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Miraculous Organ: Shakespeare and ‘Catharsis’

Abstract

Noting that Aristotle’s *Poetics* was not published in England until 1623, this article begins by surveying the traces of cathartic thinking in early modern cultural theory, paying special attention to Sir Philip Sidney’s *Defence of Poesy* as the era’s most significant expression of that theory. Showing the *Defence* is not a sufficient cause of Shakespearean cathartic thinking, it traces extant ideas of purgation in England’s wider literary, Christian and medical traditions, arguing these provided Shakespeare with the purgative basis of his theatre. The article gives special prominence to Thomas Kyd’s *The Spanish Tragedy*, arguing its theatrical influence was a significant transmitter of purgative ideas to Shakespeare, the drama of the age, and *Hamlet*.

Therefore it is clear that, just as humours are moved and purged by means of purging medicaments, due to the natural sympathy and convenience that exists between them, thus in the soul pregnant with melancholy, concepts of fear and compassion, by means of [the affects of] pity and fear, alike concepts are moved and purged.

Lorenzo Giacomini, *On the Purgation of Tragedy* (1586)¹

What is, then, the purging terror of Tragedy? The terror of the interior [moral] death, which, having been roused in the soul of the listener by means of the image of the things represented, attracts like a magnet – due to the similarity that one fear has with the other – the bad sinful death [the terror of physical death]: thus reason, which is nature, and the beginning of the life of the soul, abhorring it [the sinful affect] as its capital enemy, and being opposed to it, pushes it out, leaving only the good fear of infamy and of interior death, which is the foundation of virtue.

Battista Guarini, *A Compendium of Tragicomic Poetry* (1601)²

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¹ “Percioche è chiaro che, si come per mezzo di medicamenti purganti per la naturale simpatia e convenienza che hanno co’ l’humore da purgarli, si muove e sfoga il detto humore così nel anima gravida di concetti mesti, di timore, e di compassione per mezzo della pietà, e de lo spavento si muovono, e si purgano concetti tali più perfettamente.” The translation of the quotation from Giacomini’s *De la purgazione de la tragedia* [*On the Purgation of Tragedy*], and the following one from Guarini’s *Compendio della poesia tragicomica* [*A Compendium of Tragicomic Poetry*], are from Schneider 2010: 37-8. The translation of the titles of Giacomini’s and Guarini’s works, though, are mine.

² “Quale è dunque il terrore purgante della Tragedia? quel della morte interna, il

Introduction: the English Cathartic Scene

At first glance, 1623 looks pivotal in the history of dramatic purgation in English theatre. Not only was it the year in which John Heminges and Henry Condell published Shakespeare's First Folio, but it was also in 1623 that Theodore Coulston first published a version of Aristotle's *Poetics* in England. Yet Shakespeare died in 1616 and Coulston's translation, from a version by Lodovico Castelvetro of 1570, was in Latin: available only to the educated, with an impact on theatrical analysis and practice that was slow to take hold.³ For Shakespearean scholarship the real significance of 1623, then, is its belatedness. No published, English version of Aristotle's *Poetics* existed in England to guide Shakespeare in the writing and shaping of his works. Though Greek versions and Latin and Italian translations were available, they were not so to those with "small Latin and less Greek": the majority of the English populace, perhaps including (if we take Ben Jonson at face value) William Shakespeare.⁴ What is certain is that the kind of developed, precisely articulated analyses of purgation from Italy heading up this article are alien to theatrical analysis in Shakespearean England. Far behind Renaissance Italy in this respect, English formulations of tragic affect and effect look crude.⁵

There are better and worse reasons for this. One reason is the English theorists' concern to "beatify our mother tongue", in Sir Philip Sidney's phrase in *The Defence of Poesy*: an activity imagined in competition with other contemporary languages and betraying an English complex of cultural inferiority:

Truly the English, before any vulgar language I know, is fit for both sorts [of ancient and modern versification]. For the ancient, the Italian is so full of vowels that it must ever be cumbered with elisions; the Dutch so, of the other side, with consonants, that they cannot yield the sweet sliding, fit for a verse; the French in his whole language hath not one word that hath his accent in

quale ecitato nell'animo di chi ascolta, per l'immagine delle cose rappresentate tira, per la similitudine, che l'un timore ha con l'altro, a guisa di calamita, il male affetto peccante. Onde poi la ragione ch'è natura, e principio della vita dell'anima, abhorrendolo, come suo capital nemico, e contrario, lo spinge fuori di se, lasciandovi solo il buon timor della 'nfamia, e della morte interna, fondamento della virtù".

³ Aristotle 1997: 29, n. 1. Whalley includes key dates of Aristotelean contact with England, observing the first real English translation of the *Poetics* (by Thomas Twining) as from 1789.

⁴ For Jonson on Shakespeare in these terms, see Shakespeare 1988: xlv. All quotations from Shakespeare in this article are from this edition.

