What's Seneca to Him? Senecan Shakespeare
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Introduction

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> If external influences tend to take effect not simply because they become available but because they in some way echo concerns that already exist independently (revenge, hesitation), they are themselves transformed in the process of transformation of those concerns. It is for this reason that arguments that attempt to isolate the influence of Seneca have proved inconclusive.
>
> (Belsey 1973, 85)

Confluences

At a time when detractors and supporters of Senecan influence on Shakespeare and Elizabethan drama engaged in disputes over the extent of Senecanism detectable in both, Catherine Belsey ruled out any black-and-white approach, calling into question the very notion of influence. Quoting G. K. Hunter, Belsey recalled that "the etymology of influence suggests no single link, but rather a stream of tendency raining down upon its object" (Hunter 1967, 18; Belsey 1973, 65). Literally meaning "the 'action or fact of flowing in'", influence implies a secret, invisible, and insensible flowing (Miola 2003, 323), which for Belsey needed to be reconsidered in terms of a more complex process of confluence of "the native and the classical traditions" (68). Belsey referred this phenomenon to the shaping of soliloquies as a major focus of early modern tragedies. Vacillation, she argued, was indeed a feature of Senecan drama; however, it could not be directly ascribed to ethics, as in Elizabethan plays, but to the fluctuation of passions disconnected with argument and counterargument. Such vacillation was to be viewed "in terms of conflicting waves of emotion succeeding and displacing one another" (68). Early modern tragedy, Shakespeare's included, coalesced precisely this type of Senecan self-anal-

ysis about conflicting passions with the ethical and argumentative attitude of the native tradition of morality plays.

More recently, Lorna Hutson (2015) has argued that Senecan drama, while being grounded in a "rhetoric of deliberation", differs from early modern drama for lack of circumstantial narratives prompting inference about the playworld and the characters. Building on similar premises, Curtis Perry (2021, 23) has further contended that because of Seneca's shift of attention from circumstantial evidence to "hidden inward monstrosities" (25) Seneca appears, like Shakespeare, interested in a kind of "modern subjectivity" that prefigures our own in ways that may seem "chronologically preposterous" (27). Although cautiously – yet provocatively – suggesting modern contemporariness for both poets, Perry's remark prompts two questions that are implied in the title of this issue. The first one concerns ideas of "confluence" encompassing and, at the same time, transcending Belsey's definition recalled above. In a seminal discussion of the reception of ancient scripts on the early modern English stage (1988), Bruce Smith proposed to consider the legacy of the ancients on the modern "from the opposite direction", that is, by looking at "the marks that modern drama has left on ancient, particularly on the stage productions of Greek and Latin scripts in modern times" (6-7). Confluence, in Smith's terms, referred to both the interaction of different traditions, in Belsey's sense, and the mobile historical perspectives between ancients and moderns in an interplay of receptions affecting ideas of traditions, sources, and ultimately, influences. The second question regards how notions of confluence entail contemporary stances. Not only did Shakespeare write for a community of expectations contemporary to him, but we read Shakespeare from within our own community that differs from his. As Charles Martindale has remarked, "'the horizons of expectation' of the text, 'an intersubjective system or structure of expectations', […] enters, and may substantially modify, the different 'horizon of expectation' of the reader" (2006, 4). If the horizon of the text collides with that of the readers, one affects the other, possibly causing anachronistic interferences. This is true for all the signifying virtualities embedded in texts (Bigliazzi 2023). As Sheila Murnaghan acutely pinpointed in a study of Sophocles and Shakespeare, a text such as *Oedipus at Colonus* has sometimes been read through *King Lear* in ways that have made Oedipus "sound more like

Lear". This may be viewed as "a literal instance of a phenomenon that is both the basis of a joke about the absurdity of literary scholarship and, when construed less literally, a serious point made by reception studies: the influence of a later author on an earlier one" (2019, 231-2). This is exactly what is implied in the ellipsis of our title: "What's Seneca to him, *or he to Seneca*?".

Returning in 2015 to an interrogation of sources and origins, Belsey further challenged post-Greenblatt critique of source studies (Greenblatt 1985) by pointing out that what makes a source a source is that, at the same time, it is and is not Shakespeare's text: it is "a source to the degree that it resembles Shakespeare's text", while not being "the work itself, to the degree that it differs from that text" (Belsey 2015, 63). Although apparently a banal truism, it needs stressing that it is in the "differences [that] we can find Shakespeare's hand, his limited originality (limited because the differences themselves may well be derived from other sources in a profusion of intertextual filiations)" (63). It is in the gaps between sources and texts, in the former's wavering between being and not being the latter, that processes of appropriation and transformation lie, providing the ground for signifying "transpositions" (Kristeva 1984; see also Drakakis 2021).

