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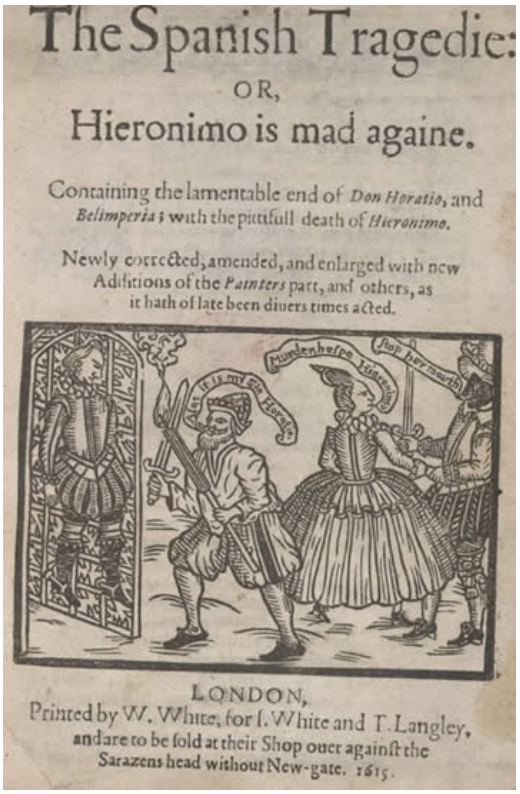
Thomas Kyd: An English Tragedy

Very little is known about the life of Renaissance playwright Thomas Kyd [1] (1558?-1594). Though scholars say that often, in this case there is an especially frustrating dearth of information (and surviving texts). Thomas Kyd was born in 1558 in London, the son of Francis and Anna Kyd. Francis was a scriviner. From 1565 he attended Merchant Taylors' School, where he was a contemporary of Edmund Spenser, who later authored *The Faerie Queene [2]*.

At some point after he left school Kyd shared a room with fellow playwright Christopher Marlowe [3]. Though little of his work survives, we know he was successful in his day as Ben Jonson called him "famous Kyd", and Francis Meres wrote he was among "our best for tragedy". It is possible that some time before 1589 he wrote what is known as the *Ur-Hamlet*, the lost version of *Hamlet [4]* on which Shakespeare's play was based



[5]
16th century illustration of 'The Spanish Tragedy', by Thomas Kyd. [Public domain], from Wikimedia Commons

In 1589 he wrote his most famous play, *The Spanish Tragedy* [6]. The bitter tale of family revenge and

courtly corruption was a smash-hit. It was published in 1592, and went through at least nine editions. For more information on the gritty play, listen to Dr. Emma Smith's podcast on *The Spanish Tragedy* [7].

Other works by Kyd include *The Householder's Philosophy*, his 1588 translation of Torquato Tasso's *Padre de Familia*. Some scholars believe him to have written or collaborated on *King Leir*, *Edward III* (also attributed to Shakespeare), and *Arden of Faversham* [8]

On 11 May 1593, the posting of the Dutch Church Libel - an anti-alien attack in blank verse signed by 'Tamburlaine', Marlowe's beloved character - resulted in Kyd's arrest. When an Arianist tract was found in his lodgings, Kyd claimed it belonged to Marlowe, his former roommate. As a result of this evidence, Marlowe was arrested (though Marlowe was murdered [9] before the conclusion of his trial).

It is likely that during his time in prison, Kyd was tortured. He never fully recovered, was rejected by his patron, and died the next year. He was buried on 15 August 1594, aged thirty-five. We are taunted by the greatness of *The Spanish Tragedy*; the true tragedy is that he died so young, and that so little of his writing survives.

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