⁵ Dewar-Watson (2004: 4-5) plausibly argues that "mediating sources" brought "the main tenets of the *Poetics*" to Shakespeare, and a fuller version of the argument, but concerning Sidney, is in Lazarus, cited below. The best evidence of a Shakespearean catharsis from Aristotle, though, is "oblique" (ibid.: 5).

the last syllable saving two, called *antepenultima*; and little more hath the Spanish, and therefore very gracelessly may they use dactyls. The English is subject to none of these defects. (Sidney 1989: 82; 115)

Yet there is not only English cultural anxiety (and promotion) here. Bookending *The Defence of Poesy*, the two, preceding quotations from Sidney show that in 1579, when he began work on the *Defence*, and still in 1595, when it was published, the preoccupations of English cultural theory were to establish the language's literary credentials. Until that basic task was complete, more detailed theoretical questions were largely a sideshow, including the putative theatrical phenomenon of Aristotelian catharsis or developed thinking on how it might work.

Nevertheless, the *Defence* shows Sidney had at least some knowledge of the commentary tradition on the *Poetics*. Very basically, poetry is defined as an art of imitation, "for so Aristotle termeth it in the word *mimesis*" (ibid.: 86). More speculatively, while Horace is normally considered the source of Sidney's view that poetry aims to "teach and delight" (ibid.), the claim is part of Sidney's sentence on Aristotelean mimesis and may reflect reading in the Italian Aristotelians: Sidney's emphasis on the unities of time and place in the *Defence* originates in Castelvetro, and another Italian Aristotelian, Antonio Minturno, considered catharsis a matter of "delight and profit"⁶ (Halliwell 1992: 415; Greene 2012: 215).

Sidney sees poetry as a subset of – though the ideal tool for – learning, the moral end of which is virtue. As he writes, defending the poets, "For who will be taught, if he be not moved with desire to be taught?" (Sidney 1989: 94). Poetry is therefore affective and transforming, but how the transformation occurs is sketchy. The closest Sidney comes to suggesting the transformation is cathartic – or, since that term only enters English dramatic discourse much later, purgative – is when he considers poetry weighing "each syllable of each word by the just proportion according to the dignity of the subject" (ibid.: 87):⁷

Now therefore it shall not be amiss first to weigh this latter sort of Poetry by his works, and they by his parts, and if in neither of these anatomies he be commendable, I hope we shall obtain a more favourable sentence. This purifying of wit – this enriching of memory, enabling of judgment and enlarging of conceit – which commonly we call learning, under what name soever it come forth, or to what immediate end soever it be directed, the final end is to lead and draw us to as high a perfection as our degenerate souls, made worse by their clayey lodgings, can be capable of. (ibid.: 88)

⁶ "[D]ilettare con profitto" (Minturno 1564: 28).

⁷ For more on the history of the word 'catharsis', see Rist 2013a: 139.

Various points need emphasis here. First, Sidney treats poetry as a subset of learning, these remarks having no especial bearing on tragedy or drama. Second, learning (and so poetry) presents a purgative “purifying of wit”. Third and fourth, broadly as in the passages from Giacomini and Guarini above, this purification is of the soul, which Sidney presents as corrupted by the “clayey” body: the purification is moral. Fifth, it is implicit (though not explicit or defined, as it is by the Italians) that the exterior proportion of the poetry (“each syllable of each word by the just proportion”) bears on the act of purification: that there is what, explicitly, Giacomini defined as “sympathy” (“simpatia”) between expressive forms and their effects, in which proportioned words are essential for purification.⁸ Sixth, there is Sidney’s language of “anatomies”, which might be dismissed as metaphor if it did not return when Sidney turns directly to the effects of tragedy:

Tragedy, that openeth the greatest wounds, and showeth forth the ulcers that are covered with tissue; that maketh kings fear to be tyrants, and tyrants manifest their tyrannical humours; that, with stirring the affects of admiration and commiseration, teacheth the uncertainty of this world, and upon how weak foundations gilden roofs are builded. (ibid.: 98).

Like Sidney’s passage on learning’s purification of wit, this on tragedy needs handling with care. There is nothing directly here on tragedy as a purifier or purgative; tragedy’s explicit effects are “admiration and commiseration”, though Sidney goes on to say its best examples draw “abundance of tears” (ibid.). While the allusion to houses built on weak foundations, echoing Matthew 7:26, gently universalises as well as moralises the impact of tragedy, moreover, the primary focus of the analysis is tragedy’s effect on tyrants. Sidney’s analysis of tragedy’s effects is both more restricting and more political than Aristotle’s in this respect.

