himself as the agent of divine vengeance-justice (4.1.189). Rather than a usurpation of divine justice, Hieronimo's revenge can thus be seen as a genuine expression of God's agency, and this is why he escapes punishment.

How, then, do we reconcile these two readings? Is Hieronimo a godless usurper of divine authority or a genuine representation of the agent of divine justice? By considering the play in terms of the theatrical effect it confers on its audience, my interpretation reads *The Spanish Tragedy* as didactically condemning Hieronimo's revenge without ignoring the problem posed by Hieronimo's afterlife. The path to salvation through penance and love that Hieronimo approaches but fails to apprehend is achieved in us *through him*.

4. Quotes from *The Spanish Tragedy* are from the 2013 Calvo and Tronch edition.

5. Biblical quotations are from the Geneva translation. I have modernized the spelling.

6. For the connection between *The Spanish Tragedy* and Revelation, including the significance of Hieronimo as the bearer of the sacred name, see Ardolino, *Apocalypse and Armada*, especially ch. 4.

He is figured as a divine agent not because he is, within the world of the play, an expression of divine power, but because he effects in us, in the dynamic between stage and audience, an experience of salvation. This salvation is not the true deliverance from sin and eventual resurrection but a theatrical image of that deliverance, much like how the Communion can be experienced as the promise of salvation. By having the onstage audience members cheer at the deaths of their own family, the play-within-the-play exposes the perversity of revengeful desire. The tragic finale is caused by the same lust for revenge that propels the offstage audience's engagement with the drama. The onstage audience exposes the offstage audience's sinfulness by mirroring this mode of engagement. But the offstage audience, because of the representational distance that separates it from the drama, is spared from the same punishment. The ecstasy of this theatrical salvation is then enhanced when Hieronimo—master dramaturgist and fulfiller of the audience's revengeful desire—is revealed to be rewarded in the afterlife. By being punished along with the rest of the blood-lusting cast, Hieronimo endures the punishment from which we, the equally blood-lusting offstage audience of the revenge tragedy, are spared. Although the classical setting keeps this fundamentally Christian resonance from violating the prohibitions of explicitly religious content in the professional theatres,[7] the knowledge of Hieronimo's eternal bliss ("sweet pleasures" and "eternal days") seals the redemptive effect of this theatrical salvation. It is with an eye to this theatrical effect that I argue the play's Eucharistic allusions should be understood.

After Hieronimo discovers his dead son hanged and stabbed in the family's "sacred bower" (2.4.27), he takes from his son's body a bloodied handkerchief and displays it to his wife Isabella as a token of his vow for revenge: "Seest thou this handkerchief besmeared with blood? / It shall not from me till I take revenge" (2.5.50–51). The explicit parallels to the crucifixion in Horatio's murder associate this symbol—which Hieronimo later tells us he "dipped" in the "bleeding wounds" of his son's body upon making the discovery (4.4.122–23)—with the Host of the Eucharist. This association is underscored in Hieronimo's final revelation after the *Soliman and Perseda* production,[8]

7. For a summary of these prohibitions, see Dutton, "Censorship."

8. I follow the established convention of referring to the play staged in the final act of *The Spanish Tragedy* as *Soliman and Perseda*, which is not to be confused with the anonymous 1592 *Tragedye of*

when he entreats his audience to "behold this bloody handkerchief" that he has held in his "bloody heart / Soliciting remembrance of my vow" (4.4.121–26). In this latter moment, the blood-dipped handkerchief serves as the sign of remembrance for the son's death and Hieronimo's vow for vengeance. By that point in the play, after the staged killing, the source of Hieronimo's grief has been made universal among the onstage audience. Like Hieronimo, Castile and the Viceroy have just lost their sons, and the childless King, with Lorenzo as his heir to the throne, has lost a figurative son. The handkerchief is thus made the Eucharistic token of the shared loss of the son in the very moment that such a loss's universality is unveiled.

The relatively limited critical conversation surrounding the influence of Eucharistic theology and liturgy on Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* recapitulates a broader critical debate concerning the Reformation's relation to Renaissance drama. In redirecting this conversation by focusing on the popular practice of reformed Communion, my argument about this seminal play in the history of English Renaissance drama thus also has a stake in our understanding of how post-Reformation religious attitudes and practices affected English playgoing culture. A chapter in Huston Diehl's influential *Staging Reform, Reforming the Stage* offers the Eucharistic significances in *The Spanish Tragedy* as an example of the book's broader thesis that the Reformation had a positive, as opposed to reactive, influence on the theatrical culture that flourished under Elizabeth and James—that of Marlowe, Shakespeare, Jonson, and Webster. Diehl argues that *The Spanish Tragedy*'s metatheatrical conclusion, in staging a hyper-literalized onstage representation that confuses and bewilders this naive onstage audience, "disrupts the devotional gaze" of the offstage audience. This disruption in turn encourages in the offstage audience a recognition of the representational status of the onstage signs, just as reformers sought to disrupt the idolatrous gaze of communicants in order to encourage a conscious, reflective, and participatory mode of receiving the signs of the Eucharist. This new mode of seeing, according to Diehl, counters the illusory power of spectacle by emphasizing the figurative nature of the signs involved: "By foregrounding the very issues that lie at the heart of the eucharistic controversy, *The Spanish Tragedy* calls attention to a dangerous and fraudulent kind of theatricality—a

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Solyman and Perseda. For a discussion of this play's relation to *The Spanish Tragedy*, see Erne, *Beyond The Spanish Tragedy*, ch. 7.