The relevance of this issue in discussions of what Seneca is to Shakespeare (and vice versa) is rooted in the Folio. It was Ben Jonson who first implicitly invoked a sense of "gappiness" (to borrow Emma Smith's term, 2019), in claiming Shakespeare's opaque, invisible belonging and not belonging to a classical tradition of tragedians as a locus of generative potential in a dynamics of intertextual affordances and receptions. In his tribute to the poet, Ben Jonson's invocation of "him of Cordova dead" alongside "thund'ring Aeschylus, Euripides and Sophocles", among the Greek tragedians, "to hear thy buskin tread, / And shakes a stage", at the same time distanced Shakespeare from that company of poets and included him into one and the same community. As Tara Lyons points out in this issue ("Shakespeare and the English Seneca in Print: Collections, Authorship, Collaboration, and Pedagogies of Play-Reading"), Jonson "paradoxically ensures that Shakespeare is rhetorically situated within this very literary network" in which, Jonson implies, Shakespeare is not enmeshed (29). For Lyons, this literary cohort is guaranteed by rhetorical continuities. For Nashe, famously, it was instead good sentences that "English

Seneca read by candlelight" yielded ("Preface to Greene's *Menaphon*" 1589). The first Renaissance tragedy, *Ecerinis*, composed by Albertino Mussato in 1315 in Padua, where it was performed at Christmas, was *modelled* on the "theme, style and metre of Seneca" (Boyle 1997, 245). But it was sentences rather than models that early criticism bent on source hunting looked for. The initial craze was for "crude cataloguing of parallel passages and of formal, structural and thematic debts", and only at a later stage a more cautious critical approach to the intersections between medieval traditions and Seneca's drama focused on the penetration of "'Senecan sensibility', manifested in features as disparate as the ideology of heroism and the 'rhetoric and psychology of power'" (Boyle 1997, 245). However, Boyle has further cautioned that "the notions of 'debt,' 'influence,' and 'source' are themselves problematic, and can signify a number of relationships both direct and indirect between author and author, text and text, text and tradition" (246; see also Miola 1992). Boyle's reference to T. S. Eliot's challenge to "trace Senecan sensibility" beyond formal features and "the borrowing and adaptation of phrases and situations" (1997, 140) did not ignore that that "sensibility" could mean differently for different people. When T. S. Eliot introduced into the English language the word "Senecanism" in his 1927 essay "Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca"[1], what he had in mind was Roman stoicism, a way of thinking that was exemplified by Seneca, but which may have derived from other sources as well (1997, 131; Braden 1984, 279; 1985). Senecanism, for Eliot, encompassed "the attitude of self-dramatization assumed by some of Shakespeare's heroes at moments of tragic intensity" (1997, 129); it was a way for Shakespeare's characters such as Othello of "adopting an aesthetic rather than a moral attitude, dramatizing himself against his environment" (130-1); it was a heightened "*bovarysme*, the human will to see things as they are not" (131). Admittedly, Eliot's discussion of Senecan Shakespeare was not concerned with tracing Senecan's influence on Shakespeare, but with Shakespeare's "illustration of Senecan and stoical principles" (131). This reversal of perspectives, shifting the attention to how the latter poet shed light on the former one in ways that make reversibility

1 *OED* dates it to 1934, when the revised edition of the *Selected Essays* was first published (orig. 1932).

coherent with Smith's idea of confluence and Murnaghan's sense of 'reversed influence', is apparent in Eliot's approach from opposite endpoints to stoicism as a form of protection for the individual in an inimical world. A way of "cheering oneself up" as the "reverse of Christian humility" (131-2) is the kind of self-consolation through self-assertion that Eliot finds in Medea saying "*Medea superest*", the same form of self-affirmation enabling Antony to say "I am Antony still", and Hamlet to die "fairly well pleased with himself": "Horatio, I am dead; / Thou lov'st; report me and my cause aright / To the unsatisfied […] / O good Horatio, what a wounded name, / Things standing thus unknown, shall live behind me!" (132). Eliot explained Antony and Hamlet through Medea, while getting to Medea through Antony and Hamlet. The "Elizabethan hero" appeared to him "much more stoical and Senecan […] than the Senecan hero" (132). It is this sense of a heightened Seneca, whatever this word may mean for anyone, that penetrates our interpretation of what Senecan, and Seneca, mean for us – and Shakespeare in relation to him.

