What's Seneca to Him? Senecan Shakespeare
ISSN 2283-8759
pp. 91-111 (2023)

The Dark Side: Seneca and Shakespeare

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Seneca conducted Shakespeare on a journey through the dark side of human life – rage, madness, tyranny, revenge, and furor. This journey passed through infernal and nightmarish landscapes, *per Stygia* ("through Stygian regions"), *per amnes igneos* ("through rivers of fire"), and *per scelera* ("through crimes"). It introduced protagonists who dare to defy the gods and dislocate the universe by committing evils without precedent and beyond limit (*modus*). This experience of the dark side furnished Shakespeare (and most of the West) with resources for drama, especially tragedies like *Titus Andronicus*, *Macbeth*, *Hamlet*, *Richard III*, and *Othello*. We shall explore Shakespeare's reception of these resources through three distinct but related modalities – quotation with and without Latin markers; the reimagination of extended passages, characters, and actions; and the refiguration of a convention, *the domina-nutrix* dialogue.

Keywords: Shakespeare, *Titus Andronicus*, *Macbeth, Hamlet*, *The Tempest*, *Richard II*, *Othello,* Seneca, *Phaedra*, *Thyestes*, Revenge, Intertextuality, *Domina-nutrix* dialogue

Though modern readers tend to agree with T. S. Eliot, who famously quipped, "Seneca's characters all seem to speak with the same voice, and at the top of it" (Eliot 1927, 54), early modern writers found in his plays compelling paradigms of tragic speech, character, and action. The great Renaissance critic Julius Caesar Scaliger declared Seneca, "nullo Graecorum maiestate inferiorem […] culto vero ac nitore etiam Euripide maiorem" (inferior to none of the Greeks in majesty […] in ornamentation and splendor greater even than Euripides)[1] (Scaliger 1561, 323). This decidedly eccentric opinion nevertheless reflects widespread critical admiration. Witness Polonius in *Hamlet*, who casually identifies "heavy" Seneca (II.ii.327) as the model for

1 On the initial stages of the early modern discovery of Seneca see Guastella 2016.

tragedy, for portraits of outsized passion, rage, revenge, tyranny, and *furor*. Deeply exploring the dark side, Seneca's characters say the unspeakable (*nefas*), and do the unthinkable (*crimen*, "crime", *scelus*, "wickedness"). The list of dramatic imitators includes Mussato, Cinthio, and Dolce in Italy, Jodelle, Garnier, Corneille, and Racine in France, Kyd, Marlowe, and Jonson in England, O'Neill and others in America. And, of course, Shakespeare. Seneca bequeathed to these dramatists, in A. J. Boyle's concise formulation, models for "vivid and powerful declamatory verse, psychological insight, highly effective staging, an intellectually demanding verbal and conceptual framework, and a precocious preoccupation with theatricality and theatricalization" (Boyle 2017, xviii). Seneca also gave to Shakespeare and the West an anguished idiom for tragic reflection, soliloquy, and self-creation through language and action, what Gordon Braden perceptively called "a style of autarkic selfhood" (Braden 1985, 2). We shall explore Shakespeare's reception of these gifts through selected case studies in three distinct but related modalities – quotation with Latin markers; the reimagination of extended passages, characters, and actions; and the refiguration of a convention, *the domina-nutrix* dialogue[2].

I

The Peele-Shakespeare *Titus Andronicus* features two Senecan quotations, both, significantly, from *Phaedra*, Seneca's tale of monstrous passion, false allegation of rape, filicide, and dismemberment. In *Titus Andronicus* the future rapist Demetrius, burning with lust, declares

2 Positivistic modalities centering on parallel passages, of course, only begin to indicate the possibilities. Miola also attends to "inherited topoi and reformulated conventions" (1992, 9-10), "clusters of rhetorical and thematic ideas", and "larger patterns of concatenation and configuration"; Burrow analyzes Senecan influence as a rich fusion of remembrances, an "intertextual concoction" with transformed ingredients (2013, 165). Proposing Seneca's *Thebais* and *Oedipus* as well as Sophocles's Theban plays as "original" texts for *Lear*, Kerrigan argues that "layers of imitation resonate back to antiquity, to something like symphonic effect" (2018, 64). Similarly, Perry discusses the "resources" and "affordances" of Senecan tragedy (2021, 1-36).