'Catholic' theatricality—in order to demystify and discredit it."[9] The play teaches the offstage audience, like the prepared communicants, to recognize that the onstage signs do not have the Real Presence of the things signified but are to be understood instead as visual signs whose spiritual counterparts the spectators discern actively and internally. *The Spanish Tragedy*, according to Diehl, is therefore a case where reformed theologies are redeployed on the commercial stage in order not to fill a demand for pre-reformed modes of sacramental spectacle but to achieve a theatrical-sacramental effect "powerful enough to awaken memory, trouble the conscience, and perhaps even reform the soul."[10]

Through a reading of *The Spanish Tragedy*'s Eucharistic resonances, Diehl thus challenges the thesis, associated with Stephen Greenblatt and Louis Adrian Montrose, that the commercial theatres preserve and fill a demand for the magic of spectacle excised from ecclesiastical venues with the Reformation.[11]

9. Diehl, *Staging Reform*, 119.

10. Diehl, *Staging Reform*, 109.

11. Montrose's consideration of the Eucharist, and religion more generally, in relation to drama does not extend beyond the politics of legitimation or mystification and subversion: "In a society in which the dominant social institutions and cultural practices were predicated upon an ideology of unchanging order and absolute obedience, an emergent commercial entertainment that was still imbued with the heritage of suppressed popular and religious traditions could address vital collective needs and interests that those dominant institutions and practices had sought to appropriate or to suppress, or had merely ignored" (Montrose, *Purpose of Playing*, 37). For a trenchant corrective to Greenblatt's treatment of the Eucharistic controversy in relation to Shakespeare, see Beckwith's "Stephen Greenblatt's *Hamlet* and the Forms of Oblivion," which in itself is particularly pertinent to my own argument. Beckwith points out that Greenblatt overstates the English Reformation's break from its medieval predecessors (for example, in constructing the Prayer Book Eucharist as a Zwinglian, memorialist one) and thus is forced to see Shakespeare's medieval inheritances as ghosts of their pre-reformed predecessors. As Beckwith writes, "If Greenblatt has failed to see the complexities of the medieval Eucharist in its communal, jurisdictional, and ecclesiological dimensions, in its absence as much as its presences, thus underestimating the continuities as well as the discontinuities of medieval and early modern theater, he has also not seen the complexity of the Reformation's engagement with ritual forms" (Beckwith, "Stephen Greenblatt's *Hamlet*," 272). For approaches to early modern drama adjacent to Diehl's, see Knapp, *Shakespeare's Tribe*; White, *Theatre and Reformation*. Advancing perhaps the strongest case among these for reform's positive influence on commercial theatre, Knapp argues that reformed English religious thought and practice "shaped the drama at a fundamental level, in helping to determine the conceptualization of the player and the playwright as professions, and of the theater as an institution" (Knapp, *Shakespeare's Tribe*, 9). He emphasizes the communitarian influence of reformed sacrament on theatre (see especially ch. 4) but

In response to Diehl, Andrew Sofer proceeds from the Greenblatt–Montrose thesis to argue that the theological controversies surrounding Real Presence in the Eucharist are not of primary concern to Kyd and his Elizabethan playgoers, and that, rather, the echoes of religious spectacle in *The Spanish Tragedy* are best understood as translations of medieval liturgical spectacle. *The Spanish Tragedy*, he argues, appropriates symbolic and spectacular power of pre-reformed worship "on behalf of a newly invigorated professional theater freed from the orderly bureaucratic surveillance of a clerical hierarchy."[12]

Pointing to the cloth signifying Christ's resurrection as performed in the *Visitatio sepulchri* (visit to the sepulchre) of the medieval Easter liturgical drama, as well as Christ's blood-stained shroud and holy "Veronica cloth" of the Corpus Christi cycles, Sofer suggests that the bloodied handkerchief of *The Spanish Tragedy* would resonate with the post-Reformation dramatic audience's longing for and memory of these bloodied dramatic cloths endowed with the sacred and magical power of Christ's Presence. Sofer argues that these medieval liturgical significances culminate in an explicit evocation of the Catholic Mass,[13] and he even goes so far as to suggest that the actor playing Hieronimo might have elevated the handkerchief facing the onstage audience in the gallery "with his back to the playhouse audience—just like a Catholic priest officiating at mass."[14]

As persuasive and illuminating as this argument is for the influence of the use of sacred cloths in medieval drama on *The Spanish Tragedy*, the main details Sofer identifies for reading Hieronimo's unveiling scene as a reference specifically to Catholic Mass (other than the speculative conjecture about the stage direction) could be better interpreted for their resonances with reformed liturgical practices and discourses. Hieronimo himself does not present the cloth as having any magical significance but as "soliciting remembrance of my vow" (4.4.126). If this moment evokes the Eucharist, the phrasing is closer to the Elizabethan Prayer Book Communion's "continue a perpetual memory of

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pays less attention to the popular experience and attitudes towards Prayer Book liturgy that, as would seem to follow from his thesis, early modern playwrights sought to translate to the stage.

12. Sofer, "Absorbing Interests," 138. For a reading of *The Spanish Tragedy* with a related historical thesis but focusing on funerary practices rather than the Eucharist, see Rist, *Revenge Tragedy*, 27–44.