Although for Scaliger Seneca was even greater than Euripides (Miola in this issue: "The Dark Side: Seneca and Shakespeare", 97; Miola 1992, 2), it has often been acknowledged that Romantic writers have bequeathed us a negative legacy that has debased him as second-rate, imitative, and inauthentic compared to Greek authors. As Perry has recently observed, such harsh criticism has distorted for centuries "our understanding of Shakespeare's engagement with Senecan tragedy", so much so that "even if Shakespeareans now acknowledge Seneca to be important for early modern tragedy we remain unlikely to see his influence as an especially robust or interesting one" (2021, 2; see also 11-16). For Perry it is Seneca's own radical individuation "in relation to a Roman moment that involves a modern seeming set of concerns about the relationship of the individual to political community" that best makes Shakespeare's long interest in him relevant to our perception of his modernity – and Seneca's via him (9) – as well as to their conceptions of characterological depth and social and political alienation (5, 21). Thus, if Eliot inaugurated an interpretation of the linkage between the two playwrights through interest in inwardness and self-dramatisation, as recalled above, the foregrounding of the self (or of Braden's "autarkic selfhood", 1985) is made possible only by situating this experience within the playworld, in spaces visualising and framing the

surfacing of unconscious desires and repressed passions beyond plot structures (Perry 2021, 21, 27).

By focusing on questions of authorial construction, appropriation, domestication, but also 'improvement' and expansion, this issue engages with these different threads of confluences, aware of, and dallying with, perspectival mobility about what constructing Senecan Shakespeare may mean.

Constructing Authors

Our starting point is the invention of the English Seneca in 1581 and of Shakespeare-the-author-for-playreaders in 1623. As Stephen Orgel has remarked, "[f]or the Renaissance, classical drama was literature and was taught in school, though Terence was also performed, and was a model for Latin as a living, spoken language, hence somewhere between literature and life" (2015, 64). Seneca too was played in Latin since 1540s and in English apparently once in 1559-1560, at Cambridge, where Neville's translation of *Oedipus*, first published three years later, was produced. Studley's *Agamemnon* was probably staged in 1566 in an unknown venue[2]. The first English translations of Seneca began in 1559, with Heywood's *Troas*, but the ten tragedies were collected only in 1581 by Thomas Newton, who added one translation of his own doing (*Thebais*) to the seven already published in smaller formats (by Heywood, Neville, Studley, and Nuce), to which he also added two more prepared by Studley (*Hippolytus* and *Hercules Oetaeus*). Through those books, and the final canonisation of Seneca as a dramatist who was to be read for his grave and virtuous sayings, despite being a pagan, Newton also gave instructions on how to read plays following Seneca's own teaching: not in fragments, by singling out sentences and individual passages – which, however, enriched the message – but by reading the entire book. English readers of vernacular texts thus became acquainted not only with strange parts of drama, such as the chorus, but also with a way of reading that privileged, as Lyons underlines, "character and plot as integral to exegesis" (34). In "On Discursive Reading", Seneca himself in-

2 See http://www.apgrd.ox.ac.uk/productions/production/169, and http://www.apgrd.ox.ac.uk/productions/production/5097.

structed readers to follow this course, so that in his preface "Newton was actually delivering instruction that echoed Seneca's own advice to play-readers" (36). It may be recalled that, although English plays that were performed in England between 1576 and 1642 also found their way into book form, "fewer than a fifth were ever printed, and of that number not all survive today", so that they "made up a relatively small percentage of the overall book trade and did not enjoy the same literary status as poetry, sermons, philosophical treatises, or even classical drama" (Stevens 2010, 503). It is not coincidental that English drama was banned from the "Oxford's Bodleian Library at its foundation", "though by 1623 drama had moved up sufficiently on the aesthetic scale that the Bodleian was the first owner of record of the Shakespeare folio" (Orgel 2015, 64). However, what was known about classical drama could only be read in books and any performance or translation was based on printed texts. As Stephen Orgel has further observed, "[f]or the Renaissance, classical drama was literature and was taught in school, though Terence was also performed, and was a model for Latin as a living, spoken language, hence somewhere between literature and life" (2015, 64). By placing ourselves in the shoes of early modern readers we can try to grasp how Senecan drama was understood and reinvented.