> *Sit fas aut nefas*, till I find the stream
> To cool this heat, a charm to calm these fits,
> *Per Stygia, per manes vehor*. (II.1.134-36)[3]

The first Latin phrase, "Sit fas aut nefas" (be it right or wrong) is commonplace but the second, "Per Stygia, per manes vehor" (II.i.35, "Through Stygian regions, through shades I am borne"), echoes and alters Phaedra's resolution after hearing of Hippolytus's death, "per Styga, per amnes igneos amens sequar" (*Phaedra* 1180, "through Styx, through rivers of fire I shall madly follow"). Demetrius's "vehor" (I am borne) signifies that he is passively carried through a hell of mad passion, whereas Phaedra's "sequar" (I shall follow) actively commits her to future action in the world below. Furthermore, Demetrius anagrammatically recomposes Phaedra's "amnes" (rivers) and "amens" (mad / madly) into his "manes" (shades); Pramit Chaudhuri comments tellingly.

> Thus, the twinned themes of semiotic confusion and moral disorder emerge not only from the inaccurate and inapposite citation of literary models – Ovid and Seneca – but also from the very nature of the anagrammatic wordplay itself: the word *manes* ("shades") both recalls the text's Senecan roots and advertises their ostentatious transformation by a process of verbal alchemy, letter by-letter, scene-by-scene (Chaudhuri 2014, 795).

Such verbal alchemy has sinister purposes: significantly, Phaedra in her lines renounces lust and seeks to pay the penalty through suicide ("poenas tibi / solvam", 1175-6); altering her words and wrenching them out of context, Demetrius seeks to valorize his future rape and mutilation of Lavinia.

Significantly the Goth son here echoes and imitates the Roman son Lucius at the outset of the play:

> Give us the proudest prisoner of the Goths,
> That we may hew his limbs and on a pile,
> *Ad manes fratrum*, sacrifice his flesh. (I.i.99-101)

3 I quote Shakespeare from *The Norton Shakespeare* (Shakespeare 2016); Seneca from the Loeb edition, *Seneca Tragedies* (Seneca 2018). I modify translations from this edition and cite other classical authors and translations to their Loeb editions.

Intending to sacrifice Alarbus "ad manes fratrum", to "the shades of brothers", the Andronici portray barbaric slaughter as religious ritual. Titus in effect parses the valorizing Latin phrase, "ad manes fratrum", to the anguished Tamora:

> Patient yourself, madam, and pardon me.
> These are their brethren whom your Goths beheld
> Alive and dead, and for their brethren slain
> Religiously they ask a sacrifice. (I.i.124-27)

Though Romans generally disapproved of human sacrifice, Ovid supplied some ancient precedent for this Latin expression: Althaea asks the shades of her recently killed brothers ("fraterni manes, animaeque recentes", *Metamorphoses* 8.488) to accept the sacrifice of her son[4]. The Andronici here, like Demetrius later, use some imported Latin to authorize their atrocity. Like Roman, like Goth. The crime that initiates the revenge action thus reverberates in the subsequent horrors as the play devastatingly deconstructs Roman pretensions to civilization and virtue.

After Lavinia reveals her rape and her rapists, the horrified Titus again quotes Seneca's *Phaedra*: "Magni dominator poli, / Tam lentus audis scelera, tam lentus vides?" (IV.i.81-82, "Ruler of great heaven, are you so slow to hear crimes, so slow to see them?"). He here echoes Hippolytus: "Magne regnator deum, / tam lentus audis scelera? tam lentus vides?" (671-72, "Great ruler of the gods, are you so slow to hear crimes, so slow to see them?"). Titus voices what Thomas G. Rosenmeyer has called the Senecan *Shreirede*, "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, 183). This cry expresses in another key his later mournful desperation signaled by quotation from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (1.150), "Terras Astraea reliquit" (IV.iii.4, "Astraea [Justice] has left the earth").

4 For another precedent see Livy's Horatius before slaying an Alban: "'Duos', inquit, 'fratrum Manibus dedi: tertium causae belli huiusce, ut Romanus Albano imperet, dabo'" (*Ab Urbe condita*, 1.25.12, "'Two victims' he said, 'I have given to the shades of my brothers: the third I will offer up to the cause of this war, that Roman may rule Alban'").

Madly, Titus sends letters by arrow to the heavens, to Jove, Apollo, Mars, Pallas, Mercury, and Saturn; "We will solicit heaven and move the gods / To send down Justice for to wreak our wrongs" (IV.iii.53-54). Senecan question and solicitation of the gods becomes a standard part of early modern tragic idiom, deployed most variously and agonizingly in *King Lear*, where the characters continually look heavenward in petition, self-congratulation, bewilderment, frustration, or accusatory outrage.

