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Seneca Improved: Shakespeare's Medieval Optimism

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Seneca's tragedies are tantamount to anti-theodicies, featuring vicious cycles of violence that seem impossible to forestall, enacted by protagonists and antagonists at the mercy of forces beyond their control. Some critics such as Jan Kott try to align Shakespeare with this perspective. In Shakespeare's plays, however, Senecan pessimism is relatively limited and almost always framed within the opposing conventions of vernacular Christian drama. Expressions of nihilism tend to be undercut by dramatic irony. Shakespeare's distinctiveness in this regard is more apparent if we compare him to Marlowe, as well as later figures such as Webster. Senecan pessimism takes on new life for these early modern English playwrights as a classical analogue of the despair and abandonment they feel in response to Calvinism, which presents God as pitiless and inscrutable. Shakespeare, by contrast, hews more closely to an older and more optimistic vision of divine justice. Revengers and overreachers are not exultant at the end but instead defeated, deflated, and demoralized, like the Antichrists and Lucifers of medieval cycle plays. Characters have some degree of moral agency, like the protagonists of morality plays. They are offered opportunities for repentance, even if they do not always choose to change their ways. Providence provides quasi-miraculous resolutions. I focus here on Shakespeare's four main tragedies, *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Othello*, and *King Lear*, as well as his rewriting of key elements of these tragedies in his later tragicomedies: Ophelia as the Jailer's daughter in *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, Cordelia as Marina in *Pericles*, and Othello as Leontes in *The Winter's Tale*, as well as Posthumus Leonatus in *Cymbeline*. Shakespeare's medieval optimism, already apparent in his earlier tragedies, becomes more pronounced over the course of his career. While his contemporaries became more Neo-Senecan, Shakespeare instead doubled down on his lifelong indebtedness to medieval Christian drama and romance.

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The pessimism of classical metaphysics is a critical commonplace, familiar from figures such as Burckhardt and Nietzsche (Burckhardt 1998; Nietzsche 1999). The gist of the observation is that the world-view of pagan antiquity was relatively bleak, as compared to what could be described, by contrast, as medieval optimism. Some historians such as Jean Delumeau, taking their cue from Renaissance humanists such as Petrarch, paint a grim picture of the Middle Ages as a time of fear, guilt, and despair (Delumeau 1990)[1]. Compared to the elegant sadness of the poets and philosophers of ancient Greece and Rome, the medieval *Weltanschauung* is more hopeful, however, than the myth of the so-called 'Dark Ages' may make it seem (Mommsen 1942; Andrea 1992; Nelson 2007). God as he appears in light of Christian revelation is more comprehensible and sympathetic than the 'unmoved mover' of classical philosophy and more reliably benevolent than the fickle, less-than all-powerful anthropomorphic deities of the poets. The world after the fall of Rome takes on a new appearance as purpose-driven and ultimately just, rather than the product of a pointless Epicurean 'swerve' or an all-obliterating Stoic "eternal recurrence". Empowered by the influence of Christianity, people see themselves as having some degree of meaningful moral agency.

Shakespeare encountered these opposing worldviews in the dramatic traditions of his day: on the one hand Christian vernacular drama, and on the other Senecan tragedy. Seneca's letters and essays are not exactly cheery. In his plays, however, even more so than his philosophical prose, Seneca is an echt-pessimist. His tragedies are tantamount to anti-theodicies, featuring vicious cycles of violence which seem impossible to forestall, enacted by protagonists and antagonists at the mercy of forces beyond their control. Some critics such as Jan Kott and Jonathan Dollimore try to align Shakespeare with this perspective, as if Shakespeare were a forerunner to Hobbes. In Shakespeare's plays, however, Senecan pessimism is always kept within limits. To draw an analogy to comedy, another way to describe what happens to Senecan tragedy in Shakespeare's plays is that Seneca is 'improved'.

1 See also Greenblatt 2011. For objections to Greenblatt's characterization of the Middle Ages, see Monfasani 2011, Hinch 2012, and Miles 2016. Miles, for example, decries "a caricature of 'the Dark Ages' scholars abandoned decades ago".

In his study of English Renaissance comedy, Ervin Beck, following a lead from Hardin Craig, notes the ubiquity of prodigal sons, appearing in almost forty plays between 1500 and 1642 (Beck 1973). Examples from Shakespeare include Prince Hal in *Henry IV* and Bertram in *All's Well that Ends Well*. Such characters are also commonplace in Roman New Comedy; as Beck observes, however, the "basic assumptions" of this Renaissance subgenre are "fundamentally opposed" to those of its most obvious classical precedent (110). "New Comedy is *adulescens triumphans*", whereas "prodigal-son comedy is *senex triumphans*" (111). In the plays of Plautus and Terence, "the young hero is usually vindicated, and the older generation is usually discredited". In English Renaissance "prodigal-son comedy", the "quintessential element", by contrast, is that "a young man has departed from the values of his forebears – values which the play assumes he ought to embrace" (110). Beck finds the origins of this change in the Continental movement that came to be known as *Terence moralisé* – or, as Beck puts it, "Terence improved".

Shakespeare's "Seneca improved" is a similar "precise inversion" or "diametrically opposed archetype" (111). Shakespeare is aware of Senecan tragedy and invokes its conventions but reshapes it to conform more closely to a Christian point of view. Shakespeare's distinctiveness in this regard becomes more apparent if we compare him to Marlowe, as well as later Jacobean playwrights such as Webster, Middleton, Marston, and Ford. Senecan pessimism takes on new life for this new generation of English playwrights as a classical analogue for the very different understanding of God that they find themselves steeped in, like Marlowe at Cambridge, as a result of the contemporary rise of Calvinism: God as distant, inscrutable, and seemingly indifferent to human suffering. Seneca helps these Jacobean authors articulate their religious anger and despair. As Thomas Rosenmeyer observes,

> Stoic pessimism, combining with its creed of causality a willing admission that we cannot hope to discern the various strands of the causal tissue and that we are reduced to manufacturing our own crude triangulations, was well suited to merge with Pauline Christianity as the Renaissance rediscovered it. (Rosenmeyer 1989, 74)

Shakespeare, by contrast, hews more closely to an older and more optimistic medieval vision. Revengers and overreachers are not exultant at the end of his plays, even his tragedies, as they are in Senecan and

some contemporary Jacobean drama, but instead defeated; not only defeated but deflated, diminished, unappealing, like the Antichrists and Lucifers of medieval cycle plays, as those cycles reach their end. Shakespeare's characters have some degree of moral agency, like the protagonists of morality plays. They are offered opportunities to repent, even if they do not always choose to do so. Providence provides quasi-miraculous resolutions.

By way of illustration, I focus here on the 'big four' tragedies of Shakespeare's middle age, *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Othello*, and *King Lear*, as well as Shakespeare's reimagining of key elements of these tragedies in his so-called 'late plays'. My argument in this respect resembles Piero Boitani's account of Shakespeare's development in his recent book *The Gospel According to Shakespeare*, but with the addition of an antagonist: Seneca. According to Boitani's "general plot", "from *Hamlet* to *King Lear*", "Shakespeare's New Testament is only announced", and "faith, salvation, and peace are only glimpsed at from far away", whereas in "*Pericles, Cymbeline, The Winter's Tale,* and *The Tempest*", "transcendence, immanence, the role of the deity, resurrection, and epiphany are openly, if obliquely, staged" (Boitani 2009, xi). To restate this claim in terms of intellectual and literary history, Shakespeare's medieval optimism, already apparent earlier, becomes much more pronounced towards the end of his career. While his contemporaries were becoming ever more neo-Senecan, Shakespeare instead doubled down on his lifelong indebtedness to English vernacular Christian drama. The arc of Shakespeare's career can be understood, in other words, as at least in part the expression of a lifelong, horrified, fascinated, slow-burning disagreement with Seneca about metaphysics as well as ethics.

My confidence that Shakespeare took an interest in Seneca and that this interest was merited is in keeping with some recent developments in classics as well as Shakespeare studies that I take to be familiar, understood, and more or less accepted but that not too long ago were considered at best contentious and at worst flat-out wrong. For example, I do not pause here to contest or even to explain at any length the once-pervasive belief that Senecan tragedy is aesthetically inferior to Greek tragedy. In his recent book *Shakespeare and Senecan Tragedy*, Curtis Perry provides an incisive summary of the origins of this claim in nineteenth-century German Romanticism, as well as its effect on Shakespeare studies: until recently, Shakespeare scholars were reluc-

tant to concede that Shakespeare might be deeply indebted to a classical author, Seneca, whom they saw as second-rate (Perry 2020, 11-16).