Presenting in 1581 the Senecan collection by the order of the translators, while also keeping their traditional numbers, meant constructing Seneca as the result of a truly humanist collaborative effort, where translators such as Heywood had claimed editorial accuracy in engaging in textual editing when he first prepared his texts and published them individually only a few decades before Newton's enterprise. The Seneca who emerged from this publication made no distinction between the tragedian and the philosopher, nor was his authorship questioned even in the case of the *Octavia*, a Senecan play in mood while not being by Seneca – it anachronistically contains a reference to Nero's death who outlived Seneca. Although rarely considered from this perspective, the publication of the *Tenne tragedies* in 1581 contributed to the later construction of Shakespeare as an Author, who, albeit not pedagogical, as in Seneca's case, like him transcended time, while being rooted in the theatrical culture of the seventeenth century. Therefore, it may not be far-fetched to argue that the English Seneca was "the midwife assisting at the birth of English

drama" (Rees 1969, "English Seneca: A Preamble", qtd 13), and, as Lyons contends, "an imperative forerunner to Shakespeare's folio" (13). Thus, if reading the *Tenne tragedies* was also a way to learn play-reading, reading Shakespeare's Folio meant approaching it as part of a lineage of classical dramatists whose works were organised according to classical genres, Comedies and Tragedies. This also implied detaching Shakespeare's plays from their theatrical origin, where mixed forms "were readily consumed by audiences" (30) – an origin, however, which the list of the "Principall Actors" with Shakespeare at its top still harked back on.

Performances construct authors as books do, and contemporary performances of Shakespeare tend to construct him as distant from the declamatory Seneca as possible. As Stephen Orgel contends in this issue ("Domesticating Seneca"), our modern ways of performing Hamlet as ruminative more than declamatory makes us forget that soliloquies were declaimed. Actors soliloquising on stage did not do so in a voice-over, as famously Laurence Olivier in his 1948 *Hamlet*. The player reciting the Hecuba passage in the same play declaims the narrative of Priam's death and Hecuba's grief, albeit not bombastically, but according to Hamlet's taste for moderate acting – a cameo piece metatheatrically foregrounding what meant declaiming. Although difficult to stage, Marcus' highly rhetorical description of Lavinia's maimed body in *Titus Andronicus*, a scene Heather James reads as an anti-Petrarchan blazon (1997, 66-8), is sometimes erased from performance (as in Peter Brook's 1957 production) not only because incongruously lyrical, but also because declamatory as a Senecan drama is expected to be. It is a piece that affords a performative styleme deeply resonating with Seneca – if by this we mean the performative potential embedded in his rhetoric. It is a resonance suggesting a virtual 'performativity' akin to Burrow's notion of stylistic imitation (2019), except that it concerns acting. Julie Tamore's 1999 *Titus* retains that declamation but situates it within an estranging postmodern scene, where Lavinia is turned into a Daphne morphing into a tree, with the stumps of her arms branching out into twigs and blood gushing out of her mouth – Ovidian metamorphosis and Senecan horror of a post-rape Daphne. Orgel's reference to a Chorus figure from Giovanni Paolo's *Antigone* dating from 1581 visualises this kind of performance style which was very much in tune with Senecan long speeches.