As before, the Senecan quotation in *Titus Andronicus* shows significant alteration. The theistic opening invocation, "Magni dominator poli" (Ruler of great heaven), replaces the polytheistic original, "Magne regnator deum" (Great ruler of the gods). The substituted "dominator" appears four times in Senecan tragedy, twice in *Phaedra* (1039, 1159), twice in *Titus Andronicus*, and only one other time elsewhere in Shakespeare's works, in a comic bombastic address to the King by the swaggering Spanish soldier, Don Adriano di Armado[5]. The other occurrence of "dominator" in *Titus Andronicus* occurs in Aaron's earlier declaration to Tamora, "Madam, though Venus govern your desires, / Saturn is dominator over mine" (II.iii.30-31). Here Aaron anglicizes the word to reject Tamora's advances and to identify the deity that rules him, Saturn, who stands in pointed opposition to Titus's "dominator", i.e., Jupiter or God, and whose name resounds in the vicious earthly ruler in the play, Saturninus. The mythological deity Saturn also doubles as the planet that astrologically determines temperament, according to the theory of the four humors. In this role Saturn, associated with cold and dry elements, causes an excess of black bile that results in melancholic individuals; as Robert Burton explains:

> If *Saturn* be predominate in his nativity, and cause melancholy in his temperature, then he shall be very austere, sullen, churlish, black of color, profound in his cogitations, full of cares, miseries, and discontents, sad and fearful always, silent, solitary. (Burton 1621, 242)

Titus's "dominator" is a god of Justice who resides in heaven and can punish the wicked; contrarily, Aaron's "dominator" resides within as

5 "Great deputy, the welkin's vicegerent and sole dominator of Navarre, my soul's earth's god, and body's fostering patron" (*Love's Labour's Lost*, I.i.213-15).

melancholic temperament and spurs his evil deeds: "Vengeance is in my heart, death in my hand, / Blood and revenge are hammering in my head" (II.iii.38-39). The heavenly god of justice makes no appearance in the play but the human capacity for bloodshed and revenge is on full display.

Senecan quotation in *Titus Andronicus* authenticates the play's classical setting and its genre as tragedy. More broadly, the Latin spoken on stage illustrates the humanist habit of citing classical authority, of adducing Greek and Latin texts as compelling precedents for thought and action, as well as their habit of fragmentation, of piecemeal remembrance and appropriation. But Senecan quotation here also illustrates the paradox at the heart of the humanist appeal to classical *auctoritas*: in new contexts fragmentary quotations express new meanings, ones often far-removed from or even, as here, contrary to their original imports. Recontextualized, supposed nuggets of timeless and unchanging wisdom turn out to be indeterminate and highly flexible sites of signification. Shakespeare beautifully illustrates this problematical hermeneutic in Titus's quotation of Horace *Odes* 1.22: "Integer vitae, sceleris purus / Non eget Mauri iaculis, nec arcu" (IV.ii.20-21, "The man upright in life and free from crimes needs neither the javelins of the Moor nor the bow"). Demetrius's reading of the Latin lines gives the dim-witted Chiron a chance to congratulate himself on his recollection of Lily's Latin grammar, a standard Elizabethan schoolbook. But Aaron reads more rightly their new threatening signification, written as they are on scroll wrapped around an arrow:

> Why what a thing it is to be an ass!
> Here's no sound jest! The old man hath found their guilt
> And sends them weapons wrapped about with lines
> That wound beyond their feeling to be quick. (IV.ii.25-8)

The opening lines from Horace's playful poem on the lover's invulnerability here become literally and figuratively weaponized, grim prophecies of Titus's imminent and bloody revenge on men manifestly not upright in life and free from crimes.

II

In addition to quoting lines of Seneca and reworking well-known sententiae, Shakespeare also reimagines extended Senecan passages, characters, and actions. Commentators, for example, have long noted two echoes of Seneca in Macbeth's outcry[6]:

> Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood
> Clean from my hand? No, this my hand will rather
> The multitudinous seas incarnadine,
> Making the green one red. (II.ii.63-66)

Macbeth recalls both Hippolytus's interrogative wish for lustral purification and his simultaneous realization of its impossibility:

> *quis eluet me Tanais aut quae barbaris*
> *Maeotis undis Pontico incumbens mari?*
> *non ipse toto magnus Oceano pater*
> *tantum expiarit sceleris.* (*Phaedra*, 715-18)

> (What Tanais will wash me clean, what Maeotis, pouring its barbarous waters into the Pontic sea? Not even with the whole of Ocean could the great father himself cleanse so much guilt.)