My own operating premise, by contrast, is that where Seneca departs from Greek precedent, he does so because he has different concerns and because he is expressing a different worldview. His distinctive formal qualities are not failed 'Silver Age' attempts to live up to the standard set by the 'Golden Age' of Greek tragedy but instead well-suited to his distinctive interests. The familiar but misguided objection to Senecan tragedy that it is both derivative and unsuccessfully so may be compared, by this light, to eighteenth-century carping at Shakespeare's plays for departing from neoclassical conventions such as the so-called 'unities'.

For critics such as Sidney, Voltaire, or Samuel Johnson, the only conceivable reason why Shakespeare does not abide by the rules of neoclassical decorum is ignorance or, more charitably, naïveté: if he had known what he ought to do, they assume, surely, he would have done it. But in fact what Shakespeare does is deliberately choose a different set of formal conventions, those of English vernacular drama, in full knowledge of their incongruity with classical precedent. He mingles kings and clowns, shows violence on stage, and so on, not because he is unaware of Seneca or Plautus but because he finds the example set by Christian cycle plays more congenial. Shakespeare is not neoclassical, not because he is a barbarian, but because he is a Christian.

For some readers, a bald assertion of this kind that Shakespeare is a Christian may come as a shock. So, I hasten to add it is a claim I intend to argue here, rather than merely assert. In so doing, however, I will be drawing upon some of my other published work, as well as larger changes within Shakespeare studies. Briefly put, there are two main reasons why it can seem like heresy in some quarters to maintain that Shakespeare is a Christian. One is that over the course of the twentieth century, Shakespeare took on an outsized and misplaced importance as a supposed harbinger of secular modernity (Cummings 2013, 1-18). Critics tend to want to find in Shakespeare a mirror of themselves. So, as literary critics as a social class have become less Christian, they have tended to argue for a Shakespeare who is, like themselves, indifferent or even opposed to Christianity (Gray 2021). Likewise, they have tried to characterize Shakespeare as 'early modern' rather than 'late medieval'.

This appropriation of Shakespeare is at best tendentious. As much recent scholarship has shown, seeing Shakespeare as "our contemporary" in the sense that Jan Kott gives this phrase – that is, postmodern, nihilistic – requires overlooking his recurrent, sympathetic allusions to the Bible as well as his deep indebtedness to English vernacular drama and romance (Auerbach 2003, 312-34; Beckwith 2011; Boitani 2009; Cooper 2008, 2010; Hamlin 2013; Kott 1974; Morse, Cooper, and Holland 2013; Steiner 1996, 21-22). In my book on Shakespeare's Roman plays, I argue that Shakespeare is suspicious of early modern Neostoicism and, by extension, present-day liberalism; tragedies such as *Julius Caesar* and *Antony and Cleopatra* illustrate, by contrast, the irreplaceable value of Christianity, both as a moral system and as a political foundation (Gray 2019).

Shakespeare's Roman plays are exercises in dramatic irony, which he flags up for his audience through pointed allusions to late medieval English vernacular drama such as Passion plays and morality plays as well as Christian scripture. The same is true, I would say, of other plays set in other pagan historical moments such as *King Lear* and *Troilus and Cressida*. I have been attacked on occasion for arguing that Shakespeare's point of view is essentially Christian (Cantor 2020). My observations about Shakespeare's methods, sources, and sympathies are in keeping, however, with the larger 'religious turn' in Shakespeare studies following the terrorist attacks of 9/11, which demonstrated that the modern world is not as secular as some had imagined, as well as new interest since the turn of the century in Shakespeare's engagement with medieval sources, following some unfortunate claims by New Historicists in the 1980s that the early modern period should be considered a radical break in the "history of the subject" (Greenblatt 1990; Aers 1992).

The second major obstacle to recognizing Shakespeare's sympathy for Christianity is the myth of Shakespeare's 'undecidability', which dates back to Keats' claim about Shakespeare's "negative capability", and which seems to have been well-nigh cemented into place towards the middle of the twentieth century by the influence of critics such as A. P. Rossiter and Norman Rabkin (Rossiter 1961; Rabkin 1981). To this day, for many Shakespeare scholars, it is tantamount to axiomatic that Shakespeare advances no fixed opinion about any controversial question of ethics or metaphysics. Instead, the legend

goes, Shakespeare always presents both sides of every such question with an even hand, so that it is impossible to associate him with one side or the other. He is "the angel with horns", "the rabbit/duck", that is to say, a kind of Rorschach blot or Derridean *aporia,* from which no determinate conclusion can be drawn (Rossiter 1961; Rabkin 1977).

I find this account of Shakespeare's psyche and, by extension, his *oeuvre* wildly implausible. Everyone has opinions, even Shakespeare, and such opinions naturally manifest themselves in our creative work, as well as more abstract, explicit, and polemical forms of expression. In general outline, at least, if not necessarily in every last conceivable particular, what Shakespeare believes can be discerned from what he wrote. Nor is our lack of more direct information about Shakespeare's faith an insurmountable obstacle. Biographers tend to get distracted looking for the wrong kind of evidence, as well as by the question whether Shakespeare was Catholic or Protestant. We do not need to assign Shakespeare to one denomination or the other or to find some sort of signed *credo* in an attic in Stratford in order to conclude that Shakespeare was more sympathetic to Christianity than he was to Seneca's nihilism. The plays and poems that we have are enough.

In what sense, however, does Shakespeare express beliefs about ethics and metaphysics? In what form? Shakespeare's works, I believe, can be best understood as thought-experiments. Drawing on his lived experience, as well as his wide reading, Shakespeare constructs hypothetical worlds as laboratories, within which he entertains doubts about his own beliefs and tests their validity (Gray 2018b, 2020). Could a Stoic philosopher such as Brutus prove successful in power politics? (Answer: no.) Could an edgy student such as Hamlet, enamored of all the latest intellectual fads, prove successful in power politics? (Answer: again, no.) All fiction is to some extent a thought-experiment of this kind. Nonetheless, not all fiction is equally earnest or effective in its execution of this aim. What makes Shakespeare's works great literature as opposed to propaganda is that Shakespeare gives great force and power to the opposite of his own beliefs. He presents his doubts as 'steel men' (so to speak) rather than 'straw men'.

This willingness to plumb the depths of one's own misgivings requires intellectual courage, and it can lead to misinterpretation. Shakespeare personifies the opposite of his own, more traditional Christian vision in charismatic, antinomian narcissists who triumph

for a time but ultimately come to a bad end: characters such as Cleopatra, Falstaff, Richard II, Edmund, Iago, and Richard III (Gray 2018b; 2021). These characters can be so compelling, albeit only temporarily, in their moments of exultation, that critics who share their proto-modern point of view sometimes lose sight of the larger frame within which they operate. They overemphasize the highs and minimize the lows that these characters experience. To do so, unfortunately, is to miss Shakespeare's characteristic method. It is like thinking Plato is on the side of Thrasymachus rather than Socrates; it mistakes the antagonist for the protagonist within Shakespeare's own mind.

I bring up this model for understanding Shakespeare's plays, a model I call elsewhere "a dialectic of faith and doubt", because it allows us to make sense of Shakespeare's response to Seneca (Gray 2018b; 2021). Shakespeare is closely engaged with Seneca, but as a defining enemy rather than as an ally or model (Gray 2014b). This "agonistic" influence resembles but is not to be mistaken for the kind of "misprision" or "strong misreading" Harold Bloom describes in his *Anxiety of Influence*, because its aim is something more precise and meaningful than "aesthetic supremacy" (Bloom 1997, xxiii, xxvi). For Bloom, Shakespeare's great rival is Marlowe, much as Milton's is Shakespeare. "Marlowe haunted Shakespeare, who defensively parodied his forerunner while resolving that the author of *The Jew of Malta* would become for him primarily the way *not* to go, whether in life or in art". Aaron the Moor, for example, is "a monstrous blow-up of Marlowe's Barabbas", just as Shylock is "a reaction-formation to Marlowe's cartoonish Jew of Malta" (xxii).