13. Sofer, "Absorbing Interests," 129.

14. Sofer, "Absorbing Interests," 145.

that his precious death,"[15] a distinctly reformed departure from the Sarum Rite, than to the corresponding moment in the Mass. Even though the cloth, unlike the host, really does bear the real presence of his son's blood, it is its symbolic significance that remains primary. Furthermore, Hieronimo's exposition of the spectacle is not in the diverse foreign languages of the foregoing spectacle or the Latin of Mass. Rather, he explicitly notes as he moves into the exposition, "here break we off our sundry languages, / And thus conclude *I in our vulgar tongue*" (4.4.74, my emphasis). The explicit shift to vernacular again suggests a closer alignment with the reformed service's balance of ocular spectacle and comprehensible vernacular exposition than to the Latin Mass. The medieval liturgical significances that Sofer helpfully identifies can therefore be understood to be recast with the reformed attention to aural exposition and understanding as opposed to, or at least in balance with, non-verbal spectacle.

Sofer's criticism of Diehl centres on the latter's emphasis on sacramental theology at the expense of the performance of the sacrament itself. To suppose that the play encourages the audience's self-reflection on the ontological status of the onstage signifiers, Sofer argues, is to over-intellectualize and thus underestimate the visceral force of violent spectacle that brings people to the theatre to see a revenge tragedy in the first place: "The spectator is far more likely to be swept up in the deadly action of the masque than to be busy deconstructing its theatricality."[16] The visceral theatricality of this spectacle is, according to Sofer, a specifically Catholic inheritance. Although this response to Diehl may underestimate the extent to which London parishioners would have internalized and responded to Eucharistic controversies, I agree with Sofer insofar as the semiotics of the Eucharist were only one part of how a popular audience would experience and associate with the Communion service, and not necessarily even the primary, immediate part. What is of at least equal importance in the context of *The Spanish Tragedy*, I argue, is the *communion* of Communion—the Eucharist not as an intellectual abstraction but as a public event to be performed and experienced, ultimately to establish or affirm unity and concord among the participating community. Such an approach to the Eucharist is not excluded to medieval religious practice but finds its strongest

15. *Book of Common Prayer*, 137. I have modernized the spelling. For the significance of these words in the reformed Communion vis-à-vis its pre-reformed predecessor, see Cummings's note in *Book of Common Prayer*, 731n137.

16. Sofer, "Absorbing Interests," 146.

expression in the Elizabethan Prayer Book liturgy contemporary with *The Spanish Tragedy*'s first performances.

II

The reformed Communion of the Elizabethan *Book of Common Prayer* (1559)[17] offered a discourse and practice of social communion, recognition, reciprocity, and charity. The emphasis on the ceremony as a "supper" shifts the spectacular sense of the Mass to the participatory sociality of a meal among fellows. In the first exhortation of the Communion, the priest speaks of the Lord's Supper as a domestic and hospitable meal: "Ye know how grievous and unkind a thing it is, when a man hath prepared a rich feast: decked his table with all kind of provision, so that there lacketh nothing but the guests to sit down."[18] Those who neglect to attend are rebuked as much as those who "stand by as gazers and lookers of them that do Communicate, and be no partakers of the same."[19] The distance that separates the gazer from the elevated Host in the Mass contrasts sharply with the closeness of a table shared between brothers and God: "when you depart, I beseech you ponder with yourselves, from whom ye depart: ye depart from the Lord's Table: ye depart from your brethren, and from the banquet of most heavenly food."[20] The many participants are united into the one "mystical body, which is the blessed company of all faithful people," and thus the participants, united under the common "we," commune with God as reciprocal subject and object of the liturgy, "that we may evermore dwell in him, and he in us."[21]

17. For an overview of the important revisions to *The Book of Common Prayer* from its original 1549 edition to the 1559 edition that endured throughout Elizabeth's reign, see the introduction to Cummings's 2011 edition, xxv–xli. For studies dedicated to *The Book of Common Prayer* and its influence on post-Reformation English literature, see Targoff, *Common Prayer*; Rosendale, *Liturgy and Literature*.

18. *Book of Common Prayer*, 130.

19. *Book of Common Prayer*, 131. Echoing the Prayer Book service, the "Homily on the Worthy Receiving of the Sacrament" describes the sacrament as "where every one of us must be guests, and not gazers, eaters and not lookers" (*Elizabethan Homilies*, 2:15.30–31). I have modernized the spelling.

20. *Book of Common Prayer*, 131.

21. *Book of Common Prayer*, 136. See also the "Homily on Common Prayer and Sacraments": "for we are not strangers one to another, but we are the citizens of the Saints, and of the household of GOD, yea, and members of one body" (*Elizabethan Homilies*, 2:9.191–93). I have modernized the spelling.