In an early modern edition of Seneca published around the time of *Macbeth*, Thomas Farnaby glossed this passage with cross references to the similar agonized question and answer in *Hercules Furens*:

> *quis Tanais aut quis Nilus aut quis Persica*
> *violentus unda Tigris aut Rhenus ferox*
> *Tagusve Hibera turbidus gaza fluens*
> *abluere dextram poterit? Arctoum licet*
> *Maeotis in me gelida transfundat mare*
> *et tota Tethys per meas currat manus,*
> *haerebit altum facinus.* (1323-29)

> (What Tanais or what Nile or what Persian Tigris with its violent waters or fierce Rhine or Tagus, turbid with Spanish treasure, can wash my right hand

6 See, e.g., Cunliffe 1893, 84-85, who credits Lessing (*Theatralische Bibliothek*, 1754) for the *Hercules Furens* parallel below.

> clean? Though chill Maeotis should pour its northern seas over me and all the Ocean stream across my hands, the deed will stay deeply ingrained.) (Farnaby 1613, 70)

Farnaby commented: "Mari autem polluta cuncta expiari credebantur: θάλασσα κλύζει πάντα τἀνθρώπων κακά" (They used to believe that all pollutions could be purified by the sea: "The sea washes away all the evils of men", Euripides, *Iphigenia in Tauris,* 1193). This ancient belief generated in Greek and Roman tragedy the conceit of a crime so heinous as to defy purification by the earth's rivers and oceans[7].

Arising from Greek ideas about "miasma" (pollution, defilement, stain of guilt), this conceit undergoes Senecan rhetorical formulation and then combines with post-classical ideas of sin, conscience, and damnation to generate tragic rhetoric and action in *Macbeth*. The tyrant gains the crown but cannot clear away his guilt, depicted in Christian terms: Macbeth discovers too late that it is better to be dead than suffer the stings of conscience, "Than on the torture of the mind / To lie in restless ecstasy" (III.ii.21-22). Before the murder of the king he ponders "the deep damnation of his taking off" and later admits that he has given his soul to the devil, his "eternal jewel […] to the common enemy of man" (I.vii.20; III.i.68-69). Initially Lady Macbeth mocks her husband's horror at his blood-stained hands and weapons and boasts that she can easily wash away the pollution: taking the bloody daggers, she declares, "A little water clears us of this deed. / How easy is it then" (II.ii.70-71). Later she reappears, tormented, broken, sleepwalking, ceaselessly miming handwashing: "Out, damned spot! Out I say!", "What, will these hands ne'er be clean?", "Here's the smell of blood still. All the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand. Oh, oh, oh!" (V.i.31, 38, 44-45). Senecan rhetoric here generates a famous *coup de théâtre*, one that original performances expanded spectacularly, according to Simon Forman, eyewitness to a 1611 staging of *Macbeth* at the Globe: "When Macbeth had murdered the king, the blood on his hands could not be washed off by any means, nor from his wife's hands, which handled the bloody

7 See Aeschylus's choral description of all streams failing to purify a "χερομυσῆ φόνον" ("a hand stained by murder", *Choe.* 72-74 [73]) and the Messenger's comment about the inability of Ister and Phasis to wash clean Oedipus's house (Sophocles, *Oedipus Tyrannus* 1226-27). See also Parker 1996, 226-27.

daggers in hiding them" (Forman 1611, 207r). Visible throughout the play, these blood-stained hands become a striking production choice and memorable stage effect.

Another example, more naturalized and less signaled by verbal echo, appears in *Hamlet*, which descends from Seneca's much-imitated *Thyestes*, the archetype for revenge tragedy in the West. The revenger Atreus first enters the stage berating himself for inaction:

> *Ignave, iners, enervis et (quod maximum*
> *probrum tyranno rebus in summis reor)*
> *inulte, post tot scelera, post fratris dolos*
> *fasque omne ruptum questibus vanis agis*
> *iratus Atreus*? (176-80)
>
> (Idle, inert, impotent, and [what I count the greatest reproach for a tyrant in crises] unavenged: after so many crimes, after your brother's treachery and the breaking of every principle, do you act with futile complaints – you, Atreus in anger?)

Beginning with the snarling consonant-vowel combinations, this speech provides one well-noted genesis for Hamlet's soliloquy of self-reproach, "Oh, what a rogue and peasant slave am I!" (II.ii.469):

> Yet I,
> A dull and muddy-mettled rascal, peak
> Like John-a-dreams, unpregnant of my cause,
> And can say nothing – no, not for a King
> Upon whose property and most dear life
> A damned defeat was made. Am I a coward?
> Who calls me villain, breaks my pate across,
> Plucks off my beard and blows it in my face? (II.ii.485-92)