Bloom is no doubt right that Shakespeare responds to Marlowe. But his sense of what motivates Shakespeare is underdeveloped. What drives "aesthetic rivalry" (xxvi)? Surely Shakespeare's aims go beyond one-upmanship. He is not simply trying to score points in a competition for social status. He is arguing with Marlowe about the complexity of human nature. His characters differ from Marlowe's because he has a more nuanced, insightful, and compassionate grasp of human psychology: a view of what Jews, Moors, and indeed all of us are that he works with great success to defend and advance.

Nor is Marlowe Shakespeare's most important such interlocutor. When it comes to deep disagreement about the nature of reality, Seneca poses a more substantial intellectual challenge, especially if

we consider Seneca not only in his own right but also as the touchstone for contemporary Neostoicism and the inspiration for an ongoing wave of neo-Senecan tragedy. Seneca is an influence, a 'source', but not in the sense of an ideal whom Shakespeare seeks to emulate. Instead, Seneca is a provocation; a bogeyman; a sparring partner; a shadow self. He is to Shakespeare, one might say, what Montaigne is to Bacon, Descartes, and Pascal. He articulates what the other is most afraid might be true.

In the work that I have published to date on Shakespeare's reception of Seneca, I have sought to explain the depth and importance of Shakespeare's distrust of Seneca's claims about ethics and human psychology, while at the same time conceding some similarities (Gray 2014b; 2018b). In what follows, I turn instead to metaphysics. Tragedy is by nature a reflection on the intricacies of causation: to quote Thomas Rosenmeyer, "a tragedy can be said to achieve its effect by cultivating the obliquity of the relation between freedom and necessity, between voluntary action and external constraint" (Rosenmeyer 1989, 77)[2]. Of the various kinds of such 'constraint' that may exist, the most significant and interesting is other people, or more precisely, other persons, by which I mean not only other flesh-and-blood human beings but also supernatural, immaterial entities such as gods, ghosts, and furies. What a playwright believes about the supernatural is, for this reason, of the greatest possible consequence for the form that tragedy takes at his hands. Shakespeare believes in free will, natural law, and divine providence; Seneca does not, or at least, not in the same sense. So, the plots that they develop naturally differ.

Shakespeare draws extensively on some of the formal devices that he encountered in Senecan tragedy, but he uses them to a very different end. For example, with regards to literary history, the soliloquies that we find in Shakespeare's tragedies and that have come to be considered the defining feature of his superlative skill in the representation of human psychology are not entirely original, although they may seem that way in comparison to some earlier English vernacular drama, but instead can be better understood as a refinement and a further elaboration of a pattern Shakespeare found in Senecan tragedy. As Thomas Rosenmeyer explains, "in Greek tragedy

2 See also Leo 2019.

the agent establishes his commitment and broadcasts his desires and his aversions"; "only rarely does he grant us the glimpse of an inner conflict" (Rosenmeyer 1989, 57). What Shakespeare found in Senecan tragedy, by contrast, is vacillation (Belsey 1973)[3]. Hamlet hesitating to kill Claudius; Brutus, Caesar; Macbeth, King Duncan; Othello, Desdemona; etc.: the protagonists in these scenes recreate crucial moments of indecision when characters in Senecan drama such as Atreus and Medea hesitate before committing an egregious crime, torn between a burning desire for revenge and lingering, countervailing impulses such as piety, duty, and compassion (Gray 2018a).

Both Shakespeare and Seneca are fascinated by the internal tension between anger and pity that can arise within the subjective experience of a single individual. When it comes to their sense of the place of pity in the larger cosmos, however, the two playwrights are at odds. For Shakespeare, "pity" is "sacred" (Shakespeare 2014, II.vii.124); "the quality of mercy" is, as Portia says, "an attribute to God himself" (Shakespeare 2010a, IV.i.180, 191). "It blesseth him that gives and him that takes" (IV.i.191). Seneca, by contrast, draws a fine distinction. As is notorious, in his advice on ethics, Seneca argues for *clementia* but draws the line at *misericordia.* He is open to the value of some forms of what we might call emotion, but he is wary of empathy, which he sees as a risky and unnecessary form of subjective entanglement.

Rosenmeyer finds it perplexing that "in the prose works, Seneca's view that a good man, even under Stoic auspices, is not devoid of all feeling does not extend to *misericordia*, the compassion a human being feels for the sufferings of another". Seneca's plays, he argues, "show a much greater openness for the feelings that bind men together". By way of illustration, Rosenmeyer draws attention to the "great choral odes, or essays, on the sharing of grief" in *Agamemnon* and *The Trojan Women* (Rosenmeyer 1989, 24). In *Agamemnon*, the chorus of captive Trojan women urge Cassandra to mourn with them:

3 See also Perry 2020, 22-27, on Senecan tragedy "plumbing the depths of motives inaccessible to the rational logics of transparent, plausible desire" (24). With regards to their representation of the divine and the supernatural, as well as individual moral decision-making, I agree with Perry that Tanya Pollard "sometimes underestimates the differences between Euripides and Seneca" (Perry 2020, 28 n.5; Pollard 2017).

"It's helpful to mingle tears with tears"; "it's helpful to weep for our losses together" (Seneca 2017b, 265)[4]. In *The Trojan Women,* the chorus recommends the same to Hecuba: "Sweet is a group of mourners to one who grieves" (Seneca 2017a, 184)[5]. "The signals built into Senecan drama", Rosenmeyer suggests, "take us back to an Aristotelian compassion that the early Stoics had rejected as a basis for healthy human intercourse" (Rosenmeyer 1989, 25).

It is worth noting, however, that in both of the passages Rosenmeyer singles out, "the sharing of grief", although desirable, is presented for the most part as an elusive counterfactual. In *Agamemnon,* Cassandra refuses to join the chorus in collective mourning, and they warn her that other hypothetical partners in grief will prove inadequate. Neither Philomela nor Procne nor Cycnus nor Alcyone nor the devotees of Cybele, nor indeed Cassandra herself on her own, they insist, will be "up to lamenting such massive tragedies", that is, "up to lamenting [her] family with suitable sorrowing" (Seneca 2017b, 265-66)[6]. Cassandra's response is not to weep or wail, but instead to rip the sacred garlands from her head, angrily proclaim her indifference to the gods, and list all the various people she has lost, emphasizing her own isolation.

In *The Trojan Women*, the chorus tells Hecuba, "The tears and lamentations that teem from a crowd / of people weeping the same way sting more gently". But the main body of the ode then dwells on the fact that not everyone present is in fact "weeping the same way". For "grief" to be satisfied, it would be necessary to "get rid of the happy", so that "no one else has a happy face". "Take away those affluent in / gold, and take away the people who / plow rich fields with a hundred oxen". The chorus of captive Trojan women then reflects on their impending separation: "this gathering and these tears of ours will be / broken up and scattered here and there by the driven fleet" (Seneca 2017a, 185)[7]. More precisely, then, what we find in Seneca's tragedies is not so much approval of empathy as a wistful longing for a world in which indulging in compassion would make sense. It would be a

4 Sen. *Ag.* 664, 667.

5 Sen. *Tro.* 1009.

6 Sen. *Ag.* 676-77.

7 Sen. *Tro.* 1011-43.

relief to be able to share our suffering with each other. Unfortunately, however, in the world as it really is, everyone is on their own.

This conclusion, that loneliness is inevitable, is in keeping with the world that Seneca depicts in his tragedies, a 'low trust' society where to cooperate is to risk betrayal[8]. Within this brutal context, no-one can afford the vulnerability that *misericordia* entails. Even acts of charity can be dangerous. In his essay *On Clemency*, Seneca urges Nero to spare the vanquished and cites the example of his ancestor, Augustus.

> Your great-great-grandfather forgave those he conquered; if he hadn't, whom would he have ruled? From his opponents' camp he drafted Sallust and men like Cocceius and Dellius and the whole cadre of his closest associates; soon he chalked up to his clemency's account men like Domitius, Messala, Asinius, Cicero – in fact, all the first flower of the community. (Seneca 2010, 156)[9]

But the tragedies tell a different story. There, this kind of clemency appears to be an unacceptable risk.