Much of what can be discerned of the popular attitudes and experiences of Communion suggests that the event would be understood, at least in its ideal form, in terms of parochial unity and neighbourly sociality.[22] As Arnold Hunt suggests, at the centre of the popular attitude towards the Eucharist is an emphasis on Communion as "an instrument of reconciliation."[23] This sociality-centred approach to the Eucharist appears to represent a unique and popular post-Reformation practice that "cannot simply be attributed to the persistence of Catholicism."[24]

In practice, this approach to the Eucharist finds expression especially in the adherence to the requirement that communicants be in a state of goodwill and charity towards their fellows before participating in Communion. As required by the 1559 Prayer Book, parishioners were not to receive Communion until all animosity between any members of the parish "be reconciled" and any wrongs "recompensed" with the wronged party "content to forgive from the bottom of his heart."[25] Hunt cites several reports indicating the sincere adherence to this requirement among the laity, even to the extent that non-participation was a formal recognition of a dispute between parishioners and that "on the settlement of a quarrel, the receiving of the sacrament could be made the occasion for a public act of reconciliation."[26] The preparedness of each individual communicant also guarantees the fellowship among the congregation. The mere appearance of a multitude of parishioners in the annual Easter Communion is thus itself an index of neighbourly concord within a faithful Eucharistic community. The sign of this concord ascends to the congregation's participation in a vision of the absolute "unitie of the holy ghoste."[27] While the realization of this vision is

22. For evidence suggesting a high attendance rate at Communion in London parishes, see Boulton, "Limits of Formal Religion." For discussions of popular attitudes towards the service and evidence of general popular enthusiasm, see Maltby, "Prayer Book and Parish Church," 207–12; *Prayer Book and People*, 40–52; Hunt, "Lord's Supper," 60–75.

23. Hunt, "Lord's Supper," 47.

24. Hunt, "Lord's Supper," 47. See also Maltby, "Prayer Book and Parish Church," 212: "In the Prayer Book, *every* celebration of the Eucharist was also, explicitly, *communion* on the part of the people—and for the laity *that* was the real dramatic disjunction from the piety and theology of the Latin Mass" (emphasis in original).

25. *Book of Common Prayer*, 124.

26. Hunt, "Lord's Supper," 49

27. *Book of Common Prayer*, 138.

compromised by the worldly factors impressed upon the performers, just as the hierarchal seating of the amphitheatres compromises its theatrical vision of unity,[28] it is the vision of the event nonetheless.[29] Indeed, if the persistence of coercion, social precedence, and hierarchy suggest a service of social differentiation rather than integration, it is still this vision articulated in the service itself that gives rise to what David Aers and Sarah Beckwith call the "eucharistic longings" and "dreams of reconciliation" that are translated to the commercial stage.[30]

It is this sociality-based conception of the popular Elizabethan conception of Communion that I argue is the primary import of the Eucharistic allusions in *The Spanish Tragedy*. Like the Communion service, performance in the commercial theatre is an occasion of public congregation—an occasion for fellow community members to appear before one another and direct their shared attention to an onstage vision in which they themselves are, in a certain sense, participants.[31] This function of theatre is explicitly thematized in *The Spanish Tragedy* by the excited anticipation surrounding the reconciliatory

28. See Gurr, *Playgoing*, 21–22: "The amphitheatre auditoria reproduced quite precisely the Elizabethan social hierarchy, from the lowest in the yard below to the lords' rooms on the stage balcony above the actors, placed at the middle level between the stage as earth and the stage cover as the heavens." This hierarchy is determined by the tiered pricing scheme governing where playgoers sat in the theatre (Gurr, *Playgoing*, 17).

29. For the qualified "levelling" effect of Prayer Book liturgy, see also Maltby, *Prayer Book and People*, 30.

30. Aers and Beckwith, "Eucharist," 165.

31. On dramatic and sacramental participation, see Dawson, who argues that ideas of participatory representation informing post-Reformation English Eucharistic discourses translate to a liturgical, participatory conception of theatre: "The theatre […], through the physical presence of the body on stage, even through the institutional arrangements that make it culturally viable, brings together stage and world, actor and spectator, in an ongoing act of theatrical, secularized, negotiated belief" (Dawson, "Performance and Participation," 26–27). Dawson aligns this conception of theatre with Richard Hooker's receptionist Eucharistic theology. In both, the tension between theatrical-sacramental presence (of the represented character or of Christ) and the material presence (of the actor's body or the Eucharistic elements) is resolved by participation, a dynamic negotiation between audience and actor, spectator and spectacle. As we have already seen Diehl argue in *Staging Reform*, the metatheatricality of Renaissance drama draws attention to the representational, illusory status of the onstage scene. Metatheatricality thus thematizes the audience's participation in the imaginative process by which this scene is transfigured. The actor and crudely material stage are transformed into characters and scenes they are not by an "exchange" that "can best be construed as a kind of socially efficacious ritual enabled by the act of participation" (Dawson, "Performance and Participation," 27). My reading of *The Spanish*

wedding, which is the occasion of the *Soliman and Perseda* performance. But even if *The Spanish Tragedy* commands such shared attention, it may still seem surprising to ultimately suggest that an onstage vision of murder, suicide, self-mutilation, and afterlife torture lead to a unified experience of communal love and charity. That this violence thwarts an occasion of sacramental unity through marriage might suggest, rather, a parody of the possibility of any such union. The same would seem to apply with the allusions to the Eucharist. Rather than unification in the mystical body, the coinciding of onstage violence and Eucharistic overtones might suggest instead "a deliberate parody of the traditional climax of the Mass" that reinforces the play's political and anti-Spanish concerns.[32] As I argue, however, if we consider the sacramental dimension of the performance—that is, the effect brought about not by the representation itself but by the theatrical event dynamically involving both audience and stage—then the allusions to the Eucharist, rather than as parody, may instead be understood as contributing towards effecting the local and cosmic unity envisioned in the Prayer Book Communion.[33]

The characters within *The Spanish Tragedy* recognize this potential of the communal experience of theatrical production to effect reconciliation, love, and unification. The occasion for the performance of the play-within-the-play is a wedding that intends to strengthen the peace and new alliance of Spain and Portugal (2.3.10), just as it intends to resolve the web of interpersonal quarrels (between Bel-Imperia and Balthazar, Portuguese Viceroy and Spanish King, and Lorenzo and Hieronimo). As Peter B. Murray writes in his commentary on the scene in which the plans for the wedding are formed, the King "and the Viceroy will unite kingdoms, crowns, flesh, and all in the marriage of Bel-Imperia to Balthazar."[34] The prospect of the marriage carries with it a sense of

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Tragedy firmly positions the play within the theatrical tradition in its relation to the Reformation that Dawson identifies.