As Orgel further reminds us, *the* tragedy par excellence in Renaissance England, when "revenge was the originary subject of drama" (53), was not *Oedipus*, but *Thyestes*, a play featuring an inventively gruesome killing of children. Compared to Seneca, Greek tragedy is more concerned with the killing of parents, as in the cases of Oedipus, Electra, and Orestes. But in Seneca, the action often climaxes with the death of children. This happens in plays like *Hercules Furens*, *Medea*, and *Thyestes*, and this is also the case with *Phaedra* and the *Trojan Woman*, where Hippolytus, Astyanax and Polyxena are also sons and daughters who are killed for revenge or sacrificed (Braden 1985, 249; Patrick Gray "Seneca Improved: Shakespeare's Medieval Optimism", 137). Braden makes the same point with regard to Macbeth's killing of Macduff's children (1984, 291), and in this issue Patrick Gray mentions Cordelia, Ophelia, and Desdemona as figures of blameless young women who die for no fault of their own, symbols of suffering innocence (137ff.). In *Titus Andronicus*, sons and daughters also die, and no one, says Orgel, "argues against revenge except Tamora, who is obviously disingenuous" (62). It may be recalled that in the years when revenge tragedy was taking shape in England, judicial punishment was not yet entirely distinct from extra-judicial forms, and that in any case the topic was still controversial, suggesting a degree of continuity between "wild justice", in Bacon's terms[3], and "justice" (Callaghan and Kyle 2007, 54). More recently, Woodbridge has emphasised that a certain distrust of justice at the time favoured private vengeance as a response to the failings or perversions of the court system, and that drama, in turn, replicated this by exploring four main possibilities: unacknowledged merit, undeserved rewards, unpunished crimes, and unjust punishments. *Titus Andronicus* fulfils all four conditions, but it

3 In the 1625 expanded edition of his *Essays* (the first one dates from 1597 and the second from 1612), Francis Bacon included the essay "On revenge", which gives this definition: "Revenge is a kind of wild justice, which the more man's nature runs to, the more ought law to weed it out. For as for the first wrong, it doeth but offend the law; but the revenge of that wrong putteth the law out of office. Certainly, in taking revenge, a man is but even with his enemy; but in passing it over, he is superior; for it is a prince's part to pardon. […] Public revengers are for the most part fortunate. […] But in private revengers are not so. Nay rather, vindicative persons live the life of witches, who, as they are mischievous, so end they infortunate" (1999: 10-11).

problematises the Senecan model, hyper-Senecally building an escalation of revenge on a stratified series of classical patterns of female violence (subjects and objects alike), calling into question gender and power relations[4]. And yet, that Senecan model remains the matrix of Elizabethan, and Shakespearean, revenge tragedy. The Latin Seneca, as the Seneca of Jasper Heywood and the other translators, lies at the origin of the genre as well as of ideas of "declamatory Seneca". Beyond modern performative domestications – the articles in this issue claim – he remains audible across Shakespeare's entire career.

Dissonant Polyphonies

"In *Hamlet* Shakespeare does not resolve the tension between classical and Christian melodies but arranges them in dissonant polyphony" (Miola "The Dark Side: Seneca and Shakespeare", 109). In his article, Robert Miola asks what it means acting like a Senecan revenger for Shakespeare and convincingly argues that "like no Senecan revenger, Hamlet struggles with the morality of revenge" (107). Questioning both the classical and the Christian tradition, differently from Atreus, Hamlet "worries about damnation and wants to act in perfect conscience" (107). It is in this gap of conscience distancing Hamlet from Atreus that Seneca appears especially relevant; Atreus makes Hamlet's language more audible in so far as it is not the language Atreus speaks, while still resembling it. As Dominique Goy Blanquet recalls in "Seneca's Metamorphoses, from Chaucer to Shakespeare", Shakespeare's familiar pattern was to revise or dramatise other works, by "following his principal source quite closely and then to veer ever further from it as he developed the action and the characters in his own distinctive manner" (Jonathan Bate's 2018 edition of *Titus Andronicus*, 133; qtd 89-90). In this

4 A problematisation of power relations in *Titus* is consubstantial to the gender and cultural affiliation of the avengers, complicating the issue with implications of 'feminisation' of the avenger, first seen as a 'weak subject', then as a subject of bestial violence', leading to a complex layering of female patterns of violence: the only form of self-defence and self-assertion triggered by the violence of male power in cultural systems in crisis, such as that of Rome at the time of its victory over the Goths. It is not surprising that in this context *Titus* bears the trading mark of a super-Senecan drama, although its configuration hybridises revenge models across Roman and Greek narratives, from Ovid to Euripides (cf. Bigliazzi 2018b, 2019b).