Nevertheless, the language of “anatomies” encountered in Sidney’s passage on purifying wit continues here in the painful rhetoric of “wounds”, as well as in “ulcers . . . covered with tissue” and “humours”. The terminology forms part of a metaphorical strand in the *Defence* seeing poetry as a “medicine of cherries” (Sidney 1989: 96). Since, according to early modern physiologies, the humoral properties belonged to humanity, Sidney’s analysis of tragedy’s “affects”, while centring on tyrants, has wider potential. Very broadly, moreover, since Aristotle appropriated “catharsis” from medical terminology, Sidney and Aristotle share some medical understanding of the effects of theatre on persons.⁹ As the citation from Giacomini at the open-

⁸ For “simpatia”, see Schneider 2010: 37.

⁹ Cooper (1956: 31) influentially described Aristotelian catharsis as “medico-literary”. Sidney’s allusion to the “sweet violence of tragedy” (Sidney 1989: 96) seems to develop his metaphor of poetry as a medicine of cherries by suggesting that in tragedy the sweetness

ing of this article implied, sixteenth-century neo-Aristotelians, applying to theatre the humour-theory of the Hippocratic school and Galen, presented tragedy as entailing humoural purgation; so while Sidney's theory of theatre is narrowly political by their standards, it also echoes the purgative theatre of neo-Aristotelians like Giacomini, rather as – in its moral applications – it anticipates the neo-Aristotelianism of Guarini.

Yet suggesting a general distance between the English authors, in Sidney's presentation of the unities of time and place, tyrants as the theatre's principal audience, and also in his strongly-held view that mingling tragedy and comedy is "gross absurdities", there is little consonance between Sidney and Shakespeare.¹⁰ The general distance applies equally to Shakespeare and Sidney's views of catharsis. Where Shakespeare addresses the medical-purgative power of theatre, the claim is far more direct than in Sidney. Symptomatically, regarding distance, the best example is in a comedy:

Your honour's players, hearing your amendment,
Are come to play a pleasant comedy,
For so your doctors hold it very meet,
Seeing too much sadness hath congealed your blood,
And melancholy is the nurse of frenzy.
Therefore they thought it good you hear a play
And frame your mind to mirth and merriment,
Which bars a thousand harms and lengthens life.
(*The Taming of the Shrew*, Induction, 2, 125-32)

Unlike Sidney's *Defence*, this identifies dramatic (though not tragic) purgation as a medical experience directly. Sidney's *Defence* may be a cause, but it is not a sufficient cause even of this early example of Shakespearean catharsis.¹¹ Nor is it sufficient to point to versions of the *Poetics* available in the contemporary England, since the *Defence* is the best evidence there is that these texts were culturally significant.¹² To grasp Shakespeare's direct understanding of purgation, we must attend to early modern understandings

of the (medical) cherry turns violent. He offers no explanation for this, though, and does not develop the thought far.

¹⁰ Citation from Sidney 1989: 112. Lazarus (2015: 505) is right, therefore, to be suspicious of the critical assumption that "[a]s Sidney goes, England goes". Although emphatically absurd, the conjunction of tragedy and comedy is, according to Sidney in another passage, at least not "hurtful" (Sidney 1989: 97).

¹¹ The Oxford editors consider *The Taming of the Shrew* was written before 1594. See Shakespeare 1988: 25.

¹² I discount Ben Jonson since his "first hand knowledge of the *Poetics* . . . places him in a very small minority in England" (Dewar-Watson 2004: 2). I have observed elsewhere that Jonson's notion of catharsis – such as it was – does not truly resemble Aristotle's (Rist 2013a: 139).

of purgation with equal directness. We may begin by observing that unlike the *Poetics* in England, the roots of that understanding go deep.

From Plato, there is a second, religious idea of purgation on which Aristotle drew when forming his idea of catharsis. It derives from the idea of entering a holy place and refers to purification as a cleansing of guilt.¹³ In Christianity, it associates with Christ, who “gave himself for us, that he might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify unto himself a peculiar people” (Titus 2:14; *King James Version*).¹⁴ In Shakespearean England, these Christian and medical ideas of purgation were inextricable. As Sarah Dewar-Watson observes, this is in part because the “Renaissance habit of syncretism meant that the Aristotlelean notion of *catharsis* became fused, and indeed confused, not only with Christian notions of purgation from sin, but also . . . with medico-therapeutic theory” (2004: 5). Yet since religious and medical dimensions of catharsis are already in Plato and Aristotle and Christian ideas of purification are in St Paul, the fusion, predating the Renaissance, needs definition.

Christian Catharsis

The Defence of Poesy is a syncretic work *par excellence* and Aristotle is one of very many authors it evokes. Much more immediately, it responds to Stephen Gosson’s puritan *The School of Abuse* (1579), which Gosson dedicated to Sidney, but which attacked fiction-makers, and so poets and actors, as liars.¹⁵ The immediate context for the *Defence*, then, was English religious, and specifically Christian, conflict over the place of literature in English society. Making the following choice of literary models for nation-building significant, Sidney worried that in arguing poetry was legitimised by the Psalms of David he “profane[d] that holy name”:

So, as Amphion was said to move stones with his poetry to build Thebes, and Orpheus to be listened to by beasts - indeed stony and beastly people - so among the Romans were Livius Andronicus and Ennius. So in the Italian language the first that made it aspire to be a treasure-house of science were the poets Dante, Boccaccio and Petrarch. So in our English were Gower and Chaucer, after whom, encouraged and delighted with their excellent fore-going, others have followed, to beautify our mother tongue, as well in the same kind as in other arts. (Sidney 1989: 82)

¹³ Greene 2012: 215. Sidney’s view of the purifying power of wit, cited above, would seem indebted to this Platonic view, but the question is beyond our present concern.