32. Sofer, "Absorbing Interest," 145.

33. For an alternative reading of *The Spanish Tragedy* as an imaginary projection of unity or wholeness in response to the Reformation's crisis of authority and certainty, see Shortslef, "Undemanding Dead." When Shortslef, echoing Lee Edelman, writes that *The Spanish Tragedy* represents an attempt to address the "traumatic" destabilization of authority by "projecting into the past and future the imaginary form of a whole and unbroken community" (Shortslef, "Undemanding Dead," 473), this vision of transtemporal unity is close to the vision of unity I argue the play seeks sacramentally.

34. Murray, *Thomas Kyd*, 130.

reconciliation that verges on the sacred, most of all for the Viceroy, for whom the wedding represents not only the peace between the two kingdoms but also the apparent rebirth of his son, formerly believed to have been killed in battle. Responding to the Spanish King's diplomatic request for a consent to the wedding, the Viceroy renounces the diplomatic affairs of the worldly city and instead states his intention to "solemnize" the wedding (3.14.27) and then "live a solitary life / In ceaseless prayers, / To think how strangely heaven hath thee [Balthazar] preserved" (32–34). The theatrical performance is thus wrapped up in significances of sacramental unifications that include the union of flesh and kingdoms in marriage and the solemnization of a resurrected son.

The Spanish and Portuguese courts anticipate the wedding as an occasion for sacramental unity between and among individuals, families, and kingdoms. This anticipation ironically points to a false comic conclusion in *The Spanish Tragedy*. The reconciliations of the Viceroy with his son and with the King anticipate the exchange between Castile and his son Lorenzo that follows, in which the sacramental modes of unification overlap with the dramatic. When the two are left alone on stage, Castile requests to speak with Lorenzo. His aim is to ensure both the reconciliation of Lorenzo with Hieronimo and the smooth wedding of his daughter. To do this, he first asks Lorenzo to take charge of the arrangements for the play:

> Castile: Nay, stay, Lorenzo, let me talk with you.
> Seest thou this entertainment of these kings?
> Lorenzo: I do my, my lord, and joy to see the same. (3.14.40–42)

The phrasing of Castile's question is somewhat ambiguous. He may simply be asking his son to confirm his awareness of the upcoming wedding. This would seem to be in line with the catechizing that follows, wherein Castile condescendingly asks his son more obvious questions to affirm Lorenzo's loyalty to his sister: "knowest thou why this meeting is? […] She is thy sister? […] Thou wouldst be loath that any fault of thine should intercept her in her happiness[?]" (43–50).[35] I consider it more plausible, however, to read

35. The question mark does not appear at the end of Castile's third sentence in any of the quarto editions and is accordingly excluded from the Calvo and Tronch edition, but I prefer Maus's inclusion of the question mark because Castile's sentence and Lorenzo's answer parallels the preceding question–answer

"see" in the sense of "to take care something happens,"[36] that is, "to see to it." In this reading, Castile requests that Lorenzo "prepare" the "entertainments" for the upcoming event. He is assigning Lorenzo the task of putting on the play. In addition to explaining why Lorenzo (accompanied by Balthazar) comes to be the one to contact Hieronimo about putting on a play (4.1.56–60), this reading suits Castile's ambition to reconcile his son and Hieronimo. Knowing that Hieronimo, as we have already seen from the entertainment of the ambassador, will be the natural person for Lorenzo to contact in arranging the entertainment, Castile assigns the task to Lorenzo with the hopes that the stage can be a site of reconciliation through collaboration. In any case, to those in the Spanish court who have heard rumours or have their own suspicions after witnessing Hieronimo's knife-digging performance before Lorenzo and the King earlier in act 3, Hieronimo and Lorenzo's collaboration on the play appears as a sign of reconciliation between them. Beyond its function within the grand union of the wedding, the preparation and performance of the play thus has an inherent reconciliatory function.

The play-within-the-play is thus the focal point of sacramental unity falsely anticipated by Castile, Lorenzo, Balthazar, the Viceroy, and the King. For Hieronimo, Bel-Imperia, the ghost of Andrea, as well as us, the offstage audience watching what we know to be a Spanish *tragedy*, the play-within-the-play promises the exact opposite of this unity. This tension between tragic and comic anticipation is voiced by Balthazar when he hears of Hieronimo's play idea—"What, would you have us play a tragedy? […] methinks a comedy were better" (4.1.149). The major figures of the Spanish court anticipate in the drama a comic theatrical-sacramental communion that is ultimately denied to them. The onstage entertainment that was supposed to seal the effect of comic unity turns out to be quite the opposite.

III

The sacramental communion denied to the onstage audience is, however, achieved in the theatrical-sacramental event that occurs in the London playhouse. The difference, of course, is that *Soliman and Perseda* is a literalized

exchange. In any case, the catechizing rhetoric of the exchange blurs the boundary between question and statement.