sense, the Hamletic sceptical variations on Senecan revenge, also mentioned by Miola, "place him on a higher ontological level" in ways that witness Shakespeare's dialectical engagement with Seneca from *Richard III* to *Hamlet*, not his jettisoning Seneca, even when Senecan revengers are made to appear comparatively archaic (Goy Blanquet 89; see also Perry 2021, 81, 87-8). Hamlet is "haunted by a whole range of classical actions and modes of speech that threaten to absorb him", Burrow remarks (2013, 175), but it is precisely his not being absorbed that allows him to challenge those models while retaining the mood. Miola's article shows how this occurs textually by moving from parallel loci indicating possibilities to "inherited topoi and reformulated conventions, clusters of rhetorical and thematic ideas and larger patterns of concatenation and configuration", as in the case of the *domina-nutrix* or *satelles* pairs[5]. From an analysis of anagrammatic wordplay, as in the *amnes* (rivers), *amens* (mad), *manes* (shade) verbal alchemy of Demetrius' *Per Stigia, per manes vehor* ("through Stigian regions, through shades I am borne", II.1.35) that modifies Phaedra's *Styga, per amnes igneos amens sequar* ("Through Styx, through rivers of fire I shall madly follow", 1180), to a close discussion of more extended passages, Miola examines a whole range of subtle transformations of language, styles, and devices, including the typically Senecan *Schreirede*: the "heightened speech whereby the character (or the chorister) deflects his glance from his own person and frantically looks for sympathy in the presumptively sympathetic universe" (Rosenmeyer 1989, qtd 100). Thus, by way of verbal alteration and the imitation of models and conventions, Shakespeare appeals to classical *auctoritas*, and re-shapes Senecan fragments, moments of speech and forms to express new meanings.

For Miola Seneca "conducted Shakespeare on a journey through the dark side of human life" (115), but his Senecan heroes are nonetheless located within a Judaeo-Christian context different from Seeneca's. This assumption constitutes both the premise and the final thesis of Patrick Gray's article, which argues that Medieval optimism in Shakespeare modifies substantially what he retains of Seneca's stoic pessimism. Gray's contention is that "while his contemporaries became more Neo-Senecan, Shakespeare instead doubled down on his lifelong indebtedness to medieval Christian drama and romance". What interests

5 On the classical legacy of the *nutrix* figure see Colombo ed. 2022.

Gray is that the "arc of Shakespeare's career can be understood […] as at least in part the expression of a lifelong, horrified, fascinated, slow-burning disagreement with Seneca about metaphysics as well as ethics" (122). While Goy Blanquet and Miola are concerned with how textually and conceptually Shakespeare configures and expresses madness, fear, fury, and tyranny, as well as the moral dimension of vengeance at the core of the tragic experience, Gray looks at those issues from the other end of the spectrum: from the point where the tragic is behind, and Christian reconciliation comes to the fore. At that point, the sense of a Christian order despite sufferance no longer appears by way of dramatic irony, as in the tragedies, but substantially. Thus, to the question 'What's Seneca to Shakespeare?' Gray replies that he is "a provocation, a bogeyman, a sparring partner, a shadow self. He is […] what Montaigne is to Bacon, Descartes and Pascal. He articulates what the other is most afraid might be true" (127). It is no surprise, therefore, that Shakespeare's departure from Seneca is especially evident in the late plays, which are beyond the darker experience of tragedy, whose echoes eventually remain audible as fragments of a virtuality diluted and assuaged into romance and tragicomedy. No wonder that Gray engages with George Steiner (1996) at this point because it is the idea itself of Senecan and Shakespearean tragedy that is questioned through its transcendence. Famously, Steiner found in Greek drama the embodiment of absolute tragedy (except for, understandably, *Eumenides* and *Oedipus at Colonus*), and considered Senecan tragedy an inferior version of it. For him, Shakespeare offered only occasional glimpses of an absolute sense of the tragic, for instance in *Timon of Athens* and *King Lear*, because he thought that his tragedies had "in them strong, very nearly decisive, counter-currents of repair, of human radiance, of public and communal restoration" (xiii). Gray challenges both ideas, Steiner's debasement of Senecan tragedy and his acceptance of *Lear* as an absolute tragedy, advocating an alternative vision to suffering as the promised end in the fallen world: the possibility that the end of the story may not be "The End" (John Cox, *Seeming Knowledge: Shakespeare's Skeptical Faith*, 2007; qtd, 121)[6].

6 For Garber (2004, 694), which Gray quotes, this question is destined to remain open. For a different position which engages with the same problem, but from the point of view of ancient and early modern conceptions of temporality in relation to the figure of Oedipus in Sophocles and Seneca and of Lear in Shakespeare, see Bigliazzi 2019a.