¹⁴ Wycliffe’s Bible renders “purify unto himself a peculiar people” as “make clean to himself a people acceptable”.

¹⁵ The opening attack on poets in Gosson’s *School of Abuse* itself underpins its analysis of the (misleading) power of poetry with contemporary medical metaphors.

Each of the authors listed here are authoritative in their civilisation of a "bestly people" through the beautifying of its "mother tongue". Yet the celebration of Petrarch and especially Dante speaks to a particularly Christian (and un-puritan) aesthetic. In the *Canzoniere* and *Divine Comedy*, the poets present a speaker on a literary journey beginning on Good Friday (*Inferno*, Canto 2; *Canzoniere*, Sonnet 3). Their journeys evoke what early moderns, following biblical precedent, understood as the Christian purgation of the Passion. The purgation in Dante's journey is especially prominent, since Book 2 is *Purgatorio*: "dove l'umano spirito si purga" (1, 5) ["where the human spirit purges itself"]; and we will shortly see more such purgation in England (Alighieri 2003: 18).¹⁶ Yet the ostensibly more secular *Canzoniere* sees its speaker fall into despair at the death of his beloved Laura, only for Laura to return to him as a saint. It ends – like the *Paradiso*, Canto 33 – with praise of the Virgin Mary.¹⁷ Suggestively for considerations of the purgative culture of Shakespearean England, the ritual structure of Christ's Passion narrative – purgative death and resurrection – highlights in two of the three Italian authors Sidney champions.

It is argued that choosing Gower and Chaucer alongside Dante and Petrarch is a way of highlighting the Italian authors' centrality in the English literary tradition Sidney would construct.¹⁸ Yet the key point here – as suggested by Emile Mâle and Eamon Duffy among others – is the primacy of Passion narratives in the contemporary culture and mentalities.¹⁹ The scope of the Passion encompassed not just Petrarch and Dante as major Renaissance influences, but also patterns of death, purgation and resurrection infusing English popular culture and visible in literature from the medieval drama to seventeenth-century devotional poetry. Showing the realm of the human as at once of this world and the next, with the dead returning spiritually to direct the living, the living travelling (like Dante) into lands of the dead, and Christianity partaking each day in the death and resurrection of Christ in the ritual performance of the Mass, this primacy implied direct analogies between the health of the body and the health of the soul.²⁰ To

¹⁶ See especially line 5.

¹⁷ Rist 2014: 72-3, though the observation, here, of Dante's parallel with Petrarch is additional.

¹⁸ When Sidney wants to glorify the poet, his example is Dante. Speaking of the poet, "having *all*, from Dante's heaven to his hell, under the authority of his pen" (Sidney 1989: 93; my emphasis), Sidney certainly had Purgatory – outstanding, here, by omission – in mind. Masden notes that Sidney presents Dante and Petrarch – and indeed Boccaccio – as much for their "religious and philosophical" views as for having been founders of Italian literature and that Sidney presents Chaucer and Gower "in the same way" (Sidney 1989: 125, commentary: 26-9).

¹⁹ Mâle 1986: 83; Duffy 2005: 234-5.

²⁰ For the human realm in these terms, see Jupp and Gittings 1999. For the Mass as

maintain that health, purgation was essential. This is how William Crashaw explained Christ's Passion ("the precise merits of the death and resurrection of Christ") as a purgative and therefore healthful action in 1610:

Particularly as the body, so the soul stands in need of three sorts of phisic. First, it is necessary that it be purged from the corruption of sin, which else will kill the soul; then, being purged, it is to be restored to life and strength; lastly being so restored, it is requisite that it be preserved in that state unto the end. Answerable unto these there is the threefold kind of phisic we receive from Christ; viz. purgative, restorative, and preservative. First, purgative, to purge our souls from corrupt humours and the infectious stain of sin. (Crashaw 1610: A1-A2)²¹

Purgation, here, applies unequivocally to both the body and soul of the early modern person and it is a Christian principle. Elsewhere evoking Christ as the "spiritual Physician", Crashaw implies how deeply ingrained in Christianity his purgative analysis is (ibid.). The image derives from St Augustine's fourth-century image of the *Christus Medicus* or 'Medical Christ':

To the almighty Physician, no infirmity is incurable . . . The human physician sometimes is deceived and promises health in the human body. Why is he deceived? Because he is treating what he has not made. God, however, made your body, made your soul. He knows how to restore what He has made. (Qtd in Henderson 2006: 113-14)

In speaking of Christ as a "spiritual Physician", Crashaw drew on Augustine's image of Him as an "almighty Physician", as that image had been handed down through millennia, and as Augustine had traditionally inferred it from the Gospels. Though Aristotelian catharsis in England before 1623 was a sideshow, Christian purgation was not.