Emrys Jones observes that "what is recalled is not so much the exact words as the shape and movement of the passage" (Jones 1977, 23). Both speeches share accusatory interrogatives, disgust at inaction, a listing of offenses, self-loathing, and the imperative call to action. A. B. Taylor (1988, 522-24) notes additionally that John Studley's translation of Seneca's opening triplet ("ignave, iners, enervis") in *Hercules Oetaeus* (1721) as "O coward, peasant slave," may have suggested Hamlet's first line. Hamlet's later self-exhortation, "About, my brains!" (II.ii.507) surely rings a change on Atreus's "Age, anime" (192), the

address to the soul being a standard rhetorical topos in Senecan drama. (Cf. Hamlet's earlier, "Oh, my prophetic soul!" I.v.41). Whether or not the allusion to Atreus would have been "absolutely unmissable" to many in Shakespeare's audience, as Colin Burrow claims, clearly Hamlet here self-consciously speaks and acts like a Senecan revenger (Burrow 2013, 175).

But what does acting like a Senecan revenger mean for Shakespeare? In addition to self-recrimination and the hortatory address to the soul, it means hearing a supernatural call for revenge and calling upon mythological models for help. The Ghost of Tantalus and a Fury initiate Seneca's revenge action in *Thyestes*; Elder Hamlet's Ghost commands his son, "Revenge his most foul and unnatural murder" (I.v.25). Atreus looks to his blasphemous, child-killing ancestor, Tantalus, and the son Pelops for inspiration (242, "Tantalum et Pelopem aspice"); and also to Procne and Philomel, who foreshadow his revenge by killing a son and serving him as a meal to his unwitting father (275-6, "animum Daulis inspira parens / sororque", "Breathe your spirit into me, you Daulian mother [Procne] and sister [Philomela]"). Hamlet similarly looks to the king-killer Pyrrhus, "Roasted in wrath and fire, / And thus o'ersizèd with coagulate gore" (II.ii.383-4); and also to king-killing Lucianus in the Mousetrap play, significantly, like Hamlet, "nephew to the king" (III.ii.226). Consider these two soliloquies spoken in close proximity:

Lucianus
Thoughts black, hands apt, drugs fit, and time agreeing,
Considerate season, else no creature seeing.
Thou mixture rank of midnight weeds collected,
With Hecate's ban thrice blasted, thrice infected,
Thy natural magic and dire property
On wholesome life usurp immediately.
(III.ii.236-41)

Hamlet
'Tis now the very witching time of night,
When churchyards yawn and hell itself breaks out
Contagion to this world. Now could I drink hot blood
And do such business as the bitter day
Would quake to look on.
(III.ii.359-63)

Just after hearing Lucianus's tenebrous rhetoric, Hamlet similarly invokes the dark forces of night and witchcraft to rouse himself to *nefas*, the unspeakable crime.

What is more, Hamlet's wish to commit a crime so monstrous as to make the day quake to look on recalls specifically the unnatural night that Atreus's *nefas* brought upon the earth: "hoc egit diem / aversum in ortus" (1035-36, "this drove the day back against its dawning"). To be a Senecan revenger, finally, is to obey Atreus's famous dictum about outdoing the original offense, "scelera non ulcisceris, / nisi vincis" (195-96, "crimes you don't avenge, unless you outdo them"). Accordingly, in the speech that Samuel Johnson famously thought "too horrible to be read or to be uttered" (Johnson 1771, 65), Hamlet seeks not only Claudius's death, as the Ghost commanded, but also his eternal damnation: he refuses to kill the king at prayer because he fears that his soul might then be saved and resolves instead to "trip him" in an act of sin, "that his heels may kick at heaven / And that his soul may be as damned and black / As hell whereto it goes" (III.iii.93-95).

But, of course, Hamlet is not Atreus, nor was meant to be. His madness comes and goes, sometimes being "antic", a fantastic imposture sometimes put on to distract and deceive. The role of Atreus and other prototypical Senecan revengers is likewise antic, a fantastic imposture that Hamlet sometimes puts on and periodically struggles to enact. At other times, of course, he drops the mad rage for philosophical reflection, his soliloquies showing an anguished intelligence, moral sensitivity, and ardent wish for the quietus of death, "a consummation / Devoutly to be wished" (III.i.62-63). Like no Senecan revenger, Hamlet struggles with the morality of revenge, testing the veracity of the Ghost with the Mousetrap play, and later asking:

> Is't not perfect conscience
> *To quit him with this arm? And is't not to be damned*
> *To let this canker of our nature come*
> *In further evil?*
> (V.ii.67-67.3; italicized lines are F only)

Heir to Christian as well as classical traditions, Hamlet, unlike Atreus, worries about damnation and wants to act in "perfect conscience". Peter Lake comments tellingly on Hamlet's differences from his Senecan examplars:

> Shakespeare was here appropriating, mimicking and even parodying Senecan models in a play whose appeal, and certainly whose grip on its first audiences, surely turned on its being a very different sort of play from Seneca's, with a revenging hero whose "heroic" status stems not merely from his failure, but ultimately from his refusal, to play the role ascribed to him in the traditional 'Senecan-style' revenge tragedy. (Lake 2020, 113)

Surprisingly, the ending of the play does not choose between opposing classical and Christian traditions but heightens the expression of each. Like the Senecan revenger, Hamlet achieves his revenge in fury and excess: he stabs the king *and* pours the poison down his throat: "Here, thou incestuous, damnèd Dane, / Drink off this potion" (V.ii.303-4). But unlike Atreus, Medea, and the rest Hamlet has not planned this culminating atrocity; instead, Claudius plots the treachery, unbating and envenoming the sword, poisoning the chalice. Before the final banquet Atreus experiences giddy exultation, thinking himself divine and dismissing all the gods:

> *Aequalis astris gradior et cunctos super*
> *altum superbo vertice attingens polum.*
> *Nunc decora regni teneo, nunc solium patris.*
> *Dimitto superos: summa votorum attigi* (885-8).

> (Peer of the stars I stride, out-topping all men, my proud head reaching to the lofty sky. *Now* I hold the kingdom's glories, *now* my father's throne. I discharge the gods: I have reached the pinnacle of my prayers).

Reporting his escape from the voyage to England, however, Hamlet affirms his faith in God: "There's a divinity that shapes our ends, / Rough-hew them how we will" (V.ii.10-11). And before the final duel, he humbly resigns himself to God's loving care:

> We defy augury. There is special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be, 'tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come; the readiness is all. (V.ii.191-94)

Rejecting augury, the classical practice of predicting the future by consultation of natural phenomena, Hamlet pointedly alludes to Matthew 10:29: "Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing, and one of them shall not fall on the ground without your Father?" (Geneva

Bible 1599). No Senecan revenger speaks like this and none dies as Hamlet does, exchanging forgiveness with an enemy, preventing a friend's suicide and instructing him to report his cause aright, giving a dying voice to a political successor, and receiving the final benediction that envisions heavenly reward: "Now cracks a noble heart. Good night, sweet prince, / And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest" (V.ii.337-38). In *Hamlet* Shakespeare finally does not resolve the tensions between classical and Christian melodies but arranges them into complex, exhausting, and dissonant polyphony.

The reimagination of Senecan passages, characters, and actions constitutes a capacious modality of influence and intertextuality. Sometimes traces of verbal or ideational iteration signal the lines of descent but often the genealogical markers lie beneath the surface. Unlike the easily identified and discrete quotation of Senecan Latin, such reimagination usually combines with broader appropriation of rhetorical topoi, dramatic convention, and dramatic action, often as these elements descend from multiple sources and pass through multiple intermediaries. Seneca provides fundamental DNA for tragedy to the West, but his bequest combines with other sources especially Christian ones, in a dynamic and unpredictable process of dramatic recreation.

III

Sometimes Shakespeare refashions not direct quotations, recalled sententiae, or extended passages and actions but Senecan conventions, i.e., recurring rhetorical and structural features such as the appearance of a ghost or messenger (*nuntius*), the choral ode, or the conversation between a passionate protagonist and restraining confidante. This last convention, the *domina-nutrix* dialogue, Seneca deploys variously to exhibit a rich range of rhetorical arguments and dramatic situations. Normally, the raging protagonist plans atrocity while the confidante fruitlessly dissuades, pleads, fears, scolds, warns, and begs. Here, for example, Clytemnestra abandons reason and the Nutrix objects by rehearsing a precept of conventional, even proverbial, morality.

Clytemnestra
Ubi animus errat, optimum est casum sequi.
Nutrix
Caeca est temeritas quae petit casum ducem.
Clytemnestra
Where reason fails, 'tis best to follow chance.
Nutrix
Blind is he and rash who follows chance.
(*Agamemnon* 144-45)

The Nutrix in *Medea* similarly counsels her mistress to prudent restraint and accommodation: "Compesce verba, parce iam, demens minis / animosque minue; tempori aptari decet" (174-75, "Check your words, spare now your threats, mad one, and your proud spirit humble; it is good to fit yourself to the times"). These sensible admonitions fall on deaf ears as do the questions and reservations of the Attendant (*Satelles*) in *Thyestes*. The restraining advice, in fact, only spurs Atreus to greater heights as he seeks to achieve a new selfhood by exceeding all limit (*modus*) and precedent:

Satelles
Quid novi rabidus struis?
Atreus
Nil quod doloris capiat assueti modum;
Nullum relinquam facinus et nullum est satis.
Satelles
What new scheme is your rage devising?
Atreus
Nothing conforming to the limits of ordinary bitterness. I shall leave no deed undone – and none is enough. (254-56)

Shakespeare refigures the *domina-nutrix* convention often and variously. Richard III, for example, confides in the loyal Buckingham his plan to murder young Edward, heir to the throne, and his brother:

King Richard
Shall I be plain? I wish the bastards dead,
And I would have it suddenly performed.
What say'st thou now? Speak suddenly. Be brief.
Buckingham
Your grace may do your pleasure.