For example, when Andromache pleads for life of her son, Astyanax, Ulysses acknowledges that he feels sorry for her: "the pain of a stricken mother affects me" (Seneca 2017a, 175)[10]. Nonetheless, he explains, he cannot afford the danger Hector's son would pose to future generations of Greeks, if he were allowed to grow to manhood. He would be putting his own son, Telemachus, at risk. "This very love," he tells Andromache, "In which you persist in your intransigence / reminds the Greeks to think of our little children" (170)[11]. Given that Astyanax is still an infant, and as such might be raised as a slave, or as if he were a foundling, it is remarkable that neither Andromache nor Ulysses gives even a moment's consideration to the possibility that Hector's heir, once he came of age, might leave the Argives in peace. The idea that a Trojan nobleman such as Astyanax might not seek revenge, given "weapons and ten years", does not enter the picture (170)[12].

More generally speaking, throughout Seneca's tragedies, no-one is willing to share political power – not even with their closest kin.

8 On the concept of a "low trust" society, see Fukuyama 1996.

9 Sen. *Cl.* 10.

10 Sen. *Tro.* 736.

11 Sen. *Tro.* 589-90.

12 Sen. *Tro.* 591.

As Thyestes says, "The throne seats only one" (Seneca 2017b, 207)[13]. Within the domestic sphere, wives refuse to share their husband with concubines. Aegisthus warns Clytemnestra, "Tolerating partnership is alien to kingdoms and to marriages" (252)[14]. Why Seneca's *Phoenician Women* is incomplete is a mystery; it is in keeping with Seneca's vision, however, of our human condition that it breaks off in a stalemate between two brothers while a woman, their mother, pleads in vain for them to reconcile. Eteocles and Polynices refuse to share power not only within Thebes itself but even as neighbors, each ruling over his own separate territory. It is as if Seneca stopped writing because he could not imagine a plausible resolution to this kind of stand-off. Why would either side ever concede? *Homo homini lupus* ("man is a wolf to man"): life consists of vicious and unsparing power struggles, without any conceivable end in sight.

Shakespeare's familiarity with this worldview helps to explain Brutus's reasoning in his soliloquy, "It must be by his death" (Shakespeare 2000, II.i.10-34). Even though he has no evidence of Caesar ever showing any propensity for cruelty or scorn, Brutus assumes that if Caesar is ever granted the power to do so ("augmented"), he will inevitably prove tyrannical (II.i.30). Brutus assumes, in other words, that he is living in the world that Seneca depicts, where no-one can be trusted to restrain themselves voluntarily from what he calls "the abuse of greatness" (II.i.18). Any appearance otherwise should be interpreted as a ruse, like Atreus' outreach to his naive brother, Thyestes, or Mark Antony's ostensible reconciliation with the conspirators after they assassinate Caesar.

"'Tis a common proof", Brutus muses, thinking of Caesar, "that lowliness is young ambition's ladder" (II.i.21-22). Given this more general insight, it is no small instance of dramatic irony that the scorn and betrayal Brutus fears he might receive from Caesar he receives instead from Antony. In his arrogance, philosophical idealism, and political naïveté, Brutus fails to recognize that "gamesome" Antony may prove a serious threat (I.ii.29). Brutus's careless treatment of Antony, whom he underestimates, resembles Caesar's earlier disdain for Cassius and the other conspirators, symbolized by Caesar being deaf in one ear.

13 Sen. *Thy.* 444.

14 Sen. *Ag.* 259.

"Do not consent that Antony speak in his funeral", Cassius warns Brutus. "You know not what you do" (III.i.232-33). In *Antony and Cleopatra*, like-minded suspicion rapidly bedevils any apparent prospect of peace. Enobarbus scoffs at the idea that Octavian and Antony will rest content with their separate halves of the Roman Empire. Like Jocasta's sons in Seneca's *Phoenician Women*, they will not split the world between them. Instead, he explains, now that the third man of their triumvirate, Lepidus, is out of the way, the two rivals are like "a pair of chaps", that is, jaws: "throw between them all the food thou hast, / They'll grind the one the other" (Shakespeare 1995a, III.v.13-15).

The question naturally arises, then, whether Shakespeare himself shares this rather bleak perspective. Can life ever be anything more than a zero-sum struggle for dominance? In his eulogy at the end of *Julius Caesar*, Mark Antony heaps praise on Brutus as "the noblest Roman of them all" on account of the concern that he showed for "the common good" (V.v.69, 73). Audiences today also tend to find Brutus an attractive character. We admire his fair-mindedness, his friendship with Cassius, and his love for his wife, Portia. But the trust that he extends to Antony and to his fellow Romans proves misplaced. His friendship with Cassius leads him astray, and his grief at the death of his wife, Portia, is to his own way of thinking an embarrassing weakness. A Stoic philosopher, which is how he sees himself, should not, he thinks, prove so susceptible to "accidental evils" (Shakespeare 2000, IV.iii.144).

In *Antony and Cleopatra,* when Enobarbus finds himself forced to choose between Antony and Octavian, he is overwhelmed with guilt at the thought of leaving Antony, but he also knows, as do we, that Antony is doomed. Antony in this play is not ruthless enough to hold his own against Octavian. The same sense of loyalty to Cleopatra, as to Enobarbus, that endears Antony to us, his post-classical audience, is what proves his undoing at the Battle of Actium, when he abandons the fray to follow Cleopatra's fleeing ships. As Enobarbus explains, "The itch of his affection should not then / Have nick'd his captainship" (III.xiii.7-8). Antony laments his "unnoble swerving" at Actium and admits he is "made weak" by his "affection" (III.xi.49, 67).

Writing about Jacobean tragedy more generally, Jonathan Dollimore takes Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida* as a representative example. Characters such as Antonio and Pandulpho in Marston's

play *Antonio's Revenge* as well as Troilus in Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida* "internalize rather than transcend the violence of their society, being incapable of surviving its alienating effects except by re-engaging with it" (Dollimore 2010, 49). In the case of Troilus, "a thwarted lover rescues himself from his own vulnerability by acting out a savage revenge". He "becomes" what "his society is": "savage". Charging into battle with "careless force" (V.v.40), he becomes "one of them", "a 'heroic warrior'", "a thing of courage to whom mercy is "a vice" (V.iii.37). (41). Titus takes a similar turn in *Titus Andronicus* when the Roman authorities prove indifferent to his pleas for the life of his sons (Gray 2016). After a spell of desperate weeping, he concludes that Rome is "a wilderness of tigers" (3.1.53). So, like Aaron and Tamora, as well as Troilus, he becomes "what his society is". By the end of the play, he is again "one of them": a "ravenous tiger", "beastly" and "devoid of pity" (5.3.5, 194, 198).

In what sense, however, is *Troilus and Cressida* representative? In his book *Radical Tragedy*, Dollimore focuses on four of Shakespeare's plays: *Troilus and Cressida, Antony and Cleopatra*, *Coriolanus,* and *King Lear.* This selection is by no means representative of Shakespeare's *oeuvre*. What does tie these plays together, however, is that they are each set in a historical moment before the advent of Christianity: respectively, ancient Greece, ancient Rome, and pre-Christian Britain. This peculiarity of their setting is not incidental. Given Shakespeare's interest in what we might call cultural criticism, we should be very careful not to mistake the world as the characters in these plays perceive it, the world as it appears from a pagan perspective, for the world as Shakespeare himself perceives it, that is, the world as it has been reframed by Christian revelation.

For Goethe, Shakespeare's Romans are "Englishmen to the bone". "It is said that he has delineated the Romans with wonderful skill. I cannot see it" (Goethe 1963, 61). Learned critics have noticed anachronisms such as the striking clock in *Julius Caesar* and the game of billiards in *Antony and Cleopatra.* Alexander Pope, however, sees the larger picture. Shakespeare is a kind of historical anthropologist. "We find him very knowing in the customs, rites, and manners of Antiquity", Pope observes. "In *Coriolanus* and *Julius Caesar*, not only the Spirit, but Manners of the *Romans* are exactly drawn" (Pope 1778, 114). Shakespeare aims to avoid substantive anachronism, even if he

does not always succeed. So, when he wants to draw attention to the shortcomings of pagan society, as compared to a Christian standard that the characters he depicts would not and could not have known about, he does so indirectly, through dramatic irony.