Christian Catharsis and the Shakespearean Theatre

Crashaw's presentation of Christian personality as essentially and variously purgative might lead one to expect he admired theatre. In fact, he was violently hostile to it, as he made clear:

The ungodly Plays and Interludes so rife in this nation; what are they but a Bastard of Babylon, a daughter of error and confusion, a hellish device (the devil's own recreation, to mock at holy things) by him delivered to

performance, see Siera 2014: 39. For early modern theatre's debt to religious performance generally, see Dillon 2006: 1-3.

²¹ For this and the following early modern textual quotations, I have modernised the spelling.

the Heathen from them to the Papists, and from them to us? Of this evil and plague, the Church of God in all ages can say, truly and with a good conscience, we would have healed her. (Crashaw 1608: 169)

Testifying to Crashaw's humoural spirituality, it is apposite to note how spiritual and corporeal discourses of healing mingle again in this passage. Yet the predominant topic is the evil of theatre, which is a Catholic inheritance of Pagans crucially mocking "holy things". Given Crashaw's insistence on Christianity as a purgative religion, the subverted holiness includes Christian purgation. Crucially for analysis of Shakespearean or wider English Renaissance theatre, the theatre is an institution rivalling Christianity in its purgative power. That the rivalry is jointly a matter of pagan and Catholic heritage is important. It implies contemporary actions of purgation in the theatre that are outside the Protestant's remit. Following our comments on Dante, the Catholicism (and Paganism) of Purgatory stands out.²²

Pervasively denounced by early modern Protestants, Purgatory was also widely seen as a place of purgation.²³ Thomas Bell's *Motives: Concerning Romish Faith and Religion* (1593) illustrates both early modern tendencies:²⁴

Thirdly, that sundry having venial sins abide the pains of purgatory, appeareth by Bellarminus his words before alleged, and by Dominicus so to in these words:

. . . He that shall blaspheme the holy Ghost, shall neither be forgiven in this world, neither in the world to come.

In which place Gregorious pope of Rome, noted certain light sins to be forgiven in the world to come, by the fire of *purgation*.

And their Aquinas saith thus.

. . . For venial sins are *purged* by fire sooner or later, according to their greater or lesser adherence or gravity.

And for a full accomplishment of this conclusion, Josphus Angles utters the great perplexity of papists, concerning their *purgative* imagination. (Bell 1593: 101; my emphases)

Testifying to the conjunction of Hippocratic and Catholic ideas in sixteenth-century purgation, Purgatory is in turn, here, purgation, a purge and a purgative. Unsurprisingly, in view of Crashaw, this idea of purgation receives far more positive representation in the theatre, where it was central in the rise of revenge tragedy.

²² I address Virgil and Purgatory below, but for a broader history including Purgatory's classical antecedents see Le Goff 1984.

²³ On the denunciation, see Marshall 2002.

²⁴ For other examples of these tendencies, see Rist 2013a: 143-8; and Rist 2013b: 123-5.

“Saint Jeronimy!”: Purgation From Kyd’s *The Spanish Tragedy* to Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*

Besides offering Shakespeare’s most direct evocation of a medically-purgative theatre, as we have seen, *The Taming of the Shrew* opens in homage to Thomas Kyd’s hugely-influential tragedy of no later than 1592 (probably of 1586-87) *The Spanish Tragedy*:²⁵

HOSTESS You will not pay for the glasses you have burst?
 SLY No, not a denier. Go by, Saint Jeronimy! Go to thy
 cold bed and warm thee.
 (*The Taming of the Shrew*, Induction 1, 6-8)

Here “Jeronimy” refers to *The Spanish Tragedy*’s leading figure, Hieronimo, and the passage recalls a line much-cited in the era: “Hieronimo, beware; go by, go by”.²⁶ Yet as striking as the homage to Kyd is Shakespeare’s association of Hieronimo with sanctity. Only semi-satirical, the designation evokes Christian contexts for the tragedy borne out by its initial and framing dramatization of Purgatory.

The play opens in an afterlife largely derived from book 6 of Virgil’s *Aeneid*: a place of purgation associated by Christian commentators following St Augustine with Purgatory up until (and in less Protestant circles, beyond) the Reformation (Wilson-Okamura 2010: 173-8). The opening scene fills out the Purgatory by showing that a spirit’s successful passage through the afterlife depends on its “rites of burial” (1.1.21) – a Catholic claim in sixteenth-century England – and properly burying the dead is thematic thereafter (Rist 2008: 27-44).