King Richard
Tut, tut, thou art all ice; thy kindness freezeth.
Say, have I thy consent that they shall die?
Buckingham
Give me some breath, some little pause, my lord,
Before I positively speak herein.
I will resolve your grace immediately. *Exit.* (IV.ii.17-25)

Like Atreus and Medea, Richard here plots to kill children; and here the confidant, formerly a trusty co-conspirator, registers protest, this time in shocked silence and a hasty exit. Given his unquestioning complicity up to now, Buckingham's sudden compunction surprises and isolates Richard in his spiraling evil. Switching allegiance to the King's enemy Richmond, Buckingham goes on to oppose Richard in deeds rather than words. Caught and condemned, however, Buckingham reflects on his own just punishment for sin on All-Soul's day by "that high All-Seer that I dallied with" (V.i.20). At the end he finally voices the Nutrix's conventional morality, not in counter-argument and witty gnomic word play, but in a contrite gallows realization about sin, moral order, and Providential justice.

In *Othello* Shakespeare features a more complex variation of the *domina-nutrix* convention. While lying about Desdemona and Cassio, Iago assumes the role of the loyal and restraining confidant in order to transform Othello into a passionate protagonist, filled with rage and fury. He begins with disarming protestation, "My lord, you know I love you" (III.iii.116); then he plays the conventional moralist, rehearsing wise sayings as he preaches three mini-homilies on the importance of reputation, the fearsome power of jealousy, and the parlous state of the insecure rich:

Good name in man and woman, dear my lord,
Is the immediate jewel of their souls. (III.iii.154-55)

Oh, beware, my lord, of jealousy!
It is the green-eyed monster which doth mock
The meat it feeds on. (III.iii.163-65)

Poor and content is rich, and rich enough;
But riches fineless is as poor as winter
To him that ever fears he shall be poor. (III.iii.170-72)

Iago begs pardon "for too much loving" Othello (III.iii.211) and then instructs him "To scan this thing no farther: leave it to time" (III.iii.244), thus, like Nutrix and Satelles, advising inaction and patience[8].

The brilliance of Iago's performance as Nutrix ironically turns Othello into the raging Senecan protagonist. Like Atreus or Medea, Othello summons infernal powers and fills himself with natural and supernatural evils to achieve a new identity:

> Arise, black vengeance, from the hollow hell;
> Yield up, O love, thy crown and hearted throne
> To tyrannous hate! Swell, bosom, with thy fraught,
> For 'tis of aspics' tongues. (III.iii.442-45)

And like his Senecan predecessors Othello becomes possessed by a furor that knows no limit and hence no possibility of relief. After achieving his revenge and feeding Thyestes his own sons, Atreus is dissatisfied:

> *Sceleri modus debetur ubi facias scelus,*
> *non ubi repones. Hoc quoque exiguum mihi.* (1052-53)
>
> (There is a limit owed to crime when you commit crime, not when you repay it. Even this is too little for me.)

Before and after the stabbing of Cassio, the enraged Othello likewise speaks this rhetoric of insatiation:

> Oh, that the slave had forty thousand lives!
> One is too poor, too weak for my revenge. (III.iii.338-39)
>
> I would have him nine years a-killing. (IV.i.167)
>
> Had all his hairs been lives, my great revenge
> Had stomach for them all. (V.ii.74-75)

Othello fully and tragically assumes the *domina* role Iago has scripted for him, masterfully drawing upon the energies and the conventional

8 In a parallel argument to this one, Tatum 2019 has discovered another classical prototype behind Iago, the comedic *servus*, specifically fom Plautus's *Amphitryon*.

dialogue and inverting them to produce the very outcome they are designed to prevent.

Shakespeare's most creative and eristic appropriation of the *domina-nutrix* convention occurs late in his career in *The Tempest*. He establishes the classical power dynamic from the outset: the ruling *dominus* Prospero addresses both Caliban and Ariel as his slaves (I.ii.270, 313), orders them to perform tasks, and threatens punishment for disobedience.