Throughout his Roman plays, Shakespeare uses parallels to familiar scenes from English biblical drama, as well as verbal allusions to Scripture, to create a double vision (Hamlin 2013, 179-230; Gray 2019). His audience as Christians know what the characters do not. These references crop up at key moments and would have been recognizable to his contemporaries, even though they may be less so to many of us today. Coriolanus refusing to show his wounds, for instance, would have called to mind the resurrected Christ revealing his wounds in English Passion plays. When Mark Antony talks about finding "new heaven, new earth", the audience would have heard an unwitting allusion to the Book of Revelation (Shakespeare 1995a, I.i.17; Rev. 21:1). And so on. As George Steiner observes, "There plays around the thoughts and statements of the individual characters in Elizabethan tragedy a light of larger reference", a light that was "perceptible to the theatrical audience", if perhaps "in varying degrees of immediacy" (Steiner 1996, 319). Shakespearean drama relies on and presumes "a community of expectation", just as "classical music relies on an acceptance of the conventions of interval in the tempered scale" (320).

Shakespeare's departure from Seneca is still more readily apparent if we range more widely across the full canon of Shakespeare's works. In one of his earliest plays, *Titus Andronicus*, Shakespeare not only adopts but hyperbolically and insistently heightens the propensity for violent cruelty that he found in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, as well as Senecan tragedy, as if to criticize it by exaggeration (Gray 2016). In his relatively early comedy, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, he pokes fun at the bombastic style of contemporary translations of Senecan tragedy (Gray 2014b, 206-7). In his early comedies, as well as *Julius Caesar*, he casts doubt on the practicability of Seneca's claims about ethics, which he brings up repeatedly under the colloquial heading of "philosophy" or "constancy" (Gray 2014b, 219-20; 2019). What is most revealing, however, is the direction of travel of Shakespeare's career over time. Dating Shakespeare's plays is not an exact science; nonetheless, give or take a few years here or there, it is possible to discern some significant trends. Comedies and English history plays

in the early years; tragedies, Roman plays, and problem plays in the middle years; and then finally, as if in conclusion, half-a-dozen tragicomedies. This last genre is the polar opposite of Senecan tragedy; Shakespeare's chosen guide here, by contrast, is medieval romance (Cooper 2008; Felperin 1972).

Pericles, Cymbeline, The Winter's Tale, The Tempest, The Two Noble Kinsmen: these plays are often referred to as Shakespeare's 'late plays', and aptly so, not only in terms of where they fall in his career but also, I would say, because they respond to his earlier work; specifically, the 'big four' tragedies, *Hamlet, Othello, Macbeth,* and *King Lear.* Shakespeare's late plays benefit from being interpreted in light of these earlier tragedies, not in the sense that they are sequels, but in the sense that they are what we might call "re-writes", "do-overs", or "adaptations". They introduce similar characters and plots, and they address similar ethical and metaphysical questions. But the decisions the characters make are different, and the answers Shakespeare gives, or at least, strongly implies, about theology are more clearly drawn.

In keeping with its source material, *Pericles,* like *Troilus and Cressida,* is set in ancient Greece. *Cymbeline*, like *King Lear*, is set in pre-Christian Britain. In these late plays, however, Shakespeare is less interested in cultural criticism than he was before. An analogy might be the difference between the earlier play *Romeo and Juliet* and the later play *All's Well that Ends Well*. In *Romeo and Juliet,* the tragic protagonist, in the sense of the "character" (so to speak) who commits a blameworthy fault, is neither Romeo nor Juliet nor even their particular parents so much as it is Verona as a whole, a society which has let itself become too preoccupied with honor. "Capulet, Montague, / See what a scourge is laid upon your hate" (Shakespeare 2012, V.iii.291-92). As the Prince says at the end, "All are punished" (V.iii.295). In *All's Well that Ends Well*, the problem is again a preoccupation with honor, but the problem is associated with an individual, Bertram, and his comic analogue, Parolles, rather than any particular social class or society: "natural rebellion done i' th' blade of youth" (Shakespeare 2014, V.iii.6).

In *Troilus and Cressida*, Shakespeare's focus is the overvaluation of honor that he sees as characteristic of Bronze Age Greece. The point of the play is the misguided moral vision of "the princes orgulous", including Hector as well as Achilles (Shakespeare 1998,

Prologue.2). In *Pericles,* by contrast, the eponymous Prince of Tyre is little different in his moral outlook from the Christian knights of Arthurian romance; the Greek setting is not so much a distinct society as an opportunity to bring in supernatural machinery such as miracles and gods without falling foul of contemporary censorship. Depicting Christian providence on stage would have risked scrutiny; putting it in pagan costume gives Shakespeare a freer hand. And the same is true for *Cymbeline*. Shakespeare can show Jupiter appearing to Posthumus in a dream on stage, whereas he could not if the god in question were Jesus. For Shakespeare at this point in his career, pagan settings are no longer of primary interest in their own right but instead pressed into service as convenient disguises, defamiliarizing potentially controversial references to Christian doctrine and practice.

The most obvious connection between Shakespeare's mid-career tragedies and his late plays is the premise of the jealous husband who becomes convinced that his wife has been unfaithful, even though she is in fact entirely chaste: Othello in *Othello,* Posthumus in *Cymbeline*, and Leontes in *The Winter's Tale.* The name of the Italian gentleman, Iachimo, who misleads Posthumus closely resembles the name of the envious Venetian lieutenant, Iago, who misleads Othello. Both names, moreover, perhaps not coincidentally, resemble the name of the deceptive wizard, Archimago, who leads the Red Crosse Knight astray in Spenser's *Faerie Queene,* as well as that memorable antagonist's namesake, the imagination, the faculty of the mind which misleads Leontes, as well as Othello and Posthumus.

Othello kills Desdemona, and Posthumus and Leontes likewise give orders for their wives to be killed. In the later plays, however, these analogues of Othello are spared the consequences of their murderous intent: their subordinates manage to hide their wives until their anger passes. After they repent, Posthumus and Leontes discover that Imogen and Hermione are still alive; their wives forgive them, and their marriages are restored. In terms of Shakespeare's relation to Seneca, a more precise contrast to tragedies such *Medea* and *Agamemnon* could hardly be found. The supposed betrayal that prompts the protagonist's violent rage never in fact occurred; the act of vengeance that he tries to undertake is not actually carried out; at the end of the play, he and his erstwhile would-be victim are happily reconciled.

A less obvious connection between Shakespeare's mid-career tragedies and his late plays is how he reimagines the death of children, a distinctive feature of Senecan tragedy. As Gordon Braden points out, "in the family romances of Greek tragedy, the events that stand out most powerfully in the cultural memory tend to be the killing of parents: Oedipus, Electra, Orestes are among the most resonant names". "Seneca's three most famous and, in the long run, influential plays" are, by contrast, "specifically about the killing or worse of children by their own parents: *Hercules Furens*, *Medea*, and most powerfully *Thyestes*" (Braden 1984, 290). One might add to this list *Phaedra*, given the death of Hippolytus, and in a looser sense, *The Trojan Women*, given the deaths of Astyanax and Polyxena. Neither Hector's son nor Priam's daughter are killed by their parents, but they are two young innocents whose executions are central to the plot. Writing on *Macbeth,* Braden sees the influence of Seneca in the massacre of Macduff's children and the attempted murder of Banquo's son, Fleance, as well as Lady Macbeth's horrifying claim that she would be willing to kill her own nursing infant.

In keeping with its tendency towards exaggeration, *Titus Andronicus* features an array of dead children, beyond even anything to be found in Senecan tragedy. Tamora's sons, Titus's daughter, Lavinia, and several of Titus's sons are all put to death for one reason or another. In the tragedies of his middle period, Shakespeare focuses instead on a single character, allowing the audience to become more attached in advance of that character's unexpected and undeserved demise. Perhaps the most painful example, or at least, the most shocking to any principle of 'poetic justice', is the death of Cordelia in *King Lear.* But Ophelia is not far behind. Her death and indeed Hamlet's, as well as Laertes', can be considered part of the same pattern. Desdemona is a wife, rather than a child, but stands alongside Lavinia, Cordelia, and Ophelia as an example of the blameless woman who dies young through no fault of her own.