Keeping the Ghost of Andrea on stage from start to finish, *The Spanish Tragedy* also consistently maintains its Purgatorial perspective. Yet besides a place on stage, purgation is a transformative experience witnessed in Andrea. In each of their speaking scenes until the last, the isolated interplay of Andrea and Revenge repeats a dramatic pattern. Andrea repeatedly shows confusion with the tide of events while Revenge, his companion, repeatedly demands patience in response. Illustrating the sequence of the pattern in this foundational revenge tragedy to highlight how Purgatory underpins the genre, I quote and comment on each passage in turn. The first passage is as follows:

GHOST No sooner had she [Proserpine] spoke but we were here,
 I wot not how, in twinkling of an eye.

²⁵ On this influence, which goes far beyond revenge tragedy, see Semple 2016.

²⁶ Kyd 2013: 240 (3.12.30). All subsequent quotations from *The Spanish Tragedy* are from this edition.

REVENGE Then know, Andrea, that thou art arrived
Where thou shalt see the author of thy death,
Don Balthazar, the Prince of Portugal,
Deprived of life by Bel-imperia.
Here sit we down to see the mystery...
(*The Spanish Tragedy*, 1.1.84-90)

Preceding and introducing the action in Spain, here the Ghost of Andrea shows anguish over where he is and also how he came there. In response, Revenge induces Andrea patiently to await the outcome of the play, giving Andrea his dramatic bearings and assuring him the wait will be worthwhile.

The second passage is similar, but the Ghost's anguish is greater since the dramatic goal he seeks eludes him:

GHOST Come we for this, from depth of underground,
To see him feast that gave me my death's wound?
These pleasant sights are sorrow to my soul.
Nothing but league, and love, and banqueting?
REVENGE Be still, Andrea; ere we go from hence,
I'll turn their friendship into fell despite,
Their love to mortal hate, their day to night,
Their hope into despair, their peace to war,
Their joys to pain, their bliss to misery.
(*The Spanish Tragedy*, 1.5.1-9)

The third passage repeats this procedure. The more the dramatic goal eludes Andrea, the greater his anguish is:

GHOST Brought'st thou me hither to increase my pain?
I looked that Balthazar should have been slain;
But 'tis my friend Horatio that is slain,
And they abuse fair Bel-Imperia,
On whom I doted more than all the world.
REVENGE Though talkest of harvest when the corn is green.
The end is crown of every work well done.
The sickle comes not till the corn be ripe.
Be still, and ere I lead thee from this place
I'll show thee Balthazar in heavy case.
(*The Spanish Tragedy*, 2.6.1-11)

The final example of the pattern shows Revenge has fallen asleep, to the consternation of Andrea:

GHOST Awake, Revenge, if love, as love hath had
Have yet the power or prevalence in hell!
Hieronimo with Lorenzo is joined in league,
And intercepts our passage to revenge.

Awake, Revenge, or we are woebegone!
 REVENGE Thus worldings ground what they have dreamed upon,
 Content, thyself, Andrea. Though I sleep
 Yet is my mood soliciting their souls...
 (*The Spanish Tragedy*, 3.15.12-27)

In every instance in which they speak, then, the confusion of the Ghost is met with the reassurance and plea for patience of Revenge. From their opening moments, Revenge's advice is the same: "Be still" (1.1.5), "Be still" (2.6.10), "Content thyself" (3.15.18).

One effect is to maintain the focus of the audience on the originally-stated, dramatic goal of retribution, as the play winds hither and thither in its "passage through . . . wounds" (1.1.17)". The result is that the Ghost, observing the dramatic action, comes to stand for an English audience yet to accustom itself to revenge tragedy's delays and needing lessons in dramatic patience. For patience receives its reward, as the last scene shows. Indicating the triumph of patience, the Ghost of Andrea is transformed:

GHOST Aye, now my hopes have end in their effects
 When blood and sorrow finish my desires:
 . . .
 Aye, these are spectacles to please my soul
 . . .
 I'll lead my friend Horatio to those fields . . .
 I'll lead fair Isabella . . .
 I'll lead my Bel-Imperia . . .
 I'll lead Horatio . . .
 Let me be judge . . .
 (*The Spanish Tragedy*, 4.5.1-30)

Indicating a triumph of patience in stark contrast to his former anguish, the Ghost is content: happy with the outcome and, for the first time, keen to take a lead in future events. The implication is that the tragedy, for which he has been both audience and patient, has cured him. The meta-theatrical implication is that audiences, like patients, will leave the theatre in better spirits.²⁷ A dramatization of Purgatory, itself entailing patient observations of suffering, proves theatrically purgative. While the lengthy cause of purgation is patience, moreover, the immediate cause is what Andrea calls "blood and sorrow". In a tragedy in which, as conventionally in the era, "passions" are both "protestations" and "deep laments" (4.1.4-5), and in which the "sword" is a figure for the cross yet is also the figure for "thy tragedy" (2.1.87-93), the

²⁷ For the etymological relation of 'patient' to 'passion', see under 'passion' (noun) in the *Oxford English Dictionary*. The definition also makes the relation of 'physical suffering and pain' to Christ's Passion overt.