> [*to Ariel*] If thou more murmur'st, I will rend an oak
> And peg thee in his knotty entrails till
> Thou hast howled away twelve winters. (I.ii.294-96)
>
> [*to Caliban*] If thou neglect'st or dost unwillingly
> What I command, I'll rack thee with old cramps,
> Fill all thy bones with aches, make thee roar,
> That beasts shall tremble at thy din. (I.ii.367-70)

Like the traditional Senecan protagonist he sets up an elaborate revenge on his enemies, beginning with the tempest and subsequent shipwreck, and continuing on through the disappearing banquet and threatening harpy apparition, after which he exults: "these mine enemies are all knit up / In their distractions. They now are in my power" (III.iii.90-91). Abruptly breaking the wedding masque performed to celebrate his daughter's nuptials, he exhibits Senecan anger, the "beating mind" (IV.i.163) that signals a dangerous and uncontrollable *affectus*, as the onlookers note:

> FERDINAND
> This is strange: your father's in some passion
> That works him strongly.
> MIRANDA
> Never till this day
> Saw I him touched with anger, so distempered. (IV.i.143-45)

Later, at the climactic moment for revenge in the play, Prospero's magic has rendered his enemies powerless prisoners, distracted, full of sorrow and dismay. But, surprisingly intervening, Ariel plays the conventional Nutrix, or restraining confidante.

Ariel
Your charm so strongly works 'em
That if you now beheld them, your affections
Would become tender.
Prospero
Dost thou think so, spirit?
Ariel
Mine would, sir, were I human.
Prospero
And mine shall.
Hast thou, which art but air, a touch, a feeling
Of their afflictions, and shall not myself –
One of their kind, that relish all as sharply
Passion as they – be kindlier moved than thou art?
Though with their high wrongs I am struck to th' quick,
Yet with my nobler reason 'gainst my fury
Do I take part. The rarer action is
In virtue than in vengeance. (V.i.17-28)

Astonishingly, and perhaps for the only time in the Senecan tradition, restraining counsel persuades the Senecan protagonist to abandon revenge, to take part with "nobler reason 'gainst […] fury". This nobler reason arises from a compassion that Ariel the spirit, intuits but cannot feel[9]. Prospero the human is "kindlier moved", i.e., moved to act more kindly, and moved to act more like one of human kind, flawed and sinful, but capable of mercy and grace. The transformed dialogue thus furnishes the play with its climax, a spiritual victory over Senecan rage, revenge, and furor.

Seneca's *domina-nutrix* dialogue appears here in disparate forms – direct imitation in *Richard III*, ironic inversion in Othello, and climactic reformulation in *The Tempest*. As always, Shakespeare transforms classical convention audaciously, often drawing upon other literary models, contexts, and traditions. His appropriation of this Senecan dialogue thus takes its place beside his better-known appropriation of another Senecan convention in *Hamlet*, the Ghost. Like a Senecan ghost Elder Hamlet's Ghost appears to initiate the revenge action, but unlike this predecessor he comes from Purgatory not Hades, where he is "confined to fast in fires / Till the foul crimes done in my days

9 Gray 2016 has argued recently that Shakespeare generally rejects Senecan philosophical Stoicism and tragic selfhood in favor of Christian compassion.

of nature / Are burnt and purged away" (I.v.11-13). And unlike the Senecan *umbra*, as Catherine Belsey has recently demonstrated, this Ghost draws upon the popular fireside tradition of ghost stories and directly engages characters on stage (Belsey 2010, 2014).

Seneca conducted Shakespeare on a journey through the dark side of human life – rage, madness, tyranny, revenge, and furor. This journey passed through infernal and nightmarish landscapes, "per Stygia" (through Stygian regions), "per amnes igneos" (through rivers of fire), and "per scelera" (through crimes). It introduced protagonists who dare to defy the gods and dislocate the universe by committing evils without precedent and beyond limit ("modus"). This experience of the dark side furnished Shakespeare (and most of the West) with resources for drama, especially tragedies like *Titus Andronicus*, *Macbeth*, *Hamlet*, *Richard III*, and *Othello*. And, further, as we have not here noted, Seneca's *Medea* shapes Lady Macbeth, his *Hercules Furens*, both *Othello* and *King Lear*[10]. But Shakespeare often places Senecan heroes in an alien Judaeo-Christian universe and invokes a distinctly different God and moral order. The resulting tensions, collisions, and dissonances, as the examples of Macbeth, Hamlet, and Prospero especially illustrate, generate distinctively surprising, bewildering, and compelling drama.

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10 See Miola 1992, 92ff., 122ff.

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