Young women serve for Shakespeare as a symbol of the suffering innocent, much as young men do in Virgil's *Aeneid.* Through the death of these attractive characters, Shakespeare poses a significant challenge to theodicy, much as Virgil does to the value of Roman imperialism. As Dostoyevsky observes in his *Brothers Karamazov,* the death of a child is an especially grievous blow to any simple or unqualified be-

lief that the world is morally just[15]. Trying to explain "the problem of evil", Ivan clarifies for Alyosha that "there are numbers of questions, but I've only taken the children, because in their case what I mean is so unanswerably clear" (Dostoyevsky 1926, 257). When Titus learns that his daughter Lavinia has been raped and mutilated, he cries out to the heavens in Latin, and his rhetorical question paraphrases Seneca's Hippolytus: *Magni dominator poli / Tam lentus audis scelera, tam lentus vides?* ("O ruler of the great heaven, / how are you so slow to hear crimes, so slow to see them?") (Shakespeare 1995b, IV.i.81-82)[16].

The unexpected discovery, by contrast, that a child who had been presumed dead is in fact alive is a pivotal feature of the conclusions to most of Shakespeare's late plays. Pericles recovers his daughter Marina; Leontes recovers his daughter, Perdita; and Cymbeline recovers his daughter Imogen, as well as his two sons, Guiderius and Arviragus. The survival of these children, especially the two long-lost daughters, Marina and Perdita, returns to the question posed by the loss of Cordelia and presents what seems, at least, to be a very different answer. Through the kindness of strangers, as well as fortunate happenstance, tantamount to divine intervention, the world as it appears in these plays is morally just. Shakespeare seems to return to the loss of Ophelia, as well, in a subplot of *The Two Noble Kinsmen*. The daughter of the jailor responsible for caring for the two protagonists, a young woman who is herself a sympathetic picture of innocence, falls in love with one of them, Palamon, a man above her station, and, like Ophelia, goes mad when her love is unrequited. Unlike Ophelia, however, she is brought back to her senses, and the play ends with her having found a more suitable match.

All to say, at the end of his career, Shakespeare goes to great lengths to recall and revise the most distinctively Senecan elements of his earlier tragedies. What are we to make of this exercise in reimagining? One possibility is that Shakespeare changes his mind as he grows older, relinquishing his former nihilism or, perhaps, Epicureanism, in favor of a newfound faith in divine providence. For my own part, I do think the middle years of Shakespeare's career

15 See Ch. 17, "The Problem of Evil."

16 Cp. Seneca: *Magne regnator deum, / tam lentus audis scelera? Tam lentus vides?* (*Pha.* 671-72)

were to some extent a 'dark night of the soul'. But I also think that it would be a mistake to imagine a complete about-face. I would say instead that towards the middle of his career, Shakespeare uses tropes drawn from Senecan tragedy to explore his doubts about Christianity, without ever fully abandoning his faith. His affinity for Christianity appears in these plays indirectly, in the form of allusions and dramatic irony. His interest at this point is not so much in the positive assertion of Christianity as it is in the negative exploration of what life would be like without it, including the political life of a pagan society such as ancient Rome as well as the moral life of an individual such as Coriolanus.

Towards the end of his career, by contrast, Shakespeare finds a symbolic language in the rival conventions of medieval romance that allows him to express his faith in a guiding and benevolent supernatural framework more fully and directly. His interest turns to the abiding truth of theology as opposed to the contingencies of history and the peculiarities of individual psychology. His protagonists become less distinctive, less sharply individuated, because his focus now is on what is true for every human being as such, rather than on how we differ from each other. Plot begins to take precedence over character; we return, to some extent, to the medieval world of "Everyman" and "Mankind".

In Shakespeare's late plays, the improbable coincidences and 'happy accidents' characteristic of romance as genre register his confidence in divine providence. The unexpected restoration of those who had been presumed dead reveals his belief in the promised resurrection of both body and soul in the Christian afterlife and explores the implications of this article of faith for our happiness, our moral decision-making, and our intuitive sense of 'poetic justice'. Ivan's mistake in *The Brothers Karamazov* is to insist on seeing justice "here on earth" (Dostoyevsky 1926, 256). When Shakespeare, departing from his source material, goes out of his way to end *King Lear* with Cordelia dead, he signals his awareness that this kind of justice is not always to be had. When Hermione is restored to Leontes, however, or Marina to Pericles, Shakespeare clarifies that he does nonetheless believe that justice is ultimately served: the innocent live again and are rewarded, even if it is later on, after death, in what Ivan dismisses as "some remote infinite time and space".

In his "Preface to Shakespeare", Dr. Johnson argues that Shakespeare's comedies are more self-assured than his tragedies. "In tragedy he is always struggling after some occasion to be comick, but in comedy he seems to repose, or to luxuriate, as in a mode of thinking congenial to his nature" (Johnson 2021, 431). With a nod to George Steiner, I would attribute this predilection for comedy not only to Shakespeare's "natural disposition" but also to his faith. In his book *The Death of Tragedy*, Steiner argues that tragedy in the proper sense of the term, "absolute tragedy", largely disappears after antiquity. Christianity and, more recently, the rise of Marxism put an end to the metaphysical presuppositions that enable 'true' tragedy. At the height of the Reformation, the influence of Calvinism produces some important exceptions to this sweeping claim, as does the Jansenist version of Catholicism that we see in, most notably, the tragedies of Racine. More generally, however, Steiner is correct: Christianity, like Judaism, is "an anti-tragic vision of the world" (Steiner 1996, 331). "The Greek tragic poets assert that the forces which shape or destroy our lives lie outside the governance of reason or justice", whereas "the Judaic vision sees in disaster a specific moral fault or failure of understanding" (6).

For Steiner, tragedy "in the radical sense" is "stringently negative" and "despairing", conveying "a view of reality in which man is an unwelcome guest in the world" (xi-xii). This "metaphysic of desperation" is "almost unendurable to human reason and sensibility"; "hence very few cases in which it has been rigorously professed". Among the moderns, Steiner cites "Büchner, and, at certain points, Strindberg" but does not include "dramatists of the absurd" such as Samuel Beckett (xiii). "The minimalist poetics of Beckett belong, for all their express bleakness and even nihilism, to the spheres of irony, of logical and semantic farce rather than to that of tragedy" (xii). Beckett writes "'anti-drama'", like the 'anti-art' associated with the Dada movement, and the result is "crippled and monotonous" (350).

Steiner's touchstone is Greek tragedy, but he excludes plays such as *Eumenides* and *Oedipus at Colonus* which end with "a note of grace" (7). Among Shakespeare's plays, he singles out *Lear* and *Timon of Athens. Lear* in particular is paradigmatic: "absolute tragedy" exists, and "only" exists, where "the summation of insight into human fortunes is articulated in Lear's fivefold 'never'" (Shakespeare 1997,

V.iii.307)[17]. This reading of *Lear* is familiar from Jan Kott, who compares *Lear* to Beckett's play *Endgame*, and can be found in its most substantive form in G. R. Elton's book, *King Lear and the Gods* (Elton 1966; Kott 1974; Perry 2020, 112-14). But *Lear* is an exception. More generally speaking, Steiner sees "a radical split between true tragedy and Shakespearean 'tragedy'". In the Renaissance, "it is in Racine", not Shakespeare, "that the tragic ideal is still instrumental with unqualified force" (Steiner 1996, xiii).

Steiner's take on *Lear* is not universally accepted. A long-established, lively, and countervailing current of criticism sees *Lear* instead, like Shakespeare's Roman plays, as an exercise in Christian irony, such that a message of hope, albeit subtle, shines through the despair that arises from the characters' pagan ignorance (Cox 2007, 84-96; Crawford 2019; Davidson 1996; Jensen 2019; Lawrence 2004; Lehnhof 2018; Perry 2020, 138, 142-45). "Are we in Christian, providential world or a Senecan one in which there is nothing larger than the self?" As Curtis Perry observes, Shakespeare puts the audience "in an interpretive position analogous to that of characters within the world of the play" (131). "Is this the promised end?" Kent asks (5.3.268). For Marjorie Garber, "The question remains open; it is not foreclosed, even in the direction of nihilism" (Garber 2004, 694). John Cox concedes that here "in the fallen world", suffering may be "the last thing we witness" (92). But death is not necessarily "The Last Thing" (96). "As in other Shakespearean tragedies that place their action in the course of Christian destiny", "the end of this story is not The End" (92).