36. *OED*, s.v. "see," v. 20a. Accessed 7 July 2021.

representation, whose onstage signs are denied their representational status. This representational status allows the offstage audience the distance, though not removal, from the onstage action that permits a process of repentance and communion akin to that envisioned in the Eucharist: to undergo as a collective audience the expiation of the bloodlust fantasies of the flesh and thus confront sinfulness while simultaneously being spared from its punishment. Both the reformed Communion and *The Spanish Tragedy* offer representational sacrificial substitutions—Christ's body and the characters killed onstage—that allow the audience-participants to confront their own sins of the flesh and experience salvation from those sins at the expense of the representational substitute. While the represented salvation in Communion is only a sign of hope for ultimate salvation, the audience of *The Spanish Tragedy* witness the image of their own painful judgement from which they are spared in an experience of salvation from a mirror image of onstage slaughter.

This Pauline discourse involving the recognition of the flesh's incapacity to fulfill the law is made explicit in *The Spanish Tragedy* with Hieronimo's *vindicta mihi*—"vengeance is mine"—speech, quoting Romans 12:19:

> *Vindicta mihi.*
> Ay, heaven will be revenged on every ill,
> Nor will they suffer murder unrepaid.
> Then stay, Hieronimo, attend their will,
> For mortal men may not appoint their time.
> Per scelus semper tutum est sceleribus iter.
> Strike, and strike home, where wrong is offered thee,
> For evils unto ills conductors be,
> And death's the worst of resolution. (3.13.1–9)

The verse from Romans ("Avenge not yourselves but give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine: I will repay, saith the Lord"), the paraphrase of which Hieronimo completes in the second line, instructs a patience that leaves revenging action to God, while the line from Seneca's *Agamemnon*, "Per scelus semper tutum est sceleribus iter" (The way through crime is always secured by further crimes), whatever its appropriate interpretation in the original source, inspires Hieronimo to his role as a revenger. The tension expressed in this soliloquy ("stay […] strike") is thus between Christian patience and the

personal agency of the Senecan revenger that Hieronimo takes as his dramatic model (in this case, Clytemnestra).

Despite this tension, the juxtaposition of the Pauline text and Senecan revenge tragedy reveals a striking continuity.[37] The impetus of the revenge tragedy is the existing legal institutions' incapacity to achieve justice in the given scenario. The revengers must take matters into their own hands. Audience members of *The Spanish Tragedy* are forced to confront the insufficiency of the law to achieve justice or salvation in the worldly life of the flesh. We come to sympathize with Hieronimo both because he is generally more respectable than his noble-ranking opponents and because the play repeatedly stresses that the legal-institutional outlets available to him are genuinely insufficient for realizing justice in his case. The deferral of justice in the underworld sets the scene for this insufficiency of the law that continues both with the Portuguese Viceroy's narrow avoiding of what would be an unjust execution of Alexandro and Hieronimo's inability to have justice for Horatio's death. When Hieronimo in the presence of the king cries, "Justice! Oh, justice! Oh, my son, my son, / My son" (3.12.564), Lorenzo, blocking him from approaching the King to plead his case,[38] tries to dismiss him and thus demonstrates how the worldly hierarchy of the Spanish court is ultimately incompatible with the achievement of justice. It is only after this scene that Hieronimo realizes his striving for justice to be futile, vows to "surrender up [his] marshalship" (3.14.75), and adopts for himself the role of revenger-Christ in the *vindicta mihi* speech of the following scene. The moment after he declares vengeance for himself, he tears up the legal bonds of the four plaintiffs and thus effects, as does Christ according to Romans 10:4, the "end of the Law." We in the audience thus witness the impossibility of justice or salvation under the law and are thus led to will that Hieronimo and Bel-Imperia perform the revenge themselves. As with Paul's letter to the

37. Indeed, although the lines that follow make the Biblical allusion explicit, the only quoted words from Romans, as Frederick S. Boas first noted, could themselves be Senecan. See the note in Calvo and Tronch's edition, 252n1.

38. This stage direction is not given by the text but is based on both the scene itself and the exchange between Castile and Lorenzo two scenes later. Lorenzo speaks directly to Hieronimo while the King, his view blocked by Lorenzo, struggles to recognize him—"who's that? Hieronimo?" (3.12.63)—and when the King questions Hieronimo directly, it is Lorenzo who interjects to answer. Having witnessed this earlier scene, Castile reports the rumour that Lorenzo "keep'st [Hiernomio] back and seeks to cross his suit" (3.14.56) and, when Lorenzo denies this, Castile says, "Myself have seen thee busy to keep back / Him and his supplications from the King" (3.14.77).

Romans, *The Spanish Tragedy* thematizes the limitations of flesh and law that give way to the necessity of a revenger. However, for Paul, this recognition of the problem of law and flesh is only the first step in the process of salvation that is completed not by a personal revenger but by Christ, as in Romans 8:3–4: "For (that [freedom from sin and death] was impossible for the Law, inasmuch as it was weak, because of the flesh) God sending his own son, in similitude of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh, that that righteousness of the Law might be fulfilled in us."