Christianity resounds. Working through contemporary dynamics of death, resurrection and spiritual cure, no-one in sixteenth-century England could have missed Christ's Passion as one purgative basis for *The Spanish Tragedy*.²⁸ Yet unfortunately for some, the play has a second, purgative basis in Purgatory, constructing a dramatic association between purgation and Purgatory we have seen was deep-rooted.

The roots nourish *Hamlet*. The success of *The Spanish Tragedy* meant there was no need to tell either ghosts or audiences to be patient in Shakespeare's version of a revenge tragedy. Nevertheless, Hamlet's delay requires patience of audiences, and his impatience makes the requirement thematic. Moreover, in *Hamlet* Shakespeare echoes Kyd both in an isolated Ghost seeking onstage audience-response and in the famously pointed allusion to Purgatory. According to the contemporary interchangeability of the terms, Shakespeare calls the Purgatory a "purge":

I am thy father's spirit,
Doomed for a certain term to walk the night,
And for the day confined to fast in fires
Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature
Are burnt and purged away.
(*Hamlet*, 1.5.9-13)

According to the various overlaps between life and death observed in this article, purging here equates both with a place of the dead of temporary punishment – Purgatory – and with the living experiences of burning and fasting. Although he refrains from their full expression, moreover, by recalling tales that "[w]ould harrow up thy soul, freeze thy young blood" (1.5.16), the Ghost anticipates Hamlet's delayed action as a "freeze" both spiritual and physiological. Hamlet's subsequent delay illustrates the freeze, giving the Ghost a pervasively representative agency in the play, which thus also, in homage to Kyd, exists as a purgative as well as Purgatorial expression. As an audience to the Ghost and a respondent to his dramatized narrative, Hamlet, following Andrea and Revenge in *The Spanish Tragedy*, stands as a cypher for the audience-responses of the play. Thus it is, seemingly, that in seeking to understand Shakespeare's play, swathes of criticism have attended primarily to Hamlet's 'character'.

Yet despite its interest in motive, character criticism has traditionally been secular, largely assuming an incoherence A.C. Bradley made explicit: "although this or that dramatis persona may speak of gods or of God, of

²⁸ Barber (1988: 153-64) established the Passion in *The Spanish Tragedy* especially in the death of Horatio. Comparing *The Spanish Tragedy* with Corpus Christi plays, Goodland (2016: 175-96) brings out the Passion's far more holistic presence in Kyd's play.

evil spirits or of Satan, of heaven and of hell, and although the poet may show us ghosts from another world, these ideals do not materially influence his representations of life” (1991: 40).²⁹ Knowing the significance of religion to the theatre, today Shakespearean scholars reject this, but the impact of the transformation on understandings of dramatic characters and their motives bears emphasis.³⁰ Although their definitions of spirits were overlapping rather than always identical, early modern theorists of physiology as well as religion considered spirits instrumental in human agency, somewhat in the way scientists today consider our actions and personalities as (more or less deterministically) are shaped by our genes.³¹ Each discipline assumes human actions and temperaments have causes, but in early modern theories of humours and religion, the causes were deemed spiritual. As Laurentius put it, explaining the physiology of cataracts in his *Treatise of Melancholy* (1599), “the *spirits* and black vapours continually pass by the sinews, veins and arteries, from the brain unto the eye, with causeth it [the eye] to see many shadows and untrue apparitions” (qtd in Rist 2013a: 149; my emphasis). Hamlet and Hieronimo are both melancholic.³² They are both objects of this early modern, spiritual physiology.

Both plays are at pains to demonstrate this, in the association of Ghosts with action as well as in many, more localised allusions to spiritual agency. Charting the use of the term “spirit” in *Hamlet* is revealing in this respect.³³ In the early stages of the play (1.1.135, 1.1.142, 1.1.52, 1.2.253, 1.4.7, 1.4.21, 1.5.9, 1.5.183, 3.1.600) the word primarily denotes the Ghost or an associated supernatural entity. Yet in several examples from 3.2, where Guildenstern refers to Gertrude “in most great affliction of spirit” (3.2.299), it refers to the material, expressive and affective states of persons, which the actors make visible. The spirits of Hamlet, Fortinbras and, by reference to kingship, the entire “weal” (3.2.14) are described this way, each actor, including all those of the commonweal, thereby dramatizing one or more spirits through his (or today, her) actions. Strikingly, in the last allusion to this action, Hamlet dies and the “potent poison quite o’ercrows my spirit” (5.2.305). Here the primary sense of spirituality remains physiological, as it has been in the play’s latter stages, but on the cusp of death the play’s earlier sense – of a spirit

²⁹ On the same page, Bradley (erroneously) asserts Elizabethan drama was “almost wholly secular”, later arguing *Hamlet* was in this respect exceptional (1991: 166).