According to Steiner, "in the most drastic cases" of "absolute tragedy", "the human estrangement from or fatal intrusion upon a world hostile to man can be seen as resulting from a malignancy and daemonic negation in the very fabric of things (the enmity of gods)" (Steiner 1996, xii). As an example of this perspective, Steiner cites *Lear*'s Duke of Gloucester: "As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods; / They kill us for their sport" (Shakespeare 1997, IV.i.38-39)[18]. Within "the Judaic vision", God is ultimately just. Steiner concedes that the Book of Job might seem to suggest otherwise; even there,

17 Cited in Steiner 1996, xii.

18 Cited in Steiner 1996, xii.

however, he points out, Job's virtue is ultimately rewarded. After allowing Job to suffer for a time, God restores his health, his fortune, and, in a sense, his family, replacing his lost wife and children with a new wife and new children. The supernatural forces that we find in Greek tragedy are not always so fair-minded. "There are around us daemonic energies which prey upon the soul and turn it to madness or which poison our will so that we inflict irreparable damage upon ourselves and those we love" (7).

Given his interest in depictions of the cosmos itself as not only inhospitable but even outright inimical to human flourishing, it is unfortunate that Steiner does not give more attention to Senecan tragedy, which he dismisses as an "inferior Latin version" of Greek tragedy (21). Seneca's plays present a more extreme and more consistent case study in what he calls "absolute tragedy" than any other corpus that we know of. When it comes to the supernatural, Racine's Christianity seems to stay his hand. Even in plays set in classical antiquity, as opposed to ancient Israel, the divine for Racine is more typically stern, distant, and mysterious than ugly, monstrous, near-at-hand, or ferocious. Seneca is less restrained: ghosts, furies, and even the gods themselves are at best indifferent and at worst actively malevolent[19]. The supernatural is repeatedly presented at great length and in vivid detail as horrifying, like the snakes, ghosts, and furies whom Medea summons to her aid: "an entire host of evils, secret, hidden, and obscure" (Seneca 2017a, 36)[20].

Shakespeare's late plays present a very different picture of the gods and their influence. In *Pericles*, shortly after Pericles is reunited with his daughter Marina, he hears "rarest sounds", "most heavenly music", which he identifies as "the music of the spheres" (Shakespeare 2004, V.i.217, 219-20). In *The Winter's Tale,* Leontes initially dismisses the "truth" revealed by the "sealed-up oracle, by the hand delivered / Of great Apollo's priest", then repents almost immediately once he discovers that his son has passed away (Shakespeare 2010b, III.ii.125-26, 137). "Apollo's angry", he concludes, "and the

19 For a (long) list of passages in Senecan tragedy in which characters complain about the injustice or cruelty of the gods, see Gray 2014b, 204 n. 7.

20 Sen. *Med.* 679; cp. 670-842 and 958-70. See also, e.g., Sen. *Pha*. 1007-110, 1159-272; Sen. *Oed.* 88-201, 217-38, 308-98, 530-660; and Sen. *Her.* 1-124, 205-78, 551-620, 709-806, 937-1201, 1221-26.

heavens themselves / Do strike at my injustice" (III.ii.143). He asks Apollo to "pardon" his "great profaneness" and begins a long process of penitence (III.ii.151-52). In light of this "saint-like sorrow", his advisor Paulina reveals that his wife, whom he had presumed dead, is still alive; he and Hermione embrace and are reconciled (V.i.2).

In *Cymbeline*, Jupiter appears to Posthumus in a dream while he is asleep in prison and reassures him that even though all seems lost, all will be well. What appears to be adverse circumstance is no more than temporary and indeed for Posthumus' benefit. "Whom best I love I cross", Jupiter explains, "to make my gift, / The more delayed, delighted" (Shakespeare 2017, V.iv.71-72). Posthumus "shall be lord of Lady Imogen / And happier much by his affliction made" (V.iv.77-78). When Posthumus awakes, he finds a tablet on his breast restating Jupiter's promise, as if by way of further reassurance. All to say, at the end of his career, within the limits imposed by contemporary censorship, as well as his desire to avoid obvious anachronism within what are ostensibly pagan settings, Shakespeare goes out of his way not only to depart from but to pointedly reject Seneca's much less winsome vision of the divine and the supernatural. Even though it may appear otherwise from time to time, the cosmos, he insists, is ultimately orderly, just, and benevolent.

Shakespeare seems closer to Seneca, by contrast, in the tragedies that he writes towards the middle of his career. Here, God himself does not appear in person, as he does in *Cymbeline*. Innocents really do die. The lives of the protagonists do not end with their fortunes restored or their repentance rewarded but instead in sorrow, shame, and no small degree of self-delusion. In what sense, then, if any, can we say that Shakespeare's sensibility here is not Seneca's? Shakespeare's departure from Senecan precedent is subtler here than it will be later: his incongruous framing of the central plot. Unlike Seneca, Shakespeare ends all his plays, even his tragedies, by reasserting something like the Great Chain of Being. A relatively virtuous ruler appears, albeit sometimes like a *deus ex machina*, and restores hierarchical order. With the debatable exception of *Lear*, Steiner insists that Shakespeare's "mature tragic plays" are not "true" tragedies for precisely this reason: they end not with despair but instead with "strong, very nearly decisive, counter-currents of repair, of human radiance, of public and communal restoration". "Denmark under Fortinbras,

Scotland under Malcolm, will be eminently better realms to live in, an amelioration to which the preceding griefs contribute directly" (Steiner 1996, xiii).

Senecan tragedy includes very little "repair", "restoration", or "amelioration"[21]. Instead, as Gordon Braden observes, "Senecan tragedies tend to end with still widening circles of conflagration reminiscent of the *ecpyrōsis* of Stoic philosophy". A "destructive cycle" that at first may seem confined to the protagonist "spirals outward of its own logic to claim by the end something close to everything" (Braden 1984, 289). Braden sees this "widening gyre" as subjective: "still essentially within the hero's unchallenged fantasies of vindictive fulfillment". Senecan drama "never quite steps outside those fantasies", whereas Shakespearean drama "never loses touch with the reality that ultimately resists and circumscribes any one man's will", "A world that will outlast Macbeth's rage, however total", reveals that anger's "emptiness". Shakespeare uses the objective world, a "slightly larger, slightly tougher reality", to reframe and undercut the would-be all-encompassing, self-destructive subjectivity of his tragic protagonists (290).

Thomas Rosenmeyer's interpretation of what happens in Senecan tragedy is more radical (Rosenmeyer 1989)[22]. The decline towards apocalypse that Braden discerns is not confined to Seneca's protagonists' "fantasies" but instead a physical and very real result of their contamination of the world in which they find themselves. That is to say, within the world of Seneca's plays, the slide towards cosmic chaos that his characters subjectively lament is objectively true, in a sense that it never really is for Shakespeare. As Rosenmeyer reminds us, according to Stoic cosmology, everything in the universe is in some more or less refined sense material. The ontological distinction between mind and body found in other systems such as Neo-Plato-

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21 Perry draws attention to "two major scenes of fraught and partial reconciliation" in Senecan tragedy, which he sees as "key intertextual models for the reconciliations in *King Lear*'s final movement": "between Oedipus and Antigone in the first part of *Phoenissae* and between Hercules and Amphitryon at the end of *Hercules Furens*". "Crucially", he observes, each of these scenes "verge[s] on utter failure": "Oedipus and Hercules each grudgingly agree to continue living, but each also proves incapable of reciprocating the familial affection offered by his interlocutor" (Perry 2020, 112).

22 On Rosenmeyer, see also Inwood 1991 and Perry 2020, 126-33.

nism does not provide any kind of firewall insulating one category of things from another.

Moreover, according to the Stoic doctrine of cosmic 'sympathy', everything in the universe is connected, like the organs within a living creature. "The universe that you see, containing the human and the divine, is a unity", Seneca writes. "We are the limbs of a mighty body" (Seneca 2017c, 377). This sense of embeddedness within the larger world can be understood as ennobling the human individual; to say that we are responsible for the well-being of the universe implies that we each have a dignified place within it. As Rosenmeyer discerns, however, the intimate and inalienable connections between absolutely everything that the Stoics posit have the inadvertent side effect of making both us and the world in which we find ourselves frighteningly vulnerable to disruption. "When one constituent of the cosmos is disturbed or off balance, the whole world, because of its total interconnectedness, is affected" (112). In the words of the Hellenistic Stoic philosopher Chrysippus, one of Seneca's most influential sources: "If a person is cut in his finger, the whole body suffers" (112)[23].