The crucial point I wish to make with this Paul–Seneca intersection is that in juxtaposing the Pauline revenger-Christ with the genre-defining figure of the Senecan revenger, this soliloquy exposes how the latter arises out of an inappropriate response to the penitential recognition of the fleshly condition.[39] Like the Prayer Book Communion, which begins with a recitation of the Ten Commandments and a plea for mercy for their transgression, *The Spanish Tragedy* works in its audience a process of penitential recognition that resolves itself in our salvation, though here not just hoped-for but experienced, from the bloody onstage scene of the finale.

The exposed sinfulness inherent in the audience's very engagement in the tragedy is hinted at in the play's induction, with Andrea departing an infernal underworld to effectively join the theatre audience. Audience members familiar with the conventions of the revenge tragedy pay to see its bloody spectacular conclusion. Like Andrea, we anxiously, sometimes impatiently, await revenge. The classical origin of the play's underworld aside, the fact that we are now among those awaiting afterlife judgement is a reminder of the judgement that awaits us.

This mirroring exposure of the audience's sinfulness in an onstage audience culminates in the metatheatrical finale, when the image of an audience applauding the thrill of tragic catharsis is morphed into unknowing applause for the slaughter of one's own family. Hieronimo's actions, from the vow for revenge to its execution, are an occasion for the audience first to identify with Hieronimo in willing revenge and then to experience salvation when the punishment for the insufficiency of flesh is endured by the onstage substitutes, including Hieronimo. This Christian variation on tragic catharsis is underscored by the play-within-the-play, where we see an image of both the cruel counter-ethics of drama and our response to it: the King cheers to see his own niece and nephew killed—"old marshal, this was bravely done" (4.4.67)—just as we cheer to see

39. For an alternative reading of the play's Pauline themes, see Justice, "Spain, Tragedy."

our neighbours killed as actors on the stage. Whereas the onstage audience is punished for its perverse desire, the distance that separates the onstage representation from the offstage audience allows for a dynamic between the two in which the sensible signs of the drama are perceived by the participants and transformed, along with their desire, into an experience of grace.

This effect echoes the Eucharist not only in its being an occasion for confronting our sins and hoping for salvation but also of experiencing a recognition or communion with our fellows in the theatre, who have undergone this same process of desire and recognition. In the King's applause and later bewilderment, we witness the culmination of the Spanish court's failure to uphold the only means for the flesh to fulfill the law: the love for one's neighbour as oneself and recognition that the one whose death you seek in anticipating the play's revenge is your neighbour, your brother, and yourself. The basis for this fulfillment of the law is the gift of Christ's suffering, whose universality is translated here to the common grief over a lost son. In the moment before the Eucharistic climax of the unveiling, Hieronimo addresses this shared loss to the Portuguese Viceroy and Castile, who have both just witnessed the death of their sons. He first turns to the Portuguese Viceroy:

> Speak, Portuguese, *whose loss resembles mine*.
> If thou canst weep upon thy Balthazar,
> 'Tis like I wailed for my Horatio. (4.4.113–15, my emphasis)

And then to Castile, who likewise partakes in the grief of a lost son: "And you, my Lord, whose reconciled son / Marched in a net and thought himself unseen […] How can you brook our play's catastrophe?" (116–120). Here, "brook" means both to enjoy the onstage performance and figuratively "digest" the realization of its consequences,[40] and it sets up the alimentary dimension of the Eucharistic climax that immediately follows: "And here behold this bloody handkerchief" (121). The King and Viceroy have applauded the performance (we hear nothing from Castile but may assume he responds with similar approval), but the applauded image turns out to be a source of shared personal torment. Even if the ensuing reconciliation and communion is denied, the public performance thus becomes an occasion for the recognition of oneself in the other: "And grieved I, think you, at this spectacle?" (112)

40. *OED*, s.v. "brook," v.1. 1a, 2c. Accessed 7 July 2021.

Hieronimo has already undergone such a recognition, in the image of the "Old Man," Don Bazulto. In act 3, Bazulto comes to Hieronimo, in his role as Knight Marshal, to seek justice for the death of his own murdered son. Hieronimo first sees Bazulto only through his own narcissistic fantasy—first as his son and then as his own image: "thou art the lively image of my grief / Within thy face my sorrows I may see" (3.13.159–60). He thus denies Bazulto's own being and suffering. However, Bazulto's "spirit" of "windy sighs," as the spirit's transcendence of flesh, opens the possibility for a unity of fellowship and the harmonic convergence of many into one—the double unity expressed in the pun on cord–chord:

> Thy muttering lips
> Murmur sad words abruptly broken off
> By force of windy sighs thy spirit breathes
> And all this sorrow riseth for thy son;
> And selfsame sorrow feel I for my son.
> Come in, old man, thou shalt to Isabel.
> Lean on my arm; I see, thou me shalt stay;
> And thou, and I, and she will sing a song,
> Three parts in one, but all of discords framed. (3.13.162–70)

Isabella, Hieronimo, and Bazulto are to be joined into one by means of the mutual recognition of their grief. But ultimately the cord of despair, as an instrument of suicide, overpowers the (cordial) chord of musical harmony and loving communion. Hieronimo slides back into the narcissistic fantasy through which he can conceive of himself as the divine agent of vengeance: "Talk not of cords, but let us now be gone, / For with a cord Horatio was slain" (3.13.171–72). Hieronimo's grief over his son stands in for the Christian grief in the face of the flesh's unworthiness to receive the free gift of the Son's sacrifice. This grief, figured as the allegorized Despair in Hieronimo's poniard-and-rope soliloquy (3.12–24), is only the first part of the path to redemption. Without the faith to receive God's grace, this grief slides into the sin of despair. As with the Red-Cross Knight of *The Faerie Queene* by Edmund Spenser (Kyd's fellow Merchant Taylors' alumnus), Despair must be overcome with the purgation and redemption in the liturgical House of Holiness. If one fails to do so, the theatrical site of sacramental redemption becomes the house of worldly judgement.