Praetexta

In "'Teach me how to curse': Senecan Historiography and *Octavia*'s Agrippina in *Richard III*", Caroline Engelmayer brings the discussion beyond Seneca through the reception of a play devoid of Senecan authenticity, but whose authority Thomas Newton and his contemporaries did not question: the *Octavia*. With this article we enter the historiographical debate related to processes of cultural memory and national myth-making (155) as constructed in Shakespeare's historical plays, a genre which the Folio significantly did not derive from classical models. Engelmayer argues that the *Octavia* provided Shakespeare with unprecedented dramatic resources which he exploited in the construction of competing historical models in *Richard III*, a play that for once is not examined for the 'autarchic selfhood of the titular character', but for its female voices. Interestingly, the *Octavia* is considered for the affordances it offered Shakespeare to reinterpret Margaret through Agrippina as the leading, and most controversial, female figure of a group who from the margins redraw the trajectory of the nation's history beyond "autarkic selfhood and unquenchable *ira*" (156). This play, as an example of "secondary pseudonymity" showing stylistic overlap with the Senecan corpus, provided Renaissance writers with possibilities for generic appropriation in the articulation of political history "around a typically Senecan double-bind of historical causality" (157; Perry 2021, 39ff.): the character's acknowledgement of his wish for and impossibility to escape the Tudor myth. For Engelmayer, the antagonism between "Nero's teleological narrative of imperium *sine fine* against assertions of cyclical strife championed by the ghost of Agrippina" (158) is appropriated and adapted by Shakespeare to contrast Richard's imperial narrative with Margaret's cyclical sense of history. As the article suggests, this is not Shakespeare's only rethinking of Octavian Agrippina, a figure that crops up again in Gertrude as the objective of Hamlet's excessive affections, as well as in plays such as *Julius Caesar* and *King John*. But in *Richard III*, Agrippina is a more complex and composite Senecan memory in combining with other memories of Hecuba from the *Trojan Women*, where likewise female lament exposes and denounces a cyclical history of male violence. In this pseudo-Senecan praetexta, Shakespeare finds both inspiration for interrogating national history, and the symbol of factional conflicts prefiguring the

Wars of the Roses. For Shakespeare, Engelmayer suggests, "English civil bloodshed formed yet another iteration of the strife that plagues the imperial play world of the *Octavia*" (171). And if Nero's matricidal violence prefigures Richard's own violence, Agrippina's prophecy, as a precedent for Margaret's own prophecies, is eventually "a vector for Christian providential justice" (159) towards "the Tudors' redemptive ascent to the throne" (178).

Expansions

As we have seen, Senecan verbal echoes are often turned by Shakespeare into verbal alchemies expressing "new meaning[s] often far removed from or even contrary to their original import" (Miola "The Dark Side", 102). David Adkins' "Juliet *Furens*: Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* as Senecan Drama" and Francesco Dall'Olio's "'Like to the Pontic sea': Early Modern Medea and the Dramatic Significance of *Othello* III. iii.456-61" present two cases where the expansion of the verbal parallels exemplifies how Senecan confluences may combine Shakespeare's Senecan memories and Shakespeare's memories of Senecan receptions alike. David Adkins' foray into Shakespeare's actualisation of a Senecan latency in the sources of *Romeo and Juliet* about Juliet's frenzy and horrible imaginings in the potion scene (IV.iii), brings to the surface an elaborate dynamics of memorial rearticulations of *Hercules Furens*. For Adkins, "[t]he question is not whether this is a Senecan tragedy but what kind of Senecan tragedy it will be, and which Senecan personae Juliet will enact as she performs her dismal scene" (187). Interestingly, the expansion of the Senecan imaginary revolving around how "the horrible conceit of death and night" (IV.iii.37) changes Juliet's response to fear from the novellas tradition to a Herculean model of madness, when the loss of reason leads to destructive agency. Verbal echoes disclose that "the most frightening place in *Romeo and Juliet* is Juliet's mind" (189), a nightmarish locus which at the same time links this passage with Hercules' fury and Tamora's own alleged fear of madness in the horrible vale she describes in *Titus Andronicus* II.ii.102-4. But expansion goes beyond these lines, knitting together Senecan resonances as can be found in Deianira's fear that Nessus' love potion may be poisoned in *Hercules Oetaeus*; but also in a more general fear of being buried alive as discussed in Seneca's *Natural Questions*, as well as in images of death