These central claims of Stoic cosmology help us to make sense of some aspects of Stoic ethics that are otherwise counterintuitive. As I explain in more detail elsewhere, theologians and preachers in Elizabethan England see a connection between temperament and what they call variously "peculiar", "special", or "besetting" temptation. Each of us, by virtue of our distinct constitution, is more susceptible to some kinds of sin than others. This contemporary sense of the theological importance of individual psychology may have helped inspire Shakespeare's interest in vivid characterization. In contrast to medieval characters such as "Everyman" or "Mankind", Shakespeare takes great care to distinguish one sinner from another. The Stoics, by contrast, lump all sins together, both in kind and in degree. As Rosenmeyer explains, for "the Stoic moralist", "there is no such thing as a limited or moderate flaw". Faults cannot be quarantined as "merely venial"; "negligible frailty is inevitably transformed into gross peccability". "Contagion is compounded", given "the resonance of ethical relations" within "the fuller and more integrated sphere of experience, in which ethics and physicality mesh" (141).

23 Cited in S. E. *Adv. Math.* 9.80; Rosenmeyer cites von Arnim 1964, 2.1013.

A Christian may be inclined to see an analogy here to the far-reaching consequences of the Fall of Man. As St. Paul writes in his letter to the Romans, "by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin, and so death passed upon all men" (Rom. 5:11). The "bondage of corruption" means that "the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together" (Rom. 8:21-22). Very much in contrast to Christian doctrine, however, in the world of Senecan tragedy, the contagion of vice, which the Stoics see as a kind of ignorance, extends all the way up to the divine. Hence a marked difference between the gods of Greek and those of Senecan tragedy. As Rosenmeyer points out, "Greek gods demonstrate a heavenly assurance". "Aphrodite in *Hippolytus* and Dionysius in *Bacchae* can be cool and imperious because in the vision of the playwright they represent forces that, though by no means entirely legible, are thought to be dominant and unrefracted". In Senecan drama, by contrast, gods and demons are less confident. "Like the men and women they can neither assist nor, of their own volition, destroy", these supernatural forces are "the furious, but important, prisoners of an inscrutable universe" (85).

What we see in Senecan tragedy, by this light, is a process of inexorable "sympathy": "the inevitability of pollution, given the frailty of man" (143). "Human beings and their world are constantly working on each other": the setting contaminates the protagonist, who in turn further contaminates the setting (141). "Oedipus, at the center of a diseased world, knows that the disease will translate itself to him also. But he also knows that in some mysterious way he is himself responsible for the cosmic sickness. Man and the world have become linked, with infection the inescapable accessory and coextension the dreaded consequence" (117). Not just the protagonist but "the causal system" itself, including the divine and the supernatural, as well as the merely human, is "intrinsically corrupt": "inescapably flawed and diseased" (90).

In the tension he discerns between Stoic ethics and Stoic cosmology, a tension he sees as irreconcilable, Rosenmeyer finds an alternative to an interpretive protocol that was once common among classicists but now is widely seen as an unsatisfying evasion: "the cutting in two of Lucius Annaeus Seneca" (8)[24]. For centuries, critics "embar-

24 See also Perry 2020, 9-10.

rassed or irritated by their own failure to find anything essentially Stoic or philosophical in Senecan drama" have divided Seneca the tragedian from Seneca the moralist (8). "The burden of this contrastive analysis is, it seems, the following: if the drama were truly Stoic in complexion and intent, it would feature believable human beings in action, and reason would win out; that is to say, it could not be tragic, and would have considerable difficulty being drama" (9).

As "an explicitly optimistic philosophy", Stoicism, like Christianity, might well seem to rule out the possibility of tragedy (xiii). By way of illustration, Rosenmeyer cites a version of *Oedipus*, now lost, written by Diogenes the Cynic, "in which he sought to show that it was silly of Oedipus to be exercised over his marriage to his mother, on the grounds, presumably, that events beyond our control should not be permitted to disturb us" (12). An entirely successful Stoic wise man or *sapiens* would inevitably prove boring on stage: Milton does his best with the Lady in *Comus*, as well as the rather more Stoic than Christian version of Jesus that he presents in *Paradise Regained*, but neither work has the momentum of Shakespeare's tragedies, and neither protagonist is as sympathetic as, for example, Shakespeare's Brutus. J. W. Wieler argues that an affinity for Stoicism proved a similar stumbling block for Shakespeare's contemporary George Chapman. "The failure of Chapman's tragical drama ever to achieve fully the stature of great tragedy is in large measure due to the fact that Stoicism negates the premises from which such tragedy develops" (Wieler 1948, 163)[25].

At best, a Stoic playwright can give us a negative exemplum, designed as a deterrent. But this kind of antihero can be easily misunderstood. Given that he is in practice the protagonist of the on-stage narrative, it is almost inevitable that the audience will start to take his side. As Rosenmeyer observes, "the theatricality, the sparkling rhetoric, and the proud vitality of the Senecan villain stand ready to transform the cautionary, if not into a positive model, into a new compound whose educative dimension is inscrutable" (22). In Seneca's plays, as in Shakespeare's, charismatic villains reveal the author's ambivalence about his own ethical paradigm. What if the road not taken is in fact the road I should be taking? What would my life

25 Cited in Rosenmeyer 1989, 17.

be like if I did (Gray 2020)? Seneca has his doubts about the merits of Stoic constancy, not to mention Epicurean withdrawal from society, just as Shakespeare does about Christian compassion[26]. So, in his tragedies, he explores what he seems to see as its most attractive alternative: violent revenge.

Interpreting Seneca as divided within himself, arguing with himself, engaged in "a dialectic of faith and doubt", allows us to recognize that Shakespeare is not entirely opposed to Seneca but instead can be better understood as elaborating on an undercurrent of self-doubt that he found already latent within Seneca's own work: a side of Seneca Rosenmeyer describes as "a deep pessimism, a kind of rogue Stoicism, gnawing away at the strained assertions of a grim confidence" (Gray 2018b, 2021; Rosenmeyer 1989, 151). The same could be said of Seneca's relation to Virgil's *Aeneid*, as regards its depiction of martial heroism, but that would be another story (Perry 2020, 67 n. 23; Rosenmeyer 1989, 25; Trinacty 2014). For now, my point is simply that Shakespeare learned how to take Seneca apart from Seneca himself. Both Shakespeare and Seneca use tragedy as an opportunity to explore their doubts about the practicality of Stoic and Epicurean ethics.

As regards ethics, what Rosenmeyer says of Senecan tragedy applies equally well to Shakespearean drama: "There is no room for prudent men or women who manage to dissociate themselves from the external ferment". "The ideal of the Stoic saint who stands off by himself" is "just that, an ideal, and a blind one at that" (142). The more substantive difference between the two playwrights lies instead in how they arrive at this conclusion: the premises that inform their reasoning. Shakespeare may believe in the Fall of Man, but Seneca, or at least, the

26 As is not always recognized, Seneca's advice about ethics in his letters and essays is strongly inflected by Epicureanism as well as Stoicism. Briefly put, with the exception of his essay *De beneficiis*, Seneca abandons the Hellenistic Stoic concept of *oikeiōsis*, as well as the Stoic emphasis on moral duties to other people apparent in, most notably, Cicero's *De officiis*, in favor of Epicurean arguments for withdrawing from society altogether. For further discussion of Epicurean as opposed to Stoic ethics in Seneca's philosophical prose, see Gray 2014a and 2019, 57-59. For Epicurean arguments for avoiding other people in Seneca's tragedies, as well as failed attempts to follow through on this principle by characters such as Hippolytus in *Phaedrus* and Thyestes in *Thyestes*, see Gray 2014b, 221-22, and esp. 221 n. 53.

Seneca that we encounter in the tragedies, is the more thoroughgoing pessimist. Vice as he sees it is both inevitable and infinite in its implications. For Shakespeare, by contrast, the mistakes of a sinner, although grievous, can be undone, and they take place within a larger frame that remains untouched. Unlike Seneca, Shakespeare does not think the cosmos itself is chaotic or inimical. Instead, he shares the faith of the medieval optimist that the universe is orderly and ultimately just.

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