³⁰ See Dillon 2006: 1-3; Jackson and Marotti 2004: 167-90.

³¹ On the intense religious and medical overlap, see Parker 2014: 1265-97.

³² Hamlet’s melancholy has been established since the early twentieth century. For the history, see Rist 2008: 18, n. 72. For Hieronimo’s passions identified as melancholy, see *The Spanish Tragedy*, 3.12.97.

³³ I shall not trace Kyd’s spirituality further in this Shakespearean essay, but for discussion of it, see Rist 2016: 1-20.

that leaves the body – haunts the first. The play's drama of spirits variously merges ghostliness with personhood according to the spiritual physiology of the day. Like the departure of the spirit from his body, therefore, the departure of Hamlet from the play entails purification.

Ritual and religious qualities of the purification are in the closing emphasis on mourning and remembrance, as well as in Horatio's prayer that "flights of angels" sing Hamlet "to thy rest" (5.2.313).³⁴ Grief for the dead is therefore a general component of the purification. Yet the closing passage of the play has particular terms for this experience for onlookers seeking to know what it is "ye would see" (5.2.315). These include "woe", (5.2. 317), "wonder" (5.2.317), the "dismal" (5.2.321) and varieties of "blood" (5.2.321; 329; 335), the play supplying various images of the experience to an audience linked with "the noblest" (5.2.341). Yet since it accords with the history of purification in this piece, another feature deserves emphasis. Horatio's closing decision to "speak to the unknowing world / How these things came about" (5.2.333-4) emphasises confessions, which the play has already marked in the "form of prayer" as a "purging of . . . soul[s]" for "offence"(3.3.51; 3.3.85; 3.3.36). Precedents are in Kyd, where Pedringano must "confess, and therein play the priest" (*The Spanish Tragedy*, 3.3.39).³⁵ They are also in the Ghost's "Unhouselled, dis-appointed, unaneled, / No reck'ning made, but sent to my account / With all my imperfections on my head" (*Hamlet*, 1.5.77-9), alongside which purification and Purgatory combine, as we have seen. A part of what John Bossy has termed Christianity's "machinery for the regulation and resolution of offences", confession complements Christ's Passion and Purgatory in these plays as the purification of speech.³⁶

Conclusion: The Miraculous Organ

One might expand these observations of dramatic purification to other tragic or tragically-inflected plays by Shakespeare, but concluding with the paradigm is more useful. In *The Mousetrap*, *Hamlet* presents a play-within-a-play: an overt and celebrated opportunity for audiences to watch not just a drama, but also an audience's responses to it.³⁷ According to Hamlet's plan,

³⁴ For discussion of this mourning and remembrance, see Rist 2008: 73-4.

³⁵ See Rist 2016: 10-12. For wider examples of confessional theatre in the era, see Faas 1986: 45-6. I disagree with Faas's reading of these events, though, as noted below.

³⁶ Citation from Bossy 1975: 21. Bossy observes the purification of confession on the following page.

³⁷ I here finesse Dewar-Watson's broadly cathartic and confessional reading of the scene (2004: 5).

Claudius responds forcefully, in what Hamlet takes as a confession both of crime and sin. The rationale underpinning the procedure is unusually explicit:

I have heard that guilty creatures sitting at a play
Have by the very cunning of the scene
Been struck so to the soul that presently
They have proclaimed their malefactions;
For murder, though it have no tongue, will speak
With most miraculous organ.
(*Hamlet*, 2.2.591-6)

This explanation of theatrical power brings together the general principals of dramatic purgation on which this article has dwelt. First, theatre has a purgative power. Second, the purgation is of “malefactions”, which with connotations of suffering meant both sicknesses and evil-doing.³⁸ Third, it is confessional. Fourth, entailing connections between the corporeal and the spirit, it strikes “the soul”. Fifth, striking the soul produces action in the tongue, entailing further body-soul connections and causality. Sixth, the tongue is therefore a “miraculous organ”, combining the ideas from physiology and religion we have observed.

Shakespearean catharsis is rarely so deliberate and it is never as considered as it was in sixteenth-century Italy. Nevertheless, it permeates Shakespearean drama.³⁹ This is because Shakespearean drama did not need a very analysed view of catharsis to produce purgative effects. Combining physiology with religion, the “miraculous” culture, performative, literary and confessional, into which Shakespeare was born, though ever more restricted in Reformation England, saw largely to those.

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³⁸ See ‘malefaction’, definitions 1, with etymology, and definition 2 in the *Oxford English Dictionary*. Sickness and suffering, here, are important. Faas (1986: 46), for example, argues that this speech by Hamlet reduces tragic effects to moral ones. But neither suffering nor sickness is (at least overtly) moral, while both are (arguably) universal.

³⁹ For Shakespeare’s use of purgative metaphors to describe social and also personal change in a range of his plays, see Rist 2013b: 130.

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