from the *Trojan Women*, connecting Juliet with both Astyanax' murder and Polyxena's sacrifice. As Adkins contends, "What makes the lovers' end Senecan is that horror has given way to wonder. Juliet's premonitions that her dismal scene belongs to Senecan tragedy are accurate, but only insofar as there is more to Senecan tragedy than the horrifically grotesque" (208). Whether we agree with this view or not,[7] Romeo's final encounter with Juliet's splendour in the monument does convey a sense of exalted triumph reminding us of Polyxena's amazing beauty in her sacrificial death: "stupet omne vulgus […] movet animus omnes fortis et leto obvious […] miserentur ac mirantur" (1143, 1146, 1148; see 208). This is how "Shakespeare overpowers Senecan dread with Senecan wonder, reading the word against the word" (209); in such moments of "erasure and amnesia" (Burrow 2013, 200), the reader may see how Seneca is transformed into Shakespeare (209).

Francesco Dall'Olio also focuses on a single passage to expand the discussion to cover the whole play. The starting point are the famous Pontic lines in III.iii as the crucial moment when Othello resolves to revenge on Desdemona. Curtis Perry (2021) has recently suggested that Othello shifts from a Ciceronian model of public persona to a Senecan one based on constancy and unwavering identity. Building on this premise, Dall'Olio reinterprets the Pontic passage vis-à-vis *Medea* 404-7 (*dum siccas polus / versabit Arctos, flumina in pontum cadent, / numquam meus cessabit in poenas furor*; see e.g. Braden 1985, 175), suggesting more than an inert allusion to that play. The contention is that "the Pontic passage falls within the scope of a broader Elizabethan tradition of appropriations of the Medea model which articulates the violent or cruel vengeful behaviour of male or female tragic characters, or their loss of social or gender identity" (219). Thus set against the backdrop of contemporary receptions of Medea feeding into early modern Medea-like figures, both male and female, the Pontic passage helps rethink the whole tragedy within a wider context where dangerous otherness was formulated, on the one hand, as male barbarous intrusion threatening society (Othello), on the other, as female non-conformity to social standards of femininity (Desdemona). Thus, elaborating on the Pontic passage, Dall'Olio engages with the dramatic and conceptual articulation of the play through the mirror of Elizabethan receptions of Medea

7 For alternative positions see for instance Targoff 2012; Bigliazzi 2016.

to go beyond intertextual parsing and foreground the main theme of the tragedy: "the damnation of the Other within a bourgeois-puritan civilization that removes and expels the monsters of its own imagination through projection" (Serpieri 2003, 5; trans. Dall'Olio, 238).

Coda

As noted at the outset, this special issue is premised on an awareness that all readings are located at different points on the reception spectrum. Our title asks what Seneca is to Shakespeare, but also, silently, what Shakespeare is to Seneca. But a third question latent in all the articles, needs spelling: what's Seneca to Shakespeare's contemporaries, and what are they to Seneca? The first classical play written in English was performed at Gray's Inn in 1566, and it claimed to be an English version of Euripides. But, as we now know, George Gascoigne and Francis Kinwelmershe's *Jocasta* was a translation of Lodovico Dolce's 1549 *Giocasta*, roughly based on Euripides' *Phoenician Women*, but with massive differences. For one, he introduced an entirely new spectacular scene with the sacrifice of a goat, reminiscent of the narrative of the sacrifice of a bull and a heifer in Seneca's *Oedipus*[8]. Robert Miola has dubbed Dolce's tragedy a "Senecan adaptation" based "on a Latin translation", underscoring that when Gascoigne and Kinwelmersh presented their English version to their audience, their 'Euripides' was in fact "three hands and three tongues removed from the original Greek" (2002, 33). To what extent did it remind the spectators at Gray's Inn, and the readers who first encountered this play in Gascoigne's 1573 *A Hundreth Sundrie Flowers*, of Seneca? What was Seneca *to them* if they received that play as neither Italian nor Senecan, yet fully Greek? The derivation from Dolce's play was suggested by J.P. Mahaffy in 1879, and only a few years later, in 1884, John Addington Symonds corrected the assumption that "'Jocasta' is the only early English play for which a Greek source has been claimed", eventually acknowledging its "Italian derivation" (222). Apparently, no Senecan shade had entered the picture yet, although for most of us it is neither secret not invisible; after all, a goat was still Greek then, if the frontispiece claimed it. Our Senecan sense of it may or may not be theirs.

8 See Bigliazzi and Suthren (forthcoming).

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