Driven by Despair, Hieronimo's hand of judgement falls as hard upon himself in self-slaughter as it does upon his foes. Like the Red-Cross Knight, however, we in the audience undergo both the recognition and purgation of sinful desire and thus may emerge from the theatrical-sacramental house under the cordial seal of faith.

IV

As I have argued, the representational status of the drama itself saves the offstage audience from punishment for the sin they see mirrored on stage, and this salvation promotes a sense of communion and fellowship that explicitly resonates with the parochial unity experienced in the Prayer Book Communion service. This parochial unity also expands outwards to the sense of national unity promoted by the conclusion's depiction of a conquest over Iberian-Catholic empire.[41] Expanding beyond the eschatological and liturgical themes developed so far towards the ineffable limit of the drama, I suggest that this geopolitical dimension also points to an aesthetic apocalypse that transcends both local and national units of belonging. Like the Prayer Book Communion service, which, with its collect for the queen, affirms degrees of unity beyond the local parish to the nation and true church, *The Spanish Tragedy*'s affirmation of social unity also includes that of the national political order. I have suggested that the play forces the audience to confront their condition of sin but that the representational status of the play—the fact that the signs, like the elements of the Eucharist, are explicitly signs—is a condition of the unification achieved by the theatrical-sacramental event. This representational status is the crucial difference between the characters killed onstage and the audience saved offstage. When this difference is not maintained, when the world of the play bleeds into the immanent world in which it is staged, the latter is subsumed in the tragedy.

41. For the most extensive case for the reading that the play endows Hieronimo's revenge "with a historical necessity that raises his personal vengeance to the level of nationalistic retribution," see Ardolino, *Apocalypse and Armada*, especially ch. 8. For an alternative interpretation of the play's geopolitics as more balanced, at moments even "Hispanophilic," see Griffin "New Directions." Ardolino is in accordance with a long tradition of scholars who read the play in the context of the nationalist-apocalyptic rhetoric surrounding the Anglo-Spanish War. For a list of references to these works, see Ardolino, *Apocalypse and Armada*, xn4. For a reading countering this tradition, see Rist, *Revenge Tragedy*, 27–44.

This is why the comic union anticipated in *The Spanish Tragedy* is ultimately thwarted. The world of Spain becomes a tragedy. For an English audience amid the Anglo-Spanish War, the onstage tragedy of Spain is the comic victory of the saved audience.

The local unity effected by the audience-participants' identification with Hieronimo in his plot against the guilty Lorenzo and Balthazar is also paralleled by the association, established early in the play, between Hieronimo and England, which establishes his personal revenge as a national triumph over Iberian-Catholic empire. The masque Hieronimo presents to the Spanish court and Portuguese Ambassador in act 1 presents three knights taking the crowns of three kings, signifying, as Hieronimo explains, historical English conquests over Portugal (for the first two) and over Spain (for the last). Both the Spanish King and Portuguese Ambassador, through some contortion of reasoning, interpret the masque as a reaffirmation of the legitimacy and precedent behind Spanish conquest over Portugal (1.4.140–74). Thus, even before Horatio's murder, the audience is led to identify Hieronimo's theatrical cunning with English duping and subduing of the Iberian Kingdoms.

When Hieronimo associates his vengeance on the Spanish court with the fall of Babylon (4.1.186), Kyd aligns the revenge with the Protestant English underdog's projected victory over Catholic Spain—with the unmarried Bel-Imperia (beautiful power, beautiful empire) standing in for Elizabeth. Hieronimo's revenge thus resonates with reformed tradition associated with Bale and Foxe that interprets the Christian apocalypse as depicting Protestantism's triumph over Catholicism as antichrist, a tradition that gets reinscribed in a national-eschatological context during the Anglo-Spanish War.[42] The Spanish will be undone by their own Catholic superstitions—signified by the onstage audience's miscomprehension of the play in "sundry languages," like an uncomprehending audience of the Latin in the Mass—only to have their defeat unveiled to them in "our vulgar tongue," the tongue of the reformed liturgy and, for the offstage audience, English. After the Babelic "confusion" (4.1.172, 187) of *Soliman and Perseda*, Hieronimo's return to English (in the unveiling of his revenge plot) plays into the national-eschatological vision of English as the redeemed Pentecostal or anti-Babelic unity of language—as with Sir Philip Sidney's suggestion that English outstrips "the Tower of Babylon's curse" in lacking the Babelic confusions of grammatical case, gender, mood, and

42. See Capp, "Political Dimension," 93–99.

tense.[43] The return from multiplicity to unity effected by Hieronimo's unveiling exposition corresponds to the Communion's unity at local and national levels, the national unity itself resting on the unity of the English tongue, its true church, and governing monarch. Thus, the convergence of local and national unity, individual salvation, and the apocalyptic collapse of the boundary separating subject and object resonates outwards to the cosmic unity achieved with the eschatological return to the pure, ineffable unity of the Word. It is from this final perspective of aesthetic apocalypse that Hieronimo's auto-glossectomy is properly understood.

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43. Sidney, "Defense of Poesy," 1081.

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